

## OVERTURE CONCERNING THE PROPOSED REVISIONS OF THE THREE REFORMED STANDARDS

### Background:

Faith Alive Christian Resources has been in the process of developing a new *Psalter Hymnal* as a joint venture with the Reformed Church in America. It is a long-standing denominational policy to include the confessions of the church in its hymnals. Because the CRC and RCA have different translations of the Reformed Standards (*Belgic Confession (BC)*, *Heidelberg Catechism (HC)* and *Canons of Dort (CD)*), both denominational offices authorized Faith Alive to appoint a committee to work on a common translation. They released their proposed changes in April of 2010. Because of the short time frame given for consideration, Synod 2010 acceded to several overtures to give churches more time to review and reflect on the proposed changes.

Church councils were given until October 1, 2010, to respond to the translation/revision committee and the new revision was presented to the church on October 29, 2010. The committee did make some positive changes based on those responses, such as returning some of the language that emphasized the warm, personal nature of the *HC*. One major doctrinal improvement was retaining Adam as the representative head of the human race in *HC* Lord's Day 20. We are thankful for these changes, but some of the fundamental and more essential problems remain.

### Review of Main Concerns:

#### 1. Weakening the Fatherhood of the triune God

The proposed revisions removed the masculine pronouns for God 205 times (*HC* 51, *BC* 75, *CD* 79), and they retain the masculine pronouns only 113 times (*HC* 34, *BC* 33, *CD* 46). This accounts for 64% of the masculine pronouns being removed when referring to God. The manhood of Jesus is omitted seven times, with "he" replaced by the word "Lord." Three of the four masculine references to the Holy Spirit in the *HC* and *all* 3 references in the *BC* are deleted.

One example in proposed *BC* Art. 9 removes the masculine pronoun for God by saying, "when God says: 'Let us make humankind in our image,' and afterward God indicates the unity as saying, 'God created.'" The current version states, "'Let us make man in our image,' and afterwards he indicates the unity when **he says**, 'God created.'" The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), which the translation committee used as its foundational Bible translation, even retains the masculine pronouns for God in the verses which stand behind this part of Article 9 (Genesis 1:26-27):

"Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

In *BC* Art. 10, the proposed revision de-emphasizes the masculine nature of the Trinity in eternity before the creation of the world. The current version says: "**he** who is called God, the Word, the Son, and Jesus Christ already existed when all things were created." The revision says: "the *one* who is called God, the Word, the Son, and Jesus Christ already existed before creating all things."

De-emphasizing the masculine aspect of God goes against the overwhelming way God reveals Himself in Scripture, which is also reflected in official CRC policy per Synod 1997, pp. 267-94, which declared that “The endorsement or use of contemporary inclusive language for God -- i. e., the broad gender-egalitarian and/or gender-neutral approach, is unacceptable to the Christian Reformed Church” (Acts of Synod 1997, p. 692). Therefore, using gender-neutral language for God in our confessions or even moving in that direction violates the standing position of the CRCNA.

## **2. Weakening the Divinity of Christ:**

Christ's divinity is also weakened in *BC* Art. 9, which currently reads, “And therefore the holy one to be born of you shall be called the Son of God” (quoting Luke 1:35). The revision proposes: “*therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.*” This revision, based on the NRSV, causes confusion as to when Jesus assumed his divine nature; implying by the future tense it is at some point *after* his birth.

## **3. Weakening the Nature of the Godhead:**

*HC* Q&A 25 weakens the nature of the Godhead. “Since there is but one God...” becomes “Since there is but *one divine being,...*” God is a “divine being,” certainly, but the NIV has only one reference to “divine being” and that is the Apostle Paul’s interaction with the pagans at the Areopagus in Athens. The NRSV only has one reference in I Samuel 28:13, but that is a reference to the Witch of Endor’s vision of a spirit. Referring to God as merely a “divine Being” takes away from the unique and personal nature of God.

## **4. Distinctive Theological Language is Lost:**

Confessions should reflect the distinctive language used commonly in the church. There is a unique theological language that is used because of the depth of meaning behind those terms that other more ordinary words do not fully encompass. For example, in *HC* Q&A 56 it currently says, “...because of Christ's **atonement**...” That becomes “Christ's *satisfaction*...” in the revision. Is Christ satisfied now? What does it mean to be satisfied? Synonyms include “happy” and “content.” Is God merely happy and content with us now? Or have our sins been atoned for? Also, in *HC* Q&A 45 it currently states, “...are now **resurrected** to a new life...” In the revision this becomes “are now *raised* to a new life...” “Resurrected” more clearly connects our new life with Christ’s. And finally, in *BC* Art. 14 it now refers to “The **natural man**,” which becomes “*those who are unspiritual*,” in the proposed revision. This takes away vivid, personal language. These are just a few examples of a broader problem with the proposed translation.

## **Summary**

Since the Reformed Standards provide the doctrinal foundation for the way the Christian Reformed Church interprets Scripture, all CRC office-bearers sign their name agreeing with these confessions and all professing members state their agreement with them in their Profession of Faith. This vital role in the life and faith of our denomination compels us to respond, particularly as the proposed changes affect the foundations of our unity as believers in Christ Jesus.

## **Overture:**

Classis Holland overtures Synod 2011 not to adopt the proposed revision by Faith Alive Christian Resources of the Three Reformed Standards.

**Grounds:**

1. These proposed revisions are in direct conflict with the standing position of the CRCNA. Synod 1997 declared that “the endorsement or use of contemporary inclusive language for God--i.e., the broad gender-egalitarian and/or gender-neutral approach ... is unacceptable to the Christian Reformed Church” (Acts of Synod 1997, p. 692).
2. Avoiding or minimizing masculine pronouns for God is contrary to the language given to us in Scripture, which overwhelmingly uses masculine pronouns for God. This philosophy leads to some serious theological problems as highlighted above. Without these masculine references to God we lose the depth of the original meaning of God’s relationship to His people, such as a Father to his children.
3. The proposed revisions rely on Scripture quotations from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), which is not used in many CRCs as their primary pew Bible. The New International Version, 1984 (NIV84), is the primary pew Bible and teaching version in the vast majority of CRCNAs, and also in a sizeable number of RCAs. Synod 1992 approved the use of the NRSV in Christian Reformed congregations and institutions, but with this concern: “the translation contains problems significant enough to warrant caution in its use” (Acts of Synod 1992, p. 671). In fact, there was enough concern that Synod 1992 wanted to ensure all were informed by instructing the *Banner* to publish this caution, which it did in the June 29, 1992, issue (p. 17). That article also referred back to Marten H. Woudstra’s article entitled “Pitfalls of Modernizing the Bible” published in the December 17, 1990, issue of the *Banner*, reviewing the NRSV.
4. The Reformed Standards hold a significant place in the life and theology of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, requiring all office-bearers to “teach these doctrines diligently” and “defend them faithfully.” It is imperative that any process to change our confessions – especially changes that raise such significant theological issues as indicated above – be done in a clear and deliberate manner where the reasons for such changes are defended from Scripture and shown to be theologically more accurate. The proposed changes do not do that in our judgment.

**BY ACTION OF CLASSIS HOLLAND OF THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN NA DONE March 10, 2011.**

In Christ,

Mr. Calvin Hoogstra, Acting Stated Clerk