

What are the “Gereformeerde Gemeenten”?

Viewed from outside her ranks, the “Gereformeerde Gemeenten” are often delegated to the uncomfortable position. The “Gereformeerde Gemeenten” (hereafter: GG) are often perceived as being overly conservative, overly experiential and mystical, and overly critical of a looser form of doctrine and life. The visitor, however, who actually takes the trouble to overstep unjustifiable accusations and attends worship service(s), usually has quite a different response to GG preaching. Sermons are viewed as long, but also as intensely biblical, informative, searching, and practical. Over and over again, visiting listeners remark how entirely different the GG is from what they have heard about it.

The “Gereformeerde Gemeenten” (hereafter: GG) are intensely serious about living the Reformed heritage throughout their entire lives, believing the Reformed doctrine with their entire minds, and experiencing Reformed truth in their entire hearts.

Yes, but. . . Reformed, Christian Reformed, Protestant Reformed, Free Reformed, Reformed Church. . . . and now “Gereformeerde Gemeenten”? Is it any wonder that many find Reformed splits mind-boggling? Is not the GG just another redundant and unedifying schism within the Reformed family? Does the GG possess unique viability? What is the relationship of the GG towards other churches of Reformed persuasion?

Origin

The “Gereformeerde Gemeenten”, presently numbering 158 congregations in the Netherlands (approximately 103,000 members), 28 congregations in North America and Canada (called the “Netherlands Reformed Congregations”, hereafter: NRC with 10,080 members) ¹, and a handful of congregations in various foreign countries, organized denominationally in 1907. The so-called “*Churches under the Cross*” (established in 1839, after breaking away from the 1834 Secession congregations) and the so-called *Ledeboerian churches* (established in 1841 under the leadership of Rev. Ledeboer who seceded from the Reformed State Church) in the Netherlands, united in 1907 under the leadership of the then 25-year-old Rev. G.H. Kersten to form the “Gereformeerde Gemeenten”.

Forms of Unity & Liturgy

All “Gereformeerde Gemeenten” and the “Netherlands Reformed congregations”, office-bearers, and members subscribe to three Reformed *Forms of Unity*: the *Belgic Confession of Faith* (by Guido de Bres), the *Heidelberg Catechism* (by Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus), and the *Canons of Dordt*. Both the *Belgic Confession* and the *Canons of Dordt* are read regularly at worship services, and the *Heidelberg Catechism* is preached weekly except on church feast days. Godly sobriety dominates GG and NRC liturgy out of deep reverence for God and His holy congregation. Prayers, Psalter singing, offerings, and benedictions consume approximately thirty minutes of a typical worship service, while the central

¹ Yearbook 2008, p. 362v

emphasis on preaching the Word of God is vigilantly maintained. Large numbers of songs, choirs, testimonies, and congregational readings are all rejected because they are viewed as intrusions on the church's highest and most sacred calling - to unashamedly preach the whole counsel and Word of God: *Biblically, doctrinally, experimentally, and practically.*

Doctrinal Emphasis

GG and NRC preaching stresses the vertical line of the gospel, believing a right relationship between God and man is indispensable to the resulting horizontal, person-to-person relationship.

Consequently, God is never left out of preaching. God, in and through Christ, is the center and heartbeat of every message. His being, names, attributes, and diving Persons - the electing love of the Father, the redeeming love of the Son, and the applying love of the Holy Spirit, is continually brought to the fore. GG and NRC preaching cautiously seeks to maintain the biblical balance between God's justice and His love; divine love is preached without the relinquishment of divine justice. The Lord is too holy and righteous to be satisfied through any other channel than the blood of His only begotten Son.

Man's lost state and condition by nature due to his deep fall in Adam, his dire need for a meriting and apply Savior outside of himself, and his hopeless inability to accept such a Savior in his own strength, are continually emphasized. GG and NRC members are constantly told that total depravity must become total reality and not something prevalent only on the printed pages of the church's creeds and confessions. The necessary and irresistible work of the Holy Spirit in uncovering a person's total sinfulness to himself before room is made for this same Spirit to apply and glorify Christ within the soul, is a biblical truism oft repeated. The grand gospel truth of free and sovereign grace which stresses that man must be abased to the lowest and God exalted to the highest in the salvation of a sinner and also that the Lord Jesus is a complete and an only Savior without any merits of man, is considered to be of inestimable, prime value.

Consequently, in distinction from most present-day Reformed denominations, GG and NRC inevitably place heavy emphasis on the *necessity of being born again*. True conversion is never assumed. The child growing up in the pale of the church receives the outward benefits of the covenant (which are many), but its true essence can only be received via regeneration.

Therefore GG and NRC congregations feel compelled to build and promote their own Christian education. That's why the education of children should proceed on the principle that they are as all men by nature in an unregenerate state. The religious education of children should therefore be used as a means of grace to their spiritual welfare.

GG and NRC members believe that more than historical faith (believing biblical truth and doctrine with the mind) is necessary for salvation. Namely a *true saving faith* (it is a certain, i.e. a positive, not doubtful, knowledge of God, and of His promises revealed to us in the gospel, and a hearty confidence that all my sins are forgiven me, for Christ's sake) is essential to obtain everlasting life. A true Christian shall surely be able to tell how the Lord converted him/her, and how he/she has

experienced and is experiencing the misery-deliverance-gratitude order of salvation (it is referred to the Heidelberg Catechism), *if truly converted by the Lord*.

The GG and NRC maintain the historic Reformed position of a *visible/invisible church*, viz., the majority of members (though believing Reformed doctrine with their minds) are still lacking true heart conversion, which reveals itself in the fruit of their lives (Matt. 7;16); other members, *out of free and sovereign grace alone*, are recipients of Spirit-wrought regeneration and conversion. *Biblical marks and steps of grace* which distinguish genuine spiritual life from counterfeit Christianity are continually emphasized from the pulpit out of love so that members may examine, under the Spirit's guidance, whether they are, in fact, true believers. This is not mysticism. *Mysticism separates Christian experience from the Word of God, but the historic Reformed stance demands God-glorifying, Word-centered, Spirit-wrought experiential Christianity.*

This emphasis inevitably yields the fruit of a smaller percentage of believers partaking of the Lord's Supper than in most Reformed churches of our day. Most GG and NRC members would find it next to impossible to partake of God's Holy Supper with levity and lack of spiritual life, as many seem to do in our generation.

Practical Emphasis

The GG and the NRC not only endeavors to buttress the historic Reformed stress *doctrinally*, but also *practically* in daily life. The denomination takes God's Word seriously when the Lord continually commands His people not to mingle with sinful, worldly people, worldly customs, worldly practices, and worldly places. Not to merit salvation, but as an inevitable consequence of salvation, the believer will "come out from the world and be separate" as God's Word commands. Therefore, the church unflinchingly condemns those things which tend to provoke sin or the lusts of the flesh. Television, dancing, theater-attendance, over-indulging in sports, modern fashions, materialism, watching worldly films by a DVD recorder or by a computer, watching evil things on internet, listening to pop music, premarital sex, etc., are forbidden on the basis of God's Word: "Abstain from all appearance of evil" (I Thes. 5:22).

This conservative way of life, however, far from being meritorious, is a spontaneous outgrowth of bowing gratefully under Divine Lordship, for the true Christian will have no desire to set his heart on trivialities of this world that tend to interrupt his close walk with God.

The true Christian's life is meant to be a preparation for the life to come. His godly walk and tempered concern over the lawful matters of this world will cause him to try to be the salt of the earth and the light on the hill. His walk, his talk, and even his withdrawal and silence will also testify to the living principle of real Christianity in exercise within him.

Such an approach to daily, practical life is viewed as biblical and realistic (not radical!) within GG and NRC circles. When the majority of programs that come across a television set or the worldly films that can be watched by DVD recorders or the evil things on open internet,, for example, are basically evil and morally warped, a true Christian would not get mixed up in such evil things. He is also acutely aware of the fact that his old, corrupt nature would not allow him to "control" television,

the watching of worldly films by a DVD recorder or by a computer or the evil things on open internet, because it can never become a God-glorifying way of his/her life.

Thus the GG and the NRC reject two streams of thought current today. On the one hand, they reject the unworldly line of thought which *literally* separates its members totally from the world. GG and NRC members maintain the biblical injunction that Christians must remain *in* but not *of* the world. On the other hand, the denominations also reject the imagined notion that the Christian sanctifies worldly transactions and happenings by his/her presence and intervention. GG and NRC members firmly believe, for example, that dancing corrupts the Christian more than the Christian sanctifies the dance. The transition of many Reformed denominations from the traditionally Reformed perspective necessitating separation from the world towards the "Christian-sanctifying" theme, is viewed in the GG and the NRC as nothing more than a free license to sin. It strips the church of its precious *antithesis heritage*.

Conclusion

The GG and the NRC are far from being a perfect church. We never claim to be the only church. Rather, we supplicate that we may be counted among the number of churches who, by grace, have remained faithful to the truth - biblically, doctrinally, experientially, and practically. We trust that God's Word is proclaimed, discipline exercised, and sacraments administered as instituted by Christ. We also trust the Lord has enabled us in some measure to carry the banner of truth delivered to us by our Reformed forefathers without compromising or surrendering to corrupt influences which are incessantly at work - forces which seek either to destroy the only foundation of salvation (Jesus Christ and Him crucified), or to undermine the experiential knowledge of God's only way of salvation.

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