

Gays: in or out of the CRC?

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With Tentative Response (in red) by Jan H. Boer

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The way the current debate about gay membership in the CRC is framed by the Report on Human Sexuality has nothing to do with whether a homosexual lifestyle is normal or not. The Report, and if it is adopted by Synod, the ecclesiastical decision by Synod is based on the assumption that homosexual activity is inherently creationally disordered or abnormal and therefore sinful and therefore ought to be condemned by the CRC. **But ecclesiastical courts like synods are not competent to judge the (ab)normality of forms of human sexual expressions** like same sex relationships without consulting authorities on human sexual relations such as the American Psychiatric Association. This research body on human sexuality clearly stated that homosexuality is a normal variant of human sexual behaviour, when it removed homosexuality as a category in the DSM. (The DSM is the “bible” for all psychiatric/psychological diagnoses)

I have a number of times in our Musketeer chats asked you guys why the theological judgement that HS is not normal is wrong. I asked this with reference to the creation account. All three of you have steadfastly chosen silence. I conclude from this that you just don't like the idea for it seems to lead to basically consider it sinful. I don't think it does. Unless you guys can correct me, to me HS is a disorder caused by the fall / sin, but it does not mean that it is sinful. It is not desirable, and those afflicted with it need to be sexually restrained much like heteros. I consider HA abnormal / disordered, but accept HS practice within recognized restraints as fully acceptable. The one does not need to lead to the other.

Ecclesiastical courts not competent—Questions of this nature have many aspects to them and I am not sure ANY agency or discipline can make that judgement about the entire issue. The various agencies / disciplines need to get together and bring their various competencies into play and find a way of somehow coming up with a full answer that incorporates all the competencies. But surely an ecclesiastical court can contribute to that

process by making a judgement from the Biblical point of view, while recognizing that theirs does not cover the entire front.

American Psychiatric Association (APS)—I read Satinover's book some years ago and, unfortunately, I have no access to it anymore. But my memory tells me that he comes down heavy on APS for its dependence on ideology as much as science. He wrote this after years of involvement in the world of psychiatry, particularly in gay issues.

The APS is, as much as I know about it, a secular organization. And we know how much secular culture has been trying to push religions and their ideas off into some obscure corner somewhere and keep it out of such public issues. I get the feeling you are showing more trust in them than I am ready to give them.

Jeffrey Satinover, *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996 (280 pp.).

Bob Thune, review of above, June 30, 2011. <http://www.goodreads.com/book...>

Sherry Tyree, review of above, *Voices Online*, vol. XIII, no. 4, December 1998. <http://www.emaso.com/links/REF-Books/REF.1-D.htm>

Readers' strongly conflicting opinions on this controversial book can be found at: http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/62588.Homosexuality_and_the_Politics_of_Truth

It puzzles me, therefore that such well known, well respected Reformed biblical scholars as the authors of the report come to their conclusion that a homosexual lifestyle is abnormal when it is clearly against all psychiatric evidence.

Against ALL psychiatric evidence OR vs psychiatric evidence mixed with a heavy dose of ideology?

This conclusion is all the more distressing when it leads the authors of the Report to advocate banning practicing homosexuals from CRC membership, which, according the CRC's own confessions, in effect bars them from the means of grace necessary for eternal salvation.

That distresses me as well.

In the meantime, the Report has unnecessarily caused a great deal of consternation among the rank-and-file members of the CRC both in Canada and USA. There is even talk about church splits reminiscent of the fallout from the *Women in Office* debate. It would therefore behoove the Report authors to remove the Report from the agenda of the coming synod to restore some semblance of peace in the denomination.

In a way, yes. But it does have to be dealt with somewhere along the line.

If, as it appears to me, nothing good derives from this controversy, why do we afflict ourselves with it with so much passion and acrimonious debate?

Just because we Musketeers along with a lot of others in the CRC may have settled the issue for ourselves, this is not the case with many others who feel threatened by this entire development and feel passionately that we are taking the church in the wrong Biblical direction. We need to honour that concern and not just deride them. There is nothing wrong with a degree of fear. Paul's letters are full of fear of current developments. The church must always be on her guard against the whiles of the devil. Fear may be part of that, but it does not explain the whole picture; faith must be there as well. Faith and fear go together.

I think that, together with all the good things that attend being Christian and Reformed, we also suffer from a schismatic gene, that afflicted us every so often over our centuries' old history. Every so often Reformed Christians appear to succumb to a need to split.

Indeed, the history of Reformed churches includes a lot of shameful splits, but that holds true for most of the Protestant churches. Pluralism and toleration took a long time in coming since the Reformation. The mill of God grinds slowly.

I believe that the current debate about gay membership is only the latest variant of a debate within the Reformed Christian community that has gone on for centuries about "*the Christian in the world*", 1) or on how Christians ought to relate to surrounding culture. This debate has been going on at least since the time of the Reformation.

Again, by no means only among the Reformed.

The answer to that question has essentially been given in two ways: *Christians ought to combat and avoid existing culture*, and *Christians ought to engage and transform existing culture into a Christian direction*.

These are only two of various answers to that question. Remember Richard Niebuhr's famous book on the issue.

Currently, within the CRC, if one decides the answer is that Christians must combat and avoid existing culture then one is likely to deny gays membership in the CRC. Conversely, if one believes that Christians must engage and transform existing culture one is likely to extend church membership to include gays.

In my Reformational thinking, these are not either / or but both simultaneously. I believe that antithesis and common grace go together; both must be recognized and be part of our Christian "arsenal."

Developments and deviations in the Church of the Reformation from Calvin to Kuyper

Already during the Reformation, the question how Christians ought to relate to surrounding culture was answered in two ways. Luther and Calvin chose to engage existing culture with the aim of Christianizing it. That was the central message of the Reformation. They combatted the cultural dominance of the RC *hierarchy* (i.e. the rule of the clergy over all of medieval life) which promoted RC theology as more authoritative than the bible.

Would the RC recognize itself in that statement? There have been enough retractions of Protestant denominations' interpretation of RC views, that I would be very careful with such statements unless you can verify them.

You place Calvin and Luther right alongside each other. But did Luther not start out with his two-kingdom theory with two separate sources of truth, one of which rests on the Bible; the other, on reason without the Bible, thus leaving the largest swath of life without the Bible?

I have met Danish Lutheran missionaries in Nigeria who were surprised at the political and economic implications of my ministry with the Institute of Church & Society. They had never heard of this kind of thing and were not aware that there are many books advocating a more wholistic approach.

The Reformers asserted that the Christian gospel was *sola scriptura* and they rejected salvation by good works by confessing *by grace alone, through faith*. For

both of them these were articles of faith from the heart, realities that are felt deeply as much as thought about, rather than doctrines one must subscribe to. For them this confession was a vision that inspired them to action. Both of them also combatted monasticism (which promoted and practiced escape out of existing culture into so called “religious” communities, thereby elevating church devotional life over ordinary life). The Reformers insisted that one is to serve God in everyday life, etc. In short, they promoted Christianity over churchianity.

True that this is how monasticism is often portrayed, but is it an adequate description? Monasteries have often been the centres and initiators of social change and community development.

These were not theological slogans for them but expressions of a heart-and-life commitment that Christ was Lord over every aspect of their lives. This meant that a direct personal relationship was possible for every Christian, without the help of the church, it meant that Christians need not worry about the future because God would look after them in every way, and it meant that it was their task to Christianize surrounding culture in every way possible. This gospel took off like wildfire and spread throughout Northern/Western cultures (France, Holland, Germany, Denmark and the Scandinavian countries) as well as the Eastern European countries like Hungary. It gave people a clear sense of trust in God and a clear sense of how to serve God with their lives. Cultural development flourished everywhere this Reformed Christian gospel was preached and practiced.

However, right from the start there were also deviations from that central gospel: anabaptism, pietism, moralism and biblicism. What these all had in common was that they believed that the task of Christians was to combat and to avoid surrounding culture.

Where would you place ARPA in this context?

Anabaptists denied the biblical teaching, re-affirmed by the Reformation, of infant baptism. Infant baptism was the cornerstone of the Reformation because it meant that God freely offers His saving, regenerating grace to every child born by Christian parents and that this grace is actualized and bears fruit in that child’s later life when she/he appropriates that grace by confessing her/his decision for Christ. As we will see later, this teaching had all kinds of implications for the establishment of (Reformed) Christian schools.

The move to believer's baptism has sometimes been described as a switch from the communal to a more individualistic worldview. How do you see that?

Anabaptism's rejection of infant baptism meant in effect that God was unable to effectively offer His saving grace to children until they had done public confession of faith. This situation meant that especially Evangelical parents pressured their children to make a "decision for Christ" as early as possible during revival meetings to be on the safe side. Within the Dutch Reformed Christian community itself this rejection later resulted in a split between the *Gereformeerde Kerk* and the *Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerk* about the issue of *presumed regeneration*.

Second-generation Reformers, the Lutheran Melancton in particular, sought to systematize Reformed theology by using scholastic (i.e. Greek-Aristotelian) logic. The unfortunate result was that for many Lutheran (and later Reformed) churchgoers their religion became little more than an adherence to a set of abstract doctrines that seemed to have little relevance to the way they lived their personal lives. This eventually ushered a reaction in the form the Evangelical Pietistic spiritual revival during the Eighteenth Century.

In this situation, Jacob Spener started a movement within Lutheranism that came to be called *Pietism*. It spread to other faith communities as well. It emphasized a return to the text of the bible, rather than the creeds, it stressed the necessity of a personal relationship to Jesus Christ, and it focused on the need for repentance and to do good works for the less fortunate in society. Pietists also sought to gauge the genuineness of their faith by how they *felt* about their relation to God rather than what they *thought* about Him. They put a lot of emphasis on living holy lives and worried whether they were holy enough for God to be able to save them. In effect they questioned the one thing the Reformers never questioned, i.e. God's irresistible grace and thereby missed the joy of being a child of the Father. Within the Dutch Reformed Christian community, a group most affected by this heart and mind set were the *Oud Gereformeerden*.

Under the influence of the surrounding Enlightenment culture Moralistic Christians reduced the richness of the gospel to a way of promoting moral behaviour. Rationalistic philosophers like Immanuel Kant taught that the goal of human life was *beneficence*, i.e. for one to be kind to ones neighbours, and religion was considered only valid to the extent that it helped to achieve this goal. The preaching of the gospel became reduced to a set of moral lessons aimed at making

Christians live as well behaved citizens of the state. The state church, the Hervormde Kerk was most afflicted by this deviation. In Holland it led to a church split during the Eighteenth Century by the Secession group.

Furthermore, under the influence of surrounding Enlightenment culture biblicists came to view the bible as a collection of isolated infallible texts which they saw as wise sayings directly applicable to living Christian lives in any culture at any time in history. They missed the historical-redemptive unfolding of salvation that is clearly evident in the Scriptures themselves. This deviation most afflicted the Evangelical churches.

All these deviations from the gospel took centuries to unfold, but in the end they caused a number of Reformed Protestant churches to deviate from their original heartfelt confession.

The Secession Group, the Doleantie Group and the influence of Kuyper

Fast forward to Eighteen-Century's Europe, with a particular focus on The Netherlands. 2) 3) 4) At that time, Christianity experienced a continent-wide Evangelical/Pietistic revival fueled by dissatisfaction with the situation in the State church in every country.

A case in point is what happened in The Netherlands among members of the State supported church, *De Hervormde Kerk*, the Reformed Church, or the church that hailed back directly to the Calvinistic Reformation. Under the influence of the Enlightenment that church had become defined by its adherence to a set of abstract doctrines and no more. This gave little comfort to the personal lives for ordinary church members. To fill this need some members met weekly in *conventicles* (a term derived from Pietism) at each others' houses for bible study and to talk about issues that pertained to sin, repentance and salvation, which they perceived to be the heart of the gospel. The authorities of the State supported church, the Hervormde Kerk, considered these meetings to be acts of church disunity and harassed those who participated in these conventicles to the point that they decided in 1834 to secede from the State Church and to form their own church, *de Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerk*. They became known as the *Seceders*.

I should note that this was, to my knowledge, the first split, but by no means the last, in the church that based itself on the Fifteenth Century Calvinistic Reformation.

Fifty-two years later, in 1886, another group seceded from the Hervormde Kerk under the leadership of Abraham Kuyper. They were called the people of the *Doleantie*, or the people who “mourned” (the apostacy of the state church). Where the Secession group left for reasons akin to Pietism, i.e. to combat and to avoid the apostacy of the existing culture, this group left to restore the original impetus of the Reformation, i.e. to engage surrounding culture with the aim of making their Christian influence felt. So, in addition to establishing their own *Gereformeerde Kerk*, they also worked to form their own Christian schools, from Kindergarten to a Free University, their own political party, named *De Anti-Revolutionaire Partij*, and many of their own other social institutions in the news media, institutions for the promotion of the arts and for building public housing. They did indeed make their influence felt culturally, including forming the government of The Netherlands several times, starting with Kuyper becoming their first Prime Minister.

In 1992 Kuyper managed to reunite the Christelijk Gereformeerde group of the Secession and the Gereformeerde group of the Doleantie into one denomination by calling the two groups *Gereformeerde A* and *Gereformeerde B*. A small group of the seceders refused to sign on. They kept the original name, *De Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerk* for themselves and spent their time criticizing the newly formed Gereformeerde church, mainly on its doctrine of *presumed regeneration*.

It is also noteworthy that a sizable group of members in the Hervormde Kerk sided with the principles of the secession, but did not feel free to leave the State church. Instead they formed their own group and called it the *Gereformeerde Bonders within* the Hervormde Kerk.

Lastly, In The Netherlands the Gereformeerde Kerk experienced yet another split much later in 1944. The seceding group left, (or was ousted by) the mother church under the leadership of Klaas Schilder, a professor at the Gereformeerde seminary in Kampen. This sizable group did not see themselves as seceders. They called their act of separation an act of liberation and named their church *De Vrijgemaakte Gereformeerde Kerk*. Doctrinally, according to their own communication, their decision was based on a disagreement about baptism and the Lord’s Supper. But I have been unable to discover the exact content of this point of dispute.

The Development of the Christian Reformed Church of North America

The name of the CRC is not “of North America” but “in North America.” That was a conscious choice parallel to Christ’s “in the world” but not “of the world.”

Also, in 1846 and for some years thereafter a large group of the original seceders emigrated to USA under the leadership of revs. Van Raalte and Scholte with the aim of establishing Dutch Reformed enclaves near Holland, Michigan and near Pella, Iowa. After only a few years the leaders of these Dutch Reformed colonies decided to merge with the Reformed Church of America (RCA). This much older church group had been established in USA centuries ago as an offspring of the Hervormde Kerk in the Netherlands when New York was still a Dutch colony.

Some of the members of the mother church did not agree with the merger and formed their own denomination, *The Christian Reformed Church* (CRC) and they founded their own religious center in Grand Rapids, Michigan where they built their a Christian university and a seminary and called it Calvin College in recognition of one of the founders of the Protestant Reformation. It became a respected Christian university throughout the USA and the world.

Between 1948 and 1965 a large number of Dutch Reformed Christians immigrated to Canada from Holland and started their own churches as Canadian congregations of the CRC in the USA. In this way the American CRC expanded to become *The Christian Reformed Church of North America*. Already from the beginning of the CRC’s expansion the American and the Canadian branches of the CRCNA formed an uneasy alliance with the potential of a split. The American side was more inclined toward Pietism and the Canadian side more toward Kuyparianism.

By the grace of God this has not happened yet. But in the 1980’s another issue arose that did cause a number of congregations to split from the CRC on both sides of the border and to form a variety of *Orthodox Christian Reformed* churches.. The issue that caused the split was whether women were to be allowed serve in ecclesiastical office, like that of elders or deacons or even as preachers of God’s Word. This split was not over a north-south, Canadian vs. American issues, but rather one that pitted **progressive CRC members** against **conservative CRC members**.

I am not too fond of the use of these red (herring?) terms. For people who use them, it is often the equivalent of good or correct people vs bad or wrong people. It seems to me a foreign subjective intrusion into what, I believe, you mean to be an objective history.

In my opinion this was a red herring issue, since in actual fact women had begun to take leadership roles in many congregations already. As I see it, the issue was more an expression of fear by the more conservative members of the church, who, with all the changes that were happening, were afraid that the church was becoming too worldly. This was a sign that in their confessional life they had moved to the combat and avoid camp with respect to surrounding culture.

In my opinion those who currently object to gay membership are likewise motivated by this fear. Throughout our history, when Reformed people became afraid, they moved from a cultural engagement position, which in the best of times has been the default Reformed position, to a combat and avoid position, which is more in line with the dominant heart-and-mind set of Evangelical Christians in North America. This then may lead them to secede from the CRC and to start their own Reformed denomination.

The mind set of Evangelicals—are you not ignoring the fact that aspects of Kuyperian thought have crept into the Evangelical community? When Christianity Today declares Kuyper one of the three most influential theologians in the 20th century in the USA that means something, even if it is not precisely our kind of Reformational thinking.

So, for the CRC to deal with the gay membership issue successfully we may need to defocus on this issue and instead we may have to consider repenting from the schismatic tendencies within in us that have plagued the Reformed Christian community from its inception.

From its inception? I thought it began early in the 19th century?

That schismatic history cannot be denied. We have (had) too much of that among the Reformed here in Canada. But not sure your scheme of progressive vs conservative AND fear is an adequate framework from which to view that history. Disagreement is not the same as fear. And: Are you not driven by fear as well? Your whole article seems to me an expression of fear.

How do you see Runner's later development in joining one of the groups that seceded from the CRC? Was that the fear you are talking of?

For many decades scholars have been relegating the role of religion to a secondary or even lower level of influence. It was mostly seen as a subsidiary factor under economics, politics or culture. This has been

debunked the last couple of decades and it is now recognized as a major factor, not merely subsidiary.

I get the feeling you are doing the same with the HS issue. You turn it into a subsidiary force with fear being the major one. Get rid of the fear and you'll get rid of HS. Am I doing you an injustice?

You write of the influence of pietism and related streams of thought as they are found within the CRC. For a clear example I invite you to turn to a publication I edited: *The Early CRC in Its Own Words*. You can find it on the BOER FAMILY LEGACY page of my website.

Sources consulted

- 1) Runner, H. Evan, *The Christian in the World*. A lecture delivered some time in early 1960 at Calvin College.
Runner believed that the churches of the Reformation, past and present, struggle with a debate about the importance of *regeneration vs. common grace*.
- 2) Van Belle, H. "From Religious Pluralism To Cultural Pluralism, Continuity and Change Among the Reformed Dutch in Canada" in R. Kroes and H. Neuschäfer, (eds.) *The Dutch in North America, Their Immigration and Cultural Continuity*, Amsterdam: V. U. University Press, 1991, 40 pp.
- 3) _____ "The Impact of W.W.II on the Reformed Dutch in the Netherlands and Canada: A Comparison," *Pro Rege*, vol XIX, 4, June 1991.
- 4) _____ "Vision and Revision, a brief history of neo-Calvinism in The Netherlands and Canada" in G. Dekker, D. Luidens & R. Rice (eds.) 1997 *Rethinking Secularization: Reformed Reactions to Modernity*, New York, University Press of America.

Thanks for this bibliography. It provides me with more complete info of your three publications listed here.