

## REPORT 44

## THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

(Arts. 51, 52)

DEAR BROTHERS:

## PREFACE

The Synod of 1969 appointed this committee to study the nature and extent of biblical authority. The mandate for this committee reads as follows:

"Synod appoint a committee to study the nature and extent of biblical authority, and in particular the 'connection between the content and purpose of Scripture as the saving revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the consequent and deducible authority of Scripture,' to evaluate critically in the light of the above-mentioned study and our confessional standards the manner of interpreting Scripture presently employed by some contemporary Reformed scholars, and to serve the churches with pastoral advice in these matters. (Note: the quotation is from the letter of the Gereformeerde Kerken to the RES 1969 as cited on pp 86-87 of our 1969 Agenda.)

"Grounds:

"a. The Gereformeerde Kerken have expressed the desire 'for a continued joint discussion of these questions.' (Letter addressed to RES dated August 1, 1969; cf. Acts of RES, pp. 307-309).

"b. The Reformed Ecumenical Synod has requested this study. (cf. Agenda, Report 16, VI d, pp. 86, 87). (See Supplement 16).

"c. In this way the pastoral concern of Overture 5 can be met (Acts, 1969, p. 102)."

In addition to the materials contained in the mandate and grounds listed above, the Synod of 1970 referred to this committee certain documents involved in the matter which the Central Avenue Consistory had raised concerning Dr. Willis De Boer's interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis. These documents were referred to the committee "for their consideration in making their report" (Acts, 1970, p. 43).

In fulfillment of its mandate the study committee submitted its original report to the Synod of 1971. Initially the advisory committee of the 1971 Synod recommended that synod adopt the points of pastoral advice contained in the report (Acts, 1971, pp. 102-103). But after some discussion on these points, synod instructed its advisory committee to reformulate its recommendations along the following lines:

"1. The entire report be submitted to the churches for study and reactions."

"2. The entire report be submitted to the RES for consideration and reactions."

"3. The study committee be retained to receive and evaluate these reactions." (Acts, 1971, pp. 128-129).

In reformulating its recommendations, the advisory committee of the 1971 synod did not recommend that the report be submitted to the Reformed Ecumenical Synod. It felt that it was inappropriate to send to the RES a report on which our churches had taken no decision. Instead it recommended the following four points which were adopted by synod:

"1. That synod submit the entire report to the churches for study and reactions. Ground: This will provide the churches opportunity for consideration of the report.

"2. That the study committee be retained to receive and evaluate these reactions, and structure the discussion as it deems best, with a view to presenting a report in 1972.

"3. That synod make this report available to the churches in booklet form.

"4. That synod declare that this is its answer to Overture 57." (Acts, 1971, p. 129).

During the past year your committee set itself to the task of implementing these decisions of 1971. Now, in reporting to the Synod of 1972, we call your attention to this past year's activities, hoping that this resumé will serve as helpful background for a better understanding of this revised report on the Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority.

In compliance with the decisions of the Synod of 1971 the original report was made available to the churches in booklet form. Taking into account the discussions of this report at last year's synod, the committee included in the booklet a preface to the report to assist the churches in the continuing discussion. In this preface a number of explanations were offered in an attempt to clarify some questions and remove some misunderstandings which had arisen. The preface also made an appeal to the churches and members of the churches to share their reactions to the report with the committee for its consideration in submitting its report anew to the Synod of 1972.

It appears that this original report has enjoyed a wide circulation in the churches and sparked some lively discussion. Over 10,250 copies of the booklet were printed in September. Within six months the entire stock was exhausted. The committee received responses from ninety-seven consistories, plus sixty-one personal letters. Random conversations indicate that many more consistories and church groups also discussed the report, but chose not to submit their reactions. The committee also took note of articles on the report in various publications and reactions voiced at various public meetings. In an attempt to help structure the discussion, members of the committee contributed a series of six articles in *THE BANNER*, plus some writings in other publications. Members of the committee also participated in various meetings to discuss the report with consistories, classes, ministerial associations, a seminary seminar, and other church-related organizations.

A word of appreciation is in order for the many lively and meaningful discussions which this report occasioned in the life of the church. Honest and healthy discussion in matters of agreement as well as disagreement is very important for the well-being of the church. We make bold to suggest that synod seek ways of encouraging our people to keep

alive in our churches continuing brotherly discussions of these vital issues surrounding biblical authority. A word of commendation is in order for the way many have undertaken a careful and thorough study of this report. The committee was able to benefit greatly from many points of valid concern and criticism arising out of the bosom of the church. It was encouraged by those who expressed general agreement and even enthusiastic endorsement of the report. Even the large volume of negative critics proved in great measure to be very helpful. At the same time, however, the committee feels constrained to add a word of deep disappointment concerning wholesale condemnation sometimes heaped upon the report and the irresponsible charges sometimes leveled against it. Nevertheless, constructive criticism born out of mutual concern for a faithful witness to the truth of God's Word is always a tremendous asset in the life of the church. The committee therefore openly acknowledges its indebtedness to many consistories and church members for the valuable contributions they made to our continuing reflection upon the meaning of biblical authority.

The committee acknowledged by return mail all communications addressed to it. All correspondents were assured that their reactions would be given serious consideration by the committee. In making this promise we have tried to keep our word. Accordingly, in the light of both positive and negative criticisms and the ongoing discussions, we now submit to the Synod of 1972 our revised report on the Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority.

After continued study and reflection the committee feels compelled to maintain the major thrust of its original report, convinced that the main lines of that report are true to Scripture and the creeds. However, to clarify the intent of the report and to remove some misunderstandings, the committee has introduced a number of minor revisions and expanded its discussion on a number of points in the report. In addition, on the four matters which follow the report has undergone some rather substantial revisions.

First, further reflection on the two formulations of authority as sketched in the original report has resulted in a more unified presentation in this revised report. The committee does not wish these two formulations to be construed as two distinct positions, but as integral aspects of the same truth. The present report was therefore revised accordingly.

Secondly, the committee discovered that the section in the original report dealing with two approaches to Genesis 1-11 was subject to interpretations radically different from that intended by the committee. It was therefore decided to restructure and expand this section in such a way as to more clearly express the intent of the report, namely to maintain the clear witness of Scripture and the creeds to the historical reality of the events recorded in Genesis 1-11, yet without imposing upon the church an official binding interpretation of all the details which enter into the composition of this unique segment of biblical revelation.

Thirdly, early in the discussion of the original report it came to the attention of the committee that the phrase "the historical reality of redemptive events", which occurred three times in the section on Pas-

toral Advice, was the occasion for some misunderstanding. In this revised report the committee seeks to remove this occasion for misunderstanding. These passages have been rewritten to make clear that the report does not intend to introduce into biblical interpretation a dualism between some events recorded in Scripture which do participate in the history of redemption and others which do not. All events recorded in Scripture, even creation and the fall in their own unique way, are viewed as belonging to the over-all history of redemption, and as such come to us with the full authority of the Word of God.

Fourthly, the revised report proposes seven points of pastoral advice rather than five. These changes were accomplished, first, by drafting a new first point of pastoral advice in order to summarize more adequately in a positive way the results of our study on the nature and extent of biblical authority. Furthermore, the second point of pastoral advice in the original report was divided into two points of pastoral advice in the revised report in order to set those two parts in clearer focus. Moreover, the first point of pastoral advice in the original report was made the final point of pastoral advice in the revised report because of its comprehensive nature as a practical conclusion.

Against the background of these introductory comments, your committee now respectfully submits its revised report on the Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority to the Synod of 1972 for its consideration and action.

## I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS OF THE MANDATE

### A. *The Occasion for the Mandate*

The grounds given for the mandate indicate that the background lies in the work of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod. For even Overture 5, which is given as the third ground for the mandate, had for one of its two grounds the request of the Gereformeerde Kerken submitted to the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (cf. Acts, 1969, p. 503). The doctrine of Scripture has been on the agenda of the RES since its inception, but it was not until Potchefstroom, 1958, that the RES issued a declaration concerning that doctrine. The declaration was to the effect that Scripture in its whole extent and in all its parts is the infallible and inerrant Word of God; and even though the Holy Spirit used human authors, inspiration entails that what they wrote was an infallible communication of God's self-revelation. This declaration was directed primarily against the error which characterizes Scripture as a fallible human witness to divine revelation.

At the next meeting of the RES in 1963, the Gereformeerde Kerken submitted a letter expressing their basic agreement with the declaration of Potchefstroom while raising a question concerning the adequacy of that declaration:

"... The synod readily expresses its agreement with the vigorously expressed confession concerning the inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture as an absolute and infallible rule for the faith and life of the church, and it also agrees with the rejection of such qualified views as would hold the Scripture to be a fallible human witness to revelation.

On the other hand, it is the judgment of synod, that the pronouncements of the RES do not make sufficient distinctions in dealing with the nature and extent of the authority of Scripture which follow from its inspiration to be able to satisfy the demands which may be made of a new, elucidative confession of the inspiration and authority of Scripture. In particular, it fails to find in the pronouncements of the RES any connection between the content and purpose of Scripture as the saving revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the consequent and deducible authority of Scripture" (Acts, RES 1963, p. 202).

In response the RES requested the Gereformeerde Kerken to present a supplementary report which would suggest solutions to the problems they themselves had raised. The RES also called attention to the report, "Infallibility and Inspiration in the Light of Scripture and the Creeds," which had meanwhile been presented to the Synod of the CRC in 1961. The Gereformeerde Kerken informed the RES in 1968 that they could not comply with the request for a supplementary report. They felt that a number of questions concerning the scope and nature of biblical authority were still very much in discussion and that therefore the time was not ripe for a common declaration on these matters. Instead, they requested a continued joint discussion of these questions (cf. Acts, RES 1968, p. 308).

Therefore, the RES in 1968 recommended.

"that the two sentences from the letter of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland to the RES 1963 (Acts, 1963, p. 202; cf. earlier quotation) be referred to the churches of the RES, and they be urgently requested to give earnest and prompt study to the questions so urgently asked by the Gereformeerde Kerken, and that the churches send their conclusions in these matters to the other member churches as soon as possible, and the General Secretary be asked to stimulate studies and conferences on this subject" (Acts, RES 1968, p. 74).

We must remember this historical sequence. That sequence indicates both the limited nature of the mandate given to the present committee and the starting point of its work. This mandate does not call for studying all over again the entire issue of the Bible's inspiration and infallibility or trust-worthiness. Rather, it calls for the study of the nature and extent of biblical authority in relation to the content and purpose of Scripture.

#### *B. Relation of the Present Study to the Reports of 1958 and 1961*

Before proceeding to the study of the nature and extent of biblical authority, the committee desires to call specific attention to the two above-mentioned reports on inspiration and trustworthiness and to some attendant pronouncements of the synods of the RES and the CRC on these matters. We do so to indicate our agreement with their thrust and to focus attention upon some of their givens and conclusions that are immediately relevant to this study.

##### *1. Agreement with the RES Report*

As a starting point and a source of relevant material we turn first to the "Report of the Committee on Inspiration to the Reformed Ecu-

menical Synod of 1958" (*Acts of RES*, 1958, pp. 33-56). This is a substantial report on inspiration and inerrancy. It presents a detailed study of two most informative Scripture passages on inspiration, II Timothy 3:15, 16 and II Peter 1:21, to which it adds an analysis of the New Testament view of the Old Testament and of the witness of the apostles. It gives furthermore a doctrinal analysis of inspiration beginning with the witness of the creeds. The comprehensive conclusion of the report is: "Holy Scripture alone and Holy Scripture in its entirety is the Word of God written, given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and practice, an inspiration of an organic nature which extends not only to the ideas but also to the words of Holy Scripture, and is so unique in its effect that Holy Scripture and Holy Scripture alone is the Word of God." (*Acts of RES*, 1958, p. 55).

Significant is that the authors of the report saw the need for including a section entitled "Organic Character of the Revelation of Two Covenants" (*Acts*, 1958, p. 44f.). The report here calls for "due regard to Scripture as an organism." While the revelation of the God in the Bible is a unity, that unity is not without diversity. Thus there is a *history* of redemptive revelation, there is progression from the Old Testament to the New, and there are contrasts between the two covenants. Recognition of Scripture as an organism will keep us, the report asserts, from treating the oracles of God as "... a multitude of isolated sentences which may be understood apart from their place in their immediate context and in that of the larger context" as well as from "... a mechanical and forced method of harmonistics." The report asks for recognition of the organic nature of inspiration intending thereby neither to detract from the divine inspiration nor to limit the authority of Scripture. It does so rather to clarify the avenue through which God reveals himself in a wholly trustworthy manner. Its conclusion on this point is the following: "This doctrine of inspiration, while holding that the human authors of Scripture were moved by the Holy Spirit so as to insure that what they wrote communicated infallibly God's self-revelation, also maintains that the Holy Spirit did not suppress their personalities, but rather that he sovereignly prepared, controlled and directed them in such a way that he utilized their endowments and experience, their research and reflection, their language and style. This human aspect of Scripture does not, however, allow for the inference that Scripture may be regarded as a fallible human witness to divine revelation, for such an evaluation constitutes an attack upon the glorious sovereign work of the Holy Spirit in inspiration" (*Acts of RES*, 1958, p. 55).

The report observes a direct relationship between inspiration and the content and purpose of Scripture. It asserts that Scripture is inspired with a view to a particular purpose and that that purpose will bear significantly upon one's understanding of inspiration. "Broadly speaking it may be said that the content of Scripture is concerned with the unfolding of the divine plan of redemption..." It observes how Paul in II Timothy 3:15-17 "lays remarkable emphasis upon the fact that the inspired Scriptures have been provided with a view to the saving

transformation of man by way of faith in Christ" (p. 38). While warning that this observation may not be thought of as restricting the extent of inspiration, the report holds that "the redemptive purpose of revelation and inspiration will have far-reaching consequences for our interpretation of the Bible" (p. 38). Thus the report affirms that it is valid and necessary to understand the inspiration of Scripture as integrally tied in with the redemptive purpose of Scripture.

Finally, the report acknowledges that the historic Christian church's sustained faith "that Scripture in its whole extent and in all its parts is the infallible and inerrant Word of God" is explained by the fact of Scripture's pervasive witness to its own God-breathed origin and character, and by the fact that as redemptive revelation Scripture is necessarily characterized by the divinity which belongs to redemption. (Acts of RES, 1958, p. 56). The conclusions drafted by the committee were adopted by the RES (Acts of RES, 1958, p. 56). They were also adopted, with appropriate editorial changes, by the CRC Synod of 1959 (Acts, 1959, p. 64).

## 2. Agreement with the CRC Report

The action of the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1961 on the report "Infallibility and Inspiration in the Light of Scripture and our Creeds" together with that report itself form another significant basis for our study. That synod commended this report to the church because it felt that the report would serve to remove misunderstandings that had arisen and would function at the same time as a framework for further study of the nature of the relationship between inspiration and infallibility. The report was occasioned by a spirited discussion in our denomination about how the infallibility of Scripture ought to be understood.

The report is a detailed study of inspiration and infallibility and the relationship between them. With care and precision relevant passages of Scripture are exegeted. In connection with each of these the report seeks to answer the question on what matters Scripture speaks with divine authority and trustworthiness. The word "infallible" connotes, so says the report, "non-deceptiveness, inerrancy and non-failingness, i.e. all those qualities which make for complete trustworthiness." In the light of the witness of Scripture and the meaning of the concept "infallible," the report concludes: "The inference from inspiration to infallibility is indeed legitimized by revelation itself" (Acts of Synod, 1961, p. 285).

In what way does the report understand infallibility as applied to Scripture? The following quotations pinpoint its position. "Initially we may say that infallibility as an inference drawn from inspiration is to be ascribed to Scripture only in accord with the extent, nature and purpose of inspiration . . . . The extent of inspiration, we affirm, is both plenary and verbal. It reaches to the whole of Scripture and to all its parts. We must therefore assume that Scripture's trustworthiness extends to every word. However, inspiration with its sequent divine trustworthiness does not apply to each word, each 'jot and tittle', considered in isolation . . . . As to the nature of inspiration, we begin with the as-

sumption that it is organic . . . . The organic nature of inspiration precludes defining infallibility in terms of purity of literary style, pedantic regularity in grammatical construction and orthography or monotonous uniformity in literary skill. It warns us further not to expect that the human authors wrote from the vantage point of omniscience and full comprehension. They were men whose knowledge did not run ahead of their day until they were acted upon by the inspiring Spirit of God, and then their knowledge advanced only in those matters on which God would have them speak with authority . . . . Finally, there is the purpose of inspiration. The purpose was . . . to constitute Scripture a self-revelation of God possessing an authority and a trustworthiness . . . that is divine. As 'an inspired rule for faith and practice' Scripture must be supposed to speak with divine trustworthiness on all matters . . . on which Scripture claims to speak authoritatively" (Acts, pp 285-287).

Even more clearly than the RES report, the 1961 report emphasizes the redemptive focus of Scripture. The inspiration, authority and trustworthiness of Scripture cannot be properly understood apart from that focus. The report asserts: "To be sure, Scripture does not range encyclopedically over the whole spectrum of human knowledge. There is a central point of focus. Its purpose is to make men 'wise unto salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.' Therefore it centrally and pervasively witnesses to Christ and the way of salvation which God has both wrought and supremely revealed in him. It is for this purpose and for this purpose only that Scripture makes use of Scripture, and it is from this perspective and from this perspective only that Scripture makes claims for itself. Scripture presents itself solely as a divine self-revelation of God for redemptive purposes. But in communicating this redemptive self-disclosure of God, Scripture claims to speak authoritatively and infallibly on all matters on which it finds necessity to speak" (Acts, p. 290).

On the basis of this report the Synod of 1961 declared "that both Scripture and the creeds establish an essential relationship between inspiration and infallibility, in which the infallibility of Scripture is inferred from inspiration, and inspiration secures the infallibility of all of Scripture." That same synod affirmed the faith of the church in the infallibility of Scripture and urged upon the church the approach of humble faith in the Word of God (Acts of Synod, 1961, pp. 78, 79).

This report on the Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority should be viewed in the light of the two above-mentioned studies and the synodical decisions concerning them. We do not distantiate ourselves from the positions taken there. Rather, we acknowledge our agreement with the thrust of those reports and proceed on the basis of the church's common confession concerning these matters. But the issue before us has a distinctly different focus from those of the previous reports. The issue now is whether the church can come to greater clarity on the nature and extent of biblical authority and what has been called "the connection between the content and purpose of Scripture as the saving revelation of God in Jesus Christ *and* the consequent and deducible authority of Scripture."



### C. *The Specific Mandate*

The attempt to gain a perspective on the nature and extent of the authority of Scripture by viewing it in relationship to the content and purpose of Scripture is, as the reports of 1958 and 1961 testify, not a new development in the Reformed tradition. Herman Bavinck already insisted on this relationship in his discussion of organic inspiration. "Scripture," he said, "is the Word of God because in it the Holy Spirit witnesses to Christ and because the incarnate Word is both its material and its content. Form and content interpenetrate each other and may not be separated" (*Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 1928, I, p. 414). Thus the recommendation of the RES to study this issue does not involve the development of a completely new idea, but rather the explication of the consequences of an idea commonly accepted in the Reformed tradition.

It may seem strange then that the study of an idea commonly accepted should become a matter of such urgent consideration. The reason for this is well known to those who are aware of recent theological developments in the Reformed community. Some publications dealing with the doctrine of Scripture have vigorously stressed this perspective which closely ties the inspiration and authority of Scripture to the content and purpose of Scripture as the saving revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The results of this emphasis and the development of methods for the study of Scripture within the framework of this emphasis have not received unanimous acceptance. In fact, some within the Reformed community believe that the manner in which this perspective functions in some recent publications is not really an acceptable development of an undeveloped nuance in the Reformed tradition, but that it actually constitutes an unacceptable delimitation of—and to that extent a denial of—our common confession concerning the full authority of the Word of God. Overture 5 speaks of the "feelings of uncertainty, grief and even distrust" caused by these recent theological developments (cf. Acts, 1969, p. 502).

In this way the concern of the RES to have the doctrinal issue studied and the pastoral concern of Overture 5 come together, for the central issue in both cases is the same. Thus it is the task of this committee first of all to study the authority of Scripture in relationship to the content and purpose of Scripture (Section III of this report), to ascertain then whether some of the recent developments remain within our common confession concerning the authority of Scripture (Section IV), and finally in the light of this to give some pastoral advice to the churches (Section V).

## II. PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF A KEY SENTENCE

The sentence quoted in our mandate is taken from the letter of the Gereformeerde Kerken to the RES in 1963 in which they point out what they judge to be the inadequacy of the RES declarations of 1958. In their judgment those declarations failed to make sufficient distinctions in dealing with the nature and extent of the authority of Scripture, and in particular failed to discuss the "connection between the

content and purpose of Scripture as the saving revelation of God in Jesus Christ *and* the consequent and deducible authority of Scripture.”

The major obstacle in interpreting this sentence lies in the fact that it occurs in a letter without an interpretative context. Hence the sentence remains somewhat ambiguous and it is open to more than one interpretation. For example, it could appear to suggest that the authority of Scripture only follows upon and is to be deduced from its content and purpose. If so, it would be possible to conclude that the authority of Scripture is somehow limited to a canon within the canon which must now be discovered. This in turn would produce some form of dualistic approach to the authority of Scripture expressed perhaps in terms of kernel and husk, content and wrapping, the divine and the human factors, or in terms of that which is and that which is not the infallible Word of God. Although obviously it is necessary to make some distinctions in interpreting the concrete expressions of Scripture's authority (e.g. the traditional distinction between historical and normative authority), any attempt to separate in a *dualistic* fashion the content of Scripture from the form in which it comes to us runs counter to the genius of the Reformed tradition. That tradition has consistently opposed any attempt to separate the formal and the material aspects of Scripture, or to separate Jesus Christ as the content of Scripture from the garment of Scripture in which he comes to us. It has affirmed that both the form and the content of Scripture participate in the single, unified, authoritative Word of God, and that any distinction deemed necessary for interpretation should not imply that certain aspects can be removed or isolated from the authority in which they share precisely as aspects of the revelation of God. It has insisted upon dealing with the Scripture and its authority as an integrated whole. If the sentence in question therefore intends to suggest dualistic approach to the authority of Scripture, it is not acceptable.

There is, however, reason to doubt that such a dualism is the intent of the sentence. Although the English version of the letter is the official version sent to the RES, the Dutch version written for the Synod of Apeldoorn is less ambiguous and less deductivistic. Instead of speaking of “the *consequent* and deducible authority of Scripture” it speaks of “*het daarmee gegeven en daaruit af te leiden gezag der Schrift*” (the concomitant and deducible authority of Scripture). Thus the Dutch version is much closer to affirming that the authority of Scripture is given along with—and is not simply to be deduced from—the content of Scripture. It then speaks in addition of the authority that is to be deduced from the content and purpose of Scripture, but by this they intend to refer only to the nature and extent of that authority. When seen in this light, the sentence does not intend to suggest that the authority of Scripture pertains to something less than the whole of Scripture. Whether this sentence expresses as clearly as possible the intent lying behind the letter is questionable.

Therefore, we believe that we should not focus our attention upon that sentence and its manner of formulating the issue, but should deal with the issue out of which it arose. That issue came to expression in the

discussion of the 1958 RES resolutions on Scripture at the 1961 Synod of the Gereformeerde Kerken at Apeldoorn. There the general criticism expressed was that the 1958 resolutions, while stressing the divine character of Scripture, failed to do justice to the "human side" of Scripture. For example, although the resolutions speak of organic inspiration, their primary intent is to affirm that human authorship does not infringe on the divine authority of Scripture. Again, although the resolutions characterize Scripture as redemptive revelation, the only conclusion drawn from that fact is that Scripture is characterized by the divinity which belongs to redemption.

Although accepting all of this as true, the Synod of Apeldoorn did not consider this to be an adequate confession in the context of the questions being asked today. In this century there has been a tremendous increase in knowledge concerning the past history of mankind. In addition, modern man is conscious of his distance from that past, and he is aware of the differences in the human situation as man moves from one era to the next. Consequently, because Scripture is in one sense an historical book recording past events and written by men who lived many centuries ago, questions are being asked today precisely about that historical character of Scripture. Is the authority of Scripture in any way influenced or qualified by its historical character? That is the question that must be answered today. And although organic inspiration does not in any way reduce the divine authority of Scripture, it does affect the concrete form and manner in which the divine authority is expressed. Although the character of Scripture as redemptive revelation implies its divine authority, that same redemptive character has much to say concerning the nature and extent of that authority. Thus the criticism of the 1958 resolutions by the Synod of Apeldoorn was not that they are incorrect, but that they do not provide us with the kinds of distinctions or the framework necessary in order to answer the questions being asked today about the authority of Scripture.

A subsidiary concern running through the discussion at Apeldoorn was the desire to avoid an atomistic approach to the concept of inspiration and authority (i.e. one that views each word or verse as being inspired and authoritative in and by itself). That same desire was expressed in the 1958 RES report, but the Synod at Apeldoorn felt that this desire could not adequately succeed when one stresses only the divine character of Scripture. An exclusive emphasis upon divine inspiration could lead to the conclusion that each passage or verse in Scripture has authority in and of itself quite apart from the central content and purpose of Scripture. The synod was not suggesting that such a conclusion was to be derived from the 1958 report, but only that a more adequate defense against such an atomistic view of the inspiration and authority of Scripture requires a discussion of that authority in relationship to the pervasive content and center of Scripture, Jesus Christ. In this way a clearer insight would be gained into the nature of the authority of Scripture both in terms of its totality and in terms of its various parts.

### III. THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

#### A. *A Confessional Stance*

The mandate of this committee concerns the nature and extent of biblical authority. However, discussion of biblical authority is never a simple matter. There is a mystery surrounding the authority of the Bible which we can never fathom. The authority of the Bible is the authority of God himself, and we acknowledge the authority of the Scriptures "because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they carry the evidence thereof in themselves" (Belgic Confession, Art. V). We can never adequately define but only acknowledge and confess God's authority. We confess that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and that it is unconditionally authoritative for faith and life. The nature and extent of Scripture's authority can really be discovered only through a life of obedient submission to it, a life guided by the Holy Spirit. The entire Scripture in its entirety, as the inspired Word of God, is authoritative. The Scripture is a comprehensive Word, a Word addressing the whole of life and calling one's whole life into the service of God. It is the Word of him who created all things and who is now through his Son and Spirit recreating all things. The written Word as the message of salvation in Christ sheds light upon the whole creation and upon man within the creation, for it is the revelation of the whole counsel of God.

This confessional stance is clearly expressed in our Reformed Confessions. In the words of the Belgic Confession we confess that we know God by two means: "First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe; . . . a most elegant book . . . sufficient to convince men and leave them without excuse. Second, he makes himself more clearly and fully known to us by his holy and divine Word, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to his glory and our salvation" (Art. II). Further, we confess that this Word of God was not sent nor delivered by the will of man, but that 'men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit' . . . and that afterwards God, from a special care which he has for us and our salvation, commanded his servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit his revealed word to writing and he himself wrote with his own finger the two tables of the law. Therefore we call such writings holy and divine Scriptures" (Art. III). And "we believe that the Holy Scriptures are contained in two books, namely, the Old and New Testament, which are canonical, against which nothing can be alleged" (Art. IV). After mentioning the sixty-six books of Scripture, we confess that "we receive all books, and these only, as canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith; believing without any doubt all things contained in them, not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but more especially because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they carry the evidence thereof in themselves" (Art. V). And, with respect to the sufficiency of the Scriptures as the only rule of faith, we confess "that those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein" (Art. VII).

This confession, we are convinced, is required by Scripture and is faithful to Scripture itself. Scripture is our final and absolute authority in this life for it is the Word of God. Neither the creed itself nor "any writings of men" may be regarded as "of equal value with those divine Scriptures"; Scripture is "the infallible rule" of faith and life (Art. VIII).

Scripture's own claim to authority as the Word of God is the basis for this confessional stance. Jesus' attitude toward the (Old Testament) Scripture is decisive. In his entire ministry he teaches and demonstrates that "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:34). In withstanding the temptations of Satan, Jesus Christ simply responded: "It is written" (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10). In a comprehensive way Christ relates his entire ministry to the fulfillment of Scripture: "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:17-18).

All Scripture speaks with the authority of "thus saith the Lord." Paul asserts that the "sacred writings . . . are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" because "all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (II Tim. 3:15-17). Similarly Peter writes: "First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (II Peter 1:20-21). Thus what Scripture says, God says. The entire "God-breathed" Scripture is the authoritative Word of God. That is Scripture's claim, and the Christian believingly responds to God's Word in confession.

### *B. Description of Biblical Authority*

The confessional stance surveyed above also underlies this report. We not only judge this confession to be correct and faithful to Scripture; we also judge it to be adequate in itself—also for the present day. All that one can really do in fulfillment of our mandate is to state this confession in different ways, explain its meaning and implications, and defend it in the face of alternative views. This is now part of our task as we respond to synod's mandate "to study the nature and extent of biblical authority."

At the outset it may be observed that the terms "nature and extent" are not ordinarily applied to the authority of Scripture. Our creeds speak of the authority of Scripture in terms of God as the divine author. This reflects the Reformation emphasis upon the divine authority of Scripture in contrast to the Roman Catholic emphasis, at least in practice, upon ecclesiastical authority. Protestant theologians also distinguished between the formal authority and the material authority of Scripture; formal authority referring to the divine author, and material referring to the content of Scripture. With reference to the content of Scripture, a distinction was sometimes made between historical authority and normative authority; historical authority indicating that everything in Scrip-

ture is historically true and trustworthy even when reference is to Satan and godless men; and normative authority referring to that which is normative for us, excluding, for example the words of Satan and godless men.

The terms "nature and extent" are regularly applied to inspiration, but their application to the authority of Scripture is rare in the history of the church and theology. However, these terms have been applied to the authority of Scripture in recent discussions and synod's mandate requires that this be the focus of the present study.

*The Nature & Extent of Biblical Authority — The Content & Purpose of Scripture.*

The Bible addresses man with divine authority. The Holy Spirit inspired men to write the Scriptures, and by means of inspiration God himself is the author of Scripture. Thus Scripture speaks with the authority of its divine author. All Scripture speaks with the authority of "Thus saith the Lord." Recognition of this divine authority of Scripture was the basis for Jesus' appeal to "It is written." What Scripture says, God says. Thus it must be affirmed that the *nature* of Scripture's authority is *divine*. And because the entire Scripture is the inspired Word of God, it must be affirmed also that the *extent* of the authority of Scripture is *pervasive*; it is a *plenary and verbal authority* just as it is a plenary and verbal inspiration. The entire Scripture—its whole extent, all its parts, its very words—is the *inspired and authoritative* Word of God.

This affirmation of the *nature and extent* of the authority of Scripture as a *divine, plenary authority* is basic to every true faith-response to God's Word. However, this faithful confession requires further elaboration. What it is that God specifically says in the authoritative Scripture can be grasped only by a faithful hearing and interpretation of Scripture itself. While the entire Scripture speaks with divine authority, this divine authority is understood concretely and specifically only when one takes account of what God said, how he spoke, to whom he spoke, etc. Thus a description of biblical authority requires an understanding of the content and purpose of the divine message as well as the acknowledgment of the authority of the divine author of Scripture.

The importance of understanding the content and purpose of Scripture in connection with authority can be clarified by a comparison with what we commonly call "general revelation." When one speaks of the divine, plenary authority of Scripture, he must recognize that it is also warranted to speak of the divine, plenary authority of general revelation. We must confess that God's revelation is always presented with divine authority. We confess that God reveals himself in the "creation, preservation, and government of the universe." This revelation, usually called general revelation or creation revelation by Reformed theologians, is also given with divine authority. While this revelation in creation and history is a non-verbal revelation, we must confess that the divine authority of this revelation is also pervasive; it is also a divine, plenary authority—that is, all of general revelation is addressed to us by God with divine authority. Of course, as a result of the fall man is not a faith-

ful respondent to the creation revelation; the sinner now needs the Scripture as the "spectacles" by which he, through faith in Jesus Christ, is again enabled to read God's revelation in creation faithfully.

Thus, while one must speak of the divine, plenary authority of general revelation as well as the divine, plenary authority of Scripture, the difference between these two is rooted in the message or content of each. In a comprehensive way we can say that general revelation reveals God the Creator, while Scripture reveals God the Creator-Redeemer. Or we can say that general revelation is a non-redemptive revelation while Scripture is a redemptive, saving revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Scripture in its entirety is addressed to fallen man, man the sinner. Scripture reveals what God has done for man's salvation; it sets forth the saving revelation of God in Jesus Christ. All Scripture presents this redemptive, saving message as it unfolds the theme of creation, fall, and redemption. In other words, Scripture's message is not partly redemptive and partly non-redemptive. All Scripture is redemptive in character; it is addressed to fallen man in order to redeem him totally by redirecting him in faith to God, his Creator-Redeemer. As such Scripture reveals God's good creation of all things, man's rebellious fall into sin, and God's saving work through Jesus Christ for man's salvation and the building of the kingdom of God.

Thus the entire Scripture is redemptive, even as it republishes and interprets the creation revelation (Ps. 19, Rom. 1:18 ff, etc.), as it reveals God's dealings with mankind from creation to the time of Abraham, as it reveals God's covenantal activity with Abraham and Israel, as it reveals the life and work of Jesus Christ. The whole of the Scriptural message is aimed at redirecting the sinner to know God and himself so that he may serve God with all his heart in all his ways. What Scripture reveals concerning the creation, the role of the state and society, the nature of man and the world, and whatever else, is God's redemptive revelation to man. Salvation must be seen in its comprehensive dimensions, and any form of dualism between nature and grace—whether Roman Catholic, Barthian, fundamentalistic, or whatever—must be rejected.

In the light of the above considerations, we must say that the divine, plenary authority of Scripture is expressed in its totally redemptive, saving message. Furthermore, this redemptive, saving message of the Scripture is given in the history of a progressively unfolding revelation. While all Scripture speaks with divine authority, the reader of Scripture must pay attention to what God says, how he speaks, to whom he speaks, etc. The progressively developing covenant history must be considered in rightly understanding God's revelation. There is fulfillment in Jesus Christ, and therefore not all of the authoritative Word of God applies in the same way to faith and conduct today. God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son is not a command of God to all covenant parents to sacrifice their first-born in the same way. The ceremonial requirements of the Old Testament are no longer to be observed after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, whether applicable for a limited time or for the whole of history, the address of God is divinely authoritative. But questions as to its specific intent and

meaning, and its present applicability arise in connection with faithful hearing and interpretation of that divinely authoritative Word. In this way the nature and extent of biblical authority involve both the authority of the divine author and the content and purpose of his authoritative message. These are like the two sides of one coin.

### *Excluded Positions*

From the description of the nature and extent of biblical authority presented above, it should be clear that various contemporary views of biblical authority are rejected. Clearly rejected, both by our creeds and the above description, is the traditional Roman Catholic view which, at least in practice, views the authority of the Bible as a church-imposed, ecclesiastical authority. The liberal view is also rejected; it regards the authority of Scripture as only that of the unique religious consciousness of gifted men who wrote the Bible. The neo-orthodox view of Karl Barth in which the authority of Scripture is regarded as merely "witness to revelation" is also rejected. Unacceptable also is the view of biblical authority suggested by Rudolf Bultmann (and carried on in the "new quest" and the "new hermeneutics" of G. Ebeling, E. Fuchs etc.) in which the Gospels are regarded in varying degree as the creation of the early church (*Gemeindetheologie*). The view of biblical authority set forth in this report is clearly incompatible with any of these major contemporary views.

In the theological literature of our day, the views just mentioned are very common. At the same time one frequently discovers complex variations of these views as well as combinations of features of these main views. In this report it is not possible to mention all the complex variations of the views of biblical authority. However, this report is mainly concerned with the new theology that is being developed within the Reformed community. This new theology often reflects nuances of some of the main contemporary views, but here they become even more complex because these theologians continue to affirm their allegiance to the Reformed position. In the following sections of this report, as well as in the preceding sections, attention is focused upon representative issues in this new theology within the Reformed community which affect the nature and extent of biblical authority.

### *C. Explication of the Divine Authority and the Redemptive Message of Scripture.*

At this point it may be helpful to explicate further why the description of the nature and extent of biblical authority requires holding close together the divine authority and the redemptive message of Scripture. Hence attention now is focused upon the message of Scripture as this helps us to understand the nature and extent of Scripture's authority.

The Scripture itself clearly states its own central purpose. The self-proclaimed purpose of the Gospel of John is that these things are written "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (20:30, 31). The Gospel is characterized by the apostle Paul as "the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith" (Rom. 1:16). He also ascribes that same



purpose to the whole of Scripture. In II Tim. 3:15-17 he speaks of the "sacred Scriptures which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ." He affirms that "all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

These affirmations not only describe the purpose of Scripture but provide us with the key for the proper understanding of Scripture. The Bible is a unique book and it has been inspired with a particular purpose in view. Unless one acknowledges that purpose and uses it as the key for understanding, even though he confesses the inspiration and authority of Scripture, he has not submitted himself to the real authority of Scripture. Such was Jesus' criticism of the Jews in John 5:39, 40: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and it is they that bear witness to me; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life." The divine authority of the Word of God is actually recognized only when one has submitted himself to the one of whom the Scripture speaks. Any understanding of the Word of God which does not recognize this key for understanding its various parts, is erroneous, no matter how vigorously it affirms the inspiration and divine authority of the Scriptures.

The Jews, who were criticized by Jesus, affirmed the inspiration and divine authority of every word and letter of the Old Testament. They believed that the Word of God addressed itself to every issue of life, and then if one used the proper methods he could answer any question on any subject. Consequently, they derived from the Old Testament numerous teachings and laws which they claimed to be as authoritative as the Old Testament itself. However, Christ declared that they did "not have his word abiding" in them because they did not believe in him (John 5:38). When interpreters today refuse to accept the Christ of the Scriptures, they have also failed to submit to the authority of Scripture. And when Christian interpreters, although confessing the full authority of Scripture and believing in Jesus Christ, derive from the Scriptures teachings which do not reflect the intended meaning of Scripture, then they are not submitting to the authentic authority of the Word of God. Also when passages or texts or phrases or words are isolated from their scriptural meaning and intent, they do not express the divine authority of Scripture.

What the 1961 Christian Reformed Church Report on Inspiration and Infallibility said about plenary, verbal inspiration also applies to the authority of Scripture. That report warned against taking words "considered in isolation" as inspired words. "Words get their meaning from their usage in their respective contexts else they can be made to do violence to the author's intent. By the same token we may not lift any portion of Scripture, however large or small, out of its original context in the larger body of inspired literature and still claim for it, in its artificial isolation, divine trustworthiness. That is to say, we can distil from the doctrine of plenary, verbal inspiration [and authority] only that Scripture possesses a divine trustworthiness on matters concerning which it speaks, not on matters on which certain passages in

isolation, may seem to speak nor yet on matters on which men, by improperly handling Scripture, may seek to force Scripture to speak" (Acts 1961, p. 286). Similarly, while the extent of Scripture's *authority* is plenary and verbal, the words must be understood in the context in which they are given and with the meaning intended by the divine author.

Such a concentration upon the content and purpose of Scripture implies, among other things, the following for an understanding of the nature and extent of biblical authority. It implies that the authority of Scripture is properly understood only when the various parts of Scripture are interpreted as functioning in their role within the history of redemption and revelation. It implies further that the authority of Scripture is properly understood only when one takes into account that the Scripture is written by men and that it is originally addressed to a people living at a certain time and under particular circumstances. It is not possible, nor is it necessary, to write exhaustively about these various implications. We shall attempt only to make several basic observations about each.

The content of the Bible is properly described as the history of redemption. That description emphasizes that the Bible is history and not myth. In classical myths of ancient time that which was important occurred in the arena of the gods and not in human history. In the Bible God acts and speaks and makes man his covenant partner in history. The redemption he promises and brings takes place in historical events, and without this historical foundation the Bible loses its meaning. Consequently, the Bible is filled with historical records of what God has done for his people in the past; it stresses the role of the eyewitness; and it guards jealously its anti-mythical nature.

As the history of redemption the Bible contains revelation given over a long period of time. Not everything happens all at once. There is action and progress, address and response, promise and fulfillment. God is involved with his people over a period of centuries. There are different epochs; there is an old and a new covenant. Consequently, not all of the words or commandments of Scripture apply to us in the same manner in which they applied to those to whom they were first spoken (e.g. the laws concerning purification in the Old Testament). However, we should not conclude that such things are no longer divinely authoritative, but rather that they participate in the divine authority only as they function within this history of redemption. For such things were written for our instruction (Rom. 15:4) and admonition (I Cor. 10:11). This biblical perspective is reflected in the Belgic Confession when it speaks of still using "the testimonies taken out of the law and the prophets to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel" because their "truth and substance" remain with us in Jesus Christ (Art. XXV).

As the history of redemption the Bible speaks of beginnings and ends. The Bible is not a record of unrelated actions and sayings of God, but it is a record in which the various events, saying, and responses bear a fundamental relationship to each other. There is a single plan of

redemption and the whole of revelation points in that direction. Hence the history of redemption as recorded in the Bible can be characterized as the saving revelation of God in Jesus Christ. From its beginning to its end, from the beginning of history to the final coming of the kingdom, the history of redemption moves toward and flows from Jesus Christ. Thus the only correct understanding of the tremendous variety contained within Scripture is that which interprets it in its relationship to Jesus Christ. He is its unifying theme.

The Bible, as the authoritative Word of God, has been written by men. This fact also affects the manner in which the divinely authoritative Word is communicated. We have long been aware of the differences in grammar, style, spirit, and word choice among the authors of the various books of the Bible. Such differences have led to the development of the concept "organic inspiration." Inspiration did not suppress the personality of the author. God used men to write his Word. But this means also that the eternal Word of God is communicated through a time and culture conditioned vehicle, *viz.* human language. The biblical authors used the language they spoke: Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek. Their inspired writings reflect the time and circumstances in which they lived. Yet the Scriptures written by these men is the authoritative Word of God.

These human authors, commissioned to proclaim what God has said and done, stand within and write from within the history of redemption. They do not write mere chronicles, nor do they even write a history of Israel or a biography of Jesus Christ. What we call the historical books of the Bible are in actuality prophetic history, a selection of events to proclaim what God has done and is doing for the salvation of his people. It is history written to highlight the covenantal relationships between God and his people. Consequently, biblical history is episodic in character. Biblical history is kerygma, proclamation, *i.e.* events together with the interpretation which the events have in God's plan of salvation. Such is the perspective of the biblical author, and therefore criteria used for assessing the character of the Bible as history must not negate the self-proclaimed character of the biblical record.

As the written revelation of the history of redemption, the Bible was originally addressed to definite situations and to people living under particular circumstances. These situations and circumstances affect what is said and how it is said. For example, commandments and exhortations given at a certain time and place are not necessarily universally applicable. The entire legal structure of the Old Testament applied then and there but after the fulfillment in Christ no longer now and here. Not that we no longer learn from that legal structure, but even where it still instructs us the manner in which it applies has drastically changed. This is so because of the fulfillment of the law in Christ, but also because the circumstances under which the Old Testament people lived are no longer those under which we live. Thus, for example, the Old Testament property laws still instruct us concerning basic principles, but the specific laws governed a situation quite different from ours. This same perspective applies to the New Testament. We

no longer feel bound to exchange the holy kiss, to wash one another's feet, or to require women to wear a veil when they pray. Those are exhortations whose form is determined by the culture and circumstances of that time. They still contain an authoritative message for us, but the form of our obedience has been altered by changing circumstances. Similarly, we do not feel bound by the decree of the Council of Jerusalem regarding things strangled and blood (e.g. Jehovah Witnesses see in it, together with Lev. 17:11-14, the basis for their refusal of blood transfusion, and some Christians believe it forbids eating such a thing as bloodwurst). We interpret the meaning of that decree in the light of the particular circumstances to which it was addressed.

All of these observations which stem from the character of the Bible as an historical book are important for our understanding of the nature and extent of biblical authority. Because the Bible is an historical record it is important to take into account the distinction between what it meant originally and what it continues to mean. It is therefore necessary to know as well as we can the original setting, using all the evidence the Bible itself provides as well as the increasing knowledge provided by historical and archaeological research. Due to our distance from the time in which the various books were composed, we often do not possess an awareness of situations, concepts, or trends well-known to those to whom it was originally addressed. Therefore scholarly research can contribute to a better understanding of these matters. This does not mean that our confession of its authority is dependent upon such research, but only that such research can be an aid to faith's understanding of the Word. Our distance from the time of the Bible's composition involves, however, not only a loss which we try to regain, but also a plus which lends dimensions and perspectives to the biblical words of which the original recipients were possibly unaware. This also functions in the Holy Spirit's use of the Word to lead the church into all the truth.

Our confession of the authority of the Bible takes into consideration the observations mentioned above. None of these observations should be understood as introducing a new form of dualism into our approach to the Scriptures by which one is able to dissect Scripture into that which is and that which is not the authoritative Word of God. These observations do not intend to delimit the authority but only to understand the mode in which the Word has come to us, for that mode affects how that authority functions. The Bible is not a system of theological dogmas nor a code book of law with an easy and immediate application to every circumstance of life. Our confession has always rejected the simplistic biblicism implicit in that position because that position misconstrues the nature of the Bible itself and how it has come into being. The Bible is covenant history, the history of redemption, and it is only from within that perspective that it sheds its light upon the whole of human life.

The description of the Bible as the saving revelation of God in Christ is also no delimitation of the authority of Scripture. For the entire Scripture is authoritative, and its message is cosmic in scope, involving

man and all of his activities in creation and history. Hence the authority of Scripture touches every sphere of human life and knowledge but it does so in its own way and from its own perspective, *viz.* from the standpoint of creation, fall, redemption and the coming again of Jesus Christ.

We have not said everything that can be said about the nature and extent of biblical authority. We have tried to establish certain basic perspectives on the nature and extent of biblical authority. In the light of these we now proceed to the second part of our mandate. There we intend to discuss concrete problems and thus to illumine and further explicate the basic perspectives developed above.

#### IV. CURRENT METHODS OF INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

The second part of our mandate requires us "to evaluate critically in the light of the above-mentioned study and our confessional standards the manner of interpreting Scripture presently employed by some contemporary Reformed scholars." Our task is not to adjudicate charges brought against any person nor to assess the acceptability of any particular book, but to evaluate methods or principles that are visible in the interpretation of Scripture by some contemporary Reformed scholars. Since we are considering methods and not persons, we have decided not to mention theologians by name. To assess fully each theologian and the books he has published would have resulted in a very lengthy and highly technical report. Thus in this report we have not attempted to evaluate the entire theology of particular persons, but only the manner of interpreting Scripture that is employed.

In the light of our study of the nature and extent of biblical authority, it has become apparent that the major questions arise in connection with the historical character of the Bible. And in so far as one can speak today of a new hermeneutical development in the Reformed community, the newness consists in a different approach to and a different understanding of the Bible (or parts of it) as an historical record. To evaluate the validity of this new approach we believe that we must consider: (1) the use made of the findings of various sciences for the interpretation of Scripture, (2) the permissibility of the use of the historical method in the interpretation of Scripture, and (3) the historicity of the biblical record, in particular the first chapters of Genesis.

##### *A. Biblical Interpretation and Scientific Findings*

The legitimacy of using knowledge derived from scientific research for interpreting the Bible has been a sensitive issue among us. It has been so because of our continuing commitment to the Reformation principle that Scripture is its own interpreter. That principle stems from the confession that Scripture is the product and instrument of the Holy Spirit, and consequently it may not be controlled by knowledge or methods derived elsewhere. Scripture may not be interpreted contrary to its own intention, and the true meaning of Scripture must control our knowledge and methods. Thus whenever traditional interpretations of Scripture are altered in connection with new insights gained

through scientific or historical research, the suspicion is aroused that this may be an instance in which Scripture has been subjected to our knowledge rather than our knowledge to the authority of Scripture.

It should be noted, however, that by confessing Scripture to be its own interpreter one has not solved all problems of interpretation. The Reformers, while confessing the perspicuity of Scripture, never intended to suggest that there were no problems encountered in interpreting the Bible, problems requiring the application of grammatical and historical exegesis. By means of the principle that Scripture is its own interpreter, they did oppose the imposition of a variety of meanings upon Scripture as occurred in the allegorical interpretation of that time. That Scripture is its own interpreter implied for them a deep respect for the text, for the written Word. Consequently, allegorical exegesis was rejected because it destroyed the integrity of the written text, and so was any form of spiritualistic exegesis which ignored the meaning of words. One honors neither the Bible as the Word of God nor the Holy Spirit through whom the Word was written and by whom it is understood, by adopting methods that lead one away from the written text and its self-proclaimed intention. Hence every interpretation, and every method used for interpretation, must subject itself to the authoritative Word. This is done precisely by honoring Scripture as a written text, with all that this implies for grammatical and historical interpretation.

That the Reformers themselves used and developed the principles of grammatical-historical-theological exegesis is so well known that it needs no illustration, and that this development became a stimulus for the scientific study of the Bible is also an established fact. Consequently we who stand in the Reformed tradition have gladly welcomed and made use of the findings of science that are directly related to the exegesis of the Bible in order to get at the meaning of the biblical text. Basically the Reformed community has been receptive to new insights with respect to the meaning of words gleaned from documents contemporaneous with the biblical writings, to new information on the syntax of the biblical languages, and to new understanding of the literary forms that are used in the Bible.

In addition, we have gladly used insights gained from historical and archaeological research into the history, religion, and culture of the nations surrounding Israel. We have profited from knowledge of the Qumran community, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and rabbinic literature. Such information has helped to bridge the historical and cultural gap that exists between our time and that of the biblical writings; it has helped us to understand better the meaning of the biblical text and in this way it has led to the reinterpretation of certain passages of Scripture. New light from historical and archaeological research has been shed, for example, upon the structure of covenant treaties, the meaning of the prohibition against boiling a kid in its mother's milk, the significance of Rachel's stealing the household gods, the injunction for women to wear veils while praying and prophesying, etc. In using such materials the stated principle has been that these findings may not dictate an interpretation of Scripture contrary to its own intent; but certainly

these findings may, and in fact, must, be used to help to understand the intended meaning of Scripture.

In this way we have acknowledged the historical character of the divinely inspired Bible and have been willing to use the results of scientific research to illumine its meaning. But in addition to these scientific data directly related to biblical exegesis, there are findings in other sciences, not so directly related to biblical exegesis, which must also be taken into account. Here we have in mind such sciences as astronomy, biology, geology, etc. In regard to these sciences, an illustration taken from Calvin will indicate how in his day a new scientific insight in astronomy became the occasion for reexamining a traditional interpretation of Scripture.

The Copernican revolution occurred during Luther's lifetime and Luther still felt compelled to reject vigorously that point of view. He could not accept for theological and philosophical reasons the Copernican theory that the earth was not the center of the universe. But Calvin in his interpretation of the creation account states the following:

"To my mind, this is a certain principle, that nothing is here treated of but the visible form of the world. He who would learn astronomy, and other recondite arts, let him go elsewhere . . . For Moses here addresses himself to our sense, that the knowledge of the gifts of God which we enjoy may not glide away . . . By this method . . . the dishonesty of those men is sufficiently rebuked who censure Moses for not speaking with greater exactness. For as it became a theologian, he has respect to us rather than to the stars . . . Moses wrote in a popular style things which, without instruction, all ordinary persons endued with common sense are able to understand; but astronomers investigate with great labor whatever the sagacity of the human mind can comprehend" (*Commentary on Genesis*, Gen. 1:6, 15, 16).

Thus Calvin did not believe that there was a conflict between the new scientific point of view and Scripture, and therefore did not reject the Copernican point of view. The new scientific advancement did become the occasion of reexamining the traditional interpretation and, in fact, this reexamination did lead to a new perspective on this part of Scripture. To affirm that scientific discovery has led or can lead to a reinterpretation of certain aspects of the Bible is not the same as asserting that science dictates the interpretation of the Bible. Scripture must always be interpreted in terms of principles that are germane to its own nature as the revelation of God. And Calvin's new perspective with its basic assertion concerning the character of biblical writing in Genesis 1 could be substantiated by the character of biblical writing elsewhere. However, scientific discovery does compel us to ask whether a traditional interpretation reflects the intent of the Bible, or whether it is a reading of the Bible in the light of out-dated scientific conceptions. The new interpretation must then manifest, of course, that it does justice to the intention of Scripture and that it is supported by principles of interpretation in harmony with the character of Scripture.

While thus acknowledging that the findings of science in general may be the occasion for reexamining a traditional interpretation, we in

the Reformed tradition have also been on our guard against the possibility of science controlling the interpretation of Scripture. Indeed specific instances of science controlling or dictating the interpretation of Scripture have occurred in modern times. The clearest example is the rejection of miracles in classical liberalism. Nature was viewed as a closed system of cause and effect relationships. Consequently, liberal interpreters were compelled to reject miracle as historical fact and had to look for other ways to account for the miracle stories in Scripture. This reinterpretation of miracle resulted from their acceptance of a current scientific theory concerning what was possible in the areas of nature and history. In this way interpreters allowed a view of nature and history, a view in conflict with Scripture, to determine the interpretation of the biblical message. Such interpretation obviously runs counter to the principle that Scripture is its own interpreter. Methods of interpretation may not be based on principles which contradict the proclamation of Scripture itself.

No one in the Reformed community would basically disagree with this understanding of the principle that Scripture is its own interpreter. Representatives of the new hermeneutical development in the Reformed community, in so far as they address themselves to this principle, also say essentially the same thing, yet certain statements are made in their writings which raise the question whether the principle is being maintained. If one asserts, for example, that science makes it impossible to believe any longer that there was historically an original man and woman who were the ancestors of the human race, then the principle that Scripture is its own interpreter is no longer being maintained. Although scientific evidence may become the *occasion* for a reexamination of a traditional interpretation, any reinterpretation must be based on principles germane to and garnered from Scripture itself. Ultimately, the validity of every interpretation must be judged in terms of whether it agrees with Scripture's own interpretation of itself, and whether it contributes to a clearer insight into the Scripture's message as a whole.

#### B. *The Use of the Historical Method*

"The historical method" means different things to different persons. But in all instances the historical method includes presuppositions as well as procedures. From the time of the enlightenment, the historical method (or the historical-critical method) designated not only commonly accepted procedures used by historians but also certain well defined presuppositions, *viz.* that we exist in a closed universe and that therefore all historical facts occur within discoverable cause and effect relationships. Thus *the* historical method involved the rejection of miracle, and when applied to the Bible resulted in new interpretations which contradicted the biblical presentation. Therefore, *the* historical method was rejected by evangelical scholars.

Our use of the term, "the historical method," is not the same as that above. It is widely recognized today that historians do not all function with the same presuppositions. Some still accept the naturalistic presuppositions mentioned above, others have a different philosophical basis, while still others accept biblical presuppositions concerning reality. In



spite of differences in their presuppositions, all are called historians because working in the same field of inquiry they use procedures or techniques which are generally similar. In fact, since all historians must make critical evaluations of reported fact, all historians (in spite of their different presuppositions) are said to practise the historical method (or the historical-critical method). Thus in the discussion that follows the committee is aware of the need to examine critically the presuppositions that historians use, and emphasizes the necessity for the Christian historian to practise his method within the framework of biblical presupposition.

The committee introduces this discussion of the use of the historical method with some reluctance. For the material is often highly technical involving detailed theological analysis. Some parts are less difficult because they relate to questions raised by many in their reading of the Bible (e.g., why do the Gospels present the same event in different ways?). Other parts, however, are very difficult because they deal with technical questions which are usually not raised by most who read the Bible (e.g., the question concerning what is called the historical Jesus, and the question concerning what one can or cannot say via the historical method about the resurrection). It may be that some who are not interested in such technical questions may wish to pass those sections by.

However, synod's mandate to respond to the request of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod and to analyze the principles employed by some contemporary Reformed scholars, compels us to include these sections. For the question regarding the use of the historical method lies at the center of the debate concerning the interpretation of the Bible. Due to its complexity, we cannot within the limits of this report discuss the use of the historical method in all of its ramifications. We intend only to select several areas as illustrations, to point out problems that appear, and to make some judgments concerning these.

### *1. The Historicity of the Gospels*

The fact that there are four gospels, each having its distinctive emphases and each reporting in its own way events or sayings contained also in one or more of the others, has frequently raised questions concerning the nature of the gospels as historical records. These questions arose already in the second century, and throughout the history of the church there have been various attempts to account for and/or resolve the differences existing in the gospels. These attempts range all the way from the creation of a single gospel out of the four to the popularly held opinion that the gospels are independent biographies. And if the gospels are independent biographies, the differences in the reporting of what appears to be the same event must be explained either in terms of normal differences in eye witness reports or in terms of different situations in Jesus' ministry.

It has often been maintained that our confession concerning the reliability of Scripture means that events occurred precisely as they are reported to us. Little distinction was made between the event and the way in which the event is reported. Although there was some recog-

dition of the differences existing in the reporting of the same event, it was held that these differences did not alter the basic perspective. Differences were considered to be indications that the authors did not function with standards of notarial precision, and consequently the differences should not be analyzed too closely. Even though it was admitted that the gospels could not be harmonized in all details, the significance of these details for understanding the way in which the gospels report historical events was not fully realized.

In recent decades a different solution has been developed. There is a general consensus that there is some form of literary dependence among the synoptic gospels (i.e., the first three). The majority favor the priority of Mark, i.e., that Matthew and Luke use Mark in writing their own gospels, while some argue for the priority of Matthew. In addition, other sources, written or oral, are also thought to have been used (cf. Luke 1:1-4). In either case, whether one accepts the priority of Mark or Matthew or some modification of those theories, the method adopted for answering questions about similarities and differences is essentially the same. When one adopts a theory of literary dependence, one no longer attempts to answer questions concerning differences in the reporting of what appears to be the same event by suggesting different situations in Jesus' ministry. Instead, if the gospels are interdependent, one attempts to answer questions concerning differences by analyzing the intent of the author and/or the situation of those for whom he is writing. This fundamental change in approach to the gospels means that one functions with a different understanding of the way in which the gospels report historical events.

Thus today it is precisely the differences that are considered important for assessing the historical character of the gospels. The general assertion that the authors were not governed by standards of notarial precision is no longer considered adequate. What standards did they follow? How do they report events? What is the intent of the author, and what influences affect the way in which events are reported? Such are the questions being asked and it is believed possible to suggest some tentative answers.

Perhaps an example or two would be helpful. Peter's confession is recorded in three gospels: "You are the Christ" (Mark 8:29), "The Christ of God" (Luke 9:20), "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). What did Peter actually say? The three forms of the confession, although not contradictory, are distinctively different. Those who believe that Matthew and Luke are here dependent on Mark would see in their accounts an interpretative expansion of the confession. In other words, the gospels are not to be viewed as necessarily and always presenting verbatim accounts of words spoken or speeches given. Although actual happenings lie behind the accounts, in this case Peter's confession, the report of those events frequently includes interpretation so that the full light of revelation falls upon those events and sayings. In view of Jesus' promises concerning the work of the Holy Spirit (John 14-16), it should not strike us as strange that the disciples report events in that way. For the Holy Spirit who inspired the authors

is precisely the Spirit of Truth who interprets the meaning of the ministry of Christ.

The story of the rich young ruler provides a second example. The account is essentially the same in Mark and in Luke: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus said unto him, Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone" (Mark 10:18-19). Matthew presents a different account: "Teacher what good deed must I do to have eternal life? And he said to him, Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good" (Matt. 19:16-17). Again one can ask, what did the young ruler and Jesus actually say? Obviously Matthew is reporting the same conversation as that recorded in Mark and Luke. Here again it is possible to give reasons for the changes found in Matthew's account which are related to the type of audience for which he is writing. To prevent the conversation from being misunderstood, Matthew already interprets it in the form of presentation rather than by attaching a commentary to it. In any case, whatever the reasons, here we have again the phenomenon encountered in the first example.

Similar examples could easily be multiplied. However, since the intent of our report is not to persuade others of the correctness of this approach but only to judge its permissibility, we shall simply summarize that approach and its understanding of the gospels as history.

By means of the theory of literary dependence, it is thought possible to discover some of the factors influencing the form of the proclamation as this develops between Jesus' lifetime and the actual writing of the gospels. Such factors as the following are usually mentioned: the translation of Jesus' sayings from Aramaic to Greek, the proclamation of the message to non-Jewish audiences requiring changes so that the message could be understood, the needs and situations of the audience for whom the gospel is written, the specific intention of the author which influences his selection and ordering of materials, and the influence of Easter and Pentecost in producing a more complete understanding of the life of Jesus. Thus the gospels are not merely "objective" descriptions of events or verbatim records of Jesus' words. They are proclamation, kerygma, i.e. events and sayings which the Holy Spirit leads the authors to interpret as they bring that message to a variety of persons and audiences.

It is evident that the approach described above produces a different understanding of the way in which the gospels report historical events. Crucial to this approach is the distinction that is made between the actual events in Jesus' life and the reporting of these events in the gospels. While emphasizing this distinction between event and report, this approach does not wish to suggest a separation between event and report. The difference between making a *distinction* and making a *separation* between event and report is a very crucial one. Any position which separates or makes a *division* between the report and the event makes it impossible to say anything about the event itself. In fact, such a position allows one to assert that some quite different event lies behind the report or even no event at all. Such *separation* or *division* does not do justice to the historical character of the Bible. The intent of speaking of a

*distinction* between event and report is only to affirm that the Bible presents to us interpreted events, i.e. events placed in relationship to and seen in their significance for the history of redemption. Thus the approach to the gospels described in the preceding paragraphs continues to maintain that the gospels are reporting historical events. In addition, while affirming a *distinction* between event and report, this approach affirms that the parallel reports contained in the Scriptures are binding upon us because they are the inspired Word of God.

It is our opinion that this approach—so long as it functions within the framework of the gospels—is permissible within our confession concerning the authority and reliability (infallibility) of Scripture. For it seeks to understand the kind of reporting the gospels themselves indicate, and it does this by observing the similarities and differences the gospels themselves contain. There is no attempt to impose an arbitrary framework upon the gospels, nor to control the interpretation of the gospels, by means of non-biblical presuppositions. Whether or not everyone is convinced that this new approach is correct, or whether everyone accepts the explanation of particular items, is not the issue. Theologians frequently differ concerning particular theories of explanations. The basic methodology underlying this approach, however, does not infringe on the authority and reliability which the Bible claims for itself.

However, it seems to us that one should not in terms of this approach begin to speak of the historical unreliability of the gospels. Even though we recognize differences in the reporting of the same event and different interpretations placed upon the same event, to label this “historical unreliability” seems to impose standards upon the gospels that are foreign to the intention of their authors. And if—as all agree—the gospels were not written to satisfy the kinds of questions the modern historian asks, they why in terms of such questions should they be labeled historically unreliable? Isn’t this analogous to saying that the Bible is scientifically unreliable because its language seems more Ptolemaic than Copernican when it speaks about the movement of the sun? Yet we do not apply that label because we believe that the Bible was not written from the perspective implied in that standard.

In addition, to speak of the gospels as historically unreliable—even if the intent is very limited and in no way questions the message of the gospels—raises the more basic question of what constitutes reliable historical reporting. The fact that earlier events are interpreted in the light of later events, that changes in words and different emphases are required to make the message intelligible to different audiences, and that an event may lead to more than one perspective does not constitute unreliability. Historical reporting in general is always done after the fact and usually interprets earlier events in the light of later events. Historical reporting is always influenced by the perspective of the author and the needs of the audience. Such is the case also in the gospels. The historian cannot in fact always determine the actual sequence of events nor always understand the differing sequences reported in the gospels; but to designate that as “historically unreliable” is misleading and confusing to the church which rightly confesses the trustworthiness of Scripture.

## 2. *The Historical Jesus*

The quest for the historical Jesus has been carried on for almost two centuries. The term "the historical Jesus" usually refers to the Jesus as discovered through historical research. For more than a century it was believed that one could historically reconstruct the picture of Jesus as he actually was. Usually the historian's picture turned out to be in conflict with the picture of Jesus presented in the gospels and confessed in the church, because the historical research was based upon rationalistic or naturalistic presuppositions. Consequently, the various pictures of the historical Jesus closely resembled the kind of Jesus acceptable to the particular historian doing the research.

Today the new quest tends to make more modest claims. The new quest recognizes the possibility that the historical method cannot uncover everything about Jesus, and thus "the historical Jesus" refers no longer to Jesus as he actually was but only to the picture of Jesus that can be reconstructed by means of the historical method. Some Reformed theologians in the Netherlands are also engaged in this quest. They suggest that the appropriate method for uncovering this historical Jesus is that of "pure historical research." Although they declare that the quest cannot achieve the goal of presenting to us Jesus as he actually was, nevertheless this historical quest plays a significant role in their assessment of the historical reliability of the gospels. They claim that the historian discovers the following facts: Jesus was born of a woman, lived in Nazareth, initiated a public ministry in connection with John the Baptist, was crucified by a Roman procurator, was a performer of miracles, lived as a rabbi, spoke as a prophet, and lived the radical life of love. These do not constitute a complete list of facts that can be uncovered by the historian, yet they are a good indication of the kind of historical picture that is reconstructed.

Such facts obviously constitute part of the picture for they are taken from the Bible itself. But why is the historical picture limited to such facts? These theologians seem to give two answers to that question. The first stems from the historical method. The sources used by the historian, i.e. the gospels, are described as tendentious, one-sided documents. The gospels are one-sided because they are written by believers, by those committed to Jesus Christ. Therefore, the historian must be aware of the possibility that the faith-perspective of the author has altered the facts. The result is that in this quest the faith-perspective is neutralized and is allowed no role in reconstructing the historical picture of Jesus.

But is this permissible? Hasn't one then allowed a method to dictate the limits of historical possibility? Why should an historical method be allowed to suggest that what the gospels present and what faith claims concerning the historical Jesus is not to be included in the historically reconstructed picture? If a method sets limits for what Jesus could have been, then it is evident that such a method is rooted in principles contrary to the Scripture's own view of historical reality. Such a method cannot be considered legitimate.

However, the stance of these Reformed theologians on this point is not completely clear. For they also recognize that historical research as a

matter of fact cannot reconstruct the actual Jesus. Thus the historical picture as reconstructed is declared by them to be incomplete. This indicates a refusal on their part to allow the historical method *a priori* to set limits for what Jesus could have been. Nevertheless, the faith-perspective of the authors which is contained in the gospels is still not allowed to function in the historically reconstructed picture of Jesus. Why? This leads to the second answer.

In the new quest as practised by these Reformed theologians much is made of the distinction between the Jesus who was and the Jesus who is, i.e. the Jesus who lived before the resurrection and the Jesus who lives after the resurrection. It is claimed that the gospels—although they preach about the historical Jesus—are actually describing for us the Jesus who is. Therefore, the fact that the historian cannot recover the Jesus who was should be no disappointment for the church because her faith is in the living Lord, the Jesus who is. And the gospels clearly and reliably proclaim to us who he is. It is for this reason that the gospels to a large extent cannot be used by the historian who is seeking only to reconstruct the Jesus who was.

What is meant by this distinction? What about continuity between the Jesus who was and the Jesus who is? How do we know that the concern of the gospel writers is the latter and not the former? Part of the answer given is contained in the emphasis placed upon such texts as Romans 1:4, Acts 2:36, and Philippians 2:9-11. These passages speak of Jesus as having been made Lord and Christ and having been designated Son of God through his resurrection from the dead, and they are then interpreted as implying that Jesus was not known as such prior to the resurrection. Thus wherever such titles are ascribed to the pre-resurrection Jesus, it is claimed that this must be seen as a confession of the post-Easter community interpreting the historical Jesus in the light of what they now know Jesus to be. This is not to be interpreted as a denial that Jesus was already prior to the resurrection virtually what these titles indicate, for this is primarily a question of whether he claimed or was known to be such.

In evaluating the above position, no one would wish to discount the significance of the resurrection and Pentecost for the writing of the gospels. The gospels themselves indicate in places that the meaning of some events in Jesus' life was not known until after the resurrection (e.g. John 2:22; 12:16). It is also not to be denied that the titles ascribed to Jesus gain new dimensions because of his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Certainly the titles of Jesus have a greater glory for us and for the authors at the time the gospels were written than they did prior to the resurrection. Although Peter, for example, confessed Jesus to be the Christ, it is clear from the following episode (Matthew 16:21f.) that Peter did not understand the full implications of his confession. That there is then a fuller revelation of who Jesus is in the resurrection, and that this fullness affects the proclamation of the gospel would be denied by no one.

The theologians we are discussing, however, go beyond this. They suggest that Jesus made no such claims for himself and therefore these

titles were neither claimed by nor applied to him before the resurrection. The Jesus who was, was a non-messianic figure, or, more accurately stated, a messianic figure by implication (e.g. he lived a radical life of love). We judge that this more radical position concerning the messianic self-consciousness of Jesus calls into question the reliability of the gospels. For although one grants that the disciples' ideas and confessions had to be corrected and clarified and that Jesus was at times reluctant to make public claims, nonetheless the gospels themselves indicate that the disciples were following someone who claimed to be, and whom they believed to be, greater than a miracle worker, rabbi, or prophet. In addition, according to the gospels Jesus himself advocates some secrecy about his identity. Consequently to declare that all messianic claims on the part of Jesus, or confessions that he is the Messiah, are post-resurrection creations places in question at this point the character of the gospels as reliable records of events.

In addition, this approach opens the door to *Gemeindetheologie*, the position which affirms that the gospels are to varying degrees the *creation* of the early church. The Dutch theologians involved in the new quest indeed prefer to speak of the recreation or transformation of tradition by the early church rather than the creation of tradition. In fact, they assert that tradition is not created *ex nihilo* by the early church. However, in the case of Jesus' messianic self-consciousness this distinction does not appear to have been maintained. The result is that the historical reliability of the gospels is questioned because a *division* (not just a distinction) is introduced between historical event and the proclamation contained in the gospels. The only point of continuity that remains is in terms of the person of Jesus, i.e. the living Lord is the rabbi from Nazareth. It is further argued that since the person is the same the distinction between pre- and post-resurrection is finally irrelevant, and what really applies only to the post-resurrection situation was in fact projected back into the pre-resurrection period.

Once again, why is there such a radical shift in understanding the historical character of the gospels at the point of Jesus' messianic self-consciousness? We admit that we are not always completely certain precisely what these theologians are saying on this point or why. But our impression is the following: (1) there is the use of an historical method which even they assert cannot uncover the Jesus of history; (2) nevertheless, in the light of the historical picture recreated by that method a radical reinterpretation is given to such texts as Acts 2:36, Romans 1:4; (3) in the light of these considerations form criticism is applied to the tradition contained in the gospels, and the conclusions of form criticism are then claimed as the real reason for the change in understanding the historical nature of the gospels.

The committee is not convinced that the radical shift mentioned above actually flows from the application of form critical technique. Although we cannot enter upon a thorough discussion of form criticism, we would note however that it is important to distinguish between form criticism as a technique and form criticism as a method which often contains silent presuppositions of various kinds. As a technique, form criticism analyzes the literary forms contained in the gospels. As a method, form criticism

(or at least certain form critics) has questioned the event-character of the gospels. There is a growing consensus among evangelical scholars that form criticism in itself does not call into question the fact that the gospel is presenting historical events. If a form critic does question the event-character of the gospels—as did the radical form critics and to a much *lesser extent* (apparently only at one point, *viz.* Jesus' messianic self-consciousness) the theologians under discussion—he does so because of presuppositions that affect his use of form criticism (in this case the historical method and the particular understanding of Acts 2:36, Romans 1:4). Consequently, from a theological point of view we are not convinced by the case presented. In addition, we believe that any view that allows the actual creation of events for the sake of the message calls into question the reliability of the gospels.

### 3. *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ*

Questions concerning the new theology in the Netherlands have arisen also in connection with the discussion of the fact of the resurrection. This discussion is related to the previous one because both arise from the use of the historical method. Because of the complexity of this discussion and the ease with which misunderstandings can arise, we wish to emphasize that no one associated with the new theology in the Reformed community denies the factuality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The question under discussion is only what the historian can say concerning the fact of the resurrection as recorded in the gospels.

Those associated with the new theology speak in a rather consistent manner concerning the resurrection. They assert in essence that the historian as historian can say nothing about the resurrection. His method is based upon the principle of analogy and analogous causes and consequently can make no assertions about that which is unique. Therefore, it is claimed that for the historian the resurrection is the least acceptable kind of reality precisely because it is a unique event, and about such events the historian can say nothing. The most that the historian can ascertain is that the disciples believed that Jesus arose. He cannot verify the fact of the resurrection.

Because of an apparent similarity between the new theology in the Reformed community and the views of Rudolf Bultmann, it is necessary to indicate the essential difference. Both agree that the historian can only ascertain that the disciples believed that Jesus arose. However, Bultmann's use of the historical method based on analogy leads him to declare that the resurrection as historical fact did not occur. In the new theology the assertion is only that the historian via the historical method can neither affirm nor deny the resurrection as historical fact. As a Christian he believes it, but as an historian he can make no pronouncement concerning it. This constitutes an important difference between the representatives of the new theology and Rudolf Bultmann.

However, the assertion that as an historian one can say nothing concerning the resurrection as an historical fact raises a fundamental question. Since the historian gets at past events primarily through documents, and since his judgments concerning past events is determined by his assessment of the reliability of the documents, may the *Christian* as his-



torian stand neutrally over against the resurrection as historical fact? Granting that the gospels are not merely objective descriptions of events (as discussed under point 1 of this section), we all agree that the gospels reliable report the resurrection as historical fact. Why then should the *Christian* as historian not pronounce the resurrection to be a fact? If he does not do so because of the historical method, then that method presupposes a view of reality not in harmony with Scripture, and these presuppositions should, therefore, be rejected.

Although the issues surrounding the historical method are extremely complex, and we do not wish to give simplistic answers, nonetheless these issues are especially crucial where they concern the historical Jesus and the events of his life. For by means of the historical method a picture of Jesus is reconstructed which is different from the picture presented by the gospels. Even though that historical picture is then declared inadequate, it still functions as one of the factors in assessing the historical reliability of the gospels. But why should a method which by definition cannot pronounce upon that which is unique be allowed to say anything decisive concerning the life of Jesus? And if because of this historical picture (at least in part) the theory is accepted which allows post-resurrection beliefs and experiences to create events in the life of Jesus, how do we know that the resurrection is a fact? Apparently no longer because of the reliability of the documents as authoritative scripture. Instead it is claimed that we believe the resurrection to be a fact not because Scripture tells us but because the New Testament itself was written because of the resurrection. Obviously the resurrection was decisive, but the argumentation of the new theology indicates that the reliability of the documents has already been undermined by the use of the historical method. In this way, although perhaps unintentionally, the historical moorings of certain events in the life of Jesus and of the resurrection appear to have been loosened.

### C. *The First Chapters of Genesis*

The first chapters of Genesis constitute a third area in which various questions have arisen concerning the interpretations suggested by the new theology developed by some Reformed theologians, especially in the Netherlands. These chapters are of fundamental importance for understanding the entire Scripture for they reveal the foundations for the biblical message. Genesis 1-11 constitutes the prologue, not only to the book of Genesis, but to the entire Pentateuch, as well as to the Old Testament in general, and thus to the New Testament as well. These are chapters which are understandable in faith by every believer, and yet they involve issues of the greatest profundity for the Christian scholar. The perspectives set forth in these chapters are basic for the Christian engaged in the scientific, scholarly disciplines.

It is understandable then that these chapters have been of a special interest to representatives of the new theology. It is a matter of serious concern that some representatives of this new theology in the Reformed community contend that some or all of these chapters do not narrate actual events. With this in mind, we now turn in this section first to the

general character of Genesis 1-11 and then more specifically to Genesis 1 and Genesis 3.

### 1. *Genesis 1-11*

In a very brief space these chapters reveal the main events in the history of God's dealings with the world from the time of its creation to the time of Abraham. In covering this long period of history Genesis 1-11 presents only a few episodes. The main events revealed in these eleven chapters are the following: God's good creation of the world and man in the beginning; our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise; the temptation and fall into sin of our first parents; God's curse and his promise of victory for the "seed of the woman"; the development of the two seeds in Adam's descendants; the corruption of mankind and the saving of Noah and his family from the judgment of the flood; the rebellious apostasy of the race at Babel and the scattering of the peoples. Then Genesis continues with the account of God's new beginning with Abraham in the covenant of grace and carries through this revealed history until the time of Israel's sojourn in Egypt. That constitutes the revealed prologue to God's covenantal dealings with Israel and this prologue is basic to an understanding of the entire Scripture.

### *Aim of the Author of Genesis 1-11*

What is the aim of the author in these first eleven chapters of Genesis? It is clear that Genesis is an historical book (cf. the ten instances of *toledoth*, "generations of . . ."), and that accordingly the first chapters narrate events that really happened. However, the inspired author is presenting God's revelation as he relates this history. He is not writing history simply for history's sake; nor is he producing a complete and exhaustive history of everything that happened since the beginning. Through the inspired author God is revealing to fallen men that he created the world, that sin originated through Adam's fall, that he made a new beginning with the race at the time of the flood, and that he scattered the peoples at Babel. This account thus prepares the way for understanding God's covenantal dealings with Abraham and the development of Abraham's descendants to form the covenant nation of Israel. Thus the first eleven chapters present what may be summarized in terms of creation, the fall, the flood, and Babel.

The author is selective in setting forth the revelation of God in these eleven chapters. And he describes these important events in varying degrees of detail. The mighty work of creation is described in a single chapter. The account of Adam and Eve in Paradise and the fall is presented in two chapters. The development of the two seeds descended from Adam is given in two chapters. The account of the flood, on the other hand, is described at considerable length, covering no less than four of the eleven chapters. Then again the description of the apostasy at Babel is set forth in a single chapter and certain references are highly and tantalizingly condensed as in Genesis 10:8-12.

The writing of the first eleven chapters of Genesis certainly took place a long time after the actual occurrence of these events. It is fully in harmony with the Reformed understanding of organic inspiration (RES

Acts 1958, p. 44 and CRC Acts 1961, pp. 256, 286) to recognize that the description of these events in some ways reflects the time in which Moses wrote. For example, we learn from Exodus 6:3 that the specific revelation of the name Jehovah (Hebrew: *Yahweh*) did not occur until the time of the Exodus. Yet in Genesis 2:4 the name *Yahweh* (Lord God) is used in the account of God's relation to man in Paradise, while Genesis 1 used the name *Elohim* (God). Also in Genesis 4:26 we read that in the days of Enoch men began to call upon the name of Jehovah (Lord). In these passages we see that the author, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, used the intimate, covenant name of Jehovah, which was first revealed in his own time, to name God in that earlier history.

In a similar way in the "table of the nations" found in Genesis 10, the names employed are designations in use at the time of Moses. Such use of names is common in history writing. For example, we are accustomed to say that the Dutch founded New York City even though we know that they originally called it New Amsterdam. Such anachronistic use of names is generally recognized. It is certainly possible that, as our knowledge of the ancient world increases through archaeological and other studies, additional instances of this sort may become known. Such usage of names is fully compatible with the organic inspiration of the Bible.

#### *Stylistic Differences and Figurative Expressions*

We must insist, then, that the first eleven chapters of Genesis reveal the major historical events in the history of God's dealings with man and the world prior to the time of Abraham. As the inspired writer presents God's revelation to us, he does not give a full and comprehensive history but he makes a selection in terms of his aim and purpose. He is not writing of these events simply for the sake of giving a factual history or a mere chronicle of events. He presents God's revelation to us. Thus he presents the major events together with the meaning and significance these events have for the biblical message. Now we must observe that within these eleven chapters, which concern events that really happened, the author's style of writing differs somewhat in the description of one event from the style used to describe another event. We must also acknowledge that there are some figurative expressions used in the description of this history.

The careful reader of Genesis 1-11 will observe that there are stylistic differences within these chapters. The style of Genesis 1, for example, is majestic and solemn, and differs from the style of Genesis 2. The style used to describe the rebellion at Babel (Gen. 11:1-10) differs again from that of the account of the flood (Gen. 6-9).

There are, of course, also stylistic differences between the narrative accounts in these chapters and the lists of names or genealogies. The genealogies found in Genesis 1-11 are not exhaustive or complete lists of ancestors. The author has made a selection here also. Furthermore, these lists of names also indicate a certain structure. Thus the descendants of Adam via Cain are traced in seven generations (Gen. 4), while those of Adam via Seth are traced in ten generations. Moreover, there is a certain parallel or contrast in these two lists: Lamech, the seventh from

Adam via Cain is the boastful and arrogant person described in Genesis 4:19 ff., while Enoch, the "seventh from Adam" (Jude 14) via Seth, is one who walked with God and was "taken by God" (Gen. 5:21-24).

Although Genesis is an historical book tracing for the most part "the generations of . . ." (Cf. Gen. 2:4; 5:1, etc. [ten instances]), there are also certain figurative or symbolical references within this historical account. For example, the two trees of the garden are given a figurative or symbolic significance by God in connection with the probationary command: the one tree represents the knowledge of good and evil to be reached by way of obedience; the other represents the life promised by God for Adam's obedience or forfeited by his disobedience. The reference to God's breathing into man the breath of life (Gen. 2:7) is generally understood as an anthropomorphic description since God does not breathe as man does. Again in the account of God's curse upon fallen man, it is generally agreed in Reformed circles that the reference to the "seed of the woman" refers, not to all the physical descendants of Eve, but only to the line of the faithful, the line of believers. The "seed of the serpent," on the other hand, refers not literally to snakes and serpents, but to the unfaithful, unbelieving descendants of Eve. The presence of such figurative descriptions in these historical chapters has been generally recognized in the Reformed community. It should be emphasized, however, that real events and important truths are being described by these figurative expressions.

Recently some proponents of the new theology within the Reformed community have come to regard many more elements in Genesis 1-11 as figurative and symbolical. This has contributed to the unrest and concern of many. Although the above mentioned examples are commonly understood to be figurative expressions, it is unwarranted to simply declare that almost everything in Genesis 1-11 is figurative or symbolical. Any one who claims that other details involved in the biblical description of these great events are figurative expressions will have to present his position by means of careful exegesis and sound biblical exposition. No one may make such claims simply because he thinks that modern science has made it impossible to understand Scripture in the traditional Reformed way.

However, if the church is confronted by sound and careful exegesis, it should follow the Berean attitude of testing whether such "new" interpretations are true to Scripture. Of course, "new insights" which involve confessionally defined matters should be distinguished from those not contained in the confessions. For those interpretations which concern the confession, the church has a prescribed procedure which must be honored by all. Where new interpretations do not concern creedally defined matters, a discussion need not follow the sequence of consistory, classis, and synod. All are, however, bound by Scripture. No one should disturb the church with careless, personal opinions. Nor should anyone submit "new interpretations" unless he has engaged in careful investigation of Scripture. Furthermore, one who submits "new interpretations" should also carefully consider the history of Reformed interpretation of the passages involved. But when someone has carefully studied the Word

and is convinced of the biblical warrant of his interpretation, the church should hear and test and hold to that which is genuinely scriptural. This is certainly the perspective of our confessions also, which regard the creeds themselves and the writings of men as subject to the authoritative Scripture (Belgic Confession, Art. VII).

### *The Confessions on Genesis 1-11*

When the Reformed Confessions speak of the inspiration, infallibility, and authority of the entire Scripture and the necessity of our "believing without any doubt all things contained in them" (Art. V), they of course include Genesis 1-11. However, there are also some specific references in our confessions to certain features of Genesis 1-11.

The Belgic Confession affirms that "the Father by the Word, that is, by his Son, has created of nothing the heaven, the earth, and all creatures, when it seemed good unto him, giving unto every creature its being, shape, form, and several offices to serve its Creator" (Art. XII). More specifically it affirms that "God created man out of the dust of the earth, and made and formed him after his own image and likeness, good, righteous, and holy, capable in all things to will agreeably to the will of God" (Art. XIV). The fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise is confessed as an event which occurred in the past while having its dire effect by bringing about the corruption of all of Adam's posterity (Art. XIV, XV; cf. Heidelberg Catechism Q. 6-8). Some of the details of the account of the fall are also referred to in Articles XVII and XXIII. The Canons of Dordt likewise refer to the actual occurrence of creation and the fall (I, 1; III-IV, 1,2).

All of these confessional statements clearly teach the good creation of the world and man in the beginning by God. Likewise they clearly teach an historical fall involving the two progenitors of the human race at the beginning of human history. They trace mankind's present corruption to this event which occurred in Paradise. It is clear from these statements that any denial of creation or of the historicity of the fall as an event at the beginning of human history is in conflict with our confessions. And we believe that these confessions are faithful to Scripture in these affirmations and should continue to be faithfully confessed by us all.

Thus we have seen that it is crucial, both in terms of Scripture and our confessions, to understand the first eleven chapters of Genesis as revealing real events that have actually occurred. Yet some representatives of the new theology in the Reformed community contend that some or all of these chapters do not narrate actual events. It is understandable that these suggestions have disturbed many. The contention that these chapters do not present events that really happened is certainly in conflict with our Reformed Confessions and in conflict with Scripture itself.

If one does not accept the actual occurrence of such events as creation and the fall, as revealed in these chapters of Genesis, he will be compelled to view the main lines of the entire biblical message in a different way. Because this issue is so important, we turn now to give further attention to Genesis 1 and Genesis 3.

## 2. *Genesis 1 and Creation*

Our creeds clearly affirm the biblical teaching of God's creation of all things in the beginning. Since the appearance of the theory of evolution, the church has been challenged as to the legitimacy of her confession of creation. The subject of creation has been on the agenda of the Christian Reformed synods a number of times. The Reformed Ecumenical Synod has also concerned itself with this subject on more than one occasion. Most recently the Christian Reformed Church has considered the question of creation at the Synods of 1966 and 1967. A brief review of these most recent considerations must suffice here.

In 1966 the synod received three overtures which requested a study of the questions relating to creation, evolution, and theistic evolution. In response to these overtures the Synod of 1966 decided to "appoint a committee of six members (jointly representing the related scientific and theological disciplines) to advise the Synod of 1967 as to the membership and specific mandate of a commission which is to be appointed to study, in the light of the present status of scientific studies and of Reformed theological scholarship, the matters involved in and clustering around the question of the compatibility of theories of 'theistic evolution' with the biblical witness and the creedal affirmations concerning the origin of the world and of the human race" (Acts 1966, p. 78). When this committee reported to the Synod of 1967, that synod decided to "withhold action on the recommendations of the 'Committee to recommend a Commission and Mandate on Creation and Evolution' and, thereby, not implement the decision of the Synod of 1966" (Acts 1967, p. 76). Two grounds were adduced in support of this decision: "a. There is no specific case before it in which the scriptural and creedal teaching of creation by divine fiat is being challenged and, therefore, synod judges that such a study, as contemplated by the decision of the Synod of 1966 is not necessary at this time. b. This is a study we may confidently trust can and will be carried on by interested and competent and responsible persons in the community of our common faith" (pp. 76-77). It should be observed that the mandate of the committee submitting this report does not require our engaging in this further study. However, our present mandate at least warrants a reminder of the position taken by the Synod of 1967.

It should be noted that while our creeds clearly affirm the creation of all things by God, neither our creeds nor any official synodical decisions have led our churches to an official position, for example, on the length of the days of creation. Within the Reformed churches which subscribe to our three forms of unity, there has long been toleration of certain alternative views of the length of the creation days so long as these positions affirm God's creation and do not conflict with Scripture and confession.

It is important that those who engage in the study of creation and evolution (theistic evolution) fully recognize the authority of Scripture and maintain an authentic faith response to God's revelation. The temptation to succumb to modern science and to allow science to dictate biblical interpretation has been referred to earlier in this report. It is incumbent upon the church and all her members to faithfully confess the cre-

ation of all things by God and authentically maintain this perspective as one engages in scientific studies, also when examining views which challenge this biblical revelation today. Any one engaged in the discussion of these weighty matters should do so with a clear and unambiguous adherence to Scripture as the authoritative Word of God, and in agreement with our Reformed Confessions which are subordinate to that Word.

### 3. *Genesis 3 and Romans 5 on the Fall*

Another area of concern has been the interpretation of Genesis 3. Some Reformed theologians associated with the new theology have argued against the traditional interpretation which affirms the historical reality of the event described in Genesis 3. We shall use this issue to illustrate the methods and principles of interpretation used by some contemporary Reformed theologians. We would remind the church that our task is not to assess the correctness of detailed exegesis, but to comment upon methods and principles employed and to test these in the light of our confession concerning Scripture and its authority. This task assigned to the committee reflects the fact that the church in its assemblies may make judgments on such exegetical matters only in so far as they impinge upon what the church believes to be its clear confession of the truth.

The new interpretation suggests that Genesis 3 should not be viewed as presenting history in any temporal sense. Instead, it is argued that Genesis 3 should be interpreted as a "teaching model," i.e. Genesis 3 teaches the truth concerning the human condition but it should not be interpreted as a description of an event that occurred after creation. Various reasons have been given for this position. One is that science has made it impossible to believe that this is history in any temporal sense. The committee has noted earlier that although scientific findings may occasion a reexamination of a particular interpretation, they may not dictate a new interpretation. Thus, if the new interpretation is to be considered valid, additional reasons must be adduced for the assertion that Genesis 3 is a teaching model. Since Scripture is its own interpreter and since the New Testament in Romans 5 does comment upon Genesis 3, it is essential to consider this material.

Thus the most important additional reason adduced in favor of the new interpretation is the assertion that Paul in Romans is making use of a typical rabbinic method of interpreting Scripture. It is noted that although apart from Genesis 3 the Old Testament hardly ever mentions Adam, the rabbis had developed an extensive theology concerning Adam and Eve. Anyone who reads that theology and the stories associated with it knows that the rabbis were most often not concerned with history but with instruction. They created many stories about Adam and Eve for the sole purpose of instruction. Thus it is argued that Paul, trained in rabbinic theology, uses the story of Adam to illumine the significance of Jesus Christ. It is claimed that like the rabbis, Paul is interested in Genesis 3 more for what it teaches than for what it reports as an account of what actually happened. Finally, it is argued

that the loss of Genesis 3 as an historical account is not important for, after all, Scripture is primarily concerned to teach us about Jesus Christ and not about Adam.

The committee wishes to make several observations about the principles used to support this new interpretation. The claim that Paul at times functions in a rabbinic manner is not to be rejected out of hand. To support that claim appeal has been made to the following: Paul's mention of the rock that followed Israel (I Cor. 10:4), his use of allegory in Galatians 4:24ff., his identification of Moses' opponents as Jannes and Jambres (II Tim. 3:8), and the fact that Paul quotes from the three divisions of the Old Testament—as did the rabbis—to prove a point. If such an interpretation of these items is valid, the suggestion that Paul at times reflects his rabbinic background can be viewed as a legitimate implication of organic inspiration, i.e., that the Holy Spirit uses men as they are with their own personality, education and background.

However, it is significant that in Romans 5 Paul does not borrow a story created by the rabbis but uses only material found in the Old Testament. If he had borrowed a story from rabbinic theology, the suggested reinterpretation would be possible. But precisely here Paul refers only to that which is contained in Genesis. The fact that the rabbis had other stories with no basis in historical fact and which were used only as teaching models, is hardly decisive at this point. For there is no evidence that the rabbis ever questioned the historicity of Genesis 3. Thus an appeal to rabbinic interpretation provides no basis for assuming that Paul is uninterested in the historicity of Genesis 3. Also, in Romans 5 Paul introduces the history of redemption perspective when he speaks of the period from Adam to Moses and of those whose sins were *not* like the transgressions of Adam (Rom. 5:14). Such a perspective is not accounted for by the theory that Paul views Genesis 3 only as a teaching model.

In addition, to suggest that the matter of historicity is really unimportant because the Scripture is primarily about Jesus Christ suggests a rather narrow Christocentric view of Scripture. Obviously the Bible is about Jesus Christ, and we have emphasized that perspective in the discussion of the nature and extent of biblical authority, but that basic perspective does not by itself cancel the significance of other historical issues. The Bible not only affirms the historicity of Jesus Christ but also proclaims Jesus in his relationship to the creation and to the history of redemption. However much one must maintain the centrality of Jesus Christ and the significance of this for a proper understanding of the various parts of Scripture, one may not use that perspective to rule out the significance of other questions—however subordinate they are to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is central both in the Scriptures and for faith, but one may not conclude that because one accepts the historical Jesus by faith that therefore all other historical questions are biblically unimportant.



*The Confessions*

In conclusion we return to the confessions because the church's concern in this matter is related to the fact that her confessions have something to say about the teaching of Genesis 3. The confessional items are primarily the following: Lord's Day 3 and 4 of the Heidelberg Catechism which speak of the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise; the subsequent corruption of our own nature because of this willful disobedience; and the temporal and eternal judgment of God upon both original and actual sins. Articles 14 and 15 of the Belgic Confession are a further explication of the same points. In addition, there are passing references to Adam in Articles 17 and 23 of the Belgic Confession, and the discussion of original sin in a historical context in the Canons of Dordt III-IV, Articles 1 and 2.

This confessional issue has been in the forefront of the debate also in the Netherlands. In 1967 the Synod of the Gereformeerde Kerken declared that the earlier decision of the Synod of Assen which required a literal understanding of several details of Genesis 3 was no longer binding. However, the synod also affirmed that what the confessions say concerning the origin of sin and the consequences of the fall is essential to the proclamation of the gospel and has to be maintained. In 1970, in response to the interpretation of Genesis 3 as a "teaching model," the Gereformeerde Kerken declared that the denial of the historicity of the fall at the beginning of human history could not be harmonized with the previous synodical decision. And thus the synod implicitly affirmed that this new view could not be harmonized with the confessions.

Thus the confessional statements mentioned above have been interpreted traditionally, and still today, as teaching an historical fall at the beginning of human history with its disastrous consequences for the history of mankind. It is clear from the statements themselves that the denial of the historicity of the fall of our first parents at the beginning of human history cannot be harmonized with the confessions. This appeal to the confessions is not intended to elevate them above the Scriptures, for we are convinced that the confessional perspective reflects perspectives garnered from Scripture itself. We have in mind not only Romans 5, but also the way in which Genesis 1-11 is tied to and prepares the way for the history of Abraham. Thus our appeal in this matter is basically to the Scriptures themselves, and to the creeds only as our confession which contains this biblical perspective.

**V. PASTORAL ADVICE**

We come now to the third part of our report—pastoral advice to the churches. In the preceding study we discussed first the nature and extent of biblical authority in the light of Scripture and the Reformed confessions. We then engaged in a critical evaluation of certain methods of interpreting the Bible as presently employed by some Reformed scholars. Now we turn our attention to the more practical objectives as envisioned in the mandate, namely, "to serve the churches with pastoral advice in these matters."

Pastoral concern for the churches is one of the grounds advanced by synod for undertaking this study. Such concern is wholly in keeping with the nature and task of the church. It is therefore quite appropriate that pastoral advice should constitute the practical outcome of this study report.

Throughout this report we have tried to keep in mind that as servants of the church we are obliged to honor the pastoral concern which lies at the very heart of the church's interest in the question of biblical authority. We have therefore tried to avoid a strictly academic approach to our mandate. Our aim has been to deal with the issues involved, not in a theological way, but in a biblical and confessional way—at the level of the faith-knowledge and faith-life of the churches. We realize, however, that in this respect we have been only partially successful.

Difficulties involved in understanding this report grow to some extent out of the nature of the mandate itself. The mandate opens up a large area of very complex and challenging problems. Involved are views of Scripture as developed by theologians and scientists, which concern problems which seem to be foreign to the faith and life of many believers. Apparently they do not arise directly out of the living concerns of the pulpit and pew. Yet in many cases these critical issues have been injected into the life-stream of the congregations through pastoral booklets addressed to the churches, the so-called "cahiers" published in the Gereformeerde Kerken of the Netherlands. Thus these issues force themselves upon the attention of church members at large and have created a measure of uncertainty and unrest. Most of our people, however, apparently feel that these critical issues are not really their problems, but are problems foisted upon them by others.

Perhaps it should be added, however, that the scholars whose views have been dealt with in this report firmly believe that they are actually responding to issues which are looming ever larger on the horizon of church life, even though many members of the church do not yet sense their urgency. The conviction with which they speak arises from their attempt to gauge the pulsebeat of Christian living today. Their claim to a hearing is based upon their professed attempts to meet the spiritual crises especially of today's Christian youth, whose confidence in the authority of Scripture is being threatened by the eroding influences of modern science. They therefore regard the so-called "new hermeneutics" as a positive contribution to meeting the felt or unfelt, yet very real needs of the church.

Most of the views examined in this report have been propounded by scholars from one of our sister churches, the Gereformeerde Kerken of the Netherlands. Because of the close ties between us these views have found their way into our circles. Moreover, these views are a matter of deep concern within the larger family of Reformed churches which makes up the Reformed Ecumenical Synod. This report therefore looks out beyond the boundaries of our own denomination. Though it is addressed first of all to our churches in North America, it also seeks to keep in mind the larger concerns of our sister churches around the

world and within that international arena it seeks to make a contribution to the faith-knowledge and faith-life of these churches.

In fulfilling our mandate we felt that, if we were to meet these critical issues honestly, it was important to address ourselves to the views of Scripture which gave rise to these problems at the rather learned level at which these problematic views have been articulated. Therefore, in seeking to do justice to the very complex problems involved and in seeking to avoid a superficial and simplistic treatment of them, we found it necessary again and again to engage in rather theoretical discussions. This more challenging material can be of service to the church in giving guidance to its theologians, scientists and other academicians, as well as its ministers, students and other educated people. Thus the report as a whole has a specific pastoral value. In addition ministers could help make the report serviceable to others by translating the more difficult sections into concepts more readily understandable by their people. Now, however, as we seek to distil from the preceding discussions certain practical implications for the life of the church, we are attempting very deliberately to speak the pastoral language of the churches.

Within the Christian Reformed Church we cannot appeal to a strong tradition of pastoral advice coming from our synods to our churches. We are therefore forced to reflect on these questions: What is the nature of pastoral advice? What form should it take? What status should it hold among us? The pastoral advice here submitted reflects our answers to these questions within the scope of the mandate. But clearly one consideration is of fundamental importance. Pastoral advice, as offered and as received, presupposes a spirit of mutual trust and confidence. The benefits of all pastoral advice depend upon a healthy confessional unity among our churches. With it, pastoral advice can give sound spiritual direction to the life of the church. Without it, pastoral advice will assuredly fail to win the hearty response of acceptance which we owe to every proclamation of the church which is anchored in Scripture and the creeds.

In this spirit of pastoral concern we now offer these reflections in the hope that they will serve to confirm the churches in their common commitment to Scripture as the authoritative Word of God. These points of pastoral advice should not be taken as new or additional confessional statements. Rather we urge them upon our churches as reaffirmations of our accepted confessional commitment to the authority of Scripture with a view to averting the crises and divisive tendencies which surround the issue of biblical authority among fellow Christians in other Reformed churches.

At the risk of saying what probably needs no saying, we remind the churches of the crucial importance of holding fast our common confession of biblical authority. We emphasize this point in view of the fact that the historic Christian doctrine of biblical authority is in crisis in our times. This crisis lies especially in the area of hermeneutics, which is concerned with the basic principles and methods of biblical interpretation. The hermeneutical problem is the pivotal point of much contemporary theological controversy. Involved is a right understanding of

Scripture, which is a matter of paramount importance today for the entire Christian church, including those churches which stand within the Reformed tradition.

A continuing concern with biblical inspiration, infallibility, and authority is reflected in the fact that these doctrines have been on the agenda of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod from its beginnings and have been matters of ongoing concern in the Christian Reformed Church as well. The various study reports on these doctrines during recent years reflect earnest efforts aimed at coming to a better understanding of Scripture. Relying upon the promised leading of the Holy Spirit we hope that this report on biblical authority, building upon the foundations laid in these previous reports, will contribute to a deeper and fuller understanding of the content and purpose of Scripture as the saving revelation of God in Jesus Christ. To this end we submit this report to the churches as a summons to communal reflection upon the authority of Scripture as our rule for faith and life. But a word of caution is in order: we must guard against so exhausting our energies in talking about the Bible that we fail to get on with our prophetic calling as churches to proclaim its message and to put that message into practice as God's people living in his world today.

Against the background of these introductory comments we now submit to synod the following confessional preamble, followed by seven points of pastoral advice, together with a brief elaboration of each point, requesting synod to adopt these seven points and recommend them to the churches as pastoral guidelines.

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As a preamble to the following seven points of pastoral advice synod calls the attention of the churches to these relevant statements from one of our creeds on the authority of Scripture:

"We confess that this Word of God was not sent nor delivered by the will of men, but that men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit . . . Therefore we call such writings holy and divine Scriptures . . . We believe that the Holy Scriptures are contained in two books, namely, the Old and the New Testaments, which are canonical, against which nothing can be alleged . . . We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith; believing without any doubt all things contained in them, not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but more especially because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they carry the evidence thereof in themselves . . . We believe that those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein. For since the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in them at large, it is unlawful for anyone, though an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are taught in the Holy Scriptures . . . It does thereby evidently appear that the doctrine thereof is most perfect and complete in all respects . . . Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever

does not agree with this infallible rule." (Belgic Confession, Articles III-VII)

1. *Synod calls the churches to a wholehearted recognition that Scripture addresses us with full divine authority as the saving revelation of God in Jesus Christ and that this authority applies to Scripture in its total extent and in all its parts.*

All Scripture speaks with the authority of "Thus saith the Lord." For what Scripture says, God says. All Scripture is "God-breathed", and therein lies its authority. Being the Word of God written, it "cannot be broken". These are claims which Scripture makes for itself, and it presses these claims upon us all as our common confession of faith.

From these awesome claims it is clear that a mystery surrounds Scripture which we can never fathom. Since biblical revelation comes to us with the full authority of God himself, its authority can never be adequately defined and explained, but only humbly confessed. Thus when theological questions arise concerning biblical authority, even then we are obliged to state and vindicate our position, in the face of alternative views, within the framework of a biblically Reformed confessional theology. In all of its utterances the church is called to respond to biblical authority in the spirit of confession.

All Scripture speaks with the authority of its divine author. Its authority is divine in origin and nature. Scripture is therefore normative for faith and life. It comes from God and speaks of God as it reveals the mighty acts of God unto salvation in his words and works. This history of redemption includes acts of judgment and reconciliation. Viewed in its extent, the whole Bible is authoritative. Viewed as to its nature, biblical authority is divine authority, qualified, but not limited, by its being redemptive revelation. The divine, plenary authority of Scripture is pervasively revealed in its totally redemptive, saving message. Scripture's message is, therefore, not partly redemptive and partly non-redemptive. All Scripture as Word of God is redemptive in nature. It is addressed to us as fallen men to redirect our lives in faith to God our Creator and Redeemer, and thus to restore us to our God-given place and task in creation. Thus we confess that biblical authority involves both the authority of the divine author and the content and purpose of his authoritative message. This confession holds true for Scripture pervasively, in the total extent of biblical revelation and throughout all its parts, though these parts are not to be seen in their isolation but in their revelational wholeness within the overall Christocentric perspective of the Bible.

Accordingly, the divine authority of Scripture can be faithfully understood only by listening attentively to its redemptive message. In bowing to the authority of Scripture as Word of God we must open our minds concretely to what God says, to whom he originally spoke, the historical-redemptive context in which he spoke time and again, the cultural conditions under which he spoke, and thus to discern what God is saying to us in the Scriptures today.

God reveals himself with full divine authority in the world of his making as well as in Scripture. There we meet him as Creator. Because

of sin, however, our eyes were blinded, our ears deafened, our hearts hardened to this revelation. So God now reveals himself anew in Scripture to us as sinners and for our salvation. Both in creation and in Scripture, and supremely in Christ, God has spoken with full divine authority. The divine authority of Scripture, in distinction from creation revelation, is characterized by its redemptive message. Scripture speaks with full divine authority in the language of redemption. For the divine authority of Scripture is deeply embedded in the unfolding revelation of the history of redemption, the plan of salvation, as centered in Jesus Christ, leading the way for the coming Kingdom of God.

Thus we must think of the authority of the Bible's divine author and the authority of its redemptive message as going hand in hand. They are like two sides of a single coin.

This perspective on the nature and extent of biblical authority is not a new confessional stance. It is securely anchored in the Reformed confessions as they have shaped our Reformed heritage in biblical interpretation. Therefore, neither this point of pastoral advice nor any of the others are to be construed as new confessional statements. Rather, all these points of pastoral advice are intended as reinforcement and elaboration of our accepted confessional commitment to the full divine authority of Scripture as pervasively revealed in its redemptive message.

*2. Synod calls the churches to maintain the clear witness of the creeds to the authority of Scripture as rooted in the historical reality of the events recorded in Scripture.*

We are called to be both a confessional and a confessing church. If we are serious about this, we may not take our confessional heritage as Reformed churches lightly. In the face of increasingly vocal anti-confessional tendencies in recent years, even within the Reformed community, we should resolve to uphold the witness of our confessions. Questions concerning biblical authority as we face them today are doubtless more complex than the form in which the Reformed churches confronted them at the time our creeds were written. But let us not underestimate the relevance of our Reformed creeds. They still offer a sound biblical perspective for approaching the central issues of biblical authority in our times.

At several crucial turning points in biblical revelation the reality of God's covenantal partnership with man in actual events is being called into question today. Some scholars replace the traditional historical-redemptive interpretation of Scripture by a method of interpretation which reduces some crucial biblical episodes to teaching models. Though they argue that biblical authority *as such* is not being challenged, but only the *nature* of biblical authority, it is nevertheless clear that their view of the authority of such biblical passages is no longer rooted in the historical reality of actual events. In the face of such challenges the church in its teaching and preaching must make clear that its message is securely anchored in real events involving real persons, places, and times—unless Scripture itself leads us to a nonliteral interpretation.

We should therefore follow the lead of our confessions in their meaningful testimonies to the historical reality of the events recorded in

biblical revelation—including the creation of man and the world; the fall of our first parents Adam and Eve in Paradise, and the consequences of their sin in human history; God's judgment upon sin; and God's saving work in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

3. *Synod, while confessing that the authority of the biblical message is rooted in the historical reality of the events therein recorded, urges the churches to recognize that these events are presented and interpreted in terms of their revelational meaning.*

Although we must maintain that the biblical message is rooted in the historical reality of the events recorded in Scripture, we must also recognize that these historical narratives are not purely objective, factual accounts. They are not mere chronicles. Scripture interprets as it narrates. It is prophetic history with a redemptive focus and purpose. In its witness to events it also proclaims the meaning of these events. Recognizing this leads us to a clearer understanding of what kind of book that Bible is.

The historical setting and cultural context of biblical revelation are therefore important for a right understanding of biblical authority within the framework of an organic view of inspiration, and also for interpreting Scripture in keeping with its own claim to full authority. We must therefore seek to discover how a given episode is woven into the total fabric of biblical revelation.

It is possible in certain instances to distinguish, partially at least, between an event and the way that event is recorded in Scripture. However this distinction should never be used to divorce the meaning of an event from the event itself which undergirds and shapes its meaning. We must take seriously both the message of the biblical text as it lies before us and the reality of the events to which Scripture bears witness, without playing one off against the other. Thus the distinction between event and record in biblical interpretation should not be used to discredit the historical reliability of biblical revelation. Throughout Scripture biblical authority is bound up inseparably with the historical reliability of the biblical witness to events which really happened. With this confession the authority of Scripture stands or falls in the confession and life of the church.

4. *Synod, acknowledging that Scripture is self-authenticating, reminds the churches that the authority of Scripture is not dependent upon the findings of science; while scientific findings can serve as occasions for a better understanding of Scripture, nevertheless the church may appeal to the authority of Scripture alone as the basis for its faith and life, and accordingly must seek to develop a Christian community within which all scholarly work is carried on in faithfulness to the authoritative Scriptures.*

The interrelationships between biblical interpretation and scientific findings is a source of recurring tension within the Christian community at large and also within the Reformed churches. This area of conflict also bears upon the question of biblical authority.

We must recognize that it does not lie within the mandate nor the competence of the church to take positions or make pronouncements on specifically scientific issues. But we must also recognize that the proclamation of the gospel entrusted to the church does address itself with the full authority of the Bible itself to the entire range of our life-relationships, including our involvements in the scientific enterprise. The proclamation of the gospel must therefore open up before us the total biblical perspective within which we must live our lives and do our work. Hence in following through on its proclamation of the gospel the church must encourage its members to pursue their scientific work in loyalty to the authoritative Scriptures and in harmony with the confessions, and assure itself of a similar commitment on the part of scholars working within the church's sphere of responsibility.

This view of the task of the church offers real possibilities for arriving at a Christian perspective on the relationship between biblical authority and scientific findings. For by proclaiming Jesus Christ as the key to God's creation revelation and the heart of God's inscripturated revelation the church can point the way to a clear recognition that there are no real contradictions between these two ways in which God reveals himself to us. In both creation and Scripture God addresses us with full authority. The conflicts that sometimes arise are due to discrepancies in our responses to these two modes of revelation. As Reformed Christians we must take both revelations seriously. Taking Scripture seriously leads to recognizing science as a legitimate expression of the cultural mandate. Therefore we must seek to profit from and make thankful use of the findings of science as seen in the light of Scripture. Motivated by these convictions we often discover that the results of scientific investigation become the occasion for reviewing and sometimes, upon further biblical reflection, even revising certain standing interpretations of the Bible. When in faithful obedience to God's full-orbed revelation we are led to a re-evaluation of certain biblical data, we should not resist such insights as lead us to a clearer understanding of both Scripture and creation in their revelational unity.

The church may not, however, allow its message to be made dependent upon the scientific enterprise, nor allow scientific findings to dictate its interpretation of the Bible, nor allow the claims of science to call into question its confession of biblical authority, nor allow any science, including theology, to determine what is believable and what is not believable in the Bible. For such concessions to science would mean reversing the right order of Christian thinking. Scripture itself is the lamp to our feet and the light upon our path as we walk through the various fields of scientific inquiry.

Basically Scripture is its own interpreter. Neither scientific knowledge nor theological expertise may function as prerequisites for a right understanding of Scripture. In varying degrees both can serve the church in deepening and enriching its understanding of God's revelation both in Scripture and in creation, when pursued within the framework of a Christian confessional perspective. Accordingly we urge our scholars to act, speak, and write in such a way as to demonstrate that their scholar-



ship is being carried on in faithfulness to the authority of Scripture and in loyalty to our confessions and thus merit the confidence of our people.

Under the enlightening power of the Holy Spirit the Bible is an open Book, which in its central and comprehensive message is readily accessible and unmistakably clear to the believing heart and mind. The biblical faith and obedience of God's people may not be made dependent upon theologians or other scientists on the faulty assumption that a hearty confession of biblical authority and a right understanding of the biblical message awaits their authoritative word.

Indispensable for understanding the central and comprehensive message of Scripture is a Spirit-led faith. With this in mind our pulpits must proclaim the full-orbed message of Scripture with a ring of authority which echoes the authority of Scripture itself. All those who have ears to hear must be able to discern clearly what the Spirit is saying to the churches and what that redeeming, liberating, life-giving Word means for living the full life of Christian discipleship in God's world today.

*5. Synod encourages the churches to see to it that biblical studies are carried on in a careful and disciplined way, submissively rethinking the thoughts of Scripture itself; and accordingly warns against the use of any method of biblical interpretation which excludes or calls into question either the event-character or the revelational meaning of biblical history, thus compromising the full authority of Scripture as the Word of God.*

Since Scripture as the Word of God is an historical revelation, it calls for methods of interpreting its redemptive message which do justice to its deeply historical dimension. Hence, in the Reformed tradition we have often spoken of the historical-grammatical-theological method of interpretation. Nowadays, in addition to the adjective "historical," the adjective "critical" is commonly used to describe methods of biblical interpretation. We should recognize, however, that the validity, acceptability, and usability of this concept "critical" depends upon how this concept is defined and how it actually functions in biblical interpretation. Biblical scholarship can be carried on *critically*, if we make clear that "critical" does not imply a refusal to submit our thinking believingly to the authority of Scripture or a refusal to respond wholeheartedly to the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit who gave us the Word. Biblical studies can be carried on *critically* if we understand "critical" to mean a careful, disciplined, analytical rethinking of the thoughts of Scripture itself.

Thus understood, historical-critical studies, in harmony with the doctrine of organic inspiration, have contributed to a richer appreciation of the real human and historical dimension of Scripture as God's Word to man. Such scholarly approaches to Scripture have highlighted in exciting ways a better understanding of the historical setting and cultural context of the biblical message.

However, the historical-critical method as employed in contemporary theology often betrays fundamental religious presuppositions which com-

promise a wholehearted confession of the full authority of Scripture. In some cases this method is employed on the silent assumption that the Bible is purely a product of human history. In other cases this unbiblical bias is explicitly present as a working principle. Whenever this method of interpretation is thus used to reduce the Word of God to the words of men, the results are devastating for the life of the church. The Bible is then robbed of its authority for Christian living. It then serves only as an historical document for scholars and experts, a handbook for theologians and historians in the pursuit of their scientific studies. A form of historical theology then replaces proclamation; the pulpit loses its prophetic voice; and for the people of God the Bible as Word of God becomes a closed book. At best the biblical message can then be recovered only as an after-thought, once the historical-critical method has run its full course. For this method of biblical interpretation is deliberately blind to the revelational content and purpose of Scripture.

As presently employed by some contemporary Reformed scholars, this method does not necessarily involve a rejection of the revelational content and purpose of Scripture. For they hold that for them the historical-critical method serves only a limited function. There is more to the biblical message than can be uncovered by this method. Accordingly they do not apply this method in the radical, thoroughgoing way described above. As Reformed scholars they recognize the revelational as well as the historical dimension in Scripture. Distinguishing between these two dimensions, they clearly make room in their theology for the revelational dimension, though the relationship between the historical and revelational is often highly ambiguous.

In so far as these Reformed scholars make use of the historical-critical method, they set the revelational dimension outside their purview. For such exclusion is taken to be a built-in limitation of this method. By definition this method cannot pronounce upon the revelational dimension of such central redemptive events as the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ. Working with the historical-critical method in biblical studies therefore means that the Christian historian *as historian* cannot pronounce upon those uniquely redemptive events which constitute the very heart of Scripture, nor can he deal with the revelational dimension of these events. He must by definition limit himself to that which can be proven historically, for example, by the law of cause-and-effect or the principle of analogy—whatever additional revelational meaning he as a believing scholar recognizes in the biblical record.

In the measure that this method is consistently applied it involves basic presuppositions which render theology extremely dubious as a faith-task within the Christian community. A genuinely confessional theology then becomes a highly questionable undertaking. For, though limited in application, such use of the historical-critical method excludes in practice what the Christian in principle confesses, namely, that Scripture reports reliably the mighty acts of God in history. It therefore does injustice to Scripture's claim to be fully and pervasively the Word of God and involves a serious reduction of the Reformed confessional approach to biblical authority and interpretation.

The churches should therefore guard against the use of any method of biblical interpretation which by definition cannot or in practice does not pronounce upon the unique event-character of biblical revelation or upon the revelational character of Scripture which constitutes the very heart of its message. Our methods of interpreting Scripture must be true to Scripture's own view of reality and expressive of our Reformed confession concerning biblical revelation. Scripture itself is the norm for our theological and other scientific enterprises, and thus also the norm for our principles and methods of biblical interpretation. Faithful biblical interpretation must begin with the believing confession that God's Word has seized control of our hearts and minds, so that we then willingly lead every thought captive in obedience to Christ the Lord. Scripture itself must first interpret for us the meaning of our lives as the spiritual starting point for our interpretation of the biblical message for today.

*6. Synod reminds the churches of our brotherly obligation to respect such freedom of biblical interpretation as falls clearly within the bounds of our creedal forms of unity, while recognizing, of course, that in all things we are bound by the Word of God.*

While maintaining that our creeds witness authoritatively to the central truths of Scripture, we must recognize that our creeds also countenance a certain freedom of exegesis and allow for differences of insight on some specific matters of biblical interpretation. We should therefore abide by the spirit of our creeds in not requiring of ourselves or others more than our creeds themselves require of us. In matters on which the creeds speak we must honor their authority. Where the creeds allow for a certain freedom of interpretation, there we must exercise Christian toleration. In all things, however, we are bound by the Word of God.

Yet the confessions remain forms of unity for the faith and life of the church. As forms of unity they are designed to promote a common witness to our biblical faith and to preserve the unity of our common commitment to the authority of Scripture by delineating the fundamental perspective within which freedom of exegesis is to be exercised and differences of insight evaluated and, hopefully, resolved.

As long as our diversities of interpretation fall clearly within the bounds of our basic and comprehensive confession of biblical authority and within the witness of our creeds, such differences are to be countenanced, though with the hope in time, by mutual trust and ongoing diligent reflection on the meaning of God's Word, we may arrive at greater unity in our response to the biblical message.

If therefore among Christians who share the same biblical faith, differences prevail on certain points of biblical interpretation, and if appeal to Scripture itself leaves these issues unresolved, then appeal to the authority of the creeds is the path to travel in delineating the biblical-confessional arena within which differing parties are to seek a settlement. In all questions of biblical interpretation, whether they concern matters clearly confessed in the creeds or not, the church must always demonstrate the Berean spirit of testing whether these interpretations are true to the Scriptures.

*7. Synod reminds the churches that the authority of Scripture lays its comprehensive claim upon the total life of the church, so that biblical authority is not only to be believed and confessed as an article of faith, but also to be consistently applied and practiced in the life and ministry of the church.*

Our common confession of biblical authority has profound and sweeping implications for the preaching and teaching ministry of the church. Since Scripture is the standard of authority for the life of the church, as well as for life as a whole, its norms must give meaning and direction to all the ministries of the church. Though we may vigorously affirm the authority of Scripture, that affirmation rests in judgment upon us whenever our preaching or teaching lacks the authoritative ring of the biblical message. It is not enough to openly profess our allegiance to the authority of Scripture. That authority must also actually function as an operative principle in the life of the church.

By the authority of Scripture we must test even our most cherished traditions and practices. By that authority we are called to work together for the ongoing renewal of the church in keeping with the Reformational principle, "The church reformed must always be reforming." By that authority our creeds exercise their authority in the life of the church. By that authority we may be called again to shape new creeds.

Experience teaches us that it is possible to honor the authority of Scripture in word, and yet betray it in deed. Sometimes this happens through misplaced emphases. For example, if in preaching and teaching we develop biblical themes atomistically, that is, by cutting them loose from their historical-redemptive rootage in Scripture or by unfolding them in isolation from the focus of Scripture as the saving revelation of God in Jesus Christ, then our confession of biblical authority amounts to little more than mere lip service. Then the voice of the church loses that clear ring of biblical authority, "Thus saith the Lord!"

Such denial in practice of what we claim in principle also happens when we fail to expound the Christ-centered revelation of the Old Testament, either by neglect, thus reducing the Old Testament to a closed book, or by distortions which eclipse the redemptive perspective which binds the Old Testament as promise to the New Testament as fulfillment.

Furthermore, it is also inconsistent with our confession of biblical authority to adopt dualistic forms of interpretation which undercut the integrally unified, organically whole nature of biblical revelation—as, for example, when we subject our exegesis to such faulty dichotomies as formal versus material aspects in Scripture, doctrinal facts versus moral values, the human factor versus the divine factor, history versus proclamation. Such dualisms often imply that some elements in Scripture are authoritative, while others are not; or that some carry more authority than others. Such patterns of thinking fail to do justice to the comprehensive nature of biblical authority. For the full authority which Scripture claims for itself radically excludes every intimation of a canon within the canon of Scripture.

The church must also keep its windows open to God's world by addressing the redeeming message of God's authoritative Word to every sphere of life and to every human situation. For God's Word has cosmic dimensions. Only by honoring this comprehensive concept of biblical authority can the church lead the community of believers to a growing Christian maturity in its witness to a secular society, and thus live up to its God-given mission in the world.

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SYNODICAL ACTION

Your committee respectfully submits the following recommendations:

A. That synod recommend the preceding study report (Sections I-IV) to our churches for the purpose of giving direction in our communal discussions concerning the nature and extent of biblical authority.

B. That synod adopt the following seven points relating to the nature and extent of biblical authority as pastoral advice to the churches, in the light of our common commitment to this confessional preamble:

"We confess that this Word of God was not sent nor delivered by the will of men, but that men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit . . . Therefore we call such writings holy and divine Scriptures . . . We believe that the Holy Scriptures are contained in two books, namely, the Old and the New Testaments, which are canonical, against which nothing can be alleged . . . We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith; believing without any doubt all things contained in them, not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but more especially because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they carry the evidence thereof in themselves . . . We believe that those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein. For since the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in them at large, it is unlawful for anyone, though an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are taught in Holy Scriptures . . . It does thereby evidently appear that the doctrine thereof is most perfect and complete in all respects . . . Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever does not agree with this infallible rule." (Belgic Confession, Articles III-VII)

1. Synod calls the churches to a wholehearted recognition that Scripture addresses us with full divine authority as the saving revelation of God in Jesus Christ and that this authority applies to Scripture in its total extent and in all its parts.

2. Synod calls the churches to maintain the clear witness of the creeds to the authority of Scripture as rooted in the historical reality of the events recorded in Scripture.

3. Synod, while confessing that the authority of the biblical message is rooted in the historical reality of the events therein recorded, urges the churches to recognize that these events are presented and interpreted in terms of their revelational meaning.

4. Synod, acknowledging that Scripture is self-authenticating, reminds the churches that the authority of Scripture is not dependent upon the findings of science; while scientific findings can serve as occasions for a better understanding of Scripture, nevertheless the church may appeal to the authority of Scripture alone as the basis for its faith and life, and accordingly must seek to develop a Christian community within which all scholarly work is carried on in faithfulness to the authoritative Scriptures.

5. Synod encourages the churches to see to it that biblical studies are carried on in a careful and disciplined way, submissively rethinking the thoughts of Scripture itself; and accordingly warns against the use of any method of biblical interpretation which excludes or calls into question either the event-character or the revelational meaning of biblical history, thus compromising the full authority of Scripture as the Word of God.

6. Synod reminds the churches of our brotherly obligation to respect such freedom of biblical interpretation as falls clearly within the bounds of our creedal forms of unity, while recognizing, of course, that in all things we are bound by the Word of God.

7. Synod reminds the churches that the authority of Scripture lays its comprehensive claim upon the total life of the church, so that biblical authority is not only to be believed and confessed as an article of faith, but also to be consistently applied and practiced in the life and ministry of the church.

C. That synod approve in substance the introduction to and elaboration of the seven points of pastoral advice as set forth in Part V of this report as the explanatory context for understanding this pastoral advice to the churches.

D. That synod submit the entire report (Sections I—V) to the Reformed Ecumenical Synod as a contribution to the broader ecumenical discussion of the nature and extent of biblical authority.

E. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to Dr. G. Spykman and Dr. D. Holwerda as spokesmen for the committee.

F. That synod declare the committee's mandate fulfilled and therefore now discharge the committee.

Respectfully submitted,

The Committee on Biblical Authority

A. Bandstra, Chairman  
D. Holwerda  
F. Klooster  
J. Vos  
M. Woudstra  
G. Spykman, Reporter