

June 29, 2008

Dear Friends:

It has been written that whenever there is a divided vote, some people will be disappointed. This seems to hold true especially in the courts of the church.

Moreover, beyond disappointment (which tends to go first one way and then the other), there has been a keen awareness in the church, at least in the Reformed churches, that even the official decisions of the church may fall short of the will of God. So it is, from time to time, that decisions are reversed and that even confessions of faith are revised.

This insight about the fallible nature of the decision making bodies of the church and therefore about the tentative nature of their decisions was famously articulated about 360 years ago in the Westminster Confession of Faith:

Of Synods and Councils

3. All synods or councils since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both.

The Book of Confessions, 6.175, p. 158

When it is put that way, the negative import of the matter is clear: since the Scriptures are the rule of faith and practice (see both the Shorter Catechism and the Larger Catechism, *The Book of Confessions*, 7.003 and 7.113), the decisions of synods or councils cannot be that rule.

It occurs to me, though, to look at the more limited but positive application at end of that sentence: the decisions of synods and councils are meant to be used “as a help” in both faith and practice. Perhaps this is part of the work of the church between councils, to determine how best to use the decisions of the councils “as a help” in both faith and practice.

Perhaps this is part of the work of the Foundation, to promote the study of the Scriptures, of the confessions, and of the classic writings of Reformed theology, in order to help us all determine how, if possible, the decisions of the church in our day can be used “as a help” in both the Christian faith and the Christian practice of the congregations where we live and serve.

Grace and Peace,

Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, *Executive Director*
Foundation for Reformed Theology

4103 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23230-3818
(804) 678-8352
www.foundationrt.org

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