

# The Formularies of Unity and the Dutch Reformed Church: A preliminary survey

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## Abstract

*This article undertakes a survey of the application of the Formularies of Unity by the Dutch Reformed Church, covering its history from the 18th century to approximately 1935. Although these Formularies were the accepted confessional basis of the church, it did not prevent additional theological accommodation during the 18th century. During the first part of the 19th century an institutional concept of the church put forward a subscribing formula. The confession became important. In principle the way was opened for an institutional and contractual enforcement of the Formularies. This happened when the church was involved in the wide-ranging liberal struggle during the sixth decade. Even before the 20th century a new approach in which the role of the Formularies was seen more dogmatically and confessionalistically came to the fore. And, when the church was once again entangled in a struggle (viz. the well-known 'Du Plessis case' of the 1930's) the dogmatic point of departure played into the hands of a confessional fundamentalism. In the history of the Dutch Reformed Church, the Formularies thus gained in ecclesiological emphasis and value and its application was conditioned by the context and theological influence. Most importantly, the underlying problem of its historicity on the one hand, and its scriptural context and intent on the other hand, remained an unpaid account.*

## 1. Introduction

There has never been a time in the history of the Dutch Reformed Church that the Three Formularies of Unity have not been its confessional basis. Ecclesiological as well as theological, its history shows a typical association with these Formularies. From a church history point of view this phenomenon can be distinguished and described, and a line of development can be pointed out. This tendency can be traced back to the 18th century, although the Formularies only came into real prominence in the 19th century. Its application was determined and qualified by the historical context and foreign theological influence. At the same time

the church was confronted with the characteristic question or problem peculiar to an authoritative confession. As a formal document the confession was implemented to safeguard the teachings of the church. Assuming positions and in terms of minority and majority convictions the basic problem was, however, sidestepped. The aim of this article, therefore, is to survey the application of and the reflection on the Formularies of Unity by the Dutch Reformed Church, covering its history from the 18th century to approximately 1935.

## **2. The 18th century: additional influences not prevented**

For the sake of the historic positioning and link, a few remarks are necessary regarding the 18th century. The generally accepted perception exists that the Cape Dutch Church adhered during the 17th and 18th centuries in a strict sense to the Formularies of Unity in the way it was stipulated and understood by the famous Synod of Dordrecht (1618/19) (Du Toit, 1911; Vorster, 1981; Van der Watt, 1976). One should, however, be very wary of describing the first 150 years of South African church and theology history as reformed and 'Dordrecht reformed' in terms of the Three Formularies of Unity. Granted, the ministers, sick-comforters and teachers did indeed in a formal sense by signature adhere to the Three Formularies. And, as an institution and in societal context the church did – in a confessional sense – hold its own, not leaving room for other churches and associations. That is why the church was instrumental in discouraging and even averting the initial Moravian mission (Müller, 1923; Krüger, 1966:11 ff), and why it prevented the Lutherans who avowed the Augsburg Confession of Faith to institute ecclesiastically (cf. Hoge, 1939:17-19 ff; cf. also Hoge, 1938). In this respect it can indeed be argued that the reformed confession formally protected and maintained the public faith at the Cape.

However, this aspect should not be misunderstood. During the 18th century the accepted and underlying government-centric consciousness dealt with a theocratic concept of the unitary culture, which linked the public religion to the Cape Church (vide Brown & Britz, 1991:420 ff). In this concept and practice, the Formularies were inculcated in a functional and traditional way rather than confessionally. This phenomenon is underlined by the fact that during the 18th century the theology of the Cape Church followed the contemporary Dutch tendencies and positions. In a broad sense it therefore displayed a characteristic rational element, which was typical of the way in which theology was scholarly debated and practised at the accepted Dutch faculties (cf. Knappert, 1912:68 ff; Bronsveld, 1873:69 ff; De Jong, 1972:258 ff; Vos, 1888:100 ff). This conclusion is based on the study of published ecclesiastic theological literature of Cape origin (cf. Britz, 1990:23-40; Britz, 1992:110-126).

Although the published sermons of Cape origin were therefore not so much in accord with *De prediking van de Nadere Reformatie* (cf. Brienens, 1974), the

"Oude Schrijvers" were read as well (cf. Van Zijl, 1991). It is a well known fact that the Nadere Reformatie applied the Formularies in its own characteristic way, determined by a contextualization in consequence of a particular understanding of the gospel (cf. Brienen, 1986; Graafland, 1961). Its influence, emphasis and orientation among members of the Cape Church should not be underestimated (cf. Bosman, 1855; Spoelstra, 1963:5 ff; Moorrees, 1937:267 ff). Keeping this in mind it is – in another respect – quite clear why one should be very careful not to draw a line directly and one-sidedly between the Cape Church of the 18th century and the Dordt confessions.

This is also indicated by two further developments – the one more historical, the other more theological – during the last quarter of the 18th century. After 1770, when the Cape Patriots (cf. Beyers, 1929; Schutte, 1974) shifted the emphasis to society and democracy, the confession did not stand in the way of a shift with regard to the old theocratic concept and vision (Pont, 1969/70) which, however, did not mean that religion was sacrificed. Society was viewed in terms of the law of nature and God. Religion, however, was no longer linked to one church. Even before 1780 the Lutheran Church organized itself (cf. Hoge, 1938; Hoge, 1939). A new order proclaimed itself and was initiated.

Secondly, and during the same period of time, the Formularies did not prevent a further theological accommodation. In the Reverend Van Lier an approach from the viewpoint of faith and the individual verdicts of faith found a theologian and spokesman of stature (cf. Hanekom, 1959). In his method of work and the activation of mission work the convictions of evangelical assimilation of the Puritan tradition of England were clearly visible. Together with Michiel Vos (vide Du Plessis, 1911b) he introduced this evangelical accent which bound working communities together transconfessionally, especially with regard to mission work during the 1780's. Attitudes, suppositions and deductions were, however, not accounted for scripturally and tested confessionally (cf. Brown, undated: 90 ff).

In conclusion, it is therefore clear that during the 18th century the Cape society and its public church was open for theological influencing – the origin of which should not be sought in the immediate proximity of the kind of scriptural synthesizing found in the Three Formularies of Unity. As directive ecclesiastic writings the confessions of Dordrecht remained in the background.

Ecclesiastically the confessions of Dordrecht became prominent in the 19th century.

### **3. The 19th century until 1862: an institutional concept of the church put forward a subscribing formula**

Historically and from a church history point of view the situation at the Cape changed at the turn of the century. The political structure of the Dutch East India Company was replaced by a Batavian interpretation. In 1806 the Cape became a British colony. In a common context many churches<sup>1</sup> (and mission societies – cf. Du Plessis, 1911a:61 ff) from different confessional convictions and traditions joined in the process of furthering the ministry and mission work of the Christian church in a plural society (cf. Giliomee & Elphic, 1986). The various churches had to adapt mutually and come to an agreement. The Cape Dutch church thus did not only have to cope with a new situation and its challenges, but had to identify and position itself ecclesiologically and theologically as well (cf. Claassen, 1986). In that respect it was no longer possible to take into consideration only its own tradition and Dutch orientation. Some of its leading ministers such as Serurier, Fleck, Borchers (vide Veltkamp, 1977), Berrangé, Spijker and Heyns were theologically quite satisfied with a moderate supranaturalism according to which the supranatural aspect of the Christian faith was reconciled with the insight and claims of the Enlightenment. In addition the arrival of the Scottish ministers (cf. Moorrees, 1937:537 ff; Sass, 1956; Claassen, 1990, Beukes, 1985) introduced a Presbyterianism as conceived ecclesiologically and evangelically in terms of the Westminster Confession.

Against this background the Cape Church met in 1824 as a synod. The 1804 "Kerken-Ordre" (cf. Kleynhans, 1974:24 ff, 109 ff, 294 ff; Pont, 1991:170 ff) of De Mist, which protected its position in the new dispensation by law, was followed. In terms of an institutional church concept the synod regulated the church's government and ministry. In this concept, as expressed in the "Algemeen Reglement" of that year (Pont, 1991:204 ff), the Scottish Presbyterianism was reconciled with the Dutch supranaturalism (cf. Brown, 1992:692). In the process an ecclesiological legal concept was coined according to which the doctrine of the church could also be endorsed. In fact, according to Section 35 of office-bearers (teachers of religion) were expected to subscribe to the confessions of the church "welke overeenkomstig Gods Heilig Woord, vervat is in de Formularien van Enigheid" (Pont, 1991:222). Ecclesiologically, the Formularies of Unity gained decisive importance.

At the synod of 1837 this "Acte van Onderteekening" was amended particularly by demand of the Scottish ministers. The proposal by the Reverend W. Robert-

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<sup>1</sup> In addition to the Dutch Reformed and Lutheran traditions, churches of British descent (the Anghcan, Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational and Baptist churches) were also established at the Cape during this period

son that the "Acte" should read: "dat ik de Leer, welke in de aangenoemene Formulieren van Eenigheid der Hervormde Kerk is vervat, hartelijk geloof overeenkomstig Gods Heilig Woord te zijn ..." (Pont, 1991:186), was barely accepted.<sup>2</sup> It was, however, an important amendment in that the scriptural context of the Formularies had been accentuated, thereby taking a different direction in subscribing to the doctrine of the church than the Nederlands Hervormde Kerk did (cf. Rasker, 1974:41 ff). This amendment at the same time linked the subscription to the doctrine only to the spirit and purport of the confession (Pont, 1991:98 ff).

This formula obviously did not say everything. The Formularies were not mentioned by name. The question can thus be asked whether the formularies had been regarded as superfluous. Furthermore, was the point at issue a functional canonical act and entrenchment in terms of a confessional accord, rather than the intrinsic 'confessionality'<sup>3</sup> of the Three Formularies of Unity? Or did an explanation not really matter? Would that be the reason why Ordinance 7 of 1843 mentioned only the "confession of the Synod of Dordt and ... the Heidelberg Catechism"? Or was the *Confessio Belgica* – in the context of a British colony and judicial system – dropped deliberately in this case? (cf. Pont, 1991:251 ff, 260 ff).

When the Cape Dutch Church therefore had to identify itself among other churches, and an influential theological orientation was added, an institutional church concept put forward a subscribing formula which indicated the confessional basis "als overeenkomstig Gods Heilig Woord".<sup>4</sup> The confession became important, although it was not defined in detail. However, when the confession became involved in the institutional enforcement of the doctrine after 1860, certainty became necessary, especially in view of the wide-ranging church struggle (cf. Moorrees, 1937:881 ff; Hanekom, 1951:308 ff) during the period 1860 to 1870. This struggle led to a further development in which the Formularies functioned in the Dutch Reformed Church.

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2 This proposal was accepted with 21-19 votes. See *Handelingen eener buitengewone Synodale Vergadering der Nederduitsch-Gereformeerde Kerk van Zuid-Afrika*, 1858:141.

3 By 'confessionality' is meant the inherent reliability and scriptural intent with which the Confessions synthesise Scripture and revelation.

4 *Wetten en bepalingen voor het bestuur der Nederduitsch Gereformeerde Kerk in Zuid-Afrika*, 1844: Art 63, 35. This subscribing formula remained unchanged until 1870.

#### **4. An institutional and contractual enforcement during the liberal struggle (1862-1875)**

Obviously the course of the so-called liberal trend and the liberal struggle should be studied historically. This trend should also be understood theologically. The community and more than one church were involved. Theological influencing from abroad created a situation that demanded a solution. For the Dutch Reformed Church this struggle involved dogmatic as well as canonical consequences. The confessions, and their authority, suddenly became the centre and focus of attention. Unswerving and definite application could no longer be avoided.

With the theological training at Stellenbosch in its own hands (cf. Ferreira, 1979), the church was applying the biblical-apologetic approach of the Utrecht School (cf. Rasker, 1974:134 ff) evangelically and contextually. Methods and a ministry pattern for the sake of the revival of the Dutch Reformed Church and society bound the Evangelicals together. However, the Groningen (cf. Rasker, 1974:45 ff) and Leyden (cf. Rasker, 1974:113 ff) adaptation and dismantling of the idealism of the former supranaturalism at the same time provided, under the influence of the critical German theology, competent preachers on the Cape pulpits. Their viewpoints and diction were, however, too drastically different. Their viewpoints were at variance with the strong convictions within the Dutch Reformed Church – convictions regarding sin, atonement in and by Christ, the supranatural nature of the revelation and the infallibility of the Bible (cf. Hofmeyr, 1860; Hofmeyr, 1868).

At the Synod of 1862 controversialists threw down the gauntlet. As an institution the Synod acted in its own right and in a general sense, in that way, on the one hand asserting its authority ecclesiocratically in order to bind the church to its ministry and, on the other hand, dissenting ministers to the confession. This approach, however, could not keep the church out of the civil court. Its own *Wetten en bepalingen* were the cause.

The church, or rather the synod, wanted to retain and apply the confession in its historic sense. Many members of the church were convinced that liberalism necessitated the enforcement "van de zuivere leer" (Handelingen, 1863:xii). And, "eene verdediging derzelve" was not excluded as well (Handelingen, 1863:xii). *Geene leervryheid* (vide Lid der Synode, 1863) became an ecclesiastical point of departure. The synod stood by the *Acte van onderteekening*, and controlled the situation. The synod vested it with church jurisdiction to take action (against the Revs. Kotzé and Burgers) (cf. Moorrees, 1937:889 ff). In this sense the Formularies were viewed contractually and linked to legitimation (or admission), thereby driving back the function of the confession within the framework of "reglementen" and "wetsbepalingen". Within this framework the confession was enforced.

Were they, within the outline of an ecclesiological legal concept, formally the watchmen on the walls without sharing the public square? Would that be the reason why the subscribing formula was amended and extended in 1870? From then onwards ministers had to confirm that they believed wholeheartedly that all the clauses and parts of the doctrine in the formulary and Catechism, being the Formularies of Unity of the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands, were in accordance with the Word of God. In addition they had to undertake to be willing to reject, repudiate and exclude from the church all false doctrines. Therefore they also undertook not to teach against the confession directly or indirectly.<sup>5</sup>

Ecclesiologically the Formularies were therefore enforced. At the same time, many of those who endorsed this conduct, were theologically bound to the conviction that neither rules nor stipulations would be able to stop the liberal trend. For that purpose they believed "dat geene reglementen noch wetsbepalingen in staat zijn dien stroom af te keeren. Dat daartoe hooger, sterker, levender kracht, de banier van 's Heeren Geest, noodig is" (cf. *Handelingen*, 1863:xii). These words echo a serious conviction in dealing with this matter. Examined closely, this theological motive threatened the inherent confessionality and competence of the Formularies in a subtle manner. The orthodox ministers wanted to act biblically, and to remain faithful to the Bible. With almost no reference to the Formularies, they favoured an evangelical concept or objectifying of the Christian faith (cf. Brown, 1990; Brown, 1991; Brown, W., 1987:91 ff). Their apologetic method, according to which a case for faith, the revelation, the Christology, etc., has been made out in the literature<sup>6</sup> in which *De Moderne Theologie*<sup>7</sup> had been rejected, is a striking proof of this approach.

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<sup>5</sup> Vide *Wetten en bepalingen voor het bestuur der Nederduitsche Gereformeerde Kerk in Zuid-Afrika*, 1870: Art 62, 57.

<sup>6</sup> As Clericus dr. Kotzć, the local minister of Richmond, immediately drafted *Eene beoordeeling naar aanleiding van de dertien toespraken gehouden in de Mutual Hall, Kaapstad* door D.P. Faure, SSMC (Kotzć, 1868). Andrew Murray (jr.) also reflected on *Het moderne ongelooft in dertien leerredenen* (Murray, 1868).

<sup>7</sup> According to Faure, the modern reformation and trends boiled down to *De Moderne Theologie* (vide Faure, 1868). He argues that the liberal conviction synthesises revelation in terms of reason. Accordingly, reason is the only agent "waardoor de mensch de openbaring Gods, zijne uitwendige openbaring in natuur en geschiedenis, zijn inwendige openbaring daar binnen in u leert ken" (Faure, 1868:57). Appealing to Article 7 of the Belgic Confession, viz. that Protestants do not adhere to the infallibility of the church or its doctrine, Faure stays with his conviction "om ons verstands, ons rede, ons geweten ... te raadplegen, tegenover de letter der Schrift en de Kerkleer" (Faure, 1868:27). Cf. further XYZ and Herder. 1871.

Even when J.J. Kotzé<sup>8</sup> published *De Belijdenisschriften der Nederduitsch-Gereformeerde Kerk en derzelver geschiedkundige toelichting* in 1865, he evaded the problem. To him the ecclesiastic use of the Formularies meant "de vasstelling van de voorwaarden der kerkelijke gemeenschap ..." (Kotzé, 1865:1). According to Kotzé the formularies were the church's "geloofsovertuiging aangaande de "christelijke waarheden" and "zijn de waarborg van haar bestaan" (Kotzé, 1865: 27, 28, 30 ff). The relationship between Scriptures and Formularies was thus hierarchically understood. Kotzé (1865:30) claimed that the Formularies are subordinate to Scripture, but the problem of its confessionality was neither touched nor solved.

Would that, and an ecclesiastic theological conviction, be the reasons why Hofmeyr described the Formularies as the imperfect work of men? Hofmeyr said that the Formularies are intended to ward off false doctrines that the church encountered and fought – false doctrines which had been overcome in the power of the Holy Spirit. The aim of the Formularies, however is not to limit the truth to which the Holy Spirit leads the church until it will reach full growth and completion in Jesus Christ (Hofmeyr, 1865:153; cf. Murray, 1888:373-377). Along these lines he thus qualified a wider and more current insight. In fact, Andrew Murray was probably in trouble at the 1870 Synod for the same reason when the Reverend J.J. Kotzé convincingly indicated that Murray was not in complete agreement with the Canons of Dordrecht regarding predestination (cf. Pont, 1959; Anon., 1871).

On the other hand, the problem of the historicity of the Formularies was also overlooked – a problem particularly raised by the liberal theologians. These liberal theologians indeed wished to be free from church or confessional prescription and ties – even the scriptural prescription was adapted to the norm of reasonable viability. According to that, the magisterium of a church document out of the past was confronted with the authentic Protestant approach.<sup>9</sup> In their defence of the true teachings of the church, the orthodox group did not pay any attention to this admission and a far-reaching hermeneutical problem remained unsolved.

To conclude: an evangelistical motive and a theological method evidently prevented a thorough exposition of the question of the historicity, as well as the scriptural connections and meaning of the Formularies. In the apologetic approach room was made for a supranaturalistic adherence to the Bible and association with faith (cf. Brown, 1991:575). E. Brown pointed out that the first two

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<sup>8</sup> Not to be confused with J.J. Kotzé of Darling. Cf. Beyers, 1981:304ff.

<sup>9</sup> This was perhaps one of the main reasons why Faure deserted the Dutch Reformed Church to form a Free Protestant Church in Cape Town.



professors at the Theological Seminary in Stellenbosch believed that nature and revelation, reason and faith were not in discord (Brown, 1991:575,574-590; Thom, 1989). This conviction was coupled with an evangelistic approach. In this way the ministry and preaching saved the church from a rationalised theology as it was accommodated in Europe and particularly in Germany. The same road as that of the Free Church of Scotland was followed increasingly.

Since 1870 then, and due to the liberal controversy in the Cape Church, the Formularies of Unity were inscribed ecclesiastically. In terms of an ecclesiastical jurisdiction, it was maintained by the synod. In this way the Dutch Reformed Church drew the contours within which the Formularies would function, thereby accompanying its theology and its ministry.

## 5. Since c. 1880: a new confessionalistic input and approach towards the function of the Formularies of Unity

Even before the 20th century, a new approach regarding the Formularies in the Dutch Reformed Church came to the fore in which the role of the Formularies was seen more confessionalistically. Yet another theological trend and method announced itself in the Dutch Reformed Church. Once again links were found overseas – this time with the confessional movement as initiated in the Netherlands by the Secession of 1834 (cf. Rasker, 1974:55 ff) – a movement which was taken further by Abraham Kuyper and others (cf. Rasker, 1974:153 ff,171 ff). In Paarl the Reverend S.J. du Toit (cf. Scholtz, 1975) put this impetus into words<sup>10</sup> and complied with it in his own way (cf. Scholtz, 1975:233 ff). He found supporters in the Reverends W.P. de Villiers (cf. de Kock, 1981) P. Huet (cf. Hough, 1962) and Frans Lion-Cachet (cf. Kriel, 1955; Engelbrecht, 1953). The last-mentioned ministered in the Transvaal and ensured that the Formularies were accepted ecclesiastically as the *norma normata*<sup>11</sup> (vide Lion-Cachet, 1866:18 ff, 26 ff).

<sup>10</sup> S J du Toit did not hesitate to polemicise in this regard. He was indeed in more than one respect at loggerheads with the Dutch Reformed Church. In the papers of which he was the editor (*De Afrikaanse Patriot* and *De Getuige*) he accused his church of neglecting the confessions, especially as far as the doctrine of election was concerned. At the same time he opted for supplementing the Formularies in an eschatological-millennialistic way. What the Cape Synod did not succeed in doing, he did. He published the Formularies of Unity, added his comments "om leden onzer kerk een zoo duidelyk mogelijk begrip te geven van wat eigenlyk de betekenis is van onze Gereformeerde Leer en wat dezelve onderscheidt van de leer van andere kerkgenootschappen die van ons verschillen" (*Handelingen*, 1881:82, vide further S J du Toit, 1895a, S J du Toit, 1895b, S J du Toit, 1901, Oberholster, 1956:50 ff).

<sup>11</sup> Vide also Pretorius, 1986:203ff. For a contemporary standpoint and emphasis, vide Bosman, 1889:5 ff,9,12,15,21 ff, Goddefroy, 1890

Without going into the matter further, it can be stated that the Dutch Reformed Church did gain a confessional consciousness. Theologically this would function more strongly. This confessional consciousness had a conservative character, and gained ground in the church after the South African War of 1899-1902. Links were found with the Vrije Universiteit (Amsterdam) (cf. Pont, 1987:28 ff; Brown, 1987:33 ff) and with orthodox and reformed churches in the United States of America. Princeton (cf. Noll, 1983) and its theological stand, inter alia, became known and attracted South African students.

In the meantime, while J.I. Marais and C.F.J. Muller in their *Gereformeerde Maandblad*<sup>12</sup> wanted to take the hands of young clergymen in their ministry, the theological problems of the time were touched upon at a regular basis. Scholarly theology was to be regarded seriously. Under the influence of the Scottish and Utrecht biblical-apologetic movement, higher criticism (vide *Gereformeerde Maandblad*, 1892:4 ff; Ibid. I(2), 1892:15 ff; I(12), 1892:8 ff; IX(1), 1904:6 ff; XII(2), 1907:29 and the complete XV, 1910) scriptural inspiration (vide *Gereformeerde Maandblad*, 1892:4 ff; I(2), 1892:8 ff), evolution (cf. *Gereformeerde Maandblad* IX(1), 1904:5) and the humanisation of Christ (cf. *Gereformeerde Maandblad* I(1), 1892:4 ff; IX(1), 1904:6 ff) were discussed. And yet, as Brown points out, it did not prevent the ministry and training of the church from being led to the fundamental aspects of salvation in which conversion, sanctification, prayer and mission work were most important. These aspects, he says, cultivated a conservative trend in a fundamentalistic sense (Brown, 1979:133 ff). Incidentally, the *Gereformeerde Maandblad* paid little attention to the confessions of the church. When it was discussed – in 1892, 1898, 1912-13 and 1915 – the emphasis was placed on the historic context in which they were founded, and which accentuates their value.

At the beginning of the 20th century the Dutch Reformed Church undoubtedly accommodated a different and more dogmatic method parallel to the traditional biblical-apologetical and evangelistic approach. The church did not, however, take into account the fact that ecclesiastical and theological presuppositions were at work within this method. Another aspect, namely that an ecclesiastical and confessional problem could arise in this regard, was also not foreseen. This aspect had indeed consequences regarding the authority, application and significance of the Formularies of Unity as the confessional base of the church. And, in the meantime, the new dogmatic and confessionalistic impetus slowly but surely found its adherents which grew in numbers.

During the twenties the historicity of the Formularies as a theological and ecclesiastical problem could no longer be avoided. What became known as the 'Du

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<sup>12</sup> The journal existed from 1892 until 1920.

Plessis case' made the avoidance of this problem impossible. The balance between two divergent orientations and theological convictions could no longer be maintained and opponents, with contrasting viewpoints, took up positions. The church found itself in a difficult situation, which could not be solved easily (cf. Olivier, 1988; Olivier & Brown, 1992; Erasmus, 1986). The doctrine of the church, as expressed in the Formularies of Unity, was again addressed to reach a decisive answer.

Diverging points of view were taken with conviction and motivation. The essence of these lines of thought can be read in the theological journal *Het Zoeklicht*, which wished to cast "een gekoncentreerd, onderzoekend, krities licht op de dingen die in de duisternis verscholen lichen" (*Het Zoeklicht*, 1923:1(1)2.) This journal wanted to break new ground, and wanted to help the Dutch Reformed Church to re-orientate meaningfully in terms of modern insights and theological claims (cf. Erasmus, 1986:258 ff, 274 ff). The insistence to re-orientate and its consequences, gave rise to opposition from within the church. In 1926 Dr. D.R. Snyman established *Die Ou Paaie*. With reference to Jeremiah 6:16, he and his supporters wanted to keep the Dutch Reformed Church dogmatically to its confession.

The subscribing formula again involved the doctrinal base of the church in the situation. However, groups, and unattached individuals actualized it contextually. The one side regarded the confession as consisting of historic formulas of the Christian faith which had to assist in reaching better formulations. Consequently the confession suffers from essential insufficiency to a greater or lesser extent. The doctrine in a confessing church is always open to reform, reformulation, investigation and supplementation. Consequently, it should become serviceable to the life of the church – as God and the Spirit carry it into effect. The confession acts as the guide, and leads to the Protestant principle of freedom within the limits of the confession.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For this approach, cf. the titles of the multi-faceted discussions published in *Het Zoeklicht* during this period in time: "In welke richting vloeit de stroom?" (Van der Merwe, 1926: 118); "Hoc gaat sich onze kerk jegens de nieuwe geest gedragen?" (Du Plessis, 1926:163 ff); "Exegese en confessie" (Van der Merwe, 1926:207 ff); "Confessie-herziening" (Anon., 1927:1 ff); "Prof. Doedes en de Geloofsbelijdenis" (Anon., 1929:9 ff); "Reformata quia Reformanda"; "Die leerbesluite van die Vrystaatse kerk juridies en teologies getoets" (Anon., 1931a:144 ff; Anon., 1931b:181 ff); "Konfessie-herziening" (Anon., 1931c:225-259); "Die toekomst van ons belydenis" (Du Plessis, 1931:231 ff); "Ons Formulier van Enigheid" (Anon., 1932a:270-278); "Die P. Neethling-Trustakte" (Anon., 1932b:32 ff) Vide further the editorials (Anon., 1926a:25 & 1926b:257), as well as the minority rapport at the Cape Synod of 1928 (Handelinge, 1928:310-315) and Du Plessis's address to the Cape Synod of 1932 (Handelinge, 1932:252-257)

The other side regarded the Formularies as the expression of faith as proclaimed in Scripture, and therefore being more than historic formulations. As such the Formularies are regarded as essentially sufficient, and therefore authoritative enough to dispel the critical questioning of the time, to correct the fallacy and to apply doctrinal discipline. Accordingly, the life of the church becomes serviceable to the doctrine: the confession is the criterion. This reformed principle, they argued, determined the limits of freedom of thought and research in the confession.<sup>14</sup>

The church acted within its meeting and took a specific stand in terms of its confession. For the majority, the Formularies helped to refute false doctrines. Some did not hesitate, without denying the sufficiency of the confession, to draw up supplementary dogmatic decisions to ensure absolute clarity. At the Free State Synod of 1931 it was even entrenched in an additional formulary (Dertigste vergadering van die Hoog Eerw. Sinode van die Ned. Gereformeerde Kerk in die Oranje Vrystaat, s.a.:171-173.) The matter was therefore concluded.

The historicity of the Formularies as an ecclesiological and theological problem was, however, side-stepped. At the same time their scriptural context and the reference of the Formularies were not considered. It was not realised that a dogmatic point of departure had played into the hands of a confessional fundamentalism. It was also not recognised that a historically critical and inductive method – particularly if applied apologetically – cannot be without presuppositions.

Du Plessis fell victim to the situation. In a certain sense the church, and the problems regarding the authority and application of the Formularies, also fell victim

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14 Illustrations of this side of the argument can be found in various articles published during this time: "Waar dryf ons heen?" (Malan, 1926a:16 ff; Malan, 1926b:51); "Waarheen voer Modernisme?" (Malan, 1926c:360 ff); "Sommige besware teen die Modernisme" (Malan, 1927); "Die dwaling wat ons kerk hierdie eeu bedreig" (Anon., 1928); "Die verweerskrif van prof. Du Plessis" (Van Rooyen, 1928:164 ff); "Die GKN en die uitbou van die belydenis" (Van Rooyen, 1928:238 ff); "Terug na die belydenis" (Anon., 1928:271 ff); "Die hersiening van ons gereformeerde belydenis" (Lategan, 1931a:367 ff; Lategan, 1931b:437 ff). Vide also the majority report on doctrine at the 1928 synod of the Dutch Reformed Church held in Cape Town (Handelinge, 1928:243 ff,275 ff,293-299,305-309. Cf. further Nege-en-twintigste vergadering van die Hoog Eerw. Sinode van die Ned. Gereformeerde Kerk in die Oranje-Vrystaat, s.a.:22, 40, 41ff; Dertigste vergadering van die Hoog Eerw. Sinode van die Ned. Gereformeerde Kerk in die Oranje-Vrystaat, s.a.:109-129, 142-143, 171.) The rise of new student organisations parallel to the Christen Studente Vereniging, also indicated a new approach: Die Kalvinistiese Konfessionele Vereniging, Konfessionele Christen Studente Vereniging, Die Kalvinistiese Bond, Die Federasie van Kalvinistiese Studente Verenigings and their influential publication *Koers in die krisis* (Stoker & Potgieter, 1935). See also Kriel, 1924; Kotzé, 1932; Snyman, 1965.

to it. Could this be the reason why the Dutch Reformed Church continued to employ its Formularies in both a dogmatic and evangelistic sense? Could this be the reason why the confession did not function sufficiently in theological reflection in subsequent years? To discuss this, one would immediately engage a new and contemporary development, which is beyond the scope of this article.

## 6. Concluding remarks

When one considers the history (until c.1935) of the Dutch Reformed Church, it is clear that its Formularies played an important role. Conditioned by the context and theological influence, they gained in *ecclesiological emphasis and value*. The Formularies were involved for the sake of the church itself, and were therefore used and understood as an ecclesiastical confession. This emphasis and practice pushed their *Christocratic notion and service* unnoticed into the background. Indeed, the confession of the church is more than an ecclesiastic matter. The confession is open to the King of the church, and therefore also to His service as He effectuates it by the Word and the Spirit. By upholding the Formularies ecclesiastically, this aspect was neglected. The Dutch Reformed Church did not steer clear of a confessional fundamentalism.<sup>15</sup> And, as far as the Formularies served an evangelistic-theological purpose, the church played into the hands of a confessional particularism.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps that is why the underlying problem of the historicity of the Formularies on the one hand, and the Scriptural context and intent on the other hand, have remained an unpaid account. The Formularies were, after all, not ministered completely for the sake of and in the name of the Lord of the Church, as it remains He who cares for, protects, guides and serves His flock.

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<sup>15</sup> As inter alia during the 'Du Plessis case'.

<sup>16</sup> As inter alia during the liberal struggle of the 19th century.

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