

Report on Special Worship Services

A study report approved

by the Synod of the Free Reformed Churches of North America held in June 2009

To Synod 2009

Brothers,

The Committee Church Order (Sub-committee of the Publications Committee), having reviewed the relevant material, submits the following report and recommendation:

I. PREFACE:

A. Background:

1. In 1984 an overture came from the Consistory of Free Reformed Church of Langley requesting that Synod "study Article 67 of the Church Order, entitled "Christian Feast Days;" and to revise this article in such a way that special worship services are left to the discretion of the local consistories." (see **Appendix A**).
 - a. The consistory of Langley asked Synod to "*study Article 67 of the Church Order, entitled 'Christian Feast Days', and to revise this article in such a way that special worship services are left to the discretion of the local consistories*". (see Acts of Synod 1984, suppl. no. 6, p.28, see also the reasons given for this overture).
 - b. The main concerns for this overture, as expressed in the reasons given, were:
 - 1) If such a ruling is binding upon the consistories and upon members, does it contradict the Biblical principles of Christian Liberty?
 - 2) If it is held to be binding we would be excluding from our fellowship members who would not be able to submit to this article in good conscience.
 - 3) In Article 86 of the Church Order we state, "Foreign churches whose usages regarding non-essentials differ from ours shall not be rejected." Is this matter a non-essential usage? If so would members from foreign or domestic churches be rejected on the basis of such a difference?
 - c. In connection with the overture from the Langley consistory, Synod 1984 adopted the following motion:
- "*That Synod charge a committee to study the implications of article 67 C.O.D. from Scriptural, confessional and church historical perspectives, giving due consideration to the traditions of various Reformed communities and to report to Synod 1985.*" (See Acts of Synod 1984, art. 16, p.5) In fulfillment of this mandate the Committee Publications (sub-committee Church Order) submitted the *Report on Christian Feast Days (1989)*.
 - d. The resulting *Report on Christian Feast Days* which was completed and adopted by Synod in 1989, (See Article 12 of *Acts of Synod 1989*, Supplement No. #-C, pages 39-54).
2. Synod 2008 (Article 39) received an overture from the Consistory of Calgary (See **Appendix B**), requesting revision of the *Report on Christian Feast Days (1989)* or of the *Church Order (FRCNA)*, Article 67. Synod 2008 adopted the following motion, as per the published *Acts of Synod 2008*, Art.44:

"To establish a Study Committee with a mandate to report to Synod 2009. This report should contain either:

An updated version of the Report on Feast Days originally received by Synod 1989. This update should effectively communicate the grounds for the FRC practice of holding worship service on recognized feast

days and effectively answer the concerns regarding this practice. The report should be available in a form that can be used by the churches to deal with those who hold differing perspectives on the issue; or, To present a report providing grounds on which Article 67 of the church order might be amended in a manner that would allow the conduct of feast day worship services to be a matter of local consistorial discretion.

Moved/seconded/carried

B. The Committee Reports the following:

1. One **clarification** needs to be made: It must be understood that a mandate which is worded as “either ... or ...” does require some additional insight on the part of a Committee to ensure that the intention of the Synod is carried out. We must assume that the matter is to be studied and that the choice as to which (or both) of these two paths are to be followed is left up to the discretion of the committee based on its study.
2. The following **actions and considerations**:
 - a. After preliminary study we met on Feb. 2, 2009.
 - b. We have considered:
 - 1) The overture from the Consistory of Calgary.
 - 2) The discussion of this at Synod.
 - 3) A study by a member of Calgary providing a critical and helpful analysis of the report and its conclusions.
 - c. We have also reviewed the *Report on Christian Feast days (1989)*, in the light of the above.
3. The result of this review has produced the following **observations**:
 - a. That an *Ad Hoc* Committee (appointed by Synod 1991) reported to Synod 1992: “*It was conceded that the report ... may indeed have contained some weaknesses and in some statements may even be open to correction.*”
 - b. That (judging from the critical analysis by the Calgary member) the greatest difficulty seems to be with the section of the original *Report (1989)* entitled “II. Redemptive-Historical Study,” and the section entitled “Conclusions,” and that we confirm that these sections do contain some questionable exegesis and statements. (These sections could leave the impression that the report was using the practice of Jesus and the apostles to defend the recognition of “Christian feast days” as necessary practices of worship, rather than precedents for defending the Christian liberty of the New Testament church to call extra worship services at such times as a discretionary and circumstantial matter).
 - c. That continental Reformed (in particular, Dutch Reformed churches) have been of the conviction that calling special services on such days was permitted within the boundaries of the principles of Reformed Worship, and in accordance with the Biblical principles governing such circumstances of worship, namely, decency, order, edification and love, without the violation of individual conscience.¹
 - d. That a broader assembly (synod), when exercising its authority to promote or preserve a desirable uniformity of worship, must limit its application so as to respect the liberty and limits of conscience, and the autonomy of its constituent local churches (consistories); and that the authority of the local

¹ Continental Reformed churches have allowed this liberty to the churches regarding Christian feast days: “Moreover, if churches do religiously celebrate the memory of the Lord's Nativity, Circumcision, Passion, Resurrection, and of his Ascension into heaven, and the sending of the Holy Spirit upon his disciples, according to Christian liberty, we do very well approve of it....” (Cf. *Second Helvetic Confession*, ch.24. written by Heinrich Bullinger). This formulation does not mandate, but allows the practice. Compare also the recently drawn up United Reformed article: “The Consistory **shall** call the congregation together for corporate worship twice on each Lord's Day. Special services **may** be called in observance of Christmas Day, Good Friday, Ascension Day, a day of prayer, the national Thanksgiving Day, New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, as well as in times of great distress or blessing. Attention **should** also be given to Easter and Pentecost on their respective Lord's Days.” Note the use of “shall” “may” and “should.” (Church Order of the URCNA: 1997, Art. 37. Emphasis added. PV)

- consistories must be exercised with due respect for the liberty and limits of conscience of its individual members. (*Belgic Confession*, Art. 32).²
4. In order to help the churches understand these issues relating this matter we have revised the original *Report* and submit the following study report, conclusions and recommendations.

² "In the meantime we believe, though it is useful and beneficial, that those who are rulers of the Church, institute and establish certain ordinances among themselves for maintaining the body of the Church; yet they ought studiously to take care not to depart from those things which Christ, our only Mediator, hath instituted. And therefore, we reject all human inventions, and all laws, which man would introduce into the worship of God, thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever." *Belgic Confession*, Art.32.

II. THE STUDY REPORT

The regulation about which there is concern is found in Article 67 of the Church Order of the Free Reformed Churches which reads as follows: - "*The churches shall hallow the Lord's Day according to God's Law. The congregations shall also gather for worship on recognized Christian feast days.*"

A. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

1. The Sufficiency of the Word of God.

For faith, life and worship Scripture is sufficient, to which nothing may be added and from which nothing may be taken. (cf. II Timothy 3:15-17, Rev. 22:18,19).

God has instituted certain ordinances in the Old as well as New Testament administration of His Covenant which are to be observed as necessary and essential practices in the church's worship. From this nothing may be subtracted and to it nothing may be added. (Deut. 4:15-20, 12:32, Matt.15:9).

On the other hand, in there are also things circumstantial to worship. For example in the New Testament there is liberty with respect to the place of worship, etc. (John 4:23).

2. New Testament Simplicity and Liberty

Jesus announced that the time had come when worship would no longer be restricted by the limitations of the ceremonial law.

To allow for the spread of the gospel in all the nations (all the languages and cultures) of the world, New Testament worship is characterized by a far greater simplicity as to its form with far greater stress on the spiritual essence of worship - worshipping God in spirit and in truth. (John 4:20-24)

When human ordinances are made binding upon the conscience of believers they tend to detract from the commandments of God.

Jesus sternly expressed His grievance against the Pharisees who continued to "bind heavy burdens" upon the consciences of those whom He had come to set at liberty. (Matt. 15:1-9, 23:4 Mark 7:6,7)

Certain Old Testament ordinances were no longer binding upon the conscience of New Testament believers and were not continued in their Old Testament form since they were fulfilled by Christ (Col.2:16,17). However, certain Jewish ordinances which continued were to a degree tolerated by the New Testament church because they did not essentially conflict with the gospel.

Some of these Jewish practices were even made use of in order to promote the cause of the gospel of Christ. The Feast of Purim was instituted during the time of exile (Esther 9:26-28). The Feast of Lights (also called the Feast of Dedication or Hanukkah) originated during the inter-testamentary period.

Jesus did not condemn such ordinances as such, but, rather, at one occasion even made use of the Feast of Lights as an opportunity to preach, "I am the Light of the world". (John 8:12, 9:5, 10:22,23) Jesus apparently saw it as a proper and edifying to peacefully adapt His preaching to the existing tradition of celebrating this feast.

B. BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REASONS PERMITTING WORSHIP ON CERTAIN WEEK DAYS.

It can be argued on the basis of Scripture, that assembling on certain week days, either in connection with an accepted ecclesiastical or civil calendar, though not enjoined, may yet be useful and permissible, provided these assemblies do not contravene biblical commands in any other respect.

1. A Commemorative Reason

God commands his church to remember his deeds in the historical of redemption (1 Chron. 16:12; Ps 105:5), or in providence (Deut. 32:7). Scripture does not restrict us as to the occasion and order in which we might remember these deeds, provided such commemoration does not contravene biblical commands.

2. An Instructive Reason

God specifically commands his church to make known his deeds in the past (Ps 78:4-6), that the rising generation might know these works and not forget them. Again, Scripture does not limit the occasion and order in which we might declare these deeds, provided such instruction does not contravene biblical commands.

3. A Public Witness Reason

The church would do well to use opportunities in which the surrounding world is focused on concerns on which Scripture contains instruction, to gather to receive such instruction, provided it does not use a manner that contravene biblical commands.

4. A Pre-emptive Reason

Lamentably, the world observes many special days (both ecclesiastical and civil ones) in vain and even ungodly ways. By gathering for worship, the church may preempt a licentious and vain manner among its members.

In all of this, the churches must exercise great care that every one understand the singular character of the Lord's Day, and that no other day, no matter how the world or churches may mark it, rivals the Lord's Day.

C. HISTORICAL-CONFESSIONAL STUDY

1. The Origin of Christian Feast Days

Already early in the history of the church we find religious commemorations of certain events of redemption. In an attempt to draw people away from pagan festivities the church instituted set days for these commemorations which coincided with the pagan feast days (e.g. Christmas and Epiphany). After Christianity was made the preferred religion of the Empire by Constantine in A.D. 324 many people pressed into the church who still held to pagan superstitions. Instead of insisting that they must only "observe all things whatsoever Christ had commanded" (Mt. 28:20), the church allowed certain pagan traditions to continue by "Christianizing" them. This practice is known as syncretism: an attempt to harmonize conflicting beliefs. The result was that certain pagan superstitions continued to be mixed in with the Christian feast days.

Let us briefly look at the origin of the more common Christian feast days.

1. The word "**Christmas**" is derived from the Old English "Cristes Maesse", that is "Christ's Mass". There is no definite evidence supporting any date for Christ's birth. Nor is there any Scriptural ordinance commanding the celebration of His birth.

Historians generally suppose that after Emperor Constantine's conversion (A.D. 312) he instituted the feast of the birthday of the "Sun of Righteousness" (Mal. 4:2) as a rival to the popular pagan festival of the Unconquered Sun at the winter solstice. The first record of a feast of the birth of Christ is found in an early Roman Almanac which shows that the festival was observed by the church in Rome in A.D. 336.

From the ancient pagan festivals of Saturnalia (Dec. 17) and New Year's come the merrymaking and exchange of presents. From Old Germanic midwinter customs have come the decorations with evergreens. From the medieval feast of St Nicholas of Myra has come Saint Nicholas ("Santa Claus"). The Dutch brought the tradition of St. Nicholas (Sinter Klaas, hence "Santa Claus") to America when they settled in their colony of New Amsterdam (now New York).

2. The name "**Easter**" is derived from the Old English "eastre" which was an ancient pagan festival of spring in honour of Eastre, an ancient Anglo-Saxon goddess.

The name Easter was, unfortunately, attributed to the oldest Christian festival celebrating the Lord's Passover in memory of Christ's suffering and resurrection. By the middle of the 2nd century this celebration was generally observed on the Sunday after the Jewish Passover. The ecumenical Council of Nicea in 325 decreed that all the churches should celebrate the feast together on Sunday. In A.D. 330 Athanasius called the week before Easter "holy Paschal week". Various remnants of pagan fertility rites and symbols still cling to the day.

3. The **Ascension** of Christ into heaven was at first part of the total exaltation of Christ which was celebrated on Sunday, especially on Easter Day. Around A.D. 300 the Spanish Council of Elvira rejected a special feast of the Ascension as an unwarranted invention. But by the end of the 4th Century it had become general practice as well.

4. **Pentecost** was celebrated by the early church as the climax of the great "50 days" of Easter. As early as the 5th century it was observed.

2. Romish Bondage

Throughout the centuries additional days were set apart in honour of the martyrs, other saints and especially in honour of the virgin Mary. By the 15th century almost every day on the calendar was a feast day. It was so bad that even the Roman Catholic Synods (1512 and 1524) took measures to limit the number of feast days.

What horrified the Reformers most about these Roman Catholic ordinances was not only that some of them were idolatrous but that Rome claimed that they were supported by "apostolic tradition" (cf. Calvin's Institutes, IV-10-18). These ceremonies were proclaimed as part of the true and necessary worship of God (Calvin, IV-10-6) Many of Rome's ordinances were "for the most part useless and sometimes even foolish" (Calvin, IV-10-11). Furthermore, they were increased to such a number as to be unbearable (Calvin, IV-10-13). In this way Rome brought the conscience of believers into bondage.

Today the "Basic Catechism" of the Roman Catholic Church still declares that it is the duty of every believer to keep "every Sunday and holy day of obligation " which includes: Christmas, Solemnity of the Mother of God (Jan. 1), Ascension Thursday, the Assumption (Aug. 15), All Saints Day (Nov. 1), and the Immaculate Conception (Dec. 8). (Basic Catechism, St. Paul Editions, 1980, p. 21).

Rome's abuse of church authority and the tyranny she exercised over the conscience of believers was boldly condemned by the Reformers. They not only expressed their objection to these feast days but those which were contrary to God's Word were abolished outright.

Wherever possible they abolished them all from the practice of the Church.

3. Reformation Liberty

The Reformers have left us some valuable writings in connection with the matter of church ordinances such as feast days.

i. Calvin

Calvin wrote at length about church ordinances and their relation to Christian liberty (see "Institutes", Book III, ch.19, and Book IV, ch.10) Calvin's teaching can be summarized in this way:

Proper church institutions are those which are in accordance with the following considerations:

- 1) if they do not nullify God's precepts (IV-10:10).
- 2) if they serve to preserve decency and order (IV-10:28,29).
- 3) if they are not useless but serve to edify (IV-10:11,32).
- 4) if they are not made so as to bind the conscience with human doctrines or laws or compel obedience in matters indifferent (IV-10:1-8).
- 5) if they are lovingly considerate of the weaker brethren in their assemblies (IV-10:21,22).
- 6) if they become not so numerous as to be a burden but be kept to a minimum (IV-10:13,19,32).

In connection with our topic, it is relevant to note that, when Calvin discusses the importance of keeping ordinances down to a useful minimum, he quotes Augustine as citing the ordinances which were in use in his time including "the celebration with annual rites of the Lord's Passion and resurrection, his ascent into heaven, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, and any similar event which has occurred which is celebrated by the whole church, wherever it may be spread". After this quote from Augustine Calvin states: "Since Augustine listed so few examples, who does not see that he intended to refer to authors worthy of credit and reverence the observances then in use, that is, only those simple, infrequent and sober rites useful to preserve the church order?" (IV-10:19) Calvin viewed such ordinances as being in themselves within the authority of the church and not excessive.

ii. Genevan Pastors

In Geneva, in the time of Calvin, the Company of Pastors ruled that all feast days in addition to the Lord's Day would no longer be observed: "On Sunday 16 November 1550, after the election of the lieutenant in the general Counsel, an edict was also announced respecting the abrogation of all the festivals, with the exception of Sundays, which the Lord had ordained." (The Register of the Company of Pastors in Geneva in the Time of Calvin, ed. Philip E. Hughes, Eerdmans, p. 130) John Calvin used his liberty on December 25, 1555 to preach on Deuteronomy 21:10-14. On the previous Lord's Day he preached on the birth of Christ.

iii. The Augsburg Confession (1530)

In the *Augsburg Confession* we find an exposition regarding the liberty of the conscience in relation to church ordinances.

While Philip Melancthon was the author of its form and gentle, peaceful wording, Martin Luther supplied the doctrinal matter for the Confession and approved the final draft. (Creeds of Christendom, Philip Schaff, Harper & Brothers, vol. I, p. 229)

In Article V of the *Augsburg Confession* (entitled, "Of the Distinction of Meats and of Traditions") the German Reformers expressed their concern about the alarming trend of Rome to make such matters meritorious and essential practices. They observe that, "daily new ceremonies, new orders, new holidays, new fasts, were appointed; and the teachers in the churches did exact these works as a service necessary to deserve grace; and they did greatly terrify men's consciences, if aught were omitted." The church leaders at Augsburg then followed with a warning that three dangers follow such a teaching. For the sake of brevity we give only the key statements: "For first the doctrine of grace is obscured by it, and also the righteousness of faith, which is the principle part of the Gospel...."

Secondly, these traditions obscured the commandments of God, because traditions were preferred far above the commandments of God....

Thirdly, traditions brought great danger to men's consciences, because it was impossible to keep all traditions, and yet men thought the observation of them to be necessary services...." (see "Augsburg Confession", Art.V).

But how then was this teaching put into practice in the German context?

We are not at all surprised that **Luther**, in a sermon on good works in 1520, expressed his personal desire that all Christian feast days be abolished or moved to the Sunday.

However, the Augsburg Divines did believe that the church was at liberty to institute certain feast days and they warned against view such in a ceremonial or legalistic way. They defended the liberty of the conscience in such matters. They conclude their Confession with the following paragraph:

"Yet most of the traditions are observed among us which tend unto this end, that things may be done orderly in the Church; as, namely, the order of Lessons in the Mass and chiefest holidays. But, in the mean time, men are admonished that such a service doth not justify before God, and that it is not to be supposed there is sin in such things, if they be left undone, without scandal. This liberty in human rites and ceremonies was not unknown to the Fathers. For in the East they kept Easter at another time than they did in Rome; and when they of Rome accused the East of schism for this diversity, they were admonished by others that such customs need not be alike everywhere. And Irenaeus saith: 'The disagreement about fasting doth not break off the agreement of faith'. Besides, Pope Gregory, in the 12th Distinction, intimates that such diversity doth not hurt the unity of the Church; and in the Tripartite History, lib. 9, many examples of dissimilar rites are gathered together, and these words are there rehearsed; 'The mind of the Apostles was, not to give precepts concerning holidays, but to preach godliness and a holy life (faith and love)'. (Schaff, vol.3, pp.42-49)

iv. The Second Helvetic Confession (1566)

The Second Helvetic Confession was the second confession which flowed out of the Reformation in Zurich, (German) Switzerland which Zwingli had been instrumental in starting. This confession was first written by Henry Bullinger (1504-1575), the successor of Zwingli, in 1562 and two years later it was elaborated. When Frederick III, Elector of the Palatinate, (publisher of the Heidelberg Catechism, 1563) in 1565 asked Bullinger for a summary of the Reformed faith, Bullinger sent him a copy of this confession. Frederick published it in 1566.

This confession was the first continental Reformed confession: it was adopted by Reformed churches in France, Switzerland, Hungary, Poland and Scotland (1566). It was also well received in Holland.

In Chapter XXIV of this confession, after a statement on the Lord's Day, we find the following paragraph, entitled "Of Holidays, Fasts, and Choice of Meats":

"Moreover, if churches do religiously celebrate the memory of the Lord's Nativity, Circumcision, Passion, Resurrection, and of his Ascension into heaven, and the sending of the Holy Spirit upon his disciples, according to Christian liberty, we do very well approve of it. But as for festival days, ordained for men or saints departed, we can not allow of them. For, indeed, festival days must be referred to the first table of the law, and belong peculiarly unto God. To conclude, those festival days which are appointed for saints, and abrogated by us, have in them many gross things, unprofitable and not to be tolerated. In the mean time, we confess that the remembrance of saints, in due time and place, may be to good use and profit commended unto the people in sermons, and the holy examples of holy men set before their eyes to be imitated by all." (Schaff,p. 899)

In chapter XXVII, entitled, "Of Rites, Ceremonies, and Things Indifferent", we find the following important exhortations:

"Wherefore we should seem to bring in and set up Judaism again if we should multiply ceremonies or rites in the Church according to the manner of the Jewish Church. And thus we are not of their judgment who would have the Church of Christ bound by many and divers rites, as it were by a certain schooling.

For if the apostles would not thrust upon the Christian people the ceremonies and rites which were appointed by God, who is there, I pray you, that is well in his wits, that will thrust upon it the inventions devised by man? The greater the heap of ceremonies in the Church, so much the more is taken, not only from Christian liberty, but also from Christ, and from faith in him; while the people seek those things in ceremonies which they should seek in the only Son of God, Jesus Christ, through faith. Wherefore a few moderate and simple rites, that are not contrary to the Word of God, do suffice the godly....

But yet, notwithstanding, we admonish men to take heed that they count not among things indifferent such as are not indeed indifferent; as some used to count the mass and the use of images in the Church for things indifferent. 'That is indifferent' (says Jerome to Augustine) 'which is neither good nor evil; so that, whether you do it or do it not, you are never the more just or unjust thereby.' Therefore, when things indifferent are wrested to the confession of faith, they cease to be free; as Paul does show that it is lawful for a man to eat flesh if no man do admonish him that it was offered to idols (1 Cor. x. 27,28); for then it is unlawful, because he that eats it does seem to approve idolatry by eating of it (1 Cor. viii. 10)" (Schaff, vol.3, pp.903-905)

v. The Formula of Concord (1576)

This creed is named for its aim to bring about peace and unity to the Lutheran Church after some thirty years of bitter controversy. One of the issues which it addresses is a question of conscience: can the church, under pressure from Romish authorities, re-adopt various *adiaphora* which had been disposed of during the earlier years of the Reformation, without denying the gospel?

This controversy was addressed in Article 10 of the Formula of Concord, of which we quote only the affirmative statements:

"I. For the better taking away of this controversy we believe, teach, and confess, with unanimous consent, that ceremonies or ecclesiastical rites (such as in the Word of God are neither commanded nor forbidden, but have only been instituted for the sake of order and seemliness) are of themselves neither divine worship, nor even any part of divine worship. For it is written (Matt. xv. 9): 'In vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.'

II. We believe, teach, and confess that it is permitted to the Church of God any where on earth, and at whatever time, agreeably to occasion, to change such ceremonies, in such manner as is judged most useful to the Church of God and most suited to her edification.

III. We judge, nevertheless, that in this matter all levity should be avoided and matters of offence be guarded against, and that especially account should be taken of the weak in the faith, and forbearance shown towards them (1 Cor. viii. 9; Rom. xiv. 13).

IV. We believe, teach and confess that in times of persecution, when a clear and steadfast confession is required of us, we ought not to yield to the enemies of the Gospel in things indifferent. For thus speaks the Apostle (Gal. v. 1): 'Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.' And elsewhere (2 Cor. vi.14): 'Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers,' etc. 'For what concord hath light with darkness?' Also (Gal. ii. 5): 'To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the Gospel might remain with you.' For in such a state of things it is no longer a question of *adiaphora*, but of the restoration and maintenance of the truth of the Gospel and of Christian liberty, and of how care may be taken lest idolatry be manifestly strengthened and the weak in the faith be caused to stumble. In matters of this sort it is certainly not our part to concede any thing to our adversaries, but our duty requires that we should show forth a godly and frank confession, and patiently bear those things which the Lord may have suffered our enemies to do against us.

V. We believe, teach, and confess that one Church ought not to condemn another because it observes more or less of external ceremonies, which the Lord has not instituted, provided only there be consent between them in

doctrine and all the articles thereof, and in the true use of the sacraments. For so runneth the old and true saying: 'Dissimilarity of fasting does not destroy similarity of faith.'

4. Anglican Uniformity

The theology of the English Reformers regarding the issues under consideration is best summarised by references to certain relevant statements found in the Westminster Confession.

i. The Westminster Confession

The English Reformers held strongly to the sufficiency of Scripture as a rule for worship. However, they did acknowledge that there were certain circumstantial matters which must be left to the discretion of the church, as the following statement demonstrates: "There are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed." (Chapter 1, Art. VI)

The English Reformers were equally strong in their defence of the liberty of conscience: "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy of conscience, and reason also." (chapter XX, Art. 2)

They also opposed the spirit of anarchy: "They who, upon pretence of Christian liberty, shall oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God." (chapter XX, Art. 4)

Under the heading "Of Religious Worship" the statement is made "that God may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture". (Chapter XXI, Art. 1) In a following article the English Reformers list what they believe to be the elements of worship prescribed in Scripture:

"The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence, singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ, are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: beside religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner." (Chapter XXI, Art. 5)

The use of special worship services for times of fasting and thanksgiving was left to the liberty of the churches depending on the circumstances which they faced. Liberty was allowed in such matters of indifference.

ii. Act of Uniformity

In May 1662 a strongly Anglican (Episcopalian) parliament made many changes to the *Directory of Worship* (Prayer Book) and passed the Act of Uniformity. It reinstated much of the Romish church calendar. The use of any form of church service other than that prescribed in this revised Prayer Book was strictly forbidden.

This was rightly seen as a return to pre-Reformation bondage.

The Romish and obligatory character of this regulation caused some two thousand Presbyterian clergymen to refuse to conform.

The result was that these "Dissenters" were driven from their parishes and reduced to poverty.

The Scottish Parliament followed the sad example of England and also persecuted the Dissenters (who were called "Covenanters" in Scotland).

5. Presbyterian Purity

i. Puritan Theology

The Presbyterian Puritans especially in Scotland held very strongly to the purity of worship, or the regulative principle of true worship: what God has commanded is true worship, what He has not commanded is not true worship. Not even matters of indifference may be admitted as part of true worship.

This principle is derived from the teaching of the Swiss and German Reformers, who refused to consider matters of indifference as essential parts of worship. It is a violation of the purity of worship principle to consider or enforce regulations concerning Christian Feast Days as essential parts of worship.

However, there exists among some Presbyterians an interpretation of the Westminster Confession, ch. XXI, article 5, which so sharply distinguishes between ordinary and occasional usages that it forbids designating set days for worship (i.e., other than the Lord's Day) -- at least, not on any day that Rome happens to have set apart!

We can agree that spontaneity should be preserved in private and public fasting. (Matt. 6:16-18, Jonah 3:5-9). However, we cannot agree with those who argue that ecclesiastically setting additional days and times for worship is in itself a dishonouring of the Sabbath and an abomination to God. It is implied in this criticism that setting such days apart as a permanent and general usage gives such days a holiness above others and makes them constituent parts of the stated worship of God. (cf. James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, Banner of Truth, 1960, vol. 1, p. 410, 411).

If such ordinances were preached and enforced as universally necessary and binding the criticism would be warranted. That would make them essential instead of indifferent. However, the voluntary agreement to set aside certain days for worship does not in itself imply that such days are holy or that their observance is essential. Neither does a regular Wednesday evening prayer service mean that there is anything holy about that day or that the practice is essential to true worship.

To suggest that the Westminster divines intended an absolute condemnation of such set days is incredible. Why then did they quote Esther 9:20-22? It is quoted as an example of legitimate "thanksgiving upon special occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner" (ch. XXI, 5). Surely they would have cited it as an example of an unlawful addition! They knew very well that the Jews had ordained Purim as a set celebration for all Jews to be held every year. (Esther 9:27,28). Provided it was not made essential to true worship or conscience-binding, did they usurp divine authority? Was this yearly celebration of God's wondrous work of grace not a legitimate and edifying use of their liberty?

ii. Puritan Practice

As much as possible the Puritans, especially in Scotland, abolished the feast days which had been instituted by the Roman Catholic Church. John Knox, the Reformer of Scotland, was a disciple of Calvin. Under his influence the Reformed churches in Scotland banned all Roman sacred days. There were three reasons why the Reformers in Geneva and Scotland did so: 1) "The festival days are not ordained of God but are a human invention; 2) they minimize the Sunday, the God-ordained weekly day of rest; 3) they lead to paganistic celebrations and promote licentiousness." (J. VanDellen & M. Monsma, *Church Order Commentary*, Zondervan, p.273)

It is not surprising then that we find an appendix to the Directory for Worship which was added by the Scottish Puritans.

It reads as follows:

"There is no day commanded in scripture to be kept holy under the gospel but the Lord's day, which is the Christian Sabbath. Festival-days, vulgarly called 'Holy-days', having no warrant in the Word of God, are not to be continued."

It is true that such days should not be regarded as holy days. To promote such a view of these days would be to promote superstition.

However, we must guard against the other extreme as well. Some of the writings and practices of the Puritans reveal their conviction that esteeming such days or observing them in any way was in itself sinful. On Easter Day pastors would religiously avoid preaching on the resurrection of Christ. Instead some would demonstrably preach on His birth. Any observance of such days was seen as an approval of the idolatry of Rome.

There was no acknowledgement that such days could at all be regarded "unto the Lord". Just as the meat of which the apostle Paul speaks is regarded by the weaker brother as unclean, so the days regarded by Rome was considered unclean. (Rom.14). Its association with false worship (pagan or Romish) the weaker brethren considered to have rendered the day forever unclean in itself (1 Cor.8 & 10:23-33). It can no longer be used "unto the Lord". This is to swing from one superstition to another.

We must, however, insist that the church has the liberty to choose any day for special worship services. Neither the superstitions of pagans, Papists nor the licentious partying of the world on a particular day will make that day unclean for the church.

6. Reformed Accommodation

i. Reformed Confession

In the Creeds adopted by the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands we do not find lengthy discussions on matters indifferent. We need not doubt, however, that they adhered to the same Biblical principles which were expounded in the writings of Calvin and in the Swiss and German Creeds. The *Belgic Confession* which is subscribed by the Reformed churches in the Netherlands contains the following articles:

"We believe, that the ceremonies and figures of the law ceased at the coming of Christ, and that all the shadows are accomplished; so that the use of them must be abolished amongst Christians; yet the truth and substance of them remain with us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have their completion. In the mean time, we still use the testimonies taken out of the law and prophets, to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel, and to regulate our life in all honesty, to the glory of God, according to His will." (Art. XXV, "Of the Abolishing of the Ceremonial Law")

"In the meantime we believe, though it is useful and beneficial, that those, who are rulers of the Church, institute and establish certain ordinances among themselves for maintaining the body of the Church; yet they ought studiously to take care, that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, hath instituted. And therefore, we reject all human inventions, and all laws, which man would introduce into the worship of God, thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever. Therefore we admit only of that which tends to nourish and preserve concord, and unity, and to keep all men in obedience to God. For this purpose, ex-communication or church discipline is requisite, with the several circumstances belonging to it, according to the Word of God." (Art. XXXII - "Of the Order and Discipline of the Church.")

ii. Reformed Practice

It is apparent from the various synodical decisions of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands that the Dutch churches originally wanted to follow Geneva and Scotland. They made attempts to peacefully abolish the whole ecclesiastical calendar. This was evident in the decision of the **Synod of Dordrecht 1574**:

"Regarding the feast days, in addition to the Lord's Day, on which we are especially obliged to keep ourselves from labour, and to gather in the temple, it is decided, that we shall be content with the Sunday alone. Yet we shall treat the usual material regarding the birth of Christ in church on the Sunday before Christmas Day, and admonish the people to dispose of such days, and also preach on the same material on Christmas Day if it falls on a preaching day. We shall also be permitted on Easter and Pentecost Days to teach regarding the resurrection of Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit, which shall be left to the freedom of the ministers." (Synod of Dordrecht 1574, art. LII, trans. from "Kerkelijk Handboekje", ed. Ds. G.H. Kersten, p. 74)

The only note of accommodation was regarding the sermon material around Christmas Day. There was not even a special day set aside for it. The ministers were even allowed to exercise their liberty in the choice of sermon matter on all other Lord's Days. There were no feast days set apart in addition to the Lord's Day.

However, it was hard to stop the custom. The people were reluctant to "dispose of such (feast) days." Furthermore, the early Dutch Reformers did not receive the kind of cooperation from the government that Calvin enjoyed. Provincial governments sanctioned various days as national holidays. The result was a "needless and harmful idleness." Having a day off became a temptation to go along with the licentious celebrations and harmful frivolity of the world on these days.

Thus, while the desire was still to observe only the Lord's Day, the approach became one of accommodation to serve the principles of decency, order and edification.

The **Synod of Dordrecht 1578** made the following decision:

"It would be desirable that the freedom to work six days as God permitted would be maintained and that only the Sunday would be observed. Nevertheless, since some other feast days are being

maintained by the authority of the Government, namely, Christmas Day with the following days, as well as the second Easter Day and the second Pentecost Day, and in some places New Year's Day, and Ascension Day, thus the ministers shall diligently see to it that by preaching, in which they shall teach the congregation in particular regarding the birth and resurrection of Christ, the sending of the Holy Spirit, and similar articles of faith, the needless and harmful idleness be changed to a holy and profitable practice. The same shall be done by those ministers of churches in cities where more feastsdays are maintained by the authority of the Government.

Meanwhile, all churches shall labour so that the customary observance of all feastsdays, except Christmas Day (since Easter and Pentecost occur on Sunday), may as much as possible and in the most suitable way possible be abolished." (Synod of Dordrecht 1578, Art. 23, Kersten, p. 105)

The **General Synod of Middelburg 1581** urged that the congregations appeal to the government to abolish such days except Christmas and Ascension Day.

"The congregations shall endeavour to have their Government authorities abolish the feastsdays, except Sunday, Christmas Day, and Ascension Day. But in those places where, by the ordinance of the Government, more feastsdays are maintained the ministers shall labour by the preaching in order to change the needless and harmful idleness into a holy and profitable practice." (CHURCH ORDER adopted by the General Synod of Middelburg, June, 1581, art. L, Kersten, p. 131)

The Acts of the **Synod of 's-Gravenhage 1586**, indicate that there was no appeal to the government to reduce the feasts days.

"The congregations shall keep, in addition to the Sunday, Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. But in places where by the ordinance of the Government more feasts days are maintained in remembrance of Christ (such as the circumcision of Christ and Ascension Day), the Ministers shall endeavour by their preaching to change the needless and harmful idleness into a holy and profitable practice." (CHURCH ORDER adopted by the National Synod, by order of His Majesty, held in 's-Gravenhage, June 20, 1586, art. LX, Kersten, p. 166)

At the famous **Synod of Dordrecht 1618-19** there is a turn from reluctant accommodation to promotion. Preachers are urged to endeavour to have the government authorities conform to the practice of observing the Day of Circumcision and Ascension.

"The churches shall keep, besides the Sunday, also Christmas Day, Easter and Pentecost, with the following day. And since, in most of the cities and provinces of the Netherlands, in addition to these the Day of the circumcision and of the Ascension of Christ are still observed, the Preachers shall, wherever this is not yet the practice, endeavor so that in these districts the Government authorities may maintain uniformity with the other churches." (Acts of the National Synod held in Dordrecht, 1618, 1619 Kersten p. 203)

This decision which appeared as Article LXVII of the Church Order, was made by the Synod after the foreign theologians had departed. (Kersten, p. 190, 199)

Good Friday was not officially mentioned by the early Dutch Synods for fear of Romish superstition being associated with that day. They felt that this day had a real danger of becoming elevated above the Lord's Day. However, many churches did hold an evening service on Good Friday. It has now become a very significant day on the church calendar.

iii. Reformed Church Order

Article 67 of the Church Order of the Free Reformed churches states:

"The churches shall hallow the Lord's Day according to God's Law. The congregations shall also gather for worship on recognised Christian feasts days."

It would be wrong to conclude from the title, "Lord's Day Observance", that so-called "feast day" are to be placed on the same level as the Lord's Days. They are mentioned here only because the Lord's Days are set days for worship. The only other possible location for it would be in Article 64.

However, placed in Article 67, it is even more obvious that the "feast days" are distinguished from the Lord's Days. The Lord's Days are to be "hallowed", while feasts days are not. The Lord's Days are set apart "according to God's Law", while the feasts days are not. They are days for worship designated by the church.

D. CONCLUSIONS

In answer to the questions raised in the Langley consistory's overture to Synod 1984 concerning Christian feast days we submit the following conclusions:

1. That the administration of Old Testament worship is fulfilled in Christ who is "the Lamb of God," the Mediator of the New Covenant, Lord of the New Testament Sabbath, the Head of His Body, the "chief Shepherd and Bishop" of His Church; hence, after His Ascension the Church is commissioned to preach the Gospel and "observe all things whatsoever (He) has commanded." (Mat. 18:20).
2. The ministry of Christ and the guidance of His Spirit in the Apostles reveals the wisdom of, and precedent for accommodating the circumstances and forms of Gospel ministry and worship to the acts of God's providence, and to the circumstances of a culture in order that, without neglecting or contradicting any Biblical principles or precepts, without adding any elements of worship or non-ordained "holy days," and without binding or compelling any person's conscience, yet striving so to labour that "by all means" the Gospel may be preached to all nations, that all congregations may be edified, and the wondrous works of the Lord may be remembered and praised to His glory.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. That Synod approve the following *Report on Special Worship Services*.
2. That Synod decide:
 - a. To revise *Church Order* Article 67 so that instead of reading:
"The churches shall hallow the Lord's Day according to God's Law. The congregations shall also gather for worship on recognised Christian feast days. That the Consistories be urged that such special worship services be held, and their attendance be supervised, in such a manner as does not bind or compel the conscience of any member but does nurture unity and 'keep all (members) in obedience to God."
 - b. That this *Report on Special Worship Services* be sent to the Consistories as a way to understand the nature of *Church Order*, Article 67.
3. That Synod confirms that those who join our churches from a different Calvinistic tradition in which Christian feast days were strictly avoided are respected for their convictions and that we welcome them in our fellowship as churches, confirming the principle of *Church Order*, that "churches whose usages regarding such matters differ from ours will not for this reason be rejected from fellowship." (cf. *Church Order*, Article 86).