

# IN RESPONSE - THE RPCNA'S TOTAL ABSTINENCE VOW & THE CRC

by Dennis Prutow

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At its 1995 Synod meeting, the Christian Reformed Church took the step of allowing the ordination of women. This is considered by many to be wholly unbiblical. Unfortunately, the Christian Reformed Church took an end run around its Constitution to bring this about. This is doubly troubling. Those desiring the change could not muster the support needed to bring about regular Constitutional change. Thus the end run. What follows is an excerpt from an official news release of the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church.<sup>1</sup>

## Synod Permits Regional

### Ordination of Women

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich.--The 1995 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church tonight voted to permit classes (regional groups of churches) to make an exception to the existing church order and ordain women as elders, ministers, and evangelists. In order to ordain women, the classis must declare that the word male is inoperative in response to local needs and circumstances.

Delegates referred to this move as a compromise, in that proponents of women in office said this move is too limiting and opponents said it goes too far. Synod officially recognized that people in the denomination hold two different perspectives on the issue of ordaining women, both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God.

For more than 20 years synods have been discussing the issue of ordaining women to ecclesiastical office, with increasing intensity over the past five years. In 1990 synod voted to open all offices to women by removing the word male from the pertinent church-order article. However, that church-order change was not ratified by Synod 1992. Once again Synod 1993 voted to change the church order and to permit the ordination of

women, but Synod 1994 failed to ratify that decision. This year's synod took the route of allowing classes to claim exception to the church order rather than changing it permanently. The exceptions were placed in supplementary notes of the church order, which means the decision will not require ratification next year.

In a strikingly similar way the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America gutted a prerequisite for ordination. The RPCNA has, for some time, maintained an ordination vow requiring its officers "to abstain from alcoholic beverages." Many people in the church maintain this vow, Query 8 as it is affectionately called, is overbearing and unscriptural. For several years attempts have been made to amend this vow through proper constitutional channels. Because the constitutional requirements have not been met, Query 8 stands.

The 166th Synod of the RPCNA, meeting at Geneva College took the following action after there were once again an insufficient number of votes to change Ordination Query 8.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas we believe that the abstinence clause of ordination query #8 is not part of the New Testament description of the characteristics of elders and goes beyond the testimony of the church,

and whereas a number of synods have voted to change this abstinence clause to bring it into conformity with the Word of God,

and whereas a majority of elders has repeatedly voted to change this clause, while a minority of sessions has resisted reformation of ordination query #8,

be it resolved by the Synod of 1995 that ecclesiastical discipline and ex-

clusion from office be suspended for all who take exception to the abstinence clause of Query #8 for conscience's sake, provided that they commit themselves to Christian sobriety and love for the brethren and the peace of the church.

Those speaking in favor of the Resolution admitted this was an end run around the Constitution. They argued such an end run is justified since a majority of the elders within the church think Query 8 is unbiblical. The resolution passed 44 to 35 toward the close of the Synod meeting. Upon reconsideration, the Resolution again passed 44 to 38. As it now stands, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America has a constitutional requirement it cannot muster the votes to change but has also voted not to uphold.

The action of the Christian Reformed Church is indeed troubling. Unable to bring about regular Constitutional change an unbiblical practice was introduced using another tactic.

Is the action of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America substantially different? Because individual elders have disagreed with Ordination Query 8, men have been ordained in the church contrary to the Constitution. In order to force change, other denominations have ordained women and homosexuals in contravention to church law. Now the highest court of the RPCNA has voted to disregard an ordination vow and not uphold an ordination standard.

This is a very bad precedent. Will a future Synod of the RPCNA point back to this action as an example for ignoring church law against the ordination of women or homosexuals? Will individuals not holding to inerrancy or the virgin birth of Christ find reason to be admitted to the ministry of the RPCNA in this fashion? When a church does not follow her constitution, devastating repercussions follow. What is in store for the RPCNA as she too refused to follow her own Law and Order?

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<sup>1</sup> SYNOD 1995 NEWS #07, Christian Reformed Church in North America, Calvin College Fine Arts Center, 3201 Burton St. S.E., Grand Rapids, MI 49546.

<sup>2</sup> To amend the Constitution of the RPCNA two thirds of the Sessions within the church must agree to the change and, in addition, a majority of the elders, teaching and ruling, within the church. The vote for Constitutional change during the past year and reported to the 166th Synod was as follows: 67 Sessions and 262 elders voting; Session vote: 37 yes, 3 tie. Elder vote: 152 yes. The item was defeated.

# IN RESPONSE - PART ONE: ARE VOWS OF TOTAL ABSTINENCE LAWFUL?

by Dennis Prutow

Debate rages within the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America over Ordination Query 8, the vow requiring total abstinence from alcoholic beverages. Is such a vow lawful according to God's Law and the Confession of the church? If a vow of total abstinence is unlawful, no church may require it of its officers. However, if such a vow is lawful, a second question arises, is it proper for a church to require subscription to this lawful vow. Some within the RPCNA adamantly deny the propriety of requiring such a vow of total abstinence.

Other questions lurk in the background. Does the so-called regulative principle to vows? Is the church a voluntary society into which men and women enter and does a voluntary society have the privilege of stipulating the standards for its officers as long as those standards are lawful? I think the answers to these questions are in the affirmative.

With the passing of the special Resolution discussed in the previous article there is a final question. Is morally and ethically correct for a church body to do an end run around its Constitution the way the 166th Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America did in its special Resolution? This question comes home most fully when placed in the context of a membership vow stipulating every member "promise to submit in the Lord to the teaching and government of this church as being based upon and described in substance in the *Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America*."

That Constitution requires a vote of two thirds of the Sessions and a majority of the elders to agree to an amendment. What of those who vote to make an end run around the constitution; have they broken their vow to God to submit the government of the RPCNA? The Word of God directs, "It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay" (Ecclesiastes 5:5). Jesus Christ warns, "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20).

First of all, I think a vow of total abstinence is a lawful vow according to Scripture and our Confession. The Westminster

Confession of Faith 22.7 states, "No man may vow to do anything forbidden in the Word of God..." It goes without saying a person cannot take a vow he or she believes in contrary to the Word of God. Romans 14:23 is clear. "But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin." The act itself may be approved by God; the person may be wrong in his or her understanding of Scripture. But if a person lacks the faith that God approves, taking a vow is sinful. Beyond doubt, this is the case with the vow for total abstinence. If a person sincerely believes taking this vow forces him to violate Scripture, this person must not and cannot take the vow. It would be sinful to do so.

More specifically, according to the Confession, vows are unlawful when they call us to violate the written Word of God. "No man may vow to do anything forbidden in the Word of God..." There are good biblical examples. Jephthah's vow was unlawful because it called him to commit murder. Judges 11:30-31, "And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord and said, 'If Thou wilt indeed give the sons of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the sons of Ammon, it shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering.'"

The Vow of the Jews to kill Paul was similarly unlawful. Acts 23:12, "And when it was day, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul." Such unlawful vows should be renounced immediately.

The confession gives three examples of unlawful vows. One, The Popish monastic vows of perpetual single life are unlawful because they violate specific injunctions given in Scripture. For example, 1 Timothy 4:1-3, "But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods,

which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth." We also point to 1 Corinthians 7:2, "But because of immoralities, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband." Vows of perpetual celibacy call us to violate Scripture.

I'll abstain from commenting on the words "abstain from foods" for the moment. My object at present is to show the three examples given in the Confession of Faith call us to violate specific Scriptures. Please bear with me in this.

Similarly, vows of professed poverty are unlawful because they require us to violate the Word of God. Exodus 20:15 says, "You shall not steal." Westminster Shorter Catechism 74 asks, "What is required in the eighth commandment?" Answer, "The eighth commandment requireth the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others." Vows of poverty require us to violate the Eighth Commandment. Other Scriptures elicited are 1 Timothy 5:8, "But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever"; and 2 Thessalonians 3:10, "For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone will not work, neither let him eat." It should be obvious we cannot take vows which call us to violate the Word of God.

Yes, this includes vows of "regular obedience." The Scriptures here are plain. "You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men" (1 Corinthians 7:23). "But Peter and the apostles answered and said, 'We must obey God rather than men'" (Acts 5:29). We must grasp the point of the Confession here, "No man may vow to do anything forbidden in the Word of God." Remember Jephthah's vow and the vow of the Jews to murder Paul. There are also direct prohibitions against vows of celibacy and poverty. Such vows are clearly unlawful.

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## IN RESPONSE - PART TWO: ARE VOWS OF TOTAL ABSTINENCE LAWFUL?

by Dennis Prutow

Once Again, Westminster Confession of Faith 22.7 says, "No man may vow to do anything forbidden in the Word of God." The position taken by some differs from this Confessional stance in an important way. The contra-Confessional position says: There is no Scriptural warrant at all for the requirement of a vow of total abstinence from alcoholic beverages. In other words, there is no positive command requiring a vow of total abstinence. I agree. However, this does not, in and of itself, militate against such a vow. Although Scripture may not enjoin such a vow, Scripture may, and I think in fact does, allow such a vow. That is, such a vow does not cause a person to violate clear commands of the Word of God.

There is a difference between the two positions. We see this in our understanding of Worship. We worship God only in the way specifically outlined in His word. This is the Reformed view. Others, Lutherans for example, tell us we may worship God in ways not specifically forbidden in Scripture. The latter stance is more broad. The former position is known as the Regulative Principle. Interestingly enough, the Confession does not apply the Regulative Principle wherein oaths and vows are concerned. The Confessional position is slightly more broad than the position advocating the Regulative Principle. The Confession does not say, "No man may vow to do anything not required by the Word of God." The Confession says, "No man may vow to do anything forbidden in the Word of God." The distinction is vital. It stands behind all our oaths and vows. If this distinction is not maintained, all ordination queries which have no positive warrant in Scripture are unlawful. The question then becomes, does a vow of total abstinence from alcoholic beverages cause us to violate commands of Scripture?

We immediately reference the Nazirite Vows. Numbers 6:2-5 indicate, "Speak to the sons of Israel, and say to them, 'When a man or woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to dedicate himself to the Lord, he shall abstain from wine and strong drink; he shall drink no vinegar, whether made from wine or strong drink, neither shall he drink any grape juice, nor eat fresh or dried grapes.

All the days of his separation he shall not eat anything that is produced by the grape vine, from the seeds even to the skin. All the days of his vow of separation no razor shall pass over his head. He shall be holy until the days are fulfilled for which he separated himself to the Lord; he shall let the locks of hair on his head grow long." Samson was a Nazirite. Is this vow of total abstinence contrary to the command of God? Apparently not. Here God commands such abstinence. From this single example, we may rightly take it that a vow of total abstinence is not contrary to Scripture. It is a lawful vow.

What of 1 Timothy 4:3 which speaks of "men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods, which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth." Does this overthrow a vow of total abstinence from alcoholic beverages? I do not think it does. As F.F. Bruce indicates, along with others, Paul himself may have and very likely did take a temporary Nazirite vow (Acts 18:18).

If the injunction of 1 Timothy 4:3 can be applied to vows of total abstinence, such vows, even for the minimum of thirty days, would be contrary to Scripture and therefore be unlawful. Certainly Paul would not act contrary to his own injunction to Timothy. On good grounds, I do not think we can use 1 Timothy 4:3 in an argument against vows of total abstinence.

Another argument raised comes out of the Lord's Supper. If Christ calls us to drink fermented wine in the Lord's Supper, a vow of total abstinence requires us to violate the command of Christ. How do we answer? Contrary to the supposition of many, it is by no means certain fermented wine was used in the Lord's Supper. Leviticus 10:8-11 speaks as follows. "The Lord then spoke to Aaron, saying, 'Do not drink wine or strong drink, neither you nor your sons with you, when you come into the tent of meeting, so that you may not die-- it is a perpetual statute throughout your generations--and so as to make a distinction between the holy and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean, and so as to teach the sons of Israel all the statutes which the Lord has spoken to them through Moses."

The priests were forbidden to drink wine or strong drink prior to offering their sacrifices. The penalty for violations of this command was death. The reason was "to make a distinction between the holy and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean." Abstinence in this case was part of the process of sanctification required by the priests as they entered the presence of God.

Jesus Christ is our great High Priest. Jesus Christ followed and fulfilled all of the commandments of God prescribed in the Old Testament. He was without sin. Can we conceive of our Lord, acting as a priest, preparing for the sacrifice toward which all the Old Testament sacrifices pointed, and at the same time violating the command of God not to drink wine or strong drink in preparation for this final and ultimate sacrifice? I think we must pause here for reevaluation of the adamantly held position that beyond question fermented wine was used in the institution of the Lord's Supper. Jesus Christ did not violate any commandment of God. If my thinking is sound at this point, failure to use wine in Communion because we have taken a vow of total abstinence is not a violation of Scripture. This argument against total abstinence does not stand.

Vows of total abstinence are lawful because they do not call us to violate the Word of God. The absence of specific Scriptural injunctions to take such a vow is immaterial as long as we do not bind ourselves to something requiring us to violate Scripture. As Robert Shaw observes in his commentary on the Confession, "Persons may bind themselves by a vow, either to necessary duties or to other things not expressly required..." We may bind ourselves more closely than Scripture as long as we do not violate Scripture. Vows regarding faithfulness to Presbyterianism are an example. I therefore maintain vows of total abstinence are lawful vows.

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# IN RESPONSE - MAY A CHURCH REQUIRE A VOW OF TOTAL ABSTINENCE?

by Dennis Prutow

May the church require a vow of total abstinence of its officers? This question rises out of our previous discussion. Since we determined a vow of total abstinence is lawful in and of itself, we may frame the question like this: Is it lawful for a church to require its officers to swear to a lawful vow? Many answer with an adamant NO! A church has no right to coerce its officers to do something contrary to their consciences. I fully agree with this latter statement. No church may coerce its members or officers. I do not think this is what is taking place within the RPCNA. No individual within the church is coerced into some action contrary to his or her conscience.

If you admit Query 8, the vow of total abstinence, is lawful, I think you are in an untenable position. Let me attempt to explain. Beyond doubt we are discussing voluntary action. No one can properly take a vow under compulsion. We must always take vows without any mental or spiritual reservation. Failure to do so is to act out of faith. This is sin.

I also maintain the church is a voluntary society. The RPCNA, as other denominations, is a voluntary society. The use of parliamentary procedures such as *Robert's Rules of Order* to govern deliberative assemblies is evidence of this.

We all voluntarily become members of the congregation and denomination of our choice. In the case of the RPCNA, men and women become members knowing the standards of the church.

Every voluntary society has the privilege of setting standards for membership and for holding office. This is also a solemn responsibility in the church. The church should never establish unbiblical standards for membership and for holding office.

Is it improper for a voluntary society such as the church to require a *lawful* vow of its office bearers? A church cannot require an *unlawful*, unbiblical, vow. Can she require a *lawful vow*? How can the answer be anything but yes? We are not asking whether or not such a requirement is altogether wise. We are simply stating what seems to be patently obvious to any casual observer. An organization has the proper right to require its officers all that is lawful. As the West-

minster Confession of Faith states, "No man may vow to do anything forbidden in the Word of God." The church is not requiring men to vow to do anything forbidden in the Word of God. The requirement of the church to take a *lawful* vow to serve as an officer is lawful.

The response is simple. The church cannot *compel* individuals whom God has called to take a vow contrary to their conscience. Since the RPCNA is a voluntary society, not the Third Reich, no one is being *compelled* to take a vow to abstain from alcoholic beverages. The argument that the consciences of God's officers are needlessly being trampled is specious. If officers in the RPCNA have taken this vow without faith, they have sinned. The church cannot be faulted for their voluntary action. I repeat, no one *compelled* them to take this vow. Since this is the case, the church has not trampled on their consciences. No one is compelling others to take this vow. If the vow is not taken voluntarily, the individual sins. This is key. *The church cannot be held hostage to the consciences of men who cannot take a lawful vow.*

Those who oppose the vow of total abstinence continue to maintain the church is *imposing* a vow "without direct Scriptural warrant." They do not grasp the crucial and very critical difference I've labored to establish in the previous two lessons. There is a difference between Westminster Confession of Faith 22.7, "No man may vow to do anything forbidden in the Word of God" and Westminster Shorter Catechism 51, "The second commandment forbiddeth the worshipping of God by images, or in any other way not appointed in his Word" (also Westminster Confession of Faith 21:1). We must not miss the point of Westminster Confession of Faith 22.7. The so called Regulative Principle does not apply to our taking of vows. Reread the previous two articles to see this spelled out.

Another question does rear its head. Is it proper for the members of a voluntary society who disagree with the Constitution of that voluntary society simply to do an end run around that Constitution when they freely and voluntarily joined the society and swore before God when they did so they would uphold the Con-

stitution of said society? I do not think so. As a member of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America I covenanted with God as follows: "Do you promise to submit in the Lord to the teaching and government of this church as being based upon Scripture and described in substance in the Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America?" This too is a lawful vow. I swore before God I would submit to the government of the Reformed Presbyterian Church as outlined in her Constitution. The Constitution requires a particular procedure for the amending of ordination vows. This is no mere technicality. It is a vital portion of the Constitution. In voting in favor of the special Resolution at the 166th Synod I did not submit to the Constitution by upholding it as stipulated in a vow I made before God. I thereby broke my covenant with God. More pointedly, members of Synod publicly broke covenant with God.

This is a very serious charge but this how I see it. If I am shown wrong I will repent in dust and ashes and publicly retract this charge. If I am correct and the highest court of the church has publicly sinned, how do we appeal? Is a public entreaty to repent in order?

The Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America finds herself in a quagmire. This is my personal opinion. Those who are *law abiding church members* and have not sought ordination because of they cannot in good conscience take a vow of total abstinence are being further penalized. They do not serve. They will not serve under the cloud of what they consider the lawless action of a synod. However, those who do an end run around the Constitution, a procedure outside the Law and Order of the church, benefit by paving the way for those of like mind to serve. Is this the way of righteousness? "O Lord, who may abide in Thy tent? Who may dwell on Thy holy hill?" The hard truth is this, "He swears to his own hurt, and does not change" (Psalm 15:1 & 4).

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