

Overture to the 2018 General Synod – Interpreting the Declarations

The Holland Classis overtures the General Synod to direct its Commission on Theology to present an interpretation of the sentence, "I accept the Standards as historic and faithful witnesses to the Word of God." This sentence is used in the Declaration for Licensed Candidates (Appendix, Formulary #1), the Declaration for Ministers of Word and Sacrament (Appendix, Formulary #3), the Declaration for a General Synod Professor (Appendix, Formulary #7) and the Declaration for Commissioned Pastors (Appendix, Formulary #16). We request that the interpretation presented by the Commission address these questions as well as any other relevant question that arises within the commission: What has been the historical understanding of this sentence (i.e. why is this sentence in these declarations)? What had been understood that the person was declaring about the Standards when the declaration was made? What does "historic" mean? What does "faithful" mean? Has the understanding of the meaning of this declaration changed after the 2017 General Synod declaration about the interpretation of the Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108-109? If so, what is that understanding? Does the declarant affirm the action of the 2017 General Synod when the declarant states, "I accept the Standards as historic and faithful witnesses to the Word of God?"

Reasons:

1. It is important that this sentence has a common interpretation and understanding for the sake of all persons who are required to make this declaration in front of a classis or General Synod. The sentence's meaning has come into question because of the action of the 2017 General Synod which stated an interpretation of Heidelberg Catechism #108 and 109. This declarative sentence has been understood to mean that the Standards were interpreted in their context at the time the Standard was written. The General Synod in 2017 provided a present-day interpretation to the Heidelberg Catechism. It interpreted the Standard in a present-day context rather than historic context.
2. The sentence, "I accept the Standards as historic and faithful witnesses to the Word of God" has been contained within the Declarations since 1973. We wonder what it means in this new century to say these words?
3. The action of the 2017 General Synod took a new step to provide a current interpretation to the Catechism. With its action, the synod has opened the gateway to be challenged to provide contemporary understandings to other questions and statements in our Standards, such as the value and priority of infant baptism. Will other such contemporary interpretations alter the meaning of the sentence within the Declarations?
4. The Belgic Confession Article 36 states, "the government's task is not limited to caring for and watching over the public domain but extends also to upholding the sacred ministry, with a view to removing and destroying all idolatry and false worship of the Antichrist; to promoting the kingdom of Jesus Christ; and to furthering the preaching of the gospel everywhere; to the end that God may be honored and served by everyone,

as he requires in his Word.” The Reformed Church in America has not provided a contemporary interpretation to this sentence but recognizes that the sentence is part of the historic record of the document. Likewise, Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 80, which condemns the Mass, remains as a witness in the Catechism without contemporary interpretation or alteration. Are these items now required to have a contemporary interpretation that is approved by the General Synod so that we understand their meaning, as was done with Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108/109?

5. The Commissioned Pastors, Ministers, General Synod Professors, and Licensed Candidates should be able to be aware of and understand what they are declaring before their hearers when they recite this sentence.