

## HISTORICAL REVISIONISM

by G. I. Williamson

“Historical revisionism” (also but less often in English called “negationism”) is a phrase that describes the process that attempts to rewrite history by minimizing, denying or simply ignoring essential facts. It is, in other words, a breaking of the ninth commandment as clearly illustrated in the following two examples.

(1) During the rule of dictator Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union, a variety of revisionist tactics were employed to ignore unpleasant events of the past. Soviet school books would constantly be revised to remove or alter photographs and articles that dealt with politicians who had fallen out of favor with the regime. History was frequently re-written, with past events modified so they always portrayed Stalin's government favorably.

(2) In George Orwell's now famous book *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the government of the main character's country (Oceania), which is nominally led by the enigmatic Big Brother, is constantly revising history to be in harmony with the current political situation. For instance, if Oceania is at war with Eurasia, then the official position is that they have always been at war with Eurasia. If the situation changes, the civilians are brainwashed accordingly. In this novel, historical revisionism is one of the main policies of the propaganda arm (“Ministry of Truth”) of Oceania's government. The main character, Winston Smith, is employed to revise newspaper articles and doctor photographs. This book was inspired from the real-life government policies in the Soviet Union (as indicated above.)

It is bad enough when we encounter this in the civil sphere. It is even worse when we encounter it in the Christian Church. But it is far more prevalent than many seem to realize. How often have you heard the familiar phrase “this is the way it's *always* been?” Is this not what we often hear when a question is raised concerning such observances as Christmas, ‘Good Friday’ and Easter? Here, as an example, is what one Consistory recently said in response to just such a question from members of their congregation.

“Historically, there have been two views with regard to special services. The Continental approach (Reformed and Lutheran) has had a more favorable attitude toward them. The Presbyterian approach (Puritans, etc.) has had a more negative attitude. Both of these traditions are advocates of the Regulative Principle for worship, yet they apply it slightly differently.”<sup>1</sup>

Isn't this just another example of “this is the way it's *always* been?” The problem with the Consistory's answer is that it does not adequately state the truth. Was John Calvin not ‘Continental’? He certainly was. But he was also in hearty agreement with his predecessor, William Farel, who had already banished all observances of special days other than the Lord's days in the Geneva church. And these early Reformers were not alone. Two respected scholars of the Christian Reformed church—Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma—were honest enough to admit this when they wrote, in 1941, a much more accurate statement. They said:

“During the early days of the Reformation some Reformed localities observed only Sunday. All special days sanctioned and revered by Rome were set aside. Zwingli and Calvin both encouraged the rejection of all ecclesiastical festive days. In Geneva all special days were discontinued as soon as the Reformation took a firm hold in that city. Already before the arrival of Calvin in Geneva this had been accomplished under the leadership of Farel and Viret. But Calvin agreed heartily. And Knox, the Reformer of Scotland, shared these same convictions, he being a disciple of Calvin in Geneva. Consequently the Scottish Churches also banned the Roman sacred days.

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<sup>1</sup> I've refrained from naming the source of this statement because I don't want to single them out. It is virtually identical with similar words of defense for the status quo that I have heard many times over the past half century.

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These eminent Reformers took this stand for the following reasons: The festival days are not ordained of God but are a human invention; they minimize Sunday, the God-ordained weekly day of rest; they lead to paganistic celebrations and promote licentiousness. In view of present day celebrations of days as Christmas and Easter by the general public and many believers it must be said that the contentions of the Reformers as to this last point were certainly correct. Present day celebration of these days is more pagan than Christian. Neither can it be denied that the observance of these days is but an invention of man, and that many people hold these festivals in higher esteem than Sunday.

Considering the position of the Reformers, we are not surprised that the Synod of Dort, 1574, held that the weekly Sabbath alone should be observed, and that the observance of all other days should be discouraged. This same Synod, however, also decided that the Ministers should preach about the birth of Christ on the Sunday preceding Christmas day, and Ministers were also permitted to preach on the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday and on the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost Sunday. The “tweede feestdagen,” i.e., second festival days, still observed in Holland on December 26 and on the days following Easter and Pentecost, were set aside and ignored completely by this Synod.”

The inescapable question is therefore this: are these statements by Van Dellen and Monsma true? If they are it is a serious distortion of truth to say “The Continental approach...has had a more favorable attitude toward” these days than these Presbyterians. It is also a distortion of the truth to say “the Presbyterian approach (Puritans, etc.) has had a more negative attitude” toward these days than did Continental Reformed *unless the earlier period—the first years—of continental reformed history is arbitrarily excluded*. But if the above cited historical facts are *not* excluded they indicate a very opposite conclusion. The earlier Continental Reformed people were just as negative toward these days as those awful ‘Puritans’ ever were. It is also a fact that the Heidelberg Catechism and Belgic Confession—which were written and adopted in that early period by the Continental Churches—are in full accord with the teaching of the Presbyterians on this subject.<sup>2</sup>

The historical record does indeed reveal an important difference. But the difference is not between Continental Reformed, on the one hand, and Presbyterian, on the other, but rather the difference between what our Fathers meant when they said “*all*,” “*any*” and “*only*” and what we today take those words to mean. In other words the truth is that neither the Continental Reformed *nor* the Presbyterians today really hold to the same rules as our Fathers did. The above-quoted Consistory said: “Both of these traditions are advocates of the Regulative Principle for worship, yet they apply it slightly differently.” This sentence

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<sup>2</sup> The Heidelberg Catechism (Q/A 96) says we are not to worship God “*in any other way than he has commanded in his word*.” None of these special days such as Christmas are commanded. The Belgic Confession Art. VII says “*the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in them [the scriptures]*” therefore “*it is unlawful for any one, though an apostle to teach otherwise than we are now taught in the Holy Scriptures*.” Christmas, Good Friday and Easter are nowhere revealed as any part of Apostolic Church teaching or practice. This same article goes on to say: “*nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times...as of equal value with the truth of God...Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever does not agree with this infallible rule which the apostles have taught us...*” How can it be denied that our present day practice is in large measure a contradiction to this very clear warning? Similarly Art. XXXII says “*rulers of the church...ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, has 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*.” Van Dellen & Monsma were honest enough to admit that special days such as Christmas, Good Friday and Easter are mere human inventions. How, then, can anyone who favors these days claim to agree with the Belgic Confession? (I underline the words that most Reformed *and* Presbyterian Churches today do not seem to me to agree with).

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implies that there has always been a difference between Presbyterian and Reformed Churches concerning this matter, and that the difference is not important. But the facts of history—both earlier history and later history—indicate rather that (1) there was no significant difference at all to begin with, and (2) that the very real difference between the earlier and later practice in both traditions is very significant indeed.

Historical records show that earlier *practice* was modified much earlier in Continental Reformed churches than it was in Scottish Presbyterian churches. The First Book of Discipline, adopted by the Scottish Presbyterian Church (CofS) in 1560 said “*keeping of holy dayes...all those that the papists have invented, [such] as the feasts...of Chrismasse...which things because in Gods Scriptures they neither have commandement nor assurance, we judge them utterly to be abolished from this realme.*”<sup>3</sup> And because there was no pressure at that time from civil authorities to compromise this conviction, “the Christian Year ceased to be observed in the CofS for nearly 200 years”<sup>4</sup> It was different with the Continental Reformed Churches. They soon began to accommodate these feast days. Therefore, as Van Dellen and Mon-sma themselves asked, in the light of the earlier stand of these churches: “How is this to be explained?” They answered their own question as follows:

“The [civil] government of Holland was loath to set all the Christian festivals aside inasmuch as many of the people delighted in these days for the sake of their pleasures and because the government officials and employees hated to part with a number of holidays which afforded them rest and recreation. Rather than see these days given over to the danger of abuse and frivolity, the Churches accommodated themselves to circumstances and began to celebrate these days after a fashion. Thus the Synod of Dort, 1578, Article 75, declared in substance that it would be desirable to celebrate Sunday only according to God’s ordinance. But, inasmuch as Christmas Day and the day following upon Christmas, as well as the days following upon Easter and Pentecost and in some places also New Year’s Day, and Ascension Day were legal holidays by authority of the governments, the Ministers should preach appropriately on these days in order to turn a fruitless and harmful idleness (*lediggang*) into a holy and profitable exercise. Furthermore, Ministers of cities which observed other festivals by authority of local governments, should hold services on these days also. At the same time this Synod urged that the Churches should work toward the setting aside of all festive-days, except Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost.”

It is not my purpose in reviewing this history to put the Continental Churches in a bad light. My purpose is simply to do justice to historical facts. And the fact is that Reformed Churches in Holland compromised their earlier—more consistent—stand against the observance of *any* and *all* special days other than the Lord’s Day. Yet even as they compromised—choosing expediency rather than conflict due to circumstances beyond their immediate control—it is important to note that they still affirmed their *desire* and *intention* “to work toward the setting aside of all festive days, except Christmas, Easter and Pentecost” (these three ‘special days’ were evidently tolerable because at least two of them occur on the weekly holy day God has ordained; which is the Lord’s Day). What is needed, then, is a more honest dealing with the concerns of those who still believe what the early Continental Reformers believed with respect to the observance of special days other than the Lord’s Days. Instead of making statements that imply that there has *always* been a significant difference between the Continental Reformed and the Presbyterian view concerning these days, we need to be honest enough to simply admit that *both were of one mind to begin with*. Both of them originally wanted to do away with all of these special days. And today the majority of churches from *both* traditions have quite generally accommodated them. In other words, there was no significant difference between the two *to begin with*, and there is not much difference between the two *today*. And this means that both have changed in their understanding of the language of our historic confessional documents. So instead of suggesting that it was only those dreadful Puritans who were over-reacting

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<sup>3</sup> *Dictionary of Scottish Church History & Theology*, p. 170. IVP 1993.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171

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against the errors of Rome, it should be honestly admitted that *if the Puritans were over-reacting then so was John Calvin and, indeed, the early Synods of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands.*

This leaves one important question. If what we have said is accurate then what does it mean to say that we still hold to the Regulative Principle of Worship (RPW) which was carefully formulated by our Fathers and preserved in our Presbyterian and Reformed Confessions? The Reformation Fathers—both Reformed and Presbyterian—used words like “any” and “all” and “only.” When they said God is not to be worshiped in “any” way that he has not commanded but “only” as he has commanded in his word, they *meant* (along with other things) that the “only” days that the churches should observe are the 52 Lord’s days that *he* has commanded.<sup>5</sup> The prevailing view today is that certain other ‘special days’ should *not* be excluded *even though we know very well that they were never commanded by God.* The question, then, is this: How can we—(if we hold to this now-prevailing point of view)—honestly claim to be in agreement with the “all,” the “any,” and the “only” terminology of our inherited Confessions (whether Reformed *or* Presbyterian). Would it not be more honest if we would simply say “we don’t really agree with our Confessional standards on this any more because we think *some* exceptions should be made to the ‘all, any and only’ language.” And shouldn’t we stop singling out the ‘Puritans’ for disrespect and honestly admit that our Fathers were “just as bad as they were.” Our Fathers formulated their concept of what we now call “the Regulative Principle of Worship” in such a way that an honest person who reads what they wrote has no excuse for failing to understand that they held that *nothing* is to be allowed in the sphere of worship unless it is shown from Scripture to have God’s approval.

I first became concerned about this subject because of the historical material cited by Van Dellen and Monsma in their Church Order Commentary. And what has discouraged and saddened me is the lack of *scriptural* reasons for the now entrenched tradition of observing special religious days other than the Lord’s day. Over the past half century I have sought diligently for sound arguments for this practice and, I am sorry to say, the more I read in defense of it the more convinced I am that the early Continental reformed people were right, and that the present practice is not. And one of the things that has strengthened me in this conclusion is the way in which *the present practice is defended by the use of ‘Historical Revisionism.’* One of the things that I have most often noticed is the allegation that the ‘Puritans’ were some kind of extremists—*people who ‘over-reacted’ to things God never commanded which characterized Roman Catholic worship*—and that, in this over-reaction, *they were deviating from what Reformed churches have always included, namely some of these Roman Catholic practices.* Well, if the Puritans over-reacted so did John Calvin. So did the men who wrote the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession. And so did those early Synods in Holland that adopted these documents and then tried to implement what they say by observing only the Lord’s day. When present practice can only defend itself by wrongly slandering the Puritans, I am all the more convinced that they (the Puritans)—along with Calvin himself, and the Reformed Churches in their best (earliest) days—were right.

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<sup>5</sup> As John Calvin said in his commentary on Galatians 4:10-11—where Paul condemns the false apostles (Judaizers) for insisting on the observance of days other than the weekly Lord’s day—days which God *had* appointed in the O.T. ceremonial law: “*The Papists must therefore be held equally censurable with the false apostles; and with this addition in aggravation, that, while the former proposed to keep those days which had been appointed by the law of God, the latter enjoin days, rashly stamped with their own seal, to be observed as most holy.*”