

PERSONAL PREFERENCES AND PERTINENT PRINCIPLES

In the past months the issue of how to address God has again become the subject of discussion and debate. It all began with an editorial by Br. A. Sikkema titled "Hallowed Be Your Name" It appeared in the Dec. 3, 1994 issue of Information. A few excerpts from Br. Sikkema's editorial will give us the general drift of his views on the matter of using "Thee" and "Thou" in prayer.

"Why do we have an entirely separate language for prayer? Everyone will agree that phrases like: Wilt Thou grants us...'; 'We thank Thee that Thou hast blessed us with...'; 'Thou art...' are not used in our daily speech with one another but are found only in prayer. Phrases of this form are made necessary by insisting on the use of 'Thee and 'Thou' in prayer."

Br. Sikkema continues with some observations about Bible translations and notes that "the KJV uses 'thee' for any single person being addressed, and the NIV employs 'you'. This difference is purely one of preference, and the NIV takes the most accurate rendition, for there is no distinction in the original languages between how God and people are addressed in the Bible."

Furthermore, "On a more general point, archaic prayer language can illustrate a (perhaps unconscious) dualistic approach to life: one language for prayer, one for everyday use... There is one sphere for religious activity, and another for non-religious, both of which are sovereign."

Finally, "In prayer, we shouldn't be struggling to maintain an unfamiliar language."

Br. R. Koat made his contribution to the discussion in an editorial in the January 14th issue of Information. In response to a letter to the editor by Br. John Vantil he made an attempt "to set a few linguistic misconceptions straight." He notes that "You and your have established themselves as the universal standard: the polite as well as the informal pronouns for all occasions. We simply cannot turn the linguistic clock back, no matter how we try."

In an article titled, "Thou or You: What is proper when we speak to God?" (IHA, March/95), Rev. E. Kampen also joined the discussion with the statement that "There is no Scriptural or linguistic reason to insist on the continued use of 'thou'...in addressing God. This is not to say it must be stopped. Rather, this should not be made into a point of orthodoxy, a test of faith... It seems that everyone, even those who defend the use of 'thou' in addressing God, are willing to grant this point."

Generally speaking, we can agree with many of the statements or assertions made in the course of the discussion and debate. We have no reason to question the accuracy or truth of Br. Koat's statements in his attempt to set a few of the linguistic misconceptions straight. We can concur "that the newer pronoun usage merely reflects the development of inexorable linguistic changes that all living languages are heir to do." We can also support Br. Sikkema in his assertion that "there is no distinction in the original languages between how God and people are addressed in the Bible." The statement by Rev. Kampen that "there is no Scriptural or linguistic reason to insist on the continued use of 'thou' in addressing God" would be difficult to refute. We can also endorse the statement that "the use of 'thou' or 'you' is ultimately a matter of preference, not principle...it is more a matter of custom than conviction."

That does not, however, negate the fact that a change in how we address God cannot be totally isolated from the many other changes and developments that are taking place in our churches or church community. There seems to be a compelling need to change things; an insatiable urge to do things differently. The Reformed practices and traditions of the past are often put aside to make

way for what is acceptable and popular in the present. The heritage of hundreds of years is replaced with that which is current and common; that which finds its justification only in its newness. We think here of proposals and initiatives to change the Reformed liturgy and/or order of worship. We are reminded of the persistent requests to alter the manner in which we traditionally have celebrated the Lord's Supper. We note, particularly in our homes and schools, the continuing shift away from the Reformed tradition of singing the Genevan psalms/tunes.

The change in the way we address God is only one of the many changes taking place in our churches and church community. It is not only the issues themselves, or the fact that a doctrinal matter is at stake, that generates discussion and debate, but also the manner in which many of the changes take place.

We can agree that the matter of how we address God may be more a matter of preference than principle, yet we should keep in mind the pertinent principle that personal preferences do not constitute proper grounds on which to implement change when we deal with matters that affect others. Changes which affect our whole community are never the sole jurisdiction of its individual members. We believe that all changes, all that is new, must stand the test of intense criticism before a decision is made to implement these changes. We must be careful that "by leaving each other free" to implement our personal preferences we do not engender a climate in which everyone does what is right in his own eyes.

And that brings us to another pertinent principle. We don't make changes for the sake of a change; we make changes because good grounds have been adduced for the need of a change. Those who appropriate for themselves the right to change the way in which we traditionally have done things, often do so without presenting the necessary and proper grounds for the desired changes. They simply go ahead and change things to accommodate their personal preferences or convictions, thus conveniently circumventing the process of discussion and debate; the exercise of Reformed polemics. The pertinent principle that good grounds be adduced for the desired changes is promptly forgotten. We are faced with an attitude and approach that says, "We have decided to make changes, and if you don't like it, prove us wrong!" They put the onus on others to produce the grounds that they themselves were unwilling or unable to provide. If arguments are presented they are often the consequence of, rather than the grounds for the changes already made.

Take for example the resolute decision "to discontinue the use of 'thee' and 'thou' in our prayers" and the subsequent comments on the "dualistic approach to life" and the fact that "we shouldn't be struggling to maintain an unfamiliar language." Is it not somewhat unusual that people appropriate for themselves the right or freedom to deviate from the way in which we as churches or church community traditionally have done things, and that they then complain about "dualism", and lament the fact that things are unfamiliar. What comes to mind is, for example, the reluctance of many to use the Genevan psalms/tunes in the home and school, and in assemblies or music programs. Is this not a self-imposed 'Dualism' resulting in self-inflicted unfamiliarity? We all have our personal preferences, but we must keep in mind the pertinent principle that personal preferences do not constitute proper grounds on which to implement change when we deal with matters that affect others. Furthermore, if we see the need for change we should remember that it is not in our province to initiate change based on our personal preferences. Those who see the need for change have the obligation to provide proper grounds for the requested changes, and must be prepared to submit these grounds to public scrutiny. Then it is possible that valid grounds are adduced, and that

we can all agree that change is beneficial and urgently needed. Then change should also take place, not by appropriating for oneself the right to unilaterally accommodate one's own personal preferences, but by applying the aforementioned pertinent principles in a manner that allows for a communal consensus.

Ron Dykstra

A CONTRIBUTION

When we got married, the consistory presented us with a Bible. We had a choice: the old translation (statenvertaling), or the new translation. We opted for the former, as we were raised with it!

Then later on we started to read from the new translation. On account of the kids, you know. But on Sundays we used the old translation, with THAT we were raised!

Our minister puts lots of effort into making his sermons. He reads from the new translation, the one that is laying on the pulpit now. Often he adds, "Actually, beloved, it is better put THIS way! Then it strikes us that that is exactly the way it is put in the old translation, a little bit complicated sometimes, translators were often right though. Would that be because they were so Reformed, maybe?"

The new translation has captured our lives - on the pulpits and in the hands of the church people. How did this actually come about? To find this out we turned to the Acts of the Synods. Kampen 1951 stated "to firmly dissuade (beforehand) the use of the new translation." Enschede 1955 (after much deliberation, and even five proposals which did not make it) appointed a committee in order "to find out if the translation in question was usable for the reformed community." Bunschoten Spakenburg 1959 declared "that the pronouncement of ...Kampen ...was of no effect anymore... (and) that the local Churches were free - if they so desired - to make use of the new translation in the worship s services..." So THAT is the way it all went!

But there was MORE! The Committee of Enschede also stated: "to consider it an important drawback of the new translation that it sometimes offers a free rendering... which hampers the searching of Scriptures..." also "that for the members of the Churches the old translation will remain indispensable". Of this NOTHING can be found back in the decision of Bunschoten - Spakenburg.

Important objections: A hindrance for Bible study, indispensable, that old translation. That's quite something! But how many families after 1958 still have the old translation in their homes? Weren't things settled a little too promptly in those days? We need seven years to test the psalms. With the Bible we were ready in three.

Translated from Zebrapad, by KLAAR-OVER, from De Reformatie, Jan. 12, 1980

In connection with the discussions about a new Bible translation, Mrs. A. Heetebrij, of Chilliwack sent us these pieces for consideration.

De Bijbel

Bij t'openslaan van't Boek der Boeken
Gedenk 0 Christen dag aan dag
Dat wie dat Boek wil onderzoeken
Geen eigen licht vertrouwen mag.
Geen mensen wijsheid kan hier baten
Geen vlijtige arbeid hier volstaan
Alle eigen inzicht dient verlaten
Een ander oog moet open gaan.
Voor dat g'U dan zet tot lezen,
Val Christen, val uw God te voet
Zo dat een heilig eerzaam vrezen
Zich meester maakt van uw gemoed
Vraag voor gij verder gaat een zegen;
Vraag oren, ogen en een hart,
En Jesus zeive komt u tegen
In dit Zijn Woord bij vreugd' en smart.

— Isaak da Costa

The Bible

When opening the Book of Books
Remember Christians all your days
That those who want to search the Scriptures
Must not rely on carnal ways.
No human wisdom can avail here
No diligent effort will suffice
All self-reliance be rejected
Another light must light the eyes.
So, when you set yourself to reading,
Pray, Christian, pray before you start!
So that an awesome, humble trembling
May take control of mind and heart.
Before you proceed ask for blessing
That God may open eyes and ears.
And Christ Himself will come to meet you
In this His Word in joy and tears

Freely Translated

Some Comments:

Of course, this all happened in our sister churches in Holland - quite long ago, but isn't it a small world indeed! The RSV, the NASB, the NIV, or whichever new translation our leaders may

consider “The Old Word In The New Form”, none of them can ever replace the Old King James. As KLAAR-OVER writes, “Those old translators were often right though” and he adds the question (which we believe to be an intelligent observation), “Would that be because they were so Reformed?” To this we want to add another question, or rather a remark. How can a Church who supposed to be so Reformed among the “reformed” leave the translation of Gods Word to those who are unreformed in their doctrines? Is it because the Church has joined the ranks of the New Evangelicals? A. Heetebrij

CORNELIUS VAN TIL AND THE LIGHT OF NATURE

By Wes Bredenhof

In the February 18 issue of Reformed Polemics, Rev. P. de Boer wrote an article concerning the “Light of Nature.” He was concerned with demonstrating that the Westminster Confession and the Belgic Confession are not in total agreement when it comes to this doctrine, though it appears so. Moreover, Rev. de Boer took it upon himself to stress that the interpretation of the Westminster Confession in the OPC on the Light of Nature is incorrect. He laid particular stress upon the teachings of Dr. Cornelius Van Til, late professor at Westminster Theological Seminary. Rev. de Boer attributes Van Til with teaching that “if man thinks things out in the correct way, he must come to the conclusion that God exists and understand the wisdom and perfection of God.” It is my contention that Dr. Van Til does not say this at all, but actually taught something quite to the contrary. It was this very thinking that Van Til militated against his whole life, both in his specialized field of apologetics and in systematic theology.

Van Til consistently rejected all forms of natural theology throughout his entire career. In his class syllabus, A Christian Theory of Knowledge, Dr. Van Til condemns the evangelical view of natural theology and the idea that fallen man can find soteriological knowledge in nature¹. He also points out quite clearly that, in accordance with the picture presented in Romans 1, the natural man knows in his nature (general revelation) that he is a creature of God. Therefore, as Romans 1 also states, all men know that God exists, but not all men acknowledge this fact. He cannot consciously come to the conclusion that God exists. The truth remains buried within the unregenerate man under the manure pile of his sin and he cannot find it for the entire stink which is so sweet in the unregenerate nostrils. The natural unregenerate man tries his utmost to suppress the sense of deity which he possesses, and no matter how much “right reason” he may utilize he will never understand the wisdom and perfection of God without the work of the Holy Spirit.

Natural man, according to Van Til, CANNOT use “right reason” to come to an understanding of the character of God. Van Til absolutely rejects this type of thinking and he criticizes Warfield for holding to this idea.² But Van Til also criticizes Kuyper on the opposite end of the spectrum, who states that the effects of sin upon the mind do not allow for any value in the discipline of apologetics. Van Til agreed with Kuyper that there is no common ground between believer and unbeliever, but he also went further in saying that there is a point of contact.³ Van Til recognizes that the noetic effects of sin are too powerful for the natural unregenerate man to come to a proper

understanding of God from nature alone. Man needs special revelation. Van Til, in line with Rev. de Boer, also states that Adam needed special revelation in Paradise.⁴ It is for this reason, that in his apologetical system. Dr. Van Til stressed the need for the Christian apologist to utilize not only the general revelation of nature, but also the special revelation of Scripture. It can even be said that Van Til attributed much more importance to special revelation, because of his recognition that all the arguments for Christianity are evaluated by the natural man on the basis of his presuppositions and the evidences from Scripture are stronger than those from nature and their acceptance is indeed necessary to properly understand nature.⁵ Van Til did not place too much authority on the general revelation of nature. In fact, he has been strongly criticized by some Reformed writers for not placing enough emphasis on the revelation available from the universe.⁶

Van Til's doctrine of the knowledge of God very definitely included the noetic effects of sin. Van Til acknowledges that the natural unregenerate man is in complete bondage to sin, and will do anything possible to avoid acknowledging the truths which he knows in his heart of hearts. What the natural man does not recognize is that in his very existence he demonstrates the truth of that which he continually attempts to suppress. His presuppositions may state one thing, but his life and actions exhibit another. This is, of course, the epistemology of the natural man which under girds Van Til's system of apologetics.

Dr. Van Til never taught that if man reasons properly he can obtain correct knowledge of God from nature. Moreover, none of his followers have held to such thinking. Dr. Greg Bahnsen, an example of a well-known consistent Van Tilian, always points to the fact that the natural man's thinking is blinded by the iron mask of his presupposition of autonomy.⁷ This is also what another student of Van Til, Dr. John Frame, teaches.⁸ By now it is clear that Rev de Boer has been attacking a straw man. His supposition regarding full justice has come to full recognition. In the future careful consideration of Van Til and his teachings should be undertaken by all who attempt to criticize him. His philosophy is often more complex than a few ideas or phrases taken out of context might indicate.

It should also be pointed out that Van Til and his students were and remain faithful to the teachings of both the Westminster and Dutch Continental Standards. In fact, in the course of his lifetime, Dr. Van Til was a faithful subscriber to both sets of confessions and was never accused of the contrary. There is no inconsistency between what the Reformed confessions teach and that which Van Til taught.

In conclusion, contrary to what Rev de Boer may believe, the OPC should be encouraged more and more to take up the Christian epistemology developed by Van Til and his followers. There is not much authority given to general revelation, but it is recognized that the interpretation of general revelation is guided by presuppositions, either theistic or anti-theistic. Natural unregenerate man cannot know God in all His wisdom and perfection. Many in the OPC have taken up the work left by Dr. Van Til, but it seems that his heritage is more and more in danger of being lost. It is my hope that we in the Canadian Reformed churches will recognize more of the value of the work of this "Reformed giant," that we may not only build up ourselves but also our brothers and sisters in the OPC, that we may all live "ad maiorem Dei gloriam," to the greater glory of God.⁹

- 1) A Christian Theory of Knowledge (Class Syllabus), Cornelius Van Til, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, PA, 1954,p.149
- 2) *ibid.*, p. 167
- 3) The Defense of the Faith, Cornelius Van Til, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1955, p.94
- 4) A Christian Theory of Knowledge, p. 152
 - 5) On this point Van Til is in agreement with Dr. C. Van Dam in “How Does God Reveal Himself in His Works and Word?” *Clarion*, Volume 41, No.8, April 24, 1992.
 - 6) Classical Apologetics, A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics, R.C. Sproul et al., Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1984, *passim*.
 - 7) An excellent practical example of this can be found on the 2 tape set, “Does God Exist? The Great Debate. Bahnsen (Christian) vs. Stein (Atheist),” which can be obtained from Still Waters Revival Books, 4710-37A Ave., Edmonton, AB, T6L 3T5, for \$8.05 (including P and H, and GST).
 - 8) Apologetics to the Glory of God, An Introduction, John M. Frame, Presbyterian and Reformed, Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1994, pp. 22-26
 - 9) I do not claim in this article to have completely explicated the Doctrine of the Knowledge of God in the teachings of Van Til. It would take much more than a short article to accomplish this task.