

IS THE REFORMED FAITH EXPERIENTIAL?

In many places there are discussions between a variety of Reformed churches about the desire and the need for unity. Several issues are raised as obstacles in this endeavor.

In the discussions between the Free Reformed Churches (FRC) and the Canadian / American Reformed Churches (C/ARC) the featured difference is said to be the preaching. This argument has been raised by the FRC in Langley as well as by Rev. C. Pronk at The Burlington Reformed Study Centre held in Oct. 1992.

In a response to questions, later published in a booklet, Rev. Pronk says: "Neo-Calvinists, as we saw, try to combat individualism with a renewed emphasis on the doctrine of the covenant, and in doing so they will often appeal to Calvin and legitimately so. But, although Calvin also stressed the importance of this key doctrine of Scripture, he did not make membership in the covenant a kind of eternal life insurance. While such covenant membership of believers and their children is a great blessing and privilege, it does not guarantee salvation. There has to be faith and repentance, sorrow for sin, a hunger and thirst after righteousness, a close walk with God, and a personal relationship with Christ. These things must be insisted on in preaching, for unless we as wretched and undone sinners learn to cast ourselves on God's mercy revealed in His dear Son, yes, unless God embraces our souls and accepts us in His Beloved Son, our religion is but a shell, an outward thing. Let no one dismiss this as mysticism, for without this experiential, individual, personal and intimate heart-knowledge the Church is dead and no amount of fireworks can bring her to life. The Old Calvinists, including the dissidents of 1892, knew this. Therefore they preached the way they did, making many mistakes, no doubt. Their sermons probably were too exemplary at times and too moralistic here and there, not showing the historical setting of a text, focusing too much on the individual and not enough on the congregation as a whole. I'm sure that all these charges can be substantiated."(Page 70)

After this paragraph Rev. Pronk speaks about the faults of redemptive-historical preaching and concludes that the differences in preaching are quite great and that this will be the main reason to prevent union "any time soon."

We quoted Rev. Pronk at length for two reasons. Firstly, this view appears to accurately represent a large segment of the FRC's. Secondly, it is good to understand what is meant when we are told that there is such a difference in the preaching.

In reading Rev. Pronk's position one could come to the conclusion that the C/ARC approach to preaching must be wrong because the FRC method appears very scriptural. But upon reflection it is difficult to call to mind a C/AR minister who would disagree with Rev. Pronk.

In his position he has dealt accurately with the matter of how it should be, but appears to have a skewed view of how it is in the C/ARC.

Where does he hear (or read) from the C/AR side that the covenant is an "eternal life insurance"? Where is such a concept taught?

As C/ARC's we also adhere to the Heidelberg Catechism in which it is confirmed that "I...belong to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ" and that by His Holy Spirit He "makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him." (LD. 1)

We further adhere to the same Belgic Confession that summarizes the Bible when it says that true faith worked man by the Word and Holy Spirit, "regenerates him and makes him a new man". (Art. 24)

Here we clearly confess with the FRC that salvation is an individual matter that changes people. Faith is indeed heart-felt. And we agree that faith without works is dead. If it can not be seen in how we live, in what we say, or even in how we think, that we are renewed, then we are dead in our sins. In the C/ARC's we don't call this experiential, we call it application. We apply the truth of the text, in its proper context, to the lives of the church members. Our ministers exhort, comfort, admonish, and teach from the pulpits. Now it must be said that there is difference from one minister to another. But, as Rev. Pronk readily admits, the FRC also has excesses in its preaching.

While we must argue with Rev. Pronk about his caricature about the C/AR preaching, it is good to reflect on the message that his argument includes. Is there not among the C/ARC's a sense of automatism? In the practical lives of the members is there always a true application of the truths of Scripture? Particularly in the raising of children it appears that much is left to automatism. They have good Christian parents; go to the Christian school, to catechism, twice to church, study societies, etc. But is there an emphasis on the personal faith? Is there any emphasis on behavior as a result of that which they learn? What causes the lack of respect for others? Why is there sometimes a disdain for staying on the "narrow way"?

Of course, it is sin! But is that something that we have learned to accept? Or are we striving, every day, to live out of the regeneration (rebirth) that Jesus Christ has gained for us?

Rev. Pronk is wrong about what he says about the preaching in the C/ARC. Yet we must heed his warning about the need for the personal application of the truth of Scripture. Our ministers must continue to apply the text, in context, to our daily lives, pointing to our Christian privilege.

And Rev. Pronk and the federation to which he belongs needs also to apply the truth of scripture and seek to experience the communion of saints in the unity of faith as our Saviour has prayed for in John 17.

PdB

A LETTER TO THE EDITORS

In Reformed Polemics of April 15, 1995 is an article entitled Personal Preferences and Pertinent Principles. In connection with that I send along a copy of a letter to the Editor of Clarion Prof. Geertsema would not take it for Clarion - without explanation. Please ... see whether ... (there is) some space for it in R.P. as an addition to your article.

Keep up the good work with your little paper. It is good counter-weight for the too often one-sided articles in Clarion.

Just recently I received Clarion #15-16. July 29/94. We are very thankful for the way in which the authors brought the rich blessings of the Reformation of 1944 to remembrance While reading the

different articles, the thought crossed my mind: To what extent do we as Can. Ref. Churches abide by this heritage, in handing it over to the next generation, and are those who receive this heritage willing to work hard to know and abide by this heritage? (I use the words of Prof. Geertsema in his Editorial).

I am greatly concerned that the spirit of progressive liberalism, as in the days before the Liberation, is gaining ground again. I hear remarks about the Confessions as being historical documents which do not serve the need of the present time. Also about Church History I even heard an office-bearer say: "Do not always talk about the history. That is past."

More and more we can hear that people, in thinking and speaking, fall back to the Kuypenan idea of pluriformity and the idea of the invisible church, as the essential, the real thing. In many more things we see and hear the urge for renewal and in that we see backsliding from that Reformed heritage. Of course it is not necessary to hold onto this heritage because it is old, but if it is proven to be good, then the proposed renewal must be proven to be better.

It strikes me, for instance, that among us the words used in addressing our Covenant God as "Thee and Thou" are frequently replaced by "You". In defense of this practice it is often said: Thee and Thou are old English - we should not be so archaic. Not only common church members, but even office-bearers and ministers are going over to that kind of word use and defend it this way. But why does it matter if it is old English? Do we show our reverence to our God better with "You"? I will mention a few Scripture passages. To avoid the risk of taking too much space, the interested reader can look them up for him/her-self. See Ps.34:7, 9; and Ps.145:19. Fear is not used here in the sense of afraid or scared, but as revere (or the Dutch: eerbied). See also Ps.34:3, "Magnify and exalt His Name" and Ps.34:18, "The Lord is near to the broken hearted and the crushed in spirit." These broken hearted come to the Heavenly throne in humbleness and speak according to the Spirit, Rom.8:26; and not according to human science. Through Malachi the Lord says: "If I am a Father, where is my honour?" Mal.1:6. That teaches us that we should honour our Father in our whole life, in our work, and in our prayer as well. We live in a time that the Name of our God is despised more and more. God is even addressed as "mother". Shall we then not work hard to teach our children to revere our God? Teach them how rich we are that we may call Him our Father? If godless people go by their science and in haughtiness revere themselves instead of God, we shall not adjust to that, but rather choose to be called archaic. Jesus Christ, Himself, has taught us to address His Father: Our Father Who art in Heaven. That is a distinct place. He is there on His heavenly throne. The Father's name is bound to the name of the Son, and to Christ is inseparably bound the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the New Testament Church. We may say 'Father' through the redemptive work of the Son, Jesus Christ. On page 599 of the Book of Praise the Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper provides more encouragement to Hallow the Name of our Father" that is, to pray with respect. Also compare Ps.8 and Ps.29. I urge all and everyone to stay away from this kind of renewal, for whenever this type of renewal begins it is hard to stop.

It is remarkable that those who push for a host of changes in all areas of church life (Dr. de Jong in Clarion, pg 359) often have arguments ready. They will argue that the change is for the glory and reverence of the Lord. Often such people come before the Lord in the worship services in clothing that would close many doors or restaurants for them.

Again! Let us be thankful for the great gift which the Lord bestows on us. Not only in the Liberation of 1944, but in all things. And let us show our reverence, for about many of the present day “renewals” we must say, “you did not so learn Christ” (Eph.4:20).

Thank you for placing this. W. de Haan, Wardsville, Ont.

CHURCH NEWS

At Classis Pacific of April 18, 1995 the Church of Smithers asked for concurring advise to extend a second call to Rev. Huigen of Fergus, Ont. In their argumentation they read a letter of Rev. Huigen that indicated that he would seriously consider such a call if it was extended to him.

At the same Classis the Church of Abbotsford sought concurring advice in its desire to extend a second call to Rev. R. Schouten of Calgary, Alberta. They included a letter from Rev. Schouten that indicated that, barring a catastrophic occurrence in Calgary, he would accept a second call if it was extended.

In both cases Classis gave concurring advice. Since then Rev. Schouten has been called and he has accepted the call to the Church at Abbotsford, B.C.

LISTEN AT YOUR OWN RISK

Is music warping into moral melt down?

Lyrics promoting masturbation, rape, suicide, and murder are frequently passed off as legitimate music and it’s getting tougher to be a parent of teenagers. Just ask JoAnne Whitteker and Helen Bissonette.

They said that they aren’t church-goers or radicals. In fact, they happen to be liberal in outlook - but they’re ticked off about what is being sold to unsuspecting parents and teens.

The two Abbotsford mothers thought they were doing their kids a favor by buying them cassettes by the popular group Green Day, for example.

“We thought they were legitimate stars. They had the fifth top-selling album in the U.S. - they sold four million copies - and they’ve been ‘nominated for four Grammys,’” Bissonette said.

No parental advisories warned them of the content. They were about to be educated on the laissez aller lyrics of the ‘90s. It wasn’t a pleasant lesson.

(Some of the lyrics follow - not printable in our paper - Pdb)

What particularly galled these two neighbors is that there was no warning label, nothing to indicate that this was objectionable material.

“Most parents don’t realize what’s on these tapes - the kids don’t need to hear that” Bissonette said.

It was also annoying to find one song that wasn't included on the jacket label. Heavy breathing and panting accompanied the warped music. The lyrics alluded to masturbation and it ended with a sound like the "pop" of a champagne bottle.

"Sneaking a song like that is so hidden, so subterfuge" Whitteker said.

But it's going over the limit when songs portray sex in a sordid and vulgar way, she said. "This whole experience has been an eye-opener" Lead singer Ice T and Body Count are another example of a group writing depraved lyrics, murderous words sprinkled liberally with profanities.

An example from the song Last Breath (is also not fit to be published -PdB). "What really irks me is that as a parent you look at the Billboard list and you buy a CD for a birthday or a Christmas present - and you have no idea what you're contributing to" Whitteker said.

They believe tapes like these should have warning labels or should not be sold to teens younger than 18. "Afterall, I wouldn't go out and buy a pornographic video" Whitteker said. "And if these tapes aren't banned, at least rate them and warn people about them".

Since Whitteker complained, warning stickers are appearing on some of the tapes. It's the record company's responsibility to post warning labels, said Chelsea Noble, Music World manager in Clearbrook.

"If a consumer complains about a tape that didn't have a warning label Music World will exchange it, she said.

Dave Brian of MCA Records, told The News that labels are put on tapes solely at the discretion of the record company, normally to identify foul language.

Some concern has been expressed about moral standards and what is being played on the radio, Brian said.

"Record companies are sensitive to their public image and will be flexible to valid pressure from consumers," he said.

"I can't fathom any parent not taking issue with lyrics that desensitize young people and plant seeds for deviant behaviour" said Kari Simpson, Citizen's Research Institute, a non-profit, non-partisan organization seeking legislative changes.

She's not afraid of "censorship" In fact Simpson would welcome it. Lyrics laced with profanity and suggestions to behave violently will surely produce negative behaviour, Simpson said.

"With juvenile sex crime rates skyrocketing and violence against women increasing, it's obvious that we have to get to the root cause" she said.

Professionals note that advertising propaganda strongly affects the public's buying patterns. Why wouldn't they see the effect that music has on young people? Simpson asks "The time has come to have a rating system for records just like we do for movies, because it's not only in the interest of our children, but in the interest of society, as well" [BY TRUDY BEYAK. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION FROM THE ABBOTSFORD NEWS]

COMMENT

How is this different from what happens in some homes of Church members? Do parents always know what is being listened to by their teenage children? Do the teenagers have sufficient discretion in purchasing?

How does our Christian application of Scriptural truths affect the music and songs our children and parents choose?

When we hear charges of automatism against the church we should not be afraid to look in the mirror to see if there is some truth to these accusations.

When we read an article such as the foregoing we can conclude many things. For example, we should be more vigilant in the efforts to censure such material. We can also learn that we should be more active in evangelizing to those who buy and sell such material. These are laudable things to learn but, perhaps it is more necessary firstly to be warned about the affect this type of material may be having in our homes and in the Church

PdB

BEZA and the OPC

Around 1950 there was a correspondence going on between Prof. K. Schilder and Prof. H. Hoeksema of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

This was as a result of the question: to what federation of churches should immigrants, members of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, go when they arrived in North America. Prof. Schilder maintained that the Protestant Reformed Churches were, in fact, the legal continuation of the Christian Reformed Church. His main argument was that this federation had, as it only forms, the same three forms of unity as the Reformed Church in Holland always had.

But then the Brief Declaration of Principles was born in the Protestant Reformed Churches, and this changed the whole picture. Prof. Schilder wrote extensively about it in "de Reformatie". These articles appeared later in a booklet with the title "Supra-Scriptural binding - a new danger".

It is important to note that the doctrine of the covenant and the conditions in the covenant of grace were the main issues. Prof. Hoeksema denied the conditions in the covenant, while Prof. Schilder defended their existence. There is even more at stake, i.e. with whom did God establish His covenant, and who is the head of the covenant of grace, etc.

Unfortunately the Declaration of Principles closed the door to the Protestant Reformed Churches to reformed immigrants. This was very difficult for Prof. Schilder to digest. He had expected so much from this relationship. He continued struggling to correct the problem and was saddened that this matter could have arisen in the Protestant Reformed Churches.

In his defense of Scripture and the confessional vision of the covenant Prof. Schilder quoted several times from the theologian Beza as proof for the truth that the covenant consists of two parts, promise and demand.

Beza was born in 1519 and died in 1605. He was not only a disciple of John Calvin, but also his successor after Calvin died. Repeatedly Prof. Schilder would ask Prof. Hoeksema “Would Beza be acceptable in the Protestant Reformed Churches?” adding, “He would be welcome with us” or “I would advise that he be accepted”. Finally it was obvious that he (Beza) would have been shown the door, when the synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches accepted the Declaration of Principles. Prof. Schilder made it very clear that he never would have been able to submit to the Declaration of Principles and his advice to reformed emigrants was accordingly.

But what has Beza to do with the OPC?

What would happen to Beza if he would knock on the OPC door? Let me quote a few lines from “The History of the Controversy of Blue Bell” by Kenneth Kok, page 6. “I was examined for two hours on the floor of the Presbytery of Philadelphia. I was asked if I would give Billy Graham the Lord’s Supper? I said that I found Billy Graham to be an Armenian Baptist, Dispensationalist, and I could not give him the Lord’s Supper. I was asked if the door of the church shouldn’t be as wide as the gates of heaven. I said, I don’t know how wide the gates of heaven are, I haven’t been told. And so it went. And I was asked about the doctrine of the covenant. Did I believe that there were conditions in the covenant? And I said that the Lord said to Abraham, “walk before Me and be blameless” so it seemed to me that there were conditions in the covenant.”

At any rate, at the end of two hours the vote was taken and candidate Kok was turned down by a vote of 19 to 2. This is only one example. More could be said about these matters as they relate to the Hofford case or what happened to Dr. N. Shephard, not to mention the Denver situation.

Maybe candidate Kok could have expected what happened.

Sorry, my conclusion must be: Doesn’t the Larger Catechism read “With whom was the covenant of grace made? The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam and in Him with all the elect as His seed.” Here there is no place for conditions. More and more I am confirmed in the opinion that the divergences should be thoroughly discussed before offering a closer relationship. We should know where we are. And the warnings are sent from people who know the situation in the OPC. They should not be shrugged off in the way Prof. Van Dam is doing it in Clarion. Things are too serious and should not be dealt with in a superficial way as Dr. Van Dam does, or Rev. Kampen, or Bart Bikker in his reaction to Br. Van Assen’s letter to the editor in Clarion.

No place for Beza in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

T. van Laar

CLASSIS PACIFIC

Classis Pacific of April 18 had to deal with the matter of contact with other “reformed” congregations. This matter was first on the Agenda via the Okanagan Accord introduced by the Church at Vernon, BC. |

This Accord recognized the Orthodox Reformed Church of Kelowna as a true church and sought to commence pulpit exchanges, accept one another’s attestations, and invite members of each others congregations to join in the Lord’s Supper.

Classis decided to:

- 1) Appoint a committee to a) investigate and study the request of the Church at Vernon b) serve next Classis '95 with a detailed report c) take up contact with the Deputies for Ecclesiastical Unity and to take into account the decisions of Gen. Synod in these matters.
- 2) Request the Church at Vernon to refrain from pulpit exchange and admission to the Lord's Supper until the Committee's Report has been received and acted upon by Classis Pacific.

Similar oral advice was given to the Churches at Langley and Aldergrove.