

A BURNING ISSUE!

In the past issues of Reformed Polemics we twice dealt with an article by James White in Christian Renewal of Aug/94 titled, "Whatever Happened to the Gospel." ("Brothers and Sisters in Christ?" Nov.26/94, and "An Injudicious Approach", Feb. 18/95.) In his article James White gives his review and response to the document "Evangelicals and Catholics Together." We concluded that "people are not 'one' or in a state of unity when they disagree about the content of faith." Furthermore, "let us also reject any appearance of harmony and unity (that is purchased at the price of truth ... without agreement upon this truth to unify, any efforts at 'working and witnessing together' is meaningless and without purpose. There is no unity with reference to the message we preach to the world..."

That these conclusions will not be readily accepted, even by those who lay claim to being Reformed, should not come as a total surprise. There is ample evidence that also those who do in principle concur with these conclusions often fail to see what implication this has for their everyday life. The issue of abortion and the involvement of many of our church members in the pro-life movement provide us with a clear example of what can happen when we try to combine political expediency with proclaiming the Word. We form alliances wherever we can find them, and anyone who shares our concern for the unborn is suddenly considered to be a 'brother and sister in Christ, regardless of what they believe, or irrespective of their doctrine. Even those who do not believe are invited to join the fight against the evil of abortion. Simply put, the goal justifies the means. Saving lives becomes more important than speaking the truth.

In the April 10/95 issue of Christian Renewal there is a letter to the editor by Br. William Schon. In this letter we are asked the rhetorical question, "Why, when Rome is burning, do we discuss who can join the fire brigade? The continuous slaughter of the innocents does not allow us to stand by idly because of irreconcilable differences between Protestants and Catholics." In response to such a question we can first of all say that Br. Schon is absolutely right in saying that we cannot just "stand by idly." As Christians we should be the most outraged at the wholesale slaughter of the unborn. It flies in the face of the most fundamental values revealed in the Word of God. Therefore we can no longer remain complacent or "stand by idly", but we must diligently continue our struggle against abortion. That does not mean that we should let ourselves be worked into a state of panic, but that we take a closer look at the kind of fire we are fighting, and then also use some discretion in the methods we use and the people we choose to assist us.

James White cannot be described as someone who stood by idly. He became actively involved in protesting the murder of unborn children. He joined Operation Rescue in the Phoenix area, and was even engaged in debating abortion rights advocates on local radio stations, and appearing as a representative in the media. He notes that "it is vital for everyone to understand how strongly one can feel about this kind of issue, and how that strong feeling can overshadow every other consideration."

He observed that "it was not long...before I became aware of a real problem,... it was understood by all that everyone involved in the work was to be considered a Christian if indeed they claimed to be

one. On the practical level, this meant that if I were to find myself... with a Roman Catholic it was my duty and obligation to join hands with this person as a fellow believer in Christ, no questions asked. I could not address the issues that separated us. I could not contrast the finished work of Christ, and His free grace, with the Roman concept of the Mass as a propitiatory sacrifice, and the idea of merit. I could not, if convinced of its necessity, share the gospel of grace with this Roman Catholic, for this would amount to a 'division in the ranks' so to speak, and would detract from the focus of the work. This reality quickly drove me from the organization, (Operation Rescue. RD) and helped me to see the very error that has now been enshrined in 'Evangelicals and Catholics Together.'"

"The tragedy of... joining hands with all kinds of other people, many of whom call themselves Christians "...is to be seen in the fact that while seeking to accomplish something that seems good, it abandons the one thing that can, in reality, bring about the very good it seeks. This was the lesson I learned when fighting against the murder of unborn children. While I may wish to bring an immediate stop to this hellish activity, I had to realize that there is only one true long-term solution, only one means by which I as a Christian can overcome the powers of evil that seek to destroy and kill and main. It's not like I had forgotten the truth; it just got buried under strong emotions. The truth is rather simple: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes' (Romans 1:16). It is a verse almost every Christian knows, and yet its truth is so often forgotten. If I want to stop abortion, I must seek to change the hearts of those who would kill little children. How can I change hearts? I can't, but God does, and that by one means, and one means only- the gospel; the gospel of Christ; the gospel of grace. That is the gospel that speaks of God's holiness. His wrath and His love demonstrated in the cross of Christ... That is how I can see hearts changed. 'But that takes time!' we are told. 'And we don't have that kind of time!' Such is not, however, a statement of faith, but of disbelief. God saves, in His time, in His way. I have to accept His will in these matters, if I am faithful to the Scriptural witness."

When we join hands with all kinds of other Christians, to provide a basis for a common front against the evils of our age, then we do away with the single means by which those goals can be obtained: the Gospel. We may recognize the power of the emotions evoked by abortion, and other evils; but if we wish to honour and love God, we cannot allow our sentiments to overthrow Biblical truth.

Charles A. McIlhenny echoes these sentiments in an article titled, "Does Being a Protestant Make a Difference in the Pro-Life Debate?"(Christian Renewal, Feb.20/95) He describes his contact and discussions with Roman Catholics as "a beautiful opportunity to refresh my own mind about the biblical doctrine of 'justification by faith alone' versus the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification by good deeds." He writes, "In the back of my mind I had known that sooner or later I'd have to make a choice whether to keep my evangelical Protestant witness clear and uncompromised, or to be swallowed up in the cesspool of ecumenism. And I knew that that would cost me acceptance in the battle to save the unborn."

"The practical implications, as well as the doctrinal significance, of Paul's defense of the purity of the gospel presented in Galatians have been of great encouragement. Paul's rebuke of Peter was not merely a doctrinal dispute, but a practical difference of conduct between believers and

perverters of the gospel... As Christians we can do nothing less than fight for the unborn on the ground of the grace of God in Christ - that free grace - that free and imputed righteousness from Christ alone. We cannot fight in the Spirit with a compromised gospel. Romans 10:1-2 clearly condemn such zeal without knowledge."

McIlhenny continues with the statement, "I've seen too many well-meaning evangelicals protest abortion while ignoring the profound difference between the works-righteousness of Roman Catholics and the sola fide of historic Protestantism: For the sake of the unborn, for the sake of the mother, for the sake of a just society, etc. - but not distinctly for the sake of Christ's righteousness received by faith alone... That to me is the focal issue in the pro-life stand against abortion. Unless we protest for Christ's sake and for the sake of the gospel, it profits nothing. For to save mother and child in this life, while carelessly disregarding their need to hear the message of forgiveness in Christ for the next life, is futile. Will they, in fact, miss eternal life because we've compromised the message of the gospel in our pro-life protesting?"

McIlhenny sums it all up when he states that "the only hope for the pro-life movement is not compromise, but in the distinctive message of the grace of God in Christ alone." We are not protesting against abortion and defending the unborn as an end in itself. "As Christians, our goal is to save the unborn child in the name of and for the cause of Christ and His kingdom. Unless we get that straight in the first place, there is really no reason to oppose abortion at all."

Shall we "stand by idly" while Rome is burning? Certainly not! We can wholeheartedly agree with Br. Schon that we must diligently continue the struggle against abortion. Shall we discuss who can join the fire brigade and how we are going to fight the ever consuming fire of abortion? In view of the comments made by James White and Charles McIlhenny, that is not only remarkably prudent, but also absolutely necessary.

Ron Dykstra

SYNOD 1995 ABBOTSFORD

The delegates arrived at Synod with a four inch binder full of material. Upon arrival another four inches greeted them. After sifting through it all the agenda was put together on five pages, single spaced.

Before Synod was opened the delegates, members of the Abbotsford congregation, and many from the surrounding Fraser Valley attended a prayer service at 8:00 PM Monday, May 8 in the Abbotsford church building. During this service our heavenly Father was asked for guidance over the work of Synod.

The chairman of the previous Synod, Rev. J. Visscher, led the service. He chose as text John 110:14-16. From this text he elicited the theme:

The Good Shepherd cares for His catholic sheep. This care is reflected in His (a) knowledge about them, (b) sacrifice for them, and (c) gathering of them.

After the service a social hour was held in the church annex. It was an opportunity to greet the delegates from far and to renew acquaintances.

The following day Rev. M. VanderWel, minister emeritus of the convening church of Abbotsford welcomed the delegates as they met together for the first time. He asked them and the audience to sing Psalm 123. After reading Micah 6:1-8 he stressed the words of verse eight: "He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

After his remarks the assembly sang Psalm 25: 2, 6. At 10:12 Rev. VanderWel declared Synod constituted.

All the primary delegates were present. The first order of business was to elect a moderamen.

Following convention the chairman was selected from the east, as the previous chairman had been from the west. The result was as follows:

Chairman: Rev. de Gelder

Vice Chairman: Rev. Aasman

1st Clerk: Rev. Agema

2nd Clerk: Rev. Visscher

The moderamen proceeded to assemble all the submissions to come with a final agenda. The balance of the first day and likely much of the second was taken up in reading the latest submissions.

At least two submissions suggested that synod change to the method of decision making and reporting that is being used in the Netherlands and Australia. Very early on Synod Abbotsford decided to maintain the Canadian practice of Observations, Considerations, and Recommendations.

To deal with the number of issues on the agenda Synod decided to break up into four advisory study committees who would each propose Observations, Considerations and Recommendations about assigned agenda points. The arrangement is as follows:

Committee 1.

Rev. E. Kampen (convener), Rev. J. De Gelder, elder L. Stam, and elder G. VanWoudenberg.
Agenda items: OPC, Finances, Misc.

Committee 2.

Rev. J. D. Wielenga, Rev. R. Aasman, elder G. J. Nordeman, and elder I. Veurink.
Agenda items: Bible translations, Free Reformed Churches, Women's voting, Divorce/Remarriage, and Theological College

Committee 3.

Rev. W. Den Hollander, Rev. D. Agema, elder F. Ruggi, and elder T. van Popta
Agenda items: Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad, Denver, ICRC, and a personal appeal.

Committee 4.

Rev. P. Feenstra, Rev. J. Visscher, elder H. Berends, and elder J.Boot.

Agenda items: Procedures for admitting new churches to the federation (should R.S. deputies be at Classis), Deputies for the promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity, ERQ, Book of Praise, and personal appeals.

CHURCH NEWS

Rev. J. Huijgen of Fergus, Ontario has accepted the call extended to him by the Church at Smithers, B.C.

Rev. W. M. Wielenga of the Lynden, Washington has declined the call extended to him by the Church at West Albany, Australia.

SOME COMMENTS ABOUT EVENTS AT THE FIRST DAYS OF SYNOD

The first evening plenary session for debate and discussion of Synod 1995 was opened at 7:00 PM May 11, 1995. The floor was immediately given to Rev. de Jager from the Netherlands, who, along with Rev. VanVeen had been delegated to visit our Synod. They had been at Synod since Monday and had joined in some of the discussions at the advisory committee level. They would leave the next day (Friday) for the US.

In his speech Rev. de Jager remembered the Liberation of 1944 (Church) and 1945 (Nation) and noted that both affected and involved Canada.

He indicated that the Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad in Holland had a broader mandate than the Canadian one. Often the Dutch churches receive pleas for help from churches in India, Brazil, Zaire and other places. This, in part, explains why they are so involved with churches around the globe.

He mentioned the IRTC (an International Reformed Training Centre) where ministers from around the world come for training. The Dutch mission work is also changing. They often send workers and professors to help people in other countries help themselves.

Contact with their sister church, the RCUS, is flourishing. Contact with the OPC is growing, but they are interested in the discussions the Canadian/American Reformed Churches are having with the OPC. The decisions Synod Abbotsford are eagerly anticipated regarding this contact, as it will have an affect on the discussions they have with the OPC.

Rev. de Jager expressed the hope that the universities in Belfast, Edinburgh, Hamilton and Kampen would grow in cooperation.

Rev. de Jager stated that there was gratitude for the visit of our delegates to Australia. He also expressed appreciation for the appointment of Deputies for Ecclesiastical Unity by Synod 1992.

In a general overview of the Dutch churches Rev. de Jager indicated that the defense of the doctrine was in tack but that spiritual life was an area of concern. He reminded the assembly that by preaching only the doctrine, personal life-style did not always change like it should. He expressed the need for balance. He said, "We have learned to speak about prayer, but have we learned to pray? We have learned a lot about sin, but have we learned to confess sin to God and to our neighbour?" There needs to be a better balance between doctrine and life, in order to remain truly Reformed.

Rev. de Gelder responded to the speech by acknowledging the struggle to remain faithful in a secularizing world. He sent greetings to the Dutch churches on behalf of Synod and showed appreciation for the fact that Holland takes into account the vulnerable situation we face in our discussions with the OPC.

The advisory committee's proposal regarding contact with the sister churches in Holland and Australia were unanimously adopted. In connection with Holland some discussion was held about their decision to permit the reading elder to raise his hands in proclaiming the blessing. It was felt that this could have some impact on the difference between the office of minister and elder. The standing committee will enquire.

With regard to Australia the standing committee will be asked to solicit the reasons why their rules for contact remain different from ours.

The church of Grand Valley had a submission regarding the deacons in the consistory. This proposed change would necessitate changes to the Church Order. The same was the case with overtures from the church at Toronto and br. Lindhout. They sought changes to ensure that not the same delegates would be at Synod that were at Reg. Synod. In all these cases it was decided that such changes should first be dealt with at the minor assemblies so that the churches would be aware of them. Plenary session of May 12 dealt with the Book of Praise. The proposed new translation of the Nicene Creed and an alternate melody for the Hymn 1A was the main topics for discussion. It was decided to send the discussion back to the committee.