

REVIEW AND PREVIEW

This is the final issue of Volume One of Reformed Polemics. At the end of our first year it is good to review the past and to take a look ahead.

In our first issue of Oct 15, 1994 we noted that polemic theology has as its object the refutation of errors and that “if someone cares about those who are going on ways of falsehood...he will wage a battle for their minds.” We stated that “just when so many are afraid of debating the issues for fear of antagonizing others, we believe it is imperative that the issues are raised and discussed.”

In reading over the last eighteen issues we may note with gratitude to our heavenly Father that we were able to provide our readers with articles on a variety of current issues. We hope and pray that they were beneficial in supplying the armour of faith that God’s people need in spiritual warfare. We strive to have all our arguments based on God’s Word and to acquaint ourselves and our readers with God’s Word so that it will be the only guide as we make our way through the maze of this sinful world.

Such an endeavour requires study. Many years ago John Calvin argued with those who attempted to defend the Roman church against the Reformers by saying, “Judge for yourself, if your assertion, that the church fathers oppose us, is not too bold. You must admit that you have barely seen the bindings of their books. If only you would have paged through them, then you would have wisely remained silent.” Surely many of us stand accused by these words of Calvin. Also when we review the first year of Reformed Polemics we realize our shortcomings in this regard. At the same time we express our sincere gratitude to those who have contributed by indeed studying a variety of issues and providing us with insight and direction.

We also wish to thank our readership for the enthusiastic support we have received. Time constraints have prevented us from promoting our paper. Yet subscriptions have continued to stream in. We are humbled and gratified by this development.

The newness of this endeavour, inexperience with advancing technology, and the ever-present time constraints have led to an eclectic layout of our paper. For this we apologize and ask for your patience. Help is on the way. We have received some input and offers to assist. During the summer break we look forward to developing these areas.

From the above you will have gathered that we plan a Volume Two. The response of readers, their increase in number, as well as the continuing developments in and around the Church compel us to persevere.

Increasingly the antithesis between humanism and true Christianity becomes apparent. But there remain many places where it is still hidden. We continue to see a task in exposing and discussing attempts to ignore or hide this chasm. Often God’s Word is used to say what it does not mean. People speak of gray areas that should allow us to pursue the pleasant general principle of ecumenism. In this way the antithesis gives way to synthesis. A frequently used text for this type of ecumenism is John 17:21-23. There the Lord Jesus prays to the Father that all those who are His may be one; all those who are not of the world but who are sanctified through the truth. Many do

not add the rest of the text where Jesus adds, “even as we are one.” What is being prayed for here is not a compromise unity but a unity that reflects the Trinity. Such a unity is based on the thesis of God’s Word. It does not allow for a synthesizing of thesis, but a recognition of an antithesis with all that is not in accordance with God’s Word.

The ecumenical movement receives momentum from another strain of thinking that believes that the Church may not be stagnant but must progress. “The modern philosophy of life puts great emphasis on humanity. In historical and especially revolutionary movements which occur or that are deemed necessary for the advancement of humanity, human ethics place everything in the hands of man himself, based on a secularized natural right to renew (read: attack) existing structures.” (Dr. C. Vander Waal in *The Covenant Gospels*) This includes the feeling that many of the practices of the church are outdated, boring, etc. The music is old, the psalms are not modern, the liturgy is too staid, the outreach is insufficient, the joy is missing, the sermons are too long, the people are not pleasant, etc and etc. The statement can be heard, “we should not live in history but we should make history.”

Here we come across a restlessness that demonstrates a lack of the peace of Christ. Here we come into danger of transgressing one of the final stipulations of God’s Word. “If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things written which are written in this book.” Rev.22:18b-19.

There is dissatisfaction with the way things have been. But is this unhappiness based on a demand from God’s Word to change or is it unhappiness based on our human inclinations and desires. Are we worshipping God the way he demands it of us in His Word or are we doing it according to human design? And what about that outreach? Why must it be done? How must it be done? What is its goal, its purpose? These are questions that must be answered in light of God’s Word before we propose changes and progress.

Our Father teaches us by history. He does so in His holy Word when he depicts “for us the history of His people Israel. He also does so by reminding us of the struggles of His Church in the Confessions that were established as antithesis to the wrong teachings in the past. “After the church reformation of 1544, when the group that truly loved the Reformed confessions was chased out in a blind spirit of self-assertion, that spirit led the churches to an accelerated decline:....Anyone who lets go of the confessions of the churches is liable to wind up anywhere and renders himself vulnerable, just as a fortress without walls lies open before any enemy who may attack. History is very instructive here. (Rudolf van Reest in *Schilder’s Struggle for the Unity of the Church*. pg 39).

In the year ahead we wish to continue in Schilder’s struggle, being instructed by history - above all being led by God’s Word in the light of truth.” PdB

The History of Reformed and Presbyterian Contact?

No, this article is not meant to give a long history of Reformed and Presbyterian contact. It is an appeal to all those informed about such contact to please publish it. In his letter to the editors of Reformed Polemics of March 18, 1995, Rev. J. van Popta stresses that there has been such ongoing contact and acceptance of the Westminster Standards. He writes: "If we reject the Westminster Standards we must admit that we stand in judgment of our fathers. We must be willing to say that for 350 years the Reformed church of our fathers has been wrong." He also writes that "This was the position of the Reformed Church, the Session Churches, the Union Churches, and the Vrijgemaakte Churches." It is not only from Rev. van Popta that I have heard this, but from others as well; but I have not yet seen substantiation for this claim. Yes, I know that there was some loose contact between Reformed and Presbyterian churches and among some of their members, but I am not aware of any official decisions or recognitions until quite recently.

To the best of my knowledge our Dutch sister churches did not officially consider the Westminster Standards to be Reformed and scripturally sound until 1967. Rev. J. van Popta makes our 1965 synod say more than it did because it mandated deputies to look into the differences of the confession and test it ("toetsen") according to God's Word (Acts, 41.IV.2), but regardless, even if our church had officially recognized the Westminster Standard to be Reformed and scripturally sound, this is quite recent, I think.

There is some evidence that the reformed "fathers" had some reservations, to say it in a mild way, about the Westminster Standards. For example, Dr. K. Schilder writes in an article that the Westminster Confession "is by far not reformed in the matter of church doctrine"¹. In a series of articles published in De Reformatie, Prof. L. Doekes first shows that there are many similarities between the Westminster Confession and the Three Forms of Unity but in the last installment he is quite critical of some of its formulations.² Although Ph. Schaff has much to say about the Westminster Confession and how it was modified by presbyterian churches in Europe and America, he is silent about any recognition of this confession among the European Reformed, leaving one with the impression that it was never officially recognized.

Maybe I have overlooked something, but in conclusion, for all those who claim that the Westminster Confessions were recognized by Dutch Reformed Churches please substantiate that claim when seeking to use it as an argument for today. Thanks. Rev. P. K. A. de Boer

1. K.Schilder, De Kerk Vol.111 (Oosterbaan & Le Cointre N.V.1965) pg.364. Literally: "De Westminster Confessie (lang niet gereformeerd inzake de kerkleer), beweert dat somminge..."

2. L.Doekes, "De Westminster Confessie", De Reformatie, Vol. 58, nos. 34-37, June 1983.

Presbyterian Church Government compared to Reformed Church Government

Some time ago, in the March issue of Reformed Polemics, Rev. J. van Popta, in a letter to the editor, pointed out that I had wrongly put in brackets behind the word Erastian "church rule by the elders". This must have been a slip of the pen (or of the mind). He was correct when saying that the

Erastian form of church government is the involvement of the civil government in the government of the church. My humble apologies for any difficulty this error may have caused.

Rev. van Popta then goes on in his letter to insist that the Presbyterians are definitely not Erastian and that historically the Presbyterians have had no greater difficulty with church hierarchy than those of the continent who hold to the Church Order of Dort. First of all, the historic argument does not hold much weight because the problem was that in the 1940's when the Dutch synods became hierarchical, they did not hold to their own Church Order. The problem was not with the Church Order, but the lack of keeping it. However, the Presbyterian form of government lends itself to hierarchy.

Although in my previous article I slipped up by referring to Erastian as rule by elders, real Erastians, that is, those who think the church should be ruled by the civil government, were present at the Westminster assembly.

Ph. Schaff identifies four groups present at tills assembly, namely: Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Independents, and Erastians.¹ It is true that the final form of church government adopted was not Erastian, yet they did have some influence at this assembly. Ph. Schaff says that "The assembly itself owed its existence to an act of Erastianism." My suggestion is that this Erastian influence is shown by the parliamentary approach to church discipline among the Presbyterians.²

My concern in the previous article (to which Rev. van Popta refers) was to show that Presbyterian Church polity lends itself to hierarchy and Rev. van Popta does not disprove that. My article was originally written for the Manitoba Church News and had been published in Reformed Polemics with my permission. After the publication of that article I had the privilege of coming across a republication of William M. Hetherington's History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines³ by which some of the things I wrote were confirmed. One thing that really struck me from this book was that the doctrine of the church was really a big question at this assembly. It was well understood that one's view of the church would also have a bearing on one's approach to church polity. Presbyterian doctrine of the church begins with the reasoning about the "universal church" and this is where its church polity begins as well. This is shown in their Form of Government which in chapter II concerning "The Church" first says that "Jesus Christ, being exalted far above all principalities and power, has erected in this world a kingdom, which is His church"⁴ and then, in section 2, speaks about: "The universal church visible..." which is distinct from the universal church invisible. The question immediately arises whether the office-bearers are office-bearers of the invisible or the visible church. The Westminster Assembly does not come to a clear answer to this question but appears to compromise so that ministers of the Word are not members of a local congregation but of the regional church. They stand above the congregations and the assemblies, only the presbytery is above them. This is different among the (continental) reformed where not distinction is made between the visible and invisible church but the church is recognized to be the actual gathering together of God's people. There the ministers of the Word along with the overseers (elders) are members of the

local congregations (i.e. churches). They are together directly accountable to the Lord. The consistory is therefore the highest assembly and major assemblies are lower.

It was also interesting to read from Hetherington's history that some, not all, of the independents at the Westminster Assembly argued in favour of autonomy for local churches. These men were not independentists by refusing to be joined together as churches, but insisted that the local church is the real gathering of Christ's flock. In their arguments, they referred to the Dutch churches and wanted a comparable form of church government!⁵ All this confirms the suggestion made in my previous article that historically the onus lies with the Presbyterians to prove why it is necessary for them to bypass the (continental) reformed doctrine of the church and its form of church polity. My suggestion is that the Westminster Assembly by-passed the more clear formulation for the doctrine of the church because it was already practicing a form of church pluriformity as proven by the make-up of this assembly, which included all those mentioned earlier in this article.

Actually it is too bad that the Canadian Reformed Churches have not paid more attention to Presbyterian church polity because it especially shows there how the Presbyterian doctrine concerning the church is put into practice.

Rev. P. K. A. de Boer

1. Philip Schaff, *Creeks of Christendom* (Baker Book House 1977) See Vol.1, pp. 731-740

2. This is my suggestion although at this point of time I have no clear substantiation. It would be interesting to study this point more.

3. W.M. Hetherington, *History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (reprinted by Still Waters Revival Books from the third edition of 1856) 1993."

4. It is questionable whether the kingdom of heaven is identical with the church, but that is another matter which is beyond the purpose of this article.

5. See especially Chapter HI of Hethennngton, op.cit.

ILLUMINATION

To "illuminate" means to give light; to light up. It also means "to make clear; explain; elucidate;" or "to inform; instruct; enlighten." We often use the word "illumination" when we speak about the work of the Spirit in guiding us into the truth of the Word of God. In his book "The Glorious Body of Christ," R. B. Kuiper writes about two views of the illumination of the Christian church which represent opposite extremes.

On the one hand, the Roman Catholic Church holds to the view that the church is illuminated to the point of infallibility. It lays claim to an infallible Bible and an infallible church, and therefore to the infallible interpretation of the Bible by the church. Rome actually declares the pope to be infallible in his official pronouncements on matters of faith and morals and holds the church to be divine; it deifies the church. Obviously this position goes far beyond anything taught in the Bible and does violence to the Word of God.

On the other hand, certain Anabaptists stressed the right of private interpretation of the Word of God to the point of practically ruling out the illumination of the church by the Spirit of truth. They fell into the serious error of flippantly brushing aside the historic Christian church's interpretation of the Word of God. They did not have an eye for the illumination of the Christian church by the Spirit of truth.

The Roman Catholic theologians and the spiritual descendants of the Anabaptists are still among us today, and they continue to perpetuate and propagate the same serious errors. When we closely analyze their views, we will see that both of them suffer from extremism. The truth lies between them.

“An elderly church member once said to his youthful pastor: ‘In my study of the Word of God I have a great advantage over you in your study of the Word. You are biased by your knowledge of the church’s creeds; I have no such bias but am led directly by the Holy Spirit.’ That was a highly presumptuous saying. It ignored the significant fact that throughout the centuries the Spirit of God has been leading the church into the truth and that the truly great creeds of Christendom are the products of that guidance.”^(a) By means of its confessions the church guards the Word of God against every wind of doctrine. The confessions, by means of which the church repeats Scripture, keep the church on the scriptural track.

“Jesus’ promise “When he, the Spirit of truth, is come he will guide you into all truth’ (John 16:13) was addressed to the twelve, not as so many individuals, but as the nucleus of His church ... The apostle Paul states that to the church of the old dispensation ‘were committed the oracles of God’ (Rom. 3:2). Likewise the church of the new dispensation is custodian of the Word of God. The same apostle describes ‘the church of the living God’... as ‘the pillar and ground (bulwark) of the truth’ (1 Tim.3:15).”^(b)

God’s truth is preserved in the church, for the church is the dwelling place of God in the Spirit. It is the place where the Holy Spirit manifests itself. The Spirit of truth will continue “to make clear; explain; elucidate;” and “to inform; instruct; enlighten.” The Spirit will continue its work of illumination of the Christian church. “Truth, therefore, is not extinguished in the world, but remains safe, because it has the church as its faithful custodian, by whose work and ministry it is sustained. And if this custody rests in the prophetic and apostolic ministry, it follows that this safekeeping of the truth wholly depends on whether the Word of God is faithfully kept and preserved in its purity.”^(c)

Kuiper notes that “in spite of all the errors that have at different times crept into the church, and in spite of the frequent prevalence of error, the Spirit of truth has never departed from the church, nor will He depart at any time in the future...

In one sense the church of Christ is not infallible. Most assuredly it can err. It has erred grievously in the past. It errs exceedingly grievously today. But in another sense it is infallible. It will never lose the truth. The truth will never perish from the church. As there always has been a body of believers upholding the truth of God, so there always will be. The church of the past was, the church of the present is, the church of the future will be ‘the pillar and ground (bulwark) of the truth.’

In that respect, too, the Christian church is indeed glorious.”^(d)

(a)(b)(d)R.B. Kuiper, The Body of Christ.

(c)Calvin, Institutes #2 p. 1161

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