

BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST?

In Christian Renewal (August 1994, page 10) we find an article entitled “Whatever Happened to the Gospel?” In this article James White gives his review and response to the document “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium.” James White writes that “it may well be the most significant document produced in our generation. The signers represent a broad spectrum of men and women representing numerous denominations and perspectives. It is carefully crafted and written. It addresses weighty and important issues.”

What motivated the authors to write this document? “It seems that the document’s authors feel that the ‘existing divisions’ (between evangelicals and Roman Catholics) are not ‘legitimate’, “(a) “The clear intent of the document is to encourage cooperation between evangelicals and Roman Catholics in the great task of bringing the Gospel to the world...Roman Catholics and Evangelicals are being called to recognize each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.”(b) The document asserts that “all who accept Christ as Lord and Saviour are brothers and sisters in Christ.” This is probably the key affirmation of the document, and everything else hinges upon this statement. “On the basis of common love for Christ, evangelicals and Catholics have to respect each other and work together to bear witness to the world. The underlying message is that so long as people together love Christ, their differences are not relevant to the task of mission, “©

The document does give recognition to the fact that there are “differences and disagreements”, but these become irrelevant when it comes to the task of bringing the Gospel to the world. “No amount of doctrinal differences can do away with the ultimate belief that Evangelicals and Roman Catholics are both Christians, and are both members of the Body of Christ.

Furthermore, the document dances between two very different positions with its affirmation that there is ‘but one church of Christ’... Rome has taught, infallibly, that she, and she alone, is that Church, and that anyone outside of her fellowship is, in fact, outside the fellowship of the one true Church, “(d) “Basically, the signatories (to this document) are saying that Rome and the Evangelical churches are together Church of Christ and working for the same goal. As Reformed people we will have to take a different line. We will say that Rome lacks the marks of the true church of Christ, “(e) and we may well ask some relevant questions: “How can the divergent messages of Rome and of the Reformation be used to gather and preserve the one church? Do they not proclaim different Gospels? Do we not confess that the true preaching of the Gospel is the first mark of the true church, and that we find this mark woefully lacking in the Roman fellowship?”(f) How can we accept the affirmation that Evangelicals and Roman Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ when they don’t have the same message to share with the world? How can they be brothers and sisters in Christ when both sides have to admit that they cannot firmly believe the message that is preached from each others pulpits is true?

The document “Evangelicals and Catholics Together”, demonstrates how far people will go to produce a unity based on something other than the truth of the gospel. Luther refused to be bound by the Roman Catholic church. Having been liberated by the truth of justification by faith he saw clearly that truth must always come first. Everything must be judged by the Word of truth. The

point is that without agreement upon this truth to unify, any effort at “working and witnessing together” is meaningless and without purpose. “There is no unity with reference to the message we preach to the world, and it is pure make-believe to say otherwise, “(g)

People are not “one” or in a state of unity when they disagree about the content of faith. Therefore we cannot recognize each other as brothers and sisters in Christ if there is not a shared faith and a common confession of the truth. How can we call people brothers and sisters in Christ if they belong to churches, sects, denominations, and organizations which are, according to our own confessions, unscriptural in their theology and unsound in their doctrine? Where is then the unity of faith and the common bond with Christ?

As Reformed people we can appreciate James White’s critique of the document “Evangelicals and Catholics Together”. This document gives an appearance of harmony and unity that is purchased at the price of the truth. Yet, also in our Reformed community we can sometimes hear and read statements that closely parallel the sentiments expressed in this document. In “Information”, April 10/93, we read that “irrespective of doctrine, we will have the main thing in common: belief in our Lord and Saviour.” We are also told that if people can positively answer a number of questions they are “fully united with Christ...be they Canadian Reformed, Evangelical, Baptist, Christian Reformed or any other Christ-centered orthodox Bible teaching Christian.”

In the November 5/94 issue of Information we were introduced to “Christians United for Reformation

“(CURE), “an organization made up of confessional Presbyterians, Anglicans, Lutherans, Baptists, and all evangelical Christians who are strongly committed to the theology of the Protestant Reformation.” In a report of a recently held Reformation Rally we are informed that “although the listeners worship the Lord in different church denominations, they felt united by the Word of truth and recognized each other as brothers and sisters.”

The November 19/94 issue of Information presents us with the assertion that “differences concerning the doctrine of infant baptism are important, because all truth is God’s truth, but the absence or presence of this doctrine does not create a different religion.” Also, “where organizational unity is not open to us we need to express unity by loving other Christians, accepting and recognizing them as members of the body of Christ.”

When we examine the aforementioned statements we are left with the distinct impression that there are all kinds of Christians, in all kinds of churches or denominations, with whom other Christians like ourselves may disagree about certain matters, but who are all brothers and sisters in Christ. “Such is the position prevailing today. This position is based upon a failure to understand the nature of the New Testament Church which is ‘the pillar and ground of the truth.’”(h) And the truth must always come first. Who are my brothers and sisters in Christ? Christ himself gave the answer, “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister...” (Mt. 12:50) Let us, in word and deed, manifest our unity as brothers and sisters in Christ with a unanimous and faithful confession of the truth. Let us also reject any appearance of harmony and unity that is purchased at the price of truth.

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- (a)(d)(g)(h) Whatever Happened to the Gospel? James White. Christian Renewal, August 1994)
(b)(c)(e)(f) Evangelical-Roman Catholic Truce? R. Schouten, Clarion, Oct. 7, 1994)

PREACHING: THE HEART OF THE WORSHIP SERVICE

By: Mr.R.H.Dykstra

In discussion with the Orthodox Christian Reformed Church (OCRC) we do well to examine the preaching of God's Holy Word. We need to examine both the method and the content.

Preaching, together with Scripture reading(s), forms the heart of the Reformed worship and as such it is imperative that this be done using the redemptive historical approach rather than the exemplaric method. As such it is to be done in total conformity to Scripture and Confession. The method of preaching, namely the "redemptive historical" should not present any real difficulties in our discussions. Likely, we can all agree that the only proper response to exemplarism is the answer of the Reformed confession of the Scriptures as a unified whole, as the one revelation of redemption, given, as it is, in a historical way.

We need to preach Jesus Christ as Saviour, as chief Prophet and Teacher, as High Priest, and Eternal King. Then members of the congregation will learn about their service as living members of Christ. This will lead to truly christological preaching.

If we agree on this, where might there be a difference? We also need to look at the content of the preaching. To get a better understanding of any differences that may be there we should go back to the Liberation of 1944.

Prior to 1944 we, and our ancestors, who were members of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands were sister churches to the Christian Reformed Church. In the 1940', during World War II, these Reformed churches were in a state of upheaval. This culminated in an ecclesiastical liberation in 1944. It was due to doctrinal and church political matters. Unbiblical teachings about baptism and the covenant were imposed on the churches. The Synods (of Sneek-Utrecht, 1939-1943; and Utrecht, 1943-1945) acted in a hierarchal way.

Surely, many remember something of the struggle between Kuyper and Schilder. Objections were raised against three of Kuyper's teachings; his ideas about justification, regeneration, and baptism.

Kuyper taught the doctrine of justification from eternity. According to him, the believers only need to be aware of the gift of God in their lives, they do not need to pray for true forgiveness, only for the awareness of the forgiveness of their sins.

Regarding regeneration Kuyper considered it to be a seed of new life in man, implanted directly by the Holy Spirit without the means of the preaching of the gospel. This new germ could well lay dormant for years before being awakened by the preaching of the Word of God.

The third of Kuyper's teachings that greatly influenced the Reformed churches, but that was strongly opposed by many, concerned baptism. Kuyper taught that baptism seals the regeneration

that is already present in the child. Baptism presumes the implanted ability to believe, an ability that was given at birth in some mysterious way.

The sermons of those who supported Kuyper's thinking degenerated into dogmatic reflections about the Word instead of being drawn from the Word. Thus the emphasis fell on the subjective element - how am I saved?

The inevitable consequences of Kuyper's misunderstanding of baptism and the covenant was the "hold for" or "consider as" decision made by the Synod of 1905 as it addressed the issue of "presumptive regeneration." This decision made everything uncertain; it removed the ground from underneath the sacrament of baptism and took away the binding power in Scripture's own words about the "promise" and "demands" of the covenant. The result was that everything sank away into the quicksand of subjectivism.

In opposition to such teaching and preaching, Schilder, Greidanus, and Lindeboom, with many others, fought for an interpretation of our confession that was faithful to Scripture. These church reformers, imitating the example of the Saviour Himself, did nothing more than preach in a manner faithful to Scripture, attacked the deformation in the Church, and because of their opposition to the hierarchy of the Synods, were deposed from office.

As a result, on August 11, 1944, hundreds of objectors gathered together in de Hague. It was not a triumphant gathering, for there was great sadness of heart because things had reached this stage. The aim of the Liberation was not to start up something new, but it was, rather, liberation from synodical decisions contrary to God's Word. Those people in de Hague simply wanted to remain Reformed. They wanted to be faithful to God's Word and not to human teachings. They wanted a Reformed church government, not hierarchy. They wanted to abide by the Reformed Confessions and not the ideas of clever professors.

What has all this to do with the preaching? Have these two groups, that separated in 1944, been able to come to terms in the ensuing years? Not at all! In fact they drifted farther apart. Before we assume that no differences exist, it would be prudent to ask if the issues of the 1940's have evaporated or if they still exist. Will ministers in the OCRC and the Can. Ref. Churches preach in the same way about Lord's Day 27? Or are there still differences in how we view baptism, the covenant, and regeneration.

In more recent years deformation has also taken place within the Can. Ref. Churches. We, too, have to struggle to keep the preaching according to Scripture and Confessions. But, when we mutually consider the preaching it is prudent to review the issues that have been in focus in the Christian Reformed Churches, from where the OCRC stems. Do we agree on the matters of creation, women in office, new hermeneutics, homosexuality, the Lord's Supper, the true church? All these have a bearing on the preaching.

In all these issues we must seek the truth. Church reformers are not people who fight for unity, but people who fight for the truth.

The unity that follows is the fruit of their struggle (Schilder's *Struggle for the Unity of the Church*, pg.404). What we are called to do, even to the point of allowing our own blood to be shed, is to keep the Word. And this is where Schilder has set an example for us. "For some, he said, the

discussion of the “Una Sancta” leads to an emphasis on the “Sancta”, on the holiness of the Church, and with a one-sided love they make much of the purity, the spotlessness of Christ’s Church. But others look so exclusively at the “Una”, the unity of the Church, that her holiness recedes to the background and so they try to unify the most heterogeneous elements. May our discussions lead us closer together, may they lead us to “Una Sancta.”