

### **LEARN NOT THE WAY OF THE HEATHEN**

It's that time of the year again! Christmas shopping, Santa Claus, Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer, Frosty the Snowman, Christmas shopping, gifts, lights, decorations, Christmas trees, Christmas carols, Yule logs and mistletoe. Folks enjoy holidays, parties, family get-togethers, dinners, eating, drinking and merry making. The question, "Should we celebrate Christmas?" is still relevant today. "Christmas, for all intents and purposes, has become spiritually bankrupt, much to the displeasure of those for whom Christmas is a deeply religious event. The imperative of gift-giving has all but obliterated Christmas's religious aspect. Santa Claus, not Jesus Christ, is the 'de facto' king of Christmas, "(a)

Some people have suggested that we let Santa reign supreme, and move the observance of Christ's birth to a more appropriate date. Others envision the need to put Christ back into Christmas." They are convinced that we should not let the wrong celebration of Christmas deprive us of the opportunity to commemorate our Saviour's birth soberly, with discretion, and in a way that shows the true joy of Christmas. "The question, 'Should we celebrate Christmas?' has often been answered by Reformed Christians with a sincere and firm NO...Already as early as 1520 Martin Luther expressed his desire that the Christian Church would maintain the Sunday as its only feast day. In Geneva the feast days were abolished under the influence of Farel. John Calvin later expressed agreement with this action."(b) There was firm resistance to the Romish festive calendar with its many holy days. The Reformers removed "Christmas" from their ecclesiastical activities.

In the centuries after the Reformation resistance to celebrating Christmas gradually disappeared. The questionable origin of this celebration, its pagan symbols and its close ' connection to sun worship, did not deter Reformed Christians from once again appropriating December 25<sup>th</sup> as the day to commemorate the birth of the Saviour.

In Article 53 of our Church Order we read, "Each year the Churches shall, in the manner decided upon by the consistory, commemorate the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, as well as His outpouring of the Holy Spirit." Today the important question is no longer, "Should we still celebrate Christmas?" or "Should we move the observance of Christ's birth to a more appropriate date?" Generally speaking we agree that, in addition to our weekly observance of this glorious event, we should also continue to commemorate the birth of our Saviour on Dec. 25<sup>th</sup>.

We can also whole-heartedly subscribe to the thought that our celebration should be truly Christ-centered. We live in the world, but we are not of the world. Therefore our Christmas celebration should be different from that of the world. We will want to show that difference, not just for the sake of being different, but because we are different. As Christians living in the middle of this world, we must develop our own way, a distinctively Christian way, of celebrating Christmas. We cannot avoid being affected by the spirit of the world, but we must resist its commercial hype and secular influence. We do not need bright lights, decorated trees, and expensive gifts in order to experience the true joy of the birth of our Lord and Saviour.

Are we, as some have suggested, “guilty of abandoning one of the last vestiges of Christianity in our modern culture” when we refuse to decorate our homes with the popular paraphernalia which the world uses to create an artificial and superficial atmosphere? Can we show others the real Christ of Christmas when there are no discernable differences between our celebration of this event and that of the secular world? Is it even possible to “put Christ back into Christmas” if we are not willing to purge our celebration of Christ’s birth of its heathen traditions and pagan customs?

How can we possibly reconcile the pagan custom of worshipping trees with our veneration of the True Vine? (John 15:1) In Jeremiah 10 we read, “Thus saith the Lord. Learn not the way of the heathen ...for the customs of the people are vain: for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe. They deck it with silver and with gold: they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not.” (Jer.10:2-4.KJV) Is there perhaps a lesson for us here?

Where is the plausible connection between the heathen worship of the sun of the universe, and our adoration of the Son of God? Is it indeed prudent to employ the pagan symbols of candles and lights to give credence to our Christ-centered celebration of the Light of the World?

Furthermore, what relevance does the arrival of Santa Claus have for our celebration of the coming of Christ into this world? Would it not be wise to separate the giving of gifts to each other from the commemoration of God’s greatest gift of His only begotten Son? Gregory Felton, a freelance writer for the Vancouver Sun presents us with the affirmation that “Christmas is not large enough to accommodate both the moralities of consumerism and Christianity: One of them must give way to the other...It is clear that the spiritual strength of Christmas can only be rediscovered in a contemplative, spiritual environment free from the cacophony of materialist self-indulgence,...the act of perpetuating the Christmas tradition of gift-giving on religious grounds is dubious, “©

Do we need a newspaper columnist to tell us what should be obvious to all of us?

“Should we celebrate Christmas? This question has been asked many times by Christians. The decisive question is how we will celebrate it, not just physically but spiritually. Which Christmas atmosphere do we pass on to our children? The Word of God and the Spirit of Christ must dominate our celebration from beginning to end. Otherwise, before we know it, we have come full circle and are right back at the pagan origin, “(d) “Learn not the way of the heathen.” Do we still dare to be different?

Ron Dykstra

(a)(c)Let’s Leave Christmas to Commercialism, Gregory Felton, Vancouver Sun, Nov.22/89

(b)(d)Should We Celebrate Christmas? Cl. Stam, Reformed Perspective, Dec./89

## CHURCH NEWS

Rev. R. Schouten of the Church at Calgary has received a call from the Church at Smithers, B.C.  
Rev. Cl. Stam has declined the call from the Church at Hamilton, Ont.

Rev. R Aasman has declined the call from the Church at Albany, Australia.

## ASSURANCE OF FAITH

On Saturday, Nov.26 the Free Reformed Church of Abbotsford hosted a Reformed Symposium. It was one of a series that began a number of years ago in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia.

These symposia are open to the public, but specifically to members of the Free Reformed, Canadian Reformed, and Orthodox Christian Reformed churches. The purpose is to discuss a variety of matters that may be seen to separate these churches. The meetings are organized by a Ministerial where the ministers of the aforementioned churches meet on a regular basis to discuss matters of mutual interest and concern.

From among this group a speaker is chosen, who will present the topic from the view held by his church. A minister from each of the other churches responds to the speech with the view from their church.

From these symposia it has become apparent that on all the issues dealt with, no serious differences are held. But at the same time it has become apparent that emphasis varies from church to church. The pattern of the past meetings continued at the Nov.26th meeting. Rev. G. P. Hamstra of the Chilliwack Free Reformed Church spoke on the subject: "Assurance of Faith". He began by giving a historic perspective, showed how the Bible teaches this doctrine, and made some concluding remarks.

In his concluding remarks Rev. Hamstra pointed out that faith in the promises of the gospel is primary for Assurance. At the same time the Christian is called to test his faith and assurance by self-examination. This self-examination is not primary, for then we would run into problems, yet we may not neglect it, for else we may succumb to self-deception. Balance is important. He also noted that Assurance of Faith is the norm for a Christian. Although for many Christians doubt is a reality, it is something that must be fought against; in prayer we must seek the peace of God.

Rev. A. Korvemaker, minister of the Surrey Orthodox Christian Reformed Church responded with appreciation for the words that had been spoken. He emphasized that the Assurance of Faith, although testified by the Holy Spirit to our spirit, must be seen to be worked by the preaching of the Word and the use of the Holy Sacraments.

Rev. C. Van Spronsen also spoke words of appreciation for the presentation and noted that in the Canadian Reformed Church there might be a danger of too much assurance, while with the Free Reformed there might be a lack of assurance at times. He also emphasized that the Spirit works through the Word.

## REACTION

In the question and answer portion of the meeting Rev. Hamstra was asked how the FRC countered subjectivism. He said that there must be balance in the preaching between the promises of God and self-examination.

Rev. Korvemaker responded to a question about the necessity of addressing Christians as well as unbelievers alike to seek God. He said that an overemphasis on the need to come to Christ may lead some to think that they have not yet come to Him. Also here a balance needs to be struck.

To the question of how much agreement there should be before the churches could unite Rev. Hamstra said that it would not be necessary for everyone to agree on everything, yet it appears that we all agree on any of the issues we have addressed in these symposia. He stressed that the local churches should be emphasized. The federations should have less effect. If it was up to die ministers alone there would be union already. But at present unity of others with the FRC would cause disunity in the FRC.

In connection with this matter Rev. C. Van Spronsen addressed the issue of where to go from here. He also agreed that full unity at present would likely lead to dissention. At the same time he felt it was time for some progress. He suggested pulpit exchange, open Lord's Supper table, but at the same time keeping our own identity. This would necessarily be a temporary measure as we must at all times strive for full unity.

## COMMENT

When listening to the several speeches at the past symposia one can hear the frustration of ministers with their fellow church members. As they have had opportunity to discuss frequently and at close quarters with one another they have come to the conclusion that those who have the same confession ought not to be separate. Yet they notice among their members a reluctance to join another federation.

In many cases it is history that gets in the way. Also federative links are an impediment for many. Although one or two FRC churches in the Fraser Valley may be willing to unit with the Can. Ref. they would have to leave their federation to do so. This would mean pointing to fault with the FRC. The other alternative would be to convince the whole FRC to unite with the Can. Ref. This is a very large undertaking that would have very many, seemingly insurmountable, obstacles. The discussions between these two federations in the Netherlands indicate that such a goal is not easily attained.

In the case of the OCRC, it would be wise to review die matters around the Liberation. Not to say we were right and you were wrong, but rather to determine that we are presently on the same side of those issues.

With regard to the matter of temporary pulpit exchange and opening the Lord's Supper table to each other, such moves would indicate unity where there is not yet unity. On the other hand, if, for example, the FRC in Langley wished to withdraw from their federation, join the Can. Ref. classis, but remain a separate congregation, using their own Psalter and liturgy for a time, such a unity could be pursued.

PdB

## **ECCLESIASTIC ASSEMBLIES**

Several ecclesiastic assemblies have been held in the past weeks. Some interesting items occupied the agendas. We would like to pass some of these items on, along with some food for thought.

### ***Classis Ontario North - Dec.9. 1994***

In Ontario the Church at Ottawa asked Classis to support its overture to General Synod, Abbotsford - 1995. The overture would ask Synod to recognize with gratitude that the ERQ is a true church of Jesus Christ and to enter into Ecclesiastical Fellowship under the rules adopted in 1992, and to mandate the Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad to:

- Assist in establishing fruitful communication and mutual assistance between our two church federations.
- To inform the Churches of the relationship with the ERQ.
- To report to General Synod 1998 on this relationship.

After some discussion this request was denied. Yet further discussion took place during which two brothers from the ERQ were given the floor. Both Rev. J.G. Deblois and P. Bedard, who had earlier been given a place at Classis' table, spoke about their urgent desire to be recognized by our federation.

They admitted that women deacons are allowed according to their Church Order and that they do not fence the Lord's Supper table as they would like, but noted that these were issues that they have not yet been able to correct.

They reminded the brothers of the rich heritage of our federation and explained that they had only been in existence for six years.

Included in their plea was the desire to be recognized by a truly reformed federation in order to counter the accusations that they were only a fundamentalist sect.

After some more discussion another vote was taken. It appeared that some of the brothers had been swayed by the words spoken and Classis decided that "The information provided by the Church of Ottawa demonstrates that the l'Eglise Reformee du Quebec can be recognized as a true church of Christ. Therefore, Classis requests Synod 1995 to respond to the request of the l'Eglise Reformee du Quebec by mandating the Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad to intensify and confirm the contact initiated by the Church of Ottawa with a view to enter a relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship.

### ***Regional Synod - West: Dec. 6& 7***

This Synod was confronted with a number of appeals. The first was a matter of discipline and was dealt with in closed session.

The balance of appeals was from the Church at Coaldale against decisions of Classis regarding the Church at Denver.

Firstly Coaldale asked Synod “to judge that Classis AB/MB(C.A.M.) May ‘94 was in error when it maintained the decision of C.A.M., March 1994 to admit the Church at Denver into the federation.”

Synod considered that “While C.A.M. May 1994 acknowledged that C.A.M. March 1994 made a mistake, it is understandable that it did not want to reverse the decision since that would have been unfair to the Church at Denver, which had been given a place in the federation due to the March 1994 decision.” And “The two grounds adduced by Classis May 17 to prove why the acknowledged errors could not be rescinded are inadequate,”

The Recommendation which was adopted reads:

“Regional Synod judges that C.A.B. May 1994 erred in maintaining the decision based on the grounds adduced.”

The second appeal was divided into three sections. The first asked Reg. Synod(R-S) to judge that C.A.M., March ‘94 did injustice to the churches at Coaldale and Taber by declaring their letters inadmissible.

In this matter the adopted Recommendation reads: “Regional Synod judges that the Church at Coaldale did not prove that Classis dealt unjustly in refusing admission to the letters of the Churches at Coaldale and Taber without further grounds.”

The second section asked R.S. to judge that the objections of Coaldale and Taber were erroneously judged by Classis. R.S. adopted the Recommendation: Regional Synod judges that C.A.M. March ‘94 did not deal with the objections made by the churches at Coaldale and Taber.”

In the matter of Classis doing injustice to the decision of R.S.-West, 1993, R.S answered Coaldale by adopting the following Recommendation: “R.S. judges that Coaldale did not prove that classis ignored ‘serious questions raised by R.S.”

The third appeal launched by Coaldale asked R.S. to judge that Classis did injustice to Scripture and Church Order when it accepted the concurring advice of R.S. 1993 to admit the Church at Denver.

R.S. adopted the Recommendation that “R.S. judges that:

1. The Church at Coaldale does not prove C.A.M., March 1993 erred in accepting the concurring advice of R.S. West 1993 by implementing the decisions of Classis Oct. 13 & 14.
2. The Church at Coaldale’s objection to the decision of R.S. West 1993 should be addressed to General Synod.

Finally Coaldale asked R.S to judge that C.A.M. did not properly deal with the matter of Rev. Pollock’s vows before examining him. In this matter R.S. adopted the following Recommendation: R.S. judges that the Church at Coaldale has a legitimate concern that the matter of the vows was not properly resolved by C.A.M., March 1994.

**Classis Alberta/Manitoba - Dec. 20**

In response to a submission from the Presbytery of the Dakotas (POD) in the OPC, and after the decisions of Reg. Synod West, Classis decided to deal with the matter of Rev. Pollock's vows again. Much could be reported about the submission from POD, but it will have to wait till another time. It must suffice to pass on the judgment of Classis regarding this matter.

“Judgment:

1. Not to accede to the call of the POD to repent and apologize in writing as well as by personal representation for the sin of encouraging Mike Pollock to evade the corporate responsibility that he took upon himself when he took the OPC vows that he has now broken.
2. To assure the POD of the OPC that had Rev. Pollock been not merely a candidate for a call in the OPC, but the minister of an OPC congregation, Classis AB/MB would have dealt with the question of his vows and with the admission of the Amer. Ref. Church at Denver quite differently, namely by insisting that the minister and congregation follow due process according to the OPC Form of Government.
3. To send to the stated clerk of the POD this decision with observations and considerations as our understanding of the question of Rev. Pollock's vows.” (from Rev. R.A. Schouten)

***COMMENT***

From the decisions at these various assemblies one soon receives an impression of confusion. At the one end of the country a Classis recognizes that a federation ‘with regulations that give reason for concern’ has the marks of the true church. At the other end of the country churches are actively busy in discrediting the decision to recognize a church that has adopted all the confessional forms and the Church Order that we have. Repeated attempts are made to also discredit the minister of this congregation.

At the federative level we have caused the same confusion. We recognize the Free Church of Scotland and the Presbyterian Church in Korea, but are not able to do the same for the OPC.

It becomes increasingly clear, especially from the decisions of major assemblies, that in the Canadian Reformed Churches there is wide disagreement - a disagreement about what the Church is; a disagreement about the need and method of unity with other federations.

Voices have been raised by members of the OPC about the double standard with which we appear to measure. Warnings of this nature were placed on the table of Synod 1992, but they were ignored. Synod 1995 will have a difficult task to untangle the mess. We express the hope that they have the courage to be honest about the errors of the past.

The Can. Ref. Churches need to come to agreement about what the CHURCH IS according to Scripture. They need to abide by that measuring rod. No compromise! No pluriformity.

PdB