

## **INFANT BAPTISM**

In our last issue Rev. K. Kok reminded us of the fact that the Christian religion does “consist of essential and non-essential doctrines, but that the Word of God is completely essential.

There are, also among us, those who have problems with this type of thinking. Some have expressed the belief that many of the doctrines that separate believers are not of such a nature that we may use them to differentiate between true and false churches.

One doctrine that falls into this category is the teaching and practice of infant baptism. It is felt among such people that this is a true teaching of Scripture but that it is not an essential doctrine for salvation. A person’s salvation does not depend on whether he believes or practices infant baptism.

Two issues come into focus when we have to deal with such thinking. The first is the question about the essential nature of our salvation and the second is the understanding of the doctrine that is being minimized.

### **WHAT IS ESSENTIAL?**

Those who argue that the doctrine of infant baptism is not essential for an individual’s salvation place the emphasis of the essential in the wrong place. It must be remembered that our first task is to glorify God by living our life in obedience to Him. As the apostle Peter teaches us, “Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter. ... Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator.” (1 Peter 4:16 & 19)

When we begin to look at matters from this perspective we place the emphasis on the essential in the correct place. In order to do what is essential we must be obedient to God. We will only be able to do that when we understand what it is that He requires of us. This is revealed to us in His Word. There is nothing in His Word of which He says that it is not as important as the other parts. So we must be obedient to the complete revelation of God - the whole Scriptures.

### **INFANT BAPTISM ESSENTIAL**

A number of years ago Rev. J. Visscher wrote a two-part article in Clarion, entitled “Infant Baptism – Divine Demand or Human Invention?” (Clarion: Vol.36, No 3 and 4, 1987). In it he delves into the thinking behind the insistence of Baptists that infant baptism may not be practiced. He also ably shows the Scriptural basis for this practice.

He correctly points out that the Baptist position places the emphasis on the recipient of baptism rather than on the originator. He says, “To ground the validity of an administration of baptism in something within the recipient is a departure from and a violation of the Soli Deo Gloria of Reformed theology.” (ibid.)

He concludes his extensive article (a good review on this subject) by describing five points we should make about the position of the Anabaptists:

- 1) By excluding the children of believers from baptism it goes contrary to the whole character of God's progressive revelation;
- 2) It caters to individualism and refuses to recognize the Biblical teaching of covenant solidarity;
- 3) It undermines the unity of the Word of God and the people of God by either driving a wedge between circumcision and baptism or else by distorting the meaning of circumcision;
- 4) By implication it makes God a God of the strong, the mature, the able, the adult but places in question whether He is also the God of the very young, the mentally disabled, and all those who can for one reason or other not meet the pre-condition of faith;
- 5) It emphasizes the subjective by making something in man the sole pre-condition for baptism, "(ibid.)"

From this summary it becomes clear that there is more at stake than merely the age at which one receives the sacrament of baptism. Rather, the issue centers around who God is, His covenant, His almighty power and man's total depravity.

Those who would relegate this doctrinal issue to the non-essential must remember that years ago many struggles have been fought about this doctrine. The matter of the place of infants in the covenant was also very important during the Liberation in the Netherlands. It threatens to become an issue again now that the Church has accepted the Westminster Standards as a truly Reformed Confession.

Let us continue to accept the doctrines of Scripture as they have been passed on to us in the Three Forms of Unity, then we will not have to re-examine them time after time. PdB

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER

by: Henry. A. Jansen

Why is prayer important for Christians? It is the most important part of our thankfulness to God (Q & A 116 of the Heidelberg Catechism). An old Latin proverb says "Ora et Labora" meaning "Pray and Work". We must adhere to this important teaching in all circumstances of life. The one cannot go without the other. It is in vain to work without praying and at the same time if we do not do our work faithfully and to the best of our ability, our prayers become idle words. If the Lord does not bless our work, our effort is in vain. When we study for school or society, work on the job, buy a new car or house, do we really pray about them? Do we work and pray? Prayer can become just another custom.

When we ask the Lord for something, do we also *work* towards this goal? Or do we just sit back and expect it to happen? Other times we may think we can do things in our own strength but when it doesn't go well we will resort to prayer. If that is our attitude we have a wrong understanding about prayer.

When we pray we must trust that the Lord, as our Father, hears our prayers and that He will give us all we need according to His wisdom.

That is also how Christ related to His Father. He prayed often. He went alone to the mountains in solitude to pray. He went in order to glorify the Father and to seek strength for what lay ahead.

An intimate relationship between the Lord and the believer is not something that just comes spontaneously from the bottom of the heart, without applying any rules. It must be governed by the law of the Lord and be in accordance with Biblical guide-lines. Prayer is something that has to be learned and exercised. It does not come naturally, just like a child has to learn to talk. The disciples asked Jesus how to pray and He taught them the Lord's Prayer. Not that it is to be used as an "only" prayer, but as an example of how to pray and to show what belongs to a prayer that is pleasing to God's ear. The first and most important thing in our prayers should not be the fulfillment of our desires, but the glory and honour of the Lord.

Prayer is a service of gratitude. A real prayer can only be said by a true believer, by someone who knows that Jesus Christ is his Saviour and God is his Father. In Romans 8:26, Paul says "We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." Christ taught us, and the Spirit continues to teach us to pray like children, with childlike trust in God our Father (Matt. 7).

Parents know what is good for their children, they will give them all they need, but children have to learn that what their parents give them is not always what they ask for. It might be something that is even better for them than what they ask for. So, God also knows what we need much better than we do.

The question may arise why we should pray if the Father knows our every need before we ask Him. In Lord's Day 45 we confess that "God will give His grace and the Holy Spirit only to those who constantly and with heartfelt longing ask Him for these gifts and thank Him for them."

Sometimes our prayers seem to be unanswered even though the Bible says, "Ask and it will be given to you...for everyone who asks receives" (Matth.7:7, 8).

Our prayers are always heard but we have to trust God and believe that He knows and gives us what is good for us. Sometimes our faith is put to the test. We may ask for anything, as long as we do it with the confession "not my will but Thy will be done". We must ask with reverence and not as impatient children who want to have their way and get upset if they don't. We have to learn to accept the will of our heavenly Father.

We should never under-estimate the power of prayers. We talk about others, but do we also pray for them? We are concerned about the many things happening in the world and in the Church, but do we also bring these matters before the Lord? Prayer is not strictly a personal thing. But it is a matter of the communion of saints.

Yet, our prayers should also have a personal aspect. When we confess our sins our prayers can be very personal. And then we should also remember to be specific, for if we are not aware of what our sins are, then the sincerity of our prayer comes into question.

Lord's Day 1 teaches us first to know our sins and misery before we can be thankful for God's deliverance.

When we pray we must do it with our whole heart, realizing to Whom we are speaking. The best place to learn this is at home, in the family. Some parents ask their children to lead in prayer after meals. Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train up a child in the way that he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it." Prayer then becomes natural, as it is supposed to be. There is a saying, "The family that prays together, stays together." A variation to this is "the Christian who prays, stays," that is, perseveres until the end, by God's grace and Spirit.

Our prayers are sacrifices of thanksgiving. For a sacrifice we have to set high standards. At the same time, it has to come from the heart and it has to be in obedience to the Word of God. The Lord has taught us clearly that "to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" (I Sam. 15:22).

### **THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS**

By: Rev. P. K. A. de Boer

It may be good to take a hard look at the Westminster Standards because the previous General Synod has decided to establish sister-church relations with some Churches who maintain these standards. Moreover, it is important to look at these standards in view of our relation with the OPC. There has been some writing about the differences in the Westminster Standards and the Three Forms of unity regarding the doctrine of the church and the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Rev. B.R. Hofford wrote a booklet about it, entitled, Open Communion in the OPC. This booklet was published by DLPB and I highly recommend it. Instead writing about these same matters, let me first say a little about the history of the Westminster Standards.

The Westminster Confession of Faith along with the Larger and Shorter Westminster Catechisms were composed and endorsed by the Westminster Assembly. This assembly was held from July 1, 1643 till February 22, 1649. By way of comparison, the Synod of Dort was held from November 13, 1618-May 9, 1619. You may have heard some say that there were some presbyterian observers present at the Synod of Dort. This is true, but these were not observers who held to the Westminster Standards. These standards did not yet exist. It is not sure whether the Presbyterians subscribed to any standard at this time. It was this Synod of Dort which initiated and insisted on subscription. The Dutch churches did not subscribe to confessional standards until after this synod. It may be asked why the Westminster Assembly did not invite Dutch observers; after all, they had been invited to the Synod of Dort.

The Westminster Confession was first presented to the British Parliament in December 7, 1646, but was not printed for distribution until sometime in 1648 or 1649.

Compared to other confessions that were written during the time of the reformation, it is one of the latest. The Belgic Confession was written in 1516, the Augsburg Confession in 1530, the first Helvetic Confession in 1536, the Heidelberg Catechism was first adopted in 1563 and translated

and published in the Dutch language in 1566, the second Scottish Confession in 1581, the Irish Articles in 1581 and the Canons of Dort in 1619.

The Westminster Assembly was called together by the British parliament for the purpose of establishing unity among the churches of the reformation in England, Scotland and Ireland. Presbyterians from Scotland and Puritans from England and Ireland had a dominant role in this assembly. Men from the Church of England were also invited to participate in this assembly, but because it was convened by parliament without royal approval, those from the Church at England hardly participated. They were prevented from participation by a decree of the king. There were also a small number of independentists at this assembly who had quite an impact by their words.

Ph. Schaff says that the main reason for this assembly was to gain uniformity in church polity. He says that they basically agreed in matters of faith. If this were entirely true, it would seem strange that a confession and not a church order or constitution came from this assembly. To a certain extent the church political differences were recognized to stem from doctrinal differences. For example, questions concerning who is the head of the church and questions about unity and independence. These church political questions are not entirely separable from doctrinal questions.

However, the assembly apparently assumed a certain unity in faith and therefore concentrated on the points of agreement. In this respect the Westminster assembly was quite different from the Synod of Dort. The Synod of Dort was called together for the very purpose of dealing with the Armenian question. It judged the Remonstrant position to be contrary to scripture. It also dealt with the church political consequences of the Remonstrant heresy. Separate from the doctrinal matter, which was dealt with in the Canons of Dort, it also dealt with church political questions by writing the Church Order of Dort and to protect the true Word of God, by writing a Form for Subscription. Unlike the action taken by the Synod of Dort, the actions taken by the Westminster Assembly show more a conciliatory approach.

Initially, the Westminster Assembly tried to revise the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England (1563 and 1571). This attempt was abandoned and a new confession was written. Ph. Schaff shows that the set up of the Westminster Confession runs parallel to the Irish Confession of 1615. This does not mean that the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England were entirely ignored. These articles have an impact on the Westminster Confession. Perhaps the Second Scots Confession of 1581 had even a greater impact. The Scottish Presbyterians had a very strong place at this assembly.

The unity of this assembly lay mostly in agreeing to reject Roman Catholicism, including the authority of the pope, the doctrine of transubstantiation, and indulgences.

It also agreed that the Anabaptist (Baptists) teachings must be rejected concerning infant baptism, and concerning the place of the state. It agreed that the Armenians were unscriptural. The Westminster Confession has a real Calvinist flavour and it did not only borrow from previous English, Scottish and Irish Confessions, but the continental confessions were also

known and were influential-these included the Augsburg Confession, the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort.

All this does not mean that the Westminster Confession is without weaknesses. It was influenced by Puritanism and Presbyterianism and receives a minimal influence from the Church of England (Anglican Church). From the puritan side it receives a more subjective and mystical influence while from the presbyterian side it receives a more structural form. Till this day there seems to be a difference of emphasis among those who adhere to the Westminster Confession for some speak of it as a Presbyterian confession and others, as a Puritan confession.

Concerning church government, there were two opinions:

Episcopalian, (rule by the bishops) Erastian (church ruled by the elders). The assembly consisted mainly of Presbyterians and therefore on the basis of its majority, the presbyterian form of church government gained much weight. However, the presbyterian form of government was not endorsed by parliament. Parliament was convinced that the state should retain rule especially in matters of church discipline. Because the Westminster Assembly did not receive royal approval, the Church of England government remained Episcopalian with an Erastian flavour.

The Presbyterian Church government is not the same as the continental reformed. Both have rejected the Roman Catholic teaching that the pope is the head of the Church. Both the Presbyterians and the Reformed maintain that Christ is the Head of the Church. Christ has established elders, in Greek, presbyters, in the Church as overseers to take care of His flock.

We, who are from the continental Reformed have noticed that the Bible speaks about the church (singular) and also about churches (plural).

For example in 1 Corinthians 11-14 we are told about how certain things must be done in the "church" (singular). In Revelations 1 and it is done in chapters 2-3, different churches (plural) are addressed. Think also of how the letters of the New Testament are usually addressed to an individual church, at Rome, at Corinth, etc. It was in view of how the churches are addressed individually and each church is called to account, that we recognize the autonomy of local churches. We belong to a federation of churches (plural). We call ourselves the Canadian Reformed Churches (plural). Compare this to the presbyterian system. The OPC, for example, is called the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (singular). They do not speak about a federation of churches, but about a "church" singular, or a "denomination". In practice, this means that the local churches are not considered to be held accountable to the Lord for their own deeds. In the Presbyterian system the entire "church" is represented at the General Assembly and part of the church is represented at the sessions. A session is the meeting of elders (with deacons) at the local level. The Presbytery is the meeting of some elders with all the ministers of a certain area. These ministers are members of the Presbytery, but not of the local congregations. They are under the supervision of the Presbytery. It is in this context that a Presbytery can appoint a minister of committee regarding a certain congregation of the church, moreover, the Presbytery deals with many things which we would deal with on the local level, for example, home and foreign missions, youth events and so forth. From the Presbytery it is, to a certain extent, a ruling over the local congregations. There is a certain amount of hierarchy which we have always tried to avoid. This is

what had added to the complications at Blue Bell and Laurel. You may recall that Rev. K. Kok explained some of these things.

Which is the better system of Church government? My convictions are probably evident from what is written here. It is too bad that the Presbyterians did not pay more attention to the scriptural distinction between church singular and plural which is maintained in the continental Reformed Church Order. Are the Presbyterians so wrong in this matter that on account of it they must be said to be unfaithful? The Presbyterians may be faithful in many ways, and who will condemn them on this point alone? That is not the question here. The question is, what kind of church polity is in greater agreement with God's Word and therefore more helpful for the churches? I am convinced that the Reformed system is more scriptural and better. This is said with all humility and also with great thankfulness. Hopefully, you, too, are convinced so that we together may convince the Presbyterians who want to show faithfulness to the Lord that this is the better way to go church politically.

One thing must be added, this may never become a question of "my way" is better than "your way." It must always remain a seeking after the "Lord's way." Do not let anyone undermine or neutralize your conviction which you base on God's Word by those kinds of arguments.

When speaking about the Westminster Assembly and the church political direction it has chosen, it must be noted that it did so knowing full well that the continental Reformed had taken a different course. Some Presbyterians observed the Synod of Dort where the Church Order which we still use today was agreed upon, but the Westminster Assembly decided to go their own way. The Presbyterians were under no obligation to follow the same church political course that had already been taken on the continent, but for the sake of the unity of Christ's church, it sure would have been much better if they had looked more carefully at the continental Reformed system. If necessary, they could have improved on it and adjusted it to their own situation. The point is that historically speaking the onus lay with them, and when they chose a different route, the unity of the church was hindered.

Even though some recognition was given to the Westminster Standards and its church polity on the continent, the Westminster Standards and church polity was never accepted by the Reformed Churches as one of its confessions or as its church polity. Historically, at times some unity was expressed in words, but it has hardly ever been practiced in deeds.