

CARE FOR THE FLOCK

In some congregations many of the annual family visits have already been completed; in others the elders still have many visits to make. But is that all there is to the pastoral care of the flock? In 1 Peter 5:1, 2 we read: "To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers - not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be..." Here the elders are specifically instructed about the general nature of their task. At present the main stream of work by elders consists of consistory meetings and family visits. Now anyone who has had the honour of filling such an office will readily admit that doing these two things well often takes up all the available time outside of the normal work day, family responsibilities, relaxation and contemplation.

Yet, it can be legitimately asked if in this manner the care for the flock is adequately accomplished. In our present circumstances there are often complaints from school staff about the problems children bring along to school. At times rumblings are heard about the perceived need for counselors at school (especially high schools). In addition marital problems are on the upswing. Financial concerns and lack of work often lead to difficulties. Moms working can bring about undisciplined children, grumpy parents and a consequent lack of communication and spiritual growth. Substance abuse is on the increase all around us, and also within the churches. Other forms of abuse are also increasingly being exposed. False doctrines abound in the form of literature, electronic ministries, the neighbours and the classmates at post secondary institutes of learning.

In all these matters ones spirituality can be affected. And when an elder looks at this list of dominating influences on the sheep of the flock he could easily say, "This is too much". How can elders lead and comfort year round on all these matters on a ratio of 1: 65 on a part time basis? Wouldn't it be better if some professionals took over in their relative fields of expertise? For that is the trend today. When children don't receive enough to eat for their lunch the government institutes a hot lunch program for the schools. When both parents want or need to work, the government establishes day care centers for the children. When students display an increased number of problems counselors are hired for the schools. When life's concerns and pressures leads some of God's children into mental depression experts in mental health are sought.

Now some have said this is the way it should be. When you are ill you go to a physician. We agree! But when someone discovers he has cancer, or must have his leg removed, or a baby is to be born, etc, is an office bearer not contacted? Certainly we may and must make use of the knowledge God grants in doctors, counselors, and other experts. But the missing link in many of these circumstances is the care of the shepherds.

Most of what happens to us affects our relationship with our Creator, our Father. Yet, so often, we forget or do not want to involve those whom He has sent to help us. There seems to be an embarrassment about the difficulty or an unwillingness to accept direction and instruction. It

appears that we are more comfortable in treating the symptoms than the cause. We appear to be afraid that the cause for the difficulty may be found to be too close to home.

And if we decide that the elders should become involved we often approach them in the wrong way. They are told the problem and a solution is expected... and it better be to our liking as well. But rather, we should become convinced that when we ask for the guidance of elders we are, in effect, asking for advise from God. And when we do that we must follow the instructions that he has given us. We must first rightly know how great our sin and misery is, then we must recognize that He has sent a solution for it, and finally we may come to a course of action that demonstrates our thankfulness for His solution.

Of course this is the route we must follow for faith, but that includes all of life, not just the theoretical believing in Jesus Christ, but a practical believing that His sacrifice makes a difference in our lives. Jesus grace and mercy makes a difference when we are depressed, when we lack the finances to make ends meet, when students at high school turn to substances to avoid the reality of life, or when they become pregnant outside of marriage. Jesus grace and mercy makes a difference when families no longer communicate, when marriages are breaking up, when sickness strikes..

The elders are instructed to care for the flock, but the flock must also be prepared to be cared for. Sheep ought not to ignore the officers God has appointed to care for them, by fleeing to an expert who will address the symptoms, but not the cause. Rather they should seek God, the Father, and those men who He has set in place to be fellow human contacts about their concerns. And when the cause of the problem has been addressed, when the spiritual well-being of the sheep has been ensured, then the symptoms can also be addressed. When help for that is needed it should be sought. In the same way as we seek a medical physician when we have cancer so we may consult a mental health physician when we are depressed. But let us not neglect the True Physician and His appointed officers.

PdB

LITURGICAL UNITY

The regrettable introduction of the NIV into our church federation as the most superior Bible translation around seems to be bringing with it far more ramifications than just the reading of Scripture in our worship services. Dr. J. de Jong, in the July 14 issue of "Clarion" already expressed his misgivings in an editorial entitled "Which Version Now?" He warned against hastily going along with the proposal of the last general synod. I quote the final passages of his article: "Let us not be hasty in making changes which can damage the uniformity of liturgy and worship and create increased barriers in appropriating the language of the church and the confessions. Considering how long the Authorized Version held sway, there should be no reason for us to be caught up in a state of permanent revision. Should we not strive to continue working with what only recently has been adopted?"

I fully endorse these sensible words of Dr. de Jong. His concerns, however, relate mostly to the texts of the Three Forms of Unity and the liturgical forms in our Book of Praise. It is only recent that the Scriptural quotations listed in the Confessions and Forms been taken from the RSV

Bible. But I believe that there is even more urgent reason for concern about what Dr. de Jong rightly sees as being threatened: 'the uniformity of liturgy and worship'.

At the same time it is worthwhile to note the deplorable fact that the committee on Bible translations and Synod Abbotsford both saw fit to largely ignore the basic deficiencies of the NIV. These were pointed out in Dr. J. van Bruggen's book "The Future of the Bible". To dismiss serious words of warning from such a reputable scholar of Scripture as Dr. Van Bruggen (warnings which he still fully supports) as 'hate literature, as was done by an other member of our Theological College faculty during a congregational meeting in one of our churches in Ontario, is of course an unworthy 'cheap shot'.

The mere fact that Dr. Van Bruggen's book originates from the same publisher as the NASB Bible translation does not make that book 'hate literature', nor does it invalidate the solid arguments against the NIV presented in that book.

But getting back to the concerns of Dr. de Jong about the impact of the NIV on our liturgy and worship, I believe that there is reason for additional concern. In addition to the adoption of the NIV there is apparently another innovation afoot in several congregations within the church federation; namely the introduction of the 'fashionable' habit of addressing the Lord with "You" and "Your" rather than with "Thou" and "Thy". All this is a consequence of the purported urgency to adopt the NIV.

I will confine myself, for now, to the impending usage of "You" in congregational prayer. My first question regards the correctness of decorating the pronoun "you" with the label "vernacular" - as was done in the same Ontario church alluded to earlier - thereby suggesting that by implication "thou" is something like "non-vernacular".

The word "vernacular" seems to express a rather hazy idea, which can apparently mean several things. One of my dictionaries gives the following two descriptions for starters: "1. The standard native language of a country or locality.² The nonstandard or substandard everyday speech of a country or locality" and then follow two more descriptions for good measure. Most dictionaries agree that the original meaning has something to do with 'native' language.

But how 'native' can you get when we start addressing the Lord with 'You' while the Canadian people still find it a proper mode of respect and /or reverence to address both this country and the Lord God with 'Thee' in the Canadian national anthem? It seems to be a 'problem' for some church people to address our heavenly Father with 'Thou/ but this nation seems to have no problem at all to express devotion to a united Canada, as was done recently by many thousands in Montreal and elsewhere, with the words 'O Canada, we stand on guard for THEE' on the occasion of the Quebec referendum. When addressing an entity greater than themselves, namely their 'home and native land' - Canada, the Canadian people obviously still think that it is a proper mode of respect and devotion to this country to use the 'vernacular' ('native') "Thee" rather than 'You'. But don't we address Some-One greater than Canada when we address our God and King in prayer? And should we not at least render the same measure of respect and devotion to Him?

In the second stanza of the national anthem - 'Ruler Supreme' - the same mode of address is used with regard to God. In my mind this only reinforces the urgency of the argument just made.

We also seem to be losing sight of the fact that even in present everyday language (vernacular) also royalty and high officials in the service of the crown, such as mayors and judges, the proper mode of address is never plain 'you' - a mode of address also fitting for children and/or

animals/pets ('hey you') - but always 'your majesty' or 'your highness' or 'your honour' respectively. Should such an example not make us careful to rush into a rash pursuit of a mistaken understanding of what is properly to be understood by 'the vernacular'?

Dr. de Jong, in his Clarion article already paid some attention to the regrettable consequences to be expected from a rash adoption of the NIV for the ongoing use of our beautiful Book of Praise. Apart from the to-be-expected difficulties with confessions and forms, more averse consequences can be experienced in the worship services when the 'man in the pulpit' has begun by addressing the Lord with 'You', while the 'people in the pews' keep addressing the Lord with 'Thou' in their psalms and hymns. And I imagine that this will continue in the foreseeable future, no matter what mode of address emanates from the pulpit.

My question: Does this inconsistent mode of address not turn our worship service into a kind of 'dog's breakfast'? This last expression - being a 'native' or really 'vernacular' Canadian description for 'a strange mixture' according to my dictionary - may sound somewhat impious, but is it not impious when a congregation addresses God in one mode at one moment and at the next moment in another mode? Have we ever considered whether the Lord is going to be pleased with this 'strange mixture' of modes of address? An answer to this last question may be found in God's holy Word itself. There He tells us that the Lord is pleased when His people sing and pray to Him 'with one voice'. (Rom.15:5,6)

I fear that this God-pleasing aspect of 'one-voice' is being lost in our vain search for the 'vernacular'. Should the acceptance of our Book of Praise not also include the acceptance of the mode of address given in that book for our services of worship? Would such an ongoing and inclusive acceptance not also preserve that aspect of 'one voice' along with the aspects of 'steadfastness' and 'togetherness' also mentioned in that Scripture passage? And would that not also preserve the ongoing pleasure rather than a pending displeasure of the Lord, who also 'attends' our services of worship?

Len Van Zandwyk

OTHER NEWS

Reformed Churches of New Zealand Suspend Ties with CRC

The decision of the 1995 Christian Reformed synod to allow classes to ordain women by declaring parts of two church order articles "inoperative" continues to send shock waves through the conservative Reformed community. In early January, the Reformed Churches of New Zealand (RCNZ) officially notified the Christian Reformed denomination that it had voted to suspend ties with the CRC at its triennial synod last October. The RCNZ was largely begun through the efforts of the Christian Reformed and Orthodox Presbyterian ministers in the 1950's, but RCNZ stated clerk Rev. Bruce Hoyt said the CRC decision to ordain women left the denomination with no choice. Synod "really felt there wasn't really too much chance of a conservative move having any chance in the CRC," said Hoyt.

The RCNZ decision, made at the denomination's triennial synod last October, followed closely on the heels of an even stronger decision by the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in

Nederland (Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands or CGKN) to sever fraternal relations with the CRC. Like the CGKN decision, the RCNZ decision was made by large majority - in this case, by a nearly unanimous vote.

While far smaller than either the 294,000-member CRC or the 75,000-member CGKN, the 3200-member RCNZ has maintained much closer relations with the CRC than did the CGKN. Organized in 1953 by Dutch immigrants to New Zealand who had originally joined the local Presbyterians but seceded due to liberalism, the RCNZ heavily relied upon Christian Reformed and Orthodox Presbyterian pastors in its earlier days. The dual connection with Orthodox Presbyterian and Christian Reformed pastors led to one of the RCNZ's unique distinctives: according to Rev. Tom Tyson, editor of the OPC periodical *New Horizons*, former RCNZ minister, and an OPC fraternal delegate to the most recent RCNZ synod, the RCNZ is the only denomination in the world which holds the Presbyterian Westminster Standards and the Dutch Reformed Three Forms of Unity in full and equal standing. The RCNZ currently has 17 churches and three presbyteries. "When our denomination started, we drew heavily upon the CRC, both in using the Psalter Hymnal and in only slightly modifying the CRC church order," said Rev. Bruce Hoyt, stated clerk of the denomination. "We also drew heavily from materials published by the CRC and probably still do, but that's under evaluation."

Despite the closeness of recent ties, Hoyt said the CRC decision to allow the ordination of women left their denomination with no choice - especially because of the provision allowing classes to declare parts of the church order inoperative. "When the 1995 CRC synod occurred and took such a dramatic action and reversed effectively the previous decision [against ordination of women] we had really very little hope, not only because of the strong action but also because the nature of the action indicated that the church order, Scripture, and confessions were not as strong as they had been in the CRC," said Hoyt. "We felt we had very little option. They really felt there wasn't really too much chance of a conservative move having any chance in the CRC." In fact, the decision of the RCNZ synod went beyond the recommendations of its interchurch relations committee, which had produced its report prior to the CRC synod. The original report called for cautious action, citing nearly two pages of problems in the CRC but concluding with a six-point recommendation, among them that synod maintain its fraternal relations with the CRC until 1998, carefully examine the doctrinal beliefs of visiting CRC ministers, and communicate concerns to the CRC in the areas of theistic evolution, denial of Scriptural inerrancy by the editor of the *Banner*, denial of election and reprobation by Rev. Harry Boer, and relations with the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN) and the World Council of Churches (WCC).

The last point indicates an inaccuracy in the RCNZ report: the CRC does not "maintain full ecclesiastical relations" with the GKN or the WCC. The CRC synod limited but did not cut ties with the GKN a number of years ago due to the GKN's tolerance of gay marriages, and is not a member of the WCC although it does send observers to WCC meetings. According to the minutes, the New Zealand synod voted to "suspend formal relations" with the CRC rather than adopt the committee report or completely cut ties. Hoyt said the middle-ground decision was intended to indicate the seriousness of his denomination's concerns about the CRC while avoiding precipitous action. "Suspension means we won't interact like sister churches, yet we're giving a strong warning that our relationship will have to be terminated if there is no change," said Hoyt. "The

reception of ministers wouldn't apply any more and the reception of members automatically would now have to be received on a case by case basis, there wouldn't be an automatic transfer."

Although the option of loaning CRC ministers to New Zealand is clearly over, RCNZ presbyteries would still be able to admit CRC ministers through the normal process for receiving ministers from denominations not in fraternal relations with the RCNZ, Hoyt said. Not surprisingly, Christian Reformed representatives were not overly happy with the RCNZ action. "Since this is the second time now this has happened, it may seem a little strange just to say we're disappointed by it, but that perhaps is the best way to describe it," said CRC General Secretary Dr. David Engelhard. "The fact that it is suspension, not termination, is a bit more courteous than what some other churches have done," said Engelhard. "There's opportunity for dialogue here which I appreciate; at least it's better than what the Christelijke Gereformeerden did by terminating relations immediately." Engelhard noted that the category of "suspension" had been used by the CRC itself in its own fraternal relations with other denominations. "The CRC is still in a suspended relationship with the South African church over the apartheid issue, whether apartheid is a heresy," said Engelhard. "The interchurch relations committee will understand that. We have to deal with them and ask what is it in the statements we have taken that causes concern." Engelhard expressed cautious optimism about the prospects for discussions with the RCNZ. "We have discovered with other churches such as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church where they expressed their regrets and apologies that dialogue can work," said Engelhard.

For Immediate Release

By Darrell Todd Maurina, Press Officer: United Reformed News Service

BELIEVERS WILL NOT PERISH

True Profession

How should we address people? In the manner in which we address people in the preaching must we differentiate between believers and unbelievers? This is a topic of discussion within the church regarding which we surely want to hold on to the address used by the apostles. The congregation of the Lord Christ is addressed in the preaching as: brothers and sisters, beloved of the Lord Jesus Christ, but what about in mission and evangelism? How should we address people? Should they be addressed as future believers and as hardened unbelievers? For some of them are chosen to salvation while the others will unequivocally harden themselves in unbelief.

You don't know anything about that, the Word of God says. The Lord has indeed written the number of the elect in His book, but He has not made it known to us. So what does God require of us? He wants the promise of the gospel preached to all, without distinction (Canons of Dort, Chap 2). For God Himself makes no distinction. With the Lord there is no favoritism, no respect of persons. His gospel is brought to lepers in Surinam, to the impoverished areas of Curitiba, to Mamelodi and Soshanguve. His Word is also preached in the cities and towns of the rich western countries. For all these people, the rich as well as the poor, the prosperous as well as the indigent, the same injunction holds true: repent, and believe in the Christ, the Son of God. The promise is

proclaimed; and God calls people to listen, to obey His Word. He does not merely present Himself and His salvation so that people may positively or negatively respond. The Lord demands! He demands and speaks to the people with Godly authority. Now God's servants, the preachers of the gospel, lay this claim on their hearers. They come upon instruction from the Lord. He sends His servants out into the world. According to God's good pleasure the gospel reaches first one, and then another people. In this way, in accordance with the mission strategy of the kingdom of God, the whole world will be addressed.

Life in Christ

With what message do God's preachers come to the people? They may speak about life, everlasting life, in Christ, the only Saviour. He, the Son of God, has earned life for people when He died on Golgotha, when He gave His life on the cross. The Lord did not only obtain eternal life, but He is also going to distribute it. He is going to ensure that all those for whom salvation is intended will receive it. He does that through His Spirit and Word. The Holy Spirit goes out; He works faith in the hearts of people through the preached Word. And to this great work we are linked by the Holy Spirit. In this matter He has given the Church of Christ a task. She is responsible for the spreading of the gospel in this world. For that reason brothers are called and appointed and, with laying-on of hands, are sent out in the office of preaching - just as it happened with Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13). Because they don't know who the elect are they bring the gospel of life to everyone. They proclaim: Christ has died for sinners! Everyone who, through faith, is brought to Him will be saved. Believe in Christ and you will be saved. Obey the command of Christ. Now this obedience does not come from oneself. One may pray to the Lord for it, and ask God for faith. Ask the Lord, and He will also give what He requires. It is God's command that we believe, is it not? It is also His gift when we actually begin believing.

Death in Own Fault

Important matters are at stake here. The preservation of the world, the rescue of people, created in the image of God, is being fought for. And who remains on the wrong side of that line? Who dares to remain aloof and refuse to listen to God? Still there are people who do, people who choose for unbelief.

They have heard the call of the gospel, but they do not let it affect them. Some of them know the Bible well. They even know how to find texts for their advertising campaigns.

Is such unbelief innocent? May a person choose for himself and refuse the offer of God's salvation because the gospel does not concur with the advantages of earthly life, does not concur with the benefits of the intellectual world, the prosperity of society? The Lord calls people to life, but they suffer eternal regret if they refuse Him. Those who consider the promises of God as worthless and discard them will be lost because of their unbelief. That is your own fault! The gospel is never brought without engagement. People, called by the message of salvation, are thereby given responsibility. Then our unbelief is not an innocent business, not the free choice of a person who doesn't feel like it because he has other interests. Rather such unbelief makes a person guilty before God. Judgment awaits him; the righteous sentence that the Lord declares over all evil

found in man, and especially because of his hardened refusal of Gods rescue. He who refuses to accept Christ as Saviour will one day meet Him as Judge. At the same time we must maintain that our rescue is not earned. Faith is not our doing, but it is a gift from God. It is completely Gods work. To Him, therefore, is all the glory.

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Translated by PdB from Reformanda, Jan.11, 1996