

SYNCRETISM

Recently Dr. James Visscher held a speech in Langley, B.C. entitled “Trends in the Church”. One of the six trends he identified was that of Syncretism. It is remarkable that this trend, so prevalent in the world, can also be seen in the Church.

The term ‘syncretize’ means to attempt to blend or reconcile, as in philosophies. Thus syncretism means the attempt to reconcile or blend various religions. This activity is certainly present in our modern world, but how can it be present in the Church?

In The World

Multiculturalism is not foreign to North Americans. The European has lived with the Indian for a couple of centuries at least. Africans, Asians and other nationalities have reached our shorelines via various means and have assimilated into our society. Although one nationality may have assimilated better than another, most have held on to their own religion. As a result, religious tolerance has been taught and accepted by nearly everyone.

The fruit of such tolerance logically leads to syncretism, but also to antithesis. If we can truly live together in one society and allow the various religions to flourish, it follows quite logically that soon we begin to see either good or evil in these religions. That is why we can notice two opposing trends taking place. On the one hand, we notice a desire to maintain and strengthen the heritage which we brought along and on the other hand we find those who believe that all religions are good and that it doesn’t matter what you believe.

In Canada we find the Indian nation(s) struggling for self-government so that they can live according to their traditions, laws and beliefs. The French in Quebec want their own country or at least sovereignty association. They want to maintain their own language, their own laws, and their own beliefs. In the United States of America the greatest surprise on the political scene is the popularity of Pat Buchanan as presidential candidate; a popularity due mainly to his plat-form of nationalism regarding trade, immigration, etc., as well as his support of Christian values.

At universities and seminaries the trend is the opposite, in most cases. There the syncretic views can be found to flourish. There we hear talk of separation between church and state. The toleration of all religions has grown to mean equal validity amongst all religions. No religion has the right to claim exclusive truth. From such thinkers came the wisdom of ‘the universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man.’ Numerous books have been written that try to explain that all religions are basically the same. That the outward trappings may be different due to cultural influences but that the essence of all religions is the same.

Some have tried to describe this type of thinking by depicting the Church or Religion as a mountain. The peak would depict God and the bottom is where man begins his life. In climbing the mountain one would come ever closer to God. It is clear that the way up the mountain is not

important but that one makes progress toward the top. In essence, if one follows the Islam route, the Roman route, the Voodoo route, or the Scriptural route doesn't much matter.

However, when we examine the religions of the world we soon discover that this model can not be accurate. For many of them are contradictory, thus not leading in the same direction at all. How can Buddhism be true when it denies the existence of a personal God and at the same time Christianity is true when it affirms the existence of a personal God? Can both the Sadducee and the Pharisee be right when they hold opposing views of an afterlife? Can the Islam religion that holds to the killing of infidels be equally right with the Christian religion that teaches the loving of your enemies?

The syncretist must either ignore such differences or consider them insignificant. At this point most syncretists move to reductionism. They begin to reduce the significant distinctives of each religion to maintain religious peace. The same matters that have caused wars and divisions in all of history are quickly reduced to insignificant heritage quirks and people are called to live in peace.

But for those who take their religion seriously, this solution can not be satisfying. Religion deals with weighty matters. It concerns the ultimate destiny of all. Thus many recognize the call for peace brought on by reductionism due to syncretism as a call for peace where there is no peace. It need not surprise us that there is much unrest in numerous quarters as a result of an effort to syncretize.

In The Church

This same trend has also found a foothold in the Church. Although it would be difficult to find anyone in the Canadian/American Reformed or affiliated Churches who would say that Islam and Christianity are in essence the same, there is still an influence of syncretism there that needs to be identified and refuted.

During times of reformation the lines of demarcation are easily distinguished. For a modern example of this we might note how the issues of feminism, creation and hierarchy have cast a demarcation line between Christian and Orthodox Christian Reformed. Similar lines were drawn during the Great Reformation, the Liberation, and numerous other reformations. Each time, as history marched on, these lines became increasingly difficult to distinguish.

Especially in present day North American multiculturalism and increasing globalism, we recognize a similar trend in churches to erase these demarcation lines. Issues that have been important enough to cause generations to separate themselves from those in opposition are being minimized. Increasingly matters of covenant, baptism, church concept, discipline, etc. that have divided Protestants for hundreds of years are being reduced to mere disagreements over matters that can be viewed correctly in various ways. Beyond that Protestants and Roman Catholics who have fought strongly about their differences, who have drawn explicit demarcation lines, are considered two aspects of the same belief.

To be sure, we must not forget the injunction of John 17 where the Head of the Church prays for unity. We may not leave lines of demarcation where they are not approved of by God, but neither may we remove them when God clearly has directed them to be there. Let us remember that John

17 also gives us a clear direction about the type of unity we should eagerly seek - vs. 22 "The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one."

The apostle Paul speaks of these matters when he urges his student, Timothy, "to charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine ... (for they do so) without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions." 1 Tim 1: 3-7.

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There are many practical questions and points for discussion when we touch on the matter of liturgy, but the most important question is: What is our starting point? How do we use the instruction of Scripture when it comes to the service of our Lord?

LITURGY: SERVICE ACCORDING TO THE WORD!

By A. Boersema (taken from Reformanda and translated by P. deBoer)

The manner in which people use Scripture is dependent on the insight of their faith. How does a person view the Bible? Does he know it in faith? Does he read it in the sure knowl-edge whereby he trusts it all as the personal Word of God?

In Reformed theology this element of Lord's Day 7 of the Heidelberg Catechism is an important starting point. For that reason there is also an emphasis on the unity of Scripture, of the Old and New Testament. In all these books we read the Word that has been revealed by our God. He already spoke of the gospel in paradise and by the patriarchs and prophets. This gospel was fulfilled in the only Son of God - this too was taught us by the Lord Himself, and His apostles.

When we read the unity of Scripture in this way - as all these books witness of the Christ (John 5:39) - then that will have certain consequences for our Bible use. The Lord asks us to study Scripture. That is different from the gathering of some loose texts from here and there. This is something that, unfortunately, does happen. Based on a point of view, we would like to defend a position or a new proposal and we pluck a number of texts at random out of the Bible to support our position. Then, under the heading 'Some Scriptural References', we produce a report or brochure containing Bible texts selected to underscore our personal understanding of the problem or our personal position on it. Does such use of God's Word provide a complete message or are we making selective use of it to support our own understanding? This same question must also be presented when the matter of present day liturgy is being discussed within the Reformed Churches.

A variety of reports and notes have been written by liturgically interested church members and ecclesiastical deputies. In these one may find many worthwhile elements, particularly historical ones. Various Scripture references are also mentioned to further illuminate liturgical questions and concepts. Still, the manner of Scripture use does raise a number of questions. I would like to raise a

few of them.

The Song of Praise

In order to become more specific we will select a few examples. First we will look at the matter of singing in turn. We are frequently told that a number of Old Testament texts call for alternate singing, thus it is considered Scriptural to sing in turns. So who would dare to deny a church the right, or even the responsibility to do so?

But on an equally strong basis one could argue that the people of Israel were impoverished by being allowed to sing only when it was their turn. The main input came from the priest, the priest choirs, and the singers and musicians from the Levites. It is not very difficult to pick out these texts and argue that we should arrange our present day services in that manner. But is that progress, or would you then be turning the clock of history back without taking any notice of the progress that came through Christ?

Is sufficient consideration being given to the import of Easter? Now we are all anointed with the Holy Spirit to be active in the 'office of Christian'. That is why, as congregation - young and old together, it is good to praise and glorify God. Hasn't that contribution of the whole congregation in the worship service been a large benefit of the Reformation?

It still strikes Roman Catholics that in Reformed meetings everyone sings together. The praise of God is carried broadly; and everyone should participate, and no one should keep his mouth shut.

Therefore we should praise all initiatives to stimulate congregational singing. But let us not deprive the congregation of singing by placing her in the listening mode in order to introduce other musical contributions. That would certainly not be an improvement or a benefit for Reformed liturgy.

We certainly may learn from the Old Testament books that it is very important how we arrange the worship service. It should centre on the honour of our God; also our song of praise is to be used to proclaim His glory.

The Song

When the subject of adding hymns to the hymn section arises, Scripture use also plays a role. The New Testament certainly speaks about the song of praise of the congregation. In her psalms, hymns and spiritual songs she sings to the honour of her Lord and Saviour. In various Scripture portions we can find elements of these songs of praise and even complete songs.

Whenever someone speaks about the great value of the New Testamentic song, we can only heartily agree. But the question as to what is meant by such terminology still remains. Often the meaning is that our hymn book needs to be expanded with a large number of additional hymns by poets of the past and present. Would they be new testamentic songs? No, they would be songs from the period after the New Testament. If we would follow the desired expression - which is not adequate - then we would be suggesting that these songs would be on the same level as the old testamentic songs, the Psalms. Indeed, they would be considered even higher than the Psalms as

they can now sing of the salvation that has come in Christ!

It remains necessary to emphasize the high value of the Psalms as the songs of the covenant, inspired by the Holy Spirit. We may ascribe the same value to those songs that are truly new testamentic - the songs of praise that have received a place in the books of the New Testament. Expansion of the song treasury of the church will have to begin there. There are still a number of songs that await rhyming. That has priority over the selection of free songs by all sorts of poets from later times.

The Preached Word

Still, up till now, we have not touched on the most important point! But are we allowed to make such a strong statement? The statement that the preaching is the most important element of the worship service is disputed today. It isn't the preaching itself so much that is the problem, but it concerns the Word. The manner in which it comes to us is varied. The Bible is read, or the minister preaches about it. But we can also proclaim the Word ourselves in our prayer and in our singing. In this way the whole congregation is involved in the proclamation of the Word and the whole service consists of it. For this reason it may not be judged negatively when more attention is paid to the Bible reading and singing.

There is nothing wrong with that for the sermon is not the one and only, the most important part of the worship service. The focus is the Word!

Although it may not be intended that way, such talk is dangerous in its application. Such statements are not the right words for our time. We must rather state that the great importance of the preaching as administration of the Word is being devalued. Increasingly there are critical comments made about the administration of the Word. Therefore it is not wise to stimulate this devaluation or to feed the ongoing undermining of the preaching.

Beyond that, the foregoing argumentation can not find sufficient ground in Scripture. 'It's all about the Word', it is said. And who would deny that? There is plenty of Scriptural proof to support such an expression. But the problem is that in this way 'the Word' is made into an abstract entity. We meet 'the Word' in many shapes and forms - in preaching and teaching, but also in upbringing and Bible reading at home, in introductions and personal Bible study, and in songs and poems.

As attractive as that may sound, it doesn't fit in with the instruction of God's Word itself. How does the gospel come to us? It comes to us in the preached Word. How are people reached with the message of Christ? That gospel is preached to them! That has been the instruction of Christ Himself and of the apostles. (Matt. 28:19; John 5:24 ff; Rom. 10:14-17; 1 Cor. 1, 2; 9:16ff; 15:1, 12; 1 Cor. 4,5; Gal. 1; Phil. 1; Col. 1:5,25,28; 1 Peter 1:25).

In Scripture we do not find an abstract entity that needs to be developed, but we find the preached Word. We may hear that Word, and it has brought us to faith. Certainly there are many means that support and promote that Word proclamation. Then we can think of the songs and all forms of

instruction, but they do come in the second place. The most important means of the Holy Spirit is the sermon, the preached Word.

In conclusion we want to mention that the earlier argumentation is also opposed to that which the Reformation has taught us and what the Reformed confessions speak of. Contrary to the sacramentalism of Rome with her seven means of grace and the spiritualism of the Baptists with their inner light, the Reformers placed their emphasis on the means the Holy Spirit actually uses: the audible and visible Word. The preaching of the gospel was implemented in opposition to the salvation automatism of Rome and the individualistic faith experience of the Baptists. Because of faith we are declared righteous and that faith comes by hearing and hearing comes from the preached Word.

This belongs to the basics of Reformed confession. It is the ongoing theme of the Catechism and the Belgic Confession (L.D. 6; 21; 25; 31; 35; 38; 44; 48 and Articles 24; 29; 30; 33; 35; 36).

This all means that in the order and form of the worship service we must follow the guidelines that God has given us in His Word. In addition we can learn much from the liturgical history of the church. And all our efforts, with the blessing of the Lord, may contribute as well, so that God's Name receives all honour and praise; for He alone is worthy of our highest praise and deepest reverence. Then we can sing together with all creatures: "To Him Who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!"

A READER SPEAKS OUT:

BEWARE OF THE SCRIBES: The Importance of GOD'S WORDS

In John 17:17 Christ says, "Sanctify them through Thy truth:

Thy word is truth." In Luke 4:4 He rebukes Satan with the words: "It is written that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God." Thus Christ has told us in no uncertain words that the very words of God are truth and are not to be ignored, nor played around with, but to be obeyed down to the very last word! (Also see Matt. 5:18).

God speaks in the same manner in the Old Testament. In Jeremiah 1: 9 He says, "Then the LORD put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the LORD said unto me. Behold, I have put words in thy mouth." Later in Jer. 5:14 we read, "Wherefore thus saith the LORD God of Hosts, because ye speak this word, behold, I will make my words in thy mouth fire, and this people wood, and it shall devour them." Further, God says, "Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you." Deut. 4:12. Exodus 32:33 adds, "And the LORD said unto Moses, whosoever hath sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book." Is the LORD too severe; perhaps by our human standards of compromise? Yet God is God and His ways are too marvelous for me! He leaves us no choice, but to believe and obey. There is nothing else we can do in our lives. We must also remember that when we deal with the translation of His Word.

It is marvelous to read how Matthew, Mark, Luke and John write so very clearly about the Lord Jesus Christ and His three year ministry on earth. But they had God, the Holy Spirit to guide them.

- "But the comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said to you."

Then there is still Rev. 22:18, 19, "For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, 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 which are written in this book." This leaves us without excuse regarding the very words of God.

Some of the foregoing texts have been significantly changed by the NIV translation team. This may mean that only one word is different. The first one is John 17:17. Whose truth is the Bible speaking of, 'Thy truth' (KJV) or 'the truth' (NIV)? It is important to realize that the context is not relevant in this study. I am homing in on the differences in wording. Has the Bible been added to, subtracted from or changed? Have God's words been altered in any way? These changes may also involve a phrase or even a whole message. In the case of Luke 4:4 a phrase is missing in the NIV. The KJV reads, "but by every word of God." That is by no means an insignificant difference. In Jer. 5:14 the NTV does a lot of explaining, which is not necessary nor is it the place of a translation. It is your minister who is to do the explaining, along with commentaries and your private Bible study. Deut. 4:2 makes specific mention of God's words. Brothers and sisters, the NTV does not - it has eliminated that key word - WORD! In Rev. 22:19b the NIV belittles God's curse to those who tamper with His words by dropping that little word- "and"!

I have tried, with the use of Scripture, to show that we may not take any liberties with the words of God. This then clearly shows that in the translation of the 'words of God' we need both literal and complete equivalence. Dynamic equivalence, which reeks of change, simply will not do! Using Rev. 22:18, 19, as well as other scripture passages, I will address dynamic equivalence in a later article. Please take note that there are many more Scripture texts that speak about the nature of God's Words.

Do not take my word at face value, but please check it out for yourselves.

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