

The proper tone and improper tactics

Questioning the motives of a man's heart

In the editorial on "Orthodoxy and Lovelessness" (Feb. 2 and 16, 1996) we discussed improper tactics frequently employed when we engage in polemics. We also touched on "the art or practice of disputation or controversy." We even mentioned the words "psychological warfare," and noted the devastating consequences of this improper act. We stated that when we resort to psychological warfare then we are no longer "waging a war to win our neighbor, but conducting a battle to ruin his reputation."

Concern about the use of improper tactics was also expressed in a letter to the editor of Reformed Perspective (January, 1996). The writer, br. Henk Van Beelen, responding to Peter Englefield's "Christians versus Rock", stated that he was "thoroughly upset by the tone of this article." He notes that "in an accusatory fashion it lambastes the writer of a previous article ("Music for the Christian: Rock or Not?", Bill Selles, Reformed Perspective, April, 1995) by insinuating he is dishonest and by ascribing 'dirty tactics' to him." Br. Van Beelen says: "According to me this is a personal attack which judges the 'motives of a man's heart' and as such constitutes unchristian polemics... Perhaps all those who wield the pen should do some soul-searching on this matter."

It is not our intent to use this editorial to delve into the intricate details of br Van Beelen's critique of Peter Englefield's article, or busy ourselves with a comprehensive analysis of Peter Englefield's response to "the writer of a previous article." We will, however, engage in "some soul searching on this matter," by examining the concerns of "the tone" of an article, ascribing "dirty tactics" to the writer, judging the "motives of a man's heart," and the allegation of "unchristian polemics."

We can begin by agreeing with br. Van Beelen that "the tone" of what we say and write should be such that it reveals not "the works of the flesh", but "the fruit of the Spirit." (Gal. 5: 19-26) In our speaking and writing "let us have no self-conceit, no provoking of one another, no envy of one another." (Gal. 5: 26) Rather, let us speak the truth in love, (Eph. 4: 15) for, as we have also concluded in our discussion about "Orthodoxy and Lovelessness," that is not simply an interesting option, but a definite command.

In fact, if we truly aim to speak the truth, and we do so in the proper tone, truly showing "the fruit of the Spirit," (patience, kindness, humility, goodness, gentleness, self-control, etc.) then we are by that (f)act already showing true love, compassion, and concern for our neighbor. By our actions we clearly indicate that it is our desire to "walk as children of the light, for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true." (Eph. 5: 8 and 9) We shall endeavor to "let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear." (Eph. 4: 29) Then we will truly "set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity," (1 Tim. 4:11) When we discern in our fellow polemicists that kind of a disposition, then we may indeed acknowledge on the basis of what we hear and read, that such a person is correctly motivated; that the "motives of a man's heart" are honorable because he, by God's grace, reveals the fruit of the Spirit. "Thus you will know them by their fruits." (Mt. 7: 20) "Good deeds are conspicuous; and even if they are not, they cannot remain hidden." (1 Tim. 5:25)

Likewise, if in our speaking and writing we show “the works of the flesh,” (enmity, strife, jealousy, bitterness, anger, selfishness, slander, deceitfulness, dissension, etc.) then also these works will not remain inconspicuous. If we delight in finding fault in others, if we condemn others rashly or unheard, if we employ harsh and judgmental words, if we resort to incorrect and improper tactics, then we clearly exhibit the fruit of a sinful and rebellious heart. Then also the “motives of a man’s heart” will in due time become apparent, for, the mere disposition of our heart can never be entirely separated from our harsh and judgmental words or our dubious and questionable deeds. “But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts ... false witness, slander.” (Mt. 15: 18 and 19). In due time “the motives of a man’s heart” will come to light. For “the good man out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure produces evil; for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” (Luke 6: 45)

As brothers and sisters in the Lord we must begin with the premise or presumption that the motives of our fellow polemicists are honorable; with the assumption and expectation that they, in their speaking and writing sincerely aim to speak the truth in love. Yet, if in our speaking and writing we see in ourselves and in our fellow polemicists repeated evidence of “the works of the flesh” and a total lack of “the fruit of the Spirit,” then it would be advisable for us to re-examine (question) our motives for speaking and writing. If we are not motivated by a zeal for the truth and love for our neighbor, then what is it that induces us to speak and write?

Do we speak to share our thoughts or to give someone a “piece of our mind”? Are we busy searching for the truth or are we occupied with finding fault? Is it our desire to test the spirits or badger out brother? Are we prompted by a passion for polemics or a proclivity for politics? There is merit in asking ourselves these questions, for polemics can easily degenerate into a battle between personalities in which personal attacks are not carefully avoided. When we are engaged in waging a war to win our neighbor “it can (readily, RD) become a war of wits or a verbal barrage which does not deal with the real issues, but gets sidetracked in mud-slinging and name-calling. Then polemics no longer serves its purpose, namely to win the neighbor for the Truth.” (a)

The fact that we must avoid personal attacks does not mean that we may not ask our fellow polemicists what it is that motivates them. When instead of “the fruit of the Spirit,” we encounter unquestionable evidence of “the works of the flesh” we may and we must ask our fellow polemicists what it is that motivates them! We can determine (judge) that what was said and the manner (tone) in which it was said is at odds with our premise and presumption about our fellow polemicists’ motives for speaking or writing. We may conclude (judge) that what was written and the tactics that were employed are not in agreement with the implied objective and purpose to speak the truth in love. When we encounter not simply an occasional slip of the tongue or gaffe (blunder) of the pen, but a continual and unrelenting display of personal attacks and improper tactics then we can indeed judge someone, on the basis of their words and deeds, as being wrongly motivated.

Then it is indeed true that in due time the “motives of a man’s heart” will become apparent, for they cannot remain hidden. Jesus said: “A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit... Thus you will know them by their fruits.” (Mt. 7:18- 20) Then we may never know precisely

what it is that motivates people to say and write the things they do. Only the Lord knows the hearts of all men. We can, however, judge what was said and written to be in conflict with what we may expect from someone who is rightly motivated.

Needless to say, before we talk with our fellow polemicist about the motives of his heart, we need to “first take the log out of your own eye, and then we will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother’s eye.” (Luke 6 : 42) How can we legitimately discuss with our neighbor the motives of his heart if we are not even sure what it is that prompts us to approach him?

Furthermore, let us consider the fact that we, due to our own sinful nature, can so easily misjudge others. Let us also leave open the very real possibility that even people with the right motives will sometimes use the wrong methods or employ improper tactics. Similarly, we should not overlook the likelihood that there are polemicists who display a seemingly impeccable style, but whose motives are less than honorable. We read, for example, of Amaziah that “he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, yet not with a blameless heart” (2 Chronicles 25: 2)

When it is clear that others lack the proper tone or employ improper tactics then we must humbly demonstrate this, not to vindicate ourselves, but to assist our fellow polemicists and protect the readers. Then we must do that in a spirit of gentleness, choosing our words wisely and using a “tone” that shows evidence of “the fruit of the Spirit.” Therefore, since the term “dirty tactics” generally implies a calculated and deliberate attempt to be underhanded and dishonest we would not be amiss if we spend some time examining (questioning) our motives for wanting to use this inappropriate term. What would make us want to use these particular words, and what do we hope to accomplish by doing so?

There is no doubt that “the writer of a previous” article employed an improper tactic. The accusation that parents are motivated by fear in their choice of music is unwarranted. Note that this improper tactic is a graphic illustration of the “psychological warfare” we discussed in our previous editorials, and, like our earlier example, brings into question the motives of a person’s heart. This improper tactic “trivializes parents’ valid concerns for rejecting rock music, attributing them instead to irrational fear.”(b) What would motivate us to engage in psychological warfare when we are presented with a timely opportunity to deal with the real issues?

Let us resolve, in what we say and write, to speak the truth in love. Let us carefully avoid personal attacks and instead decide to deal with the real issues. Let us challenge each other to live up to the premise and presumption that the motives of our hearts are honorable; that we truly desire to “live according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8 : 5) Let us demonstrate “the fruit of the Spirit” by our proper “tone” and our refusal to engage in improper tactics. And let us remember that when we question each other about “the motives of a man’s heart” we will have to give account to the Lord “who knowest the hearts of all men ...” and “who discerns the thoughts and intentions of the heart ...”.

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(a) Rev. Cl. Stam, “The Polemics of Love”, Clarion, June, 1989.

(b) Peter Englefield, “Christian vs. Rock”, Reformed Perspective, September, 1995.

Dutch Synod Meets

The Synod of the Gereformeerde Kerken (Vrijgemaakt) in the Netherlands will commence on Wednesday April tenth. On April ninth a prayer meeting will take place in the church at Berkel en Rodenrijs.

There are at least seventeen reports from various deputies, and together with the other agenda items delegates will have before them a pile of paper more than 6 cm thick. The reports are soft cover and the letter type used is not very large. I wonder how one is able to read everything and form scriptural viewpoints on so many issues with so much material. Thankfully we may know that the delegates have asked our heavenly Father for guidance. May their work be further remembered in the prayers of church members in the Netherlands as well as their sister churches.

The agenda is comprised of the following:

1. *Doctrine*

- 1.1 A request to change ground three of Synod Heemse's (1984/85) decision in the Hoom case. Two requests for a revision of the decision.

2. *Church Government*

- 2.1 Women Voting: Thirteen requests ranging from recalling the decision of synod Ommen (1993) to changing the text on minor points.
- 2.2 Divorce: Requests for clear lines on how to deal with various matters in divorce cases. There is also a deputies' report on divorce.
- 2.3 Suspension from Lord's Supper: Appeal from a brother who feels wronged.
- 2.4 Naming of Board for a Classis: Art. 42 CO (no such art in CO - has to do in case of a church having two or more ministers and being delegated to a classis.) -a request for clarity on this point.
- 2.5 applying Art. 32 CO: Has to do with Credentials of delegates -one appeal for revision of decision Ommen (1993)
- 2.6 General Deputies Deacons: One request to change their instructions/work methods.
- 2.7 Classical Exams for Students: Request to consider the many meetings for Classis Kampen must hold regarding this matter, -request from church at Voorberg for reconsideration of regulations for church exams.
- 2.8 Report from Deputies Art. 19 CO - Training for the Ministry
- 2.9 Report from Deputies for Matters Concerning Deacons
- 2.10 Report from Deputies regarding the deaf and hard of hearing

3. *Worship Services*

3.1 Votum/blessing: 29 requests ranging from recalling decision Ommen (1993) to making it binding on all the churches. Also, several requests to appoint deputies to study the matter again and to make a study of the offices as we have them and what the Bible teaches us about them. Ommen decided that the elders should also raise their hands in blessing the congregation when they lead the worship services.

3.2 Administrating Lord's Supper at Home: Request is made to decide that this is possible within Art. 60 CO.

3.3 Services for the Handicapped: Four requests for clearer guidelines -report from deputies

3.4 Report from Deputies on Worship Services' - one reaction to deputies' report

3.5 Report Days of Prayer Art. 54 CO -no use made of this article in the last period

3.6 Form for the Ordination of Marriage: The church at Zwolle has created an alternative form. The Church at Delft, requests that this form be admitted for use.

3.7 Hymns: Request from Leiden to include a rhymed version of the Lord's Prayer.

3.8 Bible Translation: Appeal from Smilde against working together with NBG (Nederlands Bijbel Genootschap) on a new translation, report from deputies Bible translations

3.9 Radio and T.V. Broadcasts -report from deputies.

4. *Evangelism and Mission Work*

4.1 Financial Contributions -request from Classis Rotterdam for exemption from contributing to deputies ASE

4.2 Relationship between Sending Church and the Church in Irian-Jaya -Request from Enschede-Noord to form an Indonesia committee

4.3 Report from Deputies

5. *Schooling (University of Kampen)*

5.1 Curators: Request to examine policy in naming personnel
- Consequences of retirement roster

6. *Internal Contacts*

6.1 Report from Deputies for Contact with Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken -remarks from church Ten Boer about report

6.2 church unity: Report from Deputies

7. *Contacts with Churches Abroad*

7.1 Diaconal matters -appeal against decision of deputies to hold a collection for the reformed church of Japan (support given due to earthquake)

7.2 report from deputies IRTT -Report commencement of activities

7.3 Report of Deputies for Contact with Churches Abroad

8. *Federal Government Relations*

8.1 Composition of Board of Deputies

8.2 Report from Deputies

9. *Synodical Matters*

9.1 Appointment of deputies for Worship Services

- Request from Church at Rotterdam-Centrum re care in appointing deputies

- Request from Church at Rotterdam-Centrum re permanent address for GS

9.2 Report from Deputies for Spiritual Care for Those in the Military

9.3 Report of Deputies for Archives/Documents

10. *Particular initiative*: Request examination of termination of employment of drs. G.C. Groenleer

11. *Miscellaneous*

11.1 Indexing acts

11.2 Membership of church: Church Boundaries

No false doctrine in ‘side issues’ either

“Do not be carried about with various and strange doctrines” -Hebrews 13:9a

By H. Bouma, originally published in De Reformatie of Oct. 15, 1968. Taken from Una Sancta, March 16, 1996.

Since the first years of Christian church history the churches had to deal with various heresies. Undoubtedly you will have heard of Judaism which Paul battled strenuously. The readers of the letter to the Hebrews were also confronted with ‘various and strange doctrines’ which were propagated in their midst.

The writer speaks about ‘various’ doctrines. He does not mean that there were different kinds of doctrines. The word ‘various’ literally means many coloured or variegated. It seems that the author had in mind doctrines that presented a variety of colours on the one palette; different views on the one subject. Sure, there was the ‘colour’ of the Gospel; but to this the false teachers had added other ‘colours’ which they merged with those of the Gospel. The message which they brought, therefore, was more attractive and came across better; it was received by the hearers as warmer and more meaningful.

The author, however, adds that these other colours were in fact ‘strange’ matters. ‘Strange’ in this case means an idea not originating from true preaching. Perhaps these matters had germinated in the minds of pious Christians. Yet they had to be called ‘strange’ because they did not come from the Word of God and therefore did not belong in the Christian’s life.

The author addresses his readers about this at the end of his letter. He has good reason for this. He writes as it were: do not be drawn in by these strange multi-coloured teachings. There were some who had obviously been fascinated and infected by these doctrines.

As yet, not many had apparently followed this trail. The danger had not yet cast its net very far. In addition, these doctrines did not deny the core of the Gospel. If that had been the case the author would have undoubtedly warned in a manner across the board and in a much more vigorous way.

It is clear that the author did not have his eye on heresies which, so to speak, undermined or denied the heads of the Christian doctrine, the foundations of the church or the core of the Gospel. Sure the entire letter to the Hebrews is one stirring warning against laxity in the church and spiritual life of the Hebrews. There is no mention, however, of any-one who was backsliding into heathendom. Those who believed the 'coloured' doctrines had not denied God. The author did not therefore have to address the readers in such absolute terms as Paul did in the letter to the Galatian Christians: "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you...?" (Gal. 3:1).

No, we are not here dealing with a heresy which touches the heart of the Gospel. That is abundantly clear from what the author of the Hebrews says in the rest of verse 9. He does not say: Be very careful, the heart will be established by grace, not with food. He does not say: I warn you against Judaism! If that had been the case he would have expressed himself in a different way. He, however did write: "For it is good that the heart be established by grace, not with foods..." The words 'it is good', which are used elsewhere in Scripture, do not have a commanding tone, but mean to convey something like 'that is good' or 'that is great' (as in Matthew 17:4 and 1 Corinthians 7:1).

To sum up, we can say that the author, at the end of the letter, gives some words of warning about not being carried away by various coloured doctrines. In doing so he is talking about 'side issues'.

It is, however, all the more noticeable that, although the heresies are not the worst possible, he does express himself in pretty stern tones when it comes to the warning itself. He feels compelled (and the Spirit of God inspired him in this) to express himself in a very severe way when it comes to his actual warning. He is not satisfied with a friendly suggestion or mild advice as he did elsewhere in the letter. Now he does use the commanding tone.

Apparently he does consider the situation serious. There is real danger in what people could easily consider as a difference in side issues. Is that such a bad thing? The prophet who is teaching these variegated doctrines surely does not deny God?

Yet the writer has but one message: do not be carried away by these doctrines. You cannot ignore this. These teachings are no longer allowed to exist unhindered, or the church will be like a ship, like a beach ball, a toy thing of the waves, driven by every wind of doctrine, instead of serving as a beacon in the sea.

The writer does not have to elaborate on this matter in the conclusion of his letter. In the preceding passages are sufficient signposts. God's people must cling to the good confession that it has learned to recognize (according to Hebrews 4:1-4 and 10:23).

If strange doctrines about 'side issues' remain unchallenged unfaithfulness will continue to undermine the church. The church will remain on the straight road if it heeds the urgent admonition of the author who was inspired by the Holy Spirit.