

A CHRISTIAN WITNESS

God's Word teaches us that salvation comes through faith when we repent from our evil ways and convert to a new life in Christ. This new life is a heartfelt joy in God through Christ and a love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works. It further teaches us that these good works are only those which are done out of true faith, in accordance with the law of God, and to His glory, and not those based on our own opinion or on the precepts of men (Lord's Day 33 of the Heidelberg Catechism). Although we may not strive to do good works in order to merit salvation we are instructed to do them out of thankfulness for salvation.

An Exhortation

Recently an article appeared in Information (a Newspaper for the Reformed Home, distributed to Can. Ref. Churches in the B. C. Lower Mainland), entitled, "Is It Wrong to be Pro-Life?" This stirring exhortation called Christians away from apathy and toward involvement in the fight against the horrible sin of murder that snuffs out thousands of infants before they can open their eyes. In that article the readers were reminded of the great evil of abortion and the apparent failure of the Church to have an impact on this wide-spread disdain for God-given life.

Although we may heartily agree with many sentiments brought forward in this article we must also warn against a wrong thread that runs through it. The article asks, "Why is it then, when it comes to the murder of the unborn, that we are often so strangely silent and unwilling to be involved? Why do we hide behind excuses, such as: I'm too busy, it's the government's responsibility, I don't want to participate in public protests, I won't work together with other religions, it's not the children of unbelievers who are at risk, etc, etc. ... But there are men and women who will talk about it...should we not then applaud such people and encourage them with our prayers, our financial support, and our time and effort? Or should we question their motives, their religious beliefs, even their eternal destiny?"

This exhortation appears to indicate to Reformed Christians, that we ought not to let church affiliation stand in the way of membership in Pro-Life organizations and activities. Such thought patterns are becoming increasingly prevalent among Reformed people and are voiced in connection with a variety of causes.

Faithful to God's Word

The exhortation we referred to presented several Scripture references. It would be good to look them up: "Love the sojourner therefore; for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt" (Deut 10:19); "Cursed be he who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. And all the people shall say, Amen." (Deut.27:19) "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall do him no wrong."(Lev.19:33); "The Lord watches over the sojourners, he upholds the widow and the fatherless; but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin." (Psalm 146:9); and, "Is not this the fast I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?" (Is.58:6, 7).

In none of these references, nor in their context, do we meet the admonition to work at the relief of the downtrodden with those who reject all or some of God's revelation. Rather the contrary can be found in the context from which most of these texts were taken. It is not possible, in this limited forum, to discuss all these references, but it will suffice to deal with a couple (although much of what is said about them will hold for the others). Both of the references taken from Deuteronomy are part of the exhortation by the Lord to His people to live in obedience to Him. The theme of this section of God's Word is "that you may fear the Lord your God, you and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life." (Deut 6:2) The curse quoted from Deut.27 is followed immediately, in chapter 28, by a repetition of this theme. There we read, "And if you obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments which I command you this day, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth." Still further, in chapter 9 of this same book God explains that when He will give the Canaanites into the hands of His people, they should not express pride about their righteousness, but that this will rather be because the iniquity of those nations.

From these verses and chapters they come from, we learn that God's honour is of primary importance. A good work is only that which is done out of true faith, in accordance with the law of God and to His glory. That includes caring for that which He teaches us to care for. Certainly an abhorrence of abortion is included in such a list. Certainly speaking and acting to prevent such abhorrence is also included. Although our citizenship is not of this world we are still citizens in this world. We, who are to reign with Christ over all things, certainly must let our voices be heard. But that includes that we must do it in accordance with the Word of that same Christ, our Head. He will instruct us how this must be done when we have arrived in Paradise restored. But, so much to more, must we be prepared to let Him instruct us while we are still here, in Paradise destroyed. We may not fall into civil disobedience to prevent others from transgressing God's laws (as some have propagated). Nor may we compromise our faith by being yoked with those who deny many of the truths we have been given in the Word of our Teacher and Lord.

Does that mean we can not be pro-life? On the contrary, we must be pro-life. But it likely means we can not be Pro-Life. For our activity is not primarily for the purpose of changing others, our witness is primarily for the glory of our God. We must understand, as the Israelites had to learn, that our duty is to be obedient and that the consequences are in the hand of our Father. It is the same lesson that Gideon had to learn when he had to reduce his army to such a small number that it seemed ridiculous in the eyes of man. But the foolishness of man is wisdom with God.

Must We Do Good Works

What about those good works then? What about that exhortation to be active against the scourge of abortion? Let us not flag in zeal for good works, but let us follow the direction of our Leader. We need not worry about the effect of our obedience, but we may trust that when we, in obedience, act against the evil around us, God will direct it to His glory. Then we must indeed exhort one another to be much more involved in the exposition of the evil of abortion, of euthanasia, of divorce, of murder, of injustice, of theft, of the twelve curses we find in Deuteronomy 28, and of the transgressions against the Ten Commandments.

Possibly our consistories could, directly or through their Home Mission committees, appoint people to assist those who are contemplating or have had abortions and to express the truth of Scripture about such practices to the authorities. Not only is it necessary for the Voice of the Church to be heard about abortion, but also about so many other transgressions of our society.

An exhortation like the one found in that local Information paper must surely stir us up to a Biblical response. "Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established...A man's mind plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps." (Prov.16:3 & 9)

PdB

Is It Reformed to Speak About a Personal Relationship With Jesus?

On the evening of May 19, 1996 Rev. R. Schouten spoke to the young people gathered together for study and fellowship on the topic shown above. The speech was well-received and was the impetus to a good discussion during the meeting and afterwards. The following is an effort to represent something of what we heard that evening. Hopefully it will continue to be the starter for further discussions for all those who read it.

The matter of a "personal relationship" may make one squirm or feel inadequate because we do not understand what is meant by it and because we may feel that we are missing something that we should be experiencing if we are truly followers of Jesus Christ. In addition, we may feel estranged from this term because it is considered to originate among evangelicals and to be predominantly an American Christian concept.

Yet the Bible does teach us about relationships with Jesus Christ. This relationship is depicted by the alliance of Christ as Head with us as His body; or as Christ the Bridegroom with us as the Bride; or as Christ, the High Priest with us the people. In these alliances we are related to Christ by faith. Lord's Day 7, part 2 tells us that this faith is a firm confidence. Faith is a transfer of trust in ourselves to a trust in Jesus Christ. The Belgic Confession describes Biblical faith in Article 22 where we confess that we embrace Christ, make Him our own, and appropriate Him. Our relationship is a deeply personal matter; nobody can do it for us.

When people put their faith, their trust in Jesus Christ they are made one with Him, they are in Him. According to Rev. Schouten this idea has been under-emphasized in the Reformed community. He noted that the Catechism does place a stress on it when it speaks of being engrafted into Christ by true faith (Q/A 20); when it reminds us that those engrafted into Christ will bring forth good fruit (Q/A 24); and when it helps us confess that we share in the life of Christ (Q/A 53). The same concept is be found in Romans 6:3ff where we read of being baptized into Christ, of being one with Him in all that He did (in His birth, death, resurrection, and ascension), and of being identified as part of Christ. Eph.2:4-6 also speaks of this idea when it shows us that we are made alive together with Christ.

When we accept the promises of Scripture we are considered as one with Jesus Christ and that's why God loves us. That is what we must always keep in mind - we must personally rely and trust in Him. The means by which we do this is called faith. It is the means by which we embrace Him (B.C. - Art.22). It brings and maintains us in communion with Him and all His benefits.

When we think on these things certain questions may come up in us. We may start to ask: "where is my faith?" "In what do I put my trust?" "Have I received Jesus Christ?" "Even though I have received the sign and seal of baptism, have I made Jesus Christ my own?"

Jesus Christ is described as dwelling in us by His Holy Spirit. This is the power of God that lives in us through faith. Col.1 speaks of this as the mystery of "Christ in you". In Romans 8:9 we are reminded that "you are in the Spirit" and that if the Spirit is not in you, you don't belong to Christ. The apostle John, inspired by the Holy Spirit, writes: "Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit." (John 15:2) Therefore the presence of faith, of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, will bring forth fruit. If, through faith, Christ is in us by means of His Spirit then we will be able to recognize the fruit of the Spirit. The Bible tells us that "...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us have no self-conceit, no provoking of one another, no envy of one another." (Gal.5:22-26)

We must have a personal relationship with Christ or we will perish everlastingly.

After the speech the following dialogue was included in the discussion.

Question: Is receiving Christ an event or a process?

Answer: Both are possible. We should not deny that at times a person experiences a sudden understanding of the truth of Scripture; however, more frequently the acquisition of faith is a process.

Question: Why does the matter of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ make us squirm?

Answer: The evangelical definition of such a relationship may be different from ours. They tend to make this relationship into a "buddy" relationship. In this way Christ is brought down to the level of man. When we stress the covenantal aspect of Christ's relationship with us we sometimes err in assuming that the covenant is a guarantee. In this regard we must admit that the stress on personal faith needs emphasis amongst us. Further, there are many who stress the personal relationship without regard for the teachings of Scripture about the Church.

Question: Can we pray to Jesus Christ?

Answer: Being united in Christ, we ought to go to the Father in our prayers. Only in the story of the stoning of Stephen do we read of an exception. Prayers throughout the gospels address the Father. Further references can be found in John 14 - 16.

Question: Should those doing public profession of faith be asked about their relationship with Jesus?

Answer: Yes, they should be challenged about this. Do they really know God or do they just know about Him? This can be done in conjunction with the second question of the Form for Public Profession of Faith.

Question: What about casual prayer versus starting with "Our Father"?

Answer: Prayer must be regular and also reverent. Although we may pray spontaneously, prayer must remain respectful. The Bible gives guidance on this matter in many places, e.g. Daniel, Colossians 9, etc. We must address God with childlike reverence.

Bernice Vandebos

A LOOK AT PROMISE KEEPERS

An organization called Promise Keepers has been much in the news lately for attracting large crowds of men to its gatherings. But what is Promise Keepers (PK)?

PK is a para-church movement that was founded five years ago by former football coach Bill McCartney. The first organized meeting in 1991 drew some 4,000 men. The following year there were 22,000. And this year there were 61,000 in the Minneapolis Metro dome alone - one of thirteen sites across the nation. Next year the number of meetings is expected to double, and there is talk of a million-man rally in Washington in 1997

But what does PK stand for? The answer is found in "The Seven Promises". There are some good things in this statement. In spite of them, however, it is my conviction that the movement is not only unacceptable, but in fact a serious threat to the honor of Christ and the well-being of his church.

First of all, PK (like so many para-church organizations) usurps the prerogatives that our Lord has given only to his church. It is for this reason that the historic church has always been concerned about doctrine. It is not clear which Jesus PK is committed to honoring. And that is by design. It seeks to break down doctrinal (denominational) barriers. But any movement today that seeks unity without a confessional basis is dangerous.

Is it God's will that we should worship and pray with idolaters? Our Confession says Roman Catholics are idolaters (WCF, 24. 3). Yet many of them are involved in PK. What about members of cults (such as Mormons) and apostate denominations? They are involved, too. Can a Reformed Christian rejoice in fellowship with such? We think not. Yet it is precisely this that PK promotes. For this reason alone we predict that the PK will - in the end - do far more harm than good.

But that is not all. You will also notice that PK is committed "to pursuing vital relationships with a few other men, understanding that he needs brothers to help him keep his promises." It is certainly true that we all need help in keeping our promises. That is why God

himself has provided overseers - elders - to watch over the flock (Acts 20). But where has he commissioned men to just take this task upon themselves, and to do it with “a few other men”?

The answer is clear: PK has no authorization from the Lord to promote this usurpation of one of the primary functions of the organized church. Nowhere in the Word of God do we find authorization for Coach McCartney to assume the role of spiritual leader for thousands. And nowhere do we find authorization for a special cell-type relationship with a few other men. No, what Christ has authorized is the communion and fellowship of the body of Christ, organized under the oversight of elders chosen by the people and ordained by the church.

I asked a man who belongs to a church here in northwest Iowa, where PK has become the “in thing,” one simple question: “If your church was still exercising the discipline that it did some forty years ago, do you think PK would be needed, or even popular with so many of these men?” He lowered his eyes and replied, “No, I don’t think so.”

And this is the bottom line. We make our most solemn promises - in the form of sacred vows - before the congregation when we are married by the pastor, when we bring our children to be baptized, and when officers are ordained and installed. The fact that PK is such a felt need by so many confused people today is symptomatic of the abysmal failure of the church to be and do what Christ has commanded her to be and do!

The remedy for the depressed state of the church today will not come by way of human inventions. It will only come when there is a new Reformation - a return to the institutions of Christ - and the restoration of scriptural discipline in the church. G.I. Williamson

Rev. Williamson, a retired OPC pastor, serves on the Committee on Christian Education and the Committee on Ecumenicity and Interchurch Relations. This article was taken from the official OPC magazine, New Horizons, January 1996.

The Seven Promises that PK men must make are:

1. A Promise Keeper is committed to honoring Jesus Christ through worship, prayer, and obedience to his word through the power of the Holy Spirit.
2. A Promise Keeper is committed to pursuing vital relationships with a few other men, understanding that he needs brothers to help him keep his promises.
3. A Promise Keeper is committed to practicing spiritual, moral, ethical, and sexual purity.
4. A Promise Keeper is committed to building strong marriages and families through love, protection, and biblical values.
5. A Promise Keeper is committed to supporting the mission of the church by honoring and praying for his pastor and by actively giving his time and resources.
6. A Promise Keeper is committed to reaching beyond any racial or denominational barriers to demonstrate the power of biblical unity.
7. A Promise Keeper is committed to influencing his world, being obedient to the Great Commandment (see Mark 12:30-31) and the Great Commission (see Matthew 28:19-20).

CHURCH NEWS

The Synod of the Liberated Churches in the Netherlands has officially welcomed the newly appointed teachers for the Theological University in Kampen. Rev. W. H. Rose has been appointed to instruct the students about Old Semetic Philology (comparative semetic linguistics) and the cultural history of the Old Middle East. Rev. I. D. Haarsma will teach the History of Philosophy, while Rev. P. W. van de Kamp will teach the pastoral subjects.

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (May 29, 1996) URNS - When the synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches convenes this year in Grand Rapids, it will mark a historic transition in the seventy-year history of that denomination. For almost half of the denomination's history, Prof. Herman Hanko has served as professor of New Testament and church history at the Protestant Reformed Seminary in Grand Rapids. His replacement this year will be chosen from three candidates, the oldest of whom is in his early forties.

The theological school committee of the Protestant Reformed Churches has nominated three men to synod: Revs. Russell Dykstra, Barrett Gritters, and Charles Terpstra. Synod will choose one of the trio as the next professor at the seminary.

Other major items on the agenda for synod include:

- * A recommendation from the ecumenicity committee to send two delegates to the International Council of Reformed Churches, meeting in Seoul, South Korea, in 1997.
- * A proposal from the foreign missions committee to call a missionary to the nation of Ghana in Africa
- * A request from the Hudsonville (MI) PRC and the denominational home missions committee to organize the Covenant Reformed Fellowship of Northern Ireland as a member church of the Protestant Reformed denomination
- * An overture from First PRC of Grand Rapids to schedule and begin preparations for a denominational commemoration in the year 2000 of the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Protestant Reformed Churches.