

## **REFORMED FUNDAMENTALS**

In education there has been much talk in recent years about a return to 'the basics'. By that is meant that schools should concentrate on teaching students the fundamental skills in reading, writing and arithmetic in order to equip them for a productive life in society. There is a perception, valid or not, that too much emphasis is spent on other things which are considered less important. The latest buzzword in educational circles is 'character education', a reference to the need for schools, as the agents of society, to foster character in students. The advocates say that many parents are not teaching values to their children and churches aren't up to the task either, so the last remaining structure is the public school and it must be equipped for the task, for the betterment of society.

This is not an editorial about public schools or the need for values or character education. Rather, it is about 'reformed fundamentals'. It is about Reformed identity, Reformed heritage and Reformed basics. Let's elaborate.

Any perceptive observer of the church scene will be aware that there are many things being written and talked about that raise eyebrows. Increasingly in our Reformed publications, whether local or national (international), we see approving quotes from the likes of Max Lucado, Larry Crabb, Charles Swindoll, to name but a few. There are also approving references to para-church organizations such as the Promise Keepers or invitations to Ligonier Conferences.

By making the specific references above we are not saying that such authors (or organizations) don't have anything worthwhile to contribute to our understanding of our Christian calling and so on. Not at all! What we are saying is that it appears to be symptomatic of a trend - to seek guidance and inspiration from individuals and groups that are outside of our Reformed heritage. It's indicative of a search for 'truth' removed from our Reformed roots.

Furthermore, one sometimes get the impression that we are almost embarrassed to refer to ourselves as 'Reformed' and would rather be known simply as 'Christian'. We don't seem to want to talk about what distinguishes us as Canadian or American or Free Reformed people, as if we would all be better off if we didn't talk about that. It's in the spirit of 'Let's talk about what unites us and not about what divides us'.

It is our contention that we need a 'back to the basics' movement in our Reformed community. We need to clearly understand where we have come from historically, what are the defining characteristics of the Reformed faith so that all of us, but particularly the next generation, may have a clear sense of their Reformed 'identity'.

This is not sectarianism or a desire to preserve an organization based on ethnicity but, in accordance with our Confessions, it is recognition of God's guidance in history to preserve for himself a faithful Church, the bride of His Son. If we do not recognize or acknowledge this, how

can we pass on that knowledge to the next generation, let alone to those who have not heard the gospel message?

There is an inherent recognition by many what we must live out of our basic, fundamental values and that our actions must be in harmony with our 'values' (cf. for example the popularity of books such as Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits* and *First Things First*). If the 'world' recognizes that, how much more those who are followers of The Way!

What are the implications for us as members of the Body of Christ? First of all, we must be clear about what those Reformed 'fundamentals' are and then teach and communicate them effectively. How can this be done?

As members of the covenant community we need the weekly proclamation of the Word to teach, comfort and admonish us about how we ought to live in fellowship with God and our neighbour. The pure proclamation of the Word (including the faithful teaching from the Heidelberg Catechism) will equip the saints for living in obedience to God.

This teaching needs to be reinforced in the home and schools, established by the parents to assist them in their nurturing tasks. It goes without saying that such teaching must be in harmony with the preaching and must equip our children to give a good account of their Reformed identity. To that end it would be appropriate to require students to submit to a final examination of Reformed Fundamentals as part of their graduation requirement.

The older generation also has an obligation to contribute to the Reformed 'bank account', as it were, by way of writings and teaching about the application of Reformed thinking to contemporary issues. It is therefore incumbent upon us to add to the stock of knowledge so that we in turn can pass on to the next generation. This calls for memoirs, histories and seminal thinking on issues related to justice, politics, economics, and so forth, from a Reformed perspective. There's a challenge for the current generation of parents and grandparents! The best Reformed thinking needs to be passed on so that our children are equipped to deal with the challenges of a new age, having been given the tools to do so. Identifying those Reformed fundamentals and discussing how then can be best transmitted will be the focus of future articles.

H.

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## Book Review

By Wes Bredenhof

True and False Worship, John Knox, Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1988, soft cover, 64 pp.

Our modern age finds many people with different ideas about what Christian worship should be. Some say that worship must be pleasing to the human senses. These people introduce not only things which are pleasing to the eyes and ears, but even things, such as incense, which are pleasing to the nose. Others argue that worship must fit the standards of human reverence. Still others say that worship must be according to what we think will please God. As long as we have good intentions in our worship, then God will be happy with it.

Reformed Christians have a special interest and heritage in the area of worship. As Carlos Eire points out in his book *War Against the Idols* (Cambridge UP: 1986), worship was one of the most central contentions of the Great Reformation of the 16th century. Especially with the Calvinists, the right and proper worship of God was no small matter. The Calvinist Reformers pointed the Church back to the Biblical principle of worship. As the Heidelberg Catechism states it in QA 96: "We are not...to worship Him in any other manner than He has commanded in His Word." (cf. Belgic Confession, Arts. 7 and 32).

John Knox, the famous Scottish Reformer and author of *True and False Worship*, followed in the footsteps of Calvin with regards to worship. The booklet under review is subtitled, *A Vindication of the Doctrine that the Sacrifice of the Mass is Idolatry*. Knox, the former Roman Catholic priest, vigorously attacks the Roman Catholic Church and her false worship. He does this by means of two syllogisms (arguments), the first to show that the mass is idolatry, and the second to show that it is an abomination. The reason that the mass is idolatry is that it "is invented by the brain of men, without any commandment of God." Here we find Knox's application of the Reformation principle of worship. It is interesting that the Heidelberg Catechism (QA 80) uses the exact same reasoning, though it is not as explicit. In the second syllogism, Knox shows that the mass is an abomination, namely a "service of God whereunto is added a wicked opinion." In the struggle for the Reformation in Scotland, Knox's booklet proved to be a worthy weapon. Biblically and logically sound, it is difficult to refute when one submits to the Scriptures as ultimate authority.

John Knox wrote this booklet in 1550. We live in 1997. More than 400 years have passed since this book was written. In those 400 years, we find more slipping away from the Reformation teachings, especially concerning worship. Someone wants to add liturgical dancing to the worship service. Another would like musical and voice soloists or choirs. Still another is in favour of open discussions instead of preaching. When one follows the Reformation principle of worship, these things are easily ruled out. John Knox has something very valuable to say to us on this very important topic. We have a rich heritage in the Reformation, we must be careful that we do not lose it. This booklet, though somewhat archaic (the revisions and footnotes of the editor are very helpful in overcoming this shortcoming), can be a valuable means to that end. Few modern books on worship can compare to the forcefulness and Biblical simplicity found in this excellent work. Simply reading the Introductory Essay by Kevin Reed and skimming through the contents ought to

be enough to stir up our minds to consider these Biblical teachings which are greatly neglected in our time. However, reading the full contents may cause a revolution in your thinking about worship.

True and False Worship is available for \$3.99 (+ \$3.95 S and H & 7% GST) from Still Waters Revival Books, 4710-37A Ave., Edmonton AB, T6L 3T5

## The Place of Children in the Worship Services

When attending a worship service in a reformed church, it is striking how many children occupy the pew. Sometimes parents have to walk out with a young child who was not behaving too well or has to go to the washroom. At times the children, especially the younger ones, do not sit all that still and are distracting to the parents who try to teach them differently. Other members sitting near by are distracted too. During the last fifty years or so, more and more congregations have introduced a nursery where the little ones stay so that parents need not take turns to stay home or be interrupted by the very little ones during the services. In some of the larger congregations the nurseries are filled with little toddlers. Among some, the question has arisen whether the time these toddlers spend in the nurseries can not be utilized better. Instead of these little ones playing with toys, would it not be beneficial to tell Bible stories? And, would some, who are a little older, say four to six or seven years, not “get more out of” a simply Bible story than a complicated sermon? Ministers always seem to have trouble communicating at their level, and besides, these little ones cannot concentrate on a 30 to 45 minute sermon. What about a “kind of” Sunday school for these little ones? A lot of other churches (denominations) do that

All these arguments sound very reasonable; however, our conclusion concerning this matter may not rest on pragmatic arguments alone. What the Lord teaches about children in Scripture must be taken into account.

In both the old and the New Testament children are included among God’s people. The Lord had made His covenant with Abraham and his seed. In the New Testament age the Lord continues His covenant promises with the believers and their children. Acts 2:39 is well known among reformed believers who had to refute the Anabaptist movement as well as those who wanted to maintain that children really belong to the covenant which is confirmed to them at baptism. There, in Acts 2:39, the Apostle Peter, while speaking the word of the Lord, says that the “promise is for you and your children”.

That children are part of the Lord’s people is shown in some striking ways both in the old and New Testament. When the people of Israel left Egypt, as expected, the children were taken along. This is not to be taken for granted because at first Pharaoh tried to let them go without the little ones, see Exodus 10:10. When therefore later, the children of Israel were gathered at Mount Sinai to hear the LORD speak, — Exodus 19:16 speaks about: “all the people” — we may be sure the little ones were included. They were all part of the assembly of the LORD’s people. Even more telling is what we are told in Joshua 8. After having entered into the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua, the children of Israel gathered at Mount Gerizim and Ebal. There we are told, verse 33 that “All Israel...stood on opposite sides of the ark.” Again “all Israel” means all, including the little ones. This is confirmed when in verse 35 we are told: “There was not a word of all that Moses commanded which Joshua did not read before *all the assembly* of Israel, the women, and the little ones (my italics), and the sojourners who lived among them.” About the Hebrew word that is used here and translated little ones, one dictionary says that: “the primary meaning is ‘human beings

from ages 0-20,' with stress on the younger ages." Another dictionary says that it refers to "children (as going with quick, tripping steps)." Thus, very young children are included.

These examples, the gathering at Mount Sinai and the gathering at Mount Gerizim and Ebal were admittedly special circumstances. But, just consider if the arguments for children not being present should be applied to these circumstances — they may cause distraction, they cannot understand anyway, they cannot concentrate so long. Concerning distraction; at these assemblies the children would not have been distracted because along with their parents they would be awe-struck. Concerning, not understanding anyway, it is true, they would not understand everything but they would know that something special is happening and afterward they would be full of questions directed to their parents. Concerning the argument of not being able to concentrate so long, perhaps it is true, but does that really matter? Keep in mind the importance of these occasions. When gathered at Mount Sinai the LORD who had delivered the children of Israel out of Egypt, in an official way, publicly renews His covenant with them. He began by saying: "I am the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Do the little ones, the children, not belong to the covenant too? They sure do and therefore the LORD's speaking at this time is also directed to them. It would have been defiant for any among the Israelites, both old and young, to have stayed away from this assembly, except perhaps, on account of serious illness.

The same is true for the assembly at Mount Gerizim and Ebal. There the LORD, in an official way, established His people as the people of the land. Joshua reads the whole law and one can well imagine that not all the little ones could concentrate for so long a time, but they were there. The words spoken, even if they could not fully understand it all, was meant for all of them.

These were special occasions, but was it not the same at the regular assembling at the tabernacle and later at the temple? At times the children of Israel had become casual or indifferent because they had taken it for granted, but at these assemblies at the tabernacle and temple the LORD, through the priests who brought the sacrifices, declared forgiveness of sins. This was an official declaration. Compare it to a judge who gives the official pronouncement: "guilty" or "not guilty". Even if the little ones did not understand what was said, this official pronouncement was made to them as well.

Even though times have changed in that we no longer live in the expectation of the Messiah to offer Himself up for sin, the LORD has not changed. Because times have changed, sacrifices are no longer made. Instead, the benefits of Christ's sacrifice are proclaimed. This is what the official preaching of the word is. When the Lord Jesus saw His disciples after His resurrection and breathed the Holy Spirit on them, He had said, John 20:23: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained," From this we confess in Lord's Day 31 that: "The kingdom of heaven is opened when it is proclaimed and publicly testified to each and every believer that God has really forgiven all their sins..." Even though children do not fully understand, just like at Mount Sinai, so also today, this declaration is made to them. They are part of the Lord's people. As we are told in the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 12:18-24, we have come much further than Mount Sinai. We have "come to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to the

innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first born who are enrolled in heaven..." Do our children not belong there? Just consider one part of the worship service, the blessing. Would we want our children to miss out on it? The Lord in His mercy grants that they may be part of this assembly and this assembly is gathered today in regular worship services! Let them all be there.

Indeed, there is a place for a nursery in church so that neither parent need miss out on this assembling together. However, if the children are old enough to listen to Bible stories, certainly they are old enough to be present in the assembly of the Lord's people. Let us never put them aside into some kind of "inferior" gathering specifically designed for children but let us in practice show the rich blessing our children have from the Lord. He has fully included them among His people. Parents can make sure that the little ones go to the bathroom before the worship service begins and they can also do a lot towards teaching them to sit still. Actually it is surprising how good the little ones can sit when the minister has a particularly good sermon and everyone pays close of attention. The attention the parents give, to a certain extent, rubs off on the children. If parents come with a casual attitude we should not expect the children to sit still. However, regardless of how much children and everyone else too "get out of" the worship service, the Lord gives us very much. It is there, in the assembly of the Lord's people that salvation through the blood of Christ is declared to the whole congregation.

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## OTHER NEWS

### **Calvin College Issues Statement of Support for Bouma**

In a prepared statement, Calvin College has issued a response to the pending overtures before Classis Wisconsin and Classis of the Heartland. The following is the complete text of the prepared statement by Phil de Haan, Calvin College director of media relations, without any form of editorial comment.

From Phil de Haan, Director of Media Relations, Calvin College  
Distributed by United Reformed News Service

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (February 19, 1997) URNS -- Calvin College affirms the decision of Synod 1996 that Dr. Hessel Bouma is responsibly working within the bounds provided in Church Order Article 29 as he examines the complex range of issues related to the lives of the unborn. In addition the 31-member Calvin College Board of Trustees -- which includes 29 CRC members, ministers, and business people, men and women, young and old -- has examined both the book *Christian Faith, Health, and Medical Practice* and Professor Bouma's teaching and concluded that the positions and conclusions taken in and reached in the book by the five authors do not violate the confessions or Scripture, standards to which all Calvin faculty members are held, and that Professor Bouma's classroom performance exhibits a healthy respect for the decisions of Synod and a deep love for Scripture and the Christian faith which serves as a foundation for all that he does. An academic setting such as Calvin College must allow its professors room to examine various

dynamics related to important issues of the day. Academic freedom is at the heart of what we do at Calvin -- always cradled in the confines of Scripture and our common confessions.

**Calvin College Professor's Views on Abortion Prompt More Complaints in Classis Wisconsin and Classis of the Heartland**

What should the official college of the Christian Reformed denomination do with a professor who states that "abortion is not the moral equivalent of murder," that "under exceptional circumstances, abortion occasionally may be recommended, cooperated with, or tolerated," and calls the Synod 1976 decision supporting the Human Life Amendment to the US Constitution "an emotional response to the dramatic increase in abortions in the wake of Roe v. Wade, based on minimal Scripture exegesis"? Synod 1996 answered that question by affirming an earlier conclusion by the college board of trustees "that the book [written by Dr. Hessel Bouma III and others] and Professor Bouma are strongly but not absolutely pro-life and that Professor Bouma maintains a healthy respect for the decisions of synod and reflects this in his teaching." That answer isn't good enough for a Classis Wisconsin committee appointed to study Bouma's views, or for First Christian Reformed Church in Sheldon, Iowa.