

Spiritual Growth

Modern day North American evangelicalism focuses on the theme of spiritual growth. Many books and articles have been written to help Christians grow. Recently this theme was picked up by a group of three Dutchmen who traveled to North America to see what there was to see. As a result of their travels they activated a discussion in the Netherlands about this subject to the point that in some circles an unhealthy antithesis has arisen between spiritual growth and doctrine.

Who has not heard of J. I. Packer, Martin Lloyd Jones and Larry Crabb? If you haven't read one or more of their books, you quite likely have heard of them. They are leading authours in the present North American Christian scene. But when visiting any decent Dutch book store you will see counters stacked with their books translated into Dutch. They are the hottest sellers among the Christian population of that country.

Now it must be said that many of the things these men write is very good, useful and edifying. At the same time there is reason for caution.

In 1994 Rev. H. Smit, Mr. A. Kamsteeg, and Mrs. A. Don-Van Leeuwen traveled to the U.S. to visit and interview a dozen North American authours and ask them if they would be willing to speak in the Netherlands. They were in search of spiritual inspiration from a different Christian background. As a result of their trip they organized regional meetings and invited some of the people they met in the US to speak at these gatherings. Much publicity was given to these 'congresses' and numerous articles and discussions have taken place as a consequence. Developments have been recorded in *Nederlands Dagblad*, articles of support have been written in *Bij de Tijd*, articles of analysis can be found in *De Reformatie* and *Nader Bekeken*, and articles of concern have been found in *Reformanda*. These are papers from the Liberated Reformed church community. There are likely more such articles to be found in the press of Dutch denominations. A new, 28 page paper, 'Groeï' (Growth) was started in September 1996. Its header reads "Magazine for Spiritual Forming and a Call to Revival".

The matter of spiritual growth has become so topical that even the theme of the recent "Schooldag" of the Liberated church in the Netherlands. When asked if this theme was chosen because of the consternation caused by the three travelers to North America the pat answer has been that spiritual growth is a constant struggle for the church and is not the private initiative of three zealous searchers nor is it something that must be imported from North America to Europe. Yet the impact of the publicity given to the three travelers has been extreme and one would be hard pressed not to suspect that the choice for the "Schooldag" theme has been affected by this impact.

IMPRESSIONS OF A 'SCHOOLDAG'

The Liberated churches in the Netherlands have the tradition of beginning the new Theological school year with a full day of speeches and songs to which all the church members are invited. This day is held in Kampen where the Theological University is located. In the past the whole of Kampen has been taken over for this event. As the years have come and gone the magnitude of this day has diminished somewhat but many still take the day off and gather together to visit the University, to listen to speeches, to sing together and to meet one another from across

the country.

This past September 25th yours truly and his wife were privileged to witness such a day. For me it was the first time. Seven church buildings were utilized for the event this year. In each building three different speakers would ascend the pulpit. We chose to listen to the speakers in the Nieuwe Kerk. These same three also spoke in three other buildings.

Prof. Dr. J. C. Thienpont from Aix de Provence in France was the first speaker. His topic was 'Psalmen: vast voedsel of snoepje voor onderweg?' (Psalms: Solid food or candy for the journey.) This man is instructor for reformed theological students in France. He has become increasingly aware of the riches of the Psalms as they are present in the Liberated churches. He deplored the fact that only some are available as accurate French translation and on the original melodies. He maintained that they are an excellent instrument toward spiritual growth. Beyond the actual words they present they include poetry and emotion that add to their value and beauty.

Prof. M. te Velde of the Theological University in Kampen addressed the theme of the day under the title 'Groeien doe je samen' (Growth is Something You Do Together). In the traditional manner of reformed ministers he had three sub points. Spiritual growth must be done in the context of the church of all time, the church throughout the world and, most importantly, in your local church. In this speech Prof. te Velde pointed out that spiritual growth is not a phenomenon of recent times or of North American authours but that it is the historical struggle of the church of all times. Reformations and Liberations have been caused because the church needed to return to spiritual growth. During the history of such attempt to grow the church became increasingly richer in its understanding of God's Word. We may not neglect such growth but must build on it.

Although North American authours do not have a monopoly on the understanding of spiritual growth, Prof. te Velde reminded his listeners that they should be prepared to accept leadership from all the church gathering work Jesus Christ, wherever in the world that takes place. But closest to each of us is the spiritual growth that takes place at home. He emphasized that such growth must take place in the context of the local congregation, the local church. Jesus Christ desires to feed his members in the local church. There is where they receive His gifts of grace. There they receive the food necessary for spiritual growth.

The third speaker in the Nieuwe Kerk was Prof. Dr. C. J. deRuijter, also of the Theological University in Kampen. His topic was 'Blijvend onvolgroeid' (Never Fully Grown). He suggested that a very good place to witness spiritual growth was during the years of catechetical instruction. As the young members of the church increased in their knowledge of scripture and while they matured as individuals they increased in spiritual growth. He also noted that many young Christians experienced crisis' in their lives after they had done profession of their faith and had stopped their catechetical learning. In his pastoral experience he noticed that when people are in their early twenties they can often be faced with many difficulties. From discussions with such people he determined that they missed the catechetical knowledge necessary to deal with such difficulties in a scriptural manner. For this reason he suggested that catechetical instruction be continued after people profess their faith. He realized that such a program of instruction may put a strain on ministers and offered the solution that other instructors could be appointed for such catechetical courses. Later, in a question and answer session, Prof. teVelde endorsed this suggestion and urged quick implementation rather than prolonged considerations.

In addition to the speeches organ music, psalm singing, and spiritual songs could be heard

from every church building in Kampen. As each gathering came to a pause, and later to an end, 7500 Liberated Reformed Christians poured into the narrow streets of this old city. Vendors with appropriate books, fund raisers for worthwhile causes and suppliers of physical nourishment were lined along these same streets and good Christian fellowship was witnessed all around. Friends and acquaintances, family not seen for years met and chatted, hugged and discussed. For someone who had never seen it before it was truly a heart warming experience.

ISOLATED EMPHASIS ON SPIRITUAL GROWTH DANGEROUS

Yet the theme of the day may not get lost in the emotion of the experience. Beyond the joy at seeing so many brothers and sisters together there was the gladness with which we could recognize the efforts of the speakers to emphasize the need for spiritual growth in the context of the church and balanced with scriptural doctrine. Although there may be a danger among some Christians to lean towards an automatic system of growth, there may, at the same time, not be a swing toward Pelagianism.

It is God who gives us the faith to believe, to do good works, to pray, to depend on Him. The Canons of Dort beautifully summarize God's Word about this matter in Chapter III/IV, Articles 16 and 17. There we confess, "... So also this divine grace of regeneration does not act upon men as stock and blocks and does not take away the will and its properties, or violently coerce it, but makes the will spiritually alive, heals it, corrects it, pleasantly and at the same time powerfully bends it. As a result, where formerly the rebellion and resistance of the flesh fully dominated, now a prompt and sincere obedience of the Spirit begins to prevail, in which the true, spiritual renewal and freedom of our will consists."

We are reminded in these articles that God uses means to provide spiritual growth. Therefore such growth can not be isolated from the teachings of scripture and the working of the Holy Spirit. It can not be an extra strong effort of man to will growth. But rather "the aforementioned supernatural working of God whereby He regenerates us, in no way excluded or overthrows the use of the gospel, which the most wise God has ordained to be the seed of regeneration and food of our soul. For this reason the apostles and teachers who succeeded them ... did not neglect to keep them (the people they instructed), by the holy admonitions of the gospel, under the administration of the Word, the sacraments, and discipline.

So today those who give or receive instruction in the Church should not dare to tempt God by separating what He in His good pleasure has willed to be kept very close together. For grace is conferred through admonitions, and the more readily we do our duty, the more this favour of God, who works in us, usually manifests itself in its luster and the more directly His works proceed."

Therefore those who teach that God does not use His powers to bend man's will to faith and conversion deny God's grace in our conversion and subject the work of Almighty God to the will of man. For it is His divine power that grants us all things that pertain to life and godliness (cf. 2 Peter 1:3).

PdB

The Value of our Book of Praise

By Wes Bredenhof

In the recent book "Our Reformed Church Service Book," (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1995) Rev. G. Van Rongen ably elucidates for his readers the history and value of our Book of Praise. He does so especially with a view to the position of this book within our Sunday worship services. The Book of Praise (along with our Bibles) is a testimony of what Reformed worship ought to be. It also defines other parts of our church life, by giving us the confessional standards, liturgical forms, prayers and the church order. The Book of Praise is certainly a defining statement of what it means to belong to a Canadian Reformed church. As such we ought to appreciate the value of this book for our churches.

However, this small book should not be forgotten in the other spheres of life. Too often the Book of Praise is left on the sidelines once we emerge from the pews on Sunday afternoon. For many families the Book of Praise seems to be as familiar as the church organ--we see it once a week and know it from that. To be sure, many families with school-age children regularly encounter their Books of Praise in conjunction with their children's memory work, but apart from that the Book of Praise is often a lonely tome.

The Book of Praise deserves a central place in our spiritual lives, not only as the book which (secondarily) defines our worship on Sundays, but also as a book which defines our worship every single day of the week. For example, consider how our Books of Praise should be employed in our family worship. The Book of Praise provides a ready library of familiar tunes (though some unfamiliar ones as well--practice, practice, practice) for family singing. Moreover, the creeds, confessions, and prayers may also take their appropriate places in our family worship.

The Book of Praise often finds itself neglected at many Bible study groups as well. If there is any enthusiasm for singing, especially among younger people, it is usually for syrupy hymns or monotonous evangelical "praise and worship" chants. Where is the Book of Praise? Have we given up on the covenant song book of God found in the Psalms? The Book of Praise is often shoved aside as irrelevant and boring--but is this not rather an indication of what our itching natural ears want to hear? An indictment of what we truly think about our worship on Sundays? Let's turn back to the Book of Praise--to solid majestic tunes, to trustworthy lyrics, to songs which we, as Reformed Christians, can truly call our own.

Finally, what about our schools? Occasionally one may hear rumblings about those who are discontented with our Book of Praise and want to introduce other songs into our Christian schools. Let us not be so quick and eager to cast aside the work which our fathers have done in giving us this book. Moreover, we ought to remember that a very significant portion of our Book of Praise is inspired by God Himself! Are we not satisfied with what God Himself has given us?

The Book of Praise, as a human work, has its shortcomings. There are various ways in which our beloved BoP could be improved--however, this is not the place to make such suggestions. Instead of being overly critical, let's look at the positive elements of this historical gem, of this Reformed testimony. We ought to appreciate the heritage which we have received--a heritage which stems straight from 16th century Geneva and the land-breaking work of men such as

John Calvin. The more willing we are to cast aside our Books of Praise in all spheres of life, the more willing we are to cast aside this rich Biblical heritage. God forbid that we do that!

A Letter to the Editors

Dear Editors:

It was heart warming to read that at least two articles out of three in Clarion No.18, Sept. 6, 1996 were in favour of church preservation. Though I can well agree that all believers should be on in Christ and I am quite willing to accept that the people in the churches named by Rev. J. Visscher are true believers, I do not agree with the direction that Rev. J. Visscher prescribes. It is not my intention, however, to try to give my opinion, or to show another way out. I would then fall into the same trap or stumble over the same rock as suggest others are doing.

I think we should first analyze what is important. And that is quite simple. Matthew 22:37 says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." And verse 39 adds, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (RSV)

The only way to show that we love God is to serve Him in the ways prescribed by Him in His word. This will automatically create an environment full of love for our neighbour.

This is, of course, easier said than done for we are all sinners and we all have our own way in which we like to translate scripture. One thing we should keep in mind is that the Bible was not given to us for our pleasure or our use, but for the honour and glory of God. So let us see what God says to us.

Romans 12 especially verse 2, says: "Do not be conformed to this world." Now I don't believe that the federation is in danger of becoming clouded over by worldly conduct, but we must keep sober and have a clear mind. Not, as is suggested in the end of the article by Rev. J. Visscher, that some may go it alone. This almost sounds like blackmail to me. This reminds me of environmentalists and the like, who even reject court orders because they want to have it their way and they want to have it now. We can not live under two federations, Matt. 6:24 & Luke 16:13 ... "No one can serve two masters," etc. We cannot afford to make an umbrella federation to be united at all costs. This would be saying that the Canadian Reformed Churches are not true churches of Jesus Christ. If we are not true churches then this should be corrected. If there is something in the federation that is not in accordance with the Word of God, be it in the Church Order, the Three Forms of Unity, the preaching of the word, or the discipline, then go the church orderly way and make it known and correct it. But if we are true churches then don't start bending the rules. That won't benefit us or those who should be attracted by us. What would they think of the Canadian Reformed Churches if they see that we are like a leaf in the wind blowing where the wind wills it? No, brothers, we must first and foremost be steadfast in our service to God and so set an example that others, whether they are believers or heathens, may be envious and so also become one in Christ with us.

With brotherly greetings, M.Onderwater

What does the Liberation mean for us Today? (Conclusion)

General Synod of 'sGravenhage - 1914 pronounced that:

"our reformed churches have consistently decided, in accordance with the example of the apostolic church, that tolerance may be exercised toward those brothers who, in truth, deviate in a certain part of the doctrine, provided such is not a fundamental part of the truth, and provided such deviants are prepared to

be better instructed and promise not to promote such deviations, naturally such individuals will not be eligible for election to a special office in the church as long as they maintain such deviations."

That is a wise synodical decision:

- erring individuals must be prepared to be instructed.
- they may not promote their wrong understanding.
- they are not eligible for election to special office.

In the sixties people did promote wrong teachings. Criticism was voiced against the Canons of Dort. There was criticism about being bound to the confessions. There was a call for tolerance. And among some there was also a tendency not to concern themselves with decisions of Synods.

But again, just as in the time of the Liberation, people were directed to God's Word alone. God speaks. He is the trustworthy One. And the confessions repeat what He says. As long as the churches, on the foundation of the Bible, do not come to different conclusions, the members continue to be bound to the confessions. Of course the Word of God always stands above our human confession.

Weren't mistakes made in 1926, 1944 and 1967? Undoubtedly: in the fellowship with one another and in the tone of our behaviour. And the Lord sees our sins and shortcomings even more clearly than we do. Let us humble ourselves. We could not hold-on to one another. Yet there is thankfulness for Gods preservation: church preservation.

Many more things happened in the forties and the sixties than what I am able to relate in this short time frame. But the foregoing has indeed been an important issue: being bound to the confessions of the church and the matter of tolerance. In the sixties the warning was issued: Brothers, this can't go on this way any longer. Error must be countered and not tolerated. In those years people have repeatedly pointed to the understanding we have in the subscriptions form for office bearers. But it carried on. Deformation in a church community usually begins slowly. Counter the beginnings! The question is not: how many errors can we tolerate and still remain church? Rather, the call is clear: strive to enter in, for the days are evil and the way is narrow. If we twist Scripture (2Peter 3:16) that tends to our own destruction. It doesn't matter if that happens with regard to baptism or with regard to the salvation of deceased believers or concerning God's election from eternity: we may not twist Scripture.

"Hold on to what you have": that's what it was about during the Liberation and also in the sixties.

Rev. M. J. C. Blok, translated from Reformanda by PdB

CHURCH NEWS

Classis Pacific of the Canadian Reformed Churches has not dealt with the notification by the church at Aldergrove and Langley that they intend to pursue pulpit exchange with the Free Reformed Church of Abbotsford. As the information was sent just prior to the convening date of Classis it was deemed inadmissible. Discussion about other documents that could be deemed admissible was also postponed as they dealt with the same subject matter.