

HARVEY'S HYPOTHESIS APPLIED

The "Just Do It" Approach Put Into Practice!

In the August 1966 issue of Christian Renewal and also the September 6th issue of Clarion we encounter under the title "That They May All Be One", "a modest proposal for the unity of the church." This proposal is, according to its author Rev. J. Visscher, "the result of years of personal reflection and communal discussion." We were informed via our local church news that on "Friday, Sept. 27, 1996 at 8:00 p.m. there will be a meeting of the representatives of the Canadian Reformed, Fellowship of Uniting Reformed, Free Reformed, and Orthodox Reformed Churches. The purpose of this meeting is to discuss the feasibility and desirability of creating an Association of Reformed Churches (ARCH) as a vehicle to promote further unity between the respective churches. The meeting is open to the public."

This meeting was held as scheduled. The chairman, Rev. J. Visscher, introduced his proposal with the statement that the Council of the Can. Ref. Church at Langley had "unanimously endorsed this proposal" and was therefore found willing to host this meeting on the ARCH proposal. Of the 24 churches that received invitations, 20 were represented at the meeting. The proposal was discussed at length. Only the delegates were permitted to speak, and speak they certainly did. As expected, strong support for the ARCH proposal came in the early stage of the discussions. Those who were sympathetic toward the proposal took the available opportunity to give it their endorsement. Yet, as the meeting continued, those who had their misgivings and reservations also took the time to express them.

The obvious disagreement on these matters as documented in Clarion (a) and other publications was also very evident at the meeting to discuss Rev. Visscher's ARCH proposal. Collectively the delegates' response to this "modest proposal for the unity of the church" could be summed up in one simple sentence: Never were so many delegates so firmly united in being so utterly divided. And that applies not only to the delegates from the "other" federations present at this meeting, but also to the delegates from the Canadian Reformed Churches. Even though there was strong emphasis on "the spiritual unity which is already ours", a distinct difference of opinion and general disagreement were the order of the day (evening). Why so much uneasiness or apprehension about Rev. Visscher's proposal? Why so much reluctance or plain unwillingness to be involved in "creating ARCH as a vehicle to promote further unity between the respective churches?"

It is not our intent, in this editorial, to address and discuss in detail all the questionable statements made or the false dilemmas created in the course of the discussion. For now we will be content to focus on only one particular aspect of this attempt "to promote further unity between the respective churches", namely the perception (or threat?) that it may be necessary for the local churches to "go it alone" or to "just do it." We shall call it "Harvey's Hypothesis" applied.

A hypothesis can be defined as "a supposition made as a basis for reasoning," or "an unproved theory, proposition, supposition etc., tentatively accepted to explain certain facts or to provide a basis for further investigation, argumentation, etc." Such is our definition of a

hypothesis. So who's Harvey? He is none other than Rev. Harvey Ouwinga of Second CRC in Kalamazoo. We were introduced to him in the pages of Christian Renewal (b) where he, in response to the discussion about the need to provide adequate grounds for women in office and women being delegated to attend Classis, made the following rather intriguing observation: "The ground is that we're doing it and therefore it ought to be done because it is practiced."

Our first reaction as Reformed people may indeed be surprise and disbelief. We are still somewhat familiar with the Reformed tradition of having to provide proper grounds for the statements, proposals, or decisions we make. Yet, absurd as this implausible or ludicrous observation may seem at first glance, it is not all that far removed from the sentiments expressed in the course of the ARCH proposal discussion on achieving federative church unity. Rev. Visscher's "modest proposal" loses some of its modesty when we are informed that "some may see their duty to the Lord and the unity of His church as being more important than (than RD) federative loyalty."

To many readers this statement seems to suggest a sentiment which says: "We 'will go it alone' if this proposal does not meet with a favorable response from the churches in the respective federations." In the words of our acquaintance Harvey, "we are doing it and therefore it ought to be done because it is practiced." We seem to have here an example of "Harvey's Hypothesis" applied or the "just do it" approach put into practice. Hopefully this is a totally wrong appraisal of what was meant or intended, yet some of the statements made in the course of the discussion on the ARCH proposal meeting did nothing to discourage or eradicate such conjecture. As proper grounds for this assertion let us examine a few examples of what was said to perpetuate the perception of the presence of the "just do it" approach to federative unity. (I quote from my notes RD)

1) "Do what is right in the eyes of the Lord. We must not hide behind rules." "Not 'the Church Order says', but the command of Christ." Several delegates expressed similar sentiments in reference to the Church Order. We may indeed disagree on what the Church Order says, or on whether or not it makes provisions for the situation under discussion, but to suggest that we must "do what is right in the eyes of the Lord" in contrast to abiding by the rules which the churches in a federation have voluntarily adopted and by which they are consequently bound is creating a false dilemma. It seems like we are exhorted to heed the command of Christ to be united, but not to worry about the rules. And that in the pretext of doing what is right in the eyes of the Lord!

In the Christian Reformed Churches we encountered similar sentiments, and there the solution to the problem of having allowed women on the pulpits and at Classis was to simply declare the word "male" in the Church Order "inoperative." A classic case of Harvey's Hypothesis applied, for Rev. Harvey Ouwinga's solution was simply to "just do it." The quoted statements of some of the delegates at the ARCH proposal meeting seem to suggest a similar solution.

2) Closely connected to the aforementioned statements is the remark that "we must not lose sight of the importance of the local church." Being Reformed, I think most of us will know what is meant, and we can wholeheartedly agree. Yet, when this is said in the context of the perceived necessity of having to "go it alone" and "not hide behind rules", and when this involves initiating pulpit exchanges, accepting each other's members to the Lord's Table, etc., with churches which are currently members in a number of other federations, then we have good reason to give the matter some further thought.

"We must not lose sight of the importance of the local Consistory", but neither must we lose sight of the fact that these Consistories and churches, whether Can. Ref., Free Ref., Orth. Ref., or Fellowship of Uniting Ref Churches, have voluntarily entered into federation with other churches. Therefore they are bound by the rules which they and all churches in their respective federations have voluntarily agreed upon. The apparent refusal of some of the delegates to acknowledge the binding nature of these voluntary agreements among the churches in their federation inevitably leads to the perceived liberty to "go it alone" and "just do it." Then Harvey's Hypothesis is readily applied.

3) Repeatedly we heard from the delegates of the four federations about "the spiritual unity which is already ours." This in spite of the fact that not all federations, or all of the churches in these respective federations share the need or desire to come to such a federative unity. We might very well ask: What is then the basis for this assertion? This question brings to the fore the dividedness present in our own federation on this matter. Do we enter into discussions to find out if they are true churches, or do we enter into discussions because we recognize them as true churches? Currently membership in the ICRC implies that we engage in discussions "to express and promote the unity of faith that the member churches have in Christ." Our sister churches in Australia (FRCA) could not agree with this formulation and suggested instead "to express and promote unity in the reformed faith which the member churches confess."

On the basis of the remarks made by a number of the delegates, the existence of "spiritual unity" with all the federations present at this meeting is deemed to be a foregone conclusion. Therefore the ARCH proposal is seen by many as another example of the "just do it" approach to federative unity. It seems that we are again urged to place ourselves in the same predicament of Synod 1977 of first considering or recognizing a church to be true, (OPC) and then spending the next fifteen to twenty years trying to provide proper grounds for such recognition, discussing the divergencies, and wondering how we can resolve this dilemma of our own making.

Rev. Visscher's observation (ARCH proposal) that it is his experience that the other federations "are more open to inviting outside ministers on their pulpits" and that this "may well relate, at least in part, to somewhat differing views on the church..." should alert us to the fact that we better deal with this difference before we "recognize in principle also each other's preaching", and prior to laying claim to "the spiritual unity which is already ours." Let us learn from our past mistakes, and first thoroughly discuss all of the issues. Only then will we, together, have the proper basis on which to decide if true spiritual unity does indeed exist.

4) In response to the remark that as federations "we need a statement of faith from the local churches" it was noted that the very fact that "we subscribe to the three forms of unity is already a statement of faith." However, the real point is not that we have such a statement, but rather, how does this statement of faith function in the respective federations. In our own churches this statement of faith which "we hold dear and adhere to" is by many churches members, including office-bearers, only adhered to "insofar as" or "to the extent that" they are scriptural, rather than because they are scriptural. When we add to this the expressed sentiment of some that "irrespective of doctrine, we will have the main thing in common: belief in our Lord and Saviour", then it might be prudent to examine the conclusion that "real unity exists" with these disconcerting developments in mind.

Is it possible that our perceived unity with churches in other federations is, at least in part,

the consequence of the "disunity which is already ours?" Do we all share the same definition of unity? Are there, also among us, "differing views on the church?" Have we examined the possibility that the perceived need of some of the local churches to "go it alone" or "just do it" is the result of the fact that we no longer know or agree on what it means to be reformed in both profession and practice? Are we then, like our acquaintance Harvey, prepared to put into practice an approach that has as its basis the hypothesis that "we're doing it and therefore it ought to be done because it is practiced?" On the basis of the statements made at the ARCH proposal meeting and at the recently held Classis we cannot totally discount that possibility.

In our overtures to come to federative unity with the federations mentioned in the ARCH proposal let us be careful that we, in what we say and do, do not give cause for the perception that at the local level we will "go it alone" or "just do it." The real or even the perceived application of Harvey's Hypothesis as the basis for our local efforts to federative unity can only lead to further exacerbate the "disunity which is already ours" as a federation of churches. Quoting from Prof. De Jong's article: "A conference or federation of federations is fine if it fosters unity; it is a detriment to all if it circumvents the revealed will of God concerning the way to true and lasting federative unity, That way is always: submission to the norms, and unity according to the call and norm of Art 28, B.C." (c)

Ron Dykstra

a) See *Clarion*, Sept. 6, 1996. *A Federative or a Local Matter?*, Rev. W.W.J. VanOene. *Church Unity and the Lord's Table (1)*, Prof. J.DeJong.

b) *Kalamazoo Declines to Allow Women Delegates to Classis*, Darrell Todd Maurina, *Christian Renewal*, Feb. 12/96.

c) *Pursuing Federative Unity: Obstacles, Possibilities and Strategies*, J. DeJong, *Clarion*, Aug. 23/96

The Clarity of Scripture

By H. DEJONG

My title is a translation of a subtitle of an address held by B. Kamphuis, professor of Dogmatics at the Theological University of the Reformed Churches (Liberated) in Kampen, the Netherlands. This address was held January 22, 1988 and was published as booklet entitled "Clear Language" (translation mine, as are the rest of the quotations in this article).

Prof. Kamphuis chose this subject on the occasion of his acceptance of his position because the clarity of Scripture has become a problem. He says: "I am convinced that one of the great problems of today's theology is the fact that the clarity of the Bible is no longer recognized in the practice of theologizing" (page 9).

It would be worthwhile to reproduce the entire address, but I will limit myself to a few citations. On page 19 he states:

A second point I want to raise is the individualistic, pious narrowing of the view on the meaning of the Bible. Although the Belgic Confession still says that God reveals Himself to us in His Word as far as is necessary for us in this life, to *His glory* and our salvation, it would seem that the emphasis is more and more being placed on the latter: it is for our salvation. No, even more pointedly, it is for *my* salvation. That is the focal point with which the Bible is read. And that determines the description of its clarity. The light of God's Word creates but a very small ray of light in this dark world. Outside of that ray a lot remains dark, also in the Bible itself. But that doesn't matter much: after all, it only affects the salvation of the soul.

As far as I can ascertain, such thinking is not unknown in and outside of "our" churches. The salvation of the soul seems more important than the glory of God. In my opinion, this is because many know the *word* "covenant", but not its meaning.

Prof. Kamphuis also points out that language is created for God. The language of Scripture is therefore not corrupted by sin, for all of Scripture is inspired by God (1 Tim.4:4). On pages 28 and 30 he writes:

Sin is not an insurmountable obstruction for the language of God's revelation. In brief, God wants to and can speak to us clearly. That, too, belongs to the clarity of Scripture...[God has spoken clear language to the first hearer and reader, but] how can this language still be clear for us, who live so many centuries later?...Because God, still today, speaks also to *us* in the covenant...[Only those] who allow the light of this clear Word to shine on their live [will see the Bible as] the living, always actual word of the covenant.

I find it curious that no reference is made here to the works of the late Dr. C. van der Waal, a vigorous proponent of the Bible as the book of God's covenant. Prof. K. Schilder also pointed us in this direction (see also Prof. J. Geertsema's comments in the "Character of Confessions", Clarion 6, March 22, 1996).

Finally, let us quote 2 Peter 1:20,21: "First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but man moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."

Having mentioned all of the above, we must be very careful, for instance, with the many Bible translations that thrust themselves upon us; also the NIV that is recommended for our use, although it is largely a dynamic equivalent translation. Numerous sects (Baptist Brethren, Mennonites, and Nazarenes) have contributed to this translation, none of them have an eye for the Bible as the book of God's covenant, making a good translation impossible.

We have seen that the Lord speaks to us in clear language in the Bible, namely covenant language. This language must be left in the Bible, as well as the contexts in which the Holy Spirit has placed His words. We must always hold before us the majesty of the Written Word, as we confess it in art.5 of the Belgic Confession: "Even the blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are being fulfilled."

Prof. Kamphuis points out that nonetheless there are passages in Scripture that are difficult to understand. Even Peter notes this about some parts of the epistles of Paul in 2 Peter 3:16. He add, however, "which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction." All the same,

God's Word has been written in human language, and can be studied and understood on the basis of the Word itself. For God's Word can be compared only with itself. That is why the apostle Paul admonishes in 1 Cor.4:6: "I have applied all this to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brethren, that you may learn by us, not to go beyond what is written."

To impose one's own patterns of thinking on the Scriptures is the equivalent of false prophecy, for only Scripture can be the guideline for interpreting Scripture - Scripture leads us, not the other way around.

The Value of Family Worship

By Wes Bredenhof

It would probably not be remiss to describe the typical Canadian Reformed family devotion as a simple combination of prayer and Bible reading, with possibly some questions or discussion on the passage that was read. Oftentimes this easily becomes a habit with very little positive effect on the spiritual life of the family. As we all agree that the family is one of the most important institutions in our lives, as important as the church, we should re-examine our habitual ways of family worship.

We should begin by asking the most obvious question, "What is worship?" For a definition we could perhaps think of the worship service on the Lord's Day. We read Scripture, we listen to the preaching, we take part in the sacraments, we sing, and we pray. Some of these elements belong to Sabbath worship and may not be removed from that context, for example, the sacraments; but what about the other elements? Should not our family worship also reflect, to a certain degree, the worship service?

From such passages as Colossians 3:16-17 and Ephesians 5:19-21, we see that worship contains the elements of instruction, praise, prayer, and discipline. Our worship service contains these elements, but does our family worship? Can we really call our family's service to God "worship" if it does not contain these elements?

Instruction is an important part of family worship. Even more so than the Church, the family has the responsibility to teach (the children) the truths of Scripture. This, after all, is the promise parents make at the baptism of their children. Especially husbands/fathers are to be concerned with this task since they normally are the spiritual heads of their households.

Praise is also important for family worship. Here the Book of Praise is extremely helpful. This beautiful book should be a living part of our lives, also among our families. The singing of Psalms and Hymns ought to be a cherished activity in our homes. Perhaps some find the Genevan tunes to be difficult--well, practice makes perfect. And even when there is a tune which is too difficult to master, why not consider investing in another Psalter such as the one put out by the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, "The Book of Psalms for Singing"? Such a Psalter could be utilized if there is an unmanageable tune in the Book of Praise. If we take our singing of praises to God seriously, there is no excuse. Family worship must contain singing of praises to God, for God has ordained song as the highest and most intensive form of praise to Him.

Prayer is a part of family worship which we cannot possibly neglect. But prayer is to be

more than a form prayer which father rattles off habitually every evening. Prayer must be well-thought out, not necessarily eloquent, but well-considered. The leader of family worship should ask for specific matters for prayer. Asking for prayer requests is not a common practice in our churches, but in order to pray effectively for one another we should know what and who to pray for.

Finally, discipline is also something we should consider employing in our family worship. If a family member needs to be publicly admonished for unfaithfulness, family worship is an appropriate time. This will be an effective means by which the family will be nurtured unto godliness--which will also bring honour and glory to God.

Family worship needs to be re-examined. We need to look at our own practices and see if there is a need for change. Our churches are only as strong as our families. We need to build strong families if we are to have strong churches. More importantly, it is especially through the family that children are introduced to the Christian faith. Children will take being a Christian seriously when they see that their parents do not regard it as burdensome and habitual. This may seem difficult or impossible to some, but the blessings which family worship brings are innumerable. Moreover it will enable us to show our thankfulness better to God for the rich blessings of salvation which He has showered upon us freely. Praise Him!

Suggested "liturgy" for family worship:

- a) Prayer for blessing (could be combined with prayer before a meal)
- b) Singing
- c) Reading
- d) Discussion (may be combined with Instruction)
- e) Instruction (going through the Confessions may be useful as a guide)
- f) Discipline (if required)
- g) Prayer requests
- h) Prayer of application/supplication

Some resources for family worship:

Family Worship: Biblical Basis, Historical Reality, Current Need, Kerry Ptacek, Covenant Family Fellowship, McCalla, Alabama, 1994.

The Book of Psalms for Singing, The Board of Education and Publication of the RPCNA, 7408 Pennsylvania Ave, Pittsburgh, PA, 15208, USA.

For those with Internet access, the following WWW site will be helpful:

<http://www.computer.adv.com/asformy house/>

"Masters of families, who preside in the other affairs of the house, must go before their households in the things of God. They must be as prophets, priests, and kings, in their own families; and as such they must keep up family-doctrine, family-worship, and family-discipline: then there is a church in the house, and that is the family religion I am persuading you to."

Matthew Henry in "A Church in the House: A Sermon Concerning Family Religion"