

WELL...WHAT THEN ??

There continues to be an ardent desire to pursue church unity, especially among Canadian Reformed people. Yet success remains elusive. The most recent developments have been the formation of the Uniting Reformed Churches of North America (URCNA) and the proposal for an Association of Reformed Churches (ARCH). Surely, many of us wonder how we should react to these developments. Although we favour unity, and because we do not always want to be negative, we struggle with the formation of a Scriptural response. Let us struggle together...

Unity

In order to focus on, and to determine when one reaches his goal, it is necessary to define it. Much of the difficulty with regard to church unity stems from a variety of definitions or understandings. While some are struggling with the best method to attain it others proudly proclaim that it already exists.

As in all questions of doctrine, so also with the matter of unity, it is best to turn to Scripture for guidance and solutions. Most often John 17 is quoted as the clearest text that instructs the Church about unity. This whole chapter is the prayer of Jesus Christ for His people. He prays that those whom the Father has given Him may be kept safe from the world and that they may be united even as the Father and the Son are united. As Jesus is preparing to depart from the earth He tells the Father that He has given His Word to His people and that His people have believed His Word. He prays that those whom He has kept while on the earth may continue to be separated from the world and united together around that Word. Further, He prays for those who will come after the present living believers. And finally, He prays that all those who are His may be with Him in eternal glory, united in the love which the Father has shown to the Son.

From this prayer we learn that church unity (the unity of the body of Jesus Christ) is to be modeled after the unity of the Father and the Son (the unity in the Trinity). We also learn that this unity must be based on Jesus Christ, the Word. The apostle John begins his gospel with this theme: "In the beginning was the Word", and "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men" (1:1, 4). Even though this Word has come to produce unity it also causes division - "So there was division among the people over Him" (7:43) and "There was again division among the Jews because of these words" (10:19). And why was there division? Because of unbelief - "...I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep...."(10:25,26)

Many more texts can be quoted, but the interested reader can pick up the gospel of John and read it from front to back to learn what the will of our Saviour is. We will come to the same conclusion that Guido de Bres came to: "The true Church...practices the pure preaching of the gospel."(Art.29, Belgic Confession).

"We believe, since this holy assembly and congregation is the assembly of the redeemed and there is no salvation outside of it, that no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, no matter what his state or quality may be. But all and everyone are obliged to join it and unite with it, maintaining the unity of the Church." (Art.28, BC).

From this Scriptural guidance we must firmly plant in our minds the need for doctrinal agreement. Our unity of confession must include agreement on what the Church is, what unity is,

as well as agreement about the perceived and real differences on other matters. It is against this background, this reality, this demand that we must evaluate activities of other reformed believers and proposed amalgamations.

URCNA

When we, Canadian (Liberated) Reformed believers, see what is happening in the Christian Reformed Church we may recognize the loving hand of our Father when He liberated us from a church that was headed in a wrong direction. We may recognize what Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind"(9:39).

Yet, once more, the Christian Reformed Church has rebuked the Word, and others have liberated themselves from her. More believers have been allowed to understand that the church to which they belonged was leaving the direction of the Word when it dealt with the issues of creation, new hermeneutics, women in office, homosexuality, etc. Twice God has led a significant group of people who wanted to remain true to the Word out of this false church.

Now one would expect that these two groups would seek one another and rejoice that they could worship together. But this has not happened. Rather the newly liberated people have decided to federate separately from the earlier liberated ones. The obvious question we should ask is, "Why?" To this question there have been many answers; but none of them satisfying. Some of these answers speak about difficulties in the Canadian Reformed Churches, others speak of unity first among this second group so that then they could be on the same footing as the others in unity discussions (federation to federation).

ARCH

At the same time as the URCNA is being established others are proposing an umbrella-type organization of a number of reformed denominations. Out of the Pacific Ministerial, authored by Rev. J. Visscher of the Canadian Reformed Church at Langley, BC, comes a proposal to form an association between the Canadian Reformed, Free Reformed, Orthodox Christian Reformed and Uniting Reformed Churches of North America. This association, called ARCH (Association of Reformed Churches), will provide an avenue for more discussions, allow for pulpit exchange, acceptance of attestations, and recognition of discipline from each other.

One can sympathize with the intent of this proposal. In the article proposing ARCH, Rev. Visscher describes the correct, scriptural goal for unity. He recognizes the need for federative unity, but also the many obstacles that are put up to discourage or prevent it. Rev. Visscher admits that his proposal is made in modesty and that it is not necessarily the only method of forging ahead to the desired goal. Yet, there are dangers inherent in this proposal that may prevent it from being an acceptable option for progress toward the Scriptural call to unity.

WELL...WHAT THEN ?

We are left with our dilemma. How do we react to these goings on?

In connection with the ARCH proposal a meeting was held in the Canadian Reformed Church at Langley, BC. All the local churches of the proposed participating church federations were invited and most came. During the discussions it became apparent that there are differing

views about unity and the need for an ARCH. Most speakers expressed an appreciation for the intent expressed in the proposal, but they varied on the need and effectiveness of it. One could sense that some were of the opinion that a type of unity already existed between the various federations and that they were reluctant to proceed beyond that which already existed. At the same time the formation of the URCNA indicates that those churches are not primarily interested in unity with other churches and federations, but prefer a unity with one another while they are prepared to accept a pluriform view of the wider catholic church.

It appears to be premature to adopt the ARCH proposals (to say nothing of the idea that these proposals should be redundant when true unity does come about.) ARCH proposes to put into place a type of unity that is not real unity as is defined in Scripture.

Many among the group of four church federations have a different understanding of what unity is or should be. They do not have the same definition of the end goal. At bottom there is not agreement on unity or on the definition of what the Church is. A number are content with the present circumstance of various reformed denominations all recognizing each other as true churches but remaining separate with their own identity and distinctives. In addition, one may wonder if there are other matters that this group of four would not be united on. It appears that this fear continues to live among many of the membership in the various federations.

We must conclude that the real solution lies in a true unity as expressed in God's Word. This can only be done in true and humble obedience. We must continue to discuss why we are separate and bring those issues to the light of the Word. We must pray for guidance and understanding; understanding, not of one another's point of view, but of Scripture's meaning.

Rev. Visscher's suggestion to appoint committees is a good one. It does not need an umbrella organization to operate. Synods, Classis, and even Consistories can appoint committees to study the differences between federations. But these studies ought to be realistic. They may point out the areas where there is agreement, but much of that has been done already, nor is that in question. The rub is the areas of disagreement. Those need to be addressed and discussed.

If the newly formed URCNA feel the need to compose a new Church Order would they not be willing to explain to us what is unscriptural about the one we have?

If they are happy to live with the changes that the Christian Reformed Churches have made to the Three Forms of Unity won't they be willing to discuss them with us. What about the perceived notion that experientialism is so much different than application of God's Word between some Free Reformed and Canadian Reformed?

We hope and pray that unity may continue to grow. That progress can be made in the discussions between federations. And that each may humble themselves before the demand of Scripture to be one even as the Father and the Son are one.

PdB

Our Firm Foundation

Imagine that you are a sailor, sailing along before the wind in your small sailboat. Everything is fine under the wide blue sky when suddenly the till snaps off in your hand. Picture the scene in your mind's eye. The trim little sailboat was sailing along so nicely, parting the waves like a knife. Now, without a rudder, it reels drunkenly at the will of the wind and waves. The contrast is startling.

Or picture yourself in a brightly lit room. You can clearly see everything, the open window, the chandelier, and the stair descending. Suddenly the room is thrown into total darkness. Now, where you walked moments before with confidence and a sure step, you grope blindly and hesitantly move about the room. You are lost, unable to orient yourself as you stagger around.

Scripture, the Word of God, is our tiller and the light with which we see. If in one catastrophic moment the Bible was revealed to you as false, would you reel and stagger like a ship without a tiller or a man in a darkened room? By God's grace and the work of the Holy Spirit we know that the Bible is the everlasting Truth, but have you ever thought deeply about what that means to you?

Take a moment and think of how many different ideas, theories, sciences and religions declare their truths to the world. Every day the newspapers, books, radios and TV's trumpet a newly discovered fact, or the coming of a new 'saviour of the world'. The Muslim will tell you that Mohammed the Prophet has received a revelation from Allah, the one true god. Believe and obey Allah and you will be saved. The scientist writes in his thesis that new numbers have been found for the speed at which the universe is expanding. On the basis of those numbers the universe is billions of years old. The Buddhist will ask you to meditate and free yourself from all the distractions that hound you. Only then will you truly know yourself and find salvation from the chains of this world. The list of 'truths' could go on and on. And to the list we could add ourselves. The Christian will tell you that a man named Jesus Christ died on a cross to free us from our sins. Believe in Jesus and you will receive eternal life. From every corner of the earth and from every person you will hear more different 'truths'.

Now I will appeal to your imagination again for a moment. Imagine yourself to be seated in a large room. Your chair is in the middle of the room. All around you in a huge crowd are gathered all the peoples of the world with their 'truths'. The evangelical Christian and the Roman Catholic bishop are seated somewhere on your left and they are loudly arguing with one another. The Buddhist quietly meditates, while beside him a fitness expert tries to convince everyone that a healthy body is all the truth you need. Over there stands the scientist whose views change with the conclusion of each new study. The Jews are huddled in a corner trying to hammer out all the various little details before they make their presentation.

The reason that all these people are together is so that they may present their 'truths' and you may choose between them. And so for hour after weary hour all the groups parade before your chair and declare to you the 'Truth'. Some are ludicrous and you cast them aside right away. Others have a grain of truth to them it seems, but they have some visible flaw which cannot stand up to close scrutiny. But you find that when all the groups have passed that there remain a large amount of 'truths' that you cannot with your human mind distinguish between. All of them have

various points on which they are diametrically opposite so that no two of them can be true at the same time. Yet, it is impossible to choose between them. The more you dwell on your choice the more befuddled you become. Each delegate presses his Koran or Bhagavad-Gita into your hands. The strange conflicting ideas whirl around in your head.

Perhaps you can understand the utter hopelessness of such a situation. At first you might be convinced by a skilled delegate with a persuasive tongue. But then another comes along and is very persuasive as well. There is absolutely no human way to decide between all those different 'truths'. Nothing is certain anymore because each 'truth' contradicts the other. It is impossible to choose one and it is impossible to accept them all. And so it becomes impossible to choose anything. You are left without truth of any kind. And if nothing is true who can say that murder, thievery, adultery, war, and blasphemy are wrong? And who can say that there is a God who dwells in the high heavens and rules the nations with a rod of iron? Can you imagine not being able to know for sure that anything is true?

Well, if you can picture what I have tried to describe then you will want to fiercely cling to the truths of Scripture. They will be to you like a firm rock for a drowning man to grab onto and hold with all his strength. To let go of the rock is to be carried away by the flood, tossed and thrown about where there is nothing firm.

There is no need to think deeply about all those hundreds of conflicting truths that harass us from every corner of the globe. Just believe. It is so simple. Just believe that the Bible is true. Believe it and you will find yourself miles above the whirling mass of confusion where people debate about the truth but find only doubt. If you just believe it you are an immovable rock that neither the Buddhist, nor the Muslim, nor the scientist can ever budge.

When we drink some water we quickly forget what it means to be thirsty. When we are sitting in front of a warm fire we easily forget the biting bitter sting of a winter wind. When we are healthy we forget the misery of a persistent sinus cold. And so we take water, heat and health for granted. These things lose their value in our minds when we fail to consider what it would *mean if we did not have them!* It is the same with Scripture. We can easily lose sight of the Bible's infinite value because we forget how much we really need it. I am sure, of course, that each one knows that the Bible is valuable. But how valuable is it to *you?* How much do *you* need it?

In His Word God rebukes us, exhorts us, comforts us, teaches us, and warns us. Without His Word we are nothing, but with His Word we are kings. So think for a moment how much you need His Word. Think of the emptiness that would fill your heart if you could not confront all the petty wisdom of the world and say, "I believe. It is enough". When you sit around the fireplace the fire seems warmer if you remember that not too long ago you were shivering outside in the cold. In the same way, you more fully realize that the Word of God is your anchor when you consider how much doubt, confusion, and despair would reign in your heart without it.

Most of us have been brought up from our youth to know and see faith. But sin, that is part of our life, forces us to consider doubt. Weigh the two in your hands. On the one hand there is confusion and despair; on the other hand there is comfort and confidence. So when sin threatens to undermine faith, consider its conclusion. Having a better understanding of its consequence we will be stronger for having rejected it. Just believe: "He who doubts is as the wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the sea" (James 1:6) but, "Thy word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens"(Psalm 119:89). Take a moment to consider how much you need God's Word and you'll

find that Psalm 119 is too short to sing of it. If you can more fully appreciate you need for His Word you will listen to it closer, defend it harder, be rooted in it deeper, and put it into practice better and more often.

David De Boer

EDUCATION, Who's Task Is It?

It appears that this question is not only being asked in Canada or North America, but also in South Africa. Rev. J. R. Visser wrote about it in Kompas, the periodical of the Church in South Africa. Rev. C. Bouwman translated a part of it in Una Sancta. We pass even a smaller part on so that our readers may consider this perspective.

The Task of the Church

With regards to education, responsibility is first of all for the parents. This does not mean, however, that the church has no task here. The church is not called to establish a school. The task of the church and especially the Consistory is this: that the parents be instructed in their task regarding the education of their children. This instruction is to be done with conviction. The Church of Jesus Christ can have an enormous influence in society by promoting, over against unchristian and unreformed education, the education that teaches true wisdom. Then the church understands her task. Then the church labours to the upbuilding and advantage of nation and people. Then the church works to the upbuilding of the kingdom of Christ. The Consistory shall need to admonish members when they fail, while the possibility exists, to send their children to a school where education is given in agreement with Christ's Word. This admonition is necessary because the Lord in His Word has given to parent the duty to bring up and teach their children in agreement with Christ's doctrine. The Consistory needs to be active on this point. The preaching, too, must give attention to it.

The education of the youth is a matter in which the entire congregation must be involved. The whole congregation is responsible for this education, for at baptism the children become members of the congregation. This concept is expressed beautifully in a form used for infant baptism in the time of the Great Reformation. We read, among other things, the following: "Since our children are now baptized into the fellowship of Christ, I ask that you, through Jesus Christ, recognize them as members of Christ and together with you as members of the congregation. Therefore I ask that each of you, in as far as Christ makes it possible for you, to help that these children be brought up for the Lord and that each of your help them to live, with body and soul, to the glory of Christ."

CHURCH NEWS

On Nov. 3rd a new church was instituted at Waterval-Boven in South Africa. Rev. P.A. de Wet, who seceded from the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederduits Gereformeerde Kerk) in September this year, was followed by a number of families. They have now decided to reinstitute the church in Waterval-Boven. It is expected this new congregation will apply for admission into the federation of the Free Reformed Churches of South Africa (Vrye Gereformeerde Kerke van Suid Afrika), a sister church of the Canadian Reformed Churches, the Free Reformed Churches of

Australia and the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands (Liberated). Last year the FRCSA already admitted another seceded congregation into the federation. It is called Bethal and its minister is Rev. P. Nel.