

A Christmas Meditation

“Good Christian Men, Rejoice”

No doubt the title is familiar to you. Who has not heard the upbeat musical strains of this Christmas ‘classic’ coming over the air-waves, in shopping malls, at the office or at some festive program? If people think about the words they hear or sing at all, one might wonder what goes through their minds.

Through the filter of the secular media, we see a world filled with the angry voices of protest and discontent. Strikes, layoffs, downsizing, consolidation - these are the economic realities of the day. Budget cutting in the public sector results in a decrease in services at hospitals, schools and welfare offices. Stories about increased demands on Food Banks and of people ‘falling between the cracks’ in our communities are the subject of emotional appeals to open our wallets in sympathetic response. Not to mention the sad plight of refugees by the thousands wandering through Africa or the thou-sands of victims of natural or man-made disasters all around the world.

Against such a backdrop, we hear the strains of “Good Christian Men, Rejoice”! What are people thinking, assuming they reflect for a moment? Do they hear that word ‘rejoice’ as they impatiently plunk down their plastic for one more purchase? What do we, who are called ‘Christians’, think about when we hear it? Do we still know what it means to rejoice both individually and collectively, or are we too caught up in the Christmas-time maelstrom of partying, spending and worldly merriment?

Let us reflect on that further. The apostle John tells us, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14) What a marvelous revelation, the culmination of prophetic utterances - the fact that God, through His Son, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, deigned to tabernacle (dwell) among us. That is reason for us, and all men who will heed His voice, to celebrate, to rejoice in the Immanuel - God with us.

We should not feel constrained in celebrating God’s redemptive acts, even though in form it might resemble that of others around us who may not believe. Rather, as we have opportunity, we can give account of the reason for our year- round rejoicing in the name of our Saviour, whose incarnation is the focus at this time of the year.

The quality of our rejoicing must be greater and more lasting than the fleeting attention the ‘world’ gives to it. We rejoice not only in His birth. As the apostle Paul says, “And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” (Phil. 2:8) There is a ‘history’ of salvation here whose impact we ignore at our peril. As the apostle states further in the same chapter, “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name” (vs. 9). Does the world still know the meaning of that name? How should we respond to the proclamation of that name?

Paul continues, “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.” (vs. 10) No one is excluded from this. Does this not give us the perfect evangelistic and

missionary mandate? Christ came to proclaim, for all, the way to salvation, that is, through Him the only son of God. Rejoice in that name and that message of salvation, for the redemption of all, wherever they may be on this earth.

God's desire is (as expressed through Paul by the Holy Spirit) that "every tongue (should) confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Phil. 2:11) No intimations here that there are many roads leading to God, no false ecumenism based on the lowest common denominator, no blending of truth and reason in a deceptive syncretism. No, there is but one way to the Father! Through the Son! Encouraged by the Holy Spirit! Let us rejoice in that knowledge of salvation, that glorious doctrine of the Triune God, which as the Athanasian Creed states so clearly, is a fundamental part of our catholic faith, "which except a man believe faith-fully, he cannot be saved."

In the midst of our rejoicing, we should not lose sight of the dangers which are all around us - in the world, in our still weak flesh, and yes, consequently even within the Church of God. We must stand firm against the enemies of the cross of Christ, as the apostle warns us in the same letter. For, as he says, "Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things." (Phil. 3:19) Let us therefore continue to be Scripturally-discerning of events within and without, for His honour's sake.

We are reminded, through the Spirit, by the same apostle that "our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself." (vs. 20,21) What an awesome picture, what a prospect! Too often we find ourselves constrained by our own petty concerns or worldly influence and forget the broader perspective quoted here which gives us what we need to know. It helps to shape our attitude in our daily walk and talk as God's children.

Finally, towards the conclusion of his letter, the apostle Paul exhorts (yes, exhorts) his hearers to "Rejoice in the Lord always". (Phil 4:

4) For good measure, he even repeats it once more. Paul uses these words of encouragement to give us perspective on the present ("have no anxiety about anything"). Remember the cares of the world expressed some paragraphs earlier?

What are we to do instead? "By prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (vs. 6) and what then will be the result? "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." While some may reject the singing of "Good Christian Men, Rejoice" as being politically incorrect, let us (men, women and children) continue on our way, rejoicing in Christ, the King.

H. J. Ludwig

Polemics and Music - "A Response"

Because I have been challenged to respond, I will do so. I do this even though my challenge remains unanswered, that those who wish to engage in polemics about my ideas about music argue against my scriptural argument. This response will be on two fronts. First, a direct response to Br. Ron Dykstra's editorial, "Music for the Christian?" September 28th,

1996. Second, a shift in discussion from music only to the general idea of holiness in a creation, fallen and redeemed.

To begin with, a comment about the use of the word "rock". It has been mentioned in other publications that it would have been good to define the term before getting involved in the discussion. I disagree, but only because all forms of music should be judged by the same criteria. I contend that not all classical music is good, nor is all rock music bad, and there is a huge range of musical styles in between.

Now, Br. Dykstra argues that if rock music has changed it is "certainly not for the better". If he is speaking about secular rock, I agree. The lyrics of the songs and the lifestyles of the artists are much more offensive to the Christian than they were even ten years ago. Surely though he is not referring to the lyrics and lifestyles of Christian artists.

Br. Dykstra then deals at length with the subject of "Pop" music as a revolutionary form of music. The quotes which he uses help him arrive at the conclusion that pop music is "revolutionary in character and intent". What Br. Dykstra does not speak about is the character and intent of artists like Stephen Curtis Chapman who writes, "May this recording bring honour and glory to the God by whom and for whom it was ultimately recorded." (Taken from the "Signs of Life" album) If space permitted I could give dozens of such quotes as well as song lyrics, all of which show a character and intent that, rather than being the human centered impetus for revolution, is the God centered impetus for worship.

Br. Dykstra goes on to the idea that Christ is less important in the lives of those who become involved in popular forms of entertainment. The conclusion he leaves to Nijhof, who states that, "We are Reformed... in our church activities, but our amusement, our rejoicing, we do not find in the Lord but in the amusement of this world." Is the claim here that it is un-Reformed to listen to music which promotes a Christian lifestyle? When my children sing and talk about fighting against Satan by staying close to God, or talk about loving their neighbors without concern for their skin color, have they learned something un-Reformed? Or have they learned something that can be applied to how they live as they learn and grow in the understanding of what it means to be a Christian in a Reformed Church?

Next comes the call to respond. How should I do that? I was accused of being dishonest by Peter Englefield because I reported that there were times in the history of music when music had to be reclaimed for church use. Is he also dishonest because he did not include information about the development of Rhythm and Blues from the Southern United States gospel music? Of course not! I was no more dishonest than he was, so I saw no reason to respond to his accusation. John Makujina's article is also an "excellent article" according to Br. Dykstra. I won't disagree, but the Scriptural focus to this article rests on the text of 1 Cor 14: 7-11, in which Paul uses the example of the necessity for clear notes from instruments to prove that it is more important to be understood than it is to speak in tongues. Paul's analogy is reversed when it is used to prove that the sounds of the instruments need to be understood. I used the same text to show that one criterion we should use for judging music is whether or not we can understand the lyrics. This is more consistent with what Paul was saying. Beyond that, I could produce as many scholarly arguments that rock does not have the effect John Makujina claims it does. It would only be a battle of the sources. I have not avoided the issue. I am waiting for something more solid to engage with.

In the second to last paragraph Br. Dykstra says he has "already established that the

revolutionary element is present in the music itself". I say he has not. It is assumed, not proven, and it ignores the character and intent of Christian music in all forms. Br. Dykstra concludes this paragraph with the quote, "In this music we must see the antithesis which in creation exists between the church and the world". I agree that we need to be aware of the antithesis. I disagree with where Br. Dykstra draws the line. The line is in each and every person and activity in the world. It runs straight through the heart of every Christian, and then in everything he says, does, and thinks. It is a matter of obedience and disobedience.

This leads to the second part of this response, shifting the discussion to the question of redemption of a fallen world. What is it that makes one activity redeemed and another not? What makes one activity God pleasing and another not?

Br. Dykstra used the argument that the intent of a certain type of music can be judged, and this is one criterion to make it acceptable or not. I agree. Rev. K. Sietsma, in his book *The Idea of Office* writes that the difference between the good a believer does in a day and the good an unbeliever does in a day is one of intent. The believer wakes up intending to serve God and the unbeliever does not. I believe this is true of all areas of life. To give an example of how this applies in practical ways, consider that the Bible calls the love of money "a root of all evils" (Tim 6:10). Now an unbeliever can love money, and still use to do what seems to be good. However, unless it is redeemed by an intention to serve God, the end result is not good. It remains the sinful act of man. On the other hand, a believer can also be sinful and love money but because he uses it to do well with the intention of serving the Lord, the Lord will redeem his efforts so that the product of the money and labour is holy.

I once wrote that the line of Cain listed in Genesis 4 contained the instruments of music, showing that they had to be redeemed for God's service. I was later asked, what about the tents? Did they have to be redeemed as well? The answer is yes. All of creation had fallen and everything used from then on had to be redeemed, even including the use of livestock which was first listed in the line of Cain (Gen 4:20). What is the difference between an unbeliever's cow and a believer's cow? Only the intent of the one who owns it.

Br. Dykstra himself pointed out to me that at the time that the Genevan tunes were written there was no difference between the musical style of the church and the world. What is left then that separates the two? It is not the intent? The intent can be seen through the lyrics of praise, and the reason the songs were written. In a constantly changing cultural world this remains my basis for judging all my entertainment. As Br. Dykstra quotes again from Nijhof, we must "rejoice in the Lord at all times." I won't do it perfectly, but my intent is to serve God.

I find it, then, unworthy of "Reformed Polemics" to comment that my statements, assertions, and sentiments are "rather dubious or questionable", because they are disagreed with, while other articles are "Scriptural and scholarly" because they confirmations of previous thought. I still have not seen an argument that says that I used Scripture incorrectly, or dubiously, or questionably. As to the comment that I am unable to discern, I assert that I discern quite clearly, through the Scriptural glasses of a Christian worldview which says that "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof". I consider it proper discernment to understand that the entire world and everything in it was affected by the fall, meaning that everything we use from then on must first be redeemed. Our goal should be to use the earth to the glory of His Holy name. That begins with our

intentions, and ends with God's redemption. I do discern, and I do seek to recognize the antithesis. I discern the character and intent. I think Br. Dykstra is only judging the type.

How long will this discussion go on? In a sermon I heard while visiting the Valley last summer, direct reference was made to the discussion about music in a sermon that was on the topic of holiness. To paraphrase, "It is not a question of what music you listen to. It is a question of holiness." The point bothered me at that time because the question of music was one I was very involved in and felt very strongly about. I've since learned to look at the issue the way Paul told the Romans to look at the issues of worship and food. Let everyone be convinced in his own mind. (Romans 14:5) I am convinced that I will be able to give account to God.

To conclude, holiness is only available to believers. Believers are set apart not because they are better, or more able to serve, but because God has given them the intention to serve. On this basis is the fallen world redeemed, and on this basis the Christian should judge everything. Bill Selles

[The recent editorial "Thumpus Uninterruptus" (November 23/96) addresses some of the matters raised in this response, but Br. Ron Dykstra will address the many remaining points in future editorials or articles." The editors.]

CHURCH CHOICE?

'Shopping'

You can read it about it repeatedly, first here and then there: Young people will do public profession of faith, and that means that they have chosen for God, but that certainly does not mean that they have made a Church choice.

We read about that again in 'De Reformatie' of Nov.16, 1996. In an article titled *Consumption in the Church* mention is made, among other things, about 'shopping'. The author notes that in the Church one can also meet a consumptive attitude. Then church members sit in Church and ask themselves: 'Am I happy here?' That is the question that is of prime importance to the critical consumer. We quote:

"You can also find consumers in the Church. You can notice that by the consequences of their attitude. If, for example, things don't go well in Church an increasing number of people look elsewhere. Sometimes in other congregations and sometimes in another church. It is certainly not in vain that we call that 'shopping'. A critical consumer in our society has a good look at what a store has to offer. If you don't like what you see you go to the next store. Church-goers are learning the same critical attitude. If you're not happy you can look for an other address."

And Then It Comes

And then we get to the point - the author continues...

"That such a phenomenon exists in the Church will not be denied. It becomes increasingly clear from the fact that young people no longer consider their profession of faith a Church choice. More and more the young people understand their profession as a

choice for God. But the matter of church membership is left to the situation in the city where they will end up living.

How Is That Possible?

This is something we just can't understand. How is this possible? Of course doing profession is a public choosing for the Lord, the faithful God of the covenant, into which one has been placed on the basis of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord has indeed chosen you to belong to Him - for ever. And your public profession is a choice for Him in answer to His choosing you. It is a choice worked in your heart by the Holy Spirit through the Holy Word of the Lord. But the Lord has not only placed you in the covenant but He has also given you a place in His Church. And when you profess your faith you also express your joy of being allowed to belong to the congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ. You don't exercise a church choice. The Lord has already made that choice for you. He has placed you within His Church. Doesn't someone who professes their faith within a Reformed Church believe what it confesses about the church in accordance with God's Word? Doesn't such a person believe that that is the Church? And we are speaking about Reformed members, aren't we? And they subscribe to the confessions, - including what these say about the church, - don't they?

How Is It With The Catechetical Instruction?

When we read things like, "But in which church they will become members depends on the situation in the place where they will end up living" then we ask ourselves what has happened during the catechetical instruction such people received before professing their faith. For such instruction would also have included, among other things, what Scripture and Confessions teach about the Church. Furthermore, at pre-confession class some time must have been spent on the Form for Public Profession of Faith. We pay particular attention to the first question: 'Do you wholeheartedly believe the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confessions and taught here in this Christian Church? DO you promise by the grace of God steadfastly to continue in this doctrine in life and death, rejecting all heresies and errors conflicting with God's Word?' As far as we know these questions are always reviewed by the professing catechumen. Yes, they are often broadly discussed.

We have more than one experience that such a catechumen said: 'I don't know if I will be staying with this church', or: 'I don't know if I will choose for this church.' To this last question we have always answered: 'You don't have to choose at all. The Lord has already chosen you. What is expected of you is that you publicly express your joy and thankfulness at being chosen.' Whenever these two questions were asked, every time again; an ample and detailed discussion followed. At no time was there not spoken about the doctrine of the church at pre-confession classes. One knew precisely what he was doing when he professed his faith. That is to say: one could know it precisely. And any one who spoke and maintained what was mentioned before, i.e. 'I don't know if I will be staying with this church'; or 'I don't know if I will choose for this church', would not do profession of his faith. Such persons would not be admitted. That would then not be a judgment by the minister, who had been giving catechism, but by the consistory that took all the question of the Form seriously. Fortunately, this is the only manner in which we have experienced things. No consistory ever had to have a discussion about these matters. It was clear for everyone.

And we can't imagine that there is a reformed consistory that would permit someone to publicly profess their faith if they weren't convinced that the church where they have received their place is the place where they belong. And we can't imagine that any catechism class would teach differently or even that the doctrine of the church remains un-discussed. Rev. J. M. Goedhart from Reformanda, Dec.4, 1996