

THE DIALECT OF CONFESSIONAL INDIFFERENCE

There is More than One Way to Worship

In the Christian Reformed Churches (ChrRC) much time has been spent discussing and debating the whole matter of women in office and the entire issue of homosexuality. The discussion or debate has now expanded to include the subject of public worship or more specifically the need to make changes to “the prescribed form of public worship” (liturgy). In the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) there is still a sense of liturgical similarity and familiarity when we visit the other churches in our federation. Yet also in our federation “there are churches which for one reason or another have decided to implement some changes with respect to the standard Reformed liturgy.”^(a)

In a recent issue of Clarion Prof. J. De Jong notes that “in themselves changes are not bad things. But the question remains whether changes are for the better. Sometimes it seems as if the enthusiasm for new approaches outweighs the understanding of the reasons we have for doing things in certain established ways. We can all easily climb aboard the wagon of liturgical and ecclesiastical change. In fact, it even seems to be somewhat of a fashion today. But do we know where the wagon is headed?”^(b)

When we follow the developments in the ChrRC we indeed do know where “the wagon is headed.” Rev. John Vermeer, pastor of the First ChrRC of Sheldon, IA, notes that in the ChrRC the wagon has headed in the direction of “the contemporary service, the children’s service, the Tenebra service, the praise and prayer service, the candlelight service, the healing service and the concert of prayer service.”^(c) He notes that “there is the liturgical dance, the liturgical drama and the liturgical concert. There is the blue hymnal, the gray hymnal, the *Hymns for the Family of God*, praise songs, songs in the book and songs on the screen. There is organ music, keyboard music, rock music and recorded music. There are those who clap after special music, clap with the music they are singing, clap by the direction of the worship leader. Along with clapping of hands are the raising of hands, the shaking of hands and the holding of hands.”

Rev. Vermeer observes that “it is obvious that we (ChrRC) are not worshipping ‘one way’ any more. That recognition is the one reason we hear people saying, ‘There’s more than one way to worship.’” The statement that “there is more than one way to worship” is more than simply recognizing that change has moved people to make this statement. Rev. Vermeer notes that “there have been evangelistic, temporal, pragmatic, domestic, emotional and ecumenical motivations tied up in this declaration. What seems to be lacking in much of the motivation is a true wrestling with what we have said confessionally concerning worship.”^(d)

Rev. Vermeer spent some time “reflecting on common statements made pertaining to issues within the church that reveal a sense of confessional indifference.” A review or summary of Rev. Vermeer “reflections” will be extremely beneficial for us as members of the CanRC, particularly now that “there are churches which have decided to implement some changes with respect to the standard Reformed liturgy,” in the discussions that are taking place, and in “the common statements

made” we, as members of the CanRC, also encounter what Rev Vermeer described as “the dialect of confessional indifference.” What persuades people to say that “there is more than one way to worship?” What are some of the motivations that prompt churches to “implement some changes with respect to the standard Reformed liturgy? Let’s take a look at Rev. Vermeer’s appraisal of the motivations and arguments behind the perceived need for changes to the way we worship.

There is, first of all, the **EVANGELISTIC MOTIVATION**. We live in a post-Christian era, and we must change liturgically. We have to ask the question, “What is attractive to the un-churched?” and respond accordingly. Our services must restructure, moving from a focus on the faithful, to a focus on the faithless. If we want newcomers in our church we cannot expect them to be attracted to ways that may be familiar to us as believers, but we must shift to what they as unbelievers can understand and are comfortable with.

Closely related to the evangelistic argument is the **CONTEMPORARY ARGUMENT**. Our worship has to keep up with the times. If people are listening to a rock-and roll beat, we cannot expect them to appreciate a hymnodic tempo. After all, it’s not the music, but the message that counts. Also, we live in a visual age. We are dealing with television minds, and video consumers - people who are used to being entertained by the arts, and entertained in a multi-sound-bite manner. We must keep the sermons short and find more innovative and more contemporary approaches to bringing the Word to these people.

The **PRAGMATIC ARGUMENT** states that we have to do what it takes to bring people in and to keep them in. If what we are doing does not attract the people then we have to find out what appeals to them. Bring in well-known speakers and famous singers; try drama, dance, or concert, etc. If it means restructuring the order of worship, let’s do it. Whatever it takes, we will do!

The **DOMESTIC ARGUMENT** is one pertaining to the family. It also has a sense of pragmatism in it. “The children get little out of the conventional service, so let them have their own service. Besides, they can be a distraction to others in the congregation, not to mention a distraction to those trying to take care of them.”

The **EMOTIONAL ARGUMENT** has elements of the other motivations involved but also has its own distinctive nature: “The services are dull, boring, too long and too repetitive. They’re not exciting enough and they lack a true spiritual dimension. We need to reflect the joy of the Lord more in our services. We need to be more contemporary and we need more variety in the worship services. We have to do something to liven them up. If we don’t our young people will go elsewhere.”

There is, furthermore, an **ECUMENICAL MOTIVATION** to today’s liturgical dialect. “There is much we can learn from the charismatics in worship, just like they can learn from the Reformed concerning theology.” There is a greater emphasis on the lectionary and the liturgical calendar rather than the catechetical year. Also, one sees a church growth, seeker-sensitive, contemporary-worship mentality that seems to know no partiality to denomination.

Rev. Vermeer notes that “truly there are many things - even more than we have mentioned - that motivate a person to say, ‘There is more than one way to worship.’ And certainly there are some legitimate concerns expressed in these motivations... But what seems to be lacking in much of the

motivation is a true wrestling with what we have said confessionally concerning worship. When a person says there is more than one way to worship, there are certainly some pertinent questions to ask in reply: ‘If there is more than one way to worship, how does one define confessionally what those ways are? Do the confessions speak about worship? How does our Reformed view of the covenant affect the way we approach worship? When does worship take place from a Reformed, confessional point of view? What makes our worship Reformed from a confessional point of view? What is happening in worship from a Reformed point of view? What elements do we include in Reformed worship? Can we speak of a distinctively Reformed way of worship?’”^(e)

According to Rev. Vermeer, “the problem appears to be that we are quick in the ChrRC to state our liturgical freedom, but slow to speak confessionally as to the basis of that freedom. We often seem to be asking the wrong questions. We are asking the questions: ‘Is it attractive? Do I like it? Does it work? Will others like it? Is it visual? Does it move me? Is it fun? Is it contemporary? How can we do this differently? Is it what everyone else is doing?’ (a somewhat ironic statement) The questions we don’t hear are: ‘Is it right? Is this what God wants? Is this what we confess as a church to be legitimate? Is God pleased? How does this express a distinctively Reformed way of doing things? How does this witness to the world of the distinctive approach that Reformed people take with regard to the worship of their God? How is our covenant view of life and reality affected by our liturgical practice? What really are the elements that comprise Reformed worship?’”^(f)

When we search for answers to the latter kinds of questions then we will come to “the understanding of the reasons we have for doing things in a certain way.” (J. De Jong) Then we are actually engaged in a “true wrestling with what we have said confessionally concerning worship.” (J. Vermeer) Our Reformed standards do address the question of worship, either implicitly or explicitly. Rev. Vermeer formulates a number of principles derived from these standards, and we quote:

- 1) Official worship (that is, worship called by the office-bearers of the church) is an assembling of God’s people (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day (LD) 38). It is, therefore, not first of all an evangelistic endeavour.
- 2) God’s people include young and old alike (LD 27, A. 74). To take children from official worship is to take them from the assembly to which they are called.
- 3) God calls us to emphasize the audible in proclamation (LD 25, Q.65; LD 35), for it is not in seeing that one believes but in hearing (Rom. 10:14-17), which is in line with the age in which we live: a) where we live by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7; John 20:29), and b) in the age of fulfillment through Jesus Christ, not in the Old Testament shadows where the visual was so necessary to typify the coming Messiah (Heb. 1:1ff.). This is not to say that the visual is ignored, but only that the visual should be reserved for the sacraments the Lord has instituted, and that even there, as with anything visual, the proclamation of the gospel must ultimately explain their significance.
- 4) God is present with His people in official worship. The church of Christ is a body where Christ dwells with her by means of His Spirit (LD 18, 20). Surely He will be with her when she is called to assemble by those authorized by Christ. Such presence must cause both joy

in our hearts as well as reverent fear and should be made evident in the way we approach Him.

- 5) God calls us to worship, not by our own creative means, but in accordance with His word (LD 35). God decides how He is to be worshipped; we don't decide for Him according to our tastes, whether as believers or unbelievers.
- 6) Worship should be simple in nature (LD 35) in order to keep anything from coming between the communion that the Lord establishes with His people through the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments.
- 7) The means of grace that the Lord provides are found in the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments (LD 25. Q. 65, Belgic Confession 29, Canons of Dort, V, 14). Making substitutes for these means, no matter what the motivation, is to ignore the means the Lord has provided for the encouragement and challenge of God's people.
- 8) Worship is, by its very nature, God-directed (LD 34, Q. 94; LD 38; LD 47). God's people seek blessing to be sure, but this only comes from a gracious God who deserves all our praise, all our attention and all our love. Such a selfless, God-focused attitude must be ours as we come to worship, and if such is occurring in our worship services, we should be thankful.
- 9) Worship should be holy, since our God is holy and His people are declared holy (LD 21; BC 27). Therefore what should be done in holy worship must be done in righteousness, and should be done in a distinctive fashion that reflects, not the world's tastes, but the God who calls His people to reflect His holiness. If our worship services look more like Broadway or Hollywood, we must question how it is that our worship is displaying our distinctive Christian calling."

Rev. Vermeer has done us a great service by familiarizing us with "the dialect of confessional indifference" as it has manifested itself in the ChrRC. He has shown us what direction we will be going when we "climb aboard the wagon of liturgical and ecclesiastical change." His "reflections" have provided us with a number of principals derived from our Reformed standards. His conclusion: "As we grapple with the issue of worship, may God help us to do so more and more in a confessional way." Prof. De Jong's conclusion: "It is simply a matter of survival, and of remaining what we are called to be: Reformed believers testifying to the grace, mercy and love of God in an apostate and self-directed world." (g)

Ron Dykstra

(a) (b) (g) *The Head or the Tail*, J. De Jong, Clarion, June 14/96.

(c) (d) (e) (f) *The Dialect of Confessional Indifference*, John Vermeer, The Outlook, March 1996.

THE FAMILY

The Beginning of the Family

When a boy and a girl marry a family has begun. The two of them already form a family. A family does not just come into being when children arrive. No, even if there are no children, if the boy and the girl never receive children, they never-the-less form a family - a family of two people. That

is also one of the reasons that it is very important how you start a marriage relationship. In connection with that we have selected Ephesians 5:22-23 as our guide for this article.

The Position of Marriage

In Ephesians 5:22-23 the apostle Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, puts marriage in its proper place. He puts it in its proper, prominent place, where the Lord wants it to be. Paul calls what the Lord says in Gen.2:24, that a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and that they shall become one flesh, a mystery. And then he says, "This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church;" (vs. 32). And that mystery lies in this:

- That over against his wife the husband displays the image of Christ; namely, his relationship over against the congregation, as a Bridegroom to his bride.
- That over against her husband the wife displays the image of the congregation; namely, her relationship over against Christ, as bride to her heavenly Bridegroom.

The Relationship of the Husband Over Against His Wife

Christ makes it possible for His congregation to be for Him what He wants her to be for Him. In the same way a husband must make it possible for his wife to be for him what he wants her to be for him. A husband must love his wife just as Christ loves his congregation. The apostle works this out even more. He points out that Christ really was prepared to sacrifice everything for His congregation, even to the point of blood and life itself. For her sake He has surrendered Himself, namely to death on the cross and in hell; just so that He could make her holy and without blemish (vs.27).

The love of the Lord for his church is the measuring rod for the love of a husband for his wife. A husband must love his wife as his own body (vs. 28). That is not to say that the love of a husband for his wife ought to be the same as for his own body. But it does mean that such love must be natural, self-evident. No one ever hates his own body. On the contrary, he feeds and provides for it. In the same manner Christ cares for His body, His congregation, and us as members of His congregation (vs.29, 30).

Notice how lovingly Christ treats His congregation. In the same manner a husband must treat his wife. That's sure something - that command to the husband with regard to his wife. That's quite a task! But along with the rest of the congregation Christ also feeds and provides for such men, just as a mother cares for the little child she has carried just under her heart. In the same manner Christ gives to the husband all he needs to fulfill his task.

The Relationship of the Wife Over Against Her Husband

The relationship of the wife over against her husband must image the relationship of the church over against her Lord. Because Christ is the head of his congregation, his body, the congregation must be submissive to Christ (vs.22, 23). The head leads and steers the body. The body obeys the head. The same applies to the congregation of Christ. When things are well this happens willingly and happily, not as a result of coercion. Because the congregation knows that is the best, for Christ

wants and works for only what is best for her. In the same manner a wife must be submissive to her husband.

Paul does not forget the difference between a husband and Christ. Nor would that be possible, seeing he is being driven by the Holy Spirit. In verse 23 we read, "...Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is Himself its Saviour." It does not say, as it does in some newer translations (de Nieuwe Vertaling), that he maintains his body. And that now the husband must take care of his wife in the same manner.

The husband is not the redeemer of his wife. While Christ is the redeemer of his congregation. That difference is very great. Notwithstanding the wife must remain equally submissive to her husband as the congregation is to her Lord (vs.24).

In addition we read, "in everything". That does not mean through thick and thin. Rather, it means anything that the husband might ask of his wife in agreement with Scripture. For only that is good for her as well as for him.

After all, she must be obedient to her husband "as to the Lord" (vs.22). Nor would a faithful, Bible-believing husband dare to ask anything from his wife that is contrary to Scripture. The wife should be able to be as submissive to her husband as to the Lord. And her husband should see to it that this is possible. That means he can't act as a tyrant, treat his wife as a slave or consider her a house maid. Rather, he should strive to treat her in the same loving manner that Christ treats his congregation.

That's quite something, that task of the wife with regard to her husband in marriage. It's quite a task! But along with his whole congregation the Lord also feeds and provides for the wives. He gives them, too, what they need to fulfill their task. He also prepares the husbands to willingly deal with his wife in accordance with his task.

Unity between husband and wife in their prayer life about their respective tasks in marriage is certainly included here. That prayer life is included in Gods counsel.

The Basis

That is the basis of going out with one another as boys and girls, in going steady, and in getting engaged. That is the basis for preparation for marriage, if the Lord grants marriage. This is the way it should be in a marriage; just as it is described in Ephesians 5:22-33. For that's what the Lord says. These are the things that young men must keep in mind when they ask a girl out, or when girls are asked out.

The desire for marriage is from the Lord, Himself. There's nothing wrong with it. That's how the Lord has made boys and girls - to marry. That is the rule, which is confirmed by the exception. But the desire to marry must fall into line with what the Lord has to say about it, as He does in Eph.5. Young people may never think, "as long as I get married". They should long for a marriage as described by the LORD. A marriage in which as a husband over against your wife you mirror the image of Christ over against his congregation. A marriage in which as a wife over against your husband you mirror the image of the congregation over against Christ.

For your desires ought to be in agreement with the desire of the Lord. Whether you are husband or wife, boy or girl, you need to walk and talk according to the will of the Lord in your whole life; and thus also in marriage. In that way you help the Lord gather and build his congregation. And isn't that what we all want to do, we and our children? Isn't that our joy? Isn't that what makes Him glad? Won't we live in this way since we know from His Word what awaits His congregation, wherein we, as members of the body of Christ, may share?

Rev. J. M. Goedhart, from Reformanda, Dec.4, 1996

Translated by PdB

ONCE

Once
every eye
shall see Him.

Once
He'll come again
on the clouds.

Once
all men
shall kneel
before Him,
all nations,
all peoples.

Once
I too shall stand
before His throne.

Once
I'll look
into His eyes.

Once
I'll trembling kneel
before Him -
shall I be allowed
to enter His Kingdom?

Then

He'll say: Come,
you are holy -
I died on the cross
for your sins.

Then
I'll go in
to the feast
where there is no sin,
no sorrow to be found.

Then
shall I
together with them
who have also believed
in Him
thankfully
perfectly
joyfully
and eternally praise God!