

BLACK AND WHITE THINKING

Church Union and Shades of Gray

In previous editorials we have dealt with “discernment,” and we stated that “discernment will come only as we train our minds to be understanding in the truth of God’s Word and learn to apply that truth skillfully to our lives.” We must learn to discern. (a) We also discussed “reckless faith,” and we observed, quoting J.F MacArthur, that “discernment is the process of making careful distinctions in our thinking about truth. The discerning person is the one who draws a clear contrast between truth and error... Discernment is black and white thinking - the conscious refusal to color every issue in shades of gray. No one can be truly discerning without developing skill in separating divine truth from error” (p.69). (b) MacArthur notes that “the culture around us has declared war on all standards, and the church is unwittingly following suit. It has become quite popular among Christians to assert that almost nothing is black and white. Virtually all issues of right and wrong, true and false, good and bad are painted in shades of gray. Many Christians assume this is the proper way of understanding truth” (p.45). (c)

Such a “way of understanding truth,” namely “shades of gray,” is also articulated by Dr. T. Plantinga when he describes the similarities and the differences between the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) and those “concerned” or former members of the Christian Reformed Churches (CRC). In the book “The Challenge of Church Union,” (d) under the title “How Close Are We?,” and under the heading of “a different pattern of thought,” he notes that “it is the tendency on the part of many Canadian Reformed people to think in terms of absolute contrasts, of blacks and whites, when dealing with situations in which Christian Reformed people see a lot of gray” (p.86).

Dr. Plantinga cites as an example “the famous question of ‘the true church.’” He states that “when the Belgic Confession speaks of the true church in Article 29, we do not find in this article an endorsement of black-and-white thinking, such that a church (or a federation of churches) either possesses the marks of the true church wholly and purely or lacks them, in which case it is ‘a’ false church - or, as some would say, ‘the’ false church... The process by which churches deviate and surrender the marks that are essential to being a true church takes time.” Consequently Dr. Plantinga concludes that “the notion of the true church must not be understood in black-and white terms” (p.86).

As we follow Dr. Plantinga’s presentation, we are confronted with the assertion that “some Canadian Reformed people, operating by a black-and-white thinking, are inclined to suppose that since their own congregations do manifest the marks of the true church, they are the only true church in town, and that any other churches in town that are not affiliated with them must therefore be false churches” (p.87-88). (e) Dr. Plantinga refers to the Westminster Confession which affirms that all churches... are subject to what it calls “mixture and error.” We encounter here, paraphrasing the words used by Plantinga, “the famous question of ‘more or less pure’ forms of the church.” This “more or less pure” view of the church seems to appeal to Dr. Plantinga, because this “different pattern of thought” (Dr. Plantinga) or particular “way of understanding truth” (MacArthur’s terminology) regarding the church compliments current efforts toward church union. Our inclination to employ black-and-white thinking, using the terms “true” and “false” (BC Art.

29), must therefore give way to the more palatable notion of “more or less pure” forms of the church. Then, and only then, can we expect to make progress in our endeavors to achieve church union with other Reformed churches, or federations of churches.

Dr. Plantinga notes that “Canadian Reformed people also like to emphasize that the church is - or must be - one. In other words, they take the prayer of the Lord Jesus in John 17 (“that they may all be one,” RD) very seriously.” It is his opinions that “if the doctrine of the ‘true church’ is subordinated to the Biblical emphasis on the unity of the church things begin to fall into place.”

When we reflect on what we have read in some of our previous editorials, then we will have some difficulty trying to harmonize the substance of those particular editorials with what we encounter in Dr. Plantinga’s presentation. How do we reconcile Dr. Plantinga’s explicit suggestion that we resist the tendency “to think in terms of absolute contrasts, of blacks and whites,” with J.F. MacArthur’s fervent appeal for discernment; for a restoration of absolutes; for a return to black and white thinking? How do we correlate Dr. Plantinga’s assertion that “the doctrine of the ‘true church’” must “be subordinated to the Biblical emphasis on the unity of the church,” with Dr. Martin-Lloyd-Jones’ statement that “unity must never be isolated or regarded in and of itself, and it must never be a foremost consideration.”? Must we relinquish our “true and false” church concept in order to advance the cause of church unity and church union? Must we, as Can. Ref. Churches and as church members, abandon our so called inclination to black and white thinking and perhaps start painting the issues of right and wrong, true and false, good and bad, in generous “shades of gray”?

In the very same book (f) in which we find Dr. Plantinga’s speech, we also encounter some pertinent and appropriate responses to his somewhat perplexing and puzzling presentation. We read that Dr. Plantinga’s comment about Canadian Reformed people being “black and white” in their thinking is considered “very interesting, but disturbing” (p.100). “People really get worried when we use the words true or false. I have always been taught that true means faithful to the Word of God and that false means being unfaithful... I do not think that it is really meant to be black-and white in the sense of making everything simple. I do like to mention that there is the tendency in our modern society to make everything gray” (p.107). “We are used to being knocked as black and white people. But try to understand what we were (are, RD) fighting for, namely, the truth of God’s Word” (p.108).

“It is more than once suggested that the liberated churches see only themselves as true churches and that all others are by consequence false. But this is in fact a caricature. What Schilder and others emphasized is simply that we should not with respect to the church seek to ‘explain’ the apparent disunity among churches from out of the Kuyperian theory of pluriformity (or the church as an ‘organism’ versus the church as ‘institute’, or the idea of the ‘invisible’ church’). Neither the Bible nor the confessions speak in terms of pluriformity...” (p.78). The confessions speak about the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ. The confessions also show us the clear norms for church gathering. The confessions dare to speak of true and false church.

We don’t deny that there are people who look at matters that are gray and are quick to call them black or white. However, the wrong application of black and white thinking, by “some Canadian Reformed people” does not in itself negate the necessity for such thinking. “Art. 29 of our

confession about a true and false church is nullified because of all kinds of distinctions of visible/invisible, organism/institute, more or less pure forms of the church of Christ, and so forth. In this framework everything that calls itself church of Christ must be church in some way or the other. That's also our concern about quotations from the Westminster Confession that Plantinga cites..." (p.100)

When we read the book "Schilder's Struggle for the Unity of the Church," (g) we note that although this book was written by Rudolf Van Reest, it was actually translated by none other than Dr. Plantinga. It is therefore somewhat of a surprise that we should find in this particular book a fitting response to Dr. Plantinga's statements and views on church union as found in the book "The Challenge of Church Union." Quoting from Rudolf Van Reest's book we note that he also has something to say to us about what Dr. Plantinga calls "the prayer of the Lord Jesus in John 17" ("that they may all be one", RD). "In our time, this beautiful chapter of the Bible is misused in a horrible way. Various winds of doctrine, numerous sects, different types of movements, false ecumenists, the World Council of Churches - all of these take this prayer of the Savior on their lips and then press for the greatest possible organizational unity involving all of Christendom. Such false unity is the great temptation Satan places before us in our time." (p.402)

"The people of false ecumenism act as though we - who are no more than poor wretches, puny creatures, foolish people cleaving to the dust (Psalm 119:25) - must now see to it that this prayer of the Son is heard by the Father. We will go to work to make sure that this 'unity' for which the Son asks is actually achieved!" (p.403). We organize international conferences (ICRC), Reformation rallies, study seminars, panel discussions, unity symposiums, church union gathering, etc., perhaps thinking we must do "all of this to make sure that the prayer of Christ can be heard on the basis of our efforts. What foolishness!" (p.403)

Clearly "the unity of the Church does not depend on us - it already exists. Thanks be to God, the unity of the Church stands above every threat, firmly anchored in heaven, because of Christ's high-priestly prayer (John 17, "that they may all be one"). What we are called to do - even to the point of allowing our own blood to be shed - is to keep the Word" (p.404). In John 17:17 Christ prays, "Sanctify them in the truth: Thy Word is truth." Whoever does not keep that Word is not included in the unity of the Church. Simply put: "Church reformers are not people who fight for unity, but people who fight for truth. The unity that follows is the fruit of their struggle." (p.404)

Dr. Plantinga's assertion that (some) Can Ref. people "operating on black and white thinking" suppose that they are "the only true church in town," is in fact a caricature. This caricature (wrong perception) becomes the basis for his suggestion that we abandon our black and white thinking about "the true church." This caricature also becomes the impetus for the inference that we curb the use of our confessional language of "true and false" church (BC Art. 29). Dr. Plantinga's affinity for churches that are subject to "mixture and error" and the "more or less pure" forms of the church of Christ illustrates the validity of MacArthur's concern about painting in "shades of gray." Furthermore, to ensure that church union is not jeopardized, Dr. Plantinga suggests, on the basis of his own misconceptions, that "if the doctrine of 'the true church' is subordinated to the Biblical emphasis on the unity of the church, things will fall into place." This all, of course, for the sake of unity and church union!

We wholeheartedly share Dr. Plantinga's ardent desire for unity and church union. However, that commendable cause is better served by "a different pattern of thought" than the one which Dr. Plantinga has to offer. For, "unity must never be isolated or regarded in and of itself, and it must never be a foremost consideration" (Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones). "Church reformers are not people who fight for unity, but people who fight for truth. The unity that follows is the fruit of their struggle" (Rudolf Van Reest). If we compromise that truth in our desire for Christian unity then what remains is neither truth nor unity; only subtle "shades of gray."

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- (a) Learn to Discern, Reformed Polemics, Nov. 22/97
- (b) (c) Reckless Faith, Reformed Polemics, Dec. 20/97
- (d) (e) (f) The Challenge of Church Union, The Burlington Reformed Study Centre.
- (g) Schilder's Struggle for the Unity of the Church, Rudolf Van Reest

DEACONS IN THE ERQ

Recently the Committee for Contact with L'Eglise Reformee du Quebec (ERQ) submitted a Report to General Synod Fergus 1998. Although the Report is generally quite informative and has a number of good recommendations, its virtual endorsement of women deacons is rather disturbing.

The report notes that in the ERQ the office of deacon is open to women. ERQ deacons are not part of council but are under the supervision of the council. Their work consists of helping those in need, distributing gifts, training members concerning material goods [ERQ Church Order 2.4.1]. Also, they make pastoral visits concerning the spiritual growth of the members [4.2.5] and can participate in the work of committees of synod [2.4.6].

The Committee argues that, since ERQ deacons are not part of the ruling council, the ordination of women deacons is a minor point that merits no further discussion. It puts the issue in a positive light by arguing that Calvin favoured deaconesses and that early 16th century Dutch Reformed Synods allowed for them. According to the Committee, the ERQ is merely following Calvin's model, rather than that prescribed by the Church Order of Dort or the Belgic Confession.

Calvin's Model

Regrettably, the Committee's reference to Calvin and early Reformed synods regarding deaconesses is highly misleading: such deaconesses had functions quite distinct from those of male deacons. From the first Reformed synod (Emden 1571) onward only males could be ordained as full deacons.

The Committee refers to Calvin's "Institutes" [4.13.19]. But there Calvin stresses primarily that deaconesses must be widows of at least 60 years of age (cf. I Tim.5). The Committee neglects to mention that elsewhere ["Institutes" 4.3.9] Calvin outlines two classes of deacons: (1) male deacons who administered the alms and (2) the above-mentioned widows who were to help the poor and sick. In Calvin's "Ecclesiastical Ordinances" (1541) the male deacons were to collect and distribute alms to the poor, set diaconal policy, make calls with pastors and elders, and supervise

the hospital; the deaconesses were to aid the poor and tend the sick [Note 1]. The deaconesses were subordinate to the male deacons and were in essence assistant deacons.

Even in the early church, up to the Reformation, whenever deaconesses were appointed, a very clear distinction was made between them and male deacons. The prime function of deaconesses was to minister to women specifically, particularly sick women [Note 2].

Thus, contrary to the claims of the Committee, the ERQ, in ordaining women as full deacons has departed radically from the position of Calvin and early Reformed church polity, which was based directly on the Biblical norm of male headship [cf. Acts 6, I Tim.2,3, I Cor.11,14, etc.].

The ERQ Church Order, concerning the ordination of deacons [2.4.2], refers to Acts 6 and I Tim.3 but ignores the fact that both these texts clearly specify that deacons are to be male.

Deacons and Council

Does it make a difference when deacons are not part of council, as the Committee argues? No. Calvin in his sketch of diaconal duties makes no mention of any functions normally performed by council, nor were deacons ever part of Geneva's church council [Note 3]. Indeed, Calvin's description of diaconal work is rather similar to that of the ERQ.

The deacon in his diaconal work still exercises authority in setting policy, making diaconal decisions, collecting and distributing alms, teaching, supervising and admonishing, and making pastoral visits. Hence male headship still applies.

We note in passing that the role of ERQ deacons does not differ greatly from that found in our Church Order. Our "consistory" is almost equivalent to the ERQ "council"; both exclude deacons. The only function our Church Order assigns to the consistory with deacons (i.e., our "council") is that of nominating, appointing, and suspending office bearers.

In conclusion, I am disappointed that the Committee did not study this contentious issue in more depth and did not make a more accurate appraisal. This is a major divergence of the ERQ that certainly warrants further discussion and admonition.

Notes:

[1] See, for example, CRC Acts of Synod 1981:505. This issue was debated extensively in the CRC 20 years ago and much useful historical information can be found in its various study reports.

[2] For a detailed historical account of the role of deaconesses in the pre-Reformation churches see A.G. Martimort, "Deaconesses: An Historical Study" (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1986); also CRC Acts 1981:501-502.

[3] CRC Acts 1981:506

COMMENTS ON THE REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE FOR CONTACT WITH OPC

By Rev. B. R. Hofford

General Synod 1995 mandated the CCOPC “to work towards formalizing the relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship under the adopted rules by using the statements of Synod Lincoln 1992 (ACTS 1992, Art. 72, IV. A. 1. e. i. ii) as a guideline to arrive at an agreement with the OPC on the matters of the fencing of the Lord’s Table and confessional membership.” In response to this, the CCOPC devised a Proposed Agreement on these two issues which was subsequently agreed to by the CEIR. The problems arise, however, when you compare the 1992 Synodical statements with the text of the Proposed Agreement. Let us first examine the statements relating to the fencing of the Lord’s Supper.

The 1992 Synodical statement regarding the Lord’s Supper reads as follows, “it appears, in view of the OPC’s ongoing internal deliberation that there is still reason to continue the discussion on this point. It is hoped that in time the OPC and Canadian Reformed Churches may come to a common understanding and unified practice regarding the supervision of the Lord’s Table. This is not to say that an identical practice is required with respect to the supervision of the Lord’s Table to come to ecclesiastical fellowship. It should be agreed, however, that a general verbal warning alone is insufficient and that a profession of the Reformed faith is required, in the presence of the supervising elders, from the guests wishing to attend the Lord’s Supper.”

The Proposed Agreement regarding the Lord’s Supper reads as follows, “The churches of the Reformation confess that the Lord’s Supper should not be profaned (I Cor. 11:27, see H.C., L.D. 30, Q&A82; WC, 29:8). This implies that the celebration of the Lord’s Supper is to be supervised. In this supervision the church exercises discipline and manifests itself as true church. This supervision is to be applied to the members of the local church as well as to the guests. The eldership has a responsibility in supervising the admission to the Lord’s Supper.

The CCOPC reports that this Proposed Agreement regarding the Lord’s Supper was accepted by the OPC as the basis for a sister church relationship. It was also agreed that both the OPC and Canadian Reformed Churches would follow their own practices within the bounds as expressed in the statement. For example, a local Canadian Reformed Church will continue to use the rule of Art 61 of the Church Order also with respect to members of the OPC.

The first question to answer is whether or not the CCOPC was faithful to its mandate. No one can in principle object to the fact that the CCOPC did not use the exact text of the relevant parts of the 1992 Synodical statement as the basis for discussion and agreement. Synod mandated that these statements be used as “guidelines.” However, in order to be faithful to the Synodical statement as a guideline, one must be careful that the integrity of the statement be preserved, and here is where the problem lies. For while we cannot disagree with the text of the Proposed Agreement regarding the Lord’s Supper, it becomes clear that it fails to remain faithful to the guideline established by Synod.

The first problem is that the CCOPC Agreement omits any reference to what Synod stated should be agreed upon, namely, that a general verbal warning alone is insufficient. Synod recognized, correctly, that this is at the heart of the difficulty with the OPC in this matter. For it is common practice in the OPC for only a general verbal warning to be given before admitting people, including visitors, to the Table. Thus, while we may not object to anything per se in the CCOPC Agreement, it avoids addressing this precise issue.

It should not be surprising that the CEIR was enthusiastic with the CCOPC statement for undoubtedly they could endorse these views while still being allowed to practice their general verbal warning without condemnation. The OPC agrees that the Lord's Supper must be supervised, even with regard to visitors, and that the elders are responsible for this supervision. But they do not see this as being incompatible with a general verbal warning. In fact, they believe that such a warning fulfills the conditions set forth in the agreement. Thus, we may conclude that this Agreement does not fulfill the mandate given to the CCOPC. We are no further along in this matter of fencing the Lord's Supper than in 1995.

The second problem with the CCOPC Agreement is that it omits any reference to the fact that a profession of the Reformed faith is required in the presence of the supervising elders from the guests wishing to attend the Lord's Supper. Once again, the CCOPC has by-passed dealing with one of the specific points of difference between the OPC and the Canadian Reformed Churches. While it may happen in a few congregations of the OPC that a visiting guest to the Lord's Supper is required to profess their faith before the supervising elders, this is by no means the rule, nor is it required by their form of government. In fact the most common practice in the OPC is for guests to be admitted by the general verbal warning. Under these circumstances, the supervising elders do not know if the visitor professes the Reformed faith. It is left in the hands of the visitor to make the judgment.

This issue regarding professing the Reformed faith as a pre-requisite for admission to the Table also relates to the second broad category addressed in the Agreement, that is, confessional membership. More will be said about that later, but for now it must be noted that in the OPC, guests, not to mention OPC communicant members, are generally not required to profess the Reformed faith. This is established by the fact that guests from a wide variety of non-Reformed churches are frequently admitted to the Table. Again, we ought not be surprised at the enthusiastic reception which the deguttled CCOPC Agreement received by the CEIR.

One final consideration regarding the Lord's Supper is not so much a criticism of the CCOPC as it is of the guideline given by Synod 1992. This has to do with the lack of comprehensiveness of the criteria for admission to the Table. Is it sufficient to insure that the visitor professes the Reformed faith in the presence of the supervising elders? It is certainly one essential criterium, but there is one other. The second essential requirement for admission to the Lord's Table is a life consistent with the profession. (Art. 61, C.O.) The difficulty with the suggestion of Synod is that while it may be possible by interview (although we may have serious doubts about the integrity of such a procedure) to ascertain whether or not the visitor actually professes the Reformed faith, it is not possible for such an interview to establish a history of faithful living on the part of the guest. It is true that in such an interview, the supervising elders may elicit a personal testimony from the

visitor regarding his life, but this is not consistent with what is required by Scripture, namely, that such a testimony be given by the elders who supervise, over time, the life of the person.

This very point was appealed to the General Synod 1995 by Grand Rapids. General Synod responded by saying, "It has been stated that Synod 1992's consideration 'that a general verbal warning is insufficient but that there must be at least a confession of the Reformed faith in the presence of the supervising elders before someone can be admitted to the Lord's table' is not in harmony with Art. 61 of the C.O. This complaint suggests that Art. 61 is the only possible way to execute what we confess in Lord's Day 30 Q.A. 81, 82. However, this suggestion is not proven from Scripture." (Acts, Art. 106, V, C, 2,p. 73).

In response, it must be pointed out that Grand Rapids did not suggest Art. 61 sets forth the only method by which proper supervision can be maintained. Our point was not to insist on a particular methodology but to insist on all of the proper criteria being taken into account. And Art. 61 does indeed take into account the two necessary criteria; both the profession and the life. Furthermore, LD 30, a true confession of Scriptural teaching, also brings into view the same two criteria for proper admission to the Table. For Grand Rapids to be required to prove more from Scripture was not reasonable.

---To be continued