

SECULARISM

One of the compelling dangers that threaten believers is the tendency to separate daily living from our confessed life of faith. Although we may agree when someone tells us that life is one, in practice we often fall into the temptation of divorcing our activities and decisions from the perspective of eternity that our faith gives us. Once the work week starts we so easily conform to the way the world operates, we fall prey to secularism.

When we consider the world in which we live and how we work and play in it, it won't take very long before we realize that we often do things for the wrong reasons. The world pursues gratification, success, achievement and more, more of everything. How easily aren't we caught up in the same chase?

In the world we meet people who work all day long with the hope that quitting time comes soon so they can enjoy themselves, or work all week to enjoy the weekend, etc. Others scheme in all sorts of ways to find the easiest and quickest way to make the most money so they can acquire the goods (toys) they want. This secularism, the desire to obtain earthly goals most frequently stems from selfish goals. But are these attitudes only found in the world or is there secularism among church members as well?

One could even ask if there is secularism in the Church. And when we listen well we can hear attitudes that fall under that category among our brothers and sisters. How often don't we hear, "I don't feel at home in that church"; or "The preaching doesn't do anything for me"; or "The children need..." the young people need..." the older folks need..." or "The liturgy should be more modern to attract ..." etc. What we are actually hearing is an attitude that seeks worldly goals.

Yet in the worship services we are to seek heavenly, eternal goals. "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness ..." (Matth.6:33). During the services we worship: we sing praises to God, we pray to Him, we reverently read His Word and listen to the preaching of it, we obediently answer the call to help in the relief of our needy brothers and sisters, we experience the communion of saints. On that same day, the Lord's Day, we also experience the beginnings of the eternal rest that awaits us.

Notice that! On the Lord's Day we experience the beginnings of the eternal rest that awaits us. We do something here on earth with an eye to the future where we will experience it fully, perfectly. Now isn't that exactly what we should be doing every day in every way?

In Church we strive to realize that we are not there for ourselves. We are not there to satisfy our needs, but we are there to worship our God. In the process we are blessed, but that is not our first priority, that is not the reason we worship. The same should go for our activities on the other days of the week. At the beginning of the worship services we rise and 'lift up our hearts to God', we focus our attention on service to Him. But do we not lift our hearts to God in prayer for His guidance through the day on Monday morning as well? That means that everything we do during that day seeks His blessing, is done out of obedience to Him, is done for His sake. When we begin an endeavour do we not ask our God for His blessing, and do we not add, 'not my will but Thy will be done'? If we do that why does it sometimes appear that we don't really concern ourselves too

much with our Father's will when we are in the throws of business life, of family quarrels, of sports events, of reading books, watching videos, of stealing away on holidays, etc.?

Does that mean that all earthly achievements are wrong? Can we not strive to buy a home, a car, a holiday, an education? May we not enjoy sports, reading, videos, computers, research, sleep, conversation, etc, etc? Surely, we may and we often do. Our Father has promised - "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well." (Matt 6:33)

John Calvin has devoted an entire chapter of his Institutes about this. He begins, "...we are at the same time well instructed by Scripture in the proper use of earthly blessings, a subject which, in forming a scheme of life, is by no means to be neglected. For if we are to live, we must use the necessary supports of life; nor can we even shun those things which seem more subservient to delight than to necessity. We must therefore observe a mean [a course between two extremes], that we may use them with a pure conscience, whether for necessity or for pleasure. This the Lord prescribes by his word, when he tells us that to his people the present life is a kind of pilgrimage by which they hasten to the heavenly kingdom. If we are only to pass through the earth, there can be no doubt that we are to use its blessings only in so far as they assist our progress, rather than retard it." Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book 3, Chapter 10 makes for very interesting reading and causes us to reflect.

It is our motivation that causes us to do what we do. Are we motivated by what we have become through the gracious gift of faith or are we motivated by what we want? Sin was caused by man doing what was motivated by self-satisfaction, by accomplishing something for himself. Salvation was caused by Jesus Christ obeying God, the Father. In the act of salvation we are shown by example by our Saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ, how obedience to God means sacrificing ourselves for God and our neighbour.

In the end, then, there should be no difference in our attitude, our motivation for what we do on Sunday or Monday. Everyday we are to worship our God with all that we are and everything that we have. Then we will be different from the world and those who do not know God. Often we will find ourselves doing many of the same things, but there will also be times when we will not want to do the same things as those around us, for they are motivated by secularism and not by obedience to the will of our Father.

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A CONFESSIONALLY REALISTIC SOLUTION?

By Rev. W. W. J. Van Oene

In the issue of March 6, 1998 of Clarion, the Rev. C. Van Spronsen made us share his thoughts and concerns about the relationship of the Canadian Reformed Churches with others who appear to be standing on the same basis and whom various ecclesiastical assemblies have recognized as faithful churches.

The desire for unity as expressed by our colleague cannot but have our wholehearted support and endorsement. He appears to have struggled with the question how such recognition can be realized in a closer relationship.

It is excellent that this question is discussed among us and that clarity be achieved in this respect.

Rev. Van Spronsen, although maintaining that federative unity should remain the ultimate goal, yet suggests in the meantime, apparently as a sort of transition period, to have a less “formal” fellowship, which is to allow “time and a forum to grow towards this further expression of unity even if it would take another 5, 10 or 15 years.”

It will, I hope, not be necessary to quote extensively from Rev. Van Spronsen’s article, as at least the large majority of our readers will be familiar with it. We therefore proceed right away to the matter itself.

Is what Rev. Van Spronsen calls a “realistic solution” a confessionally realistic solution?

SOLUTION TO WHAT?

In the first place we ask: To what has a solution to be found? What is the difficulty, the problem here?

Is there unwillingness on the part of the Canadian Reformed Churches to seek unity? I have not noticed any sign of that. And therefore: apparently nothing has to be “solved” here.

Rev. Van Spronsen himself stated in so many words that with those with whom contact was sought “we have experienced a certain hesitation bordering on fear to push for federative unity.” They are dragging their feet.

I agree with him that “brotherly love for one another should motivate us to respect these sentiments whether we feel they are justified or not. “But the big question is whether the way he suggests us to follow is a cure for that fear and a solution to that “problem.”

It appears that the problem to be solved is not to be sought with the Canadian Reformed Churches but with others who thus far have stayed away from every serious effort to come to federative unity.

But then it must be maintained and strongly upheld that the way to cure that fear is not a yielding to it in the manner which Rev. Van Spronsen suggests, but a constantly reminding them of the calling to come to federative unity. If they are not totally convinced that the Lord does not want a continued separate existence, nothing we do or do not do will help.

GIVING TIME IS FINE

If they need time to come to that act of obedience, let's give it to them by all means. Even if it takes five years, we will have to show brotherly love and patience and keep up the discussions, although we should not forget that discussions have been going on already for several years!

We should, however, not accept a pattern that will only perpetuate the separate existence ad infinitum, and THAT's what is going to happen if the course suggested by Rev. Van Spronsen is chosen. The result would be a "legalized (false) pluriformity" in which various groups live brotherly together, each following their own course, each retaining their own identity, each experiencing their own development. But that is not the unity of the CHURCH.

Now, many who went the path of obedience by refusing to be responsible any longer for the deviation in the Christian Reformed Church have already deviated from that path of obedience by not continuing and preserving the unity and fellowship of the church, but by forming two separate organizations. We have the United Reformed Churches of North America and we have the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches. Why? Because they have lost sight of what the CHURCH is.

That was their "solution." Whatever harmonious relationship they may claim exists between these two "federations," they are disobedient by having formed two separate federations instead of just continuing together as the legitimate, faithful Christian Reformed Church. Although they may have been legally prevented from keeping that name, the principle remains the same.

If they even appear to be unable to remain or to again become united but seem to be content with continuing a separate existence, what solid ground would an expectation have that federative unity will be achieved if they and we should enter into a relationship such as suggested by Rev. Van Spronsen ? Zilch!

THE ICRC

When the date for the Synod of 1983 approached and when I was delegated to that assembly, I was planning to vote against joining the ICRC, as I had serious reservations about joining such an organization as Churches.

As a result of the discussions at synod, however, I came to the conclusion that, however hesitantly, I should "give it a chance" so to speak, and voted in favour.

Seeing the whole development, I now am inclined to favour the position of our Australian sister churches that terminated their membership.

More and more, I am afraid this organization becomes an Association of which birds of different plumage can be a member. I question, however, whether it is the style of the CHURCH to be a member of an association.

As far as I see it, Dr. A. Kuyper Sr has "defeated" not his tens of thousands but his hundreds of thousands with his (false) pluriformity theory.

This danger is emphasized by Rev. Van Spronsen's argument that "we already meet with the URCNA and the FRC in the forum of the ICRC." Thus the ICRC becomes the gate through which

approval of an unlawful separate existence within the borders of the same country is seeking acceptance.

DIFFERENT HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Certainly, “we deal with Churches who have been apart for many years and who have had their own historical development for so long and at times in totally different cultural settings, such as the ERQ, for example.”

Although the hairs on my head have greatly diminished in number, I have a sufficient quantity left to give credence to my assurance that not a hair on my head would want to demand of others that they shall have the same judgment about their history and development that we have.

I shall, for example, not demand of the FRC that they shall acknowledge that the refusal of their ancestors to go along with the Union of 1892 was contrary to the will of the Lord (as I am proving in my forthcoming book), but I shall gladly stretch forth with them to what lies ahead, leaving the judgment about what is past for each one’s responsibility.

But to permit, with an appeal to different historical developments two federations to continue side by side in an association without a definite commitment to come to federative unity? No, that would be unlawful!

As for the ERQ, we would have the same situation which existed in the Netherlands after the Reformation. Quoting from a handbook on church history, we hear the following: “The first national synod held on native soil was the one of 1578 in Dordrecht. Here the Wallonian and the Nederdutch Reformed Churches came together in one synodical bond as two separate groups, something which since has remained like that.”

There is nothing against it having two linguistically different “federations” within one federation. But that is not in the least an argument in favour of a non-ecclesiastical association of different federations that “meet together in conference format like a regional ICRC.” Conferences are not the style of the CHURCH.

Quoting the ERQ fails to have the force of argument in the present issue.

And mention of the Free Church of Scotland fails to take into account that they belong to a foreign federation that we have acknowledged as a sister church. This is an exceptional situation which, as such, lacks the fiber to serve as an argument in favour of the suggested course of action. It is not in the least on a level with the existence and permissibility of different federations within our own borders.

FRUSTRATIONS AND TENSIONS?

Rev. Van Spronsen also spoke of “present tensions and frustrations experienced by local churches ... when different churches have come to mutual recognition of one another.”

I ask: “What tensions and frustrations?”

By what are these alleged tensions and frustrations caused then? By abiding faithfully by the rules adopted by the churches in their federation; or by the lack of response on the part of the federations to which those other churches belong?

Certainly, abiding by the rules that the churches have adopted may not be easy at times, but if for that reason there are "tensions and frustrations," these are caused only by the fact that some churches want to go farther than the adopted rules allow them. Then it is unavoidable that they feel frustrated, but this is then not caused by their sister churches that hold themselves and others to the adopted rules. It is, in reality, caused by their own unwillingness to honour their commitments as members of one federation.

One should not turn things around to put the blame where it should not be put. Then things are muddled up.

IMPRESSION ON THOSE OUTSIDE

If the rule is followed which Rev. Van Spronsen considers possible, there will be another conference, and then one that will not bring us one step closer to union, to a merger. On the contrary, the result will be: Why bother, for we live brotherly alongside each other, happy and content in our own circle, and we have fraternal relations, don't we? No need for change!

In this manner the present situation is continued and made permanent, for there is no real incentive to come to true unity, such unity as is required by the Confession and is a testimony to those who are without.

"We could share our common calling in the world," Rev. Van Spronsen writes.

But what kind of impression would this make on those who are "in the world"?

Right now it is already difficult at times to explain the difference between others and ourselves. If an outsider is genuinely puzzled by churches that claim the same faithfulness to God's Word, but lead a separate existence, and asks us to explain what the difference is, we may try to inform him as well as we can. Then we have something solid to answer.

Now, however, envisage the scenario that they all live alongside each other, each having its separate existence, yet conferring fraternally together in a loose organization. What are you to answer in that case when the question is asked: "But why are you not one then?"

Such a separate existence, however lovely the conferences may be considered to be, is far from being an effective testimony to the world. It is, on the contrary, a testimony of poverty and disobedience, a sign of shallowness and of superficiality.

When someone is brought to submission to the Lord Jesus Christ by means of the spreading of the Gospel, where are you to direct him?

If the suggested course is followed, the advice would have to be: "It does not matter where you go; the one is as good as the other."

Would THAT be fulfilling the church's calling and acquitting ourselves of our responsibility towards the world? Rather the opposite would be the case.

CONCLUSION

And thus, while appreciating our colleague's serious effort to help matters along, we must reject his "solution" as confessionally unrealistic and unacceptable.

Ecclesiastical fellowship is still ECCLESIASTICAL fellowship, not a fellowship of likeminded societies that form an association within which they can retain and continue their own specific character, customs, and usages.

The mandate is and remains: come together, unite, and proceed as one body, the body of truly Reformed churches of Christ that in their oneness present a powerful testimony to all who are without.

The Invisible Church Concept in the Westminster Confession of Faith

By Glenn Hofford

The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 25, contains the following statement: “The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all.”

In contrast it describes the catholic visible church in this way: “The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion.”

The statement in the Westminster Confession concerning the invisible church may at first glance seem to be Scriptural, in accord with the Apostles’ Creed and in agreement with the writings of Augustine and Calvin. It is easy for the student of the Westminster Confession to grasp this concept, a picture of an invisible entity consisting of the “souls” of all the elect. The letter of Paul to the Ephesians seems to describe an invisible church when it refers to the church as Christ’s body. And Hebrews describes the “church of the firstborn”. But we must examine this concept of an invisible church more closely to see if it is Scriptural, and if it has a basis in earlier creeds and Christian writings. Is it in accord with early credal formulation (the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed), and with the writings of the church fathers? And if not, where does this concept of the invisible church come from, and how did it find its way into the Westminster Standards?

In the first place, the Westminster Confession states that the catholic, or universal church is invisible. In the Apostles’ Creed we confess “a holy catholic Christian church”. Did the authors of the Apostles’ Creed refer here to an invisible church? To answer this, we must look to the New Testament: the New Testament does not use the term “invisible church”. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, says that he “persecuted the church of God”. (I Cor. 15:9). He refers there to the church in a collective way. Most of the uses of the word “church” in the New Testament refer to specific local churches, and some passages describe the church in a broader sense, but in a broader sense with respect to the inclusion of all the local churches. The church (singular) almost always refers to the collection of the known churches (plural). And these churches, even when viewed as a collective unit, are not invisible, but fully visible, both to God and to us. The Apostles’ Creed, then, is describing the universal visible church. It is describing the church “collectively”. As Rev. I. De Wolff states in his booklet *The Church, Notes on Articles 27-29 of the Belgic Confession* “Christ also speaks in this way about His congregation when He refers

to the whole New Testament Church or Congregation, which shall be built upon “this rock” (Matt. 16:18), as well as when He speaks about the Congregation when He means the local Church or Congregation in connection with discipline (Matt. 18:17).” The Apostles’ Creed describes the same church as that of Matthew 16. Is Christ building an invisible church as He gathers His church in history? No, He is not! He is gathering His church as a collection of faithful local churches. Therefore the Westminster Confession is introducing a new and extra-Scriptural concept when it describes “the catholic or universal Church, which is invisible”.

The Nicene Creed also establishes a parameter for the definition of the term “church” when it states that there is only one church, not two distinct churches: “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.” (Nicene Creed)

It is not necessary to further analyze the context of this statement in the Nicene Creed, but we may simply note that it adds the term “one” to what is already stated in the Apostles’ Creed. It is important then to note the fact that the Westminster Confession contradicts this by holding forth two definitions of the catholic church. By starting with the statement about the catholic church which is invisible, does the Westminster Confession go on to describe visibility as an aspect of this invisible church? The answer is no - the Confession then describes the other, visible catholic church. So we do not find the concept of invisible church in the Nicene Creed, and furthermore the Nicene Creed restricts us to speaking of only one church, thus guarding against formulations such as are found in the Westminster Confession.

The Apostles’ Creed then, neither explicitly nor implicitly fosters the notion of an invisible church. Just as the New Testament uses the word church to describe visible church or churches, for instance when Christ addresses each individual, local church in the early chapters of Revelation, the Apostles’ Creed describes only the visible assembly of God’s people. The Nicene Creed also prohibits us from speaking of two churches. The Westminster Confession of Faith contradicts this when it describes two catholic churches: invisible and visible.

It is sometimes thought that Augustine of Hippo spoke of an invisible church. However, Augustine did not actually use the phrase “invisible church”, nor does he hold forth the concept of an invisible church. In *On Baptism, Against the Donatists*, Augustine describes an “invisible bond of love” which ties together the true believers in the church (in contrast to the hypocrites within the church) (3) But the enemies of this brotherly love, whether they are openly without, or appear to be within, are false Christians, and antichrists. For when they have found an opportunity, they go out, as it is written: “A man wishing to separate himself from his friends, seeketh opportunities.”(4) But even if occasions are wanting, while they seem to be within, they are severed from that invisible bond of love. Whence St. John says, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for had they been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us.” (*On Baptism, Book III, Chap. 19, 26*)

Augustine uses the phrase “invisible bond of love”. There are many characteristics of the members of Christ’s church which themselves are certainly invisible: for instance our faith can be said to be invisible. By describing this bond between believers in the church as invisible, Augustine is in no way setting the stage for a description of the church itself as invisible. Remember that the word church comes from the Greek word “ekklesia”, meaning assembly. The

assembly of God's people is a visible thing. These members of the church may then have beliefs, emotions, etc. which are invisible.

In *The City of God* Augustine makes extensive reference to God as invisible. This is in accord with Colossians 1:15 ("He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation"). It is important to realize that "invisibility" is an attribute of God, and one which we may not easily apply to other created things and human institutions, without good reason. This work of Augustine contains no reference to an "invisible church".

It is apparent then that Augustine did not invent the invisible church concept, as is sometimes thought. The invisible church concept as taught in the Westminster Confession seems to have later roots.

Calvin, in his *Institutes*, makes reference to an invisible church, but he does not describe two churches: an invisible and a visible one, as does the Westminster Confession of Faith.

"Sometimes by the term "church" it means that which is actually in God's presence, into which no persons are received but those who are children of God by grace of adoption and true members of Christ by sanctification of the Holy Spirit. Then indeed, the church includes not only the saints presently living on earth, but all the elect from the beginning of the world. Often, however, the name "church" designates the whole multitude of men spread over the earth who profess to worship one God and Christ." (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, Chap. 1, 7. Invisible and visible church)

It is important to note that he does not go on to postulate an "invisible church", as an entity: Calvin stops far short of the terminology of the Westminster Confession.

One of the earlier confessions that use the invisible church concept in a way that is similar to that found in the Westminster Standards is the Scottish (or Scots) Confession.

In the Scots Confession, John Knox and the other authors refer to the universal church or "Kirk" as invisible, and this may have paved the way for the formulation concerning the church as it is found in the Westminster Confession. Chapter 16 of the Scots Confession "Of the Kirk", states "This kirk is invisible, known only to God, who alone knows whom he has chosen, and comprehends as well (as said is) the elect that are departed (commonly called the kirk triumphant), as those that yet live and fight against sin and Satan as shall live hereafter". One fallacy in this statement is that the church is known only to God - this does not accord with the fact that the church on earth has the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. (Matt 18) The elders given the responsibility of supervising visible local churches are fully aware of the identity of the individuals who are under their care. The Scots Confession might have made the statement that the "elect" are known only to God - this is certainly true, however, the Bible does not speak of the church in this way.

The Westminster Confession is an English document, but it was profoundly influenced by Presbyterianism, especially the Scottish Presbyterians. John Knox, in turn was the most influential Reformation figure in Scotland. It is no surprise then, that the Westminster Confession reflects the same doctrine as that of the Scots Confession concerning the church.

Evaluation

As members of churches which hold to the Three Forms of Unity will surely know that the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, nor the Canons of Dordt contain an invisible church concept. These standards were complete as early as 1618-19. The Westminster Standards come from the Puritan-influenced time period of the 1600's in England (1646). As it is therefore a fairly late confessional document, the Westminster Confession's authors had at their disposal numerous other confessions and statements to work from, including the continental standards just described, the Scots Confession, the Second Helvetic Confession and other English confessional documents. This being the case, they did not choose the more Biblical and cautious language of the Belgic Confession, for instance, when describing the church, but chose to formulate the doctrine of the church in such a way as to suggest that there are two separate churches, the invisible church and the visible church. It may be that the writers of the Westminster Confession were attempting to formulate a statement that would reflect the teachings concerning the church as Christ's body (and bride) which are found in Ephesians and Colossians. However, the Scriptural language which describes the church in this way does not imply that Christ's body (the church) is then invisible - the church can be described as Christ's body, and still be visible, just as the bread of the Lord's Supper is called Christ's body. We do not conclude that the bread of communion is invisible. The Bible uses a metaphor in calling the church "Christ's body", and this metaphor does not imply that, just as the body of Christ is at present time invisible (to us), the church is invisible. It may also be that the authors of the Westminster Confession were thinking of the church in the future (as the Scots confession puts it the "church triumphant") - it is true that we can not yet see this church. However, as we expect a new heavens and a new earth, we look forward to that which will also be visible.

It is apparent that the Westminster Confession is a document that, although consistent with Scripture and earlier authorities in many ways, is not fully consistent when it comes to the doctrine of the church. As we read this confession we must be careful to observe whether or not it goes beyond God's word. The Bible uses simple language to describe the church, and a confessional statement must stay within these bounds. The assembly of God's people will finally be completely gathered into God's presence, and at that time, the church will indeed consist of all the elect.

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