

## The Bible's Call for Unity!

Recently it was my turn to provide an introduction at our local Men Society meeting. Our board, in conjunction with the boards of the Women Society and the Young Peoples' Society had decided that we should delve into the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians. Studying this chapter brought to mind that although we often have much to say about the goings on in our local churches and in the church federation, it is imperative that we do all of that based on the teachings of God's holy Word. And when we open that Word we may thankfully recognize that it is also alive to our current questions.

As we turned to the first chapter of 1 Corinthians we were immediately confronted with the matter of division and unity, with the matter of sectarianism and being perfectly of one mind. Right away we were being taught about issues that face the church in our day. They have been a major part of our local discussions and on the agendas of our major assemblies for many years.

It is certain that everyone involved in these discussions is driven by the call of God in His Word for unity. There are many places in the Bible that direct us to it. The first chapter of 1 Corinthians is one of them. John 17 also contains a well-known prayer for unity. Matthew 28 is frequently pointed out as a directive for the church and its members to become active in church gathering work. Yet, errors are often made in understanding the precise teaching of the Holy Spirit in these passages. Of course we have ministers who study theology and exegesis for many years and who must know far better than laymen how to interpret and understand the Bible. But at the same time God's people, all of them are charged to read and study His Word. With the help of the Holy Spirit they, too, are able to discern - and they must read, study and discern. [That's why it is so good that study societies continue to schedule meetings. That's why it is good that consistories encourage such meetings by mentioning them and asking questions about them at home visitations. It is also beneficial for home discussions when men, women and young people's societies discuss the same topics.]

One of the themes that permeate the New Testament letters is that of unity, of being of one mind. Paul begins his first letter to the Corinthians with it and also ends the second letter with the same admonition. In 1 Cor. 1: 10 we read, "I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment." In 2 Cor.13:11 we find his closing words, "Finally, my brethren, farewell. Mend your ways, heed my appeal, *agree with one another*, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss." The apostle Peter takes up the same theme when he writes, "Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; ..." (1 Peter 3:8).

The NIV and the NKJV versions of 1 Cor.1 include the word perfectly in verse 10. The brethren are urged to be 'perfectly' joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. Such a call for perfect unity should not surprise us, however, when we compare the prayer of our Lord in John 17. Twice in His prayer our Saviour prays that we may be one even as the Father and the Son are one. He says, "Holy Father, keep them in Thy Name, which Thou has given me, that they may be one, even as we are one." (verse 11). And again in verse 20, "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that Thou hast sent me." It is edifying to read that whole prayer of our Lord in John 17 when we consider the matter of unity.

From these words of God the Son to God the Father passed on to us by God the Holy Spirit it is abundantly clear that we do not have licence to play fast and loose with the truth of His Word by trying to differentiate between essential and non-essential issues. When we decide that there are differences between ourselves and others than we must consult these words of our God before we claim that our differences are not of such a nature that they are not an impediment to further unity. When we see others refusing to be pulled along into beliefs and conduct contrary to Scripture we may not immediately conclude that we are one with them. We must first determine whether what kept us apart for so many years has been overcome.

John Calvin wrote about these things when he explained Matthew 28:20. There our Saviour directs the church to go to all nations, to baptize them in the name of the triune God and to teach them all that we have been taught by our Saviour. Calvin said, "He sends out the Apostles with this provision, that they do not obtrude their own opinions, but purely and faithfully pass down, from hand to hand, what He Himself commanded." Then he mentions how the Pope of

his time had done differently. He says, "Seeing that he has made havoc of Christ's authority and tainted the Church with his rotten foolery, it is clear enough how far he has lapsed from the apostolic office."

. When we realize these demands of our God we might become exasperated. We might ask how it is possible for church members to be so agreed. From what we know of human nature it is very difficult, if not impossible, for people to agree on everything. But then we may be comforted with the reality that each time we are exhorted to perfect unity we are also reminded that we can and may not do that in our own strength. When the apostle Paul addressed the Corinthians about this he prefaced and concluded his admonition with the reality of the God's election. He reminds his readers that they have been called by God to be saints. They have not come to this of their own accord, or because of logical reasoning. He even points out that human reasoning is foolishness with Him, and that His wisdom is considered foolishness by the world. At the end of the first chapter Paul points again to the calling of the saints. He really wants to give all the glory to God. Never does church unity depend on man, yet it is part of the believers' responsibility. Because we are called we have a calling; and because we are called we can fulfill our calling. Not perfectly, but in Jesus Christ we may prayerfully continue to work at our calling. Then we do not have to compromise; rather, then we may not compromise; for it is the work of our God and Saviour that we are doing.

PdB

**GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (October 7, 1997) URNS** -- *Are members and leaders in the Christian Reformed Church "obliged to support" the official synodical report on homosexuality?*

That question highlighted a theme issue of the Calvin Seminary Forum, a publication sent by the CRC's official ministerial training institution to all church councils in the 286,000-member denomination, as well as to significant contributors to the seminary.

"The problem is that some voices in the church are speaking and acting like the 1973 position on homosexuality is optional," wrote seminary president Dr. James A. DeJong. "People are free to disagree with it, some claim, because we are not bound by synodical decisions. So, some disagree openly -- in personal conversations, on the internet, in articles in church papers, perhaps even in classrooms or from the pulpit. We should tolerate, even welcome these voices, it is said. These dissenters have a right to their opinions and to express them. By giving them a platform in the church the church tests its positions, learns, and moves forward. Even church leaders, office bearers, have claimed this right for themselves and for others."

While granting that this approach to issues may be legitimate in a pluralistic secular society, DeJong argued that "it confuses people when the church deals with such dissent in a vacillating or indifferent manner."

"Does the church really take seriously what it says? Where it stands?" asked DeJong. "Will the church do anything to or about those who express disagreement with its basic positions?"

According to DeJong, he intends "to tackle head on the argument for the toleration of conflicting positions on homosexuality (sexual activity between persons of the same gender)."

In his article, DeJong noted that at the time of their ordination, Christian Reformed ministers, elders, and deacons sign the form of subscription and promise "to teach, defend, and propagate this understanding of the faith" on matters addressed by the denomination's doctrinal standards. With regard to synodical positions, DeJong noted that the church order considers synodical decisions to be "settled and binding" unless proved contrary to the church order or Scripture. DeJong also noted that the church order has a process for submitting a "gravamen" to revise the doctrinal standards, as well as providing for overtures and appeals to change specific decisions of synods or other church assemblies.

"All these mechanisms provide for orderly, thorough consideration by the church, thus for change that best protects and reflects the peace and harmony of the church," wrote DeJong. "Until such considered change is approved, the church is bound by its existing doctrine and polity."

According to DeJong, "the notion that our church order or synodical decisions are merely advisory" arises from a number of sources, including "the acid of today's rampant individualism, which eats away the unity and mutual accountability of the body of Christ," as well as "perversity, pride, stubbornness, arrogance, or other spiritual weaknesses that remain too much a part of us."

However, DeJong said that another reason why people believe synodical decisions on homosexuality or other issues are merely advisory "may be a mistaken, uncritical application of the church's approach to the women's ordination issue to the question of homosexuality."

DeJong noted that synod had debated the issue of women's ordination for over a quarter century and had repeatedly referred contradictory reports on the subject to the church for study. "Our synods have responded to the issue of homosexuality in a radically different (and much more typical) manner," wrote DeJong. "The synod of 1973, based on a clear and careful study, took a definite and unambiguous position. That position is so solidly held that recent synods have refused to reopen and to review it."

"On the issue of homosexuality, therefore, no basis exists for claiming that leaders are free to dissent publicly with the church's position," wrote DeJong. "There is every basis for expecting them to be fully supportive of it."

In other articles in the theme issue of the Calvin Seminary Forum, professor of pastoral care Dr. Melvin Hugen presented a case for the possibility of changing homosexual orientation and professor of philosophical theology Dr. John Cooper argued that no theological or exegetical basis exists for changing the CRC's stance that homosexual practice is unacceptable.

#### Why the Special Issue?

In a subsequent interview, DeJong said the special theme issue of the Forum was necessary because of the confusion that had been raised in the church about whether people are free to dissent from the Christian Reformed synodical position on homosexuality.

"There appears to be a lot of misunderstanding even among leaders in the church as to the binding character of synodical decisions; I simply wanted to point that out," said DeJong. "It doesn't serve the unity and peace of the church for everyone to go out and do or say what's right in their own eyes."

What should Christian Reformed members do who disagree with the CRC position on homosexual activity?

"They should send in an overture making the biblical case for their position as opposed to the unbiblical case of the present synodical position," said DeJong.

That overture should be sufficient, according to DeJong, without further public advocacy or writing of articles disagreeing with the synodical stance. "My feeling about that is it doesn't serve the peace and the unity in the church, which in the article I try to establish as a clear biblical apostolic requirement, for people to start agitating publicly about this," said DeJong. "If they feel deeply about this they should follow the prescribed ecclesiastical methods."

DeJong declined to identify any specific church members or articles which had violated the synodical stance on homosexuality, but emphasized that disagreement with synodical positions could not come without consequences.

According to the church order, individual members of the CRC may be suspended from participation in the sacraments or expelled from the church by means of excommunication; ministers, elders, and deacons may be suspended from office or deposed from office, following which they are treated as individual members and can become subject to suspension or excommunication.

DeJong declined to specify what ecclesiastical sanctions should be applied. "I think the church has got to face that and the church has to decide what to do with such people," said DeJong.

#### Response to De Jong's Article

President De Jong's article didn't go down well with homosexual officebearers in the CRC or officebearers who disagree with the 1973 synodical position that "homosexuality -- as explicit homosexual practice -- must be condemned as incompatible with obedience to the will of God as revealed in Holy Scripture."

The article did have an effect on those officebearers: no openly gay CRC ministers, elders, or deacons were willing to publicly state their private objections to De Jong's article.

Other gay members of the CRC were less hesitant to express their objections. "I think that the message this sends out is the church isn't even willing to talk about the issue, which I think people have suspected for a long time, but this tends to put the nail in the coffin," said gay CRC member Brad Bergman. "This kind of document, the Forum that came out, does not even encourage discussion, does not encourage people to think on this issue, and that's kind of sad."

"It seems like something the Catholic Church would do to stop any kind of discussion on an issue; they basically say this is the way the church believes and you have to believe this way and that's the end of the discussion," said Bergman, urging the CRC to continually re-evaluate its worldview. "When the church takes the position of, 'no, we aren't going to look at this because this is the way the Bible says,' it effectively closes discussion and can make the church look like they're running scared because they might have something to lose if they opened the discussion up." According to Bergman, the article may bring disunity rather than the unity DeJong sought.

"Unity doesn't mean everyone agrees the same way, I think it means we can agree to disagree and to discuss the issue and not be afraid of people losing their jobs or being ostracized in the church because they dare to question a specific position," said Bergman. "Martin Luther did that how many hundreds of years ago when he posted his theses on the door of the Catholic Church. That's the tradition we come out of: challenging the authority if for no other reason than to simply be able to say, yes, the authority's right."

Bergman questioned why DeJong didn't want open discussion on whether the 1973 synodical position was right or wrong. "I really don't think they have anything to lose by looking at it; if they have the spiritual and biblical and proper interpretation of the Bible in regards to homosexuality, looking at it again will not change that," said Bergman. "If, however, they may be off base on one or two points or if maybe there is something in the pastoral guidelines that is not effective, we will only benefit by getting greater clarity as far as what the church can do."

"I just think trying to stifle any kind of conversation like this isn't healthy to the growth of the church," said Bergman.

Gay members of the Christian Reformed Church and their supporters weren't the only people objecting to De Jong's position on the authority of synodical decisions.

"President De Jong's article is not helpful," said Pastor George Vander Weit, stated clerk of Classis Lake Erie and author of the original 1990 overture that led to changing the Christian Reformed position on women's ordination.

"The article simplistically says that those who differ with synodical decisions operate with the notion 'that our church order or synodical positions are merely advisory.' Those who differ have far more respect for synodical decisions than that," said Vander Weit.

"The article fails to note that, although the denomination has always required its leaders to follow a very specific procedure when disagreeing with the confessions, it has allowed much more room with synodical decisions," said Vander Weit. "It has never sought to silence public disagreement and has consistently allowed negative votes to be recorded when those decisions have been made; it has even invited discussion on various issues."

Vander Weit -- who supports the 1973 synodical position on homosexuality -- cited other examples where the Christian Reformed Church had permitted members to disagree and openly argue against synodical positions.

"For example, ten years ago the Banner asked me to review a book entitled 'Christianity and American Freemasonry;' along with that review, it published my objections to the denominational position against lodge membership," said Vander Weit. "Thirty years ago the issue of whether deacons should be delegated to classis and to synod was debated in the Banner. Numerous other examples could be given to illustrate that there has always been room for open discussion of synodical decisions."

Vander Weit argued that the article's position on the authority of synodical decisions was historically inaccurate and that open discussion on the positions of the church is beneficial.

"In an observation that disregards the mutual accountability of the body of Christ, the article, in its comparison of the synodical decisions on women-in-office and homosexuality, suggests that non-debatable pronouncements from on high are to be preferred over invitations to the churches to participate in discussions," said Vander Weit. "There is a significant amount of ferment on a variety of issues in the church today, and the response of some is to exert power to silence discussion and/or dissension. The church is better served by articles, like the others in the Forum, that engage the discussion being carried on in both church and society."

Regardless of the Forum article, Bergman said CRC members who disagreed with the synodical position on homosexuality were unlikely to be silenced. "Personally I don't think it's going to change much," said Bergman. "The people who think '73 needs to be revisited are still going to think '73 needs to be revisited."

## **THE BLESSING OF CHILDREN**

by H. W. van Egmond

These days there is much talk about a balanced population growth. Within such a mindset there is no room for families with many children. Two children is still acceptable – preferably a boy and girl. But when a family begins to count more than two offspring, the community begins to look at the developments as anti-social. In reformed circles the number of children in a family is also dropping.

Now when we say something about this subject let it be understood that we are making some general observations. We certainly don't forget that there are also situations where children are longed for but not received. In those circumstances there is much sadness. In this article we wish to write something about the blessing of children, a means by which God blesses His Church.

### The Gathering of the Church

Lord's Day 21 confesses that Christ gathers, defends and preserves His Church. God's Son has a congregation on earth that is totally dependant on Him for every thing. What Christ has once obtained must sustain Her always. It is through His Word and Spirit that He places these benefits (forgiveness of sins and everlasting life) in the midst of His Church. This is how Christ is busy in heaven. From His high position as King of kings He involves Himself, as Head of the Church, in the defense and gathering of the people that He has bought with His blood. For He is a king Who needs subjects.

### The Increase of the Church

Lord's Day 21 states that Christ gathers His Church from the beginning of the world till its end. In an uninterrupted manner Christ brings His chosen ones together. He has also involved us in that activity. In is included in our mandate to work with Christ at the increase of the Church. From among others, that is also clear from the mission mandate: go forth and make disciple from among all the nations and baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and teach them to obey all that I have commanded you. This mandate clearly focuses on the increase of the Church. Also non-Jews will be included in number of the children of Abraham in Christ's Church.

But Christ also wants His Church to expand in another manner. He also wants to use births as a method of gathering the full number of the Fathers chosen people. For children are also included. Time and again, when a child is born, a new name, a new member, is added to the congregation of our Lord. We must surely include them. That is the first question that is posed to parents who bring their child for baptism: "Do you confess that our children ... are sanctified in Christ and thus as members of His Church ought to be baptized?" The clerk will write the child's name on the membership list, but God will register its name too. Certainly, but with the demand that they must later recognize and confess their privileged position. But they are chosen to live as children of God's people with the command not to deny this great privilege. Thus we can conclude that Christ also increases His Church by means of births to believing parents.

### The Call in Marriage

Christ, Who gathers and increases His Church, involves married couples. For God uses the means that He has placed in creation to attain His goals. We might suggest a look at Art.17 of Chapter III/IV of the Canons of Dort. That article deals with our conversion and regeneration. The Canons say: "The almighty working of God ... does not exclude but requires the use of means."

We can imagine that in connection with our topic. Christ gathers and increases His Church, but that does not exclude the means – namely the command to husband and wife that "by marriage the human race is to be continued and increased" as the Form for Marriage repeats. God seeks the full number of His congregation. A husband and wife who have said their "I do's" must consider this be their mandate. Excuses such as – first we must learn how to be parents – are very lame. Generally children are not born in bunches. Rather to get into the role of parenting one should start with children as soon as possible. There will still be ample time for preparation. Let's be careful not to use such seemingly

logical excuses to cover up other motives. We think of the desire to pay off a mortgage quickly or the preference to live it up for the first few years. Then it would have been better to post-pone the marriage date a few years; for we may not separate marriage from the purpose for which God has for it.

#### Praying Parenthood

Together with God, parents may expect, receive, and raise their children. Psalm 127 reminds us of the blessing of the birth of sons. That's how the Lord builds the house. God's work goes on. It is our fundamental belief that we may entrust our children and ourselves to God's hand. Believers sing about that with the words of Psalm 105. God's promises are true and sure. Together with our children we can then continue in the line of God's people. We have a mandate in the full expanse of God's work. Then, together with Christ we may look forward and beyond our own families.

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#### CHURCH NEWS

Classis Pacific of October 6, 1977 has decided to overture Regional Synod West with the suggestion to divide Classis Pacific into two Classis. The churches at Smithers, Houston, Surrey (Maranatha), Cloverdale, Willoughby Heights, and Langley to become Classis Pacific - West while the remaining churches at Vernon, Chilliwack, Yarrow, Lynden, Abbotsford and Aldergrove would become Classis Pacific - East.