

UNITY: WHAT'S HAPPENING TODAY?

A number of weeks ago we discussed the Bible's Call for Unity. We concluded that the Scriptural call for the body of Jesus Christ to be one is a radical requirement. The Church must be one as God the Father and the Son are one. The believers must be perfectly of one mind. Several major assemblies have recently expressed this truth at their meetings and in their decisions.

The Synod of the United Reformed Churches In North America met on Oct.21 in St. Catherines, Ontario, Canada and decided (upon an overture from Classis Midwest) to pursue the establishment of ecumenical relations with twelve Reformed and Presbyterian federations. Their first ground was, "The Lord calls us to manifest visibly our spiritual unity with congregations sharing our common bond of faith. Furthermore, this unity should strive for the mutual edification of member congregations as well as the development of an effective witness to the world. [John 17:20-23; I Corinthians 12:12; Ephesians 4:1-6; 4:11-16; Philippians 2.1-2]

From June 4-11 this past spring the General Assembly of the OPC also met. From that meeting several decisions were sent to the October 1997 ICRC meeting in Seoul, Korea. One of the documents that was sent along was entitled Biblical Principles of the Unity of the Church. It is too long to publish here now, but includes the following statements:

"II. The unity of the church

C. The church, the visible organization, is described in the bible as one church. God has given only one covenant of love (Deuteronomy 7:6-12) and has only one people of the covenant.

IV. toward perfecting biblical unity

E The present division into separate denominations is because of unfaithfulness to God as expressed in beliefs, teaching, and living, on the part of both individuals in the church and the churches that are contrary to the word of God.

F. We find ourselves in this sinful situation as we undertake to pursue the mandate of unity. There exists between us and all other churches a sinful disunity that demands reconciliation in a biblical way. This sin must be faced and removed so that true and full unity and fellowship of the church may be reached.

H.4. There then may take place the actual steps toward uniting.

These include:

(b) Reconciliation between the bodies (the sin that is involved in the separate existence must be faced and resolved: this may be only the sin of separate existence; or a sin which has historical roots; or doctrinal error; or error in the life of the church)."(a)

It is apparent that there is recognition of the scriptural command for oneness as church. At the same time there is an understanding that the goal is not easily attained. There is a wide spectrum of reasons for this difficulty ranging from ethnic idiosyncrasies or diversity in heritage, all the way to sin of doctrine and life. Yet there are few leaders of federations who dare to speak clearly about the fear of compromise in doctrine and practice. When attention is drawn to teachings and practices that can not exist in one united church they continue to be ignored or relegated to future discussions after some form of unity has been attained.

From every side attempts are made to bring about church unity. At the same time there is a continued fear of causing even more schisms, divisions and splits in the process. Unhappily the methods that are being employed fail to deal with the brokenness that exists and the reasons for it. The ICRC is an example of this. "The purpose of the conference is 1.to express and promote the unity of faith that the member churches have in Christ ;"(b). From the Press Release of the October 1997 meetings we learn that seven federations were joined under this expression and promotion of unity: "When the meeting opened, there were 14 member churches; after the reception of new member churches, there are now 21, representing over 450,000 people across the world... Interested visitors from 10 other churches were also present."

If each of these federations is able to join the International Conference of 21 Reformed Churches why can not even two of these federations join together into one? What keeps all these 21 federations apart?

During the proceedings in Seoul the following topics were introduced and discussed: 'Principles of Reformed Missions. '; 'Women in Office, with Particular Reference to 'Deaconesses.'; "Biblical Principles for the Relation between Church and State"; 'Challenges of the Charismatic Movement to the Reformed Tradition'; 'The Ministry of the Word Amongst Asian Religious Peoples.' None of these topics was designed to address differences among the member federations. None of these deal directly with promoting visible unity as required when we search out the Bible's call for unity.

A little over a year ago Rev. J. Visscher of Langley, BC drafted a proposal from the Pacific Reformed Ministerial for an Association of Reformed Churches. One public meeting was held to discuss the proposal. The concluding paragraph of a report of that meeting reads: "All the speakers did convey appreciation or agreement to the proposal of ARCH. Church unity is dear to our hearts. However, it is not for the essence of the church but should be there for the well being of the church."(c) It is apparent that not everyone at that meeting was convinced of the scriptural injunction for true unity. Although the goal of the proposers of this association was laudable and in line with what Scripture teaches, the method suggested to attain the goal contains the same errors as can be found with the proceedings of the ICRC. There is an assumption of an adequate form of unity which is in fear of being threatened if the differences are debated in order to attain the true unity originally sought and Scripturally defined.

In the October issue of Christian Renewal Dr. W. Robert Godfrey, president of Westminster Theological Seminary in California adds himself to the list of those with suggestions. He writes: "Let all of these denominations (or as many as are willing) join together under one general assembly (or general, national synod) with each former denomination becoming a particular synod under that general assembly....The general assembly would adopt the Westminster Standards and the Three Forms of Unity as its confessional basis. It would meet every three years and have very specific, limited powers...." (d)

In his article Dr. Godfrey recognises that "the failure to manifest unity greatly weakens the credibility of the Reformed cause " and that "one solution would be to continue having inter-church relations committees talk to one another and seek organic union after working through all differences and suspicions"(e), but appears to consider this an unsatisfactory option.

Now some may consider it foolish to seek reconciliation about differences. Others may say that sin will prevent the accomplishment of what God teaches us in His word. But the Holy Spirit does remind us whenever we read the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians that the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men. Of course that passage in I Corinthians 1 speaks about salvation through Jesus Christ, by grace through faith. Yet, it may also give us courage to continue in obedience in our striving toward the goal of true unity in the body of that same Saviour.
PdB

- a) This document contains much more and will be discussed in more detail at a later date.
- b) From the ICRC web page on the Internet
- c) Information, Oct.5, 1996
- d) Christian Renewal Oct.20, 1997, Vol.16, No.4 pg5.
- e) *ibid*

Who Wrote Ecclesiastes?

A few years ago, when our Men's Society studied Ecclesiastes, there was considerable debate as to who wrote it. The author, although not explicitly named, is said to be the son of David, king in Jerusalem (1:1), over Israel (1:16); of unrivalled wisdom (1:16); etc. Who else could this be but Solomon?

Yet the main commentary used, by Rev. Blok [1], claims that the author was merely someone, writing about 700 years later, who *pretends* to be Solomon. K. Schilder [2] and G. Aalders [3] take the same position.

Blok's view about the author and historic context certainly affects our reading of the book. It raises also a deeper problem: if, contrary to Eccl.1:1, the Preacher was in reality *not* the son of David, king in Jerusalem, and then we seem to be faced with either error or deception. How can this be, if the Bible is the inspired, inerrant word of God? Can we no longer take the Bible at face value?

Do All Commentators Agree?

Blok argues that the Preacher has purposely left the mask of Solomon transparent: one can see through it and realize that it is not actually Solomon who is speaking. Indeed, Blok asserts that "all commentators agree that Solomon could not have written this book".

But that is not true. Most commentators, until the last few centuries, took Solomon to be the author of Ecclesiastes. Actually, this was one of the main considerations in including it in the Old Testament canon. This view was held also by Calvin [4], and by the Synod of Dordt (1618/19), which approved the Belgic Confession (Art.4 lists Ecclesiastes as a Book of Solomon). Even today there are still commentators defending the traditional stance (e.g., Walter Kaiser [5]). Thus the mask is not as transparent as Blok claims.

The Case against Solomon

Why could Solomon not have written Ecclesiastes? Blok mentions some internal evidence. For example, the author is not mentioned by name. Also, there are some references to oppression, which doesn't seem to fit in with Solomon's time. However, in Proverbs 28 & 29 Solomon also refers to oppression, and the Israelites complained of the heavy yoke put on them by Solomon (I Ki.12). Solomon's reign, though peaceful, was not free of oppression or evil.

Aalders argues that "surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me" (1:16) implies that there were many kings over Jerusalem before the author: hence this could not be Solomon, who was preceded only by David. In response, we note that the text doesn't specifically limit the rulers to Israelites. Many others (including Melchizedek) ruled over Jerusalem before Solomon. Furthermore, a parallel text (I Chr.25:29) describes Solomon as bestowed with majesty "as had not been on any king before him in Israel".

For further arguments of this nature see Aalders; for their rebuttal see Kaiser. It seems that the Biblical evidence by itself does not rule out Solomonic authorship.

This brings us to Blok's most important reason: the language of the book. On the basis of external linguistic factors scholars in the 19th century thought the book was written in the 4th or 5th century BC. This played a large role in the rejection of Solomonic authorship.

More recently, however, the scholarly assessment has changed. Kaiser argues that the linguistic evidence no longer supports claims for a late date for Ecclesiastes. Reitman [5] notes that the uniqueness of the Hebrew makes it difficult to trace the historical context of the book: the language does not allow us to date the book accurately.

Hence Blok's main proof falls short. Yet, even if scholarly opinion had not changed, Blok's reasoning is still dubious: our interpretation of God's Word should not be unduly influenced by fallible, extra-biblical, scholarly opinions.

Confessional Implications

An Internet search revealed the curious fact that of the Reformed churches (including Christian Reformed, Free Reformed, Vrijgemaakt, and others) that have posted the Belgic Confession, all have kept the reference to Solomon in Art.4 - except the Canadian Reformed Churches (and our Australian sister churches).

Why did we drop it? Synod 1983, which adopted the revised Belgic Confession, gave no reasons. Perhaps the matter was thought too insignificant to comment on. But, if so, why make the change at all?

While this, in itself, is hardly a major confessional matter, it does raise a further question: what other changes have been made in the Three Forms of Unity by the various Reformed denominations that claim adherence to them? Unity talks must surely be accompanied by efforts to resolve any differences and to establish a commonly accepted standard text.

In conclusion, I find the case against the Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes to be unconvincing, its main argument being based on a dubious application of discredited scholarship. I regret that our churches felt it necessary to modify the confessions on this matter.

John Byl

1. Rev. M.J.C. Blok, "Ecclesiastes", Inter-League Publication Board, 1988.
2. K. Schilder, "Christus in Zijn Lijden" (2nd ed., 1951) II:51.
3. G. Aalders, "Het Boek der Prediker", 1948.
4. J. Calvin, "Institutes", Bk.III, Ch.XXV, V.
5. Walter Kaiser, "Ecclesiastes: Total Life" Chicago: Moody press, 1979.
6. J.S. Reitman, "The Structure and Unity of Ecclesiastes" *Bibliotheca Sacra* **154** (July-Sept. 1997), No.615: 297-319.

The Free Reformed Churches in South Africa

Although a number of readers know South Africa and the church situation here, there are many church members who are unfamiliar with our history and present situation. To help us become more familiar with one another it might be helpful to pass on some more information about the Free Reformed Churches of South Africa (FRCSA), and the recent local church situation here.

History

First, I want to give you a small introduction on the church history of the Reformed Churches of South Africa(RCSA), starting at the beginning of the previous century. In 1859, a few years after the Disruption (1834) in Holland, Rev. Dirk Postma, together with others, founded the first Reformed Church in Rustenburg, South Africa. He was also the founder of the Theological college in Kampen in 1854. Since that time the RCSA has grown and in 1980 there were more than 400 RCSA congregations. They also had established their own Theological college in Potchefstroom and were active in hundreds of mission churches of the RCSA.

In 1945 the "Vrijmaking" took place in Holland, and the RCSA chose the "Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerken"(Christian Reformed Church) [known as the Free Reformed Church in North America - ed) as sister church / corresponding church. In 1950, a few Dutch families from the Liberated Reformed Churches in Holland, emigrated to South Africa. Because they originated from the Liberated Reformed Church, they didn't see their way open to join the RCSA, and founded the first Free Reformed Church in South Africa. It grew to 3 congregations in 1970. In 1969, the congregation in Pretoria split up because of the work and ways of Rev. C. van der Waal, and half of the congregation (supporters of v/d Waal) went over to the RCSA. The rest formed a separate congregation, and stayed with the FRCSA. Both of them have established their own Reformed Primary School, one called "Johannes Calvyn", and the other one " Dirk Postma."

Recent situation

In the beginning of the nineties, the political situation in South Africa changed, and Nelson Mandela became President of South Africa. It was not only a new era for the country, but also a new era for the church an South Africa. The "Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk"(NGK), which developed as the state church during the past two centuries, slowly but surely, took over the "new" Modern Theology, both in the churches, as well as in their Theological colleges. Scripture criticism affected, and is still strongly affecting the NGK. Some congregations are slowly moving to the pietistic way of worshipping and theological thinking. In the past few years, the Lord led four ministers from the NGK to the FRCSA because of the theology of the NGK. They are now serving as ministers in both the local congregations and the mission churches of the FRCSA. One of them, Rev. Nel, came over to the FRCSA with app. 70 people from his previous NGK-congregation. This group has now grown to more than 100 people in the past year. They have founded their own Free Reformed congregation in their town, Bethal.

So at this stage there are two congregations in Pretoria, one in which Rev. Rob Visser is serving, the other one is vacant. There is also a congregation in Cape Town where Rev. Eugene Viljoen is serving, and one in Johannesburg, and also one in Bethal. There are five mission churches around Pretoria and Cape Town.

Next year we hope to start our own Theological College in Pretoria, where the local ministers will act as lecturers. We will also receive help in the form of guest-lecturers from Kampen and Hamilton. May the Lord's blessings be on this college.

Future

Many South Africans are searching for the Lord. Some have had christian instruction and others are complete heathens. It is very humbling for a church to be faced with so much unbelief and also searching people. The FRCSA can play an important role in giving answers to these people. Although this task is very humbling it is also a large responsibility. We pray that the Lord will have mercy on us and use us as humble tools in His church gathering work here in South Africa. Soli Deo Gloria!

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Letter to the Editors:

I would like to make a few comments on Synod '95s proposed Nicene Creed and the proposed revision of this version as found in a recent Clarion. It strikes me how conservative both versions are and how they endeavour to stay as close to the wording in the original language and English text as possible. This straight-forward method of translation, however, is no longer the norm when translating the Scriptures on which the creeds are based. If Synod felt so compelled to revise yet another creed why not conform it to their choice of Bible version? Should not the creeds and confessions speak the same language as the Bible? This is very inconsistent scholarship. On the one hand Synod recommends to the churches what it thinks is the most reliable and accurate Bible version (the NIV), yet, on the other hand, it maintains the formal form of the Nicene Creed. Take, for example, the very important position of Jesus Christ as God's only begotten Son. This term is maintained in Synod's version and in the revision proposed in Clarion. But if Synod were to revise the creed in accordance with the modern language of the NIV, then one would expect their version to read something like:

"...And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the one and only Son of God, fathered of the Father before all ages; God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God; fathered, not made..."

The problem, of course, is obvious. Jesus Christ is not the one and only Son (or for that matter the begotten God-NASB) since all believers are sons of God (Romans 8:14, Galatians 3:26, LD 13 HC). The difference, of course, is that Christ is the begotten and we are the adopted. The church has confessed Jesus Christ as the only begotten Son for centuries. It is only modern scholars in a modern age who have erased a crucial term from the Bible. We can be thankful that the creeds and confessions remain true to the word of God. But Synod's choice of Bible version has far-reaching consequences. Could it be that is the reason most other conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches have refrained from making this same choice?

With brotherly greetings, Rick Duker