

Reckless Faith

When the Church Loses Its Will to Discern

In the editorial "Learn to Discern," (a) we noted that "the path to discernment is the way of spiritual maturity. And the only means to spiritual maturity is the mastery of the Word of God." This particular quotation was taken from a book by John L. MacArthur. The title of this editorial was taken from the front cover of MacArthur's book. On the dust jacket of his book, MacArthur mentions that "Reckless Faith" is a plea for discernment. "A plea for God's Word... for Christians, and the church itself, to return to the truth."

We are informed that "John F. MacArthur is the pastor teacher of Grace Community Church, Sun Valley California... is a well-known Bible expositor... speaker... best selling author... president of the Master's College and Seminary." Clearly this author comes with some rather impressive credentials. Presumably he stands outside the Reformed camp, so we will once again need to read critical-ly. The spiritual discernment for which this author pleads should invariably be our goal, and therefore we must use that kind of discernment also in our perusal of this author's book.

We read that "this book takes a serious historical look at where many Christians have gone wrong, and explains in depth the point at which faith becomes 'reckless.' It also gives a clear prescription for how the church can return to discernment... Spiritual discernment begins with God's Word. But authentic faith cannot bypass the mind. It requires that we engage our intellect as well: 'As Christians, we need not distrust sound logic. We need not - we dare not - abandon reason... For when a church loses its will to discern between sound doctrine and error, between good and evil, between truth and lies, then that church is headed for spiritual crisis.' In a society that is hostile to anyone who declares absolutes, that tolerates faith in any form, that values emotion over reason and trends over conviction, it's no surprise that many American churches have lost their ability to discern between biblical truth and doctrinal error. Such emotional, reckless 'faith' inevitably leads to spiritual disaster, taking its followers on a dangerous journey that leaves them defenseless against false teaching."

When we read these introductory remarks to MacArthur's book and in particular the statement that "many American churches have lost their ability to discern between biblical truth and doctrinal error," then we are inadvertently remind-ed of the developments in the Reformed Churches (1920's) described in the book Schilder's Struggle for the Unity of the Church, (b) In it Prof. F. W. Grosheide declares: "It cannot be denied that in our Reformed circles there are at present all kinds of phenomena which point to decline and regression. Among those phenomena I would make special mention of indifference to the church (onkerkelijkheid) and conformity to the world... Finally I would point to increasing ignorance of Reformed truth." Dr. K. Dijk went on to observe: "Many people feel uncertain and shaken up. They can no longer say positively and surely what is true, and they do not dare to speak in specifics. They are afraid of dogmatic formulations. To be questioning and seeking is regarded as a greater indication of earnestness than to be precise about one's confession. People lean toward the things we have in common with other people instead of having an eye for what specifically characterizes one's own standpoint."

In addition to Dr. Dijk and Prof. Grosheide, mention is also made of Rev. P. J. W. Klaarhamer who, in his farewell sermon (April 21, 1919), referred to an ongoing deformation:

“We are endangered because we do not know the Word of Truth... Instead of continuing reformation, I see rising deformation...” What these people observed in Reformed circles during their era (1920’s), closely parallels what John MacArthur describes as happening in the present in “many American churches.” He sees the unquestionable signs of a “reckless faith.” Such a “reckless faith” says MacArthur, embodies “the notion that it isn’t important what you believe, as long as you believe passionately enough.” Such “reckless faith” goes to two extremes. “At the one end of the spectrum it looks within - relying on feelings, inner voices, fantasy, or subjective sensations. At the other extreme it fixes its hope on some external human authority - the teachings of a supreme leader, religious tradition, magisterial dogma, or some other arbitrary canon.”

In the introduction to his book MacArthur writes: “Note that at both poles reckless faith seeks spiritual truth apart from Scripture - and that is the very point at which it becomes reckless. Both kinds of reckless faith also have this in common: they are irrational and anti-intellectual... ‘Anti-intellectual’ doesn’t mean they oppose intellectual snobbery. It means they spurn the intellect and encourage blind, uncritical trust. Anti-intellectuals often set faith against reason, as if the two were opposites. That kind of ‘faith’ is gullibility. It is foolishness, and not biblical faith. Biblical faith is never irrational.” To avoid misunderstanding MacArthur makes three very careful distinctions. First, in defending rationality we must remember that “sin has corrupted and darkened the mind and heart of every person so that none of us could ever reason our way to salvation. That is why God has given us super-natural revelation in His inspired Word, the Bible. Scripture is God’s revelation to us. It is true because God is true (Rom. 3:4). We don’t reason our way to this truth. Rather we begin by taking God at His Word, and we make Scriptures the foundation on which all reason builds.

Second, to say that people can’t reason their way to the truth of Scripture is not to imply that Scripture itself is irrational. The Bible is perfectly reasonable, consistent with itself, true in all its parts, reliable, and trustworthy as the definite test of sound doctrine. Because it is pure truth, it is perfectly rational.

Third, to argue against irrationality is not to argue in favor of rationalism. Rationalism is a philosophy that denies divine revelation... Rationalists make human reason both the source and the final test of all truth. In short, they set human reason in place of Scripture. Christians have always rightly rejected rationalism as inimical to the Christian faith. This is the point: although we must reject rationalism, we dare not repudiate rationality - the right use of sanctified reason, sound logic, clear thought, and common sense. Those who reject rationality render all truth nonsense. They discard all the mental faculties essential to understanding. They portray faith as a blind leap in the dark, something that bypasses the intellect. Such ‘faith’ is either feeling based, or it is made to be a sheer act of the will. Either way, it is reckless faith.”

A few more quotes from MacArthur: “Authentic faith can never bypass the mind. It cannot be irrational. Faith after all deals with truth... The body of truth on which our faith is based has depths that are mysterious - unfathomable to the merely human mind, or inscrutable - but truth is never irrational. The difference is all important. God cannot lie (Titus 1:2). Therefore what God says is

true - and the antithesis must be false. Truth cannot be self-contradictory. Truth makes sense; nonsense cannot be true... Moreover, the doctrine on which we base our faith must be sound - which is to say biblical... Sound biblical doctrine therefore underlies all true wisdom and authentic faith. The attitude that scorns doctrine while elevating feelings cannot legitimately be called faith - even if it masquerades as Christianity. It is actually an irrational form of unbelief."

After making the point that "God holds us accountable for what we believe as well as how we think about the truth," MacArthur continues with this thought by stating that "all Scripture testifies to the fact that God wants us to know and understand the truth. He wants us to be wise. His will is that we use our minds. We are supposed to think, to meditate - to be discerning." In the well-known Scripture verses he quotes we note the repeated use of words like truth, knowledge, discernment, wisdom, and understanding: "Thou dost desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part Thou wilt make me know wisdom" (Ps. 51:6). "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do his commandments" (Ps. 111:10). Teach me discernment and knowledge, for I believe in Thy commandments" (Ps. 119:66). "In (Christ) are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). (NASB)

Biblical faith, therefore, is rational. It is reasonable. It is intelligent. It makes good sense. "Spiritual truth", says MacArthur, "is meant to be rationally contemplated, examined logically, studied, analyzed, and employed as the only reliable basis for making wise judgments. That process is precisely what Scripture calls discernment... So 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). 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)

MacArthur's book is "a plea for God's Word... for Christians, and the church itself, to return to the truth." It is an appeal for spiritual maturity and scriptural discernment in a time when "many American churches have lost their ability to discern between biblical truth and doctrinal error." There are the unquestionable signs of "reckless faith." We can observe skepticism (a denial that anything can be known for certain), rationalism (the theory that reason is a source of truth), and secularism (an approach to life that purposely excludes God) and any number of other anti-Christian philosophies.

We are seeing history repeat itself before our very eyes. The words of Grosheide, Dijk, and Klaarhamer are still echoing in our ears: "all kinds of phenomena which point to decline and regression"; "indifference to the church and conformity to the world"; "being afraid of dogmatic formulations"; "no longer (being able to, RD) say positively and surely what is true"; "endangered because we do not know the Word of truth"; and "rising deformation". And now contemporary

writers are taking up the cry again. MacArthur calls it “reckless faith.” Our recent history forces us to join with him in his warning call. “True Christians cannot condone or disregard anti-Christian influences in their midst and expect to enjoy God’s blessing.”

Ron Dykstra

Notes:

- a) “Learn to Discern”, Reformed Polemics, Nov. 22, 1997.
- b) Schilder’s Struggle for the Unity of the Church, Rudolf Van Reest, p. 60 and 61.

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Before Many Witnesses...

“How merciful our God is, Who does not let us struggle all by ourselves, lonely and forlorn, but Who has given us a place in His Church, Who sealed and confirmed His mercy unto us in the presence of many witnesses.

If at any time we should despair of His mercy, there are the many witnesses who were there when we received the sign and the seal of the covenant and who can confirm it from their personal knowledge of that fact.

If at any time we should slacken, there are the many witnesses who are able to remind us of the day when God’s mercy became so abundantly clear: when He enabled us to make that good confession, having called us by His effectual calling unto everlasting life.

It is not without reason that the Lord exhorts us in the Epistle to the Hebrews that we shall eagerly seek for peace with everyone and for holiness without which no one shall see the Lord.

The meaning of this exhortation is not that we shall go after peace in order that we may have peace with everyone.

We are exhorted to go after peace as a group, as a body, in company with the whole Church, everyone joining in, so that no one stays behind, for without holiness no one shall see the Lord.

The many witnesses are there to help us stay with the flock. That we made the good profession before many witnesses helps us to stay on the right track, so that we all may see the Lord.

When making profession of faith, we do not make profession of a personal conviction, although we are personally convinced of it, but we make profession of our faith as being the same as the faith of the Church: they all believe the same, they all strive after the same goal, contend for the same prize which is given to all, and hold on to everlasting life.

It would be of little help if the witnesses reminded us of our personal conviction, expressed on a certain occasion. Then we would be thrown back on our own person, our own convictions, and thus on our own resources.

But it is a tremendous help that those witnesses can remind us of the grace of God bestowed on us and received and acknowledged by us when we made the good confession. They were there; they saw it and they heard it.

And in the mouth of two or three witnesses every matter shall be established. There is no doubt about it.

Proceed then, go after peace in the communion of the Church, and strive together after holiness that you may see God.”

Excerpt from *Before Many Witnesses* by Rev. W. W J. Van Oene in the book by the same title.

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Music for all Seasons

A CD Review

By P. deBoer

God's Truth Abideth Still and Sing to the Lord are two CDs produced under the Church Music and Records label. They were produced in 1996 and have been available for about a year. Together and singly they make a wonderful collection of Psalms and Hymns. All the selections are based on the Book of Praise of the Canadian Reformed Churches. However, there is great variety in the manner in which these are presented.

One may eagerly await the singing of The Children of Asaph and at other times be regaled by a church full of congregational singing. The Children of Asaph is a small children's choir, conducted by Theresa Janssen, that was organized in the Fall of 1994. The main focus of the choir is to sing Psalm settings and Biblical songs to the glory of God. It is their hope and prayer that through this recording many other children, as well as their parents, may learn these Psalms, which speak of God's faithfulness and of our obligation to live to His glory.

The wonderful music and singing is accentuated by the pan-flute of Noortje Van Middelkoop. Noortje is famous in a number of countries for her mastery of this instrument and ably provides excitement and brilliance to a number of selections on these two CDs.

Two other notable participants that provide a balanced variety for the listener's pleasure are Harm Hoeve and Herman Van Vliet on the pipe organs of various church buildings.

Both these able organists are well known to many who appreciate the Genevan tunes of the Psalms. They accompany congregational singing with reverence, decorum and excitement. In addition to their mastery of the music, they have a deep commitment to the content of the Psalms themselves. The combination can be heard in their playing on these DDD compact discs.

Guest appearances are also made by Bastiaan Van Vliet on the French horn, Lucy Bootsma on the violin and Daniel Bootsma on the cello.

Both of these CD's are highly recommended. They are available in Canada from Church Music Records: 1-800-563-3594, in the USA from Inheritance Publications: 1-515-628-3804, and in

Australia from Euro-Disk: 09-390-4940. Otherwise they can be sought where one might consider being able to purchase this type of music and song.

As editors we are thankful that efforts have been made to publish the Psalms as found in the Book of Praise - in the English language. We are also convinced of the beauty of the Genevan melodies that have come to characterize them. These recordings can only enhance the appreciation for these wonderful blessings from our heavenly Father.

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Christmas Meditation

O come, O come, Emmanuel

A well known and much beloved hymn that is a favourite at this time of the year is the one that begins with the above words (Hymn 12 in our B. of P.) As is often the case with something familiar, we sing it without giving it too much conscious thought. The words glide off our tongues and through our lips without having touched our hearts. Let us therefore reflect upon it a little more deeply.

The song is actually a plaintive cry from a people in exile who yearn for freedom - freedom from bondage, from death and the grave, from the gates of hell. At first glance these are not images that we normally hear associated with Christmas time. In reality, however, that is what it's all about.

The language evokes images of the Old Testament: 'ransom captive Israel', 'Branch of Jesse's stem', 'David's key' and so on. Indeed, how can one separate the coming of the Lord from the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies and the need for salvation of God's covenant people?

There is a fervent cry to 'regard Thine own and rescue them'; to disperse the gloomy clouds of night'; to 'forever shut the gates of hell'. The author is keenly aware of the need for salvation through the promised Emmanuel. Without Him the alternatives are indeed dark and grim as portrayed. The desire for salvation is not based on an individualistic motive as so often appears in generic Christmas songs, but it is placed within a historical, covenantal perspective.

There is confidence in this song as well - confidence that the Emmanuel shall 'come to thee, O Israel'. And to that sure knowledge the songwriter encourages the singer to 'Rejoice!' not just once but twice. It is the same confidence that allowed Simeon 'to depart in exaltation' now that 'Thy promise is fulfilled' (H. 18).

To be sure, the fulfillment was not limited to God's Old Testament people but 'For peoples everywhere/A light for revelation' (H. 18). Mary, too, recognized this in her song: 'Rememb'ring evermore/what He to Abram swore/And to his seed forever.' (H. 13)

While Hymn 12 anticipates the coming of our Lord, we live in the time of fulfillment. Emmanuel has become *Immanuel* (God with us). What wonderful knowledge to have as members of God's covenant people in the new dispensation! Does that mean we no longer need to sing this song? Have we 'grown' beyond that in this time? Not at all!

Even though 'A great and mighty wonder/ Upon the earth was done' (H. 16), we still feel the pull of our old nature which cleaves to us while we are alive. For us too, death and the grave await and 'death's dark shadows' need to be put to flight; the gates of hell 'forever shut' so that we may rejoice as well with our Immanuel.

Now when you sing your hymns in celebration and remembrance of Christ's birth, may the perspectives of the Old and New Testament be joined in creating the perspective of eternity as so beautifully portrayed in another Hymn in the Book of Praise based on Philippians 2:6 -11 (H. 19).

Here Christ's earthly suffering on our behalf is portrayed; it culminates in glory with the raising of the Son to 'the heavenly heights', receiving 'The Name surpassing every name in might' (H. 19).

And lest we forget the purpose, 'Let at the name of Jesus every knee/From heav'n above to depths below the sea/Now humbly bow before His majesty'. At the conclusion of each stanza we may repeat the 'Hallelujah' in preparation for joining the great Hallelujah Choir to praise and glorify God throughout eternity. Amen.

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