

EVERLASTING LIFE

As we replace our 1997 calendars with the 1998 one, we stop to contemplate the passing of time. Some of us might recall the first words of Ecclesiastes: ‘The words of the Teacher, son of David, king of Jerusalem: “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” What does man gain from all his labour at which he toils under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains for ever.’ (Eccl.1:1-4 NIV). Yet as Christians we believe the life everlasting.

All around us, and even among us, we hear plans and schemes about the future. Our whole western economy follows the whims of the ‘baby boom’ generation. As this generation grew into the active part of their life cycle, sports became the focus, now that they are beginning to think of retirement and more sedentary activities, RRSP’s and retirement villages, golf, travel and other such topics dominate the ad campaigns and self-help seminars. Things today are not much different from the days of Isaiah when the people did not give regard to the work of the Lord, but rather took things into their own hands and could be heard to say ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die’ (Isaiah 22:13 RSV).

While life appears to go on without regard to Him Who created it, sin multiplies. Morals and ethics are almost depleted, the value of life has degenerated to the convenience of others, principles have been replaced by tolerance, and an outlook for a bright future is darkened only by the fear of sickness and pain. Death is the end. But as long as it can be delayed and softened with medication its inevitability will continue to be endured.

Slogans such as ‘he who has the most toys wins’ speak volumes about materialism, egoism and individualism that mark our day. Yet this is the environment in which we begin a new year. But let us not forget it is the nineteen hundred and ninety eighth year of our Lord.

(Approximately) 1998 years ago ‘she (Mary) gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger,...’ (Luke 2:7). And many hundreds of years before that the promise of salvation was first made to Adam and Eve. Time and again when everything appears lost the Almighty Creator intervenes in the “normal” course of history to right the wrongs, to overcome sin, to reform history.

Not long after the Creation of heaven and earth and all that is in it man sinned and everything suffered. God’s beautiful handiwork was condemned. But He came to man and promised a way out. As the Old Testament unfolded there was an endless array of disobedience, punishment and return. The last prophet echoed the Old Testament deformation when he rebuked the chosen people of God: ‘You have wearied the LORD with your words. Yet you say, “How have we wearied him?” By saying, “Every one who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them.” (Malachi 2:15).

The history of the New Testament is not different. The covenant people of God continue to stray from ‘the way’. Minor Reformations are followed by the Great Reformation. Secessions and Liberations remind the true believer that the Holy Spirit remains vigilant about the Church. And

again the Church strays away. Will man never learn? Is there not an end to the cycle of sin? Jesus, Himself speaks in wonderment about this phenomenon. He asks, "Nevertheless, when the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8)

These are sobering thoughts to accompany us into a new year. Yet they reflect reality. But at the same time our Father in heaven has also given us much reason for joy and courage as we reflect on the passing of time. In 1992, while Rev. R. Timmerman was minister of the Liberated Reformed Church of Assen-North in the Netherlands, he wrote a booklet entitled *Eeuwig Leven* (Everlasting Life). In it he reviews the various Bible texts that speak about the life hereafter. When a christian focusses on those texts he is reminded that things will not always be as they have been in the past. There will be a time that there will be no more deformation, no more backsliding, no more false dilemma between doctrine and life style, no more tolerance of unscriptural teaching and behaviour. There will come a time and place where everything and everyone is perfect.

The history of salvation has shown us that when everything appears to be darkest God rescues His people. The apostle Paul reminds the Romans, and us, about that in the eleventh chapter of his letter to them. God does not forsake the work of His hands. We may, and must, go forward in the way that He teaches us in His Word. Also in 1998 we must continue to work at what He gives us to do. Be that is as a minister of the word, in the preaching and teaching; be that is as an elder in the consistory, in the pastoral care of the flock and the ruling together with the minister. Be that is as a teacher in the Christian school, in the teaching of the covenant youth; be that is as an administrator at such a school, in supervising the teachers, establishing reformed curriculum, in exercising proper discipline. Be that is as a parent, in love and nourishment of our children, in education and as an example in a God-directed lifestyle. Be that is as a deacon, in the proper love and care for the members of the congregation. Be that is as a child, in the love for God, our parents, and all the others He has given to help us form a life dedicated to His service. Be that is as single person, in the daily work He has granted us and in the various opportunities He gives us to serve others; and the list goes on.

Rev. Timmerman reminds us to be encouraged for our Father has given us a wonderful future to look forward to. He draws out of Scripture what the Holy Spirit has given us there so that we might receive a taste of what awaits us. At the close of his 82 page book (in Dutch) he concludes:

"When I let the various Biblical remarks about (the wonderful future that awaits us - PdB) really sink in, then I come to the conclusion that much of the present world will come back. Otherwise I wouldn't know what to do with all those things the Bible says about that. The new earth is not just a large space where an innumerable crowd of people stand and sing. The Bible gives many clear indications that there will be more. The comments that are made indicate that much of what was present in paradise will return, much of that beautiful world that God created - with plants, flowers and animals. And that will all be to the greater glory of God. We do not receive a detailed image of that new earth, but there is enough information that leads us to understand that there will be more than many singing people.

The Bible does not give us a complete picture, but the information it does give is trustworthy, that is our starting point. It will be a wonderful future: a renewed paradise with the tree of life; and

renewed man. The corruptible shall have become incorruptible, the mortal shall have put on immortality, and the weak shall have been raised in power.

Yes, we await 'a new heaven and a new earth' according to His promise. We know it will be a wonderful future. We certainly do not know everything about it, much remains hidden, unrevealed. But let it be sufficient that once we too will see what John was already allowed to see in a vision: 'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.'" (Rev.21:1-4)."

As we begin 1998 Anno Domini (the year of our Lord) let us remain comforted as many before us and as we together confess. "Since I now already feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy, I shall after this life possess perfect blessedness, such as no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived - blessedness in which to praise God forever." (HC, Lords Day 22; A. 58)

PdB

AUTHORITY

Effective influence is a key for making decision by majority. When the government plans to make a decision about a sensitive matter there will always be someone or a group of activists who want to dictate over and above the effective influence of the majority. But who should have the final say? And why, does the power to make decisions lie with the majority or with those 'who are placed over us'? We would like to focus attention on these questions as they pertain to the church and the communion of saints. Is the authority a thing of the past? Can we still speak about authority there? Or has the authority of the church also been replaced by the effective influence of the brothers and sisters?

In order to answer the question whether authority has become an outdated concept it is first necessary to really understand what is meant by authority. The authority literally means to have the right to say something. One who has authority has the right to impose a rule or command with force.

What does Scripture say about authority and about one who wields it? Our confession says in Lord's Day 9 of the Catechism that God is the Almighty, Who with His counsel and providence still upholds and governs heaven and earth. This same Almighty is, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Father. God has the power to rule. His Word has force. What God says happens. There is nothing and no one who can resist his power. God speaks with authority! Who is man that he would set himself in resistance to God? To their own hurt and shame God breaks such disobedience (Isaiah 40:21-24). God is the potter and we are but clay in His hands (Rom.9:21ff). God rules with authority that envelopes all power and dominion.

The question comes up: How does God exercise His authority in His church? The Bible explains that God delegates His authority, passes it on to His Son, Jesus Christ. At the Ascension His church is assured of this: Unto Me is given all power in heaven and on earth. Lord's Day 19 describes the splendour of Christ at the right hand of God when it says: "Christ ascended into heaven to manifest Himself there as Head of His Church; through Whom the Father governs all things." Christ rules His Church! He has the right to control what happens in the midst of His people. The decisions about what we must do and not do ought to be made in obedience to His authority. Christ is the only one Who has the first and the last word. And the Bible is our study material from which to learn the will of our Head, Jesus Christ.

But Christ also delegates His control. He calls people to see to it, in His name, that His will is carried forward. Office-bearers have the task of serving Christ. They must watch over the congregation and see to it that nothing infiltrates it contrary to Gods Word. For if a doctrine or opinion was to enter the Church that would mean opposition to our Head, Christ. Office-bearers must work with that Word of Christ. They must admonish the sinner in His name. In circumstances of sorrow and strife they must use the Word to comfort and encourage (Eph.4:7-16).

Many no longer want to accept this manner of care from Christ via the office. They think that He cares for them directly, outside of the office, detached from His Word. They are masters unto themselves and consider themselves wiser than Christ, Who, in love, appointed office-bearers for His Church. Such people seek 'the hidden things', but not the 'thus says the Lord'. They live their mystical world where they expect to receive experiences from the Holy Spirit. But they want nothing to do with study and discipline. A direct desire of their heart they interpret as the will of the Lord. And from that we can hear sayings such as: "I find that the Lord has given me the room to do things that deviate from His commandments." Their own heart determines what course of action shall be chosen and against what they shall fight. Their own heart has become their norm. It is such who make noises about having effective influence in the ruling of the Church.

What we have previously said about the rule and control of Christ is wonderfully summarized in Scripture regarding the name of Christ, as our Head, in Eph.1:22; 4:16;

1 Cor. 2:12-31. In the first chapter of Ephesians we come across that. Christ is given to the congregation as Head. God has given Him all power; has placed everything under His feet. The position of Head is coupled with everything being put under His feet. Christ stands above everything! This Christ, in this position, has been given to the congregation as its Head. Clothed with power and majesty Christ has been given the authority to care for His Church. He is able and allowed to do that. He received this power from the Father and earned it with His own blood for the benefit of His Church. Christ's position of power cries out for recognition. For in this manner He is the leader. He is superior and highly positioned. He emanates authority. He has power and competence, and does not permit anyone to oppose Him.

Answer 50 of the Catechism deals with this matter of the Christ's authority. He is our head, not to strike fear into us, but to defend and protect us from all the enemies. As our Head, Christ is clothed with authority. He has the right of say over His Church, precisely for the sake of her peace and protection.

In Ephesians 5:23 Scripture describes a husband as the head of his wife just as Christ is the Head of His congregation. In the discussions about the marriage form we often meet this text. But that is not the point of discussion this time. At present we are dealing with the position of the husband as head of the wife. Paul gives a similar comparison: even as Christ is the Head of His congregation, even so is the man over against his wife. As we have made clear above, when we speak about 'headship' we are speaking about authority. We emphasize that we are not speaking about arbitrary authority that annihilates like a despot. But Christ, as Head, cares for His Church in love and with sacrifice; but also with power and from a high position. That is the authority of Christ.

In the same manner the husband has authority over the wife. Paul draws this to the attention of husbands: you have the say so over your wife and your family in love and with sacrifice; to protect and defend her against all evil - especially the evil from 'the evil one' and the world. Man and wife live trustingly under the control of Christ. In the same way the wife must live trustingly under the control of her husband.

Having had this overview we must deal with the question: Is authority old fashioned? Have we finished the time period of control by others over us and entered the time of majority influence where people decide their course of action in accordance with their own insights? Those who would defend such a situation come into conflict with Almighty power of God and the authority of Jesus Christ. Even more, those who deny authority will not be able to travel further with Christ as Head. For Christ requires obedience to His authority in Word and Spirit.

Remain obedient to the serving authority of office-bearers who come to you in Christ's name. Under that authority from Christ we will not be ineffective, but we will grow toward Him Who is our Head: Christ. (Eph. 4:14ff). H.W.van Egmond

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ARTICLE 22 of the BELGIC CONFESSIO

The specific duties of the office of elder are together with the ministers of the Word, to have supervision over Christ's Church, that every member may conduct himself properly in doctrine and life according to the gospel; and faithfully to visit the members of the congregation in their homes to comfort, instruct, and admonish them with the Word of God, reproving those who behave improperly. They shall exercise Christian discipline according to the command of Christ against those who show themselves unbelieving and ungodly and refuse to repent, and shall watch that the sacraments are not profaned. Being stewards of the house of God, they are further to take care that in the congregation all things are done decently and in good order, and to tend the flock of Christ which is in their charge. Finally, it is the duty of elders to assist the ministers of the Word with good counsel and advice and to supervise their doctrine and conduct.

Rev. W. W. J. van Oene writes about this article, in part:

'We could divide the specific duties of the office of elder into three main categories. There is in the first place the government of the church, which includes the discipline; further there is the supervision over other office-bearers, fellow elders, deacons, minister. In the third place there is the visiting. These three categories are no more than three facets of the one task.

The government of the church includes everything and not just what some would call “spiritual matters”... No part of the task of the elders is more “spiritual” than the other.

The government that has been entrusted to them is of a serving nature; it has as its goal and should be exercised to this end that Christ have dominion over the church and that God’s Word be acknowledged and honoured as the only rule for all of life. Holy Scripture tells the elders not to lord it over the Church of God, the flock of Christ. We repeat what was said above: authority is always given for the benefit of those over whom it is exercised, never for the benefit of those who receive it.’

“With Common Consent”: page 106

Letter to the Editors,

I applaud br. R. Duker’s letter to your paper. He raises excellent “food for thought” with regard to Synod ‘98’s plan to alter the Nicene Creed. Personally, I find it unnecessary that Synod ‘98 arranges to do so, but the plans are in place and will proceed accordingly.

Some thoughts develop from br Duker’s comments that can add to his suggestions.

Perhaps recent Synods should have changed the Nicene Creed prior to its search for a new Bible translation upon the realization that the RSV will no longer be available. Br. Duker correctly points out the possible consequences of Synod’s choice of another translation.

I dread to think of what else future Synods may be “forced” to change, in order to make all creeds and confessions coincide. Then there is also the Church Order. Somehow it will have to fit as well. Correct translations of any of these documents are far better left as they are. Proper wording is of vital importance in order to understand what God says to us. This reminds me of a previous article in this paper, “Watch Your Language.”

An interesting question Br. Duker raises, “Could it be that this is the reason most other conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches have refrained from making this same choice?” That might “throw another curve” into the unity discussions.

Does Synod ’98 not have anything on its agenda that needs more crucial attention than the alteration of a Creed, or which Church might be added to the list of those already in ecclesiastical fellowship, etc.?

Does General Synod only pick up where it left off at the previous session, with an occasional appeal thrown in, often regarded as secondary, and proceed to carry out the plans already laid out?

Something has gone drastically wrong when proposed agendas take priority to the appeals for purity of the church. Will it not make more sense to gather every three years, reflect on the situation within the churches between those three years, and make the necessary changes in accordance with God’s Word? The appeals plead with the assemblies for the purity of the church according to God’s Word. It is more often seen among the “silent minority” where the church has strayed from His Word than the majority will ever admit. Yet, things must go on as planned in order to “further the Kingdom”. If most scriptural appeals; the “difficult” ones, were given priority, the Kingdom will be

furthered. These (scriptural) appeals usually lead to the repentance necessary, thus advancing the Kingdom as the King gathers His church. Ignoring them only leads to the decay of the church. No one may ever claim that the church has advanced from generation to generation based on its synodical agendas. History itself shows us that.

The only necessary items on the agenda are those that deal with the daily renewal of our lives, beginning with the awareness of our sin and weakness, then the assurance of our deliverance in the Blood of the Lamb, and finally our thankfulness to God for this deliverance.

Br. Duker, I'm sure others will be able to glean even more from your letter than I have.

In Christ,

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