

## THE SUBSCRIPTION DEBATE <sup>(1)</sup>

### *“Strict” versus “Loose Subscription”*

In the editorial “Confessional Binding and Subscription: For Office-Bearers Only?” (a) we examined the word “subscription,” and we said that to “subscribe” means “to give support, sanction, or approval; consent or agree (to),” or simply put, “to express full agreement with.” With that definition in mind we are not amiss in asking how it is possible that in the context of a discussion on subscription or confessional binding we can even begin to entertain the idea of a so called “loose subscription.” “A ‘less strict’ subscription is not a genuine or honest subscription... We either subscribe ‘wholeheartedly,’ as we have promised, or we have not really subscribed at all.” Therefore in the context of confessional binding the term “loose subscription” is really an oxymoron - a figure of speech in which opposite and contradictory ideas or terms are combined - as in “Christian rock” and “Reformed Baptists.” We should be loath to engage in any form of discussion that mandates the use of this type of deceptive or misleading terminology.

### **LOOSE SUBSCRIPTION**

The fact that the term “loose subscription” - which really is no subscription at all - can even be a considered or accepted as a credible term in the discussion on confessional binding is itself an indication of the extent to which some church members will go in their refusal to be bound to the true confession of God’s Word. These people want to have their cake and eat it too. They lay claim to being communicant or confessing (voting) members of the church, but they do not want to be strictly and fully bound to the true confession of God’s Word as the church has summarized it. They only want to use doctrinal standards as non-binding guides, and therefore they insist that “loose subscription” remain the reigning position in the church. They want to leave room for their scruples or mental reservations, so they “subscribe” tongue-in-cheek or with their “fingers crossed” (Gary North). (b) The Presbyterian pastor Samuel Miller (1769- 1850) rightly regards this loose or “evasive subscription” as “a solemn perjury.” (c)

In the editorial “Confessional Binding and Mental Reservations - Free to Disagree?,” (d) we discussed the change made to the Form of Subscription of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands (1816), and we mentioned that this change required office-bearers to accept the confessions of the church not because they accord (agree with) the Scriptures, but insofar as they accord with the Scriptures. This episode in our church history makes it clear that the issue of confessional subscription, particularly the matter of “strict vs. loose subscription” is not solely or exclusively a Presbyterian problem. And, like the current “strict vs. loose subscription” debate at Westminster Theological Seminary, also we have recently had occasion to engage in some more reflection and retrospection on this particular point at General Synod Burlington 1986.

In a letter to Gen. Synod 1986, regarding the questions in the Form for Public Profession of Faith and Baptism, the statement was made that the present formulation “summarized in the confessions,” is “in conflict with reality” because “it is questionable whether every believer must, or even is able to give allegiance to ALL formulations used in the confessions in order to be

admitted to the sacraments” (Art. 144, observation 5). Gen. Synod correctly considered that the appellants “do not prove that the present formulation (of the questions in the form for baptism and public profession of faith, RD) is ‘in conflict with reality’ nor that it is impossible for anyone to keep the Scriptural command (Romans 10:9,10; Rev. 2:26) and ‘wholeheartedly’ believe (agree with) the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confessions and taught here in this Christian Church” (Art. 144, consideration 5). Simply put: It is entirely realistic to expect everyone to wholeheartedly agree with or to strictly and fully subscribe to our Reformed confession of Scripture. Not only is it realistic, our forefathers have, in reality, done it for hundreds of years!

### ***STRICT SUBSCRIPTION***

There is therefore nothing “loose” about our subscription. We are strictly and fully bound to our Reformed confessions. This insistence on strict subscription clearly has consequences for how we view confessional binding or subscription. When we review our previous discussions on this particular subject we can briefly summarize the main points as follows:

1) We reject the erroneous notion that we subscribe to “only the Apostles’ Creed.” In response to the suggestion (opinion) that historically we subscribed to “only the Apostles’ Creed,” we note that a creed is one of the ancient statements of the Christian faith, and that a confession is a later detailed summary of the Christian faith. The history of the Church did not end when the Church “willingly received” the ecumenical creeds. This history continued when the reformed confessions came into being during the Reformation era. What the church, on the basis of the Word of God, believes and has confessed in the Apostles’, Nicene and Athanasian creeds (4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries) was expanded upon in the confessions: Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort (16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries). The detailed confessions, in their elaboration of the truth, remain faithful to the Apostles’ Creed. We wholeheartedly subscribe to our creeds as well as our confessions. We may therefore indeed speak of “creedal” subscription, but we must be wary of those who insist on using only (exclusively) this particular term in contrast or opposition to confessional subscription.

2) We disallow the strange idea that subscription is for “office-bearers only.” The subscription of the office-bearers to the confessions is not a more strict subscription, but a more crucial one because their influence and authority as leaders, supervisors and teachers in the midst of the congregation is considerably greater. But, although the subscription of the office-bearers is a more crucial one, yet we all believe and we all confess (subscribe to) the same truth.

3) We disagree with the destructive supposition that we subscribe to the confessions of the church insofar, (inasmuch) or to the extent that they agree with Scripture. That is pure subjectivism! We subscribe to our Reformed confessions because they accord with Scripture. Our confessions are faithful and trustworthy summaries of the truth of the Word of God. What we therefore profess to be true is not true because it is in the confession, but because it is in God’s Word.

4) We disown the error of differentiating between major and minor issues in the confessions. In this context we disclaim other frequently encountered faulty distinctions such as doctrinal versus peripheral; important vs. unimportant; fundamental vs. non-fundamental; essential vs. non-essential; necessary vs. unnecessary, or what some people believe versus what others think, etc., etc. If we differentiate between major and minor issues in the confessions we will eventually differentiate between major and minor issues in the Scriptures, for, as history teaches us,

confessional relativism and scriptural relativism are mutually related. If this kind of relativism is introduced then the undivided Word of God is lost.

5) We therefore refuse to engage in a “strategy of verbal subversion” (Gary North) by which we create false dilemmas and faulty distinctions (differentiations). We do not accede to the pernicious proposition that there are unimportant, non-fundamental, non-essential or unnecessary articles in our Reformed confession of Scripture. The non-fundamental articles of the doctrine are not in, but outside the confession. Furthermore, it has not been proven that we are not “able to give allegiance to ALL formulations used in the confessions.” That does not mean that it is impossible to make improvements to the formulations used in the confessions, or that revision will never ever be necessary. What it does mean is that what we have (already) confessed to be true we also truly believe, and what we have (already) formulated in our Reformed confession of Scripture we wholeheartedly confess. We all believe and we all confess ALL that the church, on the basis of God’s Word, has summarized in her confession(s).

6) We do not consider our creeds or confessions as merely “articles of peace,” in other words: as articles which he who subscribes is not considered as professing to believe, but as merely engaging not to oppose - in any public or offensive manner. No one is ever at liberty to subscribe articles which he does not truly and fully believe. If he cannot subscribe honestly or wholeheartedly, then let him not subscribe at all. Paraphrasing Samuel Miller’s sentiments of this subject: “If the doctrine taught in the Confession be wrong, let it by all means be changed. But as long as we profess to hold certain doctrines, let us really and honestly hold them.” (e) Therefore we hold to (subscribe to) our Reformed confession of Scripture not merely to keep the peace, but to wholeheartedly confess the truth. The confession of the lips and the conviction of the heart always go together.

The aforementioned points are not at all meant to serve as a complete compilation of every possible approach used by those who endeavour to undermine strict subscription, but simply to highlight some of the well-known ways by which people, whether they be Presbyterian or Reformed, have tried to get from under the authority of the confession of the Church. These points should serve to familiarize us with the loose subscriptionist’s destructive “strategy of verbal subversion,” a strategy that is primarily “based on the misuse of words” (Gary North).

### ***THE ADOPTING ACT***

The Westminster Standards were officially adopted by the American Presbyterian Church in 1729. At that time, the Synod of Philadelphia was the highest judicatory in the church. The Adopting Act was passed on September 19, 1729. In the context of what we have just said about strict and loose subscription, reading this Adopting Act is indeed a very revealing and somewhat disconcerting affair. We read, for example, that the members of this Synod agreed that all ministers “shall declare their agreement in, and approbation of, the Confession of Faith, with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster; as being in all essential and necessary articles, good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine...”

Furthermore, a “candidate of the ministry” shall declare “his agreement in opinion with all the essential and necessary articles of said Confession of Faith and Catechisms...” And, in case a minister or candidate for the ministry, “shall have any scruple with respect to any article or articles

of said Confession or Catechisms, he shall at the time of his making said declaration declare his sentiments to the Presbytery or Synod, who shall, notwithstanding, admit him to the exercise of the ministry within our bounds, and to ministerial communion, if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge his scruples or mistake to be only about articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government.”

“But if the Synod or Presbytery shall judge such ministers or candidates erroneous in essential and necessary articles of faith, the Synod or Presbytery shall declare them incapable of communion with them. And the Synod do solemnly agree, that none of us will traduce (libel or slander, RD) or use any opprobrious (abusive or defaming, RD) terms of those that differ from us in these extra-essential and not necessary points of doctrine, but treat them with the same friendship, kindness, and brotherly love, as if they had not differed from us in such sentiments.”

### ***A CUSTOM-MADE FORMULATION***

When we closely examine the terminology used in the Adopting Act, especially the bold italicized words and phrases, our response will probably be one of surprise and disbelief. How can we seriously expect someone to strictly and fully subscribe to (adopt) a confessional standard using the kind of ambiguous, vague, indefinite and unclear language as found of the Adoption Act? When we read, for example, about “good forms of sound words and systems of Christian doctrine,” and “extra-essential and not necessary points of doctrine,” and “articles not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship, or government,” then we are confronted with custom-made confusion. Those who insist on loose subscription to the confessional standards of the church, and who want them only as non-binding guides, will find in the Adopting Act a custom-made formulation; a formulation that makes strict and full subscription practically impossible.

We are reminded here of the concurring sentiments expressed in some of the quotes from articles written in the mid 1980’s and incorporated in the editorial “Confessional Binding and Mental Reservations - Free to Disagree?” We stated that “we find the Presbyterian subscription to the confession ‘as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures’ rather vague, and the distinction between essential and non-essential articles is equally vague and extremely dangerous. To what extent are Presbyterians bound to their confessions? Is individual freedom here not being elevated at the cost of true confessional unity?” (f) We also wrote: “So one accepts the ‘system of doctrine’ contained in the Standards, but is not bound to ‘extra-essential and not necessary points of doctrine.’ In traditional American Presbyterianism, there is certainly no binding to the literal text and all the articles of the adopted Standards.” (g) We are therefore not amiss in questioning the Presbyterian position on confessional binding (confessional membership).

In “Confessional Binding and Subscription - For Office-Bearers Only?” we made the observation that “historically the Presbyterian Churches have subscribed to their Standards inasmuch as they find them to be biblical and not because they are biblical. The profession required of other members is less than that required of office-bearers and it is a profession which is not to be judged by the standards of the church.” Therefore, “when the OPC (Presbyterian) say they hold to the Westminster Standards, they mean something entirely different than what we (Reformed) mean when we say that we hold to the Three Forms of Unity. There is a greater ‘variety of practice’ concerning ‘confessional membership’ and what is expected of those who make public profession

of faith. That is why some OPC members consider the Reformed practice of confessional membership or strict confessional binding or subscription too restrictive, unnecessary, undesirable, and even exclusivistic and sectarian.” (h)

### ***AN ONGOING DEBATE***

The Presbyterian strict vs. loose subscription debate is already a three-century long unresolved controversy (1690's -1999). For the Canadian Reformed Churches it has developed into a two-decade long fruitless discussion. Even so, devoting a bit more time to this crucial and contentious matter is certainly not a superfluous undertaking. Therefore, the Lord willing, we will continue our study of the history of American Presbyterianism by taking a closer look at how the vague and confusing terminology found in the Adopting Act came into being, and also consider the disastrous consequences that this “loose language” had and still has for confessional binding or subscription as practiced in the Presbyterian churches.

Ron Dykstra

(a) (h) Confessional Binding and Subscription: For Office-Bearers Only?, Reformed Polemics, Nov. 6/99.

(b) Crossed Fingers - How the Liberals Captured the Presbyterian Church, Gary North.

© Introductory Essay, Kevin Reed (Doctrinal Integrity, Samuel Miller).

(d) (f) Confessional Binding and Mental Reservations - Free to Disagree?, Reformed Polemics, September 25/99.

(e) Doctrinal Integrity, Samuel Miller. (In this paraphrase the two words before the word “doctrine”, namely “system of” have been omitted from the rather indistinct or uncertain phrase, “system of doctrine.”)

(f) (g) Creedal Subscription, Reformed Perspective, August 1985.

### ***‘Love the Lord your God with all your Mind’ Living out of a knowledgeable faith.***

[The following is the second of four articles taken from a speech delivered in August 1999 at the annual Western Canadian Study weekend held in Calgary, AB.]

While there are numerous philosophical influences in the world, we will deal briefly with Secularism, Materialism, Relativism, Pragmatism and Feminism, as outlined by Rev. John Sittema in his pastoral book called “With a Shepherd’s Heart”. We will also include some contemporary examples that show how these influences affect our thinking about knowledge and faith.

### ***Secularism***

The world, in which we live, is clearly a worldly society. That is a society that views the world in time bound terms of the ‘here and now,’ and denies the eternal aspects of this life. Ultimately this worldview is limited to what happens right now and shows little regard for what happens in the future or the future consequences of our actions.

We see clear examples of secular thinking in two different ways. First there is the passionate need for instant gratification: fast food that we get at the restaurants, ‘get rich’ schemes and lotteries, the need to be amused by entertainment etc. In the Christian circles we can see this secularist influence as well. Consider the need for user friendly churches with music and entertainment that mimics the world. Young people are always asking that the worship services include modern drama and music,

or if the church could allow public testimonials for church members. Then there is impatience when it comes to growing in knowledge. The question gets asked, do I really have to study all these years to learn about the scriptures - after all I am already a Christian? Secularism also denies traditional or historical knowledge, claiming that it is no longer relevant. History is not viewed as useful for the 'here and now' generation for we live with different cultural circumstances and social issues. Secularism rejects history and lives as if this 'here and now' generation are the first to encounter all social, political and religious issues. In our churches there are those who will also place our Reformed confessions and church liturgy in the same category. They claim that our confessions are no longer relevant with the issues of today and need to be replaced with modern creeds and catechisms that deal more with social issues than doctrinal matters.

The consequence of secularism can be seen in the different views of life it causes people to display. Secularists prefer to work from a dualistic mode that separates life into opposing categories, like placing a rift between our church life and our worldly life. The most important separation that results from this 'here and now' thinking is the denial of eternity, and the rejection that there will be future consequences as a result of how we presently live. Young people tend to justify their ungodly lifestyle, worldly party spirit, abuse of alcohol and drugs and general misbehaviour, on the premise that they are only 'sowing their wild oats.' They claim they will clean up their wild ways after they have had their 'fill of the fun'. Young people say this as if there are no future consequences of their worldly lifestyle. All too often, rebellious teen-agers forget that we are just a heartbeat away from our eternity.

When applied to the topic of knowledge, secularists understand that knowledge gives power and therefore they limit the nature and extent of knowledge to what can be determined by our senses and science. Science claims to deal only with the facts, while religion is said to deal with morals and private values. Secularism claims that your morals and ethics are personal issues that have no place in philosophical debate and discussion. Ultimately secularism is the denial that everything belongs to Christ and is subject to his rule. (Heidelberg Catechism L.D. 19) It denies the eternal impact of our actions so that we live for ourselves and not to the honour and glory of God.

### ***Materialism***

You have probably all heard the saying 'whoever dies with the most toys wins'. This saying pretty much sums up the influence of materialism. Materialism competes for your time, your energy, your mind, and finally your soul. While secularism places the focus on the 'here and now', materialism ensures that our heart is absorbed by it. Scripture clearly warns us against materialism by teaching that 'a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions (Luke 12:15). We are told we cannot serve two masters, that is serve God and our possessions (Matt. 6:21, 24). We are also warned that it is not only having money that leads to materialism but also the love of money that is the root of all evil. (1 Timothy 6:10) Let's not fool ourselves, it is not only the rich to whom these admonitions are directed but to each of us. Materialism is clearly advertised all around us in every form of media from the Internet to the television. It tells us that success is to be measured in monetary forms and by the accumulation of possessions. It causes society to be infatuated with what is new and fashionable, leading to the abuse of personal credit cards. Our government

demonstrates a lack of fiscal stewardship, showing little regard for the repayment of our national debt. Materialism will even drive young people to kill for the sake of getting someone else's brand name sports shoes or their leather jacket.

The pursuit of material goods also has a relationship with knowledge. The relationship is indirect, and is not always done intentionally. It is when we are busy working to earn the money to enjoy the things we want - to go on a fancy summer holiday, buy a new car or motorbike, spend money on new clothes and beauty products. Some even work two part time jobs after school or college to get what they want. Our parents can also be affected by this, working overtime for a better house or family car or even a better standard of living. However it is the time that we spend working our jobs, and enjoying our toy that robs us from growing in the knowledge of the scriptures. Study society takes second place to our worldly pursuits. We would skip out on bible study before we would miss out on a game of hockey! No time is left for our personal bible reading and prayer, and the weekly church service is needed to catch up on some lost sleep. These materialistic pursuits consume our time and energy and ultimately will have the direct effect of reducing our desire to live our lives for Christ, sometimes to the point where all we can offer is mere lip service. No longer do we seek the kingdom of God and take comfort in His promise of provision. Instead we look to our own provision and seek to live a self-sufficient life apart from God.

### ***Relativism***

The worldview of relativism states: whatever is true for you is not necessarily true for me. Relativism claims that all the religions of the world may contain some form of the truth, but none can claim to be the only truth in this world. Ultimately relativism does not accept nor understand the absolute truth, which Josh McDowell defines as 'that which is true for all people, for all times, for all places'. Every one has their own set of beliefs and values and will need to determine right from wrong on their own.

Relativism is perhaps one of the most relevant and destructive world-views that currently influence the American evangelical churches. Its attacks can be as blatant as saying that all religions have a Supreme Being that leads to eternal life, and as subtle as suggesting that it is not what you know but how you live that is important. Relativism has made a huge impact in the Evangelical churches driving it from extremes of charismatic faith healers to user-friendly, seeker sensitive, and church growth movements. No longer is there the desire for doctrinal clarity, but a minimization of the fundamentals of the Christian faith. The desire for unity is placed higher than the pursuit of the truth of the Gospel, leading many to seek the minimum requirements of the Gospel instead of its depth. It is for the sake of accommodation that churches remove or depreciate their confessional documents to allow fellowship with other denominations and even different religions. Even the matter of fellowship and communion has been emptied of its substance and character so as to be no more than a social event with a religious twist.

Relativism is an extremely subtle influence and is sometimes difficult to put your finger on, as there are often other influences at play as well. In our churches we hold the conviction that the preaching is the proclamation of the Gospel. Some however will contest the preaching as the minister's version of the truth, as if the minister was sharing his personal gospel. Take the Ten

Commandments as an example. As God's Words we confess them to be authoritative in our lives - the truth of how we are to live in thankfulness to God. Others see the commandments as merely suggestions that could be true if they were relevant to the situation. Is the seventh commandment, you shall not commit adultery or fornication, the truth of Gods Word? Why then do we hear that so many young people are sleeping around? Do we think that this commandment is only true for other young people, or was God just suggesting that you obey this commandment whenever you wanted to? The point is clear; relativism is an evil that we must face and fight in our churches.

### ***Pragmatism***

Pragmatism is a philosophical idea that judges the practical results of certain actions in order to find out if they are true. This means that whatever works for you is the right thing to do. Relativism says truth is what you want it to be, while pragmatism says whatever methods produce the best results are what is good to do. On the church scene, a clear example of pragmatism would relate to church growth movements. Should the result of changing the music to be more upbeat and contemporary in style, reducing the time for sermons, and including a positive social message lead to an increase in church membership then obviously this would be the right thing to do. This type of pragmatism is exactly how the church growth movements started and flourished. On this subject, a well-known evangelical wrote that; '...the concern "Will it work?" has long overshadowed "Is it true?" Theology has given way to technique. "Know-whom" has faded in favour of "know-how." Serving God has subtly been deformed into servicing the self. At worst, the result is a shift from faith to "faith in faith"...'.

Faith is no longer is objectively sought in the Word of God and believed to be worked through the Holy Spirit. Rather faith is attached to how faithfully we apply 'successful' methods and outreach programs for church growth. 'Pragmatism results in evangelicalism rich in ingenuity and organisation but poor in spirituality and superficial, if not banal, in doctrine.' (ibid) From the outside things look great - lots of activity and a lot of fun! But don't look any deeper for the theology is washed away in all the enthusiasm. When you concentrate on the methods, your faith is centred more on your works than on its content. Evangelical Christians become so focused on displaying their good works that they are lead more by a spirit of activism than by the truth of the scriptures.

Pragmatism is also alive and well within our social realms. If drugs and alcohol are what make you happy, then they must be okay! If excitement is what you want, and that can be achieved by the weekend parties, that it must be the right thing to do! Another classic pragmatic example is when young people justify their relationship with a girl or boy friend from outside the church as a good form of evangelism.

Pragmatism leads to devastating situations. Consider a young Christian girl who becomes pregnant and is bound to be a single mother. Sure the sexual activity was exciting but when you come to think about it the father is not really the guy that she would want for a husband, and would probably be a poor father. The point is this - the pregnancy is unplanned, the baby is unwanted, the father is a jerk, and the perhaps the worst thing is people in the church will know that she has been fooling around. With these circumstances in mind, she decides that the only right thing to do is have an abortion and in this way she will not have to do deal with negative consequences. This is

pragmatism at its worst! Ultimately pragmatism is a selfish and self-serving ideal that shows little regard for one's family, neighbours or the community in which we live. Who cares what society thinks or says, 'cause this is right for me! I am a god unto myself!

### ***Feminism***

The final worldview or worldly influence that we will briefly consider is that of feminism. Of all the worldviews that we have considered so far, you may be somewhat surprised to see feminism on the list. After all, isn't feminism just the other extremity of macho-ism? Isn't feminism just an attempt by women to receive social justice and equality in the work place? According to soul singer Aretha Franklin, feminism is just a matter of asking for a little R.E.S.P.E.C.T. However there is more to feminism than meets the eye. 'Feminism is different. It is a belief system; it embraces values and ethics; it seeks to shape behaviour far beyond the mere quest for justice and righteous. And it is evil.' (Pg 70 With a Shepherds Heart) Gender feminism as it is described by the most zealous of feminists, is a radical concept that is dissatisfied with the traditional understandings of the place of women in society. It intends to '...deconstruct [that is, break down] those roles and relationships, replacing them instead with a frightening and humanistic set of alternatives that redefine marriage, family, sexual right and wrong, and even theology.' (Pg. 71) Feminism is not only a worldview for women, but is all too often found and promoted by men. As mentioned above, gender feminism also attacks Christianity. The more obvious feminist influences are the re-working of theology that transforms doctrines that relate to man, God and sin, incorporating feminine values and ethics. The changes that are made to the understanding of the biblical family, of male head-ship and the marriage covenant, also have a gradual and subtle influence in the church. The knowledge of the doctrines of scripture are being twisted and interpreted within the framework of feminine values and ideologies. The so-called gender-neutral bible may also be inadvertently driven by the subtle influences of feminism. In our church we may witness subtle influences, like studies society or church related meetings in which women open meetings with prayer and bible reading. The influence of feminism is enhanced by men who neglect bible study and call upon their wives to show Christian leadership within the family. More extreme examples can be illustrated in the push for women in office. Despite its seemingly innocent appearance, feminism must be recognised as a real and dangerous threat to the faithfulness of the church and its members. Our place in this world is polluted with all of the contaminated worldviews, of secularism, materialism, relativism, pragmatism and feminism. These evil worldly influences will attempt to distort and diminish the central importance and value of scripture knowledge in the Christian life of faith. We must look to the purifying truths of scriptures to be the light and guide on our paths as we take our place in this world.

W. Pleiter

## **A living dog is better than a dead lion in A.D. 2000!**

### ***Ecclesiastes 9***

What sense did our life make in 1999 and what sense will it make in the year 2000?

When we sit down to consider all things as the Preacher of Ecclesiastes did, we come to the same conclusion as he did: we do not know! The Preacher was a wise man. He looked at life under the sun from all different angles but had to conclude time and again: all is vanity!

Are we to begin this New Year in a spirit of gloom and despair or is there hope for us in A.D. 2000?

In the verses 1-3 the Preacher tells us what life is like and what it turns out to be.

No one knows the future. There is only one thing that is certain. One thing all people in this world have in common, the righteous as well as the wicked, the good and the evil, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not, the good man and the sinner, he who swears and he who shuns an oath.

Before the Preacher tells us what this one thing is, he first tells us in verse 3 that people's hearts continue to be full of evil and that there is madness in their hearts while they live. That will also be the reality in the new year: more evil and greater madness. Then, finally, he tells us what that one thing is: after that they go to the dead. 1999 brought us one year closer to death! We can do all we want in this new year, do good or evil, but one thing we cannot avoid is death! Everyone, also the righteous, the children of the Lord, are going the same way. The end is the same for all alike.

Is that not tragic? Is that a fair reward for the believers and their children? Why should God's persecuted children share the same fate as their cruel oppressors?

Is there no comfort and hope for us in this year?

Yes, says the Preacher, for a living dog is better than a dead lion.

What good are these words to us in our grief and sorrow, in our illness and pain, in our worries, problems, and sins? Is this a temporary hope only? A stay of execution so that we may start the new year off in a cheerful mood?

What about that living dog? Well, the dog the Preacher is talking about is not our family pet, not "man's best friend." In Canaan dogs were not family pets but the scavengers of the streets and fields, the despised, filthy, unclean dogs! Remember how offended Goliath was when David came to him with a stick in his hand? "Am I a dog that you come to me with a stick?" In other words, "Do you think you can chase me away like a dog?" It was rather the other way around: the strong warrior Goliath stood there royally and fiercely like a mighty lion! What was David compared to him? He was on a shepherd boy with no weapons but only a stick in his hand and a few pebbles in his bag, a dog compared to the lion.

When David flees from Saul he complains: "After whom has the king of Israel come out? After whom do you pursue? After a dead dog!" (1 Sam 24:14; cf. also 2 Sam. 9:8) Compared to King Saul in his royal power, David, the fugitive, was like a dead dog, good for nothing.

The dog was a despised, unclean animal. The heathen (Mt 15:26), female or male prostitutes, sodomites, practicing homosexuals, are called dogs in Scripture (Deut 23:18). The Lord tells us in Revelation 22:15: "outside are the dogs...."

What a tremendous contrast between the dogs and the lions. A lion is a beautiful, majestic animal compared to those unclean dogs. A lion impresses us with his dignity and strength. "What is stronger than a lion?" the Philistines answered Samson. The lion puts fear into the hearts of people. "The lion has roared, who shall not fear?" (Amos 3:8) The lion is stately in his stride, the mightiest among the beasts, which does not turn back before any! (Proverbs 30:29-30) That is the lion! No wonder the devil in his great power is also called a roaring lion, trying to devour us.

But how then can the Preacher comfort us in the new year by saying that a living dog is better than a dead lion? Because a dead lion is nothing anymore; it is lifeless, unable to do anything. A living dog is at least alive and able to do something, for it is not dead yet.

Man in his power and glory as a ruler, a mighty king or dictator, important and esteemed, and feared by many, is like that mighty lion while those who are nothing in the eyes of the world, who are despised and kicked around, are like those dogs - no one is afraid of them.

Millions live in fear of such mighty rulers who wield their power at will. But only as long as these rulers are alive! When the mighty lion is dead, he is good for nothing, a rotting carcass, feared not even by the rabbits of the field. In the hour of death even the powerful dictators would gladly trade with the poorest beggars - if they could. In the hour of death they would prefer to be a living dog rather than a dead lion.

The dogs the Bible speaks of are better off alive than dead. For as long as there is life, there is hope. A tree that is cut down may start to sprout again next spring. But a man whose life has been cut off lies completely dead here on earth. For him it is too late. It is all over. Someone once said of a Roman Catholic pope (Boniface): "he came in like a fox; he ruled like a lion, and he died like a dog."

But as long as there is life, there is an opportunity to repent and turn to God. Once dead, it is too late.

God gives us another year with the comfort that it is a year of life! Another year in the land of the living! But the Lord gives us at the same time a serious warning to use our time this year in the service of Him, the holy God.

We are inclined to complain when things are not as prosperous as they used to be, or when we have to cope with serious problems. We are no better than those murmuring Israelites in the wilderness. But instead of complaining we would do better to remember what the Preacher says to us in this new year about that living dog.

Why? Because the living know that they will die. We can prepare for death. But the dead know nothing. For them it is too late. In A.D. 2000 we are still joined to the living. We don't know for

how much longer. Who will be carried to the grave next? Some older ones? Someone in the prime of life? An infant or a teenager? We do not know. The Lord says to young and old at the beginning of the new year: prepare yourself! Do not postpone! A dead lion is no good anymore. It is too late for him!

We find the greater meaning and promise in our Lord Jesus Christ who is the living Son of God, our risen Saviour. He gave His life. He went to the dead Himself in order to give us eternal life in the midst of death. That is why our life makes sense, also in the year 2000. For Christ our Mediator was scorned and rejected as a despised dog in our place. But He is the Lion! He Himself tells us in Revelation 5:5:

“Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered.” Christ has triumphed so that He could open the scroll on the hand of God and break open its seven seals.

Christ has conquered that other lion, that roaring lion who seeks to devour us in this year. Christ has conquered Satan in our place! Therefore our life, our personal life and our church life, will make sense this year. Even though we are a year closer to death we are still in the land of the living. No, rather, we are forever joined to the living Lion, our victorious Lord and King Jesus Christ.

He is our comfort also when we will bring some loved ones to the grave this year. He, the Prince of Life is our comfort in the hour of our death. He has joined us to Himself. We are His with body and soul in life and in death!

We do not enter this new year in gloom and sadness. We go forward in true faith in our living Lord and Redeemer.

What about those who have gone astray from the Lord? There is still time for us to call them back, and for them to repent and return to the God of Life.

The devil has not ceased his roaring yet. He still seeks to devour us. But in our living Lord we may resist him so that he will flee from us, according to the Lord's promise in James 4:7. Christ was attacked by dogs (Psalm 22) in order to save us from the dogs and the lion's mouth.

Let us then serve Him in this new year, remembering that God has joined us for all eternity to the living Lion Jesus Christ. Then the year 2000 as a year of this living Lord, will be truly a Happy New Year in the land of the living!

M. Werkman