

## **BEING TRULY REFORMED IN AN ECUMENICAL WORLD**

In an editorial on Sept. 11, 2000 a Canadian paper, the National Post, remarked how the various Christian churches have become far less insistent on being right over against other Christian churches but have been very eager to portray a united front against the religions of so many others who are joining them on North American soil. It was noted that Roman Catholics are eager to join with Protestants to defend the principles of Christianity against the increasing popularity of Moslem, Islam or Buddhist beliefs.

In contrast to this present day phenomenon is the desire and effort to remain truly and distinctly Reformed. These two trends are antithetical. And although there may not be many Canadian (or Free in Australia) Reformed who are ready to join with the Roman church, there is also in our churches a desire to be more ecumenical. When this is the case we are at times surprised and also ashamed when we hear where the truly Reformed sounds are coming from.

Recently an article appeared in the Protestant Reformed Theological Journal (Nov. 1997) that was written by a certain John Hooper. He is a microbiology technician in a hospital in Plymouth, England. He wrote his paper "Biblical Church Unity" to fight the spirit of independentism among the churches in England. In it many Scriptural truths regarding the nature of Church unity are brought forward. In line with what Ron Dykstra wrote in our previous editorial, Hooper notes that unity is grounded in the truth and must be expressed in a visible manner in this dispensation. We quote:

"What we must realize is that that same body of truth which united the churches of Galatia and Achaia with those of Jerusalem and Ephesus, every succeeding generation of the Lord's people have had in their possession. It was not unique to the days of the apostles. They were inspired by the Holy Spirit to write it down for us, so that we have it now in our own hands without alteration, no more and no less. Therefore, the unity which they experienced in their day is no less accessible to us.

The church today has no excuse for disunity merely because she has come such a long way in time from the golden age of the apostles. We have the same faith, the same apostle's doctrine, the same word of truth as the early church possessed. This is the true apostolic succession - not a succession of office or authority but a succession of doctrine, of truth down the ages. Never has the church been without it: 'I have given them thy word,' said Christ, 'thy word is truth' (John 17:14, 17).

The church in our day has received the truth as a glorious heritage. From generation to generation that heritage, like the athlete's baton, has been handed down until we are entrusted with it for safe keeping in these closing years of the twentieth century.

The consequence of this succession is that we enjoy a blessed organic unity with the saints of former days. It must be said that this is not sufficiently appreciated by us, if at all. If we are united with the saints of past generations in a common belief in the truth, being guided by the same Spirit of truth, that is a great blessing and we can live, or should live, in the consciousness of it. We should live in conscious fellowship with the church of the past. No individual believer, no local church or denomination of churches can sit in historical isolation, any more than it can in geographical isolation, because all are members together of the same body.

Maybe one of the reasons why this consciousness has been lost is the church's ignorance of her history, but I believe there is another even more important reason. We live today in an age of unashamed individualism. The 'rights' and desires of the individual are considered paramount. He is independent. He is responsible only to and for himself. He sets his own goals and ethical standards in isolation from all that has gone before, and even to the disregard of others around him. He goes his own way and seeks his own ends for his own personal fulfillment."

As much as the apostle's taught the truth about Jesus Christ, Who many of their hearers had not seen, our ministers can and must teach the same truths. Both the apostles as well as our ministers must and are able to so because the Holy Spirit will guide them. In John 16:13, 14 we read, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you." This is the bond that united the early church in the days of the apostles and it is the same truth that must bind us together today.

In the same connection Mr. Cal Kalsbeek, on the occasion of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Protestant Reformed Churches, wrote, "'And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake' (Matt.10:32). When the Lord's body, the church, battles for the truth, she will be hated even as the Lord was hated. The fact of the matter is, if we follow the apostle Paul's instruction in Colossians 1:24, we will rejoice in these sufferings, for we are privileged ... Still it hurts! It does! If it were not for the fact that the blessings far outweigh the afflictions, we would despair."

In the same anniversary issue of The Standard Bearer Rev. Jason Kortering writes, "This is our heritage handed down through the ages to us. Our children learn from catechism the classic texts from the Bible, 'The curse of the Lord is in the house of the wicked, but he blesseth the habitation of the just' (Prov.3:33). 'Can two walk together except they be agreed' (Amos 3:3). Our Canons of Dordt express it this way, 'As all men have sinned in Adam, lie under the curse, and are deserving of eternal death, God would have done no injustice by leaving them all to perish, and delivering them over to condemnation on account of their sin' (Head I, Art.1).

D. G. Vanderpyl in the conclusion of his book Trust and Obey, a forty year history of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand, writes, "If we wish our churches to remain true and faithful, according to Art. 29 of the Belgic Confession, then we must continue to fence our pulpits with a fair and proper colloquium doctum, whoever a particular minister may be and regardless of from whence he may come! In seeking our relationships with other religious bodies we must be cautious and prudent and remind ourselves of our corporate responsibility in these areas. As churches we must weigh up the consequences before rashly or unilaterally effecting any association with them.... I know we are called to kindness in pursuit of our ecumenical task. But kindness must never degenerate into accommodation and compromise. How difficult it then becomes to climb back to one's former position. Yes, history teaches us that many churches are never able to climb their way back to faithfulness to God's Word. A cautious Berean spirit is the watchword!

Coming closer to home Rev. S. Kang, a missionary minister of the Korean Presbyterian Church (Kosin) regards with some wonder the relationship the Canadian Reformed and some of their sister churches have established with his church in Korea. Through contact with Rev. Kang we learn that

there is little antithesis in the Kosin church and even less understanding among the membership about what it means to be Reformed. From Rev. Kang we also learn that there are more Korean Presbyterian Churches (Kosin) in North America than there are Canadian / American Reformed churches. Yet, we have taken up contact with the churches in Korea, with whom very few of us can communicate, while we have no (official) contact with any of them in our own backyard.

In conversations with brother Moises dos Lintos, a member of the Reformed Churches in Brazil and a delegate to the founding Synod of this new federation, we learned that much work has had to be done in one of the first congregations formed in Brazil by our missionaries, mainly because a firm Reformed doctrine was not taught. Too broad of an ecumenical flavour has given many of our brothers and sisters in Sao Jose a wavering foundation. Our brother Moises has spent many hours in visits and exhortation in order to help this congregation stay closer to the truth of the apostles and prophets. He speaks highly of the Reformed teaching he himself has received from missionaries and workers sent by the Canadian Reformed Churches, but he also recognizes the danger that broad ecumenism presents. In this connection he is also very sad to see a missionary who has worked on behalf of the Canadian Reformed Churches move to an area where he feels called to join a church with whom neither the Canadian Reformed nor the Brazilian Reformed Churches have ecclesiastical fellowship.

It is the work of the Holy Spirit that has guided the teaching of the Reformed faith in Asia and South America to lead men like Rev. Kang and elder Moises dos Lintos to be weary of wholly accepting the Westminster Standards on a level with the Three Forms of Unity.

They praise God for the work He has done in them and in their country when the Reformed doctrines were taught and proclaimed there. And they do not dare to water down these doctrines with the introduction of teachings, sometimes also by way of Presbyterian confessions, that Reformed Christians have fought against in the past.

Even in our own federation we have those who have struggled valiantly against teachings based on the Presbyterian Standards but that conflict with the Reformed Confessions. Struggles that many would like to minimize and/or ignore.

Let us be on guard lest, while we spread the good news of the truth once for all proclaimed by the apostles and prophets and passed on perfectly in the Word by the Spirit, we ourselves succumb to the spirit of broad ecumenism that pleads for compromise in order to present an appearance of unity that can not stand.

PdB

## **General Assembly of the OPC**

New Horizons in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church is a magazine 'published monthly ... by the Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.' In its issue for September 2000, Vol.21, No.8 it presents a lead article by Pastor Glenn D. Jerrell reporting on the Sixty-seventh General Assembly. Several items deserve our attention. Under the title "Statistics" we can read the following:

“The OPC’s statistician, Luke E. Brown, a ruling elder from the Presbytery of Philadelphia, reported that 1999 marked the sixth consecutive year of growth for the OPC. We are seeing 4 to 5 percent annual increases in membership and attendance. The total membership of the OPC at the end of 1999 stood at 25,302 (397 ministers, 17,327 communicant members, and 7,578 baptized children). Also, the OPC grew in 1999 to 204 organized churches and 63 mission works. Giving increased 11 percent during the year.”

Later in the article we come across a section titled “Ecumenicity” There we read:

“A report from the Committee on Ecumenicity indicated that the OPC is in ecclesiastical fellowship with eleven churches around the world. It also reported that the Free Church of Scotland has experienced a schism.

The Assembly amended the policy of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church with regard to its relationships with other Reformed churches. Formerly, we had the single category of ecclesiastical fellowship, though in practice we had varying degrees of relationship. Now we will have three categories of relationship: ecclesiastical fellowship, corresponding relations, and limited contact.

In 2001, the OPC will host the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC) at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. This will be a splendid opportunity to meet Reformed brothers from around the globe!

Fraternal observers and delegates addressing the Assembly were: Rev. L. Dale Clark from the Reformed Church in the United States, the Rev. William Renkema from the United Reformed Churches in North America, and the Rev. Jan De Gelder and Gerry Noordeman from the Canadian Reformed Churches. The Rev. John R. Battles representing the Bible Presbyterian Church, was also introduced to the Assembly.”

### **“And it was very good...” the Decrees of God.    *By Wayne Pleiter***

It was a long summer. It was an ambitious plan. Every Saturday a young freckle-faced boy would watch his father tear down an old shabby fence and work on replacing it with a new wooden enclosure. As sure as the father would work on the fence, the young boy would also linger nearby to watch with admiration. If he was given the chance he would do his best to pitch in with some help, cleaning up the scraps, and holding the posts as his father levelled them. As the summer ended so did the project to rebuild the wooden fence. One fine evening, as the sun began to set on the newly completed fence, the boy’s father stood back to review his handiwork and to reflect upon the completion of his plans. With one hand pointing to the new fence, the young boy tugged at his father’s side and with an approving smile, said “Dad, it looks very good!”

When we open the Holy Scriptures in Genesis, we read the awesome exposé of God’s creative work of the heavens and the earth. Using anthropomorphic language - that is language which uses human expressions (God spoke, God saw etc) to give us a taste of its deeper meaning - God the Father unfolds His eternal plan for creation. In the opening scene, it is with brilliance that God sets the stage for creation, affecting His divine plan as He spoke light into existence. As the curtains

closes upon the first day, we picture God reviewing His work, and with gratification observing "...that the light was good." Repeatedly as each day's performance concluded, God expressed how each creative work was completed with perfection and in total conformity to His eternal will (v.4, 9, 18, 24). And so, as the series of God's creative acts conclude, we read the solemn declaration that "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Gen. 1:31).

In the same way the boy's father, after building his fence reflected on his labour, so our almighty God stands back in full assurance and sovereign satisfaction that creation was completed in accordance to His perfect plan. As sure as God expresses His divine plan for each day's 'design' for creation, we are assured of its fulfillment; "and it was so" (Gen. 1:7, 9, 11, 15, 24, 29). Even today, with the pollution of sin that contaminates creation, we still have ample reason to praise God's marvellous plan of creation and proclaim with the scriptures, 'it is very good!'

### ***A Different Kind of Plan***

We live in a chaotic society, filled with external pressures that aggressively compete for our time and attention. We juggle our various responsibilities, trying to manage our affairs effectively while maintaining our sanity. At regular intervals, we reassess our goals and reschedule our priorities only to discover that the rules of the game have changed. So how are the plans of God different than our plans?

To understand what the plan of God means, it would be beneficial to consider the more accurate theological term 'decree'. To decree is to do something more than just make a plan – it is to make a plan with the authority and power to carry it out. A decree is a plan issued as a lawful order or with judicial power, hence the signet rings that would symbolise the command of the ancient kings. In the Old Testament we can read about numerous decrees, like when King Cyrus made a decree during the days of Ezra for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 5:13,17). Perhaps the most well known decree is found in the Gospel of Luke; "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world" (Luke 2:1). While Caesar made his decree to demonstrate the might of his government among the nations, our Lord God providentially summons Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem to the birth place of the King of kings - our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are numerous passages throughout the scriptures that mention the decrees of God (Ps. 2:7, Ps. 81:4, Ps. 105:10, Jer. 31:35, Rom.1:32) and they are also expressed in a variety of terms, some more difficult to understand than others. For example, in Ephesians the decrees of God are described as His 'eternal purpose' (3:11), and in the book of Acts it is stated as 'God's set purpose and foreknowledge' (2:23). In another example, we can read of God's decrees as declared in the power of predestination. In Romans we read: "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." (Rom. 8:29) Ephesians also provides a powerful example of God's decrees using the terms, 'will' and 'good pleasure'. We read: "[God]...made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure..." (Eph.1:9). So it should be clear to us that God's decrees are His sovereign will, established from eternity according to His good pleasure and revealed through our Saviour Jesus Christ. Indeed it was in wisdom and in power that God's decrees were founded. "His wisdom is profound, his power is vast!" (Job 9:4) So with deep gratitude we joyfully sing:

“The LORD’s Decrees are firm and sure, they shall eternally endure, Performed by Him in true perfection.”

(Book of Praise, Ps. 111 stanza 4)

### ***Comfort for God’s Children***

When we reflect upon our lives we realize how great our limitations are and how little control we have in effecting our personal plans. We are so easily frustrated when our plans do not work out how we intend them to. Often we struggle within our personal or family relationships, in our schooling and at the work place. Even financially we strive to make ends meet while the ungodly seem to prosper. And like the prophet Jeremiah we like to complain to God about His kind of justice. “Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?” (Jer.12:1). And it is precisely for these reasons that we must not think of God’s plans within the context of our own personal experience. Let scripture remind us that our sovereign God is free to decree as He wills. Who of us is prepared to challenge God’s freedom to do as He pleases? “Who has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed him as his counsellor? ...and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding?”(Is. 40:13, 14) With awe, let us do more then objectively marvel at the deep theological truths of God’s decrees. Rather, let us also open our eyes to subjectively experience the immense comfort contained in them. Indeed this comfort is so majestic that it will, like the apostle Paul, empower us to rejoice in all circumstances of life (c.f. Philippians 3:10-13).

### ***The Power of God’s Providence***

We have already stated that God’s decrees are eternal and that they were established before the foundations of the world. But we must also know that God’s decrees are final, absolute and unconditional. ‘God foreknows what will be because He has decreed what shall be’ (A. Pink pg. 26). We are assured that our omnipotent God will perform ‘all’ of His decrees and is not dependent on any circumstances that may or may not occur. Further, God will also provide the means for His decree to be fulfilled. An example of this is found in 2 Thessalonians. In this passage we read that God provides the means of faith to those who before creation were decreed elected to salvation (2 Thess. 2:13). In a broader sense, we can be assured that God will provide us with the strength to deal with all the circumstances of life. While there are times when we are taken by surprise - and perhaps disappointed by certain events - we can always be comforted that our all-knowing God is never taken off guard. Indeed, it is good for us that God rules over all things. God did not merely decree to make man and then abandon him or give him up to chance. (cf.. Belgic Confession Art.12, 13). Rather, we are to believe in God’s providence, trusting that there is nothing in the history of mankind - not one single event - that was not ordained in advance by the decree of God. By submitting our whole life under the care of God’s providence we can trust in the means found in Christ and His Word for the comfort and support necessary to face all our situations in life.

### ***Designed in Wisdom***

We should also be encouraged with the knowledge that God’s decrees are infinitely wise. Wisdom in the biblical sense “is the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it” (J.I. Packer, Knowing God, pg. 100). Sometimes we

may want to question where God's wisdom is when we face various trials and difficulties; why must we suffer so much anguish and disappointment in this life? And where is the sense for the painful adversity that has afflicted my life? We are to remember that when we suffer, it is because "God in His wisdom means to make something of us which we have not attained yet, and is dealing with us accordingly." (Ibid. Pg. 108) In His eternal wisdom God has a plan for all His children – not a plan that is necessarily void of personal suffering - but a plan none the less that finds its meaning and fulfilment in our Saviour, Jesus Christ. It is in the only begotten Son that we can see God's wisdom personified, and experience a foretaste of God's eternal decree. Thus, we can take confidence in our "God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles..." (1 Cor. 1:3b), trusting "that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose"(Romans 8:28).

### *Singular in Purpose*

As we ponder the depth of God's redemptive love for us in His eternal decrees, it might appear as a mere technicality to note at this point, that we have only spoken about God's decrees in the plural. But it is important and more precise to use the word 'decree' in its singular form as done in Scripture (e.g. Rom. 8:28, Eph. 3:11). This may not make any sense from our human perspective, for we speak of God's decree as being constructed of numerous different plans, each plan building upon the other as the occasion would determine. But that is the way the mind of man works - creating successive plans to meet the various situation that arise – typically, situations that are out of our control. Therefore, as often as we change our minds, we also need to adjust our plans.

Thankfully this is not so with our almighty, all-knowing God. Our Father's plans or decrees are not limited to our human understanding. Unlike mortal man, God's 'infinite understanding does not proceed by steps, from one stage to another.' Rather we are to believe that 'there was only one act of His infinite mind about future things' (A. Pink, Page 13). As difficult as it may be for us to humanly comprehend, we are to simply confess that our Father's comprehensive plan was established from eternity in absolute perfection. What a consolation it is to appreciate all that has been, all that is, and all that will be, was already ordained by God in eternity for His own Sovereign enjoyment. So then it is fitting that we stand back with humility and with awe proclaim His Glory:

"We Praise Thee and in Thee we trust;  
We give Thee thanks forever,  
O Father, for Thy rule is just  
And wise, and changes never,  
Thy hand almighty over us reigns:  
Thou doest what Thy will ordains.  
'Tis well for us Thou rulest."  
(Book of Praise; Hymn 62 Stanza 2)

## **Repentance**

### ***A Matter of Life and Death***

“From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 4:17) Just before Jesus’ public ministry on earth began, John the Baptist’s message to the Jewish Church also rang, “Repent!” And as long as Jesus was on earth, the refrain resounded, “Repent!”

This message draws on the repeated cries of the Old Testament as well - “Turn around, make a radical change in your life, serve the Lord!”

The words “repentance” and “repent” are used at least 130 times in the Bible. And the need for repentance is made clear on almost every page of the Bible. The Lord God calls such great attention to repentance in His Word. We must take it seriously.

### ***Two Roads***

There are two roads in the world, says the Lord: a wide road and a narrow road. The wide road is the easiest and is followed by many; people are on the wide road when they live as they think best. They don’t love God, and have no need for prayer or the study of His Word. Their thoughts and desires are directed to this temporal life. They ignore God’s commandments and don’t worry at all about the future. Because of that they often fall into grievous sins. The wide road leads to Hell!

On the other hand, the Bible also tells of the narrow road. Far fewer people travel this road. They are people who reckon with God and His infallible Word. They want to be instructed by God’s Word. They want to love God Who created and preserves them. They also want to love their neighbour. The narrow road leads to Heaven.

### ***What is Repentance?***

Repentance is to leave the wide road which leads to destruction and to travel the narrow road, the road to eternal life; to turn right around; to think and live differently, to give God His rightful place; to live according to His Word; to go to the Church where His Word is preached faithfully.

Repentance is turning to Christ.

Since the fall into sin in Paradise we are by nature rebels, resisting God. We wanted nothing to do with God, we chose for the devil, for Hell. Since the break with God, we seek our own pleasure, our own honour, and our own well-being.

In unprecedented love, God offered His Son Jesus Christ as Saviour. Repenting is loving this Jesus, following this Saviour.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life” we read in John 3:16.

Without Jesus Christ you are lost. But whoever believes in Him has eternal life. This Jesus died on the cross for the misdeeds and daily sins of all His children. Thus Christ delivers from sin. But then - he also expects us to live as His children, to begin a new life.

“How?” you may ask yourselves.

Read Colossians 3:5-17. Perhaps you live respectably, perhaps you don't gossip, or use abusive language. (Colossians 3:11), but, I ask you, do you live as verse 17 requires: “with every word or deed in the name of the Lord Jesus” Do you acknowledge him as your highest authority in everything that you do?

He who repents learns to follow Jesus on the narrow road - to Heaven. The Holy Spirit brings him to repentance and teaches him a totally new way of life. You can read about that in Galatians 5:19-24.

Led by the Holy Spirit, he receives love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22). The peace of Christ begins to reign in his heart. With a thankful heart he sings psalms and hymns together with God's people: the Church.

### ***The Fight Begins***

Following Jesus is not always easy, because the devil constantly tries to draw you away. Your life begins to be a constant struggle. You are walking on the narrow road - the way to Heaven - but the sins of the wide road are very tempting. You have to resist, every day of your life. You want to serve Christ according to His commandments, but you so rarely succeed! Paul illustrates this fight in Romans 7:13-26...”For the good that I wish to do I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not wish.”

He who desires to live as a Christian, desires to live according to the commandments of the Lord. You find them in Exodus 20:1-17. Among others, there is the third commandment, which prohibits cursing, how often don't you catch yourself swearing again, although you had firmly resolved to stop? There is the fifth commandment, which discusses the authority of parents. Even those who walk on the narrow road sometimes still against their will - disobey their parents. There is the seventh commandment, which speaks of the sanctity of marriage. He who walks the narrow road will also have his temptations. The sexual revolution of the wide road does not leave the children of God unaffected. And so we could go on. God's good commandments try to keep us from accidents, yet we, time and again, seek out the filth of the wide road.

### ***The Feast Begins***

As we've already said, the wide road leads to Hell, and the narrow road leads to Heaven. What could then be better than following the narrow one? What a glorious future for those who live according to the Word of the Lord!

But don't think that this feast begins only after our death, in heaven. For believers, it begins today! Whoever follows Christ and obeys God's commandments, experiences great joy today!

In Psalm 119:72 we read “The law of Your mouth is better to me Than thousands of coins of gold and silver. “ What is often most important to us? A new house, money, status. That's what we slave for. Often it is our only striving - and then we use it selfishly.

But whoever turns to God will find that God's law will give him more joy than all these. He will begin to serve God and his neighbour with his money - for example, through church collections, mission, charity, etc. He will sing, "Oh, for Your law I long wholeheartedly!"

The feast begins now - for those who believe.

Therefore the Bible, on nearly every page, calls you to repentance. God has no pleasure in the death of a sinner, but rather that he should repent and live. The Lord promises peace of heart and eternal life to all who come to Him and believe. Therefore repent - your life is at stake. Then the feast will begin for you, too.

Further reading:

John the Baptist on repentance: Luke 3:1-18

Returning to the Father: Luke 15:11-32

A tract on the Web page of the Church at Kelmscott Perth, Australia  
(<http://members.iinet.net.au/~jvd/tracts/repent.htm>)