

POLEMICS

WHAT IS IT AND WHO NEEDS IT?

Most dictionaries will come close to the following definition: "The art or practice of disputation or controversy; specifically polemic theology, which has for its object refutation of errors." The word 'polemics' stems from the Greek root meaning 'to wage war'. Does that sound like something reformed Christians need today? Is there a need to introduce a polemic paper to the plethora of Christian literature that already exists? Is it something we need in our homes, in our families?

We believe it is! In an article entitled *The Polemics of Love (Reformed Perspective, June '89)*, Rev. C. Stam explained the need for polemics in Christian lives. He noted that our confessional documents, and especially the Three Forms of Unity, are generally polemic and he wondered if that is why they are not in such favour these days. We do well to listen to several other comments he made back in 1989.

After quoting Prov.27:6; 28:23, and Ps. 143:5 he notes..."It is clear that if someone cares about those who are going on ways of falsehood or are being misled, he will wage a battle for their minds and hearts, and he will not shun the fight". He also sounds a warning: "It can become a war of wits or a verbal barrage which does not deal with the real issues but gets sidetracked in mud-slinging and name-calling". He gives direction: "Everyone who engages in polemics must be careful to stick to the issues and not to make personalistic comments", and finally he cautions but encourages..."It would perhaps be safer and easier not to speak out or to write. But whoever is called to the great battle of the Lord must fight and fight well, honestly and confidently tackling the issues out of love for God and the neighbour."

It is these sentiments that have driven us to venture into the field of polemics, reformed polemics. Just when so many are afraid of debating the issues for fear of antagonizing others, we believe it is imperative that the issues are raised and discussed. When there are those who would prevent the issues from being placed before God's people it becomes necessary to provide an avenue by which our brothers and sisters are able to read and write about the matters that threaten our obedient service to God.

HIDDEN AGENDA?

At the very outset of our endeavour we want to emphasize that we are opposed to the idea of sectarianism. Our discussions will be focused on obedience to the ordinances of God. That will include the injunction "that they all may be one". We, too, will strive for unity with those who hold the same faith. Because church unity has been raised so often by so many in our federation it must be discussed, analyzed and debated. We are convinced that we may not blindly enter into an alliance without prayerful polemics. At the same time we may not condone divisions for personal preferences.

A 'ONE ISSUE' PAPER?

Church unity is not the only matter about which we need to polemicize. The infallibility of Scripture, the authority of the confessions, the translation of Holy Writ, church discipline, marriage - divorce - remarriage, lifestyles, education, political involvement, civil disobedience, and many other subjects need to be discussed in light of God's revelation.

WHO'S GOING TO POLEMICIZE?

Mr. Ron Dykstra and the undersigned have both seen the need to become involved in this type of endeavour. Until recently we were part of the editorial board of INFORMATION. That paper was distributed as a handout in the churches of the Fraser Valley for the past two years. In the belief that the direction of the editorials threatened the permission of this type of distribution the publisher of INFORMATION decided to alter the format and eliminate an editorial board.

It is our belief that a paper should have a point of view. A paper without an editorial position merely becomes a bulletin board of ideas that are available for selection by the reader just like various brands of perfume on a store shelf. At the same time we believe that much can be learned from a debate and discussion with those who disagree with our particular understanding. It is for this reason that we pledge to publish any articles or letters basing their argument on Scripture and the Confessions. Although we reserve the right to comment on contributions we want to be held accountable to the word of God. We will not refuse space in our paper for those who hold a varying opinion.

We hope to include articles of interest to North American readers from such publications as Una Sancta from Australia and Reformanda and others from The Netherlands.

WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT?

The format of Reformed Polemics will be as you see in this first issue, an editorial page, a news page, and one or two guest articles on pages three and four. If you wish to become involved in this endeavour please contact us or send your contribution. We do not know what the future of this endeavour will bring. We pray that the Lord will bless it and provide the strength and insight we will need. We will always eagerly receive suggestions for improvement and growth.

This paper will mainly come to you via the national mail services. The cost of the first subscription will cover the mailing and very little else. If you are able and wish to support our effort with some assistance for equipment and incidental costs we will not look lightly upon your generosity. But we hope that the financial considerations do not hamper our aim for reformed polemics. If you know anyone who might be interested in receiving this paper please encourage them to contact us. We look forward to pleasant and edifying discussions via the pages of Reformed Polemics.

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WRONG ASSUMPTIONS

A point which has received considerable attention is the question: with whom is the covenant of grace made? This is an important point because it is related to the debates that took place during the Liberation of 1944. It is not the Westminster Confession of Faith, but the Larger Catechism that comes into focus here. Question and Answer 31 of this Catechism says, "With whom was the covenant of grace made? The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed."

You may recall that exactly this point was questioned during the Liberation of 1944. Some said:

- 1) The covenant is made with the elect.
- 2) Baptism is the sign & seal of the covenant.
- 3) Baptism must therefore confirm election.
- 4) We do not know who are elected.
- 5) We therefore "assume" that those who are baptized belong to the covenant.

Those who were liberated from this teaching argued in the opposite direction, starting with number 5.

5) To "assume" membership in the covenant negates baptism as a sign and seal. Baptism must "confirm" something. "We believe that our gracious God has ordained sacraments to seal His promises to us and to be pledges of His good will and grace toward us." Bel.Conf.flrt.33. (Cf. H. C. Lord's Day 25, Q & A 66)

- 4) We do not know, only the Lord knows who are elected.
- 3) Baptism can not confirm election as we can not learn who are elect.
- 2) Baptism is a sign and seal of the covenant.
- 1) The covenant is not made with the elect.

"Covenant" and "elect" are not the same thing. For example, Esau was a member of the covenant. He was properly circumcised. Yet, he was not elected as proven by his ungodly life (see Romans 9:13). Because #1 is wrong, the conclusion drawn from it is wrong.

The Committee for Contact with the OPC

The Committee for Contact with the OPC (CCOFC), in its evaluation of divergencies points at this Q & A of the Larger Catechism. It adds that Q & A 166 of the Catechism seems to speak in a different way because there the

Presbyterians confess that baptism is not to be administered to those that are "out of the visible church". It is to be administered to "infants descending from parents ... professing faith in Christ, and obedience to him, are, in that respect, within the covenant, and are to be baptized."

In the 1971 report the deputies come to the conclusion that "in distinction from A.31, A166 agrees with the Scriptures which teach that the covenant was made with the believers and their seed..."

The CCOPC report of this matter to Synod 1986 is much the same. An acknowledgment is made that there is a dual emphasis on the covenant parallel to the distinction between the church as visible and invisible. The committee adds that "within the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches there has been freedom of different approaches with respect to the relation between God's election and His covenant."

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This last statement is questionable. Do the Presbyterians not subscribe to their confessional standards? If so, then it is not left to their freedom. If the Larger Catechism is inconsistent and the Presbyterians subscribe to their confession then they must subscribe and be bound to an inconsistency concerning the Reformed Churches. If the binding statements made in 1944 were Scriptural, we should have had no trouble being bound to it. After all, we are bound to Scripture. The reason why we did not bind ourselves to those statements is that they were unscriptural. After the Liberation there admittedly have been two ways of interpreting the events that took place and they may have been understood differently at the time too. We cannot go into that now.

Going back to the Larger Catechism, it is Questionable whether Q.A. 166 is really inconsistent with Q.A.31 of the Catechism. Q.A. 166, partially quoted above, addresses the question of who should be baptized. It states that those outside the visible church and thus strangers of the covenant should not be baptized. The implication is that the members (i.e. the elect) of the invisible church and thus of the invisible covenant are not baptized. The statement made here concerning infant baptism is not straight forward either. It says that the infants of believing parents are to be baptized and they are "in that respect within the covenant." What does "in that respect" mean? There is some reservation in those words. What appears to be implied is that with respect to their parents they are in the covenant but with respect to their election it is not sure.

This "in that respect" is another way of saying that they are "assumed" to be real members of the covenant. It should also be noted that the expression "covenant of grace" is not used here, but "covenant of promise". There seems to be an implied difference.

Synods' mandates

Synod 1989 mandated the CCOPC to investigate further. It reported to Synod 1992 that it did not have time to fulfill this part of its mandate, yet the Synod decided to adopt the 1971 and 1989 reports! Like shown above, the errors from which we liberated ourselves are being brought back. We have not yet bound ourselves to the Westminster Larger Catechism and this alone is reason enough not to do so. We should direct those who do bind themselves to this Catechism to reconsider their position.

P.K.A. de Boer

A HOLY MOVEMENT?

There is a new movement developing in our Churches which, if left unchecked, will have serious detrimental effects upon our faithfulness to Christ's church-gathering work. I refer to the movement that says we can work together with those with whom we perceive to have unity of faith, but with whom we clearly have no unity in church gathering. I speak of it as a "movement", for it is not an isolated incident.

At the Reformed Tertiary Students' Conference held on July 16th at the Reformed Church of Kingston, fifty people attended, twenty were from the Free Reformed Churches (FRC).

At the March for Christ, Free Reformed members marched next to Christians of other denominations to unite in prayer that the light of the gospel might shine into all the world, and to visibly proclaim their love for Jesus. That the Evangelism Committee of the FRC of Launceston endorsed participation indicates that the work of evangelism can be an inter-denominational effort.

Recently Fair Haven Hostel was opened to others who are said to be faithful Christians, but are not members of the Church. Perhaps there are other activities as well, such as Drug Arm in the Metro area.

When I was at the Theological College Prof. Faber wrote an introduction to Schilder's Theses concerning the Church. He explained that before the theses were published Schilder had already brought forward his criticism about the practical implications and the application of the theory about pluriformity of the Church, developed by Dr. Abraham Kuyper. I quote the following: "Schilder was of the opinion that the work of home mission also means bringing people to the obedience of the faith with regard to the Church of Christ. One is not allowed to render asunder what God has joined together.

A point at issue was also the custom to invite delegates of other "denominations" to festal Church services - the installations of a minister, the dedication of a Church building - without speaking about the differences in doctrine or Church polity or without stressing the necessity that unity in faith has to be shown in unity of Church gathering". [Can. Ref. Magazine. 8/72]

Of importance is the phrase "that unity in faith has to be shown in unity of Church gathering". In Art.27 we confess that the Church is united by the power of faith. And in LD 21 we confess that the Church is being gathered in the unity of the true faith. Schilder gave due emphasis to Art. 20 & 29 where we confess that everyone is obliged to join and unite with the true Church which displays the three marks. One may not speak about the Church which is united by the power of faith (Art.29) without speaking about maintaining the unity of the Church.

Dr. Schilder did not deny that there are believers outside of the Church. But he knew that there was no room for cooperation or close associations with them in Church matters without exhorting them to faithfulness concerning the Church-gathering work. If they indeed display the marks of the true Christian they are obliged to join themselves to that body which displays the marks of the true Church. Schilder saw that cooperation with members of other "denominations" was improper without first paying attention to and correcting the disobedience displayed by these same believers who do not join themselves to the Church of God.

I wonder whether this same attitude was displayed at the Reformed Tertiary Students Conference. Did any of our youth stand up and exhort to faithfulness those participants who do not belong to the Church of Christ, pointing out to them from the Scriptures wherein they err from the true doctrine and Scriptural polity?

When our members marched together with members who do not belong to the Church of Christ, did they ascend the platform to correct the notion that true unity is not only a unity of faith but also a unity of Church gathering? Did they exhort them to be obedient and join themselves to the Church of Christ? Did anyone point out the doctrinal errors of the Baptist, Anglican, or United Churches?

We display a readiness to work with those who are outside the Church, but are we ready to point out their errors in doctrine and Church polity, as Schilder pointed out that we must, and are we ready to exhort them to separate from what is no church and join themselves to the true Church? Are we prepared to persist in our exhortations until they submit in obedience?

I could be wrong, but I doubt whether this happens. It certainly did not happen in the thirties. I rather think we remain silent. And what does our silence mean? If we do not exhort them to join the Church we either regard the church to which they belong as true or show that it doesn't really matter whether they join the true Church or not - in the line of Billy Graham who emphasized *that* you worship, and not *where* you worship. But suppose that we have talked with them, and they do not see our point? Can we still work with them? I can hardly see how! What does Scripture say

concerning those who profess to be God's children, but who live in rebellion to the Lord by remaining members of the false Church?

I would remind you of what we read in Psalm 101 where David clearly shows that he will not foster relationships with those who are unfaithful. He says in vs. 6, "My eyes shall be on the faithful of the land, that they may dwell with me; he who walks in a perfect way, he shall serve me."

In the thirties the doctrine of pluriformity with its concept of visible/invisible Church undermined the identity of the Church. The clear distinction was no longer seen between the true and the false Church, and those gatherings were regarded as Church which did not show the marks thereof.

I believe that this present movement can be traced to our membership in the ICRC.

We are sitting together with Churches we have never recognized as true and faithful Churches, while the constitution of the ICRC speaks, not only about expressing unity, but also promoting unity. I'm afraid that little real effort is made by the member Churches to discuss the differences in doctrine and Church polity.

Yes, I think that we are beginning to reap the fruits of our inclusion into the ICRC.

A. Vandelden

[Edited for space from Una Sancta]