

AN INJUDICIOUS APPROACH

In the editorial “Brothers and Sisters in Christ” (Reformed Polemics, Nov. 26/95) we dealt with the document “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” (ECT). We concluded that the underlying message of this document is that in order to really affect the politics of our times, and to have an impact on the world in which we live, we must all work together. Since making an impact on society is the real goal, we can forget about the doctrinal standards of our own so called denominations. We must agree that we are one in Christ regardless of what we believe. We must be prepared to recognize each other as Christians, as brothers and sisters in Christ, irrespective of doctrine.

Furthermore, we concluded that we must be careful not to follow the same erroneous line of reasoning that forms the basis of this document. We see here an example of the same injudicious approach that prompts ecclesiastical assemblies to declare denominations as “true” before they have adequately discussed their differences (divergences). It leads to the tacit acceptance of people as Christians, regardless of what they believe and irrespective of the doctrines they embrace. This approach is unscriptural in that it makes the truth of the Gospel irrelevant, and undermines the Confession of the Church.

To avoid misunderstanding it might be beneficial to address the caricatures and misconceptions that often surface when we warn against the tacit acceptance of other denominations as “true” and other people as Christians. In cautioning against this approach the point is not that there are no other true churches than the American/Can. Ref., Churches and their sister churches, or that there are no other Christians than those who are members of these churches. We, as American/Can. Ref. Churches do not claim to be the only true church, nor do we insist that we as members of these churches are the only Christians that exist.

The important point is that we may not declare other churches to be true, or other people to be Christians, brothers and sisters in Christ, until we have determined that we are truly one in what we believe and confess, both in word and deed. We are not one in Christ regardless of what we believe, but because of what we believe. Our unity as brothers and sisters in Christ is based upon our common confession of the truth as revealed in Gods Word. The process of determining whether we are truly one, brothers and sisters in Christ, will require a lot of discussion, much patience, and will take a lot of time.

We can therefore agree that we should never say to someone whom we have just met that he or she is NOT a Christian. Nor should we assert that he is indeed a Christian. Since we have just met this person we do well to refrain from making any kind of judgment one way or the other. We must resist the urge to start reasoning out of God’s eternal decree of election. How can what is only known to God become the basis for our actions? Since when do we decide who is elect and reprobate? The question is not whether a person is elect, but whether he truly believes. We cannot, and should not try to work with what the Lord sees, but only with what he has revealed.

The norm is that we recognize each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, as Christians, on the basis of our unity in faith. The usual, normative, and scriptural use of the word Christian is in

reference to those with whom we are one in faith and confession. They are our fellow brothers and sisters, who in everything, including the demand to be joined to the true Church, submit themselves to the will of Christ.

Fellow Christians are those who sit around the one table of our Lord, listen to the one Word, and subscribe to the same confession of the truth.

“What do we do with people not in the true church who seem to know and confess at least some of the truth? First, we must always refrain from feeling obligated to make a judgment about this person’s election. Indeed, we must resist the often intimidating attitude that challenges us to make some judgment from God’s secret-will perspective. At the same time that we must be careful not to jump to conclusions about the election of the person, so we must be careful not to jump to the opposite conclusion—that he is reprobate. The point is, we don’t know God’s secret will with regard to this person. All we can do is acknowledge with gratitude whatever amount of the Bible the person confesses, but then, as opportunity and occasion permit, confront the person with what it means to follow Christ fully. In short, sooner or later, the person in question must be encouraged to join the true church if he does indeed believe the Bible. Only when he joins the true church may we then consider him a Christian brother. This is not being uncharitable or skeptical. Rather, it is being honest, attempting to take people seriously, and at the same time seeking to live our the revealed-will perspective of the Bible, “(a)

That is indeed the proper approach. We must learn to simply live in obedience to the norms of Scripture, and concentrate on teaching and preaching these norms as revealed to us by God. We must reject any approach which injudiciously seeks to delve into the invisible (to man) aspects of God’s church-gathering work and which makes the truth of the Gospel irrelevant, and the Confession of the Church redundant.

Ron Dykstra

(a)From letters to the congregation, June 21/85, Rev. B Hofford)

CAPTURING THE CULTURE

Film, Art and Politics by Richard Grenier

A Book Review

Says the author: In the middle of the 1980's I was assigned by the New York Times to cast my eye on the spiritual state of the arts in America, above all on its political drift - if I should discover any. I was sent to movies, the theatre, art shows, concerts (classical and rock), to opera, to ballet, to professional wrestling. I attended poetry readings. I read literature most diligently. I read essays, novels, interviewed writers and artists. I read art history and biographies of great artists and writers of the past. I watched rock videos, I watched television commercials.

The interesting results of Grenier's exhaustive journalistic mission are published in this book. What he found was that the people who tend to shape the way society thinks are driven by socialistic ideals. Most people, he says, are unaware of the degree to which Leftist ideologies dominate so many of our institutions and are filtering into society, changing our attitudes and values. Grenier shows that the people who tend to influence the way society in general thinks - the intellectuals, writers, painters, actors, film producers, news reporters, and teachers - are overwhelmingly to the left of public opinion.

Why is this so? Grenier feels it's because the intellectual and artistic class find society morally wretched, miserably lacking in the shining values that give life meaning. Most modern artists, he says, are dismayed at the loss of absolute and sublime values.

Grenier observes that as societies lost their religious belief, certain groups sought salvation in other ways, ways that would endow their lives with a full and all-embracing meaning. Since they no longer believed in God Who gave people a purpose in life, a reason for living, they had to find some other purpose in life. With God "dead" the best way of giving an ongoing meaning of life was politics, whereby they sought to change society for the better and so create a better world in which to live. The political ideology that seemed to offer the best option for an ideal world was socialism, otherwise known as the political "left".

Grenier says that among the types of people most inclined to adopt and promote this sort of thinking are university professors, clergymen, government officials, artists and journalists. Yes, the Left commands the intellectual and cultural heights of our society - the universities, most of the best-known newspapers and magazines, the major television networks, the writers and producers of movies, much of the staffs of mainline churches, and much more. The Left therefore has a disproportionate influence over public information.

Most people today no longer get their information from reading but from television. And what young and old spend most of their time watching is not news but movies written, directed and acted by artists. And it is this artistic class in particular, says Grenier (who comments exclusively on a number of movies), that is in a spiritual quest for a more meaningful world. It is estranged from the traditional values of its own society, finding them unworthy because they are based on the Word of

God. For if God doesn't exist, then the Bible is a myth, and if the norms for society are based on a myth why should those norms govern our lives?

Grenier point out that sometimes the ideas of this educated elite do not "take" with the general public. Sometimes they merely numb, but sometimes they soften up the viewer making the manners of thinking that might earlier have seemed outlandish familiar and even tolerable. Sometimes this thinking is even heard coming out of the mouths of untold numbers of the country's school teachers.

During the 1980's for example, the US National Council for Social Studies stated that it was wrong to regard the American definition of human rights as superior to the Soviet. The American news media in those years, to maintain "balance", asserted time and again that Soviet human rights included free health care, virtually free housing, freedom from unemployment, freedom from inflation, freedom from want. Now that all this has been shown to be fraudulent (daily accounts of hunger, homelessness, street crime, appalling health care, extreme privileges of the elite, corruption at every level) one wonders at how easily Westerners were misled.

Yes, reporters, educators, and particularly film artists today have become political. They try to jolt people into a new awareness of today's most pressing social issues: nuclear war, unemployment, toxic waste, feminism... They don't offer practical solutions; they are simply outraged.

Unemployment is an outrage. Nuclear war is an outrage. Sexism is an outrage. The rallying cry to liberate society from these "outrages" is often enough to infuse life with a sense of meaning. But once this liberty has been attained the cohesion and sense of community that its pursuit inspired seems to evaporate.

Readers of Una Sancta know that only through faith in the Triune God there is meaning in life. But whilst we may limit the influence of unchristian ideologies by keeping the TV out of the home, may shun the cinemas, treat the blaring pop singers of our day with the contempt and revulsion they deserve, and promote upbuilding literature in our families, it is well to take note of Grenier's observation. For the Left also influences Australian society to such an extent that even the most careful of Christians cannot but be affected to some degree.

For example, there is an emphasis on social issues such as feminism, toxic waste, nuclear war, equality, etc., in government education curriculums, material which tends to find its way also into our schools. There is a push to infuse leftist politics into the teaching of literature. It finds its way into the books our children pick up from our school libraries. Newspapers and radio news broadcasts too reflect the leftist ideals in their selection of news items and in how they publish or present them.

Grenier's book exposes a major ungodly spirit of our times. While we may already be aware, to some extent at least, of the influences of this spirit, his findings can spur us to be more alert to the leftist ideology infiltrating and shaping Western thinking. We can discuss it with our children, highlighting how this is the godless alternative posited by those who reject God, declare the Bible a myth, jettison Biblical norms and promote a society based on different norms. We can watch out

for it in our school: the text books, curricula, library books. We can be busy with the perfect antidote: the study of God's Word.

J. Numan in Una Sancta 12/10/94

THE "LIGHT OF NATURE"

In chapter one of the Westminster Confession we read the following: "Chapter 1 - Of the Holy Scriptures

- 1) Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave man inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and his will, which are necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in diverse manners, to reveal himself, and to declare his will unto his Church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the holy Scriptures to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people have now ceased." (There are different editions of the Westminster Confession. The edition used here is the one used as the doctrinal standards of the OPC and the PCA published by Great Commission Publications - 1926).

In his book *The Reformed Faith*, an exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith (Christian Focus Publication, 1974, first edition 1845), Robert Shaw says that this section addresses four main points:

- 1) That the knowledge of God's existence and His perfection is attainable from nature,
- 2) That the light of nature is insufficient for man to know the will of God necessary for salvation,
- 3) That God is pleased to grant His church a special "supernatural" revelation, and
- 4) That this revelation has been committed to writing.

Rev. G.I. Williamson, in his book, *The Westminster Confession of Faith, for Study Classes* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co. 1964) gives a similar division of this section. This Rev. Williamson, by the way, is the OPC minister at Carson, N. Dakota. We want to give special attention to the first of the four points into which Shaw has divided this article because there may be a difference of approach and emphasis concerning this point between the Presbyterians and the (liberated) Reformed.

The difference in approach and emphasis centers on how and what man knows about God from creation without special revelation, that is, without Scripture. Shaw says that two things can be known, 1) the fact that God exists, and 2) some of God's perfection.

By way of explanation he says, "When we affirm that the being of God may be discovered by the light of nature, we mean, that the senses and the reasoning powers, which belong to the nature of man, are able to give him so much light as to manifest that there is a God" (P.2).

Williamson goes a step further. He does not just say that from nature man can know that a God exists (without knowing who God is), but stresses that "every fact (and the sum total of all facts) proves the existence of the God of the Bible" (P.I). Especially the (liberated) Reformed, after Prof.

K. Schilder exposed and rightly rejected the wrong theory of revelation taught by K. Barth, have insisted that the best argument concerning the existence of God which (at the best, and even this is doubtful) can come from nature, (that is philosophically) is to understand that a god exists. Without scripture it is impossible to prove that the God of Israel is the true God. According to Schilder, (and he followed the exegesis of S. Greijdanus on Romans 1 and 2), the light of nature is of no real help to know God. It is from Scripture itself that we must know that the heavens declare His handiwork (Psalm 19), but we would not have come to this conclusion unless the Lord had revealed it in scripture.

At first Article 2 of the Belgic Confession may appear to say the same thing that this first section of the Westminster Confession says. However, when Schilder explains the meaning of Article 2 of the Belgic Confession, he emphasizes that we do not confess two different “sources” of knowledge of God, but two different “means.” *Christelijke Religie*, p. 6, and *Het Amen der Kerk*, p. 21-22, make the same point. They emphasize that it is God who must make Himself known and He uses instruments - creation and scripture - to accomplish this. He uses creation to render man without excuse, and scripture to reveal salvation. Thus we notice a difference here between the Belgic Confession, Article 2, which speaks about creation as a “means” by which God make Himself known sufficiently to render man inexcusable and the Westminster Confession which speaks about the “light of nature” as a source of knowledge of God.

You may wonder whether this difference is of any real importance. To explain the difference let me formulate it this way; the Westminster Confession speaks about knowing God from creation like we might know an artist from his work. The Belgic Confession insists that we can only know God from creation in as far as He makes Himself known in creation. Thus, we cannot know God from creation like we know an artist from His work. In this context it is also important to know from scripture that creation itself is not what it was in its perfection at the beginning. An artist may be known by his painting, but if someone ruins the work of art by scribbling all over it, not so much can still be known about him.

The Westminster Confession indeed insists that the knowledge given in scripture is necessary for salvation, but those who write about it, and in particularly Dr. C. Van Til who has had much influence in the OPC in this regard, teach that if man thinks things out in the correct way, he must come to the conclusion that God exists and understand the wisdom and perfection of God. He make a distinction between the understanding of the “regenerated man” and the “unregenerated man.” He says that man must be “regenerated” to properly understand the knowledge of God given in creation, but it is there to be understood. See his, *In the Defense of the Faith*, Volume 5 (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co. 1982), especially chapter 7. In rebuttal it may be pointed out that before he fell into sin Adam would not have understood that he was not permitted to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil if the Lord had not told him (special revelation). He could not have known if from creation alone. Even though Dr. Van Til insists on the need for regeneration to know God, for him it remains that if man reasons properly, correct knowledge of God can be obtained from the light of nature. This is questionable. The same kind of

thinking is found in J. Murray's ethics where morality is based on "creation ordinances," Principles of Conduct, (Eerdmans, 1974) and Dr. G. Bahnsen is not free from this thinking either.

It would take too much time and space to show from scripture that it is questionable, but good arguments can be found in the works of Schilder on this point. Dr. C. Van Dam has also published an article in Clarion (Volume 41, Number 11, June 5, 1992) about this point, "How does God reveal Himself in His Works and Word?" The OPC can be commended for wanting to submit to the authority of scripture, but the question remains whether perhaps too much authority is given to "general revelation." If this is the case and sometimes it appears to be, our starting point in discussions with them may not always be the same.

Perhaps not full justice has been done to all the authors mentioned here, but that is hard to do in a few words. Of course, a careful attempt was made to be fair. The point was to show that there is some difference between the Westminster Confession and the Belgic Confession on this point which is important enough to retrieve attention in our continuing contacts with Presbyterian Churches.

PKA deBoer From the Manitoba Church News, April 11/93