

UNITY OF A CLOSER KIND

Although there has been much discussion about unity between the OPC and the Canadian Reformed Churches, another set of talks has been going on for some time between Canadian Reformed and Free Reformed Churches.

Many years ago the Can. Ref consistories of Cloverdale and Langley initiated discussions with the consistories of the Free Reformed churches in Aldergrove and Pitt Meadows. As a result of internal difficulties in the Free Reformed congregations these discussions stalled.

In the past year(s) such talks have commenced again. These discussions began mainly between the Canadian Reformed Church at Langley and the Free Reformed Church of Abbotsford. Recently the newly established Can. Ref consistory in Aldergrove was also included. Other discussions have also been held between churches from these denominations in Chilliwack and in Port Kells/Langley.

Similar discussions were held on the first three Thursdays in October 1992 in the Main Auditorium of Redeemer College. Those discussions have been neatly compiled in a useful book entitled THE CHALLENGE OF CHURCH UNION (Publication 1 of the Burlington Reformed Study Centre).

We can call such discussion “of a closer kind” because they are between churches who subscribe to the same summaries of the Bible. All the people involved in these talks agree about what the Bible says. They all summarize the Bible in the identical way.

As Dr. J. de Jong pointed out in his address to the Office Bearers Conference in Western Canada a couple of years ago, it ought to be a high priority for those who confess Scripture in the same way, to live in obedience to Scripture’s call to be one.

As a variety of consistories across Canada strive to address this priority it seems likely that different approaches will be taken. There is no accepted approach to this type of discussion, nor does the Church Order give detailed guidance here.

In the Oct. 1992 meetings of the Burlington Study Centre, Dr.de Jong states, “I do not think that we should first get involved in cooperative efforts without first discussing the issues. I would promote discussions at all levels but I would stress the priority of ecclesiastical discussions, locally and nationally, because that is what church union is all about.” At the same meeting Rev. J. Mulder expresses his opinion that “We pray that the Lord may show us ways to talk informally on the local level, to learn to know each other, to love each other, and to appreciate each other. From that the ecclesiastical contact will really grow from the bottom up.”

In the Fraser Valley a document “A Call to Ecclesiastical Unity” was prepared over a year ago and circulated throughout the country. Some of the proposed signatories were not even in agreement with the document.

In this past month new developments have taken place. The Church News that was distributed on Sunday, Feb.26, in all the churches in the Fraser Valley has the following Statement on the cover:

“On this 20th day of February, in the year of our Lord 1995, we, the Councils of the Aldergrove Canadian Reformed Church, the Emmanuel Free Reformed Church of Abbotsford, and the Langley Canadian Reformed Church, express that we recognize one another as true churches of the Lord. We agree to invite one another’s pastors, from time to time, to speak an edifying word in our respective congregations, pending the advice of the major assemblies. Further, we agree to establish a committee involving two office-bearers from each of our churches to discuss further ways to promote ecclesiastical unity along the lines of the paper, A Call to Ecclesiastical Unity.”

This committee will invite the other Canadian Reformed and Free Reformed Churches in the area to send two delegates to join such a committee. In due time this committee is to come with concrete proposals to the respective church councils.

At the same time the discussions that are taking place in Chilliwack and Port Kells/Langley appear not to have reached the same progress (yet). Also at the same time one of the leading figures in the Free Reformed Church, Rev. C. Pronk writes in his Answers to Questions in the book *The Challenge of Church Union*, “The FRC and Can. Ref Churches have much in common, indeed, and for that we are very grateful. Yet, it would be less than honest to ignore the differences. These differences concern especially the preaching as I have tried to show. Unless we come closer in that crucial area, therefore, I see no prospect of a union of our churches any time soon...”

Seeing the variety of approaches that are being considered and taken, and seeing the lessons we should learn from our past attempts at bringing federations together, it seems wiser to convince our respective federations of what we have seen in the other as a result of our local discussions before we begin with local and bold statements. Our discussions with the OPC should have taught us first to help each other in agreeing about how we view another federation.

When, as a federation, we can recognize another federation as faithful church then we should strive for union. If either of such federations refuses to seek that union, then those members who understand the need to unite must review their position.

The call for unity is clear, yet many seem able to avoid it by stumbling over issues they can not define. While we must be patient with such brothers, we may also point out that failure to seek proper unity is schismatic.

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REFORMED CHRISTIANITY AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

The history of the Christian religion has, for the most part, been dominated by exclusivist thought. Most of its greatest thinkers have interpreted the Bible and tradition as showing the Christian Way to be the only way. The twentieth century has brought the world closer together. The Christian community has been confronted with the existence of other competing religious groups. Some Christians have chosen to remain exclusive and deny the validity of other religions. Others, however, have elected to take a different path. These people view other religions as alternative paths to liberation or salvation rather than as competing traditions. This essay will attempt to deal with this religious pluralism from the viewpoint of Reformed Christianity.

Before any discussion continues, it would be best to provide some brief definition of Reformed Christianity, as that will be the context to which religious pluralism will be applied in this essay. Reformed Christianity is a name applied to one group of Protestant churches. The important figures at the head of Reformed Christianity are men like John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli. The Reformation slogans “scripture only”, “faith only”, and “grace only” are its basic principles. The title “Reformed Christianity” encompasses a wide range of different denominations so it will be impossible to accurately represent all of its dimensions. This essay will approach religious pluralism with the tenants listed above and will use the creeds and confessions of the Reformed movement as sources.

What then, is religious pluralism? What does it presuppose and what are its goals? Who are the people who support it? After these questions have been addressed we can ask, “What do Reformed Christians say about religious pluralism?”

Religious pluralism is a particular approach to the relationships between religions. This approach can be distinguished from two others: exclusivism and inclusivism. Both exclusivism and inclusivism place one’s own religion above all others. Religious pluralism suggests that different religions can not be ranked by the inclusivist or made absolute by the exclusivist. Instead it proposes that all religions are equally valid paths to the goal of salvation or liberation (Hick 1985 pp. 5, 6).

This proposition is based on the idea that all religions ultimately have the same goal and confess the existence of the same Reality. The goal of the religious pluralist is to have the Buddhists, the Christians, the Jews, the Muslims, and the Hindus all acknowledge each other as different paths to the same final end. The need for this proposition arises from the experience of religious diversity (Hick pp. 191-193). There are many religions. It seems as though they make different claims and have different ideas of reality. Many times members of different religions have come into conflict with each other; sometimes there has even been war between them. The religious pluralist seeks to find some common ground between religions that will serve as a starting point for discussion that is mutually upbuilding (Klos 1990 pp. 187-190).

There are two prominent ideas about what constitutes the common ground between religions that is essential to religious pluralism. These ideas are represented by the scholars John Hick and Wilfred Cantwell Smith.

Hick writes that all religions seek salvation or liberation. He then argues that different religions are different means of obtaining salvation or liberation (Hick pp. 3-6). The metaphor that is often used with this argument is that of a mountain. Each religion is a different path to the top of the mountain. At the top of the mountain is salvation. The paths are different because they have to travel through different terrain, but each ultimately reaches the top.

Smith takes a different approach. He sees religious diversity as merely the product of different culture, tradition, and history. All religions, according to him, represent the same reality, but all have interpreted reality within the context of their own culture (Hick pp. 149-152).

There are religious pluralists within every major religious group.

Each pluralist tries to find ideas and doctrines within his own tradition which will allow or even promote the position that his own religious understanding is one of many. In Christianity there are many pluralists. There are pluralists within every major Christian group, Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. The scholars mentioned above, Hick and Smith, both come from a Christian background.

What remains then is the response of the Reformed Christian to religious pluralism. Do the Bible and the Reformed confessions agree with the pluralist approach to relationships between religions? Is it possible for the Reformed Christian to acknowledge the existence of other religions as alternative but equal paths to salvation? What are the consequences of religious pluralism for the Reformed Christian?

First of all, what does the Bible say about Christian pluralism? Well, a very brief glance at the Bible will reveal that it does not speak about alternate paths to salvation or liberation. Jesus says to his disciples that no one can go to or know God the Father except through himself (John 14:6, 7). The apostle Peter when speaking before the elders of Jerusalem says that "salvation is found in no one else" than Jesus "for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). These passages say that it is impossible to know God or find salvation through anyone other than Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul says that unless a person believes in the resurrection of Jesus his faith is futile (I Cor 15:17). This is not the language of the religious pluralist. In fact, it is the very opposite. These texts make exclusive statements about salvation.

The Reformed Confessions make the same type of statements about the relationship of Reformed Christianity to other religions. Article 28 of the Belgic Confession states that there is no salvation outside of the Christian Church.

Article 20 states that it is a "terrible blasphemy" to think that salvation is found even partly outside of Jesus. The Heidelberg Catechism states the same thing in Lord's Day 11 where it says that salvation is found nowhere but in Christ. The Canons of Dort states over and over again in its articles that salvation is found only in Jesus.

Statements about the exclusiveness of salvation in Christ are not just isolated instances in the Bible or the Reformed confessions. Instead, salvation in only Jesus could be said to be their main themes.

Another way in which Reformed Christianity cannot agree with religious pluralism is in the definition of salvation. Most churches which belong to the Reformed movement maintain that salvation is a matter of God's election of certain people. This doctrine was a matter to which John Calvin devoted much of his energy. The salvation to which men and women are elected consists of eternal life in God's presence and in freedom from sin. Religious pluralists would either dilute this doctrine to make it fit with other traditions or they would outright disagree with it. Either way, Reformed Christianity cannot acknowledge the plurality of religion and keep this particular doctrine of salvation. Reformed Christianity does not view salvation as at the top of a mountain with many paths reaching to it, but rather as a very narrow door with only one small path leading to it (Matt 7:14).

A third way in which Reformed Christianity rejects pluralism is that it affirms the Bible as the only revelation which God has given to mankind. A pluralist view would have to maintain that every religion's collection of sacred writings is equally valid. This is in direct conflict with the Bible. Rev 22:19 warns against anyone who dares to add to the words of the Bible as the only revelation of God.

The religious pluralist will try to show that Jesus can be found in different religions throughout the world. The Jews, Muslims, and Hindus all have their own version of Jesus so that the Bible is correct when it maintains Jesus as the only way to salvation. The problem with this argument is that it relies on a picture of Jesus which is spoken in relative terms. The Bible speaks in absolute terms of a Jesus that was born in a stable in Bethlehem and died on a cross on Golgotha. This Jesus is the one by whom salvation is brought to mankind. The Bible does not allow us to relativize Jesus to other cultures. Allah is not the one who died on the cross, nor is Vishnu, nor is the Buddhist's Transcendent (Faber pp. 54-63). It is not possible to find either Jesus or a Triune God or salvation outside of the Christian Church, according to the Bible and Reformed Christianity.

Exactly the same thing must be sad about the Reformed idea of salvation. The Reformed idea of salvation is laid out in absolute terms by the Bible and the Confessions. Salvation is needed because man is totally corrupt (Rom 3:10, 11). Salvation is freedom from this corrupt nature and the opportunity to live with God in harmony. The religious pluralist will try to make this idea of salvation fit with the Buddhist idea of Enlightenment or the Jewish idea of the coming Messiah.

However, he will not be successful unless he detracts from the Reformed idea. The Reformed idea and the Buddhist ideas are different. They cannot be equated unless one or both are compromised. The Reformed position will not allow for compromise; the Bible and the confessions both state a policy of exclusivism.

Within the historical Reformed Christian tradition there has been a majority consensus that Christianity is the only Way to salvation. The religious pluralist cannot make Reformed

Christianity fit within a plural system of religions because Reformed Christianity is exclusivist. The two systems cannot be reconciled unless one gives in to the other. Reformed Christianity cannot become plural unless it changes its very foundations, the Bible and the confessions.

The position of exclusivism seems harsh and nearsighted for a religion which claims to be a religion of love. Is not a Christian being unfair and unloving when he declares that the religion of another person is wrong and must be abandoned in order to find salvation? Does not Christianity preach tolerance and love for one's neighbour? Couldn't this tolerance extend to the area of salvation and the concept of God? To be honest, there are Christians that do think that the ideas of tolerance and love conflict with exclusivism. This essay, however, has shown that for Reformed Christianity there must be a position of exclusivism in order to maintain a Reformed faith. How then do Reformed Christians reconcile tolerance and exclusivism?

Well, according to the doctrine of Reformed Christianity the dilemma outlined above is a false one. Tolerance and exclusivism do not conflict. The tolerance of which the Bible speaks is not for the

realm of religion. The Bible does not tolerate the idea of alternative religion (Ex 20:3,4). And the love of which the Bible speaks is not one which will allow for a Christian to ignore the fact that someone is being misled by another religion. The Bible requires that a Christian tell someone that his religion is wrong. The Bible even holds Christians responsible for people who have not been warned (Ezek 33:7-9).

The exclusivist view of the Reformed Christian is not a view which is born out of hatred or ignorance or a sense of competition. Instead this view is derived from the Bible and the confessions which define the Reformed Christian Church.

Reformed Christians do not hate Muslims or Jews or Buddhists or Hindus. Reformed Christians do not look down on people of other religions as lesser people because they are not Christian. Reformed Christians believe that all men and women are equally deserving of God's condemnation. The Reformed Christian does believe that Jesus is the only way to salvation. And rather than water down his faith in order to accommodate the faiths of others which he believes to be insufficient for salvation, the Reformed Christian will declare his path to the world for everyone to see as the only true path to salvation.

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“THIS CHILD OF THINE”

Recently a discussion was held in two Dutch Christian news-papers, Reformatorisch Dagblad and Nederlands Dagblad. It may still be going on. At issue was the phrase “this child of Thine” from the first prayer in the Form for Baptism. The question was posed, “Since the linguistic modernization of their Church Service Book by the General Synod of Arnhem 1981, have not the ‘Liberated’ Churches smuggled a kind of specific ‘Liberated’ theology regarding the covenant of grace into the Form for Infant Baptism?”

It was said earlier, from outside our sister churches: The ‘Liberated’ churches have their own theology regarding the covenant, in particular concerning the position of the children within it.

Someone who sent his children to a ‘Liberated’ claimed that at that school all the pupils were considered to be believers; it seems as if there was no need for them to be regenerated and converted. The Principal strongly denied this.

Then the chief editor of the Reformatorisch Dagblad took up this point and, referring to the ‘Liberated’ version of the Form for Infant Baptism, he underlined this. According to him there is a danger in the thinking of the members of these churches. They are quite easily inclined to think that

everything is fine with all their baptized children, because they are considered to be in God's covenant of grace, each and every one of them.

According to him we should never forget that there two different groups among these children: those who will come to faith, and those who will go through life as unbelievers. In his opinion we must distinguish between the administration of the covenant and 'the essence' of the covenant. Not all those who are baptized children are among the ones God has chosen to salvation, others appear to belong to the reprobate, the rejected ones.

This is why that editor is not very enthusiastic about the phrase 'this child of Thine' in the 'Liberated' service book.

However, after further study he had to admit that the 'Liberated' text of the Form is historically correct, whereas the text used in other churches simply has 'this child,' which is a very neutral term. (Some editions have "these children," most likely because in earlier days larger churches had adopted the tradition to have baptism administered only once a month, so that a number of children were baptized at the same time.)

Indeed, in the original text that has come to us from the Palatinate, the same source to which we owe the Heidelberg Catechism, we read 'this child of Thine' (in previous editions of the Book of Praise: 'this Thy child').

Now we all know from Scripture that on the last day it will appear that some of the baptized people had been elected by God to eternal salvation, and others - whether or not their number will be larger or smaller, we don't know — were not elected.

And indeed, "not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel" (Rom.9:6), and some of the children of the Kingdom will be cast out because of their unbelief. But the Saviour Himself calls them "children of the Kingdom"!

However, this is not the point on which parents should reflect when they present their children for baptism and afterwards, for this leads to fear: do our children belong to the elect or to the reprobate? Did they participate in the administration of the covenant of grace only, or also in its essence?

The point they should reflect on is: the LORD fulfills His eternal council also in the line of the generations, as He has promised to Abraham, therefore all our children are children of the covenant. God's covenant promises have been sealed to them in holy baptism and tills is the solid basis that the parents have for the education of their children. What we confess in the Canons of Dort applies also to our children, that "as many as are called by the gospel are earnestly called" (III/IV 8). Parents can daily repeat what was prayed for their children at their baptism, that he (she) "may grow and increase in the Lord Jesus Christ", and "that he (she) thus may acknowledge Thy fatherly goodness and mercy" -in other words that as adolescents they may make public profession of faith.

It may not be necessary elaborate on all this. The only thing we would like to emphasize is the great significance of the covenant promise. This is what, according to Scripture, the LORD seals to our

children when they are baptized, but at that time He does not speak about election and reprobation. How we - and therefore also our children when they grow up - are assured about our election is something we confess in the Canons of Dort. The only time that election is mentioned in regard to children is in that well known Paragraph 17 of Chapter 1 where we read the comforting words: “the children of believers are holy, not by nature but in virtue of the covenant of grace, in which they are included with their parents. Therefore, God fearing parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in their infancy.”

Is this specific ‘Liberated’ or Scriptural? It appears that ‘Liberated’ here is the same as Scriptural!
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