

THE NEED FOR REFORMED EVANGELISM

THE CREEDS OF THE CHURCH

The Church Order of the Christian Reformed Churches (CRC) contains an article that is not found in the Church order of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC). We read that “Each church shall instruct its youth - *and others who are interested* - in the teaching of the Scriptures as formulated in the creeds of the church, in order to prepare them to profess their faith publicly...” (CRC, Church Order, Art.63.) We notice that the “others who are interested” are to be instructed “in the teaching of Scripture as formulated in the creeds of the church”. In the task of bringing the Gospel to “others who are interested” we should readily use our Confession to give a true and authentic survey of the confessed doctrine of the Church. An important aim of our evangelistic efforts is to teach people to read and understand the Word of God. Yet we may not ignore the Reformed Standards as a summary of the teachings of the Scriptures.

The CRC, in spite of having Article 63 in their Church Order, did not live up to the intent or purpose of this article. Many in the CRC have indeed realized that their approach is less than Scriptural and Reformed. Their critique of the CRC evangelistic methods and programs contains a lesson for us. Therefore we will examine a few excerpts of what was written.

METHODS OF EVANGELISM

“Paul once said of some of his fellow Jews: They have a zeal, but not according to knowledge. I sometimes think of these words in connection with some methods of evangelism employed by radio preachers, churches and para-church groups. At times the gospel itself is disgraced by those who are supposed to enhance it. Zeal for evangelism is good, but it must be accompanied by a thorough knowledge of what the gospel is all about.

Even in the Christian Ref. Church (CRC) we have not always escaped the temptation of using methods that are less than biblical, less than Reformed. We have at times taken a “smorgasbord” approach to the matter: borrowing a bit from here and a little from there, without a clear, coherent and consistent package. We seem to get carried away by methods which others appear to use successfully, and suddenly Reformed principles recede into the background,” (a)

REFORMED EVANGELISM

“A byproduct of our emphasis on evangelism has been increased contact with people from a variety of church backgrounds. This has led to a new attitude among us that generally minimizes differences between denominations and church traditions. How many times haven’t you heard someone excitedly announcing his discovery that ‘there are Christians in other denominations, too?’...”

The point of all this is NOT to discourage local churches, and individuals within those churches, from doing mission work; the opposite is in fact true. Evangelism is too important for us to allow any part of the church to remain on the sidelines because their input has been ignored. Tragically,

the liberal element within the church has been in the forefront of our evangelistic discussions. That has not only “soured” many conservatives on evangelism as practiced; it has also meant that often our efforts as a denomination have been based on assumptions that are from a Reformed viewpoint, dubious. It is easy and convenient to parrot the views and copy the methods of a variety of Arminian para-church organizations.

Let me urge you, if you are one who has been “turned off on evangelism by the tactics and assumptions of others, please don’t give up! Get involved!

Challenge un-Reformed assumptions and methods when you see them. Don’t allow practices and teachings that are un-Biblical to be introduced under the guise of evangelism. Evangelism is too important a task for any of us to ignore for any reason, “(b)

NO “DENOMINATIONAL DIFFERENCES”

“Coffee Break’ is one of the evangelistic programs of the CRC being used in several congregations. It is a Bible study program designed for ladies of the church, but geared toward outreach. Ladies of the church are encouraged to invite non-church friends and neighbours to come along to this Bible study (at which babysitting is provided) and thus introduce them to the Scriptures and (hopefully) to the church, in a ‘non-confrontational’ setting.

The intent of the program is good: to reach out to ladies of the community with the gospel of Christ. Such efforts are laudable.

Having seen and listened to the brief slide program intended to acquaint churches with this program, however, (produced by the Home Mission Board) I have some questions. As already said, the program wants to be ‘non-confrontational’ in character. So far so good. But the program goes on to say that ‘denominational differences are not discussed.’ That strikes my Reformed feelers in a wrong way. What is meant by that? Does that mean that Reformed distinctives like infant baptism (the teaching of the covenant), the nature of the kingdom of God, the teaching about total depravity and about God’s electing love, etc., are not discussed? Are these merely ‘denominational differences’ which can conveniently be forgotten or overlooked? Or are they fundamental teachings of the Bible which cannot possibly deal with election and man’s total depravity? How could one study Rom. 4 or Gal. 3 and not get into the whole matter of the covenant and infant baptism?

Granted, when introducing newcomers to the Bible, one does not need to go into the fine points of theology and all the differences between the various Reformed Churches. But a statement such as that referred to above surely makes one wonder, and leaves something to be desired. It almost sounds as if doctrinal differences are merely a matter of “pet (denominational) peeves”. If that is the case, we better repent quickly and get together with Roman Catholics and others. But that is hardly the case! Are we going to hide our distinctive during Coffee Break discussion, but then later, if some of these ladies express an interest in the church, face them “with all the goods?” Or are we only interested in leading them to Christ and not His church (if that were possible)? Imagine a Jehovah’s Witness coming to one of these Bible studies and not being willing to discuss the triune God, because we don’t want to discuss “denominational differences!” Is there, after all, such a

thing as a non-denominational church? What kind of church would that be – a kind of an “invisible” church which floats above all the variations of the church on earth?

I have some real questions here. I don't believe for a moment that we have to apologize for our distinctive Reformed teachings. After all, we confess that ‘they do fully agree with the Word of God’ (Form of Subscription). Or are we not so sure of that anymore, particularly when it come to our evangelism programs?

THE LESSON

We may not necessarily agree with everything that was written, yet the message is clear. Right from the beginning let us make use of the Reformed Standards as a summary of the teachings of the Scriptures in our evangelistic effort. We have in them God's gift of an excellent instrument with which we are rich ourselves, and with which we can help others in a profitable way to read and understand God's Word.

To whatever degree we depart from the Word of life, to that degree we become deformed, not Reformed.

Ron Dykstra

THE REFORMED CONFESSIONS AND THE GOSPEL

by: REV.K.A.KOK

At some point during discussions about contact between our federation of churches and other churches, or about the relationship between ourselves and other “Christians,” someone is sure to raise the distinction between “primary” and “secondary” doctrines - as in, “Faith in Christ and belief in the Trinity are primary; the matters of infant baptism and predestination are only secondary.” The implication is clear: there are essential doctrines of the gospel which must be believed, while the confessions of the church might contain something very different, or, at least, something additional to these “essential” doctrines. And so a wedge is driven between the gospel which saves and the faith confessed by the church. In such a case, an individual holds to the confession only inasmuch as they are biblical and not because they are biblical.

This, of course, leads only to the morass of subjectivism. If everyone is allowed mental reservations about the confessions, as well as the right to pick and choose what constitutes the “essential” doctrines of the gospel, what is left of the “faith for all delivered to the saints”(Jude, vs.3)? Can a church allow these mental reservations to her confessions without losing her own heart? Saving faith and the confessions of the church cannot be separated, for if they are, nothing remains of either saving faith or of the confessions.

Just wait a minute! No less a Reformed luminary than John Calvin made the distinction between “primary” and “secondary” doctrines. Surely it would be wrong to suggest that Calvin threatened the heart of the Church! And with a mind-numbing regularity, Calvin's Institutes, Book IV 12 is trotted out. There we can read:

“What is more, some fault may creep into the administration of either doctrine or sacraments, but this ought not to estrange us from communion with the church. For not all the articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all men as proper principles of religion. Such are: God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God’s mercy, and the like. Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of faith.”

Q.E.D. and further debate is ended...or is it? Notice, first, that there is a lot of doctrinal ground covered in Calvin’s phrase “and the like.” Second, Calvin also enumerated some of the doctrines which may be disputed without breaking the unity of the faith. Now, Calvin wrote at the time of disputes with the Roman Catholics, the Anabaptists, and the Lutherans. If he thought of “primary” and “secondary” doctrines as many do today, we might expect baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and predestination - just to list three disputed doctrines - to be named as “secondary.” This, however, is not the case:

“Suppose that one church believes - short of unbridled contention and opinionated stubbornness - that souls upon leaving bodies fly to heaven; while another, not daring to define the place, is convinced nevertheless that they live to the Lord. What churches would disagree on this one point?”

Though Calvin had many major doctrinal disputes confronting him and dividing the Reformed from other “Christians,” yet notice the astonishing insignificance of the doctrine over which he would allow a difference in confession to exist.

Well, obviously, Rev. Kok, ardent confessionalist that he is, is twisting Calvin’s obvious meaning. For the moment, we will leave aside the question of just who is twisting Calvin in order to cite a Calvin scholar with no ecclesiastical axe to grind: “And he (Calvin) tried once more to utilize the distinction between essentials and inessentials of faith...It will be noticed in the first place that Calvin had insisted that ideally there shall be agreements in everything, and that disagreements arose out of “remnants of ignorance.” Secondly, although the matter at issue was disagreements within churches, Calvin referred (as if it made no difference) to disagreements between churches...; the former were apparently too much for him to take. Finally, it is notable that when he came to giving an example of a matter which might safely remain controverted, the only examples that Calvin saw fit to bring forward was one of breathtaking obscurity and triviality. “Why.” he said, “should it be regarded as a ground for dissention between churches, if one, without any spirit of contention or perverseness in dogmatizing, holds that the soul on quitting the body flies to heaven and another, without venturing to speak positively as to the abode, holds it for certain that it lives with the Lord?”(CO I, 545). Why, indeed? But the controverted doctrines between and within churches bore no resemblance to this topic or to the manner of conducting disputes. The fact that he could not find anything more contentious which might safely be left unresolved gives lie to the general assertion...If Calvin’s theology had any real room for adiaphorism, there were infinitely more immediate and contentious matters amongst which to choose illustrations of things which might safely be left in dispute amongst evangelical friends.’¹

Calvin is no witness for distinguishing between the gospel and the confessions.

The Reformed confessions are the gospel; they are, in the words of the Athanasian Creed, the “catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved.” And let us not travel up that blind alley of whether or not there will be non-Reformed “Christians” in heaven; let us stick to the norms of faith and not be waylaid by hypothetical exceptions to those norms.

“Enough”, you might cry. “Rev. Kok has certainly got off the deep end yet again.” Perhaps, but I would contend that the distinction between the gospel and the confessions results, in part, from the relativism of our day. So long as any beliefs are matters of subjective opinion and personal preference, then the world and other ‘Christians’ do not much care what you believe. Indeed, Satan does not care if the church believes true things, so long as she does not insist that she has the exclusive truth and holds others accountable to the truth as well. In the face of this relativism, the church must maintain that she, and she alone, has the exclusive truth. Jesus Christ rules ‘over all things for the sake of the Church’ (Eph. 1:22) and, through His Spirit, leads her ‘into all truth’ (John 16:13). This further means that the Confessions of the Church are accurate summaries of God’s Word.

Often, the sad shape of the church at Corinth, or of several of the churches in Revelations 2 – 3 are cited as proof that doctrinal deficiencies do not disqualify a body as church. These passages teach no such thing. Just consider the churches in Asia Minor; God’s Christ dwells in the midst of the seven golden lamp stands, which are the seven churches. The covenant promise has been fulfilled and is realized in history by Christ, but His accomplishment has not relativized the necessity for the church’s covenant faithfulness. The danger of apostasy has not disappeared. Christ did not leave the churches in Asia Minor in their “far from perfect” state. In His first letter He calls the church at Ephesus to repent of her sin and renew her fallen faithfulness, or He would come and remove her lamp stand (Rev. 2: 4, 5) – she would cease to be a church in whose midst He would dwell. To the church in Smyrna He wrote, in sovereign denigration of the Jewish synagogue there, that, for all its claims to be the dwelling of God, it was in reality the ‘synagogue of Satan’ (Rev. 2:9).

The true church is called to faithfulness to the Christ of God, to Him in Whom the covenant is unalterably sure. The Church is also then called to her inescapable covenant responsibility; she is called to “ecclesiastical perseverance,” can only those churches can be called true churches where “it governs itself according to the Pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head (Belgic Confession, Art. 29). Of course, the church is faithful only because her God dwells in her midst, but only the church which manifests the three marks – the evidence of God’s dwelling within her – can be called a true church.

Any religious body claiming the name “church” but failing to manifest these three marks must be called a false church. It is naïve to believe that such a body would welcome this title, “for all sects which are in the world today claim for themselves the name of Church” (ibid). Nevertheless, we are speaking of “the body and communion of the true church which must be distinguished from all sects that call themselves the church” (ibid). Doubtless, both the sects and the false churches will object and will be offended; for not only do they consider themselves to be true churches, but they

will point to broad areas of agreement with the church, denigrating differences to be a “secondary” importance, and to their evident sincerity. This is what the Gnostics did, what the Marcionites did, what the Arians did, what the Appolinarians did, what the Nestorians did, and what the Eutychians did. It is what heretics always do, but this did not prevent or inhibit the ancient church from stamping their claims as invalid and false. Was this because the catholic church was narrow and failed to see that they were not perfect? No, it was because the catholic church knew that she, and not another, had been led into the truth by the Spirit. The heretics, too, claimed devotion to Christ and zeal for the Gospel of God. Yet, as the catholic church of today, we may legitimately rejoice that the catholic church of old separated truth from error, the true Gospel from the anathema, the true church from the false. As they did so, their confession of Christ remained, but the confession itself expanded – not in order to bury the Word of God under the words of men, not to take the focus from Christ, but to make the focus clearer. This happened because Christ dwelled in their midst as His true Church, fulfilling His promise to lead her into His truth (John 16:13).

And this is an essential part of our covenant responsibility today. When our forefathers in the 1500’s, in the 1830’s, in the 1880’s, and in the 1930’s and 40’s rediscovered the true Gospel, they distinguished truth from error, and because of that, they soon had to distinguish the true church from the false. To do so they discerned from the Word of God the marks whereby the true church could readily be distinguished from the false.

This led to and demanded the whole faith which God had taught His church in her struggles against error throughout her history and in their own day. They were not afraid to deny that purity of sacrament, of the preaching of the Word, and of discipline was found either with Rome, or with the Anabaptists, or with the state churches, or with the synodical churches, even though all said much of Christ and boasted “of Him in words” (Heidelberg Cat. Q.A. 30), since neither Rome nor any of the rest bowed to the faith God had taught His people in history from His Word: “they in fact deny the only Saviour Jesus” (ibid). In contrast to them, our forefathers humbly, but gratefully and boldly claimed that they themselves had learned to confess that true faith, not as an irrelevant appendage to the Gospel nor as an unwarranted theological digression, but in the glorious richness of the Reformed faith which was faithful to the Gospel and synonymous with the truth of God.

This conviction can be seen in Lord’s Day 7 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Having affirmed that only those are saved by God who embrace Christ in true faith (Q.20), the question is naturally raised about the nature of true faith (Q.21). The answer avoids all subjectivism. True faith is an assured confidence which believes the truth of the Gospel. Then the Catechism goes on to say that the Gospel which must be believed is faithfully summarized in the Apostle’s Creed (Q.22).²

The Catechism, however, does not only reproduce the Apostle’s Creed and stop there. It goes on to expound it, setting forth the Reformed understanding of the faith of the “one holy catholic and apostolic church” as the Gospel which must be believed. They saw no distinction between the Reformed Confessions and the Gospel – nor do I.

Our Reformed forefathers saw that their covenant responsibility to delight God and abide in His truth required saying “no” as well as saying “yes”. They recognized that a church which cannot say “no” soon loses its ability to say “yes”. They also clearly saw that a true church which distinguishes the faith it professes from the faith necessary to salvation has already set out on the pathway from true to false church, for it thereby has denied Christ’s presence and teaching in her midst.

No true church has ever planned to degenerate into a synagogue of Satan. It happens by degrees, as such a church listens less to God’s call to purity and more to a call for a lowest common denominator confession that recognizes that “all churches have very great weaknesses and no church possesses a perfect theology.” The distinction between “primary” and “secondary” doctrines makes the Confessions of the church, at best, unnecessary, and more probably, irrelevant and an obstacle to the progress of the Gospel. The church which harkens to such urgings has already questioned the presence of God in her midst, has mistaken the call to the Word of God to further reformation to be the same as the siren’s call away from the faith once for all delivered to the saints, and has begun to seek Jesus Christ elsewhere that where He promised to be – namely, in her midst, guiding her into all truth. If she follows in that uncharted course, she will make a shipwreck of her faith. She will not find the only Head of the Church, but she will forfeit His presence – all in the name of chasing the Christ Whom she already, by His grace, possessed.

The church which distinguishes between her confessions and the gospel will soon find that she has lost both. The church, which holds to the confessions inasmuch as they are biblical and not because they are biblical, will soon find that she has lost both the confessions and Scripture. We ought not to try to be wiser than God and so distinguish the “essential” from the “non-essential” in His Word. Let us confess the faith which has been delivered to us.

¹ Harro Hopfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982, pp 85f.

² See the discussion of this by C. Trimp, “The promise of the Covenant: Some Observations” *Unity in Diversity*, ed. Riemer Faber (Hamilton: Senate of the Theological College, 1989), esp. pp74f.