

**THE** Outlook

*Devoted to the Exposition and Defense  
of the Reformed Faith*

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EVANGELISM  
REVISITED

## WHAT IS THE GOAL OF EVANGELISM?

Some hold that the goal, purpose, chief end of evangelism is the conversion of the lost. No doubt, we have here a truly noble sentiment and one worthy of contemplation.

If the goal of evangelism is the apparent conversion of the lost, then we should develop a methodology which is resistant to all other influences and keeps as its main purpose the apparent winning of souls. What Henry Ford did in the manufacturing of automobiles, we can do even better for the production of converts. After all, Henry wasn't doing the Lord's work and we are.

Now this methodology must be simple and to the point. The last thing we want to do is to introduce too many complexities in this matter of apparent conversion. The goal here is visible conversion not conviction. Another necessary item to reach our goal is a heaping measure of sensitivity toward the unconverted. We must be very careful not to say anything that would be contrary to their world view. Everyone knows you can't convert somebody whom you offend. Remember "visible conversions" are the goal.

A good tool to use in our arsenal toward apparent conversion is pity. Methodologically speaking, pity helps to get converts. If we must say anything about Jesus to get converts, then let's cause people to feel sorry for Him. Tugging at people's sympathies can be done something like this: "Poor Jesus there on the cross, dying for you. Won't you feel sorry for Him and follow Him?" History shows this one is a proven winner.

Another technique we can use to achieve apparent conversion, is the "Things go better with Jesus" line. This

will work great for people whose lives are going smoothly. We don't ask them to change anything; we just ask them to add Jesus, and bingo, we have ourselves a ready-made board member. This line is also a great hook for the miserable because it communicates that their lives will be forever harmonious after conversion.

Regarding content, always remember that the goal here is apparent conversion. People are not theologians so never confuse them by giving them content. They can be visibly converted without it and get it later if they want to. Remember that people will only be confused by the facts. If we must insist on content then we should keep repeating in different forms the proven mantra, "Jesus loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." People like hearing that.

In the matter of conversion we must be very careful about the atmosphere we create. Lighting should be dim. Our focus groups show that dim lighting is favorable for the emotional response we want to produce. Also an organ is always to be preferred to a piano. Pianos are too vibrant and alive and we want to create a somber and sober atmosphere. After all, this is a serious matter and we want to treat it that way.

When it comes to crunch time (the call for the decision), remember we want to urge people to do the right thing (for their own good of course). Prospective converts need closure on this conversion thing, so have them do something that will prove to them for the rest of their lives they are converted. Have them walk an aisle, sign a pledge card or pray a prayer.

Is the goal of evangelism the apparent conversion of the lost, or is the goal of evangelism the *glory of God* which, by God's grace, will lead to the conversion

of His people? And if the goal of evangelism is the glory of God, how does that change our thinking about the way we evangelize?

For too long the evangelical church has been making apparent conversion the goal of the Evangel. John Murray flatly says:

Conversion, it ought to be remembered, is not the gospel. It is the demand of the gospel message and the proper response to it.<sup>1</sup>

Though well-intentioned, we have turned the response to the gospel (conversion) into a Holy Grail that must be obtained at all cost, even at the cost of the gospel itself. We have forgotten that we are not primarily responsible for the individual's response to the gospel; we are primarily responsible to proclaim accurately the gospel, and pray passionately that God will move mightily through the foolishness of our preaching. What the evangelical church needs today in her evangelistic outreach is a massive move away from decades of a vapid, mindless methodologicalism that is totally devoid of any Reformed ballast. Without this ballast we will continue teetering precariously close to Pelagius's

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fondest aspirations for the church. We will continue to have churches full of "converts" that have little interest in Christ.

A Reformed ballast contends that the goal of evangelism is the glory of God. Since it is God's glory that is at stake, we are constrained to evangelize in a way that is God-pleasing. The way we know what pleases God is by the Holy Spirit bringing to life the Word of God. And what does the Word of God say about God-glorifying evangelism?

It says that the kind of evangelism which most glorifies God is the type that always holds before the lost *the character and person of God* (Acts 17:22f). Evangelism that starts with people's needs is destined neither to honor God nor convert people. When we start with the needs of people we have a gospel that makes sin solely subjective. Sin is de-

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fined in terms of a "rotten world" and a "rotten life." While that may be true and while we must sympathize with people's rotten lives, this is not the essence of sin in the Reformed tradition. In the Biblical Reformed tradition, sin is primarily objective. Sin is rebellion against the majestic sovereignty of the most holy God; sin is a denial of God's sovereign rights, and sin is holding as vile the person and character of God.

"In our evangelism we need to cease trying to 'fix' people's lives by patching together the old nature."

## GOD'S HOLINESS

Therefore God-glorifying evangelism which leads to God-glorifying conversion, starts with the *character* of the first person of the Trinity. This must be stressed when we are dealing with a people that have virtually no accurate God-concept (again consider Acts 17:22f). Evangelism must trumpet the excellencies, beauties and terrors of God. No attribute of God exhibits these qualities as well as His holiness. It is God's holiness that reminds us of God's standards for man. It is God's holiness that clarifies for us the distance between God and man. God's holiness explains each individual's responsibility to God. God's holiness forces us to speak forthrightly about His wrath against sin and sinners. God's holiness justifies His intense anger toward the unrepentant. God's holiness underscores the utter impossibility of men satisfying Him on their own merit. His holiness defines His mercy and grace. God's holiness crystallizes for us the necessity of the incarnation, perfect obedience, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and the session of our Lord Christ at God's right hand. God's holiness adorns the beauty of His love.

Without holiness, God's patience would be an indulgence to sin, His mercy a fondness, His wrath a madness, His power a tyranny, His wisdom an unworthy subtlety. It is God's holiness that gives a decorum to all.<sup>2</sup>

In our evangelism we show our love for the lost best when we set forth most clearly *the person and character of God*.

God-glorifying evangelism must insist on people seeing that their own personal problems are nothing in comparison with the problem they have with God. Their felt needs (rotten lives) are shamed by their real need (seeing their sin against a holy God). In our evangelism we need to cease trying to "fix" people's lives by patching together the old nature. People must see their need for a *new nature* in Christ. Evangelism that emphasizes God's holiness, by God's grace and the Holy Spirit's quickening, brings this perspective.

## REGENERATION

A reintroduction of the Biblical Reformed ballast to "Evangelical" evangelism must also include a return to a Biblical understanding of *regeneration*. Jesus said, "You must be born again," but He never suggested that we conceive and birth ourselves. God-glorifying evangelism recognizes quite simply that "salvation is of the Lord." The way we typically frame repentance suggests that this is a decision that individuals can be cajoled and corralled into making for themselves. Yet, even Wesley, who is hardly the patron saint of the Reformed tradition, said "that a man cannot repent whenever he wants to." We must again emphasize the truth that what man most desperately needs to do (repent) is precisely that which he has no power to do and yet it still must be done. The Reformed doctrine of regeneration resolves this paradox and casts us again on God as the *author* of our faith, and so again glorifies God.

Evangelism which emphasizes regeneration distances itself immediately from an easy-conversionism which:

far too frequently is so superficial and beggarly that it completely fails to take account of the momentous change of which conversion is the fruit.<sup>3</sup>

In the Reformed construct there is still the call to repentance and faith but it is framed in a way which spells out clearly that man must even seek repentance and faith from God. Bunyan in *Grace Abounding*, notes that he spent 18 months in repentance before Christ was revealed to him. The Reformed construct teaches that even a person's *seeking* of repentance and faith is a disposition given by God. Rightly understood, the Reformed doctrine of regeneration teaches that saving

repentance and faith *follows* God's work of regeneration. Practically speaking this means that conviction of sin is not necessarily equal to regeneration. People can sense their sin after a fashion without being regenerate (consider Judas). It also means that people can repent and believe after a fashion without being regenerate (consider Jesus' conversation with "believing" Jews in John 8:31-47). The proof of regeneration does not lie primarily in one's outward act of repentance and faith (praying a prayer, walking an aisle, or learning a catechism). The proof of regeneration lies in the God-produced continual desire for and love of Christ revealed in the convert's walk with Christ after regeneration. Evangelism which has glorifying God as its goal always throws people back on God and His grace. Emphasizing regeneration does just that.

There is much more which could be said about the need for a Biblical Reformed ballast in our evangelism. We have not discussed the need to return to preaching the law. We have addressed a few urgent questions to our current practice of evangelism. A correct understanding of the person and work of the Holy Spirit is sorely needed in pop evangelism. Thinking on the "Order of Salvation" would benefit our evangelism as well. When one attempts to speak of evangelism that has glorifying God as its goal, he is urging serious study. So, while admitting that this treatise is woefully inadequate, let us close with just one more thought about God-glorifying evangelism.

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## EXALTING CHRIST

God-glorifying evangelism exalts Christ and His cross, not with sentimentality, but with Biblical truth. This truth presents the cross in relation to the triune God before presenting it in relation to man. If we hold to the conviction that the cross is primarily about us we are in danger of missing the wonder of it all. The wonder is that God in His holiness would lay *upon Himself* His own righ-

teous wrath before He would lay it upon His people. The wonder of the cross is that God, for the love of His glory, would rather bear the severity of His own intense wrath before He would pour that wrath out upon His people. The wonder of the cross reveals God as both *just* and *justifier*. Until we see the cross solving the dilemma of a righteous God, justly forgiving the sins He loathes without compromising Himself, we will always be in danger of missing the cross.

*The cross is not primarily about us but about Him.* God-glorifying evangelism recognizes and proclaims this truth.

God give us the grace to proclaim the truth that evangelism's goal is not superficial conversion but the glorification of God.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Murray, John. *Redemption Accomplished And Applied* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing) 1995, p. 41.
2. Charnock, Steven. *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House) reprinted 1996, Volume II, p. 114.
3. Murray, John. Op cit., p. 105.

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## Feature Article

I have been thinking a lot, in recent days, about the Christian ministry. I wrote an earlier *Update* (Vol. 5, No. 3, 1996) on the subject of divine call to the ministry. I can't seem to get a growing concern for pastoral integrity out of my mind. My exposure to the church across North America has underscored this concern. Furthermore, my relationship with truly God-called men strengthens the impression that holy servants of God are an awesome weapon in God's hands.

The failure of the church in regard to the life and doctrine of her ministers is perhaps her greatest failure in the twentieth century. We have built better schools but trained less qualified men. We have granted more degrees but produced fewer and fewer genuinely holy ministers. Men have studied books and taken courses but have not been given the Spirit to comprehend the most basic truths of the Gospel. We must have holy, God-taught ministers or reformation and revival are unlikely.

Generally, sheep will only be effectively led by God-called and God-equipped men. True reformation can be seriously undertaken only by such men.

Contemporary revival praying is meaningless, in most instances, precisely because church leadership is not in line with the revealed Word of God on the important matters of life and doctrine.

Further, my own private counsel with several brethren who have been severely misled by their ministers, has convinced me all the more that there are far more false teachers in the church than any of us imagines. I hope I am wrong in this but I fear otherwise.

## WHAT CAN WE DO?

The apostle Paul writes to a young minister of the gospel, "Watch your life and your doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save

both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tim. 4:16, NIV). A pastor who would stand in evil times must give careful attention to two principle things—his life and his doctrine. This he must devote himself to night and day, without letting up for a millisecond. Only in this earnest endeavor will he save his own soul. Only in this will he be useful to the saving of those he serves.

The Christian ministry was never intended to be a safe place. The images of Scripture, especially regarding the work of the ministry, are—images of battle, struggle, sacrifice, discipline, endurance, faithfulness and tears. The call to pastor the church of God is a call to give up one's life in the service of others. Listen to Paul's counsel to a young servant: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a *workman* who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2: 15).

**"We have granted more degrees but produced fewer and fewer genuinely holy ministers."**

This charge is one which commissions a man to labor, never tinker! Souls are at stake, that of the minister and those of his hearers. Let those faint of heart do something else. Indeed, if you *can* do anything else *do* it but don't, for God's sake, enter, or remain in, the Gospel ministry. If God has not sent you, resign your post!

And if this were not daunting enough to dissuade even the stout-hearted, James, himself a pastor, writes, "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such *we shall incur a stricter judgment*" (James 3:1).<sup>1</sup>

This business of shepherding the flock is eternally serious. Giftedness in public speech is not the *sine qua non* of pastoral

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ministry. Charisma and charm are not prerequisites. Polish and studied success will not suffice. You must, *above all else*, be a man who is supremely exercised over your own soul and every aspect of your doctrine. How *will* you live? What *will* you teach? These are the first things. In a very real sense, these two are everything!

## THE MEASURE OF MINISTRY

Paul exhorts Timothy to "watch," to "pay close attention," and to "take heed" to his own life. Literally, he says, "keep a very strict eye on yourself." You will watch many things that happen in your comings and goings. You will attend many meetings and observe many different people facing many different problems and needs, but above all else, you must attend to yourself.

Weymouth's New Testament translation captures the sense of this warning by saying: "Take pains with yourself and your teaching."

Holy living and sound doctrine are inextricably bound together. As one commentary sums up: "Moral and doctrinal rectitude are inseparable twins of the Christian life."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, unholy living and unsound doctrine are also frequently found together. It is an observable fact that sensuality and doctrinal error often go hand in hand. In this vein Peter writes, regarding false teachers:

For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by *sensuality*, those who barely escape from the ones who lie in error, promising them freedom *while they themselves are slaves of corruption*; for *by what a man is overcome*, by this he is enslaved. For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are *again entangled in them and are overcome*, the last state has become worse for them than the first.

(2 Pet. 2:18-20)

It must be understood, in this relativistic age where we work so hard at damage control when a minister falls, that the pastor is *especially* prone to self-deception. Jeremiah 17:9 says "the heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" The pastor is one who must speak out against sin, but as revealed in recent public scandals, the very men who fell

were often the same men who spoke out forthrightly against the sins they now confess. Richard Baxter, in the classic *The Reformed Pastor*, warned ministers regarding this when he said, "Take heed to yourselves, lest you live in those sins which you preach against in others, and lest you be guilty of that which daily you condemn." Self-deception has destroyed many leaders in the church. Unless you understand it and *daily* face up to its dangers, it will destroy you too.

## "WATCH YOUR LIFE"

Quinton Hogg, who founded the London Polytechnic Institute, devoted a great fortune to the enterprise. He was once asked how much it cost him to build up such a great institution, to which he replied, "Not very much, simply one man's life blood." That is exactly what the ministry will cost any man who takes it seriously. This is the only way we can understand the kind of life that was behind the expression, "So death works in us, but life in you" (2 Cor. 4:12).

## "The focus of the minister's most earnest efforts must be upon his own life."

We who affirm the authority of the Scripture must take seriously the warnings of the Word of God. The focus of the minister's most earnest efforts must be upon his own life. What am I when no one else is watching? How am I attending to the duties laid upon me by my ministry? How am I using my gift? Am I profiting, in my own soul, from my own ministry?

This kind of thinking is frequently expressed in the New Testament. Paul exhorted the elders of the church in Ephesus by saying much the same: "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers" (Acts 20:28).

*Right conduct is not optional.* It runs like a thread throughout the pastoral letters. This fourth chapter of I Timothy is, in fact, filled with this idea. Paul counsels, "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness" (v. 7). He adds, "In speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of (to) those who believe" (v. 12).

Your life is one continual conditioning program. You must work out your salvation every day.

## PROFESSIONALISM

My friend, Dr. David Wells, professor of theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, has written regarding the ministry in these times:

... the intrusion of the market ethos into the life of the church is having a profound effect on the way that the ministry is understood and practiced. During the last fifty years the ministry has become increasingly professionalized. Indeed, it is not coincidental that during this time, when the social status of ministers has declined, the need for them to see themselves as professionals has increased. By professionalization, I simply mean that ministers are being driven to understand themselves as specialists, those who have a special kind of knowledge, the same way lawyers and physicians and chemists do. In these other professions, specialized knowledge is used in pursuit of acquisition and aspiration. That is to say, professionals typically have careers, projectories of accomplishment for which planning and maneuvering are indispensable. Where this enters the Church...an ethos results which I believe is extremely harmful to the real interests of the Church...ministers begin to nourish and pursue private careers...older virtues that were once thought to be essential are replaced by some new virtues. The importance of theology is eclipsed by the clamor for management skills, biblical preaching by entertaining story-telling, godly character by engaging personality, and the work of the ministry by the art of sustaining a career.<sup>3</sup>

If the minister would fulfill his charge he must watch against professionalism. It is proper that his work be viewed as a profession, if by this it is understood in terms of becoming properly qualified for the position. If the minister ever begins to conceive of himself as a professional in the way that our culture thinks of professionals, then he is already in serious trouble. The office does not sanctify the person simply because the church has called the man. The man sanctifies the office by his holy life, or he discredits it and brings disgrace upon himself and the church. The minister needs to ask

himself: Did I enter the ministry because I could do nothing else? Do I remain in it because God put me here, or has it become "the only thing I can do" now that I've done it for so long?

## SLOTH

If the minister would avoid the pitfalls of moral failure he must watch his life with regard to sloth. The Word of God is replete with warnings that the minister should brace himself, girding up the loins of his own mind, and run the race of faith with patience. It is interesting that the Greek lexicon says the adjective for "easy" originally meant to "take things easy" and then later "to do wrong things or to play the rogue." The transition from ease to evil is always possible, if not very likely. The ministry offers a man many opportunities to recline, to take it easy. If the minister does this, it will not be long until he is finished in private. Moral or other failure will often expose private careless ways.

## PRIDE

Another major area to watch in ministry is pride. Professor James Denny wrote years ago, "No man can bear witness to Christ and to himself at the same time. No man can give the impression that he himself is clever and that Christ is mighty to save."

In the present age the minister has often fallen into the trap of telling himself, and everyone else, that his greatest need is to love himself more faithfully. This elusive self-esteem is said to be what we all lack in sufficient quantity. Yet the only mention in the New Testament of "self-love" is in instruction given to a pastor regarding what to be aware of as an evil characteristic of the present age (2 Tim. 3:2). Alexander Whyte understood this danger and warned fellow ministers regarding it when he wrote:

Self-love is that master-passion in every human heart. Let us give self-love the first place in the inventory and catalogue of our passions, because it has the largest place in all our hearts and lives... It is out of self-love that all our other evil passions spring. The whole fall and ruin and misery of our present human nature lies in this, that in every human being self-love has taken, in addition to its own place, the place of the love of God and the love of man also. We naturally now love nothing and no

one but ourselves. And as long as self-love is in the ascendant in our hearts, all the passions that are awakened in us by our self-love will be selfish with its selfishness, inhuman with its inhumanity, and ungodly with its ungodliness. And it is to kill and extirpate our so passionate self-love that is the end and aim of all God's dealings with us in this world...<sup>4</sup>

Self-examination is a solemn task that every believer must engage in. The minister must make this a very high priority if he would root out the rising pride that meets him at every turn in the day. Augustine said this is the deadliest sin of all. To be close to the eternal things of God is dangerous. Lucifer was close to the throne and the plans of God. He knew the Master's will. He was called into service with all of its privileges. And one king in Israel after another fell through pride of place and accomplishment. Pastors often fall when they have *seemed* to accomplish so very much.

It is important to see the *link* once again between defective life and defective doctrine. Paul attacked the Judaizers in his Galatian epistle as "those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh" (6:12). Apparently this was a group that desired to put on an outward show of piety and spirituality so that they would be admired and appreciated. John MacArthur has expressed the dangers inherent in this for leaders. He writes: "When a spiritual leader begins to view himself as invincible, when he is not accountable to anyone, and when his personality is so intimidating that no one dares to rebuke him, he is a candidate for a fall (cf. Prov. 16:18). Although all Christians struggle with pride, leaders face far stronger temptation in this area."<sup>5</sup>

## SUBSTITUTES

There is the added danger of the snare of substitutes that must be watched in the life of a pastor. Our time is one of "instant this" and "instant that." There are, simply put, no instant ministries and no instant men of God.

Ralph Turnbull suggested that we may "preach and teach so as to give the impression that we are more concerned with a humanism in religion instead of a divine revelation." He quotes from the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* where Calvin says, "It is evident that man never attains to a true self-knowledge until he has previously contemplated the face of

God, and come down after such contemplation to look into himself." Turnbull concludes that "the humanism of the sixteenth century was a wise corrective in that age, but much of the humanism of today is simply the deification and worship of man instead of God."<sup>6</sup>

Our generation makes heroes of pastors because their churches are large, or their reputation for success widely known. Our seminaries increasingly train men to be mighty in church growth techniques, entrepreneurial skills, and marketing strategies. Yet we have become virtual midgets in the realm of godly character as one leader after another falls into moral compromise. Surely something is wrong in this approach.

John Bunyan was said to have had more divinity and grace in his life than any preacher of his time. He felt himself a fool at times. (So much for self-esteem!) He labored to preach, thinking that he was an unworthy wretch. Of him John Burton wrote:

To the end they never made Bunyan a Doctor of Divinity nor anything else of that honorable sort. But three degrees had already been granted to him that neither Cambridge nor Oxford could either give or withhold. "To wit, union with Christ; the anointing of the Spirit; and much experience of temptation." All of which go to fit a man for that mighty work of preaching the Gospel of Christ, much more than all the University learning that can ever be had.<sup>7</sup>

James Fraser of Brea in Scotland wrote: "The preacher must have a sense of his charge; the danger of immortal souls deeply imprinted on his heart. He that hath but slight impressions of his charge will never faithfully perform it."<sup>8</sup>

## PENITENTIAL PREACHING

What is needed, especially today, is what the older divines called "penitential preaching." We must learn to search the hearts of our hearers properly. This is demanding work, often abused by legalists and ignored by antinomians. Puritan Thomas Boston writes that ministers need "to terrify the godly in their too easy and too presuming way with God and themselves...preaching (that is) life-searching, conscience-searching, heart-searching."

If you are a minister, is the danger of immortal souls stamped profoundly upon your heart? Are you really laboring to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12)? In this path of careful watchfulness the true minister will be enabled to guard his own life as he should.

## ENCOURAGE TRUE MINISTERS

If you are not a pastor, would you pray that God would give to your elder(s) this kind of careful attention to their own lives? Realize that walking with God is more important than anything else a shepherd does. Humbly intercede for pastors that they will watch their lives closely.

Recognize that no one is under pressure to conform to the spirit of this present age quite like a minister of the gospel. Those men who will live godly lives in the ministry are under severest attack. Your prayers for them mean more than you know. They don't need blind allegiance or false support but they do need real, genuine encouragement in these difficult days. May God use you in this work of reformation.

## FOOTNOTES:

1. Leaving Soldier Field from a recent Promise Keepers event that I attended I was struck by many impressions of what I had seen and heard. Perhaps the most profound feeling of all was the impression upon my own mind made by this text. I could find no excuse for the way speakers had mishandled serious and essential doctrinal matters in Scripture. All the charity in the world could not excuse the serious distortion of the Gospel of Christ I had seen and heard, yet inwardly I realized afresh how few seemed to care.
2. Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Timothy and Titus* (Nashville, Tennessee, 1992), 141.
3. David F. Wells, *The Bleeding of the Evangelical Church* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth, 1995), 5-6.
4. Ralph G. Turnbull, *A Minister's Obstacles* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1972 reprint), 41.
5. John MacArthur, "Why Is There So Much Sin Among Leaders in the Church?" In *Grace to You* publication, n.d., 10.
6. Ralph G. Turnbull, 63.
7. *Ibid.*, 68.
8. *Ibid.*, 68.

Next Issue (Vol. 5, No. 6): "Watch Your Doctrine."



Gary Cox

I was sitting in her kitchen having a Coke. She was an attractive woman and the parent of a pretty little girl.

She was also another sad product of the "Me" generation who had overdosed on the road to "self-fulfillment."

She had recently divorced her husband for the unspeakable crime of not making her happy. She had just sort of fallen out of love with him, whatever that means.

And this baby boomer could just as easily have been of the male gender, for this kind of insanity knows no discrimination.

As we talked, it became clear that she desperately wanted to justify herself to me, to her little girl, and to the world if it cared to listen, that what she had done was okay.

She succinctly concluded her closing argument with this question: "God wants me to be happy doesn't He?"

And with those eight words this 30-something lady summed up a philosophy of life that permeates our culture.

Somehow, too many of us have bought into an ancient theology that says God exists for my personal pleasure.

Ultimately, the end of all things is whatever I think will make me a "happy camper."

After all, doesn't the Declaration of Independence guarantee me the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"?

Yet in the process of that never-ending odyssey we have ended up crucifying the notion of commitment, self-sacrifice, honor and integrity on the cross of convenience and immediate gratification.

You know what the truth is? The truth is that God is far more concerned about our holiness than He is with our happiness!

And the fact might rub us the wrong way, but it's the right answer.

You see, "happiness" is something you receive by *obeying* the Word of God. It may sound a bit trite, but the old hymn writer summed it up fairly well when he penned, "Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey."

Most Americans are frantically searching for contentment and a full, rich, satisfying life. The only problem is that too many of us are looking down the wrong holes. That's why we pursuers of the "good life" consume 50 percent of the world's illegal drugs. It's a major reason why 46 million teenagers have a drinking problem.

We are so busy running after our own happiness that the average dad can only squeeze out *seven minutes* per week with his children, and then we wonder *why!*

Why is one in every four children from a single parent family?

Why is it that every 26 seconds there is a runaway?

Why is it that every 8 seconds a child drops out of school? How come every 7 seconds a teen-ager has a baby?

**"It's not reformation, but transformation through a personal relationship with Christ."**

Who can account for the reason why every seven minutes a young person is arrested for drugs and every day 135,000 kids bring guns to school?

Ah, but we have taught our children well! As a society, we have communicated to them (whether we meant to or not) that the most important thing in the world is one's own personal pursuit of pleasure regardless of the broken pieces left in the wake of one's own free spirit.

Sorry folks, but Pogo was right: "We have met the enemy and it are us." We have attempted to fix the engine with-

out the manual of life which is the culturally transcendent Word of the living God.

He knows exactly what "makes us happy" and it's not doing our own thing, but it's doing His will.

America is sliding down a slippery slope of materialism, hedonism and humanism. At the bottom of that slide is the abyss of self-destruction. But here's some good news. Jesus said: "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly." It's not the old life warmed over. It's not reformation, but *transformation* through a personal relationship with Christ.

That's the road to happiness and joy and contentment and peace and all the things that people really long for but so few ever really seem to find.

"But God wants me happy doesn't He?"

Yes He does. But you'll only find out how much at the foot of the cross and in a life lived for His glory instead of your own happiness.

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Laurie Vanden Heuvel

In our discussion last month we tried to establish some concrete standards of judgment for that subjective art called **music** as it applies particularly to the church, the body and bride of Christ. But the exercise of our priestly office as believers would be incomplete were we to neglect so important an aspect of church music as the **words** which comprise our songs, the offerings of praise to our God.

With the constant appearance of new translations and paraphrases of Scripture, some of them good, others not so good, many of them couched in colorful covers with catchy titles, no one will dispute the fact that in this day we are witnessing a renewed interest not only in the Word of God but also in the *spread* of that Word in a form which speaks intelligently to the people of our day.

Paralleling this trend is a chorus of those who also express discontent with the language of the traditional psalmody and hymnody of the church.

With this in mind, it is appropriate that we begin our discussion by stating what we are *not* including in our attempt to uncover standards of judgment as they pertain to the word content of our songs.

*First*, we are **not** addressing ourselves to the complaints of those who react against the altering of "ye" and "thee," of "beseeches" and "vouchsafes" in the hymnals. We must acknowledge that meanings and usages of words do change over the years and as responsible members of Christ's church we may be sensitive to this. History tells us that James II described St. Paul's Cathedral in London as "amusing," "awful" and "artificial." But he did not offend the architect, Sir Christopher Wren. King James II simply meant that Wren's work was "pleasing," "awe-inspiring" and "skillfully constructed."

*Second*, we are **not** addressing ourselves to the complaints of those (and

their number is legion) who react negatively to the use of the words sin, grace, sacrifice, salvation, judgment, God, eternal life or any such doctrinal terms. Such people are contesting not words, but concepts - truths, doctrines if you will, which are *fundamental* to an understanding and acceptance of the Christian faith itself. The tragedy reflected in complaints of this sort is more often than not, a weak pulpit ministry in the lives and backgrounds of such people. There the rich content of these doctrinal words has never been faithfully expounded. The rich grace of God, assurance of sin forgiven on the merits of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ alone, and the promise of eternal life has never been experienced. Thus the doctrinal words of the hymnal line up before these people like so many tombstones of a dead theology in a graveyard called the church. Is it any wonder then that people are turning to exotic, hypnotic, charismatic forms of worship? Paul says in Romans 10:2: "For I bear them record that they have a zeal but not according to knowledge."

What we are addressing today is the **word-content** for the texts of the songs we select for congregational singing, choir anthems, preludes, offertories and postludes. This word-content can be divided into three categories.

## SCRIPTURE VERBATIM

The *first* category of song is the most authentic because its text (words) conveys almost *verbatim* the text of Scripture itself. Can there be purer songs than those whose text is inspired by the Holy Spirit Himself? They are the purest form of religious art. They, together with the rest of the Bible, are the only body of revealed art we know. The Book of Psalms comprises the bulk of this hymnody (called psalmody), but there are many songs taken from other portions of Scripture as well. Dr. Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

maintained that the metrical Psalm in English could not be the pure Word of God, because the arrangement of rhythm and rhyme make a really faithful rendering of the Hebrew in English an impossibility. But history has proved that most existing psalmody is, in fact, faithful to the text of Scripture itself.

## SCRIPTURAL TEACHING

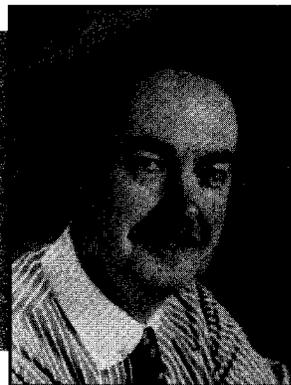
The *second* category of song bases its contents on the direct and sound *teaching* of Scripture, even to the pinpointing of Biblical chapter and verse, while at the same time not using the text of the Scriptures verbatim. Many denominational hymnals contain an "Index of Scriptural References in Hymns" which will give the number of the hymn together with the passage of Scripture upon which it is based. One example of this is the "Gloria Patri" based on Revelation 1:4-8. And there are hundreds more.

## SUBJECTIVE RESPONSE

The *third* category of song bases its content not upon the verbatim rendition of Scripture or the direct teaching of Scripture, but upon *personal experience* of religion, the subjective response to religion, the "I" instead of the "Thou." Here we have a shaky foundation, often based largely on emotion tending strongly to mysticism, ambiguity, repetition, often void of doctrinal purity and lacking in a deep consciousness of sin and an awareness of the holiness of God. Certainly the Christian may sing of his/her inner experience, but it must always be a *song of praise directed to God* for who He is and what He has done, for whatever He chooses to send in our lives, be it pain, sorrow and disappointment or joy, love and peace, knowing that He does all things well.

## THE STANDARD

The standard by which we must determine the suitability of the word-content of any spiritual song is as simple as this: Does it direct us to God or to ourselves? In these days, the church must sharpen her critical faculties which in some quarters have laid dormant for decades. It must ward off the wooing of those writers, arrangers and performers who appeal primarily to the imaginations, feelings and self-centeredness of too many well-meaning Christians. They are mutilating and muzzling the true message of the church which is - *to God alone be glory* for all He has done.



Cal Thomas

The decision by one judge in Hawaii that the state may not prohibit same-sex "marriages" goes against the Author of marriage, legal precedent, the will of an estimated 75 percent of Hawaii's citizens and what used to be called common sense. But it is not the victory the gay lobby claims. It is what Alliance for Traditional Marriage chairman Mike Gabbard calls "a preliminary decision. The main event is the upcoming 1997 legislative session, where a constitutional amendment defending marriage as the legal union between a man and a woman will be introduced and hopefully passed with the required two-thirds majority in both the House and Senate."

The reason Hawaii and the rest of the nation are having problems not only with same-sex "marriage," but also a host of other moral issues, is that we've forgotten or ignored certain definitions. If gay "marriage" is allowed, there will be no stopping others who wish to strike down what remains of foundational truths once thought to be self-evident. Even the dictionary will have to be rewritten because it says, to marry "is to join as husband and wife according to law or custom." The US Supreme Court has understood this definition to mean that marriage occurs when a man and a woman enter into a legal and spiritual relationship ordained by God.

"For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother, and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." That's from the Old Testament Book of Genesis (chapter 2, verse 24, to be precise), a book that has been receiving some attention on television, in *Time* magazine and in the bookstores in recent weeks. That notion of male-female marriage is repeated in the New Testament and given a further dimension when St. Paul describes it as an earthly manifestation of the Trinity.

So, God is the Author of marriage, not a university sociologist, or think tank and certainly not the courts. But what happens when a nation (or the courts)

forgets God and what He has created for our benefit? All things then become possible, even probable. If gay "marriage" becomes possible, then there is nothing stopping polygamists, or anyone else, seeking redress of unique grievances. Where will the line be drawn, who will draw it and on what standard will it be based?

Besides, homosexuals can and do change. My files bulge with stories of those who once engaged in sex with people of the same gender, but no longer do. They testify to the possibility of change for those who want to. Along with our own history and the history of nations that tolerated licentiousness, it is the greatest legal argument against granting the right of marriage to same-sex couples.

Fortunately, Congress has passed and President Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act, allowing states the right not to recognize same-sex marriages. But this will be challenged under the Constitution's "equal protection" clause.

The tyranny of some courts continues. The will of the majority and even precedent can be set aside by the power of a single judge. But the battle isn't over. The gay lobby will continue its attempt to intimidate all who stand in the way (including columnists). Those opposed to gay "marriage" believe they will prevail in the Hawaii legislature with their proposed constitutional amendment.

It will probably be close. While Hawaii has long been on the liberal fringe of many social issues, the struggle to maintain what remains of the social fabric will ultimately determine whether we will continue to follow ancient Rome on the road to destruction, or come to our senses, turn around and re-enter a harbor of safety ordained by God for our own protection.

Turning Benjamin Franklin's categorical statement into a question, the gay "marriage" debate is about whether God any longer governs in the affairs of men — but what happens to us if He doesn't?

Los Angeles Times Syndicate

June 13, 1996

Dr. David H. Englehard, General Secretary  
Christian Reformed Church in North America  
2850 Kalamazoo Ave S.E.

The Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Dear Brothers in Christ:

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Mindful of the blessings that we have received from you over many years past, we now write you with heavy hearts. We grieve because you have embarked upon a course that disrupts the fellowship we have enjoyed from our very beginning.

It was you who sent the telegram to our very first general assembly in June 1936 inviting our infant church to send a fraternal delegate to the meetings of your synod. By God's grace, over the course of the intervening years, our relationship grew and deepened as we have sent our children to your schools, especially Calvin College; we have seen our sons and daughters intermarry with yours; we have labored side by side in the mission field, and we have worked together in the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (now Council) and the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC).

At our fourth general assembly in May 1938, the stated clerk of your synod wrote us to say:

The synod of the Christian Reformed Church, recently in session in Grand Rapids, Michigan, was glad to receive the greetings, coming from the General Assembly of the [Orthodox Presbyterian Church], in session at Philadelphia.

We appreciate it that you voted unanimously to send greetings to our church. We can say from our side that we also sincerely rejoice in the fellowship we have with you, as members of the Body of Christ, the Great Head of the Church....

May grace, mercy, and peace be multiplied to your denomination, in standing for the old time religion, as expressed in the standards of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches.

It is our earnest prayer that, by His grace, we might continue to stand together for that same "old time religion" and hold fast to the teachings of Scripture that have been passed on to us. But it now appears that you have chosen to follow a different course, one that abandons the standards and beliefs of all the other member churches of NAPARC, and violates our relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship.

Brothers, we believe that the following actions adopted at Synod 1995 were contrary to sound doctrine:

1. That synod recognize that there are two different perspectives and convictions, both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God, on the issue of whether women are allowed to serve in the offices of elder, minister and evangelist.

*Grounds:*

- a. The numerous overtures to this synod on this issue, as well as decisions and reports of previous synods, adduce good biblical grounds for both positions.
  - b. The Scriptures (e.g., Rom. 14) and previous synodical decisions advocate a position of tolerance on nonconfessional issues. (*Acts of Synod 1995*, Article 75, pp. 731-32)
2. [That] a classis may, in response to local needs and circumstances, declare that the word *male* in Article 3-a of the Church Order is inoperative and may authorize the churches under its jurisdiction to ordain and install women in the offices of elder, minister and evangelist. (*Acts of Synod 1995*, Article 79, p. 733)

As to the first action, throughout Scripture God's covenant people are reminded that obedience to His Word is costly and often not without pain in this world. Beginning in the garden, the temptation has always been to take the edge off from that which God expressly prohibits. We realize that the biblical injunctions against women in the offices of elder, minister and evangelist are very unpopular in the wisdom of this age. But this past year, you declared — by synodical fiat — that Scripture's instruction on this issue, which the church of Jesus Christ has held to be clear for almost 2,000 years, is forthwith no longer clear.

You now declare that "there are two different perspectives and convictions, both of which honor the Scriptures as the infallible Word of God," and that there are "good biblical grounds for both positions." But this

goes further than merely saying that the Scriptures are not clear on the issue. Although we do not think that such was your intent, your formulation comes dangerously close to asserting that there are two biblically valid interpretations of Scripture on this issue: that Scripture teaches both that women are *eligible* for the offices and that women are *ineligible* for the same offices. But this cannot be. "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (*which is not manifold, but one*), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly" (*Westminster Confession of Faith* I.9: emphasis ours). Brothers, we urge you to turn back.

On the second action, we note that just one year earlier, your own synod declared: "The clear teaching of Scripture prohibits women from holding the offices of minister, elder and evangelist" (*Acts of Synod 1994*, Article 80, pp.513-16). We concur. The ordination and/or installation of women to the office of elder, minister or evangelist is contrary to the Scriptures (1 Tim. 2:12). Brothers, we plead with you to repent.

Further, to relegate a foundational matter pertaining to qualifications for church office — especially for that of the minister of the Word through whose mouth God addresses the congregation of His people — to a decision by local option is seriously to undermine the purity, peace and unity of the church itself.

Brothers, we must also state that we are deeply troubled at the manner in which this change was accomplished:

5. That synod designate Recommendations 2 and 3 as Supplement, as opposed to changing Article 3-a of the Church Order.

*Grounds:*

- a. Placing this decision, together with its regulations, in the supplement, as opposed to changing Article 3-a of the Church Order itself, will reflect its temporary nature and allow Article 3 to remain as it is.
- b. A decision to add a supplement to an article of the Church Order does not need to be ratified at a following synod... (*Acts of Synod 1995*, Article 79, p. 736)

Article 47 of your Church Order provides:

Article 47: Task of Synod

The task of synod includes the adoption of the Church Order. No substantial alterations shall be effected in these matters unless the churches have had prior opportunity to consider the advisability of the proposed changes.

In conducting the affairs of the church, we are admonished to make sure that all things are done properly and in order (1 Cor. 14:40) and are cautioned to have due regard for what is honorable, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men (2 Cor. 8:21). We fully recognize that you, the synod, are the final arbiters before the Lord of the constitutionality of the process by which your Church Order has been changed to permit biblically unqualified persons to be admitted to those church offices. Nevertheless, we find ourselves perplexed that those seeking a change to your Church Order were unwilling to work through your own normal process for amending that order by proposing their desired changes to the next year's synod, and instead appear to have ignored the Church Order. Article 3-a of your Church Order provides:

Confessing male members of the church who meet the biblical requirements are eligible for the offices of minister, elder, and evangelist.

The word "male" can mean only that a candidate must be a male, or, stated in the negative, *cannot* be a female. Any tinkering with the Supplement that has the effect of now reading Article 3-a to mean that a candidate can be a female certainly has the appearance of being a "substantial alteration," contrary to your article 47, to an outside observer. Brothers, the righteous man keeps his promise, even when it hurts (Ps. 15:4). What you have done and the manner in which you have done it do not bring honor to the name of Christ.

Where does this leave us? In 1978, following your lead, we adopted the following as our policy governing our relationship with other Reformed churches:

1. That we acknowledge the Scriptural mandate (Ephesians 4) to enter into Ecclesiastical Fellowship where it is consistent with Scriptural unity and truth as a visible demonstration of the unity of the church both to the church and to the world.
2. That we define Ecclesiastical Fellowship for the NAPARC churches as follows: Ecclesiastical Fellowship is a relationship in which the churches involved are Reformed in their confessional standards, church order and church life though there may be such differences between them that union is not possible at this time and there might be considerable need for mutual concern and admonition.

3. That where churches enter Ecclesiastical Fellowship with other Reformed churches, that relationship be implemented where possible and desirable by:
  - a. Exchange of fraternal delegates at major assemblies
  - b. Occasional pulpit fellowship (by local option)
  - c. Intercommunion (regulated by each session (consistory))
  - d. Joint action in areas of common responsibility
  - e. Communication on issues of joint concern
  - f. The exercise of mutual concern and admonition with a view to promoting the fundamentals of Christian unity.
4. That we mutually recognize that the decision to enter into or withdraw from Ecclesiastical Fellowship with another Reformed church shall be decided by each church on an individual basis.

We appreciated your struggle in 1983 as you wrestled with the nature of your continuing relationship with your mother church, de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN). You were faced with (then) recent decisions of the synods of the GKN to allow conduct that in your judgment was contrary to the Scriptures and in conflict with the decisions of your own synod; with the observation that your own concerns and protests regarding these decisions had not moved the synod of the GKN to modify its position; and with a concern over the laxity within the GKN in dealing with ministers and other leaders who openly promoted views conflicting with the Reformed confessions (*Acts of Synod 1983, Article 57, pp. 677-80*).

Today, we find ourselves in a similar situation with respect to the decisions of your 1995 Synod, and we confess, brothers, we find it every bit as distasteful as you did in 1983. But we have promised, and with this letter are keeping that commitment, to engage in "the exercise of mutual concern and admonition with a view to promoting the fundamentals of Christian unity" (3.f, above). Further, we have adopted the following:

1. That the Assembly suspend the relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the Christian Reformed Church in North America, in that:
  - a. The element of "exchange of fraternal delegates at major assemblies" in our relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the Christian Reformed Church in North America shall be restricted as follows: the 63rd (1996) General Assembly advises the presbyteries of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church that they should no longer assume, by virtue of our previous unrestricted relationship, that the Christian Reformed Church in North America is a church of like practice for the purpose of the seating of corresponding members at presbytery (*Form of Government XIV,9*);
  - b. the element of occasional pulpit fellowship in our relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the Christian Reformed Church in North America shall be discontinued, except at the discretion of the sessions;
  - c. the element of "intercommunion" in our relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the Christian Reformed Church in North America shall be restricted as follows: the 63rd General Assembly advises the lower judicatories of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church that they should no longer assume, by virtue of our previous unrestricted relationship, that the Christian Reformed Church in North America is a church of like practice for purposes of the reception of members (*Book of Discipline II.B.e*), the removal of members (*Book of Discipline II.B.3*), and erasure (*Book of Discipline V.2*).
2. That unless the 1997 regular general assembly determines that intervening actions of the Christian Reformed church in North America warrant a reversal of this action or a continuation of the period of suspension, the relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the Christian Reformed Church in North America shall be terminated with the close of that assembly.

Brothers, we are saddened at the prospect of a rupture in our relationship. Through all of our years, you have always been there to share a common yoke—and often you carried a heavier end. But now we fear that our ways may be parting. We and others of like faith and practice may not and cannot go down the path you are choosing, so we plead with you to turn back to the Scripture-based fellowship that has been a blessing in the past.

It is our earnest prayer that you will withdraw from the precipice, repent, and again contend for the Biblical order Christ has commanded for His church.

Yours in Christ,

Donald J. Duff, Stated Clerk



## What We Believe

Cornelis P. Venema

All Reformed believers who cherish the church as the bride of Jesus Christ are vitally interested in the preservation and promotion of unity within the local church and in the relations between all true churches of Jesus Christ. Such believers confess, in the language of the *Nicene Creed*, "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church." They confess, in the language of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, that Christ is gathering the church "in the unity of the true faith" (Lord's Day 21). They recognize that the prayer of our Lord in John 17:21, "that they may all be one," asks the Father to preserve those who are Christ's in the most profound unity, a unity that reflects the unity of the Father with the Son and that constitutes an important testimony to the world which confirms the gospel message. They remember the words of Ephesians 4:3, exhorting all believers to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

This confession of the unity of the church places a special responsibility upon every Christian to act in ways that responsibly serve the cause of unity. Any reckless or irresponsible (because unnecessary) disruption of the unity of the church is a sin, not only against those who are members with us of the one household of faith, but also *against Christ Himself* who purchased the church with His own precious blood (Acts 20:28). For this reason, one of the chief confessions of sin we must make as believers is the confession of our sins in not having done what we were given opportunity to do to preserve the unity of the church.

But not only does this confession place every believer under a special responsibility to act in ways that preserve and encourage unity. It also places every believer under an equally great responsibility to *speak about and reflect upon the unity of the church in ways that are biblical, responsive to the confessions of the churches,*

*and likely to advance a more faithful course of conduct in this respect.* I mention this additional responsibility — to act not only but also to speak in ways that serve a responsible pursuit of unity — in the light of a recent article on this subject by Professor David E. Holwerda, published in the *Calvin Seminary Forum* (Vol. 3/4, Fall 1996). This article, as I shall attempt to argue, represents a confusing and unhelpful contribution to the way we should think about unity and schism in the body of Christ. It does not meet the test of responsible speech respecting the unity of the church.

### "TRUTH, UNITY & MISSION"<sup>1</sup>

In his article, Professor Holwerda begins with a brief reflection upon the teaching of John Calvin, the creed, and "most importantly" the Scriptures, with respect to the subjects of truth and unity within the body of Christ's church.

According to Professor Holwerda, Calvin did not justify the Reformer's separation from the Roman Catholic Church by way of an appeal to the idea of a "pure church." All churches are sinful, some more so than others, but it is not biblical to separate from a church solely on the basis of its sinful or unholy corruptions. Nor did Calvin endorse any kind of break with the visible unity of the concrete body of Christ by appealing to the doctrine of an "invisible church." The unity of the church is an attribute of the visible church. Therefore, any unnecessary break with this church is tantamount to an act of schism against the body of Christ. For Calvin, there could only be one possible basis for separation from that which is not legitimately entitled to call itself "the church of Jesus Christ": the conviction that such a church no longer bears the marks of the true church, namely the "pure preaching of

the Word and the Sacraments administered according to Christ's institution."<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Calvin distinguished between "necessary or essential doctrines and those articles of doctrine which may be disputed because they do not break the unity of the faith." So long as a true church (possessing the marks of the preaching of the Word and the proper administration of the sacraments) does not deny any of these necessary or essential doctrines, it would be schismatic to break unity with it.

This position of John Calvin is also the position of the creed, particularly the *Belgic Confession*. In this *Confession*, three marks of the true church are distinguished — the pure preaching of the Word, the proper administration of the sacraments, and the faithful exercise of church discipline. Believers are duty bound to remain united with the true church which bears these three marks; to separate from the true church would be schism. Conversely, believers are also duty bound to separate from the false church, any so-called church that does not exhibit these marks but rather ascribes more authority to itself than to the Word of God, will not submit to the yoke of Christ, does not administer the sacraments according to Christ's ordinance, and persecutes those who rebuke it for its errors and idolatry (Article 29). The creed, accordingly, follows the pattern of John Calvin's teaching: separation from the church, unless based upon the judgment that it has become no church at all, a false church, is tantamount to sinful schism in the body of Christ.

Professor Holwerda then notes that these views of Calvin and the creed find their basis in the Scriptures. In the Scriptures, the unity of the church is both God's gift and the believer's task: Christ

**"This article...does not meet the test of responsible speech respecting the unity of the church."**

grants unity to the church through the Holy Spirit and He calls the church to maintain itself in unity (Eph. 4:3). Central to the message of the gospel is the doctrine of Christ's work of reconciliation whereby sinners are restored to fellowship with God the Father through the work of the Son in the fellowship of the

indwelling Spirit. This doctrine of salvation is confirmed by the visible unity of the fellowship of the church. Therefore, any unjustifiable disruption of the church's unity is a denial of the doctrine of the gospel and a sin against the love for one another that is a pre-eminent mark of the Christian life. Holwerda insists that "[t]o obscure this visible unity of the faith for insufficient reasons is sin against the purposes of God in Christ."

Within the setting of this reflection upon the unity of the church in the teaching of John Calvin, the creed and the Scriptures, Holwerda evaluates recent developments in the Christian Reformed Church especially. He finds it "puzzling" that many ministers, members and even congregations have separated from the Christian Reformed Church over issues like the ordination of women, though they have not leveled the charge that the denomination is a false church or been able to show that this or other issues is among the "central doctrines" of the faith. But it is more than simply puzzling to him. He also finds these acts of separation from the Christian Reformed Church to be schismatic and sinful, serious violations of the Scriptural and confessional teaching regarding the unity of the church. As he puts it,

Such attitudes reduce church schism to a matter of simple disagreement. But schism is more than disagreement, and if it is not justified, schism is a grievous sin. But what if the CRC is wrong about allowing women in office? Justification of schism within a Reformed view of the Church requires that the so-called error is central to the unity of the faith, or that it attacks the central doctrines that constitute the unity of the church. The CRC has declared that the issue of women-in-office is not central to the unity of the faith. If others believe it is, a substantial case must be made which implies that the CRC no longer possesses the marks of the true church and is, therefore, the false church.

## SOME OBSERVATIONS AND QUESTIONS

Assuming that the foregoing provides an accurate summary of Holwerda's argument, it should be apparent that a very serious charge has been leveled against

those who have separated from or are contemplating separation from the CRC: they are guilty of the sin of schism.<sup>3</sup> Such believers must be regarded, according to Holwerda, as failing to meet the test of Scripture, confession and the Reformed tradition, so far as their attitude and conduct respecting the unity of Christ's church is concerned. Though Holwerda does not suggest any particular course of action that should be taken against ministers, believers and congregations who may have separated from the CRC, it seems apparent that, if his position has

**"The CRC, in the judgment of many of those who have separated from it, is no longer united in its biblical and confessional commitments."**

merit, they should be liable to some form of church discipline. Schism in the body of Christ may not be tolerated any more than any other serious sin. And schismatics are at least as worthy (if not more so!) of church discipline than idolaters and adulterers.

Since Holwerda's article makes this serious charge of schism, and since it reflects the kind of thinking that often confuses church members when they consider the issue of separation from the CRC, I would like to offer the following response to it. This response will take the form of a series of observations and questions, each of which could be expanded and developed further. I offer them, however, in order to show that *Holwerda's article does not make a helpful contribution to clear thinking about the important matter of church unity in the present situation, particularly within the CRC.* Indeed, in my opinion, Holwerda's article is one of the more confused and confusing attempts to address the issue of church unity that I have read in some time.

In no particular order of importance, I would offer the following observations and questions.

### Only the "tip of the iceberg"

First, Holwerda leaves the impression that those who are leaving the CRC do so primarily because of the issue of women in office. Though it is certainly true that the issue of women in office has

played a central role in recent developments in the CRC, developments that have led many to separate from it, this issue is really only the "tip of the iceberg" so far as most of those separating are concerned. Most of those who have been recently leaving the CRC have done so because, after a lengthy and protracted period of time, they have drawn the sad conclusion that the CRC no longer wishes to be the kind of denomination it once was and even still formally professes itself to be. The CRC, in the judgment of many of those who have separated from it, is no longer united in its biblical and confessional commitments. Many of those who have left the CRC have concluded that it is no longer, in the historic sense and meaning of the terms, a *confessionally Reformed* denomination. This conclusion has been drawn, not only upon the basis of a kind of laundry list of alleged offenses committed by the denomination, its agencies and officers, but also upon the basis of the kinds of departures from the historic Reformed faith that the denomination seems willing to tolerate.<sup>4</sup>

### A fatal admission

Second, in his discussion of the *Belgic Confession's* identification of the true and the false church, Holwerda unwittingly admits something that proves fatal to much of his argument. The importance of this admission warrants quoting it in full:

Of course, today denominationalism has complicated the picture. We do not claim that we are the only true church for we readily grant that designation to others as well. Still, if Scripture and the creed have any contemporary relevance, it follows from their teaching that we must consider the church of which we are a member as a manifestation of the true church, owing it all the obligations, commitment, and respect that are due to the true church, the body of Christ on earth.

If the first part of this statement is true — that we may readily acknowledge many denominations as belonging to the true church — then it seems hard to see why we are obliged to consider "the church [read: denomination] of which we are a member" to deserve the same kind of allegiance to the true church spoken of in the *Belgic Confession*. If more

than one denomination is included within the true church, to change membership from one denomination to another would not be an act of schism, certainly not tantamount to leaving the true church. Unless Holwerda wants to argue that it is never permissible to transfer membership from a member congregation of one denomination to a member congregation of another denomination,

### **I have long been convinced that those who advocate the ordination of women to office in the CRC have a serious hearing problem.**

it is not easy to see why a decision to leave a particular denomination, whether as an individual member, minister, or even as a whole congregation, is a sinful act of schism. As long as there are several denominations that we may readily call true churches, there no longer seems to be any reason to argue that leaving one of them for the other is necessarily schismatic.

I do not mean to suggest by this that leaving a denomination or a congregation that belongs to one denomination for a congregation that belongs to another is not a serious step, one not to be taken hastily or lightly. However, in the present divided state of the churches, with many different denominations and churches that may be "more or less corrupt" but not so corrupt as to become synagogues of Satan, a decision to separate from one denomination *certainly does not require making the judgment that it has become the false church.*<sup>5</sup> Many, if not most, of those who have left the CRC have done so, not on the basis of the conclusion that it has become the "false church," but on the basis of the conviction that it is *no longer a denomination that is Reformed in the historic sense of the word.* Many of these believers have grown weary of having to *battle within the denomination for the very things the CRC historically believed and continues often formally (but only formally) to profess.* These believers do not regard such continual fighting for the Reformed faith within the denomination to be their duty any longer. Before the Lord, they believe in good conscience that the battle they have

waged has been fought and lost, so far as the denomination is concerned.

### **Separation, a penultimate judgment**

*Third*, related to this fatal admission regarding the existence of denominations, more than one of which might be part of the true church, Holwerda also neglects to reflect carefully upon the occasion and reason for the separate existence of such denominations. Diverse denominations exist largely because of a diversity among the churches in confession, church polity and worship or liturgy. These differences, however much they may be lamented and resisted, unavoidably prevent the fullest possible fellowship between churches which may be true churches of Jesus Christ. In such a situation, the existence of separate denominations may in some cases simply reflect a kind of *penultimate judgment* that full communion between them cannot occur because of these real and significant differences in confession, polity and worship.

Of course, this does not mean that such differences are a matter of indifference. Whenever true churches of Jesus Christ are not able to enjoy full communion with each other for these reasons, this is to be lamented and efforts should be made to achieve the kind of unity in confession, polity and worship that would permit such communion to occur. The Word of God obliges all churches to conform in their confession, polity and worship to one standard. *There ought not to be these differences between the churches which have given rise to the phenomenon of denominations.* Nevertheless, so long as these differences remain, there will be an unavoidable diversity of churches and church communions.

When applied to the present situation within the CRC, this means that those who are separating from the CRC are often making the *penultimate judgment* that they may no longer remain a part of a denomination whose corruptions are not only increasing but whose official position on matters relating to the confessions, church polity and worship are no longer historically Reformed. Though those who are leaving may not have made the *ultimate judgment* that the CRC has become a false church, they have judged that *they have much more in common, confessionally and church politi-*

*cally*, with others who share their love and commitment to the Reformed faith but who are not a part of the CRC denomination.<sup>6</sup> Their decision to leave the CRC may actually prove to serve the cause of the true, confessional unity of the Reformed churches. Rather than remaining in a denomination that has shown itself unwilling to preserve its Reformed heritage, a denomination where their continued presence is a constant source of in-fighting and futile efforts at reformation, they have chosen to identify themselves with churches that are genuinely committed to the propagation of the best of the Reformed confessional heritage.

### **What freedom of conscience is permitted?**

*Fourth*, one of the significant omissions from Holwerda's article is a comment or two on *how those who are convinced that the ordination of women is contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture will be able to survive with their consciences intact in the CRC.* I have long been convinced that those who advocate the ordination of women to office in the CRC have a serious hearing problem. They have been unwilling to hear our case or provide any answer to our plea that a way be shown to us whereby we could remain in the CRC without being compelled to act in sinful disobedience to Christ's revealed will for His church. All we are ever told is that the women in office issue is not that serious an issue; it is a "matter indifferent," a matter left to the freedom of the churches. But this doesn't begin to resolve the problem of conscience facing those opposed to the ordination of women: how may they remain in the CRC if in doing so they are compelled to disobey their Lord's will in this matter?

Of course, Holwerda and others who share his view might reply by saying, "but you have the freedom not to ordain women." This, however, is small comfort when it is also said, "but you must pay for all the denomination's ministries through your ministry shares" (formerly, "quotas") or, "but you must support only one seminary that will determine who may and who may not be a candidate for the ministry in the CRC." It is also small comfort when it is also noted that *those who have agitated for the ordination of women in the CRC were willing to*

accomplish their purpose by way of a method that renders the Church Order (Articles 3,29,30,31) of the CRC, so far as conservatives are concerned, as worthless as the paper on which it is written! One does not have to be very wise in the ways of the world to smell the foul odor of churchly politics and disingenuousness in the way two synods of the CRC have managed to declare the Church Order "inoperative" to accomplish a purpose that remains formally forbidden by the language of Article 3 of that same Church Order.

What Holwerda's article lacks is any reflection upon the shabby way in which the CRC has abused the Church Order at its assemblies in recent years. He also fails to give any consideration to the uncharitable way in which former members, ministers and congregations who have left the CRC have been treated by many assemblies and members of the CRC. Many of these members have been the subject of disciplinary actions by CRC assemblies which do not meet the test of biblical standards of conduct.

Unless Holwerda is willing to present a reasonable scenario, showing how conservative Reformed believers can survive, let alone prosper, in the CRC, his argument amounts to saying something

**"It has always been a puzzle to me why many so-called 'progressives' in the CRC have not... left the denomination quietly in order to affiliate with churches more congenial to their novel and innovative views."**

like: "You conservatives must remain in the CRC, unless you want to be charged with schism, but as you do so make sure you continue to pay for that which is sin and keep silent in the face of the denomination's corruptions!"

### **Who has brought division?**

*Fifth*, the charge of being schismatic, which Holwerda levels against those who are leaving the CRC, could just as well be leveled against those who have recklessly, without regard to the inevitable consequences, forced the CRC to change its position on a number of issues, including the

ordination of women to ecclesiastical office. It has always been a puzzle to me why many so-called "progressives" in the CRC have not, in the interests of preserving the historic unity of the CRC, left the denomination quietly in order to affiliate with churches more congenial to their novel and innovative views. Those who have been compelled to leave the CRC have largely done so only after a protracted period of struggle to preserve the denomination's commitment to its historic heritage in the faith. They have often left only with the greatest reluctance and, the Lord knows, much grief and distress. Why have they been compelled to leave? Because they have treacherously betrayed the faith of those who went before them? Because they have abandoned the principles and practices that once united the denomination? Not at all. Most of them have left with a deep sense of having been betrayed by the denomination in which they were nurtured.

When I read an article like that of Professor Holwerda, I am left wondering whether he and those who speak as he does have ever read or pondered the meaning of these words from Article 32 of the *Belgic Confession*, the very creed to which he makes his appeal:

In the meantime we believe, though it is useful and beneficial that those who are rulers of the Church institute and establish certain ordinances among themselves for maintaining the body of the Church, yet that they ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, has instituted. And therefore we reject all human inventions, and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God, thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever. *Therefore we admit only of that which tends to nourish and preserve concord and unity, and to keep all men in obedience to God.* For this purpose, excommunication or church discipline is requisite, with all that pertains to it, according to the Word of God (emphasis mine).

By the standard of this article in the *Belgic Confession*, the only possible reason anyone in the CRC could advocate or permit the ordination of women would be upon the basis of a clear biblical argument showing it to

be obedience to the Lord of the church. Now undoubtedly there are those in the CRC who would like to attempt such an argument (though thus far they have fairly successfully kept it to themselves). But there have been no official denominational attempts to do so, despite the permission now granted by the denomination to the practice of ordaining women.

My point is: why should those who adhere to the historic consensus of the CRC on many of the controversial issues of the day be held responsible for the divisions that now plague the denomination and its member congregations? Why should the shoe not be on the other

**"...separation from the CRC is 'a grievous sin.'"**

foot, the foot of those whose persistent, often times disorderly (by the standard of the Church Order), advocacy of the ordination of women have brought such division, pain and distress to a denomination once known for its united testimony and labor?

### **How should schismatics be disciplined?**

*Sixth*, as I suggested earlier, Holwerda's argument leaves open the question, what should be done with those who are schismatic and disturbing the peace and unity of the denomination. It seems irresponsible for Holwerda to charge a great number of fellow believers, officebearers and even entire congregations, with the grievous sin of schism, but say little or nothing about the way their sinful conduct should be addressed.

Were I to believe, as Holwerda apparently does, that these people are guilty to a greater or lesser degree of this sin, I would have to recommend that they be disciplined in a formal way. This is precisely what Article 21 of the *Belgic Confession*, quoted above, describes as the remedy for those who are introducing things that Christ has not taught and that disturb the peace and concord of the church. Holwerda does indirectly suggest that they may be liable to formal discipline, when he contests the attitude of some who maintain that they be permitted to "part as friends or as brothers and sisters." That kind of attitude, he argues, does not reckon with the fact that separation from the CRC is "a grievous

sin." But he does not specify what action should be taken against those guilty of this sin.

## A double-edged sword

And *seventh*, the argument that Holwerda uses against those who have separated from the CRC is a *double-edged sword*. It could equally well be used, were

**"There are simply too many internal inconsistencies and unsubstantiated claims in his article for it to be convincing."**

it a valid argument, *against the CRC itself, including its members and officebearers.*

It would not be difficult to show that the differences that exist between the CRC and the RCA, the denomination from which the CRC seceded in the middle of the nineteenth century, are not clearly differences regarding any necessary or essential doctrines of the Christian faith. Nor would it be difficult to show that the CRC's past and present separation from the RCA has not been based upon the charge that the RCA is the "false church." The original secession of the CRC was based upon the conviction that the RCA was not sufficiently committed to being a consistently Reformed denomination in confession, church polity and worship.

If Holwerda's argument, therefore, is well-meant and sincere, then it follows that the charges he makes against those who have seceded from the CRC could just as well be made against himself, the institution at which he teaches, and the congregation of which he is a member. To put it as clearly as I know how: Professor Holwerda, by the standard of his own article, is a schismatic, teaching at a schismatic seminary and member of a schismatic congregation and denomination. If his argument is true, he should confess to his sin and return to the true church from which he has separated. He should resign his post at Calvin Seminary and turn from his and his colleague's grievous sin of schism. But not only that, he should also take the required steps, personally and officially, to restore full unity and fellowship with all true churches of Jesus Christ from which he is sinfully separated.

## CONCLUSION

For all of these reasons, Holwerda's article cannot be regarded as a helpful contribution to our reflection upon the unity of the church, particularly in the context of the present situation of the CRC. There are simply too many internal inconsistencies and unsubstantiated claims in his article for it to be convincing. Were Holwerda's argument valid, he would have succeeded in indicting, not only those separating from the CRC, but also all those who are separated in any way (denominationally) from other true churches of Jesus Christ. In this respect, his argument suffers from the fallacy of proving too much.

But this is not the most objectionable feature of Holwerda's article — that it is not very convincing or persuasive in its argument. What is most objectionable is the attempt to hold those leaving the CRC primarily responsible for the divisions and internal distresses that it presently is undergoing. As I suggested earlier, this is to shift the blame to those who are least responsible for what has taken place in recent decades in the CRC. Why should those who continue to insist that the "old rules" obtain be blamed, when others come and disrupt things by seeking to "change the rules" mid-game? To the extent that Holwerda and others have contributed to the introduction or permitting the introduction of views and practices, once regarded as unbiblical and unReformed in the CRC, they should more appropriately be regarded as the disturbers of the denomination's peace. Whatever sins may have been committed against the church's unity by those who are leaving, the burden of responsibility for the present divided state of the CRC rests with those who might best be described as "innovators".<sup>7</sup>

- 1 This is the title of Professor Holwerda's article.
- 2 Holwerda correctly notes only two marks of the true church in his summary of Calvin's position. Though one might argue that the traditional third mark, the faithful exercise of church discipline, is inherent in these first two marks, Calvin does not expressly include discipline among the marks of the true church.
- 3 In the old communion form long in use among the Reformed churches, those who are guilty of raising "discord, sects and mutiny in the Church and State" are expressly warned not to come to the Table of

the Lord. This form rightly recognizes that this sin is grievous and therefore requires the exercise of church discipline.

- 4 Perhaps this is the appropriate place for me to note that the toleration of a doctrinal error is no more excusable than the teaching of such an error. I find it difficult to distinguish between the toleration and the approval of a teaching, at least when this occurs within the church. An approved teaching is, in one sense of this language, any teaching that is officially permitted.
- 5 I am reflecting here the language of a *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chap. XXV,v: "The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a church on earth, to worship God according to his will."
- 6 Some of my readers may at this point be interested in pursuing the question whether the CRC is a false church (or in danger of becoming a false church) more directly. I am purposefully avoiding that discussion for several reasons. First, Holwerda is addressing his argument primarily to those who in leaving the CRC, have done so without declaring it to be the false church or insisting that such a declaration is necessary to justify their action. Second, it is my conviction — though some will contest it — that the marks of the true church apply directly and immediately to the local church where the Word is preached, the sacraments administered and discipline exercised, but only indirectly and immediately to a denomination or communion of churches. And third, I am arguing that, in the present situation, leaving the CRC does not require the judgment that the CRC (or its member churches) is a false church.
- 7 I express myself this way in part to acknowledge that not all of those who have left the CRC or are leaving may have done so in ways that honor the requirements of God's Word and proper procedure in the church of Jesus Christ. Though I am addressing myself to Holwerda's argument in this article, I do not want to be misunderstood, as though I were claiming that those leaving have always been without sin in doing so. Surely there is room for all present and former members of the CRC to confess their sins of omission and commission respecting the unity of the churches and the denomination itself.

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# The Shepherd's Staff

A Column for Elders & Deacons

John R. Sittema

Last month, I wrote in this column a piece explaining why I think the unbridled criticism of Promise Keepers I hear from so many quarters of the Reformed world is unwarranted. In short, I argued that we ought to take a balanced and careful approach, testing the produce and the fruit of the movement before opposing it. I wrote that in my own experience, the fruit produced by the Lord in the lives of the men I know through the Promise Keepers experience is good fruit. That is, they have come back invigorated in their faith, recommitted to the Word and to the worship of God, rededicated to a life of service within the church. Interestingly, despite all the accusations I hear about Promise Keepers being a non-discerning ecumenical movement, thus one that weakens the distinctives of the Reformation, the men I have known find in Promise Keepers a challenge to know their Reformed heritage, with all its theological strength and vigor, much better.

In this column, I want to follow up on this theme, and write to you about cultivating faithfulness and leadership among men in the church. One of the reasons, I believe, that Promise Keepers is such a success is that it takes a no-nonsense approach to holding men accountable to their covenant obligations before the Lord. It's like being on a high school or college football team: you learn the disciplines required to learn your position, to keep your grades up and to behave according to the standards set by the coaching staff. When my son played high school ball, despite the 3 hours per day of practice, his grades actually improved. Why? Because the coaches and the other players held each other accountable to high standards. (Interesting, isn't it, that Bill McCartney, the founder of Promise Keepers, was a highly suc-

cessful college football coach!) Promise Keepers does that with men in regard to their life-commitments to God, to church, to wife and family, to community and world. They establish high standards and build a system of accountability to those standards that holds men accountable to the Word and to each other. And they do it effectively.

I'd like to encourage you, as pastoral elders and deacons within the flock of Christ, to be intentional about cultivating the men in your church family, and holding them accountable, to demonstrating Biblical headship and leadership in their home and families, within the church, and in their world. Christ expects nothing less.

## What does a Biblical leader look like?

Now, before I go any further, I should spend a couple of minutes telling you what I think a Biblical man of God ought to be. Not all are "up front" and visible, loud and strong in their leadership; in fact some are quiet and gentle by disposition and personality. Not all are intellectually keen, men of advanced education, great thoughts and great vision; most are average guys with a job, two kids and a mortgage, and a bit of a potbelly. But all men of God have a few things in common.

In the *first* place, they have a servant-heart for Christ and others. I'm struck by Jesus' teaching in Matthew 20:26-27. He makes clear that greatness in His kingdom comes by way of servanthood: "Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve..." You pastoral elders must, therefore, seek to cultivate among the men of God in your care such

a spirit of servanthood.

*Secondly*, the men of God who are shaped by Biblical vision will have good and godly marriages. Read Eph. 5:21ff carefully, and note what it says about headship within the marriage relationship. In the first place, God doesn't even tell men to be heads over their wives! He tells wives that, but not the men. (I've always thought the Spirit did that because men don't need help thinking highly about themselves! They already have a sinful tendency toward arrogance!) What he tells a man is that he ought to love his wife like Christ loved His wife. Clearly, that involves careful listening to her, a tenderness about how he treats her, sensitivity to her needs, both physical and emotional, what I Peter 3:7 calls treating her "with understanding." Just as clearly, it involves giving spiritual/Biblical direction, seeking her holiness (read Eph. 5:26 carefully!), cultivating her obedience and encouraging her own service to Christ with her own spiritual gifts. You pastoral elders must, therefore, seek to cultivate among the men of God in your church the spirit of Biblical headship.

*Thirdly*, men of God who are servant-leaders in the Church and Kingdom of Christ love Christ's wife, the church, deeply. In the requirements for office in I Tim. 3, a man's ability to "manage his own family well" is requisite for both the office of elder and deacon. Ever wonder why? Let me put it to you in another way. Would you, if you knew you were about to die and had to designate a caretaker for your family, entrust your precious family to someone whom you knew had proved he couldn't care for his own? Of course not. Neither will Christ entrust His precious bride to men who can't take care of their own wives and children! So you, pastoral elders must look for and seek to cultivate men who love the church, warts and all, as the precious bride of Jesus Christ, men who in their lives already show the heart of a pastor, a care-giver.

*Finally*, men of God who are servant-leaders in the church and kingdom of Christ, know and love God's Word and its truths. Amazingly, though the prophet cries, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6), many today believe the church can be led and cared for by elders and deacons, or taught by Sunday School teachers,

who do not themselves know the doctrines of the faith. Churches elect people to become elders or deacons who are good at chairing meetings, or who have some administrative skill, or "whose turn it is" to serve. Instead, you pastoral elders must look for and seek to cultivate men who love the Word, and who are wise and skilled in its application to their own lives and to the lives of God's people.

### Build Such Men!

Sense a shortage of such godly men in your church? In almost every church I have had contact with in recent years (and that's a lot, since I lead a lot of seminars for elder and deacon development all over the country), I have heard the lament that "we don't have enough men qualified in the I Timothy 3 sense!" My only response to that is to say, forcefully and quite bluntly, what are you doing about it?

I'm not kidding. If you go to a meeting to nominate elders and deacons and find the frustration of putting people in nomination who really, honestly, are less-than-qualified according to I Timothy 3, what do you do about it? Do you place men in nomination anyway? Shame on

you! Instead, announce to the congregation that men who meet all the Biblical qualifications of I Tim. 3 have not been identified and raised up among the flock, and then repent that you haven't made such a priority in your ministry? That's painful, and perhaps shocking, but Biblically righteous.

From the above, I think it transparent that I don't believe, in our day and age, such men are made by accident. There are some young men who grow up under extraordinarily godly and wise fathers, and they themselves learn such faith and wisdom from them. But in today's church, such is rare. More likely the gradual erosion of godly male leadership in the church in recent generations has afflicted your congregation, too. More likely you have generations of men who know how to make money, provide physically for their families, but who are not men of the caliber of leadership as defined above. Their wives, if you could get them to be open and honest about it, would cry sad tears while they tell you of their longing for a husband who would be a tender, faithful, sensitive and spiritual leader. I have believed for a long time that the rise of feminism in the church, including the vigor of the argu-

ment for women in the pastoral offices, is due in no small part to the failure of men to be the kind of men of God of which the Bible speaks. In short, men in today's church are paying for their own sins of the last couple of generations. Such has been my experience wherever I have observed the church up close. Most are so disillusioned that they gave up hoping for it years ago.

No, men of God with servant-leadership hearts aren't made by accident. They are cultivated carefully, intentionally, purposefully. And that gets back to you, pastoral elders. You have that job, and it's a big one. What are you doing about it? If the answer is nothing, then don't gripe about Promise Keepers. Offer something better! Better yet, build on that movement, harvesting the fruit of the Lord it produces, and cultivating ever greater harvest for the years to come!

*For next time: a curriculum for Leadership Development for the local church.*

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## Past times

*W. Robert Godfrey*

Desiderius Erasmus was probably the most brilliant scholar in sixteenth-century Europe. He was witty, urbane and sophisticated. Born near Rotterdam ca. 1467 in humble circumstances he became the prince of Renaissance humanists. When he died in 1536, he was revered throughout Christendom.

Erasmus was very concerned about the state of the Christian church. He criticized the ignorance and superstition, the corruption and formalism in many of the institutions of the church. He wanted

reform in the church that would lead to a form of Christianity that was more simple, more moral, more personal and sincere. He wanted Christians to know the Bible, love Jesus and live a good Christian life.

When Luther gained prominence, Erasmus was initially sympathetic and resisted great pressure from the Roman Catholic authorities to attack Luther. His humane, reasonable and rather tolerant attitudes - linked to a genuine concern for piety and morality - have become a

model to many in our day. We might call such attitudes the "Erasmian impulse" in theology.

Despite his concern for reform in the church, Erasmus never joined the Protestant movement. In a letter to Martin Bucer, the reformer of Strassburg, written in 1527, he explained some of his reasons. He wrote that he was not convinced that the movement came from God, that of the Protestants he knew some had "become worse and none better," and that he was offended by "the intense discord between the leaders of the movement."<sup>1</sup> Erasmus showed that the essence of his understanding of Christianity was in the moral change that it produced in its adherents.

In 1524 Erasmus did write a work criticizing Luther entitled, *A Diatribe on the Freedom of the Will*. He rejected what he saw as the extremism in Luther's theology in its denial of free will or free choice in matters of salvation. Erasmus argued that the Bible and the church fathers did not support Luther. He warned against making strong assertions in theology and called for moderation. He said that

we certainly need grace for salvation, that grace does almost everything for salvation, and that we should give all our praise to grace. But he also said that some human cooperation with grace is necessary to uphold the justice of God and the responsibility of man.

**“The motivation to twist a text is the desire to evade its plain meaning so that one will not have to change one’s theology.”**

In 1525 Luther responded with his *Bondage of the Will*, a work almost four times as long as that of Erasmus. Luther’s treatise is a detailed, point by point refutation of Erasmus. Luther always regarded this response as one of his best and most important writings.

Luther acknowledged great strengths in Erasmus: “I recognize that you are a great man, richly endowed with the noblest gifts of God - with talent and learning, with eloquence bordering on the miraculous...I could very much wish that you would be content with your own special gift, and would study, adorn, and promote languages and literature as you have hitherto done with great profit and distinction.”<sup>2</sup>

Luther also recognized that Erasmus had focused in his work on a crucial theological issue: “You and you alone have seen the question on which everything hinges, and have aimed at the vital spot...”<sup>3</sup> Erasmus had attacked the *sola gratia* of the Reformation. Luther recognized that this was a critical, foundational matter and vigorously defended his teaching that we are saved by grace alone.

## THE “ERASMIAN IMPULSE”

As I recently reread Luther on the *Bondage of the Will*, I was impressed anew by the power of Luther’s treatise. It remains one of the greatest defenses of an Augustinian theology of grace. But the purpose of this article is not to review Luther’s arguments for grace in detail. Instead I want to reflect on the *basis* from which Luther argued against Erasmus. I want to look at Luther’s response not just to Erasmus’ theology, but also to the “Erasmian impulse” in theology. It

struck me that we need to hear Luther again, because the “Erasmian impulse” is alive and well in the theology of the church today. Truly there is nothing new under the sun.

## THE BIBLE - ITS CHARACTER AND USE

Two key elements make up the Erasmian impulse to which Luther responded. The *first* is the *character of the Bible and the way in which it is to be used in theological controversy*. For Erasmus the Bible was an obscure and ambiguous book that frequently did not speak with clarity. The *second* is the *character of the God whom we serve*. For Erasmus God was a being whose actions would satisfy human notions of fairness and justice. Against both of these Erasmian elements Luther would thunder very different convictions.

Erasmus had begun his treatise against Luther saying that he tended to be a skeptic except where the Bible and the Church taught clearly. He did not relish strong theological assertions. Luther attacked him sharply on this point insisting that the Bible, Christianity and faith require strong assertions of truth. The spirit of skepticism is not the spirit of Christianity.

Luther felt that strong assertions were necessary, because the Bible itself made such assertions so clearly. Repeatedly he made the basic assertion that the Bible was clear. “I said above that things which are either contained in or proved by Holy Writ are not only plain, but also salutary...” The clear light of the Bible was like the sun: “For it ought above all to be settled and established among Christians that the Holy Scriptures are a spiritual light far brighter than the sun itself, especially in things that are necessary to salvation.” (Notice that Luther related the clarity of the Bible especially, but not exclusively to matters of salvation. The Bible is clear in all it teaches.) He called the Bible “crystal clear” and declared that it could be understood by “the natural, grammatical meaning of the word.”<sup>4</sup>

Luther realized that some passages in the Bible were obscure and difficult to understand. But this obscurity was not a great problem: “I admit, of course, that there are many texts in the Scriptures that are obscure and abstruse, not because of the majesty of their subject mat-

ter, but because of our ignorance of their vocabulary and grammar; but these texts in no way hinder a knowledge of all the subject matter of Scripture...The subject matter of the Scriptures, therefore, is all quite accessible, even though some texts are still obscure owing to our ignorance of their terms...If the words are obscure in one place, yet they are plain in another...”<sup>5</sup> For Luther the problems in Biblical interpretation are in us, not in the Bible. By contrast in the Erasmian impulse the problem is more in the Bible than in us.

Luther saw several ways in which the Erasmian impulse read obscurity into the Bible. **One** was *laziness*: “It is true that for many people much remains abstruse; but this is not due to the obscurity of Scripture, but to the blindness or indolence of those who will not take the trouble to look at the very clearest truth.” Certainly in the church today many are lazy and cannot be bothered to study the Bible with care. A **second** reason was *the misuse of human understanding*: “...for Reason interprets the Scriptures of God by her own inferences and syllogisms, and turns them in any direction she pleases.” Today too, reason makes the words of the Bible mean whatever it pleases. A **third** is *interpreting Scripture by turning the plain teaching into another meaning by treating the words as various kinds of figures of speech or tropes*. Luther wrote that Erasmus had “discovered a new method of eluding the plainest texts by choosing to find a trope in the simplest and clearest of words.”<sup>6</sup>

Luther expanded on this third evasion of the clear meaning of the Bible at sev-

**“Interpretation must please human prejudice rather than submit to the revelation of God.”**

eral points in his work. He is worth citing in some detail because these arguments reappear in so much contemporary theology. “It is the habit of all those who elude arguments by means of tropes to show a brave contempt for the text itself and devote all their energy to picking out some particular word and torturing it by means of tropes, crucifying it on the cross of their own opinion without regard either for the wider context, or the words that follow and pre-

cede, or the intention or motive of the author." This habit of twisting words and contexts makes it easy to evade the force of a text. "But perhaps here too there is a rhetorical device that teaches you to obscure the sense whenever there is any danger of your being caught by a word." *The motivation to twist a text is the desire to*

**"Those who twist the Scriptures to suit themselves usually do so to recreate God in their own image."**

*evade its plain meaning so that one will not have to change one's theology.* Churches today have too many people inventing new definitions of Biblical words and new contexts of Biblical passages.

Of Erasmus and those like him who undermine the clarity of the Bible Luther wrote, "...though their eyes are open and the words could not be clearer nor the facts more evident, they see just the opposite; so careless are they in their reading and marking of Holy Writ, which they have to brand as obscure and ambiguous." Sarcastically Luther commented, "Even I must applaud the distinguished pleader for free choice who teaches us to adapt the testimonies of Scripture to our taste by suitable interpretations, so that they may truly stand on the side of free choice, or in other words, may serve to prove not what they ought but what pleases us." *The "Erasmian impulse" seeks to make the Scripture ambiguous wherever it opposes its teaching: "So the whole of this magnificent interpretation achieves nothing more - if it achieves anything at all - than to make that passage of John uncertain and ambiguous. Nor is this surprising, for it is Diatribe's one concern that the Scriptures of God should be everywhere ambiguous so that she may not be obliged to use them...." Interpretation must please human prejudice rather than submit to the revelation of God: "Here, I see, you are of the opinion that the truth and usefulness of Scripture is to be measured and judged by the reactions of men, and the most ungodly men at that, so that only what has proved pleasing or seemed tolerable to them should be deemed true, divine, and salutary, while the opposite should forthwith be*

deemed useless, false, and pernicious." The world in its opposition to the truth and clarity of the Word becomes the standard for interpreting the Word. How much of academic Biblical studies today are shaped and led by unbelievers.

Luther knew that only those who were led by the Holy Spirit could really understand the truth of the Bible: "If you speak of internal clarity, no man perceives one iota of what is in the Scriptures unless he has the Spirit of God."<sup>8</sup> Those without the Spirit will inevitably resist the message of the Bible.

Luther also knew that where the Word comes in power, trouble will follow: "...it is the most unvarying fate of the Word of God to have the world in a state of tumult because of it. This is plainly asserted by Christ, when he says: 'I have not come to bring peace, but a sword' (Matt. 10:34)...To wish to stop these tumults, therefore, is nothing else but to wish to suppress and prohibit the Word of God. For the Word of God comes, wherever it comes, to change and renew the world."<sup>9</sup> Erasmians want peace above everything and will shave and change the Word in order to promote their conception of peace. Luther spoke in the spirit of the Bible when he said, "Let us have peace if possible, but truth in any case."

The Erasmian misuse of the Bible is alive in Christian theology today. Each of the Erasmian techniques to avoid the plain meaning of Scripture can be easily demonstrated in discussions ranging from women in office to homosexuality, from church growth to worship.

## THE CHARACTER OF GOD

For Luther the misuse of the Bible by the "Erasmian impulse" reflected a misunderstanding of the character of God. Those who twist the Scriptures to suit themselves usually do so to recreate God in their own image. This reinterpretation of God was especially clear in the debate over grace. The God of the Bible is a God who is awesome in power and majesty, whose ways are far beyond human understanding. His decree predestining some to life and reprobating others to death manifests that power. The complete dependence of man on the grace of God challenges man's pride and self-reliance. Luther wrote of God: "Thus it comes about that when we do not let God's will alone have the will and power

to harden and show mercy and to do everything, we attribute to free choice itself the ability to do everything without grace, despite our having denied that it can do anything good without grace."<sup>10</sup> God must do all in salvation; man cannot contribute to or cooperate with grace. Otherwise religion focuses on man's powers and grace becomes at best marginal in Christian experience.

The notion of such power in God offends us, but that power is revealed in the Bible and demands our faith. Luther wrote: "Thus God hides his eternal goodness and mercy under eternal wrath, his righteousness under iniquity. This is the highest degree of faith, to believe him merciful when he saves so few and damns so many, and to believe him righteous when by his own will he makes us necessarily damnable...."<sup>11</sup> Many will not believe such teaching, but if it is true, it must be proclaimed and believed so that we will know the true God and His ways: "And if the ungodly are scandalized and depart in great numbers (John 6:66f.), yet the elect will remain...He is God, and for his will there is no cause or reason that can be laid down as a rule or measure for it, since there is nothing equal or superior to it, but it is itself the rule of all things. For if there were any rule or standard for it, either as cause or reason, it could no longer be the will of God. For it is not because he is or was obliged so to will that what he wills is right, but on the contrary, because he himself so wills, therefore what happens must be right. Cause and reason can be assigned for a creature's will, but not for the will of the

**"But Luther would not permit the Erasmians - for all their good intentions - to turn the Bible into an unclear book."**

Creator, unless you set up over him another creator."<sup>12</sup> To deny this power to God is to create another, an inferior God.

Luther saw one example of this need to recognize the true God in the doctrine of predestination. He discussed Romans 9 as a clear Biblical text on election and reprobation. He noted how Erasmus had twisted the text to avoid its plain meaning, especially Paul's citation of Malachi,

"Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated." Luther argued: "...God's love toward men is eternal and immutable, and his hatred is eternal, being prior to the creation of the world, and not only to the merit and work of free choice; and everything takes place by necessity in us, according as he either loves or does not love us from all eternity..."<sup>13</sup> Erasmus had suggested that Malachi did not really write of eternal decrees when he mentioned Jacob and Esau. Luther commented, "This again is said to the disparagement of Paul, as if he had done violence to the Scriptures."<sup>14</sup> It is amazing how the approach of Erasmus has been resurrected by "Reformed" authors - such as Harry Boer in his 1980 gravamen against reprobation which he presented to the Christian Reformed synod. The synod rejected the gravamen, but Boer continued to teach its content without any discipline. The "Erasmian impulse" is unwilling to discipline Arminianism. Rather than change its convictions, the "Erasmian impulse" will criticize Paul's interpretation of the Old Testament and betray the confessional standards it has promised to uphold.

The doctrine of reprobation is indeed potentially terrifying. Luther acknowledged this: "Who will believe, you say, that he is loved by God? I answer: No man will or can believe this; but the elect will believe while the rest perish in unbelief, indignant and blaspheming as you are here. So some will believe."<sup>15</sup> The God of the Bible is the God of election and also the God who gives faith and enables the faithful to overcome every doubt and temptation.

Luther taught that this doctrine of predestination in its fulness is crucial for Christians to know because it guarantees the promises of mercy in Christ: "For if these things are not known, there can be neither faith nor any worship of God. For that would indeed be ignorance of God, and where there is such ignorance there cannot be salvation, as we know. For if you doubt or disdain to know God foreknows all things, not contingently, but necessarily and immutably, how can you believe his promises and place a sure trust and reliance on them? For when he promises anything, you ought to be certain that he knows and is able and willing to perform what he promises; otherwise, you will regard him as neither truthful nor faithful, and that is impiety

and a denial of the Most High God...Therefore, Christian faith is entirely extinguished, the promises of God and the whole gospel are completely destroyed, if we teach and believe that it is not for us to know the necessary foreknowledge of God and the necessity of the things that are to come to pass. For this is the one supreme consolation of Christians in all adversities, to know that God does not lie, but does all things immutably, and that his will can neither be resisted nor changed nor hindered."<sup>16</sup> The plan and grace of God assure us that His promises are absolutely reliable.

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Luther believed that to assert free will is to undermine or destroy the work of Christ. Either Christ saves His people completely or free will is the crucial factor in making actual a salvation that Christ only makes possible. Passionately he wrote: "I wish the defenders of free choice would take warning at this point, and realize that when they assert free choice they are denying Christ. For if it is by my own effort that I obtain the grace of God, what need have I of the grace of Christ in order to receive it?...Hence, inasmuch as you maintain free choice, you cancel out Christ and ruin the entire Scripture. Moreover, although verbally you may make a show of confessing Christ, yet in reality and in your heart you deny him."<sup>17</sup>

The "Erasmian impulse" may find in Luther a theologian who was talented and wise in many things. It may see him as heroic and courageous. But it must ultimately conclude that he was too extreme. He pressed points of theology that were better left alone. He did not recognize his own limitations and the frailty of all human thought. Far better if he had left some things unsaid and recognized the spirit of Christ in many who disagreed with him in non-essential matters, such as free will.

To such an impulse Luther would respond that his thought was indeed frail and prone to error. If he were promoting his own ideas, he would indeed have

been tolerant and diffident. But Luther would not permit the Erasmians - for all their good intentions - to turn the Bible into an unclear book. The Bible was the revelation of God and God was successful in revealing Himself in it. Luther would also not permit the Erasmians to refashion God according to their own taste. The real Christian says with Paul, "Let God be true, and every man a liar" (Rom. 3:4). God is all-powerful and accomplishes all things according to the counsel of His will. That truth must be confessed by all Christians.

Today the churches are full of Erasmians who are kind, agreeable and tolerant - until they meet a Luther. But these Erasmians are destroying the church. They compromise the gospel at one point after another, maintaining that we must always be dispassionate in our uncertainty. Today more than ever the church needs strong assertions of Biblical truth. The church needs more Luthers, because Luther ministered in the spirit of Paul and, much more importantly, in the spirit of Jesus. Jesus was no skeptic, but revealed God through His Word clearly, plainly and forcefully.

*(To be continued.)*

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Cited in Hans J. Hillerbrand, *The Reformation*, New York (Harper and Row), 1964, p. 424f.
- 2 *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 17, Philadelphia (Westminster), 1969 (hereafter *Luther*), p. 333.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 124, 159, 168, 283.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 110f.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 111, 184, 220.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 237, 254, 270, 281, 282, 135.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 129.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 229.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 236f.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 252.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 122.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 321, 323.

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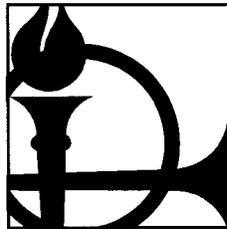
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