

Canada's First Christian Festival Lacks Reformedness

On Victoria Day weekend Christians of mainline denominations met In Ottawa for Canada's first Christian Festival. It was a bilingual and bicultural event which drew at least 10,000 people. The festival was modeled on Germany's biennial Kirchentag, first instituted by German Protestants following the Second World War. The organizers of Canada's festival anticipate that it will be the first in a series to be held every two or three years, each time in a different city.

The festival's theme was "Together in Hope". This hope seemed directed more to the renewal of this world than to the hope of Christ's second coming and the ushering of the promised new heaven and earth. The challenge was: "Are we helping to build a new humanity and a new world or are we content with the reign of Injustice and Isolation? Through our own faith, we CAN help others to believe. Through our own love, we CAN help others experience the love of Jesus. Through our own forgiveness we CAN help others to hope for a new beginning." Renowned speakers as well as gospel entertainers took part. More than 100 workshops and seminars dealt with the key areas of Christian concerns. One observer described all these events as "a smorgasbord of Christian thought and action". How true!

The speakers ranged from American evangelist and prison reformer Charles (Chuck) Colson to Jean Vanier, son of a former Governor General, who works with mentally retarded adults, and also with prisoners and the underprivileged in various fields.

The Peace and Disarmament sectionals featured, amongst others, church leaders from the Ecumenical Council of Cuba, the executive director of Project Ploughshares and spokesmen from the American and Russian embassies.

Should we as Reformed Christians consider participating In future festivals? NOI We cannot be part of a "smorgasbord" Christianity. Consider the views of four important contributors to the festival; two are Roman Catholic and two belong to the United Church of Canada. All four advocate ideas we cannot endorse.

Dr. Rosemary Reuther

Dr. Rosemary Reuther of Chicago participated in the sectionals "Theology in the Christian Community Today" and "Woman: Crossroads". Dr. Reuther is a Roman Catholic feminist theologian associated with a Methodist seminary. She has a bent for radical politics. Her feminism is a part of her organic socialist vision.

In her theology sin is not disobedience to God; it has purely a social dimension. Westerners cannot deny their past. They share in the sin of oppression and injustice. Our sin can only be forgiven when we are ready to do justice to those who are oppressed.

The Kingdom of God is not a spiritual Kingdom, but a movement of Justice and love. God is not the sovereign one. He is one of the powers in this world. He is the party in conflict. He is on the side of those who struggle against poverty and injustice. Dr. Reuther has made a definite break with traditional Roman Catholic doctrine and philosophy.

Dr. Gregory Baum

Another prominent speaker was Dr. Gregory Baum, an internationally known Catholic scholar and advocate of modern Catholicism. He teaches at the Faculty of Religious Studies and Sociology at St. Michael's College in the University of Toronto. Dr. Baum uses an excessively anthropological method of doing theology in which the study of God is really our self-study. The mission of the church is a movement of humanization. The experience of human solidarity makes us aware of the unity of the human family and its common destination to growth and reconciliation. His book, *Catholics and Canadian Socialism: Political Thought in the Thirties* shows his sympathy towards socialism.

Dr. Lois Wilson

A key lecture was delivered by Dr. Lois Wilson, the first woman moderator of the United Church of Canada, the first female head of a Canadian denomination and past president of the Canadian Council of Churches. She is an ecumenist and a social activist. She says of ecumenism: "It may take different forms, coalitions, local work, but we should never give up on structural unity."

Christ's resurrection is related to the renewal of society. She sees the miracle of the resurrection happening when one person shares the suffering of another, in love. She writes: "To many people, it will seem highly irrelevant that we celebrate Easter as a religious festival. It is culturally acceptable as a celebration of Spring, or as an occasion to expose children to Easter bunnies and eggs. But the resurrection? Evidence of new life? A celebration of God's entering into human life, becoming what we are, in order that we might become what he is? Persons and communities raised from death to life? Astounding!"

Dr. N. Bruce McLeod

Dr. N. Bruce McLeod, former moderator of the United Church, took part in the discussion on "A New Holocaust - Refugees in Central America." He is a Universalist in his theology. We are all aboard the "earth-ship" and we are inextricably linked to all other passengers. The refugee crisis has taught us to work together as Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Dr. McLeod has an optimistic view of man's condition. The fragile world boat will not sink. We will not drown. "For there is a caring abroad ready to break through our hands, that intends to steady the whole ship, and to turn the earth, with all its people, into a home."

Organized religion

Canada's first Christian Festival was celebrated in a time of serious crisis for the mainline denominations. Dr. Reginald Bibby, head of the sociology department at Alberta's University of Lethbridge, said, on the basis of survey of Canadians on the subject of their religious attitude that "organized religion in Canada is experiencing a dramatic drop-off. Churches are losing many of their once-active members and adherents, while failing to replenish their losses... Dr. Bibby reports that the United Church, our nation's largest denomination, registered a sharp drop in membership from a high of 1,062,006 in 1966 to 930,226 in 1977, and its Sunday school enrollment shrank from 570,000 to 242,000.

Why this membership loss? The United Church has a theology that tends to adapt to society Instead of transforming it. At the festival it was attacked by some participants for its liberal stand on abortion. This position was defended by Dr. Ruth Evans of Toronto who said: "If a pregnancy is to be terminated it should be as early as possible."

Support also came from Dr. Eugene Roy, a retired professor of philosophy and psychology at Concordia University and College Militaire de Ste. Jean, who blamed the Roman Catholic Church and to a lesser extent the Anglicans for sexual discrimination in society. He felt that the United Church of Canada has to a great extent become fused with a highly secularized culture. I suggest that it has indeed surrendered by and large to the spirit of the age. There are evangelicals still within the United Church. The small United Church Renewal Fellowship is a case in point. However, the spokespersons for the denomination are from the liberal camp.

Liberal theology is by its very nature accommodating to the times. As it has lost its Biblical roots, it has become a humanism couched in religious terms. It is man- and world-centred. God exists for man and man is the measure of all things. Much of liberal theology is built on the concept that man is not only basically good, he is also perfectible. It still believes in the possibility of a future utopia.

Reformed Christians should forthrightly and honestly say that they cannot cooperate in a festival without a doctrinal agreement, a consensus on the authority of Scripture or a creed. Our cooperation should be with the evangelicals. We have many basic beliefs in common with them. I hope that a revived Evangelical Fellowship of Canada will organize a festival in the near future. We can make a positive contribution to such an event. The challenge is there!

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