

THE EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP OF CANADA

The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, What does it intend to accomplish? What does it does it stand for? What Should we join or remain aloof as Reformed Christians? These questions I want to deal with in this article.

When I heard about the E.F.C., just after it became organized, I was so enthusiastic about it that I wrote Dr. Harry Faught, the elected president of the E.F.C., and pastor of the Danforth Gospel Temple, Toronto, Ont., for information. In his reply he mentioned, among other things, that the E.F.C. "is a parallel to the National Association of Evangelicals in the United States, although there are some differences in approach and in scope of work." Now this statement would immediately raise the eyebrows of some of my ministerial brethren, as the Christian Reformed Church was once a member of the National Association of Evangelicals. If the E.F.C. is similar to the N.A.E., should we still spend time discussing the E.F.C.? What happened to our relationship with the N.A.E.? I am convinced that the E.F.C. should be seriously considered, but before that - our past relationship with the N.A.E. must be reviewed in order to get a clearer perspective of the problems we face in our approach to the E.F.C.

The N.A.E.

The National Association of Evangelicals, was organized in St. `Louis, U.S.A. in 1942. The officers and board of administration of this association are members of a wide variety of denominations. A list of affiliated denominations can be found in the Acts of Synod 1949 of the Christian Reformed Church, p. 293. Many fundamentalistic church bodies are active members according to this list. The N.A.E. was organized to reaffirm, the historical evangelical position, to witness against apostasy, to provide a medium for united action by Evangelical Christians. (1)

From the very beginning of the association, there were several in our denomination who desired to join the N.A.E. An overture from the First Christian Reformed Church of Bellflower, California urged the Christian Reformed Church to become a member of the N.A.E. The overture expressed its desire for an orthodox Protestant organization which could speak for mainstream orthodoxy. The overture stated: "Evangelical Protestantism that is fairly representative of Orthodox Christianity through which it may become articulate." (2)

Also, a very enthusiastic letter was sent to the Synod of 1943 by three "delegates" who attended the "International Constitutional Convention for United Evangelical Action." The "delegates" advised the Synod to join and the synod took favourable action the very same year. The denomination had joined but not everyone was altogether happy with this situation. The ecumenical honeymoon bliss was soon over. In 1944, Classis Hudson overtured to sever its relationship with the N.A.E., unless it restricted its activities which did not concern the preaching of the gospel. Despite this opposition, membership in the N.A.E. was continued.

A Spiritual Feast

Christian Reformed members closely associated with and directly involved in the N.A.E. proved in general to be very enthusiastic about this fellowship with other evangelical Christians. The "Report of the 1944 Convention of, the National Association of Evangelicals held at 'Columbus, Ohio, from April 12 to 17" delivered to "the Synod by the Christian Reformed convention delegates praised our affiliation with the N.A.E. highly. The delegates reported' "that it was something of a spiritual feast for them to spend a number of days at said convention."(3)

These words we should keep in mind! Spiritual feasts are rather rare in this twentieth century! The same delegates found that the alliance with the N.A.E. rested upon an "excellent doctrinal basis." They were favourably impressed that the N.A.E. stressed the importance of education, and also pointed out that the Columbus convention had refrained from organizing a nation-wide evangelistic campaign. Naturally, the delegates also had some misgivings about the N.A.E., as could be expected of such a gathering of Christians from so many different backgrounds. However, the reporters still said "We would neglect a grand opportunity and make ourselves guilty of criminal neglect if we should withdraw our cooperation from the N.A.E."(4)

Despite these very enthusiastic reports, opposition within the Chr. Reformed denomination increased rapidly. In 1947, the difference of opinion had become so serious that it was necessary to bring out majority and minority reports to the Synod. The majority was in favour of maintaining the affiliation with the N.A.E. The report to "bring back the issues to their proper perspectives by reemphasizing that the N.A.E. was "set up to speak unitedly as a pressure group in America, to protect our mutual interests and to protest actions which are discriminatory and which would favour certain powerful groups in our nation."(5)

Our affiliation had certainly not been fruitless. Whereas in a liberal oriented ecumenical body the Reformed voice would be like the proverbial prophet crying in the wilderness, the Christian Reformed Church had made quite an impression. Our influence helped to bring about the National Association of Christian Schools. Dr. J. H. Kromminga rightly stated about our presence in the N.A.E., "the co-operation is in fields where the differences need not to be expressed, or where they have no determinative weight. Therefore, co-operation is possible, and its benefits outweigh the objections to it." (6)

Dr. J. H. Kromminga also describes our position clearly when he writes "The Christian Reformed Church has occupied a position of some importance in the Association. Many of the members of the Association are independent churches, or congregations whose denominations belong to the Federal Council. The well-organized and unified Christian Reformed Church thus carries weight through its delegates. Undoubtedly the influence of that church has been a strong consideration in keeping the Association from engaging in an evangelistic campaign of its own. The experience of the church in Christian education has also been of great assistance in the program of education which the Association is now sponsoring."(7)

FEAR OF FUNDAMENTALISM

The N.A.E. desired our membership. It wanted our advice and fellowship. There was a basis for discussion as all participants agreed on the authority of God's Word. There was a genuine opportunity for a very beneficial dialogue. However, the minority report expressed its conviction that the N.A.E. was actively engaged in evangelistic work but it was mostly alarmed about Arminianism and consequently fundamentalism. The minority was afraid that the programs of the N.A.E. would "help to break down precious walls of doctrinal distinctiveness raised up by our fathers at Dort, walls which should stand be strengthened!" (8) The minority therefore. advised the Synod to discontinue our membership as a denomination. However, Synod rejected the minority report despite the objections raised. The minority increased its opposition numerically and in 1948 we find again two separate reports presented to the Synod. The majority was still in favour of the N.A.E., though problems, such as shoddy radio programming by fundamentalists were mentioned. In 1949, the majority and minority reports were in reverse of 1948. The majority was in favour of withdrawing and the minority desired to maintain the membership with the N.A.E. What was the reason for this change of attitude? It was the fear of fundamentalism.

(to be continued)

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge. Vol. II, p. 783.
2. Acts of Synod, 1943, pp. 152f. cf. p. 134.
3. Ibid., 1944, p. 326.
4. Ibid., p. 329.
5. Ibid., 1947, p. 396.
6. J. H. Kromminga. The Christian Reformed Church. A Study in Orthodoxy. p. 118.
7. Ibid., p. 117.
8. Acts of Synod, 1947, p. 403.

Johan D. Tangelder
November, 1968