

## The CCRCC's Plan to Join the CCC

***"My son should study much history, and meditate on it for it is the only true philosophy." - Napoleon at St. Helena***

***"Unity that allows everything from the extra-biblical dogmas of Rome and Eastern Orthodoxy to the liberal rationalism of some Protestant church leaders is no unity at all." Former professor of church history at Central Baptist Seminary, Toronto, Ontario.***

Church unity has been a subject of considerable controversy; disagreement over how it is to be understood has, ironically, caused a great deal of disunity.

There are Biblical and practical reasons for greater unity among churches. The high priestly prayer of Jesus has been called the most persuasive argument for unity. "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17: 20f). Other major passages are Ephesians 4 and Philippians 2.

A practical consideration which argues for unity is the witness of the church. When we were serving in the Philippines we were struck by the multiplicity of missionary efforts. People had to decide not only whether to become a Christian, but also what type: Baptist, Brethren, Reformed, Pentecostal, whatever. And in our sinful world, the modern church with its many denominational divisions does not present itself as an appealing unifying and healing force.

Reformed Christians also long for unity. As it has often been recalled, John Calvin expressed a willingness to cross ten seas in the interest of unity. He viewed unity as both a theological and a practical necessity. Therefore, the Christian Reformed Churches in North America seek contact with other churches. The Canadian CR churches try to develop contacts on an official level through the interchurch relationship committee (IRC) of its Canadian Council.

The Council, which met in the Jubilee Fellowship CRC, St. Catharines, Ontario from November 22-26, 1993, had as one of its agenda items the interchurch relationship committee report. The latter expresses regrets that attempts to develop closer relationships with church communions closest to the CRC historically and confessionally have been unsuccessful. This is understandable, considering the debates on creation/evolution and women in office. Since there was no opportunity to come closer to the conservative Reformed churches, the committee began to spend time and energy on church communions "somewhat further from us historically." And they note that their survey has found that most local CRC ecumenical contact is with the Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist (Convention Baptists) and Lutheran churches. And to no great surprise they now propose that the CRCs in Canada join the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC), subject to review by the Council in 1995. The only ecumenical involvement so far

is with the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada. The committee is convinced, however, that the relationship with the EFC does not exhaust the CRC's ecumenical calling as it has been mandated in John 17 and Ephesians 4.

Should the CRC join the CCC? The answer should be a resounding no. We can't join for historic, practical and above all Biblical reasons.

### **The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada**

The IRC reports that the CRC's relationship with evangelicals has proven to be a blessing for both the CRC and the EFC. I am glad for the ties we have with the EFC. In the late 1960s I attended the EFC General Council meeting in Toronto as an observer for Classis British Columbia. In my report to classis I recommended affiliation. I also wrote an article for Calvinist Contact, recommending closer ties with the evangelicals. Over the years, my own involvement has been positive.

Who are the evangelicals? What do they believe? Professor Charles Tipp describes an evangelical as one who takes as his authority the written Word of God as contrasted with the Roman Catholic who emphasizes also the authority of the institutional church, and with the liberals who elevate the authority of human reason over the Scriptures. "The basic characteristic of an evangelical," says Tipp, "is his acceptance of the divine authority and inspiration of the infallible written Word of God." He notes that evangelicals believe that contrary to the emphasis of some liberals who say that doctrine divides, doctrine should unite. The authoritative Bible is the true basis of Christian union. This is in line with Calvin. He too believed that the deepest basis and final criterion was the Word of God. He wrote, "But do what they will, they cannot reproach us with having any other end than to gather in the people who have long been going astray, and to bring them back to their standard, which is the pure word of God. We demand, however, that all differences of opinion be determined by an appeal to that, and that every one abide by what we know to be the will of God." Evangelicals believe that the Gospel is exclusive (John 14: 6). The IRC recommends continued support for the EFC. The November council should support this. In the United States, the CRC is a member of the National Association of Evangelicals, a sister association of the EFC.

### **World Alliance of Reformed Churches**

WARC, founded in 1875, presently includes 175 churches in 84 countries. It is closely linked to the World Council of Churches and since the late 1960s has organized and welcomed bilateral and multilateral dialogues with Christians of other traditions and people of other faiths. In 1983, the alliance initiated the WCC program on "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation," with its study on covenanting for peace and justice.

In 1924 the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational churches formed

the United Churches of Canada. WARC ruled that the United Church should retain the membership hitherto held by the Presbyterian Church in Canada. At its 1938 assembly in Montreal WARC gave those Presbyterian churches, which had stayed out of the union, full recognition and status. In 1938 Dr. George Pidgeon, former Presbyterian and first moderator of the United Church was elected to a one year term as chairman of the Alliance's Western Section, and for the next five years he convened its program committee. This brief history of the WARC is important to understand the CRC's 1988 synodical decision. The IRC recommended that the CRC join the WARC for reasons similar to those given by the Council of the CRC in Canada to join the Canadian Council of Churches. However, committee member Rev. G. Bouma had his negative vote recorded. He stated, "The CRC ought to abstain from membership as long as WARC admits on an equal basis into its membership churches where denial of the faithful proclamation of the Word of God is not militated against, and where denials of some of the most basic and crucial doctrines of Christianity are tolerated." Dr. Zwaanstra rightly notes that the committee did not defend the Reformed faith and practices of all of WARC's. member churches. The IRC's recommendation was objected to by a few classes, churches and individuals. The most basic criticism was that the Alliance embraced as members some unashamedly liberal churches such as the United Church of Canada. Opponents of the Alliance said that the membership was simply forbidden by the Word of God. By a vote of 90 to 82, the Synod defeated the motion to join the WARC. If the WARC couldn't be joined because of liberalism in some of its member churches, why should the CRC in Canada join the Canadian Council of Churches of which the United Church is one of the founding members? The United Church certainly has not changed. A critic has described the UC as the fastest shrinking church in Canada. Sad to say, "No wonder."

### **The United Church of Canada**

In the UC the moderator is its principal spokesman. Any public statement he or she chooses to make is considered to be a statement by the UC unless repudiated by his/her executive or the next General Council. One of the UC's most outspoken and controversial moderators was the layman Dr. Robert McClure (1900-1991), who served from 1968-1971. He was certainly non-conventional, both in faith and practice. "By the age of 22," he said, "I was probably Unitarian." He didn't believe in many of the Gospel's key doctrines, such as the bodily resurrection of Jesus, the miracles or in the death of Christ as atonement for man's sins. He suspected that the institution of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was derived from the primitive practice of eating your enemies' organs in order to acquire their courage. Under his leadership the UC adopted a new creed for experimental liturgical use. A principal of one of the UC's own theological colleges called the creed "poetic but unChristian." McClure was also a staunch supporter of "the right to abortions," believing that the greatest crime is to give life to a child who is unwanted.

McClure said what many in the UC thought. Ben Smillie, writing in the UC Observer in 1967, said that to deny the higher critical approach to Scripture "is to fly in the face of facts about the Bible." And he declared, "If Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and Jonah are personages in myth and allegory, they cannot be historical people at the same time no matter how sincere one's faith." In a letter to the editor of the UC Observer (April 1, 1968) Rev. W.G. Onions of Winnipeg, Manitoba, called verbal inerrancy of Scripture "nonsense." Not surprisingly, The uniqueness of Christ has also come under attack. In an Observer article *The Many Faces of Faith*, Pauline Webb writes that we are on the brink of a new ecumenism. This new ecumenism means coming closer together with people of other faiths, such as the Hindus and the Muslims. All roads lead to God. Says Webb, "I am compelled to say in all honesty, 'No, Jesus is not the only way,' if that is taken to mean that all who do not know the name of Jesus have lost the way, have no passport to heaven." Evangelicals have a hard time in the UC. Rev. K.D. McKibbin, an Ottawa-area UC minister who studied "Clergy Abuse" says that "Evangelical and charismatic are unacceptable things to be in the United Church."

In the April 1990 issue of *Saturday Night*, Ivor Shapiro wrote a telling article "The Benefit of the Doubt," reflecting on the gay ordination issue in the U.C. Shapiro argues, "The gay ordination crisis was threatening to empty its pews and its coffers. That's when the United Church of Canada began discovering what really holds it together: not knowing what to believe." Shapiro describes the UC as a church which has capitulated to agnosticism and become a spiritual wasteland. He notes, "Doctrine, schmocctrine, says the United Church: in this church it is acceptable not to know what to believe."

Everything is up for grabs. And he comments, "Without dogma, the church has only one dynamic-social activism." This explains its strong support for the Church coalitions, called "the new frontier of ecumenism." The Canadian Council of Churches is also heavily involved. And the CRC is an active participant as well. The IRC notes, "Our council's representatives (at the Canadian Council of Churches) have been full participants in the justice work of three joint task forces of the member churches. They have observed the work of other 'coalitions' as well. Because of our cooperation in these task forces, our Executive Secretary (Rev. Arie Van Eek) has a seat on the supervisory Commission for Justice and Peace. This CJP is one of the three commissions of the CCC."

### **The Canadian Council of Churches**

The CCC was an outgrowth of the 'liberal philosophical and theological' assumptions held by many mainline Canadian church leaders. The founders' approach was to establish unity on the basis of the "lowest common denominator." It was basically a continuation of the liberal social gospel movement. It was commended to the Anglican General Synod in 1943 on the

basis "that we must have sufficient organization to examine more closely into industrial and economic matters." The CCC was officially born in September, 1944.

What are the implications of joining the CCC? If it does become a member, the CRC will have entered the World Council of Churches through the back door as the CCC is regarded by the WCC as an associate council. The matters dealt with by the CCC's department of Ecumenical Affairs include securing financial support for the World Council from the member churches in Canada.

Thomas F. Best, an executive secretary in the WCC's sub-unit on Faith and Order, calls councils such as the CCC, "the most pervasive and significant expressions of the ecumenical movement." This fact has led the CRC to say 'no' to both the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA and to the WCC. Synod of 1967 said that joining the WCC meant giving recognition to churches with a radically different interpretation of the gospel. The majority of the delegates believed that simply by joining, "a genuinely Reformed church would inevitably have to endorse the inclusive methodology of the WCC, recognize all member churches as churches of Christ, and as consequence relativize and confuse its own Reformed witness. These conclusions are worth noting as one of the stated reasons for joining is the "opportunities to influence the direction of the CCC." However, judging by the trends in the CRC, it seems to have become more influenced by the ecumenical movement than vice versa.

### Summary OF Objections

How can the CRC join the CCC when there is no agreement on what is crucial and central to Biblical teaching? We often tend to forget that our Lord prayed only for oneness in the truth (John 16: 16). The Christ of the Scriptures gathers His church through His Word and Spirit. A true ecumenism requires the exclusion from the church of Christ those who deny the core doctrines of the Gospel. I am not talking about questions of minor importance. As I have shown, some of the key UC leaders challenge the doctrine of the atonement. This is a matter of salvation. Dr. Cornelius Van Til observed, "Those who implicitly or explicitly deny the substitutionary atonement of Christ in history should be given no place in his church." An agreed upon core of doctrinal orthodoxy should function as a major foundation for Christian fellowship and cooperation. Differences over matters not essential for salvation shouldn't hinder fellowship. The Reformer Martin Luther was willing to develop separate styles of worship and discuss them with other protestants. But he also believed that there were matters worth disputing over and, if necessary, warranting a break in fellowship. He broke with the Church of Rome over salvation issues.

The CCC is not governed by a Biblically inspired framework for their socio-economic proposals and programs. Their inspiration comes more from liberation theology than the Gospels. The CCC is wedded to the spirit of our times. Says

Reginald Bibby, "In attempting to meet the new with the new, religious organizations come precariously close to letting culture dictate the content and the forms of faith. The demands of the market can become the key criteria for determining the nature and the shape of religion.

Church leadership is also in a state of crisis. Denominational loyalty has weakened. The ties to traditional mainline churches are no longer what they used to be. People in the pew become more reluctant to spend their money on projects suggested by denominational officers. Margaret Helen Ogilvie, professor of law at Carleton University, notes that the rift between the clergy and the laity has never been so great as today. She attributes it-almost entirely- to disputes about the causes of aboriginals, refugees, visible minorities and other groups traditionally on the fringes of Canadian society.

It is also noteworthy that mainline churches spend more energy on social and international problems than on the task of evangelizing our nation and the world. While conservative churches are making progress in this area, the mainline churches have shown a marked decline.

The Canadian Council of Churches is not an option for the CRC. We must seek fellowship with other Christians, but not at the expense of truth.

Johan D. tangelder  
Fall, 1993