

Confessing Churches in Confusing Times (2)

The Present As A Mirror

Having served as an ordained Christian Reformed Church (CRC) minister since 1967, I have seen rapid changes in church and society. Second services with catechism sermons were the norm. In my second congregation, a large men's society regularly met to discuss the Reformed confessions. Christian organizations and Christian education were promoted to the best of our ability. For years, I could preach in a CRC church without having to ask a week ahead of time about its order of worship. All churches had the same format of worship. Now many churches are changing and adapting their order of service to respond to the wishes of postmodern people. CRC Synod 2005 said there is continuing need "for a fresh, contextualized, theological reflection that addresses the culture of our time." The Task force stated, "it is also our belief that expressions of the gospel must be open to insights we gain from our brothers and sisters in places such as China, Honduras, and Nigeria."

Traditions are no longer considered important. Many argue that tradition is hanging on to something outdated. But Charles Colson rightly claims, "If you lose the community of memory of one generation, you can make it up. But after two generations, you've severed the arteries of civilization that transmit truth and virtue. Clearly, the stakes are enormous, not just for the church but also for our culture." As I look in the mirror of the present, I wonder whether confessional Reformed churches will have a future. In his essay *What about a Bicentennial? Mr. and Mrs. CRC* (Pro Rege, Sept. 2007) James Schaap wonders, "Will there be a bicentennial?" He says that the answer to the question will likely be determined by the social and cultural forces outside the denomination, which are both powerful and destructive *on all denominations - not just the CRC*.

I am not opposed to change. But we must be aware that the tradition that gets radically changed every generation is not really a tradition. For tradition to be tradition, it must have a considerable amount of permanence and changelessness. Tradition can become tradition only when it is passed from one generation to another. This then is my concern: What are we going to pass on to the next generation? As a church we must preserve the ability to absorb the meaning of what it means to be a Reformed Christian. And then we must transmit it to our children.

Our Postmodern Culture

Is it still possible in our postmodern-relativistic culture for confessional churches to survive, let alone grow? Our culture is a fragmented place of choice and freedom, rampant consumerism that yields little comfort or meaning. It is less and less formed by the great traditions and Christian heritage. We witness the secularization of modern life, which undermines religious authority and beliefs. As a result our society has become deprived of the wonder of worship.

In Canada, multiculturalism is official government policy, sanctioning a plurality of life-styles, whereby every individual is offered a diversity of opinions to form his own world and life view. Consumerism and personal choice have become a lifestyle for many. Increasing value is put upon our decision making. Many claim, "I have a sovereign right to my own conscience." No

wonder Time Magazine argued the real Person-of-the-Year for 2006 was and is the individual. Moral absolutes are said to be old-fashioned. Relativists claim that nothing can be known for certain, except one thing, that nothing can be known for certain. Thus they protect themselves from the smiling scorn with which they regard everyone else. TV programs supply ongoing stimulation with major demands on the viewers' attention or interpretative faculties. This supply of information and entertainment has a drug-like effect on a vast number of people. Against this background of the explosion of entertainment, the word of God comes across to many people as simply boring.

What I have written so far may seem like a litany of gloom and doom. But we must understand the times and the influence of our postmodern culture on our youth. Unfortunately, many churches seem to have caved in to postmodern culture and let down their youth. Dr. Ben Witherington of Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Ky., said that popular culture is "haunted" by Jesus but is biblically illiterate. Sociologist Christian Smith has noted that "most religious teenagers aren't well educated in the faith or given much practice in articulating their beliefs and why and how they matter." And if they are not taught, they will have nothing to pass onto the generation following them.

The General Church Scene

Many argue that religious tastes have greater currency than religious heritage. Denominational loyalty is disappearing. Some churches give themselves names such as "Community Church", "Worship Centre", or "Neighbourhood Fellowship". Some relativize the importance of the church. They say, "No one is going to ask me when I stand at the gate of heaven, 'Of which church are you a member?'" Starting with the priority of the individual, people are told that they must find "the church of their choice that best fits their needs." Seeker services have to meet the aspirations of potential "religion shoppers." Not God's choice, but individual preference then constitutes the gathering of the church. This consumer's mentality has become one of the major heresies of our century. A subtle distinction is now made between saying the church is Christ's body, apart from which a Christian cannot live, and saying that a Christian should find a church meeting his needs.

The church has little authority when individual choice reigns supreme over our decision-making. Consequently, church discipline has become extremely difficult to exercise. If a church member doesn't agree with his/her council or has acquired a different taste of music and worship than offered in his/her congregation, he/she simply moves to another denomination or a non-denominational church. (In a recent series of articles, "The Circulation of the Saints", I addressed this phenomenon.)

The emergent postmodern way of doing and being a church is another growing phenomenon. This new way of doing church finds its focus in the postmodern holy grail of tolerance, diversity, generosity, openness, inclusion, anti-dogmatism, and subjectivity. Emergent leaders have little interest in theology and an understanding of its importance. Consequently, they are in no hurry to become confessional churches. In fact, they are either dismissive or even disdainful of the formulation of doctrinal statements. They stress their provisional, their non-binding character, claiming that they are the product of human effort, not to be confused with the changeless truth that is in the mind of God and beyond our reach.

Some also claim that the formulation of binding confessions contradicts the self-sufficiency of Scripture and destroys Christian liberty. And often when confessions are discussed, the cries of well-intentioned believers tell us that we should preach only Jesus. "No creed but Christ," is their slogan. But we cannot preach Jesus without arriving at an increasing clarity of God's great plan of redemption. Others have the slogan: "Deeds, not creeds." They speak of a life of discipleship rather than assent to any confessional standard, right conduct rather than right teaching. But they are mistaken in their belief that the deed is more important than the content of faith. No one has been shot for being nice, but thousands have been martyred for their verbal expression of their faith.

Church development experts speak about "meeting people's needs." Religion is re-packaged by mega-churches. No commitment and no obligations are required. Doctrines are either abandoned or modified by cultural context. The mention of sin, repentance, and the doctrine of justification by faith are taboo, and replaced by a therapeutic message. The focus is on marketing techniques. The warning against "Hell" is seldom heard. But Jesus talked much about the coming judgment. We must also ask the question, "Do we warn against the judgment to come?" If not, the next generation won't believe it. One generation neglects the belief; the next generation rejects it.

The Disunity of the Church

Church history is a history of a broken unity, which should grieve all of us. In an article *Biblical Basis for Ecclesiastical Union*, John Murray (1898-1975), Orthodox Presbyterian Professor at Westminster, Philadelphia, wrote, "The fragmentation and consequent lack of fellowship, harmony, and co-operation which appear on the ecclesiastical scene are a patent contradiction of the unity exemplified in that which Jesus referred when he said, 'as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee.'" Murray echoed the sentiment of the Reformers, who had no intention of founding new churches. Their aim was to simply work for the renewal of the Christian Church. They wanted to return to the early church fathers and the Bible. But it didn't turn out that way. In every country where the Reformation took hold, the church fragmented. Over the centuries, they have become increasingly divided over personal and doctrinal differences. The late Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones spoke of the endless divisions that have taken place among "men who have held to the same evangelical faith. They have divided over personality, they have divided on subtle, particular emphases." And he noted, "There is a multiplicity of denominations, and men do not hesitate to set themselves up and to start new denominations – not in terms of vital truth but in terms of matters which are not even secondary, but of third-rate, fourth-rate, even perhaps twentieth-rate importance." But there is also testimony from history to the terrible dangers of denominations which started on the right track, but gradually changed, almost imperceptibly, into something contradictory to the Gospel. For example, the *Christian Post* (Oct. 30, 2007) reports that several congregations have already voted this year to disaffiliate with the PC (USA) - the largest Presbyterian denomination in the USA - and more are expected to leave in the coming years. The conflict began in 2001 when the PC(USA) would not affirm the singular saving Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Today Reformed churches are more divided, even fragmented, than those of nearly any other confessional tradition. There seems little motivation to defend a robustly distinctive Reformed theology. Many claim that Reformed liturgy is frozen in time. Words such as church order and church government, institutional church are held in low regard, or at the minimum accepted with a cool reserve. People associate these concepts with hardness, being unspiritual, and dead formalism. They argue that the latter have very little to do with spirituality, piety and fear of the Lord.

How do we find answers for our situation? What does the Gospel mean to a person living in a secularized-postmodern culture? What is the message people within and outside the church need to hear today? How do we say it in such a way that it touches people's hearts and minds? How can we stop the drift away from the Christian faith and the Christian church, especially among the young people? What must we do to remedy the loss of evidence of the Holiness and Majesty of God in the lives of church members and in the surrounding culture? But despite all the trials and questions we should remember that the church is not a debating club, but the revelation of the body of Christ.

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