

No Fence around the Pulpit !

At the next meeting (1971) of the Council of the Christian Reformed Church in Canada, the Committee on Inter-Church Relations will bring its report. The main item of this report is the contact with the Presbyterian Church in Canada. The committee had cordial contacts with the P.C.inC., and they sensed "a ready acceptance of our churches as being one with them in the Lord, but no great hurry to come to organizational unity." On the basis of their contacts and study, the committee will recommend:

1. That our committee be authorized to develop the contact that has been initiated.
2. That local churches and pastors be urged to develop informal contacts with their Presbyterian neighbours, so that there may be growing understanding on various levels.
3. That the new ordination questions of the P.C.inC. (appendix A) be recommended to the churches for study and for discussion with local Presbyterian contacts, and that reactions to these questions be sent to our committee." (1)

Over the years I have had contact with many fine evangelical Presbyterians. As a member of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, an organization similar to the National Association of Evangelicals, I have come to deeply appreciate their love for the Lord and His Church. Presbyterians such as Dr. M. DiGangi and Dr. W. Fitch are making very valuable contributions to the Reformed faith.

The P.C.inC. is the third largest Protestant denomination in Canada. In 1967 it claimed the allegiance of approximately two hundred thousand communicant members. It draws most of its support from people of England, Scotland and Ireland, but it also ministers to other races in Canada. It believes to be in "historic continuity with the Church of Scotland as reformed in 1660." (2)

A Confessional Church

Like other Reformed churches, the P.C.inC. is a confessional body. It accepts the Westminster Confession of faith (1646) as "a subordinate standard of doctrine", the Declaration of Faith concerning Church and Nation 1954, and holds the Larger and Shorter Catechism, drawn up by the Westminster Assembly as "agreeable to the Word of God, and in nothing contrary to the received doctrine, worship, discipline and government of this Kirk." (3) And the P.C.inC. accepts and uses the great, historic creeds of the Christian faith. "Thus the Presbyterian Church in Canada is a confessional church, pledged to a definite corpus of doctrine as her understanding of the truth of God." (4) But how true is this church to its confession? Rev. D. L. Campbell writes "Ordination vows are a special kind of promissory oath. In an oath we call upon God to witness our sincerity and honesty in our profession. We solemnly avow that we are telling the truth, and that we are voluntarily assuming serious future obligations which we swear to fulfill, God helping us. . . . Ordination vows are then the church's "fencing" of the pulpit. In them an ordinand pledges himself to the Scripture as the

infallible rule of faith and life, and to the subordinate standards as a reliable and authoritative exposition of the biblical faith. He must pledge himself to abide by it in all his teaching, and to preach the gospel in accordance with the doctrinal principles contained in it" (5) Thus the ordinand voluntarily binds himself by a solemn oath to maintain and defend the doctrine of the church. But here the weakness of the P:C.inC. is revealed and the basic problem we have to face in our search for further contact. Rev. L. Campbell writes about the loyalty of the Presbyterians to the creed "But here some do not agree. There are those, such as the ministers of the Presbyterian church who held the subordinate standards of that church up to ridicule during the attempt to push the United Church of Canada Bill through the Private Bills Committee. These men had sworn to maintain and defend the doctrine they were ridiculing. When asked, one frankly admitted that when he had been ordained it was, 'with mental reservation' that he had taken his ordination vows." (6) He strongly rebukes those who had mental reservations when they took their ordination vows. "The doctrine of the lawfulness of mental reservation is more suitable to Jesuitical deception than to Christian honesty and truthfulness." (7) The history of the P.C.inC. justifies this stern rebuke.

A Compromising Church

What has the P.C.inC. done with its confession? Is there still doctrinal discipline? The record is one of compromise, due to indifference rather than to tolerance. (8) By 1910 the PRESBYTERIAN affirmed editorially that the critical approach to the Scriptures "is held, so far as we know, by all the men who teach the Bible in the theological colleges of the Presbyterian Church in Canada." (9) As a matter of fact, no man has been deprived of the pulpit or teaching because of his particular views, (10) The last "heresy" trial was held in 1876 and 1877 when the General Assembly dealt with Rev. D. J. Macdonnell's view of eternal punishment. He believed eternal punishment to be inconsistent with the concept of an all-loving God. The assembly adopted a compromise position. Although Rev. Macdonnell's personal doubts had not been totally removed, he agreed to honour his ordination vows. (11) Such doctrinal laxity has been a part of the P.C.inC. for years, even during and after the great disruption of 1925.

The Anti-Union Forces

In, 1925 the Methodists, the Congregationalists and a large segment of the Presbyterians formed the United Church of Canada. The anti-union forces continued on as the Presbyterian Church. This was done at great cost. Many sacrifices were made to keep the historic continuity of Presbyterianism in Canada. Why was the union so persistently and bitterly opposed among Presbyterians? Observers have a variety of answers.

We cannot enter into a discussion of the many issues which were at stake. But there were some marked and major objections. The ethnic element was strong. There was a fear of identity loss. (12) Many were deeply concerned about the strong element of "evangelism and social service" which was especially a part of Methodism. Many

warned that union would mean bureaucracy and "Religio-political" involvement. Some theologians feared an avalanche of liberalism through union. Reasons for anti-unionism were varied. But the desire to keep the church pure was not at the heart of the great struggle. Dr. Grant suggests that "Many anti-unionists were among the most fervent supporters of missions, prohibition or liberal theology." (13) It is now not so difficult to see why Presbyterians can have such a wide range of theological opinions within their rank's. Those who did not enter the United Church of Canada had such different reasons for their action that it is hard to determine what some meant with Presbyterianism. The theological spectrum ranged all the way from liberalism to fundamentalism. The Presbyterians have an open house. The confessional standards do not function in "fencing" of the pulpit.

Ecumenical Activities

The P:C.inC. in a broad sense is an ecumenical minded church. It has been and is eager to co-operate "with other denominations. It is a member of the Canadian Council of Churches, the World Council of Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Observers have been sent to the meetings of the American Consultation of Church Union. (14) Evangelical Presbyterians do feel rather uneasy with these ecumenical alignments. A good number have joined the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and found in this movement ways to express and put into action their orthodoxy.

Considering the serious struggle in 1925 it is remarkable how amiable the relationship with the United Church of Canada has become. Within the last decade the P.C.inC. has called in representatives of the United Church to help it to find its own distinctive witness in Canadian society. (15) It has become quite common, on the local level, for Presbyterians to have joint summer worship services with the United Church or the Convention Baptists. Where is the Presbyterian identity during the summer months in, many small towns and villages across Canada? The Presbyterian Committee on inter-church relations asked its denomination "What does the church feel should be our distinctive contribution to the life of God's church. in this land?" The general consensus from the replies received was "The presbyteries appear unanimous in feeling that there is something distinctive about being a Presbyterian, but they do not appear to know exactly how to define this feeling. They seem to feel that it would be a great loss. to the Church of God, if The Presbyterian Church in Canada should disappear, but it is clear from the submissions that the church should try to explain itself to itself at this period of its history," (16)

Shall we start walking on the broad ecumenical path with the P.C.inC. or shall we stay on the narrow road of orthodoxy? It is not very fashionable to walk on the narrow path of orthodoxy. It is so easy to climb on the ecumenical band wagon. If we want to remain true to the Word of the Lord and our Reformed heritage we cannot venture any further into a relationship with a church which is unable to fence off its pulpits..

Bibliography:

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- (2) *A Short History of The Presbyterian Church in Canada*, Presbyterian Publications, Toronto, Ont., 1967, p. 8.
- (3) Ibid. p. 11.
- (4) ed. W. Stanford Reid. "*Chosen and Ordained.*" A Study of the Presbyterian Doctrine of *Ordination*, 1963, p. 15.
- (5) Ibid. p. 17.
- (6) Ibid. p. 17.
- (7) Ibid. p. 18.
- (8) *A Short History*, p. 69.
- (9) Ibid. p. 69.
- (10) Ibid. p. 69.
- (11) Ibid. 67 cf. Douglas J. Wilson. *The Church Grows in Canada*, p. 116.
- (12) J. Webster Grant. *The Canadian Experience of Church Union*. p. 55.
- (13) Ibid. p. 54.
- (14) *The Acts and Proceedings of the Ninetieth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada*. p. 399.
- (15) *The Canadian Experience of Church Union*. p. 75.
- (16) *The Acts and Proceedings*. p. 438.