

What Is Fundamental and What Is Nonessential in the Church?

Anyone, who follows the current trends within the church, knows that there is a drift toward polarization. There is controversy over women in ecclesiastical office, and whether children may partake of the Lord's Supper. Questions are raised about the relevancy of the views of the Reformers and alleged cultural and temporal conditioning of the Scriptures. As the world watches us embroiled in conflict, they don't understand what the disagreements are about, but they will judge on the basis of how we approach our differences and how we deal with one another.

Ought we to allow differences? Should we be tolerant and cover up our differences in order to keep the peace? How can we stay together while there is such a diversity of opinions? Where do we draw the line and say, we can't go any further? What are the fundamental and what are the nonessential articles of the faith? This last question has been on the minds of many theologians.

1. John Calvin (1509-1564)

John Calvin was deeply concerned about doctrinal unity. In the interest of harmony within the churches of the Reformation he was ready to moderate his position, without compromising his convictions. His outlook was ecumenical. Tolerance was shown in his exchange of correspondence with the Lutherans. He also corresponded with the British Archbishop Cranmer concerning the latter's project for the convening of an international congress of Reformed churchmen "As nothing tends more injuriously to the separation of the churches than heresies and disputes respecting the doctrine of religion," wrote Cranmer on March 20, 1552, "so nothing tends more effectually to unite the churches of God and more powerfully to defend the fold of Christ, than the pure teaching of the Gospel and harmony of doctrine." Calvin replied that it was "to be reckoned among the greatest evils of our time that the churches are so estranged from each other that scarcely the common intercourse of society has place among them. Much less that holy communion of the members of Christ which all persons profess with their lips, though few sincerely honor it with their practice." He added the famous comment that, "if he could be of any service, he would not shrink from crossing ten seas, should that be necessary for the purpose of attending such a gathering."

In his *Institutes* Calvin wrote that not all doctrines are of equal importance. But some are essential for salvation. Such doctrines are: "God is One; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God's mercy; and the like. Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which still do not break the unity of the faith ... Since all men are somewhat beclouded with ignorance, either we must leave no church remaining, or we must condone delusion in those matters which can go unknown without harm to the sum of religion and without loss of salvation" (IV.1.12).

Calvin also wrote that differences of opinion over nonessential matters should in no ways be the basis of schism among Christians. He warned against leaving the church because

of any petty dissension. We must try to correct what displeases us. When a believer voluntarily deserts the outward communion of the church where the Word of God is preached and the sacraments are administered he is without excuse. Must the believers stay in the church at all cost? Is there no threshold to cross? Yes, there is. Calvin says, "The errors which ought to be pardoned are those which do not harm the chief doctrine of religion, which do not destroy the articles of religion, on which all believers ought to agree...But as soon as falsehood breaks into the citadel of religion and the sum of necessary doctrine is overturned and the use of the sacraments is destroyed, surely the death of the church follows --Just as a man's life is ended when his throat is pierced or his heart morally wounded" (IV.2.1).

2. Dr. Herman Bavinck (1854-1921)

Dr. Herman Bavinck was another Reformed theologian who wrote and spoke extensively about unity and diversity in the church. In 1888 he delivered address entitled "The Catholicity of Christendom and Church." Bavinck was a true son of the 1834 Secession, but his interests and study led him beyond this circle. He was a man of noble character, walked humbly before God and was courteous towards his fellowman. He had the rare ability to appreciate his opponent's opinions, and tried to fully understand his thought so that he could do justice to what was written or said. He was a brilliant scholar and able theologian. He deplored the divisions within the Church of Christ, but believed that the unity of the church, so gloriously depicted in the Scriptures, will never be regained. In a brochure published in 1912, he wrote. "The unity of the church and Christian Christendom is gone forever: the differentiation is on the increase in every area also in religion." Bavinck was well acquainted with the issues within his denomination. Some members were isolationists, who opposed anyone not belonging to their camp. And there was the more broadminded Brummelka who kept in touch with Groen Van Prinsteren.

Bavinck saw his world increasing in godlessness: the secular spirit was taking hold. He understood that Christians needed each other in the battle against unbelief. He was convinced that Christians, instead of battling each other should stand together in their opposition to the encroachment secularism, evolutionism and liberalism. Yet Bavinck refused to compromise the Savior. whose voice he heard in the Scriptures. He had a true catholicity of spirit as well as an unswerving loyalty to the Truth. He was thoroughly Reformed and worked along confessional lines. For Bavinck, the Gospel went beyond the personal salvation of the individual soul. "The gospel," he wrote, "is a message of good tidings not only for each individual, but also for all of humanity, for the family and society and government, for art and science. for the whole cosmos, for the groaning creature." Bavinck was convinced that this message must be proclaimed by the church. The New Testament paints a beautiful picture of the unity and catholicity of this church. This unity is described by Jesus and His apostles as the vine and the branches, the bridegroom and the bride, the temple and the home. Jesus prayed for the unity of the church and is still praying.

The first century churches were different in origin, in culture, in nationality and different in historical background, but in Christ there was unity. Bavinck wrote, "This catholicity of the

church, as the Scriptures portray to us and the first congregations show us, is of gripping beauty. Whoever shuts himself up in the narrow circle of his own little church or group (conventikel) does not know her and has never experienced in his life her power and comfort" (De Kalholiticiteit van Christendom en Kerk). No wonder that the apostles warned against schism. Already in the first century the glorious unity of the church was endangered. Judaistic and gnostic heresies arose and found acceptance in congregations. Yet Bavinck said that in the light of the catholicity of the church, discipline was applied by the early church leaders in order to bring the errant sinner back to the fold of Christ.

What is the divided church today? Especially since the sixteenth century Reformation, the trend has been in the direction of constant secession and division. Dr. Bavinck was convinced that these divisions are a sin before God. Therefore, Reformed Christians never made secession a matter of historic principle. In 1834 they were forced into secession.

Bavinck was convinced that unity and catholicity can only be realized in this present world on the basis of the truth of God as revealed in Scripture. To be a real church of Jesus Christ, as far as this is possible in this sinful world, the church ought to show the three marks of the church. The church must be a place where the Gospel is preached, the sacraments administered and discipline applied. But her separation from the world and unto Christ may never lead to isolation from the world. She must stand in the midst of life.

Bavinck emphasized that believers are duty bound to remain in their own church as long as she does not hinder them in being true to the confessions, and if she does not force them to obey men more than God. He writes that one of the problems we face is the lack of understanding of what the church really ought to be. Says he, "One leaves a church as easy as one joins it. If something does not suit a certain church, one searches without a pinch of conscience for another. It is the taste that ultimately decides. The exercise of discipline becomes impossible this way, she completely loses her character: which minister still dares in good conscience, except in very, very few cases, to make use of the form of excommunication."

Bavinck urges believers to be very careful with the way the term schism and heresy are handled. We should never forget that these evils are great sins. Schismatics are those people who without having any objections to the fundamental teaching of their church separate from her because of some minor point of worship or church government. Heretics are those people who err in the substance of doctrine. Schismatics break the fellowship of the church. Heretics break the unity of doctrine. In this discussion we must keep in mind the Reformed principle of differentiation not only between faith and theology, but also between fundamental and nonessential articles of faith. If these distinctions are not made there will be no end to church divisions.

Bavinck warns those who lightly talk about seceding from a church, "Every sect which holds its own circle for the only church of Christ and believes to be the only one in the possession of truth languishes and dies off, like a branch that is torn from its stem."

As we experience increasing polarization and tensions within our denominations, and show an apparent lack of understanding of the nature of the church, we do well to discuss John Calvin's and Herman Bavinck's thought-provoking arguments on what is fundamental and what is nonessential to the faith.

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