

## Church Doctrines

"At a Reformed Confessional Conference in 1991, "sponsored by the Alliance of Reformed Churches, held in Chicago, representatives from "Biblically Reformed denominations and churches" discussed steps leading toward church unity. The ultimate aim was to form a united Reformed Church, holding to the inerrancy of Scripture and faithful to the confessions. A noble goal! But will this unity ever be achieved?

In 1888, Dr.H.Bavinck (1854-1921), professor of Reformed Dogmatics at the Free University, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, pleaded in his lecture De Katholiciteit van Christendom en Kerk (Catholicity of Christendom and Church) for Christian unity. He mentioned that since the Reformation, the once united Christian church had split into innumerable churches, sects, societies and organizations. Bavinck thanked God for the restoration of the Gospel to the church through the Reformation. But he also said that Protestantism has its dark side. Ever since the 19th century, it has seen more and more fragmentation, especially in the U.S. Bavinck laments that through this development the church itself suffers. More and more Christians see the church as a society you can join or leave at will. When one church does not suit another one is chosen. Taste decides. This makes discipline difficult, if not impossible. But there is a positive side. Bavinck notes that Christianity is still alive, and its health and welfare are a concern for many. He also warns against false unity. A church should not unite for the sake of unity itself. You cannot unite what does not fit.

In 1886, Dr.Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) led a sizeable group out of the Dutch Reformed Church. A new Reformed denomination was established, faithful to the Word and the Confessions. Kuyper dreamed about a united Reformed church. He wrote; "Especially in our serious times in which we live, reunion of those who hold to the Reformed Confessions is a must."

Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones (1899-1981), physician, preacher and Reformed leader, longed for the unity of those of like faith. He wrote, "Everybody seems to be talking about church unity except evangelicals. Surely with our view of Scripture and with our knowledge and understanding of it, we, of all people, ought to be the first to preach the vital necessity of church unity; but we are the last to do so."

### **More than a human institution**

In our time far too many see the Church only as a gathering of people doing their religious thing. The church is considered irrelevant and outmoded. But the church is more than a human institution. The Church at one and the same time is both human and divine. Its members are ordinary human beings but the Church is also the divine body of Christ (1 Cor.12). Martin Luther wrote, "The church is a high, deep, hidden thing which one may neither perceive nor see, but must grasp only by faith, through baptism, sacrament and word."

No thoughtful person can deny that today's Church is suffering. Our own denomination is rent by inner strife. And much time and energy is spent on denominational issues. But all this conflict shows a genuine love for the Lord and concern for the Church and its ministry in the world. With all this controversy we tend to forget that the local congregation is the only concrete manifestation of the Church on earth. Our Lord said, "Upon this rock I will build my church" and the foundation to which He referred was Peter's glorious testimony "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matth.16: 16). This passage shows that the church is not just a human organization but a body of believers who confess Christ as Lord and Saviour and pledge themselves to Him. Through the preaching of the Gospel the church is established. On the day of Pentecost three thousand new converts "were added to their number that day" (Acts 2:41). These new believers and their children came together for fellowship, instruction in the word of God, the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and worship. And in each local church, pastors, elders and deacons were elected or appointed and ordained. Each local church reached out into the community with the Gospel. The local church in Antioch sent Barnabas and Paul to do mission work. The apostle did not write his letters to a denominational head office. When he wrote to the Church at Corinth, he was addressing a local congregation. He addressed churches in Galatia and a church in Ephesus. Through the apostle John, our Lord sent His letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor (Rev.2, 3). All these churches differed in their needs and their problems. Some were spiritually strong, others weak. Some faced doctrinal conflicts others struggled with inter-personal relationships and moral questions. But the outstanding feature was that through Christ they were related to each other. These churches did not exist in isolation. They were conscious of their common bond of faith with other churches. Yet each congregation was a manifestation of the body of Christ. Even today the Church ministers to the world through local congregations.

### **Church Nomads**

In his book, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, Dr. George Marsden observes that one of the striking features of much of evangelicalism is its general disregard for the institutional church. He says, "Even the local congregation, while extremely important for fellowship purposes, is often regarded as a convenience to the individual. Ultimately, individuals are sovereign and can join or leave churches as they please. Often they seem as likely to choose a church because it is 'friendly' as to do so because of its particular teachings." Robert W. Patterson notes the same trend in his article [In Search of the visible Church](#) (*Christianity Today*, March 11, 1991). He writes that many evangelicals seem to feel less and less attached to the church, even at the congregational level. A growing number are even unwilling to commit themselves to any particular congregation. Pollster George Barna calls them "church nomads", attending a church with good preaching on Sunday mornings, show up at a second church with a vibrant youth program for the kids on Sunday evenings, and participate in a small group from a third church during the week. A worrisome trend!

John Calvin called the church a nurturing mother for the souls of believers. When they become disconnected from the church they become spiritual orphans, cut off from spiritual nourishment and growth. St. Augustine considered the church so important that he went so

far as to say, "No salvation exists outside the church." A new Biblical understanding of the church is needed. As soon as one commits him/herself to Christ, he/she becomes incorporated into the church fellowship. The book of Acts records that new converts were received into the church and participated in its responsibilities and privileges. And moral standards were taught. The apostle Paul encouraged believers to live for the Lord according to His law and testimony. Because of decreasing lack of commitment to the church, evangelical Christians (Reformed included) are no longer unanimous in matters of moral conduct and behaviour.

What can be done to bring about a change? We cannot bring about a revival and reformation in our own strength. This is the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. We should certainly not lower Biblical standards. Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones wrote that the first step toward revival is not to bring down the standard of church membership, but to raise it. We must grasp once again the idea of church membership as being the membership of the body of Christ and as the biggest honour, which can come to a man in this world.

### **The Priesthood of Believers**

The priesthood of all believers was a key principle of the 16th century Protestant Reformation. Not the priests alone, but all Christians have direct access to God. And since we are in Christ we share His ministry. As W. H. Griffith-Thomas put so well, "Christianity does not have a priesthood; it is a priesthood, a priesthood for all believers." But how well does this principle function in today's Reformation churches? Has it become a mere slogan? It seems to me that in the "Women-in-office" debate the office of "the priesthood of all believers" has become short changed. Much is said about the special offices of pastors, elders and deacons. These offices were instituted in the New Testament to help equip believers to function in their own respective ministry in the church, not to do the task for them (Eph.4: 11-13). The special offices are temporal in nature, but the priesthood of all believers is eternal. Pastors, elders and deacons won't have a function in the new heaven and earth. The only office which will remain is the office of all believers-prophet, priest and king. There the new song shall be, "You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth" (Rev.5:10). While we are still here on this old earth, we all share in the ministry. The special offices have been ordained to give leadership and focus to our common priesthood. In 1 Peter 1:5 and 2:9, Peter addresses the dispersed Christians of Asia Minor as "a holy Priesthood" and "a royal Priesthood." The priesthood of all believers is precisely for all believers. The apostle Paul described this priestly task as offering "your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship" (Rom.11: 1). All of us are involved in a calling; all of us have a ministry. I thank God for the men and women who are so faithful in their calling. In whatever work we do, we function and minister as Christians. Within the fellowship of the church so much ministry needs to be done by one and all according to the various talents the Lord has given. The church is not a plane in which all passengers fly to the same destination, but with only a few in a responsible position. We all have a task - the youngest as well as the oldest. All are accountable to the Lord for His gifts entrusted to them. I pray that we may regain the Biblical vision of all members seeing themselves as part of a single and Indivisible ministry. The apostle Peter said that we are

a temple of living stones "being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. I: 5).

## **Discipline**

Discipline has not made the church archaic or less attractive. A church without discipline courts moral problems within, doctrinal confusion and the decline of spirituality. That's why the New Testament has so much to say about discipline regarding doctrine and life, and its pastoral and judicial character.

The Lord gave power to the church to exercise the discipline of admission and excommunication (Matt.16: 1-19; 18:15-20; John 20:21-23; I Cor.5: 1-5). But does discipline not conflict with the truth that God is love? Not at all! Because God loves His own, He disciplines His own. "My Son, do not despise the Lord's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in" (Prov. 3:11,12). The author of Hebrews refers to these verses in his argument for discipline (Hebr.12: 5, 6).

One of the most contested measures of discipline concerns not moral but doctrinal issues. Can the church still "silence" theologians whose teaching openly and flagrantly contradict the confessions and creeds of their church? The apostle Paul, the author of that marvelous ode to love - 1 Corinthians 13 is also the one who severely rebukes the false teachers in the churches. And he does not mince words, "If anybody is preaching to you another gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned" (Gal.1: 9). In Titus 3:10 –11, Paul declares that a heretic has to be rejected. "Have nothing to do with him," he says. And that is what happened; such discipline was the practice of the church up to a certain point in history.

For what causes should the church administer discipline? John Owen, English Calvinist theologian (1616-1683), gave this useful summary:

1. Moral evils contrary to the light of mature and express commands or prohibitions of the moral law and the direct rules of the gospel.
2. Offences against the mutual love which is the bond of perfection in the church, if pertinaciously persisted in.
3. False doctrines against the fundamentals in faith or worship, especially if maintained with contention, to the trouble and disturbance of the peace the church.
4. Blasphemy or evil speaking of the ways and worship of God in the church.
5. Desertation or total causeless relinquishment of the society and communion of the church.

## **Peace and Harmony at any Cost?**

We can appreciate Paul's desire to have his "joy complete by being like-minded" (Phil.2: 2). Some say that we must always be positive. They delight in the fact that they are not controversialists. They don't want to offend anybody. They say to pastors, "Give us a

positive message. Why expose error? Our world is negative enough as it is. We should avoid spiritual battles at all cost." But if Martin Luther and John Calvin had taken this attitude, neither the 16th century Reformation would have taken place nor would the Reformed Church itself be in existence. Christian Reformed Church was a result of a well documented split in 1857 from the Reformed Church of America.

For all Paul's longing for harmony, unity and peace, it is remarkable how much time he devoted in exposing error and in admonishing those who lived in contradiction to the Gospel. His beautiful ode to love is found in his first letter to the Corinthian Church written to straighten out their thinking and behaviour. For example, he addresses the proper handling of lawsuits (1 Cor.6: 1-8), the goodness of sexual relations within marriages (7:1-16), the proper attitude for men and women in worship (11:2-16), the use of spiritual gifts (12-14), and the nature and reality of the resurrection (15). In his letter to the Ephesians he wrote that they were engaged in a struggle and exhorted them to use the weaponry available to them (6:1-17) and "to be alert" (6:18). So controversy in the church is not new. It has troubled the church since its very beginning. In Jude 3 we read: "Dear friends, although I was very eager to write you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints." Here we are told to defend the faith. But some argue that we should not spend time defending the faith. Our task is to proclaim it. Of course we must evangelize. But our faith has content. We must preach the Christ of the Scripture. He gave Himself for sinners and rose from the dead on the third day. We must preach truth over against error. This is what the apostles did. And in our momentous times we too must fight the battle of the Lord. Purity of doctrine is still important. We must be able to discern the spirit of the times. This is one of the main reasons why we have the Bible, which is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work"(2 Tim.3: 16f).

### **Liberal or Conservative?**

Wherever I go I find church members labeling each other. People are put into compartments and categories. He is a liberal; he is conservative. He is this or that or the other. Because of my articles, analyzing various trends within the denomination and in theology, I have been classified as a conservative. And therefore, the congregations I serve are also known as conservative.

I don't like labels. Who wants to be put into a compartment? We should avoid labeling like the plague. We are Christians primarily; that is why we must not put a particular label first. The label conservative, often gives the impression of someone who is unbending, unwilling to change or consider new ideas. But rightly understood, this label is not a dishonour. The conservative wing of Protestantism is increasing in number and vitality. In 1972 Dean Kelly, a leading figure in the U.S. National Council of Churches, attributed in his book, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, the growth of the conservatives to the clear answers they provide to the ultimate questions, and to their insistence that commitment costs something in personal lifestyle and personal resources. Do conservatives refuse to entertain any new ideas, hold to the traditions at all cost?

Conservatives read literature which oppose their views. As a matter of fact, conservative theologians are better acquainted with liberal theology than liberal theologians with conservative writings.

Who are the conservatives? A conservative holds to the full inspiration and authority of the Scriptures, the deity of Christ and His substitutionary death on the cross, the doctrine of the Trinity, the need for regeneration by the Holy Spirit and conversion, the belief in the second coming of Christ and a personal, ongoing fellowship of the believer with his/her Lord. A conservative desires to preserve the truth and the values of the historic Christian faith, but his mind is not closed to change if he can be persuaded that a change is both Biblically sound and for the better. The late Dr. Oswald T. Allis, a prominent Old Testament scholar and defender of the faith, once said, "Conservative is a good name for those who hold to the old views as to the authority and trustworthiness of Scripture. For it is their aim to conserve and preserve all that is true and valuable in the biblical scholarship of past generations, especially since the time of the Reformation." If we are labeled because we hold this position, so be it.

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