

## Journalism: A Reformed Daily Newspaper?

Is a Reformed daily newspaper for Canada just another pipe dream, or can it become a reality? Or is a Reformed daily only possible in Holland? I often think about this as I read our city's only daily, *The London Free Press*. The contents of the latter resemble a tabloid - a paper featuring local, foreign, sports and business news, entertainment, political commentary, trivia, scandals and a smorgasbord of opinions. It is a postmodern, politically correct, feminist and humanist daily, which tries to please every sector of society. This paper reminds me constantly that we are involved in spiritual warfare, a clash of ideas and beliefs.

A paper can have a positive as well as negative impact on society. Because of its vital role, Christians need to reclaim journalism with hard-hitting Biblical principles. Journalism is a calling which can aid the transformation of our culture and confront falsehood and injustice. I am convinced that we need a well-written and properly laid out quality daily paper which offers articles on education, children's stories with sound moral content, a column for teenagers as well as parents, all written from a biblical perspective; a paper without lurid pictures which accentuate the sensual, covering major stories in ways that point out inaccuracies and biases of the media outlets. I am envisioning a daily paper which will function not only as a means to inform us about current events, but also to articulate our own principles, a paper which will combat the secular impulses infiltrating our homes and churches while illuminating and expounding the credibility and claims of biblical Christianity.

### News reporting

Why a Christian daily? Does it make a difference how news is reported? How should Christians interpret the constant flow of news? Perhaps some think that it is not even necessary to raise these questions. But all news events are seen through tinted glasses. Many Christians get their news about religion - sparse as the reporting is - mainly through the secular press, which is far from a reliable source. At the national Women in the Media conference in Winnipeg, November 1997, journalists discussed the media's reluctance to cover religious news. The conferees acknowledged "poor religion coverage." And the fact that religion pervades all of life was foreign to most. The general feeling even among Christians was that a religion page in the Saturday issue is already a major concession by the secular press.

One's perspective makes all the difference in news reporting. Once in a while I listen to the short-wave news broadcast from Havana, Cuba. Afterwards I tune into a North American station to listen to the same news. The difference in perspective on the same events is remarkable, to say the least. Havana's reporters portray the actions of the U.S. always in the worst possible way, while U.S. reporters are usually very critical of Fidel Castro's regime. The fact is: no one is neutral.

For example, how does a journalist report on an earthquake? Whether a reporter is a Christian or not makes a difference. A clear illustration is found in the 1820s *Boston*

*Recorder*, which reported in vivid detail on the sudden destruction caused by an earthquake at Aleppo in Syria. It noted that "the crash of falling walls, the shrieks, the groans, the accounts of agony and despair of that long night cannot be described." But the *Recorder* did attempt to describe the likely purpose behind this tragedy: "Earthquakes must be numbered amongst the '*terribilia Dei*,' the 'terrible things of God,' in which His irresistible power to punish His sinful creatures is most awfully displayed: and which fill the human mind with greater terror than any other public calamity."

## **Church and politics**

Although a Christian daily reports church news and comments on developments and trends within the Church, it should not be a paper owned and operated by a church. When problems and controversies occur within the Body of Christ, a Christian daily reports on them accurately and soberly. For example, the moral downfall of Jimmy Swaggart, the flamboyant television evangelist, made sensational news for the secular press. A Christian daily reports on it with a deep sense of grief and humility as this sad news hurts the whole Body of Christ. Concerning conflicts within the church, factual reporting is essential. But reporters cannot take sides. The church papers can do this, but not an independent daily.

In the past, the daily papers were strictly partisan. They were owned and controlled by political parties or people with a political agenda. Some party leaders were even chief editors. I don't believe that this fosters democracy. A measure of independence is necessary, otherwise a paper will find it difficult to comment on party policies or even provide information. A paper needs to keep its editorial independence. It is nigh impossible for a paper beholden to a political party to criticize its blunders. A political party's interest is best enhanced through its own paper.

## **Public opinion**

The Christian press does not derive its perspective from public opinion. The latter, however, plays an important role in the secular press. It constantly seeks the opinion from the public. Poll taking is a very profitable modern enterprise. But polls are always biased. The way questions are phrased and the intents of the polltaker largely determine the results. According to Walter Lippman, one of the pioneers of modern journalism, public opinion is a "weak reed shaped more by emotion than reasoned judgment." Public opinion is not the opinion of the majority in the population. Public opinion can be liberal and politically correct while the majority opinion is conservative. It has its roots in the soil of the French Revolution, which declared man autonomous and without the need of God. The majority is not always right. Moral standards are not founded on a majority of fifty plus one. Public opinion can be easily manipulated for evil ends. Jewish leaders manipulated public opinion and incited the crowd to call for the release of Barabbas and the crucifixion of Jesus. In other words, leaders can whip up a crowd's emotions and then cite its call for action as evidence of "the will of the people." A Christian will have a critical view of public opinion, as the latter does not recognize the

authority of God. Isaac Da Costa ( 1798-1860) accurately observed that it is our duty to rise above public opinion and not to be led by it, but rather to guide it.

### **Christian journalists**

In an essay, "Dr. Kuyper as journalist," published in 1937, A. Zylstra wrote that also in our fallen state we still have the office of prophet, priest and king. This office can only be fully developed when the heart has been transformed by grace. Only then can this office be fully directed to the service of God. This also includes the office of a journalist. Zylstra's view of call is thoroughly biblical. How many pastors have encouraged young people to enter journalism as a calling and kingdom service?

A journalist must love truth and have a sharp intellect, a great capacity for hard work under all circumstances, a feeling for justice, a sense of discretion, a love for learning and discovery, and a warm heart for the needs of others. But the Christian journalist adds a few other essentials to this list. On top of this list is the love for the Lord, His Word and His Church. The Bible is his guide and not public opinion. His conscience is bound by the Word of God. His journalistic work must be directed by it and is done to the glory of God. As Zylstra remarked, "The freedom of journalism is rooted in the freedom of the Word of God."

A Christian journalist is the only one who can shed true light on the world. He knows that the world belongs to the Lord (Psalm 24:1). To understand God's world, a journalist should be a careful student of history. How can one interpret the present without knowing what has gone on in the past? History is not a dust heap. It has meaning. All that happens in our society fits into God's plan and purpose. With this in mind, the journalist can form truly Christian opinions and judgments about news and events.

### **A biblical perspective**

How important is a perspective? A perspective gives a vantage place from which one can scan and analyze events as they happen. A perspective can be compared to a lookout tower. As one stands on it he can see in all directions. The Bible functions as the Christian's lookout tower. It shows where man came from, why he is here, and where he is going. To interpret the news properly, we need to know the nature of mankind, his status as the image bearer of God, his fallen nature, and his calling as a steward of God's world. We will be starkly realistic about human nature. We will see the folly in all the talk about man's innate goodness and his ability to improve the world without divine intervention. We will view a criminal not as a patient who needs a cure, but as one who has broken God's law. We will write about crime, punishment and rehabilitation. We will promote the sanctity of life from the moment of conception to man's last breath, as our times are in the hand of God. We need to know that unbelief and rebellion control man and his ideals about life and the world. We need to see clearly the antithesis principle at work, the clash between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, until the Lord's return in glory and power.

## **A confessional paper**

Since I dream of a Reformed and not just a general Christian paper, the focus should be on the Reformed confessions. A Reformed daily and its journalists are defined and bound by the Three Forms of Unity. Many argue that the confessions should not have a role in the world of work and business. They argue that the confessions are only church documents. But the confessions are not for the institutional church only; they are authoritative for all life, including the work of journalists. The confessions function wherever we live and work. How can one leave his confessions behind in church? What we believe on Sunday should influence what we do on Monday. For example, a journalist influenced by Hal Lindsey's spectacular dispensational views of Israel will have a different way of reporting on the events in the nation of Israel than a Reformed journalist, who believes that the church is the new Israel. He will seek justice for both Jew and Palestinian. No Christian journalist may remain silent about his convictions. Reformed Christian journalists employed by a Reformed Christian daily provide a rallying point for fellow believers and sound a trumpet call for righteousness.

## **Sensationalism**

Should a Christian report on scandals? Clyde Graham, of *The Regina Leader Post*, observes: "I think most newspaper editors, when they get on a kind of pride kick, when they're trying to show that their newspaper is a really great newspaper, what they do is send out their reporters to dig up a few scandals. It's sort of the Watergate syndrome. They feel that's investigative reporting." It is of course much more appealing to get a flashier and easier story than a more substantial and difficult one, especially in our television-saturated times. The profit motive is for secular papers also a vital factor. If a story will sell the paper, why not publish it? Much journalism has degenerated into mere business. News is regarded as what is most saleable. It is what appeals most readily to man's base instinct and sensual appetite. Newspapers, in order to keep their cost down, have come to rely on advertising revenue - the larger the audience reached, the more advertisers and the greater the income.

The aim of secular journalism is to secure an audience, and the more sensational, sordid, dramatic, and tragic a story, the more likely an audience will be secured. Whatever sells is deemed press-worthy. For the sake of profit, therefore, the secular press constantly invades the private lives of the rich and the famous. It reflects the Western world's appetite for vicarious kicks. The West has become a civilization of voyeurs. Celebrities have become more newsworthy than scientists who have made a wonderful contribution to the cure of a serious illness. Material success is viewed as more desirable than a contrite and a broken heart. This appetite for money and the sensational has had tragic consequences. A cataclysmic example is that of Princess Diana, who was constantly haunted by the press. She became the most photographed woman in history. Her fatal car accident in Paris was allegedly caused by press photographers literally hunting for a sensational picture with the hope of selling it for a vast sum of money.

Should everything be published? Reputations have been destroyed by inaccurate and sensational reporting. There are numerous stories of men and women accused of sexual harassment, whose names were published and later on declared innocent. The preoccupation of the secular press with the alleged escapades of President Clinton shows how low journalism can sink. Week after week, Time magazine provides lurid details of the scandals and the men and women involved in them. Our city's paper daily featured articles on the shameful stories.

Before a Christian journalist reports on a story, he will ask whether or not he is breaching the ninth commandment. He will also show respect for people. He knows that he can either ruin a person's name or enhance it. A Christian paper will not publish everything, as it is not profit driven. Dignity and honesty and love for the neighbour play a vital role in deciding what should be printed. Yet a Christian paper should not cover up wrong doings in the name of love and decency. It must be honest and forthright. Marvin Olasky suggests in his book, *Prodigal Press: The Anti-Christian Bias of the American News Media*, that the proper use of sensationalism should win back readers who view tragedy as amusement rather than education. He notes:

The Christian reporter's goal should be to provide a complete account, material and spiritual, as best he can within the limits of everyday journalism. If a Christian wants to report only the elevating and not the depressing, he is forgetting that in Christianity there is no repentance without an awareness of sin, no triumph without suffering, and no resurrection without the cross.

## **Sports**

Should a Reformed paper have a sports section? In most papers the sports section is substantial, a feature faithfully and devotedly read by sports fans. A Reformed paper will not report on Sunday sports, but not all sports reporting should be banned. Every sport can become an idol. For many sports has become a religion. However, we can't skirt around sports, pretending that it has no place in life.

A Christian sports editor carefully sifts the important from the trivial. Major sports events can be discussed in a responsible and interesting manner, without resorting to sensationalism or idolizing a famous sportsman or woman. The Reformed community has not done well in developing a biblical view on sports. A Christian daily can make a vital contribution in this area of life.

## **The profit motive**

A newspaper cannot exist without advertising. It is the bread and butter of dailies. Millions are spent on ads. Modern advertising creates needs. It reflects the mores of our society. It tells us what we ought to wear, to eat, and what kind of a car we should drive. It encourages consumerism. Advertising, combined with easy credit and plastic cards, has led people to buy luxury items they couldn't afford. Millions are over their ears in debt. Advertisers see newspaper readers as consumers of products. They are out for

the dollar rather than to dispense information about a product. The influence of advertizing should never be underestimated.

Christian newspapers are dependent on advertising for their income as much as the secular press. But it is guided by a different ethic. Does a paper have to accept each ad? No, it doesn't. A proper ad features and recommends an article. Discernment is used. For example, if the book review editor cannot recommend a certain book, an ad for that book is not acceptable. Cigarette ads as well as liquor and ads promoting gambling should be refused. How can a Christian paper warn against smoking, drinking and gambling if ads promoting them are inserted? This would not be consequent. The standard for advertising is the Ten Commandments. In other words, I am suggesting normed advertising.

## **Conclusion**

In our secular times we need a prophetic voice. In my series of articles on journalism, I have tried to make a case for a Reformed Christian daily as a vehicle of such a voice. I have shown that what I am suggesting is not new. In Canada as well as in Holland and the United States, the daily press was Christian. In Holland there are still a few Christian newspapers and one specifically Reformed - *Nederlands Dagblad* (Netherlands Daily). In conclusion, I want to point out that the best news is yet to come. The news of the world will be history some day. We are waiting and longing for the greatest news event of all times, the second coming of Christ in glory. This will be the last and the best news. May the Lord find us faithful in our calling as prophets, priests, and kings when He returns.

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