

## 10. DO NEW MEMBERS HAVE TO ADJUST THEMSELVES TO OUR REFORMED WAYS, OR DO WE HAVE TO ADJUST OUR CHURCH LIFE TO THEM?

In this question comes to light the fear (yes, the fear!) of some among us that, in case the LORD would bless our evangelistic endeavours, and several "outsiders" would become "insiders," the true Reformed character of our churches and our Reformed ways might be endangered. Thus the "end" would be worse than the "beginning." Where would we end up if many other believers would "enter" and mix with our congregations which are, let us be honest, quite set in their ways?

This is an interesting topic because it forces us, first of all, to take a look at ourselves, and ask the question, "are all these 'set ways' purely a result of our desire to live according to the Scriptures, or are they also mixed with elements of a *tradition* which, as such, need not be 100% Scriptural?" Are they, maybe, of ethnic origin?

"*Tradition*" . . . , in using this term we may easily slip into a wrong direction. Outside our circles this term is used regularly. It is then understood as follows. All churches which are in the world today, find their common root in the one ecumenical church of the first centuries. However, by reason of history, of nationality, of conflicts, even of climate, they have grown apart. Essentially there is not that much difference, considering their common origin, but each has its own "tradition," i.e., something particular that has been passed on (that's what the word tradition means) from generation to generation. But all are branches of the same trunk, even of the same Vine, Jesus Christ. Their differences are not really essential, and thus there is nothing valid against their joining together as they do in the World Council of Churches and National Alliances. They can only learn from each other, keep each other in balance, and so together show something of the "many-sided," "many-coloured" wisdom of God (Ephesians 3:10). All those different "colours" stem from the one light that is broken up in the spectrum from infra-red to ultra-violet.

It sounds nice but it isn't nice. It is a clear denial of the biblical teaching that the truth is one and that the truth makes one, unites.

While rejecting this fantasy out of hand, we have not yet answered the question whether not also Reformed Churches, however much they want to remain faithful to the Reformation, the Return to the Word of God, show in their lives some fragments of a "tradition" which need not and may not be super-imposed upon the truly ecumenical character of the Church.

It cannot be denied that we here in Canada have sometimes been "accused" of being "Dutchie," whatever that may mean. In several ways we differ in our daily customs from the customs followed in what for many

of us is an adopted, a new homeland. Just to mention a "neutral" example. An evening visit among people from Dutch extraction starts with coffee, and more coffee right from the start; later on the bottle may be put on the table. Our fellow-citizens have a different custom. Whether they offer you a drink or not, coffee plus some snacks come towards the end of the evening.

Then there is smoking in and around the church building. In The Netherlands that was simply the thing to do. Ecclesiastical meetings were held in thick clouds of tobacco-smoke. There is even a Dutch saying, "het is geen man die niet roken kan," you are not really a man if you cannot smoke. Happily, in recent years cigarette smoking has gone down drastically, although the younger boys and especially girls seem to make up for the difference. In several congregations smoking is simply forbidden around the church building.

But try to think what impression that made on our fellow citizens in previous years, the offense we gave to other Christians when they saw us leaving church smoking! If that was a "tradition," we may only be thankful that it is dying, not in the last place because it finally dawned upon us that "it just was not done" on church property. We would not think of urging a new member to adopt our custom and make church decisions while surrounded by smoke so thick that you could slice it.

Take another example. Many a person has occasionally, while on a trip, business or not, attended a church service of another so-called "denomination." It must have struck them how cordially and warmly they were welcomed, even sometimes from the pulpit. Whether that was all meant seriously is not for us to judge. The cordiality was there. At the same time, we have heard complaints of visitors that, although they liked the sermon and the singing, they were made to feel like strangers; rather stared at than cordially welcomed.

It may be our shyness (who laughs there?) or something else, but in this way we may have put stumbling blocks in the way of those who might otherwise have come again, and made to feel at home. One doesn't return when one is made to feel a stranger. We may say, "but if they are hungry for the pure preaching, they should overlook the cool attitude of our people." But we should not say a thing like that, because we call ourselves Bible-believing Christians.

Does, then, the Bible have to say something about this too? Most certainly! What more exalted examples do we have than the Lord Christ Himself, and His great apostle Paul! Their combined example gives us the answer to both sides of the question under discussion.

One may say that our Saviour was crucified not in the last place because He went against "the tradition of the elders." Several examples could be mentioned, to begin with the Sermon on the Mountain (Matthew 5-7). Take Mark 7:1-13. The Pharisees took offence at the fact that the dis-

ciples of Jesus, in contrast with those of John, did not “live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled,” verse 5. This does not mean that the disciples ate with dirty hands, but that they did not observe the many ritual washings which were considered necessary because one could become defiled by contact with pots and pans, with women in their period, with relatives of a person who had died, etc.

One would say, the Lord Jesus, if He really wanted to win also the leaders of the Jews, could have easily prevented this conflict by telling His disciples, “you better act according to the tradition, in order not to put a stumbling block in their way.” On the contrary, He called those leaders hypocrites who worship God in vain. The reason is clear. Their “theology” was in radical contrast to the Gospel of the Kingdom, and for that purpose our Saviour did not hesitate to react the way He did, even though it would cause His death at their hands.

On the other hand, the Lord did not hesitate to talk with the Samaritan woman, John 4, although even His disciples were surprised. He did not avoid contact with sinners, even sat at the table with publicans! For us, living so much later, it is hard to understand what this attitude meant for Christ’s contemporaries. For them these traditions were holy. To break them would blow up the Jewish Church, and that’s what happened.

The least we should learn from this behaviour of our Lord is that going against what is revered as a respectable tradition is not always wrong. It even may be healthy and necessary. Thus we should do some self-examination and ask ourselves what in our Reformed life is good tradition, based on biblical principles and what is just tradition and nothing else. If the latter is the case, we just are not allowed to impose it on anyone, let alone on someone who until now was a stranger to it, and does not understand it.

Then there is Paul’s example. We know from him that he went out of his way to win others for the Gospel. Let’s start with I Corinthians 9:19-23, and ask ourselves if we would be ready to adopt the same attitude. “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the Law I became as one under the Law — though not being myself under the Law — that I might win those under the Law. To those outside the Law I became as one outside the Law — not being without Law toward God but under the Law of Christ — that I might win those outside the Law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the Gospel, that I may share in its blessings.” These words do not stand by themselves. In the next chapter, 10:32, 33, we just read, “Give no offence to Jews or to Greeks or to the Church of God, just as I try to please all men in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage but that of many, that they may be saved.”

Similar sayings can be quoted from Romans, like chapter 2:14, "I am under obligation both to Greeks and barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish." Paul wanted "to make my fellow Jews jealous and thus save some of them," chapter 11:14; and he could never have done that if he did not become a Jew to the Jews! Finally, though going into a somewhat different direction, chapter 15:1, "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves."

One might ask, is there not a contrast between the attitude of Christ and that of His apostle? It seems so indeed, but in fact there is none. The Saviour had to break the man-centred "religion" of the Pharisees in order to preach the Kingdom and die for it. Paul had to win Jews and Greeks for the Gospel, that he might save them. Christ teaches us that traditions may be an obstacle for entering the Kingdom. Paul teaches us that we should not hesitate to go out of our own way as far as possible in order that we may win and save others.

This should be our attitude and behaviour in the work of evangelism. We should remove all man-made obstacles so that we may really "reach" people. If one wants to use the term "adjust" here, it is fine with us. We have to do a lot of adjusting if it were only for the reason that "outsiders" may understand what we are talking about!<sup>1</sup>

Some examples may help to convince each other of the need of such adjustment in order to "save some." We start with a case that is, while this is written, stirring up great controversy in the Christian Reformed Church. A lady was won for the Lord, but when she wanted to join the Church, the problem arose, "what to do about the fact that she has been living for a number of years in 'common law' " (as such an illegitimate relationship is

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<sup>1</sup> The remark that "outsiders must be able to understand what we are talking about" refers, as a matter of fact, also and in the first place to our *preaching!* No one would suggest that the contents of truly Reformed sermons should be watered down for the sake of those few in the audience who know nothing about the Scriptures, the Covenant, the Creeds. We repeat here the remark, that as much as parents have the duty to discuss the sermon with their children afterwards, explaining to them what they did not understand, as much we who have the opportunity to take a neighbour along to Church have the task to explain to them what was difficult for them to grasp. Yet, our preachers should find their example in the prophets, the Christ, the apostles who spoke in such a way that people understood what they were talking about, except when the Lord, Matthew 13 (cf. Isaiah 6) started to speak in parables that they "might hear and not understand." That was a punishment for their hardness of heart. One who is eager to hear the message should, however, not be hindered by a language that may be daily bread for us, but "Latin" for them. Preaching has to be direct, relevant, timely, an arrow that hits the heart, while at the same time it must be opening of the Scriptures, solid food. For "little ones in faith" the congregation has to "multiply" the sermon for them in the form of "milk." Scripture has much to say about this, but we must leave it in this context with a brief remark.

called). The case even reached classis and synod. The one camp said, "if we let this go, we betray our discipline, and — though winning a person — we may suffer great loss." Let this person first break off the relationship, or anyway confess her sin, and then get properly married, before she becomes a member. The position of the other camp can be formulated this way, "accepting her, does not mean legalizing 'common law'; she is new in Christ. She needs time, and then we may expect that a better understanding of the Will of God brings her to the decision of her own (which is much more pleasing to the Lord than when we force it upon her)."

What should we do in such a case? During this controversy reference has been made to what happens on the Mission Field, if a gentile comes to repentance and receives Christ as his Saviour. In several cases the man has, according to national custom, more than one wife, which is considered "normal" as it was considered "normal" in the days of Jacob, David, Solomon . . . . Must we, then, first force the man to send his wives — except one — away before he may join the church? To some even asking this question may seem sinful. But have these "some" ever considered the terrible cruelty that will be committed to these poor women who are sent away (with their children)? They become outcasts, despised by everyone. Does the Gospel demand such cruelty?

Slavery is wrong; yet Paul sent Onesimus back to his master. Jesus Christ did not abolish slavery by forming an "Alliance against Slavery," nor did Paul. Both knew that with the progress of time Christian faith and life would overcome this evil.

In John 4 we read that the Lord knew all about the Samaritan woman, "he whom you have now is not your husband." Yet, when the woman asks Him where the LORD has to be worshipped, in Jerusalem or "on this mountain," the Lord did not say, "let's first get back to your sinful relationship, break it off before we can discuss anything else." No, He reveals Himself to her as the Messiah, and she becomes, not only a believer, but also an evangelist, "many believed in Him because of the woman's testimony," verse 39. The Lord must have known that changing her life-style would become a *fruit* of her faith, not a pre-condition.

We know that we are on dangerous territory here. To harlots Jesus said, "your sins are forgiven," and "go, and sin no more." This cannot mean that the church, if she wants to be faithful, should accept people who *remain* alcoholics, thieves, idolators, etc. Faith must show itself in a change of life. Yet, it seems that there are cases, like the ones mentioned, in which we may have to choose between either refusing a new believer membership of the Church of Christ as long as situations, that are hard to change overnight, have not been completely cleared up — or accept such a believer and yet give him or her time to show such a growth in Christ that he or she, by their own free choice, draw the consequences of their choice in a life committed to the Lord. We might have said to Naaman, "never one

step in that idol-temple again!" Elisha was a bit milder and more understanding. He listened to Naaman, "henceforth your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god but the LORD. In this one matter may the LORD pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon — when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, the LORD pardon your servant in this matter." Then Elisha said, "Go in peace" (II Kings 5:17-19).

One may conclude that such matters can occur on the Mission Field, yet at the same time most vehemently deny that we should ever repeat this "go in peace" when evangelism bears fruits.

Examples may help as well as confuse the matter. Let's take Union membership. There is no doubt among us that membership of most Unions is incompatible with being a Christian. "What has a believer in common with an unbeliever?" (II Corinthians 6:15 etc.). We should never compromise here. Does that also mean that a person who has recently come to faith must see things as sharply as we are privileged to see them — or should we not give him some time in order that, not by force but by own conviction and free choice he comes to the conclusion to break away from that Union, whatever the cost? The answer may lie in Paul's words to the Philippians, 3:15, "Let those of us who are mature be thus minded; and if in anything you are otherwise minded, *God will reveal that also to you.*" *J.B. Phillips* paraphrases, "and if at present you cannot see this, yet you will find that this is the attitude which *God is leading you to adopt.*" *S. Greydanus* in his commentary explains this "otherwise minded" as having an opinion or attitude which is *not* in harmony with the demand of the Gospel! But . . . God is leading you to change your mind and to adopt the right attitude. This is not in conflict with the Law and the Prophets because they all "depend on this, love God above all, and love your neighbour as yourself." Only real Christian love for the neighbour whom we want to win for Christ, will lead us to the right solution in cases like the ones mentioned here.

Years ago we established contact with a young man who was "on his way to become a church member." During one of our talks, he said, "I don't think that I can join your church because I am a soccer-addict and all the games are on Sunday; on top I like dancing and I was told that your people are forbidden to dance . . ."

What to answer to such reasoning? Our answer was, "Who told you so?" He looked very much surprised, but we repeated, "Who told you so?" When he was still confused, we said, "We have only one condition for joining the church, that you love the Lord your God with your whole heart." He insisted, "but doesn't your church stand for . . . (and he came with quite a list)?" The answer was, "I have never seen such a list, our church stands for nothing but *'Sola Scriptura, Sola Fide, Sola Gratia,'*"

only the Scriptures, only through grace, and faith. Pretty soon, in joining the church, the brother lost his taste for dancing and for soccer-on-Sundays.

Let's be careful not to make a list of conditions for admission to the church; anyway let's not make it any longer than Jesus Christ and Paul made it. Paul on the one hand "opposed Peter to his face" because he for a time did not eat with uncircumcised Christians, Galatians 2:11ff., but on the other hand he submitted to the "request" of the elders in Jerusalem by performing all the rules of purification prescribed by the ceremonial law, (Acts 21:17-26). Inconsistent? No, in the one case he stood for the glory of the Gospel, in the other he became a Jew to the Jews, "that I might save some." And these two are one!

Never compromise with the Gospel. But go out of your way to remove any and all obstacles for those who seek a way out of their misery and are hungry for the Saving Word. Such "obstacles" may be Dutch or other traditions and customs of which we have mentioned some before, only some . . . . It should not happen that those who recently joined the church have to go through the miserable experience that in their presence Dutch is spoken by people who are very well able to speak our own language.

"Obstacles?" Let us examine ourselves very conscientiously, although it is an unpleasant business. We don't like it. Yet, instead of trying to mention more of such obstacles, we better conclude our discussion of the dilemma, "they adjust to our ways, or we to theirs?" with the words of the King of the Church Himself.

Having stated that we expect anyone to wholeheartedly accept "the complete doctrine of salvation," no more no less, and thus never adding any water to the wine, knowing that young converts are as a rule quite radical, because they do not mind to undergo a radical change, we hear our Saviour say, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matthew 18:6). These "little ones" are not necessarily young children, but also those young in faith and in faith-knowledge. Woe to us, if we have ever put a stumbling block in their way!