

DISTINCTIVES OF THE REFORMED FAITH

(Ed. Note: This is the concluding article in a three-part series. Preceding subjects were 'Piety,' and 'Worship.')

3. Theology

Third, the Reformed faith also has a distinctive theology: pre-eminently the biblical theology. That is apparent even from the expression "Reformed faith" itself; for it is the faith of the church reformed from its errors and corruptions in accordance with the Word of God. This last is utterly basic to the Presbyterian position. As the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it: "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men." (I/6) We call this the regulative principle of Scripture: it stands over our private lives, our church life, and our theology, as God's Word to us and therefore normative and regulative and completely authoritative in "all things necessary for [God's] glory, man's salvation, faith, and life."

Now, what shall we say about Reformed theology? It is all-embracing and comprehensive in its scope, the only full-orbed, consistent, thoroughly and searchingly biblical theology in the Christian world. Our Westminster Confession gives a superb description and definition of it as a whole. In this connection one must mention specifically the doctrines of grace, as they have long been called, or the five points of Calvinism: the unconditional and gracious character of election; the atonement of Christ limited to the elect of God as to its design and extent; the total depravity of man and his utter inability to any saving good; the irresistibility of the divine grace; and the perseverance of the people of God. These five great and altogether scriptural points of doctrine are not the sum and substance of the Reformed faith, not synonymous with it. That faith is far vaster than the area they cover and encompasses the whole of truth within its purview. Calvinism is not satisfied with adherence to the Scriptures at these points only, as though that were all it had to say. Nothing is strange to it, and it demands that every sphere of life, every aspect of theology, every element of human experience, be subjected to the authority of the Word of God. "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (for the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds;) casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every

thought to the obedience of Christ." (II Cor. 10:3-5) At the same time, one cannot claim to be Presbyterian or Reformed unless he holds to these five cardinal truths; nor can he tamper with any one of them and retain the scripturalness of his faith. They are like five great pillars of truth upon which rests the salvation of men. Not, of course, that doctrine saves. It is Christ alone who saves. But it is in the truth that men are set free; and that truth is in Christ: He is the truth. And still more, Christian experience, the apprehension of that truth which is Christ, is informed, summoned to life, governed, guided, directed, instructed, and in every way subject to the authority of the truths, the doctrines, the great facts about himself and his plan of salvation, which God has given us in his Word. What these five points of Calvinism do is to point to, insist upon, underscore, guard, and define the gracious character of redemption: that it is all of God; that there is nothing of man in it; that from start to finish, in every sense, we have nothing to contribute, nothing to offer, but that the Lord does it all.

The doctrine of election, and those other truths which flow from it and are inextricably bound up with it, does not inhibit or depreciate the preaching of the gospel. On the contrary, only the Reformed faith is able to proclaim that gospel in its fulness and power. In the words of the Synod of Dort, which formulated the five points: "The promise of the gospel is, that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have everlasting life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of his good pleasure sends the gospel." (II/5) It does not tamper with human responsibility, nor cancel out the free offer of the gospel. "As many as are called by the gospel are unfeignedly called; for God hath most earnestly and truly declared in his Word what will be acceptable to him, namely, that all who are called should comply with the invitation. He, moreover, seriously promises eternal life and rest to as many as shall come to him, and believe on him." (III-IV/8) But the Reformed faith, because it holds to the truth of Scripture regarding election, etc., does insist that preaching be done in the way the Word of God indicates it should be done, and that we not take refuge in devices and methods which are in fundamental disharmony with it. Preaching should be warm, clear, as interesting as possible, addressed both to the mind and the heart, or rather: to the heart through the mind and understanding; but it must be consistent preaching, preaching which declares that salvation is of the Lord, and

that even saving faith itself is the gift of God. Only he can enable the exercise of faith; only he can open the heart of man and allow access to the truth; only he can regenerate the sinner by the power of his Spirit.

Reformed preaching is preaching indeed, because it is theological preaching, preaching that is consistent with the biblical revelation. Reformed preaching is powerful preaching, because it addresses men and women with the very truth of the sovereign and eternal God, and with all the care and earnestness with which ministers engage in its exercise is content to wait upon the Lord to draw his people to himself. It will be seen at once that theology relates itself inevitably to how we conduct our evangelistic work. A Reformed minister cannot utilize Arminian methods: methods which hold that there is something the sinner can do for himself and his own salvation. A Reformed minister will never suggest in any way that God's work of grace in the heart is dependent upon an act of faith or acceptance on the sinner's part. No sinner can accept Christ. No sinner can decide for Christ. It is Christ who accepts him, and Christ who decides for him, and not the reverse. We address ourselves to the conscience when we preach, and we command men to repent, and we exhort and plead and remonstrate, and we warn as to the consequences of unbelief. But we do not resort to shortcuts and expedients that rob God of his glory, and exalt the ability of man. The sinner is responsible. But he is not able: not able to choose God, not able to believe the gospel. Only as God works, can faith come alive. And when God has worked, then faith will come alive, and be true and genuine and lasting — eternally lasting.

One of the paradoxical features of our church life today is to be found in the fact that so many Presbyterians profess the Reformed faith, the faith given such matchless and beautiful form in the Westminster Confession, and really believe they adhere to it, while at the same time they go on in their preaching and in the conduct of their ministries to behave like Arminians, not realizing that their profession is belied by their practice. Modern evangelistic methods are just that: modern, only as old as the early years of the nineteenth century, when in the Presbyterian Church and outside it men began to depend upon ways and means of influencing the hearts of sinners that were drawn from the worldly principle of what would work, rather than from the Scriptures. Charles G. Finney is one of the culprits in this respect, perhaps **the** culprit so far as the American situation is concerned. But our fathers knew better. And the great evangelists of the past knew better. We ought to know better, and to do better also. In looking toward the establishment of a continuing Presbyterian Church, possibly of a great national Reformed and Presbyterian Church, loyal to Scripture and the Reformed faith, we must begin to bring our theology and our practice into conformity with each other. Our doctrines must be determinative for that practice. And the whole must be subordinate to and under the authority of the Word of the living God, the holy Scriptures.

— John Richard deWitt

Why Division Is Necessary In The Presbyterian Church

Many are asking the question, "Why is division necessary in the Presbyterian Church?" Let me begin to answer it by describing a partnership in which the two partners have developed such different goals and methods for carrying out the business of the company that each is using all the company's assets and energies he can muster to oppose the work of his partner, whom he sincerely feels is trying to take the business in the wrong direction. As a result the business is going backwards and neither partner is achieving his goals.

In the Presbyterian Church we have a crisis created by the extreme differences in goals, methods, and philosophy held by the two "partners," the liberals and the conservatives. Each of these "partners" is dedicated to his goals and each feels that his is right. Each feels that the solution to the problem is for the other to give up his ideas and bend over to accept the opposite's.

Let's think about the goals of the liberal for a minute. First let's remember that he is sincere and dedicated in these goals, and he is willing (if he is a good liberal) to pay whatever price necessary to achieve these goals.

The liberal churchman is intensely concerned about ecumenism and social action. For him it is crucially important that all whom he would call "Christian" be included in one great super church, so he is working toward not just a union of Presbyterians but a union of all denominations (and many liberals would like to include the Roman Catholic Church also). This, of course, necessitates a doctrinal statement that seeks to be inclusive. This statement must play down doctrinal distinctives and make truth broad enough to take in almost anyone who wants to join. He may be willing to include those who believe the Bible to be verbally inerrant (though he is somewhat suspicious of such persons), and those who hold a very low view of Scripture; those who believe that unrepentent, unbelieving sinners will go to an eternal hell, and those who believe that all will ultimately be saved.

The liberal churchman is also wholly committed to social action. He may or may not believe in the necessity of faith in Christ for personal salvation, but he will definitely be involved in and committed to the primacy of righting the wrongs in society, in ecology, in race relations, in industry, and in the conduct of government. (Interestingly enough, he may defend pornography, questionable movies, abortion, the use of marijuana, or even Communism.) Because of his commitment to these things he will give his energies to the Church's machinery, serving tirelessly on committees and task forces to bring the Church, by every means possible, to commit itself to his goals.

The methods of the liberal churchman are seen in the way liberal leadership has guided the affairs of the Presbyterian Church (both North and South)

to the place that all of the denominational seminaries and nearly all of the colleges are committed in this direction. Almost all of the boards and agencies are staffed by leaders of this persuasion, most of the presbyteries are guided by men of these convictions, most of the nominating committees and most of the commissions on the minister and his work are controlled by men of this persuasion. It is to express my admiration of their discipline and dedication that I acknowledge that at least in the upper echelons the church is firmly under the control of liberal goals and philosophy.

Now let's briefly consider the goals of conservative churchmen. The conservative believes that men are lost apart from faith in Christ and therefore are just one heart beat from an eternal hell. Because of this he feels that there is nothing more important than taking the message of repentance and faith in Christ to every one possible by every means available. He further believes that when a person comes to a personal faith in Christ he then receives the Holy Spirit who enables him to become a new person and to want to do something about the place where he lives, the people with whom he works, the needs of his community, etc. In other words, the conservative believes in social action, but not an organized program so much as the activity of born again people under the impulse of God's Holy Spirit. A classical example of this is the renewing effect of the Wesleyan revival in England. The conservative churchman will give his energies toward not only the winning and nurture of souls, but also to the support of world mission projects that keep the preaching of the Gospel out in front of even the feeding of the hungry or caring for the sick. If he is consistent, he believes that it would be a tragedy to show concern for a man's physical welfare and not tell him of the Saviour who is the Bread of Life.

The conservative churchman has not been nearly so farsighted or adept in the courts of the church as has the liberal. Because his views are "narrow" and exclusivistic, he has often been difficult to work with in the presbytery, and probably has been so busy with his own projects at home that he has not had time nor the interest to give himself to the committee work of the church. To him such activity has seemed unspiritual, unnecessary, and time consuming. He has probably become discouraged because once the liberal leadership asserted its control in the presbytery he was made to feel about as "out of it" as a horse and buggy on an expressway.

As a churchman the conservative does seem quite often very negative, because whereas the liberal is inclusive in his philosophy, the conservative is exclusive. This means that the liberal can take in almost anyone, regardless of what he believes, (the person believing in the Genesis account of creation would be suspect) while the conservative will have to be against all those who do not subscribe to verbal inerrancy and to the Westminster Confession. Since none of the official seminaries purposely produce this kind of candidate for the ministry anymore, the conservative sounds like he is against everyone. Often he wears of the struggle and goes off into a corner "to do his own thing" and

leave the church politics to the liberals. Because of this the conservative is then tagged as uncooperative and disloyal to the program of the church. This only deepens his frustration, because he feels his position is more true to the historical position of the church than is the contemporary program.

Realizing this tension in the Church, liberals have been talking a lot of late about the need for reconciliation. What they mean is that the conservative should be able to accept views that are different from his own in the same way that the liberal is able to, and that sounds beautiful. But what he is really asking the conservative to do is to become inclusivistic. To the conservative it is suggesting that truth is relative, that the Bible can be true or not true at the same time, and this is precisely the issue that the conservative has been fighting for these many years. To him this is not reconciliation but total collaboration with the enemy.

Put the shoe on the other foot. Would it be possible for the liberal to change and to begin to accept verbal inerrancy, or the reality of an eternal hell, or to begin to have evangelistic services and visitation evangelism to urge men to repent and believe in Jesus Christ lest they perish?

The conservative churchman is committed to the purity of the church, and by this he does not mean loyalty to church programs but rather loyalty to the Word of God as interpreted by the Westminster standards. He has insisted, though not successfully, that those who hold contrary doctrines should be excluded, or excised, but he has found out that it is impossible to bring church discipline against false doctrine in a climate where the inclusivism of liberal theology prevails. So the only opportunity for discipline is discipline in reverse, that is, withdrawal.

Let me illustrate that. Picture an operating room in which three surgeons are about to perform an operation. One believes in being as clean and septic as possible. The other two are not concerned about their personal scrubbing, the sterility of their instruments or other safeguards to protect the patient from infection. What is the first surgeon to do? He will first try to get the other two to scrub and sterilize, but if he is always outrated and meets scorn and ridicule at such a narrow exclusivism, he will then withdraw himself from the operation and from cooperation with ideas he considers dangerous to the welfare of the patient. Now he can go apart to practice medicine according to his convictions. This is discipline in reverse. This is like the conviction of a conservative who is unable to reconcile his exclusive theology with the inclusive theology of his liberal friends. It is not that he does not like them or is mad at them. It is that his concern for the patients under his care compels him to withdraw and practice apart.

Reconciliation, it seems to me, is impossible. The two goals, the two methods, the two philosophies are just not reconcilable. There are two Churches within the Church, and "can two walk together unless they be agreed?" The partnership is destroying itself by its infighting and neither partner is able to pursue his goals. The time has come, it

seems to me, for men of good will to respect each other and to dissolve the partnership in the fairest and most Christian way possible. Let's work and pray to do this in love, and to maintain our fellowship with our Christian friends in whichever group they may choose to belong, and let's maintain respect for all, even for those with whom we may seriously disagree.

But some will say, "does this not destroy the unity of the church for which Christ prayed?" In answer to that I would say that each of us has discovered that unity in the body of Christ is not accomplished by organization but by the Spirit of God and we experience it regardless of ecclesiastical organization. There can never be the true organizational unity that men seek until there first is spiritual unity and there will not be spiritual unity until we are willing to acknowledge the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit in the authority of His Word. Then will Christ be truly the Head of His Body the Church. "Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

— Kennedy Smartt

FREE TO PREACH?

"Man cannot travel in vehicles that travel faster than fifteen miles per hour . . ."

"We'll never build a flying machine . . . it's impossible!"

"Li'l Abner will never get married . . ."

"Ministers in the PCUS are still free to preach the gospel . . ."

All of the statements above once were 'truisms' — and none of them are true today. Li'l Abner and Daisy Mae have enjoyed wedded bliss for many years now, and men are already leaping past the Moon in flying machines that will take them to Mars and beyond.

And many ministers in the PCUS are not allowed to bear an unhindered testimony to Christ.

Those churchmen who keep telling us that ministers in the Southern Church are free to preach the Gospel must hold an awfully unPresbyterian view of the minister's relationship to his Church. Presbyterians always have understood that the Church of Jesus Christ is larger than one's own parish. The minister of the Gospel desires — nay, is constrained by the love of Christ — to proclaim the truth, not only within the confines of his own sanctuary, but in Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly, and throughout the world.

But many ministers in the PCUS are not allowed to do this. Many men must confine their witness to the seven acres on which their church stands, or at least to their immediate neighborhood.

Do you doubt this?

A Presbyterian minister, a member in good standing of his Presbytery, was denied permission to preach the Gospel as a PEF evangelist outside the bounds of his Presbytery. Now, if he continues his evangelistic ministry, he must move.

Graduates of Reformed Theological Seminary are denied the right to preach the Gospel within the bounds of several Presbyteries in the Southern Church.

In many liberal Presbyteries conservatives are purposely excluded from committee assignments, from participation in camps and conferences, from any meaningful involvement in the work of the court.

Liberal Commissions on the Minister and His Work have denied conservative churches the right to call a pastor of their choice, and have even refused to allow conservative ministers to preach within the bounds of the Presbytery.

In at least one Presbytery, a conservative minister who sought to examine candidates in strict accord with the Book of Church Order was declared "Out of Order" and forced to sit down.

One congregation has been forced to pay Presbytery taxes even though a portion of the funds are used to pay for abortions in the county. When the ministers and Session tried to publish their own views on the matter, they were silenced by threats of discipline.

And what of the ministers who have been threatened with disciplinary action if they persisted in efforts to declare the truth against the errors in denominational boards and agencies?

Is a man really free to preach the gospel when he can do so only in his own pulpit? Is he merely to ignore his responsibilities to Presbytery and Synod? Is he simply to abandon any ministry through denominational channels such as camps, conferences, committee work? Is it truly 'Presbyterian' to suggest that he do so?

Like we said, the statement that "A minister in the PCUS is still free to preach the Gospel," was a truism. But no longer.

— Paul G. Settle

KEEPING POSTED

● By now you have learned that twenty churches in Tuscaloosa Presbytery (Ala.) have been dismissed with their property. The churches, most of them small, and five ministers, have formed Warrior Presbytery and plan to be a part of the continuing Church when it is constituted.

● A Presbytery in Texas recently withdrew from a P. E. F. evangelist his permission to labor outside the bounds of Presbytery. The same court declared that no church could consider for its pastorate a graduate of Reformed Theological Seminary.

● A Presbytery in Alabama recently turned down a candidate for ordination because he was a graduate of Reformed Seminary — though the Committee on Candidates recommended him and though even the liberals admitted that the man was theologically and spiritually sound.

● Two churches in North Alabama Presbytery were dismissed with their property. Churches in at least five Synods are making plans to withdraw as soon as possible.

● The CBS Television Network recently announced plans to show X-rated movies unless a great number of viewers protest. Write immediately and voice your opinion to: Dr. Frank Stanton, CBS, 51 W. 52nd St., New York, N. Y. 10010.

● Don't believe that union with the UPCUSA is a dead issue. Union is ever more a reality as the months pass — for union presbyteries and functional union at administrative levels increasingly merge our denomination with the Northern church. North Alabama Presbytery and Huntsville Presbytery (UPCUSA) had a joint meeting on Feb. 6 — giving warning that soon Alabama will have a Union Presbytery.

● A Convocation of Sessions has been called for Atlanta, May 18-19, in the Westminster Presbyterian Church. The purpose of the convocation is to discuss the future for many conservatives in the Southern church. Invitations will soon be mailed to the hundreds of Sessions and ministers who are aligned with Presbyterian Churchmen United.

● Make your plans to attend the Summer Institute of the Christian Studies Center to be held at Warren Wilson College, Swannonoa, N. C., June 11-July 7, 1973. An outstanding faculty, including Dr. Norman Harper, Dr. Morton Smith, and Dr. Paul Schrotenboer, will lecture on a number of vital themes. Evening speakers will include Dr. L. Nelson Bell, Dr. Joel Nederhood, the Rev. Sam Patterson, and Dr. Donald Patterson. For information, write to: Christian Studies Center, P. O. Box 17122, Memphis, Tenn. 38117.

● P. C. U. sponsored a retreat for DCE's, near Rock Hill, S. C., in February. Workers from Georgia, Alabama, Virginia, and S. C. attended, giving their time to Bible study, discussions of problems and their solutions, and exchanging practical suggestions. Mrs. Paul Settle (Georgia) was guest leader. Miss Betty Wilson, of Smyrna, Ga., organized the event.

● The Atlanta School of Biblical Studies began its Spring Quarter on March 19, with classes located at Chapel Woods Presbyterian Church, Decatur. This growing educational Institute deserves your prayerful support. For information, 'phone secretary John H. Knight at (404) 432-1235, or write him at 740 Banks St., Smyrna, Ga. 30034.

● Dr. de Witt's article in this issue of CONTACT concludes his three-part series on Distinctives of the Reformed Faith. Response to these excellent articles has been tremendous. Praise God!

● Cassette tapes of the recent forum/debate in Birmingham, with Jack Williamson and Paul Settle discussing the issues with Frank Harrington and Dave Edington, are now available from this office — free loan.

● It may not be too late for you to register for the Christian Education Conference, co-sponsored by PCU and Trinity Presbyterian Church of Montgomery, Ala., April 5, 6, 7, in Montgomery. Dr. Ed Clowney is the speaker, and 45 workshops and other activities make this an event that will interest everyone — ministers, DCE's, lay workers, church officers, students. Write today: Miss Linda Barlow, 3436 Wellington Rd., Montgomery, Ala. 36106.

An open letter . . .

TO THE MODERATOR OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, U. S.

Dear Doctor Bell:

Your letter, addressed to all ministers and Clerks of Sessions, came to me as a minister of the Presbyterian Church, U. S. Since your letter was a general, public letter, I am requesting the editor of *Contact* to print my reply. I am a minister who has almost forty years of continuous service in the PCUS.

I wish to thank you for so often honoring Christ and His Word in your statements and writings. It is good to have a Moderator who so long has stood for the Bible as the Word of God. Some of us who also have stood for the same principles are dismayed that you have forsaken us and speak against us. It was in the *Presbyterian Journal*, which you helped to found, that I was first introduced to the concept of "a continuing Presbyterian church." Being now dedicated to this concept, I am proud to do what I can to continue the kind of Church in which I was ordained.

Perhaps the most grievous error in your letter is the statement, "no minister can say that he has been denied his right to preach the gospel as he feels it to be his duty." In my files are records of ministers who have been refused entrance into presbyteries because they preach the true biblical gospel. Some Commissions on the Minister and His Work automatically refuse to consider any of the more than 600 ministers, members of Presbyterian Churchmen United, who preach the gospel and are dedicated to preserving the Presbyterian faith. About the time your letter was published I was in conference with one of these men—a PCUS minister of impeccable credentials who had just recently received a call from a congregation in Southwest Georgia Presbytery. The Commission in that Presbytery had arbitrarily blocked his call.

In paragraph six of your article on page three of the March 5 issue of "This Week," you wrote "Commissions on the Minister and His Work have often sought successfully to block congregations from calling a 'conservative,' despite the fact that the Commission's powers are advisory only. Since I have been Moderator I have received complaints

(Continued on page 6)

from widely separated areas telling of arbitrary actions of discrimination against both congregations and individuals whom they wished to call."

Both of your statements cannot be true. Either there is complete freedom to preach the gospel within the bounds of the Presbyterian Church, U. S., or there is not. The issues today are too clear cut to be straddled.

The "Reaffirmations of 1973," which properly express for many of us conservatives our faith and intent in this crucial period of our church's life, is worthy of your study. When a constitution is adopted it becomes a matter of faith and practice for those who sincerely subscribe to it. You say that there is no constitutional issue before us because the 'theory' of the Constitution has not changed. The "Reaffirmations" point out that there are many points where General Assemblies have deviated from the Constitution. In theory the Constitution is intact; in practice it has been largely scrapped. We must decide whether our religion is a matter of 'theory' only, or a matter of truth and practice welded together in sincere, believing worship and service.

As the Holy Spirit works in the church today, I know Him most intimately in the warm, loving, dedicated unity of those Ruling and Teaching Elders who are planning for the continuing Presbyterian Church. If you cannot be a part of this company now, perhaps you will want to join them later. There is every indication that the emerging Church will not only be thoroughly Reformed and evangelical, but the members of her courts will be patient, loving, steadfast, and tolerant — and, not least, her ministers will be free to preach the gospel anywhere God calls.

Sincerely yours,

John E. Richards
Perry, Georgia

CLOSET CALL

"And when thou prayest, enter into thy closet . . ."

— Matthew 6:6

Remember the Christian Education Conference in your prayers. It convenes on April 5, in Montgomery, Ala.

Pray for the Lord's blessings on the meeting of the Steering Committee, April 6-7.

Continue to seek God's wisdom and guidance for us all as critical and far-reaching decisions are made for the life of the Church of Jesus Christ.

Pray that those persons who disagree over issues will nevertheless continue to love one another.

Praise God for the exciting success of the ~~NPRF meeting in Atlanta, February 15.~~

Don't forget to pray for the pastors and churches who are being threatened by their presbyteries because of their loyalty to Christ's truth.

Praise the Lord that He has brought us to the very threshold of the continuing Presbyterian Church.

Pray for God's will to be done in the Convocation of Sessions, May 18-19.

Thou shalt make thy prayer unto Him, and He shall hear thee . . ."

— Job 22:27

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