

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHMEN UNITED

Contact

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ON LIVING WITH DIVERSITY

Dr. Ben Lacy Rose, the Moderator of the 1971 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S., and a professor at Union Theological Seminary, has written a significant statement in the seminary's "As I See It Today . . ."—an organ for the faculty. Dr. Rose's "contemporary comment" is entitled "On Learning to Live With Diversity." It is an attempt to analyze the pluralism in our denomination and to call the brethren to reconciliation.

If Dr. Rose's article is a genuine expression of his views, it gives us cause for solemn contemplation, for he seems to completely misunderstand the vital issues which pierce like thorns the sides of conservative believers.

We should like, in this editorial, simply to reflect "out loud" on some of Dr. Rose's statements.

He begins by declaring that we need to "learn to live with the diversity which now exists within our denomination."

We say, "Amen!" Surely, in a Christian brotherhood, there is no place for petty quibbling over matters of purely personal preference in areas where God's Word does not provide definitive guidance.

God's servants have always attempted to subordinate personal opinions to the will of the majority on issues that are "indifferent"—that is, on issues concerning which God has spoken no clear word. Surely, we must strive to dwell together in harmony and love.

He continues, "Many persons are nostalgic for a day when our church was more homogeneous, when there was almost no variation in worship or program or creedal interpretation . . . (a day when) . . . ministers held to the same basic interpretation of the Confession of Faith."

Now, what does Dr. Rose mean by the phrase "interpretation of the Confession of Faith?" How does one "interpret" the Confession? Is the Confession not to be **received**, according to our ordination vows, as "the system of doctrine taught in Holy Scripture?" It seems that the Confession speaks rather plainly—at what points are its state-

ments open to "interpretation?" Where does the Confession sound an uncertain note which might give cause for varying responses? Is the statement on Scripture open to interpretation? The chapter on God? His decree? Salvation? At what point does the Confession fail to faithfully set forth the Bible's teaching?

Or, is Dr. Rose questioning, not the meaning, but the authority of the Confession? Is he suggesting that the binding nature of the carefully worded doctrinal statements is open to question? We understand that many ministers chafe under the restrictive reins of Confessional Presbyterianism. Some men seem to interpret their necessary allegiance to the Confession as merely a loose, token subscription to a general theological stance. But, is this honest? Is any Presbyterian minister **forced** to take his vows of ordination? Does not the minister freely affirm before God and His people that he "sincerely receives and adopts" the Confession and Catechisms as containing "the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scripture?"

Surely, unless language is meaningless, that vow conveys more than a loose or token subscription. Perhaps many men attack the Confession because they do not sincerely mean what they say when they take upon themselves its doctrinal yoke. We find it difficult to believe, however, that Dr. Rose is condoning such tongue-in-cheek vow-taking.

In his third paragraph, Dr. Rose says, "that day (the day of homogeneity) has gone forever, and it is not possible for us to return to it." He seems to be saying that those men who are uncomfortable in the harness of Confessional Presbyterianism can never be reconciled to those who are strict constitutionalists. They seem unable to rest until they have kicked the traces.

This is exactly what the Steering Committee of the conservative coalition said when they affirmed that "division is apparently inevitable." The coalition is simply taking note of the fact that our liberal friends just cannot live within the confines of Biblical orthodoxy and that they are therefore striving mightily to take us into a "new church" that does not insist upon strict doctrinal integrity. The coalition of conservatives recognizes that the liberals' schismatic actions will eventually destroy the Presbyterian Church in the United States.

Dr. Rose continues, "Underlying many of the problems . . . is the fact that, although this pluralism is admitted, we have not really come to terms with it."

Now, conservatives **have** come to terms with the pluralism, and they have **firmly rejected it!** Except on non-essentials, God's men should speak with one voice. The cardinal doctrines are not to be compromised. There must be no pluralism on doctrinal statements concerning the nature of God, His written Word, the person and work of Christ, etc., etc. If the Bible is given by the immediate inspiration of God, if it is infallible truth and of divine authority, if it does contain the whole counsel of God for faith and life, and if the Holy Spirit speaks only in the Scriptures, then pluralism is

impossible in the Church of Jesus Christ. Pluralism—if this means diversity of conviction on cardinal issues—is not possible for the child of God. At stake is the authority of Christ Himself.

The professor complains because “we still want to press other ministers into **our** mold . . .”

Indeed, we agree that such a narrow, legalistic attitude is to be deplored, if the mold is shaped by merely personal biases. But, if the mold is the Bible, then is it not **God’s mold**? No man is **forced** to take vows which press him into such a mold. Certainly, freedom is to be allowed where it is possible. But, freedom, if it is not to deteriorate into license, must be responsible—responsible to God. No minister is free to willfully disobey God’s Word. Where God has spoken, that should settle it for every believer in Jesus. And this is a critical issue, for conservatives are most upset these days because it seems to them that the official leadership of the denomination is unwilling to abide by the plain teachings of God’s written Word.

Dr. Rose calls for a revival of “true liberalism,” which is characterized by the man who desires to “emancipate himself and his fellows from all that binds the mind and the will.”

Here, indeed, is the crux of the matter! How can a Christian, a minister of the Gospel, a man who takes seriously his vows of ordination, be a “liberal” if it means what Dr. Rose says it means? How can a child of God desire to be emancipated from “all that binds the mind and will?” Are we not bound to Christ? Is not our goal and our glory to have the mind of Christ? Do we not yearn for His will to subdue ours and to place us in bondage to His Word?

Can anyone imagine the Apostle Paul yearning to be freed from “all that binds the mind and will?” Paul desired to bring “into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (II Cor. 10:5). Our Lord said, “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31, 32). Obviously, only those who are loyal and obedient to Christ’s words know the truth and are thereby freed from sin and hell.

So with Calvin. He writes in a letter to Farel in October, 1540, “I yield my soul chained and bound unto obedience to God.” The great Reformer opposed the restriction of freedom when the oppressing agent was beside or contrary to the Bible. But he staunchly insisted that the human mind and will must be subjected always to God’s objective revelation of Himself in Scripture. He says, “The unerring standard, both of thinking and speaking must be derived from the Scriptures” (Inst. I-13-3).

Dr. Rose writes, “We need . . . a spirit . . . that will oppose ecclesiastical authoritarianism . . .”

All of us oppose “ecclesiastical authoritarianism” if this means an arbitrary imposition of man-made rules which bind the conscience. Certainly every individual should enjoy the freedom to respond to Christ and His will according to the dictates of his conscience—but let it be agreed that

Christ and His will are known only in the Scriptures—and **their** authority is the authority of God Himself who is the author thereof.

Rose concludes, “learning to live with diversity does not require any compromise. Coming to terms with pluralism is really a form of reconciliation. Reconciliation is our acceptance of each other as Christian brothers and our fixed determination to walk together in spite of our differences. In Christ we belong to each other.”

Evidently for Dr. Rose, our differences are minor ones. But, not for the conservative. The conservative sees the differences as critical, radical, as touching upon absolutes. They have to do with the very nature of God, with the nature of the Bible, with the person and work of Christ, with salvation, with heaven and hell. How can two walk together when they disagree upon such matters? They can love each other, surely. But can they unite in common cause?

Such a form of reconciliation is “no compromise” only if we have no authoritative word from God, only if ordination vows are taken lightly, only if “the faith once for all delivered to the saints” is placed on a shelf in favor of a contemporary do-it-yourself religion that is neither Reformed nor Christian.

Dr. Rose’s article, rather than an instrument for reconciliation, is eminently disturbing and perhaps even divisive. For it seems clearly to prove that our liberal friends simply do not understand why conservatives are protesting the divisions in the church. Apparently, we are caricatured only as narrow, opinionated, obscurantist bigots (sadly enough, this may be true of some of us), who are grieved because we cannot have our way in the petty games of ecclesiastical politics. There seems to be no awareness among the liberals that our grievances have to do with conscience, with the integrity of our vows of ordination, with our very life before God Almighty.

It is not a question of love for brother, or for neighbor, or for enemy. It is a question of love for Him who loved us and gave Himself for us. We can not, we must not deny **Him**.

EFFORTS TOWARD RECONCILIATION???

Hanover Presbytery (Va.) has appointed a commission to keep under surveillance groups or individuals within presbytery bounds who “threaten the peace and unity of the church.” The presbytery also overtured the next General Assembly to erect a church-wide commission to act in a similar capacity. The moves were directed against “representatives of four organizations within the church (which) have prepared . . . to disrupt and divide the church.”

(Editor’s note: By “four divisive groups” they **must** refer to the Boards of World Missions, of National Ministries, of Women’s Work, and of Christian Education!)

LETTERS...

The more I learn about the Establishment, the more anxious I am to cut loose from them as quickly as possible.

—TEXAS

Finding myself not in complete accord with . . . Presbyterian Churchmen United, I respectfully request the removal of my name from your rolls.

—TENNESSEE

Thank you for your presentation the other night at First Church in Johnson City. I thought it was most informative and very well presented. It answered some questions . . . and I feel I see the logic of the declaration more clearly now.

—NORTH CAROLINA

I attended the Atlanta "rally" and received strong blessings from the Saturday morning addresses.

—SOUTH CAROLINA

I have chosen to be an advocate for the Presbyterian Church, true to our present Confession and Reformed Standards, but **within** our denomination . . . whatever the result of a vote on merger.

—SOUTH CAROLINA

Enclosed is a small contribution for . . . Presbyterian Churchmen United. Let me say again how thrilled I was with (the meeting) recently in Augusta. I believe PCU gained a lot of support and that Christians were brought face to face with the issues . . .

—GEORGIA

I am enclosing a copy of the Declaration of Intent which was adopted by our Session . . . and approved by a **unanimous** vote at our congregational meeting . . .

—FLORIDA

When Louisville Presbytery ordained me in 1916 I was a convinced Calvinist and Presbyterian. To me our creeds and our government are a vital part of life. . . . while I cannot do much else, even an old man can pray for you . . .

—TENNESSEE

NEWS NOTES...

Wilmington Presbytery (N. C.) passed a resolution which called the churches' attention to Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship's association with "forces seeking a division in our church . . ."

The purpose of the resolution is to discourage churches from using PEF evangelists.

East Arkansas Presbyterian issued a strongly worded statement warning Sessions and churches against specified "divisive groups," and called for members to "disassociate themselves from all efforts at division." Persons associated with "divisive" groups were asked "not to enter the bounds of presbytery . . ."

"It is well to remind our land of boasted freedoms that it was a conviction of the will of God based on His Word, not a humanistic glorying in self-will, that nerved John Huss for the flames at Constance and enabled Luther to face the Diet of Worms. The lone, unarmed Luther stood against the Might of the Holy Roman Empire . . . declaring, "My conscience is thus led by the Word of God. I can do no other. God come to my help."

—Wm. Childs Robinson

"The Reformation:

A Rediscovery of Grace"

MY IMPRESSIONS of the Atlanta Meeting called by the Steering Committee for a Continuing Presbyterian Church.

Four of us from the Seminole Church attended the Atlanta meeting called by the Steering Committee for a Continuing Church. We had been told that this Committee consisted of a group of men who had grabbed the ball and had run with it as if others were not even in the game. Consequently, we approached this meeting somewhat skeptically.

However, we found men of the Spirit humbly asking that same Spirit to guide them and others in the present church crisis. Instead of impatience we found a restrained attitude as the entire group of laymen and pastors got down on their knees to ask God to lead them.

The issues were clearly laid out before us. The liberals and the conservatives are as divided as east is from west. Much of the present controversy is only symptomatic of a lack of Biblical integrity by many in our church as they face the authority of the Scriptures. We were also encouraged by the stand the Steering Committee took against racism.

There was a spirit of love expressed among the men present which revealed our common bond in Christ. But, even more impressive, we sensed a spirit of love for all brethren, even those who are theologically opposed to our position.

Yet, the most impressive part of the meeting was the real concern the Steering Committee had for each of our opinions and questions. They never did tell us what they are going to do, but rather said, "You tell us." For the first time in a long time we left a meeting feeling like someone had heard what we had to say, and they cared.

—Rev. Paul Kooistra

Associate Minister

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Tampa, Fla.

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HONOR ENOUGH

What honor crowns the brow of my dear Saviour,
God's anointed,
The church's Head,
Redeemer of men from ev'ry land;
Dying for me,
Risen for me,
Praying for me at God's right hand—
The mighty Conqueror He!

What honor must I not accord my Lord—
Could man suffice?
What will entice
And lead my soul away from Him
I love so dear
And gives me cheer?
How could I compromise His name?
Who else is there to fear?

What honor can this vain world afford—
The voice of man
Allow I can
And set the bounds of what I do or say?
What shackles then
If I please men
And all the while my precious Lord betray?
Ah no! His cause I must defend.

What honor now He gives me as His child,
If I but dare
And show I care,
How blessedly He bestows His wondrous love,
Comes by my side,
Lets me confide
In His great strength, grants wisdom from above—
So, into the unknown I'll let Him guide.

—Donald C. Graham

A CALL TO PRAYER AND FASTING ...

I am concerned that we of the evangelical and Reformed faith do not miss God's will and opportunity in these transitional days. The history of God's revivals and awakenings shows that results, fruit, deep movements of the Spirit of God, are preceded by periods of prayer and self-examination by the people of God.

It is not uncommon to read of presbyterys, synods and Assemblies setting specific days for prayer and fasting.

Recently, I met some men who are meeting each Friday, 12:00-1:00 p. m., for prayer and fasting. They are establishing a time, too (10:00 a.m.), when one pauses to pray wherever he is.

Let us call all constituents of PCU to prayer daily at 10:00 a. m. for individuals, and on Fridays, 12:00-1:00 for groups.

We might pray:

1. For the local churches and the Church at Large
—For a Reformation of Doctrine
—For a revival of Christian experience
—For a return to the Primary Mission of Evangelism
2. For a continuing Evangelical and Reformed Witness to be truly:
—Reformed to the Scriptures at all points in Doctrine
—Reawakened in Personal Piety
3. For the same in our Nation

—Rev. Ben Wilkinson
Presbyterian Evangelistic
Fellowship

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PCU

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IMPRESSIONS OF THE ATLANTA
MEETING (OCTOBER)



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