

From Dort to Today-the development of the reformed faith (11)

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A TIME OF DECLINE (1619-1834)

Since it is several months that an article appeared in this rubric on this subject, we shall have to try to pick up the thread of the story.

We were discussing in general the history of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands between the end of the Synod of Dordt and the Secession of 1834.

More particularly we were discussing the doctrinal developments of that period with special emphasis upon all the theological deviations which made the Secession a necessity.

More particularly yet, we were discussing the influence of “pietism” during this period. We have already noticed that pietism has as its chief characteristic strong emphasis on the necessity of inward spiritual experience. This, in itself, can never be wrong. But in the pietistic movement of that day it led to many evils in the Church: the assurance of salvation could only be based upon a clearly definable experience in which a man heard the voice of God; a dangerous experientialism which led to placing inner light above the authority of Scripture; a false subjectivism which led to all kinds of spiritual and moral excesses in the Church, etc. You can find the rest in the May issue of *Beacon Lights*.

To continue with the story, there are several remarks that should be made in this connection:

1) First, this pietism was very popular during the period between Dordt and the Secession. It had tremendous influence in the Netherlands. It had powerful effects on all future developments of the Reformed Churches. In fact, even today, both in the Netherlands and in this country, one does not have to travel far to find these people who place religious experience above the Word of God.

2) Secondly, the question of participation at the Lord’s Supper also entered into the whole question. Only those could come to the table of the Lord who were able to prove their assurance of salvation by some dramatic religious experience. The result was that the majority of the members of these Churches were barred from the sacrament of communion; only an elite group which became the object of veneration, could come to the Lord’s table. This wrong custom is still retained today in the churches that follow this tradition.

3) Thirdly, various questions of doctrine were also affected. The whole movement, you must understand, did not put much stock in doctrine. Sound doctrinal preaching pretty much went by the board. Instruction in doctrine was considered to be dangerous, leading only to dead orthodoxy; and was consequently abandoned. All the emphasis in the preaching and teaching was on experience.

Nevertheless, unavoidably, doctrinal questions entered in. Some of these were questions that would arise again and again in the Church.

There was, for one thing, the question of the relation between faith and justification: whether faith was before justification or whether justification was prior to faith. As I said, these questions were subjects for extended debate all the way into our century.

Secondly, questions arose concerning the Baptism Form. When the question of the Form was put to these “experientialists”, “Whether you acknowledge that although our children are conceived and born in sin, and therefore are subject to all miseries, yes, to condemnation itself;

yet that they are sanctified in Christ and therefore, as members of His Church ought to be baptized?" you can understand that with some sort of subjective experience being the criterion of the Christian life, this question could hardly be answered with a "Yes". Parents could not believe their children were "sanctified in Christ" until they had some religious experience to substantiate this.

Naturally, this involved all the entire doctrine of the covenant and of infant baptism. And these are questions also which continued to arise in the Church up till today. These questions are still disputed and occasions for disagreements in the Reformed Churches. Yet the question is: "One what grounds are infants to be baptized?" And this question has received, and still receives all kinds of answers in the Reformed Churches.

In close connection also with the pietistic movement, there was a return to revivals. These revivals were in many instances similar to the Wesleyan revivals in England. Often they would become very emotional affairs and highly disorganized meetings where people "moved by the Spirit" made such a racket that the police had to be called to preserve the peace.

Still another series of doctrinal controversies arose with the growing influence of rationalism in the Low Countries. France was living through the terrors of the French Revolution. Reason was enthroned; man was exalted above God; the Scriptures were discarded. These rationalistic influences were felt also in the Netherlands and corrupted especially the Universities.

Also the devastating effect of higher criticism as developed in Germany came across the borders into Holland.

No wonder really that there was a growing tendency to ignore the studies of the original languages of the Bible and a decline of serious exegetical studies. The result of all this was that theology was divorced from the exegesis and exposition of Scripture. Often the cry was heard that theology could be justified sufficiently on the basis of human reason.

You can imagine what happened. All the cardinal truths of Scripture were called into question. Many times they were openly denied in the universities, in the pulpits and in the published literature of the day. The truth concerning the trinity was attacked. The divinity of Christ was denied. The fall of man, eternal punishment and the atonement of Christ were flaunted. There were liberals and modernists in the Church. And, although they did enormous damage to the Church, they were retained in positions of influence. Every attempt to censure them and apply discipline was stymied by the State. And this was all because human reason was set up as a higher standard than the Word of God. Men no longer bowed in humility before God's revelation; they bowed before their own reason and worshipped the mind of man as the ultimate standard of truth. Heresies that had been condemned by the Church as early as 325 A. D. in Nicea and 451 A. D. in Chalcedon were publicly taught. The truths of Luther and Calvin were openly mocked.

Finally, there is an interesting deviation from the truth that is of particular concern to us. It is sometimes claimed in our day that some aspects of the theory of common grace are new developments of doctrine, new insights into Scripture, new contributions to the body of the truth and the confession of the Church.

But the fact of the matter is that these errors already appeared in the Churches of the Netherlands during this period we are discussing. And they not only appeared, but they were, strikingly enough, condemned by the faithful in the Church.

For example, there were those that taught that God's grace is only in the preaching of the gospel and not in the operation of the Holy Spirit. The result was, of course, that the gospel

became a general grace to all that heard it. From this point of departure, there were several jumps made. Some taught that there is a decree of God calling all men to salvation apart from the decree of election. God does not simply call the elect; He calls all men with an earnest desire. And He does this through (and this was the term used) “an offer of the gospel that was well-meant” on the part of God in the sense that God desired the salvation of all. Others jumped another way and a general de-emphasis on the doctrine of predestination was the result. Election and especially reprobation were pushed into the background as being part of God’s hidden will with which we have nothing to do. And all this so soon after Dordt!

History indeed repeats itself.

In all these controversies there were always those who tried to defend the truth and who fought bitterly to keep the Church pure. But discipline was stymied and the State reached its long ugly arm into the affairs of the Church foiling every attempt of the faithful. There was often talk of the need for secession from the State Church, but usually the argument prevailed that faithfulness to Christ demanded that the Church remain intact.

Yet, secession was really the only possible solution. Not only to purify the Church, but also to escape the crushing hand of the State. It became a spiritual necessity that the faithful people of God leave the State Church and establish once again the Church of Christ faithful in doctrine and life.

And this is what happened.

1834 was the year of secession.

Originally Published in:

Vol. 24 No. 6 August September 1964