

Mennonite-Reformed dialogue

Baptism, peace, and the state in the Reformed and Mennonite traditions, 1989

The following are the findings of the consultation on "Baptism, peace, and the state in the Reformed and Mennonite traditions" held at the University of Calgary from October 11 to 14 1989.

This concluding statement attempts both to reflect the life of their communions as they are, and to articulate vision of what they ought to be. It became clear that both Reformed and Mennonites own a common Reformation heritage. It was realized that while there is a Mennonite spectrum of views, there is also a considerable area of common ground. The old sense that the two parties are rigid and bitter enemies is gone. Reformed and Mennonites now accept one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Baptism

Concerning baptism, it was agreed that neither the Mennonite nor the Reformed traditions can properly be understood apart from a doctrine of prevenient divine grace. It was agreed that further discussion should be devoted to this question, especially as it impinges upon a correlative understanding of baptism and the nature and place of human response: and in relation to the question of divine initiative and human response vis-à-vis Christian initiation as a process in which there is mutual involvement and interaction between the communities of church and family.

It was noted that both traditions insist upon the connection between baptism and church membership. However, within the Reformed family of churches, not only are there different views as to precisely who is a member of the church, but there does not as yet appear to be any clear consensus with respect to the place and function of the practice of confirmation in relation to baptism. On the basis of practice of believers' baptism Mennonites are able to answer questions about church membership less ambiguously. It is suggested that Reformed churches give further attention to resolving confusions and disagreements within their own ranks, and that Mennonites reconsider their position vis à vis other churches, especially with respect to baptising believers who have received infant baptism according to the theology and practice of other communions. Both communions need seriously to address the question of whether and with what ecclesial consequences the Gospel breaks down barriers which the respective doctrines and practices of baptism have erected.

The Reformed house clearly emerged as one in which there are many ecclesiological mansions, and each ecclesiology (established or free, gathered or connectional) reflects differently nuanced understandings of the nature and function of baptism. whereas in all Reformed churches baptism is seen as the sacrament of incorporation into the church, and hence as the basis of the nurture of the child (or older believer) in the community of faith, in Reformed churches which are national in character, baptism per se may be viewed as constituting membership, and may in practice be a terminus. In Reformed churches which have adopted the ecclesiology of the gathered church, the role assigned to baptism is sometimes views as minimal. For their part, those Mennonite circles which are strongly ethnically conscious sometimes reduce believers' baptism to a mere formality. In order that serious dialogue may continue, the question of how a tradition which includes a variety of ecclesiologies may engage in discussion with one which is much more homogeneous is of primary importance.

It emerged from the papers and discussions that from the beginning of the Anabaptist movement, church discipline has been closely linked with baptism. Congregational discipline has also figured prominently in traditional Reformed ecclesiology and practice. However, both the misuse of disciplinary measures within the churches of both communions and the "spirit of the age" have either undermined the practice of congregational discipline, or contributed to its discontinuation. Both Mennonite and Reformed churches need a renewed theological understanding of baptism as entailing supportive parental and congregational accountability and discipline; and such an understanding needs to be practised consistently. Mennonites should view and practise discipline as a means of restoring an erring brother or sister in compassion and love. The Reformed should regain and re-institute a supportive and corrective practice of discipline as a part of normal congregational life. Both communions urgently need to examine the relation between baptism, the Lord's Supper, and discipline.

The dialogue participants have been challenged to re-examine the biblical foundations for Christian baptism, and to clarify the hermeneutical context within which Scripture is heard. Both Mennonites and Reformed acknowledge the Bible as the primary rule of faith and life in seeking further clarification, mutual correction, and a greater measure of unity in their views and practices of baptism. However, full agreement has not yet been reached on the following points:

- whether and in what sense baptism in the NT may be understood as analogous to circumcision in the Old (Col. 2.9-15);
- whether the NT teaches believers' baptism as the normative order;
- whether the NT understandings and accounts of baptismal practice allow for infant baptism;
- the sense in which baptism as "mystery" or "sacrament" may be grounder in the NT concept of "mystery" or the NT concept of "pledge" (I Pet. 3.21);
- the degrees to which differing views of covenant and of the relation between divine grace and faith comport with Scripture.

The scriptural foundations for the above issues need further examination.

Peace and the state

The realities of a nuclear age have prompted many in the Reformed family to address the peace question with greater urgency, and to take account

of the fact that violence can be institutional, economic, and systemic as well as military. This recognition has prompted a fresh investigation of the strategies of active non-violence, and has greatly facilitated dialogue with the Mennonites.

If the issue of peace is adequately to be addressed, the Gospel must be related not only to questions of war, revolution, and military affairs, but also to an expanded theological understanding of the institutions of civilization - for example, families, economic and technological systems, cultural patterns, and political regimes. These were intended by God to be preservative and enhancing of human life, but are too often characterized by conflict, hostility, division, and violence. Believers, congregations, and the peoples of the world are thereby victimized. The vocation of all Christians to be peace-makers in all arenas of life requires careful consideration.

The Reformed have traditionally held that there are situations in which it becomes necessary for the Christian to take up the sword. The Mennonites have not traditionally endorsed this view. The establishment of a just order which entails the use of violent force is still, in the eyes of many of the Reformed, an obligation in a sinful world. However, some in the Reformed family adopt a stance which is in complete harmony with that of the Mennonites. Reformed scholars need to respond to the Mennonite challenge concerning the consistency of their stance(s) on peace, and the degree to which they are faithful to Scripture.

It became clear that there are differences in the way in which Scripture is read, both within the Reformed and Mennonite traditions and between them. Nevertheless in general it can be said that both traditions take their stand on the Christ event, including the life and example of Jesus, his atoning death on the Cross, his Resurrection and lordship over the powers. Within this understanding Mennonites and some part of the Reformed family, have emphasized the obligation of non-violent action in accordance with the teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Other Reformed Christians would claim that free responsibility in Christ may involve violent action at times, undertaken in repentance, and confident in the forgiving mercy of God.

Despite the elements of convergence noted above, it was admitted that some continuing mutual suspicion remains, involving a partially articulated attribution of moral inadequacy. The Mennonites suspect that the Reformed-Puritan traditions sell out biblical principles too soon to the strictures of necessity. The Reformed heritage suspects that the Mennonite tradition says that it was to be socially responsible and engaged, but is not in fact ready to take full responsibility for justice in society.

The Mennonites' theological understanding of revolution requires clarification. Though not wishing to surrender their peace principle, they must ask: How are unjust rulers, who understand nothing but force, to be dethroned? It became clear that Mennonites are not abandoning traditional Anabaptist pacifism, but they are struggling with the question how to apply the peace principle concretely in today's situation. The Reformed noted that the Mennonite Central Committee is with the oppressed in its programmes, but that Mennonites are at a loss in some situations where the regime is unjust.

Both traditions are changing, the Reformed realizing that they must pay more attention to the integrity of the church as a witnessing and nurturing community that they have sometimes done, the Mennonites recognizing that they have to participate and act responsibly in society and culture.

The traditions are converging on the conception of Christ as transforming culture, as opposed to his being over, against, or above, it.

Reformed and Mennonites are coming together in understanding of what it is to be in but not of the world. There is acknowledgement on both sides of the dual membership of the Christian believer in the secular community and in the society of the redeemed. It is agreed that the state is needed in a fallen world, as a positive but provisional institution, to maintain some relative order, justice, and peace, and that some degree of coercion is legitimate in the attainment of this end.

Pacifism is the crucial element of the witness of Mennonites to be listened to by the Reformed. It is to be noted that there are sections and groups for peace-making already at work in the Reformed context. Mennonites could greatly advance the discussion of this crucial issue if they would undertake scholarly work to show how the concern for peace is rooted in, and derives from, the whole work of Christ - his life and ministry, and his atoning death and final victory. The implications of God's redemptive Act in Christ for the mission of Christians as agents of peace and reconciliation need clearly to be worked out. Further work might be done on the analogy between the place of peace in the Mennonite tradition and that of the sovereign grace of God in the Reformed.

While there is convergence on the role of the church, differences remain as to its nature, and on the terms most appropriately used to express it. Hence the need for further analysis of this matter both within the two traditions and between them. It would seem that the Reformed tend to have a more social understanding of the catholicity of the church, while the Mennonites tend rather to emphasize the discipleship of believers in the context of commitment to community. In the effort to relate to culture, the Reformed have sometimes identified themselves too closely with it, while the Mennonites, in their effort to challenge culture, have sometimes distanced themselves too far from it.

Recommendations

The following recommendations, addressed to the executive committees of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Mennonite World Conference, were unanimously approved by the Reformed and Mennonite participants in the consultation on "Baptism, peace, and the state in the Reformed and Mennonite traditions," held at the University of Calgary, from October 11 to 14 1989.

- That in gratitude for the unity into which God, by grace, has called us, and with a view to urgent and credible mission, Reformed and Mennonites engage wherever possible in united witness and common study at all levels, from the local to the international.
- That the executive committee of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches promote a discussion among Reformed churches on the nature of the church, having regard to the varied ecclesiologies - and free, gather and connectional - that are to be found in that communion, the objective being to reach a biblically grounded ecclesiology which will take due account of the realities of the several societies within which the churches are currently called to serve. That the question of church establishments be raised with the Anglican Consultative Council and the Lutheran World Federation.
- That the Executive bodies of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Mennonite World Conference promote a joint discussion between their member churches on the nature of the church and

baptism in relation to Christian incorporation and nurture, the Lord's Supper, and church discipline.

- That the executive committee of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches urge member churches of the Alliance clearly to articulate their understanding of baptism, and to revive and practise that understanding of the church as God's covenant people, within which the integrity of infant baptism is actualized.
- That the executive committee of the Mennonite World Conference urge its member churches seriously to examine their attitude towards Christians baptized as infants who wish to exercise their church membership in a Mennonite church, in relation to the questions of the nature and mode of baptism, and in the light of the Gospel which has made us one.
- That the executive committee of the Mennonite World Conference initiate a discussion among Mennonites on the possibility of a theological understanding of revolution, and the application of the peace principle in face of economic, institutional, military, and cultural violence.
- That the executive committee of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches initiate a discussion among Reformed churches on the possibilities in, and applications of, just war theory, and on Christian participation in the responsible use of coercive power.
- That the results of the consultations urged under 2 and 7 above be shared with the Mennonite World Conference as a basis for further joint discussion.
- That the results of the consultations urged under 5 and 6 above be shared with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches as a basis for further joint discussion.