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FORUM

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COVER ESSAY

TOLERANT INCLUSIVISM THAT EXCLUDES.

A dominant stream in today's culture can be described with three related but not identical terms: diversity, inclusivism, and tolerance. Diversity, sometimes called multiculturalism, is a positive notion calling us to greater appreciation of the non-Caucasian, non-European peoples and cultures of the world. Inclusivism is the other side of the coin asking us to avoid language or custom that potentially excludes some people. Thus referring generically to "man" is said to exclude women; the preferable inclusive term is "humanity" or "human being." Similarly, conversation in a diverse group should avoid "insider" talk (such as jokes) that could only be understood by one of the groups. Community conver-

sation ought to include all and exclude none. Finally, tolerance is a political notion calling citizens to respect and honor the civil freedoms of all others, particularly those with whom we disagree. Thus Christians must be politically tolerant of other religions, honoring their full civic rights.

Theoretically all three notions should be embraced by Christians. The wonderful diversity of the world's peoples and cultures is a positive good that enriches all of us. Christians who confess that all people are created image bears of God should be especially sensitive to avoid language and behavior that marginalizes others. And contrary to certain theocratic notions, a Christian political

philosophy embraces genuine pluralism. The rights and responsibilities of citizenship must not be restricted by religious beliefs. Christians, for example, should not wish to deny Muslims or Buddhists their civil rights. All of this seems rather self-evident, but public discourse on these issues is very confused today. There are secularists today who in the name of tolerance



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ance! Intolerance of Christianity is thus judged to be an act of tolerance. Examples of such politically

"God is not a white European"

truly believe that any explicitly religious witness in the public square is an act of intolerance. Thus, public affirmation of Christian sexual morality is judged to be homophobic hate speech that must be silenced. Remarkably, this posture is taken in the name of toler-

correct intolerance abound today.

The church also seems confused sometimes. ***Multicultural diversity is something to be celebrated in the church. We are***

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enriched by embracing as brothers and sisters in the faith people from all nations. God is not a white European. Of course not! Yet just as multicultural *ideology* ends up as a tool to trash the very Western and American culture which has made diversity possible, the very identity of the church is threatened when diversity as such becomes the goal. Put differently, tolerance is a civic virtue but inappropriate in the church. **Diversity in the church has biblical and confessional limits and may never trump confessions or polity integral to the church's identity.**

From that perspective let me share experiences of two worship services (within 2 days of each other) when the ironies of the diversity and inclusion/exclusion phenomenon became very real for me. (Since I wish to highlight principles and ideas rather than be critical of specific people, I shall exercise creative license by disguising the details a little.) The first was with mostly fellow Christian Reformed church members of a generally progressive bent who in a deliberate effort to be more inclusive to "seekers" incorporated into a worship setting many elements foreign to me but native to the seekers. The second service was in a church fellowship that had deliberately separated itself from the Christian Reformed Church because of disagreements with tendencies and directions in the CRC. From a strictly sociological point of view I should have experienced inclusion in the first group since it was self-consciously attempting to be inclusive. At the same time, as a minister and seminary professor in the CRC, I should have felt

excluded by the second group since their separation from us was deliberate. The funny thing is, my experience was exactly the reverse: the inclusive group excluded me, the exclusive group included me, even gladly welcoming me to the Lord's Supper. In the remainder of this essay I want to reflect on that strange experience.

It is possible here to provide obvious and easy psychological explanations. Perhaps the "for-



eign" elements in the inclusive service made me uncomfortable simply because I was not used to them. If it were only a matter of my comfort zone being challenged, improved familiarity would fix things. Similarly, since the second service was a reminder of the CRC past (blue Psalter Hymnal, traditional CRC liturgy, male officebearers) I as a middle-aged man might just be on an "feel-good" ecclesiastical nostalgia trip. Perhaps. Perhaps. I do not discount the possibility that some psychological factors may have played a role. Nonetheless, it was a much deeper experience. In both places I was pierced to the spiri-

tual core of my soul. In the second service my table fellowship with "separated" brothers and sisters was a profoundly meaningful moment of reconciliation.

In the first service I moved from mildly agnostic indifference to actual spiritual dread. As certain ancient practices with pagan roots were introduced I experienced a spirit that was not the Holy Spirit but a malevolent one. By contrast, the Communion experience with

those were separated from me ecclesiastically was less a matter of exclusion than a sad brokenness *within* the body of Christ. Above all things, without a doubt, we first belonged to Christ. That clear sense of belonging to Christ, of sharing the apostolic faith of the universal church, was present in the second and absent in the first service. It became clear to me that as in civil society, the intention to be inclusive can in actual practice be an act of exclusion. Sometimes inclusivism excludes.

This is an important lesson for the church. When in an attempt to be inclusive the church changes "hymns" to

What then is to be done about this? Clearly, we can't oppose all change. **To never change, never to be open to new cultural expressions, never to try new forms and elements of worship is to risk quenching the Holy Spirit and dying as a church. The issue of balancing change and fidelity to confessional truth is perhaps the critical issue facing the CRC today.** We must discuss it openly. Here is a suggestion for a framework within which change and cultural adaptation can take place. I believe that the four criteria used by the CRC's 1968 Liturgical Committee Report are applicable here. The four motifs identified by the committee as essential to good worship are: it must be biblical, catholic, confessional, and pastoral (see *1968 Acts of Synod*, 134-198). Careful reflection on those four criteria could guide the practice of CRC mission efforts to reach across cultures and increase the denomination's diversity in appropriate ways.

While tolerance is a necessary virtue for civil society, the church of Christ has an identity rooted in the truth of the gospel that may never be compromised. We need the kind of discernment that is informed by the broader Christian tradition

“ [Today] intolerance of Christianity is [often] judged to be an act of tolerance ”

include "hers" or refers to God as "She," then I and many others are excluded. When seeker services avoid confession of sin as an integral part of a service those of us who need to confess and be assured of forgiveness are cheated. When worship is so contemporary that some "traditionalists" find it difficult express praise to their God (or vice versa), friendliness to one generation and culture is the vehicle for excluding others.

as well as the particularly Reformed tradition if we wish to stay Christian much less stay Reformed. There is a great deal at stake in getting this right. The only real inclusion that matters is our inclusion for eternity in the fellowship of Christ's body. **Preoccupation with earthly inclusiveness runs the risk of eternal exclusion. We can't afford to make such mistakes with people's souls. ■**

Henry Zwaanstra, Editor

CHRISTIANITY AND THE NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS.



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This issue of FORUM focuses on Christianity and the non-Christian religions. Professor Bolt approaches the subject out of a personal experience. Professor Cooper addresses it analytically from a Reformed, biblical perspective and suggests how non-Christian culture may legitimately be transformed to Christian obedience. My own thinking on the subject has been shaped and informed by my former professor, J. H. Bavinck, missiologist at the Free University of Amsterdam. (*An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, 169-190).

Statement of the Problem

Among non-Christian peoples, whether tribal or culturally sophisticated, religious ideas and moral norms are united with social or communal customs and practices. **When Christianity enters a non-Christian society, questions inevitably arise as to how far**

it can accommodate or adjust itself to the customs, practices, and mores present among the people.

Everyone knows that Christian missionaries should learn the language, respect the customs and manners, and try as much as possible to imitate the way of life of the people among whom they are called to work. This is not the problem. The real problem arises when a small band of Christians has been gathered into a native or indigenous church. The social customs have non-Christian religious connotations that are not religiously innocent. If the newly formed Christian community accommodates too much, it puts itself and its members in danger of being swept back into paganism. If, on the other hand, it adopts too little, it may create an unbridgeable gap between itself and the native or national community to which the gospel must continue to be preached.

The problem is not new. Tertullian, a third-century North-African Christian said that some businesses and professions, for example the teaching of literature, were simply closed to Christians. They were either intrinsically idolatrous or served idolatrous ends. He also believed that lighting doors with lamps was idolatrous (*On Idolatry*). Approximately two centuries later another North African, Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, also addressed the problem. He introduced an important distinction. He said that the Heavenly City “invites citizens of all nations and all tongues and unites them into a single pilgrim band. It takes no issue with that diversity of customs, laws, and tradi-

tions...” humans use to maintain social peace and harmony. The difficulty, however, arose when out of demonic deception “wise men” of the Earthly City allied numerous gods with the many

are often not radically distinguished, there are nuances of difference. Some are more religious; others more social. Sensitivity to these differences can provide criteria for judg-

“The real problem arises... when Christians are gathered into... a Church.”

different areas and aspects of human life. To this the Heavenly City had to say “No” because it must adore and serve our God alone. As a result the Heavenly City cannot share with the Earthly City common religious rules and practices. It has no choice but to dissent, (*City of God*, Bk. XIX, Ch. 17)

Approaching a Solution

The problem is not easily solved. Historically, Roman Catholics, especially the Jesuits, have been more accommodating to non-Christian religions and cultures than have Protestants. The differences are theologically rooted. For Catholics human nature after the Fall is still capable of attaining true knowledge of God. For Protestants, human life is entirely influenced and distorted by sin. Consequently, the whole of human life needs to be converted or transformed into God’s service.

Bavinck made what seemed to me some good and wise suggestions in approaching a solution to the problem. ***In non-Christian cultures customs and practices serve both religious and social functions.*** Although these functions

ments, judgments best left to the indigenous Christian community rather than to foreign missionaries. Moreover, with time, cultural customs and practices can become detached from their original pagan background. They can become secularized and no longer be stumbling blocks to the faithful.

Bavinck’s contention that “accommodation” or adaptation is not an appropriate description of what should take place seems correct. Accommodation always involves a mixture of non-Christian and Christian elements. He advanced the idea of “possessio,” to take possession of, as a biblically more appropriate description. Christian life should take non-Christian forms of life into possession and in this way make them new. In non-Christian life customs and practices serve idolatrous ends. Christ through the gospel can, however, take human life and culture and turn them in a different direction so that they acquire entirely different religious content while the external forms often resemble the old. Christ renews, re-establishes, and gives new meaning. According to Bavinck, he takes possession. It may, however, take a long time. ■



JOHN COOPER

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Is All Non-Christian Culture Idolatrous?

Religious and cultural diversity can be confusing, even for thoughtful Christians. A group of Christian Reformed Dutch-Americans at a community festival joined with Native Americans who were presenting some of their traditional chants and dances. **While many spectators thought their spontaneous involvement was “really neat,” there were both Christians and Native Americans who were surprised and offended.** The Dutch-Americans were trying to exemplify Christian values by being inclusive and affirming multiculturalism. But they were oblivious to the fact that the dances were religious rituals and the chants included prayers to the spirits of the earth. The Native American medicine man who led the group could not understand why Christians would practice his religion. He would not participate in their Lord’s Supper.

This incident surfaces complex issues about the relation between religion and culture. The Dutch-American Christians had simply assumed that the singing and dancing were “secular” activities, not having to do

CHRIST REFORMS CULTURE: *The Gospel and Non-Christian Religions.*

with religion. This assumption has shaped Western society since the Enlightenment, when religion was relegated to the private personal realm and public culture was constructed on a non-religious foundation, tolerant of many religions but dependent on none. *Given the bigger picture, however, this separation of sacred and secular seems naive.* Most other societies in world history, including the Native American peoples, have integrated spirituality and culture much more directly. In addition to explicit acts of “worship,” the routines and rituals of everyday family life, as well as communal education, economic activities, social regulation, and the arts are imbued with religious significance and content. Furthermore, it is fair to ask whether modern Western culture really is religiously neutral or instead embodies another religion: humanism in various forms.

Unlike these Dutch-Americans, missionaries usually have been aware of the integration of religion and life. **Thus they sometimes required converts to abandon their cultures completely, adopting not only Christian beliefs and morals, but also Western names, language, music, dress, and food.** These attempts at “Christianizing the heathen” are now almost universally denounced as cultural imperialism. Even conservative evangelicals agree that missionaries often went further than necessary in asking new Christians to repent of their native cultures.

So we have two ends of a spectrum. **One extreme minimizes the presence of religion in the cultural activities of life.** This attitude easily

results in the unwitting endorsement of cultural expressions incompatible with one’s own religion, as our Christian Reformed brothers and sisters learned from their Native American neighbors. **The other extreme maximizes the connection between religion and culture.** It sets up twin misjudgments: One is that a culture generated by Christians (such as Western culture) is intrinsically Christian. The other is that a non-Christian culture is completely incompatible with the

expression of loving obedience to God. Thus there is an essential connection between imaging God (religion) and culture. If Adam and Eve had not sinned, there would have been only one religion and morality: true love and obedience to the Creator God. But I believe there would still have been cultural diversity. We humans would still have developed a variety of foods, building styles, music, and literature. **Cultural diversity within one true religion is a potential of God’s good creation.**

“Is it spiritually wise to attempt Christianizing Buddhist prayer wheels, Hindu fruit offerings, or Native American cleansing ceremonies...?”

Gospel. Together the twin mistakes generate cultural chauvinism and even imperialism.

What is the wisest way to think about these things? I suggest two ingredients. **The first is the Reformed tradition’s biblical perspective on religion and culture** in creation and redemption. The second combines accurate cultural understanding and spiritual discernment of the particular situation being addressed. Cultural situations vary and may call for different responses.

Biblical Perspective

When God created our first parents in his image, he gave them dominion over the earth and made them stewards of his Garden (Gen. 1, 2). This is the origin of culture. Carrying out the “cultural mandate” is an

But Adam and Eve fell and thereby infected the human race with sin. Thus there is religious diversity as well as cultural diversity. And since culture inevitably expresses religion, **all human culture is deformed by sin and most of it has developed in devotion to false gods.**

But God did not abandon us in our sin. He promised and sent a son of Adam and Eve, his own Son, to redeem and restore his people and his creation. To achieve this goal God has preserved fallen creation and the human race. He has prevented sin from ravaging them completely. Because of God’s goodness, there is still health and beauty in nature. Human individuals and human cultures still manifest evidences of the image

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of God. We call this providential goodness of God "common grace." It is rooted in his saving grace but extends even to those who do not respond positively to the Gospel. **Because of common grace, there are varying kinds and degrees of human good even in pagan cultures. This good can be reclaimed for Christ by those who follow him as Savior and Lord. But the antithesis of Satan to the rule of Christ remains.**

Spiritual Discernment

Applying this biblical perspective thus requires intelligent spiritual discernment, the second ingredient of wisdom. **We must attempt to distinguish between what reflects false religion and what is consistent with God's will for creation in cultural products and practices.** In Native American dances, for example, can one distinguish between the good social, musical, and choreographical elements and the idolatrous religious-spiritual elements? Can one separate the acceptable elements from their false religious meaning, give them a new meaning within a Christian framework, and thus "reform" and reclaim them for Christ? This is what Christians have attempted with non-Christian culture for two thousand years. We have reformed ideas from Greek philosophy for our theology. We have adapted forms of social organization, art, and music from European tribes who became Christian. Martin Luther brought the pagan Saxon fir tree into the celebration of Christ's birth. Perhaps we have made some mistakes.

To be legitimate, **reformation of non-Christian culture requires several steps.**

It takes understanding and spiritual discernment of the religious meaning and dynamics of the cultural object or practice. It involves deliberate de-paganization: negation of the false religious meaning and dynamics the object or practice has in its non-Christian worldview. And it requires careful integration into a Christian world and life view. If these steps are followed, much of value can be reclaimed from Native American, African, Asian, as well as post-Christian Western and Latino culture. God's redemptive grace can sanctify what his common grace has preserved.

However, **there are some parts of pagan culture not worth reclaiming.**

Some artifacts and activities are so specifically religious and polluted by false spirituality that they are best abandoned. This is especially true with pagan forms of worship. Is

applies, for example, to certain kinds of music and other Western cultural icons that seem clear manifestations of a false religious spirit. Would a Buddhist monk, Native American medicine man, or anti-Christian rock star incorporate a secularized Lord's Supper into their culture because they thought it was "neat" and want-



when it is still understood and observed by non-Christians. **Biblical wisdom discerns the inappropriateness of praying to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with a Buddhist prayer wheel or celebrating Christ's atonement through a Native American cleansing ceremony.** This sort of syncretism is a stumbling block both to non-Christians and weaker Christians and should be repugnant to the mature in Christ (1 Cor. 8).

Western Christians are in a perplexing situation. Historically much of our culture was shaped by biblical religion. But it never was fully Christian, even after the Reformation. And since the Enlightenment, it is increasingly animated by scientific humanism, relativism, and materialism.

Even if Western civilization were fully Christian, it would not have been the only possibly Christian culture, since cultural diversity within religious unity is a potential that God gave in creation. So the cultural imperialism of Western missionaries was never justified. Non-Western converts should have been disciplined to evaluate their own cultures, rejecting and reforming them according to the principles of biblical wisdom. Facing the complexities of post-Christian, post-modern society, European (including Latin)-American Christians need at least as much biblical wisdom and spiritual discernment as our Native American, Asian, and African brothers and sisters to come to terms with our own increasingly pagan culture, its influence on our attitudes and life-styles, and even on our worship practices. **Our only hope is that Christ rules by his Word and Spirit.** ■

ed to be inclusive?

Would they go even further and include the Lord's Supper in their religious rituals? The medicine man mentioned above

// Our only hope is that Christ rules by his Word and Spirit //

it wise to attempt Christianizing Buddhist prayer wheels, Hindu fruit offerings, or Native American cleansing ceremonies just to preserve their aesthetic qualities or to affirm those cultures? This question also

was emphatic. He knew that these practices are spiritually incompatible. For the same reason, a practice with an explicitly non-Christian spiritual purpose cannot be given a Christian meaning, especially

WHAT I MOST WANT MY STUDENTS TO KNOW ABOUT BIBLICAL STUDIES.



JEFFREY A. D. WEIMA

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As Professor of New Testament at Calvin Seminary, I have the privilege of teaching in the area of biblical studies. And when I reflect on what I most want my students to know, I am drawn to the challenge that another teacher, Paul, gave to his pupil, Timothy: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). **My chief goal as a teacher of biblical studies, therefore, is to ensure that graduates of Calvin Seminary “correctly handle the word of truth.”**

What kinds of things are involved in dealing with the Bible in a correct manner? What principles should one follow in properly interpreting scripture? The technical term for this subject is hermeneutics. Such a topic, of course, is a highly complicated one

about which much can be said. Here, however, I limit myself to a very brief overview of five hermeneutical principles that I hope my students will take with them into ministry.

The Holy Spirit Principle

The first thing that every reader of scripture ought to realize is that the same Holy Spirit, who inspired the biblical writers to record the words found in the Bible, needs to work in our heart and life today if we are to interpret those words properly. Jesus talked about this illuminating work of the Holy Spirit when he said: “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things...” (John 14:26; see also John 16:13). Paul similarly refers to the Holy Spirit as the revealer of God’s truth in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 2:10-11). These and other texts led the Reformers to emphasize the illuminating work of the Spirit in causing believers to interpret the Bible properly. John Calvin, for example, states: “We must come [to the Bible] with reverence, we must

wait entirely upon God, knowing that we need to

be taught by his Holy Spirit, and that without Him we cannot understand anything that is shown to us in his Word” (Sermon on 1 Timothy 3).

The first way, therefore, to “correctly handle the word of truth” is to call upon the Holy Spirit to illumine our sin-darkened minds so that we can properly understand God’s truth as we meet it in the Bible. **I want my students to have a powerful awareness of their dependence upon the Holy Spirit for a right interpretation of God’s word.**

The Grammatical Principle

As any person who speaks a foreign language knows, it is impossible to go from one language into another in a perfect manner. You always lose something in the translation. That is why the Italians have the proverb “Traduttore traditore,” which means, “The translator is a traitor.” No matter how gifted the translator may be, something is

Testament was originally written in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. And when the Bible is translated into our modern languages, something is lost. As Haim Nacham Bialik, a Jewish poet, put it: “Reading the Bible in translation is like kissing your bride through a veil.” You can do it, but it is not as good as the real thing! Similarly, one can certainly profit from a study of scripture in English, but it is not as helpful as looking at the text in its original language. The interpretation of scripture often depends on the meaning of particular words or the grammar and syntax of a particular text.

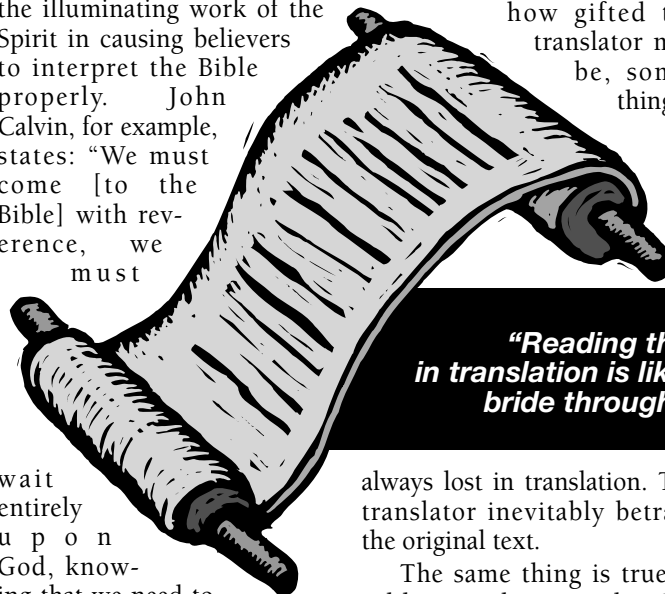
The second way, therefore, to “correctly handle the word of truth” is to study God’s word in the ancient languages. **I do not want my students to be limited to translations but to be fully equipped to study God’s word in the languages in which it was originally written.**

The Literary Principle

The Bible is literature and as such ought to be approached from a literary perspective. This involves an appreciation of the different

forms of writing found in scripture: historical narratives, law codes,

poetry, wisdom sayings, gospels, parables, letters and apocalypses. Each of these writing forms has its own unique characteristics and



“Reading the Bible in translation is like kissing your bride through a veil...”

always lost in translation. The translator inevitably betrays the original text.

The same thing is true of Bible translation. The Old

STUDIES...cont.

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each should be interpreted accordingly.

For example, when Jesus says: "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away" (Matt. 5:29), it is important to know that this is an hyperbole—a deliberate use of exaggeration to drive home a point in a memorable manner. Jesus never intended this saying to be taken literally and it would be wrong to interpret it in this way.

Or when the writer of Proverbs says: "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself," and then proceeds in the very next verse to say: "Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes" (Prov. 26:4-5), it is important to know that this is a wisdom saying. Unlike law codes (such as the Ten Commandments) that are to be universally applied in all situations, wisdom sayings provide general guidelines by which we can live in a right relationship with God and our neighbor. Thus, the writer of Proverbs is not contradicting

an appreciation for how information is communicated through the sophisticated artistry and aesthetic quality of the biblical texts. ***I want my students to preach and teach in a way that is faithful to the various literary forms employed by the biblical writers. And I want them to interpret scripture properly by taking into consideration the text's rich literary features.***

The Historical Principle

The Bible, of course, did not fall down from heaven in the King James Version with maps in the back. Instead, God chose to reveal himself and his work of redemption in very specific historical events. This means that modern readers of scripture must always work at thinking themselves back into the ancient world of the biblical authors—into their history, language, geography, and culture. For example, one needs to know how salt was used in the ancient world

"My chief goal is...that graduates... correctly handle the word of truth."

himself. He is rather stating the important truth that sometimes it is wiser to ignore a foolish person than to draw attention to his foolishness, while at other times it is wiser to rebuke a fool than allow other people to be misled by his folly.

The third way, therefore, to "correctly handle the word of truth" is to approach the Bible from a literary perspective. This involves not just a knowledge of the different forms of writing in scripture, but also

in order to appreciate Jesus' statement that believers are "the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13). Paul's lengthy discussion of meat offered to idols (1 Cor. 8:1-11:1) should be understood in the light of sacrifices offered at pagan temples. James' discussion of faith (James 2:14-26) needs to be heard in a specific context where church leaders were discriminating against poor Christians—an historical situation quite different from the problem of legalism lying

"...the Bible...has only one primary author and that is God."

behind Paul's discussion of faith in Galatians.

The fourth way, therefore, to "correctly handle the word of truth" is to take seriously the historical and cultural context of any biblical passage. ***I want my students to dig deeply into the ancient world and culture of the Bible so that they make scripture as understandable and relevant for modern readers as it was for its original hearers centuries ago.***

The Theological Principle

Although the Bible has many secondary authors who were led by the Holy Spirit to record their message in different forms of writings and in different historical situations, it has only one primary author and that is God. As Louis Berkhof, former president of Calvin Seminary, noted in his book on hermeneutics: "Scripture contains a great deal that does not find its explanation in history, nor in the secondary authors, but only in God as the *primary author*...In view of all this, it is not only perfectly warranted, but absolutely necessary, to complement the usual grammatical and historical interpretation with a third. The name 'Theological Interpretation' deserves the preference, as expressive of the fact that its necessity follows from the divine authorship of the Bible" (*Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 133-134).

The fact that God is the primary author of the Bible highlights the unity of scrip-

ture. There is ultimately one divine voice speaking in the Bible. This means that we must not read certain passages in isolation from others but interpret the passages in light of the whole. As it is often put, this means "interpreting scripture with scripture." This also means that the interpreter must know the broad themes that serve to unify the message of scripture such as the Covenant and the Kingdom of God.

The fifth way, therefore, to "correctly handle the word of truth" is to approach it theologically. ***I want my students to avoid "proof-texting" and taking verses out of context but instead to base their theological doctrines and world-and-life view on the whole of what God reveals in his word.***

The Future of the Christian Reformed Church

Many today wonder about the future of the Christian Reformed Church. If our denomination is to survive the challenge of living in an increasingly secular and materialistic society, its members and especially its leaders need to know how to interpret the Bible properly. We need ministers who preach and teach the biblical text from a Holy Spirit, grammatical, literary, historical and theological perspective. In short, the Christian Reformed Church needs godly kingdom workers who "correctly handle the word of truth." ■

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DISCERNMENT IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD.



DEAN DEPPE

Professor of New Testament at Calvin Seminary.

The book of Zechariah concludes with these inspiring words: "On that day HOLY TO THE LORD will be inscribed on the bells of the horses, and the cooking pots in the LORD'S house will be like the sacred bowls in front of the altar. Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah will be holy to the LORD Almighty" (14:20-21a).

Abraham Kuyper proclaimed: "There is not one square inch of this universe that God does not claim as his own." That is the world and life view for kingdom living. According to Zechariah human beings will not only image the creator's message, but the horses also will announce the char-

acter of God. In the ancient world the horse was used for very ordinary purposes – for transporting people, for plowing the fields, and for pulling chariots in battle. To put Zechariah's images into contemporary language, we might say that the truck transporting the earth's commerce, the farm machinery harvesting our food supply, and the arsenal of tanks preparing for war will all be employed for kingdom purposes in the reign of Christ.

The bells on beasts of burden will ring for all to hear, "Holy to the Lord." Commentators disagree whether this Hebrew sentence refers to bells, to the reins or harnesses of horses employed in war, or to the stable of horses (Calvin) making the passage easily applicable to Jesus' birth. Since the previous verse refers to the feast of tabernacles, the picture is most likely that of the horses transporting pilgrims to Jerusalem (Is. 66:20). People from every nation will arrive on horseback peacefully (Ps. 20:7; 30:16-17) ringing the bells in the same manner as the priests approached the Lord (Ex. 28:35; 39:26).

Notice that the bells are not attached to the door of the synagogue. Thus in our day Zechariah 14 would not refer to

church bells that summon us to Sunday worship but more appropriately to the alarm clocks that wake us for a day of service, to the dinner bells that call us to table fellowship, or to the school bells that invite us to intellectual pursuits. Upon each of these is inscribed "Holy to the Lord."

No lines of demarcation separate secular and sacred in the kingdom. The ordinary workhorse carries the same insignia of consecration as the priests, who carried the inscription "Holy to the Lord" on the gold plate attached to their turbans (Ex. 28:36). The vessels employed in temple worship serve God no better than the bowls a mother uses to serve her family. There is absolutely nothing in the lives of God's people that cannot be consecrated for kingdom service.

All cultural treasures and achievements can therefore be brought into God's service (Is. 60:3,5; Zech. 14:14; Rev. 21:24,26). Yet we must still exercise spiritual discernment since the scriptural standard remains, "Holy to the Lord." The Christian church cannot envelop every cultural tradition, religious symbol, song, or ceremony into its life without a process of transformation tak-

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ing place. Theological reflection is of utmost importance. As our cultural understanding of tolerance changes from civil respect for another's creed to the idea that all religious faiths are equally true, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the heart of the Christian faith may itself be up for grabs. Certainly the Reformed faith is as big as the world, but it is also as narrow as the insignia of the kingdom, "Holy to the Lord." The earth is the Lord's and all its cultural treasures, but the church can only discern them when it is "wholly holy." ■