Calvin Seminary Forum

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It never has been easy to be a confessing Christian. It has not often been easy to be a Reformed Christian. And it is certainly not easy to be Reformed in America today.

There are so many pressures against holding to our tradition and so many inducements to dilute our faith. American culture in the late twentieth century glorifies the individual and the present moment. At the same time, almost paradoxically, it demands the dissolution of genuinely distinctive cultural experiences into a bland multi-cultural soup concocted from the lowest common denominators of various groups in the American melting-pot. It may, therefore, be pointedly counter-cultural and quite unpopular to declare that Reformed Protestantism can be best identified as a particular community of belief held together by a particular tradition.

On the religious front, American culture increasingly looks either for a generic, politically correct liberalism or a generic evangelical conservatism. And again, being Reformed appears distinctly counter-cultural, inasmuch as being Reformed means espousing a particular confessional theology. To make this point, of course, is not to deny that the Reformed or Calvinist approach to society, from the very beginning, has included a very this-worldly program of social reform and transformation. Rather it is to affirm the Reformed confessional assumption that the Word must be preached and, through the calling Word, individuals and communities will be changed by the grace of God. And it is also to affirm that standards and mores of a sinful world cannot take priority over the Word.

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As Reformed Christians we also hold to the priority of God’s grace in salvation over against any and all attempts to claim that sinful human beings initiate their own salvation. Traditionally and confessionally we have stated the priority of grace in several ways: our confessions have declared that salvation is by grace alone; that it is through faith in Christ alone; that we know of this salvation not through our own discernment but by Scripture alone. In order to make the point more clear, our confessions have drawn powerfully on the Pauline epistles and have insisted, with Paul, that faith is not a work but is a gift of God distinct from all human merits. So too, our confessions have argued, again following the Apostle, that the divine gift of grace and faith is not conditioned by our merits or in any way by our fallen world, but is grounded in an eternal decree and ordained by God before the foundation of the world. We also affirm that this eternal saving will of God is the foundation of our assurance: we rely for our salvation not on our own doings and not on possibilities naturally resident in our worldly environment, but on the eternally-willed grace of an eternal God.

Counter-Cultural

If these Reformed teachings oppose worldliness and are somewhat counter-cultural, they also guarantee that the Reformed faith is neither anticultural or utterly otherworldly. God’s eternal decree of salvation becomes effective in the midst of life, through the means of Word and sacrament. The marks of the church, our confessions tell us, are also divinely given means of grace that identify and locate the saving will of God in our midst, specifically, in the midst of the covenanted community of faith as it engages in its life in this world. It is, moreover, this sense of being a covenanted, believing community living faithfully in this world and at the same time seeking the kingdom of God that leads us to affirm so strongly the biblical teaching of infant baptism: children, too, belong to God’s covenant and that by grace alone, as clearly witnessed in the baptism of infants, who obviously can do nothing to save themselves.

Once all of these confessional points have been made, it ought also to be clear why being Reformed stands in the way of becoming a generic American Christian or even a generic American evangelical. Despite all its good, and even good Christian intentions, generic Christianity accommodates itself to the culture around it. Generic Christianity sets aside the traditions of liturgy and hymnody that have nourished our Reformed faith and replaced them with alternative forms of worship that nourish alternative confessions. Together with its generic forms, American Christianity tends to teach a highly individualized notion of salvation that strips away the notion of salvation by grace alone and argues the cooperation between individual people and God in the quest for salvation. It accordingly views the church not as a covenanted community but as a voluntary association of adult believers made to feel comfortable in a thoroughly acculturated context of Sunday worship.

We end where we began. Being Reformed in late-twentieth-century America is not an easy thing. In order to be Reformed we must continue to uphold a particular confession of faith and a particular tradition of practice. We are called upon to oppose aspects of the culture and at the same time to preach the Word and to engage
Honoring Consciences is a sacred duty. Of course, no strongly held opinion is a matter of conscience. In fact, most of our strongly held opinions are not. Also, a person's conscience can be wrong, misguided, and, consequently, the Church has every right to try to persuade persons to change their minds on conscience issues.

Martin Luther took his stand on conscience: "Here I stand! I cannot do otherwise."

The Synod of 1995 attempted to honor conscience by means of a compromise. Whether it has honored conscience sufficiently, only time will tell. Compromises by their very nature are always a bit unsatisfactory for neither side gets everything it wants.

The procedure of several synods prior to 1995 was to vote this issue up or down by a rather slim majority. Usually at the next synod the vote would be reversed. On matters of conscience, ruling by a slim majority is not the best way to go.

Synod 1995 went in a different direction. It tried to honor the consciences both of those who were for and those who were against placing women in the office of elder and minister. Of course, synod could not agree with both — that is an impossibility — but it tried to honor the consciences of both.

Why was such a position possible at this synod? Besides the two major groups who were either for or against the issue for reasons of conscience, there was a group who while personally not in favor of women in the office of elder/minister believed that the unity of the church required this compromise.

Did they simply violate their own consciences? No, they did not. For while personally they were not convinced that women should be admitted to the office of elder/minister, they believed that other interpretations of the relevant biblical texts are possible, that the issue itself while important is not central to the Christian faith, and that preserving the unity of the church is a more serious obligation. For such reasons they were able to vote for the compromise along with those who favored women in office.

Speaking generally, the compromise allows a classis to declare itself in favor of women in the office of elder/minister. If a classis votes against such a position, no church in that classis may ordain a woman as a minister. A congregation may not ordain a woman as an elder apart from such a classical decision. But even if a classis votes in favor, no congregation can be required to ordain a woman either as elder or minister. Thus synod protects every congregation against coercion in this matter. And the entire compromise is to be reviewed in five years.

But didn't one side simply lose? Yes, they did. Their position against women in office no longer controls the polity of the church, at least for the next five years. Can they live with that situation? Some can, perhaps some cannot.

To live with it, they must assess how central this issue is to the Christian faith or to the Word of God. Calvin once wrote that the church cannot require agreement on all issues. If it does, there will be as many churches as there are people. Agreement must be maintained on matters central to the Christian faith. In addition, they should remember that those who disagree do retain the freedom within their respective congregations to maintain their position of conscience. They also retain the freedom to try to persuade the church to change its mind.

**Synod 1995**

The Synod of 1995 attempted to honor conscience by means of a compromise. Whether it has honored conscience sufficiently, only time will tell. Compromises by their nature are always a bit unsatisfactory for neither side gets everything it wants.

**Honoring consciences is a sacred duty.**

Whether the issue of women in ecclesiastical office has divided the church in ways it has not been divided since the common grace controversy earlier in this century, the face of such division of opinion can the Church preserve its unity?

**This Issue**

This issue and the next will be about being Reformed. Are we in danger of losing some of its essential characteristics? From a historical perspective Richard Muller describes several essential features, W. Van Dyk considers the importance of Infant Baptism, H. DeMoor raises questions about changes in church government/administration, and J. Bolt argues that if change is not to be destructive of the church, its advocates must love the church. Hopefully, these articles will stimulate continuing reflection on these matters.
THE CHURCH...

LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT!

Passion often distorts truth and masquerades as confidence. There is the famous—hopefully apocryphal— anecdote about the preacher whose sermon manuscript included the marginal instruction: “Weak point, shout loudly, pound pulpits!” Passion or zeal for particular causes often reduces complex issues to bumper-sticker slogans.

A favorite slogan among patriotic Americans during the Vietnam-war era— “America, love it or leave it!”— demanded unconditional approval of years now Americans have been subjected to a steady stream of invective denouncing their country as an imperialistic, militaristic, racist, sexist, homophbic evil empire. It should not surprise us that this unsparing and unrelenting hostility toward America has not resulted in improved civic virtue. Instead we get traitors such as Aldrich Ames, an increasingly fragmented and polarized. And we need to ask: Is this the fruit of hatred? Hate, after all, does not have any capacity to generate genuine community. Hate trashes but does not build. Revolutionary zeal of course does not want to transform or build, it wants to destroy and it does so with the utopian hope that out of the ashes of destruction the new national goals and actions and sought to stifle all dissent. Not only did it grossly oversimplify the complex issue of American foreign policy, its muzzle was more appropriate to totalitarian regimes than to a professedly democratic nation. American opponents to American war efforts rightly felt unfairly excluded from important public discourse.

And yet, the benefit of 20/20 hindsight now leads us to ask: was there a nugget of wisdom even in that jingoist slogan? Was the protest movement of the sixties not in fact fueled by profound hatred of all American institutions and the nation itself? For twenty-five American intelligence officer selling state secrets to the highest bidder. This consequence would not have surprised C. S. Lewis who, reflecting on the relativism of modern progressive education observed:

“We make men without chests and expect of them virtues and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are surprised to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.” (The Abolition of Man, 35)

In short it is clear now that the result of this angry assault on American values and institutions has not been without a price. Instead of a better and more just society, a renewed civic community, we are just order will arise. Remarkably, the sad lesson of revolutionary failures has not yet squashed this utopian hope. Suppose we put the most favorable spin on “America, love it or leave it!” and simply come with the modest assertion that those who really want to change and transform a society—rather than simply trash it—must first of all love it? This insight has long characterized the anti-revolutionary (conservative) tradition of political and social commentators from the Englishman Edmund Burke to the Dutchman Abraham Kuyper. Revolutions are fueled by destructive hatred; reform proceeds from love.

AMERICA

“LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT.”

Hate trashes but does not build”

JOHN BOLT
Professor of Systematic Theology at Calvin Seminary

This is a bit of political wisdom directly applicable to the church. It suggests that genuine reform of the church must proceed from deep love for the church. This caveat sometimes seems to some of us to be ignored by advocates for change. Caught up in the passion for change some enthusiasts trash the present church mercilessly in ways similar to the sixties’ radicals trash America. This is expressed in global accusations and complaints about the church. The

Revolutions are fueled by destructive hatred; reform proceeds from love.
Infant Baptism: Is it Really So Important?

The year is 37 A.D. The Lord Jesus returned to heaven just a few years ago. His disciples are spreading the Good News and are building the church. Your parents, and their parents for many generations before them had active membership in the synagogue, but as a young adult, you met Christ on the hills outside of Capernaum, and you received him as God’s Son, your Savior.

The birth of your baby was one of the wonders of your life. You and your husband have never been so happy. But decisions have to be made: the would not understand. She could not respond. She can’t believe, can she?

But you and your husband don’t question that. The traditions of the Old Testament have been woven into the fabric of your life. Of course, the infant children of believing parents should receive the sacrament of initiation into the community of Gods people. It has been so for over 2,000 years, ever since Abraham. And that’s not all. Just a few years ago Jesus had received little children into his arms. And your neighbors: about a year ago they had con-

(1 Corinthians 7:14).

It simply would never occur to you that your infant daughter should not be baptized. So very early in her life you and your husband take her to church where she is sprinkled with water and baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And Now

But that was almost two millennia ago. Today, a number of churches, including some in the reformed tradition, are growing indifferent to the baptism of infant children of believing parents as a condition for church membership. Among them, it does not seem as obvious and as important as it was to our imaginary couple. Perhaps a combination of the invasive individualism of the day and the passion of many churches to increase membership numbers has motivated some congregations to the easy position that yields to parents who say of their infant child: “We don’t want to decide for him. If he wants baptism, that’s his business. He can decide for himself when he is old enough to make that choice.”

And why not? What’s wrong with that? Why does the church order of the Christian Reformed Church insist that:
The covenant of God shall be sealed to children of believers by holy baptism. The consistory shall see to it that baptism is requested and administered as soon as possible? (article 56)

Is infant baptism really that important?

The answer is “yes.” Infant baptism is important. Believing parents should not neglect to bring their infant children for baptism. Congregations in the reformed tradition should not make the inclusion of infants in this sacrament optional.

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THE CHURCH: A BUSINESS?

“What if the Spirit leads where consumers do not wish to go?”

Long before Vatican II, the Reformation rediscovered the church as a people, a community of redeemed pilgrims, predestined for adoption, chosen in Christ, on the way to the New Jerusalem. This people’s identity is found in the Creator’s choice no longer to “live in a temple” but to have his chosen become “a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph. 2:22). Its primary purpose on earth is fundamentally counter-cultural: simply to “be for the praise of [God’s] glory” (Eph. 1:12) and make known “the manifold wisdom of God” (Eph. 3:10). And its mission is defined more by what it is than what it does.

Church as a service agency?

Strange, then, especially for those of us in the Reformed tradition, that we are rapidly losing this biblical notion of the church’s identity. We seem to be setting sail on a different course, one that reduces the church to a business. In the words of Philip Kenneson, this people’s gathering is no longer focused on “worship and discipleship”; rather, it has become the “opportunity for professional purveyors of religion to dispense their products to consumers.” The church has become a “service agency” catering to consumers of religion. Says Kenneson,

No longer is the church the “household of God” which gathers regularly to worship its Lord and which attempts to embody in its life together the character of that Lord. No longer is the church the “body of Christ” whose members understand themselves inseparably joined to other members. No longer is the church about God. The church is now about us and our felt-needs” (“Selling [Out] the Church in the Marketplace of Desire,” in Modern Theology, IX, 4 (1993) p. 341).

After Synod 1995 had been presented the new updated vision statement of the CRC, one particularly astute delegate responded in words to this effect: “I don’t read anything here about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, about Moses and the Exodus from Egypt, about Elijah, about a faithful remnant, about the Lord Jesus Christ who came, about the New Testament church ....” There’s a lot of wisdom in that observation. Apparently, we now have this tendency to approach the church as a purely local phenomenon, a current social institution, and while we do not deliberately ignore its immediate and even historical context, we all too easily miss its rootedness in the biblical stories. When asked what bothered him the most about all of our gospel, selling ministry or, in George Barna’s terms, “marketing the church.”

Henry Demoor
Professor of Church Polity and Church Administration at Calvin Seminary

Synodical deliberation this year, one fraternal delegate put his finger on the same thing: your vision statement is typically American, the manifesto of a corporation peddling the

A vision statement without remembering Abraham, Moses and the Exodus?

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The Church...continued

WE MUST LIVE THE GOSPEL, NOT JUST PEDDLE IT.

Scriptures and the original languages in which they were written, for example — hardly weigh on those who must decide whether to call a minister from another denomination. The only burning question is: is he needed here and will he benefit the program?

Assemblies have always been at the heart of our church government. They are our instruments of accountability, something entirely lacking in more independent circles. But the very matters in which such accountability is essential, agenda items that used to occupy most of our time together as delegates from different churches, are increasingly pushed to the background: matters of church discipline, of Reformed doctrine, of basic justice in dealing with members and their appeals, of worship with integrity and sound liturgy, of pastoral care, of relationships with other Christians and with political and social leaders — all of this is now branded with the label: just too much concern for “maintenance ministry.” The point now, so it seems: are our churches delivering their product to the consumer, is ministry and mission happening, are congregations growing in number, do we have the necessary funding and staffing, and can we be more effective in what we’re doing? If we had a bishop, he’d no longer be the pastor of our souls. He’d be the CEO.

### Church Administration

This “consumer orientation” also has its effect on our unique form of church administration. We seem less concerned, now, to ask whether we’re still distinctively Reformed in the way we administer the church’s affairs; whether, for example, such administration is at all consistent with our church polity. Organizational theories and marketing strategies are largely seen as “neutral,” as if they have no effect on the church’s self-understanding and mission in the world. If they work for Amway or Steelcase, they’ll work for our churches too.

New leadership models abound. One of the latest was developed in line with Kennon Callahan’s “missionary pastor” (Effective Church Leadership). It is called “vision leadership.” On the surface, from a formal point of view, it is reasonably harmless and in tune with a classic Reformed understanding of office. But when we ask the content question, look at what this model of administration actually means in the practice of church life, one wonders how sound it is. As we measure our effectiveness by the yardstick of relevance to the surrounding culture, do we still entertain the question whether in that process the gospel is in any way compromised? Are we honest about saying that quality of ministry is as much a measure of success as quantity? As we engage in the knotty gristle of visioning and planning and organizing and restructurings, do we still prize our churches mutual accountability system, or is there a subtle shift to the autonomy of the local church, with all its potential for abuse? The facts are that all administrative approaches affect our self-understanding as well as our deepest theological convictions.

Judging by the latest vision statements I’ve had the opportunity to examine, our congregations are slowly but surely entering the religious market in America, learning to compete with others, to upgrade our services and products, to sell the gospel like it’s never been sold before. While most do not harbor any false illusions about becoming exemplary supermarkets, like a Crystal Cathedral or a Willow Creek, many are definitely on the consumerist course and transforming their structures and strategies accordingly.

Living the Gospel

To be sure, I applaud our passion for the lost. I applaud efforts to lower the illegitimate barriers that keep us isolated and ineffective in our new environment. I applaud our concern that many more must be brought into the fold. My note of caution is the Scriptures’ insistence that through the ages we are about God’s mission in the world — it is His Kingdom that is coming, not ours — and that it is the Spirit who leads us as a pilgrim people. And what if the Spirit leads where consumers do not wish to go? His mission and His leadership must never be compromised. In short, we must live the Gospel, not just peddle it.

The Church, Love it or Leave it...continued

CRC church order is totally biased against diversity; it’s strictly a Dutch thing. The CRC did no evangelism for its first hundred years and its ministry during that time was “mere maintenance” having nothing to do with Christ. Repudiation of these and similar sentiments builds climactically to a fevered pitch of radical and revolutionary repudiation of the CRC tradition in the hope that after totally dismantling the old a new and better CRC will rise.

Perhaps it is too strong to call such revolutionary enthusiasm hatred but at the very least it reflects deep-seated hostility and disrespect for the CRC past, a hostility that deeply hurts many who feel it. Here the analogy with the political arena demands our attention and the question: “Does your desire and proposal for change reflect love for the CRC?” If not, then hateful destruction rather than loving reform will be the result. Eristhwhile reformers should not be surprised that they then encounter resistance among the faithful constituency of the CRC. Dare we say to the revolutionaries among us: “The CRC, Love it or Leave it?”

I understand that sentiment and it tempts me in my weaker moments. Yet for the same reason that the famous bumper sticker itself is destructive of conversation and community even though it may contain a kernel of wisdom, so I do not think we should use such language in the church. Instead, we must continue to call for and model love and civility in our conversations, also and perhaps especially the conversations in which we plead for change.
INFANT
BAPTISM continued
WILBERT M. VAN DYK

Reasons

The FIRST reason for that lies in the unity of the Bible: sixty-six books, two testaments, one volume, one divine Author, one central message. If the first testament required the infant children of believing parents to be included in the sacrament of initiation into Israel, by what logic should we read the second testament as if God changed the rules and the infants of believing parents are no longer to be sacramentally initiated into the new Israel?

To withhold baptism from an infant of believing parents is to demonstrate indifference to the covenant that God placed as the organizing principle of his work of grace among his people.

The THIRD reason for maintaining the requirement of infant baptism lies in the mission task of the early church. The apostles went out to preach the gospel. They called on unbelievers to repent of their sins, to believe in Jesus Christ, and to be baptized. And when that happened, “they and their households were baptized.” (Acts 16:15, 16:33, 18:8, 1 Cor. 1:16) That’s exactly the pattern that we find in the Old Testament. “Walk before me and be blameless,” said God to Abraham in Genesis 17:1; and then Abraham and his household were circumcised. “Repent and believe,” said the apostles; and then believers and their households were baptized.

To withhold baptism from an infant of believing parents is to ignore the history that God wrote in the work of the early church.

The LAST reason for insisting on the baptism of infants of believing parents lies in the nature of the sacrament itself. Baptism is God’s visible word to his church. The church did not invent baptism. People did not fashion it. Baptism is God’s idea. In baptism God acts. God speaks. God seals his promises. God claims us as members of his covenant community and marks us with the brand of his ownership. Baptism is not a statement that we make about God, but a statement that God makes to us. And God has a right to make his baptism statement to whomever he wants, even to infants who do not yet understand his word.

This does not strike us as strange, does it: to speak to infants who do not understand? We who are parents or grandparents do it all the time. We tell them that we love them, that they are good, or cute, or cross. We ask them whether they are hungry. We accuse them of having dirty faces, or of pushing cereal into their ears. We don’t find that conversation with infants strange. Why, then, do we assume that God has no interest in speaking to us or in hearing from us until we are old enough to speak for ourselves?

To withhold baptism from infants of believing parents is to refuse to allow God to speak to them in the language of the sacrament that he has designed for them, too.

Summary

The unity of the Bible, the character of God’s covenant with us, the missionary activity of the early church, the nature of the sacrament: all of this declares that we may not treat the baptism of the infant children of believing parents with indifference. To insist that the infant children of Christian parents must be baptized is to provide the infant child with God’s sacramental word of grace. It is to give the parents opportunity to exercise their role in God’s covenant. It is to challenge erroneous individualism of our day. And it allows the church to maintain undiminished loyalty to Scripture.