

Reformed-Mennonite Dialogue: Phase Two

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A conference on "Baptism, Peace and the State in the Reformed and Mennonite Traditions" was held at the University of Calgary, Canada, 11-14 October 1989. The conference was sponsored by the University of Calgary Institute for the Humanities, in co-operation with the University's Department of Religious Studies and Chair of Christian Thought, with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Mennonite World Conference as co-partners. It is believed that this is the first occasion on which an Institute in a secular university has joined with two Christian world communions in the scholarly discussion of issues which have traditionally divided them.

In 1984 a first round of talks was held in which the two traditions introduced themselves to one another, and reaffirmed the 1983 repudiation of the denunciations that had marred their earlier history. The objective of this conference was to analyse in depth the three outstanding topics on which Mennonites and Reformed have traditionally disagreed. Mennonites uphold believer's baptism, maintain the independence of the church from the state, and have come to be known as one of the historic peace churches. The Reformed (Presbyterian, Reformed, Congregational and many united churches) baptise infants — as well as previously unbaptised adults, are internally divided over the church-state issue and, in some quarters, are finding common cause with Mennonites as (at least) "nuclear pacifists."

Mennonite participants in the conference were: Harry Loewen, Howard Loewen, and Marlin Miller. Reformed participants were: Iain Nicol, Max Stackhouse, and Charles West. In addition, responses to the papers were presented by Harry Hiller (sociologist), Andrew MacRae (systematic theologian), Hugo Meynell (philosopher) and Tom Sinclair-Faulkner (church historian). The sessions were chaired by the joint secretaries, Ross T. Bender, President of the Mennonite World Conference, and Alan Sell, Chair of Chris-

tian Thought, University of Calgary, and by Ronald W. Neufeldt, Head of the Department of Religious Studies, University of Calgary.

The text of the papers and responses presented, together with the conference report, will be published in 1990.

The cordial atmosphere which prevailed enabled the expression of points and disagreement and encouraged the quest for convergence. It is hoped that the published findings will be studied at all levels within the two communions.

Report

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, 11-14 October 1989, between representatives of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Mennonite World Conference, with the participation of scholars of other traditions.

In writing this Report the authors have attempted both to reflect the life of their communions as they are, and to articulate a vision of what they ought to be. It became clear that both Reformed and Mennonites own a common Reformation heritage, and the participants in this dialogue were well informed of the historical and theological roots of both traditions. It was realised that while there is a Mennonite spectrum of views and a Reformed spectrum of views, there is at the same time a considerable area of common ground. The old sense that the two parties are rigid and bitter enemies is gone. We now accept each other as brothers and sisters of Christ.

Convergence was reached in the conclusion that neither the Mennonite nor the Reformed traditions can properly be understood apart from a doctrine of prevenient divine grace. However, it is important that further discussion be devoted to this question, especially as it impinges upon a correlative understanding of baptism and the nature and place of human response. It may be suggested that such study should also consider the question of divine initiative and human response in relation to Christian initiation as a process in which there is mutual involvement and interaction between the communities of church and family.

Both traditions also 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 the 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 should seriously address the question of whether and in what respect the Gospel breaks down barriers which our respective doctrines and practices of baptism have erected.

The Reformed house is one in which there are many ecclesiological mansions, and each ecclesiology (established or free, gathered or connexional) 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 may sometimes be viewed as minimal. 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 at every level.

In those Mennonite circles which are strongly ethnically conscious, believers' baptism may be a mere formality.

Since 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, in reviewing this matter, we have acknowledged that 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. We commend to both the Mennonite and Reformed churches a renewed theological understanding and constructive practice of baptism as the entrance and commitment to supportive parental and congregational accountability and discipline. We particularly encourage Mennonites to view and practise discipline as a means of restoring an erring brother or sister in compassion and love. We particularly encourage the Reformed to regain and reinstitute a supportive and corrective practice of discipline as a part of normal congregational life. We urgently encourage both communions to examine the relation between baptism, the Lord's Supper and discipline.

We have been challenged to re-examine the biblical foundations for Christian baptism, and to clarify the hermeneutical context within which we hear and accept the witness of Scripture. We acknowledge the Bible as the primary rule of faith and life in seeking further clarification, mutual correction, and a greater measure of unity in our views and practices of baptism. Nevertheless we have not yet found agreement on several 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 grounded in the NT concept of "mystery" or the NT concept of "pledge" (I Pet. 3:21)
- the degrees to which our differing views of covenant and of the relation between divine grace and faith comport with Scripture.

We therefore challenge each of our communions jointly to re-examine the scriptural foundations for their views on these matters.

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 systematic 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.

The Mennonites need to develop a theological understanding of revolution. They do not wish to give up their peace principle, but they must ask: How can we dethrone those unjust rulers who understand nothing but force? 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.

Representatives of both communions recognise that if we are to address issues of peace in our world, we need to relate the Gospel 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 characterised by conflict, hostility, division and violence. Believers, congregations and the peoples of the world are thereby victimised. We therefore acknowledge together the vocation of all Christians to be peace-makers in all arenas of life.

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. The Mennonites would challenge the Reformed on the consistency of their stance(s) on peace, and the degree to which they are faithful to Scripture.

There are differences in the way in which Scripture is read, both within

the two traditions and between them. Nevertheless in general it can be said that both Reformed and Mennonites 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 parts of the Reformed family, have emphasised 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 must be 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 structures of necessity. The Reformed heritage suspects that the Mennonite tradition says that it wants to be socially responsible and engaged, but is not in fact ready to take full responsibility for justice in society. Some of the same suspicions lurk beneath the surface in debates inside our respective families, but in a dialogue such as ours it is easier to articulate suspicions because we expect the differences to be organized somewhat along traditional lines — Mennonite/Reformed.

The Mennonites need to consider how to apply the peace principle in the face of unjust regimes. The Reformed note 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 have changed, the Reformed realising that we must pay more attention to the integrity of the Church as a witnessing and nurturing community than we have sometimes done, the Mennonites recognising that we have to participate and act responsibly in society and culture. We are converging on the conception of Christ as transforming culture, as opposed to his being against, or above, it.

We 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. Scholarly work by Mennonites on the basis of pacifism in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, issuing in the mission of Christians as agents of peace and reconciliation, would be desirable. A useful research topic would be the analogy

between the place of peace in the Mennonite tradition and that of the sovereign grace of God in the Reformed.

While we have convergence on the **role** of the church, we still differ to some extent on its **nature**, and on the terms most appropriately used to express it. Hence the need for further analysis of this matter both within our two traditions and between them. It appears to us that the Reformed tend to have a more social understanding of the catholicity of the Church, and that the Mennonites tend rather to emphasise 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.

The cordial atmosphere which prevailed during this consultation enabled the honest expression of points of disagreement and encouraged the quest for convergence. We take heart from the distance which, under God, we have travelled, and we look forward to the continuation of this dialogue. It must not be allowed to lapse, or even to languish, here.

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 Reform and Mennonite participants in the consultation on "Baptism, Peace and the State in the Reformed and Mennonite Traditions," held at the University of Calgary, 11-14 October 1989.

1. 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.
2. 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 — established and free, gathered and connexional — 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.
3. 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.

4. 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 practice that understanding of the church as God's covenant people, within which the integrity of infant baptism is actualised.
5. That the Executive Committee of the Mennonite World Conference urge its member churches seriously to examine their attitude towards Christians, baptised 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.
6. 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.
7. 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.
8. 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.
9. 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.