

REFORMED CONTINUA

Magazine of The Reformed Churches (restored) of The Netherlands

Proverbs 8:32

- Volume 15 - January 2014 -

From the editor

January 2014

We are thankful to the Lord that we may begin a new year and also present you with the 15th issue of the Magazine.

The three articles on 'Postmodernism and faith' have been presented to you in short succession. In this Magazine you will find the third and final article.

This issue contains:

- **Editorial: Postmodernism and faith (part 3)**
These three articles have been written by Rev. S. de Marie and were previously published in 'De Bazuin'.
It is advisable to read these articles so that

postmodernism can be recognised in the many errors.

- **Read what is written**

This article, by T.L. Bruinius, was also published in 'De Bazuin'.

Thus far the articles in this issue of Reformed Continua.

God Himself gathers and preserves His Church and will do so to the end. We may know and experience this.

Finally we hope and pray that this issue may again be well-received.

Joh. Houweling, Bleiswijk

Postmodernism and faith (3)

Dealing with postmodernism

by S. de Marie

In the previous leading articles we first discussed the origin and the essence of postmodernism, especially as culture-philosophical movement. Then we discussed the influence of this way of thinking on society and church.

In this final article we will discuss the dealing with postmodernism in relation to faith. Should we seek affiliation with this thinking? Does postmodernism offer new possibilities for spreading the gospel? Or will we have to reject it and not open up to it?

Seeking affiliation?

In the book *Geloven in zekerheid, gereformeerd geloven in een postmoderne tijd* (Believing in certainty, Reformed believing in a post-modern time) published in 2000 by the Theological College at Kampen, under editorship of K. van Bekkum and R. Rouw one already writes fairly unbiased about post-modern thinking. In this book the Scriptural faith of the Reformed people is set aside as rationalism of modernism.

The authors, from various churches, indeed criticize postmodernism in its most pronounced form, whereby everything is relativized, leaving emptiness. They certainly see great danger in the relativizing of all truth where it concerns certainty of faith. Yet they do seek affiliation with the post-modern man. We will let a few writers have their say to make this clear.

The psychiatrist, Prof. G. Glas, writes that, as reformed people, we have become too strongly attached to historical reliability. According to him people used to be too busy with their intellect, trying to receive certainty. Historical reliability gives such certainty. But, says Glas, isn't believing primarily a matter of the heart?

In this way Glas makes too much of a separation between certain knowledge and true faith. However, where it concerns believing, there are two aspects of the same thing: that what is certain and firm in God's Word, may also be for me (HC, LD 7).

Prof. Glas, however, is carefully tampering with the absolute truthfulness of God's Word and allows

for criticism of Scripture. Particularly because he challenges the historical reliability.

Prof. Glas also comments on the antithetical attitude of the Christian in this world:

Christian participation in culture is not a matter of either decidedly following your own line, at the cost of everything, even though it means expulsion and isolation, or, on the other hand, gutlessly going along with the prevailing vogue. There are more dimensions that can help in assessing the Christian contribution in the social debate. (page 30)

Drs. P.H. Vos, lecturer at the Gereformeerde Hogeschool at Zwolle speaks of indebtedness of the orthodoxy towards modern thinking. What he wants to say is that Scriptural faith, that takes everything that is written in God's Word as being trustworthy and accepts God's Word as the infallible Word of God in all its parts, comes forth from the modern thinking of reason, of the mind. The reverent bowing to the Truth is considered to be a product of the movement that preceded postmodernism. He writes further:

Man did plead against the autonomy of the reason on the authority of the Bible or the tradition to the Confessions, but subsequently this basic principle often acted as the untouchable foundation on which the knowledge of faith could be built(...) Through this, certainty of faith was often reduced to a matter of accepting the right basic principle. Thereby the certainty of faith as existential involvement of the salvation of Jesus Christ could be oppressed. (page 52)

In other words: there used to be a rational believing wherein everything from Scripture was accepted and man was bound to the Confessions. No objections were allowed to be made against this. But with that, man placed himself out of the picture. Everything was pinned to truths without man himself being sufficiently involved.

Vos sees this as a form of 'foundationalism'. A thinking from the firm foundation of God's Word. But he rejects that type of thinking. Nowadays one can no longer come with absolute truths:

There appears to be no such thing as an undoubted foundation of knowledge. Also the Bible cannot serve as an undoubted foundation. The model

wherein the Bible serves as an undoubted foundation for our certainty and claims of truth, has become problematic. (page 53)

Vos does see new possibilities for the Christian faith in postmodernism:

There is openness for different opinions and respect for other things. Also openness for transcendence. Christians can learn to speak a new language. Through the development of a subtle use of language, something can be expressed for which there is no adequate language. (page 58)

In this we see the return of something of what post-modern language has become: Expressing something that cannot be expressed. To him, faith is especially about personal experience and feelings. Especially stories can play a good role in this. They call up things:

In theology it must be about a manner of thinking that is aware of the narrative character of the Bible as its object. The biblical stories reveal a certainty that is not obtained by argumentation and proof, but takes shape in the life history of real people, who discover the transcendent God and at the same time experience that they are being found by this God. Certainty of faith has to do with the fact that they experience that God is carrying them. (page 58, 59)

Finally we will let the philosopher, Drs. C.E. Vink, speak. He also pleads for a certain adaptation and affiliation:

In the current era of freedom and individualism, believing is firstly a personal matter, that is to be confessed in an authentic way. On the other hand, a tradition of faith, that focuses itself especially on rational firmness and purity of its convictions that are to be authoritatively accepted, makes itself, with such an attitude, vulnerable in the current cultural climate (page 76).

Thus far some quotations from the book published by the Theological College at Kampen in 2000, on certainty of faith.

My conclusion has to be that, in this book, true faith as we confess it in our Reformed Confessions, is set down as a sort of rationalistic foundationalism, belonging to modernism. At the same time a plea is being made for a more existential relational approach. An approach which does more justice to man, especially the post-modern man.

I want to strongly reject this view. The authors, in

my opinion, have not understood that the disease and sin of modernism was that man had lifted up his own reasoning, his own intellect to a norm, over against the real Truth of Scripture. With postmodernism that denies every firm truth, man is now actively undermining the certainty of the only Truth.

Ultimate Commitment?

In the above-mentioned book and also in a booklet written by Mrs. F. Oosterhof: *Het postmodernisme in Bijbels licht* (postmodernism in the light of the Bible), from the series *Woord en Wereld*, the ideas of the theologian Bishop Lesslie Newbigin are brought to the fore. This man of the World Council of Churches is also known as an apologist (defender) of postmodernism, therefore good reason to pay some more attention to him. Newbigin also, is of the opinion that it is necessary to do away with the modern rationalistic thinking. But through plural thinking and the relativism of postmodernism Christianity could come to an end.

Newbigin therefore propagates a different certainty. He does not place it in the 'object', the Bible, neither, as he states, in man, the 'subject'. His certainty lies in the 'personal commitment', which is also ultimate and therefore may not simply be broken.

You then have a personal commitment, not with the Bible but with the Person of God and Christ, as it takes form in the Gospel.

Believing as 'commitment', according to him, always precedes knowledge. You first commit yourself to God, then you learn to know Him. You first commit yourself to Christ, then you receive knowledge of Him. For knowledge is always influenced by what your conviction is. Newbigin thinks that with this he overcomes the work-plan objective/subjective. According to Newbigin absolute truth does not exist, because everybody uses his own interpretation, imagination and intuition to determine this. In all types of human knowledge, in his opinion, a certain personal commitment of the knower plays a role. It is therefore your relationship with God and Christ, that is important to you, is 'ultimate'. That gives you certainty. That is not obtained through the Bible, but the relationship gives it to you.

Every commitment of faith is highly personal. You may propagate the content of your faith and you may even try to convince others, but, says Newbigin, you may not claim its absoluteness. It

remains your faith, your personal faith. No general absolute truth.

Newbigin: with your ultimate personal commitment with which you accept matters from the Gospel as true, you must then also enter into dialogue with others. Even with other religions. For such a dialogue can lead to you having to adjust what you believe. But that remains within your commitment, for your commitment with Christ does not change by it. So, even in new circumstances, it can become necessary to reconsider and re-word the Christian doctrine.

The thinking of Newbigin, that is so unsuspectingly recommended, does not allow for one's confession to imply a firm confidence in the solid truth of God's Word, on God's firm promises. Such a confession is always a new starting point for the search for the truth. For, according to him, the truth is not fixed, but it develops. In this way there is always a changeable truth, yet there is 'certainty'. For that certainty lies in everyone's personal commitment. The commitment itself remains, but the 'truth' that you devise with it, can change.

Newbigin does not want to 'return' to the time when the authority of the Bible was regarded undoubted.

So here we have to deal with a serious mutilation of the confession regarding our faith, and a serious impairment of the authority of God's infallible Word. We must namely never be allowed to find certainty in our faith itself. That certainty is in Christ and His Word. It is in God and His promises. Newbigin detaches faith from the absolute truth of God's Word as the infallible source of our certainty.

To him certainty of faith does not rest on the absolute truth of the revelation of God and Christ but in actual fact in the believer himself. For the believer himself makes the commitment, he chooses his truth. It is his highly personal commitment. He is continually seeking new adaptations for what, to him, his ultimate commitment is worth.

For Newbigin, God's Word does contain the 'fact of Christ, as the centre of God's self-revealing deeds', but to him, the historical facts of birth, resurrection and ascension, do not belong to that fact. The historicity of it is left for what it is.

My conclusion has to be that this theologian, who in a *post-modern* manner, impairs the strength of God's Word and thus the authority of God Himself,

is just as dangerous as for example a Prof. Kuitert, who did that in a *modern* rational manner and finally said goodbye to his faith.

Final conclusion

The final conclusion must be that we reject both the rationalistic modernism and the relativistic postmodernism as philosophical ways of thinking that draws us away from God and His Gospel. The post-modern *relativizing* of the Truth of God's Word is possibly even more dangerous than the rational *opposing* of that Truth. Relativizing is namely a process that is less tangible and creeps in into the churches more easily, to do its truth-undermining work more gradually.

At the same time we must realize that our society today is influenced immensely through the thinking and patterns of postmodernism. That influence can easily penetrate further into the churches because the great danger is that we are all being brainwashed via modern media and its post-modern thinking. This applies to both office-bearers and church members. In our thinking and speaking about matters of faith, Gospel and church, we will therefore always need to ask ourselves to what extent relativizing of the Truth of the Gospel is at issue.

Great vigilance is therefore required both in theology and in church life and in the ministry. Upon the ministers rests the huge task to arm the members of the congregation as much as possible against the destructive influence of post-modern doubting and relativism.



Read what it says

by T.L. Bruinius

Read what it says, leave written what you read! That is the ancient Reformed basic principle for our reading of the Bible. That is the most important. If we let go of that, then we will read the Bible in our own way and then we will go astray.

Nowadays we hear a lot about the so-called new hermeneutics. There are many misconceptions about that. It seems good to us to say something more about that, before we, for instance, discuss the GKV-report 'Man/Woman in the church'.

Exegesis

What exactly is hermeneutics? It is not a 'doctrine'. And the new hermeneutics is not exactly a 'false doctrine' either. Such as the 'doctrine of presumptive regeneration', for instance, a doctrine that we know from the struggle for the truth at the time of the Liberation in 1944. Or the 'doctrine of common grace' of Dr. Abraham Kuyper. No, it is a way of **dealing** with the Bible. A way of **reading** the Word of God.

When we talk about the interpretation of the Bible, the interpretation of texts and Scripture passages, we call that 'exegesis'. What do we read here? What does it say exactly? And, when we know and understand what it says: what does the Lord then say here to His people?

That is exegesis. Interpretation of Scripture. Ministers are working on it every week. This should, if all is well, be the basis for every Scriptural sermon. It is about what is written there. In the sermon the Word of the Lord is presented and explained.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the set of rules which indicate **how** we must read. **How** we are to see what it says exactly and what the Lord said. Hermeneutics should, by rights, precede the reading and the exegesis, the explanation.

Let me give an example. I have a piece of text in front of me. Sentences, words. I read and I read again. It is a clear but fairly boring story. Until I find out that this is not just a piece of text, but it is poetry! Until I discover that I should place the sentences and words differently, in a certain order. Then the boring, pragmatic text becomes beautiful. Then I see the poetic aspect. Then the text comes alive and I read other things in it.

I first used the wrong rules for reading. I used the reading rules for pragmatic texts, but I should have used the rules for poetic reading. So now I read something completely different. Now I can explain the piece very differently.

This is more or less the ratio between hermeneutics, the science of interpretation, and the exegesis, the interpretation itself.

Reformed hermeneutics

There are a number of basic rules in the Reformed hermeneutics. The Reformed church, the church that is true to Scripture, has adhered to these rules throughout the centuries. They can be traced all the way back to the time of the Great Reformation.

These rules are derived from the Bible itself! We must remember that. Derived from what God's Word itself, and mentioned in several places, teaches us about how we are to deal with that Word.

An important rule, for instance, is that the Bible is **one**. It is a collection of books, yes, but not a loose collection. Together they are the revealed Word of our God. Given to us by our God Himself and through the Holy Spirit, by means of people, put together to form **one** Bible. In this way they are related one to the other and have to deal with each other. In this way they refer to each other and clarify each other. Those Books of the Bible never stand on their own, but together they form the one rich Gospel of God's work of salvation.

Uncomplicated

Another important rule, for instance, is that Scripture is uncomplicated. It can be understood by the people. Clear and obvious.

No, that does not mean that **every text**, that each word from the Bible is understood by everyone straight away. Most of us are unable to read the original language of the Bible. Also, there are many different manuscripts, and which is the right one? Furthermore, we have not all received the same gifts. Some find reading easier than others. It is not for nothing that we have ministers and handbooks, not for nothing that we have education and catechesis and Bible-study societies. No, uncomplicated means that, even if we do not immediately understand everything, God's will is clear for every true reader. If we just simply read what it says then that is enough for us to understand what the Lord asks of us. And what He promises us. We do not always need difficult scientific reasoning

for that. You simply see it if you read carefully and with a believing heart. If you leave written what you read.

Scripture alongside Scripture

A third, very important rule for the reading and interpretation of the Bible is that Scripture interprets itself. That rule is associated with the two previous ones. In spite of the unity and the simplicity of the Bible, there is enough to investigate and to explain further; to see even more clearly the richness and the power of that Scriptural message. Then exegetes, interpreters must first of all compare text with text. Where in the Bible is also spoken in this way? Where is this text quoted? Is it quoted by the Lord Jesus? Or by an apostle? Which prophets prophesy about the same subject? Where do we come across the same words in the original text? Then texts that we initially find difficult become a lot clearer. Then we can place a text in the ongoing line of God's revelation of salvation.

Fundamental

Another important basic principle is that the Word of God is inspired by the Lord Himself. For this He uses the people, who are inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that it can be understood by the people throughout all the ages. Until Judgment Day. The books of the Bible are not man-made writings but, God's Word itself says that, the words of our Lord.

There are more rules. It is, of course, good to know something about the way of life of the people in Biblical times, about the geographical situation, about the customs and religion of the surrounding nations. If we know what a 'winnow' is, then we also know what the Lord Jesus says in Luke 3:17. If we understand how Jerusalem was situated high in the mountains and how you, when travelling to the city, see all those mountains around you, then we can understand Psalm 125 better as well. If we see something of the Canaanite Baal worship, then we can understand better how terrible it is when the Israelites identify their worship service to Yahweh with that of Baal.

In addition, another hermeneutic rule, it can also help us to get an idea of when the Bible passage contains a piece of history, a prophecy or a hymn. Also the form in which the Bible passage is written can be of importance for a better understanding of the text.

Faith

The abovementioned rules on the unity and the simplicity of the Bible, that the Bible is its own interpreter and, above all, that the Bible is God's own inspired Word with its unique and divine authority, these are fundamental Reformed hermeneutic rules.

We also make confession of these rules in articles 5-7 of the Belgic Confession. They find their basis in the faith. The faith that holds God's complete Word as true.

Different meaning

And now the new hermeneutics.

What are the differences? Firstly: we should not be too quick to think that theologians, who base their explanation on the new hermeneutic rules, do not want anything to do with God's Word anymore. Or that they do not want to grant any authority to God's Word anymore. It can lead to that. Yes indeed, it often leads to that. But even today's Bible interpreters often will still grant a certain amount of authority to the Bible. The question is only: in what way do they mean that. Sometimes they speak in the same manner as the Reformed theologians. They use the same words, but the contents, the meaning of those words is different. That is why the new hermeneutics (which is not really that new, but has, for a long time, right up to the 1990's, been rejected, for instance, in the GkV) often has an insidious effect. Gradually the meaning of the concepts are being changed. Gradually theologians are starting to think differently. Language takes on a different meaning. That is why it is so dangerous. Much more dangerous than preaching that very clearly deviates from God's Word.

Context

In the new hermeneutics the context of the Bible passage is very important. More important than other issues. More important, so we can say, than just reading what it says. The context, that is the time in which the Word was first spoken or written. Those are the cultural and social conditions in those times. That is the manner in which the people communicated with each other at the time. We can also mention the so-called tell-conventions, the way in which God's Word was written at the time. In the same way, as is assumed, that heathen nations told and passed things on. Ways of telling as done in the ancient East, where a lot is concocted by the writer. This would also be the case with the

writers of the Bible. This relates to the happenings and the stories in the Bible, but also to the way the commandments of the Lord have been written.

These elements become predominant for the reading of the Bible, for the explanation of what it says. Time-bound, as it is called. Or culture-bound. The context, the circumstances in which that Bible text came into being and the form in which it is written becomes more important than the obviousness and the unity of Scripture. It is more important than the principle of comparing Scripture with Scripture. More important than the uncomplicatedness of God's Word.

If you place that context above the rules of interpretation that the Bible itself teaches, then you will read the Bible very differently. Then the inspiration of the Bible, and also the authority of the Bible will take on a whole new meaning. In fact, deep down, you then let go of that inspiration and that authority.

Bowing down

But aren't these proclaimers of the new hermeneutics just a little bit right? Is it then not true that the Lord spoke to His people in the language of their time? Is it then not true that in the Bible examples are used which the people at that time knew and understood?

Yes, that is certainly true. The Lord is perfectly wise. He speaks to His people in such a way that they can understand. In this He bows down to His people. Like a father bows down to his young child and explains something in child language. Because otherwise it will not understand anything of it. We call that 'accommodation', adaption. John Calvin already used this term.

However, that does not mean that the context now becomes determinative for the message. Not if, through that, the other Biblical hermeneutical rules, are pushed aside or are predominated (ruled over).

This is what the new hermeneutics does. The context becomes determinative for the exegesis. Instead of being an aid, it becomes the one and all. That leads to the context prevailing over the Word! With all its consequences.

Thus says the Lord?

If this context is so determinative, then we have a problem. For we live in a very different context. One of the important starting points of the new hermeneutics is that a Bible word cannot just be applied from the Biblical context into ours.

The Bible is not so very uncomplicated at all, such as we have always confessed. On the contrary.

When the Lord, in the seventh commandment, forbids adultery and commands His own to be completely faithful in marriage, and never to break the God-given bond ...

Yes, that's true. That could be applied to that time. The Lord wanted to teach His people that they had to distance themselves from the customs of the Egyptians. He is going to build His nation, His church. Therefore the Egyptian habits must be unlearned.

One man with one woman, lifelong.

Yes, we then say: thus says the Lord. In this way He also speaks to us. This is what we will do.

No, says the man of the modern hermeneutics. You can no longer say 'thus says the Lord'. Not automatically. That is still questionable.

You can't just transfer the Word of the Lord into our time. It's not that clear at all. Of course we will listen to the Biblical teaching, but we know, in our context, of a lot of forms of cohabitation that are very different. Also the motives for marriage and the organization thereof are very different than in the ancient Israel. Or in the heathen Egypt.

The context strongly influences the exegesis. We must take a good look at that. Nowadays we have the registered partnership. The gay marriage. Very different relationships between husband and wife. Other views about the duration of a marriage ...

Affiliation

Besides the context there is another important thought in the modern hermeneutics: the Word of God must seek affiliation. Affiliation with the environment. Affiliation with man and society. Man has to be able to grasp, to understand that Word. It must not immediately arouse opposition in society. For then there is no point in preaching and witnessing. The Lord Himself did it as well, man then says. Then, among other things, one looks to the words of the Lord Jesus, but also to the apostles. Therefore we must do the same. In our words and with our deeds. Otherwise the Word will be rejected.

One then forgets that the world has strayed away from God and is still straying further away. That the antithesis is widening all the time. That God's Gospel is a stumbling stone for man. That modern man is no longer *able* to understand the Word and living out of the Word. Not because times have changed but because faith is lacking. The Bible itself teaches this.

Adapting the message of the Bible means that the message is being changed. In against the revealed will of the Lord. The Gospel is being made pleasant for man.

Quest

If, in this way, you reject the Reformed hermeneutics and make the new hermeneutics the basic principle, then it will become difficult. Then the 'thus says the Lord' is silenced. Then the interpretation of God's Word for today becomes a quest. A real quest.. Without certainties. Then the Bible text must be explained differently under different circumstances. Constantly changing. Constantly watching the other context, the time in which we live. Then, as the context changes, we must not be bent on rigidly clinging to the old explanation. For then there will be a distancing from the world. Then the Gospel, then the life of the church is out of step with the times. Then, with our Biblical message, we will become eccentrics and undesirables. No, we must always keep looking for the correct interpretation in our context.

Post-modern

The new hermeneutics, that quest, links up perfectly with the present-day post-modern sense of life. The spirit of postmodernism that is slowly permeating the entire life. Postmodernism does not believe in fixed sureties either. On the contrary. Truths are variable, shifting, dependant on person and circumstances. Truths that you surmise, are brought forward by way of questioning, are made debatable. Who says that you are right? There may well be other answers.

Church

In the modern hermeneutics it is now the task, the assignment of the congregation, of the church, which, according to God's Word, must keep that Word, to do that quest. It must, time and time again, take into account the changing context and adapt, as much as possible, the interpretation of God's Word to it. The congregation *can* do it, for it is enlightened by the Holy Spirit. In the end it is the congregation, the local congregation, preferably in combination with others, but independently if necessary, that determines what is good and true, determines how and whether God's commandments have validity for today and are to be practised today. Whether a registered partnership can be allowed, or whether living together in a homosexual relationship can be accepted. Whether one can re-

marry after divorce. Whether the Sunday should still be hallowed, or whether the special offices should be opened to women.

Thus says the congregation

Starting with the rules of the new hermeneutics will inevitably lead to the 'thus says the Lord' being replaced by 'thus says the congregation'. This may or may not come through the mouth of ministers, or through the mouth of professors, sometimes with the help of 'great' theologians of today.

Then one will read what it does not say. Then the authority of the Bible has been lost. Then the very first faithful presupposition, that God's Word is complete, uncomplicated, obvious and self-explanatory, is rejected. Then there is unbelief.

The developments in the GKV, and also in the Netherlands Reformed Churches, the Christian Reformed Churches and in other, former conservative circles in the Netherlands, must be determined against this background.

The decisions in the GKV concerning the Sunday, the seventh commandment and the open Lord's Supper table were taken against this background.

The report 'Man/Woman in the church' must also be read against this background.

Therefore, read what the Bible *says* and *leave written* what you read!





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