

All in the Family

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I remember how it used to be at Grandma's. The whole family was there—aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws. They were all there one time or another. Some of the clan came after the morning service for coffee while the kids were in Sunday school. Others made their weekly pilgrimage to the five-acre celery farm on Sunday afternoon. A few stopped after the evening service. (It made me a little jealous that some of my cousins got to stay with Grandma during that evening service. She peeled apples and cut them up into quarters. Sometimes she could peel a whole apple without lifting the knife or breaking the long ribbon of red peeling.) Grandma was always at the center of things. Grandpa was off to the side a bit in his favorite chair, pipe stand at hand and several cans of Prince Albert nearby. The air was tinged with blue because he alternated between pipe and cigar, and the cigar was finally deposited in the bowl of the pipe to draw out its last glowing ashes. The atmosphere was always the same—warm, familiar, comfortable. Grandma was there and so love and security were there. It was family.

There was one source of tension, however. There was a mixed marriage to contend with. One of my aunts had gone off and married a Christian Reformed boy from a couple of farms up the road. She joined the Christian Reformed Church but was never really converted. She grumbled about it a lot. And from that union sprang several cousins. The Christian Reformed Church did a good job on them. They never seemed to know there was anything else.

Well, we lived in reasonable peace over the years of my childhood. When Grandpa or Grandma had birthdays we all got together, and that was something else. Once in a while the peace was shattered — when, for example, we got talking about the Christian school or the upcoming Hope-Calvin game. Then the atmosphere was warm too; in fact, sometimes it even got hot.

Those occasional sharp confrontations were gathered up into a larger bond that had the toughness of love. I knew, without anyone ever telling me, that we were really all one – one family. We could argue, raise our voices or grumble at each other, but we belonged together; we belonged to each other.

Now many years later in the midst of my ministry I find myself on a “Joint Christian Reformed-Reformed Church Committee for Study of a Theology of Evangelism.” My experience on this committee has reminded me of my experiences as a child in a family that had “mixed marriages.” There was always a little rivalry, little points of tension, sometimes confrontation and sharply differing perspectives. But, there was also always that sense of family. We belong to each other and that which makes us one family is of far greater import than the things that separate us.

There are many mysteries in life, but one of the greatest is how two churches with the same national origins, the same polity, liturgical tradition and confessional allegiance have been able to go their separate ways for over a century. Yet even such a long period of separate existence has not been able to erase from our corporate consciousness that we belong together, that we belong to each other.

Both denominations in their respective Synods of 1973 adopted recommendations that a joint committee be formed. The committees of each church responsible for Inter-Church relationships had been working together in “concentrated dialogue” since 1969. This dialogue had issued in a formal meeting of the two churches in the fall of 1972. The experience of that event was reflected in a Conference Statement, which gave thanks to God “for the unity he gave us during our deliberations.” The Conference heartily endorsed the following recommendations and covenanted together to implement them.

1. That we recognize, reaffirm and publish the positions taken by our respective Inter-Church Relations Committees in 1966 and 1987, the substance of which is herewith submitted:
 - a. Joint work on liturgy to explore common concerns, suggest and foster similar patterns of worship and liturgy in our two churches.
 - b. Joint planning be used in church extension to avoid overlapping so that Kingdom resources and witness be used most effectively.
 - c. The encouragement of local exchanges between churches including pulpit fellowship.
 - d. Overseas mission efforts done in a cooperative manner whenever possible.

There was much more to the Conference Statement dealing with cooperative efforts on the denominational, classical and congregational levels and in the area of publication. The statement ended with an eloquent call to action, pleading,

The mercies of God that what we have envisioned we, together with many others, may now bring into being so that his name may be glorified, his church may be made victorious and his people may rejoice in the blessings that flow from the unity we seek.

Against this background the Joint Committee CRC/RCA for Study of Theology of Evangelism was born. Five members from each church were appointed and the first meeting was held in December of 1973.

Two churches in the Reformed tradition must necessarily discuss theology in any coming together. Furthermore, there is wisdom in focusing on the imperative that rests upon the whole church, the sharing of the Gospel with all men. Unity arises not so much out of discussion of abstract principles as out of engagement in the execution of the mission of Jesus Christ. Evangelism, telling good news in a world of bad news, is a natural place to begin to search for our unity. Happily, we on the joint committee can testify that we sensed a warm fellowship in our common search for some word to speak together concerning the grace of God which has appeared in Jesus Christ.

The issue of our committee's work thus far is a Manifesto On Evangelism. That may seem to be a rather meager result. Yet, I think when the Manifesto is studied it will prove itself a carefully formulated and profoundly significant statement. In the preamble to the Manifesto, the committee acknowledged that it had narrowed its task to sharp focus, hoping to make a distinct contribution to current discussion from our Reformed perspective as well as lifting into prominence a theme which is central to the biblical revelation and strangely absent from much of the material on evangelism; that theme being the Kingdom of God.

We were aware of other discussions on the theme of evangelism. We sensed a real struggle in the Christian community at two points:

First, how are word and deed related in Christian witness? Is social action, born of Christian conviction, evangelism? Is evangelism oral testimony only, and are deeds of demonstrated Christian concern in connection with that testimony merely optional? But behind this tension lies a more fundamental concern. What is the word, the message, in evangelism? What is the message which deeds are to demonstrate? (Preamble to the Manifesto).

It was the Committee's judgment that the historic Reformed accent on the Kingdom of God was a key to a meaningful solution to these questions. In various study papers prepared by members of the group the Kingdom theme surfaced again and again. Furthermore, we felt there was a lack of concern with the Kingdom idea in much contemporary discussion, although it is certainly a central

biblical motif. We opted to make a concise statement which expresses our unity in the understanding of our evangelistic task as well as the central theme of our proclamation in word and deed.

The Manifesto itself is divided into three sections: The proclamation of the Kingdom, the signs of the Kingdom and the imperative of the Kingdom. The opening paragraph evidences the inclusiveness of the Kingdom theme, which allows it to overcome the false antithesis between word and deed which has so long plagued the church.

We share the newly expressed concern of believers everywhere to understand the nature of evangelism and its place in our total task. We deplore our own tendencies in thought and action to separate Gospel proclamation from compassionate ministry. We believe that both are rightly understood only in the light of the Bible's pervasive theme—the Kingdom of God.

Strong proclamation of good news is immediately affirmed in the first section and that section is concluded with the statement “that all ‘evangelizing’ in the New Testament sense of the term includes the joyous proclamation of God's saving rule, together with the call to repent and believe the Gospel.”

But the Manifesto continues in the second section, “the proclamation of God's Kingdom rule brings with it the reality proclaimed,” and after a discussion of what that entails specifically, we go on to affirm

that all evangelizing in the New Testament sense of the term is accompanied by the signs of God's Kingdom among his people and springs from their active concern for the full deliverance and restoration of all to whom the Gospel is addressed.

The final section of the Manifesto deals with the imperative placed upon us in light of the Kingdom that has come in Jesus Christ for we testify to our conviction that “the Gospel of the Kingdom brings the only hope for lost mankind.”

In our committee deliberations it was obvious that we were not all at the same place. It was obvious, too, that both churches were at different points, spoke out of differing contexts and had to speak to differing expectations and concerns. It was most interesting to observe, however, that differences of opinion did not always follow denominational lines. And perhaps the greatest realization to arise out of our study and discussion together was the fundamental unity that is ours both in our understanding of the Gospel and in the high sense of urgency in making it known to all men.

The most significant feature of our joint committee is the fact that we are meeting each other, studying and praying together, enjoying table fellowship together and coming to appreciate each other. The results of such coming together have already been significant in terms of personal relationships established and

mutual respect and trust that have developed. This has led us to recognize each other and the importance of working together in cooperative ventures, the utilizing of the resources of our respective churches to the greatest possible advantage and the seeking of a common purpose, the furtherance of God's Kingdom in the world. The removal of distrust, suspicion and a spirit of competition inevitably results when we come together and place ourselves at the disposal of the Lord of the Church for the execution of his mission.

We are not bothered by our separate denominational existences. Our energies need not be swallowed up in trying to merge two denominational structures. Rather we are open together to the Spirit's leading, seeking ways in which we may bear effective witness to the Christ who has made us together a part of his Body. In the light of this challenging mission that unites us, we have a new recognition of the fact that we belong together, we belong to each other, because together we belong to him.