

The Vision Must Not Die

An Article
Reviewing the Vision of Arie R. Brouwer
As Shown in His Writings

by

Richard A. Rhem
Minister of Preaching and Theological Inquiry
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan

Published in
Perspectives
A Journal of Reformed Thought
March 1994, pp. 11-13

On October 7, 1993, the Rev. Dr. Arie R. Brouwer died after a ten-month struggle against cancer. His death was noted in the *New York Times*, recognizing the worldwide dimensions of his ministry. A brief memorial piece appeared in this journal in the December 1993 issue. With his passing the church has lost a significant leader, one of the most significant leaders in the last half of the century. This is true for his own denomination and true as well for the world church as it has come together in the ecumenical movement. Arie has died but the vision by which he lived must not die, a vision for “the unity and renewal of the Christian community as sign, instrument, and foretaste of the unity and renewal of the community of humankind and the whole creation.”

Ours was a long-time friendship going back to college days. Our paths continued to cross though we journeyed in divergent directions, he holding the top executive posts in the Reformed Church in America and the ecumenical councils; I remaining essentially in one congregation. But over the last four years of his life we were able to spend meaningful time together and be in frequent communication. In a most remarkable way, from divergent paths, we discovered to our mutual delight that we shared a common faith, understanding, and vision for the church. I know of no one who worked more faithfully and consistently to implement that vision than Arie Brouwer. I know of no one who articulated it with greater clarity or passion.

As tribute to him, out of my profound respect for the ministry he carried out, I want to lift up some aspects of his vision. The aspects I have selected reflect the areas about which we reflected together and about which he has written. While making no claim to present the full spectrum of his vision and passion, I am certain what follows is faithful to that vision and passion at its heart.

That the Church Be One

Arie's commitment to the ecumenical movement was unwavering to the end. Even following his resignation from the office of General Secretary of the National Council of Churches of Christ he remained convinced that the only way into the future for the church lay in a movement toward unity. In an article that appeared in *The Christian Century* (Feb. 23, 1990) he raised the question Can the mainline find new life on the ecumenical way? He answered with a strong affirmative.

He was well aware of the obstacles to a truly ecumenical Christian church. Indeed, he had faced them head-on, daring to confront entrenched power and vested interest that obstructed the way to renewal. In chapter 9 of his journal, dated June 11, 1993, he entitled the entry "Unfinished Business—My Ecumenical Vocation." He referred to some correspondence he had received that gave him occasion to speak positively of his own opportunity to use his positions of influence. He felt fortunate to be able to use that influence in order to empower the institutions he administered to serve their respective constituencies for the well being of the human community. He expressed the hope that "somewhere beyond the far horizon" there are church leaders in formation who will have "the will, wit and wisdom" to lead the church to the realization of the ecumenical vision.

He recognized the present survival posture of the mainline denominations. Simply taking measures to survive, their leaders are distracted from the ecumenical vision, and the resources available to the councils are drained away. It is now widely recognized that the respective mainline denominations are in very serious trouble, their future in the present configuration in doubt. He wrote an appendix to that journal entry, cited above, which he entitled "A Few Notes on Ecumenical Immobility." There he pointed to the fact that the ecumenical councils of churches, the main instruments of the ecumenical movement, are now almost completely captive to the churches. In *The Christian Century*, June 27-July 4, 1990, Arie documented the resistance to restructuring he had encountered, listing the ecclesiological claims of the churches, the institutional interests of the denominations, economic control, and ideological alignments within the churches and the Council itself. Writing with the intimate knowledge of an insider, he contended:

With the churches in control, it follows that most of the leading participants in most council meetings are either ecclesiastical bureaucrats or hierarchs, who are mostly prisoners of their positions. Real movement toward unity would render most of their present positions redundant. ... Very few bureaucrats, church bureaucrats included, are willing to put their positions at risk—even in the face of open violation of truth or justice, much less for the sake of a vision only dimly perceived. (Journal, 47)

Confronted by such a sobering realization, Arie yet remained hopeful; his vision did not waver. If the present institutional framework of the Councils offered no possibility of renewal, then another way must be found. That was part of his greatness. He recognized the historical imprisonment of church structures. He worked with a certain freedom as a church executive, freedom from the numbing paralysis that immobilizes lesser leaders who expend their energy shoring up outworn structures. In an article published in *The Christian Century*, he indicated that he was aware already a decade earlier that the dwindling away of national denominational program bureaucracies was inevitable and the trend irreversible. Not happy about it, he nevertheless neither went on the defensive nor threw up his hands in despair. Rather he plunged into the leadership of the conciliar movement with great energy and hope. The future he felt would lie in ecumenical relationship—the churches needed more than a new way of acting; they needed a new way of thinking, a new self-understanding. “Only thus,” he contended, “can they be set free from cultural captivity, ecclesiastical enchantment, institutional survivalism, traditional confessionalism and other ‘isms’ that bind them.”

Arie gave this effort his best wisdom and strength of leadership but finally concluded renewal could not come as long as the present framework of the councils remained in place. Still he would not give up the vision; he sought yet another way. In the last months of his life he served as interim pastor of the Glen Rock Community Church in New Jersey. His excitement about returning to the parish, to preparation of liturgy and preaching was evident. Here he saw the arena for renewal for the whole church “from below.”

The Ecumenical Congregation

In his journal he spoke of his vision for an ecumenical congregation. He noted the number of congregations that have represented in their membership a plurality of diverse traditions and saw these concrete communities as an “interesting ecumenical opportunity.”

If the diverse traditions could be consciously articulated in congregational life ... their particular contribution to the fullness of the Gospel (the tradition) recognized and affirmed and then integrated in a recognizable way into the life and worship, particularly the worship, of the congregation, then I believe we would create, yes create, congregations with a sturdiness and attractiveness that would give them a burst of new life, perhaps even ending the mainline malaise. (42)

His focus turned to the local congregation, not as withdrawal from the ecumenical enterprise, but as the instrument through which to bring renewal to the whole church. He became convinced that the way forward in the ecumenical movement was to be found in a movement from below. He cites the example of the base communities of Latin America but sees it as a mistake simply to adopt

that strategy. Rather, he contends, “we must create the forms for such movements from below appropriate to our own culture” (43).

For the United States, he was convinced, the model was ecumenical congregations. He speaks of his first efforts at creating such a congregation, efforts cut short by his cancer. But his passion for the vision is evident as he writes,

From such ecumenical congregations could, I believe, eventually grow a National Christian Council that could gradually transform the anachronistic and divisive denominational structures that are now stifling the ecumenical movement. Deprived of their determinative divisiveness, the denominations could serve a function in such a council much like that of the orders within the Roman Catholic Church. (43)

In his recognition of the congregation as the instrument through which renewal would come to the whole church, Arie clung to his ecumenical vision but demonstrated again, as he had throughout his various executive leadership roles, his ability to let go of anachronistic structures and trust the Spirit to create new wineskins—and new wine. In his last work in a parish he was realizing a deep longing, “the longing to rearticulate my faith—not in an academic work of theology, but in song and sermon and liturgy—in precisely such an ecumenical congregation.”

A Spirit-Seeking Tradition

As he was gathering his writings and speeches from the decade of his ecumenical leadership, he found three themes recurring—elements of renewal that he stated thus in a speech he delivered at that time:

A life-celebrating liturgy (worship and faith),
A community-building structure (order and life and work),
A Spirit-seeking tradition (theology, doctrine and dogma).

When he was forced to lay down his work in the spring of 1993 he was deeply engaged in the first element, creating a life-celebrating liturgy. Much of his vocational life was given over to creating community-building structures, but that I must leave to others to record. Here let me lift up that third element of renewal—a Spirit-seeking tradition.

Arie’s theological pilgrimage brought him to an ever-greater appreciation of the Spirit as the source of the living tradition of the church. His ecumenical encounter with orthodoxy impacted Arie deeply. In a lecture entitled “On Being Reformed in the Ecumenical Movement,” he quoted the Greek Orthodox theologian Georges Florovsky who claimed that

loyalty to tradition means not only concord with the past, but in a certain sense freedom from the past.... Tradition is the constant abiding of the Spirit, and not only the memory of words. Tradition is a charismatic, not an historical principle. (*Bible, Church, Tradition*, vol. 1, 80.)

Arie admits that following the Spirit is a risky journey, a risk Reformed scholasticism did its best to reduce. He writes,

The scholastics defended the *deposit* of the tradition but did not sustain the *dynamic* of the tradition. They stressed the *testament* of the Spirit, but neglected the *testimony* of the Spirit. They followed *past confessions* but did not lead in *present confessing*; they preserved the *Reformed faith* but did not pursue *reforming the faith*. (*Ecumenical Testimony*, 310f.)

The tradition congealed, he points out, at the Great Synod of Dort (1618-1619), and immediately thereafter the Dutch delegates, meeting in a separate session, “froze the tradition solid,” declaring that the creeds were “in all things conformable to the Word of God.” The die was cast – ongoing theological inquiry was ruled out of bounds from that time forward.

Arie describes the disastrous affect this absolutizing of an historically conditioned credal formulation has had on the church. It will not do, he claims, simply to chip away at the frozen forms. Rather,

If we want the tradition to flow freely and clearly as the water of life for a thirsty world, we will need to thaw it out. (311)

The lecture, delivered at Western Theological Seminary, was printed in this journal (October 1990) and three persons were invited to respond to it, one a Christian Reformed pastor-theologian. Dr. Clarence Boomsma, for whom Arie had profound respect. Boomsma was very affirming of the lecture but claimed that the place and authority of the Bible needed to be firmly established and, further, he maintained that the role of Scripture was “muted and unclear” in the discussion of both our Reformed tradition and the ecumenical movement. In response to that critique, Arie wrote that the place and role of Scripture was indeed a difference between them.

I have long struggled with what I have come to think of as the fundamental irony of the Reformed tradition: While insisting that the Word of God written has been given to us by the Spirit, we have often made the Spirit captive to that Word. And this in the face of the Scripture’s own clear testimony that the Spirit cannot be bound. We can transcend the irony if we affirm that even as the Canons of Dort cannot bind the Word of God, so the canons of Scripture cannot bind the Spirit of God — The church is reformed *by* the Spirit of God and *according* to the Word of God. (*Perspectives*, Oct. 1990, 13.)

For Arie, the sense of the Spirit as the source of the living tradition of the church was a growing edge. In *Ecumenical Testimony* he published an article that had appeared in *The Reformed Journal* in the mid-seventies under the title, “Worship in the Reformed Church in America.” He retitled it “A Life-Embracing Liturgy,” and in his introductory comments noted that if he were to write the article in 1991 he would write one key paragraph differently.

I would not say, “The Word of God renews the Church,” but rather the Spirit of God. According to the Word, to be sure, but in the power of the Spirit, who is “The Lord and Giver of Life.” Already then I mostly thought that, but apparently not yet firmly enough to challenge the safety devices of Reformed scholasticism that have so long subjected the Spirit to the Word—especially the Word written. That subjugation I believe to be the major impediment to the renewal of the tradition. (*Ecumenical Testimony*, 226)

In the end it was the renewal of the whole church for which Arie longed, and it was his conviction that the Reformed community was strategically positioned to spearhead such renewal through openness to the Spirit. Precisely because we have understood ourselves at our best as a reform movement in the one Church of Christ—not as something separate and apart—we are committed at the core of our being to a church: one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

Our calling to reform the tradition then can be accomplished only by engaging the whole tradition of the whole church in its mission to the whole world. (*Ecumenical Testimony*, 313L)

The Vision Must Not Die

In the Foreword to *Ecumenical Testimony*, which Arie invited me to write, I expressed my profound respect and admiration for the leadership he had given to the church, noting that his solid rootedness in his own particular tradition combined with the breadth of exposure he experienced in the world church resulted in a clear-eyed view of the promise and peril of tradition. Deep formation in his Dutch Calvinist pietism and mysticism combined with an historical sense and the dynamism of the Spirit to create newness made him a rare visionary leader. Only God’s Spirit, “The Lord and giver of life,” can renew the church. That, Arie Brouwer knew well. Yet his sturdy Calvinist spirit understood that not as a passive acquiescence to the inexorable drift of historical trends and circumstances from which he could not escape. Trusting the Spirit, Arie acted, led, sought the will of God. Of God’s will he wrote,

We seek it; we search it out with a passion. As we discover the will of God, we strive to do the will of God in order that in our doing what we know, we may learn what we do not know. (*Ecumenical Testimony*, 317)

To lose such a leader is a very great loss. Arie was my friend. I miss him. But my grief is greater when I think of what the church and world have lost. However, he has left us a legacy of writings and sermons in which the vision shines forth. His life was fruitful, indeed, but if we would return to his words and open ourselves to the Spirit that animated his vision, his life may prove even more fruitful in his death. He would not be the first for whom that is true.

Arie has died; the vision must not die.

References:

Arie R. Brouwer. *Ecumenical Testimony* (Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America). Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991.

Arie R. Brouwer. *Overcoming the Threat of Death: A Journal of One Christian's Encounter With Cancer*. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994.