

The Truth About the Truth: Reflections on Denominational Exclusivism

by Theodore Plantinga

October discussions

Each year, during the month of October, certain discussions about truth take place at Redeemer College, where I teach philosophy. More specifically, these discussions have to do with the theological and confessional orientation of the college. A student may say, "When I signed up to come here, I had no idea this was a Reformed college." The underlying complaint is: "I get all these Reformed ideas shoved at me, and I'm supposed to accept them as the truth! But I'm not Reformed."

Now, that Redeemer is a Reformed college is not exactly a secret: its full and official name is "Redeemer *Reformed* Christian College." Students who are only dimly aware of the full name may complain that Redeemer is a *Christian Reformed* college, whereas the admissions counselor had given assurances that it was "non-denominational," and therefore a school in which students of every sort of background can feel at home. As evidence such students invariably point to the fact that the current Christian Reformed hymnal is used in chapel services.

At the end of October comes Reformation Day. In lectures given around this time, I always insert some references to the Reformation and its legacy. But there are some students who have scarcely heard of the Reformation. Many of those students will listen with appreciation and interest to what I and others may say about the Reformation. But there are usually a few who respond to Reformation-Day pep talks as further proof of an oppressive Reformed chauvinism that haunts the college.

Such questions also get taken up at meetings of the faculty and staff, and the standard answer is rehearsed. That answer is that the college is "non-denominational," or perhaps "inter-denominational," or even "multi-denominational." If one asks just what is meant by these impressive terms, the usual answer is that people drawn from many denominations are represented in the ranks of the staff and faculty, and also that the Board of Governors is deliberately structured in such a way that there are people of a number of denominational background serving together. As for the students, applications from all denominations are welcomed. And so there should not be a problem.

But there are invariably a few students on campus who persist in believing something is amiss. One such was a recent graduate who took up the issue with me. This young man, of evangelical background, took a couple of courses with me and objected now and then to Reformed references and emphases popping up in my lectures. During his final year, he wrote me a letter to explain his views. He also published the substance of his letter as an article in the student newspaper.

The student's letter contained the following interesting words: "... growing up I have been associated with four different denominations. I have come to realize [that] no one denomination has the absolute truth." As I read the letter and reflected on it, I wondered: can such a sentiment properly be stated? Could we say, seeking to articulate this student's conviction, that the truth about the truth is that no one has the truth? Would such an admission keep everyone happy at Redeemer College?

A pesky problem

The answer is no. I, for one, would have trouble with it -- for philosophical reasons. Such sentiments are very hard to state accurately. To talk such a line is in effect to saw off the branch on which you are seated.

The "truth about the truth" claim is basically a form a skepticism. The ultimate claim of the skeptic is that nothing is certain,. But as soon as one begins to believe the skeptic on this score, one also has reason to doubt him. Think about it: if nothing is certain, how can one *assert*, with confidence, that nothing is certain? If the truth about the truth is that no one has the truth, the claim that no one has the truth is probably not true either.

The logical opposite of such thinking might be called dogmatism. Let's distinguish unlimited dogmatism from domain-delimited dogmatism. In connection with the latter, I would argue as follows: there is nothing illogical or

epistemologically untenable about asserting that within a clearly specified domain, my convictions are equivalent to the truth about the matter, and that anyone who holds views that conflict with my convictions is mistaken. When I take such a stance, I do not undercut myself. If the question is, for example, whether baptism ought to be administered to the infant offspring of believing parents (an issue on which the Redeemer community is divided), there is nothing illogical about asserting that the Reformed position is correct and true and that all positions that conflict with it are mistaken.

Dogmatism and rationalism go together quite nicely: a Christian might have all his doctrines neatly worked out and arranged in the form of a rational system, without thereby undermining their logical status. This is not to deny that there is something unwholesome or self-stultifying about such a stern and tidy rationalism in matters of doctrine, but from a strictly logical point of view (in logic we stress that people ought not to contradict themselves), there is nothing to be said against it. A carefully thought-out, domain-delimited dogmatism cannot be torpedoed from within.

Having the truth

Is denominational dogmatism the answer, then? Should the student be told that although people from many denominations are *welcome* at the college, one denomination *has the truth*? And would the college then, in effect, invite the adherents of the other denominations to acknowledge Reformed -- or perhaps Christian Reformed -- truth by dropping their unworthy denominational allegiance? There might be some who would be inclined to offer this type of response to the Reformed chauvinism complaint. I for my part would not do so -- but not because I believe in some sort of egalitarianism of denominations. (Yes, one does here echoes of such a sentiment from time to time at Redeemer.) Instead I would argue that there is something problematic about the notion of having or possessing the truth.

Is "the truth" something that can be handled and put into one's pocket, or perhaps into a safety deposit box in the bank? Presumably not. What, then, could be meant by saying that one "has" it? Does my having it prevent others from having it as well? Or if *my* denomination has the truth, does this entail that *yours* does not?

In connection with denominations, the notion of "having the truth" is usually related to doctrine. An old-fashioned denomination has an official doctrinal stance, which is to be distinguished from doctrinal emphases and fads that may from time to time manifest themselves. The official doctrinal stance is

formulated in credal documents, which may or may not be supplemented by additional doctrinal declarations adopted by the Synod or the General Assembly. To have the truth is to have the correct doctrine, which means in practice that one claims to have the best creeds. As far as the Christian Reformed tradition is concerned, the best creeds are the "Three Forms of Unity," namely, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort.

These three may well be the best creeds, but they are not "had" or possessed by any one denomination exclusively. They are held in common by quite a number of denominations in the Dutch Reformed tradition. Which of those denominations is then the best or the truest? One might respond by suggesting that some denominations hold those "Three Forms of Unity" more fully and faithfully than certain others. Some have altered articles within the creeds: think of Article 36 of the Belgic Confession, which deals with the task of government. [NOTE 1] Now, the purpose of altering something within a creed is presumably to seek or make improvement, but the change does represent a departure from other groups that hold the same creed in its unaltered version. To make a change is to become unique -- perhaps better, perhaps worse.

It should also be noted that some denominations have dropped parts of some creeds, like the refutation of errors in the Canons of Dort. And some denominations have seen fit to drive home the point of the creeds through additional doctrinal declarations which are said to be wholly in harmony with the creeds and with Scripture, such as the 1905 Conclusions of Utrecht, [NOTE 2] or the 1924 "Three Points" on common grace. [NOTE 3]

If doctrine is a good thing, could we say, "The more doctrine, the better"? Many people in the Reformed world do not think along these lines at all and therefore are very wary of additional doctrinal declarations. This is one of the reasons for the opposition, in certain circles, to the so-called "Contemporary Testimony," whose actual title is "Our World Belongs to God," which was adopted by the Christian Reformed synod in 1986 as a quasi-credal document. It is not only the content of this "Testimony" that draws questions but also the very idea of trying to add to the truth.

"The more, the better" does not seem to be the accepted rule, then, when it comes to official doctrine. Indeed, there are some doctrinally self-conscious Reformed Christians who practice what we might call doctrinal minimalism. They like to say that we should not "bind" people in terms of what they are to believe -- nothing is obligatory in the way of belief except what Scripture teaches. There must be no "extra-Scriptural binding." [NOTE 4] For adherents

of doctrinal minimalism, it would seem that the best denomination would travel light, so to speak.

Battles about the Bible

Arguing about the truth in terms of the creeds is a particularly Reformed approach. There are also churches that would identify having the truth with having the Bible. Now, of course everyone in the Christian world has the Bible in some sense, and so one must be specific. One way to be specific is to argue about which English translation is the best, and to commit oneself fully to that translation in personal Bible reading and in church life. Some fierce battles about the Bible focus on the question of translation.

It is also possible to develop the theme of battles about the Bible in terms of interpretation and "hermeneutics" (a dreaded term in certain circles). One then alleges that a new and mistaken hermeneutic has crept into such-and-such a denomination, which must therefore be judged as suspect. Presumably the faithful should break with it. Sometimes such argumentation leads to excessive enthusiasm for "literal" interpretation. (Just believe it!) Pastors and professors try to outdo each other in being literal and conservative in their approach to Scripture. Thereby a basis can be laid for "having the truth" in a fuller and higher sense than other denominations.

Eschatological specialization also enters the picture here, for there is plenty of room for variation when it comes to drawing up a detailed account of the last things. One's own reading of the book of Revelation can then be literal and Bible-affirming on every point, whereas all the others are hermeneutically suspect.

Historical legitimacy

Another approach to having the truth or claiming to be the true or truest church is to assert some sort of historical legitimacy in which continuity (no "starting over" is allowed in church life) would play a key role in the argument. Rome, of course, makes such a claim in opposition to the churches called Protestant. Within the Anglican tradition (Church of England), we also see such reasoning. And in the Reformed world we see such a mentality within the "liberated" churches, which in North America are known as Canadian (and American) Reformed. The "liberated" churches claim to be the true historical successors of the denomination in which Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck were able to come together in the church union of 1892 in the Netherlands. Even though the "liberated" churches are considerably smaller in number than the "synodicals"

who expelled Klaas Schilder and his associates, the larger group is the band of imposters, and the smaller group is the true, legitimate continuation of Reformed church life in the Netherlands. Such, at least, is the reasoning often offered in these circles. [NOTE 5] These churches can then claim to have the truth in the sense of having the truest history, that is, the denominational history in which the greatest faithfulness to Scripture and to revealed truth was manifested.

Shopping around

Many Reformed believers are very uneasy with a strictly church-historical approach to the question of having the truth. They would like to think in more dynamic terms. If a church somehow has the truth, its preaching will be vital, authoritative and inspiring, its fellowship a delight, and so forth. Moreover, it is often argued that the individual believer does not belong to a denomination but to a local church. There was a time when I was criticized publicly for making such a claim about myself. [NOTE 6]

And so the major issue for people who wish to think in dynamic terms about churches having the truth is not which *denomination* on the vast North American continent is the truest and purest but which *congregation* in one's local community is the best in terms of the preaching of the Word and the enthusiastic and faithful response of the congregation. In one town the best and truest congregation might be affiliated with denomination A, while in another town the best one might be affiliated with denomination B. Thus the local church has priority over denominations.

This type of thinking was fairly prevalent in my own Christian Reformed upbringing, especially on the part of those who wished to avoid denominational idolatry and chauvinism. And it has a lot of appeal to me right to this day. But there is one difficulty with this view which I cannot easily answer, namely, that it encourages a "shopping around" mentality that would lead believers to forsake a floundering congregation instead of seeking to reform or strengthen it. The life of a congregation, like the course of a marriage that endures for many years, will invariably hit some rough spots. Just as a married man should not cruise around looking for a better wife than the one he already has, who may have fallen on hard times because of illness, so the church member must show faithfulness and commitment in his local church membership.

I have long believed that the "shop around" approach to having the truth in your church life could be made more dynamic by careful attention to announcements about who is preaching where on a given Sunday. If the overall norm is that

one is to drink in the purest and most dynamic preaching of the Word week by week and thereby participate in the truth and affirm it in the pew with heart and mouth, one might need to do quite some church visiting and would probably also want to avoid services conducted by uninspiring seminary students and "interns" who are still honing their liturgical and hortatory skills in anticipation of eventual ordination. I must confess that I have, from time to time, attended a service where I was not a member specifically to hear a certain preacher. But I know that my place on Sunday is in my own local church.

Possessive words

When we are growing up, we are often told by our elders not to be "possessive." Instead we must be willing to share what we have with others. In church we also hear preaching to this effect. Yet when it comes to the issues discussed in this essay, possessive words play a prominent role. To say that I have the truth, or that a certain church or denomination does, is to use possessives. We also use such words in relation to the Bible: "*My Bible tells me ...*" Possessives are a barrier in talks aimed at promoting church union: we fear that the folks in denomination A will act as though they have won a big victory once we have joined *their* church. Might they chant "We're number one!" like sports fans celebrating after their team has won the league championship?

Now, we don't want to feel like the losing side that is left muttering "Wait till next year" when the championship game is lost. And so we may find ourselves thinking, "What we should do instead is to get *them* to join *our* church." Well-meaning pastors may point out that the church does not belong to us: it is *Christ's* church. We nod knowingly, but the correction has little effect. We think in terms of "mine" and "ours," and we want to emerge the winners.

If we wish to share some of the broad-mindedness of the Redeemer student who discovered that no denomination has the absolute truth, we must get used to speaking in a different way about the truth. Above all, we must recognize that the truth is never *my* private possession. When I confess, with the church of all ages, that Christ indeed arose from the grave, I am not mouthing a personal opinion or disclosing the results of some research that I undertook on my own. No, I must think of myself as responding to truth that was there all along, truth that does not somehow depend on my assent. I must think of myself as embracing truth, and joining with others in confessing it with heart and mouth. Thereby I align myself with the church that belongs to no human or group on earth but must be considered the bride of Christ.

And I draw spiritual sustenance from a Bible that is indeed mine in the sense that I have my own copy of it (in fact, quite a few copies, and many translations, in a number of languages) but is *God's* in the sense that we call it the Word of God. In recent decades we have become too free in attaching "my" and "mine" to words like "church" and "Bible" and in using "I" (first personal singular) when leading others in prayer.

Truth and respect

What one should learn in a college like Redeemer, where believers from many denominations study side by side, is not that no one has the truth, or that everyone does, but that truth must be respected whenever and wherever we encounter it. At Redeemer one forms relationships with people from Christian backgrounds other than one's own. Not all of them are model believers, but some manifest a commitment to Christ and a spirit of devotion to the Word of God that one cannot help but admire. Without agreeing with such people on all doctrinal points and questions of exegesis, one comes to respect them. And to respect our fellow human beings involves being open to truth that may come our way through them. And so one learns that the truth of God is proclaimed and lived in *many* church communities.

Note that I did not say *all*. There are some church communities which deny fundamentals of the faith. And some Redeemer students switch church membership during their college days, perhaps after coming to such a realization about their local church community. It is possible to be broad-minded about the power of God's Word being present in *many* church fellowships and denominations without at the same time affirming that *all* officially Christian churches are preaching the truth. I wish they did all preach the truth; my own church-going experience tells me that this is not the case.

Living with conflict

Is there then no truth about the truth that can be articulated in conclusion? Perhaps it is time to retire the phrase in my title and to inquire instead about the truth concerning doctrinal and exegetical conflicts within the Christian community. Neither a denominational egalitarianism (all churches are good) nor an exegetical skepticism (we really don't know what the Bible is trying to say) will help us here. Short of Christ's return, we must learn to live with doctrinal conflict and dividedness.

To learn to live with it means first of all that we do not allow it to undermine our own conviction and firmness of purpose. A Calvinist pastor must boldly

preach the doctrine of election even though he is aware that many Arminian Christians, perhaps including some dear friends of his, deny some aspects of his message. Secondly, it means accepting a degree of tension as part of the situation in which we must live prior to Christ's return. A child in the home does not like it when his mother and father quarrel: it makes him feel insecure. Likewise, a humble church member may be shaken by heated public debates between leaders in his church fellowship. In both domestic and ecclesiastical quarrels, an element of sin often clouds the issue. But once this is admitted, it must still be recognized that our respect for the Word of God requires us, on occasion, to take significant issue with someone who ought to be our partner and companion in the Lord's work. To respect other people and to take them seriously presupposes a willingness to correct them when we see them go astray -- and also a willingness to receive correction from them.

Students at Redeemer are sometimes distressed to hear their professors differing openly on some issue. Wouldn't it be nice if all the professors sang from the same hymnbook? Indeed it would, and I believe that one day they will, but not in this life. And when that day comes, no one will need to complain that a particular hymnbook has been given a special place of privilege. But short of that great day, we will need to serve truth by engaging in conflict from time to time. That's the truth about the truth -- as I see it.

NOTES

[NOTE 1] In 1905 some words were deleted from Article 36 of the Belgic Confession by the synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. The deleted words are marked as such in their context: "Their task of restraining and sustaining is not limited to the public order but includes the protection of the Church and its ministry in order that [BEGIN DELETED WORDS all idolatry and false worship may be removed and prevented, the kingdom of antichrist may be destroyed END DELETED WORDS] the kingdom of Christ may come, the Word of the gospel may be preached everywhere, and God may be honoured and served by everyone, as He requires in His Word." The quotation is taken from the *Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter*, revised edition (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 1987, p. 470).

[NOTE 2] The 1905 synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, meeting in Utrecht, declared: "According to the confession of our churches, the seed of the covenant, by virtue of the promise of God, is to be considered regenerated and sanctified in Christ, until the contrary should become evident from their doctrine and conduct as they grow up" (*Acts*, Article 158). These

1905 "Conclusions of Utrecht" were adopted by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America in 1908. They were challenged from time to time, given an "official interpretation" by the Synod of 1962, and finally set aside in 1968.

[NOTE 3] The CRC Three Points of 1924 occasioned the break with Herman Hoeksema, who rejected the notion of common grace completely, and also led to the beginning of the Protestant Reformed Churches. The three points can be summarized as follows: (i) In addition to the saving grace of God, shown only to those chosen to eternal life, there is also a certain favor or grace of God which he shows to his creatures in general. (ii) God restrains sin in the life of the individual and society. (iii) The unregenerate, though incapable of any saving good, can perform civic good. For further details on these points and their significance, see Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1955), pp. 424-7.

[NOTE 4] See Klaas Schilder's treatise "Extra-Scriptural Binding -- A New Danger," published in Jelle Faber, *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism* (Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Publications, 1996), pp. 55-167.

[NOTE 5] The church struggle of the 1940s need not be summed up here. Those who would like a more detailed account of the events and their subsequent ramifications for good and for ill should consult Rudolf Van Reest, *Schilder's Struggle for the Unity of the Church*, trans. Theodore Plantinga (Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Publications, 1990), and *Seeking our Brothers in the Light: A Plea for Reformed Ecumenicity*, ed. Theodore Plantinga (Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Publications, 1992).

[NOTE 6] I once took some heat on this score when I maintained that I do *not* belong to a denomination but to a local church. See "Do You Belong?", *The Outlook*, Vol. 42, No. 8 (September 1993), pp. 20(22, and "Separation Anxiety," *Christian Renewal*, Vol. 12, No. 8 (Dec. 27, 1993), pp. 2-3.