

BRITISH REFORMED FELLOWSHIP FAMILY CONFERENCES

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The importance of fellowship between members of the church of Christ has been recognised by the members of the British Reformed Fellowship since its beginning. When this important point is coupled with the attitude of Reformed believers towards their families it seems only natural that fellowship between Reformed families should be sought and clearly this fellowship is all the more beneficial when it is centred around the Word of God (Luke 24:32).

With these thoughts in mind, our first Family Conference was held in 1990, from 31st August to 2nd September, at the Living Waters Christian Conference Centre, Colwyn Bay, North Wales. Some 26 adults and 17 children attended and heard Professor David Engelsma of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America present five stimulating addresses on the all-important subject of "Marriage and the Family." Although only a short weekend conference, the event proved extremely profitable and those who attended expressed the wish that it should not be a 'one off' but that plans should be laid for a further conference in 1992.

After much planning and searching for a suitable venue, our second Family Conference was arranged for a whole week, from 15th to 22nd August 1992, in the beautiful seaside resort of Bangor, Northern Ireland. The conference was held at "Stricklands," the Northern Ireland Institute for the Disabled, on the outskirts of the town and overlooking Belfast Lough. The attendance was almost double that in Wales and several travelled from as far away as the USA in order to be present. Furthermore, the evening meetings were open to the public and a number of visitors attended from all over Northern Ireland.

The conference was again addressed by Professor Engelsma, ably assisted this time by Professor Herman Hanko also of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America. The theme specially chosen for the conference was "The Covenant of Grace."

Fellowship started as soon as the guests began to arrive on the

Saturday afternoon and at the special introductory meeting in the evening many met for the first time. At the close of that meeting Pastor Jim North, the Chairman of the BRF, led the devotions from Malachi 3:16, "Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another..."

On the Lord's day a time of corporate prayer preceded the morning worship service which was held in the conference centre and conducted by Professor Hanko. In the afternoon guests travelled by car to Ballymena where a special gospel service, organised and advertised by Covenant Reformed Fellowship, was held in the town hall and conducted by Professor Engelsma. The day was concluded at the conference centre by a "Question Time" at which many hard questions were addressed to the two Professors who responded with doctrinal and practical answers based firmly on Scripture.

The theme of "The Covenant of Grace" was treated in eight sermons shared equally between the two speakers.

Professor Engelsma dealt with the following subjects:

1. **The Source of the Covenant in God Triune** (Genesis 1:26,27).
The whole doctrine of the covenant rests on the truth that God is in His own Triune life a covenant God. The pattern for God's covenant with His people derives from the fellowship found within the Trinity.
2. **The Cosmic Character of the Covenant** (Genesis 9; Rom. 8).
As an illustration of the covenant of grace God's covenant with Noah is a rejection of the idea of common grace. God establishes His covenant with the divine elect and also with the entire creation so that it too may be redeemed in Christ.
3. **The Covenant Calling of an Antithetical Life** (2 Cor. 6:4).
Covenant people face the fundamental calling that they should live the antithesis for which they have covenant responsibilities and obligations. Christian service on the part of God's people should be undertaken with thankfulness.
4. **The Covenant as a Pattern for Marriage** (Ephesians 5:22).
The covenant has profound implications for the marriage relationship and this in turn affects the attitude of God's people toward the question of divorce and remarriage.

Professor Hanko addressed the following subjects:

1. **The Covenant with Adam: A Covenant of Works?** (Genesis 2; Romans 5).
God's covenant purposes began with Adam but

although Adam was the head of the whole human race, God did not plan to realise the covenant of grace in the first Adam but only in the second Adam, Jesus Christ.

2. **The Covenant Children of Abraham** (Genesis 17; Galatians 3). First, the covenant children of Abraham are: (i) centrally Christ, (ii) those who believe in Christ, (iii) the elect children of believers. Second, the covenant is established in the line of believers and their generations. Third, the covenant is, by its very nature, unconditional.
3. **The Training and Rearing of Covenant Children** (Proverbs 22). Scripture provides advice for parents in carrying out their responsibilities of raising their offspring as covenant children.
4. **The Covenant and Making Friends** (Psalm 119:63). Scripture provides advice for young people on questions such as friendships, dating and the seeking of marriage partners.

It can be seen that the conference provided a wealth of sound biblical teaching on the great doctrine of the covenant of grace and each of the sermons created much discussion amongst both conference guests and visitors.

Whilst the addresses were at the heart of the conference, they were not the sole activity. During the week several sightseeing outings were arranged, including a coach tour along the North Antrim Coast to the Giant's Causeway and another to Newcastle and the Mountains of Mourne. Visits were also made to Carrickfergus castle and the city of Belfast. Mealtimes also provided opportunity for fellowship, for talking and for meeting new friends.

Fellowship? Oh yes, the conference was a time of great fellowship. The promise of Matthew 18:20 was clearly fulfilled and we all left Stricklands saying like those on the road to Emmaus, "Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?"

It was somewhere half way through the week when plans began to be made for the next Family Conference in 1994. We look forward under God's blessing to another time of fellowship around the Word of our great covenant God and would encourage all who can attend to make every effort to do so.

[Conference brochures for 1994 are available in the UK from the Editorial Office or in the USA from: Mr Bill Oomkes, 6299 Wing Avenue SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49512, USA. Tel (616) 698-6697.]

BOOK REVIEWS

Editor

AN INQUIRY INTO THE SCRIPTURAL CHARACTER OF THE REVIVAL OF 1859

Rev William Hamilton

Publisher: *The Reformed Book Outlet, Hudsonville, USA.*

Distributor: *Covenant Reformed Fellowship, Ballymena, NI
1993, paperback, 297 pages, £4.50 + p&p.*

Obtainable from: *CRF, 7 Lislunnan Road, Kells, Ballymena
Co Antrim BT42 3NR, N Ireland. (Tel: 0266-891851.)*

Was the 1859 Revival in Ireland a work of the Holy Spirit of God? Were similar revivals in Wales and Scotland at that time works of the Holy Spirit? Have any of the revivals that have taken place since that time within the British Isles been works performed by the third Person of the Trinity? Listen to Rev William Hamilton, a contemporary eye-witness of the revival in Ireland: "It is essentially and fundamentally evil"! (page 295).

Before denouncing the writer as either a heretic or a lunatic, we should perhaps first be prepared to read what he has to say and, with the author, bring the revival – and other more contemporary movements, for that matter – to the bar of the Scriptures and the great confessions of the Church. This is exactly what Rev Hamilton did and the conclusion he arrived at was that the 1859 Revival was found wanting.

This perhaps begs more questions than it answers. If the Rev Hamilton is correct in his analysis, then we might well ask the following questions:

- 1/ What are we to make of revivals in general? Have they all been "essentially and fundamentally evil"?
- 2/ In what do we place our hope for the future blessing and prosperity of the Church? Many of us have grown up with the conviction that much, if not all, twentieth century evangelism has been essentially arminian and detrimental rather than advantageous for the well-being of the Church. But when revival comes – so we have been led to believe – all our problems will be solved! Or will they?

3/ Given that the 1859 Revival and other similar movements were, to say the least, of a questionable and dubious nature, does this mean that there is no such thing as a genuine work of the Spirit of God, a genuine revival? No one would surely dare criticise the Reformation, so was that a genuine revival? If the answer is that it was a 'reformation' as distinct from a 'revival,' then how do we define the difference?

Perhaps our readers have thoughts on these and other related questions and we would be glad to hear from them – but only after they have read and perused Rev Hamilton's book!

For the interested reader, the back cover of the reprint of this fascinating contemporary study states:

In 1859 there was a great revival in Northern Ireland that began in the little village of Kells. According to the many accounts, all kinds of people were converted including prostitutes, drunkards and thieves. Immediately many of these people began "preaching" through the whole of the land. The result seemed to be a great return to the Lord and to true religion...

However, not all during the 1859 revival believed that it was the fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit. They came to this judgment because of the unscriptural and anti-confessional stance of those who participated in the revival. One man who observed what went on, the Rev William Hamilton, wrote *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Character of the Revival of 1859* in which he pointed out clearly the errors he saw.

Hamilton was a respected minister of the Irish Presbyterian Church, ministering for some 38 years chiefly in the town of Edenderry, Co Tyrone.

From the Foreword, written by the book's Distributor, we learn:

William Hamilton's book... is not just a searching critique of a specific revival, that of Northern Ireland in 1859, but of all revivalism. It says things that need to be repeated today and that need to be heard by those who think or act as if revival is the sum and substance of true religion or the only hope of the church...

It amounts to a Biblical and Confessional examination of many issues, both doctrinal and practical, which remain in the church. On the basis of Scripture and the Confessions it establishes principles that ought to rule the church in every age and promotes practices that are both godly and edifying. Consequently, we believe that the book will be of interest even to those who have no particular interest in Northern Ireland or its church history.

For example, the book deals in a very succinct but thorough way with the doctrines of Scripture, of the Person and work of

the Holy Spirit, of the church and its ministry, of conversion, of the law and its place in the life of the Christian, and of assurance.

For those interested in questions of Christian practice there are interesting and Biblical discussions of such subjects as lay ministry, women teaching in the church, revival meetings, the giving of testimonies, total abstinence (from all alcoholic drink), ecumenism, and various forms of religious excitement such as are found in the charismatic movement. These things were characteristic of the Revival of 1859 and are judged in the light of Scripture and the Confessions. Since they are still to be found in the church the book can be read with profit by anyone interested in these issues.

An Inquiry into the Scriptural Character of the Revival of 1859 is not the easiest of books to read and has its shortcomings. It is written in the style of a continuous discourse and the material is not arranged under headings and in chapters as would have been preferred. Nevertheless, the book is highly recommended and folk are urged to obtain a copy for themselves and consider the evidence presented by the author.

WHY DENOMINATIONS? A Brief Answer to Ecumenism J A Watts

*Gospel Standard Trust Publications, 12b Roundwood Lane,
Harpenden, Herts AL5 3DD*
1993, paperback, 52 pages, £2.50 inc p&p

The Gospel Standard group of Strict Baptist churches are renowned for adherence to the teaching of hyper-calvinism, that is, they reject the doctrine that men in a state of nature should be urged to repent and believe in Christ and they aver that the gospel should be preached only to 'awakened sinners.' While we could not concur in any way with such ideas, it must be admitted that in these days of laxity on every hand, while moral standards are slipping at an alarming rate and while churches are rapidly losing all credibility in the eyes of the general populace, Gospel Standard churches are remaining very much as bastions of truth and integrity.

The Gospel Standard Trust has been responsible for publishing many worthwhile books and in recent times have produced a series of contemporary booklets on topical subjects. The above title is one of the latest to be published and offers a defence of traditional church structures and divisions as opposed to the cry for ecumenical union heard nowadays even within the evangelical fraternity.

The author in a few places (naturally) exhibits his preference for the baptist community and also argues in favour of the autonomy of the local congregation. He does concede, however, that "the best form of inter-church relationships is when groups of churches holding to the same faith and order bind themselves together in a voluntary way in the spirit of the gospel" (p 7). What a pity this falls short of the full-blown tried and tested form of church government expressed in the Reformed confessions and notably in the Westminster *Form of Presbyterial Church Government*. Nevertheless, in chapter 6 under the heading *The Need for Articles of Faith*, the author, in one of the best passages in the book, remarks: "Perhaps one of the greatest dangers among the churches at the present time is that all too frequently every man does 'that which is right in his own eyes' (Judges 21.25) in disregard of the interests of his brethren and the religious community in which he moves. As soon as there is a difficulty, people and churches are tending to sever their denominational links and become independent instead of retaining the links and exploring every possible avenue for reconciliation. In recent years this has seriously reduced the strength of useful church groupings which in past generations have had such a stabilising effect on the churches. What a need there is to reverse this trend and to obey the Scripture exhortation to 'strengthen the things which remain' (Rev. 3.2)! Daniel was told by the Lord to 'stand in his lot' and perhaps this exhortation is needed today" (p 42).

One or two minor criticisms could be levelled, notably the repeated use of anonymous quotations, such as "one writer observed..." and "a contemporary writer says..." This anonymity almost includes the author himself as no details are provided about him, such as whether he is a pastor or church officer. Even the famous 18th century preacher William Huntington was unashamed to declare his credentials, signing himself on every occasion as "William Huntington, S.S." – Sinner Saved!

We commend the Gospel Standard Trust for this publication and hope that it achieves a wide circulation.

Other titles in the series include: *A Christian Attitude to Trade Unionism; Christian Marriage and Divorce; Creation – The Bible and Science; Cremation – Not for Christians; Divine Guidance – How I may Know God's Will; Drug Taking – A Warning; Our Inheritance – A Protestant Constitution; Spirit of Truth – Some Aspects of Charismatic Teaching; and "The Old is Better" – Some Bible Versions Considered.*

ARCHAIC OR ACCURATE? Modern Translations of the Bible and *You Versus Thee* in the Language of Worship
 Edited by J P Thackway

The Bible League, 20 Thistlebarrow Road, Salisbury, Wiltshire SP1 3RT

1993, paperback, 48 pages, £1.00 per copy inc p&p
 (£8.50 per 10 copies inc p&p)

The Bible League celebrated its centenary in 1992. It was founded with a single aim: "To promote the Reverent Study of the Holy Scriptures, and to resist the varied attacks made upon their Inspiration, Infallibility and Sole Sufficiency as the Word of God." True to this objective the League has selected eleven contributions, drawn largely from past issues of its magazine, the *Bible League Quarterly*, relating to the vexed question of whether Deity should be addressed in public worship by singular or plural pronouns.

The articles vary widely in size and style. Three are extremely short, each occupying little more than a page, while two contributions by the late Professor John Heading of Aberystwyth account for over a third of the booklet. The blurb on the back cover sets the scene for the publication:

Recent decades have seen the arrival of many new translations of the Bible, and with them the increasing tendency to use the pronouns *you* and *your* when addressing God.

Is this a healthy bringing up-to-date of a Christianity which is too often seen as old-fashioned and irrelevant? Or is it a curious departure from timeless principles, both in accuracy of translation and in reverence when calling upon the Lord?

The articles in this book, written by different authors at different times, maintain that we are witnessing today a modern Downgrade which is scarcely appreciated by the Lord's people in their eagerness to be 'contemporary.'

With a Foreword which sets the scene, we have here perhaps the most comprehensive treatment of this subject available today.

John Thackway is Minister of Holywell Evangelical Church in North Wales, and Editor of the *Bible League Quarterly*.

One criticism must be voiced and that is that no details are provided of any of the contributors. One or two are well known names within contemporary evangelicalism but the majority may be unknown to most readers.

The booklet is thoroughly recommended for dealing with a subject that today is in danger of rapidly becoming taboo amongst the Lord's people.