

Adult Ed – 2/6/22

RCA and Beyond: Reformed Distinctives and Affirming Voices in the RCA

From last week (Reformed distinctives)

1. History: creedal/catholic Christianity
2. Authority: Scripture
3. Comfort: the priority of God's grace in Christ
4. Family: the covenant people of God
5. Church Order
 - a. Episcopal (bishops)
 - i. Hierarchical
 - b. Congregational (Baptists)
 - i. Independent
 - c. Covenantal (Presbyterian/Reformed)
 - i. The catholic church
 1. The NT refers to the church as wider than a local congregation (Acts 9:31; 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:4-16)
 2. Broader assemblies (Acts 15-16) make binding decisions. These assemblies are wider, not "higher."
 - ii. The plurality of leadership
 1. Ministers/elders ("overseers" "elders")
 2. Deacons
 - iii. Structures
 1. Church order: checks and balances
 2. Mutual support for missions, theological education, etc.

Affirming Voices in the RCA

1. Understanding Affirming Voices

- a. Affirming/Revisionist View: Same-sex *marriage* should be *affirmed* as a legitimate moral option for gay/lesbian/same-sex attracted people.
- b. Two main approaches:
 - i. Challenging the Bible's authority.
 1. The Bible speaks to this topic but is flawed and should not be considered authoritative.
 - ii. Challenging past interpretation of the Bible.
 1. We need to reexamine Scripture in light of new interpretive questions.
- c. Types of disagreement:
 - i. What we should do.
 - ii. The underlying reasons for why we should (or should not) do it.
 - iii. Vision 2020 quote: "A crucial moment that shifted our understanding was recognizing the difference between General Synod statements on human sexuality and the functional reality of our structure. This team believes the denomination has existed for a long time with functional diversity. Historically, we have been united around our standards, and because of the way our polity works, functionally the RCA is theologically diverse about a range of topics, including human sexuality, infant baptism, women in church leadership, and others. Our practices vary from classis to classis and congregation to congregation."

2. "Affirmed & Celebrated: A Reformed Theology of Inclusion" by the Theology Committee of the Classis of New Brunswick. Online at <https://www.rca.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Appendix-Affirmed-and-Celebrated-2019.pdf>

- a. This document shows that at least some in the RCA not only dispute the historic view of marriage, but **question and undermine the authority of Scripture** (approach 1 above).
- b. Chapter 1: Our Call for Unity in the Church
 - i. "The church as a whole does not yet discern a consistent message between the Scriptures of God and the Spirit of God."

1. Danger: pitting Scriptures vs. the Spirit. Or labeling as “Spirit” what is really the spirit of the age, not the Holy Spirit.
2. Sidenote: Lack of historical honesty - the church throughout history has discerned a consistent message on the topic of the basic definition of marriage.

c. Chapter 2: Reformed Interpretation of Scripture

- i. Alongside traditional means of revelation – general revelation (creation) and special revelation (Scripture) – this document also includes “**ongoing revelation.**” God continues to speak to us even now (p. 7).
 1. The term “revelation” should not be used as a theological term for how God speaks to us now.
 2. Revelation vs. illumination. This document dangerously equates God’s current work of illumination (which helps us understand Scripture and bring it to bear on our lives) with revelation. Thus, God’s current work is not simply illumination of Scripture by the Holy Spirit but revelation to me/us that is equal to Scripture.
 3. “Biblical words are not the Last Word. They are the Living Word.” (p. 7)
- ii. Conclusion: “There is no single, inerrant interpretation of the Bible that is not subject to revision.” (p. 10)
 1. This fundamentally challenges creedal/catholic Christianity, which holds that there are settled doctrines, including those found in the Apostles, Nicene, and Athanasian creeds.
- iii. Takeaway: this document **undermines the authority of Scripture by classifying current illumination as “revelation” and by arguing that there can never be any settled doctrine or interpretation of Scripture.**

d. Chapter 3: Morality, Theology, and Scripture

- i. “Scripture’s authority lies not in rules, but instead in principles which guide us through the work of the Holy Spirit.” (p. 12)
- ii. “What makes [an ethical] decision moral is not a direct correspondence to the specific moral rules found in a biblical text.” (p. 16). Instead, it is “faithfulness to the life we share by God’s grace and the Holy Spirit.” That is a bit vague.

- iii. Several times, this document quotes an RCA document, “Church and Scripture,” which states, “At the level of specific moral rules, however, the authority of Scripture is not always prescriptive; sometimes it is exemplary or illustrative.” But there is a big difference between saying:
 - 1. The authority of Scripture is not *always* prescriptive at the level of specific moral rules (in other words, not *every* moral rule given in Scripture is binding for us today), and
 - 2. The authority of Scripture is *never* prescriptive at the level of specific moral rules (in other words, *no* moral rules given in Scripture are binding for us today).

- iv. Takeaway: This document **undermines the authority of Scripture by saying that we should not look to Scripture for at least some binding moral rules that apply to all times and places.** But the historic Reformed (and catholic) view of Scripture is that it definitely DOES contain at least SOME moral rules that apply to all times and places (for example, the Ten Commandments, which are arguably *intensified* by Jesus rather than relaxed in Matthew 5-7, a pattern adopted in the Heidelberg Catechism’s explanation of the Ten Commandments). By setting aside the teaching that Scripture does sometimes contain specific rules that are binding for us today, **this document clears the way for something other than Scripture to have the authoritative word on sexual ethics (or other ethical matters).**

- e. Chapter 4: Theological Account of Our Classical (New Brunswick Classis) Position
 - i. Challenging the Bible’s authority
 - 1. “The Bible is a poor rule book for sexual ethics.” (p.17)
 - 2. “The Bible alone is insufficient for providing the rules for a modern sexual ethic.” (p.17)
 - a. Instead, they argue that we have to adhere to the Bible’s most important ethical principles: justice, mercy, forgiveness, mutuality, and infinite respect due to everyone. (This document doesn’t explain why the Bible can simultaneously be a very poor rule book but an outstanding guide to ethical principles).

3. “Christ expects us to work together to continually uncover the rules that build today’s faithful communities.” (p.17)
 - a. Notice the move here: **the Bible’s rules on this are poor and invalid for us today. So we must be the authority to construct rules that align with a “modern” sexual ethic.**

ii. The authority of the individual and contemporary cultural categories

1. “Personal identity (including sexual orientation, gender identity, etc.) is *revealed* in an intimate relationship between each person and God.” (p.14) → Here we come back to the category of “ongoing revelation.”
2. “We believe that we can discover all aspects of our personal identity—including gender identity and expression, sexuality and sexual orientation—through *experience*, guided by faith.”
3. “The role of the church, then, is to affirm and respect each person as they learn who it is that God is calling them to be; to guide all people to live in justice and love; and to help each person interpret their experience of God’s call on their lives.”
 - a. Remember, though: interpreting “God’s call on their lives” definitely does NOT mean pointing them to Scripture on any specific rules regarding sexual ethics.
4. “God alone has primary authority over the gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation God has ordained for each of us.” (p.15)
5. “It is fitting to proclaim God’s primary authority in determining each person’s gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation.”
6. “No human being should attempt to prescribe personal identity for another.”
7. “The pastoral role of the church is to affirm each person’s God-given identity and to uphold our faith in God’s primary authority over who we are to be.”
8. “Today we are learning that God is male and female, transgender, intersex, heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, and queer.” (p. 16)
9. “God’s plan for each of us is unlike God’s plan for any other person.”
 - a. Why is why none of us can point to anything—including Scripture—that might actually give someone concrete guidance about what to do or not do.

- f. Notice the logic here:
- i. The words initially sound good and right: “God is the ultimate authority.”
 - ii. But that authority is not conveyed through Scripture or even the Christian community discerning Scripture together—it is ***revelation*** directly to the individual. The **individual is thus the unquestionable ultimate authority.**
 - iii. The document fails to acknowledge or even be aware of the extent to which **it also affirms our broader cultural categories as a timeless authority.** Terms like “sexual orientation,” “sexual identity,” “gender identity,” and other related terms, such as transgender, intersex, heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, and queer, are all very specific 20th-21st century North American ways of categorizing identity. In addition, our culture places sexual identity (who we’re attracted to) at the core of our identity (not every culture does this).
 - iv. Those identities then become the timeless moral authority that guides our action. We *ought* to live in line with what our identity (as defined by our culture) *is*. This is why the document asserts that it is impossible to love the sinner and hate the sin: “our sexuality and gender identity cannot be separated from who we are because they enliven our very being, they draw us into relationships, families and communities and lead us to desire and worship God.” (p.18) In other words, if someone’s orientation is a certain way (toward the same sex), then it is inherently good for them to be in a same-sex relationship/marriage.
 - v. Takeaway: this **undermines the authority of Scripture by combining the ultimate authority of the individual with the authority of our culture’s categories** as the ultimate moral guide to tell us what we ought to do. It still pays lip service to the authority of God, but when it spells out what that actually means, God’s authority is revealed not through Scripture but through the unchallengeable individual.

3. Conclusion:

- a. This document shows that at least some in the RCA not only dispute the historic view of marriage, but the authority of Scripture. What are the implications for remaining in a denomination where this is believed and taught by churches and pastors, not just in New Brunswick classis, but in others as well?
- b. Because our church order does not provide a way for a classis to bring charges or discipline against another classis that undermines the authority of Scripture. Given what we believe about church discipline (that it is a mark of the true church), what should we do? Can we function in a denomination where there is not accountability in this broader way?