

A WARNING AGAINST UNFAITHFULNESS

Jeremiah's first prophetic message runs from 2:1 to 3:5. God described Israel in its earlier time as a bride who in her youth was eager to please her husband (2:1-3). In the earlier days God had brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt and chosen Israel to be His own people. She used to follow Him in the wilderness. Jeremiah bypassed the many lapses during Israel's time in the wilderness, and the fact that a whole generation except for Joshua and Caleb was condemned to die there. He focussed on the fact that the difficult conditions there taught Israel to trust God for everything, water, food, protection, and travel plans. Calamity had come on all who attacked her. Israel was holy to the Lord.

However, Israel became like an unfaithful wife. In Jeremiah's time the people were worshipping foolish idols, and were guilty of many other kinds of unfaithfulness. They forsook the Fountain of living water and dug for themselves cracked cisterns, which could not hold water. Through Jeremiah the Lord contrasted the faithfulness of Israel at that time with the unfaithfulness of the people of Judah in Jeremiah's time. He called them to account by asking whether He had failed them in any way that might have provided a reason for their unfaithfulness: "What wrong have your fathers found in Me that they have gone so far away from Me? They have been following worthless idols, and they have become worthless. They have not asked, 'Where is the LORD, who brought us up from Egypt, and who led us through the wilderness, through a land with deserts and gorges, through a land of drought and deep darkness, through a land that no one had crossed, and where no human being lived?'" (2:5-6). God spoke as One who had been repaid wrongly and ungratefully for His faithful love.

Lack of concern for the truth of God is like a spreading cancer. An astute theologian observed several years ago that once the barriers begin to fall between the Christian denominations, they also soon begin to fall between the Christian faith and other faiths. Our post-modern age has become a syncretistic age, when many Christians are beginning to assert that the god of the Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, and the rest is the same as the God of the Christians, and that they can all rightly pray to "him" as the same god. What is different from this kind of idolatry and that of the people of Judah in Jeremiah's time? However, God's name includes not only who He is, but His good name, and His Word.

Lutherans across the world should apply similar questions to themselves. Have not many of them turned their backs on the New Testament and Reformation teaching of justification through faith alone, by conceding, in dialogue with the Roman Catholics, that justification is a process, which depends on renewal of life as a prerequisite for God's favourable verdict? Justification by God's grace alone through faith in Christ alone, without works is the central article of faith in the Scriptures, the one on which the church stands or falls. Have not most of the Lutherans in Germany, northern Europe, and America also gone the way of the Altered Augsburg Confession, in Article X, by arranging communion fellowship with the Reformed? Have not most of them blunted their confession through ecumenical associations with churches that do not teach the truth in its purity? The Lutheran church in Australia began in the late 1830s when people left the country of their birth for a foreign climate and language. Those people wanted to retain the faith, including real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar, and to pass it on to their children as it had been confessed in the early days of the church and of the Reformation. No personal cost was too great compared with that. Most of the first Lutheran immigrants to Australia left their homes to avoid the pressure of the Prussian government to adopt compromise worship with the Reformed.

However, just several weeks ago the Lutheran Church of Australia signed a "covenant of co-operation" which was arranged by the National Council of Churches, with fourteen other denominations to recognise each other's ministries. It is a disaster for genuine Lutheranism. It exhibits a false view of the unity of the church. The common prayer, strategies for mission together, recognition of ordained ministries and sharing of the Lord's Supper ought to presuppose full agreement in doctrine. The various side agreements demonstrate clearly the lack of agreement in the Gospel and the Sacraments. There is obviously no agreement in doctrine with these denominations in many respects, as the various denominations give a home and habitation to many errors. The other denominations were the Catholic, Anglican, Uniting, Churches of Christ, Quakers, Salvation Army, and Congregationalist churches, and seven Orthodox churches. They all promised "to share pews, pray together, recognise each other's rituals, and some of them agreed even to share clergy." It was reported in the SA District Newsletter "Together", Aug-Sept 2004. Under such an agreement, what has happened to Australian Lutherans' faithfulness to the Gospel in rejecting the sacrifice of the mass, in confessing the real presence, and in taking original sin seriously as the rationale for infant baptism, to name only three points? For it is Christ's will for His disciples to continue in His Word and reject and to avoid those who teach falsely.

The ecumenical movement not only fosters a false view of the unity of the church and justifies common church work among groups that are not agreed in the doctrine of the Gospel, but thrives on what appears to be a death wish. Doctrinal substance is melted away and abandoned in ecumenical euphoria, which produces compromise and refusal to condemn what is false. The result is a kind of stupor, which makes people unable to be precise or to act with resolve.

The sin at the time of Jeremiah that had particularly led Israel astray was idolatry. "I brought you to an orchard land to eat its fruit and its good things" (v. 7). The Lord called the land of Canaan and His people Israel His

“inheritance.” However, many of them were serving Baal, the god commonly worshipped by Phoenician and Canaanite peoples. Following worthless idols caused the Lord to regard them as worthless.

The Lord laid a great deal of the blame on Israel’s leaders, the priests, the civic leaders, whom Jeremiah called “shepherds”, and the prophets. “The priests did not ask, ‘Where is the LORD?’ Those who handled the Law did not know Me. The shepherds also rebelled against Me. The prophets prophesied by invoking Baal and followed things that could not benefit them” (v.8).

God accused Israel of unfaithfulness. “That is why I shall contest a lawsuit with you again”, declares the LORD, “and I shall contest a lawsuit with your children’s children” (v.9). Israel had exchanged the true God for idols.

Many people who defend ecumenical unfaithfulness these days claim that only the redemption of Jesus Christ matters, and everything else is unnecessary and expendable. They forget that Jesus Christ requires faithfulness both to Him and to His Word. Being unfaithful to His Word is one way of being ashamed of Him (Mark 8:38), and puts those who are unfaithful at grave risk of finding the Lord ashamed of them at judgment day.

Through Jeremiah, God pointed out that what Israel had done was highly unnatural. Even the heathen people in the surrounding regions did not change their gods. “For go across to the coasts of Cyprus and look! Send to Kedar and examine carefully! See whether there has ever been anything like this! Has any nation exchanged its gods, even though they are not gods? However, My people have exchanged their Glory for something that could not benefit them” (v.10-11).

The important thing for all people, including ourselves, to consider most seriously is not cosy relations with others who have not continued faithfully in Christ’s Word, but what the Lord Himself thinks about unfaithfulness. Those who abandon discrimination and their loyalty to the Lord are themselves the losers, just as the people of that time were. ““Be appalled at this, you heavens! Let your hair stand on end, and be utterly desolate!’ declares the LORD. ‘For My people have committed two wrongs: They have forsaken Me, the Fountain of living water, and they have hewn out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, which cannot hold water’” (v. 12-13).