

We Cannot Go Back **By Steve Schlissel**

It is hard for us to recognize the desperation of our times because materially we are still quite successful. After the tragedy of 9/11 the amount of money that poured into New York City, including my own church's 9/11 Relief Fund, was overwhelming. Billions came into the city, and people were talking of scores of billions of dollars. In such an economy and under such circumstances, we are slow to feel our poverty and the crisis that is on us. Nevertheless, we still face this crisis and we should know that there are precedents for great prosperity accompanied by an even greater spiritual crisis. In the Northern Kingdom of Israel in Hosea's time and not long before the destruction of that kingdom, the people were experiencing unrivaled prosperity — but that didn't keep them from facing the judgment of God. Will unrivaled prosperity keep us from facing the judgment of God?

What Bavinck Knew

Over a hundred years ago Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck wrote about the conflict that would be presented to the world at the dawn of the twentieth century (the article first appeared in English translation in, of all places, the *Methodist Review*, which, of course, today would cause him to be brought up on charges). He stated:

"It is well known that at present this conflict is no longer confined to one or another article of our Christian confession, to the authority of Scripture or tradition, to justification or election; and not even any longer to the Deity of Christ or the personality of the Holy Spirit. But in the spiritual conflict that is now waging in every part of the civilized world, the points at issue more and more are the principles of Christianity itself, and the very fundamentals of all religion and of all morality. This conflict extends the whole length of the line. More serious and fiercer than ever before the conflict is between the old and the new world-view. For man has undertaken the gigantic effort of interpreting the whole world, and all things that are therein, in their origin, essence, and end, what is called purely and strictly scientifically, that is, without God, without any visible, supernatural, spiritual element, and simply and alone from the pure data of matter and force."¹

It is a fearful thing to survey our situation one hundred years later. The development and the consistency of humanism have just about gobbled us up so that our children have been given over to humanist education, our institutions have been given over to humanism, and our courts are governed by humanism — all by the very principle that Bavinck warned against. We have forgotten that there ever was a time when a Christian consensus prevailed in our country. The two coasts have obliterated the middle, which still has a large segment of faith, so that the East Coast and the West Coast dictate what we are and what our identity is as a nation. We have even forgotten that there is a conflict. Anybody who says that there is a spiritual conflict is considered to be an oddball; instead, we're supposed to go with the flow and be "nice guys," no matter what.

The courts, the institutions of higher learning, and certainly the media — the elite— all believe that humanism is a given. That is their starting point. There is no God to measure our rightness or wrongness in any idea, in any concept, in any ruling.

¹ Herman Bavinck, "Creation or Development," *Methodist Review*, Nov. 1901

Therefore, justice has become unpredictable. Education to a large measure is totally relativistic, except for certain measurable things; that is to say, an inch might still be an inch, although Doug Wilson tells that math standards are flexible now in certain tests. You are getting it close, *and so you are right*. Of course, you have to argue about what *close* is. So, we see the decline of standards because of man's becoming the center of the universe. All things being done by him, measured by him, and determined by him has overtaken the entire culture of Western civilization.

The Islamic Answer

The crisis is accelerating because we have a Muslim answer. The Islamic world is not afraid to say that there are absolutes; nor are Muslims afraid to say that these absolutes ought to be applied culturally. They are not afraid to say that we should be willing to die for this. They are not afraid to hijack airplanes and bomb them into buildings and have people die in their cause. Meanwhile, we have our church groups that say, "Come in! You won't feel threatened by our little gathering. We'll just share good feelings and affirm one another." In answer to the Muslim attack on the West we have a feminized church that gets more feminine each day.

The Muslims will win as a result of their boldness, since America is lost in a vast wasteland, doesn't know which way to turn, and is vulnerable to anybody who stands up and says, "Follow me!" We saw this recently with a 15-year-old punk crashing an airplane into a building in Florida. The Islamic conversions from a once Christian nation have quadrupled in the U.S. since September 11. They have never had so many people converting to Islam in America.

The Failure of the Calvinists

On the one hand, we have a wasteland of humanism that has obliterated our Christian consciousness, our Christian history, our sense of having a past that has done glorious things by the grace of God. On the other hand, we have a religion that is not afraid to assert itself as a world power and calls upon people to follow it with a voice that appears to be authoritative. Meanwhile, Christians are in the middle consuming one another, biting and devouring each other, having lost the character of even the Gospel.

The Reformed people, who should be the most responsible and the most mature, have not been as responsible and mature as they should be. We continue, I am afraid, as Reformed and Presbyterian people to think that time was frozen, if not in the sixteenth then, at least, in the seventeenth century. We think that once the Westminster Standards were written, truth was frozen, and we can never reopen and reconsider anything again as if it were necessarily an act of apostasy to develop in our understanding of applying Scripture.

We have this notion that we should go back in time. However, the only reason that these historic accomplishments were successful is that our Reformed forefathers were building on Roman Catholic capital in a Christianized Europe; but this is no longer the case. Even if we wanted to go back, we couldn't go back for that and a hundred other reasons. Everybody had better wake up and smell the coffee. We are never going back to 1645. We are not going to have an act of parliament to decree that the Westminster Standards are to be the standards for our entire nation. These

are desperate times, and any Pollyanna notion that there is a previous moment in history that is to become the norm for now is false and dangerous. History doesn't move backwards. We must not think that the high point of all Christian history was reached at a certain point in time and that every act of reformation is simply a return to that point. We had better begin to understand that we live *today*. This is where God has put us, and we have an obligation to find out what His will is for our generation and for our children's generation.

Reformation is a return to the Word of God and the Holy Spirit enlightening us to understand what our responsibilities are in any generation in which we might find ourselves.