

Prophetic Pastoral Care and Counselling

A short reflection from the 'United Protestant Church in Belgium' by prof. dr. Jaap J. de Lange (Leuven, the 20 August 2009)

Ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the 'United Protestant Church in Belgium' I do thank the organizing committee for their kind invitation to be present at the opening of your conference and to give me the opportunity to wish you all a very interesting and meaningful conference here in Leuven.

Conferences like this often take place during the summertime, when we are less occupied by our daily work at our faculties. In this case it meant, that the president of our synod, dr. Guy Liagre, is still on holiday and that I'm here to speak to you in his place as professor Practical Theology at our Protestant Theological Faculty in Brussels.

As you might know the 'United Protestant Church in Belgium' is really a small minority in this country. Let us say, that amongst the approximately 10 million Belgians there are about 50 thousand members and friends of the 'United Protestant Church'. Yes, you are right that is not more than half a percent of the whole population.

In our country our church counts about 100 congregations of different background. That is to say, there are 67 French-speaking, 34 Flemish-speaking congregations and also 3 German- and 2 English speaking congregations.

For the most of you this will be an extraordinary situation, but consider that it is not only the differences in languages that form our challenge of being one church. For these congregations represent also different traditions, such as: Calvinistic, Methodist, Lutheran, Anglican and nowadays also Korean.

So even if our church is numerical small, she has an ecumenical character. That is part of her identity. Protestant denominations here in Belgium cannot afford living apart from each other. That is also why several other small denominations have joined the 'United Protestant Church' in partnerships. So for example, the Union of Baptists in Belgium, the Seventh Day Adventist Church, the Salvation Army and also the Free Methodist Church in Belgium.

Of course there are also relations with the Roman Catholic Church, on a locally and from time to time on a national level. But here and now I restricted myself to one of the main characteristics of the 'United Protestant Church in Belgium': small but united with a diversity of backgrounds in a predominantly catholic society.

If you have followed me in the picture that I have been drawing for you about the Protestant Church, it is obvious that you don't have to be a prophet to understand at least one of the difficulties that is also related to the theme of your conference. I mean 'prophetic pastoral care' cannot be discussed without reflection on plurality.

That marks not only the situation of the Protestant Church in Belgium, although it is typical for us, but it is in many ways the situation in which we all more or less live. How does that influence prophetic pastoral care? And how can we deal with plurality in case of prophetic pastoral care? In view of daily church life we cannot ignore these questions.

At the same time you cannot decide to speak only of 'pastoral care' and leave out the element of prophetic. Because for the church these two are sides of the same medal. Only together they represent the one service of the church to mankind, to women and men, to society; not as separated matters, that would be a not desirable escape, but in relation with each other.

It is therefore very important to consider what your starting point is. In my opinion it should be found in prophetic pastoral care as a spiritual, religious service even if it has and should have in some situations a social component or effect. Pastoral care in her four traditional functions

of healing, sustaining, guiding and reconciling and an ecclesiastical point of view about the role of the church in society has to go from there hand in hand.

Of course, even then there will be moments of confrontation, you cannot avoid them all, but at least this starting point will help us also methodological in finding possibilities of communication and reciprocity

Surely, there is a lot more to say and that is what you are going to do in the next days. So, I'm not here to give you an outline of difficulties and possibilities, or to formulate starting points. What I tried to do was to show you in a few words how the theme of this conference is not just an academic topic, but can be found in daily church life where we have to deal with it.

It is also for that reason, for the benefit of the church, that I started my say wishing you all to have a very interesting and meaningful conference with inspiring contributions and fruitful discussions.

Thank you.

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