The significance of Calvin's anthropology for preaching on ethical themes

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Abstract

In this article the author highlights Calvin's anthropology. A main feature of this anthropology is his dualistic view on man. Calvin was very much influenced by the ancient Greek philosophy, which argued that man had two parts: a superior soul and an inferior body. The author argues that this perception is at odds with a Biblical image of man. According to the Bible no part of man is inferior or superior to any other part of his personhood. The article indicates that a Biblical perspective on anthropology will draw different conclusions in ethics compared to a dualistic perception of the nature of man. A correct appreciation of the anthropology of man is therefore needed to guide decisions in ethics, where the focus is constantly anthropological.

1. THE TOPICALITY OF THE THEME

The comment is frequently made that Reformed preaching is ingenuous and naive. What is meant by this is, amongst other things, that the preaching bears little relation to the existential questions with which human beings have to contend. Why are issues such as abortion, euthanasia, aids, in vitro fertilisation, human rights, impure language, nudity, war, violence, poverty, prosperity, thrift, et cetera not (adequately) addressed in preaching? Are these themes disposed of with the reading of the law? The answer must be No. If preaching is the proclamation of God's will for human life, then it must impinge on the entire spectrum of our lives. This is a necessary implication of preaching, which must have a practical aspect that is relevant to the issues that agitate the human heart (Velema 1989:11).

Preaching about ethical issues is the focus of this contribution. It raises the question of the significance of anthropology for preaching on ethical issues. In order to demarcate the field of study of anthropology, the question is specifically directed to the significance of Calvin's anthropology for this genre of preaching. The emphasis falls on Calvin's understanding of humankind, on account of the fact that his anthropology merges Reformed and Graeco-Scholastic views in this regard.

2. SECTION A: ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

2.1 Features of Calvin's anthropology

Although Calvin broke, to a large extent, with medieval modes of anthropological thinking, the essence of his approach remained Greek and dualistic, deriving specifically from Plato and Augustine (Smit 1991:83). Although he stands in the Reformed tradition of the witness of Scripture, he was not able to break with Scholasticism. Human beings are made up of two parts, namely a soul or spirit and a body (Kotze 1984:17). For him the soul was everything and the body merely a repository for it. In typically dualistic fashion Calvin believed the soul to be transcendent; after all, it came from God. On the other hand, the body is non-transcendent. In contrast to (indeed in opposition to) the celestial soul is the earthly body. For Calvin inferiority and corporality are synonymous. He was convinced that the body was the reformatory / house of correction (ergastulum) or prison (carcer) of the soul. God's image is encountered only in the soul. Genesis 1:26 must be regarded as a key text in Calvin's anthropology. God is spirit and cannot be represented by any corporeal form. Consequently the words 'God's image' cannot relate to the human body (Kotze 1984:46).

'For though the divine glory is displayed in man's outward appearance, it cannot be doubted that the proper seat of the image is the soul' (Calvin 1962:I, 162).

'Hence, although the soul is not the man, there is no absurdity in holding that he is called the image of God in respect of the soul' (Calvin 1962:I, 163-4).

Stellingwerf aptly summarises Calvin's anthropology when he writes:

> Calvin's dualistic view of humankind fails to do justice to the integrity of personhood, is in conflict with what God's Word says about human beings, and leads to false problems and contempt for creation. The doctrine that human beings comprise two parts, an immortal soul and a body in which the soul is incarcerated, is Greek and not biblical in origin. Calvin attempts to prove the immortality of the soul from Holy Scripture by referring to passages where Paul speaks about the immortality that the entire person will receive in the resurrection. That which is bestowed on the entire person in re-creation, Calvin attributes to the soul from creation, with the result that the resurrection of the body is for him of subsidiary importance.
>
> (Stellingwerf 1965:20 — own translation)

This comment may create the impression that Calvin made no positive contribution to a Christian anthropology. Calvin's concept of the seed of religion (*semen religionis*) high-lights the natural point of contact in existence between God and humankind since the fall. This view of Calvin — and, following in his footsteps, of Kuyper — ties in with Reformed thinking. For Calvin and Kuyper, the point of contact between God and humankind is located in the so-called phenomenon of *semen religionis* and *sensus divinitatis*. Here the emphasis falls, on the one hand, on humans as image-bearers of God and, on the other, on the human heart as the focal point of human existence. Kuyper's elucidation of these two concepts is informative:

> But just as creation culminates in humankind, so glorification also finds its fulfilment only in humankind created in the image of God, not because man seeks it but because by means of the semen religionis (seed of religion) God himself planted the only truly religious expression in the heart of human beings alone, God himself makes humans religious by the *sensus divinitatis* (intimation of the Eternal), which he causes to touch the strings of their hearts.
>
> (Kuyper 1959:37; own translation)

Calvin's (1962:I, 37-45) comment that every human being has a sense of Deity and that genuine human knowledge is dependent on God therefore merits particular attention.

2.2 Corrective: Biblical focus on humankind

A biblical view of humankind is not intended to be a scientific and therefore systematic anthropology. The Bible provides the 'raw material' for a biblical view, from which a scientific view of humankind may be constructed (Heyns 1974:69). Regarding human beings, the Bible says that they are created in God's image in order visibly to represent him on earth (Gn 1:26). The wrongful taking of a human life is forbidden (Gn 9:6, Ex 20:13) and God is already involved in our prenatal life (Job 10:8-11, Ps 139:13-16, Jr 2:5). The body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, to be used for God's glory (1 Cor 6:19-20).

In anthropology we are struck by the use of the terms soul and body. Sometimes the concept spirit is used in distinction to soul. At best the concepts of soul and spirit are confusing. Although these concepts are distinguished from one another, the intention is not to view them as three pieces of a puzzle. Even statements to the effect that the body is the prison of the soul are foreign to the Bible. Paul's arguments involving the flesh (*sarx*), the body (*soma*) and the spirit (*pneuma*) are not meant to stress that the

spirit is raised above the body or the flesh. He uses the terms with a bearing on a salvation history — eschatological argument, not to design an anthropology. He wishes to clarify the point that those who live in accordance with God's will are spiritual and those who oppose it live according to the flesh. Therefore these concepts represent two modes of being (Rm 8). The Bible does not know of separate creative acts for soul, spirit and body (thus creationism and traducianism are ruled out). It only knows human beings in the totality of their personal and corporeal functions. Smit (1985:16-17; cf Smit 1992:189) holds that this is best expressed by personality. Personality is heart and bodiliness. A human is a duality of body and heart. Obviously duality indicates no more than a distinction between human inwardness and outwardness. When heart and body can be regarded as an integral unity we can talk about the personhood of a human being. Herein lies the unity of a human being. Human existence is impossible without a religious heart. But, equally, there is no such thing as being human without a body as the vehicle of our being to give expression to the heart. The preferred model for a Christian-Reformed view of personality is that of a duality of heart and corporeality.

Of importance in anthropology is the question of the origin of the soul, although this is an issue that is totally foreign to the Bible. Theologizing on its origin is Greek, rather than biblical. The assumption that the soul becomes sinful only in its embodiment on the part of the parents is purely speculative. Original sin is not physical sin but human sin. The Bible speaks of a human totality, and not of a body with a hierarchy of parts. What the Bible does say is that soul and body form such a unity that the suggestion of a separate origin of the soul is alien to it. From this we must deduce that a human being with a soul and body is created in the moment of conception. God makes use of the reproductive possibilities with which he endued human beings. By his creative act a human being, comprising soul and body, comes into existence at conception (Heyns 1978:124). Therefore it is not so that God's sovereign disposing over all things is compromised when a human becomes a concrete being (soul and body) by means of parents' procreation. The parents' direct action remains dependent on God's actions (Berkouwer 1957:325).

The question relating to the inception of life is also important. There are various points of view regarding the criteria for determining when a new life comes into existence: impregnation, primitive streak, brain function or perception, foetal movement, quickening, viability, et cetera. I find it ethically inadmissible that a wedge is driven between corporeality and personhood. This fails to do justice to the worth that every bearer of God's image has from the beginning (Du Toit 1978:65, 95-96, 1989:102, 104-109; Smit 1985:176; Fonteyn 1991:ii; 6-16). Rather the point of view should prevail that conception is the beginning of human life.

To summarise: Human beings should be acknowledged as human in terms of personality. Man is a dichotomy of soul and body with a religious heart representing the totality of personhood. Human beings are created in the image of God. This image was not lost as a result of the Fall, but is renewed as a result of our adherence to Christ. So we are enabled to be in principle what God intended us to be. The practical outworking of being God's image bearers is that we must visibly represent him on earth.

3. SECTION B: ETHICS IN PREACHING

3.1 Characteristics of ethics in preaching

In defining ethics, Velema (1987:7, 8, 10) says that what is at issue is good and evil, what is permissible and what is impermissible, what may be done and what should not be done. The ethical is directed to God's honour and human welfare. Its essence is therefore the normative assessment of a situation. In preaching as the proclamation of God's Word and Will there is more than enough scope for ethical questions to be raised and normative pronouncements on situations to be made. Exhortation and encouragement should be integral aspects of preaching (Van Rensburg & Kellerman 1992:221). Ethics in preaching must be clearly distinguished from moralistic preaching. The purpose of the latter is to absolutize normativity in spite of the situation, proffering it as the only solution. In preaching the absolutization of moralism always takes place at the expense of the gospel, the Person and work of Jesus Christ, the salvation-history context and the evangelical message (Van Rensburg & Kellerman 1992:216-217). Typical of ethics in preaching will be:

* Ethics is no extraordinary theme for homiletics. Although all Scripture passages have a normative claim on us, we do greater justice to them in thematic preaching than in pericope preaching. This involves a selection of texts, for example Genesis 3:10 (nakedness), the second commandment (imaging Christ), the sixth (Do not commit murder), the seventh (marriage and sexuality), et cetera.

* In the sermon preachers do not become ethicists; but remain the heralds of God's Will for human lives. If a controversial book is published, for example, and a minister wishes to preach about it, he cannot rely on hearsay or what literary scholars say about the book. He will have to study it for himself not only to form a good idea of what it is all about, but also to be able to engage with the issues

raised from God's Word. Anyone who merely reacts to public opinion or on the basis of his own preconceived notions is homiletically dishonest and runs the risk of falsely accusing his neighbour — in contravention of the eighth commandment.

* Ethics in preaching is not a critical review of a problematical situation but the proclamation of God's Will for the life of the believer. The preacher must be careful not to confuse the two. Furthermore, examples from manuals of ethics and the answers offered there may never speak with greater severity than the Word.

* The minister should ensure that the examples referred to are realistic and recognisable, without exceeding the limits of propriety. One example is the use of language. It is unthinkable that swear words should be used in the pulpit. References to nakedness and sex need not be explicit.

* In preaching on ethical themes the hermeneutical rule that everything must be understood in context is most relevant.

* If the requirement for a normative life is that the ethicist must bring an ethically realistic judgement to bear on the full compass of reality, then the requirement for preaching on ethics is that salvation in Christ is of primary importance. By no means does this mean Christocentric preaching. Rather, what is intended is that Christ has redeemed all reality and that this encourages the believer not to shy away from reality but rather to move towards it, proclaiming the Kingship of Christ in all spheres of life. What is also meant is that Christ's saving work transcends this reality and will one day replace it with a new reality.

* Another matter that must receive attention is Christ's forgiveness. As Christ has forgiven us, so the preacher must encourage believers also to forgive those who are anti-normative. For ethics may well serve to make us aware of the greatness of our sin and wretchedness, how we are freed from our sins and their consequences and what sort of life we should live (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 1).

4. SECTION C: IMAGE OF HUMANKIND IN ETHICS

4.1 An exploration of the sixth Commandment

In the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* the text of Exodus 20:13 reads 'You may not wrongfully kill'. Older English translations, such as the Authorised Version, rendered it 'Thou shalt not kill'.

Modern translations, such as *Today's English Version*, have 'You may not commit murder'.

But what precisely is the meaning of the commandment? Exegetically and hermeneutically the following comments may be made:

* Fensham (1984:138) explains that the Hebrew verb *rasah* which occurs only 67 times in the Old Testament, relates to premeditated killing. Although *rasah* is used, for example in Deuteronomy 4:41-43; 19:1-13 and Joshua 20:21, for unintentional killing, closer investigation has brought to light that *rasah* relates to deliberate killing. For death on juridical grounds or in warfare *harag* and *naka* are used. Not all killing is prohibited by the sixth commandment — only the wrongful (unlawful) and therefore unauthorised killing of a human being that has not been commanded by the Lord. What is at issue therefore is killing as murder and not as punishment for the shedding of innocent blood. In this regard it would seem advisable to translate the commandment consistently as 'You may not wrongfully kill' (cf Douma 1986:142, 192-193). The omission of any indication as to whose life is intended, gives the commandment such a wide scope that it also relates to the unborn foetus (Draijer & Geelhoed 1972:54). One may concur with Douma when he says that the sixth commandment is concerned with the protection of human life. Although other forms of life (for example animals and the environment) are not excluded, they do not constitute the focus. This commandment deals with the protection of the image bearer of God. The purpose of the commandment is not only that we should not kill (Gn 9:6) but also that we should not curse (Ja 3:9) a fellow human being created in the image of God. In the sixth commandment the preface to the decalogue plays an important part. The source of life is grace, and therefore life must be used to praise God. Not praise but being in God's image is the criterion for the protection of life. Life is never an end in itself but is directed to the service of God and one's neighbour. Respect for life is the due of God, who is the giver of life (Douma 1986:133-146).

* In *Die nuwe mens onderweg* (1970), Heyns writes that this commandment also relates to the taking of one's own life. Anyone who takes a life robs God. Ending a life is a privilege which God reserves to himself alone. The unambiguous witness of Scripture is not that man must live, but that man may live (Heyns 1970:175, 178, 179, 183, 188). In his *Teologiese Etiek I*, Heyns elaborates on these remarks. Anyone who kills a human being (including himself) violates the image of God. God is the giver of life. Consequently life may not be absolutised, that is detached from God and elevated to the status of an idol. Even less may it be minimalised,

that is detached from God and debased to practically nothing or to very little (Heyns 1982:329-331). Velema (1983:26) too links human life to the image of God. The prohibition of the taking of human life must be understood within this context (Velema 1983:26). This commandment is rooted in the relationship between God and man. Before the creation of man, his task and destiny were determined (Gn 1:26, 28). The coherence between his being created and having a destiny assigned is important. The commandment is not to be regarded as an abstract task distinct from human existence. It is a task that man receives because of the privilege that he alone is created in the image of God. The commandment echoes the destiny of man. Without the commandment, that destiny cannot be attained. So destiny and commandment are tied to each other and mutually determine one another. Velema (1987:55-56) suggests that the commandment is the way by which we may attain our human destiny.

* The intention of the sixth commandment is clear: respect for one's neighbour's life but also for one's own. This must not be understood as an absolute respect for life. Absolute respect for life is only due to the Lord as the Giver of life. Life is a gift from God and must be respected as such. Therefore no-one should show contempt for life or voluntarily forgo life. To do so is to insult the Creator (Naudé 1988:374).

4.2 Comment

Medical ethics, which needs to take account of the sixth commandment, can only do justice to it if the image of man against which the commandment is projected is drawn from the Bible and is faithful to the Bible. It is in this situation that Calvin's image of man is not able to stand the test of Reformed ethics. An anthropology that elevates the soul above the body and that links its conception of what man is to the soul alone can hardly urge that all life should be respected.

Medical interventions in human life would also be difficult to assess ethically as the body is regarded as subordinate to the soul. The impasse is greater: how can one plead for the preservation of life — from prenatal life to life afflicted by dementia and senility — if the body as expression of human personality is of little value? Calvin nowhere recommended abortion or euthanasia on demand, yet his image of man simply does not sustain opposition to such interventions. Clearly a body which has been made subordinate to the soul cannot be treated as a battlefield of human events as long as the soul remains unscathed. Even a body image characterised by under-valuation demands respect and not unwarranted interventions. The problem is that the respect for life that is demanded is appropriate to an over-valued soul but not to an under-valued body —

and this is the height of dualism and contradiction. The respect required by the sixth commandment is not a shared or divided respect. Rather, it is directed to a human being whose religious heart is expressed in his corporeality. These two aspects are in relation to each other, not one above the other. This does not emerge in Calvin's conception of man[1]. Therefore everything Calvin says regarding respect for man will have to be critically examined.

4.3 Application: Psalm 139:13-16 and Job 10:9-12

Both pericopes deal with the creation of man and God's pre-natal involvement in it. The authors had no sonar scans at their disposal, only the eye of faith that could penetrate the uterus of life. The metaphors used here to describe the creation of man indicate an intimate involvement with an embryo which is a body and soul from the moment of its conception, a personality with a religious heart. At no stage is there any speculation about the soul being elevated above the body in the process of formation. There is no distinction between the human status of an embryo and a human being. Its status as a human being is not an interim status until it can prove itself worthy of being a human being. In terms of personhood an embryo is as fully human as any other human being. Procreation must be viewed holistically. With reference to Psalm 139 and Jeremiah 1:5, one could speak of a mysterious involvement of God at every stage of embryonic development. This compels us to conclude that the handiwork of God is to be respected in all circumstances; that no evil may be contrived against it; and that human beings are always to be respected and valued as human beings.

End Note

[1] Kotze (1984:98) draws attention to the development in Calvin's view of the body. In the 1536 edition of the Institutes he still calls the body the carcer of the soul. In the 1559 edition the body is no longer called the carcer, although he still refers to it as the ergastulum.

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