

Bishop Committee Report

April 4, 2012

God continues to demonstrate his faithfulness in providing for those who love him and are faithful to his call to surrender and obedience. This past year you have again shown support and patience toward this committee as we make an attempt to identify and address pertinent issues of our day. We find it encouraging that there is much goodwill among us in spite of the differences that exist. Our intention is to focus on issues that put the souls we shepherd at risk of the enemy's destructive efforts, or cause divisions among the churches of the constituency. Your ongoing comments and input help give us perspective on your concerns as well as ideas on how to constructively work on them.

At the Ministers Meetings of 2011 we had proposed and received your support to formulate a Mission Statement that represents things that we believe do not change. We asked five brothers Elmer Glick, Marvin Kauffman, John U. Lapp, Bobby Miller, and Ronald Miller to assist in its writing. When we looked at what all should be included in such a statement it became apparent that it would need to become more of a Statement of Faith than a concise Mission Statement. Our hope is to start with a document that we can gather around. We were not intending with this writing, to provide a comprehensive description of who we are. We would appreciate your evaluation of this statement in its current form.

We acknowledge that much more could be said about what defines us. Some of these things could be practical in nature others philosophical, but it did not seem logical to begin with things that have changed over time. We are open to adding to what has been written as it represents what we truly stand for. We believe it is safe to assume that every pastor here is deeply concerned about the destiny of those he shepherds. Most of us probably wish we could somehow spell out boundaries for our people that would be safe and leave the future of our churches predictable. At the same time we are aware that we ourselves have helped or led out in changes, some practical and others philosophical in nature. The burden then rests on each one of us to lead in such a way so that each change we make honors and builds on the foundation that has been laid, Jesus Christ the righteous.

How to lead in such a way as to provide protection for the flock of God in practical ways, and yet inspire the conscience of each individual to live a life above reproach is an honorable goal we all aspire to. The urge to easily fix boundaries as a way of containing a given problem certainly has merit. It is important, however, that we go beyond that and inspire in the heart of our flock a conscience that enhances each person's ability to receive and believe the mandate to live a life of holiness and sanctification. It is easy to target the use of radio, television and the internet as contributing to this world's moral decay. They certainly have greatly increased the accessibility to a morally corrupt mindset and worldview. We would agree that the use of radio and television have been defining factors in the history of our constituency. Also that the net effect of these two mediums have not proven themselves friendly to wholesome thought and Christian growth. While the radio and T.V. are convenient targets because they are so recognizable, it is unclear that to merely draw a line around them will serve us the best. We urge this body to go beyond and develop a conscience against the mind set that trivializes the harm that most of the content of these two mediums cause. Unless we are able to do that, it is highly unlikely that our measured acceptance of internet use will stand the test of time.

Over the past several years there has been considerable discussion on matters of identity among ministers of this constituency. This committee looked at the question two years ago by surveying the ministers of the constituency. There was significant interest in some defining lines that would serve as a guide for those seeking fellowship with us. More recently we as a committee made an effort to contact the majority of the bishops to get a sense for the value each one would place on such a definition. The majority of those surveyed would wish for a clearer understanding of what defines this constituency. There were constructive comments that focused both on what we are and what we are not. We invited suggestions as to what would be defining marks of our people. The suggestions included a variety of ideas. Among the most frequently mentioned were the beard, the women's veiling, cape dresses, modesty, the non-use of the radio and television. There was also a good bit of uncertainty as to how we would implement such a defining line while maintaining our current respect for congregational autonomy. We also invited each one to evaluate their congregation's handling in general of technological developments of our day. Most admitted some uncertainty – recognizing that there is work to be done.

Another question was what are ways we can make it easier for each other? Much of what we heard was a desire for a general respect for each other and remembering that our actions do reach into other churches. There was some interest, as well; that the Bishop committee would be more active in highlighting concerns and showing ways of working through the harder issues we face. While the answers we received may not provide us with a lot of new ways of working, it was a helpful exercise in getting a current perspective and some guidance for the future.

We believe it is imperative that we recognize the dangers we face from the efforts of the world to reshape our thinking. We call on each one of us to examine the way we lead our flock and the dangers we may unwittingly expose them to. Let us recognize the efforts of the enemy for what they are, remembering that he uses every imaginable source to destroy us, including our own lusts. Let us acknowledge the harmful effects of the internet, radio, and television and find ways to protect ourselves and the flock from their harmful influence. Where that means excluding their use, or where that means a close accountability let us step up and be the shepherd we've been called to be.

Based on the above mentioned contact with Bishops, our sense is that the sanctioned use of the radio continues to be seen by the large majority of this gathering as a defining issue. We urge great caution in guiding our congregations in decisions on these matters remembering that to willingly allow its use may put us at cross purposes with the majority of our brothers in this group. Where radio use has been sanctioned by design or default, we believe, that as in the case of the internet, safeguards need to be administered to help our people recognize and avoid the inherent dangers. To our knowledge there is no filter for radio and television except a pure heart. Where we sense that a pure heart is not the motivation for the use of any form of media, it behooves us as under shepherds to help our brother recognize and deal with the deceitfulness of his heart.

How do we best move forward in bringing things to some resolution with regard to the things that challenge our unity? It seems to us that if we are to maintain the standard of holiness and devotion that reflects the new life we profess, there must be a deepening willingness on the congregational level to address difficult questions. If we lose the right to enter the lives of our brothers in areas of concern on a personal level, parameters set by the congregation or the constituency will have little meaning. Is not the time ripe for us as pastors to engage the members of our flock in serious dialog about matters of personal holiness? Current and future generations will continue to want to understand why we set defining lines where we do. We must face matters of relevance unapologetically in the face of the unrelenting bombardment of ideologies through what seems to be appropriate media, not to mention the huge increase of social networking that is so pervasive.

When it comes to addressing areas of need within our churches it seems important that our perspectives are guided by the following considerations;

1. That we recognize that the world we live in today differs from the world in earlier generations in that we are confronted with philosophies, ideas, and world views that were not nearly as prevalent back then.
2. That we acknowledge that the way we live must spring out of a renewed mind that transforms the way we think, the words we speak, and the things we do.
3. That we help those under our care to think with a renewed mind that equips them to meet the philosophies of our day from a biblical point of view lest they fall into the snares of the devil.
4. That unless we provide the current generation with the tools they need to combat today's influences, they will be ill-equipped to perpetuate the biblical values we consider essential in the next generation.

May we summarize with the words of the apostle Paul, first from Galatians 5:13 "For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another." and then from Titus 2:11 "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared unto all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ."

The Bishop Committee,

David Yoder, Chairman, John U. Lapp, Philip Miller, Ivan Beachy, Laban Kaufman