

Sewell, K C 1995 — The Idea of a Free Christian University

Instituut vir Reformatoriese Studies, Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir Christelike Hoër Onderwys. 17 Pages. Price: Unknown

Reviewer: Prof P S Dreyer

Sewell's theme is the idea of a (1) *free* (2) *Christian* (3) *university*. In his exposition he shows himself as a true disciple of the philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd and the theology of Abraham Kuyper, both well known in South Africa over a period of more than half a century. Most of what he writes is therefore nothing new.

1. Following Kuyper (whom he puts on a par with Luther and Wesley, p 6) Sewell considers a *free* university as one directly subject to Jesus Christ and not subservient to church, state, industry, agri-

business or commerce (p 8). Only such a university is free, and this is also the God-given freedom of the scientist and scholar (p 10), although governments, churches and business should all support the free Christian university (p 9).

This idea may be appreciated as an ideal situation, a type of utopia. In practice no church will allow its clergy to be trained at a university where the church has no say in the training, and no institution (state, business, whatever) will donate large sums of money to a university without having some kind of say in the university and without expecting results in the form of people trained for service of some sort in the community. It is an historical fact that in modern times practically all scientific research has been done and progress made as a result of initiatives and funding mostly by the state but also by business.

2. 'The university, if it is to be authentically Christian, must believably embrace the Word of God written in the scriptures' (p 10). 'Only the scriptures teach us that it is Christ who is the risen Redeemer and Renewer of our life in its entirety, and therefore also of all our science and scholarship' (p 10-11). 'To be Christian the university must profess and believe' (11).

Of course all Christians embrace the Word of God believably and accept Christ as the risen Redeemer and Renewer of our whole life, but what is a redeemed and renewed science? How does a university believe and accept and profess Christ? By a declaration of the University Council? Or by a clause in its constitution? And who accepts the declaration or clause as correct and sufficient? And who supervises the university in its obedience to this declaration of faith? And who disciplines it, if necessary? Who, if not the church? Which church? One of the fundamental mistakes of Neo-Calvinist philosophy (and theology) is to objectify faith in Christ as an attribute of a body or object or institution like a university. Only human beings can believe in Christ, confess their faith and think accordingly, all in communion with their church, as a result of the preaching of the Gospel, and disciplined by the church.

3. 'A Christian university is a community of teaching, learning, research and reflection that in its life and structure recognise the unity and diversity of things in Christ Science and scholarship along with every other facet of human activity, unfolds as the service of either the only true God or of an idol' (p 13).

Obviously (3) follows from (2), and just as obviously the objections against (2) obtain also against (3). To this I wish to add the consideration that, according to the Bible and to Calvin, faith in Christ, the renewal of our lives and a life in the service of the Lord is the work of the Holy Spirit. Must we assume that according to Sewell truly scientific work can only be done by scientists who have received the Spirit of the Lord? Secondly, in the line of Sewell's argument one would expect Christian sciences in a Christian university. What is the difference between science on the one hand and *Christian* or *atheistic* or *liberal* or *communist* or *Buddhist* science on the other hand? Of course there are differences in the view of life and the world, in political propaganda and private agendas, but are there different mathematics or sociologies or geologies or whatever? The answer in South Africa is no. Christian science in South Africa means professing to certain religious beliefs, using a few typical clichés, writing in the introduction of one's doctoral thesis about the absolute necessity of a Christian science, having a few phobias (like evolution), and for the rest doing good quality scientific work in the best tradition and idiom of the scientific world.

Finally, what we need are not Christian universities or sciences or parliaments or whatever; what we need as an urgent necessity are Christians, firm believers in Jesus Christ our Redeemer, Christians who are scientists, politicians, businessmen, believers in all walks of life, people ready not only to profess Christ, but also to stand up and be counted as Christians.