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J.M. Batteau

Editorial

"Scripture must be our fortress and our weapon in the spiritual battle we have to fight. (...) We must be part of the 'army of the Lord,' fighting the insidious influence of liberal theology. (...) It is an expression of the rebellious City of man, disguised as Christian theology." Here I quote my own words in the article in this issue of Lux Mundi on "The Authority and Special Character of the Bible."

Overreaction?

To some readers, these words may seem to be an overreaction. Is it not so that liberal theology, begun in the 18th century in Germany, with as a leading representative, F.D.E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834), has brought at least some good into theology? Isn't liberalism a sincere effort to be "honest" about the historical problems we face when we read the Bible, trying to find the core of God's enduring message in this all-too-human book?

My experience

Having grown up in a liberal Episcopal church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A., in the 1950's, I know from experience what liberal preaching and church life are like. At that time I heard about and saw commitment to social justice, and to following Jesus as a compassionate human being. In themselves, praiseworthy things, certainly. But, however sincere the ministers were who preached this kind of message, what I heard was, unfortunately, far less than the Gospel of the Scriptures. It was in essence a kind of humanism using religious language. The liberal German theologian, Paul Tillich, at that time a Professor at Harvard, was in those days a leading theologian who influenced many deeply (and my parents knew him personally).

In church, in Cambridge in the 1950's, I never heard about the need for personal faith in Christ as one's Savior in order to be saved from the wrath of God. I did not hear about Jesus's resurrection as a real, historical fact. I did not hear about His coming again to judge the living and the dead. Or rather, we recited the Apostles' Creed in church services, but when this creed was reflected upon in sermons or lectures, it was essentially "demythologized" as being Christian faith expressed in words we might "sing," but could not really "say," as one Episcopal Bishop put it. Jesus, God and man, born of a virgin? No, this was no longer believable for modern man, it was claimed.

Kuyper's experience

Abraham Kuyper, the great Dutch theologian of the 19th and early 20th century, made a similar journey from liberalism to orthodoxy long before I did. He too was raised on (moderate) liberal theology, and, as a student in Leyden in the 1850's, went even farther, at one point applauding with the rest of his fellow students when a lecturing Professor openly denied Jesus' historical resurrection from the dead.

Kuyper's conversion started at his first pastorate in the town of Beesd in the 1860's. In a biography of Kuyper of 2006, Jeroen Koch questions the trustworthiness of Kuyper's account of his conversion in these and the following years. Yet it is clear that by the 1870's, Kuyper was fully committed to the historicity of Jesus' resurrection and to the full trustworthiness of Scripture as God's infallible Word.
Kuyper was thereafter a vigorous foe of all forms of liberalism, whether moderate or radical. His founding of the Free University in 1880 was openly based on an uncompromising commitment to Christian orthodoxy, and a rejection of all liberal views.

Sadly, in 2013, this heritage of the Free University has been so watered down, that even the theology department is not consistently committed to the orthodoxy which Kuyper envisaged as being the foundation of all the faculties of the university. So-called Higher Critical methods in studying the Old and New Testaments are the rule there, although, thankfully, in Systematic Theology there are voices expressing commitment to orthodox positions.

No exaggeration

It is encouraging to me to be a part of the historical company of Christian ministers, theologians, and simple believers who have not backed down when liberal views have tried to infiltrate the church. It is not an exaggeration to continue to categorically reject theological liberalism, in all its forms. Abraham Kuyper, Klaas Schilder (1890-1952), J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937), Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987), and many others, are still invaluable allies in the struggle of our day to remain faithful to the living God, who has given us His Word to be the unerring source of true faith for the true church until the Lord Jesus returns in glory. ■

A.J. de Visser

The Mission of God by C.J.H. Wright (2)

In this article we continue our review of Christopher J.H. Wright's book *The Mission of God*.[1] I will first mention some positive aspects of the book and then move on to highlight a number of concerns.

Positives

In evaluation, let us begin by noting a number of positives. The best part of *The Mission of God*, in my opinion, is Part 2 which is entitled 'The God of Mission.' This part contains three good chapters. The first chapter is a defense of Biblical monotheism. The second chapter is a defense of Jesus Christ as the unique Saviour of mankind. Wright points out that the Bible really comes with one message in this regard: "The YHWH-centered monotheism of the Old Testament became the Jesus-centered monotheism of the New Testament." (126) The third chapter explains how the Bible confronts idolatry in its many forms, whether ancient or modern. Quote: "Although gods and idols are *something* in the world, they are *nothing* in comparison to the living God." (187, italics as in original)

Another strength of Wright's book is his explanation of important aspects and institutions of the old covenant, such as the calling of Israel among the nations and the Year of Jubilee. Even though I do not agree with the missiological implications which Wright draws from such passages, one can learn much from his exegetical work. The same applies to his discussion of passages from the psalms and the prophets which speak prophetically about the nations seeing the light, learning the law of God, assembling before his throne (230-243).

For readers who do not have the previous article within reach, here are the five key aspects of the book again: **(1)** First and foremost, mission work is God's work. **(2)** Mission work focuses on every need in this fallen world, whether spiritual, social, economic or environmental. Thus, mission work includes evangelism, social and political action, and care of the environment. **(3)** Mission work is more than being sent out with a message. It is also simply being a blessing to your society and the world. **(4)** Old Testament motifs such as the Exodus and the Jubilee have enduring significance as paradigms for mission today. **(5)** The Bible should be interpreted from a missional perspective.

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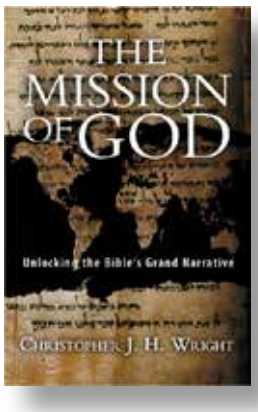
Use of OT passages

Having mentioned that Wright's focus on the Old Testament passages is one of the strong aspects of the book, I also need to say that there are significant concerns with how he uses the Old Testament. The first concern is that *his exegesis of Old Testament passages seems to be influenced by his desire to read holistic mission into the text*. In order to illustrate this, let us take another look at what Wright does with Genesis 12:1-3. While everyone agrees that the call of Abram is a pivotal moment in God's plan of redemptive history, there are different interpretations regarding the question what is expected of Abram. To what extent is he expected to be involved in the life of the neighbouring tribes and towns? Is he expected to speak to his neighbours about God? Is he expected to promote justice and peace in Canaan? Or is he expected to live in relative isolation from his neighbours?

Wright argues that Abram is commissioned to mediate God's blessings to the nations. Much of his argument is based on the translation of the phrase "...and you will be a blessing." While most translations take this as indicating the result or purpose of Abram's journey to the promised land ("so that you will be a blessing"), Wright prefers to take it as a distinct command: "Be a blessing." As we mentioned in the previous article, he even suggests that it would be entirely appropriate to take Genesis 12:1-3 as "the Great Commission" in the Bible (p. 214).
Eckhard J. Schnabel, in his book *Early Christian Mission* (2004), rejects the suggestion that Abraham was called to actively mediate God's blessing to neighbouring nations. He interprets Gen. 12:1-3 as follows: "The blessing for the nations is a promise, not a command. Abraham does not receive an assignment to carry YHWH's blessing to the nations; rather, the nations are promised divine blessing if and when they see Abraham's faith in YHWH and if and when they establish contact with his descendants."[2] This is confirmed in the ensuing chapters of the book of Genesis. Those who are well disposed toward Abraham and his descendants fare well (Melchizedek, Abimelech), while those who oppose him or his descendants are punished.
The promise that Abraham and his descendants will be a blessing to the nations is repeated several



times in the book of Genesis (Gen. 18:18; 22:18, 26:4; 28:14). Obviously, it is an important aspect of God's plan of redemption for the world. At the same time, the emphasis is not on the people of Israel actively 'spreading the blessings' to the other nations. Rather, the emphasis is that God's people are called to live in covenantal obedience and that this will bring blessing not just to God's own people but also to the entire world. Ultimately, it will be through the great descendant of Abraham, the Lord Jesus Christ, that the nations will be blessed.

A related question is: If Abram was called to 'be a blessing' to the nations around him – as Wright suggests – what form was that calling supposed to take practically? Was Abram expected to evangelize his neighbours? Or was he expected to help the poor and fight against injustice? A key passage for Wright in this regard is Genesis 18, Abraham's plea for Sodom, and especially the Lord's words in verse 19: "I have chosen him that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him." Focusing especially on the phrase "to do what is right and just" (or, more literally, "to do righteousness and justice"), Wright claims that the Lord expected Abraham "to do righteousness and justice for the oppressed and against the oppressor" (367). In the case of Sodom and Gomorrah this meant that the Lord wanted Abraham to be concerned "about the suffering of the oppressed in the region at the hands of these cities." (367) The weakness in Wright's argument is that the text does not support what he is trying to prove. The text says that Abraham was expected to teach *his children and his household* to do righteousness and justice. No reference is made to teaching *the nations*.
Moreover, Wright's suggestion that Abraham was concerned about the suffering of the oppressed in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, is not supported by the evidence in Genesis 18 and 19. The evil that is singled out in those chapters is not social injustice but rather moral decline and perversion, evidenced by the fact that the men of the city are addicted to sodomy. In the New Testament we read that Abram's nephew Lot, apparently the only righteous man in the city, was distressed because of "the filthy lives of lawless men" in Sodom (2 Peter 2:7).
In conclusion, Wright's explanation of Genesis 12:1-3 illustrates the problem that he is trying to find a holistic view of mission in the Old Testament.

NT evidence lacking

A second concern regarding Wright's use of the Old Testament is that *he does not sufficiently ask the question whether implications drawn from the Old Testament are supported by evidence from the New Testament*. For example, when Wright says that the Exodus and the Jubilee are paradigmatic and highly repeatable models for the way God wishes to act in the world (275, 300), he fails to entertain the question whether such claims are actually being backed up by the New Testament. Take the Jubilee: Does the New Testament really indicate that the Jubilee is a paradigmatic and repeatable model for mission work in the world today? Wright would have a hard time to convince his readers that this is the case. But he does not even raise the question. Something similar could be said about the Exodus. Wright claims that "the rest of the Bible clearly takes it as paradigmatic" (275) but he does not offer any Biblical proof for this statement. The same applies to the claim made in the next paragraph: "The inevitable outcome surely is that *exodus-shaped redemption demands exodus-shaped mission."* (275, italics as in original) In other words: Wright is saying that just like the Exodus had political, economic, social and spiritual dimensions, so our redemption in Christ has political, economic, social and spiritual dimensions. It sounds powerful. Wright says it is 'inevitable.' But does the New Testament actually support this conclusion? The question comes up what Wright does with passages such as Colossians 1:14 and Ephesians 1:7 where redemption in Christ is described in terms of forgiveness of sins.[3] One would have expected Wright to discuss such passages and then attempt to prove that even though the apostle mentions forgiveness of sins, the New Testament actually supports a broader understanding of redemption. Now that Wright fails to do so, it reinforces the impression that the 'exodus-shaped' understanding of mission which Wright promotes does not flow from Biblical passages but rather from his own desire to understand mission that way. ■

In the third and last article of this series will mention a few more concerns.

Notes:

1 Christopher J.H. Wright, The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative. IVP, 2006.
2 Eckhard J. Schnabel, Early Christian Mission, Volume 1 (IVP, 2004), 63.
3 For this point I am indebted to Bobby Jamieson's excellent review of Wright's subsequent book The Mission of God's People at www.9marks.org.

J.M. Batteau

The Authority and Special Character of the Bible

The historic Confessions of the church are a good place to begin when we talk about the authority and the special character of the Bible.[1]

We, as Christians, are not living in an historical vacuum, but are part of a long tradition of church history. To say this in an Augustinian way, we are citizens of the City of God, heading for a glorious climax of history when the Lord Jesus appears at His Second Coming. In the meantime we are engaged in the all-absorbing spiritual battle against Satan and his hosts, and against the rebellious City of man, called to "take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the *word of God*" (the *rema theou*) (Ephesians 6:17). And we do this as a Confessing Church, united spiritually to Peter when he *confessed* (spoke publically) that Jesus "is the Christ, the Son of the living God!" (Matthew 16:17).

The early Confessions

As Reformed Churches in the world, we have *early Confessions,* dating from the early church. In the Belgic Confession of 1561 we say that we "willingly receive the three creeds, of the Apostles, of Nicea, and of Athanasius." To be more specific, these are creeds recognized officially by the historic Western church. The Eastern Orthodox churches recognize and generally admire the Apostles' Creed and the Athanasian Creed, but of these three they hold officially only to the Nicene Creed.

While the Apostles' Creed does not mention Scripture directly, every statement clearly *comes from* Scripture: "I believe in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." Or in the Latin original: "*Credo in Deum Patrem omnipotentem*." This is an echo of many Scripture verses. Think of the expression "God the Father." In Isaiah 63:16 we read: "You, O LORD, are our Father" (NKJV) (Hebrew: "*attah YHWH abinu*"). Think of the next phrase: "Creator of heaven and earth." In Latin: "*Creator(em) coeli et terrae*." This is another echo of many texts in the Bible, starting with the very first: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). And so on throughout this creed. The Apostles' Creed is totally derived from the revelation in Scripture.

The Nicene Creed speaks more explicitly about Scripture. We read there, "And we believe in the Holy Spirit… *who spoke through the prophets.*" The original Greek has here: "*to lalesan dia toon profeetoon*". We can see the Nicene Creed as an elaboration of shorter, baptismal creeds, similar to the Apostles' Creed. Here it is said explicitly that the Holy Spirit "spoke through the prophets." And by this is meant not only the prophets of the Old Testament, like Isaiah, but all those who as prophets were used by God to speak His words, which were eventually written down as Holy Scripture. The Bible, according to the Nicene Creed, has been spoken by God's prophets, is now written down, and still is God the Holy Spirit's Word to the world.

The Athanasian Creed, like the Apostles' Creed, does not refer to Scripture directly. But every statement is thoroughly based on what Scripture says, about God, and about the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a confession of "the catholic faith," in Latin, the "*fides catholica*." That does not mean the Roman Catholic church, but means the church spread throughout the whole world, united in faith in the Trinity and in the divinity and humanity of Christ. Here too, Scripture is the source of what is confessed. Although the word "trinity" (Latin "*Trinitas*"), is not found in the Bible, the *concept* of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is very much present. Think of John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God": *en archee een ho logos, kai ho logos een pros ton theon, kai theos een ho logos*". This proves the full Godhood of Jesus: the Word was (and remains!) God. Other texts in the Bible demonstrate the full divinity of the Holy Spirit. So the Athanasian Creed, in confessing faith in God as Trinity, is doing nothing other than putting in clear words what the Bible reveals about God in Himself.

The Belgic Confession

When we look at the three Confessions of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands, we discover

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that the Articles on Scripture are much more elaborate. In particular, the Belgic Confession, is the most extensive in confessing the authority and purpose of the Bible.

The Belgic Confession does this in Articles 2 to 7 (I use the English version of the Canadian Reformed Churches):
Article 2 says that God has revealed Himself "by the creation, preservation and government of the universe." In the original French of Guido de Bres, the French-speaking Belgian author: *"Par la creation, conservation, et gouvernement du monde universel."* "Second, He makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word as far as is necessary for us in this life, to His glory and our salvation." *(«Secondement, il se donne à cognoistre à nous plus manifestement par sa saincte et divine parole; voire autant pleinement, qu'il nous est de besoin en ceste vie pour sa gloire, et le salut des siens.»)*
Here we see that God's revelation in nature is complemented and increased, as far as content, by the written Word, the Bible, which is given to save us, to the glory of God. Here we see the special character of the Bible. It is not a book with a lot of interesting information, like a Guiness Book of Records, but a book with a saving purpose in combination with giving glory to God.

In the rest of the articles of the Belgic Confession we confess the following about the Bible:
Art. 3: It is the Word of God, committed to writing by God Himself through his human servants. As such it is "holy and divine Scriptures." *(«Escritures Sainctes et divines»).*
Art. 4: A list of the canonical books, that is those books which we receive as inspired by the Holy Spirit (excluding the Apocrypha).
Art. 5: "The authority of Holy Scripture." Here it is appropriate to cite the entire text: "We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith. We believe without any doubt all things contained in them ("*et indubitable (nous) croyons toutes choses qui sont continues en iceux*"), not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but especially because the Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts that they are from God, and also because they contain the evidence of this in themselves; for even the blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are being fulfilled."
Art. 6: "The Difference between the Canonical and Apocryphal Books." Here it is said that we can learn from the apocryphal books, but they do not have the same "power and authority" *("force et virtu")* as the canonical books.
Art. 7, "The Sufficiency of Holy Scripture." "We believe that the Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe in order to be saved *("doit croire pour estre sauvé")* is sufficiently taught *("suffisament enseigné")* therein.... It is therefore unlawful for any one, even for an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in Holy Scripture... it is evident that the doctrine thereof is most perfect and complete in all respects" *("... la doctrine est tresparfaitte et accomplie en toutes sortes")*... We may not consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with the divine Scriptures; nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God, since the truth is above all; for all men are of themselves liars, and only a breath (Ps. 62:9). We therefore reject with all our heart whatever does not agree with this infallible rule ("*ceste reigle infallible*"), as the apostles have taught us: Test the spirits to see whether they are from God (1 John 4:1). Likewise: If any one comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him (2 John 1:10)."

Here in these articles we see the Belgic Confession confessing the faith of the Reformed Churches in the unique *authority* of the inspired, infallible (in the sense of always totally true and reliable!) Scriptures, combined with affirming their *soteriological purpose*: "to His glory and *for our salvation*" ("*le salut des siens*"Art. 2). Although the Bible speaks authoritatively on all that it speaks, including minute historical details and geographical matters, we see that all those details ultimately are related to the saving purpose of Scripture: to bring us to a *saving faith* in the Lord Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit, *to the glory of God*, Father, Son, and Spirit. This remains the "scopus," the aim of the Bible. The Scripture doesn't want to satisfy our curiosity, it wants to save us from an eternal hell, and glorify God in the process! If we hold these two matters together, the authority and the purpose of the Bible, then we are confessing the Word as the church always has wanted us to confess!

The Westminster Confession

It is striking that all orthodox Protestant Confessions since the Reformation, Lutheran, Reformed, and including the Reformed Baptist

Confessions, have uniformly echoed these convictions expressed in the Belgic Confession. That is certainly true of the Westminster Confession (I use the version used by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.):

"Chapter 1: Of the Holy Scripture

1. Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.
2. Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testaments, which are these: (Here follows the list of the canonical books) All which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life.

..

4. The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.
5. We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God: yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.
6. The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word...

...

8. The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical; so as, in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal unto them...
9. The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.
10. The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture."

In the Westminster Confession we see the same reverence for the divine, incontestable *authority* of Scripture ("the supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined"), with its *saving purpose* connected *to giving God all the glory* (Paragraph 5: "the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation"; Paragraph 8: "(that they) through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope").
The Westminster Confession and the Belgic Confession unite in praising God for giving us His inerrant Word, which constantly leads us to the Lord Jesus Christ, and enables us, by the sovereign grace of God, and through the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit, to embrace Him in faith as He is offered to us in the Gospel. Praise God for His Word!

Theology since the Reformation

In the course of church history since the Reformation, this attitude and expression of faith with the respect to the Bible, has typified those orthodox Reformed churches which have desired to remain *confessional* churches.
However, since the Enlightenment of the 18th century, liberal theology, that is subtly unbelieving theology, has penetrated the Protestant churches of the world. This is evident in the circles of the World Council of Churches, where officially the churches are bound to faith in Jesus "as God and Savior," but in practice easily diverge from that confession without any problems. This is so because the Bible is no longer seen as God's inspired, inerrant Word. Princeton Seminary, in the U.S., has a mission statement that says that it "receives the Bible critically." This means that the views of Higher Criticism, which question the historicity of the Bible at many points, are held to. The Bible is for Princeton Seminary not God's Word, but man's word about God.

Infiltration of liberal theology

And unfortunately, such Higher Criticism is slowly infiltrating our orthodox Reformed circles. The sad case of Dr. Peter Enns, former Professor of Old Testament at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, is a case in point. He was eventually forced to leave, a couple of years ago, having written a book which *questions* the historical reliability of the Bible. Now he has gone further, and *denies the* historicity of important sections of the Old Testament.
In The Netherlands, there are certain scholars in what have been traditionally orthodox Reformed churches who are questioning the historicity of certain events in the Old Testament. And there are scholars in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands, still connected with the orthodox Reformed Union (Gereformeerde Bond), such as Dr. H. de Leede, who deny the historicity of Adam. Just a few examples, but enough to show us that the battle for and around the Bible is not finished.
Spiritual warfare

This is so because we live in the midst of the spiritual warfare described in Ephesians 6:12: "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, *against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places*." *(…pros ta pneumatika tees poneerias en tois epouraniois).* Satan and his hosts want to destroy the church, using human citizens in the City of man, and want to undermine as much as they can the authority and saving effect of the Word of God. Paul expresses his worry in 2 Corinthians 11:3 about the Corinthians: "But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ." He warns them of preachers who come in the name of Jesus, but preach another Jesus than the real one, and a different Gospel than the one that Paul had preached (vs. 4).
That means that the Scripture must be our fortress and our *weapon* in the *spiritual* battle we have to fight. If we are to remain Confessional Churches, we must fight the spiritual fight. We must be part of the "army of the Lord," fighting the insidious influence of liberal theology, among other dangerous movements, wherever it raises its ugly head. It is an expression of the rebellious City of man, disguised as Christian theology.

The Bible: our authority and saving guide

Illuminated and empowered by our Confessions, seeking to understand, proclaim, and apply the Scriptures to all of life, let us ask God's help in continuing to be the City of God here on earth, looking forward to the coming of our Lord Jesus in glory.

Note:

1 *A lecture given at various Korean Seminaries on his trip to South Korea in the Fall of 2012*

A. Versluis

Show them no mercy (2)[1]

Discussions about violence in the media will sometimes turn to the Old Testament. "The Bible too incites hatred", people will say, pointing to God's command to wipe out the Canaanite peoples. May people draw on such passages from the Old Testament, to justify violence in the present time? And how do you, as a Christian, deal with such a terrible command? [1]

Does this command to wipe out the Canaanites excuse acts of wholesale violence? This accusation is often heard. The philosopher Paul Cliteur is one such accuser. He claims that monotheistic religions are by definition intolerant.[2] In his view, the Old Testament also contains numerous utterances that lend legitimacy to acts of violence.

A call to violence?

The charge that the Bible lends support to acts of violence is understandable. For sadly, it is true that throughout history people have justified their oppression or destruction of other peoples by appealing to this command. We think of the extermination of native peoples in North America and the oppression of the black population in South Africa. The fact that we reject such appeals to Scripture does not negate the fact that they have occurred.

At the same time, the conclusion cannot be upheld that Deuteronomy 7 and similar passages justify the use of violence. After all, the Christian church and Christian theology do not read these passages in isolation. They have regard for their canonical and redemptive-historical context.

There are four reasons why attempts to justify violence on the basis of this command to destroy the Canaanites are entirely illegitimate:

First, the Old Testament command to wipe out the Canaanite peoples was restricted to the time of the occupation of Canaan. It was not repeated once the people of Israel had settled in the land. It is true that the Israelites were continually warned not to follow the wickedness of the Canaanites, but these warnings were not again linked to a command to destroy them. In the course of time, the Canaanites were gradually absorbed into the people of Israel.

Second, this command to destroy is confined exclusively to the Canaanite nations. The attitude Israel must take in relation to other nations is quite different. Israel may not destroy these neighbouring peoples, and their territories are to be respected. Strangers are to be treated with kindness. From all this it is clear that the Canaanites were very much an exception.

Third, the position of Gentile nations has undergone a radical change in the New Testament. The message of God's salvation now goes out to all nations; now, Gentiles too come to share fully in this salvation. In the New Testament, the judgement of God no longer strikes specific nations that are punished as a whole. This alone shows that the command to destroy any nation can no longer be applied to our time.

Fourth, the New Testament teaches much more clearly than the Old that the judgements of God and their execution are to be left in the hands of God. Moreover, God´s great judgement is postponed to the final judgement. While in the Old Testament, the people of God were called upon to use violence, this no longer happens in the New Testament. The warfare Christians are called to is a spiritual warfare, and it is fought with a spiritual armoury. The Kingdom of God cannot be realized by means of human violence.

These considerations lead to the conclusion that any appeals to this command to wipe out the Canaanites in order to justify acts of violence in the present are to be utterly rejected. Since the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is impossible that the people of God might, at any time in history, be called upon to put other peoples to death.

No 'solution'

I would like to address one more question: How are we, as Christians, to deal with this command of God to wipe out the Canaanite peoples? I cannot dismiss this command as a wrong human interpretation, as has often been suggested. For then it would not have come from God: it would have been an unjustified human conclusion. This command is too closely bound up with the revelation of God in the entire Old and New Testaments for that to be true. True, this command was never repeated, but nowhere is there a denial that it was once actually expressed. Nor does the New Testament ever in any way condemn this destruction of the Canaanites.

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Besides, the Lord Jesus Himself often speaks about the judgement of God, and of eternal condemnation. In this specific situation, in this phase of the history of salvation, the utter destruction of the Canaanite peoples was apparently the will of God.
I read the command of God to wipe out the Canaanites as a part of the way that God has gone in history. It shows that God, in His holy wrath, can come with an all-destroying judgement upon wickedness. But that can never be separated from His love and mercy. The way of God in history is inseparably joined to His election, and to His judgements over His own people and His own Son.

The fact remains: this is a dreadful command. I cannot fully understand why, in that context, this was evidently the will of God. Why God wanted one nation to be wiped out, and why He chose another, a nation that was no better, a nation that God more than once came to the point of destroying. Clearly, God's own people deserved the same judgement, but it was saved nonetheless. The only explanation given for this is God's sovereign and inexplicable love (Deuteronomy 7:7-8).
Still, it is beyond our understanding that God, who reveals Himself as the God of love and compassion, can issue a command to exterminate whole peoples, apparently indiscriminately, without warning, and without possibility of salvation. Even when we weigh the reasons for this judgement provided in the Old Testament, it is still beyond our understanding why this consequence should follow. For that, I have no 'solution' that would answer our questions.

Moving on

I do, however, understand *why* it is beyond my understanding. For with the coming of Jesus Christ, the relationship between Israel and the nations changed decisively; the option of violence for the people of God has changed also. From our situation after the coming of Christ, we cannot return to the situation before His coming. We cannot go back behind this progress in the history of salvation, either to explain why God gave this command in this situation, or to make a judgement concerning this command.
Our own cultural situation is also different, especially in the way we experience acts of violence. The affective distance and resistance we feel when we read Deuteronomy 7 is also there when we think of all the violence that has been committed in the name of God throughout history: the religious wars, the killing of heretics and witches, and so much more.
I cannot fully comprehend or explain the command of God to wipe out the Canaanite peoples: the history of salvation has progressed, and we live in a greatly different cultural context.
Taking into account the message of the Old and New Testaments as a whole, I cannot deny that this command, in this unique situation, was the expressed will of God. I read Deuteronomy 7 as one part of the way that God has gone in history. The history of the judgement and the grace of God leads to the coming of His Son Jesus Christ. As the great Substitute, He placed Himself under the judgement of God. In Him, the love of God was revealed in all its fullness. For this reason, and for this reason alone, I can love the God who reveals Himself in His word, and entrust myself completely to Him.

Notes

1 *This is a translation of the second of a two-part article in the Dutch language entitled 'Geen verbond, geen genade', published on July 20 and August 3, 2012 in De Wekker, a magazine of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in the Netherlands. This translation by Aart Plug, July 2013, by arrangement with the author*

2 *See, for example, Paul Cliteur, Het monotheïstisch dilemma, of De theologie van het terrorisme. Amsterdam, Arbeiderspers, 2010*

J.W. Maris

A doctrine of dispensations
Dispensationalism examined

The best-selling series *Left behind* by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins has made Christians all over the world feel quite uncomfortable. In these fictional novels, the secret rapture of the believers at the moment of Christ's first return creates havoc in society.

This article is an adaptation of a speech held at a conference in Seoul. All Scripture quotations and references are taken from the New International Version of the Bible, (NIV), 1984 edition.

Aeroplanes crash to the ground because the pilot, a Christian, suddenly disappears from the cockpit. Traffic turns into a dangerous chaos when traffic police disappear into thin air. Patients undergoing surgery bleed to death when the operation is abandoned. Men and women are suddenly missing from their families, and disappear from society. Governments accuse each other of subversive activities and even start wars. The films that were made by adapting this script also left a deep impression on the public, especially on Christians. The reality described is not a danger to believers, though, as they are safe. They are in the rapture, to be with the Lord.

Of course, the scenario does not end there. The conversion of many, including many from Israel, is also to be expected, and at the same time the great tribulation takes place on earth for a period of seven years. All the disasters described in Revelation 6-19 will happen in the time of the Antichrist. Believers will not be affected by that – they have been taken away.

We can imagine ideas like these having an impact on Christians, and certainly on young people. While it is not here possible to go into detail regarding the interpretation of Scripture that is behind all this, I would like to sketch the principal ideas that are at the root of this theory, as well as the hermeneutic, the way of reading the Bible, that is behind it. What we encounter here is

1. Orientation

Dispensationalism.
Apart from these fascinating novels and films, there are more ways in which the ideas of the rapture and all that surrounds it are being advocated on an international scale. Many magazines dealing with Israel and its future have a dispensationalist background. The *Scofield Reference Bible* has also been of great importance. It is clear that a premillennial conviction plays a role, with its expectation of Christ's reign on the earth for a period of a thousand years. However, not all premillennialists are dispensationalists. And there a quite a few differences within Dispensationalism itself, for there is even such a phenomenon as 'ultra-dispensationalism', to name but one variation.

The origin of Dispensationalism can be traced to the 19th century and John N. Darby (1800-1882). He could be called the father of the *Brethren*. The reason why he separated himself from the Anglican Church concerned the fact that he found it unbearable that the church was subordinate to the state. His difficult character most likely played a part in his work, as also did his education as a lawyer. Yet his true inner motive was his love for Christ. His passionate nature made him a rather compelling leader, and was the cause of many conflicts. However, we concern ourselves with the manner of reading the Scriptures rather than personality issues.

The system
There is more to Dispensationalism than the doctrine of the rapture of the church at the start of the millennium. First and foremost, we should pay attention to the biased way of reading the Bible, the hermeneutic. There is a system of seven dispensations. Of course the term dispensation is not unfamiliar to Reformed or Presbyterian believers. We distinguish the Old and the New Dispensation, the Old and New Testament. We know that in the Old Testament the *Law of God* has a dominant position, and in the New Testament the *gospel*. How to define the relationship between these two is certainly an important topic. In Darby's thinking, an antithesis or a contrast exists between the dispensation of the law (Israel, the OT) and the dispensation of grace (the Church, the NT).

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In connection with this we could already consider an important question: Is the relationship between Old and New Testament, between law and gospel, one of contrast? Or is the relationship rather one of a continuing path of promise and fulfilment?

The principle upon which Darby bases the distinctions between the dispensations is remarkable and demands reflection. In his way of thinking, the Biblical testimony can be divided into seven dispensations in which the special relationship between God and man altered. Moreover, each dispensation ended or will end in failure. The 'scheme' of dispensations is as follows:
Paradise.
Man has to preserve his *innocence*. This is actually a preliminary period, leading up to the Fall.
The period of *conscience*.
The law has not been given yet. However, this period ends in judgment – the Great Flood.
After the Great Flood.
Capital punishment is established, and a *government*. However, by the time of Abraham, there are hardly any believers left.
Abraham and his offspring.
This is the dispensation of *faith*. This also went wrong and ended with persecution in Egypt.
The Exodus and the covenant at Sinai: *the law*.
This ends in the exile.
Now, since Pentecost, it is the time of the church.
This is the dispensation of *grace*, ending in the great apostasy.
The last dispensation: *the millennium*.
This also ends in misery when Satan is released against Jerusalem.
[8 The eternal destination, of course, being no dispensation, when all is made new: the new heavens and the new earth in eternity]

Looking at this scheme we realize that one dispensation is not always completed when a new one begins, in spite of the fact that it did not bring what was expected. For example, the conscience [2] is still valid for individual persons. Human government [3] is still a reality for the peoples of the earth. Regarding the dispensation of the law [5] it is important to acknowledge that the cross of Christ brought an end to the significance of the law. And of course here we do, in fact, still see two tracks: one for Israel and one for the congregation.

2. The hermeneutics of Dispensationalism

How do we read the Bible?

Dispensationalists teach that the Bible must be taken literally. We can agree with that, especially in the sense that an allegorical exegesis of Scripture is to be rejected. That would, indeed, lead to all kinds of arbitrary explanations. The number three then might always point to the Trinity; the colour red always indicate the blood of Christ etc. Of course, dispensationalists too recognize that some passages are written in metaphorical or symbolic language, such as the parables of Christ. Nevertheless, this outline of dispensations is employed almost as something conjured out of a magician's hat, giving a significance to texts and portions of Scripture that would never be discovered during normal Bible reading. An important example of this is the explanation of Paul's words to Timothy (2Tim. 2:15) where the command is given to 'rightly divide the word of truth' [King James Version] or, literally, to 'cut the Word straight' (*orthotomounta*). According to these teachers, the assignment here is to divide the Word into pieces, in order to make the application of the words clear for different periods and for different people. Yet what Paul actually says is that one must do justice to the Word of God: 'who correctly handles the Word of truth' (NIV).
The Lord's Prayer is likewise cut into pieces, and sections are made applicable for completely different times and groups.
The books of the Old Testament prophets, in turn, are often explained as a route map for the future. The way in which chapters like Ezekiel 40-48 are dealt with raises many questions. We find the vision of a new temple, with a special priesthood from the family of Zadok (Ez. 40: 45f; 44:15); there will be sacrifices (Ez. 40:39; 43:18f.). God comes into the temple (Ez. 43:1-5) and a fordable river streams out of the temple, etc. Such will be the temple of the future, in the millennium, so they claim. Quite literally. On a number of other occasions we must conclude that dispensationalists themselves do not escape spiritualization, in spite of the confessed necessity of taking everything literally.[1]

Such an approach to Ezekiel's prophecies raises several questions, such as how there can still be sacrifices after the curtain of the temple has been torn in two from top to bottom (Mat.27:51). And

where does the idea come from that this will be fulfilled in the millennium?
Another example of this cutting of the Word into periods is the division of the letters of the Lord Jesus to the seven churches of Asia (Revelation 2 and 3) to match periods in church history following the days of the apostles. Here the division does not follow the dispensations but is also an example of 'cutting' into periods. The letter to Philadelphia, for instance, is said to describe the period of church history from 1730 – 1900. It is directed at the spreading unbelief, and the revival of Christianity in Europe and in America, with missionary activities around the globe.
Perhaps it will be possible to find a church of each type in every age, and in this light Revelation 3:10 indicates the rapture of the church.[2] The serious and encouraging message of these letters for the church of all ages is, in fact, distorted by such an approach.

The Bible divided

The necessity of dividing according to the dispensations is continuously pre-eminent as the background to the exegesis. The seven dispensations are not only related to historical periods; the corresponding chapters of God's Word also only apply to a certain group. That idea is based upon 1 Corinthians 10:32 where Paul mentions the Jews, the Greeks, and the church of God. The general idea is that any part of Scripture can only be directed to one of these three categories, Jews, pagans or Christians. One author (Chafer) says that for Christians only the Gospel of John, Acts and the Letters apply. The Great Commission in Matthew 28 is primarily to do with the kingdom of God and not with the church. It will only become relevant for the rest of the Jews after the rapture of the church. In this way, for the exegesis of each verse of the Bible we would need first to establish whether it is spoken to heathens or to Israel or to the church. This can differ from verse to verse. A certain dispensationalist author even remarked that an edition of the Bible in three sections might be more consistent.
It is clear that, in the list of dispensations, the fourth to the seventh are actually the most important to us. New Testament Christians have left the first three dispensations behind them. It is also obvious that the whole explanation of the Bible becomes critically important in regard to the relationship between Israel and the church, with important consequences for eschatology of course.

Israel and the church

Typical of Dispensationalism is that God has different plans for Israel and for the church. Israel's future is a kingdom on this earth; for the church there will be heavenly bliss. The church will share her future blessing by faith in the finished work of Christ; for Israel the way of obedience to the law remains. When Jesus came to earth it was for the establishment of a kingdom of a thousand years with Israel. Only when Israel rejected him did he become the Crucified. And then God's plan for a kingdom was postponed until Christ's second coming. If Israel had not rejected the Messiah, then there would have been no need for a cross.
This whole package of ideas has enormous consequences! God's counsel embracing all (or as we might also say, the sovereignty of God in His controlling of the history of creation) is completely neglected. The glorious message clarified in the New Testament, how – in Christ – the promise to Abraham is being fulfilled so that in him all the generations of the earth will be blessed, is rejected. Dispensationalists refuse to do justice to the unity of God's plan and his actions.

3. The Unity of God's work

God is One

When Reformed people try to discuss theology with dispensationalists the theme of God's covenant is certain to form a stumble-block. This subject, of course, has to do with the unity of God's work as opposed to the crumbling of salvation history as presented by dispensationalists.
Not only is the unity of history, and of God's work in history, at stake, but also the deep conviction that God Himself is One. The God and Father of Jesus Christ who created heaven and earth is the God of Israel, and the God of David, and of Hezekiah etc. We must face the question: has God's revelation moved along a path from one failure to another? This question gives rise to many more questions! Does the Old Testament, and for example the Law, no longer have a message for the church of today? Does Jesus as the Messiah and King of Israel have a completely different programme from what he is for the Church, the Saviour, the Bridegroom? Do we really have to lay aside all those passages as though they are meant for another category of readers? Is the great tribulation, of which the book of Revelation speaks, something of no concern for the majority of believing Christians, because they will – in the rapture – escape that fate?

Many of these questions become even more poignant when placed in the light of the description of the millennium. While it is not possible to go into that aspect now, the realization, according to the doctrine of dispensations, that many parts of the book of Revelation do not necessarily touch us is quite shocking.
In order to keep sight of the whole of God's Word, I prefer now to outline some general biblical principles. The very first is that God is One (Deut. 6:4; Eph. 4:5-6). The Creator of heaven and earth comprises all ages in his divine sovereignty (cf. Acts 15:14-18). God is One in his purpose (Acts 2:23; Heb. 6:17).

One revelation

Through all the centuries, the church has been aware of the fact that the Bible contains the one history of God's dealing with man. God is at the beginning, and Genesis 1 already shows that the creation is considered as a whole, and is entirely God's. Immediately it is about us! In the 'mother of all promises' (Gen. 3:15) all ages are enclosed. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain (Gen. 6:6), but the word 'failure' does not fit here in this shocking conclusion, for, in the next phase, he keeps his original plan with man and creation (Gen. 12:3). Israel is the narrowing down of God's dealing with man, but it is with an aim to its widening. So we see God's history with his world as a history of salvation.
In the New Testament we are taught how the Old Testament is involved with Christ (Luke 24:27, 32, 45; Acts 18:28 etc.). The unity of God's revelation is closely connected with the unity of God's work, right across human sin and rebellion and unbelief. The Gospel of Matthew, the letters to the Romans and the Hebrews, and the book of Revelation are characterized exactly by the insights to the Old Testament that they present. The old saying by Augustine, that the New Testament is hidden *(latet*) in the Old Testament and that the Old Testament is opened (*patet*) in the New Testament, describes this unity quite effectively.

Yet dispensations exist!

The word dispensation is familiar enough. We know it from the biblical testimony regarding the covenant of grace. The outline of God's covenant - throughout the Bible – is an important hermeneutical tool for interpreting the unity of God's work in history. And there we find two dispensations, the old and the new covenant. These two, however, are not contrasted with each other because the first covenant had 'failed'. We prefer to see both as characterized by the concepts of *promise* and *fulfilment,* rather than as opposed to each other. In Colossians 2:11-12 Paul deals with circumcision. He does not say that circumcision no longer has anything to say to the Christians in Colosse, but that those who by faith and baptism are connected to Christ share in his circumcision. A continuity and a difference are made clear simultaneously. There is one covenant, one history, but because of the new dispensation in Christ, the bloody sign that was part of circumcision is not necessary any more for us.
Nevertheless, we are still confronted with God's judgment because we trespassed against his law. At the same time we realize that Israel was already dependent on God's grace (see Ex. 34: 6-7!). We might even say that Old and New Testament overlap each other! How clear this is in 1 Peter 1:13-19. The apostle points to the demands of the law of holiness as a proper description of what, by grace, is actually given to us (v. 13). The believers are redeemed with the precious blood of Christ (vs. 18-19), and therefore they are urged to holy living. This illustrates both the connection and the difference between law and gospel! The law never existed without the gospel. And the gospel of grace never leaves the law behind. The standard of God remains. God is One.

Further reading see page 105

Some literature

- Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism. Its historical genesis and ecclesiastical implications,* Grand Rapids 1978 (2nd edition)
- William E. Cox, *An Examination of Dispensationalism*, Phillipsburg 1963
- J.N. Darby, *De hoop van de Gemeente van Christus,* Winschoten z.j. 2nd edition (original edition 1842)
- Tim LaHaye & J.B. Jenkins, *Left behind*, a series of fiction novels. Various editions
- Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism, Rightly Dividing the People of God?* Phillipsburg 1995
- Willem J. Ouweneel, 'John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) – Person, Leben, Denken, Wirken' , in: *200 Jahre John Nelson Darby,* Edition Wiedenest, Hammerbrücke 2002 (2. Aufl.)
- Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*. Grand Rapids 1987
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by JW Maris[1]

[Introduction]

The Role of the Civil Magistrates
The Belgic Confession, Article 36

Article 36 of the Belgic Confession – the article on the Civil Magistrates – has been a source of discussion and even of conflict in The Netherlands for more than a century. The consequences of these differences have been felt in the ecclesiastical as well as in the political arena.

For many years, the Reformed Churches (liberated) (GKV) and the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (CGK) had been engaged in discussion concerning a number of principle and practical issues that needed clarification between them, and Article 36 was one of those issues.

The original Article 36 of the Belgic Confession included in its description of the task of the civil government the protection of the church and its ministry in order that "... all idolatry and false worship may be removed and prevented, the kingdom of antichrist may be destroyed, (and) the kingdom of Christ may come ..." (in the Dutch text, they consist of 21 words: ... om te weren en uit te roeien alle afgoderij en valse godsdienst, om het rijk van de antichrist te gronde te werpen...)

The Belgic Confession, as adopted in the GKV, does not include these 21 words in Article 36. The CGK has retained them, but has also been struggling with the proper use and acceptance of these words. Is it really the task of the civil government of any country to enter into a judgment as to what is biblical truth and what is not?

The following report was compiled by the joint deputies of the CGK and the GKV, and adopted by the General Synods of both churches as an accurate representation of the matter under discussion.

It describes how the CGK – through years of discussion and contacts with other churches of the same confessional foundation – came to a practical explanation of and a justified attitude towards this article in our confession.

On the basis of this report the GKV Synod of Amersfoort-Centrum 2005 concluded that indeed no confessional disunity existed between the two denominations at this point (Acts, Article 134).

Time and again, the relationship between church and state is the subject of consideration and discussions in different parts of the world. Hence, the editors of Lux Mundi thought it useful to publish the relevant section of this report: ***The 21 Words Of Article 36***[2]

This discussion concerning Article 36 touches on an issue that is indeed a point of principle in the Confession. There is, therefore, good reason to provide a brief historical overview of the decisions made by both the GKV and the CGK.

The decision of 1905

At the General Synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, held in Middelburg in 1896, a gravamen was lodged by (among others) A Kuyper and H Bavinck, concerning certain passages in Article 36. Their objection was that these passages in effect obliged the civil government to destroy idolatry, and required the church to lay this obligation before the government. After extensive preparatory work, this matter was dealt with in 1905, at the General Synod of Utrecht.

The preparatory committees came to the conclusion that the Confession was to be interpreted historically, and that the passage in question must be understood to mean that the civil government was not to allow idolatry, false worship or blasphemy to go unpunished in the public arena. The civil government had the duty to use compulsion and force, and if necessary capital punishment, to achieve this end. For this reason, the committee concluded that the objection ought to be upheld.

At the same time, the majority of the committee advised against the deletion of this passage, for three reasons:

- It feared that such a deletion would mutilate the Confession; after all, the Confession is not a 'stringing together of loose opinions' but a coherent whole.
- It was concerned that nothing would be left of the civil government's positive calling with regard to the first table of the Law.
- It did not believe that the time was ripe for a positive amendment to Article 36.

Notwithstanding, Synod decided, by a vote of 24 to 16, to delete from the Confession the words *"in order to prevent and remove all idolatry and false religion, and to destroy the kingdom of antichrist*". It should be noted that the grounds presented for this decision could also

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be advanced against other passages in Article 36 that Synod decided to retain. The advisory committee had already pointed this out.[3]

After the Liberation of 1944 the GKV decided to uphold this decision. It is still in force in the GKV today.

Article 36 and the Synods of the CGK (1)

In 1928 the Synod of the CGK was asked to deal with a gravamen concerning the same matter. The gravamen was dismissed on the ground that Article 36 was to be understood in the light of declarations made by the Synods of 1574 and 1581.

In 1937, Rev C van der Zaal lodged an objection to this decision. After all, the Synod decisions referred to addressed the calling of the church and its ministers, but not the task of the civil government. First a study committee, and then synodical deputies were appointed to investigate the matter, with a mandate to report in 1941. In the event, no report was submitted, and the deputies were discharged.

International Reflection

Between 1912 and 1946, the same matter was in discussion in the Christian Reformed Church in the USA. Subsequently it was tabled for discussion at the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (RES) of 1949, leading to a joint declaration, unanimously adopted and recommended to all member churches. This declaration consisted of four parts, the most significant of which (part B) read as follows:

*'that consequently the magistrate is called to protect the preaching of the Gospel and all the holy service of God with all the means given it by God, in order that freedom of conscience to serve God according to His Word be guaranteed and every anti-Christian power which would threaten the church in the exercise of its holy ministry be resisted and prevented.'*4

By way of the RES, the matter found its way back to the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN). There was a general view that the deletion made in 1905 was unsatisfactory. Synodical deputies proposed a new formulation, and Synod 1952/53 of the GKN declared that there were sufficient grounds to amend Article 36. There was to be consultation with other churches that held to the Belgic Confession. The following wording was proposed:

*'The magistrates, called to promote the building of a society of men that is pleasing to God, in submission to the law of God, and strictly avoiding all abuse of power, has the duty, in those parts of life entrusted to its authority, and using the means lawfully at its disposal, to resist and prevent all hindrances to the proclamation of the Gospel and the sacred worship of God, in order that the Word of the Lord may proceed, that the Kingdom of Jesus Christ may have its progress, and that all antichristian power be resisted.'*5.

The GKN tabled this formulation at the RES in Edinburgh in 1953, with the intention that consultation between the various churches was to follow.

Article 36 and the Synods of the CGK (2)

The Synod of the CGK of 1959 responded to the RES declaration and the proposal of the GKN. Once again, Synod deputies were appointed, with a mandate to study the questions regarding Article 36 of the Confession.

A report was delivered to the 1962 Synod of the CGK. This highly valuable report – including an extensive minority report – led to the following decision [translation mine – AP]:[6]

1. *To reply (to the proposal from the GKN) as follows:*
   a. *That in the opinion of Synod, amendment of Article 36 is not to be recommended, as long as there is insufficient clarity and agreement of thinking within the churches regarding this matter;*
   b. *That Synod agrees that this matter ought to have the attention of the churches, since the manner in which the principle intent of Article 36 is expressed has raised questions and doubts within the churches;*
   c. *That Synod is prepared to undertake further consultation with the General Synod of the GKN and its deputies in relation to this matter;*
   d. *To appoint deputies to conduct discussions with the GKN and its deputies regarding Article 36, and to instruct these deputies to be guided in their discussions by the following conclusions:*
      i. *The original intent of the third clause of Article 36 was that the civil government, using the means of force at its disposal, is to act against all idolatry and false worship, in order to prevent and remove them; including, in cases of public godlessness, the use of the most severe penalties;*
      ii. *The grounds for this description of the task of the civil government in relation to religion were drawn from the Old Testament, but without sufficient regard for the special position of Israel as a theocratic nation;*
      iii. *The possibility of a correction to the decision of the General Synod of 1928 (Acts, Article 70) ought not to be dismissed;*
      iv. *Should the entire third clause of Article 36 be deleted, a weighty principle of this article would be removed, namely that the civil government, within the limits of it authority,*

must cause the commandments of God to be honoured, also those commandments that relate to the worship of the Lord.

v. *The way in which this principle is articulated in Article 36 gives rise to questions and doubts;*

vi. *Amendment of Article 36 is not to be recommended, as long as there is insufficient clarity and agreement of thinking within the churches regarding this matter; however this matter ought to have the attention of the churches.*

In the years following, some discussions took place between the deputies of the CGK and the GKN respectively. The point was made that in the view of the CGK, the declaration proposed to the RES failed to express the obligation of the civil government, within the limits of its authority, to promote the honouring of the commandments of God. The deputies of the CGK had the impression that their counterparts were not averse to such an amendment. However, owing to its adoption at the RES, the statement had already acquired a status of its own.

Further consideration led to the adoption, at the 1968 General Synod of the CGK, of the following statement. In effect, it was an amended form of the statement proposed by the GKN, and was communicated to the GKN and the RES:

The civil government, called to assist in the building of a society of men that is pleasing to God, and strictly avoiding all abuse of power, has the duty, in those parts of life that fall under its authority, and using the means lawfully at its disposal, to promote that all people live in accordance with the requirements of the Law of God, and further *to remove all hindrances to the proclamation of the Gospel and* the whole of *the sacred worship of God.* It must carry out this calling*, in order that the Word of the Lord may proceed, that the Kingdom of Jesus Christ may have its progress, and all antichristian powers might may be resisted* (amendments in bold print)[7].

The divisions between the churches of the reformed confessions made practical agreement on amendments to the text of the Confession impossible. As a result, there was no further progress on the proposals.

Having said that, the CGK will have take into account that its Synod, already in 1962, concluded that Article 36 embodies a 'weighty principle', but that the way it is expressed 'gives rise to questions and doubts within the churches'. The article as a whole must then be read and understood in the light of the additional formulation adopted at the Synod of 1968.

The current situation of the CGK and the GKV

In the discussions between the respective deputies, the following conclusions were reached:

a. The deletions in Article 36, agreed to in 1905, while still in force in the GKV, do not satisfactorily resolve the questions that have been raised;

b. Within the existing political practice of our time, maintaining Article 36 in its original form is fraught with difficulties.

c. In view of the complicated ecclesiastical realities, amendments to the Confession are likely to be just as difficult a road to follow.

In conclusion, the best course of action is to investigate whether the Synod of the GKV could find itself in an additional explanatory declaration of Article 36 – such as contained in the decision of the CGK, as outlined above – that describes how, according to God's Word, the task of the civil government, and the task of the church in relation to the civil government, is to be seen in the situation of today.

Such an explanatory declaration would allow us to come to grips with the difficulties that arise from the text of Article 36, without requiring amendment to the historical text itself. ■

Notes:

1 *Dr JW Maris (b.1941) is emeritus professor in Dogmatics of the Theological University of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Apeldoorn, the Netherlands, and a member of the joint deputies of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken (CGK) and the Gereformeerde Kerken - vrijgemaakt (GKV), a member of the editorial committee of Lux Mundi, and one of the authors of this report*

2 *This translation by Aart Plug, August 2013. Unless otherwise indicated, this includes translations of excerpts from various Acts of Synods*

3 *Acts of Synod, Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, 1905, 318*

4 *Acts of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod of Amsterdam 1949, 29*

5 *Acts of Synod, Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, 1952/53*

6 *Acts of Synod, CGK Haarlem-Santpoort 1962, Article 184, p89ff*

7 *Acts of Synod, CGK Hilversum 1968/1969, Article 146*

R.C. Jansen

Red or Blue? Commentaries on the Dort Church Order

Church Polity is where the rubber of Scripture hits the road of organized church life. As such, it is a place of friction. Scripture, given its divine origin, reveals abiding, eternal truths. Regulations, given their human origin and context, change, accommodating to new circumstances. The tire is the same but the road is new all the time. However, where tires and asphalt are easily distinguished, it is not always clear what in the practice of the church is permanent or changeable.

Church Order commentaries are a helpful tool in this endeavour of distinguishing. Church order commentaries in the Dutch language were freely available since the early 1920s. It would seem that by the mid twentieth century the need for an English language commentary was felt. Van Dellen and Monsma took it upon themselves to ensure the studies of Dutch men such as Dr. F.L. Rutgers, Rev. Joh. Jansen and Rev. H. Bouwman would continue to be known in the English speaking world as knowledge of the Dutch language lessened. Moreover, the Christian Reformed Churches in North America (CRC) were best served by a commentary on their own church order, rather than one on that of the sister churches in The Netherlands.

The first "Van Dellen and Monsma", published in 1941, was quickly sold out. A second, "somewhat revised and up-to-date" edition appeared in 1950. It too was soon out of stock. And so a third edition, with minimal changes compared to the second, appeared in 1954. During the 1960s the Christian Reformed Churches thoroughly revised their church order. Hence a "Revised Church Order Commentary" was published in 1967. It was authored by Monsma as VanDellen had passed away. It should be noted, though, that many passages written by VanDellen passed unchanged into this Revised CO Commentary. One other noticeable difference was: the first three editions had a red cover, that of the revised was blue.

The 1954 edition has been so popular that, during the 1990s prices rose to well above $50 a volume. This may be in part due to churches leaving the CRC, many of whom would federate to form the United Reformed Churches (URC). Prices dropped again when in 2005 Wipf & Stock republished the 1950 edition in paperback and in 2009 a paperback version of the 1954 edition. "Van Dellen and Monsma" is, however, in such high demand that recently the Reformed Free Publishing Association (www.rfpa.org) published an eBook version. This raises the question: why is there such a demand for the older editions of "Van Dellen and Monsma"? Why the preference for red over blue?

The Netherlands

Red or blue, the choice also exists in The Netherlands. During the 1910s Rev. Joh. Jansen began publishing an extensive commentary on the Church Order. He had to abandon this and instead, publish a "short commentary". It's first edition appeared in 1923. It had a red cover. In 1937 a second "enlarged and revised" edition was published. Its cover was blue. So was that of the third revised edition, published in 1952. Following the schism in 1944 that led to the formation of the Reformed Churches (liberated), the 1923 edition was so popular that, in 1976, a facsimile of the 1923 edition was published by Ton Bolland. It's cover was red. So why is that in Holland and in America orthodox Reformed churches with a church practice shaped by Dort polity prefer red over blue?

During the 1920s both the RCN and CRC had to deal with issues of alleged doctrinal unfaithfulness by ministers and consistories. During the course of the various trials that took place, synods on both sides of the Atlantic took it upon themselves to depose office-bearers. Some in the churches objected to this course of action. They argued that a major assembly does not have the authority to depose office-bearers, holding that deposition is the prerogative of the local church. In both the RCN and CRC two camps arose: those defending so-called "old polity" (primacy of the local church) and those defending so-called "new polity" (a measure of authority for major assemblies).

In The Netherlands things came to a head during the 1940s. Disputes over various matters of doctrine led to General Synod Utrecht 1943 deposing many office-bearers. Those deposed, often whole councils, formally seceded from the RCN in 1944 to form the RCN(liberated). The majority of those deposed

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advocated the "old polity" and hence the RCN(I) continued to practice "old polity".
In the CRC there was no schism. During the 1960s the Church Order was thoroughly revised. The changes then made have been documented by Rev. W.W.J. VanOene his unpublished M.Th. thesis. While the changes were not as extreme as in Holland, there clearly was a tendency in the direction of centralization. It is noteworthy that during the 1990s those who left the CRC chose for a more decentralized approach to the church federation. As a result, the URC also tends to practice "old polity".
The switch from "old" to "new" is very noticeable in the various editions of the commentary by Jansen. The red edition advocates "old polity", the blue editions advocate "new polity". For example, in commentating on article 30 on the authority (competency) of ecclesiastical assemblies Jansen deals with the distinction "major-minor" in regards to assemblies.

First edition

In the *first* edition he notes three things. (1) A major assembly is major as the number of churches involved is larger. (2) Not the character but the measure of authority is different, at a major assembly there is an accumulation of powers. (3) The task and domain of a major assembly are more restricted, for "in Reformed polity the broadest power belongs to the council." In the *second* edition Jansen explicitly notes under point (2) that the character of authority is the same for council, classis, and synod. In the *third* edition Jansen further adds to point (2) that the authority of all assemblies is determined by the fact that they consist of office-bearers. And point (3) of the first edition, still found in the second, is lacking in the third. It would seem Jansen was no longer comfortable with stating that the broadest power belongs to the council.

The switch is also noticeable where Jansen deals with the sorts of matters major assemblies may deal with. One of these is matters that could not be finished by the minor assembly. In the first and second editions Jansen lists the following situations as examples of unfinished business: inability, neglect (e.g. through illness), or appeal. In the third edition "neglect" has changed to "mismanagement", and the illustration is failure by a minor assembly to exercise church discipline. It was considered permissible for a broader assembly to exercise discipline.

Appeals

Article 31 of the Dort Church Order indicates appeals are possible if a decision is considered to contradict Scripture or the adopted Church Order. This raises the question, who is to be convinced of this, for a decision to be stayed? In the first edition Jansen indicated, the person or party (church) appealing. In the second edition he wrote, the major assembly. In the third edition he reconfirmed what he wrote in the second edition, appealing to a decision of Synod Sneek 1939.

Article 36 deals specifically with the jurisdiction or authority of major assemblies over minor assemblies. The commentary in the second and third editions is totally different from that of the first. In substance, one of the main switches relates to the question: why does article 36 not indicate that the authority of a major assembly over a minor assembly is similar to that of a consistory over the congregation? In the first edition Jansen argued that there is a principle difference. In the second and third edition he stated there is no principle difference. The omission is simply because the Church Order has nothing on congregational meetings. In the third edition one also finds this added comment: "The might of a local church is subject to the might of the major assembly."
Briefly put, the blue editions of Jansen (second and third) advocate a more hierarchical and centralized church polity than the red (first) edition. That is why the orthodox Reformed in Holland prefer the red over the blue.

English

The English language church order commentaries also have red and blue editions. The switch from "old polity" to "new polity" is not as noticeable here. In fact, given the heated discussions in Holland, the silence of Monsma on many issues in his 1967 edition is surprising. He himself inclined towards "old polity" at crucial points but seems to have preferred steering clear of controversy on this matter..

Both the red and blue editions defend the primacy of the local church in Dort polity. While there is no higher or lower authority between the assemblies, the assemblies do differentiate as to character and domain. It is quite proper for a consistory to tell a major assembly "hands off". Even the Revised CO Commentary states that "no major assembly ... has the right to depose a minor assembly." However, as VanOene points out, in 1971 it did happen: a classis suspended a consistory, a decision that was never

challenged on account of being not in keeping with the church order.
Regarding major assemblies dealing with matters not finished by the minor assemblies, both editions follow Jansen's first and second edition, no mention is made of "neglect to exercise discipline" as an illustration of "unfinished business".

Both red and blue English commentaries quote H. Bouwman (Dutch, 1934) who stated: "Ecclesiastical authority consists of three things: Authority to administer the Word and the Sacraments; authority to elect ecclesiastical office-bearers; and authority to exercise ecclesiastical discipline. There is no other authority in the ecclesiastical sphere. And this three-fold authority does not pertain to the Major Assemblies, but to the office-bearers of the particular Churches." Monsma thus would disagree with Jansen that a major assembly can exercise church discipline or that they have the authority of office. Where broader assemblies are concerned, the red and blue English Church Order commentaries are similar. However, they are not identical. One change is remarkably similar to one of Jansen's. Like Jansen, Monsma argues that if a person objects to a decision taken by a major assembly, such a person should submit and conform to that decision during the course of appeal. In the first edition Van Dellen and Monsma had quite adamantly defended the freedom to act in accordance with conscience, implying one does not have to conform to the decision.

It should further be noted that already the (red) revised third edition of Van Dellen and Monsma reveals some of the tendencies found in Jansen's second edition and the blue edition does go further. For example, appealing to Acts 15, Van Dellen and Monsma argued that an assembly has authority over local churches. Those who defend "old polity" would dispute this.
What also makes the third edition of Van Dellen and Monsma useful is that the church order it comments on is, for the most part, identical to the original Church Order of Dort. Many federations of churches still use a church order that closely follows it. The Revised Church Order Commentary is a commentary on a strongly revised church order.

Used with caution

The red may be preferred, but it needs to be used with caution. What Prof. S. Volbeda wrote as introduction to the 1941 Church Order Commentary is true for all: "Not all the views propounded by the authors command the assent of all who are able to judge of matters canonical." Other views may be found in handbooks on church practice such as those written by VanOene, C. Bouwman, and VanRongen. Those able to read Dutch and/or Afrikaans are well served by also consulting H. Bouwman, K. DeGier, D. Nauta, J. Kamphuis, B. Spoelstra and J. Visser. Most of these commentaries are readily accessible via www.kerkrecht.nl>Bibliotheek>Commenatren. Those looking for an orientation will find *Bound yet Free: Readings in Reformed Church Polity* edited by J. DeJong helpful. Orthodox Reformed Churches with Dutch roots have faced the dangers of hierarchy. Hence they have a tendency to steer clear of centralization. That is why there is a preference for red over blue. It is a good thing the red Van Dellen and Monsma is now available electronically. ■

J.W. Maris

A doctrine of dispensations

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And Israel?

The place of Israel in God's history also cannot be seen apart from the notion of fulfilment, and of course not apart from the one Messiah. The unity of the body of Christ, existing in Jews and Gentiles, is essential (Eph. 2 and 3). I cannot elaborate on that now. Let it suffice to notice that for too long Christians have taken refuge in a kind of 'replacement theology' in which Christians supposedly took the place of Jews in God's salvation plan. In doing that, the word 'together' in Ephesians 3:6 is sold short, as is the metaphor of the olive tree in Romans 11:17-24. God's work is one. ■

Notes

1 *See e.g. Is. 55:12; Mi. 6:1; Joel 3:18; Hos. 2:17)*
2 *See the Scofield Reference Bible.*

P.H.R. van Houwelingen

Why are there four Gospels?

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching..."

(Acts 2:42)

Why are there four Gospels in the Bible, and why are they so different from each other? This question is known as the synoptic problem; especially Matthew, Mark and Luke, when arranged in a side-by-side overview (Greek: synopsis), display marked similarities, while showing numerous differences also.[1]

Let us take one example: the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan *(Matthew 3:16-17; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:32)*. The same event is presented four times, each time within a different narrative framework. Matthew places the encounter of John the Baptist with Jesus at the centre; in Mark, Jesus seems to be the only person to be baptised; in Luke, by contrast, Jesus is just one of the multitude; for John, the perspective is the testimony of John the Baptist.

The voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism, recorded in direct speech, is rendered objectively in Matthew ("This is my Son") and subjectively in Mark and Luke ("You are my Son"). John does not record the voice from heaven at all, but we do hear it echoed in the witness of John the Baptist: "I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God" (ch 1:34).
A number of hypotheses have been advanced to explain this phenomenon. During the first centuries of the church this was not yet seen as an issue. Augustine began to sense that there might be a problem, and discussed it in his 'On the Harmony of the Evangelists'.
Since the Enlightenment, 'literary dependence' has been widely proposed as a solution: the evangelists were thought to have copied material from each other. Mark, the shortest Gospel, is generally believed to have been the earliest. Matthew and Luke would then have used this as their main source.
In addition, another document – no longer in existence – is believed to have recorded only the words of Jesus, and not the story of his life. This hypothetical document is identified as Q (from the German Quelle, or source). Some have gone so far as to construct an entire Q-community around it. However, in the words of the New Testament scholar Mark Goodacre, with an allusion to John 1:18: "No-one has ever seen Q".

No definitive solution

No single hypothesis is able to provide a definitive solution, simply because we know so little about how the Gospels came into being. Against the 'literary dependence model' is the argument that while the four narrative frameworks may be different, they agree most closely where they represent the actual words of Jesus himself. In addition, the similarities are greatest when they record events in which Jesus' disciples are gathered around him.
A more attractive explanation seems to be offered by what is known as the 'tradition hypothesis'. This approach takes its starting point in a common oral tradition.
To understand this, we need to go back to the first Christians in Jerusalem. What was their situation between Easter and Pentecost? Initially, the disciples received further instruction from the risen Lord; after his ascension they waited prayerfully for the coming of his Spirit. From Pentecost onwards, they instructed the church in Jerusalem in a form of catechesis, the "apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42, in Greek: hè didachè toon apostoloon). Specifically, we ought to think here of the tradition concerning the Holy Supper and the resurrection. It was not long before the disciples had to defend themselves against criticism; as a result, their instruction took on an apologetic, defensive character.
Within this context, namely the apostles' teaching in Jerusalem, the synoptic tradition might have come into existence. Various factors would have played a part.
To begin with, we are dealing here with recollections. All of the evangelists, each in their own way, speak from personal experience. Matthew was one of the Twelve, Mark provides a written record of Peter's preaching, Luke draws on eye-witness accounts, and John, Jesus' beloved disciple, acts at certain crucial moments as a direct witness. The titles of the four Gospels, containing the names of their authors, appear in all manuscripts, and must date from the earliest period.

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Doctrinal tradition

Next, there is the doctrinal tradition, which passed on what Jesus taught. The three synoptic gospels use the word didaskolos ('teacher') 40 times, and 'rabbi' 8 times, to describe Jesus. He acted as someone who taught with authority, one who was establishing a doctrinal tradition. Within oral cultures, memory training is an important means to pass on such instruction; at the same time, it is possible that some written notes were made of what Jesus said. The Gospels themselves refer to the memory of what Jesus said and did. And Jesus told the apostles to further instruct the newly converted in "all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20).

Finally, the apostles were in contact with each other. During the times they met, a collective memory was formed. It was fed by their personal involvement, the activity of autobiographical memory, a sharing of information, and a concrete articulation of this tradition in spoken and written form.

Still, the Gospels were written in Greek, while the spoken version was in Aramaic. How do we make sense of that?

Of course, Jesus and his disciples were almost as at home in Greek (their second language) as they were in Aramaic (their mother tongue). In the Jewish-Christian congregation at Jerusalem there were a number of Greek-speaking believers. From its earliest beginnings, the congregation would have functioned bilingually. Thus, the apostolic proclamation took place, not just in Aramaic, but also in Greek.

Oral tradition

The word choices of Matthew and Mark, and to a certain degree those of Luke, are likely to have been influenced by these oral traditions. In addition, the Greek translation of the Old Testament is sure to have contributed to a basic Christian vocabulary, which was then further extended through the mutual relationships existing between the various churches.

The memory of what Jesus had said and done served as a kind of funnel. In this way, a collective memory took shape, shared by the apostles and other eyewitnesses; in addition, John preserved his own recollections of Jesus. This collective memory existed in both spoken and written form. Wherever possible, the preferred medium was the 'viva vox' (the living voice, we would say, or live transmission), but as the number of surviving eyewitnesses diminished, the need increased for written material. In the end, that led to the four Gospels as we know them.

In this process, the 'apostles' teaching' served as a kind of repository and melting pot of all that had been passed on. In Jerusalem, this tradition assumed more definite forms. Sometimes, in the context of catechesis; in other cases, in an apologetic setting.

Each of the Gospels is an independent text, deriving from this shared oral source, and each Gospel is able to stand on its own feet.

From the perspective of the Christian faith, we discern another dimension of this process of remembering and proclaiming the Gospel: the work of the Holy Spirit. For in this apostolic teaching, we see a fulfilment of what Jesus, himself full of the Holy Spirit, had said to his disciples: "the Holy Spirit … will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:26). Thus, the New Testament canon begins with the Gospel for four voices.

Notes

1 *This article is to appear in the Dutch language as: "Waarom vier evangeliën?" in: Van Houwelingen, PHR and Sonneveld, R, Eds. : Ongemakkelijke teksten van de apostelen. Amsterdam: Buijten en Schipperheijn, due for publication in late 2013. This translation by Aart Plug, August 2013, by arrangement with the author. All Scripture references and quotations are taken from the New International version of the Bible (NIV), 1984 edition.*

P.G.B. de Vries

ICRC 2013 – a visitor's impression

A peaceful rustle penetrates the recesses of my room. It is as if a light breeze makes the leaves quiver, yet not a breath of wind touches the trees. There must be a little waterfall nearby, making its way through the rolling landscape of South Wales. The night rejoices in the light of a luminous moon. Let it be the sign of an open receptive heaven in the week to come.

Our location was a typical British university campus in Cardiff. Where we arrived at the campus of the University of Glamorgan, we later departed from the University of South Wales. Names can change, but the place remains the same. In the Conference Centre at this University, the eighth International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC) was held from 28 August to 4 September. Some 80 representatives from thirty churches gathered here to listen to lectures on 'Preaching', to engage in some networking, to decide upon the membership of new churches and whatever else was tabled. In this article we will not enter into all these points, but rather give an overall impression. As these are personal impressions, they are, naturally, open to discussion.

Prior to the meeting, an Opening Service was held in the Immanuel Church in Cardiff, one of the congregations of the hosting church, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in England and Wales (EPCEW). Rev. Ian Hamilton led this service, with a sermon on 2 Corinthians 2:12-17. For a moment, the Apostle Paul is disconcerted when he discovers that, contrary to his expectation, Titus is not there when he arrives at Troas. Despite the door being opened for him to preach the gospel, Paul departs for Macedonia. Surprisingly enough, he then bursts out into a joyful cry that Christ always leads us in triumph. The minister encouraged the listeners with this thought. Even though we sometimes live in difficult circumstances and experience resistance, and may even become disheartened, "He always leads us in triumph". [1]

Theme

Preach the WordRev. Dr Robert Letham (EPCEW) spoke on *The Necessity of Preaching*

1. Rev. Dr James Visscher (CanRC) dealt with *The Nature of Preaching*
2. On a final note, Rev. Dr Jun Ho Jin (KPCP) delved into *The Practice of Preaching in Non-Literary Cultures*, illustrated by the possibilities for spreading the gospel in Cambodia.

As is customary, the discourses were followed by workshops and a plenary discussion.

New Members

That the ICRC was able to welcome two new members made this a joyful occasion. The conditions for the membership of churches are listed in the *Regulations*. Three churches met these conditions and two became members, on which we will elaborate later. The following churches were welcomed as members:

1. The Africa Evangelical Presbyterian Church (Kenya)
2. The Sudanese Reformed Churches

All had very different backgrounds and a great diversity in size, but all were recognized as brothers in Christ and were given a joyful welcome. Prayers for the church concerned were held after each round of votes.

An Introduction to The Universal Reformed Christian Church in Nigeria was given by Rev. Peter G. Azuana. The chairman encourages the sponsoring churches to help complete the application process before the 2017 conference.

Nothing takes place without God's will. May that be a comfort to the Christian Reformed Churches of Australia. They, too, applied for membership and this led to some discussion in the gathering. Why and wherefore is not relevant here. In this impression I only remark on the strange manner in which matters can proceed. In order to be admitted as a member, two thirds of the member churches must endorse the admission.

The CRCA, in the end, was one vote short. In itself, there is nothing wrong with that. But, because of the discussion, further consideration was necessary on the next day, to be followed by said round of voting. What was the case here? When you want to become a member, at least two churches must support the application. Unfortunately, one of these two churches had been obliged to leave the conference the following day. Had the CRCA received this vote, it would have become a member without further ado. I should imagine this is a little painful.

About the author:
P.G.B. de Vries is one of the editors of Lux Mundi.

Review

One of the more technical subjects was a very necessary modernization of the *Regulations*. From my own experience I know how difficult it can be to adapt domestic regulations at a provincial majority church meeting, but it really becomes a problem when you have to do that in a setting in which an odd 20 different meeting cultures wish to contribute. The result is a confusion of tongues that brings to mind the tower of Babel. This is a pity, as it leaves little time to discuss the things that really matter. Within the ICRC, for example, a number of new committees are being set up that are to facilitate the work of the member churches at various levels. It would have been better to talk this through a little more instead of questions of precisely how and where definition X or Y is stated.

Presentations

Two presentations were also given during the conference, which were not equally successful. Representing *Refo500*[2] were Dr Herman Selderhuis of the University of the Christian Reformed Churches in Apeldoorn and project leader Karla Apperloo. Refo500 aims to be a platform to bring the history of the Reformation once more to the attention of people in the 21st century: a *platform* on which a broad array of organizations can connect, from cities (such as Heidelberg) to Universities, even Roman Catholic ones. In a few years this association has grown into an international giant. Not all the representatives at the ICRC appreciated the difference between a platform and an organization, and Refo500 was judged to be an ecumenical club.

While I do not wish to defend Refo500, I would mention a point that came to my attention. This article is, after all, an impression. Overall, I noticed that there was much attention to the sermons, their content and construction, but very little for the hearers, a target group that consists of people who do not yet know God, and who know even less of the history of the church. Could not an organization such as Refo500 be a stepping stone to acquaint people with God's work through the ages? It is then the task of the church, the pillar and ground of the truth, to elaborate on this by bringing the gospel. May I suggest: give it some thought, brothers!

The other presentation was by Rev. Jos Colijn, who is setting up an international masters course for the Theological University of the Reformed Churches in Kampen (TUK): *Research Master in Reformed Theology*. This is to be a two-year course, and the main distinctive of the RMRT programme will be its Reformed identity and its academic excellence.[3] A wonderful initiative, if perhaps a little on the expensive side for many churches (25.000 euro).

The members of the Executive Commitee, from left to right: Rev. C. Richard H. Holst (Chairman), Rev. Dick Moes, Rev. dr Peter J. Naylor, Mr Henk Berends (retiring), Rev. Cornelius Van Spronsen (retiring) and Rev. Dr James Visscher.

Some thoughts

It is always easy to deliver criticism from the sidelines, and this is not my intention. However, I would like to make a few remarks that I hope will be experienced as supportive in a positive way for the work the ICRC is doing.

The lectures were of a high theological and theoretical standard. In the West we are used to tackling a subject with rigorous discourse. This time it was 'Preaching', and at the next conference probably 'Hermeneutics', and so on. I would like to make two minor remarks. Firstly, are those really the subjects that support the work of the churches, and by that I particularly mean internationally? Secondly, would not a more practical approach to the problems facing the churches, be it *Islam* or *Secularization*, be more apposite? Once again, this is not meant as criticism, for I know how difficult it is to make the right decisions at such conventions. But nevertheless...

However, let us not forget that the importance of a conference such as this can only marginally be measured by the subjects dealt with. Infinitely more valuable is the communal contact and fellowship. During these six days, every nook and cranny of the building was filled with little gatherings of people holding their own discussions, praying together, making communal preparations for the upcoming Asian Church Leaders Convention in Seoul, etc. The significance of this is probably greater than we will ever know.

Next conference

The ICRC conferences take place once every four years, which means that the next one is planned for 2017[4]. The URCNA (United Reformed Churches in North America) will be the hosting member church, the Lord willing. The meetings will most likely be held in the vicinity of Hamilton (Canada). The main theme will be *Hermeneutical challenges at the present*. In addition, two workshops are planned, one on a diaconal subject and one on the subject of Islam.

Conclusion

Contrary to my custom, I have tried to remain superficial in this article, not entering deeply into the subjects but merely touching on as many points as possible. It may be a little haphazard, but I hope it has whetted your appetite, so that you, as reader or as church, would like to know more about the ICRC. *Lux Mundi* has come to an agreement with ICRC to work together more regularly. As a result we hope to cover the lectures and summaries and the introductions of the new member churches in the following issues. The ICRC can also make use of *Lux Mundi* to publish announcements, reports and preparatory material for a new conference. The future will tell how this will take shape.

I would like to conclude with one final remark. It was heartening to be a guest in Cardiff. To me, the contacts with church members after attending the Sunday church service in the Bethel congregation

From left to right; Rev. Daniel Kithongo (Kenya – AEPC) Rev. Patrick Jok Wic (Sudan – SRC) and Rev. Peter G. Azuana (Nigeria – URCC)

was a personal highlight. The hospitality and care for the well-being of the ICRC attendees by the local Bethel and Immanuel churches was heart-warming. A tribute to them!

Notes:

1 *The text of this sermon will in time be included in the Conference Minutes and can be accessed on the ICRC Website* www.icrconline.com. *There one can also find an overview of the Churches in Membership and the preparatory texts of the discourses on Preaching.*

2 See www.refo500.nl

3 *To our surprise we could not find information on this masters course on the TUK website.*

4 *For the benefit of those who wish to attend the next ICRC conference: However hard the host church tries to prepare a warm welcome, the intentions are thwarted if the representatives do not inform them of their arrival, etc. So please inform the host church fully and on time, to prevent stress and embarrassment for your host. In this case, the only solution to welcome the guests was to post someone at the station for the duration of the entire day! This is, of course, not recommended.*

...during these six days, every nook and cranny of the building was filled with little gatherings of people holding their own discussions...

Jesus said, "I am
the light of the world." John 8:12