

LuxMundi 32

No 3 September 2013

Published quarterly by the Committee
on Relations with Churches Abroad
of the Reformed Churches in The
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Editorial

By J.M. Batteau, p. 59

A Clear Repetition?

By J.M. Batteau, p. 60

Baptism for the dead?

By P.H.R. van Houwelingen, p. 64

The New Testament and the Apostolic' Creed

By J. van Bruggen, p. 66

TU Kampen in context

By J. Ophoff, p. 71

Like clay in the hand of the Potter

By E. Brink, p. 74

Order in the church: Good and pleasant

By K. Harmannij, p. 77

Show them no mercy (1)

By A. Versluis, p. 80

The Mission of God by C.J.H. Wright (1)

By A.J. de Visser, p.82

Newsupdate

Myriam Klinker-De Klerck, p. 79

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Editorial

The voices from our sister-churches in Canada, Australia, and the U.S. are disturbed: “You Reformed people in The Netherlands are going liberal, just like the Synodical Reformed churches did! Wake up, repent, and return to the Bible and the Reformed Confessions!”



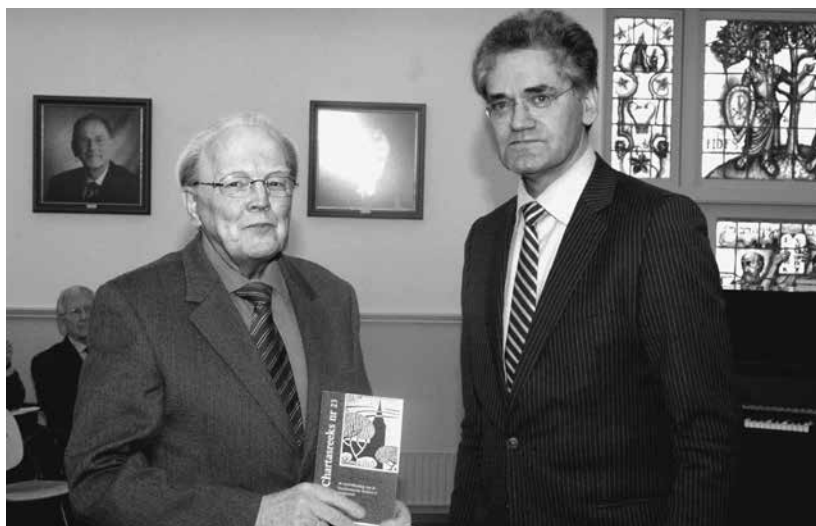
Our sister-churches in Australia and Canada have written our coming General Synod letters of admonition, pointing to very worrying developments, which, to them, indicate that we are losing our moorings in God’s Word. They say that we allow liberal lecturers to lecture in Kampen (Stefan Paas, Koert van Bakkum), that we are heading in the direction of allowing women to all the church offices (see the reports of the deputies making recommendations to the coming Synod about this issue), and that we are cooperating with the Netherlands Reformed churches in various places, a denomination which already has women in office. These are dangerous developments, in their eyes.

Confirmation

In the midst of receiving such admonishments, we are hearing from the sociologist, Gerard Dekker, that our sister-churches seem to be right: we Reformed churches are simply repeating the pattern of the Synodical churches before us. They adapted to the liberal, secular Dutch society, with the intention of relating the Gospel to it, and the Reformed are doing the same, albeit at a later date, and in a somewhat different way.

In an article in this issue of *Lux Mundi*, Dekker’s book, *The Continuing Revolution*, is described, with the critical reactions of Koert van Bakkum and Mees te Velde, faculty members of the Reformed Theological University in Kampen. Is Dekker right?

Prof. Dr. G. Harinck presents the author Dr. G. Dekker the book De doorgaande revolutie (The continuing revolution) in the auditorium of the Theological University in Kampen
(photo P.G.B. de Vries)



Are our critical sister-churches in the world right? Or are the responses of Van Bakkum and Te Velde sufficient to calm the roiling waters. They say, basically, there’s nothing to worry about.

Reflections

It is not my intention in this editorial to try to answer these questions in detail. That will be the difficult task of the coming General Synod of 2014, for which preparations are being made.

It’s always good to listen to sisters, whatever they have to say. That is part of being part of one, close family. So if our sister-churches in Australia and Canada say that they are worried about us, that should be taken very seriously. We might have the tendency to smile and, inwardly, take their criticism with a grain of salt. But that would not do justice to our sisterly relationship. So I think we must do so some serious reflection about the criticism we’re hearing.

Further, Dekker’s book is, with its limitations, one which documents some striking parallels between the Synodical and the Reformed churches (*liberated*). As Van Bakkum and Te Velde admit, these parallels cannot be ignored. It seems, indeed, as if the trends toward adapting to Dutch secular society are demonstrable in both denominations.

It is true, as Van Bakkum and Te Velde point out, that the Reformed are developing under the influence of a different set of factors than the Synodical Reformed did. In the 1960’s and 1970’s, a distinctly liberal, anti-orthodox wind blew through the corridors of the Free University of Amsterdam, leading to a totally different approach to the Bible and to Reformed faith. Now, in Kampen, we cannot say that we see a parallel to H.M. Kuitert, the liberal theologian who rejected orthodoxy and eventually even belief in a personal God. In Kampen, the basically orthodox, classical approach to Scripture and the Reformed Confessions is present, a search for more Biblical approaches to ethics, spiritual life, and being missionary churches in our modern context, combined with the impact of a more “evangelical” ethos in theology and church life.

Uncertainty

It seems to me to be too early to predict which way our churches will be going in the near future. The key issue will be, as it was, for the Synodical Reformed churches, the authority of Scripture.

> page 63

A Clear Repetition?

Gerard Dekker sees the Liberated Reformed churches following in the footsteps of the Synodical Reformed Churches. And he doesn't think it's a bad idea at all. Respondents had criticism of his analysis.



On March 1, 2013, the sociologist Gerard Dekker presented his little book, *The Continuing Revolution: The development of the Reformed Churches in perspective* (*De doorgaande revolutie: De ontwikkeling van de Gereformeerde kerken in perspectief* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2013)), in the auditorium of the Theological University of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands. He had been asked to analyze and summarize his findings concerning the developments in the latter denomination (which publishes this magazine, *Lux Mundi*), since he had analyzed the developments within the larger denomination, the Reformed Churches (Synodical), back in 1992.

Dekker's two books

The book he brought out that year was called *The Silent Revolution: the development of the Reformed Churches (Synodical, J.M.B.) from 1950 to 1990* (*De stille revolutie: de ontwikkeling van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland... (Kampen: Kok, 1992)*). In it he traces the way a large denomination grew after the Second World War, then declined, and changed from an orthodox bulwark into a liberal denomination by 1990 (it joined with the *Hervormde* Church in 2004 to form the Protestant Church in The Netherlands (*De Protestantse Kerk in Nederland*)).

In his new book, Dekker sees the smaller Reformed Churches (*liberated*) following a similar path of initial orthodoxy and separate identity in the years 1970 to 2010, first growing in numbers as a very distinct church group, then declining in numbers, becoming more diffuse, and aligning itself as a part of, rather than hostile to, the surrounding secular Dutch culture.

Continuing Reformation

The Continuing Revolution gets its title from the consequences of the church "Liberation"

(*Vrijmaking*) of 1944, which split the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (*Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*). The primary issue then was the matter of "presumed regeneration," the personal view of Abraham Kuyper (1937-1920), also shared by various Reformed theologians of the 16th and 17th century, that we should presume the children of believers to already be regenerate at the time of their baptism. Later we see if that presumption was valid or not. Klaas Schilder (1890-1952) rejected this view, believing that baptism is a covenant sacrament for all the children of believers, without presuming them to be regenerate. He was eventually ejected from his Professorship in Kampen by the General Synod, and in sympathy a significant number of ministers and members went within him, forming the Reformed Churches (*liberated*). As a consequence, the Liberated Reformed members began to establish their own Christian schools, and even a political party (the GPV), and refused to cooperate with members of the larger Reformed Churches (Synodical) in any way. This was pushed by the slogan: "the continuing Reformation," ("*de doorgaande Reformatie*"). With a play on words, Dekker has used this phrase to now describe a "continuing Revolution" ("*doorgaande Revolutie*") whereby the Liberated Reformed churches are now evidently following the Synodical Reformed churches in adapting to secular society in different ways.

Parallels

Dekker points to how the two denominations mirror each other. If one looks at the Synodical Reformed churches in the period 1950 to 2000, all the trends seem now to have been repeated on a small scale in the Liberated Reformed churches between 1970 and 2010.

The Synodical Reformed churches grew to a peak of 880,000 in 1974, and then shrunk to 677,000 in 2000. The Liberated Reformed churches grew to reach a peak of 127,000 in 2004, but then began to lose members, and in 2010 numbered 124,000.

Both denominations, having as a heritage the influence of Abraham Kuyper, were different from other Reformed denominations in their wanting to have an impact on the culture around them. Dekker sees this as the underlying motivation for the Synodical churches to adapt to their more and

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At the right of Dr. Dekker, Prof. M. te Velde (photo P.G.B. de Vries)

more secular surroundings. Not as a capitulation to secularism, but as an attempt to reach the culture with a gospel “in rapport with the age” (a phrase coming from Kuyper).

He sees the same thing happening in the Liberated Reformed churches. They too are adapting more and more to changing times. Their once very closed, separate life, with only Liberated Reformed organizations, has become much more open, with some organizations (such as the GPV) totally disappearing. But this change is actually logical, he says, due to the Kuyperian background of the Liberated Reformed leading them to try to influence their culture in a more effective, and thus now more open, way than they were doing in complete isolation.

In the Synodical churches, the church bureaucracy grew, women were eventually allowed as office bearers, including the office of minister, church services became less well attended, particularly the afternoon service. Dekker points to the same striking pattern in the Liberated Reformed churches. The central church bureaucracy has grown, women are now allowed to vote in church elections (although not yet allowed to the church offices, that may be coming soon), and the afternoon services are less and less well attended.

As far as doctrine is concerned, here Dekker sees real differences between the two denominations. The Synodical churches, now part of the Protestant Church, are now predominantly liberal, while the Liberated churches are still quite orthodox. But even here there are signs that the Liberated churches are following the Synodical pattern. Doctrine is tending to become less important than emotion in Liberated Reformed preaching and church services, and the view of Scripture is less rigid than it used to be.

Regarding ethics, the Synodical churches now have no problems with homosexual practice, and unmarried couples living together is fully accepted. This is quite different, as yet, in the Liberated churches. Yet, Dekker says, the signs are showing a development in a similar direction. The Liberated churches signal more unmarried couples living together, which is a pastoral challenge. And there is more and more acceptance of the fact that there are homosexual members, some of whom live together, and church discipline is not always being used in these cases.

Dekker's conclusion

Dekker concludes, on the basis of this analysis, that the Liberated Reformed churches have already imitated the Synodical Reformed churches, and will continue to do so in the future.

He says this with some qualifications, yet nevertheless he feels that, on sociological grounds, this pattern is too clear to be avoided.

A voice of criticism: Van Bakkum

At the presentation of Dekker's book in March, two Liberated Reformed theologians on the staff of the Liberated Reformed University in Kampen gave carefully thought-out reactions to the book, which were then also made public.

Koert van Bakkum, lecturer in Old Testament, sees in Dekker's analysis quite a bit which he can agree with. The Liberated Reformed churches have indeed moved from being closed to being more open. He sees the strongest parallels being the demographic one of growth, then decline, the professionalisation of church life (bureaucracy), the increased participation in Dutch social life, and the abandonment of certain typical Reformed characteristics of the past.

But Van Bakkum signals a lack of theological and church insight in Dekker's analysis. While there is, indeed, a growing “pluriformity” in the work of various Liberated Reformed theologians, the trends now are quite different than the theological trends which were evident in the 1960's and '70's in the Synodical churches. The explosive opening toward liberalism of that time is not present in the Liberated Reformed theology, according to Van Bakkum. In the creation ethics of Hans Schaeffer, in the political theology of Ad de Bruijne, in the study of Hans Burger of the concept of “being in Christ,” attempts are being made to renew the Biblical, neo-calvinistic, Kuyperian tradition, while at the same time emphasizing the importance of the church. The Kingdom of God is the setting of marriage,



dr. K. van Bakkum
(photo P.G.B. de Vries)

and in Christ we are more than conquerors. This is another kind of language than H.M. Kuitert of the Free University and the liberalism which followed. In fact, says Van Bakkum, the Liberated Reformed theologians mentioned, and others, are continuing the movement of Klaas Schilder to renew Reformed theology by focusing more on the church.

Van Bakkum sees Liberated Reformed spirituality as rational, practical, and oriented to the world, with a deep consciousness of being chosen by God. But the Schilderian preaching of God's promise and the corresponding demand of obedience is now being complemented with an "evangelical" emphasis on spiritual life, emotional response, and missionary vision. There is a "mixed economy" going on, rooted in the orthodox Reformed tradition, but going also in new, but still Biblical, directions. While the Liberated Reformed are indeed declining in numbers, this doesn't mean that they will parallel the Synodical churches in all ways. A new balance between ratio and experience is being sought, but not at the cost of prayer, discipleship, and inspiring church life. Whatever happens, our life is partial, not more than "piecework" (*"stukwerk"*). But in the church we are certain of reaching our home port.

Another voice of criticism

Professor of Church History, Church Polity, and Congregational Renewal, in Kampen, Mees te Velde, also expressed his reaction to Dekker's book at the March presentation.

Te Velde tells that the Liberated Reformed followed the developments in the Synodical churches very carefully after the Second World War. And with constant disapproval and disdain. The liberal view of Scripture and the rejection of Christ's substitutionary atonement were criticized at

length. He calls this a good, healthy reaction, and a sign of spiritual life in the Liberated churches. However, he says, this criticism was offered at a safe distance, without much awareness of the challenges that the Synodical churches were facing. It is easy to criticize a big, pluriform denomination, from the safety of a small, homogeneous group. That led to a too black and white way of thinking about things. In the 1970's, the Liberated Reformed rejected the Hymnbook of the Protestant churches as totally unacceptable, and never ever considered joining the Dutch Council of Churches. Now we use that Hymnbook ourselves, and we're considering becoming observers within the Council. How times change!

Te Velde believes that Dekker's little book gives us insights into the developments of the Liberated churches. We are indeed deeply influenced by the culture around us, more than we are aware of. Dekker shows how this has taken place. Further, our common roots with the Synodical churches are indeed revealed in the way we have both reacted to our place in society. We both have wanted, indeed, to proclaim and live the Gospel "in rapport with our age" (Kuyper).

However, in calling the Liberated Reformed developments "revolutionary" ("the continuing Revolution"), Dekker has not had sufficient insight in the desire of Liberated Reformed people to be Biblical. "We honor the fact that the church is always developing and subject to change. But we test that movement as much as possible by the Bible." Te Velde feels that Dekker has not seen that adequately. Therefore he calls the term "revolution" "mistaken."

Te Velde is also critical of Dekker's method. Dekker used only the yearly reports and commentaries present in the yearly Liberated Reformed "Handbook." This in contrast to his use of much more, and much more diverse, sources in writing his book about the Synodical churches in 1992. The authors of such Handbook commentaries often wrote with a particular slant and interpretation, which colored their analysis considerably.

Another example of Dekker's faulty use of sources is his analysis of the demographic changes. The parallel is certainly there on the surface between the Synodical and the Liberated churches: growth, reaching a peak, then decline. But where did those who left the churches go to? In the case of the Synodical churches, the vast majority of those who left the church stopped going to church completely. In the case of the Liberated churches, three quarters of those who left, left to join other churches, usually

the smaller, more orthodox denominations. This is quite a different story than Dekker makes it seem!

Te Velde is not convinced by chapter 6 of Dekker's book, about the supposed parallel developments between the Synodical and the Liberated churches regarding church doctrine and confessional faithfulness. A few off-the-cuff remarks of the Liberated Reformed Professor George Harinck (special Professor as Director of the Archives and Documents Center of the Liberated Reformed churches), in an interview, are of a totally different order than the extensive theological works of H.M. Kuitert and C.J. den Heijer. And Dekker misses the influence of evangelical thinking and action on the Liberated Reformed.

Te Velde sees that evangelical influence as giving a special color to the style which the Liberated Reformed are developing. It is, indeed, a kind of modernity. But wholly different than the liberalism in the Synodical churches. "A heart-felt personal faith and a truly experienced Christian life, and that in practice amidst a secular world, is much more at

the center, at this moment." This is precarious, true, but such is life.

In conclusion, Te Velde, agreeing with Van Bakkum, says that what is most important is that the light of the Gospel shine on everything which we encounter in this world. And follow Jesus! Very complex. But also very simple. Te Velde is not pessimistic: the path to follow is clear!

Summary

Summarizing, we may say that while Dekker provides evidence of striking parallels between the Synodical and the Liberated Reformed churches, representatives of the Liberated Reformed, while agreeing that Dekker has made some good points, do not feel he has given an adequate depiction of the actual developments which have taken place till now. ■

■ *In the editorial at the beginning of this issue of Lux Mundi I reflect on Dekker's book and the responses to it by Van Bakkum and Te Velde, in the light of criticism of the Liberated Reformed churches coming from some of our foreign sister-churches.*

J.M. Batteau

Editorial [from page 59]

The liberal theological tradition is still strong in Europe, particularly in Germany, but also in The Netherlands. Orthodox institutions such as the Theological Universities of Kampen and Apeldoorn, are under pressure to conform to academic standards which push, automatically, in a liberal, anti-orthodox direction.

The role of Lux Mundi

Parenthetically: we see the role of *Lux Mundi*, in such discussions as these, as that of seeking to inform a world readership about what the issues are. In general, we seek to help build up the body of Christ in the world through different kinds of articles. We also try to keep the international Christian community aware of what is happening in the Reformed and the Christian Reformed churches here in The Netherlands. And we try to do that transparently, with openness and honesty. When there are, as now, critical letters from sister-churches calling for a response from a General Synod, and when there are debates about a controversial book, such as this book of Dekker's,

we want to describe clearly what is happening, but without directly jumping to conclusions, or taking sides, on one side or another. *Churches* must resolve issues as *churches*. And we are not a church, we are a *magazine* with a particular task to perform. We don't want to ignore the issues and the different points of view, but it is not our task in this magazine to take standpoints about controversial and as yet unresolved issues.

The future?

Regarding the letters of admonition from the Australian and Canadian churches, and the discussions raised by Dekker's book, the question remains: which way will the Reformed churches go? It's time to listen to our critical sisters in the world. Not necessarily to admit that their accusations are justified. But to examine ourselves seriously, in the light of God's Word, listening to what our sisters say with an open spirit. And hopefully, with His help, not repeat the pattern of the Synodical Reformed churches of bending to, rather than confronting, the spirit of our age. ■

Baptism for the dead?¹

“...what will those do who are baptised for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptised for them?” (I Corinthians 15:29 NIV)



Mormons practice a ritual substitutionary baptism for relatives who have already died. They base this practice on the text quoted above. In Mormon thinking, family relationships last forever; even death does not undo them. Through baptism for the dead, deceased relatives are offered an opportunity in the hereafter – as a voluntary choice afterwards – to accept the gospel of Christ, and to be received into the fellowship of believers. For Mormons, then, this ‘baptism for the dead’ is a substitutionary baptism of living people, acting on behalf of ancestors who are no longer alive. This also explains why Mormons are so preoccupied with tracing their genealogies. Their headquarters in Salt Lake City has access to the most extensive collection of genealogical records in the world.

Not a substitutionary baptism

Is this what Paul had in mind? Indeed, there are Biblical scholars who interpret I Corinthians 15:29 in this way. In the Greco-Roman world, people did try to assist deceased relatives in their relocation to the other world. Sacrifices were brought to the gods, and memorial meals were organized. In the same way, so goes the explanation, there would have been believers in Corinth who underwent a substitutionary baptism for the benefit of relatives or friends who had not (yet) been converted; posthumously they were then regarded as Christians.

Substitutionary baptism, however, was unknown as a Christian practice or in the early church, with the possible exception of sectarian groups such as the Marcionites, who, according to some church fathers, practised this baptism.

In addition, the term ‘the dead’ in this chapter always refers to an unspecified group, as distinct from ‘the living’. Paul says nothing about the identity of these ‘dead’. We simply do not know whether they might have been relatives of

Corinthian believers. Neither does Paul offer any comment about his own opinion of the practice of baptism for the dead itself; it appears that there was a fairly limited group within the church that had this view of baptism, just as there was another group that denied the resurrection from the dead (v 12).

Other interpretations

A number of alternative explanations of this puzzling text have been advanced. For instance, ‘baptism’ is sometimes understood to be a *symbolic* expression, describing either an involuntary experience, something which washes over you (see Mark 10:38; Luke 12:50) or an immersion in the practices of attending to the dead. For pagans, these practices consisted of sacrifices and memorial meals; among Jews this would refer to the ritual washings prescribed for those who had touched a dead body (see Sirach 34:30, Hebrews 9:10).

However, such a symbolic interpretation seems unlikely: after all, the first chapter of this letter addresses a *concrete* issue concerning baptism that was playing out in the church of Corinth. *Who* has baptized you is not important, writes Paul: the one Christian baptism must transcend all partisan divisions within the congregation (I Corinthians 1:14-17).

In the footsteps of the early church fathers, we might best think of this as the normal baptism with water. In a manner that the context points us to: people were baptized for the benefit of their own body, which in Adam is under sentence of death (ch. 15:22). After all, do we not all stand with one foot in the grave? In other words, they were not baptized for the benefit of others, those who had already died, but for themselves, so that when they died, they would be *physically* set free from the power of death. Thanks to their connection with Christ in baptism, believers come to share in the resurrection and eternal life (in that case, the Greek preposition *hyper* would have a causative meaning here: ‘because of’, or ‘on behalf of’, as in II Corinthians 1:11b or Philippians 1:29). It may be that some believers delayed their baptism until death was imminent, but that is not clear from the text.

Did Paul regard this view of the Corinthians as

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Photo P.G.B. de Vries

tending towards a form of superstition, as if baptism itself had magical power to save from death? In any case, he seems to take some distance from it, referring to its adherents in the third person: *'those who are baptised for the dead'*. Nowhere in his letters does Paul himself make such an explicit connection between baptism and belief in the resurrection. Still, he does not deny this relationship, and he uses this somewhat peculiar view of baptism among the Corinthians as an argument to highlight the reality of the resurrection. If the dead are not raised in the future, then being baptized loses all significance, even for the present!

Baptism and the resurrection

Whatever 'baptism for the dead' may have been taken to mean, and whatever the motives for this practice might have been, it is clear that Paul constructs his argument concerning the resurrection by asking rhetorical questions that his readers could easily answer for themselves. On the basis of Christ's resurrection, he had argued that death is not invincible (vv. 20-28). What are people who are baptized for the dead trying to accomplish, Paul now asks his readers; why would they do such a thing? The implied answer is clear enough: they do so from a conviction that there *is* life after death, not just a continued spiritual existence, but also a resurrection of the body. And their aim is that they, like every baptized Christian – in the words of the Reformed *Form for Baptism* – "*may finally be presented without blemish among the assembly of God's elect in life eternal*". ■

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Note:

- 1 Originally published in the Dutch language as 'Dopen voor de doden?' In: PHR van Houwelingen and R Sonneveld: *Ongemakkelijke Teksten van Paulus*. Amsterdam, Buijten en Schipperheijn, 2012, pp 138-140. This translation by Aart Plug, July 2013, by arrangement with the author.

The New Testament and the Apostolic' Creed¹

We all know the New Testament, and we all love it. It teaches us to know the Christ, and his work of salvation for us: his love for sinners, whether Jews or Gentiles.



For many, the Apostles' Creed has a very different quality. It is from a later date, and ultimately it is only a human document. Protestants are inclined – no doubt as a reaction to the Roman Catholic view of tradition – to so distinctly separate Scripture and tradition that everything coming after the New Testament itself is regarded as a purely human product, and as such open to challenge. This may explain why so many are quite alert to what they regard as Scripture criticism, but far less alert to what may or may not be happening to our apostolic creed. We often forget that the New Testament itself did not yet exist at the beginning. For century upon century, God's people had lived by a *book*, the Law and the Prophets. These were the Scriptures that were read in every synagogue throughout the world. Moses set the standard, and the prophets gave hope. In this way, the people of God lived towards the future of the Anointed King, the Redeemer for all time. But when at last the time of fulfilment dawned, there was no new *book*. There was no Part Two. The New Covenant had no written beginning; the New Testament was not yet there. The New Covenant began with the apostolic tradition and the apostolic confession. It was not till later that the New Testament Scriptures came into existence. The thesis of this article is that the Christian tradition *preceded* the New Testament, and that the New Testament was *built upon* this tradition. The writings of the apostles and prophets are founded upon the rock of the apostolic confession.

1. John the Baptist

The beginning of the Gospel, we read in Mark 1:1-4, was John the Baptist. He appeared in the wilderness. All the people went out to hear him, and many of them were baptized in expectation of the coming – in judgment and in forgiveness – of the Lord himself.

About the author:

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Of all the prophets, John the Baptist was the greatest. Greater than Isaiah, greater than Daniel. Still, there was no book that was ever named after him. There was never a document with the title *"The prophecies of John the Baptist"*. For Islam, Mohammed is the great prophet, and his greatest legacy is the Koran. But the great prophet of the Messiah left us no book of his prophecies. For a moment, Luke 3:1 seems to be the beginning of such a book. The words we read there are reminiscent of the opening sentences of some of the books of the prophets: *"In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert"*. However, after this introduction, all that follows is the narrative of John's appearance, and a recount of his message to the crowds. Why is there no book now? Why is there no written record of the prophecies of this, the greatest of all prophets? Because all other prophets *pointed forward* to the Messiah, but John *pointed him out*. All other prophets looked into a misty future, and attempted to decipher what they saw (see I Peter 1:10-12) but John sees the Lamb of God standing before him, clearly and as large as life, and points him out (John 1:29-34). The reality of the Messiah has overtaken the book. John is not standing in the Bible; he is standing in the wilderness, and the Lamb of God is right there with him. The Word has become flesh: there is nothing more for John to write. Now that the Promised One has come, the prophets can put their pens down!

2. Jesus of Nazareth.

Just as we have no book ascribed to John the Baptist, there is no book bearing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is no less remarkable. Moses wrote down the Law, after God himself had first inscribed the two stone tablets. But Jesus wrote nothing. Once, in the synagogue of Nazareth, he read aloud from the Scriptures, but immediately afterward he closed the book, sat down, and began to speak: *"Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing"* (Luke 4:21). You can close your Bibles now: reality has arrived.

We only read of one time that Jesus wrote, and even then he did not appear to be really there: while the accusers of the adulterous woman stood waiting impatiently for Jesus' judgment, he bent down and started to write on the ground with His finger. Whatever he wrote in the dust that day has long ago been erased.

Jesus doesn't write: he comes, he is there, he calls the crowd together. On this mountaintop there is no thunder, no tablets of stone are brought down from on high to the people. Instead, on this mountaintop the Sermon on the Mount comes directly to the crowd, present and nearby. It comes from the mouth of him who had come down to this multitude. The Messiah doesn't write: he teaches, and he leads his disciples. The same is true after his resurrection, when he goes before his disciples into Galilee.

Why should he write? At his ascension, he assures us that he is with us always, to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

Moses and the prophets wrote, because there was something for them to pass on. There was a distance to be bridged. Jesus does not write: he is with us forever. He did not leave us as orphans. His Spirit has come to live in our hearts.

3. The writing of the Spirit in our hearts.

By his Spirit, Christ has written us very special letters. Letters, not written from a distance with pen and ink, as the Law and the prophets were, but letters written close at hand, written by the Spirit of the Living God. They were not written on stone or paper, but upon our human hearts. The Spirit of Christ has written the name of God upon the hearts of converted believers. He causes them to be born anew. Converted Christians are the Spirit's trail of ink upon the pages of this world.

As much as Paul was a writer of letters, he understood only too well that his real work was to mediate this Spiritual writing in human hearts. In a letter to the Corinthians he writes: "*You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts*" (II Corinthians 3:3).

After Pentecost, it was not a new book that went out into the world: it was the Spirit himself who went out to Israel and the nations. And the trail left by the apostles consisted of people who had been called into life "*through the word of truth, to be a kind of firstfruits of all that he created*" (James 1:18).

The New Testament church came into existence without a New Testament!

4. Recorded – lest we forget

That which we call the New Testament today is a collection of documents that we could describe as 'commemorative literature'. In his first *Apologia*, Justin Martyr calls the Gospels the 'memoirs' (*apomnēmoneumata*) of the apostles (66,3; see also his *Dialogue* with Tryphon, 100,4). These are the commemorative works of the apostles. Books to remember, not what had been written, but what had *happened*. Books *about* John and Jesus.

Everything we know about John the Baptist and about Jesus himself, we know, not from themselves, but from others! It was the apostles who heard and saw and preached (I John 1:1-5): and afterwards they wrote it all down, lest we forget!

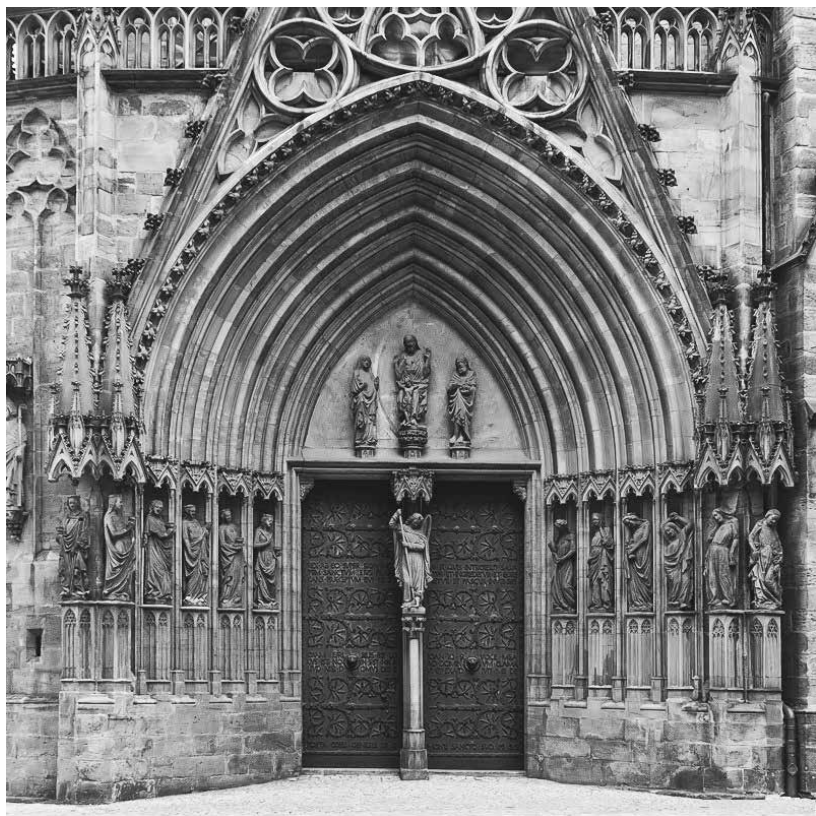
That which was passed on through Peter was committed to writing by his son Mark. The witness of Matthew among the Jews concerning the coming of the Messiah was written down when he left Palestine to go abroad. It is not till the end of his life that John records some of the things he remembered, the truth of which is attested to by other witnesses (John 21:24-25). And in order to confirm what he has already heard, Theophilus receives from Luke a carefully researched written report.

In short: the Gospels were written later, as a commemoration and confirmation of the apostolic preaching of the Gospel.

In Surinam (the former Dutch colony in South America) there are homes that are built upon square stone foundation poles. The homes of people are visibly founded upon sturdy columns. That is also the way it is with the Gospel: it is firmly founded upon the witness of the apostles. We may live in communion with the Spirit of Christ, but our house stands on the foundation of the apostles. We have no writings of John the Baptist, no book of Jesus. All we have is the documents, the commemorative writings of the apostles and the elders, the leaders and the brothers of Jesus. But these eyewitness accounts are our guarantee: the Gospel of the Messiah, the Son of God, is trustworthy, and deserving of full acceptance.

5. The New Testament: an answer to prayer.

The New Testament, as we have it, is a varied collection of apostolic writings. It is a collection of history books, letters, and a revelation. How, then, should we characterize this broad whole? All



Joachimskirche in Erfurt –
The 'apostelenportal'

kinds of attempts have been made to describe and characterize this collection of documents.

We are well acquainted with the description of the New Testament as an uncovering of what is still hidden in the Old. With respect to its content, this collection of books is one of *fulfilment*.

Another description takes its point of departure in the authors. One could say that here we find the assembled inheritance of the apostles, the normative charter of Christianity, the *canon*. In recent centuries, many New Testament scholars have increasingly challenged these descriptions. These scholars describe the New Testament as an arbitrary collection of early Christian literature, the alluvial deposit of a new form of religiosity, precipitated around an impressive historical figure. These scholars see the New Testament as no more than a manifestation of human beliefs: Holy Scripture has lost its normative character; it is all tradition, and no more.

I would like to ask your attention for a different characterization: in the first place, the New Testament is uniquely *an answer to prayer*. It is the divine answer of the prayer the Son directed to the Father.

In the last night before he was crucified, Jesus prayed for his apostles and disciples. First – as we read in John 17 – he prayed for those the Father

had given him, those to whom he had revealed the Father. They were to be sent out into the world, so that others would believe in him through their message.

That especially is why Jesus prays that they might be one (v.11): after all, his intent is that the world might believe that the Father had sent the Son. For the sake of so many, right into the 21st century, Jesus expressly prayed that the apostles might be one after his departure.

There was a real need for this prayer. At that time, all of Jesus' disciples still rejected the idea that Jesus was to be crucified. And in the preceding few months there had been raging quarrels between them. And all this while their Master was still with them! Prospects for future unity seemed quite bleak. And that is why Jesus prayed for their unity in faith. Were it not for that prayer, we might never have heard anything more about the Father and the Son. Or we might have been left with a scattered assortment of contradictory writings, arising from the mutual rivalry of Jesus' past disciples. Then we would truly have to make do with no more than early Christian literature, with no more than tradition.

But Jesus' prayer of that night was answered. At Pentecost, and afterward, this group of unwilling and quarrelsome apostles was forged into a strong unity. The book of Acts bears witness to that: in widely varying circumstances, the apostles Peter and Paul preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Messiah of Israel. And in Galatians 2 we read how Peter, James, and John extend the hand of brotherly fellowship to Paul and Barnabas. They may have different fields of labour: the Gospel unites them with each other and with Jerusalem.

The greatest marvel is that all the apostles, except for a few minor and temporary differences, remain fully united, even to the point of martyrdom. From Jerusalem, their paths went off into all directions, but it was always *one Gospel* and *one faith*². More than anything else, the New Testament is uniquely an answer to prayer.

6. The groundwater of the apostolic faith

There is, however, something quite striking about the New Testament. In it we find the apostolic Gospels as windows on the Saviour's work; we read about the preaching of these apostles in the book of Acts. Other than that, we only have documents written for particular circumstances, letters addressed to specific people or groups of people. Letters that were written in concrete situations. Anyone who reads the New Testament today can

easily discover what the apostles and elders *wrote* in their letters. But what did they *believe*? What united *them*?

The New Testament letters provide no direct answers to these questions. Letters are not creeds, or confessions of faith. Neither are they statements of principle, or common manifestos. But the apostles would not have been able to address, with full conviction, specific circumstances in the various churches, if they could not draw on universal and consistent prior convictions: common ground that they shared with those to whom they wrote. It is this shared, common faith that enables the apostles to encourage, exhort and admonish. A short sharp letter, written by Jude for a specific occasion, presupposes *“the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints”* (v.3). And Simon Peter knows that he and all of his readers have received the same *‘precious faith’* (II Peter 1:1). This community of faith does not exist just between the apostles and their readers. It is also

apostles wrote letters, and travelled from church to church. They were shepherds who were called to feed their flocks (I Peter 5:1-4; Acts 20:18-35).

From the very beginning, the *‘apostles’ teaching* was the instruction of *“Peter, (who) stood up with the Eleven”* (Acts 2:14, 42).

Very early in its history, the Church began to express this common apostolic faith in the words of the Creeds: the Apostles’ Creed summarizes this faith in 12 statements. One faith, shared by twelve apostles!

This Apostles’ Creed, while drawn up at a later date, aims to function as a uniformly articulated standard for all the letters: this was the *point of departure* for all the apostles whenever they wrote their pastoral advice and admonition. This is the point of view that unlocks for later readers all the lines of sight in the landscape of the apostolic letters.

Beneath the surface of their letters lies the groundwater of the apostolic faith. As Christians, we search for the groundwater of these letters, and we discover that they flow from the wellspring of Christ and the Spirit. Once, the apostles learned to accept Christ with a true faith: now, *‘streams of living water’* flow from within them (John 8:38). The contents of the Apostles’ Creed (the 12 articles) are not a ‘later product’ of the church: they are an expression of what lay at the foundation of all the apostolic writings. The apostles, when they wrote their letters, simply echoed and affirmed the Gospel that Jesus Christ had taught them to accept. Together, the apostles are arrayed as a hedge of believers, between whom we walk whenever we enter through the door of the Gospel.



Jacob Van Eyck: *the adoration of the Lamb by the 24 elders*. c.1430

shared among all the apostles and prophets that lived during the apostolic period. Peter writes about *“the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Saviour through your apostles* (II Peter 3:2).

Behind all those letters, behind all the apostles, stands this common tradition, a tradition on which Paul also draws. Concerning the most important things that he has preached in Corinth, he writes: *“...what I received I passed on to you as of first importance...”* (I Corinthians 15:3; see also ch. 11:2, 23). It is not just the churches that must hold fast to *“the sacred command that was passed on to them”* (II Peter 2:21); the leaders of the churches too have no other task than to *“guard what has been entrusted to (their) care”* (I Timothy 6:20). One day, they will have to give an account of the way they did that (Hebrews 13:17). It is precisely for this reason that the

7. Summary and conclusions

To summarize, we can say that the supposed sharp distinction between the *earlier* New Testament, and a *later* tradition, which includes the Apostles Creed, does not conform to reality. The house of the New Testament rests upon the pillars of the apostolic tradition. Sometimes, this tradition can be discerned *in* the lines of the New Testament; more often, however, it can also be found *between* and *behind* these lines.

Conclusion 1.

In our time, most people accentuate what they themselves believe: the personal experience of faith, and one’s own understanding of what that faith is, often form the points of departure for dialogue. At the very least, there is a need for an addition here: my personal faith must agree with and build on the



Stilt house, Suriname

teaching and tradition of the apostles. Otherwise, it is no longer the catholic Christian faith; it can only be the transient experience of a passing sentiment in a particular age.

Conclusion 2

In our day, the claim is often heard that our confession must connect to the contemporary questions of our own time. In this context, the expression 'a growing confession' is sometimes heard. The apostolic confession, however, did not spread in connection with and in response to the questions of its age; instead, it connected to the heavenly revelation through the Son, who came from above. It was expressed with increasing precision in order to defend it. To the Jews, this confession was offensive; to the Greeks, it was foolishness. For both, it was irrelevant. But what is irrelevant for men is relevant for God; in every age, it becomes relevant for all who accept the Gospel. This confession teaches us to analyse the so-called questions of our time, and often to unmask them. The preaching of Paul at the Areopagus cut across the Greek world-view and experience: they '*spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas*' (Acts 17:21). To the Athenians, Paul's preaching about the resurrection

from the dead and the final judgment was quite irrelevant, and they sent him on his way. This, however, did not lead Paul to develop a 'growing Gospel', driven by the questions of his audience.

Conclusion 3

The unity of Christians and the promotion of the true and living faith would be greatly served by a broader knowledge of the Apostles' Creed in evangelical circles, and by a revived exposition and preaching of the Creed in Reformed churches. Since ancient times Faith, Commandments and Prayer were the three pillars of Christian liturgy, preaching and spirituality. In the Reformed tradition, these three pillars were brought together in the Heidelberg Catechism. Whoever fails to uphold honour the place of regular Catechism preaching, regular reading of the Ten Commandments, or regular use of the Lord's Prayer, loses connection with this ancient foundation, and is exposed to the danger of restricting preaching and spirituality to the personal interests of the preacher or the narrower concerns of the congregation. It is only upon the foundation of Peter the Rock that the church will remain invincible. Only this foundation will give it lasting relevance for a humanity that has lost its way, and within a divided Christendom. ■

Notes:

- 1 *Translation of a speech entitled Het Nieuwe Testament en de Apostolische Geloofsbelijdenis, presented at a meeting of members of the Reformed Churches (liberated) at Nijmegen, the Netherlands, on March 22, 2011. This translation by Aart Plug, July 2013, by arrangement with the author. All Scripture quotations and references are taken from the New International Version of the Bible, (NIV), 1984 edition.*
- 2 *For more on this subject, I refer to PHR Van Houwelingen: CNT: De Apostelen, Kok, Kampen, the Netherlands, 2010.*

TU Kampen in context

In the minds of many churches and Christians throughout the world, Kampen is inextricably linked to the Theological University. This image has not changed with the departure of the Protestant Theological University to Amsterdam and Groningen. Christians from around the world who wish to study Reformed theology come to Kampen. It is important that the readers of *Lux Mundi* are kept up to date. Our world develops rapidly, and a theological university is a part of that world.



Undoubtedly all kinds of stories about Kampen are reaching readers all over the world. The preparatory course has been discontinued: what does that mean for the study of the classical languages that has always been central in Kampen? Has the Synod of the Reformed Churches indeed decided that 'Kampen' will be moving to another location? What can Kampen mean for the churches worldwide today? In this article I will outline some of the developments the University has faced in recent years.

Funding

The Theological University in Kampen (TUK) is closely affiliated to the Reformed Churches. The training of ministers for the Reformed Churches is the university's core business. Until 2009, the funding of the university was entirely shouldered by the churches. As early as 2005 the General Synod decided that the university would apply to the government to be eligible for government funding. Since 2009-10 the TUK has been included under the Higher Education law as a philosophical institution with a right to funding. On average, forty percent of the budget is funded by government department. So even today the churches provide more than half of the financial resources of the University.

Identity

The University incorporates its Reformed identity in some key features of education and research:

1. Theological education and scholarly research are carried on in the context of a living relationship with God. All knowledge is related to the spiritual knowledge of God. Therefore we focus on both the various academic disciplines of theology and the spiritual and personal development of students in relation to God and to each other;

2. Theology requires a close reading of the Bible. The Bible is indispensable as God's revelation through which we can come to know Him. It is also vital for knowing the realities of church and creation in relation to God. The Bible is decisive for all subjects studied. How to use the Bible in a personal way is specifically practised;
3. Theology is directly connected to the life of the Christian congregation as it exists in the world. This connection is expressed in the choice of subjects, literature and assignments.¹

Bachelor's Revision

In 2009 and 2010 a project group worked hard on the revision of the Bachelor's curriculum. This revision was necessary, due both to the discontinuance of the preparatory course in classical languages and to the profound reflection on theological education. A few basic principles of the Bachelor's course:

- The knowledge and (grammatical) mastery of Latin and Greek, which is necessary for theology, is integrated into the Bachelor's course;
- The Bible and source languages are included in the training as auxiliary science, and integrated into the module "*Listening to the Word*", a module that starts in the Bachelor of Theology and continues in the Master of Divinity;
- The entire Bible should be treated in the Bachelor's course.

Kampen, therefore, remains a theological education, with an emphasis on a good knowledge of the Biblical languages. This is connected to the module "*Listening to the Word*" throughout the entire programme of instruction. Theologians, of all people, must learn to listen to the Word of God with their heads and their hearts.

In the past academic year 2012-13 the first group of students followed the renewed final-year classes. Much has been invested in the past two years in a renewed Master of Divinity programme, continuing along the lines of the Bachelor's courses. Characteristic of the renewed Master of Divinity is the constant interaction with practical reality, ensuring students are better prepared for their work in a congregation. After a couple of lean years the number of students is now stable at a higher level. On 1 October 2012 there were 46 Bachelor's students, 36 students in the Master of Theology and 28 students in the Master of Divinity programs.

About the author:

"Rev. J. Ophoff (born in 1960), is minister of the Reformed Church in Zwijndrecht, and chairman of the Supervisory Council of the Theological University in Kampen."

Along with a number of other registrations, the total number of students was 125. In the one-year Master of Theology course it is especially the Master Missional Church that appeals to students.

Internationalisation

The General Synod of Harderwijk in 2011 and 2012 gave a powerful boost to the University's internationalisation policy. Some of the financial resources that became available as a result of government funding were re-invested to strengthen the university's strategic and international position.

It is important to note that the university's internationalisation programme runs along two paths. The academic path concerns international academic cooperation with similar so-called benchmark institutions in the fields of education and research. The ecumenical path concerns the contacts and exchange of lecturers with foreign theological institutions, institutions that do not yet meet European quality standards, and appeal to the TUK out of a shared Reformed identity.

In 2012 more lecturers and researchers went to foreign institutions (including Brazil, Kenya and Louvain, in Belgium). Twelve students from abroad came to study in Kampen during that same year. The university encourages students from Kampen to study somewhere else in the world for a while. There were also lecturers from elsewhere who came to Kampen (including Dr. Gordon Campbell of the Union Theological College in Belfast (UK) and Prof. Dr. C. van Dam of the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary). The university has appointed a tutor for the guidance of foreign and PhD students.

When it comes to internationalisation, another key component is the development of an English-language Master's programme. The General Synod mandated that also. Since September 2012, Jos Colijn has been appointed as coordinator (0.25 FTE). The workload of his function will be expanded in September 2013. It is important that this programme is accredited, too. To this end, the English-language Master's programme will probably be formed as an *International Master in Reformed Theology in context* with intended date of commencement September 2015. The university is consulting with institutions and lecturers from all over the world with regard to this research Master's programme.

Cooperation

In the Dutch context the universities of Kampen and Apeldoorn (TUA) are two small theological

universities that need each other badly. A good cooperation exists between the two Boards of Directors, and regular consultations are being held. Almost all the lecturers of the various disciplines know each other. For many years now the cooperation has been most intensive when it comes to scientific research. Together, they have settled on three research programs for the 2012-17 period. The three research groups consist of professors and researchers of both institutions. The General Synod of the Christian Reformed Churches will meet in September 2013, while the Synod of the Reformed Churches (Liberated) meets in the first half of 2014. Undoubtedly, both Synods will discuss the cooperation between the two universities. Years ago, the first attempts were made to achieve cooperation between the Gereformeerde Hogeschool (GH) in Zwolle and the TUK. For a variety of reasons these attempts were unsuccessful. The Synod of Harderwijk 2012 gave the go-ahead for the plan of the TUK and the Centrum Dienstverlening Gereformeerde Kerken (Service Centre of the Reformed Churches) to set up with the GH a Practical Centre in the area of practical theology, practice-oriented research, knowledge acquisition, and service.

The TUK expects much to come from the interaction between all kinds of religious practice and scientific reflection in the Practical Centre. The researchers will focus on questions and bottlenecks in the ecclesiastical practice, in the fields of pastoral care, youth work and the diaconate for example. The relevance of the scientific research is thus served. This interaction is important for the churches too: courses in the congregation will not only provide a few easy to swallow morsels, but are preceded by solid research and enter into a full consideration of matters. Bottlenecks that occur in many congregations will be thoroughly analysed, ensuring that all factors will be taken into account in the final recommendations.

An example of such a project is the research into the methods of church planting. Research will be done into the identity, funding and effectiveness of church planting projects within the Reformed Churches (Liberated). The aim is to report this research to the General Synod of 2014. In the research project *Diversity*, a realistic and adequate picture of the existing and expected future points of difference within the Reformed Churches (Liberated) will be obtained, based on a comprehensive consultation of experts from the ecclesiastical field. It includes both the theological



photo P.G.B. de Vries

content and the way to deal with those points of difference. Both areas may give rise to serious problems in the perception of members of the congregation. The aim of this project is to develop a course and associated resource material for the congregations.

Knowledge Exchange

AKZ+ deserves a mention, too, when it comes to cooperation. AKZ+ is a good example of the third primary purpose of a university (the first two being education and research): knowledge exchange and services to the churches and society. In AKZ+ the TUA, TUK and GH (Apeldoorn, Kampen and Zwolle) are working together. AKZ+ offers courses to a broad public and responds to questions that Christians are facing today. This way, the research and education taking place within these three institutions is made fruitful for its supporters. In 2012 a series of lectures was held on the desirability of Christian politics. In 2013 new courses of lectures will be offered, including series dealing with Karl Barth and Bram van de Beek's theology.

Another example is the *Continuing Education for Pastors* program (PEP). It has become increasingly obvious in this past decade that ministers need to be constantly trained, as happens in other professions (such as doctors and lawyers). The university offers

a variety of refresher courses, primarily intended for ministers, but also open to other participants. The TUK focuses on three areas: updating theological knowledge, understanding of context and culture, and competence development. Specifically, this translates into a well-attended conference about homosexuality, a course in coaching, an Islam journey, a course on *Sermons about the Old Testament*, a short *Update in Theology* and an intensive course about Charles Taylor, *Secular Time*.

Visible

Early in 2009 the university outlined its ambitions in the strategy document *Serving & Versatile*. In the Dutch context a great deal is happening in the field of theology. Theological education is being reorganized. The number of students at theological faculties continued to decline. More than four years after *Serving & Versatile* we can conclude that the position of the TUK has been strengthened. The university is more visible, and that among other things is reflected in the number of students applying for the Bachelor's or one of the Master's courses. In recent years, a number of new lecturers and researchers have been appointed in order to invest in the future of the university. The preliminary results of the 2013 education audit show that the quality of education is very high. In the meantime, reflection on the strategic position of the University is still going strong. The Synod's order to reflect on the location of the university and on cooperation with other partners should be seen in that light. The question is how Kampen can remain attractive for current and future students as a theological university.

Grateful

At the TUK, people work hard on education, research, and knowledge exchange. The context is constantly changing and poses intense questions for the University and the churches. It is a great gift for us as a university community to experience that we continue to be able to do this work in faith, in deep dependence on God who gives us so many gifts and possibilities. "As for other matters, brothers and sisters, pray for us. Pray that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured, just as it was with you." (II Thessalonians 3: 1) ■

Note:

- 1 "Trialoog" - Self evaluation report 2013, page 8. See www.tukampen.nl. I have also extracted a lot of data from the annual report 2012, recently published on the website.

Like clay in the hand of the Potter¹

"Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?" declares the Lord.

"Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel"

(Jeremiah 18:6)



He can make and break us! We are the material in God's hand. He can do with us as he sees fit. That is the Artist's privilege. We are made the way He envisaged us. In a similar way this image is also used by Paul. God is sovereign and free to do as He will. "Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" (Rom 9:20). Yet, upon closer inspection, we see that the image of a Potter is used differently by Jeremiah.

Jeremiah is commissioned to go and look at an everyday scene: a potter at work. One could find these everywhere in the Ancient Near East, as one still can find them today in many parts of Africa. The potters then worked with two wheels (18:3). The potter's wheel (or disk) was connected by a vertical axle to another stone wheel. The bottom wheel was driven by the foot so that the top wheel, serving as a plate upon which the clay lay, was turned as well. At the start it is just a lump of clay, but by turning the wheel it can take shape. The creator's hands start to mould it into shape. He gently coaxes the clay upward and shapes it into what he has in mind. The potter wants to make something beautiful. As with everyone who loves his work, so he himself wants to make something he can be proud of, something to be admired. This requires great patience and artistic craftsmanship.

Only, in this instance, while Jeremiah is watching it is not working at all (18:4). The unmanageable clay suddenly slips away from the potter's fingers. Today, not a single product emerges that is to his satisfaction. The material is unyielding and impossible to mould into shape. The clay is resisting his intentions - and even the craftsman can do nothing with this sample.

Then the potter removes from the wheel the whole object he has been working on for some time. He folds it back into a shapeless lump of clay and starts to knead it again. For he must have something useful that suits his purpose. He then carries on working for as long it takes, until he is satisfied; until it is exactly as he had envisaged (18:4). The potter is patient with the material even when it is intractable and unyielding. A good potter always masters his clay in the end.

Living material

Here it is not a pot or vase that is finished, but one that still has to be *moulded* into shape (18:3). The material is still living, still moving, it can take on another shape. God is the Sculptor who continues to shape the model. He wants to model according to the image He envisages. In order for that to happen the material has to cooperate. The Creator Sculptor can only make something of it if it *allows* itself to be moulded into shape. Something good can only emerge if they cooperate and do not resist each other. That is how the Creator has created us, as living material, equipped with our own responsibility. It is a combined play between God and man. The Potter, who is extraordinarily artistic, moulds the shape but, at the same time, the material must cooperate. Their reactions partly determine what will happen, for nothing happens automatically. God demands a response. He associates with people in a serious manner, true to life, in an open relationship. He struggles to win the hearts of people, as a potter struggles to master his material.

Unmanageable material

How obstinate the material is! It does not give way, not even an inch. It is unyielding and will not do what the Maker wants, so that He can make nothing of it: unworkable, unmanageable. In this way nothing beautiful will come from his hands. It is doomed to fail. That is not God's fault, as the Potter, for there is no lack of vision, expertise, craftsmanship or good intentions. But the material will not let itself be moulded. It is unyielding, inflexible, hard and resisting. It simply refuses. Nothing can be done with it. The people will not let themselves be shaped according to their Creator's noble intentions.

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It is not difficult to imagine this, considering what was going on in those days of King Jehoiakim (2 Kings 24). God had done so much to shape his people, and reshape them under the reign of the well-meaning King Josiah. There seemed to be the beginning of repentance and restoration. But the first signs of reform soon subsided. Everything became more important than God: the growing economy, the pull of free sexual morals, the political lobbies and diplomatic deals, one superpower eyeing up the other. In the meantime, the living God was being passed by and completely ignored.

Jesus, the greatest prophet, established the following in His days: what did God not do to form you, His people? But you were not willing (Mat 23:37). Therefore it is doomed to failure. Whoever refuses to allow God to shape him, and maintains a life without Him, fails. All the beautiful things that God envisaged will not emerge, more's the pity.

Patient reformation

One would expect that at length the Lord would be completely done with it. When material resists more than it cooperates... and people become so unmanageable.... When the work that God has in hand fails, surely He will not struggle endlessly to make something of it? Indeed, there comes a time when He starts afresh. That is God's style: like a potter making a new start, He does the same. *God does not give up when the clay refuses to be moulded.* He does not stop when all fails miserably. Neither does He cast away the failed project. He presses the lump of clay into a ball and He makes a new start. For He cannot leave His project. He is full of patience and perseverance. He will not rest until it is finished. He does all it takes to form His people, however unyielding and unmanageable they may be.

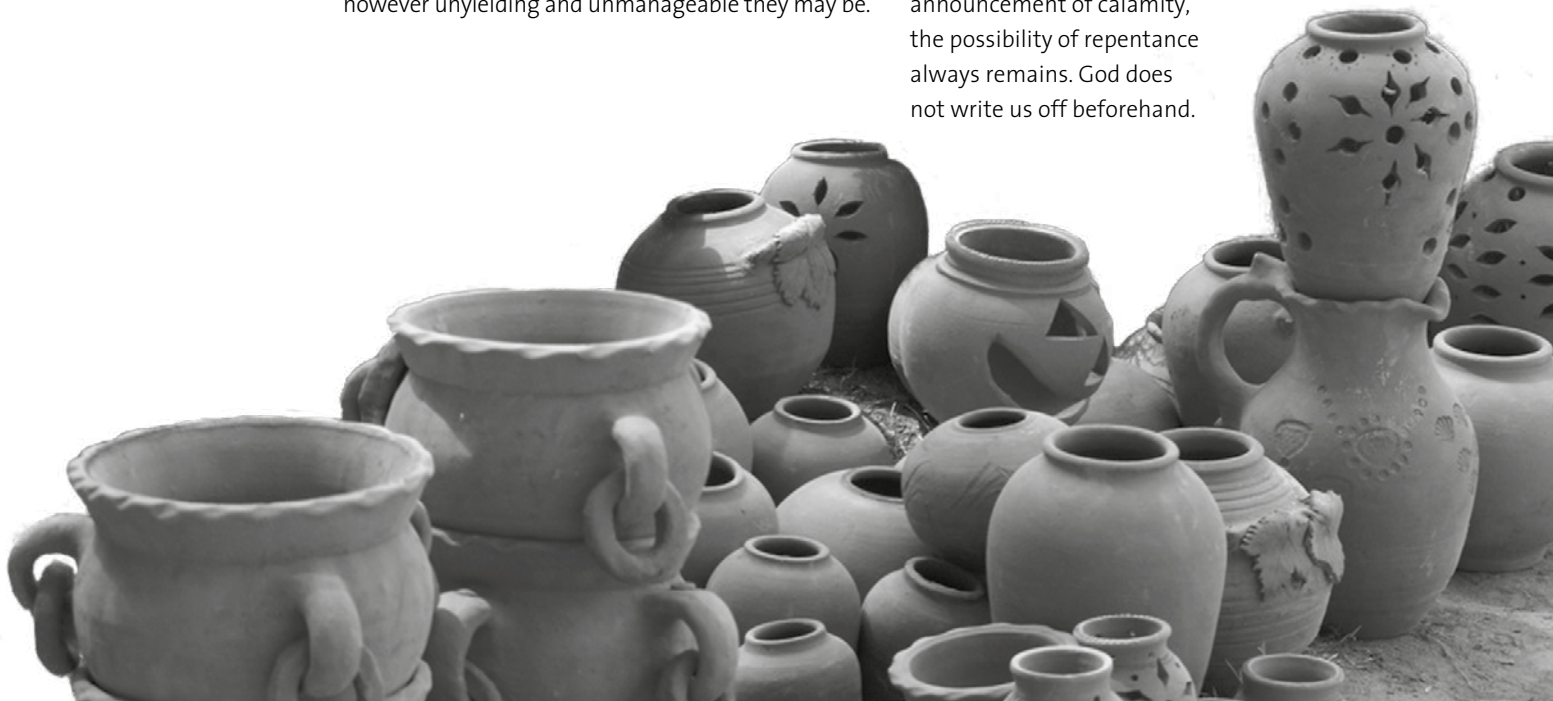
Jeremiah wants to move God's people to commit themselves anew into the hands of God the Sculptor. The Sculptor wants nothing more than to make something beautiful from that same lump of clay - be it willing or unwilling. Sometimes clay needs a hard hand and considerable pressure to mould it. God does not cease nudging his people so that they are moulded into shape and built up, though it might mean that God places Himself in a vulnerable position before the forum of all nations. Nevertheless, there is a limit to His patience. If the clay is no longer fit for its original purpose, the potter makes something else out of it. The quality and pliability of the clay plays a part in determining what he can make of it.

Living relation

Our God is like a potter. He is free to use His material as he sees fit. He can make or break us. Yet this is not the point at issue here. It is about God taking very seriously our own responsibility.

For the Lord is not a potter who works in silence (18:6). By speaking, He seeks contact all through the ages. He utters His words through Jeremiah and demands an answer, a response (18:9-10). God maintains a living and open relationship with his people. God reveals His plan and this demands a response. And by now the plan that Jeremiah is revealing is a disaster scenario. Whether the prophet likes it or not, he is to contradict all those who make light of the situation: if you continue down this road, things will go from bad to worse and further down the drain. Improve your life: let yourself be reformed!

Just to make things clear, this is not *an inevitable fate*. Even in the face of the greatest threat and the clearest announcement of calamity, the possibility of repentance always remains. God does not write us off beforehand.



He keeps calling upon us to repent, up until the very last moment. All thoughts of inevitable doom are strange to Him. What He has said is not an unrelenting destiny. Certainly, God means what He says, like a parent who sincerely warns his child. But He always keeps the road to repentance open. The Lord never acts blindly, in a fixed consequential sequence, as if He is tied to his own words. He continually takes into account the changed circumstances and makes a strong appeal to our responsibility. There is room to move. God is sensitive to repentance.

Jeremiah may see things very darkly: there's little chance of those people repenting. God had even forbidden him to intercede in prayer (7:16). So unmanageable and incorrigible is the mentality of these people. It is even so strong that obstinacy and unwillingness are voiced openly (18:12). God actually says in so many words that he does not count on repentance. He knows His people well enough and sees through them. But that is in itself compassion. *He lays bare their unwillingness and even then offers room to repent.* His association with people is so lively. He shows His love in the darkest threat. The prophecy of doom finds its most treasured fulfilment when it can be withheld because of repentance.

Flexible plan

God reconsiders...(18:10). In many Bible translations this has been translated as 'God repented'. Is that possible? Can God turn back on His intentions? Does He adjust his clear-cut plans? Does God, then, not have a fixed plan? He is free to reconsider

His resolve. But that does not mean that He has changed his mind, or that His plan has failed. He does not act willy-nilly, but in all freedom. God's plan is flexible in all directions. He purposely anticipates what people do and draws up His plan accordingly. For He is sovereign and not dependent upon what people do. He achieves his purpose, but can do that by means of a radical change of course. If people react *thus*, He will do *such and such*. When people behave differently, He acts differently. He has taken all possible scenarios into account. God is only bound to Himself. He will not be tied down by consequences drawn by people, as though He were obliged to stick to what they want Him to stick to. *What God has done and said previously does not limit His freedom regarding the future.* He can change His plan according to the situation into which people bring themselves.

God compares Himself to the Potter who is and remains creative. He works patiently with living material and anticipates unerringly all varying circumstances. ■

Note:

- 1 This article was first published in *The Netherlands* in April 2011 as 'Zoals klei in de hand van de Pottenbakker' in the religious magazine *Nader Bekeken*, Volume 18, Issue no. 4, April 2011. In this translation by Sabrine Bosscha-Timmermans, July 2013, all Scripture quotations and references, unless otherwise stated, were taken from the *New International Version of the Bible*, (NIV), 1984 edition.

Order in the church: Good and pleasant

A new Church Order in The Netherlands

When the queen of Sheba visited the king of Israel, she was greatly impressed by what she heard, but also and especially by what she saw. She saw *all the wisdom of Solomon and the palace he had built, the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes, his cupbearers, and the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the Lord* (1 Kings 10:4,5). The wisdom of Solomon was not just a matter of fine words; it found expression in the organization of his reign.



The Queen of Sheba was struck by the order that ruled among God's people. Actually, she was not the first stranger to be overwhelmed by this phenomenon. In this, the sorcerer Balaam had preceded her. Having been hired to curse the people of Israel, the power of the Holy Spirit was such that he was unable to do anything but bless it. Together with his employer, the king of Moab, Balaam had tried to escape this power. On his third attempt, he no longer sought direct contact with God; instead he turned his focus directly toward the Israelites. Surely, the sight of these intruders was sure to evoke feelings – and words – of distaste and hostility! But the opposite happened. *“When Balaam looked out and saw Israel encamped tribe by tribe, the Spirit of God came upon him and he uttered his oracle: ‘How beautiful are your tents, Jacob; your dwelling places, Israel!’”* (Numbers 24:3,5). This order that so overwhelmed Balaam was by command of the LORD Himself: Numbers 2. It was His will that Israel should not become an amorphous mass, but be an ordered army. It was to His honour that Israel had not left Egypt in wild flight, but in ordered array, *“by their divisions”* (Exodus 12:41, 51). Paul truly had enough reason to write to the Corinthians that *“God is not a God of disorder, but of peace”* (1 Cor 14:33)

Why dirty word?

Why, then, does ‘order’ seem to be a dirty word for so many people? Largely because we are wary of people who would, by means of their ‘order’, impose their own rules upon the church, turning

believers into slaves, rather than free Christians. There is good reason for this caution.

This peril cannot be averted, however, by keeping all forms of regulation at a distance. If we did this, the danger would just be the greater. For I know myself only too well. Should there not be a functioning church order, I would only try to use my position to impose my own will. No-one would then hold me back for we do not wish to be bound by church rules, do we?

A sound church order will serve to limit firmly the power of potential leaders in the church. For Christ alone is to be the Lord of the church. The church order, then, will set the limits of the office-bearers’ authority.

The church order requires office-bearers to work collaboratively. The church order gives assemblies the means to deal with unfaithful office-bearers. And all this to safeguard the church of Christ from the desire for power of the few. A sound church order provides the framework for giving ordinary church members a voice. The church order prescribes that all kinds of important decisions may only be taken with the agreement of the congregation. The church order provides recourse for those who have suffered injustice. In short, the church order creates room for ordinary members, those who do not have special positions, to exercise their own responsibilities before Jesus Christ their Lord.

Means of communication

Another important function of a church order is as a means of communication. The church order enables local congregations to establish relations with others, and to form a bond of churches. Relationships will always be difficult when each of the participants operates by their own set of rules. Mutual agreements lead to better mutual understanding, and promote more meaningful relationships. That is why the church order sets out how mutual relationships are to be exercised. And what authority a broader assembly of churches has. We do not want to have a central directorate, a

About the author:

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'head office', which decides how matters are to be conducted at a local level. At the same time, we do not want our broader assemblies to be little more than 'talk-fests', lacking the capacity to resolve common issues. A sound church order, then, will create a healthy balance between the influence of broader church assemblies and the freedom of local congregations.

Finally, each church order must also regulate matters of church discipline. For us to keep each other together in the salvation of Christ, we need to be able to admonish one another about errors or sinful practices. If the congregation is to be preserved as a holy unity, those who oppose the faith must needs be removed from the church. Such exercise of discipline is never easy. Not least because those who are addressed rarely show any appreciation for it. A sound church order will encourage the elders of the church to persevere with what must be done. It provides suitable instruments for discipline, and sets out how these may be used. It protects office-bearers from improper use of discipline and unfair criticism. It provides for the right moments to request the advice of others. In this way, the church order assists to promote "*harmony and unity, and to keep all in obedience to God*" (Belgic Confession, Article 32). A sound church order is therefore a matter of great importance to the church, and is pleasing to God.

A New Church Order

That is why the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands have invested a great deal of time and energy in a thorough revision of its Church Order. The General Synod of 2011 already adopted a provisional version. After a final round of consultation within the churches, the new Church Order is to be implemented in 2014. A number of its key features:

The *accessibility* of the Church Order has been enhanced. Compared with the *Church Order of Dort* of 400 years ago, there are more chapter divisions. This will assist readers in more readily finding their way in it. The old sequence of articles has been replaced; it is now organized in a manner that fits more logically with the needs of our time. In this context, one important change is that all decisions made by the churches that are linked to the church order are brought together in a carefully articulated set of 'general regulations'. With the new Church Order, you no longer need to be an expert in church government to see which points of church polity

apply in particular situations. Everything in the Church Order is readily accessible to any interested member of the congregation.

The *catholicity* of the Church has received greater emphasis. An enemy of Christ may not be harboured as a friend within the church. Hence, the churches' disciplinary processes have been reviewed, so that even in a time of growing indifference with regard to the choice of a church denomination, they may remain effective. On the other hand, the church ought to stand open for all those who truly desire to live by the grace of Christ. This will ask us to exercise a degree of tolerance with some who have not yet found the right way on certain points. In addition, the Church Order, much more explicitly than before, gives recognition to other bonds of churches at home and abroad.

The *external dimension* of the Church Order has been brought into sharper focus. The church has its place within the civil society, which operates by its own laws. Churches in the Netherlands enjoy a great deal of freedom. They have the right to regulate their internal affairs themselves. But it would be shameful for the church if its internal regulations were inferior to those outside. Churches that do not have their own affairs in order are more liable to be confronted by intervention from the side of the civil authorities. The new Church Order aims to enable the churches to present themselves to the world without embarrassment, so that civil authorities can exercise restraint in matters that belong to the churches.

Procedures for appeal are more precisely described. Decisions within the churches can often evoke resistance. Sometimes rightly, sometimes not. But in all cases, lack of proper care in handling complaints and grievances will easily lead to deep-seated conflicts, in some cases even to schism within the church. Hence, it is vitally important that principles of justice and due process for all parties are carefully observed, right from the beginning. At this point, the new Church order is much more elaborate than the old one. Objections and grievances can be properly dealt with at an early stage, and conflicts prevented as much as possible.

The *organization of the churches* has been simplified. Up to the present, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands had three levels of assembly: *classes* at the regional level, more broadly

at *particular synods*, and nationally at the *general synod*. The revised Church Order no longer gives the same place to the particular synod. While this assembly will not cease to exist, they will be fewer, and their tasks will be much more limited. The intention of this arrangement is that the distance between the general synod and the local churches will be reduced. Further, at the level of the congregations, the respective roles of elders and deacons will be more clearly differentiated.

Those of us who grew up with the old Church Order may need time to get used to the new one. The revision is quite substantial, and it will not be easy to simply lay the two versions next to each other for comparison. Our experience is, however, that those who make an effort to carefully read the new Church Order, and make its contents their own, will make an easy and relatively smooth transition. It is our hope that this revision may, under the blessing of God, serve the peace and order within the churches. ■

Myriam Klinker-De Klerck receives her doctor's degree

On Friday, June 7, 2013, Myriam Klinker-De Klerck received her doctor's degree on the basis of a dissertation about Paul's pastoral letters.

On that day, drs. M.G.P. (Myriam) Klinker-De Klerck (born in 1975) became a Dr. in theology at the Theological University of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands in Kampen. She defended successfully her dissertation with the title, *"Pastoral rule or naturalization course? A contribution to the research on ethical directives in 1 Timothy and Titus."* (*Herderlijke regel of inburgeringscursus?...*) Hereby she became the first woman doctor of theology at the TU in Kampen.

In her research, drs. Klinker addressed the issue as to whether the Pastoral Letters are intended as "pastoral instruction" from Paul to his assistants Timothy and Titus, or as documents from a later time which promote a kind of "civil" life-style for Christians. The reigning theory is that because Christ's Second Coming didn't occur, there was a need for a longer stay in society for Christians. The ethical directives in these letters would then be a stimulus to adapt to the social norms of that day.

However, Klinker defended the older view that the Paul is the author of these letters, and that they may be seen as "pastoral counsel." The advice in these letters is comparable to Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians, she argues.

Myriam Klinker is a member of the Reformed Church in Emmeloord, studied theology at the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium), and has worked as the assistant to Prof. P.H.R. van Houwelingen in Kampen. She lectures there now in New Testament and New Testament Greek.

(Taken from the website of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands: www.gkv.nl)

Show them no mercy (1)¹

Our world is full of violence. On any day, you might follow the news, and there it is: robbery, murder, acts of war or terrorism. We should not be surprised when the Bible, too, confronts us with violence. But there is one thing that raises serious questions for us: sometimes God Himself instigates this violence. How could a God of love command that entire nations be wiped out?



My dissertation deals with the Lord's command to Israel to destroy completely the peoples of Canaan². In this two-part article I will discuss the conclusions of my investigation. In particular, I want to examine the implications of this command for our view of God (part 1); further, I will address the question whether these texts do not give rise to violent acts in the present, and how Christians today are supposed to deal with these Scripture passages (part 2)

Content

We find the most comprehensive and confronting expression of the command to exterminate the Canaanites in Deuteronomy 7. When Israel enters the Promised Land, it must destroy completely all the nations that live there. Israel may make no treaties with them, and may show them no mercy or compassion. They may not intermarry with them. Moreover, every reminder of the religious practices of these peoples is to be destroyed also. These commands, however, apply only to the inhabitants of Canaan. Other nations Israel must leave in peace; they must have friendly relations with them.

The reason for this command is to be found in the special position of Israel as the Lord's people. Israel belongs to Him. If the Canaanite nations remained, they would draw Israel away with them to worship their idols, and they would turn their backs to the Lord. In other places of the Old Testament, another reason for this command is given: the sins of the Canaanite peoples.

Israel must keep far from these sins: they must live by the commands of God. Then the Lord would bless them abundantly. Deuteronomy 7 especially elaborates on the Lord's love for Israel, and on the rich blessings He promises when His people serve Him. On the other hand, if Israel should take over the practices of the Canaanites, the same judgement would strike them as well.

In later years, Israel does indeed follow the sins of these nations, and even outdoes them in wickedness. In the end this leads to judgement: the Babylonian exile.

Problem

This command to destroy the nations raises penetrating questions. Throughout history, the Old Testament has been challenged and rejected because of them. In the 2nd century AD, Marcion contrasted the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New, in part because of the violence that the God of the Old Testament required. In Marcion's view, this could not be reconciled with Christ's command to love one's enemies. And in our own time, the well-known British atheist Richard Dawkins has characterised the God of the Old Testament as a 'bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser'.

We, Westerners at the beginning of the 21st century, are quite sensitive to violence. The history of the 20th century has been marked by an eruption of violence; millions of human lives have been lost. Especially since September 11, 2001, religion has often been associated with acts of violence. The mass shooting of 77 people by Anders Breivik, the Norwegian terrorist, has strengthened this association. Somehow, Breivik imagined a link between Christianity and his personal ideology of merciless violence. Through these and other events, 'religion as a motivation for violence' has become a hotly debated topic.

These observations provide us with no resolution for our difficulties with the command of God to destroy the Canaanites. It is important, however, to remain aware of our cultural context, since it does influence the way we read the Bible.

God's command to wipe out the Canaanite peoples raises huge questions for us. How could God Himself command such violence? Violence so radical that entire nations must be wiped out, utterly and indiscriminately? The Canaanite people had done nothing to Israel. They were given no opportunity to surrender or repent, it seems. Why? It is not just those who reject the Old Testament who ask these questions. It is especially when we *do* regard the Old Testament as the Word of God that such questions arise.

Why should the Canaanites have to be completely destroyed, and why should Israel, which is in no way better or more worthy, be chosen as the people of God? How could God Himself give the command

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for something as dreadful as genocide? How does that fit with His revelation in the Lord Jesus Christ, the One who came to seek and save the lost? For so many readers of the Bible today, such questions are as large as life.

Our view of God

What are the implications of this command to destroy the Canaanites for the Old Testament's portrayal of God? In Deuteronomy 7, God's command to wipe out the Canaanite nations is closely linked to the nature and acts of God Himself. He is the One who issues this command, and He is actively involved in its execution. After all, the Lord Himself has given these people into the hands of Israel. Later, when the Old Testament looks back at this (partial) destruction, it explicitly points out that the Lord Himself has destroyed these peoples. At the same time, this very chapter speaks at length about God's love and faithfulness for His people. When we think about the portrayal of God that Deuteronomy 7 presents, two aspects are important.

In the first place, this command to wipe out the Canaanites was given in a unique situation. Israel was called to do this only once, and with a view to one specific situation, and for a limited period of time. This extermination of the Canaanites is exclusively linked to the settlement of Israel in the land of Canaan.

Nowhere in the Old Testament is such a command ever grounded in the fact that people live in the land given to Israel. Nowhere do we read of a hatred of strangers *per se*. In Deuteronomy 7, it is the unique and exclusive relationship between the Lord and Israel that is at stake, and with it the fulfilment of God's promises. At the same time, we hear of the judgement of God upon the sin of the Canaanite peoples. For a long time the Lord had been patient: now the measure of their sin was full (Genesis 15:16).

In the second place, this command to destroy the Canaanites is a part of the way the Lord followed in the Old Testament. In this command, aspects of God's self-revelation in the Old and New Testaments come to the fore, in particular His holiness and His abhorrence of sin. In both the Old and the New Testaments God's love and His wrath belong together. The Lord is merciful and gracious, and He punishes sin (See Exodus 34:6-7). The New Testament too speaks of the judgement of God. God's wrath can lead to terrifying judgements, such

as the Great Flood, or the destruction of Sodom. In them we see something of the coming final judgement.

This judgement of God is dreadful, but it is not capricious or arbitrary. His judgement over the Canaanite peoples is almost always motivated by a reference to their wickedness. More than that, the same judgements will also come upon God's own people, the Israelites, if they should follow the ways of the Canaanites. It is important to see the framework the Old Testament provides for these judgements, and to have regard for these texts within the history of salvation. As a Christian theologian, I can only have something to say about this command of destruction if I read it together with the message of the New Testament: that God in his Son has taken this judgement against sin upon Himself. The judgement of God and His grace are brought together at Golgotha. God has laid the judgement upon His own Son, who knew no sin. This is how God showed His love for people who had fully deserved this judgement. This is the only way that you can see who God is, in His judgement and in His compassion.

Notes:

- 1 This is a translation of the first 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 This doctoral dissertation was published as: *A Versluis: Geen verbond, geen genade: Analyse en evaluatie van het gebod om de Kanaänieten uit te roeien (Deuteronomium 7)*. Zoetermeer, Boekencentrum, 2012

The Mission of God by C.J.H. Wright (1)

It can be confusing to keep theologians apart if they have the same family name, especially if they are from the same country and the same denomination. In the Reformed tradition, for example, we have two Bavincks and two Schilders. In the contemporary Anglican world we have the phenomenon of two Wrights.



Many readers of *Clarion* will be familiar with the name N.T. Wright, the well-known Anglican bishop and New Testament scholar. In this article I want to introduce you to another Wright, an Anglican clergyman as well (though not a bishop), and an Old Testament scholar. His name is Christopher J.H. Wright¹. Wright is International Director of the Langham Partnership International, a group of ministries founded by John Stott in 1974. Wright is also a leader within the Lausanne movement and delivered one of the main speeches at the Lausanne III conference in Cape Town (2010). He has written several books, including *The Mission of God* (2006) and *The Mission of God's People* (2010). His theological views have been influenced by John Stott but he seems to be cautiously moving away from some of Stott's positions (more about that later). The book *The Mission of God*² is a massive book of more than five hundred pages. It has become a standard work in the field of Biblical theology of mission. It is expected that the book will be a text book at evangelical seminaries for the next few decades. Since the book is going to influence the thinking of the next generation of ministers and missionaries in the broader evangelical movement, it is important to take note of what Wright is saying. An additional reason to do so, is that that Wright's theology of mission suffers from important weaknesses. As I hope to demonstrate, it would not be good if Wright's approach was swallowed hook, line and sinker.

In this article I will attempt to summarize the book. In the next two articles I will mention some positives and discuss a number of key concerns. I need to mention that I have benefited from listening to a review of Wright's book by Dr. Gary Millar at the 2013 Gospel Coalition conference in Orlando, Florida³. I also found helpful comments in

Kevin DeYoung & Greg Gilbert's *What is the Mission of the Church?*⁴

Mission as God's Work

Summarizing a densely written book of more than 500 pages is a tall order. I apologize in advance to the reader if this summary is going to be a bit dense as well. I will attempt to highlight only the most important aspects of the book.

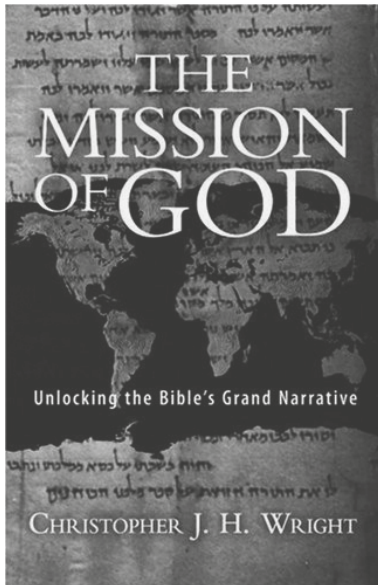
First, as the title of the book indicates, Wright emphasizes that *mission work is God's work*. Wright gives the following definition of mission: "Fundamentally, our mission (if it is biblically informed and validated) means our committed participation as God's people, at God's invitation and command, in God's own mission within the history of God's world for the redemption of God's creation." (p. 22-23) This definition represents a popular emphasis in current missiological thinking: We should not think of mission work in the first place as the work of the church. We should rather think of mission work as the work of God, and we should keep in mind God is already at work in the world. The church is called to participate in that work. (Of course, the important question will be: What is God believed to be doing in the world? More about that later.)

One more comment regarding Wright's definition: You will have noted that he formulates a purpose of mission work. The definition says that the purpose of God's mission is 'the redemption of God's creation.' That is a broad purpose which allows Wright to include socio-political action and environmental care as part and parcel of mission work. (I'm tempted to comment, but let's first complete the summary of Wright's book.)

Second, Wright says that *God's mission is holistic*, in the sense that both spiritual and physical needs are addressed. Per consequence, mission is everything that Christians do to address the world's spiritual and physical needs. This is an important move! Classic Reformed theology would agree that Christians have a task in this world, a task which includes social action and caring for the environment. However, this would not be called mission work. In classic Reformed theology, mission work is defined in terms of the spreading of the gospel for (1) the salvation of individuals and (2) the planting of the church. Wright,

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following John Stott, takes a broader approach. He thinks of mission work as the church “through the combined engagement of *all* its members... applying the redemptive power of the cross of Christ to *all* the effects of sins and evil in the surrounding live, society and environment.” (322, italics as in original). In other words, mission can be anything ranging from evangelism to social involvement and protection of the environment. In Wright’s opinion, all these aspects are important and we should not say that any one is more important than the other (in this respect he differs from John Stott who would have said that the proclamation of the gospel is the most important part of mission work).

Being a Blessing

Third, Wright believes that mission work is *more about being a blessing than about being sent*. He suggests that the Great Commission of Matthew 28 has played too important a role in thinking about mission. In this respect Wright is once again a follower of John Stott who said similar things in his book *Christian Mission in the Modern World*⁵. Like Stott, Wright warns against overemphasizing the aspect of ‘sent-ness’ in mission. He warns against becoming ‘obsessed’ with the great mission imperatives, such as the Great Commission. (61) Instead of understanding mission primarily as *being sent* into the world, Wright would like to see mission being understood as *being a blessing* to society. In this respect he considers the calling of Abram (Genesis 12:1-3) to be a key passage. Abram was sent to Canaan and the goal was that the nations would be blessed through his presence and his intercession for them. Wright makes the remarkable suggestion that the calling of Abram in Genesis 12 is more worthy to be called ‘the Great Commission’ than Matthew 28:18-20. Quote: “It would be entirely appropriate and no bad thing, if we took this text as “the Great Commission.” Certainly it is the biblical foundation on which the text in Matthew is based that is usually elevated to that role.” (214, italics as in original)

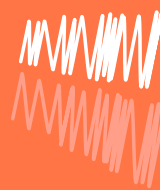
Fourth, Wright suggests that *some Old Testament events or motifs should play a more important role in our understanding of mission*. One such event is the Exodus, which Wright refers to as ‘God’s model of redemption.’ This has implications: Rather than seeing forgiveness of

sins and reconciliation with God as key aspects of redemption, Wright suggests that we should look at the Exodus in order to determine the character of redemption. He argues that the redemption which the Israelites received through the Exodus had political, economic, social and spiritual dimensions. It was a holistic kind of salvation. He concludes: “So although the exodus stands as a unique and unrepeatable event in the history of Old Testament Israel, it also stands as a paradigmatic and highly repeatable model for the way God wishes to act in the world...” (275) In other words, God’s mission is still the same: He wants to bless people politically, economically, socially, and spiritually. Thus, mission work should focus on all these aspects. Another Old Testament theme which Wright takes to be ‘paradigmatic’ is the Year of Jubilee, which he calls “God’s model of restoration.” (300)

Fifth and finally, Wright’s book is an effort to *prove that the Bible should be interpreted by using a missional hermeneutic*. There is more about mission in the Bible than just a few ‘mission texts.’ The whole Bible should be understood from a missional perspective! After all, Wright argues, God is a missionary God, a God who is on a mission. Therefore, God’s Book must be interpreted from a missionary perspective. Wright calls this approach a “missiological hermeneutic of Scripture” (26). This does not mean that each and every text in the Bible is saying something about mission. The idea is rather that a missional perspective can function as a kind of a map to help us find our way through the Bible, help us understand where God is going with the world. In the following articles we will evaluate this important book. ■

Notes:

- 1 Incidentally, both Wrights will be speaking at a conference on “A Missional Reading of Scripture,” organized by Calvin Theological Seminary (Grand Rapids) in November 2013. See <http://calvinseminary.edu/academics/continuing-education/missional-reading>
- 2 Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*. IVP, 2006.
- 3 Workshop at The Gospel Coalition, Orlando, April 7, 2013 by Dr. Gary Millar, entitled: “A Biblical Theology of Mission: An Evaluation of Chris Wright”
- 4 Kevin DeYoung & Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making sense of social justice, shalom, and the Great Commission*. Crossway, 2011.
- 5 John R.W. Stott, *Christian mission in the modern world*. (London: Falcon, 1975), 29.



**Jesus said, “I am
the light of the world.”**
John 8:12