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Editorial

By J.M. Batteau, p. 67

Commentaries and preaching (3)

By J. van Bruggen, p. 68

Jerusalem, the Mother Church (2)

By P.H.R. van Houwelingen, p. 70

Church and State in the Belgic Confession

By P. Nullens, p.75

That practical Old Testament

By G. Kwakkel, p.80

The Old Testament and Christian life

By A.L.Th. de Bruijne, p 83

God's Jealousy and the Outpouring of his Spirit

By R. ter Beek, p. 86

What Does a Goal of Unity Mean?

By D. Gordon, p. 89

Newsupdates

Death of Prof. Cornelis Trimp, p. 74

Rev. Kees van Dusseldorp Doctor of Theology, p. 74

Connecting with Job's suffering, p. 85

Gerrit de Graaf Doctor of Theology, p. 91

Doctorate Rev. Arie Versluis, p. 91

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Editorial

Do the confessional churches in the world have a future? Here in The Netherlands it is hard to get our young people interested in what our creeds teach. They are positive about Biblical, Christocentric preaching, and for styles of worship which incorporate the old (an organ) and the new (a praise band). But inspired by the Three Forms of Unity? Not really.



Confessions? The reaction to a growing number of our members, and not just young people is, “So what?” They feel that these old documents are just that, old documents. Nice if you’re interested in history, but covered with the dust of ages, and not really relevant for our day. If a confession, or Statement of Faith is really necessary, why not compose one in modern language, addressing the concerns of our modern age? Or why not just be content with the Bible? That’s God Word, isn’t it, whereas the creeds are human documents?

International confessional fervor

In other parts of the world it’s a quite different story. In my editorial in the last issue of *Lux Mundi*, reporting about the meeting of the ICRC churches of Europe meeting in Ukraine, I mentioned the contagious enthusiasm of the Ukrainian Reformed theological students for the Reformed Confessions, and included the comment that we could use some of their fervor for doctrine here in The Netherlands.

My wife Margreet and I visited the United States in May and June of this year, attending the Synod of the Reformed Church in the U.S., the General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and the Synod of the United Reformed Churches in North America, and greeting these bodies on behalf of our Reformed Churches (Liberated). It was an invigorating series of visits, crossing the entire continent of the U.S. from West to East. And one thing that impressed us was the great importance placed on doctrinal purity by the brothers gathered at their “broadest,” and Presbyterians would say “highest” deliberative gatherings. These guys take their confessions super seriously, for their churches and for all the members of the churches! If a Synod or General Assembly is any indication of how the orthodox Reformed church federations are doing in the U.S. and Canada, then we can be assured that they genuinely want to remain consciously, confessionally Reformed. I think we can learn from them.

Blow the dust off

Here in The Netherlands we could use a good dusting off of our creeds. That is, we need a revival of confessional consciousness. The Heidelberg Catechism is pretty well known, due to the regular use of that Catechism is one of the two services on Sunday. Most people, including the young people, are acquainted with the Catechism’s major themes: misery, “Sin and Misery,” “Our Deliverance,” and “Our Thankfulness.” It would be good if we could look afresh at the 37 Articles of the Belgic Confession, and the Five Chapters of the Canons of Dort. Not as an exercise in library science (yawn, yawn). But as an attempt to mine again the Biblical truth contained in these great expressions of faith.

For let’s not kid ourselves. All churches, of all stripes, are “confessional” churches. They have commitments which they hold to, either written or unwritten. Pentecostal churches have their doctrine of the “baptism of the Spirit.” Baptist churches have their doctrine of “water baptism for believers only.” Liberal churches have their doctrine of “the Bible is ‘true’ but the events described there didn’t truly happen.” You can’t avoid being “confessional,” you just need to make sure your “confession” is truly Biblical!

On Fire for Biblical teaching

We as Reformed people have to help ourselves, and particularly our young people, see why the way we confess our faith is central to our life as churches of Christ. Jesus addressed Peter after his confession that Jesus was the Messiah: “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 16:17). The Lord Jesus asks us to confess Him, in accordance with His inspired Word, as individuals and as churches.

We need to help our members see how vital it is to serve the Lord by *knowing the history and the teaching He has revealed in the Bible*. And that one of the best ways of getting to know that history and teaching better is through a deeper acquaintance with our confessions.

“Lord, revive us, and help us to be churches which confess and serve You in Spirit and in Truth!” ■

Finding Simon in the Gospels:

Commentaries and preaching (3)¹

How the Gospel is to be found in the Gospels is shown in a small passage from Mark: the healing of a leper (or, as the NIV notes have it: a man with an infectious skin disease).



The story takes place during the time that Jesus travels throughout Galilee, preaching in the synagogues (Mark 1:39). Verse 14 describes this preaching in greater detail: Jesus is preaching the Good News – the Gospel – of the Kingdom of God. In doing so, he drives out demons (v. 39): and here too we should take into account what we have already read in vv. 22-28. Jesus does not speak as the teachers of the Law; He teaches with authority. He commands the demons, and they cannot but obey Him. In the light of the previous verses, v. 39 shows that wherever He goes, Jesus brings – with divine authority and divine power – the Good News of the Kingdom of God. When in this situation someone with an infectious skin disease comes to Jesus (v. 40), we understand that he expects more from Jesus than could previously have been expected of God. The laws of ceremonial purity, recorded in Leviticus 13 and 14, do not really leave room for healing from this disease. This was an affliction from God: all you could do was wait and see whether it would come to an end. Until such time, you were unclean. People so afflicted would not visit doctors or healers – there was no point. Who could resist God? What God has made unclean, man cannot cleanse.

A better understanding

In turning to Jesus, this man's expectation was quite extraordinary. He understands, more than most others, what Jesus' divine authority can really mean. He says something that can only be said to God Himself: "*If you are willing, you can make me clean*" (v. 40). He confesses Jesus as Lord, as God. And then we see Jesus' compassion (v. 41). It is different from any sympathy humans can offer the sick. Jesus knows that those who are unclean, by God's will must remain unclean for as long as He decides. At the same time, in His divine compassion, Jesus shows He has mercy toward the powerless.

He says simply: "*I am willing. Be clean.*" He speaks as God. Whatever God has made unclean, only God can cleanse.

Jesus does another remarkable thing. He reaches out and touches the man. And that was just what no-one was allowed to do. Whoever touched such a person became unclean himself. Jesus shows the true nature of his compassion: He takes the man's uncleanness upon Himself. He takes his place. The plague has come upon Him.

Welcome home

This divine word and this willing substitution are sufficient to cleanse the leper completely. Without delay, the man is told to go to the temple, where the priest will declare him clean. Welcome home! Jesus does what the Old Testament could never do. He fulfils it. But He does not abolish it. The one who is cleansed must offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for his cleansing, as a testimony to the people. That will show them that Jesus is not an anti-Moses revolutionary, but someone greater than Moses.

When the man – declared to be clean – returns from the temple, he sees more in Jesus than just a fellow human being, a healer. He sees the One who is greater than Moses, the One who fulfils the Scriptures, the One who saves from the coming wrath. And he goes out and spreads the news everywhere. He proclaims the gospel.

This story was not included in the book of Mark as an example of humanity and compassion, or of the power of human faith to heal. It was included as part of the gospel of God. That is what gives this story its power. Many of the sick today will remain sick. To them, also, this healed leper has Good News to tell: the gospel of Jesus Christ, Who saves us from the wrath to come, a wrath that threatens us all, and from which we have no other protection.

Simon

The Gospel of Mark presents an extra layer to this story. In chapter 14 we read that Jesus – just before His death – is present at a banquet in Bethany. This banquet is held '*in the house of Simon*' (14:3). Who is this Simon? A short note is added: he was known as '*Simon the Leper*' (or '*Simon who had been a leper*' – Tr.). Now the whole Gospel of Mark

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mentions only one leper, who was also healed. This Simon at the banquet in Bethany must have been the supplicant who was cleansed in chapter 1. It is in Simon's house that a woman pours perfume onto Jesus to prepare Him for His burial. In response, Jesus provides us with an added perspective: *"I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her"* (v. 9). In this story about Jesus' burial, we see Simon, healed from his leprosy, sitting at the head of the table. He had believed that if Jesus was willing, He could cleanse him. Now he sees what it means that Jesus had reached out and touched him. Jesus had taken the plague upon Himself, and must now die and be buried. Simon can smell it in the fragrance of the perfume.

Living proof.

Wherever ministers and evangelists preach the Gospel, they may also bring out Simon from the Gospels. Not just as a sick man, whose healing arouses envy, but as living proof of what John writes: *"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us ... full of grace and truth. ... From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known"* (John 1:14, 16-18).

Commentaries

That is the gospel in the Gospels, which preachers may uncover and proclaim. Commentaries can help with that. It is this conviction on which the *Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament* (CNT), 3rd edition², is built.

The thematic volumes of this commentary provide a broad view of the whole. They form an introduction to the textual commentaries, which in turn refer back to the thematic volumes. The textual commentaries aim to throw light on the whole of the passage within the context of the document. Where the need arises, linguistic and historical aspects are also discussed.

Taking its starting point in a positive view of the text, the CNT at the same time gives a contemporary accounting of its scholarship. Many commentaries – such as Herder's – have centred on modern and often Scripture-critical exegeses. This Scripture-critical approach has become the tractor to which the exegeses are attached, and

which, so to speak, drives them past the text. The CNT takes the opposite approach: the text is what drives the exegesis, and as we follow the text we may sometimes look around to see what else has been said.

Commentaries always stand in their own age. A homiletic commentary, such as practised by Origen, is quite out of place today. A philological commentary, such as Greijdanus carried out, does not promote a clear view of the whole. The aim of the CNT is to provide commentaries that are optimally useful for Christians and preachers in the 20th and 21st century. And what can be more 'useful' than to enable us *'to learn to praise the great works of God the more attentively, and to teach us to preserve the apostolic trust delivered to us the more diligently'*? ■

Notes

1. This is the third of a series of three articles first published in the Dutch language in *De Waarheidsvriend*, 7, 14 and 21 May 2009. This translation by Aart Plug, July 2012, by arrangement with the author. All Scripture references and quotations are taken from the *New International Version of the Bible* (NIV), 1984 Edition.
2. Several of the titles in this series have been translated. For details, see www.cnt-serie.nl/vertalingen/

Jerusalem, the Mother Church (2)

The first instalment of this series of articles¹ highlighted the centrality of Jerusalem during the apostolic era, and examined the two most important historical sources for our understanding of the early history of the Christian Church, namely the Book of Acts in the New Testament, and Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History.



This instalment continues with a description of the development of the mother church Jerusalem, its relationship with one of its most prominent daughter churches, the church in Antioch, and the leadership role of the brothers of the Lord in the early church at Jerusalem.

The place where the first church gathered. It happened, then, in Jerusalem. Where, exactly? Luke records that Jesus' disciples '*stayed continually at the temple*' (Luke 24:53). Luke begins his second book, *Acts*, with an account of Jesus' meeting his apostles (ch 1:2-4), and goes on to describe a subsequent meeting (ch 1:6: *sunelthontes*).

The implicit subject of v.12 is clearly the apostles, the ones who returned to Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension from the Mount of Olives. In addition, ch 1:13 lists the eleven remaining apostles by name: "*Peter, John, James* (the sequence in the Majority Text is: Peter, James, John) *and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James.*"

The apostles had a regular meeting place in Jerusalem, an upstairs room where they usually stayed (v.13: *to huperooion*; compare Acts 9:37,39; 20:8). We can think here of the time between the Ascension and Pentecost, days of expectation, fulfilled by the coming of the Holy Spirit. V.15 marks this period with the words '*in those days*'.

It is quite possible that this upstairs room was also where Jesus appeared after his resurrection, on Easter Sunday and the week following. Looking back a little further, we can think of the room where Jesus celebrated the last Passover with his disciples, a guest room somewhere in the city. In

the other gospels, this room is described as a '*large upper room*' (*anagaion mega*; Mark 14:15; Luke 22:12), fully furnished, containing at least three sets of couches surrounding a large table. Peter and James had been given the task of finding the unknown owner of this house, by means of directions Jesus had given them. In this room, apparently a place their Master liked, they had made the necessary preparations for the Passover meal. Had arrangements been made for a longer tenancy of this room, perhaps?

Even though a different terminology is used, this upstairs room in *Acts* is often identified with the upper storey described in *Mark* and *Luke*. (It is rather less likely that we ought to think here of a different upstairs room, located somewhere within the temple complex; it is not till Acts 2:46 that the temple is first mentioned). The article used in v.13 could well be used anaphorically, referring to a location already known to the readers of Luke and Acts.

Actually, an important historical argument may be advanced for this interpretation: archaeological research has shown that after Jerusalem was destroyed, a synagogue of Christian Jews was built upon the remains of this house. From there, various churches were established in Jerusalem. These days, tour guides point out the Coenaculum (the room of the Last Supper) as being located in a space above the traditional burial place of King David, in a 12th-century Crusader church in Jerusalem.

Eleven remained

After Judas' death, eleven of the twelve disciples remained. They are all listed by name in v.13, beginning with Peter. Luke tells us that this gathering of eleven men '*all joined together constantly in prayer*' (the Majority Text has '*prayer and supplication*', v.14). This would certainly have included prayer for the promised Holy Spirit. Luke's account shows that this wonderful unity, finding its expression in calling together on the Name of God, was characteristic for the Christian community in Jerusalem from the earliest, most tender stages of its existence (Acts 1:14; 2:1; 2:46; 4:24; 5:12).

Women were there too, Luke tells us in v.14. At first glance, we would be inclined to think of the women

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from Galilee, the ones Luke frequently mentions in his gospel as Jesus' most devoted followers. There are, however two clues pointing in a different direction.

To begin with, the sentence lacks an article, leading Van Eck to make a point of translating this phrase as: '*with women*' rather than '*with the women*' or '*with some women*'.² Nowhere does the book of Acts refer to women from Galilee.

Second, the Western text has added the word 'children' as well as an article, which indicates that the women meant here were also mothers of children. It seems reasonable, then, to think of the wives and children of the men listed by name in the previous verse. It is possible that not all of the apostles were married, but we know that Peter, for instance, took his wife along on his journeys (I Corinthians 9:5). During the years that Jesus lived and worked on earth they had often, and for extended periods, left their families behind. Immediately after the Ascension, had the time perhaps come for family reunions?

If we follow this reading, v.14 lists two separate groups:

- a. the disciples, mentioned by name, together with their wives [and families];
- b. Mary, the mother of Jesus, mentioned by name, together with his brothers and sisters.

The physically absent Jesus, taken up into heavenly glory, brings these two core groups together. For both groups he forms the spiritual centre. The first group consists of his disciples and their immediate families; the second group is made up of his own immediate family: his mother, brothers and sisters.

This, by the way, is the last reference to Mary in the New Testament. She receives a place of honour among those remaining in Jerusalem, but increasingly she steps back into the shadow of her ascended Son, and eventually disappears from view altogether. In v.14, Mary is recorded as the mother of Jesus. Her Son, physically absent, but explicitly present in the text through his mother, is the real central character of this account. It was he who had arranged for this meeting place; it was he who had commanded his followers to go back to Jerusalem, and there to await what was to happen next.

Starting in v.15, a larger group of disciples comes onto the scene. The text gives us no reason to think of a different location. Apparently, the

meeting place is still the same house, but an upper room would not have provided enough space to accommodate them all. Might they, perhaps, have begun to use the whole house (compare Acts 2:2)?

Luke relates how Peter began to speak, amid 'the brothers' (*adelphoi* in the Nestle-Aland edition, also the NIV and the ESV) or 'the disciples' (*mathētai*, as in the Western Text and in the Majority Text). The former highlights their relationship to each other: this group belongs to a spiritual family. This is the first time they are referred to as such in Acts. The latter focuses on their relationship to Jesus: this group is a gathering of his followers. This would connect well with the language usage of Luke and Acts. One way or the other, this marks the first beginnings of a congregation in Jerusalem. We are shown a fellowship which includes Jesus' disciples, together with their families, along with all other disciples, in the broadest sense, both male and female. V.23 mentions two more by name: Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias. This situation is reflected in an expression that we find twice in Luke's gospel: *the Eleven and [all] those with them* (Luke 24:9,33).

A communion of saints

In Acts 9:31, the best manuscripts have 'church' (*ekklesia*) in the singular. This can be explained by the word that follows: *kath'holēs*: the catholic mother church of Jerusalem extends across a much larger area than the holy city itself: it can be found in Judea, Samaria and even in not-previously-mentioned Galilee.³ In addition, Christian Jews travelled abroad, to bear witness across the diaspora of what God had brought about in Jerusalem (they went to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch; Acts 11:19). It is to these people that James, the brother of the Lord, wrote his diaspora letter, to be followed later by the letter of his younger brother Jude. James' address says: "*To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations*" (James 1:1).

Peter is often underrated, according to Hengel.⁴ Not only was he a passionate preacher; he also capably organized the church and acted as a missionary strategist. Unlike Paul, Peter does not revisit churches he has already planted; instead, after his journey to Samaria he makes a circuit through the plain of Sharon and visits the chief Jewish cities of the region: Lydda and Joppa. There, he meets 'the saints' (Acts (9:32,41), an expression generally used for the believers in Jerusalem, sanctified by

the Spirit (Acts 9:13; 26:10, compare also Revelation 20:9 and Paul's reference in Romans 15:25-26, 31).

Peter, then, was visiting the outlying districts of the one church of Jerusalem. Within the church there was great encouragement, thanks to the healings he performed in Lydda and Joppa. Outside the church, the effect of Peter's visit was that those who lived in Sharon turned to the Lord. An example of missionary activity among the Jewish people!

Antioch, the daughter church

The second Christian church only comes into existence when the people of Antioch become acquainted with the gospel of Jesus Christ. This happens when men from Cyprus and Cyrene, some of those who had been scattered by the persecution in Jerusalem, come into contact with the Greek inhabitants of Antioch (probably beginning with those among them who were 'God-fearing').

Again, the church in Jerusalem keeps a close eye on this development. When the news of what has happened reaches them, they wish, just as in Samaria, to retain control of events. This time, it is Barnabas, a bridge-builder *par excellence*, who is sent to investigate. Barnabas, tells Luke, was a good man and full of faith, well trusted by the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:24). Having his own roots on the island of Cyprus (Acts 4:36), he was the right person to assess what the Cypriot and Cyrenian brothers had achieved in Antioch. On his arrival, Barnabas encouraged (*parekalei*) them all to persevere, and to remain true to the Lord. Barnabas was also the one who introduced Saul – just as he had previously done in Jerusalem – to the church in Antioch.

By a spontaneous process, this is where believers are first called *christianoï* (Acts 11:26b; compare Acts 26:28 and I Peter 4:14): here, the Christians, disciples of Christ, form an independent community.

From that time on there is, alongside the mother church in Jerusalem, a daughter

church in Antioch, consisting of not only Jewish but also Gentile Christians (here too, the singular *ekklesia* is used: Acts 11:26; 13:1; 14:27; 15:3). Apparently, this church is under the leadership of prophets and teachers, five of whom (just as the Twelve and the Seven) are mentioned by their full names: Barnabas, Simeon Niger, Lucius the Cyrenian, Manaen, and Saul (Acts 13:1). Increasingly, the daughter in Antioch begins to show marks of adulthood, and eventually becomes an independent church, full of missionary vigour.

What was the relationship between the mother church in Jerusalem and her independent daughter in Antioch? There was always a risk that they would grow apart. Each of them had their own character: Jerusalem was exclusively Jewish, while Antioch was partly Gentile also. In Acts 11-15, Luke repeatedly points out that these two Christian churches, intimately woven together by a common past, consciously aimed to find a way together once the work of mission among the nations began to expand.

Frequently, delegations were sent from the one church to the other. A number of prophets travelled from Jerusalem to Antioch to pass on their message, or to deliver and further explain a letter. Antioch provided financial help to Jerusalem for the support of brothers and sisters during a period of famine. Antioch, not Jerusalem, became the home base for Paul's missionary journeys; even though Paul was not from the church in Jerusalem, some of his first missionary colleagues were – Barnabas, John Mark and Silas (see also Acts 11:22,27; 12:25; 13:4-5; 15:22,40). Mission work among the Gentiles, therefore, was not a typically Antiochian enterprise; it remained anchored in the mother church in Jerusalem.

James and the elders

With Peter's departure, the leadership of the church in Jerusalem fell to James. In the New Testament, he appears more than once as a church leader (Acts 12:17; Galatians 1:19, James 1:1). This brings to the

fore a category of men less well known than the apostles: the brothers of the Lord. Still, the New Testament does tell us something about the role Jesus' blood-relatives played in the New Testament church.

At the beginning, Jesus' own brothers did not believe in him (John 7:5). It seems, however, that his appearance as the risen Lord, especially to James, brought about a change in their attitude (I Corinthians 15:7). Together with their mother Mary, Jesus' brothers formed part of the early church in Jerusalem (Acts 1:14). Later, next to the apostles, the Lord's brothers played an active part in the proclamation of the Gospel. It appears that James, the eldest, remained in Jerusalem, while the younger brothers Josés, Simon and Jude (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3) are believed to have made missionary journeys of their own. In contrast to Paul, however, they were accompanied by their wives, who themselves were among the believers (I Corinthians 9:5).

In addition, two letters in the New Testament canon, sent to Jewish Christians, have the names of Jesus' brothers in their address: a diaspora letter by James himself, and a follow-up letter written by his brother Jude. Neither of them, however, present themselves as the Lord's brothers; rather, as his servants. Jesus is our Lord and Master, no less (James 1:1; Jude: 4).

The devout lifestyle of James, who daily prostrated himself in the temple to plead for forgiveness for his people, evoked such respect that he became known as 'the Just', i.e. the Righteous (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, II 1, 2-5; 23, 4-7).⁵ He was indeed a *tsaddiq* in the fullest sense of the word. And because Jerusalem was regarded as the mother church for all of Christianity, James was held in high esteem even well outside the boundaries of the Holy Land (compare Galatians 2:12).

The *Gospel of Thomas* contains an apocryphal saying of Jesus, which could well be taken as a witness to the

universally respected righteousness of the brother of the Lord. When the disciples wondered who should become their leader after Jesus left them, he is supposed to have said: “Wherever you are, you are to go to James the righteous, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being”. What the rabbis said about the Torah, applied to James also, throughout the world.

After James’ violent death, he was succeeded as leader in the church of Jerusalem by another of Jesus’ relatives: Simeon, the son of Cleopas, known to us as one of the travellers on the road to Emmaus. Hegesippus describes Cleopas as the brother of Joseph, Mary’s husband. If that is so, Simeon was a first cousin of Jesus (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*. III 11; IV 22,4). In addition, two of Jude’s grandsons, arrested by Domitian because of their Davidic ancestry and later released, have played an important role in early Jewish Christianity.

The bishop’s seat, symbol of James’ position as leader, was an object of interest right up to Eusebius’ day. From the quotation below, it is clear that in the first centuries of church history, the Holy See was not in Rome, but in Jerusalem: *Now the throne of James, who was the first to receive from the Saviour and the apostles the episcopate of the church at Jerusalem, who also, as the divine books show, was called a brother of Christ, has been preserved to this day; and by the honour that the brethren in succession there pay to it, they show clearly to all the reverence in which the holy men were and still are held by the men of old time and those of our day, because of the love shown them by God* (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* VII 19).

Nevertheless, we do not get the impression from the book of Acts that after the apostles’ departure, the leadership of the church narrowed to one person. In the company of James, a number of elders suddenly make their appearance (Acts 11:30; 21:18). Already at the council in Jerusalem they are mentioned in the same breath with the apostles (Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23).

No particular moment

In contrast to the Seven (Acts 6:5-6), or the elders of the Pauline congregations, we do not read of a particular moment when these elders were chosen or appointed. Apparently, these men were not elders in the sense that they had been put forward from within the churches. Their authority was self-evident. They derived it from the life experience that came with being an older member, in this case from their special first-hand experience of having known Jesus Christ personally, and of having been sent out by him (perhaps as one of the Seventy: Luke 10:1-20).

Hence the almost automatic connection between these elders and the apostles. Van Bruggen compares their position in Jerusalem with that of the elders of Israel, the ones who had witnessed the entry into the land of Canaan, and who had outlived Joshua. After Joshua’s death, these men remained as living eyewitnesses of what God had done for Israel (Joshua 24:31; Judges 2:7). Similarly, the elders in Jerusalem were living eyewitnesses of what God had done in Israel through Jesus Christ, his own Son.

These eldest disciples of Jesus formed a college, of which, so to speak, James was the chairman. Within the church of Jerusalem, ‘James and the elders’ have a position of authority, as the Book of Acts shows. They have custody of the diaconal funds collected for the church (Acts 11:30). During the Jerusalem council the elders, with James as their spokesman, stand beside the apostles. The decision of this council, as described in Acts 15, has been of immeasurable value for the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. You do not need to be a Jew to be allowed to belong to the God of Israel! Later, the elders gathered around James to receive Paul and his companions; their joint declaration is then expressed in the first person plural: ‘we’ (Acts 21:18-25).

If Bauckham is correct, the early Christian tradition has preserved the names of the elders of Jerusalem.⁶ In his *Ecclesiastical*

History, Eusebius lists fifteen Jewish overseers, continuing up to Hadrian’s campaign after the Bar Kochba revolt. The list begins with James, the brother of the Lord; then follow Simeon and Justus; then another twelve names. The number fifteen seems rather artificial, since later Eusebius lists another fifteen Gentile overseers, for a round total of thirty. Eusebius’ explanation for the large number, that they each lived for only a short period, is hardly convincing, since it is known that Simeon lived to a very old age.⁷ It is far more likely that the overseers listed did not succeed each other, but were each other’s contemporaries, sharing the leadership of the church in Jerusalem. If we regard Simeon and Justus as James’ direct successors, we are left with precisely twelve: Zaccheus, Tobias, Benjamin, John, Matthias, Philip, Seneca, Justus, Levi, Ephres, Joseph and Jude. These twelve men are likely to have formed the college of elders who, together with James, gave leadership to the church of Jerusalem.⁸

The final instalment continues with an overview of the place and contents of the seven Catholic Epistles in the New Testament, and concludes with a brief examination of the significance of Jerusalem in the letter to the Hebrews and the Book of Revelation.

Notes:

1. This is the second of a series of three articles, originally written as a single as yet unpublished article in the Dutch language, entitled *Jeruzalem als Moederkerk*, derived from *Apostelen. Draggers van een spraakmakend evangelie* the final thematic volume of the series *Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament*, published in the Dutch language in 2010 by Kok, Kampen, the Netherlands. This translation by Aart Plug, January 2012, by arrangement with the author. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations and references are taken from the *New International Version of the Bible* (NIV), 1984 edition.
2. John van Eck, *Handelingen. De wereld in het geding* (Commentaar op het Nieuwe

Death of Prof. Cornelis Trimp

On March 9, 2012, emeritus Professor Cornelis Trimp passed away, and went to be with His Lord. He was 86. He was Professor of “Diaconiology,” now called “Practical Theology,” at the Theological University of the Reformed Churches (Liberated) in Kampen from 1970 to 1993.

He taught many generations of ministers “homiletics,” the art of preaching. Beside that he taught liturgics, pastoral care, catechetics, the theology of the diaconate, and theology of evangelism. He was thoroughly committed to confessional, Reformed theology, in the style of Klaas Schilder, and rejected Barthianism, but was open to new accents. For example, he wrote a book on preaching, *Klank en Weerklank* (“The Sound and the Responsive Chord”), in which he showed that preaching must not only be concerned with the correctness of exegesis, but also must seek to effectively communicate the Gospel to the hearts of the members of the congregation.

We in the Reformed Churches are very grateful to the Lord for the conviction, the wisdom, the scholarship, and the devotion of Prof. Trimp, by which he helped our churches serve the Lord in so many ways.

Gerrit de Graaf Doctor of Theology

The historian Gerrit de Graaf received his doctor of theology degree from the Theological Seminary of the Reformed Churches (Liberated) on 1 March 2012.

His dissertation was on the topic: “The World is Turned Upside-Down” (*De wereld wordt omgekeerd*), and concerning the period 1956 to the 1990’s, when missionaries from the Reformed Churches (Liberated) were active in spreading the Gospel among, and interacting with, tribes in Boven Digoel Papua (formerly called Irian Jaya), Indonesia. How did this interaction proceed? How was it valued by both parties? What were the consequences for Papua culture? Was the vision of the Reformed missionaries of “purifying” the Papua culture a fruitful one? These are some of the central questions addressed in this work.

Testament; Kampen: Kok, 2003), 43.

3. In reading the plural ‘churches’ along with plural verb forms, the Majority Text differs from all other textual sources, with the exception of a small number of early translations. The singular is used throughout Acts (5:11; 8:1.3; 11:22; 12:1; 15:4,22; 18:22; compare James 5:14)
4. Martin Hengel, *Der unterschätzte Petrus*. Zwei Studien (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 148.
5. Throughout these articles, quotations from and references to Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* have been taken from the Loeb Classical Library No’s 153 and 265 (Greek text with English translation), Volume 1 (Books I – V) translated by Kirsopp Lake (1926), Volume 2 (Books VI - X) translated by JEL Oulton (1932).
6. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* IV 5,3; V 12,1-2. Richard Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 70-79 [The Jerusalem Bishops List].
7. According to Hegesippus, Simeon died as a martyr at the age of 120 (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* III 32, 3,6)
8. When, in his letter, James advises the seriously ill to call in the ‘elders of the church’ (James 5:14), he probably has the elders of Jerusalem in mind.

Church and State in the Belgic Confession¹

Christian confessions are timeless in their message. They articulate the church's lasting proclamation of the Word of God, and give voice to the believing soul's communion with God in an ever-changing world. It appears that Article 36 of the *Belgic Confession* is different. It makes declarations about the task of civil government. But does it still have something relevant to say about civil government today?



In our time, the state is almost universally seen, not as divinely ordained, but as a human institution, arising from a social contract between the governors and the governed, with a strict separation of powers between church and state. How then do we make sense of the article's call that kings and rulers "*protect the true religion and destroy all false worship*"? This 16th century text appears to cross the boundary between church and state, and leaves uncomfortable associations with various forms of theocracy, such as Sharia law. We will only understand the relevance of Article 36 if we see it for what it is: an expression of faith, and not a socio-political declaration. The continuing actuality of this centuries-old statement does not lie in the elevated insights of John Calvin or Guido de Brès, but in the fact that it echoes the teaching of the Scripture: the canon of the Bible, specifically the New Testament. By going back to the source of our faith, we gain new insights, relevant for contemporary Christian social and political thinking and action.

Text and Context

The Sixteenth Century: An Era of Transition

Article 36 of the Belgic Confession must be read in its historical context. It was written in the 16th century, a period of transition between medieval and modern models of the state. This period saw a transition from divine to human sovereignty, from theocracy to democracy.

The world-view of Thomas Aquinas was unitary: all of reality – including the social order – was governed by God's creation ordinance: human law was derived from natural law, and ordained for the common good.² Aquinas drew heavily on Aristotle:

the creation of a *polis* (political community) was a natural goal of mankind. Even if there had been no Fall, argued Thomas, there would always have been a need for civil rule. This was in contrast to Augustine, for whom there was a polarity of conflict between the 'city of God' and the 'city of man'. He regarded civil authority as a divine intervention against evil, rather than as an institution rooted in creation.³ Aquinas saw church and state as complementary, with the spiritual authority of the church prevailing over the civil authority of the state. Since the Church was *societas perfecta*, it set norms for the creation of public order. This presumed dominance of the church over the state created an ongoing tension, typified by the power struggles between Emperor and Pope during much of the Middle Ages.

While the Reformation was primarily a theological and ecclesiastical revolution, it also had far-reaching political ramifications. With the pope no longer seen as the 'vicar of Christ' the state was freed from the domination of the church, and based its legitimacy directly on the Bible.

Luther rejected the Aristotelian model of civil governance, and returned to the Scriptures and to Augustine: the state was not a creation ordinance, but a divine response to sin. There would be no need for kings and rulers if all people were Christians. Be that as it may, at the beginning of the 16th century the legitimacy of the state was still theologically based. The Reformers were certainly no democrats, replacing the sovereignty of God with that of the people. It was the mediating role of the church that they challenged. This in turn diminished the unifying force of the church in society. Faith and politics were still conjoined twins, and to disconnect the two would prove to be a delicate and difficult operation.

The state existed to promote the welfare of its citizens, and their spiritual welfare also. Caring for the true religion (*curiae religionis*) was included in caring for the welfare of one's subjects, for which the ruler was accountable to God. Article 36 is consistent with Calvin's plea that "*a public form of religion may exist among Christians, and humanity among men*". For Calvin, the common good and true religion were two sides of the same coin.⁴ Gradually, this view of the state changed. The

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Calvinist Johannes Althusius (1557-1638) spoke of a social compact, describing society as a system of human covenants. He began to develop the concept of 'separation of powers', and was one of the forerunners of the concept of the sovereignty of the people. This in contrast to Luther's (and to a lesser extent Calvin's) view of the absolute power of the ruler.

By the 17th century, the awareness matured that the ruler must remain aloof from religious divisions. There was no place for religious warfare, and religious differences were increasingly confined to the churches themselves.

Article 36 must be read against a background of the decay of the *republica christiana* and the transition from medieval absolutism to the 17th century concept of state sovereignty. In the 18th century, the concept of the secular state arose, and with it, the beginning of the end of a unified Christian culture. The secularising state, the diversity of confessions and Enlightenment philosophy were all dynamic and mutually influencing developments.

Judgment and discernment.

We are now in the 21st century. The French Revolution has completely reshaped the European political landscape. Democracy, multiparty systems, separation of church and state, and religious pluralism have become social realities. Religious tolerance is taken for granted. Europe is largely secularized, and institutional religion has lost its dominance. This tremendous shift changes the perspective of the discussion. I mention the contribution of two contemporary ethicists. The Dutch theologian Gerrit de Kruiff sets aside the theocratic view. To him, the state is a 'human endeavour'.⁵ He is wary of striving for a 'Christian society', which assigns a dominant political role to Christians. Scripture does not give a normative description of the ideal state. This, of course, does not give the state a free hand, and Christians must remain vigilant for dangerous excesses.

Oliver O'Donovan offers a deeper theological perspective. Political activity is rooted in Scripture, in the analogy between God's rule and human rule.⁶ Together with O'Donovan, I believe that 'judgment', the basic act of moral discrimination, is a critical aspect of civil government. It is mentioned in Romans 13, expressed in Article 36, and deeply rooted in Calvin's political ethics. To Calvin, government is about the law and the magistrates, who are a 'living law'.⁷ 'Justice' is about protecting the good from the wicked, distinguishing right from wrong. It is wisdom, applied in an ever-changing

world. Current events must be interpreted in their deeper theological meaning. In Biblical terms, we must 'discern the spirits' (I Cor 12:10). How can Article 36 assist us in creating such a framework of values and interpretation?

Back to the Source

The Bible and the Language of Faith

Article 36 begins with: "*I believe*": it is an expression of faith, not a political-judicial statement, and the text must be honoured as such. With the eyes of faith, we see the rule of God behind civil rule, a spiritual dimension behind political events, a connection between heaven and earth. This dimension must be described in Biblical terms; hence Article 36 echoes the words of Scripture. This statement of faith begins with "*our gracious God*" (*nostre bon Dieu*). The goodness of God comes first, standing in contrast to the wickedness of man, restraining evil. The civil authorities exist "*because of the depravity of mankind*". Our gracious God uses civil authority "*in order that the licentiousness of man be restrained and that everything be conducted among them in good order*". It acts to restrain chaos and promote good order.

In contrast to the Roman Catholic view, the Reformed confessions regard civil authority not as arising from man as a social being; it is a response to the sinfulness of man. To restrain wickedness the civil authority may use force to "*punish wrongdoers and protect who do what is right*". Behind the terror of the sword stands a just and gracious God. Article 36 explicitly uses the eschatological and apocalyptic language of the New Testament. The goal is "*that the kingdom of Christ may come*" and the removal of false worship serves "*the destruction of the kingdom of antichrist*." The task of Christians is an indirect one: to watch over civil authority, so that it protects the church and its ministry. Luther, Calvin and de Brès alike all stressed that only the preaching of the Word could effectively combat false teaching. The Word of God is the first and chief sword, since by means of its proclamation evil is repelled and the kingdom of antichrist is destroyed.

Mankind and spiritual reality

Article 36 refers to 'mankind', a created and ordered social reality. As a generation in revolt against a gracious God, mankind has become a plaything of greater powers. For 'mankind', the New Testament often uses the encompassing term 'kosmos', a world that holds to its own values and wisdom

... at a symposium
commemorating the
450th anniversary of
the Belgic Confession
held at the Theologische
Universiteit, Kampen, the
Netherlands...
photo P.G.B. de Vries



(I Corinthians 1:20), opposed to the values and wisdom of God (I John 2:15-16). Christians may not conform to the pattern of this world, but must be transformed by the renewing of their minds (Romans 12:1,2).

The 'kosmos' forms the stage for higher powers.⁸ The life of individuals is influenced by the greater structures of society, and these in turn are under the influence of higher spiritual entities. This threefold layering we find with Paul: "*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins (level 1) in which you once walked, following the course of this world, (level 2) following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience (level 3)*" (Ephesians 2:1,2, ESV).

What appears to be rebellious freedom actually follows a predetermined pattern, "*the course of this world*". A neutral zone does not exist. Evil transcends both the individual and the structures of this world. Our struggle is "*against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms*", Ephesians 6:12. In relation to this threefold reality, God uses fallible civil authority to restrain evil in this world.

Our submission to civil authority rests on the fact that "*the authorities that exist have been established by God*" (Romans 13:1). Here, Article 36 rightly highlights the providence of gracious God.

However, the authorities instituted by God are open to the influence of spiritual powers. Next to the reassuring words of Romans 13, we must also read the ominous language of Revelation 13. There, civil authority has become totalitarian, and demands to be worshipped. Still, in the end God will conquer all those kingdoms. *The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever* (Revelation 11:15).

Modern man finds it hard to deal with this Biblical

language. However, a theological social ethic takes account of this transcendent dimension. In his *Christ and the Powers* Hendrikus Berkhof revived this theological approach.⁹ He sees the powers as 'the framework of creation, preserving it from disintegration' and 'the dam which prevents the chaotic deluge from submerging the world'. To him, these powers manifest themselves in human traditions, societal institutions and authorities, without which life would be impossible. However, these powers can have a negative as well as a positive side. They create order, but they could also alienate us from God. In that case, the powers become idols (Galatians 4:8). They become a "*barrier between the Creator and his creation*".

The third level of Christian Social ethics

Between Liberation Theology and Charismatic evangelicalism

Berkhof's argument has been quite influential. The Mennonite John Howard Yoder took it over and concluded that the Christian's calling is to live within the new order, the church, God's people, rather than to participate in political power.¹⁰ Similarly, the integrated world-view of Walter Wink steers a course that is radically opposed to materialism: the core of all reality, including political and corporate reality, is spiritual.¹¹ And in his social ethics, Stephen Mott points in a similar direction: "*The biblical concepts of cosmos and the supernatural powers constitute an objective social reality that can function for good or evil.*"¹²

Both the second and the third layers can be found in Article 36, and they provide an especially useful corrective for our time.

On the one hand, Protestant pietism and

evangelicalism, with their emphasis on personal sin and individual salvation, have often had a blind spot for the evil present in social and political structures. The direct connection laid between personal sin and higher spiritual powers often leads charismatic variants of evangelicalism into a kind of Gnostic spirituality, which imagines that structural problems can be solved by way of exorcism. Hence, the growing interest in so-called “deliverance ministry”. In itself, the theme of ‘spiritual warfare’ is not wrong, but it deserves better theological reflection into what it actually means.¹³

By contrast, ‘liberation theology’ focuses its attention exclusively on structural evils. The weakness of the liberation agenda is its entirely horizontal view of reality and, in the footsteps of Bultmann, its one-sided emphasis on the social and moral message of the gospel.¹⁴ The problems of the world are socially immanent, and can only be solved by social action.

Whenever we return to our sources in Scripture and the old confessions, we see that the realities of this world can only be understood within the greater framework of a temporally transcendent reality. Institutional and social structures that go far beyond the powers of individuals are often the instruments of higher powers. The ‘system maintenance’ of global organizations leaves the individual as no more than a plaything of the system. Mindless drifting on the stream of social trends blinds people to structural evils that bring misery to millions of human beings.

Karl Barth

I conclude by referring to the work of Karl Barth. Both his *Römerbrief* and his *Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde* stand in the Reformed tradition: civil authority exists, not because man is a social being, but because man is a sinful being. It exists to punish evildoers (Romans 13:3; I Peter 2:14).¹⁵ For Barth, civil authority is not a product of sin, but arises from God’s gracious providence to counter the power of sin. It belongs to the powers of the angels. In his *Das christliche Leben*, Barth explores the struggle for human justice more deeply. Here, he discusses social ethics in the light of the Lord’s Prayer. He unifies prayer and ethical behaviour, since the petitions of the prayer stand in stark contrast to the reality in which we live. In their prayer for the Kingdom of God, the zeal of Christians for God finds expression in their struggle for human justice, a struggle against evil and for humanity.¹⁶ This struggle is not only unavoidable, it is by direct command of God himself. Christians

stand in conflict with chaos. They have fixed their eyes on the Kingdom of God, and cannot but rebel against evil, transcending their personal struggles, and devoting themselves to the greater struggle of their Creator, who desires to give life to all men. This warfare is not waged with physical force, but with witness, patience and faith. It is more than just human, says the New Testament: it is a struggle against demonic powers. The rationalist ‘disenchantment’ of reality has blinded us for the higher powers that are hidden behind immoral social structures.

Alienated from God, says Barth, mankind lives a life without God. But he has not become master of his own life. The promise “*you will be like God*” (Genesis 3:5) has never and will never come true. The more mankind emphasizes its own autonomy, the more enslaved it is to those ‘nameless powers’.¹⁷ These powers have escaped human control; they manipulate us more than we master them, and have become the source of our alienation.

Conclusion

We cannot do without a critical theological examination of developments in society. Why have we, for so long, been blind to the horrors of slavery? Are we just as blind today to the misery of child labour and human trafficking?

Both the power of the state and the power of money can become idols. At the same time, our gracious God is pleased to use civil authority to restrain the power of money. State intervention in economic processes is often necessary. In Adam Smith’s model, the profit motive is self-regulating, and a laissez-faire economy should be free from state intervention. However, recent financial crises have shown us the importance of legal frameworks to restrain personal greed and promote the common good. This too is a relevant application of Article 36. The need for governments to ‘restrain the licentiousness of men’ applies to financial systems also.

Still, the most important instrument given by God is not government, but his church. The church of Christ has been set free from all kinds of powers. It does not have the capacity within itself to break these powers, but as a liberated people, it proclaims to these same powers the manifold (multi-coloured!) wisdom of God (Ephesians 3:10). Such a proclamation can only arise from a moral basis. In the words of Berkhof: “*We can only preach the manifold wisdom of God to Mammon if our life displays that we are joyfully freed from his clutches.*”¹⁸



photo P.C.B. de Vries

Notes:

1. This is a condensation of an address delivered in the Dutch language on 1 November 2011, at a symposium commemorating the 450th anniversary of the Belgic Confession held at the Theologische Universiteit, Kampen, the Netherlands, and in English on 27 November 2011 at an international conference in Brussels, Belgium. This condensation, based on the English version, is by Aart Plug, by arrangement with the author. Quotations from the Belgic Confession are taken from the *Book of Praise of the Canadian Reformed Churches*, 1998 edition, Premier, Winnipeg. Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations and references are taken from the *New International Version of the Bible (NIV)*, 1984 edition.
2. O. O'Donovan, *From Irenaeus to Grotius: a Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought, 100-1625*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1999, 322-326.
3. G.G. de Kruijf, *Waakzaam en nuchter: over christelijke ethiek in een democratie*, Baarn, Ten Have, 1994, 62-66. In Augustine's thought the City of God and the City of Man remain in tension, in a conflictive relationship. He cannot be seen as an advocate of Theocracy.
4. Calvin, *Institutes* 4.20.3.
5. de Kruijf, p174ff
6. O. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology*, Cambridge / New York, Cambridge UP, 1996, 2.
7. Calvin, *Institutes* 4.20.14. For the relationship between Calvin's political ethics and O'Donovan cf. G. den Hertog, 'Urteilen als Kernaufgabe der Obrigkeit. Ein Vergleich von Johannes Calvin und Oliver O'Donovan,' in *Kirche, Theologie Und Politik Im Reformierten Protestantismus: Vorträge Der 8. Emdener Tagung Zur Geschichte Des Reformierten Protestantismus*, Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener Theologie / Foedus Verlag, 2011.
8. This view on reality was entirely familiar to the Greeks, who saw life as an expression of powers (Plato: *archontes*) as well as to the Jews, who spoke of angels to give expression to the thought (2 Enoch 19:4-5).
9. H. Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, Scottdale, Mennonite Publ. House, 1977, 33.
10. J.H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1994
11. W. Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*, New York, Doubleday, 1998, 17-21.
12. S. Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*, 2nd ed. New York, Oxford UP, 2011. 192.
13. D.A. Carson, 'God, the Bible and Spiritual Warfare : A Review Article'. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42 (1999) 251-269. J. Beilby (ed.), *Understanding Spiritual Warfare Four Views*, Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, forthcoming (2012).
14. C. Kiesling, 'Bultmann's Moral Theology : Analysis and Appraisal'. *Theological Studies* 30 (1969) 225-248.
15. K. Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, Zurich, TVZ, 2011 and K. Barth, *Rechtfertigung und Recht; Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde*, Theol. Studien, Zurich, EVZ, 1970, 104.
16. K. Barth, *Das Christliche Leben: Die Kirchliche Dogmatik IV/4, Fragmente aus dem Nachlass, Vorlesungen 1959-1961*, Zurich, Theol. Verlag, 1976, 356-372. In a note Barth refers to the fact that Calvin never advocated any form of religious war in France.
17. S. Plonz, *Die Herrenlosen Gewalten: eine Relektüre Karl Barths in Befreiungstheologischer Perspektive*, Mainz, Matthias-Grunewald-Verlag, 1995, 317.
18. Berkhof *ibid.* (n. 47) 50f.

That practical Old Testament

Why still use something old once you have received something new and better? Many Christians are asking themselves this with regard to the Old Testament. God's revelation in the New Testament surpasses that of the Old Testament. As you get to know Jesus better and more directly in the New Testament, what use can the Old Testament then be to us?



It cannot be denied that there are some wonderful stories in the Old Testament, as well as prescriptions and rules containing much wisdom for everyday life. But would we not benefit more from it if we were able to apply those commandments and rules directly to our own situation? Would the Old Testament not be more useful if it taught clearly that we are saved by faith and grace alone, and not through obedience to God's law? Would the Old Testament not stand closer to us if Jesus Christ was brought forward in a less veiled manner?

In reaction to such questions you might attempt to defend the Old Testament by, for example, pointing out how much of the future Redeemer is already displayed in the Old Testament. Or you might try to prove that the Old Testament also already speaks of salvation through God's grace. While that is a good and justifiable course, it does not take away the fact that such things are, indeed, noted more explicitly in the New Testament.

In this article I would like to choose a different approach. I am not going to do my best to prove how many beautiful things from the New Testament are already in the Old. On the contrary, I wish to claim your attention for what is *not* written in the Old Testament. These past years, I have often discovered how good it is to simply acknowledge these things. Instead of this leading to the Old Testament distancing itself from me, I actually started valuing it even more.

Disappointments

I would like to explain this by using a few examples. The first example is God's revelation on Mount Sinai and Israel's experiences throughout the centuries following. When the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai, they were told that they were God's treasured

possession. They were to become a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, although God did emphasize that this would only become reality if they took his words to heart and kept his covenant (Ex.19:5-6). Subsequently, the Israelites were given a great number of commandments and prescriptions. They were privileged above all other nations: God set up his earthly throne, in the tabernacle right in the middle of their camp, and also supplied them with priests and sacrifices to support them. Did they then already realize that the commandments and sacrifices could not truly save them? They did know that they could only exist as God's people because of God's mercy. Had they not made themselves a golden calf, a few weeks after the recital of the Ten Commandments? If Moses had not thrown himself into the breach for them, God would have destroyed them then and there (Ex 32). Nevertheless, they were allowed to move onward to the promised land, with God himself in their midst, based solely on the fact that the Lord is a God who is loving and compassionate, patient and faithful, a God who forgives sins (Ex 34:6-7). All this they could have known, but this does not imply that they also had a clear view of how God himself, through all those commandments, was leading them to Jesus Christ (cf. Gal. 3:23-24), or that God himself had to give them the obedience to his commandments. Paul wrote that, centuries later, in Phil. 2:13: "...for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose". At Sinai, Moses did not yet tell them that. For centuries, therefore, the Israelites lived with the commandments, the priests and the temple services given to them at Mount Sinai. That long history is one of continual disappointments and failures, enough to cause despair.

Self-chosen swamp

Reading the books of the prophets can give you the same experience. You come across some beautiful prospects and encounter prophecies in which you can clearly point out the fulfillment in the life of Jesus Christ. But even when you lay down all the prophecies alongside one other, you still do not see an unambiguous picture of what Jesus was to be later, and what he came to do. There are too many images beside one another for that. More probably, you may feel that many prophecies do not appear to be directly about salvation by Jesus. Most

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*...There is talk of a 'vault'
that divides the waters
and appears to be 'sky'
(Gen. 1:6-8)...*
Photo P.G.B. de Vries



prophesies speak of sin, judgment and destruction, yet all those stories of Israel's unfaithfulness and all those prophesies about Israel's downfall are still exceptionally valuable. God has taken the time to teach us something that we find hard to accept: God himself must personally pull us out of our self-chosen swamp. There is salvation, but from the position of one's own downfall. We must acknowledge: we should have been the ones to hang on the cross of Calvary. We can only live because Christ took over our destruction from us. The Old Testament does not paint all the finishing touches of Christ's work for us. It does clearly show how necessary God's intervention in his Son was. I have yet to meet a Christian who can do without that lesson by God, given to us in that lengthy Old Testament.

Meaningless

The second example of a part of the Old Testament in which many things are *not* being said, is the Book of Ecclesiastes. The Preacher, or Teacher, starts by stating that all is meaningless (Eccl. 1:2). At the end of his reflections he hardly seems to have made any progress: "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Everything is meaningless!" Can he tell us no more than that all is meaningless? How sad it would be if Ecclesiastes was the only book in the Bible! It leaves so much undiscussed! Not denying that, I would claim that it is a good thing that this book is in the Bible. Firstly because very many people recognize themselves in this. They appreciate the Teacher's carefree honesty. He does not make things any better than they are. You cannot discover the meaning of life, at least, not if you look around you in the manner of the Teacher, with your own eyes and thinking with

your own mind. At the same time, the Teacher is doing something similar to what we see in the long history of Israel and all those prophets of doom, namely, showing us that it must come from the other side. Not only our salvation, but also the insight into the meaning of our existence. That is a lesson that we, despite all our learnedness, are still in need of learning.

The Teacher does not give a clear revelation of the meaning of life. His book does show the way in which his readers can cope, very practically. That is "Fear God and keep his commandments" (Eccl. 12:13).

Practical

This brings us to the next point: the Old Testament is a very practical book. I would like to explain that by using two examples: Genesis 1 and Job. When opening the Bible at Genesis 1, you would most likely expect an account of the origin of all things. Approaching the text with questions of today in mind, you will then soon be disappointed. Genesis 1:2 says that there was darkness and water, before God created light. The text does not tell us in so many words where they came from. There is talk of a 'vault' that divides the waters and appears to be 'sky' (Gen. 1:6-8). But how is that to be understood? How does that relate to what we ourselves observe above us? Genesis 1:14-18 speaks extensively of the creation of planets and stars. We would like to know what the relationship is between the light they give and the light that was there before the fourth day, but we read nothing about that. Nor is the question answered concerning the millions of years of which astronomers speak.

It may sound strange, but it is this peculiarity which, in fact, illustrates the practical character of Genesis 1. The chapter's foremost purpose is

apparently something different from answering the theoretical question of the origin of all things. What the Bible's first chapter particularly shows us is that God gave man a place to live, in a safe environment and with everything he needed. It also shows that our goal should be that we dedicate the days of our life to God. For the whole story works towards a climax that is formed by the seventh day, which is blessed and sanctified by God. Genesis 1 shows us that we need not fear the darkness or the water. Neither need we fear the heavenly bodies, which were idolized as divinities by heathens in those days. Those were all matters touching directly on the Israelites' everyday life practice¹.

Why?

The Book of Job poses a question that many people are concerned with. It is the question of the meaning of suffering: why someone should suffer who does not in the least seem to deserve it? Job himself does not get to hear why all this suffering happened to him. We, the readers of the book, know more. For we, as opposed to Job, know from Job 1 and 2 what took place in heaven between God and Satan. Yet we still have unanswered questions. Could God really not have responded differently to the provoking words of Satan, instead of dealing Job such a blow? In his answer to Job, God illustrates his great power by pointing out fearsome creatures like the hippo and the crocodile (Job 40-41), but the question why he created such menacing animals is not entered into.

The book of Job does not tell us all we would like to know about the meaning of suffering and the role of evil in creation. It does show us the practical and passable route. That is the route of awe and reverence for God (see Job 28:28; 40:1-14; 42:1-6). Job calls upon people, both then and now, to put their questions into the safekeeping of that awesome God. That is the route along which we, as human beings living under God's throne, are truly able to move onward.

Signpost

The Israelites in the times of the Old Testament often had different problems to deal with than we do. Not all that is applicable to them in their everyday life is directly applicable to ours. Indeed, the Old Testament is so practical because it enters into what was going on *then*. At the same time, that is what makes God's revelation in the Old Testament so beautiful. You see how he is constantly busy, with endless patience, seeking his

people. He addresses them and gives them the help they need. Never too little, but also never so much that it overrules them. His word is truly a lamp for the feet, a light for the path (Ps 119:105). It may not tell you all you would like to know; but it gives you enough to walk safely along the route that God wishes to walk with you.

That is also true of the words of the prophets. Through the prophecies, God was speaking first and foremost to the people in the situation in which they found themselves at that time. In that situation, He showed them the way. He took the time to teach his people, in the ups and downs. Step by step, he was making it more and more clear that it really all had to come from him, from his redemption, given to us while we did not deserve it. The Old Testament displays how God truly walks into history to seek people and, with great patience, brings them where they ought to be: with him and with the great King of David's house (cf. Hosea 3:5).

There is much more to be said about the practical use of the Old Testament for Christians today. I am thinking, for example, of what my colleague from the Theological University of Apeldoorn, Prof. Peels wrote about the height, depth, width and length of the Old Testament Divine revelation in comparison to that of the New Testament his book *Shadow Sides: The Revelation of God in the Old Testament* (published by Paternoster Press in 2003).

In short

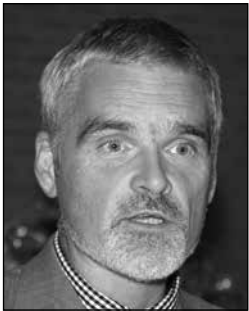
The Old Testament displays how God really walks into history, seeking people and, with great patience, bringing them to where they ought to be: with him and with the great King of David's house. You must take the Old Testament as it is, in what it offers and in what it does *not* offer. If you do that, you will start to appreciate it more and more.² ■

Notes:

1. Should you wish to read more about this, see my book *In den beginne en verder. Een bijbels-theologische reflectie op de schepping*, recently published by *De Vuurbaak* in Barneveld.
2. This article was first published in the Dutch language in *De Reformatie* 5, 2 December 2011. This translation by Sabine Bosscha, May 2012, by arrangement with the author. All Scripture references and quotations are taken from the New International Version of the Bible (NIV), 1984 Edition

The Old Testament and Christian life

Recently a debate was held in our congregation defending the thesis that you need only the New Testament to know how to live a Christian life. I maintain that you do actually need the Old Testament and would like to specify that further in this article. What sections of Christian life would you miss were you to keep the Old Testament closed?



It is not surprising that people today underestimate the importance of the Old Testament. More and more Christians are experiencing a contradiction between the Old and the New Testament. The Old was for Israel; the New is for the church. In addition, there is an increasingly allergic reaction to the commandments. It is then said that Christians do not have to deal with Moses' commandments but with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, or only with the commandment of love. God no longer tells us what is right and wrong but renews us through Christ's Spirit. Good works will then follow naturally and may vary according to the situation. This opinion often stems from an evangelical background, although many evangelical Christians are placing different accents today. For Reformed Christians, however, this is quite an about-turn. Ever since Calvin they had been reproached for being far too Old Testamentary. That we sang only psalms in the church services was no coincidence. Nevertheless, I dare to question whether the Reformed truly did that much with the Old Testament in their ethical practice. Firstly, we often limited ourselves to the commandments in the Old Testament. By preference we divided those into three categories. The ceremonial prescriptions accompanying Israel's worship services we would rule out, they were not for us. The same was valid for civil laws given to Israel to form their existence as a nation. In the end, we were left with only the moral commandments, words containing God's will for all times and places. Those too we also usually summarize in the Ten Commandments. In this way, in the practice of daily Christian life, the greater part of the Old Testament remains out of view for Reformed Christians as well.

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Development

Actually, it is right to build a Christian life praxis on the New Testament first of all. In Matt. 28 Jesus ordered his disciples to obey everything *He had commanded*, bearing in mind the Sermon on the Mount. This forms the constitution of the Kingdom and therefore forms the basis for Christian life. It is also correct to emphasize before all else that Christian life revolves around unity with Jesus and following Him. He makes new people of us, people who learn to think and feel like Him. For this reason the sermon starts with the beatitudes which sketch the contours of a Christian character as opposed to listing a pile of duties. Paul's words in Galatians 5 about the fruits of the Spirit are also directed at more than simply our behaviour. They regard new qualities. All that being said, it does not mean that the practical content of this new Christian life cannot be made specific. Jesus and his apostles also specified very clearly what did and did not belong in this new existence. In doing so, they continually fall back on The Old Testament, developing the Christian way of life from that starting point. In the Sermon on the Mount for example, Jesus presents concrete directions for a Christian life. He derives these constantly from the Old Testament. In this way, for example, he launches his radical words on adultery by making use of the seventh commandment. His instructions for a Christian life originate by placing Old Testament words in the perspective of the coming Kingdom of God. At the same time, Jesus leaves many terrains of life undiscussed. He brings up adultery and dealing with one's enemies, but not the Sabbath or the relationship between parents and children. Is he demanding concrete choices from us concerning sexual ethics, while the rest remains unspecified and is left to grow spontaneously? We misunderstand the Sermon on the Mount if we think that. He is challenging us as mature Christians to do the same with these other themes as he had demonstrated in the Sermon on the Mount. The content of a Christian lifestyle can be found by working 'New Testamentally' with the Old Testament words.

Mix

Do not the apostles do this constantly in their

letters? Paul's instructions for a Christian life in Romans 12-15, for example, form an educational mix of all the factors with which one could give substance to a Christian way of life. He writes about dedication to God, unity with Jesus, and the creativity of God's Spirit. He repeats direct instructions from Jesus' teaching, such as loving one's enemies. Yet he also brings the Ten Commandments to bear. Alongside that, he draws from other Old Testament passages too concerning the relationship between Israel and other nations, or about people in governmental power. Not that the apostles act as if nothing has changed during time. We do not see a dumb repetition of the Old Testament, but they do generously draw from it. No wonder, as that Old Testament was their only Bible. It is this 'scripture' that is called useful for *teaching righteousness* so that *God's servants may be equipped for every good work* (2 Tim. 3:16).

God, nation, land.

Using the Old Testament in this manner is fitting with its content. The biblical scholar Christopher Wright discovered in the Old Testament a triangular relationship between God, the people of Israel, and the promised land of Canaan. Everything God says and does is connected to that triangle. All the laws and instructions show who God is, in building up the people of Israel and bringing them to the Promised Land. The Old Testament displays how the living God, through redemption, creates a new society on a piece of liberated earth, thus presenting a model for all of creation. Israel displayed his kingly priesthood amidst the other nations: from them one could read who God is and what He wants (Ex.19). This new society, based on God's instructions, was meant to attract the attention of other people and bring them to praise their creator. Something of that became visible when the Queen of Sheba visited King Solomon (1 Kings 10:9). In this way, the new society or civilization of Israel was formed, in the triangular relationship between God, people, and land, an intermediate station on the road to God's ultimate destination, the re-creation. Stopping at this intermediate station, we see that God remains faithful to his creation, redeems her and brings her to his destination. That being said, we must not make such an intermediate station absolute. On many points we are still at the beginning. Often Moses' commandments show us what changed in respect to other nations when Israel started serving the true God. God does not lift his people suddenly up and out of the world of those other people. He does not suddenly make them perfect. Israel's new society formed a kind of experimental field, with God's worldwide goal at the same time still far away. Nevertheless, we cannot just skip past that intermediate station. God's instructions for Israel are not random or meaningless but all have something to do with God's course from creation to kingdom. They say something about who God is, what the new civilization revolving around him looks like and what he has in mind for this earth. We need them in order to develop a suitable Christian way of life further along the track today.

Changed triangle

What we should bear in mind, however, is that the three corners of the triangle have now changed. We have a deeper knowledge of God, thanks to Jesus. We no longer form a nation united on earth but a community that is scattered across the world. And we do not yet have our own liberated land but are pilgrims on our way to the new world of the future. This must be thought through when trying to discover God's will from the Old Testament.

In doing so, however, we may not limit ourselves to moral prescriptions alone or direct ourselves only to the Ten Commandments. The whole Old Testament explains how God shaped the society around Him in the Promised Land. So, in principle, everything helps in finding conclusions for today. Of course, the manner in which passages from the Old Testament can be applied to life today is not always completely clear. In this we recognize Christian maturity, which demands that we, as followers of Christ, draw expectantly from the Old Testament for our Christian life.

Society and justice

I would like to illustrate this with a few examples. Only the Old Testament can help us with a Christian view on how to treat the earth or on the government and organization of a society. In the New Testament these were not a topical questions as Christians had hardly any influence in the world they lived in. Their orientation shifts from the Promised Land to the new heavens and the new earth. Therefore they do not reflect upon their position in a foreign society but barely enter into the question of how such a society should be organized or governed. Later on, Christians did receive the opportunity to exert influence in society. Then they immediately fell back on the Old Testament because it contains instructions that let how God sees society shimmer through. Today we see something comparable concerning the environmental issue. The New Testament offers us no more than a basic attitude, but thanks to the Old Testament we discover that God saw animals as valuable creations and that we should not degrade the land. With regard to possessions and the economy, the New Testament teaches that Christians as pilgrims on route should consider possessions as something relative and be prepared to make sacrifices. While one will not find reflections about the best economic structure, it is becoming an increasingly important issue for Christians. In the modern world we too form little cogs in the mighty economic system. The Old Testament in particular contains many directions for the economy, for example the instructions for the year of jubilee, in which slaves were to be released and all debts forgiven. A Christian politician recently proved just how topical that is by rightly referring to this rule in connection with Greece's unsolvable burden of debt.

In short, one could say: without the Old Testament the whole Christian social tradition of thought and Christian reflection on political responsibility and justice would never have developed. The same is true, for example, of the Christian view on violence,

punishment and on war and peace. Of old, such 'earthly' applications of God's words were characteristic of Reformed Christians, and not evangelical Christians. That had everything to do with the evaluation of the 'earthly' Old Testament.

Wisdom and relativism

Another point of value for Christian life is the commonsense wisdom in the Old Testament. Especially books such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes make it clear that, in order to discern between good and evil, it is necessary that you simply open your eyes and look around you at everyday reality. You must not think that you can derive everything directly from the Bible. If you look around you, in unity with Christ and through the spectacles of God's words, you will see much to help you make practical choices between good and evil. Christian life revolves for a great part around practical wisdom in a realistically viewed world. Jesus' New Testament message is profound and radical. Yet it is not meant as an abstract ideal, but something to start working with, concretely and practically. Sometimes we must start in a small way and can only take small steps ahead, and sometimes we are not able to keep evil at bay for quite a while. The Old Testament then helps us to find the most responsible route in imperfect situations. This brings to mind the manner in which Moses temporarily condones divorce, while limiting it at the same time.

Feast and Advent

My final example concerns the festival calendar for God's Old Testament society. Apparently, God wants people to celebrate his works together in such a way that they fit into the rhythm of the seasons in the Promised Land. On these feasts everyone was allowed to share in God's blessing, especially the weak and the foreigners. If I stand for a moment at that intermediate station and try to process it for today's times, I will not claim that such feasts were only ceremonial prescriptions to which Christians are no longer bound. It brings me a taste of God's intentions for humanity and the earth. Does not Revelation 7 depict God's kingdom as an eternal Feast of Tabernacles?

Therefore it suits the Christian lifestyle to independently shape it into something new for today. Isn't it wonderful that the early Church instigated a Sunday and Christian feast days? God's new works in Christ were celebrated and connected to the rhythm of a suffering creation and with love for the weak and for other people. We can only think of this if we are used to drawing from the Old Testament for the organization of Christian life. Thanks only to the Old Testament is it now Advent again. ■



Connecting with Job's suffering

On August 18 Rev. Egbert Brink received an honorary doctorate in Divinity and the degree of doctor in Theology (ThD) at William Carey International University in Pasadena. His work as a lecturer at the Faculté de Théologie Évangélique de Bangui en de Faculté Jean Calvin in Aix-en-Provence, as well as numerous articles published, and above all the recommendation of Dr. Moussa Bongoyok, formed the basis for an application to the graduate programme of the Promise Christian University.

On August 16 the presentation and peer review of his dissertation *Connecting Horizons with Job* (Coping with trauma by connecting with Job's suffering) took place in the William Carey University. This dissertation aims to prove that a pastoral care worker can make his own contribution on the trauma healing process in cooperation with other care-givers. From his own competence on religious domain, a spiritual counsellor or pastor can guide the counselee in tackling the 'Question of God' and help to restore the connection with God. The Book of Job can help to express the confusion of feelings that are evoked in a traumatic context, in particular in the relationship with God, other people and oneself. The language of Job appears to be very useful in formulating the experience of suffering and asking the most penetrating life questions.

Connecting Horizons with Job will be published by the William Carey University shortly. Egbert Brink's presentation can be viewed on the university website <http://vimeo.com/wciu>.

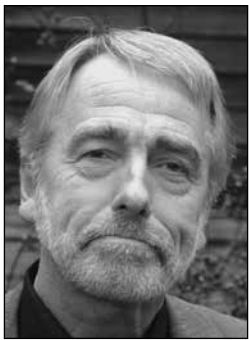
We congratulate Dr Egbert Brink on his academic promotion (magna cum laude) on this practical subject on the cutting edge of theology and psychology, and hope with him that his study will contribute to the spiritual healing of sufferers of trauma.

To this end, a more extensive article on the interesting subject of his thesis will be published in a following issue of Lux Mundi.

God's Jealousy and the Outpouring of his Spirit

Joel 2:18-32 (Hebrew text 2:18-3:5)

In this meditation I'd like to make a few remarks about a central part in the book of Joel: the section that ends with the famous promise of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Peter quotes this text on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). This part starts in Joel 2:18: 'Then the LORD became jealous for his land and had pity on his people'.



This combination of his jealousy and pity urges God to restore the land, trees, and vineyards. There will be early rain and late rain again, and the effect of the terrible fourfold locust plague described in Joel 1 will be restored. But not just that: the reason causing God to send these armies of locusts - the lack of true commitment in the service of God in the temple of Jerusalem - will be restored as well: the outpouring of God's Spirit will heal Judah and Jerusalem in this respect. All young and old, men and women, servants and maids will be so doused with God's Spirit that they are fully aware of all the great deeds and plans of God. This makes Jerusalem a home for all who call to God for deliverance from judgment. It is my intention to search for an answer to the question: what does all this – and especially the abundant gift of his Spirit – have to do with God's jealousy?

God's jealousy

God is 'a jealous God' (Ex. 20:5; Dt. 5:9; cp. Ex. 34:14) – what does that mean for us?

The words 'jealous' and 'jealousy' (Hebrew: *qn'*) have the connotation of 'an intense, energetic state of mind, urging towards action' (Peels, DOTTE 3,938 s.v.). Think of passion. Think of burning fire. Think of a raging storm, fury.

God is a passionate God. He cannot remain passive or silent when someone insults him or disqualifies him. As examples, when someone acts as if God does not exist, or as if he had never spoken, or when someone gives his honour to someone else, or when someone attacks his beloved, his people, his

servant, his anointed, or mocks them.

His jealousy is a very personal revelation of God's being. It is an expression of his highness and holiness; it is God taking his holiness seriously. Is God's jealousy a characteristic that we should fear, because it is dangerous? Or is it a quality of God that gives us hope and joy?

God introduces himself as 'a jealous God' in the closing words of the first two commandments of the covenant law. This means two things, to begin with.

His reaction to the first commandment: *no other gods before me*, characterizes God as a jealous God. Anyone refusing to obey, kneeling before other gods in his presence, arouses his jealousy. You cannot serve God and at the same time one or more other gods. Whoever does so treats God as one of the many, denying that God is the only one. But there are no other gods! All that is presented or presents itself as gods besides God are fake gods. To place God on the same level as non-gods, fake-gods is very insulting. It touches the heart of his holiness, his honour.

God's reaction to the second commandment: *no carved images to bow down to or to serve*, can, to some extent, be compared to his jealous reaction to the disobedience of the first commandment. False gods are as a rule represented by an image. But God's jealousy also reacts fiercely to the use of manmade images of creatures in the service of God himself. It is far below God's majesty, as the creator of all things, that people should think he can be represented by an image of a creature. We cannot let dead things represent the living God; we cannot lock him up in a creature; we cannot make him portable for our purposes.

Expressing this in one affirmative sentence: God claims the right to be the only one, the only creator and the only redeemer of his people (see Deut. 4: 32-40). That is his holiness and his jealousy.

God guards his uniqueness, his being the one and only God who is higher and has more majesty than any creature because he himself is the creator. Violation of this reality arouses an ardent reaction, a passionate answer. Israel experienced this

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expression of God's jealousy, when he addressed the worshipping of other gods by Israel, Ezek.5:13; Zeph.1:18; 3:8 (cp. Deut.32:16,21; Ps.78:58; Ezek.8:3).

God's jealousy demands all

Let us think of the implications of what we have seen till now. God wants to be the only one for his people. He does not want his people to treat him on the same level as his creation, in one way or another.

What does this mean for Israel's commitment to God? That he does not acknowledge any other god, that there is no other creator, or redeemer, means that God in his jealousy claims all the love and all the esteem of his people. That he does not accept but fiercely rejects the Israelites worshipping other gods, means that he also will not accept the Israelites keeping even a small bit of themselves for themselves. God's jealousy demands the whole Israelite and all Israel.

This connection is made in the greatest commandment (Deut.6:4-5): 'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might'. His jealousy will not accept half a servant, half a believer. A half obedience, a 60 percent commitment, a 99 percent devotion is not enough.

A clear illustration of this side of God's jealousy can be learnt from Joshua at the time of the renewal of the covenant in Shechem. His instruction is: fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness (Josh.24:14). If they are not willing to do so, they can choose to serve either their old Babylonian gods or the new Canaanite gods, whatever. So the choice is: to serve God or to serve non-gods. The Israelites insist: we will serve the LORD, for he is our God' (18). Joshua replies: 'you are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God, he is a jealous God (...)'.

There is an enormous risk: when they now commit themselves to God and after some time they start serving other gods as well, he 'will do you harm and consume you after having done you good' (20). They persist, nevertheless, and Joshua says: 'Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the Lord'. They promise and they even sign for it in Shechem.

In his jealousy God claims the whole heart, the whole soul and all the powers of his men and women. God's jealousy is a mighty power in the covenant; it enhances the relation between him and his people up to the maximum, to the optimum.

In fact, here we meet with the answer to a problem many Bible readers have with Joel. He summons Judah and Jerusalem to repent, but he does not tell us from what specific sin. Here we learn that sin has a mother. Her name is: loss of commitment, weakening of love, formalization of faith, emptiness of heart. Before there is sin, disobedience, or spiritual adultery, there is shrinking love, weakening faith. Judah and Jerusalem were not disobedient, but disobedience lures at the door. Judah and Jerusalem lose faith, they lack devotion. Sin will be the next step.

Joel passes on God's instruction in Joel 2:12: 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments'. God's jealousy is speaking!

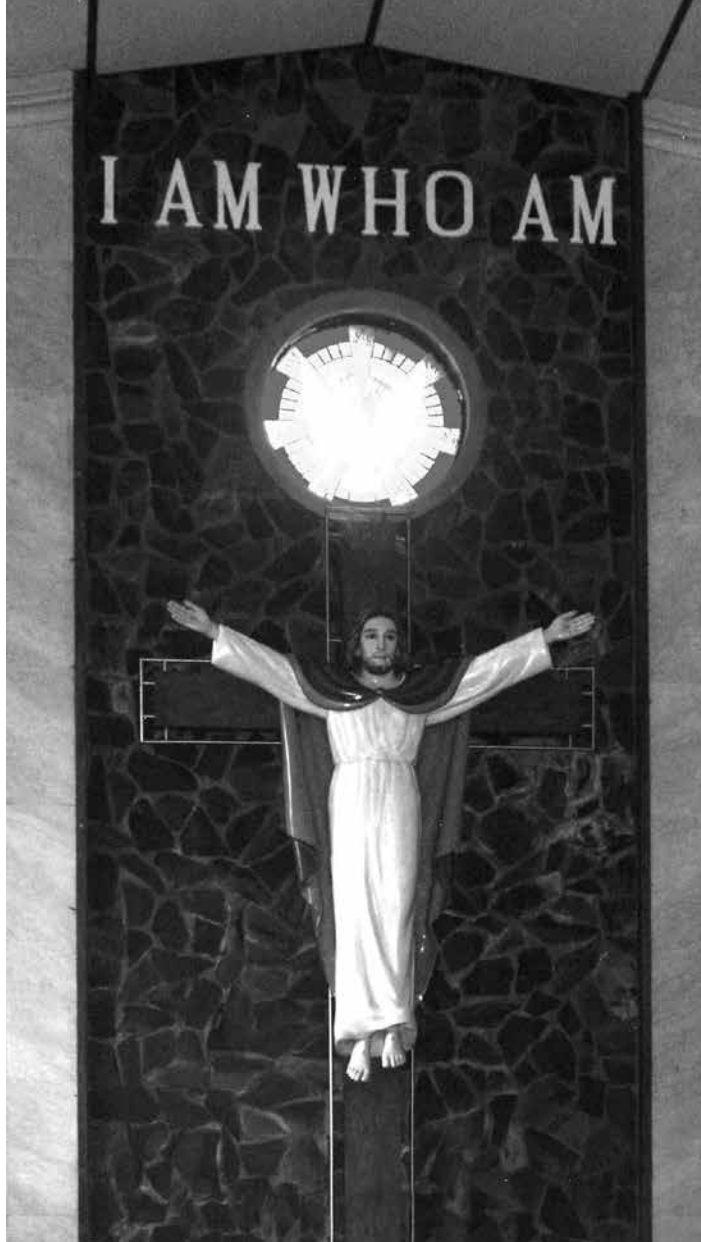
Is the demand of God's jealousy fair?

God's jealousy enhances the relation between him and his people up to the maximum. Humanly speaking, do we not see here a tremendous problem for the God of the covenant? Is it not - with Joshua - realistic and fair to say: neither Israel was, nor are we able to serve God in such a way? Will God's jealousy not turn out to be a destructive power because of our sinfulness? Why should we enter the covenant with this 'jealous God' and risk our death sentence?

Why would God enter into a covenant with humans who will certainly disappoint and embarrass him? Does not his repeated passionate reaction to the lack of faithfulness of his people cause reputation damage? Will not his punishing of Israel's sins, his anger against idolatry, and the fierce criticisms of his prophets against Israel's conduct - without noticing any improvement, cause him to lose credibility? All these humiliations of Israel, its splitting into two kingdoms, the deportation of the ten tribes, the exile and dispersion of Judah, the destruction of his own house, the temple in Jerusalem, and in the end the complete dismantling of the throne of his beloved messiah - David and his royal house - do they build up the glory of his name?

Yes, here we have a serious problem. Because of his jealousy, God does not want to lose his covenant people in even the slightest way. But at the same time he only will be satisfied with 100 percent loyal believers, and with a 100 percent committed people.

Perhaps we think this must make God's jealousy a threatening and destructive power. But - Joel's preaching shows - it does not. God's jealousy



...the second commandment: *no carved images to bow down to or to serve...*
photo P.G.B. de Vries

appears in combination with his pity to be an incomparably strong and creative power in the covenant. It does not only mean that God restores the land, the vineyards, the fruit trees and the throne of David. His pity on the people (Joel 2:18) transforms God's jealousy into the energetic motivation to restore the land, the people, and the obedience, and to heal the gap between God and his people. When God is ready with his restoration work, the conclusion will be, Joel 2:27: you shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I am the LORD your God and there is none else. And my people shall never again be put to shame'. No more shame means that it is not enough to water the land, and to let the trees blossom and bear fruit. If God's people are never again to be put to shame, they need to be created anew. The jealousy of God makes it necessary that it is sure that all his people only love him and that in them there is nothing besides the knowledge and the reverence and the admiration of God. In order to enable this, it will not be enough that God criticizes his people over and over, helps or even redeems his

people, now and then to restore his people. For a people full of only his love and faithfulness God has to pour out his Spirit on all flesh. He has to baptize all flesh in his Spirit.

God's jealousy: creative covenant power

So are we to fear the jealousy of God? No, let us admire it! We may appeal to it. We may ask God for the fullness of his Spirit, for a heart full of faith, love and praise for his mighty love for us, for a heart that is full of Jesus and his passion for our salvation. God's jealousy may help us to ask him sincerely to keep us from stumbling and to make us strong in doing good. God's jealousy can help us to sincerely ask God for a complete renewal of our body, our soul, our heart and of all our power. God's jealousy can stimulate us to strive ardently for a life that fits to God's holiness and passionate love, for a mind and body that will not destabilize the covenant God made with us. God's jealousy stimulates us to long to be cleansed completely and made perfect forever.

And the reputation damage? I consider the history of the failing of the covenant and the nevertheless ongoing radical faithfulness of the Lord to Israel as steps toward the suffering and repudiation of Jesus Christ, God's own beloved Son. In order to forgive Israel's guilt, and our sins, in order to cleanse us and renew us, God had to do the work himself. The Son took our place. He dressed himself in our sins and was rejected by Israel, by the world and by the Father himself. Jesus Christ had to come to become the new heart, the new spirit, the new soul of the covenant: the new man, the new Israel, the new David. He had to come as the standard of us renewed.

God is going to make that reality. It will be the victory of God's holy jealousy. A blameless people will meet the glory of God's holiness. Jesus together with the Spirit will ultimately present a blameless people to the Father, without guilt and without sin. Like Jude affirms when he closes his letter in the New Testament with this prayer: Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Saviour, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen (Jude 24-25). ■

■ Adapted from the message delivered in the Morning Chapel service of February 3, 2012, Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Dehra Dun (Uttarakhand, India).

What Does a Goal of Unity Mean?

While NAPARC isn't a household word, that group of 12 Reformed and Presbyterian denominations represents over a half million people. It continues to grow. Several years ago NAPARC represented just 5 denominations, including the RPCNA, one of the founding members. With its current 12 member churches and 3 observer churches, there are nearly 1 million people connected with NAPARC.



NAPARC is the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council. That council gathered for its 37th annual meeting on Nov. 15-16 in Atlanta, Ga., at the headquarters of the Presbyterian Church in America. Each member church, including the RPCNA, was represented by up to four delegates.

The emphasis of this year's meeting was a consideration of what organic unity means and how it could be accomplished. NAPARC's primary goals are to facilitate cooperation and to emphasize the need for organic union. Over the life of NAPARC, much more time and emphasis have been placed on cooperation than on union, according to some veteran delegates. Two years ago NAPARC created a committee to make recommendations about how it could make greater progress on that second goal.

NAPARC's constitution states that it is to be "a fellowship that enables the constituent churches to advise, counsel, and cooperate in various matters with one another and hold out before each other the desirability and need for organic union of churches that are of like faith and practice." The second goal is similar to the wording of the RPCNA's Covenant of 1871: "We will pray and labor for the visible oneness of the Church of God in our own land and throughout the world, on the basis of truth and of Scriptural order."

One result of NAPARC's intention to "hold out... the desirability and need for organic union" was that Dr. Robert Godfrey (president and professor of history at Westminster Seminary California), who has been an advocate of uniting NAPARC denominations, was invited to be the keynote speaker at this year's meeting.

A Reformed Dream

In 1997 Robert Godfrey wrote an article in a small magazine called *Outlook* that was titled, "A Reformed Dream." People paid attention, and the article was reprinted in *Modern Reformation* in 2005. Godfrey's dream is that the NAPARC denominations would unite in one general assembly, with each denomination retaining its own constitution "as separate synods that never interfered with one another's work." The new structure, he asserts, would create a means for greater cooperation and unity, including in our testimony to the watching world.

Negotiated union can be a great thing, he said, but hardly ever happens. Godfrey made it clear that he is speaking of a true union on a scriptural basis. He said that some division is good, since there exist both true and false churches. And we acknowledge that there are other true churches with whom we are not fully united. But the NAPARC churches, he said, are confessionally united, in that they adhere to equal confessional standards (the Westminster standards and the Three Forms of Unity). We should not allow our significant degree of unity to make us complacent in working toward greater unity, he said.

In a discussion time following Godfrey's speech, there was much excitement about Godfrey's idea and also much concern about how it could be implemented. Delegates agreed that NAPARC has no independent authority, and so any union would have to be a union of the member churches and not something instituted by NAPARC itself.

Godfrey was appointed as an *ex officio* member of NAPARC's goal-review committee to see whether there was merit for any concrete proposals to NAPARC.

Other Work

The meeting of NAPARC provides both official and unofficial times for discussion, cooperation, and fellowship. All 6 members of the RPCNA's Interchurch Committee were present, having met in private session the day before the NAPARC meeting. Over the two days of NAPARC, the RPCNA met with delegations from the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, the Canadian Reformed Churches, the United Reformed Churches, and the

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Heritage Reformed Churches. There was productive and specific discussion about how these denominations could work more closely.

All member and observer churches provided reports to NAPARC. There was significant interest in the RPCNA's position paper on sexual orientation, since many of the NAPARC denominations are working on similar papers or dealing with similar issues. There was also much interest in the Covenant of 1871 when a passage was read aloud during the RPCNA report.

All 12 member and 3 observer denominations plan to meet again Nov. 13-14, 2012, in Indiana. NAPARC's official web site is www.naparc.org. ■

From the NAPARC Constitution

Confessing Jesus Christ as only Savior and Sovereign Lord over all of life, we affirm the basis of the fellowship of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches to be full commitment to the Bible in its entirety as the Word of God written, without error in all its parts and to its teaching as set forth in the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms. That the adopted basis of fellowship be regarded as warrant for the establishment of a formal relationship of the nature of a council, that is, a fellowship that enables the constituent churches to advise, counsel, and cooperate in various matters with one another and hold out before each other the desirability and need for organic union of churches that are of like faith and practice.

From the RPCNA Covenant of 1871

That, believing the Church to be one, and that all the saints have communion with God and with one another in the same Covenant; believing, moreover, that schism and sectarianism are sinful in themselves; and inimical to true religion, and trusting that divisions shall cease, and the people of God become one Catholic church over all the earth, we will pray and labor for the visible oneness of the Church of God in our own land and throughout the world, on the basis of truth and of scriptural order. Considering it a principal duty of our profession to cultivate a holy brotherhood, we will strive to maintain Christian friendship with pious men of every name, and to feel and act as one with all in every land who pursue this grand end. And, as a means of securing this great result, we will by dissemination and application of the principles of truth herein professed, and by cultivating and exercising Christian charity, labor to remove stumbling-blocks, and to gather into one the scattered and divided friends of truth and righteousness.

Doctorate Rev. Arie Versluis

On June 20th Rev. Versluis defended his dissertation in the field of Old Testament Theology. The title of the published dissertation is *Geen verbond, geen genade, [No Covenant, no Grace] Analysis and evaluation of the command to exterminate the nations of Canaan (Deuteronomy 7)*.

This chapter in particular has often given rise to criticism on the violent aspects of God's revelation to Israel. Through his careful and scholarly research Dr. Versluis is able to conclude convincingly that this command to exterminate these peoples is exclusively connected with Israel's settlement in the land of Canaan and with the unique and exclusive relationship between YHWH and Israel. He explains how God's judgment, while terrifying, is not capricious and arbitrary as the motivation for the extermination lies in the sins of the Canaanite nations. Moreover, the same judgment is announced to God's own people Israel, if it follows the nations of Canaan – a judgment that is finally executed. There appears to be reason enough to read this command together with the message of the New Testament, that God in his Son has taken the judgment of sin on Himself.

We congratulate Dr Versluis with the result of his work! Prof. Eric Peels, who acted as the promoter, is also to be congratulated on yet another valuable academic result by one of his students in the field of OT theology.

We hope to publish a more extensive reproduction of this dissertation by Dr. Versluis in a following issue of Lux Mundi.

Rev. Kees van Dusseldorp Doctor of Theology

On February 29, 2012, Rev. Kees van Dusseldorp, currently pastor of the Reformed Church (Liberated) in Cappelle on the IJssel-South/West, received his doctor of theology degree at the Theological University of the Reformed Churches (Liberated) in Kampen, by defending successfully his dissertation on the subject, "Sermons among the stories" (*Preken onder de verhalen*), an theological analysis of "narrative preaching" as a fruitful critical angle to look at traditional Reformed preaching.

A preacher is bringing God's Story to people living in the midst of "stories" and "storytellers." Reformed homiletics can be enriched by listening to what social science and other disciplines have learned about "narratives" in human culture.



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