

LuxMundi 30

No 4 December 2011

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

By J.M. Batteau, p. 81

Riddles around the letter to the Hebrews (2)

By P.H.R. van Houwelingen, p. 82

How can a God of love use violence?

By H.G.L. Peels, p. 86

Commentaries and Preaching (1),

By J. van Bruggen, p. 92

Equipped For Service: Excellence in Teaching

By A. Plug, p. 94

Loving Muslims - not fantasy friends

By M. de Vries, p. 97

Christians in society

By P. Niemeijer, p. 101

Wisdom

By G. van Ek, p. 104

News Update

Story Bible for Older Children, p. 85

Prof. Kwakkel appointed in France, p. 91

European Conference of Reformed Churches 2012, p. 100

Albert Gootjes Dr. in theology, p. 103

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A different kind of “Oktoberfest”! Next week, the last week of October, I’m heading to a conference in Berlin, called “The Gospel and the City.” It’s a conference sponsored by “City to City Europe,” part of the Redeemer City to City movement connected to Redeemer Presbyterian Church, in New York City.



The flyer presenting the conference describes its purpose: “The Gospel and the City Conference is organised by City to City Europe, a growing network of church planters and pastors in major European cities. They are from various denominations and minister in different urban contexts. As a network, we realize that effective urban ministry needs an approach that applies the gospel to every aspect of life and church ministry. We further realize that church planting needs to be thoroughly contextualised. We appreciate secular culture while maintaining the historic confessions of the Christian faith. Many of us were inspired to explore this approach in depth through the practical example of Redeemer Presbyterian Church and the teaching of Timothy Keller, founding pastor of this church” (see <http://citytocityeurope.com/berlin-2011>).

Europe in spiritual crisis

This conference is taking place at a critical moment in European history. Europe is the only continent on earth where the church is not growing. Many people still claim to have a faith of one sort or another, but participation in church life is waning. Orthodox, Biblical churches are in general the exception to this pattern, but these churches tend to be small and inward-looking, trying to preserve their heritage without much missionary impact. The Gospel and the City conference is seeking to help the churches of Europe reach out with the Gospel in their own settings.

Europe has become pagan. What has brought on this mass secularization and spiritual decline? It is hard to say. Various factors can be mentioned: the power of the secular Enlightenment in science and art, materialism both theoretical and practical, and the splintering of orthodox churches. We are living in the midst of a crisis of faith unprecedented since the rise of Christianity. The Pope, himself quite orthodox regarding the Person of Christ, is calling for a new evangelization of Europe. The so-called ecumenical churches in Europe, members

of the World Council of Churches, are seeking new, creative ways of being the church in our day. The evangelical, Biblical churches, dwarfed institutionally by these first two, are often faithful, but not generally effective in evangelism.

Tim Keller’s vision

It will be the first time that Tim Keller will be visiting the continent of Europe. In the video on the website, he says that he is excited about coming and even thinks that, perhaps, God is going to be working to reshape the face of Europe. He points to encouraging church-planting activities going on in various big European cities.

Is this mere American enthusiasm, just unfounded optimism? We who live in Europe tend to be more somber about the future of the church. Books are appearing here in The Netherlands with titles like “Marginal and Missionary,” in which the missionary task of the church is placed in the context of shrinking, ingrown churches, with a heavy dose of skepticism about any real turn-around in the future.

Nevertheless, many of us will be going to Berlin, looking forward to hear Tim Keller. We from the orthodox Reformed churches are appreciative of his stance regarding the infallible authority of Scripture and the centrality of Christ, and have been stimulated over the last 10 years by what God has done in New York City through Keller’s ministry. He is someone who enjoys living in the city, is committed to its flourishing, and that is something quite new in our circles. He is a gifted preacher, who seeks to proclaim God’s Word in a way that communicates with hip, urban young people of our day. His book, *The Reason for God*, is an expression of Reformed apologetics which has found a large audience. I don’t agree with him on all points, but I think it’s a good book, and have used it in group studies as a pastor in The Hague, and in private conversations with young people struggling with their faith, with positive results. I’m thankful for Tim Keller, and I hope he can help us here in Europe to be living, Biblical churches, with a message that reaches the hearts of many in our generation. ■

Riddles around the letter to the Hebrews (2)¹

The three most outstanding riddles about Hebrews are: who is the author, who are his audience, and what was the situation? In the first instalment we concluded that it is difficult to identify the author. It may have been Barnabas. In this second instalment, we are able to discover rather more about the readers and their situation when we make the connection with the church at Jerusalem, from a redemptive-historical point of view our mother church.

The second riddle: who are the readers?



It is likely that the author of Hebrews did, at some time, belong to the church he writes to. He asks them to pray for him, for he hopes that he may soon be restored to them, and he plans to visit them, together with brother Timothy (ch. 13:19, 23). At the time of writing, however, he is in Italy, from where he passes on greetings: “Greet all your leaders and all God’s people. Those in Italy send their greetings” (ch. 13:24). He sends greetings on behalf of Christians living in Italy: from the church at Rome, and also from the churches in southern Italy that, apparently, had been established by this time (for example in Puteoli –see Acts 28:13-14).² We can compare this greeting to that of Paul, when he writes to the church in Corinth: “the churches in the province of Asia send you greetings” (1 Corinthians 16:19).³ It appears, then, that Hebrews was written from Italy. This would then also explain how *I Clement*, written at an early date, is already familiar with this letter.⁴

It is possible that the letter’s puzzling superscription: ‘To the Hebrews’ (*pros Hebraious*) dates from the time when all of Paul’s letters were brought together, with no other purpose than to harmonize this letter with the other material in the collection. Still, almost every subsequent manuscript takes over this title ‘to the Hebrews’ as a *subscriptio* (it is to be found, for instance, in the *codex Sinaiticus*, the *codex Alexandrinus* and the Majority Text).

This expression ‘Hebrews’ refers to Jews who have come to confess Jesus as the Messiah. This is confirmed by the parallelism in the letter’s

prologue: it compares the way God spoke to ‘our forefathers’ – the ancestors of Israel – and the way he speaks today through his Son to us, the descendants of these forefathers. The numerous references in Hebrews to the cultic worship of Israel would only have made sense to Jewish Christians. Just as was the author himself, his readers were part of the people of God, the heirs of what was promised, those who were called (ch. 4:3, 6:17, 9:15).

Superb Greek

Why then is Hebrews written in superb Greek, and why are its quotations taken from the Septuagint? Barnett’s suggestion, that the readers of Hebrews were primarily Greek-speaking Jews, a continuation of the Greek-speaking community in Jerusalem referred to in the first half of Acts, has merit.⁵ In part, one suspects, because of their extensive network of contacts in the diaspora (greetings from Italy!). In any case, a letter written in Greek could also easily be distributed among the Jews in the diaspora.

If this identification – the readers were Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem – is correct, there are implications for the interpretation of certain key features of the letter. For then it had been the direct witness of the apostles that had brought these Jews to accept Jesus as Israel’s Messiah. The statement that God confirmed their message by ‘signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit’ corresponds with the events in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. The experience of ‘earlier days’, when they were insulted and persecuted, and even had their property confiscated (ch. 10:32-34) reminds us of the wave of oppression in Jerusalem after the death of Stephen. The ‘leaders’, who proclaimed the Word of God, whose lives and the outcome of whose faith they had to consider (ch. 13:7), could well have been prominent men such as Stephen himself, and James, the brother of the Lord.

Even a passage such as ch. 4:4-6, which has always been difficult to interpret, could be explained in this historical context, as Geertsema has done. When they were converted, the readers had been enlightened by the Gospel; they had tasted the heavenly gift of Christ; they had shared in the Holy Spirit, who was poured out at Pentecost; their

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faith had been fed by the apostles' preaching: forgiveness of sins and eternal life. If, knowing all this, they fall away, they subject Jesus (after all, the Jews in Jerusalem had loudly called for him to be crucified) to public disgrace by nailing him to the cross all over again. It is impossible for such a person to be brought back to repentance.⁶

In short: the readers of the letter to the Hebrews were Jewish Christians, probably living in Jerusalem. Perhaps that is why, at the conclusion of the letter, they are called 'saints' (ch. 13:24, ESV). Whether or not these 'saints' were actually living in the holy city is not clear. They receive greetings from the Christians in Italy. At the time of writing, the author was staying there. But, he says, he hopes to be restored to his readers soon.

The third riddle: what is the situation?

The key question, when dating the letter to the Hebrews, is whether or not the temple in Jerusalem was still in operation. In the letter, cultic worship is consistently described in verb forms that denote the continuing present. That may be no more than a literary convention (as, for example, in a cultic passage in *I Clement* 40-41). This letter, however, draws on existing cultic data when arguing that the readers are to seek their salvation in Christ who is in heaven. The writer argues, for instance, that the continuing sacrifices can never make perfect those who draw near to worship. If they could, he says, would they not have stopped being offered (ch. 10:1,2)? If he had written his letter after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, it is unlikely that he would have made his point in these terms. In other places, too, it appears that cultic worship is still alive and well (ch. 7:27-28; 8:3-5; 9:25; 10:8; 13:10).

Tent of Meeting

For this reason it is hard to believe that this letter can be dated any time after AD 70.⁷

It is remarkable, though, that the writer nowhere refers explicitly to the temple. Instead, he continually goes back to the Tent of Meeting, and to the people of Israel during their time in the wilderness. He consistently portrays the cultic worship in Jerusalem in Old Testament terms. This is similar to what Stephen did in his address, and it may have served to relativize the importance of the temple, and to warn the Jews against misplaced pride (Acts 7). The sanctuary in Jerusalem is neither

the beginning nor the end of meeting with God. If the old covenant is described as obsolete and aging (ch. 8:13), that must certainly include the Old Testament cultic worship that went with it. In constructing his argument, the author goes back to the Old Testament foundation of the temple worship. By highlighting the mobility and the temporary character of the Tent of Meeting, he makes his readers see that true worship has been moved to heaven. There, in the person of Jesus Christ the Son of God, it finds its resting place and final destination.⁸

The letter to the Hebrews was probably written during the period between the death of James, the brother of the Lord, and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, that is between AD 62 and 70. In many respects, this was a time of crisis. The Jews who confessed the Messiah were severely oppressed by their nationalist compatriots. They are addressed with a 'word of encouragement' (ch. 13:22: *logos paraklèseos*). The fact that the letter identifies itself in this way seems also to describe its character. Acts 13:15 shows us that delivering such a word of encouragement was customary in the synagogues: when Paul and Barnabas(!) came to Antioch in Pisidia, the leaders of the synagogue, following the reading of the Law and the Prophets, invited them to speak such a word to the congregation. Paul takes the opportunity to deliver a lengthy address, which culminates in the proclamation of Jesus the Messiah. It is entirely possible that both this sermon and the letter to the Hebrews are elaborations on a form of address that was customary in the synagogues.⁹ One might, then, read Hebrews as a sermon in written form, one that could span the distance, and which served to encourage the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem.¹⁰ The author wishes to create the impression that he is in the midst of the assembled church, and speaking to it directly and personally. He carefully avoids any reference to writing or reading; instead, he accentuates speaking and listening, (ch. 2:5; 5:11; 6:9; 8:1; 9:5; see also 11:32: "*I do not have time to tell about...*"). He often uses 'we' and 'us'; from a distance he identifies with his unseen audience. He frequently uses rhetorical devices, and the dynamic within the letter is enhanced by regularly alternating instruction and admonition.

Series of quotations

By means of frequent and sometimes extensive quotations, the author endeavours to let Scripture

>>> see page 84

itself speak. He introduces the letter with a catena of Bible references, a series of quotations strung together like beads on a string, showing that Moses has been superseded by Jesus, to whom – according to Psalm 8 – everything is subjected. After that, three great themes follow, the themes that are characteristic and non-negotiable for orthodox Judaism: homeland, temple and city.¹¹ Time and again, the author reminds his readers not to fix their eyes on what is earthly, but on what is in heaven. That requires a believing upward and forward shift in one's thinking. In this context, he addresses all three themes:

1. The 'promised land' is the eschatological rest, which we must still enter. After all, God's promise of rest – to which Psalm 95 alludes when it recounts the message for the unbelievers in the wilderness, that they would never enter the Promised Land – still stands (ch. 4).
2. Our 'tent of meeting' is the heavenly sanctuary, where Christ ministers as our perfect High Priest. He is a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek (Psalm 110); he is the Mediator of a new covenant, one that causes the earlier one to be forgotten (Jeremiah 31). He is the One who is to come, the One who will not delay, the One who will save the righteous by faith (Habakkuk 2).
3. The 'city' we look for is the city of the future, the heavenly Jerusalem. God the Father nurtures his children with discipline – according to Proverbs 3; the trials of this life are part of the school of faith, and may not discourage us.

This shift in thinking challenges the readers of Hebrews to stop orienting themselves on earthly certainties. Prepare yourselves for the loss of the earthly Jerusalem, the holy temple city. As perilous as the situation may become – land, temple and city are not non-negotiable. We can give them up. Our anchor is none less than the Son of God, Jesus the Messiah. He is a greater Mediator than Moses could ever be. Those who, in times of crisis, orient themselves on Him, will find the courage to leave the camp, to let go of their dearly-held Jewishness,

and to leave Jerusalem (compare ch. 13:13-14).¹² We have no enduring city here; Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever (ch. 13:8).

Conclusion

The letter to the Hebrews aims to speak a word of encouragement in a time of crisis. It is a sermon in written form, which stimulates the reader to persevere in the power of faith, even when Jerusalem is overrun and the temple is destroyed. The anchor of Christian hope is not let down, but drawn up into heaven, where Jesus Christ is, the embodiment of our New Testament worship. The following table may assist in understanding this, by linking the chapter divisions and the Scripture references to the three great themes: homeland, temple and city. ■

Notes

- 1 This is the second of a series of two articles that was originally published in the Dutch language as: 'Raadsels rond de brief aan de Hebreëën', in *de Reformatie*, vol 85 (2010): 258-259 and 274-276. This translation by Aart Plug, June 2011, by arrangement with the author. Scripture quotations and references are taken from the *New International Version of the Bible* (NIV), 1984 edition.
- 2 The Greek grammatical construction of v.24b can be regarded as an attraction, in which *hagioi* is amplified by v.24a: *Those (the saints in Italy) greet you from Italy*. The phrase *apo tēs Italias* is effectively equivalent to *en tēi Italiai* (as in Acts 17:11, 13: The Jews from or in Thessalonica). This refutes the theory that this text refers to Italian migrants, who had come *from* Italy, and were sending greetings to those who were living *in* Italy. Wherever, in the manuscript tradition, the *subscriptio* mentions a place of origin, it is either Rome (as in the *codex Alexandrinus*) or Italy (as in the Majority Text).
Regarding the theory referred to above, see for example Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews* (The Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 49-50. This

Theme	Chapter	Represents:	Scripture References:
Jesus a greater Mediator than Moses (chapters 1-2)			[Chain of references] Psalm 8
Homeland	Chapters 3-4	Eschatological rest	Psalm 95
Temple	Chapters 5-10	Heavenly sanctuary	Psalm 110 Jeremiah 31 Habakkuk 2
City	Chapters 11-13	City of the future	Proverbs 3

theory assumes that Hebrews simply belongs to the material that records the development of the Christian church in Rome. See Reidar Hvalvik, "Jewish Believers and Jewish Influence in the Roman Church until the Second Century." In *Jewish Believers in Jesus*, eds. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik, 179-216 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007). For a documented discussion of the meaning of *hoi apo tēs Italias* see C. Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux I* (Études Bibliques; Paris: Gabalda, 1952), 261-265.

3 There is an apocryphal but credible tradition, dating from the same time as Tertullian's account, that Timothy and Barnabas spent some time in Rome, prior to Paul's departure for Spain (*The Acts of Peter* [Actus Vercellenses], 4). Compare Hebrews 13:23.

4 The similarity between Hebrews and *I Clement* was already noted by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* III 38, 1-3. See also Donald Alfred Hagner, *The Use of the Old and New Testament in Clement of Rome* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 179-195. "It seems certain that Clement read, loved, was taught by, and made use of, the Epistle to the Hebrews in writing his pastoral letter to the Church at Corinth." (194).

5 Paul Barnett, *The Birth of Christianity. The First Twenty Years* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 107-108.

6 J. Geertsema, "Is bekering van een afvallige onmogelijk?" In *Exeget[h]isch*, eds. P.H.R. van Houwelingen e.a., 121-149 (feestbundel J. van Bruggen; Kampen: Kok, 2001).

7 G.A. van Veelen, "Inleidingsvragen bij de brief aan de Hebreëen." In *Verkenningen in de katholieke*

brieven en Hebreëen, eds. A.G. Knevel et al., 149-160 (Kampen: Kok Voorhoeve, 1993); Peter W.L. Walker, *Jesus and the Holy City. New Testament Perspectives on Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 227-230; D.A. Carson & Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament. Second Edition* (Leicester: Apollos), 606-607.

8 Compare B.F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews. The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (Reprint Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), xl.

9 John van Eck, *Handelingen. De wereld in het geding* (CNT; Kampen: Kok, 2003), 284.

10 H. Thyen, *Der Stil der jüdisch-hellenistischen Homilie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1955).

11 Walker, *Jesus and the Holy City*, 201-226.

12 For further details see: P.H.R. van Houwelingen, "Vlucht naar voren. Het vertrek van de christenen uit Jeruzalem naar Pella," *Theologia Reformata* 45 (2002): 339-361; P.H.R. van Houwelingen, "Wij hebben hier geen blijvende stad," *De Reformatie* 79 (2003): 49-52. Verg. Randall C. Gleason, "The Eschatology of the Warning in Hebrews 10:26-31," *Tyndale Bulletin* 53.1 (2002), 97-120 [120]; Carl Mosser, "Rahab Outside the Camp." In *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology*, eds. Richard Bauckham et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 383-404. Contra Scott D. Mackie, *Eschatology and Exhortation in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 135-150, who takes the view that Hebrews only relativizes the value of Roman citizenship.

Story Bible for Older Children

During this last year, Inheritance Publications in Canada have published a new edition of the Story Bible for Older Children in English. The Dutch author, Anne de Vries (1904-1964), is much praised for the excellent manner in which he was able to word the Biblical stories for both young and old. In Holland this book is a true classic, the 29th edition being currently on the market.

Discussing this book is superfluous, for the book (or rather books, as it is a two volume edition) has proved its worth over the years. The target Group is also clear. It is not intended for kindergarten infants, but for youth of around 8 – 14. This is noticeable in both the use of language and the imaginative way of writing. For younger children the tempo would be too slow. The great advantage of this is that it is also very suitable for adults who have little knowledge of the Bible. Therefore it can easily be used in a missionary context as a first step on the way to reading the Bible itself. The Inheritance Publications edition is, as usual, very well presented. We should add that this edition also includes the beautiful illustrations by Cornelis Jetses (1873-1955). That on its own would be reason enough to buy this book.

Announcement of:

Anne de Vries, Story Bible for Older Children (Old Testament and New Testament), translated by Theodore Plantinga, Inheritance Publications Alberta, 2010, set (2 volumes) US \$ 55.95

PGBdV

How can a God of love use violence?

Violence in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, is a stumbling block to many. That was indeed the case early in church history, and is even more so today. The Old Testament can be seen as the documentation of the origin of Israel and the Christian congregation: the Word of God for all ages. From this a believer draws comfort and strength; from this the church derives directives for faith and life. You would therefore expect to find words of love, light and life – not the language of violence.



Nevertheless, just a few pages after that beautiful beginning, it does come to that: revolution, manslaughter, vengeance and a destructive flood... and so this continues right to the end of the Bible. Someone once did the maths and these figures are now floating around everywhere: the Old Testament contains 600 passages about murder, 100 texts in which God gives the command to kill, and 1000 passages that speak of God's wrath, punishment and warfare. Blood flows plentifully in the Bible. From the blood of Abel that cries to the heavens in the first Bible book of Genesis, up to and including the call upon God to avenge spilt blood in the last Bible book of Revelation. Many Bible readers have already given up by this point. Shouldn't the Bible be a sort of safe haven in this world in which we live, filled as it is with violence and misery? A book that points to a different world, the world of *shalom* and not the world of *hamas* (the Hebrew word for 'violence', all too well known these days in politics)?

Juridical definition

The dictionary presents us with the following juridical definition of the word 'violence': '*abuse of power, in which the rights of others are violated in a violent manner*'. It is clearly a negative concept. To our sensibilities, violence, futility, and abuse of power all lie along the same track. In the past century we have seen so many examples that we have become sick to death of it: Verdun 1916, Hiroshima 1945, Rwanda 1994, New York 2001. Violence is, as it were, incorporated into our human society. Violent conflicts form a permanent factor that has to be reckoned with, on a personal level, socially, and worldwide. Is there a daily newspaper anywhere in which the word 'violence' cannot be

found? Yet it is important to make a distinction between one sort of violence and the other. There is violence that is evil through and through, that seeks only its own interest and despises the other, but there is also contra-violence that has the intention of resisting evil, sticking up for the other, and restoring justice. The violence that the child-molester Dutroux used on his victims was of a very different character to the physical violence used by the police at his arrest. Of course, in the havoc of human existence things often get terribly intertwined. Yet in practice we cannot get around this fact: there is evil violence and there is liberating violence. Violence that serves the world of *hamas*, and violence that serves the world of *shalom*.

When we also come across that whole spectrum of violence in the Bible, should we, in a certain sense, not be *glad* that this is the case? Whom would it serve to have a Bible filled with wisdom and devout redemptive reflections that stand removed from our daily reality? Life is multicoloured, raw, and sometimes bewildering. In this life, natural violence, and social, military, religious and political violence all play a great role. The Old Testament addresses this everyday reality, the texts focussing on a God who goes his own way with his people, in this real world, with a deep passion for justice and peace. A God therefore who, in extreme cases, also makes use of violence. Wrongdoing is not taken lightly; people are held responsible; the dimension of violence is not concealed. What a joy it is for all those who have been marginalized and trampled on in our world history that the God of the Bible also – yes, especially so – concerns himself with violence. That means, in the words of the theologian Kuitert, that the bully will not have the advantage over the victim forever.

The ground rule

In the meantime, it is important that we see the violence theme in the Old Testament in the right proportions. Though it is clear that violence is fully present in the Old Testament, the actual question is how, and in what connection, this violence emerges. Sometimes the Old Testament, after some selective treatment of the 'awkward texts', gets

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quickly set aside as a problematic and primitive book. Painting a distorted picture is a lot easier than doing justice to the whole of the Old Testament. When reading this book in all fairness, one cannot miss the ground rule of justice and peace. God has created the world as good, and he did not let go of that world after sin had driven a schism through all creation. Against all the evils of greed and decay he is working towards a world of *shalom*: in the Old Testament via his people Israel, and in the New Testament via his son Jesus Christ. In this way he (speaking in New Testament terms) 'makes his kingdom come'. His first utterance to go out over this creation was 'let there be light', and that will also be his last word. In between both these words, he shows us the way, and leads us out of the dark towards the light, because of his incomparable love for man. However, in order to come to a world of *shalom*, God sometimes, in this broken world of *hamas*, has to make use of violence: contra-violence to curb the evil, to punish and cast out. Indeed, contra-violence is and remains a form of violence, but it is necessary because evil usually cannot be stopped by words, however alluring or angry those words may sound.

The Old Testament makes it clear that this kind of violence is only safe with God. Violence in the hands of people very quickly gets out of hand. Surprisingly enough, the Old Testament itself, despite its reputation as a book of violence, brings a far-reaching message of anti-violence. This is especially noticeable when we make a comparison between religious literature from the ancient world around Israel. In Assyrian royal inscriptions or Ugarit mythology, forceful power is sometimes raised to a level of the highest virtue. In the Old Testament, however, violence is never glorified. On the contrary: human violence is unmasked as a great evil at the very beginning, in the history of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4). In order to curb the spread of this evil, God gives the brother-murderer a sign: God himself will act as judge over whoever injures Cain. In this story, which could be seen as a window on world history, God's contra-violence is mentioned for the first time. Jesus' statement that "*all who draw the sword will die by the sword*" (Matt. 26:52) resonates on a broad soundboard in the Old Testament literature of wisdom. Everywhere this wisdom warns against the folly of violence and the lust for power. In Old Testament law, clear boundaries are set around the violence of retribution, for example, in the well known '*an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth*'. In the society of that time, in which revenge

was without limitations (as with the figure of Lamech in Gen. 4, who brags that he will revenge himself 77 times for every injustice done to him), this rule came as a blessing from heaven: just *one* eye for an eye and only *one* tooth for a tooth.

Discouraged

In all sorts of situations in the Old Testament, human violence is discouraged. It is striking how often the kings of Israel and Judah are severely criticized by the prophets for their use of violence. The prophet Nathan, for example, reprimanded David, the pre-eminent king and founder of the Judaic royal dynasty (2 Sam. 12). This David, chosen by God, was not permitted to build a house for God because he was 'a man of blood'. Such criticism was unheard of in the world of the Ancient Near East. There the founder of the dynasty was by definition always the founder of the temple.

The longing for a world of *shalom* gains ground especially in the prophecies of the future. The Old Testament does not preach a call to conquer the world by force, but rather that the law will go out from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem, and that the people will then come to find shelter under God's judgment. '*They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore*' (Isaiah 2). A stirring vision is that of the kingdom of peace in Isaiah 11, with images of predatory and tame animals grazing together, and of a child that plays at a snake's den. Psalm 46 sings of what God is doing on earth: '*He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. He says, "Be still, and know that I am God!"*'

Our perception of God

The fact that the Old Testament contains a clear anti-violence message does not solve the problem of violence in this book, but puts an even greater strain on it. For how does this message relate to various passages in which, to our sensibilities, excessive divine violence is exerted, or in which people are called upon to destroy others? Examples are plentiful: the Great Flood over the whole earth, the downfall of Sodom and Gomorrah, the wiping out of the people of Canaan and Amalek, frightening prophecies of judgment, terrible curses

of hatred. If God is a God of love, surely this cannot be! Is this not in contradiction to the biblical ground rule that we sketched previously? Many Bible readers find that the questions simply multiply. Whoever looks for answers to these questions should do so in all humility. For these are not the sort of questions that can be met with clear solutions and well-balanced arguments. The demonic reality of evil is too great for that, and the God of the Bible is not to be fathomed. Of crucial importance here is that we are prepared to test our own perception of God critically against the biblical image of God.

It cannot be denied that, in the past century, far-reaching changes have taken place in modern western thinking about God. This has been referred to as a metamorphosis in the perception of God. Clearly an end has come to unproblematic talk of God's vengeance, God's judgment, and God's wrath. The combination of God and violence evokes embarrassment and resistance in many people today. The perception of God has faded somewhat, become milder, softer and lighter. The call to break with authoritarian perceptions of God from the past is heard everywhere: away with the depressing and slavish images of God as Lord, King, Judge, Warrior! The accent on God's compassion, love and grace must prevail. Some even speak of a 'therapeutic' God image. That very well suits a culture that gives priority to the assertive human with his independent freedom of choice and self-realization. Collective thinking, such as is found in many cultures and also in the Bible, has become strange to us. The individual has become the norm and the starting point in our thinking. The accent lies on positive emotions and experiences, and a prosperity-ideal of abundant enjoyment and the exclusion of all disturbing factors. Faith must comply with man and his own experiences. In this context, what would you want with a God who ruffles your feathers, demands surrender, conversion and obedience – a God who sometimes even punishes and exterminates a complete nation in his wrath?

Part of the trouble

No doubt these developments play a part in the trouble we have with the violence passages in the Old Testament. Where former generations of Bible readers had few problems with this issue, we do have them: our reading glasses have changed. It can therefore be refreshing to listen to the biblical interpretation of Christians in non-western traditions, who often appear to view the problems in a very different way. They too acknowledge the central message of God's love and forgiveness, but they will be less inclined to place this in opposition to biblical notions like revenge and judgment. How does a Tutsi whose family has been slaughtered by Hutus read the Old Testament testimony of God's judgment prophecies? How does a Cambodian who wears the scars of the Khmer Rouge era in his flesh read the curses uttered in the Psalms? We can stay closer to home and listen to the Yale University theologian Miroslav Volf, a Croatian who in the nineties was a witness to the violence in the Balkan wars. He writes:

'One, then, could object that it is not worthy of God to wield the sword. Is God not love, long-suffering and all-powerful love? A counter question could go something like this: Is it not arrogant to presume that our contemporary sensibilities about what is compatible with God's love are so much healthier than those of the people of God throughout the whole history of Judaism and Christianity? (...) Recalling my arguments about the self-immunization of the evildoers, one could further argue that in a world of violence it would not be worthy of God not to wield the sword; if God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make the final end to violence, God would not be worthy of our worship.' (...) The only means of prohibiting all recourse to violence by ourselves is to insist that violence is legitimate "only when it comes from God" (...) My thesis that the practice of nonviolence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many Christians, especially theologians in the West (...) Soon you would discover that it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the

birth of the thesis that human nonviolence corresponds to God's refusal to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die. And as one watches it die, one will do well to reflect about many other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind. 1

Deeply anchored in the Old Testament is the confession of the compassionate God who is love, and who *therefore* can rise so ardently to anger (Ex. 34). Both sides of this basic confession – God's holy love and God's holy wrath – dominate history. The picture that the biblical testimonies paint of God takes us to the reality of life. Following through on the question of the purpose of the violence texts in the Old Testament, we come up against the unfathomably deep intensity of evil, injustice, arrogance, repression and lust for power. God, who loves justice and righteousness, does not remain unmoved when it is violated. He takes the man who commits injustice in his actions completely seriously and holds him responsible for his deeds. In these passages we meet a zealous God who in his holy wrath unmasks and judges all evil. Inside him is a deep aversion to all that is at odds with the goodness of his creation. A powerful longing for peace, justice, and destruction of the darkness speaks from this. There has truly been a battle fought since the breach at the beginning of humanity, when God spoke to the serpent in paradise: *'And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.'* (Gen. 3).

The completely Different

The violence passages in the Old Testament open our eyes to who the God of love also is, and who we are as humans. God is the completely Different, who truly takes action both in word and deeds. Thanks be to God – for in the everyday reality of a world in which the devil and fate, hatred and death are constantly making their move, a God-with-clean-hands would be completely out of the game. The God of the Bible can do awesome things, horrible things

to us humans. But never randomly and unpredictably. He does not practise violence for the sake of violence, as is the case in many a literary text about the gods in the worlds around Israel. In some way or other his 'violence' always has to do with his aversion to evil, sin, and revolt. His intervention foils the triumph of the lie. God's violence stands in a broader frame: that of his justice. Time and again, his violence serves the restoration of justice and peace.

In this lies comfort for the numerous destitute and deceived in our world history. *'My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you. When your judgments come upon the earth, the people of the world learn righteousness'* (Isaiah 26). All the more do we understand how powerfully deep God's love is, who gave all to save this world. Grace, reconciliation, justification, new life – all those great words in the Bible glow even brighter when we see that God is a holy God, working his way right through our world of *hamas* to his world of *shalom*.

Genocide? Vengefulness?

Yet it still troubles us when we stumble across passages in the Old Testament that, on first reading, are hard to digest: infamous passages we continually carefully steer clear of in the Sunday sermons. Two of the most well known are the command to exterminate the Canaanites in Deuteronomy 7, and the proclamation of hatred in Psalm 139. Now it is true that genocide is a crime against humanity, and inciting hate has rightfully been made a penal offence in our country. What is to be done with a Bible in which these things are documented? What we should do with the Bible is, foremost: read carefully, listen patiently, judge fairly. The command to kill seven nations in Canaan is horrifying indeed. "Repayment by destruction" is what Deuteronomy 7 calls this. It brings to mind the Muslim fanatics' *jihad*. But is it that? It is noticeable that God's command in Deuteronomy 7 is unique: only there and only then was Israel commanded to do

this. Only to these seven nations, and not to arch enemies like Edom or Philistia (apart from Amalek, but that is a different story altogether). Only at that one moment in history and never again. When you read this text in its broader context, you notice that this command to exterminate is connected with two issues: firstly with God's deep disgust with Canaan's wickedness, and secondly with God's exclusive love for Israel.

With the Canaanite nations, something special was going on. As early as Genesis 9, in the story of Noah's drunkenness, we see that after Ham's misbehaviour, it is not Ham himself but his son Canaan who is mentioned in the ensuing curses. In Genesis 15, God speaks to Abraham about Israel's long stay in Egypt: only the fourth generation was to return to Canaan *'for the sin of the Amorites (a collective name for the Canaanites) has not yet reached its full measure'*. In many other passages also, for example Leviticus 18 and 20, or Deuteronomy 9, 12 and 20 the gruesome injustice and idolatry of the Canaanites nations is brought to the fore. Apparently, these nations, notwithstanding the years of God's patience following his promise to Abraham, had hit rock bottom in their immorality and godlessness. God wished to protect his people against this. He loved his people, with whom he had made his covenant, too much. Through this people God determined to put into effect his purpose for the world: *'for you are a people holy to the LORD your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the LORD has chosen you to be his treasured possession'* (Deut. 14:2). Nothing and no one was allowed to come between him and Israel, especially not the evil-doing Canaanites' temptations. The land of Canaan was to be a dwelling place in which God and his people could live together in safety. Israel was not to be contaminated by the moral and religious filth of the original inhabitants. This has nothing to do with ethnocentrism, but everything to do with the holiness of God's people. Were the Israelites to yield to temptation and themselves commit the same atrocities,

then God would not spare them, but strike them with the same excommunication. This is exactly what took place in the events of history. For Israel did not drive out most of the Canaanite nations, and subsequently succumbed to the charms of the 'Canaanite' way of life, surrendering to idolatry and violence. The end results of this downhill slide were the exiles into Assyria and Babylon: the land 'spat out' the people. Israel itself suffered the fate of the Canaanite nations, as had been the case with Sodom and Gomorrah beforehand, and even earlier with the great flood. God, as it were, partially brings forward in time the Great Judgment, in order to put an end to the evil right then and there. Not that it pleases him to do this: *'For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone'* (Lament. 2). But with this contra-violence he prevents evil from running rampant uncurbed.

Psalm 139

Just as troubling to our ears as the exterminating command in Deuteronomy 7 is the curse from Psalm 139: *'Do I not hate those who hate you, LORD, and abhor those who are in rebellion against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies'*. What is the psalmist saying here? His song swoops us up into a high flight: God sees all, knows all, knows us completely. In accordance with this the poet proclaims his dependence, and says that he belongs to God totally. To accentuate this last statement, he confesses – wholly in the language of the Old Testament – that he does not at all belong with the godless, and 'hates' them. This entails a total commitment to God and a heartfelt aversion to the world of evil, and of the "bloodthirsty". These are not his personal enemies, but God's enemies: observe the order in the text. It is a type of confession in a negative mode. However paradoxical it may appear, this hate is not in opposition to the biblical ethic of neighbourly love, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

In Psalm 139, someone is speaking who is part of God's covenant people. In Old Testament times, God's way with this world is characterized by a unique

concentration on this one people of Israel, among whom he wished to live. It was all cutting edge history here. God had made his covenant with Israel. In the world of those times, it was customary to confirm a covenant with a series of blessings and curses. So it is with the 'treaty text' of God's covenant with Israel, see for example Leviticus 26 or Deuteronomy 28. With his 'hate' against God's enemies, the poet is latching onto God's own covenant curse upon the godless. God himself hates all who do injustice, and despises all who deceive and shed blood (Psalm 5), *'...but the wicked, those who love violence, he hates with a passion'* (Psalm 11). As God's covenant people, Israel had the holy duty to hate evil, and cast off uncleanness and godlessness. Evil was not to gain a foothold in Israel (Psalm 140). By standing completely on God's side, the poet of Psalm 139 makes a choice for the world of blessing and goodness, truth and justice. This poet does not take justice into his own hands, but with his prayer places everything in God's hand. When reading such a proclamation we should also take into account that the Old Testament believer had barely any view of the life after death that we now have. Nor did he know of a judgment day at the end of world history in which God would ultimately do justice. Therefore, with a curse he calls upon his God to intervene here and now and show his justice. For it is unimaginable to him that godlessness should have the last word in his reality...

Not same manner

The aforementioned means that we would not be able to pray this sort of prayer today in the same manner that Israel did. But to condemn these prayers from the world of the Old Testament would be short sighted. The kernel of it, the longing for justice and peace, remains essential up to today. You can taste in it something like in the book *Star Children* by the Jewish author Clara Asscher-Pinkhof. After she has described how, in the middle of the night, the grinning SS soldiers of Westerbork transit camp drove a group of hundreds of frightened little children into the train, the train to Auschwitz, she continues:²

'O, but they will avenge themselves! Whether they are alive or not, - they will avenge themselves! They will not let the cry from their toothless little mouths be silenced, the complaint from their wide open eyes be covered up till the end of times! No rest will there be for all who perpetrated this, - no peace for those who dragged infants from their cherishing homes and smote them onto one deadly heap, - no rest, no peace, as long as the echo of those children's outcry and the reflection of those complaining eyes have not been silenced. They are powerful, these defenceless. Their power reaches to the end of the world, to eternity.'

The difference

The church has always maintained that the Old Testament is God's Word. This does not speak for itself: because of its violent passages, a cry arose to do away with the Old Testament. Marcion gave vent to this cry in the second century after Christ in his book *Antithesis* ('contrasts'), in which he makes a huge contrast between the Old and New Testament, and between the God of the Old and of the New Testament. To him, violence and revenge stood completely opposite to peace and reconciliation and love. With all sorts of variations, many follow his track right up to today, speaking of a contradiction between Old and New Testament, although seldom so radically as Marcion. That does seem a logical conclusion, if you juxtapose a curse from the Psalms right next to Jesus' prayer on the cross. And you could claim to detect some kind of reproach against all the violence in the Old Testament in Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount ('love your enemies', Matt. 5). Some scholars speak of a two-track policy in the Old Testament: on the one side you have the language of violence, on the other the language of peace. The latter gains strength through the ages, and the New Testament follows that line. Yet this image does not do justice to the testimonies of the Old and New Testament. For nowhere do the New Testament authors criticize the Old

Testament. They take it as their starting point, as the authoritative Word of God, as Jesus himself did. They readily quote from the imprecatory psalms. Jesus himself uses the language of violence in his parables and in his warnings against Hell. At one point he compares himself with a king who will have his enemies destroyed before his eyes (Luke 12). In the Book of Revelation the Lamb and the Lion are the same person. *God is a consuming fire*, as Hebrews 12 quotes from Deuteronomy 4. The thesis can easily be defended that the New Testament is even more serious about judgment and condemnation than the Old Testament. In the New Testament it becomes manifestly clear that God's wrath extends over the entire world (John 3:36; Rom. 1:18). Moreover, God's judgment here gains a greater depth because it can be called 'eternal' – up to and including the terrible prospect of Hell.

No contradiction

Between the Old and New Testament we see no principal *contradiction*, but we do see a clear *difference*. Undeniably, we read less about violence in the New Testament than in the Old Testament. And the New Testament preaches with more emphasis on reconciliation and love toward the enemy. Not because God's image in the New Testament has changed, but because there God's way with his people and this world has changed, and with a very far-reaching change at that: in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In him, the world of *shalom* broke through definitely; the kingdom of God began. It broke through the boundaries of Israel, and spread out into the whole world. No longer is there the unique concentration on Israel alone, but God reaches out to everybody with his gospel. In Jesus' death and resurrection, God's justice comes to light in the ultimate manner. In Jesus' death on the cross – which was extremely violent – he reconciles us humans to God. To save people, God himself brought the offering of his love. The great judgment on evil came down on Jesus; he bore God's condemnation in our stead. All who trust in Jesus are saved – but whoever rejects his Word awaits the judgment on the

Last Day. In the intervening period in which we now live, the time of God's patience (2 Pet. 3), the gospel is being spread worldwide. The gospel proclaimed by Jesus is not an opposing voice that partly disqualifies the Old Testament, but it gives voice to the new, decisive phase in the coming of God's kingdom in this world.

Hereby the church does not wield the sword, but the weapon of prayer. No longer (as in Israel in the Old Testament) do the state and church come together in one nation, with the necessity to execute violence. Violence is not an instrument used to realize the 'salvation-state', the kingdom that has come in Christ – no indeed, the church fights with the Word. This does not set aside the fact that, according to the New Testament, as far as the 'constitutional state' is concerned, God can make use of human violence to curb evil: the sword has been entrusted to the government (Rom. 13 and 1 Pet. 2). Therefore the church, while praying for the government and committing everything into God's hands, awaits the day that God's world of *shalom* will break through for all eternity (Rev. 19). ■

Notes:

- 1 Miroslav Volf: *Exclusion and Embrace, A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*, Nashville 1996, p 303-304, including a quotation from Henry Atlan's 'Founding Violence and Divine Referent' in *Violence and Truth: On the Work of René Girard*, edited by Paul Dumouchel, Stanford University Press 1988, p 198-208.
 - 2 *Freely translated from the Dutch edition: Sterrekinderen by C. Asscher-Pinkhof, Kok 2003.*
- * This article was originally published in the Dutch language as 'Kan een God van liefde geweld gebruiken?' in: Cees Dekker e.a. *Hete Hangijzers*, edited by Buijten & Schipperheijn, Amsterdam 2009. This translation by S.M. Bosscha, August 2011, by arrangement with the author. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations and references are taken from the New International Version of the Bible (NIV), 2010.

News Update

Prof. Kwakkel appointed in France

Prof. Dr Gert Kwakkel, professor of Old Testament at the Theological University of the Reformed Churches (GK) in Kampen, has received a part-time appointment in France.



(photo P.G.B. de Vries)

Prof. Kwakkel has been invited there to lecture Old Testament at the Faculté Jean Calvin in Aix-en-Provence. It is no unknown territory to him. He studied there in the Eighties and is chairman of the Kampen – Aix-en-Provence Foundation, a support foundation for this Reformed French language theological education.

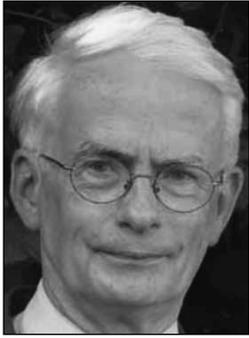
This French theological university is not connected to one particular church, but wishes to serve all the French churches. As is the case in most French theological education establishments, it receives no financial support at all from the government.

Yet this Faculty does have a clear vision. The education given there is in conformity with the Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Creed of La Rochelle (drafted in the 16th century by Calvin and related to the Belgic Confession) and the Declaration of the French Evangelical Alliance. Together with the small Institut Farel in Quebec, it is the only Reformed French language university in the world.

PGBdV

It All Hangs Together: Commentaries and Preaching (1)¹

Commentaries are good and useful if they assist in understanding the text of Scripture. However, if they hinder our view of the text, they simply stand in the way.



What really is the text? Is it a collection of sentences that need linguistic illumination to translate them, and to make them understandable? Is it a succession of passages that need historical elucidation to help us understand their situational context? Is it a document, for which one aims to convey the author's intention, his scope, as clearly as possible? The truth is that texts are all of these at the same time. Some commentaries of the Bible specialize in philology (understanding of language), some in historic-literary context, some in representing the redactional intentions of the text.

This one-sidedness can be an advantage, in that it allows for fine-grained examination of the text; at the same time it has the disadvantage that it fails to throw sufficient light on the text as a whole, and that it does not provide for critical feedback from other dimensions of the text. In recent decades, there has been renewed recognition of the fact that a text – be it a letter, a book, a psalm – is a unity of expression, and hence a unity of understanding. Commentaries should help the reader gain a view of the text as a whole. They may not crumble it into fragments.

What, then, is the text as a whole? Whenever we read a passage of Scripture, or even a whole book, we are faced with the coherence of revelation. Anyone who does not wish to take God or divine revelation into account, swims against the current of all the books of the Bible. In Scripture, there is the overarching context of God as Creator and Redeemer: His work, His voice, His presence have forged a wide variety of words and events into a coherent whole. Not one word of Scripture stands on its own, separate from all the others (II Peter 1:20). This has consequences for commentary. Calvin understood this only too well: His Institutes are actually an introduction to his Commentaries

on all the books of the Bible.

To explore this coherence, we examine the exegesis of the various gospels as they relate to the Gospel. What is the connection between the parts and the whole? To what extent do commentaries help us to see this coherence, or do they just get in the way?

The gospels and the Gospel

We get a good picture of how the Good News was proclaimed as one coherent whole when we read how Peter comes to Cornelius. Peter says – just as Mark does (Ch. 1:14, 13:10) – that God, through Christ, has been sending the good news of peace through Jesus Christ to Israel (Acts 10:36). Then, when Peter summarizes this good news, we actually hear the whole book of Mark in one short outline:

“You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached – how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen – by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:37-43).

This is the Gospel that preachers must proclaim. That is what they are trained for; that is what all of theology, if it understands its task, must serve.

But how do we proclaim this one Gospel, when we have four separate gospels as our textbooks, and when we snip each of them into little pieces, to read and to preach from? Whenever we read passages from the first four books of the New Testament, they are first of all parts of the one Gospel, and not primarily pieces of any particular book. It follows, then, that we may not deal with each passage in isolation; rather, we ought always

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to have the whole Gospel in view when we talk about any of its parts.

To accomplish that, it is good always to realize the greater framework in which each of the separate stories and miraculous signs is placed. In a manner of speaking, we must lift them out of the box of the book, and place them in the wide open space of the joyful Story, of which they are part, and to which they bear witness. To do this, three overarching realities are very important.

The first is that everything began with John the Baptist; the second, that everything was foretold by the prophets; the third, that the Son has received all things from the Father.

Every miracle of Jesus, and every word of His that we preach must always be placed within this wide horizon. For then the preacher proclaims the Gospel from the gospels, and there will be no tension between our focus on one part and our attention for the whole to which it belongs.

I would like to elaborate on these three perspectives.

Jesus after John

To most Western Christians, John is not much more than the advance warning signal. A blast from a trumpet, which is simply forgotten once the King Himself arrives. True, it was always John's intention that Jesus should become greater and he himself less. And that is what happened as the Gospel spread: John stepped back from the stage.

However, we would be wrong to forget that all of Jesus' life on earth stood in the light of John the Baptist. Just as a football match is played in a stadium, lit up by giant floodlights, so all of Jesus' work stood in the light of John the Baptist. We should not turn off that light too quickly. I list a few things that we tend to overlook: At the end of Jesus' life on earth, John was still held in greater regard among the people than Jesus Himself: while the leaders of the people did not dare to attack John, they had no such scruples about Jesus (Matthew 21:23-27). Beyond Palestine, Jesus had no noticeable influence until the apostles appeared; John, however, did have international stature (Apollos of Alexandria, Acts 18:24-25; John's disciples in Ephesus, Acts 19:1-5). Jesus allows John to baptize Him; He calls John the greatest prophet who ever lived (Matthew 11:11-13; 17:10-13; Luke 16:16), and He often makes reference to John's witness (Matthew 21:32; John 5:33).

As we know, this John the Baptist was the prophet who set in motion a whole movement

of penitence, in expectation of the coming Redeemer. And while it was not at all unusual for prophets to be 'criers in the wilderness', John was a 'baptizer in the wilderness', and all the people came to him.

People, then, looked at Jesus through the eyes of John. And the converse was also true: Jesus looked at the people through the work of John. The preaching of John had brought about great changes in the year leading up to Jesus' ministry. And the echoes of those changes could be heard as He moved around in Israel. I mention two examples:

1. Christ's proclamation of the Kingdom of Heaven is sometimes separated from John's prior ministry. It is then seen as a benevolent message of peace and exaltation. In reality, however, Jesus' preaching stood against the background of John's baptism of repentance. The people have been confronted with their sins. They were deeply impressed by the impending fire of judgment, and by the axe that lay at the root of the tree. This is the situation in which Jesus comes with Good News for those who are oppressed, those who are mourning, those whose hearts are afflicted. He brings good news of forgiveness, of entry into the Kingdom of God. Through Jesus, Israel is given another chance. Whenever preachers proclaim the Kingdom of God, they must start at the beginning; they may not forget John's preparatory message. The Gospel of the Kingdom is for those who confess their sins, for those who come to be baptized, full of hope, in the Jordan of repentance. The message of the Kingdom of heaven is not to be received apart from a baptism of repentance and a prayer for mercy.
2. The second example is that of the prostitutes and tax collectors who stream to Jesus. Often, God is portrayed as the One who has a special preference for the outcasts. God makes a point of going to the margins of society; hence, we too should go to places where decent people would rather not be.

This, however, is a great misconception. Of course, the Good News is for all people, without distinction. But nowhere do we read that Jesus goes to preach in the brothels or the casinos. He preaches in synagogues, and at His own appointed place, on the mountain. Prostitutes and tax collectors come to Him, not the other way

>>> See page 96

By A. Plug

Equipped For Service: Excellence in Teaching

The John Calvin Schools Conference, 2011

Leaving the eastern fringe of the city of Perth, the Great Eastern Highway winds up into the forested slopes of the Darling Range. Then, the views open up and you find yourself in the broad valley of the Avon River. This is prime Western Australian farm country. On the banks of the Avon is Muresk Agricultural College. For generations, it has trained young people in agricultural practice and research. It is a wonderful setting to learn. Away from the rush of the city and suburbs, and surrounded by fields and trees, on land that slopes gently down to the Avon.



This was the setting for this year's John Calvin Schools Conference. Just over 100 teaching professionals from all of the John Calvin Schools in Australia were there together: metro, Albany, Bunbury, and Launceston. Not just teachers, also teachers' assistants and education students as well. In a collegial atmosphere, sharing together the joys and challenges of teaching covenant children at Reformed schools.

We were fortunate to have not just one, but two outstanding guest presenters, both from Canada: colleague Inge De Visser from Ontario, and colleague Harry Moes from Canada's west. Each of them brought a different perspective on the conference theme: Equipped for Service, Excellence in Teaching.

There were other presenters as well, and a broad variety of workshops for the participants to choose from. Senior college specialists, early childhood and preprimary, middle school, special needs teachers and assistants, primary teachers, support staff, no matter what their daily tasks might consist of, there was something there for everyone.

The Conference Opening

The John Calvin Schools Conferences have always been well-supported by our school communities and their boards, and it was only fitting that the

conference was opened by one of our longest-serving supporters: Len Van Burgel, who recently retired after more than 30 years as a Board member. Len took a few moments to reflect on the growth and development of the John Calvin Schools. He called us to grateful remembrance for everything that the Lord gave us over the years, and encouraged us to faithful service in the path He sets before us.

The First Keynote: Inge De Visser

Those of us who already knew our first guest personally, knew what to expect; the rest of us were in for a treat. Inge has a lifetime of experience in Reformed education, and has a special interest in the nurture of spiritual growth and development in young people. Born Inge Oostdijk, she is married to Dr Arjan De Visser, professor at the Canadian Reformed Theological College. Inge grew up in the Netherlands, lived for many years in South Africa, presently lives near Hamilton, Canada, and works as a Special Needs teacher at one of the Canadian Reformed Schools in the area. She has written widely on her subject of interest, and is a highly regarded speaker.

Inge's address really set the tone for the conference. Drawing on her extensive knowledge of Scripture and Confession, and sharing experiences from decades of working with children and young people, Inge by turns inspired and educated us. She has notes, but doesn't read from them: rather, she reaches out from the lectern and carries her audience along. In her "Ten Advices for Teachers", she stressed the importance of two things: the critical importance of teachers themselves living out their faith in their classroom practice, and the essential need to build and nurture relationships with students. Much of what she said could apply to anyone who lives and works with children, but for those present at the conference, it gave us a great deal to think about and work with.

In a later session with Special Needs and a Early Childhood Teachers, as well as Teachers' Assistants, she developed her theme at greater length, using

About the author:

Aart Plug (b. 1951) has worked in the John Calvin Schools for over 35 years as a classroom and special needs teacher, and as a primary school principal. He is presently active in a curriculum development and support role for all of the John Calvin Schools in Australia.



Inge de Visser and Harry Moes

case studies and sharing approaches to reaching out to younger students and those who face special challenges. As precious children of God, we owe it to these children to reach out and build strong relationships with them. It is our love for our children, and our love for the God of these children that lays the foundation for teaching excellence.

The Second Keynote: Harry Moes

Harry also has a long history in Reformed Education. He is principal of Credo Christian High School in Langley, BC. He also works with government authorities and independent school organizations on school development and improvement. It would be hard to imagine two people who are more different, and whose approach to the topic was more different, than Inge and Harry. While their voices, tempo and rhythms were quite different, they were unmistakably singing off the same page.

In his address, Harry showed that creating a standard of excellence has everything to do with being a Christian school. His definition of an “excellent Christian School” set this out quite clearly: “An excellent Christian school is one that committed to the pre-eminence of Christ, as reflected in the development of the Christian mind and character of its students, and in its establishment of excellent standards in teaching and learning, so that the school is a model of best practice.” This definition was explored across several dimensions, at far greater length than is possible to set out here.

In a follow-up workshop, Harry asked upper primary, middle and senior high school teachers to reflect on this further, drawing on their own experience of teachers who stood out for them as excellent, and applying these examples to their own day-to-day practice.

Just as in Inge’s presentations, one thought came through repeatedly: excellence in schools and excellence in teaching have everything to do with the relationships that are nurtured and enjoyed within the school. It is our love for our children, and our love for the God of these children that lays the foundation for teaching excellence.

Other presentations

There were two other major presentations: the first by colleague Alwyn Terpstra, in which he traced the history of curriculum development since the foundation of the John Calvin Schools in Australia, and made connections with our current focus on curriculum and school development today. The remarkable thing is that through all the changes, the guiding thoughts of commitment to the authority of Scripture and Biblical principles of schooling, and the ways in which that was worked out in our school curriculum have remained as relevant as ever. As we go through one curriculum cycle after another, it is easy for us to lose contact with this legacy, and at the same time increasingly important that we do not. We will need it as we begin to take up a new Australian Curriculum. The introduction of web-based planning and documentation will allow us to keep all of this past work at our fingertips, and allow us to use it as we plan for teaching and learning in the coming period, but only if we take the necessary steps to ensure that it is available.

In a parallel workshop for Special Needs Teachers and Teachers Assistants, colleague Dini Plug

The John Calvin Schools of Australia

In the early 1950’s immigrant families from the Netherlands settled in Australia. Some of them, having been tested in the struggles that led to the Liberation of 1944, established Free Reformed congregations in their new homeland. At the same time, these Reformed parents also responded to their calling to establish covenantal schooling for their children. And the Lord blessed this obedient response. What started out as a small John Calvin School in 1957, with two teachers and about 50 children, has now become a network of seven schools, extending from Perth and Albany in the west, to Tasmania in the east. From kindergarten to end of secondary, 1200 children and adolescents receive an education that is based on Scripture and confession, to equip them for service in the Kingdom of God. Most of the teaching staff were born in Australia; some have come from Canada, South Africa, New Zealand and the Netherlands. While most have had their training at secular universities, the John Calvin Schools have a vigorous and effective system of pre-service training and in-service development in the principles and practices of Reformed education.



presented on “Art in Special Education”, a highly informative hands-on session. For students who have great difficulty learning in the usual cognitive ways, the expressive and creative aspects of art often provide other avenues for learning.

At other times during the conference, participants had a range of special-interest workshops to choose from. A sample:

- Is the grass still green at night? Science in Early Childhood
- Bible Story Telling
- iMovie in the classroom
- Snips and Snails and Puppy-dogs’ Tails: teaching adolescent boys
- Sumptuous Sushi (!)

Looking Back

The 2011 John Calvin Schools’ Conference was a highlight for the year: presenters and presentations that helped us to focus on what is really important in Reformed Education; opportunities for colleagues from all of our schools across the country to have time away from day-to-day-work; events that catered for everyone, from Special Needs Assistants to Senior College specialists (and even visitors from the Philippines!); excellent facilities in a wonderful location, and so much more. It really was a refreshing and reinvigorating break.

We give thanks to our faithful covenant God for what he provided and enabled us to do. May we use these gifts in ways that they become blessings: to the praise of God, for the promotion of His Kingdom, and for the benefit of His children. ■

J. van Bruggen

It All Hangs Together

around. And why do they come? Because they have heard the message of John the Baptist, and have taken it to heart.

Jesus Himself said: “I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him” (Matthew 21:31-32). The stream of tax collectors and sinners that comes to Jesus really does have something to tell us. Not about Jesus’ preference, but about the sinful negligence of so many pious brothers! ■

In the coming instalments, Dr Van Bruggen explores the significance of two other overarching realities to the Gospel: that everything was foretold by the prophets, and that the Son has received all things from the Father. Finally, he draws these threads together to show how the Gospel is to be found in the gospels.

■ **Note:**

1 This is the first of a series of three articles originally published in the Dutch language in *De Waarheidsvriend*, 7, 14 and 22 May 2009. This translation by Aart Plug, August 2011, by arrangement with the author. All Scripture quotations are taken from the *New International Version of the Bible* (NIV), 1984 Edition.

Loving Muslims - not fantasy friends

Seven statements with an explanation conducive to a Christian attitude towards our new neighbours



[1] 'Lord, thank you for the Muslims'

In my childhood I often experienced 'reading services' in my church. The elder would sometimes read the standard prayers that were found at the back of the service book (Book of Praise) then in use. Therein could also be found a prayer for 'the mission among Jews, Muhammadians, and heathens', who 'live without hope and without Thee in the world'. It is interesting that in this formulation Muslims were placed on the same level as Jews or, at the least, both were differentiated from the heathens. No less remarkable is the fact that they are now no longer mentioned in the set prayers in our present-day church service book. In the Sixties, we prayed for these followers of Muhammad when Muslims were not yet noticeably present in society, Islam was not anymore considered a threat to world peace, nor yet the object of heated discussions. However, now that Muslims are a topic in almost every newspaper, we have lost that standard prayer.

Can we see God's guidance not only in the presence of hundreds of thousands of Muslims as new neighbours, but also in the disappearance of the aforementioned prayer of intercession? The latter may even be a sign that the Almighty has heard those prayers offered up for Muslims and has answered them.

Did we not plead that they be reached by the gospel? Yet we did not go out to reach them. While their countries became more and more 'closed' to missionary work, the Lord made it easy for us: he placed them on our doorstep. Maybe it is now time for a different prayer: 'Lord, thank you for the Muslims. Amen.'

[2] Islam is a religion

Islam is a 'religion', whether or not Allah worshipped by Muslims is the same as the Father of Jesus Christ,

for that question would need more space to do it justice. 'Religion' is a fairly neutral term derived from the Latin *religio*, a noun that heathen and Christian scholars have linked to varying verbs. We could translate it as 're-reading', 'reconsideration', 'binding to', 'leaving behind', 'renewed choice' or 'obligation'. However that may be, Islam obligates a repetitive recitation (the melodious recitation of the Quran), binds its followers to the *sharia*, secludes from all that is outside of 'the house of Islam', and commits all to Islam.

It is unrealistic to view Islam as 'merely' an ideology. Not because there are not some contemporary Muslim leaders who do indeed propagate such a notion, but because not a single Muslim considers Islam to be just an ideology. Moreover, there are Muslims whose particular Islam is exclusively spiritual. *The* definitive Muslim does not exist, and it is possible that the Arab 'Spring' revolution will bring that to light in a surprising way.

Additionally, the Christian religion also has an ideological dimension, so that Islam cannot be distinguished from Christianity as 'ideology' versus 'religion'. The GPV, a former Reformed political party in The Netherlands, recognized this years ago with their slogan from Deuteronomy 6:18, 'so that it may go well with you'. Christ-based ethics, politics, philosophy and sociology contain reconstructive building stones for the benefit of the whole of society. We pray daily for the coming of God's perfect theocracy.

[3] Islam is definitely not a step forward

There is at least one church in Birmingham facing a mosque on which is displayed in giant letters, for all the churchgoers to see, 'Read the Quran, the Last Testament'. The claim here is that Islam is the perfection of Judaism and Christianity, the perfection of all religions. Muslims maintain a rigid 'replacement theology': the law, the prophets, scriptures and gospels, even in their original editions, have all become outdated and superfluous since the revelation of their book.

It is a gigantic misunderstanding. 'For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (John 1:17). What can Muhammad's preaching add to that? Nothing at all: Islam is definitely not a step forward.

About the author:

Rev. Marten de Vries (b.1955) works for the MAR (Missionaire Arbeid Rijnmond), an organization dedicated to bringing the gospel to people of other religions. He has studied Arabic, Middle-East cultures and Islamic Theology.

Islam attacks the heart of the Christian confession of the church of all times. All that 'Ichthus' stands for: 'Jesus Christ, God's son, Saviour', is whole-heartedly denied in the sources of Islam. Muhammad's followers have once more let themselves be fitted with the yoke of slavery, from which God in the Old Testament wished to liberate his people. At best, Islam is a kind of extra Biblical Judaism. This insight should be far more relevant to Christians than the question whether Muslims are necessarily from a backward culture. For centuries the Islamic world towered above the West, both politically and culturally, and for all we know those times might return. Meanwhile, religiously speaking, Islam is not a step forward but a giant step backward.

We should not consider the Muslims' religion to be more Biblical than it is. We may make friends with Muslims; we must even love them. Yet it is not to the glory of God and his Anointed, nor is it respectful to these Muslim neighbours, to treat them as fantasy friends.

This is a classic mistake made by unreformed dialogue constructions, and it distorts interreligious discussions from the start, sooner or later leading to frustrations on both sides.

[4] Islam is what Muslims make of it

In the above I have tried to paint a picture, and draw a general pattern, from a Christian perspective, reflecting what I have read and heard. It is however a methodological error to try to give a watertight definition of someone else's religion. A Muslim cannot, need not, and may not tell me what I should believe as a Christian. Likewise, what a Muslim says about Islam is what is valid to him, and I am not in a position to say what 'Islam' – let alone 'true Islam' – is.

In the Sunday service, we frankly express what we ourselves confess as 'our catholic and undoubted Christian faith', but as a Christian I have no concern with 'Islam'. My concern is with Muslims who do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

What I have learnt through study and relationships with Muslims is a framework within which I interpret my neighbours' statements, including his well-meant objections to the Christian confession. I have also learnt to communicate my message better. To me, Islam is not what I have read in books, but what I directly hear Muslims say. I do not take 'my Islam' and then go in search of statements that confirm my interpretation.

There is no other way to reach Muslims, to touch

their hearts and, where necessary, to debate them. If you are busy fighting fantasy enemies, you are tilting at windmills, and they will strike you on the head. Whoever does not start by listening to the Muslim opposite him cannot have much to say to him.

[5] Whoever confesses his faith, need not fear a Muslim

A non-Muslim professor once suggested that fear of Islam is a matter of 'unknown, therefore unloved'. He was referring to himself: once afraid of Muslims, yet discovering upon acquaintance that they are not so bad after all.

Among Christians originally from countries that were dominated by Muslims there is great sympathy for the 'Geert Wilders movement' (a Dutch right-wing party that is against Islam), and this fact detracts somewhat from that opinion. Even though in their countries of origin these Christians had been 'living apart, together' with their Muslim neighbours, they, through all the negative experiences and interaction, do know what they are talking about.

What makes Muslims in Europe so terrifying? Is Islam a threat because of the combination of the number of Muslims and the surmised ideological component of their religion? You could be down to earth and point out the percentage of Muslims, which is no greater than that of Christians in Egypt or Syria; or the fast declining birth figures among the next generations of immigrants; or the often Christian African and East-European immigrants who are equally great in number; or the hopeless (hopeful?) division between Muslims charging each other with heresy. You could take into consideration that the number of members of the joint traditional orthodox-protestant denominations surpasses the number of Muslims, even if we do not count all the evangelical groups and immigrant churches.

There is something going on, certainly. But in so far as we can speak of danger, that could as soon come from non-Muslims, both left- and right-wing groups, from the so-called 'multi-culti-huggers' who continually try to ingratiate Muslims by granting them special privileges, as from critics of Islam who try to cast Muslims in a bad light. Both groups give Muslims far too much space. Should they ever settle into that space, negative sentiments will be unleashed in society that will especially strike back on themselves, like a 'boom-erang'. Should the space allocated to them later be restricted, it will cause frustration. Terrorism is usually not a menacing takeover of power, but

a symptom of the despair of disillusioned groups or individuals who have come to discover that the expectations created proved to be unrealistic. Lastly, there is no reason whatsoever to be afraid of Muslims. However joins in the confession on Sunday that Christ is seated at God's right hand, knows that He reigns. No-one need fear Muslims taking over power, even if Muslims should gain political and social territory. Jesus rightfully declared: 'In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world' (John 16:33). Whoever looks up to his exalted Lord, watches the news in the Christian manner and is afraid of no Muslim.

[6] The church does not need to fight Muslims, but should proclaim the gospel.

Church members should be equipped for their task in the world by the church, as should Christian politicians, who in that capacity are obliged to concern themselves with the subject of 'Islam'. The church as an institution should not be active in politics, but has a different agenda: proclaiming the gospel so that Christians in all offices and positions can be a reflection of Christ in their attitude. The church does not need to fight Muslims, but should proclaim the gospel. It is true that servants of the gospel are also called upon to refute heresies. Knowledge of the religion of Muslims and the biblical exposure thereof are more urgent for today's church leaders than the refutation of 'Rome', within the framework of the missionary charge but no less so in protection of their own members.

Girls with a Muslim boyfriend are prone to fall easily when they have had no thorough religious education. Humanly speaking, Islam's increasing power is a result of the division of Christ's church; Islamization of the Middle East is taking place because all the Christians have left; Eastern carpets now decorate our former church buildings because church pews remained empty; and the religious attraction of Islam can grow by dint of the vacuum that came to exist due to the lack of Biblical knowledge.

Yet the negative, the rejection of heresy, is only useful as a complement to a positive message. Our main concern should not be that Muslims are obtaining more influence, but that Christians have not familiarized themselves with the gospel. It is a matter of the direction in which we look. So we could say that the problem of Muslims is not that they follow Islam, but that they do not truly know

Jesus. Christians should not therefore be taught to dislike Islam but rather to communicate the gospel in terms that are understandable to Muslims, which is very possible. Muslims have no 'only comfort in life and in death' (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 1). They live in insecurity until judgment day. We have something wonderful to share with them. Are they open to that message? In the Netherlands there are possibly more 'e-migrants' that exchange the church for the mosque than 'im-migrants' who place their trust in Jesus. All the while, people in a wide circle around Mecca are coming to the true faith in the face of oppression. Where the ground is most dry, there is thirst for living water. It is said that more Muslims have become Christians during the last fifteen years than in the previous 1500 years. May the Lord of the church give an extra impulse of his Holy Spirit via today's 'Arab spring'!

[7] Christians love Muslims

Muslims, what are they to us? I was once asked to replace this question as the title for a lecture as it sounded too negative. Yet I meant it positively. We can reject 'the Islam', and also Islam as perhaps adhered to by our friends Ahmed, Aicha, Ali or Asma. Yet we can love Muslims. Even if they are not 'moderate' but 'radical' Muslims, not mystics but Islamists after a Salafist fashion. Church members should be colour blind when they see 'sheep without a shepherd'. Not just because we can encounter very nice people even among the people of an evil ideology, but because we ourselves are loved by God. "Glory be to Him who loved us, washed us from all sin and stain!" (Hymn 5, Book of Praise).

Christians love Muslims - not because (and as long as) they are seen as candidate Christians, and friendship evangelisation is seen as the ideal missionary strategy. Christians love because they are followers of Jesus, who welcomed the tax collectors, Zealots and Roman occupiers. Christians do not just tolerate Muslims: they give them space. They do this knowing that Christians are being treated badly in 'Islamistan'. And they do so not in order to claim that a church must arise in Mecca, but because God welcomes Muslims here. In the event of a persecution of Moroccans, which could happen if a demagogic party gains influence in economically difficult times, Christians must even be prepared, at the risk of reprisals, to help and hide Muslims.

Christians join Muslims, meeting them in real life

European Conference of Reformed Churches 2012

Marginal and Missional

Deo Volente the fourth European Conference of Reformed Churches will be held in Kiev, Ukraine 24-27 April 2012.

The 2010 Conference in Edinburgh concluded –among other things - that in former times Europe was a missionary sending continent with the Church being mainstream and powerful and the Reformed faith being a strong tradition in many European countries, and that nowadays our continent is a mission field with the Church more and more pushed to the margin. Therefore the fourth conference will be held under the title 'Marginal and Missional'.

Three speakers will perform a lecture on several aspects of our missionary calling:

From margin to mainstream to margin (Jos Colijn);

Rational or practical (Wim Verboom);

Traditional or experimental (Neil Macmillan).

There will also be some presentations and workshops.

The conference will be held at Kyiv Theological Seminary, 75 Gorlivska street, Kyiv, 02091 UKRAINE, phone: (+380-44) 563-2499, fax: (+380-44) 563-2499. The Seminary offers accommodation in four-bedded rooms. Transportation from and to the Kiev Airport will be centrally organised. The price is set at €185 for attending the whole conference.

In November the eight European members of the International Conference of Reformed Churches will receive an invitation for themselves and their relations. Next December the Organising Committee hope to send a registration form and further details such as the International Bank Account Number (*IBAN*) and the Bank Identifier Code (*BIC*).

The Organising Committee:

James Maciver (Free Church of Scotland)

David McKay (Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland)

Han Schenau (Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland)

Lucius de Graaff (Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland)

(all correspondence via BBK Office,
Mrs. Gretie Enter: BBK@gbouw.nl)

situations. They accept invitations by Muslims to join in an *iftar* meal, even if it has an obvious missionary goal. Christians, in their turn, might ask them to come and eat with them: for most immigrants that would be the first time they would eat with Christians and witness the ensuing Bible reading and prayer.

Whoever has never eaten with the Turks has no right to write about Islam. Christians like to talk with Muslims, and about them too...especially to bring them, name and circumstances, before God's throne. A Muslim of worth will take such intercession as a show of unexpected love.

Christians in society

On Friday 24th June the members of General Synod of Harderwijk 2011 (GKV) were received in the city hall by the Mayor, drs. J.C.G.M. Berends (CDA), and councillor P. Teeninga (CU). It was a very pleasant and animated gathering. The mayor enthusiastically described his city, with both words and images, as open, relaxed and enterprising. The councillor also spoke about the work of the synod. On this occasion the following speech was delivered by the chairman of the synod.



Many thanks for your invitation to come here. We were very pleased to accept it. Your presence and speech during our opening assembly were greatly appreciated. You pointed out Harderwijk's contribution to the common interest throughout the ages as a Hanseatic city, a university city, a garrison city, a fishing harbour and a tourist region.

To our embarrassment, we must admit that to us, as synod, Harderwijk is above all the place where the Petra church is situated, where we were received and cared for by hospitable people (outstanding representatives of your city!). During those months we saw little more of your city than the fastest route to the church (or the necessary diversion routes). We are here for an assembly and have little time for much else. Therefore we appreciate this reception today because it allows us to come into contact with the city. We might add that we certainly intend to do some sightseeing in Harderwijk as yet. For you have good reason to be proud of your city.

Do we as synod have something to offer society? I could point out that our churches are active in theological reflection and diaconal relief. Or draw attention to our churches' spiritual ministry in the military forces, and the welfare and judicial institutions. Yet today I would like to focus on what could be called our churches' core business. Allow me to tell you what sort of people we are and what you may expect of us.

Our society

There is much to be thankful for in the Netherlands of today. Freedom and justice, healthcare and education, prosperity and welfare come to mind, all at a high level in our country. Yet we would also like to comment of the darker side.

Our society harbours many people who miss

a coherence and a stimulating meaningful connection within public life. We calculate and consume, we charge to our own advantage, and want to enjoy life, but where do we find rest? Where is peace? What inspires us?

The essentially optimistic market thinking of the second half of the last century has been replaced in our own times by fear, because of phenomena larger than ourselves which we now see as a direct threat: there is more between heaven and earth than we can control or study. Earthquakes, tsunamis, tornados and terrorism show us how vulnerable even the most mighty societies (Japan, America and Russia) are.

An unbridled market thinking and the pursuit of own interests have turned the economy into a central value, and made life materialistic. Due to efficiency considerations, a compulsion to economize, and for competitive interests, we have endured a scaling-up in which we have lost all sight of the human measure. Bonus culture, stress and burnout, the poor becoming poorer (close by and far off), hardening of mutual and international relations stemming from gut feelings - these are all phenomena well known to us.

Amusement and pleasure place human emotion at the centre. They stimulate us to leave all scruples behind, and they drive us across the borders of respect and of what is holy and seemly.

In this society the church has its place. And it must be admitted: we as churches have not always been the distinguishing community we ought to have been. More than we would like, we have allowed ourselves to be dragged along, and did, and still do, eagerly participate.

Faith

But there is *more* in the church than what people contribute. As protestant churches we are churches of the Word. We accept the Bible as God's Word, according to which we wish to live, even if goes against the majority. From the past there have always been things that the church wishes to pass on to next generations: *faith, commandments and prayer*.

Firstly, this *faith*. The highest Lord and King of the entire world is the triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In this God there is a fullness of life and fellowship, of love between Father and Son and the Holy Spirit. This God showed his love by offering his own Son for us, sinners. He wants his love to keep working through us, his people.

About the author:

Rev. Pieter Niemeijer is minister of the Reformed Church in Den Helder and chairman of the General Synod of Harderwijk.

■■■■■ In Article 36 of the Belgic Confession we read about the relationship between the church and the civil government. This confessional statement is often experienced as more of a stumbling block than a useful tool. During the Reformed Churches' (GKV) General Synod in Harderwijk, the chairman, Rev. P. Niemeijer, had occasion to address two representatives of the local government. This speech can be seen as a good example of present day communication between church and government.

The world in which we live and love is no bad or hostile territory. God himself is her creator. In our contribution to science, technology, politics and labour we wish to honour that confession. At the same time it means that in all these things we do not wish to leave God out. Ignoring him and his work is, to our minds, not a matter of being neutral or objective, but of impertinence.

We confess our God to be the creator of all people. He brought us all forth from Adam. That forbids all discrimination, and demands respect even for the vulnerable, the handicapped, the homeless and for unborn life. God created us with a goal: to know him and to refer to him in all our actions. He wants every person to receive ample space in which to serve him without in any way being forced - directly or indirectly - to do so.

He created our sexuality. He instituted marriage between one man and one woman. He charged us to strive for a relationship of faithfulness and respect. The apostle Paul gave women in the church the charge to demonstrate that it becomes us all to be quiet and respectful before the Lord and adopt an attitude in which we are open to correction by the Lord. And he gave men in the church the charge not to play the macho man, or abuse their own position or status, but to particularly display to all what true love really is, the love of Christ.

We confess the Son of God as the Redeemer on whom we are *all* dependent. Guilt and corruption are far more deeply rooted in humans and the world than can be solved by human hands – even by the government. God himself must intervene. He alone brings the atonement and the salvation that creation yearns for existence. For we have a Saviour who is risen from the dead and reigns in heaven. We believe in the Holy Spirit who inspires us and makes us into a true human being. Not a zombie, but a. Along with all others, we too carry the guilt and corruption within ourselves. Therefore, a merciless settling of accounts and a 'claim culture' do not suit us, but rather love and justice, humility, service and generosity. And we *can* deny ourselves things because we live for more than this earthly

human being with our own responsibility under God's governance. Man, not as an individual, but connected: the Spirit connects us to God and to each other, in different relationships, at different levels. He causes us to invest in relationships. He teaches us that what we wish for ourselves, we should also not grudge others. And he makes us faithful and trustworthy, which are virtues that our suspicious and impulsive society yearns for.

We believe that the triune God created the world, rules history and one day will judge all people. Everyone will have to give account of himself, including those who have escaped trial in this world. Justice will be done – a reality that also has meaning for the lawmaking, governing and judicial powers in our world.

Commandment

Next to faith, there is also the *commandment*. In our Reformed liturgy we are familiar with the Sunday morning reading of God's Ten Commandments. These are not a random set of rules. They come directly from God. Nor are they rules that limit themselves to personal sanctification. They allow us to discover our guilt. They show us the road of Christian thankfulness. And in addition they also, in our view, have a public function. They contain God's will for a complete nation that, having being liberated from slavery, is on its way to the Promised Land. They are commandments directed at a society in a country where strangers also live, and where employees and cattle also deserve rest and peace. At the same time they are commandments that keep us humble. Terrible offences like murder, adultery and theft are forbidden to us. Apparently, such explicit commandment is necessary as such serious sins are in our blood. That is a disillusioning observation. But what one hears from time to time about outbreaks in the world (and even within the church) of murder and manslaughter, greed and self-enrichment, manipulation and sexual abuse, calls for recognition and realization that we should not paint too rosy a picture of us humans.

The Lord Jesus taught us in the Sermon on the Mount that these commandments reach down even deeper. They forbid us to shut out people with abusive language, or even to desire wrong things. They also forbid us to use violence in order to establish our ideal state. Indeed, we are called upon to protect what is vulnerable and those who have no helper. What God commands is: *love* towards him and to our neighbour, even if he is our enemy. *Thus* we fulfil his law.

We believe that we cannot do this in our own

strength. We are not yet perfect and do not radically anticipate that perfection. This attitude distinguishes us from all forms of fundamentalism. We are still a work in progress. And as a work in progress we are every day in need of forgiveness in Christ's blood and renewal by his Spirit.

Prayer

Next to faith and commandment there is also *prayer*. Praying people are humble people. They are people with a broad view. I think of the 'Our Father' that Christ taught us, a prayer in which we as children direct ourselves to God, and wherein the whole world simultaneously comes into view. We pray for the coming of God's liberating Kingdom, for obedience overall to God's will 'which is only good; that so everyone may attend to' (Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 49, answer 124). And we pray for daily bread for everyone, for a life filled with forgiveness: forgiveness that is received and that is granted. And we pray for deliverance from the devil's grasp. From a world full of personal guilt and international injustice, a world in which people suffer and in which the environment does not rejoice before God but cries out to him, we look forward to and pray for the complete deliverance of God's creation.

Christ taught us to pray for *all people*. For governments also, as the apostle Paul commanded us, in so many words. There is much that church and government share, yet they also differ from each other in character and intentions. In the Bible, we even see a love-hate relationship developing. Both church and government stand beneath God as highest Lord. But they do not merge into one. Christ gathers himself a congregation *from* all peoples, tribes and nations. That makes believers as citizens of God's Kingdom 'strangers in the Diaspora'. We see in the Bible how the church stands prophetically distinct from the civil government and how the church can experience suffering through nations and people (Psalm 2; Rev. 13). Yet none of that takes away from the fact that Christ also makes use of the service of our governments. And that the government should be assured of our respect, our tax money and our prayers for peace in city and country. We pray for you.

Let me conclude by expressing the hope that we as orthodox churches and Christians behave in society according to our faith. And that you as the government can thankfully ascertain that. May God be with you in your difficult and important work!

Albert Gootjes Dr. in theology

Albert Gootjes, graduate of the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, received his doctorate in theology on Oct. 19, 2011, at Calvin Theological Seminary, in Grand Rapids, Michigan, U.S.A. His dissertation was on the French theologian, Claude Pajon (1626-1685).

In an abstract of an earlier article Gootjes wrote: "Given that Calvin served as an important source and authority for Amyraut during the controversies on universal grace which broke out ca. 1634, one might expect the same to be true for the polemics on (im)mediate grace surrounding the teachings of another (later) Saumur universalist, Claude Pajon... however, the manuscript works written by, to, and about Pajon reveal that he did not shelter behind Calvin's name... The extant sources instead show that John Cameron and Paul Testard, two earlier promoters of *la grâce universelle*, were Pajon's main sources of inspiration and served as his authorities... a twofold conclusion, namely, that the marginal place of Calvin in the Pajon controversies may well be attributed to the greater acceptance *la grâce universelle* had gained by that time; and secondly, that one does well to recognize the existence of different currents within *la grâce universelle* of seventeenth-century French Protestantism."

JMB

Wisdom

The Hebrew word for wisdom, *chokma*, which we encounter in the Old Testament, can still be heard in the Yiddish word *choochem*, meaning a clever and shrewd person. That also connotes a wisdom that entails practical insight, in contrast to the Western, more theoretical conception of 'wisdom'. Wisdom relates to all areas of life and was highly regarded in the Ancient East. The wise were held in esteem within and beyond Israel.



With regard to the building of the tabernacle (Ex. 25-40) and the temple (2 Chron. 2), wisdom had to do mostly with trade skills. Certain cities in Israel were particularly known for their wise people. It was said, for example, of the small city of Abel Beth Maakah: 'Get your answer at Abel, and that settled it' (2 Sam. 20:18). This expression is quoted by a woman of that city to Joab when he besieged Abel. When we take note of the manner in which this woman then proceeds to negotiate with Joab, she could certainly be seen as a striking example of the wisdom for which this city was known.

In the days of the Kings, we encounter wise men in court circles, as advisors of the king. Opinions still differ greatly on whether there was a more or less official school system where future court officials were educated. Nevertheless, it is clear that the development of the governmental office called for an elite group of writers. In this way, in keeping with the surrounding countries, a new class of wise men came into being in Israel, namely the scribes connected to the court and the temple. Thus the foundation was laid for the origination of wisdom literature. We generally consider the books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes to belong to the wisdom literature. Yet the deuterocanonical books Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach also belong to this genre. Research has yet to reveal to what extent the wisdom tradition has worked its way into other Old Testament books. Psalms 37 and 49, for example, are considered to be typical wisdom psalms.

Framework

In this wisdom literature we can find the framework upon which to paint a picture of the wisdom in ancient Israel. Wisdom can be gained based on *tradition, self-experience* and *revelation*. *Tradition*

focuses on experiences from the past. These are passed on by the teachers from one generation to the next. Apart from this, *self-experience* also plays a large role, as we see in Proverbs 24:30-32¹:

³⁰ I went by the field of the lazy man,
And by the vineyard of the man devoid of
understanding;

³¹ And there it was, all overgrown with thorns;
Its surface was covered with nettles;
Its stone wall was broken down.

³² *When I saw it, I considered it well;
I looked on it (=looked into it, transl.) and received
instruction:*

Firstly, attention is drawn to a certain matter, which is then carefully scrutinized. Consequently, the importance of the matter is acknowledged. The matter is taken to heart. That leads to insight, which is to say that connections are made. In the aforementioned case this leads to the insight that there appears to be a connection between the owner of the vineyard and the sad state of the vineyard. Finally, a conclusion is made and a lesson deduced, which is applicable in other situations also. Apart from tradition and self-experience, knowledge that is gained by *revelation* also plays a role in the process of gaining wisdom. In this case we should think of a special intuition, not directly visible to the eye, towards understanding life's depths of meaning. It concerns opening up to the secrets of life, which are being revealed in a special way through dreams and visions, and also by means of actual experiences such as illness (cf. Job 4:12,13; 33:14-22).

Wisdom is not a matter of course, but deep down is a gift from the Lord. The 'not to be taken for granted' character of wisdom is characteristic of the wise person's understanding of reality. On first impression, the Book of Proverbs appears to take its starting point in an optimistic and harmonious view of the world: the righteous will live in prosperity and the godless will be hit by disasters (cf. Prov.12:21; 14:11, 14, *et al*). Indeed the Book of Proverbs does embrace such a harmonious view of reality, and this is to be comprehended, considering the educational character of the book; but at the same time this book shows us that life is more complicated than some proverbs allow us to believe. In the end, no one knows what tomorrow will bring (Prov. 27:1), and it is possible to believe

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we are on the right track, while it turns out to be a deadly road (Prov. 16:25). Also for Proverbs, it is true that the wise person must continually overcome the chaos and degeneration of society. It is Wisdom who acts as a guide for the pupils and points the way to life (cf. Prov. 8).

Riddles of life

What is true of the Book of Proverbs is even more applicable to the books of Ecclesiastes and Job, where there is a struggle with the riddles of life. The Preacher discovers that wherever he looks, all is 'meaningless' (Eccl. 1:2). Yet he does not dwell in despondency. He is always well aware that in all the meaninglessness, wisdom is still better than folly, just as light is more useful than darkness (Eccl. 2:13). Furthermore, he never uses the word 'emptiness' or 'meaninglessness' with respect to God! It is also important to see how the theme of joy is emphasized in some eight texts throughout the whole book (Eccl. 2:1-11; 2:24-26; 3:12, 13; 3:22; 5:17-19; 8:15; 9:7-9 and 11:7-12:1). The first text can be distinguished from the other seven. Eccl. 2:1-11 is about the joy that man himself can make of reality; in the other seven it is about joy as a gift from God. These texts form a central motif, while the emphasis increasingly lies on joy as a gift from God, ending in a personal appeal to the pupil to remember his Maker (Eccl. 12:1).

The Book of Job struggles with the question as to what extent it is possible for people to serve God 'without reason' (Job 1:9), that is to say, for no other reason than love itself. Satan denies this possibility, and consequently a drama unfolds in which the longsuffering Job is the central figure. Eventually, Job's cry for justice is answered by God (Job 38-40:2; 40:6-41:26). These answers are beautifully composed and particularly demonstrate how God does not let righteousness become a 'system' in which the freedom to love for no other reason than love itself is sacrificed to the principle of justice. In this last case, everyone would get what he or she deserves, but the basic fact of being human, which consists of loving without reason, is totally lost. It is

the suffering Job who gains the insight that, to God, justice and freedom belong together, and the one may not be sacrificed for the benefit of the other. It is from this understanding that Job, in his suffering, becomes a mediator for his friends (Job 42:8-10).

In the deuterocanonical books Wisdom and Sirach, a direct connection is made between wisdom and the history of Israel, between wisdom and the Law of Moses. Similar connections cannot be found in the books mentioned above. In these later books we see the different strands of Old Testament tradition coming together.

Filled with wisdom

In the New Testament, Luke the evangelist emphasizes that Jesus Christ became filled with wisdom (Luke 2:40, 52), while we see Paul, especially in 1 Corinthians, struggling against a wisdom comprised of words, but with no knowledge whatsoever of the cross (1 Cor. 1:17). In this focus on the cross, Paul seems to join the prophetic criticism of wisdom as it was worded in Isaiah 5:21, Jeremiah 8: 9 and elsewhere. This prophetic criticism and Pauline concentration can lead to an undervaluation of wisdom. James, starting from the New Testament, can then help us rediscover the road to the broad wisdom tradition of the Old Testament: "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom" (James 3:13). ■

Note:

1. New King James Version

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