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When tectonic plates collide, they cause an earthquake and sometimes a devastating tsunami. For countries situated near a fissure in the earth's crust the question is not whether disaster will hit them but when it will strike. Likewise, when people, powers and religions collide, everything starts shifting - with unforeseeable consequences.



From the start of this year of our Lord the whole world has been focussed on the turbulent developments in the Middle East. There was a general understanding that the situation could not remain as it was. So though it was perhaps not entirely unexpected, a contagious revolution suddenly arose from the bottom up, and no one knows where it will end.

The fury of the Arabic people must not be interpreted as primarily religious, except perhaps in Bahrain, where the Shiite majority no longer tolerates a Sunni government. But bearing in mind that the Shiites enjoy full freedom to practice their form of Islam and do not exactly suffer poverty, even in that country it is essentially about the political power of people of a certain religious identity. In the background there is the controversy between the predominantly Sunni Saudi Arabia, which will not tolerate a Shiite stronghold on the Arabic Peninsula, and the Shiite Iran, which would like to extend its leading role in the Islamic world. But in Egypt it was not only the Muslims who were fed up with Mubarak's regime and the corrupt government.

In Egypt, a visitor from the West does not have to wait long to experience how rotten the society has become. Having to bargain with traders in the *souq*, who have no objective other than to fleece you while you are souvenir hunting, could be considered to be a sport. That taxi drivers claim that their fare meter is broken, take enormous detours, claim to have no change, and meantime charge you double or treble the amount, says even more about a country. But when a train conductor, asked about the correct platform, or a policeman, asked for directions, more or less compels you to tip him, you start to appreciate and understand the frustration of a people that has

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no knowledge of government *servants*, but which to all appearances exists for the purpose of enriching the persons placed above them.

Great suspense

At the same time, it is clear that the (Christian) brotherhood in the Arabic world is in great suspense as to what the near future will hold. For many centuries, legitimated by Islam, Christians have held a second-class status in 'Islamistan'. The discrimination reaches further than the fact that they are generally not entrusted with high office. Even in relatively secular countries like Egypt or Syria, where the percentage of Christians surpasses that of Muslims in Europe, their freedom to confess their religion is curtailed by what Islam allows. That means (sometimes endless) opposition to the building or renovation of churches. Spreading the good gospel is completely out of the question, and while someone who was once baptized can easily convert to Islam, the opposite is impossible without risking one's life

The question is whether youngsters in the Orient who were raised within Islam are all so happy with these age-old practices. The political revolution is not unconnected to the digital revolution: the world has opened up and it has become impossible for dictators to keep their subjects ignorant. The new generation of the East desires the same freedoms as their Western contemporaries, and many are of the opinion that it is inappropriate in this day and age to deny their fellow citizens this freedom. While part of the Muslim youth in the West strives to strengthen its Islamic identity in the midst of a non-Islamic majority, youngsters who were raised to be followers of Mohammed are often hungry for the gospel, which has suddenly come within their reach. Meanwhile, Coptic Christians and all the other millions of Arabic-speaking Christians in the entire region no longer find it more or less 'normal' that they should suffer inequality of justice - that too must come to an end.

Not whole story

Yet this is not the whole story. There are colliding powers. It may well be that the Muslim Brotherhood – and if it be the case, thanks be to God! – is one or two decades too late in its attempt to hijack the Arabic revolution, as Khomeini was

→ see page 7

How Serious is a Second Baptism? - Part 4

In the previous instalments¹, we found a persuasive argument that baptism has indeed come in the place of circumcision as the sign of the covenant. This we read in Christ's so-called 'mission command' in Matthew 28:19. Here, we see that henceforth the Gentiles too are to be included in the covenant, and that this entry is sealed with a baptism in the Name of the Triune God. It follows then that a second baptism is not really possible. For circumcision was a once-in-a-lifetime event, which took place right at the beginning of one's covenant relationship with God.



History

The claim is made that infant baptism was introduced at a later period, and was a departure from New Testament practice. It should be clear from the preceding material that this is not the case. The history of the early church shows the same thing. From the earliest history of the church, infant baptism was regarded as a perfectly normal practice. Rev. A Verbree, in his *Over Dopen*, provides extensive evidence of that.² And in view of what we read in the New Testament, that is only to be expected. From the beginning, there was a sign that sealed incorporation in the covenant: circumcision. And when that sign is superseded by baptism, it follows naturally that this new sign also ought to be administered to infants. It might have been possible that the new covenant no longer required a sign of incorporation – after all, it was a *new* covenant (or a new phase of the covenant), but if a new sign *has* been given, then children ought to receive it also, as a matter of course. From the earliest history of the New Testament church, this was the approach that was taken.³ The story of Polycarp's youth (he was born around AD 70, well within the time of the New Testament) shows that clearly.

Dedication

In the circles where 'the baptism of faith'⁴ is defended, children are often 'dedicated' to the Lord in a special ceremony, instead of being baptized. That's a fine gesture. It makes us think of parents coming to the baptismal font in churches where infant baptism does take place. The first time you take your child to church, you take it to be

baptized. And if you do not accept infant baptism, you will still have the need to bring your child in its earliest infancy, to present it before the Lord, and to commend it to His attention and care.

Such a dedication is purely a parental act. And no matter which way you look at it, that makes it inferior to baptism. When a baby is baptized, God lays His sign and seal upon it: this child is His, and He includes it in the family of His covenant. By the washing with water, He affirms that its sins have been washed away for the sake of Christ's blood, and that the Holy Spirit will come to live in it. The most important aspect of infant baptism is what God does. He confirms, from above, His gifts to this child. That is not what happens in a dedication. At best, the latter is an (unanswered) request from the parents.⁵

Rejection of God's promises?

In discussions with Anabaptists during the 16th century, strong language was sometimes used. Zwingli compared a second baptism with crucifying Christ anew.⁶ And it is possible that when one of our children leaves for another church or fellowship, the emotions that this arouses will lead to sharp words. Still, the 'baptism of faith' cannot be characterized as a rejection of God's promises. For the one who is baptized actually seeks the promises of God, and wants to live by them. It isn't God's *promises* themselves that are rejected. What is rejected is the sign and seal, once given in baptism.

Compare this to a bride, who looks at her hand and sees the wedding ring sparkling on her finger. She no longer sees it as a symbol of her husband's vow of faithfulness. She no longer is assured of its value. What she wants is another affirmation of his faithfulness and love, and that is what she asks for. So this is not a rejection of what God has promised. But at the same time, a second baptism is not a trivial matter. The example of the wedding ring should make that clear.

God sees a child of believing parents, "*conceived and born in sin, and therefore subject to all sorts of misery, even to condemnation itself*". He "*sanctifies it in Christ*", and as a sign of that He wants it to be baptized. In a manner of speaking, he slips the wedding ring of His love onto the child's finger. And as the child grows up, it becomes aware of this wedding ring, and what it means. Its parents

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instruct it in the meaning of baptism. Subsequently, the child begins to ignore that, regarding the ring as having no value, and asks the Lord for a new sign. That is no small thing, but it is not a rejection of God's promises. It is a rejection of its (infant) baptism. Strictly speaking, it's a denial. But then, it's a denial of the *sign* of God's promises, rather than of the promises themselves. That was the mistake that the 16th century Reformers (sometimes) made. It is a personal decision whether or not you wish to attend the second baptism of your child, your brother or sister, your friend or workmate. But I can well imagine that you would not want to witness a public demonstration that God's wedding ring is being ignored.⁷

'Baptism of faith'

This remains an awkward expression. Still: in circles that reject infant baptism, adult baptism needs to be seen as such. One way or another: the faith of the one to be baptized plays a role. That is not so with 'covenant baptism'. The dilemma remains: infant baptism or 'baptism of faith'. The precise role that faith plays in this conception is, however, not always very clear.

Before the baptism of faith can be administered, it needs to be clear that the adult who requests it is a believer. To that end, an investigation takes place. And at the beginning of the ceremony, the one to be baptized gives a personal testimony of faith. If you should ask, then, whether faith is in some way the *basis* for the baptism, that will usually be vigorously denied. And that's just as well, for this cannot be true. Nothing that comes from us, not even our faith, can ever be the ground for an act of God. Anyone who does regard one's own faith as the basis for baptism ends up in some form of (semi-)Pelagianism or Arminianism, and that

greatly widens the division. Still, for anyone who defends the baptism of faith, the notion that faith itself might be a good work on which baptism is based is a very real danger.

Within the Reformed community, a public profession of faith is necessary before adult baptism can take place. Such faith is seen as a precursor to (but not as a ground for) baptism. A proponent of faith-baptism might say the same thing. In Reformed thinking, however, there is the following addition: in baptism, God seals the covenant that originates with Him. In this way, any notion that faith might somehow be the *ground* for baptism is cut off. The ground for baptism is that God has established His covenant with this brother or sister. And the church has come to know this because it has observed his/her faith. All who believe (and their children) have been included in the covenant. And to such the seal of membership in the covenant, baptism, ought to be administered. The ground for baptism, therefore, is the command of God. In this way, one's own righteousness is excluded, and much more clearly than in the baptism of faith.

And that is very important. The Heidelberg Catechism puts it in the sharpest possible terms: one must find in Him *all* that is necessary for one's salvation, and whoever seeks their salvation or well-being anywhere else than in Christ alone, in fact denies the only Saviour Jesus (Lord's Day 11, Q&A 30). And that's the danger that lurks in the baptism of faith. If the covenant is not clearly confessed as the only ground for baptism, there will always be the danger that some notion of self-delivery might creep in. Where faith plays a dominant role in baptism (as it does in circles where the baptism of faith is practised), the door to such a danger is not fully locked. Once again: that really is important. For it touches the heart of our faith: salvation through Christ alone (*sola gratia*).

But what about the Holy Supper? Isn't the same danger present there? After all, profession of faith is a necessary condition for taking part in the Holy Supper. The visible sign and seal of Christ's suffering and death is only for those who have professed their faith.

We need to be alert here. Sitting at the Lord's Table may lead to complacency or self-satisfaction. At the same time, we must note that Christ Himself has instituted the Holy Supper in this way. Those who take part eat and drink not on the ground of

their faith, but on the ground of Christ's command: "Take, eat, drink, all of you". This command goes to everyone who has come to an adult faith. This command is the ground for our celebration. The danger of seeing our faith as the ground is thus warded off, much more so than with a baptism of faith, where the public profession of faith immediately precedes the administration of baptism. What's more: baptism is a once-only event, while we do not repeatedly profess our faith before the Holy Supper. That limits even more the danger that we see our faith as the ground for taking part.

The core of the argument is that Christ has instituted baptism separately from the faith of the one to be baptized.⁸ The same cannot be said of the Holy Supper. Having said that, we do need to remain alert to the danger of complacency when we take part in the Holy Supper.

Finally: God's Word does not teach 'the baptism of faith'. Just as in the Old Testament, baptism is administered to believers and their children, as a sign and seal of their membership in the covenant. Whoever longs for a sign with his faith may take part in the Holy Supper. That is the sign God has given to strengthen the faith that is present. That is where you may be assured of your faith by its fruits (Lord's Day 32, Q&A 86). That is not what God gave you your baptism for.

How serious is a second baptism?

The example of the wedding ring, described above, should make that clear enough. God has shown you that you may always belong to Him, from infancy on. You may belong to God's people: baptism is the sign that you have been incorporated in God's New Testament people: the church. Baptism is a sign of inclusion; in that too, baptism is a continuation of circumcision.⁹ You cannot be a member of two churches at the same time. There ought not even to be two churches (John 17:21). And for that reason, a second baptism ought rightly to be regarded as a *de facto* withdrawal¹⁰.

In addition, the notion of self-delivery is an ever-present danger. The Biblical doctrines of original sin and divine election are often neglected (or even denied) in the circles of faith-baptism.

Should a second baptism lead to the exercise of discipline? May brothers and sisters from an evangelical fellowship be allowed as guests at the Lord's Table? For the most part, discipline is applied because of a sinful life (drunkenness, unlawful

killings, neglect of the worship services, unlawful divorce) rather than because of sins in doctrine. Still, both of these can be grounds for exclusion from the Holy Supper. At the Lord's Table, we celebrate our unity of faith in Christ. Then, such unity ought to be present.

We have a history behind us in which God has given us a great deal. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded (Luke 12:48). In the course of history, God has given a clear understanding of the meaning of baptism, in part through our struggle against Anabaptism. In other places, the church may not have that clarity, possibly because it did not have that struggle. They may well have more insight on other points, because their struggles have been different. But since God has given us this clarity, if anyone will not be convinced, and persistently rejects the instruction of the Reformed confessions, there is insufficient unity in faith to celebrate the Holy Supper together.

One may ask: Isn't the fact that our confessions include a statement opposing a second baptism (Belgic Confession, Art.34) something of a happenstance? It's true: this comes from a very specific point in our church history. It was part of our struggle against the Anabaptists during the European Reformation of the 16th century. This is wisdom God has given us, in His time in history. It would be improper for us to ignore it or resist it. After all, from everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded. That is why it is entirely proper to require a rejection of faith-baptism. Anyone who does not reject it may receive extensive instruction from the wisdom of the Reformed confessions. And this instruction will provide evidence of the condition of our brother or sister's faith. Whoever is willing to be instructed, and who does not propagate their divergent views, could be admitted to the Lord's Table, on condition of ongoing instruction.

Those who reject such instruction, undergoing a second baptism, refusing to acknowledge error, rejecting admonition or instruction, and/or failing to have their children baptized, deviate so clearly from the instruction of God's word about the one sacrament that they ought to be excluded from taking part in the other sacrament.

It's a great pity that – as someone said – we might "lose some of our most committed members" as a result. (By the way, I do not share that impression). It may be true that committed members may be drawn towards the baptism of faith. At the same time, a great number of highly committed

members remain. With conviction of faith, they present their children for baptism, teach them to understand their baptism, and themselves draw on the riches of their own baptism as infants every day! ■

Notes:

1. This is the final article in a series of four which first appeared in the Dutch language in *De Reformatie* in December 2009 and January 2010 entitled: *Hoe erg is herdoop?* (vol 85, 12 (pp 190-191), vol 85, 13 (pp 208-209), vol 85, 14 (pp 223-224), vol 85, 15 (pp 239-240)). This translation by Aart Plug, October 2010, by arrangement with the author.
2. A Verbree: *Over Dopen*. Barneveld, 2009, pp103-107
3. See also Voorberg, P: *Doop en Kerk. De erkenning, door kerkelijke gemeenschappen, van de elders bediende doop*, Heerenveen, 2007, p29ff
4. Translator's note: Here and elsewhere in this article the Dutch original *geloofsdoop* (literally 'faith baptism' as opposed to 'covenant baptism') is rendered in this way. See also previous instalments.
5. Verbree: *Over Dopen*. pp112-115
6. Voorberg: *Doop en Kerk*, p138, p357ff.
7. Compare with Verbree: *Over Dopen*. pp119-121
8. When presenting my doctoral thesis (*Doop en Kerk*, see above) I defended the provocative proposition that "Infant baptism is fully a baptism of faith." I did so to point out that infant baptism may only be administered within the context of faith: believing parents in a believing church fellowship.
9. Voorberg: *Doop en Kerk*, pp279-381, 446-460.
10. The exercise of discipline need not be a blunt instrument. Where a second baptism takes place after a period of extensive instruction and admonition, it may be viewed as the final outcome, and a withdrawal from the church will be confirmed. Where the baptism is an impulsive act, patient instruction may well lead to repentance and return to the Reformed confession of the covenant. It is, however, prudent to make it clear to the person who has been so baptized that he/she has received the sign of admission into another faith community, and that this places his/her continued membership in their own congregation under severe pressure. A communicant member will be withheld from the sacraments, since there can be no room for simultaneous membership in two faith communities. An announcement to the congregation cannot be avoided. If after, say, one year of instruction and admonition there is no evidence of repentance, then there ought to be acquiescence in a *de facto* withdrawal.

able to do with the Iranian revolution forty odd years ago. At the same time, some extremely powerful anti-Western sentiments do exist, and whenever 'Western' is identified with 'Christian' it is, needless to say, unfavourable to the church of Jesus Christ. Following colonization before - and imperialism after - World War II, the crusades of the Middle Ages are topical once again. Western support (often Christian motivated) for the state of Israel has not done much towards improving the attitude towards the indigenous Christians. The fate of Muslims in the Balkans in the nineties, and Western interference with Afghanistan and Iraq after the turn of the century, has caused many to shut the door and lock it. Western intervention in Libya against Gaddafi could also suddenly rebound on the indigenous Christians in the whole Middle East.

Jesus has overcome the world

What will the world have come to in ten or twenty years, if our Lord has not yet appeared? Will the controversy between Sunnis and Shiites have altered relations? Will the claims of Christians in the East have been blotted out through oppression, flight and emigration? And will the West have by then become for the greater part Islamic? Who knows (God alone!), there may even be an explosion of unknown freedom; and churches from Indonesia to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania may have experienced dramatic growth through a flood of conversions; a growth greater than the decline of the churches in the spoiled West during the last half century. But there is one thing we need not fear: Islam will not take over the world. That is impossible, for Jesus Christ himself said to his disciples: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (*John 16 v. 33*) ■

The biblical background of the doctrine of the Trinity

Many Christians do not concern themselves much with the Trinity. Orthodox Christians believe in it with a holy conviction, yet they often find it difficult to explain exactly what it entails. Nevertheless, they are deeply convinced that not only their heavenly Father is God, but Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are too. Yet at the same time it is true that there are not three gods, but only One. Therefore, in the Christian tradition, God is designated by that unique word in which both the number 'three' and 'one' are present: Triune.



While this belief in the triune God comes to the fore regularly in the songs that are sung in the church liturgy as well as in the prayers, it more often than not plays no role of importance in daily life. Ministers and teachers also find it difficult to explain the gist of it in a clear and understandable manner. In congregations where it is the tradition to preach regularly from the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 8 from the Catechism (the Lord's Day dedicated to the Trinity) often causes the preacher some anxiety.

Remarkably enough, outsiders are often more intrigued by the doctrine of the Trinity than Christians. This is certainly true of Jews and Muslims, who tend to consider this doctrine to be a serious blasphemy, because it is, in their view, a subtle form of polytheism. This is also true of western agnostics and atheists. They can often imagine belief in a God, but opt out when this God is said to consist, in some mysterious way, of three different identities. They compare it to someone imagining himself to be three persons simultaneously. The association (naturally very offensive to Christians) with a multi-personality disorder is quick to be made, and the doctrine of the Trinity then provides a good reason to steer clear of Christianity from then on. Seekers who are still open-minded about Christianity also often come up against this 'problem'. Some years ago, field research showed that the question of God's Trinity is one of the top three questions asked during the Alpha course (the other two are how there can be so much suffering and evil in the world;

and why, amongst all religions, only the Christian faith should be true). Apparently, the complicated doctrine of the Trinity is one of those themes that cause people to doubt whether they should become a Christian.

This last conclusion seems a great pity to me, and totally unnecessary. In this article I would like to attempt to explain what the doctrine of the Trinity is, and why it is so important. I will not elaborate much on where this doctrine came from, on the many complicated discussions that were dedicated to it in the first centuries of church history, or on its later vicissitudes. There is enough other literature at hand on that subject (whoever wishes to know more about this can refer to the books of Butin and Olson & Hall mentioned in the bibliography at the end of this article). Instead, I would prefer to make an attempt at illustrating that the doctrine of the Trinity comes directly from the Bible, and bring to attention its practical relevance.

The doctrine and the Bible

What most Christians *do* find a very important part of their faith is the Bible. One does not have to believe that the Bible was dictated word for word by the Spirit and written down infallibly by the biblical scribes, in order to appreciate the importance of the meaning of the Bible to the Christian Faith. Most Christians even read the Bible on a daily basis. Well then, when we try to do justice to the whole of the Bible in an unprejudiced manner, something like the doctrine of Trinity is bound to emerge from it. Not completely worked out, and not in a quick-fix manner – which is why the church needed some centuries to express the doctrine of the Trinity adequately – but so much so that the seeds of this doctrine can be found in the Bible.

Whoever tries to dispense with the doctrine of the Trinity will, by definition, need an alternative, and indeed many have been offered. For example, there is the idea that God is one and singular – a deeply rooted conviction in Greek philosophy. Or the notion that there are in fact two gods – a position widely held in Persian religions, which gained ground in the early days of Christianity through the teachings of Marcion: there is a good God (the Father of Jesus) but also a bad one (the Creator of all matter). Both options were rejected by the

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Church at an early stage because they obviously do no justice to the testimony of the apostles. However, some more subtle alternatives remained active for a longer period in church history and still emerge from time to time. Here too there are two positions: the idea that God is one person playing different roles (technical term: modalism or Sabellianism); and the thought that God the Father is just a little bit more Divine than the Son and the Holy Spirit (technical term: subordinationism). On closer inspection, we would have to say, however, that these alternatives also distort the biblical message. Even in the Old Testament, we cannot place what is said of God under one single denominator.

Old Testament

Starting with this last observation, let us begin by looking at the Old Testament. I would like to take the well-known history of the 'binding' of Isaac in Genesis 22 as an example. At first, it is God himself who addresses Abraham and calls upon him to sacrifice his son (vv. 1,2). Subsequently, when Abraham is at the point of killing his son on mount Moriah, it is the angel of the Lord who addresses him by name just as God did, to inform him that he need not slay his son (vv. 11,12). After that, when Abraham has sacrificed a ram instead of his son, and named the spot 'God will provide', the angel of the Lord calls him a second time. That goes as follows: 'I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you' (vv. 16,17). Apparently, the angel of the Lord is brought forward as someone different from God in the one case and identical to God in the other. It is striking that the angel here is not a sort of go-between, but, just like God, speaks 'from heaven'. The content of the message appears to differ at first: God asks Abraham to slay his son, whereas the angel forbids it. Is God for the bad news and the angel for the good? No, the story reaches a climax when in vv. 16 and 17 God and the angel are at one. God identifies himself completely with his angel, and Abraham need not be afraid that God will ask something different after all.

We also come across similar patterns of distinction-and-identification with God in other Old Testament

archetype stories, like when God calls Hagar back from the desert (Gen 16), Jacob's discussion with Leah and Rachel about what took place at Bethel (Gen 31), the calling of Moses (Ex 3) and the birth of Samson (Judges 13). Especially intriguing is Ex 23: 'See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared. Pay attention to him and listen to what he says. Do not rebel against him; he will not forgive your rebellion, since my Name is in him. If you listen carefully to what he says and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and will oppose those who oppose you. My angel will go ahead of you and bring you into the land of the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites and Jebusites, and I will wipe them out' (vv. 20-23). Here again we see the mysterious change taking place, in which God first distinguishes himself from the angel, and subsequently identifies himself with him completely: 'If you listen carefully to what *he* says and do all that *I* say...' But here we also see what this identification is based on: '*since my Name is in him*'. That is an exceptionally interesting formulation, especially when positioned alongside the manner in which God, according to the New Testament, gave his Name to Jesus (Phil. 2:9,11), and how Jesus, according to the Gospel of John, applies the Name of God ('I am who I am', Ex. 3:14) to himself in the so-called 'I am' sayings ('I am the Good Shepherd', etc.).

Similar observations can be made in the Old Testament regarding the Spirit of God (*ruach YHWH*). We cannot go into this in detail at this point, but very often God's actions are attributed to the Spirit – and in these cases also, it is noteworthy that, on the one hand, God's Spirit has his own identity (that is to say: his own 'colour' and 'character') with respect to God, but, on the other hand, also merges with God himself. In short, careful reading of the Old Testament passages already take us a long way along the road to understanding what caused the early church to gain the insight that formed the grounds for the doctrine of the Trinity.

New Testament

In the New Testament this original pattern materializes even further. The gospels show us

how Jesus calls upon God as his Father, and in his sermons calls upon the people to turn to God. Mark summarizes Jesus' mission as: proclaiming the good news of *God* (Mark 1:14). That good news has everything to do with the coming Kingdom of God (Mark 1:15). Many of the parables mean to clarify the way things work in God's Kingdom. They make it clear that God's Kingdom is not of this world, for it is not about power and high positions, but about compassion regarding those who are lost. The parables show us that grace, love and forgiveness set the tone – while at the same time judgment is passed on those who want no part of this. Jesus' whole presentation was thoroughly theocentric. His goal was to bring into the spotlight the all-encompassing relevance of God and of a life under God's rule. Even when someone suddenly called out: 'Yes, but you yourself are not just anybody – you are the Messiah, the Son of God' – Jesus kindly asked the caller not to continue along this line (Mark 3:11,12; 8:30). He sometimes forbade his followers to speak of his miracles (Mark 1: 44, 5: 43, 7:36, 8:26). And if someone addressed him as 'Good master' it was as if Jesus, startled, directly wished to set things straight: 'Why do you call me good?' Jesus answered. 'No one is good—except God alone' (Mark 10: 18). He also says (John 8:50) 'I am not seeking glory for myself... but I honour my Father' (John 8: 49). In short, all that Jesus did and said was done with the purpose that we give to *God* the position he deserves: by acknowledging his majesty, placing his will above all, and allowing him to set the course. That is the message that Jesus preached throughout the country for three years. His whole life was filled with this. You could say, in agreement with the 20th century Dutch theologian A.A. van Ruler, that the New Testament revolves around Jesus, but regards God and his Kingdom.

Spotlight

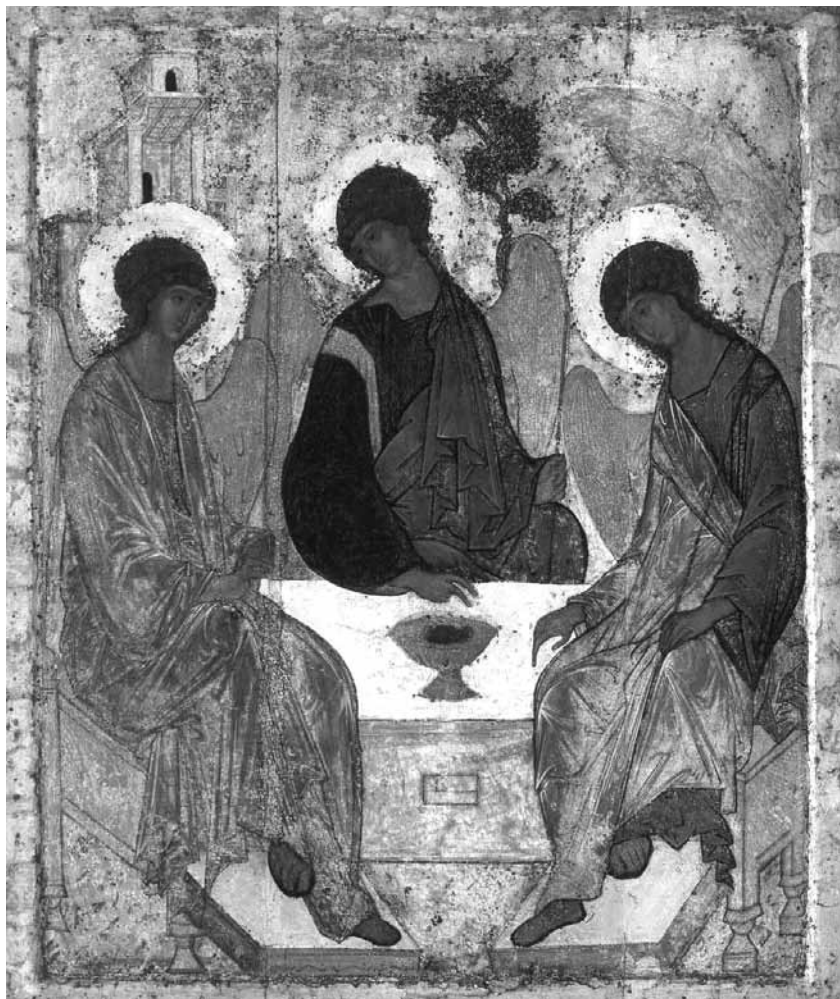
How then does God react to Jesus' performance? In the gospel, this becomes clearer along the way: by doing the exact opposite, namely, by placing *Jesus* in the spotlight, declaring him as his beloved Son. In the gospel we see God himself speaking on only two occasions, but in both cases it is to identify with Jesus and place him in the centre. Firstly at the baptism in the river Jordan (Matt. 3:17, Mark. 1:11, Luke 3:22), and later on at the transfiguration on the Mount (Matt. 17:5, Mark 9:7, Luke 9:35; compare also the summarized message in John 12:28).

After that, Jesus enters Gethsemane, the decisive moment in which he lets deeds meet words by assimilating himself with the will of his Father. He did that all the way to the cross. Subsequently, God spoke to him one more time by raising him from the dead. The resurrection, as New Testament scholars unanimously tell us today, was a Divine deed of rehabilitation. For here God made it clear in an unsurpassable manner: *this* man got it right in his message about Me! So whoever wishes to know Me must look to Jesus: to his message, his deeds and his death and resurrection. From now on it can be truly said: 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14: 9). In the fourth gospel especially, the gospel of John, we find the deepest and lengthiest reflections on this relationship, and see the entrance to the Kingdom of God and eternal life, joined to belief in Jesus (John 3:16).

That is why from Easter onward, in the words of the German theologian Rudolf Bultmann, Jesus the preacher became the preached. For from the resurrection onwards the Father glorifies the Son with a glory that is unsurpassed (see John 17:5). He gives him the name that is above every name (Phil 2:9) and gives him all authority in heaven and on earth (Math 28:18). He takes him up into the heavenly realms (Luke 24:51, Eph. 1:20, 4:10). And there even places all things under his feet (1 Cor. 15:27; Eph. 1:22). From Easter on, the Father places the Son in the spotlight. Just as the Son was always pointing towards the Father, so the Father now ensures that everything points to him. Everything in the New Testament now revolves around him. Moreover, we need no longer be silent about the fact that he is the Messiah. On the contrary: 'Therefore let all Israel be assured of this', says Peter, 'God has made this Jesus...both Lord (*kurios*) and Messiah.' (Acts 2: 36). From now on the proclamation of the good news about God especially regards the decisive position assumed by Jesus. A matter of the greatest importance now is that no one knows the Father except those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (Matt. 11: 27).

Through the Holy Spirit

But how can the Son reveal if he is no longer here? Has he not risen and ascended to heaven? The New Testament leaves no uncertainty as to that question: Jesus reveals through *the Holy Spirit* of God. That Spirit had already inspired and equipped



The icon of the Trinity, painted around 1410 by Andrei Rublev. It depicts the three angels who visited Abraham at the Oak of Mamre - but is often interpreted as an icon of the Trinity, sometimes called the icon of the Old Testament Trinity.

him for his mission (Matt. 1:18-20, Luke 1:35; Matt. 3:16, Mark 1: 10, Luke 3: 22, John 1:32f., Luke 4:14, 18f., Matt. 12:28, John 3:34). Well, it is that same Spirit who is sent by the Father and the Son to ensure that the Son, and via the Son the Father, is placed in the centre all over the world. Towards this goal Jesus baptizes with the Spirit (Matt. 3:11) and his followers will receive the Spirit (Luke 11:3, John 7:39). The Spirit will 'give them life' (John 6:63) and teach them how to testify of Jesus even in difficult circumstances (Luke 12:12); he will even speak through them (Matt. 10:20, Mark 13:11). In short, the Spirit is the one who continues Jesus' mission on earth: He makes people willing to ensure that the proclamation of the Kingdom is continued. He connects people to God's forgiving love by getting them connected to Jesus (John 16: 14a). Those who receive the Spirit then glorify both the Father and the Son. The surprising thing is that this has not developed gradually but was this way from the

beginning. We have no indication whatsoever that there was ever a time in early church history when Jesus was not worshipped and glorified. That is sometimes assumed by the so-called 'aggrandizement theory', which claims that people started attaching more and more metaphysical powers to Jesus along the way, until, after a few centuries, he was placed on the same level as God. Even though this theory was trotted out again at the end of the last century by the Dutch theologian H.M. Kuitert, it is now generally viewed as simply at odds with all that we know about the first period of Christianity. From the very start it was true: 'no one can say, "Jesus is Lord", except by the Holy Spirit' (see 1 Cor. 12:3b). It is the Spirit that teaches believers to call Jesus 'Lord', that is, to give him the title that in the Old Testament was only God's due. It was seen in this way already in the first Christian congregations, and not just four hundred or so years later. The Spirit confirmed the complete unity between the Father and the Son, which is why the New Testament can, in one instance, speak of the Spirit of the Father (e.g. in Matt 10:20), and in another of the Spirit of the Son (e.g. Galatians 4:6). For is he not the Spirit of both?

Recapitulating the above: in the New Testament Jesus proclaims the kingdom of the Father. He is so intensely connected with this that he himself is the one who brings this kingdom to earth, making it a reality in his life, suffering and death. God the Father is the one who, in response to this, subsequently completely identifies with Jesus and defines himself as his God and Father. The Spirit, lastly, is the one who continues Jesus' work on earth and completes it, just as he had also supported Jesus in his work. He inspires people to believe in and worship both the Father and the Son. ■

The second part of this contribution will be published in the next issue of Lux Mundi

Notes

- This article was originally published in the Dutch language as 'De drie-eenheidsleer: rechtstreeks weggelopen uit de Bijbel' in: Cees Dekker e.a. *Hete Hangijzers*, edited by Buijten & Schipperheijn, Amsterdam 2009, Ch. 11, p. 199-210
- Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations and references are taken from the *New International Version of the Bible (NIV)*, 2010.

Paradise Motifs in the Book of Revelation - Part 1

Among church people, the books of Genesis and Revelation are generally referred to as the first and the last books of the Bible. And that is quite true, when one considers the position these two books have been given in the Bible: it begins with Genesis, and it concludes with Revelation. It is just as true when one pays attention to the themes that are central to these books: the beginning and the end of the present world order.¹



In regard to their age, however, it is not so simple. In the case of Genesis, it depends on whether Moses is to be seen as its main author. If so, then Genesis could be regarded as the oldest book of the Old Testament; but even then, historically, the Book of Job appears to be very old.

In the case of Revelation, this book is generally taken to be the most recent New Testament book, because of all the future-oriented visions it contains. However, the early tradition needs to be taken into account: this holds that John, after his exile on Patmos – where he saw these visions – was released again, and went to live in Ephesus. There, at a very old age, he wrote his Gospel. In that case, rather than Revelation, the Gospel of John ought to be regarded, historically, as the last book of the Bible. For an unsuspecting reader of Scripture, that would be a strange thought: the Bible beginning with the Book of Job and ending with the Gospel of John...

However, if we take our starting point in the canon as it has been handed down to us, then Genesis is indeed the first book of the Bible, and Revelation its last. In this way, the canon forms an integral whole, for there is a clear connection between these two books. More precisely: the beginning of Genesis, the account of the creation of heaven and earth, is clearly linked to the end of Revelation, which presents us with the prospect of a new heaven and a new earth.

The end of Revelation has been called the capstone of the Christian Bible, and rightly so. The grand narrative of God encompasses the past, the present and the future, from beginning to end, from Genesis to Revelation.

In this two-part series, I would like to investigate which motifs from the story of creation in the first book of the Bible recur in the last book, and

what role these motifs play. I intend to cluster the relevant textual material into seven such motifs, and discuss each separately. In every case, the book of Revelation will form the starting point, and from there we will look back at the book of Genesis.

These motifs are:

- The paradise garden of God
- The new heaven and the new earth, where there is no sea
- God and the Lamb as the eternal source of light
- Servants who reign as kings
- Free access to the Tree of Life
- A river of living water, with deposits of precious stones
- The removal of the dragon-snake: the paradise curse lifted.

In the discussion of these motifs, the similarities between Revelation and Genesis will, of course, be highlighted. And at the end of this study I will, by way of conclusion, also identify the differences between them.

By 'paradise motifs' I understand those elements of John's visions that, to trained readers of the Bible, are reminders of the creation story of Genesis 1-3. The world to come (with the New Jerusalem as its world capital) stands fully in line with the world of Paradise as it was in the beginning. In line, that is, from a redemptive-historical perspective. And by 'trained readers' I mean in the first place John himself, the human author of a book full of heavenly visions; then his first audience in Asia Minor, near the end of the first century AD; and finally people such as ourselves, readers from the First World at the beginning of the 21st century.

The paradise garden of God

There is only one place where the book of Revelation explicitly refers to Paradise. It is not where we might expect it: in the description of the New Jerusalem (ch. 21-22) where most of the Paradise motifs are found. No, we find it where Christ concludes his personal letter to the church at Ephesus with the promise of life: *To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God* (ch. 2:7). The reference in this text to the Tree of Life – another paradise motif, to be discussed separately in section 5, below – shows that this must be a reference to Genesis 1-3.

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The Greek word *paradeisos*, first used by the historian Xenophon around 400 BC, has been borrowed from the Persians and Medes. Its meaning is not disputed: *Pari* = around; *daeza* = wall; *paridaeza* = a walled enclosure, such as the private parks of rulers and nobles. The Greeks, however, understood the word to mean what was contained within the wall, that is the royal gardens. When in Alexandria the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, its translators knew all about the pleasure gardens of the ruling Ptolemies. Besides, Hebrew had borrowed a similar word from the Persian: *pardes*, a royal preserve. It occurs three times in the Old Testament (Nehemiah 2:8; Ecclesiastes 2:5; Song of Solomon 4:13). That explains why the translators of the Septuagint in Genesis 2 used *paradeisos* rather than the simpler *kêpos* (garden: an open space, not enclosed, where ordinary plants and trees grew) to describe the Garden of Eden².

In this way, the Garden of Eden was rightly described as a pleasure garden. The Hebrew *gan-Eden* could be translated as 'land of joy' or 'happy land'. Strictly speaking, however, this 'garden' and 'Eden' are not identical, for Genesis 2:8 tells us that the LORD God planted a 'garden in Eden' (*gan be-Eden*). This pleasure garden was located 'in the east' (the local and most commonly understood meaning of the Hebrew *mikkêdèm* in Genesis 2:8) or perhaps 'in the beginning' (the temporal sense used by the Vulgate may be preferable)³. God himself planted a garden in Eden, trees and all. A fitting name for this garden is indeed *gan-Elohim*, 'the garden of God' (as in Ezekiel 28:13 and 31:8-9). This pleasure garden, the very opposite of a barren wilderness, truly belongs to the invisible dwelling-place of God. Hence the other Biblical reference to 'the garden of YHWH'⁴. The second chapter of Genesis calls to mind a palace garden, complete with fruit trees, with the man God created placed in it as his custodian. YHWH appears as the lord of the manor, walking through his garden in the pleasant cool of the evening (Genesis 3:8).

Against this etymological background of the word *paradeisos*, it is striking that Revelation 2:7 places the promised Tree of Life 'in the Paradise of God' (*en tooi paradeisooi tou theou*). In their *Lexicon*, Louw and Nida note the following: "the reference may reflect somewhat more closely the historical background of this term. It is appropriate to translate: 'the garden of God', especially since in the context the reference is to the fruit of the tree of life"⁵. Therefore, the promise contained in ch. 2:7 could be represented as follows: "To him who

overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the Tree of Life, which is in the paradise garden of God".

Those who conquer belong in the company of the Conqueror, and they will be allowed to live in God's natural environment, that is, his royal domain.

A new heaven and a new earth, where there is no sea

Various exegetes have rightly pointed to the chiasmic structure of Revelation 21:1-5a:

- A new heaven and a new earth (v. 1a)
- B The first heaven and earth have passed away (v. 1b)
- C There was no longer any sea (v. 1c)
- D The New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven (v. 2)
- D₁ The dwelling of God is with men (v. 3)
- C₁ There will be no more death, etc. (vv 4a-4c)
- B₁ The old order of things has passed away (v. 4d)
- A₁ "I am making everything new!" (v. 5)

Together, 'heaven and earth' represent the created order. In Genesis 1:1, the expression 'heaven and earth' is a comprehensive formula for the entire cosmos. We are told how the first heaven and the first earth were created. 'Heaven' stands for the heavenly expanse; 'earth' represents the dry land that appears when the waters flow away. In Revelation 20:11, John refers to this cosmic constellation when he says: "Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them." The removal of the old order takes place to make room for a qualitatively new act of creation by God⁶. The décor changes: a new heaven and a new earth appear (Isaiah 65:17 – a new creation; II Peter 3:13 quotes this prophetic promise).

In the Old Testament, 'the new' (Greek: *kainos*) refers to God's saving intervention in the future, expected by the people of Israel; in the New Testament, it refers to the eschatological renewal brought about by the saving work of Jesus Christ. What is 'new'? Not a renovation of the existing order: no, the Creator makes a clean start, as at the first. Isaiah prophesies that 'the former things will not be remembered', while the new order will endure (Isaiah 65:17; 66:22). The striking element of Revelation 21:5a is that the One who sits on the throne (already described in ch. 4 and 5) himself, in his own person, speaks: "I am making everything new!"

V. 2 says that the New Jerusalem comes down 'out of heaven'. That must mean the dwelling place of God himself, the One who transcends the old as well as the new world order. Hence the addition

'from God' (*ek tou ouranou* means the same as *apo tou theou*). The New Jerusalem is not a remnant of the old order; nor is it a natural outcome of the new order. No, it is 'from God', truly the 'city of God'.

Our survey of the structure of this passage shows that this is its core. The coming of the New Jerusalem 'out of heaven, from God' has as its aim that henceforth God will dwell with men. In Israel, there was already an awareness that God had pitched his tent among them, so as to dwell with men (Ps 78:60). Truly, his dwelling is 'with men' (*meta toon anthroopoon*). Not just with Israel, not even a restored or an extended Israel. The dwelling of God is with all of mankind. All those living on earth become his people. His covenant will reach its full extent, so that the united nations will be included in it. The New Jerusalem becomes the capital of a new world in which, because of God's permanent presence, righteousness dwells. In this new constellation of heaven and earth, there will be no more room for the sea (*hè thalassa ouk estin eti*). Here, the sea is apparently viewed as something negative, something threatening. Indeed, in the chiasmic structure of vv 1-5a, the sea is located in parallel with those other things that will no longer be: death, mourning, crying or pain (v. 4). A sea of sorrow will be wiped away by God's own hand.

In contrast to Genesis 1, where the sea is portrayed as an essential element of God's good creation, in Revelation the sea represents the forces of evil (such as 'the beast from the sea', ch. 13:1) and of death (in ch. 20:13 the sea is associated with 'death and Hades').⁷ When Babylon is destroyed, it is especially the prosperous seafarers who must stand helplessly by while the world economy, the stage of their venture capital, collapses (ch. 18:17b-19). There will be a much calmer passage for the New Jerusalem, once there is no more sea. In Genesis 1:2, the ancient 'deep' signifies a state in which life and habitation are impossible. The sea (LXX: *thalassa*) in ch. 1:9-10 is the water, which at God's command is gathered together. When that happens, dry land appears, and the created world becomes fit for life and habitation, so that mankind can find a safe abode. Since then, the powers of death have made the world an unsafe place, but once the sea is no more, this threat will be removed, once and for all.

Old Testament and ancient Jewish tradition portray God as being in constant confrontation with the sea. In her study, Kloos identifies a number of divine acts, the most notable of these being: God sets boundaries for the sea; he lifts up his voice against it; if need be he dries it up.⁸ Wherever YHWH

appears, the turbulent sea must draw back. When God comes to dwell forever among men, he will provide a safe abode – one without an ocean view.

God and the Lamb as the eternal source of light

Since in the Book of Revelation the presence of God in his creation stands central, the differences between day and night lose their prominence. After all, he is always there. The heavenly liturgy, the adoration before his throne, continues day and night (ch. 7:15, cf. 4:8). At the same time, we do read of an absence of daytime or nighttime rest, occasioned by adoration of God, accusations before God, or punishment from God (ch. 4:8; 12:10; 14:11; 20:10). The fourth trumpet announces a temporary absence of light as a warning to all of mankind: a third of the day and a third of the night are to be without light (ch. 8:12). For a short time, God withdraws from his creation.

This shows us how essential the presence of God is for the world. His first act of creation was to call forth the light (Genesis 1:1-4). Wherever God appears and acts, light shines. As John expresses it: "God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). Strictly speaking, on the first day God created light only, and not darkness. His speaking appearance drives away darkness as a natural consequence. The presence of the almighty Creator is expressed in his first act of creation, the creation of light.⁹

Sun and moon (and stars) serve in this created order as heavenly lights (Genesis 1:14). That is how God has ordained it; he himself has hung these lights on the expanse of heaven. In this world they are *needed*, they mark the succession of day and night, the seasons, days and years (Genesis 1:16: they rule over day and night; 1:18: they separate the light from the darkness). Without them, mankind would have no awareness of the passage of time. In addition, they are the lights that make everyday living possible. But in the new world, these lights are no longer needed. For the ultimate Source of light in the New Jerusalem is God Himself. Even the radiant sun and the shining moon pale in his presence (Isaiah 24:23). All things return to the beginning, never to change again: we exist in the light of God our Creator.

City of light

The gates of the New Jerusalem are no longer to be closed at night; they are continually open. In his prophecy, Isaiah had already foretold that in the future Zion would be the LORD's glorious city of light:

“Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night” (Isaiah 60:11a). It is noteworthy that Revelation tells us that the gates will not be shut in the *daytime* either. Might they need to be closed because of danger that threatens from outside (cf ch. 22:15)? The causal *gar* (“for there will be no night there” ch. 21:24) suggests that we ought to think of the closing of the gates at the end of the day. Such a closing will no longer be necessary, when day and night flow into each other. That is clearly also the intention of Zechariah’s prophecy (Zech 14:7b): “When evening comes, there will be light.”

Isaiah has this to say about Zion, the future city of light (ch. 60:19): “The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory”.

Where Isaiah speaks of one source of light, in the Book of Revelation that is doubled: “...the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp” (ch. 21:23) – even though elsewhere in the Bible Christ is called ‘the light’, but never a ‘lamp’. Fekkes explains this in terms of the Hebrew parallelism found in Isaiah: ‘the LORD will be your light, God will shine on you.’¹⁰ This doubling paves the way for the book of Revelation to turn the parallelism into a chiasm: “...the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp”. Still, the Lamb is not an independent source of light: God and the Lamb belong together and complement each other.

‘The lamp of God’ was a cultic object in the Tent of Meeting and in the temple. That light was to be kept burning, unceasingly, day and night (Leviticus 24:1-4). In the city that has no temple, God’s shining presence, together with the Lamb as Lamp, is its perpetual source of light. Likewise, the godless city of Babylon is punished by the removal of light (ch. 18:23).

At first, the light is for the New Jerusalem itself: ‘the glory of God gives it light’ (ch. 21:23: *autèn*); then, the light is also for its inhabitants: ‘the Lord God will give them light’ (22:5: *ep’ autous*). Especially this second reference makes us think of the priestly blessing over Israel. For that is how the name of God was put on His people. And this also fits with the promise of the Name that is placed on the foreheads of his servants, and with the whole cultic setting of the passage: ‘The LORD make his face shine upon you’ (Leviticus 6:25). The ancient priestly blessing becomes a perpetual reality for the inhabitants of the New Jerusalem.

Who exactly are those inhabitants? They are the nations who live in the light of Jerusalem; rulers of the world, too, will be included among those who worship

God and the Lamb. The ‘pilgrimage of the nations’ motif in John’s visions shows us how all of them go up to Jerusalem. The promise to Abraham, the ancestor of the people of Israel, that all nations will be blessed through him, finds its ultimate fulfilment.

Three of the seven paradise motifs have been examined so far. The second, concluding instalment will deal with the remaining four motifs, as well as the differences between Revelation and Genesis. ■

Notes:

1. This article was originally presented in the Dutch language at a ‘permanent education conference’ on Genesis at the Theologische Universiteit in Kampen, the Netherlands, Nov. 19, 2010.
2. Jan N. Bremmer, “Paradise: From Persia, via Greece, into the Septuagint.” In *Paradise Interpreted. Representations of Biblical Paradise in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Gerard P. Luttikhuisen (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 1-20. In Luke 23:43 and II Cor 12:4, *paradeisos* denotes the heavenly paradise, the abode of believers after death.
3. The argument for this reading can be found in T. Stordalen, *Echoes of Eden. Genesis 2-3 and Symbolism of the Eden Garden in Biblical Hebrew Literature* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 261-270. The temporal meaning of *mikkèdèm* is undisputed in e.g. Micah 5:1, The Vulgate has ‘*a principio*’, an allusion to ‘*in principio*’ in Genesis 1:1. Hence, the garden of Eden is typified as something from a bygone era; paradise is far in the past, and no longer to be found in the present.
4. A survey of all Old Testament references to Eden can be found in T. Stordalen, “Heaven on Earth – Or Not? Jerusalem as Eden in Biblical Literature.” In *Beyond Eden*, eds. Konrad Schmid and Christoph Riedweg (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 28-57 [31-36].
5. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida (eds.), *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains. Volume 1* (Cape Town: Bible Society of South Africa, 1989), 5.
6. David Mathewson, *A New Heaven and a New Earth. The Meaning and Function of the Old Testament in Revelation 21.1-22.5* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 2003), 38.
7. See also Rev. 8,8; 12,12; 16,3. Jonathan Moo, “The Sea That is No More. Rev 21:1 and the Function of Sea Imagery in the Apocalypse of John,” *Novum Testamentum* 51/2 (2009): 148-167.
8. Carola Kloos, *Yhwh’s Combat with the Sea. A Canaanite Tradition in the Religion of Ancient Israel* (Amsterdam: Van Oorschot/Leiden: Brill, 1986), 81-83.
9. Ed Noort, “The Creation of Light in Genesis 1:1-5: Remarks on the Function of Light and Darkness in the Opening Verses of the Hebrew Bible.” In *The Creation of Heaven and Earth. Re-Interpretations of Genesis 1 in Context of Judaism, Ancient Philosophy, Christianity, and Modern Physics*, ed. George H. Van Kooten (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 3-20 [7]. In II Cor. 4:6 Paul argues from the creation of light. Admittedly, Isaiah 45:7 states that God created light and darkness; however it is clear from the context that this is meant to refer to prosperity and disaster (cf Is. 42:16; 58:10, 60:2).
10. Jan Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions in the Book of Revelation. Visionary Antecedents and their Development* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 267-268.

This translation by Aart Plug, February 2010, by arrangement with the author.

All Scripture quotations and references are taken from the New International Version of the Bible (NIV), 1984.

The Dutch National Synod

The Dutch National Synod: two days of plenary meetings and faith discussions held on the 10th and 11th December 2010. Approximately 75 men and women from our churches (CGK/GK/NGK¹) were present, having been invited by their own church institutions to take part in the discussions on church unity.



Together with many others from a total of 52 church denominations they went on their way to the very cold 'Grote Kerk' in Dordrecht (or 'Dordt', as it was known in the days of the original Synod of Dordt). They were cold December days and the huge church was unheated. From the Theological Universities of Kampen and Apeldoorn were present professors Ad de Bruijne, Barend Kamphuis and Eric Peels. Additionally, many church ministers and members of church committees were present as well as ordinary church members.

How did a National Synod come about? In the summer of 2008, Rev. G de Fijter, then president of the PKN-synod, suggested that the Protestant churches should send out a mutual appeal to Dutch society. He saw more and more people in that society who were completely unfamiliar with the gospel. Deliberating on the form such an appeal should take, he came up with the idea of a National Synod. National, because we have a message for the whole nation; Synod, because that has always been the name given to a gathering of many churches. Of course, it is not a true synod as such. It is a national appeal by Christian churches and communities. No more and no less. That is why the name was extended to National Synod: Protestant Forum. It is not an official church gathering but a meeting of members from various Protestant churches who wish to send out a signal to society. In the GKV the request to take part found its way onto the table of the Deputyship for Church Unity. After some internal deliberation, it was decided to accept the invitation and render ourselves accountable at the coming general synod of Harderwijk 2011. We considered the gathering to be important enough to be present and join in the discussion. In advance, the organizers had drawn up and communicated a draft credal statement that had a strong Trinitarian character.

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Haert-warming

How would one characterize the National Synod? In short: it was heart-warming, despite the cold surroundings. Certainly heart-warming because of the truly beautiful worship music by choirs like the Gospel Choir and the singer Sharon Kips; they performed some beautiful evergreens such as: He's got the whole world in His hands, O Happy Day, and Amazing Grace. Cold but warm. Topped with the warmth of plentiful communal song.

Rev. T. van der Leer made the opening speech, contributing something that was put into practice later in the day. He made clear that, as always, so in this gathering too, it is all about Jesus. Jesus came with his message of love to this world. So that love is in the centre. But...is it not also about truth? Is not that what we strive for? Certainly, but the truth *is* the love.

For the second half of the afternoon we moved to Wartburg College, where faith discussions in small mixed groups of approximately 12 persons formed the core. These discussions formed the heart of the National Synod. Brothers and sisters from many faith denominations shared with each other what God's grace in Christ meant to them personally in their lives.

In the evening program we were divided into two groups. There was a forum and a plenary discussion. To aid the discussion, two theses had been formulated.

Thesis 1: *The characteristic of a Christian is not truth, but love*

This caused quite a stir. Yet the kernel was: the search for truth is of importance, but we have too often assumed that we could formulate the truth in order to judge and condemn others with it. Yet the core of the matter is: the truth *is* the love. Prof. Peels said in short: it is not either/or (the truth *or* the love) – but both. It is striking that it was John who spoke of 'truth' but also of 'love' (1 John chapters 2 and 3). Prof. Kamphuis added that the problem is not so much the question of truth or love, but especially of how Christians have handled this truth and love.

Thesis 2: *Church division is no longer of any concern to the youth.*

This brought on many reactions, like a fine one from Dr I.A. Kole: church schisms are the cause of much grief; but Jerusalem has twelve arches: we do not all

Credal Statement

We believe in the living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit

God the Father

He, the Creator and the origin of all life, has entrusted us the earth to manage and protect that.

He destined us to live with Him and our fellow man in faith, in love and in peace. But where we forget and leave God - we do so since time immemorial - we lose the meaning of our existence.

There evil makes itself wide, negligence in love, infidelity and violence: a world that is doomed to perish in the judgement.

Still God remains faithful to what He created!

This encourages us to stand among others, in all their troubles, small or large.

To his caring hand we trust ourselves, both during our life and in the moment of our death.

Jesus Christ

God is the Living, who we really may know through Jesus Christ his Son, born of Israel, in whom we hear God's hidden heartbeat.

Jesus is the righteous, who has done the will of God and who has demonstrated us this will.

He has assumed our guilt and worn it to the cross of Calvary reconciled us with God. His grave was not the end: He is risen! Therefore, for us death is no longer the last word.

Since Easter the gospel sounds on, word of the reversal to new life. It proclaims us God's peace beyond understanding.

No man is a hopeless case anymore because in the wall of death and guilt, Jesus has opened a door to the Father and each other.

To Him we eagerly look forward: Come, Lord Jesus, come!

The Holy Spirit

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit is poured. He came and he comes with a rain of gifts.

He opens our eyes and our hearts to Jesus and allows him to have a place in our lives. The testimony of prophets and apostles, Breath full of the Spirit, teaches us to go in Jesus' track in order to live a life by God's grace by trial and error

That brings us to our neighbour

To be a helper where no helper is, to pray where

people are numb and speak for those who have been silenced.

The joy of the gospel binds us together, we belong together and are given together in the one body of Christ, his church.

It hurts us that the unity in Christ among us is so broken, almost invisible.

We can not rest, because the good Shepherd has one flock. In our country there is a growing community of those coming from the global Christianity, eager to express their faith.

Together, we want to be church in the Netherlands and encourage each other in faith, hope and love.

We pray that this will be a testimony to all with whom we are in conversation, also those who profess a different religion.

So we are en route to the day that Jesus Christ will come back. God will destroy all evil, give us peace and justice: a new heaven and a new earth.

have to enter through the same door. Let the Spirit go His own way, and accept the differences with which the Spirit works.

The following day we started off in Wartburg College once again, with a continuation of the previous day's faith discussions. Now the focus was on how we as Christians can be meaningful to society in words and deeds. Many different reactions came up, but with a common denominator: it is not our purpose (and not necessary) to radiate a sort of unity-utopia. Truth also means not brushing away underlying differences. But rising out above this we can listen to one another concerning what connects us as Christians: Jesus has done God's will, and has lived this will for us; he has taken our debts upon himself and made atonement for us with God; He is risen: death does not have the final word. If we recognize each other in this, we know in our heart that we have a connection.

Two concerns were mentioned by name: Not everyone in one's own circle is ready to participate in faith discussions with other Christians: the differences are too great. A concern of more import: if Christians display this division to the outside world, we form a blockage for others to find faith. For Christians, it is therefore an exciting challenge to formulate a mutual message for the world, in which you do justice to both the truth and the love. To that end, mutual faith discussions can be very fruitful and beneficial.

Signal-text

In the afternoon, the plenary closing session took place, once again in the Grote Kerk.

Another beautiful program with many valuable contributions by different speakers, including the Dutch Minister of Internal Affairs, Piet Hein Donner, who was offered the so-called signal-text. It is a message to Dutch society, in which many wonderful things are said that are beneficial to everyone: living from the source, Jesus Christ; what he did for us in the sacrifice of his life is of decisive importance to everyone. Through his Spirit he gives meaning and purpose to our lives.

The Hon. Piet Hein Donner declared his adherence to this. The National Synod displays the concern of Christians for society, both materially and immaterially.

Stepping out in unison is of immense importance: you must not attempt to start building the bridge



to society from the banks of your own truth across to the other. God built that bridge in Christ. That is what our faith discussion should be about (see the credal text and the signal message to society).

During the final gathering we sang a beautiful song together, with a text by the poet Koos Geerds. “To the envy of the world, God’s face radiates his light upon our paths, generously and full of grace!”

Thankful

A National Synod: what are we to think of it? Just like us, many asked themselves that same question beforehand. But when you have been speaking for two days about the heart of the gospel, as it was made visible in Jesus Christ, the thankfulness for all that you have recognized in others dominates. Thankful, because we have a strong signal for the world: that one message of salvation, despite the differences that are most certainly there, is of lifesaving importance. How wonderful it would be if we could spread that message in all unity to the whole country.

Let us give meaning to the National Synod on a local level: hold faith discussions with all those

with whom we know ourselves to be connected in Christ. If we subsequently – despite our differences – discover what connects us in Christ, we can no longer delay holding high the rescuing message of God’s salvation and mercy to all our fellow countrymen. ■

Note

¹ Dutch church denomination abbreviations used:

- GK Gereformeerde Kerken
Reformed Churches
- CGK Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerken
Christian Reformed Churches
- NGK Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken
Dutch Reformed Churches
- PKN Protestantse Kerk Nederland
Protestant Church of the Netherlands

Signal-text

Dear fellow citizens,

Almost four centuries ago the Dutch Protestant Churches' National Synod (meeting) was held in Dordrecht (1618-1619). Yesterday and today, with Christians young and old from almost all the Protestant churches, a 'National Synod' was held again in this same city for the first time. After all those centuries of division, we met each other and spoke with each other about our belief in Jesus Christ, our Saviour. From our midst we would like to address the whole of the Netherlands with a statement declaring two things. Firstly, that we as Christians, belonging to different churches, yet listening to the same gospel, also wish to listen better to each other and to help each other. Secondly, that we as Christians strive in a positive way for a healthy and just society. We wish to contribute towards helping our neighbour in the spiritual and practical sense. This we do out of our faith in the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who has entrusted the earth to us humans so that we may manage it and care for it.

Thankful

In the last 50 years our country and our people have experienced some far-reaching changes. There was a strong growth in prosperity. We have gained more freedoms, and there is more space for individuals and groups in our society. Healthcare is now at a high level. There is much to be thankful for. At the same time, division and confusion has also increased. The 'pillars' and fixed structures of the past century have been eroded. Many do not know what the world is coming to and which way it should go. Our country is becoming strongly polarized about core issues such as fundamental freedoms, the stagnating growth of prosperity, and integration. Our society has become multi-coloured through the arrival of other religions; yet that also causes tension. It cuts us to the heart that so many people in our country suffer rudeness, exclusion and loneliness. The great questions for the future are pressing themselves to the fore: care for the elderly, for the environment, for the growing number of youthful dropouts.

Faith

We have no more a monopoly on wisdom than others have for tackling these questions, let alone the solutions. But we do live from a source that always continues to give us hope to handle these questions and to search for new answers. That source is Jesus Christ, as we know Him from the Bible. What He did for us in the sacrifice of His life is decisive for us. What He portrayed in His life demonstrates how we should stand in this world compassionately and with a reconciliatory attitude. We believe that in Him our work is not in vain. We freely invite every fellow citizen to put their faith in Him, as we do, and draw hope and strength from that.

New courage

What we need in our country is new courage and a vision for the future. Our society can count on us as those who seek to walk the path of faith, hope and love; and as those who try to put this into practice in their family, in their neighbourhood, at work, in voluntary work... in short, in everyday life. We say this in all modesty. Much good has been achieved in the name of Christ, but we are fallible people, and are aware that the church has often failed in the past and the present. At the same time, we confess that faith in Jesus Christ transcends our failures. He is our life. The Spirit opens our eyes and our hearts to this. Through His Spirit, Christ gives our lives meaning and purpose.

Helping each other

Yesterday and today many hundreds of Christians from the full spectrum of Dutch Protestant churches gathered together in Dordrecht. That the church in Holland in ad 2010 displays a splintered image has all sorts of historical and theological reasons. However, we experience it as a fault that the church has become so divided. We find it terrible that for many people this, among other things, is one of the causes that the good message of Christ does not come across. From strong conviction that what connects us is more than what divides us, we entered into discussions of our mutual faith during these days in Dordrecht, crossing church boundaries in the process. We experience it as a sign of hope that, despite all our differences, we discovered in each other the same longing for peace in the one name of Jesus Christ. Therefore we declare our desire to commit ourselves to listen better to each other, and where possible help each other in practical ways.

Perspective

As Christians we continually pray for God's blessing for our society. We would like to enter into discussion with everyone about how rich a life in Christ is, and how He frees us from the burden of guilt and evil, and gives us a joyful perspective! As Christians we also wish to make our contribution towards a society in which people take care of one another. We wish to truly apply ourselves towards a positive climate in the Netherlands on issues such as education, health and environment. This is the signal that we would like to broadcast today, we who have reached out to one another across the dividing lines here in Dordrecht, in order to reach out to all in our country: Christians and non-Christians, believers and non-believers alike. We do so out of love for the gospel, and a sincere faith in Jesus Christ our Lord, who gave his life for this world. 'A shield and my reliance, O God, Thou ever wert. I'll trust unto Thy guidance. O leave me not unguided.*'

* a couplet from the Dutch National Anthem

Marriage, Family and the Civil Authority

Part 1 A theological and ethical perspective¹

In this series of articles, we will first examine what Scripture says about the intimate relationship between husband and wife, and the relationship between parents and children. Next, we will discuss the task of the civil authority with regard to these relationships.



The word ‘family’ has a variety of meanings. Its original meaning points to an intimate relationship between people, marked by shared responsibility. In earlier times, a ‘household’ included servants and extended family. In our time, the word ‘family’ is understood to include a variety of primary relationships, with or without children. In its more specific meaning, the term ‘family’ denotes the distinctive nature of the relationships between a man, a woman, and their (growing) children. In these articles, the terms ‘marriage’ and ‘family’ ought to be understood in this sense. ‘Marriage’, then, is defined as a covenantal bond between a man and a woman, directed towards the formation of a family. And ‘family’ is defined as a covenantal blood relationship between parents and children, directed towards their upbringing as mature persons. Used in this sense, the terms describe the distinctive nature of these relationships.²

That is also how these terms are commonly used. In the broader community, the term ‘family’ is strongly associated – and sometimes even identified – with the having of children, including sole-parent relationships.

This article aims to provide a systematic overview of what Scripture says about God’s purpose for the relationship between husband and wife, and the relationship between parents and children. It does not presume to present the last word. In the reality of political life, Christian politicians cannot

apply Scripture in a Biblicistic manner. At the same time, they cannot do without a reflection on what Scripture says. Perhaps these articles will contribute to such reflection.

What follows will not be an idealized representation. Such an idealization is a philosophical construct, foreign to the Christian faith. In addition, within today’s society, marriage and family relationships are often greatly distressed. Here, idealized representations serve no useful purpose. Marriage can lead to profound joy, but also to unspeakable suffering. In the words of Lilian Rubin, husband and wife can sometimes be ‘intimate strangers’. Often, childhood experiences lead to lifelong scarring. The sorrow of broken marriages and broken families should never be discounted.

1. Instituted by God; object of human responsibility

The origin of marriage is found in God’s work of creation. God created mankind, male and female, in His image (Genesis 1:27; cf 5:2; Matthew 19:4 and elsewhere). When God formed a woman from his rib (Genesis 2:22), Adam sang for joy: “*This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh*” (2:23). Regarding this work of creation, the author of Genesis declares: “*For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother, and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh*” (2:24, Matthew 19:5, etc.). He draws an obvious conclusion from what he sees in his own world, one that is rooted in the natural mode of human existence. That conclusion is this: the origin of marriage is found in the work of creation. In the New Testament, Jesus affirmed that conclusion (Matthew 19:4). God has joined the man and the woman together (ch. 19:6). That is how God has instituted it, and this institution can be thankfully received, as a gift of God, for the well-being of mankind.

At the same time, this institution of God is also the object of responsible human conduct. Marriage is a

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possibility laid in creation, not a natural imperative. Adam, in his song of praise, freely responded to God's gift. In the light of creation, being married and being unmarried are fully equivalent callings; the one is no greater than the other. Service to God is the highest and last goal of man; being married or unmarried is not. Christians confess that God has instituted marriage as a means to order the relationship between a man and a woman; they also acknowledge that the concrete marriage they are in is a calling from God.

The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the family. True, there was no family before the Fall; even so, the family has its origin in creation. To the bond of marriage, God has joined the blessing of having children (Genesis 1:28).

Here too, the gift of God is at the same time the object of responsible conduct. Man obeys not the laws of nature, but the Creator's Word. For mankind, fruitfulness is a blessing *and* a calling. In obedience to and dependence on God, man responds. Christians confess that both the family as an institution *and* the concrete family they belong to are a divine calling.

God has provided social structures and institutions – including marriage and the family – for our well-being. We may not, for ascetic or other reasons, look down on them. Sometimes, the apostle Paul is unjustly accused of an ascetic disdain for marriage and the family. However, Paul never regards being married as inferior to being unmarried. On the contrary: *"... everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer"* (I Timothy 4:4,5).

2.1 A lifelong covenant, directed towards the formation of a family.

Marriage has a twofold purpose. In the first place, God provided marriage as a covenant relationship between a man and a woman.

The creation of man implies a covenant relationship between God and man, and likewise between man and his neighbour. God intends human relationships to reflect the covenant between God and man.³ That is why marriage is characterized as a covenant. According to Scripture (Proverbs 2:17; Malachi 2:14), such a covenant is an exclusive, all-encompassing and lasting relationship, not just a conditional contract. It necessarily also reflects the covenant relationship between God and His people (cf.

Jeremiah 2:2; 3:1; Ezekiel 16:8-14; Hosea 2:18-19, Ephesians 5:22-33).

This relationship binds man and his wife to loving mutual service: a joyful bond, in which each receives love, support and devotion from the other. This close bond is rooted in the creation of man and woman 'in the image of God' (Genesis 1:27), in the woman's calling as 'suitable helper' (ch. 2:18), in her formation from Adam's rib (ch. 2:21,22), in their being 'one flesh' (ch. 2:24). This all-encompassing relationship has a shared destination. The notion of human covenant relationships, embodied in the command '*you shall love your neighbour as yourself*' (Matthew 22:39), finds its highest expression within marriage.

In the second place, marriage is directed towards the formation of a family. The human race is increased through marriage. God gives the blessing of fruitfulness (Genesis 1:28). Man does not create new life himself; he receives it from the hand of God (cf Genesis 9:1; Psalm 127:3; 128:3).

At the same time, this blessing obliges man to responsible conduct. God commands people to cooperate with His purpose. Man may not distance himself from God's blessing. Marriage and having children go together.

Already in the Old Testament, the blessing of children is valued very highly. Childless women felt diminished and rejected by God and people. The lack of an heir was a great misfortune. That is why the provision of levirate marriage allowed childless widows in Israel to produce an heir for their family (Deuteronomy 25:4-10).

In the New Testament, the same applies. The coming of Christ continues this creation mandate. In New Testament times, having children in marriage is still a blessing, a gift and a divine calling.

Of course, this does not in any way diminish involuntarily childless marriages. But God's command that marriage is to lead to the formation of a family, may not be arrogantly set aside

Cultural Mandate

This promise and calling to have children is closely linked to the broader cultural mandate. An acknowledgement of the former must imply a recognition of the latter. For Christians, this blessing and calling has an extra dimension. For marriage 'in the Lord' not only increases the human race; it also serves to build the church of Christ.

Which of these purposes takes precedence? The having of children may not be regarded as the foremost goal of marriage, as traditional Roman Catholic moral theology supposes. That would downgrade involuntarily childless marriages. 'Success' in marriage does not depend on having children. 'Fruitfulness' is more than just physical. Despite the pain of childlessness, such a marriage is still truly and fully a marriage. That is why the establishment of a covenant relationship between the partners is still given as the first purpose of marriage. In this relationship, sexual union has a place in its own right, aside from its procreative function.

This priority of the covenant relationship does not, however, lend legitimacy to a voluntarily childless marriage. Childlessness is not an option to choose, but an adversity to be dealt with.

Is there a third purpose for marriage: as a remedy against sexual immorality? Undoubtedly, since the Fall, marriage has served as a bulwark against immorality. Paul already pointed this out (I Corinthians 7:2-9). In Corinth, false teachers promoted a gnostic contempt for marriage, leading some members to abandon their marriages. Having done so, some were overtaken by the flood of sexual licence that engulfed the port city. In this situation, Paul reaffirms with apostolic authority that the place for sexual relations between a man and a woman is within, and not outside of, marriage. Realistically, Paul points to the dangers of sexual asceticism: marriage helps to restrain that. That is why this institution may not be disdained. It is far better to marry than eventually – having persisted in sexual sin – to burn in the fire of God's judgment. To stay standing when you choose (or are called) not to marry, while remaining sexually pure in a fallen and dissolute world, you need the power of God. God has given marriage to channel human sexuality, and as a protection against sexual immorality. But it is incorrect to advance this protection as a third purpose of marriage. It operates on a different level to the forming of a covenant relationship and the raising of a family. These purposes exist independently of sin, and have been given with creation.

2.2 A covenant relationship directed towards bringing up children to maturity

Similar to marriage, God has a twofold purpose for the family, as a relationship between parents and children.⁴

In the first place, the family is given as a covenant relationship between parents and their children, just as marriage is. Parents are called to love their children as themselves; and for children, parents are their nearest neighbours. It is an intimate, profound relationship, which also reflects and illustrates the bond between God and His people. God is Father, and His people are His children. Marriage reflects the bond between Christ and His church; the family does also. Family relationships make no sense without an understanding of the bond between God and His people.

The close relationship between parents and children implies that each is called to loving mutual service, for God has called them to help each other. Scripture emphatically teaches that parents have a responsibility to serve their dependent children, to provide for their well-being, to bring them up in the way of the Lord and instruct them in the wisdom of life.

Parents are to love their children, according to Scripture. They are often willing to provide generously with material goods; however, this giving must also extend to nonmaterial things: guidance, time, attention, help, space, patience, joy and hope. In this way, they can show something of God's relationship with His people, and Christ's relationship with His church. Such a bond between parents and children can be typified as a covenant relationship, and it has intrinsic value.

Likewise, children are to serve their parents. That was the intention of the fifth commandment (Exodus 20:12, Deuteronomy 5:16), and Jesus taught the same (Matthew 15:4-6; Mark 7:10-13). Failing to care for needy parents (whether materially or nonmaterially) is a breach of the covenant relationship. Love is shown by caring for parents in their old age. Paul encourages children to "*first put their religion into practice by caring for their own ... parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God*" (I Timothy 5:4).

Maturity

In the second place, the family is directed to bringing up children to maturity. That is why parents have authority over their children, and why children are bound to obey their parents. While the first purpose of the family highlights *continuity* within a covenant relationship, the second brings out the *dynamic* of this relationship. This dynamic is expressed in the growth of children, and their upbringing to maturity, equipping them for their cultural calling (Genesis 1:28). Otherwise, coming

Wedding ceremony in the Philippines



Photo P.G.B. de Vries

generations will not be equipped for their calling to stewardship.

A biological bond brings with it an educational relationship. We all live before the face of God, and are accountable to Him. Older generations must teach the younger about God's promises and requirements. They must also instruct them in their duty to their neighbour, with whom they share God's calling.

God himself has instituted this educational relationship around the poles of authority and respect. Parents are instruments in God's hand. They have authority to decide, and power to make things happen. This power may not be abused; according to God's purpose it must be used for sound and wholesome development. The origin of this authority and power is not found in the parents' personal qualities, their expertise or their natural dominance. Nor does it draw on tradition or civil structures. It is founded in the creation order, and is their calling before God. That is what the fifth commandment proclaims and teaches. Scripture requires that this parental authority be honoured. Parents are bringers of the Word; parental authority and filial obedience takes place 'in the Lord' (Ephesians 6:1).

God has given parents authority to lead their children to maturity, in keeping with the goal for

their lives. This authority exists as long as their children are dependent, and is directed towards their independence and maturity. For that reason, their authority is a 'functional' authority. It serves the attainment of their children's goal, in agreement with the will of God. The test of their authority, then, is whether it serves that purpose. Still, their authority is more than just 'functional'. Even when it falls short, their calling remains. God has not entrusted this special and intimate care of children to 'ideal' parents, but to people who have been 'taken from the dust'.

Provision of food

This parental nurture of children includes provision of food and clothing, protection from harm, and the conscious and unconscious influencing of the child's psychological, moral and spiritual makeup. One could understand it as a pedagogical quintet: protection, care, instruction (in knowledge and skills), introduction (into meanings) and initiation (into secrets). In these roles, parents can be described as guardians, gardeners, shepherds, guides and priests respectively.⁵

Parents can rightly be regarded as having 'moral' authority. Other relationships in society may also have moral authority over children, but then it is often (such as in schools) derived from the moral

authority of parents. From the perspective of the creation order, parental authority within the family has precedence over other forms.

This second purpose (bringing up children to maturity) implies that from a social and ethical perspective, the family has a fundamental influence on the development of each person. It shapes his relationship with God, with his neighbour, with himself, with creation and with human society. Theological ethics addresses the core question: How ought one to deal with the child, in a way that agrees with the God-given goal of his existence? In the words of Gustafson, parents are charged with 'moral stewardship'.

A wholesome upbringing takes place when parents willingly serve to promote and preserve good relationships between their children and God, their neighbour, themselves, creation, and the human society in which they live.

In summary, the family is the intimate relationship of parents and children which, in addition to its own intrinsic value, has the ultimate goal of fully realizing the destination in life of its children. ■

Notes:

1. This, the first in a series of three articles, is an abridged translation of 'Huwelijk, gezin en overheid: een theologisch-ethisch perspectief', first published in the Dutch language in: D. J. Steensma, M. Verhage-Van Kooten, J. Westert (e.a.), *Individualisering en gezinsbeleid. Gezin, arbeid, opvoeding en zorg in het licht van christelijke politiek*, Nunspeet 1998. This translation by Aart Plug, March 2011, by arrangement with the author. All Scripture references and quotations are taken from the *New International Version of the Bible* (NIV), 1984 edition.
2. Compare D.J. Steensma, 'Het eigene van het gezin' in: J.W. Maris en H.G.L. Peels, *Onthullende woorden. Theologische Leefeenheden en beleid I* (bijlage).
3. J.A. Heyns, *Teologiese Etiek I* (Pretoria, 1982) 14.
4. Compare Steensma, 'Het Eigene van het gezin', 164-179.
5. W. ter Horst, *Wijs me de weg! Mogelijkheden voor een christelijke opvoeding in een post-christelijke samenleving* (Kampen, 1995) 79-136

Every three years, the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken (CGK) in the Netherlands have their general synod, just as other reformed churches do. Between late August and late November, 52 ministers, elders and deacons meet on specified days to deal with an extensive agenda. 2010 was the year of such a synod. This is a personal reflection.



A common spiritual theme

Every synod is preceded by a prayer service, which is conducted by the chairman of the previous synod. The central words of that service resounded, at all levels, throughout the duration of the synod: "It is the Lord who judges me" (I Corinthians 4:4b). The brothers were called to truly stand before the face of God, knowing that His judgment far transcends the judgment of church members, or the judgment of those to whom we are spiritually related to various extents. It is a blessing when we can see that the Spirit has indeed acted through the preaching of the Word and through prayer. That makes us humble and thankful.

This was the common spiritual theme that ran right through the synod. Brothers not only *spoke* to each other, they also *listened* to each other. It wasn't enough for them to hold an opinion; they were also willing to be open to discussion, and if necessary to reconsider. For the most part, it wasn't the lesser points that were questioned and discussed; it was the main thoughts and spiritual directions coming from the reports that were considered and weighed. That is what gave spiritual and literal momentum to the synod. As to the latter, ten days were enough to come to a provisional close. Often, people think (and sometimes they say or write): 'what influence does a synod still have on local congregational life? The churches simply go their own way'. However, I would wish that every member of the church could experience, even if only once, the spiritual atmosphere that prevailed at Nunspeet. This was the churches at their strongest. Or rather: the churches at their weakest, and the Spirit at His strongest. And we may pray that for the one topic still to be dealt with in the spring of 2011 (homosexuality and homosexual relationships) this same Spirit may lead the brothers in the same way. After all, this matter had still not crystallized with the study committee to the point where it could be placed on the agenda.

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An energetic and blessed Synod



“Go ... proclaim ...”

The church has a message that is of eternal significance. It doesn't keep that message to itself. In 2010, the synod was able, at the recommendation of the deputies for mission, to identify three new mission locations: in Burundi, Thailand and Siberia. Older members of the churches will still recall the beginning of mission activity in Indonesia in the 1930s; and subsequently, in the 1950s, in other mission fields, largely in South Africa. The churches may serve in different locations on the world map now – until the moment that the time is fulfilled.

However, attention was not exclusively directed to 'the ends of the earth': the report from the deputies for evangelism showed growth in the number of mission congregations (ICF: International Christian Fellowship) within various cities in the Netherlands. These congregations are the result of mission work that was started in the 21st century, especially in the large cities in our country: Rotterdam, Utrecht, Haarlem, Amersfoort, among others. For it is clear that in recent decades there has been a strong decline in the Christian faith in the Netherlands. The number of Dutch people who are still involved in any way with the Christian churches has become minimal, especially in the western parts of the country. For the congregations, that has given rise

to a great spiritual struggle. Yet at the same time it has also given rise to encouraging developments. Synod was able to obtain a first-hand picture of this through a presentation about the missionary work in Haarlem-Schalkwijk, and this was followed by an intensive discussion concerning the way in which these congregations can take their own place within the bond of churches.

The Unity of reformed confessors

In 1947, the CGK appointed their first Deputies for the unity of Reformed confessors. During the 60 or so years of their existence, these deputies have experienced difficult times. Membership of this committee called for great faith, if you understand what I mean. The discussions often sharpened our thinking internally – after all, this is right at the heart of what drives and binds the churches spiritually – but noteworthy and lasting outcomes were usually quite limited. That can be seen when one considers the local and the national contacts with the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken (NGK)¹ and the Gereformeerde Kerken or Reformed Churches. There is a clear contrast between local and national contacts. And regardless of how one evaluates that, this remains painful. Since 2004, the way has been open to work towards closer relations with Reformed congregations within



The moderamen of synod. From left to right Rev. J. van 't Spijker, Rev. J. Schenau, Rev. P.D.J. Buijsm (chairman) and Rev. D. Quant.

the Protestantse Kerk in Nederland (PKN), i.e. the Gereformeerde Bond congregations and localities. However, in the ensuing six years, there has been virtually no progress.

Noteworthy developments

In 2010, there were three noteworthy developments:

1. Concerning the Hersteld Hervormde Kerk (Restored Reformed Church -HHK), Synod declared that it recognizes its desire to be a true church, founded on the Word of God and the Reformed confessions. This HHK came into being in 2004, and consists of a number of congregations from the former Nederlands Hervormde Kerk that did not join with the fusion of the Gereformeerde Kerken and the Evangelisch-Lutherse Kerk to form the PKN.
2. Synod decided that all congregations, whether or not they have closer relations with other churches locally, may invite ministers into their pulpits from churches covered by the above declaration. This means that ministers from the HHK and from the GKV may now preach the Word in our congregations. In 2012, the deputies will make recommendations as to how this will apply to the NGK and Gereformeerde Bond in the PKN.
3. The path to closer relations has been simplified: the role of classis has been reduced. At the same time, a determination was made about essential points of agreement: views on the preaching, the congregation, the sacraments and church discipline.

This blessing does not come without its concerns. The question was raised: Will the churches not be driven apart under the influence of this wide range of spiritual contacts? At the same time, these are visible evidence of the spiritual breadth and diversity that we have known and nurtured so long already. Will not the Spirit keep helping us further here?

Foreign churches

The church looks across geographical boundaries: delegates from various countries came to meet us, and to pass on spiritual greetings from their churches: Scotland, Ireland, Romania, America, Korea, Japan, South Africa ... That enabled us to see something of the worldwide work of God on this earth. And this sense of communion has encouraged the Synod to continue with its work.

Bumps in the road to ministry

We have a special arbitration panel for the ministry. It is no surprise that this panel gives very little publicity about its work. It could not be otherwise: these brothers work quietly behind the scenes when difficulties arise in the relationship between ministers and their consistories, in the hope that through prayer and effort the relationship can be improved. On this occasion, however, the panel tabled its report for reflection at the synod. And during the discussion, it became clear that this matter touched sensitive nerves. The report and discussion focused on the question: are there opportunities for earlier intervention? How can

problems be prevented rather than resolved? Synod adopted a comprehensive package of measures: more effective screening of students admitted to the Theological University in Apeldoorn, as well as more focus on the students' personal growth during their study; ongoing professional learning for ministers (in addition to being a calling, the ministry is also a profession); mentoring programmes (currently, this is a classical matter, and every classis has its own approach); and more penetrating questioning during the church visits (which really ought to be done properly every year!).

*As on every occasion,
synod meets in the
Oenenburgkerk, Nunspeet.*

Revised Statenvertaling

In 2007, there was a drive among delegates to the synod to investigate the reliability of the 'Herziene Statenvertaling'. Ministers of the CGK were among those who worked on this Bible revision. This is a translation of the Bible that is based on the text of the old 'Statenvertaling' of 1637. It is a monumental translation, but especially among young people it has difficulty taking root: the gulf in language has simply become too great.

In 2007, the commission of Synod was unable to respond: in the absence of a request from the churches it could not be placed on the agenda of Synod. It was different this time: the churches of the eastern region had submitted a request to investigate the translation upon publication. These churches had already carried out a thorough pilot study, comparable to that undertaken by the previous synod when the NBV (Nederlandse Bijbelvertaling) of 2004 appeared.

This study proved to be so thorough that Synod took a bold step: as the first of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands, it approved the use of this translation of the Bible in the worship services. Several consistories have already acted



on this decision. When, on December 4, 2010, the new HSV was presented in Dordrecht, I received a copy, and the next evening I was already able to use it in the worship service.

In Summary:

The fairest and most essential spiritual task of a synod is to provide leadership to the local churches, and to stand ready to serve them. The matters mentioned above show clearly that the Synod was so enabled. Praise, therefore, is due to the Lord, the One who gave a spirit of unity, and in whose hands we humbly lay our efforts for His judgment. And that brings us back full circle to the beginning: to our prayer service. ■

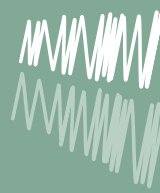
Note

1 For a key to the abbreviations used, please see page 18

- This translation by Aart Plug, March 2010.
- Photography: P.G.B. de Vries

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