

# LuxMundi 29

No 3 September 2010

Published quarterly by the Committee  
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# Editorial

This past spring the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) met in synod and this past summer the United Reformed Churches (URC) met in synod. As the CanRC and URC look to merge into one bond of churches, these synods were critical. For the merger talks were stalling. Would a merger prove an impossible dream?



The CanRC are convinced a merger is not impossible. Assembled in synod, they took the somewhat unusual step of writing the URC a passionate appeal. The CanRC are convinced a merger is mandated, for they wrote:

*"It is thus our calling as churches of Christ not only to recognize the unity that exists, but also to express this unity in concrete and discernible ways. We should let the world know and see that we are one. Besides the fact that this is our calling, we also believe that it is not by accident that the Lord has caused our paths to cross and to come this far on the road of church unity. Obviously He sees that we would benefit from one another."*

As to what such benefits might be, the letter continues:

*"As a relatively new federation, we can benefit from your drive, enthusiasm and boldness to take the Reformed faith into new areas and places as evidenced by your numerous church plants. We can learn from your doctrinal struggles. We can learn from your deeper understanding of our North American culture and how best to meet its challenges. At the same time we may have a few beneficial things to offer you in the areas of federation building, church polity and foreign missions."*

Delegates from the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken attend General Synod 2009 (Amersfoort-Centrum) of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland.

Photo P.G.B. de Vries



The CanRC are not ready to give up: *"In conclusion, brothers, we would appeal to you not to place the unity discussion on hold or to terminate them. We fully realize that the road ahead is still filled with a number of challenges, but we would remind you that much has already been achieved."*

## Not convinced

The URC are not so convinced a merger is possible. The official press release describes the URC position as follows:

*"Synod explicitly reaffirmed without dissent our conviction that the Canadian Reformed Churches are a federation of true faithful churches of Christ, whom we love and respect as fellow-workers in the kingdom. Synod encourages the churches to facilitate further opportunities for our churches to interact with Canadian Reformed Churches."*

That seems positive enough. However, the URC decisions on the various joint committees working on practical sides to the merger are telling. Much was left rather open-ended. Work continues on the Proposed Joint Church Order, though it had been presented as a more or less final product. Theological Education, which has proven to be the most difficult issue, is back to the brain-storm stage. Finally, the URC concluded the mandate of the Songbook Committee to work on a Common Songbook with the CanRC.

The courtship is ending. While the CanRC is still focused on marriage, the URC position, as an official CanRC delegate to the URC synod has written, seems to be 'let's just be friends'.

The focus for unity between the CanRC and the URC has been pushed to the backburner in the context of church federations. It's now a local issue. This itself is a problem, as the CanRC are concentrated in Canada, while less than half of the URCs are found there. In a sense, URCs in Canada are now in a bind: should association with local CanRCs or with the geographically more distant American URCs have the priority?

## Déjà vu

I have a sense of *déjà vu*. Between the summers of 1999 and 2009, I served as a minister in the Gereformeerde Kerken in The Netherlands. They

## Farewell and Thank You



**W**ith this issue, the editorial committee of *Lux Mundi* says farewell to its editor-in-chief, Paul Waterval. Paul has served the magazine since 2006.

In this past summer, he was called to another task. The Gereformeerde Kerk of Amersfoort-West called him as missionary pastor for Grace Church. This is an international, multicultural church in Amersfoort that was established by classis in 2008, to proclaim the Gospel to all foreigners living in the city.

We pray that for Paul, the coming period will be blessed and fruitful. It will also be one of some uncertainty. His ministry in the congregation will take up 50% of his time; for the remainder he will have to find other ways of generating an income.

We thank Paul for the time and effort he has put into *Lux Mundi*. We lose a dedicated colleague. His academic qualifications are a rather unique combination of theology and English language and literature, and this made him the ideal person for the task.

*The editors*

are in the process of merging with the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken. There too, the focus for unity in the context of church federations has been pushed to the backburner. It has become a local issue.

In Holland, the impasse was reached several few years ago. Thus, when it comes to unity being pursued primarily in the local setting, there's been some experience. The picture that is emerging is checkered. In some places there is total co-operation, even congregations that merge or at least share the services of a minister. In other places there is total lack of co-operation. And where the local setting does not have a CGK or GKv, out of sight seems to imply out of mind.

I also note that the issue of mergers not happening is not just a phenomenon of Reformed Churches with a Dutch background. The Presbyterian Church in America and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church have attempted it twice during the 1980s. Both times it failed. Yet they continue to recognize each other, to the point of many joint activities. Should organizational unity be a priority? Or is mutual recognition sufficient? It seems that churches are by default opting to acquiesce in denominationalism. The PCA has even adopted it into their church order (BCO 2-2). Are we, by default, not creating theological enclaves and preventing the exercise of that most Biblical principle of church polity: accountability?

*By schisms rent asunder*, sings a hymn. There are schisms that need to take place, for the sake of God's truth. However, there are also divisions among those that are truly God's people. Can we rest comfortably while this is so? ■

For further information see [www.canrc.org](http://www.canrc.org) and [www.urchna.org](http://www.urchna.org).

### **The Canadian Reformed Churches**

*The Canadian Reformed Churches were formed during the 1950's by immigrants from The Netherlands, after the Christian Reformed Church refused to recognize the legitimacy of the Liberation of 1944 and after the Protestant Reformed Churches adopted the Declaration of Principles.*

*The United Reformed Churches were formed in 1996, after the Christian Reformed Church allowed for the ordination of women.*

# How Serious is a Second Baptism? (2)

In the first instalment<sup>1</sup> I pointed out that some church members desire a conscious experience of their baptism; having been baptised as infants already, they undergo a second baptism elsewhere. This evokes a range of emotions, and also raises a number of theological questions. For instance, the difference between the old and the new covenant is important.



Doesn't this difference justify the disappearance of circumcision, and can it really be shown from Scripture that baptism has become the sign of the new covenant? Doesn't the New Testament show that it was adults who were baptised, and then only after they professed their faith? If that is so, then you need compelling arguments to advocate infant baptism, especially since the New Testament does not mention it at all.

## What is the dilemma?

Up till now, we have used the terms 'infant baptism' and 'adult baptism'. This does not help to clarify what the problem is. For in most churches that strongly defend infant baptism, adults are baptised when they join the church (if they had not already been baptised elsewhere), and in mission areas adult baptism is the rule rather than the exception. The dilemma is not between *infant* and *adult* baptism. The real issue concerns the underlying views on baptism.

The defence of infant baptism is chiefly based on the concept of the covenant. Baptism is understood to be a sign and seal of the covenant; that is why all children ought to be baptised. Baptism is also a seal of one's *entry* into the covenant. This covenant is eternal, and cannot be broken. It follows, then, that a person can only enter once into this covenant. Baptism, therefore, is an infant baptism, once and for all, based on the notion of the covenant. For proponents of adult baptism, on the other hand, the primary connection is between baptism and the faith of the one who is baptised.

This is not to say, however, that faith does not play a role with defenders of infant baptism, nor that

proponents of adult baptism see no place for the covenant. Still, the difference of view concerning the moment of baptism is grounded chiefly in the dilemma between covenant and faith.

This also is an indicator of the depth of this difference. If this was no more than a simple disagreement concerning the moment of baptism, it could probably be shrugged off. But when we highlight the background to this disagreement, then we encounter profound differences of view: faith and covenant. The dilemma, therefore, is between 'covenant baptism' and the 'baptism of faith'<sup>2</sup> From now on, in the interests of clarity, this is the terminology we will use. In Baptist and 'evangelical' circles, baptism is dependent on the faith of the one who is baptised. Such a baptism can be characterised as a 'baptism of faith'. This is a pivotal point. In any discussion, the problem needs to be clearly defined. Lack of clarity in terminology often leads to a confused discussion. And for this topic, the right words may sometimes be hard to find.

It is clear enough that proponents of infant baptism base their argument on the covenant. It is equally clear that defenders of adult baptism take faith as their starting point. It is not so clear what precisely the role of faith is. For some, faith is the basis for baptism; for others, it is little more than the precursor. Still others just say: "there has to be faith", without any further indication of the role of faith. Hence my formulation: 'faith as the starting point for baptism'. I believe that by highlighting 'covenant baptism' as distinct from 'baptism of faith', the key issue is best described.

## May we or must we?

In this connection, there is one important question to answer: *must* children of believing parents (for it is these children we are talking about) be baptised, or *may* they be baptised? Often, a plea is made to retain infant baptism as an *option*, but not to *require* it of parents who are members of the church. The Heidelberg Catechism leaves no room for this freedom: children *ought* to be baptised (Lord's Day 27, q&a 74). In the classic *Form for Baptism* used in churches with a Dutch Reformed background, parents agree that their child 'ought

## About the author:

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Photo P.G.B. de Vries

to be baptised' (1<sup>st</sup> question). Those who do not baptise their child are subject to church discipline. Parents who withhold the one sacrament from their child will not be able to just participate in the other sacrament. Whoever persistently errs in *doctrine* or life must be withheld from the Lord's Supper.

### The covenant

In this discussion, there are two different approaches to the covenant. Those who defend infant baptism take the covenant as their starting point. Particular emphasis is placed on the continuity between circumcision and baptism as a sign of entry into and continued membership of the covenant: baptism is regarded as having taken the place of circumcision. Those who argue for adult baptism usually do not deny the importance of the covenant. Those who believe (together with their children) have been *included* in God's covenant. In their view, however, baptism plays no role in anyone's *entry* into the covenant. Let us, therefore, trace the role that the covenant plays in Scripture, and the connection between covenant and baptism, if indeed there is such a connection.

### The covenant of grace

Whenever 'the covenant' comes up in discussions about baptism, a special covenant is meant: the covenant between God and people, in which He does not account their guilt and sin to them – the covenant of grace. In this discussion, the covenant God made with Noah, and agreements between people (such as the one between Jacob and Laban) can be left out of the picture. What we are talking about is the *bond* between God and man, which after the fall, by the grace of God, is again possible. It is important to keep this notion of a 'bond' in mind when thinking about the covenant.<sup>3</sup> God has given a Redeemer, who has paid for the guilt

of mankind. His work God graciously imputes to people. They stand with Him in a covenant relationship. God wants this to be a real covenant, and expects that people will behave as real partners in this covenant.

The first time this covenant of grace is explicitly mentioned is in Genesis 15. Here, God shows that He has chosen Abram to stand in this covenant relationship with Him. In Genesis 17, God adds a sign to this covenant: all male members of the covenant are to be circumcised.<sup>4</sup> On the eighth day of their lives, this already needs to be brought home to them. This circumcision functions as a seal of their membership in the covenant. This is not a point of dispute between defenders and opponents of 'covenant baptism' on the one hand, or 'the baptism of faith' on the other.

### The covenant broken

The covenant of grace has been instituted by God as an eternal covenant (Genesis 17:7; Psalm 105:8ff; Psalm 111:8)<sup>5</sup>. In practice, this covenant frequently falls apart. Already at its beginning God takes this into account: whoever refuses to be circumcised has *broken My covenant* (Genesis 17:14). Whoever fails to keep God's commands does the same (Leviticus 26:15; Psalm 78:10). In so doing, the people lose their position as His covenant people, and are regarded as any of the other nations (Jeremiah 7:25ff). Still, from God's side, the covenant does not come to an end. He will never break it (Judges 2:1). If, after breaking the covenant, God's people turn to Him in repentance, He will remember the covenant (which the people had broken from their side, Leviticus 26:14-45). Time and again, the covenant is the reason why the Lord rescues them from the misery into which they, by breaking the covenant, had plunged themselves (Deuteronomy 4:31; Judges 2:1,2; 2 Corinthians 13:23; Psalm 106:44ff; Ezekiel 16:6off, cf Ezekiel 20:37)<sup>6</sup>. Truly, the covenant is eternal.

## The new covenant

Man may often break the covenant; God upholds it. At such times, it may not function as a covenant, but it is still there. Still, there is such a thing as a *new* covenant. This new covenant is promised already in Jeremiah 31:31-34 (see also Hebrews 8:7-19). There was a need for a new covenant, for God's people had broken the old one, and were unable to keep it. The bond between God and people would have disappeared if God had not provided a new covenant, one with better promises. The characteristics of this new covenant are: its laws are written in its members' hearts; God is a God to them, and they are His people; from the least to the greatest, they will know God fully; and He will forgive their sins. This is also called the covenant of the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:6-18), for the Spirit is the gift of the new covenant. This 'new covenant' is first spoken of when Christ institutes His Holy Supper (Luke 22:20).

## The relationship

This aspect of the topic needs some attention, for some take the position that the new covenant has replaced the old, and that therefore baptism could not have taken the place of circumcision. This argument, however, does not go to the heart of the matter, for even if the unity of the old and the new covenants could be shown, that does not necessarily imply that the sign of the covenant itself was not simply abolished.

Still, let's pay some attention to the relationship between the old and the new covenant. It is clear that there is unity between the *promise* of the old and the new covenant (compare, for example, Jeremiah 33:31 with Genesis 17:7) and between the *gift* of the old and the new (the Spirit, see Isaiah 44:3 and Acts 2:16ff). The new covenant gives new radiance to the old (it tears away the veil covering the old covenant, 2 Corinthians 3:14). In the new covenant, *the* covenant, the ancient covenant God made with mankind, reaches its full bloom<sup>7</sup>. The argument that a new covenant by definition abolishes the sign of the old is not valid; but its continuation has not been proved either. Since a great deal has changed with the transition from the old covenant to the new, such change might also include the abolition of the sign of the covenant.

In the next instalment of this article, we will trace the development of the new covenant. We will focus on Matthew 28:19, where Christ, just before His ascension, sets out His mission command and

institutes the sacrament of baptism. We will see how the new covenant stands in continuity with and fulfilment of the covenant once made with Abraham, and we will examine its implications for the place and role of baptism in the New Testament church. ■

### Notes:

1. This is the second in a series of four articles 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)).
2. This translation by Aart Plug, June 2010, by arrangement with the author.
3. Translator's note: The Dutch original of this article has *verbondsdoop* ('covenant baptism') and *geloofsdoop* (literally 'faith baptism') respectively.
4. Translator's note: This connection comes out much more clearly in the Dutch, where the words for 'covenant' and 'bond' are '*verbond*' and '*verbondenheid*' respectively.
5. A fascinating study can be made of the role circumcision played within Israel, and the reasons why God chose this sign. This is not the time and place to elaborate, but a broader discussion can be found in my *Doop en Kerk. De erkenning, door kerkelijke gemeenschappen, van de elders bediende doop*, Heerenveen, 2007, pp 279-312.
6. The Hebrew word '*olaam*' is not always used in the sense of 'eternal' as in 'time unending'. In this text, however, it does have that meaning (see my *Doop en Kerk*, p293ff).
7. *Doop en Kerk*, pp 299-305.
8. *Doop en Kerk*, p. 237ff.

# Revelation: why, how and when?

“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw...” (Rev 1:1,2). Here we have the title of the last book of the Biblical canon. What does this title tell us about the revelation which came to John on the island of Patmos? This is a reflection on the why, how and when of a Bible book, which uncovers as much as it conceals.



## A chain of revelation?

A popular approach to understanding the title of the book of Revelation, one which is followed in many commentaries (for instance, that of Van de Kamp), is that of a *chain of revelation*. This approach takes the view that the knowledge of divine revelation has been passed on successively as follows: God – Jesus Christ – his angel – his servant John – his servants.

In the Greek, however, the two main verbs in the first sentence are grammatically in apposition: both of them have God as their subject (*edooken... ho Theos... kai esèmanen*). This is consistent with the theocentric perspective of the whole book. The commonly accepted interpretation requires that halfway through the sentence, the subject changes; the angel, then, is understood to be a servant of Jesus Christ<sup>2</sup>. In the parallel text at the end of Revelation, however, we read that God has “sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place” (ch 22:6)<sup>3</sup>.

The phrases ‘his servant John’ and ‘his servants’, also, must be understood with reference to God, for throughout Revelation we read about the ‘servants of God’ (ch 7:3; 19:2,5; 22:3,6; compare *sundoloi*, ch 6:11). It is clear enough that ‘his servants’ are not servants of John. God is the One who is served in faith and obedience by John as well as his readers. ‘He’ (ch 1:1b) must refer to God Himself. God, through his angel, has made this revelation known to John.

Lietaart Peerbolte, correctly beginning with God as the subject, identifies ‘the angel’ in this presumed chain with Jesus Christ. It is God who, by way of his divine messenger Jesus Christ, allows John to see something of the secret of how things really are.<sup>4</sup> The chain of revelation is understood, then, to have one chain less.

In this construction, however, the word ‘angel’ is simply understood as ‘messenger’, while in no other book of Scripture there are so many angels as in Revelation. It seems most likely simply to think of a real angel of God, distinct from Jesus Christ. After all, elsewhere in this book, angels are only fellow-servants of John (ch 19:10; 22:9), while the exalted Christ, the Lamb of God, is in every way superior. Here, the angel is probably a so-called interpreting angel (*angelus interpres*) such as those who play a mediating role in the visions of Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah, an angel whose task is to lead the seer by the hand, as it were, through the whole succession of visions.

## The great Initiator

The notion of a ‘chain of revelation’, therefore, does not seem to be especially helpful as a means to understanding the title of the book of Revelation. Instead, it might be better to envisage God as the great Initiator, and that in two ways: first with regard to the *source* and the *destination* of this revelation; then also in regard to its *mediation* and *proclamation*. The first aspect is that of ‘why’, the second that of ‘how’.

The schematic summary below may help to illustrate this. The overarching thought is that God takes the initiative to unfold the near future. The left-hand column shows that God gave his revelation to Jesus Christ, with the intention of showing God’s servants what must soon take place. The right-hand column shows that this was realised by sending an interpreting angel to John, one of God’s servants, to show him what must soon take place.

The revelation, which God	
gave	by sending
him (Jesus Christ)	his angel
to show	made known
his servants	to his servant John
what must soon take place	

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### 'Soon': four possibilities

The word 'soon' (*en tachei*) carries in it the urgency of the book of Revelation. A decisive moment has arrived. Everyone must give ear, without delay, to what this book says, for the time is near (*ho gar kairos engus*: ch1:3; 22:10)! This word 'soon' raises the question how the book of Revelation ought to be interpreted. In broad terms, there have been four different approaches:<sup>5</sup>

1. The *preterist* (belonging to the past) view: Revelation relates exclusively to John's own time; the book describes, in a prophetic manner, the situation of the Christian Church in the first century AD.
2. The *historical* view: Revelation relates to the entire Christian era; the book describes the situation of the Christian Church between Christ's ascension and his return.
3. The *futurist* view: From chapter 4 onwards, at least, Revelation relates exclusively to the end-time; the book describes events which are still to take place.
4. The *idealist* view: Revelation describes in symbolic terms the struggle between good and evil; the book has no direct relationship with historical events, neither in the past nor in the future.

While in our time the first view is the one most commonly taken, the promises of the book of Revelation extend well beyond the first century AD: beyond the horizon of time we see a whole new world order appear, in which the New Jerusalem – heaven on earth – will realise the old ideal of an eschatological 'city of God'.

The problem of the second view, which builds on Augustine's conception of the 'millennium' in Rev 20 as period between Christ's ascension and His return, is that it is often difficult to make a direct connection with historical events. Augustine lived in the first millennium, but every historical period has its own characteristic features.

The third view, popular among all kinds of dispensationalists<sup>6</sup>, fails to do justice to the prophetic significance of Revelation for every age; moreover, it is strongly oriented to Western culture and history.

The fourth view does not account for the moment of recognition the first readers would have had: the seven churches of Asia Minor. In a more general sense, it deprives the book of Revelation of its concrete relevance for all time.

In short, none of these four perspectives does full justice to the significance of this extraordinary book.

### A redemptive-historical approach

The command to 'write' found in Revelation 1 might serve as the key to unlock the whole book: "Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later" (ch 1:19, with a repetition of the command already given in vs 11).

The expression 'what you have seen' encompasses the entire content of the book of Revelation; it is followed by a two-fold elaboration: 'what is now' and 'what will take place later'. There are two aspects to the whole: John is shown something that throws light on both the present and the future. 'What is now' cannot be separated from 'what will take place later'. Both aspects of the one reality are described.<sup>7</sup>

If in this way do justice to the prophetic-apocalyptic character of Revelation, throwing light on both present and future, it becomes possible to bring together elements of truth which are present in all four of the views outlined above. In this way, we arrive at an interpretation that could be called *redemptive-historical*.

Proceeding from the first-century historical situation in which the Christians in Asia Minor lived, John was given an overview, in one glance, of how the church of Jesus Christ will grow and develop; how it is involved in the global conflict between good and evil, a conflict which escalates as the end-time approaches.

John's book has become a guide which, in a manner similar to the interpreting angel of the visions, guides Christian readers of all ages through all the facts and events of this world into the Kingdom of God.

The courage-inspiring perspective held before them on their way is the victory of the Lamb. Christians, especially in times of trial and oppression, must focus all their hope on him. From the beginning to the end, Revelation tells us, Jesus Christ is the one who testifies to these things (ch 1:2; 22:20).

Near the end of the book, Christ himself speaks: "I am coming soon", and John responds with a believing Amen. It speaks to every reader and listener, whose response in turn encapsulates their Christian expectation for the future: "Come, Lord Jesus!" (ch 22:20). ■

#### Notes:

- 1 H.R. van de Kamp, *Openbaring. Profetie vanaf Patmos* (Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament; Kampen: Kok, 2000), 47-49.
- 2 David Aune, *Revelation 1-5* (Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, 1997), 15: "The subject of the verb... is ambiguous; it could be either God



## Three Decades of Service... ...and a Conference to Show Gratitude

**Back in 1981, Cornelis Van Dam, a young pastor from Surrey, British Columbia, began teaching the Old Testament subjects at the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. At that time the Theological College itself was still in its youth. Classes were taught in a large manor which had been conscripted into service as a seminary.**

Some aspects of that building were less than ideal. However, Van Dam and his colleagues, along with their students, made the best of it. Times have changed. In 1985 the Theological College, now called the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary, moved into more spacious accommodations. Modern, new library facilities were built in 2000. Over time new faculty members arrived; others stopped teaching due to retirement or sickness. For the past 29 years, though, one thing has remained constant at the seminary: the presence of Dr. C. Van Dam, faithfully and joyfully teaching the Old Testament subjects.

Yet, as the Preacher says, “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven” (Eccl. 3:1). At the seminary in Hamilton the time of Dr. Van Dam’s retirement is swiftly approaching. During the 2010-2011 academic year, he will still teach one course for one semester, but for the rest he will be on sabbatical. His successor, Dr. Jannes Smith, is already in the classroom. And at the end of this academic year he will officially retire.

In order to honour him and thank him for his three decades of service at the seminary, a festschrift is being prepared by a group of his colleagues and former students. It will be published, the Lord willing, in 2011 with the title, *Living Waters from Ancient Streams*. In addition, some of the contributors to this book will be presenting their research at a full-day conference slated for January 7, 2010. The line up of speakers and their topics will be:

- Dr G. Kwakkel – *The Exodus Narrative and the Sinaitic Covenant*
- Dr A. Wolters – *Wordplay and History in Daniel 5*
- Dr J. Visscher – *Bavinck on Creation*
- Dr N. Kloosterman – *Old Testament, Ethics, and Preaching*

Faculty at the seminary will respond to each of these presentations and there will ample opportunity for discussion. More information about this conference can be found at the seminary’s website, as soon as it’s up and running: [www.canadianreformedseminary.ca](http://www.canadianreformedseminary.ca). In honouring Dr. Cornelis Van Dam, both we and he, wish to give all glory and gratitude to our Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for without his constant guidance and blessings, none of this would have been possible.

or Jesus Christ, though the latter is logically more probable since the revelation was transmitted by God to Jesus Christ, and it must be Jesus Christ who then further communicates the revelation”.

- 3 This does not exclude, of course, that Jesus could send an angel (Rev 22:16). Still, Jesus Himself usually spoke of angels of God or angels from heaven. Zahn argues that without some kind of prior clarification, not one reader would be able to understand what ‘an angel of Jesus’ might mean. (Theodor Zahn, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*. Erste Hälfte Kap. 1-5 mit ausführlicher Einleitung [Kommentar zum Neuen Testament; Leipzig: A. Deichertsche Verlangsbuchhandlung, 1924], 146).
- 4 Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte, “Het boek Openbaring als visionaire brief,” *Schrift* 201 (2002): 96-98.
- 5 I follow the classic division given by Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957; reprinted 1980). A brief summary of the history of interpretation of the book of Revelation can be found in Gerhard Maier, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*. Kapitel 1-11 (Historisch-Theologische Auslegung; Brunnen: Brockhaus, 2009), 59-76.
- 6 Worked out and defended by WJ Ouweneel, *De Openbaring van Jezus Christus*. Bijbelstudies over het boek Openbaring (Vaassen: Medema, 1988), 38-49. In his view, the seven letters in Rev 2 and 3 represent seven successive periods in the history of the church (Ephesus: the apostolic period; Smyrna: the time of the martyrs; Pergamum: the period of the state church; Thyatira: the Middle Ages, with Rome as the world church; Sardis: the time of the Reformation; Philadelphia: the greater revival of the 19th century; Laodicea: the apostasy of the major churches from beginning in the 20th century).
- 7 For the interpretation of Ch 1:19 see also: Van de Kamp, *Openbaring*, 84-86; J. de Vuyst, *De Openbaring van Johannes* (Kampen: Kok, 1987), 27-28).

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

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

# On our way to the Third Stage of Christianity (2)

World Christianity is about to change. Most Christians no longer live in the West (Europe / North America) but in Latin America, Africa and Asia. A Third Christianity is emerging: with an emphasis on the senses, healing, vision, prophecies, powerful revelations in dreams, spontaneity and creativity. Is that our perspective too?



Also, new religious movements are gaining ground: Reiki, Therapeutic Touch, New Age, using singing bowls, incense, music vibrations and alternative healing methods. In both developments we can recognize the same religious undercurrent, *primal religion*.

## Primal religion's contribution

First let us recapitulate. Primal religion is characterized by six elements:

1. a sense of affiliation of man to the whole of nature
2. the need for *power*
3. an animated universe of, among other things, ancestral spirits
4. a relationship between the spirit world and blessing and curse
5. participation of 'living dead' ancestors in the here and now
6. a 'sacramental universe': rites, sacrifices and symbols influence the universe, for better or for worse.

Bediako states that this *primal religion* can enrich Christianity, yes even fundamentally change it, for example in the

- recognition of ambivalent powers in the spirit world, including those of (quarrelling) ancestors as 'living dead'.
- awareness that both God and man stand at the heart of religion, because God is close to man and will never let him down, Acts 17:27.
- recognition that the mystery of Christmas enables God and man (all humanity) to dwell *together*, and that in this way all men are saved, Rev. 21:3,
- the principle of 'vital participation': the church as the body of Christ is, together with Him, part of the divine nature, 2 Peter 1:4, and gains admittance to the divine *power* via conversations with Moses, Elijah, Jesus, and others.

With these and other elements, *primal religion* can rescue Christianity from her dualistic way of thinking, return her vital *power* and reinstate the unity of theology and spirituality.

## Evaluation

This plea for *primal religion* as the rescuer of Christian faith is not the vacuous remark of an African religious craftsman. On the contrary, aspects such as 1. experience of the *unity* of the (divine) universe, 2. recognition of *magical influence* through rituals, 3. *legitimacy* of seeking contact with the dead, 4. *mystical* incorporation into the higher world – all these come to the surface in the worlds of literature, TV (e.g. 'Char, the medium', (horror) movies and MTV- music. These phenomena cannot be brushed aside with an embarrassed smile. In seven points I now hope to explain the radical difference between *primal religion* and the Christian faith.

### 1. Highest god

*A priori* the question is whether (all) African religions even have a 'highest god'. There is reason to believe that such a god only came into being through contact with Christianity. So much so that *primal* elements were incorporated into the image of God. Better stated: the biblical God was altered through encapsulation into *primal religion*. In so doing, a legitimate space was created for syncretism and manipulation in doctrine, church, and life. Also, new room was created for fundamental distrust directed against God.

The highest god (he, she or it?) is bound by habitation to a clan or tribe. Most likely he is the oldest forefather. It is therefore not a question of sovereign, electing love. He has no universal pretensions or missionary task. At most he is creator of the tribal ground of the clan. Possibly he has a wife and children, with all the imaginable conflicts this brings, just as on earth.

The tribal leaders do not need him in their daily lives. They handle problems with the help of the ancestors, spirits and powers. In the utmost desperation they might appeal to him, but with no certainty of being heard. He has never made any promises. Essentially he is far away and unavailable

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for comfort - as is the case with the highest god of the neighbouring tribe. For there is a whole pantheon of highest gods, each limited by tribal boundaries, usually lonely, often forgotten behind the horizons of time.

The biblical God is unique, a trinity, a perfect harmony of three persons. He is sovereign, has omnipotent power over the course of world history and challenges the fundamental rights of other gods. He is not chained to Israel, but created him and chose him above all other peoples out of love. He has compassion towards this world. He draws up a plan of redemption and is executing it along the road of covenant history, with His Son Jesus Christ as Mediator and Redeemer. He invites believers to live with Him in love, in a world of justice, truth, goodness, beauty and love.

The first three commandments and the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer furiously resist any assimilation between *primal views* and the Christian faith. Any such assimilation would be a reproach against the faithfulness of the one true God, as revealed in Christ.

## **2. World and universe**

In *primal religion* the world/universe is inhabited by spirits, gods, ancestors and *powers*. This spirit world is an ambivalent whole, uncontrollable, even by the highest god. This haphazard and fickle cosmos puts fear into the hearts of the people. There is no reason systematically to research the universe, the world and nature, for only through charms, rituals, sacrifices and prayers can one attempt to alter the course of history. This belief is the cause of a passive approach to the world and to life.

The Bible teaches us that the universe is inhabited by angels, spirits, and powers. This is the invisible world, created by God. Indeed, Western Christianity has lost this concept, yet that does not drive us into the arms of *primal religion* but should open our eyes to God's works in the universe. All is under His authorization, even the business of the angels, yes even of the devil himself. At the same time, we realize that the struggle between good and evil in the Bible is thousands of times more grim than in *primal religion*. The Bible teaches us that the devil wants to thrust God from His throne. Such a scenario is more serious by far than any mythical horrors. The very existence of heaven and earth are at stake. It is God Himself who takes action and is victorious in Jesus Christ. Christmas, cross and resurrection are the landmarks of the steady advance of God's Kingdom.

## **3. Man**

The position of man in *primal religion* is unclear. What identity does he have? What mission, expectation, goals? He hardly knows his way in the world, and there is no covenant with the highest god, no calling to love the godhead and receive forgiveness of sins. On the contrary, he is actually the god's superior. By manipulation he can induce the highest god to help him. There is talk of the guilt (maybe even sin) of others, but never of oneself.

The Bible portrays man as in God's image, originally good, but thoroughly corrupted because of the fall into sin. The world was turned upside down. In spite of that, God promises that He will dwell in peace with man, to the glory of His Name. So man stands before God to live *coram Deo* and to proclaim His Name through all time and to all the ends of the earth.

## **4. History and time**

The *primal religion* has no knowledge whatsoever of redemptive history. The incarnation did not *take place*, but is a revelation of the status quo. God does not *come* close (at Christmas), in historical fulfilment of his promises, but apparently was already always close. Christmas only lifts the veil of the hidden true state of things. While this 'closeness' is indeed seen by Bediako as a correction of *primal religion*, it still does not bring about a silent awe of the miracle of the Son of God who became man, right then and there.

Contrary to the linear timeline of Old and New Testament, *primal religion* has a cyclical concept of time. Everything just 'potters' on. What has been always returns. There is no escaping the circle of life. Eternal repetition, without rest, without goal. This *vision* leads to apathy, passivity, hopelessness. Scope for the coming of the kingdom of God is squeezed out by the longing for a return of the mythical genesis of the tribe.

## **5. Redeemer and redemption**

Near to this never-fulfilled view of history lies the *primal view* on redemption. Deep down there is no sin: only misunderstanding or bad luck at worst. When life on earth is moving on in prosperity then all comes full circle. It is a superficial vision, in which all is transpiring smoothly, in spite of the cries of grief and misery. For man can still do so much himself, can't he? There is no ultimate sin, no blasphemy of God's Name. No eternal punishment. Therefore man needs no grace, no redeemer, no loving mediator, no atonement at the cross and no mediator in heaven.

Certainly there are all kinds of mediators in the primal vision – a whole 'ladder' of deceased ancestors that climb up to the highest rank via a hierarchical system. If someone calls upon his deceased family member, the ancestor will make them listen "higher up" – for they are family, after all. Nevertheless, you have no promises to rely on. You cannot close the prayer with an 'amen'. The *primal religion* is interested not in setting free from guilt, but in *power* that will cover up *shame*.

### **6. Death and resurrection**

In all grief, death is not the ultimate problem. You are gathered unto the forefathers – at least, if the burial ritual is correctly carried out. You might even cause some adversity and disaster to befall your family on earth so that they will not forget you. Whatever the case, there is a general/universal atonement. To Bediako, the incarnation of the Word means that God accepts and redeems all people.

The Bible does contain some hidden mysteries concerning death and resurrection. Yet we know that the dead in Christ are with Him, and that all the deceased are being preserved for the Day of the Lord. Where and how? We do not know. Is communication with the deceased possible? All the Bible says is that such communication is forbidden, which does suggest that it is possible.

We know that the faithful in heaven feel for the church on earth. They plead for shortening of the time she has left here. There are a few hymns that sing about the "triumphant and struggling" church. More attention to this can help us to resist the temptation of *primal vision*. At the same time, we should arrive at a greater realization that God's ultimate goal is not to have souls in heaven, but real physical people living on the (new) earth. In *primal religion* there is no victory perspective like the one the Bible portrays in the resurrection of Christ, 1 Cor. 15:32-34. This 'earthly dispensation' of the Gospel is much more deeply anchored than in the *primal religion*. The latter does not get beyond a replay of earlier golden ages. God's new world far exceeds the first paradise: no longer susceptible to sin, we will be lovingly dedicated to glorifying God.

### **7. Church and sacraments**

The clan itself is the church. Natural relationships dictate the action radius of salvation. In a certain way, even 'faith' is unnecessary, for you are always part of the clan and tribe, in blessing and in curse. But this 'church' has no mission. Imagine sharing welfare and salvation with others...you would be

selling yourself short! All must bow to the needs of the tribe. To break with the tribe is to saw off the (life) branch you are sitting on. So there will always be tribalism and tribal wars, right up into the church. At the other extent, there is no need for (church) discipline. However cunningly achieved, each tribal member receives a permanent position amongst the fellow tribal members.

The (holy) symbols and rituals are the levers of the machinery of our existence. Simply by using them, they work towards your welfare, *ex opere operato*. In this way *primal religion* has made her entrance into the church. The water, bread, and wine are loaded with divine magical energy. You can take it home with you, treat your sick with it, sprinkle your field with it – you will see that it really helps...*I think not*.

The Bible teaches us to see the church as the miracle of grace, the gathering of those who expect their salvation from Christ alone. Believers with their children, who, if need be, break with their tribes and earthly family for the sake of Christ. A gathering that is really connected to the church of all ages, places and all nations; that with its confession of faith draws a line between church and world; that worships Christ as the only redeemer, child of Christmas, atoner on the cross, conqueror of the devil and of death.

### **Conclusion**

The study of the case of *primal religion* is much more than collecting information about the religion and the difficulties of third world churches. There is great reason to treat the advertising folders, the therapeutic offers, the amazing documentaries and the truly occult literature with suspicion. Maybe even more: to mistrust the tendency towards new revelations, prophecies, spectacular healings, transcendent mediation, prayer sessions where you listen to your 'inner self' amongst softly glowing candles, vibrating music and the endless repetition of murmured Scripture verses.

There is no stronger resistance against magic and mysticism than a thorough celebration of the Christian festivals, starting with Christmas. God's Son became man, true man, in *this world, this history, this* deeply sinful world, with the light of grace...heavenly glory. ■

# Looking at original sin together with others (3)

In part two of this article we stated that our sinful nature works through the structures of our being. When tracing original or inherited sin along the structures in which God created us, the mystery surrounding it just melts away. We no longer need feel embarrassment and complain about the difficulty of the subject. We can learn to apply this doctrine to the reality in which we live.



In this we stand alongside the people around us who do not believe. Last time we remarked on how the awareness of the connection between all people in their misery and failure is widely spread in our society. There is a general opinion of the equality of all people: equal value (that might even be called a secular confession) but also equal deficit – the ‘human condition’.

## Pride

However, that awareness is not as natural as it appears. In truth, it is primitively human to consider oneself superior to others. It is a stubborn inclination that manifests itself throughout all human history. The moment tribes called themselves human they considered other tribes to be less than that. The Greek regarded foreign peoples as ‘barbarians.’ Whites have denied that Negroes had a soul. Aryans were seen as better humans and Jews as inferior. Man is by nature tribal.

Even the Enlightenment, with equality and brotherhood in its banner, is in fact full of such sentiments since it considered people from the past to have been primitive, cramped, stuffy, old-fashioned and backward. ‘We know better. They lived in the dark; with us the light is breaking through’. Today we see an offshoot of this in the contemporary common scorn for religion, expressed in accusative terms like ‘fundamentalism’ and ‘exclusivists’.

## Muslims

It is not easy to apply the confession of ‘the common inclination towards evil’ consistently. Long after the German occupation, the categorization

into ‘good’ and ‘evil’ prevailed. People who had suffered in the war did not want to know that there were also prisoners in the concentration camps who oppressed or stole from their fellow prisoners, or that people of the resistance often argued amongst each other, and deeds of resistance were sometimes inspired by motives that were less than noble, not to say downright egotistical. .

Today also, the concept of equality is being threatened. When people become afraid, they easily cramp up into ‘us-against-them’ thinking. For a long time, besides being compassionate towards asylum seekers, an open attitude towards Islam was also an expression of enlightened broadmindedness, in marked opposition to ‘cramped’ orthodox Christianity. Since ‘9-11’, however, a new wave of aversion is moving through our society, not only among PVV (*a far-right nationalist party in the Netherlands -ed.*) sympathizers but also among intellectuals. And the church is not immune to it either.

The Christian confession of original sin offers a stable basis for a well-balanced Christian attitude towards Muslims. On the one hand, we are by nature inclined towards dislike and hate – both we and they. Neighbourly love is not so naive as to be blind to that. On the other hand, however, there is for those people too the love of Christ, which we have received.

## Human deficiency

More generally speaking, our confession of original sin is a solid starting point if, in our associations with non-Christians, we face up to the fact of human deficiency. We have sunk deep. How is this possible?! Yes, that is how we are. There is but one way to rise up out of this. Yet there is a way! Together with our fellow human beings we can scientifically analyse and creatively portray how we as humans are connected in misery. The connection is present at all levels, in all structures of our existence: genetics, background, responsibility... everything. You can reach out and touch it, so to speak.

Just to be clear: I do not thereby mean that we must accept without criticism all that is portrayed to us in this area. It is, for example, very common to bring

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the human moral deficiency into connection with the lower nature of man – with his evolutionary origin. We do not accept that. Yet we do enter into the discussion about human deficiency, making use of information and means of expression that are commonly accessible to people: relationships between parents and children, history, influences, art. In the same way we, as Christians, take part in the public debate.

At the same time, we do not join in the sensational style in which misery is often expressed, or the lustful atmosphere, or the melancholy or cynical approach. We also need not, as novel and film reviews often do, leave it at: 'Yes, that's life'. We know how different it can be: how it could have been, how it could be; we also know how it can become and will become. A tiny sliver of light can alter the atmosphere even in the darkest pit.

### Shame

It is also important for ourselves and our Christian life to see original sin in this way. It should not be a mystery to us. Not in the manner of 'We cannot understand it but must just believe it, because it is in the Bible'. That is true of the miracles of God. We confess the Trinity as a mystery, as we do the resurrection of Christ. God's mercy is beyond our understanding. With sin, however, it is different. We do that ourselves. Original sin is from below. It is something of ours: human, all too human. We should therefore be able to recognize it. True, we will only do that if we take the biblical teaching to heart, if we subject ourselves to it. In order to confess it, it should be clear in our conscience. We may not completely fathom the depths of it in this life, just as with the sins we commit. Our knowledge of our misery will always be imperfect, just like all the 'good works'. But we do see the abyss in front of us.

Sin can never be explained away. When God asks: Adam where are you? Why did you do that? - then we have no answer. We have no excuse. So it is also with original sin. In these articles we are engaged in explanation in the sense that we attempt to shed light on the matter. In the light of the Bible we see how the connections lie. It is not an excuse, as in 'That is just the way I am'. As far as that is concerned, it is still an embarrassment. But we have a clear realization that we are like that; we acknowledge the original sin in ourselves as a life-sized reality - a reason for shame.

In this way we can confess original sin, clearly and concretely, and ask God's forgiveness for it.

### Scholasticism

Would it not be best just to leave the *inherited guilt* and *inherited blemish* pair for what they are? They do not help clarify what original sin is. They seem to suggest two aspects that can be distinguished in original sin. But in turn they both raise more questions. Inherited blemish seems to suggest a sinful nature that we cannot help; inherited guilt seems to suggest something that is held against us before it can be pointed out in our own life.

Taken together, they even raise more questions than they answer. Together as a pair they do not give the full picture. It is as if you said to someone who stole a substantial sum of money: 'There are two sides to what you have done. In the first place you have been greedy. In the second place you must now pay back the money'. In themselves those statements are true, but they can hardly be placed alongside as an explanation of the reality of what has happened. You would have to squint to bring them together. The concept of *inherited blemish* draws our attention to our biological structure; *inherited guilt* to our position in a legal or forensic regard. They are both abstracts taken from a reality that entails much more.

If we describe original sin as we have done, we do not need this conceptual pair.

You will not find them in the Confession. Neither does Calvin present us with a worked out theory on *inherited guilt* and *inherited blemish*. He purposely avoids tackling the issue of how inherited sin is transmitted from the parents to the children: "It is not necessary that we enter into that labyrinth..."<sup>12</sup> It has been said that the Reformed confession displays a deficiency on this point, but perhaps that is, in fact, its strength. Rather than giving the appearance of making original sin in any sense fully understandable, the confession limits itself to measuring its full weight. The same is true of the concepts of *realism* and *federalism*: that pair had also best be put aside, for partly the same reasons. They do not solve the problem, either together or apart. The debate between them has not taken us any further and there is no sign that it ever will. Both approaches rely on the same Bible text: Romans 5. That makes it at least probable that neither one is taught, or even favoured, by Scripture. A continued use of both the aforementioned conceptual pairings will only lead us into the swamp known as scholasticism.

### Romans 5

Nevertheless we must pay some attention

to Romans 5. That passage is the heart of the scriptural evidence of both approaches. *Realism* concentrates on a phrase in v. 12 and tends towards the translation 'in whom' and lets this refer to Adam: "in whom all have sinned". That is not the most obvious explanation; for this phrase is situated too far away from Adam. Others translate 'because all sinned'. But what is written is not 'in' but 'on', 'with', 'in connection with'. No statement is made here with regard to the manner in which the sin of all people is connected with Adam.

*Federalism* concentrates on v. 19: through the disobedience of one many were 'made' sinners. That stands in parallel with the following: through the obedience of one man many will be 'made' righteous. The word 'impute' or 'account to' is used here: the righteousness of Christ is made accountable to us – the sin of Adam is made accountable to us.

Indeed, in this connection Adam and Christ are placed in a far-reaching parallel. The similarity is that in both cases what one person does has consequences for all people: for 'the many', humanity. The 'many' are communally connected with the 'one'. Though this be so, it has not been stated *what* that connection is.

### Searching for words

For that connection the word '*solidarity*' has been used. However, that word points to a connection that has been purposely chosen or at least consciously recognized. You declare yourself at one with someone. And that is not the intention here. There has been talk of 'corporate thinking'. Paul would have been thinking here along the lines of a '*corporate personality*', as found in collectives elsewhere in the world: man experiences himself not as a detached individual; the individual is part of the community, and the community is present in the individual in some way. What one suffers, all can be seen to have suffered, in some sense. But here too we gain no insight into the nature of the connection. There is something irrational in this way of thinking, something anti-rational; it blocks further explanation. Why do we belong together? What is it that connects us?

### Adam and Christ

There is a huge difference between our connection to Adam and our connection to Christ. Adam's sin is 'made accountable' to us because it is also our sin. That is on our account, because it is in us. Christ's righteousness is made accountable to us even though we have done nothing for it. It is put to

our account from outside, as a gift of grace. That is beyond argument, and must be kept in mind in this biblical passage where Adam and Christ are placed in parallel. The parallelism lies in the reality of the connection, not in the nature of it.

The subsequent reference to Adam, with which theology follows this Bible passage, does remind us of the structure in which sin was transmitted: it is the family connection. (Because of this, so much depends on whether Adam and Eve were truly the first human couple.)

Just like the other terms mentioned, the word '*representation*' does not completely fit the bill either. There has to be a certain framework within which the representation comes into being and/or is recognized, like, for example, a function or delegation. It is true that in this connection Adam is often named with a functional title: 'head of the covenant'. But to our appreciation it remains something outward. Also it underplays the procession of sin through the line of generations. In short, Romans 5 helps us very little with respect to getting to know how the connection lies between Adam's sins and our sinful nature. We can sometimes ask too much of Bible passages when we wish to draw some dogmatic conclusion from them. Repeated, careful exegeses will then not always lead to the desired result. In history, the connection between Bible passages – often taken out of context – and dogmatic propositions have often produced a short circuit. We must take that into account in this case too. The doctrine of original sin does not rest on *one* particular Bible text, just as is the case with many other doctrines. We are sooner convinced of original sin by confronting ourselves with the Word of God as a whole and reflecting ourselves in its mirror – ourselves and the relationships in which we live.

### David

It works the same way with the doctrine of original sin. It did not start with God accusing us: 'You have a sinful nature!' It did not start by its being impressed upon the Israelites' children in catechism class. No, David was already a grown man. He had committed a dreadful sin, one that had developed into a giant web of sins. He regarded himself upright for a while, until – on God's initiative, through a prophet – he was forced to look into the mirror.

He saw himself reflected in the mirror of God's Word, of God's deeds – the prophet held them up to him, applied to his personal life. How did he



handle that? How did he react? He knew God's commandments. He knew the song of Moses that prophesied how Israel, in times of prosperity, would desert God. He saw himself in the mirror of God's holiness, as it shone on each and every page of His Word. Then, in horror, he learned to know himself. He saw that there was more than this one deed, or the deeds in the limited period of a few months. He saw in the deeds his attitude, his inclination, the pulling power of sin in him. Then he said – without God himself prompting him – “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”

That acknowledgement received a place in God's Word. We now all learn to know our original sin, taken by the hand by this text. If there is one core text for the doctrine of original sin then it is this one – the cry of (in modern jargon) an 'expert by experience', a king that became a father to God's people.

### **Augustine**

Later in church history, it was no different. More than with any other doctrine, the church can be grateful to one man, Augustine, for the doctrine of original sin. He did not discover it in the church. Before his time there was hardly any reflection on the sinful nature of man and how it worked through the generations. The church preached salvation of sins through Christ. She was capable of condemning Pelagius' doctrine. But Augustine learned to know original sin through his own life history. He was familiar with Christian doctrine; his mother was a Christian. But for a long time he wandered, as far as his convictions were concerned, into different philosophical and religious doctrines, and concerning his lifestyle into a practice that as a Christian he would later reject as sinful. All that time he experienced the pulling power of sin, even while the gospel was drawing him, while God was already at work in him. From the Word of God he

came to know the justification through Christ. He got to know his own sinful nature through the fact that it took him so long and it cost him such effort to let go of his old life, to become a Christian; to accept God's word and consequently say 'yes'. Along that road he became a teacher of the church on this issue, and many others, to the present day. In his autobiography, and in the calm light of having been saved, he points out original sin in his own life. He applies what he has observed in infants: when I was hungry and wanted to drink from the breast, then I cried angrily and impatiently if I did not immediately get what I wanted. Then already my sinful nature was apparent, from what came forth out of it.

### **Prophecy**

After David we also hear God, through the prophets and throughout history, reproaching his people that they are collectively soiled. Without being exhaustive, we can mention Isaiah 43:27, Ezekiel 20 and 23. This is then recognized in confession of guilt by Daniel (Chapter 9), Ezra (Chapter 9, especially verse 7) and Nehemiah (Chapter 1), as also in the aforementioned Psalms. Similar prophetic accusations can be heard from the mouth of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 21:34ff and 23:35 and from that of Stephen in Acts 7. These Bible passages are seldom brought into view in the discussion on original sin, though they do belong there. Does God perhaps only make accusations on hindsight? Could he do nothing to stop sin running rampant throughout the further history of humanity? Our final article will deal with this question.

#### **Note:**

1. Calvin in his commentary on Psalm 51:5, cited by G.C. Berkouwer in '*De zonde II. Wezen en verbreiding der zonde*'. Kampen 1960.

# The church and the internet (1)

The keynote of Queen Beatrix's Christmas speech was the importance of 'genuine contact.' It was an outstanding message that could just as easily have been addressed to a church congregation. How gratifying to hear from the queen in person how she sees her life and government in the light of Jesus' love.



In today's times she sees it as a challenge for us all to re-connect the individual and the community. People are very busy with themselves: their world is narrow. But remarkably, this is taking place in a world that is full of the internet, which should be a wide world. It is indeed wide with respect to the information available, but it also brings loneliness, for everyone is sitting in front of their own computer screen. People communicate with quick, short messages. The internet is all about calling out at random and zapping all sorts of information together, but the person behind the internet is not seen. "Palpable closeness is needed, genuine contact through deeds and words", is the message of Queen Beatrix. Her speech, unfortunately, was forthrightly denounced publicly, as is prone to happen in Holland. Yet she is right. She is quite well informed and can call upon many sociologists to corroborate this development. The internet appears to span all distances, but in the meantime the average Netherlander knows more about president Obama than about his own next-door neighbour. That genuine close contact is being lost. Even though you might have hundreds of 'friends', the internet is impersonal. For you can just as easily 'unfriend' them all, can't you? Wasn't that *the* word of 2009 – to *unfriend*?

## Pillar and network

We used to have our own 'pillar institutions', alongside all the other pillars in society. You felt at home with your brothers and sisters, you stood for the same things and knew how to reach one another. We need not romanticize this, as if it was always so wonderful, but there was clarity, connection and recognition. These days it is the network that is important, but that is something quite different from a pillar. With a few clicks you enter some domain on the net, look around, react to something, take what is to your liking and disappear again, unnoticed. This

has little to do with connection or commitment. You do not even see one another. The pillar gave us a community, call it the community of saints, in that people accepted a certain responsibility for one another, with a view to God. But a network is flighty; it offers no security. Everyone looks out for himself and makes his own choices.

A community recognizes boundaries. It is clear who belongs and who does not. Faith and unbelief are two separate worlds. But such boundaries are not present in the worldwide web network: everything lies open for all to see. You can join anything you like without anyone seeing you.

We cannot begin to conceive what this means to the church as a community. It is a different way of life altogether.

## Another world

The internet inspires fickleness: we click content towards ourselves and click away when we are not interested. That can also become a lifestyle attitude in the church. Everything that pertains to organization and sound union is simply 'zapped' away, because we would rather click on something that appeals to us. Speaking of shopping, the internet is all about consuming and in this it influences our lives.

This is noticeable in the practice of every day, e.g. in the fact that the new generation knows next to nothing about the most basic life rules in the church community. An attestation? What is that? Why should you apply for it? Isn't a notification of change of address enough, even if moving to the other side of the country?

And what of a classis and a synod, in which we associate as churches and manage and maintain projects? They are quickly becoming unknown phenomena. Or what of the fact that we have accepted responsibilities together for a Theological University, for all kinds of relief and equipment projects, both nationally and internationally? It seems to come from another planet. What does a church council do? The internet generation has no idea whatsoever. It never ceases to surprise me. Church administrators have their hands full explaining what is normal protocol. Not only explaining but also convincing in the face of astonished reactions. Some time ago I watched a quiz on television. The question was: Who painted

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the “The Night Watch”? Nobody had the faintest idea. Someone was asked to point out Spain on the globe. After some searching the pin was stuck into Australia! Those are not small mistakes; this has to do with a lack of basic knowledge, not least caused by living in another world. Numerous items are clicked open continually and there is so much to comprehend - surely you can make your own choices? So it is in the world and in the church too, for that is today’s culture. When was the Belgic Confession written? In the adult youth group no one has any idea. You do not have to specify the year, but what period? Hesitant answer: during the Liberation...? No, it was in the times of the Reformation and the ‘Eighty Years’ War between Spain and the Netherlands. Have you heard of Calvin, of William of Orange and Alva? All I see are faces that look lost.

On the other hand, it is incredible what information they are able to collect by surfing the internet when it does interest them. I cannot beat that. And the contact they have in this way and what they learn, that is certainly not all negative. A generation of *world citizens* is growing up. The internet generation thinks in other dimensions.

Viewed from that perspective, I can in some way understand the indignant reactions of some to the Christmas speech. The internet also offers contact, even more so in fact. Yes, of course! People who know nothing of a national synod do pick up things from England and America: how people there live to God and sing and worship. Those are choices they make, which can be enriching. There have been moments when I too have looked lost when I heard of these things. Who then is living in another world...?

### **Other boundaries**

It is astonishing how easily people switch congregations. Sometimes they only send a message to the church administrators, a notification, no more than that. When challenged, they say something like: “We have been visiting this new congregation for a while and we like it”. Period. This really hurts me, and not only me. In the communion of the Lord’s Supper we devote our lives to God and to each other. Certainly, this happens in other congregations too, not to say anything negative about that, but that cannot be a reason just to exchange brothers and sisters one day. Ever since there has been an agreed acceptance of attestations between CGK and GKv and

sometimes with NGK, it has only become easier. Many attestations are requested without a house move being involved.

It is also surprising how easily church members choose where they go to church. There are so many places where you can hear the gospel. Yes, indeed, thanks be to God! Nevertheless, church boundaries are functional, as are the boundaries of a church cell group under the responsibility of an elder: you cannot devote your life to all Christians at the same time, can you? If you do not concentrate on a congregation and/or a cell group, not much will come of fellowship and communal relationships. In practice, you will seek out Christians whom you like in the congregation, befriend them and so form your own smaller group.

It is absolutely astonishing, the fickle behaviour of people who do not wish to commit. As a result, home is either everywhere or nowhere. When you get to know the workings of the internet, then you start to understand what is happening. This is where it comes from: being everywhere at once without commitment; getting what you need from everywhere without investing yourself; being together with no promises - for if you don’t like it you can just leave. That discovery does not make the problem smaller, but bigger, for this is not something coming from a faction within society. This is our culture. We are all in it, and it permeates society whether we like it or not. It does help to form a more discriminating view. In a new world you work with different boundaries. In the old world the boundaries were geographically determined. Whether someone lived on one side of the street or on the other could determine their church membership. That church boundary was ‘sacrosanct’, and issues could arise if a church council stood its ground, and they could have valid arguments for this. Today’s internet user, however, lives in a world in which that does not exist. The idea does not even enter into his head that moving house also entails changing his church membership. “Why then? What’s the problem?” For distances no longer exist.

This brings to the fore the question of what the real boundaries are that we should be defending. Are they the geographical boundaries? Or the historic ones (say, between NGK, CGK and GKv church denominations)? Or are those the boundaries between Christians and non-Christians? I think

that the Queen's analysis contained a good deal of truth. "Palpable closeness is needed, genuine contact through deeds and words." By extension, it is also true that we need perceptible boundaries. A community that has no boundaries is not a stable community but one that is always ebbing away. You cannot devote your life to Christianity in a general sense: it must take real shape in your association with the Christians around you. Or to put it more accurately, to the neighbours around you. Queen Beatrix again: "Do we still know who is our neighbour? It is everyone who comes across our path: the fellow human beings in our life. But do we still see them?" Amen. Along with all the internet experience, it is important to stay close to home.

### **Other ways**

Reading the Bible has become a problem in our times. People read less, and when they read, they hardly see what is written. I notice in the younger generation that they find it difficult to come into contact with the text.

Listening to a sermon is also difficult. The sermons have to be shorter. If there are guests or friends invited to the church service then you really cannot preach for longer than a quarter of an hour, twenty minutes at the most. One cannot listen to a longer discourse. And that is not only true of those from outside the church, but also of our own younger generation.

In time I have come to understand this. The manner in which these people are used to gaining their information is completely different from ours. Everything is being made visual, packaged in short fragments of text, presented interactively, and so on. Everybody's opinion is sought. Listening is not practised anymore.

In the old days, we used to have Bible studies together, examining a text and asking ourselves what the exact meaning could be. Today we'd sooner start with our personal opinions on the text, what appeals to us and what we can do with it in our lives.

Nevertheless, I see signs of the tide turning. There is a great need for a clear and honest word from God to the heart of man. Also, always having to offer one's own opinion gets tedious, and one cannot keep it up. One does not have that many opinions.

After a while one starts pretending and just says something to keep up appearances. All the noise and interaction can be a cover-up for personal emptiness and individual insecurity.

This leaves us with the question of what is the best way to bring the Word of God to the people. Firstly, the minister of the Word should take the recipient into account, or else it is not ministry, is it? Now that we have the internet generation in the church more and more, we are faced with the challenge of coming within their hearing range with God's Word. The Word of God can find many ways to reach people; the half hour monologue is our own invention. In the meantime, I have noticed that giving opportunity to ask questions directly following the (short) sermon can be helpful. All sorts of personal thoughts then come to the fore that can give a welcome depth and/or balance, or at least offering the possibility of such. Just knowing that the opportunity is there helps towards a more interactive listening attitude during the sermon.

### **Challenge**

With all this in mind, I would like to return to the words of the queen: "Perhaps the greatest challenge is to re-connect the individual and the community and restore trust".

It is not about denying the individual or labelling it negatively. Certainly not! For even though this whole internet development supplants traditional practices, there is still an element of truth that life is highly personal. Everyone is faced with making his or her own choice; no one can make it for them. At the same time, if you are continually only being approached individually, something is going wrong. Then you get lost in the possibilities. Man was created for relationships, so we need to be able to mirror ourselves to God and to each other.

It is about individual *and* community. There was a time when the community was dominant and the individual was suppressed. Today it is the other way around: we must exert ourselves for the survival of the community before it is crushed. But in such a way that we still see the individual and acknowledge the importance of the individual. What we need is a church that is prepared repeatedly to be renewed by the Spirit of our God. In the next article I hope to write more about that. ■

# John Wesley's concept of faith

It is hardly necessary to explain why John Wesley and the influence of Methodism are relevant for our exploration of determining factors in present-day spirituality. With Wesley, we are certainly in a different atmosphere from that of John Calvin. Wesley was not at all fond of Calvinism.



There is a historical development from 18<sup>th</sup> century Methodism to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Holiness Movement – with names like Andrew Murray, Charles Finney and Reuben A. Torrey – and from there to the 20<sup>th</sup> century Pentecostal and Charismatic Movement. John Wesley's emphasis on holiness and perfection, and his powerful mass meetings, where many people were moved and not infrequently physically affected by his message, had a long-lasting influence within the Methodist movement and beyond it. He was not a theologian like Calvin, but he was a great spiritual leader in his time, and is still regarded so in ours. We can respect his zeal for the Lord and for the gospel. His untiring work was no less impressive than Calvin's.

Nevertheless, there is reason enough to look closer at a few features of his message, and to do so critically. It is good to realize that though we have to deal with certain aspects of a man's conviction, this does not mean that we are judging his heart or soul. Also, when we deal with present-day issues in Christianity, we need to discern between the person and the doctrine he is presenting!

It is not possible to treat Wesley's doctrine of Justification and Sanctification exhaustively. I considered it would be useful to focus on his idea of faith. We see the difference with Calvin's thinking more clearly then.

So I mainly want to explore his idea of faith, which he often called 'the gate of religion', and from there see how he dealt with justification and sanctification. We also hope to get a view into his somewhat ambiguous attitude towards 'enthusiasm'.

## Faith as the gate of religion

With a deep conviction, Wesley repeatedly stresses the necessity of faith. 'Saving faith is a sure trust and confidence which a man has in God, that by the merits of Christ his sins are forgiven, and he is reconciled to the favour of God.'<sup>1</sup> It is also clear that Wesley sees faith as a gift of God, although he does not emphasize that very much.<sup>2</sup>

The very essence of Wesley's preaching, however, is not on faith, but on its effect in a believer's life. In a letter from 1739 he writes:

*'a man (...) is not to think well of his own state till he experiences something within himself, which he has not yet experienced, but which he may be beforehand assured he shall, if the promises of God are true. That something is a living faith; a sure trust and confidence in God, that by the merits of Christ his sins are forgiven, and he reconciled to the favour of God. And from this will spring many other things, which till then he experienced not; as the love of God shed abroad in his heart, the peace of God which passeth all understanding, and joy in the holy Ghost; joy, though not unfelt, yet unspeakable, and full of glory.'*<sup>3</sup>

For Wesley, the importance of faith is as the gate to what really is important: the feeling of assurance and forgiveness. Religion can be described without using the word faith, the most essential feeling being love.

So it is rather that faith is 'the gate to the inward religion' than that faith itself is indicating the most important change that a Christian needs to have. Faith as well as justification by faith only have their significance 'at first'.<sup>4</sup> This faith is also not sufficient for acquittal at the Day of Judgment, but only for 'the present remission of our sins'.<sup>5</sup>

For being a child of God it is not sufficient to believe. Faith only brings in 'a state of acceptance to God', which is the state of a servant, and not that of a child of God. The necessary stage is reached only when a man can testify as his divine conviction that he, by faith, is in a state of life in which he experiences that the Son of God has 'loved me and given Himself for me'. Only when this testimony is given as an internal assurance can a man call himself a child of God.<sup>6</sup>

## Wesley on justification by faith

John Wesley certainly confesses that believers are accepted by God 'wholly and solely for the sake

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of what Christ hath done and suffered for them.<sup>7</sup> However, in the course of his development he became afraid of antinomianism to such an extent that in the end he did not any more use the term 'imputation of the righteousness of Christ'.<sup>8</sup> He rather emphasized that our *faith* is imputed to us as righteousness. Of course, there is nothing wrong with that, but it is characteristic! In Wesley's thinking the *inward aspect* always prevails over the relationship with God in Christ. Moreover, for Wesley it is not justification that is decisive for salvation, but sanctification. It is the new life that is most necessary. Of course, justification is necessary for salvation, but it is not sufficient. The real, essential change in a Christian's life has to be sanctification, or rather holiness. Wesley mostly treats justification in view of sanctification. Justification for Wesley only means a *relative* change, sanctification a *real* one.<sup>9</sup> There is a clear difference with Calvin in this respect. For Calvin, justification and sanctification are both given by the grace of God, and they are closely connected. The one cannot exist without the other. Essential to both is the relationship with Christ by faith.

This was not acceptable to Wesley. To him, Calvinism was an impediment on the way to holiness.<sup>10</sup>

Certainly Wesley confessed that to him justification is a work of God.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the fact that some people believe, and others don't, is caused not by divine election, as Calvin and Whitefield would say, but by 'the free responsiveness of human nature'<sup>12</sup> that was not taken away.<sup>13</sup>

Wesley had developed a special construction in order to say that the free choice of man is still caused by free grace. Wesley was convinced that this 'preventing' or 'prevenient' grace is given to every human being.<sup>14</sup> With this construction he could replace the doctrine of predestination of Calvinism. Nevertheless, Wesley's doctrine of conditions must not be overlooked. In order to receive the grace of faith there must be repentance and 'works meet for repentance' that go before faith.<sup>15</sup>

### Sola fide

One might say that within the framework of Wesley's doctrine of justification the Reformation conviction of *sola fide*, (*faith alone*) is now at stake! There is yet another factor that makes clear what kind of spirituality we find here. It is not only the additional factor of works alongside faith that is needed for justification, but also the extra factor of

experience alongside faith as a decisive condition. Wesley confesses justification by faith alone, but the question must be asked: What is the nature of that faith?

Someone rightly observes with regard to this question: 'Wesley always begins with man'.<sup>16</sup> This not only goes for the decision man must make, but it also goes for the experiences of justification. Wesley often gives descriptions of very emotional and even physical experiences that to him present an evident experience of justification, without even a mention of faith! From his Journal, quite a few instances can be given.

In May 1759 we read: '...a stranger (...) fell backward to the wall; then forward on his knees, wringing his hands, and roaring like a bull. His face first turned quite red, then almost black. He rose, and ran against the wall, till Mr. Keeling and another held him. He screamed out, 'O what shall I do, what shall I do? O for one drop of the blood of Christ!' As he spoke, God set his soul at liberty: he knew his sins were blotted out; and the rapture he was in seemed too great for human nature to bear.'<sup>17</sup>

Apparently, in one of Wesley's descriptions of faith – 'an assurance that Christ loved me and gave himself for me'<sup>18</sup> – the words *loved me* and *for me* are emphasized in such a way that we get the impression that the assurance of faith and justification rests upon the discovery of something *within man*. That *something* is none other than what is experienced inwardly.

He can ask: 'Does any one believe, who has not the witness in himself, or any longer than he sees, loves, obeys God?' The answer is: 'we apprehend not, seeing God being the very essence of faith; love and obedience the inseparable properties of it.'<sup>19</sup>

So for Wesley the essence of faith is: seeing God. This is so different from the Reformers, by whom repeatedly faith was founded upon trusting the promises of the gospel.<sup>20</sup>

It also appears in Wesley's own conversion experience – the famous Aldersgate Street experience on May 24, 1738, when listening to Luther's Preface to his explanation of the letter to the Romans. Wesley describes this moment as follows:

*'About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.'*<sup>21</sup>

It is remarkable that the emphasis is not on faith in Christ, on trusting Him, but on the *feeling* of that. A shift is to be found from a Christ-centred or God-centred way of dealing with faith to a man-centred faith. It is an anthropocentric tendency. Still, we ought not to overlook the fact that Wesley's experience that day really was significant to his confession of justification by faith.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the very accent in all his dealings with faith and with justification is strongly anthropocentric. And that accent has been influential though the centuries since his time!

### Faith and sanctification

Of course, it is well known how Wesley's concept of sanctification aims at perfection. He himself did not speak of sinless perfection, but rather used the term Christian perfection. His friend John Fletcher, though, had no hesitation in speaking of sinless perfection also. But I am not dealing with that now.<sup>23</sup> It is perhaps enough to say that to Wesley a combination of faith *and* love, of faith *and* good works is essential for being a Methodist. In order to understand the secret of this combination we must know how Wesley understood faith. This has been called 'peculiar faith'. If we believe that God is promising that we may become holy, He is also able, and prepared, 'to do it now'. So faith is strongly emphasized, but almost exclusively as it is focused on something that can happen immediately, on a special experience.<sup>24</sup> So this 'peculiar faith' is directed to something, something that can happen '*even now*'. Wesley likes to use expressions as *merely by faith* and *by simple faith*. He then always means a faith that is attaining some experience.<sup>25</sup>

In a characteristic booklet, *The Character of a Methodist*<sup>26</sup>, Wesley describes the 'true' Methodist in the following words:

*'There is not a motion in his heart, but is according to his will. Every thought that arises points to Him, and is in obedience to the law of Christ.'*

*'By consequence, whatsoever he doeth, it is all to the glory of God. In all his employments of every kind, he not only aims at this (which is implied in having a single eye,) but actually attains it.'*<sup>27</sup>

So the idea of sanctification is that it is reached. Faith is not a matter of walking in communion with the Lord, and of struggling against sin. Faith indicates that I aimed at something, and reached it. Living in sanctification does not necessarily mean any more living by faith. 'Holiness comes by faith'<sup>28</sup> to Wesley indicates the road to holiness, not holiness or sanctification itself.

When Wesley gives examples of his pastoral care, he never asks after someone's faith in the Lord, but asks questions like 'Do you pray always? Do you rejoice in God every moment (...) Do you desire nothing? (...) Do you feel the love of God continually in your heart?'<sup>29</sup>

We must see how Wesley was certainly very effective in influencing the people he spoke with, but at the same time observe that his approach is entirely anthropocentric. It is not the object of faith who is put in the centre, but the believer – with his or her life in holiness.

### Wesley's attitude to 'sola fide'

In his *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Wesley strongly opposed Christians who wanted to live by faith alone. He was afraid of a life that would abandon obedience to the law of God, as he perceived such tendencies in the Moravians, followers of Count Zinzendorf. In that connection he wrote things such as 'Beware of solifidianism'!<sup>30</sup> With regard to justification he certainly maintained 'sola fide', although the role of conditions in that respect is essential to such an extent that we see a synergistic model. With regard to sanctification, we find that he testifies at the same time to a holiness that is attainable 'by simple faith' *and* his testimonies of aversion from the sola fide. This can be explained from the fact that Wesley uses two approaches to 'faith'.

The result of this attitude to faith is that 1. faith is only important when it is combined with works, and 2. faith does not have its meaning or find its aim until it reaches certain experiences. What is absent in Wesley's doctrine is that faith implies a relation to the promises of the gospel, to the Scriptures, and even to Christ. Because of his focus on experience, Wesley's concept of faith has become completely anthropocentric. Faith even disappears behind the horizon of experience.<sup>31</sup>

### The testimony of the Holy Spirit felt

We must pay attention to Wesley's dealing with the testimony of the Holy Spirit as a special and important experience. This relates to the assurance of faith. For Wesley, assurance is not through believing in Christ, whereby the anchorage of faith lies outside man, in Christ. On the contrary, assurance lies exclusively within the believer, within his experience, and for the duration of the experience. The testimony of the Holy Spirit in this connection is a *direct* testimony of the Holy Spirit with our spirit. He describes it as follows:

*'The testimony of the Holy Spirit is an inward*

*impression on the soul, whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit, that I am a child of God; that Jesus hath loved me, and given himself for me, and that all my sins are blotted out, and I, even I, am reconciled to God.'*<sup>32</sup>

It is characteristic for Wesley that he explains the testimony of the Spirit without any reference to faith. He is aware of the danger of enthusiasm, and also that the voice of one's own imagination can be taken for the witness of the Spirit. Nevertheless, the main point of assurance is put in terms of someone's own experience.

It is useful to realize that, in contrast to the doctrine of the Reformation, in Wesley's thinking a shift has taken place from the assurance of faith to the assurance of experience. Another point of difference is the fact that for the Reformers the assurance of faith has to do with future salvation, whereas for Wesley the assurance is limited to the present state of the experience.

What then is this experience for him? It is a matter of feeling, of seeing, of observing the reality of faith. The consequences of this experience are shown in the almost unbelievable declaration his *Journal* gives eight months after the Aldersgate Street event. He then declares that he is not a Christian because he feels that at that moment he does not love God:

*'I affirm I am not a Christian now. Indeed, what I might have been I know not, had I been faithful to the grace then given, when expecting nothing less, I received such a sense of the forgiveness of my sins, as till then I never knew. But that I am not a Christian at this day, I as assuredly know, as that Jesus is the Christ (..) I have not any love of God. I do not know either the Father or the Son.'*<sup>33</sup>

All anchorage and assurance is found in what is *felt*. This goes for his doctrine of justification and also for his conviction of sanctification.

Even physical experiences are part of this experiential evidence. Indeed, of his Aldersgate Street conversion in 1738 he said: 'I felt my heart strangely warmed.'<sup>34</sup> We also hear of 'strong tremblings'<sup>35</sup> that occurred during worship services.<sup>36</sup>

### **Experience yes, enthusiasm no...**

A few times Wesley expresses some doubt with regard to the evidence of experience. That is when he must conclude that the experience is ending in enthusiasm. Then pride and haughtiness enter in. In such situations, Wesley gives the strong admonition to be lowly in heart 'lest Satan should get advantage over him.'<sup>37</sup>

Enthusiasm is described as '*...a sort of religious madness; a false imagination of being inspired by God*'. An 'enthusiast' to him is '*one that fancies himself under the influence of the Holy ghost, when, in fact, he is not*'.<sup>38</sup>

When he is confronted with extraordinary reactions during his own sermons and the revivals that occurred, he knows there are tares among the wheat. He then infers haughtiness and enthusiasm.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, in his *Journals* we find many places where he easily seems to yield to the evidence of extraordinary powers and experiences that occurred in his open-air meetings, as well in the witness of people he met. Generally, Wesley meets all kinds of bodily and emotional outbursts with gratitude, and concludes them a great fruit on his preaching, insofar as he one time calls out: 'What a day of Jubilee was this!'<sup>40</sup>

Wesley tells that he once asked the Scottish Presbyterian preacher Ralph Erskine – well known as one of the 'Marrow men' – how he would judge such phenomena. Erskine then answered that Satan can also manifest himself like that in order to obstruct the good work of God. The fruits of justice and conversion will give final proof what was from God and what not.<sup>41</sup> It seems that Wesley did not know very well how to handle this judgment.<sup>42</sup> Even cases of demonic possession or frenzy are in the end mentioned as a way of participation of the devil in what God does.<sup>43</sup> One might conclude that Wesley abhors enthusiasm, but that his criticism is without criterion.

### **At last**

Perhaps we must say that Wesley, in spite of his criticism of enthusiasm, accepted the same when it occurred in the circle of his own adherents. At best, we can call this a rather naive attitude. He did not use the rule of the written Word – as he himself had advised to do – and so, in fact, his preaching sometimes even opened the door to enthusiasm. What is missing is the use of the standard of faith instead of the standard of experience.

Why is it so important to have this clear vision on our famous and beloved brother John Wesley? Of course, this is because his influence has been seen in the centuries following him. He left a stamp on his own age, the 18th century. The revival and holiness movements in the 19th century cannot be thought of apart from his influence. The daughter of the holiness movement, born on the threshold of the 20th century and still active, is the Pentecostal



Movement. The church of our own time, the 21st century, has to be aware of the attractions of the Charismatic Movement, in which the fundamental choices of John Wesley and his friends are still active.

And the answer to all this? A thorough awareness of the meaning of *faith*, faith being the standard of life, and of experience, and of salvation; faith having its anchorage in the promises of the Holy God, in all that is outside ourselves, and in Christ, the Saviour.

#### Notes:

- 1 In *The principles of a Methodist further explained*, Wesley's Works (WW), Vol. VIII, 474. See also WW VIII, 352; V, 39; 6of, 213.
- 2 'You not only do not, but cannot, by your own strength, thus believe.' WW VIII, 6. See J.W. Maris, *Geloof en ervaring*, Leiden 1992 (GE), 25.
- 3 WW I, 215.
- 4 Justifying faith 'is an assurance that my sins are forgiven, clear at first, but soon clouded with doubt or fear. The other (sc. 'the abiding of the Spirit') is much a plerophory or full assurance that I am forgiven, and so clear a perception that Christ abideth in me, as utterly excludes all doubts and fear, and leaves the no place, not for an hour. So that the difference between them is as great as the difference between the light of the morning and that of the mid-day-sun.' WW VIII, 393
- 5 WW VIII, 392.
- 6 Sermon CVI, I, 1-12, WW VII, 196-200.
- 7 In his sermon *The Lord our Righteousness* (1765), WW, V, 238.
- 8 WW X, 314f.; WW X, 428.
- 9 H. Lindström, *Wesley and sanctification*, Grand Rapids 19802, 84
- 10 See a.o. WW VIII, 300. See also H. Linström, *Wesley and sanctification*, Grand rapids 19802, 94.
- 11 WW VIII, 5,6,48,428.
- 12 See W.R. Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley*, New York / Nashville 1946, 105-118.
- 13 '...he did not take away your liberty, your power of choosing good and evil: he did not force you; but, being assisted by his grace, you, like Mary, chose the better part.' Cited by Cannon, o.c., 107.
- 14 WW VI, 512.
- 15 See WW VIII, 275f.
- 16 Cannon, o.c., 246.
- 17 WW II, 485; cf. WW II, 497f.
- 18 In the sermon *The Scripture Way of Salvation*, WW VI, 43-54.
- 19 WW VIII, 276.
- 20 Of Calvin it could indeed be said: 'The very nature of faith can be explained best and most clearly from its relation to the promises of God.' So J. van Genderen, *Geloofskennis en geloofsverwachting*, Kampen 1982, 26.
- 21 WW I, 103.
- 22 Cf. J.W. Maris, GE, 33f.
- 23 See C.N. Impeta, *De leer der heiliging en volmaking bij Wesley en Fletcher*, Leiden 1913; Lindström, *Wesley and sanctification*, 126-16; K.H. LaRondelle, *Perfection and Perfectionism*, Kampen 1971, 309ff.; W.S. Gunter, *The Limits of 'Love Divine'*. The Theological Development of Early Methodism in Response to Antinomianism and Enthusiasm, Nashville 1989, 104-117, 202-227.
- 24 In *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (WW XI,393) Wesley sums up that he and his brother always '... maintained,
  - 1 that Christian perfection is that love of God and our neighbor, which implies deliverance from all sin.
  - 2 that this is received merely by faith.
  - 3 that it is given instantaneously, in one moment.
  - 4 that we are to expect it, not at death, but every moment; that now it is the accepted time, now is the day of this salvation.'
- 25 See Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 242.
- 26 WW VIII, 339-347.
- 27 WW VIII, 344, 345.
- 28 WW VIII, 300.
- 29 WW I, 476. Cf. J.W. Maris, GE, 37f.
- 30 WW XI, 431; Cf. D.F. Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, Grand Rapids 1976 (2nd ed.), 326.
- 31 Cf. J,W, Maris, GE, 40.
- 32 In a sermon on Rom. 8,16, *The Witness of the Spirit*, WW V, 115; cf. J.W. Maris, GE, 41.
- 33 WW I, 170ff.
- 34 WW I, 103.
- 35 WW I, 206.
- 36 See J.W. Maris, GE, 48f.
- 37 WW I, 104; cf. XI, 401f. See also J.W. Maris, GE, 53f.
- 38 WW VIII, 106; cf. WW V, 111.
- 39 WW XI, 406. He sharply judges those who at that time prophesy that the world would perish on February 28, 1762. WW XI, 408.
- 40 WW II, 495.
- 41 Ralph Erskine's letter in Wesley's Journal, WW I, 207ff.
- 42 Cf. J.W. Maris, GE, 59f.
- 43 Cf. J.W. Maris, GE, 60

Lecture held during the Conference in Kiev,  
October 28-29, 2009

# Global and continental ecumenicity

**There is but one Lord, one body (Ephesians 4), one church. Yet the church is found in many places. It was thus common, in the early church, to refer to the church as the catholic church. The word catholic is derived from the Greek words KATA HOLOS (contracted to KATHOLOS) meaning “throughout the whole”. For the church (singular!) was one and united, even though dispersed throughout the whole world.**



**I**t made sense that, when heresy reared its head, the local manifestations of the church throughout the world came together in a single meeting to decide on the issues. We know this meeting today as the First Ecumenical Council, or the Council of Nicea.

Since Nicea there have been various global assemblies of churches, recognized to different extents by various groups of churches. However, the equality that existed among the local churches was lost as Rome and other places became centres of ecclesiastical power. In the Western Church, “Catholic” became further defined as “Roman”. Hierarchy had taken hold of the church.

During the Great Reformation, many Christians rejected this centralized church structure as being unbiblical. Subsequently, churches took on a more national or provincial character in their organization. It did not mean, however, the rejection of a need for a global expression of ecumenicity. For example, the Second Book of Discipline (1578) of the Scottish Kirk listed four sorts of assemblies, the most extensive being “of all and divers nations professing one Jesus Christ”.

In spite of this professed ideal, it would seem that only two assemblies approximating this can be found in the Reformed tradition. The Synod of Dordt 1618-19 had 27 delegates from foreign churches in attendance, and the Westminster Assembly had commissioners from the various nations of the British Isles.

After the Great Reformation, Presbyterian-Synodical churches took their stance against both Congregationalism and Episcopacy. The need

for local manifestations of the catholic church to connect with each other was professed and practised by forming ‘bonds’ of churches. Such ‘bonds’ of churches tended to be limited to national or cultural boundaries. The relations between bonds of churches tended to be bilateral. One might call it congregationalism at a national or cultural level.

However, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and especially during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there came an urge for a new forum where bonds of churches might meet and relate to each other in a multilateral way. In the course of time we see the formation of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), the World Council of Churches, the International Council of Christian Churches (ICRC), the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (RES), the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC), and the World Reformed Fellowship (WRF). Recently the WARC and RES have merged to form the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

These bodies are not church assemblies with a jurisdiction similar to that of consistories, sessions, presbyteries, classes, synods, and general assemblies. They are associations that arrange meetings which function as a platform for furthering the expression of the singularity and unity of churches throughout the world. During the course of the twentieth century, the more Reformed of these organizations have especially focussed on the outreach of the church.

## ICRC and WRF

Globally speaking, two bodies are of a particular interest to those seeking to be orthodox-Calvinist in their convictions.

The International Conference of Reformed Churches was started in the early 1980s by churches that had connections with the Reformed Churches (liberated) in The Netherlands. As the course of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod became more liberal during the 1990s, some churches left the RES to join the ICRC. At the same time, the ICRC has grown through attracting members from various continents around the globe. Only established bonds of churches with a clear confessional character can be members of the ICRC. Conferences are held once every four years, featuring speakers from various cultures, and giving much opportunity

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for churches to meet each other. More information can be found at [www.icrconline.com](http://www.icrconline.com).

The World Reformed Fellowship is less formal than the ICRC. It was formed out of two other organizations, both with connections to the Presbyterian Church in America. It admits as members individuals, bonds of churches, and organizations and institutions with a Christian character. More information can be found at [www.wrfnet.org](http://www.wrfnet.org).

Both the ICRC and the WRF hold as standards the Westminster Standards and the Three Forms of Unity. Some will argue that as the WRF also accepts those holding the London Confessions of 1689 and the Savoy Declaration, its base is a little broader than that of the ICRC.

It soon became clear that the jump from bilateral relations between primarily national bonds of churches to a global forum is quite large. As a result, an in-between step has been or is being formed in many places. In what follows, an overview of these more regional associations is given.

### **The Americas**

The Confraternidad Latinoamericana de Iglesias Reformadas (CLIR) serves the Latin American churches. It was initiated by the Presbyterian Church of America, the Presbyterian Church of Brazil, and the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico. It is closely associated with the WRF. For more information see [www.clir.net](http://www.clir.net) (Spanish).

The North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) forms an ecumenical platform for the churches in the United States and Canada. It is structured very similarly to the ICRC and most of its member churches are also members of the ICRC. However, NAPARC actually predates the ICRC by more than a decade. For more information see [www.naparc.org](http://www.naparc.org).

### **Europe**

The European Conference of Reformed Churches (EuCRC) has opted for a form of existence between that of the ICRC and WRF. While membership is limited to churches, the conferences are open to any interested party, and invitations are sent out not just to churches but also to organizations and institutions. To date, three conferences have been held.

The European Regional Ministry Advisory Board operates out of the WRF. It is at a very early stage of its development, having hosted just one conference up till now.

### **Asia**

As one of the parent organizations of the WRF had its membership spread around the Pacific Rim, the WRF has always had members in the Far East especially. However, there is as yet no ecumenical organization for the WRF in Asia.

Mainly through the efforts of one of the ICRC's largest members, the Presbyterian Church in Korea (Kosin), there have been a number of mission conferences for the ICRC. The ICRC has a strong focus on South East Asia. The sub-continent of India - which is home to a number of ICRC member churches - has its own Reformed Fellowship.

### **Africa**

Like Asia, the ICRC approach to ecumenism in Africa has its origin with mission projects and mission conferences. As established African churches became part of the ICRC, attempts were made to set up an African Conference of Reformed Churches. This is still developing.

The WRF is also developing initiatives in Africa.

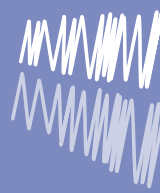
### **Oceania**

While both the WRF and ICRC have member churches in Australia and New Zealand, there are as yet no organizations in place to serve these countries and the many islands of the South Pacific.

Further information on Europe, Asia, and Africa can be found at the WRF and ICRC websites.

### **In closing**

What I personally find disturbing is that the WRF and ICRC are in many ways duplicates of each other. In some ways, the distinction between the WRF and ICRC mirrors that found in many countries, between conservative wings in large national churches and conservative churches who have chosen in the past to secede from such churches. The approach chosen in Europe - an organization with churches as members but conferences that are open to all - may well be an approach to practice in other continents and globally. It would allow for the WRF and ICRC to merge in a practical sense, pooling resources the way they are already pooled in the Americas. Both globally and regionally we have two organizations that profess to serve the same end: to express the unity and catholicity of Christ's church worldwide, and to further the cause of Christ's Kingdom through mission. It is to be regretted that these two have not been able to co-operate more in the past and that so little headway is being made in seeking co-operation for the future. ■



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