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Editors: Rev. J.M. Batteau
Rev. R. ter Beek
Mr. P.G.B. de Vries
Rev. P.P.H. Waterval
Mrs. S. Wierenga-Tucker

Design: BVGO - Age Jan van Veelen
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Address for editorial and administrative
matters (subscriptions, change of address):

Lux Mundi / office BBK

P.O. Box 499

8000 AL ZWOLLE

The Netherlands

Phone: ++31(0)38 4270470

E-mail: bbk@gbouw.nl

<http://www.bbk.gkv.nl>

Bank account 1084.32.556

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These are exciting times for evangelicals in the Netherlands, as the Christian Union (CU), the party representing this community in parliament, is about to take part in a new coalition government. In the general elections of November 2006 the CU doubled its number of seats to 6. It was then asked to join in coalition talks with the Christian Democrats (CDA) and Labour (PvdA), which remained the two largest parties after the elections (41 and 32 votes respectively), but did not win the 76 seats needed to control the lower house of the parliament.



Dutch evangelicals realize this is a historic opportunity. Not only because the CU has never been in power before, but also because the last coalition government with an orthodox Christian Party dates back to 1973. Over the last few years the CU, which came into being in 2001 as a merger of two look-alike Reformed parties (GPV and RPF), has won a lot of sympathy for the constructive and outspoken way in which it has played its role in parliament. Undoubtedly, a lot of the credit for this goes to party leader André Rouvoet, who is renowned as a sharp debater and was voted Politician of the Year in 2004.

Historic opportunities, however, are not always recognized and welcomed by all. Although an internet poll showed that about 90 per cent of the CU grassroots applauded the opportunity of joining the nation's driving seat, one or two prominent evangelical church leaders raised serious qualms. One of them, referring to the unshakeable stance of Daniel's friends in Babel, said that evangelicals should refrain from government if the godless laws on abortion, euthanasia and same sex marriage passed over the last few years cannot be reversed. Others pleaded for continuing in political opposition because power always tends to corrupt. The great majority of CU supporters, however, do not agree with these views. They believe that in the given circumstances of a highly secularized society, the CU should get involved and try to do their utmost in making small progress on these issues. Adopting an attitude of aloofness would be too easy an option and could mean that another coalition prepares legislation that is even worse.

Other qualms, if not to say vehement protests, were expressed among non-Christians. Some absolutely abhor the idea of 'Calvinists' influencing central policy-making and compared the CU with the Taliban. The above-mentioned laws are cherished by many liberals as hard-fought assets that should

remain sacrosanct. Even the CU's plea to evaluate the collateral damage caused by these laws was characterized by some anti-Christian spokesmen as 'highly dangerous'. Other non-Christian politicians and journalists, however, have denounced these protests as unfair and admit that the CU is a civilized political party that subscribes to the rules of democracy and could make a valuable contribution to governing the nation. After all, although it never had the chance to govern at the national level, the CU and its predecessors have had a long and respectable tradition of government at the provincial and local level. Most commentators also rightly point out that the CU's influence on the ethical issues is bound to be moderate due to its small size compared to its coalition partners. In order to reverse legislation the CU would have to have a majority in parliament and if that were the case, it would be the political reflection of nothing less than a spiritual and moral revival in the Netherlands.

How does the CU see its new task? Eimert van Middelkoop, experienced CU politician and one of the prospective cabinet ministers, believes that on the one hand the CU should hold on to its theological convictions and, on the other hand, should assume a modest role. Small positive steps are to be preferred to a grand but unrealistic neo-calvinistic program of political reform. This implies the willingness to make compromises. Van Middelkoop emphasizes that the CU does not want to be a party that merely promotes the interests of Christians, like the ultra-orthodox parties in the Israeli Knesset. Christian politics would no doubt be much easier if it were just a question of defending old privileges, but the real challenge lies in serving the common good. The party manifesto which covers the whole spectrum of current political issues, is a reflection of this high pretention. Thus, the CU's defence of 'particular education' (i.e. the right to found schools on the basis of religious beliefs) is not an example of defending a privilege of Christians, but stems from a conviction about the value of freedom of education. And this freedom applies to all, Muslims, Hindus, atheists and Christians alike. Helping to govern the nation with a view to the common good is a noble Christian calling indeed. If the Christian Union diligently pursues this calling, it will certainly make a difference. ■

How should the Pulpit address the Pew?*

Some Lessons from Paul

Just how should the person on the pulpit view those who are in the pew? This question appears to be very much of concern today. I am thinking about a remark in a very recent issue of *Clarion* in which we were told that there is this longstanding belief among the Free Reformed that Canadian Reformed ministers really do not understand what an experiential, discriminating ministry should be (Vol. 55, No. 17, p. 403).



I am thinking also of the accusation often directed at our federation to the effect that we, who have rejected Kuyper's presumptive regeneration, seem to have let it back in through the backdoor because of the way in which we view our children. I am thinking of the fact, of course, that we have several young people before us who will face this challenge in their future ministries: how should they view those who assemble week after week under the preaching of the Word?

There are many approaches to preaching, but I would like to suggest this evening that it is possible to build an approach out of an understanding of who the audience is. It's quite straight-forward. If we view them all as condemned and hardened in sin, that will bring about a certain kind of preaching. Conversely, if we view them all as saved and safe, that will determine the content and the tenor of preaching as well.

Romans 4

Some of you will realize that, for some time now, I have been working on Romans 4 as a test of modern approaches to New Testament studies. My family in fact would tell you that I have been working on this *too long*. But that's just the nature of dissertation work. In any case, while working on the last part of Romans 4, I became deeply impressed how, in this chapter which is really all about justification by faith for Jew and Gentile, Abraham is utterly convinced that whereas he is unable, God is able. Faith for Abraham is entirely a matter of believing

in the promises of God, believing in the power of the God who is able to do what he is not able to do. Abraham, Paul says, knew that both his body and Sarah's womb were "as good as dead;" "Yet," says Paul, "he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why it was credited to him as righteousness" (Rom 4:20-22). Clearly faith is embracing the promises and the power of God. This is a very significant point, since Abraham is the father of all believers, Jews and Gentiles, according to Paul. The one answer for all the people of God is to "walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had..." (Rom 4:12). Living in the disposition of faith, embracing God throughout our lives is what the Christian life is all about. What strikes us about Abraham is that it is not Abraham, but it is God who does everything. And that seems to me to be what we need to lay hold of.

As others have touched on this,¹ I do not pretend to be telling you something entirely new; but few seem to have worked it out the way I think it should be. There is little about this in textbooks on preaching.² My point is that in the writings of Paul, we have a model as to how a minister ought to view his congregation. Every service is like a letter of Paul, or any of the other apostles for that matter.

We begin most of our services with what? Words from the beginning of 1 Corinthians: "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 1:2). We end our worship services with what? Words from the end of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians: "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor 13:14). How do we begin our sermons? With the address: "Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ." But are we sufficiently aware as we preach that this is whom we are addressing?

About the author:

G. H. Visscher is professor of New Testament at the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Hamilton, Ontario. Email: gerhard.visscher@canrc.org

Proclamation

Sermons are not an address to *potential* members of

the congregation. Sermons are not an address to the *part* of the congregation that we think believes. They are an address, a proclamation to the congregation that has professed and does profess God as God, Jesus as Saviour and Lord, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Now, consider: how does Paul speak to that congregation? I suspect that if one of us would be pastoring a church that had all the problems the Corinthians had, we would be addressing that question: do you believe or do you not? Are you part of the Christian community or are you not? We would be issuing our calls for faith and repentance.

But strikingly, that is not Paul's approach. He begins this letter, "I always thank God for you because of..." (1 Cor 1:4). And he, very pastorally, urges them to depart from their divisiveness (ch. 1), to expel the hardened sinner (ch. 5), to settle their differences internally (ch. 6), and so forth. That, by the way, is a pattern throughout all of his letters. Embracing the positive, appreciating how they are a new body in Jesus Christ, and acknowledging the presence of the work of the Spirit who continues to renew the churches and all those who believe. You see, there is an approach to preaching that focuses again and again on the manner in which we enter the family of God. It is busy, you could say, with the *doorway* into that family. Questions of election, and faith, and experience, and whether you belong, receive ample attention. And I do not deny that those questions need to be dealt with now and then, especially when the text calls for it. Paul does that too: Romans 4, Galatians 3. But, for Paul, it is not always about that. He's not busy so much with what it takes to get into this family, but he is busy again and again with the question: what does it look like to belong to this family? What do its family members look like? He's busy with the question: are we living out of Christ Jesus? By the power of the Holy Spirit?

And why does Paul follow this approach?

Because he truly does see them *in Christ* and as congregation *of Christ*.

Wisdom from God

One can think in this regard of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1:30, where he speaks about our Lord Jesus Christ "who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption." Rather than upbraiding them for their lack of faith, he attempts to persuade them that despite their lowly calling, they already possess true wisdom in Christ Jesus, and he defines that wisdom in terms of "righteousness, sanctification, and redemption." It is not the age or creativity of

human beings that constitutes wisdom. It is not Paul's own eloquence that will make them wise. Wisdom is the work of God in Christ. Paul uses these three metaphors to try to explain the depth and the breadth of what the people of God are in Christ. Their *righteousness* is by faith in Jesus Christ. Their *redemption* is through the one Redeemer, Jesus Christ. But similarly, their *holiness*, by which he appears to mean first of all their positional holiness, their new status as sanctified believers, as holy congregation. Not unlike Israel, the new people of God are set aside in Christ and called to manifest their new lives daily until it is perfected on the day of the Lord. This is strikingly evident in 1 Corinthians 6, where Paul reminds the Corinthians of their former lives as sexual immoral, idolaters, adulterers, and the like. "That is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:11). Precisely because it is all from God in Christ by the Holy Spirit, therefore Paul is slow to suggest that their faith is not good enough, or their status is questionable, but he is constantly urging them by the power of the Holy Spirit to be what they are in Christ. It is again and again the imperative based on the indicative. Precisely because they are in Christ, they must live the life in Christ. Precisely because they *are* holy, they are to *be* holy. Precisely because they *have* been set free from sin, they are not to let sin *reign* over them. If Paul tells the people of God so emphatically in Romans 6 that they must consider themselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus, should the preacher not help them to live out of that wonderful reality?

Righteousness

The point is that everything is not said and done once we have come to the faith or once it has been verified in some way or the other that our faith is true. While we need of course this imputed righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ, He who is our wisdom, our righteousness, and our sanctification also continues to work in us by His Spirit so that we are transformed persons, renewed beings who also fulfill the requirements of the law (cf. LD 32). It is striking that throughout Corinthians, the solutions to each problem, each challenge that the congregation faces, is answered by exploring for them what it means to be in Christ and to continue to be renewed by the work of the Spirit of Christ. Chapter 2 sets forth that methodology: his preaching is not just some eloquent and persuasive words; rather, it comes with "a demonstration

of the Spirit's power." And chapter after chapter thereafter puts it into practice; the divisions of the church at Corinth are reprehensible because they divide Christ (1:13) and destroy the temple of the Holy Spirit (3:16, 17). The immoral man of chapter 5 is to be expelled because they really are congregation of Christ (5:7, 12). Lawsuits should not be happening among them because in Christ after all they are the saints who are to judge the world one day (6:2). Sexual immorality is off limits precisely because their bodies are "members of Christ" (6:15) and "temples of the Holy Spirit" (6:19). Questions about marriage and singleness are all dealt with on the basis of the fact that these persons all belong to the Lord (7:17, 32, 33, and 39). And that is how it goes throughout Paul's letters.

Every preacher would do well to read through Paul (or other New Testament writers) and consider whether he so addresses his people. It is true that these are letters, not sermons, but one who reads them carefully can have no doubt that Paul would so address God's people in preaching as well. The principles are the same. They are not just in Adam; they are in Christ. They have everything in Christ. And so, blessings and growth and strength will come to them, not through human eloquence, not through force, the cunning of men, or whatever else; but in Christ, through the presence and the power of the Spirit. There is a tremendous dynamic about the life in Christ through the Spirit that we are often slow to consider. Precisely because the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are persons who live within us (1 Cor 3, Rom. 8:23), who grieve (Eph 4:30), and can be sorrowful and quenched (1 Thess 5:19), the person who is in Christ needs to be reminded of the challenges of this dynamic relationship.

Book of Acts

One can compare in this regard how Paul writes in his letters with how Paul preaches in the book of Acts. He is always what you could call, "audience sensitive." At Lystra (14:8-18) and in Athens (17: 22-31) he has a completely different message than he does in Thessalonica (17:1-4) and Berea (17:10-15). Among the Jews, he will argue from out of the Old Testament Scriptures (18:4); among the Gentiles, he will argue from out of creation and providence (14:15-18; 17: 22-31), declaring to them the content of Scripture; but among the Christians, he will remind them of the greatness of God's work in Christ through his Spirit (20:18-35). And all of Paul's letters are proof of the latter. So too, it seems to me, a preacher should be "audience-sensitive." The congregation of Jesus Christ cannot be addressed in

the same way as one would address a gathering of persons who are interested but do not (yet) believe. Even in a gathering where both groups are present, one cannot use the same "brush," so to speak and address them in the same terms.

To come back to that image of the doorway for a moment, it goes here somewhat in the same manner as it goes in the family. Parents are not always standing at the doorway, discussing with the children whether they are in or out, whether they belong or not. The children belong and they live in the security of their parents love. So too with the family of God. There are times when the call for faith and repentance will be heard clearly and forcefully also in this family. But at the same time, there is not this unending preoccupation with the question whether they are in or out. They have been embraced with the love of God. And they need to be shown time after time, Lord's Day after Lord's Day, what it means to be in Christ and to be renewed again and again by the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ. To be sure, if that does not resonate within them, they will move towards the door and office bearers will, so to speak, have a discussion again about those questions of faith and repentance and those discussions and appeals will have a passion about them. But that is not a weekly preoccupation in the family of God anymore than it is a weekly preoccupation in the family home.

Uplifting and delightful

To put it frankly, to be sent out of church repeatedly on the Lord's Day wondering whether I live on the brink of faith and unbelief because of what I see in myself is a discouraging way to live. But to leave the building with the conviction that God loves us in Christ and to be challenged to live then as we are in Christ by the power of the Spirit of God ... that is uplifting and delightful. That is what we need. And that, I have no doubt, is Paul's way.

To put it somewhat more technically, one of our learned brothers has pointed to how the Canons of Dordt, Chapter 2, Article 5, does not say that it is the *call* for faith and repentance that must be the focus of the preaching, but it is the *promise* of the gospel that ought to be proclaimed. "The *promise* of the gospel is that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life. This *promise* ought to be announced and proclaimed universally and without discrimination to all peoples and to all men, to whom God in his good pleasure sends the gospel, together with the command to repent and believe." And this is so precisely because the promise itself includes the powerful work of the Spirit,



everything we need to believe and walk in faith. Dr. Hendriks goes on to point out that in the churches that see it differently, the preaching of the necessity of rebirth is wrongly placed between the preaching of the gospel promise and the congregation, and that leads to man-centeredness again.³ It is instead the promise of the gospel that must be preached and embraced; and that reminds me of that theme in Romans 4, about Abraham who embraces the promise that comes from the God who can do and will do what he cannot do ((4:13, 14, 16, and 20)!

Children too

To be sure, all of this does not exclude our children and our young people. While they surely need to be reminded of the need to walk in faith, embracing the promises of God, Paul recognizes that they possess this sanctification, this positional holiness in Christ (1 Cor 7), and in Ephesians 6 (v.1, 4; cf. 1:1), he addresses them too as members of the church. Covenant children are not in the community because they believe, but precisely because they are in, they need to believe and grow up into maturity into Christ by the power of his Spirit. There is nothing automatic here. For children, for teens, for adults, faith and repentance are needed daily. But throughout all this we should continue to stand behind the classic words of the Form for Baptism: Just as our children “share without their knowledge in the condemnation of Adam, so are they, without their knowledge, received into grace in Christ.” To be sure, as they mature, there will be “doorway discussions” about faith and belonging; not however because they are outside, but precisely because they are inside the family and Christ and his Spirit “are promised to them no less than to adults” (LD 27). It has to do with the promise again! And that promise is not just about future realities⁴; it cuts into the present and offers them too strength and blessing as they walk in the ways of faith.

Redemptive-historical

This, it seems, is one significant solution to the redemptive-historical question. It is often difficult

to know what a real redemptive-historical approach is in a sermon. This says it, does it not? Whatever the passage being dealt with, the minister is not speaking to the Israelites of David’s day (nor to the Philistines of David’s day!) or the Jews of Jesus’ day; he is speaking to a congregation that has been bought with the blood of Jesus Christ and struggles today to give glory to God.

It is a solid antidote to moralism. Moralistic preaching, no doubt, will make people behave somewhat better. All ethical teaching, all promotion of religious values, whether they be Christian or Buddhist or whatever, will probably render some positive benefit. But it is the Lord Jesus Christ and the Spirit of God alone that softens hardened hearts and changes stubborn sinners into new creatures who are directed to God and his glory. Moralistic preaching will make bad people better; but real preaching in the strength of Christ and his Spirit makes dead people alive, old people new!

When I, as a preacher, am not cognizant of these points, but just busy with admonitions of my own cunning and fine exegetical points that I might find, then I am relying on eloquence – what Paul warns against in 1 Corinthians. This is inadequate administration of the Word of God to the people of God, bought with his blood, filled with his Spirit.

This seems to me to be an answer to the charge that our preaching is much too objective, that we are addressing the brain and not the heart. The criticism is not entirely unjustified. Surely when we learn from Paul, we are not just delivering academic lectures to be judged by how many interesting insights they contain. “Powerful preaching occurs only when a Spirit-illuminated man of God expounds clearly and compellingly God’s Spirit-inspired revelation in Scripture to a Spirit-illuminated congregation.”⁵ And that is going to be “experiential” in the good sense of the word as it probes into our hearts and the wonderful reality of God and his Spirit dwells in us and challenges us to be what are in Christ, of grace. Dr. C. Trimp refers at one point to Dr. H. Bavinck to make the point that it is a precarious thing to found our faith on our own experience, for our inner life will always remain imperfect on this side of the grave; “Not even in a single one of the Twelve Articles of Faith am I able to replace ‘I believe’ with ‘I experience.’” Trimp writes, “Experiences have a right to exist and are inseparable from godliness. We find many examples of this all through Scripture, especially in the Psalms where feelings are expressed as they should be. But, added Bavinck, it is always the Word of God that brings about these experiences

of faith. Further, they do not precede faith but accompany and follow it. Thus they can never be the foundation of faith.”⁶

Examine yourselves

That seems to be the sense of what Paul means by the call to “examine yourselves” in 2 Corinthians 13. It is not a call to look for surety of faith in experience in and of itself. But it is a call to examine our hearts and lives as to whether we know of any evidence of this Christ and his Spirit dwelling in us. Does the gospel resonate in us? Is it making any difference? Imagine having a guest in your house and you pay no attention to him. Eventually, I think he will find the door and leave. So too, we have honoured guests living in us. Does that not come with tremendous challenges? But if we ignore them, what will the consequences be? You see, my struggle as a Christian – and I suspect yours - is not so much that I do not believe. It is: what does this faith look like? How do I live with these honoured guests in me? What are the daily challenges and consequences of our wonderful status in Christ?

That is where the pulpit must come to the aid of the pew every time again. May the Lord bless all those who are called by Him to this tremendous task. ■

Notes:

1. See e.g., Hendriks, “Experiential Preaching,” *Diakonia* (Volume II, Number 4; June 1989) 76.
2. Clarence Stam, though from a different angle, that of the covenant, makes some similar points in a chapter on “The Covenant and Preaching” in *The Covenant of Love: Exploring our Relationship with God* (Premier, 1999), 141-147.
3. Hendriks, “Experiential Preaching,” 76.
4. On this, see C. Trimp, “The Promise of the Covenant: Some Observations,” *Unity in Diversity: Studies Presented to Dr. Jelle Faber*, (Premier, 1989) 71-77. Trimp also comments: “Should man refuse to accept God’s promise in faith, the validity of the promise yet remains; but the saving power of the promise is lost. The promise is aimed at faith and faith is closely connected to the promise” (77).
5. John MacArthur, “The Spirit of God and Expositor Preaching,” *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* (Word, 1992) 103.
6. C. Trimp, “A Resounding Gospel: Preaching and our Experience of Faith,” *Diakonia* Vol. 11, no 3, p. 82. See the whole chapter for a fine exposition of what experiential preaching is in the right sense of the word.

P. Niemeijer

Respect for what

On 26 September 2006 I delivered an address in the town of Ten Boer for the purpose of explaining a number of decisions made by the General Synod of Amersfoort-Central 2005. From several quarters the request came that I publish what I presented on that occasion. I am encouraged by the apparent need to publish my address. And I am glad to satisfy the requests that have come my way. So in what follows, you will find the slightly edited text of my address. In the endnotes I have sought to provide a brief expansion, mostly in light of the discussion that followed my presentation.



Our church federation is going through difficult times. On the one hand, there are those who want little to do with a church federation (sometimes called a “denomination”). They see the church federation as something that simply obstructs and frustrates local churches and local initiatives. Others hold the church federation in such high esteem and expect so much from it, but they shoot themselves in the foot; they criticize synodical pronouncements so strongly that the net result is the undermining of the church federation. How can you demand respect for synods that apparently make such serious blunders?

On the *one* side there is much for which the apostles have taught us to give thanks to the Lord. I am thinking of that which Christ and his Spirit are bringing about in our churches with regard to faith and obedience, with regard to love for the Lord and efforts on behalf of his kingdom, with regard to benevolence radiating toward those beyond our group, with regard to a sacrificial and hospitable attitude toward our neighbors, and with regard to the energy of our youth and the maturity of our elderly.

On the other side there are also dangers and temptations. First, within ourselves. If we look clearly in the mirror, we see that *all of us* are children of our time more than we would prefer. Being our own boss, seeking our own interests first, absolutizing the comfortable sphere in which we feel accepted and at home, uncertainty about various issues that press upon us, no patience for genuine listening to the deep stories or lengthy opinions of others—who would claim that we are

About the author:

Rev P Niemeijer (1955) is minister of the Reformed Church (liberated) in Den Helder. He was chairman of the general synod of the Reformed Churches (liberated) in Amersfoort Centre 2005.

God has instituted - I

immune from these?! Even *as churches* we realize that we are under siege and vulnerable. My sense is that in an uncommonly honest manner, synods in recent times have voiced this. I am reminded of the summons to humble ourselves, issued by the General Synod of Zuidhorn 2002-2003 on account of matters like divorce, sexual abuse, issues within local churches involving consistories and ministers, and the whole discussion on liturgy and disunity (*Acta*, art. 209). I am thinking also of what the last synod wrote to the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands [Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken] and to the Restored Reformed Churches [Hersteld Gereformeerde Kerken]. The spirit of individualism and relativism, of materialism and greed, does its work among us as well. Among our churches one could point both to the anxious quest for regulation and to indifference toward ecclesiastical agreements. It was not without cause that recently *The Candlestand Statement* was formulated in response to charismatic movements of our day. The synod wrote of our awareness that other Reformed confessors are looking with apprehension at the way in which we as churches use the Word of God in dealing with issues confronting us in our modern time. We are unwilling to walk away from these issues. But we realize full well that we are working in a context full of risks and dangers. And we acknowledge that in this context we have but little strength. We understand that we are not entitled automatically to a blank check of support (*Acta*, art. 20; appendix 10.1). Such sentiments as these were not uttered by critical church members, but they were written by the *synod*.

We have every reason, therefore, to be engaged together concerning the church federation and concerning the decisions of the most recent synod. For that synod accomplished a tremendous amount of good work—thanks be to God’s Son and Spirit! This included the strengthening of church life, the spreading of the proclamation of the Word of God, equipping church members and office-bearers, care for those who live in special circumstances, an eye for the worship services as the heart of church life, and attention to devout communion with God. All of this was accomplished not merely through difficult discussions, but also through much positive work!

But there are also matters that remain sensitive and disputed. That is precisely where we need to

pause and reflect. Those matters constitute for many the litmus test. I plan to ponder with you a number of those decisions, and to say something about them, using the title, “Respect for what God has instituted.” Under this heading, I wish to discuss Sunday observance, marriage, the sacraments, and the church federation.

1. THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT

I begin with the matter of the Fourth Commandment of the Ten Commandments. First, let me provide a bit of history. From the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, the Reformed and Secession (“Afgescheiden”) churches in the Netherlands regularly issued public calls in the context of their society for maintaining Sunday observance and rest. In a Christian country, such as the Netherlands used to be, people perhaps did not always listen, but at least they did not find it strange that such calls were issued. Virtually everyone knew of the Fourth Commandment and had respect for the institution of the church.

In the twentieth century this changed. More and more frequently, Sunday became part of the work schedule, and the Netherlands rapidly lost its Christian character. The Reformed Synod of Groningen 1927 was far more restrained on this matter than its predecessors in previous centuries. They summoned the government and employers to grant opportunity to employees at least to attend church. A rather restricted view of Sunday observance, this was: merely permit the possibility of attending worship services. That was the last Reformed synodical decision regarding Sunday that was issued prior to the decision of the General Synod of Amersfoort-Central! Don’t claim too quickly that the old days were better than today!

During the 1960s our churches had to deal with the view of Rev. G. Visee. Summarized very briefly and generally, he taught that the New Testament church no longer observes a Jewish Sabbath, and *thus* the Fourth Commandment has passed away, and *thus* the Ten Commandments no longer possess authority. For him, the sabbath and Fourth Commandment served as the wedge argument against the entirety of God’s law! If there is no longer any sabbath, then there is no longer any law, was his reasoning. No wonder that as churches with such a history, we are very apprehensive about this subject. We don’t want Visee’s solution!

In contrast to the Particular Synod of Overijssel, which had also rejected the view of Rev. Visee regarding the Fourth Commandment, the General Synod of Hoogeveen 1969-70 restricted its decision

to a condemnation of Visee's view concerning the law. A proposal requesting the synod to reject his teaching about the sabbath was not adopted, for reasons not included in the decision. Thus, the Visee case did not lead to a general pronouncement about the Fourth Commandment, except then that the decision concerning the entirety of the Ten Commandments naturally entailed the validity of the Fourth Commandment.

The Nieuwegein case

Then the Nieuwegein case arose! In the context of an individual appeal, the synod of Leusden 1999 had to judge a portion of a sermon of Rev. D. Ophoff, who at the time was pastor in Nieuwegein. I have formulated this carefully: the appeal involved a "portion of a sermon" of Rev. D. Ophoff. For the synod declared that in the disputed sermon on Lord's Day 38 (2 June 1996), "concern for the worship services and for opportunity to attend worship services was clearly prominent," and further, that there was no reason "to agree that *in the entirety of his functioning* as minister of the Word within the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, Rev. D. Ophoff departs from the teaching of the church with regard to the Fourth Commandment of the law of the Lord" (*Acta*, art. 25, decision 4.1 and 4.4; italics added by the author).

As confirmation of this latter declaration, the synod referred, by way of example, to a sermon of Rev. Ophoff preached on the Sunday just prior to the Sunday when he preached the disputed sermon. This earlier sermon was also on Lord's Day 38 (May 26, 1996), in which he stated:

"Be thankful for the Sunday that God has given you. A day that He himself protects against all busyness and hurry. A day, therefore, that we must protect, so that the Lord has an opportunity to work in us by his Spirit."

"Actually you could say that God himself creates a quiet time in our lives by means of Sunday. The day when the noise of ordinary daily life must be silenced, so that the Lord can speak, so that there is also the rest and the time for answering him in prayer."

"Sunday is a wonderful day for the work of the Spirit in us." (*Acta*, art. 25, ground 5)

What, then, was the content of the disputed portion of the sermon? The synod informs us that Rev. Ophoff preached a sermon on Lord's Day 38 (as we mentioned, the second sermon on this Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day, since he had also preached on this Lord's Day the preceding Sunday!) with the theme: "Find rest in the Lord: 1. That remains the message of the Sabbath; 2. That is possible also on

a Sunday that is under assault." In this sermon he stated, among other things: "Let it show just how valuable this day is to you. As far as I'm concerned, not on the basis of an absolute, divine command, but because it is good to find communal rest one day in the week, according to the example of Israel's Sabbath" (*Acta*, art. 25, material 1.a).

As far as I'm concerned, not on the basis of an absolute, divine command, but because it is good . . . This is the sentence at the heart of the controversy. In connection with this sentence, the synod declared that it is perhaps valuable in a catechism sermon on one of the Ten Commandments to stimulate the congregation unto love for the goal that God has in view with that commandment, but that in the sermon in question, it does not come out adequately that Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 38 is speaking of a *command*, namely, especially on the day of rest to attend the worship services faithfully (*Acta*, art. 25, decision 4.2 and ground 2). So, on that point the synod did indeed identify an omission in Rev. Ophoff's sermon.

The synod declared further "that the view of Rev. D. Ophoff, that Sunday *as a day of rest* is not based upon a divine command, is not to be condemned" (*Acta*, art. 25, decision 4.3).

Why is it not to be condemned? Because it is correct? The synod did not say that! It is not to be condemned because in the past, leaders who denied that our Sunday rest flows *directly* from the Fourth Commandment were not condemned for holding that view. There has always been room within the churches for the view that Sunday as a day of rest is based on a responsible choice of the Christian church, who in her believing response to the leading of God's Spirit assigned to Sunday the special value of the day of rest according to the example of Israel's sabbath (*Acta*, art. 25, grounds 3 and 4). Luther, Calvin, and Gomarus, to mention the names of several such leaders, were never condemned on account of their view regarding the Fourth Commandment or regarding the basis of Sunday rest. If such room for that viewpoint always existed in the church, one should not now condemn Rev. Ophoff for holding that position. For then you would be guilty of changing the rules during the game, as it were.

Yes, but why did not the synod add a positive declaration about Sunday rest? That was considered. But the majority of synod said: This synod was not asked to make such a declaration, and thus the synod lacks any formal authorization to make such a declaration.



Rev Niemeijer talking to Rev J van Benthem, reporter for the Friesland Committee, who interest was, amongst others, marriage and divorce. (Photo: P.G.B. de Vries)

Whereas this synod saw so clearly that it had not been asked for a general pronouncement about Sunday, but for the resolution of a local dispute, one is all the more surprised that the synod of Leusden did indeed take up the decision regarding this matter, in chapter 1 of the Acts: regarding doctrine. Thereby it appeared as though the synod had indeed made a general doctrinal pronouncement.

Because of that misunderstanding the subsequent synod - the General Synod of Zuidhorn 2002-2003 - received a large number of appeals to adjudicate.

Synod of Zuidhorn

The synod of Zuidhorn dealt with the Nieuwegein case, and intentionally included its decision in its Acts in the chapter where it belonged: chapter 3b Church government/adjudication, in art. 52, 53.¹ The synod rejected the requests for revision. That particular matter came up once more in Amersfoort and was finally decided. There it was explained why now, so many years after the original complaint, nothing more has changed with regard to the decision of Leusden and the rejection by the synod of Zuidhorn of the requests for revision (*Acta*, art. 70; see also the address of the chairman after the decision was taken).

Mandate for assistance

In Leusden, therefore, no general pronouncement about *the Fourth Commandment and Sunday* could be made. That was not the case at the synod of Zuidhorn. That synod did receive a request from the Particular Synod of Holland-South for such a pronouncement.

The synod decided to consider that request and appointed a committee to study “the Fourth Commandment and Sunday,” with the mandate “to serve the churches with assistance wherein a positive, definite position is offered with regard to the ethical conduct of believers and churches in the 21st century with respect to observing Sunday as the Lord’s Day in the light of the Fourth Commandment.” This decision is included - correctly! - in chapter 1 of the *Acta*, under the heading “Doctrine” (art. 13). For the intention of this assistance was to offer general assistance regarding Sunday observance, apart from the restrictions and limits of the individual appellate case of Nieuwegein and *alongside* that matter, assistance in which the “unresolved dilemmas” would hopefully be addressed. Since the Dutch government and society have lost their Christian character and since the generally assumed character of Sunday as a day of rest has come under pressure, it is important that the churches renew and develop their conviction on this point (cf. *Acta*, art. 13). A fine and important mandate!

The study committee undertook its assignment and brought a report to the synod of Amersfoort-Central. In the preliminary discussion with the synodical committee and after public discussion by the synod, the study committee adjusted their original submission. The synod subsequently adopted it with one abstention (on formal grounds). Why was such a report necessary at all? Why can’t one simply draw a straight line from the Fourth Commandment to Sunday rest? Because none of us does that! Even the restored Reformed [hersteld gereformeerden] don’t do that.

- *The Fourth Commandment speaks about the seventh day, but we observe only Sunday.*
- *The Synod of Dort already declared that we are no longer bound to the strict observance of that day which had been mandated especially for the Jewish nation. On what did the Synod of Dort base this? And what are we bound to instead, then?*

In addition, there are questions:

- *What does it mean when Paul summons the Colossians not to condemn anyone on the matter of sabbath, which he calls a shadow of that which must come (Col. 2:16-17)?*
- *How did Christians observe Sunday as citizens of the Roman empire, where there was no “free Sunday” yet? Did they stay away from their jobs or did they suffer martyrdom on this account?*

One could say that this report had to make clear how one moves from the Fourth Commandment to our Sunday observance. Everyone realizes that there is quite a distance *between these two points*. But what precisely is the route from one to the other? That is what the committee report describes in a Christocentric manner: they draw the lines from the Fourth Commandment in and through Christ to our modern Sunday! One of the important questions in that connection pertained to Sunday as a day of rest; the fact that there is a day for the worship of God and the gatherings of the congregation is undisputed; but is Sunday always a day of rest? That was the question. Does the element of rest belong to that which God commands in the Fourth Commandment? And is that an *abiding* aspect of the Fourth Commandment?

Rest

If, with this question in mind, you review the positive contribution provided by the synod of Amersfoort-Central 2005 (*Acta*, art. 22), you will find a clear answer. To the abiding aspects of the Fourth Commandment belongs first of all the rhythm of working and resting (teaching section, 3.2). And not merely in the sense of being busy during the day and sleeping at night. *Nor does this refer to the rhythm of workdays followed by a day off (practical-ethical section, 2.1 and 2.2). As churches we want to testify publicly* about this: we want to point to the Creator of everything that lives, the One who has supplied the rhythm of working and resting to people created in his image (teaching section, 6). We defend maintaining Sunday as a day of collective rest (teaching section, 6). Whereas in many perspectives on Sunday observance, Sunday is first of all a day of “celebrating,” so that resting serves celebrating, the synodical advice places resting first: First comes resting, then celebrating (teaching section, 4; practical-ethical section, 2.3). That command to rest from your own work and effort requires concretization. And that concretization brings us then to the issue of Sunday work (practical-ethical section, 2.9-12; 2.16).

With this positive contribution we are, I think, beyond where we were before the synod of Leusden. Anyone wanting to discuss Sunday observance now cannot ignore this assistance. It is not a fourth Form of Unity, a new confession—I know that. But we were not expecting one, either. For we have Scripture and Lord’s Day 38; to these we are bound. But it is also not to be ignored when the church for the first time, after a long and careful

investigation of Scripture, arrives at a declaration which cuts through the matter and offers assistance to the churches. This is also help for our presentation to those outside the church, and can function as a public testimony. That is something for which to be very grateful! For the first time after a very long period, the church is speaking about this matter! This contribution is not a final statement, but a clarifying and stimulating impulse to further reflection and action. The introduction even speaks of a desire to “understand *ever more clearly* how Sunday has been given to us in Christ unto the redemption and sanctification of all the days of our lives” (italics added by the author).

2. DIVORCE

I move next to a second issue, that of *marriage and divorce*. For a long time, there have been among our churches two grounds for divorce: adultery and being willfully abandoned by one’s partner. If either of these was involved, you were free to divorce. That seemed clear, but in reality it was not. Let me mention just a few issues:

1. Isn’t it a somewhat biblicistic manner of using Scripture, to suppose that a pair of passages supply a complete and developed ethic of marriage and divorce? Moreover, is the prohibition of the Lord Jesus against remarrying “for any other cause than adultery” really intended to indicate a ground for legitimate divorce?² And is the one who was sinned against always free of guilt?
2. The question is familiar as to whether willful desertion by a spouse is also a legitimate ground for divorce. In 1923 and 1933 the synods did not resolve this question; and the synod of Berkel and Rodenrijs 1996 in fact left the issue undecided.
3. Are there not other perversions which are at least as serious as adultery? What about incest, homosexuality, addiction to pornography—or must we classify all of those as adultery? What about alcoholism, psychopathic destructive behavior or abuse? May you divorce your spouse for one incident of adultery, but not for years of abuse? You realize what is going on with this line of reasoning: the legitimate grounds expand, so that you get more grounds for legitimate divorce.
4. Does not our church discipline get stuck in a kind of trench warfare: people are kept endlessly from the Lord’s Table, the matter is not resolved, and finally the consistory at a certain moment lifts the discipline—but on what basis? Nobody can really say, even though everybody realizes that there was no other solution.



The board of the General Synod of Amersfoort Centre 2005
(photo P.G.B.. de Vries)

The new line

In this situation the study committee came up with a different approach. Why? In order to make things less stringent? In order to expand the grounds still further? No, they chose an entirely different starting point.

They pointed out that all talk of grounds for divorce focuses on the *boundaries* of marriage. If you compare marriage to a playground, then when you talk about grounds for divorce, you are really focusing on the *fence* enclosing the playground. How high is the fence, and where are the holes for escaping? But far more important is what is happening *on the playground itself*. We must work on preventing the occurrence of divorce, and on strengthening marriages. By means, for example, of strongly recommended marital courses in churches (*Acta GS Amersfoort-Centrum 2005*, art. 57, decision 5). And if it is a struggle to remain married or to forego remarriage, then we must again teach one another the meaning of maximal consecration to the Lord, what it means to sacrifice and bear one's cross, and this not only in reference to marriage, but in terms of all of life! We must learn to live with incompleteness, and with unfulfilled longings, by looking to the coming kingdom of God (*Acta*, art. 57, decision 1). That is the style of the kingdom. That signifies no weakening or obscuring of God's commands, but a relativizing of our difficulty and a stimulus to hold to Christ's instruction, against all temptation, and to forego divorce and second marriage.

Talk about grounds for divorce involves another objection. It creates the impression that one has the freedom, in certain situations, to divorce. A ground for divorce, among us anyway, generally means that in all those situations you may legitimately divorce. But that is not what the Bible says. The Bible

supplies no automatic authorization of divorce. The Bible focuses precisely on faithfulness: what God has joined together, let not man put asunder. That which you have promised in the name of the Lord you must keep. In order to do that, you may indeed ask the Lord for strength. If there is any rule that applies in the church with regard to marriage, it is this: *Do not divorce!* Divorce is always evil, an evil so serious that it must be prevented and opposed as much as possible. The mandate always remains, that we must work for reconciliation and restoration of the marriage relationship along the route of repentance, forgiveness, and self-denial.

For that reason the recommendation is also that there ought to be no confirmation of a second marriage after divorce in a church service (*Acta*, art. 57, decision 6: starting points). Thereby as churches we provide a public testimony in our secularized nation concerning the sanctity and indissolubility of marriage - no matter what that requires of the people involved.³

No Anabaptist perfectionism

Thus, there are *no* situations in which you can "just" divorce and remarry, no situations in which you simply have the freedom to do that. But in practice occasionally there *are* nonetheless situations, are there not, in which *living* separately is unavoidable and in which the consistory can do little else than acquiesce?

It occurred in Corinth, did it not, that people separated? Yes, said the study committee, but then the rule of 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 applied: no one may put away his wife or her husband. But once this has occurred, then such a person must remain unmarried or be reconciled with the spouse. The committee and the synod said: when living together is no longer possible, then go no further than separation of bed and board, so that reconciliation remains possible and remarrying is excluded. When divorce and remarriage do occur, then a consistory must consider what must be done: must discipline be exercised, or must the consistory acquiesce?

But may a consistory *acquiesce*? Cannot every problem be overcome in faith? In response to that (Anabaptist-evangelical) perfectionism, we must say: Unfortunately, in this dispensation matters can progress to the point where you simply have to say: everything has been tried, many struggles have been waged and many prayers prayed, but nothing worked. Put more strongly: a still greater evil would occur if the married cohabitation were to be continued. No matter how much we regret

it, we can do nothing else than acquiesce. That can then be the responsible choice. For then you would be saying: We cannot demand that they continue living together under one roof, for then other people will be irreparably damaged. At that point you can release people from the obligation to continue living together. That is also what happened in 1 Corinthians 7. A person was no longer “bound.” We can acquiesce with a clear conscience, despite the fact that we wish it were otherwise.

Years ago, in such a situation the acquiescence would have occurred *quietly*. The congregation would have heard nothing, and when they saw separated spouses going to the Lord’s Table, they could have thought: their divorce and their remarriage were apparently legitimate, and not wrong. Such misunderstanding is not a good thing. Therefore we now have the opportunity for the consistory to make an announcement from the pulpit indicating how it evaluates the divorce or remarriage and why it acquiesces (*Acta*, art. 57, decision 4a). This way, nothing is surreptitiously legitimated, and we can prevent the Lord’s command from being neutralized in a sneaky way.

The consistory can also decide to engage in (required) *discipline*. In doing so, the consistory must not be content with an administrative observation that a particular “ground” was or was not met (“if adultery occurred, then the divorce is okay”), but - even as elders normally evaluate matters everywhere else in their pastoral work! - the consistory must look at the attitude of the brother and sister involved. How are they handling their marital difficulty? Are they willing to listen to Christ and submit to his yoke, or not? Are they working with an honest and clear appeal to their understanding of Scripture, or is there evidence of hardening in sin? Are the brother and sister (so to speak) “willing to be accountable,” or do they perhaps give evidence of a complete incapacity to focus on their problems in faith, so that something else than discipline may be required? Another question related to exercising discipline is this: How does the congregation view this situation? Are people very strict on the matter of divorce, but very lenient about every other area of life? Does not the consistory then need to avoid giving the impression that only select sins truly offend (*Acta*, art. 57, decision 4 ground 1)?

By now you will have realized that the search for grounds for divorce has been abandoned. That has led only to expanding the possibility of divorce.

When a divorce occurs, the consistory must not tally the reasons (is that one okay, yes or no), but must evaluate the posture and attitude of those involved, and do that in a spiritual manner. ■

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Endnotes

1. Because this involves not a general doctrinal pronouncement, but a pronouncement addressed to a particular case under appeal, only those directly involved are called to implement the decision, and the pronouncements of Zuidhorn and Amersfoort-Central are intentionally not included in the list of decisions which must be implemented in all the local churches (cf. Acts GS Zuidhorn 2002-2003, art. 211; Acta GS Amersfoort-Centrum 2005, art. 191).
2. In Matthew 5:31-32, the Lord Jesus says, “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (ESV). In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus shows that God’s commands go far deeper than one might have thought. Even sending a wife away (with a certificate of divorce) for another reason must not be treated lightly. It can easily lead to adultery, namely, through remarriage. A very radical saying of our Savior! That is not intended to suggest that adultery is a legitimate ground for divorce, but that sending a spouse away for a reason other than adultery can easily lead to adultery! There are more kinds of adultery than sexual!
3. I myself hope, if ever that were to happen to me –may God graciously prevent that– that I would receive grace as the “injured party” then to understand my shared responsibility for maintaining this public testimony of the church, and therefore forego any request for the church’s confirmation of another marriage.

Spiritually Reformed

My concern is with Bucer's *pietas*, that means his attitude to life as stamped by faith and love. With Bucer "*pietas*" is a combination of spirituality and piety. Bucer gives a reassessment of the classical notion of *pietas* in a Biblical Christian sense and he gives it a bipolar structure: both the category of the faith and the category of ethics. Here we get a glimpse of Bucer's heart.



Now just imagine that a consistory in 2006 could invite young Bucer to speak on October 31, on the occasion of the commemoration of the Reformation. The consistory asks him to speak about the well-known central themes *sola gratia*, *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, *solo Christo*, *solli Deo gloria*. Bucer did not invent the solas himself, but he would not mind connecting his message to them. How would he express the reformational message? I quote him from his commentary on the epistle to the Ephesians published in 1527, which he called "a summary of complete sacred learning," as well as a sermon held in 1528 in Bern.

Sola gratia

By grace alone. Being in his congregation at X. we can hear Bucer argue passionately that we are only saved through God's grace or benevolence out of his sheer pleasure. God's goodness is the fountain of really everything that is good. That God is the electing God makes the believer sing songs of praise from the heart. Predestination is not a terrifying decree, but rather a source of salvation. "All salvation is fruit of God's election", all righteousness and salvation of mortal people depend on it and is realised by Christ in the elect,

On October 3, 2006, Dr. J. Hoek (56) became Professor of Reformed Spirituality at the Theological University of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN) in Kampen. This position was established by the Reformed Alliance (Gereformeerde Bond).

Since 1996 Dr. Hoek has been supervisor of the training course for religion-pastoral work at the Christelijke Hogeschool Ede. Besides this he became part-time Professor of systematic theology at the Evangelical Theological faculty in Leuven (Belgium)

Hoek was charged with the task "to find with his students the sources of Reformed piety and to open them up for our time." He seeks to link "spirituality" with the work of the Holy Spirit. He wants to bring out the specific aspects of Reformed spirituality. Therefore he imagines how the Reformer Martin Bucer (1491-1551) would speak at a commemoration of the Reformation on October 31, 2006, and how a consistory (church council) afterwards would wonder what they can do with the Reformer's remarks.

*In this article we will give a summary published in Dutch in *Nederlands Dagblad*, October 4, 2006. The complete text was published by the Theological University of the PKN (www.theologischeuniversiteitkampen.nl).*



both gentiles and Jews, to God's praise. Nothing of this comes from us, everything from Him.

This persuasion implies that we can be absolutely sure of our salvation, not only for the present, but also until the glorious end. For it is just as impossible to be erased from God's book and to fall from the faith, as for God's determination to become powerless.

What we have in no way received by our own *good* works cannot be lost by our *bad* works. This "basic security" relieves our anxieties, giving us a deep inner peace and freedom.

Yet human responsibility, paradoxically, remains in force, one hundred percent. Predestination does not exclude human free will, but on the contrary it brings this free will about. This is a paradox incomprehensible to the mind.

We are not going to parcel out the field between God and man, but we experience that it is just where everything is ascribed to God's action that man is given ample room. In response to God's call we will set to work on the road to life with every power that God gives.

Sola scriptura

Bucer makes it clear that to him the authority of Scripture is beyond dispute. He has dedicated his life to the interpretation and the preaching of Scripture. He rejects whole-heartedly submitting the Bible to inner and directly heard messages that are ascribed to the Holy Spirit. It is unhealthy to seek all kinds of separate direct revelations. Real wisdom and the revelation that we should really long for is that which makes Christ known to us and



...at the Theological University of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN) in Kampen
(photo: P.G.B. de Vries)

that teaches us how great the inheritance is that is promised to us. Therefore the knowledge of Christ is the touch-stone to put wisdom and revelations to the test. With this touch-stone the revelations that many people so often boast about can be evaluated. Word and Spirit are closely related. We notice that Bucer is a theologian of the Spirit. He emphasises that every preaching will be ineffective until the Holy Spirit makes the gospel resound in the heart and thus convinces the heart.

Bucer does not retreat into a conventicle, a small group of likeminded souls. His piety is explicitly ecclesiastical piety. Therefore he has dedicated himself all his life to the edification of the congregation.

Sola fide

By faith alone. Bucer is completely in line with Martin Luther. He who believes has got it! With him too, the centre of preaching is the justification of the godless, although his formulations can be subject of discussion. Faith embraces Christ's righteousness, which is not inside ourselves and that is purely a given thing. But indeed this is a faith that is active through love, *caritas*, and thus proves to be genuine. This love is present first and foremost in the congregation as a community of faith and love, and from there it radiates further

into the outside world. It is radically excluded and totally impossible for us as human beings to climb the ladder out of our misery and hopelessness. A new birth, a re-creation therefore is necessary and indispensable. This is realised by the communion with Christ in faith and will lead to a new life to the honour of God and to the salvation of one's neighbour.

He who through the hearing of the Word and by faith in Christ, knows himself to be justified as a godless man by mere grace, is a free man, at rest and thus dedicated. What remains as appropriate and valid is a demonstration of thankfulness to the heavenly Father.

In this way there can be spiritual growth: an increase in *pietas*. Through the love of God faith is set on fire to such a degree that its only aim will be a life tuned in to what pleases Him. Whatever he sends us, we will agree with. In this dedicated life God's law, the thora, as a rule of thankfulness is given its full due. The new man was created in Christ to that purpose "only to live for the well-being and the benefit of his neighbours".

The theme of his life will be the sacrifice of love towards God and his neighbour. *Caritas* is really directed towards all people. Bucer denounces the anabaptists' avoidance of the world.

By reflecting on the Word of God we comply (though it is only partly) with our name and calling. We are chosen and called to be God's children. Resting on this dedication to God and neighbour we can bear a lot in this life that is sometimes so hard. We bear adversity and oppression with calm courage. We are honoured when we are afflicted because of the name of Christ.

Solo Christo

By Christ alone. Listening to Bucer one tastes that the community with Christ is the heart of his spirituality. It is a question of Christ being all or nothing. The good Spirit of God is given to the elect because of Christ's sacrifice. He who rests in Him can be assured of eternal life. The saints were built on Christ and therefore assured of God's mercy. So they will sleep a carefree, peaceful sleep.

Soli Deo gloria

All honour be to God. From Bucer we learn that a Christian life is a theocentric life. A life in intimate association with the Lord, A life of prayer in serious communication of the heart with God and a sound reflection on what is lacking in us as to the glory of God, with an ardent supplication to Him for restoration.

God's honour is at stake in every aspect of life. Bucer's theology is not only covenant-theology, but also theology of the Kingdom of God. Reformed piety as stamped by him focuses on the imitation of Christ in all spheres of life, not only in personal godliness and personal devotions, not only in the ecclesiastical realm, but likewise in politics, in economics, in science and culture, with an eye to God's doings in history with his covenant people Israel and with the nations. With Bucer a Christian expectation for the future does not at all lead to abandoning the world or inertia. He is convinced that spiritual matters are weightier than physical ones, and those of the future weightier than those of the presence. Yet he is balanced and level-headed enough not to deny the blessing of a long life on earth.

Life itself and prosperity in outward things are good gifts of God.

In the expectation of the great Future we reflect God's goodness in our existence. If thus His great goodness becomes apparent in us as children of God, many will be invited to embrace it. We should especially exert ourselves to reflect the heavenly Father in His goodness. That is an inviting life: Come and join us on the way to a better homeland!

Reflection

The consistory that in our bold imagination had invited Bucer for the commemoration of the Reformation, considers in the weeks after that the question how what Bucer had said can be applied to the current situation and context of the congregation. This process of reflection is a continuing business, but in any case an attempt is made to establish some principles. The consistory arrives at three fundamental aspects.

Theocentric

God is in the centre. The consistory members have in common that Bucer's testimony has given them new enthusiasm and courage to tell in church and society in no uncertain terms that life before God's countenance is wholesome and good for people. They realise well and once again what they and together with them all the other active community members are doing it all for in the church and God's kingdom. Properly speaking even our very humanity is at stake. For the gospel makes it clear that we, people matter, that we are more than just chips of wood floating on an ocean, more than pinpoints in an immense, expanding universe. God values us, indeed very much so. He wants to make contact with man. From eternity to eternity

He makes an effort for the salvation of man, because He has made it a point of honour.

If you realise all this to some degree, you know that man lacks an enormous lot if he lacks God. As a believer you heartily wish everyone the communion with the God and Father of Jesus Christ. We have been taken care of and that's why we can now take care of our neighbour. We are orphans no longer, therefore we will take pity on the abandoned.

Faith and love are the two sides of the one medal. People really do not realise what they are lacking. What a calling and challenge it is to demonstrate in one's life in dependence on the Holy Spirit how wholesome believing is. A life that puts God in the centre is open for other people. Therefore the consistory considers the necessity to find ways of communicating the message of the gospel and also to take an intense interest in the world of experience of people that we meet nowadays. This fits in completely with the emphasis of the Reformed tradition on the appropriation of salvation. Salvation is not an impersonal mass product. It deals with a unique person meeting the most personal God. It deals with a living relation.

Disciple of the Word

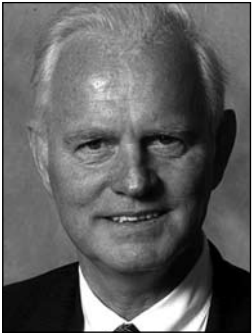
In its considerations the consistory is well aware of the task to get close to people. Yet the consistory realises how essential it is in obedience to God's Word to remain critical of the current culture of experience, also in its religious expressions. Attentive listening to present man and to the world is preceded and also followed by tuning in to God's unique words in the Scriptures.

It would be a misunderstanding to think that the gap can be bridged by adapting the message to the taste of the receivers. The salting salt would lose its taste and its potential to cleanse and preserve. For sure the church cannot give in to a style of living that is typical of the closed world view of materialism.

That we are strangers on this earth does not alter our responsibility. At the end of the times deep missionary and diaconal concern is expected from Christ's church. This is a direct result of the expectation of Him that is coming. It entails inventiveness to present the time-honoured gospel again and again in new, modern forms, and readiness to serve one's fellow men in their needs, their loneliness and brokenness. I am convinced that during this search we will be surprised to see the essence and relevance of Reformed piety radiate time and again. ■

Christians have a political calling in a secular society

In the Netherlands the so-called secularisation-proposal is more and more subject of criticism. It is the proposition that as prosperity and scientific knowledge are growing, there will be less and less room for religion. It has been apparent for a long time that this proposition does not hold outside Europe and North-America. But nowadays also in Europe--and The Netherlands is no exception--more attention is being paid to religion. However, religion must be now regarded as comprising more than just Christianity.



The questions that all this raises for churches and Christians are studied in political theology. This section of ethics is also given more and more attention. It is in this field that the subject of the doctoral thesis *Levend in Leviathan* (Living in Leviathan) lies, with which the Professor of ethics of the (liberated) Reformed Theological University at Kampen, Ad de Bruijne, obtained his doctorate at Leyden last autumn.

In the theological discussion and in political practice De Bruijne distinguishes five ways of approach:

1. **theocratic:** state and church together are under God's authority (Great-Britain)
2. **liberal:** religion and the public domain must be strictly kept apart (U.S.)
3. **civil religion:** one way or another religion is the necessary centre part of society (Germany)
4. **confessional pluralism:** various religions publicly balance each other and in that way also society (the Netherlands)
5. **double thought:** in one's own domain openly Christian, but in public plural and neutral (Australia)

Apparently it is possible within a democracy to give shape to the relation between religion, church and public life in various ways, whereas each position also has its disadvantages and problems. In the theological debate two more positions are added to the five above:

6. Christians must not strive for a public place for the Christian religion, but ought to form an alternative community in the public domain (Hauerwas)
7. O'Donovan's theory

In his dissertation De Bruijne investigates the value of the latter theory for the present-day debate in the Netherlands. O'Donovan is a prominent Anglican, professor of Oxford from 1982 until 2006, later of Edinburgh. His most important books are *Resurrection and Moral Order* (1986), *The Desire of the Nations* (1996) and (together with his wife Joan) *From Irenaeus to Grotius. A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought* (1999).

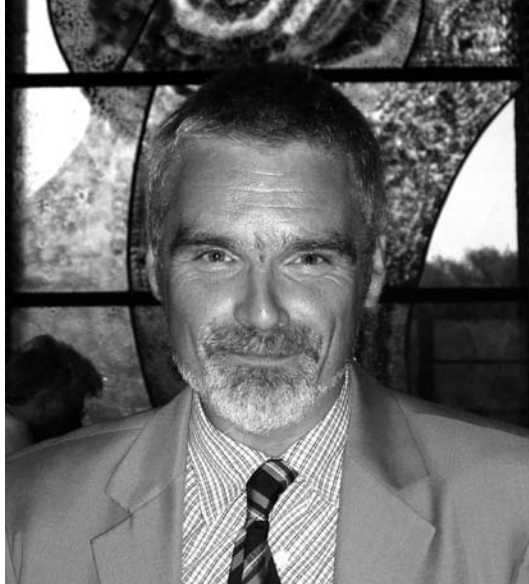
By the term "christendom" O'Donovan means the view that the political order ought to have an openly Christian character. There was once a period in western history when this view was the guiding principle (313-1791). The political order of "christendom", though, remains fully secular. Christians expect the new era of the Kingdom of God, but until the moment that this reality dawns, they still live in the old era of God. At the same time the approaching kingdom of God must openly put its stamp on this secular reality, as long as history continues.

The Bible calls both God and Jesus king. God revealed Himself in the political institutions of a concrete earthly nation (Israel) and an earthly kingship. Jesus Messiah inherits David's throne. This is the key to the reality of what is political. Jesus is the exclusive representative of God's authority. It is only in Him that from now on the collective identity of people and nations is allowed to exist. He is the permanent successor of the earthly human governors of Israel. His government has also to do with the concrete political reality of other nations in the world. A new aeon is beginning in which Christ leads the nations on earth on behalf of God. This cannot but lead to a confrontation between God's politics and the existing earthly politics. But this new reality will remain hidden for the time being, it is not until the second coming of Christ that it will be revealed. Until that moment it can only be seen

About the author:

Jurjen P. de Vries (1940) studied theology at the Theological University of the Reformed churches (Liberated) in Kampen. For many years he has been editor-in-chief of *Nederlands Dagblad*, a Reformed daily newspaper, and from 1999 until 2003 he was a member of the Senate of the Dutch Parliament.

Dr. A.L.Th. de Bruijne
(Photo P.G.B. de Vries)



in the faith. Because of that there is an interim in the history of the world; indeed, the old era is not a thing of the past yet, and thus the governors of the old era are still in office. God keeps making use of the outdated instruments of His providence. They still have to serve Him by maintaining a certain justice on earth and in this way to reflect something of his restoring judgement. (For O'Donovan, rectifying judgement is typical of politics).

Only one

In principle only one political community is possible after the coming of Christ: the church as the hand of Israel extended to the world. But the church cannot as yet relieve the existing political communities and is therefore dependent on these communities for its concrete earthly existence. It has to participate in them and it needs their structures. It is only in sacrament and liturgy that it is a recognisable new community and as such it takes its place in society. It is not allowed to create its own political structures and present these as direct forms of God's kingdom. It is not allowed to isolate itself from the existing political societies, neither present itself in their midst as a counter-society. The church is living in Leviathan (see the book of Revelation).

At the same time the bearers of political responsibility are addressed by the gospel in a special way. Not only must they have their lives re-created in the dedication to Christ, but they also must surrender their political authority to Him and openly recognise His authority and government. At the same time they will humbly receive and under His authority learn how to fill in the limited remainder of their task, seeing to a certain provisional justice on the way to His kingdom and in the service of the mission of His church. (Psalm 2, Isa.60:3, Acts 9:15).

Thora

God's law remains in force. The wisdom from the

Thora helps to shape a secular order that has to be "christian" at the same time. The state, too, is a heritage of "christendom" as a permanent structure of government, even when governors change; this will prevent the absolutising of political power. The good aspects of modern society cannot be retained and deadlocks cannot be overcome without a conscious assimilation of this tradition. Incidentally, we ought not to forget that the tradition of "christendom" has also shown serious shortcomings, especially in its concept of political authority. Biblical-theological renewal remains a necessity.

O'Donovan makes a stand against four points of criticism of "christendom":

1. The church compromises itself with worldly power. Such abuses can be prevented if the church keeps confronting the rulers with the gospel.
2. "Christendom" leads to pressure and violence in the field of faith and conviction. This is a lapse. It is true that a consensus with respect to content will be conducive to binding laws, but the same holds good for liberalism, even if it should pretend to be neutral.
3. An "established" church robs the church of its freedom and discriminates against other churches. But separation of tasks and responsibility will remain possible even then.
4. The Bible portrays the church as a suffering minority. But this is not a fundamental necessity. The two witnesses of Rev. 11 stand up on their feet again--as long as the church remains faithful to its prophetic calling.

Nevertheless O'Donovan gives strong criticism of "christendom":

1. The missionary colour of the church threatens to fade because of it.
2. The theocratic interpretation that it was often given fails to appreciate the secular character of earthly politics and it overestimates the possibilities of Christian rulers.

Temporary character

In the course of church history, the church and Christians had to face ethical questions with regard to their actions in the midst of a political reality. The idea of christendom is the historically coloured answer to it (and so, according to O'Donovan, it is not immediately to be derived from the Bible). Therefore the idea "christendom" has a fallible and provisional character and is determined by an



André Rouvoet

historical constellation. We must not take this as *the* model of christian political responsibility. The period of “christendom” can serve as an example when we are called upon today to understand God’s revelation concerning politics and society. Our answer need not be identical, but it should be of at the same high level. Modern western society bears the deep stamp of the age-long struggle of the church in its midst. But this late-modern society is characterised by its departure from church and gospel, forgetting its historical interrelation with Christian truth. The impasses within western society are related to the severance of that tie with the formative past. The present late-modern society will not overcome its problems, unless it learns from “christendom” to keep the connection with the church and its message open.

O’Donovan’s theory offers a third road between current dilemmas such as liberalism or theocracy, civil religion or the shunning politics by Christians. De Bruijne draws the conclusion that O’Donovan’s theory is fruitful because of its openness to the reality of God’s providence, the rule of Christ and the counterforce of evil. This openness relieves one of the ambition to develop a sound model. This is fundamentally impossible, too. A weakness in the theory, according to De Bruijne is the proposition that every society needs a religious centre, its too easy rejection of pluralism, and a certain outdatedness of theological insights about creation, history, and eschaton.

Speak in public

We can learn from O’Donovan that the church must speak in public in a prophetic way by pointing out both the final and the pre-final objectives for the political society, as they follow from God’s revelation in Christ, and by exposing the anti-christian dynamics in its opposition against the rule of Christ. With this perspective individual Christians ought to then participate in public debate and political action. They must not strive for a Christian society, but they can be thankful if such a thing occurs. Neither must Christians lay a

direct normative claim, although a direct appeal to the knowledge of God’s revelation is indispensable for the sake of a clear understanding. In their concrete contributions they know they have been taught by the tradition of “christendom”. This will often enable them to improve the terms on which a debate is held and offer new perspectives. In the public domain an aversion can be noticed against religious and theological reasoning which appeals to revealed commandments of God or to church and tradition. Non-christians experience this reasoning as irrelevant and unconvincing, as unverifiably authoritarian and inadmissably imperative. Christians must realise that the recognition of and the consensus about this normativeness is not a matter of course, but depends on God’s providence. Otherwise they will put up an extra obstacle for their discussion partners and strengthen the liberal reaction that declares religious arguments out of order. Thus fully biblical politics can go hand in hand with earthly responsibility and with the possibility of rational communication and consensus with other members of society.

Renewed interest

This latter view is of renewed interest in the Netherlands now that, as is to be expected, a positively Christian party with six seats in Parliament, the ChristenUnie (the Christian Union), is going to take part in a new government coalition for the first time in its history.

As concerns the identity of a society, O’Donovan points out a road between relativism and absolutism, conservatism and progressiveness. Every identity of human co-existence has to step back behind Christ.

In that secondary position it can then, under God’s providence, yet receive a temporarily regulating function. In this way the value of continuity and the fundamental openness for historical change can be kept together. In the discussion about the statement concerning the Christian roots in a European constitution this insight may be clarifying. Europe nowadays can no longer be called a Christian continent without further comment, but it has seen a long period of christendom. There was much that deserves criticism in it (the absolutism of rulers, religious wars), but christendom has left its deep mark on Europe. It would be wrong to ignore that. Not, incidentally, that De Bruijne has exhausted the subject with his commentary of O’Donovan’s theory. He intends to develop his own view in a later book. We are looking forward to that with great interest. ■

Creative and Reformed

About room for missionary projects

No, this title does not say that we had better tamper with the Reformed principles. "Creative bookkeeping" is easily considered a sign of fraud and disaster, but with the compound "creative and Reformed" I would rather draw attention to the innovative power of the notion "Reformed". Reformed and being creative are partners by nature. This is not new at all, for the combination creative and Reformed is actually a redundancy, like "wet water" or a "round circle". The adjective "creative" emphasises a quality that is already inherent to "Reformed".



Nowadays, however, you need to struggle to lay the creative notion of "Reformed" on the table. In the church and in society Reformed and creative appear more like opposites. Reformed people are: austere dressed, averse from any change, enjoy a traditional menu, hold two church services a day, avoid football on Sundays. The mouldy image of what is "Reformed" makes many people turn a deaf ear nowadays to pleas for the vital importance of Reformed lines, also in missionary projects. But wrongly so! Or is it?

Reformed to the bone

In the scope of this column I wish to deal with the meaning of the notion Reformed in a missionary and ecumenical context, for example in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Williamstown, Harare, Zwolle, Nairobi, Delhi, Jakarta, etc.

As a teacher of the training department of De Verre Naasten (IRTT) I exert myself for Reformed Theology – so with an emphasis on the Reformed content of this theology. In the decision process to enter into contact with other churches in the world DVN test them by important criterions of approachability on Reformed doctrine and conduct in life. In relations with other churches in the world deputies BBK also use the Reformed doctrine as a key to either open or close the door. And the International Conference

of Reformed Churches (ICRC) mentions as an important ground for its existence "to present a Reformed testimony to the world". Members are only admitted if they 'faithfully adhere to the Reformed Faith'. We come across the same grounds in our country with Deputies for Church Unity and, as we may assume, also with the missionary projects that receive financial support from our federation of churches (Enkhuizen, Bergen op Zoom, Lichtenvoorde, Amsterdam, Venlo, Maastricht), or that are in any other way ecclesiastically embedded (Stadshartkerk Amstelveen, Mijdrecht). Reformed idiosyncrasies are deeply ingrained in us. Apparently they also form a central theme for our church life outwardly. More often than not they are the legitimisation for founding and maintaining a separate institute, its reason for existence, therefore. That is why the question of the lasting value of these Reformed idiosyncrasies is so extraordinary exciting, especially because for the rank and file of our churches these things are no longer self-evident and clear. For quite frankly, what is yet the meaning of "Reformed"? And what should it mean in our missionary projects?

Solidification in forms

A Reformed missionary, who went abroad to plant a church, was given instructions to do so in agreement with the Three Forms of Unity (the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort) and the Church Order. More often than not this emphatic demand (which had long been a matter of course) led to bizarre situations. Missionaries considered the Reformed character of their work and the forms of the home front as one and the same thing. Thus it could happen that Papuans had to get familiar with the Genevan melodies, which, depending on the home church, had to be sung metrically or not. The liturgical order of worship specified by the General Synod of Middelburg 1933 was introduced as the standard "order of worship".

In Harare there is a church building that could be a replica of any village church in the Veluwe (a rural area of the Netherlands). What was typically

About the author:

*Rev. Gerrit Riemer (*1951) has been working as a missionary in Papua New Guinea for the Reformed Church (lib.) of Enschede-North. Since he has been back in The Netherlands, he has been writing theological books for the Reformed community in Indonesia. He is also involved in the organisation of Intercultural Reformed Theological Training for the general synodical committee for mission, assistance and training / De verre Naasten*

Reformed embedded itself in outward forms and was identified with them. That was also how it was understood and adhered to by the receivers. On Kalimantan Barat, for example, a change in the liturgy (a departure from the order introduced by the first missionaries) causes much heated discussion. Elsewhere, too, church leaders prove to be fanatic defenders of the forms handed down, and they consider deviation from them a devaluation of the Reformed character of their church. This phenomenon is not only typical of the Reformed mission work, but also of the mission work of other ecclesiastical traditions.

Talented expressiveness

It was not until the last two decades that real attention grew for contextualisation, that is to say that the receiving culture itself gets a firm say in matters of finding forms fitting to the church service. I was in a position to cooperate in that and I have experienced how immensely important this is. For the receiver of the gospel becomes creative with the gospel; he discovers how he himself can and may formulate the answer to the gospel. The forms that he creates – in order to present them before God’s countenance – sprout from his own art of expression, as it developed in his past. He discovers that this God “has crowned him with glory and honour”. It is to Him that he owes his special talents and gifts. The way he is, is the way he finds expression to reflect God’s glory. Therefore no Genevan melodies, no versified psalms, no order of Middelburg or Kampen, no literal Decalogue read in the morning service, etc. Instead of this, he makes use of his own art of singing and his own woodcarving to decorate the church and his own architecture for the building of a church. He also makes use of a way of catechising that corresponds with indigenous didactics and a style of preaching that utilises the local narrative art. Initially all this was looked upon by the Reformed home front with a certain amount of suspicion, but the conviction that things had to be done like this, grew, and that indigenous forms would much more guarantee a real appropriation of biblical-Reformed content. Moreover, would not God enjoy Himself fully, now that his people world-wide reflects to Him the good of the rich variety of his creation in such an authentic way?

Carved images

Creative and Reformed, this is only possible if what is typical of the Reformed character is not attached to certain forms. It would actually be the

easiest way to fix and preserve what is Reformed. We would soon be ready; what our ancestors have developed would be good enough for all times, and we can rebaptise the church a museum. We could close the TUK (Theological University Kampen) for our only aim would be preserving everything in its original state. There is then no need of ongoing understanding, neither of research programmes. Everything is settled. The way in which to interpret the Bible, the liturgical forms, methods of catechising, the style of preaching, the missionary approach. Because of this rigid fixation of forms, much content seems to have solidified and be fixed immovably, with all the dangers of sacralising and ritualising involved; dangers of which the Reformers had liberated the church and also wanted to protect against for the future. When form and content are identified, we run the risk of making God into a carved image again. That is not what Reformed is meant to be. On the contrary.

The risky enterprise of coming face to face.

Then what? What is the idea? The heart of the Reformation is closely related to the Scriptures. The point is that we listen to the voice of God. The voice of God that is to be heard right through the paper of the Bible. One who listens to the voice of God enters into the world of God. This world and this life thus catch the light of heaven, right through the paper of the Bible. This is how God allows people to meet him. In this confusing world of spirituality and religiousness “Reformed” only wants to be guided by an understanding of the Scriptures. Listening to them is an introduction into amazement about God’s creation; listening to them produces absolute trust in his guidance; understanding that renders a deep experience of the meaning of the covenant that He makes with people. The far-reaching meaning of that word of Scripture incites people to prophesy, to serve, to speak in all languages. That gives mouth, heart and hand to love God and one’s neighbour. Creatively. Doing the same thing over and over again means the silence of the grave. The encounter, the venture of the encounter and in that way of renewal, creation and recreation right through the paper – that produces blossoming.

Divine Scriptures

The Reformed identity becomes apparent where the interpretation of the Bible retains its value as the final argument that all arguments of a different nature have to give way to. The churches of the Reformation have laid this down by way of an anchor in article 7 of the Belgic confession (as



The Reformed Church in Venlo rents a church building from the Catholic Parish of Boekend, a part of Venlo.
(Photo P.G.B. de Vries)

also in art. 31 of the Church Order) “It is unlawful for anyone, even for an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in Holy Scripture”. A Reformed person will elevate the “divine Scriptures” for their uniqueness. What they teach is “most perfect and complete in all respects”.

Literalness: a heresy

Yet this is not all. This is only the start and it shows how difficult this starting point is, and how wrong it can prove to be in practice. Church history can be described not only as the struggle to retain the Scriptures, but also as a constant struggle to understand them properly. At bottom church history is the history of the exegesis and the interpretation of the Word of God. In this history the church discovered, often at its own cost, how to do it and not to do it. Thus the church rejected notarial, wooden literalness in its doctrine of Scripture, a heresy, however, that keeps cropping up. The church learned to preserve the Word of God against Biblicism, against fundamentalism, against the use of a Bible word out of context, against endless allegorising and exemplarising.

Re-sourcing and renewal

Biblical scholarship is the heart of the Reformed identity. The formulation of the faith uses the results of former times, but because of the starting point that has been laid down (the primacy of the Word of God) it does not fear in the present situation to make different choices both as to form and, if new insight in the Scriptures requires this, as to content. This re-sourcing is essential for the vitality of Reformed theology; it leads to continuity and to renewal. The Reformed churches (liberated) are changing, as disquieted church members often say. Well, it would be really disquieting if these churches were *not* changing. This is the first thing

to be said about it. And the second thing is that any change can only identify itself as “Reformed” if the first mark of “Reformed” (sound Bible-exegesis) is not bartered away.

Points passed.

As regards Bible interpretation and the formulation of the faith, the church in its history has had to define its position time and again, and sometimes to shift its ground. In this way the church accepted its responsibility in distinguishing between spirits. The track was extended, points were passed. Sometimes it can be necessary to retrace one’s steps as far as behind the points, that is if ongoing Bible study requires. We must not deal with the results of good biblical scholarship in a cramped way. Not even when it should mean that positions taken in the past must be altered. At the same time our history often shows us how not to do it. “Reformed” also becomes apparent as a tradition warned, warned against the misuse of the Scriptures, warned against subjectivism, rationalism, liberalism, anthropocentrism, mysticism. What a long list this can become! The thread in the rejection of all these kind of things is: maintaining the first principle of the Reformation, the renewed obedience to Holy Scripture. The church that is keen to listen to what the Spirit has to say through the Word this time.

Warned and Reformed

The intention of this article is to create room and to indicate the boundaries. It is necessary to create room to move for missionary and ecumenical projects both in our country and abroad, but also to define its boundaries in what is more than just a rough draft. Every Reformed church founder is a warned man. He works under the authority of churches that in the past have laid out the track by trial and error and have passed certain points. This has found its expression in amongst other things our Creeds. He will seriously take these into account, he will put a lot of work into his own conviction, and he is prepared to give account for it. Even if he is founding a new church in modern Amsterdam, historically seen he does not start from scratch. That has a deep meaning. It does not mean that with an eye to his target group (people who do start from scratch) he must not be given all room to find, together with these newcomers, new forms to experience the faith and praise the Lord God. It does mean that in trying to find these things he proves to know how to approve what is excellent. He is well-grounded in the Scriptures and he will not run

upon rocks that the church has already run upon in the course of history.

Limited(!) room(!)

As the supporters of this work the churches would do well to put and keep the consultation with the missionary workers about the Reformed content of their work on the agenda. Let that be a constructive and cordial consultation. If that happens we can be generous in giving these projects much freedom to develop their liturgy and religious forms and to discover how creative "Reformed" can be.

Thus mission churches will in a well-considered way develop forms different from those that are common practice in the existing churches. From the existing churches this requires a de-absolutising of the familiar patterns. It has taken far too much time in Papua and in many other places to find room and methods for that. With that in mind let us be more magnanimous and effective with regard to projects at home without from the very start obliging these churches to adapt in the future to what is "common practice" within the federation of churches. When such a mission church develops into a self-supporting church (that is the idea, isn't it?) they will then be loyally accepted within the federation of churches, and retain their own character. I am convinced that in the interaction that will develop the existing churches will also be enriched. Let us as churches stimulate the Reformed character to prove its creativity and elasticity and that a diversity of new churches can arise which "govern themselves according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head", Belgic Confession Art. 29. ■

Chaos in the church

If he is asked to characterise the situation of the church, it is with one word: 'chaos'. Nevertheless, Prof. Van 't Spijker (79) is not dejected. The retired professor from Apeldoorn knows that only orthodoxy survives. "Because of my age I recognise patterns which I know through my studies of church history."

By Huib de vries

For decades the Christian Reformed Prof. dr. W. van 't Spijker was busy studying church history, tracing connections and analyzing developments. Especially the latter is almost impossible when it comes to the present, for "our church life is characterised by disorder, lack of oversight and insight. Everything is in a state of flux, in all churches. The situation reminds me of the chaos and emptiness before creation."

"As possible causes I see factors that are anchored deep in history. In the early church and in the Middle Ages life was orderly arranged. This was also the case during the Reformation. After the Enlightenment, however, everything became more diffuse. Post Modernism cannot be explained apart from the Enlightenment."

In the Netherlands, reformed protestantism flourished conspicuously long. How do you explain this?

"Especially because it had a clear structure, through the 'pillarization' of Dutch society. The question, of course, is whether this structure covered the content. Now the great pillars have disappeared. The challenge is to give shape again to positive elements from the past, but then without pillarization."

You do not wish for it to return?

"No, pillarization has negative side effects. One model in church history that could be of help today is that of the early church. There are clear parallels between that period and ours. Of course you cannot do history over again. The great difference is that the early Christian church existed in a pre-Christian society, whereas we live in the post-Christian era."

Compared with surrounding countries, the situation in the Netherlands is still relatively positive. Is that difference going to disappear in the next twenty years?

"I do not expect that. In the Netherlands there has been an orthodox movement for centuries. I think that this will remain, although it will face more difficulty. The weakness of this movement is the lack of ecclesiastical unity."

Interview with Prof. dr. W. van 't Spijker



Prof. dr. W. van 't Spijker
(photo Reformatorisch
Dagblad)

Has this weakness grown due to the formation of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands in 2004?

"The final result of the unification process lacks the original enthusiasm. It has become a question of turning this way and that. The liberalism that was tolerated in the Dutch Reformed Church, is still present in the PCN. It is a simple transformation. In principle, little has changed.

How do you assess the formation of the Restored Reformed Church?

As I see it, it was unnecessary. There is even more confusion now.

Rev J.H. Velema expects that one part of the Christian Reformed Churches will unite with the Restored Reformed Church, and the remaining part with the Reformed Churches (liberated) or the Netherlands Reformed Churches. Do you agree with him?

"No, because this can easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy, for which I do not want to bear responsibility. Apart from the Reformation and

the Secession of 1834, all schisms can be explained on the basis of factors relating to character. I still consider it an advantage that our churches have not experienced a schism. But I do fear that recognition among us will disappear due to the growing diversity. The local situation receives priority over national decisions. That is independentism. Apart from that I see a lot of ignorance of the principles of the reformed confession, also among leaders."

Is this characteristic of Christian Reformed Churches?

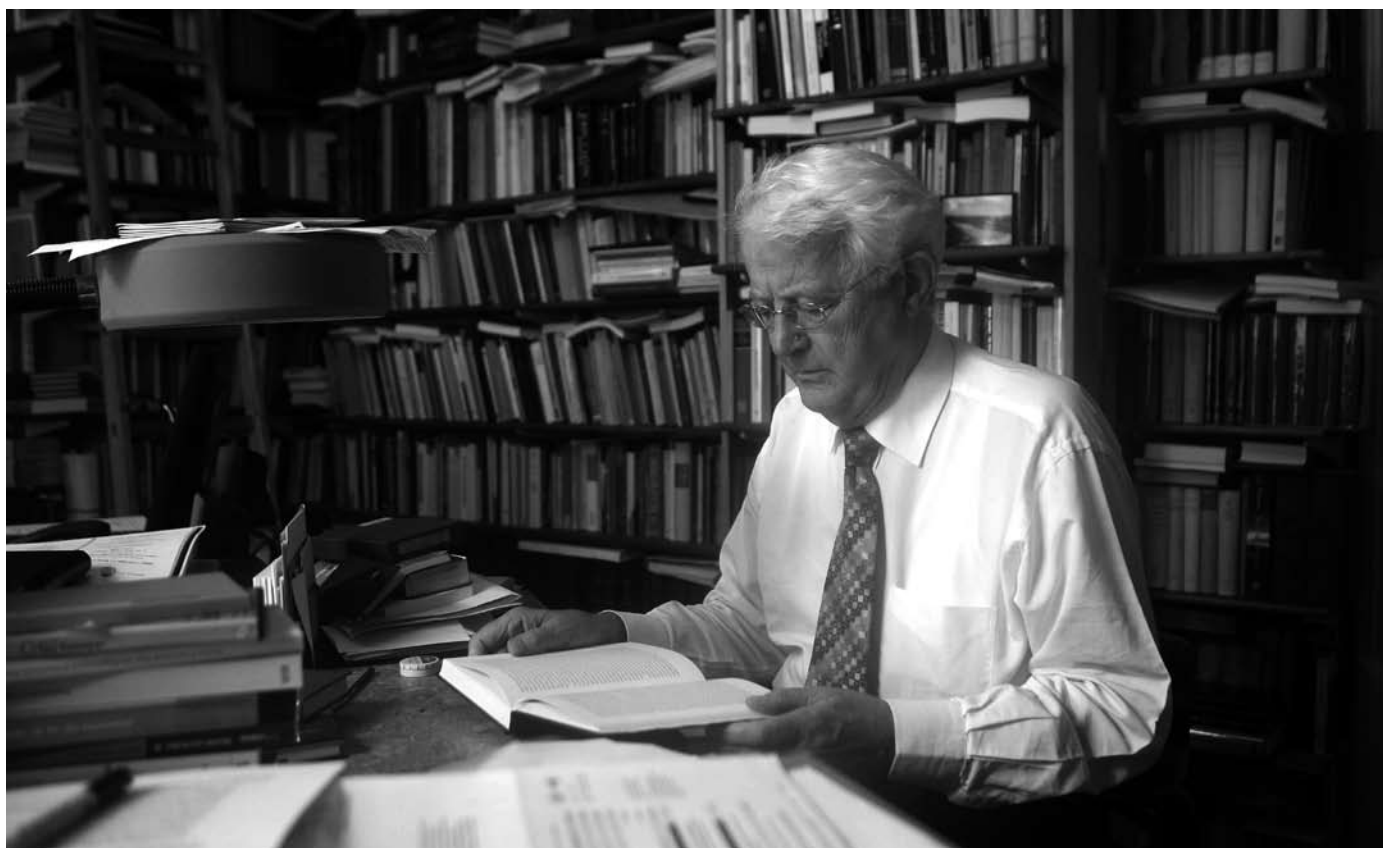
Certainly not. It is a result of the individualistic climate that pervades our western culture. Through the media, the world has been broken open. The consequences can be seen in all churches. Take, for example, the great confusion in the Reformed Churches (Liberated) which were a bulwark of ecclesiastical uniformity for many years.

The lack of historical awareness, the influence of individualism and the emphasis on emotions explain the great impact of the free evangelical movement, which unites all these elements. Choruses have almost been canonised in many Reformed churches. Nonetheless the Psalms will survive. I am no advocate of exclusive psalmody, but nothing can beat the Psalms. Augustine said: 'How can you praise God better than with His own Word?'

Prof. C. Graafland said that the Protestant Church in the Netherlands only has a future if a fruitful integration with the free evangelical movement takes place.

I would not say that. It only has a future if the great principles of the Reformation are relived and restudied. And as far as church development is concerned, people do not realise what they are risking if they abandon Reformed church structure. This was not invented by man but based on Scripture. History teaches us that a biblical church structure helps to protect the content of faith. Free evangelical and charismatic circles, with their emphasis on the Spirit, cannot save the established churches. Our fathers also spoke about the Holy Spirit but did not disconnect the Spirit from structure. The Belgic Confession says that the church "must be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word." Gospel, Word, Spirit and structure belong together. In free evangelical circles this is not recognized at all.

"The crass ignorance of principles of the reformed confession is striking".



*Prof. dr. W. van 't Spijker
in his studyroom
(photo Reformatorisch
Dagblad)*

What is the attraction then?

"The new generation is searching for authenticity and biblical piety in new forms. Many parents have not lived this out and passed it on to their children. Children will therefore look for it elsewhere. Unfortunately they do so in the wrong place".

Among young people there is hardly any idea of awareness of the church. Can this also be seen positively?

It is a good thing if people start to see that church life is broader than their own small part of the Reformed world. I understand if young people start to question all sorts of theological discussions and ask "What is this all about?" Those discussions did harm to the true catholicity of the church, as well as to the catholicity of devotion. One church places special emphasis on the covenant, another on experiential faith". By making all sorts of compartments in devotional life, you run the risk of losing piety itself. True catholic piety needs an ecclesiastical structure. This leads to a healthy awareness of the church."

Within the Reformed denominations there is growing number of questions around the authority of Scripture. How should we react to this?

This problem also requires an authentic piety. The

Scriptures should be subjected to the standards of so-called science. The Bible is primarily the book of God's covenant, in which we read how God lives with his people. The Bible begins with creation, not with the covenant between God and Abraham, but you cannot separate these two from each other. If Isaiah 40 speaks of God's almighty power in creation, he does so in the context of the covenant."

Do you see the discussion about the origins of the world, the reality of miracles and the way the Bible speaks about homosexuality as a threat for the Reformed denominations?

These discussions take place in every age. They give me concern, but history teaches me to put that into perspective. The soldiers of Philips of Hesse appeared at the Diet of Augsburg with on their uniforms these words in Latin : "The Word of the Lord stands forever." Theories about the Word come and go, but the Word itself stands firm and keeps comforting and drawing people".

For churches on the right, the theological developments are a reason to seek isolation. Can you understand that?

Certainly, but it is no solution, because you cannot take part in public discussion. Internally isolation leads to tensions which will surface sooner or

The Korean Institute of Reformed Studies (KIRS)

In the Korean Presbyterian Church is 'a lack of accurate and profound academic researches about the Calvin theology itself through studies of the original texts' Besides Reformed theology did not influence the church practice of pastoral duties and missionary work, nor the church's involvement in culture and society.

How to overcome this? By going back *ad fontes*, to the originals of Bible, Church Fathers and Reformers. That was the answer Prof. Lee Hwan Bong gave in his Director's Address at the opening of the Korean Institute of Reformed Studies, based at Kosin Christian University, May 30, 2006. Prof. Dr. B.J. van der Walt from South Africa delivered a lecture on 'Christian Identity and Relevance. The urgent need for Christian organizations and institutions in an increasing secular world'. This institute has the purpose to accomplish systematic and fresh research of the historical Reformation theology and faith with Calvin as the central figure.

By means of academic seminars and publications it hopes to restore the vitality of Korea's reformed theology. The first seminar was held October 30, 2006, to celebrate the Reformation. The theme was 'Calvin and the Church'. The institute has plans to open a 'Classical Language Academy' to train students in the languages needed to read the original texts. In the long term it hopes to realize an integral Korean translation of the complete Calvin. For that purpose it has started to establish a specialized collection of books and papers on Reformation subjects, also in an electronic way. As a special target was adopted to publish a Korean version of the *Institutes of Christian Religion* at the occasion of the celebration of the 500th anniversary of Calvin's birth in 2009.

The KIRS is founded in Kosin University in Busan (www.kirs.co.kr). Information: prof. Lee Hwang Bong (email: wblee@kosin.ac.kr).

later. A church that opts for isolation cannot be a missionary church either.

Could the study of Calvin's works be a remedy against distortions in theological thinking?

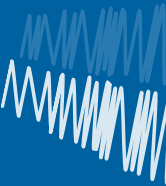
Calvin's work is valuable but cannot be transplanted to our time. The great danger of transplantation is rejection. Calvin teaches you to think clearly but you have to hear him against the background of the whole Reformation: Luther, Bucer, Melancton, Bullinger and others and realise that the Reformation wanted nothing else than return to the early church. That which was valuable in the early church and the Reformation must be given new shape in our times."

Does the current situation make you dispirited?

No, at my age I recognise patterns which I know from studying history. The things I have experienced, I can read about in the handbooks of church history. There is little new under the sun. That gives hope for the future. Because there is One who sees to it that Christ will never be without subjects." ■

This is a shortened version of the interview which appeared in *Terdege*, 23rd August 2006.

News update



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