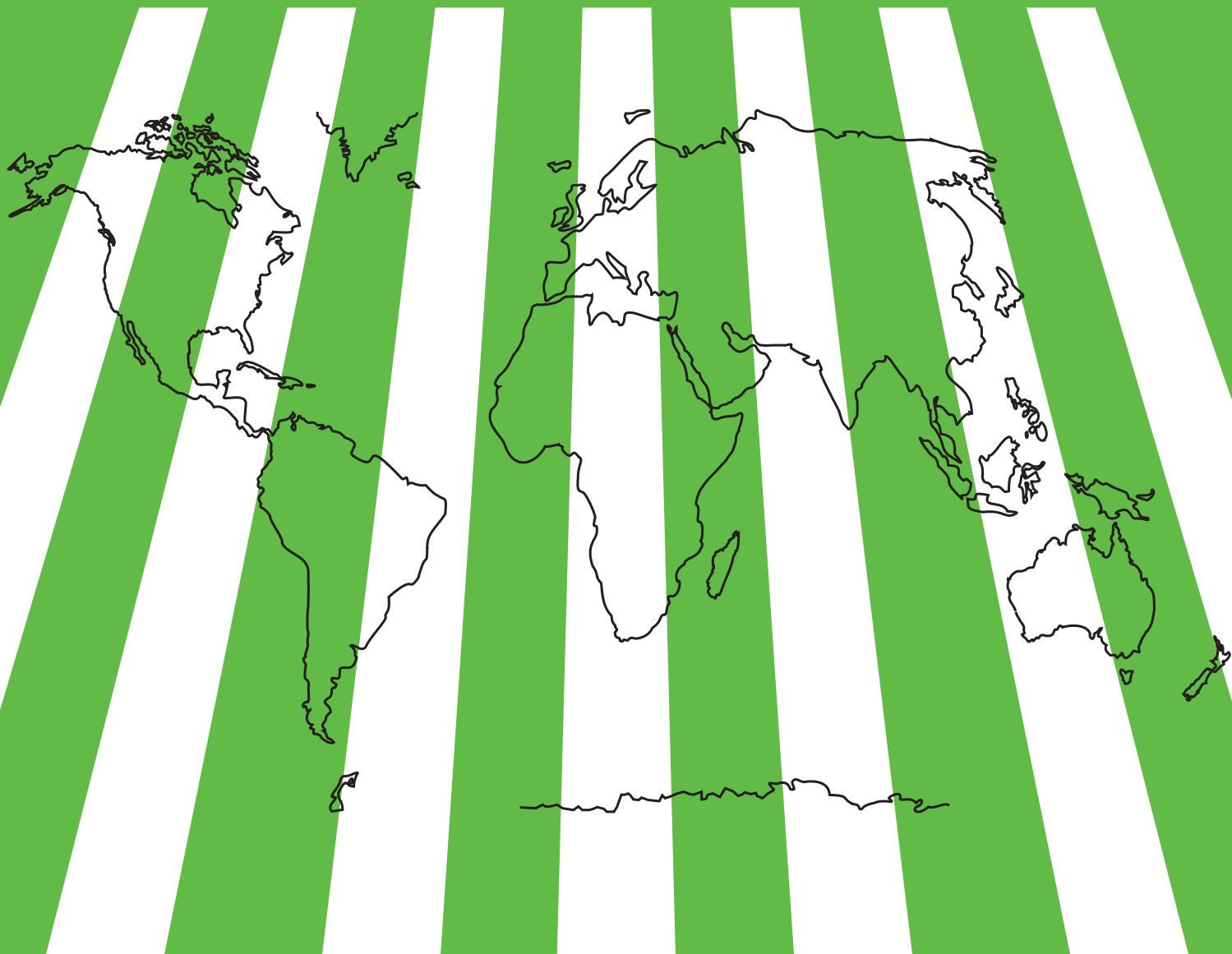


# Lux Mundi

Volume 24 - No. 1  
March 2005



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

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## Editorial

**The world has learned a new word: *tsunami*. The disaster of 26<sup>th</sup> December 2004 was too big for the existing vocabulary. An ocean was shaken. Endless coastlines were affected by the water.**

It was naturalised in the Dutch language within a few days. Also in the figurative sense of the word. The old Dutch word for great flood, 'zondvloed', from the old translations of Genesis 6-9 has gone out of use, but since December 26<sup>th</sup> 2004 we cannot do without a word for 'exceptionally great flood'. Its follower comes from the Japanese. The literal tsunami was followed by a tsunami of horror and then by a tsunami of helping initiatives and a stream of money.

All sorts of prophets were ready to explain what God meant by it. A

punishment for the godless Swedes, said one. A signal of the nearness of the coming of Christ, said another. An unbelievable expression of horrible cruelty, said a third. These were self appointed prophets, who, at best, just repeated old words, because God Himself has given no explanation.

As I see it, a more fitting reaction would be: ask Him for compassion. And: confess that you do not want your trust in His goodness to fail because of so much misery and thus aware of your limitation: hold onto Jesus Christ, the crucified

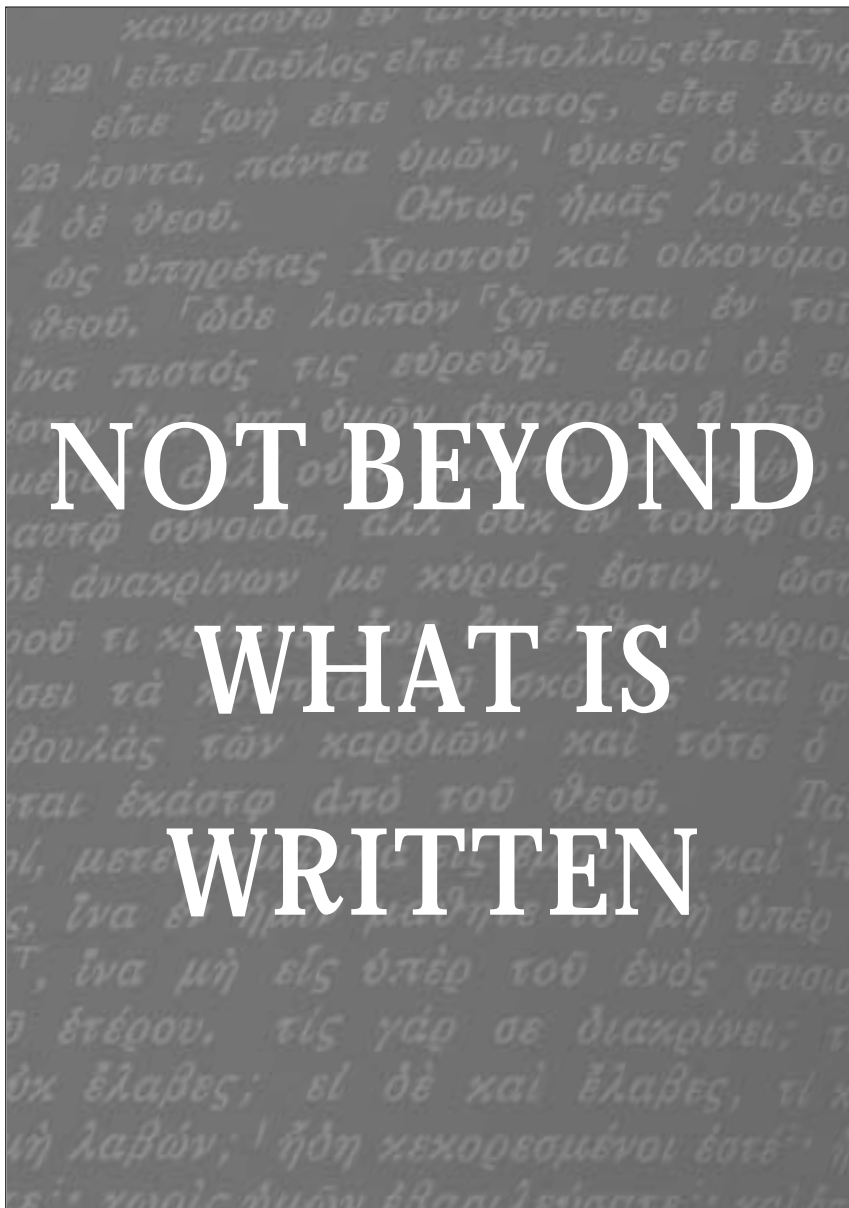
one, who now is risen and glorified and who leads history to its completion. And: plead for the tsunami of his purifying glory over all the earth (Is. 6:3).

This issue offers you again a glimpse into what is happening in the churches in Reformed Holland. The Christian Reformed Synod (CGK) took place last year. The Dutch Reformed (NGK) national meeting held its last sitting in January. The Reformed (liberated) synod will come together this month. You will find some of this reflected in this issue.

Various requests have come to us to present a coherent story of what is happening in the Reformed Churches (liberated) in the Netherlands at this moment. Our conviction is, that the split that is going on, is not necessary. The brothers and sisters who have gone their own way, limit the room given within the Reformed Confessions unnecessarily. This means that we feel that their judgements have done us no justice. It also means that we still consider them as brothers and sisters.

BBK Deputies have wanted to explain the situation to sister churches and contacts abroad. Along with this issue our foreign subscribers will find an example of the brochure Not beyond what is written. If you want to order more copies, this is possible via the BBK office in Zwolle. The address is printed on the inside cover. Shortly, an English and a Dutch version will be available for downloading from our website [www.bbk.gkv.nl](http://www.bbk.gkv.nl) (also via [www.gkv.nl](http://www.gkv.nl)).

I pray for streams of our Lord's delight for all who know Him (Ps. 36).





## General synod GKV 2005

### March 2005: The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated) together once more for a general synod. A preview

**God willing, on March 12<sup>th</sup>, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated) shall come together again in a general synod. According to the church order, this takes place once every three years. The nine provincial synods each send two ministers and two elders to Amersfoort, where the synod will be held in the Kandelaar Church. Just as three years ago, the synod will take place on every Friday and Saturday, until the agenda has been completed. Maybe this time, it might succeed before the summer holiday.**

The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands have eventful years behind them. For years, there has been a small minority, grouped together in the Reformanda association, which has strongly resisted the course of the churches, for example, on the point of renewing of liturgy and extending the repertoire of hymns. They thought that they could detect deviation from the Scriptures in the Synod's statements about issues such as Sunday celebration and divorce. Further, they considered that the synods, other than in the past, stepped much too easily over points of difference in contacts with other churches in the Netherlands, such as the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* (CGK: Christian Reformed Churches).

After a consideration of the objections, the last synod decided to carry on the policies of her predecessors on these points. In answer to this, a number of church members, including emeritus minister Rev. P. van Gurp, called for a new liberation. Approximately 1500 church members (over 1 percent) responded to this call. In the meantime, a number of (regional) churches are founded across the country, and are busy establishing a church association. Apart from that, not any minister nor church council has joined them.

There are church councils which share one or more objections. These have chosen to bring these before the next synod and request a revision. The next synod will have to judge whether or not these requests can be admitted. For the rule is, that after one revision a case must be regarded as definite, unless new grounds are brought up, obviously not handled before.

For the rest, the most important matters come back to the synod via the reports from the various deputies. The last synod appointed more than 30 committees to address issues which were on going between synods and for study tasks. These will all be reporting to the synod 2005. Most of the reports have already been published on the website [www.gkv.nl](http://www.gkv.nl). Some, such as reports from deputies who arrange radio and television transmissions via the public national stations, will not require much synod time, but the

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deputies report about Sunday and the fourth commandment, and that of the deputies for marriage and divorce, will certainly be comprehensively discussed.

#### **Fourth Commandment**

The meaning of the fourth commandment was first raised at the Synod in 1999 because of a letter of objection to a section of a sermon. This synod did not want to denounce the saying that Sunday rest is not a direct commandment from God. The synod of 2002 affirmed this judgement. She indicated that there always have been two approaches to the New Testament meaning of the fourth commandment within the church (as can be seen in a comparison between the Heidelberg Catechism and the Westminster Confession). At the same time, there was a need felt to conquer this difference of insight scripturally. A study committee was appointed to look into this, who last year unanimously published an extensive report (*Zondag HEER-lijke dag*; also issued as a book). In this, the value of the Sunday rest for the New Testament church is held up, but more as a gift than as a commandment.

#### **Divorce**

In their report to the Synod in 2002, the deputies for divorce and remarriage produced a new hermeneutical vision on the Scriptural information about divorce, about which members of the synod also had their questions. This vision is less especially determined by rules as by the charge to live according to the style of God's Kingdom. Critics feared that this could lead to a weaker moral standpoint, but the aim of the deputies was actually the very opposite.

Consistent with the style of the kingdom, saying 'I do', should remain 'I do', as long as both partners are alive. For this reason the church should not go on to solemnise second marriages after divorce. In a new report, the deputies have explained their standpoints further. However the synod will judge this, that divorce is evil in God's sight, remains undisputed.

### **Hymns and spiritual songs**

As far as church music is concerned, the synod released 117 hymns from the collection published in 1973 for the large protestant churches (*Liedboek voor de Kerken*). The Reformed Churches already had a collection of 41 hymns. A further 90 hymns and spiritual songs from other collections and from reformed poets, were released for use in the worship service. The next synod will have to reach a definite decision about these; we have not yet heard of objections to these songs. Alongside this, the committee will be presenting a following selection of 90 songs from the *Liedboek* and another 30 from our own writers. The ultimate goal is that the churches have a dynamic list of spiritual songs at their disposal, and a printed collection consisting of a selection from this list.

### **Canon law and Church Order**

The committee for canon law and church order are bringing a number of proposals which will certainly set tongues wagging. They are pleading for making more work of putting ministers to work as pastors in the public health sector and in prisons. Up until now, the churches have only been involved in the army. The interesting, but also complicated factor of this work, is that ministers are not only there for their own church members but for others as well.

Further, these deputies offer an arrangement for the position of church workers. These are people (m/f) with a master's in theology (without the Biblical languages), who can be employed for certain tasks in the church, in order to

give relief to the minister and / or the elders. These deputies also draw up outlines for a complete revision of the Church Order and ask the synod for permission to proceed on this road.

Suggestions have also been sent in from the churches for revision of the Church Order. One classis wants to be rid of the rotation of the chairmanship of the classis by the ministers and one Particular Synod wants to scrap the rule which states that the minister, by virtue of his office, must be chairman of the church council. Further, one church council requests that there be no objection to offer bread and wine to the sick who are following the worship service at home via a radio or telephone connection.

### **New Bible translation**

The decision about the New Bible translation which appeared last year in the Netherlands, is awaited with tension. From the beginning in 1990, a committee of synod deputies was following the progress. Church members have also worked on it as translators or revisers. The expectation is that deputies now will recommend its usage. If the synod follows this advice, this translation shall quickly replace that of 1951, in which the language has rapidly dated.

### **Asylum seekers**

The synod shall again have to address the issue of the admission of asylum seekers who were members of a Christian church in their own land, to the congregation. The



Approx. 300 articles have arrived for the attention of the synod of Amersfoort Centre, and that is considerably less than the about 2000 articles sent to the Synod of Zuidhorn. Local minister H.J. Boiten will open the synod. (photo P.G.B. de Vries)



last synod decided to allow them to participate in the sacraments as guests, but only to admit them to full membership, when the government had given them a residence permit. Six church councils will object to this affiliation with the (disputed) Dutch government policy for aliens.

### **Relations with other Dutch churches**

The synod shall again speak about the relationships with the closest related churches in the Netherlands, the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* (CGK; from which the *Gereformeerde Kerken* have been separated since 1892) and the *Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken* (NGK; separated since 1967). There does not appear to be much progress in the mutual approaches.

### **Churches abroad**

As usual, a week has been reserved for the receiving of representatives from sister churches abroad. This will take place in the week 23-28<sup>th</sup> of May. Of that time, the first days are for meeting and getting to know the Netherlands. On Friday and Saturday, the representatives will visit the synod

and each will have the chance to speak to the synod and be addressed, on behalf of the synod. Then, in their presence, the report of deputies for relations with churches abroad (BBK) will be discussed.

This report recommends to take up sister church relations with four churches: the Reformed Churches of Kalimantan-Barat and Papua in Indonesia, both originating from missionary work carried out by the Reformed Churches (lib.), the United Reformed Church in North America, which came out of the Christian Reformed Church, and the Presbyterian Free Church Council in Kalimpong (India).

The visit of guests from abroad is a happening which helps the synod realise that the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ is not limited to one place or one person, but that He gathers her together across the whole world. It is a privilege that we may know and maintain contact with so many sister churches through modern communication methods. Without doubt, many churches abroad, and certainly those which have historical links with the Netherlands, shall follow the work of this synod with interest. It also obliges the synod to keep the world wide bonds with Christ's church in view in all decisions.



The Kandelaar church in Amersfoort where the full sittings of the synod will take place. (photo P.G.B. de Vries)



## Enjoyment with a dark side

**What is the Preacher (Ecclesiastes) well known for? Ten to one you will quote 'vanity of vanities'. This is not surprising, for it is a recurring refrain throughout the whole of his wise sayings. And the terse expressions are encapsulated by the provoking statement: utterly meaningless (NIV), or as in the new Dutch translation (NBV): 'air and emptiness, says the Preacher, everything is just emptiness' (1:2 and 12:8, freely translated). This reminds us of Abel (it is the same Hebrew word that the Preacher uses for 'vanity'), the first man who died, and of how he died. What is life? Is it not fleeting, temporary, disappointing, yes even pointless? Is it worth the effort?**

This last question is the exact question the Preacher poses himself in 1:3. If life is so fleeting, what then is the advantage of living under the sun? This question is approached from various standpoints (2:11ff; 3:9; 3:19; 5:8; 6:8; 7:11; 10:11). Now the Preacher would never deny that human activity produces something, he just emphasises its temporary character, especially because of death. He emphasises repeatedly how little remains of what man has accomplished. Yet this demonstration does not lead to a pessimistic view of life. I would even say: on the contrary. Life, as he sees it, is absolutely worth living: enjoy it! The positive sides of life have firm boundaries, to be sure, and become clouded, but the negatives do not remove them. Even though there is no lasting advantage because of death, the Preacher nevertheless recommends that life be enjoyed as much as possible!

### **Enjoy life!**

This is not just a casual comment. The call to enjoy life is a continuing refrain. As many as seven times he recommends life be enjoyed, especially the seemingly little things of life. It is striking that as you continue reading the book, the call becomes more powerful. The first time it is just a simple observation that ultimately, man has nothing left to him but to eat and to drink and find enjoyment in what God's hand offers us (2:24ff). Then in 3:12, the observation is presented as a result of knowledge. After he has considered much, the Preacher comes to the following conclusion. If man takes delight, and finds satisfaction in all his toil, it is a gift from God. He goes on to state that he has come to the conclusion that this indeed is still the best, after having had a good look at many things (3:22).

The fourth time that the call comes to the fore is in 5:18 where he draws attention by using one little phrase: take note! (let op! in Dutch Translation) Here is what I have seen (NKJV) and realised (NIV): that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to enjoy all good as a gift of God. The Preacher is realistic, nevertheless, and admits that this enjoyment cannot be separated from the necessary toil. In

### **About the author:**

Since 1997, Rev. Egbert Brink has been minister of the Reformed Church (liberated) in Waddinxveen. He studied at the Theological University in Kampen and at the Faculté de Théologie Libre in Aix en Provence. He has written several books. His popular treatment of Reformed doctrine *Het Woord vooraf* will be published in English hopefully later this year, under the title 'His Word before yours'.

8:15, the signal is even stronger; the conviction is growing, as it were. The recommendation now sounds enthusiastic: So I commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad...

It is not just a recommendation, it even becomes a charge. In 9:7-9, it nearly sounds like a command. The Preacher presses the point, convinced of the wisdom for life: eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart! This conviction is underlined with a confirmation from God Himself: God favours what you do. Finally, in 11:9, the young man is personally addressed: be happy young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth!

### **Misinterpretation**

How often have there not been sermons preached on this last verse as though this was only intended for the youth? Characteristic of this was the antithesis that was created, partly due to the customary translation. Enjoy yourself, *but* remember that you will one day have to give account. There is really no reason to translate it as an antithesis here, however. It is much more plausible to translate it as: *and* remember that you will have to give account of your joy (Nieuwe Bijbel Vertaling 2004). Whether you enjoyed the moments of your life that *could* be enjoyed! Undoubtedly, there will be difficult days that will threaten to embitter your life. The Preacher is realistic enough to acknowledge this. However, the question is whether you seized the good chances and opportunities with both hands. This speaks of wisdom and the art of living.

### **God given joy**

Thus the charge to the young man does not stand on its own, but is deeply rooted in the whole of the Preacher's thoughts. It is my conviction that the connection between these seven hinges of the book is the manner in which God is spoken of. It is He who gives the joy in the small pleasures that life offers. He is the one who holds happiness in His hand and who shares it out. Repeatedly we hear about: the hand of God (2:24), the gift of God (3:13), man's lot (from God) (3:22). Or it is literally stated that God gives joy, in this life



(5:18; 8:15). Ultimately, in 12:1 it reaches the climax: God is the Creator. Remember your Creator in a personal bond with Him. Enjoyment of life is a gift from the Creator and can only really be received in a living association with Him.

It is noticeable that in all these calls, the shadow of death is present. For this reason people have spoken of a *carpe diem*-motive: *make hay while the sun shines* for tomorrow we die. This would do no justice to the Preacher. He always makes his positive recommendation after the diagnosis of a complex situation or after a disappointing experience. But not in order to set the one up against the other.

### **Balance in God's hands**

In the wise observations of the Preacher, I recognise a triple-plaited cord: the fleeting character of life, the joy of life that remains, the shadow of death. Each of these three lines is connected to God. The joy of life is a personal gift from God. The temporary character of human activity contrasts with the permanence of His work! (In Ecclesiastes, God's work is never

described as 'vanity')! And it is God who controls death and decides the moment of death. God Himself maintains the tense unity of it all and has a grip on reality as no other (3:1-11).

The positive in life is placed next to the negative, without relief of tension. The joy of living is and remains a concrete gift from above. The shadow of death is the black border around life's joy, but does not take it away. For man finds his ultimate destination in God the Creator. The breath of life returns to God who gave life (12:1 and 12:7). No matter how much life has been scarred by Abel-like experiences, thank God He did not deprive Adam's children of all pleasures and enjoyments. To say it provokingly, in the style of the Preacher: life without a grain of joy is atheism, practically.

This article was originally published as 'Genieten met een donker randje (Prediker)' in: Koert van Bekkum a.o. (Eds.), *Gods Woord in mensentaal. Denken over het gezag van de Bijbel*, Barneveld: Nederlands Dagblad 2003, pp. 162-165



## About divorce and remarriage (2) The style of the kingdom versus remaining sin and weakness



Since 1993 the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated) are in a process of reflection on divorce and remarriage. The deputies appointed by the General Synod of Zuidhorn-2002 had to consult the churches on this subject. Half way one of the deputies, A.L.Th. de Bruijne wrote articles on the theme in the reformed weekly *De Reformatie*. These articles are now published in *Lux Mundi*. In the previous article De Bruijne demonstrated how deputies are in line with existing church practice. In this issue he tries to make clear how they emphasise especially the style of Christ's kingdom as an indicator of the right direction (I) and addresses some criticisms deputies had to deal with (II).

### Part I

#### Style of Christ

We must not isolate the increasing difficulty around divorce from a broader and deeper crisis in Christian life today. It constitutes only one of the symptoms. In order to come to a real answer, spiritual renewal and new dedication to God is necessary. Our society is not christian anymore. Once more we have to commit our lives and also our marriages (including our marriage difficulties) to Christ, directing ourselves toward God's aims with marriage. Then you learn to see things not so much as they appear, but in the light of his coming kingdom. Not as you feel them yourself but judging them with the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16).

If you do that, you will notice that we often deal with divorce and remarriage in a too limited way. We often say: 'you have the clear rule, the seventh commandment: do not divorce; and you have a number of clear exceptions to this rule: and then it is allowed'. Yet, the Sermon on the Mount teaches that life with Christ goes deeper and reaches further than fulfilling the rules with exceptions.

In saying this, we are not saying that such rules, especially the seventh commandment, can be put into perspective. It is a persistent misunderstanding that our report places God's commandments on the sideline and puts something vague like the "style of the kingdom" in their place. We hold completely to the commandment but do believe that Jesus' teaching goes further. In His kingdom it becomes more not less. For this reason the Christian lifestyle asks for more than rules and exceptions to rules. The first questions become: what on this point of our lives fits with God's purpose, as He made this completely clear to us in the person and by the works, promises and commands of Christ?

#### About the author:

A.L.Th. de Bruijne (1959) is lecturer in Ethics at the Theological University of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated) in Kampen. Before that he has been ministering in the churches of Nijverdal (1986-1991) and Rotterdam (1991-1997).

And: what for now does the most justice to God's coming new world that Jesus opens for us? And: in what do you recognise Jesus Himself leading us, who wants to make his image visible in us? That is what we mean when we use the much criticised expression 'style of God's kingdom'. This includes also the concrete commands, *and may never - also according to us - be in contradiction to the commands.*

#### Seven plus

The seventh commandment says: you may not commit adultery. We often instinctively fill this in as: you may not divorce, but that is not what the commandment says. In the context of the law of Moses, God even tolerated forms of divorce. The direct point of the seventh commandment is that marriage breaks because a third person is involved. Divorce was when a husband took the wife of his neighbour, or when a wife had sexual intercourse with another man. This went beyond divorce. It is not for nothing that some Christians who wish to be faithful to the Bible, say that divorce is not always wrong, and by holding such an opinion one would be going further than the law.

What we say in this connection is that this is precisely what Jesus often does: go further than the immediate tenor of the law of Moses. Sometimes He does this by looking back at God's perfect creation and sometimes by looking forward to God's perfect kingdom. For the law of Moses is not a timeless manuscript but a dated expression of the will of God in the history of salvation. When it comes to Jesus, it is not over if you have properly followed the letter of the law. In the light of creation and of the kingdom, He teaches you to dig deeper: what does God want in our lives? What suits people who have been redeemed by Christ and have received His Spirit as an advance of the new life? According to us, Jesus' radical message about divorce: do not divorce at all, stands in this light!

#### Adultery

But what of the exceptions? Adultery and desertion, and, as indicated in the previous article, maybe a few other circumstances: is divorce then wrong, too? For example, in the case of adultery we must not begin by looking to see if the Bible also says somewhere that divorce 'is allowed' or 'is not allowed' but with the question: what goes with Christ



Gustav Dore - Moses breaking the tables of the law

and his kingdom? Nobody can avoid that you are then called to forgive the other - if he or she genuinely confesses guilt - and even to be ready to wait long for that. That is how God deals with his adulterous people. In this way we see Jesus appearing even before His enemies. Adultery is thus no automatic ground for divorce.

Indeed, the way of forgiveness was also indicated in the old approach. Nevertheless the emphasis is different. What usually happens after adultery is that the marriage can be seen as undone and that it is a question of willingness, whether or not the offended party can forgive and go further along the road of reconciliation. The 'rule' comes first and the 'style of Christ' constitutes a possible additional option - but we would all understand it if the person could not manage this. In our vision there is no ground for this opinion within the framework of the New Covenant. There can be no doubt, according to us, as to what Christ's way would be, even in the light of such a devastating sin by the partner. In this, the way of following Christ is also clear. This does not impede of course, that forgiving is sometimes very difficult or is not yet possible and that we need to have much patience with each other.

Another question is the attitude of the guilty party. If he or she does not reach recognition of guilt and repentance, then as we see it, reconciliation and recovery of the relationship is not possible. We are still of the opinion that even then, a complete divorce with the option of remarrying, should not necessarily be automatic. Sometimes there is room to wait for the other. If in such a situation the marriage still breaks down, it is ultimately not the adultery which is actually the cause but the refusal of the sinner to repent. On

this point, according to us, this situation is not different to when somebody abuses a partner and shows no regret or repentance. This illustrates that as soon as you speak of a calling to forgive, adultery can no longer be presented as an absolute and direct ground for divorce.

Our approach also does more justice to the fact that in cases of adultery the question of guilt is not unequivocal by definition. When a man neglects his wife emotionally and she falls in temptation through contact with another man, she bears her guilt of course, but he cannot be rid of his share of the guilt in the marriage break up. Using an approach wherein you only look at the rule and the fixed exceptions and apply these simply and clearly, no justice would be done to the spiritual depth and the complex character of the various elements in the sin. With the help of an approach according to the style of Christ, these other elements would also come into consideration.

### **Bible**

Many cannot understand why we speak so sparingly about adultery. Does the Bible itself not clearly name 'adultery' as ground for divorce? Let us first say: if this is the case, then we bow to this, because, as I wrote previously, our approach on the basis of the style of the kingdom, is not meant to release us from concrete words of scripture. We are following however, an exegesis, which is very old and which was broadly carried in the early church, but which has passed out of sight in our more recent church tradition. It came under our attention via the books and commentaries of Professor Van Bruggen.

Strictly speaking, the Bible says nowhere that adultery is a ground for divorce. We thought this term up ourselves, later in the history of the church. And the question is whether or not it is a good term. The wording of Scripture only indicates that the Lord Jesus when speaking about divorce, makes an exception of adultery in a certain situation. But which situation that is, is not clear. Van Bruggen's explanation appealed to us, which says that here, Jesus hints at the disobedience to God's law which had crept in amongst the Jews on this point. Instead of stoning, they used the letter of divorce, which was not meant for this. In this case Jesus would be confirming that in 'adultery' something unusual was happening compared with many other marriage sins, but not that this constitutes a fixed ground for divorce.

Something similar plays a role in the classic 'second' divorce ground: desertion, from 1 Corinthians 7. We do not come across a term such as 'grounds for divorce' here either, but we do come across a very concrete and specific situation: an unbeliever leaves a partner who became a Christian. Strictly speaking, the reason why the unbeliever goes away cannot be found in 1 Corinthians 7. Nor is it clear why in this case, Paul does not insist on the continuation of the marriage. There are explanations of this text which point to special circumstances in Corinth, in which case the direct relevance in other situations would be reduced. This fact alone should make us careful with the conclusion that Paul's teaching on this point should be taken as a proclamation of a second fixed ground for divorce. In other circumstances than

that which Paul has before him, a believer following the style of Christ when an unbelieving partner goes away, could try to remain faithful, maybe from a distance.

For that matter, we think, just as our critics, that we can best view 1 Corinthians 7 as a choice in a situation in which two principles rear up together and threaten to clash with each other: your call to be faithful to your partner, even if he remained an unbeliever, and your call to follow Christ. In this concrete situation, Paul points in the way: being faithful to Christ has priority, naturally.

### **Double emphasis**

So we are placing two emphases simultaneously. According to us, you must aim high when it comes to marriage and divorce. Not via a system of single rules and fixed exceptions, stating in advance: in this case divorce is allowed. Divorce can never be good, we say, because it can never be at one with God's purpose for marriage as this is made clear in the light of creation and kingdom. Stay close to Christ by striving for mutual faithfulness, no matter how difficult it is, even when it feels impossible. Aim for this in faith. When you dare to expect much, you will be able to see something of it even in this life. And if you give up in advance, you block the working of God's Holy Spirit too easily.

At the same time we all know how sin and evil can paralyse Christians - your own sin but also that of others. It is possible that you have to face the same sort of choice that we recognised in 1 Corinthians 7: caught between two evils. You taste something of this in Paul's words earlier in the chapter. He says in verses 10-11: you must not separate from each other, but if that does happen, be reconciled or remain unmarried. In this, Paul also shows that he sees the brokenness. He does not insist: you must be reconciled, although in a marriage conflict, this is of course, the style of Christ, but he also gives an indication that if that is not possible, at least stay unmarried. He knows, probably from experience, that the reconciliation which is commanded, is not always attainable.

According to us, there is no biblical reason to say that such a choice between two evils can only take place when there is talk of adultery or desertion. As I said in the first article, there is a reason why the church in the past has always had more situations in mind. If adultery and desertion were not meant to be fixed grounds for divorce for always, then the obligation to push every situation under these categories is taken away. What remains is the guideline - when the choice is between evils, you must always choose in the light of the Scriptures, for that which leads to the lesser evil.

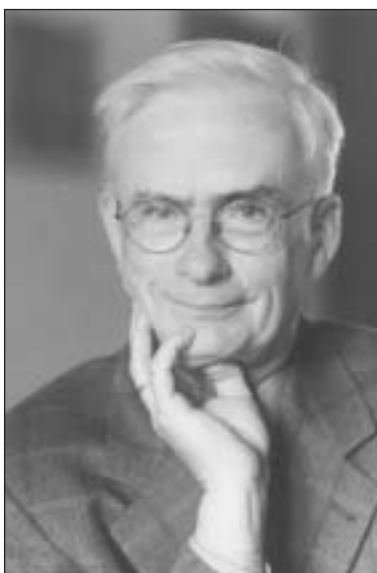
### **Possible with God**

This combination of a high aim and the search for a way which is, simultaneously the most responsible in the midst of

sometimes irreconcilable brokenness, is called contradictory by some critics. The one thinks we are too strict and idealistic. The other complains that we are too tolerant. We acknowledge that on this point there is an enormous tension. But it is the tension which belongs to this life: the tension between following Christ on the way to his kingdom, and living in a still sinful world.

We have only one defence to this criticism. The secret of this way of dealing with divorce lies in the submission to Christ. The relation with Him will always be under attack in this old world: a case of faith, struggle and growth. It will not

be perfected in this life. As church you have to see this when dealing with divorce. At the same time this bond with Christ in our lives does more than we pray or realise. The disciples also thought that Jesus' words about divorce were too strict or too idealistic. If it has to be like that, they say (Matth. 19), then you can better not marry. Jesus' answer also points to a way for today: there are also those have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom. This is the secret. If Jesus with his kingdom is the true treasure of your heart, you find all your joy in Him. He is your life and your future. The more you believe this and live it, the more you dare to expect, the more you are prepared to do anything for Him, if necessary, even to suffer and to lose your life. He says Himself: he who loses his life, will gain it. Even an impossible marriage, in the light of God's Kingdom, can become possible with God.



*...It came under our attention via the books and commentaries of Professor Van Bruggen...*

### **Practice**

Our emphasis on communion with Christ, means, according to us, at least three things in practice:

- 1 It makes a difference if you are dealing with somebody who follows his own interests and therefore does not persevere in his marriage, or with someone who truly seeks Jesus, also in a difficult marriage, and for this reason, fights but ultimately has to give up the struggle. You respond differently to the divorce and eventual regret of the first, than to the same of the second. The first must repent before Christ. The second must grow in Christ.
- 2 Finding your life and joy in Christ and his kingdom and therefore even depriving yourself, is not only intended for people in a difficult marriage. This call is for us all. Therefore we must never moralise over people who want to divorce or remarry. It would be hypocritical to say to them; "you must follow Christ in his radical commitment to the kingdom" and not know this radicalism in other areas, yourself. To put it bluntly: a church with less than normal willingness to make sacrifices for neighbours in need, is in no position to judge the divorces in her midst. If we want to deal with this problem, then we, as Christians together, must want to learn this style of Christ across the whole spectrum of our lives. In so doing we serve our brothers



and sisters with marriage problems or after a divorce, more than just with disapproval or telling them what to do. This sort of communal style in the church carries and stimulates our way of dealing with marriage problems.

3 In the Old Testament it was normal that divorcees married again. We are inclined to forget this. In their article, Pathuis and Voorberg suggest that the letter of divorce would counteract this. They think that the letter of divorce functioned as a sort of 'separation from table and bed'. But they base this only on an assumption and, in the light of what is known, they miss the point. They repeat an old opinion about the intention of the letter of divorce in the law of Moses. Contrary to what is often realised, the letter of divorce in the Old East was not generally in use. We come across it only in certain higher circles. Moses did not limit the use of the letter of divorce but took it further than was usual in his context: he extended its application to all members of the people. The intention behind this was to resist easy divorce for men and to protect the position of the women more. But if there was talk of an official divorce, then there was also room for the next marriage. This appears in the Bible itself. In Deuteronomy 24, Moses speaks about such a next marriage as something which was a matter of course. And in Matthew 5 Jesus says: if you send your wife away, you make her a victim of adultery. Jesus just assumes that a woman who has been sent away will marry again. It is also confirmed by the literal words on the Jewish letter of divorce, as they have been found. In this a man declares: "you are free to marry whomever you want". Above all, in Israel's culture throughout most phases, it was not normal for a woman who was not yet too old, to remain unmarried (see David Instone-Brewer, *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context*. Grand Rapids 2002).



Dr. David Instone-Brewer

We realise far too little that this was the practice in the Old Testament. And because of that we do not see that where this is concerned, the New Testament indicates a more radical new line than the Old : after divorce, do not marry again. (I assume now that we read this line from the New Testament correctly and will go into this more extensively). This greater radicalism can only be understood in the light of the

coming kingdom. On the basis of the creation and the Old Testament, you could say: a person is not meant to live alone. But in the New Testament, next to the call to follow Christ within marriage, a call to serve Christ while unmarried becomes evident. Christ's kingdom gives meaning to marriage as well as to being single. Both are made places of growth for Christian love. The Spirit makes both subordinate to a new lasting community in which people shall not be alone but live together: the church of Christ. As soon as you realise that your calling to stay unmarried after a divorce for example, has something to do with that special perspective of

the New Testament, it becomes clear that this means something for the way we deal with divorced fellow Christians. If, as churches, we want to reduce the number of remarriages after divorce, we must do more than read the law to divorcees and say 'it's not allowed'.

Having to remain unmarried is only understandable in the bedding of that new society within the church. A church that wants to propagate this call to remain unmarried, in the first place will have to work on being a home where not only married but also single people and divorced people are completely included, accepted and involved. Only such a church can be convincing in the insistence of the sacrifice of remaining unmarried after a divorce.

### ***Spiritual: prevention and help***

If we try to answer the growing divorce problem with loud words and tighter rules which we intend strictly to maintain, we might be forcing the right thing to happen but apart from Christ, in a carnal way. Especially so if we refuse to recognise that some situations have broken down and that people sometimes do not have the strength of faith or the room to go further. In raising these points we are not looking for loopholes but we are looking for a way of dealing with marriage problems and divorce wherein we first bring each other close to Christ in order to go forward together on the radical way of discipleship.

At the same time: if we just surrender step by step to the broken reality and accept one new divorce ground after another, we are being caught up in a downward spiral. In another way, this is just as carnal. Where is our expectation of the Spirit of Christ in this?

Maybe that is why it is better to react to the current problem by trying to go around it. Let us not only be shocked by the many marriage crises and try to tidy them away nicely or to limit the damage, but let us also pay attention especially to avoiding future problems. For this reason we have suggested paying much more attention to church instruction and training to marriage and being single, not only when people get married, but from the very beginning of church teaching. If anything has been missing in catechism lessons in the course of the centuries, it is instruction in the practice of Christian life, while in the Old Church this was the very centre of church teaching. We also recommend that we work on having more to offer in situations of marriage difficulties than norms which say how things should be done. Direct help is necessary, which combines spiritual guidance with relational expertise.

Before everything, we hope for a desire in the churches for new dedication and discipleship of Christ. Therefore it would be a great pity when an unrestrained and upbuilding discussion with each other about this, is pushed out of the picture by concern and distrust. Even if nothing concrete came out of our approach but a spark that sets this desire for new dedication alight, we would have reached our aims in a way. Would Christ's power not be promising for Christians in the middle of this crisis about marriage, sexuality and relationships?



## Part II

I hopefully made clear that our talking of the 'style of the kingdom' is not meant to avoid concrete Biblical words, but to stimulate a new zeal and dedication at a deeper level. Now I am going to look more closely at the criticism. I address four subjects:

- A. 1 Corinthians 7
- B. 'hardness of heart'
- C. discipline
- D. remarrying after a divorce.

### A. 1 Corinthians 7

The greatest difficulty comes from our handling of 1 Corinthians 7. In our report we say that in 1 Corinthians, Paul gives an incidental exception to Jesus' rule that you may not divorce. Moreover, we suggest that in some circumstances, the church is obliged to do something like this. Of course, Paul speaks with apostolic authority and the church does not, but this does not take our point of comparison away.

Sometimes, while maintaining the rule, you come up against a situation in which application of this rule would have unacceptable consequences. In such a case, it is better - or preferably, the lesser of two evils - not to apply the rule than to suffer the consequences. In 1 Corinthians 7, application of the rule not to divorce, could lead to the sacrifice of the bond with Christ for the sake of your unbelieving partner. Because this is unacceptable, Paul 'suspends' the rule, as it were, for this situation. This exceptional missionary circumstance was not yet in view in Jesus' teaching. But, as we see it, this can happen more often and then the church is obliged to do something like this.

Take, for example, the case of a woman who is married to a psychopath who terrorises her life and even threatens her, and who destroys the family. According to us, in this sort of situation, the church must do more than wait on the sidelines. Some would recommend this approach - the church hopes that the woman has enough faith and strength to carry on, supports her in this, but will not judge her too harshly if she does not succeed. In this arrangement, you leave the responsibility completely in her shoes.

In many other difficult marriage circumstances, this can be a good arrangement but in this sort of extreme situation, I see it as an unacceptable way of keeping your hands clean as a church. You know that God does not want somebody to destroy his partner or family. You are called to stand up for the life and salvation of your neighbour, certainly when they are weak. In this situation, if there is no other alternative, the church should say, as did Paul in 1 Corinthians 7: you are no longer bound. Just as in 1 Corinthians 7 it is 'an evil' if the marriage breaks up, but just as there, it would be a greater evil if you forced those involved to maintain the marriage at any price.

### Questions

Many critical questions have risen around this approach. Does the church have the same apostolic authority as Paul?

Can you say that Paul releases people from the compliance with a rule of Christ? Is God's revelation on the subject of divorce not closed, so that you cannot expand the principle of 1 Corinthians 7 to other situations?

We can certainly empathise with some of this criticism. In retrospect, we see our choice of words as having been unfortunate, if only because of the misunderstanding these have caused. 'Release from the obligation to follow the rule' or 'suspension from obligation' are vulnerable expressions, to be sure if one uses them to say what the church today ought to do.

We distance ourselves fully from these expressions, even though we do not mean to say what various critics hear in them. Instead of these sort of expressions, we now say that in 1 Corinthians 7 we see how Paul *applies* the guidelines Christ gave concerning divorce, in a very specific situation.

On the other hand, we rather miss in what our critics say, thorough consideration of the problems surrounding 1 Corinthians 7. Because as Paul writes: you are not 'bound', we are inclined to understand this as 'bound to husband or wife'. But in following others, we have pointed out that Paul uses another word here than would be expected in that case. The word he uses, seems to be best understood as a reference to Christ's rules. In the concrete situation in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul seems to be saying that those involved are not slavishly bound to the rule that you may not divorce. This was the reason for our, in retrospect, too vulnerable expressions.

Many critics (Storm, for example) nevertheless, do not go into this argument with one single word and act as though it is without question that the verse speaks of being bound to your husband or wife. All the same, this point does make rather a difference. Because, if Paul says: here you are not bound to your husband or wife, you could possibly come to a new category, a ground for divorce. But if he has the binding to the rule in view, it is about more than an incidental concrete signpost in a dilemma. We think it is a real shame that all sorts of critics heavily criticise our use of 1 Corinthians 7, without offering an alternative for the considerations which brought us there. In this we think also of our earlier mentioned standpoint, that situations in which we meet an extreme dilemma, occur more frequently. The church, in one way or another, will have to indicate the way forward then, and in those cases can learn from what she sees Paul doing in 1 Corinthians 7.

### The oath

What we want to claim with the help of 1 Corinthians 7, can also be made clear along another channel. Maybe this will help to take away the difficulty with our handling of 1 Corinthians 7. To this end, I will make use of a less charged example.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ utters radical words about the oath. You must absolutely not swear, He says, everything more than a 'yes' or a 'no' is 'from the evil one' (Matth.5:33-37). Now that the kingdom is drawing near and Christ's mercy and His Spirit shall fill us, we must aim further than just limiting lies (with the help of an oath). Now the law is written in our hearts and lies must be banished. I will not

now look at the familiar question of whether or not Jesus' word was also meant for civilian society, for example, in a time in which this is has become estranged from God. In any case we can learn that *in the church*, an oath is not fitting and betrays the influence of sin. All the same, later in Paul's teaching, now and again we come across a sort of 'oath', not as he speaks to society, but *within the church*. It seems that things still sometimes happen which should not happen. And it seems that as a consequence of this influence of sin, situations occur in which *you cannot avoid an oath*. In such circumstances the straightforward application of Jesus' words that you may never swear could make, that lies and mistrust ruin relations amongst brethren, or that room for the Word and the church officer (Paul) disappears. Then a choice between two evils is thus created: the oath as means of help, for which there is not actually any place in the church, and the dangerous spreading of lies and mistrust. In these situations, Paul chooses for the oath as means of help.

Structurally, something similar to 1 Corinthians 7 about divorce is happening here. The question is what we can conclude for our circumstances from this. Should we say: oaths are never allowed, except in the exact same circumstances that Paul later allows an oath to be made, using the argument that Paul was an apostle and we are not? Or could other situations emerge *after the New Testament time* which do not look exactly like that of Paul's, and which allow you to draw a more general lesson from his example? Namely this lesson: sometimes also within the church, you get caught up in a dilemma and then an oath is the lesser evil.

This question has already been answered by the church in Lord's Day 37 of the Catechism. There we confess that the oath is sometimes permitted '*if necessity demands this*.' The church has not said: we may not go further than the concrete situations wherein we have come across exceptions to Jesus' rule in the New Testament that we may not swear an oath. On the contrary, in Paul's dealing with Jesus' words in specific situations, the church, in the full realisation that he was an apostle and we are not, nevertheless, has also recognised an element of example and has dared to expand this to that *unspecified* indication in the catechism. We could make comparable comments about the 'white lie'.

### **Divorce**

What we mean to say about divorce on the basis of 1 Corinthians 7, is not different. For this reason all comments that critics make about the fact that God's revelation has been closed, also on the divorce theme, and that we may not add or take anything away from God's Word do not hurt us at all. We recognise that revelation has been closed. We come across this example of application of apostolic teaching *within* the revelation and work with it further.

Moreover, the closure of God's word does absolutely not mean that the last word has been said and that ethics can be reduced to exegesis, as our critics seem to think. The Scriptures say things about the government and about war and peace. God's revelation on this theme is closed. Nevertheless, the most important insights in Christian ethics on this point, which most Reformed people up until today,

take for granted, come from ethics developed in the history of the church which build upon the revelation given, and not upon direct exegesis. The political situation of later centuries, with a more or less Christian government and society did not occur in this way during the period of God's revelation. The Scriptures say nothing directly about certain concrete subjects and the situations in which they were relevant (for example in medical ethics). There we find it completely normal to work on the basis of the broad general thrust of the Scriptures and to use examples which the apostles offered in other circumstances. No grounds exist to determine that on the subjects over which the Scriptures do say something or even say much (such as the oath or divorce) everything has been said, *also for concrete ethical circumstances*, and only needs to be exegetically dug up, so that we may suddenly stop applying for today or make use of elements of example.

### **Context (1)**

Storm summarises our vision in this way: according to us, the context of the church may make clear to us that we are free from clear Scriptural rules. No wonder that he then declares that he is afraid of new hermeneutics that he sees creeping into our approach. Fortunately for him and for others, we do not recognise ourselves in this reproduction. I already indicated, that especially to avoid misunderstandings on this point, we distance ourselves from the expression 'release from the obligation to follow the rule'.

I now add that the element of 'context' can receive its place in two ways. In the first place, insight in the concrete circumstances (context) can make clear that there is evidence of a dilemma, in which a choice between two evils seems to be unavoidable. In this case we keep speaking of an 'evil', also if we were to accept a divorce. This also means that Christ's rule in the relevant situations remains completely valid. She truly collides with another rule or against consequences which seem unacceptable in the light of Scripture. But also if we cannot follow Jesus' rule because of this, it remains intact. We even believe that you can only make such a choice between two evils in humility and thereby must always call upon God's grace.

### **Context (2)**

But the context can play its part in another way. Sometimes it seems to be that the Scriptures directly say something about a certain subject in our context, while when looking further into the historical background of the text, you must conclude that it is not or not quite about the same subject. The rule is not abolished or suspended then, either. But then you conclude that the rule, in retrospect, was not relevant to what you meant to do with it.

A simple illustration can be found in the opinion of some Christians that the death penalty is unacceptable on the grounds of the sixth commandment: you shall not murder. He who sees this commandment in its original context, directly discovers that this conclusion is not right. The sixth commandment appears to be relevant to something like the death penalty, but it is just not talking about this.

An overworked but clear example lies in what Paul says

about women covering their heads (1Corinth.11:2-16). The person who reads the Bible as an unhistorical collection of norms, may well think that this is a direct clothing requirement for today. But, if you look into the historical context of such a text, you discover the meaning of covering the head in that time. In our context, this is different. Instead of a *direct* application we see a guideline at another level. For example: Paul teaches us that also in the way we present ourselves, we must respect the place which God gave to us as husband or wife and not be a provocation.

You must *always* try to find out if a biblical guideline or norm is relevant to similar things in our time. The same is relevant to themes such as 'homosexuality' or 'women in church office', with which our critics unfortunately want to illustrate the dangers of our approach. It certainly is damaging, that people often copy each other on such themes, that homosexuality, women and office in Bible times were completely different manifestations than they are today, so that you are not bound to what the Bible says about these concretely. But, it is *just as damaging* when others, just as casually and without arguments, prove the opposite. Why? Because you must not assume *in advance* that an equal sign can be placed between such things. You must listen to the Bible carefully as God gave it in those times, and look at your own time. In this way you discover whether and to what extent there is evidence of differences and similarities. Reformed ethicists, who, like Douma and myself, reject the homosexual practice, do not make conclusions *without* such honest research. Should we act otherwise, then that would be irresponsible towards those involved and could provoke them to easily join the opposite standpoint.

Also in the application of what the Scriptures themselves have to say about divorce, we may not avoid such research, in which marrying and divorce, as it then was, is compared with the present context. And this is not about getting rid of the biblical norms, but precisely about discovering as concretely as possible what they do or do not want to say, in order to be able to bring them into practice as God intended them. The critics create the impression that they have a blind spot for the necessity of this sort of reflection. But such discernment is not only needed concerning 'divorce', but also



Charles Horne, *The Bible and Its Story: the sermon on the mount*

around other ethical subjects in order to come to a convinced and convincing Christian style of living.

### **B. Hardness of heart**

Along with many others, Pathuis and Voorberg show their concern about the way we speak about 'hardness of heart.' In Matthew 19 Jesus says to the Jewish leaders: *Moses allowed you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning* (NIV). It is clear that Jesus teaches us not to fix upon a sort of godly command or permission to divorce, but upon the binding nature of marriage. The fact that there was a temporary command under Moses which catered for divorce, was because of the hardness of hearts. But near to Christ and in the perspective of the kingdom, hard hearts will become soft. As I made clear, the main thrust of our approach is based upon this: always start with the binding nature of marriage and therefore, deny yourself in order to remain faithful. Jesus points to no other way and his mercy and Spirit make possible what you thought you could not do! Nevertheless, we admit that 'hardness of heart' from time to time raises its head even in the church of Christ. We then can still learn from Moses' temporary measure. Considerable criticism has been expressed on this point. In this we would be opening up an escape route, write Pathuis and Voorberg.

By the way, we do not associate hardness of heart especially with remarriage after divorce. As much by an illegal divorce as by an illegal second marriage, there can be evidence of weakness of faith or insight, and of powerlessness, according to us. If there is evidence of clear resistance to God, we are of the opinion that the church may not be *tolerant and patient*. But if there is evidence of a weak faith or Christian life, the church must search for a way of keeping those involved as close as possible to the style of Christ, to help them pick up the thread of a Christian life again.

### **Terminology**

We think that the most criticism on our speaking of 'hardness of heart' stems from a difference in terminology. The critics understand 'hardness of heart' as 'unwillingness to repent', while we meant the weakness of believers and the great influence of the old nature in the Christian life sometimes.

The word that Jesus used, is not frequently used and gives pretext for more than one interpretation. We acknowledge that the interpretation of the term as 'unrepentant' is well founded, irrespective of the question whose 'unrepentance' Jesus implies. For this reason it is better not to tie our plea so directly to the exegesis of this expression. That could easily distract from the central question: do we also under the New covenant still have to take account of weakness and of the influence of the old nature in the Christian life? We are possibly more in agreement about this, than the debate about the expression would suggest.

After all, Pathuis and Voorberg also write about 1 Corinthians 7:10f that Paul adjusted to the situation in which reconciliation between a married couple who have left each other, is no longer possible. In spite of Jesus' radical

words in Matthew 19, Paul also takes account of sin, weakness and a ruptured life which are not always sufficiently conquered. And he points to a way which takes account of this, just as Moses did by introducing the temporary letter of divorce.

By the way, this has also been the usual approach of the Reformed Churches. Even if there has been evidence of divorce without one of the recognised grounds, for example, because the relation was damaged, the church accepted this in the end, as long as it was clear that the involved parties were not acting out of unrepentance. And it was precisely in such circumstances that the church guarded against a possible second marriage.

Our comments about the hardness of heart are aimed at the same. He who says that Jesus put a stop to the letter of divorce and in that also abolished divorce and that since you do not have to take into account weakness and lack of faith as Moses did, must realise that he is leaving the track which the Reformed Churches have always followed. In the dealings with marital sins and divorce, a certain perfectionism can easily creep in (that we often label as anabaptist in other discussions).

In contrast to this, we rightly say: that also those who may live through the Spirit, are repeatedly liable to the influence of the flesh. The formula in the classic form for the celebration of the Lord's Supper points us the way here: there is still evidence of 'many sins and shortcomings' in the life of genuine Christians. Decisive is whether or not 'we are heartily sorry for these shortcomings and desire to fight against our unbelief'. The anti- triumphant note in this expression must be noticed: 'desire to fight'. There is no assumption that this struggle always gets off the ground. Genuine Christians are often weak. There is absolutely no suggestion that the struggle automatically leads to victories. According to Lord's Day 12 we will have the final victory after this life. In this life, fortunately, the Spirit gives us a generous taste of this, but this does not guarantee that every weakness or influence of the flesh is already 'conquerable'. This conviction means that you cannot make yourself completely free of Moses' wisdom directed at limiting remaining weakness or consequences of sin. This is how we meant our reference to the hardness of heart. But in order to avoid misunderstandings, we shall no longer use this expression in this connection, but speak about weakness and the influence of the flesh in the Christian life.

### **C. Church discipline**

There is also much criticism of what we write about church discipline. For some divorce and remarriage situations we recommend the use of a new disciplinary measure. The synod has indeed given room for this for the time being. In this, the church council makes known to the congregation his judgement about a situation which became public, not always prohibiting those involved from taking communion. We view this as important because of its exemplary effect. If there are more and more cases of divorce and second marriages, this seems to become more and more usual in the church. If other people find themselves in such a situation,

they will consider this possibility sooner.

But now some think that we want to unsettle the existing discipline. This is absolutely not the case. If the church council knows for sure that people deliberately resist God's Word in a certain issue in their lives and oppose God, it is necessary to refuse access to the Lord's table, also with regard to divorce and remarriage. But the problem is, that sometimes a situation has become known in the congregation, before it is clear how the church council deals with it. Often the elders are first busy pastorally for a long time and if necessary, with silent discipline behind the scenes. Sometimes a consistory does not even have the frankness for any form of discipline. Or the consistory never comes further than this silent censure; and after a while he has to abandon disciplinary measures and end silent discipline without public announcement. Sometimes these are about distressing circumstances, wherein we are dealing with positive brothers and sisters who obviously love and serve the Lord.

In such cases [tr: as things are presently done in Dutch churches] the congregation notices nothing. People who think that we are in favour of liberalizing disciplinary procedures, have not understood our intentions. We see that there already is a broad practice. And we are concerned about the undermining effects of this upon others in the church. For this reason we introduced this new disciplinary measure, not as a replacement of withholding people from the Lord's table, but as an addition for situations in which a public signal is necessary, while this can not (yet) be given in the existing disciplinary process.

Of course there are also people who say: sin is sin, therefore you must always withhold people from the Lord's table, and somebody can appear so much like a Christian, if he makes a wrong choice at one point, this is false. If he does not repent of his choice, it follows that he must be cut off. But this takes us back into the sphere of perfectionism. In the Reformed churches people are not permanently held back or cut off because of sin or wrong insights which they hold in good faith, but for hardening in sin, which is proof of unbelief. A church council should form a spiritual judgement about this. Especially because often such a hardening in sin is not there, we can understand that church councils in some cases of divorce and remarriage do not have liberty to withhold people from the Lord's Supper or to take further steps in the process of christian discipline.

### **D. Remarriage**

A last point of criticism of our report has to do with marriage after divorce. Some are concerned because we reckon the hardness of heart (from now on: the influence of weakness, sin and brokenness) also relevant to this matter. But just as a church council sometimes has to resign to a divorce without approving it, it can also be that he sometimes resigns to a second marriage. And just as divorce sometimes seems to be the lesser of two evils, this can also be true of a second marriage.

We direct your attention to the example of a young man or woman who married in a rush and divorced as quickly. The



way of following Christ is then clear, according to us. At the same time, experience teaches that also true Christians are sometimes too weak to sustain this a life long and can become entangled in much worse sins. Or, think of the mother of a growing family who, after her divorce, finds herself in big trouble and from whom the children threaten to go off the rails because the stability in the home disappeared. According to us, it is then not unthinkable to avoid the greater evil of the children derailing by choosing for the lesser evil of the second marriage.

Others are mindful of an other aspect of our view of remarriage. They think our proposal of not 'confirming' second marriages in a church service, very unfair. After all, are there not people who cannot help it that they are divorced? And do people who marry a second time, not need God's blessing and the support of the church?

In the first place, we think that we have good practical arguments for our proposal. For in the current situation, church councils must decide whether or not remarriage is allowed. Actually church councils are not up to this because in the most instances they cannot honestly reconstruct the preceding circumstances. This brings much inequality with it. Some can remarry because there was formal evidence of adultery, even though it was an incident and the reasons behind it remain unknown. Sometimes ecclesiastical solemnisation of a marriage is refused because the valid grounds were not present, while there might have been years of struggle and difficulty preceding. The agreement not to solemnise second marriages in the church, would avoid much injustice and relieve church councils from a responsibility which they often cannot realise.

At the same time, we think that also in the light of Scripture, there is something to be said for our proposal. In our view, marriages following after divorce never are up to the standard of God's intentions, even though there are situations imaginable in which staying unmarried can be the worst option. But you have promised each other fidelity before God 'til death do us part'. With such a promise in mind, it is not fitting to promise the same again to someone else, while the other is still alive. Moreover, there are concrete Bible texts which seem to confirm this. In 1 Corinthians 7:11 we came across Paul's guideline: if you are already divorced and reconciliation is not possible, stay unmarried. Nowhere in the text is there an indication that this refers only to specific divorces. We have introduced this division on the basis of our habit of working with fixed grounds for divorce. But if we are right that the Scriptures did not intend to give such grounds, then neither can they become a binding factor in the application of Paul's word. And if the expression 'bound' in 1 Corinthians 7 has no relation to your commitment to your partner but to the way of dealing with Jesus' command not to divorce, then you can say with less ease, that after such a divorce, that you are free to remarry.

Along with 1 Corinthians 7 we also point to Matthew 5. There, Jesus says: if you marry a woman who has been sent away, you commit adultery. Under our terms, there would be evidence of deliberate desertion: a man sends his wife away with a certificate of divorce. Maybe she can do nothing about it. In the Reformed tradition we then say: she is therefore free to marry. But is Jesus not more radical? If she were to remarry in this situation, He calls that adultery. Thus here Jesus too, rejects a second marriage.

### **Foundation**

We are well aware that our standpoint is stricter than it has been previously in the Dutch Reformed tradition. And especially on this point we have tasted much resistance, not least of all from fellow ministers who find this unjust. Moreover, we recognise that our standpoint leaves questions unanswered. If, after a divorce, the one partner marries again, must you still tell the other partner that his or her second marriage is not God's intention and refuse solemnisation in the church? And if you promote greater involvement of the church in preparation for and coaching of marriage, with an view to our non Christian society and law, does this not conflict with your refusal to solemnise marriages, which you afterwards have to recognise as real marriages anyway?

We hope that around this suggestion, agreement and conviction may yet grow. But at the moment this evidently is not the case. It cannot be that the synod of Amersfoort, assuming that it be convinced by us, should change something in the churches, while a basis of a shared conviction for such a change is yet missing. For this reason, in our report we shall on the one side, uphold our plea but at the same time, moderate our practical proposals. In short this means that we are of the view that in situations of a preceding marriage, in which discipline is being exercised or in which the church council sees an public disapproval in the church as necessary, marriages shall not be ecclesiastically solemnised. In other situations, there will be room. We do think, that if we go no further than this at this time, it is important in such cases, to do justice to the seriousness of the marriage break up of the first marriage. In this connection we are considering the possibility of, where suitable, inserting elements of penitance and sorrow with the solemnisation of such a marriage.

I hope and pray that this explanation may have cleared issues up and may serve the continuing discussion around divorce and the whole of our lifestyle.

This article is a slightly abridged version of the articles 'Nieuwe toewijding', 'Kritiek gewogen' and 'Gedeelde overtuiging?', parts 2, 3 and 4 in the series 'De kerkelijke discussie rond echtscheiding', in *De Reformatie* 79 (2004) 685-690; 701-704 and 717-720 [June 26; July 3 and 10, 2004]. The introductory article was published in the previous issue of *Lux Mundi*.

## The church is catholic (1)

For many centuries the Christian church has been deeply convinced of the fact that it is “catholic.” Through the Apostles’ Creed believers have spoken of faith in the “holy catholic church” for centuries. When in 1980 our General Synod (of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken, trans.) declared that the text of the confessions of faith, as these were presented to the churches in 1971, can be viewed as a reliable rendering of what we confess as churches, the word “catholic” was again recognizable as a usable ecclesiastical word for Protestants.

For a long time it had been usual for Protestants to leave the word “catholic” to the Roman Catholics and to describe the church with the words “universal Christian (church).” “I believe (in) a holy, universal Christian church” sounded much more Protestant than the risky word “catholic.” In sermons, especially ones about Lord’s Day 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism, ministers could declare that we too, are “catholic,” and that “the Catholics” would be better off calling themselves Roman Catholic, because that is what they really are. Nevertheless, in the church it sounded a little strange to use this term as part of our confession of faith in this way. And many will still think so, in spite of the fact that unimpeachable scholars such as Prof. van Genderen and Rev. J.H. Velema worked on the new inter-church translation of the confessions of faith (for sale in bookshops since 1983).

**We ought not to be afraid of the word “catholic.”**

In the year 381, the Council of Constantinople similarly confessed the catholicity of the church. The Confession of Nicea-Constantinople, which no less than the 12 Articles (Apostles’ Creed) is one of our confessions, speaks, after all of “one holy, catholic and apostolic church.” These characteristics of the church are for the church in Rome of the greatest importance of course. But this is no less so for the church of the Reformation, although discussion is called for about the way “catholicity” is spoken about, on both sides of the dividing line.

Through a couple of articles I would like to offer food for thought regarding the meaning that the word “catholic” has for us as Reformed believers, and for our experience of being a church.

### **Not scared of “catholic”**

For a long time, people have rendered the word “catholic” as “universal” or “universal Christian.” Luther had absolutely no love for the word “catholic” and replaced it with “Christian”. That it came back into the Protestant dictionary in the twentieth century may well have been under the influence of the ecumenical rapprochement between Roman Catholics



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and Protestants. The “catholics” came a bit closer to us. At the same time, a sort of ecumenical acceptance seems to have grown from the fact that this word was the general title of the church of Rome, and that Protestants had no desire to fight for the use of the name.

Where people thought about the meaning of the word, however, they found they couldn’t do without it, and wound saying that they as Protestants were also “catholic.” By saying that they are “catholic” they express what others mean with the words “I believe (in) a holy, universal, Christian church.”

For this reason, I would like to make an appeal to not be frightened by the old word “catholic”. More important, however, than the word we use is the conviction that we ought not to ignore the content we confess when using the word. This is so because there are a few statements in our Protestant catholic confession that make us feel a trifle uncomfortable in practice. These statements could nevertheless contain something very important concerning what the church of the Lord Jesus Christ really is. We should not too quickly be afraid of unexpected pitfalls, as we let the reason dawn upon us why the church of Christ is called “catholic”. Maintaining our confession of faith has always had an element of nurture, and sometimes correction, in it! If we observe here how the confession, above all, intends to echo and to apply Holy Scripture, then we can resist the possible uncomfortable feeling which accompanies the use of the word “catholic”.

### **The intention: the breadth of the church**

One cannot draw a direct line from the word “catholic” in its confessional use to its use in the Bible. The word *katholikos* is a Greek word, to be sure: it can even be found in the New Testament. The only thing is, this word as it used there says nothing specific about the church. In Acts 4:18 we read that the disciples received a command from the Jewish authorities to keep “totally” -using the word *katholou*- quiet, and not to teach or speak in the name of Jesus. The meaning there is only the broad sense of “completely” or “totally.”

What did the church of the first centuries want to do by applying this concept to the church of Christ? The first thing was that people wanted to make clear that the church was not only a local organization, but that it was a whole that transcended all local churches. The local churches are

oriented to the breadth of the Christian church. One local church was therefore also "catholic." It belonged to that one great whole.

What also was communicated by this usage was the confession that, in comparison with the national organization of God's people in Israel, something new had now come. The church of Jesus Christ is no longer limited to Israel, but exists in the whole world and comes from all nations.

A third aspect, which already can be found in church history in the language of the Bishop Cyrillus of Alexandria in the fifth century, more specifically indicates content. With the word "catholic," he meant that the church had received the *complete tradition* that it needed. It possesses all necessary doctrines, without distinction. As a consequence of this the church also shares in *complete salvation* through which all sins of body and soul are healed, and through which all virtues and good works are brought forth. This "catholic church" shares in all spiritual gifts.

**Divisions between Protestants ought to stimulate us to re-examine our separate existences in the light of the one, catholic church of Christ.**

These various aspects of "catholic" transcend a purely geographical or historical understanding of catholicity. It is more than not being nationally or geographically restricted. It has significance for more than a certain century. In it there is the realization that the church has a universal significance. There is a missionary consciousness in it, communicating that the message from which the church lives ought to resound to the farthest ends of the earth. The name of the Lord must be praised in song from where the sun rises to where it sets (see Ps 113:2f), and that throughout all history.

### **To the heavens...**

In what has been said above, there is clearly more than simply an indication of the size of the church. That is the first thing: the church is worldwide and at the

same time it belongs to all centuries. Thus, it stretches across the boundaries of the world and across the boundaries of time. But there is also the infinitely deep dimension of real catholicity. The Dutch theologian, H. Berkhof, wrote a book in 1962 about the catholicity of the church, and in it he connected the word catholic to the fullness which proceeds from Christ and makes its dwelling in the church. This sort of thought does justice to the meaning which has resounded in this word for centuries. If you replace the word "catholic" with "universal Christian," it sounds too flat. The height of it has disappeared: the ascent heavenward, for Christ's sake, and the descending of Gods angels via a ladder which descends to earth and reaches up to the heavens. You could say that the fullness of Christ, his person and work in service of the church, defines the church. For this reason it is catholic. It reaches as far as its Head, to Whom all authority has been given in heaven and on earth.

I hope it will be useful now to indicate more precisely which conflict between Rome and the Reformation circles around the catholicity of the church.

### **Roman Catholic objections against Protestant Catholics**



*For a long time it had been usual for Protestants to leave the word "catholic" to the Roman Catholics. The photo shows a part of the St.-Johnscathedral in 's-Hertogenbosch (photo P.G.B. de Vries)*

In the sixteenth century, the Roman Catholic church emphasized that the church of the Reformation could not be catholic because the Reformation was limited to one part of the world, Europe, and then especially in the northern half. More than a thousand years before, Augustine had also used that argument in his struggle against the Donatist sect, which claimed to be the only true church in North Africa. A church which existed in only one area could not possibly be catholic, according to Augustine. Roman Catholic opponents of the Reformation also contended that the Roman Catholic Church was much bigger than the Reformation churches. How could a minority group be catholic? There is something worth considering in this argument. The Reformation has since





*Liturgical vestments and forms, and a powerful organisation , are no guarantee that the church continues to be the same church*

spread across to all parts of the world, but the division between churches of the Reformation could well be reason to re-examine our being-a-church-in-isolation in the light of the one catholic church of Christ.

We are finally, however, not really impressed by the size of the organization and numbers of the Roman Catholic Church. The Reformers observed that even the largest church can let its connection with the church of the apostles slip away. They reasoned as follows. False teachings and practices have meant that the church of Rome has lost its continuity with the early church, while with the appearance of the Reformers, and the preaching of the apostolic gospel, the true church has become visible again. It is precisely that content of the gospel which is necessary in order to do justice to the catholic character of the church. The being of the church ought to be the same at all times. Liturgical vestments and forms, and a powerful organisation , are no guarantee that the church is continuing to be the same church. A famous Roman Catholic theologian such as Hans Küng has clearly recognized this in our time. The principle of the catholicity of the church lies in the identity of its essence.

Having established that the word catholic is not something exclusively Roman Catholic, I want to look at a number of biblical facts which make the meaning of catholicity clear. Even though the word catholicity cannot be found in the Bible, it is nonetheless a biblical word.

### ***Christ, Head and Cornerstone of the Church***

The principle of the catholicity lies in the identity of the church. This is an important point. If the church is the body of Christ, and He is its Head, then this is decisive for the concrete details of the church's existence. A human body never has a different identity than its head. Even in a passport or in a driving license this is as clear as day. A photo of someone's head is sufficient to indicate the person involved..

If knowledge of Christ is decisive for the question of what is most essential for the church, then this can also be applied to the catholicity of the church. It is possible to speak of the "catholic" significance of Christ, even if this is not a normal use of language. Christ Jesus is not merely someone from a certain time or a certain place. When the Son of God becomes man, He remains the one in Whom "all the fullness

of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Col 2:9). He is full of grace and truth; and from this fullness we have all received blessing upon blessing (John 1:14, 16). He does not have such limitations as we have! The range of Christ reaches as high as the heavens. Therefore you cannot apprehend the reality of the church by merely human characteristics. Even when Christ takes on our flesh and blood, He is the one who can say: "Before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58). After his resurrection, He says boldly, as a lasting support for His own: "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me" (Math 28:18). For this reason, his disciples are also called to be witnesses "to the ends of the earth". (Acts 8:1)

The Lord Jesus does not belong to a certain people or certain country. Is He not the Head of Creation? The title "firstborn over all creation" (Col. 1:15) points to His position as Lord of all creation, like the Son of a king is clothed with honour in order to exercise government on behalf of the Sovereign. After all, "all things were created by him and for him." In the same chapter, Colossians 1, Christ's high position is irrevocably bound with His being Head of the body, the church (Col.1:18).

### **The church is of course nothing without its Head.**

In its Head the congregation has, thus, the link to the most universal, the most cosmic scope of its existence. The church is not just an institution in society which can be found in the telephone book. For the church there is the book of the majesty of God in which the length and the breadth of creation, and the centuries of past and future are entrusted to us. The church breathes in this space of its Lord!

### ***Nothing outside Him!***

All this does not imply that the church of Christ can ascribe greatness to itself in the midst of the world. Absolutely not! The church is, after all, nothing without its Head. Its eyes must remain fixed upon Him. The danger that threatens the church is surely that it can want to become something of great significance in and of itself, apart from the Lord Jesus. The church must always be directed back to a living by faith. That is the narrow way, which for the church means not letting itself be turned away from the gospel which is heard and proclaimed, not letting itself be tempted to human speculations and philosophy. These are contraband. If that happens, then there is agreement with the "elements of the world," and not with Christ (Col.2:8). Such attention for itself, by itself, and its own possibilities of knowledge and experience make the church proud, blown up, full of empty air, so that our connection to the Head is lost (Col. 2:18, 19). These are dangers which threaten the church.

We ought to connect the greatness of the church, also when observing the dangers which threaten the church, with the word "catholic." As long as the word catholic points to Christ, we are safe. In Him there is space worldwide, without Him nothing but hot air.

When the New Testament speaks of the "world," kosmos in Greek, then the division between God and sin becomes visible. The "world" lies "under the control of the evil one" (1



John 5:19). It does not know God (John 17:25). The church ought not to borrow anything from the world in that sense. If the church is catholic, and so has a worldwide orientation, then there is not any significance given to the "world" itself. Only the cross of Christ is central. The cross of Christ stood in the midst of this world (John 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 5:19; 1 John 2:2). For this reason He is the Lord of history, because He is not only the Lion of Judah but also the Lamb that was slain (Rev. 5:5). Therefore He is King into all eternity (Rev. 11:15). His promise opens up the perspective of a new heaven and a new earth (2 Peter 3:13).

### **Catholic and one**

The significance of Christ ensures us that the church knows about earlier boundaries which have been broken through. The separation between Israel and the heathens has been removed in Him. It is striking how Paul, in the chapter in which he emphasizes this (Eph 2:11-22), says that this has come about in Christ and through His Spirit. Christ is the cornerstone of the catholic structure which becomes visible under the new covenant (Eph 2:20). When someone comes to faith in Him, the promises of the Old Covenant are fulfilled, including the promise that in Abraham all nations of the earth will be blessed. This is no catholic or ecumenical aim in itself, but rather what is involved is the knowledge and the confession of salvation in Christ. At Pentecost, God's great works were spoken of in all languages (Acts 2:8-11). The way in which the catholic church experiences its identity is via a vital connection between the Head and the members of the church. It is the bonds of faith in Christ, awakened and fed through the Word and through the Spirit.

**You can't be a Christian on a small scale with a few like-minded people like yourself.**

It is possible that the church be spread across a very large area, and that the members of the congregation not know each other at all. Nevertheless, there is an awareness of belonging to each other, of being one body of Christ in Him. In the New Testament we are struck by how the apostolic letters are often circulated to different congregations. What is important for one congregation is important for another. If there is poverty in Jerusalem, Greece takes up a collection. The abundance of the one part of the body automatically pours over to help the other part (2 Corinthians 8:14). It is one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all (Eph 4:4-6). For this reason, all party spirit and heresies are strangers to the essence of the church (1 Cor. 3:4f; 11:18-19).

See how the work of the Lord Jesus at Golgotha was directed at achieving unity! In His reconciliatory work, unity was brought back to that which had been torn apart and

which is continually threatened by divisions. Doesn't the Lord's Supper speak of this, this unity in His blood? That's why the apostles took so much trouble to prevent division in the church. The first official church "general synod" had to face this threat. The church leaders understood only too well that that such division was a threat to the very being of the catholic church (see Acts 15:8-9; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Gal. 3:28; Philem.:16)



Prof. dr. C.G. Berkouwer

### **All from Him**

If we realize how close the bond is between Christ and His body, then it becomes clear how close the bond is between the being of the church and its catholic character. You cannot be a Christian on the small scale of a few like-minded people. Christ's scale is catholic: as wide as the world, as far as the ends of history, and, at the same time, so intensely involved with the heart of salvation in the person of the Lord Jesus Himself. This is the reason why the church is having difficulties in a time and in a society which is trying to push back the gospel to the periphery of life. For the church it is only natural to open its doors wide to the world, and to witness boldly concerning Him, who has the right to subject everything and everyone to His rule.

G.C. Berkouwer once said rightly that the catholicity of the church must be tested by its calling to be the light of the world. Why should we crawl back into our shells, if our Head has the only message of healing which affects all mankind? And why should we be preoccupied in the world with things which pass away, without naming Him, who is eternal?

The heart conviction of Christians in this world ought indeed to be genuinely more catholic-more and more deeply conscious of Him in Whom we believe. Is He not superior to everything else?

The catholicity of the church also has urgent consequences for the activities within the church. We hope to deal with this issue in a second article.

In this issue of *Lux Mundi*, we publish parts 1 and 2 of the four part series 'De kerk is katholiek', originally in *De Wekker* (2004). Parts 3 and 4 will be published in the next issue.

# Reformed Believers in Central and Eastern Europe

Long before the fall of communism and the revolution in 1989 intensive contacts existed between churches in The Netherlands and believers, Christian churches and communities in Eastern Europe. The Reformed Churches Liberated (GKV) were also very involved in this. Starting in about 1970, visits were already being brought from The Netherlands to churches in Eastern Europe and, in secret, thousands of Bibles, hymn books, Christian reading material and money were taken there. After the fall of communism in 1989 new possibilities have arisen for church work in the Central and Eastern Europe, Ukraine, Russia and White Russia.

In this article we would like to give an overview of the church work being undertaken by the GKV in Eastern Europe. There we can see God's wonderful ways of dealing with his church and with His children.

## Great Hungary

After the First World War, peace agreements were made, with the result that so-called "Great Hungary" was divided up. This happened in 1920 at the Peace Treaty of Trianon. Big parts of former Hungary were added to other countries in the area.

One big part was given to Romania (Siebenburgen), involving approximately 2 million Hungarians. Another part was given to Slovakia in 1920. Here too, a Hungarian minority came into existence. Another part was given to Ukraine and a part to Yugoslavia. In all these surrounding countries, relatively large Hungarian minorities were created, all of which had strong ties with their original fatherland. These people kept on speaking Hungarian and they remained faithful to the Hungarian Reformed Church. This is still true today. Up until today, there are GKV contacts with all the Hungarian speaking minorities in all five countries of the area.

Since the Great Reformation of the 16th century contacts have existed between the Protestant Churches in The Netherlands and the Hungarian Reformed Churches. The churches of The Netherlands wound up having the Heidelberg catechism, the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort as their confessions of faith. The great Hungarian confessions were written in Europe between the years 1540 and 1570. The Second Helvetic Confession, written by Bullinger, had great influence. The Heidelberg Catechism was also adopted as one of the Hungarian confessions of faith. Because of their confessional unity, it was understandable that the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands always had good contacts with the Hungarian Reformed Churches. In the 17th century for example, various Hungarian theologians studied at Dutch theological faculties.



## About the author:

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## Hungarian minorities

The Hungarian Reformed mother church in modern Hungary has almost two million members and more than 1500 ministers. There are 5 Reformed theological seminaries. The church has a Presbyterian structure with somewhat hierarchical tendencies. The head of the church is a bishop. A general synod is held once a year.

This church structure can be found in all the countries where the Hungarian Reformed Church exists.

The Hungarian Reformed Church in Romania and in the former Soviet Union existed until 1989 under extremely difficult circumstances. Under the dictator Ceaucescu, the Hungarians were doubly discriminated against: the ethnic Hungarian minority was persecuted and the Reformed Hungarian church was barely tolerated alongside the Romanian Orthodox church. This was also true of the Hungarian Reformed Churches in the old Soviet Union. They were given little freedom to be Reformed.

In Slovakia, too, Reformed believers formed a small, though lively, minority. In such circumstances the Hungarian Reformed Church becomes the place of refuge for those of Hungarian background.

After the fall of communism, circumstances improved considerably. Starting in the sixties and seventies, secret visits were brought by GKV representatives to Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Yugoslavia. Ministers' conferences were organised, Christian literature was spread, and courses on the church and other topics were given. Although material help in the form of money and goods was given, the emphasis was upon "spiritual help."

One example of this was the giving of scholarships to Hungarian students to study for a number of years at the Theological University in Kampen of the GKV. These students were sponsored by the Fundament Foundation. After graduating, they then returned as ministers or teachers to the Hungarian Reformed Church.

## The Fundament Foundation

While it was difficult to visit and meet Hungarians in all these countries up until 1989, after the fall of communism in that year the borders became more and more open, and it was easier to visit the Eastern European churches and to have

## Eastern Europe



contact and develop activities. In the early years, starting around 1970, contacts were established via the Fundament Foundation, a Reformed foundation which was active in Eastern Europe for the GKV. Fundament stands in the tradition of the century old contacts between Reformed people in Hungary and in The Netherlands. Depending upon the circumstances, the content of the contacts have differed. For example, during the years of communism setting up long

conferences was not possible. After the fall of communism, such conferences became possible. Fundament desires to offer theological support in the broadest sense of that word to the brothers and sisters in Central and Eastern Europe, on the basis of full equality, respecting the Hungarian-speakers own responsibilities. The Fundament Foundation is a voluntary organisation within the GKV. Support for the Foundation comes chiefly from members of the GKV.



## **What does the Fundament Foundation do?**

Its chief activities are:

- the organisation of one-day or longer conferences for ministers, elders, students, catechists and church members about general church subjects;
- offering the possibility to ministers and/or theologians who have nearly finished studying to study in Kampen;
- the translation and publication of Dutch published theological works;
- offering pastoral and diaconal help, either directly or via local committees.

The following is of importance further:

- Fundament works closely with the Hungarian Reformed union of elders for the equipment of elders for their tasks;
- Guest lectures are regularly arranged for theological students in Hungarian speaking areas;
- Fundament offers a stipend to Hungarian theologians for (doctoral) study at the Theological University in Kampen, Broederweg (GKV);
- the aim exists to publish Reformed theological literature for ministers, elders and church members. Fundament consults with a team of Hungarian theologians for this purpose;
- Fundament also seeks to train catechists and Scripture teachers, preferably in collaboration with Hungarian Reformed organisations; for example, the teaching project at the Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj, Romania.



*Opening class of ERSU 2000, the Evangelical Reformed Seminary of Ukraine*

## **Ukraine and Russia in the picture**

Up until this point we have spoken about our contacts with the Hungarian Reformed churches in Central and Eastern Europe. But, since 1972, completely new church contacts have come into existence between the GKV and churches and Christians in Ukraine, Russia and White Russia.

Since August, 1991, Ukraine is an independent country. Before then, this country was a republic of the Soviet Union. Prior to independence, there was little religious freedom in Ukraine. It was difficult to find a Bible. There were no Christian schools and evangelisation was not allowed. Partly for these reasons, the Reformed churches (Liberated) in

Gelderland and Flevoland (The Netherlands) decided to begin missionary work in Ukraine and to send Rev and Mrs Nap for this work.

After a time of orientation, a decision was taken not to plant a church there independently, but to have a partnership with the existing Ukrainian Evangelical Reformed Churches (UERC).

Prior to the Second World War, there were already Reformed churches in West Ukraine. The centre of the UERC was the city of Kolomea. The Reformed churches in The Netherlands already had intensive contact with these small churches and their mission posts. After the Second World War, the 50 Ukrainian Evangelical Reformed Churches and their mission posts in West Ukraine had disappeared completely. Ministers had fled to Canada and America or were carried away to camps in Siberia. In the time of the Soviet Union, people were denied access to the Bible. It is wonderful to see how God's Spirit has been working in Ukraine. In 2004, Sunday services were being held by the UERC in seven places. The circumstances remain challenging: the influence of the old ideology (communism) and of the new ideology (individualism and capitalism) is strong. Let us therefore continue to pray for the Evangelical Reformed Churches in Ukraine.

## **Working together in Ukraine**

Help is being given to the UERC's church building work in Ukraine and to missionary work by the GKV churches in Gelderland and Flevoland. There are two main focus-points: Together with the Ukrainian Presbyterian churches and with American missionary workers from Mission to the World (from the Presbyterian Church in America), a theological seminary has been set up in Kiev, where evangelists and ministers are being trained. The idea behind this is to form a well educated group to give guidance to the churches. Rev Jos Colijn has been sent there by the GKV. He works as one of the staff at the seminary.

But there is also work being done at ground level with a view to church growth. Rev Harryvan was sent out to Kiev especially for this in 2003 by the GKV. The existing churches and the UERC mission posts receive support via courses for church councils and Sunday school leaders and by offering guidance to the young ministers.

GKV churches (30 churches, approximately 13000 members) in Gelderland and Flevoland support this work in Ukraine. In accordance with the decision of their Provincial Synod of Gelderland, the church of Hattem functions as the church which has direct contact with the missionaries in Ukraine. The church council in Hattem has a Ukraine Committee (UC) The UC is entrusted with the task of carrying out the mission work. This is supported by the College of Missionary Deputies (CvZ) appointed by the Provincial Synod.

The Ukraine Committee(UC) considers it a matter of vital importance that the members of the (liberated Reformed) churches in Gelderland and Flevoland be involved with the mission and support work in Ukraine. For this reason, the thirty churches in these provinces are divided into four regions. Each region has a relationship with one or





*Photo of the capital city of Hungary, Budapest*

more of the Ukrainian churches. Within a region, a church can also maintain contact with a missionary worker. Church members, as well as primary school pupils, can show their involvement by, for example, sending a card at Easter to the members of the contact church(es) and to Sunday school pupils.

The local Mission and Support committees and the coordinator of the UC stimulate maximum involvement. Each region has adopted one or more projects from the contact church.

Many Hungarian speaking Christians live in the Sub-Karpathian region, an area which belongs to Ukraine. The Fundament Foundation offers, among other things, material and technical support to the Hungarian Reformed churches in this area. Conferences for ministers, elders and church members are also held.

(See <http://www.stichting-fundament.nl>)

### ***Reformed theological education in Ukraine.***

In 1995, Rev M.Nap began a Reformed seminary in Kiev in coordination with the Evangelical Reformed Churches in Ukraine (UERC) and of the GKV in Gelderland and Flevoland.

It was a small beginning, this “kitchen seminary” (Rev. Nap gave lessons in the kitchen of his flat). In the mean time, a number of Ukrainian students have begun work as ministers within the UERC. Something similar happened in the south of Ukraine. Clay Quarterman trained theological students from the Ukrainian Evangelical Presbyterians (UEPC) in Odessa.

In 2000 a new theological seminary was set up, which has now been officially registered with the Ukrainian government.

This seminary is the result of a collaboration between the UERC and the UEPC. This Evangelical Reformed Seminary of Ukraine is supported by the Reformed churches (liberated) in

Gelderland and Flevoland, by Mission to the World (PCA), and the United Reformed Churches in North America. This support involves, among other things, sending guest teachers.

The governing body of the Evangelical Reformed Seminary was chosen by the synod of the UERC and by the UEPC presbytery.

The staff consists of Clay Quarterman (PCA/MTW), Rod Gorter (ITEM International Theological Education Ministries) and Jos Colijn (GKV). Eric Huber (PCA/MTW) is a permanent teacher at the seminary. Long term, it is hoped that Ukrainians can be appointed as teachers. At the moment, courses are given by the staff and by guest teachers from the USA,

The Netherlands, South Africa and other countries. The lectures are translated from English into Russian or Ukrainian. Where possible, Ukrainian teachers are used.

The course started in 2001/2 for the second year with a group of about 20 students. In September 2002 a second year group started with a further 17 students. For the year 2003/2004, 40 students were registered. On September 18th 2004, the first diploma was presented to 4 students. Rev Wasja Pilipenko from Stepanj was one of these. For the year 2004/2005 there are now 43 students registered at the seminary. The students come to Kiev 5 times a year for an intensive lecture period of one or two weeks.

There are also monthly course-days in Kiev and Odessa. Alongside this, the students must work in their own churches under the guidance of a mentor and have homework in the period between lectures. The theory is directly applied in practice.

More information about the Evangelical Reformed Seminary in Kiev can be found on the website <http://www.ersu.org>.

### ***Calvin in Russia***

In Russia, the Reformed Churches have a sister church relationship with the ERCUR. Evangelical Reformed Churches Union of Russia (ERCUR). The General Synod of Leusden 1999 decided to form a sister church relationship with the ERCUR.

In 1991, a small group of Reformed people gathered in Tver (formerly Kalinin). They were partly from Baptist circles and through study had come into contact with the works of Calvin. In 1992 a small church came into existence in Moscow. In the same year both churches formed the Union of the Evangelical Reformed Churches of Russia (ERCUR) and are officially registered under this name. There are two congregations, in Tver and in Moscow. There are other people, not yet members, who are showing interest. Much is being done to spread Reformed literature. Through this, house churches have been formed in, for example, Omsk,

Tomsk, Belgorod and Bela. Congresses are held, such as one held in 1999 in Tver and Tomsk.

The ERCUR has two ministers, Rev Eugene D. Kashirsky and Rev. Vladimir M. Lotsmanov. Both have been trained at Baptist colleges. There are also two elders. The official confessions are the Heidelberg Catechism, the Westminster Confession and the Canons of Dort. They use the English version of the Church Order from the Canadian Reformed Churches.

### **Mission in Belarus (White Russia)**

After the revolution in 1991, more freedom of religion came to White Russia. As early as 1993, Rev. M Nap and others, sent by the GKV Hattem, met a small group of people from the Evangelical Reformed Church in Minsk. From that time on, the Ukraine Committee (UC) has supported this church. Rev Nap and others from The Netherlands gave courses with a view to equipping this congregation.

On November 28th 1991, the Minsk Reformed Church began again. This church has the Bible, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Westminster Confession as its foundation. Rev A.P.Feijen, minister from Voorthuizen/Barneveld has been the contact person between the UC and the Reformed Church in Minsk. He gives courses twice a year, lasting two weeks, with a view to building the church. Preparation of church leaders is an important aim. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, there is growth in the faith and increase in the insight of the church members in Minsk.

The church services are visited by approximately 50 people, of whom 30 are members. Every week there is a Bible study and catechism classes.

The church has for years had problems finding a room in which to meet. Fortunately an end has come to that. A house has been bought, with help from The Netherlands, and it has been completely renovated inside by church members. Now Sunday school work can also be started.

The Minsk Reformed Church had been registered by the government, after years of failed attempts, but now it must be registered again. Official registration is extremely important for the church in White Russia. As a result of the law regarding religious organisations, it is becoming increasingly difficult for Protestant and Catholic Churches. Evangelisation is more or less tolerated but there are big concerns about the future.

It is historically important, also with regard to how the government regards a church, that the history of the Reformed church in White Russia dates back to the 16th century. Protestantism played a big role in the golden century of White Russia. In the spring of 2003, the Minsk Reformed Church celebrated 450 years of Reformation. The Minsk Reformed Church can be found on the following website: [www.cus.ca.ac.uk/~np214/reform.htm](http://www.cus.ca.ac.uk/~np214/reform.htm)

### **Other church contacts in Eastern Europe**

Finally, the GKV has other limited contacts with a Reformed church in Letland and with a few Reformed churches in Poland.



*'Worship' in the Reformed Church in Riga in Riga (Rigas Reformatu Draudze). (Photo: P.G.B. de Vries)*

### **The nature of all these church contacts**

Church contacts with Central and Eastern Europe are maintained in four ways.

1. Official church contacts via a sister church relationship. These contacts are maintained by section 4 of the BBK (Relations with churches abroad) deputies of the General Synod of the GKV. This true, for example, of the ERCUR (Evangelical Reformed Churches Union in Russia).
2. Contacts between co-operating mission churches in The Netherlands with new and existing churches in Eastern Europe. This is true of Ukraine and White Russia. These contacts are, first of all, maintained via the co-operating churches in Gelderland/Flevoland who fulfil a missionary role in these countries.
3. Activities and contacts of the Fundament Foundation with the Hungarian Reformed Churches in Central and Eastern Europe.
4. Contacts between local GKV churches with partner churches in Central and Eastern Europe. Dutch members bring visits, take clothes, but above all, seek Christian fellowship with the brothers and sisters in Eastern Europe.

Now that the borders have been opened and Hungary has even become a member of the European Union, and Romania hopes to follow in 2007, much has changed compared with 15 years ago. Then it was unthinkable that communism would fall and that contact with our Reformed brothers and sisters in Eastern Europe would be so easy. It was also unthinkable that there would be an Evangelical Reformed Seminary in Kiev, existing now since 2000, where Dutch Reformed missionaries work together with Presbyterian missionaries and teachers. Our good God has given remarkable, unexpected possibilities in Eastern Europe!

In writing this article, use has been made of [www.stichting-fundament.nl](http://www.stichting-fundament.nl) and [www.oekraïnezendend.nl](http://www.oekraïnezendend.nl)



## Revision of the Church Order

**It is beyond all doubt that our current church (*the GGRI - Gereia Gereia di Indonesia, red.*) order, which was completely taken over from our mother church, the Reformed Church (Liberated) in The Netherlands, is viewed as a church order which is founded upon biblical principles. When then, on the basis of this conviction, this church order was adjusted to the situation in our churches at the First Synod of the GGRI-NTT, it was seen as unacceptable to take on a total revision of the existing church order.**

The result was such, that the phrasing of the articles remained unchanged, while corrections were made only to a few footnotes, as we can see today in our church book, for example: "correction of the 1st Synod GGRI-NTT: 'provincial synod' and 'national synod' must be read as 'synod'." This makes, indeed, a fairly exceptional impression, but we must see this as a phase in a positive development. It also shows, however, how our dependence was the cause of a sort of fear of getting on with more fundamental exploration and revision of the existing church order.

Apparently we did not realize that the church order is not the word of God, nor a confession of faith, which cannot be changed or revised. In fact, a church order is a collection of rules, especially made for people (the church) so that they can order themselves as an organization, and which are a response to the actual and concrete needs of the church's own context, so that everything can be carried out in an orderly manner in the church. This, one's own context, has as much to do with the context of this church's own faith as the context of the culture in which the church in question lives.

### ***Wear the right clothes***

It is clear that the Dutch church order was drawn up in the context of faith and culture, answering to the needs of the Reformed churches *in the Netherlands*. When the Dutch church order was applied for use in the Reformed Church in Indonesia (and in particular in the province of Nusa Tenggara Timur), something happened which was clearly inappropriate. This was similar to when David was asked by King Saul to put on his battle dress and then could not freely move and could hardly walk. Then David went to meet Goliath in the clothes which suited him, that is to say, his own clothes. Why? Because it cost David too much effort to wear clothes which were not his own, even though it was, to all intents and purposes, the normal battle dress. Our experience in our church life is similar to David's experience with Saul's battle dress.

### ***What is fitting?***

There are many issues in the church order which we have

### **About the author:**

Rev Madah Bida, born on the island of Sabu (between Sumba and Timor), first trained as evangelist and then as minister at the theological school in Waimarang, Sumba. In the early nineties he became minister of the GGRI church in Kupang, Timor. From Kupang, he also spent six months in Australia. He took part in the ICRC in America, and has followed an IRTT course in the Netherlands. He is married with two children.

used up until now, which, if we honestly and realistically judge them, scarcely or do not at all apply to our situation, or which are strange to us, given our needs and culture. To give an example: in Sumba and Sabu, we value someone's age/seniority highly. The generally accepted norm in our culture is to cherish respect for older people. Those who are older have an automatic "monopoly on authority," and this is something which is viewed as self evident and "natural." A cultural norm such as this also plays a role in the church, which in certain institutional aspects cannot free itself from local cultural factors.

### **Authority**

As far as this is concerned, a problem arises when we want to apply what our church order says about the status, role and function of the various church offices. Take one issue, the status and role of a minister in comparison to that of elder. The church order states that the status of all church offices is equal. We have learned article 83 almost by heart: "No church may rule over other churches, and no officer may rule over other officers, in any way." But how does it work out in practice? Our internal natural response, formed by the culture, teaches otherwise. No matter what the circumstances, there is an unaffected honour which is shown to a minister. The same is true of young ministers in relation to older ministers. In our culture and also in our church, the respect which is shown to a minister is not the same as the respect shown to an elder. A minister is seen as someone with more authority than other church officers. In my opinion, this is a difference which is rooted in our culture. For this reason, ministers who have been trained in theological schools face big problems when they land in the reality of their work context. They encounter a church council and a congregation which expect guidance from them in all aspects of leadership and service, while the minister himself sees it as wrong to be "put on a pedestal" and expected always to take the initiative, fearing the accusation that he is claiming too much power for himself as minister. The negative effect of this conflict is that a church remains unfruitful and static.



### ***'Made in Holland'***

In the culture in which our church order came into existence and was written down, knowledge in the church was general, just as the ability and the knowledge of the elder or member of the church council, so that the contribution of all was clear and equal. But our situation is completely different, because only the minister and maybe one or two members of the church council have been sufficiently educated. What then happens in practice, is that the minister and one or two members of the church council dominate the church. In such a situation, should we judge the minister and church council members because they are in breach of church order article 83? As I see it, it is premature to judge the minister and church council members who seem to be ruling over the other church officers. The question which should be raised here is whether the relevant rule is realistic and whether it answers the church's needs.



*The participants of the Conference of the Gereja-Gereja Reformasi di Indonesia in August 2004*

### ***Step forward***

Let us return to our subject, the revision of the church order. For me, a first step which testifies to a development in the independence of the GGRI is that there should be at least a realization that the GGRI must dare to take a stand regarding this problem. Our church must develop our church life on the basis of experiences and struggles within our own church life, both internally and externally. For this reason, the revision of the current church order, as it was carried out by the 7<sup>th</sup> National Conference of the GGRI in Kupang, must be viewed as a first step in the history of the GGRI in its path toward the future. What has been achieved at this Conference has certainly not brought us to the end point. The regional synods of the GGRI will have to decide whether or not the revised edition can be accepted for use as a legal and binding church order of the GGRI. And, as well, if the GGRI churches decide unanimously to accept this church order, revised as it is by the Conference, then this is not yet the end of the matter. As a church which constantly struggles in a world which is constantly

changing, it is absolutely essential to have rules which are practical and applicable. This may mean that such rules will sometimes have to be changed. There is but one document which cannot be changed or adapted, and that is God's Word. Rules which have been drawn up by people, such as a church order, need revision, must be reformed, and must be revised, just so long as such changes are not contrary to the starting point of the

truth of God's Word as the only foundation and the only norm in church life.

My hope is that the church order, examined at Conference level, be examined further at the synod of the GGRI-NTT, will be changed and developed where needed, so that it can be accepted and used fruitfully, with the understanding that our task to revise the church order in response to developments will remain.



*Full attention for the discussion about revision of the church order*



# National Meeting NGK 2004

## The Dutch Reformed Churches (NGK) met in 2004 and 2005. A Mosaic.



Last year (2004) the National Meeting of the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken (NGK) convened at Lelystad. Meetings took place over a number of days and were chaired by Rev. W. Smouter. We report on a few of their decisions. One of the hot items concerned the question of women in church office. On this point the NGK first made a temporary decision and finished discussions in January 2005 in a meeting with representatives of all churches. The decision they took then, to allow sisters into the office of elder and minister, shall have a great influence on the discussions between the NGK, the Christian Reformed Churches (Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken, CGK) and the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands (liberated; Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt, GKv).

### Contacts abroad

The National Meeting examined the report of from the Committee for Contact and Dialogue with gratitude. This committee has a section for contact with churches in the Netherlands and a section for contact with churches abroad. The committee is instructed to: 1. keep seeking contact and maintain contacts with Die Gereformeerde Kerke in South Africa, the Église Réformée Évangélique in France, the Vrije Kerken (Free Churches) of Eastern Sumba, the Christian Reformed Churches of Australia, The Reformed Church of Japan, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (US), the Presbyterian Church in Korea and possible other churches of reformed confession.



Seemingly hidden amongst the woods, the building which houses the combined NGK and CGK congregation 'Het Anker' (the anchor) in Lelystad, where the Meeting was held.

### About the author:

Rutger (Ruud) ter Beek (\*1952) is minister of the Word in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated), since 2002 in Soest-Baarn. He completed his theological studies at the Kampen theological faculty in 1982 with a major in Old Testament. Afterwards he studied Semitic languages and cultures at the Catholic University in Nijmegen.

### Reformed Churches (liberated; GKv)

The National Meeting gratefully registered a growing trust between both churches. This is evident as much in the words spoken at the General Synod of the Reformed Churches (lib.) in Zuidhorn as in the developments locally. The Meeting did find it a shame that Zuidhorn decided not to agree to the request to review GKv-decisions taken in the sixties. The Meeting declared:

1. God be praised for the advances and growing trust.
2. Pray to God for an open and honest follow up, with as much a view to what happened in the past as to the present and the future.
3. The NGK want to keep working towards the unity with "all who love the Lord Jesus with an undying love" (Eph. 6:24) and therefore, and in this framework, also with the brothers and sisters of the GKv.
4. It is good if local churches keep working towards more co-operation and unity with GKv-congregations.
5. Some form of national contact at deputy level is therefore desirable.
6. Hoping for more church unity, it would be good to profit from each others' insights and wisdom now, when thinking through church problems of today.

### Christian Reformed Churches (Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken; CGK)

With regard to the contacts with the CGK, it was observed that there have been few developments in recent years. In the discussion, reference was made to the contribution of Prof. J.W. Maris at the National Meeting of 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2004. He pointed to the normative unity in Jesus Christ: We do not stand "without obligation" in relation to each other, because we are churches holding the same confession. In the same speech he alluded to a continuing discussion about the appropriation of salvation. Further the Meeting confirmed a growing co-operation with the Theological University in Apeldoorn. The Meeting found it a shame, in conclusion, that at this time there is no basis for further discussion with the CGK. It does however, recommend that the Committee looks into whether or not it would be useful to open a



*The leadership of the meeting. Second right is chairman, Rev. W. Smouter*

discussion with the CGK about the appropriation of salvation.

### **Mission**

The Meeting observed that missionary work attracts less interest within the NGK. Above all, it is difficult to maintain own missionary work on the local scale, at which it is now being carried out. The Meeting pointed to the CGK and the GKv, where this aspect of church activity is directed more centrally. The Meeting decided therefore:

1. to set up a committee of qualified people to look into the desirability of becoming a Committee for Mission and Giving Help;
2. to give this committee the task, together with those involved in current missionary work and giving support and with the previously mentioned bodies in sister churches, to draw up concrete recommendations for the future development of the national character of missionary work in our churches, in which the responsibility which the churches already giving support have for independent churches, remain guaranteed.

The Meeting offered the following arguments for this:

1. that it is worth combining forces with the aim of being more careful in selection, training, guidance and debriefing of missionaries whom we send out - in which cooperation with the central bodies established in the CGK and GKv, is perhaps desirable;
2. that it is desirable that the NGK in cooperation with the mission churches, reflect upon the relationship with the now independent former mission churches in South Africa;
3. that alongside the Foreign Section of the Committee for Contact and dialogue with other churches, which directs its attention at existing churches, there is room for a Committee or Section for Mission and giving help which specifically concentrates on directing and stimulating activities at nation level with regards to evangelisation, building up faith and clearing social needs.



*Outside the name of the church is emphasised once more*



*A lonely caller during the break. Ringing his wife, perhaps: "Hi dear, next year it's your turn to sit here!?"*

### ***Female elders and ministers?***

Last January the NGK decided to admit women to the church offices of elder and minister. Because of the extraordinary character of this decision it was taken at a meeting with representatives of all local churches. 83 churches voted; 59 of them voted for, 17 churches voted against, and 7 abstained from voting.

This decision was prepared in the report *Female Elders and Ministers?* This report speaks of two directions in the Bible. According to the one line of exegesis, the Bible says that women may serve in all offices. The other line concludes the opposite standpoint: the offices of elder and minister are not open to women. Conclusion: via exegesis, we cannot give a clear and unambiguous answer to the question of whether or not women may also be elders and ministers, on the basis of the Bible.

For this reason, an answer must be sought via the way of 'understanding Scripture', with the instrument of hermeneutics. The question has to be answered: what do the texts mean for us and for our time? Our own responsibility as believers means we must make a choice on the basis of our own culture. The reasoning goes as follows: in our culture men and women have an equal position; on the basis of our faith, we assess this as positive (as in agreement with the Bible) and for this reason we give men and women an equal position in the church. With this, a choice for the one line has been made (men and women in all offices). This hermeneutical choice does have as consequence, as the CGK deputies for the Unity of Reformed Believers in the Netherlands have written: 'that a number of Scripture data have not been taken as they stand, but can be set aside as not relevant for us'.

This report was also sent to Deputies Ecclesiastical Unity (DKE) of the GKv, with the request for comment. The GKv deputies presented their response to this report in March 2003, before the National Meeting. They wrote, amongst other things: "The Reformed Churches (liberated) have not gone through a decision-making process about 'women and office'. This means that we cannot make comments on the grounds of a decision of the Reformed Churches (liberated). The criticism we offer here is nothing more than a reaction from the Reformed Churches! In our response, we want to limit ourselves to questions about positions taken in the report, without providing alternative standpoints. That might come across as an easy option: it is easier to say how something is not, than to say how it is.





We do not consider ourselves able to do the latter, because, as stated, we cannot turn to a GKv statement on the subject 'women and office', and because, ultimately, it is not our task as DKE deputies to formulate a GKv standpoint about 'women and office'."

Deputies express their appreciation: "The report *Female Elders and Ministers?* tries to answer a question which lives broadly in churches of a Reformed conviction. Much has been written about the texts of Scripture that are of importance to the matter. The report makes up a clear inventory of these parts of Scripture, and of the interpretations given. It is right that the report does not stand still at *exegesis* of Scripture but digs deeper for *understanding*.

This is particularly addressed to the question to what extent biblical regulations are determined by their cultural context, and what consequences this has for the application of these regulations in our current context. In this, the report touches complicated but unavoidable questions. The strength of the report is that it has dared to recognise these questions."

### **The deciding factor**

All key texts are thoroughly examined, but does their interpretation really effect the conclusion? No, as deputies write: "After an exhaustive inventory of exegetical arguments for and against 'the woman in office' the conclusion is: by following the method of exegesis, we *cannot* arrive at a clear and straightforward answer. Therefore, the committee does not bring a recommendation for (even) more exegetical research. They support another way: not of *interpretation* of Scripture (this is a dead end street), but that of *understanding* of Scripture; not the exegetical but the hermeneutical way. They mean by this: the understanding of an explained part of Scripture in our current situation. With this manoeuvre, exegesis seems to have been ruled out: understanding of Scripture replaces exegesis."

Deputies agree that the question what a Bible text means for us and for our time, has to be answered, but still: the conclusion of the report that women can be ministers and elders, "is not because the committee found the arguments of those for more convincing than that of their opponents. Ultimately, the arguments are not carried out on the basis of Scripture interpretation. The deciding factor in the

committee's argument is that we are part of a culture in which women are emancipated in their relationship to men, and that aspects of this emancipation are experienced by many Christians as good. This is in our view a result of the understanding of Scripture, as the report defines it, with failing contact with Scripture itself. As a consequence the choice for or against 'women in office' has ultimately not come forth from (an understanding of Scripture that seeks as much contact as possible with) the Scriptures themselves, but from our conviction of what fits best in our (emancipated) society."

The NGK report discusses whether in Genesis 2 and 3 the priority of the man is taught. Its conclusion is "that those

who think to see a clear differentiation between man and woman in Genesis 2 and 3, which might be classified as 'the priority' of the man, can put forward maintainable arguments for this". When later 1 Corinthians 11:3 is discussed, the report states: "certainly, the man is created



*Almost all of the affiliated congregations (93 of the nearly 100) were present at Lelystad*

first, and that is not without significance". But, the GKv deputies comment: nowhere is indicated what the lasting meaning of this differentiation could be, and how it could and should be modelled in our time; the report comes no further than questions. Is this incapacity to move on from the differentiation between man and woman in the Bible towards a biblical view on the relationship between man and woman for our time, due to the assumption that Genesis 1-3 reflects the patriarchal culture of ancient Israel? In that case *not only Paul's regulations are context determined, but also the description of the man-woman relationship in the first chapters of Genesis.*

The GKv deputies for Ecclesiastical Unity are of the opinion, that you first need to know how the data derived from Genesis 1 and 2 are directive for today, also considering the way they show up in 1 Corinthians 11 : 2-16, before you open up the offices of elder and minister for sisters. Their final conclusion is: *the report forms an insufficient basis for the proposition that the office of elder and minister can also be opened up for sisters.*

The NGK committee later gave further explanation: "The suggestion which our report gives, that first an exegetical route should be followed which should later be alternated with a hermeneutical route, does not do complete justice to the actual state of affairs. In our final determination of standpoint, the complete reading process has played its part





*During the morning session talks focused on the Agreement of Church Society. It seems that some hoped it would soon be over!*

and exegetical and hermeneutical arguments closely fit together.”

The committee maintains, that “on the basis of expert exegesis, which shows respect for the Word of God, more than one standpoint remains upholdable”. “According to our conviction, for this reason, even more protracted and thorough exegesis will not help us to make all biblical data fit in one total picture.” The committee does not therefore, share the optimism of the GKv deputies that thorough exegesis can ultimately result in the desirable clarity and create unanimity.

Further, they point to the social reality: “If reflection of women in office is to be carried out in a credible way, then it cannot be isolated from the way in which men and women deal with each other in current practice in church life.” The NGK Committee find it a shame that CGK and GKv partners in the discussion do not recognise that “in general men and women within the marriage situation, and outside of it, treat



*A centre of activity at the chairman's desk.*

each other as equals. This is such a natural and heartily accepted fact that men and women would wish it no other way.”

### **The decision**

Criticism from the reformed partners in the discussion has not been able to convince the committee. On January 8<sup>th</sup> 2005, the NGK stated, “that the conclusion that the offices of elder and minister can also be opened for sisters, is a Biblically responsible one”. They have decided “that agreeing with the conclusion that the offices of elder and minister can be opened up to sisters, is an issue of Christian liberty and that therefore this opening up of the offices is permitted but not prescribed.”



This does not mean that this decision shall be brought into practice immediately, completely and by all congregations. The National Meeting also decided “to leave all local churches free to actually open up the offices to sisters”. Some NG Churches already have female elders, and now the rest are free to ordain sisters as elders. Some will not do this; the one because of cooperation with CGK or GKv congregations; the other because of fundamental objections.

The National Meeting of January 8<sup>th</sup> did not yet give permission “to actually open up the office of minister for sisters”. An important reason for this is, that admission to the ministry is the responsibility of the joint churches. How to deal with differences in conviction when it comes to a joint responsibility? For this reason, a committee shall first look into the feasibility of the opening up of the ministry and give advice about this at the next National Meeting.

### References

The complete Dutch text of the decisions of the National Meeting of the NGK at Lelystad 2004-5 can be found on the website [www.ngk.nl](http://www.ngk.nl) under the heading ‘landelijke vergadering’ (national meeting); the report of the Committee which prepared the decision about women in the offices of elder and minister, including the comments made about this report by the GKv Deputies for Ecclesiastical Unity and by CGK Deputies for the Unity of Reformed Believers, and the answer to this, can be found there under no. 25 of the ‘Stukken vergadering 2004 Lelystad 1-30’. An English translation of the comments given by the GKv Deputies for Ecclesiastical Unity, can shortly be found at [www.gkv.nl](http://www.gkv.nl) under ‘English materials’.

Photo's (and some small parts of the text): P.G.B. de Vries

## Course with two textbooks The assessment of the Alpha Course in Reformed Holland



**In The Netherlands, a certain openness to the gospel can be seen. Especially amongst young people there is interest. Also the lately started debate about norms and values, seems to be making people curious about the book upon which the Christian and Jewish faith is built. At the same time, the growing visibility of Islam has given rise to questions about our own Dutch identity and the role of the Christian faith in this. The generation which after the sixties took a deliberate distance from church and faith, seems to have brought up its children with an open mind.**

One clear evidence of this interest for the Christians book is the wide interest which the Dutch Bible Society managed to arouse for the New Bible Translation in October 2004. This new translation dominated the Dutch media for at least one and a half weeks after its presentation to Queen Beatrix in Rotterdam. The publicity still goes on. The sales figures are unparalleled.

It must be one of the factors which has resulted in the success of the Alpha course also in post modern Holland. People who have come to know and love God with the help of the Alpha course, also join the Reformed Churches. The reformed singer-songwriter Wim Buenk even wrote ten Songs for Alpha.

Although from the beginning, reformed believers and reformed churches have worked with the Alpha course, it has also started a stream of criticism, positive and negative. This criticism has not touched the form but especially certain aspects of the content. In this article I am trying to weigh up criticism and appreciation of the Alpha course, coming from reformed circles.



The Alpha Course logo

### **The Alpha course: course with two books**

The Alpha course attempts to spread the gospel with the help of a missionary learning group. A course is offered covering a number of evenings and a weekend. People who want to know more about the Christian faith, are invited to come and get to know God, the Bible and the believers. But it is not only a course with teachers and a textbook.

### **About the author:**

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is minister of the Word in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated), since 2002 in Soest-Baarn. He completed his theological studies at the Kampen theological faculty in 1982 with a major in Old Testament. Afterwards he studied Semitic languages and cultures at the Catholic University in Nijmegen.

A deliberate call is given to church members to circulate invitations within their own network and to attend themselves. It is the intention that there is a good atmosphere within the group. The meal together at the start of the evening helps this. The participants and leaders get to know each other well. The climate is favourable for friendships to come into being.

This side of the chosen method is directed at the coming into being of a personal relationship with God via personal relationships with believers. The reference to Christ must be there in word and in the deeds of the believing participants. Their hospitality, their attention and love for the participants must be at one with the love and mercy of God through Jesus Christ of whom the Gospel speaks.

The design of the course has deliberately paid attention to the work of the Holy Spirit. Not only as topic of one or more lessons. I mean that the organizers and the group leaders and the congregation supporting the course are made aware that the course wants to be a channel for the Holy Spirit. It is He, after all, who forges the band with Christ. He is the creator of faith. He makes people aware of sin and misery. For this reason the Holy Spirit is emphatically involved in the course through prayer. Prayer receives a place in the course evenings and in the course leadership. But also in the prayers surrounding the course, in a special prayer group, in the meetings of the church, constant prayer is made for the recreating work of the Holy Spirit.

It is thus interwoven with the Alpha course strategy, that it is a course with two books. The one book is the guide in the teaching, the work book for participants. This book points to the Bible, God's Word. Here, the teachers are the people who give the talks, and the people who lead the discussions. The believers who are present constitute the other text book. They point in word, attitude and prayer to the Lord Jesus, who lives and rules at God's right hand. For this reason they are available to the Holy Spirit. He is the teacher who works with the letters He has written in the faith of the leaders, 2 Corinthians 3:2-3.

This is important when weighing up the criticism. What is not present in the work book for participants, is not necessarily missing in the course. The leaders have a large

input with their talk, but especially with their attitude, their example, their prayer, their speaking about faith issues.

### **What is valued in the Alpha course**

There have been expressions of appreciation of the Alpha course brought forward by various reformed writers.

For a start, people have sensed a great respect and joy for God in the course. People have been especially addressed by God's love for mankind as that is expressed in the course. This is a great stimulant for the believers who participate, also to live out their faith in personal relationships. It is a fine way to practice mutual relationships based on trust. In your methodology you deliberately give a place to the need and the questions people have.

Subsequently people recognise the great respect for the work and the person of the Holy Spirit. Given the emphasis on prayer it can be seen that there is no reliance upon the capacity of people to bring themselves or others to repentance. People have no power to bring others to faith and repentance. The Spirit must give that. He must do that. He must do that alone. He must do everything.

Everybody is also in agreement that the course rightly emphasises that believing means coming into a personal relationship with God. Included in this is the appeal throughout the course to your own responsibility. There is an urge towards the making of choices. This is a biblical notion. A person can only be born again and come to faith by God. But if that happens, the person also begins to believe himself and repents. In order to persevere, the participant is also directed at the reality of the struggle with evil.

Finally it is good to see how the Bible is accepted and recommended as authoritative Word of God in the Alpha course. There is appreciation of the large place which is made for the role of the local church in the work of God. The church as community of believers comes extensively in the spotlight as work of the Spirit who works rebirth, in the chapter headed 'What does the Holy Spirit do?' (Work book, chapter 8) The chapter 'What about the church?' (Work book, chapter 14) is full of healthy teaching from the New Testament about the church as 'people of God', as 'family of God', 'body of Christ', 'temple of the Spirit' and 'bride of Christ'.

### **Criticism of the Alpha course: content**

In the Reformed churches, people have been bothered by issues in the course material which do not follow the line of Biblical teaching. The most objections are against chapter 9: 'How can I be filled with the Spirit?', and against chapter 13: 'Does God still heal today?'

Looking more closely at lessons about who the Holy Spirit is, and what He does, the question of how someone is filled with the Holy Spirit is addressed. On the basis of this chapter, it appears that the expression 'filled with the Spirit' is used in a distinct way: that is - being filled with the Spirit in such a way that you are going to do unusual things, and especially: to speak in tongues.

In the Bible, speaking in tongues or in a language which you have not learnt is an expression of being filled with the

Spirit. As the Spirit fills you, means that He takes control of your intelligence, your will and your feelings. He convinces you of the greatness and majesty of God and of His great love for you. He makes you absolutely willing to serve Jesus Christ, the

crucified one on the throne, king and redeemer. And His supremacy is expressed in having the frankness to speak of this. This is not a one off experience, although a hefty start is not unusual. It is a gift accompanying faith. You can also expect to know periods of inner resistance and weakness wherein the old debauchery wins ground again.

Paul's recommendation in Ephesians 5:18-21 has to do with this: 'do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery, instead be filled with the Spirit'. This does not mean that being filled with the Spirit has to be compared with drunkenness. It means: surrendering to the Spirit, protects you from falling back into your former way of life and helps you to live in a way which pleases the Lord. How do you let yourself return to the liberating regime of the Spirit? By speaking to each other in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. By listening to how your brothers and sisters praise the Lord and thank Him for everything that He has done for them. Be taken by your fellow believers to the throne of God. Read in their thankfulness the majesty of His love. Look at your life in the light of the work of Jesus Christ. Let their example help you to bow deeply before Him.

Being full of the Spirit, is being full of Jesus Christ, of His word. In your words and deeds you are one great reference for Him. On the point of being full of the Spirit, you speak of God's great deeds, proclaim the word of Christ and win respect for Jesus Christ the Lord. You will not be held back by anyone. You flow over with honour and praise. The Spirit will not let Himself be held back, certainly not by language barriers and cultural borderlines. This is the message of the Day of Pentecost. The Spirit wants to take the message of Christ to all peoples and nobody and nothing resists Him. Human limitations neither.

The Alpha course itself states it and reformed authors emphasise it: if 'being filled with the Spirit' means that you are going to do unusual things, especially to speak in tongues, a division between believers who are filled with the Spirit and believers who are not, occurs. But the Holy Spirit connects people by faith to the throne of Christ. Following Christ characterises the congregation as a whole, the congregation as the Spirit's place of residence.

Moreover reformed authors are afraid that the Alpha



*A photo of the website [www.alpha-cursus.nl](http://www.alpha-cursus.nl) showing the advertisement of the forthcoming conference 'Dynamic Prayer'.*



course gives priority to the Spirit before Christ. The period after Pentecost may well be 'the age of the Spirit' (chapter 9), but the Spirit is out to lay that link with Christ. He makes Christ known on earth. In his policy Jesus Christ comes first. If you see the 'age of Christ' to be closed in one way or another, you run the risk of letting the reconciliation be a one off closed happening, and sin a station which you leave behind. The 'pockets of resistance' which threaten your salvation (ch 10), become too much like incidents.

There is also a special chapter dedicated to the question of whether or not God still heals today, chapter 13 in the handbook. There is criticism of this, in combination with chapter 6 about prayer. It is right that what God has said in the Bible goes first (chapter 11) in order to decide what His will is. This creates caution in the 'experiencing' of God's guidance in prayer. This experience should be tested. The same should be said about prayer. In his prayer, a believer responds to God's promises. You climb to God's throne via the steps of his promises.

For this reason, it is important to pray with discernment, also when you express deep desires before the Lord, you search for connection with His own word. For this reason, he who asks God for healing from his sickness will not be able to connect to God's promise that he gives healing to every believer who asks for it. There is a promise of healing to be sure. But this is joined to the promise of forgiveness. The forgiveness of sin is the heart of redemption, the begin. Renewal and healing are given with this and follow this.

### **Criticism of the Alpha-strategy**

Alongside this criticism of the content, there is also criticism of the strategy. Things which should be told to interested people on the first introduction are not mentioned, or not mentioned enough. I name as examples: (1) That God's promise of redemption is the heart of the gospel and that faith is accepting this promise, and trusting in it. (2) That prayer is connecting up with God's promises. (3) That the destruction caused by sin is great. The power of sin is broken through faith but is not put out of action, so that the tempter can always find the weak place in God's children. It makes confession of sin and guilt, coupled with the request for forgiveness, necessary every day. (4) That the Spirit brings you to Christ and that reading the Bible is discovering and meeting Jesus. (5) Some people also miss a lesson about baptism, (6) others would have liked to have seen a more emphatic connection with church and worship service. If you are not clear about these things from the start, you can lay stumbling blocks in the way of faith for your pupils.

There are elements in the Alpha course which pull biblical truths out of position, and therefore can influence the practice of faith adversely and cause great frustration and disappointment in believers. At such moments, the value of the 'second text book' is great: what is missing can and must be brought in from the word and practice of the believers.

You can ask yourself if this is an effective way of teaching, if you have to correct the text book or even contradict it. Nevertheless, for many reformed churches, this is not a reason to stop using the course. Why the Alpha

course then? Various reasons are given for this. It is a well known 'make' which is very familiar. The set up meets a need and is effective. In the course itself, the relationship between the course leaders and the group swiftly becomes more important than the course book. There must also be trust in the Holy Spirit and the capacity of God's Word to make its own point.

Above all, it is not only the right of charismatic Christians to think about the work of the Holy Spirit in people coming to faith. The Canons of Dort, chapter III/IV pay attention to conversion and its means. This confession stands up for the use of those means. 'The supernatural working of God whereby he regenerates us, in no way excludes or cancels the use of the gospels, which the most wise God has ordained to the seed of regeneration and the food of the soul.' And today - the Canons of Dort warn - those who give or receive instruction in the church should not dare to tempt God by separating what He in his good pleasure has willed to be closely joined together (Ch. III/IV, art. 17).

Today it may still be necessary to call for preaching and teaching, for proclamation of the gospel and instruction. Today there may be even more need for a course which deliberately brings its students in contact with the regenerating Spirit and His work (Ch. III/IV, art. 11). This does not lead to a distant approach but to a personal advancement, in your dealing with each other, also in your prayer for each other. You are not just telling about something in the Bible, but you show what Somebody means to you. You give room to the emphasis on the Spirit by asking Him for regeneration through God's Word and the gift of faith through the gospel of Jesus Christ. And also by pointing to your king in heaven through your words and deeds. Jesus Christ brings people into His kingdom through His Word and Spirit. The Alpha course has found a way to give a place not only to the Word but also to the work of the Spirit in the process of missionary instruction.

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# NEWS UPDATE

## Theological University (School, Seminary) in Kampen for 150 years

In 2004 it was 150 years ago that the modest "Theological School" of the "Separated" (Dutch: Afscheiden) Reformed churches began. On Dec. 11, 2004, a symposium was held to celebrate that fact. The symposium was sponsored by the two theological institutions in Kampen which both carry the name "Theological University," one from the newly formed Protestant Church in The Netherlands (PKN) and the other from the Reformed Churches (liberated) (GKV). It was a lively symposium, with speakers from both church federations. The speakers from the GKV were Prof. Dr. G. Harinck en dr. E.A. de Boer, who spoke about the the Reformed tradition at the Liberated Reformed university. Rev. Jos Douma (GKV) also participated in a forum.



The symposium was held on Dec 11<sup>th</sup> 2004...The flag at half mast at the Theological University building (Koormarkt) because of the funeral of Prins Bernhard which took place on that day. (photo P.G.B. de Vries)



One of the high points during the meeting was the presentation of two paintings to the University: prof. Klaas Schilder left and prof. Seakle Greijdanus right. The paintings were manufactured by Johan van der Woel. (photo P.G.B. de Vries)



There was much interest in the conference, also from the Reformed Churches (liberated). The last in the row of five, is one of the speakers, Rev. E.A. de Boer. (photo P.G.B. de Vries)

## Theological Faculty Aix-en-Provence celebrates 30 years



The Free Reformed Theological Faculty (Faculté Libre de Theologie Reformée; <http://www.fltr.net>) in Aix-en-Provence is celebrating its 30th anniversary. The Faculty, founded in 1974, is the only orthodox Reformed seminary in France, and serves various church groups. The faculty members are: Jean-Marc Daumas, Church History and Theology; Michel Johner, ethics; Pierre Berthoud, Old Testament and Apologetics; Paul Wells, Systematic Theology and Apologetics; Gordon Campbell, New Testament and Greek; Frédéric Hammann, Practical Theology; and Ronald Bergey, Old Testament and Hebrew.

The Faculty is supported by a Dutch foundation, "Kampen Aix-en-Provence," and Prof. Johner was recently invited to The Netherlands for several lectures, in Gouda and Zwolle, which he gave in January, 2005. Prof. Johner described how, in the past ten years, evangelical (Bible-believing) Protestantism in France has become stronger, while liberal Protestantism has become weaker. At the

Reformed Faculty there is a lot of attention given to the defense of the Christian faith, apologetics. That is necessary in a strongly secularized French society. Prof. Johner called it a miracle that the Faculty has existed for 30 years, attracting students not only from France, but also from Africa.

## Contact stopped with Bat Tsion in Israel

At the end of 2004 the cooperation between the Reformed Church (Liberated) in Ommen-West and and the Bat Tsion congregation, pastured by Rev. Ben Tsvi, in Israel came, at least for the time being, to an end. Contact and cooperation between Reformed believers in The Netherlands and the Bat Tsion congregation had existed for many years, first through a committee and then through the church in Ommen. The Ommen church council found it no longer possible, for theological and practical reasons, to continue the relationship. This was reported to the Classis meeting, and the church of Ommen will be recommending to the Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad (BBK) that the General Synod of 2005 stop the relationship with the Bat Tsion congregation. However, this does not mean the end of all contacts with Jewish Christians in Israel, because the church in Ommen sees new possibilities for contacts arising. Further, there are other Christians in The Netherlands who see no fundamental problems in supporting Rev. Tsvi and Bat Tsion, and they will be continuing the contacts and the support.

## GSEv becomes Sensor

**GSEv** wordt **SENSOR** voor christelijke bezinning

**GSEv** Gemeente Sociaal Economisch Verbond

Wat we allang doen,  
namelijk niet alleen nadenken over sociaal economische onderwerpen,  
maar ook over  
thema's die ons maatschappelijk, persoonlijk en kerkelijk leven raken.  
laten we nu ook uitkomen in onze naam:  
**Sensor, voor christelijke bezinning**

*The Reformed Social Economic Association (GSEV) established in 1950, was remoulded to become Sensor last year, for Christian reflection. The GSEV published numerous brochures. By changing direction, Sensor hopes to reach a wider public and expand its area of work. The first project for the changed organisation is: Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.*





**BOOK REVIEW by Rev. G.R. Procee<sup>1</sup>**

***THE DORT STUDY BIBLE: An English translation of the Annotations to the Dutch Staten Bijbel of 1637, in accordance with a decree of the Synod of Dort, 1618-1619. Volume I, Genesis-Exodus.***

Translated by Theodore Haak; edited by Roelof A. Janssen.

**Inheritance Publications**

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email: inhpubl@telusplanet.net  
2003; 351 pages, hardback; \$18.90 US; \$24.95 CAN.



For many generations our fathers in The Netherlands treasured a beautiful Bible commentary that was present in nearly every home. This commentary consisted of marginal notes that were printed with the text of the Dutch States Bible of 1637 (Staten Bijbel met Kanttekeningen). These marginal notes have been widely used in the Dutch churches for centuries with much edification. They are still in print today and are considered to be a very reliable Reformed explanation of God's Word. Those of us who know the Dutch and are somewhat familiar with these marginal notes will readily agree that the quality of these annotations is excellent.

These notes supply comments on various aspects of a particular text and do this in a brief, concise, clear and factual manner. It is amazing how succinct and pointed these notes are. Without any unnecessary details one will find a direct answer to many questions concerning a particular Bible text. Office bearers, and especially ministers who are called to prepare a Bible study and who have little time to consult extensive commentaries, will find a gold mine in these Dutch annotations to the Bible.

The origin of these Dutch annotations can be traced back to the great Synod of Dort, 1618-1619. We will know that at this international synod of Reformed churches the Canons of Dort against the Arminians were formulated. But the Synod of Dort also made other important decisions. One of these was to supply the need for a thorough Bible translation in the Dutch language. Until this time, the Dutch churches had to use translations from German or English into the Dutch language. But in 1618 the Synod addressed the urgent need to have a clear translation of the Holy Scriptures into the Dutch language taken from the original Hebrew and Greek texts.

In the 8th session of the meeting it was decided to assign the work of Bible translation to some specifically Reformed theologians and also to give them the task to compile marginal notes. These notes, placed in the margin besides the Bible text, give another possible translation of a word and explain difficult expressions found in the text. To facilitate them in this work, these theologians made extensive use of commentaries by Beza, Calvin, and other Reformed theologians.

The notes had to be short and pertinent to the Bible text. The synod did not want the annotations to contain doctrinal expositions, but they were simply to be concise explanations of the actual Bible text. Therefore, the annotations are very succinct and to the point. They portray a Reformed understanding of Scripture, implying the unity between the Old and New Testaments, and rendering the centrality of Christ in both Testaments. The annotations demonstrate a Reformed hermeneutical approach to Scripture, such as allowing the difficult texts to be explained by the more simple texts, and supplying many textual comparisons. The result was a very scholarly Reformed Bible with annotations.

The Dutch government stimulated and financed the complete project and insisted therefore that the official name would be the "Dutch States Translation Bible." It was recognized in the international Reformed community as an outstanding work, evidenced by the fact that the Westminster Assembly in 1648 decided to translate these Dutch annotations into the English language. They solicited the help of a gentleman by the name of Theodore Haak, a German who had already lived in England for twenty years and who was fluent in the Dutch language. He had already translated several English books of practical divinity into German and was regarded by the Westminster theologians

as a man, "whose affection and zeal to the Glory of God, and good of the Church we know to be such, that he would willingly bestow himself upon the accurate and painful prosecution of this Work . . ."

Theodore Haak accepted the task to translate the Dutch States Bible together with the annotations into the English language. The work was completed in 1657 and in this way the Dutch annotations were made available to the English-speaking world. This work, however, soon became forgotten until just two years ago the Gereformeerde Bijbel Stichting (Reformed Bible Society) in The Netherlands made a photocopied reprint of this original work. This completely photocopied reprint is bound in one volume and is available for the price of approximately \$200.00 (US).

This edition has various drawbacks, however. The print is very old, rather unclear and therefore not easy to read. It is bound in one bulky volume, which does not allow for easy use. The notes are not easily accessible because they are simply inserted into the Bible text in a similar font and placed within brackets. In addition, this version contains quite a few errors and unexplainable omissions.

Recently Inheritance Publications of Neerlandia, Alberta has taken the wonderful initiative to republish the original 1657 English translation of the Dutch States Bible with annotations in a modern typesetting. A team of editors is engaged in doing a very careful check and comparison of the original English version with the Dutch version. The many errors in the English version are being corrected because the committee is finding that in every chapter some textual references are omitted and some parts of a Bible verse is missing.

This new English edition of the Dutch annotations is more faithful to the Dutch original and is very "reader friendly" because of its modern typesetting. The Bible text is printed in clear bold letters and the actual marginal notes in a smaller but still clear font. The Bible text is a translation of the Dutch States Bible from Dutch into English and therefore at times it varies from the English Authorized Version. The editorial committee has made various corrections to the Bible translation supplied by Haak in order to be more faithful to the Dutch original.

The whole project will comprise 14 volumes — 10 volumes of the Old Testament and 4 volumes of the New Testament. Seeing the enormity of the work, the publishers plan to publish one volume per year. The first volume, Genesis and Exodus, has been published. At the present rate, the entire project is scheduled to be completed by the year 2016. It is our hope that the publishers will accelerate this work, for to have to wait another thirteen years until one can read the whole Bible with these valuable annotations is really too long.

The books are handsomely bound and are of an excellent and durable quality. We can heartily recommend this Dort Study Bible to all our families and homes. Here we have at last a clear, succinct Reformed Bible with reliable annotations. This should be a welcome and long overdue publication for the English-speaking world that is being inundated by study Bibles filled with dispensational and other unreliable marginal notes. We can be very glad with this initiative and we sincerely hope that this ongoing project will be completed much earlier than anticipated, so that this work will be a blessing not only for future generations, but also for the present Bible-loving generation.

<sup>1</sup> First published in *The Messenger*, Rev. G.R. Procee is the pastor of the Free Reformed Church of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.



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Colour brings out in full relief  
– by means of slanting beams –  
the map of all the world.  
Increasingly far-reaching is the Light!  
Over the quarters It will claim  
an ever larger territory;  
each corner of the earth  
must yield to it ultimately.

The hands of the clock in God's hand  
mark the Light's feats of conquest on earth  
until in the fulness of time  
every one of the four winds of heaven  
shall be filled with the glory of the Lamb.

*Lux Mundi: Light shining upon this world.*

*This cover was made according to the design  
of J.P. Gootjes from Zwolle.*