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P.P.H. Waterval

Editorial

Last month I was on holiday in Rome, and while visiting St Peter's square I happened to see the 'holy father' waving to a crowd of visitors from behind the bulletproof glass of his white popemobile. I couldn't help thinking: "How secure does he really feel?"



One does not have to agree with Richard Dawkins' rabid call to arrest the pope to realize that the Vatican has an awful lot to account for. After the Roman Catholic child abuse scandals in the US and Australia, the cesspools of clerical paedophilia are now being opened in Europe. First in Ireland, where since the publication of two crushing reports in 2009 on widespread abuse, 15,000 charges have already been filed. Germany and Austria have had their ugly share of scandals. In Belgium, a bishop resigned after admitting his abusive sins. Two weeks later his boss, the Belgian archbishop, was accused of a cover-up. In the Netherlands, the situation seemed to be better until at the end of February the newspapers started reporting cases of abuse in Roman Catholic boarding schools. Since then the number of cases reported has been rising by the week.

True, the Vatican has not remained silent. On several occasions, the pope expressed his deep regrets and sympathies with victims. He also promised to discipline clergymen who are found guilty, and in many cases this has already happened. But if the scandals that have come to light thus far, which are plunging the Church of Rome into deeper discredit than ever before, are just the tip of a global iceberg, one wonders whether it can survive this crisis. The other week a



woman told me: "You won't believe how ashamed I feel to be a member of this church." It wouldn't surprise me, therefore, if this turns out to be the worst crisis for the Roman Catholic Church since the Reformation.

Born and raised a Roman Catholic myself (but converted and happily Reformed since the mid-eighties), I can't help sympathizing with the woman who expressed to me her feelings of disgrace. After all, being a Protestant now doesn't give me any advantage over Roman Catholics. In the eyes of the average unbeliever, it is the church as a whole that is to blame.

What's more, there is Protestant child abuse as well. Due to the recent publicity on this issue, the Dutch Protestant interdenominational working group against sexual abuse in pastoral relations has stated that there is currently an increase in reports of child abuse. But even though the situation in Protestant churches may not be as serious as in the Roman Catholic part of the world, there is no reason whatsoever to feel superior. Too often we hear of Reformed ministers, elders, and deacons being expelled from office because of sexual sin. Are our homes, bedrooms and studies holy sanctuaries? How much of the total global iceberg of sexual sin, which only God can see, will turn out to be Protestant on the last day?

I believe it is truly Protestant to realize that God's honour is at stake, to kneel and intercede for the daily conversion of all God's children, starting with ourselves, and to cry out: "Please, God have mercy on us, sinners!"

...First in Ireland... (photo P.G.B. de Vries)

“And then all Israel will be saved”

Part 2: Our responsibility¹

When Paul in Romans 11:26a uses the expression ‘all Israel’ he means the people of Israel as a whole. This became clear in my previous article. The next question, then, is how and when, according to Paul, the salvation of all Israel will be realized. In Romans 11 there is an interaction between Jews and Gentiles, which can be described as wave-like. When we understand Paul’s expectation within the context of his apostolic mission, we also note a powerful appeal regarding our responsibility towards the Jewish people.



5. Gentiles and Jews: a parallel.

The symmetrical structure of vv. 30 and 31 illustrates the parallel Paul sees between his audience (we noted previously that here he is addressing people of Gentile descent) and the Jewish people. In the past, the Gentiles did not believe; now they have found mercy with God. That could happen because of the unbelief of Jews, who refused to acknowledge that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel. The Jews in their turn do not believe, but would God not show mercy to His own people? He could, because mercy had been shown to those who were not Jews.

The thing that stands out is that *everyone*, whether Jew or Gentile, depends on this divine mercy. It is this mercy that sets unbelief aside. This truth redirects the problem that Paul is grappling with to God’s election. This was already pointed out in vv. 28, 29. God’s gifts and His call are irrevocable.

In the Nestle-Aland edition of the Greek text, the word *nun* has been placed in square brackets. Internal and external considerations with regard to this reading balance each other out. External considerations, however, clearly argue against a reading that includes *nun*. It cannot be shown, therefore, that the conversion of Israel already takes place in the present, as some would suggest.² How then must we deal with this dubious little word *nun*? There are two possibilities. Either we do not read *nun*, because it doesn’t belong to the original text³, or we can regard it as a reference to the future: something that is to happen soon, or a prophetic

turn of events that somehow, as it were, draws the future into the present. Either way, it is the mercy of God that Paul emphasizes. That’s what it is really about.

The textual parallel between Paul’s audience (of Gentile descent) on the one hand, and Jews on the other, can be shown in this way, the word NOW describing the present state of affairs:

Verse 30	Verse 31
you (= Gentiles)	they (= Jews)
once	NOW
unbelieving	unbelieving
NOW	[<i>nun</i>]
mercy	mercy
through their unbelief	through the mercy shown to you.

6. God’s mercy to all

The word ‘all’ (*pantas*) in the concluding verse 32, referring to the mercy of God, can only mean: ‘mercy towards all, both Jews and Gentiles’. And so this passage concludes with the hope-inspiring mercy of the God of Israel for everyone who seeks his or her salvation with Jesus Christ: “For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that He may have mercy on them all.”

The secret that Paul wanted to share with his Gentile audience in Rome is that God has not rejected His people. Together with Ridderbos, we could speak of an interaction between Jews and Gentiles⁴, or, as Matter described it: a wave-like movement of salvation. He wrote: “Israel’s deplorable fall does something for the Gentiles; in their (the Gentiles’) conversion the grace they (the Jews) rejected knocks with renewed and victorious strength on Israel’s door. There is no primacy: God has bound them all over to disobedience so that He may have mercy on them all. But there is a discernible history of salvation.” What Paul saw as a possibility in vv. 11-15, has now proved to be reality, says Matter⁵. Psalm 90 really is true for all believers: generations come and generations go – and we have all been included in the mercy of God.

7. The conversion of Israel.

It is true that the Eternal One fulfils all His promises, but that does not mean that the salvation of Israel is some kind of automatism. It goes by way of conversion, the acknowledgement of Jesus as the Messiah of Israel and the Saviour of the world. How should we picture that in concrete terms? This is and remains a difficult question. One can think of three possibilities:

Post-historic: All Israel will be converted, in the same manner as Paul on the road to Damascus, through an appearance of Christ Himself. They will hear the Gospel as the word of the returning Christ (*rhêma Christou*: Romans 10:17). This idea, however, raises serious questions. Why would Paul have had such deep and unceasing anguish in his heart (ch. 9:3), if at the same time he nurtured the hope that in the end, all would be well with Israel? Second: would this not lead, for the unbelieving part of Israel, to a willy-nilly election? Third: in most cases, the prophetic expectation mentions the restoration of Israel first, and after that a consequent coming in of the Gentiles is expected. Paul’s order is exactly the reverse. For these reasons, this is not a very useful possibility.

End-historic: ‘all Israel will be converted’ refers only to the end-time, after the salvation of the Gentiles, and relates directly to the return of Christ. His coming will remove all ungodliness (= unbelief). Baarlink puts it this way: “After the mission to the Gentiles has reached its goal, there will be an opening in Israel for the Gospel and a turning to Christ”⁶. This too raises critical questions. To what extent can the generation of the end-time still be considered ‘all Israel’? This possibility does not fit an any eschatological template, and it has not, according to Ridderbos, been elucidated by even one single exegete. Paul sees no other way for the conversion of Israel than the preaching of the Gospel throughout history.⁷

Redemptive-historic: ‘all Israel will be converted’ upon the preaching of Paul and other evangelists, once their mission to the Gentiles has been completed. Both Matter⁸ and Munck⁹ have advanced this possibility. Munck’s solution, however, was met with the objection that ‘hearing the Gospel’ is not the same as ‘entering the Kingdom’. Nowhere else does Paul use the expression ‘entering’ in a descriptive sense, and so, suggests Munck, here it must simply mean ‘coming to’. This, however, is a forced and unsatisfying construction.

The objection raised against Matter’s solution

was that v. 26 seems to refer to the return of Jesus Christ. In point 4, above, I have already shown that this objection is not well supported exegetically. V. 26 does not so much deal with the coming Messiah as it does with the God’s work of salvation, which has Zion as its centre. This possibility, therefore, remains standing.

The redemptive-historical approach appears to provide the best perspective. It does, however, need to be augmented with a future-directed dynamic. Paul had laid a foundation for further construction in the future. It is possible that Paul saw the two as lying in the same line, the history of redemption and the history of the end-time. Jesus Christ Himself had indicated this when He said: “... *this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come*” (Matthew 24:14; Mark 13:10). For the apostle Paul, this was entirely consistent with his missionary strategy: first the Jews and then the Gentiles. Then why not, by extension, make another move towards the Jews, either by himself or by his successors? Hopefully all Israel, aroused to envy by the conversion of so many Gentiles (ch. 11:11), might as yet surrender to the Gospel.

Three factors, however, ensured that things went differently from what Paul had hoped: His journey to Spain did not bring about the great breakthrough that he had anticipated. For whatever reason, this journey was not especially successful, and no church in Spain claims to have been established by Paul himself. What is more, the timescale of God’s plan proved to be much longer than expected. The passing away of the present form of this world (1 Corinthians 7:29-31) took much longer than Paul had envisaged.

There was little in the Christianized world that would arouse the Jews to envy. So often, there was an intermingling of Christianity and paganism. Non-Jewish Christians claimed exclusive authority to explain the Scriptures. Jews were accused of deicide. In spite of Paul’s words of warning, Gentile Christians *had* become conceited. They believed that God’s work had reached its culmination with them.

The Jews continued to be deeply obstinate. In Isaiah’s words, the people of God’s choice had always been a disobedient and obstinate people (Isaiah 65:2, quoted in Romans 10:21). Paul’s conditional clause is significant: “... *if they do not persist in unbelief*” (ch. 11:23), they will be grafted in again. Unfortunately, so very few Jews met this

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condition. Among Jews, those who confess the Messiah are still very much in the minority.

8. Consequences.

Was Paul mistaken? I do not believe so. His expectation was perfectly justified, in view of the divine mystery of salvation, which formed the foundation for his apostolate. Behind the future for the Gentiles, Paul also saw a future for his own people with Jesus Christ. But the things Paul shared by letter with the congregation in Rome about the salvation of Israel, had a prophetic perspective that was much more complex than he could imagine. The redemptive-historic and missionary significance of his words have proved to reach right into our own time.

And this leads us finally to the question: what are the consequences of the foregoing for contemporary Christianity? Answering this challenging question requires a sense of involvement. A search for answers could best begin, perhaps, with what has been discussed at the end of point 7, above.

In his patience with the world, God still gives time for repentance, and that is our salvation (2 Peter 3:8, 9). We live in the perspective of the Kingdom. As we pray for its coming, we are called to enter in faith ourselves, and to show others that there is no other Name given under heaven by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12). Whether these people are of Jewish or Gentile descent, outside of Jesus Christ there is no salvation. This worldwide appeal only becomes the more urgent as the centuries pass. We recognize the anguish of Paul's heart because of Israel (Romans 9:2). There are many points of recognition between the church and the synagogue, but each of these evokes tensions as well. It grieves us that we cannot share the joy of Jesus Christ with all Jews. Our hands, too, must be stretched out to a disobedient and obstinate people (see Romans 10:21). That will lead us to intensive prayers for Israel. What's more, we must try to draw Israel to its Messiah. Do we, as Gentile Christians, arouse any envy among Israel? That is precisely what Paul commends to his audience in Romans 12: by means of a Christian ethic and way of life Jews may as yet be made receptive to the Gospel of Christ.¹⁰

Jews who confess the Messiah deserve our support. More than ourselves, they know the existential yearning Paul had for his people. Too often, they are regarded as an oddity within the Christian church. Must they, as much as possible, assimilate with the Gentile majority, or may they preserve their Jewish

identity? Does mother church nurture those of her children who are descended from Israel?¹¹ And we ought not to forget fellow-Christians of Arabic descent either, for since time immemorial they too have lived in the land.

The explanation of Romans 11:26, as developed above, shows us that we as 21st-century Christians may be fully involved in what Paul envisaged when he wrote his letter to the church in Rome. Throughout the ages, the relationship between Israel and the church continues to deserve careful attention. Our Christian responsibility in this regard is activated by the expectation Paul expresses concerning the salvation of all Israel. *Ora et labora*. In so doing, we may confidently lay the future in the hand of God. May Messianic peace be the portion of us all! ■

Notes:

- 1 This is the second of two articles, the content of which was presented at a symposium entitled "Hoe leest u 'Israel'?" (How do you read 'Israel'?) jointly organized by *Nederlands Dagblad* and the *Centrum voor Israelstudies*, held in Ede, the Netherlands, on 29th September 2008. The final and fully annotated version of this presentation was published in *Theologia Reformata*, December 2008. This presentation dealing with Romans 11 may be regarded as a continuation of my 'Israel and the church. Three models for the relationship', *Lux Mundi* 27.1 (2008): 16-19.
- 2 H. de Jong boldly states: "This word is essential" (*Van oud naar nieuw. De ontwikkelingsgang van het Oude naar het Nieuwe Testament*. Kampen: Kok, 2002, 306-307).
- 3 D. Holwerda, 'Heel Israël behouden', in: *De Schrift opent een vergezicht*. Kampen: Voorhoeve, 1998, 183-184.
- 4 H. Ridderbos, *Paul. An Outline of His Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975, 360.
- 5 H.M. Matter, "'Aldus zal geheel Israël behouden worden". Waarheid en verdichting rondom Rom. 11:26a', in: N.J. Hommes e.a. (ed.), *Arcana Revelata* (feestbundel F.W. Grosheide). Kampen: Kok, 1951, 59-68. (translation mine – AP)
- 6 H. Baarlink, *Romeinen II* (Tekst en Toelichting). Kampen: Kok, 1989, 66. (translation mine – AP)
- 7 H. Ridderbos, *Israël. II: Israël in het Nieuwe Testament, in het bijzonder volgens Romeinen 9-11*. Den Haag: Van Keulen, 1955, 59-62; with a reference to Paul's argument in Romans 10:14-17.
- 8 Matter concludes that the world-shaking breakthrough to the Gentiles took place in the

first four centuries of Christendom. "The plèrooma of the Gentiles (alas,) lies behind us." ('Aldus zal geheel Israël behouden worden', 68). In this view, a missionary orientation to the future is lacking, for Matter opposes the notion that God has assigned a permanent place to Israel in the history of salvation.

- 9 J. Munck, *Paulus und die Heilsgeschichte*. København: Munksgaard, 1954; idem, *Christus und Israel: eine Auslegung von Röm 9-11*. København: Munksgaard, 1956.
- 10 A.L.Th de Bruijne has developed this point extensively in: 'Christelijke ethiek tussen wet, schepping en gemeenschap. Een positionering naar aanleiding van Romeinen 12:1 en 2', *Radix* 27 (2001): 116-148.
- 11 E.A. de Boer, 'Mag ik de Davidsster dragen?', *De Reformatie* 83 (2008): 675-678.

This translation by Aart Plug, January 2010, by arrangement with the author. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations and references are taken from the New International Version of the Bible (NIV), 1984.

Israel's Settlement in Canaan

On March 18, 2010 Koert van Bekkum received a cum laude doctoral degree at the Theological University in Kampen, after defending his thesis. His supervisors were Prof. G. Kwakkel and Prof. E. Noort. The title of his thesis is *From Conquest to Coexistence. Ideology and Antiquarian Intent in the Historiography of Israel's Settlement in Canaan*. Most likely, the thesis will be published as a monograph later this year.

Current research on biblical historiography concentrates on the relation between history and ideology. The ideological rhetoric of Joshua 9:1--13:7, combined with external evidence seems to falsify the historicity of these chapters. However, scholars disagree on the question how the text's antiquarian interest and its ideology should be related to one another. The thesis answers this question by using three methods: (1) a synchronic and diachronic analysis, (2) comparison with Ancient Near Eastern historiography; (3) evaluation of recent developments in archaeology.

The textual analysis of Joshua 9:1--13:7 reveals that these chapters can be viewed as a piece of ancient Hebrew historiography that was composed in Judah between the late 10th and the early 8th century BC with help of Late Bronze memories. In addition, the artefactual analysis of the archaeological remains of the cities mentioned in this textual unit and of some non-biblical texts shows how the Cisjordanian Southern Levant developed during the Late Bronze and Iron Ages. The dialogue between both kind of evidence highlights that there remain some minor archaeological and historical problems. But overall, the picture of a 13th century BC unified conquest of several tens of thousands of Israelites and of a scribal Judean historiographical activity with regard not only to this event, but also to the process thereafter at the beginning of the first millennium BC fits the archaeological southern Levantine picture during Late Bronze II - Iron IIA.

As a result, the biblical historiography of Israel's settlement in Canaan describes how YHWH fulfilled the promise of the land in Joshua's conquest. Between the lines, however, the text suggests a following period of coexistence with pre-Israelite peoples and a more definite fulfilment of the promise of the land in YHWH's choice for David as Israel's king.

Koert van Bekkum (b.1970) studied Theology at the Theological University in Kampen, Archaeology of Palestine at the University of Groningen and Accadian at Leiden University. Between 1998 and 2002 he was a research fellow at the Biblical Studies research unit of the Theological Universities of Kampen and Apeldoorn. During this research project, he participated in the Megiddo Expedition, the renewed excavation of Tel Megiddo in Israel. He has been the assistant editor-in-chief of the *Nederlands Dagblad* since 2002.

Newsupdate

Why does God permit suffering? (2)

In Part 1 I explained that the question why God permits suffering is typical for someone who lives in a Judaeo-Christian culture. It presupposes that evil is really evil (and not an illusion, as many Hindus and Buddhists would say). It also assumes that there is one God (and not many), and that this God is good, loving and powerful (instead of evil, or powerless, or both). I continued by presenting two philosophical arguments that attempt to explain why Christians can believe in a good and powerful God, in the midst of suffering.

In this second article I will give two more arguments, and conclude by presenting a central thought from the Bible: the Cross of Jesus Christ is God's definitive answer to human suffering.



3. The inadequacy of partial solutions

The third argument I wish to discuss proceeds from the enormous extent and pervasive reach of evil in the world. This argument states that people who demand that God prevent suffering approach evil too superficially, as if it were a surgical problem. To use a metaphor: evil is not a rotten spot in an otherwise beautiful piece of fruit: the whole fruit is rotten to the core. For God adequately to deal with evil, it isn't enough to intervene selectively here and there. Nothing more and nothing less than a complete cleansing – a transplant even – will do. In the words of the New Testament: "A new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (II Peter 3:13). It is precisely this Biblical perspective of the total renewal of all of reality that compels us not to underestimate the nature of evil.

Thought experiment

In order to make this argument easier to understand, I have devised a 'thought experiment', which I have set out below. Let us imagine that God has decided to turn our world into some kind of utopia, a place where no-one will ever again need to ask why He permits suffering. What could God do to prevent such suffering? The first thing He might

do is to remove all natural disasters. The next step could be to remove all the suffering that people inflict on each other – wars, crime, concentration camps, etc. However, natural disasters and human evil will only ever be truly rendered harmless when the *fear* of such occurrences, or the *memory* of them has been removed as well. After all, it is emotions like these that can make life much more difficult for one person than they do for another. In this utopia, then, no natural disasters exist, nor wars, nor crimes. Not only are they absent in reality: they have also been completely erased from everyone's memory and imagination. In such a world, there can be no cancer, no disability, no miscarriage. Depression and other forms of psychological distress will be unthinkable and unimaginable. The word 'sick' no longer exists. There can be no fear of illness, no effects of illness and no memory of illness.

From our point of view, one that is determined by the world in which we live, this would be a great improvement. Of course, some forms of suffering would remain: toothaches perhaps, the complaints of old age, or (non-violent) squabbles between people. But compared to what we experience now, they would be next to nothing. But how would people, living in such a utopia, with no knowledge or fear of the sufferings we experience, respond to things such as toothaches, failing hearing, or a quarrel between neighbours? For them, these hardships would be the worst suffering imaginable. Their response would hardly be tempered by the knowledge that there are 'worse things'. Would someone who lived in such a utopia and had a toothache not have reason to call God to account? God could only remove every reason to accuse Him if He abolished toothaches as well. So what could still be left?

People still die

In this utopian world, people still die. Death causes suffering, even in a world without dreadful illnesses and without wars. Especially in such a utopian world, the fact that some live to a good old age, and others die much younger, would be a cause for resentment. Death also causes suffering for the next-of-kin. In short, death will have to be abolished too.

Would that really remove every reason for complaint? We are still confronted with the question: how would the citizens of this utopia respond, unaccustomed as they are to suffering and hardship, when confronted with the pain occasioned by unfriendly words and manipulative actions? For that would be the only evil that still remains. And in a world in which nothing exists to bring them back to their (or at least *our*) true proportions, these words and actions would be infinitely painful. In short, even this last evil – the evil that arises from our selfishness, our need for self-protection and our love of the easy way out – will have to be banished. Only then will God be 'justified'. Clearly, that can only happen when we ourselves have been 'justified', that is: when all that is evil has been removed from ourselves. This thought experiment shows that there are different answers to the question why God permits suffering. We can take an intellectual approach. But another 'answer' is also possible: *remove the cause that leads us to ask the question in the first place*. This experiment demonstrates that people will always ask why God allows evil, unless the world and they themselves are perfect. Even though this argument doesn't really answer the 'why' question, it does show that the answer is more complex than the question suggests, and that we ourselves are still in the line of fire. Justification may be an 'indirect' answer to the question why God allows suffering – not by answering it, but by taking it away.

4. Moral people in an amoral world.

The previous three arguments had a 'defensive' character. They showed something of the internal logic of the (Christian) faith, by which it can be shown that one can believe in a good and almighty God, while living in a world that is full of hideous suffering. Such arguments may serve to convince an 'outsider' that you need not be mad or devoid of feeling to believe in God; but they do not go any further than that. The fourth argument I wish to discuss does go further: it shows that our response to the evil in this world can only be explained if we have been created by a good God. In fact, this argument turns the question on its head: our response to suffering and injustice is actually evidence *for* the existence of God, rather than an argument *against* it.

This argument runs as follows: We must acknowledge that our reality is characterized by an indescribable amount of suffering, chaos, and pointless destruction. Evolution itself appears to be a totally blind process, in which countless humans and other creatures must die in order to advance the species by a small step. Anyone who takes the time to allow this to sink in must arrive at Midas Dekkers' conclusion: "*Mother Nature is an ugly old witch*". This realization might drive someone to atheism: after all, what proof do we have that a good God directs it all?

But the problem with this kind of atheism, strongly driven by involvement with and rage about oppression and suffering, is that it really has little reason to get so worked up. After all, if we are really no more than accidental products of a nature that inflicts so much suffering, why should we – and only we humans, apparently – find this so hard to take? Where do our notions of 'good', 'fair' and 'just' come from, anyway, since we live in a world that clearly is *not* good, fair, or just? How could a blind and violent process of evolution produce a humanity that has such high moral ideals and standards?

No more than labels

One might object that these ideals are no more than labels we give to successful behaviours, and that 'morality' is no more than a by-product of biological evolution. But this response betrays a confusion of categories: 'successful' is not the same as 'moral' – as evidenced by the most recent global financial crisis. The same is true for 'social behaviour' or 'altruism' (which evolutionists regard as the foundations for morality). In itself, social behaviour is not moral. A youth gang is no less social than a monastic order. Morality is no more a product of biology (even though it must have certain biological underpinnings) than language is a product of biological processes (even though those processes are necessary to be able to speak). Suffering and cruelty are problems for everyone, whether they believe or not. But for unbelievers there is an additional problem: how do they arrive at the standards by which they judge the world that surrounds them?

The belief that a good and moral God has created us, and that He intended something better for us than what we see around us, can powerfully drive us to maintain high ideals about right and goodness and beauty. Such a belief also does more

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photo P.G.B. de Vries

justice to our faith in the *absoluteness* of these ideals. We do not condemn oppression because we think it is less pleasant, or because that's what we have somehow agreed to do. Our responses to cruelties and atrocities, such as those in Rwanda, are not based on procedures or on personal taste. They have a primary and absolute character. And these responses are much easier to explain in terms of the existence of a God, in whose image we have been created, than without such a God.

The Cross as an answer to suffering

In the previous section, I have from time to time inserted comment drawn from the Bible. At the end of these articles, however, I'd like to pay some attention to the specific contribution that the Christian faith makes to the question of suffering. While Christianity does not give us clear explanations for every experience of suffering, it does provide an immense resource of hope and of courage to combat evil and to bear it when it befalls us. For Christians believe that in the person of Jesus Christ, God Himself became man. In this

way, He experienced 'in His own body' – so to speak – loneliness, poverty, torture and death. The Bible tells us that He did so for a reason. He was no passive victim; He took this suffering upon Himself in order to deliver His creation (including ourselves) from sin and evil. The death of Jesus Christ was God's solution for the pervasive problem of evil. It is not my intention here to explain precisely how this deliverance took place. I do not have the space for that here, and even if I did, I would not succeed in explaining just how Christ's death on the cross 'worked'. If the problem of evil is so complex as I have tried to show above, then the solution will also be much more complex than we can comprehend. Christians, therefore, know a God who knows suffering from experience. He knows what we are going through. The Cross does not explain evil, but it does tell us something about God: He is involved in what mankind must undergo. He willingly subjected Himself to suffering and death. In this way, the Cross is an invitation to *trust* God, even if we don't understand Him. The Cross is proof of His love, a love that we might doubt if 'apart from the Cross' we look around us at the world we live in. But it does tell us what the reason *cannot* be that God does not allow suffering because He doesn't care about us. God takes our misery so seriously that He has taken it upon Himself. Perhaps He even takes it more seriously than we do ourselves, for the Cross shows us that the solution for the evil in this world is much more complex than we might think.

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

God knows our troubles

There is more, however. The Cross shows us that God knows our troubles, and that He has compassion for us. But that is not where the Bible stops. It tells us that Jesus Christ arose from the dead. All the powers of evil and death had spent themselves upon Him, and He overcame them all. The Bible tells us that Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of God's restoration of His creation, and the resurrection of humanity. On the basis of the resurrection, Christians believe that every atrocity will one day be judged or reconciled, that one day there will be healing. Just as Jesus' suffering only made His resurrection the more triumphant, so every experience of suffering will one day contribute to the lustre and glory of the future of God. Faith in the reality of Jesus' resurrection, and in the promise which the new Testament links to that, can give us hope for a future that is infinitely better than the world we presently know. In addition, it gives us the confidence that everything we do 'in the Lord' to fight against evil, and to establish beauty and goodness in the world, 'is not in vain.' (I Corinthians 15:58).

Conclusion

Why does God permit suffering? In these articles I have attempted to show that this question may especially arise from a culture that bears the stamp of the Biblical religions. Further, I have tried to show that the question is more complex than we are inclined to think, and that, for the most part, its answer is likely to lie outside our powers of comprehension. My search for an answer goes in the direction of God's purposes for the world and for us; purposes that have become visible in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For the present, the question about suffering will not receive an intellectual answer. But the Christian tradition offers us numerous reasons to take our rage and loathing of oppression and cruelty very seriously, to take action against this evil, and to nurture the hope that this action will not be in vain. I believe that secular worldviews offer these opportunities to a much lesser degree: not only because they are much less able to explain our moral abhorrence of evil, but also because they offer insufficient hope that our struggle for goodness, truth and beauty will ultimately have meaning.

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Original sin in the structure of our being (2)

We saw last time that the doctrine of original sin raises many questions and is often cause for discussions. I would now like to present a few thoughts of my own on this doctrine, stating my conclusion straight away for the sake of clarity and ease of reference



What is original sin? When we speak of original sin we *confess* our sinful nature. We confess it to be sin: I am a sinful being! Sin is deeply rooted in me; it is the confession of Romans 7 – “What a wretched man I am!” From the very beginning of my existence it was in me: “I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51).

Characteristic of this part of Christian confession is that we, conscious of guilt, acknowledge this sinful nature as sin before God. Our inherited sinful nature is not the same as inherited physical characteristics. Skin colour and the colour of one’s eyes are hereditary; but that is not sin. An AIDS infection can be passed on from parents to children, as can a susceptibility to alcohol addiction and certain degenerative diseases. Perhaps even a strong attraction to the opposite sex can be passed on. Yet genetic characteristics, deviations or weaknesses are not sin. Illness, whether or not hereditary, is not sin. Physical factors outside of our responsibility are not sin.

It is also not the same as receiving an inheritance. You can inherit from your parents without being able to do anything about it. It takes place outside your will. You can even – under our inheritance laws anyway – accept or reject such an inheritance. You can accept it conditionally: if the debts turn out to be larger than the assets, you can ultimately renounce the inheritance. When we confess original sin, we acknowledge that we will *not* renounce it; that indeed we *cannot* do so. We have no influence over this inheritance.

Ancestors

The term ‘inherited sin’ need not be avoided, so long as we weight the second word as heavily as

the first. It is inherited *sin*. In confessing that, we take the responsibility for it upon ourselves. Yes, it is true: that sinful being – it is!!

I am connected with my ancestors in my sin. We are all of us sinful together. Such confession can be found in Psalm 79:8: “Do not hold against us the sins of past generations”, which implies that God does us no injustice by imputing those sins to us, though we plead with Him not to do so.

Something like that can be heard in Psalm 106. Verse 6 says: “We have sinned, even as our fathers did; we have done wrong and acted wickedly”. The psalm continues by describing those sins of the forefathers in terms of “they” and “them”. Even though there is no reference to “our” sins, the history does wind up with “us” pleading for salvation: “Save us, O LORD our God”. We have sinned. The sins of our forefathers in the course of history, of which we also have a part, eventually led to the wretchedness in which we find ourselves now. It is a pity that these texts are seldom if ever brought into the discussion where the doctrine of original sin is concerned.

No going back

The general resistance to the doctrine of original or inherited sin can be compared with the complaint of people who have emigrated from a paradise to a desert. The first forefathers emigrated (I do not compare the consequences of sin with emigration, but the sin itself). As a result, the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren now live in the desert, while the first forefather is already long dead. They still live there after many generations and complain about the step their forefathers took: how could they have been so stupid as to choose this environment over the original one? “I would never had done that!” they cry out. They complain about their wretched living conditions, and these complaints in themselves are valid. *But they do not go back*. They might talk of doing so once in a while: “We would prefer to go back. We are stupid not to go back. Shall we go?” They make plans, but they are always half-hearted plans. In the end they stay where they are: from parents to children to grandchildren. All together as one large family, clan, tribe, nation...humanity: one large community. Nobody leaves. Nobody has it in them to do it. The will, the pure consequent will that leads to action, is

simply lacking. They do not go back to the holy life, the life dedicated purely to God.

When you speak of inherited *sin*, you acknowledge that. You acknowledge that to be the hindrance. You take responsibility for that yourself.

That is only possible if you, as a human standing before God, have self-knowledge. You confess your sin to Him. Awareness of guilt, with the knowledge of inherited sin, is a part of conversion. Through the work of God’s Spirit, I have become a new ‘me’ that distances itself from the soiled old ‘me’. Not distanced from the responsibility, but from the will, the attitude. *This is the way I am, I see it again and again, but I do not wish it so*. That is Romans 7: the new ‘me’ takes over the old; they are two very real ‘me’s, and both of them are part of me.

This is where the actual problem of the doctrine of original sin can be found. It cannot be discerned in an objective-scientific manner. The theologian cannot cut himself loose from his position before God. The question is whether I say yes or no to God, his being God, his creation, his claim on my life, his claim to my obedience.

This is what makes the Christian confession of original sin so unique.

Vehicle

The uniqueness of Christian confession of original sin lies not in the manner in which we look upon the relationship between parents and children, forefathers and offspring and the familiarity between them, but in the acknowledgment that we are sinful like our forefathers ‘because God has constructed us humans in a mutual cohesion’.¹ We could also say: created.

This quote from contemporary times is no new insight. It is a common approach in Reformed theology.² We were not there when Adam sinned, but we have, through our forefathers, come forth from him. Along that route proceeded sin and sinfulness. Sin was decay or corruption. ‘Man brought forth children of the same nature as himself after the fall. That is to say, being corrupt he brought forth corrupt children’.³

The cohesion between the generations conveyed the corruption along with it. The created structure now became the vehicle for sin. The corruption of the best became the worst. The best: a structure designed for man to multiply himself into a whole humanity. It became the worst: community in sin, a mass revolution against God.

Accepting responsibility

This is why revolt against the reality of original

sin is nonsensical. Nobody can validly dispute their being a child of their parents. Here the word applies: “Woe to him who says to his father, ‘What have you begotten?’ or to his mother, ‘What have you brought to birth?’” (Isaiah 45:10). It is absurd to reproach your parents for having brought you into the world. The objection itself implies your being a child of your parents. Had your parents not conceived you, you would not be here, you would not have been capable of anything, let alone reproaching them. You cannot accept life with all its opportunities as an inheritance from your parents, and not accept your sinful nature also. Which is better: to exist, though a sinful being, or not to exist? We can understand people in utter misery crying out that they wished they had never been born. But this cry too can only be answered standing before God, both as Creator and Redeemer. I was conceived and born. Thus I live, but as a corrupted being – just as my father and mother. In the course of my life and my development into adulthood, I must learn not to shift responsibility for my life onto my parents, in endless inner reproaches, but learn to take responsibility for my own life upon myself. This is also an insight that psychology today brings prominently to the fore. They were contaminated; so was I!

Hereditary deviation

It is therefore not necessary to try to fathom and expound a separate explanation, a separate mechanism, through which the decay is passed on from parents to children. It proceeds through the structures and relations that God has laid down – through all those structures. One speaks of inherited contamination: that concerns the sinful nature that is in us. And inherited guilt: from parents to children, we all stand guilty before God. We could name many more structures. It can be helpful to conceive of the structures as discerned in Calvinist philosophy, the ‘law spheres’, as they were originally termed.

As humanity, in communion, we have strayed away from God. We have broken the covenant. (This is a notion that Reformed theology is comfortable with). Let us return to the image of emigration. The relationship with God is disturbed; estrangement has set in. The atmosphere is troubled, communication is disrupted, association is blocked. That passes on from parents to children. The distance remains. The estrangement proceeds – so far as we can help it. We could call this hereditary estrangement or hereditary deviation.

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Worldview

Another example can be given. Our philosophy of life and our worldview, our perception of reality, is something we share as humans. It is part of our cultural baggage. We tend to adopt this from our environment without thinking about it, without even being aware of it. Individualism, for example; or the way we treat the ecological environment; or a pessimistic view that has no eye for the sunny side of existence and God's remaining 'common grace' therein. There are different worldviews: the Chinese differs from our own. Questioning the reason for suffering is something we find perfectly normal, yet inhabitants of India have quite a different view of it. Views also change through time. Yet we all share worldviews. Apparently, we adopt such a view without thinking about it. We experience it as an objective fact: 'isn't it like that?' In reality, people are actively involved in the manifestation of such views. There is a subjective aspect: the interpretation of reality. This can be called the 'social construction of reality'. In such a 'construction', there are, to put it mildly, things that do not coincide with God's truth. We could call this the inherited error or hereditary distortion.

The two elements discussed here are pre-eminently social; they occur in our social relations – the first in our life with God⁴, and the second in our social connections as humans. Our own times pay a great deal of attention to social aspects, less so do our theological traditions. Perhaps we should now place a greater emphasis on this.

Imitation is another aspect of the passing on of sin from parents to children. Young people identify with their elders, for better or worse; they experiment with imitation of elders – as well as peers – who are important to them. That is unavoidable in the process of upbringing, development and socialization. It is this element that Pelagius emphasized – although he did not pay sufficient attention to the unavoidability of it. The church has rejected the process of imitation as a complete explanation for the passing on of the tendency to sin, including the worldview that lies behind it. However, in doing so it has never denied that it plays a role.

Family likeness

Theology systematically speaks of our connection with Adam as far as sin is concerned. I have been speaking all the time of parents and children, forefathers and offspring. Is there a difference here? If original sin can indeed be traced through connections with which God has structured our existence, then we should not only think of Adam.

We are connected to him via all the intermediate generations. On the other hand, whilst it has been repeatedly and emphatically asserted that we are guilty of Adam's sin, the impression must not be given that we are guilty of the sins of all following generations.

But if that is the case, then inherited original sin becomes very abstract and, I fear, not fathomed deeply enough. Yes, we are guilty of the sins of the fathers. We heard that in the psalms cited above. Not guilty of all their individual bad deeds, though we acknowledge within ourselves the same main features. As it is with other hereditary traits, so it is with sin. We are different people, different individuals, yet we display the image of our parents, we look like them.

We may not drown our problems, yet we are prone to ignoring them and making things comfortable for ourselves. We may not have daggers drawn when we argue, yet we have other ways, perhaps more subtle or psychological, of paying the other back and hurting him. We may think in a more egalitarian way and no longer look down on those of lower classes, yet we just as easily, carelessly, and selfishly turn away from the suffering of the less privileged of this world. We may not be guilty of the deeds of Hitler, Dutroux and Bin Laden, yet the doctrine of original sin instructs us to recognize our familiar connection with them.

Biology

So, is the sinful nature passed on through the route of sexuality and reproduction? Augustine struggled with this question. In his opinion, there was something sinful about the act of copulation because it is accompanied by unbridled lust. We have learned not to follow him in this train of thought. The sinful nature is passed on from parents to children, through the generations, as we said – that is not the same as along a purely biological route, just as parenthood is not just biological. That does not eliminate the fact that reproduction has a vital role in parenthood. The maxim that 'corruption of the best becomes the worst' can be applied here. I believe that we are not yet done with the Old Testament laws concerning (normal) sexuality and birth, though we no longer have a feel for the meaning of them. Could not these laws have worked towards the learning process that eventually brought David to confess 'I was guilty when I was born, already when my mother conceived me?' ■

Notes: see page 48

J.W. Maris

A Reformed conference on education

An impression of ICRE-3

What does it mean to be Reformed when we have to educate children in the daily routine of a Reformed school? In what respect are the practices and principles in Reformed schools in need of being improved? Is there something that needs to be improved in the qualities of Reformed teachers?



Indeed, the third conference on Reformed education, held in Lunteren, The Netherlands, April 26-28, 2010, was dealing with important issues. Quite apart from the lectures and the discussions, meeting up with one another was stimulating in itself.

When seventy participants meet around the theme of *powerful teaching* and being *excellent teachers*, it is guaranteed that something will happen. Backgrounds of Australian, Canadian, South African and Dutch teachers and school principals certainly have much in common because of their Reformed identity. Notwithstanding, diversity with regard to school culture, educational environment and history also give opportunity for exciting discussions. Listening together to the Word of God, singing God's praise, and being united in prayer really do establish a deep harmony. Discussing the questions and challenges presented by outstanding lecturers engenders a common awareness that we are never finished reflecting on the great commission given to us. I will attempt to indicate what was assimilated during and after the three outstanding lectures given at this conference.

The inside-outside exchange

Prof. Fred Korthagen is one of the leading scholars in the field of education in The Netherlands and abroad. In his lecture, which was followed intently, he proposed that good teaching goes deeper than motivating children to learn their lessons. It is about guiding them in the process of growing, which

happens from the inside. It is about finding their inner potential that has to be developed. Finding the positive qualities of a child is more fruitful than trying to eliminate the problems you come across in his or her behaviour.

Finding your way to the innermost layers of a child – Korthagen uses the example of an onion – is a challenge for teachers. If a teacher can succeed in bringing about sparkling eyes in a pupil, then a positive pedagogical climate is created that is very fruitful for growth.

To Korthagen, the innermost part of man – which he calls 'mission' – is also where human spirituality is at home. Whilst not a Christian thinker, he is convinced that Christians could accept this in their religious thinking.

Of course, at this point questions arose from the Reformed perspective about man being a sinner. Notwithstanding, in the discussion about his stimulating thoughts we discovered that the grace of God makes clear how the key to growth is not within a child, although there is an obligation in that direction. We came to see the need for a continuous connection between God's grace, in Word and Spirit, and the heart of a child. The suggestion was to replace the onion model by the Moebius strip, in which the inside and the outside are continuously connected. Insights that will certainly be taken home!

The necessity of reflection

Dr Jos de Kock, from the Driestar Academy in Gouda, spoke on *Teacher excellence, reflection and identity*. To a certain extent, this lecture continued with the 'inside' theme, because teaching and teacher excellence are passionate affairs. However, in the field of education, one can establish an appreciation of practice over theory. Often, young teachers seek direction by the example of excellent colleagues. They try to develop a sensitivity for good practice. Over against this, Dr De Kock confronted the conference with the challenging proposition that a teacher's excellence is about reflection and research.

To him, it is clear that excellent teachers are

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passionately knowledgeable and biblically grounded, and that love for the Lord and love for children are part of their attitude. However, as a result of an investigation among a number of Christian teachers, he found that the ideological and professional identities are linked differently from teacher to teacher. He stated that it really is necessary that the ideological identity be defined at the level of the individual teacher. Attention is necessary for the personal and biographical aspects of one's identity, and for reflection on the pedagogical area of teaching. This all calls for a development of a teacher's capacity to reflect; a school's capacity to 'innovate identity'; local practice-oriented research studies on identity with attention for teacher's creativity and emotion. Of course, this lecture also gave grounds for questioning, in which the necessary cooperation and interaction between the parents and the school emerged as an important factor.

Between virtues and commandments

On the third day of the conference, Dr Pieter Vos led the meeting with a lecture on *After duty – the need for virtue ethics in moral formation*. In a sense, the virtue theme brought the audience once again to the 'inside' perspective. Virtue cannot be imposed on children in the way that commandments and standards can. Personal virtues, however, are like core qualities that do have to respond to certain standards. This approach gave impetus to the question of how education can be instrumental in developing virtues. The virtue theme is of ancient pedigree. The Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote extensively on virtues in his *Ethics*. The Christian tradition has accepted the concept of virtues. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther and Calvin all employed the concept, each

with his own connotations. Augustine was conscious of the radical nature of sin, and the necessity of grace to educate the will. Thomas Aquinas' espousal of merits gave Luther cause for criticism, yet Luther was convinced that God in Christ brings virtue to us. (We do not bring it to God!). Calvin had a clear vision of the sanctification of the Christian life, in which both love for righteousness and love for commandments have a place. This means that for him, virtue ethics go together with the ethics of obligation! In later Protestantism, a development is seen in which duty outweighs virtue, ultimately leading to a rejection of virtue ethics. The fear of merits plays a role in this development, and the fear of independence rather than dependence upon God. The ethics of obligation, being the result of this, leaves unanswered the question of whether or not a child might grow in good character (like the tree of Psalm 1). Pieter Vos defends the need for rehabilitation of virtue ethics, not least in education. The inner motivation of the heart needs to have a place in our education, together with the trust that must be placed in a human being. This definitely does not exclude the importance of the law! How important it is to develop – like in Psalm 119 – an inner loving bond to the law of God. How much our responsibility for educational duties in our schools must function in dependence on the work of God's Holy Spirit!

Challenges

Needless to say, in our discussions (even on a sunny excursion to Spakenburg) the challenges presented appeared to have provided us with a wealth of stimulating resources for reflection and practice from Australia to British Columbia. There was a unanimous conviction that in three or four years an ICRE-4 would be most desirable. ■

From our editorial staff

Children of God

The Imago Dei in John Calvin and His Context

On Thursday, 29th October 2009, Jason Van Vliet defended his doctoral dissertation entitled *Children of God. The Imago Dei in John Calvin and His Context*. His supervisor at the Theologische Universiteit in Apeldoorn was Prof. Dr H.J. Selderhuis, who on behalf of the University officially conferred upon him the dignity of being a Doctor in theology.

One of the theses, added to this dissertation, highlights the significance of Calvin's doctrine of man, when it says: The most significant contribution John Calvin made to the doctrine of the image of God is his definition of the *imago Dei* in terms of the Father-children relationship. This definition is exegetically defensible, dogmatically robust and pastorally reassuring.

Van Vliet explains in this study that John Calvin had a keen interest in what the Scriptures teach about the nature and faculties of human beings, as well as their role and responsibility under God's authority. For Calvin, the proper way to understand human beings is to begin by considering them as they were originally created, that is, made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27). How successful, though, was Calvin in articulating a clear and consistent understanding of the *imago Dei*? This question cannot be answered without giving due consideration to the historical context in which Calvin laboured. After all, the Reformers were not the only ones in the sixteenth century who were reconsidering the nature and the dignity of human beings. The Renaissance humanists were also pondering this matter. In addition to this broad context of humanism, there were also other contexts

within which Calvin developed his anthropology, for instance his interaction with Philip Melanchthon and Heinrich Bullinger, as well as his polemics with Andreas Osiander and Michael Servetus.

Following this historically contextual approach, six questions are pursued in this study. They are: How does Calvin define the *imago Dei*? Is his view of human nature coherent? Has Greek philosophy influenced his teaching about the human body? Is his view of human nature similar to that of Zeno, the founder of Stoicism? What place do women have in his understanding of the *imago Dei*? To what degree does he reform the doctrine of the *imago Dei*?

In brief, the research provided the following answers to these questions. In the first place, Calvin defines the *imago Dei* as a similarity of attributes that the Triune God imprinted upon the human soul from the beginning. That is to say, as God himself is just, holy, and wise, so he also created Adam and Eve in such a way that they were just, holy, and wise. The relationship that surrounds and sustains this attributive similarity is a familial one. Essentially, at Creation the image is: like Father, like children. In fact, Calvin explicitly states that the *imago Dei* is God's testimony to us that we are his children. This understanding of the *imago Dei* does not involve deification. Calvin encountered strains of deification with men such as Andreas Osiander and especially Michael Servetus. Calvin countered these men vigorously, for under no circumstances would he allow *imago Dei* to metamorphose into *esse Deum*.

Second, at any given point in time, Geneva's Reformer may be speaking about human beings in one of four different states. There is the original condition at Creation, the sinful condition after the Fall, the condition of being restored in Christ by faith, and the final state of perfect glory when

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Dr J.P. Van Vliet

Christ returns. These four states must be carefully discerned. When Calvin is describing human beings in the *status integretatis*, or in the final consummation, he lauds the excellent attributes of human beings. By contrast, when he is depicting *humanitas post lapsum*, he is emphatic about the dismal state of affairs that Adam and Eve brought upon their descendants. This contrast is not an inconsistency or an incoherence, but rather an accurate reflection of the stark difference between pre-Fall and post-Fall humanity.

Third, Calvin eventually came to include the human body as part of the *imago Dei*. This development is surprising since at one time he himself resolutely rejected the notion that the body belonged to the image. Calvin's change of heart on this matter indicates that he is not innately negative about the human body. Furthermore, even though he does describe the human body as the prison house of the soul, this is not necessarily a sign of heavy dependence upon Greek philosophy. Alternatively, it could be an allusion to Romans 7:24 where the apostle Paul longs for escape from "this body of death."

Fourth, Calvin is known for his emphasis on God's total sovereignty. This doctrinal trademark has given rise to a question: does the omnipresence of God's sovereignty effectively turn humanity into a vast collection of statues fixed in place by the petrifying force of divine Fate, that same Fate for which the Stoics are so well known? In this regard, Calvin's refutation of the radical Reformers is informative. When Libertines such as Anthony Pocquet attributed nothing to the human will, effectively

turning people into stones, the theologian of Geneva defended the *humanitas* of human beings, insisting that, although the human will was thoroughly corrupted by sin, it was not totally obliterated by the Fall. In addition, part and parcel of Calvin's understanding of God's sovereignty is not only *what* the almighty Lord does, but also *who* he is. At Creation, God acts not only as the omnipotent Fashioner, but also as the diligent Father, tending to all the needs of his first children, Adam and Eve.

Fifth, in the sixteenth century a lively debate, *la querelle des femmes*, was being waged concerning the role and dignity of women. Calvin did not shy away from the issue, but made his own contribution by exegeting a difficult passage, namely, 1 Cor 11:3-7. Calvin explains that just as it was not demeaning for the Son to be subject to the Father for the sake of our salvation, so also the submission of women to the headship of men is not degrading, but rather promotes an order that God established at Creation. The Reformer adds that, from a spiritual point of view, God has given his image and likeness equally to both women and men. However, from the perspective of how life is ordered during this present, earthly sojourn, there is a difference between men and women.

Sixth, when compared with his theological forefathers in the early church and the medieval era, Calvin exhibited substantial continuity and selective discontinuity with the church's teaching about *humanitas*. The Reformer maintained that human beings were created in the likeness of the Triune God and that the human soul is the primary seat of the divine image. He also continued with the understanding that Christ is a superior image of God such that he alone is able totally to restore that which sin had so tragically ruined. Conversely, when necessary, Calvin spoke out against time-honoured doctrinal assumptions. For example, for centuries, theologians had been working with a perceived difference between *imago* and *similitudo*. Which one survived the fall into sin, and to what degree, was a topic of lively discussion. Yet Calvin sweeps aside the whole debate, with all of its deductions and dilemmas, and declares that the *similitudo* is essentially the same as the *imago*.

Finally, if all the conclusions summarized above all are considered together, it is clear that Calvin made a substantial contribution to the reformation of the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, and more generally, to the understanding of *humanitas*. ■

C.J. Haak

On our way to the Third Stage of Christianity

Who is the authority on Christendom or Christianity in our times? Who determines the correct Biblical view? Certainly not Western Christianity. It has prostituted itself with the Enlightenment, resulting in a dualism between body and spirit. Let us also not forget the colonial oppression in name of Christianity. The future of Christianity lies in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The West may join in, certainly, as long as she improves her life and doctrine.



It is true that Christianity's centre of gravity has shifted from the North West to the South East. At the end of the 20th century there were more Christians living outside Europe and North America than within them. The history of Christianity changed direction. Different views, scholars, books, churches and groups arrived on the Christian scene: very self-assured, well motivated, and with missionary élan. The Third Stage of Christianity is up and running, ready (at last) to conquer the world in the name of Christ.

One of the foremost leaders of this new Christianity was the amiable Presbyterian Ghanaian Bediako¹. He is the figurehead of a self-assured African-Christian identity. His death was greatly lamented, and his contribution highly regarded by the worldwide Christian community. Together with Samin Lanneh,² Bediako gave voice to contextual forms of Christianity in contrast to the dominant form of western Christianity. Many Christian church leaders in the world sympathize with his views.

Bediako examined the question why Christianity did not catch on with Buddhists, Hindus and Confucianists. He claimed that Christianity, just like the tribal religions of North-Western Europe, North America, Africa and elsewhere, is structured according to the principles of 'primal religion'³. But the West has lost its original colour under the influences of the Enlightenment and modernism. Although the missionary work of the 19th and 20th century produced results in Africa, it did not convincingly reach the heart of the African. Modernism got in the way of mission.

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Cees Haak (1948) teaches Missiology at the Theological University of Kampen.

With Pentecostal missionary work it was an altogether different matter, especially after the second and third waves of the charismatic movement after 1970. That was the pendulum that set African Christianity in motion, and in Asia and Latin America too, come to that. The many millions (yes indeed!) of Christians in this movement shifted Christianity's centre of gravity to the South East region of the world.⁴

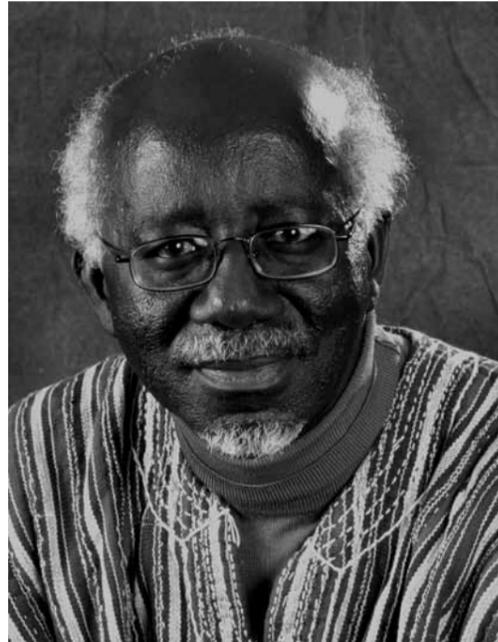
Secret of success

The secret of this success lay in the fact that the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements started reading the Bible once more from the conviction of primal religion. Away with the biblical interpretations of the modern scholars, prisoners of rationalism that they are. Instead, a hearty welcome for a primal reading of the Bible, inspired by the Spirit of emotion. This form of Christianity, now also nestling in the West, is well equipped to become the trendsetter of the Christian faith in the 21st century. The plethora of African churches setting foot on Western ground as well as the success of emotion-based currents in the West – Evangelicals, Pentecostals and Charismatics – testify to this. The world is on its way to the Third Stage of Christianity.⁵ Bediako therefore speaks of a paradigm-exchange within Christianity, the Christianity of the 'primal imagination'⁶.

African religiosity as the restoration of Christianity

In connection with theologians like Alexi Kagame (Rwanda) and Vincent Mulago (Congo), Bediako was of the opinion that the dualistic-dialectic Christianity, which in the end retained only man and not God, should be replaced by the fundamental primal conviction of two vital cores of religion: God and man. That will lead to a focus on this world, in which man will find his divine destination in sacramental unity with the transcendent. In Christ, God never abandoned humanity. 'In the mystery of the incarnation, Christ [repeatedly, CJH] assumes the totality of the human and the totality of the cosmos...' The mystery of the incarnation is therefore illuminated as the mystery of the mutual indwelling of God and man in which 'no department of Man is segregated or left out'.⁷

Kwame Bediako (1945-2008): *The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*



That also gives new scope for an African ontology: gods, spirits, people, animals, plants and lifeless things play their part in an all-encompassing unity. Therefore the African did not have to move far to embrace Christianity. Via his traditional religion, he was already involved with the transcendent. God was already in Africa before the missionaries arrived. Now, therefore, the African Christian can experience the transcendent better than the Western man: in visions, dreams, prophecies and (prayer-)healings.

Through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ, God and man, the Church will eventually, through the Spirit, start participating in the transcendent existence – in one all-encompassing unity. This is termed 'vital participation'. That way, believers, like the prophet Harris⁸, can come into direct contact with God and the transcendent world. The believer must become involved in the whole world of deceased ancestors, of future unborn children, of the believers from the Old and New Testament and, of course, of God and Christ⁹.

Western Christianity has broken the relationship with the most essential questions of life: identity, community, ecological balance and justice. Primal imagination, in particular, being thoroughly religious, can restore the authentic unity of theology and spirituality. How could it not be so? After all, primal religion is the basis upon which the Christian faith of the vast majority of Christians of all ages and nations has been built.

In 1973, the Greek Orthodox Yannoualtos spoke on 'growing into an awareness of primal world views' out of a Christian tradition that retains perhaps the deepest feelings for Christian origins. In his opinion, this new Christianity picked up where the Old Christian Faith, with its origins in a climate of primal religion, left off. He foresaw the return of a feeling of complete dedication, a contrite heart, deep symbolism and participation of the whole person in the worship service.

Lesslie Newbigin¹⁰ too, in his fight against Enlightenment thinking, states that Christianity needs a total conversion of will and thought, a transformation of thinking, in order not to become assimilated with this world. That connects Bediako to his endeavour to rediscover the primal elements of the gospel. Such a new Christianity will once again be connected to the source and the channels of the power in the universe. For true Christianity is not a 'system of ideas' but 'the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.' Rom 1:16¹¹.

Far reaching influence of Third Christianity

Though not always in the same way, the thinking of Bediako and his companions exercises great influence, especially among the leading theologians of African missiology, and also in 'Western' discussions. Partly due to the failure of modernism, people are looking for different routes in theology and in so doing connect to the African primal thinking. Room must be found for feelings of union and coherence, e.g. holistic Christianity, in which dreams, visions and revelations from another world are possible. More so than the liberal theologians, the evangelical and charismatic are now therefore seen to take the lead.

Outside Christianity also, as a reappearance of religion, this primal life feeling is gaining ground in the West. Based on emotion, numerous new religious movements can be seen that promise contact with other, higher worlds. New Age thinking, and such like, draws not only on Eastern religions but also on motifs from the African world. Elements of primal religion play a great part¹² in the numerous offers of therapy and alternative healing, Reiki, Therapeutic Touch, Aura Healing, and Wicca. All are to be found in the numerous exotic shops. In all these displays of new religiosity, two main motifs of primal religion come to the surface: magical and mystical thinking. The time has come, therefore, to take a look at primal religion.

...ecological balance...
photo P.G.B. de Vries



Primal religion¹³

As opposed to the (earlier) conception that explained the primal phenomena from the starting point of the sociological organization of illiterate societies, Bediako claims, together with Turner, that they should in fact be viewed as authentically religious. He names six characteristics of primal religion:

A sense of affiliation of man to the whole of nature, including plants and mountains, which function as mutually independent parts in the whole of the cosmos. Every article from nature can serve as a totem and vessel of spiritual and sacramental forces. In this respectful attitude towards nature, ecology follows naturally.

Awareness of the futility and 'sinfulness' of man, who needs a power that rises above himself: a creational sensitivity with an awe for what is holy. In the West, this sensitivity was unfortunately bulldozed by technical and socio-political powers. Awareness that man is not alone in the world. There is mention of a personified universe, of spirits, (occult) powers, souls of deceased people, idols, demons, both good and bad. They are more powerful than man, and are the cause of man's weal and woe on this earth. Thus one does not ask: 'what caused this?' but 'who did this?' Belief that man can step into a relationship with a good (or bad-!!)-willing spirit world, so that one can have a share in the power of blessing and protection against evil forces. That is the 'transcendent well' of true life and salvation, as an

all-encompassing whole in which man receives his position.

Intense experience of the reality of life after death: for the deceased forefathers are not dead but are 'the living dead' who stand in close relationship with the 'living alive' (as they do with the yet unborn children of the future). This relationship entails responsibilities in both directions: man 'honours' the deceased forefather with sacrifices and prayers; the forefather in his turn guarantees his mediation with the rest of the spirit world in favour of the living family member. They are the 'mediators' of the family, clan and tribe in the transcendent world.

Conviction that man lives in a 'sacramental universe'. This implies that every physical action functions as an 'instrument' for a 'spiritual power'. For the visible (physical) world is formed according to the model of the invisible (spiritual) world. This means that human actions and rituals exert real (magical) pressure on the spirit world. Man thereby has the possibility to manipulate the 'spirit world' for his own good or that of the family through prayers, songs and sacrifices. For even though there is recognition of the struggle between good and evil, there is only one set of powers, principles and patterns that reigns over everything in heaven and on earth and holds everything together in one united cosmic system.

This is the true key to understanding the power of primal vision. Bediako was convinced, as was Turner, that this perception is the undercurrent of every religion, the 'ever ongoing religious

Mission without getting in each other's way

inheritance of humanity'. In every new religious movement (e.g. through interaction with Christianity), primal vision will emerge again as one of the chief elements of the movement.

As a conclusion of this research, Bediako stated that the (certain) affinity of the primal vision with the Christian belief in heaven, angels and powers could lead to a paradigm-shift of Christianity. He was convinced that this will be the African Christian's own specific contribution to world Christianity. More so because the currently dominant (western) Christianity has driven out belief in spirits, gods and 'living' powers.

The future of Christianity lies in a reevaluation of the primal religion, of which African Christianity is the bearer with a divine calling to world mission. On the waves of the Charismatic movement, Christianity in Africa has progressed with giant leaps, as proof of the renewing power of primal vision. With that drive, African missionaries step onto European soil to save churches in this region from the Abyss, as it were. And wherever the African enthusiasm and steadfast belief in spiritual powers, prayer healings, divine revelations in dreams, visions and prophecies are met with open arms, primal religion gains ground.

Meaning and effects

In the next article, we hope to arrive at an evaluation of the 'blessings' of primal religion. We then restrict ourselves to the following subjects: God, world/universe, man, history, sin and redemption, death and resurrection, sacraments and church; the sum of these subjects resulting in a perspective on new religious movements and developments in the West, particularly in the Netherlands.

Notes:

- 1 Manasseh Kwame Dakwa Bediako was rector of the Akrofi-Christaller Institute for Theology, Mission, and Culture in Akropong, Ghana. He wrote, among other things, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*.
- 2 The Gambian Lamin Sanneh (born 1942) is Professor of Missions & World Christianity and Professor of History at Yale University, USA. He is a productive author, among other things, of *Whose Religion is Christianity?: The Gospel beyond the West*.
- 3 A term that points in a positive way to indigenous (in the past incorrectly called 'primitive'), animistic forms of tribal or cultural religion.
- 4 We well realize that these geographical designations, namely East and West, are based on the *Eurocentric* viewpoint. Who gave us that right?
- 5 Counting Christianity from the earliest centuries as 'First', and Constantinian Christianity from around the fourth century up to the Second World War as the 'Second'.
- 6 Bediako uses various terms, *primal view, primal vision, primal imagination*.
- 7 Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, p. 102.
- 8 William Wade Harris (circa 1860–1929) was a simple though fanatical 'prophet' who, through dreams, visions and conversions with Mozes, Elija, Gabriel and Christ, experienced a calling as an evangelist and within a short period converted thousands in and outside Liberia. Elsewhere, *ibid.* p. 92/3, Bediako names other examples of African Christianity, like Bishop Milingo (born 1930, Zambia) who was dismissed from his function by the Pope in 1993 because he was involved in exorcism and prayer healings, causing turmoil in the Roman Catholic world.
- 9 Bediako, *op. cit.*, p. 103/4
- 10 Bishop James Edward Lesslie Newbiggin (1909-1998) was a Church of Scotland missionary who, after serving in India, continued his missionary work in Europe, fundamentally criticising modernism in particular. He was closely involved in the development of a theology of religions, see, *inter alia*, D. Griffioen's 'Christelijke zending en wereldgodsdiensten'.
- 11 Bediako, *op. cit.*, p. 105/6.
- 12 Try a Google search with words like: esotery, (neo-)paganism, energetic field, new religious movements, New Age – I guarantee you a full day's work!
- 13 With Bediako, *op. cit.*, p. 93-96, I follow the analysis of H.W. Turner (1911-2002) who placed the study of New Religious Movements on the agenda and developed a theoretic framework for analysing it.

Churches that are members of the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC) have a gentlemen's agreement that they will not encroach upon each other's mission territories. It means that if a member church has a presence in a certain region, another member church will not enter that region with a project without first consulting the church already there. The same policy exists among the members of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC), known as the Golden Comity Agreement. In this article, I'd like to relate the experience of a local church in following such an agreement to demonstrate that this agreement is a good one.



When the Canadian Reformed Church (CanRC) of Abbotsford, British Columbia (Canada) began investigating the possibility of beginning a new mission project in a new, foreign area, some consultation had to take place. The Abbotsford CanRC was already involved with mission projects through financial support of the Surrey CanRC, which has two missionaries in Brazil, and the Smithers CanRC, which has a missionary among the natives in Prince George, British Columbia. It also supported other mission and missionary aid works, such as the work of the Feunekes Family for Mission Aviation Fellowship in Papua, the Middle East Reformed Fellowship, the Chinese Urban Mission of the CanRC's of Cloverdale and Langley, the work of Coram Deo International Aid in Port au Prince, Haiti, and the work of Children of Hope in Aguascalientes, Mexico.

The ties with Haiti were such that the Abbotsford CanRC seriously considered starting a mission project there. However, it was known that the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) and Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) were both already active in Haiti. The CanRC, OPC, and PCA are all members of NAPARC, and the CanRC and OPC are also members of the ICRC. It was considered proper to touch base with each other.

The Abbotsford CanRC took up contact with the Mission Board of the OPC. The Board explained

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where things were at in Haiti. A combined mission project of the OPC and PCA had seen the work grow to the stage that churches would soon be instituted, some with indigenous pastors. Now, the orphanage at which Coram Deo International Aid was active was quite close to one of these church plants, and the workers there had been enjoying the pastoral services of the OPC missionary. When asked, the OPC Mission Board admitted: "If we were in your shoes, we would not consider going to Haiti." And that's exactly what the Abbotsford CanRC then decided: not to go to Haiti.

Mexico

Another option was Mexico. Two families from the Langley CanRC work for Children of Hope at the Dulce Refugio Orphanage in Aguascalientes. One of the Langley pastors had made a visit there and had indicated that a mission work there would be worth looking into. As the Langley CanRC was already heavily involved in Chinese Urban Mission, it could not take this upon itself. Thus it had asked other CanRCs whether they would consider starting a mission project in Aguascalientes. Abbotsford CanRC found out that one CanRC had seriously looked into this. As that particular CanRC did not feel quite up to the task, the Abbotsford CanRC took it upon itself to investigate this further.

With the use of the 2009 ICRC mission survey and through internet and e-mail – what a blessing digital technology can be! – the Abbotsford CanRC discovered three mission projects in the Aguascalientes environs by churches who are members of NAPARC and/or the ICRC. Two hours to the east in San Luis Potosi are the Associate Reformed Presbyterians, working with the Northern Presbytery of the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico (NPCM). Three hours south west, the PCA supports the work of Rey de Reyes Presbyterian Church in Guadalajara (Mexico's second largest city). Three hours north west of Guadalajara and some 6-7 hours west of Aguascalientes (but behind a high mountain range) the United Reformed Churches have a missionary in Tepic. But in Aguascalientes itself – a city of almost a million people – the Reformed presence seemed to be limited to a small Presbyterian congregation.

Notes of 'Original sin in the structure of our being (2)' by P. Houtman (p. 40)

- 1 J. van Genderen en W.H. Velema, *Beknopte gereformeerde dogmatiek*, Kampen 1992, p.378
- 2 S. Greydanus, *Toerekeningsgrond van het peccatum originans (Adam's bondsbreuk)*, Amsterdam 1906, p. 35.
- 3 Canons of Dort Chapter 3-4, article 2.
- 4 Although it is not commonly called 'social', this does concern association, communication between persons – God and us.

Mexico being spacious, there seemed to be room for a CanRC work in Aguascalientes. It could probably combine well with the work in Tepic, as the CanRC and URCNA are pursuing a merger into one federation. While electronic communication may be a blessing, nothing beats a face-to-face meeting. Thus the Abbotsford CanRC had its pastor (undersigned) go on a fact-finding mission to Aguascalientes, accompanied by the first CanRC missionary, Rev. Cornelius VanSpronsen, presently corresponding secretary of the ICRC.

Given the gentlemen's agreement, they met with the PCA and URCNA missionaries. A meeting with the ARPC missionaries could not be arranged. In hindsight this is not such an issue, as San Luis Potosi belongs to a different geographical and ecclesiastical district within Mexico. Many facts were discovered. Among them is that the PCA has its mission work integrated with the NPCM: the PCA pastor is actually a member of the NPCM

The Golden Rule Comity Agreement

Comity has meant different things to different people. We representatives of the home missions agencies and committees or boards of our denominations resist territorial statements on comity in the light of the social and cultural complexity of North American society and the great spiritual need of our many countrymen who are apart from Jesus Christ. Out of a concern to build the church of Jesus Christ rather than our own denominations and to avoid the appearance of competition, we affirm the following courteous code of behavior to guide our church planting ministries in North America: We will be sensitive to the presence of existing churches and mission ministries of other NAPARC churches and will refrain from enlisting members and take great care in receiving members of those existing ministries. We will communicate with the equivalent or appropriate agency (denominational missions committee or board, presbytery missions or church extension committee, or session) before initiating church planting activities in a community where NAPARC churches or missions ministries exist. We will provide information on at least an annual basis describing progress in our ministries and future plans. We will encourage our regional home missions leadership to develop good working relationships.

Download from: www.naparc.org/gpage.html

presbytery of the Bajio. This is the presbytery to which Aguascalientes also belongs.

In addition to meeting the PCA and URCNA missionaries, the fact-finding team also met with people in Aguascalientes itself. Among them were the president of the local (Protestant) Pastor's Alliance, a local minister (Disciples of Christ) who also runs a seminary, and the pastor of the local NPCM.

All these meetings enabled the fact-finding team to form a good picture of the local situation. It is now clear what the needs are in Aguascalientes. It seems to be a very godless city. The Feast of Saint Marcos – which was starting when the fact-finding mission was there – is promoted as the world's biggest bar. One of the city's patron saints is Saint Death – a skeleton in a monk's habit. Local Protestants informed us that the biggest challenge in Aguascalientes is reaching out with the gospel to the upper classes. Local pastors had tried every approach they knew, but without success. It is interesting to note that reaching out to the upper class is the approach the PCA missionary in Guadalajara has taken, an approach that has been blessed with wonderful results: within 12 years a self-sufficient church with over 500 members and over 1000 attending worship each Sunday.

Prevents duplication

The lesson learned is that the gentlemen's agreement is a good one. In the first place, it prevents unnecessary duplication of missionary activity and encourages good stewardship of resources. In the second place, it allows churches that recognize each other as churches of Christ in the home situation to learn from each other's experiences in the field. Thirdly, it reminds us that it is not people who gather the church, but the Son of God. There are few areas in this world where Christ's ambassadors have not yet set foot. It is appropriate that new missionary activities, where appropriate, link into existing church gathering work. See also: <http://childrenofhope.xanga.com> ■

P.L. Voorberg

How Serious is a Second Baptism? (1)¹

Some of our brothers and sisters choose to undergo a second baptism. "Because there is no room for that in the Reformed Church", someone wrote to me, "we lose some of our most committed members." Is this spiritual loss of blood not too high a price to pay? Is a second baptism really such a problem?



I hope that we do not just dismiss this matter with a simple appeal to Article 34 of to the Belgic Confession, where it says: "For this reason we reject the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with a single baptism, received once..." The Anabaptists of the 16th century were entirely different from our own brothers and sisters, who full of exemplary faith, hope and love approach the baptismal font for a second baptism.² Afterwards, most of them just want to remain 'ordinary Reformed'. Shouldn't that be possible?

What drives them?

Conversations, discussions, lectures, correspondence, all kinds of written texts (books and articles) have helped me see a number of reasons. The sacrament of baptism is intended as a visible, tangible sign and seal; but I never noticed anything of my baptism as a baby. If the New Testament consistently connects faith and baptism³, then how can we baptize children? The Holy Supper is a sacrament, and it is endlessly repeated; why the one and not the other? And then there are the more incidental arguments: a believer feels the need for an external expression of cleansing after a particularly bad period in his life; someone was baptized in a church or movement which he now regards with aversion; someone was presented for baptism by parents who later abused their children; the one who administered the baptism turned out to have committed such foul acts that the water of baptism defiled rather than cleansed. Or a less common argument: the formula that was used at their baptism deviated from the one we find in our own form.⁴ That raises the feeling that the baptism was not legitimate.

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What are the arguments?

The Reformed argument that baptism has come in the place of circumcision, and that baptism is to be administered to infants as a once-and-for-all event is sufficiently well-known, but many are not convinced by it. It doesn't seem to be difficult to shoot great holes in this commonly-used argument.⁵

Circumcision, as a visible sign, belongs to the old covenant. The Old Testament church was a church-in-its-infancy, and a visible confirmation that children really were included in the covenant was still necessary. In addition, circumcision, as a national symbol, fitted well with a church that was at the same time a nation-state. The new covenant is essentially different from the old one (Hebrews 8), and the passing away of some external symbols fits with that: land, nation, cities of refuge, stoning and hanging as forms of church discipline, bloody sacrifices, circumcision, etc. In the Old Testament, the sign of the covenant was for boys only. In the present dispensation, no-one would advocate withholding the sign of the covenant from females. Somehow, then, a change has taken place. A new covenant brings with it a new situation. This might be the transition from circumcision to baptism, but it could just as well be the passing away of the external sign of the covenant.

Added to this, we encounter the arguments already listed above: the visible and tangible character of the sacraments, the connection between baptism and faith, the repeated use of the other sacrament, etc, etc. History, too, is brought to bear. Is there any direct evidence of infant baptism in the New Testament? Was there such a thing as infant baptism in the first centuries of the church's history? When was infant baptism introduced, and what were the reasons for that?

Adult baptism had always taken place. The New Testament gives numerous examples. Christ Himself was baptized as an adult (by John), and so were his disciples. Christ Himself baptized adults, after confession of sin and guilt; would His disciples have done it differently? There would have to be compelling evidence that they did. Scripture does not furnish such evidence. From the days of the New Testament on, the baptism of faith has been

administered, and to this day, it is still defended vigorously by millions of believers.

How do we resolve this?

To begin with, it is important that we thoroughly understand and respect each other's views and motivations. The *value* of infant baptism will regularly surface in the discussion. What percentage of those baptized as children still attaches any value to their baptism? The more one values one's infant baptism, the less desire there will be for a second baptism.

We also need to consider to what extent baptism can be repeated. Of itself, the act of baptism – in contrast with circumcision – *can* take place more than once. If infant baptism is valid, and if it can be shown that it *should* not be repeated, then this might be very difficult for someone who longs for the experience of baptism, but I imagine he will acquiesce. After all, we submit together to the will of God, also as it comes to us in His Word. If the validity and once-and-for-all character of infant baptism is not so clearly established, then there appears to be room for a second baptism. These are questions that are widely discussed today. In the Protestantse Kerk in Nederland they struggle even more with requests for a second baptism than in the Reformed Church. Proposals to permit a 'water ceremony' for those who desire a second baptism are being discussed. Over against this, the Hervormde Bond van Gereformeerde Jongeren (*the youth organisation of the – old – Dutch Reformed Churches: tr*) has proposed the wearing of a blue arm-band as a lasting reminder of infant baptism.

Those who oppose infant baptism do so for a wide variety of reasons. Some deny that children are included in the covenant. Some go so far as to deny that unbaptised children will be saved. Some argue (as, for example, the Reformed Baptists in Britain) that children are included in the covenant, and share in the blessings of Christ, and yet ought not to be baptised. It is much more difficult to defend the legitimacy of infant baptism in a discussion with them.

And isn't the discussion of infant baptism in the Confessions something of a happenstance? Would it still have taken place, if it were not for the militant Anabaptists of the 16th century? Should this difference of view about the moment of baptism be something that divides the church? Shouldn't we form a united front with 'evangelical' believers⁶, against the growing secularization of

the Netherlands? Within a century, our country has changed beyond recognition. A hundred years ago, 90% faithfully attended church. Now, only 7% do. What will happen in the next 100 years? The churches that once flourished in North Africa have all disappeared. Shouldn't we close ranks then, to save what can still be saved in Western Europe? How can we resolve this problem? There is only one way: by letting the word of God shine its light over these questions.

Denial of baptism?

How much weight ought we to give to a second baptism? Within families, strong language is sometimes used in discussions between parents and children: you may have the best of intentions, but if you have a second baptism you disown the baptism you received as a child. For baptism is a once-and-for-all event. Associations are made with Peter's denial. Deep rifts emerge. Bitter quarrels take place. Parents and children become estranged. Parents and family members will demonstratively boycott the young person's baptism, a high point in his (new) life, because "that's what the Lord requires".

Farewell to God's promises?

Baptism is a sign and seal of God's promises. When you undergo a second baptism, you distance yourself from the promises God already made when you received infant baptism. You act as if God never promised anything, for you choose to have a second baptism. And that's why a second baptism is a conscious denial of the promises God gave you as a child.

You could say that you don't mean it that way. But so what? You can have the best of intentions. Paul was certain that he was doing God a service by persecuting the church of Christ. Good intentions cannot remove the fault of a wrong action. In the same way, isn't a second baptism in reality a rejection of God's promises?

Farewell to the Church?

Baptism is a sign and seal of being incorporated in the church of Christ. Therefore, whoever undergoes a second baptism has, by that very fact, been incorporated in another communion. Membership of two churches is impossible. A church is the bride of Christ, and Christ is monogamous. A second baptism is, in fact, a withdrawal from the church. Strong arguments, which ask for a response. I intend to consider them in the following instalments.

The next installment will attempt to provide some clarity in the discussion by focusing on two different perspectives on baptism: baptism as a sign of the covenant, and baptism as a response of faith. In this connection the relationship between the 'old' and the 'new' covenant is explored. ■

Notes:

- 1 This is the first in a series of four articles which first appeared in the Dutch language in *De Reformatie* in December 2009 and January 2010 under entitled: *Hoe erg is herdoop?* (vol 85, 12 (pp 190-191), vol 85, 13 (pp 208-209), vol 85, 14 (pp 223-224), vol 85, 15 (pp 239-240)).
- 2 For a description of the 16th-century Anabaptists, see my *Doop en Kerk. De erkenning, door kerkelijke gemeenschappen, van de elders bediende doop*, Heerenveen, 2007, 106-130. I have not written these articles to direct attention towards my dissertation (on the other hand, I wouldn't object if they did) but because of the relevance of the topic, as readers will observe. Because the two topics are so closely linked, it is natural that I have frequently drawn on this study.
- 3 At the public defense of my dissertation, I defended the proposition: *In the new Testament, baptism is in the first place a 'baptism of faith'*
- 4 Since this happens quite rarely, I will not discuss it further here. I refer to my dissertation (see note i above, pp 323-325 and 403-413)
- 5 Does it actually make sense to present arguments? I refer to a discussion in *De Reformatie* (21 November, 2009) between JFH Schaeffer and R Visser. Schaeffer argues that opponents (for instance, of infant baptism) ought also to be approached on the level of feelings. In my experience, *feelings* very often tip the scales in this matter. They ought not to, since this matter touches on the contents of Scripture. A discussion on the level of feelings often leads to a sense of powerlessness. In these articles, therefore, it is my intention to provide material to carry on a discussion at a rational level. Such an approach may not be popular – but it is legitimate. We are bound to serve the Lord with all our heart, all our *mind*, and all our strength. Love also requires a choice: for the Lord. Such a choice includes obedience to the Lord, in this case listening to the Word of God, and to what can legitimately be inferred from it.
- 6 Here, I have placed the word 'evangelical' in quotation marks. In general usage, we understand what is meant with this expression. At the same time, I believe that the Reformed Churches are evangelical in the fullest sense of the word.

The doctrine of God

On April 26, 2010 Rev. Dolf te Velde (b.1974), currently minister of the Reformed Church in Pijnacker, received his doctoral degree at the Theological University in Kampen, after defending his thesis. His supervisor was Prof. Barend Kamphuis. The title of his thesis is *Paths beyond tracing out, the connection of method and content in the doctrine of God, examined in Reformed Orthodoxy, Karl Barth and the Utrecht School*. It is published by Eburon Academic Publishers, Delft, 698pp; ISBN 9789059723665.

Throughout the history of theology, the doctrine of God has been approached in different ways that reflect the specific ecclesiastical, cultural, and philosophical contexts of the time. This raises the hermeneutical question of how the method of theology affects the belief content expressed by it. Or, the other way around, can certain substantial insights be detected that have a regulative function for the method of the doctrine of God? This two-way connection of method and contents is investigated in three important blocks of Protestant, Reformed theology.

The first part joins the revived interest in Reformed scholastic theology, and attempts to discover the inner dynamics of this allegedly dry and rigid, Aristotelian theology. The second part treats Karl Barth's doctrine of God as – at first sight – a contrast model for scholasticism, and interprets this doctrine in the framework of Barth's theological method. In the third part, a first comprehensive description and analysis of the efforts of the so-called Utrecht School is provided. The final chapter draws some lines for developing a Reformed doctrine of God in the 21st century.



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