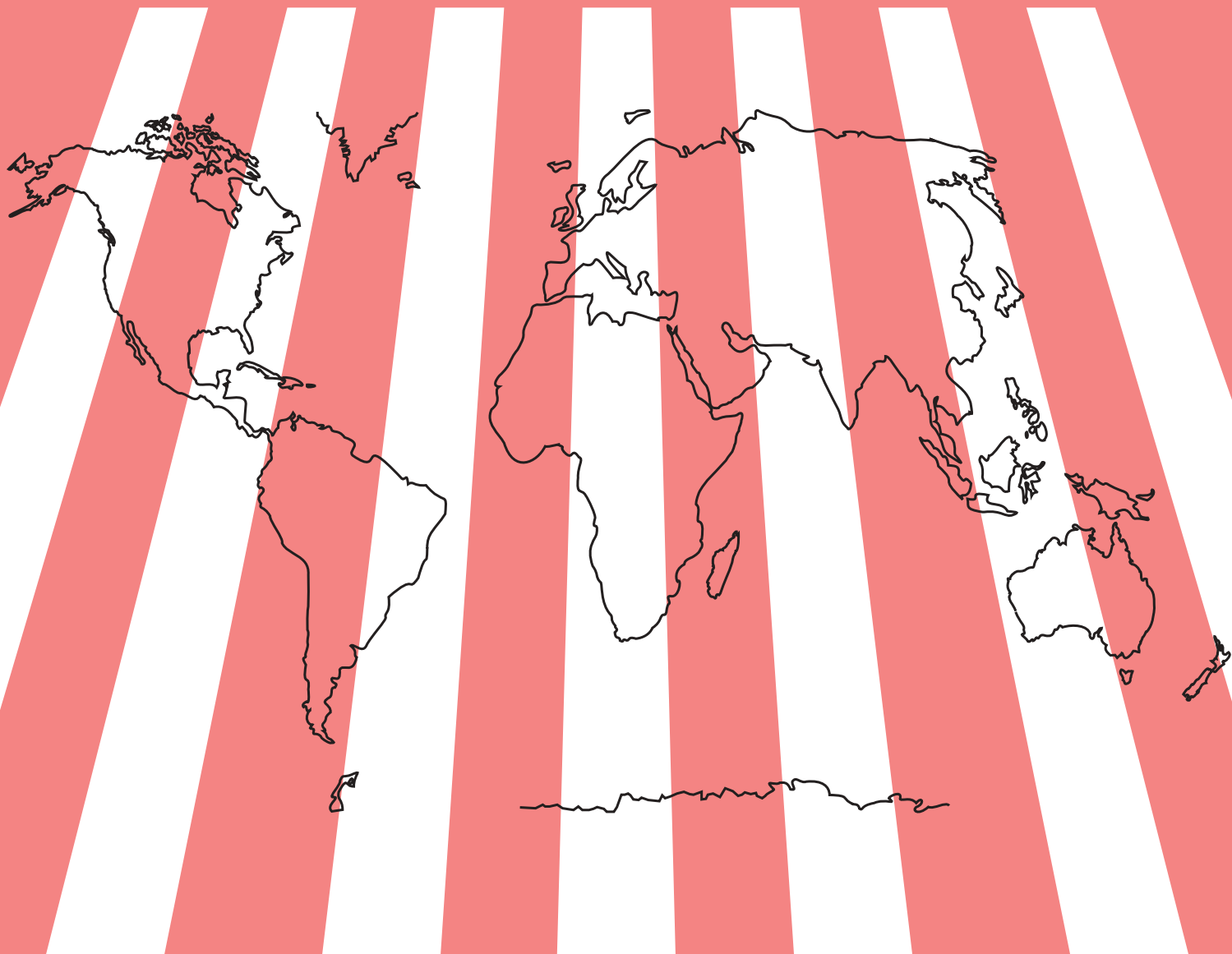


Lux Mundi

Volume 21 - No. 1
March 2002



Published quarterly by the
Committee on Relations with
Churches Abroad of
The Reformed Churches in
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Subscription Rate in The Netherlands
per annum:
€ 5,45.

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Editorial

We write these words on the day of “the wedding”, 02-02-2002, a very early spring day. Prince Willem Alexander and Maxima Zorreguieta were married in Amsterdam. Last week three feast days were celebrated. On Thursday it was the birthday of Queen Beatrix in the Palace on the Dam, on Friday evening the national wedding feast in the “ArenA”, the stadium in Amsterdam, attended by those who were invited from across the country, and on Saturday the wedding itself in the Exchange of Berlage, while the church service was held in the “Nieuwe Kerk” (New Church) in Amsterdam. National radio and TV dealt with nothing else the last few days and in the meantime, the vows of the bridal couple, the tears of Princess Maxima and the kisses on the balcony on the Dam have gone throughout the world.

The royal house of Orange, a monarchy constitutionally anchored in a democracy, and a Protestant wedding feast. It was a national feast wherein the parents of Maxima, now princess of the Netherlands, were conspicuously absent. It was all typically Dutch. Gert Schutte, leader of the Second Chamber faction of the “Gereformeerd Politiek Verbond” (Reformed Political Association) for many years, from his vast experience supplies us with a look at the

typically Dutch political situation and the place of Christians therein, also in the future.

This issue appears between two general synods. At the end of last year, the synod of the “Christelijk Gereformeerde” churches in the Netherlands came to an end. Rev. B. de Graaf gives us an impression of what was decided there. On April 6, 2002 the general synod of the Reformed Churches (lib.) will begin in the church of Zuidhorn. We don’t have anything to tell yet about that synod. Those who are interested in the reports and proposals, with which this synod will have to deal, can find them all on the following website: <http://www.gkv.nl> (see “themas” and then “deputaatschappen”). An English translation of this website is in preparation. The deputies for contact with churches abroad will also propose to the Synod of Zuidhorn that the decisions of this synod and all news, which it produces, immediately become available in English.

We hope that we may meet representatives from Reformed churches from the whole world at the Synod of Zuidhorn. See you there!



Does Christian Politics Have a Future?

During the last while in the Netherlands, many publications have appeared about Reformed life in former centuries. Even just the amount of dissertations about Christian politics in the 19th and 20th centuries can no longer be counted with the fingers of one hand.

It is striking that there is an interest for publications on this topic. Apparently Reformed life has become an interesting phenomenon. Christian politics has become a topic for scholarly research by historians. I don't want to say a bad word about the interest of these historians, rather the contrary. But the broad interest in this topic does not jibe with the real situation in the Netherlands. Christian politics is in regress, first slowly, and in the last ten years more quickly. In the eyes of many, it has become history and a curious, typically Dutch phenomenon. Indeed a phenomenon from a previous age. Yet in the Netherlands there are still Christians for whom Christian politics is not yet an old fashioned matter, even if one does ask the question whether in the future it would not be better to go in a completely different direction which is less Christian and more pragmatic and which gives more attention to people who, though from very different backgrounds, have the same objectives as us.

I am happy with this approach. For the Netherlands of the 21st century is completely different from that of the 20th century. As Reformed people perhaps we do not really realize this because our immediate surroundings have not changed all that much at first sight. The number of church members in our immediate churches has barely changed, if at all. The small Christian parties are even more strongly represented than ever before. But if we look a bit further we encounter a completely different situation. Then we see empty churches and Christian parties which have been reduced in half. For more and more people, the Bible and the Christian faith are things from a different world, from a different time. People have often heard something about it just as they have heard something about the 80 Years War which happened so long ago.

Some Sort of Religious Feeling

In addition to this, many people have some sort of religious feeling. There is probably something more to life than what we see around us. That could then also be called "god." But everyone must decide for himself whether he wants such an entity and what sort of being he imagines it to be. At any rate, it is not the case that there is one God who determines how things are to be done in the world. That is seen as a form of fundamentalism and what that leads to has been experienced in the last while. That is the picture which the editorial pages of our newspapers show to us.

The question concerning the future of Christian politics



About the author

Mr. G.J. Schutte was born on May 24, 1939 in Nieuwpoort, Zuid Holland. From 1956 to 1981 he was a civil servant in various municipalities, with the latest being deputy secretary of Zeist. From 1974 to 1978 he was a GPV member of the provincial Parliament in Utrecht. From 1973 to 1981 he was the national secretary for the GPV. From 1981 to February 2001 he was the chairman of the GPV faction in the Second Chamber. At present, he has various part time functions, such as member of the Voting Council and a member of the Board of Bartimeus, an institution for education and assistance to those with a visual handicap.

is then obvious. In a 1989 anniversary publication of the Reformed student fellowship of Wageningen I ventured to speculate on the political developments in the 1990s. Concerning one item, I was completely wrong.

I wrote my contribution in the summer of 1989. Much was already happening then in Eastern Europe. Gorbachev was in power using his political means of glasnost and perestroika. How would that develop in the 1990s? I will honestly quote what I wrote about it then:

"The nationalistic disturbances in the Soviet Union will have made clear to Gorbachev and his associates that letting go of the communist system will result in the collapse of the Soviet Union. It therefore seems realistic that also in the 1990s the contrast between east and west will remain in place. Also after the new arms agreements the Soviet Union will remain a superpower which is supported by the communist ideology. Besides, notwithstanding all that, we hope that the citizens of that country and the other countries of Eastern Europe will receive a greater degree of civil and spiritual freedom than has been possible up till now."

We now know that the Soviet Union disintegrated very soon after the writing of these words and that many states which were previously communist now request to become members of the European Union and NATO and in the meantime they all participate in the coalition with America against international terrorism.

I will not let myself be prevented by this experience from thinking about the future but if I again make my predictions, you have been warned.

In any case, it seems to me to be beneficial to try and sketch as accurately as possible the current political situation in the Netherlands in general and then specifically with respect to Christian politics. After that I will try to say something about which developments may happen in the future which will be of importance to Christian politics. Then I will automatically come to the chief question, namely, what about Christian politics now?



*Representatives in the Second Chamber of the (newly formed) "ChristenUnie",
Mr. Van Middelkoop and
Mr. Rouvoet.
Photo courtesy of Rufus.*

In the Netherlands, Christian politics have been a dominant factor for a long time. Up until the mid-1960s Christian politicians constituted the majority in the Second Chamber (the Dutch national Parliament). The adherents of the Christian parties decreased in the 1970s to well over a third, only to climb back up to 40% after the "Christen-Democratisch Appel" (CDA; Christian Democratic Appeal) came into being. In 1994 an abrupt end came to this when the CDA lost 20 seats. Now the Christian parties have approximately a quarter of the number of seats in the Chamber.

In 1994 more changed. The position of power of the CDA up until then had to do not only with the number of seats but also with the political ratios. Both of the other large parties, PvdA (socialists) and VVD (liberals) excluded each other from working together. Liberalism and socialism were regarded by the parties themselves as the largest possible opposites in Dutch politics. There was something to this, not only because of socio-economic differences but especially because of the large role which foreign and defence issues played before the collapse of the Soviet Union. The sharpest debates in the Chamber were about those issues, issues which also led to much discussion and action in society at large. It was precisely on those issues that PvdA and VVD differed for a long time.

In 1994 this was all history. Through its large decrease in seats, the CDA was in fact left out of any real involvement. The old contrasts between PvdA and VVD had largely lost their actuality and for the rest could be overbridged. The way for "purple" was prepared. D66 (democrats) formed an important link and in passing tried to get some of its hobby horses realized. When the elections in 1998 pushed the CDA back even further and the rank and file of the "purple" parties were pleased with the experiences which the "purple"

parties had acquired, continuation of "purple" was not illogical.

In the meantime, we have had seven years of "purple". It is thus a good opportunity to draw up the balance sheet in the realization that in 2002 it is again necessary to vote. We already know what the "purple" coalition has accomplished:

- in the medical field, the legalization of euthanasia and the regulation of experiments with embryos.
- in the area of family law first the introduction of partnership registration, followed by same sex marriage.
- the abolition of the prohibition of brothels and the recognition of the occupation of prostitutes as a normal profession.
- the introduction of Sunday shopping.

Of a different order but no less sharply contested is the introduction of the referendum on Jan. 1, 2002 and the (almost) elected mayorship.

Analysis of the policy of "purple"

It became quickly clear that the new political relationships had made it possible to arrange things which up until then had remained untouched or concerning which half-baked compromises were made in the eyes of the "purple" parties. In the first cabinet of Kok careful use was made of this possibility. But then already the "purple" factions in the Chamber began to stir more and more and urge the cabinet to quickly realize the political wishes of the unchristian majority.

A good illustration of this is how it went with the issue of same sex marriage. The cabinet proposed to implement partner registration. It was not at all possible to have a real marriage between two people of the same gender; therefore there was a separate registration. The majority of the Chamber accepted the proposal but at the same time said



During the "Quiet Protest" in The Hague especially many Christians went against the legalization of euthanasia. Photo courtesy of Rufus.

that the next step, a real marriage for gays and lesbians, must quickly follow. Upon the formation of the second cabinet of Kok it was agreed that same sex marriage would come. All the earlier objections and reservations were put aside; under the motto of the ending of discrimination between people of the same gender, same sex marriage would be permitted. The reaction of the State secretary Cohen was striking. At first he said that he was not for it and asked why it should be necessary but later began to argue in the opposite direction: Why shouldn't homosexual marriage be allowed?

The "purple" parties also regarded the euthanasia law as a half-baked compromise. At the time of the third cabinet of Lubbers, euthanasia was already legalized in practice. It was only the text of the law which suggested that euthanasia was indictable. Also in this issue, it was the "purple" factions in the Chamber which took the initiative. What is now becoming law was already largely proposed at the time of the first Kok-cabinet by three "purple" members of the Chamber. At the formation of the second Kok-cabinet it was agreed that the government would adopt this proposal. And this has happened.

No longer reckon with Christians

Spokesmen of the "purple" parties have made it clear over and over again that they have experienced it as liberating to be able to arrange matters without having to reckon with Christian discussion partners. The way things went in connection with the so-called civil servant who was burdened by matters of conscience is typical of this mentality. During the written preparation of the debate we had already called attention to this, assuming that the government would of course declare that no one would be forced to solemnize a marriage against which he had serious objections of conscience. After all, the Netherlands has a long tradition of

respect for objections of conscience. Think only of the special regulations in place for those who have conscientious objections to insurances and of the earlier regulations for those with objections of conscience in the military. But the government now decided to rudely reject such objections. Law is law and whoever does not want to help implement it should not become a civil servant.

In the debate we brought out the heavy artillery and, among other things, pointed to the freedom of religion and conscience which are guaranteed in the Constitution and in the human rights agreements. The Secretary of State right away let it be known that he was convinced that the objections of conscience should be recognized. But then the spokesmen of the PvdA and VVD in the Chamber protested. If it would be left up to them the civil servants would be placed before the choice: do it or quit. Fortunately the Secretary of State held his ground but also here it was the case that the push behind ignoring principled objections came especially from factions in the Chamber.

The laws in the area of medical ethics show something else. During the time when compromises were still made on these matters with the CDA it was certain that each compromise had room for going further in practice. That happened in the law about terminating pregnancy by speaking about criteria for the application of abortion during the discussion of this law but not fixing these points in the law but instead leaving it up to practice with the result that the will of the woman became the decisive factor.

Euthanasia

In connection with the law concerning euthanasia something similar happened because it was desired to bring the law in line with the larger amount of data which was available. In this way doctors and judges determined what

the prohibition of euthanasia still meant. The “purple” cabinets have kept going on this road, and this is happening much more openly.

Recently in the Second Chamber a piece of legislation was discussed about the use of embryos for scientific research. This would concern unused embryos resulting from in vitro fertilization and those resulting from abortion. The law should not be allowed to apply to the production of embryos for scientific purposes. Then you would generate human life only in order to use it for something else. That would - at least for the moment - go too far. But due to a majority in the Second Chamber it has now already been pronounced that in a few years the law can be extended in this manner.

Much can be said about this way of legislation. But it is clear that in this way the normative basis of legislation is pretty well non-existent. The government does too little too late and leaves all kinds of room for further boundary shifts.

Separation between church and state

In many discussions the principle of “separation between church and state” is brandished. Christian organizations are then seen as extensions of churches which in the past have had too much influence in public affairs. In the 19th century, the separation between church and state was formally implemented in the Netherlands and so now everything which still smells of ecclesiastical influence must be eliminated. The discussion on this issue has gained new dimensions because of the terrorist attacks of September 11. The Muslims in the Netherlands are also asked to adhere to the principle of the separation of church and state and to keep their religious convictions to the mosque and private life.

In this way, however, an improper application is made of the good principle of the separation of church and state. The separation of church and state has always meant that the church has no say in matters of state and that the state has no say in ecclesiastical matters. A free church in a free state. But this does not mean that the church and civil authority are able to hide from the will of God, as this has been revealed in the Bible. The Bible calls the government God’s servant and it calls governments to honour the God of heaven and earth. If a Christian politician reminds the government (also a “purple” one) of this, then this has nothing to do with the separation of church and state but it does have to do with a rejection of the view that government is religiously neutral.

The point is that in the present discussions, both inside and outside of the Chamber, under the guise of a separation between church and state, a separation between state and Bible is desired. Therefore religious arguments are no longer considered relevant in political discussions.

The basic view is clear: religion is a private affair; as such there is room for it and sometimes also admiration but in the public sphere religion is not relevant, not in general and certainly not the religion of one specific group.

Being sensible

It will be clear that such a widely spread view does not

make for a very favourable setting in which the Christian politics of the future will flourish. A country, wherein the Bible is more and more becoming merely an interesting book of people from former centuries, is no longer a country where Christian politics can thrive. In this sense, it is appropriate for us to be sensible and realistic when it comes to the future of Christian political parties (e.g. the Christian Union [“ChristenUnie”] which came about as a result of a union between the “Gereformeerd Politiek Verbond” and the “Reformatische Politieke Federatie”)

But there are also other developments which are of great importance for the future of politics in general. In more than one way, the Netherlands is becoming a land without boundaries. We saw this after the events of September 11: not only is a world-wide coalition formed but everywhere in the world people are confronted with the same problems, a fragile society and an unsafe feeling.

Borders disappear

Also in the European context, the borders keep disappearing more and more. We cannot say that we are heading straight for a United States of Europe. The developments are in that direction but especially when new relationships of states are at stake things can easily go awry, for example, because the interests of the different countries are too different. Nevertheless the center of political gravity is definitely shifting more and more from The Hague to Brussels. Europe is getting more and more influence concerning the framework within which the government and State-General in The Hague can operate.

This also means that the position of Christian politics in Brussels and Strasbourg will become more important. It is now still the case that the members of the European parliament are chosen per member country, with the result that the small Dutch Christian parties can be represented. But the call to form European parties will become stronger. The three large political streams in Europe already have some sort of European party but not the small Christian parties.

Boundaries not only fall away as a result of agreements between states but also as a result of technological developments. From behind your desk you can reach the whole world via e-mail or Internet. Thus you can buy things in America, tax free. Or, to stay closer to home, students who want to act against plans of the government no longer need to go out on the street but organize a large demonstration via Internet. There are concrete plans for electronic voting, as an experiment in 2003 and after that perhaps as a general possibility. But if that becomes the general practice the question arises whether it would not be better to give citizens the possibility to speak directly about the plans of the government instead of after elections for a parliament.

No representatives of the people necessary any more

I recently read a serious discussion among high government officials and academics. They reached the conclusion that in about 30 years there will no longer be a Second Chamber. By then people will be able to speak directly about proposals. They will then no longer need any

representatives. Simply the most votes will carry. The government executes what is adopted by vote via the internet.

I will be the first to admit that this would be a bad development. It is characteristic of a democracy that decisions are made after a public discussion which takes into account all the possible effects and the positions of minorities. Carrying out a political mandate is much more than pushing the decision button. But that does not take away from the fact that the pressure will increase to use the possibilities of technology. Political parties can make information available about their views and are no longer involved when a decision is made.

Reduced involvement

This is closely related to another development which we now already see happening. The number of members of most parties is visibly decreasing. The small Christian and leftist parties are favourable exceptions. But also these parties wrestle with the problem of less involvement and with difficulties in recruiting youth. People are no longer interested in the principles of politics but it is simply politics in concrete situations which is what interests people.

If we isolate the different developments we get the following picture:

- as a result of secularization, knowledge of the Bible is declining and so also the zest for politics based on the Bible;
- through globalization and Europeanization of politics the amount of influence of the national government becomes less and the grip on European and international developments is very limited;
- as a result of technology the contact between government and citizen can occur more and more without the intervention of political parties;
- the interest in actively participating in political parties is limited and keeps decreasing.



For many years Gerrit Jan Schutte was the leader of the "Gereformeerd Politiek Verbond" (GPV) in the Dutch parliament. In the background is Mr. Van der Vlies, the leader of the "Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij" (SGP).

Photo courtesy of Rufus.

Future

What does all this mean for the future of Christian politics? Before I try to give an answer I would like to begin by stating a few things. First, I want to point out again how relative all our predictions are. We can analyse current situations, perceive certain tendencies and expect certain things. We should also do this if we want to execute our responsibility in the given situation. But if our expectations will come about is uncertain. Man plans his way but God directs his step. God is not bound to our analyses and perceptions; trends can be reversed just like that. Or to put it another way: God can give times of hardening as well as times of conversion.

Further it is good to distinguish between the calling to be an active Christian in politics and society and the way in which we give concrete content to this calling. The calling to be a salting salt in the world as a Christian remains till the last day, if necessary as the last witnesses on the streets of the city. The form in which this happens depends on the time and circumstances and on what is possible or not.

Our calling as Christian is summarized in the Bible as: to love God above all else and our neighbour as ourselves. Thus we must do what God asks of us, live according to his commandments and encourage others to do the same, looking out for our neighbours. This task is our responsibility throughout our whole life, in family and church, in state and society. The political party can be an instrument in accomplishing this task. It can be a useful instrument but it is no more than that.

When we place the task of the Christian in the centre in this manner, we quickly come to the conclusion that a Christian political party is a good way in which to act out our Christian calling. The whole point is that God's demands are served and translated into political measures which are fitting in this time and country. This demands agreement concerning the nature and content of the task and concerning a common foundation and purpose.

Working Together

Working together with others who have more or less the same political goals is becoming very important in today's climate. We see this all around us. While "purple" may count on broad popular support, fortunately there are also others who with us see the dangers in the policies of "purple". I think, for example, of the conservatives. They reject the relativistic thought of the neo-liberalism of our day. Also in their view, man is not inclined to do good. Therefore, also in their eyes, the government has a task to stimulate good things (virtues as they call it) and to call evil for what it is and struggle against it. They are positive about the value of religion. On a number of specific points, such as protection of life, it is possible to have far reaching political agreement.

If we realize this, isn't it the solution for the problem of the reduced role of Christian politics? Yes and No. Yes, in the sense that there are points of contact here for mutual support on concrete items. No, if the question means that Christian politics would be traded in for the "virtue" politics of the conservatives.

"Virtue" politics

Christian politics differs essentially from conservative politics in at least two ways. First, politics, and thus also Christian politics, covers a much larger area than what can be brought under the domain of virtues. The government has its own office and task to work at the further development and management of public society in a national and international context. Conservative politics is inclined to limit the office of the government and to strive after a good, virtuous society.

Second, a conservative party misses what is essential in Christian politics, namely, a common goal which is specific to the office of the government as God's servant. It is instructive in this context to look at Groen Van Prinsterer (a Christian politician from the 19th century) who, in his time, also had much to do with conservatives and who found that he kept becoming disappointed in them. He summarized his credo for Christian politics as follows: "It is necessary that people, individually as well as communally, recognize and praise the sovereignty of God in all areas of their life and act according to the norms which He has revealed for this purpose in his Word."

The conservative will be prepared to say much good about religion but he will not want to encourage himself or others to recognize and honour God's sovereignty. That would grant the God of the Bible a place which the conservative at the most would only grant him alongside other great persons.

No alternative

Thus a conservative party cannot be an alternative for Christian politics. A progressive party is also not an option of course. On the contrary, Christian politics receives its right of existence and its strength precisely from its purpose which rises above the interests of individuals or groups of people because it is given with the mandate of Him who made the earth and everything in it and who maintains it. But it will be necessary to keep one's eyes open to both sides in order to



In the nineteenth century, the Christian politician Groen van Prinsterer had a lot to do with conservatives with whom he was disappointed again and again when it came down to it.

see on which items matters can be arranged so that the ultimate aim of Christian politics can be served in some way.

The position of Christian politics in the 21st century must also be united with inner strength combined with openness to outside. A Christian party which begins to tamper with its own foundation will more and more come to resemble the salt from the parable which had become tasteless. According to Jesus, it served no purpose and could only be thrown away. A party of whom the leaders and representatives cannot be held accountable to what the Bible says as God's Word will miss all its power as a Christian party.

Therefore it was good and necessary that the "ChristenUnie" at its inception made a clear choice for it being a confessional party in which everyone is accountable to the foundation of Scripture and confession. But such a principled choice does carry obligations. The salt must be used in the flour in order that something good might be baked.

Open eyes to all sides

In the present political situation wherein the content of policy arises less and less via the traditional political channels, in various ways this can lead to a different expression of the content than in previous times (e.g. early and mid 20th century). I already said that Christian politics must keep its eyes open in both directions, to the right and to the left. Concretely this means that sometimes it is necessary to work together with the left and sometimes with

the right. There is nothing wrong with that because the distinction between left and right, insofar as it still exists today - is almost irrelevant compared with the much more essential question whether or not the decision or policy can be used for the purpose of Christian politics. That this is not simply a theoretical matter appears from the initial proposal of the PvdA and the "ChristenUnie" with respect to Sunday rest. From different backgrounds and with different arguments both parties came to the conclusion that the position of employers who do not want to work on Sunday must be strengthened. Earlier, D66, in consultation with a Christian organization, had already suggested to strengthen the position of the objections of conscience in connection with this issue.

These events do not mean that the unchristian parties have suddenly grown in respect for the fourth commandment. Certainly not. They are not at all sorry that they have stimulated the introduction of Sunday shopping. But especially the PvdA found that the position of employers needed strengthening and in connection with this it is a legitimate argument to strive not to work unnecessarily on Sunday. This made it possible to reach an agreement with Christian politics on one concrete item. For the D66 it was important that, from a democratic point of view, people were not forced to act contrary to their consciences.

Bible and/or material arguments

These examples are not unimportant in the discussion concerning which arguments Christian politicians should use in debates with others. In debates with representatives of unchristian parties, is it appropriate to use specifically Biblical arguments or are you limited to material arguments? For me, an important guideline was in what way you were able to keep the debate with political opponents going as long and as well as possible. Then you have to discuss with the others in an understandable fashion and you should not use specific ecclesiastical jargon. But you should speak in a believable manner. Thus in important debates you should not make it a secret that ultimately the love of God and His service provides your most important incentive; this love also results in general arguments for which you ask the attention of colleagues and ministers who think differently than yourself.

Of course, people will try to escape the force of your arguments by saying, for example, that your ultimate concern is Christian norms which have no place in a pluralist society. But then you can reply that also your political opponents argue from specific ideological presuppositions which they do not share with everyone either but that you are still prepared to consider their arguments. Such an approach is more believable than as Christian parties to bring in the heavy artillery against proposals of "purple" but then to remain silent about the authority of the Bible which you consider determinative for these issues. This appeared during the debate on same sex marriage when the spokesman for the Green Left party - a fervent supporter of same sex marriage - made an example of the small Christian parties. They honestly declared their faith convictions and in this way

enter the debate. The CDA pulled out all the stops but did not mention at all what the Bible had to say about marriage.

Not only debating technique

Simply having a good debating technique is not what it is all about. It would be about a good debating technique if the Bible was simply one source among many which people could use. But the Bible is the Word of Him who rules over all things. Keeping His commandments is good for all. Prof. K. Schilder coined the well known expression, "The law of God is the garment which fits the world the best, even though sin in this fallen world resists it." Therefore it is not surprising that also unbelievers discover at a certain moment that God's laws are good and beneficial.

Compromise

If Christian politics is in a minority position, it will often have to consider whether it is appropriate to agree to a responsible compromise. This of course does not concern compromises which occur daily because not everything can be done at once. Principled matters need to be at stake. Prof. Douma has written about these matters on several occasions. He defines the matter of responsible Christian compromise as follows, "the necessary acceptance of something less than what someone may and must strive for on the basis of God's law."

Each of the components of this definition are important. Reaching a compromise must be necessary. The damage of no compromise must be greater than the damage of a compromise. The compromise must be less than what is required in God's law but should constitute a step in that direction. A compromise which involves a step in the wrong direction is not a compromise. A good compromise is also dated and must leave room for progression in a good direction. A compromise must always contain an element of "unfortunately no more." This must also be evident when it is defended. In this way it can be prevented that a compromise negatively affects the effectiveness of the Biblical norm.

The application of this general rule in public life is, of course, not easy. But it is important to maintain the rule in all clarity. Political opponents would gladly create the image of a party which places itself outside the actual political discussion if it concerns, for example, ethical issues. Even in debates about abortion and euthanasia we have never excluded the possibility of a compromise. But the political ratios were such that the majority was not prepared to consider the option of a responsible compromise.

Being on the ball

But what does all this mean in the 21st century when political decisions are made more and more outside of the traditional means? It is not that participation in government bodies and voting would no longer be important but rather that nowadays more than ever it cannot be limited to that. If the decision making in politics occurs via other means, then Christian politics must also be on the ball in these matters. The concept interactive government is often used. What is meant is that the government, while drawing up legislation,

works together with the affected citizens, companies and organizations as well as with other governments. Old boundaries are getting vaguer. The emphasis is on communal responsibility.

At present it does not concern me whether or not this is a good development. It also must yet appear how it will work out in practice. But it is clear that things are changing on this score. If Christian politics do not adjust to these new developments its influence will disappear just like that. Thus the function of Christian politics must become broader. Christian politics must use the available possibilities to influence legislation and to stimulate others to make good use of it. It is necessary to study these things and be informed. Contacts with groups in society and with individual citizens must be made and maintained. If all is well, there should not be new activities but it is more than ever essential.

Thus this also means that there is every reason to maintain the institution of the political party. Also for the new tasks such an organization cannot be missed. The fact that the small Christian parties are very well organized and compared with most other parties also have a significant bond with the grassroots puts these parties in a strong position to be able to work effectively in this new environment. But they will have to work on widening their contacts in society. The work area of Christian politics is all of society. Perhaps we had forgotten that too much in years gone by.

Globalization

Holding onto a strongly organized confessional Reformed political party in the Netherlands is not at all in conflict with increasing tendencies toward Europeanization and globalization. Making contacts with spiritually like-minded people elsewhere in Europe is very important. Up until now that has happened incidentally and noncommittally. But as Europe becomes bigger and the working of European institutions broader, it is important to seek partners who,

together with us, want to give due recognition to the will and honour of God in the political arena. That will not be so easy. Christians in different countries have widely different histories and traditions especially when it comes to political matters. The Dutch model, which we rightly value, cannot serve as the standard for contacts in, for example, Scandinavia, Hungary or the UK. On the other hand, such a model is sooner an advantage than a hindrance for making such contacts. Another complication is that for a while already the CDA has united with many Christian and unchristian parties in the European People's Party ("Volkspartij"). That kind of European cooperation is not an attractive perspective for the small Christian parties.

While discerning the problems which will be met, it is necessary for Christian politics to embark on the road of European contacts and cooperation. Therefore it is good that the youth organization "Perspectief" has made proposals in this direction at the congress of November 17, 2001 and that it appears from the reaction of the board of the "ChristenUnie" that the first measures have been drawn up with a view to going after international contacts more systematically.

The question I was asked was: Does Christian politics still have a future? If so, how? You will understand that my answer to the first question is completely positive. The "ChristenUnie" can function as a good instrument for this in the 21st century. But the place which Christian politics will have in the future will be quite different from what we were used to in the past. Everything under the condition of James: Deo Volente! (The Lord willing!)

NOTES

- 1) This speech was presented by Mr. Schutte at a meeting of the Reformed Student Fellowship of Wageningen on November 8, 2001 in answer to their question whether Christian politics still has a future nowadays.
- 2) "Purple" here refers to the mixing of red (centre and left in the political spectrum) with blue (right in the political spectrum).

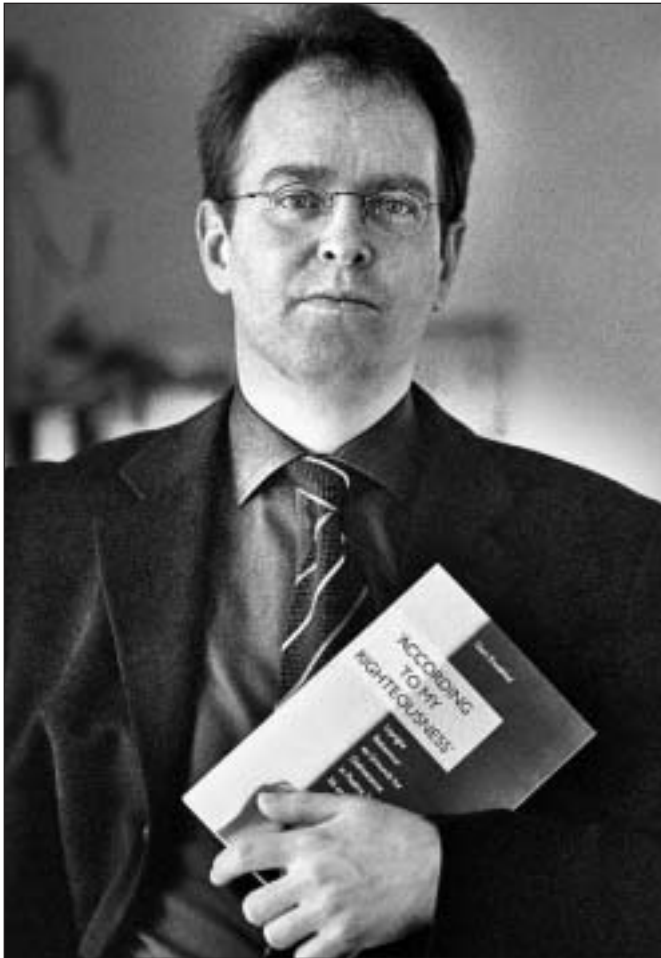
by Douglas James Green

According to My Righteousness

Gert Kwakkel, *'According to My Righteousness': Upright Behaviour as Grounds for Deliverance in Psalms 7, 17, 18, 26 and 44* (Leiden: Brill, 2002)

Judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness, according to my integrity, O Most High Bring an end to the violence of the wicked and make the righteous secure" (Ps 7:8-9, NIV). If we were to be honest with ourselves, I suspect that most conservative Christians would find this psalmist's extraordinary confidence in his own righteousness very disturbing. Paul's affirmation that no one is righteous (Rom 3:10) lurks in the back of our minds, making us uneasy with this confident claim to personal righteousness.

Therefore, in the published version of his recently completed doctoral dissertation, Gert Kwakkel has tackled a challenging problem by choosing to study texts like the one quoted above. In short, it is the problem raised by psalms in which "the persons (or the community) speaking are talking about their upright behaviour towards God or men" (p. 1). More specifically, he narrows the focus to five psalms in which the righteous behaviour of the psalmist or his community "is mentioned as grounds for deliverance by



*Dr. G. Kwakkel received his doctorate.
Photo courtesy of Nederlands Dagblad/Piebe Bakker*

YHWH” (p. 11). These five psalms are then divided into three types: (a) Psalms 7, 17 and 26, in which the psalmist appeals to God for deliverance and does so on the grounds of his own righteousness, (b) Psalm 44, which refers to the righteousness of a community rather than an individual and (c) Psalm 18, in which the deliverance sought has already occurred.

Prof. Kwakkel provides a new translation of each of the five psalms. The only exception is Psalm 18. Because of its length, he limits his translation to vv. 20-27 (MT vv. 21-28). The translations are followed by detailed notes, careful section-by-section exegesis of each psalm (e.g., for Psalm 44 there are six pages of notes and twenty-two pages of exegetical comments) and additional comments on issues such as the psalm’s unity, genre, setting and date. On one hand, this detailed exposition is a very valuable contribution. It sets the context for the more focused discussion of those passages in which the psalmist appeals to his own, or the nation’s, righteousness as the basis for God’s deliverance. In fact, readers will have in their hands something close to a full-scale commentary on this particular group of psalms. The downside of this approach is that a lot of space is devoted to discussions that do not always bear directly on the specific issue of the psalmist’s appeal to his upright

behaviour. Sometimes this means that it can be a little difficult to follow the central line of the argument.

The goal of Prof. Kwakkel’s study is to define the character of the righteousness referred to in these psalms. He considers three basic lines of interpretation. On one extreme is the approach of older commentators, who understood the psalmists’ appeal to their own righteousness as a (self-righteous) claim to sinlessness. Kwakkel finds no evidence to support the notion that when the authors of these five psalms assert their righteousness they are claiming to be without sin (p. 301).

On the other side is a much narrower definition of righteousness, one that limits it to a very specific “claim to a righteous cause versus the accusations of his adversaries” (p. 66). In other words, when the psalmist appeals to his righteousness he is doing no more than answering specific false accusations about his behaviour. Kwakkel suggests that this is the primary way that the reference to upright behaviour in Psalm 7 should be understood.

Between these two extremes is a line of interpretation that defines righteousness as something less than sinlessness, but more than just a specific case of doing right: “loyalty to YHWH, demonstrated by a way of life in accordance with his commandment” (p. 301). “Kwakkel argues that this is the dominant way these five psalms speak of upright behaviour. So, for example, although Psalm 17, like Psalm 7, defines the psalmist’s righteousness narrowly as “a refutation of specific false charges,” it enlarges that definition “to include a more general claim to a way of life that is in accordance with YHWH’s will” (p. 109). This way of defining the psalmist’s upright behaviour is also true for Psalms 18 (p. 284), 26 (p. 150) and 44 (pp. 235-36). One corollary to emerge from this study is that these psalms fit a wider pattern found in the Old Testament, which divides people into two groups: the righteous (those whose lives are characterized by loyalty to God) and the wicked (those who ignore him) (pp. 302-303).

It should be noted in passing that Prof. Kwakkel also considers whether the original background to this type of psalm was a “cultic trial by ordeal.” He concludes that the evidence in favour of this approach simply is not strong enough to support this proposal. His caution here is typical of the work as a whole and he is to be commended for resisting the temptation to make the evidence prove more than it does.

As to his substantive point, I think that Prof. Kwakkel has made a strong case and is probably correct to conclude that when the psalmists ground their appeal for God’s deliverance in their own righteousness, they are referring to a general way of life – a life of covenant-loyalty. While Kwakkel makes his case from these five psalms, his conclusions are consistent with the overall thrust of the Old Testament. For example, consider the covenant blessings of Deuteronomy 28. Here the Lord promises to grant the Israelites victory over their enemies (v. 7), if they obey him and follow his commands (v. 1). What is demanded of Israel here is not sinlessness – otherwise the sacrificial system would be meaningless – but rather loyalty to the Lord, which is seen in life lived in accordance with his commandments. If Israel is

loyal to their relationship (i.e., covenant) with the Lord, then he is covenantally-bound to rescue her from enemies. In its own way, each of these psalms assumes the same theology – a point that Kwakkel notes, at least in his discussion of Psalm 44 (p. 237).

By defining righteousness in terms of general covenantal loyalty rather than sinlessness, Kwakkel not only illumines our understanding of these five “psalms of innocence,” he also opens up fresh ways of reflecting on the nature of the righteousness of other Old Testament characters (e.g., Job). Even more significantly, Prof. Kwakkel’s work may also contribute, in a background way, to current discussions in New Testament studies concerning the character of 1st century Judaism. As an example, how might Kwakkel’s study inform our understanding of Paul’s statement that before his conversion he was “blameless” with respect to “righteousness under the Law” (Phil 3:6, RSV)? It is at least arguable that Paul is making the same claim as the writers of these five psalms. What appears to be in view here is a “covenantal righteousness” – not sinlessness – or to use Prof. Kwakkel’s phrasing, a “loyalty to YHWH, demonstrated by a way of life in accordance with his commandments.”

My point is simply that this book touches issues of great theological significance. It is not only a worthy contribution to the study of the Psalter, but also to Biblical Theology’s wider discussion concerning the definition of righteousness in the Old Testament, and perhaps even in Paul!

In conclusion, I offer a suggestion for further reflection on the exegetical issues that this book raises. The Psalms can be studied at various levels. Prof. Kwakkel’s work primarily focuses on the level of original composition, and so pays attention to questions of authorship, date and historical setting. A second level of investigation would shift the focus from a reconstructed historical setting of the psalm’s composition, to its later use in Israel’s liturgy. With this shift in function comes subtle but significant shifts in meaning. Beyond that, recent scholarly interest in the canonical shape of the Psalter has generated a third context in which to read

the Psalms. This is not the context of a psalm’s original composition or its liturgical appropriation, which are strictly speaking “pre-canonical” contexts. Rather, it is a literary-canonical context, in which individual psalms are interpreted in terms of their relationship to the canonical book of the Psalms and its role in the canon of Scripture. I suggest that paying attention to this context – “the Psalter as Scripture” – will encourage more of an eschatological interpretation than Kwakkel has adopted. Psalms 7, 17, 18, 26 and 44 will be understood not only as defining the character of the “righteous” in ancient Israel, but also offer hints as to Israel’s expectation of the identity and destiny of the righteous at the climax of Israel’s history.

But this is not to detract from the quality of Prof. Kwakkel’s work. It is a model of careful scholarship on an important topic. He is to be congratulated on a fine achievement.

About the author

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by E. Brink

Believing Again: The Bass Notes of the Gospel

Does being confronted with your shortcomings and faults bring happiness? Or if your mistakes and blunders are extensively measured? When this happens, one becomes anything but happy. Isn’t it exactly the opposite? Unhappy! I don’t really need to know what is all wrong with me and what my failures are. That only makes me depressed. If you haven’t already become miserable, you’ll become it. Aren’t we being convinced of guilt and guilt feelings? Aren’t we being saddled with problems?

Shifting?

How do you come to know what sin is? You can start with the Ten Commandments. Go through each one of them. You can check it just like that. On the basis of these commandments we also have all kinds of written or unwritten rules. Some of them have been handed down from generation to generation until a new generation comes and asks “why” questions. And then it appears that it is not always easy to determine exactly where the boundaries are. This happens not only when a new generation comes along

but also when you find yourself in new situations or come into contact with Christians from different countries and cultures.

On the Outside

In the days of the Lord Jesus, there were also all sorts of customs and rules which had developed in the course of time. The Pharisees, among others, had worked hard on this. As such the Lord Jesus does not condemn this. He knows that it is necessary to establish rules amongst each other, good customs which are agreed upon. There is nothing wrong with it: "So you must obey them and do everything they tell you..." (Matt. 23:3)! Yet the Lord Jesus also meted out sharp criticism, not against the rules as such but against the fact that the rules began to lead a life of their own. It became a closed system and simply a matter of keeping some formal rules. A danger lurks here: demanding obedience to more and more laws so that religion is reduced to adhering to a list of commandments of which one is more important than the others. This holding onto rules can become so tenacious that the command of God himself is ignored.

Formalization

The Lord Jesus uses the example of the Corban (Mark 7:11). The Corban was a promise which you made to God to reserve for him a piece of property. If you had promised this, you were bound to it. It was a good rule as such. If someone later pressured you into selling it, then you could resist the temptation by saying that it was dedicated. But you are now dealing with these things formalistically, says the Lord Jesus. Imagine that the parents have become poor and their son had made a Corban promise, but in fact it was a pious trick to be freed of the duty to support his parents. Then formally he is right (Corban is Corban) but the commandment is being ignored. The Lord Jesus denounces this as pure formalism. Such people only pay attention to the outside and not to the inside. But the rules do not mean anything if one's heart is not in it. The Lord Jesus quotes the word of Isaiah, "This people honours me with their lips but their heart is far from me" (Isa 29:13). The laws have come to exist apart from God; they have acquired a self sufficient place beside God and that is disastrous!

The heart of the command

God gave the Ten Commandments so that they would provide the standard of what sin is. But however indispensable they are, they are not conclusive. Christ lays the heart of the commandment bare. And then it appears how evangelical the law is. To love God above everything with heart, soul and mind; and your neighbour as yourself. In this way, when you touch the sensitive chord of love, you really get to know your sins. In the Bible, sin is not simply a formalistic matter but a matter of a relationship. Someone else is at stake. When you vigorously defend a thousand year old view point, it is possible that you are formally right, but if you approach the other in a loveless manner, then you have neglected the heart of the command. Formalism is a breeding ground for many sins: pride, stubbornness, mercilessness.

Love asks more than rules can ever ask. Rules have their function but they also have their limitations. Formally speaking it is possible to keep a commandment (e.g. not committing adultery), but in fact you ignore it when through your icy attitude you let your relationship to your wife freeze to death. This also applies to other rules which are good as such. You can maintain them formally, act deceitfully with them or look for loopholes. With love this is impossible. Love records everything, sensitive as it is. When you limit love, it is no longer love. Evil does not begin with transgressing external rules but it begins on the inside. From the heart come all evil thoughts (Mark 7:20-21).

Without reserve

The first and greatest commandment is: to love God with your whole heart, soul and mind. That one commandment is incredibly extensive for it asks for all-inclusive love with heart and soul. It asks for total surrender, without any reserve, and without a trace of distrust. God asks for complete love. God does not want us simply for show but he wants our heart. This one commandment is of much more weight than a thousand laws. Sin is a phenomenon which you only learn to see when you stand before God. How do you stand before Him? The realization of this comes about only in the living meeting with Him. Think about Isaiah: eye to eye with God's appearance he calls out: Woe to me! (Isaiah 6:5) Do not be surprised if awareness of sin wears off when people no longer meet God. Then, at the most, it is a vague awareness of the fact that you fail or are lacking ...; one is always easy on oneself.

Each day, each hour?

But who can say that he loves God with heart, soul and mind and with all his strength? And that everything which he does, happens out of love for God? That I never ask what am I doing this for, but always know for Whom I am doing it? With my whole heart: that my heart goes out to Him completely. That I completely trust in Him, whatever happens in my life. To love with all my soul: that I am completely inspired by Him who created me. That I am full of God. Each day and hour I am consumed by passion for God the Lord. With all my mind: that I have my questions but no suspicion or doubt comes to Him. With all my strength: that I want to do everything in order to please God, that I am willing to sacrifice literally everything for Him.

Love registers everything

When each day of my life is examined in such a way, it is evident how much lovelessness there is with respect to God. That I forget Him when things go well. That I live around Him, or pass Him by, or live in such a way that He must look the other way for a while. That I begin to make demands when things do not go well: things must go differently, it may not go this way, I don't want it to continue like this. You cannot let me live longer like this, You must change my situation. Why don't you do anything about it? And so we can make many demands over against God! And if He does not fulfill our wishes, then there is anger, disappointment or

resentment. How much self-interest, obstinacy, pig-headedness, and arbitrariness! Love registers literally everything!

Hate begins where love stops

In this light, everyone is terribly lacking in his love for God. But surely that is not yet hate!? Can we say of ourselves that we hate God by nature? We are inclined to hate God ..., that is strongly put, as if we are boiling pots of hate. By nature we focus on ourselves and not on God. Ignoring God or bypassing God is a form of hate in His eyes. It is one of two things: it is of love or it is not. There is nothing in between. My misery is my estrangement from God. By looking in the mirror of God's law, you discover how much you are estranged from Him.

Two commandments from one source

And the second is like it: you shall love your neighbour as yourself. For the first time, the Lord Jesus places an equal sign between these two commandments. That is surprisingly new. Certainly, God first, the great commandment but then loving the neighbour naturally follows. Love for God expresses itself in love for the neighbour because God is love. Love for the neighbour results from love for God.

The two commandments are one, just as the source and the water which flows from it are one and just as the lamp and the light which shines from it are one. To love God is to love the neighbour. At the root sin against the neighbour is also sin against God. It concerns His creatures. Whoever offends another, touches his Maker. The Lord Jesus has brought about a deepening: if you pass by your neighbour, you distance yourself from the love of God who seeks the lost.

Loving every person?

But surely it is difficult to love every person and to have equal contact with everyone? In Romans 12 Paul, gives many applications to the word "love": to live in peace with the other, to be patient with the other, to be able to tolerate the other, to be friendly, to do good to the other, to be faithful, to control yourself. This all goes against our corrupt nature which says, What can the other mean for me, can I profit from him, can I get ahead at his expense, what does he or she have to offer me, can I get along with him or her? Love asks: what can I mean for the other? And even then our heart is cunning. You can live in peace with the other, be friendly, do good ..., without ever giving yourself. As long as you can keep the other at a distance. As long as they do not get too close to you. If they do, then you erect a wall because you are scared that the other sees too much of you. We can be scared of the pain which relations can cause and so we can protect ourselves by living a lifestyle which keeps others at a safe distance. In this way you never really meet the other. You don't let yourself be known because of fear others will hurt you or because of shame. All this has more to do with protecting oneself and self-love than concern for the other. This is also our misery ..., estrangement from the other. To such an extent have we people become estranged from one another.

That's what it's all about

Love God above all else and your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. The Lord Jesus uses the image of two hinges. The door of love only moves when both hinges are properly in place. It's all about love. Whatever commandment it is, it is all about love. If one command is neglected, the door of love is thrown off its hinges. We can pull it apart while they are two turning points. We can emphasize the first commandment so much that the second is neglected. Escaping with pious instructions and in the meantime neglecting your wife and children. Or we can emphasize the second commandment so much that God no longer gets any love and man takes center stage. From where do you know your misery? From the fact that I put the law of God out of joint just like that with the result that the love for God comes at the cost of love for the neighbour and vice versa.

Feelings of guilt

But doesn't all this make one despair? Who can live happily under this? The feeling that we have failed only grows. There is nothing so tiring and exhausting as coping with guilty feelings. Indeed. But also then the mirror of the law is revealing. Because it is also possible that you are dealing with unjustified feelings of guilt, that you feel guilty without actually being guilty. You feel guilty because there is still so much to do which you don't get around to doing. But one does wonder whether you are also guilty because you ask too much of yourself and have the first responsibility with respect to the region close to you. Or that you give of yourself in such a way that you sacrifice yourself completely. God does not ask self-annihilation from his creatures. Only his enemies benefit from that. Love your neighbour as yourself: let it not become a third commandment that you must love yourself. It presupposes at the least that self-love is allowed to exist as long as it does not exist at the cost of the other. After all you are also a neighbour of yourself. Only, where does self-love end and egoism begin?

Will anyone who takes a long, hard look in this mirror dare to remain standing when all "clean" appearance is taken away, when all the make-up is cleaned off, when all the gables and walls are taken down around you and when you stand naked and eye to eye with God? Indeed who can compare himself with God's law and with God himself for God is love. Then I understand what Paul cries out: Miserable man that I am, the law for life has become my death. But can you be happy with that?

Christ as our mirror

There is someone who holds out the mirror for you. Christ holds the mirror. He has come in order that man may discover his guilt and may be convinced how far he has wandered from his Father. Christ has the law in his hands. He polishes the mirror. He completely exposes the commandments. But what does it help us that we are so exposed that we cannot hide anything and are frightened? This is a beneficial fright because Christ is behind it. In addition to it he says, "I have not come to abolish the law but

to fulfill it.” (Matt 5:17). What we could never have accomplished ourselves, was done by God’s own Son!

The fulfilment of the law

From this it is clear that God is love. God fulfills his own law. God the Father loved us as Himself by sending His Son. And God’s own Son loved his neighbour as Himself. For Christ loved God above all else, in our place, and the neighbour as Himself. He completely fulfilled the law of love for you and me. He took our place by totally and completely loving His Father right up until the last moment. He loved his neighbour as Himself when he died for our lovelessness and chronic lack of love. That was not holy egoism but that is loving others on His own behalf. That characterizes Jesus’ ministry. He died for people who hated and rejected Him without cause. He loved everyone for whom He was a neighbour with his whole heart, soul and all his strength right up until the cross. At the foot of the cross, I discover how miserable I am. The depth of our sin is revealed there where Christ fulfills the law.

Window upon Christ

In the law we see not only how miserably we have failed but also how much Christ has done for us. You not only see your own poverty but especially the treasures which Jesus gives. You see not only your lack of love but also the depth of God’s love for you. The more you understand what love asks of you, the more you realize how poorly you fulfill these

requirements and the more awe you get for the love of Christ. The more you look in the mirror of the law, the more you realize how much God must love you. The more you realize that you are not capable of fulfilling the requirements of the law, the more comfort you find in the fact that Christ has fulfilled it for you. You will keep thinking more and more highly of Christ and of what He has done for you, if you keep looking into the mirror of the law. And this mirror can only really act as a mirror for discovery when it is a window upon Christ.

The Bass Notes

The law provides the bass notes to the melody of the gospel. If the law is lacking, your life will miss depth. If the accusatory function of the law disappears, then your life will become superficial and will lose all its depth. You would then live on your own pious fat or you would be handed over to self accusation. If the law disappears, then the high notes of the Hallelujah will sound thin. You then immerse yourself in activism and make grace cheap. The melody of the gospel cannot do without the bass notes of misery for otherwise there is no longer any wonder at God’s love. Guilt and misery do not stand by themselves. Without knowledge of sin, there is no knowledge of Christ and without knowledge of Christ there is no knowledge of sin. He who carried the guilt wants to convince us of this. In this way, each sincere confession of guilt is a confession of faith.

by Rev. B. de Graaf

General Synod of the “Christelijk Gereformeerde” Churches in the Netherlands

In the autumn of 2001 the General Synod of the “Christelijk Gereformeerde” Churches in the Netherlands (CGKN) was held in Nunspeet, in the middle of the “Veluwe” about 30 kilometers from Apeldoorn where the Theological University of our churches is located.

For the readers of Lux Mundi, I will present some of the main points of the matters which were discussed and the decisions which were made.

Relations with churches abroad

Deputies for the correspondence with churches abroad have been working on a charter for relations with these churches. What are the priorities in offering new relations? We have relations with several Reformed churches, originally with churches founded by our emigrants and later on with churches cooperating with us in mission work and recently also other churches. But what are the criteria to increase the number of relations? And what about churches which we already meet within the ICRC? The reason for thinking about

this was the question whether we have a task in Eastern Europe. Many of our congregations have a relation with a congregation there. These churches have other standards than our Reformed standards but there are many reasons to have a relationship: theological and financial support and cooperation in mission and evangelism. At the proposal of the Deputies, Synod decided to create a third sort of relationship: besides the full correspondence and the limited correspondence, the status of contact. By using these three levels of relationship, we are in line with other churches, such as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Church in South Africa and the Free Reformed Churches of North America.

The CGKN offered limited correspondence to the Presbyterian Church of Korea (Kosin). Also the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) will be offered correspondence. This decision is in line with the decision of the ICRC-meeting in Philadelphia 2001, where the FCS (C) was invited to apply for membership.



*The General Synod of the "Christelijke Gereformeerde" Churches in the Netherlands met in Nunspeet.
Photo courtesy of Nederlands Dagblad /Jaco Klamer*

Relations in the Netherlands

The Reformed Churches (liberated)

The discussions which have been held for many years have resulted in closer relations between both of our denominations. On a local level, there is a form of cooperation between a number of congregations; in some situations even pulpit-exchange. On the denominational level, there are also forms of cooperation, for example, cooperation between the Theological University at Kampen (Broederweg) and the one at Apeldoorn, theological publications of authors from both denominations, a common meeting for ministers, and so on.

Synod took notice of these facts with joy. The deputies had been brainstorming about a federative growth model ("federatief groeimodel") and proposed to decide that both denominations form a sort of federation, each keeping its own identity, and in the meantime growing closer to each other. Synod, however, did not yet make this decision. Our denomination is very diverse and in some parts of the country the local congregations feel a large gap. Therefore we need more time for this development.

Reformed Alliance in the Dutch Reformed Church

Synod also spoke about the contacts with the Reformed Alliance in the Dutch Reformed Church ("Gereformeerde Bond in de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk"). An obstacle for closer contact was always the fact that this is a movement, an

alliance, within a church, with which we cannot come to ecclesiastical fellowship. But many reasons force us to seek cooperation with those who are "Reformed confessors." One important reason are the developments in the field of theology. Moreover, in practice, there is a large measure of unity and spiritual recognition on a local level, especially in preaching.

Therefore Synod decided that Deputies would study in how far it is possible and desirable to come to closer contact with a local congregation of the Dutch Reformed Church, when in that congregation Article 29 of the Belgic Confession is maintained.

Reformed Congregations

Synod decided to seek contact with the Reformed Congregations ("Gereformeerde Gemeenten in Nederland en Noord-Amerika"). It has been a very long time ago since there were official contacts. In the meantime, there are several forms of cooperation in social organisations (schools, Reformed Psychiatric Hospital etc.). Synod was of the opinion that all who subscribe to the Reformed confessions need each other in this time of strong secularisation.

Mission

Our missionaries are working in many countries. It is not possible to mention all the projects. But it is typical for the time in which we live that the congregations in the big cities in the west of the Netherlands are being discussed. These

congregations are decreasing in number because of people moving to other parts of the country or because of secularisation. The word "mission" was heard several times in these discussions. Is it possible that, besides support from other congregations, these weak congregations will increasingly become "missionary congregations?" Deputies for Mission abroad and deputies for Evangelism will cooperate to stimulate these weak congregations. In this way, the increasing secularisation around us emphasizes the need for each congregation to be a missionary congregation.

By Dr Rowland S. Ward

Thoughts on our brave new world

The aftermath of the 'Attack on America' leaves us with many things to ponder.

First, is there something about Islam that leads to a significant element of violence?

In our tolerant, multi-faith society it is not politically correct to even suggest the possibility, and much of the writings and documentaries (eg. Islam: Empire of Faith - going to air this month on SBS) gloss over the violent and intolerant side of Islam. However, the origin of Islam in the 7th century shows that the concept of jihad (holy war) was fundamental. While many modern Islamic scholars interpret this concept to refer it to one's inner personal struggle, this is not the early historical meaning.

Muhammed (570-632) had to leave Mecca in 622 and lived in Medina supported by local converts. These proving insufficient, raids on traders with Mecca produced the needed economic support and people to be pressed into military service - the options, conversion or death. As the prophet of God, Muhammed was religious and military leader and judge. As his movement expanded through conquest - reaching from Spain to India by AD 732 - so too did a comprehensive system of law (sharia) to direct the way of life of his followers.

The sharia was based on the teaching of the Qur'an and the traditions (hadith) concerning Muhammed. Where these were lacking in guidance, a system of jurisprudence was developed which was pretty well complete by about 950 AD, and left little scope for private interpretation. In practice sharia was not enforced in its entirety but remained and remains the ideal covering the entire life. To foster or allow religious pluralism is seen by many Muslims as a threat and an act of treachery to God. Minorities usually have only a token toleration at a second rank. And this might be understandable - except that the token toleration seems ultimately to lead to absorption or disappearance.

We do not fault Islam for its culture-shaping impact, nor its desire to see the whole world subject to the will of Allah. As Christians we too desire that God be glorified throughout

Theological University

The number of students from the Netherlands and from abroad is growing. Because of the amount of work, a sixth professor was appointed: Dr.G.C.den Hertog. The buildings are also becoming too small. In the near future, important decisions will have to be taken in connection with this. Therefore the Synod has closed provisionally so that it can meet again shortly.



the world. But under pressure any faith reverts to its basic principles. Christians reckon with the reality of a Divine Redeemer and the Holy Spirit, which Islam rejects as blasphemy. For Christians God's kingdom is progressed through spiritual agencies; for Islam submission to God is achieved by physical means. There seems no scope in Islam for a fundamental change from this perspective without denying the claims of their Prophet.

The so-called Islamic fundamentalist is indeed medieval in his outlook but in many ways can hardly be said to be out of line with a significant basic emphasis in original Islam even if the choice of conversion or death is not first offered the victims of their terrorism.

Bin Laden seeks to exploit the large pool of restless and resentful Muslims who live in societies with very little in the way of democratic institutions. At the same time more moderate Muslims may have an almost unconscious sympathy with him - even while detesting his methods. Muslim rulers would generally fall into this category but are usually reluctant to condemn Muslim fundamentalism, being fearful for their own societies.

Of course it is true that there are many ways of being a Muslim, and much has happened since AD 622. A mystic strain of Islam (sufism), whose roots are in the Qur'an, became very prevalent from the 12th century onwards, and even pantheism, as a reaction to the one-sided emphasis on God's transcendence. Most Muslims are no more interested in terrorism than you or I but it is easy enough to stir the pot - particularly grievances in some quite legitimate matters, such as American foreign policy, so intimately tied to the need for oil.

Second, is there something about Christianity that leads to a significant element of violence?

We should not be too quick to give a negative answer. Certainly Christendom has done some dreadful things in the

name of Christ. Muslims often seem a bit one-sided on the Crusades as if Islam's prior conquest was not at all objectionable. Yet, Christianity was wounded in the house of its supposed friends by much of what was done in Christ's name, as also with the Inquisition and other barbarisms. Still Christ's own teaching, while teaching a complete way of life, insists that the faith is not to be propagated by the sword, and so was its early course.

Christianity shares with every religion the tendency to persecution when in the majority or able to manipulate a majority - as by the Eastern Orthodox in Greece, the Muslims in Saudi Arabia, the Catholics in Poland and the Orthodox Jews in Israel, the Communists in China. However, Christianity in its core-principles does not share an ethic of violence with early Islam. Use of coercion arises because the grace of God is replaced by works-based ideas of salvation and the institution is placed too much in the forefront rather than the person of Christ.

Third, does the current action against the terrorists meet the requirements of a just war as that concept was developed in the European Christian tradition?

A just war must have a just cause; it must be directed by legitimate authority and not mere revenge and so involve formal declaration and immunity for non-combatants; it must have a just intention, must not give rise to more evil than good, and be a last resort; it must have the objective of peace, and use proportionate means.

Although perfection is not to be expected, not too many wars emerge entirely unscathed from an assessment by these criteria. The cause of the US may be just, but it will need to be accompanied by a more principled approach in relations with the Middle East. Doubtless you cannot reason with fanatics but you can perhaps limit somewhat some of Muslim discontent. A more open society with better spread of resources should be pursued by Muslim rulers.

Additional complications include the foreseeable reactions of a tyrant we may be justly opposing. Thus Saddam Hussein may be the ruler who causes suffering to his people, but if we know our sanctions are not working but harming disproportionately innocent women and children, can we justify their continuance?

Fourth, some Muslims view the war against terrorism as a war against Islam, when massive conflicts within Islam are not so described.

The Muslim ruler of Libya, Colonel Gaddafi, wiped-out the fundamentalist centre in his country by carpet bombing it, killing over 20,000. Iran and Iraq fought to a standstill for years (1980-88) with a loss of a million men. Iraq invaded Kuwait. Clearly, the differences and rivalries between Muslim countries are often considerable. These actions were internal to Islam and the spectre of the infidel was not present.

However, things may change. Bin Laden is probably more interested in toppling the Saudi regime which expelled him than in terrorists acts in America, the latter being a means to an end. And fundamentalist dominance in the

Muslim world would bring mayhem to Muslims, as it has in Afghanistan, as well as to the West. It is understandable and good to see Bin Laden rejected by most Muslim leaders. - but there's often a big gap between the leaders and the aspirations of their people which fundamentalism exploits.

Fifth, Muslims expressing concern for discrimination in non-Muslim countries do not seem to show much concern for religious minorities in their own lands.

The persecution of local Christians has already begun in Pakistan and elsewhere. On the very evening of September 11th a Christian restaurant owner was beaten to death by a gang of Muslim men who refused to pay for their meal saying, "Take your payment from America." In Rawalpindi five Christian families were dragged from their homes and savagely beaten by Muslim mobs during anti-American protests. In Indonesia, Nigeria and across the Islamic world many Christians are living in fear of widespread reprisals. We trust Muslim leaders here in Australia will condemn this kind of thing and contribute to a change of attitude. The future of Islam is itself at risk from terrorism.

Sixth, is there a possibility of dialogue between Christians and Muslims?

The quick answer might be in the negative. Muslims do not fit in to the history of salvation as it unfolded in the Bible events. Salvation came from the Jews and so there can be a discussion with Jews that is a bit different from that with Muslims. But there should be dialogue with Muslims. They too may through faith in Christ become spiritual children of Abraham. Any dialogue must not compromise the Christian message. That's a large part of the problem. Muhammed did not see genuine Christianity to any extent and Muslim distortions of the faith arise from this. And their distortions are not helped by the inconsistent life of those who profess to be Christians. Muslims assume Westerners are Christians. Many of them must be shocked at us, even as we are shocked at some of their attitudes. In the USA alone the abortion total is around 40 million innocent lives. A rapprochement between the West and Islam is overdue, but there will need to be change on both sides - in the West's free-wheeling materialism with a veneer of Christianity and in Islam's incongruity in a civilized world and the problems created by ambiguous and varied interpretations. It will not be an easy adjustment for either side. The gods of both sides will have to fall. Did you note the Americans' Freudian slip of initially calling the anti-terrorist campaign 'Operation Ultimate Justice'?

Finally, a sense a proportion will help us.

Most of us have lived during the Cold War when the threat of nuclear war seemed very real. Communism fell and life was a bit different but also less predictable. Now we are being reminded that it's even more unpredictable. But that's OK. We in the West can learn about the insecurity of life that most people on this planet face everyday. We are dependent on God every moment of our lives. Further, globalisation brings people into contact and into interdependence with all the

challenges to faith and conduct that involves - and the opportunities too.

Bin Laden is right in a way: the world is divided between faith and infidelity. Like Communism, Islam will ultimately collapse because it is not built on the truth. Muhammed did not go far enough in his zealous anti-pagan drive to unite the Arab tribes and establish the new faith. He did not discover the Name of God which is his everlasting Name (Ex 3:15) - the name Yahweh which reveals God as Redeemer, climaxing in the coming of Jesus Christ, the exact image of the invisible

God. Christ has all power in heaven and on earth, and the events that have unfolded in recent weeks are all fitting into his holy purpose of salvation for the human family. Not by hatred and prejudice but by love, truth, compassion and humanity his kingdom will come, his will be done of earth as it is in heaven.

From *The Presbyterian Banner*, magazine of the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia, October 2001.

By Dr Rowland S. Ward

Subscription to a Creed and the Authority of Holy Scripture*



1. Creeds & subscription

Confessional subscription, that is, adherence to a doctrinal statement by office-bearers of the Church, is a subject of considerable importance, particularly for a strict-subscription church like the PCEA. It is also one of some difficulty given that we do not want to deny the primacy of Scripture by seeming to place our creeds on the same level as Scripture by not allowing any dissent from them.

Indeed, even the practice of catechism preaching in the manner of some in the Dutch tradition has been one we have tended to follow only in so far as we follow the catechism subjects in a series of topical sermons drawn from Scripture. We are very jealous about not giving a place to creeds in the pulpit that belongs to the word of God alone. That's the theory anyway. This article aims to explore how the creeds should function in the life of the church.

Development of creeds

Initially it was enough to assert belief in some major truths of the Scriptures. Yet a brief confession such as 'Jesus is Lord' has many implications. As differences arose among those who claimed loyalty to Christ and the Scriptures, it was necessary to set out some of these implications at length.

In early Christian centuries there was much dispute concerning the person of Christ and his relationship to the Father and the Holy Spirit. The orthodox Catholics of the time set out their understanding in a form we sum up as the doctrine of the Trinity. In the 16th century Reformation the issues included the relationship of Scripture and church tradition, the nature of justification, and the nature of the church and the sacraments. Protestants made statements on such issues, protesting against the denial of Scripture as the primary and ultimate standard. In the early 17th century there was controversy over God's grace and salvation leading to the Calvinistic statements of the Synod of Dort 1618/19.

While the Roman Catholic Church produced its decrees

and sought submission to them on the authority of the Church, Protestants produced creeds but insisted on the primacy of Scripture, not Church or pope. Many Confessions were produced in the different lands to which the Reformation spread. The Westminster Confession of 1646/47 comes at the virtual close of the creed-writing age among Protestants. This accounts in part for it being really the high-water mark of creedal composition.

Some history¹

Seventeenth century Scots had no problems with strict subscription to the Westminster Confession. The Church of Scotland (1690, 1694) and the Scottish Parliament (1693) legislated it as part of the compact that recognised the Church of Scotland as the legally established religion.

In Ireland the English Church was the established one. Presbyterians in the north (Ulster) formalised subscription for licentiates in 1698 but this was not the case in the south of Ireland. In 1719 the Crown granted recognition based on the Westminster Confession, but there were significant numbers who scrupled submitting to 'human tests of divine truths' and toward whom the Synod exercised forbearance. Non-subscribers usually eventually went off into unitarianism. The resolution came only much later with the enforcement of subscription in 1835 which paved the way for the union of 1840 with the Secession Church.

In North America a kind of modified subscription was agreed to in 1729. The Confession was accepted but exceptions in articles 'not essential and necessary' could be allowed by presbyteries. From this provision, intended to have limited application, came at length a laxity that destroyed the orthodox character of mainstream Presbyterianism, particularly in the early 20th century.

Meanwhile, the Scots' adherence to strict subscription was weakened in the latter half of the 19th century more especially from about 1875. Declaratory statements designed

to soften the clear contours of orthodox Calvinism were adopted by various of the major Scottish bodies (1879, 1892), and had their impact in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere. An ill-defined liberty of opinion allowed Presbytery or Assembly interference only if there was disturbance in the church. Changing intellectual currents were significant factors and the mainstream churches were further pushed into major heresy as the 20th century progressed. Key elements of the faith were sidelined or rejected.

I am far from saying that strict subscription is a guarantee of spiritual prosperity: The Church of Scotland during the reign of the Moderates c.1770-1820 was nominally at least a strict subscription church, but it was often cold and formal. The PCEA is and always has been a strict-subscription church, but that has not guaranteed outward progress. However, clear-cut subscription to doctrinal statements by ministers and office-bearers is certainly not without great importance. 'Guard the sacred deposit', said Paul to Timothy. But churches have often been unwilling to do this.

Options

In 1720 Irish minister Rev Samuel Haliday of Belfast, refused to subscribe the Confession, but offered the following statement:

I sincerely believe the scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be the only rule of revealed religion, a sufficient test of orthodoxy or soundness in the Faith, and to settle all the terms of ministerial and Christian communion, to which nothing may be added by any synod, assembly or council whatsoever; and I find all the essential articles of the Christian doctrine to be contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith; which articles I receive upon the sole authority of the Holy Scriptures.²⁾

So Haliday affirmed the primacy of Scripture, and the utility of the Confession as containing all the essential items of Christian belief, but he did not indicate how much or how little of the Confession he regarded as Scriptural. Haliday himself claimed that there were many non-essential items in the Confession. Clearly, his is a basis which does not secure clarity of belief, one of the chief purposes of a Confession.

The same position follows if we were to have a subscription to the Confession in so far as it agrees with Scripture, or a similar ambiguous form of words, such as those imposed by the Dutch King on the Reformed Church in 1816. Only if we affirm the Confession as founded on and in agreement with Scripture, and therefore something we accept because it is Scriptural, can we secure clarity and definiteness. But then what becomes of the primacy of Scripture and final appeal to it?

2. The primacy of Scripture

The primacy of Scripture is to be respected in Christ's Church. Elders and ministers are not to be chiefly specialists in Canon Law, resisting examination of the Word of God by a mere citation of the Confession of Faith. They are to be capable teachers of the Word of God, for it is to such that Christ has committed the affairs of his Church. The past

cannot be ignored but the Gospel must be confessed in the present.

Hence, the FIRST function of a Confession of Faith is to make sure that Scripture is our primary standard in all matters of faith and conduct.

We make that claim in the very first question addressed to candidates for office! [Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God and the only rule of faith and practice?] Thus a Scriptural Confession derives its authority from the Scriptures, not the other way around. The placement of the subject of Scripture as Chapter 1 in the Westminster Confession reminds us of this in a striking way. Also important is the way in which the Confession drives us back to the Scriptures in any controversy (1:8-10). We do not honour our Confession if we use it, rather than Scripture, to refute some error that may arise.

A SECOND function of a Confession of Faith is to provide a rallying point for those of like mind concerning the main teachings of Scripture.

A Confession will probably become more full in the light of fresh disputes or heresies which require a response, but it can never be a kind of definitive commentary on every passage of Scripture. Its explanations, however good and correct, are not inspired as Scripture is. Indeed, it is always open to revision and restatement in the light of Scripture as the primary standard. Given the present fragmented state of the Christian Church it will always be wise to seek wider counsel before formal amendment with a view to avoiding idiosyncratic change.

A THIRD function of a Confession of Faith is to serve as a public statement of the faith of the people of God, and to teach the faith catechetically.

A Confession of Faith will be carefully expressed but it should not be in old-fashioned language lest it fail to be an adequate public statement and means of instruction. Its coverage is not all the minutiae of the theological schools, but the grand and clearly revealed truths in the Bible, which it seeks to commend to others.³⁾

A FOURTH function of a Confession of Faith is to be a solemn bond for the office-bearers of the Church.

Their subscription to such a form of sound words provides a bond of fellowship and co-operation. The terms of subscription must recognise the primary authority of Scripture as the rule of faith. And the vow must be taken sincerely (WCF 22:4), therefore also the meaning of the Confession must be clear.

A Confession produced by a meeting of many minds and/or formally adopted by the Church has greater authority than the opinion of an individual. Office-bearers need to be particularly careful not to elevate personal opinions to greater importance than the teachings expressed in the Confession.

A FIFTH function of a Confession is to form the basis of the trust on which Church property is held.

If these trusts do not give any power of change at all, to that extent they may not conform to the inherent power of the Church to formulate her Confession subject to Holy Scripture as set out above.⁴⁾ On the other hand, those who

seek change have often done so with a view to modifying adversely the essential doctrine of the Confession, rather than making it an even closer representation of the teaching of Scripture. If there is a genuine unanimity on the scripturalness of proposed changes, there should be no problem.

The Confession forbids us to make Synods or Councils the rule of faith (WCF 31:4), and this is a uniform principle of our Reformed tradition (eg. Belgic Confession Art 7; Second Helvetic Confession Ch II). Thus the productions of the Westminster Assembly cannot be regarded as the rule of faith, but they may be and ought to be a help to faith.

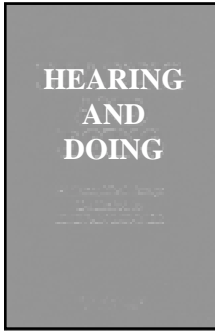
The Roman Church made its appeal to Scripture and tradition including decrees of Councils. Canon Law was the rule of faith not the Scriptures. The Confession is not rightly viewed if it is seen as a new Canon Law.

True, appealing to Scripture against the Confession in any significant way does involve 'abandonment of the communion of which the Confession is the bond' (John Macpherson, 1882). Yet even here, any judicial proceeding should emphasise the Scripture basis of the doctrine rejected. That will honour the Confession because that will honour Scripture!

NOTES

* From The Presbyterian Banner, March 2001.

- ¹⁾ I have provided a more detailed survey in Rowland S. Ward, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: A Study Guide* (Wantirna: New Melbourne Press, 1996) 204-213.
- ²⁾ Finlay Holmes, *Our Irish Presbyterian Heritage* (Belfast: Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1992) 65.
- ³⁾ Note my *The Westminster Confession and Catechisms in Modern English* (Melbourne 1996 reprinted, 2000, 2001). Examples of matters not decided include the infra- and supra-lapsarian order of the divine decrees, the definition of usury, the appointed time for the efficacy of baptism, and the relation of the active obedience of Christ to justification and sanctification. See also Peter J. Wallace, *Whose Meaning? The Question of Original Intent* at <<http://www.nd.edu/~pwallace/intent.htm>>.
- ⁴⁾ Note this point well made in *Constitutional Catechism of the Free Church of Scotland* (1847) Q.44 & fn.



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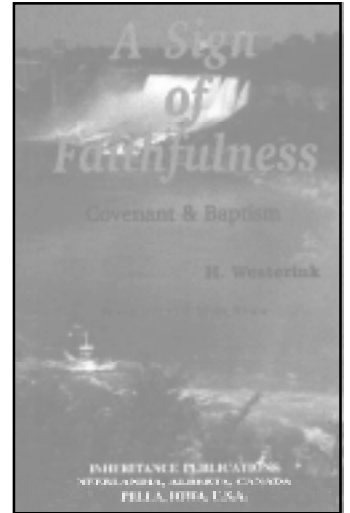
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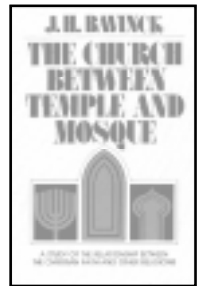
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