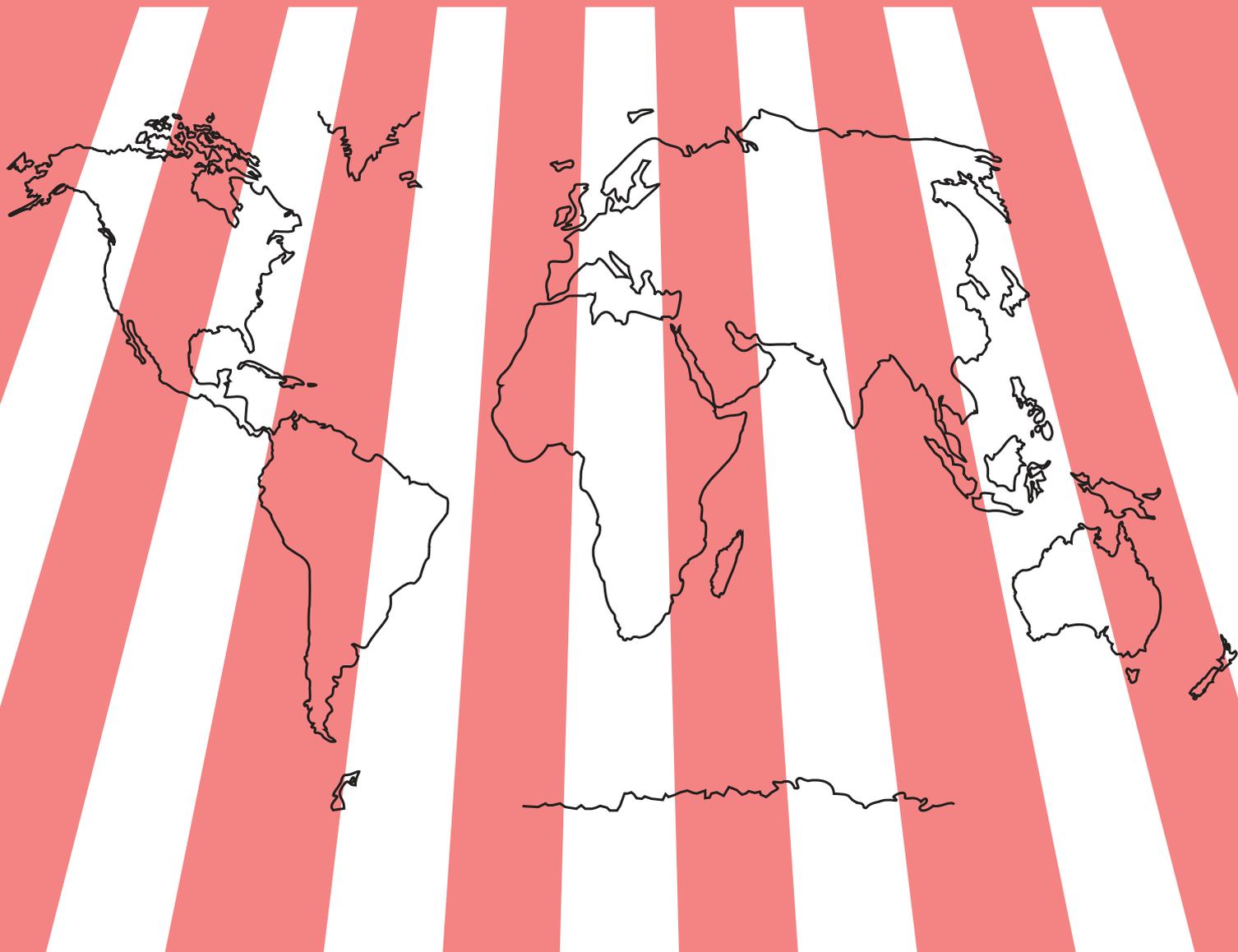


Lux Mundi

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

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Editorial

Sometimes, telling people within the Christian world that you are reformed, confuses them. Reformed? But you are a believer... It comes across as a contradiction, this being both a member of a 'traditional' church and a genuine believer.

If you then go on to explain that the church of which you are a member has a deep respect for the Word of God, tackles unbelief in the church and is active in evangelisation and missionary work, expect amazement! Is it possible - a church which maintains the old confessions and has both feet in the middle of today's world with the gospel?

Such reactions make you think. People who have been addressed by God's word, often could not feel at home in the churches. The willingness to serve the Lord is often repressed in communities which call themselves churches. Churches who leave believers out in the cold... is this possible? Churches in which unbelievers decide the way things should be... is this possible?

I shall explain: the reformed churches of which I am a member, consist of believers and their children. Only the children of believers whose lives testify to their faith, are baptised. In this way you ensure that God's message to the baptised child, also reaches the child. Only people who genuinely repent of their sins, who have vested all their hope in God's promises and the work of Jesus, and who are prepared to promise to love God and their neighbour, are allowed to take part in Holy Communion. Elders and deacons are expected to accept God's authority over their lives and to lead the congregation in serving Him. Ministers must believe themselves and be able to explain the Word of God responsibly, on the basis of the original Hebrew and Greek, so that they can not only personally see what God wants to say to his church, but also uncover lies and deceit.

Such reactions not only make you think, but give you reason to be grateful. Grateful that there are reformed churches who remain faithful to the gospel; that there are churches in which believers and their children serve the Lord. But such reactions also give you reason to knock on God's door with an urgent question: "Lord, will you in your love and faithfulness help the churches to remain faithful! Give faith!" Why? Because it is not necessarily so that a reformed church is actually reformed. The most important characteristic of a true church (try to imagine the marks of the true church without it!) is this one - that the members are Christians, are believers. To quote the Belgic Confession: people who 'believe in Jesus Christ the only Saviour, flee from sin and pursue righteousness, love the true God and their neighbour without turning to the right or left, and crucify their flesh and all its works. Although great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their life. They appeal constantly to the blood, suffering,

death, and obedience of Jesus Christ, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins through faith in Him' (art 29). The real heart of the church is in the faith of her members.

Prof. C.P. Venema of the Mid-American Reformed Seminary shows us what is on his heart. He opens a window into the present state of affairs in the Christian Reformed Church in North America. As a man who was brought up in the CRCNA, he tracks down the confessional reformed past of his churches. What he finds, makes him pray for recovery but in a strange mixture of sadness and regret. I think that many believers, in the CRCNA and outside of it, share his prayer.

Faith is not something which a person does, writes pastor Frey, it is a work of God. His mercy precedes the faith and the confession of that faith by men and women. This is why the baptism of the children of believing parents is a clearer sign of the content of faith and baptism than the exclusive baptism of adults who have confessed their faith. This is why this catholic voice from a Lutheran minister fits so well in this magazine for reformed people.

You cannot mock God's love. Hell exists. How this all fits is explained by Rev. Brink, with the Bible in his hand. He is direct in his treatment of modern day scepticism of hell and judgement. God's holiness does not make Him man's enemy. God is the enemy of sin and thus the Saviour of mankind. God's holiness can shake us up and make us feel insignificant. But then you realise that the Holy One Himself, has sought closer relations with you on his own initiative. None less than the Holy Spirit has come into our lives!

What this means for the impure and for their attitude towards God is what Prof. G. Kwakkel and Rev. J van Benthem address in their Biblical-pastoral duet. They partly represent Prof. Kwakkel's thesis on the 'psalms of innocence', Psalms 7, 17, 18, 26 and 44 (reviewed in our March issue).

Judas - the man who wrote the New Testament letter - was part of a church threatened from within by godless men. Does he end with a good wish? A cry for help? Surprisingly enough, he closes with praise to God (verses 24-25): "to Him who is able to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy - to the only God and Saviour be glory, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and for evermore! Amen."

For this sort of reaction to the distress of your own life and to the need of your church - praise to God, small people need a great faith. God is holy and this is why he purifies me, sinful man, and recreates my decaying world. This God sits, through Jesus Christ, on the throne of a true church. That is easily recognised by a faithful heart.

Few will dispute that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in



Scriptural Baptism = Believer's Baptism?*



Germany is in crisis. The reason for this crisis, however, is debatable. The flexibility in baptism practices is seen as the greatest reason for this - the church baptises the children of people who value the ceremony of baptism but who themselves are either non-believers or who can scarcely be called believers. I have to agree with this, absolutely.

But does this also mean that the problem is with the baptising of *babies*? It is said that by so doing the church has completely separated itself from the New Testament basis. The recommended "solution" is a return to the "believer's baptism". The actual Biblical baptism would then be that only adults who have confessed their faith be baptised.

Rather sizeable objections can be brought to this. In this article I want to ask four questions, two historical and two theological:

1. Is it true that in New Testament times, there is only baptism for people who have first confessed their faith?
2. Does the practice of "believer's baptism" effectively protect the church against spiritual decline?
3. Do the New Testament texts offer a single-minded plea for confession of faith before baptism?
4. Is "believer's baptism" really a clearer sign of what is signified by baptism than infant baptism?

We first take a look at the two historical questions and then at the two theological ones.

1 Was there in New Testament times only "believer's baptism"?

At the heart of every Christian baptism stands the great commission Jesus gave: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations..." (Matth.28:20). According to this charge, when people are made disciples of Jesus, two things should be done:

- a) "baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit";
- b) "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you".

The apostles did what they were told to do. They baptised people and taught them what the Lord Jesus had said to them. The order of events spoke for itself; only those who had heard of and believed in Jesus let themselves be baptised. The question was, therefore, first decided practically and not theologically.

But what was to happen to the children of the people who had believed and been baptised or when they later had children? Were these children to be baptised at the same time as their parents or not? We find no clear statements about this in the New Testament. In order to draw

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conclusions we need more information. What information then?

Jewish proselyte baptism

First of all we can look at the baptism of Jewish proselytes. Judaism once was a missionary religion. If people became Jews, they promised to keep the law. Then they were baptised. Moreover, men had to be circumcised, although there were often exceptions to this in New Testament times. Babies and young children were baptised together with their parents.

Infant baptism was therefore a normal practice in Judaism of those days. It was fairly logical then that the same should happen with the children of people who became Christians, unless there was some special reason not to do so. However, nowhere in the New Testament do we find that the apostles resisted the Jewish baptism practices. Although this does not prove that they baptised small children, it is most likely.

"Household" baptism

The texts that speak about the baptism of an entire household, point in the same direction. Lydia, the dealer in purple, was baptised with "her household" (Acts 16:15). The Philippian jailer was baptised with "all his family" (Acts 16:33). In 1 Corinthians 1:16, Paul writes literally, that he had baptised "the household of Stephanas". "Household" meant, in the use of language of those times, the whole family, including members of the family who lived with them, all slaves and their children. It is rather unlikely that not one single small child lived in all these households.

Polycarp of Smyrna

In his youth, Polycarp of Smyrna learned at the feet of the apostle John. He confessed before his death at the stake that he had served the Lord for 86 years. If he counted from the moment that he consciously believed, he must have been more than 100 years old when he died a martyr's death. He would have meant from the moment of his baptism - in the apostolic period. He could even have been baptised by the

* Translated from 'Biblische Taufe = Glaubenstaufe?', InformationsBrief Bekenntnisbewegung »Kein anderes Evangelium«, No. 208 (Oct. 2001), p. 10-15. A Dutch version appeared as 'Mag je volgens de bijbel alleen gelovigen dopen?' in *De Reformatie*, Vol. 77 (2001/2002) 869-872, 884-887 (Aug. 10 and 24).



*John the Baptist baptizes Jesus.
Engraving by Gustave Doré*

apostle John, or in any case, by someone in his neighbourhood or with his permission.

The first centuries

We know nothing from the first centuries of church history about any disunity concerning infant baptism. What we do know is that it was normal up until the year 200. Tertullian of Carthage (about 150-220) attacked infant baptism rigorously, but not because it was something new or not right. His argument was that children were still innocent and did not need to be baptised. And Origen (185-254), a somewhat younger contemporary of Tertullianus, tells us that the baptism of infants went back to the time of the apostles. Thus, whether infant baptism was practised automatically from the beginning (and that is most likely considering the above); or (if this is not the case) infant baptism was introduced without protest to the whole of Christendom.

The last point would really prove nothing, because we know that the church in early days already was a prey to false teaching. The gospel was mangled into a new law. The New Testament, especially the epistles to the Galatians and the Corinthians, show us clearly how vulnerable the early

Christians were for unbiblical teaching. Our exploration of early Christianity revealed nothing more than the - indeed very great - likelihood that the apostles baptised small children and the impossibility of proving otherwise. But the reference to Galatians and Corinthians brings us conveniently to the second question.

2 Does believer's baptism effectively protect a church from backsliding?

Alienated from Christ (Gal.5:4)

"You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen away from grace" Paul writes this to people, who were baptised according to their personal testimony. And these churches have been completely wiped off the map of the church of Jesus Christ. The theme of the apostolic criticism (ultimately the reason for the downfall of these churches) is named in Galatians 3:3 : "having begun in the Spirit are you now being made perfect by the flesh?" This "by the flesh" means: trusting in yourself, even if it is only for a small part. We are either completely and exclusively made righteous in Christ,

or absolutely not. Galatians 5:3: "And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised, that he is a debtor to keep the whole law".

Supporters of believer's baptism should ask themselves whether or not a certain sum hides behind the emphasis first belief, then baptism, and behind the assertion that a baptism which is not preceded by faith is no baptism. The sum is: 99 percent of my salvation has been achieved by Christ and 1 percent is my own contribution, achieved by my choice for Him.

Of course there is nothing wrong with the baptism of believing Christians. An unbaptised Christian who comes to faith *must*, according to the Bible, be baptised. But if this baptism is called the only correct baptism, then the temptation to see acquittal on the grounds of own works is close at hand. Then there is a danger of falling away from grace.

That is not to say that the baptism of infants does not hold any dangers. The temptation is to make grace cheap, and to think that we have salvation in our own hands and then to lose it. That infant baptism and believer's baptism hold dangers, distinguishes neither. God's gifts are always susceptible to misuse.

God's grace received in vain (2Cor.6:1)

"We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain". This is also said to people who were baptised on the grounds of their confession of faith. They too, albeit in a completely different way to the Galatians, want to see the evidences of their salvation themselves, via supernatural gifts and abilities. They too run the risk of losing salvation. Because the following words can mean nothing else: "receive the grace of God in vain". He who is saved, has not received grace in vain. Believers baptism has not saved the Corinthians from this.

The early catholic church

At the time of the apostles it was usual to immediately baptise somebody into the church. That changed fairly rapidly, because 'baptism teaching' was introduced. A period of teaching in Christian doctrine preceded baptism. As long as you were being instructed, you were a catecheet.

This was quickly followed by a misunderstanding, that baptism only took the sins away which were committed before baptism, and not those committed afterwards. Sins committed after baptism required special forms of penance. The result was that people tried to postpone baptism as long as possible, preferably until just before death, so that few chances to sin were available. For this reason Emperor Constantine was baptised in 337 on his deathbed. The great Augustine had asked for baptism as a child when he had been very ill, but as soon as he recovered his baptism was postponed. This "crisis of infant baptism" (J. Jeremias) in the fourth century, was not the dying convulsions of the Biblical teaching, as is sometimes suggested, but the result of the unbiblical opinion that the grace of baptism was only applicable to sins which were committed beforehand.

The anabaptists

The anabaptist movement at the time of the Reformation, heralded the need for the return to the Bible by going one step further than Luther. The Roman Catholic church handed out salvation via seven sacraments. For salvation you were completely dependent upon intervention by the church. Luther had corrected this by emphasising the necessity of personal faith for salvation. The anabaptists went even further by putting the believing individual at the centre. For their doctrine they turned not only to the Bible but to "internal light", direct inspiration by the Holy Spirit as well. You can compare this with Pentecostals today. They too wanted to make faith visible and tangible - compare the Galatians with their works of the law, the Corinthians with their enthusiasm and the Roman Catholic church with their handing out of salvation via visible signs. The anabaptists showed this by demanding that only believers should be baptised. In their eyes, the baptism of a child who was not able to believe, did not count. A similar tendency emerged in the revolutionary striving for the kingdom of God with one's own hands, and if necessary with force. In this connection, think of former Lutheran minister Thomas Müntzer and the disastrous Farmers' war.

These developments culminated in the founding of the anabaptist kingdom in Munster, where by a reign of terror re-baptism, sharing of possessions, and even polygamy were enforced. This was not characteristic of the anabaptists in general but it was an extreme consequence of the subjectivity which this movement brought with it. It was also the fruit of the present tendency everywhere, to try to achieve the kingdom of God oneself on earth. It is not surprising that we also see this tendency in making believer's baptism absolute and in opposition to infant baptism.

Modern baptism

If we look at baptism today, we see there all heresies we also find in churches which baptise babies: women ministers, criticism of the Scriptures, weakening of standards in regards to Biblical commandments, fanaticism. Indeed, we find these things elsewhere too, but it seems that believer's baptism has not been able to save the baptist churches in general from backsliding.

On the other side, we see in the United States, as well as in Germany, Lutheran churches which on the one hand practice infant baptism with full conviction and on the other hand have maintained the basis of the Holy Scriptures exemplarily. I only mention in America the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod¹⁾ and in Germany the *Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche*²⁾. Nevertheless are there also Lutheran and Reformed churches which have fallen prey to liberalism.

This alone shows that the practice of baptism does not determine whether or not a church remains faithful to the Scriptures. We meet both, faithful and unfaithful, in both infant baptism camps and believer's baptism camps.

The question of which baptism is biblical, is, thus, not easy to answer historically. The decision is taken on grounds of theology. This we address now.

Are you watering down the church by practising infant baptism? Are you taking a distance from the New Testament practice? We discovered via church history that it is not so straightforward. The Bible must be decisive in the issue.

3 Do the New Testament facts offer a single-minded plea for confession of faith before baptism?

We start with the words of the Lord Jesus

The great commission (Matth.28:19-20)

Here we read literally: "Therefore going make disciples of every nation, baptising them in the name of the Father, in the name of the Son and in the name of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you". The three present participles explain how this should happen: "going", "baptising" and "teaching". If people want to see the order as decisive in this, then baptism should take place before the teaching. But the order of the words contains no rule as to the order of events. Grammatically speaking, "baptising" and "teaching" are parallel to each other. That is to say that without baptism or teaching in the commands of Jesus, you cannot become a Christian. They both belong to becoming a Christian, as two sides of the same coin.

The promise of baptism (Mark 16:6)

Here belief stands before baptism: "He who believes in Me and is baptised shall be saved". But again the text gives no instructions as to the order. It is about two sides of the same issue, there is no more to it. To be saved, faith and baptism are necessary. Without faith, baptism is pointless: "but he who does not believe shall be judged". It seems that a baptism without faith is possible but the possibility of faith without baptism is unthinkable. There can therefore be no doubt about the fundamental priority of faith above baptism but a certain order by the words of institution cannot be found.

Rebirth (John 3:5)

If we find an order here, then we will have to put baptism first: "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God". First the water, then the Spirit. But here too, no justice would be done to the text if we were to establish an order of events on the basis of this.

The gospel for the children (Luke 18:15-17)

At most there is implicit talk of baptism here: "let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven" (16). In verse 15 we read: "they also brought infants to Him". Jesus says of such small children: "for of such is the kingdom of heaven".

Two comments are made about this. First of all, it says "such" and not "these". That would mean that the only attitude acceptable to God is *comparable* with the attitude of a child towards his father, as verse 17 emphatically states. That also a child can enter the Kingdom of Heaven, is not what it says apparently. Nevertheless the saying "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child" clearly assumes that "such" children can enter the Kingdom of Heaven. And

who behaves more like a child than a child? The infants brought to Jesus are also "such", not only the adults whose attitude is like theirs. If a child really can receive the Kingdom of God, then we must not refuse him or her the baptism through which it is promised.

Is this to say that all children should be baptised without distinction? No, because then we would be making baptism available apart from faith. The salvation of small children who are yet unable to believe themselves, is bound up with the faith of their parents in which they are raised.

And this brings us to a word from the apostle Paul.

Holy children (1Cor.7:14)

The apostle Paul works on the basis that the children of believers are 'holy' even if one parent is an unbeliever. And Paul always calls people 'holy' who are joined through Christ with God. See how he addresses his letters: Paul ... to the saints in ..." If they are holy, Christians that is, nobody can exclude them from baptism.

If we start weighing up, we see the following: the texts which refer to baptism, show us again and again that faith and baptism, respectively baptism and teaching in faith, belong together. The words are found in varying order but a closer look reveals that this is of no significance for the order of events. There is a clear indissoluble relationship between baptism and faith. A few texts make clear that there can be a relationship with God before a conscious confession of faith is made.

There are nevertheless two places in the New Testament which clearly seem to suggest a certain order.

The Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:35-38)

This text is often used to prove that faith is necessary prior to baptism. When the eunuch asks Philip: "See here is water. What hinders me from being baptised?" (36), then Philip answers: "If you believe with all your heart, you may" (37).

Now nobody contests that an adult cannot be baptised without first having confessed faith. All sorts of motives can



*Infant baptism by sprinkling.
Photo by Rufus de Vries*



Baptism in a river in Papua (Irian Jaya, Indonesia) by Rev. Amorou. Above: adult baptism by total immersion . Below: infant baptism by sprinkling Photo by P.R. Baas

be given to come to that confession and it is probably true that many adults came to true faith after baptism. Nevertheless it looks as though faith is a condition expected before baptism in this instance (in the newest editions of the Bible between brackets, because this verse is debated textually).

Nevertheless, this passage is important in the understanding of baptism. The desire of the eunuch to be baptised came after the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ (35). Baptism is thus not something which comes as an extra to the gospel, it is part of the gospel itself. Just as the salvation of the whole world came within reach through the death of Jesus on the cross, so baptism marks the moment that the salvation of Jesus Christ gets a hold within the life of the individual.

Buried and risen again (Col.2:12)

If there is any text which suggests an order of events, it is this one: “buried with Christ in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through your faith in the power of God”. The resurrection comes necessarily after the burial. Nobody can turn this order around. Life in faith with Christ is only possible after God has included you in the death of Christ, has made his death valid for you and in this way has freed you from yourself. This act of God in man, as that is represented in baptism (thus not only the act of God on behalf of man in the death and resurrection of Jesus) must, in the response of the person, precede faith.

And so we come to the fourth question.

4 Is “believer’s baptism” really a clearer sign of what is signified by baptism than infant baptism?

The clear misuse of child baptism in the churches of today can lead us to answer yes unconditionally! But this would be the result of the misuse of baptism. Let us begin with baptism itself; the Christian baptism is the sign of God’s work in man, not of a work of man himself. In this we see that the Christian baptism can only be received, while all other forms of baptism can be executed by man himself.

Purification

In a do-it-yourself baptism man purifies himself. In the Christian baptism, man is purified. Faith in Christ necessarily recognises that we cannot purify ourselves from our sins, but that only God can do this. And why? Because of Christ He forgives sins and changes us through the Holy Spirit.

Judgement

Baptism is the sign of judgement over sins. The baptised one must die because of his sins. He is buried in the baptism water (cp. Col.2:12) This is a sentence from God - only He is the Judge, and He executes this judgement. That this sentence is only symbolical in the water and is not literally carried out in hell, is because it has, in fact, already been executed, on the cross at Golgotha, where Christ bore the punishment in our place. In baptism God accepts the offer of Christ as atonement for the sins of a particular person. This is a decision and an act of God. This can also be seen in as much as you cannot baptise yourself, but you are baptised.

Change of power

Baptism symbolises a change of power. That is not to say that someone becomes a Christian by a free choice to get away from one lord, satan, to serve another Lord, Christ. It is more so that Christ violently rescues an imprisoned, and helpless slave to sin, death and the devil from the influences of these powers. Man is not the subject but the object of this battle between good and evil, between God and the devil. Man is not the one who goes to battle, he is the one who is rescued.

Here too we see that baptism is a sign of God’s rule over your life. It is not something to be taken. Rather, the new lord of your life *gives* this sign, just as the new owner of an animal marks it with his own brand.

Faith is thus according to its nature not a work of the believer, it is a thankful recognition of the work of the merciful, redeeming God. Becoming a conscious Christian is not the step that I take towards Christ but the step that Christ takes in my direction. Believing does not mean that I change myself, but a thankful recognition that something has changed, yes, that *He has changed everything for me*.

Which baptism this state of affairs most clearly depicts can hardly be liable to question. Adult baptism or believer’s baptism, maintains its place of course, in missionary work, in the case of adults who are not baptised. But in the Christian church, the baptism of the infants of believing parents most clearly shows the priority God’s grace takes over the faith, over someone’s choice and confession. If the validity of baptism is under discussion because it has not been preceded by faith,

faith is unavoidably reduced to a human effort and salvation is built upon the activity of man (cp. that which was written here about the Galatians). If infant baptism is administered without any recognisable connection to the believing community, something which happens unfortunately rather too often in the national churches of today, then baptism is no longer a clear sign of God’s acts for mankind in Jesus Christ. In such situations, baptism is no longer a clarification of the core of the issue, but an eclipse of it.

Conclusion

The opinion that only believer’s baptism is the Biblical baptism, is clearly not that clear after all. It is not infant baptism that needs to be so judged, but the practice of baptising children of unbelieving parents, a baptism whereby the child is not brought up in the ways of the church, a baptism with no fitting teaching to support it.

The believer’s baptism maintains her legitimate place in missionary circumstances (and we come across more and more of these). This baptism as such is not to be judged. But if the validity of the baptism is made dependant upon the belief which precedes it, if believer’s baptism is preferred to infant baptism, then there is danger of making believer’s baptism absolute and this is undesirable. Baptism is an act of God toward mankind, just as Golgotha and Easter. He who believes, receives baptism and in this the work of Christ for himself. He who believes does not accomplish baptism himself, just as he didn’t achieve the atoning work of Christ or His resurrection.

Our faith does not save us, Christ saves us through baptism and faith. In this light the baptism of children of believing parents in the Christian church remains the most appropriate form. And if unbelieving members and people on the fence want to have their children baptised, the answer is not just to let them be baptised. Then you would increasingly have to insist upon postponing the baptism and adult baptism after instruction.

NOTE

¹⁾ *The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod is a Lutheran church federation of some 2.600,000 members and 6.145 congregations in the United States, established in 1847 in Chicago, which holds to the Lutheran confession (see The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church). For information: <http://www.lcms.org>.*

²⁾ *Die Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche (SELK = the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church) came into existence in 1991 out of the union of the Evangelisch-Lutherische (altlutherische) Kirche from the former DDR with the independent Lutheran churches (united in 1972) from various lands within the German Republic. This church holds to the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confession (collected in: Konkordienbuch, 1580). She has 40,000 members and almost 200 congregations with 140 ministers. She calls herself independent because she is not dependant on the state, only accountable to her members, and independent in terms of statutes and finances. Information: <http://www.selk.de>. She maintains the Lutherische Theologische Hochschule (Lutheran Theological Faculty) in Oberursel / Taunus. Information: <http://www.ilth-oberursel.de>.*

Is Hell really there in the end?*

I Injured love

Who still dares to defend the existence of hell? He who believes in a God who 'keeps' a hell can expect the following accusations: "Is not it too awful even to mention; if we assume that there are wiggling en gnawing worms, as well as eternal furnaces of fire and sulphur, waiting for the dead who have not followed the right system of faith? It is those who want to believe in such a sadistical god, who ought to look out. It is more these Christians, who have so much to say about their fellow Christians, who ought to count on the worms and flaming fires from which they never escape"1. This is about other Christians with a different system of faith. But today you could easily replace: people with other faiths. He who dares to insist on the existence of hell, is easily suspected of wishing that hell on others.

Delusions

Inescapably hell summons up terrifying associations. Who can think of the place without shuddering? God's Word speaks very soberly about it. Probably because of this, our fantasy runs away with us and the danger of speculation is a big one. Many delusions exist about this terrible place, which do no justice to God's Word. The searing furnaces stoked up by fiery devils who torture and torment people is one example. Terrible worms who chew at people for eternity and the endless spreading of evil to which people will be delivered up... But more important than such misrepresentations is that they do crass injustice to the Lord God Himself. This happens when He is portrayed as a sadistical God, who creates the hell for his awful arbitrariness. The protest against a sadistical representation of God is correct, but so is a protest against a sentimental humane one. God is then represented as a meek God who has no rights to insist on. This comes in place of the loving God who has established His throne on eternal righteousness (Ps.97).

Escape routes

Throughout the centuries people have denied hell or alleviated its pain. I will represent three of these positions globally. These escape routes are usually offered to maintain that God really is love after all. An eternal hell could not tie up with His love and contradicts his righteousness. Above all this would mean a defeat for God and throw His victory over evil into question.

1. *The hell as penultimate reality.* That is to say: a temporary deprivation, a hellish shock, occurs, but after a shorter or longer stay in the hell, heavenly glory still follows. The

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word "eternal" in the Bible, and certainly when speaking about hell, does not mean time without end but something like 'century', a long time. Hell is something like an interim, or purgatory, where opportunities for a second chance or temporary penance exist.

2. *The hell exists but ultimately remains empty.* God is just threatening. The threat is very real and realistic, but is only meant to stimulate repentance and to cause change here and now. The judgement will not go through, just as Nineveh was spared after Jonah had preached threateningly to it. The danger is a real one, hell is a reality, but thanks to the great mercy of God, nobody will actually end up there.
3. *Hell will turn out to be nothing.* This non-existence theory is gaining popularity. The second death is presented as disintegration into nothing (annihilation) Just as Sodom and Gomorrah disappeared, there will be nothing left of the dead unbeliever. Their lives lead to nothing, people will not realise even this, because the hell means - dying a quiet death and never coming back to life. God will ultimately be all things to all people.

Pathetic attempts

Ad 1. If you take this alone, it is true that 'eternal' in the Bible can mean a long time, the longest imaginable time. But this is not true in those places where the hell is referred to. In Matthew 25:46 eternal life is mentioned simultaneously with eternal judgement. And in Revelation 14:11 "to all eternity" is further illustrated as - "they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name" (see also 20:10). The meaning of "eternal" in this context can hardly be anything else than unending, unlimited.

* Translated from 'Is de hel er uiteindelijk wel?', *De Reformatie*, Vol. 77 (2001/2002). The title of the first part (p. 465-467) was 'Gekrenkte liefde', the title of the second part (p. 490-492) 'Heilig recht'. In this Reformed weekly Rev. Brink's contributions are published under the head 'Opnieuw geloven' (Believing again).



The Last Judgement.
Engraving by Gustave Doré

Ad 2. It cannot be denied that the threat can be very real without the prediction ever coming to pass, or the judgement being postponed, and this then with the intention of calling people to repentance. But even if there are illustrations of this, it does not necessarily mean that it will always happen in this way. There are many places in Scripture where the opposite happens, and the judgement does take place, if there is no repentance. And how can hell be so empty, if God has had a place to keep satan and his fallen angels for ages (Jude 6; Rev.20:10)? How can there be talk of “those who perish” (2Thess.2:10), if there is no such thing?

Above all, the warnings are not only directed at unbelievers, but are also meant as comfort for those who are being persecuted (2Thess. 1; 1Pet.4; 2Pet.2)! Biblically speaking you cannot get around the fact that there are two categories of people at the resurrection and the judgement (Matth.25:31-34; John 5:29; Rom.2:7; Rev.20:15).

Ad 3. The contrast in the Bible is not between being and not being, but between life and death, as two ways of existence. Death is not non-existence. Death is being cut off from communication. It implies paralysis, powerlessness, ruined existence. From texts such as Eph. 2:1 “you were dead” - shows that there can be no talk of non-existence.

These people were full of life but had no contact with God and were given over to themselves. Death is absolutely not a simple extinction of existence. Nor is it true that Sodom and Gomorrah have disappeared forever. The inhabitants will be called up on the day of judgement. (Math 11:23-24).

Christ speaks

Who spoke the most about hell in the Bible? Christ! He underlines his message in flames, not to scare the living daylights out of people but to reassure us! Christ has come to save us from hell after all, and not only what the people of today call hell, but also the future one! Modern preachers cry out - hell is visible here on this earth in many places (war, aids, and in famine areas) But do they bring a word of redemption? No! They sow panic first and foremost, because who can redeem this world from hell? Christ speaks about Himself as the One who redeems. The Son of God knows as no other, what the hell is. He speaks out of experience because he went through hell while here on earth (*Heidelberg Catechism* q.44). And He speaks reassuring words contrary to the greatest anxiety, the anxiety for hell, from which all anxieties come. He is the only Person who can save us from hell.

Injured love

The foremost argument which is offered against hell, is that it would contradict God's love. It is true, it does create a tension. Who would dare to say that he absolutely understands and can satisfactorily explain it? And even so, a hell that contradicts God's love cannot exist.

Saying "no" to God's love is saying "yes" to hell. If somebody rejects God's love he cannot say that the hell contradicts God's love. *Hell is there because he rejected that love.* Hell is a rejected heaven. The same love through which God gave His Son, the same love by which Christ gave Himself, this love is the love which judges. He who despises and rejects God's love, summons God's wrath over himself (Heb.12:25-29). This is the holy indignation not only from God the Father but also from the Son: the wrath of the Lamb (Rev.6:16). God maintains His right to love in the hell. The hell is the place for God's injured love. God is and remains forever aggrieved about people who have so completely rejected Him and his Son.

It is noticeable how emphatically Jesus speaks about hell to people who have rejected Him. This is why he is so emphatic in his reaction to the Pharisees and Sadducees who have no regard for Him. They refuse to recognise Him. They follow what He does. They see all from close quarters, they see and hear what happens. If you still reject God's Son, given by God in love to set everything right... If you reject God's Son then you provoke God to the limit. You reject the apple of His eye and injure His love!

Sealed unwillingness

God does not bring misery on anybody but he seals the unwillingness of people. He takes our responsibility so seriously that the hell is the consequence of His respect for us as mankind. Ultimately there are but two sorts of people. The one says: Your will be done, and God says to the other sort - your will be done (C.S.Lewis). The doors of hell are locked but the lock is on the inside. Man shuts himself off from God, God leaves him to his own hardness of heart (cp. *Canons of Dort* 1,6).

God gives His own Son and lets Him suffer to death, and people react by saying - "thanks but no thanks, I didn't ask Him to take the misery of the world upon Himself, I'll manage it myself, I'll go my own way". These can be pleasant, friendly people who, as they say themselves, wouldn't harm a fly. They can also be criminals. The Nazi Eichmann was visited by a minister thirteen times before his execution. Eichmann thought "I don't need anyone to die in my place, I need no forgiveness, and I don't want it either". If people reject God's Son, then they must bear their own unrighteousness, with the consequence of being endlessly thrown back on yourself. The rejection of Christ seems to be that which weighs the heaviest - knowing or having known of Him and still rejecting Him (Heb.10:26-31).

Speaking in images

When Christ speaks about hell, it is obvious that He uses imagery. He uses symbols which more or less exclude each other: utter darkness and fire. A colourful use of imagery

which keep the options open. Symbolism gives a characterization but is not a photograph (K. Schilder). But the limited representation that Jesus offers, is enough to tell us that it is a terrible place, where demons live. It is ultimate darkness because you are unobtainable for God and do not share in heavenly glory. How can it be anything else - the work of Christ shines there, in heaven, while that same glittering work in hell blinds those who harden their hearts. If, in this place, the fire glows, is that then not the fire of God's indignant love? An as that intense thirst is described, is it not that earnest desire for love and security, which cannot be fulfilled (Luke 16:24) so that you are thrown back on yourself? And is that searing pain not created by the terrible sense of missing something, because you must continually do without that love?

Great grace

The Scriptures preserve us for minimalism. Sometimes it looks as though only a small group will be saved (Matth.22:14), but it is possible that this refers to the Jewish followers during Jesus' presence on earth. Other scriptures emphasise the growth and increase (Matth.8:11-12; 13), and not forgetting the multitudes which are countless (Rev.7:9). How many have gone before us? How many of the last will be the first? How many of the least will be the greatest?

God's mercy triumphs over judgement (James 2:13). It is not up to us to decide the measure of God's grace, let alone that we should try to give God lessons in mercy. We must never make a closed system of it, which we then proceed to force upon God, as though we decide the minimum of knowledge necessary for salvation. What is man? You never reach the place from which God judges. It is not up to us to speculate: will he be there, will she be there ... Adding and weighing up, so busy judging and measuring you forget to look at your own heart (K. Schilder). God is greater than our hearts (1John 3:20). Nothing more is required of us than to trust in God, the Almighty. He is completely merciful and just! Who ever loved us more?

In Christ

And what about those who have never heard of Him, but who have at the most some awareness of a god? And what about the very many followers of other religions? What will become of them? And what about all those children who have never been brought up with the Gospel? Will chanceless children end up in a chanceless hell? There is little to be found in the Bible on the subject of ignorance, but never underestimate God's mercy. God's heart is always greater than you think. Augustine, Luther, Zwingli, Melancthon, all kept the option open, that at the last judgement God will grant certain heathens a pardon. They did so on the grounds of texts such as: the first will be the last, and they will come from east and west (Matth.8:11; 19:30; 20:12). It is not impossible for God to declare people righteous apart from preaching and baptism. As sovereign God He can do this. But whoever it is, nobody can ever be saved apart from the work of Christ! Only it is not up to us to speculate about this or presume upon it. We have to be satisfied with: he who has the Son has life; he

who does not have the Son, does not have life (1John 5:12). However you look at it - apart from Jesus Christ, life is hell.

2 Holy Justice²

How can God's love tolerate hell? Can we rhyme His love with eternal fire, eternal woe, eternal remorse? Worse, is it not a defeat for God's love if hell exists? How can He tolerate there always being a place where He has no influence? Is it fair and righteous to judge people on the grounds of this one life? Can this short life between cradle and grave really be decisive for a never ending eternity? You cannot have another go at, there is no second chance. Does this not clash with God's love? Is this not against His justice?

Love and justice

The word 'righteousness' makes us think of a harsh front - a deal is a deal. Abide by the rules. Stick to the laws. The word 'merciful' makes us think of a friendly face, loving, warm, moved by compassion. The human heart is inclined to create opposites out of these two. But God does not have two sides. He is not double. There is no contradiction in God.

In the Bible we do not find a conflict between God's love and justice. Goodness and faithfulness meet each other, righteousness and peace kiss each other (Ps.85:11). His justice can seek retaliation, if He takes revenge to restore justice (Jer.51:56; Rom.2:8; Matth.22:13). His justice is full of love and his love is saturated with justice. We cannot understand this, and it can clash with our feelings, but that does not make it less true. In this, God is holy, unique and incomparable.

If God would not insist on His justice, His love would pale! God's love would be that He ignored evil and his love would cut across his righteousness. This would be unworthy of God. That would make love cheap. God has shown his love in a way that is worthy of Him. He gave His Son in complete love, but He did not lose sight of His justice for one second. *God demands righteousness. He is bound to his love.*

Maintaining justice

Hell is not a place of awful chance, but the result of carrying out his godly justice! There is no trace of unrighteousness in Him. He is completely righteous. He speaks justice, makes justice, takes revenge as no person could. He never makes a mistake. It will be performed in a most holy way (Rev.15:1-4) God shall weigh everything as a completely righteous judge. He does no one injustice. He brings everything into the light. He will judge everyone according to their deeds, their background, their circumstances. God maintains his justice in hell. God is and remains eternally injured by people who have rejected his Son so utterly.

Distinction

But what about all those who never came into contact with Christ? How could they ever have offended his love? God cannot blame them for this? Nor will He! He is completely righteous. The Lord Jesus says as much in so many words. It will be better for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgement (Matth.11:21), yes, even better for Sodom and

Gomorrah than for you who could have known (11:24)! Nowhere is there talk of a grey mass in the grey darkness of hell. There is certainly a distinction in punishment. From the one who has been entrusted with much, much will be asked (Luke 12:48-49). God will punish every one according to his or her works (Matth.12:36-37; 2Cor.5:10). Every person who ever lived will be tried justly. You reap as you sow. Everybody must bear his own guilt and accept the consequences of his deeds.

Judgement made to measure

It is noticeable that the Lord uses different standards for the heathen peoples than for His own people. The Ammonites, for instance, will not be judged according to the laws given to Israel, but according to their malicious pleasures when Judah was conquered (Ez.25:6-70). They are not judged on the basis of things they could not have known. The judgement is made to measure! The same is true of the charge against the king of Tyre (Ez.28:1-10). Success and riches had gone to his head, he let himself be worshipped like a god. God does not accept it when people ridiculously overestimate their own achievements. God addresses people who should have known better. It is again, specifically relevant to them, so as fits an honest judgement. God is and remains righteous. He asks us to trust Him in this. The ultimate adaptation is that Tyre is addressed on the fact that she practises dishonest trade and finances the temple service with this money (Ez.28:18). God goes far in this, by addressing her on the grounds of her own idol worship. Even then, her temple riches have been dishonestly obtained. Even according to her own judgements it is wrong! Everything points to how righteous God is. His judgement is based upon a charge that is even convincing to those involved.

Evidences of goodness

God insists on His justice and abides by His love. He is and remains righteous. This is not a cold righteousness, but much more of a reasonable righteousness. In all that he does He remains righteous! The existence of distinctions within judgement, brings the notion of grades of hell with it. God does not throw everybody and everything overboard in one fell swoop. God's justice is saturated with love! He who is convinced of this can better place the following K.Schilder statements. That even in hell there will be a distant reflection of God's kind countenance, and there too will be glimpses of God's immense goodness. Even in hell, it will be said that the Lord is righteous in all his ways and work, God is unmeasurably good!

Recognition and remorse

Every judged one will find it impossible to be anything but in agreement with the Judge. Recognition and nothing else but desire for the application of God's justice. You can do nothing but submit to God's judgement, because His judgements are as clear as crystal. There is no question of disputing their correctness because nothing could possibly oppose them. Everybody will agree with His Godly judgements because every tongue will confess that Jesus

Christ is Lord, be it with a good grace or a bad grace (Phil.2:9-11). The weeping and gnashing of teeth testify in this light, not to rebellion, but much more to remorse and sorrow. The pain of the remorse is the unavoidable judgement. You are brought in line with God's will but it happens at the last possible moment. You cannot avoid it. Revenge is without future because there are no more ensuing episodes. You can only look back, watch the repeats. You cannot exist in the past, so the only thing left to do is judge yourself in confrontation with God's righteous decision. You can only see that which has taken place. No change is possible.

Dante's "abandon hope all ye who enter here" is painfully accurate. It paints the picture of the worm that never dies - remaining focused on the past and knowing that nothing can be changed, knowing no renewal and change but only paralysing helplessness.

No accident

There can be no question of God failing in his victory over evil. He expresses his judgement and restrains evil forever! He sorts out evil for ever. Gehenna or hell, is no longer the place where satan and his henchmen hang out, where they do what they like and where God is denied access. Once the judgement has taken place it is not satan's territory but his prison (Jude 6; 2Pet.2:4; Rev.18:8; 19:2; 20:7-10). Hell is not a kingdom in which God has no influence and can do nothing. Sin cannot spread out unbridled. Everything has been brought to light, judged and mightily condemned (2Thess.1:8-9; 2Cor.5:10; Rev.11:18; 20:12-13). Without this judgement and condemnation the victory would be incomplete. Creatures would still be able to scoff and revile. No, this is over forever. From the last judgement onwards, this scandal of rebellion will be over. Nowhere does the Bible suggest a godly failure or eternal continuation of sin. All and everybody will be brought under the kingdom of God by the Judge, Christ (1Cor.15:27-28). The atonement of all earthly and heavenly beings in this instance means: return to the harmony which He intended (Col.1:20)3. All shall recognise His might and sovereignty. Sooner or later, everybody will recognise that Christ really is God's answer to all that has caused difficulty and pain on earth. All will see it - every knee will bow!

Ultimately God will receive honour from sending His Son. His right will triumph be it with a good grace or bad grace. This is true of all creatures (Rev.15:4), also in the judgement of the unrepentant, God glorifies His name (Ez.38:23). The glorification of God remains the aim of every creature (Prov.16:4).

God is not absent

Hell is often seen as the place of God's absence, as though it is a place where evil can do whatever it wants without interruption. God puts a stop to evil and has judged it. But if God is not absent, in what sense is He present? He is present as the God who presents Himself as holy Creator and Judge. It is not that God is righteous but ultimately merciful, as though these two are opposites. He is both completely merciful and completely righteous. I see no way of systemising this. It is a

living reality in Christ. He unites love and justice in His own person. Even in hell it is evident how righteous and good He is. The same presence that fills the people in heaven with love, feels like anger in hell, because of the rejection of His love. The same love which fills the people in heaven with happiness, feels like a repression and remorse in hell. The burning fire of God's love and His glorious radiation mean the opposite in hell: blinding, shrivelling. It is the utmost darkness. God is unmentionably far away, because from a human point of view, the chasm is unbridgeable (2Thess.1:8-9).

Question of Conscience

How can you long for the future, if your own husband of wife, brother or sister, friend or acquaintance has turned their back upon God or when the great division happens, cutting through families? A miracle must happen. As long as that person lives, there is a way back. It is possible that he or she repents, when you yourself are gone. We do not know God's plan. And what if there is no repentance?! Will we not approach the last day with fear and trembling? Will we not miss that person? On the basis of fear of missing somebody, the conclusion is often scrupulously drawn that we will not recognise anyone, all will be forgotten. But that is an escape.

Would Christ miss them? Christ who gave Himself out of great love, would He turn His back on them? Would He not miss them? If the Lord Jesus won't miss them, while He is in glory, it must be good. We cannot appreciate that now, simply because we cannot see into the future... We cannot stand where He stands. But we do not have a complete faith. We do not trust Him as completely righteous, holy and good.

Glorious justice

The glass sea described in Revelation 15 is clear as crystal, transparent up to God's throne. There is a red glow in it, the glow of His wrath, His rejected love and His holy justice. One day everybody will recognise that: Lord, you are righteous. Today I cannot understand God's intentions. His judgements are absolutely not transparent but in the distant future I hope to understand all completely, in the light of Christ. Nobody has loved the world as He has. If people turn their backs on Him it cannot be because of Him. And would He, who wipes away every tear from our eyes, not know how to deal with the sorrow which the great division will create?

NOTE

- ¹⁾ A.J.R. Brussaard, *Als een mus op het dak. Wrede trekken in het christelijk belijden*, Baarn 1978.
- ²⁾ *The range of thought of K. Schilder, Wat is de hel?*, Kampen 1920 (second edition) and of Henri Blocher, *Irons-nous tous au paradis? Aix-en-Provence, Kerugma: 1999 has been inspiring for me writing this part of my article.*
- ³⁾ Compare the note at this verse in *La Bible de Jérusalem, Paris, CERF: 1974: this reconciliation 'ne signifie pas le salut individuel de tous, mais bien le salut collectif du monde par son retour à l'ordre et à la paix dans la soumission parfaite à Dieu. Les individus qui ne seront pas entrés par la grâce, dans cet ordre y entreront par force'.*
- ⁴⁾ See for these final alineas my *Lied verlangen*, Nijmegen 2000, p. 55-56.

Pure in God's eyes ... me?

I God's holy eyes

(Kwakkel) "Pure in God's eyes": do you dare to sing this about yourself? Do you dare to say about yourself that you are pure in God's eyes? 'Am I pure in God's eyes?' Does this question bother you?

There was one person who wrestled very hard with this question. It was Martin Luther. He struggled for many years with the question: 'how am I righteous before God? How can I be sure that I am pure in his eyes, that He finds me so pure that I can live before Him?'

Is this also an important issue in your life? Does it have any part in the lives of your children or your grandchildren?

Is God there?

(Van Benthem) "Am I pure in God's eyes? Should we not acknowledge that this question is not relevant anymore today and that it is actually being pushed aside by another question: 'Does God actually exist? If so: what do I do with this knowledge? Is He concerned about me? How do I get in contact with Him?'

Luther did not doubt that God was watching him continually but he was uncertain about the question as to how God viewed him: sternly or kindly? Luther doubted that he was accepted by God.

We doubt God's existence or presence. This may be a shocking discovery, but it can be explained. Together with our children we live in a society from which God has disappeared.

For the Dutch people, God no longer plays an important part. The Netherlands are God-less.

God is not there. And people do not miss Him either. We are quite able to save ourselves. Together we, human beings, make society. We do not need God for that.

Above all, everything must be nice, appealing, involving and amusing. Nowadays, this has become of much more importance than whether or not a thing is true or false, good or bad.

This is the atmosphere, the climate in which we live daily; the air, which we inhale daily. Is it surprising that it penetrates into the church, as well, that especially young people ask: where is God? Is there a God who is sympathetic towards me? And why does this not do anything to me?

Church Life

Worse, do we not share this, unconsciously perhaps? Do we not reinforce the question by the way in which we are a church in these days and in the priorities we have? A few examples:

a. Liturgy

We are quite busy with the organisation of church services and its liturgical form. Some people are convinced



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that everything should remain as it always has been, as far as possible. They have always been used to it like that. That is why parish visits may be devoted entirely to expressions of concern about all these changes.

Other people think that things ought to be changed and improved. There should be more variation, otherwise things become too monotonous for us. Things should also become more modern, with more contemporary music. If not, we will lose the young people.

Because of outsiders, the atmosphere ought to be warmer, more personal, more human, otherwise no unbeliever will cross the threshold of our church. In this way we are busy making church services attractive to ourselves, to our young people and to outsiders.

Of course this has good aspects, yet I wonder: where is God? Do we realise sufficiently that a church service is about Him? Do we realise that our meetings take place not mainly before the eyes of the world, but especially before His eyes? Is He not, albeit unintentionally, out of sight, because of our attention to each other and to the people around us?

b. Christian style of living

Once we used to know so-called Christian morals. As a Christian you kept to certain rules: you did not travel on Sundays, no sex before marriage, voting for a Christian party and so on.

You know these Christian morals have corroded. Nowadays there is great uncertainty, even a void surrounding a Christian style of living. We are rather uncertain, and so we keep quiet, and are waiting for leaders who can save the situation. Awaiting this we let things take their course. And we seem to find it too tiring and too overtaxing to tackle difficult subjects. At best we exchange opinions about buying and eating ice cream on Sunday.

Again I ask, in the sleepiness and laxness surrounding a Christian style of living: where is God? Do we not suggest that He has nothing to do with our concrete behaviour? Have we forgotten that we live in front of his (holy) countenance in all our thoughts, word, decisions and actions?

c. *Emotive atmosphere*

In all the things which we do not know, we do know one thing: we want to be touched. Rationalism, intellect used to be first place. In reaction to this today, all attention is now concentrated on experience, emotions. Sermons which do not touch me, are not worthwhile. Special inspirations, miraculous healings, speaking in tongues raise a growing interest in our churches as well. Then something happens to you, at least!

Beside all the beautiful things that can be said about our feelings and experiences the question arises: Where is God? Have we not become so fixed upon our own feelings and experience that we have lost sight of God? Does not all this attention to miracles draw us away from God Himself?

In short: is our religion still service to God? Or, is God's service becoming 'people's service'? Do we not bend our attention for the Lord away into attention for man, through the emphasis which we lay? Do we not assist ourselves in losing sight of God, so that Christian people wonder despairingly: Is He still present in my life? Are God's eyes indeed upon me?

Psalms and God's presence

(Kwakkel) It was quite different for the psalmists. To them there was no question as to whether God was present in their lives. Psalm 139 says: LORD, you have seen what is in my heart. You know me. You know when I sit down and when I get up ... You are there. You were already there, when I started to grow in my mother's womb (1-5; 16).

You meet with the same certainty in the so-called psalms of innocence, the psalms we are speaking about especially today. For instance Psalm 18. In this Psalm David begins to sing about God's protecting presence in his life. He runs out of words: I love you, o LORD, my strength, my rock, my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, horn of my salvation, my stronghold (2-3).

He knows that it is God who has delivered him from his enemies, and that He, and no other, has subjected foreign people to him. Also in Psalm 26 he testifies to God's great place in his life. 'Your love is ever before me' (3).

Of course, the psalmists and singers had their problems as well. They questioned the way God was present in their lives. They sometimes wondered desperately if God still had them in view, whether He was still concerned about them: Awake, O LORD, why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us for ever! Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression? (Ps.44:23-25).

These are words from Psalm 44, another 'psalm of innocence'. God's people see nothing of his saving presence anymore. It seems as if He has closed his eyes toward them. And yet they know that He is certainly present. They complain of the shattering defeat they have suffered, about ransacking, and their enemies' scorn. But they see God's presence in all this, nevertheless: 'You made us retreat before the enemy ... You gave us up to be devoured like sheep and have scattered us among the nations ... You have made us a reproach to our neighbours' (10-14). They questioned *the way* God was with them, but they were sure *that* He was there and



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(Liberated) in Kampen.

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Martin Apperloo

that they lived before his face.

How is it that this is so different with us? How can our lives become just as theirs were? That we too are convinced of God's presence? That we too, live before his face?

'Go into your room'

(Van Benthem) Once Jesus said to his disciples: when you pray, go into the inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. He will reward you. Your Father sees what is done in secret (Matth.6:6f). He told them this because He knows how great the danger is if people are only concerned with each other. Because he knew how hard it is to make religion really service of God.

The Lord Jesus himself often found a lonely place for prayer; a place where He really was invisible to anybody, where He could be completely alone with his Father. Professor Van Bruggen writes: It becomes interesting when you have closed your door and no man sees you anymore'. Then you are standing before God. In the darkness of your bedroom or your bed, nobody watches anymore, just the Lord. When you are alone with Him you realise that He is really watching you.

Here is the hidden contact with God, purely between Him and you; while listening and speaking; while really seeking God's countenance; in confession of your sins, your lack of power, your failures, your dependence. Here you can speak with Him about the depth of His words, the power of His spirit. Here you meet God really, He who knows you through and through You cannot act out a part before Him, because He sees through you.

In this confidential meeting with the Lord (Psalm 25) you realise vividly again that the Lord has begun a relationship with you. Then you realize once more that you live before God's face. Then it is clear: God is observing me, not just now but every moment of the day.

This time spent in our inner room, is this not something that we need very much nowadays?



J. van Benthem, minister of the Reformed Churches (Liberated) in the church of East Drachten.

Before God's holy face

(Kwakkel) When you enter your inner room, you stand before God. This will pervade your life. Then it strikes you that you are living before His face. But will you say then that you are pure in his eyes if you know that the Lord looks through you and knows and sees everything about you? Will you not swiftly realise your shortcomings before Him, and that you cannot point out your own purity to the great and holy God?

(Van Benthem) Indeed. Completely true. What happens when you meet the Lord in reality? This morning we read Isaiah 6 : 1 - 5. Isaiah meets his God. 'I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up', he says. Already the seams of God's robe filled the whole floor of the temple. Do you understand what this expresses? The LORD is beyond all our measures in greatness, majesty, glory and holiness, and exactly this is what Isaiah tells us. There is a complete retinue of Seraphim with Him. Powerful angels, imposing appearances, having even six wings! But _ what do they do with these wings? Seraphim are angels without sin and even they are covering their faces with two wings. Even they cover themselves as if they are saying: God is so great and holy, a creature cannot just look at Him. Such is His radiance that even sinless angels cannot look straight in his face. They hide their heads and their feet reverentially. They are all humility. They tremble out of respect and honour, for God is holy.

This is what they shout to each other: holy, holy, holy is the LORD. The whole earth is full of his glory. The sound they produce is so powerful that the walls of the temple shake.

The ground trembles under Isaiah's feet when he is allowed to meet the holy God in his overwhelming majesty.

Unclean lips

Question: what would a 21st century Christian say if he was allowed to see the same as Isaiah? Would he not exclaim: what a tremendous experience, marvellous what I am experiencing now; this is so cool! Would it strike him that he

himself might not be acceptable to God? Would this notion not gradually strike him?

To Isaiah it was immediately clear. He can only utter one thing: 'Woe to me, I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips.' He does not ask himself: what does God mean to me at this moment? But: who am I to this God? What do I mean to Him? And then he also realizes: I cannot say cheaply: "Sorry", neither can I ask the Lord's forgiveness for the sins I am going to do, like we sometimes do at the beginning of our meetings. Isaiah would not think of skipping over his sins so easily for he is standing before God. Before God! And he manages only to say: I am a sinful man.

Would anybody in this meeting dare to say anything different than: 'Woe to me, I am a man, a woman, of unclean lips'?

II In unity with Christ

Lord, Thou hast probed and tried my heart,
And Thou by night dost test and weigh me.

Thou findest when Thou dost assay me
That I in evil take no part;
My mouth does not commit transgression.

As for the works of wicked men,
Thy word has kept me far from sin,
From ways of violence and oppression

(Psalm 17, stanza 2, from the *Book of Praise. Anglo-Genevan Psalter*)

(Kwakkel) We have just sung two couplets from Psalm 17. It sounded quite different from what we heard from Isaiah. He did not say: I am a man who speaks sinfully, but: Listen to my cry for help, hear my prayer - it does not rise from lips that tell lies.

David does not mention his sins at all in Psalm 17. We hear something quite different in this psalm. David's life is in danger. He is surrounded by enemies. They want to tear him apart. They try to achieve this end by accusing David falsely. He had allegedly ignored God's law as king. He did fight crime in his country, and rightly so, but he had gone too far in doing so.

Not by his own strength

Then David seeks the Lord in prayer. He begs the Lord to see what is going on. His adversaries' accusation he rejects forcefully. He has obeyed God's laws and he is pure in his walk with God. And therefore he asks the Lord to justify his deeds by saving him from his adversaries and make them undergo their deserved punishment.

Something comparable happens in the background of Psalm 26. Here there are no enemies who threaten David's life. Yet he feared for his life as well then. He asks the Lord: "Do not destroy me along with sinners, my life with murderers" (9). For some reason he was worried about it, that he might die suddenly as if he were a great sinner or a murderer. But, David argues in Psalm 26, that would be quite unfair. He had not been a great sinner or murderer.

He did not trust in his own power, but he trusted in the

Lord (1). He kept his eyes upon God and his goodness and God's truth, God's revelation guided him. He never had joined deceitful men and evildoers and their practices. He liked to come to God's house, in the sanctuary to glorify God because of his wonderful deeds (3-8). In short he had lived as a faithful child of God. His heart was with the Lord.

God had made very clear what was to happen to people who lived like David. He would bless them. He would protect them and grant them a long life. That's what David appeals to in Psalm 26. He appeals to God's promises. He says: 'It is unthinkable that I would have to die suddenly. For I have lived with You faithfully. So now I can be certain that you will fulfil your promise of life?'

Appeal to God's promises

We find this again in Psalm 44. Israel has been defeated by its enemies. This would have been right, if they had left God, it had happened often enough in its history, but now this was not the case. They are very sure: we have not left God, we have not asked foreign gods for help (17-22). That is why they do not understand at all what has happened to them and why God has forsaken them. This is completely incompatible with his promise.

This is what happens in all three Psalms mentioned: Psalms 17, 26 and 44. David and his people appeal to God's promises. Promises which He has made to them: that their lives would remain safe if they kept faithful to Him.

Actually this is nothing special. The only thing they do is hold God to his promises. They point out their own behaviour, their faithfulness to Him. But really speaking they say nothing unusual. They have not served any idols. They have been faithful to the Lord. They have obeyed his commandments. That you can say things like that about yourself should be quite ordinary. Should not that go without saying?

Now let us turn the matter around. Imagine that you would not be able to sing Psalm 26, but that you must confess quite the opposite: "I do not want to serve the Lord with a devoted heart. I would prefer to be close friends with people who do not want to serve God. I feel at home with them. It does not bother me whatever happens in the sanctuary, in divine service. I do not take time to praise God." How unusual that would be!

I cannot join in singing this just like that

(Van Benthem) Yet I always remember a visit just before Holy Communion Sunday. I was visiting an elderly sister. She had been ill and was gradually recovering. "Shall we read Psalm 26?" I asked her. "All right, Reverend", she said.

'Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have led a blameless life ... I walk continually in your truth ... My feet stand on level ground; in the great assembly I will praise the Lord'.

It was still for a moment. "What are you thinking?" I asked her. Again she was quiet for a moment. She did not venture to look at me when she answered. "Well, I cannot share these words just like that. I cannot just say this about myself. I am a sinful person, Reverend." And she bowed her head, frightened and ashamed, convinced only of one thing: I

am sinful in his eyes; my shortcomings are perpetual.

Do you recognise this? You want to be honest and pure before the Lord. You exert yourself to keep his commandments, but you fail so very often. Looking back on just one day, you see again that you were not successful. You do try but you feel that you cannot manage it. Moreover, it is the same sins, which keep recurring.

People say: You ought to pray more! You think: God will get fed up with me.

People say: You can conquer your sins if you believe! You think: Is my faith sufficient? Do I actually believe?

You try desperately, but it is never enough. You get scared. Scared of punishment. Scared of damnation. Scared of being denied. 'Do I walk in God's truth? Are my feet on the straight plain? No, I cannot join in singing Psalm 26'.

Obvious?

(Kwakkel) Things that should be obvious are not always so. Compare your own life seriously with the psalms we discussed. You see the obvious differences, and you feel uneasy when you have to sing them.

Therefore it is suitable to cite another psalm. Psalm 18. In this psalm David wants to thank and praise God. He praises the LORD as the God whom you can trust completely. The God who fulfills his promises. The God who is pure and strictly just (30). This is what David himself had experienced in the days when he was fleeing from king Saul. The LORD had saved him again and again. He had made him king eventually. And further: He had even subjected foreign people to David's power.

In all this the LORD had made himself known as a just God. David had behaved as the Lord had wanted him to do. He had kept his hands clean by not assaulting Saul, the Lord's anointed one. He had waited for his God and respected his will. He had not put aside his commandments heedlessly. He had done his utmost to remain completely faithful to God. So he could depend on God to fulfil his promises to him in protecting, saving and giving him the promised kingdom. And the LORD had done all this indeed.

Thus we know David as the man who let himself be guided by the will of his God. But the same David once slipped dreadfully when he had Bathsheba brought to him and slept with her. And after that had her husband Uriah put to death in a cowardly way. Then he was no longer able to speak as he does in Psalm 18 : 21-23: "I keep all his laws in mind. I have not turned away from his commands. He knows that I am without blame. He knows that I have kept myself from sinning." He had better swallow these words then.

Singing of God's faithfulness

Indeed, yet it looks as if David uttered Psalm 18 after those days. Actually he sang this song after the LORD had saved him from *all* his enemies (1). When David is singing this psalm there are no adversaries left any more, neither at home nor abroad (43-45). But that was not the case until after his sin with Bathsheba. When he committed this sin there was still a war with the Ammonites going on. However could he say after all this: "The LORD has rewarded me for



Dr. G. Kwakkel (right) and rev. J. van Benthem.
Photo's by Martin Apperloo

doing what is right. He has rewarded me because I have not done anything wrong?" (24).

That was only possible because of what the prophet Nathan had said to David. David had hushed up his sin with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah for a long time. But Nathan made him confess: "I have sinned against the LORD". Then Nathan was allowed to say: "The LORD has forgiven your sin" (2Sam.12:13).

Obviously David dared to sing Psalm 18, even after the horrible sin of his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah. He could do this only because he knew God's faithfulness: "He shows his faithful love to his anointed king. He shows it to me and my family forever" (50). David experienced God's faithfulness, God's unmerited favour. Only therefore could he sing Psalm 18, even after his horrible sin. Because God was present with his favour in David's life, with his love, which He would keep till the last king of David's house: Jesus Christ. David was only able to sing Psalm 18 in unity with Jesus Christ.

Together with Christ

One cannot sing Psalm 18 at any time. The same is true of the Psalms 17 and 26. You often first have to ask the LORD's forgiveness with the words of Psalm 51 or Psalm 130, or thank Him for His mercy, with Psalm 32. David did not sing all his psalms at the same moment. But when you belong to Jesus Christ, you may and can sing Psalm 18, with those far-reaching words about respecting God's laws and blamelessness. Psalms 17, 26 and 44, too. You can sing them because you are pure in God's eyes through your union with Christ. This is so deep, that obviously your impurity need not be referred to every time. If your life with God is threatened, if you do not see anything of the realisation of his promises.

Pure in God's eyes ... me? Yes, thanks to Jesus Christ. This is quite certain. This is absolutely true. How true that is, you can see in these so-called 'psalms of innocence'.

God's work in me

(Van Benthem) We are coming to a conclusion. "Pure in God's eyes ... me?" Are we still worried about it? If not, could that be because we no longer realize that we are living before God? Do we realize the influence, which a society without God has upon us? Do we perhaps contribute ourselves to God 'getting out of focus', for instance, by the way in which we fill in our lives as members of the church? Are we not becoming far removed from the atmosphere of the psalms? Is it not time to enter our inner room more often?

(Kwakkel) Realize that God's eyes are observing you. Then it will strike you that his eyes are too pure to bear your impurity. Then remember Jesus Christ. Through Him you are pure, pure in God's eyes. So pure that you may sing about it gratefully. You can sing freely, even the Psalms 17, 18, 26 and 44. Then you find it thrilling that you are allowed to point out to God his own work in your life in this way, just as David and the people of Israel have already done.

Blest is the man whose trespass is forgiven,
whose sins are covered in the sight of heaven.
Blest is the man against whom, LORD, Thou wilt
Not count all his iniquity and guilt.
How happy he, contrite of heart and lowly,
Who has confessed his sins, O Lord most holy;
Who does not secretly Thy laws transgress,
Whose spirit harbours no deceitfulness.

(Psalm 32, stanza 1, from the *Book of Praise. Anglo-Genevan Psalter*)

* Original title 'Rein in Gods ogen...Ik?!', *Wegwijs. Uitgave van de Gereformeerde Bijbelstudiebond Vol. 56 (2002) no. 6 (June/July), 140-143 ('Onder Gods heilige ogen') en 143-146 ('In verbondenheid met Christus')*. This double lecture was held at the bondsdag 2002 of the Gereformeerde Bijbelstudiebond in Groningen. The English translation is courtesy of ms. Sarie J. Geelhoed.

The Christian Reformed Church today

A denomination in search of an identity

Dr. Cornelis P. Venema wrote an article with the above title in *Christian Renewal*. A Magazine of distinctively Reformed Faith and Vision of August 12, 2002 (Vol. 20, no. 20, pp. 10-11. In it he wrote about the state of affairs in the Christian Reformed Church in North America. He is a minister in the Christian Reformed Church, a professor and President at Mid-America Reformed Seminary, and a member of First South Holland Christian Reformed Church (Illinois). He is certainly no outsider, and thoroughly dedicated to this denomination. Nevertheless, he felt it necessary to take a critical look at his own church. He had three reasons for doing so. (1) So that 'we might have a proper appreciation for the good things that God has provided us through the denomination in which many of us were nurtured in the faith.' (2) We have to be aware 'of the truth of the old adage "those who fail to learn from history are bound to repeat its mistakes"'. (3) This 'will afford us a better understanding of ourselves'. Prof. Venema chose for a rather limited and impressionistic approach and will only focus on the 2002 synod of the Christian Reformed Church. 'Admittedly, looking at one gathering of the synod is a rather limited basis for warranting any solid conclusions. But it does provide us with a bit of a window into the present state of affairs in the Christian Reformed Church.' The author takes a look at five subjects: ecumenical relations, the three requests for possible revision of the confessions, pastoral care for homosexuals, rekindling loyalty for denominational ministries, women's ordination.

With the permission of the author and the editor of *Christian Renewal*, we publish sections of the article about the discussion of the ecumenical relations (The Company We Keep) and his overall conclusions, here (Conclusion).

The "Company We Keep"

One useful measure of a denomination, like the measure of an individual, is the "company" it keeps. In this area, Synod 2002 was most significant. After a lengthy debate, Synod decided to enter the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC). Though previous synods of the Christian Reformed Church in North America rejected similar proposals to join WARC, this year's Synod voted overwhelmingly to join the alliance. Though some delegates raised concerns regarding the wide diversity of churches in

About the author:

Dr. Venema is President of the Mid-America Reformed Seminary and teaches Doctrinal Studies. He gained a B.A. from Dordt College (1975), his M.Div. from the Calvin Theological Seminary (1978) and his Ph.D. from the Princeton Theological Seminary (1985). Before coming to Mid-America, he served as pastor of the First Christian Reformed Church of Ontario, California, for six years. Dr. Venema has served as an elder in his church and preaches on a regular basis. Amongst other books, he has written: *But for the Grace of God: An Exposition of the Canons of Dort*; *What We Believe: An Exposition of the Apostles' Creed*; and most recently *The Promise of the Future*. He is a co-editor of, and frequent contributor to *The Outlook* and the *Mid-America Journal of Theology*. The complete version of this article can be obtained from:- *Christian Renewal*, P.O.Box 777, Jordan Station, ON L0R 1S0. The decisions of the Christian reformed Church General Synod, 2002, can be found at www.crcna.org under Resources.

WARC and its tolerance of doctrinal views seriously at variance with the historic position of confessionally Reformed churches, the prevailing attitude was that the Christian Reformed Church in North America could enjoy through WARC relations with many different churches from which it is presently separated. Concerns regarding the possible effect of membership in the WARC were deflected by delegates who maintained that the Christian Reformed Church in North America would be able to maintain its own confessional position and work to influence member denominations.

Another step in the direction of a more inclusive approach to ecumenical relations occurred in respect to the Reformed Church in America, a denomination from which the Christian Reformed Church separated in the middle of the nineteenth century. While the decisions of Synod stopped short of setting out on a path toward "organic unity" with the RCA, Synod instructed its Interchurch Relations Committee to discuss with the RCA how "our ministry and mission throughout the world might be strengthened by greater cooperation." Synod's decisions were in response to an overture from Classis Grand Rapids East that advocated exploring organic unity with the RCA.

Within the context of these significant moves in the direction of a more broad and flexible approach to ecumenical relations with other churches, Synod was informed that the North America Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) was taking final steps to remove the Christian Reformed Church in North America from membership. Due primarily to the Christian Reformed Church's decisions in recent years to permit the ordination of women to all church offices, the action of NAPARC was

greeted with some regret but also with a measure of realism that it was no longer possible to enjoy close relations with its member denominations. Thus, the Christian Reformed Church in North America, which was a founding member of NAPARC, was expelled from the only ecumenical body in North America that facilitates fellowship between confessionally Reformed church bodies.

(...)

Conclusion

When these actions of Synod 2002 are interpreted in the context of the trends of recent years, a profile of the state of affairs today in the Christian Reformed Church in North America begins to emerge. Negatively put, it is evident that the Christian Reformed Church in North America is not the denomination it once was. For those who are old enough to remember and favor the “old” Christian Reformed Church, this year’s Synod only confirms what they have long believed: that the “new” Christian Reformed Church is not walking in the paths laid down by those who were instrumental in its beginnings.

When I observe that the new Christian Reformed Church in North America is not the same as its older predecessor, I am not referring to the kinds of things that may (and even must at times) be discarded. Many features of the older Christian Reformed Church were in need of being jettisoned or corrected. To use the metaphor often employed, it was time to “burn the wooden shoes.” A denomination whose identity was largely ethnic and cultural (Dutch) could not expect to prosper in the context of late twentieth and early twenty-first century North America culture. A denomination whose focus was largely inward and self-preserving, at the expense of taking seriously its calling to reach out with the gospel of Christ’s kingdom, could hardly expect to thrive or remain vibrant. Indeed, where the cause of the so-called “conservatives” in the Christian Reformed Church in North America was little more than an attempt to preserve the “old ways,” whether these ways were genuinely expressive of biblical and Reformed conviction or not, it was bound for failure. Though it is not my interest to detail what things could easily be forgotten about the old Christian Reformed Church (lest I start an argument!), there are no doubt things about the new Christian Reformed Church that may well be an improvement in some of these areas.

What I have in mind, however, are a number of good and wonderful features of the old Christian Reformed Church that are no longer the case: a steady (though not spectacular) growth in number of members; a generally loyal and enthusiastic support for denominational or denominationally-related institutions; a sense of unity in the faith and in the common work to which the churches of the denomination were committed; a remarkable degree of trust throughout the denomination that was forged from a solid confidence in mutually-held convictions; a fairly clear sense of identity, which was preserved through a network of schools and educational institutions for which a remarkable level of support existed; and a strong sense of self-identity

regarding what it means to be a Reformed believer or church. Even though this description of the old Christian Reformed Church is rather general and perhaps even a little romantic, my hunch is that most of those who remember what once was, and then consider what now is, will agree: things are not the same, and they are certainly not better. You do not have to adduce all the evidence, gather the anecdotes, and contemplate the statistics, to have a kind of intuitive grasp that something good and precious has been lost.

But that’s to put the matter in too general or negative a form. Positively expressed, my sense of the new Christian Reformed Church focuses upon what I would call the *denomination’s lack of a recognized identity*. You could test my thesis here by asking at random any number of Christian Reformed Church members how they would identify or define what is unique about the present Christian Reformed Church. My guess is that their answers would confirm a deep schizophrenia within the denomination.

Though there may be many Christian Reformed Church people today who would say that the denomination is a confessionally Reformed church, which aims to communicate the Reformed faith in a positive and vibrant way to the contemporary culture, there are really *two groups whose influence and interests account for this deeply uncertain state of the denomination’s self-awareness*. Many (perhaps even the majority still?) members might well echo the language of the past, when attempting to define the denomination’s present character. However, their voices would tend to be drowned out by the clamor on the denomination’s *evangelical right and its main-line-leaning left*.

What do I mean by these terms? What I mean is that the great emphases and distinctives of Reformed Christianity, especially in its confessional documents, are not the interest of two, quite distinct groups in the Christian Reformed Church today. The one group, which I would term the “evangelical right,” is primarily focussed upon an evangelistic agenda (narrowly defined in terms of the number of new church plants and members added “through evangelism”). This group wants the Christian Reformed Church to continue to break loose from its sheltered and introverted past, and to reach out with the gospel. From the perspective of this group, much of what characterized the Christian Reformed Church in the past is an obstacle to evangelism (e.g. adherence to a Reformed Church Order, emphasizing the importance of confessional church membership, advocating the cause of Christian education, following a traditional pattern of worship). In some respects, this group represents the most significant challenge to the historic identity of the Christian Reformed Church. For, were this group’s aspirations for the denomination to be fulfilled, the Christian Reformed Church would become simply another, moderately conservative and evangelical denomination in the sea of North American evangelicalism.

The other group, which I am terming the “main-line-leaning left,” is not as numerous or broad-based as the evangelical right. However, due to its inordinate representation in positions of leadership and on denominational boards (not to mention more aggressive

posturing and pushing for its agenda), this group has considerable influence within the denomination. Members of this group have pushed such agenda items as: the ordination of women; a more inclusive approach to ecumenical relations; a more open and accepting attitude toward homosexual persons; and a more direct involvement in social justice and human rights issues. Those who belong to this group within the denomination would like the Christian Reformed Church to be more congenial to the main-line churches and their organizations. If the Christian Reformed Church were to become a somewhat more conservative, evangelical member of the main-line churches, this would represent a huge step forward as compared to the parochialisms of the past.

What is striking about these two groups is that, despite their quite different interests, they both stand opposed to an identity for the Christian Reformed church that would emphasize its *confessionally Reformed* past. No more than the main-line-leaning left does the evangelical right care that the Christian Reformed Church remain a member of NAPARC. No more than the evangelical right does the main-line-leaning left insist upon close adherence to the Reformed confessions. Though they may differ in all kinds of ways, neither group has any particular desire to see the Christian Reformed Church remain a *distinctively Reformed* family of churches.

Though it gives me no pleasure to say it, the one thing about the Christian Reformed Church that Synod 2002 most definitely confirms is that the denomination has no unifying sense of its identity. Is it a broadly evangelical family of churches? Is it a denomination that will take its place comfortably with the mainline churches, tolerating some of the most serious departures from biblical teaching? Will it limp between these two opinions? Or will it somehow rediscover its Reformed heritage? Only God knows, of course. But from where I sit, despite the remaining strengths of the denomination, the future does not look promising for the re-emergence of a denomination convinced, and enthusiastically so, of the riches of its Reformed past. The church of Antioch, cut off and adrift from its ties with the church of Jerusalem, may well find itself lost at sea.

When you consider the many positive features that still characterize the Christian Reformed Church in North America—fine educational institutions, world-wide diaconal and evangelistic ministries, the translation and publication of classic Reformed literature, a strong residue of denominational loyalty, etc.—the prospect of that kind of future for the Christian Reformed Church must evoke a strange mixture of sadness and regret on the part of those who still hope the best for the denomination.

Theological University decides to step up its foreign policy

The theological university of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated), at Kampen, is going to invest more time and effort in international relations. This was decided by the board of trustees earlier this year. In the past several valuable relations have been established, often through ecclesiastical or personal contact. Principles and objectives have been formulated now to arrive at a more systematic policy.

The aim is to express the bond of faith in these international contacts: “We want to discover what God has given to churches abroad and we would like to share what we have received.” The university seeks to establish sustained and reciprocal relations with theologically congenial

institutions and persons that want to pursue academic theological study.

In practice this could mean: exchange of teachers, incidental visiting lectureships, promoting studies abroad for gifted students, enrolling foreign students, participating in international conferences and publishing in international journals.

The general synod of Zuidhorn will discuss the question if the university, in addition to this, should provide aid to non-academic institutions abroad and if so, how much time and manpower would be a reasonable investment.

(source: press release assessor board of trustees)



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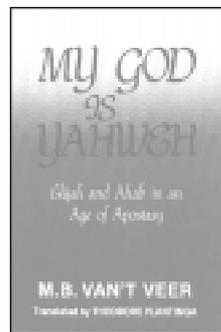
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C. Bouwman in Una Sancta: The book stood for years on the shelf of my parental home, somewhat formidable with its Dutch language and obscure title. It's now appeared in English, with an equally mysterious (and very accurate!) title: A Theatre in Dachau. I read it, and am sorry I did not read it in my youth. What a treasure of encouragement is tucked away in this gem of a book!



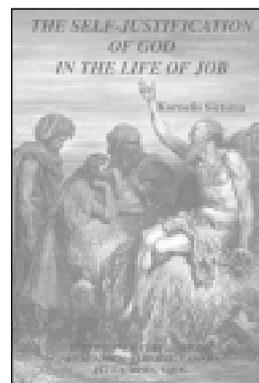
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**Colour brings out in full relief
– by means of slanting beams –
the map of all the world.
Increasingly far-reaching is the Light!
Over the quarters It will claim
an ever larger territory;
each corner of the earth
must yield to it ultimately.**

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

Lux Mundi: Light shining upon this world.

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