

LuxMundi 33

No 2 June 2014

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Our all-wise God has chosen to reveal himself and His glory through his Word. While Christians do not worship the Bible, these Scriptures play an all-important role in their faith life. For it is the way in which God, in our day and age, communicates with his own and the world.



The apostle John recorded for us these words of our Saviour: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” (John 20:29). The same apostle elsewhere wrote: “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it.” (Revelation 1:3). The Christian faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ (Romans 10:17). Without the Word one cannot believe. As we depend on the Word the question presents itself, do we understand the Word? In response to the question, “Do you understand what you are reading?” a man once said, “How can I, unless someone explains it to me?” (Acts 8:30-31). Having the Holy Scriptures is one thing, reading them correctly and understanding them is yet another. Thankfully, the risen Lord has poured out his Spirit. While “the man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God ... the spiritual man makes judgments about all things.” (1 Corinthians 2:14-15). The church has been blessed with the Spirit who guides us in God’s truth through the Scriptures (John 14:26).

However, this does not absolve us of responsibility to exert ourselves to understand. Just as there is a divine and a human side to the authoring of Scripture (cf. Luke 1:1-4), there is also a divine and human side to the reading and understanding of Scripture. We pray for illumination by God’s Spirit and trust (believe) we receive it. This illumination by the Spirit is mysterious, but it is not mystical. The Reformed will emphasize the need for study and discernment, using the faculties God has given to mankind.

This being so, the Reformed tradition reflects not only upon what Scripture says – exegesis – but also upon how we understand what Scripture says – hermeneutics. Hermeneutics brings us into the

sphere of the field of philosophy, more specifically of epistemology, the study of knowing.

In The Netherlands the question of “how do we know the truth” has received much attention as it has deeply troubled the churches this past half century. In 1966 the Dutch Reformed Church (Nederlands Hervormde Kerk) published the report *Clear Wine (Klare Wijn)*, its subtitle reading: “Accounting for the history, mystery, and authority of the Bible.” In 1980 the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (synodical) (Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (synodaal)) published the report *God with Us (God met ons)*, suggesting that truth is “relational”. In 1999 the Theological University of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (liberated) (Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (vrijgemaakt)) ran a conference at which orthodox Reformed academics debated the certainty of our knowing and believing.

What does Scripture say? How do we know what Scripture says or intends to say? Those are crucial questions, especially in a post-modern and secularizing era. In recent years concerns have been mounting in Reformed and Presbyterian circles world-wide concerning the Reformed in The Netherlands. Earlier this year the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary held a conference to which were invited academic speakers from The Netherlands and elsewhere to discuss the issue of hermeneutics.

This edition of *Lux Mundi* is devoted to the topic of hermeneutics. We open with two impressions of the conference. The first is a longer one, written by a Dutch student of theology. The second is a shorter one, written by a Canadian Reformed minister. Do realize, as you read these, that these are personal impressions of the conference, they do not necessarily convey the intent of the speakers accurately. As the dissertation of Dr. Koert van Bekkum has proved to be a flashpoint in the debate, we publish a response he has written to criticisms from within the global Reformed community. Finally, we have included translations of publications originating with the Christian Reformed Churches (Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken) as an illustration of how another orthodox Reformed bond of churches in The Netherlands, one also part of the ICRC family, views hermeneutics. May we strive to be faithful to the Word of God, handling it rightly, and thus keeping in step with the Spirit of God. ■

About the Author

Dr. Roelf C. (Karlo) Janssen received his M.Div. at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary (Hamilton) and his Ph.D. at the Theological University of the Reformed Churches (liberated) in The Netherlands (Kampen). He has previously served in The Netherlands as a deputy for Relations with Churches Abroad and currently serves as a minister in the Abbotsford Canadian Reformed Church.

Historic conference in Hamilton

For the first time since the establishment of the Theological University in Kampen and the Seminary in Hamilton (of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and the Canadian Reformed Churches respectively), a meeting took place at the academic level between professors and lecturers from both institutions.



About the author

Mrs. A. (Alie) de Vos-Koelwijn is a student Systematic Theology at the Theologische Universiteit Kampen, as such present at the conference in Hamilton. Teacher Religion at a secondary school.

From Thursday January 16 until Saturday January 18, the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary (CRTS) organized her fourth annual conference in Hamilton. This time the academics from Kampen were invited especially for a theological showdown about the subject 'Reformed Hermeneutics Today'. This was not without good cause. For the past few years Canada has expressed her concern about publications from Kampen on the subject of 'reading the Bible in today's times'. Up until now all contacts had been with the deputies of the Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad (BBK). What was special about this conference was that theologians now came into direct contact with each other. All the more so because this contact took place in the presence of 170 conference attendees from Canada (50 ministers, students and church members making up a large majority), the United States, Australia, Korea, Brazil and the Netherlands. The delegation from the Netherlands consisted of two members of the Board of Directors and six university lecturers. Furthermore, the Student Pastor and a female theology student were present. Mr Bolt of the website 'eeninwaarheid' was also present in a personal capacity. For an impression of the Canadian church, school life, and the organization of the conference, extensive information is to be found on his website 'eeninwaarheid'.

A personal impression

We landed at Pearson Toronto Airport on Wednesday towards the end of the afternoon. Two CRTS students drove us in a van to the addresses of our hosts. We were to be lodged with various professors and lecturers of the Theological Seminary. This proved to be a good idea. Living together in the same house, climbing the same stairs or sleeping together in the basement, sharing bathrooms and the dinner or coffee table, made connections in a very natural way. We were impressed by the convincing manner in which our hosts took time at the table to read from the Bible. In some families each had their own Bible from which family members and guests took turns reading a couple of verses out loud. Singing together and taking time to talk with the whole family without the distraction of cell phones with WhatsApp messages penetrating the conversation was a retro moment and a breath of fresh air. We had made a connection with convinced robust Canadian Christians.

The conference

Out of the eleven lectures and responses, I would like to give a brief account of a few lectures and the reactions to them, in order to give an impression of the lines along which the discussion and reflections took place. One of the lectures and the reaction to it from the Canadian side now follows.

Editorial note

The following article was published in 5 instalments on the web-site of the Theologische Universiteit, Kampen (www.tukampen.nl).

The Hermeneutics of Dogma

The hermeneutics of dogma: reading and understanding the dogma in our times by Dr. B. Kamphuis from the University of Kampen, Professor of Dogmatics. We must find new language and images for the gospel in these times.

A dogma is formulating what you believe about God in a human manner. Dogmas originate in words, and are written down when there is a difference of opinion about the content of what you believe about God. The time, and the way of thinking in the times, in which the dogma develops have great influence on the formulation of the dogma. The

persons writing the dogma, too, involve their own personal preferences in the dogma. It is important to keep this in mind when dealing with dogmatics.

A dogma not only has a boundary but also has some room. The boundary of the dogma states what we believe in order to be saved. But within this boundary there is room, for there is a mystery present. Together with all the saints we begin to understand what the love of Christ is, and at the same time we can only stammer. Within the



Audience at the conference, front row from left to right: Dr. A.L. TH. de Bruijne, Dr. B. Kamphuis, Drs. J. de Jong and Dr. M. te Velde (photo P.H.R. van Houwelingen)

overview of the whole, we must therefore leave room for one another. One person may place the emphasis on the Father, the other on grace, and another on sanctification. Doctrine leaves room for that. Jesus Christ crucified is the centre. He must be at the centre. But there is not a fixed framework for the experience of Faith. Important values in the practice of dogmatics are openness and catholicity.

Metaphor

A dogma continues to hold something mysterious. There are things that are beyond our understanding. Why is that? We can only speak about a mystery because it has been revealed to us. But how can God reveal to us what lies outside our own reality of experience? In his grace he does just that. He reaches out to us. He accommodates himself to us. How does he accommodate himself? He adapts his revelation and makes it suitable so that it can be understood within the realm of our experience. He makes the revelation understandable for us through images that are taken from our reality. We should, therefore, stick to these metaphors given to us by God for his revelation. They are images taken from our own context to speak about what goes far beyond our comprehension. For God is always greater than what he reveals of himself. A dogma is always limited because we speak in metaphors of a reality that we cannot comprehend. Therefore, we must continue to search for images for what we believe, and formulate that in a language that we understand today, so that the gospel may resound in our time. Longing, expectation, and imagination are directive core words connected with this search.

Clear language

After this lecture there was time for Dr. A.J. (Arjan) de Visser, Professor of Diaconology, to react to what Prof. Kamphuis had brought forward. De Visser sensed a change in Kamphuis with regard to his published inaugural address *Klare Taal* (*Clear Language*) of 1988. At that time he still spoke of the clarity of the truth in the Bible, but now he speaks more in the direction of Barth, Berkhouwer, and Gadamer. Namely, that God's Word is not adequate

enough to be fully understood as it concerns the 'it is and it isn't'. Dogmas are even more inadequate since they are human formulations. We need to search for images to reflect the gospel for today.

He asked Kamphuis if God's Word comes to us in metaphors, and whether this is true of the whole Bible. Is this not in contradiction with what we confess in Articles 5–7 of the Belgic Confession where we confess that powerful proclamation of God's Word as opposed to an obscure or metaphoric use of language? He appreciated the import of searching for new language to pass on the gospel in our time and place. But there is also an inbuilt contemporary quality in the Bible. As an example he named the Canons of Dort, which were received with enthusiasm in South Africa in his time as lecturer there.

Kamphuis answered that his development as a systematic theologian has not stood still, and that he has added two points to what he had said in *Klare Taal*. The clarity of the Bible is a confession of faith. What we see is not clear language. We see a Bible that is not clear, but we believe that it is the (clear) Word of God. Moreover, it is also the case that the Bible might be clear to me but not to you. That is why we must listen to one another. There are always my presuppositions to consider in my listening to the Bible. Metaphoric language means that we use a word from one context in another context. The sentence: 'Jesus came to the world to save it' is metaphoric in comparison with the sentence 'Barend came to Hamilton'. Here 'came' is literal. But in the first sentence, a mysterious Divine meaning lies alongside the literal meaning. Use of metaphor does not mean that the clarity of the Bible changes, only that there is a clarity that we will never completely grasp.

An attendee at the conference asked whether the spirit of the age in this way does not gain too much influence on the text. For what is the whisper of 'it is and isn't' in the metaphorical sentence: 'Jesus came to the world to save it'? Kamphuis replied that in spite of the possible danger, we cannot walk away from our responsibility to speak in the here and now. That Jesus came to save from sin means that Jesus came as a man and, at the same time, as the Son of God. That is a whisper of something we cannot fully comprehend. We must adhere to the old dogmas in the realization that they are human answers to the Word of God. But at the same time we live in another time and must respond to the Word of God in our own time.

The Salvation by Christ and Our Understanding

On Saturday afternoon Dr J. M. (Hans) Burger of the Theological University of Kampen held a lecture titled 'A Soteriological Perspective on our Understanding'. He attempted to find a way to counter the risks that occur when hermeneutic questions arise in a purely modernistic climate of thinking.

From Christian history he observed a form of 'foundation thinking' (i.e. there is an absolute truth, and this can be known) without being rooted in Christ. Where that originates, hermeneutic questions bear an inherent danger. Burger searches for a solution by making a connection between hermeneutics and the doctrine of the salvation of Christ. Hermeneutic questions are not free of sin. Finding the right path in hermeneutic questions therefore has everything to do with grace and redemption.

Burger asks himself why it is that neo-Calvinists in the Netherlands from an experiential background seem, throughout all the storms of hermeneutic discussions and the process of de-pillarization, to have been less prone to the dangers of loss of faith and internal divisions. He looks for the answer in their rejection of Abraham Kuyper, especially in that they suspected him to have been influenced by modernism. Burger does observe traces of 'foundationalism' in Kuyper in that he focused on absolute determined knowledge. This certainty is accompanied by a defence of the authority of Scripture. Burger still perceives this model in the experience of faith of neo-Calvinist theology in The Netherlands. The Bible is the foundation from which sprouts absolute, certain knowledge. In his perception, Jesus Christ and belief in him are not often named explicitly enough.

The more we focus ourselves on absolute certain knowledge, thus seeking security in a theoretical knowledge database, the more we follow a modern path and forget Jesus as our only solid foundation. When the New Testament speaks of Jesus Christ as the foundation or the cornerstone, then that is a metaphor representing new life, salvation, and community. Within this framework, knowledge questions are also implied, but their import receives

less emphasis than within a modernistic vision. In summary: the problem of modernism is its focus on knowledge questions. The knowledge is in danger of having a formal character without reference to the gospel of Jesus Christ being made. If we hold on to the mystic union with Christ and focus on the fellowship with the Holy Spirit then we are less susceptible to the dangers of, for example, ongoing church separations or doubts concerning the Faith. In whatever we do, being in Christ is of primary importance. Subsequently, Burger asks himself what, then, are the hermeneutical implications of 'being in Christ'. He distinguishes four items.

- A. **Our identity is dynamic, moving between sin and salvation.** Through sin our existence has become fundamentally unstable. In search of new stability, we justify ourselves and worship idols. This has consequences for our knowing and understanding. Through our 'self-focus' we are blind to the truth, reality, the other, and God. We become ensnared in misinterpretation and misunderstandings; lies and misleading speculations. But Jesus Christ gives us a new identity. Justified in a restored relationship with God, man is renewed in a continuous process of death and resurrection with Christ. This transformation process of justification and sanctification in man has consequences for our hermeneutic work.
- B. **In the process of transformation we receive the likeness of Christ and the Holy Spirit.** Only from Christ do we learn to read the Bible in the appropriate way. He must enlighten our understanding. Only in Christ does the Bible become a book of knowledge. Only in Christ do the Scriptures become books filled with saving knowledge of the one true God. It is important to see this in the right order: Christ is our Saviour, not these books. Be aware of your identity in Christ before undertaking anything.
- C. **Active formation is needed.** The process of transformation of the sinner starts with his conversion.: conversion from idols and wrong images of God; conversion from misunderstanding of the Scriptures, wrong conceptions of our neighbours and the world around us. In the process of transformation we learn new ways of thinking using correct interpretations. The new reality of God's Kingdom breaks through. The transformation of our understanding and the transformation of

Note from the author:

The following lecture, and the reactions of a respondent, is portrayed quite extensively. This does not mean that it covers all that was said. The intention is to report the main themes so that the reader can form an impression of the line of reasoning.



*Canadian Reformed
Theological Seminary with
Dr. A.L. TH. de Bruijne, Mrs.
A. de Vos-Koelewijn and
Dr. A.J. de Visser*

our life are inseparably related. Burger believes it is important that we learn to see everything from the perspective of the resurrection of Christ. That is the hermeneutical starting point of our understanding. Without the resurrection we could not learn to read the Scriptures in the light of Christ. What letters of a book can never do, Christ can do through his word and Spirit. The Holy Scripture and the community of the church play an important role in this transformation process. The starting point for reading the Scriptures, and for our life of faith in the church and in the world, is that we are in Christ, more and more taking on his likeness, and that in this way we are renewed in the image of God.

- D. **The longing for a new understanding yields a new perspective.** Living from the perspective of salvation in Christ, the consequences for the hermeneutic dealings of a Christian are clarified by Burger with the distinction in a text made by Ricoeur. He discerns the world behind the text, the world of the text, and the world in front of the text. By becoming well acquainted with the three 'fields' in the text, new God-given perspectives emerge. We start living in these perspectives on God, the world, ourselves, and our neighbours.

A new perspective will not change everything. We meet others with their perspective – sometimes we disagree, sometimes we learn from them. Together we share the same reality. Our bodies and diseases, our physical realities, our societies and histories – we share them, live in them, study them in science. But each perspective can bring us new knowledge. In the light of Christ, we must learn to distinguish what is true and not. That is: clothed with the new man,

with new attitudes, new regulative beliefs, a new direction of our lives, we learn to know with a new heart. And because sin and its consequences never completely disappear on earth, we need each other for a complete understanding, until Jesus returns.

Respondent

Dr. Alan D. Strange of the Mid-America Reformed Seminary of the United States had the honour of reacting to Hans Burger's lecture. He appreciates Burger's criticism of modernism but disagrees with the hermeneutical move in the direction, as he sees it, of a post-modernistic Christianity. He states that the division Burger makes between Christ and the Scriptures is a false one. He would like to keep the two together, and emphasizes that he takes his starting point in Scripture both for knowing the truth and for Christ.

Strange agrees with the criticism on the 'foundation thinking' that started with the Enlightenment. That thinking starts with autonomic man and his reason, and does not take God and his Word as the starting point. It is clear from 1 Cor. 2, he states, that the human spirit and physics are inadequate. Only the general and special revelations of God offer the necessary instruments to discern God's wisdom. As Burger has pointed out, since the Enlightenment man has been obsessed with the doctrine of knowledge (epistemology). This Modernism turned out to be a failure and, on the rebound, changed to Post-Modernism, bearing the fruit of relative truth.

Therefore Strange appreciates Burger's criticism of Modernism but cannot be enthusiastic about the alternative, which he sees as some sort of Christian post-modernism, a coherentism that seeks to dodge the truth question. The truth is not arrived at through Modernism, neither is it by Post-Modernism. For that line of thought also starts with its own autonomy (namely, the community and its beliefs) instead of with God and his revelation. Dr Strange pointed out that Christ is not only the soteric Lord but also the epistemic Lord, the Lord who brings salvation and the Lord who brings knowledge. He underpins this with reference to 1 Cor. 2 and an article on this text by Richard B. Gaffin in the Westminster Theological Journal 57:1 (Spring 1995). Christian faith as spoken of in the Bible (specifically the ontological trinity and the self-testimony of the Christ of the Scriptures) serves as the necessary and indispensable condition for our understanding. This is true not only of our faith but also for our perception of the total reality

(logic, science, ethics, etc.) The manner in which to prove the Christian faith cannot therefore be by rationalistic or empirical methods. It can only be metaphysical, God and his word giving revisionary immunity (i.e. has the inherent quality of giving us a corrected view of our understanding, and is in this way inviolable). The test for Christian faith is the impossibility of the opposite, for even the most virulent anti-theism presupposes theism.

Strange agrees with Burger in that we need an approach that starts with salvation. Not one that is set over against truth but one that brings us to the truth. Truth, as the Bible speaks of it, is different from the truth defined by autonomic man. Modernism defines truth as propositional, and Post-Modern as personal. Both definitions present a false dichotomy. Truth is both personal and propositional. According to John 14:6 the person of Jesus Christ is the truth, as set forth in the inspired propositions of the Bible. It is the word of God that furnishes us with the truth about him who is the truth. Jesus Christ is the living word of which the written word speaks. There is no divide between the living Word and the written Word that reveals Him. He is true and his Word is true.

Narrowing down the truth to 'dealing with the salvation of man and the world' does not find support in 1 Cor. 2. Paul says in 1 Cor. 2:2 that the whole reality can be reduced to Christ and him crucified. All must be seen through this single lens. Thus, too, the world of the Spirit is all comprehensive. Gaffin's article proves this convincingly: give secularism (i.e. autonomy) an inch, and it will not rest until it controls everything.

The Reader

Through the confrontation with Post-modernism we have become more conscious of the process of interpretation when reading the Bible. We must read together with the community, with God's people, and not individually.

After three days of listening to lectures of great verbal density, the humorous contribution by Dr Gert Kwakkel made a pleasant change for the audience. In an exemplary (practical) manner he managed to position a dusty subject right in the middle of the listener's life. On Saturday afternoon he gave a lecture on **The Reader as Focal Point of Biblical Exegesis**.

Burger is correct, according to Strange, in not allowing Rationalism to be the framework through which we read the Bible. Man is a rational being and has been given senses that provide information. God has created man with the power of reason. But that reason must be used to serve, not to dominate, not to judge God's word or make a framework with which to understand that word. We must acknowledge that God in his Word is our judge and that we are answerable to Him. Therefore, if we reject Rationalism, we must not embrace irrationality but commit our reason to God's service. It is correct to search for and to adopt a Christ-centric approach. But what does this mean? We do not know comprehensively (only God can) but that does not mean that we do not adequately and truly know. God has accommodated himself by condescending to speak to us, for we are his image bearers, and through his spirit we can understand him. Understanding the truth from the Bible is in fact correcting ourselves in the 'mind of Christ'.

Discussion with the audience

From the audience came reactions of recognition as well as new questions. The danger of covenant thinking without a connection to Christ was pointed out. Before you know it, faith can then become a system. The emphasis on the connection with Christ is necessary in order not to follow a system, but to have a living relationship with Christ. Another participant advanced that the basis of our certainty is God's revelation. Another asked himself: do we have the truth or do we direct ourselves towards obtaining the truth? With this last remark this part of the conference came to a conclusion.

Exegesis is concerned with the question *what* the text means. In our post-modern time the question is especially: *who* gives meaning to the text? Most of the attention does not go to the author and the meaning of the text, but to the reader of the text. In this approach there is a real danger of arbitrary explanation. While Kwakkel acknowledges this danger, he nevertheless searched for an answer to the question how this approach can help exegesis today. He took the example of a tax assessment. When you receive this tax letter, you could ask yourself: does this text actually come from the tax office or did my neighbour print it to play a joke on me? The text itself cannot do anything about these different

interpretations. The text has to accept any meaning that I assign to it. At the same time, a text is more than a piece of paper. A text functions within the framework of a society, a communication network. There are communal conventions for what the text means in a certain society.

In this way, a Bible text functions within the communicative context of the Bible. The context of the Bible is God's created and redeemed world. People were not always able to access the Bible. The text of the Bible, freely available now, was for many centuries accessible only to a limited few. Most people had access to the texts through hearing a sermon. Opportunity to read the Bible can also differ from one location to another. Kwakkel then switched over to different *reading* in different times and places. Different readers living in different situations may discover different emphases in the Bible. Still, we ought to read the Bible together with others, the Christian community. We can help each other to understand the message. The rule that always applies is that we must understand and weigh this within the unity of the Bible. The Bible is a lamp for my feet and a light for my path. God's Word sheds light upon the spot in which I walk and in which I live, not on the whole world at once. The Bible does not answer all my questions but it is sufficient, and gives me the light I need to walk with the Lord in faith.

We read, therefore, as a community of people with different talents. From the perspective of faith, we can see that the Bible passes on its message. God the Holy Spirit does that. We cannot prove this with arguments that convince everybody – especially

atheists. We need faith to see it. Here too, we see that we have no solid foundation without Faith. The book Hosea is worth reading, not only for the original readers but also for the people of later times. It is about the wisdom that the Holy Spirit is still willing to give, even though many things have already been fulfilled (see Hosea 14:10). He helps people of today to understand the text for today. Of course, we must continually ask ourselves what Hosea himself meant by certain remarks. At the same time Peter says (1 Peter 1:10-11) that the prophets sometimes said things without knowing what it alluded to. So, more than the intention of the prophet is concerned here. And sometimes one can track down that 'more' by asking how later readers could have interpreted the prophetic words. Then the reader's perspective comes into the picture. Sometimes, when there are multiple interpretations, it helps to consider the original intention of the author.

Discussion with the audience

Someone asked the question, with regard to the tax assessment story, what the role is of the fact that the author of the Bible is known, namely God. Kwakkel: interpretation and a faulty vision of who the author or sender is go together. If you take the tax assessment as a neighbour's joke, that is, of course, a faulty interpretation. But it could also be a very good falsification. As reader you have to decide for yourself whether that is the case or not. The tax assessment itself cannot influence that.

Another reader asked: what are the boundaries to the interpretation by the readers? Kwakkel: God has the last word. I trust that the Spirit will lead me.

Women and the Church

On Friday evening January 17, Dr G.H. Visscher (Jerry) spoke about the position of women in the church. He argued that Paul's injunction for women in the worship service is still valid.

He built his argument on Paul's letters to Timothy and the Corinthians (1 Cor. 11 and 14, and 1 Tim. 2: 12-15). In the worship service, a woman may not teach or speak with authority over a man. The appeal of Paul (as apostle) to creation is decisive. Because whenever people like Paul and the Lord Jesus Christ appeal to creation, the church is always being called back to principles that span the cultures of all ages.

On this point Visscher disagrees with the GKN committee's report [*ed.: the committee appointed by the Dutch synod to investigate whether women may be in church offices, which reported to the synod that they see no objection.*] In his judgment, the report speaks disparagingly of the creation order. The report suggests that Paul's reference to the creation order in 1 Timothy 2 has less authority and less power of expression than references to Old Testament texts. The report says that referring to this historic event is not a normative appeal to God's ordinances. Visscher's answer to this is that an inspired author does not need other Old

Testament texts to add weight to his words as he is himself inspired. Moreover, if such an author draws upon an event like the creation or the fall into sin as the grounds for his injunction, that has particular weight and is relevant regarding God's rules. Because it tells the reader what creation means, according to God's original intention. The order of creation refers to principles that display how people should live. They are principles initiated by God before man's fall into sin. Presumably, these principles remain part of life in Christ and of Christians who are being progressively renewed in God's image. It is not only Paul who appeals to creation. For Jesus too, an appeal to creation concerning divorce is considered a decisive argument. The same applies to David in Psalm 8, Solomon in Proverbs 8, Isaiah in chapter 40, Paul in 1 Corinthians 11, and Hebrews 2.

Visscher is convinced that the world desperately needs to hear that male and female, marriage and family, are things that did not come to us through sociological development or an evolutionary process. We need to accept that fact that, together with all other variety and beauty of God's creation, God also ordered this variety of beauty. Namely, that male should be different from female and that they are made that way physically, emotionally and psychologically, and including the fact that one of them should take more of a leadership role in the church and in the home. Today these God-ordained differences should be accentuated rather than blurred. A church that projects the clear lines of Genesis 2 and 3 in today's culture, and proclaims the whole Word of God, including a call for men to be leaders, has a vibrant message for this culture. But it has nothing to say anymore when it caves in to the fickle moods and changing attitudes of every civilization's culture.

The other difficulty he has is the approach to culture in the report. Christianity has always seen itself as a force that shapes culture by the power of the gospel. But now we are being told that Paul's culture was so unique and our culture is so unique that the message proclaimed to the one cannot be regarded as normative for the other. He asks: 'are we not then going down a regrettable hermeneutical path? If Paul's world was so unique that the Biblical principles cannot bridge the two, how then can we move from the Old Testament world to the New Testament world and then further to our world? How do we then determine the relevance of Scripture at all? Is it still relevant?' The report suggests, says

Visscher, that it follows the hermeneutics of the previous generation, but he senses a significant and far-reaching shift and fears the consequences. Instead he urges the people of God on both sides of the ocean to go forth in the confidence that the living and active Word of God which is able to divide soul and spirit, joints and marrow, is also able to be read through the illumination of the Holy Spirit in such a way that context and background help rather than hinder us in understanding the abiding principles of God's word.

Lastly, says Visscher, the inspired apostle becomes very emphatic about the importance of his prescription in Timothy, both before and after the words in chapter 2:7 and 3:15, and even in the midst in 2:12. It happens when he writes to the Corinthians in 11:16: 'If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God' (NIV). And in 1 Corinthians 14: 37: 'If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command' (NIV). In Visscher's opinion, Reformed churches not only pause and reflect when appeals are made to God's creation. They also sit up and take notice when, inspired by the Holy Spirit, the servant of the Lord becomes so solemn.

Respondent

In his responding lecture, Dr P. H. R. van Houwelingen presented his exegesis of this segment and further clarified the GKN committee's report, which is available on the website of the GKN [www.gkv.nl]. A few elements from his argument and some reactions from the audience now follow.

In 1 Timothy 2: 12-15, Paul is presenting a peaceful church order. The meaning of verse 12 is, according to Van Houwelingen, that women may not teach in an authoritative manner, 'lording it' over men. This verse can be paraphrased as: 'I am not permitting a woman to teach and [in combination with this / contrary to her subordinated position] to assume authority over a man'. In verse 14 and 15 Paul is referring especially to Eve as 'the woman'.

We agree wholeheartedly on the relevance of the Scriptures, says Van Houwelingen. The question is in what way? According to Van Houwelingen, Visscher speaks of a 'leadership role', while this is not the same as 'assuming authority'. Furthermore, Visscher mentions the church and the home, but not society. In Paul's time, however, there was

no difference between the position of women in church and society. In our society women are allowed far more opportunities than in the church and this causes friction. Today, not admitting women into church offices could cause an impediment to the gospel.

Discussion with the audience

With the listeners, the order of creation was felt to be a stronger argument than the idea that the gospel could be impeded if women hold a different position in the church than they do in society. In reaction to this, van Houwelingen points out that the committee report does put this argument into perspective, for Paul brings forward other motivations as well.

During the discussion, the use of context when interpreting the Bible was further clarified with an example. According to Van Houwelingen, Visscher

and he both agree that the apostles' decision (Acts 15) no longer applies to us today, while it was an apostolic prescription in the time of the New Testament. Today, Van Houwelingen adds, no one has a problem with consuming rare steak or blood sausage (black pudding), because they are not connected to idolatry in our context.

A visitor asked whether there are not many more impediments to the cause of the gospel? In connection with this, the example of homosexuality is named as a possible impediment in our present day culture. The audience's concern culminated in the question: 'must we, then, also adapt the confession that Jesus is the Son of God?' Van Houwelingen finds this to be on a completely different level. The confession of Jesus being the Son of God is not subject to discussion.

Reading the Bible 'Traditionally'

On Friday January 17, Dr C. Venema of the Mid-America Reformed Seminary presented an evaluation of the post-liberal or post-critical hermeneutics. He finds a better alternative in the manner of understanding the Bible in the time before the Reformation. From this starting point he arrives at a manner of interpreting the Bible that he calls: 'explaining the Bible in and with the church'.

Dr Venema commenced with a historical overview of hermeneutics. In Early Christian times, Bible texts were read as part of *one* book. A very rich and diverse book. The basic characteristic of the Bible is the story: the real, true, actual story. The Spirit has appointed people to pass this on to us. The content of the Bible gains meaning with its structure of promise and fulfilment. The Bible explains itself. Less clear texts can be interpreted with the clearer passages. The church was considered as privileged to interpret the Scriptures and does this with the aid of the confessions.

In modern times, however, a distinction is made between reading the Bible in the church and in the scholarly world. The Bible is no longer taken as the God-provided, canonically shaped comprehensive Word. Instruments of modern historical research are used to look for strata (historical layers) in the text. Only the Bible texts that can survive the test of critical reason are true. The primary interest is to find out what the text once meant to the initial readers or hearers. Thus we gain knowledge of what

men of old believed in times past. Not much is left of the text as a whole. It has been deconstructed. At the end of the period of modern historical criticism, even more radical forms of deconstructionism originated. For example, the *reader-response* approach of interpreting the Bible, where the text means whatever it says to me. The reader with his subjective interpretation of the text becomes the reference point for the text interpretation. The Bible is treated as literature. This means that it is not believed that true facts have been recorded. The texts have to be reconstructed in order to discover their meaning, and different cultures can all give their own explanation.

This proves, according to Venema, that we must keep the Bible and historical-critical science apart, for the text becomes less important and man becomes more important than the Bible if we do not separate them. It is crucial to start with the conviction that God is the Author of the Bible and that the meaning of the Bible texts coincide with the Divinely intended meaning, and that this meaning can be apprehended. God, though he may accommodate himself and use human language, is the One who is speaking, and He does that with sufficient clarity. If this conviction of the Early Church regarding the nature of the Scriptures is true, then it constitutes a foundation upon which we can say that the church is able to receive and

understand what God has spoken. Venema appreciates the endeavour of some 'post-critical modern school theologians' (in reaction to the deconstruction of the texts by nineteenth-century modern theologians) to return to reading the Scriptures holistically and canonically. For example, if you try to read Genesis 3:15 as an isolated text and try to determine how the text came into the canon and what it may have meant, you will not succeed. Only if you place the text in line with God's intentions, taking Biblical motives in the course of redemptive history into consideration, will the text clarify itself as a text for advent. Venema, therefore, appreciates the return to the grand narrative of Scripture, the recognition of the wholeness of the Bible, the refusal to get lost in the deconstruction and separating out of Bible texts.

Venema would also like to interact with these theologians' answer to the question how it is possible that an ancient text can still speak to us in this modern world. Their answer is that the interpretation of the Bible belongs to the work of the church. That means that the historical distance between then and now is bridged because we belong to the same church as the church in the first centuries that read these same Scriptures. We are reading the Scripture together as a continuing body throughout history. This means that we, here and now, are not the first people to read the Bible. What Venema finds valuable in this vision is that, as modern Bible readers here and now, we cannot say we have no obligation towards the church of all ages. This brings him to the role of the confessions in a proper reading of the Bible. The Spirit will always be with the church. So we are not simply reading, when we read the confessions, what early Christians believed the Word of God taught; we are reading (holding to the subordination of confessions to Scripture) what the Spirit teaches through and within the church, in her reading of the Word of God and understanding of what the Word of God teaches us. So we are not starting from scratch, we are not the first to read, and we do not read in isolation but together

with all the saints. The confession is therefore a stable instrument with which to understand the Bible. The connection with the church of the ages bridges the gap in time when reading the Bible

Response

Dr R.D. Anderson (of the Free Reformed Church in Rockingham, Australia) commenced with a summary of the lecture by Dr. Venema, who determined four axioms for the proper interpretation of the Bible in our time:

- the authority and inspiration of the Bible;
 - a canonical approach to the consequences of historical-critical method;
 - an ecclesiastical approach to bridge the historical gap between the Bible and our time;
 - and the confessional approach as logical result thereof.
- The universal church of all ages and locations is the bridge and path to reading the Bible, in our time as well. He built up the rest of his argument starting from a number of questions and concluded with a proposition.

Anderson starts with the question whether the coordination that Venema sees between the authority and inspiration of the Bible on the one hand, and the canonical ecclesiastical and confessional axioms on the other hand, is justifiable. What good is a canonical-ecclesiastical reading of the Scriptures if the starting point is a canonical document that originated in some faith community without there being an historical or actual basis in the Scripture itself? Anderson found it surprising that, in an overview of the history of Biblical interpretation, no reference was made to the history of revelation. The canonical approach to Biblical interpretation comes to stand completely opposite the historical-critical method: a method where the weight of developed dogmatics is read into every Bible book, regardless of its position in the history of revelation versus an approach that attempts to think through the way

each Bible book came into being and took its place in the developing history of this world. Does the historical-critical interpretation have to be adversarial to the churches' interpretative tradition? Could belief in the inspiration and authority of the Bible not encourage us to search for God's revelation of himself in history, even when it is not explicitly written in the Bible? If we accept the Biblical worldview, may we not think of world history as the gradual unfolding of God's revelation of himself in world history and of his plan of salvation for mankind? A condition for this approach of the historical-critical method is the believing standpoint of the Biblical scholar who then applies input of old civilizations in his studies.

For example, the Bible suggests in Genesis 36:31 that the book of Genesis had been written in the time of the Kings. But could there not be a connection between God's revelation at the time of the Kings (Genesis) and what God's people may then have known from the time of Noah and beyond? For example, through proto-literate Sumerian tablets, copied to later-literate Sumerian, translated into Acadian and finally into Hebrew? This may have formed the basis for what became the first part of the book of Genesis in the time of the Kings. Anderson finds this a more probable hypothesis than a prophetic dictation of new revelation in the time of the Kings, never mind the idea that a group of Yahwistic prophets composed a theological critique of Babylonian ideas on origins. With the concept of the history of revelation one can ask the illustrative question whether Genesis 1 already unfolds the Trinity or does not yet reveal it.

Finally, regarding the historical distance, Anderson does not see how Venema's solution of interpreting the Bible together with the church tradition solves the problem. There is no unity of Biblical interpretation in the tradition because it is within this church tradition that historic distance plays a part and many contextual shifts take place. So there is no tradition of canonical interpretation to apply to the Bible. ■

How are we to Read the Bible?

From January 16 to 18, the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary hosted a conference in Ancaster church on the topic caught in the title of this Bit to Read. Actually, they used a big name for the topic: hermeneutics. But they explained what they meant with the term: how does one correctly handle the Word of truth in today's postmodern world? It comes down to: how are we to read the Bible?



Half a dozen professors from the Theological University in Kampen (this institution trains ministers for the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands – those are our Dutch sister churches) winged their way across the Atlantic to participate in this Conference. Two professors from Mid-America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, Indiana (this institution contributes to the ministerial supply in the URC) braved wintery roads to add their contribution. And of course the faculty of our own Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary in Hamilton did what they could to supply a clear answer to that vital question. The Conference included two public evenings, and it was good to see that the Ancaster church was packed to the rafters on both evenings. For my part, I took in the two daytime programs too. By the time the Conference was over at 3:20 Saturday afternoon, I was more than happy to call it quits; one can absorb only so much....

Conference Background

Many of the members of the Canadian Reformed Churches have a Dutch background. Specifically, our (grand)parents were once members of the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands. There is, then, a very strong historic and emotional bond between the Canadian Reformed Churches and the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands. Smithville's two previous ministers both came directly from these Dutch sister churches, and both had their training in the Theological University of Kampen.

In the last dozen years or so, concern has slowly grown within our churches about developments we saw happening in the Dutch sister churches in general and in the Theological University in particular. In fact, our recent Synod of Carman

wrote a pointed letter to the upcoming Dutch Synod explaining why developments in the Dutch churches worry us, and urging a change (see Acts 2013, Art 165). The heart of the concern lies in how the professors of Kampen are reading the Bible. Given that we remain sister churches with the RCN, it was considered right before God to do a Conference with these men in order to understand better what the Kampen men are thinking, and to remind each other of what the Lord Himself says on the subject.

How does one Read the Bible?

It was accepted by all that the Bible comes from God Himself, so that what is written on its pages does not come from human imagination or study, but comes from the Mind of holy God Himself. So the Bible contains no mistakes; whatever it says is the Truth. Yet this Word of God is not given to us in some unclear divine language, but infinite God has been pleased to communicate in a fashion finite people can understand – somewhat like parents simplifying their language to get across to their toddler. As we read the Bible, then, the rules common for reading a newspaper article, a book, or even this article apply, ie, you get the sense of a particular word or sentence from the paragraph or page in which it's written, and when some word or sentence is confusing you interpret the harder stuff in the light of easier words or sentences elsewhere in the article. That's the plain logic of reading we all use. So far the professors of Kampen and Hamilton and MARS were all agreed.

Genesis 1

Differences arose, however, when it came to what you do with what a given text says. In the previous paragraph I made reference to a 'toddler'. We all realize that the use of that word does not make this Bit to Read an article about how to raise toddlers. Genesis 1 uses the word 'create'. Does that mean that that chapter of Scripture is about how the world got here? We've learned to say that Yes, Genesis 1 certainly tells us about our origin. (And we have good reason for saying that, because that's the message you come away with after a plain reading of the chapter; besides, that's the way the 4th commandment reads Genesis 1, and it's how Isaiah and Jeremiah and Jesus and Paul, etc, read Genesis 1.) But the Kampen professors told us not to be so fast in jumping to that conclusion. Genesis

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Rector M. te Velde (TUK) and Principle G.H. Visscher (CRTS) (photo L.W. de Graaff).

1, they said, isn't about how we got here, but it's instruction to Israel at Mt Sinai about how mighty God is not the author of evil. Just like you cannot go to the Bible to learn how to raise toddlers (because that's not what the Bible is about; you need to study pedagogy for that – the example is mine), so you cannot go to the Bible to find out how the world got here – because that's not what Genesis 1 is about, and so it's not a fair question we should ask Genesis 1 to answer.

1 Timothy 2

A second example that illustrates how the Dutch professors were thinking comes from their treatment of 1 Timothy 2:12,13. These verses record Paul's instruction: "I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve...." This passage featured on the Conference program because a report has recently surfaced within the Dutch sister churches arguing that it's Biblical to ordain sisters of the congregation to the offices of minister, elder and deacon. 1 Timothy 2 would seem to say the opposite. So: how do you read 1 Timothy 2:12 to justify the conclusion that women may be ordained to the offices of the church?

The Dutch brethren answered the question like this: when Paul wrote the prohibition of 1 Timothy 2, the culture Timothy lived in did not tolerate women in positions of leadership. If Paul in that situation had permitted women to teach in church or to have authority over men, he would have placed an unnecessary obstacle on the path of unbelievers to come to faith. Our western culture today, however, gives women a very inclusive role in public leadership. If we today, then, ban them from the

offices of the church, we would place an obstacle in the path of modern people on their journey to faith in Jesus Christ. Had Paul written his letter to the church in Hamilton today, he would have written vs 12 to say that women would be permitted to teach and to have authority over men. That conviction, of course, raises the question of what you do with the "for" with which vs 13 begins. Doesn't the word 'for' mean that Paul is forming his instruction about the woman's silence on how God created people in the beginning – Adam first, then Eve? Well, we were told, with vs 13 Paul is indeed referring back to Genesis 1 & 2, but we need to be very careful in how we work with that because we're reading our own understandings of Genesis 1 & 2 into Paul's instruction in 1 Timothy 2, and we may be incorrect in how we understand those chapters from Genesis. So vs 13 doesn't help us understand vs 12....

Confused...

I struggled to get my head around how brothers who claim to love the Lord and His Word could say things as mentioned above. A speech on Saturday morning helped to clarify that question for me. The old way of reading the Bible might be called 'foundationalism', describing the notion that you read God's commands and instructions (eg, any of the Ten Commandments), and transfer that instruction literally into today so that theft or adultery or dishonoring your parents is taboo. This manner of reading the Bible does not go down well with postmodern people, because it implies that there are absolutes that you have to obey. The alternative is to disregard the Bible altogether and adopt 'relativism', where there are no rules for right and wrong at all – and that's obviously wrong. So, we were told, we need to find a third way between 'foundationalism' and 'relativism'.

This third way would have us be familiar with the Scriptures, but instead of transferring a command of long ago straight into today's context, we need to meditate on old time revelation and trust that as we do so the Lord will make clear what His answers are for today's questions. If the cultural circumstances surrounding a command given long ago turns out to be very similar to cultural circumstances of today, we may parachute the command directly into today and insist it be obeyed. But if the circumstances differ, we may not simply impose God's dated commands on obedience or on theft or on homosexuality into today. Instead, with an attitude of humility and courage we need to listen to what God is today



G.H. Visscher and R.D. Anderson in front of the audience (photo P.H.R. van Houwelingen).

saying – and then listen not just to the Bible but also to culture, research, science, etc. After prayerfully meditating on the Scripture-in-light-of-lessons-from-culture-and-research, we may well end up concluding that we need to accept that two men love both each other and Jesus Christ. That conclusion may differ from what we’ve traditionally thought the Lord wanted of us, but a right attitude before the Lord will let us be OK with conclusions we’ve not seen in Scripture before.

Analysis

This speech about the ‘third way’ helped clarify for me why the Kampen professors could say what they did about Genesis 1 and 1 Timothy 2. They were seeking to listen to Scripture as well as to what our culture and science, etc, were saying, and then under the guidance of the Holy Spirit sought to come to the will of the Lord for today’s questions. To insist that Genesis 1 is God’s description about how we got here (creation by divine fiat) leads to conclusions that fly in the face of today’s science and/or evolutionary thinking – and so we must be asking the wrong questions about Genesis 1; it’s not about how we got here.... To insist that 1 Timothy 2 has something authoritative to say about the place of women is to place us on ground distinctly out of step with our society – and so we must be reading 1 Timothy 2 wrongly. As a result of deep meditation on Scripture plus input from culture etc, these men have concluded that God leads us to condoning women in office in our culture, accepting a very old age for the earth, and leaving room for homosexual relationships in obedient service to the Lord.

This, it seems to me, is the enthronement of people’s collective preferences over the revealed Word of God. Our collective will, even when it is

renewed and guided by the Holy Spirit, remains “inclined to all evil” (Lord’s Day 23,60; cf Romans 7:15,18). There certainly are questions arising from today’s culture that do not have answers written in obvious command form in Scripture, and so we undoubtedly need to do some humble and prayerful research and thinking on those questions. But the Bible is distinctly clear (not only in Genesis 1) about where we come from, and distinctly clear too (not only in 1 Timothy 2) about the place of women, and distinctly clear also on homosexuality. To plead that we need different answers today than in previous cultures lest the Bible’s teachings hinder unbelievers from embracing the gospel is to ignore that Jeremiah and Micah and Jesus and Paul and James and every other prophet and apostle had to insist on things that were “a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23). One questioner from the audience hit the nail on the head: the Dutch brethren were adapting their method of reading the Bible to produce conclusions accommodated to our culture.

Where does this leave us?

There was a time when the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and their Theological University in Kampen were a source of much wisdom and encouragement in searching the Scriptures. Given that all the men from Kampen spoke more or less the same language at the Hermeneutics Conference, it is clear to me that those days are past. It was fitting that at the Conference we prayed together as brothers in the Lord, but it’s also clear that we now need to pray that the Lord have mercy on the Dutch sister churches – for this is how their (future) ministers are being taught to deal with Scripture.

I was very grateful to note that the professors from the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary (and MARS too, for that matter) all spoke uniformly in their rejection of Kampen’s way of reading the Bible. They insisted unequivocally that “the whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men” (Westminster Confession, I.6).

Postmodernism does not pass us by. May the Lord give us grace to keep believing that His Word is authoritative, clear and true. ■

By K. van Bekkum

Conquest and Sola Scriptura A Response to Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical Critique of From Conquest to Coexistence

“And because we believe that it is God who, also in our time, through his almighty and omnipresent power upholds and governs all things, therefore we receive thankfully and hopefully the world which he enables us to know through scholarship in the midst of which he gives us a place. Naturally, in this connection, we distinguish between facts, which scholarship enables us to know, and the interpretations which are given to these facts in different ways by the various interpreters. But facts are stubborn things which demand respect and are placed on our path through God’s providence. Thus, just as we make grateful use of all kinds of technology invented by human ingenuity, so we also accept with joy the increase and expansion of our knowledge which the scholarship of today has given us in abundance.” (Bavinck 1911:12)
“We must be prepared on more than one point to reconsider our own views in order to come to a deeper insight of Scripture. The criticism is dominated by unbelief but it is not completely foolish. We should endeavour to read Scripture in such a way that attention is paid to real facts.” (Holwerda 1951)



Introduction

As an Old Testament scholar and Reformed theologian, I have taken part in an international debate since the end of the 1990s. In this debate, the conviction has grown that most stories in the Old Testament do not refer to actual events. Until the 1960s most biblical scholars and historians assumed that biblical history writing was historical. Afterwards this changed rapidly. First the patriarchs (early 1970s), then the conquest of Canaan (1970s) and also the biblical account of the kingdom of David and Solomon (1990s) were interpreted as unhistorical (cf. Van Bekkum 2003).

When my contributions to this debate are consulted, the conclusion can be drawn that, against the tide of much contemporary scholarship, on account of the self-attestation of Scripture (Belgic Confession Article 5), I have defended the historicity of Genesis 1-11, the patriarchs, the exodus and the conquest (including the conquering of Jericho and the miracle described in Joshua 10:12-15), David and Solomon, etc. In some publications, my starting point in Reformed theology comes out more strongly than in others. This has a reason. My contributions are

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designed to: a) more precisely describe the manner in which biblical history writing refers to these events, and b) present the results of this research to the international scholarly community debating these questions in such a way that they are not automatically rejected as being too biased.

The background to this approach lies in two considerations. First, a Reformed theologian may not ignore the question how our understanding of Scripture is affected by new facts and arguments which are presented as time goes on. Together with the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck, I am convinced that it is no coincidence that the new material which the study of the Ancient Near East has produced becomes available at this time in history. Apparently the church now needs this new material to understand Scripture so that it is placed in its own context wherein it was revealed. It is also clear (both to Reformed theologians as well as others) that this material is to be used in a good way – all the more reason to take up this task seriously (Bavinck 1911:12). Second, I have learned from the Kampen Old Testament scholar Benne Holwerda that a Reformed exegete cannot suffice only with dogmatic arguments but, for the sake of an honest understanding of the Bible, must also meet the non-Reformed community on its own turf and try to formulate alternatives on internal grounds. Those who neglect this task too easily absolve themselves of matters which should be dealt with and also do not take the opportunity to come to a better understanding of the Bible (Holwerda 1951; 1971:159-160).

My publications attempt to contribute to the current scholarly discussion. From the perspective of the church the tendency is that Reformed people do not need to be ashamed if they assume that God has given a dependable picture of his deeds in history in holy Scripture, even when this is questioned in a scholarly way. At the same time, my writings make a contribution to understanding holy Scripture and the preaching of the gospel.

The question can arise as to whether such an approach means that the interpretation of the

Bible can actually only be carried out by experts. The answer to this is that the Bible is so clear that the message can be understood by every believer. The Bible is read by the whole church. Moreover, according to its nature, scholarship only has limited value: the results of scholarship are only legitimate within a framework which has previously been agreed to by the scholars who take part in the debate. At the same time, it is true that “experts” always play a role in the reading of the Bible in the church. Even just the translation of the Bible itself, which is read by ordinary believers, is the result of the work of those who know the original languages. And also the experts themselves are dependent upon the work of other experts (Kwakkel 2010).

The history of Reformed exegesis of the last century shows that Old Testament scholars who try to better understand the Bible by placing it in its own Ancient Near Eastern context are not always understood. This has to do with the godly fear that the authority of the Bible would be undermined and salvation vanish. And besides this, it is also difficult to accept that the interpretation of a specific passage can change due to scholarly research (Van Bekkum 2013a). In this sense it was not surprising that my explanation of the book Joshua in my dissertation, defended at the seminary of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Van Bekkum 2010a; 2011), caused some unrest in the churches and that weighty criticism followed. The academic and ecclesiastical discussion about this is to be expected and should be continued and seen in its proper context.

Nevertheless, there is good reason for me to interact further with the criticism. The critical questions have continued for three years and, in the meantime, have burdened ecumenical relations now that sister churches of the Reformed Churches (Liberated) in Australia, Canada, the United States and South Africa in talks with deputies for foreign churches as well as in official synod decisions have characterized the dissertation as in conflict with the Reformed confessions (Letter of Admonition FRCA 2013; Acts CanRC 2013:178; RCUS Abstract 2013:52; cf. Batteau 2012). Recently the book was again dealt with in an appeal to General Synod Ede 2014 (Brief 2014). It is true that synod declared this appeal to be inadmissible, but that doesn't mean that the questions which are posed should just be ignored. Not only the sister churches but also the appellants have a right to answers to their questions.

After three years of experiencing continual criticism, I personally feel the need to say something in return. The persistent suggestion in all the criticism is that my book has placed scholarship above Scripture. This suggestion does my book a grave injustice and touches my confessional integrity. Therefore, I would like to provide clarity about how my book should be understood and what my position is. Hopefully this will contribute to peace in the churches and good relations with the sister churches overseas.

The rest of this response will explain: 1) the communicative context in which the dissertation was written; 2) its rhetorical form, after which I will discuss 3) the most important objections to the content and 4) briefly return to the ecclesiastical debate.

1. The Communicative Context

In many respects, the way in which Reformed biblical scholarship is done, certainly from the point of view of guiding principles, has not really changed since the 19th and 20th centuries. The Bible is to be received as God's revelation and interpreted as well as possible using the means of literary and redemptive-historical tools and with a view to the congregation. The Reformed churches have chosen to conduct the training of ministers in an academic setting. It is considered important that the training be at a high standard, be aware of what is happening elsewhere and be able to work with new developments. This was the case in the past and is still the case today.

At the same time, the situation has changed. The establishment of the Kampen Theological School (1854) and the Free University in Amsterdam (1880) occurred in the context of the reconsecration of the Netherlands and the pillarization of Dutch society, which was just starting. Present day Reformed theology has to deal with the opposite movements. The Netherlands has become heavily secularized; theology is marginalized and society is fundamentally open. While in the past it was difficult – especially in the field of Old Testament – to keep up with one's own Reformed Bible scholarship, today that is even more difficult. It has become impossible to oversee the entire field. And what is more, not only fellow scholars but also church members in general, are asking that theology be done in the manner in which they experience their faith in their life: in accordance with Reformed principles and at the same time in the midst of real life, in open contact with other people.

On this point, there is a real danger for misunderstandings in the contact with sister churches overseas. The Dutch law governing higher education (WHW) forms the framework wherein Reformed academic theology operates in the Netherlands. Naturally this law reflects the developments mentioned above. The emphasis upon doing scholarly research is unmistakable and, as a result, communication with the outside world has increased. That is why the Theological University in Kampen went from a school to a college (Hogeschool) (1936), was officially recognized by the government (1976), and became a university (1987). Since the critical Oberman report (1989) due to the lack of appropriate academic level, the Theological University has done much to guarantee the academic standard of its own research. Because of these changes the Theological University in Kampen remained what it was: an academic school for training ministers. But even though the organizational and academic requirements were increased, the government has no say in the content of the teaching or research. That would be in conflict with the constitutional freedom of education (Grondwet, Art. 23). It is therefore completely incorrect to claim that the Theological University in Kampen has changed its name in order to meet the government half-way or to escape from subscription to the confessions (Van Rietschoten, 2010). The most that can be said is that, more than before, a distinction is made between publications written for church members and those written for other scholars or for believers of different traditions or non-religious people.

2. Rhetorical Form

In view of these goals formulated by the Theological University in Kampen since 1989, the rhetorical form of my dissertation about the entry of the people of Israel into the land of Canaan needed to take into account three factors: the content must set forth responsible Reformed theology on an academic level in open communication with other scholars whether they be religious or not. At the end of the day, I found this form by dealing with a matter

which was and is vigorously debated: the relation between the message of biblical historical narratives and the references therein to the past. The connection with current research made it possible, in my view, to demolish from the inside the current consensus that no entry of Israel into Canaan took place. This intention also made it possible to deliver structural criticism against all sorts of methods in current research. By analyzing previous research I made it clear that, contrary to what was often thought, political and religious presuppositions do play a large role. I developed a model in which, on the one hand, it is possible to speak to one another about the data, and yet, on the other hand, to pose the question of truth and to bring in the principles of Reformed theology (Van Bekkum, 2010 and 2011, Chapter 1). First, this model offers a description for how this process goes for most participants. Second, I show the reader, whether believer or not, the data and go through the various interpretive options (Chapters 3-7). Finally, I make clear what my own perspective is, namely, that I am a Reformed theologian and that this naturally has consequences for how I view the Bible and for which options I have chosen along the way (epilogue).

Thus the book is an attempt to consider to what degree a Reformed conviction with respect to a topic where all interpreters have the same extra-biblical data can be convincing for those who are not Reformed, without hiding what I believe. It is assumed that in the process the scholar contributes to the understanding of Scripture and the development of Reformed theology. In this way I present for the first time a hypothesis about the dating of the book Joshua wherein not just a few separate biblical and archaeological elements are worked in, but rather a view that is based upon a systematic integration of all the elements which are important (Van Bekkum 2010:326-353; 2011:389-423).

The debate in the churches points out that the book does not explicitly refer to the Reformed method of interpreting the Bible. This is logical because the

dissertation is not a treatise about how a Reformed theologian should read the Bible. The starting point of the book is the data which all biblical scholars, whatever their background, share with one another. The assertion that this is the way in which students in Kampen are taught to exegete (among others Douma 2010) is therefore also incorrect. My book only deals with that purpose indirectly. The purpose of exegesis as taught in Kampen is to find an answer to the question, "What is the specific character and meaning of this Scripture passage in the context of the whole of God's revealed Word as written in the Bible?" (Kwakkel, 2004:39). However large a tome my dissertation is, it is nothing more than carrying water and chopping wood for the actual work which is done by others. Yet this does not take away from the fact that the praise of God which comes out in the exegetical sections is certainly meant as praising God. Glorifying God in a way which non-religious people understand is still glorifying God. It is painful that this is being questioned (Van Rietschoten 2011). The fact that this book is being used in making sermons fortunately shows that it can also happen differently.

The rhetorical form is also the reason why this book only deals with the tradition of Reformed exegesis in passing (cf. Capellen 2010-2011; Acts CanRC 2013). The book tries to highlight the inconsistencies of the contemporary consensus and therefore also seeks discussion partners primarily in those circles. This certainly does not take anything away from the value I place in my own tradition. This precise point becomes evident in the epilogue of the book, but also in many other publications (Van Bekkum 2001; 2003; 2005; 2009b; 2013a).

The use of this rhetorical form does, of course, raise the question about the place of sola scriptura. In what way does Scripture have the last word in a specific exegetical matter? During the writing process and its guidance, constant attention was paid to this question. It is my conviction that all the results fit very well within classical Reformed hermeneutics. This is not surprising since the book

compares Scripture with Scripture and always uses extra-biblical information within the overarching framework of confessional theology. Moreover, the confession itself states that these facts can make their own contribution. A Reformed person is not someone with blinkers on (Van Bekkum 2010 and 2011, epilogue).

Reviews from fellow experts show that in their judgment the confessional conviction is woven throughout the book – something which is evaluated as very positive (Peels 2010), as neutral (Hess 2012), or as very negative (Grabbe 2011; Knauf 2012).

3. Objections to the Content

a) *Explanation of the “sun miracle”*

The initial occasion for all the unrest and criticism was an interview in *Nederlands Dagblad* (Dutch daily Christian newspaper) entitled “Not everything in Joshua really happened” (Van de Poll 2010). This headline above an otherwise excellent interview was very unfortunate. The intent of the book is precisely to do justice to the purpose of the biblical text. It shows alternatives for certain forms of popular and scholarly understandings of the text. Since the interview also addressed my slightly different reading of Joshua 10:10-15, the conclusion was quickly made: this dissertation denies what is stated in the Bible. In the words of an editorial written by Rev. Stam of Canada in *Clarion*, “Dr. Van Bekkum states that the miracle of the sun standing still did not really happen as described in the Bible” (Stam, 2010).

This summary of my view is completely incorrect. The miracle stands, my book concludes (see also Van Bekkum 2010b). It might be, however, that the text itself means something different than has been thought. Through the discovery of clay tablets from Canaanite Ugarit it has become more and more clear in recent decades that the Israelites not only associated “sun” and “moon” with the lights in heaven but also with Canaanite gods. In various passages in the Bible where the terms are used there is polemic with the false gods. This raises the question: how is this in Joshua 10? What is more,

the poetry of Joshua 10:12-13 shows strong similarities with several lines in Habakkuk 3. The section in the book about these verses in Joshua explores how extra attention for these relatively new elements in the discussion adds to its understanding. In addition, the exegesis investigates the frequent assertion that the poetic section has a very different meaning from what is given to it later in Joshua 10. These matters are dealt with in a way that is very common in the Reformed tradition: first, attention is given to the meaning of the smallest exegetical unit (in this case the poetic section); next, this is placed in the broader context. In both cases, comparing Scripture with Scripture precedes the comparison with extra-biblical material. The net result is a careful hypothesis which is laid before other interpreters for assessment (Van Bekkum 2010:237-250, 352-353; 2011:279-295, 422).

Thus the miracle is certainly not denied; extra-biblical material does not lord it over the biblical text. To put it more strongly, in this case the dissertation even states explicitly that the value of certain extra-biblical parallels is limited.

Critics have been surprised that no priority was given to the traditional interpretation (Douma 2010; Capellen 2010-2011; Report CRCA 2012). The answer to that is that the hypothesis wants to further the research by drawing attention to elements in the text which so far have been inadequately treated, namely, speaking to the sun and moon as though they were persons, and the parallel in Habakkuk 3:11.

The most important point for all the critics is that the proposed exegesis views part of the passage (the “long day”) as figurative. Now it is indeed possible that the arguments from the text for this position are not strong enough. At the same time, it needs to be recognized that the alternatives proposed by the critics require other elements in the text to be taken figuratively: some people think that there was light without the sun, just as in Genesis 1, so that the day could be prolonged; others state that it was

the earth which stood still rather than the sun (and moon). In addition, the two aspects of the text to which the proposed hypothesis tries to do justice are not seriously considered. One reaction does deal explicitly with the possibility that sun and moon are personified in the poetic section. But the Old Testament reasons for this exegesis are not discussed. An alternative is proposed in connection with New Testament material and Flavius Josephus (Van Houweligen; De Boer 2010). Now it is useful to bring this in, but methodologically speaking that should only happen after first giving an explanation on the basis of the relevant Old Testament passages.

In hindsight, it can be concluded that the incorrect but, given the headline, understandable unrest about whether or not a miracle happened has hindered a normal exegetical discussion. At the same time, we need to soberly acknowledge that it is doubtful whether it will ever be possible to really get a handle on the passage. All interpreters wrestle with the fact that the perception of the world and the heavenly bodies which is assumed in the text is different from our modern perception. It is perfectly clear that the text speaks of a unique miracle. But this is first told to those who experienced the world in a way which is foreign to our modern experience of it. This makes it very difficult to define the nature of the miracle (Van Bekkum 2010:352-353; 2011:422).

b) *“Truth claim” and “truth value”*

Another important point of criticism concerns the distinction which the book makes between the so-called truth claim and truth value of the text, that is, that which the text claims to be true and the question whether this claim is in fact true. The criticism contends that this distinction opens the way for man to test and judge the truth of God’s Word. And that is in conflict with the confession and Reformed hermeneutics (Douma 2010; Acts CanRC 2013:172-173, 214).

It is indeed true that in Reformed hermeneutics the claim of the text and

what God wants to say in the text are bound together. But what cannot be separated can be distinguished. In ethics and dogmatics, it is common practice to first look at what the text says and afterwards to ask the question what it means in the current ethical or dogmatic context. The same procedure can be applied to the reference of the text to the past. After all, the text is not the past itself. The importance of first reading the text well before you dig up the past becomes apparent from the way in which the book Joshua is often connected with archaeology. Whether or not they consider the Bible to be a historical source or not, pretty well all historians working on this question look for destruction layers in tells dating to the Late Bronze Age. The clear observation that, according to Joshua and Judges 1, only four cities were destroyed (Jericho, Ai, Hazor and Jerusalem), shows how limited this approach is. Thus it comes down to first reading well: what does the text actually say?

Further, it is important to read my book very carefully regarding the use of the distinction between truth claim and truth value. In the description at the end of Chapter 1 of the procedure which will be followed, it is stated that the working hypothesis which flows out of the exegesis with regard to the truth claim can be tested in connection with extra-biblical material. The “testing” of one’s own, preliminary human interpretation is, however, quite different from “judging” the Bible itself (Van Bekkum 2010:34; 2011:40). It is therefore also of importance that the word in question “judge” (Van Bekkum 2010:32; 2011:37; cf. Acts CanRC 2013:214) is used in a primarily descriptive passage: this is how the process usually works. It is, however, no coincidence that the word choice in the final explanation of my method is a bit different. It is not about “judging” the Bible but about “testing” a human scholarly hypothesis acquired through research. This is possible because it fits within Reformed theology to be able to discuss the meaning of a text with the help of all possible means. Also connected to this is that such a researched

explanation of the Bible can be compared to extra-biblical material (cf. Van Bekkum, Van Houwelingen, Peels 2013a:251-253). In the same passage, my book adds a very important observation, namely, that philosophical and religious presuppositions, for example about the acting of God in history, play a crucial role in connection with the final acceptance of the truth value (Van Bekkum 2019:32; 2011:37). This sentence is, of course, meant descriptively and applies to everyone. But whoever is familiar with the debate – non-Reformed readers at least have noticed this – realizes that this passage also creates room for the Reformed position that truth claim and truth value coincide. This is evident in the rest of the book: nothing the text says is brushed aside as unhistorical. The epilogue also explicitly states this position.

None of the critics (Douma 2010; Capellen 2010-2011; Acts CanRC 2013:214) mention these crucial sentences. In this way, an inaccurate picture is presented of the method being used and the criticism that the distinction undermines sola scriptura misses the target. The question does remain whether, in the final analysis, the distinction between truth claim and truth value causes the two to be separated too much with the result that the Bible itself is judged (Van Dam 2014). This question deserves serious consideration. But a charitable reading of my book shows that this concern does not apply to it.

c) Terminology and inspiration

Critics have also expressed their surprise at the use of postmodern terminology. A text has an “ideology”, contains “propaganda” and is the product of a certain “community.” The reason for using this terminology is as follows: when one wants to show that a certain scholarly consensus is self-contradictory and untenable, then one needs to make its language one’s own. In addition, questions about the tradition, direction, social background and convictions of the human authors of Scripture are not wrong a priori.

Of course, the use of such terms raises the question whether all sorts of

presuppositions are being adopted, for example, that the authors of Scripture were shaped by blind prejudice or that their thinking was totally determined by the interests of their group. In Chapter 1, the aforementioned terms are defined in such a way that such negative associations are excluded and remain open concepts. The “community” can also be a group wherein religion and revelation are very much valued. Above all, the community appears to be very critical of the social environment. The result of this precise definition is that the reader, who shares in the faith confessed in the epilogue, can effortlessly read the “scribes” as “inspired prophetic scribes” of Joshua.

One critic completely ignores this manner of definition and the concrete use of the terms and concludes that the book locks the writers up in themselves (Boon 2012). It is completely impossible to defend oneself against such a suspicious reading of my dissertation. Others honestly ask whether this book takes inspiration seriously if the human process behind the writing and clarification of the history is studied in such detail (Capellen 2010-2011; De Wolf 2010). The answer to this is the following. According to Reformed theology, biblical history writing, also when this is prophetically inspired, is a process in which people have been involved with everything they have (Luke 1:1-4). This makes it impossible to distinguish between a divine and human factor. When one studies this process carefully and lets the text itself determine in what way God reveals himself, then the process of inspiration is taken seriously. It is of course true that, also in this case, God’s involvement in the writing down of the biblical text remains a mystery. But such an approach gives the concrete manner of the working of the Spirit much more its due than explanations wherein direct inspiration is immediately referred to when dealing with difficult questions. In that case there is a very real danger that God functions as a “God of the gaps.”

d) Anachronisms

Critics also question the view that certain elements in Joshua are described using

terminology from the perspective of the author(s) from a later time. Some examples of this are: “iron” is used in connection with chariots, the naming of the northern boundary of the conquered land and the naming of the inhabitants of the southern coastal areas as “Philistines” (Douma 2010; De Wolf 2010). It is also considered to be incorrect that the description of the inhabitants of the promised land would be given in a schematized form (Capellen 2010-2011).

The supposition behind this criticism is that something which is described in terms of a later period therefore also did not happen earlier (Douma 2010). Compare this with what the book actually says: concrete events from the Late Bronze Age were written down a few hundred years later in language which could be understood at that time, and which allows the more definitive fulfillment of the land in the time of David and Solomon to ring through, when the not-yet conquered area of, for instance, Joshua 13:1-7 was taken over. Thus the book is certainly about what happened. In the biblical portrayal, the text adds its own angle (cf. Van Bekkum 2013b). One might think that an account given in partly anachronistic terms or in a more stylistic form undermines the historical character of the account. But this idea rests on a misunderstanding of the nature of history writing in general and of ancient history writing in particular. All history writing refers to occurrences in terms that are understandable for the intended audience. Also today an anachronistic use of terms can happen in this connection, sometimes completely subconsciously. Usually this happens without any damage being done to the description of the events or their historicity. Thus there is every reason to allow this manner of explanation to remain in the toolbox of the Reformed exegete. Moreover, the argument that certain occurrences in the Bible cannot be historical because an account contains elements from a later time is exposed as being unsound.

The question, of course, is how it can be determined that a text contains

anachronisms. That is always the result of a complex interaction of biblical and extra-biblical material (e.g. 2 Samuel 24 describes the northern boundary of the territory ruled by David and that boundary is the same as the one in Joshua 11; in Judges 1 the Amorites are said to still be living in the southern coastal plains). It is important that each case be carefully considered on its own. I was aware of the alternative explanations, mentioned by some critics, for the stylized manner in which the Canaanite peoples are named and for the presence of the Philistines (Capellen 2010-2011; De Wolf 2010). I chose not to follow those paths because they are not able to do justice to all the information we have at the moment. In the words of Herman Bavinck: these solutions unduly ignore some “stubborn facts”.

e) Chronology and Jericho

Another misunderstanding arose in connection with a quotation from Kenneth Kitchen, who holds that dating the exodus only on the grounds of the 480 years of 1 Kings 6:1 is a “lazy man solution” and that this figure should not be taken literally (Van Bekkum 2010:32-34; 2011:38-40). The criticism is that I would hold that reading the Bible according to its plain sense is not possible and that such a method should be exchanged for one which is more critical (Douma 2010; Capellen 2010-2011; De Wolf 2010; Boon 2012; Acts CanRC 2013:172, 214).

Now it is true that Kitchen states his view quite strongly. The reason I quote him is because this Egyptologist, who is also well-known for his high view of Scripture, correctly perceives that this number (480) is used by many as an argument straight from Scripture for a fifteenth century BC date of the conquest (Acts CanRC 2013:214). But such a straightforward argument does not exist at all. Ever since in 1867 it was discovered how a list of annual appointments of officials from Assyria could be connected to known and dateable solar eclipses, historians have developed a chronology using the available archaeological, historical and textual data. Both the early as well as the late dating of the conquest are highly dependent upon

extra-biblical material. In addition, this chronology continues to be fleshed out and made more precise. A Reformed orientalist such as Cornelis van Gelderen showed in his *Bijbelsch Handboek* (1935) (Biblical Handbook) that he is very conscious of the open and ongoing character of this discussion in which all the data need to be constantly reevaluated. As Kitchen rightly comments (and Van Gelderen would agree with him), those who do not pay any attention to this neglect doing their homework. Therefore it is not surprising that in Reformed, Presbyterian and evangelical circles there have always been proponents of both dates, also of the thirteenth century.

One element in this debate is that a few questions have been raised in connection with our increase in knowledge about how numbers are used in the Bible and the Ancient Near East. To what degree is the number in 1 Kings 6:1 a literal reference to exactly 480 years? And to what extent does this number for the period between the exodus and the building of the temple also have a meaning with more content? My book ascertains that these questions can only be answered through a thorough textual examination of the number in the context of all the numbers within Scripture from Exodus to Kings.

The passage under discussion from the dissertation only wants to state that the biblical data cannot function as an absolute point of departure in the discussion about the dating of the conquest. It is one element which must be read seriously within its own literary and historical context. The passage emphasizes that the Bible must be read well rather than that it undermines Scripture. The rest of the book focuses on the textual and historical elements in the chronological debate which the book Joshua brings to our attention (Van Bekkum 2010:357-386).

Naturally this does not mean that the hypothesis of a fifteenth century BC conquest is inaccurate by definition or that no attempts have been made using correct methodology to show that a fifteenth

century conquest is the most natural answer. But the suggestion of various reviewers (Paul 2010; Capellen 2010-2011; De Wolf 2010; Boon 2012) that a fifteenth century dating solves the archaeological difficulties of, for example, the conquest of the city of Jericho is incorrect. The excavators dated the remains a century earlier, that is to the sixteenth century. It seemed that this point of view had to be corrected. Subsequent research in the 1990s, however, confirmed the earlier date. Thereby Jericho remains in all honesty an “archaeological problem”. At the very last, however, this does not mean that the destruction of this city as written in the book Joshua is in my view unhistorical. The positioning of Joshua 6 in the whole of this book of the Bible speaks volumes also with regard to its historical intention. Stronger yet: the clear corroborations between text and archaeology on the level of the social structures in the Late Bronze society as a whole even points in the direction of a historical interpretation of Joshua’s story of the conquest of the land (Van Bekkum 2013b:180-184).

4. Review and Conclusion

Looking back on the criticism of my dissertation within the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and from sister churches in the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC), it is, first of all, helpful to note that it stands within the broader context of unrest concerning developments in the Dutch churches. These churches have certainly changed. This causes internal as well as external relations to become strained and raises the question to what extent churches with these developments are remaining faithful to the gospel.

In that light it is not surprising that a dissertation which attracts attention causes critical reactions. The motive behind these reactions is completely positive: it is all about keeping one another faithful to the Word of God. It is important to truly appreciate this. I have also felt this intention in recent years. I have learned from conversations and reviews and have grown to understand that outside of the

immediate circle of Western European biblical scholarship certain terms and passages are understood differently than within that circle. I have also realized that, for example, the end of Chapter 1 of my book concerning the method could have been formulated better or differently. The opposite also happened. Sometimes there wasn’t even the veneer of a serious discussion and my book simply functioned as a stick with which to beat the Theological University in Kampen or the Reformed churches (liberated).

The above indicates how important it is in a critical discussion to place the matters in their proper perspective and to summarize the position being critiqued correctly. On this point, it seems to me that something has gone wrong in the Dutch and international reactions. The communicative context and the rhetorical form of the dissertation were especially underappreciated. Further, the representation of various important points was often misleading and simplistic. To a certain extent, this can also be expected when an academic work becomes a matter for ecclesiastical debate. The result of this is that across the board in the Dutch and international conversation the main question – being the relationship of the dissertation to the confessions and Reformed hermeneutics – is not handled properly.

In the end, this is unfortunate for all taking part in this conversation. Those who judge prematurely that the book is in conflict with the Reformed confessions prevent themselves from dealing with questions which, in the present context, come upon them forcefully from out of the classical Reformed hermeneutics (cf. Van Bekkum, Van Houwelingen, Peels 2013):

- What is the basis of the conviction that the Bible tells about God’s wondrous deeds? Is it the confession that the Bible is God’s Word by means of which the certainty of historicity is guaranteed? Or does a given trust in Christ precede this, a trust which can also live with the fact that certain matters remain unclear? (cf. Van

Bekkum 2000; 2009a; 2012c).

- How do you conduct academic biblical scholarship from a confessional perspective in open contact with the world?
- What is the place of new knowledge in the interpretation of the Bible and of the perception that it has become impossible to oversee all the developments?
- And last but not least: is it really true that a Reformed theologian can settle the discussion about the historicity of a passage in the Bible by referring to the “plain sense” interpretation thereof? Or does this manner of reasoning run the risk of ignoring the different ways in which the Bible refers to the past, and does a reading which begins with the specific form and presentation of the text do Scripture more justice?

These questions go to the heart of the specific character of sola scriptura and the intention to fully honour this rule. They deserve an open discussion within the context of Reformed ecumenicity. This sharpens everyone. And it would prevent churches from needlessly limiting their tradition or drifting away from it.

All in all, I can only conclude that in the Dutch and international discussions about my dissertation unnecessarily big words were spoken. It is unfortunate that this has happened and it has also not left me unaffected. Hopefully, when other topics are dealt with, others will be left with the impression that they were at least understood, even in the midst of difference of perspective. ■

■ Note:

To view this article with its bibliography, please go to <http://www.tukampen.nl/uploads/documents/389.pdf>

By dr D.J. Steensma

Homosexuality and Homosexual Relationships: Summary of the CGK Vision Statement¹ and excerpt from the report

Recently the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands came to a declaration in relation to homosexuality and homosexual relationships. The declaration is based on a vision statement, of which this article is a summary. The entire document can be found online at cgk.nl. A pastoral guide for the churches has also been prepared; this is to appear in the next issue of *Lux Mundi*.



Homosexual feelings are feelings of a sexual nature towards someone of the same gender. Lasting feelings of such a kind are described as a homosexual orientation. The number of people with such an orientation has been estimated at around three per cent of males and one per cent of females.

In the past, members with a homosexual orientation have often been treated badly in the church. Such treatment does not agree with the gospel. Even the thought that such members might be of lesser value than others renders us guilty before God.

Within the churches, there are diverging views on homosexuality. This cannot be separated from the society in which we live. In the broader community, same-sex relationships are generally accepted, and our churches are not insulated from these developments. Views change, self-evident truths disappear, and confusion and alienation give rise to tensions.

Background

From ancient times, explanations have been sought for same-sex attraction. Presently, biological explanatory models play a dominant role. These models attribute possible causes to hormones, brain functions, genetic factors, or a combination of the above. Other models point to psychosocial factors: learned behaviours or influences by the environment. Some theories point to disorders in the development from childhood to adulthood. Many see it as a complex interaction involving a range of such factors.

In general, it can be said that for anyone who has had a homosexual orientation from childhood, change is not possible, or at least highly unlikely.

This may sometimes be different for those who have developed this orientation during adolescence. Be that as it may, neither physical, psychological nor societal factors may be regarded as a norm for our behaviour.

It is important that the church emphasizes that sexuality and marriage are good gifts of God. Sadly, in our time many have lost sight of this truth; and also of the truth that these gifts have been deeply marred by the fall into sin, have been restored in Christ, and are being restored by the Holy Spirit. At the same time, it must also be said that the marriage relationship is not the greatest and highest fulfilment of our humanity. This fulfilment lies in our relationship with God. In this light, being unmarried is a fully equivalent alternative.

Brokenness

Homosexual feelings are signs of our brokenness. We all share in this brokenness, in various ways. None, therefore, may regard themselves as superior to others, and none, therefore, need feel inferior to others.

In Romans 1, Paul does not point to certain people who in some way might be greater sinners than others. He does not stigmatize here. His intention is to demonstrate, by means of a very obvious sin, the guilt of all mankind before God: of themselves, humanity will honour the creature above the Creator. No one is righteous. All people have been darkened in their minds, and confused in their actions.

At the same time, Paul rejects unnatural practices that go against the intention of the Creator. It is not just the pagan practice of temple prostitution that he condemns, for he also refers to sexual relations between women, and these did not occur in pagan temples. Neither does he limit himself to the homosexual abuse of a slave by a master, or of a young person by an adult. Nor does he simply reject what we might call decadent or debauched behaviour. Whatever background homosexual acts might have, the apostle censures them all.

The fact that Paul does not specifically mention homosexual orientations does not mean he has nothing to say about that. It is clear that all people, into the depths of their being, live broken lives and stand guilty before God.

About the Author

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What Paul writes goes back to Leviticus (18:22 and 20:13). Even his choice of words points in that direction. And that is quite telling. For the prohibition in Leviticus is not limited to homosexual relations in pagan temples. It is quite general, and ultimately points to the boundaries that God has set.

Scripture texts and actuality

It is not enough for us to simply quote Bible texts. We must weigh these texts in the light of the totality of the message of Scripture. This message is that God, in Christ, gives us salvation in the forgiveness of sins, in liberation, and in a new life. Whoever is in Christ is a new creation, and *becomes* a new creation by the power of the Holy Spirit. Just as Christ loves the commandments of his Father, so does everyone who bears his name. We may not relativize this rejection of homosexual behaviour in the Bible with a reference to the covenant. We may not say: as long as human relationships reflect our covenant relationship with God, they are OK. If we were to do this, we would separate our understanding of the covenant from what God has given in creation and confirmed in Christ. Others take the view that a relationship is acceptable if it is one of love. However, in the Bible love is never seen as a substitute for any other command; rather, it highlights the essence of all commandments.

Still others point to the Biblical notion of freedom: in Scripture, we see a progressive increase in freedom for those who are disadvantaged or marginalized, such as women or slaves. We do not, however, see a similar development in the Bible in regard to homosexual relations.

Many say that we, in our time, no longer apply all the commands of Scripture. Think, for instance, of the eating of blood. This was forbidden, even for pagans, in both the Old and the New Testaments. Would something similar not also apply to homosexual relationships? Initially forbidden by God, but now permitted? Wouldn't God, in matters such as these, accommodate to changing times? The

point is that nowhere in Scripture do we find any such indication at all. The church confesses that Scripture alone is the guideline and rule for all our thinking and action, not our perspective on changing cultures.

Church and church members

Within the church, all members may be held to account on the basis of this confession. But what if someone has differing thoughts regarding a loving and faithful homosexual relationship? What if he cannot see the sense of such a command? Even if we do not understand the precise meaning of a command, and may have some doubts concerning it, the call to obedience still remains. It is true that all believers stand directly before the face of God, and that all of them have their own personal responsibility. But as communicant members of the church they do all stand under the pastoral oversight and discipline of the elders. This willing submission is based upon what the Bible says about the place of the church's office bearers.

Elders give expression to what the communion of saints understands from Scripture concerning the will of God. This gives them authority to make judgments as to what is or is not in conflict with the honour of God and the holiness of the congregation. In the interpretation of Scripture, this authority carries greater weight than the understanding of an individual believer.

There are some questions that a local church council cannot deal with on its own. In addressing these questions, churches within the federation support each other. In such cases, decisions jointly taken must be accepted, subject to the right of appeal, as settled and binding. It would also be ecclesiastically unacceptable if homosexual brothers and sisters, by moving to another congregation, could be subject to a different policy on this matter. Any member who, notwithstanding, goes his own way must be seriously and lovingly admonished, in wisdom and with the utmost sensitivity.

Declaration of the church

In the declaration that it has made, the General Synod recognizes that in the past there has generally been insufficient attention for pastoral communication in relation to homosexuality and homosexual relationships.

Further, it states that within the congregation the position of members with a homosexual orientation is fully equal to that of other members. This position is not in any way diminished by their orientation. They are fully and equally members of the congregation, share in its mutual care and support, and are to be involved with their own particular gifts in the edification of the whole. Synod has also declared that sexual relations between persons of the same sex, and relationships within which such relations are embedded, are not in accordance with the Word of God. They must, therefore, be described as sins. In such situations, the church must exercise its pastoral responsibility, following the way of ecclesiastical admonition, in accordance with Scripture, the confession and the church order.

Finally, Synod has emphasized that the instruction of Scripture in regard to homosexuality and homosexual relationships in preaching, catechesis and pastoral care must be carried out in a manner that fully reflects the mind of Christ. ■

‘Homosexuality and homosexual relationships’

Chapter 4 – Faithful engagement with the Scriptures²

Before we listen to various texts and motifs found in Scripture, we wish to briefly give account regarding the manner in which we do so. It is a good thing for us, *a priori*, to provide clarity concerning the manner in which we receive, regard, and use the Bible.

1. *The Reformed view of Scripture*

In 2007 the General Synod of the CGK appointed a study committee to prepare an ecclesiastical statement regarding homosexuality and homosexual relationships. The committee was instructed to prepare this statement within the framework of a Reformed view of the Scriptures. For this reason, we aim to provide some clarity concerning this perspective. In doing so, we draw on the hermeneutical approach of the report *Vrouw en Ambt* (Women and the Office) adopted by the 1998 Synod. In this context, we highlight the following.

The Reformed view of Scripture is more than just a theoretical perspective. We accept the Scriptures *before* we develop a perspective on them. The Holy Spirit, who spoke through the prophets and the apostles, is the same Spirit who still testifies in our hearts that these Scriptures are from God (Belgic Confession, Art. 5). Hence, the reliability and credibility of the Bible do not depend on any argumentation from our side: Scripture proves itself. In saying this, we do not deny that there may be a certain tension between the Old and New Testaments, or between different Bible books. This tension, however, fits entirely within the manifold work of the Holy Spirit, who is One, but who has inspired many people in a variety of ways. This believing point of departure means that we will always desire to receive and approach Scripture in obedience. Such obedience does not speak for itself. Time and again, we will have to overcome all kinds of resistance, wrong preconceptions and misunderstandings that exist within us. A life with the Scriptures is a matter of

continual repentance and submission to God.

For those who are in Christ, this obedience is a matter of joy and love: ‘*Oh, how I love Your law!*’ (Ps 119: 97). At bottom, it is obedience to the good news that God, in Christ, does not condemn people because of their past, but sets them free from the guilt and power of sin. He opens up for them a new future, with a new life and a new identity. Regardless of their gender or sexual orientation, all Christians are one in this gospel and in this obedience – even though every day they must learn this anew.

The Reformed view of Scripture aims to do full justice to the Bible. Among other things, this means that it takes into account the time and context in which the authors of Scripture lived, in comparison with our own time. A direct application of certain Bible texts is not always appropriate. For instance, where Paul exhorts his readers to greet one another with a holy kiss, he does so in a historical context that is not our own. Doing the same today would create all kinds of misunderstandings. We must therefore take the context of a Bible text into account.

However, we may not create a situation where we give so much weight to our present culture that we in fact set aside the Word given to us. For example, in what follows in this report, the question is asked which forms of homosexuality Paul knew, and to what extent these are similar to the homosexual acts and feelings that we might encounter today. The Reformed view of Scripture identifies these aspects, and simultaneously emphasizes that

Scripture always has decisive authority. It aims to prevent any one-sidedness.

A one-sided approach to the context in which the Bible text came to be will always encounter differences between then and now. And it is easy to come to the premature conclusion that the original authors had something else in mind than what we see today. We criticize all too quickly the culture of that time, and the associated Bible text, but are not critical enough of our own culture.

Whoever takes the Bible seriously as the Word of God, however, will recognize that while the Bible came to be in a very specific context, it still speaks to all of humanity in all times and places. In other words, Scripture does not allow itself to be reduced to a truth that only applies in its own time and context. We ourselves, in our own cultural context, fall under its critical eye. Even when we take cultural contexts into account, we cannot sidestep the question concerning the distinctive authority of the whole of Scripture. The long-standing method of ‘comparing Scripture with Scripture’ has lasting value.

Further, it is vital that the Reformed view of Scripture takes account, not only of the time in which the Bible had its origin, but also and especially of the history of the salvation that God has brought about. He has followed a way along which he brought about and distributed his salvation and redemption. Hence, we will sometimes observe a development within Scripture. The meaning of an Old Testament command may, for instance, gain a more pointed focus in the light of the New Testament. This in itself shows that while the Spirit enters a particular context with the Word, he does not limit this word to that context. The Word, while related to a certain time, retains a lasting authority.³

2. *Some broad outlines*

Within the framework of this report, it is useful to point to some accents that lend colour to the whole. Most importantly, we point to the redemptive-historical progress of creation, fall, and redemption,

in which we also recognize the aspect of the Kingdom of God.

God created mankind in a certain state, i.e. 'good'. Through the fall into sin, this goodness has changed into its opposite, and is only restored to its original state by way of salvation in Jesus Christ. This classical and proven triplet (creation-fall-redemption) ought not to be understood as if we can simply and directly discern God's purpose in creation from certain orders, structures or states of affairs. The order that God laid in creation does not stand on its own, as though it were free from the effects of the fall into sin. Sin has deeply affected all of creation, including our understanding of God's creation and of his purpose in it.

God's deepest purpose is only to be known and discerned in his Son Jesus Christ. Creation, fall, and redemption do not consist solely of a historical sequence. All three stand in relation to Jesus Christ. Hence, they stand in relation to the history of salvation. They also explain each other this way: we only have access to the goodness of creation in Christ. Just how profound are the effects of sin is ultimately clear in the cross and death of Christ. In the resurrection of Christ from the dead, God the Father demonstrates his faithfulness to his purpose in creation. The creation order and its purpose stand in the light of the revelation of the Triune God.

The foregoing implies that we can only learn to understand the brokenness of creation and our own guilt, in all its depth, in the cross of Christ. When Christians suffer because of this brokenness, then this brokenness does not have the last word. Likewise, our guilt does not have the last word either. When, in what follows, we speak of what God has given in creation, ultimately the crucified and risen One stands at the centre. Creation and re-creation cannot be played off against each other. We read Scripture as a unity. The proclamation that God is Creator, and the proclamation of his glory as Creator, will resound to the end of time. This witness casts light on the renewal of all things that God gives in the coming of his

Kingdom. We see what the character of our redemption is in the triplet: creation – fall – redemption. For a Christian, redemption means that he shares in Christ's anointing. Thus, he receives a new identity. This identity, however, is experienced in the continuing tension between 'already' and 'not yet'. In Christ, believers share in the new creation; at the same time, however, they are still on their way to God's future.

The concrete realization of the Christian life is found in following Christ, who sets free his own, and calls them out of whatever still holds them in bondage. In this way, they are called to the Kingdom of God and Christ. All those who follow the One who was crucified, themselves become bearers of a cross. In the end, however, this is not bad news, but good news, the gospel. Whoever suffers with Christ may one day also share in his glory (Romans 8:17).

In the Christian church, it is common for believers to be called to great sacrifices, sometimes brought with struggle, sometimes with joy, but always with the mind of Christ, who went before us in showing what 'service' is, and in teaching us that it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35).

In this context, the accent upon 'following Christ' is also important. While for every believer this following includes cross-bearing, ultimately it is good news. Not only is this cross laid upon us, Christians themselves also willingly take up this cross in the power of the Holy Spirit.

However, believers do not stand on their own. They stand within a fellowship. The church is a communion of pilgrims, who encourage one another to persevere in this way of following Christ. To follow this way, as difficult as it may be, and though we may often stumble, is ultimately a joy. Finally: the way of following Christ is not so much a matter of complying with rules that the church may impose. After all, believers *themselves*, by the grace of God, *choose* to follow Jesus Christ. In other words, their following of Christ is real and authentic. In this, the Bible and the church are not just external authorities:

through the working of the Holy Spirit they are accepted inwardly. This Christian authenticity, therefore, is essentially and permanently bound to the authority of Jesus Christ. In following Christ, authenticity and authority do not exclude, but include each other. ■

Notes

- 1 This article is a translation of a summary of the report entitled "Fundering Kerkelijke Uitspraak" that appeared in *Kerkblad van het Noorden. Orgaan van de Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken*, 6 December 2013. The original article is available at http://www.kerkbladvoorhetnoorden.nl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2062:fundering-kerkelijke-uitspraak&catid=14:artikelen&Itemid=28. This translation by Aart Plug, May 2014, by arrangement with the author.
- 2 Synod 2013 of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk in the Netherlands released a document entitled *Visiedocument 'Homoseksualiteit en homoseksuele relaties'*. This translation of Chapter 4 of the document was made by Aart Plug, May 2014 by arrangement with the co-authors of the original document. The full text of the document is to be published at www.cgk.nl (click on "English"). An official translation is still being finalized.
- 3 See chapter 7 of the original document for a more in-depth discussion of this point.



An Open Letter to our Readers

Dear readers of *Lux Mundi*!

As editor-in-chief I would like to be the spokesperson for our editorial board in seeking your help concerning this magazine. *Lux Mundi* is the magazine of the Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (BBK). We as editors have the task of finding, encouraging, and writing articles which inform our readers about God's work in the world and which illumine theological subjects in a Biblical way, particularly for the circles of those churches which are orthodox Reformed.

Until now our editorial board has consisted of members of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands, assisted by Rev. R.C. Janssen, pastor of a Canadian Reformed Church, and Prof. Dr. J.W. Maris, member of the Christian Reformed (Christelijke Gereformeerde) Churches in The Netherlands. BBK has now taken the step of supporting our proposal to attempt a broadening of our editorial board by adding editors from our sister-churches around the world, with the eventual intention of having *Lux Mundi* become a publication under the aegis of the ICRC.

Our reasons for this have to do with our conviction that a magazine such as *Lux Mundi* would be more fruitful if its ecumenical, world-wide character were to be strengthened. Broadening the editorial participation would in itself be an ecumenical step, sharing the gifts of the Holy Spirit world-wide,

present among our sister-churches in so many different nations and cultures, and seeking together to know and serve the Lord Jesus Christ better. In this way we hope to glorify Him more, and to encourage each other in spreading His Gospel in the world.

We propose the following steps in our transition to another format. In 2014: a broadening of the editorial board of *Lux Mundi* from the various continents of the world in which there are ICRC churches. In 2015: a balancing of articles, so that 50% are from and about The Netherlands, and 50% from and about ICRC churches outside The Netherlands. There will be full coverage of regional conferences in the world. In 2016: the internationalizing of *Lux Mundi* will continue, and BBK will officially ask the ICRC, at its official meeting in 2017 (Hamilton, Canada), to make *Lux Mundi* an ICRC-sponsored magazine. In 2017: the conceived transition will be complete, if the ICRC conference approves the BBK proposal. If it does not, then *Lux Mundi* can continue as a magazine produced in The Netherlands, but with a fully international editorial board and international financial support.

We will keep you informed about the further developments.

J.M. (Kim) Batteau, editor-in-chief



In order to keep costs low *Lux Mundi* will now be available both digitally (PDF) and in print. Subscribers are at liberty to forward the digital version of the magazine on to others who might be interested in it. If you are able to make do with a digital issue of *Lux Mundi*, please send an e-mail to the BBK office (bbk@gbouw.nl) with the subject line "Digital *Lux Mundi* request." You will then begin receiving *Lux Mundi* digitally.



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