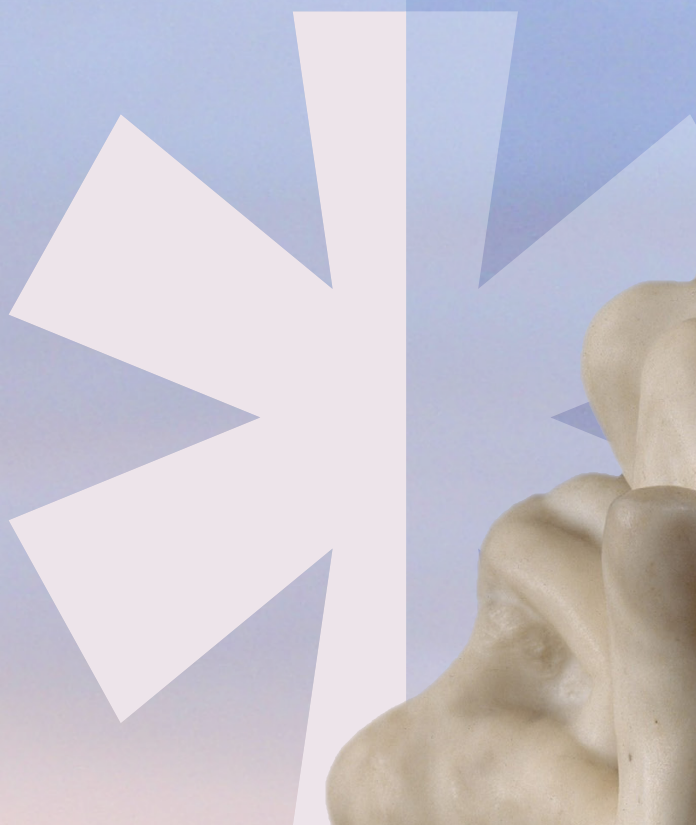


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Editors: Mrs. Sabine Bosscha-Timmermans (RCN)
Rev. Karlo Janssen (CanRC Canada)
Rev. Lungawiruol Khawbung (RPCNEI India)
Dr. Jae Youn Kim (KPCK Korea)
Dr. Hans Maris (CRC The Netherlands)
Rev. David Miller (FCS Scotland)
Mrs. Ria Nederveen-van Veelen (RCN)
Rev. Bukenya Paul (PCU Uganda)

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Address for editorial and administrative matters (subscriptions, change of address):
Lux Mundi / office BBK
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The Netherlands
Phone: ++31(0)38 4270470
Email: bbk@gbouw.nl
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Ecclesiastical Fellowship



Karlo (Dr. R.C.) Janssen

Pursuing and maintaining Ecclesiastical Fellowship is an energy, time, and money consuming endeavour. Often the question is asked whether this commitment of resources is responsible. Scripture call us to be ‘eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’ (Eph. 4:3). But how?

■ The value of Ecclesiastical Fellowship

Ecclesiastical Fellowship relations bring to expression a bond that is real yet cannot efficiently be practised because of distance and/or culture. Such relations regulate the privileges and obligations that churches have who share the same Reformed confession even though they belong to different bonds.

Privileges The privileges basically come down to the fact that churches will treat each other’s members and officers as they would their own. Sister-churches trust each other’s word.

When church A belonging to ‘denomination’ Y issues a testimony, church B in ‘denomination’ Z will accept it without questioning it. That testimony might be an attestation indicating a person is sound in doctrine and life and thus is to be admitted to the Lord’s Table. That testimony might be a declaration indicating a brother is sound in doctrine and life and thus is licensed to proclaim God’s Word. Such testimonies are used for those who travel and for those who move from one place to another.

Obligations The obligations basically come down to mutual paraclesis. ‘Paraclesis’ is a Greek word which means ‘to speak a right word at the right time’. In English translations of Scripture we find it and associated words rendered with words such as comfort, encourage, admonish, urge, exhort, help, advocate. Churches in Ecclesiastical Fellowship accept their responsibility of mutual paraclesis. They will inform each other when they consider changes in doctrine, worship, and governance. They promise to assist and admonish each other when questions or concerns arise. Mutual paraclesis compels churches to unite. Christ emphatically and explicitly prayed for the unity of the church (John 17). The Holy Spirit urged unity of the church even in view of diversity within the church (1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 2 & 4).

■ More or less Ecclesiastical Fellowship?

The challenge is that the privileges and the obligations bite each other. The obligations create a lot of work. The more Ecclesiastical Fellowship relations a church

has, the more assemblies need to be attended and the more reports, acts, and minutes will need to be read. The privileges reduce work. The more Ecclesiastical Fellowship relations a church has, the easier it is to receive members and ministers from elsewhere, and to help members who move find a new church to attend.

■ Rethinking how we do it

There are other options to just maintaining bilateral relations of Ecclesiastical Fellowship. Three things to consider are regionalization, multilateralization, and decentralization.

Regionalization implies that churches first look in their own geographical context for relationships.

Multilateralization implies using networks of churches instead of bilateral relations for paraclesis.

Decentralization implies having local churches and/or classes/presbyteries as opposed to the broadest assembly decide who to recognize. A church’s inter-church relations committee could then serve as advisor to the minor assemblies, broader assemblies as courts of appeal.

■ Already done

To some extent these are already practised.

Regionalization: While the Canadian Reformed Churches assist the Reformed Churches in Quebec, they leave assistance to the First Evangelical Reformed Church in Singapore to the Free Reformed Churches of Australia.

Multilateralization: The undertaking of a bilateral relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship carries with it a commitment of substantial resources for its implementation. Hence the Orthodox Presbyterian Church maintains contact with many churches through the ICRC and NAPARC.

Decentralization: Where incidental access to the Lord’s Supper and the pulpit are concerned, most churches already make arrangements locally.

■ With all the saints

With the Nicene Creed we do confess ‘one holy catholic and apostolic Church’. Thus the Reformers envisioned a single global church. The existence of Ecclesiastical Fellowship relations is the closest we come to expressing our global and transcultural unity in Christ. That remains a reason for joy and gratitude. For it is *with all the saints* that we come to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ (cf. Eph. 3:18-19).

May the practice of Ecclesiastical Fellowship serve God’s glory and increase our joy in him!

In this issue we are saying farewell to one of our international editors, Dr Haemoo Yoo of Korea, who had to withdraw due to a heavy workload. We are grateful for his services, the last of which was to find a replacement for himself. We welcome the Rev. Jae Youn Kim to the editorial team. Elsewhere in this edition he introduces himself. We look forward to his contribution, so that Lux Mundi may be the voice of Reformed theology around the globe, so that the light of Christ may shine in all places.

The editorial team.

Living close to God



Dr A.L. Th. De Bruijne (b. 1959) is professor of Ethics and Spirituality at the Theological University of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands at Kampen, the Netherlands.

Is it a coincidence that I am standing here before you? Not really, you might say. The topic 'living close to God' has to do with spirituality, and that is your subject area. But as it happens, when they approached me I was just busy with a book by Abraham Kuyper. '*Nabij God te zijn*' – 'Being close to God', it was called.

This book took hold of me. I lay awake one night, just thinking. Usually, I'd get up for a while: a few minutes online, have a drink, do some work perhaps. But this time I followed Kuyper's advice: if you lie awake, even if only for 15 minutes or so, that is God's invitation to speak with him. And as I was doing that, a word from the Bible came to me: it gave me just the answer for what was troubling me. I was deeply moved by the realization that God, who at this moment was directing the whole universe, also had special attention for me, here in my bed. I felt his nearness, almost physically. Is it really a coincidence that I stand here before you? In any case, you will understand why I will be using some of Abraham Kuyper's insights in this address today. My presentation has three parts: first, I will explain the risk that Reformed spirituality runs in a life close to God; next, that the LORD is close to us, and that you can sense that. Finally, we will examine the practice of living close to him.

■ Reformed spirituality and a risk

Spirituality. That's a vague word. But it is popular today. The museum next door to this church building is currently running an exhibition about 'present-day spirituality'. Postmodern people have lost interest in the business-like approach to modern living. There has to be more to it than the emptiness of a world that we see, make, and control. Transcendence, something higher: God perhaps? At the same time, postmodern people begin to discover their own feelings. We too are more than a head that thinks or a body that consumes. Reformed spirituality begins at the other end. In his grace, God is on his way, with sinful people like us, to our destination. He gives us his Son Jesus Christ. Once, we shall be perfectly like him, and in him, like God. As we are on our way, he moulds us. He deepens his bond with us. And in doing so, he is renewing the way we live. The heart of Reformed spirituality, then, is our unity with Christ. But not without the Father or the Spirit. It is not about us, but about the honour of the triune God. According to Reformed believers, our bond with Christ exists through the means he gives: especially through the Word, but also through Baptism and Holy Supper.

Besides that, the church has an important place in Reformed spirituality. One's unity with Christ is not just personal; it is also shared with others. In addition, Reformed spirituality does not withdraw into a purely personal spiritual life. The bond we have with God encompasses all domains of life within his creation. There is one thing, though: this last aspect comes with an element of risk, especially for Reformed neo-Calvinists, including those of the Liberation. And it was Abraham Kuyper of all people, the father of neo-Calvinism, who already drew attention to that risk. Neo-Calvinists are fond of saying: living close to God is simply the ordinary business of everyday life in God's creation; it is living within his covenant.

But is that really so? Do you experience this bond with God in your daily existence? Kuyper points out that Reformed believers often resemble their modern secular contemporaries. In spite of themselves, they too often experience creation as a world of objects, empty and impersonal. They believe that God is there, but he remains something abstract, a label attached to this empty life. Predominantly, this abstraction is given practical reality in activity for God's kingdom within creation, and in the doing of his will. This faith is one of decisive action. You can talk about it and reason it out at length, but it does not easily become a matter of the heart and soul.

It should come as no surprise, then, that today's Reformed neo-Calvinists are especially sensitive for this postmodern search for spirituality. Some swing back and forth from one extreme to the other. From a dearth of emotion to excessive emotion. Where we once activistically served God in all spheres of life, we are now caught up in a preoccupation with spiritual experience and emotions.

Kuyper suggests a different approach. Recently we saw a video in which various lecturers collaborated in presenting a course in spirituality to students of the Pieter Zandt College in Kampen and the Greijdanus College in Zwolle. These two schools represent the two streams of thought within the classical Reformed tradition. Where Christians of the 'Pieter Zandt' stream have traditionally had an experiential focus, paying special attention to inner spiritual life, those of the 'Greijdanus' stream are generally neo-Calvinists, focusing on active service of God in the breadth of life within creation. Kuyper brings these two streams together. And he complements them with insights from Roman Catholic and evangelical perspectives. For today also, this seems to me to be a useful approach.

■ God is near, and his nearness can be experienced

That brings me to the second aspect: experiencing the nearness of God. For living close to God is only possible when God, in his grace, first comes close to us. The Lord is near, Paul writes. You may know that, in faith. But you can also experience it. The nearness of God becomes the power that changes, from the inside out, the full breadth of the various aspects of life within creation.

How then is God near? In his Word, I hear you say. The Word is near you, says the Bible. But the Word doesn't just hang in the air. It comes to us from God's own mouth, his own heart. Within a relationship. The Word is near, because first of all God himself is near. If we should forget that, it can so easily happen – and Kuyper warned us about it – that you might have heard about God, by way of his Word, but that you have never actually met the Lord himself.

The Bible speaks of God's nearness in at least two ways. First, he comes to live with us. And second, he is always everywhere present.



[photo: Ria Nederveen]

*Behind the curtain
of creation beats the
pulse of God's own life*

■ The Lord comes to live with us

Through his work of reconciliation God, in the course of history, has come ever closer to sinful people. First, he lived among us, but separately from us, in a tabernacle or a temple. Nearby, but still at a sacred distance from us. When Jesus appeared, he came to live among us, just like that, within our everyday earthly existence. And then, when the Spirit was poured out, this nearness to God assumed a wonderful intimacy. Jesus says: My Father and I will come to make our home in you. Our hearts have become his temple.

At the same time, the throne of God remains in heaven. And in his body, Christ remains there too. Paul says: as long as we are

on earth, we live as aliens, away from the Lord. Besides: next to God, sin also still lives in my heart. And the world around us has not yet been filled with the freedom and love of God. That is why we do not always experience the nearness of God, and never in its fullness. The reality of his presence is still constrained.

Still, we may now already experience something of God's nearness. When we are one with Christ, and when God comes to live in our hearts, a profound sense of communion begins to grow. It's almost impossible to explain this oneness, but you do experience it. It is more intense and more intimate than the relationship with a close friend, or between husband and wife. The Bible says: you see Jesus. Not yet as when all our senses will be opened to God. But there is a beginning. You see Jesus with the eyes of your heart. And that evokes responses within us, effects, faith experiences. First of all awe, reverence, a degree of dread even. God is in this place: how can I bear his presence in my heart? At the same time, feelings of love and joy that words cannot express. Jesus lives in me. In me?! God, who is love, has come to live in us. His love goes straight through me; it becomes my love. You will also feel a wonderful peace. Peace and joy in God, even though there is still so much that makes you restless and unhappy. A peace that surpasses all understanding. It cannot be explained, but it can be experienced.

■ God is present in his creation

However, next to God's indwelling in our very being, as Creator he is also everywhere present in his creation. Every second, he sustains it all by his word of power. Should he withdraw himself, even for a moment, every creature would immediately cease to exist. His eternal power and deity have been clearly seen in all his works, says Paul. In him, everything lives and moves and has its being. He is not far from any one of us.

This empty modern world, a world of objects only, a place of impersonal busyness, has proved to be a lie. Everything has its own secret. Kuyper puts it this way: behind the curtain of creation beats the pulse of God's own life. It is no wonder that Westerners today have apparently become incurably 'spiritual'. However, this omnipresence of God in creation is not just important for non-Christians. As if for us, God's intimate indwelling in our hearts would be sufficient. It is especially for Christians that this continuing presence of God in creation is there to be discovered anew. It is Kuyper who provides the first impulse for a Reformed spirituality of creation. When you have learned to see the nearness of God with the eyes of your heart, you will be better able to discern his presence in the breadth of the surrounding world. You learn to look at people, animals, plants, objects, discoveries, and events through different eyes. You begin to discover the secret beneath the surface. This is more than seeing a sunset and saying: hasn't God



*He allowed his glory
to be defaced*

made such a beautiful world? For then this beautiful world can still remain an artistic product, independent of God its Creator. It is more than that: the divine Artist is himself present in his work. With the eyes of your heart you recognize in a sunset his own enthralling beauty and Creation, says Calvin, is a theatre of God's glory.

Do not be fooled into believing that there is no room any more for this way of looking at the world because we have unravelled its secrets, and are able scientifically to explain and to control the world. So what? Every scientist, every brain, every microchip, still depends for every instant on God's presence. Every piece of research, every theory, can only exist because of the possibilities he holds out. Those phenomena, too, that we are able to explain, testify of his eternal power and deity. The suggestion that God might lose more ground with every human advance is an unbelievable fallacy. You have made him a little lower than the angels – how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Nor should we think that this is merely a romantic notion that falls foul of raw reality. Recently we saw images of African refugees shipwrecked near the coast of Italy. A weeping woman and an outraged man, wading onto a beach. Behind them a sinking boat and floating bodies. God, where are you? At the same time I saw him. He allowed his glory to be defaced. The sky was a flawless blue, the sea crystal clear, the rocky coast breathtakingly beautiful, the white beach beckoned. People and demons performed a cruel drama in the theatre of God's glory. It could not be otherwise than that God felt the grief and the anger of those two people, who owed their very existence to his presence. All the evil in the world is an abuse of all the good that God in his patience keeps distributing, second by second. Everything that happens in the world plays out in the theatre of his glory.

■ Practical points for a life close to God

This brings me to the last part of this presentation: living close to God in practice. I list seven pointers.

Keep your spirituality and your manner of living close together. God is moulding you to be like him. This is not just a matter of inner experience, but also one of daily life. 'Spirituality' can sometimes become a kind of cult of the self. A luxury phenomenon for bored Westerners who have everything, and who wonder whether there might not be 'something more'.

Christian spirituality can only exist in following the crucified Jesus on the way to God's destination. Do not just seek more and more 'faith experience'. Devote your whole life to the service of God.

Put effort into spiritual exercises. To truly live close to God in the breadth of created life, you must see him with the eyes of your heart. And that will only happen if you also cultivate a distinct spiritual life. 'Greijdanus' and 'Pieter Zandt' cannot do without each other.

I know from experience how difficult it can be to engage in such spiritual exercises, and to persevere in them. It came about that I had to teach 'spirituality' here in Kampen. For that, I had to force myself to pray and meditate more. To keep listening to the Bible until the voice of God truly penetrates. To seek, from time to time, a place of solitude and silence, to fast and to stay awake. That really was no success story. Often my prayers are messy, or all-too-predictable. Most of the time, meditation does not lead to a special insight or a special feeling of God's presence.

And still, over the years, something grows. One's bond with Jesus does become more intimate. Some sins really do grow less. You learn to know yourself. The will of God for a certain point of your life becomes clearer. Someone for whom you have long been praying receives a blessing. More and more, you carry your bond with God along with you in everyday life. And sometimes there is a special moment. Or a valuable insight. For instance, in meditating on the Psalms I discovered that the Psalms themselves assume that we actually do meditate. They contain all kinds of expressions which indicate that you contemplate the words and works of God, that you taste them, examine them attentively, pause to consider them, say them aloud, repeat them often. You do not need to be an intellectual, sitting in your study, to meditate. There are so many Christians who, while working with their hands, are busy meditating, consciously or not. And you do not need to do that on your own. What is more: Roman Catholic, evangelical, and Taizé Christians teach us that singing can often turn into meditation. Spiritual exercise begins together with others, and in liturgy.

Do not be afraid of discipline. We often feel that we are too busy for spiritual exercises. And yet, that is relative. Never in our history have we had as much free time as we do today. Today we think that the new life must arise spontaneously. It must come from within yourself, not imposed from outside. And then we emphasize that quiet time is no obligation, and that a fixed routine may not suit everyone. We turn away from the discipline of a classical Sunday observance, or of coming to God at mealtimes, three times a day. But the Roman Catholic tradition can teach us how salutary fixed times and prescribed structures and words can be. Train yourself in piety, says Paul. And training is a matter of practice, meant for building speed or fitness. That is not something that comes easily or spontaneously: it calls for regular repetition, for discipline.

Integrate your spiritual life with your everyday life. Kuyper advises us to speak in our personal prayers to God about the

whole of life in his creation. In your prayers, you can mention art, amusement, a concert or a sporting event, political events, news, the environment, what happens down the street or in the community. In this way you draw all of the areas of life in God's creation into the intimate communion that you have with God. That helps you to maintain that connection with God in the practice of everyday living. Paul says: you sanctify all of your created existence by thanksgiving and prayer.

Conversely, Kuyper also advises us to carry on praying while active in the breadth of daily life. To think about God, and to speak to him. Brief, momentary prayers. Not just once in so many months, but every week, every day, perhaps several times a day. I, as a true neo-Calvinist, used to tell my students that this was unnecessary and perhaps even risky. Imagine that you were thinking about God while you were performing a calculation or carrying out a complex procedure. You need your full attention for that, otherwise you make mistakes. But Kuyper suggests that this is really an always-present substrate in your consciousness. A basic awareness of God – that does not weaken your attention for the world around you. The two are intermixed. This is how you carry the indwelling of God in your heart into your everyday life. Kuyper even goes so far as to suggest that we incorporate small memory helps about God's presence into our daily lives. In the manner of Roman Catholic wayside chapels and crucifixes. Symbols, in the car or in your workplace, that help you not to forget God.

Pay attention to God's direction. Living close to God is more than just doing his will, as his Word tells us. God himself is present, and from this Word his Spirit helps us to discern how his will becomes concrete, in all kinds of situations. Tasks at work, people who cross our paths, decisions we are faced with, things that happen – we live with this appeal in our heart: Lord, what are you doing right now, and so what are you asking of me? Often, the answer to that question was already there, in the Bible, but even then it is still God who presents you personally with that answer, and leads you by it.

Stay attuned to a sense of God's absence. Sometimes it feels that God is far away. That can make it difficult to live close to him. Still, this fits within God's training programme in following Jesus. The way to our destination leads past the cross. In all kinds of ways we share in Jesus' suffering. It is especially when God feels very distant that he evokes in us an intense longing for him. A kind of homesickness, because it makes you think of earlier moments, when he was so near. Behind that longing, the love of God is at work. He is fanning the fire of my love. For if I endure, keep living close to him, and in the end experience his nearness again, my bond of love with him is strengthened and deepened.

But it is also sin that creates distance from God. Sometimes it might be a lesser sin that we just ignore, a personal trait that we excuse, a disturbed relationship that we leave as it is. God will then feel far away, but in that feeling he is close to us with his anger or his correction. The weight of his hand bears down on us. Sometimes, says Kuyper, the idol of our own self must be knocked down, our own image of Dagon. When our heart is

crushed by our sins, God can come and live in us again. I can tell, from personal experience: he is right. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Recognize God in fellow Christians. Sooner or later you will notice that Christ is living in someone. You will recognize the presence of God in each other's lives. That is why living close to God also means living close to fellow Christians. And loving God is at the same time loving each other. Christians must always seek each other out, and forge connections with each other, in all areas of this empty modern life. For Kuyper, this meant a whole system of Christian social organizations. But even if we might do things differently, the principle remains the same. In everyday life, we are to develop relationships with fellow Christians. First of all in our own congregation, but also in our businesses, our neighbourhoods, our studies, our social organizations. In this way we fill the empty spaces in each other with the presence of God.

Sometimes God comes close in a fellow Christian to encourage or to stimulate you. You really do not need to have some special experience yourself to become aware of God's presence. He can also come to you through the experiences of others.

Earlier this year I worked at a university in America. During one of our weekly gatherings a colleague told a remarkable story. He had brought into his home a woman from Uganda, someone who had escaped from one of the labour camps of the Lord's Resistance Army. Almost every day she had been subjected to rape, but every day she felt the presence of God close to her. Once she even saw an angel, who was encouraging her. Then one day she heard a voice, saying to her: 'Tomorrow I will set you free'. The next day, together with the other women, she walked under guard to the field where she was working. Again she heard the voice: 'Turn left near that bush, and keep going, straight ahead.' She overcame her dread, and stepped aside. No-one had seen her, and soon she was free.

The woman told this story to my colleague, in the presence of his mother. She was not a Christian, and could not believe that the story was true. Not long afterwards this woman lay dying. She was afraid to die, and rebellious. One day my colleague entered her room and found her wonderfully calm. To his great amazement she said: 'God is close to me; I saw His angel in this room'. Soon afterwards she passed away, having surrendered to Christ.

When my colleague told this story, a wave of emotion swept through the room. It was not something that had happened to any of us, but we all experienced that our gracious God had been present, even in this modern, empty, broken, and newly 'spiritual' world. And we felt a renewed motivation to live close to him in this world. ■

■ Note

Text of a speech delivered at the Open Day of the Theological University of the Reformed Churches (liberated) at Kampen, the Netherlands, held 26 November 2015.

This translation from the Dutch language by Aart Plug, June 2016, by arrangement with the author.

A believing Thomas

According to the expression, a doubting Thomas is a sceptic who refuses to believe what others accept as a certainty. In other words: a realist who will not trust a report without direct personal experience and tangible proof. This is a reference to the apostle Thomas, who did not believe the other disciples when they told him that the resurrected Jesus had appeared to them. But was Thomas actually unbelieving? He grew up as a Jew, he knew the Torah. Jesus himself had chosen him to be an apostle. Just like the others he had been a hard-working disciple for many years, remaining faithful to the master. By no means was Thomas a born atheist.



Dr Rob (P.H.R.) van Houwelingen (1955) has been a minister since 1980; up until 2002 he served four congregations and subsequently became professor of New Testament at the Theological University Kampen.

However, from what the Gospel of John tells us about Thomas, we do get the impression that he had strong opinions and vented them. He did not hesitate to make a critical observation or ask difficult questions. When Jesus decided to travel to his deceased friend Lazarus in Bethany, the disciples considered it to be a reckless plan – they were convinced that Judea had become too dangerous by far. It was Thomas who remarked in a seemingly off-handed way: ‘Let us also go, that we may die with him.’ (John 11:16). He saw the journey to Judea as a dead-end road. Also, when Jesus, during his farewell discussions, referred to his Father’s house as his destination, saying to his disciples: ‘You know the way to where I am going’, it was Thomas who asked: ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ (John 14:5). Thomas had trouble following Jesus, both literally and figuratively.

Both these indications directly illustrate that Thomas could not accept the fact that they, as disciples, had to let their master go. It must have been difficult for him to come to terms with the realization that Jesus had indeed gone away by sacrificing his life. Thomas was not present on the evening of the resurrection, when the disciples had gathered behind closed doors. While the reason for his absence remains unmentioned, it is a fact that he was missing at that important moment. Thomas and Judas ought to have been with the twelve, but Judas had by his deeds withdrawn himself from the circle of apostles and Thomas was conspicuous by his absence.

■ Resurrection disbelief

When the others unanimously declared that they had seen the Lord, they would have explained that he had appeared in their midst and had left with a significant *shalom* (uttered even twice), and that he had then shown them the wounds in his hands and side. At this point, however, a deeply-rooted mistrust rears its head: Thomas refuses to accept their testimony. He himself must first see Jesus’ hands and the mark of the nails in them, and place his own hand into Jesus’ pierced side. What he says sounds particularly radical: Or ‘I will

**Thomas answered: ‘My Lord,
and my God!’**

(John 20:28)

never believe’ (Greek: *ou me pisteusoo*), namely that Jesus lives. You could call this a *confession of unbelief*, or a conditional confession. Yet it is not a case of general unbelief. Thomas did not suddenly lose sight of all that is godly, but without personal experience and tangible evidence he simply could not accept the reality of the resurrection. This is resurrection disbelief!

Jesus reacts by just letting him sit and wait for a week. Of course, he could have appeared to Thomas personally, as he did to Peter (1 Cor. 15:4). But here it is about an apostle who likes to make his own plan, who is now in danger of pulling out altogether. Thomas, especially, with his wilfulness and scepticism, had to learn to commit to the great project of Jesus Christ. That project involved the apostles jointly proclaiming the gospel of the living Lord in the world. For this reason, he is not addressed separately by the Lord, but sought out in the group to draw him in amidst the others.

After a week, the disciples are gathered once again behind closed doors, and then Thomas is actually present in the circle. As if by appointment, Jesus appears on the same spot and at the same time in their midst. No wonder that the first day after the Sabbath, the resurrection day, is also called ‘the day of the Lord’ (Rev. 1:10) and was considered by the apostles to be a typically Christian beginning of the new week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). Jesus Christ, the living Lord, meets with his church on Sunday. It all goes exactly the same as the time before. Again, Jesus comes in undisturbed by obstacles, and gives them his greeting of peace. But then Jesus especially turns to Thomas. Not to punish him, as the others had perhaps expected, but to voluntarily meet the condition laid down by Thomas, which he apparently knew about. ‘Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve,

Not the emperor

It may be that the first readers of the Gospel of John saw, in Thomas’ confession, an affirmative of their conviction that they could not possibly honour the Roman emperor as a divinity. They prayed for the emperor, not to him. It is known that the emperor Domitian, who governed from 81 to 96 after Christ, was glad to have himself called ‘lord and god’ by his subjects, but this manner of addressing Domitian had, of course, nothing to do with a personal relationship.

but believe.' Whether Thomas actually touched the scars of the Risen One, the story does not tell, but it is conceivable (cf. Luke 24:39 - 40).

■ My Lord, and my God.

Thomas reacts spontaneously to Jesus' words with a heartfelt confession of faith: 'My Lord, and my God!' A double address like that occurs in the Old Testament, for example in the prayer from Psalm 35:24: 'Vindicate me, O Lord, my God.' Thomas' confession, however, is not directed towards the Eternal, but to Jesus Christ, and the repeated 'my' makes it a strong personal confession. This disciple too is now convinced. In faith he acknowledges Jesus as his Risen Lord and his Living God.



The Incredulity of Thomas,
painting by Caravaggio,
1602
[Web Gallery of Art]

The fact that Jesus is explicitly addressed as God here is unique in the Gospels. And to think that this occurred in a circle of believing Jews, who had heard from all ages that there is but *one* God! Thomas' statement can be explained by the personal appearance of the living Lord, after his typically divine victory over death, to someone who supposedly had gone through an emotional week. Reports of the resurrection reaching him from all sides would have had him much confused.

Jesus accepts Thomas's confession of faith. Verse 29a is not, as it happens, a question, as some Bible translations would have it, but an observation. Jesus 'says' something to Thomas. The verb form used in Greek (*pepisteukas*) indicates a convincing faith with Thomas, comparable to earlier confessions (cf. John 6:69; 11:27). And the connection with the second part of the verse works better if the first part is meant as an observation, to which Jesus dovetails with a congratulation. Thomas believes because he saw the Lord – fortunate are those who believe without having seen. Jesus does not create a contradiction between seeing and believing. There is, however, another distinction, namely *seeing and believing* (by Thomas, at that moment) versus *not seeing and believing* (by others, in later times). Thomas believes in the Risen One as a

Thomas as travelling apostle

At Jesus' third appearance after the resurrection, Thomas was among the seven disciples who went fishing (John 21:2; it is he who most likely filled in the seventh position of the first six disciples of Jesus mentioned in John 1). While he is also named in the list of apostles in Acts 1:13, his name is no longer mentioned thereafter in the New Testament. A strong tradition connects Thomas to the Christian congregation of Edessa in Syria. Eusebius mentions that the area of Parthia (Persia, the current Iran) was assigned especially to this apostle (Church History III 3,1). According to the apocryphal Acts of Thomas he is supposed to have journeyed to the Far East in order to spread the gospel there. Today, there are still believers in India who call themselves Thomas-Christians.

result of what he was able to see; after Jesus' departure from earth all others are to be congratulated who believe without having seen him themselves (1 Peter 1:8).

■ Highlight

How can we Christians living many centuries later be convinced of something as incredible as the physical resurrection? By taking Jesus' congratulations and Thomas's confession of faith to heart. It was for us that this realist, too, had to be convinced. Jesus did not so much pay a home visit to 'brother Thomas', as that he came on a church visit to the apostles. Nobody could be allowed to be missing from that circle, physically or spiritually.

Let the fact that Thomas proclaimed his belief after initial unbelief, thereby not hesitating to address Jesus as 'Lord and God', convince everybody who did not personally meet the Risen One. The communal apostolic testimony resounds as in verse 25: 'We have seen the Lord.' This *seeing* of the apostles has led to *belief* worldwide (cf. 17:20; 1 John 1:1-4). It cannot be that a Christian continues to doubt the physical resurrection using the slogan: I am of the party of Thomas. The Christian church is based on the complete foundation of all twelve apostles (Eph. 2:20; Rev. 21:14).

Thomas's confession of faith is the highlight of John's Gospel and reason for the evangelist to address his readers directly and to reveal his purpose. 'Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.' (John 20:30-31). John, therefore, wishes to achieve the same effect with us readers as Jesus did with Thomas.

The confession of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, throughout all ages, rests on the unanimous testimony of his apostles, with, in their midst, a no longer doubting but believing Thomas, who has been followed by innumerable Christians, joining him with all their heart, saying: 'My Lord, and my God!' ■

Merciful Severity

Summary of the dissertation.



Bart van Egmond (1985) studied theology at the Theological University Kampen, the Free University Amsterdam and the Catholic University of Leuven. Since Februari 2016 he ministers at the Reformed Church (liberated) Capelle aan den IJssel-Noord, the Netherlands.

The present study describes and analyses the early thinking of Augustine of Hippo (354-430) on the soteriological meaning of God's judgment of sin. The design of the research is chronological-systematic. It treats, in chronological order, sub-aspects of the aforementioned theme, as they are dealt with in the writings of Augustine during his first ten years of activity as a Christian theologian. I divided this period into a number of phases, which also formed the basis for division into chapters: the stay in Cassiciacum (the summer and winter of 386, after his conversion), the period without ecclesiastical office in Rome and Thagaste (387-391), and finally the period as presbyter in Hippo Regius (391-396). The final chapter addresses the question as to how Augustine's thinking concerning grace and judgment, as it had developed over the first ten years after his conversion, is reflected in the Confessions, the theological autobiography he wrote at the beginning of his episcopate.

1. Introduction

In the first chapter the main question of the thesis is contextualized in three different ways. The first context is the anti-Gnostic (Alexandrian) tradition, which had, in all likelihood, influenced Augustine. This tradition, represented by Clement of Alexandria and Origen, suggested, in opposition to the Gnostics, that evil in the world is to be understood as a righteous punishment for the sin of man, but, simultaneously, as a proof of God's goodness. God uses evil to convert mankind. According to this view, mankind preserved free will in order to respond positively to God's corrective punishment. This thesis addresses the question of how the early Augustine relates to this tradition. The second context in which the research is placed is that of philosophical psychology. From Plato onward, philosophy was understood in medical terms as 'surgery of the soul': the soul had to be cured of incorrect opinions so that it would acquire a clear view of the truth. The order of the cosmos, too, was seen as being pedagogic. The soul suffers due to its bondage to the material and transient, but experiences, precisely therein, an incentive to return to itself, and to find its happiness within itself. Augustine learned about this psychological tradition via Cicero and the Neo-Platonists. How does he relate to this tradition when he speaks about the administration of divine and human discipline?

A third context in which the main question of the thesis is situated is that of Augustine research itself.

Two discussions play a role in this. Firstly, there is the discussion concerning the development of Augustine's doctrine of grace. Up to now, little attention has been paid to the meaning of punishment in Augustine's concept of how God's grace works. Secondly, the thesis addresses the question as to how Augustine's later justification of state coercion against the Donatists has to be made understandable from a historical perspective. Which early ideas were propounded here, and to what extent is there a development of a 'rational' Augustine who respects mankind's freedom of choice, compared to a 'suppressive' Augustine who justifies coercion in the name of God?

2. Cassiciacum: the discipline of fortune and dialogue

The second chapter covers the period of Augustine's stay on the estate Cassiciacum, where he retired a few weeks after his conversion in the garden of Milan, together with some relatives. In this chapter there are three central themes. Firstly, Augustine's Christianization of the pedagogy of fortune, the pagan name for fate. Augustine interprets fortune as the hidden providence of the Creator, who, through the suffering that strikes man, confronts the soul with its 'spiritual poverty', and incites it to bow before Christ, the 'power and wisdom of God' (1 Cor. 1:24) who, through his power and teaching, brings back fallen souls to the intelligible world.

A second theme covered in this chapter is the pedagogical meaning of the dialogues that Augustine organizes for his students. Just as with the pedagogy of fortune, the dialogues are aimed at confronting the interlocutors with the poverty of their soul, so that they become aware of the extent to which they still have to grow spiritually. Augustine discovers, however, that his own students are more driven by competitiveness and ambition than by an honest desire for truth. He uses the threat of punishment as a pedagogical means of restraining this competitive drive.

A third theme in this chapter is Augustine's view and experience of divine punishment on the road to the contemplation of God. Augustine hopes that he can reach a permanent state of contemplation in this life, but his experience of being 'pushed back' makes him aware of the extent to which he is still bound to earthly things. He interprets these punishments as a way through which the divine doctor makes him aware of how much he is still dependent on the doctor's healing hands.



3. God's pedagogy of the embodied soul: Augustine before he became presbyter (387-391)

The third chapter deals with Augustine's thinking on the soteriological meaning of God's judgment during the period of his stay in Rome and Thagaste.

It is during this period that Augustine starts to engage explicitly with the Manichean view of evil in the world. Whereas the Manichaeans interpret the evil under which we suffer as coming from the prince of darkness, Augustine states that this is to be interpreted as a divine punishment for the sin of man. We are not victims, but rather offenders who suffer punishment. It is argued that already the early Augustine sees the sin of Adam as the cause of both our mortality and the 'carnality' of the soul. This does not, however, compromise man's moral responsibility and his (partial) ability to respond positively to the divine inducement to conversion, which sounds in his suffering. Augustine is clearly moving within the paradigm of Origen, who interprets God's punishment of sin as solely pedagogical, and, therewith, as a form of grace.

A second theme is Augustine's view of God's use of punishment within salvation history. Contrary to Peter Brown and Edward Cranz, who have argued that Augustine sees salvation history as a process of moral progress, in which the transition from the Old to the New Testament would imply that God stopped using earthly punishments to educate his people, it is argued that Augustine does not know such a progressive view on the relationship between the Old and the New Testament. Although Augustine does not talk about the use of coercion in the time of the New Testament in his works from before 394, his theology still retains a principal openness for this option. A final section treats Augustine's experience of ordination. It argues that Augustine understood his ordination as presbyter as divine punishment for his own arrogance. The divine call to serve the congregation of Hippo, in the midst of the tempta-

tions of everyday life, made him conscious of how much he lacked the necessary skills, whilst he had always seen himself as someone who, due to his being a Christian philosopher, stood on a higher moral level than many of his colleagues who had ecclesiastical responsibilities.

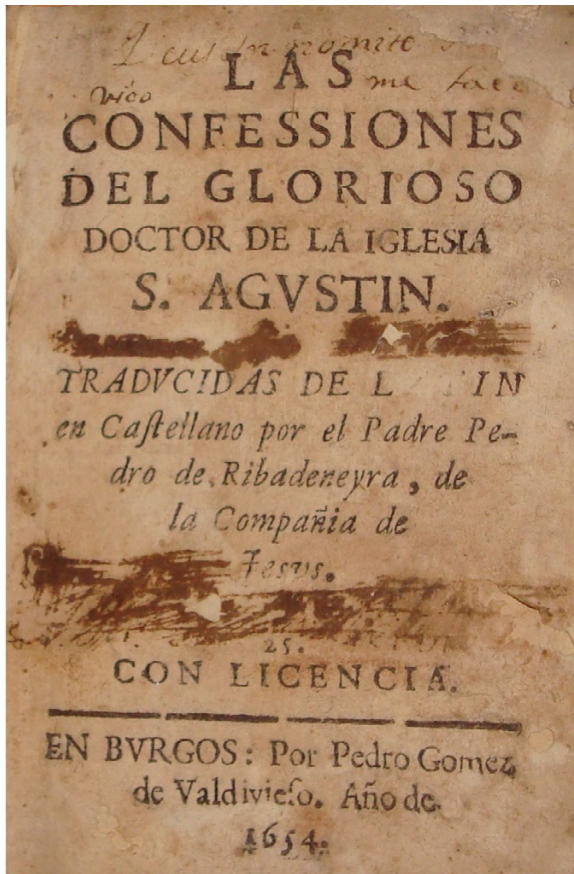
4. The re-reading of Paul and the ecclesiastical discipline – Augustine as presbyter (391-397)

The fourth chapter researches Augustine's intellectual production and practice as presbyter of the Catholic congregation of Hippo Regius.

During this period, Augustine's anti-Manichean re-reading of Paul and his own practice of discipline open new perspectives on the research question. First, the development of Augustine's thinking on the consequences of the sin of Adam is addressed. In *Ad Simplicianum* (396) Augustine reaches the conclusion that man has deprived himself of all freedom to respond in a positive way to God's corrective punishment. At this point, Augustine breaks with the tradition of Origen, in which God's punishing righteousness and his grace are brought into harmony by postulating free will. Augustine retains the anti-Gnostic theodicy, but breaks with the idea that all punishment is pedagogical. This is only true for the elect. This chapter also investigates how Augustine's view of the relationship between the law and Christ developed over time. Whereas he first approached the Old Testament law from a primarily hermeneutical perspective (as an accommodating way of depicting the teachings of Jesus), his vision is later enriched with a legal view on this relationship. The law teaches what sin is and forces the hearers to resort to the mediator of justice, Jesus Christ. This also plays its part in Augustine's changing vision on the cross of Christ. Where Augustine had previously regarded Christ primarily as a teacher, and his death as an exemplary display of abnegation, he now interprets the death of Christ as a representative payment of debt owed to the divine justice. Christ, in his person, takes the condition of punishment in which man is found and destroys it, so that they who have faith in him can be freed from the consequences of sin.

During this period one can also see a further development of Augustine's understanding of the place of law and punishment in the Christian life. He seems to relinquish his earlier, progressive ideal of sanctification. The Christian life now seems more like a constant back-and-forth of sin, punishment, and return to the grace of Christ. There is, however, no complete discontinuity on this point. This line was already present in the *Soliloquia*, although Augustine's forensic perspective in soteriology has enriched the image. The legal claim of sin has been nullified in Christ, but the influence of sin, the *poena peccati*, still asserts itself in the Christian's life. It is, however, put in service of the work of God's grace in the life of the believers.

A final series of sections deals with different aspects of fraternal correction and ecclesiastical discipline. The fact that Augustine gives attention to these themes betrays his minis-



terial practice in the congregation and the religious community that he led. Augustine appears to take over classical philosophical notions about 'corrective friendship', whilst at the same time putting these in a Christian framework. He argues that fraternal correction is not administered on

the basis of respect for someone's moral capacities, but rather on the basis of the love for Christ, who died for the brother. It also becomes clear that Augustine had already developed the most important arguments that he would later use in his justification of coercion against the Donatists. Against the Manichaeans he states, namely, that the use of violence is not principally limited to the Old Testament, provided that the one exercising the punishment has the authority to do so and does so with the right attitude. Furthermore, the *Psalmus contra Partem Donati*, composed in 393, clearly suggests that Augustine shares the post-Constantine idea that Christ binds the kings of the earth to himself, so that their coercive power is put into the service of the Church.

This chapter also deals with Augustine's own use of ecclesiastical discipline. In his way of dealing with the *laetitia* it is striking that he uses a gradual intensification of the means of coercion, until he finally takes recourse to the Pauline prayer (2 Cor. 12:21; 13:2) whether God himself will (violently) intervene to ensure that his disloyal people will not perish with the world. It is suggested to look at Augustine's justification of coercion against the Donatists from this perspective. After years of fruitless 'dialogue' with the Donatists, Augustine might have seen state intervention (and the consequences thereof) as a providential intervention of God, through which was wrought, much to his surprise, what many years of dialogue had failed to achieve.

5. Confessions: God's lawsuit with Augustine between the deferral and the reception of baptism

The fifth chapter asks whether Augustine's view of the relationship between punishment and grace, as it had developed

until 396, returns in his theological autobiography, the *Confessions*. The conclusion is affirmative. Augustine depicts his own 'understanding' of God's punishing activities in his life as a fruit of divine revelation, and his obedience as a fruit of grace. It is also argued that Augustine does not view as the main moment of his conversion his experience in the garden of Milan but the moment of his baptism, because it assured him that the power of sin in his life was broken, the influence of which he still felt after his conversion. Arguably, it was this awareness that he had to learn in Cassiciacum.

6. Conclusion

In a concluding chapter the answers are given to the three sub-questions that followed from the contextualization of the research question.

Augustine develops himself as a representative of the anti-Gnostic tradition in which God's punishment and grace are harmoniously connected in a pedagogical model, in which human free will is an indispensable link. Augustine, however, abandons this model. He retains the theodicy of this tradition (namely that the evil which we suffer is a punishment for the sin of man and not an anti-godly principle), but denies that God's punishment over sin always has a pedagogical nature. This is only true for the elect, for those who are permanently in Christ, and are therefore no longer bound to punishment. Augustine clearly places himself in the classical pedagogical tradition. This becomes evident in the way that he speaks about the educative meaning of *fortuna* and the pedagogy of dialogue. Having become presbyter, classic notions regarding 'corrective friendship' keep determining his thinking. At the same time, though, he Christianizes this tradition. He comes to understand *fortune* and its blows as the providence of a personal God, who came to the aid of man through the incarnation. He also breaks with the presupposition on which the classic pedagogical tradition was based since Plato, namely, that the human spirit suffers not so much under the consequences of its own sin, but under the influence of the passions that suppress reason. Psychagogical exhortation is thereby based on the presupposition that man can be brought back to his original rationality. Augustine's understanding of sin makes him break with this idea. The human spirit suffers under the penal consequences of sin, and can therefore only receive healing based on the fact that the debt through which it is bound to these penal consequences is nullified through Christ. Brotherly exhortation is therefore given 'in Christ' and works only because of him.

The research also shows that the debate about grace among Augustine scholars can be enriched with the insight that, although the early Augustine evidently teaches that God's grace is more than external education, he increasingly emphasizes the unique meaning of the death of Christ for man's salvation. The pedagogical model is enriched with a forensic perspective in the understanding of the reconciliation between God and man. With regard to the discussion concerning the 'prehistory' of Augustine's justification of coercion against the Donatists, the research indicates that there is no demonstrable rupture in Augustine's thinking, but rather a progressive development. ■

Slippery Slope?

Christian faith and guided evolution⁽¹⁾



Professor Gijsbert van den Brink lectures Systematic Theology at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam.

Introduction

The issue of *De Wekker* [magazine of the CGK churches] of October 9, 2015 saw the publication of two rounds of debate between Dr Gijsbert van den Brink and Rev. Peter Visser on 'Creation and Evolution'. This edition of LM, and the next, will contain a translation of this debate. Part one, by Gijsbert van den Brink, refers to an earlier article by Peter Visser, but as Van den Brink provides abundant quotations from this article, it was not considered necessary to include it. Although this debate by no means puts an end to discussion on this topic, it does reflect the manner in which this subject is being addressed by many churches, and it is notable for the respectful manner of discourse.

In *De Wekker* of 12 May last, Rev. Peter Visser joined in the discussion on creation and evolution that had been reopened shortly before by the *Gereformeerde Bond*. It became clear that we agreed on the fact that God has revealed himself to us in two ways: namely in nature and in the Bible (cf. Art. 2 of the Belgic Confession), and that these two cannot be in contradiction with one another.

However, where, for me, looking at the book of nature with an open view leads to the recognition that life on earth has developed gradually over a long period of time, Rev. Visser poses some critical questions regarding the theological consequences of this view. These questions are understandable, and I am glad to enter into them.

Because it is impossible to deal with all sides of the matter, I limit myself here to two important points that Rev. Visser touched on: the origin and meaning of our physical death, and the question whether subscribing to the theory of evolution leads to a domino-effect, as a result of which the complete doctrine of salvation is placed in a different light.

■ Death and life

Rev. Visser formulated his aforementioned concern as follows:

"Evolution requires death and suffering for development through a natural selection. Without the fight for survival there is no selection incentive, and inferior samples of a species are not 'cleared away' to make place for further evolved individuals. But surely that is not the way it went according to Genesis? God saw that his creation was good. The disobedience of our forefathers brought death into the world. If you follow the path of an evolution guided by God, then you must conclude that he himself brought suffering and death into creation. Death is then no longer the fault of us humans (Romans 5: 12), but our destiny."

Rev. Visser rightfully points out that death is part of life, evolution-wise. The fossil record shows that animals on earth have died in the course of innumerable centuries – millions of years. We can hardly accept that a trustworthy God has placed these refined impressions of dead animals in the strata in order to mislead us. The book of nature does not deceive us. Does this now lead to problems with the interpretation of Romans 5: 12? I do not think so. It does, however, require an interpretation of Genesis 1 that does justice to the

genre of this text: it is written more a song of praise for the power of the Creator than as a literal historical account. But in Romans 5, animals are not under discussion. Paul is talking here exclusively about humans and their death: 'Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to *all men* (...)' Paul, therefore, does not say that through man's sin death came over all creation, or all animals. And this also can not be distinguished from other places in the Bible (on the contrary; see for example Psalm 104: 21).

■ Death of man

Now Rev. Visser is not so much concerned with the animals, as he asks the question expressly in relation to the death of *man*. He seems to be of the opinion that whoever accepts evolution has no other choice than to consider the death that came into the world through sin as *spiritual death*: our guilty alienation from God. For was not physical death already there from the start? Indeed, many do have thoughts in this direction. I, however, agree with Visser that this does not do justice to the graveness with which the Bible speaks, not only of our spiritual but also of our physical death, as not simply a biological fact but a punishment by God.

In the Bible, however, there is a distinction between the death of us humans and our *mortality* (the theologian Pannenberg, among others, has made reference to this). According to Paul, only God has immortality (1 Timothy 6:16), whereas we humans were created with a mortal body (1 Corinthians 15: 42-49). Therefore man could die from the beginning. But, according to Genesis 2-3 he had access to the 'tree of life'! Apparently, therefore, man could, thanks to God's special grace, keep himself alive indefinitely. Even though he was mortal, he did not need to die, because God held his hand under his life to support it. Only after the fall into sin does God take that supporting hand away, and man must, indeed, die: through sin, death came into the world. That is therefore not destiny, but man's fault.

■ Work of Christ

To this, Rev. Visser connects his second question: "The question is: what, then, is the meaning of the work of Christ? That Christ has overcome death and grants us eternal life, does that, then, still have the character of grace? Must not then the (intolerable) conclusion be that Christ does not atone for our guilt with his work,



Fossil pygmy horse [photo Naturalis Leiden/Wolfgang Fuhrmannek]

but rather ‘improves’ the creation of his Father?” I must say that I cannot entirely follow him here. After all, however man exactly became a sinner, the fact is that we all without exception *are* sinners. For this reason, even when we assume an evolutionary history, the gospel of the atonement for our guilt remains

exactly what we need at the deepest level. That Christ, next to this, also overcomes our (spiritual and physical) death and offers us eternal life, makes his meaning even richer and more glorious. That, too, is pure grace. Let us therefore not act as if we are on a slippery slope as soon as someone assumes evolution, and that this inevitably gives rise to a totally new theology. Because that is simply not the case.

■ A higher level

Indeed we could say that Christ also ‘improved’ creation, or rather lifted it to a higher level. Because, as the first man Adam became a living being, so the last Adam became a life-giving spirit (1 Corinthians 15: 45). Although we were given a ‘weak’ (= natural) body at creation, thanks to Christ’s resurrection his believers will be able to share in his spiritual body. With that, Paul means a body that is no longer susceptible to sickness, pain, and death (vs. 42-43). That difficult side of our existence will then be extinguished, once and for all. Thus we definitely have no less reason to praise Christ!

In which reality do we live?

Respons to Dr Gijsbert Van den Brink



Rev. Peter (P.L.D.) Visser is an army chaplain and evangelization consultant

What is the discussion between Professor Van den Brink and myself actually about? Let me try to formulate that in a manner that is as existential as possible: As far as I am concerned, it is about the question of what reality we live in.

Two manners of looking at reality are outlined in our discussion:

- The creation has always been subject to the evolutionary process of adaptation, selection, and death (guided by God). Yet that ‘God saw that it was good’ applies to this creation. The fall into sin changes only this for man: he comes into death’s power.
- The good creation in its entirety has been dragged down with the fall into sin. What had been labelled ‘good’ *before* the fall is spoiled after. After the fall into sin, we live on cursed ground (Genesis 3:17) and the creation groans in the pains of childbirth (Romans 8. 22), together with the believers, awaiting ultimate redemption (8: 23).

The question is, therefore, in which created reality we live, how the fall into sin affects that, and how Christ redeems us and our reality. If I understand Prof. Van den Brink correctly, he chooses possibility a) and wishes to demonstrate that this choice does not have a domino-effect for the doctrine of salvation.

■ Good

To Prof. Van den Brink, the book of nature displays a long period of gradual development of life forms. This evolutionary process (guided by God) includes the death of innumerable animals, such as the fossil record displays. Creation has, therefore, in this view, been dominated by death from the start.

The ‘and God saw that it was good’ (Genesis 1) then can not be taken as an indication of a creation without death and stress, but is to be interpreted as a certain harmony in creation, a wonderful connected design of ecosystems and laws of nature.

■ Man

What, then, is the position of man in all this? In an earlier publication (2006) Prof. Van den Brink expressed thoughts of an evolution of human-like creatures who (just like other creatures) were subjected to the laws of selection and adaptation, and therefore to death. The fall into sin subsequently did not bring on physical death (that was there already), but spiritual death: the radical alienation from God and, as a result, of each other. I took this view of Prof. Van den Brink as the starting point when writing my article in *Nader Bekeken*. My observation regarding Christ ‘improving’ the work of his Father should be read in that light. If the creation

with the dying and evolving man was so ‘good’ in God’s view, why did Christ then still have to overcome physical death at Easter? Did Christ then have to ‘improve’ what his Father had laid in Creation?

■ Adjustment

When Prof. Van den Brink and I subsequently started corresponding, it appeared that he had later adjusted his view (2009). This was under the influence of Pannenberg, who maintains the consequential connection between the fall into sin and physical death. In this view, Adam and Eve are the first real people, created in God’s image. He has lifted them, as opposed to their human-like predecessors, so to speak, above the animal realm and given them a new and unprecedented consciousness to know him, as image-bearers, in a truly human manner.

These first *real* people, Adam and Eve, could, in principle, live on indefinitely through God’s grace, nourished by the tree of life. This in contrast to their forefathers. When the human couple sinned, God’s grace, which was keeping them alive, fell away from under them, and they came under dominion of death (physical and spiritual).



■ Difficulty

I understand and respect the efforts which Prof. Van den Brink is making to read the books of Scripture and nature in such a way that they are not in contradiction with one another. Yet I still have difficulty with his direction of thinking, because:

1. It includes an uncritical acceptance of macro-evolution.
Although I am no biologist and certainly would not wish to have the last word in this matter, I do understand that the theory of evolution (still) has many loose ends. Also someone like Niles Eldredge, a convinced Darwinist,¹ sees no steady development of life forms in the fossil record, rather a stagnancy. For this reason he introduced, within the Darwinist framework, the theory of ‘punctuated equilibria’ (interrupted balance). Furthermore, while the fossil record indeed shows an enormous mortality of animals, both evolutionism and creationism have their own problems with the interpretation of this chapter from the book of nature.
2. It requires a far-reaching symbolic reading of the beginning of Genesis, with, on the other hand, a suddenly literal tree of life. Notions of the curse of the earth’s ground, and the groaning of creation in pangs of childbirth, I do not see as fitting in with this design.
3. It relativizes the fall into sin as a matter between God and man and does not follow this through to the whole of creation. Apart from man, creation remains in the same state as *before* the fall. The theory of evolution offers no room for an untainted, uncursed reality in the beginning. Must I then, when confronted with natural disasters, sickness, and death of cattle and crops, think: this is apparently how God made it; this is good in God’s eyes? And this while reality time and again strikes me in the heart as a fallen reality, in which heaven and earth, man and animal groan in anticipation of redemption!
4. With his return, Christ will create a new heaven and earth (Is. 65; 2 Pet. 3; Rev. 21). His work concerns the whole of fallen reality. This perspective has no grounds if the creation (apart from the fallen man) remained ‘good’ after the fall into sin. Why a recreation, if the fall into sin affected ‘only’ man?

■ Notes

- 1 See his ‘Confessions of a Darwinist’ from 2006, <http://www.vqronline.org/vqr-portfolio/confessions-darwinist>

The Hand of God, sculpture by Auguste Rodin [metmuseum.org]

Woman and the Office: the Sore Points

Preliminary Report of Deputies: Male/female and the Office¹

The 2014 General Synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (liberated), held at Ede, appointed Deputies *Male/female and the Office*, a study committee with instructions to investigate which roles women may fill in the church and in the office. In July 2016 these Deputies submitted their preliminary report for information and consideration to the delegates of the 2017 General Synod, to be held at Meppel, and to the members of the churches.

This report is not yet the study document regarding *Woman and the Office* that Synod requested, and it does not yet offer any advice or direction in this matter. Instead, the Deputies ask for attention to the sore points they have identified in dealing with the question: which places may women occupy in the church and the office? In the autumn of 2016 the Deputies intend to submit the study document requested by Synod, incorporating their advice and recommendations to Synod in relation to this matter.

1. Mandate and Task Description

At the 2014 Synod held at Ede the report of Deputies *Male/female in the Church* was tabled. This report contained the conclusion that *'the position that besides men, women also may serve in the offices of the church ... fits within the breadth of what can be affirmed as Biblical and Reformed'*. Synod decided that it did not see room for agreement with the grounds brought forward in support of this conclusion.²

Consequently, two committees of Deputies were appointed, each with further instructions of their own: *Male/female in the Church* and *Male/female and the Office*.³

The Deputies *Male/female in the Church* were instructed to pursue, on the basis of their investigations into current practice, the ongoing discussion concerning the role of women within the church. The Deputies *Male/female and the Office* were instructed to investigate how the offices can be structured so that women can be active for God's kingdom within that structure, based on the instruction of the Bible, and taking into account current practice, the views of sister churches, and the church-orderly consequences that might arise from such an investigation. The two committees are to work in collaboration, the role of *Male/female and the Office* being predominantly one of research and study.

The formulation of Synod's original instructions raised the question with us whether we had been given sufficient room to be able to carry out our mandate.

Based on Synod's instructions, the Deputies produced a task description that would form the basis for our work, in the form of a statement that Synod subsequently endorsed. Central to our understanding of the task is a careful reflection on the doctrine of the office, especially with a view to the role of women in the church in our time and culture. This reflection is to incorporate the instruction of Scripture, the history of the church, and current practice within our churches and among sister-churches. The Deputies will also examine the degree to which the Church Order and liturgical forms might align with the outcomes of this investigation.

In this document we submit our first report. It does not yet contain any advice or recommendations; instead it asks the reader to give thought to the sore points that we have identified as we address the question what place women may take up in the church and in the office.

While this report is of course directed to the Synod, we wish emphatically also to address it to the churches and to their members, who are affected by this decision-making process. After all, it is our intention and heartfelt desire that we, in following the path to a decision, hold onto each other as churches; and that also within the churches we hold onto each other and take each other along in communal service to the coming kingdom of Christ. This can only happen if Synod delegates, and church councils and church members are prepared to confront themselves with the sore points that are experienced, including by those who may well have views that differ from their own.

This report is intended to provide a clear insight into those sore points, and contains a directed exercise to test whether this pain is recognized and acknowledged within the churches, and then consciously and sensitively to respond to the pain that is experienced. We are convinced that such an exercise is a necessary condition for a decision-making process that includes all concerned.

In support of this decision-making process, the Deputies intend to submit a second report towards the end of 2016, which will incorporate advice and recommendations to Synod.

This may be something of a disappointment to those who are becoming impatient for a resolution of this long-running matter. We ask such readers to exercise some patience until our next report is released, and to use the intervening time to make an effort – as suggested here – to help create the necessary conditions for real decisions that we can truly make together.

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- 1 Translation of *1e Rapport M/V en Ambt*, available for download at <http://mv.gkv.nl/publicaties-en-onderzoeken/>. Much of the material referred to in this article is available in English translation at <http://www.gkv.nl/organisatie/generale-synode/english-materials/>
 - 2 Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland: Acta van de Generale Synode 2014-2015 p.40.
 - 3 <http://www.gkv.nl/organisatie/deputaatschappen/mv-en-ambt/>

the deputies of
M/F and office
[photo Maaïke Oosten]



This first report consists of an introduction, a description of the sore points, further reflection on each of them, and a proposal as to how we might respond to the pain that is felt.

2. Introduction

Discussion about the place women may occupy in the church and in the offices has already been going on for a long time. The various points of view have already been extensively set out.⁴ As a result, almost everyone will have already arrived at their own position in this matter. Some may have done so more intuitively, others by weighing the arguments. However, it is highly unlikely that any new insights might still be developed or adopted. This means that very little movement is possible on the battlefield. And everyone knows that such a situation can very easily lead to a kind of trench warfare. It is not for nothing that we are using the language of warfare to describe this problem.

When we as Deputies began to immerse ourselves in the sub-

ject, it struck us how easily the debate can lead to unyielding confrontation. The discussion about *Male/female and the office* can have a deeply divisive effect in the church. When no new information or arguments are brought forward, a stalemate ensues. This became clear when the previous Synod found no room for a resolution of this long-running matter. In the meantime, the practice of local church life seems to leave room for women to fulfil all kinds of tasks and roles, separate sometimes from any accompanying Biblical reflection. The investigations that the Deputies *Male/female in the Church* have conducted have demonstrated yet again that this impression reflects the true situation.⁵

We realize only too well that the release of yet another advisory report can lead to an even greater hardening of the current stalemate. We are convinced that no one is served by such a situation. Should we as Deputies once again take a certain position, *and leave it at that*, there is a risk that churches and their members would simply respond from within their own prior positioning. And that in turn is likely to lead to a resumption of the conflict.

What we now especially need is that we do not stand *opposed to each other*, but that we *bear each other's burdens* (Galatians 6:2). We are dealing here with a problem that we as churches must (want to) carry together. Trench warfare can only come to an end when we have the courage to immerse ourselves in the pain that is suffered in the trenches on the other side. That,

4 From an extensive range of literature on the subject, we limit ourselves to the following:
- K.K. Lim, *Het spoor van de vrouw in het ambt*. Kampen 2001 (= Kerkhistorisch proefschrift TU Apeldoorn).
- John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood. A Response to Evangelical Feminism*. Wheaton 1991 (a collection of exegetical and multidisciplinary studies from a broad range of scholars who reject the admission of women to the office).
- George en Dora Winston, *Vrouwen in de gemeente van Christus*. Apeldoorn 1997 (An extensive Bible study that advocates the admission of women to offices of the church).

5 <http://www.gkv.nl/organisatie/deputaatschappen/mvindekerk/>

then, is the response that we conceive as an intermediate step. By means of this intermediate step we would like to achieve that a Christian conversation begins, one in which the participants are primarily focused on discovering just where the pain lies in their opponents' position. Are you, as a supporter of opening the offices to women, willing to truly listen to the concern of your opponents, a concern that the Bible is faithfully listened to in those texts that speak about the silence of women? And on the other side: are you, as one who defends the *status quo* in which the offices are open to men only, prepared to genuinely think along with someone who is critical of the current situation, and who desires to give women room to put their God-given abilities to work in the service of the congregation?

It is only when we genuinely wish to face up to our differences *together* that we will be ready for the next step in the decision-making process. We are not suggesting that then and there a consensus will come readily to hand. We do however believe that if we are truly willing to bear each others' burdens, we will find a spiritual way to overcome the impasse.



Here, we also wish to point out that the authority of Scripture is at stake *for both sides of the debate*. This element is often brought forward by those who are opposed to women in office (usually on the basis of the texts that speak about the silence of women). However, this can easily create the implied suggestion that it is those who support women in office who *a priori* deny the authority of Scripture. And that is a misunderstanding that can so easily bring the discussion to a grinding halt. In this preliminary report, we offer as material to work with in this discussion an exploration of the sore points that we have encountered and exchanged among ourselves in our discussions. It is our hope and prayer that this will pave a spiritual way to come to a decision.

3. Women and Office: the sore points

As we survey the discussion we note two major sore points in the exchange of thoughts:

a. *Do we still take Scripture seriously where it is in conflict with our lives?*

Within the Reformed Churches (liberated), the position that women may serve in the offices has consistently been linked to a challenge to the authority of Scripture, ever since the 1960s. This came about largely as a result of resistance to developments especially within the (synodical) Reformed Churches, where these two trends went hand in hand. From that time on, this has been a very sensitive sore point.

Since then, the place of women within our culture and society has undergone profound change. There is an almost universal acceptance, among Christians too, that women may fully participate in all aspects of society. Our present culture proceeds from the assumption of the fundamental equality of men and women. From that perspective, it is very difficult to explain why women should have a different position from men. Still, there are places in Scripture that clearly restrain – if not forbid outright – leadership activities by women in the church. Those who oppose women in office experience this as a real and significant sore point: 'What then is left of the authority of Scripture?' 'How safe is the Bible still in the church, if our standard for action becomes whether or not we are able to explain our position?' 'Are we still sufficiently trained in practising obedience to the Lord of the church?'

b. *May women still not discern in their God-given gifts a calling to be fellow-workers in the Kingdom?*

At the other end of the spectrum we observe another real and significant sore point. There are many places to be found in Scripture that assume – and sometimes even call for – a broad deployment of the gifts of women in the church (Acts 18:26; Romans 16:1,2; I Timothy 5:9,10). There is much attention given in the Bible to women who perform certain tasks, such as prophetess or deaconess. Paul goes so far as to call them fellow-workers in the Kingdom. Today, it is widely acknowledged in the church that the gifts the Spirit has given to women are also to be used for the upbuilding of the congregation.

There is a great need within the church for the deployment of these gifts, and in practice these gifts are often called upon for tasks that closely align with the work of the offices, and in some cases even (partly) overlapping with them. If in the meantime the offices are still formally closed to women, the effect created is one of alienation. An appeal to Scripture on this point may even be experienced as hypocritical, especially since so many other injunctions from Scripture that deal with relations between men and women are no longer applied literally (see for example I Peter 3:1-6). Those who support women in office experience this as a real and significant sore point: 'The Spirit gives gifts to the congregation, and these are acknowledged, but may not be officially recognized.' 'Can the ex-

clusion of women in the church really be God's intention?' 'Women perform all kinds of leadership and instructional tasks in the church, but at the same time they sometimes ask themselves whether this is really allowed.'

In summary, both of these sore points can be expressed as a painful dilemma that women in the church may face: 'Am I sinning if I respond to what I experience as my calling, or am I sinning if I do not respond to what I experience as my calling?' In what follows we attempt to provide a guide as to how we may address these sore points in our discussions together, on the basis of relevant material from Scripture.

4. Sore point 1: Difficult Scripture passages

In the discussion around male/female and office two important passages from the New Testament (I Corinthians 14:34-36 and I Timothy 2:11-15) have always played an important role, because in them the church has always heard an opposing voice, one that resists the place of women in office. In a certain sense, these passages have even become a kind of litmus test for the faithfulness to Scripture of any particular church fellowship. The theological contexts within which such discussions take place will of course vary. At the same time, however, this *shibboleth* is experienced and recognized throughout the world.

Wherever views are developed in relation to male/female and the office this has been the most painful (and for many insurmountable) sore point. The pain is concentrated on the fundamental question whether the authority of Scripture is in practice acknowledged. We would like to offer some considerations around both passages, in order to provide a helping hand to those who truly wish to help each other bear the burden of this sore point:

I Corinthians 14:34-36 contains an explicit command to be silent (a command which, it must be added, is limited to the worship assemblies). Even though this command follows v.26, where it says that all present contribute to the assembly, this prohibition makes it difficult at best for women to officiate in the liturgy, and in fact excludes it. While it is true that the New Testament nowhere explicitly states that those who lead and/or otherwise officiate in the liturgy do so in virtue of their ordination to the *office of elder*, the Reformed tradition has always operated on this assumption. This has (at least in part) come about because the office of minister has been subsumed within the office of elder or overseer. It should be obvious that this has decisively influenced the reading and interpretation of these parts of Scripture.

At the same time, passages such as I Corinthians 11:5 and Acts 2:17,18 and 21:9 show that women can officiate within the Christian congregation. Only recently, since the shift has occurred towards more liturgical participation by the members of congregation, have these places in Scripture begun to receive their due attention in the discussion. However, this does expose a paradox in the reading of I Corinthians 14. After all, the liturgical dimensions of this chapter proceed from the

assumption that the joint worship of believers does not necessarily occur in an officially structured assembly (v.26). At the same time, this passage plays a dominant role in excluding women from the office of elder.

I Timothy 2:11-15 prohibits women from teaching, and appears to assign to them a position subordinate to men. This prohibition has assumed a rather non-negotiable character, because it is often generalized to mean: *no authority over men*. It seems that women's teaching, as a matter of principle, cannot be reconciled with the position and authority of the overseer in the New Testament. This is further emphasized by the passage's reference to creation and the fall into sin. That is a double motif, and it appears all the more powerful in that it is separated from all cultural contexts, and instead is rooted in God's work (of creation) and (his punishment upon) our transgression.

It must be said, however, that this last element seems to be at odds with what Paul writes in other places. In Romans 5:12-14 and I Corinthians 15:21-22 he specifically identifies the man as the one responsible for the sin that came into the world. The apostle could quite reasonably have inferred that the man had lost his right to headship, but he does not draw that conclusion.

In summary: in both places of Scripture we can hear a counter-voice, once that does not permit the opening of the office of elder or overseer to women. It must also be said that other places in Scripture lend further weight to this conclusion. For one of the pitfalls in the discussion about male/female and office is that the two texts here mentioned are often considered more or less on their own. They then become isolated in the debate, and can easily be perceived as not much more than the two last hurdles still to be cleared. A more careful reading, however, shows that these two passages are consistent with a New Testament trend, one that portrays the man as the one who leads within the relationship between man and woman (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 11:3 and I Peter 3:5-6). There is then ample reason to take seriously the question: how do we make visible in the church the differences between male and female before the face of God?

5. Sore Point 2: Exclusion of women

Would the pain be removed by simply maintaining the *status quo*, in which women are excluded from the office of elder? That would certainly not be the case. On the contrary, it would generate new pain, because in the New Testament a new tendency becomes visible, one that restores the reciprocity between men and women in the church. At the very least, the exclusion of women from the office would encroach on this tendency.

This is all the more painful because a general recognition has developed within society at large that we all need the deployment of women, along with all their gifts. Fortunately, this recognition is also gaining ground within the church. This pain is exacerbated, however, when women are denied the last step to the office of elder. And it becomes even harder to bear



when the church takes this pain for granted with an incomprehensible (for anyone who lives in our present culture) appeal to Scripture. After all, such appeals to Scripture have been let go without difficulty when dealing with matters such as the eating of blood (Acts 15) or the covering of women's heads (I Corinthians 11). Besides, the appeal to certain parts of Scripture appears to be quite selective. For example: we use I Timothy 2 to exclude women from office; why then do we not uphold the injunction, in the same chapter, for men to pray with uplifted hands, or forbid women to wear jewellery in the worship services?

We would like to offer some considerations from Scripture, to provide a helping hand to those who truly wish to help each other bear the burden of this sore point: In the current situation of our church life, the extensive participation of women is quite remarkable (we refer to the broad documentation provided by the Deputies *Male/female in the Church*).⁶ Scripture, too, demonstrates a broad participation by women, one that, it must be said, was at the time quite counter-cultural. This tendency may be characterized as the equivalence of men and women before God. Together with the man, the woman is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Just as the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, collaborate in loving reciprocity and unity, so the man and the woman are the image, a reflection of God, whenever they, united in love and unity, serve in the Kingdom. Women are fully equal members of the congregation (I Corinthians 12:13). They share equally in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, who causes both male and female to prophesy (Acts 2:17ff). They may pray and prophesy in the church, provided they do so in a fitting manner (I Corinthians 11:2-16). Next to the trend visible in the texts referred to, the image that arises from the apostolic letters about the structure of

the congregation as the body of Christ might carry even greater weight. In essence, the church of Christ is portrayed there as representing the city of God, which Christ will once, on the last day, present to his Father (Revelation 21:9). The life of the church is therefore governed by the law of the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:1-11; Galatians 5:13-26). This implies an ethic of principal equality: all are citizens there (of Israel, God's kingdom of priests), who all have equal access to God (Ephesians 2:11-22). The early church, existing as it did in Christ, experienced a sharp contrast with its social and cultural surroundings. Where Hellenistic culture was marked by a pervasive hierarchy and great differences in social standing (male-female, master-slave, Jew-Greek), within the church these differences were reconciled (see especially Galatians 3:28). When we pay attention, we further notice that in the apostles' letters the power of this change is translated into the participation of *all* members of the church (see for example Romans 12:3-5; Ephesians 4:16; Colossians 3:16). A remarkable feature of this broad picture is that the restored alignments within the church are extended into everyday social relationships (see the 'household codes' in the letters of the apostles). Within the classical world, where tradition or the *pater familias* determined (forms of) interactions between the various members of a household, this was a remarkable development. Proceeding from the Christian church, home life was renewed as a manner of living in *shared* submission to the Lord. As members together of the *household of God*, Christians cannot help but regard each other as fellow-citizens of the kingdom. And it should be especially noted that whenever the church begins to *revert* to distinctions in status, the apostles respond with sharp reprimands (see I Corinthians 11:17-22, Galatians 2:11-14).

In summary: a church practice where women participate in the full breadth of church life in the use of their gifts, displays in that respect the Biblical characteristics of a Kingdom society that is renewed in Christ.

⁶ See the report Kwantitatief onderzoek Taakverdeling M/V in de kerk <http://www.gkv.nl/organisatie/deputaatschappen/mvindekerk/>

6. Responding to the pain

No-one who immerses himself in these sore points will be able to avoid noticing how far apart they are. Undoubtedly, this is one reason why there has often been no progress in the discussion. The question is whether these sore points can actually even be reconciled. If we want to honour the authority of Scripture in situations where the relationship between men and women comes into the picture, the question must be asked whether we ought not to have drawn more radical conclusions sooner. Shouldn't we perhaps have told women much earlier that they must be silent in the assembly? Have we up till now truly honoured the command that women may not exercise authority in the church, for instance in catechesis?

At the same time, though, this raises other questions. Has it been Biblical for the church to continue to discriminate against women, when in our culture this is (largely) a thing of the past? Doesn't it come across as hypocritical, on the one hand to fully engage women in participation in church life, up to and including liturgical roles and work in the church council, while on the other hand to insist that on the basis of these two Bible texts the offices remain closed to them?

Whichever way we look at it, it appears that neither of these two sore points will be easily removed. Because of this, it is clear that there is a fair degree of tension (above or below the surface) between what actually happens within the churches and the manner in which we conduct this discussion. It seems important to us – and to the Deputies *Male/female in the Church* – to unambiguously acknowledge this tension.⁷

As we see it, the need to be truly willing to bear each other's pain has become all the more urgent. As things currently stand, the reality of this pain can no longer be denied or massaged away, even though making a choice will be unavoidably painful. The way to coming to a decision in this matter demands a spiritual exercise in responding to each other's pain. Deputies *Male/female in the Church* have already engaged with numerous churches in conversations on this point. Still, even those who have not attended such meetings should make an effort to truly understand these sore points.

In what follows we describe one possible form of discussion that may help us to train ourselves in this practice:

One very real problem, as we begin such a discussion, is that both parties may find it very difficult to truly listen to the other side, because each party believes that it already fully understands the other's position. A worthwhile activity, designed to overcome this problem – which is at the same time a salutary exercise in love – is the following:

- a. Two representatives of opposing views (for instance, those who support or oppose women in office) begin a discussion as follows:
- b. A (supporter) articulates the position of B (opponent), including the arguments supporting it.
- c. Next, B describes on which points his position has not yet

been correctly or fully represented.

- d. Once B acknowledges that his position has been accurately set out, B will take his turn to accurately articulate A's position.

The effect of this exercise is that both participants will make a real effort to identify with the other's cognitive world. It is our conviction that this exercise in love is needed to make progress together. It is with this in view that we submit this first report. May the Lord of the church bless us to find each other in his strength and to seek the path of his will together.

5. Looking ahead

As we have observed already, we see this preliminary report as a necessary first step to make progress together in this difficult discussion. Meeting and accepting each other is an absolute precondition for a truly spiritual process. That is also what we experienced in our work as Deputies.

In order to provide whatever room might be required for such a discussion, we have made no attempt in this preliminary report to make any recommendations to Synod. Meanwhile, the work that we have already done has served to provide ample material for the formulation of advice to Synod. In various ways, the Deputies have investigated how the Bible speaks about men and women, both by means of careful exegesis and by tracing the broad lines that can be drawn through the whole of Scripture. We have also described what the Bible says about how the congregation is to be led. In addition, we have investigated the historical choices that the churches have made through the ages in developing and instituting the offices. Moreover, the research carried out by the Deputies *Male/female in the Church*, in which we collaborated, has also formed an important building block for our recommendation. In addition, we have sent a list of questions to sister churches at home and abroad, asking them to explain to us how men and women are engaged in the work of the church in their congregations, and what their views are concerning male/female and the office. Based on these building blocks, we intend to formulate a number of options, and form an estimate of what impact these options would have on the Church Order. We intend to present our report sometime towards the end of 2016. In this forthcoming report we wish, as Deputies, to provide advice and recommendations as to the possibilities that exist in deploying the gifts of women in our churches. You can then expect from us clear indications concerning the steps we believe ought to be taken in this process.

May the Spirit of Christ lead us all, and show us what matters most of all in giving ear to the Word of God in these questions. ■

Deputies *Male/female and office*:

mr. dr. A. Haan-Kamminga, *chairperson*

dr. J.P. de Vries, *secretary*

prof. dr. E.A. de Boer

E.J. de Jong-Wilts MA

H.S. Nederveen-Van Veelen BTh

prof. dr. C.J. de Ruijter

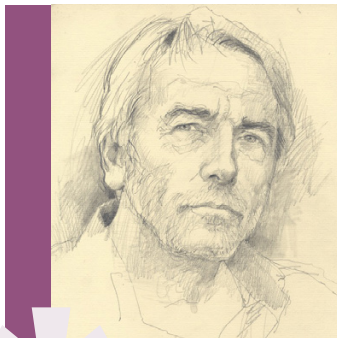
dr. W.F. Wisselink

⁷ See the report Oriënterend kwalitatief vooronderzoek Taakverdeling M/V in de kerk <http://www.gkv.nl/organisatie/deputaatschappen/mvindekerk/>

Reformed from all over Europe

An impression of the 2016 EuCRC conference

It was many years ago that the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, together with the Free Church of Scotland, took the initiative of setting up the International Conference of Reformed Churches. The first convention was in 1982, and in 2017 this ICRC conference will take place from 13-19 July in Jordan, Ontario, Canada. ([see http://www.icrconline.com/](http://www.icrconline.com/))



Rutger ter Beek (b. 1952) is minister of the Reformed Church in Leusden, the Netherlands.

The eight member churches in Europe have been organizing *regional* conferences since 2007. They also invite European contacts that are not members of the ICRC and people who are active in missionary projects led by Reformed churches outside Europe. Particularly in Europe, a great deal of the church work is a matter of individuals and small groups, located at great distance from each other. Thus it occurred that, in the village De Glind, between Barneveld and Leusden, a European conference of Reformed Churches was held from 24-27 May (see www.eucrc.org/index.php/conferences/2016). This sixth EuCRC was coordinated by Rev. Jos Colijn (Kampen).

We encountered ministers, elders, and teachers from all parts of Europe. The approximately 60 participants came from, among others, Ireland and the Ukraine, from Sweden and Siberia, from Albania and Latvia, from Switzerland and Poland, and even from Omsk and Vladivostok. How far does Europe stretch? They really wanted to get to know each other and share experiences. The daily lectures, prayers and meditations felt like rain on thirsty ground. It was also nice to make contact with Dutch fellow-believers from the neighbouring churches of Barneveld and Leusden.

The visitors enjoyed conversing with each other about a central topic from church practice. The more extensive lectures were dedicated to the sacraments, to Baptism and the Holy Supper as 'means of grace', occasions on which the Lord Jesus gives himself to the believers. On Thursday afternoon there were workshops on the practice of celebrating the Holy Supper. The overall friendliness warmed the heart. The experiential unity in faith ensured a fine atmosphere, even during difficult discussions.

Egbert Brink of the Reformed Churches (GKv) in the Netherlands spoke on 'The Lord's Supper as a Means of Grace'. What is sacramental language? What is 'the blood of the new covenant'? In the supper the Living Lord hands out himself. 'Nowhere is the future nearer than in the celebration of the Holy Supper – because Jesus himself is the host'. In the following discussion, Leviticus 7:26-27 (about eating blood), John 6, and Acts 27:35 were topics talked about at length. Practical ques-

tions also came up about the frequency and the form of the celebration, about preparing oneself and regarding celebrating Holy Supper on Good Friday.

William Schweitzer of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in England and Wales gave an overview of the objections against children at the Lord's Supper in his lecture 'Children at the Table: A Summary Critique of Paedo-communion'. He was strongly against the participation of children at the Holy Supper because they are 'children of the covenant', yet he did make a strong plea that a congregation should not refuse participation to a young child who has delivered a credible confession of faith. His lecture gave rise to some lively discussions.

Robert McCollum of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland spoke on 'Infant Baptism as a Means of Grace'. According to Colossians 2:12-13, baptism is the New Testament circumcision, in which we share in Christ's death and resurrection. We see that happening in Baptism. God has promised to be God to us and he is, through Jesus Christ our Saviour; 'but he has also promised to be God to our children after us. We therefore present our children for baptism and in so doing, by faith, lay claim to that covenant promise.'

We may have great faith in God's promises! According to Mark 10:13-16 Jesus says: 'for *to such* (the children, verse 14) belongs the kingdom of God.' Do not underestimate the Spirit! He is capable – God is sovereign – of regenerating all kinds of people (John.3:8), even children not yet born (Jer.1:5; Luke 1:44)! But the spirit makes use of the faith of parents, believing families, church members, and the whole congregation for his renewing work. The convention reflected on the question now topical in the Netherlands: what must you think about someone who has been re-baptized in an Evangelical or Baptist congregation but wishes to remain a member of the Reformed Church?

Plenty of room had been included in the programme for networking and relaxing. More or less spontaneously, part of a day was also spent talking about the immigration crisis in Europe, particularly as a special opportunity for churches to reach people from 'closed countries' with the gospel. On Wednesday afternoon the conference participants were given a tour of the beautiful city of Amersfoort; in the evening they were invited to a sing-in in the GKv church of Barneveld-Voorthuizen. ■

Holy Supper, multifaceted



photo Laurens den Butter

Rev. Egbert Brink (PhD) is lecturer of Old Testament and Practical Theology at the Theological University of Kampen and teacher at the Reformed Academy in Zwolle. He is still part-time minister of the congregation in Waddinxveen and regular guest lecturer at Faculté de Théologie Evangélique de Bangui and Faculté Jean Calvin in Aix-en-Provence.

■ Celebration

Celebrating a Passover meal together in a restaurant, the owner having placed his restaurant at my disposal, is something I do each year around Easter with all my catechism students. We do this as part of the preparation for their first Holy Supper following their confession of faith. We have all the time in the world and share the meal together, seated at high tables. Eating together creates a bond. The meal, which comprises various courses, corresponds to the Passover Meal: from the bitter herbs, water and salt, unleavened bread, fruit and nut paste, up to and including the cups of wine at the end of the meal. During the meal I explain the meaning of each course from the context of the Passover, right up to the lamb shank. In this way I continually make the connection with the Holy Supper, so that the remembrance at the love meal of our Lord Jesus can gain a deeper meaning for them. Each year someone asks: why don't we do something similar in the congregation...when celebrating the Lord's Supper?

From here on, I wish to make all sorts of connections from the celebration of the Holy Supper to contexts and events in the Scriptures, in order to illustrate how multifaceted this sacrament is, and to open our eyes to our own one-sidedness, and especially to prevent narrowing of vision and impaired vision which could rob us of our view of Jesus' magnificent work.

■ Passover context

Often the meaning of the Passover has been played off against that of the Holy Supper established by Jesus. As if there is a line of fracture between the two, a discontinuity. But there is both continuity and discontinuity, deepening and broadening of meaning. The fulfilment of the Passover does not necessarily entail abolition. Hence the fact that Jesus' disciples continued to celebrate Passover even after that unique last supper preceding his death. The Jewish tradition was simply continued. Only now it was no longer restricted to the remembrance of the salvation from Egypt, but there was a broadening and deepening to the work of Jesus' salvation from all slavery, namely from sin.

When celebrating Passover, all the senses are involved, just as is the case, in fact, at the Lord's Supper. Hearing, seeing, smelling, feeling, and, especially, tasting. An appeal is made not only to your mind but your whole body is involved. The unleavened bread depicts the restricted time at hand before the exodus, but also the

sour taste (= yeast) that had been removed, the 'bread of affliction which was left behind us'. The bitter herbs – frequently used are horseradish and endive – make your eyes water and remind you of the bitterness of slavery. Salt water allows you to taste, as it were, the tears that flowed in Egypt. A fruit and nut paste depicts the mortar used by the slaves to make bricks.

God's work of deliverance and salvation was to permeate history. Jesus continued this tradition, in particular with reference to the lamb that was slain in Egypt. The blood was to be stroked on the doorposts so that the Angel of death would pass by their doors (hence, the *Pass-over*). The lamb that was slain in Egypt was meant as a substitute for their own firstborn; but also to show that, at the core, the Israelites are no better than the Egyptians. When the lamb is slaughtered and eaten, that is a living reminder. They then truly taste that God has provided a sacrifice, so that their lives may be spared, up unto this day.

When Jesus celebrated Passover with his disciples, it gained double significance when they ate the lamb together. Although it is remarkable that Jesus did not literally make the connection himself. The significance was left open, but was tangible. Jesus offered himself as a lamb: this is my body and this is my blood. He sacrificed himself so that others can live.

During a Passover celebration, different cups of wine are served. No sour wines, but wines with a good aftertaste, because they represent the liberation. The wine depicts the joy of salvation. The first cup is drunk together with the bitter food. Then the story of the exodus is recollected. At the second cup, the bread is broken: *the bread of affliction which our fathers ate in the land of Egypt*. After this, the Passover meal follows, with all sorts of symbolic ingredients, and the third cup is raised, expressing gratitude: it is the cup of thanks. Also, the well-known psalms are sung: the *hallel* of 113-118 alongside 136, *Give thanks to the Lord for He is good!* Once the songs of praise have been sent up, the last cup is raised, to conclude the meal. This cup is called the cup of redemption. Then a prayer resounds for the future redemption of Israel and the fulfilment of God's still standing promises. It is remarkable that Jesus, in the description of the gospels, did not conclude the meal with the fourth cup (M.C. Mulder). Immediately after the songs of praise have been sung, he does not drink the fourth cup, but departs to the Mount of Olives



[photo hisgloryinourstory.com]

At the table we meet
the living Christ

(Matthew 26:30 & Mark 14:26) to pray his prayer: 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.' In the end he drinks the cup of suffering, which no one else can drink, to the last drop. Only by drinking this cup can both the Israelites and the other peoples receive complete redemption.

■ Remembrance

Do this in remembrance of *me*, says Jesus! The meaning of 'remembrance' (*zachar*) is emphasized and gains colour against the backdrop of the Passover celebration. *Remembrance* is more than: remembering what took place. It is more than just an intellectual reflection, for when you remember or reflect on something, it can leave you completely unmoved. Memory can be neutral: you think of it, but it does not touch you. It does not necessarily evoke any feelings. With remembrance this is a different matter. That certainly affects you and works within you, influencing you both physically and spiritually. *Remembrance is experiencing and reliving something*. That is clear from the manner of speaking in the Old Testament. When it is said that the people of Israel *remember* the Lord, that is more than that they remind themselves of God (Deut. 8). The intention is that their actions show that they have consideration for God, accepting him with their whole heart. Whenever they do not act in remembrance of God, they go their own way, and forget about God. Then he continues to be, as it were, something of the past, a fading memory. Remembrance of him is keeping him alive in your mind's eye, in the present as well as in the future. Remembrance is: *That he is alive for you!*

It is also said of the Lord that he *remembers* Israel, and that is often said in the most difficult circumstances. *Remembering* is to say that the Lord does not lose his people out of his sight. They stand before his eye, large as life, touching his heart. When he remembers his covenant, it means he is entirely focused on his people. He then intervenes for his people. Remembrance is, therefore, not a romantic feeling of homesickness for the past like when you keep alive the memory of a beloved deceased. *Remembrance is aimed at the Lord Jesus personally, who was dead and now lives!* Do not remember a dead person, but direct your attention towards the Living One, concentrating on him. You *commemorate* the dead, you *remember* the Living.

Remembrance embraces someone's whole life. The result of remembrance is not that we dredge up knowledge from the past *but that we know him as he is!* To know him as he is, we must know him as he was then. Truly knowing him is knowing him in his self-submission and in his self-sacrifice and in that way only. *In remembrance, he lives for you!*

■ Speaking sacramentally: Self-submission

'This *is* my body, this *is* my blood.' How much has not already been said and written about that small word *is*! Luther wrote it in large letters on the table during the discussions: *hoc est!* Another biblical context can bring us further in discovering the meaning, so that we do not over-identify, on the one hand, nor become shallow and over-symbolize, on the other. 2 Sam. 23 relates the heroic deeds of King David. In the heat of the battle the young king called out how much he longed for the delicious clear water from the well at Bethlehem. They were encamped at the cave of Adullam, in the vicinity of Bethlehem, on his birth ground. Three daredevils made so bold as to break through the enemy lines to fetch that water and offer it to their King. The greater the risk, the greater the danger, the greater the joy of these heroes. *They are price-conscious. They wanted to venture their lives for the king*. How shocking to see what David does next?! He flings the water onto the ground – not to offend his heroes, but pouring out the water before the Lord, as a sign of reversal. The water is dedicated to God, as a sign of remorse.

This water is their blood! David calls this water the blood of their life. Because they have ventured their life for it. They were prepared to sacrifice their lives. He raises the pail of water, as it were, calling out: this *is* their blood! And would he, David drink their (heroic) blood? Not that the water turned into blood, not at all! Yet the water was also more than just a sign of their blood. It is clear what David means: the water is the blood of these men because of the history attached to it. Through this heroic deed the water really tells us something special. The power manifests itself through that word *is*. This *is* their blood. Not because it comes from such a special well, but *because their life was at stake*.

David said: *Shall I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?* The Son of David, Jesus went even further. Shall we drink the blood of him who went and sacrificed his

life? Yes, we must. It has cost him his blood, so that we can eat and drink! Word for word it tells us that Christ has paid for our power of life: bread. Word for word it tells us that Christ has paid for our joy of life: wine. Christ has paid a dear price, he had to pay for it with his life. That is what you are reminded of when the cup is raised. The message of his whole life is implied in that word: *this is my blood!* The difference with David is that where he refused to drink, out of respect for the sacrifice, Jesus commands his Christians to drink, also out of respect. But be price-conscious: remember the price of the death of God's Son.

This is my body! This pronouncement of Jesus is very tangible and perceptible. In that culture one did not *have* a body but one *was* a body. It is about man, as he is, as opposed to God, others and himself.

'*This is my body*' means as much as: This is me! *Jesus's intention is to point to himself, as he made himself known in his death on the cross.* In other words: 'As bread that is broken, so was I broken in my death. This is I, thus am I, in my submission and in my self-sacrifice.' Hence also the words: *for you.* I do not do it for myself. I do it for you. It is all meant for you. But I also do it in your place. I suffered what you should have suffered. I took your place.

And the Lord pronounced this word at the moment at which, at the Passover meal, the words were uttered: 'This is the bread of affliction which our fathers ate in the land of Egypt.' As the broken bread then pointed to the past afflictions in Egypt, so this bread points to the afflictions suffered by Jesus. He piled our shortages, debts, and misery on himself. He burdened himself with our uncountable sins, in order to take them with him into death, with the intent of redeeming us from these sins. Holy Supper is the new Passover feast, the feast of freedom. His death is our bread of life.

■ The new covenant

This is the *new covenant* in *my* blood. What does Jesus mean by the new covenant? Is it a renewal of the Sinai covenant and the blood spilled there (Ex 24)? Is it a reference to the pronouncement made in Jeremiah 31:31 - 34? Remarkably enough, the expression 'new covenant' in these verses makes no reference to either Sinai, David or the covenant of Zion (De Jong, Van oud naar nieuw, 155). Apparently this here is a unique and new covenant that opens up to all people, in which Israel was to play a central part (or, rather, the Son of Israel). The term *new covenant* (*kainè diathèkè*) is only found in three contexts.

1. As mentioned, in Jeremiah 31, the prophecy cited in Hebrews 8:8-12. And the continuing line: Jesus as mediator of a new covenant (Hebrews 9:15 and 12:24).
2. In 2 Corinthians 3:6, Paul and his co-workers are called *ministers of a new covenant*.
3. In the words of institution of the Holy Supper, both with the evangelists as with Paul (Matthew 26:27-28; Mark 14:23-24; Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25): *for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*

A remarkable detail is that in Greek (Van Houwelingen) the term *diathèkè* is *not generally used* to indicate a covenant as an agreement between two parties (*sunthèkè*= treaty). The first word is a reproduction of *berit* in the Septuagint. One suspects that, in this way, they wished to express that the covenant was purely and only God's initiative (unilateral in its origin), not being the result of negotiations and compromises. Moreover, *diathèkè* actually means 'will' or 'testament' in Greek. It is possible that the idea of a testament or a new arrangement resounds here.

What, then, is new about this covenant? Jeremiah speaks of the restored unity between Israel and Judah. Ezekiel prophesies about a covenant marked by peace that is to be never ending (16: 60; 37:26). And with this expression, Zachariah refers to the release of prisoners when the King returns (9: 11). When the new covenant is ratified with his blood, the promise is fulfilled which the prophets had led us to expect.

That day of fulfilment is Good Friday. Note that in that Pass-over time Israel was led out of Egypt at sunset (Deuteronomy 16:6 and Jeremiah 31:32). Centuries later, on this special evening, the new day was heralded which was proclaimed of old. On this day of death, God's new will came into effect. And what is that? The forgiveness of sins, which amounts to a complete reconciliation. The bonds with God's people that had broken down were now renewed and restored into a strong blood bond. When God's Son died, that new disposition was done justice. The ring around Israel was now being so expanded that all people were included: an international community. Jesus sacrificed himself for many (Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45; Hebrews 9:28). That new covenant – the new bond – commenced on Good Friday.

And there is more: the expression 'pouring out' (*ekcheoo*) of His blood. Here too there is a connection with the pouring out of his Spirit as the prophet Joel prophesied (3:1-2) and which was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost. (Acts 2:17-18). In the house of Cornelius this was substantiated (10:45). It is remarkable that the terminology of 'pouring out' is alike to that of Jesus' blood being 'poured out' (*ekchunnomenon*; Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; cf. Luke 22:20). Poured out blood and poured out Spirit run parallel to each other. That shows the wide scope of Jesus' self-sacrifice, his violent death works like a cure, it heals! It is Pentecost already present in principle. This shows that the cup which we drink from, unites through a tight bond with the Lord of the people. It also refers to a worldwide faith community, an international one, becoming visible, all living out of the same forgiveness and renewal. God's Spirit allows us to share in Jesus' death and life.

■ Communion

That new bond is expressed in the core word: communion (*koinonia*) or 'participation', as the newer translations say (1 Corinthians 10:16). When Paul refers to communion with Christ's body and blood at the Lord's Supper, he refers to Jesus himself in own person. His body: that is he himself, be-

cause he has given himself completely, head to toe. His blood: that is he himself in his violent death on the cross. We are called to concentrate on Jesus in order to connect to his loving self-submission. As he was on the cross in his self-submission, so he still is now. He wants to be everything for you: communion = experiencing a tight bond with you. For this reason you can only celebrate the Holy Supper well if you connect everything to the living Christ. Because it is he himself who invites us to the table, to show us how he wants to associate with us. Very intimate, it cannot possibly be more intimate: eating and drinking Christ personally and associating with him in this way; eating and drinking out of his hands, yes eating and drinking from him himself.



After his resurrection Jesus ate and drank together with the disciples
[Supper at Emmaus, painting by Rembrandt van Rijn]

This only gains relief and colour if you see it against the backdrop of Jesus' way of life. He was not afraid to sit at the table with all sorts of people. People with whom the Jewish leaders would never have associated at one and the same table. Being seated at the table with a tax collector, for example, that was just not done: that ruined your reputation. You would be eating the fruits of a tainted income, and associating with a blackmailer, an extortionist, an exploiter. The Lord does not keep such people at a distance. He seeks community with those that are excluded by all. How is that possible? Determinative for sitting at the table with the Lord Jesus is one word: grace. Whoever prides himself on eating with him is not welcome. Whoever sits at the table with Jesus comes into the sphere of influence of his goodness. In other words: *the*

community with him is unthinkable without grace. You must be willing to receive it entirely from him. He draws such people to him, others he repels.

That connects with what Jesus himself said: Whoever eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, remains in me and I in him. Eating flesh and drinking blood: these are the strongest words you can use to express the communion to which you are invited by Christ. The love language of the first man created: *this is now at last flesh of my flesh, and bone of my bones.* The relationship is that intimate. With this, the Lord Jesus wanted to say in the most penetrating way that we must take him completely, as he is.

For this reason Paul consciously uses the name *Christ*, the title of his office. Because he does not want to speak of him as a deceased, but as the one who lives and works as the Raised. In the celebration, at bread and wine, the distance between heaven and earth is bridged. At the table we meet the living Christ, who makes himself heard. You are given a place to experience your relationship with him in a special way. He hands out himself: *this is me, entirely for you*, to show how you need him as much as your daily bread, but also to taste it, and to feel, how much he loves you. And by eating from him, you make it personal, so that it becomes part of your own life. You live *with* him, and you live *off* him. An intimate relationship with Christ is a basic need, like bread, of life importance. Christ invites us to the table. He offers community, which originates entirely from him, for he gives himself. But in the experience of the community at the table, the giving cannot be done without accepting. Christ does not give himself haphazardly. He gives himself specifically: to be accepted. This is my body *for you!* This is my blood *for you!* His language is so direct that nobody can get around it. It is either yes or no. Without faith, the Holy Supper becomes an empty form. It represents no more than a piece of bread and a sip of wine. Only through eating and drinking in faith do we maintain intimate contact with our Lord!

■ Examining

'Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.' How this examination has put up barriers to attend the table! What is Paul trying to prove? What does he want to put to the test? Whether our faith is powerful enough? Or whether the self-loathing and recognition of guilt go deep enough?

Paul uses sharp words to explain his meaning to the Corinthians, who entertained a singularly strange manner of celebrating the Lord's supper. It was not the fact that they linked the Holy Supper to a communal love meal that was the problem, but the way they treated each other that was shocking. During the communal meals, it had become the custom for the rich to have consumed their own food long before the poor could attend. While one was reclining with a full stomach, the other went hungry. In spite of this loveless attitude, they still thought they could celebrate communion. *That now is what Paul means by eating and drinking in an unworthy manner. He does not mean that the partaker of the supper is perhaps*

unworthy to celebrate. Then nobody would be able to celebrate communion. The only worthiness you take with you to the table is your unworthiness (Calvin). Paul means by 'unworthy to eat and drink': a loveless attitude. Such an attitude clashes with the celebration.

In Corinth they did want to celebrate communion as the meal of the love of Christ, but did not realize that this was only possible by showing love to one another. Saying yes to accepting Christ's love, but not being interested in 'the loving association with each other'. That is an impossibility for God. It evokes his holy indignation. That point is made by Paul in connection with the Corinthian congregation. Paul points to various cases of illness in the congregation, as a result of the desecration of the supper. It would be taking it too far to draw the conclusion from this that every desecration and loveless celebration of ours brings a concretely assignable judgment with it, or that every case of sickness is a direct judgment of God. One cannot turn this into a general rule. But that is not to expunge this, for it is a serious warning! Celebrating the Lord's Supper, while treating each other without love, is dangerous. That is like a curse to God and arouses his wrath.

The point of the self-examination is that you discern the body. By this is meant the body of Christ, his congregation. Christ does not see himself apart from his congregation. He is not separately available. This plays against the background of the egoistic supper celebration in Corinth. While you do not have to have friendly relations with everyone, or be friends with everybody, it is about whether you recognize and can see each other as fellow Christians, together at one table, eating from one bread, drinking from one cup, regardless of race, education, character. Celebrating the Lord's Supper means meeting at the crossroads of the communion: the communion with Christ and with each other.

■ In connection with other tables

In the same way that the table of the Holy Supper stands in connection with other tables at which Jesus was seated during his life here on earth, so this also applies to the joint meals with his followers after his resurrection. What stands central is the communal connection with Christ and with each other. After his resurrection, he ate and drank together with the disciples when he appeared in their house. To show that he was real: once dead, now alive! But also after the unfruitful night of fishing, he ate with them on the shore of the lake. Jesus first asked for food, but it soon appeared, after the miraculous catch of fish (John 21), that he already had a meal prepared. Jesus had kindled a fire from charcoal, with a grid upon which bread and fish were roasting. He had let them sweat while the meal was already prepared. *When Christ confronts us with our impotence, then it is so that we can rest in his omnipotence.* They were then invited to join him in the meal prepared by the Lord himself. He invited them himself and founded a communion around him, a bond. Eating together creates a bond. That is the second time at that lake that Jesus prepared the meal. The first time was the miraculous meal of bread and

fish for the thousands, followed by a boat trip. Now the boat excursion is followed by a meal. Christ takes compassion on his tired, disappointed, starving workers. He invites. They can count on sustenance and his protection. He is a powerful host who takes care of his guests.

They ate together with the Risen Lord, not just resurrected into a spiritual world, which could have been wishful thinking on their part, but actually coming and eating with them tangibly. It is a tangible proof of his physical resurrection.

Eating together is the stamp of authenticity. Thus Peter says later when he is able to haul in the 'big fish' Cornelius: *'He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.'* (Acts 10:41).

We are accustomed to linking the meal of the Lord with Passover and Good Friday. While that is certainly appropriate, let us connect not only his suffering and death, but also his resurrection, to the Holy Supper. You receive the food from the Lord's hand, his resurrection power having ensured all kinds of Holy Supper celebrations throughout the centuries, in all countries, up to the most distant shores. He is tangibly present in the signs of bread and wine, and he creates connections. He founds a community: this is the communion with the body and blood, which is he himself. That is completely him, he is the host at table, the Risen One, who lives and distributes himself, and allows us to partake of his death and life. He stays alert and caring for whoever listens to him, and is the same today, fully active as a mighty host who takes care of his people. I think of his words. "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me" (Revelation 3:20). Practising communion is what he is still doing, although it is different from back then: more verbal. But nevertheless visible in the sitting together at the table, when he as host invites you and me to the supper, in expectation... because he is busy preparing the meal for all his own, in his Father's kingdom.

■ In the light of the future

We celebrate supper until he comes. Every supper celebration is one closer to the coming meal in the kingdom of God. On several occasions the Bible speaks of the intense joy of eternal life in the image of a meal (Isaiah 25). There is reference to a feast for all the peoples, with rich food and mature wines, the faithful reclining with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. From east, and west, and north and south they will come and recline. The Lord Jesus lays a clear connection between the supper and that meal of the future. He even speaks of a fulfilment. Every Holy Supper already contains something of a commencement, an advance start. All those tables in the world point ahead, whether you are in Africa, in Asia, in Latin America, wherever in the world, sharing broken bread and singing together. When you pass the cup and drink together, black and white reaching out to each other, it is a foretaste of what is to come: all peoples united,

and all called by name. What happens here will be fulfilled there. And what we are getting now is a foretaste of that abounding joy in God's realm.

Why, then is it not possible to celebrate more exuberantly here the wonderful remembrance of his bitter death? It is not a pitiful Jesus who died, he is the powerful Saviour who gave himself, connecting all the peoples to himself. Can we not make it more of a celebration? Many ideas have been expressed on this point: a different atmosphere, the mood less downcast. For such initiatives we will have to be less cramped. Why, for example, are there not flowers on the table... why no singing during the passing around of bread and wine, for example? Silence is good, and is not necessarily a deadly silence, but does it have to be always silent? May the festive character not be expressed more? For the dominating theme is the future, when death is swallowed up for ever (Isaiah 25:8).

Here, *the expectation is intensified*. The spear point of the Holy Supper is directed towards the coming of Christ's kingdom. That realm which is fully completed, where all are overjoyed, that new world is still to come. The Holy Supper helps us look forward to that future, it awakens our desire, and keeps that desire alive. The windows to the future are opened up. *Nowhere is that future nearer than in the celebration of the Holy Supper – because Jesus himself is present*. He is the host and

makes his presence tangible in bread and wine. His presence paves the way to expectation. The supper cannot truly be celebrated without being steeped in that expectation, for what sort of bride does not look forward longingly to the coming of her bridegroom? For this reason, it is a good thing that God's Spirit prompts us, that this Spirit places it in our hearts. Otherwise the longing cry would have fallen silent long ago! *Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus*, we look forward with longing to your appearance, when we will sit at the table together for ever and experience the glorious radiation of the host. ■

In Jerusalem, the Lord of Heaven's Armies will spread a wonderful feast for all the people or the world.

It will be a delicious banquet with clear, well-aged wine and choice meat.

There he will remove the cloud of gloom, the shadow of death hovering over the earth.

He will swallow up death forever!

The Sovereign Lord will wipe away all tears.

He will remove forever all insults and mockery against his country and people.

The Lord has spoken!

In that day the people will proclaim, 'This is our God!

We trusted in him, and he saved us!

This is the Lord, in whom we trusted.

Let us rejoice in the salvation he brings!'

EuCRC 2016 plenair



photo Laurens den Butter

Children at the Table

a Summary Critique of Paedocommunion



Dr William M. Schweitzer
is minister of Gateshead
Presbyterian Church
(Evangelical Presbyterian
Church of England and Wales).
He also serves as professor
of systematic theology at
Westminster Presbyterian
Theological Seminary, UK.

Introduction

Some of our churches are being troubled by those who argue that all baptized infants should be brought to the Lord's Table as soon as they are able to eat, a practice known as paedocommunion.¹ This practice, and the Federal Vision (FV) theology that is often associated with it, have been the occasion of prolonged theological conflict in its native land of America. The battle has been fought over the past four decades, and matters are now more or less settled—all the main member denominations of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Conference (NAPARC) have issued rulings against the Federal Vision and have side-lined the practice of paedocommunion.² The chief instigators, men such as James Jordan, Peter Leithart, and Douglas Wilson, have largely retreated to their own denomination, the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC).³

The situation in Europe, however, remains unsettled. So the promoters of this doctrine think they have a wide open door to spread their teaching here. This is particularly the case in Eastern Europe, where the context of sacerdotal Roman religion and Eastern Orthodoxy – which has historically practised paedocommunion – aids their acceptance. Through the industrious missionary activity of some prominent advocates, this doctrine is gaining ground in nations such as Belarus, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, Russia, and the Ukraine.⁴ However, as the fact that this teaching originated in the United States suggests, such teaching does not need to have these factors in order to gain a foothold.

Naturally, advocates of paedocommunion will argue that what they teach is true. They claim that paedocommunion was widely practised by the early church, is taught by Scripture, is perfectly consistent with Reformed theology, and will be good for the church. Was there ever any error that did *not* make such claims? As the ordained guardians of Christ's flock, however, it is our responsibility to scrutinize such claims. When we do, we shall see that paedocommunion was never practised by the Reformed, that it is clearly contradicted by the good and necessary consequences of Scripture, is flatly inconsistent with our Reformed confessions, and has dangerous practical and theological implications. In other words, it is not Reformed and not safe. We shall cover the material under the following four headings: historical, biblical, theological, and practical application.

1. Historical

Advocates for paedocommunion place a lot of weight on historical precedent. Yet we must admit that in the annals of church history one can find precedent for just about anything. There was, for instance, a time when virtually all of Christendom embraced Arianism—this is why Athanasius was said to be *contra mundum*. Yet we would not argue from this aberration that Arianism should be restored. So the question is not whether there is *any* precedent in church history for paedocommunion but rather what the circumstances were surrounding this precedent. This is the question that we should consider as we briefly survey the evidence.

a) Paedocommunion's claim to the early church.

Christian Keigel, who in 1975 penned one of the first modern Western publications in favour of paedocommunion, asks, 'Why not let baptized infants and children *back into* the Lord's Supper? This request is not nearly so strange once it is understood that infant observance of the Lord's Supper was widespread in the early church.'⁵ Federal Vision architect James Jordan asserts that 'Infants and small children participated in the Lord's Supper in the Western Church until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.'⁶ What do we make of such claims?

First, any claim that paedocommunion was a widespread practice in the early church is highly dubious simply because no credible evidence for the practice from the first two hundred years of church history is forthcoming. The earliest Patristic writing that advocates can point to is Cyprian's treatise *On the Lapsed* (251). This treatise no doubt describes an infant being served communion, but whether the incident makes for the most solid precedent to follow is another matter. The context is the time immediately after the persecution under the Emperor Decius (r. 249–51). Cyprian indicates the low condition of the church at this time: 'Let us rather consider our offences, revolving our doings and the secrets of our mind; let us weigh the deserts of our conscience; let it come back upon our heart that we have not walked in the Lord's ways, and have cast away God's law, and have never been willing to keep his precepts and saving counsels.'⁷ So this was not a situation of the church speaking in her spiritual prosperity but in the immediate aftermath of widespread confusion and declension.

The incident Cyprian relates is, by all accounts, a strange one. In the midst of the persecution some Christian parents had left behind their infant daughter, who was then handed over to the authorities. ‘They gave it, in the presence of an idol whither the people flocked (because it was not yet able to eat flesh on account of its years), bread mingled with wine...’ The girl was later restored to her family, and was subsequently taken to church wherein the Lord’s Supper was being administered: *‘When, however, the solemnities were finished, and the deacon began to offer the cup to those present, and when, as the rest received it, its turn approached, the little child, by the instinct of the divine majesty, turned away its face, compressed its mouth with resisting lips, and refused the cup. Still the deacon persisted, and, although against her efforts, forced on her some of the sacrament of the cup. Then there followed a sobbing and vomiting. In a profane body and mouth the Eucharist could not remain; the draught sanctified in the blood of the Lord burst forth from the polluted stomach.’*⁸

Judge for yourself the merits of this evidence. Matthew Winzer concludes that, ‘So far from being indicative of a universal practice, it conveys an isolated and singular incident that required explanation.’⁹ He also notes that what is actually being reported is forced communion, something contemporary advocates for paedocommunion do not usually argue for.¹⁰ Notwithstanding these many irregularities that limit the significance of this reference, we concede that by this point there was at least one church that would serve infants at least one element of the Lord’s Supper on at least one occasion. The question is on what basis theologically? Sadly, two centuries were more than enough time for error to creep into the doctrine of the church. One need only to read Cyprian’s *On the Baptism of Infants* to see that his sacramentology was more than a little infected with sacerdotal assumptions.¹¹ In consonance with his clearly sacerdotal understanding of the ministry, it seems that Cyprian believed that the sacraments convey grace apart from faith.¹² Thus his practice of paedocommunion was likely predicated upon a false theology. What can we say about the larger picture through the first five centuries? In contrast to the practice of infant baptism during this period, where the evidence is widespread and incontrovertible, the evidence for paedocommunion is spotty and ambiguous.¹³

b) Paedocommunion was eventually accepted by the Eastern Church and, for a time, by the Western Church.

By the time of the end of the fifth century, however, it seems that infant communion had become an established practice.¹⁴ The practice probably waxed and waned over the succeeding centuries until 1215, at which point the Fourth Lateran Council ruled that the minimum age for admission to the mass would henceforth be seven years old. The precise reason for this ruling is debated; the fear that infants might desecrate the sacrament no doubt played some role but so also did the rise of a more discriminate communion in the Roman church generally. On the other hand, paedocommunion in the Eastern Church continued on to the present day. So while it is true that paedocommunion has historical precedent, the question remains whether the circumstances make it a good precedent to follow. Indeed, the fact that the Medieval Roman Church and the present-day Eastern Orthodox Church embrace the practice would seem reason more to regard it with suspicion than to accept it uncritically.

c) Paedocommunion was rejected by the Reformers.

One of the first denominational responses to paedocommunion—the Reformed Church in the United States’ (RCUS) 1977 report—aptly summarizes the situation at the Reformation: ‘While the Reformers did restore the cup to the laity, they did not return to the position of infant communion since they rejected the [sacerdotal] view of the sacraments and required that a degree of discernment accompany participation in the Lord’s Supper.’¹⁵ The point is that the Reformers did not passively carry on whatever tradition was then current in the Western church regarding the Supper; they rightly restored one old practice (communion in both kinds) while rightly rejecting another (paedocommunion).

The Reformers were aware of the possibility of paedocommunion but universally rejected it.¹⁶ Why? Let us hear John Calvin reprove the false logic of paedocommunion in the *Institutes*: *‘At length they object, that there is not greater reason for admitting infants to baptism than to the Lord’s Supper, to which, however, they are never admitted: as if Scripture did not in every way draw a wide distinction between them. [...] For if we attend to the peculiar nature of baptism, it is a kind of entrance, and as it were initiation into the Church, by which we are ranked among the*

*people of God, a sign of our spiritual regeneration, by which we are again born to be children of God; whereas, on the contrary, the Supper is intended for those of riper years, who, having passed the tender period of infancy, are fit to bear solid food. This distinction is very clearly pointed out in Scripture. For there, as far as regards baptism, the Lord makes no selection of age, whereas he does not admit all to partake of the Supper, but confines it to those who are fit to discern the body and blood of the Lord, to examine their own conscience, to show forth the Lord’s death, and understand its power. Can we wish anything clearer than what the apostle says, when he thus exhorts, ‘Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup?’ (1 Corinthians 11:28.) Examination, therefore, must precede, and this it were vain to expect from infants. Again, ‘He that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body.’ If they cannot partake worthily without being able duly to discern the sanctity of the Lord’s body, why should we stretch out poison to our young children instead of vivifying food? Then what is our Lord’s injunction? ‘Do this in remembrance of me.’ And what the inference which the apostle draws from this? ‘As often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord’s death till he come.’ How, pray, can we require infants to commemorate any event of which they have no understanding; how require them ‘to show forth the Lord’s death; of the nature and benefit of which they have no idea? [...] Had these men the least particle of soundness in their brain, would they be thus blind as to a matter so very clear and obvious?’*¹⁷ Thus Calvin’s resounding rebuttal to those who are ‘blind as to a matter so very clear and obvious.’

Moving beyond the time of the Reformation itself, it is a simple matter of fact that Reformed churches have never adopted the practice. The 1977 RCUS report goes on to say, ‘To our knowledge, infant communion was never a practice in the Reformed churches.’¹⁸ R. Scott Clark, in his series of value-added reviews on Venema’s *Children at the Table*, says ‘...it is beyond doubt and admitted by all intelligent proponents of paedocommunion that the Reformed Churches do not and never have confessed paedocommunion.’¹⁹

Wolfgang Musculus is sometimes cited as an opposing opinion among the Reformers.²⁰ Three things should be observed on this point. First, and most importantly, even advocates of paedocommunion have to admit that ‘...Mus-



ities as well as continuities between the Passover and the Lord's Supper. Defenders of orthodoxy have sometimes tied themselves in knots trying to get out of the paedocommunist's equation that whatever applied to any part of the Passover must apply monolithically to the Lord's Supper.²⁷ Yet the equation so stated is not valid. In addition to the prolonged duration and multiple elements and stages of celebration, there is the issue of frequency; the Passover was observed only once every year whereas the Lord's Supper is observed frequently. Furthermore, the Passover was intended to serve as a sustenance meal whereas it was a dangerous mistake for the Corinthians to treat the Lord's Supper as if it were ('What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in?' (1 Corinthians 11:22)). Quite simply, although we can speak of parallels and of fulfilment, the Lord's Supper is *not the same thing as the Passover*.

culus himself did not advocate a return to the practice of paedocommunion.²¹ This is putting it somewhat mildly; Musculus wrote: '...I will not be author to any man, to go about to bring in the communion of infants into the church again.'²² Thus, to use Musculus as support for reintroducing this practice would be to trample upon his own express intent. Secondly, it is useful to see that Musculus actually accepts some of the key arguments employed by paedocommunion advocates today yet, in stark contrast to the overheated rhetoric sometimes found in titles such as *Daddy, Why Was I Excommunicated?*, he sees no urgent need to bring infants to the table.²³ Thirdly, even if he had said more than he did, he would have been a singular voice—the exception that proves the rule. Finally, it was not that the framers of the orthodox Reformed faith accidentally omitted paedocommunion because there were unaware of the possibility; they had in fact heard of it from a very able man. They rejected it nonetheless.

The bottom line is that the practice of paedocommunion remained unknown among the Reformed churches for the first four and a half centuries of our history.

d) Paedocommunion among the Reformed churches is a novelty of recent vintage.

To come to any history of paedocommunion being advocated and practised among Reformed churches, we have to come to 1970s Westminster Seminary and to the larger controversy surrounding Norman Shepherd.²⁴ From there, the strands of a new sacerdotal religion begin to coalesce in the Auburn Avenue conference

material of the early 2000s which would become the Federal Vision.²⁵ The decisive debate in denominations such as the PCA took place soon after this time, as one by one the Reformed denominations took turns rejecting this movement. Purely in historical terms, we can say with great confidence that this is not a Reformed practice but rather a novelty of recent vintage.

2. Biblical

Let us now consider the Scriptural evidence regarding paedocommunion.

a) Paedocommunion's equation between the Passover and the Lord's Supper is invalid.

Did young children partake of the Passover? Calvin did not think so. In the section quoted above, he goes on to explain the implications of what is said in Exodus 12:26: '...the Passover...did not admit all kinds of guests promiscuously, but was duly eaten only by those who were of an *age sufficient to ask the meaning of it* (Exod. 12:26).'²⁶

In other words, the command for the parents to explain to their children when asked is predicated upon the children first being able to ask with understanding.

It should also be recognized that the biblical Passover was closely linked to a seven-day feast—the Feast of Unleavened Bread—and included multiple elements at different times. It is, for instance, entirely possible that young children participated in certain aspects of this larger celebration but not in the elements most closely parallel to the Lord's Supper. Moreover, the mere possibility of such a disparity should alert us to the larger issue: there are significant discontinu-

For such reasons R. Scott Clark reminds us that 'the Supper has no exact analogy in the old covenant.'²⁸ Indeed, if there were an exact and precise analogy between these institutions, we would expect to find in our sufficient Scriptures the sort of explicit warnings in the Old Testament regarding the Passover as we have for the Lord's Supper in the New. These instructions, perhaps with some reiteration predicated upon this precise parallel, would have sufficed for the New Testament church. Yet this is not what we find. Rather, the existence of the lengthy text in 1 Corinthians 11 that makes no reference to the Passover bears implicit testimony to the real discontinuities.

In any case, it is a cardinal tenet of Reformed hermeneutics that the clearer text of Scripture must interpret the less clear. That means that texts of Scripture that deal directly with the Lord's Supper must have the final say on how the Lord's Supper is to be administered and received, and others must be interpreted in light of them.

b) Paedocommunion must impose an illegitimate contextual control to overcome the strictures of 1 Corinthians 11.

1 Corinthians 11 presents a very formidable obstacle standing in the way of those who would bring toddlers to the Lord's Supper. Naturally, this obstacle must be somehow overcome. Ray Sutton writes, 'Many have said that the "self-examination" and "discernment" required therein cannot be practised by children. [...] Closer examination of the passage, however, indicates a more *corporalistic* interpretation.' He claims that the problem is not with individuals who fail to

discern the Lord's body, but rather with the whole church's actions involving pride and factionalism: *'The verses which are normally used in preparation for communion are generally taken out of context. 'Self-examination' and 'discernment' are applied across the board. But only the context can clarify what Paul says about how the Lord's Supper is to be observed. [...] However one takes the passage, it must be consistent with this context.'*²⁹

By thus monolithically imposing a corporate context upon the passage, the paedocommunion advocate conveniently evacuates the text of its clear implications for individual participants. Scott Clark notes that 'Their view depends considerably upon their reconstruction of the circumstances prompting Paul's response... The problem was not "unworthy" participants but ungodly pride and factionalism... Advocates of paedocommunion argue that what the Corinthians failed to discern was their membership in Christ.'³⁰ This is all very convenient. Assuming this particular context (which happens to be at odds with the context the church has traditionally understood from the text) and assuming that this purported context must define the outer limits of what Paul could possibly have been addressing in the text that follows predetermines the desired outcome. If this sounds familiar, it should; similar procedures lie at the heart of the New Perspective on Paul that is so beloved by Federal Vision adherents. It should perhaps come as no surprise that N.T. Wright himself also happens to be a proponent of paedocommunion.³¹ Such hermeneutical trickery is antithetical to any legitimate notion of Reformed interpretation, and its enlistment in support of paedocommunion is alone reason enough to reject it.

c) Notwithstanding, Paedocommunion is flatly inconsistent with 1 Corinthians 11.

If not the falsely constructed corporate context, what is the basic category of error the Corinthians were guilty of?³² Read the text: ²⁰ *Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper. ²¹ For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk. ²² What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you.*

They are using the Supper as something other than its intended design, as an ordinary meal ('What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in?') or, in addition to this, as a means of being

unkind to those who have less than they ('Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing?'). In either case, the guilty parties are 'not eat[ing] the Lord's Supper'; they have mistaken it for something else and have therefore brought upon themselves judgment.

Two things are to be observed from this information. First, the abuse was true of some but not all of the Corinthians. This categorically eliminates the possibility of a monolithically corporate construction. Secondly, now it would seem that there were adults who were making this mistake. This does not suggest that children are incapable of making such a mistake, but rather that even adults could. It is clear from the outset that there must be the cognitive capacity not to make this mistake in order for there to be a safe participation in the Supper. This is, of course, interrelated with the three active verbs Paul requires of participants, all of which are cognitive in nature: discerning, remembering, and proclaiming. How confident are we that a young child would never, ever mistake the Lord's Supper for an ordinary meal? Beyond that, how confident are we that he would be capable of the 'discerning', 'remembering', and 'proclaiming' that Paul goes on to demand of partakers? The answer should be obvious: no, and no. Warnings must be taken seriously. There is the real possibility of 'eating and drinking damnation' for those who do not discern. What loving parent in their right mind would wish to expose their young child to this?

3. Theological

Moving on now to more theological considerations, how well does this practice cohere with the orthodox Reformed system of theology?

a) Paedocommunion coheres well with sacerdotal assumptions,

First of all, we should just recall that the original impetus for paedocommunion historically was sacerdotal. The 1977 Report of the RCUS notes, 'Infant communion was practiced in the Christian Church from the third to the eighth centuries, and in some areas as late as the twelfth century. The basis for this practice, however, was not covenantal but sacramental or sacerdotal...' ³³ The connection between sacerdotal doctrine and paedocommunion is more than accidental, as we have noted above regarding Cyprian. The fundamental nature of the connection is pretty simple: if we believe that the means of grace operate by faith alone, we have no agenda to overthrow the warnings of 1 Corinthians 11 and admit infants



to the Table. But if we think that the sacraments convey grace apart from faith, we have a good reason to consider paedocommunion. Indeed, where has paedocommunion ever arisen in the absence of sacerdotalism? Certainly not in the contemporary American scene, where sacerdotal Federal Vision theology and paedocommunion go together like carrots and peas.

b) Paedocommunion is based upon a false logical parallel with baptism,

Ray Sutton writes, 'For several years this subject has been a concern because Reformed churches see a discontinuity in the sacraments regarding children. Baptists often level the charge of inconsistency at paedobaptists. Such a criticism initiated the following study in that it was believed paedocommunion warranted investigation.'³⁴ To some extent, this may well have been the nature of the discussion in the Westminster Seminary of the 1970s – not a desire to recover Reformed practice but the need to answer the specious logical arguments of Baptist fellow students. Of course, as we read in Calvin above, this logical parallel is not valid. We need not add anything to what he said very powerfully in the *Institutes*, as quoted above, but I would just mention that there is a good reason why we have two different sacraments: *because they exist for different sacramental ends*. One is initiatory, passively received, and portrays covenantal promise whereas the other is ongoing, actively participated in, and portrays covenantal communion and proclamation. Given such radical differences in the nature and purposes of these sacraments, is it any wonder that there would be differing regulations for who is admitted to them and under which circumstances? Even professing believers may rightly be excluded from the table when they are in open and defiant sin, whereas a baby may be



baptized in the very act of loudly protesting – the nature of the sacrament is consistent with the manner of its administration and reception.

c) Paedocommunion is incompatible with confessional standards at numerous points.

Paedocommunion is contradicted in the clearest way by Westminster Larger Catechism 177: The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper differ, in that baptism is to be administered but once, with water, to be a sign and seal of our regeneration and ingrafting into Christ, and that even to infants; whereas the Lord's supper is to be administered often, in the elements of bread and wine, to represent and exhibit Christ as spiritual nourishment to the soul, and to confirm our continuance and growth in him, *and that only to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves.*

Let us just note the ways in which this statement amounts to an explicit prohibition of paedocommunion. The Westminster divines here consider the possibility of a false symmetry between the sacraments forming the basis for a symmetrical administration. So they draw a clear contrast; on the one hand, baptism is to be administered 'even to infants'; whereas on the other hand the Lord's Supper is to be administered 'only to such as are of years and ability to examine themselves.' Note also the double qualification: it is not some ability to discern which might theoretically be available to infants but an ability that is inextricably related to age. For anyone having a sincere desire to conform to confessional Reformed standards, Westminster Larger Catechism 177 should be more than enough to rule out paedocommunion.

We must be very clear, however, that Westminster Larger Catechism 177 is no isolated proof

text, as if one could omit this point without falling afoul of any other. Rather, at each and every point that the Standards have anything to say related to who may come to the Lord's Supper, the implications of the statement are utterly incompatible with paedocommunion. As but an incomplete survey, consider the following. Whereas Westminster Confession of Faith 28.4 extends baptism to the infants of believers apart from their own profession of faith, 29.1 defines the Lord's Supper as being for 'true believers' only. The standards make reference to 'worthy receivers' and those who 'worthily communicate' (WCF 29.7, WLC 168 and 170), making clear that *unworthy* reception and communication are sadly possible. The divines employed this terminology because their sacramentology is predicated upon a discriminate administration and reception of the Lord's Table, again in contrast to the situation with baptism. Westminster Confession of Faith 29.8 speaks of 'ignorant' men receiving the Lord's Supper to their damnation, meaning that the Supper demands knowledge that not even all baptized adults possess, let alone all infants. Then there is the statement in Westminster Larger Catechism 173, 'Such as are found to be ignorant or scandalous, notwithstanding their profession of the faith, and desire to come to the Lord's Supper, may and ought to be kept from that sacrament, by the power which Christ hath left in his church, until they receive instruction and manifest their reformation.' Thus even an outward profession of faith is not alone sufficient but must be accompanied with commensurate knowledge and conduct. Likewise, in Westminster Larger Catechism 169 there are the words, '...In thankful remembrance that the body of Christ was broken and given, and his blood shed for them.' In order to *remember* something, you must of course know it in the first place. Such qualifications are flatly inconsistent with paedocommunion.

Even more telling are the expectations articulated for preparation to receive the Lord's Supper: 'They that receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper are, before they come, to prepare themselves thereunto, by examining themselves of their being in Christ, of their sins and wants; of the truth and measure of their knowledge, faith, repentance; love to God and the brethren, charity to all men, forgiving those that have done them wrong; of their desires after Christ, and of their new obedience, and by renewing the exercise of these graces, by serious meditation, and fervent prayer' (WLC 171). I will not try the

reader's patience by detailing each item on this long list of highly demanding tasks here enumerated, but suffice it to say that no infant could ever hope to fulfil them.

And then there are the reception and post-reception questions found in WLC 174 and 175:

'It is required of them that receive the sacrament of the Lord's supper, that, during the time of the administration of it, with all holy reverence and attention they wait upon God in that ordinance, diligently observe the sacramental elements and actions, heedfully discern the Lord's body, and affectionately meditate on his death and sufferings, and thereby stir up themselves to a vigorous exercise of their graces...' (WLC 174). 'The duty of Christians, after they have received the sacrament of the Lord's supper, is seriously to consider how they have behaved themselves therein, and with what success...' (WLC 175).

By what stretch of the imagination could anyone conceive that infants are capable of upholding these requirements? It should be obvious that a young child is not capable of fulfilling such requirements, precisely because the Standards did not intend for them to receive the Supper. This all leads Lane Keister to ask, 'How Hostile is Paedocommunion to Our Standards?'³⁵ Thus far the Westminster Standards. I shall now briefly touch upon The Three Forms of Unity. Although The Three Forms are not as elaborate as Westminster and lack an explicit statement along the lines of Westminster Larger Catechism 177, they articulate the very same underlying Reformed sacramentology, one that is at odds with paedocommunion. Consider, for instance, what is involved in fulfilling the requirements of Heidelberg Catechism, Question 81. The Lord's Supper is 'for those who are truly displeased with themselves for their sins and yet trust that these are forgiven them for the sake of Christ' and 'who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and amend their life.' On the other hand, 'hypocrites and such as turn not to God with sincere hearts eat and drink judgment to themselves.' Neither does the Heidelberg Catechism allow us to lose sight of the stakes involved as we read in Question 82:

Q. Are they also to be admitted to this supper who, by their confession and life, show themselves to be unbelieving and ungodly?

A. No; for in this way the covenant of God would be profaned and His wrath kindled against the whole congregation; wherefore the Christian Church is in duty bound, according to the ordinance of Christ and His apostles, to exclude such



Feed my lambs

persons by the keys of the kingdom of heaven, until they show amendment of life.

Those who partake of the Lord's Supper must have a confession as well as manner of life that are consistent with being a believer. This understanding is confirmed in that the main author of the Heidelberg Catechism, Zacharias Ursinus, explicitly teaches against paedocommunion in his *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*.³⁶ Finally, note that the Belgic Confession, Article 25, teaches much the same as Heidelberg. Thus, we see that the Three Forms of Unity cohere entirely with what was previously discussed regarding the Westminster Standards. The framers of our Reformed confessions were convinced that the instructions given to us demand such requirements, requirements that could never conceivably be fulfilled by an infant.

c) Paedocommunion will either be held inconsistently with Reformed theology, or else it will lead to a consistent theology that is not Reformed.

Is it possible, as some argue, to practise paedocommunion without there being any implications for other aspects of confessional Reformed orthodoxy? The short answer is no. Practice is inevitably connected to a coherent system of theology. Peter Leithart, writing in the provocatively titled book *Daddy, Why Was I Excommunicated?*, makes the astute observation that 'the significance for the system of Reformed doctrine' of a 'belief in paedocommunion...is vast.' It has implications for '...such major areas of theology as the doctrine of the Church, the meaning of the covenant, the relationship of the covenant to eternal election, the doctrines of perseverance and assurance, the relationship

of faith and the sacraments, the relationship of faith and understanding, the relationship of faith and works, and other questions of great theological significance. [...] For these reasons... paedocommunion is rightly seen as a profound challenge to the prevailing thought and practice. If true, paedocommunion requires the contemporary Reformed churches to undergo a far-reaching repentance.³⁷

We can be thankful for Leithart's honesty here. He would proceed to do exactly what he signalled in 1992: to recast theology in a way that is fully consistent with the implications of paedocommunion. We call this theology the Federal Vision, and it is opposed to Reformed orthodoxy at virtually every point. And one way that we understand the Federal Vision is simply the desire to be consistent doctrinally with a practice these men had already embraced. Paedocommunion is, in this sense, a gateway drug to the Federal Vision.

4. Practical Application

Let us now consider the three following items of application.

a) A plea for the discipline of those who practise paedocommunion

In this paper, I am speaking to those who are in confessional Reformed denominations, to those who have confessions of faith precisely because they mean something. We believe that they communicate the truth of God's Word. They do us no good if they are not upheld by church discipline. Although this is not always pleasant, neither is what the virulent and often schismatic advocates of paedocommunion have done to the church. Some have said that we should not focus on what we are holding on to, but rather

on what we can give. This is a false dichotomy: if we do not hold on to 'the faith once delivered to the saints', we will have nothing to give. Just like our bodies, the church has an immune system designed to preserve life by keeping out what is harmful. Theological debate and church discipline serve to protect Christ's body, the Church. It is laudable to focus on mission, but the church cannot help anyone if she is diseased.

b) A plea for diligent catechesis rather than indiscriminate laxity

One of the appeals of paedocommunion is its sheer ease. Instead of the hard work of Christian nurture and the discomfort of spiritual scrutiny, there is the wonderfully simple and easy admission to the table of all baptized infants. Yet this ease – or rather this laxity – is itself highly problematic, because it undermines the Church's motivation for catechesis. F. N. Lee points to this problem when he asserts that 'paedocommunion ultimately leads to an uncatechised Church (which Calvin says cannot long continue...)'³⁸

There is a certain irony in the paedocommunionists' rhetoric. They make highly emotional appeals that we should 'Feed my lambs' in paedocommunion. Yet the effect of their teaching is almost certainly to enervate the right motivation parents and churches have to feed them diligently the much-needed milk of Christian nurture rather than the poison of indiscriminate communion. There is no short cut to the hard work of diligent catechesis, laying the foundation for a beneficial reception of the Lord's Table. It might also be worth reiterating at this point Venema's apt observation: 'The historic view does not deny that the children of the covenant are invited to the Lord's Table. As a

matter of fact, if their baptism means anything, it means that they are invited to respond in faith to the Lord's gracious promise, which would qualify them to receive the sacrament that nourishes their faith. Therefore, the only thing preventing such children, or any others, from coming to the Table is the absence of an appropriate response to the invitation.³⁹

c) A plea for experiential religion rather than formalism

False teaching sometimes gains a foothold among us when the church strays even minutely from the full-orbed Biblical truth. In the case of paedocommunion, one area of weakness could be the relatively high age – often nineteen – that some Reformed churches have adopted as the standard age to admit to the Table. Related to this is the tendency in some churches to accept into communicant membership essentially everyone of this age who completes the required training. No doubt there are good intentions behind such traditions, but if we mechanistically receive covenant children to the Supper at one (high) arbitrary age, should we wonder if others receive them at another (low) arbitrary age? Perhaps we would do well to consider anew the model that Calvin envisioned: 'A child of ten would present himself to the church to declare his confession of faith, would be examined in each article, and answer to each; if he were ignorant of anything, he would be taught. Thus, while the church looks on as a witness, he would profess the one true and sincere faith, in which the believing folk with one mind worship the one God.'⁴⁰

To be clear, I do not wish to propose a new automatic age of ten. The point is just to say that Calvin's vision is intended to bring a child to the table as soon as he is spiritually and intellectually able to fulfil the requirements of 1 Corinthians 11, and this age could be less than nineteen. Indeed, I would argue that the age could vary significantly. The criterion is not so much age as what has historically been called among Anglo-phone churches a 'credible profession of faith'. So instead of formalism of any kind or degree whatsoever I would again plea for the religion of Calvin, Owen, Maastricht, and Edwards: the religion known as experiential Calvinism.⁴¹ ■

■ Notes

- 1 I shall be using the term paedocommunion as synonymous with *infant* communion, as is usually assumed in the English-speaking world. Note that there is an important distinction to be made between this concept and allowing young people to be admitted when they meet the biblical requirements rather than imposing an arbitrary age requirements of late teens or early adulthood.
- 2 For a summary of the denominational responses, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_Vision
- 3 See <http://crechurches.org/>
- 4 See the CREC's Joint Eastern European Project, <http://crechurches.org/missions/#jeep>
- 5 Christian L. Keidel, 'Is the Lord's Supper for Children?', *Westminster Theological Journal* 37, no. 3 (1975): pp. 301-41, p. 301; emphasis added.
- 6 Jordan, James. 'Thesis on Paedocommunion', *The Geneva Papers* Special Edition (1982), p. 1.
- 7 Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*, section 21 in A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, ed., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*.
- 8 Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*, section 25 in A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, ed., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*.
- 9 Matthew Winzer, 'The True History of Paedo-Communion', *The Confessional Presbyterian* 3 (2007): pp. 27-36; p. 32.
- 10 Winzer, *ibid*
- 11 Cyprian, Epistle 58, to Fidus, *On the Baptism of Infants*, in A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, ed., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*.
- 12 'Cyprian (d. 258) goes still further, and applies all the privileges, duties, and responsibilities of the Aaronic priesthood to the officers of the Christian church, and constantly calls them *sacerdotes* and *sacerdotium*. He may therefore be called the proper father of the sacerdotal conception of the Christian ministry as a mediating agency between God and the people.' Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Vol. II*, p. 119.
- 13 See the charitable treatment in Cornelis P. Venema, *Children at the Lord's Table?: Assessing the Case for Paedocommunion*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2009).
- 14 Among other evidence, we have a pronouncement from Gennadius of Marseilles in the year 495 that suggests this state of affairs.
- 15 Reformed Churches in the United States, 'Report on Infant Communion', 1977.
- 16 The case of Wolfgang Musculus will be discussed below.
- 17 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.16.30.
- 18 Reformed Churches in the United States, 'Report on Infant Communion', 1977.
- 19 R. Scott Clark, 'Children at the Lord's Table?', <http://heidelblog.net/2009/04/children-at-the-lords-table-1/>, accessed 24 May, 2016.
- 20 See Musculus, *Loci Communes Sacrae Theologiae*, as abstracted on the pro-paedocommunion website http://paedocommunion.com/articles/musculus_common_places.php.
- 21 Tim Gallant, http://paedocommunion.com/articles/musculus_common_places.php, accessed 26 May, 2016.
- 22 '...nec author cuipiam esse uolo, ut infantium communionem postliminio in ecclesiam reducere conetur.' Musculus, 'de Coena Domini', II. 'Quibus Administranda Sit Coena Domini, & Quibus Non Sit', *Loci Communes Theologiae* (Basel, 1567), p. 808. Translation by John Mann (London, 1578), p. 764.
- 23 Peter J. Leithart, *Daddy, Why Was I Excommunicated?* (Niceville, FL: Transfiguration Press, 1992).
- Tim Gallant, *Feed My Lambs: Why the Lord's Table Should Be Restored to Covenant Children*, (Pactum Reformada: Grande Prairie, AB, Canada, 2002).
- 24 See, for instance, the aforementioned Christian L. Keidel, 'Is the Lord's Supper for Children?', *Westminster Theological Journal* 37, no. 3 (1975): pp. 301-41.
- 25 See Waters, Guy Prentiss. *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2006.
- 26 Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.16.30; emphasis added.
- 27 Leonard J. Coppes, *Daddy, May I Take Communion?*, 1988.
- 28 R. Scott Clark, 'Children at the Lord's Table?', <http://heidelblog.net/2009/04/children-at-the-lords-table-8/>, accessed 24 May, 2016.
- 29 Ray R. Sutton, 'Presuppositions of Paedocommunion'. *The Geneva Papers*, no. Special Edition (1982), p. 3.
- 30 R. Scott Clark, 'Children at the Lord's Table?', <http://heidelblog.net/2009/04/children-at-the-lords-table-8/>, accessed 24 May, 2016.
- 31 See, <http://paedocommunion.com/whoswho/>, accessed 24 May, 2016; 'Federal Vision' https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_Vision, accessed 8 June 2016.
- 32 See George W. Knight III, 'The Lord's Supper: Abuses, Words of Institution and Warnings', *Ordained Servant* 14, no. 2 (2005): pp. 40-46.
- 33 Reformed Churches in the United States, 'Report on Infant Communion', 1977.
- 34 Ray R. Sutton, 'Presuppositions of Paedocommunion'. *The Geneva Papers*, no. Special Edition (1982).
- 35 Lane Keister, <https://greenbaggins.wordpress.com/2012/05/31/how-hostile-is-paedocommunion-to-our-standards/>.
- 36 Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*.
- 37 Peter J. Leithart, *Daddy, Why Was I Excommunicated?* Niceville, FL: Transfiguration Press, 1992, pp. 5-6.
- 38 F. N. Lee, 'Summary Against Paedocommunion', The Works of Rev. Prof. Dr. F.N. Lee online.
- 39 Venema, *ibid*, p. 2.
- 40 Calvin, *Institutes* 4.19.13.
- 41 See my "A Point of Infinite Consequence": Jonathan Edwards's Experimental Calvinism On Trial', *Banner of Truth*, July-August 2016.

And So Preachers Must

Review of the Conference of the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary

No two people will observe the same event in the same way. So it's no surprise that three hundred people will not hear the same sermon in the same way. When a preacher opens Holy Scripture on a Sunday morning, he's delivering a message of divine weight and eternal truth not just to bodies, but to souls. To complete people, hundreds of them, all listening in their own way. This is why a heart-wrenching sermon isn't enough. It's why a thought-provoking sermon isn't enough. It's why a motivational sermon isn't enough. Each person in those pews has his own needs, and they don't all need their hearts wrenched or their thoughts provoked or their wills motivated.



Jeremy deHaan is a fourth year student at the CRTS.

What each person needs, however, is to hear the whole gospel addressed to their whole person. Jesus Christ took on our human nature to redeem our human nature – the whole mess of it. As a result, his gospel is nothing less than a total claim on our being, on our emotions, our thoughts, and our wills. It was this conviction that lay behind the theme of this year's CRTS conference: 'Preaching the Whole Gospel to the Whole Person.'

Rev. Eric Watkins, pastor of Covenant OPC in St Augustine, Florida, opened the conference with a public talk on Thursday evening. His talk was titled, 'The Relevance of Redemptive-Historical Preaching in a Postmodern Context: An Optimistic Proposal.' Rev. Watkins became a believer as an adult, and only encountered redemptive-historical preaching well after his conversion. So the fact that he was speaking about such preaching to a crowd of people raised in that tradition led him to remark, 'I feel like a lion in a den full of Daniels.' He began the talk asking whether redemptive-historical preaching has gone out with the cultural tide. After all, postmodern thinking holds that we can't truly know what has happened in history, nor can we truly know what a dead author meant by his writing. Thus we cannot rely on the history in Scripture, and we cannot even know what Scripture means. To a person who believes these things, redemptive-historical preaching can have little significance.

But it isn't the case, Rev. Watkins argued, that redemptive-historical preaching has been made irrelevant by postmodernism. On the contrary, such preaching can actually have much value in a culture like ours. For one, the central element in redemptive history is God's story – and these days everyone loves talking about stories. What redemptive-historical preaching

provides is the grand story of the meaning of our lives, the story of what we are and where we're going. This shows Scripture to be what it is, not 'dulled by two thousand years of history', as some have put it, but ever fresh, ever inviting. Good redemptive-historical preaching tells the story of Christ, and then shows us our place in it. This is just the kind of thing many people today are seeking.

Friday morning began with a lecture by Dr Lawrence Bilkes, 'Spiritual Guidance in Preaching: The Manner of Preaching the Word of God.' This talk focused not on the content of preaching, but on the way the content is presented. He spoke first about the manner of the preacher, and second about the manner of preaching itself. A preacher ought to be concerned above all with the response of his hearers to the gospel. This means being winsome, and it means preaching from the same sacrificial love showed to us by Christ. To that end, there are four things that should characterize the manner of his preaching. First, he must address the mind. The mind is key, for it is right understanding that leads to right living. Second, he must address the conscience. A sermon has to expose the motives behind our actions, and call them to account. Third, he must address the heart. It pleased God to attribute emotions to himself in Scripture. So a preacher too has to feel with his flock whatever they are feeling, and this should come out in his preaching. And fourth, he must address the will. We have been created to act, and a sermon must call us to live lives of light in the midst of spiritual darkness. The preacher himself should exemplify this calling.

The second talk of the morning session was another by Rev. Watkins. This one was called 'Imitating the Saints in Hebrews 11: Revisiting the Questions of Christocentricity and Application.' Redemptive-historical preaching has long stood opposed to the method of preaching that equates the people in Scripture with the people in the pew. The method that says that because David slew his Goliath, with enough faith you can slay your Goliaths too. But Rev. Watkins argued that Hebrews 11 shows that a stark opposition is simply unbiblical. That chapter sets before us examples of how Christ's work has unfolded in real human lives. The saints we read of in Hebrews 11 received the revelation of Christ,



just as we have. But not only did they receive revelation, God worked through their lives to reveal himself, as well. This, too, applies to us. We don't simply possess the revelation of God; our lives go on to manifest that revelation to the world around us. Those of us who are alive today are the current 'theatre', as Rev. Watkins called it, of God's work in the world. Redemptive-historical preaching, then, does not stop at showing us God's work in Scripture; but it teaches us that such work continues very much in our own lives.

After the lunch break Dr James Visscher walked us through the challenge of preaching on the book of Leviticus. Because the book delves into various unpopular subjects like pus, incest, and bloody animal parts, it suffers from a lack of fondness on the part of preachers. But, Dr Visscher argued, this shouldn't be – for it's an important book. In fact, it was one of the first books that Jewish children had to study in-depth. Its central theme is the holiness of God, and all of its uncomfortable subject matter drives home that profound reality. God is holy, and clean, and pure; and his people are not. And this is how Leviticus sets squarely before us our deep need for Christ. The only way that humanity could reach the impossible holiness of God was for God to take on our unholy humanity. All of the skin diseases, bodily discharges, and sexual sins that depict our pollution before God were washed away by the blood of the one, spotless, and perfectly pleasing sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. Leviticus drives us straight to the gospel.

* Would Schilder Pass Classis?

The afternoon closed with a provocatively-titled speech by Dr de Visser: 'Would Schilder Pass Classis?' Schilder¹ drew much praise for his preaching, so that even if his hearers did not understand everything that was said, they at least understood that it was profound. The kinds of things that shaped his preaching were derived from his strongly-held theological beliefs. Schilder was a major force behind reading Scripture redemptive-historically, and his sermons could be grandiose in the connections they teased out from Scripture. And since all the lines of Scripture converge on Christ, Christ was the centrepiece of Schilder's preaching. But these strengths could also be weaknesses. In his effort to draw so many connections across Scripture, Schilder would sometimes ignore the immediate context of the passage he was preaching. This would fail a sermon proposal at classis today. And sometimes his lines to Christ were more fanciful and speculative than they needed to be. This, too, is bad news at classis. His application often amounted to little more than a call to faith when he could have done so much more, but classis tends to go easier on that, as young preachers are expected to grow in that wisdom as they minister. That being said, if Klaas came to classis, would he pass? Dr de Visser asked. 'I'm fairly confident he would scrape through.'

The conference closed with a public speech from Dr Bilkes, 'Preaching the Whole Counsel of God'. As you can imagine, that's a big topic. So to focus his talk, Dr Bilkes outlined the ministry of Jonah. It was Jonah who took the counsel of God to the nations, and Christ proclaimed that one greater than Jonah had come. Dr Bilkes highlighted four features of Jonah's message. The first was that its origin was in God. Jonah had to bring the message of repentance that God commanded him to bring, and so today's preachers must first of all bring God's Word. The highest duty for a preacher is not that his preaching is attractive; it's that it is faithful.

The second feature was the uniqueness of Jonah's message. It was not a message the people of Nineveh could have expected to hear from anyone else, for it's a message that no one wants to hear. It was a message of judgment and destruction: repent or you will be overthrown. This unique message, explained Dr Bilkes, has not lost any of its relevance. God has overthrown churches and nations in the past, and he will certainly do so today. We all must either repent or perish. The third feature was how comprehensive the message was. All of humanity has sinned against God, so a preacher must preach about the fullness of God's holiness and about the extent of humanity's sin. Because of this a preacher must preach about the fullness of Christ's redemption, for this is the all-encompassing solution. And fourth, Jonah's message was one of requirement. It did nothing for Jonah's own status, but laid a hold on its hearers. Preachers, too, ought not to preach to be admired, but to convict their hearers of the requirements of God's Word.

The subject of preaching the whole counsel of God was a fitting end to the conference. 'The whole counsel of God' is just so vast – those few words seem utterly useless to the task. That counsel cannot be contained in a single sermon, or in a lifetime of sermons. It cannot be contained in two thousand years of sermons, nor could it be contained in two thousand more. We are speaking of Christ, in whom, as the KJV puts it, 'dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily' (Colossians 2:9). We would hardly dare to utter such words were they not found in Scripture; but in Scripture they are. And so preachers must utter them and deliver them in all their majesty, however ineffective human words may seem. The dwelling of God with man is just the point of the whole gospel, and so this gospel outfits every part of our being to be worthy for God's presence. How beautiful indeed are the feet of those who prepare our heart, soul, mind, and strength for that holy place! ■

■ Notes

CRTS 2016 conference review, originally published in *Clarion* magazine, Issue 6, Volume 65.

- 1 Prof. dr. Klaas Schilder (1890-1952), Dutch theologian in the Reformed Churches (liberated) in The Netherlands.

Synod Dunnville 2016 | Press Release

By Rev. Rob Schouten, vice-chairman, Synod 2016

Editor's note In May 2016 the Canadian Reformed Churches were assembled in general synod. What follows is an abbreviated version of the synod's official press release.

On the evening of May 9, 2016, Reformed believers from many congregations in southern Ontario gathered for a special worship service prior to the convening of General Synod Dunnville 2016. Rev. Clarence Bouwman, the chairman of the previous synod in Carman, Manitoba (2013), led the worship service. In his sermon, he focused on verse 6 of Psalm 122 where the Psalmist exhorts his fellow believers to 'pray for the peace of Jerusalem'. Putting the work of the upcoming synod in the perspective of this verse was encouraging for all the worshippers and provided a strong motivation for the delegates to work in such a way that the well-being of the churches would be served. On the morning of May 10, twenty-four delegates arrived at the Dunnville church. After opening devotions led by the minister of the convening church, Rev. John VanWoudenberg, the credentials were examined. Through a free vote, Rev. Richard Aasman of Edmonton, Alberta, was chosen as chairman. Rev. Rob Schouten became the vice-chairman, Rev. Karlo Janssen the first clerk, and Rev. Eric Kampen the second clerk. A committee of the convening church had done a large amount of work to make the work of Synod possible. Each delegate had received a fully hyper-linked agenda. Access to any document of the agenda was available through a single click. As a result, delegates were spared the challenge of carrying about numerous large binders filled with synod documents. All in all, the workload looked quite heavy but not as onerous as some other recent synods. Several matters stood out immediately as difficult and challenging. The delegates knew their work would not be easy.

In the following paragraphs the major decisions of Synod Dunnville will be reviewed, though not necessarily in the order they were made. Anyone who wishes to have further details can explore the Acts of Synod which have already been published on our federation's website (www.canrc.org).

■ Ecumenical relationships

Interfacing with other sectors of the body of Christ is perhaps the most exciting aspect of General Synod. We were privileged to receive quite a number of delegates from churches in North America and further abroad. Mr Mark Bube spoke to us on behalf of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, taking us through the history of the OPC over the past three years. Rev. George Horner addressed Synod on behalf of the Reformed Churches of the United States, describing the recent history and current state of the RCUS. Rev. John Bouwers addressed Synod on behalf of the United Reformed Churches of North America. Rev. Bruce Backensto was present at Synod as an observer from the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. He passed on greetings to Synod and expressed his understanding for the hesitancy of the CanRC to enter into ecclesiastical fellowship with the RPCNA.

Synod also received fraternal delegates from beyond North America. It was a joy to have Rev. Dirk Boersema of the Free Reformed Churches of South Africa present among us. In his address to Synod, he shared the struggles of the South African churches and also affirmed the great value of the growing relationship with the CanRC. Present from the Free Reformed Churches of Australia were Rev. Stephen 't Hart and brother Peter Witten. Br. Witten addressed Synod, giving the body an update on the life and activities of the Free Reformed Churches and expressing warm appreciation for the living connection between our two federations. Present from the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (Liberated) were Rev. Kim Batteau and br. Peter Bakker. They brought greetings to Synod on behalf of our Dutch sister churches and asked Synod to continue the relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship with the RCN despite the grave concerns in Canada about developments among our Dutch sister churches. Synod also received letters of greeting from the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), the Reformed Churches of New Zealand and the Reformed Churches of Indonesia (GGRI-NTT). Also present among us in an unofficial capacity was Rev. Bram DeGraaf, missionary of the Cornerstone Church of Hamilton working in Brazil in cooperation with the Reformed Churches of Brazil.

It was heart warming to hear about the work of our Lord Jesus Christ in many countries and

church federations. It was also a joy when Synod decided to maintain relations of ecclesiastical fellowship between the CanRC and all these various church federations and to also maintain our participation in the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) as well as the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC).

In regard to the merger process with the United Reformed Churches of North America, Synod recognized that the work has proceeded more slowly than was originally expected when Synod Neerlandia 2001 initiated the process toward merger. Synod also took note of voices within the URCNA calling for a complete halt to the merger process. Nonetheless, Synod reappointed coordinators for the work of promoting unity with the URCNA and, in view of the workload and the importance of the issues at stake, even increased their number from two to four. In this way, our churches have said very clearly that we want to continue the unity process. We desire our present relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship to become one of ecclesiastical unity. We feel this is a matter of Christian love and obligation.

Another important decision of Synod pertained to the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. This small group of churches is a member of NAPARC and our Committee for Contact with Churches in North America was recommending to Synod Dunnville that we enter into ecclesiastical fellowship with these churches. Synod, however, decided 'that the CanRC not enter into a relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship with the RPCNA. Even though Synod stated that the 'RPCNA can be recognized for their fidelity to the Word of God and their strong Reformed convictions', the practice of ordaining women to the office of deacon was a barrier to moving to a closer relationship.

In the case of the Reformed Churches of The Netherlands, Synod expressed 'thankfulness and joy to the Lord for much faithfulness in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands (GKv) as well as grief and disquiet over tolerance of deviations from Scripture and confession.' Because of Synod's concern about our Dutch sister churches, the decision was made to 'continue ecclesiastical fellowship with the GKv, with the temporary suspension of the operation of Ecclesiastical Fellowship rules 4 and 5.' This decision means that the churches of our federation

no longer automatically accept attestations from our Dutch sister churches and no longer call ministers of our Dutch sister churches without first seeking classical approval. The mood of Synod in coming to this decision was sombre. After more than sixty years of close association and cooperation, it was painful to feel this separation from what is historically our 'mother church'.

■ Appeals

Seventeen churches submitted appeals against Article 110 of the Acts of Synod Carman 2013 in which it was ruled that voting for office-bearers should be restricted to men only, thereby overthrowing the decision of Synod Burlington 2010 that the question of women's voting should be left to the freedom of individual churches. Synod Dunnville sustained these appeals, judging that Synod Carman 2013 had failed to prove that the decision of Synod Burlington 2010 was in conflict with Scripture or the Church Order. The upshot is that women's voting is now once again a matter for local churches to regulate according to the wisdom given them by God.

■ Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary (CRTS)

Synod received a lengthy report from the Board of Governors of the Seminary. Synod recognized with thankfulness to God that the work of training future ministers and missionaries of the gospel could continue without interruption. In 2013, CRTS received accreditation from the Association of Theological Schools. Synod Dunnville officially approved all aspects of the work of the Board. Dr. J. VanVliet was appointed to a three-year term as principal beginning in September 2017. Synod also expressed gratitude to the Free Reformed Churches of Australia for their ongoing and generous support of CRTS.¹

■ Liturgical Matters

Rev. G. Ph. VanPopta presented Synod with an official copy of the *Book of Praise* published by order of General Synod Carman 2013.

In regard to the future of the *Book of Praise*, Synod Dunnville left the door open for future changes when it mandated the Standing Committee to 'seek, receive, evaluate and recommend proposals for changes to the hymn section to be completed for possible submission to a future Synod.'

Synod decided to maintain the English Standard Version as the recommended translation for the churches of the federation. At the same

time, Synod decided to 'acknowledge that while it may not be possible to recommend the NIV2011, a general synod may not forbid churches to use it if they so desire.'

■ Closing thoughts

Synod Dunnville turned out to be the shortest Synod of our churches in recent times. Contributing factors included: the increased use of technology, a somewhat shorter agenda, high-quality reports from committees appointed by the previous synod and a great unity of mind on most issues combined with deep respect for each other's opinion. Put all that together with a very experienced chairman, who kept the assembly on track with tactics of gentle pressure, add in the contributions of some very gifted thinkers and analysts among the delegates, and you have a recipe for a short synod.

May God bless the work of Synod Dunnville 2016 and may he also guide the churches as they scrutinize, evaluate, and implement the decisions that have been made. May our faithful Lord indeed preserve the peace of Jerusalem. ■

■ Note

- 1 Editor: the FRCA support the CRTS at the same financial level as the CanRC. In practice the CRTS functions as seminary for both the CanRC and FRCA.



My name is Jae Youn Kim, and it is a great pleasure to work as a part of the editorial team of Lux Mundi. As an international editor in South Korea, I will do my best to communicate news and articles of the Korean church, which I hope will benefit other churches around the world that share the same confession.

Before I begin my work in the team, I want to briefly introduce myself. I was born and raised in South Korea. It is interesting that my first contact with an international church was at my infant baptism. A Dutch pastor, Rev. van Gurp, baptized me when he came to preach at the church where my father was serving in 1971. He was visiting Korea as a delegate to Kosin church during that time. After 29 years, I went to study at the Theological University in Kampen and had a chance to meet him again in the Netherlands. I believe it was the confession of faith we shared together that brought us back together.

During 8 years of my life in the Netherlands, I lived and learned the reformed faith and life from many professors, teachers and church members. It made a lasting impact in my life. During my stay there, I also met my wife Soo Jin who came to study from America. God blessed us with two beautiful children, Kara and Micah during our stay there as well.

After my study in Kampen, I came back to Korea and had opportunities to serve as a pastor and teach at seminaries. Currently, I am serving as an assistant pastor at Kwan-Ak Presbyterian Church (Kosin) in Seoul and teaching at Asia United Theological University as an associate professor of systematic theology. The university was founded for the evangelization of Asian countries. My intention and effort in the school is to equip the students with the reformed confession, and to help them interpret the reformed theology in the context of mission.

**Jesus said,
“I am the light of the world.”**

John 8:12