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Piet Houtman
Editor in chief

Editorial

The theme of this issue, 'Living in the Last Days', is endlessly varied. It pertains to Christians in North Korea, Pakistan, the Middle East, and Nigeria. These, like the many martyrs in the Book of Revelation, are persecuted as Jesus predicted: 'A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.'

But living in the last days is also practised by middle class Christians in the free world in their cosy houses with difficult children, a demanding job and a modest income, and dealing with schools and elections. Then there are the Christians in the desert, who, having fled from violence or severe drought, are struggling to survive in simple villages with poverty and poor education. The manner in which our topic 'Living in the Last Days' is formulated seems to point in a certain direction. It sounds as though the Lord is coming soon! Doesn't he say so himself? So, don't expect too much anymore, don't focus too much on the realities of the present world. As the apostle says, the present form of this world is passing away. We are dispersed sojourners in this world. This is emphasized in Reformed theology in the Netherlands these days, in the context of a post-Christian world in which we face the loss of many privileges we were used to: shops closed on Sundays, the church respected, and interaction between groups in society, whether Christian or secular, in a civilized manner.

But let's realize that our predecessors also lived in the last days. They developed a Christian lifestyle and a worldview marked by Christianity as they understood it in their own culture. The challenge they faced was to develop structures for family life and society. As they became more highly educated and rose to leading positions in universities, they built up Christian worldviews and Christian science, studying 'creation' as they found it. This may not sound like living in the last days, but by using their talents they rose to the challenges of the day. 'This is my Father's world', or rather, this is our Father's world, and he sent his Son for its salvation, its renewal.

The Scripture passages most often quoted reveal the way in which we tend to interpret and shape our existence in the last days – that is, in the here and now, in our cultural atmosphere. One such passage that is quoted frequently today is from Jeremiah 29: 'Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.' It points to living in the dispersion as a minority as well as seeking peace after centuries of conflict – not only with the world but even between Christians among themselves. At the same time, conflict with the world is also an overarching theme in Scripture. Many Christians who did not court it had to fight temptation and confront the enemy. The concept of the 'cultural mandate' was coined and developed in the Netherlands and inspired various generations, but then started to decline. Elsewhere in the world, where Christianity is still flourishing, or on the rise, and a Christian worldview is being developed, it is taken over as an appealing idea – and Genesis 1: 28 is still in the Bible, as is Jeremiah 29.

Apparently a 'one size fits all' theology for living in the last days is unlikely to be developed. One-sidedness is inevitable. That does not mean that we should resign ourselves to it. This is where *Lux Mundi* comes in. Let us explore the contexts of brothers and sisters in other parts of the world. Let's sympathize with the challenges they face. In this way, without abandoning what we have learned ourselves, let us broaden our view. Together with all the saints we may grow in understanding of what it means to live in the last days. Allow me to kick off with one verse that sounds like a formula in one of the oldest Christian creeds: '...to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.' So many elements of the 'last days' come together here: the sovereign God himself who is and who was and who is to come, the imminent judgment in all its horror, our triumphant Lord who is to be hailed, the bride expecting the marriage supper of the Lamb, as well as Christ's resurrection as the solid basis laid in this world for a new life in freedom. ■

Living in the last days



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. He published several commentaries in the Dutch CNT series.

Are we living in the last days? Many Christians ask themselves that question because they are becoming increasingly alarmed by the developments in the world. Did Jesus Christ not speak of terrible events which are to precede his coming: wars, famines, epidemic diseases and earthquakes? He also mentioned lawlessness and the persecution of Christians, as can be read in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21. Is it not an ominous sign that we see these things taking place in our time? The authors of the Christian best seller *Wake Up!* complain that the established churches say so little about the Second Coming. Have we missed the Lord's clues? This book claims that a 'Prophetical Calendar' is needed to shake everyone awake on time.

The sign of the Son of Man

Some prudence is however called for because faulty interpretations lie in wait. In that same discourse, Jesus Christ warned against false prophets attempting to lead us astray. 'Be on guard, keep awake', he said, 'for you do not know when the time will come' (Mark 13:33). The alarming developments of our times are to be taken rather as warning signals than as omens. When the disciples asked Jesus for a reliable sign of the Second Coming, he did not name phenomena on earth but 'the sign of the Son of Man' appearing in heaven. This can mean either that the Son of Man himself is the sign (cf. Rev. 12:1), or that the arrival of the Son of Man will be announced from heaven with an unmistakable signal, such as a raised flag or battle banner. The book of Isaiah has prophesied more than once about such a sign: well known is the signal or banner for the nations in Isaiah 11:10. However it may be, according to Jesus, the recognizable sign will come from above. When the Bible speaks of what we call the end time, we often read the words 'the last days'. As a result, it can seem as if the Second Coming is a matter of a few days. However, in the Bible the plural 'days' indicates a certain period. Thus the New Testament also speaks of the days of Noah, of Lot, of Elijah, of David, of the fathers, of John, of King Herod, and of the Son of Man. Sometimes we read the announcement: 'The days will come ...' Those will be difficult times for Christians (2 Tim. 3:1; cf. 1 Tim. 4:1), even more so because scoffers will come 'in the last days' who are sceptical about God's intervention in world history (2 Pet. 3:3; Jude 18).

The Last Day

The period of the last days will, according to the Gospel of John, conclude with one specific day, namely 'the Last Day.' Then the dead will stand up and the final judgment

'And in the last days it shall be'
(Acts 2:17)

will be executed (John 6:39 - 40,44,54; 11:24; 12:48). The last day also comes up elsewhere in the New Testament. The apostle Paul says that God has fixed a day on which he will judge the world – including what was done in secret (Acts 17:31; Rom. 2:16). Furthermore, the New Testament letters speak of the Day of Judgment or of divine wrath and fire. But we also read about the Day of Salvation or of the glory of Christ and the believers. As Christians we see this very last day drawing near, which will cross over into eternity (Heb. 10:25; 2 Pet. 3:18). In line with the Old Testament, the epistles often speak of 'the day of the Lord' or 'the day of Christ'. That he will come as a thief in the night is an important motif in Jesus' teaching, recorded in the Gospels and included in the apostolic tradition (Matt. 24:42-44; Luke 12:39-40; 1 Thess. 5:2,4; 2 Pet. 3:10). This motif returns in the condensed warning from his own lips of which we read in the Book of Revelation: 'I will come like a thief' (Rev. 3:3; 16:15).

Understanding of the times

So what about it – are we living in the last days? That depends on what exactly one means by that. In the Old Testament the last days function as a prophetic expression for the future restoration of Israel. In those days the Lord will show mercy to his people; then golden times set in, for example because of the promised and established new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34, cited in Heb. 8:8-12). This thought is formulated beautifully in the preface to the letter to the Hebrews, when the past is compared to the present: *'Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.'* (Hebrews 1:1-2a)

In other words: with Jesus Christ history has reached its peak (Heb. 9:26). As a result, Christians receive more understanding of the times, a kind of reinforced awareness, as a result of which each moment becomes *quality time*. That God brought his son into the world and placed the universe under his authority marks the fullness of time, says Paul (Gal. 4:4; Eph. 1:10). Time has been filled, like the sand filling an hourglass. Because the current era is 'compressed', we should not become absorbed in this world; for the present form of this world is passing away (1 Cor. 7:29-31). And Peter writes that Christ was made manifest in the last times. The



Time has been filled

end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers (1 Pet. 1:20; 4:7). The Eternal pushes the buttons of time, determines the calendar and controls the world clock. He can shorten the days for the sake of the elect or stretch time for the sake of those who must still repent (Matt. 24:22; Mark 13:20; 2 Pet. 3:8-9). Because God also weighs the longing of the faithful, Peter is able to call on his readers to speed up the coming of the great day (2 Pet. 3:12). Furthermore he writes that Christians in difficult circumstances, when their faith is put to the test, can look forward to the salvation that will definitely be revealed at the end of time (1 Pet. 1:5). Living in the last days is a life full of anticipation.

Telescope

With 'the last days', therefore, the Bible means the time of salvation. This then refers, first of all, to the period after the Old Testament era, and only secondarily to the period that precedes the return of Christ, the Day of the Lord. No wonder Peter, making use of Joel's prophecy, saw 'the last days' as having come at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit mani-

festated himself in Jerusalem. As a spokesman of the apostles, he explained the events to the Jews gathered there that day. *'But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: In the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.'* (Acts 2:16-21)

Peter begins with an exhaustive citation of Joel 2:28-31, to make it clear that his prophecy has been fulfilled. Remarkably, Peter adds 'God declares' to the quotation to emphasize that the Lord himself is speaking here. God speaks through the prophet Joel. And while the prophecy starts with the indefinite 'afterward', Peter makes this indication of time concrete by speaking of 'in the last days' (cf. Joel 3:1: in those days and in that time), thus making the prophecy topical with respect to the special events that had taken place in Jerusalem. Peter may have been encouraged to be so frank from the content of the Joel quote itself. For do not the subsequent verses speak of 'in those days' and 'the day of the Lord' (Acts 2:18 and 20)? 'Those last days have now dawned' is what Peter apparently wants to say, 'we are experiencing the beginning of the end.'

Characteristic of the time of salvation is the pouring out of the Spirit on the whole of God's people. Now that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead and is seated at God's right hand in heaven, the coming of the Holy Spirit indicates that the Messianic era has dawned. That the Spirit has been poured out on 'all flesh', as it states literally, means that all followers of Jesus are filled with God. The traditional human barriers are overcome, because this applies to people of both sexes, of all ages, and from all social classes (later the Spirit is poured out on non-Jews before Peter's very eyes, Acts 10:45). Such an earth-shaking event calls for cosmic signs: blood, fire and smoke; a black sun and a red moon. Fire brings to mind the tongues of fire that had been visible that morning, and a darkened sun the three hours of darkness before Jesus died. Those who were familiar with Joel's prophecy would have discerned the language of war. An advancing army fighting a bloody battle sets fire to settlements and raises dust and smoke clouds. In the same way, the final judgment is approaching. Solar and lunar eclipses were seen as ominous signs in ancient times. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter uses the prophecy from Joel as a telescope to look as far as possible ahead. Thus he sees

Signs of the times

The expression 'signs of the times', an established term among Christians in relation to portents of the end of times or the end of the world, appears in the Bible in a completely different context. When the Pharisees and Sadducees test Jesus by asking him to show a sign from heaven, he reacts with an implicit reference to the miraculous signs from their own time. These have a signal function, just as the red evening or morning sky predicts what weather is coming. Jesus means to say: 'There are signs enough around you, you only have to learn to interpret them' (Matt. 16:1-4). The 'signs of the times' (Greek: *ta sêmeia tone kairoon*) are therefore not about portents predicting the end of times or the end of the world, but about the correct interpretation of the time by Jesus Christ and his Jewish critics. In Luke's account this becomes completely evident: '...why do you not know how to interpret the present time (Greek: *ton kairon touton*)' (Luke 12:56)?

Why I am a preterist

Preterism is the position on eschatology which holds that much of what the New Testament says about future events were fulfilled in the period between Christ's ascension and the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. In the article that follows, the author explains why he holds to the preterist view.



Rev. Gerald (G.I.) Williamson (1925) earned In 1952 a B.D. from Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary and then served briefly as a pastor in the (then existing) UPCNA, the ARPC. In 1955 he was received by the OPC, and after that served two of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand, and between these served for four years in the RPCNA. From 1992 to 2005 while again serving as an OPC pastor, he edited 'Ordained Servant,' an OPC publication for church officers. He is the author of several books on Reformed theology.

It is now well over half a century since I was a student at the Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary of the then existing United Presbyterian Church of North America. I was never satisfied with what I heard from my professors on two subjects — what the Bible says about creation and what it says about the future. What did God mean when he said he created the universe in six days (Exod. 20:11)? I learned that there were various views, the most common at the time being the view which said six days really means six long ages. But I could never accept the idea that if that was true God would say what he says in Genesis 1. Likewise I wondered, what did Jesus mean when he said to the High Priest of Israel 'you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven' (Mark 14:62)? Did this High Priest live to see that? And what did Jesus mean when he gave his disciples a list of amazing things that were to happen in their generation, saying 'this generation will not pass away until all these things take place' (Matt. 24:34)?

So, I gradually came to realize that I would have to make a serious study of God's Word in order to answer

such questions. This I did, and in the end became fully convinced of two things: the first was that the only view consistent with Genesis 1, and the many other references to creation in the rest of the Bible, is the view stated in the Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter 4:1), Larger Catechism (Q/A 15) and Shorter Catechism (Q/A 9).¹ The second was that the only eschatological view consistent with a whole array of things in the Bible is the view commonly known as preterism. I found this view to be well-received and helpful to God's people when preaching not only a series of sermons through the Gospel of Matthew, but also other passages such as 2 Thessalonians 2.

In due time this brought me to write a small book entitled *A Study of Biblical Eschatology*. I tried several times to find a publisher willing to publish it but was not successful. I think this may have been because, unlike so many books on eschatology, my book is relatively brief, and therefore not very impressive. Finally a Canadian publisher of good Reformed material, Inheritance Publications, was willing to publish it.

No warning signs

What my study seeks to demonstrate is rather simple. When Jesus was with his disciples just before his ascension to heaven, they asked him when he was going to restore the Kingdom to Israel. Jesus answered them with these words: 'It is not for you to know times



The coming of the Holy Spirit indicates that the Messianic era has dawned

appearing behind the miraculous signs of that day apocalyptic phenomena belonging to the Last Day. Amidst all those horrors, the conclusion of the Joel prophecy sounds more hopeful than ever from Peter's lips: 'And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

Paradise restored

From this perspective you can indeed say that the eschatological time has already commenced. The early Christians most likely already experienced it in this manner. Judgment was announced upon the rich because they collected treasures 'in these last days' (James 5:3, ISV). In the early second century, Bishop Ignatius of Antioch wrote in his epistle to the Ephesians: 'These are the last times' (*Ignatius to the Ephesians* 11:1). This was not bluff but an indication of the urgency of repentance. 'Let us fear the long-suffering of God, let us have reverence;' (cf. 2 Pet. 3:9), he added, 'lest it turn into a judgment against us ... let us love the grace which now is.' For that matter, non-Christians too hoped for the dawn of a special era, a golden age. The Roman poet Virgil suggested that the stabilizing government of emperor Augustus was such an ideal era that it would last for ever. The Jewish expectation for the future was actually of a restored paradise, so that the end of the world would be in keeping with the beginning of creation.

We hear Peter say something similar when addressing the Jews in Jerusalem shortly after Pentecost. 'Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago.' (Acts 3:19-21)

Peter hopes for 'moments of refreshment' that can be experienced on the road of return to God, as when thousands of Jews had let themselves be baptized at Pentecost. Such moments are a foretaste of the 'times in which all will be restored'. That restoration was promised by God himself through the Old Testament prophets, and will become reality

as soon as the Messiah of Israel returns from heaven where he was received. Then all will be well again, Peter argues, according to God's eschatological rescue plan: this is the way it 'had' to be.

Developments

Therefore, according to the prophets, the period of 'the last days' would commence with a decisive intervention by God in favour of his people. That entails on the one hand the revelation of Jesus Christs, covenant renewal, and pouring out of the Holy Spirit; and on the other hand the rise of moral decline preceding the Day of the Lord (disloyalty, deviation, lack of love, self-enrichment, increased scoffing). All these developments have been going on since Pentecost, both the positive and the negative. For this reason the Biblical motto for all Christians is: know what you stand for, be alert – in other words be level-headed and on your guard, so that you can pray. Will evil escalate within the period of 'the last days'? The Book of Revelation does give that impression. The apostolic warnings only communicate that in the last days difficult times will come and that there will be many scoffers. But even then the assumption is that the readers are already familiar with such end time phenomena from experience: they are to keep their godless fellow-humans at a distance and not let themselves be lulled into false security by scoffers. Only God stipulates the coming of the very last day. ■

Terminology

The Greek word for 'last' is *eschatos*, hence the terms 'eschatological' and 'the eschaton'. Only once does Paul refer to 'the last trumpet' (1 Cor. 15:52). A special expression is to be found twice in 1 John 2:18, where it says that 'the last hour' has come. This brings to mind the 'hour' of Jesus referred to in the Gospel of John: while at first his time has not yet come, later 'his hour has come' (John 2:4; 7:6,8; 12:23). Now that many anti-Christians have emerged who deny Jesus Christ's becoming man, John writes, we know what time it is. This phenomenon is a sign for the church that the eschatological heresy is advancing.

Notes

1. This article is a translation of *Leven in de laatste dagen*, which appeared in The Netherlands as a chapter in the author's book *Handbagage voor Jezusvolgers* (Buijten & Schipperheijn, Amsterdam 2016). Translated by Sabrine Bosscha by arrangement with the author.
2. In an earlier article in *Lux Mundi* 29 no. 3 (Sept. 2010), titled 'Revelation: why, how and when', the author commented on different approaches to reading the Book of Revelation, the historical, futurist, idealist, and preterist views. See <http://bbk.gkv.nl/en/lux-mundi/contents-2003-and-later/>. Elsewhere in this issue Gerald Williamson has also written on preterism.



The Arch of Titus is a memorial to the fall of Jerusalem



The Destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem

[painting Nicolas Poussin, 1637]

(*kronous*) and seasons (*kairous*) that the Father has fixed by His own authority’ (Acts 1:7). What this means is that God did not reveal — no, not even to his apostles — the sequence of specific events (*kronous*) destined to unfold after their generation, or even the exact character (*kairous*) of any specific future events. It also means that there is no basis whatsoever for the all too common idea of double-fulfillment. Therefore it also means that God has not revealed any future signs intended in any way to indicate the time of Christ’s second coming. People would very much like to know the next thing that will unfold in history, and even more to know when Jesus will return. This desire was also evident when Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians. Those people too wanted more information about the future. But how did the great apostle respond? He said ‘*Now concerning the times (kronous) and the seasons (kairous), brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night*’ (1Thess. 5:1-2). There is therefore no other credible conclusion. The second coming (*parousia*) cannot be rightly understood by anyone who is looking for signs, because Jesus clearly said that it will be like the world-wide flood that suddenly came on the ancient world without any warning except the warning given by Noah as ‘*a preacher of righteousness*’ (2Pet. 2:5). Our Lord’s ‘*coming (erchomai) on the clouds of heaven*’ began when he ascended from the earth to heaven, precisely as predicted in Daniel 7:13-14. His second coming back to the earth from heaven (*parousia*) will come without any warning signs. Many Christians today mistakenly think the second coming will be right after an even more awesome ‘great tribulation’ than the one that happened in AD 70. But the inspired apostle said something very different! ‘*While people are saying, “There is peace and security”, then sudden destruction will come upon them as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape*’ (1Thess. 5:3).

As I studied these things a question came to my mind that I had never thought of, or ever remembered hearing of before. The eschatological discourse of Jesus made a strong impression on his apostles. That is why the first three gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) give a rather full account of it. So I kept wondering why the apostle John did not include it in his Gospel? Didn’t he sense the momentous importance of this teaching of Jesus as the others did? Then the answer presented itself. I am now convinced that John felt it perhaps even more than any of the others! I’m convinced that this is why — inspired by the Holy Spirit — it was granted to him to hear (and see) that message of Jesus all over again, only this time in an even more vivid way. When I saw this I was overwhelmed by the simplicity of it. John says Jesus — now seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven — sent His angel ‘*to show to His servants the things that must soon take place*’ (Rev. 1:1). And to make it doubly clear that it was the same message that he had before heard from the Lord Jesus, the Lord had his angel repeat himself, saying ‘*the time is near*’. And then, furthermore, at the end of the book he emphasized it again: ‘*Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near*’ (Rev. 22:10). These statements are much like other simple but absolute statements of Jesus. So I am more and more driven to ask why these clear statements are so constantly ignored in most of what I read in books on eschatology. If these clear and simple time statements are true, the Book of Revelation is not a prediction of historical events destined to take place between the apostolic age and the second coming of Jesus. I know: that sounds like a shocking statement, but why?

■ What we need to know

What the Church of God needs now is not for God to reveal what is coming next in world history, and then what comes after that. God’s people do not need any such revelation

because the Bible is sufficient to tell us what we need to know — not by *prediction* but by way of *analogy*. As Paul said in his letters to both the Romans and the Corinthians, ‘*whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction*’ (Rom. 15:4); ‘*things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come*’ (1Cor. 10:14). We do not need to know the times or the seasons beforehand. For no matter what events unfold between the apostolic age and the second coming of Christ, we have in the Bible a sufficient revelation of the mind and will of God for our needs. We do not need another epistle written to our particular church, as was the case in the apostolic age. No, we are supposed to learn, from the letters that were written to the churches of that age, all the principles and precepts that we need to discern God’s will in our own situation. And it is the same with things such as the apostle John’s teaching about the antichrist. In my book I seek to show clearly that the antichrist is not primarily a future danger, but a danger that was already present in the apostolic age; that the antichrist is not found in one big superman, but in many deceivers and deniers; that it is not, in fact, one man at all, but a demonic spirit deceiving many men. And it was already present when John wrote about it, just as it is today. Best of all we know that ‘*the great tribulation*’ is not something future, but a past historical event. It came in the apostolic age exactly as predicted by Jesus. As he himself clearly said, ‘*then [in that apostolic age] there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never shall be*’ (Matt. 24:21). Just as the swarm of locusts of the 8th plague ‘*had never been before, nor ever will be again*’ (Exod. 10:14), so also the tribulation that came in AD 70 was worse than any tribulation in earlier history, and never again will there be a tribulation as great in the rest of history. John was even allowed to see that ‘*the great tribulation*’ was already beginning to happen (Rev. 7:14).

■ The second coming of Christ

In saying I’m a preterist I mean this: everything that Jesus predicted as things that would happen in the apostolic age did in fact happen in that generation. But there was one thing that he did not predict as certain to happen in that generation. He did not say that his second coming (*parousia*) would take place in that generation. The reason for this was the fact that (as he said in Matt. 24:36) ‘*concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only*.’ Jesus could not predict the time of his second coming when he himself said he did not know it. It is for this reason that I strongly oppose what is commonly called the ‘Full Preterist’ view. Those who teach this view believe Jesus predicted that his *parousia* would also take place in the apostolic age. But he did no such thing. What has impressed me more and more over the years is how — time and time again — even erudite scholars keep on trying to show that the Book of Revelation *does* give us information about times and seasons beyond the apostolic

generation. But the simple fact is that they are wrong. The only thing that God has revealed about post-apostolic-age events is this: ‘*the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth*’ (1Tim. 4:1-3 and see also 2Tim. 3:1-5 where the apostle speaks of ‘*times of difficulty*’). The apostle doesn’t say how many ‘*times of difficulty*’ there would be. And why not? Because — as Jesus had said before he ascended — it was not given even to them, the very apostles, to know the times or the seasons. And it is only the preterist view that is willing to rest content with that absolute statement.

I know that most English versions of the Book of Revelation speak of a release of Satan after the thousand years have been completed. But, as I try to show in my study of Eschatology (p.134), this is a typical misreading. It is another example of claiming to know the order (*kronoi*) of at least two events of the future. But just as we are not to think of the thousand years as a literal thousand years, neither are we to think of the release of Satan as a one-time event at the end of that indefinite period. And in the Majority Greek text of Revelation 20:3 and 20:7 we find the Greek word *meta* where other texts use two or three other Greek words to indicate specific things before and after. And what *meta* means is that in the midst of, or along with, the thousand years (symbolizing the entire period between the end of the apostolic age and the second coming of Jesus) God will release Satan to some extent. This reading of the Majority Greek Text is in harmony with the statement of Jesus to his apostles. This is exactly what we would expect from the statements in First and Second Timothy mentioned above. And the whole history of the Christian Church confirms this understanding. Indeed, perilous times have come! But there has been no tribulation to equal, let alone surpass, the great tribulation that culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. And, as our Lord himself said, there ‘*never will be*’ (Matt. 24:21).

I am thankful that I have lived long enough to see more and more Reformed Christians coming to see that the preterist view is really the one that is faithful to Scripture.² ■

■ Notes

- Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter 4:1): *It pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for the manifestation of the glory of his eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, in the beginning, to create, or make of nothing, the world, and all things therein, whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days, and all very good.*
- My study is available from Inheritance Publications. R.C. Sproul’s *The Last Day’s According to Jesus* and Marcellus Kik’s *An Eschatology of Victory* also defend the preterist view.

Hidden in God. Christology after the Ascension



Barend Kamphuis (b. 1950) is Professor Emeritus in Dogmatics at the Theological University of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands at Kampen. This is a condensed version of his farewell lecture, delivered on September 3, 2015, on the occasion of his retirement, at the Broederkerk in Kampen.¹

■ Introduction

Ever since I completed my doctoral dissertation in 1986, I have been continually busy with Christology, in both my instructional activities and in my own studies. During these years I have experienced that Christology is an inexhaustible subject. The more I studied it, the less I really understood it. I have more and more grown to love the confessionally Reformed doctrine about Christ. I have also increasingly learned to see its limitations. Reformed theology, too, does not offer more than an approximation.

In this farewell lecture, I am eager to share with you my thoughts about Christology as a mystery. And I want to do this from the perspective of the Ascension of Jesus Christ. My question, therefore, is: *What does the Ascension teach us about the character of Christology as a mystery?*

■ Questions around the Ascension

In May 2012 an article was published in *Nederlands Dagblad* with the title: *‘Christenen verlegen met Hemelvaart’* (‘Christians at a loss about the Ascension’). This article was based on the results of a survey that was carried out among more than 1000 ministers. More than half of them have noted a degree of uncertainty about the Ascension among the members of their congregations. And fifteen per cent of the ministers themselves share this unease as well. One of the main stumbling blocks is expressed like this: ‘You have to keep making it clear that it is better for us that Jesus has departed’. The meanings of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost are much clearer. But what is there to celebrate about Jesus’ departure? What is so good about that? In much of Christendom, the Ascension is not even celebrated at all. And that might not be so strange. In the Bible, the significance of Jesus’ ascension is expressed as a secret, as something hidden. A secret is something you keep, you just don’t celebrate it. This uncertainty, then, may well have a quite Biblical cause.

■ The Ascension as something hidden

‘And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.’ (Acts 1:9). That is how Luke recounts the Ascension. Just before that, Christ had commanded his disciples to be his witnesses. It is marvellously fitting that immediately afterwards they were to be eyewitnesses of his Ascension. Or more precisely, that they are eyewitnesses of Jesus being taken up. They do not

actually see him enter heaven: *‘a cloud took him out of their sight’* (v. 9). The disciples’ perspective is restricted: they cannot see any further than the cloud. True, v.10 describes them gazing into heaven, but in v.11 it is the angels that appear who tell them that Jesus has been *‘taken up from you into heaven’*.

The readers of Luke’s Gospel had encountered a cloud previously. At the Transfiguration on the mountain, the voice of God was heard from a cloud (Luke 9:34, 35). The cloud, therefore, was a sign of God’s presence, of his glory. And when Jesus foretells his return, we hear again of a cloud: *‘And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory’* (Luke 21:27).

Already in the Old Testament the glory of God was signified by a cloud. Think of the cloud that went before the people of Israel in the wilderness, and that rested on the Tent of Meeting (Exodus 40:34–38). When Solomon’s temple was dedicated, it too was filled with a cloud (1 Kings 8:10). The Psalms sing praise to God, wrapped in a cloud (Ps 97:2), or riding upon the clouds (Ps 104:3). At the same time, something else becomes apparent in the Old Testament: the cloud also hides God’s glory. Moses may not enter the Tent of Meeting while the cloud rests upon it (Exodus 40:35). The priests are unable to carry out their ministry in the temple while the glory of the Lord envelops it in the cloud (1 Kings 8:11). Solomon says: *‘The LORD has said that he would dwell in thick darkness’* (1 Kings 8:12). The glory of God is not only revealed in the cloud; his glory is also screened from the people by it. Psalm 97:2, once more: *‘Clouds and thick darkness are all around him’*.

When in Jesus Christ the glory of God is revealed, things change: the disciples see him on the mountain in dazzling glory. After the Ascension, however, that comes to an end. The cloud does the same thing that it had done before: it hides God’s glory, and God’s glory in Jesus. His ascension hides something. Since the Ascension, we no longer see Jesus’ glory, at least not with our physical eyes. When the writer to the Hebrews says that *‘we see Jesus, crowned with glory and honour’* (Heb 2:9), he is talking about seeing Jesus with different eyes.

In his *Commentary*, Calvin writes about the Ascension: *‘And this seems to be the reason why the cloud overshadowed him, before such time as he entered into his heavenly glory; that his disciples being content with their measure (suo modulo contenti) might cease to inquire any further. And we are taught by them that our mind is not able to ascend so high as to take a full view of the*

They cannot see any further than the cloud

[photo www.tettypols.nl]



glory of Christ; therefore, let this cloud be a means to restrain our boldness, as was the smoke which was continually before the door of the tabernacle in the time of the law.’

Colossians 3:3 explicitly refers to the hiddenness of Christ in heaven. Here, the readers are urged to set their minds on Christ, who is above, seated at the right hand of God, and not on things that are on earth. And Paul provides this argument: *‘For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory’* (Col 3:3, 4). These verses form a (partly antithetical) parallel. Both verses talk about ‘your life’, and that life is closely bound up with Christ, even to the extent that our lives and the life of Christ are identified. However, in v.3 that life is not yet visible. For *‘you have died’*. Your life is there, with Christ, but it is hidden with him in God: it is not observable or demonstrable, just as the life of Christ is not observable or demonstrable. In v.4, it changes; but that is a future prospect. Then Christ will appear, and ‘your life’ will appear with him, in glory. ‘In glory’ at the end of v.4 stands in parallel to ‘in God’ at the end of v.3. They both point to the same thing, to the same One, God. The radiance of Christ is divine glory. Now it is hidden, then it will be revealed. The radiance of believers is the glory of God, in which they may share: invisible for now, but for all to see in the future.

Later on in this lecture I will have something more to say about what that means for believers. Now, I first want to turn to what that says about Christ. He too, then, is hidden in God. The fact of his being ‘in God’ is his glory. But he does not yet show this glory. The Ascension marked the beginning of the time of our Saviour’s hiddenness. In his exaltation, then, there is still some humiliation. For he is still hidden. He can still be underrated and ridiculed. Even his suffering is added to, in the suffering of his people. Paul has pointed that out earlier in this letter (Col 1:24). The body of Christ on earth, his church, does not yet display any heavenly glory. One day, Christ’s glory will be revealed for all to see. Now, it is still hidden. One day *‘we shall see him as he is’* (1 John 3:2). Now, we still have no idea.

■ The great mystery of our faith

“Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

*He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory”* (1 Timothy 3:16).

Being taken up in glory is the final element of the mystery of our faith. Why a mystery?

In Volume 2 of his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Herman Bavinck begins his doctrine of God with a paragraph about God’s incomprehensibility. Its first sentence reads: *‘Mystery is the lifeblood of dogmatics’*². It continues: *‘From the very start of its labours, dogmatics faces the incomprehensible One’*. Bavinck argues that an adequate knowledge of God is impossible. Thanks to his revelation, the knowledge of God can be true and pure, but this knowledge *‘is always most relative and does not include but excludes comprehension’*. That is also true of the knowledge of Christ after his ascension. The cloud of God’s glory hides him from our sight. He is hidden in God, and shares in the mystery of God’s being.

I read somewhere of an analogy with map projections, and that appeals to me. It is impossible to project the surface of the earth onto a flat plane without somehow distorting it. You can choose a certain projection, the one that best meets your needs, but in so doing you will always have to sacrifice something. For example, you can choose to accurately represent the proportions of surface area, or the proportions of distance, but not both. In the same way, when we talk about Christ, we must always yield some of the truth. We may wish to hold fast to the full humanity of Christ. But for us to do so consistently will always be at the cost of the confession of his divinity, or of the unity of his person. The fact that Christ is God and man in one person is a paradoxical statement. Not because the reality of his existence is inconsistent, but because we can only por-



[Painting Garofalo - Ascension of Christ, 1510]

The Ascension marked the beginning of the time of our Saviour's hiddenness

tray this utterly transcendent reality onto the flat plane of our confessional and dogmatic formulations. Is that a bad thing? Yes, we would wish to understand and express the marvel of the incarnation of God so much better. How far our comprehension falls short! How hopelessly far do our words, our songs, our confessions and our dogmatics fall short! Is that a bad thing? Yes, consider how much harm our lack of understanding has caused: what accusations of heresy, what schisms, what centuries of struggle about him who is our peace! Is that a bad thing? No, not really. Imagine that we *could* fully comprehend him, as if he were a mathematical problem that we could solve. Then all those clever ones in the church would 'get it', while the little ones would have to stand on the sidelines. But remarkably enough, it is just the other way around. If you ever did 'get it', the songs of praise would be silenced, and the language of faith would be pushed aside by the language of science. As it is, we can only stammer about the great mystery of our faith.

■ Ascension and Pentecost

Ten days after the Lord ascended to heaven, the Holy Spirit was poured out. Does this not mean that this secret in some way came to an end? After all, we have now been anointed by the Spirit, and we have all knowledge (1 John 2:20). Jesus has promised us the Spirit, the One who will guide us into all truth (John 16:13). It is precisely for that reason that Jesus went from us, for then he could send us the Spirit (John 16:7). We engage in Christology not just after the Ascension, but also after Pentecost. It is clear that Jesus grants his Spirit to help us during his absence. But the presence of the Spirit does not set aside the absence of Jesus. On the contrary, the Spirit keeps open Jesus' empty place within us, he makes us miss Jesus, and he makes us long all the more for Jesus' return. Reformed theology has always paid a great deal of attention to the reality of the Ascension. As Reformed believers understand it, the Ascension does not mean that Christ, in his human nature, is now everywhere present – as Lutheran theology asserts. No, the Ascension means that Christ, according to his human nature, has now truly moved from one place to another, from earth to heaven. The Spirit does not set this aside; rather, the Spirit ensures that we will always be conscious of that.

In Romans 8, Paul writes about the fact that creation groans in its suffering, in expectation of its complete liberation. However, it is not only creation that groans, *'but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies'* (Romans 8:23). The Spirit is a deposit, a provisional gift, a guarantee of our complete redemption. But it is just that foretaste of eternity that makes us yearn for its completion. The Lord is the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:17), and that is precisely why, when we have the Spirit, we miss our Lord so much. *'The Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words'* (Romans 8:26): to be filled with the Spirit means to be filled with longing for Jesus. And that is just what the Bible leads up to: *'The Spirit and the bride say: "Come!"'* (Revelation 22:17), that is: come, Lord Jesus! The bride, the Christian church, yearns for the coming of her bridegroom, Jesus. It is not so that the Spirit satisfies this longing. Rather, the Spirit fans the flame of this longing: he too says 'Come'! The Spirit gives us love for Christ. This love does not take the place of Christ; rather, it makes us realize how much we miss him. For the bride, love itself is not enough. Rather, she yearns for the consummation of that love. That will be when the Bridegroom appears from where he is presently hidden.

The Spirit does not set aside Jesus' hiddenness; rather, he makes us realize that hiddenness. Since he is the Spirit of Christ, he also, in a certain sense, shares in that hiddenness. He is intangible, incomprehensible; he cannot be tied down, he cannot be manipulated. Jesus compares the Spirit with the wind: *'The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes'*

(John 3:8). And astonishingly he adds: *'So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit'*. One would expect Jesus to say: 'So it is with the Spirit'. But he goes further: rebirth and those who are born again are not subject to observation. Not only the Spirit himself but also his work share in this incomprehensibility, this hiddenness, the mystery of our faith. My conclusion is that the mystery of the Ascension is not set aside by Pentecost; rather, it is heightened.

■ We too are hidden

That brings me to the next point. Colossians 3:3 not only says that Christ is hidden in God, but also that we are hidden with him. *'With him', 'with Christ'*, is a key concept in the letter to the Colossians. When you were *'buried with him in baptism'*, you were also *'raised with him'* (2:12); *'God made (you) alive together with him'* (2:13); since you have *'died with Christ... why do you still submit to the world's regulations'* (2:20); and then 3:3 and 4: *'your life is hidden with Christ in God'* ... *'you also will appear with him in glory'*. We participate in the reality of Christ. We have been raised with Christ and we live in him. According to Ephesians 2:6 we may even say that we have ascended into heaven with Christ: God has *'raised us up with (Christ) and seated us with him in the heavenly places'*. However, if we participate in Christ's ascension, it follows that we also participate in his hiddenness. Even the truth of our existence is hidden, as by a cloud, from observation.

This is true in relation to others: the source and reality of our true life with Jesus in God is not subject to observation. It also counts for ourselves as Christians: for us too, the truth about our lives is hidden. And that is why, as Colossians 3:2 says, we must *'set (our) minds on things that are above, and not on things that are on earth'*. That is a warning for us not to look for our certainty in what is visible, as the Colossians were doing with their many prohibitions: *'Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch'* (2:21). Paul himself says: these are *'things that all perish as they are used'* (2:22). You cannot put your confidence in them. So set your minds on things above, your true life that is hidden with Christ. There is another side to this: *hiddenness* is also *safekeeping*. Whatever is hidden is also safe, it is out of harm's way. It cannot be found, and therefore it also cannot be stolen or corrupted. Our true treasure, eternal life, is already safely kept in heaven, with Christ, in God. Hidden, and therefore totally safe.

■ Conclusions

At the beginning of this lecture, we asked the question: *What does the Ascension teach us about the character of Christology as a mystery?* The answer to this question is that the Bible shows that hiddenness is indeed one of the consequences of the Ascension. Christ has withdrawn from our observation; he is in heaven, and we cannot penetrate to there. Everything that we know

about him, we know by revelation, and only through faith. Furthermore, Christ has been taken up into divine glory, of which the cloud is a sign. He is not just hidden, he is 'hidden in God'. He shares in the incomprehensibility of God. For the practice of Christology this implies that all attempts to describe the mystery of Christ can never be more than approximations. It should therefore not surprise us that there are so many different approaches to Christology, and that all of them have their limitations. Just as there are various map projections, none of which exclude another, but none of which can be combined with another, in the same way there are numerous Christologies. Of course, there are limits. Great dogmas always set boundaries. The unity of God, the divinity of Christ, the integrity of his human nature, the unity of his person: the limits are clear. But within those limits there are numerous possibilities to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Now, Christology is the heart of theology. *'No-one has ever seen God; but the only begotten Son ... has made him known'* (John 1:18). The core of our knowledge of God is formed by Jesus. Christ's ascension teaches us that all of our theology is a vulnerable exercise. The true source of our knowledge of God is Christ, and this source is not freely accessible. We may drink from this source by faith, and enjoy it to the full. But we can never fully plumb its depths, and we can certainly never take control of it. Theology humbles a person. You are constantly stammering at the outer limits of your understanding. One final conclusion about the catholicity of theology: it is especially Christology that has torn deep breaches in Christianity. Anyone who remains conscious of the limitations of the formulations of our Christology will learn to relativize the differences. The Truth embodied in the One Person has been hidden by a cloud from our sight. Our doctrinal statements, then, can never be fully congruent with the Truth. That does not mean that all points of difference are inconsequential. It makes a great deal of sense to investigate which issues were at stake and how justice has been done to them. But the last word about them will only be said when Christ appears in glory, and we with him: Christ, our life, our truth, our joy, for ever. ■

■ Notes

- 1 The complete version of this lecture (including footnotes) is to be included in a separate publication which Dr Kamphuis intends to publish in the near future. This translation by Aart Plug, by arrangement with the author. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations and quotations in this translation are taken from the English Standard Version of the Bible (ESV), Crossway Publishing, 2001.
- 2 This and subsequent English quotations taken from Bavinck, Herman: Reformed Dogmatics, Vol 1. John Bolt, ed.; John Vriend, tr. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003-2008.

Violence in the Bible and the Quran

When Christians point out the violence preached in the Quran, one very often receives the response: 'It is no different in the Bible!' Violence in the Bible is widely portrayed in articles and books appearing in the Netherlands and Belgium. For this reason it is important to make an honest comparison between the Bible and the Quran regarding the call to violence. This is not in regard to violence in general but to the violence to which believers are called.



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Common roots

There are many elements in Islam that remind us of the commands that God, through Moses, gave to the people of Israel. That is understandable. The young Mohammed was deeply affected by the proclamation that the God of Israel is just. Criminals and aggressors who cannot be stopped in *this* life will still be tried *after* this life by God. That Mohammed was touched by this biblical message was directly related to his life story. As an orphan he had experienced what it was to be treated unfairly. He also saw much injustice around him. For this reason Mohammed felt attracted to the religion of the Jews in which justice was preached. And he wished to join them in worship of the God of Israel. This intention became visible in the call of Mohammed to his followers to pray facing in the direction of Jerusalem. And just like the Jews, they had to do this three times per day. Furthermore, he charged his followers to fast on the Day of Atonement. His followers were also permitted to marry Jewish women, and had to adhere to some of the Jewish food prescriptions.

In 622, Mohammed was forced to flee to Medina. His fellow city inhabitants of Mecca were giving him a hard time. With that the *hijrah* became a reality. *Hijrah* extends as far as severing the bonds with one's own tribe. Thereafter the common faith was more important to Mohammed than the connection to his own tribe. The bond of faith henceforth exceeded the bond with the clan and tribe. And Mohammed hoped that the Jews would join him. For the Jewish tribes in Medina, however, Mohammed's ignorance was a reason not to accept him as their spiritual leader, even though Mohammed stressed that he was not bringing a new religion. He only wished to confirm what the Jews already knew. That is also the way it is recorded in Quran 3:67: 'Ibrahim was not a Jew, nor yet a Christian; but he was an upright man who had surrendered (to God), and he was not of the idolaters.' Nevertheless, this could not persuade the Jews. They pointed out the mistakes in the Quran. In addition, Jesus was acknowledged in the Quran as a prophet, something the Jews could not accept. Besides, they

probably had political motives as well, associated with their position of power in Medina.¹

Mohammed chooses his own course

After the definite break with the Jews, Mohammed followed his own path. From then on his followers would pray facing in the direction of Mecca. Jerusalem was no longer the point of reference. Mohammed converted the city of Mecca with its Kaaba into the religious centre.

And in this way, Mohammed, in consultation with his disciples, developed his own religious *framework* in which information from both the Torah and the Gospels were incorporated. But because these biblical facts were placed in a different *framework*, they have generally also changed in meaning. And that certainly also applies to the Mosaic prescriptions for conducting holy wars. These particulars were placed in the entirely different framework of the Islamic *jihad*. That does not, however, take away from the fact that these particulars remain rooted in the Old Testament.² Which is why in the remainder of this article similarities and differences can be pointed out between holy war in the Old Testament and *jihad* in the Quran.

Points of similarity

The Book of Joshua describes the conquest of Canaan by the people of Israel. Joshua had been ordered to wipe out the seven Canaanite tribes. They were to be exterminated. It was a holy war because God wished it so. The Muslims, too, are familiar with holy war, which they call *jihad*. Thanks to the *jihad*, the Muslim realm spread rapidly across the Middle East and North Africa after the death of Mohammed.

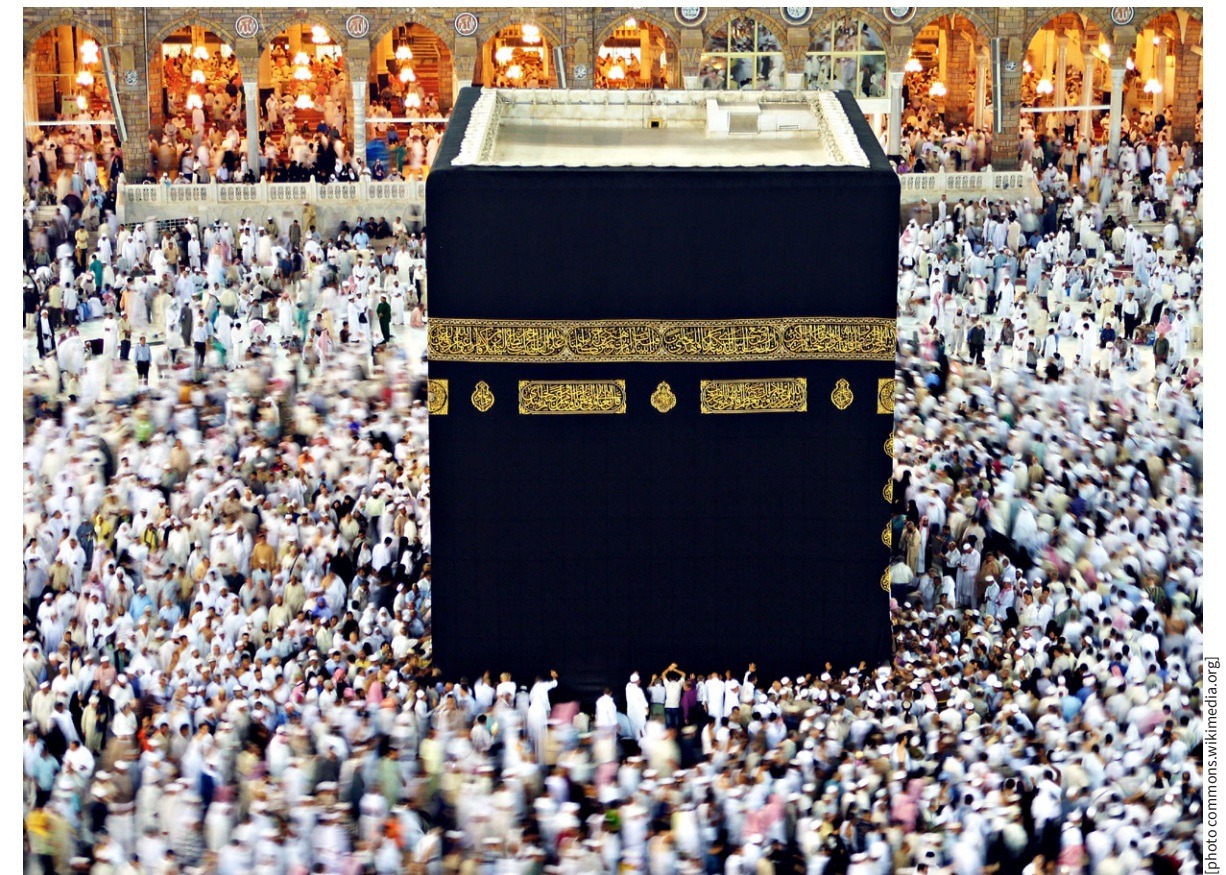
The inhabitants of the countries conquered by the Muslims received a special status. They received the position of *dhimmi* or 'protected'. These *dhimmi* had to pay extra taxes for the privilege of this protection. Furthermore their position could, in short, be defined as second class.

This brings to mind the rules fixed by Moses for wars conducted in the period following the conquest of Canaan, a time when there would be continuous attacks from hostile cities. Israel would be forced to defend itself and to enter into battle with such a city. Should a hostile city surrender, the inhabitants were brought under forced labour. That is how it is described in Deuteronomy 20:11. And what should we imagine this forced labour to comprise? We find the answer to this question in Joshua 9.

There we read the account concerning the Hivites from Gibeon, at the time when Joshua was busy with the conquest of Canaan. The city of Gibeon was located within Canaan, and the Hivites were aware of what was coming. They had heard what had happened to the cities of Jericho and Ai: these had been totally destroyed and all their inhabitants had been killed. That is why the Hivites sent a delegation to Joshua posing as inhabitants of a city *outside* Canaan. Joshua and the tribal leaders were deceived by this trick as they had omitted to ask the Lord's advice.

Differences

Next to these points of similarity the differences are noticeable. The first difference is that Christianity no longer has holy wars, whereas *jihad* is still very much alive. It is inconceivable that a Christian today would invoke the holy war prescriptions in Deuteronomy to unleash a destructive war. After the land of Canaan had been conquered, God never again ordered the occupation of another country. In this way our attention is focussed on the development in the history of God's people. In the Old Testament we see this



Mecca with its Kaaba

Thus Israel contracted a covenant of peace with the Hivites. When the deception was discovered, Joshua honoured the covenant and did not kill the Hivites. From then on, the Hivites did have to carry out forced labour. And in their situation that meant that they were to draw water and chop wood for the whole of Israel. Those tasks were to be performed especially for the altar of God (Joshua 9:27). So the Hivites asked for peace and were granted peace. That was the rule for war against enemies outside of Israel. But if such a city refused to make peace with Israel, that was not good news for its inhabitants. Then all men had to be killed and all women and children captured as spoils (Deuteronomy 20:13-14). It is a rule that the jihadists of the Islamic State still apply.

history leading to the birth of Christ. And when Jesus, after his resurrection from death, ascended to heaven, this brought an end to Israel as a theocratic state. In other words, church and state no longer coincide. Thereafter the church would spread across the whole world. The believers did receive the charge to fight, but that is a spiritual fight against the evil in ourselves and in the world. And that fight must be fought with the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God (Eph. 6:17).

The Muslims have a different story. Such a development as is found in the Bible is not present in the Quran. There is a difference between the verses Mohammed received in Mecca and the verses dictated to him in Medina, certainly. The words

Young African Voices and Reflections on the Reformation



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To many young people in Uganda, the 16th century Reformation is one of the topics covered in high school history class. It is, therefore, possible to meet a Christian who is unfamiliar about the event that redefined every aspect of society, starting in Europe, and spreading over the world. And yet the Protestant Reformation is more than a historic event, it is part of the journey of the living church, and has been part of its phenomenal growth and expansion, its discipleship and continuing witness to the world.

This is one of the observations made by a group of young people who gathered for a camp meeting from 30th September to 2nd October 2016 at Bwerenga Campsite on the shores of Lake Victoria, Uganda. The camp was organized by the Reformed Students Organisation (RSO) to discuss and reflect on how the Reformation changed the course of history and its impact today. RSO is a youth ministry of New City Community Church, a presbyterian and reformed congregation in Uganda. RSO is a family of university students who help each other through their years at college and later on as graduates. The ministry through its various activities also prepares these young people for life after university.

The participants, coming from reformed, presbyterian, evangelical and protestant churches, generally agreed that the Reformation remains a defining moment in the history of the church and the world at large. It was very encouraging to see the passionate involvement of young people in the reflections on the Reformation. They viewed the Reformation as a key historic event with continuing relevancy and deep implications to the life and growth of the church at individual and corporate level. If 500 years have anything to remind us as a church, it is the truth that God is at work through the generations. The demands of Scriptures call for obedience by believers through all generations. The Reformation remains foundational and yet a continuing work.

Thorough thought was also given to how the church re-discovered the Biblical truths that were taught by Jesus Christ and passed down to us through the apostles and the early Church fathers. In the church these truths included the acknowledgement of the sovereignty of God, the depravity of man and his need for grace, and the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. In the wider society, the Reformation advanced the almost universally accepted principles of religious freedom, liberty of conscience, the rule of law, and separation of powers. ■

us not to take justice into our own hands. Only when the harvest time has come will judgment be executed. That moment dawns when the Kingdom of God descends from heaven and all resistance to him will be cast out. That is why the Lord Jesus taught his disciples to pray *Your kingdom come*. The disciples and all other believers cannot found a kingdom here on earth. Because the Kingdom comes from God. However, there is the task here and now to preach to as many people as possible about the coming of the Kingdom, inviting all to become citizens of that Kingdom. In his letter to the church of Philippi, the apostle Paul speaks very clearly about this citizenship (Phil. 3:20): *'But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.'* ■

Notes

This article is translated by Sabrine Bosscha by arrangement with the author.

- 1 Kees Wagtendonk in *Islam. Norm, ideaal en werkelijkheid* (ed. Jacques Waardenburg) (Houten: Fibula, 2000), 47.
- 2 See J.Slomp in *De Islam en het Westen. Botsende religies – Theologische visies op macht in Islam en Christendom* (Kampen: Kok, 2002), 142.
- 3 Kader Abdolah, *De Koran, een vertaling* (Zutphen: The Geus, 2008), 360.

The farmer who had sown good seed
[painting by Vincent van Gogh, 1888]



Mohammed heard in Medina were clearly more militant. But it is not the case that the verses revealed in Medina more or less automatically render all former verses invalid. This means that contemporary Moslems can establish themselves and their way of life on practically the whole Quran. And this therefore applies to Surah 9, the chapter in which Mohammed expressly emerges as a field commander and inventor of cunning plans to bring down the enemy.³

A second difference is the Islamic division of the world into the 'house of Islam', where Islam has control, and the 'house of the war', where the unbelievers are in charge. Does the Bible also divide the world in such a manner? One could say that there was a sort of division of the world in the Old Testament: the land of Canaan on the one hand and the rest of the world on the other. Canaan was the Promised Land where peace with God was found. The rest of the world missed that peace. But this was a temporary division. Until the time of Abraham, God had not distinguished between one people and another. Only with the calling of Abraham did this change. Abraham and his family were chosen by God to assume a very special position in this world. God made a covenant with Abraham and promised him that he would be a blessing for all the people in the world (Genesis 12). And we know what was meant by that from the course of history. Abraham was to be the forefather of the Messiah Jesus.

This exclusive position of Israel has lasted from the moment that Abraham was called, up to the arrival of the Messiah Jesus. As soon as Jesus Christ, at Pentecost, poured out the promised Spirit on those who believe in him, the borders between Israel and the peoples fell away. The apostles were commissioned to cross the borders of Israel in order to bring the gospel of the risen Saviour to all the people of the world. That brought an end to the division of the world into two parts: the land of Canaan and the rest of the world. The apostle Paul formulates this in the letter to the church at Ephesus as follows: *'For he himself (that is Christ) is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.'* (NIV)

In Islam, the barrier between the 'house of Islam' and the 'house of the war' has not been removed. And as long as this division is maintained, the mission continues unabated for Muslims to conquer the rest of the world for Islam, from their own dominion. There are indeed voices within the Islamic world that advocate no longer maintaining this barrier. In this respect, they refer to the globalization of the world: Muslims have increasingly mixed themselves with the population of many countries across the whole world. Hence these innovators wish to let go of the division of the world into two dominions. Their plea is to make the entire world *al-Da 'wa*, the area where mission needs to be done. Yet orthodox Islam continues unceasingly to

adhere to the distinction between the 'house of Islam' and the 'house of the war'. This brings to mind the Anabaptists in the times of the Reformation who strove to found the kingdom of God in the city of Münster. They wanted an area where there was only room for sincere believers who wished to dedicate themselves completely to God. There was no room for unbelievers there.

How differently the Lord Jesus speaks in his parables about the Kingdom of heaven. In Matthew 13 there is an account of the parable of the farmer who had sown good seed. In the night, his enemy came to sow weeds amongst the wheat, with all the nasty consequences: when the young crops shot up and bore fruit, the weeds also appeared. The farmhands ask the farmer whether they should pull the weeds out. The farmer's answer is quite exceptional: *'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, "Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."'*

It is clear that with this parable the Lord Jesus wants to explain something about the relationship between believers and unbelievers in this world. The farmhands' proposal is to tackle the unbelievers now and bring them to justice. That was, in fact, the attitude of the Anabaptists in the city of Münster. We also recognize that attitude in jihadism. In both cases, believers are convinced that they must execute God's judgment here and now. In response to this, the Lord Jesus teaches

The Continuing Relevancy of the 16th Century Reformation



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Beloved in the Lord, during the year 2017, Christendom will remember 500 years of the Protestant Reformation. While different Christian denominations may look back at the event with different viewpoints, the Reformation that formally started in 1517 marked a turning point for the church. As members of the reformed family, and particularly as young people, we are reminded to take a moment to reflect on the historic event and its implications for contemporary reality across all spheres. Although the Reformation affected and impacted all spheres of life, the church – and particularly her biggest constituency, the young people – needs to take particular interest in its message through the centuries and its implication to her (church) mission today.

The topics on our programme have been designed to challenge us as young people to be discerning as we live in a very diverse world, to study, understand, and promote biblical values of love, sex, marriage and family, and to pursue change that flows from the personal level and affects all areas of society (education, politics, social, religion, family life). This explains the theme of our retreat: *Are you reformed?* As we celebrate this historic event, we need to pause and reflect on what we have to do in our time. The Protestant Reformation confronted the problem of deviation from biblical truths, and its outcomes still provide answers to the continuing challenges in the church and society in our times.

Reformation Day 2016 is a time to stop and reflect, to check on who we are, as disciples of Christ, and how to make the best out of our devotion and vocation, for the glory of his name. During this retreat, we will engage in discussions and share insight on how to use our education, talents, skills, knowledge, and available resources to bring about the effects of the Reformation in the community where God has placed us. I pray that as we discuss in our focus groups, we will graciously pursue the following commitments: concerning leadership, to be principled; concerning relationships, to be faithful; concerning the family, to model biblical values of friendship, love, sex, marriage, and nurturing children; concerning community, to be exemplary; concerning the workplace, to be ethical and exemplary in conduct; concerning ministry, to read and study the Word diligently and teach correctly; and, concerning spiritual formation, to study deeper, pray always, and keep fellowship always.

The Protestant Reformation confronted non-biblical and extra-biblical teachings, which remain common in churches. The Reformation, therefore, challenges us to be students of the Word of God, and, in turn, to faithfully teach our generation. This is critical considering that the protestant and evangelical movement in Africa is characterized by extensive non-denominational churches, driven by powerful, founding pastors. Some of the doctrinal excesses in churches that do not appreciate denominational structures can be prevented if they embrace the biblical message of the Reformation. The Reformation remains characterized by continuing relevancy. This calls for an answer to the question: are you reformed?

The message to our generation is clear: to be reformed is to be accountable, to God, to the state, and to fellow man, in accordance with the Word of God. Today, the church is more accountable and remains under constant watch by peers (presbyteries), laity, civil society, and state regulatory bodies. This has helped to prevent excesses and abuses that were common in the past centuries. The opportunity for reform is great because of the extensive social and political freedoms of our times. But sometimes this opportunity has not been put to good use, hence some Christians, and mostly young people, have ‘protested’ and left the churches at the slightest discomfort, which in many cases has not necessarily been doctrinal. Hence we see the church continuously unnecessarily fragmented under the guise of seeking reform. We should seek reform that strengthens the body and advances the kingdom.

The areas where we still need reformation include education, politics, and the church, and they will form part of our focus group discussions over the next two days.

Focus on biblical worship: There is need for internal reforms to make the African church indigenous in several ways, including the worship service to maintain biblical standards and meet contemporary cultural context. In many African reformed churches today, preaching of the Word remains central. During the services there is singing of psalms, classical hymns, renewal songs, and contemporary gospel songs, diversely accompanied by the drum, xylophone, handclapping, traditional harp, and cymbals, and more recently (from the late 1980s) the guitar, piano, organ, and keyboard synthesizers. There is variety. Young people particularly want the churches to be innovative and adopt new worship styles. Sometimes this brings conflict. The Reformation



Group photo at RSO camp
[photo Paul Bukunya]

helps us to remember that the focus in our worship is to glorify and honour God.

Focus on media: the increasing literacy rates in Uganda and other parts of Africa mean more access to literature about the Reformation. The high literacy rates also mean that members in our congregations can read and study the Bible, and strengthen the teaching ministry in the church. The reading culture, however, is not strong in many African communities, and they largely remain inclined to oral methods of transmission, which has many limitations. But, providentially, the media is closing the information gap, especially radio and television. Furthermore, the emergence of new web-based and mobile media can help to advance reformed teaching and promote reformed values. The church needs to embrace digital and web technologies to reach out to new dynamic audiences, mostly young people, with the infallible Word of God. We can learn from Martin Luther who made use of the new printing technology to bring the Word of God into the hands of the common people. So I ask the question: how are we going to use the media to promote the teachings and values of the Reformation during our time?

Focus on Christian education: Many young people miss an opportunity to hear God’s Word and learn biblical values at a critical time in their life, when they are asking key questions, and on the verge of stepping into the world of employment, relationships, love, marriage, family, business, and leadership. What is their worldview? What will inform their decisions? The Reformation changed the course of history in its broadest sense; its message and effect went beyond the church into society, politics, education, economics, and the workplace. We believe there is need to establish and promote Christian schools as one way of providing holistic education, to prepare the young generation for the world and the responsibilities they will hold. The message of the Reformation needs to be packaged to target and reach this audience.

Focus on the authority of the Holy Scriptures: The issues our forefathers protested still exist, or at least manifest themselves in new ways. Our society, the church included, still suffers abuse and perversion, hence the need to be always on the look out. The message to our generation is clear: the theological course of the Reformation continues. We lose the message of the Reformation when we relegate the Bible to a secondary source for our preaching, and instead dreams, for example, become the primary source. Whether in Africa or any other part of the world, the message of the Protestant Reformation will continue to have impact through intentional and sound homiletics and hermeneutics. We are urged to remain grounded in the biblical exposition of the Scriptures, always allowing the Holy Scriptures to speak to and impact every area of our lives. As heresies continue to emerge, the church needs to address them and put right what is wrong, to prevent decline, and strengthen doctrine, church government, and family values. The Reformation reminds us that God speaks with authority through all ages: his Word is unchanging.

Conclusion

The message of the Reformation remains compelling in its imperatives, convincing in its cause, motivating in its inspiration, and enduring in its basis, the Holy Scriptures. I pray that we commit ourselves, like Martin Luther, and many other reformers and other believers who have lived before us, to standing together and standing firm on the Word of God. ■



Worship at RSO camp
[photo Paul Bukunya]

My Educational Journey at ETF, Leuven



Rev. Lungawiruol Khawbung (1974, MTh) is Child Coordinator of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North-east India and teaching elder (pastor) of the RPCNEI in Rengkai, Manipur, India.

After my graduation the editorial team of *Lux Mundi* asked me to contribute a summary of my thesis for readers of *Lux Mundi*. I am happy to give a glimpse of my research results for the Reformed community through this magazine. In spite of the tremendous help I received from friends, pastors, and elders, I confess that my research findings have many limitations. In the first place, my exposure to Dutch culture and my experiences with the RCN are limited. What I express in this article is based on my own judgments.

In our postmodern culture the transmission of the Christian faith to the next generation is not the same as it was in the past. This led me to question how faith education is carried on with adolescents. I am interested to compare the following two Reformed churches because they are sister churches. My major concern is to know how faith education models and practices for adolescents in the Reformed Presbyterian Church, North East India (RPCNEI) differ in comparison with the faith education models in the Reformed Church in The Netherlands (liberated) (RCN). Although both churches are Reformed denominations, they belong to completely different cultures and different continents. However, it is interesting to note that the baptismal vows taken by parents and the congregation during the baptismal service are connected to their faith education. The promise made by the father and mother is to do all in their power to instruct their children in the Christian faith and to lead them by their example into the life of Christian discipleship. The promise is made in reliance on the Holy Spirit and with the help of the Christian community. In addition, the congregation promises to receive these children in love, pray for them, and help instruct them in the faith, and encourage and sustain them in the fellowship of believers. The survey reveals that the attempts to fulfil the promises made during baptism are performed in many situations by way of informal education.

The RCN programme focuses more on the knowledge of what life is now, and life after death or at the eschaton. This emphasis can be seen in both the Catechism and

the HGJB¹ lessons. The HGJB subjects are divided into 7 parts: Parts 1 & 2 are designed for 12 to 13 years old, parts 3 and 4 for 14 to 15 years old, parts 5 & 6 is for age 16 and 17 years, and the last part, part 7, is designed for age 17 to 18 years old. The divisions of subjects in HGJB are in agreement with the faith and psycho-social development theory discussed in my research. The content of the lessons is carefully and logically arranged to present the gospel in a systematic way. The lessons are also organized according to the psychological capability of the adolescent. Catechism and confirmation classes are the most common practice in RCN. Adolescents begin to join this class from age 12 and continue until they can make a profession of faith. This is a step-by-step lesson starting from man's misery, to his deliverance, and ending with gratitude. Both RPCNEI and RCN churches recognized the psychological differences in age, which was being addressed by both churches as best as they could. The wording in the above description is based on the information received from the interviewees and the course document that was handed to me by the Church during the interview. The practice of infant baptism and the Lord's Supper is much influenced by Calvinistic theology in both churches. There are dissimilarities necessitated by their unique situations. The priorities are different. The RPCNEI programmes are designed more for spiritual development, and therefore all programmes are worship oriented. Lessons comprise a collection of Bible stories from which are drawn spiritual examples. The Code (norm) in RPCNEI is that adolescents between 12 to 15 years are required to attend Children's Sunday School. The hierarchical structure in the tribal culture made it possible to implement this norm. The reason for this is that younger people among the tribes have a high respect for older persons and people in leadership positions. Elders at home and in the church/community are highly respected. This differs in the Dutch egalitarian culture where the equality of all people is highly valued.

The general conclusions based on my findings are:

- The adolescent faith education program of RPCNEI does not clearly show a connection between the faith education handbooks and the confessional standard of the Church. This needs careful examination.
- The handbooks that are used for adolescents 12 to 13 years (Intermediate class) and 14 to 15 years (Senior class) are a compilation of different Bible stories without a thematic connection to each other. Every lesson is a stand-alone part of the overall teaching. Bible stories are for imparting moral and



Bible study youth group RPCNEI Rengkai (left) and GKv Leerdam [photo's by Lungawiruol Khawbung]



- ethical lessons rather than presenting the account of redemption.
- It is possible that the adolescents will learn how to live the Christian life before they actually experience salvation in Christ.
- Infant baptism and child rearing: *Kohran Inthuoi Dan Bu* (The Church Order) showed that the practice of infant baptism on the basis of covenant theology is the basis for faith education at home, at school and in the church.
- Infant baptism in Reformed Churches is related to the responsibility of parents and the Church to educate children in the faith. However, the efforts made are not enough.
- The RPCNEI's faith education handbook is about how to become a better Christian. The lessons are mainly designed for Christian growth and not for confirmation and public confession of faith.
- The RCN however focuses on how a person can be saved and confirm his faith. Who am I? What/where is my destination? Who am I for God and for others?
- This approach is more systematic, cognitive, rational, and with application to life: the hope of the eschaton.
- RCN – the vow made by parents and members of the congregation during infant baptism is taken seriously in RCN's faith education programs. Details are not given here.

In view of my research findings my areas for recommendation follow. Both RPCNEI and RCN need to go beyond presenting the truth, paying attention to the following points.

- Understanding of the growth and development, needs, and cognitive learning abilities of adolescents is important.
- Integrating faith education with human development processes. Knowledge of human age-related characteristics is important in order to identify what materials, teaching methods, and interactions are appropriate for adolescents.
- The faith education programme must provide space for a learning environment in which God can be seen and heard both psychologically and epistemologically.
- In the case of RPCNEI, knowledge of each individual adolescent's strength, interest, and needs would be of great help for effective faith education (understand the circumstances of the youngster).
- RCN: simplify the Catechism and communicate in the language of the youngsters.
- RPCNEI: need to train their teachers.
- Being a professional teacher in a discipline other than the Bible does not necessarily guarantee that one is the right teacher for faith unless one is gifted or undergoes special training for the task.
- Today's younger generation thinks and learns differently. Youngsters need a learning environment that is different from that when their parents were the same age.
- Youngsters prefer an interactive method of teaching (dialogue, not monologue), with more discussions, more visual aids, and if possible showing Christian films related to the lesson.
- Cooperation between the parents, the Church

- and the adolescents is critical for the faith education of youngsters.
- Parents and the congregation need to be continually reminded to perform their vows made before God during infant baptism.
- The Puritan view of a family as a small church and the backbone of the Church needs to be brought back into the church.
- Due to Postmodern and individualistic influences and the misperception of human rights, many parents in Europe stop engaging with their children, even when they are still too young to decide for themselves.
- In the case of RPCNEI, teaching on the Reformed theology of baptism is recommended to improve the understanding of child baptism and the parental duty in fulfilling their baptismal vows.
- The ultimate aim of the faith education must be salvation. The gift of salvation must be presented clearly.

I do hope a short summary of my research findings will create awareness and more insight in the development of faith education curriculum and implementation of the same. This is my prayer that the LORD will bless all readers. ■

Notes

- 1 HGJB (Hervormd-Gereformeerde Jeugdbond) Protestant Reformed Youth League, to equip the Reformed youth to live a Christian life before God, especially with Bible study material. The Catechism lessons of the HGJB are used for this research.

Last November Rev. Lungawiruol Khawbung graduated at the Evangelical Theological Faculty, Leuven, Belgium with a thesis entitled *Educating Teenagers in the Faith: A comparison of Models and Practices within Two Reformed Communities in North East India and in the Netherlands*. In this article he gives a short summary of his research findings.

Extraordinary Gifts



Prof. Koos van Rooy (BA, ThD) is emeritus professor, Hammanskraal Theological School of the Reformed Churches of South Africa and Theological School Potchefstroom, Reformed Churches of South Africa.

Something rather extraordinary happened in the Reformed Churches in South Africa (the GKSA or so-called ‘Dopper Churches’). A chemical engineer was examined by a meeting of regional churches (classis) and allowed to be called as a minister. The person, Andries Burger, had not received any formal theological training, but was judged by the classis to have ‘extraordinary gifts’. On those grounds, he was allowed to enter the full-time ministry, following the stipulations of Article 8 of the Reformed Church Order that a person who possesses ‘extraordinary gifts’ may be called to the ministry in those churches.

■ What then is extraordinary about ‘extraordinary gifts’?

It seems that some ecclesiastics are of the opinion that the possession of these ‘extraordinary gifts’ means that a person who has not had any formal theological training should be able to:

- preach extraordinarily well;
- do his pastoral work better than the average minister;
- preside at meetings better than the same;
- know and understand more about the Bible and theology than the average minister.

If he cannot do these things, it means that he has no extraordinary gifts.

This interpretation should be rejected out of hand on the grounds that it has no foundation in Scripture. Reformed people believe, as I myself do, that the Church Order is based on Scripture, and in matters of principle such as being allowed into the ministry, it cannot be interpreted by adding new principles to Scripture. On this basis, the term ‘extraordinary gifts’ simply means that the person in question should be able to expound and apply Scripture in a simple, understandable and edifying way, to lead a church and shepherd the flock with empathy and love, and know and understand the confessions and be able to defend them against false teaching, and to do this at least as well as the average formally trained minister. Those are the requirements of Scripture itself.

■ The standard of preaching

In my long life, I had the privilege of listening to about 8000 sermons by a large number of preachers of different denominations in several countries, and I, therefore, have some experience of the quality of those sermons. The standard of preaching in other denominations than the GKSA Churches is, with some brilliant exceptions, generally lower than in the GKSA Reformed Churches.

The main reason for this is that in the latter the sermons are normally preached straight from the Bible, expounding and applying the text of the Bible. Contrastingly, in some denominations even the principle of expository preaching seems to have been rejected.

Nevertheless, two factors diminish the standard of preaching in the Reformed Churches of the GKSA. The first factor is the influence of the doctrine of presumptive regeneration, which has been dominant in that denomination for so long. According to this doctrine, a preacher should assume that all church members have already been born again, and that all of them are therefore believers — even if some of them may not be aware of it — and should not be called to a personal faith in Christ, but only helped along the way to a more extensive knowledge of their presumptive faith. The result is a preaching focusing on doctrine without an appeal to have a living relationship with God. One may listen to a hundred successive sermons without ever hearing the Word of God being handled as a key that not only opens the way into the kingdom, but also shuts it to those who persist in their unbelief. The Bible often teaches doctrine in the form of doxology, such as Paul does in Ephesians 1 or Romans 11. Often the Word of God is stronger than the preacher and his theology, and then it is actually preached in power and becomes a call to repentance, because the text cannot be interpreted in any other way. For that we are grateful.

We can also be grateful that a recent GKSA synod has repudiated this doctrine in no uncertain terms. However, it takes time for a body of preachers to cast off all the shackles of a doctrine like this one. One may still hear a preacher declaring in the name of God, ‘All of you are elect!’ — and this to a church of four hundred members, some of whom have since then openly denied the existence of God.

The second factor that lowered the standard of preaching in the Reformed Churches is the one-sided emphasis on academic excellence, and insufficient attention to the gifts of the Spirit and the fear of the Lord in training ministers. In my experience, this aspect goes hand in hand with a strong emphasis on the technical aspects of preaching to the detriment of inspiration and passion. I could name a number of preachers with doctoral degrees in theology who have very little to say when preaching the Word. They do not have the gift of preaching, not even an ordinary gift of preaching. One can listen to a long series of sermons by a preacher and at the end be at a loss as to what the man really wanted to say. I have no desire to use this article as a place for

complaining about poor preachers, but I mention this specifically to contrast it with ‘laymen’ who do have the gift to preach but are not allowed to use it.

To be fair, one should concede that these preachers are not the majority, and that there are also preachers, by the grace of God, who do have the gifts of the Spirit and who preach with inspiration. There are even a few ordained preachers with extraordinary gifts.

■ Untrained people who proclaim the Scripture with insight and blessing

On the other hand, there are people without formal theological training but with insight into the Scripture and the Reformed Confession, who have the gift of communicating with people about the Word. Usually, they are also people to whom the Lord has given exceptionally sharp minds enabling them to assimilate more knowledge and develop greater insight than others who achieve it either over a longer period or not at all.

Spurgeon and Lloyd-Jones

One of the greatest Reformed preachers of the 19th century was Charles Haddon Spurgeon. He had not had a single day’s formal theological training. One of the greatest Reformed preachers of the 20th century was Martyn Lloyd-Jones. He was a brilliant young medical doctor, but also had not received any formal theological training.

In our own time

Obviously, men with such outstanding gifts are rare. Yet there are still some preachers around who have a sufficient measure of these gifts to be a great blessing to the church. I can mention the late Dr Evert Helms, a brilliant medical doctor, who for many years worked at the Siloam Missionary Hospital in South Africa. Few people know about the degree of insight and imagery he displayed when he proclaimed the Bible to the Venda nation. Few ministers could ever reach that standard. If whites had been involved, he would have been barred from preaching because the Church Order does not make provision for one who is not a full-time minister to prepare his own sermons.

GKSA member

I know of a member of an Afrikaans-speaking GKSA Reformed Church who built up a small ‘congregation’ among English speakers with sermons he prepared himself. Few trained Reformed ministers, regardless of their giftedness, could have achieved this. After a few months, this member was barred by his Church Council from continuing unless he read the sermons of ordained Reformed Church ministers. As far as I know,



Theological University Kampen

■ Fata academica 2016

‘Globalization has definitively reached the TU’, Rector Prof. Dr Roel Kuiper stated in the ‘Fata Academica 2016’, the annual review of the developments at the Theological University in Kampen, the Netherlands. The international English Master (MIRT) is growing, with 12 new students enrolled. Stanley Hauerwas visited, and James K. Smith delivered the ‘Bavinck Lecture’ on the contribution of public theology to the debate about contemporary society. At the annual Kuyper conference at Princeton Theological Seminary, assistant Professor Koert van Bakkum held a keynote lecture on journalism and religion. ‘The TU is becoming, more and more, a focal point in the continuation of the Neo-Calvinist tradition in our time and of the reflection on the relation between faith, church, politics and society.’ To mention a few more facts from the rector’s address on the university’s 162nd birthday: while the Ministry Master has remained stable, the General Master has grown significantly in student numbers. The academic year 2016-17 has a rich harvest of six promotions, with several publications on significant subjects. The Praktijkcentrum (Praxis Centre), established in 2014, has started research into ecclesiastical praxis. Partnering with other institutions, the AKZ+ institute, through study meetings and compact video lessons, disseminates knowledge to a broader public on diverse themes concerning the Bible, faith, and the church. Plans are being developed to establish a Reformed Theological University in which several reformed theological institutes will be united or represented. The new common Bachelor is planned to start in 2018 in or near Utrecht, a centrally located university city as well as an ancient cathedral city that provides both a broader academic atmosphere and a monastic environment. ‘Let us discover how broad and deep and high the reformed creed is and what God has given us therein. That is what the GTU stands for,’ says the rector. See <http://en.tukampen.nl/news-english-website/fata-academica-2016> for the full speech.

■ Conference on the Covenant

The BEST Research Group of the Theological Universities in Apeldoorn and Kampen is organizing an international conference on the Covenant in Apeldoorn on March 30 and 31 this year. Besides aspects from Biblical Studies and Systematic Theology, historical enquiry into the development of Reformed covenant theology will also be discussed. More info on <http://en.tukampen.nl/calender-english-website/best-conference-on-the-covenant>.

■ ATSF 2017, May 29 - June 23, 2017

The Advanced Theological Studies Fellowship (ATSF) is a research exchange programme of Kampen Theological University. In this fellowship the university brings together a group of promising young international theologians (all of whom are preparing for their PhD degree) for a period of a month to spend time together exploring theological themes and exchanging insights. All the researchers can use the research facilities of the university, including its excellent library, to prepare papers presenting part of their own research. Professors and other staff of the university or from elsewhere will give feedback on the presented papers in a public session. Read more about the programme on <http://en.tukampen.nl/portal-informatiepagina/atsf-programme>.

News Update

GKSA worship service
in Totiusdal, Pretoria



[photo: Koos van Rooy]

this practice has never worked in similar circumstances. The motivation was that the Church Order did not allow him to preach. To me, it is a tragic example of 'quenching the Holy Spirit' (1 Thess. 5:19). Fortunately, this person did not allow formal stumbling blocks to prevent him from exercising his gift. First, English speakers in that Church, and people from outside the Church, asked him to continue to minister to them in English independently of the Church. He agreed, although his Church did not take kindly to it. Second, he appealed against the Church Council's decision to a classis and a regional synod. Mediation led to the withdrawal of his appeal and to the Church Council's decision to rescind its resolution. Two years later, the Church Council unanimously invited him to lead a worship service and allowed him to preach his own sermon. The LORD works in wonderful and mysterious ways.

I listened to and read some of this person's sermons and they included really excellent sermons. His preaching bore much fruit. People got to know the Lord for the first time. An atheist converted, openly professed his faith and was baptized in a reformed church. An ex-Roman Catholic nun joined and became a regular churchgoer because there she heard the proclamation of the truth of the Bible. Even an Anglican priest regularly attends worship services. Those reformed messages may in turn find their way into his sermons in his own congregation. There is a lively spiritual communion of believers. Even Afrikaans-speaking persons regularly attend worship services because there they get spiritual food. Members of churches ministered to by 'regular' ministers often justifiably complain, 'We suffer from spiritual famine.' (I am not here referring to the ordained minister of the local Reformed Church). This person is financially independent and does not take any remuneration for his services. In the future, allowing gifted church members to preach may be the answer to the increasing number of congregations who can no longer afford to maintain a minister. According to the clear pronouncement of the Apostle Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:19-20, a church may not quench the Holy Spirit by suppressing the working of his gifts. Instead, the Church should encourage the working of gifts of the Holy Spirit and should create channels for them to function. Whenever the Church Order does not address a particular situation, one should simply follow Scripture until the Church Order has been extended to address it.

GKSA synod 2015

■ A dead letter under black Reformed members

It is remarkable that the requirement that only men with a formal theological training be allowed to prepare and preach their own sermons has been a dead letter in the mission field for the past hundred years. Elders and mission helpers almost always preach their own sermons. Nobody has ever dreamt of putting an end to it. In any case, it is not practically feasible. To argue that what is good for black people is not good for white people is unbiblical racism, which is not acceptable in the church of the Lord.

I have heard biblical, practical, and edifying sermons of 'helpers' (evangelists who have not been ordained) that few trained ministers would be able to imitate. Scripture, in any case, stipulates that an elder must be able to teach. (1 Timothy 3:2) Why then, according to Church practice, is he not allowed to teach by preaching?



[photo: Pro Regino]

■ What should then be done?

To get past the inconsistencies of church practice, this matter should receive attention. The GKSA Churches need to take steps to open the way for believers who are not trained or ordained ministers to prepare and preach their own sermons if they have the gifts of the Spirit.

We are thankful for what is offered by theological seminaries, but may God forbid that meetings of churches should ever become trades unions for protecting the position of technically-schooled ministers, or for creating larger numbers of students for a theological faculty.

Recent decisions by the General Synod of the (GKSA) Reformed Churches in South Africa seem to open the way for this by appointing deputies assigned to come up with indications of how people who are not full-time ministers may practise their gift of preaching. I am referring to Acta 2009:824 point 3.17: 'to investigate the matter of preaching helpers and come up with suggestions of ways in which the need of churches where such people work is taken into account, and which agree with the principles of the Church Order...' ■

Celebrating 10 years of God's Faithfulness

In September 2016, the Christian Reformed Fellowship of India (CRFI) achieved the important landmark of ten years in ministry. In the past, God called his own chosen people in order to redeem his people from the fallen world, like Abraham, Moses and the prophets, Paul and Peter to name a few. He continues to call people even today, to take part in the mission of the church – to proclaim the gospel in the world.



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■ The beginning of the CRFI

In 2005 Mr Newbegin and Mrs Levena Salome visited a mission field in Gujarat, where they met Mr Ravichandran who was working with a mission organization. God gave Newbegin and Salome, who already had received a heart for mission work from their parents, the new charge of working in the field of sending and equipping the missionaries with biblical teaching. Mr Kees Smallenbroek (from The Netherlands) and Dr Mohan Chacko, (Principal of Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Dehradun at that time) were invited to visit the mission field in Gujarat on a field trip to see how they could set up a training facility for the missionaries. That plan proved unfeasible because the mission workers were interdenominational. In the meantime, Newbegin and Salome met Rev. Bert Kuipers, who was already working as a missionary there, and God led both Mr Newbegin and Mr Kuipers to work together in Gujarat, resulting in the formation of the Christian Reformed Fellowship of India. Mr Ravichandran was willing to help as a part-time worker. He joined CRFI as a full-time worker after completing 4 years of M.Div. study at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Dehradun. On 1st July 2006 a Day of Prayer was organized at Khergham village, Valsad in Gujarat. Five persons were selected to work in and around Saputara on the border of Maharashtra and Gujarat.

■ Progress

As one might expect, the first two years were a period of learning. Evaluation of these first two years of ministry resulted in a new strategy of reshuffling and relocating the grassroots workers. With the support and encouragement of our partner (GOSPEL) and the hard work and prayers of God's people, the work started to yield results, and the first baptism took place in December 2008 in the South Gujarat cluster. From this humble and small beginning, God blessed the work of CRFI. The field was expanded to two more states in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Basically, they work in clusters with 5-7 workers in a cluster of villages. A team leader was appointed in every cluster.

*'Go into all
the world
and preach
the gospel to
all creation.'
(Mark 16:15)*

After starting the first cluster in 2006 at Saputara, the work was further expanded to eight more clusters spread across four states during the course of 10 years. At the end of these ten years, we can humbly say that God has blessed this small beginning in 2006 to achieve the following:

- Some 75 full time workers are working with CRFI in 9 clusters in 4 states
- Some 6300 attend Sunday worship services
- Another 2100 attend outreach and prayer groups
- The total number of believers who have expressed their faith in our Lord Jesus Christ is 4300
- The total number of believers is estimated at about 6300
- CRFI is working in a total of 250 villages, regular services being held in 135 villages and prayer cells in 115 villages.

As is to be expected in any mission field, the missionaries have faced challenges. Besides experiencing persecution, some of the mission fields bought little response due to opposition from the villages and their local leaders. Some of our team leaders left the field due to various reasons, resulting in a shortage in leadership. However, God helped to overcome the setbacks and disappointments. He strengthened the CRFI to move forward with renewed determination to fulfil His calling.

At CRFI, we believe that evangelization and social aid go hand in hand. We are glad that we are able to facilitate



this through the GOSPEL/World Transforms (formerly known as World Relief & Development). They supported this social work and projects such as the tuition centre, bore well, adult literacy, and community health program, which helped us to open new doors and avenues to advance the work of the gospel. GOSPEL/WT also supported the missionaries with motorcycles and equipment, musical instruments, battery lights, etc. All these play an important role in making the work more efficient.

Future plans and direction

- Holding on to the promises of our Lord, CRFI will prayerfully move forward with new zeal and direction, with support from GOSPEL/WT, the CRCA churches in Australia, and other sponsors
- CRFI will continue to place emphasis on winning souls for the Lord, and will survey new areas that have not yet been reached by the gospel
- CRFI will give priority to Bible based / Reformed training, keeping in mind the cultural and literacy level of the target groups
- CRFI will work out plans to make its organization indigenous and self-supporting by strengthening the internal structure such as equipping elders, local fund raising, etc.

God has blessed this work in the midst of ups and down during this 10 year journey. Glory and honour to him alone for his faithfulness in leading all who are involved in this work, especially the dedicated missionaries who are based in the interior villages, living without basic needs such as proper electricity, hospital, transport, and schooling for their children. They travel in the heat of the sun, in the rain, across difficult terrain and hills to carry the good news of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. 'How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"' (Isaiah 52:7).

■ Pictures

On top: Believers from throughout four Indian states (Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan) travelled overnight and gathered in a ground near the auditorium. They are walking from there towards the auditorium where the celebration is held. Some of them travelled about 1,000 km overnight to reach the venue
Centre: Celebration of the 10-year anniversary in the auditorium in Saputara, on the border of Maharashtra and South Gujarat
bottom: The workers of CRFI in their uniform at the celebration
 Photography: Roshyama ■



The grasshopper on its way home

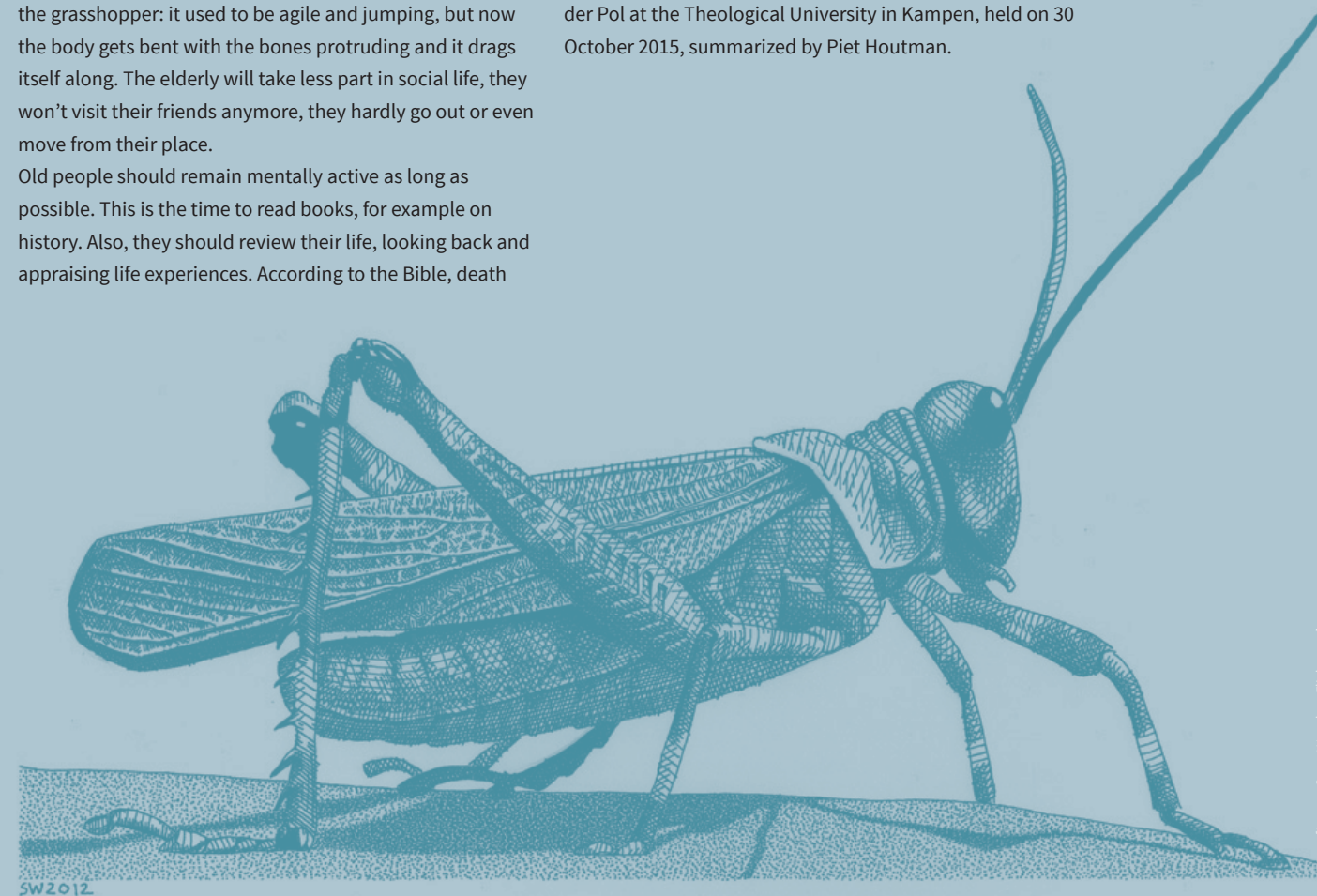
Prof. Frank van der Pol was professor of Church History (Before 1800) at Kampen Theological University. Aptly, on the occasion of his retirement in 2015, he spoke about ageing and discussed the early modern book *Cierlijke Kroon en Krans des grijsen en goeden Ouderdoms* ('Crown of Splendour and Garland of the Grey and Good Old Age'). It was written by Simon Oomius (1630-1706), who ministered in the Reformed Church in Kampen for 28 years as a pastor. From his own experience, Oomius gives guidelines for a positive view of ageing. He quotes Scripture as well as classical and early Christian authors. The last chapter is autobiographical, and he died before he could proofread his book.

The title refers to Proverbs 16: 31. Oomius describes two stages: the vital (ages 60-75) and the arduous old age. They are like autumn and winter of life. This distinction is still in use in gerontology. The reader is encouraged to pay attention to this gradual shift and not be surprised by decline. Old age comes with the decline of sight, hearing and all the senses, so that man cannot enjoy the delights of life that much anymore. In Ecclesiastes 12 we find the metaphor of the grasshopper: it used to be agile and jumping, but now the body gets bent with the bones protruding and it drags itself along. The elderly will take less part in social life, they won't visit their friends anymore, they hardly go out or even move from their place. Old people should remain mentally active as long as possible. This is the time to read books, for example on history. Also, they should review their life, looking back and appraising life experiences. According to the Bible, death

is connected to sin. This does not mean that one should bemoan sin; rather one should praise God's grace and goodness. This is the art of 'eu-thanasia', dying well. We are on the way home. How I look forward, Oomius writes at the end, to going to see God's countenance! Prof. Van de Pol applied the lessons from this book to the elderly in the present church (in the Dutch context, obviously). The church gives much attention to the young, but the elderly should be taken more into account and especially be involved in teams and working groups. The generations are interconnected. It is the responsibility of the elderly not to consider their time as a little paradise of enjoyment; it is their natural position to transmit values to the younger generations. Special attention should be given to their spirituality; their basic values are not autonomy and self-reliance. As children and other relatives often live far away, the church ought to present itself as a diaconal church, looking after the aged. They are not on the way to the end, but homeward bound. ■

■ Note

This is a summary of the farewell lecture of Prof. Frank van der Pol at the Theological University in Kampen, held on 30 October 2015, summarized by Piet Houtman.



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

John 8:12