

**Praying for Rain**  
**a study guide**



Isaac Smit

# **Praying for Rain**

a call for renewal in the Canadian Reformed churches

**a study guide**

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Published Fall 1998, by Isaac Smit

ISBN 0-9683216-1-5

This guide has been produced to accompany the publication  
*Praying for Rain- a call for renewal in the Canadian Reformed  
churches.* ISBN 0-9683216-0-7

Copies are available from the author/publisher or from

\* the Family Christian Bookstore in Burlington, ON.

\* Anchor Book Centre (Mel DeGlint) at Surrey, B.C.

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## Foreword to the Study Guide

When I started working on this project, all I had in mind was Bible study. I wanted to explore the Scriptures to find out what it means to be born again. This personal project was meant to fill a niche in my Reformed education. As I pondered the relevant Bible passages and started to form my thoughts on regeneration, however, I found myself challenging our tradition, and being challenged by those upholding it. No longer was it possible to just study the Scriptures. Instead, I was now constantly comparing the Bible with our tradition (as expressed in my own education, the opinion of others around me, sermons I had heard, and articles in *Clarion*). So, I found myself searching the Scriptures to see, whether what I had learned was true. This new position proved to be very challenging, but it also put me in a position of isolation. Even though others had challenged our traditions, it nevertheless felt threatening to stand up against an establishment I was a part of. People would see me as a conceited, critical man who delights in disturbing the peace, and indeed I have been called “troubler of Israel” and words I cannot put in print. Nevertheless, more than ever I felt God Himself urging me on to continue, giving me new insights as well as support when I needed it the most.

During my research and writing of the book, most of our people chose to ignore the comments I made and the questions I raised. It was very hard to get argued responses. Except for a few emotional concerns from some and some whispered encouragement from others, there was only silence. Even after publication, many tried to ignore the issues addressed. The *Clarion*, church and school, however, had to respond. The most elaborate reaction was from a committee, established by my employer, the board of Guido de Bres Christian High School. During the last couple of years I had not had any formal complaints and very rarely a question from anybody in the community. Nevertheless, a group of concerned parents had been formed, which had sought support from one of our ministers. When finally some of this group wanted to talk with me, they refused to discuss any doctrinal issues. They continued to put pressure on the Guido board to deal with the problem “Isaac Smit”, who was seen as a threat to the students’ faith. The board then requested a copy of my manuscript, which was about to be published. They set up a committee, made up of the board and education committee chair persons, Rev. D. Agema of Attercliffe, who had been one of the initiators in the affair, and Dr. J. De Jong of the Canadian Reformed Theological College. This committee examined my book and came up with an 11 page report, on which basis they recommended my job to be terminated. The report listed eight points of essential concern. According to “the committee” these eight points were said to “fall outside the pale of the Reformed confession, and if they are not duly amended or corrected, would result in the unavoidable conclusion that the stand presented in the book is not compatible with the Reformed confessions”. In response to their report I wrote a rebuttal to the eight “essentials”, upon which they made some minor amendments. The board spent two evenings discussing the two reports and proceeded to make a final offer. They drafted an “acknowledgement”, which I was to sign within a week. Failure to do so, I was told, would result in job termination. As I could not, in good conscience, sign the acknowledgement, my job was terminated the moment the deadline for signing had passed. A

severance package offered (and accepted) assured me of a basic income for the following year.

Five months after publication, the Hamilton consistory responded to my book. They too, presented a report. It was made available for interested church members, although here the last section was deleted. In this section the consistory notified my wife and me that we would no longer be welcome at the Supper of the Lord. I was accused of six heresies or misrepresentations of the truth. The next Sunday the Cornerstone congregation was told –by a visiting preacher- that leaving a faithful church (federation) is committing sin. I never intended to “hit and run”, so I wrote a response to the consistory report. In it, I tried to show to them how they had produced a caricature of my views, on which basis they had judged me. Although no discussion has taken place yet, the consistory claims to be in an impasse, so we must appeal to the greater assembly to do justice for the truth.

I am not publishing this information (the documents are included as appendices to this study guide) for revenge. I am not fighting the procedure, but the arguments. It is not my status, which is at stake, but the truth and freedom in Christ. It is important that we show the cracks in the clay if we want to encourage people to pray for rain.

This study guide contains:

- 1 questions and comments for further consideration. Most of these I had originally planned to include in the book. Later I decided to keep them out. The book might get too big and some of the questions might be too critical. These questions form an important component of this study guide.
- 2 some background information as to the background for and the purpose and sequence of the contents.
- 3 the responses and lack thereof, from Canadian Reformed circles and otherwise. Most of these are incorporated in the questions, while the reports by Clarion, Cornerstone consistory, and Guido school board and its committee, are included as appendices. They provide an interesting framework for my writings. Reactions are often an interesting barometer to gauge how close the initial statements hit the mark. I also want to take this opportunity to give some feedback to the reactions.

## **Chiropraxy and the Church**

Until recently, I knew very little about chiropractors. I thought I had no need of them and I was quite suspicious about their work, because of the apparent association with New Age philosophy. Well, last summer I ended up with a damaged disk (not in my computer) and my family doctor could give me little information and direction. He said things would improve but they got worse. When the toes of my right foot grew numb, I became concerned. So, upon a friend's advice, I did end up at a chiropractor.

The spinal cord is a cluster of nerves, which forms the communication link between the head and the body. It is supported and protected by a flexible column of bones, called the spinal column. This consists of 24 bones, which have a unique combination of strength and flexibility. Due to certain events, circumstances, or habits, however, the spinal column can become stressed and it may get out of balance. The imbalance of certain vertebrae will also affect others. When vertebrae are badly out of line they can restrict the nerves, so that certain body functions may be hampered. A chiropractor scans the spinal column to detect areas of stress and imbalance. Over a period of time (s)he will try to realign the vertebrae, but this requires awareness, determination, and time. Although there is probably nobody with a perfectly aligned spinal column, some people obviously have greater problems than others. Although most people will not have their column inspected until certain symptoms begin to bother them, the circumstances causing the trouble may have existed for a long time.

Christ rules His Body by His Word and Spirit. In this image, I propose that theology or doctrine can be represented by the spinal column. Doctrine is not the essence of the church, for sound doctrine, without love and obedience is useless. Nevertheless, its importance must not be underestimated; without the protection and support of sound doctrine, the Body cannot stand. Every Christian, congregation and church denomination (federation) must examine its doctrinal position in the light of Scripture. Scriptural truth often comes in pairs, which first seem to contradict each other. A lack of personal communication with God or an overreaction to perceived threats can easily throw Christians and churches "off balance". I will list a number of doctrinal "vertebrae", with both sides of the balance. I have grouped them in five main sections; God's character, revelation, salvation, covenant, and the church. Each teacher or preacher, each congregation and denomination tends to have a particular "signature"; a unique combination of emphases or preferences. This pattern is not static but quite dynamic, as culture and science, tradition and peer pressure, events and books, Word and Spirit continually affect it.

God is one but yet He is three; how can that be? Although God is not "a male", yet he reveals Himself with certain masculine characteristics. In a sense He is masculine, in another sense He is neither masculine nor feminine. He is the Holy One and yet He is our father. For each of these paradoxes we can find Christians and churches stressing either aspect of the truth.

We can know God by His Word and Spirit. The Spirit convicts us that the Word is truly His Word, while the Word is required to test the spirits, to see whether they are from God. It is God, who wrote the Bible and yet, it was written by man. Scripture is clear on how man can be saved, but Scripture still

is just a mirror of miracles. Some Christians need to be confronted with the one side, others tend to miss the other side.

Salvation is the work of God, from start to finish, but man is still actively involved. God has foreordained all things and yet we make choices and “change” history. We must work on our salvation, while God works it all in us. We must do good works, but God has prepared them for us. Salvation is the work of God and the work of man, for God removes nothing from our responsibility and we cannot take anything from His glory. Salvation is an event as well as a process. There is no one who does good, but we must distinguish between the faithful and the disobedient. All men are sinners before a Holy God, but believers are no longer sinners, as sin no longer reigns in them. God wants all man to be saved, and yet he allows some to perish. He is the God of love, but also the God of power. Faith and perseverance are gifts, but also obligations. Depending on where you are, either aspect may be emphasised, but either side must be stressed to maintain the balance.

Those who hear the Word but do not accept and do it, are God’s children and yet they are not. Being in the church is good, being of the church is better. Those who hear the Word are chosen and yet, many are called but few are chosen. The little children in the church have God’s promise, but they do not yet share in all the blessings of the church. They are heirs of salvation; without having it yet in the full sense. God’s promise holds a blessing, which can certainly turn into a curse. From old covenant to the new, there is continuity and there is discontinuity. Some churches stress the one; some stress the other. We had better focus on them both.

The church of Christ is a reality that spans the globe and yet it is the local assembly. Christ gathers people to Himself and His people gather together. People are graced into Him by faith, while people gather together in praise and worship. The Kingdom of God is today’s reality, but tomorrow’s fulfilment. It is found where the truth is heard and in those who obey it. It is not hidden, but must be displayed in walk and talk.

The Bible is a unique combination of accounts and genres, with different formats to present the truth. For the rational person, Paul may be most convincing; for the mystical person, John’s Gospel may hit a cord; in philosophical types the wisdom books may hit home, while among others the poetry may make most impact. For the Romans and Galatians, faith had to be stressed more than works, while the congregations, which James addressed, needed a somewhat different emphasis. A timeless confession should not be one-sided or reactionary, but must keep the issues in balance. If we are paranoid about Arminianism, we will likely show hyper-Calvinistic tendencies, and if we hate subjectivism, we’d better beware the trap of objectivism. We are so critical concerning others, and we know exactly where they are wrong. But, where are we off-balance? What caused this? Do we even admit that we can be “wrong”? If we are not “just right”, how right must we (or others) be to be church of Christ? What pattern of doctrine or range of possibilities defines the true church? We must examine ourselves and admit our errors. The stronger we overreact, the more we expose our problems. Let’s acknowledge our shortcomings and work on them, for it is God who does it.

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## About the Foreword

Femmie VanderBoom wrote the foreword to the book. Both the fact that she wrote it, and the fact that she made a parallel with OT prophets calling Israel back to a walk with God, have upset many (potential) readers.

I think that Femmie has threatened our ecclesiastical conscience. According to her own account, while she was adored as a leader in the federation and an example for many, she served herself and did not know Jesus as her true and only Saviour. By her testimony she shattered the popular notion that conversion is a slow, life long process, which exists to some degree in all Canadian Reformed members. She insisted that there must be a radical turnaround from self-centred living to a life fully dedicated to God.

When Femmie put (by God's grace) her life straight with God, she became alienated by the Canadian Reformed church community and was treated as a second rank Christian. As she searched the Scriptures, she too, independently from others like myself, found that the teaching she had heard was not always the pure and unadulterated Word of God.

A couple of our leaders took great offence that Femmie called me "a prophet" and that I allowed her to do so. Why? I can think of three reasons.

- (1) God no longer raises up people to call His people back to a walk with God, or
- (2) we may not call such people prophets, as this suggests an aura of infallibility,
- (3) these things do not apply to Isaac as he is not calling the (Canadian Reformed) churches to the truth, but rather away from it. If our federation and its views define the truth, there cannot be somebody (whether or not we call this person a prophet), calling us back to another truth, even the Scriptures.

Of course the book is not without mistakes or inaccuracies. On a number of points I have come to reconsider the wisdom or accuracy of certain statements. I have included such second thoughts in this study guide.

### I am convinced that God wanted me to write this book. How do I know that?

- 1 It was an inner conviction that stayed with me, growing stronger over time.
- 2 The closer I lived to God, also in my devotions, the stronger became that conviction.
- 3 God prepared me over time, in the situations he placed me, I learned to see the problems in our churches.
- 4 God gave me gifts in reasoning, logical analysis, and teaching. The M.Sc. program, I did, gave me experience, and taught me perseverance.
- 5 Other Christians have recognised God's gifts in me, and have encouraged me to use them for the building of the church.
- 6 At the start of this project several of our leaders publicly admitted that they had learned from my insights.
- 7 When I expected to meet all kinds of obstacles to be placed in my way, God surprisingly opened doors.
- 8 When I needed support, God always provided me with people to encourage me and offer help.

## **I Christ and Christian**

A typical Canadian Reformed theology can be summarised as follows:

1 The **truth** is what we also call the Reformed doctrine. It expositis God's Word in terms of confessions and convictions. All "Christians" and "churches" claim to believe in the Bible, and yet some of them reject even the most fundamental truths of Scripture. Apparently, it is not enough to use Scripture as criterion for the truth. "The Three Forms of Unity" are required to define the true Christian doctrine. They constitute the truth and form the basis of the church.

We are strong on extra-scriptural, and even extra-confessional binding. Many among us state that the church may not be defined as all those who are, by faith engrafted into Christ". The same people would insist that only Reformed Christians may partake of the Lord's Supper. Such convictions are then made essential parts of the truth, from which Bible and confessions must be read. Other Reformed churches disagree. Yet, we insist that we follow the clear reading of the confessions.

2 The truth must be communicated and maintained by **teaching** the children (catechism), by holding two speeches each Sunday (sermons), and by peer pressure (formally as church discipline, as well as informally). Only leaders, trained in "the truth" and acknowledged for their commitment to "the truth", may hold the speeches.

As a consequence, evangelism must have as purpose to bring people under "the preaching" of "the truth", which is to be found in the (Canadian) Reformed worship services.

3 **Faith** is essentially listening to the preaching, culminating in a personal commitment to "the truth". This process of a growing personal conviction concerning "the truth", called regeneration, should be accompanied with an increase in godly living, but such growth is not necessarily perceptible to others.

Some of us have described "believing" as listening,<sup>1</sup> but I think that listening is not the substance of faith, but the means of working faith and the prerequisite for obtaining it. Not everyone who hears the Word, accepts it. The argument is given that God's Word never returns empty. Of course this is true (Isa.55.11), but the result is not always the same. Among those who receive the seed of the Gospel, some will remain hard and will not accept it. Others seem to accept it, but yet they will never bear fruit. Some of us, apparently, de-emphasise the existence of rocky soil and shallow ground and suggest that we are assured of growth and fruit in every baptised child. Godly living is usually acknowledged as an obligation, but as a poor indicator of faith. The Bible, however, uses this as determinant or mark for the true believer.

4 The **church** is the community where "the truth" is preached. This is the true church. There are other organisations, calling themselves "church", while they do not agree with the whole "truth". These are not churches of Christ, and therefore they use that title inappropriately. Membership of "the church" is

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. D. Agema, *Do we need a "story"?*1, RP15(9/10), p.21

essential for hearing the truth, which is essential for acquiring faith. Membership is obtained upon public declaration of agreement with the truth or upon birth to parents who have done so. Baptism is the sign of membership and all who have this sign are assured of faith and regeneration.

Dr. J. De Jong eloquently explains that we must read the confessions as such, that agreement with all aspects of our confessions is essential for being “church”.<sup>2</sup> In the Public Letter issue, the Dutch churches took the same stand (essay 31). This means that all Baptist and Lutheran churches are by default synagogues of Satan, for our confessions do not know about a third category beyond the true and the false churches.

5 The church is also called the **covenant** community. Its members have God’s promise and seal of salvation. Baptism signifies that they all have part in the saving grace of Christ. This also obligates them to attend all church services and to lead decent lives.

Dr. De Jong agreed that non-members, who are regularly under the preaching of the Word, share in the promise.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, he reasoned that they ought not to be baptised as they lack the seal.

6 Although church members can temporarily fall away, they will all eventually return to the truth and be saved. Baptism assures us of this promise. In exceptional cases, church members do not get to heaven. This is then due to their persistent disobedience, by which they break the covenant. How these two “truths” can co-exist is a mystery that we cannot hope to understand.

Ask your minister to find out whether God promises that each baptised child will receive faith and regeneration, so that they will accept the Gospel and will grow in holiness. Ask also whether and how any such believers can then fall away from faith so that they end up in hell.

1 Our view of “the truth” is exclusivistic, as no other churches in North America agree with us. Our traditional church view describes the universal church only in the terms of Reformed congregations and their members, but as far as I know this view is unique among the churches in North America. The OPC fails as the Westminster Confession speaks differently about the church.<sup>4</sup> These churches would also fail, as they do not require agreement with the Reformed confessions, for participation at the Lord’s Supper, which we see as one of the essential aspects of “the truth”. The United Reformed churches also disagree with our church view and Lord’s Supper restrictions, as is obvious from discussions in *Christian Renewal*. The Free Reformed churches state in their introductory flyer<sup>5</sup> that “We realise that our creeds contain doctrines about which the universal church of Christ is deeply divided, for example, the

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<sup>2</sup> J. De Jong, *Confession and Church Unity*, Clarion 47(4)

<sup>3</sup> during my defense to the Guido committee

<sup>4</sup> Westminster Confession, chapter 25;

The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel, consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, and of their children, and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.

<sup>5</sup> *Introducing the Free Reformed Churches of North America*, published by Free Reformed Publications.

question of infant baptism.” This statement is incompatible with Dr. De Jong’s view of “the truth” and “the church”.<sup>6</sup> Our leaders must recognise their two-faced approach. We cannot treat Rev. DeBruin as heretic and also claim that we are doctrinally one with OPC, FRC, or URC.

The Guido committee wants to equate Christ, the Bible, the Forms of Unity, and their views. To reject any aspect of the confessions means to reject Christ. No wonder they suggest that there are but few believers outside the true Reformed church.<sup>7</sup>

2 Even our confessions teach that, in a sense, all believers are prophets. The Great Commission was for all of Christ’s disciples. Proclaiming the Gospel must be public. To equate this public proclamation with “sermons” is projecting our history and tradition upon the Word of God.

3 Faith is an action word. The listening proceeds faith, but cannot already be equated with it. At Pentecost, many listened to Peter, but not all of them accepted his words. All of them had the promise, but only those who believed were baptised. Of course, one must hear the Word in order to accept it.

4 Dr. De Jong claims that all aspects of our confessions must be equally important. Consider B.C., art.36! Who does still maintain, today, that the civil government has the responsibility to protect the true preaching and to punish the heretics “with the sword”. Is there any “true church”, which still defends John Calvin’s burning of Servetus? The claims that Anabaptists reject the civil authority and introduce a communion of goods are even historically incorrect.<sup>8</sup> Jan van Leyden’s rebellion was already rejected by Menno Simons, and cannot be made representative for the Anabaptists.<sup>9</sup> We should be embarrassed about such slanderous misrepresentation, especially if they are elevated as “the standard for doctrine and life”.

5 We have a very muddled covenant view, trying to hold new covenant blessings and teachings in old covenant structures. The promise is not only for believers and their seed, but for all who hear the Gospel. The Holy Spirit is at work in all those who want to hear God’s Word, but He indwells only those who accept the Word. Hearing the Gospel is not restricted to church buildings; hopefully it also happens in your neighbour’s house! Yet, we do not want to baptise our neighbours until there is faith and repentance. Many devices have been sought to make this fit with our “ground for baptism”, but are they scriptural?

6 As little children cannot yet have true faith, they cannot yet persevere in it. We must not put up false hopes for our children. Only those who persevere have true faith and only true believers persevere.

The chain of logic discussed, still so prevalent among us, cannot be maintained for there are too many flaws. Indoctrination on the basis of tradition cannot continue in our day and age. If it cannot stand the test of Scripture, it must fail.

When I told my students that little children in the church are not yet believers, many were upset. I was surprised with such misunderstanding.

<sup>6</sup> J. De Jong, *Confession and Church Unity*, Clarion 47(4)

<sup>7</sup> Guido committee report, appendix B1, point I.7

<sup>8</sup> Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren*, (1964, 1991), chapter 7

<sup>9</sup> Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren*, (1964, 1991), p.137, 138

When I related this to a colleague in the staff room, she also was upset with my ideas. When, a few months later the board chairman requested a copy of my manuscript, I told him about these reactions. To my amazement, he too, disagreed with me. I asked why then such little believers should not partake of the Lord's Supper. According to him, this was because they do not yet understand these things. And so we go on, trying to plug the holes of our theology, so that everything at least appears to fit.

Concerning regeneration and the little children, we can find much interesting double talk. Those who are easily intimidated would conclude that these are very complex issues, which require a Ph.D. in Reformed theology, to comprehend them. In reality, however, it is a very shaky construction, with a great diversity among our leaders. The "committee" theologians, during my defence, insisted that the (little) children in the church (already) have exactly the same blessings as the believers. (Here, we find that personal faith or appropriation is robbed from its crucial role, which we find in Scripture.) When I concluded that this implies that they are (all) already born again, having the Holy Spirit, the committee members denied it. Dr. J. De Jong claimed that infants in the church must be baptised as they don't only have the promise of salvation, but also the seal. Here again, it is actually said that the babies already have the indwelling Spirit. When asking further, however, this was denied. I know a family whose little girl passed away in infancy. The father told me that, especially then (in the fifties) it was so good to know they did not just have to presume regeneration. I asked, what that meant. Did he imply certainty of regeneration? He said "No", but there was no further explanation. At infant baptism, I have heard one of our ministers refer to the baby as "having died with Christ and been raised with Him to a new life". This too, implies rebirth. A few years ago I thought I was too dumb to comprehend this theological framework, while it supposedly made sense, and that it was the most scriptural explanation of the situation. For years, however, I did not get straight answers, and unscriptural ones to boot, and so I had to commit intellectual suicide or change my mind. Yet, the theologians claim that my writings are very confusing. They cannot understand why I do not continue in the line of the covenant concept as the Canadian Reformed leaders see it. Considering the responses of our theologians, is it a wonder, that so many among us assume that all church members are already believers? Is it a wonder that we rarely hear a call to our children to commit their lives to Christ, but at best that they must remain in Christ? If these children –in their disobedience and worldly lifestyle- prove to be unbelievers, we tend to create and enforce rules, regulations and discipline as if faith is a matter of coercion. We must realise that un-Christian behaviour gives evidence of a spiritual problem. For the little children we need discipline; the young people, however, need to turn from sin and follow Christ. They need to be born again! We can pray for that, but we cannot enforce it.

## **1 Semper Reformanda**

The first essay describes the mindset behind the book. After I received my M.Sc. degree in climatology, I spent several years to develop a Christian perspective on geographical issues. Throughout this exercise I discovered how many people get trapped into either relativism (there is no ultimate truth or criterion for right or wrong) or ethnocentrism (our own ideas and habits are the absolute criterion for truth). When I realised that our way of seeing and judging things is influenced by sin and secular culture, I became involved in a critical analysis to evaluate my traditional convictions in the light of God's Word.

Three views exist concerning the centre of reality and source of truth and morality can be upheld:

- 1 A person or group sees their tradition or culture as the centre of truth and the absolute norm.
- 2 A person or group rejects the existence of objective truth or an absolute norm.
- 3 A person or group chooses as centre of truth or absolute norm, either (an aspect of) creation or the Creator.

One reader was upset about the fact that I suggested it would be "totally overdoing it" if little boys would have to go to church in suit and tie. Perhaps I misjudged our subculture. I should have looked for a more obvious example, like the need of "taking a shower before praying to God"- as the Muslims do.

### **1 *questions and comments:***

- 1 As a college student, I was surprised by the internal contradiction between ideology and politics of the Soviet Union. In its ideology they promoted the revolution and the cause of the have-nots, but the new elite it had created enslaved the people again and any form of revolution was squashed. How could principles and politics be so contradictory? The Reformed church must beware not to become complacent. We can easily refuse to re-evaluate our beliefs as we consider them "tested through the ages". The Reformed church may not enslave its members to human rules and regulations, maintained by indoctrination and peer pressure. Rather, it should build and promote personal and congregational responsibility and freedom to serve God.
- 2 Renewal seems to have started in our churches. We see and experience how the Spirit takes some of our people, young or old, so they see their sins and flee to Him. The Spirit is taking them with force and turns them into instruments of renewal. I detect a renewed excitement about God's Word and work. The last number of years I met more young people who love to dedicate their lives to Christ's service. At some weekend camps our young people cannot stop singing praises to the Lord. Sometimes our young people do not recognise that the joy and love they experience as a "spiritual high", is the work of the Spirit. I see more young people, who "voluntarily" read and discuss the Bible in public.

- There is a shift in focus from the creeds to Christ, and from the denomination to the full Body of Christ.
- 3 The Spirit moves! Where this happens, controversy results. Some will try to keep “disturbing, disorderly” activities out of the churches. Peer pressure to maintain the status quo (“the peace”), may become oppressive. Some will be (or have been) forced to leave or quit their jobs. Those who have the Spirit will (come to) recognise His work, and no resistance can be effective among those whom he renews. Let's honestly evaluate ourselves, confessing our wrongs. Let's go back to the Bible! Semper reformanda! Let us be truly excited about the work of God, and share the joy! For some this disturbs the peace in the church(es), but to others it gives peace with God and the building of the Kingdom!
- 4 An interesting example of objectivism is the following excerpt from an “acknowledgement” I was forced to sign to retain my job as teacher at Guido de Bres Christian High School.  
 “I acknowledge that the above principles (that is: God’s Word and the three forms of unity) include the following specific doctrines, which I accept without reservation:  
 (a-g) ...  
 (h) the Lord’s Supper and its supervision are given by Christ to His church. Admission to the Lord’s Supper requires profession of the Reformed faith.”  
 What does this mean?  
 1 The confessions are put on the same line with the Bible. Indeed in point (b) the three forms of unity are described as “the normative and authoritative standard for all teaching and conduct in all areas of life.”  
 2 Christian believers, who disagree with any specific point of these confessions (including the doctrine (h) listed), are not true Christians, or –at best they are second-rank Christians, as the grace of Christ, given in His Supper is not meant for them.  
 I could not “without reservation” accept such “reformed doctrines” as the truth, and the school board was unwilling to further discuss this issue. The 22 members, representatives from 11 congregations, unanimously decided that failure to sign must result in job termination, and most of them insisted this had to happen immediately.  
 This decision also implied that these men no longer wanted to see me at the Lord’s Supper table.
- 5 It is a myth that “we teach nothing but what is found in the Reformed creeds.”<sup>10</sup> Any of the Reformed federations, claiming acceptance of those creeds, have their own slant on some issues addressed therein, while also within these federations, diversity exists.
- 6 The Bible also contains books to “prevent fossilization and degeneration into a smug and self-sufficient system of canned theology. These compel us to continually evaluate and correct our understanding.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> J. De Jong, *The Covenant and the Children of Believers- a reply*(1), Clarion 40(21), p.458

<sup>11</sup> D. Brent Sandy & Ronald L. Giese, Jr. *Cracking Old Testament Codes*, 1995, p. 271,272

## 2-3 Faith is an Action Word

Quite a few students as well as some parents and leaders were quite upset with my conclusion that little children are not yet believers. It seems that, in our emphasis on infant baptism, many of us presume the little ones to have “received” Christ in baptism. Children in elementary school are taught that they are all fellow believers.<sup>12</sup>

That faith involves a conscious commitment and acceptance would contradict our popular belief of “Kinderglaube” (faith in little children). Therefore the passive aspects are emphasised to uphold our crooked notions. Conversion is then described only in terms of a life-long, day-to-day process. I think one of the biggest problems in our churches is that most of us do not see that all children –in order to become full partakers of Christ- must have a radical change of heart. We see little children as believers, not as selfish creatures, who need yet to be born again. We see them just like us –not too good but not too bad- sinning daily, but not too badly. Any attempt to show us the scriptural truth is responded to with labels as “Arminianism!” or “subjectivism!”, “pietism” or “experientialism”.

The “Guido committee” is upset that I write “without God’s Spirit man is spiritually dead. God, in His grace, however, works in some to make them realise their guilt and misery, even before they hear or read the Gospel (p. 20)” The theologians claim that this rejects the Reformed view, whereby such awareness can only come through the hearing of the Word. All too easily these theologians equate their convictions with the Reformed view (which they equate with the truth). Not only does the reality in many lives demonstrate the Spirit’s work of preparation. To disallow such binding of the Spirit also seems to contradict John 16.8. Here Jesus says, “When (the Spirit) comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgement...” The term “world” is taken to mean those who do not know the Word.

I published the Table of Contents on the refnet. One of our leaders responded with the following message.

I hope that the chapter entitled “the need to accept Christ,” is going to be a critical analysis of such statements, since we as God’s covenant children have learned to speak over against such Arminian/Pentecostal/Evangelical terminology of the need of “acknowledging Christ,” as our only Saviour, i.e. the One in whom we have been baptized.

This and similar responses have demonstrated to me the great need to go back to basics. We have been really good at blasting all other Christians, who use slightly different terminology than we are accustomed to.

Does God give or does He offer His blessings to those who hear the Gospel? The traditional view, which I reject, claims that the children in the church already have everything in Christ. They are already (to some extent) believers, or so we assume. For some reason, this is not true for others who regularly

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<sup>12</sup> A.Witten, School Crossing, Clarion 41(1), p.12, 1992

hear the Word. This reveals a false contrast among those who hear the Word as children of believers or otherwise. Also, the term “gift” tends to downplay the need for faith and perseverance. Faith and perseverance are primarily seen as gifts from God, not as requirements for appropriation and ultimate salvation. Holy living is then mentioned as an afterthought, an appendix without eternal consequences. In our fear for Arminianism we prefer the passive “receiving” and the term “gift” to suggest that God does all and man does nothing.

Is it better to speak of God’s offer of salvation? People used to offer sacrifices. Who refuses a gift? God’s “offer”, if we use that term, is not an offer to purchase. Christ paid the price in full. Yet, His offer does require a life-long commitment; in that sense there is a cost! In this book, “offer” refers to such a gracious but serious offer.

“Come all you who are thirsty, come to the waters;  
and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.” (Isaiah 55.1)

The Belgic Confession, in the Dutch language, describes true Christians (“those who are of the church”) as having accepted the only Saviour Jesus Christ. In our translation this terminology has been avoided. On page 26, I wrote that this phrase has been deleted. Dr. Gootjes calls this a “sweeping statement” and “incorrect”.

The Dutch version states that we may know the Christians “by their faith, and when they have accepted Jesus Christ,…” In the Canadian Reformed rendition we read “They believe in Jesus Christ…” Was the phrase (group of related words) deleted or replaced? Whatever you decide, I think it is striking that the terminology was avoided!

error: On page 19, a mistake is found at the end of the third paragraph. It should read, “Jesus is not only the great Physician.”

### 2-3- questions and comments:

- 1 We have described "faith" in terms of knowing, trusting, and accepting. How are these aspects covered by Q,A 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism? Read also from the Belgic Confession, article 22.
- 2 How does John 6:53 show that accepting Christ is essential?
- 3 Kurosaki writes,<sup>13</sup> "John saw 'faith' not as a formal concept to be formulated into some theological dogma, but always as a living and moving experience, an experience best expressed with a verb."
- 4 We tend to talk more about accepting promises than accepting Christ. I don't think that this is the NT emphasis. I agree with John MacArthur, who writes,<sup>14</sup> "The object of faith is Christ Himself, not only a creed or promise" (compare Jn.3.16). Faith therefore involves personal commitment to Christ (2Co.5.15).
- 5 The Bible uses several images for man without and with God. Pelagians may ignore, and Arminians may underemphasise the image of death, as a corpse has no responsibility. Those who are paranoid of Arminianism, however, often ignore all other images (sickness, debt, etc), for fear of losing God's Sovereignty. The latter problem is not uncommon among Calvinists. We should, however, look at all that Scripture says.
- 6 What does "faith" refer to, in "Reformed faith"? Do we put our trust in traditions and confessions? Read HC, Q/A 95
- 7 Which is more important; that we hear the Word, or that we accept it, circumcision to the flesh (outward washing with water), or circumcision to the heart (Ro.2.3), baptism or rebirth (Gal.6.15; 2Co.1.22), church membership or faith? Placing the emphasis on the second aspects is, among our leaders, often called subjectivism. J. Kamphuis called this "Baal worship".<sup>15</sup>
- 8 If our (little) children are already saints, how can they not persevere and end up in hell? This is an essential question, which, among us rarely yields straightforward answers.
- 9 Dr. Gootjes laments the fact that *Praying for Rain* has so many unsubstantiated claims. The "Guido committee" also wants to know "Who said that?" Many others, however, have told or written me, saying, "We know you are right. We hear these things all the time!" Some of our scholars, however, demand proof and quotes for everything. I have tried to be specific, while avoiding personal attacks.  
Dr. Gootjes, for instance wants to know who wrote that faith is mostly "listening in obedience." The expression that "Believing is listening" can be found in RP15(9/10), p.21. It is a typical attempt to minimise the active component of faith. The same author also suggests that hearing the true preaching (!) automatically produces faith. Meanwhile he ignores the fact that much seed will not produce fruit, or even germinate!
- 10 Camp Lamp '96, a praise-and-study weekend for our young people, had as theme "Christ's Heroes". By looking at various examples from Scripture and later history, they saw how God has worked through

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<sup>13</sup> Kokichi Kurosaki *Let's Return to Christian Unity*, ending division in the Body of Christ, p.51

<sup>14</sup> John MacArthur, *FaithWorks*, p.25

<sup>15</sup> J. Kamphuis, *An everlasting Covenant*

- people in Gospel proclamation and sanctification. It's not what people did apart from Christ, but what Christ did in and through them. Nevertheless, several people criticised the theme, saying that it focused on man, rather than on God.<sup>16</sup> Of course the world has corrupted the concept of "heroes" and idolised the heroes themselves. Scripture itself shows us how we can use secular terms and ideas to explain the Truth (as in the "covenant" concept, John writing about "the Word", and Paul about running the race). In the process, these terms and ideas then get a "new and improved" meaning.
- 11 Popular Evangelical authors, such as Max Lucado and Philip Yancey, apply the Scripture to modern situations by way of stories involving people today. In recent issues of the "Clarion",<sup>17</sup> this approach has been criticised for focusing too much on people, and therefore not on God. "The problem with this approach is that the focus falls on how man responded to God rather than on how God continues to deal with man. ... By paying attention to what man is doing in the story, it fails to pay attention to what God is doing in the story." Is this fair criticism? The Bible does not drive a wedge between Christ and the Christian. Paul calls on people to imitate him (1Co.4.16) as well as the heroes of faith (Heb.6.12, if indeed Hebrews was written by Paul). It is no longer Paul who lives, but Christ in him (Gal.2.20). Therefore, to follow Paul's example is to follow Christ.
- 12 Imagery is always restricted in its function. Each image only has a partial overlap with the concept to be explained. In one sense Paul or Jesus are heroes, in another respect they are not. Besides this, they are also much more than heroes. The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, but in many (other) ways it is unlike a mustard seed. God's Kingdom is also much more than what relates to the mustard seed. Therefore Jesus used multiple images to form a composite picture of what the reality is like. Regarding images such as heroes, I heard one of our ministers preach on the "overlap", adopting this imagery. I heard another minister in a form of reactionary preaching, claim, "Talking about 'heroes of the faith' is 'worldly mythological big-speak'." A balanced approach, however, would be to show the overlap as well as the limits of such an image. This could be done by introducing the term "true heroism".<sup>18</sup>
- 12 One of our ministers wrote: "Recently I was privileged to have a lively discussion on the difference between what we may call 'Arminian' and 'Reformed' theology. I contended that the basic point of divergence between the two systems is as follows: 'Arminianism' believes that we save ourselves while the Reformed doctrine teaches that we can be saved only by Christ. I admitted that this was, perhaps, a simplification of the issue, but I suggested that in this way the lines are drawn fairly and squarely."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Heroes of the Faith?*, editorial, Clarion 46(2) Jan. '97

<sup>17</sup> Clarion 45(22), Nov.'96; Reformed Perspective 16(9), July/August '97

<sup>18</sup> Dick Keyes, *True Heroism in a world of celebrity counterfeits*, NavPress, 1995

<sup>19</sup> Cl. Stam; Editorial, Reformed Perspective 10(6) April 1990

Is this fair? If we really try to understand Arminians, we will find out that they, too, give credit to God for working faith. A non-sectarian approach would be to say, "If a Christian you meet declares that everything good only comes from God, he cannot deny the Sovereignty of God!"

- 13 Jonathan Edwards puts it well, when he writes, "God does all, and we do all." and "We are wholly passive and wholly active.", and "in Scriptures the same things are represented as from God and from us."<sup>20</sup> Paul, Augustine, Calvin, the majority of the Puritans, and Edwards all found a sovereign God and an active man to be not only Biblical, but also consistent.<sup>21</sup> It may not be easy to comprehend, but we should not ignore either God's Sovereignty or our responsibility. It seems to me that some of us, in fear of Arminianism, have lost the precious balance of Scripture and its call to be actively involved with the spiritual warfare. The paranoid fear for all that seems Arminian can be called Arminiphobia. Maintaining the scriptural balance, however, we avoid do-it-yourself religion, legalism, and despair, but also Arminiphobia, a passive complacency, stagnant growth and automatism. I have experienced several times that Arminians were quite approachable, when I showed them a more scriptural balance. By giving them an overreaction, they too, tend to overreact, and we are schismatic.
- 14 For the day-to-day things we often don't realise God's presence, and we certainly don't mention it in everything we say. If someone would do just that, we would think it overly pious and exaggerated. Whenever we deal with the choice for God, however, some insist that we only refer to it as the work of God. When I say, "I have decided to spend more time on Bible study", nobody will blame me for saying something wrong. When I say, "I have decided to follow Christ", warning fingers are raised: Arminianism! Are we consistent?
- 16 If Christians agree that everything that is good comes from God, we need not cry heresy if it sounds like people save others or themselves. The Bible is not paranoid about this! Read for instance Acts 2.40, Romans 11.14, 1Cor. 7.16, 1Timothy 4.16 and James 5.20.

**Suggestions for Further Reading:**

Donald A. Carson	<i>God's Sovereignty and Human responsibility</i>	(1981)
James I. Packer	<i>Knowing God</i>	(1973)
James I. Packer	<i>Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God</i>	(1961)
R.C. Sproul	<i>The Holiness of God</i>	(1985)

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<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Miscellaneous Remarks*, Works, II, 557

<sup>21</sup> Bogue, *Jonathan Edwards and the Covenant of Grace*, p. 221

## 4 The Mysterious Bond

As a believer, it is my greatest joy and comfort that I am united to Christ. It is also of great comfort and encouragement that –with all other Christians- I am united in Christ. This bond with Christ, supersedes and dominates all my relationships.

The “committee” responded by stating, “While Paul uses the image of marriage to describe the relationship between Christ and His church (Eph.5.20f), it is highly dubious to carry the image as far into the sexual domain as br. Smit does.”

Francis Schaeffer, on Romans 7.4, writes, “The picture here is overwhelming. As the bride puts herself in the bridegroom’s arms on the wedding day and then daily, and as therefore children are born, so the individual Christian is to put himself or herself in the Bridegroom’s arms, not only once for all in justification, but existentially, moment by moment. Then the Christian will bear Christ’s fruit out into the fallen, revolted, external world. In this relationship we are all female. This is the biblical picture, one that we would not dare use if God Himself did not use it.”<sup>22</sup>

### ***Recommended reading:***

Francis Schaeffer *Adultery and Apostacy, the Bride and Bridegroom Theme*, chapter two in *The Church Before the Watching World* (1971)

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<sup>22</sup> *Adultery and Apostacy, The Bride and Bridegroom Theme.*, chapter two in Francis Scaeffers’ *The Church Before the Watching World*.

#### **4- questions and comments:**

- 1 Search the Gospels to see that Jesus, without neglecting corporate worship, often took His quiet time with the Father. Do we emphasise enough the need for quiet, personal communication with God?
- 2 In learning from our marriage relationships as humans, consider how we have to nurture our marriage bond with Christ.
- 3 Share with others how you do your daily personal devotions. Encourage each other and help to find effective methods.
- 4 Paul, in writing the Christians in Rome about being one with Christ, does not refer to them as institution, but as a community of Christians. We may not ignore the personal situation in favour of the congregational. Paul addresses people! It's the church, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and so are Christians personally. If the Bible does not drive a wedge between the two, then neither may we.
- 5 Some of us have made a big issue of Evangelicals calling our Lord "Jesus". In many Evangelical songs and books, the name Jesus is used without the addition of the title "Lord" or "Christ". In the Jewish culture, Jesus was a common name, and the addition "of Nazareth" was required to suggest which Jesus was referred to. In our time, however, "Jesus" does not sound like "Tom, Dick or Harry." Jesus' name means much more; he is my Saviour! Evangelical songs mention the name with love, respect and close compassion and friendship. That is how He has revealed Himself to us. We may not separate ourselves from other Christians, because of traditions or emotional sentiments like these. Also in our own hymns, we find a few cases where the name of Jesus occurs, without the title "Lord" or "Christ". Find an example. I wonder if the leaders who so easily condemn evangelical songs on that basis, also refuse to sing these hymns from the Book of Praise.

## 5 The Pre-Arranged Marriage

In this essay I hoped to show that children in the church, although they do not yet factually have the blessings of salvation and the indwelling Spirit, they do have a special place as heirs. To those who insist that the children already have everything, my description is not good enough. The committee members insisted that infant baptism does not only guarantee the promise, but also faith, or the embracing of what is promised. This is suggested in their report and was confirmed in the discussion later.

This ties in with the fallacy that “our” children already believe and that their status is identical as that of their parents, who have accepted Christ as their only Saviour. Many Baptists may underemphasise the blessings of being “in the church”, but many of our leaders, in my view, are just as wrong as they fail to stress the need for a personal commitment to Christ. Baptists tend to ignore the beginning of faith in Christian children, while many among us assume our children to be fully believers already.

### **5- questions and comments:**

- 1 Does the "covenant" status of the children depend on their parents' recognition of the fact? In other words, Are children of Baptists in the covenant?
- 2 Is the status of children of believers dependent on whether or not they are already baptised? Dr. Gootjes, in his book review, expresses great concern with my statement that children of Baptist Christians have the same promises and obligations as the children of Canadian Reformed believers. As they also hear the Gospel, they share in the promises and the prerequisite of personal faith. Yet, Dr. Gootjes finds this logic “very confusing” and “unsubstantiated”. It does not fit into “our” theology.
- 3 Do we require children to be (biological) children of believers before they may be baptised? (Think of adoptions)
- 4 Baptists reserve the sign for union with Christ when the wedding is complete, Infant-Baptists apply the sign soon after birth to emphasise Christ's offer for marriage. What did Baptists introduce to acknowledge the special status of their children? What did we invent to give public attention to the act of accepting Christ?
- 5 If profession of faith is a commitment to Christ, based on a personal decision, then we should consider whether our format of doing profession of faith is correct. When a (mature) person wants to accept Christ, the elders should examine him/her. A public profession of faith should acknowledge a sorry state without God, and it should reveal the knowledge of and trust in Jesus Christ as Saviour, and a loving commitment to follow Christ, whatever it takes. If such a statement, apparently from the heart, is made to the elders, public profession of faith should not be postponed until further instruction or discipling has been finished. Accepting Christ is a personal thing, and should not be a group event, as a kind of graduation ceremony after five or six years of catechetical instruction.

## 6 The New Life

Essay six is another key essay in *Praying for Rain*. Rebirth was the issue that got this book started. Traditionally, in our circles we did not want to talk about rebirth as the gift and reality of the indwelling Spirit. In lumping it with sanctification, we made it a life-long process. Now, several of our ministers disagree with this, but the view that is promoted in Clarion is still the traditional one. I studied this issue and wrote an article for the Clarion. This, however, was not appreciated, as it was not thought to be in line with the (Canadian) Reformed tradition.

One more controversial issue is the perseverance of the saints. With this issue I concluded essay 6. I found that, “The warnings for believers to hold firm, are serious warnings. There is simply no room for complacency. Here then is another issue we could split churches over. Some will insist on the guarantee, quoting the first texts, while others will “prove” the opposite by referring to the other passages. To those who struggle with sin and cry out to God, the comfort and assurance should be emphasised. Others, perhaps, love themselves more than Christ. If they rest in their assurance of salvation, without recognising their sins, they must be warned. If we only comfort with assurance, the churches will fall into complacency. If we always question people’s faith, however, the community will lose its confidence and hope. Blessed is the church who does both, where and when required.”

Nevertheless, the “Guido committee” claims that this sets one of the fundamental points of the confessions in dispute. My words are compared to the approach of the Arminians, and this is “a point of serious concern.” On the same issue, Rev. Hoogsteen writes, “Arminian/Evangelical dangers are nearer than we like to think. (reference given) Then to the great gospel of justification is added a warning- ‘Now, don’t loose it by foolishly sinning.’ It seems that this is some backdoor Arminianism, for ability to lose justification appears to be in the hands or at the disposal of each Canadian Reformed person, not in the foreknowing, predestinating, calling, justifying, and glorifying Father of Jesus Christ.”

Perhaps some of us miss the distinction between “believers” (those who accept the Word, where the seed germinates) and “true regenerate believers” (those who bear fruit, the elect). The parable of the sower teaches us that germination does not guarantee fruit in each person. Dr. De Jong, however, claims that “a seed once germinated, will only continue to live and take deeper root. And once it takes root, if so planted, it cannot be uprooted.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> J. De Jong, *The Appropriation of Salvation*, Clarion 47(110), p.257

## **6- questions and comments:**

- 1 What is the washing of regeneration?
- 2 Is rebirth the same as the "baptism with the Holy Spirit" (Lk.3.16)? Some people accepted Christ prior to Pentecost, but apparently they missed that great event in Jerusalem. When and how did they receive the Holy Spirit? (Ac.8.14-17; 19.1-7)
- 3 Read 1Thessalonians.4.8. It is the only text, which suggests that the Holy Spirit still has to be given (again), to believers. Find texts, which refer to the gift of the Spirit as a fact for believers.
- 4 The Heidelberg Catechism in its question concerning the need of prayer (Q/A 116) seems to suggest we must keep asking for the Spirit's indwelling. Scripture normally speaks of the Spirit as given only once in a lifetime. Only Ephesians 1.17 seems to suggest differently. We can and should ask that the Spirit more and more takes control of us, and that we may be full of the Spirit. We can and must ask for a stronger working of the Spirit in fighting sin, witnessing, understanding God, and changing our character and priorities, as the change is not complete. But let us not deny it when we already have been radically (to the root) changed by God's gift of the Holy Spirit!  
Peter too, was told, first "Unless I wash you, you have no part in me." but then also, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean."
- 5 What is the essence of HC, Q/A 116, with respect to the gift and work of the Spirit? It is essential that we ask (1) constantly, and (2) seriously, from the heart, for these blessings. If we don't do this we cannot expect to be partakers. Faith, in order to be true, must be persistent and deeply emotional, not just intellectual.
- 6 Most Christians will maintain that a one-time radical turnaround is necessary for all people, whether or not they grew up in the church. Children born in the church often don't experience this turnaround as a sudden, dramatic event. In those who grow up in the church, the Spirit often works in more gentle ways, even though the net result is just as radical.  
Although some Evangelicals insist on a special dramatic conversion experience for rebirth, this is by no means the general consensus among them.
- 8 Read 2Co.1.22. How is the gift of the Spirit "of the same substance" yet "only a small sample" in relation to that which we are to receive completely at a later time?
- 9 The English delegates to Dordt spoke of humble repentance as the (non-meritorious) condition for the perseverance of the saints. They referred to Heb.12.114, 2Tim.2.19, and Ac.27.31.<sup>24</sup> Perseverance is then fully gift and fully obligation. The same is true for faith, and here too, both aspects must be equally stressed to avoid boasting as well as complacency.

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<sup>24</sup> Ds. J. Faber et al, *De Schat van Christus' Bruid* (1958)

## 7 The Multi-Faceted Work of the Spirit

When I shared my article on rebirth, I heard several objections. My responses are in brackets.

- 1 “Reborn Christians are just as much sinners as their children.”  
(We deal with this under essay 8.)
- 2 “We cannot accept Christ; Christ can only accept us, and He did so by placing us in the covenant community.”  
(We dealt with that under essay 3.)
- 3 Only the “Guido committee” listed my view of “perseverance” as a heresy.  
(We dealt with that under the previous essay.)
- 4 “If the Holy Spirit works in somebody, He must be indwelling.”  
(This cannot be so. The Holy Spirit must first prepare the soil for the Gospel, before this can be believed. Yet, the Spirit does not indwell a person before he believes. In order to demonstrate this from Scripture, I decided to write this essay on the one Spirit and His many operations.)
- 5 Dr. De Jong claims that “The confessions primarily see regeneration as a continual process of growth in faith and sanctification.”<sup>25</sup>  
(If this would be so, the confessions would not –on this point- reflect the biblical balance. His claim, however, is an essential link in the Canadian Reformed theology. Therefore, Dr. De Jong talks about “continued appropriation”.)

A few leaders have been very upset that I don’t reject all of the missionary and other reports where God communicates to people in extra-ordinary means. One elder called this “extra-scriptural revelation”, and “heresy”. Even in our own congregation, however, some have experienced such things. I believe that we cannot reject all such reports as lies, simply because they don’t fit into our doctrinal framework. Of course, we must be careful not to embrace just anything mysterious, but if a dream or other message brings somebody to the Bible (preaching) and to faith, we should be very careful to reject such as not being the work of God. Any spirit that seeks salvation in the Word, cannot be from Satan. This is not extra-scriptural revelation but pre-scriptural revelation. It is part of God’s work of preparing the soil for the Word to be received.

error: On page 40, 11 lines from the top, it should read, “Balaam prophesied too, but his heart was not changed.”

### **Recommended reading:**

J.I. Packer                      *Keep in Step with the Spirit*                      (1984)

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<sup>25</sup> J. De Jong, *The Appropriation of Salvation*, Clarion 47(110), p.258

## 7- questions and comments:

- 1 At the frontiers of the Gospel, in areas such as interior Africa, reports are common of miraculous work in support of the Gospel. These include faith healing and extraordinary gifts. Should we believe this or does Scripture say that such gifts will stop when the Scriptures are complete? Read the Great Commission at the end of Mark.
- 2 Why is it important to be careful, perhaps even sceptical, when we hear reports of miracles today? (2Th.2.9)
- 3 The “party line” in our churches is that the Spirit no longer extends the gift of speaking in tongues. It is reasoned that this is no longer required as the Bible is now complete.  
Was speaking in tongues primarily used for proclaiming the Gospel, or also for worship? (read 1Cor14)
- 4 If we claim that speaking in tongues is not from God, it must come from Satan. In a recent sermon by a visiting minister, it was plainly said that Pentecostals are not Christians. Would it not be more Christian to examine each person and case of speaking in tongues, without making such a sweeping judgement? Read Luke 11.17-20
- 5 In the book "What a Christian Needs to Believe" by Rev. F.F. Venema (a copy was given to me by the consistory upon doing profession of faith) the author states "Rebirth is not a one-time event"<sup>26</sup> His proof is in his prior statement that rebirth is identical to conversion. Conversion, however, has different meanings. The first is the coming to faith, where the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in the new Christian. The second refers to the daily struggle with sin, from which we have to turn. Rebirth or regeneration is synonymous to the former only, the second is commonly called sanctification. Show from the terminology used ("one must be born again") and the image of "second birth" that rebirth is not a lifelong process.
- 6 Louis Berkhof writes "Calvin's comprehensive use of the term regeneration often led to confusion and to disregard of very necessary distinctions." He further states, "In present day Reformed theology the word regeneration is generally used in a more restrictive sense, as a designation of that divine act by which the sinner is endowed with new spiritual life and by which the principle of that new life is first called into action."<sup>27</sup>
- 7 We are prophets, priests, and kings. What does it mean to be prophets? Doing miracles or foretelling future events were (are?) just signs to assist the prophet in his task. What was (is) that task? In what way, then does Paul suggest that NOT all are prophets? (1Co.12.29)
- 8 In our churches, the proclamation of the Gospel is often seen as restricted to sermons, but I don't think Scripture speaks this way. It is not only in the church (services) that the Gospel is proclaimed, but it is by the church (that is by Christians, (e.g. Ac.8.26-40)) that God works the proclamation. Therefore, it is not right to say for evangelism "the

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<sup>26</sup> F.F. Venema, *Wat is een Christen Nodig te Geloven?* Page 202

<sup>27</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Pages 466, 467

- church doors are open", that is: for unbelievers to come in, but rather; the doors are open for the church to go OUT INTO the world.
- 9 When I was a child I thought that my conscience communicated to me the will of God. As I grew up, I recognised the impact of upbringing and culture/tradition, and, for a while, I refused to refer to conscience as a reliable norm for life.
- Now I do think that the Holy Spirit uses the human conscience as a major means of communication. We must, however, facilitate this means.
- (1) We must live close to God, nurturing a deeply personal relationship with Christ.
- (2) We must not plug up our own or others' consciences by a list of do's and don'ts; we must live in love; that is by the Spirit, not in fear; that is by the law.
- 10 Is regeneration forever, and is it a guarantee that the believer will indeed end up in Heaven? We looked at both sides of the argument. Study the Canons of Dort (COD) Chapter 5 on this issue.
- 11 Read Eph.4.8. The Jews related this text to Moses. Moses was the representative of the old covenant. He went up the mountain and returned to Israel with the Law. The Law was meant to bring people to faith (realisation of sinfulness, etc.). Christ, as representative for the new covenant, went up to heaven and returned in His Spirit. He came to the church with spiritual gifts, to work faith more effectively than the Law could ever do.

## 8 Sinning but not Sinners

In this essay I wanted to demonstrate several points. The status of the newborn person with respect to sin is radically different from the situation prior to rebirth. Before the Spirit indwells a person, there may be coercion to lead a “decent life” by peer pressure, the desire of positive reinforcement, or parental praise. We find this also among non-believing people. Therefore, we must be careful not to equate such with true love for God and the neighbour. Likewise, we may not classify all people as equally under sin, for the newborn person is no longer primarily governed by sin, but by the Spirit of God. For those who ignore this radical change, who only want to speak of a slow, gradual, life-long change, this does not fit. Many seem to believe that those who are born in the church community, are lifelong saints as well as sinners, with only a slow, gradual change from birth to death.

As I searched the Scriptures, I found to my surprise that the normal use for the term “sinner” is not “somebody who keeps struggling with sin”, but rather “somebody who does not care about sin”. I tried to show that with many scriptural examples. Nevertheless, several readers were very upset. They tried to prove this wrong, by quoting the few verses where the term “sinner” is used differently. Perhaps it would have helped if I had rephrased “We are no longer sinners!” as “In that sense we are no longer sinners!” The context demonstrates clearly that this was meant, but many like to isolate certain “statements” and use those to build a case to “prove” me wrong.

The “Guido committee” writes that Br Smit’s “position appears to indicate that God has given us all that we need in order to attain perfection in this life. That we do not reach this is really our own fault.” In other words, our failing is God’s fault, for he failed to give us all we need to reach perfection in this life!? The committee continues, “Isaac’s view, however, is a semi-perfectionist position which denies the lingering effects of original sin.” This flatly ignores the careful balance, which I maintain. In my rebuttal I demonstrate this from the text of my book (appendices B1, B2; point 5).

In the light of the Holy God, man shows up as sinner. No matter how much good a man might have done (and only by the grace of God!), he still comes out as imperfect, stained, and full of sin. In that respect, any man is and (in this life) will always be a sinner. We know that very well.

But that is only half the truth. Many times the Bible speaks about “sinners” to refer to certain people or to a certain stage of life. How can this be, if all men are (always) sinners? Scripture interpretation demands that in such a context, the term “sinner” means something different than “imperfect man, who commits sins”. In this respect, the righteous ones are contrasted with the sinners as former sinners are born again as saints. If we are true believers, sin no longer reigns in us but the Holy Spirit does! In this sense of the word, newborn Christians are no longer sinners. They must consider themselves dead to sin and focus on the new life!

## **8- questions and comments:**

- 1 I have been amazed that some people, even with doctors' degrees, with knowledge of Hebrew and Greek, with M.Div. credentials, etc., could not figure out what I wrote about "sinners". What could be possible reasons or causes that they insist that the statement "We are no longer sinners" can only be wrong and unscriptural. How can it be that men, who have been ordained to interpret the Scriptures and teach us about them, cannot properly interpret what I wrote in this essay, and keep coming up with slanderous misrepresentations?
- 2 Read Romans 6-8. Recognise where Paul focuses on the fact that he no longer is just a slave to sin, but in Christ. Find out where he focuses on the remaining sin. This makes him (temporarily!) very sad, as he loves to be more like Christ. Romans 6 and 8 are often seen as in conflict with chapter 7, but actually they represent different sides of the same truth. Therefore, we may never isolate Romans 7 to claim that "We are all just sinners".
- 3 Some theologians have told me that the statement that "Believers are no longer sinners" is absolutely wrong. These theologians make several mistakes. A statement can have more than one meaning. The context of the statement and, more specifically, the definitions used for the terms, give meaning to the statement. If one claims that, regardless of context or definition, the statement is wrong, one must conclude that the Bible, too, contains wrong statements. If Paul writes, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us", he clearly states, "We are no longer sinners!" Yet, according to the accusers, Paul states the truth, while I teach heresy!  
One member of the circumcision party insisted my optimism concerning the newborn Christian was not Reformed and unbiblical. He referred to the last sentences of the first paragraph on page 46. As far as I know, however, these are direct (translated) quotations from "the father of the Liberated churches", Dr. K. Schilder! (reference provided)
- 4 Peter, when facing Christ's majesty, confessed "I am a sinful man" (Lk.5.8). Jesus, however, cleans people who trust in Him (v.13). What was Jesus' reply when Peter suggested he was totally unclean? (Jn.13.10). Read the first letter by John; if one is dominated by sin, he is not a Christian.
- 5 Concerning my (earlier) writing, I was "corrected" by the Clarion editor with the following: "Although we are still wretched sinners, the beauty and comfort of the gospel is that God no longer sees us as wretched sinners. He sees us in Christ." Does Christ "fool" God in pretending we are righteous, while only we know that we are just as much a sinner as before? Does having the Holy Spirit not make us different people, no longer dominated by sin? It has been suggested in Clarion that rebirth does not free us from the slavery to sin, but only to the curse of its punishment.<sup>28</sup> We call that rich and comforting? I pray that God may open many eyes to see the true riches of His work.

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<sup>28</sup> *Daily Renewal*, editorial in Clarion 46(13) June, 1997

- 6 One of our ministers, in a speech for workers in evangelism, stated that “all Christians are born-again Christians.” This leads to some interesting questions; Are our (little) children already born again? That would be unscriptural! Are our children not yet Christians? Then we are in agreement with the Baptists!
- 7 Although I maintain that the primary meaning of “sinners” is “unregenerated people”, yet, I acknowledge that I overreacted somewhat in my book by only allowing this meaning of the word, while I downplayed the secondary meaning of “sinners” as “people who sin.” If one reacts to an imbalance, it is very hard to maintain a proper balance oneself. We should keep this in mind, also when we equate “summaries of Scripture”, written to guard us against certain heresies or unbalanced doctrines, with the very Word of God.

***Suggestions for Further Reading:***

Charles R. Swindoll	<i>The Grace Awakening</i>	(1990)
Watchman Nee	<i>The Normal Christian Life</i>	(1957, 1977)

## 9 The Pursuit of Holiness

The (Canadian) Reformed leaders tend to emphasise the process of working and nurturing faith, while the Baptists focus on the event of conversion/commitment and the radical change in rebirth. Scripture requires us to consider both.

Consider the process in natural life. Although birth is a dramatic, radical change, with cause for celebration, there must be development and growth before it as well as afterwards. Here, again, we find a field of tension between two scriptural truths. Reformed churches as well as Baptists emphasise one of the two aspects, and criticise, or even condemn the others.

### **Suggestions for Further Reading:**

Jerry Bridges	<i>The Pursuit of Holiness</i>	(1978)
Jerry Bridges	<i>The Practice of Godliness</i>	(1983)

### **9- questions and comments:**

- 1 Give examples of sins, informally accepted in our churches. How can we change this, without becoming legalistic?
- 2 What is the difference between living in sin and falling into sin? Are both forgiven? Under what condition?
- 3 Study the feasts of the first moon (Lev.23) to see the strong link between salvation (rescue from death), repentance (abstaining from sin), and the fruit (thankfulness). After some time, this has to result in a harvest where others too are brought to faith (Pentecost). Apply these things to your own life.
- 4 Evaluate your "Canadian Reformed" party behaviour.  
How do you react when...
  - \*the government is being ridiculed?
  - \*another church member is placed in a negative light?
  - \*perverse jokes or language is uttered?
  - \*sin is trivialised?
  - \*alcohol or tobacco are abused?Do we have the guts to "stand up for Jesus"?

## 10 Let your Light Shine!

Just as the gathering of believers must be a visible phenomenon, regardless of the building or situation where it takes place, so also Christians themselves must reflect the person and work of Christ. I included this essay to remind us that our relationship with Christ must go beyond Christ & Christian. Here we touch upon issues, which are addressed in more detail later in the book. The Christian must commit himself to a Christian community, to share his gifts, receive comfort and admonition; to worship in communion, and to celebrate the Lord's Supper with the Body of Christ. Also, God wants more than just some groups of Christians together; he wants the whole world. All of creation must again be placed under the rule of God; it must once more be fully the Kingdom of God. Therefore we must pray and try to reach others, to make disciples for Christ.

### **10- questions and comments:**

- 1 Faith, the living relationship with Christ must show. Kurosaki writes, "This relationship of experienced fellowship with Him is what God really wants of men, for this was the purpose in our creation. Merely to confess the doctrine of redemption is only to have found *the passage* through which to come near to God. Those who stop there have not yet come into life-union with Christ. You are in danger of dead orthodoxy! Did you never encounter this kind of faith? We must avoid making doctrine the centre, rather than life.
- 2 Consider the following; "...while Glas was a Calvinist, he had a peculiar understanding of the nature of faith. Faith, for him, was essentially intellectual consent, mere belief in the facts of the gospel. This 'simple, unfussy view of gospel truth' was widely disseminated throughout the British Isles by Glas's son-in-law, Robert Sandeman (1718-1771). In fact, in England and Wales Glas's views were known by the name of 'Sandemanianism'."<sup>29</sup>
- 3 The film "Fiddler on the Roof" is sad in many respects and the Jewish religion is portrayed as not much more than a tradition, a culture. Nevertheless, we can benefit from it. Tevye frequently talks with God. As he walks along the road, or in the barn, feeding his animals -whether good things happen or sad things befall him- he talks with God. With wide eyes he looks heavenward and asks, begs, and challenges God (the thanking is lacking somewhat, I seem to remember). His complaints are not justified, of course... but his prayers are honest, straight from the heart, and to the right address. God is our Father. He wants to hear from us. When good things come to us, the first thing, which comes to mind, should be... Thank you, Dad! When we feel rotten, we should not delay, but turn to Him, not in lofty, royalty-addressing terminology, but honestly as a child addressing his father. Read David's prayers! Some of us have objected to Tevye's prayers as irreverent, but I am convinced that

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<sup>29</sup> Michael A.G. Haykin, *One Heart and One Soul, John Sutcliff of Olney, his friends and his times.* (1994), p.265

- deeply personal prayers, sharing our joys and concerns, are more pleasing for God than form prayers at set times and occasions.
- 4 We have to let our light shine, as people in Christ and as Christian community. What impression do we give to the world around us, as Christian school and church? What do we "tell" them (in our deeds) about Christ, claiming to be Christians? Is God's name blasphemed because of our lives? I certainly hope not!
- Years ago, travelling and camping with the family, we left Sunday morning early to visit one of "our" churches. On the way there we noticed that all cars seemed to pass us at speeds well over the posted limit. At church we could not help but notice some of the same vehicles. Between services we were invited over to someone's place for it was a warm, welcoming congregation. In order to follow our host, however, speed limits had to be radically ignored. Later, over coffee, our host explained that the interior roads were most popular for church members, as the risk of speed checks by police was much smaller. The "biggest joke" was yet to come. A few weeks earlier, the police had given a ticket to the visiting minister, when he raced the country roads. Lately one had to watch out on gravel roads too, as the police officers knew where and when to nail the worst offenders; the members of "the local true church". Are we honouring and respecting the government, or are we, as soldiers for Christ, putting our King to shame as an undisciplined, rowdy bunch? Do we walk as we talk? Let your light shine! We will be judged by what we do (Matthew 25)!
- 5 If our neighbour's house was on fire, would we not run to save them? Well, if they are not in Christ, there is an even greater disaster in store for them! Your neighbours are heading for hell! How come you don't warn them! Do you really care? Do we truly love our neighbours? (If you love God, you love your neighbour too!) Pray that God may change their hearts! Mention them by name and pray that God may use you to lead them to Christ. Don't give up praying. As you pray, and your desire grows to see them saved, you will want to help.

## 11 Renewal required

A few of our leaders have reconstructed my book in the following way. They start with the first section of essay 11 and label this “the problem”. They suggest that my doctrinal concerns have all flowed from my concern with the behaviour of many of our young people. Dr. Gootjes, in his book review, puts these speculations forward as fact. Nevertheless, this is not true.

My first doctrinal concern in our churches related to the exclusivistic church view. At that time I was not teaching at one of our (high) schools. I also don’t believe that there is essential difference between the sins of the young people and those of the parents. It is easy to blame the younger generation or a particular (high) school. I do believe that there is a connection between the covenant abuse we sometimes hear and the blatant disobedience and sin we can find.

Some have objected to my explicit mention of certain sins, but upon further discussion they did not disagree with any of my statements. They just wondered whether my “two-by-four approach” was wise. On the other hand, I sometimes wonder if we shun “prophetic preaching” in this respect. When “sin” becomes something vague, we cannot hope to fight it.

While still a student in The Netherlands, I met an Evangelical fellow. Although I was at first sceptical, I was thrilled by the sincerity and love for Christ I found in him and in his family. That summer, several guys of our local (art.31) church had jobs in mail delivery. That’s where I met him, too. In my (Reformed) peer group, cheating on hours worked was a common thing. “Why not enjoy a bit more time off and have the best of both worlds; holiday and pay!” The Evangelical guy was different; I knew he did not cheat. That is how our friendship started. It was a great and marvellous discovery. God had introduced me to “the other Christians”. This kind of experience has occurred time and again, for many of us, and we are learning. We can and should be jealous of such “other Christians”. Once we’ve got to know them personally, we are humbled and we know that together, we are one in Christ. Despite the high walls we have built around our churches, we could not prevent many from peeking over them and discover some of the width of the Body of Christ. The defence mechanisms of “our church”, or “the true church” has often resulted in an unfair judgement of others. Meanwhile, our own walk and talk has not been perfect either.

The statement that “Faith, for older members, is often reduced to a knowledge of facts and the trust that one will go to heaven.” looks too much like a generalisation. As such it would be a serious misrepresentation. I apologise for any hurt, which this may have caused.

p.56, 6<sup>th</sup> line from bottom;

“we denied that...”

p.58, half way;

“I don’t expect it to...”

p.59, two thirds down;

“...if the criticism is valid...”

## **11- questions and comments:**

- 1 Walk and Talk makes a close pair, which we may not separate. Without the walk, talk is deceitful and suggests hypocrisy. Without talk, the walk may be self-serving, without giving honour where honour is due. What is worse? (1Sa.15.22; Mt.7.21; Mt.21.31; Ro.2.13)
- 2 A similar pair is "trust and obey". Without trust (in God), obedience is reduced to "selfation". Without obedience, the trust is in vain; it is self-deceit (Jas.1.22). Obedience is not doing the right thing "to stay out of trouble"; that is the Old Testament-way. Obedience is not doing right "to gain respect from men", men can easily lead us astray in doing the wrong thing; it is a poor basis. Obedience has to be Christ-like; persevering when it hurts. It means going on, even if it makes you unpopular. Its motivation is the love of God, because He loved us and gives us love. Loving God implies obedience. For Christians, obedience is the rule and disobedience is the exception. When there is such disobedience (not as a rule, but as a falling into sin), however, we may trust in the work of Christ (1Jn.2.1).
- 3 In response to a request to respond to the renewal, taking place in our Dutch sister churches, Dr. J. Visscher<sup>30</sup> admitted that "we can learn a lot from contemporary authors,... like D. M. Lloyd-Jones, J.I. Packer, L. Crabb, C. John Miller, D. Carson, and J. Bridges, ... as well as from the older Puritans." J. Visscher is surprised that our Dutch Brothers and Sisters have not earlier "discovered America". In Canada, however, there is much more fear and criticism concerning non-Canadian Reformed authors than in our Dutch sister churches.<sup>31</sup> It seems to me that, as a mass response, the Dutch discovered these authors before we have.
- 4 Dr. Visscher furthermore confessed that, concerning the subjects of church and covenant, the emphasis among us usually was on the communal, while we had little attention for the personal aspect. This imbalance, he wrote, cannot be defended, and also goes against the Heidelberg Catechism. The Puritans can help to show us that the Christian faith has a personal character.
- 5 Consider what one of our ministers wrote:<sup>32</sup> "It seems that ... many reformed Christians gradually began to presume that they were regenerated because they had done public profession of their faith, were in regular church attendance, and were involved in all kinds of congregational and other reformed activities. In retrospect one could say that many were involved, be it inadvertently, in virtually the same practice of work salvation condemned in the Pharisees."
- 6 A few years ago, the Canadian Reformed community was shocked to find out that Femie VanderBoom, trusted author of "Around the Kitchen Table" (regular feature in Reformed Perspective), critically rejected her

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<sup>30</sup> Dr. J. Visscher, *Gereformeerd Denken in Balans met Behulp van de Puriteinen*, Nederlands Dagblad, Sept. 21, 1996

<sup>31</sup> James I. Packer has been invited several times to speak for our Dutch Brothers and Sisters. Most of us don't even know him, even though he teaches in Vancouver. Some of our leaders prefer to keep it that way. Clarion 46(13) June '97

<sup>32</sup> S. DeBruin, *Presumptive Regeneration*, p.19

- former life. In a summary of events,<sup>33</sup> she writes, “I was a shining example of the virtuous Canadian Reformed woman, respectable and upstanding. I thought I was a true Christian and so did you. Didn’t I show that in all I was doing for the Lord? Then one day, after much internal struggle and a deepening sense of inner despair, I saw myself with God’s eyes and saw what I was. That despite all my good achievements, I was spiritually bankrupt. Not one of my “good deeds” counted as anything in the eyes of God. I had done a lot “for the Lord,” but I had no idea what He had done for me. In my heart of hearts I did not know and love Jesus as my personal Saviour. I was not saved, did not have salvation, because I did not have a Saviour.” Many rejected Femmie’s testimony about her former state of affairs; it was too threatening for many others in the churches.
- 7 The “Guido committee” finds my description of sinful life in the Canadian Reformed community eloquent (forceful?) and too much generalising. The examples they quote are concerning a lack of authority, the growing incidence of premarital sex, and that we tolerate gluttony and greed. Anybody who has visited a Guido commencement knows about a serious lack of respect for authority and self-discipline. It is in vain that the vice principal asks all attending to refrain from applause (and cat calls) until all graduates have received their diplomas. The parents are not much better. They, too, rush out of the hall to get ahead of others, while half the graduates have not yet left their seat for the formal exit. If that does not convince you, brag at your next Can. Ref. party about your speeding habits and how you address police officers when they stop you. See how our “brothers and sisters in sin” respond. A few years ago one of our ministers was publicly ridiculing a police officer for handing him a speeding ticket. There are examples galore, for those who want to admit it. Without admitting sin there cannot be repentance!
- The statement about premarital sex comes from an elder with a long-standing experience in one of our churches; among our young people we find more openness about what happens.
- Are we better known for counting our blessings or for publishing our wish lists? Do you hear more warnings or more jokes about addiction to food? Are the theologians more upset about prevailing sins, or about mentioning these sins? Are they afraid to damage “our good name”? Sometimes it seems that mentioning the sins is worse among us than committing them! I think we’ve got it all backwards! We don’t lose face when somebody reveals our sins, but if we deny these things and get upset.
- 8 For one person, to smoke a pipe or to drink a glass of beer, are expressions of personal freedom in Christ. For another person, smoking or drinking demonstrate their slavery to things outside Christ.

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<sup>33</sup> Femmie VanderBoom, *Around the Kitchen Table*, Reformed Perspective, 15(6) Apr. 1996

## **II Covenant Crescendo**

Dr. J. De Jong was willing to serve on the “Guido” committee to evaluate *Praying for Rain*. Since then he has continued to take the lead in the attack. In sermons and Clarion articles he has not tired of “defending the truth” and exposing “the many errors” contained in my book. We have seen already, how systematically the concept of rebirth, and the difference between believers and their children has been erased. In this view it is not personal appropriation (faith), but the place in the covenant community (church membership), which receives the main emphasis.

According to a recent article, *The Baptist Error*, the ground for baptism is not faith, but (having) the promise. This is in line with his church view, where the church may not be described as the community of all believers, but only as the community where the true preaching can be found. In other words, all emphasis is on “hearing the Word”, not on accepting the Word. This is contrary to the teaching of Jesus and the letter of James. Furthermore, this doctrine creates other, even fundamental problems. Is the promise of salvation only for believers and their children, or for all those who are called by God (Ac.2.39), that is, for all people who hear the Gospel? As the Gospel contains the promise, it is for all those who hear God’s Word! In a personal discussion, Dr. De Jong agreed that regular church visitors, for instance, (“on the mission field”, he added) also have the promise. When I suggested that –in line with his reasoning- they too must be baptised, he objected. “These people”, he admitted, “do have the promise, but not yet the seal, and therefore they may not be baptised until they come to faith.”

Apparently, the promise is not a sufficient ground for baptism! By Dr. De Jong’s own admission, it is the promise plus the seal. What is this seal? How is salvation sealed upon, or guaranteed to people? Is it not by the indwelling Holy Spirit? Now, nobody can have the indwelling Spirit (rebirth) without having first heard and accepted the Word (the promise). In Acts 2 we read that all those who heard the Gospel had the promise (you and your children), while only those who accepted the Word and repented were baptised. So, the ultimate criterion for baptism is not the promise, and not even promise-plus-seal, but actually just the seal! This seal must be seen as the indwelling Spirit of God (Eph.4.30). So, it seems that Dr. De Jong must end up with what he set out to condemn; the Baptist “error”! Perhaps we can yet resolve it by claiming that there are different grounds for infant baptism and for adult baptism. For the first it is the promise, for the second it is faith. If this is true, then there is a significant difference between believers’ baptism as we find it in Scripture, and infant baptism as we derive it from Scripture.

The strong, Biblical link between personal faith and baptism is often ignored while baptism is made the sign of the promise. Where does the Bible say so? Acts 2 suggests that personal appropriation (that, which De Jong calls “subjective faith”) is set as requirement for baptism. In two of the three household baptisms, it is specified that “all accepted the Word” and on that ground they were “all” baptised!

What is the consequence of this? It has made me wonder, whether we have an infallible case for infant baptism. If the call to personal faith and appropriation is pushed to the background, the Reformed Baptists stand on safer ground, despite all the venom we hear uttered against them from our leaders.

Thank God that there are also ministers among us, who have a scripturally balanced view of the covenant, where neglect of the obligations have eternal consequences and where the unbelievers in the church are called to make a radical break with selfishness and sin. I pray that such preaching may prevail, so that the Canadian Reformed churches may be built in Spirit and in truth.

Read 1 John 2.18-25, and consider the following sermon excerpts.

“Now, that means that Antichrists come up out of the church. And they may function within the church for a time spreading their lies, but at one point or another they leave the church of Christ to form an alternative group. They become a sect, and a sect always finds its roots in the faithful church of Christ as a breakaway movement.” “The sect says, ‘We are the anointed ones and in order to experience the Spirit fully, you have to come to us.’ That’s why the sects always have much evangelical zeal. They are always doing mission work. ... People leave the church of Christ and then they join some kind of sect and then they say, ‘Finally we have found it, the missing ingredient, the real experiencing of the Holy Spirit.’ And they always try to influence others. They start with their relatives, and they start with their friends and they say, ‘Look, come here, for here is the real anointing of the Holy Spirit!’ And you know, to emphasise that, many sects even demand that you are rebaptised. That’s a sign that you now have received the real Holy Spirit.” “But John writes, ‘You have been anointed by the Holy One.’ Don’t let those lofty claims of the anti-Christian sects disturb you people, for the church that is faithful to the apostolic doctrine is the Body of Christ. This Body may rightfully share in the anointing of Christ, its Head.”

## 12 The Covenant Concept

The “covenant” is “our” dearest concept, but yet it is often little understood by the people in the pews. The great diversity of reactions from our leaders also demonstrates that our churches are not in full agreement on some of the issues. Usually, the “covenant” concept is narrowly applied to the (true!) church community. As such, the covenant community is then equated, not with those who are confronted with the Gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ, but with the members of the true church. This is the first error, for “the promise” of salvation is for all who hear God’s Word!

By focusing on the hearing only, however, two other levels of God’s grace are left out of the picture. By many among us this results in a double error. (1) God has a covenant relationship with all humans. They all receive His blessings in creation and providence, and they all must thank God, worship Him, and expect all good things from Him alone. God loves the lost ones today, just as He loved Nineveh in the days of Jonah. Do we love the “Ninevites” next door? (2) Many are called (and have the promise), but few are chosen (and have faith). By emphasizing the promise over faith and church membership over rebirth, the call for self-examination and conversion often becomes muted. For mature people, the covenant holds only condemnation, unless there is true faith! Self-examination often seems to be reduced to saying “Everyone is a sinner! So am I!” Repentance is easily reduced to saying “Sorry, God!”, without a change in lifestyle.

Several leaders, including Dr. Gootjes in his book review, have assumed I did not consult “our own” writings on the covenant. This is not true. Among others, I studied two of the three “trustworthy” sources mentioned by Dr. Gootjes. I also studied VanderWaal’s book and the discussions among K. Schilder, H. Hoeksema, and A. Kuyper. They all struggled to make a fitting theory, yet they failed (p. 107). That is the reason why I did not follow “our” tradition. If you end at a cul-de-sac, you turn back and look for other ways. That is precisely what I have been doing.

The covenant, In Israel’s time and culture, was seen as a collective bond. When God promised the land of Canaan to Israel, this promise was fulfilled. Israel arrived, but most Israelites never made it, because of unbelief. In western culture, individualism is rampant. We should make sure, that, if we derive individual promises, that these are described in terms of conditional (non-meritorious) promises. Consider 1Sa.2.30, 1Ki.21.20-29, Jer.18.7-10, Jer.26.16-19, and Ezek.33.13-15. These texts show indeed that God’s promises, even if this is not explicitly stated, are conditional. In today’s culture we expect to find such clauses to be specified “in the deal”. When we write a form for baptism in today’s setting, we must clearly state the conditional character of God’s promises. Ignoring this, we fail to communicate the full truth and invite misunderstanding and covenant abuse.

## **12- questions and comments:**

- 1 J. Kamphuis, professor at the theological college of our Dutch sister churches (1959-1987) described the Liberated Churches' viewpoint as "truly Reformed" in opposition to "subjectivistic".<sup>34</sup> He defined subjectivism as "any movement and belief which denies the Word of God and His Covenant their central governing and dominating position and does not acknowledge 'true religion' to be determined by that Word and Covenant, but, on the contrary, grants the central position to man with his religious moods and beliefs." Again we note how the Christian is placed in contrast to Christ. It is also interesting how the covenant is placed beside God's Word, apparently as a matter of equal weight and importance. God's Word is used as norm, but apparently the covenant has to be highlighted in this Word as its most important theme.
- 2 C. Vanderwaal,<sup>35</sup> formerly minister of the Free Reformed church at Pretoria, RSA, warned that "if we see, as some do, the covenant as just one aspect of God's relationship with mankind, we do, in fact, lose it. The Lord reveals Himself to His people as God of the Covenant, and that is how He wants to be addressed. A different perspective is impossible for him who respects the Scriptures." This seems to imply that Scripture should be studied only through the glasses of "the covenant". It always puts me on the alert when theologians insist we study God's Word from one perspective, which they have selected for us. When we restrict our views of God and His Word to one perspective only, chances are great that we come up with a severely limited and unbalanced perception of the Truth.
- 3 Herman Bavinck, a leader in our churches in the first half of this century, wrote, "If one makes the covenant concept the central theme of preaching, it has to be done in such a way that the call to repentance is loud and clear and that intimacy of life with Christ is fully maintained."<sup>36</sup> These are indeed essential points for us. Is the intimate, personal relationship stressed sufficiently among us? Is the essential need of repentance from sin emphasised enough? It is my conviction that we did fall short on those two points. The covenant of the Word has two sides; Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. Do we address God's covenant wrath just as much as the covenant blessings? If we emphasise the format of the old covenant, we also have to stick to this dual approach. Yet, all my students knew about the promises and blessings of the covenant, but seemed surprised, concerned, or even angered when I told them about the covenant curse. Do we, in our focus on the covenant, present a true, scripturally balanced view of it; I wonder?

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<sup>34</sup> J. Kamphuis, *An Everlasting Covenant* (1984,1985), p.17

<sup>35</sup> C. VanderWaal, *Het Nieuwe Testament, Boek van het Verbond* (1978), p.120

<sup>36</sup> C. VanderWaal, *Het Nieuwe Testament, Boek van het Verbond* (1978), p.119

## 13-20 The Trinitarian Covenant

The Trinitarian Covenant Model has been most severely attacked by the defenders of the Canadian Reformed tradition. Especially the professors have been furious (or paranoid, as some have suggested). A few ministers, however, have interacted in a much more balanced way. Other readers have expressed much appreciation for this model. Apparently, the level of comprehension is inversely proportional with the knowledge of, or commitment to, our traditional model.

At the first level of God's covenant, we find that God addresses all creatures. Although God provides great blessings, compared to later enhancements it seems quite simple. Before Abraham, or later outside Israel, people could know God by general revelation. When God instituted this covenant with Noah he used words, but not in its daily operation. Dr. Gootjes contrasts Gen.3.15 with Gen.9, while God's providence and destruction of the enemy are just two sides of the same plan of restoring His Kingdom. Considering my foreword statement that, "I am sure that some thoughts expressed here need further refinement", I think that Dr. Gootjes is remarkably sharp in his criticism.

A few leaders have made a huge deal out of the idea that, even today some who are outside the covenant community can be declared righteous. Apparently this could only be true for the time of Job, Jethro, and Melchizedek. These leaders quote texts addressed to the covenant community to prove their point. "Outside the church is no salvation" is here taken to its extreme.

How can such people be saved? In my book I attribute this to faith and obedience, as God's gift. Although the context of the book clearly shows that the norm(al way) of salvation is by hearing and accepting the Gospel, I am hesitant to restrict God's work to that. Some have called this heresy, another leader correctly pointed out that I should have emphasised more the exceptional character of this way. I am convinced that all those who reject Christ will be condemned, but I am not convinced that all who did not get to hear the Gospel, will forever perish. Of course our leaders will make an exception for our own children if they die in infancy.

The second level is further characterised by the Word of God. For Israel, this was found in "the law, the prophets, and the writings", and eventually in the greatest prophet, who came as the Moses of the new covenant. Today, the Word of God comes to mankind in the form of the Bible. For those who hear the Gospel, there are not two covenants, but the two dimensions merge together into a new, richer reality.

The new covenant no longer looks forward to a promised Saviour, but focuses on Christ crucified, who also rose from the dead. Although Christ is no longer present as man on earth, the believers form His Body, as He indwells them with His Spirit. This is a great reality, which must not be underestimated and may not be ignored. Only when we find true faith, the trinitarian covenant comes to its full splendour.

The theologians refuse to acknowledge this. In their efforts to erase the distinctions between "hearing" and "accepting", and between believers and their children, they hate to hear this other side of reality.

note: page 71, 10 lines from bottom; "One generation later...", see Gen.26.1-11. on page 92, the reference (c) to Ro.2.9-11 is out of context.

### **13-20- questions and comments:**

- 1 Read Psalm 104. How does it show that also animals must give recognition of God as Provider? Find other examples from the psalms where animals or creation are called upon to praise God, the Creator.
- 2 As a young person I was travelling through Norway. For a few days I travelled with a French companion. We visited some distant relatives of him where we were invited to stay for coffee. This happened to be a meal with all kinds of cookies and cake. Back in the youth hostel, Jean (my companion) told me how stupid he felt for not thanking his relatives. Just a little while later, when we had fixed supper, I suggested we thank God for His blessings. He claimed he was no Christian, and therefore he would not have to do this. I responded, "That makes no difference. If God gives you food, you have to thank Him, whether you are a Christian or not." Comment on this.
- 3 Most (not all) people "without-the-Word" have followed other spirits and evil desires of their hearts. What are some of the sins that have resulted from this? Read Romans 1: 18-32.
- 4 Scientists are amazed that dangerous sharks near Australia rarely see humans as suitable prey. How come, with hundreds of thousands of people swimming at the beaches, so few sharks take advantage of this great opportunity? Apparently, the sharks shy away from men, and when an attack occasionally does occur, it can often be explained in terms of surprise or self-defence. What answer do we, as Christians, have for this biologically strange fact?
- 5 Rev. Simon DeBruin writes about the sign of circumcision,<sup>37</sup> "Circumcision said basically: 'as surely as the foreskin belongs to the body, so surely do you and I (the LORD) belong together in this covenant, but when you break my covenant, you will be cut off like this foreskin and die.' In the Hebrew language, the terms "cutting" and "covenant" are closely related. The Messiah, also, was 'cut off', especially in the crucifixion, which Paul calls 'the circumcision of Christ' (Col.2.11).
- 6 Just as sin came into the world through one man, so it was conquered by one Man. Just as the serpent in Paradise brought death, when man believed its lies, so the bronze snake saved from death, for those who believed it.
- 7 John must have thought of the Exodus (the historical roots of the nation) when he saw and described the vision of Revelation 12. Satan is thrown upon the earth. He, the red dragon, threatens to kill the seed of the woman. The Son is taken away by an eagle (compare Ex.19.4, Rev.12.14) and brought into God's protection, while the woman is led into the desert. The Red Sea threatens to kill her, but God summons creation to save her so she can safely proceed.
- 8 Compare the status, lifestyle, riches, and political influence of the three first kings in Israel. Find evidence that Saul at first was not much more than a farmer-king.
- 9 How is the historical account at the end of "Judges" linked to the first act of Saul as king of Israel?

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<sup>37</sup> Rev. Simon DeBruin, *Presumptive Regeneration*, p.7, 1987

- 10 "Satan made me do it", is sometimes an excuse, people try after committing sin. It is a true statement, but we should not let it diminish our responsibility. "You gave in to Satan", would be a good response. Our lives are projections of the spiritual warfare. Compare 1Ch.21.1 with 2Sam.24.1. God never stands at the sideline of history, but he is actively engaged, without doing wrong Himself.
- 11 I hope we don't make the mistake of the Jews; claiming to be His (only) people without living in obedience. Many last will be the first; that is Jesus' covenant message, also for today. The banquet hall is filling quickly, make sure you are there! Many Jews have been bypassed by people from all other nations (Lk.13.29), I am afraid many (Canadian) Reformed people will be bypassed by Baptists and Pentecostals, whom many of us don't even see as Christians. If God does not spare the natural branches of the vine (the Jews), neither will he save us who were engrafted in the covenant of the Word, if we don't bear fruit (Ro.11.21)
- 12 Sometimes, I get the impression that true (Reformed!) Christians are supposed to talk about the covenant all the time. We are the covenant people, we have covenant children, and maintain covenant schools for covenantal education. Jesus Christ did not use this kind of language! "Covenant-talking" cannot function as litmus test for true Christians. Nevertheless, we should uphold the covenant structure; God gives blessings and he requires obedience. He first provides and then he demands a response. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded (Lk.12.48). Those who then produce fruits of faith, will receive even more.
- 13 We should not focus on "how we **can** benefit", but rather on "how we **do** benefit" (what we have received) as well as what we owe to God. It is not the promised benefits which should be central, but Christ Himself. In the Old Testament, the promises stood central; read Hebrews 11; now, however, in the New Testament; let us focus on Christ (Heb.12).
- 14 Many first shall be the last. The Jews could have known from their own covenant history. Give examples from Scripture where the blessings for older and younger children are reversed.
- 15 God instituted three feasts in Israel to be celebrated in the first moon (month). These feasts are closely connected. At full moon the Passover is celebrated, kicking off the week of Unleavened Bread. On the first Sunday (the day after the Sabbath), the Firstfruits were to be celebrated as thanksgiving to the Lord. These feasts beautifully link the Exodus from Egypt with the blessings in the Promised Land. Jesus fulfilled them by His death at Passover and His resurrection on the feast of Firstfruits. It is also symbolised in the Christian's regeneration (and baptism as the bath of regeneration); the death to sin and the beginning of the new life. Passover symbolised rescue from death by the way of blood. Unleavened Bread symbolises the fleeing from sin or death of the old nature, while First Fruits refers to the new self, expressed in a life of holiness, expressed in the fruit of the Spirit. The Old Testament feasts have been fulfilled, but are now reflected in a much richer way in Good Friday, Easter, and... the Sunday.
- 16 Is baptism for those who hear the Word, or only those who accept the Word? Read Acts 2: 41, comparing the RSV and NIV translations.



## 21 The Master's Meal

One of the eight doctrinal statements, which I had to “accept without reservation” in order to keep my job at Guido de Bres Christian High School, was, “the Lord’s Supper and its supervision are given by Christ to His church. Admission to the Lord’s Supper requires profession of the Reformed faith.” According to the Guido board, this “truth” is included in “the infallible Word of God, as confessed in the Reformed Creeds”

This leads to several questions.

- 1 Is Christ’s church restricted to the Reformed church, which maintains the Three Forms of Unity?
- 2 May Christians who disagree with any points of these creeds, for instance that the civil government must protect the church from heresy (BC, art.36), not partake of the Lord’s Supper?
- 3 Is a Reformed Baptist church per definition not a church of Christ, and is the Lord’s Supper, which is held there not the Lord’s Supper?
- 4 Is “Reformed faith” equivalent to “faith in Christ”?
- 5 If one disagrees with such an exclusive admission policy, does that mean this person therefore rejects the Reformed faith, forfeiting his own right to partake of the Lord’s Supper?

All 22 board members, representative for 11 Canadian Reformed congregations, insisted that this is the way we must see things. For those entrenched in our exclusivistic tradition, this may be self evident, but for other Christians it appears cultic. What would happen if one of our ministers would write, “I believe that all true Christians should be allowed at the table of the Lord”? Would they put the “gun” to his head, demanding to retract or lose his position?

### **21- questions and comments:**

- 1 How should we guard the Lord's Supper? What makes it unholy? Let's look at three scenarios: <sup>39</sup>
  - a) When individual members (or visitors) are living in sin, unknown to the elders or congregation, they bring themselves under God's judgement, and God will punish them (alone) when there is no repentance.
  - b) Perhaps one or more members know that some other celebrant is living in sin, but they have not warned them. (Mt.18.15ff.; If we love each other, we demonstrate this in applying the Matthew 18 principle.) In that case, whether they are members or office bearers, they will also be eating and drinking judgement unto themselves since they knowingly stand idly by and watch others profane the table of the Lord.
  - c) When someone lives in public sin, and the congregation and elders knowingly permit the table of the Lord to be profaned, all participants invite upon themselves the wrath of God. (1Co.11.29, 30: For anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and

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<sup>39</sup> after Rev. Simon DeBruin, *The Lord's Supper as taught in God's Word and defended in the reformed creeds*, a Christian lecture series, p.13, 1985

drinks judgement on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.)

Hence the table has to be supervised. It should be open to all true believers (who live accordingly), and closed to those who cannot see the Kingdom of God, as they are not (yet) born again.

- 2 Consistories may admit visiting Christians to partake of the Lord's Supper in their midst upon hearing their testimony regarding faith and life.<sup>40</sup> Most of our consistories do not make use of this right for traditionally we consider all who have not joined the true church (that is; our federation), as disobedient. Consequently, they all are obviously living in sin.
- 3 What is self-examination? It does not look for inner voices, visions, or miracles, although they can happen. Where they happen, though, they do not even prove that there is real faith. To examine oneself is to look for faith and fruits of faith.
  - \*Do you really love God? Feed His sheep!
  - \*Are you busy building God's Church and Kingdom or your career and estate?
  - \*What things do you do for God? (Do not include those things you do because others expect them from you and/or tell you to do them.)
  - \*How much personal time do you spend with God?
  - \*Do you recognise that, despite your new love and obedience, you are still far from perfect, so that you need the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit?
- 4 If the visible church is only defined as the community that hears the true preaching, then church discipline for those who don't show themselves to be Christians does not make sense. Originally, it seems indeed that the churches of the Reformation were not strong on church discipline.<sup>41</sup> Self-examination (to see if indeed you are in Christ) and discipline (admonitions, etc. where there are grave doubts) can only be important where the church is not only defined as the congregation of those who hear the Word, but where it is also defined in terms of true believers. Where our particular system of doctrinal ideas is seen as the essence of faith, however, the Lord's Supper becomes a symbol of solidarity to a specific doctrine.

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<sup>40</sup> Dr. F.L. Bos, *De Orde der Kerk*, p.222 ff

<sup>41</sup> Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren*, (1964, 1991)p.130

## 22-24      **Baptism**

I sent a copy of the book to Prof. VanDam, for a book review in the Clarion. A week later he phoned me. A book review had been written, but he wanted to see me soon before publishing it. A day before our scheduled meeting I received a copy of the book review, written by Dr. Gootjes. At the start of our meeting, the leaders asked me what I thought of the review. I told them that it was critical, but that I had expected nothing else. I also thought it was a bit of a rush job, as it contained several errors. The brothers apparently wanted this meeting to convince me that I should recall my writings. They suggested this several times and with great urgency. I told them that I had become convinced that God wanted me to write it, and therefore I could not retract it without solid scriptural arguments to do so.

The greatest concern was indeed that I had concluded that the Bible is not crystal clear in demanding children of believers to be baptised. Defending the Baptists (by taking their arguments seriously) was seen as treason. Professor VanDam concluded that I must be a very confused man, who could no longer teach at Guido. I thought of the former Soviet system. I know many among us who share my convictions, including quite a few respected elders. They keep their mouths shut- out of fear. I know a number of young couples, who disagree with infant baptism and their elders know it. Yet they have gone through the motions and had their babies baptised. Don't we see that this development produces hypocrisy and points to an internal collapse of "our doctrine"? Yet, the first person who "goes public" and says what many already believe, has to suffer for them all. In the Soviet system also, dissenters were seen as confused. They could no longer serve in society, but were placed under psychiatric care. The theologians were furious but did little in providing me with scriptural arguments. They concluded, with sadness, that rejecting the scriptural clarity on infant baptism, I had now "departed from the Reformed faith."

I noticed that quite a few among us think Baptists are not Christians. When asking about this, I would hear the following line of reasoning. "Scripture clearly teaches that children of believers must be baptised- the confessions say so. As Baptists refuse to obey, they blatantly reject God's Word. If they reject the clear teaching of God's Word, they must reject Christ." The conviction that the Bible is so clear on infant baptism stems directly from our creeds, which are taken as "the normative and authoritative standard for all teaching and conduct in all areas of life" (Guido board "acknowledgement"). Dr. Gootjes, too, only refers to the creeds, when he criticises me on this point. Is this not confessionalism? Only two of our leaders have approached me (one upon invitation) to convince me from Scripture that infant baptism is a mandate. After one "round", they quit. A couple of other Brothers gave me books to read. I read them but I was not convinced. Even among our leaders, few are willing to enter into a debate on infant baptism. If the Bible is so clear on this, why don't we get better arguments? Why not set up a forum discussion with some Baptist leaders? The clarity of Scripture has become a political statement. Anyone, who dares to question the contents of the creeds, is said to break his solemn oath, made when doing profession of faith. One's public profession of faith is used as a means of coercion and abuse, to keep conscience and honesty

in slavery. Are we not raising a community of hypocrites, with a few determined ones trying desperately to keep the masses in check by indoctrination and intimidation? Is that what sets us apart from other churches?

Does Scripture clearly command that children of believers be baptized? We can, among us, recognize three lines of thought.

1) The traditional approach: Yes! Then, indeed as some of our leaders suggest, those who deny this (whether or not they disagree with infant baptism) refuse to accept the Word of God. Therefore, as was suggested by some of our leaders, people among us who became Baptists, have left Christ (and are no longer Christians). Then indeed, we must not hesitate to keep such people from the Lord's Supper, but we must deny them the grace of God, and declare that, unless they repent, they will end up in hell. That is what church discipline means! Then indeed, those who seemed to grow in Christ, but started to doubt infant baptism, actually lost the faith and, unless they repent they will end up in hell.

\*\*\*Of course we set up a line of argumentation by which infant baptism makes sense. For us, it may be a clear issue. To find the absolute truth, however, we must also consider other possible lines of argumentation, and discern whether they make sense or could be valid. I have honestly tried, but I cannot find that Scripture is clear on infant baptism. I must conclude that we make a grave mistake by shutting Baptists out from the Kingdom of God, and to deny the Spirit's work in them. According to our own tradition, we would actually resemble the false church if we would persecute true believers for their convictions.

2) The ecumenical approach: No, Scripture is not clear on this issue. Then, if the Reformed church is the only church of Christ, it must admit all true Christians. To cast them out would be committing gross sin! If we fail to unite with certain Christians, we act like a sect. If we send true Christians to the synagogue of Satan, we ourselves (begin to) bear the mark of the synagogue of Satan.

\*\*\*Here too, the theologians cannot see a solution. Although most of them might claim that only the Reformed church is the church of Christ, they would refuse to accept Baptists as members. If the confessions are the ultimate criterion for the truth, then only those who are in agreement, or pretend to be, can be accepted in the communion of saints. If we would allow non-baptised members in our churches, we would sacrifice a key principle in our tradition, and –in a sense- cease to be Canadian Reformed. Is there another option?

3) The approach of pluriformity: No, although infant baptism makes sense to us, we may not say that God clearly commands infant baptism. Although our reasoning makes sense to us, others can research the Scriptures and come to different conclusions. A growing holiness in those who became Baptists warns us that we cannot just say that –in that same time period- Satan deceived them and tricked them away from Christ. If nevertheless, we find among us righteous Christians, who come to reject infant baptism, we should suggest to them urge them to join a different church of Christ.

\*\*\*The problem is that we have formally rejected pluriformity. According to our traditional view, Baptist churches cannot be seen as churches of Christ. If they are synagogues of Satan, we may never suggest our confused Brothers and Sisters that they should leave us to join them.

Although many members and consistory members favor the idea of ‘pluriformity’, the teachers of the law persist in the traditional line. I think we pile God’s condemnation upon ourselves if we continue to bar sincere Christians from the grace of Christ and cast them from the Kingdom. Even by our own tradition, these are marks of the synagogue of Satan! I don’t think we will see non-baptized members in our churches, as this would require “a change in the constitution”. There are, however, strong indications that, within one generation, we will officially embrace some level of pluriformity.

Although we still have, among us, objectivistic preachers, who talk much more about the promise and blessing than about faith, I know from personal experience that some of our leaders maintain a balance of the two sides of the covenant. No matter how sure the promise, for those who do not love God and hate sin, there is no true life. If that teaching (see p.125, 126) was the normal, Canadian Reformed approach, part one of *Praying for Rain* would probably not have been written. As it is, false assurance is often given to those who are on their way to hell, while others, after their conversion, are “sent to hell” for their rejection of infant baptism!

Several leaders, who were quite positive about my views, commented that I should have left out *The Battle of Baptism*. By taking the Baptists’ arguments seriously, some claim, I actually attack the Reformed doctrine. I did consider that, yet I felt compelled to address the issue of baptism. It is intimately linked with the topics addressed, and we must resist the temptation to be man-pleasers, where it concerns the quest for truth.

***For further reading***

Herman Hoeksema	<i>Believers and their Seed</i>	
Klaas Schilder	<i>Extra-Scriptural Binding: a new danger</i>	
Alexander DeJong	<i>The Well-Meant Gospel Offer</i>	
J. Douma	<i>Infant Baptism and Regeneration</i>	
Paul K. Jewett	<i>Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace</i>	(1978)

## 22-24            **questions and comments:**

- 1     We tend to emphasise that baptism is for our comfort. Where does Scripture teach that baptism is given for the comfort of believers with respect to their children? To what degree could our personal comfort and wishful thinking shape our doctrinal convictions?
- 2     Is baptism in the Roman Catholic churches just as valid as baptism in our church? Is one who is baptised in the Roman Catholic churches, re-baptised when joining one of our churches? Explain.
- 3     When is baptism valid and are the promises contained in them true? Feenstra writes,(my translation) “Firstly baptism has to be administered according Christ's institution, using water and the standard formula. Secondly, administration has to take place in a community, which confesses the Triune God. Lastly, someone acknowledged by the community as office bearer, or who received the right to baptise, must perform the administration.”<sup>42</sup>  
Are these three requirements for a valid baptism acceptable for Baptists?
- 4     How often is the Christian believer born? (Belgic Confession, article 35) Why should people be baptised only once, according to Belgic Confession, article 34?
- 5     Compare the six points listed in this essay with the following statements.  
(1) Children in the church hear the Word, and thus they are in the covenant of the Word.  
(2) People in the covenant of the Word must accept Christ.  
(3) When people accept Christ, they are baptised with the Spirit and ought to be baptised with water.  
(4) Those who are thus baptised must persevere in faith and pursue holiness.  
(5) Those who accept(ed) Christ, but later (in word or deed) turn their backs to God, may be forcefully restored by the Spirit.  
(6) Those who accept(ed) Christ, but then turn their backs to God, will (unless they repent) go to Hell.  
(7) Those who accept(ed) Christ and (by God's grace) persevere, will end up in Heaven.
- 6     Believers' baptism refers to the full three-dimensional covenant, and therefore it refers to regeneration and the gift of the indwelling Spirit. Infant baptism, with its parallel with Old Testament circumcision, signifies and seals the two-dimensional covenant. Consequently, the two forms of baptism are not identical, and regeneration does not occur until there is faith. This, however, separates water baptism from Spirit baptism, which seems contrary to Scripture.
- 7     Consider these points in defence of infant baptism.  
\*Baptism is not only the “bath of rebirth”, but also the “washing of the Word”. All people in the church hear the word. Jesus said to His disciples, “You are ... clean because of the word I have spoken to you.” (Jn.15.3). Nevertheless, Judas was not clean, in spite of the word he had

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<sup>42</sup> J.G. Feenstra, *Onze Geloofsbelijdenis*, (1966), p.374

heard. (Jn.13.10) Here we have to maintain the balance that not all Israel is truly Israel, and not all who are in the church are in Christ.

\*The Patriarchs had the sign of the covenant of the Word, yet the Word Incarnate did not yet live among them. Perhaps the Spirit does not yet have to live inside someone to get the mark of the triune covenant, but it may be sufficient that the Spirit works in him. Can we apply that to all those who begin to show an interest in the Gospel?

8 Consider these points concerning infant baptism:

\* Is baptism the sign of (having) the promise (=hearing the Word), or is it the sign of regeneration (having the indwelling Spirit = having faith)? If it is the former, we must also baptise adults who hear the Word, regardless of their response. In the past, baptism was sometimes enforced in Christian societies. More recently, the Reformed churches follow a hybrid approach. For those born in the church, it is the promise, for the others it is the seal (indwelling Spirit), which is required.

\* Compare the ancient covenant with the old covenant. The latter covenant (with Abraham, Israel) gave **greater** blessings to **less** people, compared to the earlier covenant (Noah). Could the new covenant not follow the same pattern, compared to the old? In that case, the new covenant gives extra blessings (in regeneration), but not to all those who hear the Word, but only to those who accept it. Doug Wilson apparently ignored this pattern,<sup>43</sup> but the Jews must have been aware of it.

9 The topic of infant baptism is quite a “watershed” in Christianity. Yet, there are some churches where infant baptism and rejection thereof peaceably co-exist within the congregation.

Doug Wilson writes that the Community Evangelical Fellowship in Moscow, Idaho, has “adopted a baptismal co-operation agreement”, where both views co-exist, apparently up to the council level.

The Nederlands Dagblad of May 17, 1997, reports that the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerk (offshoot from our sister churches since the late sixties) at Nijmegen, allows infants to be dedicated. Members with Baptist convictions are accepted as long as they don’t push their convictions onto others. In the more diverse denominations, such as the Anglican churches and recently the CRC, there seems also to be a greater tolerance for divergent views on this issue.

10 Do our (little) children have the same blessings as the believers? “Yes!”, said the Guido committee. Yet, Dr. De Jong also wrote that the public declaration at infant baptism “does not say anything about the planting of a seed of regeneration or grace in the individual soul or heart of the child.”<sup>44</sup> Is regeneration or the indwelling presence of God’s Spirit not a wonderful blessing? Jesus Christ said, it is a greater blessing than the bodily presence of Him among us! Read John 16.7!

11 One Reformed theologian, in a recent discussion, suggested that baptism is closer related to the price of Chinese tea than to regeneration. Yet, Scripture never calls baptism the bath of Chinese tea, but rather the bath of regeneration!

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<sup>43</sup> *To a Thousand Generations*, available at Inheritance Publications

<sup>44</sup> J. De Jong, *The Covenant and the Children of Believers- a reply(1)*, Clarion 40(21), p.457

## 25 Children in the Covenant

When I was a child...

I was timid and afraid to fail or fall short of others' expectations.

I craved compliments and praised for doing something extra.

I was often lonely and without friends.

I knew about God, and as far as I know loved Him.

Was I a believer?

For years I was in the habit of stealing candy, mostly out of self-pity.

Later I would steal money to buy snacks.

Helping others made me look good, but it was for selfish reasons.

I was convinced I was a good guy; better than all my peers.

I often twisted the truth to show myself off better than I was.

In my high school years especially, God prepared me for a big change.

I remember how a high school teacher reprimanded me in public for using dishonesty to make myself look better than a classmate. I needed this humiliation, to show me that I was a sinner.

I remember my first deep, gut wrenching feeling of guilt. I was in junior-high. Much earlier, my Dad had given me a jigsaw and patterns to cut. I realised one night, how he would have loved to see me use these gifts. Yet, I had never done so. This bothered me greatly, so that I could not sleep. Several years later, this clear memory became the model for my sense of deep guilt before God. I was a sinner!

As we noted in our definition of faith; before there can be faith, there must be an acute awareness of sin. Indeed a sudden and deep awareness of enormous guilt towards God often precedes regeneration. In some people, this guilt-consciousness cuts so deep and lasts so long, that the person is in deep turmoil. He or she may have heard a million times that God forgives sinners, but then- all of a sudden- it hits home. The Gospel takes on a new meaning, as if it suddenly makes sense. The Bible may have looked like an old history book, but suddenly it becomes a personal message from God.

I cannot put a date to my second birth, and neither is that important. What counts is that it happened. What is important now, is that I continue to walk with God, remaining in Christ, and keeping in step with the Spirit.

The Dutch say, "Elk meent zijn uil een valk te zijn." The saying suggests that all parents think more highly of their own children than what they really are. Also spiritually we tend to think too highly of our little children- as if they are already little believers. Truth is that they are born as selfish sinners, who need to be born again to start their real spiritual development. We cannot measure "faith" in the way they sing "Jesus loves me!" You should hear the kids in vacation Bible school!

After I summarised the Promise view and the Present view, I should have clarified, that within these views, different models can be recognised. These are listed at the top of page 120. The points 1-3 are not three characteristics for the Promise view, but three different models, under the same general group. In

the same way, numbers 4-6 refer to different models, used in the Present camp. On pages 120-121, I discuss these models in the sequence 3-2-1-6-5-4. Sorry for the confusion! The discussion seemed more natural this way. The numbering 1 – 6 represents a scale from one extreme to the other, or perhaps from greater subjectivism to greater objectivism?

***For further reading***

John F. MacArthur, *Faith Works, The Gospel According to the Apostles*

***25- questions and comments:***

1 Regarding this topic, it is interesting to note the events surrounding Rev. Oosterhoff of Breda (art. 31). This minister of the Word taught that Christ died for each member of the congregation; whether or not they accepted Christ. He acknowledged that not all of them will end up in heaven, and therefore he distinguished between the acquisition and application of salvation. He also taught concerning baptism, that it does not signify and seal the Gospel promise of the washing of sin and the renewal of life, but the reality thereof, as a fact prior to and apart from faith.

The consistory rejected these views, but classis and regional synod did not want to pursue any discipline. Synod Rotterdam/Delfshaven, 1964/65 dealt with the appeals on this matter and decided that Rev. Oosterhoff's teachings (as stated) are in conflict with Word and confession. Although Synod 1967 upheld these decisions, a cluster of churches in North Holland maintained Rev. Oosterhoff and his views.

2 In a way, we have come full circle from chapter one. The issue is again, "what is faith?" Is faith given to all who are in the church? Is true faith given to all who hear the Word?

True faith is forever. True faith always produces works. From the works, which include perseverance, we can generally know whether or not true faith is present. By our love people shall recognise us as Christians (Jn.13.35).

We can tell by the deeds who the children of God and who the children of the devil are (1Jn.3.10). Christians hate sin and flee from evil, while pursuing godliness (BC.art.29), and these attributes, if sustained, prove election and give assurance to the believer (CD.I.12).

Faith is not just an acceptance of indoctrinated truths, perhaps supplemented by the constant assurance; You believe for you are baptized, you are being (!) regenerated for you are in the (true) church.

3 In a very similar vein, a discussion has raged among Evangelicals, concerning "lordship-salvation" vs. "no-lordship salvation". Is it possible to be saved, while continuing in sin? Is faith real if there is no change of heart and no hatred of evil and pursuit of righteousness?

John F. MacArthur, Jr. has rightly emphasised the importance of true faith and real salvation, which is always linked with regeneration and obvious sanctification. Surely, some will temporarily fall away, and need to be pushed up again by the Spirit, but those who continue to live in sin, cannot claim to be children of God.

- 4 The Spirit's work in man; the love of God, the hatred of evil, and the pursuit of holiness are the marks of the true Christian, while infant baptism or membership of a Reformed church are not. If, for this conviction some call me subjectivistic, so be it. I cannot see Scripture say anything different. Every age and situation may have its danger, ours is "assumed faith", "cheap grace", "automatism", and minimal time for personal devotions, while embracing the world. In that setting we should reconsider our fronts, lest we, in position against Arminianism and subjectivism, lose the battle from the other side and inside out.
- 5 In the "citizenship" model, it seems to make sense to allow children to partake of the Lord's Supper celebration. Some of my friends hold this view. If children seem to show real and personal dedication to God, if they take sin serious and confess their dependence on Christ, trusting that he forgives, they could be allowed to partake. The parents need to give or withhold permission, and take responsibility.
- 6 Rev. Drost, minister in one of our sister churches wrote in a regional church bulletin,<sup>45</sup> "Fortunately we got rid of the doctrine of 'presumed regeneration', but I am afraid that the doctrine of assumed faith has crept into our covenant concept. This affects the preaching style as well as the congregational expectations. There is no room for missionary preaching then, for 'Don't we all believe already anyway?'"  
 Rev. Simon DeBruin writes,<sup>46</sup> "...in the past all concentration was on presumptive regeneration for infants of believers, whereas there seems to have been very little stress on the need of regeneration... (as they get older). What had been rightly rejected for infants had become, it seems, in general assumed for adults, be it in practice and not with an official proclamation."  
 The preaching, according to Rev. Drost, has to focus on leading to faith and repentance; that fits in the covenant framework. "Preaching in the covenant aims for the decision of faith (Lord's Day 31). It also creates division as the congregation is placed before the Mediator of the Covenant. Jesus Christ has to be central in the preaching, and the preaching invites members as well as guests to come to Him."
- 7 Consider this quote, "At most one can say God extends His grace to all the children in the covenant in the sense that they share the promises of the covenant. But this is not to be taken in the sense that God implants grace in the heart of the child from which the child can later fall away." We must not confuse the promise with the fulfilment in the child.<sup>47</sup>
- 8 Consider this sermon excerpt; "When the promise is given, we can already speak in factual terms. We don't need to claim the things promised. The promise is so sure, that we may speak of reality. It is yours today!" Taken by itself, this kind of speak erases the line between hearing and believing. It suggests that all people, who sit in church and hear the Gospel, are already saved.

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<sup>45</sup> Reina Wiskerke, quoting Rev. H. Drost in *Wij geloven immers al?* Nederlands Dagblad, 3 Feb. 1992

<sup>46</sup> Rev. Simon DeBruin *Presumptive Regeneration*, A Christian Lecture Series, 1988

<sup>47</sup> J. De Jong, *The Covenant and the Children of Believers- a reply(1)*, Clarion 40(21), p.457

## 26 Believers and Hypocrites

How are we saved? Christ died on the cross to pay the price for our debts to God. Theologians sometimes call this the ground or basis for our salvation. Does everybody automatically benefit from this saving work? No, God has ordained that people must realise their guilt, hear the Gospel message, and accept it. Christ comes to sinners by way of His Word, and they then must repent and believe.

Christ saved the world, but that is no guarantee that every human will be saved. Many are drowning in the illusion that they are good. Hearing the Gospel is like a lifesaver being thrown at you. Now, we must use two parallel stories to maintain the truth. The one is that we have to take hold and grab the lifesaver. That illustrates our responsibility. The parallel truth is that God must not only throw us the lifesaver, he must convince us to use it. Without this persuasion, we would all stubbornly ignore it and perish. That is man's depravity and God's sovereignty.

This essay deals not with the question of how we are saved. Also, it does not deal with the question, whether or not the Lifesaver was meant for some particular person. It deals with the question of whether or not I have the Lifesaver. Am I being pulled up out of the water? How can we be sure of the status of our personal rescue? To answer this question, we must focus on two aspects. First, we can trust the Lifesaver, the Person pulling the rope aboard, and the bond between them. God's Word is sure and we can trust God. Second, we must cling to the lifesaver. Therefore we must continue to realise our constant need and focus on the lifesaver.

The point I wanted to make is this; Some of our leaders put all the emphasis on trusting the Lifesaver, that the need to hang on to it is barely heard. They stress the certainty of God's Word so much that the demand for faith is muffled. Isn't it great to know that you have a Life Saver, there right beside you- and to know for sure that it will be lifted up to safety? Problem is, if you refuse to hang on to it, it will eventually leave without you! Isn't it great to know that you may hear God's Word and have the promise? The fact that the sower sows His seed in you as the soil is no guarantee that there will be fruit!

Several readers have said that this is the most confusing essay in *Praying for Rain*. In the middle of page 124, I wrote, "There are subjective grounds for salvation". From the previous paragraph it can be clear that I refer to "assurance of salvation", for which subjective grounds exist. The "Guido committee" was confused by this error, and concluded that "br Smit falls into what appears to be an explicitly confessed subjectivism."

### **26- questions and comments:**

- 1 At the time of writing this last essay of part one, Reformed Perspective published a relevant letter to the editor:  
"According to br. Wes Bredenhof, in his article "The Value of the Puritans", we are to learn from the Puritans two things; 'The first is in the realm of godliness and holy living. ... The second is their stress upon

family worship.' I firmly believe that if we are to learn anything from any one it is how to live out of the promises of God. If the first stress is on godliness and holy living, then we put the cart before the horse. And then we set ourselves up for certain failure. We must know how to live out of the wonderful covenant promises of God. Our holy living, including prayer and family worship, is then a matter of thankfulness. Let us keep a proper perspective, a Biblical one." <sup>48</sup>

It seems to me that Wes Bredenhof identified a lack of balance. If we fail to see the need for action (call it "response"), we can forever maintain to have the right perspective, but the church will become an empty shell. God's gifts and human responsibility always go together, but that works both ways. Where thankfulness falls short, God's gifts are despised (Lk.7.44-47), and ultimately lost. Beware of the covenant curse!

2 Every now and then we hear about "Arminian subjectivism". In a recent Clarion article, it was stated that, "By saying that the ground for baptism is the believer's testimonial that he has accepted Christ, the Baptists are espousing Arminian subjectivism. Man has to do something to become a Christian. God, however, is the Alpha and the Omega. Our salvation from beginning to end is from Him and through Him and unto Him...." <sup>49</sup>

We have to watch for oversimplification.

1 We are told that subjectivism ignores God's Word and His promises. Subjectivism emphasises the work of God in man. It has a true awareness of God's life-changing power, and recognises the renewing work of the Spirit. Baptists reserve the sign until the two-sided covenant is complete. That does not mean that, therefore it was not God who worked the faith in them.

2 It's not the testimonial or professing with the lips, which is central in man's response, but the acceptance as an act of the whole person, including mind (intellect) and heart (emotion). Most Baptists, as far as I know, would agree with this, and therefore, we must be careful with cheap caricatures.

3 Baptism does not guarantee salvation, as we cannot truly know the heart of man. That is true for Baptists and Infant Baptists. Being a mature Christian; being fully in Christ requires a change of heart, which God works. Acceptance of Christ and a struggle with sin and pursuit of holiness, involve the person's will and choice and action, while all power and life and truth come from God. Man's work and God's work together, but only to God's credit. Beware of false distinctions and no-lordship teaching.

4 Let's reverse the argument: "By claiming that the ground for salvation is infant baptism, the Canadian Reformed are espousing Hyper-Calvinistic (or Arminiphobic) Objectivism."

They teach that: What man does has no bearing on his salvation. All people reject the Word, but some God places in the (true) church, to lead them to Heaven. Lifestyle of these people has nothing to do with 'getting there.' During the week you really cannot tell who is Christian and who

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<sup>48</sup> Letter to the Editor, Rev. W.B. Slomp, RP 16(3) Jan.1997

<sup>49</sup> J. Ludwig, *By Virtue of the Covenant (pt.2)*, Clarion 46(3), p. 55

is not, for all are sinners." Are these generalisations and exaggerations? I sure hope so! But do we use such an approach in how we "see" and describe our Brothers, the Baptists?

5 We must learn to see that man is actively involved; he must do something (but not to earn anything). Faith is gift and obligation; work of God and work of man. Some downplay the first, others the second. We must maintain both!

3 Eight years ago, RP published an editorial about infant baptism vs. the doctrine of self-salvation. It makes a similar accusation as in the previous point. "Anabaptists have seen baptism as sign of their commitment to God and not as a sign of God's promise to believers! In Baptist tradition, holy baptism signifies and seals what lies in man and not what is given by God." <sup>50</sup>

Do we really know Baptists if we make such conclusions? Is this not a caricature of outsiders? We too easily condemn others for being Arminian, without giving them a proper hearing. What is the contrast between "personal commitment" and faith (as in "believers")? Do Baptists indeed see faith as something from man only, and not worked by God, or are we, ourselves, creating this false dilemma?

Last year our family was invited to attend the baptism of our kids' friends in a (not Reformed!) Baptist church. It was clearly and publicly said that it was God, who had worked the faith in these young people's hearts so that they now committed themselves to Christ. Let us not use caricatures for other Christians, especially if we hate it if they use caricatures for us. If we judge rashly we may be judged in a similar way!

4 Professor J. Geertsema wrote about "The question in the Liberation: What is the basis for the certainty of faith? God's Word of promise alone or also our regeneration?" In this article, he suggested that (the promise in) baptism gives more assurance than (the reality of) regeneration. Synod 1942 stated that self-examination "...undoubtedly ought to take its starting point in the covenant of grace, but self examination is still required for those who are baptised, as not all who are baptised are true believers." I would say "Right on!", but Professors J. Kamphuis and J. Geertsema warn us that in this way the promise and regeneration are contrasted, whereby all emphasis falls on the second, the subjective element. This will result, they claim, in uncertainty for the membership.

5 Dr. J. De Jong does not like to use the objective-subjective framework, because he is afraid that the two will be "entirely divorced" from each other.<sup>51</sup> He gives no examples of anybody attempting such a divorce. How could there be fruit, without the work of the sower?

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<sup>50</sup> Cl. Stam, RP 8(7), May 1989, p.2

<sup>51</sup> Dr. J De Jong, *The Appropriation of Salvation, some comments*, Clarion 47(11), p.257

### III Body Language

Are our confessions, and the way we read them, the absolute criterion, which defines the Body of Christ? According to Dr. De Jong,<sup>52</sup> Lutheran churches and Baptist churches cannot be seen as churches of Christ, since they differ from our confessions regarding the meaning of the sacraments. If a view is “clearly” different from our confessions, it cannot be tolerated among us, and the church where such matters are taught cannot be the church of Christ. Many leaders and members in our Dutch sister churches could not accept such a narrow definition of the church, and consequently they were ousted in the Public Letter affair. The very fact that recently there have been talks and attempts to heal this break suggests that views have mellowed on this point. In Canada, however, the leaders frantically try to hold to the tradition. Meanwhile, however, there is a fairly quiet majority, which no longer holds to Dr. De Jong’s definition. Many have stopped reading the Clarion, so they need not be confronted with such narrow-mindedness. It is another sign that collapse is imminent. Dr. De Jong pleads that the Canadian Reformed churches may all agree with him to form one united front. What does his church view entail?

Dr. De Jong claims that, according to the “clear reading” of our confessions Baptist churches and Lutheran churches are not churches of Christ. As the confessions only know of a true church and a false church, he must go one step further and call such churches “synagogues of Satan”. Calvin himself would shiver at the thought, and Dr. K. Schilder saw no problem celebrating the Lord’s Supper in a Lutheran congregation. So, what’s left for us? The Free Reformed churches (FRC), in an introductory pamphlet, state, “We realize that our creeds contain doctrines about which the universal church of Christ is deeply divided, for example, the question of infant baptism.” This is clearly in conflict with the “clear reading” of our confessions (which are also theirs), as Dr. De Jong sees it. By his own definition then, the FRC are not churches of Christ. Dr. De Jong also reads the confessions differently than the FRC do when it comes to the appropriation of salvation.<sup>53</sup> The Guido board, its committee, and the Hamilton consistory all agreed that today’s church may **only** be defined as the faithful congregation(s), where the true preaching is heard, and **not also** as the sum total of all believers. Consequently, the church is defined as those who hear the Word, not as those who have accepted the Word. Personally, I don’t think that this is scriptural. From *Christian Renewal* it is clear that the United Reformed churches also disagree with the Canadian Reformed definition for “church”. As far as I can tell from the Westminster Confession as well as OPC publications, their church view also does not match the “clear reading” of our confession. The Guido board and the Hamilton consistory insist that agreement with (all aspects of) our confessions, is prerequisite for the right to partake of the Lord’s Supper. Also on this point, the Canadian Reformed churches seem to be the only churches in North America to make such restrictions.

On the one hand we smile at the OPC, the FRC, and the URC. We stretch out our welcoming arms for we seek their unity. Meanwhile, however, we look

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<sup>52</sup> J. De Jong, *Confession and Church Unity*, Clarion 47(4), pp.78-79

<sup>53</sup> J. De Jong, *The Appropriation of Salvation*, Clarion 47(110)

angrily upon those among us who think like them. If I was fired from Guido for my views of church and the Lord's Supper, how can we expect that URC members would be allowed to teach our children? At bottom line, the Canadian Reformed leadership still holds views, which will ensure a continued position of "splendid isolation". We love to be united with others, as long as they first change and become exactly like us. As we all know, ministers coming from outside of our subculture never last in our churches! A careful observer must conclude that (even today, although indirectly perhaps) many of our leaders still claim that only the Canadian/American Reformed federation is really **the** church of Christ in North America.

The legacy of church struggles in the past is often carried across the generations in certain phrases. Removed from their original context, however, such phrases can easily fail to communicate their original intent. Ask ten of us what "total depravity" means and you get at least five different answers. Are believers still totally depraved or is that the status of natural man? Does "total" mean that nothing good is left, or that all aspects of humanity, including the will were affected by the Fall? On the outside, it appears that the church keeps saying the same thing, but the meaning attributed to it gets either blurred or changed over time. We must fight phraseology if we want to avoid a dead orthodoxy.

The term "church" has often come to mean "federation", but traditionally we refused to equate it with Christ's gathering of all believers unto Himself. We superimpose our traditional definition of "sinner" onto every text and we are blinded to the fact that many Scripture passages about sinners demand a different meaning. Although the confessions describe the "false church" in terms of the opposite of the church, we find it harsh to equate this with the "synagogue of Satan". For us "false church" has come to mean "not as good a church as ours", i.e. substandard. Keeping one from the Lord's Supper was meant to say, "You have no part of God's Kingdom. You are on your way to hell, and unless you repent, you will certainly not go to heaven." Nevertheless, I asked several elders in the Hamilton consistory, but none of them would admit to this after they put my wife and me under discipline. Today, "discipline" has come to mean something quite different. Brother A is kept from the Supper for his sinful life, but the elders don't see why he could not play a key role in an evangelism project. Brother B is kept from the Supper for heresy, but a key elder in this process has no qualms giving good references for this Brother's attending of (an interdenominational) seminary. Even though we read the form of the Lord's Supper, the words fail to communicate to us, for we superimpose our ideas onto the text.

When I asked students what the fourth commandment means for us, today, they often said, "We may not work on Sundays." Apparently, this is what they were taught, even though the Heidelberg Catechism teaches something quite different. We may have heard sixty sermons on this and we may have read it 65 times, but some people never seem to read what the text of the confession actually says. The fact that "Feiertag" (holiday, that is feast day, where you have a day off) was translated "day of rest" is also based on preferred interpretation.

## 27 What is the Church?

In this essay we wanted to explore what the Bible means with “the church”. It is impossible to catch it all in one definition, as the different perspectives or aspects of “church” do not completely and neatly overlap. For those who want to maintain a simple, schematic picture for this concept, we find that either the commitment to a local church is lacking or the expression of unity of all Christian believers will disappear.

As recently as two generations ago, most church denominations figured they were the only true church, and most –if not all- true Christians were to be found within their walls. The leaders would warn their sheep to avoid other Christians and not to trust them. In this way the shepherds could uphold their exclusive position and secure their status, while their sheep would never find out that other fine Christians and churches existed outside their own federation. Their confessions might say that we must diligently discern what is church of Christ and what is synagogue of Satan, but the leaders insisted that this is not the task of the laity. Rather, they must trust the leaders to do this for them. Frequent caricatures of other denominations had to convince the membership that there is no church but their own.

### **For further reading**

Kokichi Kurosaki *Let's return to Christian Unity* (1954, 1991)  
Watchman Nee *The Normal Christian Church Life* (1969)

### **27- questions and comments:**

- 1 Jonah went to Nineveh and Jesus went to Samaria. Was the (primary or only) purpose for the benefit of Israel? This is what I was taught, as if history did and does centre around a particular group of people. Was it not rather God's plan for Israel to be a blessing to all nations, and the objective of the covenant to save the whole world?
- 2 The Westminster Confession defines the church in chapter 25. It recognises different perspectives, summarised as:
  - \*the invisible, catholic or universal church; the elect of all times
  - \*the visible, catholic or universal church, described as the professing Christians and their children
  - \*particular churches, which are more or less pure in doctrine, faith, administration, and public worship.How does the Belgic Confession define the church as the gathering of all elect, the local congregations, and the true Christians? Which of these aspects are covered in which articles?
- 3 Calvin teaches that “catholic church” and “communion of saints” refer to the same entity, in which all Christians are members. The invisible church of the elect, whose membership is known to God alone, is differentiated but not dis severed from the organised church visible on earth, whose members are known to each other.<sup>54</sup> Notice that many of

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<sup>54</sup> *Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. JT. McNeil, introduction XII

our leaders would reject the “father of the Reformation” for his un-Reformed view of the church.

Rev. Stam used to represent our traditional view well, when he wrote, “When Lord’s Day 21, Question 55 speaks about the ‘communion of saints’, it speaks about ‘believers, one and all’.” These believers are not “scattered throughout various denominations”, for only those are believers, who are “being gathered in the unity of the true faith.”<sup>55</sup>

4 It has been said among us that the church is not the work of man but the work of God.<sup>56</sup> We cannot divorce these, however. God uses men, and not only ministers, elders, and deacons either. We have our responsibilities in building the church. On the other hand we should not be paranoid when changes occur in the churches. If we remain obedient, love His Word, and live close to God, we may also trust that He will continue His work, also in “our” churches.

5 There is a demand to join the church! Sometimes, new believers assume that Christianity is only a relationship of "Jesus and me". It is also possible that some leave the church "to be on their own" (with Christ). Paul warns against this. "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another- and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Heb.10.25)

6 Does the Body of Christ “universal” consist of congregations, or are individual Christians described as its parts/members?

7 Our leaders seem to claim that Baptist churches are not churches, and that Baptists are not part of the Body of Christ. They do this by defining the church as congregations, which accept the Three Forms of Unity. On the other hand, the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches defines the (local) church as “a company of immersed believers, ...” So, there appears to be a mutual lack of recognition and a common approach of exclusivism.

8 What distinguishes a sect from the church? I will try to summarise the criteria, traditionally used in our churches. A sect is the product of a schism, which would no longer stay in their previous denomination/federation. Whenever a denomination/federation breaks up, the part, which remains closest to the Reformed confessions is the church, the other part is called sect.

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<sup>55</sup> Cl. Stam, *The Confession Concerning the Church*(2), Clarion 29(22), p.486

<sup>56</sup> Cl. Stam, *The Confession Concerning the Church*(2), Clarion 29(21), p.466  
D.G.J. Agema, *The ICRC-a response*(2), Clarion 39(4), p.79

## **28-31 Church History and the View of the Church**

Young people and those who came “from the outside” usually know little of the history of our churches. To know about the issues and the turmoil of the forties (Liberation), the sixties (Public Letter), and the eighties (DeBruin case) helps to understand the typically Canadian Reformed doctrinal ideas and the circumstances that shaped them.

Reading about the past, we can get a better appreciation of the role of emotional binding to a denomination, the anger and frustration when some criticise the denomination and leave, the personal politics, the fight for the status quo, and peer pressure. Such unspiritual thoughts and actions often play an important role in times of turmoil. I think it is very important that we recognise that our churches also made mistakes and committed sins in recent church history. The future for the federation is bleak if we refuse to acknowledge the sins of the past.

We condemned the Synodicals for embracing unscriptural theories, such as presumptive regeneration. Yet, we have done the same when we reasoned that there are true believers outside of the Body of Christ. Can there be fruit bearing branches, which are not grafted into the true Vine? Are there living stones which are not incorporated into His building, built on Jesus Christ? This and other fantasies were required to uphold our own doctrinal system, which was paraded as “the truth”.

We have judged the Free Reformed for refusing to unite with us, the true church. Yet, under a veneer of open-mindedness and grace, we have done the same to the OPC, and unless dramatic changes occur, we will do the same to the URC.

We rejected the Synodicals when they ousted sincere Christian leaders who refused to budge to extrascriptural binding in the federation, but we have done the same and similar things to men like Rev. Simon DeBruin.

Renewal starts with repentance. This is true for personal renewal as well as for ecclesiastical renewal. As we know, history tends to repeat itself for most people refuse to listen the first time around.

### **28-31- questions and comments:**

- 1 Rev. D. DeJong wrote concerning the Reformed Churches in the 1930s, that "They took it for granted that they were the 'purest' church in the country, consisting of members who were assumed to be elect and born again. No wonder that the Lord so noticeably blessed all their endeavours, they thought." <sup>57</sup> How have we, in the Canadian Reformed Churches avoided these mistakes?
- 2 Consider Rev. Knoop's points for reformation in the context of our churches today. In brackets are some typical responses.
  - 2.1 Do we have a tendency to think that we have "arrived"?  
(All doctrinal problems have been resolved in the past, and our confessions are God's antidote for any threat to the status quo.)
  - 2.2 Do we have a tendency to exclusivism or sectarianism?  
(Sects are false churches. Consequently, false churches are sectarian. As we are the true church, we cannot be sectarian.<sup>58</sup>)
  - 2.3 Do we have power struggles in our consistories and major assemblies? Do we emphasise status and influence or obedience and closeness to Christ? (Read Rev. Hoogsteen's publication on "mini-bishops".<sup>59</sup>)
  - 2.4 Do we stress holy living as mark of the Church of Christ? Are we prepared to meet the Holy One?  
(To claim obedience as mark of the true Church gets people stranded in self-centredness; we have to avoid this and stick to the confession.)
  - 2.5 Do we dare to confront others publicly with the Truth?  
(Our worship services are public; the church doors are open.)
  - 2.6 Are we Nathaniels, or do we play political tricks, manipulating others? Are we "transparent", shunning the ways of the world?
  - 2.7 Are Canadian Reformed people, a special group of God's favour, over and above "other" Christians?
  - 2.8 Do we see our ministers as people with a special hot-line to heaven, while the laity cannot speak one edifying word?
- 3 Rev. H.D.J. Smit describes the classical-liberated confession on the church as follows, "Articles 27-29 all deal with the one visible church. In the Netherlands this church (at this moment) takes the shape of the Reformed churches (Liberated). Consequently everyone is called to join this one visible church (federation). Those who don't do so are disobedient as they ignore God's explicit commandment, and they are in conflict with the confession."<sup>60</sup>  
According to Rev. Smit, this interpretation is carried by two or three arguments. First the word "congregation" in article 27 is pointed out, concluding that this can be nothing but the concrete and visible church. Next, article 28 begins by referring to "this congregation", which means it refers to the same church (federation). Does article 28 not conclude with

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<sup>57</sup> *Secession and Liberation for Today*. ILPB 1984, p.22

<sup>58</sup> see RP editorial *What is Sectarianism*, Vol. 10(2), Dec. '90, p.2,3

<sup>59</sup> Rev. T. Hoogsteen, *Faithful for a Thousand Generations: Also to the Second and Third*. (1998), available at the Family Christian Bookstore at Burlington, p.92

<sup>60</sup> H.J.D. Smit, *Kerk en Organisatie, Motieven en achtergronden: een peiling*. In H.J.D. Smit et al., *Toekomst voor de Gereformeerde Organisaties* (1994), p.70

- the words "All therefore who draw away from the (this!) church or fail to join it, act contrary to the ordinance of God."
- 5 K. Schilder has strongly emphasised what became our traditional view, in the fear that people would not take church-choice to be a serious issue. Nevertheless, despite of its dominance, Schilder's interpretation has always had some opponents. It puts the Liberated Reformed community in isolation as it points fingers to all others; disobedient! It is a prime example of ethnocentrism, where one's own view is set as norm. The Scripture and confessions are then interpreted from that perspective to give divine justification of one's own views.
- 6 Among us, "regeneration" has been made a nebulous concept of which we cannot say much worthwhile. It has been wholly delegated to the "hidden things" of God, and some even called it a sin to talk about them. Scriptural evidence on this point was simply ignored. Interestingly, we have done something similar yet opposite concerning the church. We have steadily refused to describe or see the world-wide Church as something other than congregations and federations. We rather narrowed it down to our local churches with their membership lists. By doing this we have isolated ourselves, and in this perfect isolation, unbalanced views could be kept by (in Canada- a tightly controlled press,) peer pressure and indoctrination.
- 7 We do not teach the need for personal regeneration, except as an ongoing process of daily confessing that we are sinners. We do not stress church reformation as an ongoing process (semper reformanda), but only in terms of the Great Reformation(s) of the past. Why?
- 8 If on holidays, far from a Canadian Reformed church (or sister church), should we attend a different church? Does God want us to worship Him there, in the communion of saints, or should we remain by ourselves, reading a "safe" sermon, rather than polluting ourselves in "the synagogue of Satan"?
- 9 Try to answer the questions at the end of essay 30. There have been several examples in the recent past, which could help you formulate the answer.
- 10 True churches have to work together and strive for closer unity. How does our relationship with, say Reformed Baptists, form an implicit rejection of these churches as churches of Christ?
- 11 The Public Letter stated that "We are convinced that this problem will become crucial for the ecclesiastical reality of the future." Indeed, we too, are forced to look abroad and over the federation walls to re-evaluate the width of Christ's Church. When Rev. Schoep c.s. had the courage to make this point, we were not yet ready to hear it. One cannot tell a person anything unless he is ready to hear it!
- 12 Did our happy continuation of ecclesiastical contacts imply that the Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken were no longer the legal continuation of the (only) Church of Christ in The Netherlands?

### 32-35 Doctrinal discussions

After exploring the events, we must investigate the issues. Using the introduction (essay 27) as starting point, we focus on several issues related to the doctrine of the church.

We found that the Canadian Reformed churches emphasised the federation so much, that the universal church was often ignored. Church membership seemed to be more important than being members of Christ. Our federation and its contacts were often seen as the very Body of Christ and the full communion of saints. Even today, some leaders are trying hard to retain such views, while in public they will deny the implications. The reports in the appendix can demonstrate that exclusivism and objectivism still play a large role in the community.

A losing battle is being fought by some, who insist that the universal church is made up of faithful churches, not all faithful Christians. Let's call it "the Canadian Reformed Error". Several leaders have suggested that "all true believers" would constitute an invisible church, which does not exist. The impression is given that the true church is easily recognised, but that true believers cannot be recognised. We can clearly tell the true church, by comparing their doctrine to our interpretation of our confessions, but only God knows the true Christians. The Bible says, and the confessions confirm, that true Christians can be known by their profession that Christ is Lord and by their obedience in faith, by grace. Therefore the universal Body of Christ does not consist of congregations but of all those who found salvation in Jesus Christ. This is the visible church, even if there are some hypocrites, who manage to fool us (and themselves!) for a long time, pretending to be members thereof. Even the Baptists know that, so they too, do not believe that the church cannot yet be identical to the elect, contrary to what some have claimed.<sup>61</sup> The Westminster Confession also speaks of the visible universal church when it refers to all believers (and their children). It would be good if we took the time and trouble to be thoroughly informed before we judge too quickly.<sup>62</sup>

The Canadian Reformed error leads to unscriptural constructions, whereby a wedge is driven between Christ and His Body, or between His Body and the church. The scriptural images of the Vine and the living stones, also leads to puzzling questions. Can there be fruit-bearing branches outside the Vine, or living stones, which are not built on Christ? B.C., article 27 is misrepresented by equating "congregation" and "gathering" here with the work of man, who gather in worship, rather than to Christ, who gathers all sheep (gathering of (all) the believers, not just gathering of (some) believers!) to the one flock. The example, given in article 27 refers to 7000 people, who refused to bow their knees for Baal. Obviously, this does not refer to local groups, meeting at the synagogues, but to all persons who persevered in obedience and faith.

The suggestion is often made that the church congregation must be seen as a homogeneous group. The congregation is often addressed as if all have faith. I know of quite a few people, who grew up in a variety of Protestant churches

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<sup>61</sup> J. De Jong, *The Baptist Error*, Clarion 47(13)

<sup>62</sup> Cl. Stam, *Invisible Church and Open Communion*, Clarion 40(14), p. 317

without realising that they had to make a conscious, deliberate decision to follow Christ and to commit themselves to His service. The Canadian Reformed churches do not form an exception; to the contrary!

The Canadian Reformed churches reject the idea that the Body of Christ can be found in a variety of church denominations, having somewhat different emphases on aspects of the Scriptures. Our doctrinal framework is the truth and beyond that we only can find the false church, which is the antichurch.

Where this church concept is embraced as truth and where the Lord's Supper becomes the symbol for allegiance to such views, there can be no church outside of the Canadian Reformed churches. This conclusion must be made, even if we hate to publicly admit to it.

error: after the break on page 165, I refer to article 28, but the marks of the true church are described in article 29.

### **32-35- questions and comments:**

- 1 The aligned view of the church leaves no room for hypocrites. Come to think about it, we rarely talk about hypocrites. To distinguish among people in the true church is "confessionally incorrect". The antithesis, in that view, is defined by the walls of a federation; insiders vs. outsiders. In reality, however, the antithesis runs straight through churches. The Guido committee rejected this idea. If the Reformed church equals the gathering of believers, this precludes hypocrites in and believers outside of it, so they must be exceptions to the rule. Rev. Knoop had a good point about this; a need for reformation indeed!
- 2 What do we call organisations such as the CRC, the Reformed Baptists, the Free Reformed churches, or the Canadian Reformed churches? To call them churches, we would give a new, un-scriptural meaning to this word. To call them federations would create problems as not all see themselves that way. Alliance or conference might be suitable terms for some of them, but not for others. Is there not a more general term? Of course, we could use the term "denomination". Some use this term to promote the idea of equality or as an automatic seal of approval. According to my dictionary, the term can also be used as general name or designation. In this publication then, a denomination refers to "a group of churches, recognising each other and working together in various ways. Affiliation with a denomination is not necessarily expressed in the name of its member churches. The unity may take different organisational forms and have a greater or lesser hierarchy or pressure on the member churches to conform to common ideas or decisions."
- 3 Rev. J.W. Smit writes (referring to John 10.16) that the Christians outside the true churches (as we see them) are not yet in the right sheep pen.<sup>63</sup> "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too, will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd." In the same line, some of us have seen it as their mission (evangelism) to talk to Independent Reformed Brothers to come

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<sup>63</sup> J.W. Smit; *Een levend lidmaat van de kerk*, 1973 De Vuurbaak, p.39

- and join us. Only then they'd be in the right sheep pen. I don't think that the text refers to "the other Christians" who supposedly still have to join the flock. Later, Jesus prays again (Jn.17.20), "My prayer is not for them (the disciples) alone, I pray also for those who will believe in me through their (the disciples') message, that all of them may be one... May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." This is the true purpose of mission, this is the task for God's disciples, the Church; to proclaim the truth and to make disciples for Christ.
- 4 Consider this statement, "Basically the idea of an invisible entity which manifests itself in more or less pure forms is an idea which does not originate from the Word of God but from the ancient Greek philosophy which continued to influence the thinking in the Western world."<sup>64</sup> The Gospel is always incorporated into some culture. The Bible itself uses concepts of other (including Greek) thinking to explain the message. Contrary to what is suggested in the quote, even if the concept of "invisible church" comes via Greek philosophy, this does not therefore prove it wrong. Just because the image of the covenant promise as a cheque is borrowed from the world of finance, this does not suggest or prove that the comparison is wrong.
- 5 Consider this quote, "Far from being of the same mind and judgement, each denomination and sect has its own banner or trademark. Though in theory they may accept the idea that others can be right with God, in practice they believe that true Christianity is represented by their sect alone. Seeing themselves superior to others, they attempt to pull all (saved and unsaved) to themselves, and think that only in this way can they be loyal to the Lord. These sects and denominations, with no qualms over "stealing sheep" from other folds, seem more concerned with converting men to their own group than to Christ. How many of us have tried to convert a brother to their own "true faith"? Thus Paul's admonitions (e.g. 1Co.1.10, 16; 3.5-8; Phil.1.27; 2.2; 4.2, etc.) are so utterly neglected that the Ekklesia of God is now divided into hundreds of sects and denominations and has fallen into fatal disorder."<sup>65</sup>
- 6 It is a logical reality, which many tend to ignore, that "reading" is an interaction of a text with the reader's mind. A book is never (un)clear, independent of the reader. "Clarity" is never dependent on the text only, but also on the reader's mind. Even though it makes no sense to talk about an objective clarity of Scripture, we must maintain that nobody can blame God for his unbelief, with the excuse "Scripture was not clear", for the responsibility lies fully with man!
- 7 A statement can have a variety of meanings. One can say "Scripture is clear", while he means to say, "If everybody shared our Biblical knowledge, IQ, and spiritual blessings by which we understand God's Word, they would all agree with our views and particular doctrines and – in fact- become Canadian Reformed."

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<sup>64</sup> probably in *Patrimony Profile*, WWVO, Clarion 38(24), p.520

<sup>65</sup> Kokichi Kurosaki, *Let's Return to Christian Unity*, p.4

### 36 Forgive us, For we have Synod

What did Rev. DeBruin do?

- (1) He insisted on searching for the scriptural truth,
- (2) he publicly confronted the church (congregation and federation) with their existing unbalanced doctrines,
- (3) for the sake of the truth, he refused to quietly submit to tradition and pressure.

This has been summarised as; stubbornness, attacking the church, and creating divisions. Meanwhile we find that the leadership was out to appease the tradition. DeBruin's views were misrepresented, while the unbalanced doctrine of the church was maintained. Slander and persecution were accepted as means to liberate the church from the dangerous heresies, which threatened it. Even today these things linger in the federation as the appendices will demonstrate.

One Canadian Reformed leader objected that decisions against Rev. DeBruin were not made with a slim majority. "These were unanimous decisions. I know it for I was there." Rev. G. VanDooren, in context of the Rev. DeBruin case, wrote, "The last synod I attended sticks in my memory as the 'nine/seven synod.' Most decisions were taken with a 9 for/ 7 against vote, whether a motion was adopted or rejected."<sup>66</sup>

#### **36- questions and comments:**

- 1 Do church members share responsibility for how we treat our ministers? Have you ever tried to get an unbiased report on what happened when a minister left or had to leave near you? Did you ever try to get their story? Here are just some of the recent cases:  
Rev. VanEssen (Ancaster)  
Rev. Hoogsteen (Lincoln)  
Rev. Gleason (Toronto)  
Rev. Marren (mission, Smithers)  
Rev. DeBruin (Edmonton)
- 2 Read the Guido and Cornerstone reports (appendices B1, C1) and see what they state about the doctrine of the church. Can you now believe that, centuries ago, a few fanatic leaders could persuade a whole church institution to burn dissidents to death? What is worse: to burn one's body or to cut one off from God's Kingdom?

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<sup>66</sup> G. VanDooren, *Analysis of an Interpretation*, Clarion 36(16), p.346

### 37 The Federation

It is so common among us that we use “church” to refer to our federation that we don’t really think about it. In a recent article in *Clarion* we read,<sup>67</sup> “The church has never promoted a faith that comes across as a cold, lifeless set of rules and dogma (and) that one must blindly and arbitrarily accept.” No local church, ever, has come across that way? The writer probably refers to the (Canadian Reformed) church (federation). Earlier, another minister wrote, “In her history, the church has learned that (to believe that there are two covenants) is not Scriptural.”<sup>68</sup> What is “the church” here, but our federation?

Last year the Burlington Study Centre invited a speaker who was not Canadian Reformed to teach us about Christianity and youth culture. A local home mission committee invited a college professor (member of CRC) to speak on Biblical Foundations for Mission work. Just after these events, one of our ministers mentioned in a sermon that this was a bad thing, and rationalised this by quoting 1 Corinthians 12.28; “in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers...”. I asked him what he meant with “church”. Obviously it cannot refer to a local church, and neither did he want to place such a restriction.

#### **37- questions and comments:**

- 1 If church federations are like marriages, we may not accept membership of a (formerly) OPC church into our federation, for we would encourage a divorce. Do the authors who see our federation as marriage covenant, also see other federations in that way? Do they also, with the same passion, write against the "Denver divorce"?
- 2 Apparently the Reformed tradition teaches that "all those who separate themselves from the community of the faithful to form a sect on its own, have no hope of salvation so long as they are in schism."<sup>69</sup> Does this apply to individuals only, or also to churches? We have declared that the OPC are faithful churches, but yet we fail to embrace them as sister churches. Are we sectarian as denomination?

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<sup>67</sup> J. De Jong, *The Covenant and the Christian Life (1)*, *Clarion* 47(17), p.404

<sup>68</sup> Rev. D. Agema, *Do we need a story?*2, *RP* 15(12), p.18

<sup>69</sup> *The Doctrine of the Church in Reformed Confessions-2* *Clarion*, 1986, Vol. 35(3), p.57

## 38 The Creeds and the Church

If somebody tells us that we lean too far over to the right, our natural response would be to deny it. We would probably blame him that he himself leans over much too far to the left. From our perspective that makes sense. This kind of primary overreaction has also happened with respect to my book. Femmie compared me to a prophet while those who rejected my warnings treated me as Israel treated her prophets. I warned that we overemphasise our sinful nature over our new nature as if we are still under the dominion of sin. Even though I wrote repeatedly that the struggle with sin stays with us at this side of eternity, several have blamed me of semi-perfectionism. The church cannot only be the community of those who hear God's Word, for that would ignore the need for faith. Church discipline and excommunication does not fit in such a view. Consequently, we must have a dual definition, but my suggestions were considered heresy. I warned against confessionalism and so I was labelled as one who has no respect for the confessions. Among Evangelicals I am seen as a five point Calvinist, but among those where I have lived and taught so long I am ousted as Arminian and a six-point heretic. Although this is at times frustrating, it should not surprise us. It is the natural (not a spiritual!) response to warning and criticism and it takes time and revelation to change a mind-set, which has been entrenched for a long time.

### **38- questions and comments:**

- 1 In 1993, Synod Ommen of our Dutch sister churches established a committee for unity with the "Nederlands Gereformeerde" churches (which separated as a result of the Public Letter). This committee addressed the status of the creeds:  
"The present forms are not per definition ultimate, infallible, and perfect expressions of the Christian faith. In principle they are subject to change and even replacement by a contemporary confession. On the one hand we say therefore that our current confessions are faithful and authoritative in their reflection of the scriptural doctrine. In all parts they agree with the Word of God. Nothing unscriptural is found in these confessions. On the other hand it may be necessary to correct or improve an article after exegetical and doctrinal research and proper considerations. The church (federation, IS) is then called to do better justice to God's teachings in His Word."<sup>70</sup>
- 2 What are "fundamental parts of truth"? Are we to be kept from the Lord's Supper if we agree with John Calvin's definition for the church? Are we to be kept from the grace of Christ if we refuse to give to the confessions a status that only Scripture deserves? Are we to be excommunicated if we fail to see a scriptural command to baptise infants?
- 3 Is infant baptism a "fundamental element of the truth?" Not according to evangelicals. James I. Packer can accept both, the Paedobaptist and the

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<sup>70</sup> De Reformatie 72(18), 8 Feb. 1997, p. 371,372

Baptist points of view, and I have argued along the same lines. What do our leaders say?

The status of the children in the church “is not a theoretical matter, this touches the heart of the Christian congregation. It is moreover of great doctrinal importance to put matters clearly here. If you mix things up here, and you want to keep infant and adult Baptists as friends (as Packer does, IS), then you will end up with a vague and illogical story about baptism. Packer aligns himself very clearly here with those of the evangelical persuasion who consider matters of baptism not worthy of church division.

We must say a heart-felt "No" to this. Between Baptist thought and biblical teaching about covenant and baptism there remains a chasm which is unbridgeable. Precisely on the matter of baptism I find Packer's (views) lacking in scriptural-reformed thought."<sup>71</sup>

Are we not vague and illogical? Our leaders have written that Baptists are Arminians (essay 26, q.1). A few, however, have blamed them to be HyperCalvinists (as they say, “There is no general offer of the gospel in the real sense of the term.”) It may be preached to all, but it actually only is for the chosen ones. God’s promise or offer of salvation, in other words, is not for all those who hear the Gospel.<sup>72</sup>

We maintain that “having the promise” is the (only) ground for baptism,<sup>73</sup> but regular church visitors may only be baptised after they have come to faith, because “having the promise” is not sufficient ground for baptism.

4 The fact that different confessions (among our three forms of unity as well as the Westminster confession, etc.) each have a different emphasis and width is proof that none of them sufficiently and accurately summarizes the truth of Scripture. The Canons emphasise certain issues as predestination while the Heidelberger focuses on our blessings in Christ. The Belgic Confession stresses the unity of the Church as it ought to be, while the Westminster Standards show its practical diversity and brokenness. The latter also has a stronger emphasis on the sovereignty of God. Consequently, even though they all reflect the light of Scripture, none of them can reflect the full spectrum. Consequently, they cannot be equated with the Word of God.

5 We must be careful to assume that a reactionary confession gives a balanced “summary” of the full Gospel. If, for instance, a confession is written in reaction to Arminianism, we can expect it to give more attention to God’s Sovereignty, and less to human responsibility.

7 When “the truth” becomes etched in stone, there is a great danger to lose the dynamic character of knowing the full Gospel and applying it in walk and talk. The laity becomes lazy and the clergy becomes paranoid.

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<sup>71</sup> *Press Review* on James I. Packer, *Growing in Christ*, Clarion 46(13), p. 295

<sup>72</sup> Rev. K.J. Pieters, 1866, in J. De Jong, *The Baptist Error*, Clarion 47(13), also J.G. Woelderink, 1946, in Dr. W. van’t Spijker, *Gereformeerden en Dopers, gesprek onderweg*, 1986, p. 12

<sup>73</sup> J. De Jong, *The Baptist Error*, Clarion 47(13)

## 39 Unity in the Church

Obviously there is no unity in the federation on what constitutes the church. We say that the Westminster Confession is a faithful confession, yet “we” claim that true believers are not part of the universal church until they have joined a true (Reformed) congregation. We would get very upset if one suggests that we believe we are “the only true church”, yet many of our leaders hold views which clearly boil down to that conviction. Others may not cause dissension, and must be kept silent. A strong peer pressure hangs as a curse over the federation. Although some of our leaders would love to see us united with other Reformed churches, the “circumcision party” continues to stall any such attempts.

What will happen? Will the Canadian Reformed churches fall prey to serious sectarianism, where persecution will secure a dead orthodoxy, or will they repent from their self-righteous exclusivism and embrace some form of pluriformity? If the latter thing happens they will probably lose some of their identity and *raison d'être*. If tradition is the norm, that cannot be acceptable.

### 39- questions and comments:

- 1 Consider this quote, “Christianity has its centre in God Himself and in the fellowship men have with Him. This fellowship of God with believers through the Spirit is the answer to the question of what faith is. It is also the answer to what the true Ecclesia is. When this centrality of God in fellowship with men (through Christ) is made clear, we at once see that all other elements, such as an institutional church, the interpretations of the Bible, various doctrines, the morality of believers, or any other problem of different denominations or sects *cannot* be the centre of Christianity. This comes only by revelation. Very few who have been intently immersed in Bible schools and ministries will have this revelation. Everything that has been placed in their minds has solidified a mind-set. So many other things have been poured into their minds that it is virtually impossible to genuinely see the Lord Jesus as the one and only centre and the only condition of our faith. To give up this solidified mind-set is too traumatic. It can even be physically and emotionally devastating. When this revelation dawns, we know that we should not judge others by any of our standards. Christ Himself *never* made these the standard for judging his followers.”<sup>74</sup>
- 2 What have we done? We have ignored the Christian faith to emphasise the Reformed faith. By doing so, we have inadvertently pushed Christ to the background and the federation to the front. This amounts to idolatry. Unity with other Christians is thought to be only permissible when there is unity in the Reformed faith, for “believers are united in the true faith” (which means “our way of seeing things!”).<sup>75</sup> It is not the trusting of Christ, but allegiance to the creeds, which is made paramount. Only those who have unity in the Reformed faith are to

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<sup>74</sup> Kokichi Kurosaki, *Let's Return to Christian Unity*, p.32

<sup>75</sup> Cl. Stam, *The Confession Concerning the Church*(2), *Clarion* 29(22), p.486

share in the communion of saints and may partake of the Holy Supper. Yet, if one of us warns for sectarianism, we see it all around us, except amongst ourselves.<sup>76</sup>

Furthermore, we have assumed objectivism. We think we have, as far as that is possible, the absolute truth. What we believe is nothing more or less than what the Reformed confessions state. These confessions accurately reflect the complete scriptural doctrine. Consequently, if others come to other ideas about doctrinal issues, they are wrong for we are right. Consequently, we hold the norm for right and wrong. This is ethnocentrism. This is characteristic of fundamentalism and cults! Any co-operation with other Christians is a potential stain on our ecclesiastical purity, and any reading of books or listening to tapes by other Christians threatens to shake the very foundations of the truth.

Is this exaggerating the situation? Listen to what is said about parachurch organisations and/or interdenominational ministries! Remember what happened when one of our ministers gave his catechism students a “Sproul” tape for extra instruction; “Is there then no prophet in Israel?”<sup>77</sup> See how some consistories refuse to announce a Ligonier’s ministries conference in their church bulletins (they will find a reason!). Read what is wrong with Promise Keepers!

One of our ministers addressed his congregation with the warning that Promise Keepers (PK) is interdenominational, and therefore false. He started his write-up with the admonition that “we have to test the spirits to see whether they are from God”. Now, John continues to explain that “This is how we recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.” “Our” minister, however, admits that PK seeks to honour Jesus Christ, but still comes to the conclusion that PK is false and not from God. What is the norm? Does John water down the truth that we have? Think and discover what is truly false here!

- 3 Consider what Paul writes: “You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not mere men? What, after all is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe – as the Lord has assigned to each his task.” (1Co.3.3-5) “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptised into the name of Paul?” (1Co.1.13) Trying to solve the dilemmas concerning baptism and regeneration, the Church has been fragmented even further than it was. Who is Hoeksema and what is Kuyper? Is Christ divided? Was Schilder crucified for you? Or were they all God's servants, building on the one foundation, Jesus Christ?

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<sup>76</sup> *What is Sectarianism?*, editorial in RP 10(2), p.2

<sup>77</sup> WWVO, *Response to Reactions*, Clarion 41(12), p.256

## 40 Winds of Change

In 1990 we visited Dinosaur Provincial Park. My parents were visiting us in Calgary and we took a few days' holidays with them to show them the prairies as well as the mountains. Although it was only June and the mountains still had plenty of snow, the badlands were already hot and dry. The soil was parched and the bugs were bad. Yet, there were flowering cacti. (I sometimes wonder if my book would have been more welcomed and accepted if I had said more about the flowers...)

I had told several people that we would never move to Ontario. I loved the rugged nature of the west; its open spaces and its rugged beauty were so dear to us. I hated to think that we should move east, where everything seemed crowded and polluted. And yet... it seemed that God had other plans. All other options seemed to backfire, but "Guido" wanted me. Our minister tried to convince us to stay but I had a growing sense that God wanted us to go to Hamilton.

So, we went. With our van and a rented moving truck we headed east. My in-laws joined us on the long trip to Ontario. As we only left in the afternoon the first day would be short, so we camped near Brooks, still in the province of Alberta. After supper I suggested to my father-in-law to make a brief visit to Dinosaur Provincial Park. So, once more I had the opportunity to visit this park. But now, it was a different world! A huge thunderstorm swept over the landscape. As we entered the badlands, it grew dark. The rain poured down and instead of dry, parched land, there were all kinds of creeks and puddles. Erosion rates seemed high as the sediment-laden streams headed for the river. The whole event left a deep impression.

For almost seven years I served at Guido. After trying to get into mission work and full-time evangelism, God gave me a different kind of mission. While I was writing the book I tried to get feedback, but there was little in the form of helpful arguments. Discussions with professors, ministers and elders sometimes yielded valuable insight into the Canadian Reformed mind, but there seemed to be little interest to provide me with constructive feedback. It was amazing that there were no objections from the consistory that I should publish my views.

When the book came out, dark clouds began to form. At first the leaders tried to ignore it, hoping the book would "take off like a lead balloon". Yet, there were some concerned parents who saw their chance to reform the school by getting rid of me. With the help of two conservative theologians, they found enough statements in my book to claim cause for dismissal. It was to be expected. When close to five hundred books were in circulation, the consistory came with its report. I was condemned as "six-point heretic" and my wife and I could no longer partake of Christ's Supper. Yet, I remember the storm we saw on the way here. Perhaps the Lord will yet make it happen!

#### **40- questions and comments:**

- 1 Although in practice as well as in private conversation, ecclesiastical exclusivism is still quite common among us, officially this is always denied. In our Dutch sister churches there are now several ministers openly admitting that this is true, also among them.<sup>78</sup>
- 2 In the near future, it seems, we may well have an identity crisis to determine who we are as federation among federations. Seeking to maintain our federation, we will have to find a better *raison d'être* than "Only we have the objective Truth".  
One of our leaders described our "primary" task as federation in North America, is "to retain the elements of our spiritual and cultural heritage as we adapt to and become a part of a new and evolving culture."<sup>79</sup>  
Comment on this task description.
- 3 It may be clear from the "Guido" and "Cornerstone" reports that many among us refuse to repent from the sins, committed in the Rev. DeBruin case. Guido/Cornerstone seem to suggest, that the Canadian Reformed error is still in full force. Note that the Guido report was even unanimous! Nevertheless, I am convinced that these reports were the work of a few men, who desperately tried to stick to their traditional convictions. I am convinced that the majority of our members rejects the exclusivistic church concept, whereby only members in churches, which hold to all aspects of our confessions, are to be seen as part of Christ's Body. Peer pressure, ignorance, fear, and sheepish following must have played a major role in this outcome. Are we puppets of tradition or soldiers for Christ?

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<sup>78</sup> Rev. H. Folkers, *Ecclesiastical exclusivism harms the Liberated churches*, ND, 21 Dec., '95

<sup>79</sup> *Nineteen Hundred and Ninety Five*, year report in *1996 yearbook of the Canadian and American Reformed Churches*, p.150

## ***IV Body Building***

It seems to me now that the fourth section of the book is lacking in structure. It is more a collection of somewhat related essays than the building of an argument. Yet, some of the points seemed important to include.

In the first place I wanted to show that personal witnessing or evangelism clearly follows from the teachings of Scripture. I wanted to stress that we have been rather negligent in this respect even to the point of deliberate teaching against this mandate.

In the second place I wanted to address a number of issues where we must hold to the Scriptural balance, and avoid emphasising one aspect of the truth so much that another is ignored. This is true in evangelism, where Word and Spirit produce the conversion, but yet God uses disciples to make disciples. A related issue is the question whether God wants all people to be saved. In our emphasis on God's sovereignty we could easily downplay His love (for all people!), just as Arminians tend to nibble away at God's power. In apologetics we find two main approaches; the Classical approach, recently advocated in Presbyterian circles (R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner) and the Presuppositional View, developed by Cornelius Van Til and recently praised in *Clarion* as the Reformed approach. I like to think that Alister McGrath is correct when he suggests a combined model for defending the truth.

Essay 49 deals with the relationship of the Gospel and human cultures. In this topic we link the growing Kingdom with the need for regular renewal. The Canadian Reformed churches are at a stage where renewal is required. For this, we can learn from other Christians to recognise where we have gone off track. Ecclesiastical pride easily gets in the way, but we need to pray for, and work on renewal in the churches for the glory of our King.

## **41 The Kingdom of Heaven**

Our Lord Jesus Christ rarely used the term “covenant” in His teachings. He did refer to the covenant concept, however, in images like the sheep, who hear His voice and the branches grafted into the true vine. Those who obey God (in faith, by grace) are called His brothers. Christ also had strong warnings for the Jews, who claimed to be children of Abraham while they did the works of Satan. For such “covenant children” the blessings turn to curses.

Christ referred to His teaching as Kingdom ministry. The ultimate purpose is to restore God’s rule in all of His creation. Wherever people obey God, we find His Kingdom. This refers to all true Christians, or the universal church.

A difficulty here is the paradox of God’s Kingdom as it is real but not yet perfect. Although God is –also today– the all-powerful God who rules all, yet somehow His sovereignty is not yet fully revealed as Satan still has power too. As is the case with any such paradox, we must uphold both truths. We may not take away from God’s sovereignty but neither must we ignore the power of Satan. Although we know the final outcome, we must realise that today these realities still co-exist.

### ***41- questions and comments:***

- 1 Evaluate, with Newbigin's profile for the church in western society, how we, as Canadian Reformed churches, are and can be a light in the world.
- 2 What could be some causes and effects of theology and preaching that emphasise “covenant” much more than the Kingdom?
- 3 Is God’s Kingdom congruent (exactly overlapping) with the church?

## 42-45- Disciples making disciples

With my oldest son I took a course in First Aid. We both got our certificates. Recently, as we came out of church a young boy fainted. It had been hot and as he walked out into the bright sunshine the heat overcame him. Some people went over to hold him steady. They propped the boy up in a basement windowsill. The moment I realised they should lay him down to stimulate blood circulation to the brain, a friend ran over to do just that. On the way home I asked my son, "If you had seen that and nobody else went over to help, would you have gone over to assist?" He hesitated. I reminded him that "knowing First Aid" gives a great responsibility to use the knowledge and skills to save others.

This is also true for us with respect to the Gospel. We cannot insist we love God if we don't love the people we meet. We do not love them if we refuse to share the Good News. We must pray for our neighbours' salvation and look for opportunities to facilitate this. God wants to use disciples to make disciples.

When some of our leaders come up with arguments and excuses to justify or promote disobedience, whether it is in sectarianism or in witnessing, we must speak up and use clear language, not to attack the person but to defend the truth. We must not think that conservative ministers are consciously out to prevent unity in Christ and obedience to God's Word. They mean well, but that must not stop us from speaking up and using clear language. Peter meant well too, when he said to Christ "This shall never happen to you", but Jesus responded, "Get behind me, Satan!"

### **Recommended reading:**

Nora Lam	<i>China Cry</i>	
C. John Miller	<i>Outgrowing the Ingrown Church</i>	(1986)
R.M. Pippert	<i>Out of the Saltshaker &amp; Into the World</i>	(1979)
G. VanDooren	<i>Get Out &amp; Get Rid of Dilemmas</i>	(1979)

### **42-45- questions and comments:**

- 1 Can we pray the Lord's Prayer if we hold grudges and refuse to forgive the sins of others? Can we love God if we do not show a deep concern for the spiritual state and destiny of our neighbours? Can we pray for God's Kingdom to come if we refuse to fight certain sins or refuse to make disciples?
- 2 Jesus had said in several ways that, although Israel would deny Him, Gentiles would accept Him. After the completion of Christ's work, the Gospel has to go into the world, to build the Kingdom.  
Read John 12.20-26. Greeks come to hear Jesus. The apostles appear somewhat reluctant to pass their request on to Jesus. Jesus uses this event to point to the climax of His work as well as the effect for the world. Jesus must die to make salvation for all man possible. Christ's death gives life to the millions. But we must follow Him. If we are reluctant in letting the light shine, we cannot help in building the Kingdom. If we claim to be wheat, that is good. But that implies that we too have to go into the earth and sacrifice our lives, so we may produce more wheat, in

- others who come to life through us. In this way, the harvest is to be multiplied, the Kingdom built, and Christ's name to be glorified.
- 3 Christ's prayer does not just refer to the future. It has to be reality today; among us! See 1Thessalonians 1.5-8  
 "...our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model for all believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia- your faith in God has become known everywhere."
- Notice the chain of the Kingdom: hearing (and seeing!) → (gladly) accepting → proclamation (in word and deed) Notice also that we must combine the walk and the talk; they serve to reinforce each other and a godly lifestyle proves the power of the Spirit and the truth of the Gospel. Only in this way can evangelism be successful.
- 4 Even today, especially at the frontiers of the Gospel, God uses powerful signs. We have too easily discredited the miraculous manifestations of the Spirit. Reading about the work of Hudson Taylor, Watchman Nee, and, especially Nora Lam, we can hardly deny that God gives wonderful signs to accompany the Gospel. This should not surprise us, for it is fully in line with Scripture. It is an extra-scriptural argument to say that such things don't happen, "because the canon is complete".  
 When some of us know about the manifestations of the Spirit, and the church leaders deny it, we should not be surprised if such members end up leaving for other churches, where the reality of God's power is not denied.
- 5 Consider this. In the province X we have two congregations belonging to our federation. Some of our leaders would maintain that only in their church buildings do we find the true proclamation of the Gospel. Perhaps, the ministers may make an occasional visit to a hospital or home for the aged, but for the rest they are probably too busy. Consequently, nobody in this province can come to (the Reformed!) faith, as they have no preacher, which is lawfully called by a lawful church! No wonder "church growth" is thought to mean having many children. Open your eyes! Don't you see the thousands or tens of thousands who have already accepted Jesus as their Lord and Saviour? Don't you see Christ proclaimed in many other places, by many faithful servants?
- 6 Justification of our missionary disobedience still exists, and year-end reviews are very positive, highlighting all the wonderful things we are doing on the mission field and in vacation Bible schools. Yet, there are quite a few church leaders who see the need for change. Something has to be done. Nevertheless, we cannot resolve things by simple legislation. A renewal is required, in which we find repentance, a new love for God's Word, and a serious concern for the neighbour. This can only come from the inside out!
- 7 Friends of us told us this story. A number of years ago, their minister told his congregation that they were not to tell others about Christ. Whenever others would ask them, they should urge such people to come

- to church. Evangelism was to be a team effort; the congregation was to be the net, bringing the people into church, while the minister had the mandate to preach to them the Message of Christ. Shortly thereafter, a weaker member was asked by her desperate brother what had happened in her life. "You are changed, sister! What is it, that happened to you?" She just told him to come to church. A few days later, he asked her again. Desperately he begged her to give him hope. She obeyed the "church" and remained silent. The next thing she heard was that her brother had committed suicide. She felt horrible, but she received no help from the consistory. Instead, she was warned not to tell anybody what had happened. Those who protested were put under discipline. This was not in a Canadian Reformed church, but it could have been!
- 8 Gospel proclamation is traditionally done in the form of the spoken word. Some ideas and concepts as well as objects or customs from Bible times, however, can be best explained or demonstrated by other means. Why not show a picture of the tabernacle, and why not involve the sound-man to play a tape for a few seconds with the sound of the shofar? If such things can support the message, who should stop us? Custom, tradition, or the "weaker" brothers cannot object. Jesus often flaunted culture and religious traditions if they stood in the way of the Gospel proclamation. He publicly spoke to women, even Samaritans, despite the gossip and disapproval.
- 9 Consider this quote:  
 "...private religion has no place among the people of God. If you truly believe in Christ, you will openly confess your faith. But if you deny Him and His teaching (by keeping silent, IS), then He will deny you before His Father. You might make every excuse in the world for your silence, but the truth of the matter will be that you loved the praise of men more than God or (as is stated elsewhere) that you feared man more than God. Those who say, 'I do not talk about my faith because it is a private matter' must beware for Christ has commanded us to confess publicly that He is God; if we are unwilling to do this..., we can make no assumptions that we are saved."<sup>80</sup>
- 10 Although there was already a small Christian community in Rome, Paul set up office in his home, where he invited people, and told them about the Gospel. In a sense we can call this the first para-church organisation. Among us, however, we often hear disapproving words concerning para-church organisations, especially when they are "interdenominational" and when they are teaching people about the Gospel. Such organisations do not share our (in)formal Reformed doctrine, and this is perceived as a danger and a threat.
- 11 Consider the following quote from Lesslie Newbigin  
 "...the earliest church never availed itself of the protection it could have under Roman law as a 'cultus privatus' dedicated to the pursuit of a purely personal and spiritual salvation for its members. Such private religion flourished as vigorously in the world of the Eastern Mediterranean as it does in North America today. It was permitted by the imperial authorities for the same reason that its counterparts are

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<sup>80</sup> *Table Talk*, by R.C. Sproul jr., July 30, 1997

- permitted today: it did not challenge the political order. Why, then, did the church refuse this protection? Why did it have to engage in a battle to the death with the imperial powers? Because, true to its roots in the Old Testament, it could not accept relegation to a private sphere of purely inward and personal religion. It knew itself to be the bearer of the promise of the reign of Yahweh over all nations. It refused the names by which the many religious societies called themselves..., (but) called itself 'ecclesia tou theou', the public assembly to which God is calling all men everywhere without distinction."<sup>81</sup>
- 12 God is still in control, and even today he uses miracles to provide for His people. Many, also among us, have experienced it, but others deny this. They insist that God no longer works this way, and so they drive a wedge between revelation and reality. When I tell my students about the wonderful deeds of the Lord, in real events, some of them even try to prove that it happened by chance. Is that not unbelief?
- 13 The Guido committee suggests that it was without love, and probably as false testimony, that I condemned Rev. DeBoer's article against personal evangelism (p.211, 212). They wrote, "(Isaac Smit) suggests that the article in question in effect was a tool of the devil rather than an attempt to build the body of Christ. May brothers address each other in this way in one fellowship?"
- I am sure the author wanted to build the church. I am even more convinced that it is impossible to "build the body" by criticising personal evangelism. Consider the committee's concluding question. We have often addressed other Christians (who are not in our fellowship or federation) with similar terminology and worse, but within the federation, apparently, there are different rules.

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<sup>81</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, p.99-100

## 46-48 Issues in balance

God is Three in One. Some have emphasised so much the oneness of God that they came into conflict concerning the deity of Christ. Others have perhaps separated the three “Persons” so much in their theology, that the Unity was lost.

Repentance and conversion are fully the work of the sovereign God, yet they are also the responsibility for all creatures, especially those who hear the Word.

The mature Christian is born from above. Sin no longer has dominion over him. Nevertheless, sin still remains in him and guerrilla warfare continues for the rest of his life. Some ignore the radical change brought about when the Spirit comes to dwell in man. Others ignore the ongoing warfare, becoming perfectionists and then totally disillusioned when they fall into serious sin. The first will ignore the need for a new heart in “covenant children”, the second will ignore the need for ongoing sanctification.

The new covenant is the continuation of the old. It follows a similar pattern and builds forth on the old covenant. Yet, the new covenant adds a wonderful new dimension, which makes it far superior and significantly different from the old. Some have emphasised the continuation over the change, relying heavily on Old Testament patterns as criterion for today. Others have placed so much emphasis on that which is new since Pentecost, that they have little interest in studying the Old Testament.

The church is the community where God reveals His Word and works with His Spirit. The church is also the Body of Christ where all believers are united in Him. Some have despised the regular worship services while others ignore the Christians who disagree on some points with their tradition.

God has chosen those who end up in heaven already from before creation, but yet he wants all people to hear the Gospel and He wants all those who hear the Word to repent and to believe. Many are called in the preaching but few are chosen, yet all those who are called have the promise of salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Paradoxes are not easy to work with, but the Bible has many. Also among us, we can struggle with these things. It can easily happen -either in reaction to the imbalance of others or in a desire to have a simple, secure theology- that people lose sight of the Biblical balance. In these essays I have tried to work out some of the issues, where this tends to happen.

D.A. Carson	Divine Sovereignty and Human responsibility	(1981)
Alister E. McGrath	Intellectuals don't need God & other modern myths	(1993)
J.I. Packer	<i>Evangelism &amp; the Sovereignty of God</i>	(1961)

#### **46-48- questions and comments:**

- 1 History shows that personal initiative and small groups, independent from church bureaucracy, have been most successful in “Body Building”. Asking for consistory approval has often been a sure way to kill a project.
- 2 As our members are mostly middle-class and our church buildings are placed in the suburbs, we tend to forget that the inner cities create the greatest mission field today. In the rich countries, new immigrants move to the cities. We have to approach them before Mammon gets his fangs on them and before their families break apart. In the poor countries, city growth is massive. Few Christians, however, are trusting God and are willing to risk their lives to live in such places. These are mostly Pentecostals, but as one of our missionaries said in his sermon, "Pentecostals are not Christians".
- 3 Consider Jonah: 'We are God's covenant people, His chosen ones. Why should I obediently go to the world, the enemy, and tell them to repent? God could give the blessings, meant for us, just as well to them!' We often only see the world having to serve the Church, rather than the Church's task to serve the world (as service to their Master!).
- 4 In evangelism, we have to be careful that we do not have or show any self-interest. By pushing "our" church federation and "our" congregation, we may give that impression. We should rather focus on Christ, and give potential or new believers, guidelines for what kind of church to join. These guidelines should reflect the "marks of the true church", but also the "fruit of the Spirit". Proclamation of the Truth is "Show and Tell".
- 5 We are not the only ingrown churches. Many things I am criticising our churches of, are just as much a problem in other federations. C. John Miller did not have "only us" in mind, when he wrote *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*.  
Nevertheless, that does not make the warning any less serious; God does not praise us, saying, “You pretty good and more than average faithful servants!”. Neither can we say, “We have only done our jobs”, because we did not.
- 6 Of course, we are not the only ones to promote caricatures of other Christians and their views. Most Arminians seem to have quite a warped idea of Calvinism. God's sovereignty, they feel, must imply that humans are left without choice or responsibility. Starting from predestination, they think, must result in a God, who does not love all people. Perhaps we share in the blame of such misconceptions?
- 7 What do you think? There was a father who had two sons, and he wanted them to work in the orchard. The one son said all the right things, but he refused to go. He made up all kinds of excuses for his disobedience. His brother, however, reluctant at first, went obediently to work. Who did the will of the Father?  
Perhaps Evangelicals and Pentecostals will enter the Kingdom of God ahead of us. Will we repent and obey? (after Matthew 21.28-32)
- 8 McGrath may not put enough emphasis on convicting sinners of their sin and need for a Saviour. Francis Schaeffer, apparently, said once; "Give me thirty minutes with an unbeliever, and I will use twenty-five to convict him of his guilt before God, and five to show the Saviour.

- 9 In a series of articles in *Clarion*, Van Til's approach was portrayed as the Reformed approach we should follow.<sup>82</sup> Consider the following sentence "Occasionally, by grace, the unbeliever will discover a truth that comes from God, but these truths that the unbeliever discovers will never lead him to salvation."  
Is God thus limited? What is then the use and hope for evangelism or apologetics?
- 10 Concerning indigenous missions, Bob Finley, chairman of Christian Aid, writes, "For the past 40 years we have said that it doesn't make sense to spend a small fortune sending an American missionary to a foreign country where he doesn't know the language when local citizens in that country have been called of God to reach their own people. The cost of sending out one American would provide full support for 50 native missionaries who already know the several languages of un-reached people groups in their geographical areas."<sup>83</sup> He has met a lot of resistance, not because his claims are not true, but because they threaten the status quo and traditional funding. The indigenous approach also does not jive with denominational separatism, and our control on what happens in the "mission field".
- 11 In Reformed circles the term apologetics is sometimes used for discussions concerning doctrine, emphasis, or interpretation. In such discussion, however, Christ Himself is rarely the focus. Again, it seems that "faith" is seen in terms of "Reformed faith" (intellectual, emotional commitment to creeds), rather than Christian faith. Through reasoning, some think, we should be able to ever further define the true doctrine. Our main or only task in evangelism or apologetics is then to have rational discussions about theology and confessions, to win people for our (Canadian) Reformed perspective. The danger of this whole mindset is that
- a we want converts for Calvin(ism) rather than Christ(ianity),
  - b we believe in the communion of the like-minded, rather than the communion of saints.
  - c we base the Church's boundaries on the Belgic Confession, rather than on Peter's confession.
  - d we use confessional language, while forgetting scriptural language.
  - e we become elitist within the Church; the Body of Christ.
  - f we fail to be concerned about the destiny of our ungodly neighbours, and we don't pray for their conversion and our obedience in this.
  - g God will get His salt somewhere else.

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<sup>82</sup> W. Bredenhof, *Reformed Apologetics*, *Clarion* 44(18,21,22)

<sup>83</sup> Dr. Bob Finlay, *Colonialism Creates Dependency*, in *Christian Mission*, 22(2), Summer 1997

## 49 God's Word and Human Cultures

This essay deals with the interaction between the Gospel and human culture. The Gospel is a power that transforms cultures, in areas like ethics, justice, and education. Word and Spirit will teach the people what aspects of their culture must change. Missionaries must be careful not to force such transformation from their own perspective, for the Gospel does not force all cultures into one rigid, uniform Christian culture. Sometimes countries have closed their borders to political or economical forces that came with foreigners who claimed to bring the Gospel. Missionaries can also inadvertently proclaim the blessings of materialism as they fail to see how this has affected them.

The need for renewal must also be seen in the framework of a church where doctrine and lifestyle have become rigid and where the Bible no longer has the ongoing transforming power as it is viewed from the perspective of the ideas and habits which dominate the church culture. This is a dangerous situation, where we can expect a break to result in the federation. Part of the community will become cultic as it gets stuck in traditionalism and objectivism. Another part runs the risk of subjectivism. You can also find this when people leave the Reformed tradition and then overreact. In response to a slight off-balance to the right, they end up even farther off to the left.

### **Recommended reading:**

Lesslie Newbigin	<i>Foolishness to the Greeks</i>	(1986)
Lesslie Newbigin	<i>The Gospel in a Pluralist Society</i>	(1989)

### **49- questions and comments:**

- 1 The question was raised in Christianity Today, "How come that Inuit people, when they become Christians, must give up their whole culture, whereas citizens from European descent can pretty well keep on living as they used to?"
- 2 Eugene Peterson, in the Message, writes (Romans 14), "Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you disagree with- even when it seems that they are strong on opinions but weak in the faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently.  
For instance, a person who has been around for a while might well be convinced that he can eat anything on the table, while another, with a different background, might assume all Christians should be vegetarians and eat accordingly. But since both are guests at Christ's table, wouldn't it be terribly rude if they fell to criticising what the other ate or didn't eat? God, after all, invited them both to the table. Do you have any business crossing people off the guest list or interfering with God's welcome? If there are corrections to be made or manners to be learned, God can handle that without your help."

## 50-51 Lessons from Evangelicalism

A former Canadian Reformed minister, Rev. T. Hoogsteen, has recently published his own call for renewal. It is titled "Faithful for a Thousand Generations: also to the Second and Third."<sup>84</sup> It is interesting for contrast to see what he writes about Evangelicalism.

"Another way to fall into the drift of the religious environment: Evangelicalism, with roots in ancient Epicurianism, is currently a prominent Anabaptist offspring or Christian look-a-like in which human opinion and emotion enter to dominate at the expense of the Father's glory; it is a quasi-christian movement heavy on love, weak on doctrines of covenant and predestination, so, no doubt, espousal of 'love' may cover multitudes of sins, particularly man's self-glorification. Some Clarion contributors, claiming commitment to the Reformed confessions, attempt compromises, alleging that the Reformed faith meshes well with Evangelicalism. (three examples, references are given)

Here follow some basic Evangelical assumptions, albeit without foundation in Scripture or Reformed confession, with all inherent man-centredness:

-Once you realise you are not of this world, you can learn to overcome life's obstacles through the power of God.

-You can be transformed by God's power. Are you willing to let God mature you?

-Living a life of thanksgiving to God is never optional, nor is it only to be practised occasionally. Giving God thanks must be a way of life. We are continually to overflow with gratitude to God for His goodness to us.

-See what the Lord has done for me?

-Be slain in the Spirit, let your emotions dominate at the expense of the mind.

-There always comes a payday when you obey God. But in order to enjoy payday, you've got to learn how to stay in the will of God.

With such Anabaptist/Arminian smoke and mirror claims, who receives pride of place? These various summons to a do-it-yourself religion are typically evangelical outpourings. (no references provided, IS)

Through moving excesses, Evangelicalism- potent as the so-called five spiritual laws- more or less blends in rather well with an age of new spiritualities regarding what man can do relative to eternal life. By promising what may not be promised, this movement's chauvinist leaders, patriarchal or matriarchal, lead people to believe they can 1) control salvation, 2) own immediate experience of God, 3) if only they themselves add enough (quantities of) faith.

-snip-

We require a caution here, since Arminian/Evangelical dangers are nearer than we like to think. (reference given) Then to the great gospel of justification is added a warning- 'Now, don't lose it by foolishly sinning.' It seems that this is some backdoor Arminianism, for ability to lose justification appears to be in

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<sup>84</sup> published January 1998, available for \$9.99 at the Family Christian Bookstore in Burlington quotes taken from pages 24-26

the hands or at the disposal of each Canadian Reformed person, not in the foreknowing, predestinating, calling, justifying, and glorifying Father of Jesus Christ.

The moment Evangelicalism, or its mother, Arminianism, or its grandmother, Semipelagianism, seizes one's heart, a syncretism must occur. Then we begin to find ourselves more at home in North American contexts of religiosity, holding the form of the true religion, but denying its power. We come to 'enjoy' a strange primacy before the face of God, (too closely) akin to humanism."

***Recommended reading:***

Alister E. McGrath *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (1994)

***50-51- questions and comments:***

- 1 In Evangelical circles we find a lot more self-criticism than among us. In our view of "Reformed vs. Evangelical", we often see that as their weak spot, and as a positive thing for us. Their self-critical attitude, however, continues to shape and reform the movement, whereas the lack of self-evaluation among us has become dangerous.
- 2 Study McGrath's points of criticism for the Evangelical movement and see whether some of them also apply to us.

## 52 Praying for Rain

As one of the most important reasons for prayer, the Heidelberg Catechism mentions that, “God will give His grace and the Holy Spirit only to those who constantly and with heartfelt longing ask Him for these gifts and thank Him for them. We must not just apply this to personal regeneration and renewal, but also to corporate renewal. God loves to hear the prayers of the communion of saints, where they are gathered in His name. Where they recognise the need for a positive change, they must pray for God to bring this about and look for ways to make it happen.

In 1748, Jonathan Edwards wrote a small book with a long title. It was *An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God’s People in Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of Religion and the Advancement of Christ’s Kingdom on Earth, pursuant to Scripture Promises and Prophecies concerning the Last Time*. Some united efforts for regular prayer for renewal existed already in the 1740s. Although Edwards had great hopes for a positive response and God’s answer in renewal, it took until 40 years after his death before there was any dramatic effect.

During the 1780s a prayer call was issued and responded to among the Calvinistic Baptists. Michael Haykin highlights four “noteworthy points”.

(1) The approach had a healthy balance of obedience and expectancy, recognising both; God’s sovereignty as well as human responsibility.

(2) The prayers were not just for revival in their own churches, but they wanted “to embrace in prayer believers of all denominational bodies.”

(3) The prayer was for God’s Kingdom to take shape in all “parts of the habitable globe.” William Carey has been seen as the father of modern missions. His work in India is clearly linked to this “concert of prayer”.

(4) The ground for regular, communal prayer for renewal was found in Scripture. Jonathan Edwards, for instance, emphasised in this respect Ezekiel 36.37. Prior to God’s great works of restoration He causes His people to pray for it.<sup>85</sup>

### Conclusions

We must learn to have more trust in God’s guidance. In our fear-driven community, the tyranny of tradition threatens to quench the fire of the Spirit. The dynamic reality of the scriptural balance has been replaced by documents that unite the like-minded, but neglect the rest of the Body. The truth has become petrified in slogans, etched in stone. The underlying meaning is lost, but the phrases become the norm. In paranoia for subjectivism, we have fallen prey to objectivism. In fear of liberalism, we have put tradition on the throne. Those who threaten the status quo cannot share in our virtual kingdom, and must be banned from leadership and the Lord’s Supper.

To change such things, we need boldness in patience. We need to read and hear from other Christians, rather than to come to a rash condemnation. Without trashing the confessions, we must search for the biblical balance. This

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<sup>85</sup> Michael A.G. Haykin, *One Heart and One Soul, John Sutcliff of Olney, his friends and his times*, 1994, chapter 8

Michael A.G. Haykin, “*The Dungeon flamed with light*”, *Evangelical Revival in the Eighteenth Century*, brochure, 1995

balance must permeate the preaching and teaching. We must encourage positive action and a greater independence of the congregations. We must revitalise the congregation as a true community, using cell groups in the larger congregations. We must de-formalise worship and stimulate variety in our use of the traditional elements of worship. We must read the Bible with an open mind and pray for rain.

### **52- questions and comments:**

- 1 Read Mt.5.43-48. Just like God's sovereign grace (in the first dimension of the covenant) extends to all, so we too must love all man. If our love is pretty well restricted to (all?) people in our church community, how Christ-like is that? What percent of our charitable donations stays within "our own community"?
- 2 Renewal is, just like the coming Kingdom, a matter of working and waiting. It requires fervent prayer, and repentance with a new obedience. It is a work of Christ and Christians, while ultimately all the good comes from God.
- 3 Pointing out the wrongs and calling for repentance is sometimes labelled "harsh criticism and a lack of compassion". Do we respond the same way to the strong language that Jesus uses, or James? Or do we think we are better than their audiences and don't need their stern warnings?
- 4 Some have responded to the renewal in our Dutch sister churches as if it is an accusation to the older generation, as if they did not do it right.<sup>86</sup> This, however, flies in the face of "semper reformanda"; Christ requires constant growth. We must not ignore the fact that many older people also love to see their grandchildren excited about the Lord. Is it not wonderful if our children want to know Christ better, to serve Him and to sing His praises? Does it really matter then, if evangelical books facilitate this, or other-than-Genevan tunes? Patience with the weaker members is good, but we may not become disobedient due to the tyranny of the weaker brother. We must watch out not to work against God's Spirit.

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<sup>86</sup> Rev. J.M. Goedhart in "Reformanda", 25 Jan. 1996, quoted by G.J. Van Middelkoop, in "De Reformatie", 71(18), Feb.10, 1996



## **Appendices**

## **Response to Dr. Gootjes' review of "Praying for Rain"**

**This is a updated version of my response, given to Drs. Gootjes and VanDam, several weeks before they actually published the book review in Clarion 47(10) of May 15, 1998. They refused to publish my response. No reasons were given and no further communication has taken place.**

March 20, 1998 the book "Praying for Rain" was officially published. It is the result of two and a half years of study. During that time I have asked seven of our leaders to read it for feedback. The only responses I received were: "Go ahead, publish it!", and "I disagree with your approach!". Several others suggested I must have it checked by our consistory before publication. One brother claimed I was unfaithful to my promises when I professed my faith, as this implied adherence to the teaching in our churches. Now the book is published, however, it takes Clarion less than one (two at the most) weeks to respond!

The book contains four sections, covering personal faith, the covenant, the church and her mission. Except for a few brief comments, Dr. Gootjes ignores the second half of the book.

### 1 unsubstantiated claims

The impression is given that the book is poorly referenced. It contains 124 references. Nevertheless, sometimes I have chosen not to be specific, as I did not want to attack persons but ideas. Some claims are based on student responses. I wanted to organize a student questionnaire at Guido, to quantify ideas among us, but several colleagues were strongly opposed to such a project.

Almost always when I tell my students that "accepting Christ" is an essential component of faith, some reply: "Nobody can accept Christ! That's Arminian! We don't have to, for we have received Christ!" Just weeks after publication, one of our ministers wrote me: "I hope that the chapter entitled 'the need to accept Christ', is going to be a critical analysis of such statements, since we as God's covenant children have learned to speak over against such Arminian/Pentecostal/Evangelical terminology of the need of 'acknowledging Christ,' as our only Saviour, i.e. the One in whom we have been baptized." Another leader in our churches insisted two years ago that I use the term "receive Christ" instead of "accept Christ" to avoid all sense of us doing something. The expression "Believing is listening" can be found in RP15(9/10), p.21. Overemphasis of the passive aspect of faith is common among us. I know from experience that many among us view the children in the church as believers who already have received Christ and are already born again. References 15 (p.62) and 17 (p.254) also confirm this.

If anyone wants to verify the harsh treatment and lack of pastoral care of leaders or others, who had to leave, ask them! I have personally heard from at least three of them. I could get very specific and personal, also locally, but I doubt whether such sensational journalism would be better received than the current claim.

Rev. DeBruin had claimed that there is a "church of Christ in Saskatchewan", but Synod rejected this. As we don't have formal correspondence there, we cannot refer to God's church in such areas. The same applies to persecution in the church. Are there any churches, recognized by us, experiencing persecution today? Consequently, in accordance with our narrow church concept, we cannot pray for the persecuted church, but at best for the persecuted Christians.

Dr. Gootjes informs us that only one quote is given of a minister who denies this mandate of personal evangelism. This is incorrect. Clarion 32(1), 1983, p.11-16 is also quoted- on three points. Personally, I know of a third minister who shares these views, but I don't know whether he has actually published his views on this matter.

## 2 mistakes

Essay 3 deals with the need to accept Christ. Quite a few of us reject such language as Arminianism. Although the Dutch translation refers to “faith” as well as “having accepted Christ”, our version has combined these terms to say, “believe in Jesus Christ”. The term “accept” (or take, appropriate) has been avoided in this way. Although “deleting the expression” would have been more accurate than “deleting the phrase”, this cannot be made into a serious misrepresentation of the facts. Church history after 1500 is also “after Pentecost”. Although I made a bit of a jump here, I cannot consider this to be a mistake.

Even though the children of Baptists do not bear the mark of baptism, this does not therefore exclude them from God’s promises. Everyone who hears the Gospel shares in the promise, and natural descent is not (even) a prerequisite. The sign does not provide access, but the Word does. This is explained on page 105, but Dr. Gootjes calls this an incorrect statement or mistake. He makes an unsubstantiated claim.

Dr. C.J. De Ruyter writes, “What does it mean, to agree with the church’s teaching?’ I was educated with a very strict interpretation on this point. We assumed that professing your faith meant agreement with the three Forms of Unity. At the time I did profession of faith (1967), this was the common view.” De Ruyter then proceeds to describe the beauty of this view as well as some practical concerns. It is possible that Dr. De Ruyter refers to “common” as common among all kinds of Reformed churches, but this not clear from the context. Dr. Gootjes lists two other “mistakes” but these are not substantiated. Let the reader decide.

## 3 the problem

The problems do not just refer to the young people, and neither do they just refer to our walk, but also with our convictions and our talk. The book only briefly refers to ungodly lifestyles, but focuses much more on unbalanced doctrine. We have been experts of condemning other churches for their unbalanced views, but we fail to see our own. Dr. Gootjes has no right to lift out the first part of essay 11 as if that is the root problem, in my view. My concerns with exclusivism and the Canadian Reformed view of the church predated my strong awareness of acceptable sins in our community. Dr. Gootjes’ suggestions form a serious misrepresentation of my book and views.

## 4 the covenant

I emphasized that God’s covenant with man is essentially one. In time, however, we must discern different stages, in which this covenant became richer, first primarily by the Word and then by the indwelling Spirit. Many readers found my model helpful and clear. Perhaps it is very confusing for those who are entrenched in other models. The reason that I have not followed the Reformed model(s), is because they fail to resolve some essential issues. A. Kuyper tried to come to grips with it and so did H. Hoeksema. In Schilder’s tradition we don’t know what to do with rebirth and we claim that each baptized child has the assurance that the Holy Spirit will dwell in him/her. We barely know what faith is and must run stuck with the guaranteed perseverance of all the saints. When ending up at a dead end, one must retrace his steps.

## 5 baptism

Dr. Gootjes does not demonstrate how my concept of baptism (essay 22) is lacking. Several non-reformed readers have said to benefit from my description of God’s blessings for the children in the church (essay 5). As quite a few of us consider Baptist churches as synagogues of Satan, and Baptists as non-Christians, I felt I had to demonstrate that Baptists also take the Bible serious and base their views on Scripture. Although nobody has provided scriptural counter-arguments, the theologians condemn me for attacking the creeds and traditions. Unless they come up with a well-founded, scriptural rationale, they are trying to build on traditionalism and confessionalism. In the end this must fail.

6 conclusion

Dr. Gootjes assumes that I have refused to discuss my views with my minister and elders and that I avoided them to publish this book. The opposite is true; I have always shared my views, at Bible study, at home visits and in personal discussions. Most people refused to listen and to discuss it with me. (Even now, in November, I have not had a discussion with the consistory or ward elders on any of these issues.) A few months before publication, I have offered my manuscript to the consistory, but they refused to read it. With respect to Arminians today, I would suggest one must first get to really know them personally before pronouncing a quick and easy condemnation. The same recommendation should be given about my book. The Clarion readers should find out for themselves and not rely only on a few of our theologians to give a fair representation and evaluation.























**Doctrinal Concerns- a response to the report by the  
“Ad Hoc Committee re Publication br. I. Smit”**

**1. View of Scripture**

Is Scripture clear on all issues? Even Peter writes, for instance, that Paul’s writings contain some things that are hard to understand (2Pe.3.16). On page 17, I deal with people abusing the claim of Scriptural clarity to claim divine approval for their interpretation or unbalanced representation of the truth. On p. 114, I say that, due to our lack of perfection, sincere Christians do not agree on every issue in Scripture. God’s demand to baptize infants, for instance, is not crystal clear from Scripture. It is possible- after honest and serious research- to come to different conclusions. Also among us, there are different views on many issues. Each group, of course, claims to derive its view from Scripture. Our book mentions the following, re: regeneration- Rev. Wieske vs. Rev. VanOene, re: the church- Rev. Visscher vs. Rev. Stam, re: personal evangelism- Rev. Moes vs. Rev. DeBoer. We see in a mirror dimly.

Yet, I have written nowhere that Scripture does not clearly explain how one is to be saved. To the contrary; quite elaborately I describe the norm. People are saved by the work of Christ, which is promised to them in the Gospel and appropriated by faith. To say “Scripture is not clear on all issues” is not in conflict with the statement that “the doctrine of salvation has been clearly revealed to us”. Notice also, that –for any thing unclear- I do not blame God, but the consequences of sin (“imperfect man”). I find the report unfair on this section.

Can those who never heard God’s Word be saved? Although I do not describe it as the norm (the report admits “some”), I must allow God to work through other means. The norm is described very clearly throughout my book; “One must hear the Word and one must accept (and do) the Word.” Although page 70 (referred to in the report) refers to Ro.2.14,<sup>87</sup> the committee does not refute it, but chooses to ignore it, claiming there is no Scriptural evidence. What about Job, Melchizedek, and Jethro? These men did not have God’s Word, and they were not in the covenant with Abraham (Israel). The norm of article 7 refers to covenant people; “we must believe that, which we hear”. The Karen people, prior to missions, remained faithful to the Creator and despised the idolatry of Buddhism (p.70, PfR), yet the committee members judge that they were not taken up to heaven. Those who are merciful will be granted mercy. Hearing the Gospel implies the demand to embrace the truth and to accept Jesus Christ, who comes to people “clothed in the Gospel”. Those who reject God’s Word will certainly go to hell. I am not denying that in any way.

**2 status of the confessions**

A description is not necessarily a definition. By stating that “Br. Smit DEFINES the confessions...”, the committee chooses to elevate this particular description to the level of definition. This is an unfair representation, because I also describe the confessions as useful for instruction and keeping us on the straight path (p.180). Consistent with the rest of the report, here too we find selective reporting. We should all try to maintain a scriptural balance. If that objective of my book is in line with the historical purpose of the confessions, then this is similar to the creeds. What’s so wrong with stating that? Yes, I do maintain that our confessions do not contain the full revelation of Scripture, and that by unduly focusing on these documents one can lose sight of other scriptural truths. The suspicious committee (having heard only the accusers and not the defense) claims that this can lead to certain impressions and suggestions, but those are not

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<sup>87</sup> Ro.2.14, 15 (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.)

grounds for doctrinal concerns. Nowhere do the confessions claim that they have such authority as the committee implies. Nevertheless, I have committed myself to teach in accordance with the forms and I have done so till today.

“Br. Smit speaks in a depreciatory way about our confessions”, the committee claims, because I refuse to see OUR forms as a God-given criterion for the catholic church of Christ. I am not disputing the contents but the status, which some of us want to describe to the “forms of unity”. This does not undermine the standard of teaching but the standard of exclusivism among us. I also speak in a praising way about the confessions, referring to them as “a rich heritage”, but that is “conveniently” ignored by the committee.

The last “impression” is again baseless. Not all our writing and teaching has as purpose to do an intensive re-examination of our ecclesiastical walk and talk. For this study, however, my approach is appropriate. We must beware of confessionalism and traditionalism. Several of our leaders (K. Schilder, Rev. Wielenga, and I think Dr. Faber) have always insisted we should avoid extra-scriptural binding. Dr. Faber translated K. Schilder’s brochure “Extra-Scriptural Binding- a new danger.”

### **3 Baptism and Baptists**

The committee makes a big deal of using “accepting” for “appropriation” and “offer” for “promise”. If the committee maintains that infant baptism seals our whole salvation, including our entry into heaven, it goes against Scripture and confession, itself. Prof. VanBruggen warns against that (120). Rev. Oosterhoff taught that the covenant children already have forgiveness of sins and regeneration, prior to, and independent of faith. Synod Rotterdam-Delfshaven rejected this as unscriptural (122). Although all of Israel was saved from Egypt and baptized in Moses, most of them perished because of their unbelief. I believe Dr. VanBruggen wrote; “Mature persons can no longer say “I am baptized and therefore I am saved, but I believe and therefore I share in the saving work of Christ.” The committee members are risking their own reputation by maintaining the points as written in their report.

In essay 25 I describe different ways in which our people see the essence of the promises; gift, offer, promise, etc. I use the term “offer” as synonym for gift, as in offering sacrifices. The term “gift” is often used for those who overemphasize the passive aspect of faith. The committee, however, does not acknowledge that, but refers to it as “simply an offer of salvation”. This is an unfair representation of my views.

Again in the following sentence, the committee judges by appearances. Everybody who hears God’s Word has the full covenant promises contained therein. I mention this many times in my book; p. 32, 52, 91, 93, 97,...

In this one paragraph, the committee cannot and does not do justice to my discussion on the status of children in the covenant. With many elders and some ministers, I do think that the form of infant baptism does not effectively communicate the scriptural balance. These issues may not be wiped off the table, as they represent a serious concern for the churches and the life in our churches. Just to say “There is no automatism among us”, does not make the problem disappear.

Does Scripture clearly command that children of believers be baptized? We can recognize three lines of thought.

1) Yes! Then, indeed as some of our leaders suggest, those who deny this (whether or not they disagree with infant baptism) refuse to accept the Word of God. Therefore, as was suggested by some of our leaders, people who left for a Baptist church, have left Christ (and are no longer Christians). Then indeed, we must not hesitate to keep such people from the Lord’s Supper, but we must deny them the grace of God, and declare that, unless they repent, they will end up in hell. Then indeed, Peter VanderBoom, although he seemed to grow in Christ and his assurance of salvation, in fact lost the faith and died an unbeliever, while in earlier years he had been saved by his baptism. Then, indeed, Isaac Smit is a false prophet, leading the sheep to the cliffs of hell. Hence, the committee’s zeal to bring me to justice.

2) No, although infant baptism makes sense to us, we may not say that God clearly commands infant baptism. Although our reasoning makes sense to us, others can research the Scriptures and come to different conclusions. A growing holiness in Peter and Femie (over the past years), for instance, warns us that we cannot just say that -in that same time period- Satan deceived them and tricked them away from Christ. If nevertheless, righteous Christians who have hesitations, doubts, or disagreements with infant baptism, we should urge them to join a different church of Christ. If we place them under discipline, we risk God's wrath upon ourselves, if indeed we deny sincere Christians their access to the grace of God in His Supper and in their access to heaven. We then begin to show the marks of Satan and his assembly.

3) No, Scripture is not clear on this issue. If we are to be fully the church of Christ, we must be open to all Christians, whether or not they agree with points such as infant baptism. If we fail to do that, we are essentially a sect.

I disagree with point 1. I estimate that at least 25% of our people disagree with number 1, but I am perhaps the first one to publish this. I am prepared to suffer the consequences. If I am totally wrong, the sound preaching and writing of others will instruct the churches about my dangerous views, so that the churches may be saved from heresy and a departure from the Reformed truth. If I am right, I have warned the federation for the dangerous path we are on, so that renewal may take place. Either way, an open discussion will benefit the federation.

Br. Smit in no way undermines the truth that God is always first in the lives of the saints, coming to them with His rich promises of salvation from the day of their birth, and even choosing them before they were born. Even a casual reading would attest to this.

Essay 2 starts with the work of God, before it goes into the importance of man's obligation.

Essay 3, which deals with man's responsibility to accept Christ, starts (after the introductory paragraph) with man's full dependence on God.

Our accepting Christ is only possible when God the Spirit has worked in us to make us in tune with Him. Without this initial work of the Spirit, man is spiritually dead: a God hater. With the Spirit's work, however, man can become actively engaged. Throughout the process, however, all power comes from God only. Apart from God's sovereignty we are dead, apart from His Spirit we are spiritually dead. (26)

Essay 5 mostly focuses on how, already at birth our covenant relationship started with the blessings and promises of God.

The children in the church have a special blessing in their position. They are guaranteed to hear the Gospel. They have full access to God's revelation, in sermons and private talks, in catechism classes and at the family table, in books and magazines, in schools and conferences. Our children are exposed to instruction and edification in many places and formats. They too, "have been entrusted with the very words of God" (Ro.3.2b). There is even more. They may also see examples of godly people, transformed by the work of the Spirit. They may experience God's care for His people, often in miraculous ways. They may witness God's goodness in the communion of saints from which they, too, may benefit. (32)

Already at birth, Christ claims the children of His people. They too, belong to Him. Their special status holds a serious obligation in that Christ's love has to be answered by love. Already at birth, it is clear that Christ has set them apart, to be prepared for Him. Already then, Christ proposes, "I want to be one with you, I claim you too to be my own." Infant baptism (or Baptist dedication) signifies this claim and offer to marriage. It gives a great perspective. It offers the greatest gifts, yet it holds grave responsibility. Christ's claim, like a brand mark on a calf, can never be removed. The young child, raised in the church, is marked for life. (32)

Essay 6 starts with the humble status of man and the need for a new beginning, a gift from God.

Essay 7 focuses on the work of God and the Holy Spirit. His work is a prerequisite for man's turning to God or seeking for Him.

Our God is an awesome God! Did Nicodemus, after his nightly discussion with Jesus, accept Him as Messiah? This is quite likely, for he accompanied Joseph of Arimathea in taking care of Jesus' body after His death on the cross (Jn.19.39). Could Nicodemus ever boast that he himself had started the process of salvation, by visiting Jesus at night? No, of course not. This visit was not his personal initiative-apart-from-God. It was God's Spirit who was (already then) at work in him. Without God's initiative nobody wants to know about Him. It is by the Spirit that some will start to listen and become receptive to the Gospel. The Spirit works in the world, because He convicts the world of sin (Jn.15.26, 27). Without this, all mission work would be futile, for without the knowledge of sin, nobody would see the need for grace. The Spirit has to reveal man's misery, and create the desire for salvation. He also needs to convince people that God's Word is true and reliable. This work, however, is not a guarantee to salvation- apparently it is "resistible grace". Stephen accused the Sanhedrin of resisting the work of the Holy Spirit (Ac.7.51). Especially in this early stage of the Spirit's work, man can resist the Spirit. This does not diminish the power of God- He chooses it to be so. He is certainly able, at any moment, to drag people to faith. Arminians too, acknowledge this; God often "waits to see" what choice man will make, because He wants to do it this way. Those who reject Christ cannot (personally) receive the Spirit. Those who accept Christ can be sure of the indwelling Spirit. (42)

Neither do I reject election (predestination).

So, for whom did Christ die? Ultimately, of course, only for those who believe in Him and persevere in faith. Those are the ones who were predestined for heaven. The offer of salvation, however, goes out to all those who hear the Word. (230)

I could continue, but I stopped at page 42. In the section of the covenant, too, I consistently maintain that every good thing comes from God and that God is always first in people's lives. I am very concerned that this is done.

Can the Baptists in the long term maintain a good understanding of the rich blessings God gives to all people in the Christian community? (121)

#### **4 Perseverance of the saints**

The confession resolves the issue in this way; Those who fall away were not TRUE believers. Consequently, believers (in general) can fall away. The Canons state that true believers cannot commit the sin against the Holy Spirit. Yet, when the Hamilton congregation heard Rev. De Graaf from Holland, he clearly stated; "The warning about committing the sin against the Holy Spirit applies to each one of us!" Not only does the committee attack the Hamilton consistory for declaring me a member in good standing, but also in calling a minister (missionary) who contradicts the Canons on this point, more than I do.

Only the believers who persevere are true Christians. Sincere repentance is the way in which the gift of perseverance is obtained. (Faber et al., De Schat van Christus' Bruid, p. 189)

Those who claim that all those in the church are believers AND that all believers will persevere without disclaimers abuse the confessions and lead the churches to automatism and disaster. The committee suggests that my "statements" also lead to problems, but that is because they have first taken such statements out of context. This is my conclusion:

To those who struggle with sin and cry out to God, the comfort and assurance should be emphasised. Others, however, may become complacent, resting in their assurance of salvation without recognising their sins. They have to be warned. If we only comfort with assurance, the churches will fall into complacency. If we always question people's faith, however, the community will lose its confidence and hope. Blessed is the church who does both, where and when required. (38)

## **5 The status of believers**

When I write “We are no longer sinners!” I do so right after proving the primary biblical definition for “sinners”, that is: those who live in sin and refuse to repent. In our circles the term “sinners” is used to mean “people who sin”. To quote the sentence without referring to the definition used, seems devious. God says “Be holy as I am holy!” Will the committee members deny that this command to holiness implies anything less than perfection? The committee claims that my position “denies the lingering effects of original sin.” It flatly ignores the careful balance, which I maintain;

(46) “we must not deny the sin that still remains in us.”

(47) “the warfare (against sin) continues until the end.”

(48) “the struggle against sin and the pursuit of holiness remains while we are on earth.” It is not my view on sin, which is one-sided, but the committee’s description of it.

(58) “...our sinful nature is well in tune with it.”

That we do not yet reach perfection is our own fault, of course! Whose do you say, it is? I do not deny the two definitions of “holy”;

The term “saints” is related to the verb “to sanctify” or to “make holy”. To sanctify or make holy has to do with cleaning, purifying, perfecting, setting apart for God’s service, and being dedicated to God. Interestingly, the Bible only uses the word “saints” in the plural. People are first set apart, or called, when God presents them with the Gospel so that they hear the Word. If they accept the Word they become true partakers of Christ’s sacrifice and the Holy Spirit then indwells them and perfects them. Therefore, we should distinguish between two forms of sanctification. God’s work has to lead to a positive response in us. Human love finds its root in God’s love. When people learn about this love, they must respond in love. Those who embrace Christ, are the saints. They have been sanctified (1) and are being sanctified (2). Saints are Christians. (155), see also p. 71, 138

K. Schilder, leader in the Liberation, also emphasised that God principally restores man to his original, pre-Fall abilities. Of course, Schilder did not ignore that sin is still present in a believer, but his emphasis was on the new person. Schilder insisted that regenerated people are able to obey God. No longer do they need to disappoint God as partner in His covenant. No compromise! Choose between all or nothing- and all is within reach. (46)

## **6 The view of the covenant**

In the history of science we see that a new model of reality at first always looks confusing and unclear. The familiar, however, appears clear until we try to convince others. Over the last few years I have also experienced this. Therefore I cannot expect that those who are entrenched in a particular outlook, tradition, and terminology, will readily agree with me on the Trinitarian covenant model. Let me repeat what I wrote before. All those who clearly hear God’s Word or are in the church have all the promises. Yet, only those who have accepted the Word have the indwelling Spirit as a factual reality. This reality is one of the essential characteristics for the new covenant. Peter’s call at Pentecost and Paul’s letter to the Galatians, clearly show that the hearing of the Word is not enough, but that accepting the word is required to actually have the indwelling Spirit (Ac.2.41; Gal. 3.2,5,14; Gal.4.6). Rebirth coincides with this. Therefore, only those who are born again are to partake of the Lord’s Supper and little children should not. (BC, art.35)

This proves that little children, although they have all the promises, do not yet share in the full blessings of the new covenant. The committee, however, continually equates the promises of the covenant with the blessing of the indwelling Spirit. That would suggest that they assume that all children in the covenant are already regenerated. This is “assumed regeneration” or even “assured regeneration”, and is just as

unscriptural as Kuyper's theory. How does the committee figure it possible that any of these could not end up in heaven?

My quote from essay 5, under issue 3, shows that I see the blessings greater than what the report suggests. Besides; the hearing of the Word implies having all promises. To accept Baptists as Brothers and Sisters in Christ does not mean that I have serious problems with infant baptism. The book also points that out to those who are willing to read it.

The report indeed proves that the committee has not yet understood the Trinitarian covenant model.

## **7 the church**

The introductory statement is a serious misrepresentation of my (as well as Rev. DeBruin's) church view. The term "appearance" does not significantly reduce the allegations. I describe the church in terms of (1) those who (by faith) are grafted in Christ (as part of his Body); this includes all believers, or those who are OF the church. Article 27 describes this aspect of the church. (2) The church is also defined as those who are gathered together in worship- as members of local congregations. These gatherings constitute those IN the church. Article 28 describes this aspect. Although the two descriptions refer to ONE church, they do not fully overlap until the Last Day. The first aspect is visible, because normally believers can be recognized by their walk and talk. The second aspect is visible in worship services, except where the persecuted church lives "underground". Therefore I rarely use the terms "invisible-visible". The committee tries to keep its own church views vague, not referring to any specific bodies, which are in or out. From that standpoint it seems cheap to attack my views. By stating "Above all, we must see the church not as 'those who have true faith'", and making this an essential part of our doctrine, the committee depresses BC, art.27, even while it refers to this. The committee concludes that there are hypocrites within and sheep without the congregations, but criticizes me when I write "The walls of the federation do not separate the sheep from the goats.". Who has revealed to you that there are but few hypocrites within and but a few true Christians without? What about the church in China? Our exclusivism seems to result from an "us-in-the true-church" vs. "the-world-around-us" attitude, which is common in all kinds of human cultures and is condemned in my book as ethnocentrism. That is a false antithesis. Anyway, if this discussion is published, the response from OPC, FRC, and URC may well point out that the committee's views amount to saying "we are the only true church (federation) in North America". I say this, because I am convinced that only a minority of our leaders agrees with this narrow church view, and no other federation does.

## **8 Lord's Supper**

This issue too, clearly shows that the committee sees the church strictly as "a federation, denomination, or human organization" and not as "all those who -by a true faith- are gathered in Christ". The committee, apparently equates those who are in Christ with those accept the Three Forms of Unity. There can be only one thing or Person in the centre! Even if Christ is in the centre of the creeds (which I do not deny), we may not therefore equate the creeds with Christ.

Naturally the brothers are very upset with my book, because I strongly argue against such exclusivism. The reference to 1 Tim.6.13ff is ludicrous, if it suggests that "confession" refers to the Forms of Unity. I am amazed that these brothers dare to publicly put their signatures under such statements. I am fully prepared to stay my ground, because I am just as convinced as they are, that God is on my side and that He will vindicate me, even if theologians blast me, the board fires me, or the consistory of Hamilton would cast me out of the Kingdom. Regardless of family, friends or jobs, possessions and whatever, following Christ has a price, which we must be willing to pay.

I trust that –for now- we can leave the other points out of discussion. I am fully prepared to defend almost all of them. I will not revise or retract my statements under part 1, because the revision is already in the text of "Praying for Rain." The committee just missed it.

To suggest that the book was written "on the spur of the moment" is ridiculous. Already two years ago I told Mr. VanderHoeven about my plans to write it. He knew it was going to be controversial. I have asked seven of our leaders for feedback and guidance, but all refused "for lack of time". One of them has now apologized, admitting that he had the time, but lacked the courage. And yes, I do still hope and pray for all Christians to be one. How wonderful that would be! Ultimately, of course, this will not happen in this life, but we still must work for it- and pray for it. You may think I am a dreamer, but I'm not the only one. I hope one day you'll join us, and the church will be one!

In the Master's service,

Isaac (Aize) Smit









## Response to the Board's concerns

- 1 The board's quote from the Belgic Confession does not contradict my statements you refer to. Man does not need any information concerning salvation, which is not found in Scripture. I am in full agreement with that, and so is my book. If Scripture is not clear on a certain point, this does not nullify its sufficiency for salvation. If God decides to save some, who never heard the Word, does that make the Word itself any less sufficient?
- 2 My characterisation of the confessions goes well beyond "historical responses". It seems that the board uses a one-sided representation of my description to "prove" that I gave a one-sided representation. I have never attacked or denied the confessions as standards for Guido, but I refuse to see them as objective and absolute standards for Christianity.
- 3 Pharaoh's son also belonged to the covenant, which God made with all people, but he missed out on the special blessings, which God gave to Israel. If people hear the Gospel, without (yet) accepting it, they share in the promises, but they do not yet have the indwelling Spirit. We do not baptise all those whom are promised redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit. Consider Pentecost: Did Peter baptise all those to whom he said "For you is the promise, and to your children as well as all those who are called by the Gospel"?
- 4 I undermine any false convictions that all those who hear the Word will have faith and that they will persevere. Faith and perseverance are obligations just as much as they are gifts. Only those, who have true faith, will persevere and only those who will persevere have true faith.
- 5 In my book as well as my response to the committee report I have sufficiently demonstrated that I do not diminish the effects of lingering sin. Essay 11, on "our walk" also confirms this. Yet, the board seems to be blind to this. I trust the Lord will vindicate me.
- 6 I have not adopted certain aspects of the Canadian Reformed covenant teaching, as it fails to recognise:
- a. God's covenant with all people. How can they be in debt to God unless the Lord has graciously provided them with gifts and blessings?
  - b. In the new covenant, the reality of the indwelling Spirit is one of the greatest blessings. These blessings are only found in those who have accepted the Word of God.
- The reason the model is confusing to some seems to stem from a reluctance to consider any alternatives to the traditional teaching.
- 7 I have almost completely ignored the invisible church (of all the elect), and only dealt with the visible church; universally as well as locally. Its visibility stems from personal faith, expressed in obedience as well as in communal worship. Consider article 27's example of what it refers to: 7000 people, who did not bow their knees in worship to Baal. Does this refer to all those who show their faith in obedience, or does this refer to groups of people, who gather in worship?
- 8 The board is masterful in turning the tables. I insisted that all those who have faith are members in Christ and in His Body. Therefore, unless they temporarily refuse to repent from certain sins, they all must partake of the Lord's Supper. There is not a hint of a dilemma here! The dilemma comes up when we refuse to allow certain Christians to His table, or if we restrict Christ's church to the (Canadian) Reformed congregations.

Why I cannot sign  
**the “acknowledgement”, as demanded by the board**

In order to keep my job I must –without reservation- accept the following specific doctrines, which are said to be contained in Scripture as well as our creeds.

**(a) The Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and all that man must believe is fully contained and sufficiently taught therein. The Lord binds us to this Word and its proclamation for our salvation.**

Since God has chosen not to reveal every aspect of His will, Scripture does not fully contain it. Scripture contains sufficient information for man to know how he can be saved, but unless the Holy Spirit opens man’s heart to receive the Gospel, man cannot and will not accept His Word. The Lord wants us to meditate on his Word, to accept it as the truth and the only normative and authoritative standard for all teaching and conduct in all areas of life. (open for discussion, hesitant to sign)

**(b) It is our duty to maintain the good confession, in this case The Three Forms of Unity, which are based on the Word of God as the normative and authoritative standard for all teaching and conduct in all areas of life.**

This is awkwardly worded. The Three Forms of Unity may be the standard for teaching at Guido (no problem), but it is not the absolute, universal standard for Christian walk and talk. There can be only one such standard and that is Scripture. When I became a Canadian citizen I promised under oath to uphold the laws of the land. This does not mean that these laws have become “the standard” for my personal convictions, or the ultimate standard for what I do. The confessions have been changed over time and still contain errors and inaccuracies, for instance in BC, art.36. The “good confession” refers to Peter’s confession and may not be applied to whatever interpretation a particular denomination tends to hold as truth. (unacceptable)

**(c) Scripture is clear with regard to the teaching that the children of believers must be baptized.**

Scripture nor confessions say that this is a clear-cut issue. Anybody, who has tried to defend to a Baptist (from Scripture) that infants in the church must be baptized, knows that. I have heard no substantial arguments, during the 7 months since my book was published. To maintain scriptural clarity on this issue is intellectual suicide; it is a political statement, which does not reflect reality. Therefore it will become a false support until the next generation rejects this kind of falsehood and hypocrisy. (unacceptable)

**(d) We must maintain the perseverance of the saints, as confessed in the Canons of Dort, esp. chapter V, which represents an unequivocal rejection of the teachings of the Arminians.**

Perseverance of the saints is only given in the way of repentance and cannot be used as a law for all those who accept the Word. Perseverance is just as much an obligation as it is a gift from God. Those who remain in Christ, repent from their sins, and expect salvation from Christ need not worry to lose their faith, while those who boast of their covenant status, without taking their sins seriously, must examine themselves whether they are in Christ. (the committee represents a half-truth)

**(e) Although Christ has died for our sins, we must struggle with our sinful nature our whole life long.**

Although Christ has placed His Spirit in us so that we no longer are dominated by sin, our sinful nature remains at work, so that we must struggle with sin our whole life long. (no essential disagreement)

**(f) Children, as well as adults, share all the promises of the eternal covenant of grace and “redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, who works faith, are promised to them no less than to adults”**

Everybody who hears the Word shares in the promise. Just as with the perseverance of the saints, faith is not only to be described as a gift, but just as much as an obligation for those who hear the Word. (no essential disagreement)

**(g) The church is the congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers. This assembly is manifested in the concrete and visible gathering of the local churches of Christ all over the world, which can be discerned by the three marks of the true church.**

The church is the gathering by Christ to Himself and the gathering of people for the hearing of the Word and for worship. The church is manifested in worship services of faithful congregations and in the walk and talk of all those who by true faith are engrafted into Christ’s Body. They can be recognized by the marks of true Christians. The Body of Christ is not made up of local churches, but of all those who –by faith- are in Christ. (the board statement contains a half-truth, and is therefore unacceptable)

**(h) The Lord’s Supper and its supervision are given by Christ to His church. Admission to the Lord’s Supper requires profession of the Reformed faith.**

Where does Scripture (or the confessions) state that the Lord’s Supper is only for Reformed believers, who –according to the board- agree without reservation to the confessions including these eight statements? That leaves many of the Lord’s people out! It reveals a sectarian view that holds that Christ’s Supper is not for all sincere Christians, but only for those who agree with all our interpretations and emphases. If we deny sincere Christians access to the grace of Christ in His Supper, we declare to them that they have no part in His Kingdom. Such is the practice of the false church! (strong disagreement)

Isaac Smit













Isaac Smit  
RR#1, Mount Hope, ON  
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August 25, 1998

To the consistory of Cornerstone Canadian Reformed Church at Hamilton

Dear Brothers,

I thank you for the fact that you have taken my book seriously and that you took the time to acquaint yourself with its contents and form an opinion on the issues presented therein. I would like to respond to your detailed report, on each of the six heresies or distortions of the truth.

**1 My view on the Holy Scriptures**

1a Under the heading “the clarity of Scripture”, you deal with three of my statements;

- i) not everything is revealed to us
- ii) Scripture is not clear in itself; the Spirit is required
- iii) the truth is greater than the Word

As you have no problems with i), we can start on the clarity of Scripture. You refer to pages 17, 114, and 160. On page 17, I refer to the abuse of the notion that Scripture is clear, where people claim divine justification of their own interpretations and applications. I remember, as a child, that our minister said in a sermon that it is a grievous sin to watch T.V. on Sundays. Last Sunday, a visiting minister in Cornerstone claimed that leaving one church (denomination) for another is a sin, unless the first one is not a church of Christ. Such statements are presented as clear, objective, Biblical facts, while they are not. What seems clear to us, is then attributed to the revealed will of God.

On page 114, I say that Scripture is unclear (on certain issues) because people are imperfect. I don't think it makes any sense to philosophize about an objective clarity, apart from man. The whole concept of clarity only takes on meaning when we consider the reader or listener involved. Also, we are not discussing, whether or not Scripture is clear on the way of salvation, as if the unbeliever can blame God.

The parable of the sower demonstrates that the proclamation of the Word produces different results in different people. Matthew 13.19 states “When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart.” Others appear to accept the Word, but it becomes clear that there is no true faith, which produces fruit. Others hear the Word, understand it, and produce rich fruit. We find in Luke 24.45 “Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.” Do we not pray before the sermon that God may open our hearts so that we may be edified by His Word? The first time my neighbor read the Bible, it made him a stronger atheist. God's Word never returns empty, but the outcome is not the same for all. So, God's Word and our experience teach us that, unless God's Spirit prepares human hearts, no one can see the truth. We also learn that God the Spirit is not powerfully active, working faith and obedience, in ALL who read or hear His Word. This would be either a denial of the two-fold outcome or a minimal view of the power of the Spirit.

On page 160, I stress the human limitations for comprehending the full truth about God. As Rev. Huizinga said last Sunday; “Human language cannot fully describe the full reality of the Trinity”. Paul writes that only later will we see

clearly the full truth of God, as we still look in a mirror dimly. This too, stems from human nature. Nowhere do I claim that God could not reveal things to us. Apparently he revealed to Paul, “inexpressable things, that man is not permitted to tell.” (2Co.12.4) The fact that Word and Spirit do not reveal the full reality does not make them powerless, but maintains God’s sovereignty, for He has ordained it so.

In all of the above, I have in no way diverged from what I have written in my book. As far as I know, and my conscience confirms to me, this is the Biblical truth. If you still insist that I twist the truth and teach heresy, you must indeed proceed with excommunication.

1b Although your heading reads “the sufficiency of Scripture”, the section deals with the possibility that anyone could be saved before or without hearing and accepting the Word. While God already established a covenant with Abraham, we read of Job, Melchizedek, and Jethro (who were outside of this covenant) as righteous men. Without the special revelation of the Word of God, these men were yet believers, worshiping God Almighty, knowing their sinful disposition and expecting salvation from God alone. I have not found evidence that after Melchizedek this has become impossible.

Before and outside the old covenant, the general picture was very bleak. Most people turned away from their God and Maker, following the desires of their hearts, expecting their blessings from the spirits, rather than from the Creator. Yet, some remained faithful and believed God. If they would hear the Gospel, they would recognize the work of God and believe. I have written (p.96) that, “Some, by the grace of God, have done so, as they lived with God.” On page 71, I also describe it as an exception, and on page 70, I also give the credit to God for their obedience. Yet, you ignore the “some”, which refers to an exception, and you generalize and scornfully paint a picture of “the pious heathen”. I write “by the grace of God”, as I insist on throughout my book, but you still find cause to call me Arminian. I find comfort in the fact that God is the Judge.

I realize that I need more time and wisdom to consider the possibility of “walking with God” before one hears the Gospel. Yet, I am sorry to say that I find it hard to see your approach as pastoral or edifying in this respect.

## 2 **My view on the confessions**

“The Bible is not clear on all issues and without the enlightenment of the Spirit, the Bible cannot produce faith.” You summarize this as “The Bible is unclear and insufficient”, and you seem to conclude that I have a low view of Scripture. Those who truly know me can testify that the opposite is true. Although I love the confessions, I refuse to hold them “as the standard for doctrine and life”, yet that is what the Guido board required of me. I don’t care if that results in labeling, for ultimately I am only bound by God’s Word and Spirit. To put anything else at equal value amounts to idolatry. I have only challenged the confessions on their insistence that Scripture teaches that children of believers must be baptized. If “having the promise” is the only ground for baptism, as Dr. De Jong defended in The Clarion (in “The Baptist Error”), then all those who read or hear God’s Word must be baptized, for they all share in the promise. Yet, that is not what Acts 2 is teaching us. Not all those who heard the Word, but only those who accepted it were baptized. Yet, the Canadian Reformed theologians refuse to discuss these things, as did the ward elders, even though they had studied the matter. They all refer to confessions and tradition alone. The only two theologians, who were willing to help me further, dropped the discussion after the first round already. This is the best proof I have that confessions narrow our view of the full Scriptural truth.

You reprimand me that I should have approached the consistory first. Let the following be for the record, and God is my witness. Both, the chairman of the

consistory for the previous six months (Dr. Witten), as well as our pastor, knew (already for a year) from personal discussion with me that I had doubts about the Scriptural demand for children to be baptized. Last year, in the Fall, I asked Rev. Stam how many copies of my manuscript he wanted for the consistory, so they could study it prior to publication. He told me that he wanted none. He insisted that this was not necessary, even if I were to teach something going against the confessions, and he encouraged me to continue with publication. Shortly thereafter I asked Br. Witten whether it would be necessary to have my manuscript examined by the consistory prior to publication. Without hesitation, he told me that that would be ridiculous. There would be no need for this. Therefore, I am genuinely surprised to read these admonitions, for they imply a judgement upon yourselves.

### **3 My view on the covenant**

The term “also” suggests that you rely heavily on Dr. Gootjes’ report. Only some theologians and leaders in our midst have complained that my model is confusing. Others have told or written me the opposite. Now, Dr. Gootjes took only a few days to read my book and form a response. The Cornerstone consistory report, however, is the product of many minds and months of deliberation. Nevertheless;

(1) You choose to describe my three-dimensional covenant model as three distinct covenants; I only talk about separate covenants when I refer to distinct stages in time. Scripture does this too, by referring to old and new covenants, but we may not therefore separate them, as if they if they are “totally separated”. The same holds true for my view of the covenant.

(2) Your association with modalism suggests that I don’t distinguish, but separate the work of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I never claimed that Word and Spirit were not active at creation, or in the early stages of covenant history. The Spirit, who now dwells in believers, also produced faith in men like Abraham. You produce no quotes to suggest I would have denied such truths.

(3) I never call the early stages “not real”. Nevertheless, they are inferior compared to latter, much richer stages. This is also what the Scripture says, especially in the letter to the Hebrews.

(4) You import the dualism “physical” (for the old) and “spiritual” (for the new covenant), while I have not written anything like it.

I hate to say this, but your criticism totally misses the mark. Where did I write “Once reborn, one has truly arrived!”? The Guido committee criticized me for not saying that! Under the new covenant, for mature people, only those who are born again will enter God’s kingdom. That is what Jesus teaches Nicodemus. The indwelling Spirit is the seal and guarantee that we have faith. When you write “There are various dispensations, but there is only one covenant”, you summarize my view well. The term “covenants” (plural) only occurs in my introduction, essay 12. On the one hand you accuse me of believing in the possibility of salvation in the first dispensation (under 1b), now (end of point 3) you lament that I suggest that salvation was impossible under those conditions. Who is confusing?

When I studied science, I learned this: When one is entrenched in a particular model or theory, a new or different model always seems confusing at first. Throughout history, the Reformed church has developed a systematic theology, but a new approach on an aspect is quickly labeled as scholasticism. This is not objective reasoning.

### **4 My view on infant baptism**

I have thought quite a bit about the terminology of “promise” and “offer”. Each term has its strong points as well as its problems. The first term may lead to the

idea that nothing can prevent a baptized child from entering heaven. If the all-powerful, faithful God promises something; surely it must come to pass. Although this emphasizes God's work, it is easy to minimize the need for a response in faith. Although "offer", especially in our age of consumerism, has a tentative, non-obligatory association, it does stress the need for a choice. As several leaders and many members see "accepting Christ" and the very idea of "choice" as heresy (even though Scripture and confession teach it), I chose for the term "offer". In the discussion of/about K. Schilder and H. Hoeksema, the term offer was commonly accepted. Alexander DeJong wrote his thesis on this "The Well-Meant Gospel Offer". There is no reason to minimize this as "just an offer". To summarize God's blessings as I describe them in essay 5 as God's signature which by itself "means nothing" is an unwarranted reduction. I have had some readers express their appreciation for this essay, because they never before had realized God's blessings to children in the church. My book, especially essay 5, gave them a greater appreciation of the Reformed doctrine, while you reject it. In it I show that, long before we can respond with faith, God already blesses us and calls us His children. Just as all of Israel was saved from Egypt, so all those who are in the church are "saved from the world". Yet, only those who believe in God will enter God's rest. The others will perish in the desert.

Nowhere did I write that it is Reformed to say that those who are in the covenant are automatically saved. I searched the book for "autom..." and I only found (p.122); "If a personal decision for Christ is not required, we are bound for automatism and false covenant comfort." I heartily agree with you that such a view is a sad caricature of the Reformed doctrine. Yet, you seem to imply (in your final paragraph) that I have lost or left the Reformed doctrine. Although some of our leaders seem to follow that approach, emphasizing that the children have everything already and need not claim it, this was rejected by Synod Rotterdam-Delfshaven (bottom p.122).

Again, I never wrote that little children are not truly in the covenant. I have argued that they do not yet have the indwelling Spirit. I have written that the indwelling Spirit is the greatest (additional) blessing of the new covenant. Consequently, we cannot equate the status of the children and the believers, and therefore the former ones should not partake of the Supper. I do see that Scripture calls baptism the bath of rebirth. Consequently, I have asked questions, which the Canadian Reformed church fails to answer. Is it possible that fear drives the reaction?

## **5 My view on the believers**

You write about our status before God, but that is not the topic of essay 8. I deal with the balance that believers no longer are governed by sin, but by the Spirit, while the sinful nature still remains in them, resulting in ongoing warfare. The illustration at the end of the essay also demonstrates this. Consider also the following quotes, which the consistory seems to ignore.

(46) "we must not deny the sin that still remains in us."

(47) "the warfare (against sin) continues until the end."

(48) "the struggle against sin and the pursuit of holiness remains while we are on earth." It is not my view on sin, which is one-sided, but the committee's description of it.

(58) "our sinful nature is well in tune with it."

Who is confusing whom? If I am a semi-perfectionist, then so was Dr. K. Schilder (see p.46). My point is that we, in our churches, count ourselves first of all as sinners, while Paul warns us not do so. Even though we still fall terribly short of true holiness, yet we must focus on the new life in the Spirit.

Is it possible that some leaders react so strongly, exactly because I make a good point on which we need to examine ourselves?

## **6 My view on the church**

Even a casual reading of essays 27 and 32 will prove that I do not plainly define the church as “all those who have true faith.” Rather, I point to two perspectives. “Church” does not only refer to a congregation where God’s Word is preached, or those who “hear God’s Word”, but also to all those who are (by faith, what else?) engrafted into Christ’s Body. We must distinguish between those “in the church” and those who are “of the church”. These two will not overlap until Christ brings perfection at the Last Day. The reason that this Scriptural and confessional balance reminds you of Jean de Labadie, is that you reject the same aspect that he chose to highlight. Consequently, you must come to un-Scriptural constructions, such as mentioned at the end of page 153.

Can there be living stones outside the building, which is built on Christ? Can there be fruit bearing branches, which are not grafted into the vine, rooted in Christ Jesus? Must the Canadian Reformed churches continue to persecute those who reject the theory that not all those who are grafted in Christ are (yet) grafted into His Body?

Can you only refute my arguments by consistent misrepresentation and association with “other heretics”? Where do I deny that Christians must join a faithful congregation? Where do I deny that such a congregation must uphold the balanced preaching of the full Scriptures? You choose to continue in the sins of the Canadian Reformed churches, as described in essay 36, by ignoring my scriptural argumentation, by obvious misrepresentation of my views, and by using the keys of the Kingdom to enforce your tradition.

So, you conclude that I go against Scripture, and that what we have in common is not sufficient for us to be together at the Lord’s table. You are driving a wedge deep between us. This cuts two ways. By your own judgement, either I am a heretic or you act like a false church. Yet, if I were a pastor of an independent Reformed church, you would embrace me and insist on getting together. If you are wrong and your judgement is false, you cast serious doubts upon your own doctrine and actions. Therefore, I will also take over the instruction of our children (in the Christian doctrine), until this issue has been settled. I still hope and pray for restoration, but reading your comments like “final response” and “only if the book is retracted does it make sense for us to continue speaking on these matters”, this does not look promising. Although you refer to an ongoing discussion, I must remind you that there has not been a discussion of any kind. During the home visits the elders have refused to discuss the contents of my book and I have only been admonished about our practice of home schooling. Your report and judgement give an unfair representation of my views, which has also been made available to members of the congregation (upon request). As your verdict is the product of an unfair analysis, without a brotherly concern to do justice to my views and without prior discussion, there are no grounds to declare that we have no part in God’s Kingdom. Unless you retract the report and restore our status, I will include this material in the Study Guide, to be published soon. Then, everyone interested can decide for themselves, whether I am guilty of heresy, or you are guilty of persecution.

Yours in Christ,

Isaac Smit

