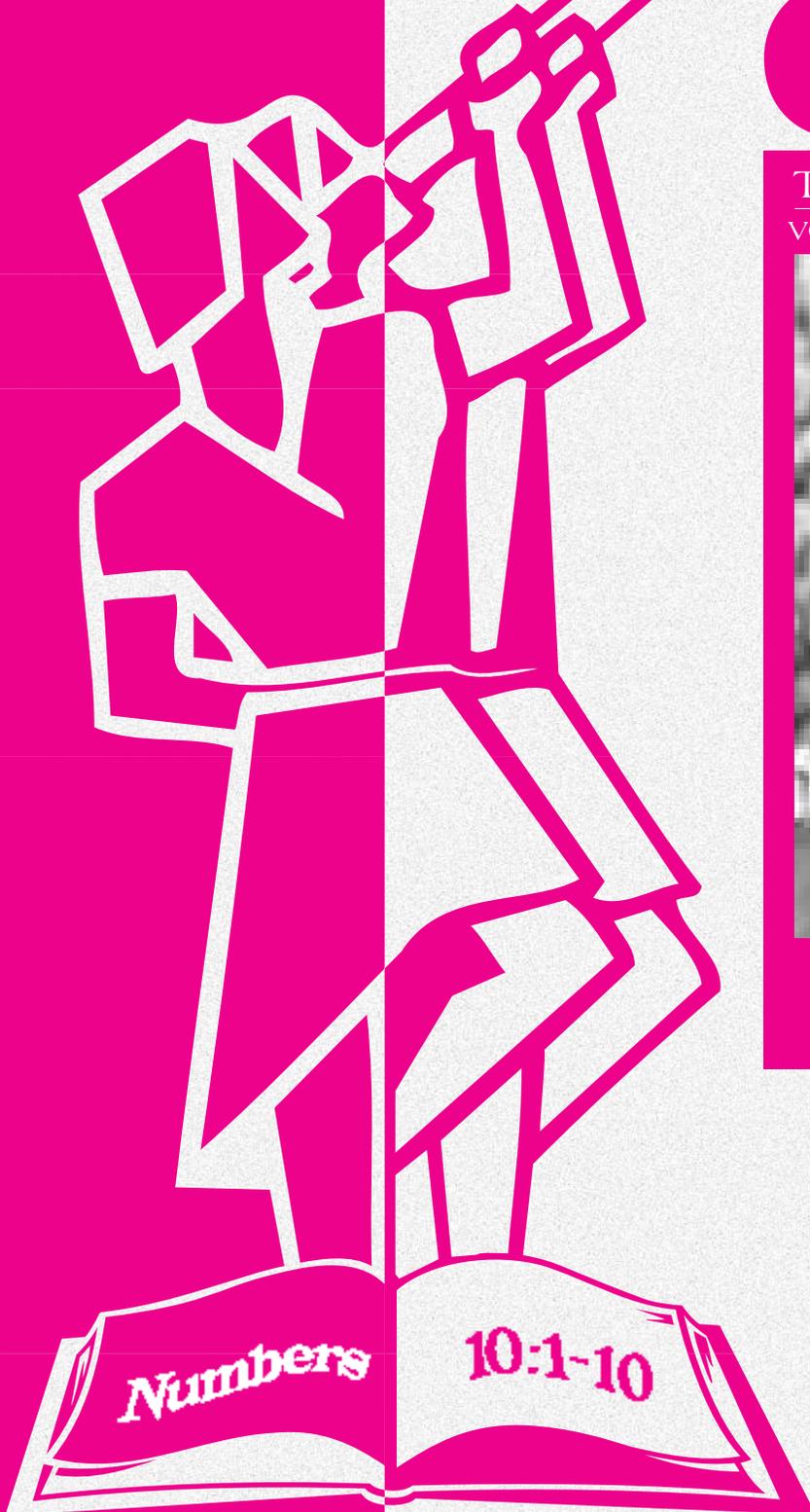


# Clarion

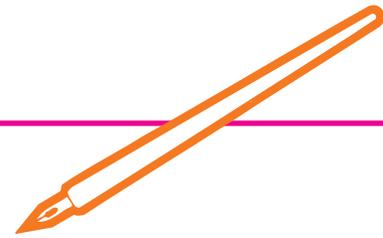
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*A Personal  
Relationship with God*



By N.H. Gootjes



## Pressures on Preaching

Thankfully, we may say that preaching is generally accepted in this world. Every Sunday ministers stand in front of congregations speaking about God and our relationship to him. People listen and consider what it means for them. Preaching is a focal point in the weekly work of the minister. Congregations see it as the centre of the service and ask, "Who is preaching today?" But even something as generally accepted as the sermon is not without problems.

Paul wrote about this in 1 Corinthians 1, where he used an unexpected expression. He spoke of the foolishness of the preaching. That raises the question whether preaching is foolishness. How can God require preaching (in the missionary commandment in Matthew 28:19f for example) if it does not make sense? How can Paul himself preach in synagogues (Acts 13:5) and in cities (Acts 14:21) if it is a foolish thing to do?

It is not the preaching itself, however, that Paul calls foolish. It is the message that is foolish. The NIV brings that out in its circumscriptive translation: "the foolishness of what was preached." This translation makes it clear that the word "preaching" does not refer to the act of preaching, but to the content of the preaching. That is correct, for Paul wrote here in v. 23 about "Christ crucified" (see also 2:2). Speaking about the main Christian message that Christ is crucified, Paul says that it is foolish.<sup>1</sup> Why is this message foolish?

First, there is the fact that this gospel speaks about a "cross." For Christians today, the cross has a glorified meaning because Jesus Christ died on a cross. In reality, however, it is a horrifying way to die. There is nothing graceful or elevated about dying on a cross, for it meant excruciating and extended pain. It was, therefore, not a normal way of dying, but an execution as a warning for others. Crucifixion calls to mind the execution of a criminal. It is not particularly attractive to preach about a criminal who died on the cross.

To this must be added that Jesus Christ did not deserve this execution. He had to undergo this punishment for us – in our place. We are guilty of many sins. As early as Paradise, God had told Adam that the punishment for sin would be death. Ever since the first people committed the first sin mankind has continued to sin and to die. Christ's crucifixion and his death on the cross reminds us that we deserve this death, with its connotations of a criminal caught, condemned, and painfully punished. This is not a gospel to make people particularly happy and joyous. It must be the most unattractive message of all. "Foolishness" is a fitting characteristic for that message. It is no wonder that few want to hear this preaching. People are not waiting for such a let down.

### Better messages?

People would rather turn to alternative messages. There are many possibilities for more attractive messages. One is the gospel of prosperity. The proclamation concentrates, not on the cross, but on the blessing. To give an example, another special blessing seems to be available: gold fillings. It seems to have started in Toronto. During a prayer meeting, people received gold fillings or even gold teeth. Pictures are published of people showing off their sparkling new gold teeth. Some received teeth in which the sign of a dove or of a cross was stamped. Something similar is reported in South America. Poor people whose teeth were in bad shape miraculously received healthy teeth that looked new. And the best news comes from Chile, where people can show gold fillings with small diamonds.<sup>2</sup>

The most important issue is not whether we can explain or disprove these reports. It is much more important to consider the content of the gospel that is proclaimed here. This is an attractive gospel that God will bless people with good health, and good teeth, if they believe in Him. It is an optimistic gospel promising blessings of wellbeing, health and prosperity. That is an uplifting gospel at a time when people are very much concerned about their health and their good looks.

This is obviously an extreme example. There are also less far reaching "improvements" on the gospel of the cross. Another example is the gospel of sorrow and support. Stories are told about people in situations of poverty and illness who need our money. Pictures and stories impress people with their plight. The listeners are called upon to help the poor and displaced of this world. Doing nothing makes one feel cheap. Being able to do something, however, makes the giver feel good. A gospel in which people are told that they can do something about the sorrow in this world is much more attractive than a gospel about Christ crucified.

Another threat for the gospel comes from our entertainment culture. Those who hear the sermon are the same people who listen to radio broadcasts and watch programs on TV. Professionals present these in an interesting way, intending to grab and hold the attention of the public. They frequently change the topics because today's audience does not have a long attention span. And they include the audience by asking them to write or to phone in. They know that they will be "zapped" away for another program if they are not able to bind the audience.

Ministers feel the pressure to become popular presenters of the Christian message. They may indicate the problematic points in society. They may come with their criticisms here and there. But harping on personal sin does not

People have no patience with the message of the cross and are "church surfing."

go over very well. And focusing on a crucified Christ is nothing new. Church people today have no patience with that. They look for a different minister in the vicinity, someone who is a better communicator of a more optimistic view. People change churches just as easily as they switch to another channel if the one they are watching is boring.

### The Cross of Christ

What can the preachers do when they work in a situation where people do not appreciate the sermons? It is always good, of course, to consider the criticism. It is possible that the communication is not as it should be, and that the preacher could do better. He should reach out to the listeners. Presentation is important. The packaging should be good.

It will have to be the packaging of the true gospel, however. The gospel does not say that the listeners are great people who deserve a break, or who can be expected to contribute richly for a good cause. The gospel, in its core, is always the preaching of the crucified Christ. This means that it is a gospel emphasizing sin and punishment. The cross symbolizes how terrible our sins are: so terrible that this severe a punishment is required. The gospel is not a soft story about help we give or benefit we receive, but a hard story of the punishment we deserve and the cross as the only way of salvation.

It is not without reason that Jews rather saw the preacher perform miraculous signs. They would be impressed and have good reason to follow him. The Greeks rather heard wisdom – deep spiritual truth – to help them understand the world. Both messages are more attractive than the preaching of the cross, which always throws our sins in our face. The gospel is foolishness, if we look at it from a human perspective. As a message, it is a disaster.

It is, however, the gospel of the cross of Christ. He took that cross upon himself. He walked with it in shame, was nailed to it in pain, and died on it. The message of the cross speaks of more than just an awful death, it also speaks of someone who suffered the death of rejection for his people. Life is in Jesus Christ. Our whole life is determined by this.

In the preaching, this message can be worked out in many ways. There is a great variety of texts in Scripture showing various aspects of our life before God. A preacher can continue from one text to another, continually discovering new aspects. All those aspects find their origin in Christ. More than that, they find their origin in the cross of Christ. Our whole relationship with God is anchored in the fact that Jesus Christ died for us.

It is therefore impossible to turn the gospel into a superficial story of financial security or emotional wellbeing. Christ's cross must be central in the preaching. This does not mean that the preacher must mention the cross on every page, or even in every sermon, but it must be in the back of our minds and must determine the direction in which we understand the Word of God.

In the end, it comes down to God's decision. Paul writes, "God was pleased through the foolishness of what is preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor 1:21b). God determined that the cross of Christ is the way of salvation. That is what must be preached and that is what we must believe. Communication specialists may cry that we are out of touch with reality and that people no longer want to hear this message. They may be right. And yet, this ugly gospel of the cross is the only solid basis of the Christian life.

<sup>1</sup>It would have been better for the NIV not to use the past tense: "what was preached." Since Paul is speaking in general about the content of the preaching, it should be rendered as: "what is preached."

<sup>2</sup>See the report in *Nederlands Dagblad*, May 1, 1999.



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By Richard Eikelboom

## In Jesus' Name

*I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name (John 16:23).*

For many of us, the most difficult thing about prayer is remembering to do it. Of course we pray at meal times. Of course we pray in church on Sunday. But our lives are so busy and our schedules are so hectic that it takes a conscious effort on our part to kneel down at the end of the day and really pray. In fact, sometimes it simply does not happen.

This changes however, when things begin to go wrong in our lives. When we lose our job, or someone close to us becomes seriously ill, or when loved ones becomes unfaithful to the Lord, then our prayers take on a new note of urgency. We ask the Lord from the bottom of our hearts to deliver us from our troubles, to look after us and make sure that all things go well.

When we come to the Lord in our difficult circumstances, we do not hesitate to pray with confidence. Because God has promised us that whatever we ask of the Father in Jesus' name, He will certainly give to us. The Lord does not say this to his disciples just once.

We find it repeated in John 14:13,14 and John 15:16. When we consider what happens in practice, it seems as if the Lord is not faithful to this promise. We pray *in Jesus' name* that the Lord will preserve life, yet the Lord takes life. We pray *in Jesus' name* that loved ones will repent of their sins and turn to the Lord, yet they continue to live in unbelief. What then do we do with the promise that the Father will give us whatever we ask *in Jesus' name*?

Simply closing a prayer with the words, "This I pray in Jesus' name," is something quite different from actually *praying in Jesus' name*. For when Moses went to Pharaoh with the command to let Israel go, he was speaking in God's name (Exod 5:23). And when a prophet would speak the Word of the Lord – when he would speak what God told him to speak – then he would speak in the name of the Lord (Deut 18:19,20). This rule remains in effect in the New Testament. When the Lord Jesus Christ commanded his disciples to go into the

world and preach the Gospel, He added the instruction to heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead and cast out devils (Matt 10:8). When Peter and John saw a leper sitting by the entrance to the temple, they healed him according to the command that Jesus has given them: they did it *in Jesus' name* (Acts 3:6)! Prophets of the Old Testament spoke in the name of the Lord only those things that the Lord commanded them to speak. The apostles in the New Testament did miracles in the name of the Lord only when they did those things that the Lord gave them authority to do. In the same way we can pray in the name of the Lord only those things that the Lord has commanded us to pray.

We will continue to pray for all things. We will continue to pray for food and drink, and for the forgiveness of our sins. We will continue to pray for the Holy Spirit to work in us and our children and many others. We will continue to pray that God will grant healing to our loved ones. And yet, in spite of our prayers, people that we care for will continue to fall away. In spite of our petitions, loved ones will continue to die. In other words, we will not get everything that we pray for. These things continue to cause us much sorrow. We will, however, not be confused by the promise that God will give us everything that we ask in Jesus' name! We must understand that God does not promise to give us everything we ask for. Instead He promises to forgive our sins (1 John 2:1,2). He promises to give us the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13). He promises that in all things He works for our good, and that nothing will be able to separate us from his love (Rom 8:28-39). Remember that faith is not *believing that God will do all things your way*. Instead faith is *believing that God will do for you everything that He has promised you*. And now that I think about it, it is so obvious: faith is simply believing the Word!

*Rev. Richard Eikelboom is the minister of the Canadian Reformed Church in Calgary, Alberta.*



### *What's inside?*

The True Church of Jesus Christ called to proclaim the cross of Christ faces new challenges every age. Those who peddle a "health and wealth gospel" compete with the message of Christ crucified. The church's preachers speak within a culture tuned in to vivid sights and high impact sounds. To those who are used to annual technological leaps and bounds, the church continues to speak the same old message – salvation from sin by the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is deadly for a church to tamper with its message to compete with those who try to make the gospel more palatable or entertaining. The church proclaims Christ and his cross. Once recent trends in preaching have given way to new innovations – as they will – the True Church of Christ will still be there, preaching the old and yet always new gospel. In the editorial, Dr. Gootjes writes about these things.

Mr. Peter Holtvluwer completes his series on Evangelicalism by coming to some practical conclusions on our approach to and what we can use of the movement. Ought we to become part of the Evangelical movement? What about co-operation in various social efforts? What about the books and videos various Evangelical authors and speakers produce? Important questions.

We are very happy to publish an article by Dr. J. van Bruggen, translated by Mr. T.M.P. Vanderven, which very ably and warmly speaks about the personal relationship the believer in Christ has with God.

Rev. DeGelder updates us on happenings within the churches.

We at *Clarion* hope you will enjoy this issue and be greatly encouraged in your walk with God.

GvP

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# Evangelicalism – Suggested Approaches to the Movement (Part 6)

By P. H. Holtvluwer

*In this final article I offer some suggestions and principles to help us in our approach to Evangelicals and Evangelicalism. I do not pretend to be exhaustive here. My aim is to point us in a direction that is in accord with scriptural norms. The approach I've taken is to ask and answer a number of pertinent questions.*

## Can we become a part of Evangelicalism?

By now it has probably become clear that for Reformed people who hold the Reformation dear and who take their confessions seriously, we cannot become part of the Evangelical movement. To do so would be to deny our heritage and worse to deny the true faith which we confess in the Three Forms of Unity. To join together with Lutherans, Baptists, Presbyterians, Anglicans and others on the basis of a few central doctrines of the Christian faith is to deny that we have come to know the complete gospel as it is in Scripture and as it is summarized in the confessions. We are not free to pick and choose which doctrines we may believe and which are unimportant. We must uphold all the commands of God and all the teachings in Scripture. If we are ignorant of a certain biblical teaching then we must learn it. If we fail to practice something we already profess then we must repent. But we may not give up our confessions for a simplified version of the gospel. That would be going backward, like going from eating solid food back to only drinking milk, as the recipients of the letter of the Hebrews were guilty of.

We Reformed cannot join the Evangelical movement but on the contrary we should call them to join us! We should not give away the riches we have in the Reformed confessions but invite others to share in them and join with us in the unity of the true faith. While we may not become Evangelicals ourselves, that does not mean we may remain in isolation. We are still called to be a salt to the earth and a light to

the world. Thus also to our Evangelical neighbours in the world we should witness to the full and complete gospel of Jesus Christ and call them to join us in this gospel. Especially now as Evangelicals and Catholics are more and more coming together we should stand up and show to Evangelicals the mockery they are making of the Christian faith. To do this, to show to our Evangelical neighbours the riches we have, we must come to know ourselves what riches we possess. That means that our community should be ablaze with study groups who are busy with Scripture, busy with our confessions, probing the depths of the riches of the Reformation. We must come to know and also then to live out our confessions so well that by our words and actions it will become apparent to Evangelicals that there is much more to the gospel of Jesus Christ than the four "isms" they are accustomed to.

## Can we join with Evangelicals in charitable or political organizations?

This question is more complex and thus more difficult to answer. To put the question a little differently, if we cannot join Evangelicalism as a religious movement, if we cannot become one with them in the faith as things stand right now, can we still join them in their various good causes or even political organizations? For example, can we join the John Howard Society and help improve conditions in prisons in countries where they are sub-standard? Or can we join a political lobby group organized by Evangelicals whose aim is to rid the country of legal abortion?

My answer to these and similar questions would be that we must in all things avoid compromising the principles of the Reformed faith. Because these organizations are either Evangelical or have Evangelical roots they may have policies or even practices which run contrary to the Reformed faith. If

they do, then we may not in good conscience join or support such a society or organization. For example, if a political pressure group regularly holds its rallies on Sunday, the Lord's Day, thus taking away from worship of the Lord, then we should avoid such a group. However, if we can find such a group or society which seeks to do good in one form or another, and which does not compromise the Reformed faith in its policies or practices, then I see nothing wrong with joining such a society in order to promote a certain good work. Although your motives may be different from the next person in the society, if compromise can be avoided then this need not deter you from joining.

## Helpful Literature:

1) J. De Jong, "Catholics and Evangelicals Together," a Press Review in *Clarion*, Vol 47, No.9, May 1, 1998.

*Dr. De Jong deals with recent developments (October 1997) in the ECT movement. While he acknowledges a positive development in one sense, he is critical of some other aspects of the document.*

2) Kevin Reed, *Making Shipwreck of the Faith: Evangelicals and Roman Catholics Together* (Dallas, Texas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1995) 96 pages.

This is a penetrating critique of the ECT movement. Mr. Reed is evidently a Reformed man and regularly quotes confessions such as the Westminster Catechism, Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession in his evaluation of the 1994 document. His book is very readable, concise and provides many pointed and insightful critiques. If anyone wants a book that clearly explains the pitfalls of both Evangelicalism and the ECT movement, get this one.

I would compare this, for example, to joining the Cancer Society as a volunteer to help collect funds for research. Your joining, as a Reformed Christian, will be motivated by a desire to do good works to God's glory, whereas your neighbour's reason for joining may simply be out of humanitarian concern. Yet his motives do not need to prevent you from joining a society which is in harmony with the convictions of your Reformed faith.

It would be good, where necessary and feasible in my opinion, if we ourselves began organizations based on the Three Forms of Unity which sought to do good works in the public sector. These organizations ought not to be run by the church – that is not the task of the church – but it can be run by members of the church on their own initiative. Small-scale projects like setting up soup-kitchens in poor areas or opening our homes for abused children who need a temporary home away from home or even forming a political group to make the concerns of Reformed believers aware to local politicians – all these are possible ways to do good works and express our faith to those around us. These and many other possible methods ought to be encouraged so that we can be a salt and a light to the broader community in which we live.

### What about Evangelical books, television, and radio?

If we can't join the Evangelical movement *per se*, should we then prohibit the reading of their books and the watching of their television programs? Despite the many negative criticisms that can be levelled against Evangelicalism as a movement, yet it must be said that not every thing they say or produce is worthless. An Evangelical like J.I. Packer, for instance, while he even signed both ECT agreements, yet in many other respects has a Reformed mind. His book, *Knowing God*, is a work that is welcomed in Reformed circles. Even in our beloved *Book of Praise* we find a number of hymns which were written by Evangelicals (eg. Hymns 23, 29, 36, 64 *et al*), hymns which continue to serve us well.

When it comes to the question whether or not we should read Evangelical literature or watch Evangelical television or listen to their radio programs, I believe the answer has to be that we may do so but we must do it with a critical eye or ear, as the case may be. As Reformed people we should read Evangelical authors with a critical eye, knowing where they are coming

from and what their weak points will be. Often many valuable things can be gleaned from them, but since they may come from a variety of backgrounds one has to be on guard against Arminianism, universalism, individualism, or the like. This too means that we have to know our own confessions well in order to guard ourselves against false doctrine. We must come prepared when we engage with Evangelicals, whether it is in person or on the written page. This requires a diligent searching and awareness of what it is that we confess. Reading, watching, or listening with a critical awareness is something we should develop for all occasions, whether reading, for example, articles in *Clarion* or articles in *Christianity Today*.

While we may  
not become  
Evangelicals ourselves,  
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isolation.

In this regard I would like to pass on a few tips which may help us to discern the things we read. In the first place, try to find out something about the author. The author's background will be able to tell you quite a bit about how he sees certain issues. For example, Dr. Packer is an Anglican, but an Anglican who holds very seriously to the Thirty-Nine Articles of faith adopted by the Anglican Church in the sixteenth century. These Thirty-Nine Articles are very Calvinistic and come very close to other Reformed confessions of the era. With this in mind one can understand and appreciate where Dr. Packer is coming from as well as what he says. If an author is a Lutheran Evangelical or a Baptist Evangelical they will approach several issues quite differently. Knowing an author's background can alert you to the potential strengths and weaknesses of that particular author.

One way to find more about the author or the book he has written is to read book reviews on that particular book. This tip applies especially to those going into college or university where you will have access to older book reviews in the libraries. Book reviews will tell you things about the author which you may not have known, plus give you an overview of the book

### Example of Evangelical and Roman Catholic Cooperation:

In the periodical *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology*, we find this description of their mandate: *Pro Ecclesia* is a journal of theology published by the Centre for Catholic and Evangelical Theology. It seeks to give contemporary expression to the one apostolic faith and its classic traditions, working for and manifesting the church's unity by research, theological construction, and free exchange of opinion. Members of its advisory council represent communities committed to the authority of Holy Scripture, ecumenical dogmatic teaching and the structural continuity of the church . . .

so that you can judge whether it's worth your time. The book reviews in our own *Clarion* and *Reformed Perspective* are also valuable in this regard.

### 4. Conclusion

We must preserve our Reformed heritage for it has given to us faithful summaries of what is contained in God's Word. However, we may not be content to avoid Evangelicals altogether but instead we ought to be interacting with them to show to them the riches we have in the Reformed faith. By knowing our confessions well and living up to them as we ought, we can be a positive influence on them rather than they being a negative influence on us.

In our interaction with Evangelicals we must avoid compromise, which is a fondness of Evangelicals themselves. We may read their books or listen to their radio programs but always in the context of weighing and evaluating what is said according to Scripture and the confessions. We may not deny that many Evangelicals have many good things to say, things which can even help us live up to our own confessions, but we must at the same time be on guard for mistaken or even false doctrines. In all this we must learn the difference between *testing* the spirits and *tasting* the spirits. With our Bibles and confessions in hand we may advance to meet the Evangelicals in whatever form we may encounter them, and in so doing remain faithful to the full gospel of Jesus Christ.

Mr. P. H. Holtvluwer has completed his studies at the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Hamilton.



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# A Personal Relationship with God?<sup>1</sup>

By J. van Bruggen

Wanted: a personal relationship! More than ever before our times demand attention for our personal relationship with God. That's good. After all, faith in a personal God must result in a personal commitment to Him. Unlike experiences which you can take note of and situations you can describe, when one deals with a living person, one must make decisions and determine an attitude – be it of rejection or acceptance, of negative criticism or genuine involvement.

I do not think that anyone has ever dared to claim that you could believe in God in some impersonal manner. That is not really the problem. Often, however, another problem emerges. The personal relationship with God may well become hidden under the everyday realities of life. Whatever remains is labelled as orthodox, but the heartbeat is gone. And after a while the certainty disappears as well, although it may take a while before the withered leaves fall and we discover that there actually is no faith left at all.

The Bible shows us that those who know the LORD love Him in a most personal and trusting manner. David says in Psalm 27: "The LORD is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear?" (Ps 27:1). This sense of trust gives us security and comfort, even in the most gloomy situations here on earth. "Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me" (Ps 27:11). Also the apostle Paul speaks quite intimately about the righteousness that comes from faith. It is not a dry piece of doctrine, but a source for real joy. "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ . . . and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" (Rom 5:1-3). This rejoicing has a most personal character, as Paul shows us in Romans 8 where he uses the first person: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor

angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God . . ." (v. 38, 39). This love is alive in our own hearts. Paul says that "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us" (Rom 5:5).

## Have we lost something?

Why is it that attention for a personal relationship with God is at times experienced as so refreshing? Is it – as is sometimes suggested – a reaction against dead orthodoxy which emphasized doctrine way too much? Is a binding to a confession on paper finally being replaced by a binding to a living God? Some seem to experience it in this way, and at times we also hear this stated publicly.

**It is possible that after the Liberation (1944) attention for a personal relationship with God became somewhat neglected.**

In my opinion the issue is somewhat more complicated. Also Reformed believers have always had a sense of spirituality. During the period known as "the Second Reformation" (the 18th century movement of Reformed mysticism), spirituality was even emphasized, and many a good book was written on this topic. Honesty demands that we should acknowledge that this has become a forgotten period within our churches, and has been held in greater esteem within the Netherlands Reformed Churches, the Free Reformed Churches, and others. Our insensitivity towards experiential Reformed people

in other churches brings to light a certain one-sidedness. However, we ought to be careful not to generalize that within Reformed churches the personal relationship with God is disappearing. Only God knows how much trust, prayer, and piety is present in Reformed fathers and mothers, in young and old. He who denies this does not know his brothers and sisters all that well.

## Little attention

It is possible that after the Liberation (1944) attention for a personal relationship with God became somewhat neglected. So much attention was given to the reality of God's promises at baptism – in opposition to the so-called Synodical churches – that a climate of certainty, sometimes perhaps even an automatic certainty, emerged: those who are baptized are children of God. And later, when the child is able to understand, he only needs to learn what he already is. Together with a strong group identity in Reformed schools and Reformed organizations, the idea of "being a child of God" easily became a collective experience: we, altogether, are children of God. It is remarkable, if not somewhat ironic, that the churches who rejected the doctrine of presumptive regeneration in practice often became communities with a strong sense of presumed rebirth. The personal relationship with God sometimes disappeared almost unnoticed.

Considering this background it is understandable that a call for a personal relationship with God is experienced as refreshing: a compensation and a supplement in a church community that would otherwise wither with only a confession and a strong doctrine of church and covenant.

At this point I do not want to discuss the doctrine of the covenant. It will be obvious that an oversimplified understanding of the covenant, as some seem to have, does no justice to the

teachings of all of Scripture, for example, with respect to the baptism with the Holy Spirit, or with respect to the one-sided origin of the covenant. I dare say that the practical application of a personal relationship with God at times did not receive sufficient attention when discussing doctrine and confession. However, this does not mean that this personal relationship has disappeared. In fact, such a relationship fits very well within the full scope of the Reformed confession. The much maligned Canons of Dort speak very intimately and personally about our experiencing God's friendly face and about things that may hinder this relationship. The problem lies more in the distance that has grown between what the confessions really teach and the rather selective impressions to which they are unconsciously reduced by some.

### Two points

Let us pay special attention to two points which are of importance to our topic. First, I want to make a number of comments defining what we mean and what we do not mean with the phrase "personal relationship with God." This explains the question mark in the title. Second, I want to say a few things about the activities which are important for supporting the experience of this relationship.

### Relationship and experience

Evangelicals and Baptists believe that it is the personal relationship with God that makes one a Christian. However, within Reformed spirituality, this relationship is considered more a supplement that must be added to an existing reality, namely the covenantal one. The covenantal relationship needs to become personal (or in Kuyperian terms, this relationship must penetrate the consciousness). And that's where the problem lies. When you consider

the personal relationship using the Baptist model, the emphasis is as much on "relationship" as on "personal." As yet there is no covenant, and a bond only comes about through a personal choice of faith. This means that the personal relationship and faith are almost identical. However, when you speak of personal relationship within a Reformed context the emphasis shifts. Not only does the relationship already exist in the covenant, but this relationship has already been accepted in the public profession of faith. This means that in this context the call for a personal relationship with God may be mistaken for a personal faith experience.

Is there anything wrong with this? Of course not, on the contrary. Yet the term "personal relationship" can be misunderstood as if there is – next to the relationship of God with me in baptism, in the covenant, and in the church – another type of relationship, one that is much more individual, much more personal. In this personal relationship we seek to find what we cannot, or can no longer, find in the family or in the church. Such high strung expectations can lead to deep disappointments and agonizing frustrations when we do not keep in mind the unique character of this relationship.

### God and man

In experiencing a relationship with someone, you expect dialogue – word and answer, feelings and satisfactions. You expect that the two of you are on the same wavelength. This fits the relationships between people very well. It does not, however, fit the relationship between God and man. He is in heaven and we are on earth. He lives in inaccessible light and we hesitantly seek our way in the dusk on our way to darkness. He is the Almighty who plays with the icebergs in the Arctic Ocean and with the fish in the depths of the seas; we are human beings who without Him cannot even breathe. He calls the stars and names each of them, while we are only spectators.

You cannot expect to have a relationship with Him as you might have with one of your friends on earth. Would we be able to walk with Him without tiring? Would we not be dumbfounded and frightened when the lion roars? Does not John, on the Isle of Patmos, fall before the feet of Jesus as if dead?



CHANGE OF E-MAIL ADDRESS:

**Rev. Paul Aasman**

(epaasman@beeline.ca)  
has been changed to  
**paasman@auracom.com**

\*\*\*

DECLARED ELIGIBLE for call by Classis Ontario South, June 9-10, 1999:

**Candidate P. Holtvuwer**  
**Candidate T. Van Raalte**  
**Candidate K. Wieske**

\*\*\*

GRANTED PERMISSION to speak an edifying word by Classis Ontario South, June 9-10, 1999:

**Mr. W. Bredenhof**

\*\*\*

CALLED by the church of West Kelmscott (Free Reformed Churches of Australia) and by the church of Winnipeg-Redeemer:

**Candidate Ted Van Raalte**

\*\*\*

CALLED to the church at Aldergrove, BC:

**Candidate Peter H. Holtvuwer**

\*\*\*

CALLED for the Mission Work in Brazil by the Maranatha Canadian Reformed Church of Surrey and by the church of Houston, BC:

**Candidate Ken Wieske**

of Albertain, ON

\*\*\*

Rev. B.R. Hofford has been dismissed according to Article 11 of the Church Order, and is available for call from other churches.

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From the Bible we learn that only in exceptional cases does the LORD speak to people face to face. He spoke to Adam and Eve before the Fall. Enoch walked with God. God did not hide his plans from Abraham. Yet it was only Moses who spoke with God face to face, and afterwards Moses' face was so radiant that he had to cover it. On one occasion Job dared to argue with God as with his equal, but God put him right back in his place: do you dare to put your hand in the mouth of the dragon? And Job covered his mouth with his hand and did penance.

When Jesus, God's Son, comes down to earth, something most exceptional happens: human beings are able to speak and walk with God – but this is Christ's humiliation. After the events of Easter things change. Mary Magdalene is not allowed to touch Him anymore because He has not yet been glorified and first must ascend to the Father in heaven. After the Ascension the heavens close, and only a very few receive a direct revelation from the Christ in his glory. Paul has been elevated to the higher heavens and heard inexpressible words. But we have to be satisfied with the words of the apostles and the followers of Jesus here on earth. John tells us that if we want to love God, we better love our brothers, because no one has ever seen God. If someone does not love his brother whom he can see, how would he be able to love God whom he cannot see?

### Relationship in faith

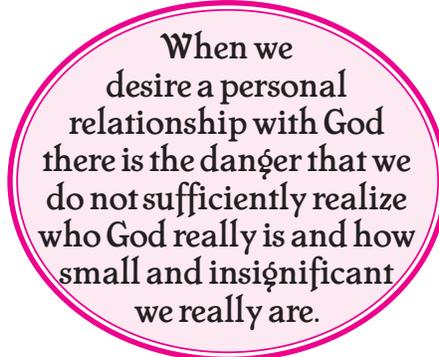
When we add to faith in this God the dimension of a personal relationship, we do well to acknowledge that this relationship is very special and unique. The higher the status of the other, the less satisfactory the expression "personal relationship" is. Our experience of this relationship comes about via our faith. We trust the LORD and experience his invisible presence, and we hope for his glory. That's how it is today, as we are on our way towards that great moment when we may know Him face to face. Today there is continued growth in this relationship, and we ought not expect everything all at once. It is important that you keep in mind the degree of intimacy that fits a particular stage of the relationship. The LORD is our gracious Father, not our playmate. He is the Almighty who has placed himself in a relationship with me. But that does not mean that He is my partner. He travels with me towards

that great crowd before the throne, but at this moment I still live as a sinner on a fallen earth.

I want to say a few more things about this with respect to Bible reading and prayer.

### Bible reading

Bible reading is not talking with God, but listening to what He has to say to us. This does not happen in a "live" broadcast; we are allowed to listen to what has been written down about God's deeds and words in the past. If you would open your Bible because you want God to speak to you directly, you expect too much. The Bible is the document in the possession of the church. It allows you to take note of what the Creator has said to others in different situations. You read the Bible in deep reverence and with great zeal because the words of God are of immense importance to you as well. This attitude is rather different from that of people who expect a direct, personal lecture. Sooner or later they will become disappointed and will slam that Bible shut because it does not speak to them anymore; the connections go dead.



When we desire a personal relationship with God there is the danger that we do not sufficiently realize who God really is and how small and insignificant we really are.

In a sense the Bible does not do anything with you; you must do something with the Bible, in the manner so often repeated in Psalm 119: "Oh how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. Your commands make me wiser than my enemies because they are ever with me" (Ps 119:97, 98). You may be surprised about what you are reading, or you may have questions. But you cannot start a dialogue with the LORD God, because you are listening to the echo of his voice. Therefore, if you expect a "duologue" when reading the Bible, you will be quite disappointed.

In some circles the waiting is for a direct word from God in one's heart. Such a word supersedes the Bible and is

said to give the only true certainty. This kind of pretentious, personal mysticism has often brought deep, life-long uncertainty and disappointments.

Also within the evangelical movement there are those for whom the experience of "God-spoke-to-me" plays an important role. Suddenly they may be convinced that God has called them to go to Peru, or to start a particular study, or to tackle a certain task within the church. Indeed, the LORD leads our lives, and therefore we will be able to gradually discover his will for our lives. But if we think of God's guidance in such absolute terms, we might well become frustrated. Often that "word of God" turns out to be impossible to achieve: the trip is too expensive, or the course of studies too difficult.

### Prayer

But is it not so that when the listener to God's word becomes a speaker in prayer there really is a duologue? No, it isn't because a prayer remains one-sided: the person speaks, but God does not. Many people speak of their prayer as "talking with God." This is wrong. The person who prays, speaks to God, but normally there is no direct answer. For this reason some Christians give up on prayer because it is not really speaking with God. In Bible reading and prayer we approach God's throne of grace. In Christ we may do so with confidence and courage. Yet we approach in faith, and not in seeing or hearing. This exceptionally respectful and trustful – almost blindfolded – means of communication gives our relationship with God a unique character. We do not see Him, yet we may experience his presence in our lives and in his Scriptures. It is clear: we do not stand in front of a void when we close our eyes in prayer and speak to Him in the name of Christ, his Son.

But, there is still a screen between ourselves and the Awesome One. And that is a good thing. It is better for us today to live in the protective shadow of that screen than to appear directly before the Most Holy One. Angels who appear before the throne on a daily basis do not live in this shadow, but we are not angels. When we desire a personal relationship with God, there is the danger that we do not sufficiently realize who God really is and how small and insignificant we really are. God is in heaven, amidst his heavenly hosts. We are on earth. We are human beings

subject to sin. We may be quite surprised that God wants us to be with Him, but we have not yet arrived in the new Jerusalem. First and foremost, our relationship with God is characterized by thankfulness, reverence, and trust. We may experience this relationship knowing that He is our Father, that his Spirit prays in us and for us, and that his angels protect us. The more you put your trust in this, the more you will experience the peace that comes from it. A personal relationship with God always remains a relation to God, and that makes it unique.

### Maintaining the relationship

In which ways can we support this unique and reverential relationship to God? Traditionally, our Reformed forefathers spoke of ecclesiastical worship, family worship, and personal worship. They meant with these terms the moments that we as church, as family, or as individuals brought our sacrifices to the LORD, thanked Him, and called upon Him for help and guidance. The term "worship" refers to something else than does the term "relationship." The three forms of worship indicate already that the focus is not merely on an individual relationship. Our forefathers practised a form for the worship of God which consisted of three essential, inseparable elements.

The worship service – the words make us think of practising and maintaining a contact by means of a worshipful attitude. And you need to be trained to be able to serve well. Religion languishes without training. You receive training opportunities in the church, at home, and in your personal life. What exactly is it that we are to train during these worship services? Our faith. In our own time faith is such a small flame; it is easily extinguished. It needs to be protected, and it needs much care to keep it going. To do this you need each other.

How do we train? At times you hear people say that they want to "work at their faith." That is a good thing, providing you recognize that you can do that only in an indirect manner. Your faith is strengthened and grows almost unnoticed as you honour God, call upon Him, and listen to his

words. Faith is a means, not a goal. That means should not be cultivated for its own sake. My faith is no more than an uplifted, empty hand, to be filled by God. The best way to keep that hand in a good condition is to focus on God, rather than on your own feelings. As a result those feelings of faith will blossom, almost by themselves. For this to happen you must stay connected with the words of God which have already been revealed. You need to, so to speak, call out in the dark because you do believe.

You must sing in a world full of pain because you trust that He will make all things well. You must continue what Enosh started: to call on the name of the LORD.

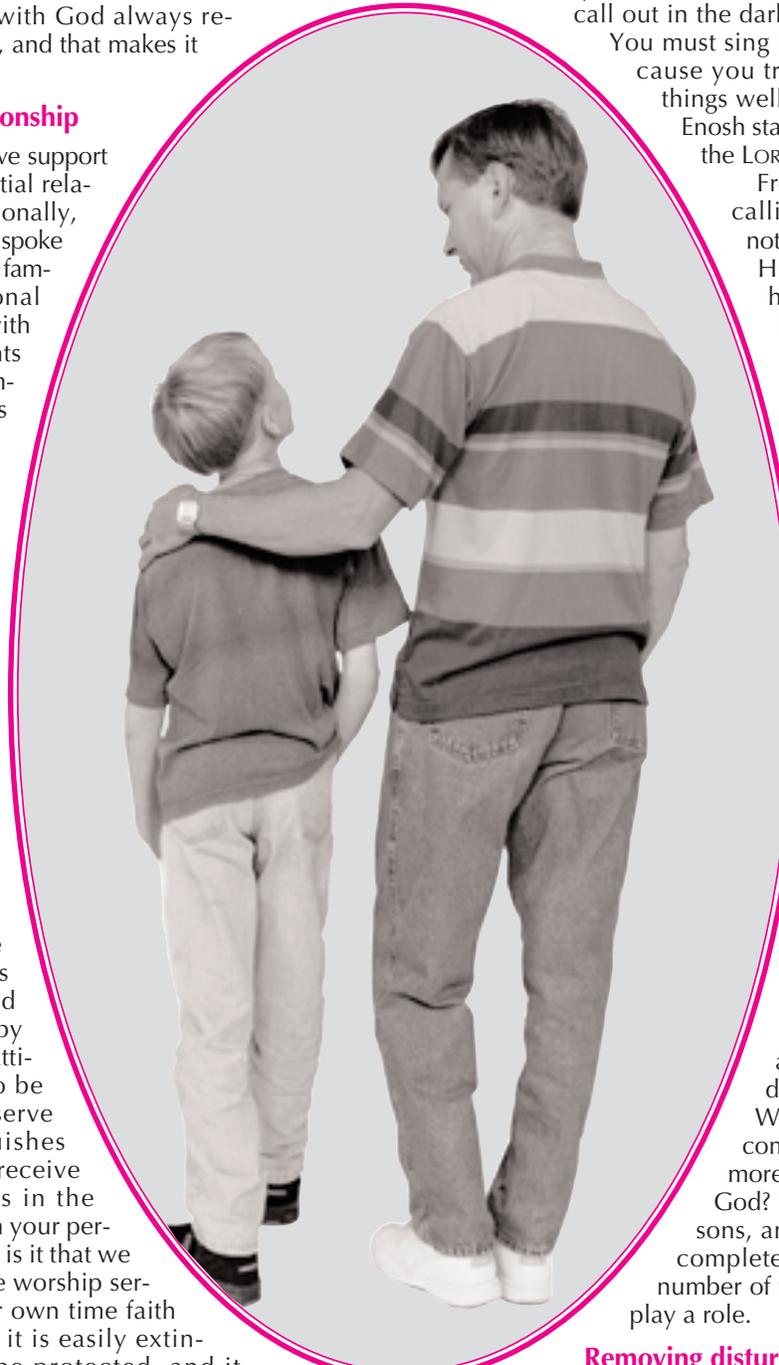
From our perspective we are calling out into the night. But not so from God's perspective. He sees all kinds of things happening around the believers. An invisible host of angels surrounds them. The Holy Spirit descends to be their guide. The heavenly Father sees them and hears them. And we may notice these things ourselves as well. You will more and more experience that you are alone, and yet not alone, even though you do not see anything. That feeling stimulates you to persevere with calling upon the name of the LORD.

### Personal worship

One of the ways for religious training is personal worship. This consists of Bible reading, reading edifying literature, meditating, prayer, and song. Why is it that this does not always satisfy? Where does that restlessness come from that wants a much more personal relationship with God? I think there are many reasons, and I cannot hope to give a complete answer. I will mention a number of things which, I believe, do play a role.

### Removing disturbances

1. It may be that our mind is not sufficiently clean and prepared before we start reading the Bible, or before we pray. If you want to take off your shoes, you do need to take the time to undo the laces first. In order to call upon God, you need to have the right attitude: of awe for the holiness in heaven, of dependence, of deep reverence for life and the Living One. We all are troubled by hurt feelings.



That is a sensitive matter which cannot simply be healed by listening to a few sermons. Much training and practice is needed in order to restore sensitivities which have been deadened by a culture that rejects what is holy to the Holy One.

2. Often we read the Bible routinely, with empty eyes and ears. We do not give our attention to search for the Giver of grace. The Bible is often way too close to us and therefore the Word is at times too far away. In some countries there is only one Bible available for a whole community. In turns people are allowed to read from it for an hour or so. That is a situation rather different from the one we know so well: almost automatically taking your Bible because we still "have to" read it.

3. Often we pay little attention to the external forms of our worship. Generally, things such as posture, dress, choice of words are not considered very important in the worship service. However, the many examples in the Bible of kneeling down with lifted hands are there for a reason. Already in the Old Testament we are taught how important it is that we cleanse ourselves and go to pray in the temple in clean clothes. The psalms teach us a choice of respectful words. I am sure that no one will use sloppy language on purpose, but it is certainly important that we pay more attention to our word choice. I do not say that time and style should have no bearing on our speech, but the respectful manner in which our grandparents started their prayers is a better model than today's often all too easy approach to prayer. Of course, we are ordinary people, but that does not permit us to address the Almighty as if he lives next door. I think that the danger of laissez-faire speech habits is greater than that of fossilized formulations. In short, the indifference towards appropriate forms, posture, dress, word and speech usage, in addressing God is an evil that damages, rather than supports, worshipful attitudes and feelings.

4. Because of the secularization of our society there is an increasing disintegration of the community and isolation of the individual. Without realizing it, we may well be influenced by these changes when we begin to speak more about "my personal relationship with God." Such speaking seems to imply that the person is not a child, a spouse, a member of the church, etc.

The trio of worship services in church, family, and private room reminds us that God has placed us in a church body, and in a family. Let us be very careful that religion does not become individualized in a spiritual sense. If this happens the believer will be tempted to use his individual relationship with God (about which others cannot say anything) as the basis to shop around for the most supportive

**My faith is no more  
than an uplifted,  
empty hand,  
to be filled by God.**

church. He will fail to integrate his relationship with God with his relationships with his parents or children. A one-sided emphasis on one's personal relationship with God tends to carry with it a certain degree of haughtiness, as if such a relationship is the end of all. But God calls an innumerable multitude. Indeed, each believer will have his own new name, but together we will become one, large, uncountable communion of saints. It is not beneath God's dignity to incorporate us into a small circle with few noble or wise people. The local community is the exercising ground for humility. When we want to strengthen our faith we need to exert as much effort in the communal training during the Sunday worship services and in the family worship exercises, as in the personal worship in our own room. In the end, no one comes to God without the one given to him or her as a companion on the way. You make it needlessly very difficult for yourself if you were to turn your back on your own congregation.

Do not focus exclusively on your personal relationship with God without working on the relationship with your brother, your minister, the people you see and meet.

These four points are of importance to a well functioning personal worship service. Together with the worship services within the family and in the church we have an excellent means to train ourselves in godliness and faith because they direct our attention to the Invisible One who lives in inaccessible light, and who allows us to address Him in Christ through his Spirit with the intimate title: Abba, Father!

### **Together on our way**

A personal relationship with God? Is that possible? Indeed, it is; the question mark can be changed into an exclamation mark if we have carefully considered the uniqueness of that relationship because we stand before our Creator, the Almighty. If Reformed believers feel uneasy about their spirituality, then the best way to heal the personal experience of the relationship with God is through a recovery and restoration of the fear of the LORD, and through promoting the three types of worship that support this fear. In short, today the personal relationship with God is determined by faith and faith experience, by living together before his face as family and as congregation – tomorrow by being together and seeing face to face.

<sup>1</sup>Dr. J. van Bruggen is Professor of New Testament at the Theologische Universiteit in Kampen. He spoke about our personal relationship with God on the occasion of the opening of the 1998-99 academic season of the Theological University at Kampen, The Netherlands. This speech first appeared in Dutch in *Nederlands Dagblad* (September 19, 1998) and was translated by T.M.P. Vanderven. It appears here by permission. 



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# THE HI-LITER

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News from Here and There

By J. de Gelder

## Lynden

Various churches are still working on the implementation of the synodical decisions on Bible Translation. After Synod Fergus 98 upheld the decision of Synod Abbotsford 95 in this matter, churches that had not changed yet are now coming to a final decision. As far as I know most churches follow the recommendation of the general synods; however, there are a few exceptions. In the Fraser Valley Church News we read what was decided just across the border:

In accordance with the previous decision-in-principle of the consistory as presented to the congregation, and having heard the congregation, the NASB (updated 1995 edition) will be used as Bible translation in the worship services beginning on May 1.

## Langley

A rather new phenomenon – for our church life – was considered at a congregational meeting in the church at Langley:

A new item will be a proposal to have the church hire a part-time pastoral assistant to help with the work of visitation in the congregation.

It would be interesting to hear more about the position of such a pastoral assistant among the office-bearers – about questions like: How do you qualify for this work? Whom will you be visiting? Do you sign a subscription form, or something like it? Could women apply . . . ?

## Edmonton - Providence

Many church councils have been busy over the past months scrutinizing and discussing the Acts of Synod Fergus 98. In Edmonton they completed the task, and we read:

The Council now considers the Acts of Synod 1998 as settled and binding.

I know it's an old point of discussion, and in the past many articles have been written about it both in Canada and in the Netherlands, but I do not think that we do justice to Art. 31 CO when we say that the decisions of the major assemblies (in this case the Acts of a General Synod) are only settled and binding after they have been reviewed by the Council or Consistory. The wording in Art. 31 CO is clear: ". . . whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding." There is, of course, the exception of the ". . . unless it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order."

Sometimes I get the impression that we tend to treat the decisions of the broader assemblies as if it says in Art. 31: ". . . whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote shall not be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved not to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order." But that is not the case. "They shall be considered settled and binding." When? Strictly speaking as soon as the decisions have been made, although in prac-

tice they will become effective as soon as the Acts are available.

That has nothing to do with hierarchy, for it leaves all the churches the full freedom to carefully scrutinize the Acts to see whether there is anything in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order. But the Acts do not need a separate council or consistory decision to be considered settled and binding. That's not only superfluous, it is also wrong.

We know that Art. 31 is a key article in the protection against hierarchy, but the wording also makes it a significant protection against independentism. Even if a council would receive the Acts and put them in the archives without looking at them, the decisions would still be considered settled and binding. With the reasoning that a separate decision was needed to make decisions of major assemblies settled and binding, some consistories in the sixties in the Netherlands claimed that they were not bound by certain decisions of major assemblies, by simply ignoring them. That breaks the federation apart. I am not suggesting – not by far – that this is the intention of any of our churches. But once in a while it is good to think of our responsibilities towards the decisions that we find in the Acts of our synods.

## Orangeville

I mentioned already the ongoing activities in the field of Bible Translation. The discussion on the pros and cons of the various translations that are available will probably continue for some time. In Orangeville's Sheepfold Rev. Pot provides a refreshing look on this matter:

We do well to remember that for centuries members of the church did without their own copies of God's Word, and had to make do with a (poor) translation in a foreign language, translated by a single individual. At the time of the Reformation, people were overjoyed to have a translation of the Bible in their own language, even if it was translated by only one person, and even if they had to share one copy amongst many of them. To think that practically all of us have personal copies of Scripture, and can even compare several translations! We certainly have no excuse for not reading and studying God's Word, and growing in the knowledge of the Lord.

## Burlington - Ebenezer

In the Ebenezer bulletin Rev. Nederveen wrote the following about the 1999 Yearbook:

Unfortunately the section on Synodical Deputies has not been updated, and is therefore obsolete. Actually, much of the yearbook is soon outdated with new office bearers, society boards, and school staffing changes in the next few months. Wouldn't it be nice if the Yearbook was

printed in June or July so that most of the information would be up-to-date for 9 or 10 months, instead of 2 or 3 months?

An excellent suggestion, I think. But who is going to do something about it? By the way, the list of Synodical Deputies is not only outdated since Synod Fergus; in a mysterious way the Committee for Contact with the OPC has disappeared altogether. Let's not speculate about the deeper meaning of particularly this omission! And then, perhaps it is only missing in my copy.

### Kerwood

The Church at Kerwood (formerly Watford) is enjoying its new church building. There was a request to install a cross on a bare wall of the building:

Consistory decided that, though there are no Biblical or confessional objections against a possible use of a cross as a symbol, not to grant this request for now. Grounds: the consistory is aware that there are strong feelings against a cross, and thus it seems wise not to introduce this issue at this time.

Loving wisdom and sensitivity goes a long way in the church of Jesus Christ!

### Chatham

At a congregational meeting in Chatham a question was asked concerning a particular council decision. The matter as such is not so relevant for the readers of our magazine, but this point – evoked another question:

Should the congregation have been asked for input in this and other matters? Answer: Council feels that certain matters and decisions should be left up to council and they may seek input from the congregation where appropriate and required; however, the congregation may request clarification on decisions made.

This is indeed as far as you can go. It is not always easy to find the fine line. The church is not to be governed as a democracy. At the same time, the leadership of the office bearers is not meant to lord it over the congregation either. In fact, you can only walk safely between both sides if there is much mutual trust between the council and the congregation.

### Byford

When your church building becomes almost too small for your congregation, you'll have to keep a special eye on visitors in the worship services. In Byford, Australia, they discussed this and came to the following decision:

In order to avoid people waiting in the foyer to be allocated seats, it is decided to give the sexton (the Australian caretaker, I presume, J.D.) the mandate to seat visitors as soon as possible. This will mean that the sexton can give any seat to any visitor as he sees necessary. The congregation members are reminded to show respect to others in the house of the Lord, especially if others are found sitting on the pew where they usually sit.

Not only in Australia, but also here, from Ontario to B.C., we all like to sit in our own cozy corner. But let's not forget: hospitality is such a wonderful thing in Father's house.

### Mount Nasura

They must have heavy-duty elders out there. Read this: The creaking sounds from the front of the church building last Sunday morning (for those who heard it) were due to the floor under the elders' pews starting to give way. Fortunately it's but a minor problem and we are thankful it didn't crumble entirely during the service. It would have been some sight seeing one or two of the brothers sitting there slowly disappear below the balustrade.

I have always known that being an elder could weigh quite heavily on the brothers. But that it was that serious . . . ! 

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Please mail, e-mail or fax letters for publication to the editorial address. They should be 300 words or less. Those published may be edited for style or length. Please include address and phone number.

### Celebrating the Lord's Supper

I would like to take a minute to respond to what I recently read in The Highlighter concerning the church at Surrey's decision to review their use of the common cup. (Volume 48 No. 10)

We in Guelph have recently had similar discussions and I would like to offer my opinion on the matter.

In order to examine this issue further, we should ask ourselves "Is this the way Christ instituted this supper?" As a matter of fact, it is not. We

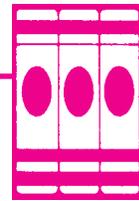
must remember that the Lord's Supper was instituted after the Passover meal, so to celebrate this supper in the context that it was instituted, we should be ready to leave at a moment's notice, we should be using unleavened bread, and we should be passing around one cup.

I realize that the amount of people celebrating at the time has changed drastically, and thus has forced us to change from one cup to two or three cups, as well as change from one loaf to a few loaves. Since we have already

changed these factors in the supper, is the addition of more cups really a stretch? We must remember that the Lord's Supper is a celebration instituted by Jesus Christ in *remembrance of Him*.

I would also like to add that to partake of the bread, but pass the cup as a form of protest is wrong. The table is not there to promote our agendas, but to glorify God and his graciousness to us.

John Van Amerongen 



## Genesis: How are we to understand it?

By Margaret Helder

**Three Views on Creation and Evolution.** J. P. Moreland and John Mark Reynolds. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999. Paperback; 296 pages; \$26.00 CDN

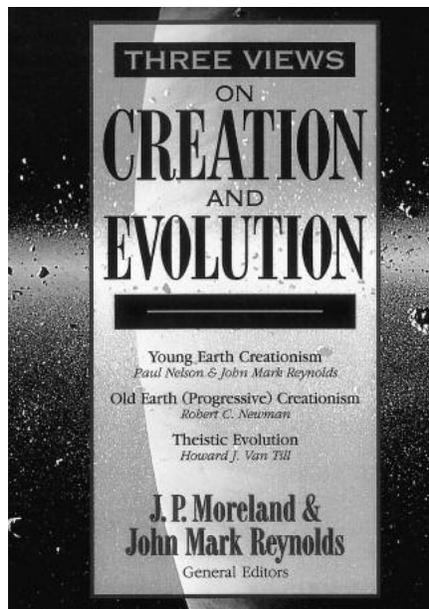
Many Christians wonder why some people make such a song and dance about origins. But as Paul Nelson and John Mark Reynolds point out in a new book on the topic, beliefs have consequences. The consequences for the interpretation of the Bible and Christian doctrine are outlined in *Three Views on Creation and Evolution*. Published in 1999, this book is edited by J. P. Moreland and John Mark Reynolds. The three views, each defended by highly qualified apologists, include young earth creationism, old earth (progressive) creationism, and theistic evolution.

As we all know, in Genesis we are first introduced to God who is the creator of all things. Since this was a real, historical event, we expect Scripture and nature to be mutually supportive, each providing different insights into what happened. Christians believe that this is the case. However, there is profound disagreement on the nature of the scientific evidence and also, on the nature of the Biblical record. Since God's work as creator is fundamental to all that follows, differences in this doctrine will necessarily impact on the rest of the Gospel message. This new book demonstrates why this is so.

### Young earth creationist position

Drs. Nelson and Reynolds, first of all, outline the basic tenets which distinguish the young earth creationist position from other views. The tenets are as follows. Nature testifies to God's character and work; all basic types of organisms were directly created by God during the creation week; the curse of Genesis 3:14-19 profoundly affected every aspect of nature; and the flood of Noah was a historical event, global in extent and effect.

Genesis 1 tells us very specifically that the various kinds of organisms were created with distinct characteristics



and separate lines of descent. Moreover, critical evaluation of nature, say Nelson and Reynolds, leads us to much the same conclusion.

God is free to do whatever He wills. But the question remains, What did He do? There are two lines of evidence available to the Christian: religious (the teachings of the church and Scripture) and natural (the findings of science). In our opinion, both types of evidence point away from evolution. (p. 45)

Young earth and old earth creationists share this view.

Doctrinal emphasis of the impact on the nature of Adam's fall into sin, however, is unique to the young earth creationist position. As Nelson and Reynolds point out, this doctrine explains the origin of death and suffering – not for mankind alone, but for all the animals as well. Such suffering was not part of God's original "good" creation. This position actually has broader appeal than merely for young earth creationists. As Phillip Johnson remarks:

Young earth creationism honors the Scriptures and gives specific content to the biblical doctrine that death

and suffering entered the world through human sin. If it turned out to be true, some tough theological problems would become a lot easier. (p. 277)

One fact which cannot be ignored, however, is that sedimentary rocks contain billions of fossils, traces of once living creatures. As commentator Walter Bradley points out, flood geology unavoidably flows from the previous point. "If death was introduced for the first time after the Fall, then all of the apparent evidence of death in the fossil record must be attributed to the Flood." (p. 77) Thus flood geology too, is unique to the young earth creationist. That the flood was universal, say Nelson and Reynolds, also is critically important to our faith. As they remark "the sorts of issues that flow from the idea of a global flood are critical to a religious believer. What will control the biblical exegesis of the Christian?" (pp. 48-49) Do we accept the record of Scripture or do we reinterpret it in the light of modern science?

The essence of the young earth position then, is that there is but one truth: The distinction between 'matters of faith' and 'matters of history and science' disappears when one grasps that faith takes as its object a man who spoke about history – the history of the people of Israel, the history of humankind, the history of the universe. When Jesus spoke of the Flood (Matt 24: 37-39) or of Adam and Eve, He endorsed the authority of the Old Testament, and his claims about Himself only make sense in that light. (p. 56)

### Old earth creationist view

While the next position, the old earth creationist view is defended by Dr. Robert C. Newman, he has plenty of company in four commentators including Drs. Walter Bradley, John Jefferson Davis, J. P. Moreland and Vern Sheridan Poythress, all of whom share this view. Another supporter is lawyer Phillip Johnson who provides a summary to the

book. Obviously this is the position of choice among many conservative Christians. The schools of theology which employ one or other of these gentlemen include Gordon-Conwell, Talbot School of Theology, Biblical Theological Seminary at Hatfield, Pennsylvania and Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

Old earth creationists also confess that testimony to God's work and character is evident in nature. As a result they, in common with young earth creationists, tend to be critical of Darwinian theory. However, these people are impressed by data suggesting that the universe and earth are on the order of billions of years old. This conclusion has some important implications for their theology. After all, something must have occurred during those long periods of time. The first conclusion then is that the process of creation occupied billions of years. It follows from this that the order of events is not as described in Genesis 1. For example, the sun and stars are presumed to have formed long before the earth, rather than on day four as described in the Bible. Secondly, some extensive evolutionary processes probably took place as countless organisms lived and died. As Dr. Newman remarks, "Genesis one does not necessarily rule out some kind of theistic macroevolution." (p. 114) Lastly, old earth creationists support the idea of a local flood rather than one which left worldwide devastation. As Dr. Poythress tells us "a local flood is much easier to harmonize with an old earth position." (p. 151)

The old earth advocates are faced, however, with obvious differences between their position and Scripture. Often their response is to challenge the traditional interpretation of Genesis. As Dr. Newman points out "Many evangelicals – both old earth creationist and theistic evolutionists – prefer the framework hypothesis." (p. 155) This interpretive approach enables the reader of Genesis to ignore the actual content of the text. As Dr. Poythress remarks "Once we fully take into account the character of biblical language, the supposed support for a young earth becomes questionable." (p. 91) People like Dr. Poythress in fact distinguish two ways to read Genesis. According to the grammatical-historical approach "one attends closely to the Bible's actual meanings within the Ancient Near East" and according to the other method, one reads Genesis in terms of modern experience. This latter approach Dr. Poythress calls "naive-modern." (pp.

90-91) It is naive-modern, for example, to conclude that flood waters covered the whole globe and that the creation merely lasted one week. According to the framework approach, God was more concerned with introducing Himself, than in telling us the details of the creation (which ancient people wouldn't understand anyway). Some literary-framework advocates actually go so far as to claim that the days of Genesis "correspond to nothing that actually happened." (p. 156) Dr. Newman, for his part, regrets this approach. He attempts more closely to dovetail Genesis and widely spaced events of creation. His correspondence is however not exact. (p. 107) He calls his own view the intermittent-day approach.

### Theistic evolution position

Lastly we come to the theistic evolution position vigorously promoted by Dr. Howard Van Till, Professor Emeritus of Calvin College. His position is "gifted with all the capabilities necessary to make possible the continuous evolutionary development envisioned by the majority of natural scientists today." (p. 162) In other words, he maintains that we will never specifically see any testimony in nature to the work and character of God. We will only see natural processes, but these (he says) were all preordained and established by God before the beginning. On the basis of his understanding of science, Dr. Van Till rejects any attempt to read Genesis in a literal fashion. (p. 192) He further insists that secular science be accepted in its entirety. As he remarks:

Some Christians go so far as to claim that the Scriptures provide sufficient detail regarding the particulars of the creation's formational history (e.g., its timetable) that scientific conclusions held with high confidence in the scientific community may rightly be dismissed with little regard for the informed judgment of that community. Personally, I find such claims to be an embarrassment, and they lead many scientists to call into question the intellectual integrity of the Christian community. (p. 194)

Since an evolutionary process is difficult to fit into the Genesis narrative, Dr. Van Till suggests that some important aspects of theology will have to be re-examined. Was Adam a real individual? How might he differ from ape-like ancestors? How did sin enter the world? Dr. Van Till challenges gifted young people to bring our theology up to date.

It is hard to believe he comes from the tradition of the reformation and *sola scriptura* when he says:

Theology must be done in a way that draws upon all resources of potentially relevant knowledge – the Scriptures, the creation, our continuing experience of the divine-human encounter, and the full array of human experiences. Although the biblical text may play a special role, it should never be treated as the sole source of theologically relevant knowledge. To build a theology on an ancient text alone is to invite the development of a seriously inadequate, insufficiently informed, perhaps even misinformed, theology. (p. 212)

The reader can judge for himself how appealing this position might or might not be.

### No theologically neutral views

In the final analysis this book demonstrates that there are no theologically neutral views on origins. Is the earth billions of years old? This idea has consequences for our faith. This question in fact dominates the whole book. Even the young earth advocates seem ambivalent about their stand on this issue. They remark "Recent creationists should humbly agree their view is, at the moment, implausible on purely scientific grounds." (p. 51) However they continue that "the reading of Scripture (e.g., a real flood, meaningful genealogies, an actual dividing of languages) is so natural that it seems worth saving." (p. 73) In similar fashion, Dr. Moreland muses "While I lean somewhat strongly toward an old earth creationist view, I cannot shake the idea that the young earth people may be correct." (p. 85)

The situation reminds us of the apostles Peter and John who placed allegiance to God ahead of allegiance to men. As they said: "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you [the high priest and his council] more than unto God, judge ye. But we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:19 and 20) We should bear this approach in mind when we turn our attention to science. Indeed editors Moreland and Reynolds in the introduction to their new book, point out that the "brute evidence" is subject to different interpretations. For example concerning radiometric methods of dating rocks, they point out that there is little question about the facts, but "widespread disagreement amongst Christians" on how the actual data are to be used. (p. 24)

For us, the whole issue boils down to one of priorities. Does Scripture claim our first attention or does modern science? Do we modify our understanding of nature to suit Scripture, or vice versa? John Morris, a well known advocate of the young earth creation model, clearly outlined what our priority, as Christians, ought to be: "My contention throughout has been that *only* Scripture gives *specific* information about the age of the earth and the timing of its unobserved events. Rocks, fossils, isotope arrays, and physical systems do not speak with the same

clarity as Scripture." He therefore concludes ". . . only as we place our interpretations in agreement with the teachings of Scripture, do we have a chance rightly to understand the past." (John Morris. 1994. *The Young Earth*. Master Books p. 119 italics his) Surely to such sentiments we can only say Amen!

This book is a wake-up call for Christians who might imagine their views on origins do not matter to their faith. Obviously the book promotes no one point of view. The choice is up to the reader. However, after reading this

book, the choice will at least be an informed one. While the book is written for any adults who are interested in theology, science or philosophy, ministers and teachers especially might want to familiarize themselves with its contents. We may not be "of the world" but we are still "in" the world, so it is helpful to be able to deal with the issues important to this age.

*Dr. Helder is a botanist who writes and lectures on issues in science of interest to Christians.*



## PRESS RELEASES



### Press Release of the meeting of the Board of Directors of the I.L.P.B. with the Administration Committee Friday, April 9, 1999, 8:00 p.m. at Pilgrim Canadian Reformed Church, London

Present: Ed VanderLaan, Jane Oosterhoff, Joanne Werkman, John Schouten, Bill Buist, Bernie Kottelenberg, Ann Boeringa, Elaine Spriensma, Rennie Pieterman.

Absent: Harold Olij, Evan Bosscher.

Mr. Ed VanderLaan read Ephesians 2: 1- 10 and led in prayer.

After 8 years of dedicated and hard work, Elaine Spriensma (sales) will be leaving in June (thanks, Elaine for a job well done); Bill Buist and his wife will take over sales and Jean Blokker will be the new secretary.

Reports from The Administration Committee were read and reviewed. A new book, *Confess Your Faith*, A.J. Pol (Guelph) has been released. It is a study book written for pre-confession class but suitable for any study group. Books that will be ready soon: *2 Corinthians* for the coming study season; *Acts of the Apostles*; *The Bride's Treasure* and *To The Praise of His Glory*; *James and Peter*; *You His Child & You His Guest*. The Marketing Committee published a comprehensive brochure that study societies will be receiving soon from their local rep. Financial statements were reviewed and found in good order.

A web site is in the planning stages and should be running before the end of the year.

Date and place for next meetings: Board – Thur. Apr. 2; Combined – Fri. Oct. 22 in the Ancaster Canadian Reformed Church building.

B. Kottelenberg led in closing prayer.

Jane Oosterhoff,  
secretary

### Press Release Classis Ontario South, May 26-27 and June 9-10, 1999

#### 1. Opening

On behalf of the convening church, Rev. G. Wieske calls the meeting to order. We sing Ps. 33:3,6, read from Psalm 33 and open in prayer. In his words of welcome, Rev. Wieske briefly explains Psalm 33 and encourages the delegates with God's Word.

#### 2. Credentials

The credentials are examined and found to be in good order. The deputies of regional synod are also in attendance. Classis was declared constituted. The suggested officers take their places:

Chairman: Rev. H. Versteeg  
Vice-Chairman: Rev. J. Van Vliet  
Clerk: Rev. J. VanWoudenberg

The chairman mentions various matters of memorabilia.

#### 3. Adoption of Agenda

After some additions the agenda for the meeting is adopted. The delegates

are given some time to read material which had come in recently.

#### 4. Request of Grand Rapids re Art. 11 CO

The consistory of the church at Grand Rapids requests approbation for the dismissal of their minister, Rev. B. Hofford, according to Art. 11 CO. This request was declared admissible. There are also various appeals from members of this congregation. They are declared admissible. After initial discussion classis breaks for lunch. After lunch we sing Ps. 46:1,5 and the discussion on this matter continues. A committee is appointed to serve classis with a proposal regarding the request of Grand Rapids. Various other delegates do some initial work on the other appeals. The committee submits its report, recommending that the request of Grand Rapids be granted. A vote is taken and the committee's recommendation is approved. The deputies of regional synod are asked for their concurring advice, and they give their assent. At this point the chairman leads us in prayer, remembering Rev. B. Hofford and his family, as well as the consistory and congregation of Grand Rapids. We break for supper and the deputies leave the meeting.

#### 5. Other Appeals from Grand Rapids

It is decided to appoint a committee to serve classis with recommendations concerning these appeals.

## 6. Acts of Classis & Press Release

The acts of classis up to this point are read and, after corrections, adopted. The press release up to this point is read and adopted.

## 7. Overture from the council of Hamilton

The council of Hamilton requests classis to judge that Classis ON-S, March 10-11, 1999, erred in not properly finishing the matter of an appeal properly brought before it, but instead appointing an ad hoc committee to report to the next classis. Classis accedes to this overture. The vice-chairman leads in closing prayer. Classis adjourns until tomorrow morning.

## 8. Other Appeals from Grand Rapids

On Thursday, May 27, classis reconvenes. We read Psalm 135:1-6, sing Ps. 135:1,10 and open in prayer. The roll is called; all are present. The committee submits its report concerning the other appeals from Grand Rapids. A vote is taken, and the committee's recommendations are defeated. An alternate proposal is brought forward, discussed and adopted.

## 9. An appeal from a brother

The report of the Ad Hoc Committee appointed by the March 10-11, 1999 classis concerning this appeal is tabled, as well as a letter from the council of Hamilton. After an initial discussion, we break for lunch. After lunch we sing Hy. 41:2 and the discussion continues. The committee's report is amended. Classis votes. The appeal is denied. The same brother has submitted an additional appeal to this classis. A response is drafted and adopted.

## 10. Other matters

Personal question period is made use of. The chairman thankfully notes that censure ad Art. 34 CO is not needed. The acts of classis up to this point are read and, after corrections, adopted. The press release up to this point is read and, after corrections, adopted. We read Psalm 122, sing Ps. 122:3 and close in prayer. Classis adjourns until June 9th, the Lord willing.

## 11. Re-convening on June 9, 1999

We begin by singing Ps. 66:1,4, reading Romans 10:5-17 and calling upon the name of the Lord in prayer. The roll is called.

## 12. Examination of br. W. Bredenhof

This brother requests permission to speak an edifying word. After he presents his sermon proposal, it is discussed in closed session. Classis decides to proceed with the examination in doctrine and creeds. This is judged to be sufficient. The brother is granted permission to speak an edifying word in the churches. We sing Ps. 147:4 and thank the Lord.

## 13. Examination of br. P. Holtvluwer

This brother is examined to be declared eligible for call. After he presents his sermon proposal, it is discussed in closed session. Classis decides to proceed with the rest of the exam. After singing Ps. 146:1 we break for lunch. Examination is given in OT and NT exegesis, as well as doctrine and creeds. This is judged to be sufficient. The brother is declared eligible for call. We sing Ps. 136:1,2 and thank the Lord.

## 14. Examination of br. T. Van Raalte

This brother is examined to be declared eligible for call. After he presents his sermon proposal, it is discussed in closed session. Classis decides to proceed with the rest of the exam in OT and NT exegesis, as well as doctrine and creeds. This is judged to be sufficient. The brother is declared eligible for call. One of the delegates presents br. Van Raalte with a letter of call from the church of West Kelmscott, Australia. We sing Hy. 64:1,4 and thank the Lord.

## 15. An appeal

After supper we sing Ps. 107:1 and turn our attention to an appeal. Upon discussion this appeal is declared inadmissible.

## 16. Other matters

Two churches request advice ad Art. 44 CO. They are given answers. Next, the council of Chatham presents a proposal concerning a change in the guidelines for church visitation. This is defeated. Then the council of Attercliffe presents a proposal for change Art. 4b2 of the church order to read: ". . . have served in churches with which the Canadian Reformed Churches do not maintain a sister-church relationship, and have been well tested for a reasonable period of time and examined by the classis in which they live, with due observance of the general ecclesiastical regulations adopted for that purpose; or. . . ." Classis agrees to pre-

sent this proposal to the next Regional Synod East. We sing Ps. 106:24, pray and adjourn for the evening.

## 17. Examination of br. K. Wieske

On June 10th we re-convene, singing Ps. 100:1,4, reading Psalm 100 and praying to the Lord. The roll is called. After br. Wieske presents his sermon proposal, it is discussed in closed session. Classis decides to proceed with the rest of the exam in OT and NT exegesis, as well as doctrine and creeds. This is judged to be sufficient. The brother is declared eligible for call. On behalf of the church at Houston, BC, Rev. J. Louwse presents br. K. Wieske with a letter of call. We sing Hy. 58:1,2 and thank the Lord.

## 18. Other matters

After lunch we sing Ps. 135:1. The council of Grand Rapids has some requests as a result of the dismissal of their minister. These requests are answered. A report is received from the Chatham council re the Fund for Needy Students. Next, a report is received from the council of Kerwood re the inspection of Classical Archives. Also, a report from the classical treasurer is received. The annual assessment is set at \$4/communicant member for classis and \$1/communicant member for regional synod. The church visitors submit a report of one visit they made.

## 19. Appointments

Convening church for next classis: Smithville. Suggested officers: Chairman – Rev. G. Wieske, Vice-chairman – Rev. J. VanWoudenberg, Clerk – Rev. H. Versteeg. Date & Place: Sept. 15, 1999 in Smithville, ON. The following examiners are appointed (alternates in brackets): Deputies ad examina – Revs. Stam and Ludwig (Rev. VanPopta); OT – Rev. Agema (Rev. Van Vliet); NT – Rev. Wieske (Rev. VanWoudenberg); Doctrine & Creeds – Rev. Stam (Rev. Kok); Church History – Rev. Kok; Knowledge of Scripture – Rev. VanWoudenberg; Ethics – Rev. Ludwig; Diaconology – Rev. VanPopta; Church Polity – Rev. Versteeg. Appointments are made for the fund for needy students, classical archives and classical treasurer. Question Period is made use of. The chairman thankfully concludes that mutual censure (Art. 34 CO) is not needed. The acts are read and, after changes, adopted. The press release is read and, after changes, approved. In closing we sing Hy. 61:1,5,6 and the chairman leads us in prayer.

J. Van Vliet  
Vice-chairman, e.t. 

# OUR LITTLE MAGAZINE

By Aunt Betty



## Dear Busy Beavers

Don't you love it when the sun comes out? It brightens up your whole world, and you can't feel glum any more. You can't complain that the day is very gray, and you have to be happy.

But then, what about when it rains. Do you start complaining that the weather is all horrible, and you can't go anywhere? If you do, maybe you should think about what you are saying. Do you know why? Well, God created the sun, but He also created the rain. He has put rain on the earth so that the plants will grow, and so that you can live. If you had no rain, and the sun shone every day, everything in the land would be very dry. There would be no water for you to drink; there would be no water for the animals and there would be no water for the plants. Then everything would eventually die, because you cannot live without drinking.

There are areas in many countries in the world where they don't have much rain. These areas are called deserts. You will find that not many people will live in an area like that, for the reason that it is very hard to live where there is no rain.

Ask your Dad, Mom, brother or sister to show you a map of the world and find all the countries where there are deserts. You'll find quite a few of them.

Lots of love  
Aunt Betty

## WORD SEARCH

By an unknown Busy Beaver

F C H E R R Y N R P Y A P -  
P L E  
B R K -  
C L D A G M H O P E X O Q  
A D U L V S T E I R O R -  
A N G E  
N Y W I L Z K C W I P -  
S C U R I

**FIND:** FRUIT BANANAS CHERRY  
APPLE PEACHES KIWI APRICOTS  
GRAPES WATERMELONS ORANGE

## Unscramble the house

By Busy Beaver Lori Oosterhoff

FGRDIE \_\_\_\_\_  
INKS \_\_\_\_\_  
OPAS \_\_\_\_\_  
DEB \_\_\_\_\_  
LOCKC \_\_\_\_\_  
AGDNER \_\_\_\_\_  
ALWN \_\_\_\_\_



## FROM THE MAILBOX

Hello, *Lori Oosterhoff*, and thank you for your letter and puzzle. You must really enjoy school, since you could write your letter in school. Do you enjoy catechism and young peoples? You really get to know a lot more about the Lord

when you go through those subjects, don't you. And it looks like you're a real budding musician with your first and second prizes at the festivals. Well done. Write again, won't you, Lori.

