

Why Do We Believe the Bible?

The Sceptre Will Not Depart from Judah



When Scripture is read, it forces a decision from the reader...



C. Van Dam

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Why Do We Believe the Bible?

You cannot make someone believe Scripture by means of visible proofs and logical reasoning.

The current scepticism

We live in a time of widespread unbelief. More and more the Bible is considered to be but one of many holy books. It is not really unique and can be ranked, for example, with the *Koran* of the Muslims or the *Bhagavad Gita* of the Hindus. Our society ridicules the thought that the Bible is the Word of God and that it is therefore normative for all of life. Indeed, our culture shows signs of growing hostility to what the Lord says in his Word. The debate in Canada over same sex marriage and the passage of the bill legalizing it has highlighted this development.

When Scripture is read, it forces a decision from the reader; be it either faith or unbelief.

This attitude of unbelief is also pervasive in the scholarly world that studies the Bible. At first glance this may seem unreal. But it is not surprising, for since the heady days of the seventeenth and eighteenth century Enlightenment, academics have led the way into this unbelief. In all fields of study, whatever could not be proved by reason was questioned and eventually rejected. This rationalism was also applied to biblical studies and the contents of Scripture. After several centuries of this approach the results have been devastating. Literally nothing in Scripture is taken at face value anymore. The historicity of events from creation to David and even beyond is questioned. Even the existence of the Lord Jesus as pictured in the gospels is questioned.

Indeed, the infamous but ongoing Jesus Seminar, a group of scholars who have determined to find out what is or is not historical about Jesus, has rejected as myth the virgin birth, the miracles, and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. On the basis of their reasoning, they also make declarations about what they think are the authentic words of Christ recorded in the gospels. With this approach not much is left of our Saviour and Redeemer.

Fighting unbelief

We should begin by accepting the Scriptures as the Word of God. When we read Scripture with a humble attitude, the Holy Spirit convinces us that these writings are true and reliable (cf. I John 4:6). However, embracing the Word in faith does not mean that we cannot defend the Bible using our powers of reason and using available evidence. Happily this is being done by very capable and gifted scholars who rise to the challenge of the chorus of scepticism all around us. A primary current example of the defence of the historicity of the Old Testament is Professor Kenneth A. Kitchen's book *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (2003). In it he details with painstaking accuracy the phenomenal amount of evidence available which underlines the accuracy and trustworthiness of the Old Testament. A similar work had been written by the late F. F. Bruce, *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?*, which was first published in 1960 but is still in print (2003).

Scholars such as these also address learned society meetings where their findings are discussed. Yet, the sceptics often maintain their positions in spite of the most explicit evidence that undermines their own theories based on doubt. For example, in 1993, an archaeological team digging at the site of ancient Dan made the stunning discovery of a ninth century B.C. inscription in Old Aramaic which mentions "the house of David." This artefact therefore attests to the historicity of King



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David and it is the only one to do so. In spite of the fact that this dig was strictly controlled and headed by veteran archaeologist Avraham Biran, and in spite of the fact that world renowned experts have attested to its authenticity and meaning, the sceptics have a very hard time accepting this. Indeed, one popular response among them is that this must be a forgery!

This rejection of solid evidence indicates that you cannot make someone believe Scripture by means of visible proofs and logical reasoning. To be sure, our faith can be defended by logic and reasoning. Faith seeks understanding. God's Word is not irrational. We have a "reasonable faith" to quote the well-known title of a book by dogmatician Herman Bavinck. However, you cannot make someone a believer by rational arguments.

This inability to prove Scripture reminds one of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. When they died, Lazarus went to Abraham's bosom, but the rich man went to hell where he was in torment. Wanting to spare his brothers the same fate, he asked father Abraham to send Lazarus to warn them. But "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'" However the rich man answered: "No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent." Noteworthy is what Abraham then replied: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:29-31). Not even a miracle will make someone take Scripture seriously. Faith is what is needed.

The bottom line

So where does all of this leave us? We don't believe the Bible because the proofs for its truthfulness are so convincing. We also don't believe the Bible because our reason tells us this is the most reasonable thing to do. If we were to believe the Scriptures for these reasons, we would be basing our faith on proofs that convince us and on reasonings that persuade us. Then our faith would not be grounded in Scripture but in our ability to prove or reason. What if we became disenchanted with the proof for Scripture that once persuaded us? Would we then abandon the Word as untrustworthy? Our faith must never rest in our proofs, logic, or reasoning. It must only rest in God Himself.

When Scripture is read, it forces a decision from the reader, be it either faith or unbelief. The Word is a two-edged sword (cf. Heb 4:12). This means that both the critical scholar and the believing scholar approach Scripture with certain basic

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and opposing presuppositions. Neither is objective in the strictest sense of the term. Both approach the Word with a definite frame of mind, accepting Scripture as a book with either a human or a divine origin.

When we read and accept Scripture, God is pleased to witness in our hearts by the Holy Spirit that the Scriptures are indeed from God! No human declaration or institution can make Scripture authoritative. It is authoritative. It attests to this itself. Scripture also needs no proofs, for it is self-authenticating. Its proof lies within itself. As our confession puts it: "Even the

blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are being fulfilled" (BC, Art 5).

We live in a time of widespread unbelief. But we cannot force our unbelieving neighbour to believe. At bottom, conversion is what is needed. It is only of grace that sheep of the Good Shepherd hear and believe his voice and recognize that "all Scripture is Godbreathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17).



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MATTHEW 13:52

The Sceptre Will Not Depart from Judah

*“The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff
from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs
and the obedience of the nations is his.”*

Genesis 49:10

The words above were spoken by Jacob when he was in Egypt and near death. He addressed his sons with a special message for each one of them. As it turns out, the message for Judah was outstanding. To understand this properly, we need to keep in mind that these were not the best of times. Jacob’s family had gone through a lot of turmoil with his own sons committing many atrocities. The fact that Jacob and his family were in Egypt was even indicative of the need to get out of Canaan for a while because Jacob’s sons were living too much like the pagan world around them. If it were up to Jacob and his sons to secure salvation and favour with God, they did not stand a chance. But then, it has never been up to man to secure his own salvation. From the time that man fell into sin, God made clear that He would provide the seed of the woman to crush the head of the serpent. And Jacob himself had wrestled with God at Peniel and refuse to let Him go until the Lord blessed Jacob. He knew that he lived by grace alone. He knew that he depended utterly on God’s gift of a Redeemer who would one day stand on earth and secure salvation for his people.

In this context it is significant that Jacob makes a prophecy about his son Judah: “The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his.” The image here is of a king: a king who holds the royal sceptre and staff. These two terms signify not only rule and power, but also the keeping of the law. This is a true king who rules in power and righteousness. And equally significant, it is an everlasting dominion that cannot be taken from Him.

At this early stage of the history of redemption, it is made clear that the seed of the woman will come from the tribe of Judah. Somewhat later it is also made clear that the Redeemer-King will come specifically from the house of David, in Bethlehem. The Lord said to David in 2 Samuel 7, “When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom.” The promises of God become steadily clearer in the Old Testament, indicating that the Son of David will establish a new kingdom that wrests the power from Satan and moves over the face of

the earth causing men from every nationality to hear the gospel, and by God’s grace, to be washed in the blood and Spirit of Jesus Christ.

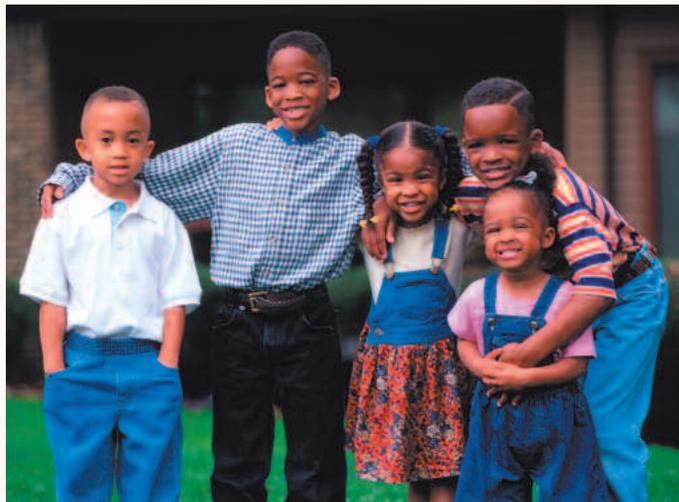
If we look at the footnotes in the NIV or at an older translation, then we see that our text can also be translated as, “until Shiloh comes.” This word speaks of peace and security. We can see it as something of a title or a name for the coming Redeemer: the Peacemaker! It reminds us of another prophecy in Isaiah 9: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” The great victory of the coming Christ would not be with swords and military strength. It will be reconciliation with God through the shedding of his blood.

Our brothers and sisters in the Old Testament already had sufficient revelation to believe and to find peace in the coming Christ. We have the prophetic word made more sure. All who hear about the birth, the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ and believe in Him will know a peace which passes all understanding.



J. Wiskerke van Dooren

Lord's Day 49



Mrs. J. Wiskerke van Dooren published a Children's Catechism in Dutch. This has been translated with her permission.

The third petition of the Lord's Prayer says "Your will be done."

Do you know why you were born? It was not just because your parents wanted to have a baby. You were born because the Lord wants you to work for Him. There is a task for you to fulfill while you are living on earth.

You may ask what your task is. As a child, you don't know yet what you will do with your life. As you grow up, you will find out. It begins to show when you are going to school. One student likes math better than reading. Another loves biology;

he wants to know more about plants and animals. There are also students who prefer making things, and others like art. The Lord does not make every child the same, and these different abilities are all valuable.

Imagine that each one of you wants to become a minister. Or that you all want to work in an office. Or that everyone wants to become a nurse when they grow up. There would not be any bakers or landscapers. And if there were no builders or framers, no houses would be built. It is very good that the Lord gives each person their own task. All of us together contribute to God's plan for now and for the future, when the new heaven and the new earth come.

Do what you have to do in school, and do it well, because the Lord has a purpose for you. Be faithful and diligent. Look at what the angels do. They are always ready to do what God says.

Of course it is fine to make plans when you are young, and also when you are grown up. At the same time, you should consider whether God agrees with your plans. It's not always fun to think about what God wants, because sometimes you have to give up your plans. You will find out that it is not easy to want only what God wants!

Continue to pray to God that his will be done. Ask the Lord to use you for whatever He wants, both now and when you are an adult. Remember that God knows best what is good for you to do.



Overcoming Discord in the Communion of Saints

(Part 5 of 5)

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In the previous installment I presented the core of the controversy around home schooling and the findings on which I based my study. My interviews were an eye-opener that revealed dynamics of the ugly and satanic division among God's people about this issue. I concluded with a qualified notion of hope, as there is a clear desire to resolve the discord and to again live in harmony as God's people. It was qualified because to know what it takes to resolve the dispute and to resolve it are two different things. In this last installment of the series I consider what Paul had to say to the divided congregation of Corinth and conclude with suggestions for office bearers.

Corinth

The Church at Corinth was characterized by a culture of division, yet it was sanctified in Christ and called to be holy (1 Cor 1:2). There is more to be said, but the theme of division surfaces throughout 1 Corinthians. Some go for Paul, others for Cephas, Apollos, or Christ. As a result, they miss out on the grace of God, the wisdom of the Spirit, and the mind of Christ. As they drift from the unity in the one and only Saviour, they argue, and condone immorality. They ask worldly courts to settle their cases. They miss the point on straightforward questions of doctrine and lifestyle. The sacrament gets corrupted and even the purpose for which the Lord has different gifts for each part of the body becomes a source of discord. It is like uncontrolled cell division, like cancer; and here it destroys the precious and delicate Body of Christ.

Discord, like cancer, leads to death. The Corinthians live as though this life is all that matters. Paul must remind them that there is a resurrection, thanks to Christ (1 Cor 15), that this is the core of the gospel by which they are saved, and that it is meaningful for life today. If there is no resurrection, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die (1 Cor 15:32); but if there is – *and there is!* – let us give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord (1 Cor 15:58). Stop the disputes, end the discord, be united in the one gospel of salvation and life, and live!

*It is not a matter of what
is best for me, or for us,
but of how God is
honoured.*

How marvelous is God's grace to and patience with this divided congregation. He gives them his grace and peace right off the bat (1 Cor 1:3). In the end, having heard all the admonishments, they must now greet one another with a holy kiss, be cursed if they do not love the Lord, and receive the grace of the Lord Jesus (1 Cor 16:20-23). The church may be divided by discord, but the Lord does not drop it just yet. He is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and mercy. If, by God's grace, we repent, if we are contrite, if we expect all from Jesus Christ alone, and are wholly devoted to Him, then we may still celebrate the

Lord's Supper and be reminded of his unfailing mercy. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits! But He does not condone slacking off, forsaking the first love, acceptance of sin and heresy; He rather calls to repentance, lest He come and remove the lamp stand (Rev 2). Restoration comes by faith that reconciliation is a gift of God. It responds to God's call in Isaiah 44:22: Return to me, for I have redeemed you. It is the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

Greet one another with a holy kiss; be holy together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; love the Lord. And (with Heb 12:15) let there be no roots of bitterness, no missing out on the grace of God. By grace, you are the Body of Christ, united in the one Spirit, and should not be divided (Eph 4:3). Here is room for humility, to bow our heads and to confess our sins. In such humility we can be a communion of saints, all individual parts of the one body; one with a gift to do this, another with a gift to do something else, much like different tissues and different organs each have their own role in the body. We all are fed with the same bread and the same wine, and all need each other; all parts are indispensable. It is not for us to mutilate the Body of Christ, or to get our pound of flesh, or to be right always.

Concluding reflections

All this does not mean, I believe, that all people now ought to make the same choice (that would be sectarian), but the

focus shifts from us-versus-them or me-versus-you to how we, for Christ's sake, can be of mutual assistance. It is not a matter of what is best for me, or for us, but of how God is honoured. The question is not at all one of a balance between individual rights and freedoms on the one hand and community expectations and commitments on the other. Rather, it is one of how the Lord calls us to be church, to be living members of the communion of saints.

Our age is one in which people like to claim the freedom to do things their own way. In the church, office bearers who comfort, admonish, and rebuke, and so execute their office as faithful ambassadors of Christ, may be told to mind their own business, or that the members are okay and that it is a matter between them and the Lord. Such attitudes generate discord, as there is no common humility before the Lord, no common desire to do what is best for the Body of Christ and God's honour. People may come to the same worship services and sit at the same Table, but go their separate ways when the communion in worship is over; they do their own thing, with their own agenda, disconnected. This ought not to be so.

Scriptural principles apply in resolving discord. We may have to let go, as Trigland said, of matters of personal preference for the sake of the Body of Christ. If it is a matter of the Lord's standards, however, we may not let go. Some things are too central to maintaining the truth to compromise. If we have made an agreement, as in the Church Order, we shall honour it until we change it (see Article 76). It is the task of church leaders to clarify the principles Scripture sets out before us – and that is not automatically the same as what our tradition, established practice, circumstance, or emotion would suggest.

In a dispute we ask polarizing questions: Are you for or against; is it right or wrong? But home schooling, or the Reformed day school isn't my god; they are both efforts to apply God's principles. Let's not argue about who is the greatest or who is right (Matt 18). Let's worship Christ and stop breaking down his Body. Let's read what Scripture

says about being a communion of saints! Christ gathers a church, his Body, and inside that body there are cells, tissues, organs, and organ systems which all need each other. These parts don't each do their own thing as though the others aren't there. They mind the business of the whole body, because it is Christ's. If not, do they really belong?

*Give the Word of God
higher credence and
authority than your
tradition.*

What if your community is torn by discord, whatever the specific issue may be? Ask your minister to preach the Word of God. Let him point to Christ, who reconciles us to God and in whom we can be reconciled to each other. Let him expose our depravity and the mercy we receive in Christ and preach the call for a life of gratitude. Elders, encourage loving and listening communication with opponents. Do not get trapped into taking sides, except where it is a clearly Scriptural requirement; provide spiritual leadership that does not make gods out of positions, preferences, traditions, or shibboleths. You are ambassadors of Christ, not of certain factions. Seek the wisdom of Solomon (1 Kings 3) and remember the requirement for judges (Deut 16:18). Deacons, may the Lord grant you the grace to show God's care to all members of the church alike, also to those with whom you may disagree. If people in your ward feel lost, lonely, or forsaken because of an ongoing feud, direct them to Psalm 13 or 88, and let them find peace in Christ who was truly forsaken of God, so we might never be forsaken by Him. (Matt 18:11)

When councils prepare a slate of new office bearers, let them look for moderate and spiritual men who could, on occasion, advise a brother or sister even against their personal preferences. Before anything else, keep reading the Word of God, and give it higher credence and authority than your

Church News

Called by the church of Orangeville, Ontario:

Rev. E. Kampen

of Langley (Willoughby Heights) British Columbia.

Called by the church of Brampton, Ontario:

Rev. M.H. Van Luik

of Chilliwack, British Columbia.

Accepted the call to the church of Calgary, Alberta and declined the call to the church of Taber, Alberta:

Rev. J.P. Kalkman

of the Reformed Church in the United States of Menno, SD.

Accepted the call to the Canadian Reformed Church of Smithers, British Columbia to serve as missionary among the natives in Northwestern BC:

Rev. C. Macleod

minister of the Free Church of Scotland, North Uist.

The press release of the **Regional Synod East**, held on November 9, 2005, has now been posted. Press releases are posted in the "Resources" section of the web site upon receipt from Regional Synod.

tradition. Read the Form for the Lord's Supper a few extra times between celebrations. Pray for love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Take note of the words with which the Lord welcomes us in church: "Grace be unto you, and peace" (1 Cor 1:3). Take to heart also the words with which He sends us off: "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor 13:14).

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The Missional Church Movement (Part 2 of 2)

Having described the Missional Church (MC) movement in the first article, we now proceed to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses. After that we will deal with the question of how the MC movement challenges the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) with regard to their missionary calling.

Anti-Christendom?

First, let us consider the MC movement's criticism of the Christendom era, the time when Christianity was powerful because of its privileged position in Western society. It is true that the church's privileged position during this period has been an enormous temptation and it is clear that the church has been affected negatively. As the church was promoted to a position of authority and influence in the world, compromise and corruption were very difficult to avoid.

However, shouldn't we say more? Can we only be negative about the Christendom era, the period from the fourth to the nineteenth or twentieth century? Should we, in hindsight, lament the fact that Emperor Constantine legalized the church? Should Christians in that time have taken a hands-off approach and ignore possibilities to have influence in matters of society?

That is what the MC movement appears to suggest, especially the Anabaptists among them. It is interesting that Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, considered to be the spiritual father of the MC movement, sounds a different note. In his book *Foolishness to the Greeks* he stated

that it is easy to criticize the church for falling into the temptations of worldly power, but then he asks what the alternative would have been. "Would God's purpose as it is revealed in Scripture have been better served if the church had refused all political responsibility, if there had never been a 'Christian' Europe, if all the churches for the past two thousand years had live as tolerated or persecuted minorities like the Armenians, the Assyrians, and the Copts? I find it hard to think so" (p. 100-101).

The fact that there was a Christendom situation in Western countries has been providential for the spreading of the gospel throughout the world.

He is right. If we compare the situation in other parts of the world with the situation in Western countries, we need to acknowledge that many blessings have flowed from the Christendom era. Although there have been terrible episodes in the history of Europe, there have also been rulers who were dedicated to serving the interests of Christianity. To mention an example, just think of the impact that Charlemagne had on the Christianization of Europe. The gospel was allowed to permeate and

influence many aspects of Western European culture and this influence is still seen in many aspects of current society, even if the majority of the people have long turned their back on God.

The fact that there was a Christendom situation in Western countries has been providential for the spreading of the gospel throughout the world. The time of colonization is frowned upon today, but it has been instrumental in spreading the Christian faith around the world. Just imagine how different history would have been if Great Britain, with its many colonies, had been an Islamic country! It is easy to criticize the Christendom era, but we should also acknowledge its positive legacy.

Counter-cultural?

Should the church be an alternative community, a counter-cultural force, as the MC movement says? It depends on what the statement implies. If the idea is that Christians should stay away from being involved in politics and society, we disagree. Christians have a calling in this world, and if there are opportunities to seek the peace and prosperity of the place where we live, we should make use of it (cf. Jer 29:7). Sometimes there is a need for prophets like Elijah to criticize the government and stay away from being involved (1 Kgs 17). Sometimes there is a need for officials like Obadiah to be involved in government, even a corrupt government, and do what they can to protect the church of the Lord (1 Kgs 18).

In another sense it is true that the church is called to be a counter-cultural force by being a city on a hill (Matt 5:14). Tim Keller, a PCA minister in New York who uses the phrase “missional church” without necessarily sharing the theology of the MC movement, has said that the Christian community should be counter-cultural by “showing the world how radically different a Christian society is.” He applies this principle to three areas: sex, money, and power. With regard to sex: Christians avoid society’s idolization of sex. With respect to money: Christians promote a radically generous commitment of time, money, relationships, and living space to social justice and the needs of the poor, the immigrant, and the economically and physically weak. With regard to power: Christians are committed to power-sharing and relationship-building between races and classes that are alienated outside of the Body of Christ.

Keller hopes and works for a church that is “more deeply and practically committed to deeds of compassion and social justice than traditional liberal churches, and more deeply and practically committed to evangelism and conversion than traditional fundamentalist churches” (*The Movement*, June 2001). Yes, this is the kind of approach we need!

Sentness?

We come to the third feature of the MC vision, which is the emphasis on the “sentness” of the church, a view which is rooted in the “*missio Dei*” concept. My first objection is that this emphasis on sentness is based on a superficial reading of the Scriptures. The MC movement takes the Lord’s command to the *apostles* (“I send you into the world”) and transfers it to the *churches* that are established by the apostles without questioning whether this fits into the general picture which the New Testament gives of the church of Christ.

Careful reading of the Scriptures does not support this emphasis on sentness. Yes, the church is called to be the light of the world, and a city on a hill (Matt 5:14). But does that suggest being a people on the move? Doesn’t it rather suggest being a place of safety and stability, a place where people may flee to for salvation?

Christians have a calling in this world, and if there are opportunities to seek the peace and prosperity of the place where we live, we should make use of it.

My main concern, however, is that the emphasis on “sentness into the world” comes with an unacceptable reduction of the gospel message. I have read quite a bit of missional literature, and I have become frustrated with the vagueness regarding the gospel truth. A lot is said about *how* the church should speak (boldly, humbly, joyfully, etc.), but after a while one wonders, *what* in the world is the content of the message going to be? And if something is said about it, one is tempted to ask: Is that all? Is there nothing more to say? For example, if Hunsberger says that the church is called to proclaim that “the reign of God is at hand” (*Missional Church. A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, p. 106-107), we would like to ask: Isn’t there something vital missing here? Isn’t the world to be called to repentance and faith? Isn’t there a call to be reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:20)? Isn’t there a call to be saved from a corrupt generation (Acts 2:40)? Isn’t there a future wrath from which people need to be saved (1 Thess 1:10)?

I presume that many supporters of the MC vision would respond that these are the wrong questions. The church has

always been too worried about people’s personal salvation, they claim. It is now time to broaden the scope. The church should make people aware that God’s reign is coming. In our view, however, the fact that such contrasts are made is reason for concern.

MC writers are fond of referring to the traditional church, not without disdain, as a “vendor of religious services and goods” (*Missional Church*, p. 83-84). The church has been trying to “sell salvation” to the people for too long, they suggest. In reply I would say this: The MC movement is trying to open up the Kingdom of God in this world without using the keys of the kingdom (HC, LD 31). The church is called to preach the gospel and use Christian discipline. If a church is not doing that, it forsakes its calling and the Kingdom of God is not going to be established in the world.

Professor John Bolt of Calvin Theological Seminary has suggested that the MC movement’s emphasis on the sentness of the church has led them to bypass the identity question: “Does missional ecclesiology possibly make the mistake of conceiving the church as sent without first properly addressing the question of *how* the sent church is gathered and *what* the sent church really is?” (*Calvin Theological Journal*, Vol. 39, 2004, p. 407). This question is pertinent. It is true that the church is sent into the world, but at the same time the church is *ek-klesia*, the community of those that have been *called out* of the world. And this community has a clear identity: it is the bride of Christ. It is the temple of the Holy Spirit. That separates the church from the world, even if the church is residing in the world.

Application

Having described the MC movement and having evaluated and criticized it, I would like to close by asking in what way this movement challenges us to re-evaluate our own theological tradition and our own ecclesial practice are far as

mission and evangelism is concerned. To keep matters simple, I restrict my application to the CanRC.

It would not be unthinkable if Reformed people became suspicious of any proposals to be more active in evangelism and mission work. It appears that there are so many ways that the church could go wrong in doing evangelism that it might be better to remain uninvolved. That, of course, would be a wrong reaction. The Scriptures teach us that the church is called to be the agent of God's mission in the world.

The church should be mission-minded and have missionary intentions.

The church should be mission-minded and have missionary intentions. The church should evaluate its specific missionary calling, related to its specific possibilities and circumstances, and have mission and evangelism projects going on until the day that the Lord returns. Whatever criticism we may have concerning the MC movement, this is something for which we have to give them credit. They seriously try to analyze the present situation in church and society and they try to make the church aware of its calling in this situation.

But we must be clear about our own message, goals, and strategies. For example, if the MC movement says that the three marks of the church are outdated, we maintain that we need those three marks. The first hallmark of Reformed mission and evangelism is true preaching of the Word of God. That is what the church is called to do in this world. True preaching is the number one calling of the church, whether it is living in a pre-Christendom, Christendom, or post-Christendom situation.

Similarly, Reformed mission and evangelism aims at planting churches

where the sacraments are administered faithfully and where Christian discipline is exercised. The church needs to be a community where God's children are taken care of and looked after. Those that need comfort should be comforted. Those that need discipline should be disciplined. If we are not doing that anymore, and if the church is unable to care for its own people, what do we have to offer to outsiders?

Challenges

There are indeed challenges for the CanRC in the current situation. Let us keep in mind that the church is always called to be obedient to its calling in a specific situation. Our missionary calling is specific, determined by the actual situation. The year is 2005. The country is Canada. We are challenged to analyze the current situation of our churches and our society.

Things have changed a lot since the 1950's when the CanRC was founded. Society has changed; from being a mainly Christian society (whatever that may have meant at the time), Canada has become a secular society. While many Christian traditions remain, there is a lot of room for other religions and non-religion as well.

The churches have also changed. The foundations of a new church federation were laid the 1950s and 60s. We have built churches, schools, a Theological College, a Teachers' College. There is peace in the churches. No major problems causing division. The Lord has blessed us in many ways. Economically CanRC members are doing very well. Just look at the houses we live in, the kind of churches we build, the kind of vehicles we use to get around. This past Sunday our minister thanked the Lord for the amazing way in which He has blessed us. One or two generations ago our parents came here with nothing, the minister said. No money, no job, no place to stay. Nothing. And look where we are today! Yes, we have reason to be very thankful.

At the same time I am concerned and I cannot help thinking that because the Lord has blessed us so tremendously, will we be able to keep in mind that our treasure is in heaven (Matt 6:20)?

To what extent is our present life still influenced by our eschatology? When it comes to evangelism, this is an important question. We believe that this life is temporary, and that there will be a future judgment. The Bible tells us that there is a place called "hell" and that people are heading there in the thousands. The Bible tells us that the Lord Jesus is coming back to judge the living and the dead. We know that Christ sent his disciples into the world so that many people might repent and believe and be saved. It's in our books, it's in our doctrines, but does it still influence our thinking and our choices?

The more we know and believe our own Reformed doctrines, the more mission-minded we are going to be.

When it comes to dealing with the question whether our churches should become more active in evangelism, the main issue is not what strategies and methods we should use, although those issues need to be dealt with, of course. The main issue is whether the Biblical perspective on salvation still determines our life and our priorities. I also believe that the more we know and believe our own Reformed doctrines, the more mission-minded we are going to be. Just read, for example, the Canons of Dort, and you will find mission and evangelism everywhere: "This promise [of redemption] ought to be announced and proclaimed universally and without discrimination to all peoples and to all men to whom God in his good pleasure sends the gospel. . . ." (CD II 5)

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by attempting to formulate some of the challenges we face as churches. First of all, as we believe that mission is God's work, and as we believe that God has chosen those who will repent and come to faith, we need to pray about this. Becoming more effective in evangelism is never a matter of just organizing your church better or choosing better methods. It is a matter of asking the Holy Spirit to guide us in what we should do, where we should go, and to prepare us for being instrumental. Prayer is needed!

Secondly, we can learn from the MC movement that it is useful to analyze the society we live in and to re-evaluate our own position in that society. I suggest that the present situation in Canada, as well as the situation of our churches, calls us to be more concerned for the people with whom we live in this beautiful country. Our churches, and especially the upcoming generation, are in a good position to proclaim the gospel to the society around us. We are grateful for what is being done already. It is encouraging that several evangelism campaigns have been undertaken in recent years and that the Lord has blessed these projects. But more could be done. May I suggest three target groups that deserve our attention:

1. The native people of Canada. There are close to a million native people in this country. It is estimated that less than two percent attend church regularly (www.mennonitechurch.ca). Isn't there still work to be done among them?
2. The immigrant communities and the people of other world religions (Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs). There are huge mission fields all around us.
3. Regular Canadians, whatever that may be, especially those in the cities. Cities have a strategic importance in mission work, even more so cities

with university communities. Couldn't we work together as churches and send church planters to places like Kitchener/Waterloo and Saskatoon? Thirdly, let us re-evaluate our strategies and methods. So far the main reason for the growth of the CanRC has been the fact that the Lord has blessed us with large families. As such there is nothing wrong with it, but it would be nice if we could also see significant growth by way of outsiders joining the church. In order to do this we may have to find new ways of doing evangelism. Let me mention two practical examples.

We need to re-evaluate our present system of doing evangelism in the local congregations.

We would do well to consider the option of sending church planters to new places on the map. It is a strategy that has been used by the OPC for many years, with blessed results. Let the churches in a certain area (for example, the churches that meet together in the same classis) join forces and make arrangements to send a missionary/church planter to a new place.

We need to re-evaluate our present system of doing evangelism in the local congregations. Many congregations have an evangelism committee to take care of evangelism work. The minister and elders are usually expected to concentrate on the work within the congregation itself. This approach has roots in the history of our churches. It goes back to the so-called "instructors and frontsoldiers" view. According to this view the church members are the soldiers – they should be involved in doing the actual evangelism. The office-bearers should not be involved in the work as such – they should only provide instruction. Time and

space do not permit to say more about this, but I think this approach is questionable. In my opinion we should not be afraid to use our ministers for evangelism, especially in smaller congregations.

Lastly, a few words about the other characteristic of the MC movement which we have criticized: that they are too counter-cultural and too critical about the Christendom situation. We have suggested that there is some Anabaptist influence here and that Christians should not be afraid to play a role in the governing of the country. Indeed, it would be good if some of our young people would consider a career in sectors of the society where Christians do not have much influence at present. We need Christians in the courts (lawyers, judges). We need Christians in the media (journalists, writers). We need Christians in high places (officials, administrators). Using again the example of King Ahab (who was perverse) and his minister Obadiah (who served the Lord) we might say: "We need more Obadias in Ottawa!"

In addition, we can learn from the Anabaptists that Christians are indeed a counter-cultural force in society in the sense that they are involved in deeds of mercy. The history of the early church tells us that Christians impressed their pagan neighbours because of the love they showed to the sick, the elderly, the homeless, the poor, the strangers in town, etc. This may be another area where we as Reformed Christians could become more active in years to come. May we be found willing to use our time and energy in comparable ministries of mercy in our own society. May the Lord guide us to be faithful to our calling in the present situation!

An abbreviated version of this article was given as a speech at the College Evening of September 9, 2005



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The 259th Synod of the RCUS in Shafter/ Bakersfield (CA), May 16-19, 2005

The trip

On Monday, May 16, 2005 I left Winnipeg. At the Denver airport I met up with Rev. George Syms. Flying together gave us the opportunity to reflect on our work within the respective committees for interchurch relations. The Canadian Reformed Church (CanRC) classes and Reformed Church of the United States (RCUS) classes are represented at each other's meetings. Pulpit exchanges take place between the two federations. We agreed that we should extensively report about our work and visits so that the churches can become more familiar with each other and share their blessings with one another. We should continue to look for opportunities to make our fraternal relationship more meaningful.

Location

On arrival in Bakersfield, a member of Synod's organizing committee welcomed us and transported us to Shafter. Until Tuesday evening Synod would meet in Shafter. From Wednesday until the end Synod would meet in the RCUS church in Bakersfield.

Atmosphere

The atmosphere among the RCUS brothers was truly governed by God's Word. In preparation for the Synod proceedings, a worship service was held on Monday evening. Rev. J. Sawtelle from Minneapolis administered the gospel.

From Genesis 49 he showed how the Lord continues his plan of salvation through weak and sinful men.

Throughout Synod the delegates were continually encouraged and admonished to do their work in humbleness of faith by devotions and another worship service on Wednesday evening. One should not be pre-occupied with personal opinions and hang-ups but serve the building up of the church, to God's glory and to each other's well being. The power of God's Word brought about an atmosphere of love, peace, and unity among the RCUS delegates.

Proceedings

On Tuesday Synod started its official proceedings. The officers of Synod were elected and the agenda established. Standing committees were appointed to expedite decision making on reports and proposals.

I was officially welcomed and seated as a fraternal delegate with the privilege of the floor. I used this privilege sparingly as reported below. Other fraternal delegates received the same privilege. From the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) Rev. Tom Tyson was the official delegate. Rev. K.M. Kabongo Malebongo represented the mission church, *Église Reformée Confessante au Congo* (formerly Zaire). Delegates from the United Reformed Churches of North America also attended this synod. As is the custom in the RCUS, several other visitors were introduced and welcomed,

as well as delegates from Dordt College and other educational institutions that are supported by the RCUS.

Four new ministers were welcomed and received at Synod. There were no new churches established.

Reports

The executive of the RCUS reported on their work of the past years. The president of the 258th synod, Rev. Pollema, observed that the churches have stayed faithful to the three marks of the true church. Rev. P. Treick, as editor of the *Herald*, reported among other things, "I have tried to produce a paper which deals with a variety of matters of interest to our readers – devotional issues, theological studies, and news items, and when room allows, something for the children."

The following special issues were studied and reported on to Synod: procedures for a denominational seminary, the New Perspectives on Paul with emphasis on N.T. Wright's teaching on justification, and a pension plan for RCUS ministers.

The ordinary permanent committees also reported on their activities. These permanent committees are Christian Education Committee, Interchurch Relations, Homes Missions, Foreign Ministries, Web Site, and Research e-Books.

The discussion about having an RCUS seminary, a pension plan, as well as the support to Dordt College evoked much

debate. The latter support was questioned by a number of delegates because of strong misgivings about the unreformed direction in which Dordt College is going. The address of Dr. Carl Zylstra, President of Dordt College, had not taken their concerns away.

Ministerial aid

Unlike the CanRC, where the local congregation supports its retired minister, the RCUS federation takes care of this responsibility through the Ministerial Aid Fund. Last year's Synod decided that a committee should be appointed to establish a Synodical Pension Plan in addition to the Ministerial Aid Fund.

The Synod received a well-researched report. If a minister decides to participate in the approved pension plan, then his consistory is obligated to match the funds he contributes. This only concerns ministers who are registered as being employed by the church. Ministers who have registered themselves as self-employed are not eligible. A financial institution will administer the pension fund.

During the discussion the church's responsibility for the minister's pension was debated. There was no unity regarding this point. Some regard the care for their ministers as diaconal help; others look at this responsibility more like the Church Order of the CanRC: that the church which he served last "shall provide honourably for his support. The same obligation exists towards a minister's widow and/or dependants" (Art 13). The report as a whole was adopted.

Seminaries

The training for the ministry of the Word received a lot of attention. The RCUS supports a number of institutions to which their young men can be sent for

training. Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and MARS have RCUS board members; New Geneva Theological Seminary, City Seminary of Sacramento, and Heidelberg Theological Seminary have RCUS professors. Synod heard visitation reports and listened to representatives of these institutions.

For years there has been a strong desire in the RCUS for its own seminary. Synod again was served by a well-researched and documented report. This report contained the mission statement of the RCUS Seminary, the statement of governmental structure, and the by-laws. An operational handbook was also proposed, providing additional guidance in the day to day functioning of a seminary. The report recommended proceeding with preparations to establish an RCUS seminary.

Not everyone was convinced of the need for having their own training (yet). The Special Committee's report for a denominational seminary stirred a very lively debate. Strong supporters emphasized that it is a scriptural requirement for the RCUS to train its own ministers. They also pointed out that disunity in the church in the past and present must be blamed on the diversity of theological institutions the RCUS draws its ministers from. Others strongly disagreed with that argument and pointed out that there is a solid theological unity within the RCUS. They applauded the diversity in training and pointed out that the RCUS governs the entry into the ministry at the classical level. Between these two polar positions are delegates who for pragmatic reasons oppose an RCUS seminary.

A motion was made to postpone establishing an RCUS seminary indefinitely. Many spoke against this motion since this action would again shelve this plan. The motion was voted down. Synod decided to recommit this

matter to the Committee. Although the decision was not made to establish an RCUS seminary at the next Synod, the work toward it will go on. Considering the vote, there seems to be a slim majority for an RCUS seminary. In this discussion I used the privilege of the floor, expressing that pragmatic reasons should not be followed. I also drew the attention of Synod to our report, "Why do the Canadian Reformed Churches have their own seminary?" as it is printed in our *Acts of Synod Chatham 2004*, p. 224.

N.T. Wright

Synod dealt with another lengthy report, "Wright is Wrong." The Special Committee to Study the New Perspective on Paul gave a critical review and evaluation with emphasis on N.T. Wright's teaching on justification. Wright removes justification from the core of the gospel and undermines the full sufficiency of Christ's work by grounding justification also in the work of the Holy Spirit. He diminishes the centrality, necessity, and importance of perfect righteousness for eternal life by redefining it in terms of covenant. Through his wholesale rejection of imputation, Wright denies that the believer stands clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ. Wright denies the finality of justification by faith and makes the believer's works necessary for their ultimate justification when he defines faith in terms of faithfulness.

They recommended that Synod adopt the following statement: "We judge that the teachings of N.T. Wright on justification are another gospel and call upon him to repent of his error." Without too much discussion the report was adopted. I asked several delegates why the RCUS deems it necessary to make statements on theological issues such as the teachings of Norman

Shepherd and N.T.Wright. The response was that while they do not have ecclesiastical jurisdiction over those men who are not RCUS ministers and professors, the teachings pose a threat to the RCUS because of the diversity among the RCUS ministers being trained by different seminaries.

Ecclesiastical relations

The Interchurch Relations Committee (ICRC) reported on the CanRC. The report referred to the ICRC's November meeting in Kansas City. "The committees discussed matters of mutual interest and concern. . . it is to be observed that a good working relationship exists between the RCUS and the CanRC and that there has been an increase in the interchange of classis fraternal delegates." Reports were given by delegates to the OPC General Assembly (Beaver Falls, June 2004), the RPCNA Synod (Upland, June 2004), and to the URCNA Synod (Calgary, June 2004). The Synod was informed that there was no report to the CanRC Synod, since they meet tri-annually.

On Wednesday morning fraternal delegates received an opportunity to address Synod. Rev. Tom Tyson brought greetings from the OPC. He interacted with a report from the RCUS delegate in which some incorrect information was given regarding some actions of the OPC. In his address, Rev. Tyson set the record straight. His address was well received. Synod was thankful for the clarification given.

Address

I also had the privilege to address the brothers. I took as lead theme: "Rubbing shoulders comes with great benefits and . . ." I referred to my address in 2003, when we were encouraged to be committed to work at one another's salvation and to do so with the mind of

Jesus Christ. After passing on the greetings from our churches I listed a number of benefits that we get from rubbing shoulders with the RCUS. Our church horizons have widened through our contacts. We enjoy the attendance and support of RCUS committee members and delegates at our ecclesiastical assemblies. Their delegates take active part in our work of synod and classis. From this contact spirituality at our meetings has improved. At our assemblies we don't merely read Scripture anymore but also have brief meditations about the passage; we more frequently join in prayer, bringing the blessings and needs of congregations and federations before the Lord. Through our contact with the RCUS we have also been "forced" to study issues such as Lord's Day observance, the administration of the Lord's Supper to shut-ins, and other topics. I also mentioned the pulpit exchange we have with RCUS congregation at Minot as a fruit of our contact. All those things show that our fraternal relationship is an active and living bond with one another, enabling us to learn from each other.

We should not only reap *benefits*; we should also truly appreciate the benefits. We have the ongoing responsibility to express our unity, to promote it, and to grow in that unity, maturing in Christ (Eph 4). For instance, as I knew from previous visits to the RCUS synod(s) that they find their songbook lacking, I took copies of the *Book of Praise* with me for free distribution. I also had some free books on Reformed liturgy, home visiting, and on the Holy Spirit. They were gone in no time!

I concluded my address with thanks for the excellent hospitality they gave me, and I commended them and their work to the Head of the church.



Further Discussion

From time to time Clarion will publish longer responses to articles received. The decision as to which responses to publish will rest with the Editor.

The *Clarion* issue of August 19, 2005 contained an editorial by Rev. J. Visscher that requires a response. Rev. Visscher himself asked for response in the last sentence of that article. The point in question is whether the churches should retain Article 11 of our Church Order in its present form and wording. Rev. Visscher wants the wording to be changed, along with the provision that a minister dismissed from his service in the congregation will cease being a minister if he has not received a call from another church at the end of a three year period.

In order to argue his case our brother started out with trying to describe the development leading up to a dismissal. The “problem” with his story is that neither he nor I have ever gone through such an experience; for this reason his description is based partially on fantasy and partially on facts which he could know only from hearsay. There are, I am convinced, many more factors that contribute towards reaching such an impasse.

I find Rev. Visscher’s description and story too simplistic. It is suggestive as well; the very name of the alleged minister shows that he “kan’t win” no matter what he does. Thereby, and this unintentionally, the author puts the larger part of the blame on the congregation.

Agreement

Let me express agreement with part of what Rev. Visscher wrote. With him, I am co-responsible for the present text of Article 11 C.O. Perhaps my share is even larger than his, since I was also involved in the preparation of the report on the revision of the Church Order that served at the Synod of Cloverdale 1983. Yet it is not in order to defend myself or

what I did that I write these lines. If anything is wrong, it has to be corrected, irrespective of who proposed it.

The “blame” rests equally upon all the churches. The report on the revision of the Church Order was sent to the churches well in time, so that they were able to study and evaluate it and to come to Synod with well-founded and well-argued criticism and proposals for change. Quite a few churches availed themselves of this opportunity, and when we read Article 91 of the Acts of Synod 1983, we see ample evidence of that.

I do agree with Rev. Visscher that the wording of the first part is weighed heavily against the minister and, unintentionally, in fact puts the (larger part of the) blame on him. This wording should be changed, indeed. In general, I can go along with the wording that Rev. Visscher suggests at the end of his editorial, at least as far as the first part of it is concerned. What I totally reject is his suggestion regarding continued ministerial status.

Changed article

Rev. Visscher stated that what he put forth in his editorial was “not written with a view to any particular person or congregation.” I gladly believe that he did his utmost to avoid any direct reference to a specific situation, yet there must be a concrete reason for writing about this topic, and whoever is no “stranger in Jerusalem” cannot escape that impression. Such definitely was not the case in 1983. It is wholly incorrect when Rev. Visscher states that the Canadian Reformed Churches changed Article 11 “in reaction to a specific situation.” Rev. Visscher even speaks of an “overreaction.”

The proposed change was not initiated at that Synod “in reaction” to anything. No one at that time would be affected in any way by the proposed change. What prompted us to propose the change was the conviction that one could not be a minister of the Word if not bound to a certain church. This principle underlies every provision regarding the ministry.

Synod did not accept the text as proposed. It was changed to read “from his service within the congregation,” instead of “from his ministry.” Synod also extended the proposed period of two years to three years.

The principle

The principle that underlies every provision regarding the ministry is that one can be an office bearer only when and for as long as one is subject to the call by the church.

An elder and a deacon are called for a specific period of time. A minister is not called for a specific period of time but for life. He remains the minister of that church for as long as he lives unless (a) he accepts a call by another church or (b) he is dismissed from his service in that church.

When he accepts a call to another church, a specific moment is determined at which he ceases being a minister of Church A and becomes the minister of Church B. This ensures that the call to the ministry is not interrupted and ensures that the proper support will continue to be given.

When, however, the bond between congregation and minister is “dissolved,” this means that he is no longer subject to the call of that church; in fact, not of any church. He basically is on a level with an

elder or a deacon whose term of office has expired.

Now Rev. Visscher can write, "How about letting a dismissed minister retain his ministerial status for the rest of his life, as the Synod of Dort (1618/1619, VO) intended." However, we receive no proof this was the Synod's intention. Besides which, the conditions at that time were vastly different from those in our days. Even if the Synod of Dort intended what Rev. Visscher alleges it did, this would not be a rule for us to measure our actions and decisions by. Synods frequently took decisions which, upon careful scrutiny, appeared to have been in conflict with the adopted principles. The Synod of 1618/1619 will have been no exception.

Always in effect?

The statement "once a minister, always a minister," is suggestive and incorrect.

With respect to the call to office there is no difference between a minister and deacons and elders. When we state that "a minister of the Word, once lawfully called, is bound to the service of the church for life," (Art. 12) two things have to be noted here. First, the ministerial status is the fruit of a lawful call. This term is used more often in the Church Order. Second, "the church" is not an invisible, "covering-all" entity, but the local church by which he is called and to which he is bound. Proof of this is that the same article speaks of the "consistory with the deacons," the local authority.

Remain with the church?

Rev. Visscher suggests that ministerial status shall "remain with the church that dismissed him," and would like to see the following provision inserted: "In the event that the minister does not receive a call, he shall remain bound to the church that he served last with respect to his ministerial status." Would the fact that he does not receive a call for *three* years be a reason why he shall remain bound to

the church he served last? If this were correct, I would say that he shall be bound to the church he served last *until* he receives a call.

Moreover, remaining bound for life to the last-served church is incorrect. A minister who retires is only released from the work in the congregation, not from the call by that church. He remains subject to the call and a consistory would have the right to recall him out of retirement and ask him to perform certain tasks in the midst of the congregation if need be. Matters stand differently when a minister is released according to Article 11. He is not released from the work in the midst of that church; the bond with that church is severed. The call is taken back; he is no longer subject to its call. This basically constitutes a loss of ministerial status. To suggest that the bond with the church shall remain for as long as he lives goes against the very grain of Article 11.

Inconsequent?

Yes, it may be stated that we are sort of inconsequent here. We let him keep his ministerial status for three years. We require that financial support shall be given "for a reasonable period of time." This is usually a period of three years, be it on a downward sliding scale. Thus we acknowledge that there is still some bond, which is definitively severed after three years. I have no problem with that. On the contrary, since no one-sided blame was attached to anyone, it is fair and just that the minister not be the only party that bears the consequences of the breakdown of relations.

Conclusion

Although the wording of the first part could and should be changed, the rest of this article should stand, as the principle underlying it is fundamental to the whole concept of the offices in Christ's church.

W.W.J. Van Oene

Does Article 11 Blame the Minister?

Having read the editorial "Another Look at Article 11 of the Church Order," (Issue 17) I can appreciate Rev. Visscher's concern for his fellow minister. The fictional Rev. Kantwin appears predisposed to view his dismissal from serving the congregation as an arbitrary reversal of God's calling, for he "can't win." He views Article 11 as a one-sided, biased regulation. Out of self-pity he feels victimized.

This was not the case with another minister, Rev. Knotso. He felt relieved and invigorated. To him Article 11 was the solution to an untenable situation, for it was not about his popularity or relationships, but his service. His classis correctly judged the "situation" and strongly resisted to assign blame. From the start it was correctly assumed that both the minister and the church had contributed to the unfortunate and deplorable situation. Nevertheless, if it would benefit the edification of the church, Rev. Knotso had been prepared to take the blame and suffer injustice. Is that not in accordance with David's examples (Ps 3, 7 etc.) and Paul's instruction (e.g. 1 Cor 6)? Moreover, he fully realized that pointing a finger meant pointing three fingers at himself. He also viewed such self-justification as the style of Satan's corruption. A change was necessary, for unfruitful service had to stop to benefit both the minister and the church.

Rev. Knotso understood that Article 11 was agreed upon to protect the minister and his family from becoming destitute by an arbitrary decision of a consistory. The Reformed churches consented from the beginning not to "hire and fire at will" (Wezel, 1568). The Dutch version is more sober and simply states that "ministers cannot be dismissed without knowledge and approbation of the Classis and Deputies of Regional Synod." The fairness of this statement has always been regarded as quite self-evident (Revs. H. Meulink & I. de Wolff, *Korte*

Verklaring van de Kerkenordening, p. 48). A brief explanation states that a dismissal must be considered in all humiliation, because circumstances had eventually caused the ministerial service to become impotent. Both sides are at fault and “dismissal means no less than a negation of God’s calling.” See also Rev. Van Oene’s *With Common Consent*.

In Rev. Knotso’s case, both parties agreed to a financial arrangement. It provided time to prepare for the next call or another professional position. Rev. Knotso understood that his ministerial status would come to a final end after three years, when classis must declare him no longer eligible for call. But, he expected a call soon. After all, did not a previous classis already urge the churches to consider calling him *before* his service might be judged no longer fruitful and edifying? Therefore, his reaction was realistic and positive. He made himself visible and available, volunteering his services. He was confident, for he relied on the Lord. He viewed the dismissal as a prime opportunity to start afresh and to become more effective in his service as a true *Verbi Divini* minister.

Rev. Kantwin made himself a victim, but Rev. Knotso proved to be a survivor. Even after three years, if it ever came to that, he would, the Lord willing, be just as eligible as anyone to present himself for the ministry (Art 3, 4).

A coloured, slanted interpretation is no reason to change Article 11. Dr. H. Bouwman (*Gereformeerde Kerkrecht*, Bk 2, para. 27) clearly teaches that Christ governs the church by the Word of God. Therefore, he adds, it is imperative that regulating articles of church government be kept to a bare minimum. Examples from others show how a church can lose its spiritual character by an abundance of regulations that are expected to cover all kinds of situations. Then the church may drown in formalism (p.327) and this may promote hierarchy. The articles 3-17 address the office of minister. Article 11 is about his service, not his popularity, social relationships, or status.

Rev. Visscher’s suggestion to change Article 11 is based on an inaccurate reflection and a misguided reaction by an unrealistic, self-centred Rev. Kantwin. It is, therefore, unwarranted. Moreover, the

suggested formulation presupposes that it is not the church but the classis that “hires and fires” ministers. Such wording introduces, or adopts, an inherent hierarchical element. His reasons suggest that the goal justifies the means. “Dissolution” is still severing the bond between the minister and the church, for he no longer serves the congregation that called him into the ministry. His academic degrees are never lost. However, no matter how you cut it, dismissal, release, separation, or dissolution still results in a shepherd without a flock, a minister without a calling church, and that is a no-no in Reformed ecclesiastical polity. That’s what I believe.

Dennis Teitsma
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Response

I would like to thank Rev. W.W.J. Van Oene and Br. D. Teitsma for taking up the challenge and reacting to my editorial. Allow me a few comments:

a) The situation that I describe in my editorial is entirely fictitious. It arose in the fertile mind of the writer and not anywhere else. As such it is admittedly simplistic and was used to catch the reader’s attention and to set the stage for the real issue;

b) By giving both parties the names that I did (Kantwin and Mildville) I was trying to avoid the “good guy-bad guy” scenario. In this respect I do believe that Br. Teitsma reads far too much into both the name and psychological condition of the Rev. Kantwin. As I pictured them, both parties in this dispute had failings but not ill intent;

c) I cannot escape the impression that Br. Teitsma underestimates the traumatic nature involved in the Article 11 route for both the minister and the congregation. In connection with this, I would like to meet the minister who “felt relieved and invigorated” after having been on the receiving end of this Article. In my many years as a pastor, church visitor, and advisor, I have been involved in at least six cases of dismissal both in Canada and abroad, and all of them have caused great pain and immeasurable damage to all parties;

d) I do not agree with Rev. Van Oene that the change made in the Church

Order in 1983 was made without any particular case in mind. Several brothers who were at that synod along with me approached me and confirmed that it was a specific case that fueled this change;

e) It is interesting that up until 1983 a minister who was dismissed in our churches retained his ministerial status and could continue to preach and administer the sacraments (see the *Acts of Synod Orangeville*, p. 119, for the text of Article 11 that our churches adhered to from 1950 to 1983). Such remains the case in some of our sister churches;

f) I must have missed something along the way for I have never heard that a retired minister remains subject to “the call” of his last congregation. I am aware that a retired minister remains subject to its care and supervision, but I have never heard about the possibility of retiring and then getting “unretired.” Nothing is mentioned about this in Article 13 of the Church Order. Perhaps Rev. Van Oene can enlighten me and the readers as to the basis for this claim?

g) I recognize that perhaps the most contentious part in my proposal is that a dismissed minister would remain tied to his former congregation; however, that would only be with respect to his ministerial status. Just as a professor at our Theological College retains his status through the last congregation that he served, so for a dismissed minister. As such this congregation’s involvement with him would be minimal and almost non-existent, unless of course disciplinary actions needed to be taken. In this way the “inconsequent” element is removed from our current approach and the vital principle of ensuring that all ministers are bound to a church would be maintained;

h) In my study I have a book called *The Case Against Divorce*, in which the author reflects on the breakdown of her previous marriage and a subsequent divorce. In doing so she comes to the conclusion that if she had known what it would all entail (the feuding, the scars, and the trauma), she would have made a much more concerted and determined effort to seek harmony, reconciliation, and healing. I think that much of the same applies to churches and ministers.

J. Visscher
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Press Release for Classis Manitoba, held September 19, 2005

Opening

On behalf of the Emmanuel ARC of Denver, the convening church, Rev. D.M. Boersma opened the meeting by requesting the brothers to sing Hymn 40:1, 2 and reading Exodus 29:38-46 and Hebrews 7:27. He then led in prayer, thanking the Lord for his goodness to all the churches and making petition for Rev. K. Jonker and the Winnipeg-Grace congregation in this time of Rev. Jonker's illness. The hosting church, Winnipeg-Redeemer, was thanked for their work.

Credentials were inspected by the convening church and all churches were duly represented. Classis was declared constituted. The suggested officers were appointed: Rev. D.M. Boersma as chairman; Rev. T.G. Van Raalte as vice-chairman; Rev. A.J. Pol as clerk. Denver Church was thanked for convening this Classis. The agenda was adopted and two fraternal delegates were seated, Rev. D. Donovan and Elder K. Cavers, both from the Providence Reformed Church of Winnipeg, affiliated with the United Reformed Churches of North America (URCNA).

Reports

Winnipeg-Redeemer Church submitted an inspection of the books for the Committee for Aid to Needy Churches and found the books to be in good order. No report was received from the Committee for Financial Aid to Students for the Ministry. No audit was received for the books of this committee. These will be expected at the next fall classis. The report from the fraternal delegate to the Presbytery of the Dakotas (POD) of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) was received. Rev. Boersma had visited the POD on April 5, 2005 when they met in the Denver area. Discussion followed.

Denver

Classis went into closed session and the church visit to the Emmanuel ARC of Denver was received. Classis returned to open session. The Church of Denver then provided an overview of their future plans. In their situation as a very small church, dependent on financial aid via Classis, they have been urged in the past to work out some proposals about how they might seek and work for growth in numbers. Denver then delivered both an oral presentation and a discussion paper regarding these matters. Classis discussed this and encouraged Denver to implement strategies in connection with their hopes for the future.

The report from the Committee for Aid to Needy Churches was received and their proposal was accepted. The churches of classis will contribute \$66 per communicant member towards this fund so that the Church at Denver may have the resources to implement their plans. This is unchanged from last year's support. The delegates of Denver expressed thanks to the other churches of the classis. Br. W. Weidenhammer led in prayer for the Church at Denver, praying that the Lord would bless the plans of this church and the gifts from the churches of the classis.

Article 44

In question period according to Article 44 of the Church Order, one church asked for the advice of Classis in a matter of church discipline. In closed session Classis gave concurring advice that the church should proceed to the second announcement of church discipline. Classis returned to open session. Winnipeg-Grace Church requested prayer for their minister who is currently unable to carry out his task fully.

Fraternal relations

Br. K. Cavers addressed Classis as fraternal delegate. On behalf of Rev. Donovan and their congregation he expressed joy at being in our midst and reminded us of their prayers for our churches.

A letter of fraternal greetings was received from the stated clerk of Classis Central US of the URCNA. They expressed regret for not being able to send a delegate and stated their desire for a growing unity. Classis Southwest US of the URCNA (the URCNA Classis in Denver's area) also sent a letter of fraternal greetings. Br. K. Brouwer led in prayer for the churches of the URCNA.

Appointments, etc.

The convening church for the next classis will be Winnipeg-Grace. The date will be December 5, 2005; if there is no material for the agenda, March 20, 2006. Suggested officers are Rev. P.H. Holtvlüwer as chairman, Rev. Boersma as vice-chairman, and Rev. Van Raalte as clerk. Classis appointed its standing committees and classical deputies for new one year terms.

A delicious and hearty lunch was enjoyed by all, followed by fitting devotions and a walk in the warm sunshine.

The following elders were delegated to Regional Synod West (November 22, 2005): W. Van Beek and W. Weidenhammer (primary delegates); V. Schriemer and C. Lodder (secondary delegates), in that order. The following ministers were delegated: A.J. Pol and T.G. Van Raalte (primary delegates); P.H. Holtvlüwer (secondary delegate).

In personal question period questions were asked regarding holding a classis in Denver sometime and adding personal notes to attestations.

The chairman deemed that nothing in the meeting warranted the use of brotherly censure according to Article 34 of the Church Order. The Acts of Classis were read and adopted and the press release was read and approved.

Press Release of Classis Niagara September 21, 2005 held at Smithville, ON

On behalf of the convening church at Smithville, Rev. A. Souman called the brothers to order. We sang Hymn 40:1, 2, Rev. Souman read I Peter 2:4-12, and then he led in prayer. The credentials were found to be in good order. Two churches came with instructions. The Church at Blue Bell was able to send only one delegate. Classis was constituted with Rev. D. deBoer as chairman, Rev. C.J. VanderVelde as vice-chairman, and Rev. D.G.J. Agema as clerk.

The Chairman thanked the convening church for making the arrangements for Classis. He noted several items of memorabilia, including the fact that Rev. and Mrs. Van Dam were blessed with a healthy baby girl and that the Spring Creek Church hopes to use its new church building as of October.

The agenda was established. Question Period according to Article 44 of the Church Order was held. The ministry of the office bearers is being continued in all the churches and the decisions of the major assemblies are being honoured by all the churches. One church requested and received the judgement and help of Classis for the proper government of the church.

Classis dealt with a proposal from the Church at Smithville to invite the Free Reformed Churches to future classes. This was adopted.

A report was received from the Fund for Needy Churches recommending that Classis support the request from the Church at Blue Bell for financial assistance. This was adopted. The Covenant Church at Grassie reported that the books of the treasurer were found to be in good order. A report from the treasurer of Classis was received with gratitude. The Spring Creek Church reported that it inspected the archive of Classis and found it to be in good order.

The next Classis will be held at the Spring Creek Church on December 14, 2005. The suggested officers are: Rev. K.A. Kok – chairman; Rev. Agema – vice-chairman; Rev. deBoer – clerk.

The appointments were reviewed and maintained. Br. D. Van Amerongen was reappointed as treasurer of Classis.

The following brothers were delegated to Regional Synod East November 9, 2005: Ministers – Rev. Souman and Rev. VanderVelde (alternates in order: Rev. S.C. Van Dam, Rev. deBoer). Elders – G. Van Woudenberg, J. Van Zanten (alternates in order: A. Kingma, W. de Haan).

Question Period was held. Censure according to Article 34 of the Church Order was not necessary. The Acts were adopted and the press release was approved. We sang Hymn 40:4, 5 and Rev. deBoer led in prayer. The chairman declared Classis closed.

*C.J. VanderVelde
Vice-chairman e.t.*

Press Release of Classis Northern Ontario, September 23, 2005, in Brampton

On behalf of the convening church of Brampton, Rev. C. Vermeulen opened the meeting of the delegates by requesting the singing of Hymn 28:1-4, reading from I Peter 1:1-12, speaking some words about this passage, and leading in prayer. As items of memorabilia he mentioned that since the previous classis Rev. P.G. Feenstra and Rev. C. Vermeulen declined calls and the vacant churches at Fergus South, Orangeville, and Brampton called ministers but these calls were all declined. He also mentioned that since last classis Rev. B.J. Berends has become minister emeritus.

After the examination of the credentials Classis was constituted and the moderamen suggested by the previous classis took their places: Rev.

Vermeulen as chairman, Rev. P. Aasman as clerk, and Rev. J. Van Woudenberg as vice-chairman.

After the agenda was adopted the following reports were dealt with: inspection of the classical archives; treasurer's report; auditing of the treasurer's books; needy student fund report; audit of the needy students fund; needy churches fund report. The archives and all the funds were found to be in good order. A report of an audit for the fund of needy churches will be submitted to the next classis by the Church at Fergus South (Maranatha). In response to a query from the church inspecting the archives, Classis decided that copies of sermon proposals presented to Classis need not be archived. Regarding account balances, Classis currently has \$1,482.47 in its fund; the fund for needy churches has a balance of \$13,035.00; and the fund for needy students has a balance of \$5,361.77. Classis adopted the recommendations of the committee for needy churches and the church in charge of the fund for needy students to not assess the churches for additional funds at this time since currently there are no requests for assistance. Classis noted that the address of the treasurer, incorrectly published in the Yearbook, is Mr. F. Hoekstra, 885 30th St. West, R.R. #7 Owen Sound, ON, N4K 6V5.

The Church at Guelph requested advice in a matter of discipline. In closed session advice was given. In response to a request from Owen Sound the members of Classis discussed and gave input pertaining to matters in its relationship with the ERQ Church at St. Georges, Quebec. In closed session Owen Sound also received advice from the members of Classis in another matter.

The Church at Guelph submitted a proposal regarding the new marriage forms in the province of Ontario which nullifies the distinction in gender and now speaks of applicant and joint applicant instead of bride and groom.

Classis adopted the recommendation of Guelph to recommend Regional Synod East to take up contact with the Government of Ontario on behalf of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) in Ontario in an effort to ensure that marriages in the CanRC in Ontario may be officiated and registered with forms that reflect the norms of Scripture regarding marriage upheld in the CanRC.

Appointments were made. The convening church of the next classis will be Elora, to be held on December 16, 2005. Suggested officers for next classis: Rev. Feenstra (chairman), Rev. Aasman (vice-chairman), Rev. Vermeulen (clerk). Committee of examiners: Rev. Feenstra and Rev. VanWoudenberg. Examiner for exegesis Old Testament: Rev. Aasman. Examiner for exegesis of New Testament: Rev. VanWoudenberg. Examiner for knowledge of Scripture: Rev. Vermeulen. Examiner for doctrine and creeds: Rev. Feenstra. Examiner for church history:

Rev. W. Geurts. Examiner for ethics: Rev. Vermeulen. Examiner for church polity: Rev. Geurts. Examiner for diaconology: Rev. Aasman. Church visitors: Rev. Aasman, Rev. Feenstra (convener), Rev. VanWoudenberg, and Rev. Vermeulen.

Church for taking care of the archives: Owen Sound. Church to inspect the archives: Orangeville. Treasurer: Br. F. Hoekstra (with Br. H. Bosscher as co-signer). Mileage rate for classis: \$0.35/km. Church for auditing the books of the treasurer: Owen Sound. Church for financial aid to students for the ministry: Guelph. Church for auditing the books of the church for financial aid to students for the ministry: Fergus South (Maranatha). Committee for needy churches: Br. C. VanRaalte (2006); Br. J. Hutten (2007); Br. F. Westrik (2008). Church to audit the books of the fund for needy churches: Fergus South (Maranatha).

Neighbouring churches were appointed. For Brampton: Guelph. For Elora: Fergus North. For Fergus North: Owen Sound. For Fergus South: Elora. For Grand Valley: Orangeville. For Guelph: Fergus South. For Orangeville: Brampton. For Owen Sound: Grand Valley.

Delegates to Regional Synod East, November 9, 2005: Rev. Aasman and Rev. Vermeulen (primi-ministers); Rev. Geurts and Rev. VanWoudenberg (alternate ministers in order); Br. H. Nobel and Br. F. Westrik (primi-elders); Br. C. Poppe and Br. B. Niezen (alternate elders in order).

Classis instructed the convening church of next classis to invite an observer from Classis Southern Ontario of the United Reformed Churches and from the ERQ. After the Acts and press release were adopted Classis sang from Hymn 46:2 and the chairman led in closing prayer.

*On behalf of Classis,
Rev. J. VanWoudenberg (clerk at that time).*

