

Clarion

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URCNA SYNOD VISALIA 2014



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Postponement or Progress?

Personal Reflections on Synod Visalia 2014

*We need to get beyond the vocabulary itself and ask,
“What does the other party really mean
by what they say?”*

Nestled up against the slopes leading toward the soaring Mt. Whitney is the city of Visalia, California. Since its population is about 125,000, the metropolis probably did not notice the extra 250 or so visitors it received in the first week of June, although a couple of hotels near the Trinity United Reformed Church were particularly busy for this time of the year. The occasion was Synod Visalia 2014 of the United Reformed Churches of North America, which began with a prayer service on the evening of Monday, June 2, and finished with a flurry of final decisions on the evening of Thursday, June 5. In addition to the two official fraternal delegates from the Canadian Reformed Churches, Rev. W. den Hollander and Rev. C. VanderVelde, Dr. Ted Van Raalte and I were invited to come and participate in a special colloquium, or discussion, on the doctrine of the covenant. Allow me to describe what I experienced and intersperse that with some paragraphs of reflection, which are in italics to make things clear.

A different flavour

When I was delegated to two CanRC synods, Synod Neerlandia 2001 and Synod Chatham 2004, they felt like bigger, and rather longer, versions of classis meetings. There were sixteen brothers, eight ministers and eight elders, sitting together at tables arranged in a square at the front of the church. (The number of delegates to synod has since increased to twenty-four.) A few interested observers sat in the pews, listening to the proceedings.

The activity of each synod shifted back and forth from plenary sessions in the auditorium to committee work in other areas of the church building. Discussion in plenary session was usually organized using the “three round system.” Each delegate was free to say his piece in each round, if he so chose, and if the matter was not resolved by the third round, it probably went back to the advisory committee for further refining. Synods within the CanRC have a discernible *deliberative* quality to them, and they usually last about two weeks.

I’ve also had the privilege of attending a few URC classes and two URC synods. At least in my experience a classis in the URC is, give or take, the same as a classis in the CanRC. However, a URC synod has a distinctly different flavour. It’s obvious from the minute you walk into the building. The delegates, as well as any observers, are sitting in the pews, and there’s only one table up front with the four members of the executive. There is a practical reason for this arrangement: there are two delegates from each church, one minister and one elder, adding up to over 200 delegates. There is simply not enough room to sit together at the front of a church building. So, they occupy the pews, along with the observers. And when a delegate wants to speak, he steps up to a microphone in the aisle, looks forward, and addresses the chairman, not his fellow delegates, although they are all listening intently, of course.

Just like CanRC synods, URC synods have advisory committees, working on reports and proposals in various rooms throughout the church building. However, many

committee rooms have about as many delegates in them as the entire CanRC synod has in attendance: twenty to twenty-five delegates. Therefore, in committee rooms there is also a different feel. Brothers do not sit around a table and discuss. They sit in chairs and address the chairman and reporter of that committee who are at the front of the room.

Moreover, in plenary sessions Robert's Rules, rather than the round system, prevail. Proposals are moved, seconded, amended, and perfected, until someone "calls the question" so it can be either adopted or defeated with a chorus of verbal votes. "All those in favour say,

INSIDE THIS ISSUE...

Recently the United Reformed Churches in North America held Synod 2014 in Visalia, California. In this issue our Guest Editorial is written by Dr. Jason Van Vliet, focusing on his personal reflections from his time at Synod Visalia. Rev. Clarence VanderVelde also reports on his visit to Synod as fraternal delegate. We also include the address made by Rev. William den Hollander to Synod Visalia.

Issue 14 brings our readers the regular columns Treasures New and Old and Education Matters. In addition, it contains Clippings on Politics and Religion from Dr. Cornelis Van Dam, a questions for You Asked, a book review, and a Mission News insert.

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'Aye'. . . All those opposed, same sign." All of this is old hat to Presbyterians who use Robert's Rules in their general assemblies, also in presbytery meetings and maybe even in session meetings. However, it sounds and feels different to anyone who's been involved in CanRC synods. Trying to be as objective as possible, the proceedings, especially in plenary session, have a *parliamentarian* quality about them, and the synod usually lasts slightly less than one week.

Reflection: On the one hand, spending a few days together at a URC synod leads to fulsome fellowship. There are so many brothers to connect with and share notes. Singing during devotions is also uplifting as nearly 250 tenors and basses enthusiastically raise their voices in praise to the Lord. On the other hand, deciding upon weighty matters with over 200 delegates is an unwieldy enterprise at times. The finer points of Robert's Rules can be opaque to those who have not studied the manual closely. More importantly than that, there seems to be precious little time to thoroughly discuss and deliberate things that are so central to the life of a federation.

A colloquium on covenant

At a recent meeting between the CERCU (Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity) of the URC and the CCU (Co-ordinators for Church Unity) of the CanRC, the topic of the covenant came up. In a way this is not surprising. The URC has been dealing rather intensely with a movement commonly called Federal Vision, and in this case, federal is not a political term but simply another word for covenant. For example, the URC Synod Schererville 2007 adopted nine points related to Federal Vision, and the URC Synod London 2010 expanded that to fifteen points. Added to that, the doctrine of the covenant has always been near and dear to the heart of CanRC people, stretching all the way back to the 1940s and the struggles at that time over a proper understanding of the relationship between covenant and baptism.

With both history and present circumstances hanging in the atmosphere, CERCU and CCU decided to invite four professors (Drs. R. Godfrey and C. Venema [URC] and Drs. T. Van Raalte and J. Van Vliet [CanRC]) to have a colloquium about this topic on the floor of Synod. Thankfully, Synod Visalia allocated two hours for this.

So, what was gained? Although it's hard to summarize (especially when it involves four professors), I'll do my best to capture the highlights. A helpful insight came almost immediately from Dr. Godfrey who pointed out that the URCNA, with a large number of its congrega-

tions in the USA, is much more "Presbyterianized" (to use his term) in certain doctrinal and church political (i.e., church order) aspects. This is because the dominant form of Reformed faith in the USA is not continental, or Dutch, Reformed with its Three Forms of Unity, but rather British-Scottish Presbyterianism which adheres to the Westminster Standards. Now it is true that both the URC and CanRC subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity; however, some in the URC are quite familiar with the Westminster Standards and are more likely to use terminology found in those standards such as covenant of works and covenant of grace, or visible and invisible church.

Reflection: As Prof. K. Schilder once said, on the basis of something he heard from Prof. L. Lindeboom, "Be careful with dictionaries!" Sometimes people use different terms to express the same thing, or they use the one and same term to express different things. Yet either way, we need to get beyond the vocabulary itself and ask, "What does the other party really mean by what they say?" For example, when CanRC ears hear "visible / invisible church," they tend to think of Abraham Kuyper, pluriformity of the church, and compromising the importance of belonging to, being involved in, and under the supervision of a local, faithful church (BC 28). Now, from a Westminster point of view many would use the invisible / visible distinction to emphasize precisely the same significance of belonging to, being involved in, and under the supervision of a local, visible church. In other words, they may use the invisible / visible distinction to fight pluriformity, not embrace it. That sounds strange to CanRC ears, I realize, but that's why it's so crucial to be careful with ecclesiastical dictionaries. We can still discuss the pros and cons of various terms, but let's begin by asking the other: "What do you really mean? What are you driving at?"

Not only are our dictionaries somewhat different at times, but so, too, are our agendas. As mentioned, the URCNA has been very engaged in a debate over Federal Vision, also at their general synods. One of their key concerns with Federal Vision is that within this movement, some tend to blend together justification and sanctification in such a way that good works become part of the means, or instrument, by which we are justified before God. In order to prevent this error and ensure that justification remains only by faith and only on the basis of Christ's merits, some in the URC use the distinction of covenant of works and covenant of grace.

In short, in the covenant of works, before the fall into sin, Adam would have gained eternal and immutable life

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(i.e., a blessedness in which even the possibility of sinning was removed) if he had obeyed the Lord's command in the garden. However, Adam disobeyed, and now such a blessed life can only be gained by faith in Christ and his merits, not by our own works. This is called the covenant of grace. Since all Reformed believers confess, over and over again, that we are saved by *grace* not *works*, you can understand that some reach for the distinction between covenant of *works* and covenant of *grace* in order to reinforce that truth.

There has been, and continues to be, significant informal progress

There is one obvious challenge though. While the language of "covenant of grace" is found in the Canons of Dort (Art 1.17 and RE 2.2, 4), as well as our Forms for Baptism and Lord's Supper, the term "covenant of works" is not. Therefore, as Dr. Van Raalte and I pointed out at Synod Visalia, if the concern is protecting the doctrine of justification, then we can easily turn to the clear distinction that the Heidelberg Catechism makes between justification (LD 23-24) in which good works cannot contribute even the most miniscule amount (Q/A 62-63) and sanctification (LD 32-33) in which good works are confessed as the fruit of faith, but not the content of faith. The content of faith is defined elsewhere in Lord's Day 7. Still, everyone present at the colloquium was entirely agreed that we are justified only by faith, only out of grace and only in Christ, and most certainly not by works.

Reflection: Although the term "covenant of works" is not found in any of our confessions, it does have a long history in doctrinal textbooks, also those used in our circles such as Herman Bavinck's Reformed Dogmatics, Louis Berkhof's Systematic Theology, and yes in the writings of Klaas Schilder, too.¹ At the same time, there are other terms that have been used as well for the pre-fall covenant: covenant of life, covenant of nature, covenant of favour, covenant of love. Each term has pros and cons which can be discussed, but it is more important that the doctrine of justification is protected from any synergistic notion that we contribute something, indeed anything, toward our righteousness before God. Personally, I prefer using the language and the structure of the Heidelberg Catechism to accomplish this. It's just so clear, crisp, and

concise. However, we should be open to discuss other ways of protecting the pure doctrine of justification, so long as we all remember, very consistently and conscientiously, that via the Form of Subscription we firmly hold each other to Scripture as summarized in the Three Forms of Unity, but beyond that we do not subscribe to terminology or theological structures in dogmatic textbooks.

A decision about union

Many delegates to Synod Visalia expressed deep appreciation for the colloquium. For them it either cleared up, or confirmed, that we are essentially united in how we understand the doctrine of the covenant. However, that naturally brings us back to the question: "If the doctrine of the covenant is not an obstacle, why don't we move ahead, even cautiously, in the work toward church union?" Good question, and Synod Visalia had to deal with it.

Summarizing the proceedings, there were two main proposals before Synod (and I paraphrase here for the sake of simplicity):

1. That Synod Visalia encourage CERCU to continue in its plan to present the next URC Synod with a proposal to move ahead into Phase 3A in which work on a plan for an eventual union would begin;
2. That Synod Visalia continue to encourage each URC classis and consistory to engage the issue of an eventual merger between the CanRC and the URCNA by inviting CanRC ministers to fill our pulpits, inviting CanRC representatives to our classis meetings, seeking open dialogue with CanRC brothers regarding any outstanding areas of concern via joint meetings, conferences, and articles in the church press.

In other words, the second proposal was to continue with our relationship as it stands right now (Phase 2), while the first was a proposal to encourage CERCU to work toward possibly stepping ahead into Phase 3A (designing a plan) in two years, to be followed, D.V., by Phase 3B (implementation of that plan) at some future point.

The second proposal passed, and if my memory serves me well, it passed unanimously. However, the first proposal clearly caused mixed feelings, and the assembly seemed rather divided on the idea. Here's where Robert's Rules come back into the picture. Within that set of rules there is an option to postpone a proposal indefinitely. As I understand it, this means that the assembly does not

disagree with the proposal, neither does it agree with the proposal, it simply says, “At this time we’re not going to take a decision on this particular proposal, and we don’t know when we will deal with it. It could be sooner or later, we just don’t know right now.”

To be as clear as possible, the CanRC relationship with the URC was *not* postponed indefinitely. That stays the same at Phase 2, or ecclesiastical fellowship, whichever term you wish to use. The only thing that was postponed indefinitely was the proposal to encourage CERCU to begin the work that would be necessary to step ahead to Phase 3A.

Reflection: Synod Neerlandia 2001 decided to enter Phase 2 with the URCNA. So, it’s been over ten years. And the discussions leading up to Phase 2 had been going on for a good ten years before that. So, we’ve been working toward a possible union for more than twenty years now. Some may feel that we’re now stalling at Phase 2. Some may even be losing patience with the whole process. Some may be inclined to say, “Let’s just live happily together in Phase 2; it’s so much easier.”

I disagree for two reasons. First, although there was no formal progress in our relationship at Synod Visalia 2014, there has been, and continues to be, significant informal progress. Compared to the last URC Synod I at-

tended, back in London in 2010, there was noticeably more familiarity with, and understanding of, each other. Let me give you one small example, at Synod Visalia the entire assembly paused to sing an enthusiastic, resounding, partially four-part harmony rendition of “Happy Birthday” to a CanRC minister, Rev. W. den Hollander. I know, one “Happy Birthday” does not a church union make – not even close. But it does indicate warmth, love, and I would even say, close family bonds. Many other conversations at meals and in the foyers confirmed that observation.

Second, more than two decades ago, we started discussions with the URCNA (still called the Independent Reformed back then) with the firm conviction that the Lord was calling us to that action in scriptural passages such as John 17:20-21 and Ephesians 4:1-3. Those inspired words of our God remain the same. Therefore, from our side, as CanRC we should remain patient, after all that is part of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). And let us pray that our heavenly Father, whose almighty providential hand guides all things, would bring us to the point where stepping toward Phase 3A does not look like an insurmountable obstacle but rather an edifying, albeit also challenging, opportunity.

¹ See Strauss, S.A. *Alles of Niks: K. Schilder oor die verbond*, 82-83.





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Sow Your Seed

“Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle.”

(Ecclesiastes 11:6)

Assembled before Solomon was a mix of Israel’s population: farmers, artisans, homemakers, builders, students. All had one thing in common: in their largely agricultural society, all knew about sowing seed. No planting meant no harvest, no harvest meant no supper. The principle was true not just for the field and garden, but true for every vocation: You had to take initiative in your work, or else you could never get ahead.

Why did Solomon tell his hearers the obvious? Solomon’s hearers lived outside of Paradise, and battled life’s brokenness. That battle tires us all. No matter how hard we try, we can’t get things perfect, can’t fix life’s brokenness, can’t remove the ache of failure. The easy answer to this frustration is to give up, to which Solomon says: “Don’t get passive, or give up! First thing in the morning, sow your seed, and even into the evening keep at it!”

Solomon worked with the Bible he’d inherited from his parents, including the revelation of God in the first chapters of Genesis. From Genesis 1:26 he learned that God intended people to rule over all he had made. From Genesis 2:15 he learned that God put Adam in the Garden with the instruction to “work it and take care of it.” The cows of the Garden could lie down and chew their cud, but Adam was not to lie down beside them. He was to work, to rule over God’s handiwork. David caught the privilege of the position when he said that man

had a place “a little lower than God” (Ps 8:5, NASB). On a scale of one to ten, with God at ten, man was a nine!

Adam’s rebellion ruined so much. God could rightly have revoked the kingly mandate he’d given, and consigned humanity to live like cows: graze, loll in the sun, chew the cud – mindless, thoughtless, passive, like Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 4:25). But God didn’t do that because he intended people to be kings, not cows. So God set about working redemption through the Seed of the woman. And while he completed that redemption, people were to act like kings, to respect the office with which God endowed them.

Hence Solomon’s inspired instruction: In the morning get out of bed, get to your land, and sow your seed. In other words, we are to plan ahead, make decisions, initiate projects, get things done – whether you’re a farmer or a businessman or a homemaker or a labourer or an office bearer or a teacher. You’re a king, with the world under your feet: Act that way!

It’s hard work in a fallen world. The weeds in the fields you want to sow make sowing seem a waste of effort. The weeds in your business environment make a good decision hard to make. Why bother sowing seed, taking initiative, or deciding on a new project if the weeds will overtake it anyway?

Through Solomon the Spirit insists that kings-under-God be at it, right in the weeds of life. So Jesus Christ

made it his business to rule, to sow his seed in the morning, and at evening to stay on task. He stilled storms, cast out demons, healed the sick, raised the dead, and did much more. As he did, the Enemy sowed his devilish seed so that weeds of resistance and unbelief threatened to choke Jesus’ initiatives. The people among whom he labored cried out to crucify him, and the result was that the master Sower was suspended on the cursed cross under the hellish sign: “This is Jesus, King.” Surely he sowed his seed in vain. . . .

But in the evening he was himself sown into the earth, a seed promising new life. On the third day he sprouted to renewed life, ascended to be King of kings, then poured out his Holy Spirit so that those for whom he died might be made alive, renewed and equipped to be kings with Christ. The blessed result is that we’re made able to rule again, rule over self and rule over all God has entrusted to our care.

So in the strength of the Spirit, we get at it in the morning, ruling over God’s world to his glory, smack in the middle of the brokenness of personal, communal, and national life. In the confidence that Christ is King, we sow what seed he gives in business, in family, in education, and even in government. Kings under Christ – what a privilege! God forbid that we act like cows, just chewing our cud. Kings we are, eager to be at it!



Synod Visalia 2014 of the URCNA



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Close to 250 men met at the beautiful and spacious facilities of the Trinity United Reformed Church at Visalia, California from June 2-5, 2014 for the Synod of the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA). With temperatures hovering around 100 degrees Fahrenheit outside, the men met inside the comfortably air-conditioned facilities to deliberate and decide on the matters before Synod. Synod was marked by the warmth of brotherly fellowship and a very efficient handling of the matters on the agenda. It was the first synod in the history of the URCNA which was finished one day ahead of schedule.

Colloquium

As fraternal delegates representing the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) at Synod Visalia 2014, Rev. William den Hollander and I enjoyed much good fellowship with the URC brothers as we attended Synod Visalia for its duration. With two delegates present from each congregation, it is a good opportunity for us as coordinators for church unity to interact with people from all regions of the federation. In addition to the speech by Rev. den Hollander bringing greetings from our federation, the highlight for us as CanRC was the one-hour colloquium (learned discussion) which took place on the floor of Synod by Dr. Robert Godfrey and Dr. Cornel Venema from the URCNA and Dr. Ted Van Raalte and Dr. Jason Van Vliet from the CanRC (Article 50). The topic was covenant views. A one-hour question period followed the colloquium, allowing for questions from delegates to Synod Visalia. This colloquium was held at the suggestion of the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity (CERCU) of the URCNA. The purpose was to help clear up misunderstandings and to see what the differences are when it comes to prevalent covenant views in the URCNA and the CanRC.

Prior to the colloquium, the two URCNA brothers wrote a paper outlining what they perceived to be the prevalent view within the URCNA, and the two CanRC brothers wrote a paper outlining what they perceived to be the prevalent view within the CanRC. It was made clear at the colloquium that two men cannot speak for an entire federation but that what was presented was fairly representative of each federation. The papers were the basis for the colloquium at Synod. These papers were distributed to all the Councils of the URCNA federation prior to Synod Visalia.

The colloquium papers indicate no significant differences regarding covenant views and the colloquium itself also led to no disagreement, with the four participants concluding that we are on the same page regarding covenant views. The colloquium was a very positive experience and helped to clear up misunderstandings. As representatives of the CanRC, we received much positive feedback about the colloquium from the delegates of Synod. The colloquium papers can be read at the website of the URCNA at www.urna.org and have also been sent to the councils of all Canadian and American Reformed Churches by your coordinators for church unity. There was talk of an audio recording of the colloquium and the question period; if this becomes available, it will in all likelihood be posted on the website of the URCNA.

Unity

In dealing with the CERCU report, the advisory committee of Synod recommended that Synod encourage CERCU in its plans to recommend to Synod 2016 that the URCNA proceed to Phase Three Step A of church unity with the CanRC; this would mean that, should the churches approve of this recommendation in 2016, CERCU would begin the *Development of a Plan of Union*. This was "tabled indefinitely," which according to *Robert's Rules of Order* means that Synod Visalia did not want to adopt or

defeat this recommendation, choosing instead to postpone a decision about it (Article 53, Recommendation 9). This decision shows that the URCNA is not ready to proceed further with concrete steps toward merger at this time. While this decision is disappointing for us as CanRC, we can be thankful that the recommendation was not defeated but tabled indefinitely. With the time remaining in our mandate as coordinators for church unity, we will continue to build relationships within the American section of the URCNA, and we will try to cultivate a will to ecumenism, as we have been doing. We will see how the LORD decides to bless our efforts in the future.

Synod Visalia did adopt a recommendation of the advisory committee that the churches seriously consider which, if any, specific articles or stipulations of the Proposed Joint Church Order (PJCO) they believe should be changed before the PJCO can be adopted for a united federation, and that the churches seek to bring such concerns to Synod 2016 by way of overture to their Classes (Article 73, Recommendation 10). Synod instructed the PJCO committee to wait with doing further work on the PJCO until after a decision to enter Phase 3A with the CanRC (Article 69, Recommendation 1).

Furthermore, in keeping with Synod Nyack 2012, Synod Visalia reiterated that each classis and consistory continue to engage the issue of an eventual merger between the CanRC and the URCNA by inviting CanRC ministers to fill pulpits, inviting CanRC representatives to classes, seeking open dialogue with CanRC brothers regarding any outstanding areas of concern, organizing joint events with CanRC congregations, attending joint conferences, and writing columns to foster our mutual understanding and affection (Article 26, Recommendation 12).

Other news

In other news from Synod Visalia, we pass on that Rev. Richard Bout was elected to serve as Missions Coordinator. Rev. Bout had served as a church-planting missionary in Mexico for the past fifteen years and was awaiting a call after repatriating (Article 66, Recommendation 8, Article 84, Recommendation 8). His task will be to offer support and direction to the various church-planting projects of the URCNA, both abroad and at home. Two councils are prepared to supervise Rev. Bout as Missions Coordinator; one of them will take on this task.

Furthermore, Synod adopted a Psalm Proposal of the 150 Psalms to be the Psalter portion of the new songbook for the URCNA. (About twenty of these Psalms are Genevans from our *Book of Praise*.) This Psalm Proposal was the joint effort of a URCNA committee and an Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) committee (Article 32, Recommendation 4). An OPC General Assembly meeting at the same time elsewhere also adopted this Psalm Proposal. The work on the Hymn section is ongoing and is expected to be completed in time for Synod 2016 (Article 32, Recommendation 7).

Synod Visalia also decided to invite the OPC to hold its 2016 General Assembly at the same time and place as the next Synod of the URCNA (Article 32, Recommendation 11). The grounds are that this would be an expression of unity as sister churches in Christ, an expression of appreciation for the OPC invitation to join them in the production of a new songbook, and an opportunity to hold a joint discussion on the songbook should both assemblies desire to do so. It was decided that Synod 2016 will be held in the Grand Rapids, Michigan area.

As we look back over the years, we realize that the process toward merger between the CanRC and the URCNA has been very slow, but we also realize that there has been a gradual but steady movement toward one another. The colloquium and the conclusions that can be drawn from it are another step on that road. Our increasing contact as coordinators with churches and classes in the USA has built relationships and deepened awareness of the CanRC. Please remember in your personal and congregational prayers the efforts toward unity. “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (Ps 127:1). C



Executive (l to r): Rev. Greg Lubbers, Rev. Doug Barnes, Rev. Bradd Niemeyer, and Rev. John Bouwers (resp. second, first clerk, chairman, and vice-chairman)

Address to Synod Visalia 2014



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Esteemed Brothers in the Church of Christ,

It truly is an honour and privilege that I may once again be present in your midst and address you as General Synod of the URCNA. The fact that I can address you in your broadest assembly with *all* your churches represented by its delegates makes this moment very special. Since General Synod Nyack 2012 I have been in the rather unique position of visiting seven of your eight classes. Included in these visits were some sixteen opportunities to conduct worship services in URC congregations, and besides those to preach as well in *other* churches among your classes upon special invitations. Aside from these preaching engagements I could address your classes and congregations to introduce the federation of CanRC and its history and heritage. In short, if ever it has been appropriate to apply the figure of “ambassadors” to the servants of Christ as they make their appeal on Christ’s behalf (2 Cor 5:20), I certainly felt like I came in that function! My appeal, however, on behalf of Christ, was not so much as saying, “Be reconciled to God,” but to encourage you with the other words of the apostle, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace!” Indeed, your invitations, your receptions, and your interests and inquiries, together with my humble attempts in fulfilling my mandate, did add up to the apostle’s appeal to manifest the maintenance of the unity of the Spirit and to promote the will to ecumenicity through the bond of peace!

Brothers, I consider myself exceedingly blessed by the experiences enjoyed during these visits and occasions. Just as we are exulting here at General Synod Visalia 2014, so I rejoiced in each and every of the other opportunities, in the truth of the words of Psalm 133, “Behold, how pleasant and how good, that we, one Lord confessing, together dwell in brotherhood, our unity expressing!” (*Psalter Hymnal* #279) When the CERCU report to your synod mentions that “Growing love, mutual

knowledge and trust, as well as increased cooperation in such things as education, evangelism, youth activities, conferences, joint services, and pulpit exchanges have marked the past number of years,” among the churches in closer geographical proximity that is, then I may add that *also* these *my* personal encounters contributed to a similar growth in love, mutual knowledge, and trust! Your committee report is so true when it observes that “It is significant that the closer and more frequent the interaction has been, the greater is the interest and openness toward progressing onward in this endeavour.”

At times the question was put to me whether I was *still* as convinced and motivated that the process toward organizational unity should be pursued, having experienced and discovered that “significant ambivalence remains concerning the whole process among the US Classes of the URC” (as your CERCU report refers to my findings). Let me assure you with all the sincerity of my heart and integrity of my faith, that my exposure to these US churches and classes and my interaction with the brotherhood in the URCNA have become an even greater incentive for this pursuit than I have had since the beginning of my involvement in 1992. In fact, the miracle of the growing unity among the churches in Canada to the point of its present integration and immersion and cooperation at every level of church life, congregational communion, and the pursuit of kingdom service in a growing number of areas of life, this *miracle* must be a strong motivation to *continue* our pursuit to the point at which we may see the *miracle of the twenty-first century* come true in the union of the URCNA and CanRC to the greater glory of God our Saviour and as testimony to the world!

Why this should be? Well, brothers, we all know that the church gathering work of Christ is a dynamic process. When you, in 1995/6 set out to establish the federation of United Reformed Churches in North America, you

pursued a union by faith, in love, with courage, and in mutual trust (as your CERCU report testifies!), because you knew that this was in accordance with the Word of God. You did so because the entire Scripture reveals this dynamic process toward union in Old and New Testament: in the service of God at Shiloh, in *one* tabernacle, *one* temple, for the *one* people of God (which was composed of twelve so very different tribes!), a unity of God's people which our Saviour articulated when speaking about *one* flock and *one* Shepherd, revealing to us in the NT gathering of his church that he breaks down dividing walls to unite Jews and Gentiles, uniting them into *one* holy nation, working towards the one multitude! God is one; he unites under the headship of Jesus Christ, and he restores unity as well!

We must see our faith working through love, scripturally, confessionally, historically, and organizationally!

Then the Scriptures reveal to us that this work is *visible*: the multitude in Revelation 7 came about through Christ, as he walked among the 7 churches in Asia Minor, holding their stars in his *one* hand, being the *one* foundation under their local churches, which expressed their unity by being a hand and foot to each other, in the congregations and among their federation! Indeed, it is this dynamic work of God that we can see throughout the history of the church, as we confess in the *oneness* and catholicity of the church! Hence, we are urged to look at *God's* work and not at the people and their feelings, reservations, or their ambivalence, but we must see our faith working through love, scripturally, confessionally, historically, and organizationally! The church is pillar and foundation of the truth; it's this truth which unites believers, congregations,

and federations! We have seen the miracle of this unity develop and grow in Canada, as it continues to manifest itself; in the same spirit of unity in the truth we may see this dynamic character of the church become evident in the union that we continue to pursue as brothers and sisters of common confession and heritage!

Esteemed brothers, just as General Synod Escondido 2001 was pivotal in promoting a growing momentum by its forward-looking decisions and appointments, you have gathered in one of the churches in California again with the opportunity to maintain and increase the momentum through decisions and CERCU's recommendations which pursue this unity in the truth (including our common understanding of the richness of the doctrine of the covenant)! The most recent General Synod of the CanRC, in Carman 2013, has reiterated and confirmed its sincere desire that we proceed in the way in which the Lord of the church has blessed us so exceedingly. It endorsed your CERCU's plan for the preparation of union in the coming years till your and our next general synods, in 2016 the Lord willing. We, as Coordinators of the Committee for Church Unity, the Rev. Clarence VanderVelde and I (your ambassador of the CanRC) will be ready and eager to do everything we can to cooperate and to facilitate whatever plans and discussions need to pave the way for your consideration and decision of our desired union. Personally I would like to assure you that as gladly as I have accepted the invitations and made the visits to your churches and classes to *introduce* our churches, so eagerly I would be available to *further* your acquaintance and remove whatever ambivalence remains!

Dear brothers in the Lord, receive the greetings of the CanRC in the communion of the Spirit of peace and in the pursuit of Scriptural ecumenicity and the ecclesiastical unity of our two Reformed federations of churches of the Lord Jesus Christ!

C





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Chinese Government Removes Crosses

Red neon crosses on church towers are a notable feature of the Korean urban landscape, especially at night. They light up the skyline and boldly proclaim the presence of Christianity. Similar red crosses, but in far fewer numbers, are also found in neighbouring China. This communist country is officially atheistic and the state promotes the doctrine that there is no God. Apparently those in power now feel that it is time to erase Christian symbols from the view of the public and de-Christianize the skylines wherever the bright red neon crosses appear. So there is an ongoing campaign to take down the crosses.

One cross removal in particular, in Wenzhou, caused quite a stir in China. Ian Johnson reported in *The New York Times* (online version May 29, 2014) the following about what took place.

For nearly a year, the Sanjiang Church was the pride of this city's growing Christian population. A landmark in the fast-developing northern suburbs, its 180-foot spire rose dramatically against a rocky promontory. Wenzhou, called "China's Jerusalem" for the churches dotting the cityscape, was known for its relaxed ties between church and state, and local officials lauded the church as a model project.

Late last month, however, the government ordered it torn down, saying it violated zoning regulations. After fruitless negotiations and a failed effort by the congregation to occupy the church, on April 28 backhoes and bulldozers knocked down the walls and sent the spire toppling to the ground. . . .

Since March, at least a dozen other churches across Zhejiang Province have been told to remove their crosses or have received demolition orders, a significant escalation in a party campaign to counter the influence of China's fastest-growing religion.

The government has defended its actions, saying the churches violated zoning restrictions. However, an internal government document reviewed by *The New York Times* makes it clear the demolitions are part of a strategy to reduce Christianity's public profile.

The nine-page provincial policy statement says the government aims to regulate "excessive religious sites"

and "overly popular" religious activities, but it specifies only one religion, Christianity, and one symbol, crosses.

"The priority is to remove crosses at religious activity sites on both sides of expressways, national highways and provincial highways," the document says. "Over time and in batches, bring down the crosses from the rooftops to the facade of the buildings. . . ."

The Sanjiang demolition in particular drew national attention because the church was officially sanctioned, not one of the independent, underground churches that often run afoul of the government. Moreover, a central ally of President Xi Jinping played a decisive role in its destruction.

The case created a backlash even in government-controlled religious circles, with prominent theologians at government seminaries publicly criticizing the handling of it. . . .

Officials argued that the church violated zoning rules, but the provincial policy paper suggests that argument was a tactical cover. The paper, called "Working Document Concerning the Realization of Handling of Illegal Religious Buildings," said the policy would face international scrutiny so officials should be careful to cloak their effort under the guise of cracking down on building codes. "Be particular about tactics, be careful about methods," it said, urging officials to focus on the idea of "illegal construction." "This is crucial to investigate and prosecute from the perspective of laws and regulations to avoid inviting heavy criticism."

The document is undated, but government religious officials say it was issued last summer by the Wenzhou administration of religious affairs in conjunction with a government bureau charged with demolishing illegal buildings.

This latest campaign against Christianity must be discouraging for Christians in China. But one thing is sure. Although the government may be able to erase Christian symbols from public view, they cannot erase the faith that God has firmly planted in the hearts and minds of those who call on him in true faith. And they pray not only for the well-being of the government but also that greater religious liberty may come one day. We should join them in those prayers. **C**



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- Q**
- a) Was the issue of women voting in church not already dealt with decades ago?
 - b) With one synod (Burlington) at this time letting the churches do “what seems right in their own eyes” and the next synod (Carman 2013) overturning that decision, is church unity not under attack?
 - c) We still believe, (as is stated in the Form for the Ordination) that “through his congregation” God calls one to the office of elder or deacon. Does God’s way now need improvement or is a representative vote no longer adequate?
 - d) Is the desire to enlarge the voters pool by including female members not equal to or in fact the same as ending the representative system that has prevailed throughout church history? And is that not called congregationalism?
 - e) Is letting all members suggest candidates, approve a list of candidates, and after preceding prayer rely most directly on God’s choice (by lot or vote) insufficient “cooperation of the congregation” as churches had agreed to do? (Art. 3 C.O.)

A *Ad a)* The matter of women voting has been a point of committee studies, synod decisions, and local discussions for quite a few decades indeed (at General Synod Toronto 1974 the first overture regarding this matter was submitted). In almost every subsequent synod the issue came up in the way of a different overture, two study committees, appeals, and another committee to finalize outstanding matters (namely of General Synod Smithville 1980). The latter committee reported its findings to General Synod Burlington 2010 in the form of a Majority and Minority Report. Finally, at our most recent General Synod Carman 2013 the decision made at General Synod Burlington 2010 was appealed by quite a few churches, so that it is correct to say that it has been in the attention of our churches for four decades (forty years!).

Ad b) General Synod Burlington 2010 did not let the churches do “what seems right in their own eyes” (which scripturally speaking is a wrong attitude and rebellious spirit as contained in the conclusion to the book of the

Judges, 21:25), but rather came to adopt the recommendation, “That any arrangement for the election of office bearers that goes beyond what has been agreed upon by the churches in Article 3 CO is a matter of the local regulations, adopted for that purpose by the consistory with the deacons.” General Synod Carman 2013, in dealing with a variety of appeals addressing both Scripture and the Church Order, came to the recommendation, “That the churches should return to the voting practice as it officially was before 2010, namely male communicant members only voting.” In itself such a development is not unusual and does not need to imply that church unity is under attack. A church federation operates in the unity of the true faith and in accordance with the Church Order; hence, as long as decisions are tested and made on the basis of these criteria the unity of the churches is being pursued. Iron sharpening iron, too, is a scriptural practice in the pursuit of arriving at the unity in the truth!

At the same time, as General Synod Burlington 2010 already considered, “The fact that for more than 30 years the assemblies of the Canadian Reformed Churches have not been able to bring the matter of women’s voting to a closure, so that this issue continues to divide the churches,

is caused by the reality that there is no clear connection, or at best a remote connection between these Scripture passages and our voting procedures. This makes the exegetical sections of both reports hardly relevant or decisive for the matter of women's voting" (Art. 176, 3.6). To this General Synod Carman considered in response that General Synod Burlington states this, yet without giving proof for such a consideration. It could well be, therefore, that in the continued pursuit of church unity in our federation, General Synod Dunnville 2016 will be dealing with appeals that supply this proof and pursue a greater consensus among our churches regarding this matter with more convincing arguments than Burlington 2010 was able to adduce.

Ad c) In the discussion about the women's participation in the voting for office bearers it has always been upheld that, as we agree in Article 3 C.O., it is a scriptural privilege for the *congregation* to be involved in the process toward the election of elders and deacons. This privilege has been based on the voting practices as revealed in God's Word and as such never was discussed as needing improvement. Rather, those in favour of the participation of the sisters in the voting practice are convinced that these sisters are as much part of the congregation as the male members have been so far. Also, they consider this participation a practical matter only of the Council consulting the voice of the congregation, and not in conflict with the headship of the men.

Ad d) The matter of the congregation's involvement is neither a representative system nor a democratic idea, but rather a practice based on the scriptural inferences as found in, for instance Acts 6 and Acts 14, as articulated in the Church Order as "with the cooperation of the congregation." This involvement is not prescriptive but descriptive, and regarding its implementation the consensus has been so far that only male communicant members are allowed to take part in the election for office bearers. A change in this practice would not change the character of a Reformed congregation to becoming congregationalistic in its government or operation.

Ad e) The practice of voting for the election of office bearers by male members only is not a matter of sufficiency or insufficiency. Even if a brother became office bearer without being elected by the congregation his election would be sufficient upon the basis of the consistory's appointment. It's a question, however, whether it is correct that the sisters may be involved in every step on the way to the installation of the elders and deacons, but be excluded only at the point of the election *per se* by the congregation. Why would they be excluded at that moment from the church orderly privilege of congregational involvement while at all other points in that process they are included in the election process "with the cooperation of the congregation?"

C

Is there something you've been wanting to know?

An answer you've been looking for?

Ask us a question!

Please direct questions to Rev. W. denHollander

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Edu-Sketch

Chris deBoer
Present principal of Providence
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Komoka, Ontario. He will be
taking another principalship in
September at Dufferin Christian
School in Carman, Manitoba.

As you read this newest Edu-Sketch, the school year is almost complete or may already be finished. As I attempt to etch a sketch of the activities and decisions made in our schools, I hope that we will continue to see evidence of God's continued faithfulness throughout the past year.

One of the things that kept many (probably all) school principals and boards busy for the months of March to June was staffing needs. Some schools will be blessed with new teachers who will take up the task for the first time; other schools will welcome experienced teachers into their staffs; yet others will continue to experience the blessing of teachers who stay, providing stability and continuity to their staffs. This dynamic is one that provides a wonderful blend for any school and can be used in keeping schools from getting stale. When one peruses *Clarion* magazine's ad section, it becomes evident that some schools are also looking to the 2015-2016 school year. John Calvin School in Yarrow, BC and Heritage Christian School in Jordan, ON are both seeking applicants for the position of Principal to take effect in August of 2015. It remains to be seen if there are many / any willing applicants. In our schools, there seems to be a real challenge in motivating individuals to take on such an important leadership role. It is good to see the proactive planning that takes place to address that.

Some schools are busy grappling with continued growth. The 2014-2015 school year will "mark the first year that all of their grades will be split [meaning two classrooms per grade], and, in fact, grade one will be three classes" for Timothy Christian School. In anticipation of further growth, the Education Committee of Cornerstone Christian School, Guelph, is reviewing the "topic of Class Size Policy. . . . We can definitely see the Lord's blessing through the growth of our student body. . . . We must consider question such as: How many students can be in one classroom? Or how many students can be assigned to one teacher?" They conclude this paragraph with a very important point: "Fortunately, we are able to glean

information from many of our sister schools who have already encountered these matters." Students, teachers, and parents at Attercliffe Canadian Reformed Elementary School saw their expansion begin in April. For some schools, like Credo Christian Elementary, Langley, firm plans for building expansion are in place, while Emmanuel Christian High School, Fergus, will be moving into a different and newly expanded building by September 2016. Ebenezer Canadian Reformed School, Smithers, is almost prepared to start building their third addition in seven years without having to establish a mortgage! Exciting growth all over this country!

One of the areas of growth that schools continue to develop is that of special needs. John Calvin School, Smithville, approved a Special Needs Program and the Education Committee of Cornerstone (Guelph) is "continually working to further develop our special education program so that all members can be confident that their covenant child's needs can be met." Neerlandia's school, Covenant, also hosted a meeting on May 21, where Dr. Christine van Halen spoke on the topic of special education to remind "us to understand why we support special education so strongly and why so much is budgeted for support staff."

Technology is challenging our schools as well. This challenge does not have to be perceived as negative, but it can and must be dealt with in a positive and proactive manner. Providence Reformed Collegiate, Komoka, hosted a *BeWebWise* campaign in its school for the students. It began with a focused devotion for the students on the Monday and then a presentation by staff members to the parents at a membership meeting on that same evening. The remaining days of the weeks had a different focus on the challenges of the use of technology, including a number of guest speakers. Smithville's school hosted a presentation by Mr. Ed Dam and Mr. Arie den Hollander addressing aspects of Internet use and social media. Perhaps other schools will be able to make use of their expertise. Meanwhile, the Grade 6 class of Credo

Christian School (Langley) concluded a Health unit on cyber-safety. The principal, Mr. Heres Snijder, encouraged parents to visit the Canadian Centre for Child Protection's Internet safety website: doorthatsnotlocked.ca. While attending a government sponsored workshop on bullying, Mr. Kent Dykstra (William of Orange) observed how "the overabundance of cameras and the ease with which pictures, videos and comments can be shared produce many severe issues that many schools have to constantly deal with." Our schools are not immune to these issues. Some of these bullying/behavioural/spiritual issues arise even without the challenges presented by technology. John Calvin School, Burlington ran a program called *The Young Peace Makers*, in order to teach students how to work out conflict. The goal was to "build language, responsibility, and open communication in the school." This school is not the first one to use this program, and there are also books and resources for adults who can be reminded how to be *Peacemakers*. The use of these programs does not need to be reactive but may best be used proactively.

Fortunately, we are able to glean information from many of our sister schools who have already encountered these matters

Speaking of being proactive, someone had a vision to initiate a mass band concert in Winnipeg, MB this past Easter Weekend. High School bands from BC, Alberta, Manitoba, and Ontario gathered together in Manitoba for an opportunity to make music together, to enjoy fellowship, and to make new friends. Undoubtedly, there is a real blessing in living in the middle of our school com-

munities, as the residents of Winnipeg and Carman would have been treated to quite a thrill. Perhaps we could do likewise with high school choirs in the future? In addition, various schools are actively engaging their local community by participating in local music festivals, art competitions, and sporting events. Perhaps this growing (?) trend to engage and participate in our local communities will also help prepare all of us to better serve as witnesses of the joy that we have in Christ!

I would like to close this sketch with a few comments on Covenant Canadian Reformed Teachers College. A lot of work is done throughout the year in training people of various ages to be new teachers. When the instructors evaluate student teachers outside of Ontario, they often make presentations at membership meetings and host workshops for staff members. But another growing element that is being developed is the offering of distance education courses. Coaldale Christian School regularly hosts an instructor from the College during the first week of its summer break. It is a good practice! Rev. Agema, an instructor at Covenant, has taught his Bible Teaching course in various places throughout the country, and this year he will travel to BC and will work with teachers from various schools there. The schools in the Fraser Valley, BC and Lynden, WA are working together with the College to make this a regular thing and perhaps a certificate can be awarded to teachers who successfully complete a certain number of courses. In addition, the Covenant Teachers College hopes to offer an online Science course for any teachers who may want to sign up, from anywhere. This is a great step in making Covenant College an ever increasing valuable resource for all of our schools. May the LORD add his blessings in this work, too!

Thus far this sketch. Certainly we can continue to see the Lord's abundant provisions for Reformed Christian education. May we continue to thank him for this great gift! 





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1834: Hendrik de Cock's Return to the True Church, Marvin Kamps. Jenison: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2014

**Additional Information: Hardcover,
512 pages, \$43.95 USD**

If first impressions count for anything, this book is a winner from the start. It has a sharp, handsome look and feel. From front to back, it's been professionally produced and that made this reviewer favourably inclined from the start. The Reformed Free Publishing Association has done justice to the subject by packaging this substantial volume with great care.

The subject is a compelling figure from our Reformed church history in The Netherlands: Rev. Hendrik de Cock. He was a leader in the Secession (or "Afscheiding" in Dutch) of 1834. The Lord worked through de Cock to recover the Reformed faith in The Netherlands after a period of great darkness and decline. This book traces his story in great detail. There is no other book like this in English – it is truly one of a kind.

Normally I'd tell you something about the author. Unfortunately, I don't know much about him and the book doesn't say much. I did have the opportunity to meet Mr. Kamps a couple of years ago in connection with his work in translating the original preface to the Belgic Confession. I know that he is proficient in the Dutch language and in Reformed theology – I gathered from the Acknowledgements that he is a graduate of the Protestant Reformed Seminary in Grandville, Michigan. Elsewhere I also learned that he has served as a minister in the Protestant Reformed Churches.

A short review is not the place to tell the whole story of de Cock – that would defeat the whole purpose of writing this review. It's enough for me to say that everything seems to be adequately covered. I've read a lot on de Cock, mostly in English, and there were *a lot* of new things that I learned about him from Kamps. As I intimated earlier, there's simply a lot here that you're not going to find anywhere else. For example, more than half of the book is taken up with translations of various primary source documents relating to the life and work of Hendrik de Cock. This cannot be found anywhere else.



Kamps has done the English-speaking Reformed world a huge service by writing and compiling this volume.

The book is strong in highlighting the issues at stake in the Secession of 1834. The author is insistent that the very gospel was under attack in the

Reformed church. He makes a solid case for that and then maintains that de Cock and the other leaders of the Secession were zealous to recover the biblical gospel. Writes Kamps, "The significance of the Secession of 1834 was that it was a return to the gospel of sovereign grace" (238). Indeed, in a time when the Canons of Dort were forgotten or ignored, the Seceders argued passionately for their restoration and the recovery of the biblical doctrines contained therein.

I also appreciated the manner in which Kamps seeks to apply lessons from this history to the present day. This might disappoint the reader looking for a "scholarly" approach to de Cock and the Secession of 1834. While his work will be of benefit to scholars (especially the many footnotes and the primary sources he translates), Kamps is not writing for them. Instead, he's writing for ordinary Reformed believers, helping them to understand what the LORD did in their history and what can be gleaned from it for the present day. In other words, this is a church history book written from the perspective of someone who has a deep faith investment in the subject matter.

That faith perspective is Reformed, but also at times distinctly Protestant Reformed. Some of his terminology is PR ("church institute," "minor creeds"), but also some of the doctrine. Readers will especially notice that coming through in chapter 8. The author is insistent that all the Fathers of the Secession (including de Cock) held that the covenant is governed by election. The covenant is established unconditionally with the elect and the elect only. Naturally, Kamps draws attention to this as a way of establishing the pedigree of the Protestant Reformed

doctrine of the covenant. Readers should be aware that this view is in parts of chapter 8, though it is not an overarching theme running through the book.

If I might add a small word of criticism, I find that the author occasionally over-stated the current situation. As mentioned, he wants to apply the lessons of 1834 to today, so we need to have a handle on the problems of today. This leads our author to some surprising statements such as, “Today the doctrines of election and the sinner’s depravity are offensive to most people who claim to be Reformed” (232). Later he opines that election and regeneration are “the two most hated doctrines in the Reformed church community” (237). “Reformed” is a slippery adjective these days with many of the so-called New Calvinists laying claim to it. I certainly don’t see

a lot of hatred for these doctrines among them or us; in fact, quite the opposite. That makes me wonder: does Mr. Kamps perhaps mean to say, “the Protestant Reformed formulation” of these doctrines?

1834 is a masterpiece of Reformed church history. Well-written and the product of countless hours of research, it was a delight to read. Even though its author comes from a different ecclesiastical background, we have a shared heritage in the Secession. As the author acknowledges in the preface, both the Protestant Reformed and Canadian Reformed Churches count Hendrik de Cock as one of their spiritual forefathers. We can be grateful that our Protestant Reformed friends have taken up the cause of making sure this valuable piece of our shared heritage is not forgotten. C

