

Clarion

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Philipp Melancthon
1497 - 1560



By J. De Jong



User Friendly Evangelism

New modes of outreach

Bill Hybels grew up in a typical CRC in Kalamazoo, MI in the sixties. He was the son of a successful vegetable dealer, and enjoyed all the luxuries of life that the sixties had to offer: sailing, driving a fancy car, living a good life. But in terms of church, Bill was not happy. Somehow he felt that the regular CRC service was not going anywhere or doing anything. People were there singing hymns and going through responsive readings, but what effect was it having?

Once, being asked, Bill brought a friend to church. He said it was the longest sixty minutes of his life. The whole routine of the service was completely strange to this guest. There was the creed which everyone recited. "The guest," says Bill, "just had to stand there mute." Then came the law. The guest had not done too well on that score, so he did not feel particularly welcome with those words. Then the text for the sermon. The minister announced the passage – a passage from Amos about locusts. The guest left the service quite bewildered, and later said to Bill, "You seem like a normal guy but what you took me to on Sunday was not normal."¹

This was a turning point for Bill. He ended up in a more progressive evangelical church in Park Ridge, IL. The church held to the traditional Biblical doctrines, but was open to new methods and approaches on the music end of things. Bill, a sixties kid, was somewhat of a "hack guitarist," and so, through a friend, he helped form a Christian rock and roll group called *The Son Company*. The Sunday night service at South Park church in Park Ridge was more like a rock concert than a church service. But the place was full of young people. He started with getting them involved in Bible studies and organizing activities for them. From then on, through a long process of growth with many pains and trials, the Willow Creek Community church was born. Willow Creek, besides being a mega-church outside the urban sprawl, has also branched out into a multi-million dollar world wide organization promoting a new form of user-friendly evangelism as the way to church growth. This is a church for the unchurched, a new no-pressure, high-on-emotion form of worship and praise. The key is not words, but music.

Seeker services

The catch word of Willow Creek is "seeker services." Bill's big discovery was that to reach out to the unchurched, you need to disband with just about everything that reminds one of church: no sermon, no law, no creed. To really be a church you must reach out to the unchurched, and gear your services to street kids. Willow Creek Community Church looks more like a classy hotel and golf course than it does a church. It is a huge recreational-like complex in South Bar-

rington, IL, close to the Chicago heartland. The services are slick, the presentations use the latest equipment and high powered media, and the church attracts about two thousand people every Sunday. Bill insists that the services are not regular church services. He calls them evangelistic services. There is very little in terms of traditional elements in the service. There is a "sermon" by Bill, but most of the attention is given to creating a positive image and a warm atmosphere for newcomers. Every part of the service is couched in positive tones, and God is said to be present everywhere, and in all the happenings of the day. The music is contemporary. There are light shows, movies, drama and pictures. Bill promotes a multi-faceted ministry. Men and women together minister to the thousands. There are no elders and no deacons. There is a collection, but newcomers are encouraged to skip that part of the service. The whole service is like one grand show for them. These are "seeker services."

The Willow Creek ministry puts most of its emphasis on "seeker services." There has been a phenomenal growth rate in attendance through the years, and presently there are up to 15,000 people attending the services on any given Sunday. Regular or "believer services" are still held, and Hybels even insists they are necessary, too. But the "seeker-services" should be held on Sundays, since that is when the unchurched have the time and interest to attend a religious gathering. So regular "believer services" are held some time during the week.

In the news

Willow Creek has been the subject of a good deal of discussion in America, and also among our sister churches in Holland. A number of ministers of our sister churches in Holland have decided to come over and have a look at what Hybels is doing in order to learn how to make churches grow. The techniques Hybels uses appear to work, and the church attracts people. Once Willow Creek became a success story, NBC came for an interview, as well as other major media. Hybels, the CRC country boy, has become a media star. The traditional CRC worship service is history for Hybels. He has joined the ranks of the Schullers, Roberts and Billy Grahams of the nation, and he is making a media impact. But where is this going?

A response

In some respects the Willow Creek movement is another typical phenomenon of contemporary American Protestantism. America is a showboat nation and it loves a slick performance where everything is oriented to good feelings and happy success stories. This is what Hybels is good at. He is a superb communicator and an excellent image projector. The services really are superwows for kids. But

Hybels has taken popular religion a step farther than many of his counterparts. He has marginalized the gospel in religion, and especially marginalized the demands of the gospel. There's no room for a Jeremiah or an Amos in this church. Everything is upbeat and God is only love.

Hybels' new movement is born out of a *reaction* to the traditional Reformed worship service. As in many cases, this is a son's *negative* reaction to the religion of his fathers. This is religion on a wave, with little or no link to the traditional forms of the gospel. The services are barely Christian, much less Reformed. The only visible trace of a gospel message is an occasional reference to the Bible. Hybels' key is: does it work? Does it bring the people in to church? Does it create an effect? There is less attention given to holding people, and even less attention to holding them to the truth. Ultimately, this a form of outreach that generates money and wealth, but no *lasting* church growth.

Hybels claims that this does not hollow out the gospel message. He wants to remain doctrinally sound but with his dualistic approach that has become entirely impossible. For, as Paul says the form of the message and its content belong together (1 Corinthians 2:13). The method of worship is determined by its contents. If one then brings in the style of the world (rock and roll) and attempts to weld this style to the gospel message, one ends up losing both the proper form and content of true Christian worship.

Our services

At the same time, one can easily imagine the reaction of Bill's friend so many years ago, even to one of our services today. Our services today are not that much different from the traditional CRC services of the sixties. The Willow Creek phenomenon does raise the question for us whether our guests are being introduced to church life as well as could be expected among Christians. A related question is whether we are concentrating on being a welcoming church.

Precisely if we maintain the traditional liturgical routines and customs, including the reading of the law and the creed, there should be a welcoming attitude to strangers and guests. In 1 Cor. 14:24, Paul is concerned about the impact of the service on the outsider, and he intimates that the outsider should be able to follow what is going on. The church should seek to make it possible for the outsider to express his accep-

tance of the gospel message, and so participate fully in the service. Paul also made it his aim to adapt to circumstances, and to proclaim the message in a way that hearers would be unfettered. He says, "To the Jews I became a Jew, in order to win the Jews; to those outside the law I became as one outside the law . . . I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some (1 Corinthians 9:20ff)." And he also encourages a walk of life that commends the respect and acknowledgement of outsiders (1 Thess. 4:12).


This is not, however, the same as compromise. Jesus said that you shall not throw your pearls before swine (Mt. 7:6). There is no room for compromising the gospel in its administration nor in its standards. The content of the message has its own distinct form of presentation. A rock music Christianity is, at the limit, no Christianity at all. A marginalized gospel, and a hollow or shallow message, leaves everyone with an empty space in their lives. They may feel good for the moment but they receive no lasting food. You create a happening, but there is no evangel, no good news, that meets the need of the man of the age.

The fine line

Also in our services we deal not strictly with ourselves. The services are public and therefore open to the world. We should avoid a clique mentality in church! We must also flee the ghetto mentality. We have a rich gospel for all the world! Let's try to foster a welcoming spirit, also in cases where a young man or woman brings a friend to church. Such courtships should be discouraged at the outset, but if they lead to a situation where the unchurched develops an interest in the gospel message for its own sake, then we need to cultivate an open and welcoming attitude.

God uses us, even with many sins and weaknesses, to bring others to His gospel. We need to hold fast to the truth, but as we hold it fast, we must willingly reach out to others – especially those who visit our services.

A welcoming church is a church with a good name! It is a means through which, holding fast the gospel, we may show the love of Christ to a world lost in sin.

Lynne and Bill Hybels, *Rediscovering Church. The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 31-32. 



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By D.G.J. Agema

Be careful to obey all His law

²⁰ In the future, when your son asks you, "What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?" ²¹ tell him: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. ²² Before our eyes the LORD sent miraculous signs and wonders – great and terrible – upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. ²³ But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land that he promised on oath to our forefathers. ²⁴ The LORD commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the LORD our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today. ²⁵ And if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness."

Deuteronomy 6:20-25

Carefulness is an important life skill. This is why we teach it to our children. How many a parent says to his child, "Now be careful." We do this because carelessness can lead to terrible mistakes or even deadly accidents. We have to learn to be careful. The Bible also uses the word "careful." You find it e.g. in Deut. 6:25 – "And if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God. . . ." In fact, the word "careful" is used most often in the book Deuteronomy. It is not out of place to say that this book teaches God's people carefulness.

In Deuteronomy Moses is about to leave Israel. Soon the LORD will call him home. His task is over. Before he goes he wants to remind Israel of its riches and its calling. He reminds the people of what the LORD has done for them and what He expects from them. It is a farewell sermon of a servant who has worked many years with this people. The result is a wonderful blend of com-

mandments and reasons why. These two are woven through each other.

When you read this book you will notice that the LORD had given many commandments to His people. Moses even uses several terms to refer to them: statutes, laws, ordinances. These commandments deal with every aspect of life: warfare, business, crops in the fields, fences on the roof of your house, care for animals, etc. These laws also applied to the children. They too are part of Israel. In the beginning of this chapter we find the well-known words that the father shall teach his children these commandments.

But what does a child do when he hears about all these laws? He asks the simple question "Why?" There are so many. Why? This is a very normal question that many children ask, that teenagers struggle with and that as adults we can have a hard time to answer. Why so many commandments?

Why can it not be done differently. Why so strict?

The LORD gives the parents the task to answer this question. The LORD does not brush the question aside. No, He says, "When your child asks that question, then answer your child." The answer is, because we were slaves in Egypt and the LORD took us out of Egypt. A remarkable answer. Imagine a child asking a father, "Why do we have to serve the Lord so strictly?" And the father answers, "Because in the Reformation we were set free by the LORD." The child would say, "So what? I wasn't there. What do I have to do with what happened then?" Everything. If God would not have done that, where would you be today?

Note in this connection the difference between the question and the answer. The child asks, "Why has the LORD commanded you all these commandments?" He says "You," as if it

What's inside?

Later this month we will celebrate Reformation day. We recall with profound thankfulness that the Lord led the church out of the darkness of ignorance back to the light of his word. This issue contains several articles on the theme of the Reformation. Dr. Riemer Faber introduces Philipp Melanchthon. This reformer is not as well known among us as John Calvin, John Knox or Martin Luther, so, read and learn! The article is commemorative as this year is the 500th anniversary of Melanchthon's birth.

The Rev. James Slaa challenges us in his article to think about whether we would be as willing as many who went before us to suffer and even to die for the sake of the truth. Guido de Brès wrote in the introduction to the Belgic Confession that he and his fellow Reformed confessors would "offer their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their whole bodies to fire," rather than deny the truth expressed in the confession. Would we have such courage?

In the editorial, Dr. De Jong writes about the Willow Creek phenomenon. Willow Creek was begun by Bill Hybels, a man who consciously abandoned the Reformed style of corporate worship. According to Hybels, the Reformed worship service is nothing less than baffling to a visitor. And so Hybels developed "seeker services" – services which cater to the seeking visitor. De Jong says about Willow Creek: "The services are barely Christian, much less Reformed." However, De Jong also uses the moment to ask some questions about our response to the visitor who attends our worship services. Read and think about it!

GvP

does not involve the child. But the answer starts with "We." This instruction about the laws and commandments of the LORD begins with showing the children how they are involved in the work of God. "When the LORD led Israel out of Egypt, He thought about you too. When He sent His Son into this world He thought about you. When the Lord gave men like Luther and Calvin, He also thought of you, my child."


These laws and commandments and the call to carefully obey them must be understood in the light of this work of God through the generations. If you have invested much into a project you want it to go the right way. The LORD has invested much in His church. He does not want it to come to a stop. He

wants His work to continue. Therefore He gave these laws, and calls His people to be careful to do them.

To be careful means that you give it all your attention, you do it thoroughly and painstakingly. The opposite is carelessness. To be careful in your writing means that you put great effort into it. To be careless means you quickly scribble something down, you don't look it over.

This is what the LORD asks of his people in the way they live before Him, that they are careful, that they cross the T's and dot the I's. It means that we do our utmost to obey the will of the LORD. We show carefulness in how we live with the Lord, in our personal devotions, and in our family devotions. We show carefulness in our entertain-

ment, in our appearance. We are careful to be a living member of the church. We need to be reminded of it constantly. Carefulness means to bring our lives in submission to the word of God.

This is an important instruction. Carelessness is the attitude of deformation. It says: "Don't be so precise;" or, "It isn't as simple and easy as our fathers said." The LORD calls for carefulness in how we live before Him, in how we teach our children to live before Him. It concerns the future of the church. Verse 24 says in keeping these laws carefully there is life. Carelessness leads to destruction, but carefulness builds up. The LORD blesses His children that carefully live from Him, in Him and to Him. 

Philipp Melanchthon 1497-1560

By R. Faber

Five hundred years ago, on February 16, 1497, Barbara Schwarzerd, daughter of the mayor of Bretten, and her husband George received a baby son. They named him Philipp, in honour of the Elector to whom George was a respected armour-maker. Unfortunately the father died in 1508 after a long illness, and Philipp was placed under the tutelage of Barbara's uncle, the famous humanist Johann Reuchlin. Encouraging the youth's studies by promising him an enviable collection of books and manuscripts, Reuchlin was pleased when Philipp excelled at the Latin school in Pforzheim.

In 1509 Philipp enrolled in the University of Heidelberg, where he earned the B.A. degree two years later. Moving to Tübingen, a university known for its "modern way" of education, young Schwarzerd soon distinguished himself as student of Greek and Latin. In the same year Reuchlin bestowed on Philipp the name "Melanchthon," Greek for "black earth," a fanciful translation of Schwarz-erd. It was not uncommon for those promoting the rebirth of antiquity to alter their names to ancient equivalents: Zacharias Baer became "Ursinus," and Luther for a time "Eleutherius." As a student Philipp was particularly interested in the literature of Greece and Rome, the philosophy of Aristotle, and astrology. Each of these

humanist subjects shaped the thinking of the later reformer. When he finished formal studies in 1514, Melanchthon worked mainly as a corrector of texts at the press of Thomas Anshelm, and published his first scholarly writings.

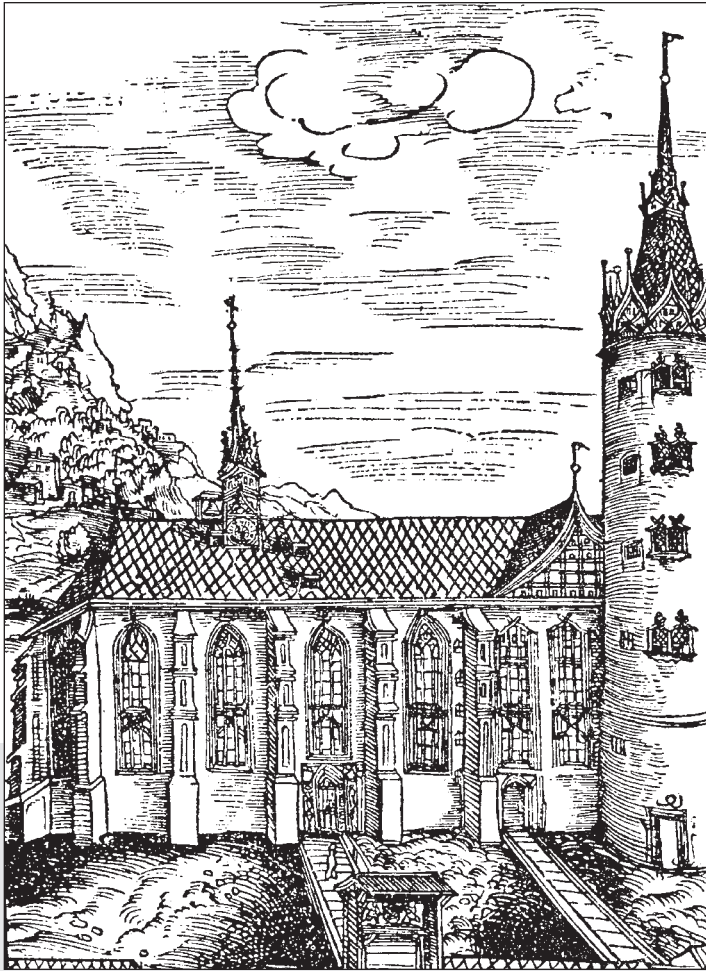
In 1518 Melanchthon was appointed professor of Greek at the University of Wittenberg, where he gave an inaugural lecture entitled "On the Improvement of Studies." In it the "little Greek" promoted the reform of the curriculum already under way at Wittenberg by advocating a return to the classics and an understanding of the languages of the Bible. In these early years at Wittenberg Melanchthon published textbooks on Greek grammar, rhetoric, and dialectics – subjects crucial to the reform of higher education and the methods of the Renaissance. In addition to teaching Greek and New Testament, Melanchthon substituted for the professor of Hebrew and lectured on Psalms. Melanchthon was a popular teacher; hundreds of students attended his lectures. In later years one of them was Ursinus, future author of the *Heidelberg Catechism*.

Endowed with a strong intellect and untiring energy, Melanchthon soon won the admiration of his colleagues. Especially Luther realized Melanchthon's worth: the knowledge of antiquity and its languages, the high academic stan-

dards, and the precise formulation of theological concepts were crucial to Wittenberg's success. Moreover, Luther appreciated Melanchthon's moderating influence upon his own forceful leadership. They became collaborators and close friends. Their homes stood on adjacent properties; the pathway between them was well travelled.

One year after his appointment, Melanchthon came to Luther's aid at the Leipzig debate with the Romanist Johann Eck. Besides arguing over the topics of penance, free will, and sovereign grace, the two clashed over papal authority. Luther made every effort to demonstrate that the Lord Jesus Christ, and not the pope, is the head of the church. Officially an observer, Melanchthon sat near his friend and whispered proof texts and other supporting evidence whenever Luther needed to cite Scripture or the church fathers. Eck, who was losing the debate, became so annoyed that he ordered Melanchthon to be quiet. At Leipzig it had become clear to all that Melanchthon was throwing his lot in with the Reformation. The humanist Reuchlin retracted the offer of his library, and ordered Melanchthon never to contact him again.

On November 26, 1520, a Latin poem posted for the students announced that lectures were cancelled: Melanchthon would marry Katharina



The castle church in Wittenberg

Krapp, daughter of the mayor of Wittenberg. Katharina and Philipp received four children. Life in the Melanchthon home was good: the children's catechism written by Philipp for use in family devotions, the in-house lessons from the gifted teacher, and the hospitality afforded to students and fellow scholars made this a special home. But the family did not always enjoy perfect bliss. The second child, George, died in infancy, while Philipp jr. required extra care. The oldest daughter Anna was not happily married, and Magdalen would later die of grief as her husband, the physician Caspar Peucer, languished in jail for his reformed convictions. Often and for long periods of time Melanchthon was called away from Wittenberg. He attended colloquies, visited churches and schools, and advised political dignitaries. When Katharina died in 1557 Melanchthon was attending the Diet of Worms; he returned many days later.

During Luther's enforced stay at Wartburg Castle (1521-22) Melanchthon took over the government of the University, also teaching Luther's courses in

theology in addition to his own. At this time he published what is perhaps his most important work, the *Loci Communes*. Literally meaning "common places," the first edition of the *Loci* consisted of a summary of Christian doctrine according to the Biblical texts. Too flatteringly described as the first systematic dogmatics of the Reformed faith, this book sets out in precise language the Reformed teaching on important doctrines such as sin, law, grace, and justification through faith. Using a technique already employed by Erasmus and other humanists, Melanchthon collected the Bible passages that may be used as proof texts for Biblical doctrine. The work was greatly appreciated and enjoyed numerous editions and revisions, eventually becoming a standard textbook for students of theology. It also influenced later Reformed writings, most notably Calvin's *Institutes*.

Never desiring leadership of the Reformation in Wittenberg, Melanchthon was unable to control radical reformers during Luther's absence. The case of the "Zwickau prophets" is revealing.

Himself a remarkably superstitious person and perhaps therefore open to the notion of extra-Scriptural revelation, Melanchthon found it difficult to chastise the three men who came from Zwickau claiming to receive direct messages from God. Not needing the Bible, these men considered themselves "prophets" and advocated radical behaviour in light of what they saw as the imminent end of the world. The learned but impressionable Johann Carlstadt was convinced. The radicals became more bold, suggesting that students leave the university altogether. Riots threatened. Melanchthon was at a loss, and wrote to Luther: "the dike has burst, I cannot hold back the waters." Matters would have deteriorated further if the strong-willed Luther had not come out of hiding to set matters straight.

Luther's desire for the reform of churches in Germany was put into effect by Melanchthon, an able organiser and advisor. Composing the *Church Visitation Articles* for the purpose of assisting local congregations in promoting change, Melanchthon toured throughout Thuringia as he inspected the state of affairs. He and Luther were not impressed with what they found. Few clergy knew the basis, nature and means of reformation, and it became clear that improvements would not come easily. The *Articles* concisely express the basics of the Reformed faith and provide guidelines for their implementation. It is said that they served to spread ecclesiastical change throughout Germany.

Melanchthon was convinced that change was required in the schools as well as churches. To that end he produced a pamphlet on the establishment of Reformed schools and on proper curriculum, and attached it to the *Visitation Articles*. The constitution for the school at Nuremberg – where Melanchthon's student and first biographer Camerarius was appointed principal – became the prototype for numerous other institutions. Melanchthon helped to set up no less than 56 institutions of elementary education throughout the land, and is regarded as the founder of the modern public school system in Germany. He also rewrote the constitutions of several universities, including those of Leipzig and Wittenberg. As a consequence of his commitment to Reformed education and higher learning, Melanchthon received the honorific title "Praeceptor Germaniae" – "teacher of Germany."

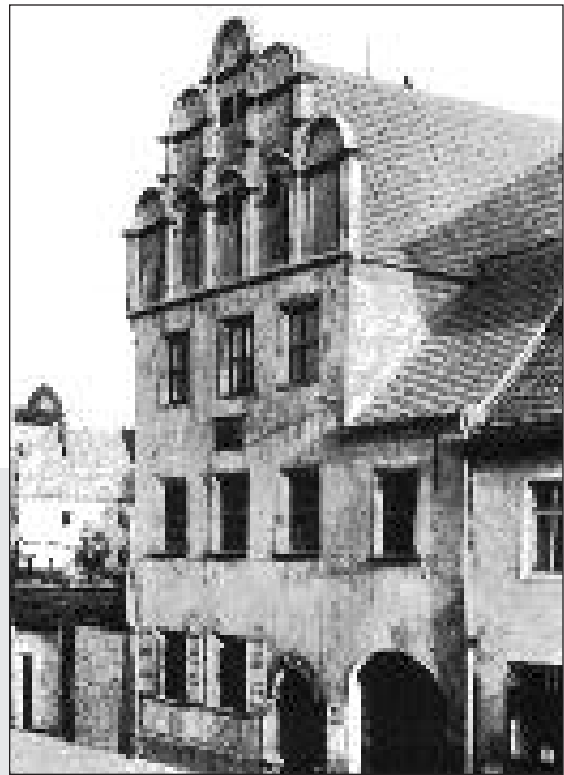
Melanchthon's skill in composition, his knowledge of the Christian faith, and his desire for unity made him the ideal spokesman of the Reformation. He attended numerous political and

religious councils, and he is the author of several significant Reformed documents. At the Colloquy of Marburg in 1529, Melanchthon promoted Luther's understanding of the Lord's Supper while debating with Huldrych Zwingli. The Zwinglians maintained the "sacramentarian" position which stresses the commemorative function of the supper. With one hopeful eye on the Romanists and their insistence on the sacrificial role of the Eucharist, Melanchthon could not find common ground with Zwingli. Partly responsible for the failure of the colloquy, Melanchthon at least helped to clarify the different positions within the Reformed circle.

As author of the *Augsburg Confession* of 1530, Melanchthon summarized the Wittenberg position before emperor Charles V. While the Romanists had prejudiced the Diet with a declaration of 404 articles against the reformers, the latter decided that a complete confessional statement was in order. The document would also serve to distinguish the reformers from the Anabaptists and others with whom they were frequently identified. Relying on the earlier *Marburg Confession* and the *Visitation Articles*, Melanchthon composed it in the absence of the banned Luther. While Luther applauded the efforts, he criticized Melanchthon for glossing over key points of difference, including the Romanist teachings on purgatory, veneration of saints, and the authority of the pope. Luther rightly was concerned that the irenic and conciliatory Melanchthon would yield too much, but Philipp felt sharply that failure to find concord with Rome might result in open persecution. The document later became part of Lutheran teaching, and it was taken up in the official *Book of Concord* of 1577.

The revised ("variata") edition of the *Augsburg Confession* reveals an important change in Melanchthon's thinking about the physical presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Influenced by Martin Bucer and increasingly drawn to Calvin's "spiritualist" interpretation, Melanchthon withdrew from the confession the phrase that the body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ are truly *present* in the bread and wine; instead he wrote that the body and blood of Christ are truly *offered* with the elements. Similar changes may be found in the later editions of the *Loci*. Luther himself did not object openly; indeed, he continued to promote Philipp's theological handbook. But whereas the friendship between Luther and Melanchthon was not broken by this doctrinal difference, such developments would later cause friction between the

Melanchthon's house in Wittenberg




"original," so-called "Gnesio-Lutherans," and Philipp.

Martin Luther died in 1546; in his Funeral Oration, Melanchthon notes that the Lord had taken to Himself a leader in His church. Through him, God had placed His Word on a lampstand, cleansed the church in her worship, and built up the flock. Realizing the loss that came with the death of Luther, Melanchthon assumed control of Wittenberg University and the Reformed cause there. However, neither Melanchthon's character nor the developments within Protestantism was such that a unified front could be reached or maintained. Moreover, wars and rumours of wars affected the political and theological discussions. As a result, the last years of Melanchthon's life were often far from pleasant, as he struggled to maintain a middle road between ultra-Lutherans and more moderate Protestant groups.

The inability of the Protestants in Germany, France and Switzerland to co-operate resulted in numerous attacks on Melanchthon and the more flexible reformers. Precisely because he was spokesman for the Reformation and a contributor to its confessions, Melanchthon became the focus of attacks on several issues. Accused by the Gnesio-Lutherans of being too conciliatory towards Romanists, Zwinglians and Calvinists alike, Melanchthon bore with patience the insults of those who could not understand or appreci-

ate the mediating position of the "Philippists." One of his own students, Flacius Illyricus, became a bitter enemy. Melanchthon's writings on the doctrines of the human will, the Lord's supper, and the non-essentials of the faith, were openly attacked. Philipp felt embattled as the union he desired for the German, French and Swiss Protestants became increasingly remote.

Nevertheless, Melanchthon continued to guide the University of Wittenberg, and in the final decade of life contributed in the numerous areas of his expertise. He advised princes and councillors, provided guidance for Reformed churches and schools, and published scholarly works. Among the ecclesiastical documents he penned at this time are the important *Saxon Confession* for the Council of Trent (1551) and the widely used *Examination of Preachers before Ordination*. But it became clear to Melanchthon that Lutherans, Zwinglians, and the growing Calvinists – let alone the Romanists – would not join during his lifetime, if ever. Worn out by constant travel, debate, and the tensions of the 1550s, Melanchthon became ill, and died on April 19, 1560. In one of his last, private writings the reformer reflects upon the benefits of entering God's glory. One of them, he notes to himself, is that "you will be free from the ragings of theologians." He was laid to rest beside Luther in the castle church of Wittenberg. 

Truth to Die For

By J.G. Slaa

Martin Luther – Worms – 1521

The year is 1513 and a restless Martin Luther is still trying to find peace in his soul. For many years now, he has *worked hard* for his salvation. But no matter how hard he has tried, his works have always been lacking. Opening his Bible, he reads the first chapter of Romans. Now the Holy Spirit enlightens his mind to understand *the truth*. In v. 17 he reads: “The just shall live by faith.” He understands that we are saved, not through *self-righteousness*, but through an *imputed* righteousness! The righteousness of *Christ* becomes our own through faith *alone*! Neither we ourselves nor the Church are Saviour, but Jesus Christ is our Saviour! When Luther further studies the Word of God in this light, and with conviction imparts this knowledge to his students and writes about them, he comes into conflict with the Roman Church. He nails 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church, condemning the Church’s practice of selling indulgences by which the souls of sinners were accounted righteous before God on the basis of the Pope’s forgiveness. As a consequence, Luther’s life becomes hard. When he refuses to recant he is deposed and excommunicated. He is asked to defend himself before the emperor at the Diet of Worms. But he will not retract any of his words or writings in which he condemns the heresies of the Roman Church! He says: “Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason . . . my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. Amen.” Luther’s friends rejoice. The Roman Catholics seethe with rage. Luther’s life is in danger. Many want to kill him. His friends kidnap him and hide him in a far-away castle for a long period of time! All because he had come to know and believe the truth. . . .

The Huguenots – Paris – 1572

It is the night of August 23, 1572, and the streets of Paris are quiet. For some time now, the whole of France has been experiencing a civil war between Roman Catholics and Huguenots (French Protestants). The Roman Catholics have been waging a strong counter-attack in response to the Protestant Reformation. Recently, however, a truce of peace has been drawn up. But will the truce hold? The streets of Paris are quiet. Suddenly, in the darkness of the night, bells begin to ring. It is a signal! Soon, the streets are filled with angry mobs and shouts of violence. A

*“ . . . my conscience
is captive
to the Word
of God.”*

*(Martin Luther,
1521)*

carefully thought-out plan is unfolding. The doors of Huguenot homes are kicked in, their windows are smashed, and the occupants of those homes are pulled from their beds and hacked down in the streets! On this terrible night, blood flows freely through the gutters. It will become known as the massacre of St. Bartholomew’s Day, when Catherine de Medici, a sister of the king, orchestrated a gruesome massacre of the French Protestants. All because these people have come to know and believe the truth of the Scriptures. . . .

Hendrick de Cock – Ulrum – 1834

Reverend de Cock, the former minister of Ulrum, in Holland, is sitting in a cold and gloomy cell on a winter day of 1834. He is not the only one suffering; also his wife and children have been thrown out of the manse into the snowy streets. Why is such hatred being meted out against this minister’s family? Reverend de Cock had always preached that there is some good in us. However, through a conversation with one of the members of his congregation, and his subsequent study of the writings of John Calvin, the Holy Spirit had worked in him to see the light of Scripture. He finally knows that there is no good in us at all! We are totally incapable of doing any good! From that moment on Rev. de Cock has made sure that his preaching reflected this truth! The result is that he has been unjustly suspended from his office, then deposed, and finally, forced to leave the Dutch State Church altogether. According to his colleagues, he is a hindrance to the Church. He must be kept quiet. So he and his family are suffering terribly. All because they have come to know and believe the truth of the Scriptures. . . .

Reformation Day – Canada – 1997

On Reformation Day we focus on the work of our Lord Jesus Christ who gathers His Church throughout all times and places. We remember in thankfulness how the Lord has guided His Church, continually bringing her back to the truth. We, in our sin, often allow heresy to enter the Church. But God, in His grace, is there to bring us back. God is there to lead us in the truth: that we are saved through faith alone in Jesus Christ. There is nothing in man, nor is there any power in the Church, to bring salvation. Only God administers grace. Reformation Day, therefore, ought to be a cherished day in the homes of Reformed people. May

the customs of this world not take our attention away from this gracious work of Jesus Christ.

Having said this, however, may the above stories (and many more!) illustrate that our knowledge of the truth of the Scriptures always involves a cost. That is because this world in its present form wants nothing to do with the truth. Satan always does his utmost to destroy the truth, attacking it whenever and wherever God graciously makes it known. Throughout history, therefore, the Church has suffered. The doctrine of *spiritual* death – the death of the old nature and the coming to life of the new by grace alone through faith – often leads to *physical* struggle and death. Also the Scriptures teach this. The apostle Peter writes: “Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world” (1 Pet. 5:8). The devil uses those who are blind to the truth to persecute those who see it.

Suffering and joy

For what purpose does God allow this? Peter, in the same passage mentioned, indicates the purpose: “And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore, establish, and strengthen you. To Him be the dominion for ever and ever. Amen.” Peter shows that God is always in control: “To Him be the dominion. . . .” Nevertheless, He allows Satan to prowl and to attack the Church. In this way the true believers are *restored*, (that is: reformed), *established*, and *strengthened*. Suffering makes us stronger, as we turn completely to God and seek His grace alone. Suffering helps us to focus on what counts: eternal life. So the apostle Paul was “strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). In fact, we may consider that suffering is a sign of our faith. “If you are reproached for the name of Christ,” writes Peter, “you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (1 Pet. 4:14).

In concert with this principle of suffering, is the call to Christians that they also *rejoice* in sufferings. Hebrews

10:34 speaks about having “joyfully accepted the plundering of your property.” And who doesn’t know the words of James, “Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (Jas. 1:2) Peter commands, “But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed.” (1 Pet. 4:13)

No fear!

Our strength to persevere in this consequence of knowing the truth, is to know that Jesus Christ has gone before us and fulfilled this ministry in perfection *for us*. The very truth of the gospel itself, that Jesus Christ is our complete Saviour and has died for all our sins, is the basis for our own path of suffering. To know the truth of the gospel is to know the truth of the way of

*“ . . . do not
fear those
who kill
the body.”*

(Luke 12:4)

Christ. We must follow that way. We can, because Christ has gone before us. We are able to suffer in this life, because, as the author to the Hebrews adds to the text already mentioned: “. . . you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.” The gospel of salvation, the gospel of free grace, which is at the heart of the reforming process of the Church throughout the ages, teaches us to focus on the life which is better, the life which is to come. Therefore we will not fear in times of persecution. As Jesus himself has said: “I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear

him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes I tell you, fear him!” (Luke 12:4-5).

You may ask: but do we suffer? Do we suffer like Christ, or like Luther or Rev. de Cock or the Huguenots? The experiences of the early Christians, of the believers in the Reformation, are not our experiences today, are they? It is true, we do not know what it is to face wild animals in the arena, or to witness burnings at the stake, or to experience torture chambers. Let it be said, however, that *there are many today* who do suffer in this way because of their faith. Think only of the Christians in China, in Russia, in the Middle East, in Africa, and Irian Jaya. Think of the persecution only 50 years ago when spies sat in the pews during worship services. Let no one say anything against the fatherland! Let no one be found harbouring Jews in their homes! Indeed, how many people died in the concentration camps or in the gas chambers or before firing squads because Christian principles were espoused in the pulpits or in the homes? Let us not forget that this was not very long ago!

Truth in a hostile world

We must be aware that for a true Christian, times of suffering are always near. When we are faced with the teachings of the wicked one, and we choose to deny these teachings and believe and make known the truth, this will result in suffering. Today that suffering might be segregation, anger and loss of benefits. Tomorrow it could be hatred, vandalism, imprisonment, repossession and law suits. The day after it could be something far more ferocious. The history of this world bears a sad testimony to the treatment of Christians who know and confess the truth. Over the centuries, man has not changed. The devil has not reformed his plans. As long as the Church boldly proclaims the truth to a hostile world, persecution of the Church will not be far away. So also the Scriptures teach us that in these last days there will be persecution. As Christians, we must acknowledge that also today many situations can arise in which we must forfeit certain rights and benefits as we stand for the truth.

A larger question is: how is our faith? Are we reformed? Are we spiritually ready and prepared to make the stand of faith in all circumstances? Life is pretty good today. Never before in

the history of mankind have we enjoyed such affluence and prosperity! But has riches, wealth and freedom been good for us? Have we used these blessings properly? Or are we in danger of becoming lax? Are these blessings becoming a snare to us?

Truth in an affluent world

Historically, we see that *hard times* have always been better for the Church! Struggle, suffering, persecution has always served to strengthen God's people. Perseverance has brought endurance, faith and hope. Think of Martin Luther, the Huguenots, Rev. de Cock. In each case the persecutors intended to terrify the Christians into silence. The leaders believed a public spectacle would mute the Christians. But the exact opposite occurred! The people saw the injustice and were more than ever confirmed in their faith. This is the Lord's way. The Lord uses persecution to strengthen and build His Church. The persecutors are blind to this and do not realize that their persecution helps the cause of the Church. The strength of reformation is in the weakness of the flesh. Man can kill the body but he cannot harm the soul! On the other hand, prosperity does not have such a good track record. Freedom, wealth, and affluence usually has had a negative impact on the Church. It becomes easier to lose our focus. We tend to forget why we are on this earth. Therefore, history shows that we are better off when we struggle than when everything is easy. It is true for the Church. It is true for our families. It is true for our individual lives. When we suffer, we learn to trust in the Lord. When we have it easy, we have a tendency to forget Him. Let us truly ponder all principles of the Reformation! Let us be careful never to lose our focus on the truth!

On Reformation Day it is good to ponder all these things. Through the grace of God, we have been enlightened with the truth. God has wondrously illumined men through the ages and this heritage has been passed on to us. Many have risked their lives for our benefit. They suffered. They joyfully accepted the plundering of their property. Are we also willing to accept the same, even to die, for the truth?

Rev. James Slaa is minister of the Canadian Reformed Church in Elora, ON.



"Ein' feste Burg is unser Gott."

by Dr. Martin Luther, 1483-1546

*Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott,
Ein gute Wehr und Waffen;
Er hilft uns frei aus aller Not,
Die uns jetzt hat betroffen.
Der alt' boese Feind,
Mit Ernst er's jetzt meint,
Gross' Macht und viel List
Sein' grausam' Ruestung ist,
Auf Erd' ist nicht seingleichen.*

*Mit unsrer Macht is nichts getan,
Wir sind gar bald verloren;
Es steit' fuer uns der rechte Mann,
Den Gott hat selbst erkoren.
Fragst du, wer der ist?
Er heisst Jesu Christ,
Der Herr Zebaoth,
Und ist kein andrer Gott,
Das Feld muss er behalten.*

*Und wenn die Welt voll Teufel waer'
Und wollt' uns gar verschlingen,
So fuerchten wir uns nicht so sehr,
Es soll uns doch gelingen.
Der Fuerst dieser Welt,
Wie sau'r er sich stellt,
Tut er uns doch nicht,
Das macht, er ist gericht't,
Ein Woertlein kann ihn faellen.*

*Das Wort sie sollen lassen stahn
Und kein'n Dank dazu haben;
Er ist bei uns wohl auf dem Plan
Mit seinem Geist und Gaben.
Nehmen sie den Leib,
Gut, Ehr', Kind und Weib:
Lass fahren dahin,
Sie haben's kein'n Gewinn,
Das Reich muss uns doch bleiben.*

The Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal
(St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1942). pp. 192



Recent Ecclesiastical Assemblies

The summer months are the time in which many Presbyterian churches hold their annual assemblies or synods. It may be of interest to our readers to review some of the more pertinent decisions these church bodies made last summer. We will concentrate on those decisions which impact directly or indirectly on our own situation.

The CRCNA

The CRCNA held what was termed one of its shortest synods on record; it began on Monday June 16, and ended Friday at noon.

Synod dealt with a proposal to allow classes to form along the lines of theological agreement, rather than stick to strict geographical areas. The proposal envisioned four classes split along theological lines. But the synod turned down the proposal, fearing that it would further polarize the church. A key argument, as reported in the *Banner*, was that "the CRC needs more movement to the center." Indeed, a proposal to allow classes to align themselves on theological grounds can only produce a modality church. You live in modalities under one umbrella, but you can attend the church of the colour of your choice.

Perhaps being spurred on in part by the message of chairman, Rev. Michael De Vries ("God is a go-ahead God . . . we must run like fury to try and catch up"), the Synod pressed ahead on the women in office issue. Two overtures appealing the church's stand were turned down. Meanwhile, synod dealt with church bodies breaking ecclesiastical ties with the CRC because of this stand.

In another development, synod decided to adopt a new model of property ownership and incorporation whereby the rights of ownership of local properties would belong to the denomination. The articles propose a denominational corporation and, according to the *Christian Observer*, state that "this corporation shall have exclusive control over all of its temporalities, nor shall the exercise of its property rights through the lawful decisions of its councils and/or corporation be subject to revision by the classis of which this church is a member or the

Synod of the CRCNA." As one can readily see, this is an attempt to block the drain of local churches with their properties from the federation. At the same time, it represents a step further in the direction of anti-Doleantie church polity. That which Kuyper and Rutgers fought for in the late nineteenth century, which also became a part of the later heritage of the CRC, is here in one blow trampled under foot. A sad development!

The PCA

The Presbyterian Church in America, meeting in Colorado Springs last June, voted to break its ties with the Christian Reformed Church in view of the latter's position on women in office. It was particularly the failure of the CRC to rescind its 1995 decision, allowing the ordination of women, that spawned this decision of the PCA assembly.

Dr. David Engelhard, general secretary of the CRC, was present at the assembly and spoke on behalf of the Christian Reformed Church. According to reports in *The Outlook*, Engelhard was the only fraternal delegate whose speech was received in total silence, with no applause. Engelhard was highly critical of the report of the Interchurch Relations Committee placed before the assembly and maintained that it presented an unfair picture of the CRC. In the discussion that followed, his viewpoint was not considered credible.

However, the PCA did not break the tie entirely. The Interchurch Relations Committee was charged to "initiate discussion with the CRC with a view to issuing a recommendation to the 26th General Assembly concerning the future relationship between the two denominations." Let us hope that the positive step taken in the break with the CRC is not to be undone with a new step that reaches out to the CRC and still ends up accepting them as a fraternal body of churches.

The OPC

The General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church was held in Beaver Falls, PA last June 10, 1997. The Assembly dealt with a report from

its CEIR committee to establish fraternal relations with the Canadian Reformed Churches.

Rev. J. De Gelder represented the Canadian Reformed Churches at the assembly. The OPC paper *New Horizons* reports on this speech, indicating it was well received. The paper also expresses the hope that relations with the Canadian Reformed Churches can come to a "closer unity." It seems as if also among the OPC brothers, there is the feeling that the outstanding matters should be finalized. Rev. Jerome Julien spoke on behalf of the United Reformed Churches. These churches will be considering the possibility of establishing fraternal relations with the OPC in their October synod. Rev. Dean Anderson of Valkenburg, Holland, a graduate of our College, spoke on behalf of the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands (Liberated).

Perhaps the most far reaching decision of the assembly was, like the PCA, the decision to break fraternal ties with the Christian Reformed Church. This brings to an end a 60 year relationship. One can well imagine that this was not an easy decision. The assembly then proceeded to establish "corresponding relations" with the United Reformed Churches.

In the report of the Assembly in the *Clarion* (Vol. 46, no. 17, August 22), Rev. De Gelder and brother G.J. Nordeman mention that the Assembly discussed a proposal from the CEIR to introduce gradations in the kinds of ecclesiastical relations the OPC would maintain with other churches. The report envisions three stages of ecclesiastical relations: ecclesiastical fellowship, corresponding relations and restricted relations. The first relationship involves full correspondence; the second, a relationship which is seen as a stepping stone to full correspondence in the immediate future; and the third, a relationship where, because of considerable differences, true union would be impossible. In the latter relationship contact is still seen as beneficial.

Given our own history and the current situation in the contact between the various Reformed and Presbyterian churches, including our own, this


sort of proposal is one which our churches might consider as well. Already in 1963 a report of the Inter-church Relations Committee to the CRC Synod noticed considerable differences in polity with the OPC, especially in the area of the authority of major assemblies. The differences here concern the binding character of statements that, while not contrary to Scripture, do go beyond it. Interestingly enough, the report suggested that the OPC practice might be superior to that of the Reformed on many points of worship and ceremonies.

This is not the place to investigate the 1963 report in detail or to draw conclusions from it; however, it does indicate that there is more to the problem than meets the eye. A unique relation-

ship of "Corresponding Relations" with the OPC might be a better format in which to discuss our differences than a relationship of full correspondence. That we will have a continued relationship with the OPC is clear. The issue at Synod 1998 will be: What form will this relationship take? We can only wish the brothers much wisdom in dealing with this delicate matter.

From the side of the OPC, *New Horizons* makes the following statement: "Our relationship with the Canadian Reformed Churches has taken an important step forward. A statement of agreement for opening the way to ecclesiastical fellowship between the CANREF and the OPC has been adopted. The issues addressed concern the fencing of the Lord's Table and con-

fessional church membership. We expect that the 1998 General Synod of the CANREF will act to establish a bond of ecclesiastical fellowship with the OPC, in which we can continue to discuss our differences and, if God is willing, arrive at a more perfect unity of doctrine, polity and life."

New Horizons also reports on the progress of the talks between the OPC and the RCUS. (The RCUS has the same doctrinal standards as the Canadian Reformed Churches.) These church groups are in dialogue with the goal of eventual union. Two areas of difference that have been discussed were "the length of days of creation" and "the voting of women in congregational meetings." 

When Lost in Fields of Woe

Much has been written about family violence and sexual abuse. Most often this violence is perpetrated against girls and young women by fathers, or husbands, or boy "friends." Often these victims do get married (or remarried) though some never do, unable to fully recover their womanhood nor enjoy, in this life, a fully healed soul or heart. Seldom, however, do we hear from their husbands. This is meant to help break the silence of sorrow that many husbands live with every day.

I wrote these for my lovely wife.

When Lost in Fields of Woe

I looked upon your auburn
Hair and brushed away a tear, that shone
Upon your cheek, lest you would turn
Away to weep alone
Lost in your fields of woe.

The terror of the night struck
Fear, and anguish beat upon your breast
And tore your heart. A sword has stuck
Deeply and stole the best
Years. Your tears have softly flowed
O'er gladdened hopes and metal cladden dreams
Yet violence shatters nights which glowed
As fired pottery gleams.

You sob, exhausted, fearful now.
Because of panic, sweat breaks out upon your
Lip and freely flows from temple brow.
Alarméd to the core,
You lie awake too frightened,
Scarred, to cry aloud or speak or groan.
Besieged with fear, it grips and tightens
Steel bands against your moan.

I hold you close within my arms.
Wet tear stained cheeks upon a quiet
Heart and safe. So far from harm
You sleep now free from fright.
When will the nightmares end? Or
Will they haunt the dark to heaven's gate?
We live our days with joy and pour
Our hearts against the hate.

Caressing, stroking auburn
Hair, my fingers lightly touch your cheek;
My face now wet. And so we yearn
For Grace. For we are weak
When lost in fields of woe.

Against the Fall of Night

By grace you stand against the fall of night,
Which comes when dreams of vi'lence seize your mind.
Yet only by the love of God you might.

I hold you close within my arms and bite
Upon my lips. And as we weep we find
By grace you stand against the fall of night.

I look into your eyes, and see your fright,
Which plead to purge the memories unkind.
Yet only by the love of God you might.

You hope for dawn of day and sun so bright
To chase these dreams of darkness! God assigned
By grace we'll stand against the fall of night.

You hope for fading memory from height
Of fears which on your furrowed brow are lined.
Yet only by the grace of God you might.

May dreams be freed, soar heavens like a kite.
This truth upon our hearts we firmly bind:
In love, we stand against the fall of night,
Yet only by the grace of Christ we might.

(The name of the author has been withheld upon request to preserve the private sorrow of his family.)

Taber bids farewell to van Poptas

by Ann Veenstra

It seems somehow appropriate that August 15 was a cold, rainy day in an otherwise beautiful summer as the congregation at Taber held a farewell evening for the Rev. G. van Popta family.

Mr. Ed Hofsink served as MC and led us through the program.

The Apostles' Creed was read in sections between the first items on the program. The younger children sang "Jesus Loves Me" and "Loving Shepherd of Thy Sheep." Others, too, made fitting contributions.

The Youth Group made a presentation of a variety of locally produced products to Joel and Anne-Marie to help them remember Taber.

The women sang a farewell song which had a verse about each member of the family.

James Bareman spoke on behalf of the Young People. He mentioned that the group would miss Matthew. Another member of the Young People, Catherine Muller, gave a tribute to Mrs. van Popta. She mentioned her rapport with the Young People, and her hospitality and good food which they frequently enjoyed. Brunette Muller expressed appreciation to Rev. van Popta for his faithful preaching and teaching and his ready listening ear.

The Ladies Aid sang a song about the ongoing fundraiser, the Pie Bake. They presented Dora with a beautiful apron as a gift.

Mr. Corny VanDasselaar presented Sarah with a Bible on behalf of the Youth/Fellowship Committee, as she had turned thirteen. He also spoke on behalf of the Men's Bible Study.

Mrs. Darlene Boeve did a reading called "The Relative Parade," which was an account of a "daydream" Rev. van Popta supposedly had, and which mentioned every family of the congregation connected to another in some way. She then presented Rev. van Popta with an album which had a page prepared by each family of the congregation in it.

Mr. John Petter had a "special" gift to present. After a short poem, he pre-



sented Rev. van Popta with a large mounted deer head in memory of the years we spent worshipping in the local "Elks Hall," and where a very large elk head graced the wall behind the pulpit, being only partially concealed by a piece of rose colored drapery fabric!

The MC read greetings which had been received from several sister churches. Rev. Eikelboom conveyed good wishes from the church at Calgary to both the van Poptas and to the Taber congregation.

Mr. Ite Veurink spoke on behalf of the church at Coaldale. He thanked Rev. van Popta for all his help to the church there, especially since the passing of Rev. Wielenga about 18 months ago. He noted that Rev. van Popta had preached in Coaldale eighty times in his five years here. Mr. Veurink also mentioned the support Mrs. van Popta has been to her husband, as well as her help in the school.

Mr. Veurink also conveyed greetings on behalf of the Classis Alberta/Manitoba. In doing so, he reflected on some of the difficulties of those meetings in the last few years.


Elder C. Hoogerdyk made remarks of farewell on behalf of the Taber con-

gregation. He expressed thankfulness to the Lord for having provided us with Rev. van Popta as shepherd and teacher, and exhorted all to continue to worship the Lord with gladness, both those leaving and all remaining here.

A farewell gift from the congregation was presented by Mr. Stuart Boeve to Rev. van Popta. It was a beautiful watercolor by local artist D.C. Lund and reminiscent of the area because it portrayed wheat before a background of grain elevators.

Rev. van Popta expressed thanks on behalf of his family for the gift, for the program and to all those contributing to it. He read to us the exhortation from Colossians 3:12-17.

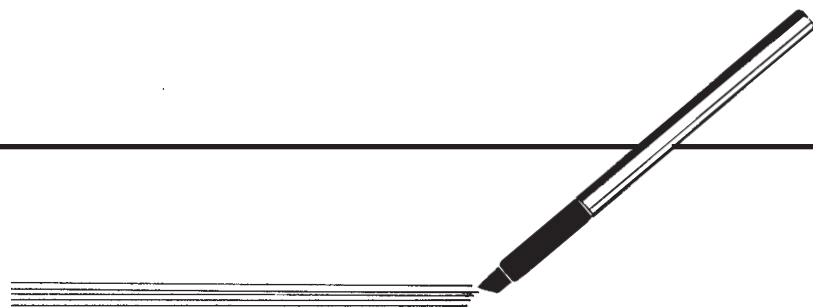
After the formal part of the evening, we enjoyed a time of refreshments and fellowship.

Rev. van Popta's farewell sermon was preached in the afternoon service on August 17. His text was Isaiah 7:9b: "Stand firm in your faith," and the sermon reminded us that our continued existence as church depends on our faith in God's Word in the following 3 points: 1. If you're unsure, you'll be insecure. 2. If you're scared, you'll not be spared. 3. If you have faith, you'll stand sure. 

THE HI-LITER

News from Here and There

By C. Van Spronsen



In the East the young people held a camp with the theme of "Body Building." No, this was not a camp stressing physical fitness but they challenged each other to use their time and talents for the body of God's Kingdom.

The construction of the building which is to house both the church and school in Calgary, AB is progressing well. An exciting time for this congregation which has lived in rented facilities for so many years!

Now that the Bible Study season has begun again it is good to take note of some comments made by Rev. F. Hulst in the King's Bridge of Tasmania. He is going to conduct a Bible study with the congregation but decided against a public discussion, "for that might take the blessing of what you have heard way." "The danger of a debate is that you talk about what is actually a side issue. And after the meeting everyone goes home thinking that the discussion point was the real issue. We should try to prevent that." How easily it happens that the main message is glossed over while we get hung up on side issues diminishing the benefits of joint Bible study.

Did you know that vandalism can sometimes have a positive effect on our facilities?

This happened in Toronto. "Repairs are organized around the church some having occurred through vandalism!"

There is positive growth in the "Trenton Group," a house congregation under supervision of the Toronto Church. The result is that the "council decided, commencing as per January 1998, to have the Lord's Supper administered in their assembly four times per year." It is hoped that these developments will lead to the institution of another congregation.

Congratulations to the Revs. C. Stam and J. Visscher who could both remember with thankfulness that the Lord granted them 25 years in the ministry. May the Lord grant you many more!

In Burlington South they started a story hour program for the four to five year old group every other Sun-

day afternoon. It is intended to be a program of Bible stories, songs, crafts and other activities geared towards this age group.

In the September 7th issue of the bulletin of the Rehoboth Church of Burlington West Rev. G. H. Visscher reflects upon the formation of two congregations out of one. "Today it becomes official. The Rehoboth Canadian Reformed Church ceases to exist and two new churches come into being: the Church of Burlington-Waterdown and the Church of Flamborough. There are mixed feelings, no doubt, as we venture forth, but we do so knowing this will be for the wellbeing of the members and the benefit of church life as a whole." They will continue to use the same facilities.

The border issue of the Burlington churches has been "resolved" after a classis dealt with this matter. Burlington East decided to reinstate the borderlines to what they were before. "Anyone moving west of Guelph Line after September 2, 1997, will need to request an attestation to Burlington South or Burlington West."

The Consistory of the Church at Watford decided that they would be using white wine instead of red at the Holy Supper due to some members suffering from migraines. (Red wine appears to aggravate this).

The contacts with the John Calvin Theological Seminary of Mexico City are increasing. The Burlington Reformed Study Centre sponsored an evening where Dr. J.P. Roberts, one of the seminary's professors, would speak about the work the Lord is doing in Mexico.

The Free Reformed Church of Bedfordale (W.A.) intends to undergo a name change and if the necessary documentation can be completed on time, effective as of January 1, 1998 it will be known as the Free Reformed Church of Mt. Nasura.

"The chairman . . . asks those present to sing. . ." The chairman welcomes all present." Who else could he ask and welcome?



Congratulations!!

October 15, 1997 is an important milestone in the life of Rev. and Mrs. James Visscher and indeed in the life of the churches he serves as well. It was twenty-five years ago that our brother was ordained as minister of the Word in Coaldale, AB. This event not only caused great joy in the hearts of the congregation at Coaldale, but also in the hearts of many other churches for Rev. Visscher was the very first student to have completed the full course of study at the Theological College and so to be ordained as minister of the Word. There had been earlier graduates to be sure. But they had all received part of their training elsewhere. Rev. James Visscher, however, had received all his theological training in Hamilton. Dr. J. Faber, principal of the Theological College, was invited to ordain our brother into the office.

Since yours truly was part of the very first graduating class, Rev. Visscher and I know each other from our Theological College days, and indeed the earlier university days. I will resist the temptation to speak of those times, except to note that the first years at the Theological College were a unique and rich experience. In all the joys and struggles of being part of the very beginning of the churches' training for the ministry, we experienced the tremendous blessings of the Lord in many and surprising ways. What I would like to do in this short congratulatory article is to mention some of the ways that the Lord our God has used Rev. and Mrs. Visscher in His service.

The very first blessing that should be mentioned is that Rev. Visscher is a pastor who knows and cares for his flock and as such also ministers the Word to them on Sundays and during the week. The first congregation was Coaldale (1972-1978), then followed Cloverdale, BC (1978-1987) and Langley, BC, where he still ministers today. As a pastor Rev. Visscher also benefited greatly from the support and dedication of his



wife Willy. They worked together in harmony, each in the place the Lord had assigned to them.

As a pastor interested in the care and teaching of the flock, Rev. Visscher enrolled in the Doctor of Ministry program at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, a program that allowed him to develop his pastoral gifts and make a real contribution to the life of the churches. Not too long after he graduated with a Doctor of Ministry degree, he published (in 1988) a workbook for catechism teaching and learning used in the churches. Entitled *I Belong*, it is a revision of his Doctor of Ministry thesis project. I notice from the Fraser Valley *Church News* that Rev. Visscher rarely uses the title Dr., preferring the more pastoral "Rev."

Rev. Visscher's gifts have been and are also recognized by the churches. Already at the Synod of Coaldale in 1977, our brother was first alternate for the Board of Governors for Western Canada and he has been a governor from 1980-1989 and from 1992 to the present – this latter time period as Chairman of the Board. Another area where our brother has served with distinction is the Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad to which he was appointed in 1977 by Synod Coaldale and where he has served uninterruptedly ever since. From 1980 to the present he has functioned as convener/secretary. I am sure he is looking forward to retiring from this Committee in 1998 (as decided by the last synod)! As any look at the extensive reports shows, the work involved in this committee is considerable. He has also served the churches as a member of General Synod in 1980, 1983, 1992 and 1995, serving as chairman at the 1992 Synod.

Rev. Visscher's organizational talents are also evident in his establishing and managing *Diakonia*, a periodical for office bearers, since 1987. Since 1995 he has shared the editorial responsibilities with Rev. Bilkes of the Aldergrove Free Reformed Church. This service of our brother also shows his pastoral concern for the equipping of office bearers. I would however also suggest that this magazine should be read by all interested male members of the church who can in this way be assisted in preparing themselves for the office.

Rev. and Mrs. Visscher, I hope you don't mind this bit of "limelight" too much. The intent is not to glory in man but to rejoice in the Lord's gifts to His people, also in the position and tasks you have occupied and done by His power and grace for the past twenty-five years. We congratulate you heartily with this milestone of service. May the Lord continue to bless you to the praise of His glory!

C. Van Dam 

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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

Letter to the editor:

Re: A Revision Revised, by W.W.J. VanOene (Vol 46, no.19)

In his remarks concerning the revisions to the Nicene Creed as it was dealt with at the last Synod Rev. VanOene mentions that the (then existing) Standing Committee for the Publication of the Book of Praise did not acknowledge receipt of Br. R. Koat's submission re the revision of the Nicene Creed. Since I functioned as secretary of the Committee at the time, a word of explanation may be in order.

1. It is true that the Committee received a copy of Br. Koat's submission. However, as Rev. VanOene noted, it was forwarded to the Committee well after the completion of its work, and after the report of the committee had been sent to the Synod. Perhaps a note could have been sent to Synod acknowledging the receipt of Br. Koat's work. But on whose authority would that have been done? There were no more scheduled meetings of the Committee.
2. It should be noted that Br. Koat's work was forwarded to us by the Church of Langley, and not by brother Koat himself. Whatever acknowledgement that was owing was then to be directed to the church of Langley, and not to brother Koat. But are synodical standing committees required to respond to submissions of individual churches?
3. It should be kept in mind that brother Koat did his work for the consistory of Langley. He was not commissioned by the Standing Committee, or by the churches. The Standing Committee itself solicited the assistance of Dr. Gootjes because of his expertise in symbolics. I have no doubt that proper acknowledgement for the work done by brother Koat was given by the church of Langley,

and that this church expressed its gratitude for the service performed to the brother himself.

4. It has happened more often in the past that submissions are received by a Committee after its work has been completed and the reports are sent to the churches. However, Rev. VanOene will no doubt agree with me that it would not be proper for a Committee to go into submissions coming at that late stage in its work, especially when those submissions deal with the very report forwarded to Synod. In fact, he might even say: this is at the wrong address.
5. The church of Langley has every right to stand behind this study, and take its conclusions to the General Synod with its own proposals and recommendations. But then the church must follow the proper ecclesiastical route, Art. 30 CO.
6. The absence of a response from the Committee to Br. Koat should then not be interpreted as a lack of appreciation for the time and effort that went into his submission, or for the quality of the work he did. On the contrary! If I recall discussions between Committee members well, there was appreciation for the time and effort put into the matter. But the Committee could not deal with it at the time.
7. As Committee we did the only thing we felt proper: we forwarded this detailed study, (with all other documents) to the Committee appointed by Synod Abbotsford 1995. No doubt this Committee has worked extensively with Br. Koat's submission, and detailed acknowledgement of this will be evident in the report to be presented to the forthcoming synod.
8. With all this effort at the level of detailed technical study, I believe that Rev. VanOene would have done the churches an additional service in his

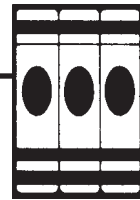
article if he had reminded the brothers that synod itself is not the place to hammer out the wording of the creed, much less to have this wording printed in the *Book of Praise*. That is not an appropriate way of dealing with matters of this nature. If the existing proposal was considered deficient, the whole matter should have been turned back to the Committee for further study, and we should have continued with the existing Nicene creed until the task was finished in a proper and orderly manner. But to work with half-finished creeds is liturgically improper, to say the least.

9. For the rest I can agree with several of the points Rev. VanOene brings forward, and I can only thank him for drawing these matters to our attention. I gladly acknowledge my share in whatever omissions that may have occurred. But my remarks are meant to point out that there are whole series of events compounding this matter which limit one's ground to attach blame to any particular person or Committee. And I trust that brother Koat will understand that despite the rather gnarled journey of his study, his work was not in vain.

Sincerely,
J. De Jong 

CORRECTION NOTICE:

Several lines were inadvertently omitted from Rev. VanOene's proposed definitive text of the Nicene Creed. After the words: "true God of true God" it should have read: "begotten, not made; being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made."



Near unto God

Abraham Kuyper. *Near Unto God: Daily Meditations.* Adapted for Contemporary Christians by James C. Schaap. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996. (235 pages, \$ US)

The last decade or so has seen a revived interest in books of meditations for the Christian home. Check the shelves at your local Christian book store and you will find a wide variety from which to choose. A recent and welcome addition is James Schaap's reworking of Abraham Kuyper's book, *Near Unto God*, first published a century ago.

James Schaap, professor of literature at Dordt College in Sioux Centre, Iowa, and himself a prolific author, has done us a very real service. He took his 1918 edition of Kuyper's meditations and, to use his own words, "cut the meditations down to their heart." He did so while modernizing the language in a style that is fresh, poetic and eminently readable.

Kuyper's book gives us one hundred and ten meditations on a single theme recorded in Ps. 73:28: "But as for me, it is good to be near God." Kuyper believed that

the fellowship of being near unto God must become a reality, in the full and vigorous prosecution of our life. It must permeate and give colour to our feeling, our perceptions, our sensations. It must not stand as a foreign factor in our life but it must be the passion that breathes throughout our whole existence. (From the "Biographical Note" in my 1979 Baker Book House edition, 12.)

Though Schaap has done extensive "pruning" of Kuyper's thoughts, yet he has truly succeeded in capturing Kuyper's passion for living our lives "near unto God." In these meditations Kuyper is ever mindful that God's Word "penetrates even to dividing soul and

spirit, joints and marrow" (Heb. 4:12). He does not put any obstacles in the way of this divine purpose of our covenant God.

We remember Abraham Kuyper's *manifesto*: "There is not one square inch of the entire creation about which Jesus Christ does not cry out, 'This is mine! This belongs to me!'" Even in these very personal, pious meditations, that claim of our Lord Jesus Christ shines through.

Many of the meditations are reflections on various Psalms. No wonder, for these deal with a whole range of human emotions in times of trial as well as joy. To be "near to God," means heeding God's command to love Him and our neighbour right from the heart. These meditations give much careful thought to this command.

Many of the meditations have Jesus Christ in the centre. A sample:

The mystery and blessing of the Christian life is simply this: that the fire of our enthusiasm to stay near unto God is kindled only in Jesus Christ. He not only keeps our eyes on the road; he delivers us to our destination. Nothing – anywhere, anytime, any place – matters more than Jesus Christ. Why? Listen to the petition in the high priestly prayer: "[Holy Father, I pray Thee,] that they all may be one . . . that the world may believe that Thou hast sent me."

That's what it's all about. (89)

Reading these meditations one can't escape the questions, "What about my walk with God? Is my heart right with Him, and does it beat with true devotion and surrender to the Lord?" Driven by God's Word we are forced to go on our knees; to close our doors and pour out our hearts before Him.

Though I have great appreciation for this book of meditations, I would be amiss if I did not offer some critical remarks. The Scripture texts are from the King James Version of the Bible because

Kuyper felt that a number of meditations "were based upon specific Biblical language occurring only in the KJV" (Preface, 5). This approach makes it somewhat difficult to move from the dated language of the KJV to the very modern style employed by Schaap.

Although we must keep in mind that these are meditations, rather than sermons, they do not always do justice to the historical and redemptive context of the Scripture passages. That is a pity. A more serious criticism may be that at various points Kuyper loses sight of the concrete objectivity of God's covenant promises as well as our obligations. Though he would distance himself from mysticism, Kuyper nevertheless falls prey to it himself at times. In the meditation on Isa. 57:11 we read: "The only means by which God becomes the focus of our lives is our melting away in Him." Although it is true that loving God, "consumes heart and soul and mind and strength," we must not lose sight of our sober responsibility. Rather than "melting away in him," we are established that we may stand (Eph. 6:13,14). In meditating on Ps. 32:5 and the forgiveness God brings to "light our path," Kuyper says,

Don't think of that light as a spotlight, stage light or left or parked in the balcony. The light he gives to illumine our paths is generated from within us.

While we indeed must be "lit up by His holiness," yet there must be no suggestion that somehow the source of that light is within ourselves.

Having said this, I hope this book will be well used by many. There is a great deal of wholesome spiritual food here. Young people, as well as the older generation, will derive much benefit from it. May the Church of Christ be drawn by His Word and Spirit to live very near unto Him, for then we shall surely be safe in a world where "devils threaten to undo us."





Press Release of Classis Ontario North, Sept 11, 12, 1997

After the singing of Hymn 40:1,2, the reading of Ephesians 1, and opening prayer, Rev. J. G. Slaa welcomed the brothers on behalf of the convening church of Elora. The delegates of Burlington/Waterdown examined the credentials. All the churches were duly represented. Two new churches were instituted since the last Classis (Burlington/Waterdown and Flamborough) replacing the church of Burlington West.

Classis was constituted and the officers took their seats with Rev. A.J. Pol as chairman, Rev. G. Nederveen as clerk and Rev. P.G. Feenstra as vice-chairman.

Rev. Pol thanked the convening church for making the necessary preparations for Classis. He welcomed the deputies of Regional Synod, Rev. D.G.J. Agema and Rev. J. DeGelder, and the visitors who were present. The chairman also took note of the following:

- The church at Orangeville eagerly anticipates the ordination of candidate R. Pot
- Candidate S. 't Hart accepted the call for mission work in Papua New Guinea
- Rev. H. Versteeg accepted the call to Chatham
- Rev. J. Mulder is in hospital having suffered a heart attack
- The church at Fergus is still vacant
- One of the deputies, Rev. Agema, has been called by Carman

The agenda for Classis was adopted after several alterations were made.

Classis then proceeded to examine candidate R. Pot. A sermon was delivered on Judges 6:11-24 by the candidate. In closed session it was decided that the examination could continue. Mr. Pot was examined on Old and New Testament exegesis, knowledge of scripture, doctrine and creeds, church history, ethics, church polity, and the pastoral subjects. In closed session, Classis decided with the concurring advise of the deputies, that the results of the examination were satisfactory. This was communicated to Mr. Pot and his wife. The candidate signed the sub-

scription form. After singing and prayer they were congratulated.

The documents necessary for the approbation of the call of candidate Pot to the church at Orangeville were present and Classis decided to do so in accordance with Article 5 of the Church Order.

Preceded by prayer Classis proceeded to examine candidate S. 't Hart. A sermon was presented on Ps. 121 by the candidate. In closed session it was decided that the examination could continue. Mr. 't Hart was examined on Old and New Testament exegesis, knowledge of scripture, doctrine and creeds, church history, ethics, church polity, and the pastoral subjects. In closed session, Classis decided with the concurring advise of the deputies, that the results of the examination were satisfactory. This was communicated to Mr. 't Hart and his wife. The candidate signed the subscription form. After singing and prayer they were congratulated.

The call of candidate 't Hart to the church at Toronto for the work of mission was approbated in accordance with Article 5 of the Church Order.

The deputies of Regional Synod were thanked for being present and were excused.

Classis presented Rev. H. Versteeg with a certificate of release according to Article 9 of the Church Order. It expressed thankfulness for 20 years of faithful service by Rev. Versteeg. Classis recessed for the evening.

On Friday morning Classis reconvened by singing Ps. 119:5, reading Romans 10:1-15 and prayer. Student D. Vandeburgt requested permission to speak an edifying word in accordance with Article 21 of the Church Order. The necessary documents were present. Classis listened to a sermon proposal on Genesis 35:1-5. In closed session it was decided to continue the examination. Mr. Vandeburgt was examined on doctrine and creeds. In closed session Classis acceded to the request of the student and allowed him to speak an edifying word in the churches for one year. The student signed the form of

subscription. After prayer and singing, Mr. Vandeburgt was congratulated.

The following reports were received by Classis:

- From the church at Burlington South (re: inspection of the archives)
- From the treasurer for Classis. The assessment for 1998 was provisionally set at \$2.00 per communicant member.
- From the church for auditing the books of the treasurer (Burlington/Waterdown)
- From the church for auditing the books of the Fund for Financial Aid to Students for the Ministry (Fergus)
- From a member of the Committee for Financial aid to Students for the ministry. It was noted that according to the regulations the church at Guelph should have reported on this matter.
- From the church for auditing the books of the Fund for Needy Churches (Fergus)

Question period according to Article 44 of the Church Order was held. There were no matters in which the consistories needed the help of Classis.

The church at Grand Valley proposed that Classis overture General Synod 1998 to change the last line of Article 39 of the Church Order to read "this shall invariably be done where the number of elders is less than three." After some discussion this proposal was withdrawn for further investigation.

The church at Flamborough requested that Rev. Visscher be appointed as their counsellor. This request was granted.

Classis granted a request from the church at Fergus for pulpit supply.

Based on the report of the Committee for Needy Churches, the churches are requested to budget \$27.00 per communicant member to cover assistance given to churches in 1998. Mr. C. Lodder of Fergus was appointed to replace Mr. H. Bouwman as a Committee member and as Treasurer of the Committee.

The church at Burlington East requested that the regulations be revised

to reflect the latest changes in Classis. This was granted.

The church at Burlington South presented a submission with regards to the involvement of sisters of the congregation in the election of office bearers. This submission was declared inadmissible because it was received too late.

The next Classis will be held on December 12, 1997 at 9:00 a.m. The church at Fergus is the convening church. It was suggested that Rev. Slaa serve as chairman, Rev. Pol as clerk, Rev. Nederveen as vice-chairman.

The following appointments were made for examinations: Rev. C. Bosch and Rev. W. den Hollander – coordinators; Rev. P. Aasman – exegesis Old Testament; Rev. G.H. Visscher – exegesis New Testament; Rev. Feenstra – doctrine and creeds; Rev. J.G. Slaa – knowledge of scripture; Rev. B. J. Berends – church history; Rev. J. VanPopta – ethics; Rev. G. Nederveen – church polity; Rev. A. J. Pol Diaconology.

The following ministers were reappointed as church visitors: Rev. Berends, Rev. den Hollander, Rev. Nederveen, Rev. Visscher; alternates: Rev. Bosch, Rev. Pol.

Other appointments were made as follows:

- The church for taking care of archives: Burlington East.
- The church for inspection of the archives: Burlington South.
- Treasurer for Classis: J. J. Poort, 1131 Fisher Ave., Burlington L7P 2L2; alternate J. Dykstra
- Church to audit the books of the classical treasurer: Burlington/Waterdown.
- Church for financial aid to students for the ministry: Fergus.
- Church for auditing the books of the fund for needy churches: Fergus.
- Committee for needy churches: C. Lodder, W. Oostdyk, F. Westrik.
- Observer to the Free Church of Scotland: Rev. Feenstra (alternate Rev. Nederveen).

- The following ministers were delegated to Regional Synod Nov. 12, 1997: Rev. den Hollander, Rev. Feenstra, Rev. Pol and Rev. Visscher. As alternates: Rev. Slaa, Rev. Berends, Rev. Aasman, and Rev. VanPopta (in that order).

- The following elders were delegated to Regional Synod: J. Boot, L. Jagt, L. Kampen, E. H. Pol. As alternates: H. Bouwman, W. Oostdyk, A. Farenhorst, A. Bax (in that order).

The church at Grand Valley is appointed to represent Classis at the ordination of candidate Pot. The church at Brampton is appointed to represent Classis at the ordination of candidate 't Hart.

Question period was held. Censure according to Article 34 was not necessary. The Acts were adopted and the Press Release was approved. Classis was closed after singing and prayer.

P.G. Feenstra 

CLARION

ADVERTISEMENTS

Births

Sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from Him.

Psalm 127:3

With thankfulness to the Lord, the giver of life, we announce the birth of our first child, a son. We named him

JARED CULLEN

Born September 5, 1997

We thank our heavenly Father for making all things well and for entrusting to us one of His covenant children.

Mel and Monica Koopman (nee Bostelaar)

160 South Street West, Aylmer, ON N5H 1S3

We, **Berney and Julia Fennema**, announce the birth of our daughter, **BRITTANY LYNN**

She was born on September 4, 1997

A sister for *Megan* and *Brent*

4843 Giesbrecht Road, Chilliwack, BC V2R 4R1

This is the LORD's doing; It is marvelous in our eyes. Psalm 118:23

Once again the Lord has so richly blessed us. It is with great pleasure that we announce the birth of our first daughter and sister

HELENA NICOLE VIS

Born July 16, 1997

Proud parents **Henry and Simone Vis**

Proud brothers *Thomas, Steven* and *David*

4369 Jackson Street, Beamsville, ON L0R 1B6

We give thanks to Thee, O God; we give thanks; we call on Thy name and recount Thy wondrous deeds. Psalm 75:1

With great thankfulness to our heavenly Father for blessing our family with another precious gift of life, we joyfully announce the birth of our daughter and sister

LEANNE LOUISE

Born September 1, 1997

Albert and Emily Breukelman (nee VanLeeuwen)

A little sister for *Melissa, Tim, Shane* and *Tyler*

3476 Cherry Avenue South, Vineland, ON L0R 2C0

Praise God from whom all blessings flow!

With thankfulness to our heavenly Father we announce the birth of our son

GREGORY DARREN

Born August 28, 1997

A little brother for *Zachary*

Kevin and Theresa Brouwer

RR#4, Grand Valley, ON L0N 1G0

With thankfulness to our heavenly Father, we joyfully announce that we have been blessed with our third child

BENJAMIN LEE

Born September 5, 1997

A brother for *Matthew* and *Emily*

George and Loretta Vandenberg (nee Dam)

192 Suffolk Street W., Guelph, ON N1H 2J7