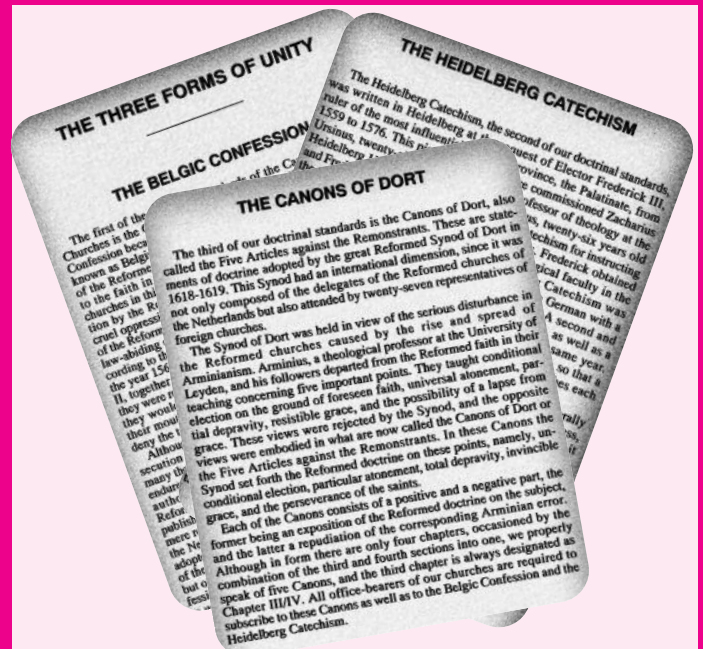


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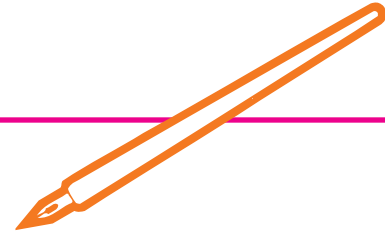
THE CANADIAN REFORMED MAGAZINE
VOLUME 48, NO. 4 FEBRUARY 19, 1999



*The Confessional History of
the Canadian Reformed
Churches*

Numbers

10:1-10



Reflections on a Decision

Synod Fergus 1998 decided to invite the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) “to enter into Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the Canadian Reformed Churches” (CanRC) on the condition that the OPC General Assembly adopt the Agreement on Fencing of the Lord’s Table as it had been revised by Synod Fergus. It is this condition by which the OPC must accept a synodical amendment to the Agreement that had been reached almost two years ago that has caused a vigorous discussion in *Clarion*.

Debating an important issue in a forum like *Clarion* is a good thing and we are happy we could have the interchanges that took place. Listening to each other helps us to understand each other and move on together. In view of what has all been said, the editorial committee however thought it would be best to close this particular discussion for now so we can turn our attention to other matters. In this editorial I would like to pause at a number of elements which may or may not have been mentioned in previous contributions, but which strike me as being important.

Keeping it in perspective

In the excitement of vigorous debate, it is easy to lose the overall perspective. Let us keep in mind the following. Although the OPC is within the Presbyterian tradition with different polity and practices, the CanRC have consistently been able to affirm with thankfulness that these are faithful churches of Jesus Christ and that divergencies in confessional and church political matters are not an impediment for that affirmation. Also this last synod could decide “to acknowledge gratefully the desire of the OPC to be faithful to the Scriptures and to defend the reformed heritage.”

Through the years, obstacle after obstacle to ecclesiastical fellowship has been removed. Synod Abbotsford 1995 had expressed the hope that the protracted discussions could come to an end and that by 1998 we could have ecclesiastical fellowship with the OPC. That has not happened now because of concerns at our most recent synod that the Lord’s Supper might not be sufficiently safeguarded in the OPC with respect to admitting guests outside the congregation. Without taking anything away from the importance of this issue, this particular issue is a specific and limited point considering what has already all been agreed upon in the past years and within the Agreement on fencing (see below).

We should therefore keep this matter within the larger perspective and not inflate it to an importance that is out of all proportion to reality and, for example, make it the final litmus test of whether the OPC is faithful or not. Indeed, Synod Abbotsford considered that practices with regard to the fencing of the Lord’s table “cannot in the end be made a condition for Ecclesiastical Fellowship” (*Acts 1995*, p. 71).

On the other hand, this matter should also not be “swept under the carpet” not to be talked about again. It should be part of the discussions within the relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship for the mutual upbuilding in the faith, as also the Agreement affirms.

What happened?

Prior to Synod, an agreement on the matter of fencing the table was reached between the committees of both churches. This statement in part asserted that:

the celebration of the Lord’s Supper is to be supervised. In this supervision the Church exercises discipline and manifests itself as true church. This supervision is to be applied to the members of the local church as well as to the guests. The eldership has a responsibility in supervising the admission to the Lord’s Supper.

This along with the other elements of the Agreement was published in *Clarion* March 21, 1997. By all appearances this report was favourably received for there was not a single critical letter to the editor or submission to Readers Forum about it.

This Agreement that was reached between our committee and the OPC counterpart is a good one. All the key elements are there. Guests are specifically mentioned as being included in the supervision of the table and the place of the elders in the supervision of the table is affirmed. Clearly, this implies that a verbal warning in and of itself is not enough. Synod, however, deemed it necessary to spell out the fencing more precisely and added to the proposed Agreement words to the effect that a verbal warning was insufficient. The specific wording of Synod on this matter has now become a condition for Ecclesiastical Fellowship. Can such a condition be justified?

A justifiable condition?

In one sense, one could say that it is justifiable. A synod has the right to decide what it feels is proper. In the previous issue of *Clarion* we could read br. Pleiter’s clearly argued defence of Synod’s action in this regard. I can see where he is coming from. It is also important to recognize that the Synod worked and laboured with integrity, seeking to do the Lord’s will, as they laboured through the huge volume of material they had to deal with. It is no picnic being in a major assembly. It is more like a pressure cooker in which it is sometimes extremely difficult to keep in balance all the different factors that impact on the decision-making process.

Besides wading through many submissions from churches on the matter, the Synod also received in their midst an official delegate from the OPC. Unfortunately, his speech to Synod gave an exaggerated emphasis to his personal point of view on the matter of fencing to the extent that his remarks were perceived as conflicting with the Agreement on fencing that had

been reached between the committees. One cannot minimize how difficult this speech made it for Synod to subsequently still approve the Agreement that had been reached. Many perceived the speech as a challenge to the Agreement. For the sake of the integrity of the Agreement an addition detailing precisely what was necessary (verbal warning not enough, need confirmation of a godly life) was therefore considered necessary. This is an understandable, although also a very regrettable, course of events.

Mind you, as Prof. J. Geertsema has pointed out in the previous *Clarion*, we have nothing to be ashamed of with the way in which we fence the table. We can be thankful to the Lord for the practice we have inherited. It is fully consistent with Scripture.

And yet it is very regrettable that Synod was not able to approve the Agreement as it had been presented, even though everything was not spelled out fully and precisely. Although Synod's actions were understandable and justifiable in the sense that we have just illustrated, yet within the context of Christian charity and of our past dealings and decisions with the OPC it was the wrong decision.

Why so regrettable?

There are three main reasons why this decision is wrong.

1. *Synod did not fully appreciate or understand the Agreement and did the work of the Committee.* When a synod appoints a committee it delegates qualified people to do the work on behalf of the churches. Such work can demand much time and energy for three years. The churches together in synod have to have very good reasons to reject the fruit of three years study and labour. In this particular case, the issue of fencing continues to be a matter of discussion within the OPC which has never made a general rule on this matter. The OPC does agree that the table is holy and therefore needs to be supervised. The practices of supervision within the OPC however differ.

In coming to an agreement that would be credible and have integrity, the committees of the OPC and the CanRC apparently followed the guidelines of the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC; of which both the OPC and the CanRC are members). The language of the Agreement on this issue is close to that of the Report of the Committee on Theological Affirmation which the ICRC adopted.¹

Although the precise words "verbal warning not sufficient" do not occur, the issue is covered by the fact that the Agreement explicitly affirms that the supervision of the table includes guests and that the eldership has a responsibility in supervising admission to the Lord's Supper. This Agreement is therefore credible and sufficient by conveying the need for more than a verbal warning. This Agreement also indicated that the discussions over differences in confession and church polity should continue within the relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship with a view to the mutual upbuilding in the faith.

By concentrating on the absence of the actual words about a verbal warning and thus deeming the Agreement insufficient, Synod misread the scope of the report and was insensitive to what had been accomplished. As a consequence, Synod then decided to do the work of the Committee by emending the Agreement at synod rather than sending it back to the Committee for Contact with the OPC. Now the motives for Synod may have been noble and undoubtedly were. (It would presumably save three years of more committee work and hasten the coming into ecclesiastical fellowship

with one another.) But this action showed a lack of understanding of the dynamics at work when the committees achieved the original Agreement which was a responsible and good Agreement.

In effect, Synod has now sent what can be perceived as an ultimatum to the OPC General Assembly. Synod may not have intended this, but that is how it can be interpreted. Given the circumstance that just as we, the OPC values the autonomy of the local church in certain matters, it will be difficult for the OPC General Assembly to accept this emended Agreement and thereby dictate to the churches precisely how the table should be fenced. The rejected Agreement should have been sent back to the Committee which knows all the ins and outs of the situation.

The lesson to be learned from the above is that synods should not hesitate to involve the chairman of the appointed committees in *all* their deliberations on the relevant committee report, even if such a person would have to be flown in from the other end of the country (which was not the case with Synod Fergus). Any report can stand further elucidation and that was apparently the case with the report on the OPC.



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EDITORIAL COMMITTEE:

Editor: C. Van Dam
 Managing Editor: G.Ph. van Popta
 Language Editor: J.L. van Popta
 Coeditors: R. Aasman, J. De Jong, J. Geertsema,
 N.H. Gootjes, G.Ph. van Popta

ADDRESS FOR EDITORIAL MATTERS:

CLARION
 46 Sulphur Springs Road, Ancaster, ON L9G 1L8
 Fax: (905) 304-4951
 E-Mail: clarion@compuserve.com

ADDRESS FOR ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS: (subscriptions, advertisements, etc.):

CLARION, Premier Printing Ltd.
 One Beghin Avenue
 Winnipeg, MB, Canada R2J 3X5
 Phone: (204) 663-9000 Fax: (204) 663-9202
 Email: premier@premier.mb.ca
 World Wide Web address:
 <premier.mb.ca/clarion.html>

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2. *Synod's decision shows a lack of sensitivity to the OPC and its struggles and history.* There is an important, but perhaps largely forgotten appendix to the synodical decisions of 1965. This appendix is a concise but moving account of the early history of the OPC and their struggles to be faithful to the Lord over against all kinds of heresies and threats to the purity of the Reformed doctrine. This impeccable record has continued throughout the years up to the present time. It is not for nothing that synod after synod could affirm the faithfulness of these churches, churches that have also shown a willingness to dialogue with us and accept criticism from others.

This latest decision of Synod which insists on adding to the Agreement what is essentially already covered in it (namely that guests need to be supervised in the context of participating in the Lord's Supper) can be interpreted as basically treating the OPC as guilty of transgressing the Lord's ordinances of keeping the table holy. Again Synod probably never intended this to be the way their decision should be taken. (After all, the General Assembly of the OPC has accepted the Agreement!) But not seeing such a possible interpretation is part of the problem. Synod's decision betrays a lack of historical sensitivity and lack of understanding in the manner in which the Lord has led the OPC in obedience to his will and how the Lord continues to lead them on.

We have our own weaknesses that can in part be understood in terms of our past history and we would not be too pleased if the OPC were to present us with a statement of what we are to do. For example, how would we like it if the OPC forced their mould on us and demanded that we have the same percentage of home missionaries relative to our to-

What's inside?

The decision of General Synod Fergus on our relationship with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church generated quite a discussion. *Clarion* is happy to have provided a forum for the discussion. In this issue, the editor, Dr. Van Dam, provides some concluding comments about the decision and the discussion. For now, as far as *Clarion* is concerned, we will consider the discussion closed. There are other things to talk and write about. As always, we do, of course, welcome letters to the editor on this topic.

The Lord has blessed us richly as Canadian Reformed Churches. We have a rich history. Last year, Dr. J. Faber spoke about our wealth at a meeting of United Reformed and Canadian Reformed believers. We are very happy to begin publishing that speech in this issue. Read and learn.

In the Fraser Valley, there is a very interesting organization called "Eirana Support Services." We are pleased to publish an interview with its director, Mr. John Siebenga.

One of God's faithful servants, who has, over the past many years, been used by the Lord to build up many different aspects of church life in Canada, recently celebrated his 55th year as a minister of the Word. As well, he and his wife were allowed to celebrate 55 years of life together as husband and wife. We are speaking of the Rev. and Mrs. W.W.J. van Oene. In this issue, you will find a little story about the celebrations written by one of their daughters. *Clarion* wishes Rev. and Mrs. Van Oene the continue blessing of the LORD.

Finally, you will find some letters, reviews and releases. Best wishes!

GvP

tal church size as the OPC, before they would consider fellowshiping with us? After all, the church is to be a light in the community, a church that aggressively gathers the elect together, is it not? As an issue one could argue that evangelism is even more important than determining precisely the manner in which guests are to be admitted to the Lord's Supper. This is only an illustration and it concerns an entirely different matter, but the point is that any church, also the OPC, must be seen in their context and not just be considered through our own glasses and historical experience. Remember we have already affirmed many times over that the OPC is a faithful church, but we sometimes act as if they are not.

3. *Synod's decision perpetuates an attitude on our part that can be seen as hypocritical.* In our relationship with the OPC, all our attention is now fixed upon this one restricted point. Besides the supervision of the guests by the elders, as already agreed upon, we now also explicitly insist on additional words to further specify the procedure.

This insistence is measuring with two standards in two ways. First, we have already said that certain church order matters and confessional matters can be discussed in a relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship. Is this issue really more important than all those other weighty issues (such as "visible and invisible church") which we have already decided to leave for future discussion?

Secondly, we already have ecclesiastical fellowship with churches that have practices of admission to the Lord's table such as we find in the OPC. Who are we to insist on certain details with the OPC while we do not do it with others? Is that Christian charity and fairness? Let us not forget that the OPC has even agreed to continue to discuss these matters with us within a relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship.

Much of our insistence on additional details shows a lack of historical consciousness in the way Christ has led the OPC out of the liberal Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and a lack of sensitivity to the ongoing discussions within the OPC about strengthening the fencing of the table. Our insistence on added details also shows lack of Christian charity and worst of all it can even be portrayed as hypocritical.

In conclusion

Synod has done their work with integrity. I am convinced of that. Their task was not an easy one and the speech of the OPC delegate further complicated matters and made accepting the Agreement much more difficult. Synod has tried to move ahead and make a very positive decision, namely, to invite the OPC to enter into Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the CanRC. However, all the good things that can be said about what Synod did cannot undo the fact of the disputed condition. The work of Synod, done in love and dedication, can benefit from the analysis of hindsight and be criticized. Our own history shows how important it is to weigh carefully the decisions of major assemblies in the light of what God requires in his Word. Let us continue to reflect on these matters, prayerfully, in humbleness, and with Christian charity.

The OPC will need to react to the decision of our Synod. May the Lord make it possible for OPC and CanRC to enter into a relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship together. May He be pleased to use both the OPC and CanRC together for the cause of his church and kingdom in North America.

¹See *Proceedings of the International Conference of Reformed Churches* held in Zwolle, The Netherlands, 1993, pp. 80-81. See also C. Van Dam, "The OPC Report at Synod Fergus", *Clarion*, May 1, 1998, pp. 212-213.



By J.L. van Popta

You Are My Friends . . .

A friend loves at all times (Proverbs 17:17).

Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

You are my friends if you do what I command (John 15:13-14).

Who of us has not wanted to be counted among someone else's friends? Children long to be included in the circle. Adults, in their loneliness, look over at someone and hope to be noticed and loved and admitted to a relationship of friendship. Friendship is a basic human need. Paul Simon, a popular American songwriter, wrote some decades ago, "I have no need of friendship; friendship causes pain. . . . I touch no one and no one touches me. . . . I am a rock. I am an island." This was a song of pain and sorrow and loneliness. It was a song of defense, not defiance, for even Paul Simon needed friends. His song expressed that basic human need. The need for a friend who loves at all times. Christians know and believe that God in Christ has admitted his own into that relationship of friendship. No Christian will want to sing Paul Simon's song.

But who are God's friends? In Scripture, Moses is called God's friend (Ex 33:4). Abraham too is called, "Friend of God" (2 Chron 20:7, Isa 41:8). The apostle James writes that "Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness, and he was called a friend of God" (James 2:23). Job lamented the loss of the friendship of God (Job 29:4). These men, Abraham, Moses and Job, believed God and in his promises. They

were loyal and walked before God with single-hearted devotion.

Who are the Lord Jesus' friends? "You are my friends," Jesus said to his disciples. He said that He would die for those whom He could call his own – for his friends. For whom did He lay down his life? The Lord Jesus says that He would do that for those who do what He commands. He would die for those who are faithful and loyal. The Lord Jesus considers his disciples as friends, if they but live in loyalty to Him. We should notice though, that the disciples to whom He first spoke these words were men who denied Him that very night. Judas betrayed Him. All forsook Him. None stood by Him in his hour of need. Even Peter denied knowing Him. Yet, He counted these disciples among his friends. Lord Jesus' loyalty is greater than that of his friends. For though He knew that all would forsake Him, yet He lay down his life for them. He went to the cross in perfect obedience to his Father and in loyalty to his friends.

When the Lord says that we are his friends if we obey his commands, He does not mean that He takes us as his friends only if we live like cowering slaves. No, obeying Him and being loyal to Him means taking seriously what He says. That seriousness must be shown in our manner of living. We must

live with due regard to what the Lord Jesus wants of us. James writes that Abraham believed God and he was called God's friend. But James also writes that friendship with the world is enmity with God (James 4:4). Friendship with the world, loyalty with the world, is hatred toward God. Each of us should reflect on that. Friendship, loyalty, with the world is hatred toward God. We cannot be friends with the world and the Lord at the same time.

Abraham, Moses, and Job – these were friends of God. Peter, John and James – these were friends of God in Christ. Yet, these were sinners, all of them. But these were people who took seriously the commandments and the will of God for their lives. So it is today. Disciples of Jesus are admitted to a relationship of friendship with God in Christ because of Christ's loyalty. This is not a relationship of equals. Notice that not one of the apostles claim for themselves that they had God as their friend. None says, "Jesus is my friend." Paul speaks and writes of himself as servant and slave of Christ. So does James the Lord's blood brother. Jude, another of the Lord's siblings, son of the same mother, simply identifies himself as brother of James. The Lord Jesus, however, admits us into the fellowship of his friends. He is always loyal. He is always faithful. He will never leave you or forsake you. He keeps covenant forever.

The Lord Jesus Christ truly fulfills the proverb: "A friend loves at all times." He is the friend who sticks closer than a brother. Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, his bride. Paul writes, "The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal 2:20b). The Lord said, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." This he did for you and for me. We are his friends!



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An Interview with John Siebenga

On November 4, 1998 Pastor Lawrence Bilkes of Emmanuel Free Reformed Church in Abbotsford and Pastor Matthew Van Luik of the Canadian Reformed Church of Chilliwack sat down in the offices of Eirana Support Services (ESS) and interviewed the coordinator, John Siebenga, about the aims, work and hopes of ESS. The following is the discussion that ensued.

First of all, John, could you explain what the name "Eirana" means. Where did the name come from?

When we first started about three years ago, we looked for a name that would reflect the direction, hope, and aims of our organization. The word "eirana" is close to the Greek word for peace as found in Philippians 4:7. The word and the context in which Paul was writing to the Philippian Christians seemed to fit very well. It wasn't everyone's first choice because it is a hard word to pronounce. The name has stuck nonetheless, and actually we have found that people have had little problem with it.

In your mission statement you quite boldly state that you are here as a resource centre to the churches. What kind of resources do you offer?

We basically have three areas that we like to address. First is the area of individual members who are trying to help someone who is depressed or hurting with emotional or spiritual needs. We have tried to provide a library of resource materials from which they can draw. These are not only books but also audio tapes and video series. As well, we have checked out a number of counselling agencies in the Fraser Valley and are able to suggest different agencies upon request. The second area we have tried to address is to make available a series of workshops and seminars to different groups on a wide

variety of topics. The third area is specific counselling on a "lay" basis.

If we understand it correctly, you maintain that you are there to support the churches. How does that work?

Most of the time it is upon request of a pastor or a council member. A pastor phones for advice or a listening ear on a problem he has encountered, and Eirana suggests material, or an approach, or an agency that the pastor could use. Often a Bible study group will request a video series which they could study or they ask for a recommendation of a series for a particular need which they have encountered in their study group. Other times there have been groups that got together simply to study a specific topic common to the group, for example, the Parenting Adolescents video series which has been very popular.

So most of what Eirana does is by request of members of individual churches as well as pastors and council members. Could you give some examples of areas where Eirana has been working?

The past two years have provided an unending variety of areas for us to be working. I never know from one day to the next what is going to be happening or where Eirana will be called next. However, sexual abuse and marriage difficulties have been the two areas in most demand. Eirana has also been called to assist in coordinating help for those with addictions.

You have mentioned two areas which as pastors concern us a great deal. Could you tell us how Eirana goes about assisting in cases of alcoholism and marriage counselling?

In the case of alcoholism, Eirana was called in by the pastors to help. In two cases an intervention was planned and successfully orchestrated. The in-

tervention requires that the spouse of the alcoholic needs to come to the point that he/she needs help with the spouse. The intervention team then is comprised of the spouse, the pastor and maybe an elder, any children that are old enough and some very close and concerned friends or relatives whom the alcoholic respects. Finally a counsellor who coordinates and moderates the intervention is also included. Much background work needs to be done such as finding a detoxification centre and/or a rehabilitation centre, practicing the intervention and coordinating followup after the intervention.

Marriage counselling, on the other hand, is a little different. Much of what Eirana has done in the past has been in direct consultation with the pastor. Often the pastor and I have gone together to help in specific situations. We have found this very beneficial for all parties. At other times, the couple has been sent to Eirana for counselling sessions. As much as possible an open link to the pastor or the ward elder is encouraged and if not immediately open, we work towards establishing that link. In both marital problems and alcoholism the prayers of the congregation are needed. Therefore, Eirana feels this link to the elders and pastors is vital.

You mentioned earlier that Eirana offers seminars and workshops. Could you tell us a bit about them?

Certainly. We have tried to pull together a variety of resources that we have right here in the Valley. We have discovered that, in the Fraser Valley, there are brothers and sisters who have been using their gifts to help others all along. We have tried to utilize their expertise in seminars and workshops. We have hosted a seminar on financial planning, one on hope for sexual abuse victims, another on mental illness, yet another on encouraging each other within the body of Christ, and a few

others on related issues. Right now we are in the process of planning a seminar on marriage with a two day retreat at the end. One of our main thrusts has been to study a book which deals with a specific area. At the moment we are hosting two such studies, both dealing with marriage.

If we could go back to the counselling that you offer, maybe you could answer a number of questions regarding your counselling. First, do you have a protocol in place that outlines the way that Eirana works with pastors and elders?

As a matter of fact, yes, we do have a protocol in place. I mentioned earlier that we try to have an open link especially to the pastors. Through our protocol, we have tried to protect the person who has requested help but at the same time we want to establish the link to the local church where the real healing community should be working. If, however, there are those who come and do not want to have the contact with the church community, we will honour that request but we make it clear that we will work toward that contact. We firmly believe that, with the prayers and support of the local church community, substantial healing can and will take place. For example, in a couple of marital separation cases, the couple has requested the prayers of their respective congregations. The pastors have complied with their request and they have been remembered in the public prayer on Sunday. We have found this to be very effective and beneficial for the church community and for the couple involved. The protocol is available for anyone wishing to use it.

Another question that comes to mind in connection with counselling is: What method do you use and how does that differ from other counselling agencies?

That's a big question. Where do I start? I think, first of all, that I have to say that I cannot judge the work of other centres. I believe that they do some very excellent work. There are a couple of local agencies that I have been able to use with very good results. Whether there is a difference between my counselling and theirs, I really cannot rightly and truthfully say. I have been working on a model of counselling that takes its starting point in the Heidelberg Catechism, especially Lord's Day 1, Question and Answer 2. Our effort is to counsel and advise from a biblical, Reformed point of view, in which we must

take responsibility for our actions and sinfulness, find life and salvation in Jesus Christ and rely on the Holy Spirit to work change in our lives.

What about confidentiality within the churches? Have you much problem with that?

Oh, here we hit a bone of contention. We actually have a protocol in place here too. But regardless of protocols we have to continually ask: what is best for the person? Once a month, two or three board members meet to discuss if the various protocols have been maintained and honoured. Where there has been difficulty in a case, this is discussed. This committee advises and/or admonishes me where I need it especially if the protocols have not been kept up. There are some very good checks and balances here.

A couple of final questions, John. First, how many people work for Eirana?

At the moment there is one full time employee and one part-time.

How is Eirana financed?


Just recently, we had a membership drive and our membership increased dramatically. We have a membership fee of \$100.00 of which \$90.00 is tax deductible. We also depend on donations and support from churches. We have tried to keep the fee for counselling work to a donation towards the costs, but that has not always worked. So for the past several months we have asked for donations according to a suggested donation per hour. During the two years we have been in existence we have been in the red at times, but we have also been greatly blessed. The Lord has blessed us in such a way that every month the bills could be paid.

Which churches does Eirana serve?

We have been serving the Canadian Reformed, The Free Reformed, and the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches.

Are you open to serving other groups or individuals?

Eirana has had the opportunity to work with members of the Christian Reformed Church and Netherlands Reformed congregations. We have even been allowed to work with some individuals who do not come from a Reformed background at all. The bottom line here is that they understand and agree to the basis and thrust of the counselling that they will receive here.



CHANGE OF ADDRESS:
Rev. J. DeGelder
7 Mercury Road, RR 1
Freelton, ON
LOR 1K0
Study/Fax (905) 690-0253
Home (905) 690-3923
All bulletins for Hi-Liter should be sent to the above address.
* * *

CHANGE OF ADDRESS:
Rev. Cl. Stam
3369 Tisdale Road
RR 2, Mount Hope, ON
LOR 1W0
679-3839 (home) 679-4554 (study)
679-1441 (fax)
e-mail: clstam@interlynx.net

Where do you see Eirana going in the future?

In the past year and a half we have been working in the mental health field. We have been exploring how to help those who suffer from mental illness and at the same time to offer a service to families of those with mental illness. Therefore we have been studying various options to set up respite care. Another area which we are exploring is a treatment centre for addictions, especially drug and alcohol. We have discovered that there is a great need in the Reformed community in this area. At the same time we see a real need to set something up for the larger community in which we live as well. In the lower Fraser Valley, there are very few detox/rehab centres that offer an extended program. At the moment, we are exploring ways to fill that void. These things are very tentative as yet but we hope that in the future we can do something in these areas. At the same time, I continue to pursue courses which will qualify me as more than a lay counsellor.

John, thank you for your time. We wish you every blessing of the Lord in your work here at Eirana.



The Confessional History of the Canadian Reformed Churches* (Part 1 of 3)

By J. Faber

**First delivered at Wellandport, Ontario on May 9, 1998 and subsequently also in a similar evening at Wyoming, Ontario on October 2, 1998. The speaking style has been retained. – Editor*

Let me first make some remarks about the title of our topic. The heading of this evening reads “The Unity of Christ’s Church – Our Responsibilities Today.” This heading is clear. In the invitation we were reminded of the prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ in John 17 and of the mandate by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 4. It is the messianic prayer for the unity of those who are his and the apostolic mandate to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. We may be thankful for the clear Scriptural focus of this evening. It does not need any *explanation* at this moment. However, it is a different matter with the *implication* of this prayer and the *application* of this mandate. This meeting is convened by a Canadian Reformed Church in a United Reformed church building. Also the speakers and their topics make it obvious that this is a get-acquainted meeting especially for United Reformed and Canadian Reformed brothers and sisters. Given the main heading of this meeting – the unity of Christ’s church – it is clear that we are together tonight with a view to possible organic union of our church federations. In this context I was asked to deal with the confessional history of the Canadian Reformed Churches.

When we think of this specific title, the question arises: What is meant by the words “confessional history”? We could take this expression in the sense of “the history of the confessions.”

The Canadian Reformed Churches adhere to the three ecumenical creeds and the Three Forms of Unity. These are our confessions and these confessions have a history within the Canadian Reformed Churches. There is a history of the *text* of these confessions. The Cana-

dian Reformed Churches have modernized the English text and in the course of this process they have even made some changes in the content of the confessions. It is an interesting and important topic but it is not our topic tonight.

Then there is the *binding* to the confessions and it is also a topic of confessional history. In the short history of the Canadian Reformed Churches there has, for example, been a case of a minister who was suspended from his office, since he refused to sign the form of subscription to the Forms of Unity. Synod Edmonton 1965 declared this suspension justified and in accordance with the church order. I regard this 1965 confessional decision an important moment in the history of the Canadian Reformed Churches but the binding to the confession is not our topic tonight.

“We are together tonight with a view to possible organic union of our church federations.”

When we speak tonight about confessional history, we do not focus on the *original* or *text* of the confessions or the *binding* to the confessions. But the United Reformed Churches and the Canadian Reformed Churches have, by and large, the same ecumenical creeds, the same Three Forms of Unity and the same Form of Subscription. Let us first and foremost thankfully and joyfully recognize this fact. For it underlies precisely our unity of faith and the endeavour for the union of our federations. We would not be here tonight, if we did not have the substance of and the binding to our confessions in common. However, the question tonight in this get-acquainted meeting is this: How did and do those confessions function in the life of our churches?

How did the history stamp our character and refine our identity?

The United Reformed Churches is a rightful continuation of the Christian Reformed Church of North America as it came about in 1857. The Christian Reformed Church was established by immigrants from the Christian Seceded Reformed Church in the Netherlands.

The Canadian Reformed Churches were formed in 1954 by immigrants from the (liberated) Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. We have, therefore, in common not only our confessions but a Dutch Reformed history that reaches back to 1571 and stretches till 1857. And even after it was established the Christian Reformed Church maintained strong sister church relations with the Reformed churches in the Netherlands. Our break-point basically is 1944, the year of the Liberation. It will not amaze you that the Liberation will receive special attention in my sketch of the confessional history of the Canadian Reformed Churches.

I would like to start with our common point of departure, the 1834 Secession from the Netherlands Reformed Church. I take you then on a short trip along four other stations. They are the Doleantie of 1886, the Union and its confirmation (1892 and 1905). Then follows a longer stay at the station of the Liberation in 1944. I will end with a few words about the necessity of establishing the Canadian Reformed Churches at their first Synod of Homewood-Carman (1954) and about our common calling today in 1998.

I. Secession (1834)

Historically, many of the families of the Canadian Reformed Churches, especially those from Groningen and Overijssel, derive their genealogical lineage from the Seceders. Almost all our first ministers studied at the Theological School in Kampen, called the School of the Secession. The very fact

that the United Reformed Churches and we have the Secession of 1834 as a common background makes a broad exposition of our historic bond unnecessary. Nevertheless, in connection with the topic of tonight I make three remarks about the confessional aspect of the "Afscheiding van de Nederduits Hervormde Kerk."

1. The Secession proclaimed again the total depravity of man and the sovereignty of God's grace. The Secession was anti-Arminian or more broadly put anti-humanist. One of the first publications by "the father of the Secession," Hendrik de Cock, was a reprint of the Canons of Dordt.¹
2. My second remark is that this emphasis on God's sovereign grace did not exclude an indiscriminate preaching of the gospel. In the preaching a rich Christ was offered to a poor sinner. Helenius de Cock, the first dogmatician of Kampen, wrote about his father that Hendrik de Cock did not make election into a condition for the preaching.²
3. The third remark is that the Secession was not sectarian but a truly Reformed *ecclesiastical* movement. The Act of Secession or Return begins with these words:

we, the undersigned Overseers and members of the Reformed Congregation at Ulrum, have for a considerable time noticed the corruption in the Netherlands Reformed Church, in the mutilation of the denial of the doctrine of our fathers founded on God's Word, as well as in the degeneration of the administration of the Holy Sacraments according to the ordinance of Christ in his Word, and in the near complete absence of church discipline, all of which are marks of the true church according to our Reformed confession, Article 29.

Anthony R. Brummelkamp was a brother-in-law of Albertus C. Van Raalte, the founder of Holland, Michigan, and was one of the first Seceded ministers. He told that in an encounter Hendrik de Cock "in all simpleness read to the people Article 29, also 27 and 28 of our Confessions of faith, not because he wanted them to make the confession the rule of their faith, but to prove that what he did was simply to execute what we, Reformed people, there confess to be the calling of us all according to God's Word."³

Let me end this discussion of the Secession of 1834 by stating that the identity of the Canadian Reformed Churches is shaped also by these confessional characteristics of the "Afscheiding": the proclamation of the sovereignty of God's grace and at the same time of the covenantal responsibility of man as professed in the Canons of Dordt. We are seriously addressed in the indiscriminate preaching of the gospel, and we are called to simply obey God's Word also with respect to the church, as confessed in Art. 27-29 of our Belgic Confession.⁴

"The Secession was not sectarian but a truly Reformed ecclesiastical movement."

II. Doleantie (1886)

We stepped into the train of our confessional history trip at 1834 and now arrive at the Doleantie of 1886. Here we meet the powerful figure of Abraham Kuyper. Although he himself never used this expression for his own reformational movement, in fact he became the leader of a second Secession from the Netherlands Reformed Church. He fought against the modernism of the theological training he himself had undergone at the University of Leiden. He forcefully attacked the so-called higher Scripture criticism. In his first principal's address at the Free University in Amsterdam in 1881, he spoke of the danger of this criticism of Scripture for the congregation of the living God.⁵

Kuyper maintained his battle against modernism in his actions together with his colleague F.L. Rutgers and other ministers and elders of the church in Amsterdam. It led to the Doleantie of 1886. In this year 1998 we commemorate Kuyper's journey to North America and his famous lectures on Calvinism at Princeton University.

When I try to characterize Kuyper's confessional influence upon us, Canadian Reformed people, I think of his splendid defense of the form of subscription and with respect to its contents I am especially reminded of Lord's Day 12 of the Heidelberg Catechism. It is the confession of office. There is the office of Christ. "Let Christ be King" was the apt title of Dr. L. Praamsma's reflections on the life and times of Abraham Kuyper.⁶ It speaks of Christ's kingship over his church. Together with

Rutgers, the man of church polity, Kuyper advocated the autonomy of the local congregation under Christ the King over against the hierarchism of church boards in the Netherlands Reformed Church. But Christ's kingship is not restricted to his church. There is no inch, there is no corner of human life of which Christ who is sovereign of all, does not say: "It is mine!"

Immediately connected with this office of Christ is the office of all believers, again not only in church but in the totality of life. The Doleantie as a moment in the confessional history of the Canadian Reformed Churches shows its effect also in an emphasis on the cultural mandate. Schilder's book *Christ and Culture* and his reminder of the ongoing antithesis in world history is an indication of the influence of Kuyper, even though Schilder had his criticism on Kuyper's terminology of "common grace." The concept of the cultural mandate of all believers played a role in the life of our Canadian Reformed immigrants.

It is needless to say that the defense of the autonomy of the local congregation was later taken up in the struggle of the Liberation. My beloved teacher Dr. Saekle Greijdanus, who died just fifty years ago in this month of May, was in church political matters a true disciple of Rutgers. Already in 1928 at the Synod of Assen and in the years before and during the Liberation of 1944, Greijdanus rejected synodicalism and defended the church political principles of the Doleantie even over against Dr. H.H. Kuyper, Abraham's son. But before we deal with these later events, we have to leave the Doleantie of 1886 and first arrive at Union station. We come to the Union of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, brought about in 1892 and confirmed in 1905.

III. Union (1892) and its confirmation (1905)

In the year one thousand eight hundred and ninety-two after the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, on the seventeenth day of June, at one o'clock, a General Synod of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands was convened and begun in the name and the fear of the Lord.

Thus reads the beginning of the Acts of the combined session of two synods in Amsterdam. It is phrased after the beginning of the Acts of Dordt and the wording as such indicates the significance of this historic event. In 1892

happened what is rightly called the miracle of the nineteenth century. The churches of the Secession and of the Doleantie came together to form The Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.⁷

I am always amazed about the fact that this Union of those who had left the Netherlands Reformed Church in two movements more than fifty years apart happened so quickly. While the first separate Synods of Seceders and Dolerenden after 1886 were held in 1888, already four years later the Union between them was established.

One can only regard this as a fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit who brings about true fellowship or communion. If we look at the actions of the brothers involved, one may say that they showed that their secessions from the Netherlands Reformed Church had not been motivated by a spirit of separatism or sectarianism but by true ecumenicity that seeks to manifest the catholicity of the church of God in the unity of the true faith.

The union of 1892 came about because the brothers did not bind one another on anything else but the obedience to the Word of God and the acceptance of the historic constitution of the churches of the Reformation in the Low Countries, namely the Three Forms of Unity and the Church Order of Dordt.

To be sure, Synod 1891 of the Christian Seceded Church had formulated some conditions. They wanted to retain the principle that the church has the calling to have its own theological institution for the training for the ministry. They did not want to give up their own Theological School in Kampen. This condition was accepted and in line with this principle the Canadian Reformed Churches have established their own Theological College in Hamilton.

Other important conditions were the following: The united churches must be acknowledged as true and pure churches according to the Confession and Church Order. It must be mutually agreed that the breaking of ecclesiastical fellowship, not only with the Boards of the Netherlands Reformed Church, but also with the members in a corporate and local sense is demanded by God's Word and the Reformed confession, and is therefore necessary.

I hear in these conditions for union a reflection on Kuyper's speculative ideas on the church. He publicized them, among others, in his Treatise on the Reformation of the Churches and in

a pamphlet on Separation and Doleantie.⁸ One may think of his distinctions between essence and existence of the church, invisible church and visible church, church as organism and church as institute, and his later theory of the pluriformity or multiformity of the church.⁹

I hear in the conditions for the Union of 1892 that the brothers of the Secession, although they did not want to exclude another form of reformation – namely, that of the Doleantie – nevertheless were convinced that there should be a royal binding to and a faithful application of Art. 28 and 29 of the Belgic Confession.

“The union of 1892 came about because the brothers did not bind one another on anything else but the obedience to the word of God and the acceptance of the historic constitution of the churches of the Reformation in the Low Countries, namely the Three Forms of Unity and the Church Order of Dordt.”

We also hear this reference to the binding confession in the answer the last Seceded synod gave to an objection to the proposed Union. The objectors wrote: “We cannot acknowledge as Reformed what lately Doleantie leaders publicly taught concerning regeneration and holy baptism.” Synod answered that the union would take place on the basis of unity in Reformed confession and church order and that points of dispute could be addressed to the authorized ecclesiastical assemblies in order there to be adjudicated. The basis of the united churches would be Holy Scripture and, subject to it, the three Forms of Unity and the Church Order of Dordt.

The doctrinal divergences continued to be discussed also after 1892. In 1905, formerly seceded brothers published *Five Theses* against the theological constructions of Abraham Kuyper and like-minded and addressed them to all consistories and members of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.

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Among the authors were professors such as L. Lindeboom and M. Noordtjiz and ministers such as T. Bos and J. Kok. These Five Theses dealt with the binding to the confession, eternal justification, immediate and dormant regeneration, presumed regeneration at baptism, and supralapsarianism.

What did they say about covenant and baptism? Well, in their fourth thesis they emphatically declared that Holy Baptism signified and seals not what is *present* or *presumed* to be present in the person to be baptized but the promises of the Covenant of grace, revealed in the Gospel. Baptism is administered *not* on the basis of presumed regeneration *but* on the basis of the Lord's command.¹⁰

What happened at the Synod of Utrecht (1905)? A committee stated that it was neither necessary nor desirable for a General Synod to make a definitive pronouncement concerning the points in dispute, since they did not concern any essential point of our confession or any fundamental doctrine of the church. They simply were divergences of opinion, different approaches, representation, or formulations. Indeed, there have been harsh expressions, unfamiliar terminology and exaggeration in certain doctrinal representations and a warning should be issued against confusing speculations.

In agreement with this report, Synod 1905 accepted a Pacification Formula of which Herman Bavinck was the spiritual father. It basically placed the two different approaches of former Secession theologians and former Doleantie theologians beside one another. It was a compromise, but 1905 brought peace. It saved and consolidated the Union of 1892.

Utrecht-1905 taught us that it must be possible to accept divergences of theological opinions and approaches within the framework of firm commitment of the Three Forms of Unity. It is

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Planks and specks

In his article "Access to the Table" Rev. J. Visscher asks whether we are making the fencing of the Lord's Supper table into the fourth mark of the true church. This is surprising since the second mark of the true church is "to maintain the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them."

Rev. Visscher also writes: "Our own house should be in order before we go about trying to arrange the furniture in our neighbour's house." If that is so, we should take steps to set our house in order. There is nothing wrong with informing the OPC that we have discovered shortcomings on our part and ask for a 3 or 6 year recess in order to come to grips with them. Think of Matthew 7:5. "First take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." Scripture does not say "because you have a plank in your eye, kindly leave the speck in your brother's eye alone."

Rev. Visscher ends with: "It is not right for us to demand of other churches that they must accept our extra-biblical position on access to the Lord's table before we can enter into ecclesiastical fellowship with them." A few comments in response. Firstly, Rev. Visscher has not proven that our position is extra-biblical. There is indeed no specific verse in the Bible explicitly telling us to hand in our attestation before we can partake as guests at the Lord's Supper table. But he has not shown that our current practices are not based on biblical principles. Secondly, if our positions on access to the Lord's Supper table are extra-biblical, we must admit that extra-biblical in the true sense of the word is not biblical.

Norm Schuurman
Beamsville, ON

Now what?

Re: Inter-Church Relations: Where Are We Headed?

Dr. J. Visscher has presented several issues for consideration with respect to *Acts of Synod Fergus 1998*. He has reviewed these issues and clearly shown that criticism and discussion of certain decisions is necessary. I commend him for that. The concern about decisions is not isolated but is wide-

spread as evidenced by Dr. Visscher's comment that "Never before have I received so many calls and comments from members of our churches in different parts of the country who are distressed by these decisions of Synod '98."

The question now becomes, "And now what, if anything?" The article ends by asking readers whether they share the concerns. My suggestion is that church members who do agree with Dr. Visscher should write their Church Council outlining the points raised by Dr. Visscher and asking for an appeal to the next General Synod. Dr. Visscher has done his part by clearly showing that changes are needed. As church members we now have a clear responsibility to do our part.

Tom Zietsma,
Hamilton, ON

Disappointed

This week I received *Clarion* and was again disappointed. It seems that every time I pick up a *Clarion* lately I am beset by complaining and discontent. The one does not like the chairman of a committee, the other does not think that Synod made a wise decision and so it goes on and on. It has always been said that *Clarion* is the voice of the Canadian Reformed Church. However, I am beginning to wonder. More time is being spent on polarizing the Canadian Reformed Church.

How can it be? We send sixteen men to make decisions for our federation. We pray for them. They pray that they may make GOD pleasing decisions! Yet we are not happy. Why not? It seems we spend more time being critical of synodical decisions than building up. Where do "we" go from here? Indeed!

Andy Keep
Brampton, ON

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an element in the confessional history of the Canadian Reformed Churches. In the struggle to come to a clearer understanding of the depths of God's revelation in 1905, we must value the *liberties prophetandi*, the freedom to prophecy.

Alas, the synodical peace of 1905 was broken in 1942. We arrive at our fourth station, the Liberation of 1944.

¹See further my essay "The Significance of the Secession of 1834 in the Light of Our Confession of the Holy Catholic Church" in *Secession and Liberation for Today*, (London: ILPB, 1984).

²Helenius de Cock, *Hendrik de Cock, Eerste Afscheiden Predikant in Nederland, Beschouwd in leven en werkzaamheid*, (Kampen: S. van Velzen Jr., 1860), p. 59: "Laster (was het) evenzeer dat hij de verkiezing als voorwaarde bij de Evangelieprediking stelde."

³*Compleete uitgave van de officiële stukken betreffende den uitgang uit het Nederl. Herv. Kerkgenootschap van de leeraren H.P. Scholte, A. Brummelkamp, S. van Velzen, G.F. Gezelle Meerburg en dr. A.C. van Raalte*, 2nd ed., (Kampen: Zalsman, 1884), p. 292. See also W. van 't Spijker, *De kerk bij Hendrik de Cock* (Kampen; Kok, 1985), pp. 24f.

⁴See further my speech "What Should Be Done?" in C. Van Dam, ed., *The Challenge of Church Union: speeches and discussions on Reformed identity and ecumenicity*, (Winnipeg: Premier, 1993), pp. 144-200, esp. 187-189 on the alleged exclusivism of Secession and Liberation.

⁵See my Kampen Schoolday address "Schriftkritiek en opleiding" in *De Reformatie* 42 (1966), 5-7.

⁶L. Praamsma, *Let Christ be King, Reflections on the Life and Times of Abraham Kuiper* (Jordan Station: Paideia, 1985).

⁷See the report of speeches by J. De Jong and C. Pronk and discussions on the Union of 1892 in C. Van Dam, ed., *The Challenge of Church Union* (Winnipeg: Premier, 1993) pp. 1-71.

⁸A. Kuiper, *Tractaat van de reformatie der kerken* (Amsterdam: Hoveker, 1884); idem, *Separatie en Doleantie* (Amsterdam: Hoveker, 1890). Important from the side of the Secession theologians are the publications by F.M. ten Hoor, *Afscheiding en Doleantie in verband met het kerkbegrip* (Leiden: Donner, 1890); idem, *Afscheiding of Doleantie, Een woord ter verdediging en nadere toelichting* (Leiden: Donner, 1891).

⁹See H. Zwaanstra, "Abraham Kuiper's Conception of the Church" in *Calvin Theological Journal* 9 (1974), 149-181.

¹⁰*Vijf stellingen betreffende leeringen, waarover in de Gereformeerde Kerken van Nederland in de laatste jaren verschil gevallen is* (Kampen: Kok, 1905), p. 17.

(To be continued in the next issue.)



What Kind of Deliverer Must we Seek?

Writing in a December issue of *Christianity Today*, John G. Stackhouse Jr. of Regent College, Vancouver, reviews a new book by New Testament scholar Charlotte Allen entitled *The Human Christ: The Misguided Search for the Historical Jesus*. Echoing the sentiments of the author, he does not hide his own disillusionment with much of the last two centuries of liberal scholarship on the person of Jesus Christ. He writes:

Almost a century ago, the scholar turned medical missionary Albert Schweitzer published a little bombshell of a book with the bland title of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906, reissued this year in paperback by the John Hopkins University Press). Schweitzer reviewed the history of critical studies of the life of Jesus, starting with the early eighteenth century sceptic Hermann von Reimarus and concluding with the late nineteenth century liberal theologian William Wrede. The central argument of Schweitzer's book at the opening of the twentieth century is startlingly appropriate also at its end.

Scholar after scholar, Schweitzer contended, had looked for Jesus down the deep well of history and had seen instead the scholar's own reflection. Some writers on Jesus marshalled impressive intellectual tools, from archaeological research to literary analysis, from comparative studies of Near Eastern religions to examination of talmudic materials. Others relied on personal intuition, perhaps a journey or two to the Holy Land and vivid imagination to construct their own "lives of Jesus." But in almost every case, Schweitzer concluded, two centuries of supposedly rigorous investigation had produced wide range of portraits of Jesus, each of which bore a suspicious resemblance to the artist and none of which was conclusive.

Charlotte Allen has come to the same conclusion after almost another century of biblical scholarship. In her new book, *The Human Christ: The Misguided Search for the Historical Jesus* (Free Press), she begins by surveying early Christian understandings of Jesus, and then takes up her story proper with eighteenth century Enlightenment inquiries into the "human" Jesus – that is, the "real" Jesus stripped of the superstitions and myths that had attached to him somehow over the centuries. Drawing her narrative up virtually to the present – yes, the Jesus Seminar appears, as do other contemporary scholars – Allen's rather lightly argued verdict is Schweitzer's re-dux: so-called critical examinations of the Gospels in search of Jesus over more than three centuries have been typically uncritical of the author's own governing biases and have resulted, time after time, in the projection of one's own ideals onto the figure of Jesus of Nazareth.

Sceptics dismiss Jesus as a lunatic, a charlatan, a troubled poet, or an impotent revolutionary, or embrace him as an ironical, detached, innocuous fellow such as they see themselves to be. Rationalists who do not discard him discover him to be logical, sensible, and practical. Liberals admire him as idealistic, brave, kind, and wise. Romantics extol him as passionate, vital, and free. Reformers revere him as bold, visionary, impatient, and forceful. Some modern Jewish scholars find Jesus to be, in fact, a pretty good Pharisee (while Paul, the exPharisee, turns out to be the troublemaker who actually started the Christian religion).

The worst kind of scholarly self-indulgence is revealed in Allen's painstaking account of two centuries of "lives of Jesus" that share one damning trait: whenever the

historical evidence fails to fit the preconceived theory, the evidence has to give way. Books of the New Testament are assigned earlier or later dates of composition and to this or that author in order to conform to somebody's scheme of how early Christianity developed. At the end of the nineteenth century, the eminent scholar Martin Kahler – no friend of orthodoxy – condemned the entire life of Jesus movement as having contributed virtually nothing to the store of historically reliable knowledge about Jesus. And many observers of the Jesus Seminar today see a similar dynamic at work in their deliberations; since "we" already "know" what Jesus typically said or did on the basis of our "study" of hypothetical documents such as "Q" or "protoLuke," or our reading back of Jewish or Gnostic texts from centuries later, then we can confidently assess the veracity of this or that report of a saying or action of Jesus. Yeah, sure.

Stackhouse then notes how Allen shows that some of these new 'theories' actually are quite old (there is nothing new under the sun!), and then proceeds to offer some comments of his own. He wonders if Allen has given enough attention to orthodox scholars. But evangelicals don't come off that well with him either! He continues:

What happens, in other words, when orthodoxy is assumed? Have evangelicals, like their heterodox counterparts, simply remade the figure of Jesus in their own image? Yale scholar Jaroslav Pelikan's book *Jesus Through the Centuries* has shown that, in fact, all Christians everywhere have tended to picture Christ according to their ethnic, economic, and political situations as well as according to their distinctive theological beliefs. And given that Jesus is the representative for all humanity, some of that

variegation of portraiture is understandable and even splendid.

But when modern North American evangelicals picture Jesus on T-shirts as a righteous Rambo (yet recall “Behold, the Lamb of God”), or arch defender of the nuclear family (but see “Who are my mother and my brothers?”), or champion of our political causes (but “my kingdom is not of this world”), then we also are guilty of – to use a Bible word – idolatry.

The biblical presentation of Jesus refuses to remain nicely confined to any of our containers. In particular, Allen shows how one picture after another of Jesus in this long line of nontraditional portraits fails before one question dear to the hearts of all faithful Christians: “What about the Cross?”

I once encountered an articulate, angry young Marxist at Speaker’s Corner in Hyde Park, London. As we had come upon a small knot of people during an afternoon stroll, it had appeared that the young Communist had silenced a gentle Christian preacher by loudly proclaiming that Jesus Christ was “not a pleasant person!” As he waved a New Testament under the nose of the abashed speaker, still marooned a foot above the rest of us on his soapbox, the assailant thought he was scoring an impressive point. But then another Christian in the audience, one with a firmer grasp of the gospel, spoke up: “Of course Jesus wasn’t a pleasant person. You don’t crucify nice guys!”

Why would anyone crucify the reasonable Jesus of the Enlightenment? Why would anyone crucify the dream poet of Romanticism? Why would anyone crucify the Law abiding, mild mannered rabbi of revisionist Jewish scholarship? Why would anyone crucify the witty, enigmatic, and marginal figure of the Jesus Seminar?

What Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner says about revisionist Jewish views of Jesus is true of most of Allen’s long line: “Theologians produced the figure they could admire most at the least cost.” But the Cross stands amidst each such easy path, each attempt to avoid the heart of the matter and the cost of discipleship. The Cross remains a stumbling block for all who encounter this Jesus. He is perhaps not the person we want, but he is surely the person we still – desperately – need.

GREETINGS FROM DENVER

Gifts came to us from far and wide
From across the ocean, from country side.
Prayers of God’s people helped lightened our load,
Helped shape our children in God’s covenant mold.
We express our thanks with a grateful heart
To brothers and sisters who played a part.
We humbly thank our God above
For His great measure of unfailing love.

With many thanks to all,
Heritage Christian School Board & Association
Denver, CO

Here in a brief and rather compact overview, Prof. Stackhouse gives us a good glimpse of the many follies in the last two centuries of mainstream liberal New Testament scholarship. It’s a clear indication of how careful the Reformed study of Scripture must be in this day and age. For writers are going to great lengths in search for some form of originality, but adherence to the text of Scripture has all but faded from view. In some cases, as for example in the Jesus seminar, we are bordering on a grand display of the theatre of the absurd with regard to the name of Jesus.¹

We can readily endorse Stackhouse’s emphasis: it is the cross that stands at the center of the life of Jesus, and still today the gospel of the cross remains “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:23). Ultimately that remains our standard of critique, and the focal point around which all the human approaches to the life of Jesus are to be judged. We can only pass judgment with the proviso that we ourselves have radically given our hearts and lives to the one who suffered the agony on the cross for lost sinners, “of whom I am chief,” as Paul says (1 Tim 1:15).


However an additional comment is in place at this point. Stackhouse ends not with the Saviour we want, but the Saviour we all need. True as all this is, from a Calvinist perspective we need to take this one more step. For ultimately the life of Jesus with its earth shattering death does not first concern what we all need, but what brings *glory to God*. If the chief end of man is to glorify and praise God (Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 1), then the glory of God must be our ultimate standard, also in the view we have of the person of Jesus Christ. Ultimately this Saviour, in the way He appears, brings the fullest and highest glory to God.

The Saviour who came to give all glory to God – such is the Saviour we need. And where is He to be found?

We can only escape all human wisdom with regard to this Jesus by an unconditional submission to the testimony of Scripture itself. That is the place we must be directed if we want to avoid this glorified foolishness called (liberal) “scholarship.” We cannot make a Jesus in our image, the Jesus we want, but we must humbly accept the Saviour as He is given by God himself, and as He presents himself in his word. At bottom, unconditional allegiance to the text of Scripture becomes the touchstone for receiving the Saviour we all need.

Let no one think that such a starting point necessarily means the end of all profitable New Testament scholarship. Stackhouse himself rightly calls attention to the conservative tradition in New Testament scholarship, through which we can gain many insights! The texts themselves, and their essential unity, give us enough to keep us busy for more than a life time! For precisely the allegiance to the texts includes within it the call and incentive to ongoing exegesis and interpretation.

Then we are confronted with the Saviour who at the same time is the head of his Church, and the Shepherd of our souls. We are confronted not with a Saviour as He was many years ago, but as He lives today! The Saviour we all need works daily – also in AD 1999 – to gather his sheep into his fold. Without the ruling and guiding Saviour today, we would all be lost.

¹Rev. G. Van Popta wrote about the Jesus seminar in *Clarion*, Vol 45, no. 10 (May 17, 1996). While I found his conclusion somewhat strong – I would rather pray for the repentance of these people than wish any condemnation upon them – I could understand his indignation at the proceedings he described. With such displays of ‘scholarship’ one is almost forced to ask if such folly can actually be surpassed. But look! Along comes another ‘scholar’ who seems to find a way to do it. 



Press Release, Classis Ontario South, held at Hamilton, December 9, 1998.

(published late due to technical difficulties, C.I.S.)

1. Opening.

On behalf of the convening church at Lincoln, Rev. J. van Vliet calls the meeting to order. He requests everyone to sing Psalm 19: 1, 4, reads Psalm 19, and leads in prayer. All delegates are welcomed.

2. Credentials.

The delegates of the convening church examine the credentials. These are found to be in good order: all the churches are lawfully represented. The churches are Chatham, Grand Rapids, Rockway, and Smithville have instructions.

3. Classis is constituted.

The moderamen is as follows:
chairman: Rev. J. van Vliet
vice-chairman: Rev. Cl. Stam
clerk: Rev. G. Ph. Van Popta.

4. Agenda.

The chairman speaks a few words about his excitement at being chairman of a major assembly for the first time and humbly solicits the help of his fellow officers. Help will be given.

The agenda is adopted as presented with the following additions:

- 6a) appeal from a brother in Grand Rapids
- 6b & 6c) letters from the church at Grand Rapids re. the above-mentioned appeal.
- 7b) letter from the church at Watford re. Proposal to divide Classis South into two classes.
- 8a) letter from the church at Smithville requesting the release of the Rev. J. de Gelder.

5. Question Period ad Art. 44 C.O.

All the churches respond properly to the questions asked.

Classis then breaks for a time to allow the delegates to study the material that came in just before Classis was opened.

6. Instructions.

The church at Rockway asks and receives advice in closed session in a matter of discipline. Closed session is then terminated.

7. Appeal of Rev. B. R. Hofford.

An appeal is received from Rev. Hofford, as well as two letters from the consistory at Grand Rapids related to this appeal. The consistory at Grand Rapids also asks per instruction how to proceed in this matter.

The appeal of Rev. Hofford, on the basis of a decision made by Regional Synod Ontario 1998, is declared admissible and is dealt with. An ad-hoc committee is appointed to serve Classis with a proposal. Meanwhile, after a break, Classis proceeds to deal with some other matters on the agenda.

8. Acts and Press Release

The Acts of Classis up to this point are read and adopted and the Press Release is approved.

9. Appointments.

Convening church next Classis: London.

Suggested officers: Rev. J. van Woudenberg (chairman), Rev. J. van Vliet (clerk), Rev. G. Ph. Van Popta, (vice-chairman).

Date and place: March 10, 1999, at Lincoln, Ontario.

10. Release Rev. J. de Gelder.

Two documents required for the release of Rev. J. de Gelder are read. Rev. de Gelder has accepted the call of the church at Flamborough. These documents are found to be in good order. Classis breaks for lunch.

11. Instructions (continued).

The church at Grand Rapids asks advice on how to deal further with the situation in the congregation at Grand Rapids. Advice is given by various delegates.

12. Proposal from the church at Ancaster to divide Classis Ontario South into two classical regions (Ontario-West and Niagara). The church at Watford has written a letter suggesting that this not be done, since both classes would be too small. It appears that the churches are

not sufficiently ready for such a step. The matter is referred back to the churches for further deliberation.

13. Release Rev. J. de Gelder (see Article 10).

Classis takes note of the other required documents for the release of the Rev. J. de Gelder. These documents are also found in order. The release of Rev. de Gelder from Classis Ontario South is honourably granted.

Rev. de Gelder is addressed by the chairman and thanked for his work in Classis Ontario South, along with best wishes expressed for the work in Flamborough. A certificate of release is given to Rev. de Gelder.

Rev. de Gelder expresses his appreciation for the good fellowship and harmony experienced in Classis Ontario South and wishes the churches the Lord's blessing also.

At the request of the church at Smithville, Classis appoints the Rev. D.G.J. Agema as counselor.

The church at Lincoln will represent Classis at the farewell of Rev. de Gelder on Sunday, January 31, at 2.00 p.m.

14. Personal Question Period is held.

Classis is informed by the church at Hamilton that Rev. J.G.R. Kroeze is available for call as per February, 1999, since he plans to repatriate in the course of the year. The church at Hamilton also presents each church in Classis South with a copy of Rev. Stam's anniversary publication, "Building the Church of God" (sermons on the book Nehemiah).

15. Censure ad Art. 34 C.O. is not needed. The chairman is thanked for his excellent work.

16. Acts and Press Release.

The remainder of the Acts and Press Release are adopted and approved.

17. Closing.

The chairman requests all to sing Psalm 100: 1-4, and leads in thanksgiving and prayer. Classis is closed.

For Classis,
Cl. Stam (vice-chairman e.t.).

1943 - 1998

On November 2, 1998, the Lord richly blessed Dad and Mom with 55 years of marriage, as well as on November 7, 1998, Dad celebrated being a minister of God's Word for 55 years. They have also been blessed with relatively good health.

On September 15, 1998, the congregation of Fergus, of which Dad is minister emeritus, held an open house in the Fergus Church building. At this time the consistory, on behalf of the congregation, presented Dad and Mom with a beautiful book of photos taken along the Grand River.

On November 7, 1998, they were able to enjoy another open house in their own congregation of Abbotsford. Both of these open houses were very well attended by many well-wishers, friends, colleagues and old acquaintances. They also received over 100 (!) cards from many different places of the world.

We are very thankful that the Lord has spared them together these many years, and that Dad has also been able to serve faithfully and diligently in the flock of Christ.

We pray that the Lord will continue to bless them, not only for us as a family, but also for the churches in general. May Dad also receive the strength to continue His work in God's service.

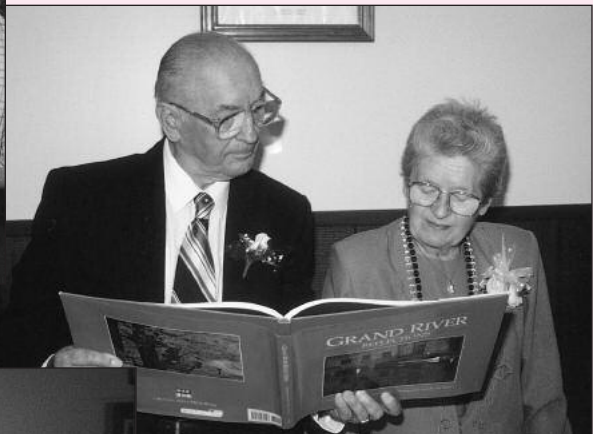
Love and Best Wishes
from the family.



Dad and Mom standing in Annex with picture presented to them by the family.



Klaas Sikkema and his wife presenting the book on behalf of the Fergus congregation.



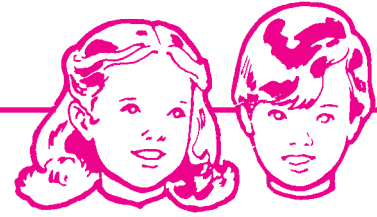
Dad and Mom enjoying some of the photos in the book.



Some of the guests at the November 7th Open House at the Abbotsford Church Annex.

OUR LITTLE MAGAZINE

By Aunt Betty



Dear Busy Beavers

Are you having a fun time this winter? Do you do lots of fun activities? Are you now able to go sledding, skiing, have snowball fights and make snowmen? I think it's always fun to be able to do that, even if you're an adult. Imagine living in a country that didn't have snow. There would be so much fun that you'd miss out on.

My mailbox is often quite empty. There are lots of Busy Beavers who haven't written to me in a long time. Why don't you make up a puzzle, or even send me a letter once in a while. I always enjoy getting letters and puzzles.

Lots of love from
Aunt Betty

PUZZLES

UNSCRAMBLE THE WORDS

By Busy Beaver *Dustin Wielenga*

SEJUS _____	TISHCR _____
RNBO _____	LSEPDISC _____
YMRA _____	RDOL _____

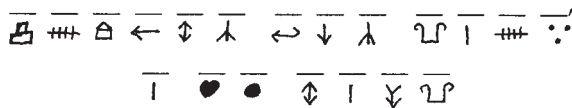
UNSCRAMBLE THE BIBLE NAMES

By Busy Beaver *Nelene Brouwer*

OAJCB _____	PESHJO _____
ONDGEI _____	IDVAD _____
AHOJN _____	SIHK _____
EETRP _____	SEJSU _____
MDAA _____	RYMA _____
AZOB _____	HMAAARB _____
SUAE _____	RANAO _____

BIBLE CODE

By Busy Beaver *Melissa Brouwer*



A = ⬆	G = →	M = ♥	S = ↕	Y = ●
B = ✱	H = ↓	N = ♠	T = ↶	Z = ▲
C = ▼	I = ←	O =	U = ↙	
D = ∴	K = ■	P = ☪	V = ⊕	
E = ⤴	K = ▬	Q = ☺	W = ⊗	
F = ↑	L = ☾	R = ✚	X = ⊖	

WORDSEARCH

By Busy Beaver *Rhonda Wiersma*

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

FIND:

CHRIST
MARY
JOSEPH
SHEPHERDS
KING HEROD
WISE MEN
STAR
BETHLEHEM
EGYPT
GOLD
MYRRH



FROM THE MAILBOX

Welcome to the Busy Beaver Club, *Dustin Wielenga*. Thank you for your letter and puzzle. I'm glad you enjoy school. Don't you think it would be really awful if you didn't like school? Do you think your teacher will be alright after she's had her operation? I hope so. Bye for now, Dustin.

Hi *Rhonda Wiersma*. Thanks very much for your letter and puzzle. Weren't you lucky to get a candy cane from your teacher? I hope you enjoyed it very much. Even though your puzzle came late, I'm sure that the other Busy Beavers will enjoy finding the words anyway. Write again, won't you Rhonda.

What a silly thing to do, *Nelene Brouwer*, to fall off the slide at school. But I'm glad your wrists are well enough now that you could write me a letter! I'm happy that you had a great time at Malcolm's wedding. It must have been sad when your kittens died. I bet you had a wonderful time at your Christmas concert. Yes, our school has a Christmas concert every year. I always really enjoy being there. It's a wonderful time to remember the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, don't you think. Bye for now.

Hello *Melissa Brouwer*. Thanks for your letter and puzzle. Rosalin must be really cute, and not only because you think so. I'm sure lots of people think she's cute. I'm glad you enjoy grade 3. Did you have fun at your Christmas concert? Till next time, Melissa.

Thanks for your letter too, *Sophia Brouwer*. Did you have a good time at the Christmas concert? What did you do during your school holidays? You had lots of nice presents from Santa Claus. You will write again, won't you Sophia?