

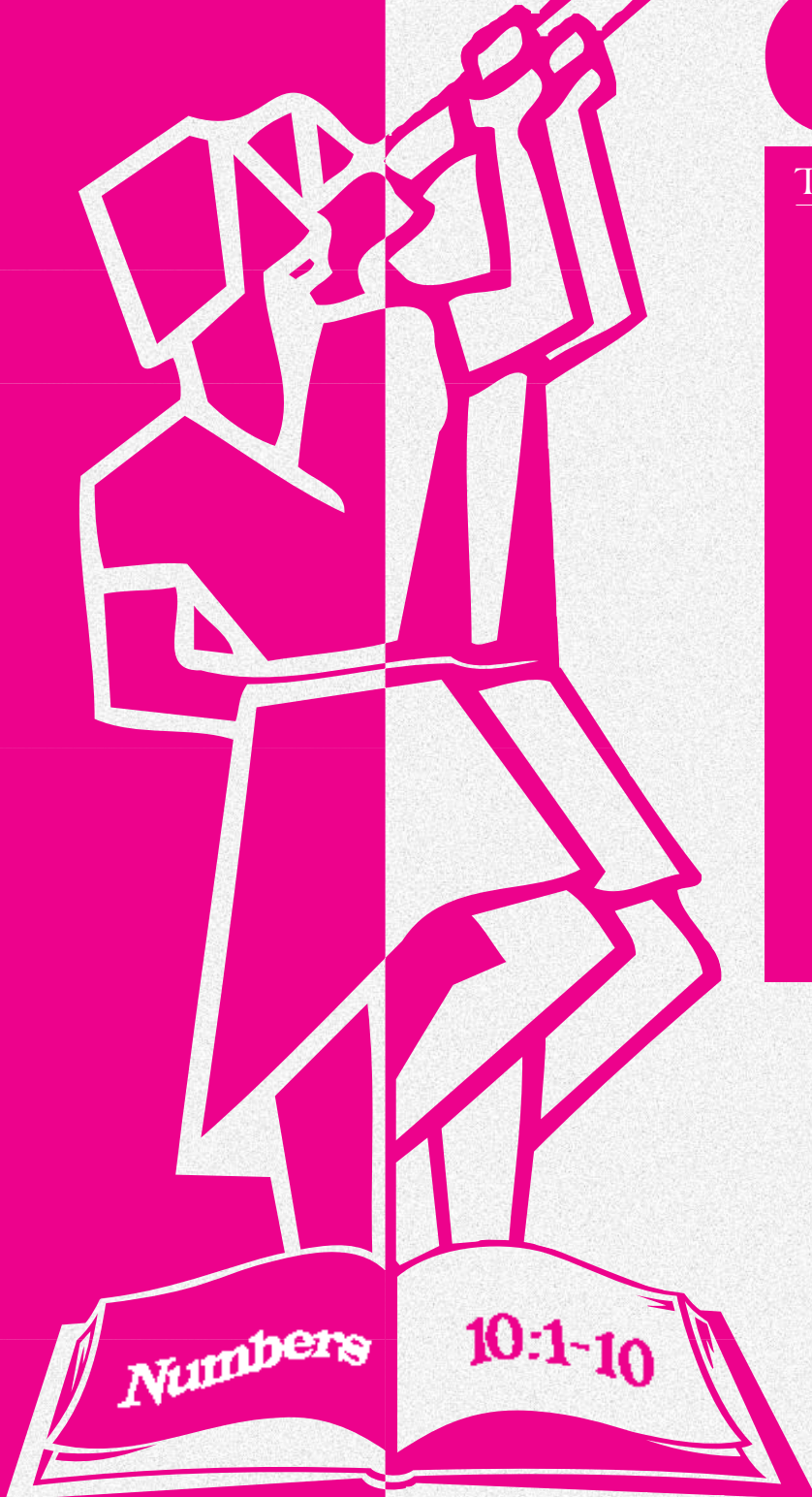
# Clarion

THE CANADIAN REFORMED MAGAZINE

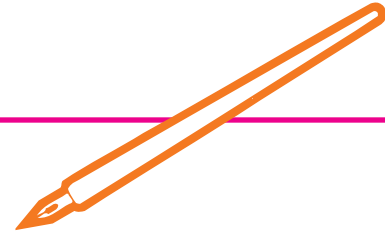
VOLUME 49, NO. 10 MAY 12, 2000



*Michael Polanyi  
and  
The theory of knowledge*



By C. Van Dam



## Creation and confession

In the last number of issues, the matter of the length of creation days has been in discussion in letters to the editor in *Clarion*. In the previous issue, there was also a contribution by Dr. J. Byl on this topic entitled "Creation Days and Church Unity." It may be good to reflect on what has been said, pull together some of the issues raised, and draw this particular discussion to a close.

### The creation days

In a January 7 Press Review, Dr. J. De Jong expressed his appreciation for the Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS) in their being vigilant in guarding "the interpretations of the scriptures against the encroachments of liberal theology and rationalistic scientism." The occasion was the RCUS defence of the historicity of Genesis 1 as describing "six normal chronological days of light and darkness." Dr. De Jong expressed his agreement with this position. He did, however, express one reservation, namely that we should be wary about binding ourselves *beyond* the explicit teaching of Scripture by insisting on the precise number of 24 hours for these days, as the RCUS apparently has done. His objection is that such a statement says more than Scripture does.<sup>1</sup> It is a small point of detail, for Dr. De Jong has expressed agreement with the basic position of the RCUS, but an important point nonetheless since a principle is at stake here. Our heritage as churches has made us sensitive to confessional binding beyond the explicit testimony of Scripture. Think, for example, of the doctrinal struggles around presupposed regeneration that eventually led to the ecclesiastical liberation of 1944.

Unfortunately, this small point of detail was completely misunderstood in some of the letters to the editor we received. It is unfair to Dr. De Jong's position that the suggestion of days being a billion years or more be raised or that he be accused of conceding to evolution.

### The real issue

What is the real issue here? The historicity of what is related in Genesis 1 and 2. The issue is not whether the day of creation was 23 or 25 hours long. Now, the RCUS undoubtedly had good intentions in fixing the days to 24 hours each. They wanted to stress that they were normal days. I can sympathize with that for I share with them the conviction that these were normal days.<sup>2</sup> But why go farther than that and seek to strengthen your position by going beyond the explicit testimony of Scripture? We end up in speculation and pedantic argumentation. Besides, judging from the Mesopotamian practice of his times, Abraham probably divided a day (the period of light and darkness) into 12

hours. Should we therefore be speaking of the work of creation, recorded in the Old Testament, as having taken place in 12 hour days? Please, let us keep it simple and biblical and accept that these were normal days and leave it at that. The precise length in terms of our hours is not the issue.

Dr. Byl admits as much when he concedes that the testimony of Scripture is adequately summarized by affirming that "the creation days were literal days, chronological periods of light and darkness, the last three being normal, solar days." While Dr. De Jong did not distinguish between the days as Dr. Byl does, he did speak of "normal days." Thus Dr. Byl's earlier suggestion that Dr. De Jong appears to be ambivalent is not really fair, nor is Dr. Byl's conclusion justified, namely, that Dr. De Jong's "unwillingness to be bound to 24 hours creation days is unfounded." All Dr. De Jong wanted to do is to make us aware of the danger of going beyond the express testimony of Scripture with respect to attempting to fix an absolute time on the creation days. As he made clear in his writing, he did not want to call into question the historicity of creation in the space of six normal days. And that is the issue we should be concerned about.

### Creation and confession

If the historicity of the creation account is what should concern us, should we then revise our confessions to make the historicity more explicit or should we perhaps adopt a new confession? In the previous issue of *Clarion*, Dr. Byl suggests that "it is high time that our federation studies the issue and adopts its own official position on Genesis 1, perhaps incorporating it in Article 12 of the Belgic Confession." This is basically the course of action of the RCUS. They have studied the matter, produced a statement on it and are now going to be urging churches they are in contact with to join with them in affirming the doctrine of six-day creation.

How should we respond to these suggestions which are born out of a heartfelt desire to serve the well-being of the church? In seeking an answer, the basic question that needs to be addressed is whether the crafting of an addition to our confessions or a new confession is necessary and warranted. Two subsidiary questions follow. First, are our times demanding such a response and second, do we presently lack the confessional wherewithal to counter the threat?

First then, do our times demand such a response? In the history of the church, confessions have often been born in the midst of intense struggle for the truth when the people of God went through a crucible of the fire of opposition to the true gospel. I have trouble seeing such a crisis situation in the Canadian Reformed churches today. I do not know of



any office-bearer who denies the historicity of Genesis 1, is pushing evolution in the catechism class or is preaching theistic evolution from the pulpit. It is of course true that our times are still very much in an evolutionary mind set and the influence of ungodly evolution goes on and on, affecting almost every part of the lives of our country, especially in our day the morals of the nation. However, more than in previous times, weaknesses and limitations of the theory of evolution are becoming increasingly apparent to scientists as well.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, with respect to the exegesis of Genesis 1, even scholars who do not want to accept a young earth or that creation actually took place in six normal days, acknowledge that the obvious meaning of Genesis 1 is that creation took place in such a period of time. But such scholars seek a way around this obvious meaning of the text because they do not wish to accept it.<sup>4</sup>

In light of the above, I have trouble seeing that we are presently in such a crisis situation that a special confessional response is demanded. The fact that this urge to have a confessional response comes up in a relatively isolated manner by one federation of churches tends to underline my observation, as does also the fact that the RCUS recognizes that they are going to have to do a lot of convincing to get other churches to think as they do. They hope to do the persuading by distributing 1500 copies of their report to delegates at major assemblies of churches they have ecclesiastical relationships with.

Now a sympathetic reader could at this point interject and say: "You may not know that the ecclesiastical house is burning, but I see it." Since perceptions can differ, this point could be granted. This brings us to the next question. Do we have to counter such an evolutionary threat with a new confessional formulation because what we have is not adequate for the task? Now it is true that in our confessions there is no express section dealing with

## What's inside?

The length of the creation days has been a topic of discussion in the last few issues of *Clarion*. Dr. John Byl of Trinity Western University, member of the Willoughby Heights Church, wrote on it in the last number. Today, Dr. Van Dam addresses the point in the editorial.

In her final installment of "Postmodernism and the Question of Truth," Dr. Oosterhoff introduces us to the thinker Michael Polanyi. We hope you enjoyed this short series of informative and enlightening articles, and that you benefited from thinking along with the author.

We all own a Bible. How thankful a person can be to have a personal copy of the Word of God! In his doctrine column, the Rev. Peter Feenstra writes about how we are to read our Bibles.

Rev. Marc Jagt supplies the meditation. The Sisters Gelms and Nordeman provide another Ray of Sunshine. Dr. De Jong reviews what sounds like a very interesting article written by Dr. J. D. Bratt of Calvin College about the wars fought in the Christian Reformed Church during the last 75 years. Finally, you'll find a letter and a press release. Enjoy your reading!

GvP



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evolution because that was not an issue in the sixteenth century. However, it is an irony of the RCUS report that it demonstrates that the Heidelberg Catechism's treatment of the fourth commandment clearly presupposes that the days of the week are modelled after the days God took to create the world. The Catechism thus defends the historicity of Genesis 1 and 2. Furthermore, does the Belgic Confession also not do this when we confess in Article 14 that "God created man of dust from the ground?" Although the confessions are not geared to our present society, they do indirectly speak to the issue.

And finally, let us not forget the clear testimony of the Word of God. What human formulation can improve on the majestic account of creation that we find in Genesis 1? The fact that creation took place in six days cannot be expressed more eloquently and compellingly than is written in the first chapter of Genesis and reaffirmed in the fourth commandment. The RCUS report on the days of creation shows that the interpretation of this chapter in the history of the church has virtually always supported that it teaches creation in six days. If another interpretation was given, then it was not because Scripture was not clear enough, but because of reasons outside of Scripture. This was also the case with Augustine (influenced by belief in spontaneous generation)<sup>5</sup> and it remains the case with much modern interpretation which thinks it is their duty to squeeze Genesis 1 into the current scientific mould of thinking. If there is a dispute or discussion in the churches on evolution or creation, let it take place very directly on the basis of the exegesis of Scripture.

I am fully aware of the fact that in spite of the clear testimony of Scripture there is a difference of interpretation among committed Christians on the point of Genesis 1. But,

should the struggle for the right understanding of God's Word on this point not be waged within the church, with brother addressing brother and seeking to convince? There are more issues on which committed Christians do not agree (such as the statement that smoking is a serious sin against the Lord and his temple, the human body, a sin which the Lord can punish with sickness). But not everything on which there may be disagreement or what may be considered a dire threat by some for the well being of the church needs a special confessional formulation.

You do not convince people by adopting a formula, but by careful and prayerful study.

<sup>1</sup>Clarion 49:1 (Jan 7, 2000) 12. In fairness to the RCUS, it should be pointed out that their proposed amendment to Article 12 of the Belgic Confession contains no reference to 24 hours. See *The Days of Creation. The Report of the Special Committee to Articulate the Doctrine of Creation* (Adopted by the 253<sup>rd</sup> Synod of the RCUS, May 17-20, 1999), 2.

<sup>2</sup>See my articles on the days of creation in *Clarion* 38:5 (March 3, 1989) and 38:7 (March 31, 1989), also made available on the internet by Mr. A. Zuidhof at: [www.hwcn.org/~ah444/#creation](http://www.hwcn.org/~ah444/#creation)

<sup>3</sup>For a popular overview of the problems (with research notes), see, e.g., Philip E. Johnson, *Darwin on Trial* (1991); for an extensive listing of the key arguments for evolution and for abrupt appearance, see W.R. Bird, *The Origin of Species Revisited* (2 vols., 1987-1989).

<sup>4</sup>See, e.g., J. Skinner, *Genesis* (1930), 4-5, 20-21 and Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (1987) 19, 39-40.

<sup>5</sup>Augustine was also hindered in his exegetical work on Genesis by his reliance on the Old Latin translation of Scripture and by his using the Apocrypha (particularly the Old Latin of Sirach 18:1) as inspired Scripture. On Augustine, see, e.g., L. Lavalley, "Augustine on the Creation Days," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32:4 (1989) 457-464.



By M. Jagt

## Service based on love!

*Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."  
Jesus said, "Feed my lambs" (John 21:15b).*

Failure can make an incredible mess of our lives. It's not just that things go wrong. Failure strikes much deeper than that. At times, we even say that we "feel like a failure" which only shows how deep our blunders can go.

That is how it must have been with Peter as well. He denied his own Master, not once, but three times! He denied the Saviour, of all people! What was it that Peter had so ironically promised a few weeks ago? "I will lay down my life for you" (John 13:37). How far Peter has fallen! And so as Peter meets with Jesus on the beach after the resurrection, he stands here as a man with some very heavy "baggage" you might say. But the Saviour has come to free him from the chains of that ugly past! That is what's going on in this conversation.

This meeting is not for the Saviour's sake, so that He can be reassured of Peter's love. He knows that already – as Peter himself points out. It is not so that Peter can finally be forgiven for his denial. There is no word of pardon here. Instead, this meeting is about the Lord restoring Peter to his *office*. The Lord Jesus Christ is preparing and equipping Peter to minister to his flock.

In fact, He is preparing and equipping all of us for ministry in the church. And what is the basis for that ministry? What is the foundation for our service to one another? Love. It is repeated three times, even. Our Lord Jesus Christ here wonderfully lifts Peter out of the pit of his guilt and shame. He frees Peter from his ugly past by blowing on the embers of Peter's love for Him. This will be Peter's strength as he shepherds under the Great Shepherd.

Our ministry must be based on love. Not on guilt, not on shame. Not on trying to make up for past failures. Not on trying to silence regrets and remorse. That kind of ministry is doomed from the beginning. It will never be able to

change the past. It will never cover up the havoc our failures wreak. Instead, the Saviour places Peter on a much more solid footing on which to serve Him. Isn't the Saviour's wisdom so wonderful?

Notice in particular for whom this love is to be. It is not love for the sheep that is the basis for Peter's service – that's what we might think, at first, perhaps. There is a much stronger foundation for our service, however. Love for the Saviour himself. We need to turn our eyes directly to Him, our Risen Lord.

That love for Jesus first of all sanctifies the church's service and beautifully transforms it in God's eyes. I can still remember what I made for my dad for Father's Day in Grade 3. It was a wishing well made of clothespins glued somewhat crookedly on a baby food jar. Perhaps you can recall making something similar. Perhaps you remember receiving something like that. That baby food jar still sits on my dad's dresser, a home for various knick-knacks. It is not a work of art, by any stretch, let me tell you. It wouldn't even fetch a price at a garage sale. But does my dad think of it in that way? Does he think it cheap and useless? Not at all. He looks past the imperfections, the globs of glue and crooked pieces of wood. He simply sees the love of his nine-year-old son. That love makes the gift special.

It is our love for Christ, as well, that transforms our service. This makes it pleasing in God's sight. In this life, our service to God will never be perfect. But it can be seasoned by love for Jesus Christ, transformed into something beautiful despite its ugliness. Isn't that what the Saviour wants, after all? Not busybodies, not perfectionists, not workaholics, but a people who serve Him out of sheer love.

That love for Christ also strengthens our service like nothing else can. This task that the Saviour gives Peter is not

an easy one. Taking care of sheep is never a simple job – especially if you have spent your entire life as a fisherman! Peter will be called to sacrifice and surrender in many ways.

But love for the Christ will be his strength. Anything less would fail him. Will guilt motivate him to let go of all he has in this world for Christ's sake and the sake of his sheep? Will remorse give him the strength to stretch out his arms and let them be nailed to a cross? A love for the Saviour will. That love the Saviour enkindles will give Peter the strength to even lay down his life in Christ's service.

Look at what Jesus promises Peter at the end of these words in John 21. Promises, I say, because it is a promise, despite how it may seem at first. The Saviour tells him about the death Peter will die for Him. That is a great promise! It means that Peter's earlier boast recorded in John 13 will now finally be fulfilled. Isn't that wonderful? Because of the work of the Saviour on the cross and the outpouring of the Spirit, Peter will be able to fully and truly love his Saviour as he desires – with his very life itself. He will not desert the flock entrusted to him, but even die for their sake and for the sake of his Lord. A love for the Saviour is truly privileged and empowered to do great things for Him!

When you fail in your service of your God and Saviour, turn your eyes to this one question asked here on the beach. You need to answer it as many times as you have failed. It will set you free from the past, transform your service, and be a great strength as you set out to serve your Saviour in thankfulness and love.

I ask it of you on behalf of the Risen Saviour: "Do you love Me?"

*Rev. Marc Jagt is minister of the Canadian Reformed Church of Ottawa.* 



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# Postmodernism and the question of truth<sup>4</sup>

By F.G. Oosterhoff

## Back to Kuyper

Last time we gave attention to Abraham Kuyper's critique of the modern belief in scientific infallibility. Before we move on to the postmodern attack upon scientism, and in order to prevent possible misunderstandings, one further remark on Kuyper's work must be made.

Kuyper stressed, as we saw, the personal element in knowing. In doing so he was not suggesting, however, that the presence of the subjective factor makes objective knowledge impossible – which means that he did not collapse into a postmodernist kind of relativism and scepticism. Kuyper knew that man was created as a rational being so that he can fulfil the tasks God has assigned to him, and that therefore he is capable of reaching true knowledge. But he also knew that man is not God and cannot know as God knows. To believe that he can reach absolute knowledge was the error of modernism. Human reason, Kuyper taught, is a gift of God and should be received as such. We are creatures, that is, dependent beings – and that, in the end, is why faith is the only road to certainty.

## Michael Polanyi

Kuyper was not a postmodern but a late-modern thinker, although he anticipated ideas that came to the fore in our postmodern period. In that sense he was in the same league as Nietzsche, who was his contemporary. Of course, their messages were altogether opposite. Also, Kuyper's words did not spread nearly as widely as Nietzsche's. The truly striking thing, however, is that in our days Kuyper's critique of the Cartesian theory of knowledge is being echoed by increasingly large number of thinkers, by Christians, but also by non-Christians. These postmodern thinkers include scientists, philosophers and theologians, linguists and psychol-

ogists, historians and sociologists, in short, people from practically every discipline under the sun. All these men and women, while realizing the defects of the modern theory of knowledge, do not deny the need for a theory of knowledge *per se*, and several of them are proposing means for a replacement of the modern one.

A leader among these people is the Anglo-Hungarian philosopher of science Michael Polanyi, who died in 1976. Polanyi is the man who has made a point of showing the very close connection between the modern theory of knowledge and such utopian schemes as communism. He is also the man who has done more than any of his contemporaries, and also more than Kuyper, to develop the contours of a new theory of knowledge.

**“We are creatures,  
dependent beings –  
and that, in the end,  
is the reason  
why faith is the  
only road to certainty.”**

## Polanyi's critique

I cannot go into the details of Polanyi's critique, nor can I properly outline his proposals for a new theory of knowledge. That would take far too long. All I can do is mention some of his theory's salient characteristics.

Polanyi, who was an internationally-known physical scientist before turning to philosophy, has shown,

firstly, that scientists don't begin with universal doubt, even if they think they do. They begin with faith, a point to which I will return. Secondly, he shows how the culture of scientism has poisoned our entire intellectual and moral atmosphere and has led, as I already mentioned, to such bloody utopian schemes as communism. A major reason is, he says, that scientism implies a belief in automatism. If only you apply the method, the result must follow. That did not happen in communism, and so recourse was had to force and coercion. He also shows that *that* kind of scientism is as strong as ever in our postmodern days.

Thirdly, Polanyi emphasizes the fact that we are not detached observers but are personally involved in the scientific pursuit. (The book in which he gives the most detailed outline of his critique and his new theory is entitled *Personal Knowledge*.) We are personally involved because we are moved not by scepticism, but, as Kuyper also said, by faith. Among the objects of faith is traditional, inherited wisdom, as well as the existence of a reality which we cannot yet see. Again, I will come back to the issue of faith in Polanyi's system.

In short, Polanyi attacks the ideas of automatism, personal detachment, and scepticism on which the modernist theory of knowledge was built. He also shows, fourthly, that because scientists are finite and because the personal element intrudes at every stage of their work, they are prone to make errors. In other words, the scientific method is neither foolproof nor absolutely certain. It remains tentative.

All this does not mean that Polanyi, any more than Kuyper, wants to replace the *objective* ideal with a *subjective* one, and so make truth relative. He knows that there is a multitude of reality checks in science and in other

disciplines. You can't get away with murder; if you try, the outcome of your theory will show up your deception and your peers will disown you. Still another factor that prevents us from collapsing into relativism is the role of faith. Polanyi says, as we saw, that scientists are motivated by the belief that truth is real and will be recognized by those who truly seek it. And they pursue their research, he adds, with what he calls *universal intent* – by which he means that they are committed to goals that have universal validity.

Polanyi reasons in a circular manner. He knows that and reminds us that all our ultimate commitments are based on circular reasoning, but also that such circularity is not vicious. In science as in other intellectual pursuits, and also in religion, we begin with faith in a reality that is as yet unseen or only dimly perceived, and we build on that faith, he says, with passionate, personal commitment, and also with universal intent. Faith is, again as in Kuyper, a means to reach knowledge and to achieve certainty of knowledge. It is, as Hebrew 11 states, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (RSV). Polanyi often quotes the church father Augustine, who said, following the Bible, that unless we believe, we will not understand. And remember that Polanyi and many of his colleagues and followers are not Bible-believing Christians.

### Application

I would have liked to say more about Polanyi and about several of his peers – men like Thomas Kuhn, Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, and so on – and especially about the bearing their ideas have on religious faith, but the series is becoming overly long. We will have to make do with what has been said about Kuyper and Polanyi. I hope that I have succeeded in showing the relevance of the ideas of these two men for Christians – and I also hope that our readers will find ways of spreading the message and of applying it. I am thinking here of parents but also, and especially, of teachers. After all, this series was based on a paper that was prepared for an audience of principals. I ended that original paper with suggestions how as teachers we can apply the message in the classroom, and I would like to conclude the present series in a similar manner.

Firstly, students should be reminded of the obvious fact that in practically all

our every-day actions we proceed (and in most cases proceed quite well) without the benefit of scientific proof. The same thing applies to our every-day assumptions. We believe (but cannot prove) that the sun will rise, that our breakfast is free from poison and reasonably nutritious, that our means of transportation are reliable, that school (or the office, or the store) will be open, and so on. In that sense, we “walk by faith.” If we insisted on demonstrative proof that all our actions are safe and justified before we engage in them, we would not even be able to get up in the morning.

No less importantly, students should be reminded, in the teaching of Bible and church history but also in that of academic subjects, that faith has an essential function not only in enabling us to live our daily lives, but also in the process of knowing and of achieving certainty.

This implies, among other things, that students must be shown (not just *told*, but indeed *shown*) that science is not the way to all truth; that it opens to us only a restricted area of knowledge; that it cannot lead us to the Infinite; and that it certainly does not have the right to dictate what we can and cannot believe.

But at the same time it must be made clear to them that we *can* have knowledge, reliable knowledge, in science as in other fields, even if that knowledge is not exhaustive. Nor should we expect it to be exhaustive: after all, we are only creatures – a truth that modernists tended to forget. One Christian author (I have lost the reference) uses in this connection the metaphor of the blind man with the cane. The cane allows him to go where he needs to go, but does not allow him to explore whatever he might like to explore. We are in a similar situation. The same limitations *and* sufficiency that characterize our scientific knowledge characterize our religious knowledge. The Belgic Confession, Article 2, tells us that God reveals Himself to us in his Word *as far as* is necessary for us in this life, to his glory and our salvation.

And lastly, students should be reminded of the fact that we learn not only by observation and sight – which is the favoured approach in a scientific age – but also by listening: especially by obedient listening. That is also the means to reach religious certainty. The Dutch language expresses the relationship between listening and obeying




Michael Polanyi,  
scientist and philosopher, 1891-1976

well: it speaks of *horen* (to hear) and *gehoorzamen* (to obey). The same relationship is implied in the English equivalent. The word “obedience” has as one of its roots the Latin verb for hearing and refers to a kind of “responsive listening.” The Lord Himself taught us the need of obedience if we want to learn and achieve certainty, for example when He said (in John 7:17) that the way to find out whether what He said came from God was to do the will of God, that is, to believe his Word.

Rather than being an obstacle to knowledge, faith makes true knowledge possible. The most striking and the most important accomplishment of our post-modern age is, I personally believe, that an increasing number of its thinkers have rediscovered this ancient truth.

Notes on references: As indicated earlier, further information on most of the topics dealt with in this series, as well as a fair number of references, can be found in my *Post-modernism: A Christian Appraisal* (Winnipeg: Premier, 1999). The discussion of Kuyper's theory is based on his *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 56-277. Those who want to read up on the scientific views of much of American Evangelicalism I refer to Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids/Leicester: Eerdmans/Inter-Varsity, 1994), which is very informative and contains numerous references.

Dr. Oosterhoff is a retired teacher of history living in Hamilton, Ontario. 

# How do you read your Bible?

By P.G. Feenstra

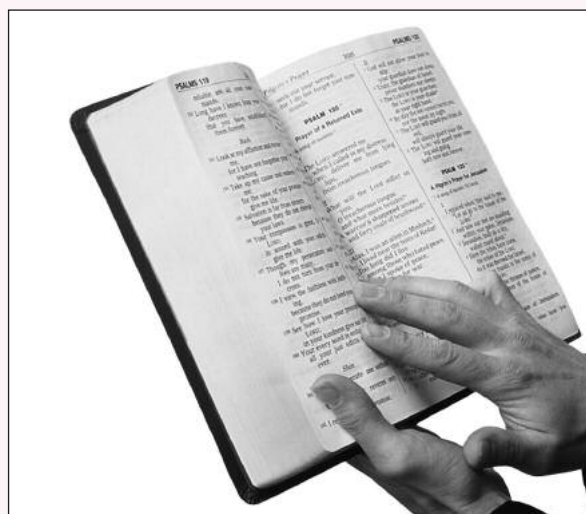
Do you know how to read your Bible? That sounds like a senseless question. Surely anyone who knows how to read should be able to pick up a Bible and start reading it without being told how to do so! Yet a correct reading of Scripture isn't as straightforward as we might think. The scribes, lawyers and Pharisees in Israel faithfully read the Word of God. Yet they really did not understand what they were reading because they had thrown away the key of knowledge.

When we sit down to read the Bible we cannot treat it like a novel, magazine or historical study. It is not on the same level as any form of literature. From Genesis 1 to Revelation 22, the Lord is speaking to us through his living Word. No part of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation because it was not written by the resolution of people, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God (2 Pet 1:20, 21).

## A book for sinners

When we open our Bibles we must read it from the premise that it is God's revelation. He discloses his glorious deeds and words to us. The Lord makes known to us his will for our lives. Moreover, we are to read this book, penned by the Holy Spirit, as those who know ourselves to be sinners.

This wasn't done by everyone in the early Christian church. For instance, false teachers in the church at Ephesus used Scripture to drum up all kinds of stories regarding their ancestors. Their time was consumed with endless genealogies which promoted speculations and did nothing to train



them and their students in the faith. These people misread the Scriptures and "wandered away into vain discussions" because they had never learned to know themselves as sinners before God (1 Tim 1:8-11). They lacked humility and an awareness of guilt. These false teachers thought quite highly of themselves considering themselves capable of teaching Scripture. Yet they themselves were not touched or convicted by its message.

The Bible is a book for sinners. We may want to write it down on one of the first pages of our own personal Bible: "This book belongs to me, a sinner." Before we read, we are to humble ourselves before the living God and ask Him, "Teach me, a sinner, the way I should go, O Lord." The purpose and goal of all of Scripture is to challenge and change us. Through it the Holy Spirit calls us to repentance and conversion. Reading Scripture requires alterations and transformation.

## Not a book for endless debates

Christians today can easily fall into the same trap. Rather than using the Bible as a textbook for vain discussions or endless debates on doctrinal and moral issues we ourselves must be convicted by its message and cut to the heart when, through it, the Lord calls us to repentance and conversion. We are to read it as those who desperately need God's grace and salvation; as those who cry out, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." This is what we are taught in 1 Timothy 1:8, "Now we know that the law is good, if anyone uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners."

You may have noticed that the Word of God never refers to itself as "the Bible". That name came into being later. In the Old Testament the Israelites referred to the Scriptures as



"The law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms" and sometimes that was shortened to "the law". Thus when Paul uses the word "law" we can easily put in its place "the Bible," or "the Word of God." 1 Timothy 1:8 could read, "Now we know that the Bible is good, if any one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the Bible is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient." The apostle is talking about the lawful use of the Bible.

### Is the Bible for Christians?

If this is true, can we say the Bible is intended for Christians? Paul writes that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane. He makes the claim that the Bible was written for the most vile sinners, to expose their error and to bring to light their wickedness. Thereby the apostle impresses upon our hearts that there is no room for anyone to sit at ease, to be filled with a sense of false security, so that with perfect composure he can use the Bible for his own pleasure and purposes.


So yes, the Bible is for Christians to make us realize who we are. Too often pride gets in the way and Christians present themselves to the world as being better than what they really are. Yet through his Word, the Lord exposes that Christians, by nature, are just as lawless, disobedient, unholy, and profane as the rest of humanity. If we were already just and righteous we wouldn't need to hear the message of the Bible; we wouldn't need Christ or forgiveness of sins.

### The Bible changes how we look at ourselves and others

The Word of the Lord teaches us not to think too highly of ourselves; as if we can withstand the temptations to sin. We may not say in response to the sins we see in others, "But that would never happen to me." Instead, we are to repeat what Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 1: 15,16, "*The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an exam-*

*ple to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life"* The apostle had not forgotten his former way of life or his present inclination to fall back into the same sins.

Examining ourselves in the mirror of Scripture our attitude toward others changes. We do not look down on those who have fallen into sin but we count others better than ourselves (Phil 2:3). We learn to see that even though there is no place for sin in the church there is room for sinners. Sinners who repent of their sins and amend their ways in conformity to God's Word find a home in the congregation of Christ.

How do you read your Bible? Once you see yourself as a sinner in need of grace and mercy your eyes will also go open to the wonderful gospel of mercy and grace of God in Christ. Let us continue to read our Bible daily, carefully and diligently, so that we may gain a deeper understanding of our own sinfulness and of the greatness of God's glorious deeds of redemption. 

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

### More on candies

#### Re: Pass the peppermints March 17

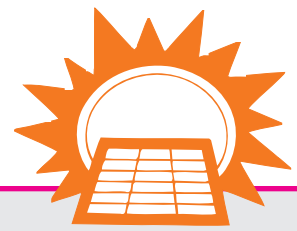
No doubt this article spawned much debate – most of it lightly flavoured – about the eating of peppermints and fruittellas during the church service.

When the article was discussed in a recent grade 12 religion class, I was encouraged to hear the students' comments. They spoke about the importance of each member in the congregation being both alert and unhindered in their worship. The discussion provided

much food for thought on how candies can achieve or restrict that end.

I did find one sentence in the article very inappropriate. Using the term "true church" in an argument about candy consumption was poor taste. The marks of the church provided in Scripture or summarized in our confessions should not be passed around lightly. The concept "true church" is too important to sour in an argument over Werther's Originals.

Jeff Wiersma  
Hamilton, ON



By Mrs. Corinne Gelms and Mrs. Erna Nordeman

*Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. (James 5: 10,11)*

## Dear Brothers and Sisters:

This world we live in is filled with so much suffering. There are many disasters that happen: wars, earthquakes, and many different sicknesses – even some that take lives. At times we may worry about what will happen to our own lives or to those whom we hold very dear to our hearts. What does the Lord have in store for us? Why is there so much suffering in this world?

When we go with this question to the Bible, we can see a prime example of suffering in the life of Job. Do you remember what happened to Job? This man was a blameless and upright man and he feared God and turned away from evil. Job was also a very rich farmer, living in the land of Uz, with thousands of sheep, camels, and other livestock. Job certainly must have enjoyed farming, and other businessmen enjoyed to go to Job to buy and trade wool and cattle because he was so honest and trustworthy. He did not get mixed up with dishonest practices, for he fled from evil. He was also blessed with a large family. He had a wife, seven sons and three daughters, and many servants. Job's greatest blessing was what God had given him in faith and trust through the working of the Holy Spirit.

Then Satan had asked God for permission to take away all Job had. Satan was only allowed to take away what God would allow him to. So Satan took all the animals, had all of Job's children killed, and then he even affected Job's health by afflicting him with painful sores from the bottom of his feet to the top of his head. Through all of this Job remained humble. He realized that being a child of God brings many blessings and much happiness, but, because of the broken world we live in – because of sin – there will also be suffering.

As Christians, when we are affected with suffering, we must still love the Lord sincerely, for the Lord will give us also perseverance, just as He gave it to Job. What a comfort to know that our God is the same yesterday, today, and forevermore.

Three of Job's friends heard about all of his sufferings, and came to sympathize and comfort him. They came with empty words of comfort and God rebuked them for what they said; however, God did not rebuke them for what they did, namely, for making the effort to come to someone who was in need. We, too, should continually remember those who need comfort. At times we may not feel we have the talent to comfort others; however, God has given each one of us different gifts, and we are commanded to use them to the utmost of our ability. The word of God teaches us that we have the duty to comfort those who are God's children. Through this, we may share in the rich blessing of the communion of saints.

After receiving much criticism, Job was still able to pray for his three friends (Job 42:8-10). It is very difficult

to forgive someone who has accused us of wrongdoing, but Job did. Are you praying for those who have hurt you? Can you forgive them? Let us follow the actions of Job, and earnestly pray for those who have wronged us.

God alone knew the purpose behind Job's suffering, and yet God never explained it to Job. In spite of this, Job never gave up on God, even in the midst of his suffering. Job shows us the kind of trust we are to have. When we endure suffering of whatever form – be it sickness, or handicaps, physical or mental – we must recognize that we have our heavenly Father who surrounds us with his care and love. We should not demand that God explain everything. God is sovereign, and in his wisdom, He allows suffering for a time, although He knows how to turn it around for our good (Romans 8:28). We may have no answers as to why God allows suffering, but we can be sure He is all-powerful.

Finally, God spoke out of a mighty storm. Seeing the great power and majesty of God, Job fell in humble reverence before God. Job had learned that when nothing else is left, he still had his Father in Heaven, and that was sufficient for him. It should also be enough for us.

We can receive comfort from the suffering that Job experienced because we still have the same God today who will also give us perseverance. It is God's joyful message in which He promises to everybody who expects everything from Him: I will help you through.

*The Lord will guard and keep you when  
You meet with harm or strife:  
He will preserve your life.  
When going out or coming in,  
The Lord will you deliver  
From this time forth for ever.*

*Psalm 121:4*

## Birthdays in June:

### 17: JOAN KOERSELMAN

Box 1312, Coaldale, AB T0K 0L0

### 20: DANIEL STROOP

193 Diane Drive, Orangeville, ON L9W 3N3

### 30: BEVERLY BREUKELMAN

2225 – 19 Street, Coaldale, AB T1M 1G4

Congratulations to you all on this your birthday. Joan will be turning 43, Daniel will turn 19, and Beverly will be 38. May our Heavenly Father continue to surround you with His love and care throughout this new year that lies ahead of you. Till the next time:

Mrs. Corinne Gelms and Mrs. Erna Nordeman  
Mailing correspondence:  
548 Kemp Road East  
RR 2 Beamsville, ON L0R 1B2  
1-905-563-0380



## A little history lesson

How important is our knowledge of church history? Quite important, we would say, and judging by his overview on the subject, James D. Bratt of Calvin College would agree. Bratt, a professor in the history department, wrote an article called “Wars of Words, Wars of Grace. A Brief History of the Battles that have Shaped the CRC.” Although the struggles are seen as very important, Bratt gives them a different twist. In a somewhat lighter vein, he gives a sociological view of the development of the Christian Reformed Church, indicating how through its wars the CRC grew from boyhood to manhood in a new environment. Here follows his brief story of the last three-quarters of the century:

To judge by the shelves at any bookstore war is most popular story in history. Wars make for exciting drama with their clear beginnings and endings, their heroism and tragedy. Even if these virtues come more from the retelling than from the events themselves, war has real teaching potential. It reveals the issues for which people are ready to fight. It shows how a people are organized as a group. And it shows how they change, for wars rarely leave people the same.

In this light the great battles fought in the Christian Reformed Church over the past century are instructive. They have come in three clusters. In the 1920s the CRC fought over common grace as a way of maintaining a strong Reformed identity through a harsh process of Americanization. This episode was settled with quick, decisive strokes. In the 1960s the denomination argued over how to understand the love of God on a North American scene that had become an attractive yet troubling home. This struggle was lower key and muddier.

Finally, from the early 1970s to the mid-1990s, the CRC fought over the role of women as a way of deciding whether to be mainstream Protestants. This conflict, prolonged and intense, left plenty of displaced members and a reluctance to fight again. It might also have left a chance for reconstruction.

### The issue of common grace

The tensions dividing the CRC in the 1920s arose directly out of the Great War of 1914 to 1918. As an ethnic church the CRC came under sharp suspicion during the war and felt compelled to adopt English as its official language. The “progressives” in the CRC wished to push that opening further and enter wholeheartedly into American life. Others saw more tumult than triumph in recent events and wished to hold back. Where and how the church was to be in the world was the underlying question; common grace became the issue.

The battle began in 1918, when some professors at Calvin Seminary complained that their colleague, Rev. Ralph Janssen, was teaching liberal views in his Old and New Testament classes. Rebuffed by the Board of Trustees and again by synod in 1920, they took their cause to the church at large by publishing pamphlets against Janssen. Meanwhile, Rev. Herman Hoeksema, the young pastor of Eastern Avenue CRC in Grand Rapids, went after Janssen in his weekly column in *The Banner*. The progressives defended Janssen in their magazine, *Religion and Culture*; the conservatives prosecuted him in their monthly, *The Witness*. When the seminary board gave Janssen a year’s “vacation” from his post in 1921, he fought back with

pamphlets of his own. This was a war of words fought out by a direct appeal to people in the pew who were connected by a tight communications network and a passionate concern for theology.

Janssen’s prosecutors charged that he diminished Scripture as special revelation and Israel as a people set apart. Janssen replied that his opponents were un-Reformed in denying common grace and that this denial led them to misconstrue his teaching while holding an exaggerated view of the church’s opposition to the world. The relevance of the case for the CRC (“Israel”) and the pressing American “world” was plain to see. Synod 1922 therefore spoke volumes in demoting Janssen from his professorship.

The Janssen battle immediately gave rise to another. Now the progressives took the offensive by charging two of Janssen’s prosecutors, Rev. Hoeksema and Rev. Henry Danhof of Kalamazoo, Mich. with violating the Reformed confessions by denying common grace. Hoeksema and Danhof freely admitted the denial but argued that their denial of common grace as not unconfessional. Synod 1924 found against them by upholding common grace as being Reformed on three points. Synod quickly added that these points did not reduce the church’s distance from the world and that Hoeksema and Danhof were correct in the essentials of Reformed doctrine. But the pair did not heed synod’s injunction to conform on the three points and ran afoul of their respective classes. Shortly after, they organized their own denomination, the Protestant Reformed Churches in America.



Hoeksema and Janssen were two of the boldest and ablest minds in the CRC. Each proposed a clear, logical and opposite course for the denomination to follow in its adjustment to the American world. The CRC instead chose a minimum of Janssen's principle and a maximum of Hoeksema's mood. It built a fortress of Reformed distinctiveness where everyone would live together as one, reading off the same page.

### The question of biblical authority

The main traffic out of this fortress for the next generation was by missionaries and soldiers. Thus it was no accident that the struggles of the 1960s began with the writings of two missions-minded World War II veterans: Harold Dekker, who taught missions at Calvin Seminary, and Harry Boer, who worked on the Nigerian field. Both thought that the CRC's confessional standards gave too little encouragement for evangelism. Boer carried on for decades against the double predestination – to salvation and damnation – taught by the Canons of Dort. But it was Dekker's articles in 1962 and 1963 on limited atonement that roused the storm. Once again progressives battled conservatives in their separate magazine and in appeals to synod. Once again the CRC's posture toward the outside was in question.

But this time North America was home sweet home, the centre of the free world in the cold war against communism. It was also a needy place, what with the civil rights movement, the sprawl of suburban materialism, and the endless war in Vietnam. The progressives thought North America was ready for the gospel; the conservatives thought it was likely to water down the gospel as the price of hearing it. The question of how appealing God was to North America soon became how appealing North America – and other places – was to God. Professor Dekker thought the answer should always fall on the goodwill, power, and scope of God's love. That some souls would go to perdition nonetheless ought to remain a mystery. Dekker's opponents claimed to have the

more traditional understanding: God exercised two kinds of love, not one love expressed in two different relationships. That the difference was not easy to see became evident when Synod 1967 called a second set of meetings to deal with the matter. Synod finally, and modestly, faulted Dekker for being "ambiguous" and "abstract," then commended the issue to the churches for further study.

Rev. Andrew Kuyvenhoven, who would later serve as editor of *The Banner*, remarked that synod's "mountain" of labor had produced a "mouse" of a decision. But the two sides recognized something more momentous. After 40 years of conservative dominance, power in the CRC had shifted to the progressives. Their victory was sealed in 1972 when synod adopted "Report 44" on biblical authority. Scripture's truthfulness, the report declared, lay ultimately in its testimony to the redemption God wrought in Christ, not in the accuracy of its statements about every domain from biology to the historical record.

The 1920s battle began with Scripture and moved to God's grace; the 1960s skirmish moved from God's love to Scripture. Meanwhile, the CRC had moved out of its fortress into a house with windows open to the world. Yet people were still supposed to read from the same book, even if they were on different pages.

### A third chapter

Bratt's story also includes a third chapter dealing with the struggle surrounding the role of women in the offices. Bratt's approach also attempts to distill a positive gain out of this fight, although he is sensitive to how much pain this last controversy inflicted. In fact, of all the controversies this was by far the worst, with the denomination left in a state of disarray and synod like a "state legislature in late session: wrangling, weary and factionalised." People are no longer reading from the same book, much less from the same page; they have migrated to different rooms, "reading different books and gazing out of the windows rather than at each other." The CRC in civil war.

It all leads to an ambivalent ending. The first two controversies were obviously good for the CRC, the first consolidating its Reformed distinctiveness, the second, allowing that Reformed fortress to get some windows open to the world. But on the last battle Bratt is less complimentary: "If those who stay in the CRC have no reason to do so unless it is to remain Reformed, perhaps some of the best listening could be for the Spirit speaking through the church's confessions again. That could turn us from fighting words into channels of a future grace." So Bratt exits his lesson leaving behind a cloud of ambiguity. Where to from here?

### A novel approach

Bratt's little lesson brings out some new features of the history of the CRC in the last three-quarters of a century. Sure to his craft, Bratt sets the conflicts in the backdrop of the political and social issues facing the American nation. Much of the debate concerned the role of the CRC in fundamentally new surroundings, and how those new surroundings were to be evaluated. As such there is merit in his approach.

Yet there is a fundamental gap in the story. Although these controversies are reviewed and related to the social milieu, they are not related to *each other*, especially in a doctrinal and ecclesiastical context. In other words Bratt writes good history, but he has forgotten the aspect of *church* history – and that is a different matter.

A brief comparison of these two conflicts will perhaps help to explain what I mean. In the 1920s the issue was common grace and the degree in which the church was able to accept and work with various cultural forms and endeavours which it witnessed around it in the new world. The tone of Kuyperian optimism inherent in the day said there was much good in the broader world around the church and believers may and should make use of it, developing the good things of the world more fully in the life of the church. The products of common grace were stepping stones to greater manifestations of God's special grace. It all reflected as positive disposition of God to the world at large, and the need for the CRC to shed its shy and withdrawn image, and to step out into the world.

It was to this Kuyperian optimism that Hoeksema and his followers reacted in the 1920s, leading to the formation

of the Protestant Reformed Churches, the first CRC splinter group. Hoeksema's reaction had some positive points, (maintaining the antithesis!) but over-shot itself by basing itself on a reading of the Canons of Dort that restricted membership in the covenant to those who were elect. Common grace was radically denied, and the antithesis was defended as operative in all areas of life. In this closed and supralapsarian approach, mission was regarded as simply extending a call to those who previously had been elected. Others were not really called, since they never would be equipped to hear the call anyway. It was all a major ecclesiastical issue for Hoeksema, for he felt that, in binding itself to the *Three Points*, the CRC had compromised itself to the world.

In the 1960s Dekker defended the love of God to all people everywhere, making this a cornerstone of his missionary preaching. But what Bratt fails to point out is that he built his case on the synodical declaration concerning common grace as maintained in 1924. In other words, it was only a small step from the assertion of disposition of divine favour to the non-elect in 1924 to a disposition of love to all the world in the 1960s! Dekker only followed through on the definite choice that had been made in 1924. Only, in his case, he defended and promoted a doctrinal stance contrary to the adopted confessional statements of the church. Whereas in 1924 the confessional statements were given a certain biased reading in favour of common grace, in 1960 they were abandoned by Dekker in favour of an alternative reading promoting the love of God to all people. But the one step could not have been made without the other! In fact even the synods dealing with Dekker appealed to the decision of 1924 as part of their defence of a more traditional view, but they were left with the mammoth task of trying to exegetically and doctrinally underpin the biased reading – an impossible task! No wonder there was a lack of solid spiritual energy to deal with the issue. The mountain of labour in the Dekker case would not have been satisfied with Kuyvenhoven's mouse had the brothers of the 1920s been more resolute in closing the door to the compromising theology of the day.

Bratt also points out that in the 1960s the progressives rather than the conservatives took control in the denomination. How true indeed! But

here too it must be pointed out that the progressives were only able to make the gains they did by riding on the progressive waves which were already present in the 1920s and which were fuelled in the 1940s with the decisions that were taken against the reformational influences of the "concerned" and the later "liberated" group in the Netherlands. And by the time the CRC – in a moment of genuine honesty and confession – came to admit that it had made a partial and biased decision against one party in the 1940s, the progressives were so deeply entrenched in the positions of power that turning back the clock was impossible.

It is from this position of entrenched progressivism that we see the opening of the conflict surrounding woman in office. If confessional deviation was tolerated in the 1960s, we see it promoted openly in the 80s and 90s. Yet there is one line from the 20s to the 90s – increased progressivism, and increased laxity with regard to maintaining allegiance to scriptures and the doctrinal standards of the church. So we have the ongoing story of the continued splintering of the CRC – a splintering which by all accounts is not over yet.

#### The sad note

Although his ending sounds ambivalent, Bratt packages his lesson within the framework an essentially positive assessment. He is obviously of the mind that the progressives and their steady influence has been a good thing for the church, helping it on the journey to mainstream Protestantism. He seems to defer to the position of the synods on the issue of women in office, apparently endorsing the view that the Bible supports two interpretations, proving in his words that "believers do not know completely what God reveals in Scripture and so must wait and listen for the Spirit's promoting." But is this a

case of believers not *able* to know, or not *wanting* to know?

"Wars rarely leave people the same." says Bratt. No doubt he's right. But wars don't always result in people turning out better, either. Ecclesiastical wars not only cause much pain; they also involve existential choices for most participants. There is more at stake than just the immense sadness that comes with the break up of homes and families and the tensions that come with ecclesiastical debates and arguments. Behind the wars is one's stand with respect to *eternal* issues, the issues of *life and death* in the deepest spiritual sense of those terms. Church people fought these battles as if their lives depended on it, since for them, their lives did depend on it. It concerned how they were applying their Christian task and duty in the world. And from that perspective these are not light matters. They concern the very life blood of the church.

Right now the CRC is not of any mind to confront its own development and be called to account with regard to its own slide to mainstream Protestantism. It probably helps few in the CRC to point these things out. But they should be said – if only for the purpose of reminding ourselves that small steps can have a great impact! Why is it that a whole generation can derail on the basis of one misstep of a previous generation? The fathers have told us: listen carefully to the truth! One wrong step and you see plainly that – even with the good that one can still find here and there in the CRC – the ship careens lopsidedly on the way to ruin. There is only one way back, the way the prophets have long pointed to: return to the testimony! Then you may lose numbers or prestige, but you gain the crown of a lasting reward, and the joy of a world in which "wars" fought for the truth give way to everlasting peace. **C**



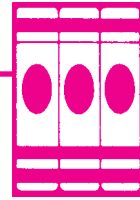
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## Uncovering ancient pulpits

By J. De Jong

Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*. Volume 3: *The Medieval Church* Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 646 plus xviii pages, US \$45.00; Paperback.

This book is the third volume in Hugh Old's mammoth project on the history of preaching, one in which the author was faced with a mountain of challenges in trying to capture 1000 years of preaching in the space of one book. Considering the wide range of this book, its depth and scholarly precision, as well as its lucid and readable style, there is no doubt that Old has set a new standard in this area that will not be surpassed for quite some time. Old has taken the time to delve into representative sermons of various traditions and periods, drawing interesting parallels and comparisons along the way. All the while he writes from the vantage point of an American Protestant who has a deep respect not only for his own tradition, but for the many background traditions and schools that formed it.

In winding his way through the many hills and valleys of the mediaeval period in the east and on the continent, Old has woven his account around the various types of preaching identified in his first studies. The result is a strong liturgical component in this book, since most of the preaching in this period had a liturgical or festal background. Old takes the time (and the space) to give detailed descriptions of various lectionaries and festal calendars, making this book an extensive resource text for liturgists as well.

### Byzantine preaching

Old starts his journey with a look at the preaching of the Byzantine period, with its special interest in high rhetoric and classical language styles. This was preaching designed to impress those in

the court, and it reflects an essential unity between church and state so characteristic of this period in the east. Several preachers pass the revue, and their styles and approaches all indicate that also in the world of preaching there is essentially nothing new under the sun. Old was surprised and impressed at the various narrative and illustrative techniques used by these colourful figures of the ancient world. Yet already here, he notes, in the fourth and fifth centuries, a process of internalization and dramatization has begun which represents a decided shift from the preaching styles of the early church.

Different forms of sermons are reviewed in this section, including a very unique form called the *kontakion*, a sort of pulpit ballad with high narrative content. Old found examples where one preacher, Photius, even conducted a mock interview with the tomb guards in his Easter sermon. Many of the sermons were biographical and exemplaric, indicating that also in the world of preaching and methods of preaching, there is nothing new under the sun. On the other hand, there was also at times a strong stress on the proclamation of God's promises, as for example Photius's prophetic sermons.

The influence of Neoplatonism is very strong in this period, leading to the use of allegory in sermons, and the idea that the liturgy is a dramatization or dramatic icon of the salvation work of Christ. Hence most of the preaching is festal preaching, which soon fell into established conventions. Catechetical preaching appeared in this period, which initially formed as a reaction to the over dramatized liturgical preaching that over the years had become too conventional.

A number of interesting details enliven the discussion as well. For example, Old asserts that eastern preachers were wary of adopting the so-called *filioque*, that is, the phrase in the Nicene Creed that the Holy Spirit also pro-

ceeds from the Son, since this was seen as a movement towards institutionalizing the Holy Spirit and the gifts of the Holy Spirit – gifts which in the eastern tradition were always regarded as more inward and more mystical. Old himself seems to lend some credence to this position, indicating that Photius "realized that the teaching of the double procession of the Holy Spirit blurred the distinctions between the persons of the Trinity." (47). From the point of view of attempting to bridge the gap between east and west, there may be grounds to carefully consider the binding character of the *filioque*, but I cannot see how Old's assessment holds on this point. There are enough "distinction texts" – that is, texts marking the clear distinction between the person of the Father and the Son – in Scripture with regard to the Persons of the Trinity to prevent any blurring from taking place.

As in the first two volumes, Old continues to lace his study with observations made from the point of view of American Protestantism, and even spices his phrases with American colloquialisms as he goes along. So some early medieval Greek preachers are compared to the pietists, who, says Old, "have a way of turning off as many people as they turn on." (56) One of the discourses of Symeon the new theologian (924-1028) remind him of the old American gospel song, "Standing on the Promises"; in fact these songs are so much in Old's mind that after quoting a few lines of "He lives; He lives . . . He lives within my heart" he says: "It is just this sort of thing that Symeon had in mind." (60) Old first thought that Symeon's sermons were "far out," but as time went on he began to truly appreciate them. Symeon was orthodox on all counts, and defended the historical character of Christ's resurrection. But here already the accent fall on the subjective experience of the resurrection in the heart of believers.



## The western church

Old then considers the missionary preaching of the preachers who turned to the west to Gaul, Spain, the British Isles, Germany and the Lowlands. These lands received missionary preachers of great force and conviction. This type of preaching was much different than eastern forms, both more popular and somewhat simpler. The mission preachers tended to follow the history of redemption more closely so that many sermons became a sort of course in Biblical history. This still characterizes much mission preaching today.

Again several names come into view, some more common, some less: Patrick, Wilfrid and Willibrord. Old notes that for the most part Patrick's sermons were unrecorded, so that we know little about his preaching. Yet it must have been powerful preaching, for he left a lasting mark. The preaching of the Scots, on the other hand is both well preserved and quite superb. Old is partial to them: "the Scots are born preachers, bards of the pulpit" (242). The Celts were singers, those who prayed through the Psalter in their monasteries. A more unknown figure among the Celts was Columbanus, who preached against Arianism, proclaiming this life is not the real life but the way to real life, not a *vita* but a *via*, and the real *via* is Jesus!

With the birth of the western church, one sees the rise of lectionary preaching. Much of this preaching arose because, especially during the 6th century, there was a marked inability with regard to preaching. Old cites Caesarius of Arles as an example of a leading preacher who published homilias to train others, but himself fell prey to simplistic moralism and allegorizing. The lectionaries and homilias were designed to help uneducated monks take care of their flocks. The lectionary followed the church year, and its lessons grew out of a re-enactment of the history of redemption. Here one finds the roots of the idea that in the liturgy of the church the history of redemption is internalized and repeated in the lives of the saints. It was not until the Reformation with its stress on preaching and sacrament being the application of the merits of Christ, rather than their repetition, that the re-enactment pattern was finally broken.

In the 7th century, Pope Gregory became one of the most important innovators in early medieval preaching. Gregory is responsible for turning the entire year of Sundays into a festal calendar, leaving the ordinary service as an unwanted relic. According to Old, this led to a tremendous ground shift in the way preaching was understood, with the result that the lectionary stands front and centre for generations following – indeed, right up to Vatican II in the Roman Catholic tradition. The lectionaries also show a remarkable emphasis on penitential prayer, even after the special feast days of Easter and Pentecost have been celebrated.

## The monasteries

The high Middle Ages brought the preaching of the monks in the various orders. They brought their own flavour to the preaching task, developing the lectionary system to its fullest extent. Here medieval preaching takes its turn towards scholasticism, moralism and mysticism. The initial period of high scholasticism saw a strongly rationalistic tone; the sermons were expository, tightly structured, and based on detailed commentaries. The principle of asceticism and celibacy figured strongly in all applicatory material: parishioners were often urged to abstain from sexual relations even with their own husbands or wives, during Advent and the Christmas celebrations.

The preaching of the Benedictines fully developed the lectionary method. So influential were the revisions of Alcuin, an early Benedictine, that the lectionary became from his time on the organizing principle for the worship of the Roman church right up to Vatican II in the twentieth century. While this preaching brought variations in sermons, it certainly did not promote the so called continuous reading of the Bible (*lectio continua*) nor did it result in preaching on various books of the Bible. The principles of moralism and asceticism developed in the early Middle Ages carries through as well, along with rampant allegorizing. A fine example comes from Abbo, who in preaching on the meal of the five loaves and the two fish, concludes that because fish are meant to swim in the water Christians need to be baptised, and because fish can jump out of the water, so too, Christians can aspire to a higher life.

The Cistercians, on the other hand, introduced a more mystical component. Much of their soteriology is based on the imitation of Christ. There is a wide use of allegory, especially surrounding bridal imagery. The Song of Songs, first thoroughly spiritualised, was seen as the primary canticle expressing the relationship of the believer to Christ. One wonders if all this is not a good example of what the psychologist Sigmund Freud meant by the conventionalized expressions of repressed sexuality.

Cistercian preaching takes a position against the more rationalistic tendencies of the earlier schools and wants to bring out a strong experiential aspect. Many colourful images are used, but all on the context of a free reign with regard to allegory. For example, for Aelred, a 10th century English preacher, the fleeing Elijah forms the model for the Christian's pilgrimage today. And the historical events in the passion of Christ are internalized in the life of the Christian: the birth of Christ is the mark of humility, the suffering on Good Friday the mark of patience, and the Easter and Pentecost victories, the mark of power. Old offers an extended array of allegorical trickeries characteristic of this period, all indicating that the Bible was for many preachers more something upon which they could spin their web, rather than a sacred text from which they were called to preach in harmony with the testimony of the apostles.

## The schools

As the various medieval schools develop, we see a rise in what Old calls illuminism: going by inner light. The only check on illuminism is the rule of faith, but this rule of faith is for most sermonisers of this period, I would suspect, simply a commonly accepted code of doctrines, rather than a living testimony. For the most part, preachers accent the emotional and experiential aspects of biblical texts, and scholasticism is on the road of breakdown, its poverty exposed in its very attempt to assert its supremacy.

The preaching of the period was characterized in general by a growing stress on subjective experience, and once again, much of Scripture is interpreted in an allegorical way. Old introduces Abelard as an outstanding example of this period, hinting that he was not nearly as dry as he is often

made out to be. Abelard preached about those things that bothered him, and that says Old is a mark of genuine preaching. Preaching is most searching when it “scratches where we ourselves itch.” (301)

Another figure Old highlights is Richard of Saint Victor whom he compares with the later Charles Spurgeon as having an uncanny ability to choose the right text for the right occasion. Indeed, a big part of ministry is to reflect on that word that needs to be heard on a given occasion, without adopting a prejudiced position with regard to the text. A special gift!

### The orders

The two primary groups of preachers in the period were the Franciscans and Dominicans. The Dominicans were great missionary preachers, the Franciscans were social preachers. Chief among the Franciscans was Francis of Assisi, and the most noted preacher of the Dominicans was Thomas of Aquinas, whom Old judges rather favourably. Old find it remarkable how much a Dominican like Thomas Aquinas put into his sermon; it was not a light dose of material!

Catechetical preaching was the dominant form of preaching in this period. True to the age this preaching was drowned in a sea of points and sub points, as well as endless divisions and sub-divisions. Why, says Old, most three point sermonisers don't realize that their style and approach has medieval roots. And this all may be true, but the question remains whether the reformatory influences of the 16th century did not put a check on endless distinctions, opting rather for symmetry coherence and clarity of style.

### Mystics and Pietists

In the end mysticism and illuminism win out in this period. In treating the German mystics, Old notes how they made an ever sharper turn to the inner life. In fact, Meister Eckhart is the only preacher who for Old slides into the ranks of heresy – a stronger judgment from an otherwise mild and congenial writer, especially when one considers that the processes against Eckhart were never finished. Old compares the mystics to today's evangelicals – always going by inner light. Nominalist preaching of the latter part of the Middle Ages also had a primary focus on the heart

and the will. The poverty of intellectualism was manifest everywhere.

A positive point in this later period of the Middle Ages was the growing decentralization of church power. The preaching began to be more popular, adopting the language of the people. The so-called conciliarist movement arose, a movement which wanted to give more authority to church councils rather than to the Roman curia. Old points out that many of the centres of the conciliarist movement later became centres of Protestantism in the 16th century.

### Off the path

One of the interesting features of the book is a separate chapter on the Czech reformation. Here Old draws heavily on the work of a friend, Rev. Schwanda, a minister in the Reformed Church of America, who had a great interest in the Czech reform. Many less familiar, but also some more familiar names pass the revue, and one sees how the word of God still survived during long and extended periods of darkness.

Another interesting chapter is Old's study of the Italian reformation. While the Renaissance was a thoroughly humanistic movement, Old makes clear that it drew its food from the lingering Christian traditions. And while the movement itself is to be rejected as self-serving, it cannot be understood apart from the Christian preachers who also spoke out forcefully against its abuses and excesses. And here its *ad fontes* principles were precisely those which its Christian critics espoused and exploited.

All of these interesting side journeys make this a rewarding and instructive book. Add to that Old's tremendous range of sources, and you are confronted with quite an achievement. With what was no doubt plenty of resources backing him up, Old must have travelled throughout Europe and the near East for this book, visiting many unknown monasteries, cathedrals, basilicas and libraries, gathering material for this expansive survey and keying it into his ever present laptop. Indeed, – whatever Old used – technology does show its advantages here, since there's a good percentage of Old's sources which many will glance over, but few will ever have the means to examine and double check.

### The assessment

In the end Old's assessment is essentially positive – perhaps even too positive. His journey of discovery leads him to appreciate the medieval preachers much more than he ever did before. And indeed, it is part of the contemporary trend in historical studies to take note of the wealth and riches of this era, rather than to pass over it as a gloomy period of darkness, featuring frustrated monks and lonely cold monasteries.

It cannot be denied! There is a richness to the Middle Ages which we are only beginning to appreciate. However, in all this the central truth cannot be forgotten. Much as this era brought forward its precursors, its pockets of reform, it remained locked in the grip of a dualistic approach to reality, and in itself was not able to bring a return to a scriptural way of life, because it did not in itself foster a return to the Word. That came with Luther! And even though he too was a medieval man, all this history to the Reformation and beyond must be regarded from the point of view of the timetable of God's providence. When it comes to a lasting reform we ask: why not a Hus and why a Luther, when they were both fiery preachers calling for reform and a return to the Word? Simply because God sets the time and the conditions for his work to proceed.

Here again we have a volume which can be read with interest by everyone, but especially by preachers and those involved in the work of ministry in a more comprehensive way. You are getting a solid text about a vital part of the life of the church from a veteran churchman who for the most part takes an orthodox stand on Scripture and on many theological issues.

One interesting side comment as I bring this review to a close along with my hearty recommendation of this book: In this 1999 (!) publication, Old consistently quotes from the RSV translation of the Bible. On the one hand, a belated tribute to what, with all its weaknesses, has been a fine rendering of the sacred text, especially from a liturgical point of view, and on the other hand, a true testimony to one who is, at bottom, a churchman who approaches the church's past with a good measure of humility, deference, and respect. Hence, a book from which all can learn. 



## Press Release of the Meeting of the Board of Governors of the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches held on March 22, 2000

### Opening

Dr. J. Visscher opened the meeting with the reading of Psalm 119:97-112. All governors were present except for Rev. W. den Hollander. The principal, Dr. J. De Jong was also in attendance.

### Retirement of professor

Prof. J. Geertsema was granted his request to retire as professor of New Testament by the end of the 2000/2001 academic year. The Senate was mandated to look for a replacement. Deep appreciation was expressed for the work of Prof. Geertsema at our College.

### New facilities

The library expansion was reported to be going well and a little ahead of schedule. The walls are up and roof is going on. It was reported that costs were within the budget.

### Accreditation

Senate was charged at the previous meeting to investigate the viability of accreditation by the Association of Theological Schools. Recognition by the ATS will allow degrees granted by our College to be recognized at other academic institutions. A verbal report was presented by Dr. J. De Jong. The Senate has been looking into this and weighing the value of being recognized by the ATS. Senate will report further at the September meeting.

### Fifth professor

The previous Board meeting had mandated the Senate to study the possibility of adding a fifth professor to the College. The Finance and Property Committee was also asked to look into the costs of implementing this. The cost of adding a fifth professor was outlined by the Finance and Property Committee. The Senate advised that it would not be feasible to add an extra professor at this time. In order, however, to give more time for training in the diaconological subjects (the department of

Dr. J. De Jong), the other professors will give up some of their class time to allow for that. Members from the church community will also be brought in to assist training in such areas as counselling and pedagogy. A further report will be submitted at the September meeting.

### Matters for the September meeting

It was decided to leave two matters on the agenda for the September meeting: Master of Theology Program and the Pastoral Proficiency Program.

### By-Law 10

Previously, the Board adopted a change to the By-Laws concerning the establishment of a Publication Committee. It was decided that this is not a change which requires the approval of the next General Synod. However Synod will have to be informed of the change.

### Ukrainian library

Our Dutch sister churches had contact with the Ukrainian Reformed Churches before WWII. The war had a devastating impact on the Ukrainian churches. As a result many Reformed Ukrainians fled to North America taking with them important papers and records of their churches. These have been archived but the archives are scattered around North America. The request has been made to our Theological College to provide storage space for these archives in the new library facilities. There would be room for this in the library and it would be done on a temporary basis, to be reevaluated after seven years. Our Librarian and Associate Librarian presented the Board with a sample agreement for this arrangement. The Board granted the request.

### Sabbatical

Arrangements are being finalized for the sabbatical of Dr. N.H. Gootjes in the fall of this year. Drs. J.M. Batteau of the Netherlands has been found willing and able to continue Dr. Gootjes' classes. The Finance and Property Committee still has to make some final arrangements.

### Visits to western Canada

Presently, the professors each take a turn visiting the churches in Western Canada on behalf of the College. Two tours on sequential years cover all the churches out west. It was reported by the professors that this was too much travelling on just two trips. It was decided to cover western Canada on three tours on three consecutive years: one to Manitoba and Denver, one to Alberta and one to BC which includes Lynden.

### Closing

A number of matters were discussed and questions raised at the end of the meeting. Some matters will be raised at future meetings, the Lord willing. The meeting was closed in a Christian manner.

For the Board of Governors  
R. Aasman 



Change of address effective May 7, 2000:

#### Rev. C.J. VanderVelde

4420 Poplar Road  
Chilliwack, British Columbia  
Canada V2R 5C8  
Tel.: (604) 823-6421

\* \* \*

Declined the call to Houston,  
British Columbia:

#### Rev R.J. Eikelboom

of Calgary, Alberta.

\* \* \*

The following candidate  
successfully sustained his  
peremptory examination at Classis  
Pacific West on April 25, 2000:

#### Candidate Frank Dong