

Clarion

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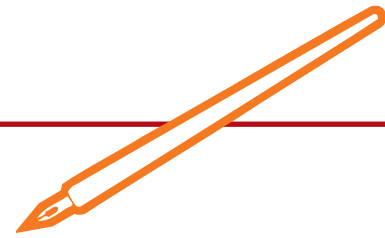


Numbers

10:1-10

INSIDE!

Training Ministers



By N.H. Gootjes



Who suffered?

In the month of March, as the church calendar leads up to Good Friday and Easter, we consider the suffering and death of the Son of God. He came into this world for that very purpose: to suffer and die. This is clearly one of the most important works He had come to perform on earth. The four evangelists all devote a considerable part of their gospels to a description of the many things Jesus Christ had to suffer during his capture, trial and death on the cross. And the epistles of the New Testament explain further the importance of this crucial event in the history of this world. The Bible presents Christ's suffering and death as one of the main purposes for which He had come from heaven.

The creeds may differ slightly in formulation, but on the main issue they are quite clear: it was the Son of God, who became a man and who suffered.

The church has recognized this at an early stage. When the creeds speak of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, they do not assign the suffering to all three divine persons. Rather, they mention in the section on the Son of God, Jesus Christ, that He came down from heaven to suffer and to die. The Apostles' Creed summarized this in the words: "He suffered under Pontius Pilate," elaborating on that in the following words: "He was crucified, dead and buried." The Nicene Creed expresses this somewhat differently. It first says that He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and continues with the words: "He suffered and was buried." The Athanasian Creed is very brief on Jesus Christ's life, but it does say that He "suffered for our salvation." This reminder that our salvation was the purpose for the coming of the Son of God forms a valuable addition to the confession of Christ's suffering. The creeds may differ slightly in formulation, but on the main issue they are quite clear: it was the Son of God, who became a man and who suffered. That is one of the main tenets of the Christian faith.

This teaching is continued in the Reformed confessions. This could easily be shown from Lord's Days 14 (the last part) and 15 of the Heidelberg Catechism. This is most familiar to us because it is frequently discussed in the afternoon worship services. I will refer to the Belgic Confession,

which also speaks clearly about the suffering of Jesus Christ. In article 20, it says:

We believe that God, who is perfectly merciful and just, sent his Son to assume that nature in which disobedience had been committed, to make satisfaction in that same nature; and to bear the punishment of sin by his most bitter passion and death.

This article deals with the incarnation, the fact that God's Son assumed our flesh and blood. There was a reason for this. He had to become like one of us in order to undergo the punishment we deserve. The Son had to come into the flesh in order to make satisfaction for our sins. Our Saviour needed to be fully human, just like we are. That Saviour is the Son of God, who became man to suffer and to die.

Did the Father suffer, too?

There is another view which is not found in the early creeds and in the confessions, namely, that not only Jesus, but also God the Father suffered in the crucifixion and death of Jesus. This thought became popular after the Second World War, particularly in German theology. In this view, God's participation, his solidarity in our suffering was emphasized. This is a great change, for the suffering is now placed within God himself. It would also mean that God was subject to suffering, just as we humans are subject to suffering.

Christ's suffering and death must not be understood in the context of God's solidarity with us, but in the context of our sin.

Think of the suffering of God's Son on the cross. The Son is not the only one who suffered as a result of the cross; the Father suffered with Him, for He forsakes his Son on the cross. In doing so, the Father forsakes himself as a father. And both suffer alone. The Son suffered when He was given over to the suffering on the cross. At the same time, it was the Father who gave Him over to that suffering, which was a terrible thing to do for a father.

Taken in this way, the suffering of the Father and that of the Son was different. The Son suffered in dying on the cross, humiliated and condemned as an innocent person. The Father did not die, but He suffered the pain of having his Son

die. For the very reason that He is the Father, He suffered when his Son died.

This view has important consequences for God himself, the triune God. If the teaching we just described were true, that would mean that both God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ stand side by side in undergoing pain and suffering. Suffering is placed within God himself. The fact that the cross brings suffering on both the Father and the Son means that suffering affects both of them. From here, it is only a small step to saying that God suffers in the suffering of the people in the world. The fact that the Father can share in the suffering of his Son would mean that in principle, He can be involved in the suffering of any person.

Scripture on Christ's suffering

This thought is so foreign to those who have grown up with the Apostles' Creed that the question must come up in our minds: How is that possible that God can suffer? Does God not sit enthroned above the circle of the earth? And are the inhabitants of the earth not like grasshoppers? (Is 40:22). Who can touch God to such an extent that God would suffer?

We need not go into all kinds of explanations how it would be possible for God to suffer. The most important issue here is whether this idea that the Father suffered when Jesus Christ suffered and died has any ground in the biblical description of Jesus' death on Golgotha. The only source we have for this is the gospels. We need to look at the way his suffering and death is described there.

What's inside?

Dear to the confession of every Christian is that God so loved the world that He gave his only Son to be born of woman so that He might suffer and die for sinners. However, into this beautiful and comforting confession has crept the teaching that God the Father too suffered with his Son on Golgotha. You may very well have been confronted with this idea. Therefore we appreciate that Dr. N. H. Gootjes addresses this topic in his editorial.

Dr. F.G. Oosterhoff continues her series of articles on faith and science in connection with the teaching of evolution. In this article she focusses on Herman Bavinck.

In the *Observations* column by Rev. G.Ph. van Popta, we are reminded of the dangers of Islam, as well as the wonderful opportunities for proclaiming the true gospel of comfort and hope.

In our discussions with the United Reformed Churches, the matter of training for the ministry is an important item. Dr. J. DeJong, in a press review, reminds us of the importance of keeping theological training under the control of the churches. He presents us with some historical background.

Finally, we have a book review that might make you want to buy the book.

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The first indication can be found in the words Christ spoke on the cross. Important is his cry: "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani": "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46). This is what he cried out with a loud voice after the darkness had surrounded him for a long time. This event along with Christ's response indicate that Jesus Christ suffered tremendously. But there is no indication that the Father suffered. The Father was not standing next to Jesus Christ, sharing in his suffering. Rather, the Father stood over against him. He made Jesus Christ feel that He had withdrawn from Him by taking even the light of the day away from Him. Another instance can be found in something Jesus Christ said later: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). These two texts prove that the Father is not involved in the suffering together with Jesus Christ, but that He is the one who required his suffering, and who accepted it. This is confirmed by the fact that the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom (Matt 27:51).

His unique suffering and death means my salvation and life with God.

The second indication is the fact that Christ's suffering and death must not be understood in the context of God's solidarity with us, but in the context of our sin. Already in the Old Testament, the people were informed of that:

Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering He will see his offspring

and:

by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many
and He will bear their iniquities (Is 53:10, 11).

These texts do not place Jesus Christ's suffering parallel to God's suffering. Rather, it was according to God's will that this suffering was placed on Him. And the purpose was not to show God's solidarity in the suffering of the world, but for Christ to present himself as the true sacrifice to God for the sins of the people.

The epistle to the Hebrews underlines this. We must limit ourselves to only two brief excerpts:

(Christ as high priest) entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption (Heb 9:12).

This means that the blood was intended for God. He presented it to God as the atonement for our sins. In this way He brought about our eternal redemption. And a few lines later it is stated again that Christ's sacrifice on the cross was given to God:

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! (Heb 9:14).

The question: "Who suffered?" is clearly answered in Scripture: God's Son came down to suffer and to die. He did not come into our world to show God's solidarity in our human suffering. He came down to remove the mess of our evil and our sin, and to restore our relationship to God. The problem is much worse than our suffering and pain. It is our sin. And the solution is much better than God's solidarity with our suffering: it is Jesus' suffering and death as full payment for the judgment we deserve. His unique suffering and death means my salvation and life with God. C

Dr. N.H. Gootjes is professor of Dogmatology at the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Hamilton, Ontario.



Faith and Science in the Reformed Tradition (3)

By F.G. Oosterhoff

Herman Bavinck

Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) was the son of Jan Bavinck, a minister in the Dutch Christian Reformed Church which in 1834 had seceded from the liberal state church. The churches of this secession (the so-called first secession or *Afscheiding*) had established their own seminary, the Theological School of Kampen, and upon completion of his secondary education the young Bavinck became a student at that school. One year later he transferred to the University of Leiden, where in 1880 he would receive his doctorate in theology. In 1882, after a brief stint as a local pastor, he was appointed professor of dogmatics at Kampen. Twenty years later he accepted a position at the Free University of Amsterdam, where he succeeded Abraham Kuyper, who had been appointed Prime Minister. He held that position until his death in 1921.

Bavinck's decision to complete his studies not at Kampen but at the secular University of Leiden aroused opposition within his church community but did not lead to a break. A son of the *Afscheiding*, Bavinck would throughout his life uphold both the doctrinal and the ethical teachings of his church. As to the latter, the churches of the *Afscheiding* stressed earnestness, piety, a simple and sober lifestyle, and in general the command to avoid indulging the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life (1 John 2:9).

But while in general agreement with the teachings of the churches in which he was born, Bavinck objected to the pietism and otherworldliness of the *Afscheiding*. With Calvin and Kuyper, he believed that the church has a task with respect to the world and that therefore believers must interact with their soci-

Herman Bavinck



ety and culture. This conviction was an important element in his decision to study at the University of Leiden, whose theological faculty was a stronghold of modernism and of the new "scientific" approach to theology. In order to fulfill his task as a theologian, he believed, he had to acquaint himself at first hand with modern theology, and indeed with the modern world of ideas as a whole. Leiden made it possible for him to do so.¹

"Grace restores nature"

Bavinck expressed his belief in the necessity of cultural engagement in the maxim that "grace restores nature." This conviction has been called the centre of his theology and philosophy, and to help us understand Bavinck, as well as the Reformed tradition in general, it will be good to stop here for a look at the statement's meaning.

The first point to be made is that the term "nature" in this context refers not first of all to the physical world, but to the world of culture – that is, to politics, to society and its institutions, and

to learning in all its aspects. The statement is based on the confession that all of life lies under the curse of sin and is in need of God's redeeming grace, and that this grace is indeed sufficient for the restoration of a fallen humanity and a fallen world. Bavinck expressed this conviction in trinitarian terms when he wrote: "The essence of the Christian religion consists in this, that the Father's creation, ruined by sin, is being restored in the death of the Son of God and recreated by the grace of the Holy Spirit into a kingdom of God."²

The confession that grace restores nature was opposed to what Reformed theologians saw as two misconceptions among Christians regarding the relationship between Christianity and culture. On the one hand there were mystics and pietists who, retreating into the fortress of faith, avoided interaction with what they saw as an irretrievably lost culture. On the other hand one encountered Christians who came close to erasing the boundary between Christianity and secular culture. That second attitude characterized the Roman

Catholic Church. In the Roman scheme, the world of nature, while wounded and weakened by sin, remains good in and by itself. This means, among other things, that the Gospel is not essential for the proper operation of society, and that the state, the family, art, philosophy, science, and so on, can function quite well on their own, even though grace has the ability of raising life to a higher level.

In order to fulfill his task as a theologian, he believed, he had to acquaint himself at first hand with modern theology, and indeed with the modern world of ideas as a whole.

It also means that nature can serve as a stepping stone to grace. That conviction made possible the attempt of medieval scholastics to harmonize pagan philosophy and Christian theology, and it explains why under Roman Catholicism revelation and reason, theology and philosophy, religious life and secular life, and so on, are not opposed to each other but closely related. The nature-grace dualism accounts at the same time for the belief that the church, as the distributor of supernatural grace, is above state and society and culture, and that theology is the queen of the sciences.

The Reformation rejected this division between a terrain of the profane and a terrain of the sacred, between nature and grace. According to the Reformers, nature was not profane in itself; it was created good and not as inferior to a supposedly higher realm of grace. Its goodness, however, was destroyed by the Fall, which, rather than only wounding and weakening nature, had corrupted it, making it utterly dependent on grace for its restoration. Sin having corrupted all, grace was needed to renew all; and grace extended as far as the power of sin. The Gospel therefore did have a message for human life and culture – for the state, the family and other social institutions, and also for the fields of the arts and learning. The Kingdom, as Bavinck expressed it, was not only a pearl, but also a yeast. There was nothing that could not and needed not be Christianized.

But he also acknowledged what he recognized as the truth in pietism,

namely its stress on personal commitment and its concern for the one thing needful, and he warned that those who enter the world must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow the Master. Cultural engagement was risky. Yet it was also necessary, an essential part of the believer's mandate. It was this conviction that informed the work of Bavinck and of the entire Neo-Calvinist revival in the Netherlands.

Bavinck and Kuyper

Of that revival Bavinck served, with Kuyper, as undisputed leader. Seventeen years younger than Kuyper, Bavinck underwent the former's influence, but he did not become an uncritical follower. Although he learned from Kuyper, and although in some respects he was overshadowed by Kuyper's genius, he remained an independent thinker, whose work as a systematic theologian and exegete was often superior to that of Kuyper. Bavinck's careful scholarship, together with his adherence to the traditions of the *Afscheiding*, led him to qualify such Kuyperian teachings as those regarding immediate regeneration and baptism on the ground of presumed regeneration, teachings that would play a critical role in the subsequent history of the Reformed churches.³ For Kuyper, regeneration could be seen as no more than an unconscious process, rather than (as the Bible teaches and the Canons of Dort confess) a renewing, life-changing rebirth. Kuyper was a system-builder and tended to be speculative and imprecise in his exegetical and dogmatic work, whereas Bavinck was the careful exegete and scholar. As a commentator put it, where Kuyper reached out in breadth, Bavinck was the man who searched the depths of biblical truth.

There were agreements as well as disagreements. The two men were of one mind regarding the task of believers to be involved in their culture, and at least initially Bavinck believed with Kuyper that the Calvinist revival might bring about a general cultural renewal in the Protestant world. Bavinck did not share Kuyper's triumphalism, however, and he criticized his idea of a strict antithesis between the science of the regenerate and the unregenerate. Regeneration, Bavinck argued, is no guarantee that scientific perfection and certainty will be achieved. Kuyper confused principles with persons. He ignored the fact that Christian scholars also are sinners, and that the antithesis

runs through the heart of people, including that of the believer.⁴

As to the idea of common grace, Bavinck made use of it, but he did not follow Kuyper in treating it as dogma. John Calvin, rather than Abraham Kuyper, was his mentor here. Like Calvin, Bavinck referred only occasionally to common grace. He used the term to account for the excellence of much of pagan art, learning, and morality, to explain why Christians can and should cooperate in the field of mainstream scholarship, and also to explain, in accordance with Romans 1:18ff., why unbelievers are without excuse. In many cases, however, he explained the "natural light" that one could still discern in the religious and cultural life of pagan societies not with specific reference to common grace, but as an effect of God's general revelation in nature and history. Much of it was also, he believed, a result of memories, however vague and distorted, that pagans still had of the original revelation given in paradise.⁵

Cultural engagement was risky. Yet it was also necessary, an essential part of the believer's mandate.

Meanwhile, as critics have pointed out, Bavinck's willingness to explain the accomplishments of unbelievers with reference to common grace contradicts his conviction that it is truly *grace* (that is, Christ's redeeming grace) which restores nature. According to one commentator, E.P. Heideman, that conviction enabled him at the same time to restrict the influence of Kuyper's dogma on his thought. Generally, Heideman writes, Bavinck followed a biblical, trinitarian line in his thinking. If we continue in that line, he suggests, we can come to a biblical alternative to the doctrine of common grace. Heideman's argument is that total depravity implies the human being's refusal to work with nature in any positive manner. But although fallen man wants to deny his office of trusteeship, God does not allow him to do so. God does not leave his fallen creature alone but in his Spirit continues to be present to him. The Holy Spirit wrestles with man, forcing him to care for creation, and therefore also to engage in scientific activity. Man indeed uses this activity to assert his independence from God, yet the driving

force behind his scientific activity is the work of God.

Heideman believes that the difference between the concept of common grace and this trinitarian approach “is as great as that which exists between Rome and the Reformation. In the doctrine of common grace,” he continues, “the emphasis lies in the activity of man. . . . Sin has not yet touched all of man; there is a positive point of contact left in him. . . . Reason can by its own power do the work given to it. In the trinitarian thought, however, it is the activity of God which is decisive. Reason, although totally depraved by sin, is driven by the Spirit of God to fulfil its office. . . .”⁶

Bavinck’s existential involvement in the problems of the relationship between faith and knowledge, together with his unswerving conviction that it is only in God’s light that we see light, go a long way in explaining the appeal that much of his work still has for those who, although living in different times, are confronted with similar problems.

Bavinck on faith and science

Among the concerns that Bavinck shared with Kuyper was the need for a critical examination of a theory of knowledge that allowed the label of truth only for conclusions that could be verified in a “scientific” manner. When a student at Leiden University, Bavinck had been personally confronted with the implications that this theory has for the believer, and he kept wrestling with the issue throughout his life. He discussed it in a number of his early writings, dealt with it at length in his monumental, four-volume work on Reformed dogmatics (the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 1895-1901⁷), and returned to the question in practically every publication of his later years. Bavinck’s existential involvement in the problems of the relationship between faith and knowledge, together with his unswerving conviction that it is only in God’s light that we see light, go a long way in explaining the appeal that much of his work

still has for those who, although living in different times, are confronted with similar problems.

It is true that they will not receive answers to all their questions. Bavinck’s statements on the issue were not free from inconsistencies, and not every conclusion he drew will have the approval of all his co-religionists. One reason may be that he attempted to stay away from easy solutions. Bavinck respected the work of the physical, geological, and biological sciences – and also of other branches of learning such as the new history and psychology – too much to ignore their power and persuasiveness. At one point he states that no single person, and not even a generation or an age may be able to resolve the questions that arise in connection with modern learning and modern society; that it is God who must, in the course of history, bring light into darkness.⁸

But while generous – in some cases perhaps too generous – in admitting the validity of much of current scholarship, he was also keenly aware of the weaknesses and unproven assumptions in the modern view of knowledge. He shared Kuyper’s insight that theories of knowledge are not neutral and that religious and other presuppositions influence scholarly work. And more so perhaps than Kuyper, Bavinck acknowledged the limitations of human knowing, confessing that not only in science but in all fields of learning, including theology, we know only in part. He did so, however, without lapsing into an attitude of skepticism or relativism. The fact that human knowledge is not exhaustive did not mean for Bavinck that it cannot be true, reliable, and sufficient.

More so perhaps than Kuyper, Bavinck acknowledged the limitations of human knowing, confessing that not only in science but in all fields of learning, including theology, we know only in part.

Evolution

Bavinck gave attention to the problems connected with the rise of evolutionary science. Dealing with evolutionism in the context of the great

scientific advances of his days, he stressed, with Calvin and Kuyper, the excellent gift humanity had received in human learning. Scholarship, including science, had benefited life in many practical ways. It had also contributed to a better understanding of revealed truth. Bavinck pointed out that Copernicanism, for example, had helped theologians in the explanation of the miracle related in Joshua 10; that studies of ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt had led to a fuller understanding of various Bible passages; and that historical studies had also clarified the meaning of much biblical prophecy (*GD*, II, 458). He believed that sciences like geology and paleontology could similarly contribute to our understanding of the Bible, specifically of the creation account (*GD*, II, 449, 458).

While agreeing with Calvin that it is not the Holy Spirit’s intention to give lessons in biology, geology, or any other science, Bavinck believed that Scripture does shine its light over these sciences.

As to biological evolutionism, Bavinck admitted that for those who do not believe in creation, the idea makes sense as an explanation of similarities between human beings and animals in anatomy, physiology, and psychology. But he also stressed that the evolutionary hypothesis was only that – a hypothesis, whose triumph had been ensured not simply by scientific evidence but also by religious presuppositions. As he pointed out, people had always known about similarities between men and animals – it explained why even the ancients already spoke of man as a rational *animal*.⁹ This awareness, however, had never before led to a widespread belief in biological evolution. Furthermore, those who promoted that hypothesis did not explain such specifically human characteristics as intellect, conscience, will, and morality, nor did they account for the existence of language, of religion, art, science, and learning in general. Therefore, not only biology should decide on the question of origins, but also disciplines like theology, metaphysics, and ethics.

Bavinck paid attention also to the matter of a “young earth” and of the nature of the days of creation. He rejected the idea that the six days must be seen as geological periods or ages but believed that one can look at them as abnormal, lengthy, “cosmic” days (*GD*, II, 462). While agreeing with Calvin that it is not the Holy Spirit’s intention to give lessons in biology, geology, or any other science, he believed that Scripture does shine its light over these sciences. In the account of creation, he observed, we are not confronted with myth or legend but, according to the Bible’s clear intention, with history.

For that reason Christian theology has, with few exceptions, adhered to the literal, historical interpretation of the account of creation. But he added that no confession has ever made any statement as to the exact nature of the seven days, and that Christian theology has always tolerated a variety of interpretations of the creation account. In this connection he reminded his readers of Augustine’s warning to believers not to be too quick in declaring a scientific theory unscriptural and wrong, but to study disputed scientific ideas and their implications carefully and so avoid making the faith vulnerable to attacks by enemies (*GD*, II, 458). As the incidents surrounding Copernicanism had shown, biblical exegesis could be erroneous.

So, of course, could the exegesis of scientific findings. Bavinck distinguished between scientific “fact” and

scientific exegesis. Generally speaking he respected what he called “stubborn facts” – although he was not unaware of the subjective element even in observation. His main concern, however, was with the *interpretation* of the data of observation and experimentation, and especially with attempts to use these data as the basis of an overarching worldview (and therefore also as an explanation of religion). It was here that religious belief, and the subjective element in general, played the decisive role.

The admission of the role of faith in scientific interpretations did not imply for Bavinck that an objective analysis and critique of these interpretations could serve no apologetic purpose and should therefore be dispensed with. In fact, a good part of his writing on the modern theory of knowledge – as applied not only in the natural and biological sciences but also in other branches of knowledge – consisted of such a critique. In the next article we will concentrate on that aspect of his work.

NOTES

¹ For much of what follows on Bavinck’s life and work, see R.H. Bremmer, *Herman Bavinck als dogmaticus* (Kampen: Kok, 1961), and the same author’s *Herman Bavinck en zijn tijdgenoten* (Kampen: Kok, 1966). A helpful summary of Bavinck’s view on nature and grace, discussed in the next section, can be found in J. Veenhof, *The Relationship Between Na-*



The Canadian Reformed Church at Brampton Ontario:

afternoon worship time changes
from 2:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.
starting March 10, 2002

ture and Grace According to H. Bavinck, transl. A.L. Wolters (Potchefstroom University, 1994; Institute for Reformational Studies, 1994).

² Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, I, 4th ed. (Kampen: Kok, 1928), p. 89.

³ Bremmer, *Bavinck als dogmaticus*, pp. 261-72, 295-301. For Bavinck’s influence on the “replacement formula” of 1905 (which served as a correction of Kuyper’s theories on regeneration and baptism), see especially pp. 262, 271, 299.

⁴ Similar criticisms of Kuyper’s theory (which was adopted by his follower Herman Dooyeweerd) were voiced by K. Schilder and R.H. Bremmer. Both objected to the fact that this theory ignores the *contents* of knowledge. “The antithesis in philosophical thinking,” Bremmer writes, “is not that of being directed to or away from God, but is that of being true or false, trustworthy or false knowledge contents.” Schilder’s objections are of the same nature. See on this point J. Douma, *Another Look at Dooyeweerd*, J.M. Batteau, trans. (Winnipeg: Premier, n.d.), p. 49.

⁵ For Bavinck’s views on common grace see, *inter alia*, his booklet *De Algemeene Genade* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1894).

⁶ E. P. Heideman, *The Relation of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1959), pp. 224f. See on this point also Bremmer, *Bavinck als dogmaticus*, p. 351.

⁷ References in the text are to the 4th edition, 1928-1930. For these references the abbreviation *GD* will be used, followed by volume and page numbers.

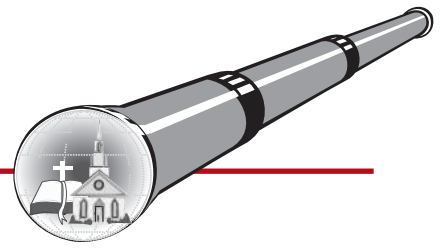
⁸ Bavinck, *Modernisme en orthodoxie* (Kampen: Kok, 1911), p. 16.

⁹ Bavinck, *GD* II, 479; “Evolutie,” in *Verzamelde Opstellen op het gebied van Godsdienst en Wetenschap* (Kampen: Kok, 1921), pp. 114-16.



Dr. F.G. Oosterhoff is a retired principal of Guido de Brès Christian High School in Hamilton, Ontario.





Observations

By G.Ph. van Popta

Islam Welcomed in the West

One would have thought the September 11 attack would cause a backlash against Muslims and Islam in North America. Incredibly, the opposite seems to be happening. A great spirit of generosity has emerged from our political leaders, liberal churches and the media. This generous spirit does not bode well for our North American culture nor for the True Church of Christ.

Western political leaders and Islam

Shortly after the attack our Prime Minister went to visit a mosque. When the media would ask him what he was doing in light of the terrorist attack, he would say, "Well, you know, I visited da mosque!" When asked how this would affect Canada's pride in its cultural mosaic, he would answer, "Well, you know, I visited da mosque!" At first we wrote it off to our Prime Minister's demonstrated inability to speak either official language very well, but now we think something more dangerous is afoot. Our Prime Minister is fostering the idea that Islam is as good as Christianity, that a mosque is the same as a church.

Instead of a backlash against Islam and Muslims, the political and religious leaders of the West have been tripping over each other to embrace them.

We have seen something similar south of the forty-ninth parallel. President George W. Bush has been seen a number of times giving interviews with the Koran lying near his elbow. The Bible, the Koran – what's the difference? On September 17, the President honoured Islam as "a faith that brings comfort to a billion people around the world."

In her Christmas message on December 25, Queen Elizabeth II said that the September 11 attack has shown the need for faith and community in overcoming adversity. The monarch said, "In these circumstances, so many of us – whatever our religion – need our faith more than ever to sustain and guide us. . . . We all have something to learn from one another, whatever our faith. . . whatever our background. . . ."

The December 31 *London Times* quotes British Prime Minister Tony Blair as saying that Christian, Muslim and Jew are all Abraham's children. The Pope has recently said exactly the same.

New interest in Islam?

Instead of a backlash against Islam and Muslims, the political and religious leaders of the West have been tripping over each other to embrace them. The following was found on the State of Qatar web page <http://www.islam.gov.qa/english/> (Qatar is a Muslim country on the Persian Gulf bordering Saudi Arabia). The article is made up of various reports in the Arab press and translated into English by the Middle East Research Institute. It can hardly contain itself in speaking about how open the "Christian" West is to Islam. The article, entitled "The Entire World Is Asking: What Is Islam?!" reads as follows:



A wave of Americans have converted to Islam since Sept. 11. . . . Non-Muslim Americans are now interested in getting to know Islam. There are a number of signs. . . . Libraries have run out of books on Islam and the Middle East. . . . English translations of the Qur'an head the American best-seller list. . . .

The Americans are showing increasing willingness to convert to Islam since Sept. 11. . . . Thousands of non-Muslim Americans have responded to invitations to visit mosques, resembling the waves of the sea (crashing on the shore) one after another. . . . All this is happening in a political atmosphere that, at least verbally, encourages non-Muslim Americans' openness towards Muslims in America and in the Islamic world, as the American president has said many times in his speeches. . . .

34,000 Americans have converted to Islam following the events of Sept. 11, and this is the highest rate reached in the U.S. since Islam arrived there.

34,000 Americans have converted to Islam following the events of September 11.

A very favourable reception

The article, then, quotes extensively a letter that Dr. Walid A. Fatihi, instructor of medicine at Harvard Medical School, Boston, sent to an Egyptian newspaper, *Al-Ahram Al-Arabi*, eleven days after the attack. He writes that the Harvard Medical School has recently become a centre of Islamic proselytizing aimed at Christians. He describes his favourable experience in a Boston church:

On Saturday, Sept. 15, I went with my wife and children to the biggest church in Boston, (Trinity Church in) Copley Square, by official invitation of the Islamic Society of Boston, to represent Islam by special invitation of the senators of Boston. Present were the mayor of Boston, his wife and the heads of the universities. There were more than 1,000 people there, with media coverage by one of Boston's main television stations. We were received like ambassadors. I sat with my wife and children in the front row, next to the mayor's wife. In his sermon, the priest defended Islam as a monotheistic religion, telling the audience that I represented the Islamic Society of Boston.

After the sermon was over, he stood at my side as I read an official statement issued by the leading Muslim clerics condemning the incident (i.e., the attacks). The statement explained Islam's stance and principles, and its sublime precepts. Afterwards, I read Qur'an verses translated into English. . . . These were moments that I will never forget, because the entire church burst into tears upon hearing the passages of the words of Allah!

Emotion swept over us. One said to me: "I do not understand the Arabic language, but there is no doubt that the things you said are the words of Allah." As she left the church weeping, a woman put a piece of paper in my hand; on the paper was written: "Forgive us for our past and for our present. Keep proselytizing to us." Another man stood at the entrance of the church, his eyes teary, and said, "You are just like us; no, you are better than us."

Continuing his letter to the Egyptian newspaper, Dr. Fatihi recounted how the next day the Islamic Society of Boston issued an open invitation to the Islamic Center in Cambridge. He wrote:

We did not expect more than 100 people, but to our surprise more than 1,000 people came, among them the neighbors, the university lecturers, members of the clergy, and even the leaders of the priests from the nearby churches, who invited us to speak on Islam. All expressed solidarity with Muslims. Many questions flowed to us. Everyone wanted to know about Islam and to understand its precepts.

Of all the questions, not a single one attacked me; on the contrary, we saw (the people's) eyes filling with tears when they heard about Islam and its sublime principles. Many of them had never heard about Islam before. Well, they had heard about Islam only through the biased media. That same day, I was invited again to participate in a meeting in the church, and again I saw the same things.

On Thursday, a delegation of 300 students and lecturers from Harvard visited the center of the Islamic Society of Boston, accompanied by the American Ambassador to Vienna. They sat on the floor of the mosque, which was filled to capacity. We explained to them the precepts of Islam, and defended it from any suspicions (promulgated in the media). I again read to them from the verses of Allah, and (their) eyes filled with tears. The audience was moved, and many asked to participate in the weekly lessons for non-Muslims held by the Islamic Center.

The spread of Islam

Dr. Fatihi then goes on to mention that on September 21, Muslims participated in a closed meeting with the governor of Massachusetts. They discussed introducing Islam into the school curriculum. He claims Governor Jane Swift agreed to implement their plans. He continues:

These are only some of the examples of what happened and is happening in the city of Boston, and in many other American cities, during these days. Proselytizing in the name of Allah has not been undermined, and has not been set back 50 years, as we thought in the first days after Sept. 11. On the contrary, the 11 days that have passed are like 11 years in the history of proselytizing in the name of Allah.

I write to you today with the absolute confidence that over the next few years, Islam will spread in America and in the entire world, Allah willing, much more quickly than it has spread in the past, because the entire world is asking, "What is Islam?!"

A conservative Christian would be rather alarmed by this. Allowing that what the Qatari web page reports, and Dr. Fatihi writes in the Egyptian paper, is somewhat exaggerated, it is made credible and confirmed by the statements of the "Christian" religious and political leaders of the "Christian" West.

How poignant that the American Ambassador to Vienna is specifically singled out as having attended the meeting at the Boston mosque. We may have turned the Islamic armies back at the gates of Vienna in 1683, but the Muslim tide is poised to sweep the West some 300 years later. And the West has its arms open.

Lord, preserve your church!



Rev. G.Ph. van Popta is minister of the Canadian Reformed Church in Ancaster, Ontario.



Training Ministers

One of the key issues in the discussions with the United Reformed Churches concerns the matter of theological training. The Canadian Reformed Churches defend and promote the principle that the training should be under the control of the churches. “By the churches and for the churches” was the motto of the Secession tradition, including the development of this tradition in the new world. The development of liberal trends at Calvin Seminary has led many in the United Reformed Churches to be less favourable to this principle, and to promote the use of non-denominational seminaries, with more of an arms-length approach to the teachers of theology.

In Scripture, the principle of ecclesiastical training always remains in force.

This issue is also in discussion among the Reformed Churches of South Africa (the so-called *Dopper kerk*). There the theological school has a closer working relationship with the University of Potchefstroom. Recently discussions were held to fuse the faculty of the College into the university, and to put the entire educational institution (two schools at one location) under one administrative Board. The unique character of the theological school as a school of the churches has thereby come under threat. Commenting on the situation in the paper *Truth and Error (Waarheid en Dwaling*, October 2001), chief editor Dr. J.G. Meijer reviews some of the principles and history of this issue for us (my translation, JDJ):

In the 19th Century theological students were trained at the university. The Secession churches departed from this practice. They did not entrust the training of their future ministers to the universities, but took control of the training themselves.

This ecclesiastical training is structured on the basis of an old Reformed principle. The well known synod of Dort said in Article 2: The offices are of four kinds: of the ministers of the Word, of the Doctors of Theology, of the Elders, and of the Deacons. The term “doctor” in Article 2 does not refer to a theological degree. “Doctor” in the Church Order of Dort is a minister that the church has set apart to train future ministers of the Word.

Reformed professors of theology at the university were to be ecclesiastical officers according to Article 2, C.O. The content of their office was described in Article 18 of the Church Order of Dort. The training of the ministers has been regarded for generations as an ecclesiastical matter, and it was always maintained as such. The Seceded churches returned to the Church Order of Dort. When the Reformed Churches of South Africa began, they also turned with their Dutch brothers back to the Church Order of Dort. On what is this principle based?

A scriptural principle

Many of the provisions in the Church Order are based on the Word of God and the confession of the church. The training of ministers by ecclesiastical officers is a principle rooted in Scripture as well.

In the old dispensation the Levites were responsible for the ministry of sacrifices and for training the people in the law of the LORD, Leviticus 10:11, Deuteronomy 33:10, cf. Malachi 2; 6, 7. To be able to carry out this training, the Levite himself obviously had to be trained. Although we read nothing about this in the Old Testament, there were probably schools that equipped the Levites for their task. The Levite trained the Levite. Samuel, a Levite, received his training from the high priest Eli, 1 Samuel 2:11. The Levites who were thoroughly trained in the scriptures were known after the exile as teachers of the law. Ezra was a leader in their midst, Ezra 7:6,11.

When the hearts of the people slackened in this calling to faith, the LORD sent his prophets. A generation of prophets began to work under Samuel at a time in which the word of the LORD was rare. The sons of the prophets appearing later were men who in a time of apostasy were trained by Elijah and Elisha. Different groups of prophets received training at different places. Elijah and Elisha had schools at Bethel, Jericho and Gilgal. The prophet Isaiah also had his school, Is 8:16.

The training of the prophets by prophets is so ordinary in Israel that Amos notes how he is an exception to the rule. “I am not a prophet or a son of the prophet.” To speak in an anachronistic way, Amos was a prophet according to Article 8 of the Church Order, that is, a prophet without a formal ecclesiastical training.

The rule of ecclesiastical training also remains in force in the new dispensation. Our Saviour chose twelve disciples, twelve students. During his three year ministry he trained them to become apostles. They were trained and prepared so that after the ascension they could officially proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

Thus the principle of ecclesiastical training remained non-negotiable.

The apostles in turn took their place in this training. Paul trained Luke on his missionary journey so that this doctor was equipped to write two books of the New Testament: his gospel, and the book of Acts. The apostles speak of their students as their children or sons. Peter trained Mark, the writer of the gospel bearing his name. Paul is the spiritual father of Timothy and Titus.

The generation after the apostles? The principle of ecclesiastical training always remains in force. Paul called Timothy to train the following generations of preachers with the words: What

you have heard from me before many witnesses, entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also, 2 Timothy 2:2.

We see in the official training of the ministers of the word both in the old and new covenant the gracious care of the Lord for his children. He at all times gave the men who proclaimed his word in purity. The LORD continues to this day to care for the spiritual nurture of his children.

The instructors at a university do not stand in the service of the churches.

He does not do this without engaging his church in the process. His people need to accept the full responsibility for the training. The LORD calls his children to entrust the proclamation of the gospel to men who are equipped to teach also from generation to generation. The office of “doctor” in Art. 2 C.O. rests on the Bible. Training of ministers by the church is a sound scriptural principle.

A non-negotiable principle

Training by the church. About fifteen years after the secession a conflict emerged in the Netherlands concerning this principle which is based on scripture. In 1880 the Free University was called into existence in Amsterdam. Dr. A. Kuyper presented his inaugural lecture on “Sphere-Sovereignty.” He divided social life into several spheres and posited that each sphere had its own principle of sovereignty. According to him the church was not called to practice science, but must leave the practice of science to the universities. On the principle of sphere

sovereignty the theological faculty of the university also took shape.

Some years later came the Doleantie, the second liberation of the Netherlands Reformed Church in 1886. Dr. A. Kuyper took a leading position in the “dolerende” church. One of the differences between the seceded churches and the *dolerende* church concerned the training of ministers. The question was: can the training by the church make room for training at the university? Both federations discussed these differences at their respective synods after 1886. At the synod of Leeuwarden 1891 the seceded brothers decided concerning the training of ministers: this training shall take place at our own ecclesiastical institution.

The *dolerende* brothers reacted to this at the Synod of De Hague. They said that the united churches would need to judge concerning this issue and the regulation of it. This synod made the whole issue a negotiable one. But the seceded churches did not agree with this position. The training of ministers by the churches was for them a principal issue. The churches were not prepared to negotiate on this issue. The synod of De Hague accepted the principle of ecclesiastical training to which the seceded churches held. The seceded and *dolerende* churches put the integral place of an ecclesiastical institution for the training for the ministry in the so-called “condition” adopted in 1892 as part of the union process. Thus the principle of ecclesiastical training remained non-negotiable.

Ten years later the Reformed churches met in the Synod of Arnhem. This synod of trouble determined – completely against the agreement of 1892 – that the school in Kampen would be united with the theological faculty of the Free University. This decision threatened the unity of the

new federation, since the seceded brothers were not prepared to sacrifice their non-negotiable principle of a separate institution for the training for the ministry. To prevent a schism the same synod decided not to carry out its own decision concerning the unification of the school with the faculty at the Free University.

Training by the church and for the church is and remains a non-negotiable principle for the churches stemming from the secession in 1834. To this date the Liberated churches maintain a seminary in Kampen and the *Christelijke Gereformeerde* churches have a ‘school of the churches’ in Apeldoorn. This is a training where the churches have all the say over the program, a school with subsidy from the state.

Does it make any difference if our ministers are trained at a university or at an ecclesiastical institution? Is the question concerning who is responsible for the training strictly a formal one? Let’s give a global view of the differences.

Error can creep in much easier in a university setting than in the churches that faithfully fulfil their “watchman’s role.”

Professors at the Theological School stand in the service of the churches. They are called to the office of doctor and are confirmed by ecclesiastical appointment. The instructors at a university do not stand in the service of the churches. They are not called in an ecclesiastical way nor are they ordained to an ecclesiastical office. The board of the university appoints them. A minister who accepts the appointment at a university leaves the service of the church, fills a position at the university and so goes over to another state of life, (see article 12 of the Church Order). Professors at the Theological school occupy an ecclesiastical office with all the consequences that are connected with this. Theological professors at the university fill an academic position in their capacity as instructors.

The difference in position is also reflected in their work. Ecclesiastical professors, called and ordained by the churches, are called to train ministers of the Word that properly explain the Holy Scriptures and defend the pure doctrine against heresy and apostasy.



Called by the church, they also work for the churches. Instructors at a university are appointed to carry on academic work. This work is directed towards purely academic goals. Professors at the Theological School also engage in academic work, but consistently for the sake of the training, and for all the churches. The ecclesiastical goals do not exist at the university.

Another significant difference is the supervision and oversight of the instructors. Professors at the Theological School as ecclesiastical officers fall under the supervision of the churches. The churches appoint governors who carefully monitor the training that is given. Instructors at a university stand under the supervision of a senate and the Board of the university. Direct ecclesiastical supervision is not present. Error can creep in much easier in a university setting than in the churches that faithfully fulfil their "watchman's role."

Finally, there is a difference in the payment of the professors. The churches take care of the support of their officers. Ecclesiastical officers receive an honorarium, also during the years of emeritation. The churches do not receive or accept state subsidy. They warded off any meddling from the side of the government in order to retain absolute authority over the training. Instructors at a university receive a salary that they earn. In most cases these salaries are subsidized by the government.

In short, "doctors" are called by the churches and ordained to their office. They work for the churches, stand under the supervision of the churches, and receive an honorarium from the churches. Theology professors at a university are appointed to their positions. They work for an academic institution, stand under the supervision of its governing bodies and receive a salary from the university which in essence is subsidised by the government.

We need to go back to the pattern of Dort with regard to the training for the ministry for and by the churches. That principle is rooted in Scripture. That principle led our fathers in the Netherlands and South Africa in the ecclesiastical training of the ministers of the word.

Maintaining this principle also concerns the well-being of the churches of the future generations. The LORD sets high standards for the administration of his word. This is the means through which the Holy Spirit works and strengthens faith. A sound Reformed



and academic training of our future ministers is of the highest importance for the growth in faith and the future expansion of the church.

A sound defence

Dr. Meijer's article gives a sound defence of the tradition maintained by our churches. To be sure, the federal seminary does not imply an absolute guarantee for confessional faithfulness. But it is much easier to maintain discipline and sound teaching when the churches retain control over the training than if they sacrificed it to others over whom they have no direct supervision.

Dr. Meijer says that the "doctors" mentioned in Article 2 of Dort's Church order were ministers. But I believe they were for the most part the professors at the universities such as Leiden, Franeker and Groningen. At that time, the training for the ministry was indeed a part of the training at the universities, which were for the most part Reformed. It was only during the Arminian conflict that the churches began to build in stronger safeguards against error. However, at the time, the appointments at the university were made by the civil authorities, with the churches only demanding that their wishes be acknowledged. In later generations the churches began to see their calling more clearly in this regard.

The office of "doctor" in the church order does not refer to a biblical office per se, but strictly a function in the churches as they existed at the time of the Synod of Dort. The Synod of Dort

did not mean to suggest that the office of "doctor" was found in Scripture, or that it had a permanent character. It only sought to give a description of the order of ministries as they were instituted at that time. At the same time, there was no question of a professor being ordained to the task to which he was called. Perhaps some were formerly ministers, but others were not. The churches simply sought to have their wishes acknowledged in the teaching at the universities and higher level schools.

In our own situation the professors also do not occupy a ministerial office. They retain the honour and title of the minister of the Word, but are not engaged in any active ministries. The synod of Orangeville (1968) used Article 6 of the Church Order to qualify their position, but this, too, is not an ideal solution, only a make-shift one. However, through this vehicle, the churches not only retain control over the training at the school, but also over the work that a professor does when he administers the Word or fulfils some other ministerial function at the request of a consistory. And that is the essential point! The gains from the Secession should not be lost as we discuss the issues of church unity, but should be exploited to their fullest. That gives more certainty with regard to future!

Dr. J. DeJong is principal and professor of Diaconology and Ecclesiology at the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Hamilton, Ontario.

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.

Dear Editor:

In *Clarion* 51:1 of January 4, 2002, Prof. J. DeJong wrote "Some Remarks at the Dawn of the New Millennium." Under the heading "The sign of the times" (third column, page 9) he states: "If one judges his time with an open Bible then we can see that the signs of which Christ spoke concerning the close of the age are being fulfilled."

The author omits the grounds for his unwarranted connection of Matthew 24 (and therewith Mark 13 and Luke 21) to the time in which we live. For surely it is 100% certain that the Lord Jesus was responding to his disciples, and showing them what *they* would experience in their lifetimes? Reading these passages in a different manner would mean imposing one's own thoughts on Scripture, which is doubtless not something Prof. DeJong wants to do.

In Matthew 24:33,34 our Saviour says (as He does in Mark 13 and Luke 21): "So also, when *you* see *all* these things, *you* know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to *you*, this generation will not pass away till *all* these things take place" (emphasis mine). We must interpret Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21 within the framework of these words, which were spoken to the disciples. We must not doubt the words of the Lord Jesus, even if some of the verses in these passages are difficult for us Westerners of the third millennium to understand. Matthew 24:14 answers the question of verse 3 regarding the "close of the age." We read: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; *and then the end will come.*" The word "world" (*oikoumene*) we read here is also found in Luke 2:1, and is clearly the Roman empire, the "world" of those days. In Romans 1:8 Paul says: "Because your faith is proclaimed in all the world." In Colossians 1:6 Paul says that "the gospel is in the whole world bearing fruit" and in verse 23 that "the gospel has been preached to every creature under heaven."

In Acts 5:31 we read that "God exalted him (the Lord Jesus) at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, to give re-

pentance to *Israel* and forgiveness of sins." The apostles, then, have completed their mandate when all the Jews have heard the gospel (Romans 10:18). Most Jews said "no" to the gracious love of the Saviour. Because of this, city, land and temple were destroyed, signifying the end of Israel as the covenant people. They had outlived their special and singular position of being God's own people.

Although much more could be said, it should be clear from the above that "the close of the age" took place in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, at which time the apostles had completed their task of preaching the gospel to the *Jews*.

Thank you for publishing these comments.

H. DeJong, Edmonton

Response

Brother H. DeJong refers to an "unwarranted" connection between Matthew 24 and the time in which we live, and he suggests that I am imposing my thoughts on Scripture even though this is something which (surely) I would not want to do. But why I ask, is this connection "unwarranted?" Even if it is true that Christ's words in Matthew 24:14, in particular the statement "and then the end will come," refer in first instance to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, would that exclude an additional reference to the end time period that we await?

One will notice in reading Matthew 24 that there are two aspects to the question of the disciples: "And what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (NKJV). The discourse that follows is woven around both aspects: the signs pointing to the immediate future, and the destruction of Jerusalem, and the "close of the age" referring to the end time, the time of Christ's final return.

Explainers often refer to "multiple fulfillments" of prophecy. Distinct elements of Christ's words found their fulfilment in the time in which the disciples lived, and immediately thereafter. But other elements only reach their final fulfilment on the day of his re-

turn. Rev. T. Boersma says: "Christ seems to be saying that the destruction of Jerusalem is the end of the world. Jerusalem's fall ushers in the catastrophe that will devastate the whole world. Yet we know that the two events are separated from each other by many centuries. But Christ puts them in one perspective: it is the one and same judgement of God which strikes Jerusalem in 70 A.D. and which will strike the apostate world at the time of Christ's return, (T. Boersma, *Is the Bible a Jigsaw Puzzle*. . . , p. 86).

To assert that the signs mentioned by Christ refer strictly to events in the days of the disciples is to deny that the words have relevance for us. That is also a form of imposing one's thoughts on the text in such a way that the text ceases to speak to the reader today. All its references are strictly to the past. Yet the text clearly has a world-wide perspective, which begins to receive more prominence after verse 29. And that accords with other places in the gospel of Matthew where a similar world-wide perspective is maintained; see chapter 8:11, 10:18.

May I end with Calvin, that most excellent teacher of the church? Regarding the words "and then the end will come" he says: "This is improperly restricted by some to the destruction of the temple, and the abolition of the service of the Law; for it ought to be understood as referring to the end and the renovation of the world. Those two things have been blended by the disciples, as if the temple could not be overthrown without the destruction of the whole world; Christ in replying to the whole question which has been put to him, reminded them that a long and melancholy succession of calamities was at hand, and that they must not hasten to seize the prize, before they had passed through many contests and dangers." *Commentaries*, Vol. 17, 129. These are words we can all take to heart. But in this case, they should also be carefully reviewed and assimilated by brother H. De Jong.

J. De Jong



Reaching and Teaching Young Adolescents (Stronks, Gloria and Nancy Knol. Colorado Springs, CO: ACSI, 1999, ISBN 1-58331-024-X)

By A. Kingma

Gloria Stronks has written another book about the Christian middle schools called *The Christian Middle School: An Ethos of Caring* (1990), and in this book, she and a co-writer, Nancy Knol, have expanded and reaffirmed the need for change for teaching students in the middle school or students in Grades 7, 8 and 9. According to them, students will have positive middle school years when they are enabled by the school and its teachers to do acts of discipleship, learn about various kinds of work, help those in need, take responsibility for the classroom climate, and become more involved in their own assessments and evaluations.

In the first chapters, Stronks and Knol argue that middle school students have different developmental needs that schools should address. These developmental needs include wanting to believe in oneself, wanting to be liked, the need for physical exercise and freedom of movement, the desire for life to be fair and just, and the need to know what will happen to them in the future (e.g. job, career, etc.) If these needs are not addressed by the school, middle school students will often act in stereotypical ways: boys will think it not cool to study or even participate in class. Girls will try to be flirtatious but good. Students will divide into three ranks: the popular, the normal, and the unpopular. High status boys will often verbally insult and even physically harass low status boys, or talk to girls in mean and hurtful ways. Parents and children can make a variety of excuses because they really do not know what to do, but Gloria Stronks claims that making big changes will help.

New techniques

Schools can do a variety of things. They can offer cooperative learning clubs, intramurals and sports (29,30). They can have students deal with their problems through discussions, journal writing, thematic language arts (69) or bible units. Schools should have some coping technique to deal with student

grief, loss, and suffering. Schools need to lead students through emotional problems, not to avoid or minimize them. Teacher need good rules and should demonstrate consistency in following them (52). Teachers should work on developing a close relationship with students, and Nancy Knol offers three ingredients that are necessary in building those relationships (53).

Any teacher can practise techniques that fit the middle school student: journaling, writing poetry, decorating a classroom in a symbolic way, integrating subject areas, using story telling whenever you can, and learning through playing games.


Changing teaching techniques is necessary and good, but it is not enough. Revising the whole curriculum and evaluation for middle school students, Stronks writes, is challenging, but necessary. She urges schools to re-examine topic skills and “habits of the heart” that teachers want students to learn and practise. She urges schools to plan interdisciplinary as well as integral units (72). She strongly advocates using a variety of assessment tools. She shares that three-way conferences have also promoted respect and responsive discipleship among students (104).

Stronks and Knol do well in developing their theme that to reach and teach these adolescents, many changes can and should be made. Stronks provides the scholarly background, while Knol demonstrate how the changes have worked in the school. If teachers always concern themselves with “unwrapping the gifts” of the students, and with providing “shalom” in the schools, then many of these changes, Stronks argues, will be made.

The relationship between church and school is lost in this book. The fine line between the task of the parent and of the school is also vague. Could the lack of these distinctions be a result of a “sphere sovereignty” philosophy? Could it be a result of a general Christian school which needs to service students from many different church backgrounds or students from no church background? It is a pity that Nancy Knol feels the need to have “worship activities” in the schools because the “middle school students rarely find in church any opportunity to experience God at their level of understanding” (91).

Same struggles

Both authors struggle with the same difficulties that Canadian Reformed School teachers also struggle with: how do we get middle school students to more openly live out their faith? It seems that these children do not want to speak or show their faith, but want to seek identity in groups, in non-Christian music, in testing or breaking rules. A few years ago, some teachers in British Columbia discussed this very matter and published a booklet to facilitate discussion in this matter. In the fall of last year, the Canadian Reformed School principals, together with interested church members, also dealt with this topic in a meeting in Langley Church building. Teachers need to counter the apparent disinterest in faith among our young people, but not in “worship activities” in our schools. Instead, we must continue to highlight for these children that God speaks through his Word, the same Word which is preached in Church. Salvation for them is through that preached Word. We need to help students to know the language of the Bible (in Bible history, church history or other subject area instruction), so that there is no gap between their daily language and biblical language. Teachers need to help children to learn to listen actively and to think critically so that they can understand sermons and work with them. We need to encourage parents to talk “faith” at home. God has placed the primary task on parents to nurture these middle school-aged children in a life of faith. Schools can and should assist the parents in this task.

Is the best way to simply send them to youth society meetings, and to a Reformed school or high school? No, the home must talk and walk the faith intimately with these young people. The school should do its best to support the parents and the church, for it is true that often in the school setting the problems arise or are voiced. The school should, however, remain focussed on its specific task: teach and instruct the covenant children in the fear of the Lord, that they too, may fear the Lord. 

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