

# Clarion

THE CANADIAN REFORMED MAGAZINE

Volume 53, No. 22 • October 22, 2004

*Intercession by  
the Saints?*

*Reformation  
begins with  
You!*

*Iraqi Churches  
Update*





**N.H. Gootjes**

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# Intercession by the Saints?

*However, for the believers in the sixteenth century, the issue whether we can invoke departed saints to pray for us was at least as important as the Holy Supper.*

As members of God's people, we pray for one another. We do not restrict ourselves to asking from God only for what we need and like; we pray for others as well. In our prayers, we remember other members of our extended family. We hear in church about members of the congregation who are in difficult circumstances or have special needs. We pray for people who are experiencing hardship, who are sick, who are mourning, and who are lonely. Interceding for one another is an integral part of our prayers.

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*Jesus Christ is bypassed and the request for intercession is directed to someone other than Jesus Christ.*

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We also expect others to pray for us, particularly our family and friends. When we find ourselves in situations of danger or hardship, we know of people who are aware of the situation and who are bringing this before the Lord in their prayers. I remember a member of my congregation, who was suddenly widowed, saying: I am surrounded by the prayers of the congregation. That was true; during the lengthy period of vacancy she and her husband had done much in the congregation and they had continued to be very active. This is only one example; there are many more occasions where believers pray for the other members in special circumstances.

## **Another kind of intercession?**

But there is also another kind of intercession. In this case, it refers to prayers said by exceptional Christians who have done exceptionally good deeds. Since they, in their lifetime, had done so many good works, they were declared to be saints after

their death. These departed saints were seen as working for the benefit of people still living on earth. They were supposed to speak to Jesus or to God on behalf of people on earth who needed help. A prime example of this kind of saint is Mary who was singled out to become the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ. The idea is that Mary and other saints had done much that is good and pleasing in the eyes of the Lord. Therefore God will hear them when they intercede for people who are still living on earth. And God will act on that. This system was developed during the Middle Ages.

The importance of this issue in the history of the Christian church can be demonstrated in the Belgic Confession. Article 26, dealing with the issue of the intercession by the saints, is about the lengthiest article of the whole confession. Only one article exceeds it in length: article 35 which deals with the Lord's Supper. But the difference is minimal: article 35 is longer by only two lines. That is surprising. When we think about what separates us from the Roman Catholic doctrine, the first issue that comes to mind is the Lord's Supper. However, for the believers in the sixteenth century, the issue whether we can invoke departed saints to pray for us was at least as important as the Holy Supper. Probably, the invocation of the saints was more important for the common people. At that time, the common church members did not often partake of the Lord's Supper. But they did frequently call on the saints for help and support. This was a living issue.

## **A living issue?**

Is this still so important that we as Reformed churches need to devote an extensive article to this issue? Is this not something that is outdated in our present situation? Do we still need to maintain the lengthy discussion of the Confession ?



Published biweekly by Premier Printing Ltd., Winnipeg, MB

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**ADDRESS FOR ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS:  
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One Beghin Avenue, Winnipeg, MB, Canada R2J 3X5  
Phone: (204) 663-9000 Fax: (204) 663-9202  
Email: [clarion@premierprinting.ca](mailto:clarion@premierprinting.ca)

RETURN UNDELIVERABLE CANADIAN ADDRESSES TO:  
One Beghin Avenue, Winnipeg, MB, Canada R2J 3X5  
Email: [premier@premierprinting.ca](mailto:premier@premierprinting.ca)

Subscription Rates for 2004	Regular Mail	Air Mail
Canada*	\$42.00*	\$69.00*
U.S.A. U.S. Funds  	\$44.50	\$57.50
International	\$69.00	\$103.00

\*Including 7% GST – No. 890967359RT  
Advertisements: \$13.50 per column inch  
Full Colour Display Advertisements: \$19.00 per column inch  
We reserve the right to refuse ads.

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada, through the Publication Assistance Program (PAP), toward our mailing costs.

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Agreement No. 40063293; PAP Registration No. 9907; ISSN 0383-0438

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This past summer, our family spent a week in a place close to Quebec City. On a rainy day, we decided to go and visit a huge Roman Catholic church building which we had seen regularly. Although it was a weekday, there were many cars in the parking lot. Inside, several activities were going on, from lighting candles and saying prayer to tours showing the impressive architecture and artwork of the building.

In addition, the visitors were encouraged to pray to the saints. Booklets were put out for people who wanted to pray to them. They could even pray to someone who had not yet been officially recognized as a saint. These booklets made it

## Inside . . .

On September 30, the Lord called to himself Dr. Jelle Faber. Dr. Faber will be remembered for his important work at our Theological College. But he was also editor of *Clarion* from 1979-1983 and he wrote frequently for *Clarion*. Dr. C. Van Dam writes a fitting memorial for our beloved professor.

Most of us grew up with sermons which spoke of the invocation of the saints. It may have sounded archaic and hardly relevant to today's situation. However, Dr. N.H. Gootjes shows us otherwise in his editorial. It all started with his summer vacation to Quebec. . . .

We also have the second part of Dr. Gootjes' speech at the Theological College evening this past September. It deals with the question: how much did Jesus Christ know? It is a fascinating topic because Jesus Christ is both God and man. During his life on earth, he knew a lot but not everything. What is that all about?

Dr. F.G. Oosterhoff continues her examination of Dr. A.L.Th. de Bruijne's final essay in *Woord op schrift*. The question De Bruijne seeks to answer is to what extent it is possible today to apply biblical passages containing ethical directions not literally but metaphorically.

We have quite a number of press releases in this issue, including one from MERF-Canada. These press releases keep us apprised of life in our federation at the level of the broader assemblies. One learns a lot.

We have some of our regular columns, *Treasures, New and Old*, *Ray of Sunshine*, *Children's Catechism* and *reformedevangelism.com*.

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very clear that the issue of article 26 of our Confession is not a dead issue from the past. Praying to the saints is still a living reality. It is disturbing to read the statements, and to consider the implications. At least, I was shocked by what I read. Here follows a short section from one of these booklets.<sup>1</sup>

Father Pampalon, intercede for us. Ask for us the grace to always strive to be perfect like our heavenly Father. Amen.

Our Father in heaven, Your love has made your servant Alfred Pampalon strive for evangelical perfection. Grant that we may always follow in his footsteps. Amen.

Most compassionate Father, may You be touched by the supplications of Your servant. Grant us the special favour... that he is asking for us.

It is remarkable that the name of this person is so prominently brought up. And looking carefully at the statements, we quickly realize that in these petitions Pampalon has taken the place of Jesus Christ.

### A closer look

Take the first statement. The brochure does not teach the believers to call on Jesus Christ to plead for us. Rather, Pampalon is asked to intercede. Jesus Christ is bypassed and the request for intercession is directed to someone other than Jesus Christ. However, the Bible clearly teaches that Jesus Christ is our high priest who intercedes for us: "But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence – Jesus Christ the Righteous One" (1 John 2:1).

Similar problems occur in the two following petitions. Take the second petition that we may follow in Father Pampalon's footsteps for evangelic perfection. It is possible that during his lifetime Pampalon strove to do good. However, that does not warrant calling on him for help before God. Nowhere in Scripture do we read that some person on earth reached perfection. Actually, Paul denied it! He stated that both the gentiles as well the people of God are under sin, and he used a long list of Old Testament texts to prove the point (Rom 3:9-18).

Rather, the New Testament tells us to take Jesus Christ as the example of complete obedience. Paul expressed that in his letter to the congregation of Philippi. First he shows the greatness of Jesus Christ: he was totally obedient, even to death. And on that basis he calls the members to continue living a life of obedience (Phil 2:5-13).

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*It is regrettable, but the fact cannot be overlooked that slighting Jesus Christ by invoking the saints continues.*

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The third petition requests God to listen to the supplications of Father Pampalon. However, this is taking away from the work of Jesus Christ. The epistle to the Hebrews is very clear on this when it discusses Christ's work as high priest. It is pointed out that Jesus lives forever and thus has a permanent priesthood: "Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lived to intercede for them" (Heb 9:25).

It is regrettable, but the fact cannot be overlooked that slighting Jesus Christ by invoking the saints continues. The issue already brought up in article 26 continues to be a living reality in our own country. It continues to be important for us to know and maintain this article of the Belgic Confession, and to make others aware of the biblical teaching on prayer. May God bless the preaching of Jesus Christ in our country, so that He alone will be honoured as our only and sufficient Saviour.

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<sup>1</sup> The quotations are taken from a booklet entitled "Novena to the Servant of God, Father Alfred Pampalon," approved in 1998. It should be noted that Pampalon has not officially been recognized as a saint. That may be the reason why it is added that this is for private use only. I also obtained another booklet entitled "Novena to Saint Gerard Marjella" in which this limitation to private use is not mentioned.



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# Reformation begins with You!



MATTHEW 13:52

*Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man!"*

2 Samuel 13:7

What is your biggest problem? Look at the disciples, for a moment. They were hoping Jesus would improve things in Israel. Get rid of the Romans. Reform the church. In fact, it wasn't just the followers of Christ who were hoping for something like this. The people in Qumran, by the Dead Sea, wanted a new priesthood. There were Zealots in Palestine who were a bit like ancient terrorists. Anything to topple the corrupt regime of the day.

All these hopes have one thing in common: they are looking outside of us, whether it's in the church, in the nation, in the world. People point to something out there – if only this or that was fixed, then life's problems would be solved.

What does all that have to do with us? The Jews wanting to get rid of the Romans – that's just a nice bit of history, you say.

It's not.

It's a "nice" bit of sinful human nature – the same sinful human that you and I have. We are blind to our real needs. We like to point our fingers to others, to things around us. But never to take the blame ourselves.

What is your biggest problem? The work of Christ shows it.

You!

Can you admit that? It's not things out there that need to be changed. You need to be changed! You don't need to be saved from others! You need to be saved from yourself! Yes, things out there are bad. But do you speak with grace and

humility? That evil out there, it's first of all in me. "Christ Jesus came to save sinners," was the inspired saying in the early church, "of whom I am the worst" (1 Tim 1:15).

Look at baptism. Here too, we are reminded of this.

Baptism, after all, is a sign or seal of God's promised salvation. It's a sign of his covenant – and that covenant is about his aid, his help to us. It's God's solution to our problems.

But look at that sign! Something happens to us! We receive water on our heads! Not something out there! Not something on them! But on me! On you! Baptism is challenge: God must deal with me. We need to be washed, transformed. We sing in Psalm 51 "bones You have broken." Christ must break us (Matt 21:43) and one of the tools He uses is our very baptism. Just as Nathan came to David to make him fess up, the Holy Spirit uses baptism to point the finger at us – "You are the man!" John the Baptist began his ministry by baptizing not the heathens, but the very people of God in the river Jordan! We confess in our *Form for Baptism* that baptism "signifies the impurity of our souls, so that we may detest ourselves, humble ourselves before God, and seek our cleansing and salvation outside of ourselves" (*Book of Praise*, p 584).

Like the cleansing in the Old Testament, which often involved both blood and oil, we must be washed in two ways.

First, we need to be washed in blood. We may sprinkle the water of baptism. But it is a sign we must be washed from head to toe – and in blood, of all things! This is how great sin's guilt is and how greatly this guilt has stained us. The justice of God requires we be immersed in blood.

Secondly, we need to be washed in oil. This is a sign of new life, a sign of the power of the Holy Spirit. The washing of regeneration must touch our whole lives. Half measures will not do. We must be born again of "water and the Spirit" – the Spirit who is like water, giving newness where before there was death.

Will you confess that? This is where all reformation begins.

But baptism does more than admonish us, of course. It also teaches us about the sure promises of our Lord Jesus Christ.

You say you need a washing? You see the dirty guilt of your sins? Look at your baptism. Christ has poured out his blood that you might be bathed in it, from head to toe.

You say you need cleansing from sin's power? Look at your baptism. The water signifies to you the work of the Spirit of Christ, whom Christ also *pours out* in abundance, to completely regenerate and renew.

Baptism is a challenge. God must deal with us first of all. And it is a promise. He has dealt with us, in Jesus Christ, through his blood and Spirit.





## Dr. Jelle Faber (1924-2004)



The Lord called his servant, Dr. J. Faber, home to Himself. It happened while he was still asleep, early on September 30. On October 4, a memorial service was held in the Cornerstone Canadian Reformed Church in Hamilton. Rev. Cl. Stam preached on two passages: "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2) and "For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord" (2 Cor 4:5). By choosing these texts, Rev. Stam honoured the request of Dr. Faber that Christ be at the centre of his funeral. His wish was fulfilled. The focus was on the crucified and risen Christ and the sermon clearly brought out the power of the gospel. It was good to be there.

For the federation of churches, Dr. Faber's departure to glory is in a real sense the end of an era. The last of the very first faculty appointed to teach at the Theological College is now with the Lord in heaven. The passing away of the College's first principal gives reason to pause for thanksgiving to God for all He has granted the churches and the College in this faithful worker.

### Some background

Dr. Faber was born on May 12, 1924 in Drogeham, Friesland. However, the family soon moved and he was raised in his beloved Amsterdam. Here he benefited from the ministry and teaching of Rev. M. B. Van't Veer, as well as the preaching of Rev. S. G. de Graaf. Because of sacrifices his siblings made, he could receive a formal education, the only one in the family to do so. He was always very grateful for this support and opportunity and dedicated himself to his studies. It was during the difficult years of World War II that he started his theological studies. Especially the teaching of K. Schilder, S. Greijdanus, and B. Holwerda made a deep impression on him. Because of the tremendous shortage of ministers, he began preaching the gospel as a student at the young age of nineteen.

In 1952, he graduated from the Theological University in Kampen, married Wietske Holwerda and became a minister in Deventer where he served until 1958. His next pastorate was the congregation of Schiebroek-Hillegersberg-Centrum in Rotterdam. While there he also taught religion at the Reformed high school in that city. Reformed education would remain a big priority in his life. As a minister, scholarly pursuits were also very much on his mind as he worked on his doctoral dissertation and edited and contributed to an interdisciplinary journal *Lucerna*. In 1969 he received the degree of Doctor of Theology on his dissertation *Vestigium Ecclesiae* which translated means "vestige of the church." In this case it refers to baptism as a vestige or trace of the church for it is recognized by Reformed churches even if administered in a church considered false.

### The Theological College

It was the Synod of Orangeville in 1968 that made the momentous decision to establish the Theological College and appointed Dr. Faber to teach Old Testament. Originally, the Synod had appointed Rev. Jules T.

Van Popta of Cloverdale, B.C. to instruct in the field of dogmatology. The Lord however decided otherwise and called the Rev. Van Popta to Himself. After his death, the Synod changed Dr. Faber's appointment to that of Dogmatology and at the same time charged Rev. François Kouwenhoven of Toronto with the Old Testament disciplines. Rev. Lubbertus Selles of Chatham, Ontario, had been appointed to teach New Testament. As part-time lecturers Synod had appointed Rev. Gijsbertus Van Dooren of Burlington to teach the pastoral disciplines and Rev. Hendrik Scholten of Smithville to instruct church history and church polity.

The official opening of the Theological College took place on Wednesday, September 10, 1969, at Central Presbyterian Church in Hamilton. Dr. Faber addressed the packed church on "The Catholicity of the Belgic Confession." There is no doubt that he chose this topic because of his deep love for the confession of the catholicity of the church. In faith Dr. Faber knew of and could passionately speak about the grand scope of Christ's gathering work and the task, be it a very humble one, that we can have in that labour of our Saviour. His subsequent reminders to his students and the churches of the catholicity of the church is a legacy we as churches should cherish for it points to the great work of our Saviour.

As a member of the very first student body, I will never forget those beginning years and the enormous burdens placed on the first principal, Dr. Faber. Within a month of the opening of the College, the Old Testament professor, Rev. Kouwenhoven, passed away unexpectedly. Until the next regular Synod in 1971, Dr. Faber took upon himself the teaching of Old Testament exegesis without diminishing his regular full teaching load and responsibilities as principal. The Rev. D. Van der Boom of Toronto was asked to help out in teaching Old Testament as well. Furthermore, during the first few years the health of both lecturers was not always up to the task, complicating matters for the principal. Moreover, as with any beginning of a new enterprise, many wrinkles had to be ironed out. It would have been normal for one to despair at such a difficult situation. But the Lord had endowed Dr. Faber with a cheerful and energetic disposition. He was always ready to take on the task of keeping the work of the

College on track. Students and staff were greatly encouraged by his positive leadership. In a real way he was the glue that kept the College together and going in those first years.

In his days as principal and Professor of Dogmatics, Dr. Faber saw much change in the Theological College. In 1981 the Canadian Reformed Theological College Act was passed by the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Ontario, empowering the Senate to grant, among others, the degree of Master of Divinity. In 1985 the College vacated the premises of 374 Queen Street South and moved to our present location on Hamilton's west mountain. Of course also considerable changes in staff took place over the years. We are very thankful that the Lord gave us the expertise, vision, and enthusiasm of Dr. Faber as the man of the first hour.

And that is what he was, a man of the first hour of our College. Dr. Faber also had the insight and wisdom to see that the way things were done at the beginning, namely with having a permanent principalship attached to the same professor with a full teaching load, was not necessarily the best way for the future of the College. And so prior to his retirement on the first day of 1990, he had recommended that the principalship should henceforth be rotating among all the faculty members. Although he immensely enjoyed the task of being principal, he also recognized that the weight of this office meant he was not always able to do all the academic work that he would have liked to have done. He regretted that. He therefore recommended that the load of the principalship be shared as it is at the present time.

As a teacher, Dr. Faber taught with great enthusiasm and his scholarship was characterized by being very concretely based on specific Scripture. He had little patience with theoretical constructions that were not grounded in divine revelation. Everything had to be based on God's Word. That safeguards the gospel and keeps the church healthy. His being a minister of the Word was not just for the pulpit but also for the classroom.

Dr. Faber's specialties included Roman Catholic theology, theological developments in the World Council of Churches, and Calvin studies. He has addressed the Ministers' Workshop and other forums on topics from these areas. After his retirement, Dr. Faber participated with great enthusiasm in colloquiums of the international Calvin Studies Society. Part of Dr. Faber's academic legacy has been gathered and published under the title *Essays in Reformed Doctrine* (Neerlandia: Inheritance, 1990). For those interested, a short list of writings by Dr. Faber can be found at the College website and a full bibliography at the Spindleworks site.

Besides his work for the Theological College, Dr. Faber also preached frequently in area churches, and laboured fervently for the cause of local Reformed education at the elementary and secondary levels, and for the Teacher's College. He also edited *Clarion* from 1979-1983.

## Unworthy Slave

One of the passages of Scripture that Dr. Faber would often refer to was Luke 17:10. It typified his work in the service of the Lord Jesus. In this passage our Saviour remarks on how a slave's work for his master is never done and that as a slave one should not expect special compliments or thanks. For, as the Lord put it: "When you (as a slave) have done everything you were told to do, you should say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have only done our duty.'" Dr. Faber knew himself to be such an unworthy slave, saved by grace alone, and a fallible instrument in the hand of the Lord. He rejoiced in the opportunity for service as a slave of Jesus Christ (see e.g. 1 Pet 2:16) and he never tired of giving himself for the task. As a cheerful and tireless slave always seeking the best for the churches, he was an example and role model for others to follow. We thank the Lord also for this legacy.

As his health grew more and more tenuous and the medical care more complicated, he remained cheerful, knowing himself safe in the hands of the Lord. His dogmatics was never an ivory tower exercise and as he grew older this became even more obvious. He was ready to go whenever the Lord would call him. The Lord has now summoned Dr. Faber to glory and his task on earth is now finished. As a faithful slave who has rendered his everything for the master, he too may know from the Lord himself: "Well done, good and faithful slave, enter into the joy of your Master" (Matt 25:21).

## In conclusion

At Dr. Faber's side and involved in a very active supportive role was Mrs. Faber. We would be remiss not to mention her tremendous contribution. Especially in those first difficult years, it was undoubtedly not easy for Mrs. Faber and the family. Much had to be sacrificed in view of the enormous energy and time Dr. Faber expended on his task within the churches. The Theological College and the churches thank Mrs. Faber and the family for their support. We are grateful to God for having given in Mrs. Faber such a dedicated and devoted helpmeet and strong support for the labours of Dr. Faber.

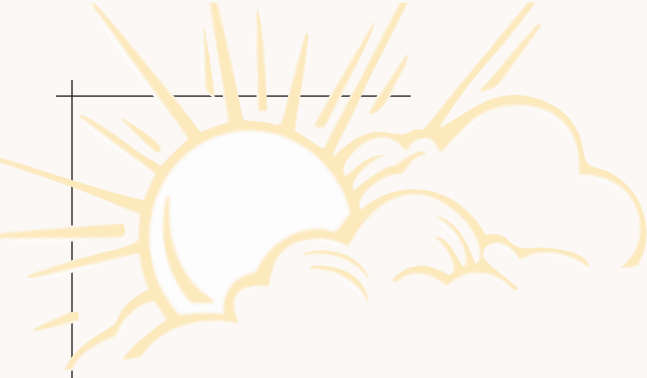
We grieve the loss of a faithful servant. We will miss his upbeat character, his phenomenal memory, quick wit, and encyclopaedic knowledge. But we rejoice in the Gospel, in the many good things the Lord has given us in him, and in the fruits of his labour that are still with us today. May the Lord continue to sustain with his promises Mrs. Faber and the family. Praised be the Name of the Lord!

<http://www.canrc.org/college/faber.html>

<http://www.spindleworks.com/library/faber/faberbiblio.htm>

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# Ray of Sunshine

By Mrs. Corinne Gelms and Mrs. Erna Nordeman

*Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, for in You my soul takes refuge.*

Psalm 57:1a

We have come to the fifth Beatitude which states, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." This is a very searching statement for all of us. With each Beatitude we are forced to examine ourselves. Each of us in our daily lives are telling others by our words and actions that yes, we are "poor in spirit, we do mourn over our sins, and we long to be meek, and we hunger and thirst for righteousness."

Now with this Beatitude we are faced with a question: are we merciful and do we know what it is to be merciful? Mercy can be compared with grace. While grace looks upon sin as a whole, mercy looks especially upon the miserable consequences of sin. The Lord in his grace and loving-kindness forgave us our sins through the blood of his Son. Knowing that it was for my sins that Christ died makes us have mercy and pity towards each other. With all the love that Christ has shown to us, we cannot but be merciful to others, also if they would do wrong to us. In ourselves we are no better than others are, for we all fall short of living a Christian life. We also have to be kind to enemies who intend to harm us.

In Psalm 57:1, David is praying to God to deliver him from Saul. He cries to God to have mercy on him. The Lord hears his prayers and shows to David his love and faithfulness.

God is the supreme example of what it is to be merciful. The perfect and central example of mercy and being merciful is the sending by God of his only Son into this world. With God there is mercy. He sees our pitiable state, He saw the suffering and in spite of our many sins, it moved Him to action. The Lord had mercy during the Old Testament times with the Israelites in the desert. He forgave them countless times and remained to them a merciful Father.

The prayer before baptism also shows God's mercy to Noah and his family. In this prayer it states, "Almighty, eternal God, in Thy righteous judgment Thou has punished the unbelieving and unrepentant world with the flood, but in Thy great mercy hast saved and protected the believer Noah and his family."

To know what Christ has all done for us, we can only be merciful to others. This we can only do because of the working of the Holy Spirit within our hearts. Thus this does not mean that we must only be merciful to our family and best friends, but

also to people who try to hurt us. We must be sorrowful for their sins and not treat them as if we are any better.

There is also a second part to this Beatitude, "for they shall obtain mercy." God through the working of the Holy Spirit works in us so that we may be merciful and forgiving. This also does not come from us. We are not merciful and kind in ourselves. One can never say "I am merciful so I will receive mercy." It is only the saving work of Jesus Christ and Him working in us through the Holy Spirit that we even know what mercy is. If left on our own we would be anything but merciful.

We must all remember that Christ will return one day. Each one of us will stand before the judgement seat of Christ and give an account of our many sins. Thanks be to God for the grace shown to us, for the Spirit of God who dwells in us. It is by the grace of God that makes us merciful and we can now in return be merciful because of God's grace. All thanks and praise be to Him alone!

*God, hear my plea, be merciful to me;  
Treat me according to Thy loving-kindness.  
Blot out my misdeeds, done in sinful blindness,  
So that again Thy mercy I may see.  
All my offences in Thy grace forgive,  
And wash away the guilt of my transgression,  
That I may free from taint of evil live;  
Lord, from my sin cleanse me in Thy compassion.*

Psalm 51:1

## Birthdays in November:

**3 WILMA VAN DRONGELEN will be 47**  
306-33375 Mayfair Avenue  
Abbotsford, BC V2S 1P4

Congratulations Wilma with your birthday. May our heavenly Father continue to keep you in his care and grant you all what you may need in this new year. Have an enjoyable day Wilma!  
Till next month,

Mrs. C. Gelms and Mrs. E. Nordeman  
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# Speech at the Theological College Evening in Hamilton on September 10, 2004

## How Much Did Jesus Christ Know? (Part 2)

### Still learning

Up to now, the pattern we found was that Jesus Christ had normal human knowledge, for He increased in knowledge. However, after He had been baptized his knowledge extended beyond what ordinary people can know. He had comprehensive divine knowledge during the three years of his public ministry.

More must be said, however, for the Bible also points out that while Jesus was fulfilling his prophetic task among Israel, He did not know everything. He mentioned that himself, not long before He died.<sup>1</sup> In this lengthy speech on the future of the church, Jesus also discussed his own return. At that point in time He stated: “No one knows about that day, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32).

We need to take a close look at this text. Jesus Christ acknowledged his lack of knowledge when responding to a question by his disciples about the destruction of the temple (13:1). In his lengthy answer He had shown again that He knew more than his contemporaries. He had stated that the temple would be destroyed (verse 2) and He had indicated what would happen about forty years later when Jerusalem would be besieged and destroyed (verses 14ff). He had spoken with authority about events no one at his time could predict, showing his knowledge of the future.<sup>2</sup> And yet, in the

same speech He also stated at one point that He did not know the time of his return. Jesus Christ did not give any qualification. He said straight out that He did not know when He would return to the earth.

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*Jesus Christ did not give any qualification. He said straight out that He did not know when He would return to the earth.*

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These biblical data have caused much discussion in the church. Considering these texts, the Christian church correctly confessed that Jesus Christ was both God and man. But it proved to be hard for them to fully acknowledge Christ's lack of knowledge. How hard, can be demonstrated by the fact that the great theologian Augustine dealt repeatedly with this text, and not always in the same way! But his main solution is clear: Mark's statement that Jesus did not know the time of his return, must be taken to mean that Jesus Christ does not make it known to others!<sup>3</sup> It is obvious that Augustine wanted to stay close to Scripture, but at the same time it must be noted that he failed to do justice to it.

Saying that Jesus did know it, but did not want other people to know, is twisting the words of the Bible. For Jesus Christ himself said He did not know!

Calvin defended the early theologians by saying they meant well for they were confronted with denials of Christ's divinity. At the same time he disagreed with their solution for it fails to do justice to Christ's own statement. He pointed out that Jesus Christ did not only mention his own ignorance, but also that of the angels. His own interpretation is based on the premise that Jesus Christ's divine nature was “in a state of repose” and did not exert itself wherever it was necessary that the human nature should act separately.<sup>4</sup>

This may be true, but Calvin's solution fails to convince. The problem why Jesus Christ in this particular case said that the Son did not know the day of his return is not really discussed. We need to investigate carefully the meaning of the text in the context of the Scriptures.<sup>5</sup>

### He was fully man

First of all we should note the expression: “No one knows the day or the hour . . . not even the Son.” Christ makes it very clear that He himself did not know the time of his return. Jesus Christ did know the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, which He had

announced in detail. But the time of his own return was unknown.<sup>6</sup> This shows that Jesus Christ here, as more often in the gospels, speaks as a human. Just as we have no knowledge of the future, so Jesus Christ did not have knowledge of the future. He stated this emphatically.

The question comes up how it would be possible that Jesus Christ is ignorant of the time of his return to the earth. If we want to do justice to this, we have to begin by acknowledging that Jesus Christ was fully man. He became hungry when He did not eat for a long time. He was sad when He heard of the death of a close supporter, Lazarus. He fell asleep when He was tired. And in the same way, He was a man who did not know everything.

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*He had divine knowledge, but not to use it for himself.*

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But did He not have divine knowledge? He did, several examples have been given before. In his teaching He showed clearly that He could speak with authority about God and his will. But He did not always do that. We do not read of extraordinary knowledge when He grew up. Rather, the Bible says that He increased in knowledge. And also in the case of his return, He did not have knowledge about the time. He did know of his impending death and his resurrection, but He did not know exactly when He would return. That means: He had to live out of faith! At this point in his life He was close to his death, and He had to trust in God.

He had divine knowledge, but not to use it for himself. Perhaps it can be expressed in this way, that He could access this divine knowledge in order to tell the people what they needed to know about God and his will. In his function as Messiah and Saviour He regularly showed that He knew God's plan and was allowed to make it known.

However, at the end of his earthly ministry He did not have knowledge of the time when He would be able to return to this world to begin his glorious reign. He had to suffer and to die just as every human being: in faith and trust. In his case, He would die the death of a condemned criminal, something He already had made known to his disciples. He knew of his death, but He had to enter into the process leading to his death, without knowing the time of his return.

We may say that He used his divine knowledge for instructing the people, but not for comforting himself. That is the reason why the incarnate Son who lived on earth, did not know when He would return to this world. He did know the fact of his future triumphant return (13:26), but He was at this point of his life ignorant of the day and hour this would take place.

### **Live from faith**

This is a very encouraging statement for our own faith. For it means that during his life on earth even Jesus Christ had to live out of faith, and be obedient unto death, just as we have to do (Heb 5:5-8). He had been going around being faithful in teaching and preaching in the villages of Israel, meeting people and being rejected by many. Even when He died He lived in faith, just like we. He entrusted his spirit to God in heaven.

Having surveyed the data Scripture provides, what is the answer to the question "How Much Did Jesus Know?" While Jesus Christ on earth, He was both true God and true man. Scripture shows us both sides: his divine and his human nature. But these two natures did not always appear side by side.

- When Jesus Christ grew up, He increased in knowledge. This shows that He had a normal human development, as far as knowledge is concerned.
- From the time He began to teach and preach He proved to know much more than common Israelites know. He was more than a prophet, more

even than John the Baptist. He had divine knowledge at his disposal. As a result He was able to preach to his people all they had to know.

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*Jesus Christ had to live out of faith, and be obedient unto death, just as we have to do.*

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- But for himself, there were limitations in his knowledge. It was part of his living in faith, that He had to go on with his work while trusting God and holding on to God's revelation. By accepting these limitations He showed yet another aspect of his faithfulness as Saviour for his people.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As a side remark, it must be pointed out that the fact that he could die is another instance that he retained his human characteristics!

<sup>2</sup> Jesus' speech contains knowledge of the future in vs. 6, 8, 9, 12, 20, 22, 24, 26ff.

<sup>3</sup> On the patristic material, see Th. C. Oden, Ch. A. Hall, eds., *Mark* (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture; Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 192-95; see also H.A.W. Meyer, *The Gospels of Mark and Luke* (or. ed., 1883; tr. R.E. Wallis; repr. Winona Lake IN, Alpha Publications, 1980), 165-6. A survey of the historical development of Christology in the early centuries can be found in J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (rev. ed.; San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), 280-343.

<sup>4</sup> See Calvin's exegesis of Matt. 24:35, in *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), vol. 3, 153-54.

<sup>5</sup> This text has long caused considerable debates in the church, see for a discussion, G.C. Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 211-23.

<sup>6</sup> W.L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 481; J. Van Bruggen, *Marcus* (Kampen: Kok, 1988), 319.

<sup>7</sup> This belongs to his active obedience, see on this my article 'Christ's Obedience and Covenant Obedience,' *Koinonia*, 19, 2 (2002), 2-22.

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# How Do We Read The Bible? (5)

## Christian Ethics

Christian ethics and the Christian lifestyle are the topics of A. L.Th. De Bruijne's final essay in *Woord op schrift*. The question he seeks to answer is to what extent it is possible today to apply biblical passages containing ethical directions not literally but metaphorically. My references in what follows will be primarily to this essay, although I will give attention also to two explanatory articles which De Bruijne wrote later and which were published in the weekly *De Reformatie*.<sup>1</sup>

## The hermeneutical question

In the first instalment of this series I mentioned some of the problems people meet today when attempting to base their ethical choices on the teachings of the Bible. One of these concerns matters on which Scripture is silent, such as today's medical ethics and other issues that are unique to modern society.<sup>2</sup> Another is why today we follow some of the biblical commands, but not all of them. The Bible says, for example, that we may not sell our land, take interest on money, or swear an oath; yet modern Christians do all these things. Apparently, this type of command was embedded in and conditioned by the culture within which it was given. The question that is being asked today is why this is not true of other commands as well – for example of those concerning divorce and remarriage, women in office, the

observation of the Sabbath, pre-marital sex, and homosexual relations. How do we know that biblical guidelines on these matters are not also time-bound?

In an explanatory article De Bruijne explains that the question how we are to base our ethical choices on the Bible is not new (Ref., p. 688). The early church already dealt with it. In our times, however, it has become more urgent, partly as a result of our openness to the outside world. Reformed people have never believed in isolating themselves from the surrounding culture but have always interacted with it. This was not too risky as long as that culture honoured a moral code that was in many respects derived from the Bible.

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*The Bible says, for example, that we may not sell our land, take interest on money, or swear an oath; yet modern Christians do all these things.*

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Today, however, our society is post-christian and pluralistic, and the wind of a postmodernist relativism freely enters the church through its open windows. It is this factor that goes a long way in explaining the urgency of the

hermeneutical question – a question, De Bruijne believes, that we cannot ignore if we do not want to add to the deterioration of the Christian lifestyle.

A contributing factor in today's situation is that in our ethical deliberations we have often been rationalistic and individualistic. We have tended to see the Ten Commandments, for example, as a timeless, universal legal code, which could be divorced from every historical context and interpreted quite apart from the community of believers. Focusing on the commands as timeless rules, the individual Christian could by careful logical reasoning, all by him or herself, come to the proper ethical choices (Ref. 689).

This usage, De Bruijne says, has led to a reaction in our postmodern age. It is true, the spirit of individualism is still strong, but the trust in logical reasoning has greatly weakened. We have learned that human reason is never neutral, and also that demonstrative certainty generally escapes us. Reasoning gets us no further than plausibility, that is, conclusions of greater or lesser probability. Even contradictory positions are often defended by logical reasoning. Those who want to prove that the Bible forbids homosexual relations, for example, can set up a rational demonstration that many will find convincing. But those who want to prove the contrary can set up a logical discourse that seems no less persuasive to others (227f.).



The subjective element – specifically the belief that one’s personal desires and feelings should be considered – plays a role in this type of reasoning, even though the element is covered up. It can also play a more overt role – in the matter of homosexual relationships and in other situations, such as those concerning divorce and remarriage. De Bruijne gives an example. He writes that one of the problems a pastor meets when referring to the Bible in matters of ethics and lifestyle is that the other person explains the argument as the pastor’s subjective, personal vision. He counters it with his own vision. For example, if he has been issued a warning, based on the Bible, against a second marriage after an unjustified divorce, the answer frequently is: “That is your exegesis; my opinion is different. Why would God ask of me such an impossible way of life? When I read the Bible, I cannot see that” (Ref., 784).

In short, what we experience today are an individualistic approach in the making of ethical choices, a tendency toward rationalism and legalism, and a turning away from the Christian lifestyle and the command to follow Christ.

### **Narrative and discipleship**

These developments have convinced him, De Bruijne says, that in ethical matters we must learn to look at the Bible in a different manner than we have been used to. He refers in his essay to the work of yet another American theologian, namely Richard B. Hays, ethicist at Yale University. With Hays he believes that we must stop looking at Scripture as a book of rules and concepts and receive it for what in fact it is, namely the history of God’s redemptive deeds in Christ.

That history comes to us in *narrative* form. This means that it is presented as a consciously composed story, all the way from the first chapter of Genesis to the

last one of Revelation. By God’s grace we have been given a place in this story, together with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the saints of the Old and New Testament. In this way we are connected to the narrative of Christ, as it is related in the New Testament. If we receive Scripture as narrative rather than as a formal discourse with timeless moral rules and concepts, its message reaches us at a deeper and more personal level.

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Stories have that effect. The emphasis in the biblical narrative is on God’s acts in the history of redemption, on words and events and examples by means of which He speaks to us today. This is what we need for our Christian life. For it is not a moral rule, but the story of Christ that wants to have authority over us and determine our lives as believers. We must live the history of our own lives in the light of Christ’s history. This means that the central issue in Christian ethics is *discipleship*, namely a following of Christ, a process wherein Christ forms us (199).

When speaking of following Christ (*navolging*), De Bruijne does not have in mind an “imitation ethics,” as we meet it for example in the well-known rule “What Would Jesus Do.” Such an approach would again deny the uniqueness of Jesus’ history and imply an ethics that is reduced to timeless rules. It



## **Church News**

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Declined the call to Orangeville, Ontario:

**Rev. D.G.J. Agema**  
of Attercliffe, Ontario.

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Declined the call to Yarrow, British Columbia:

**Rev. D.G.J. Agema**  
of Attercliffe, Ontario.

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New Address:

**Rev. C.J. VanderVelde**  
810 Foss Road  
Fenwick, ON L0S 1C0  
Office phone: (905) 892-9121  
Home phone: (905) 892-4536

would ignore the fact that it is not in abstract rules that as Christians we find our identity, but in the historical events of the life of Christ – namely those of his way of cross and resurrection. It is important to note that that identity, as the Bible teaches, has an effect on our moral *thinking* and *knowing*. It implies a renewing of our mind, as a result of which we are able “to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom 12:1,2). We are enabled spiritually to discern, and to determine what really counts. The Bible speaks in this connection of our having “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16). The Holy Spirit places upon us the stamp of Jesus’ life and history in such a way that we begin to think, experience, and apprehend in the style of Christ and in terms of his history of cross and resurrection to new creation (201, 206).

Elsewhere in his essay De Bruijne shows the relevance of this discipleship ethics for the issue we referred to earlier, that of remarriage after an unjustified divorce. He does it in a discussion with his colleague B. Loonstra,

who had argued that to forbid remarriage in such a situation would go counter to the biblical theme of love. De Bruijne replies that if our Christian identity is indeed formed by the story of Christ, then Christ's way of cross and resurrection will become evident in our lives and we will not so easily say that having to stay unmarried is contrary to the totality of the biblical message. Rather, it is by forgoing a second marriage in the expectation of the new creation that something becomes visible of Jesus and his work. We deny ourselves something for the sake of the kingdom (Matt 19:12). As we read in Philippians 3:10f, we become like Christ in his death in order that we may also come to the resurrection from the dead. This choice may serve, moreover, as an example within the Christian community and so help prevent a situation wherein the way of divorce becomes an acceptable alternative among us (210f).

## Metaphor

It is through the Holy Spirit that the Christian becomes part of the biblical narrative. The believer has at the same time, however, his own story, embedded in his own time and culture and worldview, all of which are different from the biblical ones. Because of these differences, it becomes necessary to reason by analogy, or to make, as De Bruijne calls it, "metaphorical leaps"; to translate from the biblical context into our own.

For the differences we encounter may not result in our *ignoring* certain biblical passages. We are not to cut the Bible into two parts, one of which is "time-bound" and as such irrelevant for us, while the other transcends time and is therefore applicable to all periods, cultures, and situations. In that case, the historical element in the Bible will count for us as no more than the wrapping of supra-historical truths. Once we have unpacked these truths, we can discard

the wrapping. In the matter of ethics it will mean that we will try to deduce from the Bible general rules which we can then interpret apart from the historical situations wherein they originated. That approach, however, does not work. We cannot peel the historical from Scripture, for the entire Bible is steeped in its own time and culture. If we ignore this we will end up (as today's situation shows all too clearly), by doubting the relevance and moral authority of practically everything in the Bible (200).

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*The Ten Commandments must not be removed from the rest of the Torah, nor are they to be seen as the only moral guides. The history of the Torah has moral significance as well.*

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But if we may not cut the Bible up into two parts, neither are we to adopt in an uncritical manner all the rules and principles that come with the biblical passage in question. To do this would again imply a denial of the historical element. There are redemptive-historical differences between "then" and "now": we are part of the same story as the believers of the Old Testament, but we are at a different point within that story, and that difference must be kept in mind (214). The switch from Sabbath to Sunday can serve as example (Ref. 689). Also instructive is the Old Testament prohibition of the taking of interest. The command fitted the economic order of the time, which was non-capitalistic, small-scale, and primarily agricultural. One borrowed only in case of poverty.

Our economic order on the other hand is capitalistic, commercial, dependent on large-scale operations, often inflationary, and focused on profit. Borrowing is now primarily a tool for investment. The Bible does not ask that we reject our modern economic order in favour of that of earlier times. What it does tell us is to interpret and translate the command in present-day terms. Although we may invest our money to gain interest, we are as followers of Christ instructed to do well to the poor, both at home and abroad. Serious financial sacrifices on behalf of the needy are still being asked of us. Similarities and differences, in short, will come to the fore in a variety of ways, as is typical of metaphors (201, Ref. 690).

The use of metaphor in ethical matters is not restricted to directions that are clearly conditioned by their historical context, such as the prohibition of taking interest. It applies, De Bruijne says, also to Bible texts that we recognize as containing a direct command, for these commands also originated within a specific historical and cultural context (212f). He illustrates this with reference to the Decalogue. Although the Ten Words must be received as authoritative for all times, they are nevertheless coloured by the time and culture of their period. The sixth commandment, for example, tells us that we may not murder. Literally, however, this command forbids vendettas and blood-feuds, usages we no longer follow. How then can such a command direct us? It can do this because we make a connection between the situation of today and that of the biblical world and note the similarities. It is in that way that we experience the normative character of the commandment. The necessity of making a metaphorical leap applies equally to other commands in the Decalogue. In addition to the sixth,

De Bruijne specifically mentions the fourth and the ninth.

The metaphor theory, in short, helps us realize that, in spite of redemptive-historical differences, the entire Bible is relevant for us today (205). It further shows us the need to approach the Bible not only with our analytical reason, but also, and primarily, with our imaginative understanding (200). The role of the former is not to be denied (229), but in attempting to apply biblical commands and examples we do not first of all depend on logical reasoning. Rather, we “recognize” the relevance of God’s commands for our lives in spite of the differences in time and culture. We learn that these commands are more than moral rules. They are the living words of God whereby He directs us on our way (213).

### Law as Torah

De Bruijne refers in this connection to the work of the American ethicist J.W. McClendon, who has described how the Ten Commandments, together with other instructions in the Pentateuch (the Five Books of Moses), were given to the concrete community of Israel when, after the liberation from Egypt, it had to live a life of service to the Lord in the land of promise. He points out that with the word “law” we must not think first of all of abstract moral rules. The Old Testament speaks of “Torah,” a word that we can better translate not as “law,” but as “instruction” or “giving direction.” In the Torah God showed his people the way in which they had to walk in Canaan (213f).

The Ten Commandments must not be removed from the rest of the Torah, nor are they to be seen as the only moral guides. The *history* of the Torah has moral significance as well. The Torah is also not to be divorced from its own time and place. Its meaning was the formation of a community around the worship of the one true God in a specific phase of history and at a specific place:

the land of Canaan. It is in its very concreteness that the Torah is universally valid: God is via that preliminary community of Israel on his way to his new world for all nations. The Torah shows how we have to follow God on that way. It is therefore not an arbitrary way but points to God’s coming kingdom. But the same concreteness also explains why it is not possible to apply the commandments without further ado to all other times and places. In the history of redemption there will be issues that remain the same and issues that differ.

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*Ethical choices become convincing first of all because they “square” with the history told by the Bible.*

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Our traditional view of the law, De Bruijne believes, also fails to do justice to the central place of Christ in the ethical life. Jesus does more than maintain and explain the Ten Commandments. He gives a new Torah, for the way to the kingdom is now no longer restricted to the people of Israel but runs via a new community, one that is composed of all the peoples of the world. Jesus as mediator opens that new way and also embodies it, and his disciples must follow Him and keep his commands, his Torah. Just as the Torah of Moses assumed the community of Israel, so the Torah of Jesus assumes the context of the Christian congregation. The change from Old to New Testament does not mean that the Torah of Moses with its Decalogue is forgotten. Jesus did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfil it. But with the coming of Jesus the Torah of Moses has been given a place within a different framework (Ref. 689f.)

### Focal images

In the realm of ethics, we saw, the Bible gives us both normative commands and normative examples. We are not to ignore any of these as “time-bound” and therefore irrelevant; but neither are we to remove them from their historical context. Taking into account that they originated in a different time and culture, we must translate them from their original context into our own. As to the ethical cases about which the Bible is altogether silent, we must attempt to find solutions that are, as far as we can ascertain, in accordance with the teachings of the Bible.

To be able to do this we have to be aware, De Bruijne writes, of the overall theme and intent of Scripture. He speaks in this connection of “focal images,” that is, images which serve as lenses through which we discern the unity and central message of the Bible. Following Hays, he distinguishes in the New Testament the following focal images: community, cross, and new creation. These three “call forth for us the image that must guide our use of the New Testament in ethical choices. Together they present to us. . . the narrative unity of the New Testament. This is the *narrative* of God, who forms around Christ the *community* of the new covenant, a community that is to follow Him on the way via the *cross* to a *new creation*” (198).

### Congregational ethics

In our following of Christ we are led by the Holy Spirit, who rewrites our narrative by means of the biblical narrative and places us under the authority of the history of God’s salvation in Christ (203, 232). He does this within the framework of the congregation, for the Christian identity is a communal identity. We must form a communal conviction regarding our lifestyle as part of the Christian identity.

The Spirit’s guidance and the congregational framework provide an answer, De Bruijne believes, to a question



that inevitably arises with the metaphorical approach, namely that of arbitrariness and subjectivism. For how does one know that the choices one makes along the metaphorical route are indeed valid? An analytical, rational approach seems safer, since it allows one to ground ethical conclusions on the firm foundation of timeless, universal moral rules and commands. Within a narrative approach, demonstrative proofs are much harder to come by. Dependence on the Spirit, who will lead us in the truth, is therefore essential. And instead of rational proof, which the individual can reach by his or her own individual reasoning, there is the “test” within the congregation. To have one’s life guided by the narrative of Christ, in short, is a matter of Christian practice and interaction within the community of believers. The congregation uses as guiding marks (*ijkpunten*) in this testing specific biblical commands and examples as well as the commonly held focal images. No less important is congregational prayer, not just as an extra by the ethical reflection but as a necessary part of that reflection (203).

In this connection De Bruijne refers to I Corinthians 12, which speaks of the different gifts that the Spirit distributes among the members of the congregation. This network of gifts is indispensable if we are to grow as congregation in the Christian life. De Bruijne uses the following illustration of this use of the Spirit’s gifts: when a pastor speaks with a homosexual member and tries to convince him that his participation in Christ’s narrative demands a life of abstinence, then he requires the help of other members of the congregation. He needs, for example, members with the gift of compassion; he needs people with the gift of “faith,” who show with their own life that trust in God makes possible what may appear to be impossible; he needs those who can by their example

and teaching show how a life of discipleship can take form and how it is rewarded in this life and in the life to come (Luke 18:30); he needs members who can “discern the spirits” and expose the dynamics in differing points of view; and so on. Ethical choices become convincing first of all because they “square” with the history told by the Bible. And this “squaring” is evident not only and not in the first place on the level of our thinking, writing, and debating, but on that of the *Christian life* (227).

The more mature the congregation is in faith and Christian life, De Bruijne believes, the better it will be able to read and apply the Bible and understand its ethical guidelines. Where the message of the Bible is not practised, believers make it difficult for themselves and for others to understand it. The proper interpretation begins with a life of discipleship. And therefore De Bruijne can say that the hermeneutical problem is essentially an ethical problem. Its resolution can never be given in a fully rational formula. It is to be found in a life of conversion within the congregation (204). Discipleship is a matter of the congregation as a whole (232).

In the next and final article we turn to the reception of this essay among Reformed theologians.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> References to the essay in *Woord op schrift* will appear in the text with page number only, those to articles in *De Reformatie* as Ref. with page number. The *Reformatie* articles to which I refer appear in the issues of June 14 and July 26, 2003, pp. 688-91 and 784-88 respectively.

<sup>2</sup> De Bruijne mentions in addition to medical ethics the use of the media, the use of luxury articles, tourism, and investments. *De Reformatie*, June 14, 2003, p. 688.



## Iraqi Churches Update

Thanks and greetings from your Iraqi brothers and sisters in Christ – the six congregations of Baghdad (2), Basra, Mosul, Kirkuk and Irbil. In these turbulent times they receive much comfort from the knowledge that many fellow believers are praying for them.

### Security Concerns

The security situation remains worrisome for all Iraqis – especially for Christians and other minorities. Protecting children and young women from the growing wave of kidnappings is as much of a daily concern as the

prospect of falling bomb-shells, rocket-propelled grenades, stray bullets and car bombs. Two families from the Baghdad congregations lost members in the tumultuous events. Falling bombs destroyed homes of two other families, seriously injuring two children. Evangelical Christian Iraqis along with Roman Catholics who hosted Western workers, are considered by militant Islamist groups as Western spies and collaborators. Hundreds of Western and Korean missionaries entered Iraq after the fall of Baghdad last year. For months many of them engaged in public

evangelistic efforts. Some sought to establish new churches. Such efforts were accompanied by the distribution of food, books, tracts, etc. The newcomers focused on predominately Christian neighborhoods around Baghdad, Kirkuk, Mosul and several areas of the largely Kurdish north.

The worsening security situation – especially the rise of kidnappings of foreigners – has prompted the departure of many. Numerous Iraqis of Christian background had depended on financial assistance from various Protestant and Catholic relief agencies which have now left the country.

### Losses and Gains

Since jobs are scarce and it is unclear whether Iraq's new central government will successfully regain control of the nationwide security situation, most congregations have lost large numbers of families who have emigrated to other countries. For example, the church in Basra has dwindled to about forty people. At the same time, some congregations have also *gained* families who moved into their community from less secure areas or from ancient church backgrounds, such as Assyrian or Chaldean Orthodox. But overall, most churches have experienced significant losses.

The Arabic congregation in Baghdad is the largest and has lost about 60 families to emigration. It continues to minister to 235 families and 360 children. In contrast, the church in the northern



*Iraq's six Reformed churches (two in Baghdad) are persevering amidst difficulty.*



Iraqi city of Mosul has grown from ministering to just a handful of families to becoming a fellowship of 37 families and 60 children. The churches in northern Iraq, Kirkuk and its daughter congregation in Irbil, need our prayers as they also struggle with security concerns and shrinking numbers due to emigration.

Praise God for the beginning of a small group meeting in the largely Kurdish town of Suleymanina in the north.

### Safe Haven

Except for a brief period in mid-2003, average Iraqis have not felt safe to move about freely. Although many schools and educational institutions have opened, many families have not dared to risk the dangers of traveling outside their local neighborhoods. Instead, families have been bringing their children to the safety of local church buildings during the day to receive some education and take part in church activities. At the initiative of moderate Muslim leaders, almost all church buildings are being kept secure by neighborhood militias. In the less secure cities of Baghdad and Basra, families living in the relatively safe communities near church buildings have opened their homes indefinitely to host families from less secure areas. Give thanks for the increased activities taking place in the buildings of the six Reformed congregations. Church programs include:



*Amidst continuing violence and insecurity, Iraqi churches have become more active in schooling children inside their buildings.*

Sunday services, mid-week Bible studies, classes and activities for various age groups. Security tends to improve on Fridays – the Iraqi day off – when congregations enjoy the best attendance at services and activities.

The churches in each of the major cities have developed a weekly system of visitation and diaconal care for members and friends. This insures that every family is regularly checked on.

The congregations of Baghdad, Mosul and Kirkuk have also established medical clinics offering care to the poor from any religious background. MERF diaconal aid is an essential facilitator of these vital efforts.

Although serious security concerns persist, recently one of the top clergymen of the Al-Sadr Shiite movement has added his voice to those who call for the protection of Christians and other minorities. He issued a fatwa (Islamic declaration) that “Iraqi Christians are loyal citizens and faithful neighbors and entitled to the protection awarded to good Muslims.” This received the endorsement

of the Islamic council of Sunni scholars. It must be viewed as an answer to prayer!

The pastors and elders of the Reformed congregations of Iraq are working very hard to nurture the flocks the Lord has entrusted to them. Fervent prayer is needed that law and order, as well as peace, will soon be restored throughout the country for the good of God’s people and the extension of Christ’s Kingdom.

**Thank you for your continued support!** The Lord continues to gather his people from all corners of the earth! What a privilege to be able to support a Reformed witness in the Middle East! By way of reminder: Please make all cheques payable to “**MERF-Canada**” and send them to:

**MERF-Canada**  
**1225 Dundas Street, RR #1,**  
**Burlington, ON L7R 3X4**  
**905-332-3285**  
**merf-canada@cogeco.ca**

*With warm regards,  
yours in the Lord’s service,  
Rev. J. Mulder, chairman,  
Mrs. J. VanDam, secretary*





J. Wiskerke van Dooren

# Lord's Day 21

*Mrs. J. Wiskerke van Dooren published a Children's Catechism in Dutch. This has been translated with her permission.*



Before, in Lord's Day 16, we spoke of the grave of the Lord Jesus. But we also mentioned other graves. The graves of granddad and grandma, the grave of someone else we knew.

People who die are brought to a cemetery, and there they are buried. Often, a gravestone is placed on that grave, mentioning who was buried there. If he was your grandfather, you can say: grandpa is here.

When a grandfather dies, an ad is published in the newspaper. If he loved the Lord, the ad in the paper will say: The Lord has taken to himself our beloved grandfather. Then his name is mentioned, and often a bible text is added.

How is that possible to say that? Is grandpa in the grave, and at the same time with God in heaven? Yes, both are true.

In Lord's Day 22, it says that the soul is immediately taken up in heaven. And later, when the Lord Jesus returns, the graves will be opened. Then, the souls of all God's children return to the earth. They come back in their renewed bodies. And they will always be with God.

You see that dying is not as bad as it looks. And if you really want to know why, you should go back in the Catechism. Have another look at Lord's Days 16 and 17.

And that is not all. At the very end, the Apostles' Creed speaks of the life everlasting. Isn't that neat? The end of the Apostles' Creed mentions something that has no end. It speaks about eternal life.

The body has become a glorified body. And the soul is again united with its renewed body. And as a soul in a glorified body you may be with the Lord always.

You know what is nice? Now already we can begin enjoying that feast. For you and I know that we belong to the Lord, always. And that makes you happy. When you are at school and when you are at home. When you are studying, or playing a game, or are sick and in your bed. Always happy.

The future feast begins today.

It will exceed your greatest dream.





## D. Moes

Rev. Dick Moes is minister of the Surrey Covenant Reformed Church (URC) in Cloverdale, British Columbia. [dickmoes@shaw.ca](mailto:dickmoes@shaw.ca)

# reformedevangelism.com

## Part 2: How Christians Grow – Learning to Pray

In Part one of the *Emmaus* Nurture course, we looked at what Christians believe. In Part two, we will look at how Christians grow. Part two is made up of four lessons: (1) Learning to pray, (2) Reading the Bible, (3) Belonging to the church and (4) Celebrating the Lord's Supper.

### The parable of the sower

The first lesson of part two begins with the parable of the sower. As the parable of the lost son was fundamental to the first part of this course in that it showed that people need God in their lives, so the parable of the sower is basic to part two. It shows people the need to grow as Christians. Read the parable together as a group. Then, break into small groups and have the groups discuss what kind of a person best corresponds to each kind of soil. As the groups come back together, have them share their findings. Go through the different kinds of soil together with the group. Warn the people that they will go through times of testing and that they will experience thorns growing up to choke the life out of the seed. Give the people some kind of an idea of how long it may take the seed to grow to maturity.

### The Lord's Prayer

Have the people talk together in small groups about their own experience of prayer. Be sure to allow the people to articulate a wide range of experiences. Let the groups share their experiences with the whole group. Then, introduce the Lord's Prayer. Guide the group through the structure of this prayer, briefly commenting on the address, the petitions, the doxology and the Amen.

### Developing good habits of prayer

Have the people talk together about the different reasons why it is healthy and important for Christians to develop good habits of prayer – and what some of the difficulties might be. Be sure to mention that:

- Prayer builds our relationship with God. Like any relationship, our relationship with God will develop and grow as we spend quality time on building the relationship.
- Prayer was a vital part of Jesus' own ministry. Thus, it should also be a vital part of our life.
- We grow more like the Lord Jesus as we spend more time with Him.
- Prayer strengthens us for our daily lives.
- Through prayer God's power is released in the world, in the church and in our own lives.

### Some first steps

Stress that it is good to talk to God (and listen to Him) all through the day. Most Christians, however, find it very important to have a time each day to spend with God in prayer. Emphasize that it can be hard to find such a time because of our own hectic schedule, our laziness and the activity of the devil. Highlight that in order to establish a daily time of prayer, a person should find the time, the place and plan the time. Be sure to point out that there is no single, "right" way that suits everyone. Whatever suits a person best is usually the best way for that person. Also be flexible when speaking about the components of a person's prayer time. One way that people have found helpful is to first

prepare for prayer through praise, confession and stillness. Second, they listen to God through attending to the Scriptures. Third, they talk to God about their own concerns, the concerns of those who are close to them and the concerns of the world. Have the groups discuss together the importance of each part of their prayer time.

### Praying with others

Explain why praying with others is important. Point out that this can be difficult at first. Tell the people not to worry about how other people pray. Encourage them to be natural and to persevere. Remind them of what God tells us in Romans 8:26 that the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know what we ought to pray for. Thus the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

Ask the people to reflect on how they might develop a helpful pattern of prayer. Encourage them to try to learn the Lord's Prayer by heart and to pray it slowly each day, thinking carefully about the words. Entertain any questions the people may have at this time.

If you would like to view the outline for this lesson, go to [www.reformedevangelism.com](http://www.reformedevangelism.com) and follow the links. We have added two classics on prayer to our library section. The first is J.C. Ryle's little booklet *A Call to Prayer*. The second is Andrew Murray's *With Christ in the School of Prayer*. Murray's book contains no fewer than 31 chapters on various aspects of prayer. Read one chapter at a time and have your prayer life formed by this classic. Next time, we hope to introduce "Reading the Bible."



## **Press Release of Classis Contracta Niagara of August 18, 2004 held in Lincoln, Ontario**

### **Opening**

On behalf of the convening Church of Lincoln, Rev. J. VanVliet opens the meeting in a Christian manner. He welcomes the delegates. The Churches of Attercliffe, Grassie, Lincoln and Smithville have sent delegates. The credentials of these churches are found to be in proper order. The Church at Lincoln has two instructions in connection with the upcoming vacancy. Classis is declared constituted. Classis appoints the following moderamen

Chairman – A. Souman

Clerk – D. Agema

Vice-chairman – S. C. VanDam

The Agenda is adopted as proposed

### **Release Rev. J. P. VanVliet**

Classis reviews the necessary documents and decides to release most honourably the Rev. J. P. VanVliet from his ministerial duties in the Classis Niagara. Classis provides the Rev. J. P. VanVliet with a Certificate of Release in duplicate in order that these documents – in accordance with articles 5 and 9 of the Church Order – may serve him in the Maranatha Canadian Reformed Church at Surrey and the Classis Pacific West as legitimate testimony of his release from the Church at Lincoln and from the Classis Niagara, and as a good ecclesiastical attestation regarding his doctrine and conduct. Classis sings Psalm 134:3.

### **Instructions Lincoln**

The Church at Lincoln requests that Rev. Agema be appointed as counsellor according to Art 45 Church Order. This request is granted. Classis also grants the Church at Lincoln pulpit supply. A schedule is approved.

### **Closing**

The chairman notes with thankfulness that the meeting could be conducted in an orderly and brotherly manner. The Acts are read and adopted. The Press Release is approved. The chairman leads in prayer of thanksgiving and declares Classis closed.

*For Classis,  
D. G. J. Agema, Clerk e.t.*

## **Press Release of Classis Contracta Pacific West of the Canadian Reformed Churches, held in Langley, September 13, 2004**

The Maranatha Canadian Reformed Church at Surrey had requested a Classis Contracta to approbate the call extended by that congregation to Rev. J. P. VanVliet, which he accepted.

The meeting was opened by reading from God's Word and calling upon his name in prayer. The Churches at Cloverdale, Langley, Surrey and Willoughby Heights were represented. Rev. J. Visscher was appointed as chairman and Rev. E. Kampen as clerk.

Classis reviewed the following documents:

1. Letter of call from the Maranatha Church at Surrey to Rev. J. P. VanVliet.
2. Letter of acceptance of the call by Rev. J. P. VanVliet.
3. Certificate of honourable release from the Canadian Reformed Church at Lincoln, Ontario.
4. Certificate of honourable release from Classis Niagara of the Canadian Reformed Churches.
5. Notice of assumption of responsibility for Rev. J. P. VanVliet by the Maranatha Church at Surrey as of 12:01 A.M. September 1, 2004.
6. Letter from the Council of the Church at Surrey testifying that announcements had been made on August 15 and August 22 and that the congregation had given its approbation to the call.

All the documents were found to be in order. Classis approbated the call.

Br. D. Deddens was appointed to represent Classis at the installation of Rev. J. P. VanVliet, and Rev. J. Visscher was appointed to represent Classis at the welcome evening. After prayer of thanksgiving, Classis was closed.

*Rev. E. Kampen,  
clerk at that time*

## **Press Release of the meeting of Classis Central Ontario of September 17, 2004**

On behalf of the convening Church of Burlington Fellowship, br. B. Poort called the meeting to order. He requested the singing of Psalm 87:1, 2, 5 and read Philippians 2:1-11, and led in prayer. He welcomed the brothers delegates. The delegates of the Burlington Ebenezer Church examined the credentials and reported that they were in order. Classis was constituted. The officers took their places; the Rev. G. Nederveen volunteered to serve as clerk in the absence of the Rev. J. Huijgen.

The chairman, Rev. M. Jagt, expressed words of thanks to the hosting church, Burlington Ebenezer. As memorabilia he remembered the sabbatical of the Rev. W. den Hollander, the vacancy of the Burlington Fellowship Church, and the various building activities in building projects in Toronto, Fellowship, and on the mission field in PNG. He also drew the attention to the developments at the Theological College and the health concerns of Dr. J. Faber.

After the agenda was established and adopted, Classis received audit reports from the Church of Burlington Fellowship re the archives, and from the Church at Burlington-Waterdown re the books of the Treasurer, the Fund for Financial Aid to students for the ministry, and of the Fund for Needy Churches. All these books were found to be in good order, which was noted with gratitude.



The Committee for Needy Churches submitted a report on the requests from the Church at Ottawa and Burlington Fellowship. Classis adopted the recommendations to grant the requests of these two churches. The assessment per communicant member was raised to \$40.00 for the year 2005 (the amount of support for Burlington Fellowship will be prorated according to the number of months not vacant).

In the Question Period according to art 44 CO, the Church of Burlington Fellowship requested pulpit supply for one Sunday per month, starting January 2005. This request was granted. The Burlington Ebenezer Church requested advice in matters of church discipline, as did the Burlington Fellowship Church. In closed session advice was given concurring with the requests to proceed in these matters of discipline.

Classis made the following appointments:

- a. Committee for Examinations:
  1. Coordinators – W. den Hollander and J. Huijgen
  2. Exegesis OT – G. Nederveen
  3. Exegesis NT – M.R. Jagt
  4. Knowledge of Scripture – M.R. Jagt
  5. Doctrine and Creeds – J. DeGelder
  6. Church History – W. den Hollander
  7. Ethics – J. DeGelder
  8. Church Polity – G. Nederveen
  9. Diaconiology – J. Huijgen
- b. Church Visitors: J. DeGelder, W. den Hollander, J. Huijgen, and G. Nederveen
- c. Church for taking care of the archives: Burlington Ebenezer
- d. Church to inspect the archives: Burlington Fellowship
- e. Treasurer: br. H. J. Sloots, 568 Dynes Road, Burlington ON, L7N 2V2  
Alternate: br. G. J. Nordeman (Burlington Ebenezer)
- f. Church to audit the books of the Classical Treasurer: Burlington-Waterdown
- g. Church for Financial Aid to Students for the Ministry: Flamborough

- h. Church for auditing the books of the Fund Financial Aid to Students for the Ministry: Burlington-Waterdown
- i. Committee for Needy Churches: Fred Lodder (Burlington South): Treasurer (2006)  
Barry Hordijk (Flamborough) (2005)  
Harry Sloots (Burlington Ebenezer) (2007)
- j. Church to audit the books of the Fund for Needy Churches: Burlington-Waterdown
- k. Observer Free Church of Scotland: G. Nederveen.
- l. The convening church for next Classis: Burlington-Waterdown – Dec. 10, 2004
- m. Delegates to Regional Synod East of November 10, 2004:  
Ministers: J. DeGelder and M.R. Jagt;  
Alternates: W. den Hollander, J. Huijgen  
Elders: W. Horsman and H. VanderWel;  
Alternates: A. Smouter, E. Pol.

No one made use of the question period. The chairman thanked the brothers for their cooperation and harmony and thankfully observed that censure according to art 34 CO was not necessary. The Acts were read and adopted; the Press Release was read and approved. After the singing of Hymn 46:1, 2, the chairman closed the meeting with prayer.

*For Classis Central  
of September 17, 2004:*

*W. den Hollander,  
vice-chairman at that time*

## **Press Release of Classis Manitoba, Monday September 20, 2004 held in the building of the Canadian Reformed Church Carman East, Manitoba**

### **Opening**

At 9:00 a.m., on behalf of the convening church at Carman East, br. L. Lodder called the meeting to order. He opened the meeting in a Christian

manner. He welcomed the delegates, in particular the fraternal delegate, Rev. V. Picknally from the POD-OPC (Presbytery of the Dakotas of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church). The delegates of the convening church checked the credentials. The meeting could proceed. All churches were represented by their *primi* delegates. Denver could only send one delegate. There was one instruction.

As memorabilia br. Lodder mentioned that the Church of Carman East is still vacant. The brothers Rev. R. Pot and candidate R. Bredenhof declined the calls to Carman East, accepting calls to other congregations. Rev. T.G. VanRaalte declined the call of the Free Reformed Church at Launceston, Tasmania, Australia. Furthermore the recent college evening in Hamilton was mentioned; four young brothers graduated this year. Three new students enrolled in the theological training at our College. Since we need more ministers we should encourage young brothers to consider training for the ministry in Hamilton.

The following officers were appointed: Rev. A.J. Pol chairman; Rev. K. Jonker, vice-chairman; Rev. D.M. Boersma, clerk. Classis was declared constituted. The agenda was proposed and adopted. Rev. V. Picknally from the OPC at Carson (ND) was seated as fraternal delegate.

### **Reports, proposals and correspondence received:**

1. The Classis Treasurer's report was received with thanks.
2. The report from the Committee for Aid to Needy Churches was received. Classis accepted the report with thanks to the committee members. It was decided to grant the request of Denver for support. This support will amount to \$66.00 per communicant member.
3. The Redeemer Canadian Reformed Church reported that the books of the Committee for Aid to Needy

- Churches were audited and found to be in good order.
4. The Committee for Aid to Needy Students also sent their report. It was received by Classis with thanks to the committee members.
  5. The Grace Canadian Reformed Church reported that the books of the Committee for Aid to Needy Students were audited and found to be in good order.
  6. The report of the church visitation to Denver on September 3, 2004 was read in closed session.
  7. Observer's report OPC-POD was received with thanks to Rev. T.G. VanRaalte who attended the POD meeting of April 2004. The report will be passed on to the Committee for contact with Churches in the Americas (CCCA), which takes care of our ecclesiastical contact with the OPC. The report also will be shared with Classis Alberta.
  8. The church at Carman West requested updating the *Guidelines for Conducting Church Visitation in the Classis Manitoba*. Classes accepted the idea that a review is necessary, but that a local church can undertake this matter. Classis suggested that Carman West can make a proposal to the churches.

#### Classical matters

- I. Question period according to art 44 CO was held. Carman East asked advice on a matter of church discipline. Advice was given in closed session.

2. Rev. Picknally addressed the meeting and brought the greetings from the POD. He informed the Classis about church life in the Presbytery of the Dakotas. Appreciation was expressed for the dedication with which Classis Manitoba maintains the ecclesiastical relationship with the POD. Rev. Picknally expressed the hope that the official contact may grow into more practical contact between the churches. He expressed gratitude for being invited to Classis. Rev. VanRaalte responded to the address. In prayer Classis commended the churches of the POD to the Lord's care.
3. Rev. R. Pontier of the United Reformed Churches (Classis Central U.S.) informed Classis that he is not the contact person anymore. Rev. P. Kloosterman has taken his place. Rev. Kloosterman sent a letter of greetings and expressed the hope that a delegate can be sent from URC Classis Central U.S. to a future Classis of Manitoba.
4. The following appointments were made:
  - a. Next Classis, convening church: Carman West; tentative date: Monday December 6, 2004; alternate date: Monday March 7, 2005; place: in the Carman East church building; the suggested officers are: chairman: Rev. T.G. VanRaalte; vice-chairman: Rev. A.J. Pol; clerk: Rev. K. Jonker.
  - b. After a small change the appointments in the standing committees were reconfirmed.

- c. Appointed delegates for Regional Synod West 2004 are: *Primi*-ministers: Rev. K. Jonker and A.J. Pol; alternate-minister: Rev. T.G. VanRaalte; *Primi*-elders: br. A. Poppe and C. VanSeters; alternate-elders: br. V. Schriemer (1), br. W. VanderLinde (2).
- d. Appointed fraternal delegate to POD-OPC: Rev. D.M. Boersma; and to the Northern Plains Classis of the RCUS: Rev. A.J. Pol. In case a fraternal delegate from our classical region is unable to visit the assemblies of our sister churches, fraternal greetings will be sent.
5. During personal question period the Church at Denver thanked Classis for the financial support received. Regarding calling work, the churches were requested to officially inform the classis churches when a minister is called and his subsequent decision regarding the call.

#### Closing

The chairman concluded that censure ad art 34 CO was not necessary. He thanked the brothers for the pleasant cooperation at this Classis. In turn the chairman was thanked for his work "in the chair." The Acts were read and adopted. The Press Release was read and approved. Psalm 89:1 was sung and the chairman led Classis in closing Prayer. Classis was closed.

*For Classis Manitoba*  
September 20, 2004,  
Rev. K. Jonker, vice-chairman

