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*Humility as a
Cure for
Anxiety*

*Divorce and
Remarriage*

NAPARC 2005



Road Rage



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Road Rage

Suddenly, some foolish driver cuts in front of you

We have just entered the summer vacation season. Many have already left for their vacations or will do so soon. Some will stay close to home enjoying their yards, entertaining family and friends with delicious barbecues. Hopefully we can do this with good weather and good Christian companionship.

However, with the vacation season also come busy roads, scorching temperatures, and lots of road repair. Many of us have sat in bumper-to-bumper traffic for hours; the temperature and humidity are high; the kids are getting cranky; the temperature gauge is rising dangerously; then suddenly, some foolish driver cuts in front of you, causing you to slam on your brakes. What is your reaction at that moment? It is not impossible that you get very angry, sputtering some unprintable words, gesturing wildly and threatening this foolish driver by getting as close to his back bumper as possible. This is called "road rage" and it is not at all uncommon. All kinds of people can react this way: an elderly gentleman, a young mother, teenagers, and so on. Road rage can get so out of hand that people ram each other's cars, get out of their cars and start a fist fight, or worse.

Behaviour is something we must all control

I recall a tragic case in the United States a few years ago where two young women got angry with each other on the highway, resulting in the one woman shooting the other to death. We can imagine her phone call to her husband later that day: "Honey, I am in jail." "Why?" he asks. "Well, this woman who is a complete stranger cut me off on the highway and so I shot her with my gun." It sounds ludicrous and it is.

The tragedy is that it is so common – not always with such fatal results, but bad enough!

Recent studies

In very recent studies, medical researchers claim that people who exhibit road rage could be suffering from intermittent explosive disorder (IED), a psychiatric condition far more prevalent than previously thought. It is believed that millions of North Americans are affected by the disorder, which can trigger outbursts of road rage, tantrums that lead to violent or destructive acts, and even domestic abuse. It is alleged that IED involves multiple outbursts that tend to be "grossly out of proportion to the situation." It is linked to the inadequate production or functioning of serotonin, a mood and behaviour-regulating chemical in the brain. In other words, road rage is not just bad behaviour but a mental disorder.

I cannot evaluate the legitimacy of the medical research on IED. But even if it was true and it helped us to understand why some people have a greater tendency to such things as road rage, that still does not justify their behaviour. Behaviour is something we must all control. If someone has a tendency to temper tantrums and road rage, that person must take precautions: drive less aggressively; give yourself plenty of time for a trip, factoring in such things as traffic problems; have plenty of sleep and not drink alcohol before driving; learn to be philosophical about the open road – learn to laugh or mildly shake your head at the antics of others. Be glad that you are safe and that you are still on the way to your travelling destination. Getting all worked up about another foolish driver is only going to ruin your day. Smiling or ignoring such things allows you to focus on your family, the good times, and hopefully a wonderful vacation.

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Anger

There is a lot of anger and violence among human beings. Globally we have seen deep-rooted anger between countries and different ethnic groups which erupt into unspeakable violence. In our own country we have terrorist groups planning violence against peaceful Canadians. Gang violence has become commonplace in our cities. Courts and prisons are packed with people who have committed acts of violence because of hatred toward others. Sometimes it involves spouses and families. We are reminded of James 1:19-20: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires."

Sermon on the Mount

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Christ made clear that to be a citizen of the kingdom of heaven meant living a holy lifestyle in keeping with his commandments. He said in Matthew 5:22: "But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment." This command of Jesus Christ is thought-provoking and not a little frightening. The point is: who is completely free from anger? Who doesn't get at least a little offended and angered when someone dangerously cuts them off on the highway? Now to be fair, we should understand that the Lord Jesus is not speaking so much about that initial flaring up of anger. In fact, at times such things are completely understandable. You can imagine your emotional state when you see a huge bully beating up on your little child – you get angry,

Man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires

run out, and protect your child. You should do that properly, without using bad language and unnecessary violence. But when the Lord Jesus speaks about being angry with your brother, he is talking about staying angry, nursing a grudge, looking to keep the anger alive and mounted against the object of your displeasure. This is unholy and unspiritual behaviour. This allows Satan to enter our hearts and do his work. As both Jesus and James says: man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

IN THIS ISSUE

Editorial – Road Rage
— R. Aasman330

Treasures, New and Old – Humility as a Cure
for Anxiety — R.E. Pot.....333

Towards a Common Songbook (2)
— Rev. R. Lankheet and Rev. G.Ph. van Popta334

Divorce and Remarriage — F.G. Oosterhoff336

NAPARC 2005 Report — J. Jonker340

NAPARC Address341

Press Releases – URCNA/CanRC Committees for
Ecclesiastical Unity, Classis Ontario West342

Letter to the Editor345

We may think of what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13: "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs." Whether someone cuts us off on the highway, or someone close to us lets us down, it is understandable that we feel disappointed, annoyed, and that anger starts to rise in our hearts. But such anger cannot be nursed in our hearts nor acted upon. Patience, kindness, forgiveness, and keeping no records are hallmarks of those who have been washed in the blood and Spirit of Jesus Christ. In other words, anger is not to control us but we are to control anger. We must master our emotions no matter how raw they feel or how much we may be inclined by personality to act badly.

The cure for road rage

The "cure" for road rage and anger in general is in our Lord Jesus Christ. He has fulfilled all the commandments in our place and He was abused horribly and relentlessly without retaliating in return. It is through faith in Jesus Christ, through prayer to God where we struggle with our sins and weaknesses, and thinking concretely about how we are to act as the children of God that also receive the grace we need to live in holiness before God and with our fellow man. Even if we suffer from what is called "intermittent explosive disorder" we can be helped in dealing with this through prayer and consciously fighting against our sinful tendencies through the power of Christ's Spirit. In this way we also become an example or a light to the world around us. In a world of so much hostility and retribution, it is a breath of fresh air to have kind, forgiving, and patient people. It is a rich opportunity to show the richness and joy of having Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.



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Humility as a Cure for Anxiety



MATTHEW 13:52

*“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand,
that he may lift you up in due time.
Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”*

1 Peter 5:6-7

Recently I was reminded that there is a cure for anxiety. Actually, to be honest, I didn’t really discover this cure myself. I had to learn it from someone else. And I’m still learning it. Do you know what it is? Humility. That’s right, humility is the cure for anxiety.

This isn’t my own idea. And in fact, I have to admit that when I first learned this, I didn’t even quite understand the connection. What does humility have to do with anxiety? Yet there must be a connection. In 1 Peter 5, Peter speaks about humility in one breath and about dealing with anxiety in the very next breath.

To begin with, what is anxiety? Anxiety is my natural response to the troubles that I face in this life. Maybe it’s troubles with finances, troubles with work, troubles with health, troubles with children. From God’s Word I know that because of sin everyone will face troubles in this life. And anxiety is our response to those troubles. When we are faced with troubles in the present or the future, we start worrying about them. How will I cope after being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness? Or, how am I going to get by financially after losing my job?

But why do I get anxious in situations like these? It’s because I don’t know exactly what’s going to happen. If I knew exactly what was going to happen, and if it was all under my control, then there would be no need for anxiety! Anxiety only exists because it’s not all under my control. Because I am somewhat helpless.

Isn’t that why we get anxious? We don’t want to be helpless. We want it to be in our hands. We want to work it out by ourselves. We want it all under our control. And isn’t that pride? Pride: wanting to do it alone, handle it alone, control it alone. Yes, if I’m honest with myself, I have to admit that at the root of anxiety is sinful pride.

Pride leads to anxiety. And anxiety leads to being weighed down. It’s like that old saying, being “sick with worry.” Not being in control, not knowing what is going to happen eats away at us. Worries wear us down and wear us out. We can’t think of anything else. “How am I going to solve this problem? Where am I going to get the money to pay for that? What’s going to happen to me now?” Worries are heavy and carrying them is like carrying a heavy sack around all day. They’re a heavy

burden and they soon suck the joy out of life.

King David also knew what it was like to carry around these heavy burdens. He knew what it was like to be faced with troubles. He also knew the anxieties that can come with troubles. In Psalm 55, he describes how he’s attacked by former friends. He’s betrayed. He’s persecuted. And that naturally leads to anxiety. But is David sick with worry? Does he carry these anxieties around with him? He writes, “Cast your cares on the Lord and He will sustain you” (v 22). These are the words that Peter refers to in 1 Peter 5. Do you want to know what to do with those worries and anxieties, that heavy sack weighing you down? David tells up to cast it on the Lord! That’s an act of unloading. Getting rid of the weight, throwing off the burden.

That’s how the Lord wants his children in Christ to live. He doesn’t want me carrying burdens in my own hands; He wants me to put them in his hands. And here’s where the humility comes in. I am to get rid of the notion that everything is in my control. Humility: that means, not trying to do it by myself, in my own strength, carrying heavy burdens on my own. Rather in faith, I must

acknowledge and rely on the mighty hand of my heavenly Father in Christ. My Father's hand, which created the universe. My Father's hand, which controls every aspect of my life. My Father's hand, which will sustain me. The hand of my God and Father in Christ, who cares about me! When I unload in this way, when I trust in my Father, I'm no longer burdened with worry! That's all part of

casting my anxiety on Him, that's all part of humbling myself under God's mighty hand. No more proudly taking matters into my own hands!

In the end I have to admit that anxiety about my troubles is a matter of sinful pride. It's a matter of relying on myself and failing to trust in the mighty hand of my loving Father. Thanks be to God that He knows my sinful weakness

and in love corrects my foolishness. That He knows my inclination to pride and calls me to humility. That He knows my inclination to anxiety and calls me to trust. That He knows I'm still learning and again and again teaches me to cast my anxiety on Him in prayer, to worry about nothing and pray about everything (Phil 4:6). Why worry, when I can pray?



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Towards a Common Songbook (Part 2)

A Conversation between Rev. Rand Lankheet and Rev. George van Popta

If you, as a reader of this article, had to come up with a list of guidelines to select songs for a new church songbook, what guidelines would you choose? What "minimum standards" would a particular song have to meet to be considered for inclusion in a new songbook? Hopefully your list of standards would end up looking something like the list established by our Joint Songbook Committee. Synods of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) and of the United Reformed Churches (URCNA) have approved these standards. They function as the criteria by which we are choosing songs to sing together.

As a Joint Songbook Committee we decided in our early meetings that we should first establish some broad criteria to govern our song selection and then develop these into more specific guidelines. Realizing that others before us have given this careful thought, we thankfully borrowed from certain principles of church music set forth by a study committee of the Christian Reformed Church in 1953. In the 1959 edition of the *Psalter Hymnal*, these principles are printed on page v.

First principle

In this article we list the three broad principles proposed by our committee and already approved

by our synods. The first principle is worded very simply:

The songs of the church are to be scriptural. In content, form, and spirit the church's songs must express the truth of the Holy Scriptures. Augustine, referring to the singing of psalms, said, 'No one can sing anything worthy of God which he has not received from Him. . . . Then we are assured that God puts the words in our mouth.'

Our songs, and all of our singing, must be as scriptural as possible. Every Christian should agree that, above all, the music of the church must be scriptural. This is our first and foundational principle. With singing the biblical psalms or

other portions of quoted Scripture, usually this is not a problem. We say "usually" because sometimes certain Bible verses may not be quoted accurately in a song. Or the words of a song based on a Bible text might be taken out of its context and used wrongly. We will elaborate on this in our article about the first of our guidelines which says, among other things: "The songs of the church must be thoroughly biblical."

Second principle

The second principle likewise is very foundational:

The songs of the church are to be a sacrifice of praise. Singing is an important element of the congregation's response to God's redeeming work in Christ Jesus and the Word proclaimed in the worship services. As John Calvin said, 'Singing has great strength and power to move and to set on fire the hearts of men that they may call upon God and praise Him with a more ardent zeal. This singing should not be light or frivolous, but it ought to have weight and majesty.'

The singing of the congregation within the worship service is part of the "dialogue" God initiates with his people. God speaks first; his people respond to Him. So, in the worship service, God (speaking through the minister) gives the "call to worship" as well as the opening "greeting" to his people. His people (often through the minister) respond with a "declaration of dependence" (the votum) and/or with an opening song of praise and adoration. This back-and-forth dialogue forms the framework for the entire worship service.

Singing is one of the primary ways in worship in which the people of God express their part of the worship "dialogue." Whether a song is mostly in the form of a

prayer, or whether a song is mostly praise or dedication, the congregation is speaking to God in their singing. So, as our second principle notes, songs are to be chosen which "fit" into this response from God's people. It is part of the "sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that confess his name" (Heb 13:15).

In this principle we also call attention to the important Christological focus in our singing. We praise God in and through Christ Jesus. Songs which minimize the person and work of Christ are evaluated much more critically and carefully than are songs which directly refer to Him. We don't want to say that each song must include Christ's name specifically, because most of the Psalms do not mention Christ's name. But surely, in our understanding of the redemptive-historical work of God in Christ, we should find some reference to our Saviour or to God's redemptive work. We gather in worship and we sing in our worship as the redeemed church, the bride of Christ.

Third principle

Then, finally, the third foundational principle says:

The songs of the church are to be aesthetically pleasing. The songs for worship are to be a beautiful blend of God-pleasing poetry and music.

The Bible itself highlights aesthetic beauty as an important aspect of God's creation. Beauty is found in God's very being. We should not make some kind of "sacred-secular" division which limits "aesthetics" (the study of "beauty") only to "secular" things. Yes, we enjoy beautiful landscapes and we delight in beautiful buildings. But in matters of Christian faith and life, we also take joy in beauty. The design that God gave for the Old Testament tabernacle and the later Temple

conformed to certain principles of beauty, including proportion, symmetry, colour, textures, etc. Our songs, likewise, must be beautiful. The words, the poetry, must conform to principles of beauty. The music, likewise, must be beautiful.

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," we sometimes say. What one person might find beautiful another person might think is a bit ugly. To some degree, perhaps to a greater degree than in the first two principles, an element of subjectivism is found here. For example, though the words of the hymn "He Leadeth Me" contain some good thoughts, the music is overly repetitive, going round and round and round. The words, likewise, are overly repetitive. This song is not an example of musical "beauty."

Like learning to appreciate good art or architecture or food, one's sense of "beauty" in music can be developed. Our committee does not want to recommend overly difficult music, but there will be some song selections in our future songbook that might "stretch" us a bit, at least in our first singing of some songs. But after singing an unfamiliar song twice or three times, its "beauty" will become more appreciated. It might even become one of our favourites!

These are the three "foundational principles" which serve us as general standards in selecting songs for a new songbook. In future articles, we hope to explain the more detailed guidelines we are using in our committee work.

Let us each Lord's Day come into God's presence with thanksgiving and enter his courts with praise. Let us sing to Him, sing praises to Him, through Christ our Lord!

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Divorce and Remarriage

We return to the situation in Reformed Holland. A while ago I wrote about the controversy that had arisen there in connection with synodical decisions about the relationship between Sabbath and Sunday. We noted that according to some critics these decisions are in conflict with Scripture and the confessions and give evidence of a Bible-critical attitude among Reformed theologians. A number of the critics in fact concluded that the synods' stand on the matter justified secession.

I wrote about this issue to show with reference to Bible and church history that the accusations of apostasy are unfounded. They appear to be the result of a serious misunderstanding of what the synods in fact decided and of the reasons they gave for their decisions. I referred to official synodical reports on the topic, by means of which the synods not only justified their stand, but at the same time provided the churches with a valuable study on the nature of the Sunday. That study, I suggested, deserves our attention as well. I therefore provided a fairly extensive summary.

My decision to turn to the present topic, namely the pronouncements by recent Dutch synods on divorce and remarriage, is inspired by similar considerations. In this case also, (1) accusations of apostasy have been raised which are difficult to sustain

if one studies the pertinent documents and (2) the synods in question have once again provided arguments and guidelines from which believers outside the Dutch churches also can learn. Rather than giving a more or less complete summary of the documents and deliberations, however, as I tried to do in the previous case, I will restrict myself to mentioning only the main points and refer those wanting further information to the Dutch churches' website.

Divorce is becoming more and more frequent, not only in secular society but in the church as well

I mention here especially the English translation of a shortened version of the report that guided the synodical decisions. That twenty-page document provides far more information and answers far more questions than I can do within the scope of an article.¹

Background

The reason why the issue was placed on the agenda of recent synods is that divorce is becoming more and more frequent, not only in secular society but in the church as well. Time and again, consistories are faced with the need to respond to this

development. They have to deal with questions about biblical teachings on divorce, the type of discipline to be applied in cases of unjustified divorce, the proper attitude toward remarriage after divorce, and so on. The problems they face in these areas are multiplied by the fact that practices among local churches often differ. It was in view of this situation that synods were asked to study the matter and come with guidelines. Five general synods dealt with it, beginning with Ommen 1993 and ending with Amersfoort 2005.

The central issue all along was the interpretation of relevant biblical teachings. For centuries the Reformed churches have held that there are two biblical "grounds" for divorce, namely adultery (based on the Lord's words in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9) and malevolent desertion (*kwaadwillige verlatting*). The second one was derived from 1 Corinthians 7:15, where Paul addresses Christians who are married to an unbeliever and are deserted by him or her because of the faith. In such circumstances, Paul says, the believing partner is not bound to the rule which forbids divorce. If the choice is between Christ and the unbelieving spouse, the commitment to Christ of course prevails.

A major difficulty, as various consistories pointed out, is that the

traditional grounds fail to cover all the divorce situations the churches encounter today. Frequently consistories acquiesce in a divorce that cannot be placed within one of the two accepted categories. Examples are cases where a partner is guilty of incest, enslavement to pornography, or rape within marriage; where one of the partners comes out as a homosexual; or where there is evidence of serious psychiatric problems or of physical or spiritual abuse.

From a biblical perspective

The third general synod to deal with the matter (Leusden 1999) had appointed new deputies, who were to consider the question how to deal biblically with causes of marriage break-up that are not directly mentioned in the Bible but that occur frequently today. These deputies reported first to the Synod of Zuidhorn, 2002/3 and then, by means of an adapted version of their report, to the Synod of Amersfoort, 2005. On June 24, 2005, Amersfoort decided in accordance with the report's recommendations.

The report concludes that in many cases it is indeed next to impossible to work within the framework of the so-called biblical grounds for divorce. That approach too often leads to a far-fetched reasoning by analogy. That is, not only literal adultery and literal desertion on account of the faith are considered valid biblical grounds for divorce, but also the various other cases that have been mentioned, such as incest, homosexuality, abuse, and so on. The latter, however, are then described as "some kind of

adultery" or "some kind of malevolent desertion." Such reasoning by analogy tends to become forced and can be stretched endlessly. If one insists on dealing with definitive and ever-valid grounds, it would be more to the point *either* to refuse acceptance of a divorce that cannot honestly be called adultery or desertion on account of the faith, *or else* to establish a third ground covering the additional cases.

The demand for easy divorce is strongly influenced by today's post-Christian and highly individualistic society

The deputies conclude that the idea of "grounds for divorce" cannot even be directly derived from the Bible. Scripture makes clear that there are situations which may indeed lead to a divorce, but it does not teach that divorce automatically and necessarily follows in such instances. In view of these facts, the report suggests an approach that differs from the traditional one. It asks that the churches stop concentrating on isolated texts and consider the matter of divorce and remarriage with reference to the Bible's instructions as a whole and especially to Christ's words and works. Jesus' focus is on the coming kingdom. To enter that kingdom, his followers must take up their cross, deny themselves, and mortify their old nature. The kingdom does not just demand a

following of the commands, although these of course must be obeyed, but requires more than that, namely a righteousness which is greater than that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law (Matt 5:20). In the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere Jesus explains what that greater righteousness involves and illustrates it with reference to various subjects, including marriage and divorce. The emphasis throughout is on the deeper meaning of God's law.

That deeper meaning can be summarized in the commandment to love God above all and one's neighbour as oneself. This commandment shows that even the most serious sin is not an automatic reason to end a marriage relationship. Not even adultery constitutes such a reason. It is true that it has a greater destructive effect on a marriage than most other sins. In the case of adultery the continuation of a marriage is therefore not a matter of course. But neither is, in view of the Lord's teachings, the disbanding of that relationship. God Himself forgives his adulterous covenant partner again and again. Christ forgave his enemies.

The permanence of marriage

But is the rejection of "biblical grounds" not a means of making room for divorces that formerly were not allowed? This is what critics have argued. Deputies reply, however, that they simply describe what is already happening. Church councils consistently allow divorce on other grounds than the traditional two, even though so far

this was not always openly admitted. Moreover, rather than encouraging the dissolution of marriage, the deputies urge that churches must *not* allow a practice of easy divorce, the demand for which, they add, is strongly influenced by the post-Christian and highly individualistic society wherein today's Christians live. Instead, they ask for a return to a biblical radicalism, namely to an adherence to the style of Christ's kingdom. Rather than simply attempting to set limits to the frequency of divorce, they address the core issue, which is the turning away from the teachings of Christ – in matters of marriage and divorce as in other areas. What is needed in the churches is not just rules that set bounds to sinful behaviour, but a spiritual renewal, which manifests itself in maximum devotion to God and an obedient and joyful following of Christ.

Deputies point out that Jesus' emphasis was not on possible "escape routes" from a difficult marriage, but on the permanence of the marriage union. He teaches that divorce is an evil. This must be the church's starting point. There is, however, the prevalence of sin and the brokenness of life, which can make the dissolution of a marriage unavoidable. Nevertheless, to acquiesce in a divorce when reconciliation is impossible (because of adultery, incest, or other reasons) is to choose not something that is good, but the lesser of two evils. This is Paul's message in 1 Corinthians 7. Here he urges reconciliation where possible, but states that if the choice is between Christ and the unbelieving partner, divorce is to be accepted. It remains an evil, however, for God established

marriage as a permanent relationship. Therefore Paul writes that when divorce does take place and reconciliation cannot be achieved, the believing partner should remain unmarried. And Jesus teaches that the person who marries again after a divorce commits adultery (Mark 10: 11, 12; Luke 16:18).

Jesus' emphasis was not on possible "escape routes" from a difficult marriage, but on the permanence of the marriage union

Recommendations/decisions

The following are the report's main recommendations, all of which the General Synod of Amersfoort 2005 accepted:

1. In matters of divorce and remarriage, the churches are no longer to follow the approach of deciding cases of divorce and remarriage simply with reference to what have traditionally been called biblical grounds of divorce. They will, in dependence on the abundant grace of Christ, encourage believers who face marriage problems to aim at a maximum devotion to God's will, a following of Christ, and a life style that does justice to the coming kingdom.
2. Remarriage after a divorce will, generally speaking, not be followed by a church confirmation. This decision is based on the consideration that

Scripture places great stress on the permanence of the marriage union and on the binding nature of a promise that has once been given. The promise of lifelong fidelity, which bride and groom made before God and his congregation, keeps its validity, also after a divorce. This must become clear. Also, it is often difficult for a church council to assign guilt, for example in the case of a break-up because of adultery or desertion – especially if part of the history took place outside its own congregation.

3. Church councils have the right to inform the congregation when they are dealing with a case of divorce that has become public knowledge. This is to be done regardless of the council's ultimate decision in the case. In some instances the council will decide that it must acquiesce in the divorce and that disciplinary measures will not follow. In other instances, church discipline will be applied, but frequently only after a lengthy procedure. By informing the congregation at an early stage, the council can make clear that it is indeed dealing with the matter and that it wishes to uphold the style of Christ's kingdom regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage. In this way the perception that divorce is acceptable and that the consistory silently allows it will be avoided. The information must be as austere as possible, however, and efforts must be made to obtain the agreement of the member(s) in question.
4. Church councils are asked to introduce pre-marriage courses

and to urge those who prepare for marriage to attend these courses. As one of the deputies points out, one thing that has in the course of the centuries largely disappeared from catechetical teaching is instruction in the practice of the Christian life style, whereas in the early church such instruction constituted the core of ecclesiastical education. There is an urgent need to return to that early church tradition, certainly today in our secularized environment.

5. Consistories often find it difficult to come to the proper decision in situations of divorce and remarriage and feel the need of expert advice. For that reason a permanent Advisory Council regarding marriage and divorce will be instituted. Its task will be: (1) to advise consistories in matters of divorce, remarriage, and the type of discipline to be applied in different cases and (2) to give information on such matters as pre-marriage courses, instruction regarding the choice of partners, and instruction regarding the development of relationships. (A temporary Advisory Council has already functioned since the Synod of Zuidhorn, 2002/3 and has served consistories well.) The Council will help consistories to play a more active role in the issue at hand – one that does not displace but rather supplements the church’s traditional work of preaching, teaching, counselling, pastoral care for existing marriages and preparation for future ones. A lengthy instruction regarding goals, structure, composition,

and functioning of the Advisory Council can be found in the Acts of the synod of Amersfoort.

Conclusion

What is noticeable in recent synodical decisions – in those concerning the Sunday and again in the ones about divorce and remarriage – is the emphasis on the original intent and spiritual meaning of God’s commandments. Instead of advocating an approach that runs the danger of legalism (obey the commandments, no less, but also no more, and all is well), they focus the believers’ attention on Christ’s teachings regarding the cost of discipleship, and in connection therewith, on the need for an ongoing spiritual renewal among Christians.

The call to obey the laws of Christ’s kingdom must be sounded

Deputies admit that their recommendations in the matter of divorce and remarriage do not answer every question. They are convinced, however, that the call to obey the laws of Christ’s kingdom must be sounded. It is not easy to obey that call and some church members have accused deputies and Synod of excessive idealism. Deputies admit the difficulty of obedience but warn against following the road of least resistance. One of them writes: “We hear and read how in Christ’s strength persecuted Christians in North-Korea do the impossible. Does Christ then not have promises also for Christians who live in the midst of a typically

western crisis around marriage, sexuality, and the forming of relationships?”

The sharpest criticism of the report’s recommendations and the synodical decisions is not that they are too idealistic, but that they are unbiblical. Not to honour the idea of “biblical grounds,” various opponents assert, is to “take away” from Scripture and to admit divorce for other reasons than those specifically mentioned in the Bible is to “add” to it. These critics conclude that the deputies in fact promote the heresy of an “ongoing revelation.” Synod has rejected the accusations on grounds that will have become clear in the foregoing. It has also been pointed out that what the deputies recommended and Amersfoort accepted is not new. For the first 1000 years of its existence the Christian church often did not work with “biblical grounds” for divorce and the Reformers already allowed the church to make, in a biblically responsible manner, exceptions to the biblical rule.

Again, the deputies admit that questions remain. They express the hope, however, that worry and suspicion will not prevent a serious consideration of the call they have issued for a renewed devotion, a truly Christian life style, a closer following of Christ – in the matter of marriage and divorce not only, but in all areas of the Christian life.

¹ The website is www.gkv.nl – look under “English.” In addition to this document I made use of the original report, the synodical Acts, and explanatory articles by synodical deputies. For the latter see *De Reformatie*, February 8 and 15, 2003 (H.J. Messelink), and June 19, June 26, July 3, July 10, and December 24, 2004 (A.L.Th. de Bruijne).

NAPARC 2005 Report

On Monday, October 31, 2005 I left with Rev. J. Bouwers, Rev. H. Zekveld, and elder Chuck Dykstra of the United Reformed Churches (URCNA) from Strathroy, Ontario to drive to Flat Rock, North Carolina for a meeting of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) on November 1 and 2. We arrived there at about 9:00 pm and joined the brothers from the RCUS for some social time and relaxation.

On Tuesday morning several of the churches' representatives had meetings with representatives of those churches with whom they have or are in the process of entering into ecclesiastical fellowship. The Korean Presbyterian Church in America (Kosin) was one of the churches that I was hoping to have contact with, as there was some communication between our representatives last year, but they were not present this time. This federation of churches is a part of the Korean Presbyterian Church in Korea with whom we have a sister relationship.

The meeting started at 1:30 pm on Tuesday. The URCNA were received as members. Each of the member denominations had a report of their churches regarding their membership. They all gave information as to how things are going in their churches.

After each denomination's representative spoke, a delegate from another denomination was asked to pray for the needs of that denomination. After the member churches were finished, the churches that were invited to come as observers were given an opportunity to speak. Parts of the

speech I gave can be found elsewhere in this magazine.

That evening there was a banquet and an evening of singing psalms in which most participated. This was led by Dr. Gabriel C. Statom, who is the director of music at the First Presbyterian Church of Lake Wales, Florida. The church there has compiled a collection of psalms designed to fill the void in the area of psalm singing, wanting to reflect the Reformed faith and to carry on the tradition of psalm singing along with hymns in the style of the Reformers. They have taken texts and tunes from sources such as the Genevan Psalter, the Scottish Psalter, the 1912 Psalter, the Trinity Psalter, and the ARP Bible Songs.

On Wednesday morning we had breakfast at 7:30 so the meeting could start at 8:00 and adjourn at 11:30. Reports from the various committees were dealt with. The co-ordination committee came with a recommendation to encourage those churches who had not yet studied and adopted positions relative to women in the military to do so, and to consider the work of the four NAPARC churches that had already adopted positions opposing women in military combat. After further discussion and amendments, the recommendation for the churches to vote on next year is: "The Word of God gives no warrant expressed or implied that women are to be conscripted into or employed for military combat roles, but rather they are to be defended by men and kept from harms way that they might fulfil their biblical callings and duties under God."

The Committee to plan a celebration of the 500th

anniversary of the birth of John Calvin in 2009 reported that they are planning a two-day celebration to take place in Orlando, Dallas, or Nashville.

A report of foreign and home missions spoke of the benefits of the meeting they had to ascertain where others have church plants and to give ideas as to each others' missions, also as to what works and what doesn't.

There was an overture from the OPC regarding a change to the bylaws.

The Free Reformed Churches of North America (FRCNA) applied for membership in NAPARC. After some discussion it was left for the churches to vote on.

The meeting was closed at 11:30 am with singing and prayer. After having lunch we were able to leave at 12:30. We arrived back to Strathroy about twelve hours later.

As Committee for Contact with Churches in America (CCCA) we have the mandate from Synod Chatham to observe these meetings to initiate discussions on the possibility of NAPARC being integrated into the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC). After the visit last year it became clear that this is not possible. NAPARC existed long before ICRC and there are churches who are members of NAPARC and not of ICRC. Membership in NAPARC could benefit us as the activities of each organization could complement each other. Membership could also assist us in our biblical calling to foster unity with other faithful Reformed churches who are not members in the ICRC.

May the Lord bless the work that is being done.

Address to NAPARC 2005

Dear brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

On behalf of the Canadian and American Reformed Churches, I bring you greetings. Thank you for inviting us as churches and for giving us the opportunity to speak to you again this year. I believe this is the fourth time that delegates from our churches are present here.

Our churches take ecumenical relationships seriously and we are therefore careful about the relationships we establish.

About four years ago we as Canadian and American Reformed Churches offered relationships to a number of churches besides the ones which have traditionally been our sister churches. As a result, we started to have pulpit exchanges with churches such as the OPC, URC, and the RCUS. These are new developments that take getting used to. But we experience them as positive changes. A couple of weeks ago, we could read on the Canadian Reformed website that our churches are now even calling ministers from such denominations, i.e. from the RCUS and the Free Church of Scotland.

As members of the Canadian Reformed Committee for Contact with Churches in the Americas, we are observing your meetings to see if membership in NAPARC will be useful next to the ICRC, since there are similarities between these organizations. The OPC, ERQ, and the RCUS churches, which are part of your membership, have

encouraged us to participate in NAPARC as they see a growing need for this.

The next general synod of our churches will be dealing with a response from our committee to questions concerning the need to join another organization besides the ICRC. This synod is scheduled for May 2007 in Smithers, British Columbia.

Last year two questions were brought by our delegates and you were asked to respond. The questions were: 1) What is the need for NAPARC besides ICRC? 2) Is NAPARC open to exploring the possibility of integration into the ICRC?

So far, we realize that NAPARC existed before the ICRC and also that several members of NAPARC are not members of the ICRC. We also understand that membership in NAPARC could benefit us. The activities of each organization can complement each other. Membership in NAPARC could assist us in our biblical calling to foster unity with other faithful Reformed churches who are not members of the ICRC. The ICRC does not have annual meetings to facilitate contacts between Reformed and Presbyterian. To leave such contacts to every four years may not be as useful in our denominational discussions on issues that are perhaps of common interest and concern with all churches that are present here. We would appreciate any further input in response to our thoughts on these matters.

As we see it, one area where further cooperation could benefit all NAPARC member churches is more communication among each other regarding church planting. Our churches are concerned about the choice of target areas for church planting. I.e., is there already an existing true church of Jesus Christ in that area? We started a discussion on this with the CEIR of the OPC at a meeting in April 2005. They agreed that there should be more consultation with existing churches in the area of church planting. We believe that we have the duty to join a church where it can be seen that it is a faithful church of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our witness to the community should be one (John 17: 20-26, Eph 4:1-6, BC Art 27-29). Our forces against all evil should be a united force and if we recognize each other we should not be in separate battle fields. The world around us should not be looking at us and saying that if the Reformed or the Presbyterians cannot get along, they just start up yet another church. Another issue to discuss, and I think is linked to this one, is church hoppers or church shoppers. And I add: should discipline stop at our church borders? Can we carry on discipline among churches that are not related denominationally?

These are perhaps some of the issues that we feel could benefit us and which also are possible when reading the Basis of your Council, as published on your website.

Finally, it would be good if the NAPARC website could be updated with more information as to what it offers. We are just looking for as much information as we can get. The last report of meetings was 2002.

Last year there were four members of our committee here. We had planned to have more delegates here this year but due to other commitments and circumstances this was not possible, so I alone will have to

report this year's events. The Lord willing, next year we may be present with four observers in order to make up a final proposal to our next synod for membership in NAPARC. Hopefully meeting with you during your sessions and speaking with the delegates here this year and again next year, we may see the need for our churches to become a member of this organization.

May the blessings of the Lord be upon you and may your labours be

for the ongoing gathering of the catholic Christian church which is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world. May the present hidden glory of God completely shine through the whole of the church and may we be joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith (BC, Art 27).

*Thank you,
John Jonker*



Press Releases

Joint Press Release of the Meeting of the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity (URCNA) and the Committee for the Promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity (CanRC)

On March 7, 2006 the committees for ecclesiastical unity of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) and the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA) met at the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Hamilton.

Present for on behalf of the URCNA were Rev. John Bouwers, Mr. Chuck Dykstra, Rev. Casey Freswick, Rev. Todd Joling, Rev. William Van der Woerd, Rev. Harry Zekveld and for the CanRC: Rev. John Louwerse, Rev. Jan DeGelder, Mr. John Vanderstoep, Mr. Fred Westrik. Rev. DeGelder chaired the meeting.

This was the first such meeting of these two committees since the decisions of the respective CanRC and URCNA synods in 2001 to enter

into a "phase 2" relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship. Prior to that these committees met together on a regular basis, but since that time the ongoing work in the process of unity has been carried out in local contexts and by the synodically appointed committees devoted to the study of church order, theological education, and a common song book. The purpose of the meeting was to keep abreast of the ecumenical progress being made and to discuss together our obligations toward one another in the ongoing pursuit of the scriptural calling to unity. An excellent spirit of unity and brotherly appreciation was enjoyed.

As we discussed together the progress that is being reported from the respective sides in each of the areas of church order, song book, and theological education committees, it was noted that these are not subcommittees of CERCU or CPEU but were committees directly responsible to the churches of our respective synods.

It seems clear that the work of the Joint Church Order Committee will play a lead role in the

development of union as agreeing together on a church order will obviously be fundamental in the unity process. With the blessing of God on the work of all of these committees it is anticipated that the proposed church order will reflect the amount of mutual understanding on matters such as theological education and the song book that will be required for unity to come to pass. For instance, whereas the present CanRC church order speaks of synodically approved songs and a song book that "must be used," the URCNA church order speaks of consistorially approved songs and envisions a song book that "may" be used. Likewise, with regard to theological education, the URCNA practice emphasizes the oversight of the local congregation without specifying the theological institution; the CanRC practice requires a federational Theological College.

The work of the Joint Church Order Committee reportedly goes very well, with regular progress reports published in the church press through press releases. This

work will continue to take some time. The Church Order Unity Committee must report to our respective synods and additional time will be needed, especially if any changes are made by either the URCNA or CanRC synods. The patient deliberate process taking place is seen as necessary to our goal of eventual ecclesiastical union.

The Song Book Committees also report good progress and fellowship in their work together. There is much agreement in principle. They are beginning to consider how to address the fact that the respective committees have slightly differing mandates. The CanRC *Book of Praise* Committee has a mandate to include the 150 Anglo-Genevan versions of the Psalms (with allowance for additional Psalm renditions), whereas the URCNA committee has only the mandate to consider the Genevan tunes for inclusion. At its 2004 synod the URCNA added an additional committee that would focus specifically on the prose section of the song book, the confessions, the liturgical forms, and the Christian prayers. This work should also be conducted in consultation with the CanRC *Book of Praise* Committee.

The Theological Education Unity Committees are presently at something of an impasse over the matter of the desire from the CanRC side to maintain a federational seminary. The committees report good brotherly fellowship along with the hope that further discussions may resume as new and/or different ideas and proposals are considered.

Moving to a more general discussion of the progress of unity among the local churches, at our meeting we reflected on the general attitude toward union.

There is reportedly a wide range of perspectives among the churches. Interaction between local churches varies. Pulpit exchanges and common work in Christian education exists in many areas in Canada. CanRC contact with URCNA U.S. churches is much more limited. We discussed how, since we are in ecclesiastical fellowship, fraternal delegates from neighbouring classes should be sent to classical meetings where possible. It is hoped that more classical interaction may continue to pave the way to greater unity and understanding of one another.

From time to time URCNA and CanRC congregations or broader assemblies raise questions about each other's beliefs and practices. Although the committees recognize their inability to speak officially for our respective federations, we discussed ways to address these concerns. Where specific questions have been addressed to our committees we encouraged and challenged one another to seek to respond to with reference to synodical decisions and relevant and representative periodical articles.

Toward the end of our meeting we agreed together to seek to meet as ecumenical committees at least bi-annually, to foster continued contact and to work, where possible, on common reports to the churches. We continue to pray for the Lord's indispensable blessing toward the desired ecclesiastical union.

Press Release for Classis Ontario West, held March 8, 2006 in Ancaster, Ontario

Rev. G.Ph. van Popta, on behalf of the convening church of Ancaster, led the opening devotions. He welcomed the

Church News

On June 14, 2006,

Brother Hendrik Alkema sustained the preparatory examination at Classis Ontario West and was, thus, declared eligible for call to the Ministry of the Word. Classis wholeheartedly recommends him to the churches, and has granted him permission to speak an edifying word (C.O.Art. 21). Contact: 905-304-1631; htalkema@yahoo.ca

Classis Ontario West, June 14, 2006, has extended **Brother Dong Woo Oh's** permission to speak an edifying word in the churches (C.O.Art. 21) for one year, until June 14, 2007. Contact: 905-389-0244; ohdongwoo@gmail.com

Declined the call to the church of Aldergrove, British Columbia

Rev. J. Folkerts of Winnipeg, Manitoba (set aside for a term of mission work for MERF by the Providence United Reformed Church).

Called by the church of Ancaster, Ontario, to work as missionary for Streetlight Ministries:

Rev. P. Aasman of Grand Valley, Ontario.

Called by the church of Houston, British Columbia

Candidate Hendrik Alkema

brothers who had gathered. The delegates from Ancaster reported on the credentials. All churches were lawfully represented. The church of Chatham had an instruction with respect to a matter of oversight and discipline. Classis was constituted.

Officers were appointed: Rev. van Popta (chairman), Rev. D. Vandeburgt (clerk), and Rev. J. Slaa (vice-chairman). The chairman thanked the convening church for the preparations for Classis. Again the members of Classis were welcomed. He welcomed the guests, in particular Br. Dmitry Kiselev, who was present for examination by Classis. Under memorabilia, the chairman congratulated Rev. Vandeburgt with the call he received from the church at Kelmscott and commended him and his family with their considerations to the Lord. He also pointed out that the church at Ancaster continues to await the decision of Rev. John van Popta, who is considering a call to work as home missionary for Streetlight Ministries. Finally, the church at Hamilton was remembered, with a view to her ongoing vacancy of a pastor and teacher. The agenda was adopted.

Br. Kiselev of the church at Ancaster presented himself to Classis to be examined with a view to speaking an edifying word in the churches. After it was determined that the necessary documents were in order, Classis proceeded to examine Br. Kiselev. He first delivered a sermon proposal on Matthew 7:21-23. After due discussion in closed session, Classis deemed the sermon proposal sufficient. Classis next examined Br. Kiselev in Doctrine and Creeds, particularly in the areas of "Faith" and "the Person of Christ." Once more, Classis deliberated in closed session and determined that the examination was sufficient. In open session, the

chairman, with appropriate remarks, informed Br. Kiselev of the joyful news. When Br. Kiselev promised to speak only in accordance with the doctrine of the Word of God, as summarized in the Three Forms of Unity, Classis permitted Br. Kiselev to speak an edifying word in the churches for the period of one year, conditional upon the completion of his third year of study at the Theological College. Rev. van Popta led the assembly in prayer, after which opportunity was given to congratulate Br. Kiselev.

Question Period according to Article 44 of the Church Order was held. All the churches answered positively to the first two questions asked. Regarding the third question, the church at Chatham sought to obtain the advice of Classis in a matter of discipline. Advice was given.

After the members of Classis enjoyed a hearty lunch, Classis

resumed and dealt with correspondence. Two items of correspondence were received relating to the same matter, from Br. Richard Horlings and from the church at Ancaster, where Br. Horlings is a member. Br. Horlings requested that Classis extend permission to speak an edifying Word for the period of one year. Classis granted the request.

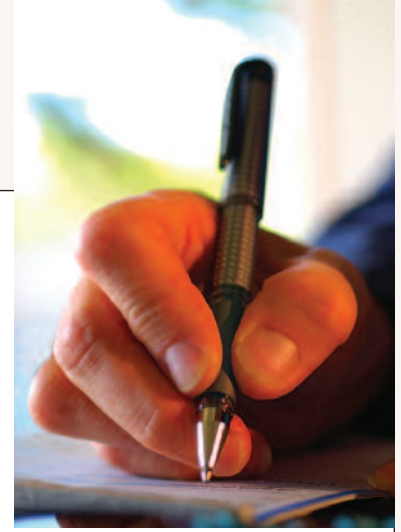
The convening church for the next classis is the church of Chatham. Classis will be held, D.V., June 14, 2006 at 9:00 a.m. in Chatham, ON. Suggested officers are: Rev. H. Versteeg (chairman), Rev. van Popta (clerk), and Rev. Vandeburgt (vice-chairman).

Opportunity was given for Personal Question Period.

Censure according to Article 34 of the Church Order was deemed not necessary. Acts and Press Release were adopted. Rev. van Popta led in closing devotions.

*J. Slaa,
Vice-chairman at that time*





Dear Editor,

Thank you for the excellent issue dated April 28, 2006 entitled "Sunday Glorious Day of the Lord." It is our hope and wish that it will encourage a better view and a better celebration of the Lord's Day.

Most of the literature on this subject says somewhere along the line that we must not let the Lord's Day deteriorate in a list of "dos and don'ts." And of course we wholeheartedly agree with that as well. Also, authors sometimes give a longer or shorter list of "don'ts" to which we or our parents have been subjected. Both of us however have very pleasant memories of Sunday celebrations in our parent's homes. Sunday was a day of celebration, a day for our best clothes, the best food, and the best of many things which we, unlike today, could not afford on the other six days. Whatever limitations there might have been, the positive is what we remember. Most authors writing about the "dos and don'ts" make us chuckle about the "don'ts" of the past, but say nothing about the "dos" for today. Fortunately the resource, translated from the Dutch on page 211 of your magazine, does at least list some "dos" in broad outlines. Quotes: "Use it optimally to God's honour," "Witness also to our neighbour," "Creativity to discover what is good and acceptable." And on page 224: "A powerless and joyless celebration of the Sunday has to do with a small faith that fails to find its power in Christ as Lord. However, a living faith in Christ, the Living One, will lead to a fervent and joyous celebration of the day of his resurrection."

Even though usually not mentioned, the list of possible "dos" for the Lord's Day is long, and therefore also on the Lord's Day we should carefully decide what should have priority. There is too much that can and should enrich our spiritual lives, for which we hardly find time during a week of work. Many men and women often do not find time to prepare a Bible introduction for their Bible study group. For this reason many Reformed Bible study groups have now discontinued these introductions. A pity. What's wrong with doing some of this on Sunday? And basic preparation for these Bible study meetings, do we still take time for it during six days? Many young families do not subscribe to *Reformed Perspective* or *Christian Renewal* and

miss much of what an informed Reformed Christian should know. "We do not have the time to read it, so why waste our money on it?" we hear at times. Would reading these on Sundays be wrong? Some do have time, we understand, to watch an occasional(?) sports game on Sunday. What would be better? And the books which young people receive when doing Profession of Faith, have they been read? A Sunday will do also for this. Of course we are fully aware of the fact that life in 2006 is busier than ever before. For all of us, for children, teenagers, younger and older parents, and even for retired people. So much more reason to save those activities that help us grow in the love and knowledge of the Lord for the Lord's Day. And, as we discovered, the list of good and acceptable "dos" for the first day of the week becomes longer all the time as we creatively seek for activities which are most suitable for that day. That is of course next to our attendance of the worship services. And thus we must constantly and wisely choose. On top of that, parents need quality time for their children also Sundays. Children and even teenagers will appreciate that too. Others may want to read some more about some aspect of a sermon heard recently. Do Christian families still have a library of Bible study books for this excellent Sunday "do" activity? And remember not all information one gets from the internet is dependable. There is no substitute for Reformed (and we mean that in the broadest sense) Bible study materials, which are ready for quick reference anytime. The creative list will continue to grow.

That excellent Dutch resource which was translated and published in *Clarion* had it right: "Sunday sanctification requires creativity to discover what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

Gerry & Paulina Denbok,
Burlington

Letters to the Editor should be written in a brotherly fashion in order to be considered for publication.
Submissions need to be less than one page in length.