

# Clarion

THE CANADIAN REFORMED MAGAZINE

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*What to do with  
the Dutch?*

*Peace*

*A Clarion Call  
from Canada*





J. Visscher

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# What to do with the Dutch?

*Synod came to the decision to continue our relationship with the GKN and declined the request of the GKN-R*

## Trouble in The Netherlands

One of the more difficult decisions at the recent general synod of Smithers had to do with our Dutch sister churches, the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (GKN). As many of our readers are aware, the ecclesiastical situation in our Dutch sister churches has for some time been a source of controversy and disagreement. In 2003 all of this boiled over and a new federation came into being which called itself the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands – Restored (GKN-R). It consists of about 1500 members and now has two ministers. It also claims to be the lawful continuation of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands.

## Causes?

What caused all of this foment and upheaval? A host of different factors have been and continue to be cited. These include: Scripture criticism, Sunday observance, divorce and re-marriage, the marriage form, women's voting rights, Bible translation, new hymns, contact with other Reformed churches, as well as changes in liturgy.

In light of these factors the GKN-R approached our Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad (CRCA) and urged it to recommend that Synod Smithers break the bond with the GKN. After considerable study, the CRCA recommended to Synod Smithers that we not "accept the GKH (or more accurately the GKN-R) request to acknowledge these churches as sister churches" and thus to break with the GKN.

## Synod Smithers reacts

Synod Smithers for its part assigned all of the reports and documents to one of its advisory committees for further examination and recommendation. In due time it reported back to Synod and the result was that Synod came to the decision to continue our relationship with the GKN and declined the request of the GKN-R. Furthermore, Synod decided to express sadness over the separation and urged our churches to pray for the restoration of unity. It also decided "to admonish the GKH (GKN-R) in a brotherly manner for its unlawful separation as outlined in Consideration 4.2."

So what is Consideration 4.2 all about? It reads, The GKH clearly indicates that they consider the GKN a false church. This shows in the way that they consider themselves the "lawful continuation of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands" (Report 5.6.4). Further, they are unwilling to consider reconciliation unless the GKN would see "the need to return to the Scriptures, confession and Church Order" (Report 5.6.5). For this reason, synod agrees with the CRCA when it speaks of the separation that occurred as "schism." The CRCA should be instructed to admonish the GKH in a brotherly manner on this matter as this action is not scripturally valid according to the Belgic Confession Article 28 where we confess that "all therefore who draw away from the church or fail to join it act contrary to the ordinance of God." At the same time, the CRCA should continue to look for ways to facilitate reconciliation. (*Acts 2007*, Article 143)





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
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A closer look at the Acts of Synod Smithers indicate that a certain brother was not happy with the strong wording of this decision and convinced Synod to reopen the discussion on this matter. After a number of rounds of discussion were held and various motions were moved and defeated, it was decided to maintain the original decision.

**Where are we going?**

Now, what does this mean? Does this mean that it is business as usual with the GKN? Does this mean that the concerns raised by the GKN-R have been dismissed? In other words, was it a decision that simply perpetuated the status quo?

For an answer, one needs to read carefully the Report of the CRCA, as well as the complete decision on the GKN found in Article 133 of the Acts 2007. It would also be most beneficial to study the past reports of the CRCA, as well as the decisions of previous synods.

What all of these reports and decisions reveal is that for some time already our churches have had concerns about the GKN. Letters have been sent to them and delegates have addressed their synods. In particular, a number of specific concerns have been raised about the Fourth Commandment, the Marriage Form, the Psalms and Hymns, divorce and remarriage, and the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Synod Smithers judged that on some of these concerns progress had been made. For example, the last synod the GKN spoke out clearly on the Fourth Commandment. As well, concerns about the Lord's Supper have been alleviated. The revised Marriage Form was said to contain "no unscriptural elements."

At the same time there continue to be other concerns. The ongoing discussion about divorce and remarriage warrants monitoring, especially when it comes to the hermeneutical principles that form the background of this discussion. The proliferation of new hymns also requires interaction both as to their number and contents. How things unfold with the decision on the Fourth Commandment requires the same. In short, the CRCA has been given a lot of work by Synod Smithers.

**A more proactive approach**

And something else, the CRCA has also been told to become more proactive. Traditionally, the Canadian Reformed approach has been to withhold official comment on reports issued by sister churches

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and to respond only, if necessary, to official decisions that have been taken. This will now change as Synod has instructed CRCA to “interact with the BBK (the Dutch counterpart committee - JV) whenever possible.” This interaction is to include more face-to-face meetings “at least every two years to discuss mutual concerns” and should help “to keep a finger on the pulse of the GKN.”

As a result of this more proactive approach, Synod Smithers also decided to expand the CRCA from six to eight members.

### A real challenge

Now, the above is, I hope, an accurate if partial summary of the actions of Synod Smithers 2007 on our relations with Dutch churches. Allow me now also some additional comments on all of this as both Editor and newly appointed CRCA member.

In the first place, I am thankful that Synod saw fit to take a more proactive approach on matters relating to our sister churches in The Netherlands. It has been somewhat of an inconsistency to see synod after synod urge committees for contact with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church to have more frequent meetings, while giving little of the same urgency to our Dutch relationships. At the same time it has become obvious that our old approach of waiting for and commenting only on decisions already made is far too much after the fact. We need to get in on the ground floor and to interact with reports before they even come to the floor of synod. At the same time nothing beats face-to-face meetings when it comes to sharing insights, discussing issues, and debating concerns.

In the second place, there is little doubt that the concerns that we have will not go away any time soon. From reading the Dutch church press, as well as from other personal and direct sources, one can not escape the conclusion that our Dutch sister churches are going through difficult times. They are threatened externally due to the forces of secularism, humanism, and militant atheism. They are threatened internally by members who want the churches to go in a more “arminian-anabaptist-evangelical” direction, as well as by those who are enamoured by the charismatic movement.

Such threats are, of course, not limited to them. They are present and on the rise in our churches as well. Indeed, it is striking that so many of the issues that our Dutch sister churches are wrestling with come originally from North America. In other cases they are

even somewhat old. Take the matter of re-baptism, or the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which seems to be the latest Dutch controversy. On our side of the Atlantic this issue was debated, dissected, and dismissed already some years ago.

In the third place, our members who visit The Netherlands and worship in our sister churches may need to become both more circumspect and more reactive. What do I mean? Well, when members come back from “the old country,” some of them return with what may be called “liturgical horror stories” and others return armed with “second or third hand reports.” What is needed in such cases is circumspection, meaning that there must be the realization that not all liturgical change can be quickly branded as “unreformed” because we don’t do it that way. When it comes to liturgy, care must be exercised and the question must always be asked, “Does it conflict with Scripture?” By the same token, when it comes to hearsay reports about what supposedly goes on in such and such a local church, care needs to be exercised as well. At times the whole story does not even get told and the resulting picture is distorted. Let us therefore be circumspect in our approach.

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### *One cannot escape the conclusion that our Dutch sister churches are going through difficult times*

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Yes, and when the need does arise, why not also be reactive? If you are attending a worship service in a sister church that you deem to be off the biblical rails, why not speak with the local office bearers and express your concerns to them directly? Or why not write them a letter? Being our brother’s and sister’s keeper applies wherever in the world you meet brothers and sisters in the faith. So, instead of coming home, firing off a letter to *Clarion* or to the CRCA, why not go directly to the source?

Still, when all is said and done it should be obvious that the coming years will not be lacking in matters to discuss and concerns to address. Your prayers will be needed in order that as churches we may be a hand and foot to one another in defending and promoting the Reformed faith, both in Canada and in The Netherlands.





W. den Hollander

# Peace



**MATTHEW 13:52**

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*“May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it.”*

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

Do you wonder sometimes whether the situation in Iraq will ever change? Given the fact that Saddam has been executed, a new government is in operation, and the police-force in charge, should there not be a state of peace? That's not at all what we see though! Daily we are shocked by the suicide-bombs and the terrorist attacks! In the images we see and the impressions we get, we don't get a sense of peace and security at all. Well, indeed, the road to peace is a long one!

It's the same with the peace in the kingdom of God. God may be called the "God of peace," who gave up his Son to establish peace; the angels may have sung "peace on earth" at the time of his birth and after his resurrection He may have greeted his disciples with peace; still, the peace of God with which we are greeted every Sunday morning isn't perfect.

In this world, yes even among God's people, there are remnants of the army of the evil one, pockets of resistance and attempts of obstruction. Just as with the Taliban in Afghanistan and the party spirit in Iraq, Satan has not been trodden under foot completely, indefinitely!

I am sure you know this from your own life as well. We're citizens in the kingdom of God, yet we still must be called to "avoid every kind of evil" and "to hold on to the good." We know that we must change, that relationships must change, and that attitudes must be sanctified for the peace of God to increase in our midst. This is what God wants, as we see in the text.

In this epistle Paul and his helpers have been working hard to pursue peace. On the one hand they've been praising the congregation for Christ's evident work of salvation in their lives. On the other hand, they also urged the believers to increase in love, so that it will overflow for each other and for everyone else (3:12). There should be no more hatred and hostility towards each other but a fellowship in love. Paul urges them to aim for peace through holiness, for that is God's will.

God calls us to live a holy life; this sanctification should affect our entire life! Indeed, Paul's focus was on the matter of sexual immorality (4:3-8); we hear him say, "Avoid every kind of evil!" A true child of God doesn't just break with one kind of sin or another; no, every kind! A true believer doesn't say, "I'm good enough as it is; you'll have to take me as I am." Rather, he tests everything and holds on to what is good. That is, he filters out what's not pleasing, what doesn't make for peace, and what doesn't agree with the newness of life in Christ. This is how we anticipate the return of Christ (v. 23). Then we're not like those Iraqis, who continue to disrupt the peace by a prolonged hatred and hostility; as we await the perfect reign of peace, we aim for it here and now already!

We do not do this ourselves. We're not on some kind of holiness tour or pursuit of perfection. No, this is the spirit in which we stand in the midst of the church and of this world. Paul shows that God Himself

sanctifies us! Yes, Paul expresses it in the way of a prayer: "May the God of peace himself sanctify you through and through; may your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless!" It means that you, the way you are (your personality, or soul), in the body you have, live in the Spirit of God! We pray for God to keep us in this state of holiness and peace (v. 24). Yes, how else could we, except by prayer and through the working of God's Holy Spirit! Sin is still there and Satan continues to attack us and in ourselves we're too weak to stand. If God's Spirit doesn't keep us and help us to seek this peace with God more and more in our life, we wouldn't get anywhere!

It is encouraging to hear the Apostle confirm his exhortation with the assurance that "the one who calls you is faithful and He will do it!" You may count on it! There may be many things in life that you desire from God, like healing and restoration for a loved one, which God hasn't promised He would give. This, however, He will do! He also assures us that his Spirit will dwell in us and live in us! If only we heed the call to faith and repentance, the call to newness and holiness. This is the way Christ governs and renews us! Christ assures us that in this way we will be kept blameless at his coming on his great day. Count on it, for God's peace will come, more certainly than the peace in Iraq.

# A *Clarion* Call from Canada

This article was placed on *eeninwaarheid.nl* in Dutch and English on June 8, 2007.

## Introduction

I'm sure you know that we have beloved brothers and sisters in Canada. They are members of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC). Many of their members have direct family relations with our churches. And in that sense these churches are close to our hearts. It is delightful to hear them speak on our synods, often with criticism in an up-building manner.

## Clarion

The CanRC also has a magazine, *Clarion*. This magazine may be compared with our *De Reformatie*, a periodical that is central in the life of the churches.

It so happens that a Canadian brother has pointed out to us that *Clarion* has been paying attention to the developments in our churches and to that of *eeninwaarheid*. He has been kind enough to forward these articles to us.

## The author

The author of the articles is sister Dr. F.G. Oosterhoff. She is an historian and has been active in secondary and higher education as docent for European history, church history, and the history of ideas. We may know her from a splendid book of the *Woord en Wereld* series,

dealing with post-modernism.<sup>1</sup> It will be less well-known that she also has written in *Clarion* about Genesis 1, about the book *Woord op schrift*, the new doctrine concerning divorce, and the Sunday.

## Sympathy

Sister Oosterhoff starts her article with a short resume of the situation in the Reformed churches. She distinguishes two groups who have a different opinion about quite a few subjects. She also reports that part of the concerned group has seceded. Sr. Oosterhoff writes that the concerned ones, the "opposition," enjoy quite a large amount of sympathy in Canada. This sympathy is increasing because they receive rumours about increasing worldliness, a diminishing church attendance, and more popularized worship services. Sr. Oosterhoff also finds such rumours disturbing.

## Media

Another reason why our Canadian brothers and sisters are sympathetic towards the concerned ones has to do with the printed and the digital media that reach them from the side of those people. These articles, often translated into English, are read more often than those of "the other side."

## Reason for the articles

*Eeninwaarheid* is said to be an "influential" digital source. Apparently, *eeninwaarheid* has been heartily recommended to its readers in a letter to the editor in *Clarion*. In answer to this letter Dr. Oosterhoff promises to write about *eeninwaarheid*. The articles we discuss here are the fulfilment of this promise.<sup>2</sup>

In advance, Dr. Oosterhoff wishes to make clear that she understands the points of the concerned ones and of *eeninwaarheid*. She also believes that they are motivated by love for the churches. But she has serious questions regarding the manner, tone, and method used by *eeninwaarheid* in its polemicizing. In her two articles she wants to question this. Furthermore, her secondary purpose is to undo the one-sidedness of the information coming from the website and related sources. She wants to do that by paying attention to the arguments of the non-concerned.

Let me interrupt here for a moment. Sr. Oosterhoff considers our articles to be "one-sided." But no proof is offered anywhere to substantiate that statement. In our articles we attempt to do our "opponents" justice by giving them ample opportunity to express their opinion. We publish as much as possible in order for the reader

himself to determine what is being said, and so to be able to judge whether or not our assessment is correct.

## Blacken

Sr. Oosterhoff starts her first article with a resume of *eeninwaarheid's* introductory article. Next, she continues with a judgement of the site. She says that we blacken the reputations of our opponents, individually and collectively. She then points to the ninth commandment and its interpretation in Lord's Day 43. This is posed, but again, not proved. I would love to see Dr. Oosterhoff demonstrate this from the content of our articles. Because, indeed, we do not blacken our "opponents." We wish to discuss the pertinent matter (not the person, but the subject) of what is being *publicly* written. We are deeply concerned about the subjects of which we write. That finds expression in our manner of writing, the tone. Clearly, we must watch this. I can tell you that we spend much time especially on this point. All articles are screened by a large number of editors. Special attention is paid to the tone and to what may be the perception of the reader who, by definition, does not agree with us. We immediately admit that our efforts herein are not perfect. Far from it! We do our work in an imperfect manner. You will recognize that. One does one's utmost to present something honestly and decently and yet sometimes it is not understood that way. We do not wish to preach or write for our own parish. If we err in the tone of our writings, we unreservedly will admit that when it is pointed out with examples from our articles. That also goes for mistakes we make in the

representation of what was written. Sr. Oosterhoff writes as if we are unwilling to admit mistakes. There are several places in our articles where she can read that the opposite is true.

But, when everything concerning the tone has been said, we very much would like to speak about and discuss the contents. Also in Sr. Oosterhoff's article it seems that the general (not concretized) remarks about tone and method overshadow the discussion of the contents. Sr. Oosterhoff gives the impression that *eeninwaarheid* posits much and postulates great theses, without providing a basis for them. When really reading our articles, one will have to arrive at a contrary conclusion. All our pronouncements are extensively argued. One can disagree with these arguments. Well, then we shall have to discuss this. But exactly this discussion of the contents is absent in so great a degree, also in Dr. Oosterhoff's article.

However, for clearness sake, we indeed will take the remarks concerning tone to heart. We will consider and once again review our writing critically.

## The Internet

Sr. Oosterhoff, same as Rev. J. Wesseling in *De Reformatie*, has problems with the medium we use: the Internet. She writes that we say "there is no other way to express ourselves." And she points to *Reformanda* to show that it can be done in that way as well, that is, via a printed periodical. But then we speak about different things. We do not mean that no other manner exists to publish our views *except on the Internet*. We mean that we *cannot make our voice*

# Church News

Declined the call to the church at Abbotsford, British Columbia:

**Rev. J. Moesker**

of Vernon, British Columbia.

Declined the call to Winnipeg-Grace, MB and Smithers, BC:

**Rev. J. VanWoudenberg**

of Guelph, Ontario.

Effective July 1st, 2007, Trinity Canadian Reformed Church in Glanbrook, ON, will change the location and times of their worship services. Please consult the Directory for details.

The mailing address for the Bethel Canadian Reformed Church at Toronto has been changed to:

11251 Bayview Avenue,  
Richmond Hill, ON L4S 1L8

Providence Canadian Reformed Church, Hamilton, ON was instituted Sunday, June 24, 2007. This new congregation is composed of former members of Ancaster and Cornerstone churches. For information concerning the worship times and location, please consult the Directory for details.

Called by the church of Willoughby Heights, BC:

**Rev. A. Souman**

of Smithville, Ontario.

Called by the church of Elora, Ontario:

**Rev. D. VandeBurgt**

of Glanbrook, Ontario.



heard in the existing church papers. For that reason another "paper" has been established and we chose a modern method, that is, via the Internet. We do not understand the problem with the medium. And we have explained that, for example, in our reply to Rev. Wesseling's articles. Moreover, Br. Huib Noordzij, in the *Kerkblad van het Midden enz.* showed that, ironically, protests were voiced in the church every time a different sound, using a new medium, was presented.<sup>3</sup> An example is the use of books in the times of the Reformation.

### Collect and spread misery?

Sr. Oosterhoff also takes issue with the sentence in our introductory article where we call on our brothers and sisters to report disquieting developments in their congregation or classis to us. That, indeed, is a less felicitous sentence. And that has been admitted in a previous article.

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*We attempt to do our "opponents" justice by giving them ample opportunity to express their opinion*

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It may give the impression that we wish to disclose, openly and candidly, all distress within the churches. If you have followed the articles on the website, you will have noticed that we have not done that. It is our intention, when collecting this kind of stories, to adapt our articles on the basis of them. When, for instance, plays are organized in the worship services –

and that does happen – and we hear that from different corners of the churches, then we can consider writing an article about it. There is nothing wrong with that. All periodicals do this. The effort is made to become familiar with the tendencies within the churches and to equip the reader with knowledge about these subjects. Therefore, we will only write about matters that are public and that can be checked. Sins, committed in secret, indeed must be pointed out not publicly, but in the way of Matthew 18. It is our opinion, however, that public matters, indeed, may be discussed publicly regardless of the medium used. That, needless to say, also is true for matters that ought to be discussed publicly, but yet are dealt with behind closed doors.

### Obtain justice?

Sr. Oosterhoff further suggests that we attempt to obtain justice by using our website. She even calls it making use of "worldly means." That is not true. Nowhere do we write: We went the ecclesiastical road. That was unsuccessful, therefore we will go and obtain justice via the Internet. Indeed, many of the editorial members specifically walk that ecclesiastical road. And what happens on that road is not published at this time. What is written about are the relevant subjects, but never in the way of: Let it be known that here I am taking the ecclesiastical road and, up till now, have received no satisfaction. I say "at this time" because I do not rule out any future writing about the ecclesiastical way. In the past, at the time of Liberation, for instance, that was done unconcernedly.

We take this road because it is the one commanded. That is the way of justice.

### Tension

As Sr. Oosterhoff impresses upon us, we, and all brothers and sisters, in accordance with 1 Corinthians 6, must consider and weigh what to do when an objection is rejected. Whether it suffices and is permissible to put that decision and your own difficulties with it in the hands of the Lord, or whether that is not possible and not allowed. That is the tension a believer experiences.

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*We mean that we cannot make our voice heard in the existing church papers*

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How drastic is the "breaking with the evil"? But certainly Dr. Oosterhoff will agree with us that we may not accept anything that is clearly against God's Word? Also when an ecclesiastical meeting, or a majority, declares that it is not contrary to Scripture. It is about these clear things we try to write, on the basis of God's Word. And here I have in mind the teaching and spreading of the framework hypothesis (in short: creation did not happen the way it is related in Scripture). Or homosexual relations. Do they have to be rejected or discouraged in God's congregation? Or are we allowed to say that the Bible does not know of grounds for divorce, but that indeed one may re-marry in certain situations? Or are we allowed to celebrate the Lord's Supper with members of other church federations, as the latest



synod has pronounced (more open Lord's Supper)? I quickly list a few subjects. These are carefully scrutinized on our website by the illumination of the Word of God. I want to show here that we are not dealing with "adiaphora" ("indifferent matters" as quoted from Luther by Sr. Oosterhoff).

It is also noticeable that on our website not much is written about liturgy and liturgical differences. Dr. Oosterhoff's second article suggests that we are very concerned about this. And, I admit, we easily could write much more about it. Liturgy, the form of the worship service, etc., also does not by definition belong to the "adiaphora." Our liturgy must be based on the teaching of Scriptures. But I fail to understand why Dr. Oosterhoff dedicates the entire second article to "differences concerning changes in worship style and liturgy," this not being at the peak of our concern. What is at the summit of our concern are the subjects I mentioned above and specifically the preservation of scriptural authority and of the confessions. I am curious as to what Dr. Oosterhoff's opinion may be on the manner in which we write about these subjects and what we pass on. Is she, too, troubled by what is being said about these subjects in the liberated Reformed churches? Or are they considered to be topics one can talk about and concerning which one can differ of opinion? In view of Dr. Oosterhoff's articles about Genesis 1 and *Woord op schrift* I cannot imagine that to be true.<sup>4</sup>



### About the contents

*Eeninwaarheid* does not look for a perfect church. It also has no desire to radicalize. It is our wish to simply keep believing what is written. And if we, in all modesty, are of the opinion that what is being written or taught is not in accordance with the Bible and the confessions, then we write about it.

### *Most people do not wish to listen to critical questions*

Why? To have a discussion about these things. To really make progress in our understanding of the essence of the subjects. So that together we may learn and understand who the Lord is and who we may be for Him. The sad fact, however, is that most people do not wish to listen to critical questions. And so they remain silent.

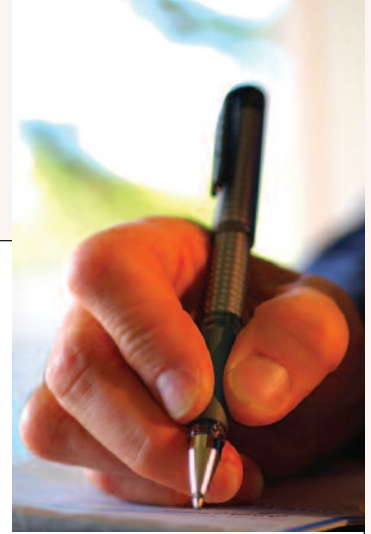
We hope that Dr. Oosterhoff will respond to our article and to the questions posed. In order that, even when physically far apart, we may experience a spiritual closeness and together may learn to understand the will of the Lord.

<sup>1</sup> F.G. Oosterhoff, *Het Postmodernisme in bijbels licht*, *Woord en Wereld* series nr. 62, (Bedum, 2004). Translated from English.

<sup>2</sup> F.G. Oosterhoff, "Dealing with disagreements in the Church, Part 1 and 2," *Clarion* (March 30 2007, p. 158 ff. and April 13 2007, p. 192 ff).

<sup>3</sup> Huib Noordzij, "Van pamflet tot website" (from pamphlet to website) in: *Gereformeerd Kerkblad*, (Vol. 59, No. 24, December 2, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> *Clarion*, August 27 - November 5, 2004.



### Dear Editor,

I can't express how much I appreciated the recent articles by Freda Oosterhoff. They were balanced, giving a fair hearing to both sides of the issues in The Netherlands. They stand in stark contrast to much of the material floating around online that accuses our Dutch brothers and sisters of abandoning the Reformed faith without truly examining what they are doing and why.

What I found most perceptive about the articles was the call for us to consider whether our worship is intelligible to our culture, our neighbours, the world that lives in darkness. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul assumes the presence of unbelievers in worship. He emphasizes the need for worship to be understandable so that the unbeliever can be convinced that he is a sinner and fall down and worship God (1 Corinthians 14:22-25).

If we believe that the gospel is the greatest treasure that anyone can find, it is our duty to present it in such a way that it is comprehensible. Psalm 22 promises us that all the nations will worship the Lord. How can this nation worship God if those who have the gospel aren't willing to present it in a way that is intelligible? We need to deny ourselves and take up the cross of Christ so that the world may know that only in Christ is salvation to be found. That may mean that, if our culture finds our worship incoherent, we may need to lay down our own desire to have a worship service the way that we want it. Are we willing to do this for the sake of our neighbours and for the sake of the gospel?

Pete Scholtens  
Cornerstone CanRC  
Hamilton, ON

### To the Editor,

Having read the articles of Dr. Oosterhoff regarding "Dealing with Disagreements in the Church," allow me some thoughts. Dr. Oosterhoff goes on at some lengths decrying the tactics and language used by those who are concerned about the present direction of the Dutch sister churches. She states, "I am convinced that these writers [those who are concerned] are moved by love for the church and wish to serve the brotherhood" while in the same breath she labels them "the opposition" (admittedly for lack of a better term). If, as is claimed, both sides of this present debate have the good of the church at

heart and both are working to maintain the church as is described in Scripture and confessed in our confessions, is it fair to speak of an opposition? Perhaps one could argue that those who advocate changes in some of the areas mentioned are really the "opposition," since they no longer wish to do things as we have in the past.

Dr. Oosterhoff also expresses difficulty with the medium via which the "opposition" makes their position known, namely the Internet, suggesting that *Reformanda* would have been the proper choice. To the best of my knowledge, *Reformanda* is readily available on that same Internet. I don't understand the argument in this case. From Dr. Oosterhoff's writing, one would have to assume that the website referred to is slanderous (as per Lord's Day 43). I too have visited the web site and find it hard to recognize slander in any way, shape, or form. In fact, one could argue that the website actually is doing precisely what the Lord's Day requires in trying to promote the neighbour's honour and reputation by keeping him faithful to the Scriptures. It is interesting to note that "we hear more from the accusers than from the accused." Silence can be very telling at times.

Dr. Oosterhoff is correct in that the younger generation grows up very differently from the older generation. The older generation was busy immigrating, learning new languages, customs, work, and building that infrastructure of churches, schools, and college. The new generation has had, and is receiving, so much more in the way of educational opportunities. How ironic it is then that this is the generation which is clamouring "for a less intellectualistic approach and sermons and liturgy that address their and their contemporaries' spiritual needs." And this in fact brings us to the "heart" of the matter as far as liturgy is concerned. What exactly does today's generation think church is? Is church about feeling good, about feeling moved, about dumbing down the gospel to add to our number or to accommodate the needs of our youth? Just what are the spiritual needs of today's youth and how are they so different from my spiritual needs? We go to church because that is where our Lord works. Church is the gathering of the believers, where Christ wishes to



teach us and remind us of that ongoing, age old struggle (the antithesis); we need to come to the recognition of our own sinfulness and our own weakness. Church can never be about winning new members through adapting our worship to the individuals need or perhaps more truthful, the individuals desires.

Today (Sunday) an interdenominational service was held in the park to commemorate Yarrow days. I have difficulty believing that Holy God was pleased by the "contemporary music" of the service. Am I therefore traditionalistic? Perhaps so. Am I living in fear of change? Perhaps so. Better that than a church which in the end is no church but an institution that caters to the whims and wishes of the world around it. Dr. Oosterhoff mentions more things which are disturbing in the Dutch sister churches, which she nowhere disputes as being illegitimate concerns. It was a golden opportunity for Dr. Oosterhoff to warn God's people on this side of the globe of the dangers assailing the churches in Holland, dangers from which we are not far removed. It is sad that she chose instead to add credence to the new directions being forged in the church of our Lord.

Dick Schouten  
Yarrow B.C.

### Dear Editors,

"What is truth?" Pilate once asked. Indeed, who, other than Jesus, can boldly lay claim to having the truth? Concerning this search for truth, Proverbs 27:17 says "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." Students of conflict management will also tell you that disagreement or conflict as such, does not have to be seen a negative event. Disagreement in the church is nothing new. In fact, the dynamic of disagreement, as Proverbs tell us, can be positive if we actively listen to each other. In the latter context, such dialogue can lead to a richer understanding for all those involved if we continue to listen to God's Word and to each other.

Recently I heard a sermon from Rev. Cl. Stam in which he stated that an important characteristic of being *Reformed* is to be *informed*. The two articles of Dr. F. G. Oosterhoff, "Dealing with Disagreements in the Church," served our churches well in providing us with timely information about many of the issues currently under discussion in The Netherlands. Those who have frequently visited The Netherlands will realize that brothers and sisters in our Dutch sister churches live in the midst of a highly secularized society that has become aggressively unchristian. Dutch society is thoroughly postmodern, much more evidently than North American society. Is it

surprising that these churches needed to change to tackle the new challenges?

Several years ago, Rev. C. Haak, instructor of missiology at the university in Kampen published a book, *Metamorphose* (Metamorphosis) in which he explains a Reformed view of trans-cultural Christian outreach. Most of his examples profile issues in countries such as Indonesia or Africa, but his point is well made that Christians must learn to take their indigenous culture captive for Christ. In the same context, the church must be very careful that it does not perpetuate or generate a separate culture within the church that is far removed from the culture outside of the church walls. If the church takes her (home) mission task seriously, she must be in touch with the cultural environment. The Dutch churches are dealing with that challenge. Consequently, what we see and hear in some of our Dutch sister churches may be different from our worship services. Different is not necessarily wrong; God's Word remains central.

Dr. Oosterhoff has challenged us as readers of *Clarion* and members of the Canadian Reformed churches to reflect on the dialogue that she has helped to generate. What can we learn from our Dutch sister churches about the on-going process of change within our own churches? Have we developed a unique, antiquated culture and language, foreign to outsiders? What traditions should we keep? Where should we boldly strike out in a new direction? Dialogue with an open Bible seeks to understand each other's position, if not to accept. Many issues do not come with clear Biblical injunctions or imperatives. Therefore, we will have to dialogue together as iron sharpens iron and together hold each other accountable to God's infallible Word. Only in this way we will develop a clearer understanding of God's will for us today.

Pieter H. Torenvliet  
Abbotsford, BC

### Dear Editor,

I appreciated Dr. Oosterhoff's recent articles on the situation in our Dutch sister churches. They prompted me to think about a variety of issues and I was happy that you published the articles. They were worthwhile for the following three reasons.

1. It is good that we continually reflect on and discuss these matters in an open forum and that such discussion involves people who have obviously researched the material and therefore can write intelligently about the issues. Dr. Oosterhoff has done that and discussion should continue on the topic.

2. When we are speaking about our sister churches, it should also cause introspection among us and about our own federation. We must consider not only what we should avoid, but also what we can learn from them in a positive way. Changes are taking place there, but change is not by definition something that must be avoided. At times it is needed and should be introduced, always on the condition that biblical principles are not compromised. The church must at least keep an open mind and not hold on blindly to man-made traditions. We have to recognize, as the Dutch sister churches have, that in 2007 our worship style does not necessarily have to be precisely as it was some sixty years ago.

3. Lastly, her articles caused me to wonder what the majority of the members in our sister churches in Holland think. I have many friends in our Dutch sister churches who have seriously asked me on several

occasions why we in Canada seem to be so critical of them. They tell me the fundamental parts of worship, for example the preaching, remain as important as ever. And so do doctrine and confessions. Many of our Dutch brothers and sisters are grateful for the fact that their church more than before realizes its responsibility to the world, while holding on to the truth of the gospel. I often feel it's so easy to pick out the negatives and lose sight of the positives and I think we should spend less time "throwing daggers" at others. It's good to remember that our own church is not without its negatives and should look in its own backyard first. May God in his mercy continue to gather, preserve, and increase his church in Holland, in Canada, and throughout the world; and may his church be a blessing to the world.

Tom Zietsma  
Stoney Creek, Ontario

*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.*

F.G. Oosterhoff

# Once More: Dealing with Disagreements in the Church

Dr. F. G. Oosterhoff is a historian in Hamilton, Ontario  
fgo@quickcllic.net

*Eeninwaarheid* has indicated their intention to publish the articles concerning the GKv in the present issue of *Clarion* (Issue 15) on their website.

My articles on disagreements in the church have led to an unusually large number of reactions (see "Letters to the Editor" in the issue of June 22 and the present one). I appreciate the interest shown. One writes, after

all, in order to be read, and it is good to note that this goal is being reached – even if there is evidence of disagreement with one's position. In the present case I had expected that.

The editor allowed me to reply to the letters. I had already submitted a response when I received the article by Samuel Driessen on behalf of the website *eeninwaarheid*. Since Br. Driessen asks for an answer, I decided to

enlarge upon my original article. In the first section I focus on the Canadian letters and in the second on the article from Holland.

## To my Canadian correspondents

I must begin this part by rectifying two misunderstandings and one error. Firstly, I have not suggested that all is well in the Dutch churches. In my articles I have spoken of developments that



cause real concern. Without being exhaustive, I referred to matters such as a secularization of lifestyle and an excessive popularizing of worship style and liturgy. But I realize that more could have been said and I will come back to it later in this article. My primary goal, however, was to deal with an imbalance. We have been hearing much about Dutch shortcomings. What was lacking, I believed, was sufficient knowledge of (and appreciation for) the fact that there are also positive developments in the Dutch churches. I therefore focused on that aspect.

Secondly, I have not been suggesting that we throw tradition overboard. Anyone who has read my articles with any care will know that such an accusation is absurd. I distinguished between biblical and man-made traditions and stated that while the former are by definition non-negotiable, the latter also can be and often are rich and valuable. History makes it very clear that it is dangerous for a church to forget its past. But I added that man-made traditions must constantly be evaluated. If they interfere with the church's God-given function and task, they must be relinquished.

Thirdly, the error. I wrote, relying on Dutch sources, that forty-eight percent of young people have left the Reformed churches by age nineteen. Apparently this figure was based on a miscalculation. The number, it turns out, is around one-third. Moreover, no distinction had been made between young people who left on their own accord and those who simply followed their parents in leaving the church. I am glad to make this correction and thank Dr. A.J. de Visser for bringing the error to light.

### *The Dutch and we*

In my articles I concentrated on what is happening in the Dutch churches rather than in our own. I did so not because I believe we should imitate the Dutch in what they do or fail to do. The reason was, rather, that they serve us in Canada as a mirror. Our traditions, challenges, temptations, difficulties, and opportunities are very similar to theirs.

That is not surprising. Firstly, the Dutch churches are our "mother church" and as such have strongly influenced us from the very beginning. Secondly, they are going through a process of re-assessing their position and task in a rapidly changing world that we also have to go through. It is true that they are well ahead of us. This, however, is not a drawback but an advantage. It means that we can learn from them – from their positive accomplishments and from their errors.

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*A church culture has developed wherein members are often better at arguing doctrinal points than at speaking of their faith in Christ*

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Because of accusations of a Bible-critical attitude among Dutch theologians, I have in previous articles paid special attention to such issues as hermeneutics, the interpretation of the fourth and seventh commandments, ecclesiology, and views on the first chapters of Genesis. It is here, in the field of doctrine and biblical understanding, that the Dutch churches are being judged first of all. I therefore regret, as I stated, that these matters are hardly

discussed among us in any serious way. Is it their level of difficulty? That is the suggestion of Mr. George Hart (whom I thank, by the way, for his generous response). Br. Hart may be right, but I still think that the attempt must be made. Not only because it is unethical to accuse others of a Bible-critical attitude if we have not even read their work (going instead by the opinion of others), but also because of the issues' relevance for us. As I showed in my articles, developments in these areas belong in my opinion to the positive developments in the Dutch churches.

### *Christ in the centre*

I would have liked to give specific examples, but space is limited and I want to speak of yet another development in the Dutch churches that so far I have not mentioned. I am referring to what I perceive as a renewed focus of the centrality of Christ in the church and the Christian life.

Because of specific developments in the history of the Dutch churches, including most recently the liberation of 1944, church members there have learned the need of doctrinal faithfulness. They realize it is essential to know doctrine well; they have learned to defend it; and they are skilful at discovering and exposing errors. This in itself is a good thing; let there be no doubt about it. Nevertheless, a single-minded focus on doctrine may lead to one-sidedness and create the impression that maintaining purity of doctrine is all that is needed in the Christian life.

Present-day church members in Holland, including pastors and theologians, have drawn attention to this danger. They point out, for example, that a church culture has developed wherein members are often better at arguing doctrinal

points, criticizing others, and condemning what they perceive as apostasy and error, than at speaking of their faith in Christ. I grew up in that culture and admit to the validity of the complaint. Even now, many of us find it much easier to talk about the church, about doctrine, about threatening apostasy, than about our hope in Christ. It is this attitude, then, that is being discussed in the Dutch churches and we will do well to pay attention. For we, too, have to keep reminding each other that it is not the church that saves, nor doctrinal purity, but Christ alone. And aren't we also running the danger of forgetting that it is Christ who protects his church? I am asking this because we pay much attention to missteps in the Dutch churches, but how often do we pray for them – individually and in our worship services?

These, then, were among my reasons for writing the articles in question. If we become aware of what is happening in the areas I described, we will, I believe, adjust our interpretations of at least some of the issues playing in the Dutch churches. We will also better understand our own members, including many younger ones, who are asking the same type of questions that are being asked among the Dutch. What these members want to see in the church is evidence of a living faith. And for them a living faith implies, again, not just watchfulness with respect to doctrine and a careful guarding of boundaries. It implies also a strong awareness of the centrality of Christ and, therefore (among other things), a desire to make his gospel of salvation known to outsiders – by means of mission, evangelism, and if necessary also by means of liturgical and worship-style adaptations. I cannot agree with

those of my correspondents who condemn such a demand as apostasy.

### **To Samuel Driessen**

It was good to hear from Mr. Samuel Driessen. The two of us have never met, but in the past we have corresponded quite a bit. He was the person who some years ago translated my book on Postmodernism into Dutch and during the translation process we stayed in close touch. I remember that at that time already we debated developments in the Dutch churches. Although we disagreed on important points, the debate was conducted in a civil and brotherly spirit. I recognize that same spirit in Br. Driessen's article. I am grateful for it and want to respond in kind.

#### *Biblical criticism?*

There is no space to deal with every point Br. Driessen raises and so I will have to select what I believe are, for him also, the most important ones. Firstly, the matter of "blackening reputations." Here I was primarily concerned with accusations of biblical criticism directed at various Reformed pastors and theologians. This is a very serious accusation, which may not be made lightly. Yet I believe that this has been done. I cannot go into detail here, but I have given reasons for my conclusions in articles published earlier in this magazine and will be happy to send them, also for posting on the website, should that be desired.

I do understand the uneasiness that follows when views we have long been accustomed to are being challenged. I have experienced that uneasiness myself. It was the main reason why over the past few years I have duly researched the matters that have caused disagreements in the Dutch churches (and, increasingly, also in the CanRC).

Having done so, I had to conclude that the revisions resulted in more truly biblical views on the issues in question. Again, for my arguments I have to refer you to the articles. (The above shows, by the way, that I agree with Br. Driessen about the importance of the doctrinal issues. In CanRC circles, however, much of the criticism has focused on life- and worship style; that is why I gave attention to these matters as well.)

#### *Dealing with differences*

Br. Driessen asks me if I believe that in the doctrinal controversies in the Dutch churches there is room for difference of opinion. I answer that question in the affirmative. We should, I firmly believe, more clearly distinguish between unity and uniformity. Unity is both a command and a gift; uniformity is neither, and the demand for it can be stifling. It implies unwarranted intolerance for diverging views. There are instances of such intolerance in the history of the Reformed churches (think, for example, of the many schisms in the history of the Secession; think also of 1944). I detect it again in our days. It has not, however, always characterized the Reformed tradition. The following examples show this:

For the sake of church unity, John Calvin was willing to go very far in accommodating both Lutherans and Zwinglians in the matter of the Lord's Supper – certainly not a minor issue. This willingness has, as far as I know, never been qualified as apostasy.

The Synod of Dort, 1618/19, issued a compromise statement in an attempt to end the conflict between those who held to a very strict view of the Sunday (the so-called sabbatarians) and those who did not believe that the Sunday was directly based on the fourth commandment – the view held by John Calvin and reflected



in Lord's Day 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Although sabbatarianism long remained dominant, for close to 400 years no charges of apostasy were issued against those who defended Calvin's interpretation. (See on all this the *Acta* of Synod Amersfoort, 2005, or turn to the relevant articles in *Clarion*, April 28, 2006.) Today it is different. When recent Dutch synods defended the legitimacy of both views, rather than making the sabbatarian one obligatory, it caused great unrest and even contributed to a secession.

I could further mention the compromise agreement of 1905 (the so-called Pacification Formula). Here again, important issues were at stake; yet for the sake of church unity both sides were willing to live with the differences. The liberation of 1944 did not take place because two different views were allowed on the covenant and other matters, but because one view was declared to be the only scriptural one. K. Schilder worked hard to maintain 1905. By allowing room for two opinions he hoped to preserve church unity. He failed, but who among us would want to blame him for trying?

Finally, there is the interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis. As I have shown some years ago (see *Clarion*, March 14, 28, 2003 and August 1, 15, 29, 2003), there used to be room in our churches for interpretations ranging from young-earth creationism (the view defended by conservative American evangelicalism) to ideas promoting creation "days" of great length. In the 1920s Dr. Schilder wrote a pamphlet defending the feasibility of the latter. He also expressed sympathy with Abraham Kuyper's suggestion that the Flood may have been regional, rather than universal. Still other Reformed theologians promoted in those years the so-called frame theory of

Genesis 1. I am not arguing here that Schilder and Kuyper and the frame-theorists were right; I only want to show that these different views were allowed. They did not lead to accusations of biblical criticism, as is the case today. Nor do they seem to have harmed the churches.

#### *Where lies the real danger?*

In short, I do not believe that the dangers the Dutch churches face are caused by the writings of their theologians and/or the decisions of their synods (although there are no doubt imperfections in the work of both). As I see it, the real threat lies, firstly, in a process of rapid secularization, which does not fail to affect the church. In Western Europe, but also here in Canada, thousands upon thousands say farewell to the faith. Even the Reformed churches are not immune to this trend. My question is: Are we sufficiently aware of the adverse effects our divisions and mutual recriminations have on our own members and on the world (which, after all, we have been given the task to evangelize)? I do not of course mean that sin must not be called sin. I do mean that at all times we must speak of the hope we have "with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15).

A second threat the Dutch churches face is a tendency among church members (and perhaps even among some pastors) to reject the Reformed theological tradition in favour of an uncritical and indiscriminate assimilation of all things evangelical and even all things charismatic – the good together with the bad. This is in part, I believe, a reaction to the church culture I described earlier. Many members are looking for more warmth, more evidence of personal piety, more openness to others. All too often, however, they are also looking for what is called

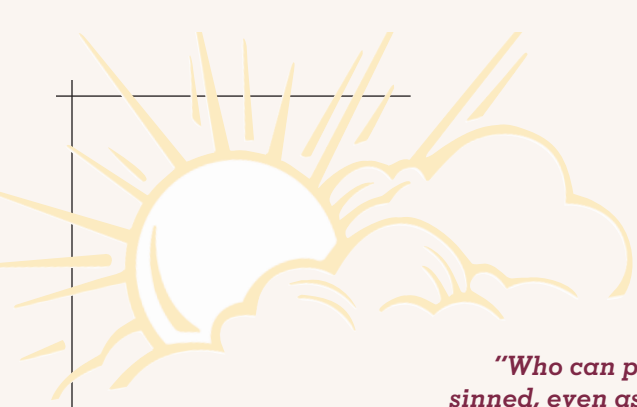
"empowerment": for a theology of glory instead of a theology of the cross.

Although this development is, in a sense, understandable, it is a matter of real concern, also for me. I am convinced, however, that on this point (and also on the previous one) Reformed theologians, synods, and the overwhelming majority of Reformed pastors see eye to eye with *eeninwaarheid*. It is therefore a great pity that present disagreements make it difficult for the two sides to work together in addressing these challenges. It is on this point especially that I would like our discussion to continue.

#### *The medium*

Finally, my criticism of the use of the worldwide web. Having listened to Br. Driessen's arguments, I admit that the difference between printed and digital medium is indeed not as great as I suggested. In either case the rule of Matthew 18 can be both kept and transgressed. But my objection to widely publicizing perceived trespasses of brothers and sisters remains. Consider this analogy: if someone in our own family should go astray in life or doctrine, we would rebuke and counsel him, constantly pray for him, and at the same time do our utmost to keep the issue "within the family." The church also is a family and should be treated as such. This is a biblical principle; witness again the rule given in Matthew 18.

In conclusion: Thanks again, Samuel Driessen, for your informative article and for your willingness to enter into genuine dialogue. I know that we (and also my other correspondents) share the desire to serve the church. May Christ, the head of the church, enlighten and guide us.



# Ray of Sunshine

By Mrs. Corinne Gelms and Mrs. Erna Nordeman

*“Who can proclaim the mighty acts of the LORD or fully declare his praise? We have sinned, even as our fathers did; we have done wrong and acted wickedly. Yet He saved them for his name’s sake to make his mighty power known.”*

Psalm 106:2, 6, 8

Our God is surely a gracious God! Do we ever take time to reflect on this? Time and again as we read through the Bible; we see how the people of Israel sinned and then how God displayed his faithfulness to them. We ought to become familiar with the ways that He has helped his people in the past. This will encourage us when we go through difficult times as well. We can trust that He remains steadfast to his promises. The trials and difficulties that we face in life are given as a tool to strengthen us in our faith. It is an instrument which will humble us and drive our focus back to God. Then we will see our need to depend on Him. Through this we will be able to praise Him and show our thankfulness to Him alone.

Therefore, do not try to plan your own life; rather, let God be the guide in your life. He knows all our ways and is with us in every situation, in every trial, protecting, loving, and guiding. We can go forward in confidence with the words of our Lord in Psalm 32:8, 10 “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD’s unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in Him.”

Praise Him alone, for He is our gracious God!

## In Hours of Discouragement, God is Our Encouragement

Sometimes we feel uncertain  
And unsure of everything –  
Afraid to make decisions,  
Dreading what the day will bring.  
We keep wishing it were possible  
To dispel all fear and doubt  
And to understand more readily  
Just what life is all about.  
God has given us the answers,  
Which too often go unheeded,  
But if we search his promises  
We’ll find everything that’s needed  
To lift our faltering spirits  
And renew our courage, too,  
For there’s absolutely nothing  
Too much for God to do. . .  
For the Lord is our salvation  
And our strength in every fight,  
Our Redeemer and Protector,

Our eternal guiding light.  
He has promised to sustain us,  
He’s our refuge from all harms,  
And underneath this refuge  
Are the everlasting arms. . .  
So cast your burden on Him,  
Seek his counsel when distressed,  
And go to Him for comfort  
When you’re lonely and oppressed. . .  
For in God is our encouragement  
In trouble and in trials,  
And in suffering and in sorrow  
He will turn our tears to smiles.

*I will instruct you, and with my aid provide you,  
And in the way that you should go will guide you.  
My counsel will be ever at your side,  
And, keeping watch, I will with you abide.  
Be not a fool, who has no understanding;  
Do not behave like horse or mule, depending  
On bit and bridle to control their course;  
They disobey unless restrained by force.*

Psalm 32:4

## Birthdays in August:

- 4 **TERENCE BERENDS** will be 31  
Anchor Home  
361 Thirty Road, RR 2, Beamsville, ON L0R 1B2
- 5 **PHILIP SCHUURMAN** will be 48  
1156 Diltz Road, Dunnville, ON N1A 2W2
- 9 **ROSE MALDA** will be 50  
Mt. Nemo Christian Nursing Home  
RR 2, Milton, ON L9T 2X6
- 18 **FENNY KUIK** will be 55  
140 Foch Avenue, Winnipeg, MB R2C 5H7

Congratulations to all who are celebrating a birthday in the month of August. May our heavenly Father continue to guide and bless you in the new year. Have an enjoyable day together with your family and friends. Till next month,

Mrs. C. Gelms and Mrs. E. Nordeman  
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