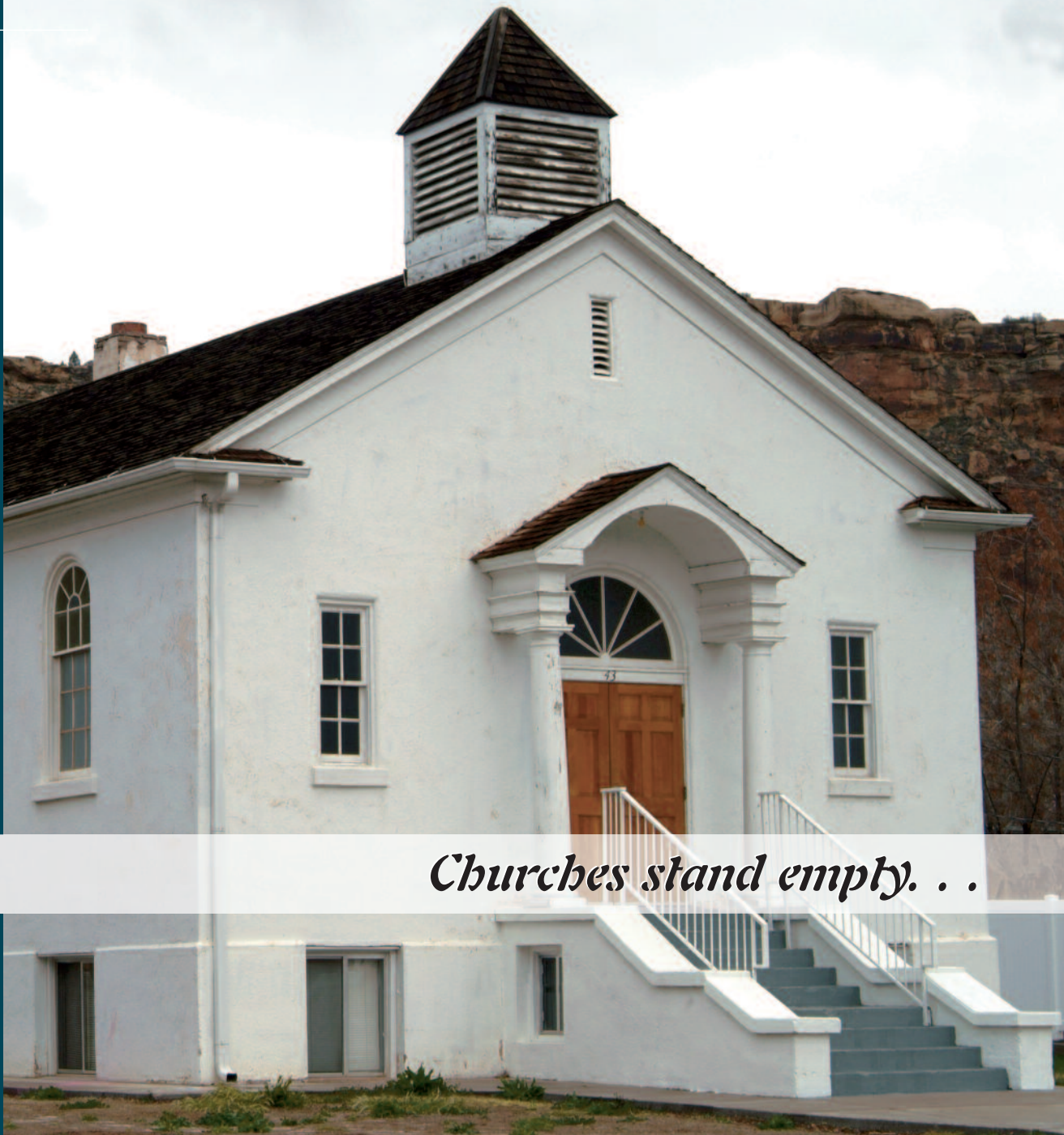


*Is God Poison?*

*You Have Been  
Raised with  
Christ*

*A Guide to  
Reformed  
Worship*



*Churches stand empty. . .*



R. Aasman

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# Is God Poison?

*Dawkins asserts that God is irrational and has inflicted grievous harm on society*

## Is God dead?

In 1966 a cover of *Time Magazine* asked in bold print, "Is God Dead?" The article inside suggested that it was a tantalizing question for believers who secretly feared He might be and for atheists who also secretly feared He might not be. In fact, there emerged a new and ludicrous reality known as the atheist Christian. The atheist Christian suggests that God does not exist but it was good to keep God alive and to create God in man's own image so that theology could continue and be good for mankind.

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*It would seem that atheism is winning the day*

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When one considers the damage done by liberal theology and secularization in the earlier part of the century, it comes as no surprise that many people were very confused about the existence and significance of God. The question concerning the possible death of God became so provocative in the 1960s that church buildings were easily filled by announcements that Sunday's sermon would address the question, "Is God dead?"

## Is God poison?

The attack on the existence of God has taken a new twist. In April of this year, *Maclean's* published on its cover the question, "Is God Poison?" The article describes a new atheistic attack against God that does not suggest He is dead. On the contrary, atheists insist He is very much alive. However, the fact that

God is alive is not a good thing: He is dangerous; He is a poison who is responsible for all social problems.

Since 9/11 woke up the world to the horrors of militant Islam, polemically-minded atheists have become very vocal about condemning all religions, mainly Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Our concern is particularly on the attacks against the God of Scripture. In a recently published book, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Christopher Hitchens opines that religion is "violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry." The evolutionary theorist, Richard Dawkins, who is described by some as the world's most prominent atheist, wrote in *The God Delusion*:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all of fiction. Jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic-cleanser; a misogynistic homophobic racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal. . . .

Dawkins asserts that God is irrational and has inflicted grievous harm on society. In fact he believes that God instills in man a desire to go to war, to act prejudicially toward people who are different, and to abuse women and children. One of his great concerns is the possibility of a rogue state in the form of a nuclear-armed American Christian fundamentalism. For people like Hitchens and Dawkins there is no question that God is poison.

## All social ills

The polemic examples used by contemporary atheists like Dawkins are startling. The God of the Old Testament is described as a homicidal maniac. God loves war and killings. He is the source of





Published biweekly by Premier Printing Ltd., Winnipeg, MB

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CLARION, Premier Printing Ltd.  
One Beghin Avenue, Winnipeg, MB, Canada R2J 3X5  
Phone: (204) 663-9000 Fax: (204) 663-9202  
Subscriptions: [clarionadmin@premierpublishing.ca](mailto:clarionadmin@premierpublishing.ca)  
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homicidal urges in society (that would include Stalin and Hitler) and such genocidal slaughters as the ones witnessed in Rwanda. Dawkins points out the involvement of Roman Catholic clergy in the Rwandan slaughter. Also the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac is cited as the background to child abuse.

Another example of how God wreaks havoc with our world is the Bible's alleged preoccupation with the Day of Judgment. Because Christians believe the world will end soon, they really do not care about the problems of the world. Environmental woes and the possibility of nuclear war are not relevant to Christians because the world is going to end anyway. In other words, religion creates people who just don't care about society.

**Why the fuss?**

One wonders about the fuss over religion by such people as Dawkins and Hitchens. It would seem that atheism is winning the day. Our society is in love with money and material things; good health and beautiful bodies are the popular themes of many books and magazines; sexual immorality and family disintegration are rampant; abortion, euthanasia, and divorce are accepted norms; the teachings of evolution are squeezing out the teaching of a six-day creation; church buildings either stand empty or have only a handful of grey-haired parishioners in them.

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*He is the false prophet who seduces and deludes the world into turning away from God to the devil*

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It would seem the war against God is being won in our society. Why so much fuss then? Could it be that in all the finger-pointing against God it is the atheist himself who wants to be god? That's frightening. An atheist without any kind of divine ethical mooring and world view is not going to lead the world into a better and brighter future. We are reminded of Psalm 14: "The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."

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## The second beast

We are warned in Revelation 13 that Satan has an accomplice in the second beast who rises from the earth. He looks like a lamb but speaks like the devil. He is the false prophet who seduces and deludes the world into turning away from God to the devil. We should not be surprised that society is being bombarded with suggestions that God is poison. We were warned that this is coming. What we are seeing is pure blasphemy. It is a pathetic treatment of the Bible and of God Himself. It misrepresents the good that Christians have done and are doing in marriages, families, raising of children, relief causes around the world, and so on. It leaves us scratching our heads but not entirely surprised as we consider just how abusive people like Dawkins and Hitchens are toward God and how willing many are to believe them.

## Stay the course

The attacks against God and Christianity should not unnerve us. When we read Scripture, we come to know the God of justice, truth, love, grace, and mercies which are new every morning. We know what He has given to us in his Son Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. We know that in spite of all our weaknesses and shortcomings, a close walk with God leads to good marriages and families, a decent work ethic, a care for our fellowman that leads us to lift up the downtrodden and to help the weak. In spite of the ridicule of God and persecution of Christians, we need to stay the course of a living faith that gladly and openly witnesses to others of the hope that is in us. How else can our world that is being led down a wide and dangerous path by bold atheists come to know the true gospel of salvation, peace, and hope?





M.H. Van Luik

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# You Have Been Raised With Christ



MATTHEW 13:52

*"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ. . ."*

Colossians 3:1a

Paul writes, "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God." Paul picks up the argument he began in 2:20, "Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of the world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules?" He began in 2:20, "Since you died with Christ." He continues in 3:1, "Since you have been raised with Christ." Therefore everyone who has died in Christ has also been raised with Christ.

Paul wants the Christians in Colossae to clearly understand what they already have in Christ. Notice that he does not say that you still need to die in Christ or that you still need to be raised in Christ, but he writes, "since you have died in Christ and since you have already been raised in Christ, therefore. . . ." Paul is not writing to tell them what they still need to do to be saved, but he says since you have died with Christ you are also raised with Christ. Therefore when Paul later in this chapter exhorts them to live the Christian life, then he does not say, "You need to do all these things in order to be saved," but his admonition is based on the fact that they have been raised with Christ.

Paul makes clear that our new life does not flow out of doing all the right things. Paul is reacting to false teachers who taught that you need to keep certain rules, customs, and regulations in order to be

saved. He warns them not to be deceived by those fine sounding arguments, for they are hollow and empty philosophies of men. That is not the way of salvation; it will only lead to death.

He says, "Know full well that you have died and are now raised in Christ Jesus." That is the only sure basis for your salvation. The exhortations that follow in this chapter are not meant to save us, but they naturally flow out of the fact that we have died and been raised by faith in Christ Jesus. The exhortations that follow are of no value to those who have not been raised with Christ. No one can obey those exhortations unless they have been raised with Christ.

In this way Paul makes very clear how closely our lives are bound up in the life of Jesus Christ. Remember that Christ came as our mediator who put Himself in our place. We deserved to die, but He died in our place. Christ identified Himself with his church, so that when He died, we died with Him. And when Christ rose up from the dead and won the great victory over death, then we rose up with Christ and won the victory. Therefore Paul says it is ludicrous to seek your salvation in the basic principles of the world that says you need to keep all these earthly laws and regulations. Those earthly things cannot save you. You have been saved only because you

have been raised with Christ. He is your salvation.

That leads Paul to the next point when he says, "Set your hearts on the things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God." Since you have been raised with Christ, you now belong to a different world and that is why you cannot allow the focus of your life to be this world. Because you have died with Christ, that means that you no longer belong to this old world for you have died to it. If you have died to the world, then you can no longer follow the basic principles of this world. The basic principles of this world teach that salvation can be attained through rules and regulations and through a strict life of self-denial. How can those basic principles of the world save you?

You have died to all that in Jesus Christ. Therefore you cannot continue to look to the principles of this world for your salvation, for you have been raised with Christ to a new life in God's new world. You must look to the things above, where Jesus Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Salvation can only be found in heaven. Why? Because that is where Jesus Christ has been exalted as our Saviour at the right hand of God. Therefore look to heaven, to Jesus Christ for your life and salvation. Our focus needs to be directed more and more to Jesus Christ above. It is from heaven that our new life flows forth.



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# A Guide to Reformed Worship (Part 1)

It is often said, and rightly so, that all of life is worship. There is little question that we have been redeemed for a life of service to God and that extends far beyond what takes place for two or three hours on a Sunday. Nevertheless, there is something special that happens when God's people gather together for public worship. For one thing, God is present in the midst of believers gathered for worship in a way that He is not otherwise (Matt 18:20). Just as God was present in a special way in the holy of holies in the Old Testament, so He is also present in a special way today when God's people are assembled for public worship (1 Cor 5:4). This means that corporate, public worship has a unique character quite different from the everyday service that believers offer up to God.

Because it is so unique and so important, in this series of articles I want to explore our Reformed worship services. We need to know why we do what we do when we gather on Sundays. Are these simply traditions that have been passed on or is there a biblical basis for our practices? When we see churches of other backgrounds doing things in a markedly different way, is this merely a matter of "worship style" or is there more at stake? With this first article, we'll begin by

laying out the two general principles that determine the shape of Reformed worship.

## **The regulative principle**

The Heidelberg Catechism expresses this principle most succinctly in Answer 96 when it says in reference to what God requires in the second commandment, "We are not to make an image of God in any way, nor to worship Him in any other manner than He has commanded in his Word." In other words, when it comes to the corporate, public worship of God's people, only God's Word can determine that worship.

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## *Is there a biblical basis for our practices?*

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We may not add or take away from God's Word. The Belgic Confession highlights the connection between the sufficiency of Scripture and the worship of God's people when it says regarding the Bible that "the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in it at length. It is therefore unlawful for anyone, even for an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in Holy Scripture" (Art 7).

This principle is known as the Regulative Principle of Worship

(RPW), but it could just as well be described as the Reformed or Biblical Principle of Worship. This principle was one of the main things that separated the Reformed not only from the Roman Catholics, but also from the Lutherans. The Roman Catholics believed that the church has been free to add and take away from what is commanded in Scripture regarding worship. The Lutherans believed that if a given worship practice is not forbidden in Scripture, then it is permitted. The Reformed argued, however, that we must only worship God in the manner He has commanded in his Word, not adding or taking away anything.

One of the classic passages for defending this principle is found in Leviticus 10:1-2. Nadab and Abihu offered a fire before Yahweh which had not been commanded or authorized in his Word. Although the details of what exactly they did are scant, it is clear that they attempted to add to what God had commanded. The result was that fire went out from Yahweh and destroyed them. One of the conclusions we can draw from this passage is that acceptable and God-pleasing worship is that which has been commanded by God Himself.

As we reflect on the implementation of this principle, we need to keep in mind two sets of

qualifications. The first set has to do with the different ways in which Scripture can command a given practice in worship. There does not necessarily have to be a direct imperative: do this or that. Sometimes Scripture gives us an example that we clearly ought to follow. At other times, we derive or deduce a certain practice through what the Westminster Confession calls "good and necessary consequence" (1.6). As this series of articles progresses, we will have opportunity to see the concrete manner in which this works.

The second set of qualifications is an important distinction between elements and circumstances of worship. Elements are the things which are done in worship. Circumstances are incidental things that surround those things done in worship. So, for instance, whether a church has chairs or pews is a circumstance. The same holds true for the kinds of tunes that are used to accompany the singing or whether the morning worship service should be at 9:30 or 10:00. Those sorts of things (circumstances) are not governed by commands from Scripture, but by wisdom and discretion informed by Scripture. The RPW only applies to the elements of worship and not to the circumstances.

### **The principle of covenantal structure**

So, let's say that the RPW is followed and Scripture gives us a

number of elements that should be in our worship service. But how should those elements be structured? Here too, the Bible gives us help in the form of something we can call "the Principle of Covenantal Structure."

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### *Worship is about a covenant relationship between God and his people*

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In all biblical covenants, there are two parties: God and his people. In the Old Testament priestly service in the tabernacle and temple, the priests acted as mediators between Yahweh and the people of Israel. At certain points, the priests represented God. At other times, they represented the people. In Hebrews 8:5, we learn that this service was a "copy and shadow of the heavenly things." In other words, this tabernacle and temple service reflected something grander: the mediatorial ministry of Jesus Christ.

What this means is that biblical worship accounts for the covenant that exists between God and his people. It does so through a structure that reflects the back and forth of a covenant relationship. Through the mediatorial ministry of Jesus Christ, we are privileged to hear God speak to us and we are

also privileged to be able to address Him.

From this principle, we can move to divide up the different God-commanded elements into those which are God communicating to man and those which man communicating to God. We can also arrange these elements in such a way that there is distinguishably a back and forth movement through the worship service. God speaks and man responds. God speaks again and man responds again – and so forth. In this way, it's clear that worship is about a relationship – a covenant relationship between God and his people, one in which the two parties are on speaking terms with one another.

Public worship is one of the most important things that we do in life. Offering up praise and glory to the God of our salvation should be one of the highest priorities for all God's children. No less should it be a high priority to want to hear what God will speak and witness the ways in which God will continue to manifest his power in our lives as He transforms us with his Word and Spirit. Thinking about these things ought to motivate us all the more to be diligent so that our worship is most certainly in Spirit and in truth.

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Recommended Resource  
*The Beauty of Reformed Liturgy*,  
G. VanDooren (Premier, 1980)

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# Convocation Report of the 38th Anniversary Meeting and 33rd Convocation of the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches

On September 7, 2007, the Theological College held its annual College Evening at Redeemer University College in Hamilton, Ontario. This was the thirty-eighth anniversary meeting, which means that under the Lord's guidance and blessing the college has been teaching men for the ministry for the past thirty-eight years. It was also the thirty-third convocation, which means that for the thirty-third time in its history the Senate could confer degrees and diplomas on students who successfully completed their course of study.

After the usual procession where the Board of Governors, the Senate, and the graduating students file into the auditorium, the assembly sang Psalm 92:1 and 2. In connection with the featured address of the evening, the newly elected chairman of the Board, Rev. G. Nederveen, read Deuteronomy 1:9-18 and led in prayer. In his welcome and opening comments the chairman expressed thankfulness to the Lord that Dr. J. DeJong, our former professor



James Witteveen

of Diaconiology and Ecclesiology, could accompany his wife and family to witness the graduation of their son and brother, Dave. The chairman also mentioned that with the enrolment of five new students the total student body stands at seventeen students, all of whom are enrolled in the Master of Divinity program.

Once again several of the sister churches in Australia had sent

letters of greeting. One of the letters, which best reflected the interest and enthusiasm of the Free Reformed Churches in Australia for the college, was read. The chairman expressed heartfelt appreciation for the prayerful and financial support the college receives from the churches "down under." On behalf of the Board of Governors, the chairman then declared the thirty-eighth anniversary meeting and thirty-third convocation opened and gave the floor to Dr. N.H. Gootjes, the principal of the college.

Dr. Gootjes presented his Principal's Report. Since this report will be published in *Clarion*, I will simply echo the thankfulness expressed to the Lord that the work at the college could continue unhindered and that four students successfully completed their studies.

Rev. J. DeGelder, who teaches Church Polity at the college, presented his address on "Grant Me Justice." In his address he dealt with the relevant topic of how appeals should be dealt with at



major assemblies. This speech will also be published in *Clarion*.

The main highlight of every convocation is the conferring of degrees. The M. Div. degree was conferred on Mr. David De Jong, on Mr. Dmitry Kiselev, and on Mr. James Witteveen, while the Diploma of Theological Studies was conferred on Mr. Jae Man Choi. In addition to the degrees, the Selles Book Prize was awarded to David De Jong. This is a monetary gift that goes to the student who has excelled in New Testament studies.

Jim Witteveen had been chosen by the graduates to speak some words on their behalf. His address was both light-hearted and serious as he reflected on the fact that Dmitry Kiselev had to leave his wife and son behind in the Ukraine for three out of the four years at the college; that David De Jong began his studies when his father's health was rapidly failing; and that Jae Man also had to leave his family in Korea for the first part of his studies. However, the overriding tone was one of gratitude to the Lord for enabling all the graduates to complete their studies.

What would a College Evening be without a presentation from the Women's Savings Action? That is simply unthinkable! And sure enough, the sisters D. Gootjes,



*David DeJong, Dmitry Kiselev, James Witteveen, Jae Man Choi, Rev. Dr. G. Nederveen, Prof. Dr. N.H. Gootjes*

J. Van Dam, and C. Nienhuis once again came through with a cheque of \$30,000 for the library. This presentation is always a unique and lively affair. The dedicated work of the many women involved in collecting the money was gratefully acknowledged by the principal. The yearly contribution by the Women's Savings Action is truly a blessing for the college. Every year the funds are fully used-up to keep the library up-to-date for faculty and students.

During the intermission Mr. Martin Jongsma played an interlude on the organ while a collection was held for a new organ at the college. The current electronic organ in the meeting hall where the students present their sermon proposals and where the weekly chapels are held is in need of replacement. The college always willingly accepts gifts for the organ. Just mark your gifts "College Organ Fund."

At the close of the meeting the assembly sang Hymn 40 and Rev. A.J. Pol led in closing prayer. He thanked the Lord for the many wonderful things we could hear and witness that evening and he also prayed God to grant the professors, students, and staff his favour for the new academic year. The assembly concluded with the singing of the national anthem.

As soon as the official part of the College Evening was finished, the social part began where the many visitors from various places took the opportunity to congratulate the graduates and their spouses and to enjoy refreshments and fellowship with one another. Once again we can look back with gratitude on how the Lord has blessed the college and how the college continues to be a blessing for the churches here and abroad.

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# Principal's Report

When we consider the Theological College and its development over the years, we can only be thankful to the Lord that He has made it possible for the churches to establish this College. Our College was instituted by a decision of the General Synod of these churches and it is still supervised by them. It can rightfully be called an institution belonging to the churches. The Canadian Reformed Churches established this institute of training, their governors supervise the teaching, and their members support it.

This structure has been in place from its very beginning. Even before the College came into existence, the theological study was not envisioned as a private enterprise, but as an ecclesiastical endeavour. As it belongs to the responsibility of the churches to assure the continuation of the preaching and teaching, those churches are still taking the responsibility, under the providence of God, to ensure that the training for the ministry continues.

We can therefore say that the training for the ministry is a function of the church. It is the church which has the task to proclaim the gospel of the Triune God (Matt 28:19, 20). Likewise, it is the church which should see to it that the preaching and teaching of God's words and deeds continues. It is in this context that we review

with gratitude what the Theological College has done and how it wants to continue to do its work.

## Students

Tonight, we rejoice that three students will receive the degree of Master of Divinity. The first is Mr. David De Jong from Hamilton, Ontario, who plans to continue his theological studies. The second is Mr. Dmitry Kiselev from Russia. He returned to his fatherland, in order to proclaim the gospel of salvation in St. Petersburg. The third is Mr. Jim Witteveen, who came from British Columbia.

At the time this is written, he is considering a call from Smithers

for mission work in Prince George. Further, Rev. Jae Man Choi, having fulfilled the requirements of his study, will receive today the Diploma of Theological Studies. Ms. Francine VanWoudenberg has followed selected courses and is now preparing to eventually work for Wycliffe Bible Translators. We wish all of them the blessing from the Lord for their future endeavours. At this point it should also be mentioned that Rev. Patrick Wic was dismissed and returned to his home country.

Thankfully, another group of students, also five in all, has requested admission to the Theological College. Following



*David De Jong, Dmitry Kiselev, James Witteveen, Jae Man Choi*



the positive outcome of the interview, they were enrolled in the Master of Divinity program. They are the following students: Mr. Brian Bosscher, from Grassie, Ontario; Mr. Abel Pol, from Carman West, Manitoba; Mr. Justin Roukema, from Langley, BC; Mr. Steven Van de Velde, from Houston, BC; and Mr. Ted Van Spronsen, from Vernon, BC.

We are grateful that so many new students could be enrolled. May the Lord provide them, and all our students, with insight in his Holy Word and with the perseverance needed to study it, so that they will be equipped for the work, for there is still great need for preachers of the gospel of salvation.

### **Academic year**

It is with great thankfulness to our God that it can be reported that during the previous year the work at the College could continue unhindered. The lectures could be presented regularly and although not the most pleasant part for both students and professors, the examinations could be written, marked, and returned. Much effort goes into this, both from the side of the teachers as well as from the students. May their effort lead to positive results for the churches over many years.

A novel feature during the past year was the fact that the professor of diaconology was not the only professor present during the sermon sessions. Dr. C. Van Dam participated in the discussion of a number of sermons on Old Testament texts, Prof. G.H. Visscher during a number of New Testament sermons, and Dr. N.H. Gootjes for a number of Catechism

sermons. The idea was that the other professors with their specialized insight could contribute to these sermon sessions. At the same time, this obviously increased their workload and it was done on a trial basis. At this point it can also be mentioned with gratitude that Rev. J. De Gelder was again willing to teach the Church Polity course during the first semester.

Several people addressed the College community, giving us food for thought. In October, Dr. Cornel Venema, principal and professor of Mid America Reformed Seminary, discussed the issue of Paedocommunion. The question is whether only the adult members of the church can be admitted to the Lord's Supper, or whether also the young children of believers, as well, should be admitted. After a critical discussion of the four main arguments used in support of paedocommunion, he concluded that on the basis of the character of the Lord's Supper this sacrament is not given to children.

Further, Dr. J.B. Klautke, who earned his doctor's degree at the Theologische Hogeschool in Kampen, The Netherlands, was invited to explain the situation of the church in Germany. He focused on the views of two important theologians, that of the eighteenth century scholar Schleiermacher and of the nineteenth century scholar Harnack. Both of these theological systems placed humans in the centre. Dr. Klautke argued that the churches in Germany actually need a reformation by returning to the God of the Scriptures.

Each year one of the professors travels to a province in order to visit the churches. This year, it

was my turn to visit the churches in British Columbia. It was good to meet the people and to interact with them. In my speech to the churches there, I dealt with an old issue already discussed by Calvin in the sixteenth century, but still in discussion. The question is how often the Lord's Supper should be celebrated in the churches. I focused on the question how Calvin attempted to prove that the Lord's Supper should be celebrated often. Later in the year, on the occasion of the Ministers' Workshop, I dealt with the more general issue how often this should take place.

Further, in the month of January, Prof. Visscher travelled to Winnipeg, where he participated in a conference dealing with the issues of the "The New Perspective on Paul" and "The Federal Vision." Prof. Visscher was able to deliver a number of lectures in which he shared the results of much of his recent studies on the New Perspective on Paul.

Dr. Van Dam travelled to the churches in the Edmonton area in October and spoke on "Office and the Elder as Leader" for the general church public and on "The Elder as Judge and Church Discipline" for the office bearers' conference. Moreover, on August 14, 2007, Dr. Van Dam participated in The Christian-Muslim Forum in Toronto, sponsored by the missions committee of the United Reformed Church in Sheffield, Ontario.

### **Synod Smithers 2007**

During this year, the Synod of the Canadian Reformed Churches convened in Smithers, BC. In connection with the Theological College, two issues of particular



importance were placed on Synod's agenda. The first concerned remuneration for those students who during the summer would work as interns in a congregation. Synod decided that the cost of the Pastoral Training Program should be kept separate from the College curriculum and that this program be mandatory for all students aspiring to the ministry of the word in the Canadian Reformed churches.

This decision is helpful, for it achieves two goals. On the one hand, someone who would like to study theology but would not aspire to the ministry can still follow the complete course and graduate with the Master of Divinity degree. At the same time, Synod's decision ensures that all those who aspire to the ministry of the Word do benefit from this practical training.

Synod Smithers also dealt with a proposal from the Board of Governors, that a fifth professor be added to the staff of the Theological College. Synod decided not to agree with the recommendation to add a fifth professor, but to instead first mandate a comprehensive review of all aspects of the work of the College. It was also good to read that Synod Smithers 2007 appreciates the work done by the professors.

### Library

As happens to any library, the library of the College, too, needs to stay up-to-date in order to function properly. This requires that our library continues to acquire books contributing to the ongoing theological discussion. We are in the fortunate position that we have two sources for the funding: the contribution made available by the governors and

the contribution brought together by the Women's Savings Action. This allows us to buy the books we need to follow the theological discussion.

We appreciate the work done for the library by our librarian Margaret Van der Velde. In the past year, she has put the Catalogue of the library on the Web. This provides an opportunity for people who are interested in theology, both from inside the College as well as from the outside, to peruse our holdings. This will make the library more accessible. We are grateful for the way in which the librarian takes care of the library.

### Administration

Catharine Mechelse takes care of the general office and all that belongs to it. She makes sure that everything that is needed at the College is actually available.

Another aspect of the work is conducting tours for school classes, when they come to Hamilton to visit the College. She was also involved in making the main entrance of the College more friendly. And last but not least, she was also much involved in the preparation of the College Evening.

### In closing

In sum, all the work at the Theological College, from teaching to administration, is done for the continuation of the proclamation of the gospel. The evangelist Matthew provides us the summary of our Lord Christ. He told his disciples that they should baptize people, "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." With thankfulness we recognize that the College has a place in serving the gospel of Jesus Christ. +



Front row: Prof. Dr. A.J. deVisser, Prof. Dr. G.H. Visscher, Prof. Dr. N.H. Gootjes, Prof. Dr. C. Van Dam, Rev. J. DeGelder  
Back row: Jae Man Choi, David De Jong, James Witteveen, Dmitry Kiselev

# Grant me justice. . . !

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[jdegeld@allstream.net](mailto:jdegeld@allstream.net)

*Address delivered at the College Evening, September 7, 2007. This printed version is slightly edited and includes some parts that were left out – because of time constraints – when the speech was held.*

Dear readers, I invite you to meet brother VanDumpink. Brother VanDumpink is a wise elder in the Canadian Reformed Church at Trapptown, New Brunswick and at the last council meeting he was appointed as a delegate to the next Classis Atlantic. When he receives the provisional agenda for this classis, it comes with a package in which he finds – among other documents – a twenty-four page appeal from a brother against decisions of the consistory of the church at A.

Brother VanDumpink likes to be prepared for his meetings and so he reads this appeal. The writer seems to be very frustrated with his consistory and in particular with his minister, but it is not quite clear to brother VanDumpink what this angry brother wants Classis to do. Well, let's wait and see, he thinks.

Three weeks later, when brother VanDumpink drives home after the meeting, he has a lot to think about. He does not feel very satisfied with how this whole appeal thing went. First there was a long discussion about the question whether this appeal was

admissible or not. There were different opinions and it was pretty confusing. Then, when in the end the conclusion was, "yes, we are going to deal with this," it did not get much better. There were lots of questions no one could answer. Some of the delegates seemed to know the brother. That did not help either. But when he had suggested asking the man to come to Classis and clarify his case, he was told, "No, no, we cannot do that. Classis can only judge by what is on paper." But then the brothers of the church at A were free to give their own view on the case and on this brother's difficult personality.

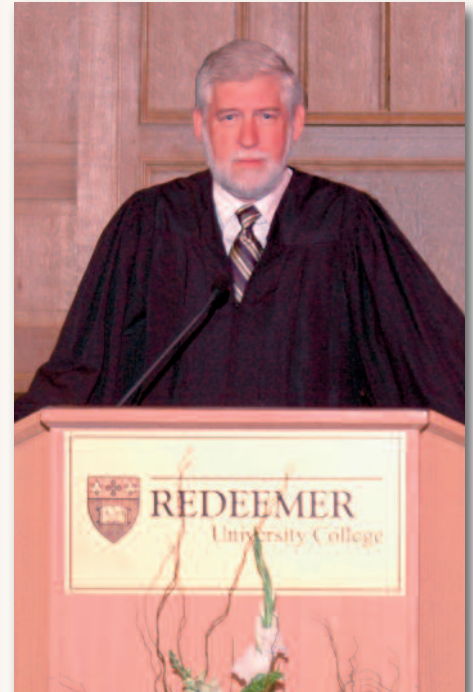
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*If there is one community in this world where doing justice has a very high priority, it is the church of Jesus Christ*

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He thought that was pretty odd. In the end they did come to a decision on this appeal, but as he drives home brother VanDumpink is wondering whether the result will do anything to solve the problem in the congregation at A. He does not sleep well that night.

Brothers and sisters, have any of you ever read something your consistory did or decided and thought, "This is wrong. I have a



Rev. J. DeGelder

real problem with this. I should write a letter"? Perhaps some of you have done that. And then you received a reply after four or five months, but you feel that the consistory did not take your concerns seriously. You feel that you have been wronged.

Perhaps you have a conflict with a brother in the congregation, or with your elder. Or you have trouble with your minister, but you feel that your complaints are being ignored. You get frustrated because nothing is being done to solve the problem, to help you restore the relationship between you and your brother. Then what? The standard answer is that "you can go to classis." Have you ever done that? Do you actually have an idea of how to do that? Where do you have to go and how does that work?

## God is a God of justice

Why do we need to think about these matters in the churches? After all – these issues don't seem to be too urgent. It is my impression that by and large things are relatively peaceful in our churches. And major assemblies like classes or synods don't seem to be swamped with appeals from brothers and/or sisters that feel that they have been wronged by the decisions of consistories.

The question is, of course, whether that means that there are hardly any conflicts among God's children where injustice causes pain and hurt, or frustration and anger. It could also mean that people that have been wronged don't even bother seeking justice by way of bringing their case to the ecclesiastical assemblies as courts of appeal. The point that I want to make is that if there is one community in this world where doing justice has a very high priority, it is the church of Jesus Christ. And not just as a theoretical statement, but as something that can be seen, experienced, and trusted by everyone inside and outside the church.

Among God's people it must be clear beyond any doubt that we work with the *highest* standards possible to do what is just when there is a conflict. We have the responsibility to grant and protect justice when someone complains that he or she has been treated unjustly. In the churches of Jesus Christ we are to see to it that justice is being done under all circumstances. This expectation is also the background of what the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:1-6 when he urges the believers to judge among

themselves disputes and conflicts that arise in the church community. The key point here, that makes the manner in which we deal with each other in the church indeed an urgent issue, is that our God is a God of justice. This is a significant aspect when the Bible speaks about God. The Lord Himself is a judge – a just and impartial judge. And He wants his people to reflect that.

At the opening of the convocation we read from Deuteronomy 1. In the verses 16 and 17 Moses sets high standards for Israel's judges.

Hear the disputes between your brothers and judge fairly, whether the case is between brother Israelites or between one of them and an alien. Do not show partiality in judging; hear both small and great alike. Do not be afraid of any man, for judgment belongs to God.

Time and again the Lord stresses the need for his people to do justice because of who He is – “the judge of all the earth who does right,” as Abraham calls Him in Genesis 18:25. Or “the just and mighty one, who does not show partiality or favoritism,” as Elihu calls Him in Job 34:18, 19. And in the Song of Moses, in Deuteronomy 32:4, Moses says about Him that “all his ways are just. He is a faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is He.”

You can also think of how we get to know God in the Psalms. Just two examples. Psalm 43:1 says “Vindicate me, O God, and plead my cause.” The words are legal terms. It is the language of the courts. The author issues an appeal: “Grant me justice, O God.” And Psalm 146 describes the Lord as “the one who upholds the cause of the oppressed and who loves

the righteous.” And there is so much more.

Later on in the Old Testament we read in the books of the prophets how disappointed and angry the Lord is when He sees how justice is perverted among his people. Isaiah laments in 5:7, “He looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.” O sure, they bring their sacrifices, they come to worship, they sing their songs, but God hates it, says Amos. They perform all the right rituals, but God does not want anything of it. “Do away with all these things, says the Lord, but instead let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.”<sup>1</sup>

In the New Testament God is the same and expects the same. In Luke 18, Jesus told the parable about this widow who keeps knocking on the door of this judge and who persistently pleads with him. Grant me justice! Grant me justice! The contrast is that God will bring about justice when his people cry out to Him and that He will do so quickly. He will show Himself as the God of justice.

Here again Scripture condemns in strong language the people who *claim* to stick to all God's rules, including the fine print of his law, but who neglect the more important things. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites,” Jesus says, “you give God a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness” (Matt 23:23).

The Holy and Almighty One does not change. As the Lord, the God of the covenant who faithfully keeps his Word, He will do justice. And He expects us to do the same among each other. His Word sets





the high standards for those in the church who are called as judges to do justice, whether this is as office bearers in the local church, or as members of a classes or synod.<sup>2</sup>

## Doing justice

When we talk about “justice” it is important to realize that in Scripture this is not an abstract ideal that can be reached by simply sticking to a set of rules. When the Lord requires justice, his goal is the well-being and healing of his people, the restoration of the peace and harmony among his children. Through the prophet Zechariah God gives the instruction, “Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another.” And, “Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts” (Zech 7:9 and 8:16). Justice includes love, mercy, and compassion.

“Doing justice” is the way to restore the covenant community. That means that most of the time it is not sufficient to decide that A is right and B is wrong. If it is clear that A is right and B is wrong, it must be said, of course, but it goes further. The aim is that when God’s children are stuck with each other, they receive help to resolve the conflict and can go on *together* in peace and harmony. Then a decision of a classis or synod in response to an appeal becomes an appeal to brothers and sisters to open their hearts for each other, to be humble and forgiving. Then justice will serve the peace.

When there is a conflict in the congregation and the parties cannot solve it and one of the parties appeals to classis, they come to the sister churches in that region for help. The sister churches

gathered in that classis are asked to judge. It is so important that the members of classis, who sit as judges, keep in mind that it is not just an A versus B case. No, they are confronted with disturbed relationships among brothers and sisters. And that does not occur in isolation. The congregation suffers. It hurts the covenant community. It affects the relationship with the Lord.

When an issue has dragged on for a while and a number of things have happened and many things have been said over time, the matter can become quite complicated. In a case like that a classis or synod can easily get lost in the historical or procedural details. It is important to remember the goal, that justice is to serve the restoration of the covenant community with brothers and sisters *and* with the Lord.

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## *When the Lord requires justice, his goal is the well-being and healing of his people*

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By the way, you can hear sometimes that as Christian believers we should be willing to humble ourselves and to bear injustice, if there is no other way to restore peace – even in the church. This is true. There can be times that I have to accept that injustice cannot be undone. This can be painful, but we live in a sinful world. And it is also true in the church that not everything that is broken can be healed or fixed on this side of the grave. We have to live with this reality and

sometimes we must leave unfinished matters prayerfully in the hands of the Lord.

Having said that, this sad reality can never be an excuse for a consistory, classis, or synod to become sloppy in administering justice according to the high standards of God Himself. No, the people who are called to judge must always see themselves as God’s instruments to administer God’s justice. This means that it is to be done in such a way that in the decision *both* parties can recognize the desire to serve the restoration of peace.

## Making it work

How can we make this work in our churches? When we are confronted with the cry “Grant me justice!” how can we respond to this and do so in such a manner that it may indeed lead to the restoration of peace in the covenant community of God’s children?

How is this matter of granting justice dealt with in our Church Order? Well, all that we have is our famous Article 31. “If anyone complains that he has been wronged by the decision of a minor assembly, he shall have the right to appeal to the major assembly.” This is very compact and not very specific. In the Proposed Church Order, presented by the Joint CO committee of the CanRC and the URCNA, this matter is dealt with in Article 55. Although some aspects are spelled out in more detail, in essence it does not say much more than our Article 31. The rule seems simple, straightforward, and clear, but in fact it leaves many procedural issues wide open.

To mention a few: there is no timeframe. When will I receive an

answer? People can feel wronged for many different reasons. Does everything carry the same weight? Do I get the opportunity to clarify my appeal verbally? Can I sit in when classis deals with my case? What could make my appeal inadmissible? What do I do then? In fact, the procedure is not very transparent. And it is not always consistent, either.

As far as I know, none of our classes have adopted a set of regulations or guidelines for dealing with appeals. And so in practice every classis goes by the collective memory of the delegates when it comes to these things. How can I be sure of consistency from one classis to the next? And can I count on equal treatment no matter whether I present my appeal to Classis Alberta, or Pacific East, or Niagara?

The suggestion to adopt as classis or synod a set of rules that would improve the clarity and transparency of the procedure, to guard the biblical standards for doing justice, has met several objections.

One is the idea that we don't need a set of judicial regulations in the church. We don't have to worry about those things. We are all brothers and sisters in the Lord and so we can trust each other. But that's a fallacy! It sounds pious, but we are dealing with a conflict between sinful people. *Especially* in a situation in which the peace between brothers in the Lord has been disturbed, and mutual trust is broken, clear guidelines can help us to prevent such a conflict from turning into personal competition or a power struggle about side-issues. And such rules will allow the judges to focus on what needs to be done to restore peace and harmony by granting justice.

In our Canadian Reformed Churches, as a relatively small

federation, this process is even more vulnerable, because we all know each other and many of us are related. When brother A's appeal is tabled, chances are that more than fifty percent of the delegates at any given classis know brother A and have already an opinion about his character and about his case. Clear rules will enhance transparency and accountability, which can help us fight partiality.

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*Those who are called to judge must always see themselves as God's instruments to administer God's justice*

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Another objection is that traditionally we have been very hesitant in our churches to set up too many regulations. The reasoning is that over-regulation leads to bureaucracy, which leads to hierarchy. And major assemblies have no business trying to fix local problems. This is no doubt a very valuable consideration. But God is a God of justice and peace. And when you notice that a lack of clarity and transparency is causing confusion, frustration, and distrust among those who seek justice, it may be good to regulate some of these things. The slogan "no more rules" can also come from an independentistic streak in our collective character.

And so I do believe that it is time to work on improvements that ensure greater clarity, transparency, and consistency in this area of granting justice when confronted with an appeal at a classis or synod.

## **Listen to the Scriptures first**

Tonight is not the time and occasion to spell out the more technical details of such a structure. But the first thing is that *together* as churches we need to be convinced that there is not only room for improvement when it comes to dealing with perceived injustice but that there is also a need for improvements here. As such this is not a new matter. Other churches and church federations have regulations for dealing with appeals and complaints that are much more detailed.<sup>3</sup>

But it is not new in our own history either. P. Deddens was professor in Church History and Church Polity from 1945 to 1958 at the Theological Seminary of our Dutch sister churches in Kampen. In 1953 and 1954 he wrote two lengthy series of articles on this topic in the weekly *De Reformatie*.<sup>4</sup> Especially fascinating is his overview of how these things were handled in the Reformed churches since the Reformation. We can learn much from these articles and I believe that Deddens' conclusions are very valuable for us today.

Unfortunately, no one listened to Deddens for about forty years. This changed in the early nineties in The Netherlands. At that time Dr. M. te Velde, currently professor in Church Polity at the Theological University in Kampen, revisited the matter and took the initiative to form a study committee. Ministers interested in Church Polity and specialists in legal matters got together and published conclusions and suggestions for better procedures. Some of these were taken up by local churches and in many classical districts guidelines has been adopted to guard a proper, transparent, and consistent procedure.<sup>5</sup>



When we try to identify some of the weak points and some of the areas in which a lack of clarity, and perhaps a lack of consensus, can easily frustrate and discourage brothers or sisters who are looking for justice in the church, and when we want to identify ways in which we can improve here, it will be good to remember the important rule of Prof. Deddens. "Listen to the Scriptures first – and *then* to the Church Order." It is important that those who write an appeal, as well as those who are called to judge it, are willing to apply the principles the Lord has given us in his Word.

Think of what we have seen already about the goal of administering justice, about the need for a thorough investigation, about impartiality, fairness, and consistency. Think of Paul's words in Philippians 2 about Christian humility, considering others better than yourself, and looking to the interests of others. When you write an appeal you need love, humility, meekness, and carefulness. You need to pray before you start writing. And when you judge an appeal you need love, wisdom, careful discretion, patience, and mercy. You need to pray before you start judging.

Let me briefly present some suggestions as to where we could and should improve.

- a. It may be helpful to set some clear guidelines for "admissibility." Much time is spent finding out whether an appeal is admissible or not, and opinions differ. In the background there is always the attraction of a shorter meeting if you can avoid dealing with an appeal. This is dangerous and can jeopardize justice.
- b. An essential rule in civil justice should also apply in the

church. That is the requirement to hear both sides, preferably in each other's presence. We have read it in Deuteronomy 1 and it was the practice in the Reformed churches in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was also done in the churches of the Secession in the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> In our churches it has become the rule to deal with appeals only on the basis of the documents, but it would be good to return to this scriptural practice.

- c. Confidential material that one of the parties is not allowed to see must not play a role in the procedures. Both parties must have access to all the documents that are relevant to the case.

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*Clear guidelines can help us to prevent such a conflict from turning into personal competition or a power struggle about side-issues*

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- d. All the steps of the procedure must be transparent and we must avoid even the slightest impression of partiality. "Justice must not only be done, but must be seen to be done." If one party cannot speak or be present, then the other one should not speak or be present either. I would feel very uncomfortable if my appeal against my consistory is dealt with at classis and these brothers can perhaps say what they want, and I am not even allowed to be there!

- e. In the legal profession the rule is "justice delayed is justice denied." Our appeal process can drag on and on and the brother or sister who complains about injustice will be discouraged. If nothing seems to happen for a long time, they will lose respect for the assemblies and for office bearers. By the time the process is exhausted it may be very difficult to restore the peace and harmony in the covenant community.
- f. We seem to have a fear for being too "pastoral" when we reply to an appeal in a major assembly. The argument is that pastoral advice in any form is the task of the local elders only and not of delegates to major assemblies. But in *this* context I believe that to be a false dilemma. When we remember the goal of doing justice in the church, there is no real contrast between a *formal* reply and *pastoral wisdom*. Scripture makes clear that justice includes mercy and compassion. Those who are called to administer justice are called to facilitate reconciliation, to help restore peace among God's children and with God.
- g. Would it not be wonderful to find ways to solve conflicts through arbitration? When both parties would be willing to agree to accept a binding conclusion and advice coming from a small number of trusted arbitrators, they would act in line with 1 Corinthians 6. It would also have the advantage that a dispute can be dealt with much quicker than when someone has to wait for a few months or more for a classis or synod to be convened.



It should be very clear that all this is not a matter of expanding the rules for the sake of having more rules. But it should also be clear that especially *today* it is utterly urgent to have clear, fair, transparent and consistent procedures in place. And when I emphasize “today” I think of the possibility that a brother is so frustrated by what he feels as serious injustice that was done to him in the way classis has responded to his appeal, that he is going to take the whole matter to the civil court.

It is very difficult to predict what the judge is going to do in a court case that involves a church, but based on the legal precedents set by the courts, one or more of the following things could happen.<sup>7</sup>

- In our country the judge will most likely not step into judging spiritual matters
- The judge will as much as he can respect the internal rules and regulations of the church
- But he *will* look at the case and check carefully whether these rules were handled in a proper manner by the ecclesiastical courts
- The judge may also go a step further and review these internal rules and practices for consistency and clarity and whether they reflect generally accepted standards for procedural fairness in our society, looking at impartiality, a fair hearing, a fair trial, and things like that
- If these rules are found wanting or if a classis has applied them in a sloppy and unfair way, the judge may step in and set aside the conclusions of the ecclesiastical courts.

## Conclusion

To sum it all up, brother VanDumpink learned from his experience at Classis Atlantic that when we hear the call “Grant me justice!” we need to think first of all: there is a problem in the communion of saints. There is a conflict between brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ. God’s children are hurting. God’s children are stuck and they need help and restoration to continue their journey *together*.

At the Theological College we prepare men for the Ministry of the Word in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. They must be able to teach, preach, do pastoral work as they comfort, admonish, exhort, and encourage with God’s Word. We know all these things.

But the minister will also be confronted with painful conflicts in various forms. That will be unavoidable. He will face confusing and incomprehensible family feuds in the congregation. He will have to deal with brothers and sisters that are angry, because they feel wronged by others in the congregation, or by decisions and actions of the consistory. Perhaps one day he himself will feel wronged by something his consistory did. Then he sees himself confronted with the question: “can I bear what I feel as injustice or do I appeal?”

These things can be daunting, intimidating and sometimes frustrating. But together with the elders he must guard the church as a community that maintains the highest standards possible for doing what is just, even if the conflict would involve aspects of the minister’s own work. Then all the efforts in the community of God’s people to restore peace and harmony by administering true justice *will* reflect God’s justice, love, mercy, and compassion.

When brothers and sisters know this, they will feel safe to bring their appeals prayerfully to the assemblies and ask, “Grant me justice.” And the brothers VanDumpink among us can sleep well.

<sup>1</sup> Other passages are Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 13:14; 16:18; 17:4; 19:19; Psalm 37:28; Malachi 2:17.

<sup>2</sup> Texts like Matthew 5:40; Galatians 6:2; Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:13 and Philippians 2:3-5 have great significance for those who write an appeal, but also for those who are called to judge an appeal.

<sup>3</sup> Book of Discipline, chapter IV, VII, and IX in the *Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, edition 2000. *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government*, 1987 revision, by William P. Brink and Richard R. De Ridder, “Article 30” (150 – 157). In several classical regions of our Dutch sister churches a “procedure for dealing with appeals” has been adopted.

<sup>4</sup> *De Reformatie*, Vol. 28 (October 1952 – September 1953) and Vol. 29 (October 1953 – September 1954). In 2001 the Rev. G. van Rongen wrote an introduction to these articles of Prof. P. Deddens and gave a summary of the content in his brochure *The Right of Appeal – How do we deal with it?*

<sup>5</sup> The magazine *De Reformatie* published the results of the work of this study committee in a thematic issue with the title “*Appelrecht*” (the right of appeal), Vol. 69, nr.30 (April 30, 1994). These articles were reprinted in *Recht doen aan ‘bezwaarden’* (Doing justice to appellants), a brochure published by the Gereformeerd Wetenschappelijk Genootschap as GWG Publicatie 2, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> For more details see the articles of Prof. P. Deddens mentioned in note 7

<sup>7</sup> With thanks to Br. H. Faber, who, some time ago when we spoke about this matter, provided some information on various cases that have been before the civil courts.



# Presentation of the Women's Savings Action at the College Evening, September 7, 2007

Mr. President, Members of the Board and Faculty, Graduates, Brothers and Sisters,

A very long time ago people all spoke the same language. However, since the tower of Babel, people have become used to hearing a different language whenever they go to another country, or even when they go to another part of the same country. Actually, it could be said that a whole economy is based on the fact that there are many languages in the world. Many jobs and products would simply not exist without this multitude of languages. Imagine a world without foreign language dictionaries, a world without English teachers, French teachers, German teachers, Chinese teachers. . . . There would just be teachers for your own mother tongue, which could be used all over the world. You could fly to whatever country you wanted and upon arrival you could converse fluently with any person in your own language. A world with no interpreters, no phrase books which never seem to give you the exact thought you are trying to express, no pronunciation tapes to listen to, no sets of CD-ROMs to work through. You could just think the thought and say the word.

You may ask: What does this flight of fancy have to do with the Women's Savings Action? Well, everything. Actually, without the

tower of Babel, the library of the College would look quite different.

To start with the main thing: we would not need Bible translations. At the College there are many shelves full of different translations of the Bible. The library not only has to have the Bible in the original language, but besides that, the library also needs a good number of Bible translations. But one translation in each of the languages is not even enough. Translations become outdated, so another one has to be made, and another one after that. The library has about sixteen feet of shelf space with Bibles – which all had to be bought – often with money from. . . you guessed it! You could call it a "Babel expense."

Then there are the dictionaries: English-French, French-English; English-Dutch, Dutch-English; English-German, German-English; the Hebrew dictionary, the Greek dictionary, etc. And let us not forget such specialties as the Latin-French one. There we can learn that "*murmurator*" means "*celui qui murmure, se plaint, récrimine.*" Just what you wanted to know. . . . All these dictionaries are made and bought and used as a direct result of the confusion of languages. The same goes for the very old and the old, the new and newer grammars of all the languages our students and professors need. Lots and lots of books.

And then lastly there are the translations: many good books besides the Bible have been written in languages other than English. Usually, the library has only the English version, but there are a sizable number of books which the library has in the original language as well as the English translation. Again, Babel expenses.

The Tower of Babel with the confusion of languages is a well-known Bible story. But when we think about it, we all realize the result of the punishment given to mankind: there are many languages. And we need tools to work with those languages. In our daily lives and in the library of the Theological College.

So we, as representatives of the Women's Savings Action, are thankful that we can again present to the principal of the Theological College a pledge for the library – for Babel expenses as well as other expenses.

During this past year a total of \$33,977.75 was collected. Our heartfelt gratitude to all of you for your donations and your hours spent collecting and counting. Above all, we thank the Lord for once again blessing our work so abundantly. Mr. Principal, it gives us great pleasure to present you with a pledge for \$30,000 for the coming year.

Keith Sikkema

Mr. Keith Sikkema is principal of Dufferin Area Christian School in Orangeville, Ontario  
[ksikkema@istop.com](mailto:ksikkema@istop.com)



## Christ, School, and Family? (Part 2 of 2)

### Reflections

In the first article, I presented aspects of a Dutch controversy regarding the identity of Reformed education. According to a newspaper report about an identity conference, it was stated that “a bond with Christ is enough” for admission to a Reformed school and that instead of having a unity between home, church, and school, one should rather have a unity between home, Christ, and school. The identity of a school would then shift from being based on and defined by its foundational documents and restricted membership to an identity as practiced in the school’s culture as sustained by the staff. Some even envisioned that Muslim children could be welcome at the school. In defence, representatives of the organizing school group, GPO-WN, presented that, “We are schools for children of (1) parents, who opt (on the basis of a Christian conviction), (2) consciously for, (3) Reformed education. This conscious choice is a very important item. Only if parents meet these criteria will they be welcome.”

Reflecting on a distant controversy, it is difficult to present a fair and balanced picture. A newspaper is produced under stress of deadlines and newsworthiness and is, by nature, not a

good source for that sort of picture. An emotionally-tinged report of people in opposition, such as *Eeninwaarheid.nl*, is likely to result in a negative bias. Walking in Dutch *klompen* by discussing key aspects of the controversy and listening to comments from both sides does not fully resolve this. Furthermore, for various reasons, some of our own families opt for a differently defined Christian school, home school, or have no choice at all, or have children whose needs cannot be met in a preferred Reformed institution. We also have schools with students from different ecclesiastical backgrounds. Without being intimately familiar with the situation, we do well to withhold rash judgment or condemnation. Keeping that in mind, I offer some food for further thought on how these developments are or may be significant to us.

### Positives, but . . .

Despite the alarmist response of *Eeninwaarheid.nl*, there are several aspects that could be mentioned as positives in this controversy. For instance, people are serious about addressing the issues at hand. In themselves, the four pillars of the identity discussion which GPO-WN initiated at the conference are

laudable. Every time our schools engage themselves in a community-wide process of reflection on what makes Reformed education Reformed, such are the type of items that must be on the table. The schools do want to remain true to their original roles and help each other to survive, to retain a distinctly Reformed identity, and to carry the burdens of government regulation. It is positive that GPO-WN wants to strengthen the Reformed schools’ identity and culture by increasing everyone’s understanding of what it means and by providing significant support especially for teachers. One should also note in this context that there remains commitment and adherence to Scripture and the Three Forms of Unity. GPO-WN does not want to rebel, but rather stay within parameters the schools have agreed on in national forums, for instance by continuing to restrict membership and staffing. It has been suggested that it may actually be good to have admission interviews with all parents, as there always is a danger that they send their children to Reformed schools out of custom or superstition. Similarly, if the identity of a school is laid down in stale and static documents that are never considered, the school may



well be on the way of losing it. Even the outwardly directed attention for the school's implicit message to the neighbourhood, without seeking to turn the school into an evangelistic institution, is to be valued.

The fact that there are various positives does not mean, however, that we should envy or desire the proposed course. We would not envy the challenges the GKNv face, either, and must consider that these moves are considered responses to a peculiar set of circumstances. In what follows, I present ways in which the new course does not appear to be so ideal. For instance, we should be leery of a massive school organization that is likely, by nature, to diminish the role of the parents, even as it assumes a pontificating leadership role. GPO-WN with twenty-three member-schools runs the inherent risk of becoming distant from the parents and the school is at risk of losing touch with local parental direction. However, there are bigger things at stake.

### Triangle

Ideally, the bond between the home, the school, and the true church should be very good. (We try to capture that in article 58 of our church order, even though how well this actually works is a different story.) We run *parental* schools, but *consistories* need to ensure that parents send their children to a *school* that maintains harmony with the Word of God as summarized in the confessions. With our schools' church membership and employment restrictions, we ensure that both the board and the staff fall under the supervision of the same consistories as the parents. The

traditional triangle expressing unity between home, church, and school is thus also more than a unity of purpose. It signifies unity of faith, as well as cooperation on the basis of that same unity, for a common purpose in the instruction of covenant children. In that regard the Great Synod of Dort (1618-19) even spoke of a tripartite catechetical instruction.

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*An important justification for establishing our own schools is that this model best attains unity by having a strong bond with the church and the home*

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The triangle holds the parents to their primary responsibility, assigns the church's role as the supportive covenant community and doctrinal instruction, and the school's as an auxiliary institution with a particular focus on a specific aspect of the parents' task. As a threesome, they have and can have a unity of purpose in training the child in the fear of the Lord. An important justification for establishing our own schools is that this model best attains unity by having a strong bond with the church and the home.

The value of this model goes well beyond the niceties that the minister includes some children's memory-work in the liturgy, or that the children observe their teachers hear the same preaching and partake in the same sacraments. It also involves how the teacher sees his students and impacts on

how he teaches from the Bible. Are they God's children because they belong to the covenant together with their believing parents, or must he hope that they will turn out to be God's children? Should the teacher rather avoid the question, or risk getting some people upset? If there is no unity of understanding here, the pressure will be great to diminish what Scripture teaches, or what the school stands for, and the unity between home and school is lost to the temporal detriment of the child. To consider welcoming Muslim children and thinking to maintain a Reformed identity seems greatly at odds with how we see the child. If a minister contends that God's love is for everyone, he should at least add a number of qualifiers. It could very well become not-so-nice at all in the classroom and it is not surprising that Rev. Jos Douma called for increased moral support for teachers under the proposed changes. Even under ideal triangle circumstances such moral support is a good thing to have.

Furthermore, the school's focus is on learning how this world was made and fits together and helps prepare the students for their task in this world. To consider this task, we are drawn to Christ by whom all things were created, in whom all things hold together, and who is the head of the church (Col 1:15 ff.). This affects not only our confession regarding the church, but also the entirety of the confession of who we believe the Father, the Son, and the Spirit to be and what they do, and it is a valid concern that the confessions are at stake. If this is upheld and made clear, very few students from outside the GKNv and CGK may actually end up being admitted.

## Optimism?

Ideally, an organization has a good and clearly defined system of checks and balances to protect its integrity. For our schools, that has also been maintained in the restricted admission and membership policies and the firm basis of Scripture and the Three Forms of Unity. Despite the new checks and balances of carefully designed interview protocols, I would not be as optimistic as GPO-WN that a distinctly Reformed identity can be maintained under the new policies. We may have the best of intentions, but when faced with choices our inclination would be to find an easy way out. I would not be so confident that the protocol ensures similar outcomes in Amsterdam, Axel, and Maastricht. Even my highly professional and money-making bank does not apply the formal protocol for account information or contacting the manager the same way at every branch. Reformed board-members, principals, and teachers are not perfect: their being Reformed does not lie in how good they are, but in their willingness to bow for the foundational documents of Scripture and Confession. At one time I asked the principal of *Veerkracht* how he would teach about the Secession, or about the Doleance, or about the Liberation in his thirty-denomination Reformed school. He never answered the question. Would teachers not end up taking a position that others are entitled to their own opinion, even though the school officially teaches that the other opinion is wrong? Would admission interview committees not colour their decision in line with local biases?

In 2001, Reformed sociologist A.B. Dijkstra identified several possible consequences of going a route of more openness (*Richting en Verandering. Effecten van een Transitie*. [Direction and change: Effects of a transition.] In *Vriendenboek Remmelt deBoer*). He notes that, in 1994, J. Messelink could still write that “the school should be able to pass on fully and without falsification the wealth of the covenant and the doctrine of the church, as expressed in the Reformed confessions” (47), but the shift in thinking about the relationship between social institutions and the church has now reached the schools. He speaks of a transition caused by stagnating growth and by a shift in the religious profile of GKNv members and wonders what the effects would be on the schools’ identities and other characteristics.

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*If there is no unity of understanding here, the pressure will be great to diminish what Scripture teaches, or what the school stands for, and the unity between home and school is lost*

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He quotes others who point out that Reformed schools are a strongly cohesive and stabilizing force in the Reformed community and that it is a central motif of Reformed upbringing to model and teach the children that life only is meaningful if lived close to God. He projects that the character of Reformed schools will diminish as functional and as value

communities, if they accept a broader admission policy and current trends continue. If this happens, the content of the school’s identity will need to be emphasized more than the current basis, for which different possibilities exist.

The CRC schools in North America may well serve as an example of what Dijkstra projects. While initially well-guarded as for membership, admission, and identity, opening their doors to wider interpretations of what it means to be Christian, for whatever lofty motives and good intentions, has frequently led to a departure from the original basis. They shared a pearl and often lost it. Sometimes, we have no choice but to cooperate with them. This is not to say that those schools are bad, or deliver poor quality education, but they are not the ideal fit we would look for. Canadian Reformed people have taken the position that it is best to hold the reigns themselves, and rightly so.

## Conclusion

Our Dutch brothers and sisters face huge challenges, both from within and without. To appreciate their struggles is to prepare ourselves for when we are faced with similar questions. It is also to commend them to the Lord in prayer. May He grant them wisdom and make them faithful not to squander what they have received. May He also grant a spirit of concord, unity, and harmony.

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*The Education Matters column is sponsored by the Canadian Reformed Teachers' Association East. Anyone wishing to respond to an article written or willing to write an article is kindly asked to send materials to Clarion or to Otto Bouwman  
bouwman@cornerstoneschool.us*

# Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the Ministry of Rev. Clarence Bouwman

It is with thankfulness to the Lord that our congregation in Yarrow along with others may remember and celebrate our minister's twenty-five years of service amongst his people.

Rev. Bouwman completed his Bachelor of Arts degree at Wilfrid Laurier University with a major in Classics in 1978. That same year he entered our theological college in Hamilton to begin his studies. He completed his studies four years later and after graduation received a call from the Church at Chilliwack, B.C.

Installed by Rev. G.H. Visscher on Reformation Day October 31, Rev. Bouwman was sent into the vineyard under the theme "In his triumphant march over the world,

God is pleased to use the preaching of Christ by Men."

After Rev. Bouwman had served in Chilliwack for three years the Lord led him and his young family (Harwin 3, Jared 3 months) across the big pond where he worked amongst our brothers and sisters in the Free Reformed Churches of Australia at Byford (1987-1994) and Kelmscott (1994-2005).

In 2005, British Columbia beckoned again. Rev. Bouwman accepted a call by his current congregation in Yarrow, just a "stones throw" from Chilliwack where it all began twenty-five years ago! This time, with a larger family in tow and several more years experience on his resume.



We give thanks to the Lord that we may remember this occasion. Through his grace and care for his people He has guided our brother and his family over the past twenty-five years and provided his people with the faithful preaching of his Word.



With thankfulness to the Lord for his faithful service among us and the other congregations he served, the Council and Congregation of the Canadian Reformed Church at Yarrow B.C. congratulates our minister

**REVEREND CLARENCE BOUWMAN**

on the occasion of his 25 years in the ministry.

October 31, 1982 – October 31, 2007

*Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season;  
correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction.  
2 Timothy 4:2*





**Press Release of Classis Ontario West, convened on September 12, 2007 in Kerwood, Ontario**

**Opening**

On behalf of the convening church of Kerwood, Rev. J.G. Slaa opened the meeting by inviting all present to sing Psalm 103:6, 8. After some reflections about Christ's care for his church, he read Philippians 1:12 - 2:11 and led in prayer. All the delegates and guests were welcomed and a special welcome was given to Rev. A. Korvemaker, minister of Bethel URC of Aylmer, representing Classis Southern Ontario of the URCNA.

As memorabilia, mention was made of the fact that Rev. D. Vandeburgt recently declined a call from the church of Elora and is presently considering a call from Grace Canadian Reformed Church of Winnipeg. It was also noted that the Providence Canadian Reformed church of Hamilton was recently instituted and is presently vacant, as is the Cornerstone Canadian Reformed church of Hamilton. The commencement of studies at the Theological College was also remembered and gratitude was expressed for the progress evident in the mission church that Ancaster is busy with in connection with Streetlight Ministries.

**Constitution of Classis**

After the delegates from the church of Kerwood examined the credentials, it was reported that all the churches were lawfully represented and Classis was

declared constituted. Classis appointed the following officers: Chairman: Rev. Vandeburgt; Vice-chairman: Rev. R. E. Pot; Clerk: Rev. Slaa. These brothers then commenced their respective duties. The chairman expressed thanks to the convening church for preparing for and hosting Classis.

**Adoption of the agenda**

After some minor revisions, the provisional agenda was adopted.

**Examination of Br. Richard Horlings**

Br. Richard Horlings presented the necessary documents for his preparatory examination in order to be declared eligible for call. After these were found to be in good order, Br. Horlings was examined on his aptitude for preaching and presented his sermon proposal on Philippians 3:10-11. Classis judged that the sermon was insufficient for the examination to proceed. He was informed of this decision in a pastoral manner and commended to the Lord in prayer.

**Address by fraternal observer**

Rev. Korvemaker was given opportunity to speak and brought greetings on behalf of Classis Southern Ontario of the United Reformed Churches, reflecting on the relationship between our respective church federations and the decisions of our recent general synods. The chairman responded with appropriate words and also extended a welcome to Rev. H. Zekveld, minister of Strathroy URC, who arrived at this time.

**Question Period (Art. 44 C.O.)**

Question period according to Article 44 of the Church Order was held. The churches declared that the ministry of the office-bearers is being continued and the decisions of the major assemblies are being honoured. A request from Providence Canadian Reformed Church of Hamilton for the appointment of Dr. N.H. Gootjes as their counsellor (Art. 45 C.O.) was granted.

**Correspondence**

A letter was received from the Theological College, informing Classis that student C. Kleyn has completed the requirements of his third year of academic study.

**Reports**

- a. Classical Treasurer (Art. 8.1, Classical Regulations)  
A report was received from the treasurer of Classis, Brian Vanderhout, recommending an assessment of \$4 per communicant member for 2008. This was approved.
- b. Church to Administer the Fund for Needy Churches (Art. 8.8, Classical Regulations)  
A report was received from the church of Ancaster, recommending an assessment of \$20 per communicant member for 2008. This was approved.
- c. Church for the Fund for Needy Students (Art 8.7).  
A report was received from the church of Chatham, recommending an assessment of \$10 per communicant member for 2008. This was approved. The report included an auditor's report of the books of the treasurer and noted that the new treasurer is Br. Rick DeBoer.

## Appointments

Classis made the following appointments:

1. Convening church for next classis: London, December 12, 2007 (alternate date: March 26, 2008)
2. Suggested officers for next classis: Chairman: Rev. G. VanPopta, Vice-chairman: Rev. Slaa, Clerk: Rev. Vandeburgt.
3. Delegates to Regional Synod East to be held November 14, 2007 at Fergus:

Ministers: Rev. J. Ludwig; Rev. Slaa (alternates, in order: Rev. H. Versteeg; Rev. Vandeburgt)  
Elders: John Heyink; Art Witten (alternates, in order: Ben Harsevoort; Terry Medemblik)

## Personal Question Period

Personal Question Period was held.

Brotherly Censure (Art. 34 C.O.)  
The chairman judged that censure according to Art. 34 C.O. was not necessary.

## Adoption of Acts and Press Release

The Acts were read and adopted. The Press Release was read and approved for publication.

## Closing

After the singing of Hymn 40:1, 5, the chairman led in prayer and declared the meeting closed.

*For Classis, R. E. Pot  
Vice-chairman at that time*



*Lake Superior, Ontario, Canada*