

Clarion

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*The faith that justifies
is the faith that
shows works*

ROMANS 3:23

comes through faith^e in Jesus Christ^f to all who believe.^g There is no difference,^h ²³for all have sinnedⁱ and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified^j freely by his grace^k through the redemption^l that came by Christ Jesus.

3:22 ^eS Ro 9:30
^fGal 2:16; 3:22
^gS Jn 3:15;
Ro 4:11; 10:4
^hRo 10:12;
Gal 3:28;
Col 3:11
3:23 (S ver 9
3:24 /S Ro 4:25
ⁱJn 1:14,16,17;
Ro 4:16; 3:21;

1712

Abraham Justified by Faith

4 What then shall we say¹ that Abraham, our forefather,² discovered in this matter? ³If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God.⁴ What does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him

Inside this issue

- Re-Baptism
- The Power of Weakness
- Reflections on a Conference





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Re-Baptism

They are now of the conviction that God calls on them to be baptized again

A bombshell!

"Dad, Mom, please sit down. I have to tell you something. I've decided that I want to get baptized again."

Now there was a time when such an announcement was unheard of in our homes, or, at least, very rare. Not any longer. As members of Reformed homes more and more come into contact with those who belong to various Anabaptist homes or have joined an adult-only Baptist church, it happens more often.

Reasons

And why is that? Sometimes it begins with a person being dissatisfied with the Reformed church of which he or she is a member. Perhaps they are not happy with the liturgy and would like to sing different songs, hear more practical sermons, experience a less formal worship setting. Or it may have something to do with boyfriends and girlfriends who come from churches with such a background and who want them to switch and join them. It may even have something to do with other issues or with not really feeling at home any longer in the church in which one was raised.

Rationale

In any case, whatever the reason may be, they are now of the conviction that God calls on them to be baptized again. More often than not they will say to their parents and others, "But the Bible teaches that we have to make a choice for God and that after we make that choice we need to be baptized. Does Christ not say in Mark 16:16, 'Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved'? Does this not prove that believing comes first and that baptism comes right after it? So really the fact that I was baptized as a baby does not count. Then I could not believe and did not believe and should not have been baptized at all. All you should have done for me is to have had me

dedicated and then waited to see what would happen with me. Once I was old enough and really believed, then you should have told me to get baptized."

Reaction

Now to be told this as a parent of Reformed persuasion is quite something. No doubt the first reaction is one of shock. Thereafter follows deep disappointment. And then there is often anger and frustration.

Of course I realize that not all who consider themselves Reformed react in this way. Some of them, who have what are called "evangelical sympathies," would take it all much more in stride. Nevertheless, even among them there will often be this real sense of hurt. After all, if together as husband and wife you have decided to raise your children in a certain way, a way that you deemed to be biblical and best, it is hard to be told by one of your own children, either directly or indirectly, that you have missed the boat and gotten it all wrong.

It is unwise to burn all the bridges when you never know what time, prayer, love, and the Lord will do in the future

But there is more. For after the announcement often comes the invitation. The son or daughter wants their parents to be present at their re-baptism and so invite them to come to the ceremony and witness it.

What to do? Some parents go, often with pain in their soul. Others just can not bring themselves to attend, knowing full well that in so doing they run the risk of estrangement. And besides, there are often more children in the family, and they are watching, watching to see what mom and dad will do.



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
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In short, then, there is often a lot of hurt here. Hurt on the part of the parents. Hurt on the part of the son or daughter who has decided to take this step. As well as hurt on the part of siblings, grandparents, other family members, and friends. There is no easy way to handle any of this. It takes a lot of prayer and wisdom from above.

And, I might add, it takes a lot of charity too. Hurt parents can so easily lash out and say and do things that they will later regret. After all, a son or daughter who decides to go this route is still a son or daughter. In addition, it is unwise to burn all the bridges when you never know what time, prayer, love, and the Lord will do in the future. Affected parents need to proceed carefully.

At the same time fellow church members need to do the same. Do not be too quick to express your opinion to such parents. Do not rush to judgment. Especially, if you have never had to deal with this sort of a situation, be careful and try to walk a few miles in the shoes of the afflicted.

Reflection

Still, whenever something like this happens there needs to be more than reaction, there also needs to be reflection. In particular, there needs to be reflection on the nature of the sacrament of holy baptism.

Why do we have our children baptized? Is this a mere matter of tradition? Is this due to some sort of community consensus? Is this a way of dispensing early and special grace?

To all of these reasons, and more, we would say "No! We baptize our children because this is God's command, because this is the historic, covenantal, redeeming way of God with his people."

And in saying this we have strong biblical support. For look at what the Bible teaches. It teaches that ever since the beginning of time God has been busy calling to Himself a people, one people, one church. Later on the Apostle Paul speaks about this in Ephesians 4:4-6 and stresses that there is "one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." God is one; his work is one; his people are one.

So how does this one God approach his one people? Does He come to Abraham, the father of all believers, and say, "You belong to me, but your children will have to wait. They need to make a

In This Issue

Editorial – Re-Baptism — J. Visscher.....	98
Treasures, New and Old – The Power of Weakness — D.G.J. Agema	101
A Guide to Reformed Worship (8) – The Sacraments: Baptism — W.L. Bredenhof	102
Reflections on a Conference (1) — C. Van Dam	104
NAPARC 2007 — E. Kampen	106
Further Discussion — J. DeGelder.....	108
Letters to the Editor	110
Book Reviews — Reviewed by W.L. Bredenhof, C. Bouwman	112

choice for me first before I will accept them and embrace them"? No, instead the sovereign God comes to Abram and says, "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you" (Gen 17:7). Thereafter God adds, "You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised. . ." (Gen 17:11, 12).

Rejoinder

So what does this tell us? It tells us first that God is the God of the covenant, that He enters into a living, binding, everlasting relationship with his people. Second, it tells us that God is sovereign. We people do not initiate this relationship. No, it comes from God. It comes from God to us. Third, we are told here as well that this relationship of covenant is marked with a sign: circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New Testament (see: Colossians 2:11, 12). Finally, we are told that this sign is to be given to believers and their seed (Acts 2:39). It is not just a case that only the confessing adults belong. No, all believers and their offspring belong to Him as well.

When we come to the New Testament are the children of believers suddenly set aside?

God claims them all. He claims the adults and He claims their children. And, lest we forget, He also claims their children who die in infancy, as well as those who are mentally handicapped, demented, or comatose. His sovereign claim is on them all.

How well the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism understood this too and declared "infants as well as adults belong to God's covenant and congregation" (LD 27, Q/A 74). The Belgic Confession says much the same thing when it declares, "Indeed, Christ shed His blood to wash the children of believers just as much as He shed it for adults."

You see in the Old Testament the children of believers were claimed by God and belonged to God. He even calls the little children of the Israelites "my children" (Ezek 16:21). They all have status and standing with Him.

But do they still have it, or have they lost it? When we come to the New Testament are the children of

believers suddenly set aside and given a different set of rules to believe and live by? Does God take a step back there and say that from now on we have to claim Him first or that his hands are tied until such a time as we claim Him?

And this is important. For according to the opinion of those who are of baptistic conviction, the sacrament of baptism is in the first place about us, about our faith or about our profession of faith. Wrong! The sacrament is first about God, about his rights, his prerogatives, and his promises. In this sacrament God is coming to us and placing his stamp of ownership on us.

Yes, and it is this fact too that gives such surety and stability to our hearts and lives. Thankfully the Christian faith is not in the first place about our choices, our feelings, our experiences, or our desires. All of these actions and reactions of ours have their ups and downs. How fragile and vulnerable we are. How pathetic a foundation we make. On the other hand, how great and firm a foundation He makes. What a marvelous certainty and faithfulness there is in God's covenant promises.

Resolve

Surely the realization of all this should also fill us with the resolve, not to repeat or re-do our baptism, but to work more with it and to remind our children to work more with theirs as well. For contrary to what others may say, the truly biblical and Reformed position is that God's children need to work with their baptism everyday. It is not a ticket to glory. It is not a passport to heaven. It is not a gate to easy believism. It is a call to faith, to hope, to love, and to a new obedience (see the Form for the Baptism of Infants).

Let me conclude with some more words from the Belgic Confession, "We believe, therefore, that anyone who aspires to eternal life ought to be baptized only once. Baptism should never be repeated, for we cannot be born twice. Moreover, baptism benefits us not only when the water is on us and when we receive it, but throughout our whole life" (Art 33).

Take your baptism to heart; take its promises and embrace them; take its demands and strive to meet them with God's help. Do not doubt it or reject it. Live it!

(PS: If it is not in your home or church library, here is a book on baptism to buy, read and discuss. It's called *The Promise of Baptism* and it is written by James V. Brownson. The publisher is Eerdmans and the date is 2007. Highly recommended!)



D.G.J. Agema

The Power of Weakness

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MATTHEW 13:52

“Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer. . . the Lord makes his life a guilt offering.”

Isaiah 53:10a

The Bible teaches us a remarkable lesson regarding the words “strong” and “weak.” It doesn’t follow human expectations! For when we hear the word “strong,” we think of a muscular person, someone who is able to stand up against attacks. On the other hand, “weak” makes us think of someone who is easily pushed over.

The Bible changes this perception. What we think of as strong may actually be weak and what we see as a sign of weakness may in fact be evidence of strength. Just consider of the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:10, “For when I am weak, then I am strong.” Elsewhere Paul speaks about the message of the cross and he writes that “the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength” (1 Cor 1:25).

Let us not be mistaken, our Lord is powerful. We know of his strength and how He stands up against the enemy. Think of the song the people sang at the Red Sea: “Your right hand, O Lord, was majestic in power. Your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy” (Exod 15:6). In Isaiah 52, too, we read about the mighty arm of God: “The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God” (v 10). Quite the language! The Lord will show his muscle. He rolls up

his sleeves to show how strong He is and all the nations will see it!

But it will happen in a way that is totally unexpected. This is why Isaiah 53 begins with that question, “Who has believed our message?” (v 1). Who believes that the arm of God is revealed in this way? It defies all human expectation. For how does God show his power? In sending his servant, who is described in this chapter.

When you read this description, you don’t think of a powerful arm. This servant was not one who commanded respect because of his physique and strength. He had no beauty or majesty. He was even despised and rejected by men. He was oppressed and afflicted and cut off from the land of the living. Who would think that in such a servant the Lord is baring his arm and showing his power?

To add to this, this is not an accident – as if the Lord would have liked to do it differently, but it just turned out this way. No, we read that this was God’s will. It was his will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer.

It is an unlikely demonstration of power to the human eye and ear, but in fact it is evidence of God’s power. For these words show the depth of God’s redemption. He was willing to have his only begotten Son

crushed. The same arm that destroyed Pharaoh and his host now crushes our Lord Jesus Christ. God is executing his will in perfect wisdom. And in this servant we see the power of God to redeem.

For the Lord made his servant a guilt offering. The work of the servant is described here in terms of the temple service. With the guilt offering, the Lord showed his people that they were sinners and that their sins incur guilt. Guilt has to be paid for. So this servant will be the guilt offering and, in doing it once for all, takes away all the guilt of God’s people. Talk about being strong!

Why did He do this? To redeem us. This is how far He was willing to go! It is more than all the signs and miracles in Egypt, more than what Israel sang about at the shores of the Red Sea. God’s servant, our Lord Jesus Christ, was crushed for our sins, as our guilt offering.

Who would think that a man nailed to a cross is strong? Yet if you want to see the power of our God, look at the cross: “The weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.” In this He turns my world upside down, and in Him my guilt is gone. With the Apostle I can say, “When I am weak, then I am strong.” For I may rely on the power of his grace. What a power! What an arm!





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A Guide to Reformed Worship (Part 8) – The Sacraments: Baptism

We began this series of articles by noting the two important guiding principles for Reformed worship: the Regulative Principle of Worship (RPW) and the Principle of Covenantal Structure. Together these two principles determine the elements and the arrangement of the elements in our worship services. As we've surveyed the elements, we've noted more than once that Reformed worship is very much centred on the Word of God. Not only does it determine the elements and structure, it also features strikingly in those very elements.

When we come to the sacraments, we seem to come to something of a different nature. Here we deal with "signs and seals," we deal with something that not only enters our ears (as happens with the Word), but something that addresses various senses. The sacraments function with our sight, with our smell, with our taste, and with our touch. In this multi-sensory way, the sacraments are special.

This is captured in the Belgic Confession (Art 33) when we confess that God has ordained sacraments "to seal his promises to us and to be pledges of his good will and grace to us." The sacraments are designed to do this in a way different than the Word because the sacraments represent "better to our external senses both what [God]

declares to us in his Word and what he does inwardly in our hearts." Because of "our insensitivity and weakness," God gives something that goes beyond the one sense of hearing. With these sacraments that God has ordained we are to be content and we are not to add or subtract from them in any way.

Indeed, the RPW leads us to insist that there are only two sets of God-approved symbols in Reformed worship. Nothing else that attempts to supplement God's Word is lawful in our public worship services. Consequently, things like paintings, videos, drama, dance – while legitimate in other settings – have no place in our corporate worship. The two sacraments of Baptism and Lord's Supper are the only signs and seals beyond the Word that lawfully belong when we gather together on Sundays.

Baptism

There is no question that the Lord Jesus instituted the sacrament of holy baptism. Consequently, the church of all ages and places has always baptized. When the Reformers set out to "re-form" Christ's church according to the Scriptures, the institution of baptism remained (although some of its trappings and theology needed re-working). However, the oft-neglected question remains: why should baptism take place in a

worship service? A glance at all the New Testament passages in Scripture where baptism takes place seems to indicate that the sacrament was freely administered in any context: even a deserted road (Acts 8:38) or a jailer's house (Acts 16:33). So, how did we arrive at the situation today where baptism normally takes place in church?

Word and sacrament belong together. This is because they express the same truths in different ways. The sacraments can be considered a sort of visible, tangible preaching of the gospel. Baptism, for instance, visibly and tangibly portrays the believer being washed with the blood of Christ. It confirms the promise of the gospel heard from the pulpit. For this reason, normally baptism is administered in a public worship service by a minister of the Word and sacraments. As history progressed, the church came to recognize this as a good and necessary consequence of scriptural teaching on the relationship between Word and sacrament. However, since the biblical evidence shows diversity in this matter, we cannot say that baptisms done in another context (or even by someone who is not ordained) are invalid.

Of course, many other questions can be raised about baptism. However, it is not my intention to

delve into those here. Rather, I would like to consider a couple of the more practical, liturgical issues associated with the sacrament.

Timing

The first issue is the timing of baptism within the worship service. Should baptism take place early in the service (before the sermon) or later (after the sermon)? In some of our churches, as a concession to the difficulties of bringing a baby into the service, baptism takes place early in the order of worship. In other churches, no concessions are made and baptism takes place after the sermon. This is done with the reasoning that the sacrament confirms what is promised in the Word and, therefore, it is only logical for the sermon to be preached first. The proper order is Word and then sacrament.

Four objections can be brought to this line of reasoning. We proceed on the assumption that if done early in the service, it takes place either after the confession of sin/assurance of pardon (in the morning) or after the creed (in the afternoon). First, if baptism is to be done in the morning service, and if there is a meaningful confession of sin followed by a gospel-focused assurance of pardon, then what is promised in the Word has already been declared before the sacrament is administered. Second, if baptism is to be done in the afternoon service, and if the promise of the gospel has already been proclaimed in the morning service, then what is promised has already been proclaimed beforehand. Third, if baptism is to be done in the afternoon, and if the Apostles' Creed truly summarizes the promise of the gospel (Heidelberg Catechism QA 22), then the promise has already been sounded out before the baptism is administered. Finally, while it is certainly an ideal

to strive for, not each and every sermon contains the promise of the gospel confirmed in holy baptism. For these four reasons, there can be no liturgical difficulty with placing the baptism early in the worship service if so desired. On this point, the Word of God gives freedom to the churches.

Who participates?

A second issue has to do with who participates in the sacrament of baptism and how. There are *four* participants in every baptism that takes place in a public worship service. First and most importantly, we have God present. God the Father, Son, and Spirit are present and make beautiful, rich promises.

Each baptism we witness as self-conscious believers is a visible reminder of the covenantal gospel that was signed and sealed to us in our own baptism

Those promises are made to the second participant: the one being baptized. In every case (adult or infant), the one being baptized is a passive participant: baptism is not something you *do*; it is something that you *have done to you*. The third participants are only present in the case of infant baptism and they are the parents of the child. They are involved as those who make vows to raise this child in the doctrines of Scripture. It's the fourth participant(s) who is/are often neglected in any consideration of baptism: the congregation of believers.

What are we doing and what is being communicated to us in the sacrament of baptism? What is God

doing with us at that moment? Most of us having been baptized as infants, we do not recall the moment of our own baptism. However, each baptism we witness as self-conscious believers is a visible reminder of the covenantal gospel that was signed and sealed to us in our own baptism. This is the beauty of the Form for the Baptism of Infants.

The Form is addressed to the "Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ." Much of the language of the Form is in the first person plural: "we," "our," and "us." As we hear the Form, the congregation is reminded first of our need for the gospel: "It signifies the impurity of our souls, so that we may detest ourselves, humble ourselves before God, and seek our cleansing and salvation outside of ourselves." Those words are not addressed to the child being baptized (that would be absurd!), but to the congregation of already-baptized believers. Second, we are reminded of what God promised each and every one of us at our baptism. Finally, we are reminded of the Lord's call to a new obedience, to a life of sanctification. There too, the little child being baptized can hardly be expected to heed that call, but the believers can! In these three things, we see a familiar pattern. It's the pattern of the Apostle Paul in Romans and it's the same pattern taken over in the structure of the Heidelberg Catechism: sin, salvation, service. Each time there's a baptism, we're visibly and powerfully reminded of all we "need to know to live and die in the joy" of the comfort afforded by God's Word. If we approach it in that way, each administration of baptism is a source of strength for every believer in the congregation.

Next time we'll conclude our look at the sacraments by considering the Lord's Supper.





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Reflections on a Conference (Part 1 of 2)

Last fall I had the privilege of attending a three day Chicago area conference on "God's Righteousness and the Obedience of Faith" which featured Rev. Norman Shepherd. He gave five lectures on the biblical doctrine of justification.

I had looked forward to this conference to renew acquaintance. It was back in my student days at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia (1968-1969) that I had first met and somewhat gotten to know Prof. Shepherd. Despite the fact that I never actually took a course with him, we had meaningful contact and I remember well his enthusiasm for the theology that had come from the Reformed Churches Liberated in The Netherlands. Although we had since then briefly met on one or two occasions, this conference would be the first time that I would actually hear him lecture. I also looked forward to finding out exactly what his thinking was on justification.

After my student days, Professor Shepherd had become a controversial figure. Even though he was never judged to be in error while teaching at Westminster, he was eventually dismissed from that institution in 1982. E.P. Clowney, the president of the seminary, had emphasized that his removal was not for doctrinal error. Apparently his presence at the seminary had

become intolerable for too many people and so he was let go. Since then, Shepherd has even been the object of charges of heresy in the public press, although none were ever brought to his consistory. Given all of this, the conference was a good opportunity to hear from Shepherd himself on the issues. The conference had been convened by an organization called Act III: Advancing the Christian Tradition in the Third Millennium. The meetings were ably chaired by John H. Armstrong and Andrew Sandlin and the relaxed atmosphere was conducive to open and frank discussion.

I will need to be selective and concentrate on the main issue for which Shepherd has been and continues to be condemned, namely, his teaching on justification by faith.¹ In this article I will outline the salient points as presented by Shepherd. In the follow-up article I will deal with what strikes me as key criticisms.

Justification by faith alone

Scripture clearly teaches that one is justified by faith alone. "A man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (Rom 3:28). "We . . . know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ

and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified" (Gal 2:15-16). The Reformed confessions use similar language (BC, Art 22; Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 11).

As a Reformed confessor, Shepherd is in complete agreement with this biblical teaching. He reaffirmed this repeatedly at the conference. However, Scripture also says more. For example, in James 2:24 we read that "a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone." Now Scripture does not contradict itself. How then should we understand this passage? Many explain James' use of "justified" here to mean that a person's works show or demonstrate that the faith which such a person has is a real faith. The fact that they have done these works shows that they are righteous.

Shepherd agrees that as a theological argument this interpretation reconciles James 2 with Romans 3. However, exegetically this interpretation cannot stand because when James uses the verb "justify" it is not one's faith that is "justified" but a person who is declared to be righteous by what he does. The point of James is that faith without works is dead. Such faith is useless. It does not accomplish anything. Such faith

does not and cannot save and justify. James does not deny justification by faith. The justifying faith that James writes about is the same as what Paul discusses. The two cannot be set over against each other. But James makes clear that the faith that justifies is the faith that shows works.

The immediate context of James 2 illustrates this point. Abraham was considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar (James 2:21). "You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did" (James 2:22). "In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead" (James 2:25-26). Other indications in Scripture of this truth include Christ's teaching in Matthew 25. On the last day, the righteous, that is those who are justified, are those who showed mercy to those in need. Only the righteous whose faith is brought out in deeds inherit eternal life (Matt 25:31-46).

If then justifying faith does not really exclude works but presupposes them, how should we understand Romans 3:28 which speaks of faith apart from works? Shepherd pointed out that the Apostle literally writes: "A man is justified by faith apart from the works of *the law* [emphasis added]." The point in Romans 3 is that if justification comes by works of the law, then the Gentiles cannot be justified or saved. Why? Because the Gentiles do not have the Mosaic Law. The Mosaic covenant was made with Israel and with no other nation (Ps 147:20). But in the New Testament dispensation, God's

saving purpose included the Gentiles. This was difficult for the Jews to accept and so they opposed this message. But, the gospel is that through faith in Jesus both Jew and Gentile are justified without doing the works of the Mosaic Law (Gal 2:14). In this connection, it is also important to realize that Israel saw themselves not as sinners needing the grace of God, but as those who did the works of the law and were therefore right with God. Paul before his conversion had also considered himself justified by pursuing righteousness by means of keeping the law (cf. Phil 3:4-6). The Apostle Paul therefore exposed the sins of his fellow Israelites and showed that doing the outward demands of the law was not enough (Rom 2:17-29). Obedience in faith is necessary along with a recognition of one's sin and the need for salvation in Christ (Rom 9:31-33).

The faith that justifies is the faith that shows works

Shepherd concluded that both Apostles James and Paul say we are only justified by faith in Jesus, that is, by a living and obedient faith. He then elaborated on this last point a bit further.

The faith that justifies

The faith that justifies is the faith that shows works. Shepherd expanded on this point and noted that repentance and obedience are inseparably intertwined. The faith of Abraham was an obedient faith (Rom 4). Galatians 5 reminds us that "the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (v 6). Love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom 13:10). As believers in

Christ, we are free from the law but not from its righteous requirements (Rom 8:1-14). In line with James 2:24 is the truth found in Romans 2:13. "It is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous." Of course doing good works is only possible through the grace of God. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:8-10).

Shepherd also reminded us that Scripture distinguishes between the righteous and the wicked, that is, the believer and the unbeliever (Ps 1). The righteous in the Psalms are those whose sins have been forgiven and who walk in covenantal obedience with God. The faith evidenced in their life gives them the assurance of their righteousness (e.g., Ps. 15, 26).

It was obvious that much of what Shepherd said was directed at those who would understand justification by faith alone to be descriptive of intellectual assent of a biblical truth with no real consequences for life. Against this easy believism Shepherd stressed that you cannot separate justification and sanctification and place them in different compartments. You can distinguish them, but you can not separate them.

In the second article we will consider some objections that have been raised against Shepherd's thinking.

¹ The proceedings of this conference are available on audio CD as well as DVD from <http://www.act3online.com/>.





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NAPARC 2007

Introduction

On November 12 and 13, 2007, four members of the Committee for Contact with Churches in North America (CCCNA), namely, Rev. P. H. Holtvlüwer, Rev. E. Kampen, Br. J. Kuik, and Rev. R.E. Pot, attended the thirty-third annual meeting of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC), held in Newark, New Jersey. This Council is "a fellowship that enables the constituent churches to advise, counsel, and cooperate in various matters with one another and hold out before each other the desirability and need for organic union of churches that are of like faith and practice." At present, there are ten member churches, namely:

- Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church
- L'Église Réformée du Québec
- Free Reformed Churches of North America
- Heritage Reformed Congregations
- Korean American Presbyterian Church
- Orthodox Presbyterian Church
- Presbyterian Church in America
- Reformed Church in the United States
- Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America.
- United Reformed Churches of North America

Reports and membership applications

One of the main items of each agenda is the hearing of reports from the member churches. Written reports are submitted in advance to delegates and observers and then a short summary is provided orally by one of that church's delegates. This mutual sharing of information is important to develop awareness of and concern for each other. It also opens the possibility for assisting one another. Several churches mentioned in their reports that they had either begun or completed studies on the new teaching known as the Federal Vision. Federal Vision theology appears to be a significant concern in the OPC, PCA, URCNA, and RPCNA. All completed reports found this doctrine to be deficient in different respects and all made efforts to clarify the confessional teaching of justification by faith alone in Christ alone through grace alone.

The meeting also had to deal with the application for membership of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC), submitted by the CCCNA in accordance with the mandate given by Synod Smithers. This application had to give information on our historical background,

confessional documents, statistical details, worship practices, and any "distinctives" that set a church apart from other churches. Most of the information had been gathered from information posted on the general website of the churches (www.canrc.org). Only one or two questions were asked, which focused on the fact that the category labelled "Distinctives" had been left blank. In response it was indicated that as a federation we may have historical and cultural identity markers but none of these is held out as a distinctive we would not do without. We seek to be simply Reformed, bound by God's Word summarized in the Confessions, nothing more nor less. The heritage we took along from the Liberation was one of refusing to be bound by statements beyond the agreed upon Confessions. All delegates voted in favour of accepting the application of the CanRC into membership. Before membership takes effect, it needs to be ratified by at least two-thirds of member churches. The Lord willing, in 2008 we can be received into full membership in NAPARC.

Following our application was the application from the Presbyterian Reformed Church (PRC). This is a very small denomination of some seven

Church News

Declined the call to Lincoln, Ontario:

Rev. R.E. Pot

of London, Ontario.

Called by the church of Willoughby Heights, British Columbia (for the second time):

Rev. A. Souman

of Smithville, Ontario.

congregations in Canada, the USA, and one in England, with a total membership of less than 400. Their distinctives involve experiential preaching and exclusive Psalmody, as well as adhering to the original version of the Westminster Standards. After extensive questioning concerning their distinctives, NAPARC delegates voted unanimously to admit the PRC to membership.

Edifying speech

It is custom that on the Tuesday evening of the meeting, the delegates hear a speech on a relevant topic. This year, Dr. Sung-Il Steve Park, adjunct professor of Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, presented a speech on the history of Presbyterianism in Korea. He explained how the Christian faith only came to Korea in the late nineteenth century but its development shows the same hallmarks of struggle as the Christian faith anywhere: liberalism, persecution, and internal division. The unique character of the Korean approach to worship (i.e. deeply emotional) was brought out as well and helped us to understand our Korean brethren better.

Meeting with churches in ecclesiastical fellowship

As in past years, our attendance at NAPARC allowed for many opportunities to mix and mingle with delegates and observers from the various churches. We took the opportunity and organized four formal meetings with Inter-church Relations Committees of four churches: L'ERQ, RCUS, OPC, and the RPCNA. We have ecclesiastical fellowship with the first three and are in the process of considering ecclesiastical fellowship with the last one. In these meetings there

was the opportunity to give an overview of the decisions of the latest general assemblies or general synods, to discuss matters of common concern, and to see how we can be of help to one another as churches in ecclesiastical fellowship. Having such meetings before, in between, and after the official sessions of NAPARC is beneficial in that it is not necessary to make separate visits to the various churches.

With thankfulness to the Lord we can look back to interesting and productive days.





Further Discussion

An Inconsistent Synod?

In *Clarion's* first issue of 2008 the Rev. J. L. van Popta wrote an article *Appealing Synod Decisions?* He deals in particular with Article 110 in the *Acts of Synod Smithers 2007* and does not find it very appealing. His conclusion is that this synod has been inconsistent in applying the established rules of procedure and that this will undermine the confidence of the members and the churches in the appeal process. Readers of this magazine may know that a proper, transparent, and consistent appeal process is dear to my heart. But I believe that my brother's article shows a fairly common misunderstanding when it comes to applying Article 31 of the Church Order.

Rev. van Popta is correct when he says that it is an important principle, rooted in Article 31 CO, that the decisions of the broader assemblies are settled and binding unless proven to be against the Word of God or the adopted Church Order. But then he goes on to say that members and churches can only ask for revision if they can demonstrate how a decision is contrary to the Word of God or the Church Order. Decisions of major assemblies can only be revised or undone if it is proved that they are in conflict with God's Word or the Church Order.

But careful reading of Article 31 shows that this is not correct. This article does not provide a rule for a major assembly, but for the local churches. It does not say that a decision of a previous assembly

can only be revised or undone if such a decision is in conflict with God's Word or the Church Order. Article 31 provides a rule for the churches. The churches need to know how to treat the decisions of the major assemblies. This is why in the so-called "Question Period Article 44" at a classis one of the questions is "whether the decisions of the major assemblies are being honoured" by the churches. The churches have agreed to consider settled and binding what has been agreed upon (in the major assembly) by a majority vote, unless it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order. The Rev. van Popta may reply, well this is exactly my argument. These three churches mentioned in Article 110 of the *Acts of Synod Smithers 2007* did not accept the decision of Synod Chatham 2004 and did not prove either that it was in conflict with God's Word or the Church Order.

Let us see. Major assemblies, and especially general synods, make many decisions in many areas. We should all have respect for the collective wisdom of the brothers at synod, but they are not perfect, and so these assemblies can make mistakes. Sometimes a decision is made in haste or without due consideration of all the implications. Sometimes decisions are made that, when you look at it again, are not so wise or helpful, or don't make much sense. However – what is not so wise or beneficial is not necessarily in conflict with God's Word or with the Church Order. Does this now mean that the

churches will for ever be bound by unwise or unhelpful decisions of a synod, simply because no one can ever prove that such a decision is in conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order? I don't believe it.

In our Church Order we have not only Article 31 but also Article 33. The churches have the opportunity and the freedom to address a synod when they have come to the conclusion that a particular decision does not make much sense, or is not helpful or beneficial for the churches. Without appealing the decision according to Article 31 CO, as a decision that is contrary to God's Word or the Church Order, they can provide new grounds that were not or not sufficiently considered before and ask synod to revisit the matter.

The three churches that addressed Synod Smithers 2007 on the issue of including the Apostles' Creed in the baptismal forms, as decided by Synod Chatham 2004, never argued that they were unwilling, or could not in good conscience consider this decision of Synod Chatham settled and binding. They did not refuse to accept and implement this decision because it was unscriptural, but they were wondering if this was a wise and good way to go. And that is a legitimate question. I did not see the complete letters, but Article 110 of the *Acts of Synod Smithers* does not give the impression that these were appeals according to Article 31 CO. In his article Rev. van Popta speaks about these as "appeals," but that is not correct.

I therefore don't think that it is fair to picture these churches as "a few dissenters" that don't even bother giving grounds on the basis of Scripture and the Church Order and to label their letters as mere "protests" that should have been inadmissible according to Article 31 CO. The point here is that when it comes to incorporating the Apostles' Creed in the baptismal forms, there simply are no grounds from Scripture or the Church Order in favour or opposed.

These churches have studied the decision of Synod Chatham 2004 (Acts Article 115) and came to the conclusion that this was not a

wise or beneficial thing to do, that Synod Chatham had overlooked certain aspects or implications. These churches then asked Synod Smithers 2007 to revisit this matter and provided what they considered new grounds. This is not a matter of Article 31 but of Article 33 of the Church Order. Synod Smithers then had all the freedom to evaluate and weigh these new grounds and see if it would make sense to revise this decision of the previous Synod. We know the outcome. Synod said, "Yes, the arguments presented are convincing" and decided accordingly.

We may not agree with this revision. And we may think that it is not very consistent when one synod says "yes" and the next one says "no" in the same matter, but then we talk about the content of the decision. But when it comes to procedure, there is nothing illegal or inconsistent in the way in which Synod Smithers applied the rules.

J. DeGelder

From time to time Clarion will publish longer responses to articles received. The decision as to which responses to publish will rest with the Editor.



Smithers, British Columbia





Postmodernism and post-secularism

I would like to respond to Rev. Clarence Stam's editorial in the issue of January 18. While I can underline several of his observations, there are also issues where corrections or at least qualifications are necessary.

One of these is the description of cultural periods. The author writes that postmodernism is a thing of the past because post-secularism has arrived. This, he adds, is in a sense a good thing, for postmodernism was secular whereas under post-secularism religion is again allowed. These definitions are largely incorrect, however. The secular age, the period which gave rise to a great variety of "death-of-God" thinkers, is generally called modernism, and the demand for religion, the supernatural, spirituality, and so on, came with postmodernism. Postmodernism therefore is not to be distinguished from post-secularism but coincides with it and is still very much with us. Confusing as it may seem, our period is at the same time postmodern, post-secular, post-Christian, post-industrial – and indeed "-post" in a variety of other ways.

Rev. Stam is right in stating that although in our days religiosity is again "in," it is also more and more becoming an individual thing. The church as a community is far less important than it used to be and many believers decide for themselves what they will or will not believe. Here the author issues warnings that deserve our close attention. For example: "Our Lord did not say, 'All you have to do is believe.' He said, 'Follow me.' Paul writes to Timothy, 'Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you. . . we are exhorted to keep the pattern of sound teaching.'" All this indeed needs saying in our day and age.

I have a problem, however, with Rev. Stam's unqualified, wholesale condemnation of post-secularism (and, by implication, of postmodernism). He writes that post-secular religion "has become an outward, formal matter. It does not really touch the heart or change lives. . . Satan's scenario calls for a lot of false religion but no true faith. . . ." And towards the end, "Nowadays the faith doesn't even exist anymore in the post-secular mind." Now I do not doubt that the promotion of false religion is part of "Satan's scenario," but neither do I believe that he has won the battle altogether. Let me explain.

Rev. Stam suggests that the post-secular worldview is especially influential among young people, including our own. I tend to agree. Like other members of our post-secular society many young

people are, for example, less prone to insist on "true doctrine" as the one and only mark of the Christian, or to stress the distinction between true and false church as forcefully as used to be done among us. But while agreeing with him on these points, I do not conclude that therefore our young people are in the enemy's camp. (I do not for a moment think that the author believes so himself, but it could very easily be "read into" his article.) Nor is their view of the church necessary unbiblical. Most of the young people I know do not reject, for example, Articles 27-29 of the Belgic Confession. They are, however, afraid of empty slogans. "True church," they reason (in an altogether biblical manner), "is what true church does." For them orthodoxy is not to be divorced from orthopraxis, nor are the marks of the true church to be divorced from those of the true Christian. They will therefore also question, I would think, the suggestion that "we" have always necessarily been on our own and will continue to be on our own until the end, because all the rest belongs to Satan's camp. Christ's dominion, they know and confess, is worldwide.

In short, many of our younger church members want to see the fruits of adherence to orthodox doctrine. They confess that when Christ said, "Follow me!" He asked not for slogans but demanded actual discipleship. It is this conviction that helps explain the increased concern for the outside world, as evident in the enthusiasm for evangelism and social outreach which we note among our own young people and among young Christians elsewhere. They have rediscovered the truth of what a Reformed theologian once wrote, namely that our conversion must consist of two movements: from the world to Christ and then from Christ back to the world. If this is an insight that post-secularism, and by implication postmodernism, has made possible, then we should be grateful that the Lord in his providence has brought about this change of worldview.

To conclude, let us by all means remind each other of the temptations which our postmodern age, like all preceding ages, poses. But let us also attempt truly to understand our times and make a diligent use of the possibilities that the postmodern, post-secular age offers for Christ's church and kingdom.

Frederika Oosterhoff
Hamilton, ON

Dear Editor,

Will the next generation of Reformed Christians still embrace the psalms and Genevan melodies for their personal and corporate worship? Already today, in praise and worship evenings, whether there is a mixed audience or one that is predominantly young people, these songs have usually been relegated to a very minor role. How many families still sing them when they have their devotions?

In past generations, the psalms stood central in our Reformed community to praise God and comfort his people. The Genevan psalter still has a dominant place in our Reformed schools; they are a significant part of the students' memory work and they are frequently sung during devotions. In our Sunday worship services psalms are still dominant. Is that because the churches feel compelled to comply with the Church Order (Article 55)? Anyone living in the mainstream of our church life will know that outside of school and church the love and interest in the Genevan psalter is slowly dying.

Ed and Jennifer VanderVegte (*Clarion*, Vol. 57, No. 1) courageously (or blindly!) argue for a status quo. They claim that we do not need to modernize the text of our psalter by changing antiquated English pronouns and verb agreements. Are these really poetic? Our psalter surely doesn't sound like John Donne or John Milton! Furthermore, the VanderVegtes are aware that Elizabethan English is not commonly used in our homes, churches, or schools. The classics of literature are meant to be studied and appreciated as classics. That is also why very few people read them or understand them. Like the Greek of our New Testament which was written in the Greek of the market place, our psalter should be for the common people. Classical Greek and classical English belong in the academy.

It was also interesting to note that Ed and Jennifer VanderVegte observed that other than the change of the "Thee, Thou, and Thine" throughout the new metrical texts, the language is still old fashioned. I agree with them. Let me give you an example from Psalm 101:5: "Those who are faithful, without guile or

malice, / I will appoint to serve me in my palace. / No liar and no scandalmonger shall / In my house dwell." Do your children use "guile or malice," do they keep close tabs on local "scandalmongers"? Go through the new metrical psalms (www.bookofpraise.ca/) and read *these through the eyes of an average young person, or school child, or the eyes of non-academics*. Should we expect the common people to reach high? They won't. They will defer to texts that are more accessible.

When I read many of the new metrical texts, I was amazed by the amount of work that has been done. But I was also disappointed. As the VanderVegtes observed, often the language is still old, i.e., idiomatically it is not contemporary or current.

Every week I introduce a new psalm for memory work at school. Because the psalms were originally written thousands of years ago, many concepts and terms unique to the psalms are very foreign to my students. Nevertheless, they have to learn those because that unique language is integral to our psalms. The awkward expressions, however, and the antiquated English are unnecessary hurdles. I had hoped that they would largely disappear in a new version, as modern idiom replaces the old. Thus far, that is not the case. I also have to remind myself that these versions currently available at (www.bookofpraise.ca) are draft. I sincerely hope they experience an idiomatic revision. As requested, send your comments to the Committee.

Our children are not given much consideration in worship services. The language of our services and the targeted audience is adult. At least during the singing they finally have an opportunity to participate, formally. Currently, we have a chance to lower the comprehension threshold so that the language will speak the hearts of the children – and to most adults! If we fail, twenty-five years from now the psalter may only find a place in the school and in church services, but not in the hearts of the people.

Pieter H. Torenvliet
Abbotsford, BC

*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.*

Book Reviews

Reviewed by W.L. Bredenhof

***The Belgic Confession:
Its History and Sources,
Nicolaas H. Gootjes
(Grand Rapids: Baker
Academic, 2007).***

Additional Information:
Paperback, 229 pages, \$20.78

Over the years, numerous commentaries have been published on the firstborn of our confessional family, the Belgic Confession. Most of these commentaries give a brief overview of the history of the Confession, but these introductions are typically regurgitated from the research of others. Moreover, up till the publication of this book, we did not have a work in English *dedicated* to the study of the history and background of the Belgic Confession.

The author, professor of dogmatics at our Theological College in Hamilton, has carefully studied all the available source documents and presents some fresh, surprising results. Since the publication of his earlier research on the subject, we knew for certain that the authorship of the Confession rests with Guido de Bres. But what we didn't know was how much of a threat de Bres presented to the Roman Catholic Church. This knowledge comes through a relatively unknown painting of the era in which de Bres is included with other Reformers such as Calvin, Beza, and Luther. Gootjes includes a reproduction of the painting along with some valuable commentary.

Besides his fascinating discussions of the history and authorship of the Confession, the author also explores the influence

of Calvin and Beza. The mention of the latter is especially interesting, since he is often overlooked in discussions (in English) regarding the sources of the Confession. Through the course of three chapters, Gootjes traces the development of the authority of the Confession, noting that it was adopted by the churches in The Netherlands very early on, probably even before its publication in 1561. Chapter 7 deals with the Synod of Dort and the discussions concerning the Confession at the synod and leading up to the synod. This is an engaging section, especially for its portrayal of Arminius and his fudging with the Confession. With an eye to discussions of our day, it was also remarkable that the Synod of Dort discussed the inclusion of the doctrine of the active obedience of

Christ. The chairman of the synod, Bogerman, attempted to have Article 22 rephrased so as to make room for a denial of this doctrine. In the end, all the delegates except for two (Bogerman and one other) voted this down and instead decided to strengthen the statement about this matter. The book concludes with a chapter surveying the various translations – this chapter is meant to be a survey, so it is not comprehensive (the early history of the Confession in Spanish is not mentioned, for instance). Nevertheless, it does reveal the widespread adoption of this creed.

Being a student of the Belgic Confession myself, I have been long anticipating this work. Gootjes did not disappoint! I am confident that this will be the definitive English source on the Confession's history for many years to come.



Reviewed by **C. Bouwman**

The Belgic Confession: Its History and Sources, Nicolaas H. Gootjes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

Additional Information:
Paperback, 229 pages, \$20.78

The Belgic Confession

To train young men to be ministers of the Word of God is no small task and invariably takes a great deal of time and commitment. Just imagine: all the background reading and study that's required to teach the entirety of reformed doctrine and ethics and philosophy, the entirety of Old Testament and New Testament studies together with the trends happening in those fields today, the how of preaching and giving pastoral care, the full scope of church history and the how of church government, and so very, very much more; there's so much to pass on to the students! And it won't do to get stale or out of touch with the latest developments in one's field. The four current professors at the College have no small task. Perhaps it's understandable, then, that not many scholarly publications have appeared over the years from the College's instructors.

Precisely for this reason is it fitting to draw attention to a publication recently published by Prof. Dr. N.G. Gootjes, professor of dogmatology – and that's to say that he's the man responsible at the College for teaching Reformed doctrine and ethics and philosophy. Recently Baker Academic, a world-renowned publisher of theology books (they're based in Grand Rapids) released a book entitled *The Belgic Confession: its History and Sources*, written by our

esteemed professor. The book covers 229 pages, comes with a plain yet attractive cover, is pleasantly laid out, and is available from Amazon for \$30 (including postage). I collected my copy from the mailbox yesterday, and finished reading it this morning.

Topic

What the book is about? The Belgic Confession is one of the world's best-known statements of faith and serves as one of the confessions of many Reformed churches. Though the Belgic Confession comes originally from The Netherlands, it today has a prominent place in many English speaking churches of the world, including the Canadian Reformed Churches. Yet there has never appeared in the English language a detailed treatment of where the Belgic Confession comes from, how it was written, how it was originally received, how it grew from the author's hand into the document printed in our *Book of Praise*, etc. Prof. Gootjes has provided this treatment and he's done it well. The book is written with the "churchly audience" in mind (as the preface says), yet is of such scholarly calibre that it could be published in Baker's "Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought" series. A hearty congratulations is in order to Prof. Gootjes and hence to the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches.

Details

A bit more detail on the content of the book may be in place. Prof. Gootjes tells us of Guido de Bres' work amongst the French-speaking Reformed people of the Southern Netherlands (now Belgium) and the struggle to pass on the wealth of Scripture in a context of persecution. In his efforts to impress on his people

what the gospel really was about, de Bres penned a confession. He did not, however, start this confession from scratch, but drew heavily on the Gallican Confession published in France a couple of years before. In fact, John Calvin himself had a hand in forming the Gallican Confession, and it's known that de Bres was in contact with Calvin. Gootjes even concludes that Calvin received a copy of de Bres' confession and expressed his agreement with it. Not surprising, then, that there's a strong similarity in thought between Calvin's Institutes and the Belgic Confession!

Prof. Gootjes tells us too that in writing his confession, de Bres also made use of a personal creed drawn up by Theodore Beza, another leader of note in the Great Reformation. De Bres borrowed from Beza, modified bits of Beza's work, and omitted other parts of it. De Bres, then, thought for himself, yet insisted on standing on the shoulders of those who laboured before him. And that, of course, is distinctly how it ought to be, for the Lord is gathering a catholic church – and that's to say that no generation has to reinvent the wheel but may (and must) treasure the work of others in whom the Lord has worked the gift of faith.

Prof. Gootjes shows that de Bres' confession was never intended to be simply de Bres' private property or personal conviction. Before he published his confession, de Bres had a number of other ministers read through it to offer improvements. When the Belgic Confession was published in the autumn of 1561, its cover page indicated that this Confession was "made with common accord by the believers who live in The Netherlands, who desire to live according to the purity of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ." "By common accord":

from the word go, this confession belonged not to an individual but to the churches. More, from the day it first appeared in print, this confession documented what the Reformed churches actually believed – and it was the statement that united the churches in one faith. Since the days of its beginning, members of the churches were meant to embrace it and office bearers were meant to subscribe to it.

And that's intriguing. For, as Gootjes relates, the times were tumultuous. We're told of the summer cottage where de Bres secretly did his work, how his supporters put fire to his study to prevent the persecutors from finding his books and papers, how the persecutors came upon the fire and put it out – and salvaged a couple hundred copies of the printed confession, only to use it against the Reformed believers and ultimately destroy what they salvaged. Given the pressures of the time, one wonders whether a new confession was worth publishing or spreading. One could

question too whether in such circumstances the churches (and hence the members) do well to have a common confession, let alone have the office bearers subscribe to it. I suspect that in our day we'd think this to be a bit over the top. But awareness of how our fathers treated the confession does us well, for here's incentive for modern people to treasure this precise statement of faith in our day and hold each other to it. After all, this confession catches so accurately what the Lord has told us in Scripture and there simply are no circumstances that allow us to deviate from anything the Lord has revealed.

Weaknesses

Are there weaknesses in Prof Gootjes' book? Of course there are; aside from the Bible, there is no book without weaknesses. Yet I'm happy to admit that the weaknesses of this book are, to my reading, few and far between. I picked up no typos, but did notice some awkward grammar. The flow of thought in the book is clear and the grounds offered for the various

conclusions are well developed. Yet precisely there is perhaps the greatest weakness of the book. The average reader, I think, will not find all the argumentation leading to the conclusions too spell-binding. Then again, that need not be a problem; here and there there's a page or three one can easily skip without losing the flow of the book.

A worthwhile acquisition – or birthday gift? I'd say yes. Just don't leave it sitting on the shelf. . . neither the contents nor the labour behind the contents deserve that.

College

The Theological College plays an important role in the life of the churches. We're thankful that the Lord has given Prof. Gootjes the strength and insight to come to this publication. May the Lord God grant the professor further health and strength to continue his work and make him and his fellow professors a continued blessing for the churches. As to scholarly publications from Hamilton's professors: we look forward to more!



The Netherlands