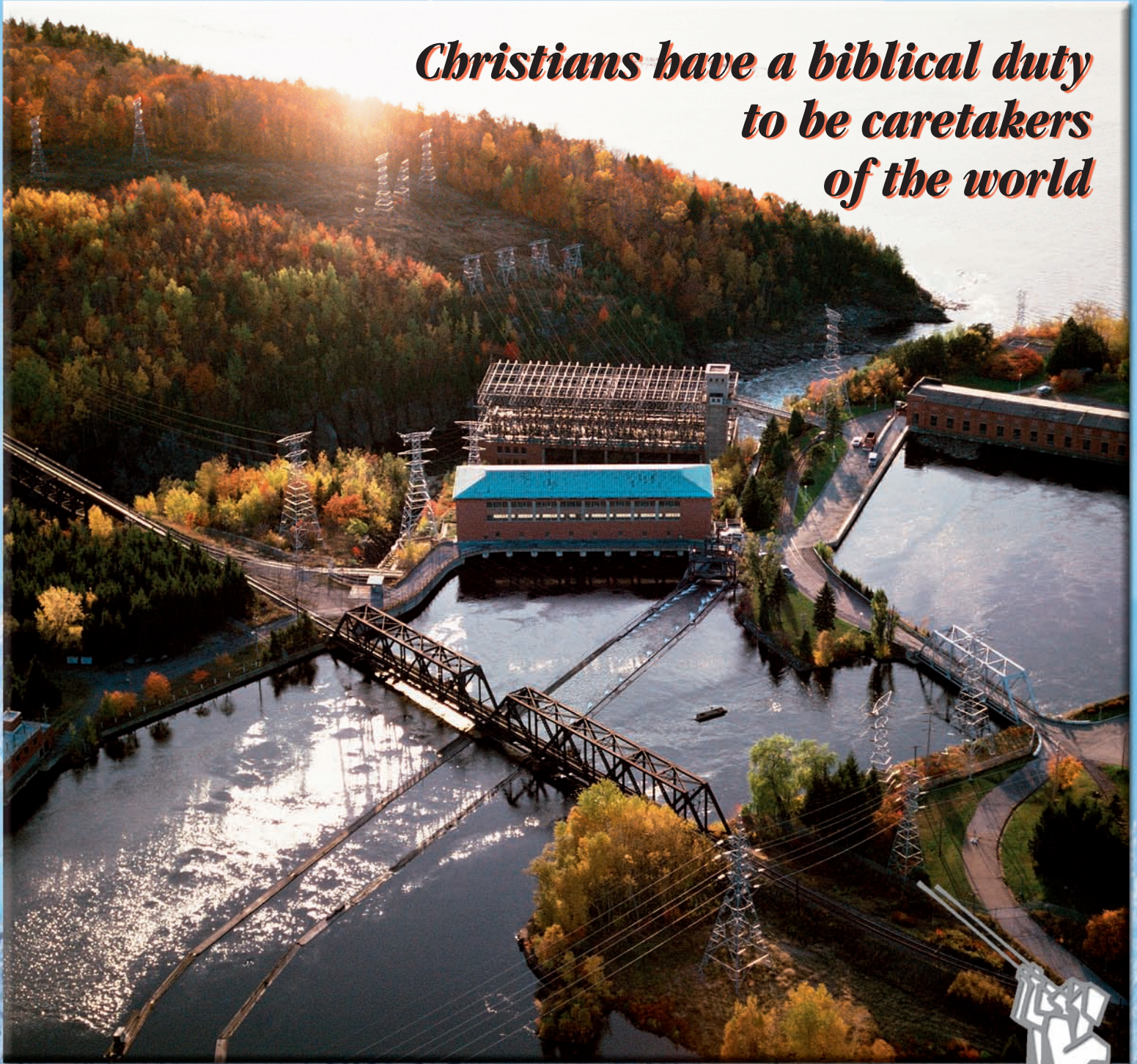


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*Christians have a biblical duty
to be caretakers
of the world*



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- Without Excuse
- Remembering Creation





W.B. Slomp

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How to Listen to a Sermon

In reality listening is more difficult than speaking

Over the years many books and articles have been written about preaching. *Clarion* has also had its share of articles concerning this topic. But to my knowledge articles concerning the art of listening to a sermon are virtually nonexistent. Listeners to sermons far outnumber preachers. Every Sunday and on special occasions the person in the pew listens to one or two sermons. That's more than 100 sermons per year. Although they hear the proclamation of God's Word, it doesn't necessarily sink in all the way. The preaching doesn't necessarily benefit the hearer the way it should.

That's because we are poor listeners. The assumption is made that listening comes naturally to us. It is not something that we need to learn. And therefore there are no courses specifically designed to teach people how to listen to the preaching. The Bible, however, tells us how important it is to listen. The preacher says in Ecclesiastes 5:1, "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen. . . ." And the Lord Jesus said in Luke 8:18, "Therefore consider carefully how you listen."

When you live close to the Lord then you are eager to hear his Word

In reality listening is more difficult than speaking. That is why James says, "My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak" (James 1:19). The biblical religion is the religion of the Word. For that reason hearing is emphasized. In Isaiah 1:2, the prophet says, "Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the Lord has spoken."

Throughout the Old Testament the Lord makes the accusation against his rebellious covenant people that they are not listening to Him. He says in Jeremiah 7:13, "While you were doing all these things, declares the Lord, I spoke to you again and again, but you did not listen; I called you, but you did not answer."

In the New Testament the importance of listening is emphasized as well. Paul says in Galatians 4:21, "Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?" (ESV)

Preparation

In order to be a good listener you have to be properly prepared. If we live during the week as if God does not exist, as if we do not need Him, then the preaching will have little or no effect. For the Word to be planted in fertile soil there must be a sincere desire to serve the Lord every day of the week. David writes in Psalm 139:23, 24, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; See if there is any offensive way in me." David wants to live close to the Lord and therefore he wants to know about any obstacles that are in the way that would prevent that.

A life of self-examination leads to the knowledge of your sins and creates a desire to hear the message of salvation. When you live close to the Lord then you are eager to hear his Word.

Preparation must therefore be done carefully. Knowing that many people pray for me during the week as I prepare the message is of great comfort to me. But, you do not just pray for the minister. You should also pray for yourself, that the Lord will cultivate your heart so that you will hear Him. Listening with your heart is difficult, because our hearts are messed up. And so, you must ask the Lord



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to prepare your heart to want what He wants, to love the things that He loves, and to care for the things He cares for.

In the parable of the sower (Mark 4:1-20) the Lord Jesus compares the heart to the soil of the earth. In order for a plant to take root and to grow the soil has to be properly prepared. In that parable the Lord refers to four different kinds of hearts.

Four kinds of hearts

In the first place Jesus Christ speaks about hard hearts. That refers to those people who are bitter and angry because of all kinds of things. Their anger or resentment could be directed at the minister for some reason, or at other people such as family members, brothers and sisters in the Lord, or co-workers. It could also be that their hearts are hardened because of unrepentant sins. Because of such a sinful attitude they are unable to hear the message. They don't listen for themselves, thinking only about how others should apply the message. But you do not get anything out of the preaching if you don't apply God's Word to yourself in the first place.

Secondly the Lord Jesus refers to those whose hearts are shallow. They are looking for immediate satisfaction in life and have no patience when adversity comes their way. They want what they want now. They seek immediate solutions and when they do not get it they shut their hearts to the Lord. The eternal truths of God's Word do not move them.

In the third place there are those whose hearts are thorny. Such people are busy in their minds with all kinds of worldly things and are full of anxiety. Consequently they have difficulty concentrating on the message. During the preaching they have their minds on the vicissitudes of daily life, choking out the message being preached.

In the fourth place the Lord Jesus refers to those with good and responsive hearts. That refers to those people who are hungry for God's Word and who expect the Lord God to guide their lives. Week in, week out they come to be strengthened in their faith

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and to be encouraged. For they know that only the Lord can rescue them in the midst of the turmoil and uncertainty and sinfulness they experience within themselves and all around them. They look forward to be fed with the good nourishment that only God's Word can give.

Conclusion

Listening to the preaching every week does not do you any good unless you also apply it in your life. It is not enough to faithfully show up for every worship service and then not to put God's Word into practice. James says, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like" (James 1:22-24).

Listening to the preaching every week does not do you any good unless you also apply it in your life

When you listen to the preaching carefully, then it is like a mirror being held up in front of you. For God's Word reveals who you truly are: a sinner in need of redemption. It exposes your sins and holds out God's promises. Through the Word of God you are washed. As the Lord Jesus says in John 15:3, "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you."

Such cleansing through God's Word can only occur if you allow his Word to penetrate your heart. Every time you hear the proclamation of God's Word your life is changed; it is renewed. You once again have been given the courage and the zeal to live your life to God's glory. And ultimately that is the aim of being a careful listener to God's Word, so that you can give glory to God's Name.



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Without Excuse



MATTHEW 13:52

“For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”

Romans 1:20

One of the most famous atheists of the twentieth century was the British philosopher Bertrand Russell, the author of a book entitled *Why I Am Not A Christian*. Russell asserted that the Christian faith has no basis in reality and that any truly rational person would reject the claims of religion. For Russell, faith was nothing more than evidence of a person’s gullibility. When he was on his deathbed, Russell was asked what he would say to God if he found himself in God’s presence after he died. In answer to this question Russell replied, “I should reproach Him for not giving us enough evidence.”

What’s the explanation for this unbelief? Is it that men like Bertrand Russell haven’t received enough evidence to see what we see? Is it that we’ve searched for God and found Him, whereas the atheist intellectuals of the world haven’t been able?

Scripture tells us a different story. Paul’s message in Romans 1:20 is that everyone knows the truth. Everyone knows that there is a God, because God hasn’t hidden Himself. What may be known about God is plain, because God has made it plain. Since creation, up to this very day, God’s invisible qualities “have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.”

The only way to claim that there is no God is to work actively to ignore that truth. This isn’t a passive act; this is a deliberate suppression of the truth. And this

suppression of the truth is done because of wickedness. Man’s guilt is not due to his ignorance of the facts. If that were true, the problem would be an intellectual one. But the fact is this: no one is ignorant of the facts! The problem is a problem of the heart and will – it’s a spiritual problem. Men fight against the knowledge of God because of the wickedness of their hearts.

Think about the evidence that is available to us. We can’t even begin to comprehend the infinity of the universe with our finite minds. Just think about the amazing power that exists within the sun, the sheer size of it, the amount of energy that it produces – and then think that there are millions of suns in the universe. Think about DNA, about human chromosomes, and about genetics. Think about your eye, and the fact that you can see. Think about your ear, and the fact that you can hear. Think about how these things work together with your brain so that you can understand, and think, and reason. Through *all* of these things God cries out to his creation, “I am here! I made this! I am God!”

So when non-Christians say that God is unfair for condemning a person who hasn’t heard about Him, we can respond by saying that such a person doesn’t exist. There is no one who hasn’t heard of God, or who doesn’t know that God exists. And that’s why there is no excuse. That’s why no one can appear before God’s judgment seat and say, “I never knew you!”

As believers, it would be easy to think that we are the wise ones because we have acknowledged that God exists and because we worship Him. But we need to remember that if it wasn’t for God’s loving kindness, we would be in exactly the same place as so many others. If God hadn’t revealed Himself to us and opened our eyes, we’d be railing against Him along with every atheist and agnostic in the world. If God’s Holy Spirit hadn’t worked in our hearts through his Word, we’d be just as lost and foolish as anyone else.

We have no cause to boast in ourselves. We believe, but not because we’re any smarter or more perceptive than anyone else. It’s because of one thing, and one thing only: God’s amazing grace. We’ve had the scales taken from our eyes. We’ve been given a glimpse of the glory of God. We’ve been given an amazing gift and we need to see the glory in being able to share that gift with others.

And if those who have never heard the gospel are without excuse, where does that leave us? If those who’ve never heard of Jesus Christ have no excuse for not knowing God, what excuse do we have, who do know Jesus Christ? If everyone is without excuse, how much more inexcusable are we if we don’t worship the Lord! We know God. We have seen his glory. Let us then glorify Him as God. Let us give thanks to Him. He, and He alone, is forever praised!



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Remembering Creation (Part 1 of 2): Caring for the Environment

Scott Hoezee,
*Remember Creation: God's
World of Wonder and Delight*
(Eerdmans, 1998), 115 pages

Scott Hoezee, a Reformed pastor in Grand Rapids, has written two books dealing with Christian attitudes toward creation. He is concerned that Bible-believing Christians, both Reformed and evangelical, allow unbelievers to set the pace in celebrating the beauty of creation, in taking seriously our duty to protect it, and also in acknowledging the great gift we receive in the scientific study of nature.

He admits that in some respects this attitude is understandable. After all, creation is now considered to be the accidental result of a naturalistic evolutionary process; the ecological movement is in danger of being hijacked by militant animal rights activists and New Age pantheists; and modern science is all too often used as a basis for atheistic ideologies. But does this justify a Christian disregard of the ecological problems and a negative attitude toward science? Hoezee does not think so. His arguments, based on Scripture, are worth listening to. I concentrate in this article on the

first of the two books, which reminds us of God's delight in his creation and points to ways in which we can learn to protect and nourish it. The second book, which focuses on the Christian attitude toward science, I hope to review in the next installment.

The cosmic battle

In the introductory chapter, Hoezee observes that Christians appear to find debates on the *origin* of the universe much more important than the question how to live responsibly in the creation as it is *at present*. He refers to the "Top 25" list of books annually published by the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*. "The readers who select these books each year," he comments, "routinely vote for volumes that critique fossil records, Darwinian theories, and the state of scientific education in public schools and universities. . . . Books dealing with a Christian view of ecology or celebrating the beauty of God's handiwork have never made the list." He grants that Christians have a stake in the creation-evolution debate, but does not believe that the atheistic attacks are a real justification for us to "take more interest in this ancient aspect of the creation than we do in our daily celebration and

maintenance of that same creation." After all, the Bible says far more about God's delight in his creation than about the origins of the world.

Referring to the use of the word *battle* in the titles of some anti-Darwinist books, Hoezee points out that the war about origins is not the only one we have to fight, nor is it the most important one. There is also the great battle between God and Satan about the *present* world. The Bible clearly reveals not only that God made all that exists, but also that He continues to love and cherish his work, "that he even now is redeeming it from the clutches of the Evil One, and that he will one day soon make a new creation of wonder and delight." "Given," Hoezee continues, "that the Son of God died to redeem the entire universe from its bondage to decay, is it any surprise that the devil even now seeks to undermine and sully the created splendors of this world? Given that one day soon God will renew everything from primroses to quasars, is it any surprise that the devil is furiously seeking to block that re-creation?" In short, promoting wrong ideas about cosmic origins is only one item "on the devil's very long list of things to do each day."

Why the lack of concern?

Hoezee notes that Christians who are most concerned about the authority of the Bible tend to be least concerned about the dangers to the environment. In fact, fundamentalists and other believers in biblical inerrancy are not infrequently hostile to environmentalism. In spite of their strong belief in biblical authority, they pay little or no attention to the many passages speaking of God's love for his creation. One reason for this paradoxical stance has already been mentioned, namely

The battle about origins (creation versus evolution) is not the only one we have to fight, nor is it the most important one

the anti-Christian attitude of many environmentalists. Hoezee points out, however, that we have a vicious circle here. "First, Christians largely ignore the physical world in favor of more 'spiritual' emphases. Then when non-Christians step into the ecological vacuum with predictably non-Christian teachings, Christians hold up those teachings as evidence that they must further distance themselves from the environmentalist movement." (I wonder, incidentally, if that process has not been going on in other areas as well – such as racism, apartheid, colonialism, gay bashing. Must we not explain the

world's hostility toward Christianity in part on the fact that when unbelievers deal with what they consider injustices, many Christians not only distance themselves, but persistently and sometimes stridently criticize the efforts?)

The anti-Christian attitude of many environmentalists, then, is one reason why Christians ignore or oppose the movement. Another factor is that some believers see Christianity's only concern to be the saving of souls, and conceive of salvation "as an escape route out of the creation and into a heavenly realm – a realm often depicted as being as unlike this earth as is imaginable." Assuming the world to be transitory, doomed to final destruction, they do not believe there is any sense in bothering about its present "groaning" (Rom 8), its degradation and decay. But in fact, Hoezee reminds us, creation will endure. The New Jerusalem will come down to *this* planet (Rev 21). We are indeed looking forward to a better home, but that home will still be *this* earth, cleansed and renewed, for God will not allow his good work to be destroyed. Creation and its importance to God are pervasive themes in the Bible, from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. It is, Hoezee says, God's "first love." Redemption came in the service of creation. Why then do so many Christians speak of creation only in order to attack the theory of evolution? Is there no more to be said and done?

The care of creation

Fierce debates are taking place today on climate change, pollution, endangered species, the dying out

of species, and the depletion of forests, water supplies, and natural resources in general. Scientists and politicians disagree on both the severity of these developments and their causes and ultimate consequences. Rather than taking a position on these complex and controversial issues, Hoezee wants to remind Christians of their duty – regardless of whether or not the environmental crisis is as severe as is being claimed – to heed the biblical command to be caretakers of the world.

Given that one day soon God will renew everything, is it any surprise that the devil is furiously seeking to block that re-creation?

That command is clear. So is the fact that Christians have all too often ignored it. Secular environmentalists like to put much of the blame for the world's decay on the biblical teaching that the human race is to dominate and subdue the earth and to rule over its fellow-creatures (Gen 1:28). Although, as Hoezee points out, eco-unfriendliness occurs also in civilizations ruled by non-Christian religions like Buddhism and Hinduism and even more so in modern atheistic dictatorships, it is true that Christians have used the mandate as an excuse for exploiting the earth. They must realize that one can "rule" in very different ways, namely in a caring,

godlike manner and in a despotic, demonic one. Having been made in God's image, humans must imitate Him who rules in such a way that all things happen "not by chance, but by his *fatherly* hand." Christ ruled by emptying Himself, thereby setting an example for his followers. Christians should also remember that the human being has been appointed a steward of creation and will be held accountable for the way he rules and uses it.

Care is to be shown for the physical creation, for the earth's vegetation, and for the animal world. The animals receive much attention in the Bible. We read in Proverbs 12 that the righteous man cares for the needs of his animal. Herein he follows his God, who established a covenant with Noah *and with every living creature that was with him*, who ordained that domestic animals, like humans, be allowed to rest on the Sabbath, and who rejoiced when Nineveh repented, and that not only for the sake of the human inhabitants but also because of the "many cattle." We can learn from the Psalms, the Book of Job, and the Bible generally, that God cares for and rejoices in all his creatures, also in those that are of no benefit to humans – the eagle, the raven, and the sparrow, the lion, the leviathan, the mountain goat, the wild ox, the coney, the ostrich, and the behemoth or hippopotamus, which "ranks first among the works of God" (Job 40:19). All creation praises its Maker, pouring forth speech day by day.

A helpful book

I hope that this book will find a wide readership among us. I recommend it in the first place to our Christian teachers who tell me they have a hard time finding the right approach when dealing with environmental issues. On the one hand they know of the exploitation

God cares for and rejoices in all his creatures, also in those that are of no benefit to humans

of nature and of the need to end this abuse. But they are also aware of the anti-Christian, anti-human elements in modern environmentalist movements,

elements that are endorsed by secular texts and perhaps even by ministerial guidelines. To find a "balanced" approach can be difficult.

Hoezee's book, I believe, can be helpful here. It is a slim volume, engagingly written, honest, and thoroughly biblical. It conveys a genuine delight in the world of nature and a genuine gratitude for God's bountiful gifts, admits the urgent need to protect creation, and gives pointers as to how we can do so, not first of all in the world at large, but in our own homes and localities. It will "speak" to children. But it also deserves the attention of the adults in the Christian community. The work of environmental protection may not be left in the hands of secularists only.



Jubilee Church Fiftieth Anniversary

On January 4, 1959, the Ottawa Canadian Reformed Church was instituted. Exactly fifty years later, on January 4 in the Year of Our Lord 2009, the newly named Jubilee Church came together once again to worship and to also celebrate God's providence in keeping a congregation in Canada's capital for fifty years. In the morning service, Pastor George van Popta focused on the new name given to the Ottawa congregation – Jubilee Church.

Ottawa chose this name for several reasons. First of all, the fiftieth anniversary of an event is called the Jubilee Anniversary. The name Jubilee also has a deep biblical significance. Leviticus 25 teaches about the Year of Jubilee. It was a year that proclaimed freedom from slavery. The Lord Jesus came to proclaim the final and everlasting Jubilee. In Luke 4:19 he called it "the year of the Lord's favour." The Lord was quoting from Isaiah 61 where the prophet was alluding back to Leviticus 25. For fifty years now the gospel of freedom has been proclaimed from the pulpit of the Canadian Reformed Church of Ottawa.

Jubilee also has a happy sound and will be understood that way. The words "jubilant" and



Mr. Holtvluwer delivers a synopsis of the past fifty years in Ottawa

"jubilation" are part of the English vocabulary. When we invite our neighbours or colleagues to Jubilee Church then we will be inviting them to a joyful place of celebration where good news is told.

In the afternoon service, Pastor George preached on Matthew 16:18 where Christ declares, "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it!" With his message he encouraged the congregation to continue moving forward, using the gifts of the older members of the congregation as a foundation and the enthusiasm of the many

younger members to fulfil our Christian mandate in this city. Certainly, as we look forward, the Ottawa congregation is facing the challenge of beginning a Canadian Reformed elementary school in 2011, *deo volente*. For this to succeed we need God's blessing and your prayers and financial support as well.

After the afternoon service, the congregation enjoyed a program of celebration to mark the golden anniversary. After opening with reading Isaiah 61, a passage which describes what the Jubilee will be like, and prayer and singing of Hymn 46, the program began with

Mr. Henk Holtvluwer, who together with his wife was an original member of the congregation. He gave an overview of the past fifty years. His presentation was followed by a visual history lesson from the youth of the congregation. Pastor George then gave a short speech about how we may celebrate a Golden Jubilee Anniversary – this phrase is usually reserved for kings and queens, but as we confess in Lord’s Day 12, we are all called to be kings and queens with Him as so we too can celebrate a Golden Jubilee Anniversary! The program



The Jubilee Children’s Choir sings praise to their Father

also included a number of songs, including a harmonized version of Psalm 47 and a version of a Robert Frost poem sung by the College

and Careers group, a Canon in D solo by Melinda Greenough, a lovely trio and two songs by the Jubilee Children’s Choir. There was also a beautiful arrangement of Handel pieces performed by Jubilee’s organist, Peter Buist. Immediately following the program, the entire congregation sat down to a potluck dinner and enjoyed true fellowship together into the evening.

On this note, Jubilee Church wishes to invite everyone from the federation to come to Ottawa this coming Victoria Day long weekend, May 16th-17th, as we continue to celebrate our Golden Jubilee Anniversary. After all, Ottawa is every Canadian’s second hometown! In all of this, Jubilee Church recognizes that to God alone is the glory! To Him be thanks and praise for what He does for us every day in Canada’s capital!



Potluck and fellowship following the program





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What's New???

It is time once again to share some of the items that have caught my eye perusing the various bulletins that come my way. We start off with something that must have happened before but was not recorded for the benefit of others. In one congregational write up it said, "On the lighter side (maybe I'm crossing the line here) last Sunday my son. . . swallowed a quarter in church. After having x-rays done we were assured that 'this too will pass.' At the time of writing this report we have received nothing in return but when it does happen we are hoping for a loonie instead. We have assured the deacons that payment is forthcoming."

It is surprising that these things don't happen more often. After all, one of the favourite mints has the image of a Queen on one side, as does a quarter.


The next item is of interest as it ties in with a point made in a previous "What's New???" about the calling of ministers. In the congregational news of the church at Smithville it could be read that the "Council has engaged Rev. Zylstra to do also pastoral work in the congregation, however, we were not the only ones interested in his services. Our sister churches

in Elora and Burlington/Waterdown are also after his services. Please pray for Rev. Zylstra that he may receive the guidance of the Holy Spirit in accepting the offer that serves His church best." A few months later it could be read in the Council report, "Council revisited the issue of Rev. Zylstra's role in the congregation. It was noted that Rev. Zylstra's work has been blessed in the congregation, and we would like to extend the period of his hire. Council calls the congregation to a meeting after the afternoon service on December 21st, 2008 where council will propose a plan for having Rev. Zylstra further his work here."

Now I wish to stress that I have no concerns about Rev. Zylstra. I have met him on a number of occasions when both of us lived in the Fraser Valley. As iron sharpens iron, we have benefited from our interaction. Reading this, however, makes me wonder if as churches we are undergoing a paradigm shift in terms of the relationship of a minister and congregation. As can be noticed, Smithville was not the only one looking for his assistance. This has the appearance of contracting out ministerial services. This seems to be drifting away from the whole

concept of calling to office. The Church Order has many articles that speak specifically about the relationship of a minister and the congregation. A minister is bound to a congregation for life (e.g. articles 6, 9, 12) and safeguards are put in place to prevent a congregation from just dismissing him at a whim. These safeguards are necessary for a minister to be able to have a prophetic voice. Perhaps it is the spirit of the age where employers try to reduce costs and obligations to their employees by contracting out their labour. One wonders if the next step is going to be to have students for the ministry serve congregations for a probationary period before they will be called, or, before their call will be approved.

Moving on to a different topic, and a different part of the world, the consistory reports of the churches in Australia reveal there is a lively correspondence between consistories and school boards. In one report it said, "From [local school] Council – re payments. Letter to be written to the council that this has our attention, as it has had in the past, and they will be asked that, if there is a case that there is negligence, they contact



the ward elder of that particular family." A little further, in another consistory report it said, "Letter from FRSA membership committee with request to speak to young people doing profession of faith about their financial commitments to the school. *Noted.*"

With respect to contacting the ward elder, I wonder how that reconciles with the stipulation in the Church Order that no matter is to be reported to it unless it has first ascertained that both private admonitions and admonitions in the presence of one or two witnesses have remained fruitless, or the sin committed is of a public character" (CanRC CO 67; FRCA CO 71). With respect to the second, one wonders if membership in the school society becomes a condition for communicant membership in the church.

The matter of terminology regarding attestations seems to reappear from time to time. In one congregational news it read, "Speaking about farewells, we also have to say farewell to the . . . family. They will be moving. . . and have therefore asked for *their attestation*" (emphasis mine).

It is good to remind the readers that churches do not have attestations on file that simply can be pulled out of the archives and sent to another church. An attestation is always a newly composed document that will

speak of the spiritual faithfulness of a brother, sister, or family. It will also include statistics pertaining to birth, baptism, profession of faith and marriage. If a family has lived in a congregation for some time and received some more children during their stay, it is obvious that the attestation with which they arrived is not sufficient. Furthermore, there may have been a change in their spiritual faithfulness. So, when one moves it is proper to request the consistory to prepare an attestation concerning doctrine and life which can then be handed in to the church where one is moving. It is an old point but merits repeating from time to time.

An interesting item was gleaned from the report of the Toronto Council of November 19, 2008. It read, "The brothers also presented a proposal for an *audio/visual enhancement* which includes a new screen mounted between the pulpit and organ along with a projector mounted on the rear wall of the worship area; a laptop located at the sound booth will be used to display text, video, pictures etc. This proposal was approved by council. . . The total cost of this project is \$23,000.00."

I am aware that this is a trend in the churches. I must say, however, that I am a little perplexed by this trend. We have the audio in the preaching. We

have the visual in the sacraments. It would seem that a projector at best adds to the visual. But then we run up against what we confess in Lord's Day 35 with its warning about "dumb images."

Finally, in some council reports one can read things like the following with respect to Christian Censure according to Article 73 of the Church Order: "Thankfulness was expressed for the manner in which we could deal with the matters on the agenda."

I would suggest that this is a new reading of Article 73. It is true that this type of censure is to be exercised at the end of a broader assembly. We read in article 34 that "at the close of major assemblies, censure shall be exercised over those who in the meeting have done something worthy of reproof, or who have scorned the admonition of the minor assembly." Article 73 calls for censure "with regard to the execution of their office." This means that if it is felt a brother is not diligent in fulfilling his duties such as visiting the members in his ward, others have an opportunity to admonish him.

With this we wrap things up again. Undoubtedly, there is plenty of food for thought and discussion, and perhaps even a short article or letter.

Till the next time!



CRCA Report on 2008

General Synod 2007 gave renewed mandates to a number of its standing committees. One of those standing committees is the Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad (also known by its abbreviation – “CRCA”).

Some background

What is the CRCA and what does it do? It is a committee composed of eight men, four of whom are past or present elders and four of whom are active ministers. These men are appointed for three year terms and can be re-appointed twice, for a total of not more than nine years of service. Also, the CRCA is a so-called Western committee, which means that those who are appointed to it come from Western Canada in general and from the province of British Columbia in particular.

With respect to the mandate of the CRCA, it can usually be found in the *Acts* of General Synod. Unfortunately the CRCA report to Synod 2007 did not make it into the *Appendices* of the *Acts*. So for a clear grasp of its mandate you will need to glean material that is found here and there throughout the *Acts*. You can also try to find a copy of a report that went out to all of the churches in the federation in early 2007 or turn to the *Acts* of a previous synod.

In any case, it can be said in short that the CRCA is charged with the task of overseeing the relations that our churches have with churches that we have recognized in other parts of the world and with which we have entered into a formal relationship. That relationship is called “Ecclesiastical Fellowship” and is governed by the “Rules of Ecclesiastical Fellowship.” A popular name for churches with which we have Ecclesiastical Fellowship is “sister churches.”

The committee’s charge

For the purposes of this article it should be noted that among other things Synod Smithers 2007 charged “the CRCA to send delegates to: the General Synod 2008 of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands; The General Synod 2008 of the Reformed Churches in New Zealand; The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Korea (in consultation and rotation with sister churches); The 2009 meeting of the ICRC (full delegation: two delegates and two advisors)” (*Acts 2007*, Article 142).

In addition to these visits the CRCA monitors relations with present sister churches, as well as investigates and recommends a course of action with respect to

possible future sister churches or churches in Ecclesiastical Fellowship. It scrutinizes all *Acts* and *Minutes* of Synods and General Assemblies. It also deals with the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC). Other items can also be mentioned but this constitutes the bulk of the Committee’s workload.

Visiting the Synod the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (RCN)

In fulfillment of the first part of the charge mentioned already, the CRCA delegated the Revs. J. Moesker and J. Visscher to represent the Canadian Reformed churches at the General Synod of the RCN (also known as The Reformed Churches, Liberated). This visit took place in Zwolle, the Netherlands, from May 27-31, 2008, which had been designated as Foreign Delegates Week by the Synod. In total there were twenty-nine delegates present from sister churches and other contacts. All of the official presentations and discussions took place in the English language.

Synod Zwolle set aside time on its agenda to receive reaction from the foreign delegates about two reports that it had circulated. One of the reports had to do with relations between the RCN and the

Netherlands Reformed Churches (NRC). The latter churches had split from the RCN in the 1960s but over the last number of years many discussions have been going on both locally and federatively.

Recently these discussions, at least on a federative level, had been about the matter of confessional subscription. A majority of the RCN committee dealing with this matter was of the opinion that confessional unity had been reached with the NRC and they reported this to Synod Zwolle. A minority on the same committee disagreed that adequate progress had been made on this issue and in their report cited the fact that since 2004 the NRC had taken a decision to allow women to serve as elders, deacons, and ministers in the churches.

Most of the foreign delegates, and this included the delegates from the Canadian Reformed churches, supported the position of the minority report. They could not see how the majority could report on progress on the front of confessional unity and understanding when the NRC was in clear violation, among things, of Article 31 of the Belgic Confession.

Another report that the RCN wanted to discuss with foreign delegates had to do with a related matter and was entitled "The Role of Men and Women in the Church." In some ways this report was preliminary in that it surveyed the field rather broadly and made some recommendations on how to proceed further with this matter. With respect to this report as well, some of the foreign delegates expressed their unease with a number of things stated in the preliminary report, including its

underlying hermeneutic and its impression of bias, as well as with the three-pronged procedure being proposed. Several foreign delegates even expressed concern that in some ways it appeared as if the RCN was in danger of going down the same road as several other Reformed churches had gone in recent years with respect to women in office.

All in all, the above cannot help but give you the impression that the discussions between the Canadian Reformed delegates and delegates from the RCN were frank and pointed. We expressed appreciation for their hospitality and their willingness to discuss these matters with us and the other foreign delegates. We also expressed the hope that they would take our concerns to heart.

At the end of this year the report of the CRCA to Synod Burlington 2010 will be sent to the churches. In that report one can find a lot of additional material about what transpired at Zwolle. Suffice it to say that for the present we urge our churches in Canada to pray for their Dutch sister that she may stay the Reformed course as well as experience greater unity and harmony in her midst.

Visiting the Reformed Churches in New Zealand (RCNZ)

Another part of the CRCA's mandate was to send a delegate to the RCNZ. Synod Smithers 2007 gave this instruction to the CRCA because it had decided to enter into Ecclesiastical Fellowship with these churches down under and it wanted that relationship to start on a proper footing. Hence the CRCA delegated the Rev. W.M. Wielenga

to represent the Canadian Reformed churches at the Synod of the RCNZ. This Synod took place from September 8-11, 2008, in Napier on the north island of New Zealand.

Upon his return the Rev. Wielenga reported to the CRCA that his presence was greatly appreciated and that he was received most warmly. The RCNZ are very isolated churches and thus feel a deep need for contact with other faithful Reformed churches around the world. Also, our sister churches in Australia (FRCA) have excellent contact with the RCNZ. The only thing that hinders them from entering into an official relationship has to do with a third party relationship that complicates things in Australia. In light of this the FRCA also had no objections to the CanRC entering into a relationship with the RCNZ.

On behalf of the CanRC, Rev. Wielenga brought fraternal greetings from our churches to the Synod of the RCNZ in which he stressed the new relationship between our respective churches. He was seated as an official delegate and took note of the discussions relating to a number of issues relating to the church order, the ministerial supply situation (seven of nineteen churches are currently vacant), a psalm and hymn book for public worship, foreign missions (also in Papua New Guinea alongside the Canadian Reformed Church at Toronto), relations with foreign churches, as well as its relationships with the Free Reformed Churches in Australia and the Christian Reformed Church in Australia (a relationship that is currently "under strain").

Visiting the Presbyterian Church in Korea (PCK)

Synod Smithers 2007 also instructed the CRCA to visit the General Assembly of the PCK (in consultation and rotation with sister churches). To that end the CRCA contacted the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands through its committee in the hope that they would send someone to the General Assembly of 2008. They were unable to do so, and seeing that the Free Reformed Churches of Australia (FRCA) had sent someone the previous year, it was decided to send Br. H. Leyenhorst and Br. J. Vanderstoep to Seoul, Korea, on rather short notice. (In the meantime a rotation schedule has been set up with the sister churches meaning that we shall in the future be sending a

delegation to Korea no more than every three or four years.)

In some ways this visit of members of the CRCA to Korea from September 18 – 25, 2008, was more challenging than the previous two visits reported on above. They could both be conducted in the English language; whereas, this one took place in Korean and had to be done through a number of interpreters. Still, with their able assistance, the brothers made it work and their visit proved to be fruitful.

On Sunday the delegates worshipped in the Sounam church and could follow the sermon with the aid of simultaneous translation. After the morning worship service a meal was served and it was followed in due time by another service. One of the delegates, Br. H. Leyenhorst, was asked and gave

greetings to the congregation before the morning service. On Monday a prayer service was held and the delegates had supper with the Fraternal Relations Committee of the PCK. On Tuesday, Br. J. Vanderstoep addressed the General Assembly and brought greetings from the CanRC. For the rest they sat in on the Assembly and had many discussions with ministers of the PCK (even with Dr. Hur, formerly a minister in the FRCA). Also a few outstanding matters between our respective churches were dealt with successfully in committee and proper documentation about this will as yet be sent. (More details will be published in our upcoming report to GS Burlington 2010.)

In closing

This brief report brings you up to date on what the CRCA has done thus far with the mandate it received from Synod Smithers 2007. At the end of 2009 we plan to present you with another report and update, although it may not contain as much information seeing that the only part of the travel mandate that remains unfulfilled has to do with the upcoming meeting of the International Conference of Reformed Churches. In the meantime we would urge you to make the well-being of our sister churches outside of North America in Australia (FRCA), Brazil (The Reformed Churches of Brazil), Korea (PCK), Netherlands (RCN), New Zealand (RCNZ), Scotland (The Free Church of Scotland), and South Africa (The Free Reformed Churches of South Africa), a matter of both personal and public prayer.

*For the Committee,
J. Visscher*



Ferrier fountain, Christchurch, New Zealand"



Press Release: A Progress Report on the Activities of the Reformed Curriculum Development Committee Meeting, November 27, 2008

The RCDC met on Thursday, November 27, 2008 in the staff room of the Credo Christian High school. As at our past meetings, reports were read and briefly explained to apprise the members of the progress being achieved on behalf of the RCDC.

First of all, we should report that the RCDC received a letter from past-CCES Board chairman, Paul Schouten, who, in this farewell letter, expressed appreciation for the work done by the RCDC.

On behalf of the Curriculum Cooperative Committee (CCC), J. A. Roukema reported on the projects it is entertaining. He reported that he had attended the *Understanding by Design* Curriculum Institute, led by Grant Wiggins, one of the developers of UbD, in New Orleans, LA (March 12-14, 2008), to become more acquainted and functional in the use of this curriculum development model. This model or design was used for our RCDC K-12 Social Studies Curriculum Development project. It is also being used for the RCDC K-10 Science Curriculum Development project. Last summer, we completed Stage 2 of that project and we are scheduled to complete it by finishing the Stage 3 component during the summer of 2009. In any case, the UbD Institute was of great value to me as it reinforced my conviction that this

model would be of great service to our curriculum development projects. The model is of such a nature that it can be used as a format for curriculum development in any school system.

We are making the most of UbD. Two years ago we assembled the staffs of our schools to introduce and familiarize them to UbD via the new RCDC Social Studies curriculum. While enthusiastically received, it met with limited success. Some tried their hand in using this design for their own unit development, but others were not quite comfortable with it. Just recently, we invited Ms Elaine Brouwer, from Alta Vista College in Bellevue, WA, to take us through the three stages of the UbD model during our Professional Development Day (November 28, 2008). This all-day presentation garnered greater interest and enthusiasm. From all accounts it was a day worth it. Of great benefit is the fact that our freshmen teachers have been taught this model in the teacher college training placing them in the position of being able to provide assistance to the veterans.

Through the CCC, our teachers have also been familiarized with the *6+1 Traits of Writing* process, an across-the-grades process that presents us with a more structured and intentional approach to writing, an approach that is used across the grades. These traits are written in a scoring guide (a rubric) that is used to assess student writing. By using this method of scoring, teachers can focus their instruction and identify the key

areas in which the student needs help. The assessment feature is an attractive and useful additional component to the Traits of Writing.

Other curricular matters demanding our attention deal with assessment. An increasing number of schools are paying close attention to the various ways of assessing student work. Ministries of Education have produced reporting policies and practices that require the inclusion of degrees of assessment. Our schools will need to come to grips with not only the theories of assessment but also with their implementation practices. The CCC is assessing the many literary resources available on assessment.


The RCDC also heard Narration and Church History projects reports from Apko Nap and Pieter Torenvliet. First was their report on the progress of their Narration Project. The authors related that this course could not be offered in a shortened version, as was requested by one school. The possibility of offering this course again to the Fraser valley teachers is being considered, although other RCDC project goals challenge this option. It was exciting to hear that the Narration course is now also available on power-point, complete and on the web. *The Flame of the Word* sales are very moderate. This is probably due to the fact that most schools have purchased the series and are waiting for the last volume to be completed.

The reason for the slow progress on Book 3 is that one of its authors, P. Torenvliet, has not been able to produce much due to the

workload of his regular duties. For this reason, the 2008 deadline cannot be met. The authors have, therefore, requested once again for release time for P. Torenvliet from the John Calvin School Board. The RCDC has requested the JCS Board to acquiesce to this proposal in the form of a secondment.

The meaningfulness of Church History instruction continues to be promoted also in China, where a brother spent some time lecturing on the book of Ezekiel, on post-modernity, and on Pentecostalism. The RCDC concurs with the prayer of the authors that the Holy Spirit will bless their efforts.

*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
obouwman@cornerstoneschool.us*



Further Discussion

Dear Editor,

I am a member of the GKN and I have visited Canada many times. At the moment I am spending a few weeks with my family in Canada. I usually try to get an impression of the developments in the CanRC by reading the past issues of *Clarion*. Of course this impression is also based on attending the church services in this area.

What strikes me the most are the ever-increasing differences between the church services in the CanRC and the GKN. The liturgy in the CanRC church services is exactly the way it used to be at home. In the Netherlands I belong to the group of church members that is very concerned about the direction our churches are taking, locally as well as federally (through synod's decisions).

I became increasingly amazed when I read several articles and Letters to the Editor written by Dr. F.G. Oosterhoff. She seems to be in agreement with many ministers and professors in Holland: they are

utterly at a loss with the concept of the church. She also underestimates how serious the situation in the Dutch churches really is.

I was very pleased with the excellent response to these articles by Brother Driessen, editor of "Een in Waarheid." The reason why I take the liberty to ask you to place my letter in your magazine is that one point of Dr. Oosterhoff's article has not been touched upon. I refer to the paragraph in the article in Volume 56, No. 8, April 13, 2007, page 194:

Whatever we think of praise songs, different musical instruments, choirs, projectors, and screens in the worship service, it will be hard to prove that the Bible forbids them. It certainly cannot be argued that matters such as a desire for unity with fellow-believers, a concern for evangelism, a welcoming of outsiders and a lowering of thresholds are signs of deformation.

I have great objections to these statements. Apart from the fact that a number of totally different issues are put together under one denominator, no justice is done to the seriousness of these developments.

In his holy Word the Lord has given detailed instructions on how He wanted to be worshiped by his people, first in the tabernacle and after that in the temple. Many details are given about the construction, the layout, and the furnishings of the tabernacle and the temple. From this we can draw the conclusion that it is very important to the Lord how we worship Him today. The Lord gives the very first details about the worship service in the same chapter where the Lord introduces the Law (Exod 20). Chapters 25 to 30 of the same Bible book are filled with detailed prescriptions of the place and the organization of the worship service.

We also find important information in the Bible on the use

of music in the temple services. Many times the words "As David had ordered" are mentioned. In 2 Chronicles 23 the importance of these ordinations is emphasized because they are written in one sentence with the Law of Moses,

Then Jehoiada placed the oversight of the temple of the Lord in the hands of the priests, who were Levites, to whom David had made assignments in the temple, to present the burnt offerings of the Lord as written in the Law of Moses, with rejoicing and singing, as David had ordered (2 Chron 23:18).

These ordinances of David are of Godly origin, as we can read in 2 Chronicles 29:25, where King Hezekiah stationed the Levites in the temple of the Lord "with cymbals, harps and lyres in the way prescribed by David and Gad the king's seer and Nathan the prophet; this was commanded by the Lord through his prophets."

These commands of David were a warranty for the quality of Church music. Also in later years when there was a reformation of the temple services, per example in Nehemiah 12:45, 46, people would refer back to David's ordinances. Perfection and teaching were interwoven with the quality of the music. We read explicitly that singers and musicians were trained, accomplished, and skilled (1 Chron 15:18-22, 25:1-8). They performed under the king's supervision. It was of great importance, because it was a service to the Lord.

Conclusion: the commands of David underlines what is of utmost importance also today. We have to glorify, to praise, and to serve the Lord in such a way that it fits his holy majesty. That is totally different from going along with all

kinds of whims and wishes of people's minds, as happens a lot in the GKN today. We sing praise songs instead of the Genevan Psalms, incomplete Psalm verses to the tune of pop music, and praise bands try to accompany the congregational singing. I am of the opinion that in this way we grieve the Lord and aggravate his anger. And we could know so much better!

Of course there are musical instruments that could be used with or even without the organ. But what happens now is something totally different: Church music is a sort of classical music, but now they introduce music influenced by pop, hard rock, hip hop, and other kinds of worldly entertainment music into the church. And as I pointed out, the Lord has given us many regulations in his holy Word that we can use to fight such developments.¹

I hope and pray that the brothers and sisters in Canada are willing to learn from the developments in the Netherlands and that they may be kept from falling into the same pit.

*With Greetings,
Your brother in Christ,
François Hoogland,
Leeuwarden, the Netherlands*

¹ I made use of several recent publications in the Netherlands: "Gods lof op de lippen" door de musicoloog/hymnoloog dr. Jan Smelik (uitgaaf Boekencentrum, 2005) en "Kogels in de kerk" door de kerkmusicus Dirk Zwart (uitgaaf Kok, Kampen, 2006).

Response

I thank Br. Hoogland for his letter, which deals with a topic that deserves our attention. For the sake of brevity, I give my comments in point form.

1. The O.T. passages Br. Hoogland quotes underline, as he

correctly points out, what is of utmost importance in our worship: "We have to glorify, to praise, and to serve the Lord in such a way that it fits his holy majesty."

2. While I understand Br. Hoogland's frustration with liturgical developments in Reformed congregations that ignore this principle, I do not agree with his argumentation. Although the *aim* of the worship services remains unchanged, their *form* does not. My correspondent leaves the impression that the OT must not only *inform* our liturgies but also *prescribe* them. But this would suggest, among other things, that we must have trained choirs and a great variety of instruments (as David ordained for the temple worship). It would even imply that we should still have a temple, priests, and sacrifices. These, however, were shadows that have been fulfilled in Christ. In other words, we have to be careful in drawing connections between OT worship and worship today. (The matter is already being discussed among us. The Australian magazine *Una Sancta*, Summer 2008, has an exchange between the Revs. Huizinga and Kroeze on the question whether the Davidic temple liturgy justifies the use of choirs in our Reformed worship services.)

3. If the Old Testament does not give us a prescribed form of worship, neither does the New. The NT makes clear that in the worship services there must be prayer, praise, the reading of Scripture, table fellowship, and so on, but it gives us no prescriptions regarding the form and order of corporate worship. Over the centuries Christian churches have therefore established their own liturgies. We have inherited the Genevan-

Calvinist one (although in modified form). This tradition includes the congregational singing of rhymed psalms set to Genevan tunes and accompanied by a church organ.

4. Like Br. Hoogland, I appreciate our rhymed psalms and the Genevan tunes and am not at all anxious to have them replaced. But I realize that these tunes, together with other elements in our worship style, bear the marks of their time of origin. When John Calvin compiled his Psalter he chose contemporary (sixteenth-century) tunes that spoke to the congregation and were easy to sing. For several centuries Reformed churches have been happy to follow the tradition, which seems to have fitted the Calvinist culture. But in this age of profound cultural change the consensus is disintegrating. The argument of those who propose liturgical renewal is that without such renewal we will find it increasingly difficult to reach today's generation – not only in the church but also in the world, and not only in our own country but also on the mission fields. They see it as a simple matter of contextualization and refer to Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 14 that we must communicate God's truth *intelligibly*.

5. Does this give us a warrant for the introduction of contemporary music? That depends on the answers to two preliminary questions, namely (1) is our traditional liturgy indeed normative and therefore not to be changed? and (2) is it by definition impossible for contemporary music

to meet the biblical norms for corporate worship? As will have become clear from the foregoing, the first question must be answered in the negative. We can here again learn from John Calvin, who wrote:

Because he [the Master] did not will in outward discipline and ceremonies to prescribe in detail what we ought to do (*because he foresaw that this depended upon the state of the times, and he did not deem one form suitable for all ages*), here we must take refuge in those general rules which he [the Master] has given, that whatever the necessity of the church will require. . . should be tested against these. . . .

Because these things are not necessary to salvation, and for the upbuilding of the church ought to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age, *it will be fitting (as the advantage of the church will require) to change and abrogate traditional practices and to establish new ones.* (D.A. Carson, ed., *Worship: Adoration and Action*, 2002, p. 104; italics added).

I may add here that since the Bible does not know of a liturgy that is valid for all times and places, our church order rightly states that the orders of worship in the CanRC are only *suggested* ones.

6. The answer to the second question depends on how one defines "contemporary worship." Current practice shows that much of what goes for such worship is indeed man-centred, secularizing, dumbing-down, an unwarranted

blending of the Christian religion with our postmodern culture, ignoring the biblical warning that we worship a God who is holy, transcendent, and a consuming fire (Hebr 12). But the abuse of something does not abrogate its proper use. That contemporary music can very well be used in a biblical manner was, as we already saw, taught and shown by John Calvin and his fellow-workers. There are contemporary examples of biblically-justified contextualization as well. One that comes immediately to mind is that of Timothy Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York. And there are many others, both in urban ministry and on the mission fields.

7. To conclude: In an age of globalization, profound cultural change, and intensified mission-mindedness, the demand for liturgical renewal will continue to be heard. I hope that it will receive the attention it deserves. I suggest that in our discussions we keep Calvin's guidelines in mind (as well as the example of the contemporary preachers to whom I referred) and not reject liturgical change as by definition heretical. But I realize that the issue demands very careful study, and I look forward to much-needed input and advice from our Reformed theologians and liturgical experts.

F.G. Oosterhoff

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.

