

Clarion

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*“It was
entirely fitting
that Christ
was buried in
a garden. . .”*

Inside this issue

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- A New Gardener in a New Creation
- URCNA Questions about the CanRC



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Synod 2010 in View

Synod will not be over until its agenda has been completed

2010 is a general synod year in the Canadian Reformed Churches. The Lord willing, on Monday evening, May 10, twenty-four delegates (twelve elders and twelve ministers) from east and west will come together for a prayer service to be held in the Ebenezer Canadian Reformed Church, Burlington, Ontario, with both local and area church members. The Rev. D.G.J. Agema, who served as the chairman of Synod Smithers 2007, will lead this special worship service.

Procedure

The next day General Synod is scheduled to convene and begin its work. Sessions will be held every morning, afternoon, and evening, with the exception of the Lord's Day and the first Saturday, a day customarily claimed by the Foundation for Superannuation for its tri-annual meeting with member churches.

On its first day of business credentials will be checked, an executive will be elected, and Synod will be constituted. Thereafter, each member of Synod will be assigned to one of six advisory committees. The first week will be filled mostly with the meetings of these committees, along with a number of plenary sessions being held in the evening and perhaps during the day. In the second week committee meetings should decrease in number and plenary meetings should become more common.

If the past two synods are any indicator then a third week of sessions may prove to be short, perhaps even unnecessary. No doubt Synod members will be hoping for the latter but expecting the former. One thing, however, is certain and that is that Synod will not be over until its agenda has been completed.

Agenda

With respect to the agenda, it is composed of regular and special items. Among the regular and predictable items, one can list appeals, standing committee reports (Address Church, Archive Church, Bible Translation, *Book of Praise*, Churches Abroad, Churches in North America, Pastoral Training Fund, Theological College, Website, and more), as well as speeches delivered by delegates from the various foreign sister churches. Among the more special items are some of the recommendations from the various standing committees and the reports (both majority and minority) dealing with women's voting.

Book of Praise

No doubt some of these agenda items will be of particular interest to our readers. In this connection one can cite the Report of the Standing Committee on the *Book of Praise*. This report is very lengthy, detailed, and loaded with recommendations. It proposes that Synod adopt a revised psalm section, a re-organized, updated, and augmented hymn section, as well as a number of other changes.

One suspects that most of the discussion will deal with the revised psalms and the added hymns. In other words, are the revised psalms of a satisfactory nature and are the churches ready to adopt them at this time or is further testing needed? Also, are the proposed fourteen additional hymns good choices or not?

Connected to all of this will also be a procedural issue. It has to do with whether or not Synod Smithers 2007 gave adequate instructions for the revised psalms to be tested in the churches.



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Churches abroad

Another item that is sure to garner its share of attention has to do with the Report of the Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad. The current state of affairs in the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands is a concern among churches and members alike and will no doubt receive close scrutiny. The same to a lesser degree may be the case with Scotland and the matter of the Free Church of Scotland – Continuing. Then too there is the request of two churches in Indonesia to be received as sister churches with the Committee proposing that one be accepted and that the other be delayed and subjected to additional investigation.

The current state of relations with the Free Church of Scotland, the Free Reformed Churches in Australia, the Free Reformed Churches of South Africa, the Presbyterian Church in Korea, the Reformed Churches in Brazil, and the Reformed Churches in New Zealand, will also be reviewed. Membership in the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC) will have the attention of Synod as well.

Churches in North America

Relations with sister churches in North America are channeled through the Committee for Contact with Churches in North America and its report will no doubt give rise to some extensive discussions as well. Of special note will be its recommendation to extend ecclesiastical fellowship or sister church status to the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America (RPCNA). One suspects that whether or not this recommendation passes will depend on whether Synod can be convinced that the women deacons in this church do not exercise ruling authority.

Our current relationships with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Churches of Quebec, and the Reformed Church in the United States will be discussed and evaluated too. An update will also be provided on our membership as churches in the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC).

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The United Reformed Churches of North America

Perhaps the matter that will generate the most interest in the churches will be the decisions that Synod will make with regard to the United Reformed Churches of North America. For some time our respective churches have been working on a merger and the result of these efforts needs to be weighed carefully. Will Synod decide to adopt in principle the Proposed Joint Church Order? Will Synod agree that the Theological College can be placed under the authority of the Regional Synod of Canada in a new federation? Is a new songbook something that needs to be agreed upon before a merger happens or can it wait and be made a priority in a united federation? Needless to say, our future as churches will rest on these decisions.

The Theological College

Synod will also give careful attention to a number of recommendations coming from the Board of Governors. These will include the appointment of two new professors, one for Old Testament studies and the other for Doctrinal studies. Dr. C. Van Dam, the current professor of OT, is scheduled to retire in 2011 but will stop teaching in 2010 and spend his last active year on a long overdue sabbatical. Dr. N. H. Gootjes, the professor of Systematic Theology, is sadly no longer able to teach due to ill health. Also of particular interest will be the proposal to change the name of the College to the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary (CRTS).

Women's voting rights

Another matter that has occasioned a lot of debate and study over the years is back on the agenda of Synod. It has to do with whether or not the female communicant members should be allowed to vote in the election of deacons, elders, and pastors. The majority report submitted by the Council of the Cornerstone Church at Hamilton, Ontario, asserts that not only should they vote but they even have an obligation to

do so. A minority report from one member of that same council proposes that the sisters not be allowed to cast a ballot.

No doubt the debate on this matter will center on the question as to whether or not voting is an act of governing or ruling. Some say that it is, and therefore women may not participate in voting. Others say that it is not, as the vote is really no more than an expression of preference.

All of this raises an interesting question and it is this: if voting is an act of governing or ruling, what gives even men (never mind women) the right to vote? If ruling or governing power is said to reside with the male communicant members of the congregation, does this not result in a Congregationalist rather than a Reformed church polity? In the former the members of the congregation rule the church. In the latter the elders rule the church.

Other matters

Reports from other committees, overtures from churches, appeals from churches, as well as members, will also be on the agenda of Synod. The church at Guelph, which deals with the funding for the Pastoral Proficiency Program, will submit its report. The same will be the case with the Committee on the Website, the General Fund Church, the Archive Church, the General Address Church, and more.

All in all, Synod Burlington 2010 will have its work cut out for it. Its decisions, perhaps more than those of any recent synod, will have far-reaching implications for the life and future of our federation of churches. As a result, it is fitting that a prayer service proceed its deliberations and it is also appropriate for all of our readers who are members of the Canadian (American) Reformed Churches be encouraged to pray that the Lord will grant much wisdom, insight, and faithfulness to the brothers who will gather together for the broadest assembly of our churches. May God see fit to bless their discussions and deliberations for the glory of his Name and to the well being of his church. C



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MATTHEW 13:52

A New Gardener in a New Creation

Thinking He was the gardener. . . . John 20:15

When we encounter Mary the mother of Jesus at Christmas time, we are prompted by Scripture to say, "Blessed are you among women." At Easter, however, this exceptional benediction seems better suited for Mary Magdalene. She gets the package deal of Easter experiences. Like Simon Peter and John, Mary sees the empty grave and the linen. Like the women who accompanied her to the tomb, she sees the angels and receives an Easter message from them. Like the travellers on the Emmaus road, she converses with the risen Saviour.

Mary Magdalene experiences it all, but understands none of it. The empty tomb frightens her and she runs off to Simon Peter and John. When the disciples retreat to their homes, Mary remains by the sepulchre, but only to lament her loss. When an angel addresses her, she is alarmed. When she finally sees the risen Jesus, she mistakes Him for the gardener. Mary experiences it all, but understands none of it.

In reflecting on her parade of Easter misdemeanours, I'm struck by the fact that Mary is more innocent than she realized, more accurate than she understood. Thinking Jesus was the gardener was a mistake of surprisingly correct proportions. Mary's confession of *mea culpa* only invites our absolution of *felix culpa*!

Understanding the Bible isn't just a matter of microscopic investigation, of parsing verbs and diagramming sentences. When the Easter narrative is examined with the panoramic perspective of redemptive history, it is striking that the locale in which Jesus stands here is a garden (John 19:41). Where the first Adam fell, the last Adam has risen!

Mary has indeed found the gardener! The first Adam was tasked with tending the garden and guarding it, glorifying and protecting what God had created. The last Adam is also a gardener, but He enters the world, not as the first Adam found it, but as he left it. With characteristic brilliance, the Anglican bishop N.T. Wright beckons us to re-examine the risen Saviour whom Mary encounters: "Here he is: the new Adam, the gardener, charged with bringing the chaos of God's creation into new order, into flower, into fruitfulness. He has come to uproot the thorns and thistles and replace them with blossoms and harvests" (*John for Everyone: Part Two*, London: SPCK, 2002, 146).

We deflate the festival of Easter if we relegate its significance merely to evidence that Christ's vicarious sacrifice was perfectly satisfactory and that God the Father had fully accepted it. If our Easter theology falls along these narrow lines, it must be radically enlarged, because Easter represents nothing less than the powerful intrusion of God's new creation into the old world of sin and death. In the new creation, the dead are raised incorruptible.

G.K. Chesterton understood this well. In his influential history, *The Everlasting Man*, the sage essayist wrote, "On the third day the friends of Christ coming at daybreak to the place found the grave empty and the stone rolled away. In varying ways they realized the new wonder; but even they hardly realized that the world had died in the night. What they were looking at was the first day of a new creation, with a new heaven and a new earth; and in a semblance

of the gardener God walked again in the garden, in the cool not of the evening but the dawn" (*The Everlasting Man*, New York: Image, 1955, 212).

This recognition of the risen Saviour as the new gardener in a new creation didn't even escape Vigen Guroian, the Orthodox theologian: "It was entirely fitting, therefore, that Christ was buried in a garden, a seed planted in the ground that blossomed into the flower of a glorified humanity. The New Adam [Jesus] refurbished the devastated garden that the Old Adam left behind. No wonder at the empty tomb, Christ came to Mary Magdalene as the gardener (John 20:15). For he is the Master Gardener, and we are his apprentices as well as the subjects of his heavenly husbandry" (*The Fragrance of God*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006, 47).

As we celebrate Easter this year, let's see this festival for what it is. Christ's resurrection is the beginning of God's new project to bring the life of heaven to birth in earthly reality, to colonize earth with the life of heaven. We are enlisted as covenant partners, apprentices of the Master Gardener, in this great work. For this reason Paul concludes his great resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15, by summoning us to get to work, knowing that our labour in the Lord is not in vain (v. 58). What is done today in the power of Christ's resurrection will be celebrated and included in the new earth!

Mary mistook the risen Saviour for the gardener. Let's recall this history so that we learn to repeat the mistakes of the past.





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The Future of Theological Education (Part 2 of 2)

A previous article recounted the main points of the Joint Report of the Theological Education Committees of the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA) and the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC). It will be on the agenda of Synod Burlington 2010. How should one respond to this report? There are both items of appreciation and critique that can be mentioned.

Appreciation

I have great appreciation for the honesty and integrity of this report. The URCNA and CanRC committees obviously worked very hard at their mandate and made many serious efforts to grapple with the challenges set before them. This report does not paper over the differences that exist on theological education. Rather, these disagreements are clearly spelled out, as are the attempts to bridge the differences and find each other in a unified proposal. What we have here in microcosm is a conversation on theological education between two church federations that seek to be faithful to their God-given mandate to be church of Jesus Christ in this world. A very important part of that is ensuring that young men seeking the ministry of the Word are properly trained. Unfortunately, in this conversation no specific proposal came out of all the work that went into trying to secure such an agreement. This failure raises the question whether the two federations are really ready for unity at this point in our respective histories.

Reflections

When one is at an impasse, it is often helpful to sit back and reflect on how similar situations were handled in the past. There is a historical example from the common heritage of the URCNA and CanRC that comes to mind. It is, of course, the unity talks about theological education in The Netherlands that

eventually led to the union in 1892 of the churches of the *Afscheiding* (the Secession) which seceded from the national church in 1834 under the leadership of such as Hendrick de Cock, and the churches of the Doleantie which separated from the national church in 1886 under the leadership of Abraham Kuyper.

The churches of the Secession were convinced that the theological education of their future pastors was the responsibility of the churches. After an initial period in which local pastors trained students for the ministry, the churches of the Secession established a seminary in Kampen which was officially opened in 1854. This was a church school. The churches took charge of the theological training of its ministers. A general synod appointed ministers to teach and synod had oversight of the instruction given. This is the approach that the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) and the CanRC have inherited and defended.

The churches of the Doleantie were led by Kuyper who had already established the Free University in Amsterdam. This school had a department of theology which provided training for the ministry of the Word.¹ In the beginning years, this was the chief department of the university. Obviously, theological education became a hot topic in the unity talks between the churches of the Secession and those of the Doleantie. One year before the union, in 1891, the Synod of the Secession churches formally maintained the principle that the church is called to have its own institution for the theological training of its ministers.²

It is to the great credit of the General Synod of the Doleantie churches of 1891 that it magnanimously accepted the position of the Secession churches. On that basis the Union of 1892 could take place.³ As agreed, eventually the united churches, now called the Reformed Churches, had an official relationship with the theological department at the Free University and the Reformed Churches had the authority to supervise

the theological training there. This supervision had real content. The mandate of the five deputies appointed to maintain contact between the churches and the Theological Department of the Free University included the following:

- to evaluate the appropriateness of the education as training for the ministry
- to be on guard against deviation from the Reformed confession
- to evaluate whether there were weaknesses in the education
- to provide the faculty with an evaluation concerning an upcoming appointment
- to make known to the faculty comments or wishes concerning the theological students and their conduct
- to make sure that no one receives a doctor's degree in theology without having subscribed to the Form agreed to for that purpose⁴

Our forefathers fought long and hard for the principle that the church should take care of the training for the ministry of the Word. If the church does not take care that preachers be trained, who else has the right and duty to do this? Is the church not the "pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15)? Did the Apostle not exhort Timothy as an ordained office bearer in the church: "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Tim 2:2)? What gives private individuals the right to do what the church ought to do? This fundamental question, directed by the brothers of the Secession to those supporting the Free University's independent faculty of theology as a serviceable seminary for the church, was never answered⁵ (although the two parties did eventually come to a unity agreement). It was not a matter of distrusting the brothers at the Free University,⁶ but it was a matter of principle. When a church gives up its responsibility to train its future ministers, the church surrenders its future, humanly speaking.

The current situation

Similar questions can be asked today. Again, this is not a matter of putting down or questioning the integrity or Reformed character of the independent Reformed seminaries that now provide most of the ministers in the URCNA. It is a matter of principle. Is it the task of an organization independent of the church to

provide for the church's leadership or is this not rightly a task of the church itself?

According to the Joint Report, the response of the brothers in the URCNA is that they do see it as the church's responsibility but they simply exercise this responsibility differently. According to the URCNA Church Order, Article 3, the consistories "shall assume supervision of all aspects of his [i.e. the student's] training, including his licensure to exhort, and assure that he receives a thoroughly reformed theological education." The Joint Report, however, notes that

As is to be expected the level and nature of this consistorial oversight varies widely within the federation. Some consistories take an active role in seminary training, others leave the training to the institutions that the URC supports and are only active once the student has graduated from seminary. The same can be said with respect to financial support. Some of the congregations within the URC provide a significant level of support for seminary education, while others support the seminaries on a more occasional basis. None of the institutions supported by the URCNA receives sufficient funds from our churches to maintain their budget.

I have great sympathy for the URCNA and have worked for many years in promoting understanding first between the CanRC and the concerned in the CRC and later with the URCNA. However, on reflecting on the less-than-ideal situation as detailed in the quote above, one wonders whether the URCNA has not overreacted to the difficulties it had with their CRC seminary by abandoning any responsibility as a *church federation* for training their own future ministers.

I realize, and the Joint Report states it, that the two seminaries providing most of the future ministers in the URCNA have considerable URCNA involvement in terms of members of the Board and professors belonging to the URCNA. That is a good thing, but there is nothing to prevent that from changing. The schools have no official line of responsibility to the URCNA and the URCNA cannot, in any official capacity, call the school to account. There is no official ecclesiastical supervision of the teaching and of the professors in their capacity as professors. The churches of the Secession insisted that the accountability be there in their relationship to the theological faculty of the Free University before entering into a union. The CanRC

should insist on the same before entering into a union with the URCNA. A bad experience with a church seminary is not enough reason to abandon the principle of a federational seminary. This principle has a long distinguished history, is justifiable from Scripture, and has generally served the church well.⁷

The way forward

The Joint Report does not come and was not able to come with any firm positive recommendation (“we do not bring specific proposals”). Since the URCNA and CanRC approach theological education quite differently, the two committees suggest that the only way forward would be by blending the two approaches into what they call a hybrid model. In the words of the Joint Report:

As a fully independent model is not acceptable to the CanRC and a fully federational model is not acceptable to the URCNA, the only real viable choice of governance for theological education in a united federation would be a model where the united federation would operate with a model of two independent seminaries endorsed and approved by the general synod of a united church (i.e., Mid-America and Westminster California), with one federationally governed seminary (the Theological College in Hamilton) by way of a Regional Synod of Canada, or if deemed appropriate, by the general synods of the united federation meeting from time to time.

In this model, there would be “a blended system of voluntary contributions and assessments to support the federational seminary and the independent seminaries.”

As mentioned earlier, I have great respect for the work these two committees have done, given their respective mandates and the views of each federation of churches. If they were to come up with any suggestion at all, the hybrid model was the only way forward. Each side would have to give and take and settle on this compromise solution.

Many questions arise as to exactly how such a hybrid model would work but we cannot go into all that now. A basic question that arises is, however, what exactly is being accomplished with this hybrid model? Will it really move the two federations into a meaningful union? As I see it, the solution suggested by the Joint Report will hinder any significant progress for the two current federations to amalgamate in any meaningful way. If we go the way of this hybrid

solution, the former CanRC will likely end up living as a federation within the larger united federation. As such the former CanRC churches could easily be regarded as a spoiler of the peace of Zion because they refuse to go along with the notion of the majority which thinks that the church should rely on independent seminaries to provide the theological education of future pastors.

I make these comments on the basis of what happened after the Union of 1892 of the Secession and Doleantie churches in The Netherlands. Even though there was a clear and unambiguous synodical decision to maintain the school in Kampen, there were many attempts to shut it down, and for a moment it even seemed that the end of that school had come.⁸ However, one must remember, that in spite of all these tensions, there was nevertheless an agreement that theological education was to be subject to official ecclesiastical supervision. The theological faculty of the Free University was under the auspices of the Reformed Churches. Nothing comparable is being suggested for the seminaries now providing ministers to the URCNA. This is noteworthy given the fact, as detailed in the previous article, that one of the six points of agreement was that the URCNA and the CanRC “should work towards theological education that is properly accountable to the churches.”

In closing

If we can learn from our heritage and history, we need to have transparency and consistency on the principle that has been agreed to, namely, that “it is the task of the churches to train ministers.” This also implies that we need more agreement on the issue than is now the case. It would be in line with the heritage of both the URCNA and CanRC to have a federational seminary. Given that heritage, is it really impossible to agree to this well-established principle? (See also footnote 7.) Furthermore, consistent with the idea that it is the task of the churches to train ministers, the churches as a federation should also have some sort of consequential supervision over any officially endorsed seminaries where future ministers are trained. Such officially endorsed, non-federational seminaries should be willing to accept a form of meaningful accountability to deputies appointed by synod (as the Theological Department of the Free University did). A new united federation needs to have “theological education that is properly accountable to the churches,” as has been agreed.

The cause of federative unity is very dear to many in the CanRC, as it is to me. But it is necessary to resolve an issue as basic as the training of future pastors before amalgamating into a united church. Let us learn from our past and insist on a clear accord about theological education before entering into federative union.

NOTE:

For further reading see the report *Why do the Canadian Reformed Churches Have Their Own Seminary?* available at http://www.theologicalcollege.ca/pdf/reasons_for_crc_seminary.pdf

¹ See G. Harinck, "De Vrije Universiteit in het zicht van de Vereniging van 1892," in D. Deddens and M. te Velde, eds., *Vereniging in wederkeer: opstellen over de Vereniging van 1892* (1992) 105.

² *Handelingen van de Synode der Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk in Nederland in de 19 Zittingen door haar gehouden te Leeuwarden, van 18-29 Augustus 1891* (Leiden: Donner, 1891), Art. 172-173; see also W. De Graaf, *Een monument der afscheiding* (1955), 175.

³ See for references to the official acts, H. Bouma, *Secession, Doleantie, and Union: 1834-1892* (1995) 168. L. Doekes, "De Heere regeert, 1892-1902" in *Tot de Prediking van het Woord des geloofs: Opstellen ter gelegenheid van de herdenking van de oprichting der Theologische School A.D. 1854 te Kampen* (Kampen: Comite van Uitgave, [1954]), 89-90.

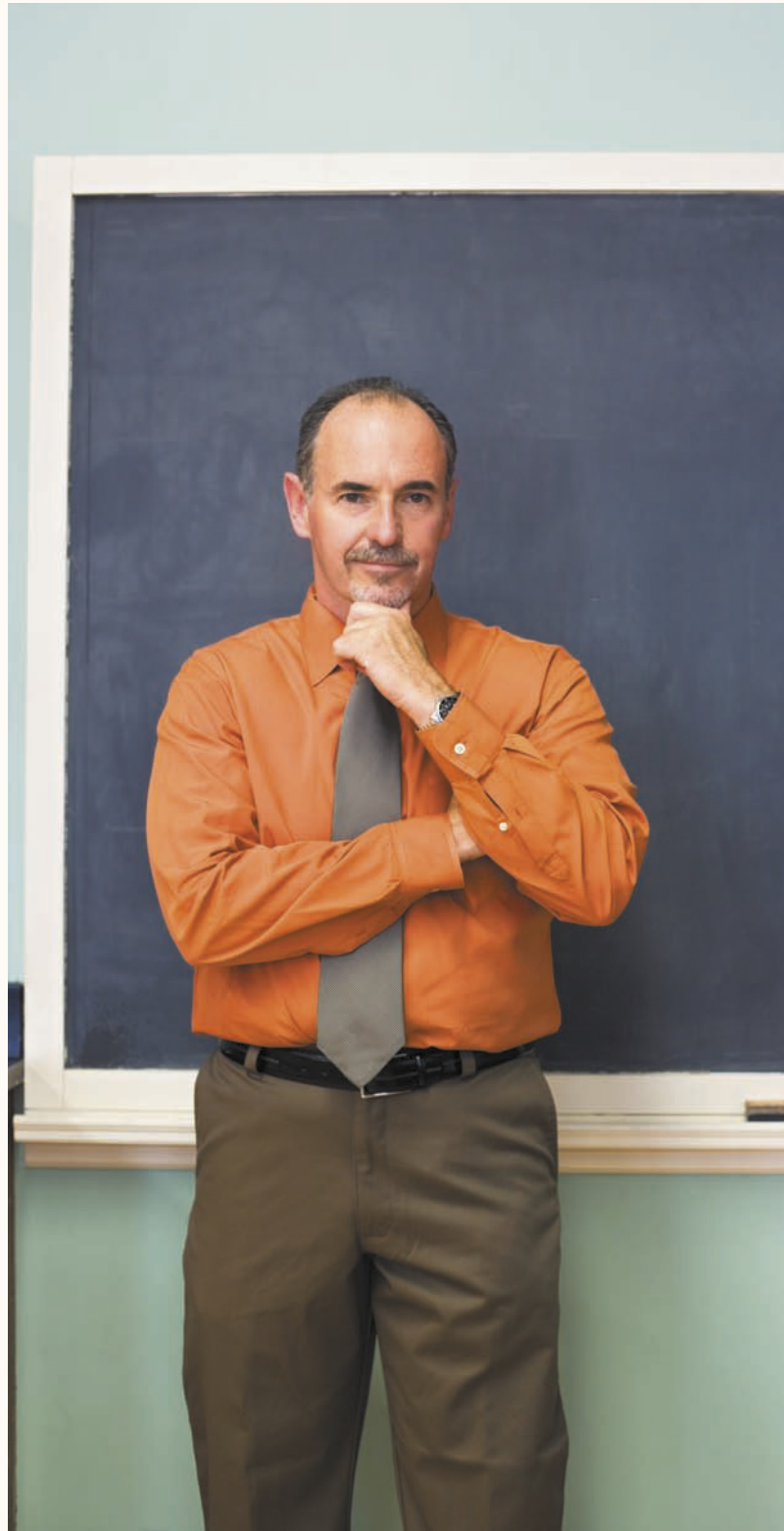
⁴ *Acta der Generale Synode van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland gehouden te Utrecht van 22 Augustus tot 7 September 1905*, (Amsterdam: Höveker & Wormser, n.d.) Art 110; also see Bijlage LVIII (pp. 191-192).

⁵ Doekes, "De Heere regeert," 86-88.

⁶ There was significant support from the side of members of the Secession churches for the establishing of the Free University. See Doekes, "De Heere regeert," 87.

⁷ On this continent there is an interesting historical event that could serve as a precedent for us today. In 1982, the Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod (RPCES) joined the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA). At the time, the PCA received most of its ministers from Reformed Theological Seminary, a non-denominational school. The PCA did not have its own seminary. The RPCES brought with them Covenant Theological Seminary. It became the official school of the PCA and remains so today. Could something similar not happen in our relationship with the URCNA?

⁸ See Doekes, "De Heere Regeert," 90-109.





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Inerrancy – Lessons from History

(Part 4 of 6)

The Geelkerken case in The Netherlands in 1926 and its fallout gives us a clear picture of how deformation sometimes develops in Reformed churches. Dr. J.G. Geelkerken preached a sermon on Lord's Day 3 in which he drew into question whether there was a literal snake speaking in the garden in Genesis 3. Geelkerken professed loyalty to the Three Forms of Unity, but went off the reservation with these remarks. Technically, the Reformed confessions do not anywhere bind a man to believe that there was a literal snake in the garden. However, it has always been regarded as the clear teaching of Scripture. Geelkerken's case ended up at Synod Assen 1926 and he was suspended and then later deposed. The synod was correct to judge Geelkerken's views as unbiblical, but the procedure it followed set a precedent which would later be used in 1944 to suspend and depose men like Dr. K. Schilder. In classic Reformed church polity, a synod cannot suspend and depose office bearers. A good intention in 1926 was co-opted for an evil consequence in 1944.

A similar pattern manifested itself in the process leading up to Report 44 in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). In 1969, Fruitland made another overture to the CRC synod, an overture which also had the support of Classis Hamilton. Fruitland continued to be concerned about teachings in their Dutch sister churches, teachings that were also having an impact in the CRC. What were those teachings?

The denial of the historical existence of our first parents in paradise, the subsequent denial of original sin, the denial of the historicity of historical parts of both the Old and New Testament, the surrender to the newest form of biblical criticism, and to the scientific dogma of evolution, all made public on both sides of the ocean, have caused feelings of uncertainty, grief, and even distrust; it is no exception any more that ministers are labelled according to their opinions and that in the work of calling a minister a consistory first tries to be informed on his position regarding the so-called "new theology."

The overture contained a number of footnotes. Most of them are quotes from H.M. Kuitert, but there was also this one from Dr. G.P. Hartvelt:

Excavations have shown us that the downfall of Jericho happened more than 500 years before the entry of Israel. Nevertheless the fall of Jericho is described in the image of a radical destruction. According to the story of the Bible it is clear that something must have happened with Jericho, but the hard facts of the excavations don't tell lies. It is hardly possible to accept the results of the excavations when we can use them and to reject them when they confuse us.

Clearly at issue here was the question of biblical inerrancy. What happens when statements in Scripture conflict with "scientific facts"? According to Hartvelt and others, we resort to saying that the purpose of Scripture is not to tell us anything factual about what happened to Jericho. The "message" is more important than "history."

The Fruitland overture urged Synod 1969 "to appoint a study-committee with the task to evaluate the teachings referred to in the overture-Fruitland 1968 and to report to one of the next synods." The grounds were that such a study is necessary in view of "the pastoral task of the church" and that "such a study is in line with the request of the Gereformeerde Kerken in The Netherlands (GKN) to take part in the ongoing debate on Scripture." Fruitland's second attempt was successful and the synod found the grounds compelling enough to adopt the overture.

A conservative CRC and its pastor (and Classis Hamilton) had expressed clear concerns about what was being done with Scripture in the Netherlands and North America. Synod 1969 responded by appointing a study committee, but then proceeded to appoint men to the committee in such a way that the outcome was a foregone conclusion. As an aside, something similar happened at the last Canadian Reformed synod with regards to the issue of women's voting. The synod appointed the church at Hamilton to prepare a study,

presumably knowing full well what the outcome and recommendations would be. So, this happens more often in Reformed churches.

Going back to 1969, the CRC synod appointed men to this study committee who were not known to be of the concerned persuasion. Of the seven men appointed, only one (J. Vos) didn't have a doctorate from the Free University of Amsterdam. Almost all of them were professors at Calvin Seminary or College. With Calvin already drifting in the latitudinarian direction, and with the Free University totally compromised, the outcome of this study committee would be predictable.

Fruitland's serious concerns had been co-opted to produce a report which would contribute further to the deterioration of orthodoxy within the CRC. Today we may be seeing a similar pattern in our own circles. For instance, apologetics is a good and necessary pursuit. Apologetics is a discipline which, when grounded properly on Scripture, can well serve the church of

Christ and the glory of God. We need to do more in this area, and especially provide more training for our young people. However, is it perhaps being co-opted in such a way that the result might just be the latitudinarian direction of the CRC and the GKN?

For example, the Reformed Academic blog purports to have an orientation to apologetics. The goal is to especially help post-secondary students who face conflicts between faith and their studies. In itself, this is an admirable ambition. However, when authors at this blog reject verbal plenary inspiration and biblical inerrancy, we are faced with the possibility of co-option. When Reformed Academic authors propose that death existed before the fall or that humanity has primate ancestors, those familiar with the history of the CRC cannot help but think of the words of that great philosopher Yogi Berra: it's déjà vu all over again.

In the next installment, we'll continue our look at the development of Report 44 in the CRC.



URCNA Questions about the CanRC

Classis Southwest of the United Reformed Churches of North America formulated a list of questions about positions and views within the Canadian Reformed Churches. Dr. Jason Van Vliet and Dr. Gerhard H. Visscher were asked by the Canadian Reformed Committee for Church Unity to answer those questions. On January 19, 2010, in Escondido, California, Drs. Van Vliet and Visscher appeared before Classis Southwest and presented an abbreviated version of what follows.

It is a pleasure to be here in your midst this afternoon, brothers, to experience the rich bond of fellowship, and to attempt to answer the questions which you have formulated. Just a couple of comments before we begin. First, it should be apparent to all that we really cannot speak for all the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) and their ministers. We can only offer to you some thoughts about the approach which is generally taken in the CanRC on these matters. Because the CanRC is a small federation, we probably

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can paint for you a fairly accurate picture. We certainly can give you an impression of what is taught presently at the Canadian Reformed federational seminary. Secondly, we do not profess to have read all the books and material written by the adherents of the so-called "Federal Vision." Certainly, we have read enough to be informed, to understand their views, and to assess what degree of similarity there may or may not be with ourselves. Your questions and our answers then follow.

1. How is the so-called "Federal Vision" (FV) theology regarded in the CanRC? Are there ministers/professors in the CanRC who support this teaching?

Federal Vision is not a raging controversy in CanRC like it is in some other federations; this is due in part to the fact that some FV emphases are ones to which Canadian Reformed people are also sympathetic. In the face of the individualism that is rampant in evangelicalism, it's good to be emphasizing

the corporate and collective aspects of Christianity; in the face of the tendency to see sacraments as mere rituals, it's good to remind each other that sacraments are a means of grace which the Holy Spirit uses for an effective purpose. So there's a certain amount of familiarity and sympathy towards some of the sounds of the FV. More than a few of our ministers may, for instance, be using Douglas Wilson's book, *Reforming Marriage*, as recommended reading in pre-marriage classes.

At the same time, that does not mean that FV material is accepted uncritically. Perhaps it's fair to say that there is neither complete acceptance nor complete rejection of FV material. The exact degree to which one sympathizes varies with the topic. In a presentation which I (GHV) made on the FV, I argued that just as it is best to decide about a federation of churches on the basis of its official documents rather than on positions of individuals within it, it is best to do the same with something like FV. As it really is made of a number of loosely connected individuals, the best one can do is note what is written in the document "Joint Federal Vision Statement" (on www.federal-vision.com). The document provides us both with points that we can appreciate as well as points that we should be concerned about. Paedocommunion is an example of the latter. There are also some statements about baptism which are problematic ("God formally unites a person to Christ through baptism"). Some statements about faith also lack sufficient clarity. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that there are a considerable number of qualifiers in the document which alleviate much of the concern raised and, frankly, leave one wondering what exactly the point of issue is (e.g., imputation of the active obedience of Christ). But we will say more about these points later.

Suffice it to say FV theology is not predominant in the CanRC. That can be illustrated by the fact that when Synod Schererville's Nine Points (as well as Mid-America's "Doctrinal Testimony") first appeared, Canadian Reformed people did not read them against the background of FV, but against the background of the Liberation of 1944. Had they read them in the context of the FV discussion, they would have understood much more; without that background, however, we understood these documents to be in opposition to a way of thinking that had become dear to us because of our more recent history.

2. How is the so-called "New Perspective on Paul" (NPP) viewed in the CanRC? Is there support in the CanRC?

I believe that there is very little awareness in the CanRC about what the "New Perspective" debate is all about. Does that concern me? It could, especially since I have spent a good portion of my life reflecting on it and writing about it (G.H. Visscher, *Romans 4 and the New Perspective on Paul*, Peter Lang, 2009). In actuality though, I think it is largely an academic debate. Those in the pew have a hard time understanding how it can be that (according to NPP) that there was no legalism on the part of the opponents of Paul or the Lord Jesus; the conclusion of my work is that there was. As Dr. Stephen Westerholm has suggested, both the Roman Catholicism that Luther thundered against and the Pharisaism which Paul broke away from had a considerable measure of semi-Pelagian thinking. Since the argument really goes full circle, why bother the pew about it? Since these are academic questions which future exegetes need to be aware of, we do ensure that seminarians know about these issues and are suitably equipped to deal with these views in their reading and interpretation of Scripture.

To suggest, however, that NPP thinking is prevalent in the CanRC is simply erroneous.

3. How do the ministers in the CanRC regard Westminster Seminary California's application of the Reformed confessions to the problems raised by the Federal Vision and the New Perspective on Paul? (<http://www.wscal.org/resources/Justification.htm>)

We do not believe that the CanRC brothers would have a problem with the "Testimony on Justification" found on that website. From our own perspective we would not need to add the references from Westminster Standards, but we do not have any problem with them either.

4. There are many ministers in the URCNA who hold to the three-covenant view (covenant of redemption, covenant of works, and covenant of grace). The Liberated tradition does not appear to hold the three-covenant view of covenant theology.

How can these two be reconciled?

Let's start with a simple observation from Scripture. Every time the word "covenant" is used in Scripture, it refers to the covenant of grace (either old or new dispensation). There is one possible exception: Hosea 6:7 may refer to a pre-fall covenant, which is sometimes called the covenant of works. Next, if we turn to the Three Forms of Unity (TFU), we find that they say comparatively little about covenant. Most references to the covenant in our confessions are in connection with sacraments (e.g., BC 34; LD 27; CoD 1.17), and they all refer to the covenant of grace. So, speaking plainly, the TFU *explicitly* advances a one covenant view (covenant of grace). The Westminster Standards explicitly speak of a covenant of works (pre-fall) and the covenant of grace, but they do not speak *explicitly* about a covenant of redemption (*pactum salutis*) in eternity. So, in short, neither the TFU nor the Westminster Standards explicitly advance a three covenant view.

Since we are confessional churches, we should find common ground in our confessions. Moreover, since both the URCNA and CanRC only subscribe to the TFU, we must hold each other accountable to preach the covenant of grace in all its fullness. Individual ministers or members may have their opinions about the validity of a two- or three-covenant view. Generally speaking, they should be free to hold those views, so long as their teachings do not contradict the TFU in any way. For the rest, though, we cannot insist that all ministers hold to a particular kind of two- or three-covenant view, because that would go beyond our subscription to the TFU.

5. What is the dominant covenant theology of the CanRC?

The dominant covenant theology in the CanRC is expressed in the Form for Baptism. This may sound a bit simplistic, but in reality the covenant theology in the Form is what the members of the federation know well and hold dear. Of course, because of our history, the teachings of Dr. K. Schilder have had, and still do have, an influence. At the same time, the majority of our members don't read Dutch anymore; also the newer generation of ministers cannot read (much) Dutch. Having said that, concerning the covenant, there are a few points we regularly emphasize:

- covenant and election are related, but must *not* be equated;
- both the promises and the obligations of the covenant should be laid upon the hearts of all God's people;

- Baptism is a sign pointing to God's covenant promises. It does not point to something which may, or may not, be within the person being baptized, e.g., a presupposed seed of regeneration.

6. Are there CanRC ministers, like many in the UCRNA, who hold to the Reformed doctrine of the *pactum salutis* (covenant of redemption)?

We do firmly adhere to a divine decree concerning our salvation before the creation of the world.

Concerning that eternal decree we certainly confess:

- that it involves Father, Son and Holy Spirit (CoD 1.7);
- that Christ was appointed to be the Mediator and the Surety of the elect (CoD 1.7 & 2:2);
- that the Father decreed to give the elect to Christ and to work in the elect through his Word and Spirit (CoD 1.7).

God's eternal decree is the foundation of our salvation (Eph 1). Whether or not that decree is described as an intratrinitarian covenant is another matter. As mentioned previously (#4 above), our confessions do not require us to speak of the eternal decree as a *covenant*. There will, therefore, be difference of opinion on that matter. Such differences of opinion should be permissible within the bounds of subscription to the TFU. Also in the context of the present debates regarding FV, it is noteworthy that the report of the URCNA study committee on FV (to be submitted to Synod London 2010) and the "Testimony on Justification" from Westminster California Seminary both defend justification *sola gratia* and *sola fides* without mentioning the covenant of redemption (*pactum salutis*). This indicates that it is possible to maintain an orthodox, Reformed understanding of the gospel without necessarily speaking of the covenant of redemption.

7. Are there CanRC ministers, like many in the UCRNA, who hold to the Reformed doctrine of the covenant of works? How is this understood?

In the history of Reformed theology, various terms have been used to describe the relationship between God and man before the fall into sin. For instance, K. Schilder was willing to use the phrase "covenant of works," although he often added "so-called" before it because he did not want people to think that Adam would have merited eternal life from God. S.G. De Graaf preferred to use the term "covenant of favour," and more recently Rev. Clarence Stam has suggested

“covenant of love” (see *Covenant of Love*, pp 48-54). The Westminster Standards speak both of “covenant of works” and “covenant of life.” Thus, there has been much variety in terminology. Whatever term might be used, concerning the pre-fall relationship we maintain:

- God created man in true righteousness and holiness, so that he both could, and should, obey the Lord his God (Q&A 6 & 9; BC 14);
- God’s command to Adam in the garden was “the commandment of life” (BC 14). In other words, *if* Adam had obeyed the command he and his descendants would have continued to live eternally in blessedness with the Lord (Q&A 6). But, *since* Adam disobeyed, he and all his descendants have become “liable to physical and spiritual death” (BC 14).

Within the CanRC, we are cautious about saying that Adam’s pre-fall obedience would have *merited* him *eternal life*. Eternal life is a gift from God, not a pay cheque earned by Adam. We do not want to leave the impression in any way that God is beholden to man. At the same time, even if we are not inclined to speak of Adam meriting eternal life (pre-fall), this does *not* mean that we are hesitant to say that Christ merited salvation and eternal life for us. That is, indeed, confessional language (BC 22).

8. How do the ministers of the CanRC regard the covenant theology of K. Schilder?

First of all, let’s highlight a few main points of Schilder’s teaching on the covenant:

- Schilder’s main burden is to keep the covenant *real*. In one speech he gave around the time of the Liberation he said, “Now we must first agree on one thing: we must believe in the *reality* of the covenant” (*Main Points of the Doctrine of the Covenant*, p 1). He emphasized this because there were people who viewed the children of the covenant through the lens of presuppositions concerning their baptism. Rather than working from assumptions and presuppositions, Schilder taught that those who are baptized are *really* in the covenant. They *really* receive the promises of salvation and they *really* receive the obligation to respond, out of thankfulness, with a new obedience. (MPDC, pp 10-11)
- Schilder also points out that everyone is baptized with the same Form. We do not have a Form A for elect and Form B for non-elect (MPDC, p 11)
- At the same time, those who are properly and legally in the covenant also have to appropriate the

promises by faith. After all, it is by true faith that we are grafted into Christ (LD 7)

- Schilder speaks of conditions within the covenant, but he also takes pains to ensure that no one misunderstands this. He says: if you mean by condition “something whereby we bind God,” or “something for which God has to wait before He can go on,” or “something which we have to fulfill in order to *merit* something,” then “we say unconditionally: ‘unconditional is the password.’” But he continues: “Do you mean by *condition* something which God has *joined to something else*, to make clear to us that the one cannot come *without the other* and that we cannot be sure of the one, unless we are at the same time *assured* of the other? Then we say unconditionally: ‘conditional is the password’” (*Extra-Scriptural Binding – A new Danger*, Inheritance Publications, 1996, p. 78).

Bearing the above in mind, CanRC are not inclined to speak of an inward/outward covenant or an inward/outward aspect of the covenant. Using that terminology leaves us with impression that some children of the baptism are really in the covenant and really baptized, while others are not. We fear this leads us back to the teaching of baptism on the basis of presupposed regeneration. That is history we do not want to repeat. At the same time, this does not mean that we teach that every member of the covenant is *de facto* elect. Not at all! Genuine profession of faith is a very real and important part of life in the covenant.

9. How do the ministers of the CanRC regard the covenant theology of Norman Shepherd?

In a sense, this is a difficult question to answer because they are so many – widely divergent – views on what exactly Shepherd’s covenant theology is. There are some aspects of Shepherd’s teaching with which we can agree. For instance, his desire to emphasize the objectivity – or reality – of the covenant is commendable. Likewise, we can agree with his concern that the sacraments do not become merely empty ceremonies.

At the same time, we would not endorse everything that Shepherd has written. For example, in *Backbone of the Bible: Covenant in Contemporary Perspective*, Shepherd writes that “we need to abandon the works/merit paradigm” (p 119). As mentioned above, speaking of the merits of Christ is confessional language which we would want to maintain, not abandon. Furthermore, in his writings, Shepherd frequently uses of the phrase “living, active, repentant and obedient faith.” “Living

faith" is used in the CoD 1.4, but "obedient faith" is not used in the TFU. Whatever Shepherd himself may mean by that phrase, it has the potential to be confusing. Someone might easily conclude that works are somehow part of the instrument of justification, namely, faith. It would be better to stick to the common terminology of the confessions and refer to "true faith" (e.g., LD 7, 23, 24; BC 22)

10. How exactly do ministers in the CanRC relate the confessional doctrine of justification *sola gratia, sola fide* to their covenant theology?

The covenant promise of salvation which comes to us, *sola gratia*, at baptism should be related to the second part of the Catechism, that is, our deliverance. Our covenant obedience (or the "new obedience" in Form for Baptism) should be related to the third part of the Catechism, that is, our thankfulness. So long as we keep that distinction in mind, we should be able to stay on the straight and narrow, doctrinally speaking. Lord's Day 24 is abundantly clear: our good works do not have any part in our deliverance. Lord's Day 32 is also abundantly clear: our good works *must* be there, but as part of our thankfulness. In all of this it must be remembered that justification and sanctification are *both* works of Christ, (see LD 32), and therefore there is no room for boasting that our good works contribute, even an iota, to our salvation. It's all of Christ! The fact that good works must necessarily come forth from Christians is not due to the nature of their faith in the first place, but it is due to the fact that by that faith they are grafted into Jesus Christ (LD 24). True Christian living is not dependent on our works, nor the quality of our faith, but on being rooted in the Christ who wondrously renews (LD 32-52) those whom he so graciously redeemed (LD 8-31).

11. How will CanRC ministers relate to those URCNA ministers and churches who not only hold to and preach the distinction between those internally/externally in the covenant but for whom it is of the essence of Reformed covenant theology since these two views would seem to be mutually exclusive? Could a congregation have a minister one year who preached the distinction and the next year who preached that all baptized members are in the covenant of grace in precisely the same way, without distinction?

It may be best to answer this question after the next question.

12. Some followers of the so-called "Federal Vision" reject the above internal/external distinction, and are preaching that every baptized person is "united to Christ," as K. Schilder said, "head for head." Is this view held or taught in the CanRC? If so, to what degree?

First of all, we believe it is erroneous to maintain that K. Schilder saw every baptized person as, head for head, "united to Christ" and therefore regenerate. Certainly he saw all covenant children as "sanctified in Christ," as the Baptism Form which is used both in the CanRC and in the URCNA says. Covenant children are "set apart" and distinguished from the children of unbelievers. The "head for head" language, however, applies to their position in the covenant. Here we (and, we believe, Schilder) would maintain that all children of believers, head for head, are truly in the covenant. They all receive the same promises. If they later err in unbelief, that is not because God did not really offer them life and salvation.

In the FV statement, it is maintained however that "baptism unites a person to Christ" and that is often maintained in a "head for head" manner. One writer, for instance, after maintaining that he fully adheres to the doctrines of the Canons of Dort, goes on to speak about how Paul addresses his congregations and suggests that Paul sees each member of the church as "head for head" "elect" (Eph 1:4). Later he suggests that one can fall away from this election. That is unfortunately confusing and problematic. We would prefer to think that Paul speaks covenantally and corporately. Paul addresses those who are faithful in Christ (Eph 1:1) and refers to his readers as "chosen in Christ" (1:4). As he speaks to the body, he goes on in Ephesians 6:1-4 to address also the children in a covenantal and corporate way urging them to obey and honour their parents. One does not need to redefine the classical definitions of election to understand things that way. I believe that what I wrote back in 2007 (G. H. Visscher, "How Should the Pulpit Address the Pew? Some Lessons from Paul" *Clarion*, v. 42, no. 55, Cf. *Lux Mundi* 26 March 2007. See <http://www.bbk.gkv.nl/data/download/694.pdf>) reflects the approach followed in the CanRC - an approach which is faithful to both Scripture and confession.

On this point, it is also good to note that the position of men like K. Schilder is not the same as the present positions of some of the FV leaders. We need to remember too that in the 1940s Schilder was opposing baptism on the basis of presumptive regeneration. If he so opposed the presumption of a regeneration in children, is it not clear that he would be even more

opposed to the suggestion that the reality was already present with newborn children? "Promise" was a big word in Schilder's approach. To suggest that Schilder replaced Kuyper's "presumptive regeneration" with a construction in which all are head for head regenerate and united to Christ is simply wrong. All are in the covenant, head for head; all receive the same promises; but not all respond in with faith and obedience.

While the exact formulations may vary, Canadian Reformed ministers generally see it and preach it in that way. Regarding the previous question, it is theoretically possible that some ministers preach an internal/external distinction within the covenant, and that that this would be tolerated within the Canadian Reformed federation. But that is rare and when it happens, it is not because the Canadian Reformed seminary has taught them in that way.

13. To what degree did Schilder reject "common grace" and how is this doctrine understood by ministers in the CanRC?

The exact reason for this question is really not very clear to us. While the topic is considerably more complex and much more could be said, for K. Schilder, the concern was that what was generally referred to as "common grace" is really a matter of God "postponing his judgement" for a time. It was unclear to him, how exactly this constituted grace. It is largely a matter of terms. There is no doubt that as long as history waits for the final display of grace and the final execution of judgement, the sun and the rain will fall on the just and the unjust alike.

14. How widely, if at all, is the free or well-meant offer of the gospel accepted and practiced in the CanRC?

Again, the exact concern of this question is vague to us. If it simply means, "Do you still agree to Canons of Dort 2.5?", the answer is simple, "Of course we do!" As a matter of fact, we would maintain that the well-meant offer of the gospel comes out even stronger with the approach of Schilder than with an approach which argues for an internal/external distinction in the covenant. How well-meant is the gospel offer for someone who is said to be in the covenant only externally? Since we maintain a real covenant, God's promises and offer of grace are real to all in the covenant. Even stronger than 2.5 is Canons of Dort, III/IV, 8: "As many as are called by the gospel are earnestly called. . . He. . . earnestly promises rest of soul and eternal life to all who come to Him and believe."

15. Some of the proponents of the Federal Vision along with Norman Shepherd have recently and publicly rejected the imputation of the active obedience of Christ.

Is the active obedience of Christ believed and preached by ministers in the CanRC? How influential has the rejection of the active obedience of Christ been in the CanRC?

Here we would like to refer to our colleague, Dr. N. H. Gootjes, who has written a clear defence of the imputation of Christ's active obedience (*Koinonia* 19.2). He argues that, even if the actual term, "active obedience," is not used, the teaching is nonetheless there in BC 22 where we confess, "He imputes to us all his merits and *as many holy works as He has done for us and in our place.*"


At the same time, we should also remember that Christ's active and passive obedience are so closely tied to one another that at times it is difficult – and perhaps also unnecessary – to distinguish between the two. For example, in Hebrews 10:9 our Saviour says "Here I am, I have come to do your will." This sounds very much like what we would call "active obedience" in dogmatics. However, immediately thereafter, in Hebrews 10:10 the Holy Spirit continues, "And by *that will*, we have been made holy *through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.*" And that sounds very much like what we would call "passive obedience" in dogmatics.

16. Are the CanRC brethren having the same discussion regarding paedocommunion? Are there congregations in the CanRC that practice or teach paedocommunion?

Paedocommunion is not an issue in the Canadian Reformed federation. To our knowledge it is neither practiced nor promoted by anyone in the federation.

In conclusion, then, where do we stand? Perhaps it's appropriate to quote from one of our leaders at this point.

At the end of an extensive article very relevant to the present discussions (*American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism*, Inheritance Publications, 1996), the late Dr. J. Faber wrote some words which highlight how still today we wish to bind ourselves only to Scripture and confession, and promote the development of theology precisely by resisting the temptation to bind each other to the specific dogmatic constructions of any theologian. We should value God's covenant and baptism very highly, he said, but "at the same time we should remember that Christ is not gathering a church of theologians or church historians, but of *believers.*" "God's catholic church is being gathered, not in the unity of a perfect theology – however eagerly we should endeavour to obtain it – but in the unity of true faith, faith in the triune God of the covenant, the God of our baptism" (p. 54).

It is in this spirit that we offer to you our answers to your questions. 



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Canticles

The Prophecies of Isaiah contain four "Servant Songs," the last of which is Isaiah 53. Perhaps no other chapter in the Old Testament so clearly proclaims the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ as does Isaiah 53. Around Good Friday we often sing a versification of it, Hymn 21 of the *Book of Praise*. However, Isaiah 53 also speaks about the resurrection of the Servant. The last three verses say:

10. He will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.

11. After the suffering of his soul,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous
servant will justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities.

12. Therefore I will give him a
portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils
with the strong,
because he poured out his life
unto death,
and was numbered with the
transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the
transgressors.

This new Easter Song is based upon
these verses and was set to the
joyous tune RIDDARHOLM.

The Risen Servant

1. Though He died He now is ris - en; Je - sus lives to die no more.
2. Then will blos - som God's good pur - pose in the ris - en Ser - vant's hand.
3. By His know - ledge He'll bless man - y, count - less will be jus - ti - fied.
4. He was num - bered with the sin - ners and their guilt He bore a - way.

Suff - 'ring Ser - vant, our guilt off - ering, He's the One whom we a - dore.
Af - ter suff - 'ring, in - to glo - ry, He will do what God had planned.
He will bear all their trans - gres - sions; all the spoils He will di - vide.
Now He's ris - en up to heav - en where He prays for us al - ways.

He will see His off - spring flour - ish, and will live for - ev - er - more.
He will see what He ac - com - plished, how our sins have all been banned.
God will grant Him His own por - tion since He for God's peo - ple died.
He, God's Ser - vant! He, our Sa - vior! We will praise Him ev - ery day!

Text: Isaiah 53:10-12; vers. George Ph. van Popta, 2009 ©
Tune: Swedish Koralkbok, 1697

RIDDARHOLM
8 7 8 7 8 7



Ray of Sunshine

Patricia Gelms and
Corinne Gelms

"O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens."

Psalm 8:1



Clarence Zwiep has found a wonderful place which he calls home at the Beacon, in Dunnville, Ontario. He enjoys the company of all the other residents and staff there. If you have had or will have the opportunity to meet Clarence, you soon realize what a happy and cheerful man he is!

From his hearty warm welcomes to his contagious smiles, Clarence has made many friends within the church community. With zest and energy, Clarence keeps active and busy. During the course of the week, he works at the UPS store in Dunnville as well as at the local greenhouse, Rosa Flora. In the home, he helps with a variety of household chores. During his free time, Clarence keeps himself entertained in his room by cutting papers and watching movies. He also really enjoys playing games with the other residents and with the staff. Clarence likes to work on puzzles, usually with pictures related to nature or farm life.

Clarence comes from a large family who is very dear to him. He is the third oldest in the family, with four brothers and four sisters. Clarence grew up on his parents' farm. He has been a hard worker and he did many of the chores on the farm. Once a month he visits with relatives; this is a (fascinating) highlight, as these visits are something that he always looks forward to with eager anticipation. At the time of writing, Clarence is currently off from work, as he is recovering from open-heart surgery. We hope and pray that our heavenly Father will grant you a good recovery. May this surgery have found its desired effect in your life. With a child-like faith, may you continue to trust in the Lord!

We hope and pray that you will have a wonderful birthday Clarence, together with all your family and friends.

Clarence loves to get mail with pictures of anything related to a farm. So let's all get out our pens and birthday cards and help Clarence celebrate his fifty-sixth birthday.

Birthdays in May

- 1 **CLARENCE ZWIEP** will be 56
653 Broad Street West, Dunnville, ON N1A 1T8

- 4 **DEBBIE VEENSTRA** will be 36
4238 2nd Concession Road,
Sherkston, ON L0S 1R0

- 10 **ROB DE HAAN** will be 45
c/o Anchor Home
361 Thirty Road, RR 2, Beamsville, ON L0R 1B2

- 21 **EDDIE VAN ROOTSELAAR** will be 17
210 Indian Creek Road East
Chatham, ON N7M 5J6

- 30 **BERNIE DE VOS** will be 35
c/o Anchor Home
361 Thirty Road
RR 2, Beamsville, ON L0R 1B2

A sincere congratulations to all of you celebrating a birthday this month. May our heavenly Father grant you all a wonderful day, together with your family and friends.

A note to all parents and caregivers

If there are any address or other changes that we need to be aware of please let us know as soon as possible.

You can contact us by the following means:

Mail: Corinne Gelms

8301 Range 1 Road, Smithville, ON L0R 2A0

Phone: 905-957-0380

Email: jcorgelms@porchlight.ca



Ontario's Forty-Eighth Women's League Day



On October 21, 2009 four hundred and six ladies enjoyed a trip to Guelph, gathering at Guelph Place for the forty-eighth Annual Ontario Women's League Day. How blessed we are to serve our God and Savior in a public building as sisters in the Lord.

We were warmly greeted by the Guelph congregation, who spent many hours preparing for such an event, and the time spent was also evident in the nicely decorated hall with fall harvest items and apples on the table. Even the bathrooms were clearly stated now to be for ladies only.

After requesting everyone to get their last minute coffee, the League President, Jane Oosterhoff, summoned everyone to their seats and introduced the singing of Psalm 138:1, 3, and 4 followed by prayer. We read Colossians 3: 1-17. Jane then welcomed us all to League Day; a day off of our regular activities, a day to enjoy the company of fellow sisters in the Lord.

A bit of business was brought to everyone's attention, namely that Dianne Westrik was introduced as the Women's League Vice President. This also puts her on the ILPB as League Representative. Words of thanks were given to Mary DeBoer for her time with the League and ILPB. It was also mentioned that Melissa Muis is the new copy editor for *Horizon*.

As previously mentioned 406 ladies had registered for this League Day. We can't forget to mention the one poor man who looks and feels out of place! All the churches in Ontario were represented as well as Grand Rapids, one sister from the West, one from Holland and a group from the URC. After roll call we sang the League Song, "Sing God's Glory."

Rev. John VanWoudenberg was then introduced and we were all reminded to be nice and polite as this is his first time using a power point. After a couple of light hearted jokes about Rev. VanWoudenberg not being able to go the bathroom (maybe that had something to do with the fact that the male bathrooms now had signs on them stating "Ladies") when he is typically used to preaching and having water, not giving a speech and while everyone else drinks water, we were then able to get into the long awaited speech on the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament.

In a very interactive manner Rev. VanWoudenberg explained the work of the Holy Spirit and how the Holy Spirit worked in the Old Testament. He spoke to us about Scripture and Creation. He took a look back at who Christ is, the Holy Spirit in re-creation and providence, the Holy Spirit in the coming of Christ, as well as the Holy Spirit and Pentecost. Rev. VanWoudenberg stressed that without the Holy Spirit no one would exist! He is the reason why we have movement, why we exist, why we move! It is the Spirit that works in us. It is the Spirit that equipped Jesus to do his most awesome task. We must stand in awe and be comforted! Praise the Holy Spirit!

Due to the fact that this was such an informative and interactive speech there was no time for discussion or questions.

We then had a collection for Covenant Canadian Reformed Teachers College. We were all reminded to sign cards, check out the ILPB table and the table for CDs/books from Anchor. We were also reminded to exercise self-control with our healthy appetites. Rev. VanWoudenberg was thanked again for providing us with a very informative morning.



Louie Medemblik then opened lunch for all ladies by reading Psalm 119:33-40, followed by prayer. We had a very organized approach to getting our lunch and were able to appease our plates with a variety of delicious food. We did have to beware of an elderly lady though who was rummaging through people's purses.

The afternoon session began by Deanna Linde playing "O Canada," to which we joined in and sang verses 1 and 4. This afternoon we tried something different for League Day. The venue wasn't set up to do workshops which the Guelph ladies did desire, so instead they had three speakers. Each speaker did a small speech, which was then followed by round table discussions. Each table was also provided with questions to assist in that matter.

The first speaker was Janice Riemersma, who spoke on "Love, Joy, and Peace," followed by Ninette Lodder, who spoke about "Patience, Kindness, and Goodness." Heather VanWoudenberg then spoke to us on "Faithfulness, Gentleness, and Self-Control." Janice spoke again, providing a summary, noting the fact that we live out of means of grace in order to grow in the fruit

of the Spirit. We also have the communion of saints, and that is such a gift! We all need to immerse ourselves in the Word of God and prayer.

Our League President came to the podium afterwards to thank the speakers for their very informative speeches (which hopefully will be found in *Horizon*) and a few announcements were made. Our collection for CCRTC raised

\$1, 941.13! Praise be to the Lord for this financial blessing! The Guelph ladies were thanked for all their hard work in putting together a fruitful League Day, as well as special thanks to Deanna Linde for her pianist skills that were put to good use.

It was announced that we all are looking forward to next year, hosted by Hamilton. We closed this day by singing Hymn 37:2-4 and Jane closed in a word of prayer.

What an amazing gift from above that we can worship the Lord in a public place and learn more about Him and how to serve Him better. May we work with what we learned this day throughout our lives. Thanks be to God! See you next year!





Letter to the Editor

As a scientist and a Reformed Christian, I read Dr. Van Dam's editorial entitled "Science and the Age of the Earth" (12 February 2010) with disappointment. He propagates young-earth creationist rhetoric instead of giving due consideration to the significant resources of Reformed scholarship within and beyond our own federation. While there are many aspects of his approach which need to be corrected, let me focus on just a couple of points which are closest to my own expertise. Both points relate to Van Dam's suggestion that "scientific theories on origins are speculation, for they cannot be tested."

First, Dr. Van Dam is clearly not familiar with the vast collection of unrelated specific detailed evidence for big bang cosmology (see, for example <http://pdg.lbl.gov/2009/reviews/rpp2009-rev-cosmological-parameters.pdf>, especially its figures which show an astounding fit between theory and observation). When proposed, this theory horrified atheists who were confronted for the first time with scientific evidence that the universe had a beginning, suggesting a creator. How should Christians respond to such a theory? In our own circles, we have brothers and sisters with significant expertise in the sciences and a love for the Reformed faith, and anyone with questions can turn to them. It is all the more troubling, then, to see our ecclesiastical leaders turning first to the American fundamentalists. I do not doubt the sincerity of their approach, but these fundamentalists do not have in their toolkit the Reformed hermeneutical approaches that we treasure, but instead appeal to the so-called "plain sense of Scripture."

Second, Dr. Van Dam ironically touts the RATE project as providing evidence for a young earth. As a PhD physicist and a Christian, I was invited to be involved in the peer-review process of the RATE project. The two key papers I reviewed were entirely wrong in nearly every possible way (misrepresenting well-understood science, incorrect mathematical calculations, specious theological interpretation, making unfounded grandiose claims) and thus I roundly recommended rejection. The articles were published anyway.

Since its publication, many other sincere, evangelical, Bible-believing Christians who work in the sciences have also identified the significant problems of the RATE project. See, for example, www.asa3.org/ASA/education/origins/rate.htm (or the June 2007 and March 2008 issues of *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*) and www.reasons.org/

resources/non-staff-papers/DotheRATEFindingsNegateMainstreamScience. We hide our heads in the sand if we claim that the young-earth creationists have the solution.

Science in today's culture is alternately idolized and vilified. Let us ensure in our critiques that we proceed with due diligence and with confidence in God's Word and in his covenant faithfulness to creation, without getting caught up in the prevalent secular and "Christian" myths about science.

Yours in Christ,
Arnold Sikkema
Langley, BC

Response

Dr. Sikkema's letter is helpful in highlighting the issues that apparently divide us.

1. Accepting the "plain sense of Scripture" (unless Scripture demands otherwise) is a hallmark of Reformed hermeneutics, contrary to what Dr. Sikkema affirms. R.C. Sproul, for example, recently reaffirmed this point when on the basis of this principle he changed his mind, moving from the framework hypothesis to embracing the plain meaning of Genesis 1, creation in six days.

2. Dr. Sikkema disputes my suggestion that "scientific theories on origins are speculation, for they cannot be tested." Yet the article on big bang cosmology which he cites admits to using unproven "assumptions" and it concedes that two key ingredients – dark matter and dark energy – "have not yet been verified by laboratory experiments" (p. 20). So it seems that there is ample room for doubt.

3. Dr. Sikkema notes that in our own circles we have Reformed scientists to whom we can turn. Yes, indeed. These include Dr. Margaret Helder (biologist) and Dr. John Byl (astronomer). Dr Byl, in his book, *God and Cosmos*, offers a detailed assessment of cosmology from a Reformed perspective. In his blog he discusses issues of science and Genesis with a high regard for Scripture: <http://bylogos.blogspot.com/>.

4. Scripture is God's Word and gives infallible information on the age and beginning of creation. Science by its very nature is unable to do this. Creationist scientists laudably try to interpret scientific data in the light of Scripture. They openly admit that they have not been able to answer all the questions arising from their RATE project. But

then mainstream evolutionary science has not been able to answer all the questions either. Dr. Sikkema refers to critiques of creationism by many "sincere, evangelical, Bible-believing Christians" in, for example, the journal *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*. It is well known that many such Christians hold to theistic evolution, a view promoted in this journal, and so their negative reaction to RATE is hardly surprising. You interpret the data through the lens of your presuppositions.

5. Let us not be blinded by current scientific hypotheses but critically examine and test them in the light of the plain testimony of God's Word.

C. Van Dam

Dear Editor:

Re: Theistic Evolution

Who is my God anyways? Seems a strange question, yes? On the other hand maybe not. My God? Isn't that the One of whom I confess, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth?" The One who is "eternal, incomprehensible, almighty?" All on the same page so far, I would think! So that leaves me puzzled, for if we agree that my God is Almighty, why the ongoing effort to make little my God? My God? The One who created woman from the rib of man, the One who commands the winds of the sea, the One who sent fire from heaven, in short, the God of Psalm 103. Today we hear much of a God who perhaps could not create the world by simply ordering it to be. Theistic evolution! Yes, God created, but in actual fact He didn't get it quite right at first and so through time and trial and error He managed to sort it out and get us where we are today. It's sort of a melding of evolution and creation which allows everyone to be right. A wonderful solution, no? But it's not faith is it, for faith says that He created by his command. The evil one works hard to convince us that God is not Almighty, that He could not create the world but that the world came into being through some other fantabulous event. When he sees that this meets opposition, he seeks other means to create doubt, to minimize who our God is, to discredit his name as well as the faith of his children. Dr. Oosterhoff comments in a previous letter that we ought to ask what is most helpful for students who are faced with the arguments re evolution; "to say that it is the devil's own work, or to tell them that many Christians are able to reconcile

it with their faith?" Perhaps it is also the "devil's own work" that many Christians are indeed able to do just that. Science is without doubt "a worthy pursuit stemming directly from our creation mandate" (D. Schreimer, *Clarion* Jan. 15). As a "worthy pursuit" it must then also carry out this mandate in such a way that the One who gave the mandate in the first place is upheld as the Almighty God who did indeed create all things by the word of his mouth. Who is my God? He is the incomparable God of Psalm 86 (*Clarion* Jan. 29) "There is no God like You, O Lord; no deeds can compare with yours." My God? Create by the words of his mouth? Absolutely. That's called faith, is it not?

Dick Schouten
Yarrow, BC

dinesch@hotmail.com

To the editor,

I find it quite peculiar that in the last number of issues of *Clarion* we are being educated by theology professors and ministers on scientific subjects ranging from palaeontology to climatology, from evolution to geology. Why are we not hearing from the scientists in our midst? When I need legal advice, I contact a lawyer, not an accountant. The record of scientists when it comes to interpreting and understanding God's creation speaks for itself (cancer diagnosis and treatment, digital electronics, agriculture, telecommunications, nuclear medicine, nuclear energy, etc.). I find it inconsistent that we are all too ready to make use of these technologies when it suits us. Yet, when scientific discoveries seem to conflict with our interpretations of Scripture, suddenly scientists' methods and findings can't be trusted. The church's record of going toe-to-toe with science is not very good. Take for example the debate between the Roman Catholic Church and Galileo regarding the geocentric versus heliocentric model of the solar system. After 400 years of diminishing credibility, the Roman Catholic Church finally admitted its error. John Calvin also used Bible verses such as Psalm 93:1 to "prove" that the earth does not move. If Ratzinger's book on Genesis (Eerdman's 1986) is any indication, the Roman Catholic Church learned a lesson. Unsettling as they may be, let's hope it doesn't take us 400 years to take recent discoveries of scientists seriously.

Yours in Christ,
Ed Baartman, Langley, 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.