Ecclesiastical Fellowship, What is it Really?

In a previous article we reviewed the changes in the rules by which the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) relate to churches in other countries and recently also with other churches in Canada and the United States. The Rules for Ecclesiastical Fellowship were developed from the earlier rules for correspondence with churches abroad. We concluded that the new rules led to the application of the idea of pluriformity of the Church.

This time we want to examine more closely the Presbyterian development of thought as it relates to church unity. More specifically we will deal with a statement of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) titled Biblical Principles of the Unity of the Church. This statement can be found on the official web site of the OPC ([www.opc.org](http://www.opc.org)) and has been printed in Reformed Polemics Vol. 8, No. 3, dated November 30, 2001.

The document in question was used as reference by Synod Neerlandia, 2001 when it expressed the fact that neither the CanRC nor the OPC consider pluriformity of the Church a legitimate concept. All the delegates at Synod Neerlandia as well as the delegates at the OPC General Assembly 2001 agreed with this statement. Yet we discovered last time that Ecclesiastical Fellowship as understood by the CanRC leads to the idea of pluriformity. Now we want to see how the OPC document deals with this matter. It is divided into four major sections:

1. The Nature of the Church
2. The Unity of the Church
3. Ecclesiastical Union
4. Toward Perfecting Biblical Unity

Since the document is too large to deal with all its content in one article we will restrict ourselves to the matters dealing with the nature of the Church and church unity. Taking this approach our first comment comes with regard to 1B. There we read, “All those who believe the promise of God and their children and have had the promise sealed to them in baptism are to be recognized and treated as God’s people, as members of the organized church.” Here we are confronted with the idea that Church membership is determined by baptism. Belonging to the covenant is equated to being a member of the Church. With this understanding it is impossible to belong to the wrong Church as long as one is a true believer. This thought leads to the acceptance of the idea of an invisible Church. From this statement one can also conclude that all true believing, baptized Christians are members of the organized Church, no matter what form that church takes. Hence the Church can have multiple forms – is pluriform.

In section two the main thrust is that the Church is one and that there is only one Church under its Head, Jesus Christ. Of special note are paragraphs C and G. First, in C we read, “The church, the visible organization, is described in the Bible as one church. God has given only one covenant of love (Deut. 7: 6-12) and has only one people of the covenant.” Once more we are confronted with the idea of equivalence between the covenant and the Church. Further, we wonder about the adjectival clause – ‘the visible organization’. Does that lead us to the idea that there is also an invisible aspect to the Church? What would that mean? Would it mean the Church from the beginning of time to the end of time, as John Calvin would describe it? Or would it refer to those members of the covenant who have not joined a visible church?
In paragraph G we read, “The unity of the church is attained unto by growing in spiritual maturity (Eph.4: 13). Unity and maturity are the result of mutual, loving admonition and joint submission to Scripture. Such maturity is manifested by speaking and acting the truth in love (Eph.4: 15).” As much as we can agree with this statement we wonder why this approach was not taken in dealing with the approximately thirteen areas of difference between the CanRC and the OPC when they began their unity discussions.

The next category is Ecclesiastical Union (EU). The first thing that catches our attention is that this category is not entitled Ecclesiastical Fellowship (EF). Surely most of us are convinced that EF is the recognition of another church or federation as a true church – being one with the church where we are members. But in this document we read something different than that. We read, “In ecclesiastical union two denominations join in submitting to one common form of government.” Even more interesting is the next sentence. “Since ecclesiastical jurisdiction includes the maintenance of spiritual discipline, unity in polity requires agreement in the standards of faith and worship which such discipline maintains.” Once again we come across an understanding that seems to have been bypassed or discarded in the arduous discussions between the OPC and the CanRC.

The final sentence in the opening paragraph of this third section reads as follows. “Hence unification in polity, when properly sought and achieved, involves also unity in faith, discipline and worship.” Once again we can heartily agree with the truths of this sentence and can only come to the conclusion that EF is not EU, that EF is a temporary step on the way to the goal of EU. Do the CanRC have the same understanding that EF is a temporary stage on the way to EU? We think not! However, it does appear from this argument that the acceptance of EF in the Presbyterian understanding of it would be the application of the idea of pluriformity.

Although we have already published the entire document we are discussing in a previous issue, Vol.8, No.3, we feel forced to repeat part of it here. The next two paragraphs in section 3 of the document are very puzzling and appear to be diametrically opposed to one another. First we read, “As we take account of the diversity that exists between denominations arising from differences of ethnic identity, cultural background, and historical circumstance the most conclusive evidence derived from Scripture is required to support the position that the obliteration of denominational separateness is an obligation resting upon these Churches of Christ. The differences that exist often manifest the diversity which the church of Christ ought to exemplify and make for the enrichment of the church’s total witness. If ecclesiastical union impairs this diversity, then it may be achieved at too great an expense and tends to an impoverishment inconsistent with the witness to Christ which the church must bear.”

Our conclusion is that here the case is made that ethnic identity, cultural background and historical circumstances can be reasons for not seeking ecclesiastical unity as doing so might impoverish the witness to Christ by the Church.

We go on. “Though the diversity which manifests itself in differentiating historical development might appear to make ecclesiastical union inadvisable or even perilous in certain cases, yet the biblical evidence in support of union is so plain that any argument to the contrary, however plausible, must be false.”
Now we read that the conclusion of the previous paragraph is false. So there is no reason for acquiescing to pluriformity of the church even if ethnic identity, cultural background or historical circumstances occasion it. So to condone the existence of the OPC and the RCUS in the same place as an acceptable situation is not allowed. Nor would it be proper to concur with the existence of congregations of the Free Church of Scotland, The Korean Presbyterian Church or the OPC in places where there are CanRC Churches. Of course the same should be said in reverse. Such situations would legitimize the idea of pluriformity in the Church and is thus contrary to the unity of faith and the oneness in Christ advocated in (at least parts of) this document.

There is much more that can be said but we must forge ahead to the fourth section of the document. Again highlighting only the most important points for the present we note C. There we find, “The ultimate goal of the unity of the church is nothing less than one world-wide presbyterian/reformed church.” But then the reality of what presently exists is addressed in E. “The present division into separate denominations is because of unfaithfulness to God as expressed in beliefs, teaching, and living, on the part of both individuals in the church and the churches that are contrary to the Word of God.” F begins with “We find ourselves in this sinful situation…” Once again we are confronted with the truth that separate denominations, a plural form of the Church, is a sinful situation. Pluriform is not a legitimate expression of the way the Church is.

Then we come to G. “In seeking actively the unity of the church, we must recognize several levels of separateness (i.e. degrees of purity) among the churches. There are presbyterian and Reformed churches that are more or less faithful. There are non-Reformed churches that are more or less faithful. There are also churches that have apostatized, and no longer have the right to be called church.” This is language that does not fall in line with what the Reformed confess in the Belgic Confession when it speaks of the true and the false church which are easily recognized. It is true that at times there may be a federation, or a church within a federation, that strays. But such must be called to repentance. Individuals who stray, who live in sin, must be called to repentance. And surely there is patience and love to be shown to them. But if they refuse to be reconciled to God, His Word and His Church, they must be cut off. The same must apply to Church federations. If they stray, live in sin, they must be admonished in love and with much patience, but if they refuse to be reconciled to the truth, to God, His Word and His Church, they must be cut off. They will lose the right to be called Church.

The acceptance of the fact that more or less pure churches exist leaves the door open to a variety of forms of churches that are considered legitimate. Here is another way in which pluriformity receives legitimacy.

To this point we conclude that the document we have been reviewing appears to have some inconsistencies in it with regard to the view of the Church. It appears that there is, on the one hand, a line that calls for true Scriptural unity and, on the other hand, a train of thought that recognizes the fact of sin in this matter, and an approach that wants to deal with that reality by condoning its existence.

It must be said, however, that the conclusion is in line with the main thrust of the document. It calls for true and pure unity in one worldwide church. On the way to this goal the document calls for ecclesiastical fellowship in which official interchange may take place of delegates at the meetings of the ruling bodies of the church. There must be mutual agreement on what the gospel is,
and cooperation in organizations, both nationally and internationally. Once that has been established the actual steps toward uniting may begin to take place.

The steps to full unity include, according to the document under review, “a) The recognition of each other as true churches of Christ, more or less pure (Confession of Faith XXV.4), in which the marks of the church are found. b) Reconciliation between the bodies (the sin that is involved in the separate existence must be faced and resolved: this may be only the sin of separate existence; or a sin which has historical roots; or doctrinal error; or error in the life of the church).”

Mention is then made of the fact that, “Agreement that the confession of the united church must be apparent in the life of the church.” This speaks against those who refuse to address the lack of living up to the confessions of a church. Once again, just as in the life of a Christian so also in the life of a church, the confession must bear out in the application, the lifestyle.

The ultimate goal of church unity – union – must include d) “The offering of each church to the other for examination; willingness to give, receive and respond to reproof; speaking and acting the truth in love.” e) “Agreement on the same ecclesiology and government of the church.”

As we said, there is much material in this document that can be compared to the new rules for Ecclesiastical Fellowship. In coming months we may take the opportunity to do so in a more detailed manner. For now we can conclude that this OPC document gives a good outline for Biblically based Church unity. It reflects the Scriptural call and norm for one Church united in full union in the truth of all that God has revealed in His Word. At the same time this document appears to permit the existence of more or less pure churches due to a variety of causes. It also legitimizes ecclesiastical fellowship as the existence of a variety of forms of churches. In these matters one can taste the flavour of pluriformity of the Church and the idea of an invisible church.

We are left with several questions. What weight does this document have in the OPC? Why do we not read and/or hear about the call for church union in the struggle for EF with the CanRC? Why do pluriformity, more or less pure churches and the invisible church idea not receive stronger condemnation in this document? Why do the CanRC appear to be convinced that EF is the final step on the road with the OPC while the OPC has the proper understanding that it is merely an interim stage on the road to full union?

These are matters that need to be addressed in the CanRC and OPC press alike. We hope and pray that the desire to come to agreement, also on the view of the Church will drive all those concerned to deal with these issues truthfully, forthrightly, in obedience to the Word of God and to the glory of His Name.

PdB

A FAMILIAR STORY?

In the Feb. 26/94 issue of “Information” (a) there appeared an article titled “A Familiar Story?” This familiar story apparently was the focal point of an address by the late Dr. P. Eldersveld at Calvin College in 1954. It is a story about a minister of the Word in the context of his task in the congregation to which he had been called. This story is about decline and deformation as it came to light in a particular congregation. Yet this story is not without some meaning and consequence with regard to the more recent developments in our churches and church federation. This story speaks for
When I came to this area forty years ago, the church to which I was called as minister was already in its *first* stage of decline. The people didn't *know* anymore what they were supposed to believe. They thought they knew! They had an opinion on almost every subject, and they didn't hesitate to express their views. I often heard the words "I think, I hope," and "I feel," rather than "Scripture says," or "the Confessions state." They seldom used those words because they really didn't take the time to read God's Word or consult their Confession. They had good intentions, but they just didn't get around to attending the Bible study meetings, and they couldn't bring themselves to do some edifying reading.

There was little interest in church matters and limited involvement in church life. They were too busy with other things. Some actually did get involved, but it was only a matter of time before they fell into the trap of activism. They were always busy in some form of Christian activity, but seldom found time for serious study of the Scriptures. They eventually lost their doctrine. They may have known the names of our three doctrinal standards, but they didn't know what was in them. And they didn't bother to find out. They didn't have time for their religious heritage, and couldn't be bothered with doctrine. I tried to teach it to them. I tried to make them study it, but they said that was for theologians to worry about. I then realized that they had taken the *first* step on the road to Liberalism. They didn't *know* anymore what to believe!

Then I began to notice that they had passed into the *second* stage of their decline. They didn't *care* anymore about what they were supposed to believe. They didn't hesitate to tell me that they wished that I wouldn't preach so often from the Catechism, the Confession, and the Canons of Dort. They did not want me to be nuanced too precisely in theological matters where there was not a consensus in the church. They wanted me to preach only those doctrines that all orthodox people had in common. And many were quite willing to have themselves identified formally in the public scene under some broadly Christian label, in an organization with other churches. They said that there were many other good Christians besides those who call themselves Reformed. As long as they were orthodox, in the broad sense of that term, that was good enough for them. Furthermore, if theologians couldn't even agree on matters of doctrine who were they to decide? It didn't bother them to see our distinctive Reformed witness submerged and compromised. I tried to instruct, guide, and admonish them, but they questioned my preaching, and no longer acknowledged it as the proclamation of God's Word. They heard, but they simply didn't listen. It then dawned on me that they had progressed to the *second* step on the road to Liberalism. They didn't *really* care anymore what they believed!

And then, still later, I began to notice that they had entered the *final* stage of their decline. They didn't *want* anymore what they were supposed to believe. They didn't want to be distinctively Reformed. They looked for something special and forgot what is normal. They consciously and purposefully opted for something else - either a form of evangelicalism or a more liberal direction. They didn't want any kind of orthodoxy anymore. They had been liberated from all that. Who still wants to argue points of religion? They said that people should be free to think and do what they feel is right. People are not necessarily right or wrong, they just happen to have different views. Truth had become a matter of opinion, and morality a matter of preference. I then realized that they had taken the *third* and final step on the road to Liberalism. They didn't *want* to believe anymore!

They were now well on the way of no returning. First they didn't *know* anymore what to believe, then they didn't *really* care what they believed, and finally they didn't *want* to believe anymore! Since they were too courteous and polite to remove me I continued to preach and teach. I didn't want to leave, but it became impossible to stay. And finally I had to leave. And as I look back I am amazed at how all this could happen in such a short time, and in spite of everything I did to prevent it. And I have many questions! However, I'll just leave you with one of them. Do you think that this could happen to our churches too?

Ron Dykstra

a) “Information” is a local “newspaper for the Reformed home” published for distribution among the members of the Canadian Reformed Churches in the Fraser Valley, British Columbia, Canada.
Here Comes the Wolf…
By W.L. Bredenhof

It was approximately 3 years ago that I wrote an article entitled “The Proverbial Wolf.” In that article, I summarized an argument made by URC pastor Michael Horton in his prophetic 1991 book Made in America: the Shaping of Modern American Evangelicalism. Horton argued that sentimental pietistic evangelicalism has the potential of leading to full-scale liberal theology. He illustrated this point with the example of German pietism and the liberal theology that closely followed thereafter. My point in writing that article (later published in Una Sancta and Reformed Polemics) was to warn Reformed believers of the dangers inherent in American-style Evangelicalism.

That article was not the product of an over-zealous Theological College student with nothing better to do. After 3 years, I am even more convinced than ever that Horton’s warning needs to be heeded, especially in the Canadian Reformed Churches. Many people in our churches do not seem to be getting the message that popular evangelicalism is theologically flaccid and in many cases on the road to serious doctrinal error. This is illustrated especially in an article that recently appeared in our circles.

Before I get to that article, it should be noted that one of evangelicalism’s strong emphases is worship and liturgy. Many places where evangelicalism is entrenched, there are calls for liturgical renewal. New and innovative practices are proposed. More hymns are called for and there is increased openness to so-called “praise and worship” music. It is no secret that a hallmark of evangelicalism is a wide diversity of worship practices. This goes hand in hand with a rejection of the Reformed principle of worship: we shall only worship God in the manner He has commanded (HC QA 96).

I raise this point because the article I would like to consider deals with liturgy and worship. The article was entitled “Liturgy and Spirituality: the Substratum of Church Music.” The author was a certain A. Velemma and it was published in the September 2001 issue of Diakonia. Diakonia is a quarterly publication intended for the officebearers in our churches. It appears that nearly every church in our federation has a subscription for their ministers, elders and deacons. This magazine is addressed to those we could call the decision-makers in our federation.

Typically, Diakonia presents articles that have been translated from De Reformatie and other Dutch sources. There is very little original material, for whatever reason. When Diakonia publishes translated articles, it usually informs us of the author and his background. We are informed of the place from where the article was gleaned. However, in this case, all we are told is that the author is A. Velemma. From the context, it would appear that the author is Dutch and writing in a Dutch context. However, we are not informed of his church background. Were it not for the content of the article, this might not be a problem.

Velemma is not writing from a Reformed point of view. One hardly knows where to start in outlining the errors put forward in this article. Let us only take some of the most serious ones. On page 37, Velemma argues that the “Calvinistic tradition” is wrong for maintaining that the special gifts of the Holy Spirit are restricted to the New Testament period. We should be open to speaking in tongues, prayer healing and witnessing. Moreover, Velemma makes an “earnest plea” for the anointing of the sick in the worship service. We know right away that Velemma is not on the same page as the Reformed faith. But when he writes this, he is not right away in the liberal camp, for we also know that many earnest evangelicals who hold to conservative views of Scripture’s nature and authority maintain these opinions. So, we conclude: perhaps Velemma is a Pentecostal believer.

However, many Pentecostals would not take the next step that Velemma takes on page 37. Velemma appeals to Dutch poet and writer Huub Oosterhuis to distinguish between two types of language: first, there is the language of clear logic, objective information, and the exact science. Then there is also a second language, “the language of what really cannot be said.” “It is the language of poetry, of the dream and fantasy, of the myth and fable.” Velemma goes on to say on page 38, “The liturgy is the place for the second language par excellence. I am thinking of songs and Bible stories, prayers and proclamation.”

The reader can be pardoned if all this sounds rather abstract. It is not only abstract; it is totally unbiblical. This is not the language of the Reformed faith. This is the language of Immanuel Kant with his noumenal and phenomenal realms. Faith and the things of faith belong to the noumenal whereas what is real belongs to the phenomenal. This is the language of Karl Barth, the German theologian with whom our Reformed forefathers valiantly did battle. Barth spoke of geschichte and historie. Historie is real history, things that really happened in the past,
objective information. Geschichte is the area where faith takes over – things that may or may not have happened, whose historicity does not really matter. In this way of thinking, the resurrection of Christ belongs to Geschichte. So, perhaps Velema is a Barthian. Regardless of what label we attach to the mysterious author, Barthian and Kantian ideas are being promoted in a publication addressed to Canadian Reformed officebearers. And this only 50 years after the death of K. Schilder!

Velema goes on with page 38 to present a notion that directly contradicts our Reformed confessions. Velema argues that in every worship service “There is something like a waiting for God, because we can never force the presentia Dei [presence of God, WB]. God is free to come….At the same time I want to hold on to the fact that God is not available on call, certainly not in a church service.” These words sound remarkably similar to Karl Barth once again and his perspective on preaching: the preaching becomes the Word of God when the Scripture-event is recreated with the hearer. However, the Reformed faith maintains that God is present in every worship service. We maintain that the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God. This expression was first found in the Second Helvetic Confession, but the concept is also embodied in Articles 30 and 31 of the Belgic Confession. Cornelis Venema, a professor at Mid-America Reformed Seminary makes this comment:

“According to the Belgic Confession, Christ is present as the bishop of his people through the ministry of those whom he appoints and commissions. When the minister of the Word preaches the holy gospel or administers the sacraments, he does so in the name and authority of Christ himself. By these means, Christ is pleased to dwell in the midst of his people…”1

Velema may sound pious and mystical, but he is far from Reformed. When God’s people are gathered in worship, He is also there. There is no need to “wait for him.” God is present in the preaching of the Word, He is present in the sacraments, and He is present with His Holy Spirit.

The problems with this article are of quite a technical nature. This is because the author himself uses language and concepts that are theologically technical and complex. In fact, I venture that 95% of the officebearers (elders and deacons) in our churches would miss about 75% of what Velema is writing. For instance, Velema speaks about the “schlechtiniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl” of Schleiermacher (p.40). No translation of this phrase is given, as if it is expected that all readers of Diakonia should be familiar with both German theological jargon and the liberal Schleiermacher. I tried to work out this term myself, having studied a little German, but I’m stumped. All I know is that Schleiermacher is not the most reliable place to be pulling quotes for a magazine for Reformed officebearers. Nor is Paul Tillich, for that matter – he is referred to on page 41. Regardless of the fact that a lot of this is incomprehensible to the average officebearer, the problem remains: an article with liberal terminology and theology has been published in our officebearers’ magazine.

Of course, editors are human and can make mistakes. But elsewhere in this same issue a disclaimer is published by the editor regarding an article of J. Luiten regarding the 4th commandment. The editor distances himself from Luiten and assures the readers that Luiten’s views are not his. What are we to assume about the editorial stance with respect to Velema’s article? Velema’s article is far more dangerous than the article of Luiten because of its use of liberal theological jargon and authors. Ironically, the only redeeming quality is that it is incomprehensible, whereas Luiten’s article can be read and understood.

Nevertheless, let us be charitable and assume the editors made a mistake. In that case, we may hope and pray for a serious rebuttal, apology and retraction in Diakonia. We hope for reassurance that this is not the editorial position of Diakonia. We expect that there will be more discernment in the future. The ministers in our federation have a great responsibility to ensure that the wolves do not sneak in under the happy guise of liturgy and worship.

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THE HISTORICAL SOUND OF ETERNAL PRAISE

The place of music in the liturgy

By Jane deGlint

It can be observed that some members of the Canadian Reformed churches would like to see some additions to the selection of hymns in the Book of Praise. This desire has become more pronounced over the years and has reached the tables of Synod Neerlandia (2001). Synod decided to mandate the Standing Committee of the Book of Praise to gather proposals for additional hymns from the churches. (Acts of Synod 2002, Article 97) Not everyone in the churches is equally happy with this development. Some fear that over time the hymns may drown out the Psalms.

The singing in the worship service is not a personal hobby of musically gifted people. It is proclamation of the Word. Throughout the ages the church of the Lord has united itself in songs of praise to the Creator and Preserver of life. As we consider possible changes to the Book of Praise, we do well to understand that through our liturgy we express that we are one with the church of all ages and places.

The church has a very long and rich history. Having its starting point at the onset of the world, the history of the church is a constant testimony of God’s great deeds of preservation and salvation. From the beginning God’s people have worshipped their Maker and sung about His marvelous acts. Man expressed his jubilant joy in poetic praise, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, for she was taken out of man!” (Genesis 1) This original song of gratitude for the Lord’s work echoes through history. It blends in with the heavenly worship of the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being!” (Revelation 4) Without interruption the song of the church rises up to the throne of God as a continuous offering of gratitude.

We know many historical details of the Old Testament church. In the days of Enosh, Adam’s grandson, men began to call publicly on the name of the Lord. From these relative simple beginnings the worship service developed into an elaborate tabernacle and temple liturgy, which was prescribed in great detail by the Lord of the covenant Himself. These instructions make it very clear that the Old Testament worship was ceremonial. All its details foreshadowed the sacrificial work of Christ, who was both the perfect lamb and the eternal high priest.

The Psalms formed an integral part of the Old Testament liturgy. Many were specifically composed for the temple musicians. But they were more than an artistic articulation of text and music. They were prophecy. As they described God’s ongoing work of providing safety for the troubled believer, they foreshadowed the work of the Saviour. The victory over the enemy becomes a prophecy of Christ’s victory over Satan. All the comfort and joy of the Psalms and other Old Testament songs find their fulfillment in the Messiah.

For that reason the Psalms are quoted very often in the New Testament. The fulfillment of the Old Testament liturgy has taken place. The shadow has become reality. Christ has come. And what is more: Christ has conquered death and hell! The deeper meaning of the Psalms takes shape. Christ himself as well as the apostles open the eyes of the believers to this glorious new perspective. As Paul expounds the depth of the gospel in his letter to the Romans, he uses the Psalms and other Old Testament poetic prophesies as stepping stones. He moves from the guilt of man (Psalm 5) to the forgiveness of sin (Psalm 32) to the adoption as sons (Hosea 2, Isaiah 10), to the rejection of the unbelievers (Psalm 69) to the final doxology (Isaiah 40).

The church has adjusted its liturgy accordingly. There was no need anymore for the ceremonies that foreshadowed the death of the Lamb. The temple service of sacrifice could be discontinued. However, the sound of the Psalms was not hushed. To the contrary, the apostles, who had sung them with their Master, taught the Psalms of the covenant to the early Christian church. Old words become new. “All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the
flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord abides for ever.’ That word is the good news which was preached to you.” (1 Peter 1. 24, 25)

Guided by the Spirit of Christ the New Testament church did not stop at singing the Psalms. They were compelled to confess and proclaim the actual events of the saving work of Christ in song. Moreover, the hymns of praise that John recorded in Revelation were taken over by the church in expectation of Christ’s return. The words of Revelation 11.15 “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever” are sounded forth in the ancient hymns of the early New Testament church. They sing, “Thou, Christ, art King of glory, radiant is Thy throne; Thou art the heavenly Father’s everlasting Son.” The liturgy of the New Testament church focuses on the proclamation of the Saviour’s achievements. The Word is the centre, whether preached or sung.

The believers of the New Testament continue the temple service of the Old Testament. They are God’s temples, in whom the Spirit dwells (1 Corinthians 3. 16, 1 Corinthians 6. 19, 2 Corinthians 6. 16). They have seen the glorious light, as foretold by the prophet Isaiah. Of this Light they sing when they come together as body of Christ, whose body was the temple where God dwelt among men (John 2. 21).

When we publicly call on the Lord as congregation, we are on holy ground indeed. In humility and gratitude we bow our heads for the majesty of our Lord. With reverence we open his Word and listen to the preaching. Amazed at God’s mercy for wretched sinners we lift our trembling voice in praise. Yet, with confidence our song swells till it bursts with exultant joy. Lord, your mercy is immeasurable, and inexhaustible your goodness! “Oh, sing a new song, for he has done marvelous things!” “The LORD reigns, let the people tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim. Let the earth quake!” (Psalms 98 and 99)

As detailed as the prescriptions were for the Old Testament liturgy, as sparse they are for the worship services of the New Testament believers. We find them scattered throughout the various epistles, often as parts of a larger picture. In Hebrews 10 the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice are described and while the author impresses on his readers to hold on these promises, he reminds them “not to neglect to meet together.” During these meetings, which took place on the first day of the week, the bread was broken (Acts 20. 7), prayers were offered Acts (2.42) and Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs were sung (Ephesians 5. 19). Funds were also collected (1 Corinthians 16. 2). In his first letter to the Corinthians the apostle Paul devotes a fairly large section to the public worship services (chapters 11-14). Having provided directions, he formulates the underlying principle: God is not a God of confusion, but of peace. For that reason all things should be done decently and in good order.

Even in the absence of detailed instructions, it is clear that the New Testament liturgy must be structured and Christ-centered. This rule applies to the music as well. The music is not a purpose in itself, but the liturgical songs serve to proclaim the Word and praise the Creator. For that reason the Psalms continue as prophetic praise, revealing their new perspective. The words of any hymns suitable for the worship service must focus on the Covenant Lord, who prepared redemption through His Son. Our songs must echo the Word, whether they are directly based on the Bible or whether they are a devout meditation on the truth and comfort of the gospel.

The text determines melody and accompaniment. The words dictate the tune, while the use of instruments must be restricted to a supportive role. Many Reformed churches have opted for the organ as main mode of accompanying the singing. The organ, sometimes described as the king of the instruments, contains a wide variety of sounds, timbres and volumes. A skilled organist can find a suitable registration for every Psalm or hymn, as they are sung under different circumstances. Many people have grown to love organ music because they associate the vibration of the pipes with the strengthening and expression of their faith. But as suitable as the organ is for accompanying congregational singing, other instruments can be employed as well, as long as everything is done to the glory of God, and not to the glory of man.

The danger of man-centered worship is real. It is tempting for man to take centre stage, especially in the way of worship. The sin of worshipping the Lord with the graven image of a man-centered music culture is always near. This sin of self-willed worship can be avoided when we continue on the path that the believers have walked since the beginning of creation.

When we come together to call on the name of the Lord, we praise our Creator with songs which reflect His majesty. Our melodies ought to be in tune with the heavenly tone set by the angels. We sing to proclaim the deeds of salvation, not primarily to describe our sentiments. Having high standards for our liturgical music, we do not focus the attention on the performers. Our Psalms and hymns must lift our minds to the glory of the Triune God.
“Through Jesus let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of our lips that acknowledge His name.” (Hebrews 13.15)

Jane de Glint

Don't Leave Home without It!
By W.L. Bredenhof

In the introductory speech, we saw that we are faced with a modern day Canaan. We also saw that the greatest need of the day in this country is the proclamation of the gospel. The moral and social problems we see around us are due to sin and the solution to sin is found with the Saviour. But how do we go about presenting the good news about the Saviour? Shall we just step out of our houses and onto the street and speak it without any second thoughts? Do we need a strategy? Do you need to be an ordained missionary such as I am?

I’d like to make an effort at answering some of these questions in this presentation. We already saw that the LORD God would certainly have us as His witnesses in this world. We confess the same thing in Lord’s Day 12 of the Heidelberg Catechism. As prophets, anointed with Christ’s Spirit, we are to confess Christ’s Name. Who are we to do this to? One of the proof texts that our Catechism offers here is Matthew 10:32, “Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before my Father who is in heaven.” The text is very general – all men, believers and unbelievers. What it says here is not restricted to the apostles either, for the Lord says, “whoever confesses…” That means that all believers are expected to confess the name of Christ before men. All believers are called to be a light and a salt in this world. You don’t have to be a missionary. You don’t need to go to university and seminary for 8 years.

What do you have to do? Well, to confess Christ you obviously have to know Him. You know Him from the Scriptures – so believers always have to be busy with the Word. Believers cannot present an effective witness in the world if they don’t know who or what they’re witnessing about. You have to know the Bible to bring its message. That’s something that all believers can and must do. Believers have to be striving for maturity – that’s the clear teaching of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 14:20. You can’t just stop learning when you’ve made profession of faith; you have to aim for maturity in understanding. Christians are people of the book and they want to grow up in Christ, they’re always aiming to increase their knowledge. They’re zealous and hungry for more. Does that characterize you as well?

Thus, to be an effective witness you have to be studious with the Word. But there is something more and it’s just as important. This is what you should never leave home without. We see it so clearly in Acts 4. Peter and John were released from prison and went back to the brothers and sisters and told them what had happened. What was their response? Prayer! Fervent prayer was offered up. They asked the Lord to give them boldness to speak God’s Word about His holy Servant Jesus. They asked that the Lord might give healing, that there might be miracles or signs, signs that point to the salvation found in Christ. And what happened? The Lord heard their prayer – they were filled with the Spirit and they spoke the Word of God boldly.

What does this mean for us today? Well, it means that prayer is absolutely necessary for witnessing to our fellow Canadians. We cannot do God’s work in our own strength – we need to ask for God’s help. You see, the danger is always there that if we strike out on our own we end up presenting the wrong message. It could also happen that if we do present the right message and see some positive results then we take the credit for ourselves. There is also a danger of a different variety. We can sometimes be rather wimpy when it comes to speaking about our faith in the Lord Jesus. We get all weak-kneed and in typical Canadian fashion we start speaking about the weather when there is a God-given opportunity to speak about the Saviour. We trust in ourselves and we see that we can’t do it – so we don’t. It’s true that we can’t do it on our own – that’s why we need to pray when we see opportunities for witnessing.

Sometimes you know such an opportunity is coming. You have a friend who is increasingly asking probing spiritual questions, for instance. You can pray about such a conversation long before it happens – you know that you’re going to see your friend tomorrow and he or she is going to bring something up. At other times, you encounter a surprise situation. You meet someone on the bus, the train or the plane and you get to talk about spiritual things and you have an opportunity to witness to God’s love in Christ. Here too, never forget about prayer. You may not have the opportunity to stop and get down on your knees, but you can certainly be praying in the back of your mind, silently. You have to find your strength from above, because you cannot do it on your own.
Having said that, what and who should we be praying for? We can take our cue first of all from what we read in Acts 4 – boldness to speak God’s Word. Naturally, we all wimp out on this count. We need God to give us this boldness, so we have to pray for it. But we must also pray for the salvation of those to whom we speak. We should pray that God will be pleased to grant the gift of faith through His Holy Spirit. We have to beseech the LORD that He will be pleased to use us as His instruments for salvation. At the same time, we have to remember that the LORD God is sovereign and therefore above all, we must pray that He will glorify Himself through us, be it in one way or another. For in His sovereign good pleasure, it does happen that He does not grant salvation where we would earnestly desire it.

Closely connected with this, I’d like to draw your attention to an illustration that I’ve heard numerous times. Maybe you’ve heard it as well. Some say that evangelizing your neighbour is tremendously important – and they’re right, for Scripture says the same thing. They say it’s just like if your neighbour was sleeping in a burning building. You wouldn’t let your neighbour be burned alive in his sleep. You’d do your utmost to wake him up and let him know – “Hey buddy, the building is burning down and you better get out!” It’s an effective illustration designed to make you feel guilty if you never say anything about the gospel to your neighbour. However, we should question whether this illustration is completely Scriptural. For Paul says quite clearly in the first two chapters of Romans that unbelievers know about the wrath of God and the coming judgment – but they suppress this knowledge and refuse to live by it. In their heart of hearts, they know that they’re in a burning building. So what they are doing is gleefully watching the flames rise up while they plug their ears and pretend not to hear the fire alarm. You see the problem with the illustration? It doesn’t mention that God is sovereign in man’s salvation. As if it were just a simple matter of you waking up your poor innocent sleeping neighbour. The Biblical reality is that only God can get that dozy neighbour of yours out of the burning building.

Of course, we are called to have a role in this. God can use us as His instruments to persuade the unbeliever that fire is bad and will kill him. But then we believers also recognize God’s sovereignty and that’s why we pray. We pray that God will be pleased to glorify His Name and if it be His will, also save sinners. We should pray for those we’re trying to win and we should also pray for ourselves that we may possess the power and authority of the Holy Spirit. Notice how Paul spoke in 2 Thess. 3:1, “Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is with you.” God’s glory is always utmost! Whether He sovereignly decides to save or not, His glory is to be our prayer. And when He answers prayer, then we also must accept whatever answer He gives in humility.

It doesn’t seem to happen very often that an evangelistic conversation has the results that we would like to see. But we must keep two things in mind. The first is that we can only speak from the perspective of the present and the past. The future is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof. We do not know what will happen in 20, 30 or 50 years with this or that person. It could be that you planted the seed only to come to fruit many, many years later. You simply don’t know. That’s why the second thing is also important: patience. The burning building illustration doesn’t help in this respect. Yes, if you have but one opportunity to speak about the gospel with a person, by all means take it. Seize the moment! But if this is a person whom you see everyday, there is no need to present Genesis to Revelation in one sitting. I would say that there is not even a need to present the full gospel message in one sitting.

There can be occasions where you slowly lead into the gospel message over a long period of time. Sometimes there are occasions where there are serious objections to the Christian worldview and these have to be dealt with before the gospel can be presented. Sometimes there are occasions where deeds speak louder than words and your lifestyle is the only contact an unbeliever has with the gospel message. Brothers and sisters, there is no place in Scripture which says that you must present the whole gospel message in one sitting to any given unbeliever. You can take your time, and in many instances, I say that it would be wiser to take your time. It very much depends on the situation. You are not a salesman trying to make the sale. We’re not hucksters with high-pressure sales tactics. We’re called to disciple the nations, we are not called to get signatures on decision forms. There is a big difference between the two! We’re believers who confess that God is in control. If He is in control then we must trust that He will give us the opportunities to bring the gospel in its fullness at His appointed time.

And this is something that we can and must also pray for. If I may get personal for a moment, I have experienced this many times in my life. While working at various places during my student years, I often prayed that the Lord would give me opportunities to speak about the faith. I asked for natural moments where there was a clearly open door to speak about the Lord Jesus. I asked for the boldness to speak at that moment. I cannot count the number
of times that God heard this prayer and answered it. It was and still is always amazing. I find the same thing with my work now as a missionary. The Lord hears these prayers and gives both the opportunities and the boldness to seize them. So too if you’re serious about confessing Christ’s Name, this should be your prayer. Look for the opportunities and go after them. Your neighbours need the gospel. This nation needs the gospel. There is definitely a burning building, but the sad part is that they simply don’t care. Your neighbours are like spiritual sado-masochists. They love the flames licking at their bodies, not even realizing that these flames will kill them. For such a time as this, we need to be bold and strong. We need to pray for this. We need to pray that we may be assured that the Sovereign Lord is beside us in our efforts to win our neighbours for Christ.

So in conclusion, to be the effective witness that you’re called to be love the Word and be fervent in prayer. Never leave home without prayer that has been sanctified by the study of the Word. For what the Spirit says through James is most assuredly true: “…you do not have because you do not ask…” (4:2). So if we are to see Canada bought back from the Canaanites, we must indeed ask! If we are to see God’s Name lifted up through us, we must indeed ask!

*Revised text of a speech given at the Bulkley Valley URC Youth Conference, May 18-19, 2001.*

**Winter Olympics 2002**

By Peter Veenendaal

No other sports event attracts so much attention! Millions of people attend the games and many millions more are glued to their television sets. We watch skiers, hockey players, figure skaters and bobsledders perform feats which seem impossible to most of us who spend our days in offices, barns, workshops, and classrooms. The Winter Olympics of Salt Lake City, USA, governed by the International Olympic Committee, are surely a great showcase of the abilities God has given to mankind and a wonderful manifestation of the powers of our Creator!

But wait a minute! There is something else to this whole Olympic story besides the glamour, glitter, glory, pomp and ceremony.

**Problems**

You may have heard of the scandal resulting from the perceived unfair judging of the Canadian figure skaters, Jamie Sale and David Pelletter. Rumours of the bribing of judges appear to be an everyday event in this sport at all levels of competition from local to international events.

Performance-enhancing drugs play a major role in public sports events such as the Olympic Games. Regardless of the fact that many unexplained deaths of high level young athletes have been documented, athletes and their trainers/coaches keep searching for new drugs by which they can circumvent existing regulations and improve performance.

Blood-doping has also been a popular practice whereby athletes enhance their blood supply and oxygen supply for a boost in performance. Injecting drugs can do this. In the past this was done by athletes who removed blood from their own bodies, allowed their bodies to remanufacture its supply and then re-injecting the stored blood into their bodies.

And then, when we think we have heard it all, we are shocked by even more startling revelations! It has been determined that near the beginning of a pregnancy (the Report Feb. 4, 2002), a woman’s blood volume is increased tremendously to fuel her unborn baby’s growth. You can see that getting pregnant a few months before the competition and then aborting the child days before the big event can be helpful in beating the competition.
Why do so many of these talented young people risk their health and their lives for a moment of fame? Why are they prepared to trade the life of an unborn child for a gold medallion? For one, there’s the honour and prestige to winning an Olympic medal. In the second place, there’s the lure of becoming rich through advertisements and sponsorships of various products. And under it all we see how man continues to serve himself and his own man-made gods instead of the God of heaven and earth.

The Olympic Games were begun some 3500 years ago to honour a Greek man-made god, Zeus. This ancient god who ruled from the top of Mt. Olympus still attracts millions of worshippers to his shrine at the Olympic Games.

Perspective
We do not need the glory, power and riches sought through the many events at the Olympic Games. We need to diligently do our daily work and fight against such temptations so that when Christ returns, we can say with the apostle Paul, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge will award to me on that day…” (2 Timothy 4:7)

Church News

News from Churches in Ecclesiastical Fellowship

Harold Camping and the Church Today

The session of Franklin Square OPC in Franklin Square, New York sent the following open letter to Mr. Harold Camping of Family Radio on September 10, 2001. We reproduce it here in order to help our readers to better understand the church view of the OPC.

Dear Mr. Camping:

We write to you with great grief, but with a sense of necessity, because of your persistence in teaching things contrary to that which is in accord with both the Word of God and the historic Christian faith. We call upon you, Mr. Camping, to repent of your repeated false teaching that “this is the end of the church age,” that God is now “guiding groups outside of the churches into truth for this ‘latter rain’ period,” and even that “the gospel has never been sent out with more purity than it is being sent out now” by groups like Family Radio (cf. Open Forum, July 11, 2001). This extends even to asserting that it is not necessary for believers to meet in churches (cf. Heb. 10:25), but that “through Family Radio we can have this kind of fellowship” (cf. Open Forum, July 12, 2001).

The Scriptures are clear that Christ will build his church despite the power of the Evil One (Matt. 16:18). His order is not just that the gospel be preached to all the nations, but that disciples be made of all the nations by way of baptism and teaching (Matt. 28:18-20). This assumes the existence of the church, for without its ministers there will not be baptisms and the official teaching and preaching of the Word of God (cf. 2 Tim. 2:2). This order is to continue until the end of the age (Matt. 28:20). Further, there is to be glory given to God in the church unto all generations (Eph. 3:21). This cannot be fulfilled if, as you affirm, “it may be that now God is finished with the church.”
We are deeply grieved that, once again, you wantonly contradict established Christian teaching that has been held for nearly two millennia. “I believe in the holy, catholic church” is part of the biblical confession known as the Apostles’ Creed. Protestant confessions have unequivocally affirmed that, despite the power of error and wickedness, “there shall be always a church on earth, to worship God according to his will!” (Westminster Confession of Faith, XXV:V). These affirmations come from the clear teaching of the Word of God. For example, it is impossible to speak of how “it is necessary for one to conduct himself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15), if, at some point prior to Christ’s return, God is “finished with the church” and it is no longer necessary for believers to be part of the church. Such a teaching is both false and dangerous to the souls of those who are meant to receive the means of grace through the church. It is public teaching that even contradicts part of the “Statement of Belief” of Family Radio, i.e., “We do affirm and declare our belief in the Christian faith and do set forth the following .... Christ’s great commission to the Church to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature, baptizing and teaching those who believe” (emphasis ours). Further, it contradicts part of the stated purpose of Family Radio, which is to “help local churches by encouraging regular attendance, membership, and personal involvement” (cf. “Introducing the Ministry of Family Radio” brochure).

For the honor of Christ, and for the good of your hearers, we again earnestly plead with you, Mr. Camping, to publicly repent of this serious divergence from the historic Christian faith, and that you publicly retract such statements. We believe it is correct to say that your teaching has, at this point, become heretical, i.e., a self-chosen opinion that creates schism in the body of Christ, denies clearly revealed truth, and accepts and promotes error (cf. “Heresy” in Baker’s Dictionary of Theology, p. 268). It is a grief to us even to think that you may need to be regarded as one who must be rejected after a first and second admonition (cf. Titus 3:10-11) because of warped teaching that endangers the souls of many.

We send this letter with prayer that you will respond in a manner that is faithful to the Word of God and to the teaching of the historic Christian faith.

Originally published in New Horizons, December 2001. Taken from the OPC website: www.opc.org

Van Houwelingen accepts appointment

Dr. P.H.R. van Houwelingen has accepted his appointment to professor of New Testament at the Theological University at Kampen, the Netherlands. He took up his new tasks as of Feb.1, 2002. He is replacing Prof. Dr. J. van Bruggen. Prof. van Bruggen will continue to lecture till April 1st.