

The Gift

There is one gift that exceeds all others. It is Jesus Christ, son of God, sent as ransom for the sins of man. While the world is so occupied with the exercise of buying to give, the Christian may rejoice in the gift of salvation bought with the blood of God Himself.

It is so easy to get caught up in the excitement that retailers and advertisers promote during the months of November and December. Many retail businesses depend on the sales they can generate during these two months for a profitable year. Often retail stores will play a mixture of songs about Santa Claus and Christmas to put people in the mood for buying in order to give. People are urged to join in the spirit of giving.

While the practice of giving something to loved ones following the example of the baby Jesus, Who, as the Christ, gave His life for those whom He loved, is a tremendous conduit for business to promote the idea of buying, it has become politically incorrect in a society of multi-religiosity. The modern position of the Canadian government regarding the use of the word Christmas or Christ by officials and/or agencies is still opposed by most citizens and almost all businesses. Perhaps it will cut into sales too much.

At almost every level of government and among a number of other societies, organizations and associations reference to God, Jesus Christ or Christmas must be eliminated for fear of prejudice against other religions. The recognition of Christianity as the religion of a country such as Canada, the USA, the Netherlands and probably many others has been replaced by a minimization of Christianity to the level of being one of many religious choices or heritages – take your pick! In many countries as well as localities it is preferred that Christmas giving becomes known as ‘the season for giving’.

The only thing that seems to prevent Christmas from being erased from the calendar is the fact that so many businesses depend on it for survival. How ironic that the real celebration of Christmas is indeed a matter of survival, a matter of life and death. There is only one gift that really matters – it is the gift of salvation given to man for free. It is the gift bought by the Creator of all things by His own death. The apostle John tells us that nothing was made without the Word, the Son of God. And he, along with all the other gospel writers also tells us that the Son of God, Jesus Christ, came into the flesh of man to rescue that same creation after man, the creature, had plunged it into sin and darkness resulting in the need for everlasting destruction and damnation.

Throughout history many men have rejected this reality. Yet, there have always been those who embraced it. There have even been times when many people have rejoiced in this ‘good news’. But time and again mankind has opposed the need for such salvation. The fact that man can not rescue himself from his dilemma has caused many people much frustration. Many other religions, many other means of salvation, have been concocted and accepted by people in order to come with a more ‘acceptable’ solution to mans’ problem, but they all involve a perceived goodness of man.

Modern Christmas, too, involves the goodness of man. People are urged, at the end of the year, to do the right thing, show your love for your friends and family and give gifts to them. Santa Claus wants to know if you have been good, and if so you will receive gifts. Seldom do you hear the real truth. Man is thoroughly evil and prone to all manner of misery. Only Jesus Christ has brought the

true, lasting gift on which every other gift must be based. The gifts we give must be year-round, based on the gift of salvation we have received. Rather than enrich our family and friends with more material goods than they might know what to do with, we ought to show the true love our Saviour has shown to us. He gave to those who were in a desperate situation. He gave to us, who were truly in need. We, too, must give to those in need. Many in this world, in our society, are in need of understanding the solution to their misery. The best gift we can give them is an introduction to the true gift, Jesus Christ.

Amongst our family, friends and Church community the best way we can celebrate Christmas is to praise and thank God for the wonderful gift He has given us.

PdB

Maintaining Unity of the Church

A few months ago I found in my files some notes written by my father. As I looked at the heading, my curiosity was kindled. The notes on top of the paper indicated that these were notes my father had made at a consistory meeting where Dr. K. Schilder had been invited to speak about seeking unity with the Free Reformed Church (Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk). This meeting must have taken place in the years following 1945.

To refresh our memories, in the 19th century there were two reformations in The Netherlands, the one in 1834 and the other in 1886. With the first one we usually connect the name of Rev. Hendrik de Cock and with the second one, the name of Dr. Abraham Kuyper. The two federations coming out these two reformations came together in the Union of 1892. Several of the churches of the first secession of 1834 refused to go along with this Union and thus formed the Free Reformed Church. We have always maintained that they were wrong in staying separate. Although we could agree with their concerns with regard to some of the teachings of Dr. Kuyper, this in itself should not have been a reason to refuse to join the Union of 1892. After the Liberation of 1944 the question came up whether we should seek unity with the Free Reformed Church. Some even suggested that after the Liberation we should have joined the Free Reformed Church. However, it was felt that this would not be correct, since that could indicate agreement with their not being part of the union of 1892. In addition, the liberated churches had to present themselves as the legitimate continuation of the Reformed Churches. Nevertheless, the liberated churches saw it as their calling to seek unity with the Free Reformed Church. All in all, this shows that the question of unity is not a new one. In fact, it is one of the characteristics of the true church. We are faced with similar questions and we can learn from what happened at that time. This is why these notes kindled my interest. These are indeed notes, not the text of Dr. Schilder's whole speech. I will translate some of the notes and give some explanatory comments as well.

The notes begin with the issue that Dr. Schilder was asked to address. "We will never come to unity with the Free Reformed Churches if we demand that the historical differences [i.e. why they did not join the Union of 1892, D.A.] must be resolved first." With this Prof. Schilder does not want to suggest that these historical differences were not important for that time. They were important for the people living at that time. That generation will have to give account before the Lord regarding

these matters. But this approach to these differences may give the impression of inconsistency when it comes to the requirements for talks with the so-called synodical churches [that are the churches from which we separated in the Liberation of 1944, D.A.] It is true that we do demand of the synodicals that they speak out about 1944 and 1946. But when this current generation is gone the coming generation will not be asked what they think of 1944, they will only be asked, "What do you confess?" Schilder then goes back to the question at hand, If we now with regard to the Free Reformed Church demand that they first admit that 1892 was a good thing, and if they from their side would demand of us to admit that the Union of 1892 was wrong, then we make the church into a gathering of intellectuals, or rather, of church historians. The man in the pew does not know any more what all happened in 1892. The only way they can find out about these things is through reports of others. Schilder then makes a general statement. "At the border crossing [or entrance, D.A.] into the church we may not ask whether all are of the same mind and all have the same ideas as we do. Who says that our thinking in everything conforms to God's Word? So much of our thinking is still stained by sin. We must come together in the unity of the true faith." Here Schilder makes a comparison to others who want to join the church. We have to ask of everyone who comes to the church of the Lord, 'Are you willing to submit yourself under the yoke of Christ if you would be addressed because of sin? 'We have to ask this because when someone repents he does so with regard to a certain point. Later one may discover that he has to repent in many other points as well. Is such a person allowed to join the church before his whole life is Reformed? Yes he is, for exactly in the church there is ongoing repentance.

Schilder then goes back to the relationship with the Free Reformed. Do we have to ask of the Free Reformed that they first have to think like us in everything? No, they have to be willing to be bound to God's Word and the Confessions. When they promise this, then we may not hinder them, just like any other person who repents and comes to church. Schilder concludes, "We must keep in mind that God will ask of all office-bearers in His Church, 'Why is this child of Mine not with the Church?' Then we should always be able to say, 'We did not hinder him, but he refused.' This position is not easy and will cause a lot of struggles in the church, but in this way we remain Church of Christ. Only when we are willing to come together where Christ is gathering is it possible to remain Church. But the church that closes the gates for true believers on the basis of reasons which cannot exist before God's face becomes a sect.

Thus far these notes. I realize that they are the summary of one person. I have no further evidence concerning that meeting. But these notes do agree with other published statements by Schilder and about him. (See e.g. Always Obedient, chapter 4) Schilder stressed the importance of willingness to obey the call of the Lord. The willingness to submit to God's Word is what makes the church a faithful church. The Church of Jesus Christ is to be recognized by her willingness to submit to God's Word. We confess in Article 28 of the Belgic Confession:

"But all and everyone are obliged to join it and unite with it, maintaining the unity of the Church. They must submit themselves to its instruction and discipline, bend their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and serve the edification of the brothers and sisters, according to the talents which God has given them as members of the same body."

You will understand that the reason why I was interested in these notes is the current discussion about our relationship with the United Reformed Churches. We see it as a calling of the Lord to seek each other. But what should bring us together? The willingness to be bound to God's Word and the Three Forms of Unity. Does that mean we will or have to agree on every point? No, fifty years of history cannot be wiped out. Do we have to wait till everything is resolved before we can be one? I do not believe this either. The question is rather, are we from both sides willing to be bound to the Word and the Reformed Confessions? Are we willing when dealing with our differences to listen to the Word and to change if it can be proven that what we do is wrong? If that willingness is there, we must go ahead. The coming years will show our commitment in this regard. As Schilder said this is not the easy way, and it will cause a lot of struggles, but only then can we remain Church of Jesus Christ.

DGJA

GOD'S SOVEREIGN GOOD PLEASURE AND OUR ACTIONS

What motivates us to test decisions of Synod and to sound a warning when they deviate from the Word of God? Should you as an ordinary member become involved when decisions are made by office bearers appointed for this by the churches? What is actually the reason why you avoid things to make life as a Christian more easygoing in this world and so much more pleasant? Is it then not enough to thank the Lord for what He already gives? Should you not simply look at what is attainable, considering the circumstances, as the Synod does in its report on marriage and divorce?

The answer to all these questions is that we owe God total obedience. That obedience has everything to do with God's sovereign good pleasure. In a time when also the church tends to relativize things and tries make the Word of God and his commandments adaptable to our opinions it is very relevant to see whether our actions answer that sovereign good pleasure of God. For, shouldn't that sovereign good pleasure determine our whole life? Indeed, what a struggle it will be to take issue with everything in opposition to that sovereign good pleasure!

God's sovereign good pleasure and creation

Already at the very beginning of his Word God makes it known to us that He, as the Creator, has made everything very good, and that He created the seventh day to take pleasure in his creation. We see in this how the triune God executes his divine plan with great wisdom and majestic power. Psalm 104 shows beautifully how the whole of creation received its purpose in this good pleasure of the Lord God. Everything has been created in and for his good pleasure. Also the creation of man belongs to the work of his hands.

Man receives from God a very special and distinguished position: to be steward and image of God with the mandate to develop creation to greater glory of the Lord. In that call to glorify God man is to lead the rest of creation. In communion with God this became man's task for life. When we then over against the theory of evolution confess that the earth has been brought about by a creative act of God then this confession may not stop at this. At the same time we are called to confess that God has created man good, holy and righteous, so that his will could conform to the will of God in every respect (art.14 BC).

Man and woman were able to live and work in such a way that God would find his good pleasure in all they did. Here we have a precise description of our task: to please the Lord in everything we do, by carrying out his sovereign will.

God's sovereign good pleasure and re-creation

Communion with God was for man the true life. This glorious life with God, with its task for life, was ruined because of man's fall into sin. And yet, it pleased the Lord to seek and comfort sinful man, to show him his grace and mercy. To that end He gave his Son, with whom He was well pleased, and in whom He would fulfill his righteousness.

This righteousness, as fulfilled by Christ, points to what is right in the sight of God, a righteousness that answered to his sovereign good pleasure. That is how Christ Jesus saved us and made us righteous before God out of grace. When we believe, God imputes (reckons) to us the righteousness, holiness and satisfaction of Christ (Art.23 BC/L.D.23 HC). It is because of this righteousness of Christ that God can be well pleased again with man, that is, with all those whom He has elected in Christ. This election, too, is rooted in His good pleasure. God works in us, both to will and to act, according to his sovereign good pleasure. (Phil.2:13)

It is God's purpose, then, to elect himself a holy people who will serve him for ever. And He works this out on earth, here and now, with as goal that future eternal glory in which He will be everything to everyone.

The eternal glory

Although the Lord makes clear that our readiness to serve him is his work, there remains, nevertheless, a great task for us, namely, that we offer ourselves to the Lord as a living sacrifice of thanksgiving. The Lord wants to restore the communion with him as our Father, so that we will do his will in everything. The Holy Spirit writes the will of God, of his commandments, on our heart. The purpose of our life, then, is to serve God with our whole heart, soul, and mind, and with all our strength. It is a life that is glorious but also carries a great responsibility.

The poet of Psalm 104 sings of the glory of creation but follows this up with his and our mandate: I will sing to the Lord all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live. May my meditation be pleasing to him, as I rejoice in the Lord. But may sinners vanish from the earth and the wicked be no more. Praise the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Lord (Ps.104:33-35).

The purpose of the Lord with his creation is that we would please him, also in our thoughts, by considering his will. Sinners who do not want to reckon with the Lord do not belong to him. That is why the Lord works towards that eternal glory via the day of judgment.

Those who are his own are called to serve him with an undivided heart. They will neither think nor act contrary to his will. With them there is not a trace of self-willfulness to be found. With them there is the beginning of the eternal Sabbath.

In Hebrews 4 we read of that perspective from out of that first Sabbath, the seventh day at creation. The plan of the eternal rest of God's works of creation and recreation is rooted in that eternal sovereign good pleasure of the Triune God. We see then that we, people, are taken up in that eternal dimension of God's sovereign good pleasure: creatures of God's creative hands and at the

same time children bought with the precious blood of Christ, who through the Spirit may say "Abba, Father," and be heirs of that eternal glory.

As a sign of that eternal glory we observe the Lord's Day as a day of rest in accordance with the fourth commandment. That's how we on a weekly basis meditate on that sovereign good pleasure of God, take pleasure in His works of creation and recreation, in expectation of that eternal Sabbath.

God's sovereign good pleasure opposed

This sovereign good pleasure of God is under constant attack by Satan. He is going all out to sabotage that glory of His creation and recreation. Still, he will not succeed because Jesus Christ has defeated him with his death and resurrection.

For us, however, the battle is not yet over. The Lord calls us to please him by denying our own will, and without any murmuring obey his will, for it alone is good. The task He gives us in this world we are to carry out as willingly and faithfully as the angels in heaven (L.D.49 HC).

When we look at our present church conflicts then it should be clear that our obedience to the Lord is at stake. Where sinful conduct or a false doctrine in the church is defended or tolerated, there a self-willed manner of serving the Lord is defended and sanctioned.

We think of the conflicts surrounding the fourth and seventh commandment, of the struggle toward off scripture criticism within our own churches, of the presence of scripture criticism in churches with whom we exercise unity towards a common hymn book that has many unscriptural hymns. It is not the first time that self-willfulness plays a role in the church. It is reminiscent of a well-known refrain in Scripture: The Israelites did again evil in the eyes of the Lord, everyone did as he saw fit. (Judges)

And we also learn about that self-willed service of God by Israel in 1 Corinthians 10:1-13: They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come (1Cor.10:4-6, 11).

The Reformed churches, too, have been delivered again in the Liberation of 1944, this time from the yoke of a sinful synod, of an apostate church. They have tasted the mercies of the Lord and learned anew what was pleasing to the Lord. Standing then in the history of the church at the fulfillment of the ages, the testimonies from Scripture and church history are a warning for us, unto our salvation. We have no guarantee that we of ourselves will be able to remain standing, for 1 Corinthians 10:12 warns us as follows: So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall.

Discipline the body

Deviation from the Lord is not something the church is faced with so once in a while. The Lord warns us time and again in his Word to do his will and not to serve him with a self-willed attitude.

We have to watch out constantly; also when we think that we do stand. Our churches seem to express an attitude of "nothing will happen to us." Such an attitude expresses a far-reaching attitude of self-satisfaction, as also seen in the naive attempts to experiment with new things, by going one's own way. Warnings from fellow church members and sister churches on this are ignored and written off as being restrictive, narrow-minded, old-fashioned and legalistic.

What a totally different attitude we find with Paul when he speaks of his own person: I beat (discipline) my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize (1Cor.9:27).

Paul, an apostle of Christ, who himself has seen Christ, and who went all out to proclaim the true gospel to others, this Paul, too, experienced those struggles within him, the struggle of faith the church and the members of the church have to wage at this fulfillment of the ages.

We are called in life to please the Lord, and to do away with all self-willfulness. How often don't we miss that appeal in the sermons? We are sooner inclined to smoothen things over, make excuses for ourselves. And in such an atmosphere we better not dare to exhort others, for it would immediately be construed as sitting in judgment over him or her. Even up to and including the ecclesiastical meetings it is as if every one is entitled to his own opinion. At the most some questions can be put on scripture criticism and the like. But to reject whatever else is wrong we just as soon avoid. We should give each other more room, pursue a compromise. That's how our churches turn into undisciplined churches. We do not want to discipline ourselves anymore. We rather not call the commandments of the Lord commandments anymore.

We rather speak about a "style of the kingdom," a style which we then should make our own, and which we then should make dependent on the circumstances (see deputies' report on marriage and divorce). We are warned not to lay (force) anything of the Word of God on a person, for now it has to come from within the person himself.

Created after the will of God

We want to come back again to that sovereign good pleasure of the Lord. That sovereign good pleasure is not just something from before the Fall into sin and for after the Return of Christ, while we live in the meantime on what Christ has done for us. In many sermons that seem to be the ultimate criterion: in a broken world the only thing that really counts that you give yourself to Christ. It may not be said exactly that way, but when the demand of the covenant is missing, it still comes down to the same thing.

We better not forget that the Lord seeks his honour also at this fulfillment of the ages. Now that we have learned to know Christ (indeed, to know!) the call to be totally different is so much stronger for us than for the O.T. Israel. The Word of God addresses us with these words in the N.T., Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph.4:21ff)

In his work of recreation the Lord Jesus wants to make new people out of us, who will in every way please God and do his will. That's why the Word of God has to remain an open book, so that we

keep on examining ourselves in order to do what pleases the Lord (Eph.5:10). And what pleases the Lord is a constant active attitude, always taking care of how we live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is (Eph.5:15ff).

Do not then not join in with them

These words are given because a living faith was also for the church of Ephesus not a self-evident matter. For them as well as for us the days are evil, also because of that constant danger of misguidance in the church of Christ. Therefore, let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient (Eph.5:6). And then follows a command: Therefore do not be partners with them Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose (unmask) them (Eph.5:7,11).

Works not pleasing to the Lord are easily wrapped in the church in beautiful biblical words, i.e., turned into religious masks. But by posing such misleading and deceptive arguments, the church will become disobedient to its Lord, then the children of the covenant will begin to think and act like the children of disobedience, the ones, subject to the wrath of God.

How important are the above texts for our time of increasing secularization, of world conformity. Our days, too, are surely to be depicted as evil. For how great is not the danger to let that worldly culture and entertainment enter our living rooms. How does that present-day consumerism not capture our mind, poison our thinking. How great is the danger that we try to make still sound good for ourselves. But the Lord says: do not join in with them.

In our churches there is the constant danger of thinking in those worldly categories of compromise, of accommodation, in which deviation from God's commandments is tolerated.

Still, the Lord says, do not join in with them. To be concrete: do not carry responsibility with those who want to sing unscriptural hymns, who want to tolerate scripture criticism (second and third commandment), who want to allow (unnecessary) Sunday work (fourth commandment), who want to tolerate divorce, and adultery through second marriages or homosexual activity (seventh commandment). But the Lord says: examine and expose in the light of God's word.

Renewed people

After man's fall into sin it was God's sovereign good pleasure to have renewed people, to do his will. They have been taken up in that sovereign good pleasure of the almighty God. From a glorious part of the gospel, in which the rich purpose of the elect is denoted as praising the glory of God, we quote: In love He predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves. . . . And He made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure . . . in order that we . . . might be for the praise of his glory (Eph.1:5,6, 9,12).

The Lord has accomplished this by manifesting his grace and mercy in Christ. From out of this grace, with its glorious promises, He now asks of us the sacrifice of our life. Of that we also read in Romans 12:1,2: I urge you, brothers, in view of God mercy, to offer your bodies as living

sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Striving for perfection

What the Lord is after is that we obey him and deny our own will (1Sam.15:22). God will not be satisfied with an outward appearance of piety, how ever properly we and others may seem to behave outwardly. The Lord will not be pleased when we make excuses about transgressions of his commandments (Ps. 40:6, Ps. 51:16, Isa.1:11, Jer.6:20; 14:12, Hos.8:13; 9:4; Mal.1:10, Rom.8:8). Surely, we may not become negligent in our life of faith. We need to persevere so that when we have done the will of God, we will receive what he has promised (Heb.10:36).

The Lord will not be satisfied when we, as his redeemed children, strive only for what, in our own eyes, is attainable. When the churches follow the wrong decisions of a Synod, they will, by that very act, allow the children of the covenant to become exempt from obeying God's commandments. Then we will become confronted with Malachi 2:13-17, and discover that God will turn away his grace from a church who suggests that doing evil, e.g., break up the marriage covenant, is doing what is good in the eyes of the Lord, is still doing what pleases him.

Let us then heed the call to strive for perfection, also now while we live in this imperfect, broken world. Such striving will be pleasing to the Lord! Surely, the Lord is not testing us beyond what we can bear (1Cor.10:13). He gives us his Spirit. Therefore, as often as we commit sins – and prove our own imperfection – we immediately confess those sins and in the Spirit of God keep fighting against them. Then we hear creation groan, and hear ourselves groan for that perfection. Even the Spirit of God groans right along with us (Rom.8:18-30). And that's how we, while constantly conforming ourselves to the image of God's Son, long eagerly for that eternal glory, the eternal Sabbath of the Lord, which is the ultimate destination of God's sovereign good pleasure and will. Therefore, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve (Josh.24:15).

S. de Marie

[Translated Letter from the Chairman of the Reformanda Association in the Netherlands]

Reformanda No.39, Oct. 23, 2002

OUR CHRISTIAN HOPE AND EXPECTATION

The Longing for His Return

What greater expectation is there than to wait for our Saviour to come from heaven? And still, the question is whether we do; whether we do indeed long for Him to come back, not to mention of longing for his return eagerly. Is it not true that we are so occupied with earthly things that we hardly take time out to think of those heavenly things, things of the future, things that express that Christian hope and expectation, our hope for an eternity to come, our life with the Lord Jesus, our life in the midst of all the saints in his presence, our life with Him and them on the new earth?

When you speak about that future life, as I often do, especially with the many elderly we have, then it is surprising how little thought is given to that Christian hope, to that life of the future, not only with a view to the so-called intermediate state, the future state of our soul between our death and resurrection, but also with a view to that perfect and complete state, the future state of our soul and body, to be realized at our Saviour's return. How strong is that longing with us: to be where the Lord Jesus is, to see Him return rather today than tomorrow?

It's true, we are called to live here on earth, and still have an important task to carry out here on earth, something that the apostle had to emphasize to the Thessalonians: do not stop what your hand finds to do; do not stop your work until your Saviour is actually here. But still, how alive was their future expectation! Is it then only to be at special moments that we are to lift our hearts high in heaven, where Christ is, that we lift them up to Him already here and now? What do we understand by this well-know phrase from our Lord's Supper celebrations, and how do we apply it? Is not this that which should characterize our Christian hope and expectation each and every day: O I wish that I would be where He is . . . O I wish that He would return, now today already.

Well, we know from Romans eight that there is such an eager expectation, such a constant longing expressed, manifested, among us. It is mentioned in one breath with the adversities we as Christians may have to suffer, first of all, for the sake of the Lord, for the sake of his Name, for the sake of the gospel of Christ, and then, secondly, may have to suffer because of the curse to which the whole of creation has become subject ever since man's fall in Paradise.

We read that the whole of creation, creation in all its parts, is waiting with eager expectation for the end, for the Lord Jesus to return, to liberate this present world from that curse, to liberate it from its bondage to decay, to liberate it, to have it regain its former freedom by inaugurating a new heaven and a new earth, yes, by revealing the total number of the elect of God, that multitude of believers of every age, all the sons and daughters of his one and age-old covenant of grace.

Well, I don't have to prove to you how the whole of creation is groaning as in the pains of childbirth. We are all too familiar with the disasters, the calamities, the catastrophes, the earthquakes, the floods, the illnesses and diseases, to which this one-time perfect creation has become subject. Yes, has become subject, not because it asked for it, but because of man, the crown of all creation, the God-given steward of all creation, because he broke the bond with God, so that

God, because of man, because of us, had to make the whole of creation subject to the divine curse that man with his deliberate disobedience to God had called upon himself, and as a result, upon all of creation.

Well, then, as a result, the whole of creation is waiting with eager expectation, with great longing for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, because it is only at his return that an end will be brought to its present frustration (NIV), to its futility (RSV), to its “fruitlessness” (as translated from the Dutch version). And what we are expected to do, Paul makes clear, is to join in with all of creation, we, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, we, who have come to believe in Jesus Christ as the only Saviour, we too then will wait with eager expectation for the redemption of our bodies, for we know that it is only at our Lord’s return that an end will come to all those illnesses and diseases, to all that pain and suffering, to that widespread death and destruction, so very familiar to us all.

No wonder, then, that when we are lax in expressing that eager expectation, that strong longing for the Lord Jesus to return, that God, in His Fatherly love (see Heb.12), brings those terrible adversities upon us . . . upon us as his adopted sons and daughters, so that we would bring, bring more and more, our thoughts and desires, our words and deeds, in harmony with all of creation, that creation that because of us cries out as in the pains of child birth, cries out loud and clear for the liberation from its bondage to decay, cries out for that glorious freedom we children of God will receive in perfect measure at the return of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Therefore, let the Lord use our pain, our sufferings to make us aware of our call to wait with good hope and eager expectation, with eager longing, the blessed hope — the glorious appearance of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ (Titus 2:13).

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Press Release of the meeting of the combined committees of the Canadian Reformed and United Reformed Churches to propose a common church order held December 11-12, 2002 at the United Reformed Church at Dutton, MI

Present were: Dr. Nelson Kloosterman, Rev. William Pols, Rev. Ronald Scheuers, Rev. Raymond Sikkema and Mr. Harry Van Gulp, representing the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA), and Dr. Jack DeJong, Mr. Gerard J. Nordeman, Rev. John VanWoudenberg and Dr. Art Witten of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC).

Dr. Kloosterman opened the meeting with a brief meditation on Luke 1: 39 - 46 and prayer.

Motions to appoint Dr. Kloosterman as chairman and Rev. Sikkema as recorder of the minutes of this meeting were adopted. Mr. Nordeman was appointed to prepare the press release.

An agenda and timetable were adopted. The agenda included a presentation of a summary of the labors of the URC committee, a presentation of a summary of the labors of the CanRC committee, discussion and adoption of a modus operandi and its implementation, and the adoption of minutes and press release. It was decided to make the most use of available time by meeting in the evening as well.

Dr. Kloosterman shared with the meeting the mandate that the committee had received from the Fourth Synod of the URCNA, Escondido 2001:

That the current Church Orders of the two federations be evaluated in the light of the Scriptural and confessional principles and patterns of church government of the Dort CO.

That the CO committee work together with a Canadian Reformed CO committee to develop suitable and agreeable adaptation[s] of the Church Order of Dort, retaining and maintaining its principles, structure and essential provisions.

He then explained how the committee had worked with this mandate and the resulting proposals for a church order, having taken into consideration the Scriptures-based foundational principles for Reformed church government.

Dr. DeJong in a similar fashion gave an overview of the activities of the CanRC committee and the mandate this committee had received from Synod Neerlandia 2001:

To work closely with the committee re church order appointed by the URCNA synod.

To evaluate the differences between the current church orders of the federations in the light of the Scriptural and confessional principles and patterns of church government of the Church Order of Dort.

To propose a common church order in the line of the Church Order of Dort

To keep the Committee for the Promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity updated on the progress.

To provide the CPEU with a report in sufficient time for them to produce the comprehensive report for Synod in a timely fashion.

It became clear that the respective mandates are very similar in that the differences between the current church orders of the federations are to be evaluated in the light of the Scriptural and confessional principles, and to propose a common church order maintaining the principles, structure and essential provisions of the Church Order of Dort. Both committees had done extensive work in mapping the various church orders, including the Church Order of Dort, to facilitate this evaluation. To clarify terminology used, it is understood that when speaking of the Church Order of Dort we refer to the original Church Order of 1618 and the adopted version by the CRC in 1914 in its English translation (1920).

It was agreed to work as one committee to develop a draft for a common church order with a single set of minutes and press releases. However, the meeting also recognized that in this process the occasional need for one of the sub-committees to confer privately might arise.

While both committees had prepared a draft proposal for a common church order, the meeting adopted a motion to use the Church Order as adopted by the CRC in 1914 as a starting point, and to compare it to the proposals from both sub-committees. The respective mandates used words that this be “a common church order maintaining the principles, structure and essential provisions of the Church Order of Dort”. This, however, was not interpreted to mean a slavish following of each article, its wording and sequence in the church order.

The first item in this effort was a discussion on the need for, and place of an introduction in a church order. The CanRC introduction, as recommended by General Synod Lincoln 1992, provides an overview of the history of this church order. In the URCNA church order the introduction focuses more on a declaration of beliefs and the biblical basis for a church order. The URC church order also includes a section 'Foundational Principles of Reformed Church Government'. The URC committee considers these foundational principles to be fundamental. While specific wording could be revised or improved on, the principles as based on Holy Scriptures must remain. Although adopted by an earlier Synod, the final status of these Principles among the churches has yet to be established. They currently read as follows:

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF REFORMED CHURCH GOVERNMENT

The church is the possession of Christ, who is the Mediator of the New Covenant

Acts 20:28; Ephesians 5:25-27

As Mediator of the New Covenant, Christ is the Head of the church.

Ephesians 1:22-23; 5:23-24; Colossians 1:18

Because the church is Christ's possession and He is its Head, the principles governing the church are not a matter of human preference, but of divine revelation.

Matthew 28:18-20; Colossians 1:18

The universal church possesses a spiritual unity in Christ and in the Holy Scriptures.

Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 2:20; I Timothy 3:15; II John 9

The Lord gave no permanent universal, national or regional offices to His church. The office of elder (presbyter/episkopos) is clearly local in authority and function; thus Reformed church government is Presbyterian, since the church is governed by elders, not by broader assemblies.

Acts 14:23; 20:17,28; Titus 1:5

In its subjection to its Heavenly Head, the local church is governed by Christ from heaven, by means of His Word and Spirit, with the keys of the kingdom which He has given it for that purpose; and it is not subject to rule by sister churches who, with it, are subject to the one Christ

Matthew 16:19; Acts 20:28-32; Titus 1:5

Federative relationships do not belong to the essence or being of the church; rather, they serve the wellbeing of the church. However, even though the churches stand distinctly next to one another, they do not thereby stand disconnectedly alongside one another. Entrance into and departure from a federative relationship is strictly a voluntary matter.

Acts 15:1-35; Romans 15: 25-27; Colossians 4-16; Titus 1:5; Revelation 1:11, 20

The exercise of a federative relationship is possible only on the basis of unity in faith and in confession.

I Corinthians 10:14-22; Galatians 1:6-9; Ephesians 4:16-17

Member churches meet together in consultation to guard against human imperfections and to benefit from the wisdom of a multitude of counselors in the broader assemblies. The decision of such assemblies derives their authority from their conformity to the Word of God

Proverbs 11:14; Acts 15:1-35; I Corinthians 13:9-10; II Timothy 3:16-17

In order to manifest our spiritual unity, local churches should seek the broadest possible contacts with other like-minded churches for their mutual edification and as an effective witness to the world.

John 17:21-23; Ephesians 4:1-6

The church is mandated to exercise its ministry of reconciliation by proclaiming the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8; II Corinthians 5:18-21

Christ cares for His church through the office-bearers whom He chooses.

Acts 6:2-3; I Timothy 3:1,8; 5:17

The Scriptures encourage a thorough theological training for the ministers of the Word.

I Timothy 2:14-16; 3:14; 4:1-5

Being the chosen and redeemed people of God, the church, under the supervision of the elders, is called to worship Him according to the Scriptural principles governing worship.

Leviticus 10:1-3; Deuteronomy 12:29-32; Psalm 95:1,2,6; Psalm 100:4; John 4:24;

I Peter 2:9

Since the church is the pillar and ground of the truth, it is called through the teaching ministry to build up the people of God in faith.

Deuteronomy 11:19; Ephesians 4:11-16; I Timothy 4:6; II Timothy 2:2; 3:16-17

Christian discipline, arising from God's love for His people, is exercised in the church to correct and strengthen the people of God, to maintain the unity and the purity of the church of Christ, and thereby bring honor and glory to God's name.

I Timothy 5:20; Titus 1:13; Hebrews 12:7-11

The exercise of Christian discipline is first of all a personal duty of every child of God, but when discipline by the church becomes necessary, it must be exercised by the elders of the church, the bearers of the keys of the kingdom.

Matthew 18:15-20; Acts 20:28; I Corinthians 5:13; I Peter 5:1-3

After an extensive discussion the meeting reached a consensus that the introduction of the proposed common church order should include: 1) a historical background, 2) the Scriptural and confessional basis, 3) foundational principles, and 4) headings of the four sections of the church order. Rev. Scheuers will prepare a draft introduction for discussion at a future meeting.

Much time was spent discussing the principle of 'jurisdiction'. This is an area where both federations have distinct views colored by tradition as well as recent experiences. The authority of the elders and minister is unquestionably one given to the church by the Lord. But what authority do broader assemblies have in the churches? Language that is mutually acceptable must be found before articles that involve jurisdiction can be formulated. These articles must avoid language such as 'jurisdiction over', but should convey words and thoughts of 'original authority', 'derived authority', and 'delegated authority'. The respective committees will give more thought to this subject before it is dealt with again at a future meeting.

Agreement was reached on wording of Art. 1 'The purpose of the church order', and Art. 2 'The three offices'. At this point it was decided to deal with subsequent articles without numbering them. Their proper sequence within the church order will be determined later. Agreement was reached on part of the articles dealing with the duties and the lawful calling of the ministers of the Word. Also provisional agreement was reached on articles dealing with ministers being bound to a particular church, and ministers coming without a congregation from another federation. The need today for an article dealing with 'Exceptional Gifts' (Dort Article 8) received much discussion. The individual committees will also consider this article before it is dealt with again at a future meeting. Provisional agreement was reached on articles dealing with provisions for the care of the minister and the retirement of the minister.

The last hour of the second day was used to review the agenda for the next meeting. In the mean time the respective committees will carefully study the various church orders, and be prepared to discuss the issues of jurisdiction, exceptional gifts, and the need for regional synods. The next meeting will take place D.V. February 13 and 14, 2003 at the URC of Dutton, MI, this being the more central location.

Appreciation was expressed to the Dutton URC for its hospitality and the exceptional help its secretary was able to give to the committee. Dr. Kloosterman, in his closing remarks, stated his thankfulness to the Lord for the brotherly manner in which the committee could proceed with its work. He wished that the churches of both federations would have seen and heard the fraternity and camaraderie so present in the discussions and deliberations. To God alone be the praise and glory.

For the committee, Gerard J. Nordeman

Following is a question, with answer, published as one of an ongoing presentation of Question and Answers on the OPC web site [www.opc.org].

Infant baptism

Question

Why do you baptize infants?

Answer

Why do we baptize infants? Because we believe that the Bible requires it. What you really ask, I surmise, is where in the Bible do we get the authority and the command? It's difficult to know how

much of a background understanding you have in the controversy between paedo-baptists and “believer’s baptists.” So I’ll take it step by step.

It would help if there were in Scripture a specific command to baptize new-born children, or to baptize only those old enough to make a credible confession of faith. But God is not obliged to answer such questions the way we want them answered. So we must look both deeper and over a broader expanse of scripture to find the answer.

So we first go back to Genesis 17:7-14. God made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants. It is important to know that that covenant was not with Abraham’s physical descendants alone, because in Genesis 12:1-3, when God called Abraham, He made three promises: a land (vs. 1), a nation (vs. 2), and a blessing (vs. 3). In chapter 17, the sign and seal of that three-fold covenant promise was circumcision. Now only male babies can be circumcised. The female infants are also in the covenant because their fathers were circumcised. Abraham was required to be circumcised before Isaac was conceived (Genesis 17:28).

All of the Old Testament ordinances having to do with animal sacrifices for the covenant people of God involved the shedding of blood. All such shedding of blood was done away after the death of Christ, the one and only true Lamb of God. To go on shedding blood after the death of Christ would suggest that His blood is not sufficient. That’s why we don’t continue the Passover Feast, but have in its place the Lord’s Supper. And circumcision calls for the shedding of blood (see Exodus 4:24-26). It is true that Jews and others circumcise their male infants to this day, but after Pentecost it was not required by God (Galatians 6:15)!

But the covenant God made with Abraham is still in force. Genesis 12:3 says, “And in you [Abraham] all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” This was a very early prophecy of the spreading of the Gospel over the whole world. Is there a sign to replace circumcision? Yes. The Apostle Paul speaks of it in Colossians 2:11 & 13: “In Him [Christ] you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by the putting off of the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ.” Paul was not talking about literal circumcision, but what circumcision signifies - the new birth through the work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:5). And it was not of Jesus’ circumcision when He was eight days old, but the cleansing of our hearts through the blood on Jesus. (vs. 12): “... buried with Him in baptism, in which also you were raised with Him [Christ] through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.” Still speaking of that which circumcision signified - the new birth - Paul brings in baptism as the symbol of Christ’s death and resurrection. Read Galatians 2:20 where Paul says that he was crucified with Christ, but he lives by faith in the Son of God who died and rose again. Here Paul is speaking of union with Christ, the state of all true Christians.

Baptism signifies our union with Christ through the New Birth. (vs. 13): “And you, being dead in your trespasses, and the uncircumcision of your flesh [referring to the heart-condition of unbelievers], He [God] has made alive with Him [Christ], having forgiven you all trespasses.” It should be clear that through these three verses Paul is talking about the meaning of the new birth, using the language of circumcision in vs. 11, speaking of baptism in vs. 12, and returning to circumcision in vs. 13.

Now neither baptism nor circumcision can save anybody. Circumcision and baptism are performed by man. In John 1:12 & 13 we read, “But as many as received Him [Christ], to them He gave the right to become the children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born [again], not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor the will of man, but of God.” So why do we baptize infants? Because of God’s covenant promise.

Perhaps the most telling verse in all Scripture is Acts 2:39: “For the promise [of the Holy Spirit] is to you and your children and to all who are afar off [the Gentiles], as many as the Lord our God will call.” The church on earth includes believers and their children. It’s not possible to distinguish between saved and unsaved little children. People must be somewhat grown up before we can be reasonably sure that they are saved through faith in Jesus. But they, like the children of the Old Covenant, are counted as the people of God from birth.

The parents bringing their children for baptism solemnly vow to “instruct their child in the principles of our holy religion as revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and as summarized in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this church; and ... to pray with and for their child, to set an example of piety and godliness before him/her, and endeavor by all the means of God’s appointment to bring him/her up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.”

Not all covenant children grow up to turn to the Lord, but many do, as against those reared in non-Christian homes, who seldom turn to Christ. The difference is, as it was in the Old Testament, how faithfully these baptismal vows are kept and whether God, by His Spirit, is pleased to call them to Christ (Acts 2:39, Romans 8:28). New Testament practice seems to indicate that, upon the conversion of parents, both parents and children were baptized (Acts 16:31-33; 1 Corinthians 1:16).

This is a very long answer to such a short question. I hope you will ponder it. And if you have further questions, please feel free to come back with them. (LE)

Letter to the Editor

I read with great interest the article by J. G. Vos, “A Call to Reformation” (July 2002). There are three areas of growing concern that I have as a minister in the OPC. In each of them, we need to return to biblical standards through a continuing reformation process.

1. Reformation to a more biblical preaching. As we obey Christ’s Great Commission, our pulpits should aim at nothing less than “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20).

Since all Scripture is Christo-centric, our preaching of it should always include commands from Christ, the practical demands of every doctrine. And these commands must be implemented. It is not enough to teach. We must teach them “to obey,” and to obey “everything I have commanded you.” Accountability structures must be introduced that will encourage the doing of the Word, not just the hearing of it (James 1:22-25). It is “everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice” who is likened to “a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matt. 7:24). Nothing short of a reformation will transform our pulpits from comfortable centers of intellectual

stimulation to places where Christ's sheep again clearly hear his voice and gladly follow him wherever he leads.

2. Reformation to a more biblical evangelism. How many OPC members are being encouraged to attempt to lead lost souls to Christ on a daily basis? How many ministers ask their congregations to pray for them so "that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known ... the gospel" (Eph. 6:19)? How many of us have our hearts filled with compassion when we look upon the harassed and helpless unbelievers around us, as Christ did (Matt. 9:36)? How many of us are truly following Christ and thereby being made "fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19)?

3. Reformation to a more biblical ecumenism. Paul was deeply devoted to Christian unity (see Rom. 15:1-6; 1 Cor. 1:10 ff.; Eph. 2:11-18; Phil. 4:1-3). Christ commands us through him, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). It grieves my soul that more is not being done to express that unity. His glory is certainly diminished and his Spirit grieved by "the tendency ... to regard the status quo as normal," as Vos reminds us. How can we be content with being divided from the PCA and other Reformed churches?

I applaud Vos's call to "denominational self-criticism on the basis of Scripture," which he recognized as a "difficult and serious" path. Truly, "when the church dared really to look at itself in the mirror of God's Word, in dead earnest, the church has been at its greatest." I sincerely encourage like-minded readers to join me in praying and working for a continued reformation in any or all of these three areas. For further serious discussion and strategizing, please e-mail me at edgross@localnet.com.

Ed Gross

Roxborough, Pa.

Letter to the Editor in New Horizons, October 2002

[Copied here for its timely and informative content.]