

Clarion

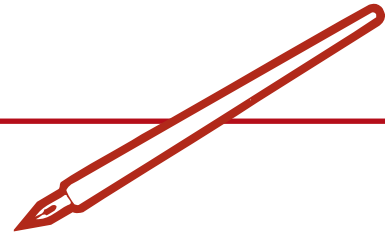
The Canadian Reformed Magazine
Volume 51, No. 20, September 27, 2002



Numbers 10:1-10

INSIDERS!

“Church is Boring!”



By J. Visscher



“Church is Boring”

A youthful complaint

I am sure that the above quotation is not exactly a surprise to many of you, especially to readers who are raising teenagers. Sunday morning arrives and it is time to get the family ready for Sunday worship and here or there a disgruntled boy or girl can be heard to say, “Church is boring! Why do we have to go anyway? Why can we not be allowed to sleep in?” Or else a discussion is held afterwards among family or friends or during the week and the same complaint is uttered.

Has our worship become stuffy and formalistic and predictable?

Often the complaint comes with additional commentary. You hear things like: “The minister preaches too long and his sermons are hard to understand. He should deal with more practical and down to earth matters. The songs are hard to sing and depressing. The organist plays way too slow. The prayers are long. Our services are far too formal and should be much more spontaneous.” Of course, this is only a sampling. Much more could and often is said. The result is that for many people worship is something you endure and not necessarily enjoy.

Assessing the situation

Now upon hearing this sort of talk the almost automatic reaction of most older people is one of dismissal. “You, young people, do not know what you are talking about. You do not have the right understanding of what worship is all about. You still have a lot to learn.” Instead of a listening ear, they get a lecture.

And that is unfortunate. Even if you may not agree with the youthful assessment rendered, you should at least take it seriously. You should even be so bold as to ask yourself, “Does my son or daughter have a point?” After all, it may just be that your offspring is expressing what you feel deep down in your own heart but are too afraid to admit, much less to utter.

Hence, the first need in this situation is to take a good hard look at your church’s worship. “Has it perhaps become stale, routine, ordinary, mundane – boring? Is the congregation coming more out of a sense of duty than anticipation? Do the minister and the organist give the impression that they are merely going through the motions? Is

there something wrong with the song selection? Has our worship become stuffy and formalistic and predictable?”

I know, I know, these are not pleasant questions to ask or to weigh, but surely we must ask them from time to time. If the Reformed church must be ever reforming, surely this applies to its worship too. We must ensure that it is always God glorifying, biblically faithful and spiritually vibrant. Never be afraid to ask hard questions about worship. In addition, always apply the highest biblical standards to worship.

The real source

Having said this, however, does not necessarily get to the heart of the matter. True, there may be problems with the way we worship, but the problem may just as much, if not more so even, lie with us and our attitude. An expression like “church is boring” can be coming out of a mouth and from a heart that is not really interested in God at all. A lack of spiritual hunger will make every worship service boring – no matter how rich or exciting the spiritual fare. The result is that those who make this complaint about worship would do well to first of all examine the condition of their own hearts.

Another good custom that many families have adopted is to have interaction about the worship service afterwards.

In addition, they would also do well to examine the criteria for worship that they are using. It strikes me that these days the standard by which worship is being measured is not the Bible but the modern media. We have become so used to slick movie and television productions with lots of music, colour, fast action and dramatic scenes. Most everything that is beamed at us comes in simple, short, quick sound and sight bursts. Our attention spans have shrunk and it takes a lot to hold them or to get them to bear down on anything that requires thought and concentration.

Another factor that comes into play here has to do with ours being very much a self-absorbed society. Everything centres around us as individuals – “how does this make me feel? What is in it for me? How does this help me?” The consequence is that we approach most things in life, as well as worship, from out of the perspective of “what will this do for me?” By nature we are consumers and takers, not contributors

and givers. It is hard for us to come together on a regular basis with the purpose of giving all of the praise, glory and honour to someone else, even if it is God.

And yet that is precisely what worship requires. It calls for a different focus. Look at the Psalms, which represent the heart of the church's praise, and to whom are they all directed? Whom do they rejoice in? Whom do they praise? Whom do they call upon? Whom do they exalt? Why, God, of course!

Our culture is no longer a word culture but it has become an image culture, and that makes the challenge of preaching even greater.

Therefore, in assessing the character of our worship we need to look at what we do on the Lord's day, but we also need to look at our own hearts, attitudes and directions.

Some challenges

More than look, however, we also need to take up some challenges and run with them. Indeed, challenges are in order here when it comes especially to three parties: parents, preachers and parishioners.

What's inside?

One of the most important blessings in our lives is the Word of God. Thus, the regular preaching of the gospel is something for which we hunger, or at least, we should hunger. Tragically, some find the preaching boring and unhelpful. Dr. J. Visscher examines this problem in his editorial and offers some insights.

Bible critics have tried to prove that the Bible originates in Babylonian traditions. If that were true, then the Bible has no legitimacy on its own and its central message is suspect. Dr. F.G. Oosterhoff demonstrates in her capable fashion that the Bible critics are simply wrong. While the Bible has connections with what is going on in the world around, it is the unique and sovereign Gospel of salvation which finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

In his column, *Living by the Doctrines of Scripture*, Rev. P.G. Feenstra speaks about the presence of Jesus Christ at his Lord's Supper. Christ is not physically present in the bread and wine, but through faith we receive nothing less than Jesus Christ Himself.

Rev. W.L. Bredenhof has supplied us with a speech he held for the Bulkley Valley Women's League Day. As he makes clear, even in his short ministry he has discovered that the biggest problem facing every person is plain old pride. In fact, it became clear to him that pride and idolatry are closely connected. In this issue we have the first of the three parts of his speech.

We have our regular columns, *Treasures, New and Old*, *Ray of Sunshine* and *Education Matters*. We also have a poem by Ida Tillema, a letter to the editor, and a press release.

I should add one comment. Somehow a letter to the editor by R. Duker and a response by T. Jelsma was deleted from issue 17. We include it now with apology to the authors.

RA



Published biweekly by Premier Printing Ltd., Winnipeg, MB

EDITORIAL COMMITTEE:



Editor: J. Visscher
 Managing Editor: R. Aasman
 Coeditors: J. De Jong, N.H. Gootjes, Cl. Stam

ADDRESS FOR EDITORIAL MATTERS:

CLARION
 26 Inverness Crescent, St. Albert, AB T8N 5J3
 Fax: (780) 418-1506 E-Mail: raasman@canrc.org

ADDRESS FOR ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS: (subscriptions, advertisements, etc.):

CLARION, Premier Printing Ltd.
 One Beghin Avenue
 Winnipeg, MB, Canada R2J 3X5
 Phone: (204) 663-9000 Fax: (204) 663-9202
 Email: clarion@premier.mb.ca
 World Wide Web address: premier.mb.ca/clarion.html

SUBSCRIPTION RATES	Regular	Air	
FOR 2002	Mail	Mail	
Canada*	\$39.50*	\$65.00*	
U.S.A. U.S. Funds	\$42.00	\$54.00	
International	\$64.00	\$97.00	

*Including 7% GST – No. 890967359RT
 Advertisements: \$12.50 per column inch

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada, through the Publication Assistance Program (PAP), toward our mailing costs.

Cancellation Agreement

Unless a written subscription cancellation is received we assume you wish to continue to subscribe. You will be invoiced prior to the subscription renewal date.

Agreement No. 1377531
 PAP Registration No. 9907
 ISSN 0383-0438

Copyright © Premier Printing Ltd.

All rights reserved. No part may be reproduced in any manner without permission in writing from the publisher, except brief quotations used in connection with a review in a magazine or newspaper.

Useful Link: www.canrc.org

IN THIS ISSUE

Editorial – “Church is boring” — J. Visscher	470
Treasures, Old and New – God is for us, who is against us? — W.M. Wielenga	473
Herman Bavinck on Old Testament Criticism (2) — F.G. Oosterhoff.....	474
Poem: The Forbidden Tree — Ida Tillema.....	477
Living by the Doctrines of Scripture – Christ's presence at the Lord's Supper — P.G. Feenstra	478
Pride and Our Idol Factories: The Disturbing Relationship Between Pride and Idolatry (1) — W.L. Bredenhof.....	480
Ray of Sunshine — C. Gelms and E. Nordeman	482
Education Matters	483
Letters to the Editor.....	484
Press Release – Classis Niagara	486

A challenge for parents

For openers, when it comes to worship there is a challenge here for parents. What sort of challenge? A challenge to teach and to model. For starters, parents need to instruct their children already at an early age about the character and nature of worship. They are to teach them about the need to prepare their hearts for worship. They should explain the rationale for the elements of worship: praise, prayer, Scripture reading, sermon, offering and sacraments. They do well to insist that there be real involvement in the activities of worship: singing, listening, praying, offering and partaking.

Another good custom that many families have adopted is to have interaction about the worship service afterwards. Usually there is enough in a worship service whether it be as the result of the preaching and the prayers, or the Scripture reading, to form the basis for a good and edifying discussion.

One more aspect that is very important in this regard is modelling. If father and mother show that worship is a priority for them, that it is something that they look forward to and that strengthens them in their faith life, this will spill over to their children. As negative parents unfortunately teach their children negative habits, so positive parents can teach their children positive ones. Indeed, it has always struck me that our most committed and active members come out of homes wherein parents have stressed the centrality of worship in a joyful and faithful manner.

A challenge to preachers

Still, if parents have a role when it comes to worship, this is even more so the case with preachers. After all, who leads the worship service in our churches? Not a worship team leader but a duly ordained office bearer. It is his duty to select the text, read the Bible, preach the sermon, lead in the prayers, administer the sacraments, and select the psalms and hymns. Some of that may be done with the input and involvement of others; nevertheless, the final call is his.

And that represents a weighty duty. Why, a good case can even be made that this represents an almost excessive duty. In an age in which preachers are no longer esteemed and people become more and more demanding, it is no light thing to lead in worship. This goes especially for the preaching. Our culture is no longer a word culture but it has become an image culture, and that makes the challenge of preaching even greater. As a result the temptation is there to make the sermons shorter, lighter, funnier and gimmicky.

Many succumb to the temptation and congregations complain that they are getting stones for bread.

So what is a preacher to do? Pray more, work harder, and stick close to the Bible. Although times change, the gospel does not change. Although expectations vary, the will of God remains constant. Although experimentation is in, preaching has to remain at the heart and centre of our worship. Only then it has to be clear preaching, relevant preaching, urgent preaching, divine-centered preaching. Pray that your minister may be up to the challenge.


A challenge for parishioners

I believe that it was the great nineteenth century preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon who came to a church to preach and no sooner had he announced his text, that he noticed that some of those in attendance were getting ready to sleep. He stopped and addressed himself directly to these people, saying, "What you are doing is truly unfair. You are not even giving me a chance. If after I have preached for a while and you fall asleep, then it may well be my fault, but you people are preparing to sleep without so much as even giving me a hearing."

The point of the story is that while the preacher has a calling when it comes to worship, the parishioner or worshipper has no less of a calling. Yet we often forget that! All the onus is usually on the preacher to do his best, and if he does not, then we have "roast pastor for lunch."

But what about those who listen and receive the Word, do they have no duty at all? I would say that they do. They have a duty to get to bed on time on Saturday evening and to awaken on time on Sunday morning. They have a duty to pray for the worship services and those who lead them. They have a duty to prepare their hearts by asking the Spirit to fill them and to involve themselves fully when it is time to worship.

The road ahead

As long as we are in this dispensation, there is no reason to expect that the accusation of worship being boring will go away. Constant attention to the quality of our worship and the ongoing efforts of parents, preachers and parishioners will, however, go a long way to making and maintaining our worship as "exciting," if not in the eyes of men, then at least in the eyes of God and his true children. 

Dr. J. Visscher is minister of the Canadian Reformed Church at Langley, British Columbia.



Photo courtesy Car Lodder

By W.M. Wielenga

God is for us, who is against us?

“What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?” Romans 8:31

The end of Romans 8 is one of the high points of this letter of the apostle Paul. With a few poignant rhetorical questions the apostle excitedly concludes that the gospel is unanswerable for its power and comfort. This is so because of two things especially. Those two things that give the gospel its power and comfort, the two themes the apostle draws out and weaves together in this section, are God’s justice and God’s love. In 8:31 (and verses 33-34) we have God’s justice highlighted; in 8:32 (and verses 35-39) the theme of God’s love is expounded.

The reason the apostle draws those two themes together here is because of what the letter is about, as found in the previous chapters. The letter as a whole is addressing, revealing, the covenant faithfulness of God. The thing that the apostle is busy with is the question: “How can God, who is the just Judge of all the earth and of all alike, Jew and Gentile, have a chosen covenant people for blessing when all alike are found to be in sin and condemnable?” The answer, which the apostle has argued in previous chapters, is that this is possible because of God’s covenant faithfulness, God’s righteousness.

God’s covenant faithfulness is revealed and seen there where his justice and love meet without compromising either one. The covenant faithfulness of God is found in Jesus Christ, the faithful Israelite and the new, last Adam, who came in obedience and was crucified for sin. In Him, in whom sin has been dealt with, the righteousness of God is revealed. In Him God has a people for blessing, a people of Jew and Greek equal and alike – for the just Judge of all the earth shows no partiality.

In 8:31, then, the focus is on God’s justice, though not separate from his love. The question of verse 31 can be distinguished as a particularly law-court kind of question. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” The expression


“God is for us” is legal terminology; the words come from the law court. That can be seen also, perhaps more clearly, from the accompanying words of verse 33: “It is God who justifies.” Justification is what happens in the court before the Judge. Justification is the act of the Judge, who is God, whereby the Judge rules in favour of one party or the other who appear before Him. The one whom the Judge justifies is the one of whom it can be said that the Judge is “for” him – hence “God is for us.” That “God is for us” is the concrete end-result of the all-important court decision: God has decided, ruled in our favour and we are free.

To be able to say with Paul “God is for us” means, then, that we did, in fact, appear before the Judge and did come out right. This brings two related questions: “Why and how did we appear before the Judge?” and “Where and when were we brought before him?”

As to the first question: the reason for our appearing before the Judge is sin, which makes us accountable to God and liable to his judgment, as the apostle says in 3:19 – we appeared as condemnable sinners in Adam. With regards to the second question: we know from Scripture that the judgment of God is mostly reserved for the final judgment on Judgment day. That’s when the final sentence comes down. Yet – and this is at the very heart of the gospel – that great court event from the end of history has been brought into the middle of history at the cross of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the one whom God sent into this world both as the sin offering in whom God has punished the guilty, and as the faithful Israelite and perfect Adam whom God has vindicated, justified, through his resurrection from the dead. God sent his Spirit to join people by faith to the Christ of Israel, the last Adam. Which means that all those who are by faith in Jesus Christ, in whom God’s judgment against sin and in

whom God’s vindication of the innocent has been accomplished, they, the believers, are on the other side of the courtroom, vindicated with Jesus Christ, in Christ. Those who are in Christ by faith are justified in Christ, share in his great vindication from God the Judge. Therefore we may say, “God is for us.” And that carries the full implication that we have nothing to fear with regards to the final judgment. We have the judgment behind us in Christ and have come out right in Him by faith today: God is for us, now and forever.

This explains also the words at the end of verse 31: “who can be against us?” and the related words of verse 33: “Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?” These words are also to be understood in terms of the court. They mean something like this: since this is the case, that God the just Judge has made the final ruling in our favour at the cross of Christ, how can we ever enter into court again as accused? In Christ it is all done.

Or it might be put like this: we cannot again appear in court as condemnable first-Adam people, for we are finished with him in Christ crucified; we are now vindicated last-Adam people by faith in Christ, through the Spirit. This is the wondrous comfort of the gospel: in Christ we are forever right with God; in Christ God will not ever again enter into judgment with us. It is this truth that becomes the motivation to seek daily cleansing from remaining sin. And whatever trials may come in this life – the apostle speaks of that in the following verses – we know that the greatest trial is behind us: in Christ we have come through the judgment of God, and have the blessing of eternal life. 

Rev. W.M. Wielenga is minister of the American Reformed Church at Lynden, Washington.

Herman Bavinck on Old Testament Criticism (2)

By F.G. Oosterhoff

Around the turn of the twentieth century, we saw last time, biblical critics attempted to prove that the religion of Israel was partly or wholly derived from Babylonian traditions. These critics referred to two sources. Firstly, they pointed to similarities between the Babylonian and the Genesis accounts of creation and flood. Secondly, they drew attention to Old Testament statements about Yahweh's conflicts with and victory over hostile forces. These activities, they believed, were similar to the struggles which, according to Babylonian mythology, Marduk and his fellow deities had been forced to wage in order to establish his rule. Even the terminology, they pointed out, was similar. Like the Babylonian myths, many an Old Testament passage also spoke of the enemies as natural forces – as storms and oceans, as sea monsters, serpents, dragons, and leviathans.

The Bible versus “Babel”

In his reply to the claims of the Babylonian school,ⁱ Bavinck observed that moderns, with their desire for a horizontalist and man-centred religion, are unable to appreciate the unique position Israel occupied in the history of salvation, and therefore in the fulfillment of God's plan for humanity. This same bias plagued the higher critics and explains their persistent failure to understand the Bible's message. The attitude of prophets and apostles was altogether different from the modern one. For them, religion consisted not first of all in satisfying the perceived needs of man, but in the knowledge and worship of the one true God. It was because they concentrated on God and his Word and will that they could still do what modern critics appear to be unable to do, namely distinguish between religion and magic, faith and superstition, theology and mythology.

Bavinck admitted the accomplishments of Babylonian civilization and agreed that the world owes Babylonia a debt of gratitude for the good things it received from it. But it should not be forgotten, he added, that Babylon was also the great source of superstition and depravity, the power that made all the nations “drink the wine of her impure passion” (Rev 14:8).ⁱⁱ It was Israel that by God's grace was freed from superstition and magic and in that respect stood alone among the peoples of the earth.

It was because prophets and apostles concentrated on God and his word and will that they could still do what modern critics appear to be unable to do, namely distinguish between religion and magic, faith and superstition, theology and mythology.

Rather, therefore, than emerging from Babylonia, the Bible stood in opposition to it. It was true that the Babylonian chaos myth and the stories of figures like Tiamat, leviathan, dragon and serpent, and that of the equally mythical Rahab, were known and used in Israel. When these figures entered Israel's circle of special revelation, however, they shed their character of mythical beings. This was clear from the fact that the images serve various purposes in the Old Testament. In some instances the monsters are simply giant animals (such as, for example, the crocodile, the hippopotamus, the buffalo); at other times they stand for natural forces like seas and storms and oceans; and at still

other times they symbolize world powers such as Egypt and Babylon and their rulers. But even when they represent natural forces, they never point to the type of power possessed by the Babylonian Tiamat, whom Marduk had to overcome before he could establish order. For the identification of the biblical Rahab, leviathan, and so on, with the Babylonian Tiamat and her monstrous offspring, there is no evidence whatsoever in the Bible.

Why then is the Babylonian terminology found in the Old Testament? Bavinck believed that in most cases it served ornamental purposes. For one thing, he writes, Israel used the names of Mesopotamian mythical beings in much the same way as we use pagan figures to name planets and constellations. Such usage obviously does not have to imply a belief in their existence. And for another, the myths served to provide poetic images, symbols and metaphors. Hebrew poets made use of them because they were well acquainted with Babylonian culture and mythology, and because the personification of natural forces was as popular and natural in Israel as it was among other nations. Israelite poets and prophets could therefore speak of mountains that clap their hands, of a Tabor and a Hermon that shout for joy, of hills that skip like calves and of an entire creation that proclaims God's glory. But again, at no point did they depict these natural objects as persons, least of all as independent powers. They served to show, rather, that creation joined the believer in proclaiming God's glory.

As more recent commentators have shown, the use of Babylonian mythology served additional purposes.ⁱⁱⁱ Natural forces are also mentioned in the Old Testament to proclaim God's sovereignty over creation. The forces that

existed independently of Marduk and rose in revolt against him – seas and oceans and monsters of the deep – are in the Bible God’s own creatures, are fully under his control (Gen 1:21, Job 38, Job 41, Ps 104:26), and are called upon to praise him (Ps 148:4-10).

We do not find Babylon behind the Bible, Bavinck concluded, but we do find behind the Bible a very ancient divine revelation, traces of which still lingered among pagan nations. It was this memory that explained such parallels with Genesis as can be found in pagan religious mythology.

But the same mythical figures may also represent forces that were hostile to God and had to be defeated for the sake of Israel’s redemption. In Isaiah 51:9-10 we read how God cut Rahab to pieces, pierced the dragon, dried up the sea, and made “the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over.” Since Rahab and the dragon can represent seas and oceans (and their monstrous inhabitants) as well as a hostile nation like Egypt, the “cutting up of Rahab” in Isaiah 51 no doubt refers to the Exodus events of both the dividing of the waters of the Red Sea and the destruction of Pharaoh’s army. In various other places we read of God’s crushing the power of Rahab, of the Leviathan, the serpent, and the “dragon that is in the sea” on behalf of his people. (See, e.g., Ps 74:13-15, Ps 89:9-10, Isa 27:1, Ezek 29:1-6 and 32:1-8.)^{iv}

Rahab and the other figures, then, serve in the Old Testament the theological purpose of proclaiming God’s sovereignty over creation, over the pagan gods, and over the nations of the world. Their usage teaches Israel to remember the absolute antithesis between the religion of Yahweh and those of the surrounding peoples, and to put at all times their trust in Yahweh, the omnipotent Creator and Redeemer, and in Him alone.^v

Israel and the nations

Although he rejected the conclusions of the Babylonian school in the matter of “Bible and Babel,” Bavinck

had also good things to say of the history of religions. He especially appreciated the fact that the newer critics had discarded the idea, promoted by earlier ones, that religions develop in isolation. As a result, Israel was no longer seen as an island, separated by a wide ocean from the rest of the world. The critics showed that as a nation and with its religious and cultural life, Israel had connections with its environment.

They also showed that it had connections with the distant past. Members of the old historical-critical school had assumed that Israelite history had not really begun until the time of Moses, and that its culture and religion had not reached maturity until much later. They had believed that the accounts of creation and paradise and flood, the person and service of Yahweh, the ceremonies and laws, the expectation of a Messiah, and so on, had originated with eighth-century prophets, or even with prophets living in the period after the exile. What they had failed to consider was that these beliefs can be, and in fact were, much older than the documents

Christianity stands not only in opposition to paganism but is also its fulfillment. Christ is the One who was promised to Israel and to the nations.

which describe them. By drawing attention to these misconceptions of the older critics, the Babylonian school served as an important corrective, even though its explanation of Israel’s religion remained unacceptable.

We do not find Babylon behind the Bible, Bavinck concluded, but we do find behind the Bible a very ancient divine revelation, traces of which still lingered among pagan nations. It was this memory, however corrupted, that explained such parallels with Genesis as can be found in pagan religious mythology. The original revelation had begun at the dawn of human history, proceeded among the descendants of Seth and Shem, and, within the bedding of the covenant with Israel, continued its flow until the fullness of time. The God who revealed himself to Abraham, bidding him to leave Mesopotamia and live in a foreign country, was therefore not a new and strange God. He was the

God of old, the Creator of all things, the One who had originally been known by all people. The separation and election of Abraham and Israel were necessary so that the original revelation could be kept pure and reach fulfillment, and so in the end become once more the possession of all nations. The promise became particular for a time, but only so that it could become universal again at a later date. Israel was part of humanity, continued to be connected to it, and was elected not at the expense of but for the sake of the rest of mankind.

And therefore a third positive element in the history of religions, Bavinck wrote, was that this school allowed for a common source of religion. Evolutionists had denied this. According to evolutionary theories, religions developed separately, and if they happened to have things in common – such as faith in a supernatural power, worship, prayer, sacrifices, the search for redemption, the expectation of a Saviour, the hope of immortality – that was simply coincidence. Many Christian apologists also denied, at least by implication, a common origin. Rather than discerning elements of truth in pagan religions, they tended to describe the founders of such religions as nothing but deceivers and enemies of God, tools of Satan. And it is true that Scripture itself calls paganism idolatry, deception, lies and vanity and darkness, and that it sees in it the working of demonic powers. There is an absolute antithesis between the Christian faith and all pagan religions; the Bible does not leave any doubt on that point.

The central message of divine revelation is not monotheism, nor the moral law, nor the laws of circumcision, Sabbath, and so on, but the covenant of grace. Not law, but Gospel is the essence and summary of the Scriptures of both Old and New Testament.

But this absolute antithesis does not, Bavinck believed, force us to deny a common origin of religious traditions among the peoples of the earth. In the earliest phase of its history, he reminds us, humanity consisted of one family.

The traditions dating from that early period were long maintained and reinforced among peoples through trading connections and other means of communication. In addition to these traditions, there is God's general revelation, and the fact that, as the Bible makes clear, the nations continue to be under God's rule and providence. The Holy Spirit has not departed from the world, and therefore Paul could tell the pagan Athenians that he was proclaiming to them the God whom they had worshipped as an unknown God. In this sense, Bavinck believes, Christianity does not only stand in opposition to paganism but is also its fulfillment. Christ is the One who was promised to Israel and to the nations. Abraham was told that in him all the peoples of the earth would be blessed.^{vi}

The essence of Israel's faith

All this shows, Bavinck concludes, that the essence of the biblical faith is not to be sought, as is so often assumed, in its ethical monotheism. That is part and parcel of the Old Testament faith and is essential to it, but it is not in itself something that "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived." Ethical monotheism could conceivably be a characteristic even of a pagan religion. The core of the revelation which came to Israel, and the heart of the religion which responded to that revelation, lie elsewhere.

To find them, we must turn to Scripture itself – to the prophets and psalmists, to Jesus and the apostles. They teach us that the central message of divine revelation is not monotheism, nor the moral law, nor the laws of circumcision, Sabbath, and so on, but the covenant of grace. Not law, but Gospel is the essence and summary of the Scriptures of both Old and New Testament. The law came after the promise and was added to show the promise's necessity and indispensability. But it was not originally connected to it, and it remains a temporary addition. The promise, however, will not cease. It originated in paradise, was maintained under the Old Covenant, reached its fulfillment in Christ, and extends itself in the New Testament dispensation to all peoples.

That promise, as Bavinck describes it, has three aspects. Firstly, it shows the electing love of God, who in free and sovereign grace chooses Abraham and his offspring and makes them his possession, and who does so in order

that the knowledge of God, which was being lost, may be preserved. This covenant relationship is not a "natural" one but has developed in history, and on God's own initiative. It is God who instituted it, and who also states the demand of the covenant. The demand is that Israel be faithful to the covenant by obeying the God of the covenant. The God of Abraham and of Israel is not a natural force, but an independent person who has his own nature and will, law, and service; who asks that the love he has shown to his people be returned, and therefore strictly forbids superstition and idol worship.

No school of higher criticism can ever destroy it. Free electing love, free and gracious forgiveness, and free and full communion are the promises which Israel received, and which it proclaimed to the rest of mankind.

Secondly, the promise to Israel shows God's forgiving grace. God's enemies are not natural forces like Tiamat and Rahab, the storms and the oceans and the monsters that inhabit sea and land and air. The force that opposes God arises not in nature but in history, in the world of man. It is the force of sin. Genesis 3 explains the origin of sin, showing that it exists in man's rebellion against God, in his transgression of God's command. The chapters following Genesis 3 trace the continuation of sin and again make manifest that it is a product of the human heart. When the stream of unrighteousness continues also after the flood, God elects Abraham, so that he and his descendants may turn from sin and walk before him in holiness.

God does this because his electing love is at the same time a forgiving love. He does not only *call* people, he also gives himself to them. He connects himself to his people so closely and mercifully that he takes over their guilt. "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." The covenant is built on re-



Examined by Classis Central Ontario on September 13, 2002 and received consent to speak an edifying word in the churches (C.O. Art. 21):

S. Carl Van Dam

Website change for the Canadian Reformed Church of Aldergrove, BC:

www.AldergroveChurch.com

demption and forgiveness, and the "walk before God's face" to which the patriarchs were called is therefore a walk of gratitude. The law came after the promise, was built on the promise, and was promulgated to serve the promise. It was a law not of a covenant of works, but of a covenant of grace. The prophets knew this. They did not – whatever the higher critics may say – introduce a new and higher moral law or invent a new, ethical monotheism. And neither did they tell the people that they had to earn their position as God's people. They told them that they already were God's people and that they had to live accordingly.

That God forgives sin out of grace, for his own sake, we can know only from the special revelation given to Israel. We would value it more highly, Bavinck adds, if we had a deeper sense of guilt. For the forgiving love of God is not obvious or "natural." If God forgives sin for his own sake, then he must also himself bring about the atonement; and the ceremonies of the law make clear that there is no atonement without the shedding of blood. In the course of its history Israel had to learn of a suffering that is undergone for the sake of others. And so by degrees was revealed the mystery of an innocent and redeeming suffering, as Isaiah speaks of it in the image of the Lord's servant, who is wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our sins.

Thirdly and finally, the Old Testament Gospel implies the promise of God's unchanging faithfulness. The more Israel's apostasy increases, the more persistent are the prophets in proclaiming that God will not break his covenant and leave his promise unfulfilled. "For the mountains may depart

and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you" (Isa 54:10). The prophets relate Israel's past, interpret the present, but also look forward to the future: to the fulfillment of the promise in Christ. In days to come, they tell Israel, God will establish a new covenant, one wherein the promise of the old covenant, "I shall be your God and you shall be my people," will be completely fulfilled.

And this, Bavinck concludes, is the content and essence of the Gospel entrusted to Israel. No school of higher criticism can ever destroy it. Free electing love, free and gracious forgiveness, and free and full communion are the promises which Israel received, and

which it proclaimed to the rest of mankind. In the person of Christ, who is the Son of God and the Son of man, who descended from Abraham and David and who is the Desire of both Israel and the nations, these promises have been fulfilled.

NOTES

ⁱFor this reply see Bavinck's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, II, 4th ed., pp. 434-39, and his *Wijsbegeerte der Openbaring*, pp. 144-170.

ⁱⁱBiblical quotations in this article are from the Revised Standard Version.

ⁱⁱⁱSee on this aspect Joh. Francke, *Veelkoppige monsters: mythologische figuren in bijbelteksten* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1970); Mary K. Wakeman, *God's Battle with the Monster* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), pp. 56-82.

^{iv}For additional texts speaking of God's control of seas and oceans, see Job 26:12,13, Psalm 18:15, Psalm 65:7, Psalm 77:16, Psalm 93:3, 4; Psalm 144:7, Jeremiah 5:22.

^vFrancke, pp. 132, 149, and *passim*.

^{vi}Bavinck, *GD.*, I, 4th ed., pp. 286-91; *Wijsbegeerte der Openbaring*, pp. 65f., 138-40, 155; *De Algemeene Genade* (Kampen: Zalsman, 1894), pp. 7-16. (Bavinck's views on the "elements of truth" in pagan religion are similar to those of Abraham Kuyper. On the latter see S.J. Ridderbos, *De theologische culturbeschouwing van Abraham Kuyper* [Kampen: Kok, 1947], pp. 98-106.)



Dr. F.G. Oosterhoff is a historian in Hamilton, Ontario.

The Forbidden Tree

By Ida Tillema

Adam one day made a wrong decision.
He decided by himself what he was going to do.
His decision was not based on the words God had given.
Adam said to the LORD, "I am better than you."

Adam said all these words to his Father in heaven
by eating the fruit of the forbidden tree.
It was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
God had warned, "You'll die if you don't obey me."

We can't decided for ourselves all that's good or evil.
We can't decide for ourselves all we're going to do.
Our decisions must be based on the words God has given,
for the LORD God said, "I'm a Father to you."

Christ's presence at the Lord's Supper

By P.G. Feenstra

The Lord's Supper exhibits to us how our great, holy and awesome God takes lost sinners into his company – not as sinners, but as those purified and cleansed with the precious blood of his dear Son. As our substitute Christ has made complete atonement and satisfaction for our sins. He has appeased the wrath of God. Thus, when the bread is broken before our eyes and we receive the cup, we may be assured of renewed communion with the Lord and with his people.

Nourishment

The Lord's Supper displays God's fatherly care for his children. He feeds and nourishes us to everlasting life. John Calvin writes these fine words:

God has created us, once for all, into his family, to hold us not only as his servants but as sons. Thereafter, to fulfill the duties of a most excellent Father concerned for his offspring, he undertakes also to nourish us throughout the course of our life To this end, therefore, he has, through the hand of his only-begotten Son, given to his church another sacrament, that is, a spiritual banquet, wherein Christ attests himself to be the life-giving bread, upon which our souls feed unto true and blessed immortality (John 6:51) (*Institutes* IV.17.1).

The Lord Supper assures us that in Christ and through the Holy Spirit we are healed from our infirmities. It demonstrates the miracle of salvation: we are made alive in Christ so that we can eat and drink. We, who were like walking corpses, dead in our sins and transgression, have been made alive. What the Lord Jesus said when He raised people from the dead, He also says to us who are made spiritually alive: "Give them something to eat and to drink."

Presence of the Word

Since Christ is revealed to us in the Scriptures, true faith lays hold of the

Word of the Lord. It delights in the Word, hungers and thirsts for Christ as revealed in the gospel. That element in the Lord's Supper is sometimes overlooked. Not only do we have the bread and wine at the Lord's Supper celebration. We have the Word of Christ! In fact, the Word of the Lord makes or breaks the celebration. Without the Word of Christ, the Lord's Supper goes from feast to famine. Without the Word of Christ there is no grace in the Lord's Supper. Responding to the Word we hunger for the Bread of Life and we thirst for Living Waters. We will have a deep passion and love for Christ. At every Lord's Supper celebration, Jesus Christ instructs us to labour for the food that will not perish but will satisfy our hungry and thirsty souls.

Christ is received – not physically but by faith.

Views on the real presence of Christ

During the Reformation of the sixteenth century the presence of Christ at the Lord's Supper was the subject of hot debate. The Heidelberg Catechism highlights the main point of the controversy when it asks in Lord's Day 29, Q. 78, "Are then the bread and wine changed into the real body and blood of Christ?" The Roman Catholics answered this question in the affirmative. They believed (and continue to believe) that the moment the priest says, "This is my body," the substance of the bread and wine change into the body and blood of our Lord. That explains why Roman Catholics consider the sacrament of the mass to be more important than the preaching of the Word. In the preaching you hear Christ speak but in the mass you receive Christ Himself. You take Him in, just as you would swallow a pill of medication. The Roman Catholic

doctrine of the Lord's Supper is called transubstantiation, meaning "change of substance."

Martin Luther and his followers rejected the Roman Catholic view concerning the change of substance. Yet they also believed Christ is present in, with and under the symbols of bread and wine because Christ's body does not consist of flesh and blood but is spiritual. Luther taught the doctrine of consubstantiation.

Ulrich Zwingli, a Swiss reformer, rejected the real presence of Christ altogether. He believed the Lord's Supper is simply a meal in which we commemorate Christ's redemptive work. Zwingli denied the working of God's grace in the Lord's Supper.

The Reformed view on Christ's presence

In the good providence and mercy of God the church was brought back to the true and sound doctrine of the Word of God. Both Lord's Day 29 and Article 35 of the Belgic Confession summarize beautifully the biblical teaching regarding Christ's presence. Both do not deny the real presence of Christ at the Lord's Supper. With the Belgic Confession we confess, "Yet we do not go wrong when we say that what we eat and drink is the true, natural body and the true blood of Christ. However, the manner in which we eat it is not by mouth but in the spirit by faith."

The body of Christ is no longer present on earth in any form or condition. He is and will remain in heaven until He appears to judge the world. The angels who were present at his ascension did not say to the disciples: "This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven will come in bodily form the next time you celebrate the Lord's Supper" but "This same Jesus, who was taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). To say Christ is

physically present in the Lord's Supper is to degrade Him. We take Him down from his heavenly majesty and splendour and humiliate Him. We serve the Lord Jesus who ascended into heaven victoriously. The Lord's Supper celebrates his victory and the completion of his work of salvation.

Nevertheless, the Lord's Supper is more than a meal of commemoration. Christ is received – not physically but by faith. With the bread and wine the Lord Jesus gives us his true body and true blood, and it is received not through man's mouth but through his believing heart. With our mouths we eat nothing more than bread and we drink nothing more than wine. But in our hearts, by faith, we receive nothing less than Jesus Christ Himself! We receive Christ as He is given to us by the Holy Spirit. When we embrace the sacrifice of Christ by faith, we find rest for our souls, we taste of the goodness of the Lord and we are satisfied.

Transforming transubstantiation

The doctrine of transubstantiation is based on a wrong understanding of the institution of the Lord's Supper and the nature of the sacraments. When Christ said, *"This is my body,"* (Matt 26:26) He spoke symbolic language. He used this technique more often. He said, *"I am the true vine"* (John 15:1), and everyone knew Jesus did not become a vine. He said, *"I am the gate"* (John 10:9), but his physical presence was not in the gate. 1 Corinthians 10 warns us not to disobey the voice of the Lord as at Massah and Meribah in the wilderness and then Paul writes, *"and that rock was Christ"* (1 Cor 10:4). This rock was not the real physical presence of Christ but the rock represented Christ.

Those who teach transubstantiation are also inconsistent in their doctrine of the sacraments. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are both sacraments. They both have sacramental power. The elements of this Supper remain what they are, just as the water in baptism remains what it is. *"Just as the water of baptism is not changed into the blood of Christ and is not the washing away of sins itself but is simply God's sign and pledge, so also the bread in the Lord's Supper does not become the body of Christ itself . . ."* (Lord's Day 29, A. 78).

The Reformed doctrine of justification through faith alone is the death blow to any view of a physical presence of Christ at the Lord's Supper and the doctrine of election and predestination

places the nails in the coffin. If Christ were physically present and if He were physically eaten with the mouth then Christ would be for all: reprobate and elect. Yet Christ is only for those whom He has chosen. Specifically in the Supper, Christ is for the nourishing and strengthening of the elect alone. Those who come to the table and do not proclaim the Lord's death, who in doctrine and life have no concern for the Lord, receive nothing at the table but an empty symbol. They eat and drink judgment upon themselves.

Pledge of his constant faithfulness

The bread and wine at the Lord's Supper are outward tokens representing what the Lord does inwardly. At the last Passover our Lord Jesus Christ gave his disciples pledges of his goodness and mercy, of what He is doing in their hearts, not in their stomachs. In the Supper the Lord pledges that He will grant us the perfect righteousness and holiness of Christ through no merit of our own. He has promised this in his Word, and He confirms it sacramentally in the Lord's Supper.

At the celebration of the Lord's Supper we are assured of Christ presence in Word and Spirit.

On their wedding day, a bride and groom give each other a ring as a pledge, a sign and seal of the vows they made before the Lord. The rings are a token of their constant faithfulness and abiding love. The name of the bride is placed in the ring of groom and the name of the groom in the ring of his bride. But that does not mean the ring becomes the wife or husband.

While Christ, the Groom, is away, his bride (the church) can look to the symbols of bread and wine as the pledges and tokens of his constant faithfulness and abiding love; they are the indications of what the Lord is doing in her heart through the Holy Spirit.

Looking ahead


At the celebration of the Lord's Supper we are assured of Christ presence in Word and Spirit. We look back at what He accomplished on the cross but we also look ahead. Every celebration proclaims and prophesies of the day when Christ will once more be

physically present with all believers. He will drink the wine new with us in the kingdom of his Father. Believing in Him now, and trusting that He is present with us spiritually, we shall see Him in his real person and we will not be cast away.

At the table of the Lord, as true partakers, we may look by faith beyond the bread and wine! With grateful devotion we marvel at God's sin-forgiving grace. Every celebration makes us long for the day when we will be set free from the bondage of sin. At the Lord's Supper we have a foretaste of greater things to come – the marriage feast of the Lamb. This feast will be more splendid and glorious than we can imagine. Christ will be physically present with us. We will be together with those whose places are vacant at the table today but who have fought the good fight of the faith and who have gained the victory.

Conclusion

The Lord's Supper proclaims a wonderful gospel. Let the truth it exhibits never be obscured by human constructions, inventions or disputes about how we prefer it to be celebrated. May we and our children embrace the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper, and hold on to it as a most precious jewel. Let not our conversations about the Lord's Supper degenerate into debates. May God grant us the grace to thank Him for his mercy and to keep our eyes fixed on Christ.

John Calvin already warned the church to be aware of Satan's tactics. *"Furthermore, Satan, to deprive the church of this inestimable treasure, has long since spread clouds, and afterward, to obscure this light, has raised quarrels and conflicts to estrange the minds of simple folk from a taste for this sacred food, and also has tried the same trick in our day"* (Institutes IV.17.1). Inconsequential and petty matters often threaten to blur and eclipse our vision and take away our focus. May Christ nourish us with his all-sufficient sacrifice so that we may hunger and thirst after Him all the more; so that we may not cling to the outward symbols of bread and wine, but lift our hearts on high in heaven, where Christ is, at the right hand of his heavenly Father (*Book of Praise*, Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper, p.600). 

Rev. P.G. Feenstra is minister of the Canadian Reformed Church at Owen Sound, Ontario.

Pride and Our Idol Factories: The Disturbing Relationship Between Pride and Idolatry (1)

By W.L. Bredenhof

This speech was originally prepared for the Bulkley Valley Women's League Day on June 19, 2002. It is presented here with some minor revisions.

Introduction

Before I begin, I'd like to thank you very much for asking me to speak with you today. A couple of months ago, I submitted a number of topics to the Wednesday evening Ladies' Bible Study and they asked me to speak on the topic of pride and idolatry. In one way, I was hoping that you wouldn't choose this topic. It hits much too close to home. So, it's not easy to speak on this subject. But I think it's necessary, both for me and for all of us. If we're honest with ourselves, we too easily fall into these sins – and ministers and missionaries are no different.

If you don't mind, I'd like to start on a personal note. I don't have years and years of experience under my belt as a missionary pastor. I have only been doing this for about eighteen months. In eighteen months, however, I have observed some things about human nature from experience and Scripture. Those observations led me to suggest this as one of the topics.

Before we came to live with the people in Fort Babine, we had caught a glimpse of life there. Besides the glimpses we had received, we had heard a lot of things. Based on what we had heard and briefly seen, we thought the biggest problems in the community would be related to substance abuse or perhaps sexual and physical abuse. These *are* problems to varying extents in Fort Babine. However, we have come to see that the biggest problem is plain old pride. And as we thought about it

more, it became clear that pride and idolatry are closely connected.

Before anyone thinks that this observation is limited to the mission field in Fort Babine, it's time to get closer to home. Working with native people means that we sometimes hear racist comments from people in our churches all over Canada. What is racism, if not pride? Let's zoom in a little closer at ourselves. To do that, I'd like to read a quote from a female author. I made sure it was a woman, since she would know more about these things than I would. This is what she says:

I believe that the Scriptures confirm my observation that there is a strong, inseparable relationship between pride and idolatry.

How do we treat our friends when we differ with them over methods? Do we criticize them behind their backs? The Bible calls this backbiting. Do we openly criticize them? Do we tell their method is inferior to our own? That can be arrogant or just plain rude. Do we make officially "polite" but loaded comments which express our displeasure and disapproval of their application of God's principles? Do we try to embarrass them to make ourselves look better? This is not courtesy.

Here are a few examples: "Can you believe how often she has to go feed her baby? My baby was sleeping through the night at six

weeks." "Your youngest is almost two? You know three children are better than two!" "Why aren't you homeschooling?" "Why are you homeschooling?" Women who feel free to express themselves about such things have no idea of the damage they are doing.¹

I think by this point I have just about stepped on everyone's toes, including my own. Let's face it: by nature, we are a proud lot. But does that make us idolaters as well? Do we really sink that far? I'm going to argue that we do. I believe that the Scriptures confirm my observation that there is a strong, inseparable relationship between pride and idolatry. Before we investigate that relationship in detail, let's look at idolatry and pride separately. We'll start with some observations about idolatry.

Some observations about idolatry

Most of us, I'm sure, know very well how the Heidelberg Catechism defines idolatry: "having or inventing something in which to put our trust instead of, or in addition to, the only true God who has revealed Himself in his Word." This is especially in connection with the first commandment. However, the second commandment is also associated with idolatry. In the first commandment, the one true God tells us to worship Him alone, and in the second commandment, He shows us *how* to worship Him. When people break the first commandment, they usually do it consciously – they know that they are putting their trust in someone or something other than the God of the Bible. When people break the second commandment, they still figure that they are worshipping God. But they worship

Him in their own way – and sometimes the way they do that is by creating images or pictures of God – outright idolatry we might say. More often, they create a different idea or concept of who God is. They recreate God according to their own liking.

More often, they create a different idea or concept of who God is. They recreate God according to their own liking.

For instance, some people cannot tolerate the concept of a holy God who would get angry at sin and sinners. So, they recreate God into a type of cosmic Santa Claus. He knows if you've been bad or good, but in the end, everybody gets the presents. This recreating of God virtually eliminates the need for a Saviour.

In this speech today, we're especially interested in this second commandment type of idolatry. As we're going to see, with pride there is often a violation of the first commandment as well. But since our situation often sees us going in the direction of "in addition to the only true God," we are especially in the realm of the second commandment. The question needs to be asked: is our understanding of who God is and what is He like in conformity with the Bible or do we recreate Him to fit our own needs and situation? When we do that, we all end up with our own version of who God is.

That's why John Calvin said in his *Institutes* that "man's nature is a perpetual factory of idols." He wasn't speaking about false gods. He was speaking of recreations of the one true God. That's why in the last paragraph of that section, Calvin speaks about the sin of the people at Sinai in Exodus 32. The golden calf was meant to portray the one true God for Israel. The infinite and almighty God of heaven and earth was reduced to a finite and destructible (as Moses illustrated) animal. This was sin against the second commandment!² And it was directly related to pride. Calvin writes, "Man's mind, full as it is of pride and boldness, dares to imagine a god according to its own capacity; as it sluggishly plods, indeed is overwhelmed with the crassest ignorance, it conceives an unreality and an empty appearance as God."³ That comment leads us into some observations about pride.

Some observations about pride

One of the most profitable places to find practical help in godly living is the Puritans. I'll grant that they're not always easy to read, but if you take the time to read their works with a charitable and teachable attitude, you'll always come away blessed. Since many of the Puritans were in tune with godliness and genuine piety, they have much to offer us on the subject of pride. Richard Greenham, for instance, said that "The more godly a man is, and the more graces and blessings of God are upon him, the more he has to pray, because Satan is busiest against him, and because he is the most likely to be puffed up with a conceited holiness."⁴ In other words, godliness and earnest prayer belong together. Another Puritan, George Swinnock, said, "Pride is the shirt of the soul, put on first and put off last."⁵ Pride is indeed a very difficult corner in our old nature. It's very hard to get into that corner and crucify that pride lingering there.

However, we know from the Scriptures that pride is what used to be called a "deadly sin." The book of Proverbs has much to say about pride. We read in Proverbs 6:17 that a "proud look" or "haughty eyes" is one of the six things that the LORD hates, one of the seven that are an abomination to Him. The LORD hates pride. Proverbs 21:4 says it bluntly, "A haughty look, a proud heart, and the plowing of the wicked are sin." In Psalm 101:5, King David promises God that he will not put up with the proud. And to be sure, the New Testament underscores the same message. Peter says it in 1 Peter 5:5, quoting from Proverbs 3, "Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.'" Romans 12:3 warns believers not to think of themselves more highly than they ought to – and this passage provides a good definition of pride. What is pride? Thinking of yourself more highly than you should. From all this, pride is obviously a sin and the Christian church has often spoken of it as a deadly sin or a capital sin – a sin from which other sins are derived.

Traditionally, there were seven deadly sins: lust, gluttony, anger, sloth, avarice [greed] and envy, and finally, pride. In a recent issue of *Christian Renewal*, columnist Geoff Thomas pointed out that most of these seven deadly sins are still recognized as something bad – though they have been transformed. For

instance, those who would previously have been said to be lustful are now diagnosed with a sex addiction. Anger is now an emotional addiction. Gluttony is an eating disorder, a food addiction. However, with pride it's different. Says Thomas, "Of all the seven deadly sins, pride is the only one that has been completely rehabilitated. That is why pride is never diagnosed as a disease. . . . These days virtually every social and psychological problem is blamed on low self-esteem."⁶ Today, many therapists and counsellors (sometimes also so-called Christian counsellors) believe that pride is a necessary and good thing, pride is virtuous. And so we have to face the fact that we live in a culture where pride is no longer understood to be a sin. But at the same time, we have to face the Scriptures that clearly tell us that it is a sin.

And so we have to face the fact that we live in a culture where pride is no longer understood to be a sin.

This places conflict and tension in our lives because we can't remove ourselves from our culture. We can't escape its influences, also when it comes to regarding pride as a positive thing. This conflict makes our lives difficult and complex. And things get only more complex when we consider what the Bible has to say about the relationship between the sin of pride and the sin of idolatry. . . .

¹*The Fruit of Her Hands: Respect and the Christian Woman*, Nancy Wilson, Moscow: Canon Press, 1997, pp.60-61.

²Cf. "The Golden Calf at Sinai" (unpublished speech), Dr. C. VanDam, May 29, 2000 at the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches, Hamilton, ON. VanDam noted that officially the worship was of Jahweh, but the popular view might have been idolatrous in the first commandment sense.

³*Institutes*, 1.11.8

⁴*A Puritan Golden Treasury*, edited and compiled by I.D.E. Thomas, Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1977, p.223.

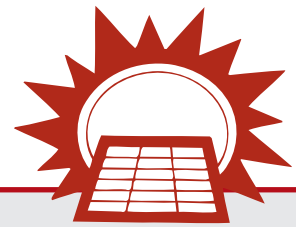
⁵*Ibid.*, p.224.

⁶"But. . . you mustn't blame yourself" by Geoff Thomas in *Christian Renewal*, Feb. 11/02, p.13.



Rev. W.L. Bredenhof is missionary in Fort Babine, British Columbia.

RAY OF SUNSHINE



By Mrs. Corinne Gelms and Mrs. Erna Nordeman

*Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man
who takes refuge in Him. Fear the LORD, you his saints,
for those who fear Him lack nothing!*
Psalm 34:8, 9

More than years can imagine
or our minds comprehend,
God's bountiful gifts
are ours without end –

We ask for a cupful
when the vast sea is ours,
We pick a small rosebud
from a garden of flowers,

We reach for a sunbeam
but the sun still abides,
We draw one short breath
but there's air on all sides.

Whatever we ask for
falls short of God's giving,
For His greatness exceeds
every facet of living.

And always God is ready
and eager and willing
To pour out His mercy
completely fulfilling.

All of our needs
for peace, joy, and rest
For God gives His children
whatever is best.

Just give Him a chance
to open His treasures,
And He'll fill your life
with unfathomable pleasures.

*Thank the LORD and come with praise;
Songs of jubilation raise
When the crop is gathered in
Ere the winter storms begin.
God, our Maker, will provide
For our wants to be supplied.
Let His people all confess
His unchanging faithfulness.*

Hymn 57:1



Birthdays in October:

6: HENRY VANDER VLIET will be 35
Anchor Home
361 Thirty Road, RR 2
Beamsville, ON L0R 1B0

17: ALAN BREUKELMAN will turn 36
225 - 19th Street
Coaldale, AB T1M 1G4

22: NELENA HOFSTRA will turn 42
Bethesda Clearbrook Home
32553 Willingdon Crescent
Clearbrook BC V2T 1S2

25: JOHN FEENSTRA will turn 44
Anchor Home
361 Thirty Road, RR 2
Beamsville, ON L0R 1B0

28: MARY ANN DE WIT will be 46
Bethesda
6705 Satchel Road, Box 40
Mount Lehman, BC V0X 1V0

Congratulations to you all who are celebrating a birthday in October. May our gracious God and Father bless you in this new year that lies ahead of you, with much health, happiness, and service to Him alone. Have an enjoyable day together with your family and friends. Till next month,

Mrs. Corinne Gelms and Mrs. Erna Nordeman

Mailing correspondence:

548 Kemp Road East
RR 2 Beamsville, ON L0R 1B2
1-905-563-0380



Involved (1)

By K. Sikkema

Parents must be involved in their children's education. In this article, I first address the fundamental reason why they should be involved. This fundamental reason does not lie in the need for developing a strong emotional bond between parents and children (although that, too, is important), not in the good feelings it gives (although it often may), not in biological logic (although that, too, makes sense), and not in the nation's need for a well-trained and competitive workforce to maintain a strong economy (although that, too, would be nice to have), but in the covenant relationship in which God mercifully placed us and our children. The other reasons cited fit in the category of what man decides to pursue as valid in its own right, rather than receiving it as a blessing from the Lord, of serving created things, rather than the Creator (Rom 1:25). It reminds one of Solomon's downfall from the wisdom and splendour God gave him when he began to pursue the benefits of God's gifts, rather than the Giver (1 Kgs 11:9). We do well to be wary of Solomon's fall, even as we draw on some of the findings of secular literature on the benefits of parental involvement.

We have an abundance of reasons to express gratitude to God for bringing us the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ, especially because there is no merit of our own that would warrant this. The apostle Paul does not hide his wonder at God's mercy by which He gave us faith in Christ through which to be justified, hope in his glory despite sufferings and persecutions, and the love of the Holy Spirit. His utter surprise at God's mercy is summarized in that one line: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8). Of course, he was primarily speaking to the Church at Rome when he wrote this, but the Scriptures speak to us today as they then did to the Romans: "All . . . who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 1:7). He is speaking to the people of the covenant, in which God establishes

a relationship of love with people He chose, and to their children.

Parental responsibility, covenant context

When parents have their baby baptized in the church, they recognize that this child belongs to God, and so to God's covenant people. They affirm and vow to accept that they have a central and significant teaching responsibility with regard to this child. When they read Scripture carefully, they will find few (if any) examples that this task can be delegated away completely, even though there are in fact several instances where part of the teaching responsibility is delegated to others (think of Samuel under the tutelage of Eli, for instance, or Jesus' early encounter with the teachers of the law). Rather, it is the parents, and particularly the fathers,

When parents have their baby baptized in the church, they recognize that this child belongs to God's covenant, and so to God's covenant people.

who are exhorted in Deuteronomy 4:9-13 and 6:6-7, and again in Ephesians 6:4 to diligently teach their children. On the other hand, Deuteronomy as well as Paul's letter to the Ephesians are directed in context to the whole congregation, and it will not do to completely sever the parents' responsibility from the responsibility of the community. The community is witness to these exhortations, and will be responsible to at least remind parents of and assist them in their calling. Even the early Dutch Reformed Synods of the sixteenth century recognized that baptism was to take place in the church, and not at home, stressing that it was an affair of the whole covenant community and not of the family only. It is inevitable that the community is involved in the education of the next generation as well.

Although some have suggested that there could be such a thing as a "home church," consisting of just one family, this clearly is not God's intent. Rather,

He urges his people in Hebrews 10:25 to gather with all the brothers and sisters at their place, just as He gathers his congregation (Matt 16:18). We understand this also as part of the communion of saints, in which we all use our gifts for the benefit and well-being of the other members, rather than keeping them to ourselves. We positively and thankfully receive the gifts and benefits Christ has poured out on his people through this very communion of saints.

What we read in 1 Corinthians 12 is also not to be hoarded by individual families, but to be shared with the whole church: the church is the body, and individual members are its parts.

Although not directly mandated by Scriptures, our schools are one significant way in which this communion of saints receives expression, as it is often through the schools that parents organize, seek, and can receive help in their central task of educating their children. At the same time, especially because these institutions in part even define our Canadian Reformed identity, we need to remember that our salvation and that of our children does not depend on attending those schools, but on Christ Himself.

Social pressure

It cannot be denied that real people, which we are, are susceptible to social pressures. Our Form for Baptism therefore rightly urges parents not to use the sacrament "out of custom or superstition," but rather for the right reasons. We can gloss over that "custom or superstition" phrase, but do well to realize that our answers to the questions at baptism are not truthful but in fact perjury, if, in fact and at bottom, it is "custom" or "superstition" for which we seek baptism. With "superstition" we may think of the belief that baptism itself is a vehicle by which God's saving grace is poured onto the child, and that without baptism the child could never find favour in God's eyes. That would be a Roman Catholic train of thought. With "custom" we may think of doing it "because everyone else does it" or "because of what others might say if we did not present the child to be baptized." Here, it would be social control or peer pressure, and not the right reason or purpose.

God does not want our outward behaviour, but our heart (Ps 40:6ff).

The same issue arises when people choose a school for their children. Is it out of "custom or superstition" that people sometimes send their children to the Reformed school? Aside from it being an expensive custom or superstition, it would beg the question of what such parents actually expect from the school. Would it be salvation for their child, or their substitute as parents, or perhaps even merit for their own salvation account? It would be a waste of money from such perspectives, if only because even the best school is hopelessly inadequate for such purposes. If, furthermore, our schools become the vehicles to "keep the elders at bay" (in their keeping with Article 58 CO), or for "doing the right thing in the eyes of the community," we are in danger of abusing what has been conscientiously built up for a good purpose to the detriment of those who use it for the right reasons. To counter this real danger, Dutch school principal Jetze Baas even suggested that parents be interviewed regarding their real reasons for sending their child to the Reformed school, as an admission requirement and as one way to ascertain that the school's purposes and the parents' expectations are properly aligned (*De Reformatie*, Feb. 26, 2000, pp. 786 ff.).

Delegating and accountability

Parents can never delegate all their responsibility to the school. They may not begin to treat the school as a "convenient-day-time-babysitter-at-which-the-kids-learn-something-useful-to-boot." In a Reformed family, the day

begins with parental responsibility for bringing up their children, and it ends with that responsibility. This includes, if at all possible, eating breakfast together as a family with prayer and Bible reading, sending the children off to school, welcoming them back home after, discussing the events of the day during supper or other good moments,


We are accountable. To be accountable means to be involved.

helping them with school assignments or just showing an interest in what they are doing, reading and sharing good books with them and to them no matter how old they are, giving thanks to the Lord for all his beautiful gifts in providing for every need as we go our way in developing and using our talents in his service before going to sleep (Deut 6:4-9). If all this is perhaps so overwhelming, we can also give thanks to God for the presence of the communion of saints, in which we can be encouraged to humbly seek help where we need it. But we may not shirk our own responsibilities by making the school responsible for our parental task. We are accountable. To be accountable means to be involved.

The school, at the same time, cannot do whatever it likes. It was established for the purpose of being an extension of the home, and to maintain the principles taught at home. As an institution, it is accountable to the community that established it. Similarly, individual and imperfect teachers need the grace of God

as much as the parents who send their children to their classrooms every day. They also need the communion of saints to support them in staying on track. For them to do a good job, and for the school to attain its purposes, we need an involved community that brings the needs of the school before God's throne of grace every day.

Conclusion

Here are, then, two principle reasons for parents to be involved in the school they choose for their children: (1) they have a God-given responsibility for bringing up their own offspring; and (2) for the teachers to do a good job, they need a prayerfully and actively involved communion of saints. If we as parents accept our responsibility regarding our children as part of our thankfulness to God, as a matter of the heart, and not just as a matter of the hand or the head, we are convinced by the most compelling reasons to be involved. We would be involved as a matter of faith, as a matter of putting our trust in God that He will provide for us in every way, and that this is the right thing to do. It is the right thing to do, not because the neighbour or the consistory says so, and not because we magically expect some eternal benefit for our children from attending a Reformed school, but because it is our faith that compels us. At the same time, we as community must be involved, because we are a witness to the vows parents made. 

Mr. Keith Sikkema is a grade 8 teacher and vice-principal at John Calvin School in Smithville, Ontario.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor:

I agree with what brother John Smith wrote quite some time ago in *Clarion* that we should sing all of the 150 Psalms. My problem is this: why is it made so difficult for us to do so? According to me the difficulty lies with the Genevan tunes. I know a lot of people will disagree with me, but let's face it, it has been a bone of contention ever since I can remember, and that's about fifty years.

I also agree with pastor Holtvlüwer (*Clarion*, July 5) that difficult tunes can

be learned, and can even be sung with confidence. But even if they can be sung with confidence, I for one don't necessarily like some of the tunes. I think of instance of Psalm 23, without doubt the best known Psalm throughout the world. But do I like the tune? No. The words and rhyming are beautiful. I looked up Psalm 23 in the *Psalter Hymnal*, and find the music much more appealing. I also think of Psalm 146. I think the music is dull. However we do have an alternate tune for 146, which our older brothers and

sisters surely remember. One of our former pastors requested it be sung to the alternate tune. And sing we did. My point is this. Is it not possible to set some of the more difficult tunes to more suitable music? For instance, we could have Psalm 23A and 23B, 146A and 146B. Remember we have Hymn 1A and Hymn 1B. So why not some of the Psalms also?

*With brotherly greetings,
George Van Bostelen,
Coaldale, Alberta*

Dear Editor:

I have followed the recent discussion on faith and science with great interest and I especially appreciate the defense of creation science by the Helters. I definitely have some concerns regarding the letter to the editor by Dr. Tony Jelsma to which the Helters have also replied. I would like to make a few remarks regarding Dr. Jelsma's letter. He states that: "the Creation Science movement is not based on Reformed theology. . ." What is Dr. Jelsma's definition of Reformed theology? Is Reformed theology not biblical theology? How then is creation science unbiblical? For sure, creation science is not based on liberal theology where the Bible is interpreted allegorically and not plainly as the very words of God.

Dr. Jelsma then refers to the "original meaning of Scripture, particularly the first chapter of Genesis." For me a red flag always goes up when someone talks about original meaning of Scripture. What "original meaning" does he have in mind? Scripture says what it means and means what it says. Does not God speak plainly in Genesis? Dr. Jelsma concludes his letter by mentioning the scientists who work for two creation science organizations, stating that "their approach to Scripture and their method of doing science are not in line with Reformed thinking and thus Creation Science should be viewed with caution by Reformed believers." But again what is meant by Reformed thinking? This might include, among other things, theistic evolutionism and the framework hypothesis. Some Reformed thinkers (such as the author of *The Fourth Day*) actually lead Reformed believers astray because they are really Bible critics.

Data is data. But how the data is interpreted makes all the difference in any field of study. As the Helters put it in their reply to Dr. Jelsma: "Based on a literal reading of Genesis, we interpret the data from nature." Creation scientists should be commended for exposing false scientific theories such as evolutionism while affirming the six day creation, the historical reality of Adam and Eve, the world-wide flood, and young Earth cosmology. One can question and debate some of the specific proposals of creation scientists, but their intent is to honour the Creator by showing how the scientific data agrees with the creation of the world as revealed in Scripture. General revelation (the creation) and special revelation

(the Scriptures) never contradict each other. The Spirit who presided over creation (Gen 1:2) is the very same Spirit of truth who wrote the Scriptures (1 Tim 4:1; 2 Peter 1:21).

Rick Duker
Edmonton, Alberta

Response:

I thank br. R. Duker for his response and for providing me with an opportunity to clarify my position. Br. Duker asks me to define Reformed theology. I invite br. Duker to reread the articles of Dr. F.G. Oosterhoff to see the approaches that Kuyper and Bavinck used towards science. To illustrate further my point that Creation Science is not in the tradition of Reformed theology: the RCUS – Defend the Doctrine of Creation Report (<http://stjohnsrcus.inet-nebr.com/page16.htm>) derives its exegetical support not from Reformed theologians but from the Seventh Day Adventists! I would say a Reformed approach to these issues would be one of humility, accepting our limited understanding of both creation and Scripture. As the Westminster Confession states, "All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all, yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded. . ." (WCF 1:7). What allows us to think – let me put this more strongly – how dare we think that we have the definitive interpretation of a Scripture passage when different interpretations exist that also take the text seriously and also contain what is necessary for salvation? By different interpretations I do not mean allegorical interpretations of liberal theology, but one that takes the text as the infallible Word of God but which uses the cosmological and literary understanding of the original recipients, the nation of Israel that was preparing to enter Canaan (I could elaborate on this but space does not permit in this response). By contrast, Creation Science interprets the creation story from a twenty-first century perspective that not only has a drastically different view of cosmology but also has a different view of what is important in a particular Scripture passage. Thus I would agree with br. Duker that God speaks plainly in Genesis, but that "plainness" was directed first to the Israelites, and only secondarily to us. Words like water, dividing, trees and the sun had significantly different implications for the Israelites than they would now. The

notion of the *perspicuity* of Scripture, i.e., that the meaning of a passage is obvious from the text, does not apply in many passages of Scripture (2 Peter 3:16), and we must be prepared to accept that possibility in the early chapters of Genesis as well. In many places Calvin speaks of Scripture accommodating to our limited understanding, "For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to 'lisp' in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking. . . accommodate the knowledge of Him to our slight capacity. To do this He must descend far beneath his loftiness" (*Institutes* 1.13.1). In his commentary on Genesis 1:6 Calvin says, "He who would learn astronomy, and other recondite arts, let him go elsewhere." The Holy Spirit is not teaching geocentricity in Joshua 10:13 where Scripture says that the sun stood still. We need to exercise the same caution in the early chapters of Genesis.

Br. Duker continues, ". . . [H]ow the data is interpreted makes *all* (emphasis mine: TJ) the difference in any field of study. As the Helters put it in their reply to Dr. Jelsma: 'Based on a literal reading of Genesis, we interpret the data from nature.'" But this is post-modern relativism. Data are not neutral pieces of information that can be interpreted by whatever framework you have. On the contrary, data are means by which God reveals Himself in creation. We cannot distort or reject the data we receive to suit our interpretative theory but we must listen to what God is telling us in creation. One of the reasons that science flourished after the Reformation is that scientists were permitted to read the book of nature directly without being told by the church how to interpret it. To be sure, it is easy to misinterpret data, but that is why science requires diligent and careful study. If we are to honour the Creator in science, we must humbly listen to what He tells us in creation. If we bind our consciences to particular interpretations of Scripture and nature, we run the very real danger of having General Revelation and Special Revelation contradict each other. That is unacceptable because, as br. Duker says, it is the same Spirit of truth that speaks to us in nature and in Scripture.

Dr. Tony Jelsma



Opening

On behalf of the convening church at Blue Bell, br. J. Gibson calls the meeting to order. The delegates sing Psalm 65 stanzas 1 and 2. Scripture reading is Psalm 8. In prayer a blessing is asked over the meeting.

Credentials and Constitution

The delegates from Blue Bell report that all credentials are in proper order. Classis is declared constituted. The proposed moderamen is invited to take its place. Br. H. Olij is appointed as vice-chairman. The moderamen is as follows:

Rev. J. Ph. VanVliet – chairman
Br. H. Olij – vice-chairman
Rev. D.G.J. Agema – clerk

The chairman welcomes all members of Classis and the Church at Blue Bell is thanked for their work as convening church. He also mentions that Grassie has extended a call to br. J. VanSpronsen. The agenda is adopted with some additions.

Form of Subscription

The Form of Subscription for the Churches in Classis Niagara is read. The ministers of the Word present at the Classis, Rev. Agema and Rev. VanVliet, sign this form.

Question Period ad Article 44 CO

The chairman asks the required questions (Art 44 CO). The churches at Lincoln and Blue Bell ask for the advice of Classis. Advice is given.

Proposals

Classical Regulations

The Church at Attercliffe has prepared an updated set of Regulations. It is decided to give these to the churches for their consideration. The churches are to submit their response to Attercliffe before the end of October 2002. Attercliffe can then report to the Classis of December 2002.

Request Classis Central Ontario June 14, 2002

Classis Central Ontario of June 14, 2002 decided to “ask Classis Northern Ontario, Classis Niagara and Classis Ontario West to adopt a schedule so that the two Classes nearest to the loca-

tion of the URC Classis each send an observer who extend the fraternal greetings on behalf of all the Canadian Reformed Churches in the four Classes.” Classis Niagara agrees with this proposal. The convening church of the next Classis Central Ontario will be informed of this.

If this proposal is agreed to by all four Classes then Classis Niagara will also adopt an alphabetical rotation schedule for the ministers in Classis Niagara to take turns going to the URC Classes.

Letter Classis Ontario West, June 12, 2002

Classis Ontario West of June 12, 2002 informs Classis that it decided to appoint the Church at Kerwood to function as Contact for Ecumenical Relations. Classis receives this letter for information.

Correspondence

Statement Classical Treasurer

Classis receives the statement of the Classical Treasurer with thankfulness. The suggested assessments are adopted (\$3.00 for Classis and \$2.00 for Regional Synod).

Audit Report

The council of Grassie reports that it has audited the books of the Treasurer and they were in good order. The Treasurer is discharged for the period June 1, 2001 - May 31, 2002.

Audit Classical Archives Classis Ontario South

The Church at Kerwood reports that it has audited the archives of Classis Ontario South. This report is received with thankfulness.

Church Visitation Reports

Reports of visitations to the churches at Blue Bell (May 16, 2002), Lincoln (June 3, 2002) and Grassie (June 5, 2002) are received with thankfulness.

Appointments

Convening church for next Classis: Grassie

Proposed moderamen:

Rev.G. Wieske - chairman;

Rev. J.Ph. VanVliet - clerk;

Rev. D.G.J. Agema - vice chairman

Date and place: December 11, 2002 in Smithville

Delegates for Regional Synod East 2002

Ministers: D.G.J. Agema and G. Wieske. Alternates: K.A. Kok and J.Ph. VanVliet (in this order)

Elders: A. Schutten and M. VanAndel. Alternates: N. VanderHeiden and B. VanGoolen (in this order).

Inviting observers: convening church Church to audit the archives: Rockway Classical Treasurer: Br. D. Van Amerongen.

Censure ad Article 34 CO

The chairman notes with thankfulness that the meeting could conclude its work in good harmony.

Adoption of Acts and approval of Press Release

The Acts are read and adopted. The clerk will prepare the Press Release in consultation with the other members of the moderamen.

Closing

The chairman requests that Psalm 8 stanzas 1, 3 and 4 be sung and leads in prayer of thanksgiving. Classis is closed.

For Classis, D.G.J. Agema, clerk



Subscribe to Clarion

or
send someone a Gift Subscription
via E-mail
clarion@premier.mb.ca

Provide full name, address, including postal code/zip code;
for gift subscription, full address of gift giver and gift receiver.

For subscription rates see Clarion masthead.

We will invoice you on receipt of your request.