



# Clarion

THE CANADIAN REFORMED MAGAZINE

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*How Do We  
Read  
The Bible?*

*Specialty Bibles*

*Calvinists in  
California:  
Visiting the  
Western  
Classis of the  
RCUS*



*God  
is  
the  
spring  
of  
living  
water*



**Cl. Stam**

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## Distinctives

*If Synod Neerlandia may have been perceived by some as having made bold strides, Synod Chatham certainly did not cause any waves.*

### Speeches at Synod

Over the past month I have been perusing the Acts of General Synod Chatham. Nothing exciting there, just a “steady as she goes” Synod, of the kind that we need now and then. If Synod Neerlandia may have been perceived by some as having made bold strides, Synod Chatham certainly did not cause any waves.

One of the most interesting sections of the Acts of Synod Chatham is found in the Appendices which gives various reports of Deputies and also includes the “speeches” or addresses of delegates from other churches. It is always important to take note of what others say about us and about themselves. Here’s where you can really learn something.

What really caught my eye is the address of Rev. L.W. Bilkes on behalf of the Free Reformed Churches of North America (FRCNA). I had met and heard Rev. Bilkes first at Synod Neerlandia and was eager to read what he had to say this time.

The address of Rev. Bilkes was rather ambiguous, to say the least. What I mean is this: after reading his address, I was unsure of what he had actually stated. On the one hand. . . he had this thought. . . while on the other hand. . . he had a different thought. The address kind of left me hanging and wondering: what do these churches really want?

### The old cow

Rev. Bilkes wondered how committed we really are to (federative) church unity. To illustrate this, he dragged an old cow out of the ditch, “If your understanding of federative unity is a correct one then the liberated churches in The Netherlands should have joined the Christelijke Gereformeerde (FRC) Kerken in The Netherlands.” In other

words, we should have become Free Reformed, and not set up a federation of liberated Reformed churches in 1944.

I’ve heard this one before many times. I’ve also read about the reasons why the liberated churches at that time set up their own federation and did not join with the FRC in The Netherlands.

Rev. Bilkes mentions one of the reasons himself, “Would the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken have accepted us?” He feels that we should have tried to federate regardless of (negative) expectations. But this does not do justice to the historical situation and real obstacles of that time.

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*So we have to ask ourselves: what is it that makes the FRCNA so distinct from the Canadian Reformed Churches? What is it that we lack?*

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I mention, for example, that the FRC were members of various ecumenical organizations which were also affiliated with the Synodical churches. It should also be fairly noted that the FRC were more sympathetic to the Synodical cause than to that of the liberated churches. The teachings of Abraham Kuyper had by and large been assimilated in the FRC, and this made it difficult simply to join these churches without discussion and agreement.

Rev. Bilkes’ clearly stated sympathy for Kuyper’s theory of pluriformity or the notion of pluriformity was quite telling. Hence his question whether unity always needs to be seen as federative unity.

Moreover, the FRC had not participated in the unification of 1892, something which the liberated Reformed Churches

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cherished as obedience to God's will for unity. These things needed some discussion and resolution before an open and honest unification could take place in 1944.

It should be noted also that the initiative for these discussions came not from the FRC but from the liberated churches. At their first Synod in Groningen, 1946, the liberated churches officially sought contact with the FRC with this stated purpose, "to find in the way of discussion or correspondence what unites us and what separates us and together to seek ways and means which may under God's blessing lead to living together as churches."

**Inside . . .**

In his editorial, Rev. Cl. Stam examines a speech by Rev. L.W. Bilkes of the Free Reformed Churches and what the implications are of that speech for unity talks between the Free Reformed and the Canadian Reformed Churches. In typical fashion, Rev. Stam pulls no punches.

Rev. P.H. Holtvlüwer was delegated to visit Western Classis of the RCUS. Since the RCUS is a sister church but might not be too familiar to some of us, this article is most insightful. It is a very positive report which makes us give thanks to God for the faithfulness of these sister churches.

In the Press Review Rev. J. Moesker gives some practical insight into why the recent phenomenon of "specialty Bibles" is unnecessary and counterproductive.

Dr. F.G. Oosterhoff again presents us with a series of articles which are guaranteed to stimulate some thought. This is a six-part series. She is interacting with four essays published two years ago in a book entitled *Woord op schrift*. Some of these essays have caused a good deal of discussion and even controversy among Reformed people in The Netherlands. This is especially the case with the contributions of A. L. Th. de Bruijne, professor of ethics. Since we have a relationship with the Dutch churches, we are thankful that Dr. Oosterhoff is willing to examine these essays and to draw some conclusions for us.

We have our columns *Treasures New and Old* and the *Children's Catechism*. We also have a short book review by Rev. C. Bosch on a practical book written by John Werkman.

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Our specific and emphatic striving for federative unity with the FRCNA dates from the very first Synod we ever held as Reformed Churches in The Netherlands. So dragging this old cow out of the ditch is about the same as flogging a dead horse. Please be fair: we have since 1944 strived for true unity that is expressed in a concrete living and working together as churches of the Lord Jesus.

### The real problem

The real problem that exists between the Canadian Reformed Churches and the Free Reformed Churches of North America (FRCNA) is not one of ancient history but one of living practice today. This is what I learned from Rev. Bilkes' address to Synod Chatham.

Rev. Bilkes spoke of "our distinctives." He said, "We seem to emphasize our distinctiveness, and you don't do that." This is not a minor matter, for the fact that the FRCNA emphasize their distinctives is "none other than which comes from the confessions and the church order" (emphasis mine, C.I.S.). In fact, then, the FRCNA claim that they are different from others because of submission to the Word of God, the confessions, and the Church Order. The distinctives are not minor points but major items that touch the very essence of the church: faithfulness to God's Word or not.

One could take the word distinctives in a lighter vein. Every church is distinct, also within one federation. For example, the Canadian Reformed church at Hamilton is distinct from the Canadian Reformed Church at Langley. There is a certain pluriformity within the church or among the churches. That is a good thing, for unity does not mean uniformity. But that's not what Bilkes means. The word distinctive is for him a matter of biblical necessity and confessional integrity.

So we have to ask ourselves: what is it that makes the FRCNA so distinct from the Canadian Reformed Churches? What is it that we lack?

### "An experiential Discriminating Ministry"

I tried to find out from the appendices what it is that we as Canadian Reformed Churches lack. Dr. Bilkes says "...our distinctiveness is in the way in which we view the congregation and in the way in which we emphasize a personal knowledge of the Lord." In the response address by P. van Woudenberg we find that "...the delegates from the Free Reformed Churches reported to their Synod in Hamilton that we (the FRC's)

continue to sense a lack of understanding of what an experiential discriminating ministry should be. This is especially evidenced in the preaching" (emphasis mine, C.I.S.).

Wow, this is heavy stuff. Needless to say, the Deputies from the Canadian Reformed Churches were quite shocked at these FRC allegations. Our ministry and preaching are apparently not in accordance with what Scripture demands. Were it not for the theory of pluriformity, this would make us a false church according to Article 29 of the Belgic Confession. Thanks be to A. Kuyper that this did not happen.

As far as I know, I have never had one FRC deputy listen to or evaluate one of my sermons. But the outcome may well have been the same: no experientially discriminating ministry. I conclude, then, that the "distinctive" really lies in the experiential preaching. Connected to this are all kinds of related matters, like e.g., how one views the "congregation." The Free Reformed Churches in North America have a discriminating experiential preaching, but the Canadian Reformed do not. In order to preserve this distinctive, the FRC choose to remain separate. The unity which they cherish is spiritual and catholic but not federative, for the latter would endanger their distinctives. Hence the general line of Bilkes' address.

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*If unity talks are going to be filled with hassling over distinctives, we may as well stop or not start.*

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I thought that spiritual and catholic unity did not require or defend distinctives but is based solely on mutual acceptance of the Word of God and the Reformed confessions. If unity talks are going to be filled with hassling over distinctives, we may as well stop or not start.

Every church federation probably has some distinctives. If we are to come to agreement on all these, we can forget about federative unity. With the FRC we have fundamentally deeper problems. We'll have to get to the bottom of this.

Through no fault of its members, the Acts of Synod Chatham are rather bland. But there's some fireworks in the appendices. We're not done yet with Dr. Bilkes and the FRCNA.



D.M. Boersma

# God is the spring of living water

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MATTHEW 13:52

*“My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.”*

Jeremiah 2:9-13

Do you think Jeremiah’s book is meaningful? He wrote his book 2,600 years ago, in an age of chariots, teraphim and city walls. He knew nothing about computers, space flight, and cable TV. He addressed the sins of Judah, who had abandoned God. Does your spiritual life look like that?

It seems that Jeremiah addresses an age that is long gone, and a problem that we do not face.

Wait, not so fast. The New Testament gives you the key: “...we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it (...). Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:19-21).

It was not Jeremiah speaking after all. God was addressing his people. His prophets use their own figures of speech and take their examples from the world they live in. But this does not mean that God’s message is limited to that age. He continues to address his people and the nations among which they live.

## ‘Idols R Us’

When you observe what happens in modern life, it is not difficult to see how God’s words through Jeremiah are still meaningful. God’s people had exchanged Him for worthless idols. We need to look at our lives and see whether we have done the same. Sure, you can look at “the world” and rake the people over the coals because they are so bad.

But how about yourself? To what extent have you fallen for the same idols? What do you do when you see the beauties lined up on the covers of the magazines in the supermarket? How do you respond to the idols of your age: the pressure to have the perfect tan and figure, the temptation to accumulate more and more wealth, the appeal of entertainment and sports over “boring” church activities? Modern life seems like a shopping mall full of idols. Which ones have you bought or are on your shopping list?

## Running water or leaking cistern

Jeremiah describes Judah’s idolatry in many different images. This is probably the best known one: digging your own cisterns while there is a well of fresh water available. Cisterns were used in the mountains to catch rainwater and store it for the dry times.

Digging those cisterns out was perfectly normal and a smart thing to do when you could only rely on rainwater. But if you had a well that produced fresh water through the year, why would you rely on cisterns instead? People plastered their cisterns to keep the water from seeping out, but the limestone could shift and crack, and gone was your water! By the time you needed it, you would find the cistern empty. So why would you cover up a well with fresh water and rely on cisterns instead? That’s foolish!

Today, you could think of someone having his water shut off by the city

because he likes to catch the rainwater that runs down his roof. Not a very healthy solution in the first place, and short-sighted when you know how dry the summers can get.

Water means life. This was even clearer to people whose lives depended on rain or a well on their land.

## God is the source of life

God teaches us that He is the source of life. You must believe in Him and trust Him for all your needs. He is the spring of living water.

But what is our problem? We start keeping certain areas of life away from Him. For those needs, we don’t trust Him. If we have needs that He does not meet, we try our own ways, instead of respecting his will or waiting in prayer. When He declares something off-limits, as He does in the 10 commandments, we try to find loopholes and satisfy our needs on our terms. This is the sin of idolatry, and this sin has been around for more than 2,600 years.

Sin is always foolish in a world where God rules. God appeals to our love for Him, and also to our common sense: “Don’t you see that you can’t make it without me? Your self-dug cisterns will be empty when you need them.”

We need to find our personal fulfillment in God alone. And even our personal fulfillment we must submit to his providence: do not determine for yourself what makes your life satisfied and meaningful. Let God determine that, and be satisfied in Him.

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# How Do We Read The Bible? (1)

Two years ago a book appeared in The Netherlands which deals with Reformed views about the authority of the Bible. Entitled *Woord op schrift*, it contains essays by four men, all of whom have (or have had) connections with the theological university of the Reformed Churches (liberated) in Kampen.<sup>1</sup> Some of these essays have caused a good deal of discussion and even controversy among Reformed people in The Netherlands. This is especially the case with the contributions of A. L.Th. de Bruijne, professor of ethics at the university.

Within our own churches little attention has so far been given to the matter. The work of De Bruijne has a number of times been mentioned in *Clarion*, but only briefly. In my opinion the issues he raises are important enough, however, to demand further notice. After all, we have a relationship with the Dutch churches and we should know what is going on among them. I therefore decided to devote a series of articles to De Bruijne's views, and perhaps, in time, also to the essays of the other contributors to *Woord op schrift*.

## A global view

The issues De Bruijne raises are hermeneutical ones, which means that they concern the rules of biblical interpretation, specifically as these apply to the use and understanding of the Bible in modern times. The specific question he seeks to answer is whether Reformed theology will benefit if it makes greater use of figurative or non-literal

explanations of parts of Scripture than has generally been done in the past.

De Bruijne's articles are technical and therefore not always easy to understand. They are, as I said, also controversial. Although some Reformed theologians have expressed appreciation for the work, others have censured and rejected it. In a few cases the term "biblical criticism" has even been used.<sup>2</sup>

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This charge (which has been rebutted by a majority of Reformed theologians) is based in part on speculative statements by De Bruijne, some of which he has since withdrawn or qualified. In part it is also a result of the essays' technical nature and, perhaps, to careless reading. Occasionally, it seems to me, critics base their accusations on arguments that have been taken out of context and are analysed apart from the author's qualifying statements.

All this is not to deny that there are aspects in De Bruijne's work that

demand further discussion. We will come to that in due course. I only suggest that, especially because of the level of difficulty, misunderstandings about his views and intentions easily arise. I realize that they may arise also in connection with my rendering of De Bruijne's arguments. In an attempt to keep them to a minimum, I will begin by giving an overview of his message and in doing so avoid technicalities wherever possible. Once his intentions are clear, details should fall into place, and this should make it easier for the reader to evaluate the work. In my overview I follow an article which De Bruijne himself published in the Reformed periodical *De Reformatie*.<sup>3</sup> The article was based on an oral explanation of his views to a congregational gathering somewhere in The Netherlands.

## Recognizable questions

In this *Reformatie* article De Bruijne points out that in *Woord op schrift* he is dealing with questions concerning the Bible which we all recognize. One of these is why today we keep some biblical commands and not others. The Bible states, for example, that we should not ask interest on our money, that we may not swear an oath, that we are not to sell our land, and that women must cover their heads when praying. Today we believe that this type of command is conditioned by the culture and time of writing and therefore no longer applicable. But increasingly people suggest that if on these points we can interpret the Bible in our own way, then

the same should be possible in other areas. And so they ask for the possibility of bypassing biblical commands in such matters as divorce, remarriage after a divorce, women in office, homosexual relationships, pre-marital sex and cohabitation, and so on.

Another type of problem concerns *historical* passages in the Bible. Biblical authors followed an approach that differs from the modern-western one. For one thing, they placed a much greater stress on story or narrative than is the case in modern history writing. They also left room for what may appear to us as discrepancies. Some of these are caused by a symbolic use of numbers. Examples can be found in Old Testament genealogies and also in the genealogy of Jesus in the first chapter of Matthew.<sup>4</sup> In many cases, it appears, the composer of the genealogy left out names, a thing that would be unacceptable in modern history writing. And there seem to be discrepancies in other parts of the Bible as well. Bible-critical scholars have long used such apparent errors as proof that the Bible is not God's inspired Word but simply a human document.

This Bible-critical scholarship has a wide reach and has over the years been instrumental in drawing many a member of the church away from the faith. Rather therefore than ignoring the problems in question, De Bruijne says, and also rather than simply repeating traditional answers, Reformed theology must deal with the issues, and this is what he attempts to do. He emphasizes that he is not dictating answers but is simply making suggestions that can be evaluated by others. In this manner, he hopes, can the discussion get underway and progress made in our understanding of Scripture.

### **Are the confessions not sufficient?**

Critics have asked De Bruijne if it is really necessary to search for new answers. Isn't the Reformed doctrine about the Bible sufficiently explained in the Belgic Confession? De Bruijne replies that he fully endorses this Reformed symbol. He also points out, however, that the Belgic Confession originated in the sixteenth century and that it was directed against Roman Catholicism and Anabaptism. Since that time much has happened with respect to our knowledge of the Bible and of the times and cultures wherein it was written, and Reformed people who agree on the confession can have different opinions with respect to issues that arose later. He uses the doctrine of biblical inspiration as an example. Disagreements exist as to its nature,

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### *Biblical authors followed an approach that differs from the modern-western one.*

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with some claiming that inspiration is essentially mechanical (the "dictation" theory), while others promote an organic view. That difference cannot be resolved with reference to the confession, for it is silent about it; and this applies to various other matters as well.

Some of the modern-day problems have come to the fore, as I mentioned, because of modern Bible-critical scholarship. De Bruijne refers to the reaction of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck to this scholarship. Both men, he observes, sharply rejected the Bible-

critical approach and its conclusions. But they also admitted that critical theologians sometimes come with new knowledge and insights, and that we may not ignore their findings. It was in part because of such new knowledge that Kuyper and Bavinck proposed their theory of organic inspiration. According to this theory God did not "dictate" the contents of the Bible but employed human authors whose personality, experience, and specific gifts affected the manner in which they wrote. To be sure, these men were guided by the Spirit and therefore proclaimed not human wisdom but God's own word. Nevertheless, the human element was not to be denied. Kuyper and Bavinck were unable, however, to answer every question concerning biblical inspiration and authority. And in 1981 professor J. Kamphuis wrote that the doctrine of organic inspiration was not really satisfactory either. Further reflection continued to be necessary.

The need for further reflection on this and other issues has not been denied in Reformed circles. Mentioning Synod Assen 1926 (the Synod that condemned Dr. J.G. Geelkerken's views on Genesis 3), De Bruijne shows that the theologians who censured Geelkerken knew that a simple "No!" was not enough. Also among the later liberated Reformed theologians (for example in Dr. K. Schilder's weekly *De Reformatie*), suggestions were made to come to a new formulation of the doctrine of scriptural authority. And when Dr. C. Trimp in 1967 issued a sharp protest against the synodical churches' retraction of the verdict against Geelkerken, he at the same time made clear that the Reformed Churches would be remiss if in their reflection upon the Bible's authority they stopped with "Assen 1926."

Continued reflection is necessary, De Bruijne believes, not in the last place for the sake of the younger members of the church, those within as well as those outside the university. They often get the impression that Reformed theology is simply “walking around” questions about the Bible and in fact ignoring them, even though the questions are very real to these members themselves. They are confronted with them in their studies and their general environment. Those who find themselves in this type of situation easily adopt an “either-or” attitude: *either* they take the questions seriously but then find it difficult to remain Reformed, *or* they decide to remain Reformed but do their best to ignore the questions. They hide their head in the sand, so to speak. De Bruijne believes that if Reformed theology does not act here, it will contribute to a situation wherein more and more people doubt the Bible and leave the church. He adds that as a pastor in a university city (Rotterdam) he himself knew of many who had left because their questions remained unanswered. In short, more must be done than simply repeating traditional responses. Attention must be given (always within the framework of the confessions) to questions with which *today’s* believers struggle.

### **Biblical history**

After this general introduction, De Bruijne explains in the *Reformatie* article the views he expressed in *Woord op schrift*. In his contributions to that book, he points out, he dealt with two issues, namely history writing and ethical commands in the Bible.

As to the first topic, critics of his work have left the impression among some church members that according to him we don’t have to take biblical history all that literally. Such an impression, he writes, is altogether mistaken. His argument is, rather, that the Bible gives real, literal history and presents it with

great exactness. He therefore emphatically rejects the view that since ancient-eastern culture stressed symbolism a great deal, historians belonging to that culture were not really concerned with literal historical truth, but simply and unconsciously mixed fact and symbol.

Over against such reasoning he insists, with specific reference to recent studies on the topic, that ancient-eastern historians were quite capable of distinguishing between literal and symbolic language, that in fact they did so distinguish, and also that they were very much concerned with literal truth. And what applies to eastern historians in general applies to the writers of biblical history in particular. They, too, were careful to distinguish between fact and symbol and to stress the truth element.

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That, De Bruijne says, is his primary message on biblical history writing. Within that framework he develops his secondary thesis, which is that if we may see biblical authors as real ancient-eastern historians, then we must also note that they used the *conventions* of ancient-eastern historiography. An instance of such a convention is the conscious use of symbolism in a historical narrative, such as the non-literal use of numbers, a point to which I already referred. This is only one example. There are various other usages in biblical narratives that, as

typically ancient-oriental, differ from modern ones.

Do such insights help us? De Bruijne is convinced they do. In the first place, they can enable us to resist the lure of Bible-critical ideas. In opposition to the assertion that Scripture is not at all interested in “what really happened,” we can show that serious modern research (also research by non-Christians) has reached an entirely different conclusion. Secondly, they can help us relativize so-called discrepancies in the Bible. These will often disappear – not because we resort to an old-fashioned kind of “harmonizing,” which frequently comes across as artificial, but because we recognize that our problem is caused by the narrative strategy the historian followed. Thirdly, knowledge of biblical narrative conventions helps to clarify to us the *meaning* of the historical passage in question. For by the manner in which a historian narrates a certain history he conveys his vision on that history. This means in the case of the Bible that in the *manner of narration* the Holy Spirit Himself reveals an aspect of the meaning of a certain event. I hope to come back to this in a later article.

### **Ethics**

Turning to ethical commands in the Bible, De Bruijne mentions the lamentable fact that as a Reformed community we hardly have a lifestyle any more wherein one can recognize what the Bible calls the “image of Christ.” We know God’s commands very well, but in an ever-increasing number of instances we suggest that the one we happen to be concerned with was conditioned by the times and culture in which it originated and is therefore no longer relevant for us. As to the cause of this situation, he suggests that at least part of the answer must be sought in the *manner* we use Scripture in determining our lifestyle and ethics. That manner, he believes, is (1) too small, and (2) too individualistic.

Firstly, it is too small. We try to derive our life style as closely as possible from the Ten Commandments and from other Bible texts that are written as commands. But that does not always work. Sometimes more than one explanation of the specific command is possible. Sometimes we realize that the biblical situation was quite different from ours. And sometimes we have to acknowledge that the Bible does not provide us with a direct answer to our specific question. Quite often the result of all this is that we decide to follow our own opinion. This happens today with different themes: the keeping of the Sunday as day of rest, divorce and remarriage, and so on.

To overcome this restricted usage of the Bible in ethical matters, De Bruijne suggests that we begin our reflections on good and evil by concentrating on all God's works and words, that we also consider the way God is directing our own lives, and that we attempt to answer questions about good and evil from these perspectives. This means that if on certain points there are no direct commands, we are not without guidance. Aware of the Bible's overall theme and intention (its *grote lijn*), we will often know how we are to direct our lives. This approach will also frequently enable us to "translate" an ancient command into present-day terms and so apply it to our own time and situation. For to stress the Bible's overall theme does not mean that this theme is to *replace* God's concrete demands. Attention to scriptural teaching as a whole may never push aside a specific command of God which is applicable today. That would suggest a diminishing of the Bible's influence on our life and lifestyle. Rather than diminishing that influence, he wants to enlarge it.

What he is trying to do in the matter of ethics, De Bruijne explains, is what Reformed theologians have long tried to do in the field of dogmatics. Precisely as a result of the renewal of redemptive-historical Bible-reading around the time of the Liberation, the insight grew that

we must not base doctrine on all sorts of disconnected proof texts. These are all too often taken out of their context. Rather, Reformed theologians said, we must base our doctrine on the totality of the Bible's redemptive history.

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*De Bruijne mentions the lamentable fact that as a Reformed community we hardly have a lifestyle any more wherein one can recognize what the Bible calls the "image of Christ."*

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This means that biblical history is not to be treated as *illustration* of a timeless dogma that has been derived from loose and disconnected texts, but that it is recognized as the *foundation* of dogma. In the same manner, he adds, he does not want to derive ethics from a 'timeless' universal law, but from God's deeds in history, and within that framework to localize the divine commands.

### Individualism

The manner in which we use Scripture in ethical matters is not only too small, De Bruijne believes, but also too individualistic. At times we operate unconsciously with the idea that we have to find out privately, all by ourselves, what is good and evil. In times when there still is something like a general consensus on ethical matters in society at large, such an approach is perhaps not too dangerous, but in a secular and radically individualistic society like ours it leads to ongoing fragmentation. One can point to God's unchanging commands, but all too often the answer is: "That's how you see things; I explain them differently." Yet the Bible teaches that the Christian lifestyle is a thing that characterizes the Christian *community*,

and that as such it must be clearly recognizable to unbelievers.

De Bruijne therefore pleads for a type of "congregational ethics" (*gemeente-ethiek*) – a situation wherein believers *together* discover from the Bible what is good and evil. He makes clear that by using the term "congregational ethics" he does not imply a replacement of the biblical message by communal deliberation. The term is chosen, rather, to stress the need for a congregational listening to *the Bible*. He believes that if we do this – if we learn to follow Christ together, as a community, in our post-Christian society – we will again recognize that God's Word speaks to the situation and the questions of today.

So much for this general and non-technical overview of De Bruijne's position on biblical authority. In the next instalment I will turn to his articles in *Woord op schrift*.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> C. Trimp, ed., *Woord op schrift: Theologische reflecties over het gezag van de Bijbel* (Kampen: Kok, 2002). Contributors are professor-emeritus C. Trimp, prof. B. Kamphuis, the rev. J.J.T. Doedens, and prof. A.L.Th. de Bruijne.

<sup>2</sup> Especially, it seems, by the Dutch periodical *Reformanda*. For one example out of many, see the issue of November 12, 2003, p. 480 and *passim*. I refer in this connection also to Dr. F.J. Bijzet's article on the Dutch situation that appeared in *Clarion*, November 21, 2003, pp. 557-9.

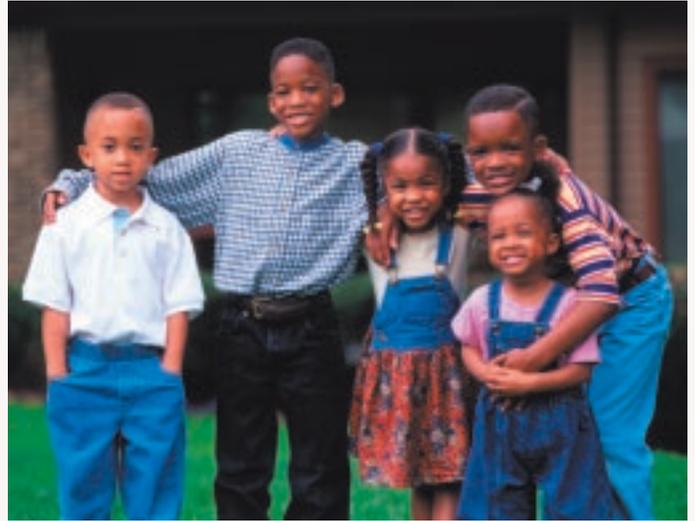
<sup>3</sup> A. L. Th. de Bruijne, "Woord op schrift: de bedoelingen," *De Reformatie*, May 3, 2003, pp. 564-68.

<sup>4</sup> For examples of the symbolic use of numbers in the Bible, see *NIV Study Bible*, Introduction to Genesis, "Literary Features." As is well known, the numbers 7 and 10 and their multiples signified completeness. For the use of these numbers, see the genealogies of Cain, with 7 names (Gen. 4), Seth, 10 names (Gen 5), Shem to Abraham, 10 names (Gen. 11), Perez to David, 10 names (Ruth 4), and Abraham to Christ, 3x14 names (Matt 1).

J. Wiskerke van Dooren

# Lord's Day 18

*Mrs. J. Wiskerke van Dooren published a Children's Catechism in Dutch. This has been translated with her permission.*



You are growing, but your bike is not. So, you need a bigger bike. Cathy's father has bought a bigger bike for her. Tomorrow he is going to pick it up. Till that time, she has to be patient.

Cathy wants to know everything about the bike. "Dad, is the colour blue or red? How many gears does it have? Does it have straight handlebars?" Her father tells her all he remembers. Cathy has not seen the bike. Yet she knows what the bike looks like. She sees it through the eyes of her father.

We have not seen the Lord Jesus. But we know all we need to know about

Him. He Himself made sure that would happen. When He lived on earth, He chose twelve disciples, who were with Him almost all of the time. They had to use their eyes and ears. They had to carefully watch (use their eyes!) when Jesus did something. And they had to carefully listen (use their ears!) when Jesus said something. The disciples did that for you. And for all God's children. What they saw and heard is written in the Bible. Now we can read what the Lord Jesus did and said. That is how we know that Lazarus came out of the grave. And that people who had terrible

diseases became healthy. And we know many things Jesus has said.

We also know that He went up to heaven. That is explained in this Lord's Day 18. The Bible says that the disciples saw it happen. And now you understand that we can say we have seen it through the eyes of the disciples.

The disciples were rather sad when they saw Jesus leaving. They kept looking up in the sky, even when He had disappeared. But then two angels came. "Do not be sad, disciples. He is now far away, but He will come back later when the new earth begins." Then they were glad when they left the Mount of Olives and returned to Jerusalem.

Yet, Jesus Christ has not totally disappeared. He is in heaven with his body, as a man.

But He is also close to us. He is interested in what you do and what you think. He also knows it whether you really love Him, or whether you hardly think about Him.

Don't forget to pray. Ask Him that He will be close to you. And ask Him that his Holy Spirit will live in your heart.

There is something else, as well. Pinch your arm, or your cheek. That is your body. You are not made of plastic or made of stone. You have bones and flesh. The Lord Jesus, too, has flesh and bone. When He went to heaven, He went there with his body to live with God. And this means that later all God's children in their body can live with God! Good to know.



J. Moesker

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## Specialty Bibles

Bibles for specific age and interest groups – even Bibles for cowboys – has become a market strategy for many Bible publishers. The idea behind specialty Bibles is to make the Bible relevant for the target group with the addition of notes and covers aimed at specific groups. But isn't it life's experiences which make the Bible as it is relevant for everyone? I have wondered about that for some time, and in an article by Andy Crouch in the June 2004 issue of *Christianity Today* I found support for my thoughts on this. Crouch writes as follows:

Last year Thomas Nelson made a splash with *Revolve*, a glossy version of "the complete New Testament" wrapped in a brightly colored clean – teen magazine, complete with cute models, dating columns, and makeup advice. Teenage girls – who told Nelson's researchers that "the Bible is freaky and we don't read it" – finally had a Bible they could call their own. (Or half a Bible, anyway, since it's hard to call the New Testament "complete" without the 39 books that its own writers constantly quoted.) Those girls, or their parents, made *Revolve* a bestseller. Once again, through evangelicalism's trademark fusion of mission and marketing, the Word had become fresh.

I thought of those teenage girls when I heard the story of Elizabeth. Elizabeth is in her late teens. She has shy, laughing eyes as she tells her story on videotape to a patient interviewer. Like the teenage girls who are the target audience for *Revolve*, she grew up praying, trusting God, and hoping to go to college.

But Elizabeth, the daughter of Christian parents, grew up not in America but in a small village in Southeast Asia. When Elizabeth was 16, a relative in her village said she could find a well-paying job in a neighboring country. Eager to help her family and earn money for college, Elizabeth went with the woman, who handed her off to traffickers who shipped her across the border.

There Elizabeth was forcibly confined to a brothel, where for about \$250 a man purchased the right to take away her virginity. She was held in the brothel for seven months, where she was raped by customer after customer.

Elizabeth could easily still be in the brothel – as hundreds of thousands of girls are worldwide – if investigators from International Justice Mission (IJM) hadn't rescued her and persuaded local police to raid the brothel. When they arrived, they found that Elizabeth had written on the wall in her own language: "Ps 27:1. The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid?"

... American Christianity is a curious thing. We have our Extreme Bibles, our Christian rock operas, our *Revolve* – ingenious attempts to make Scripture relevant to affluent people who are largely insulated from this world's wild beauty and poverty. And then we have organizations like IJM, which I serve as an unpaid senior fellow. ...

In the world where IJM'S clients live, the stories and promises of Scripture are as real as a dimly lit brothel wall and a suddenly unlocked door. It's a world where specialty Bibles are neither available nor necessary.

Indeed, great advances in demonstrating the Bible's relevance rarely come from the restless minds of marketers. They come from people who dare to obey what they read. . . . On the cruel edges of the world, there is no need for elaborate explanations to bring a distant biblical text closer to our lives. Rather, when we go to the cruel edges of the world, we bring our lives closer to the text. When some-one like Elizabeth writes, "The Lord is the strength of my life," it is not in a manner of speaking.

We live in a society that drives publishers to create a profusion of Bibles for people who consider a profusion of options their birthright. But in the end, the Bible is not a makeup mirror, casting a flattering soft light and showing us mostly ourselves. It is a window into a larger world – Elizabeth's world – full of tragedy and hope. The world where God's Word becomes flesh. . . .

I think Andy Crouch is on the mark. The problem is not that the Bible as it is isn't relevant to everyone of every age and circumstance. The problem is that in our society people are too affluent and too much lovers of self. No wonder it's hard for the Bible to be relevant, however it's marketed. . . .

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# Calvinists in California: Visiting the Western Classis of the RCUS

## Introduction

A little more than two years ago, the churches of Classis Pacific East were asked by the Committee for Contact with Churches in the Americas appointed by General Synod 2001 to actively take up contact with the nearest classis of the Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS), known as the Western Classis. Classis Pacific East of that time decided to comply with that request and subsequently appointed yours truly as both deputy for contact with the Western Classis and fraternal delegate to their meetings. I have been able to visit the meeting of the Western Classis on two separate occasions and presented reports at subsequent classes. The most recent Classis Pacific East determined that it would be beneficial for the whole federation to become more acquainted with this classical region of the RCUS, to help further our growing relationship. What follows, then, is a personal report of my observations in visiting the Western Classis of the RCUS.

## General overview

The Western Classis is one of four classical regions which make up the Reformed Church in the United States. The others are: Covenant East Classis, Northern Plains Classis, and South Central Classis. From the names of these classical areas you can already tell that the bulk of their churches are in the American mid-west. This, in fact, is where the contact began between our federations as the Canadian Reformed Church at Carman, Manitoba dialogued

with the RCUS churches in North Dakota in the mid-1980s. Ever since then, our contact as federations has been strongest in the mid-west of both countries. Nevertheless, the RCUS has a healthy and thriving classical region on the other side of the Rocky Mountains as well, known as the Western Classis, and now here too the contact between us is developing well.

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*Currently, there are no vacancies in the Classis as fifteen ministers are actively serving all churches and chapels, while two retired ministers lend a hand where they can.*

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Indicative of this vitality is the fact that the Western Classis has a solid 25% of the total membership in the RCUS – approximately 1100 members out of a total of 4350.<sup>1</sup> The Western Classis is comprised of ten fully constituted congregations as well as four home-mission posts, known among them as “chapels.” They are all located in the state of California. Currently, there are no vacancies in the Classis as fifteen ministers are actively serving all churches and chapels, while two retired ministers lend a hand where they can.

As a rule, all ministers (including retirees) are required to be present at Classis. The Western Classis normally meets only once per year, in the spring, and so the meeting is typically two to three days in length in order to conduct all the necessary affairs of the churches. The gathering for this amount of time allows for considerable fellowship and contact between colleagues and all office bearers alike. In both of my visits in their midst, I experienced warm, inviting, and mutually encouraging fellowship. I was seated, “in the bar of the house” as a fraternal delegate and given the privileges of the floor (though without the right to vote, of course).

## SOME HIGHLIGHTS:

### A warm reception

The churches and chapels are variously spread throughout the state of California, from as far north as Anderson to as far south as Lancaster in the Mojave Desert, some 515 miles (825km) apart. The topographical differences are considerable as well. I have been welcomed in the farming community of Shafter, located in the “fruit basket” of California, with plenty of farms and endless acres of fruits and vegetables. On the other hand, most recently I was very warmly received in the desert city of Lancaster (it was 90 degrees on arrival!). Such vast distances make these Classis meetings all the more important to maintain and develop the ties between the churches.

## Love for the Reformed faith

What became evident in short order amongst the brethren present was their genuine love for the Reformed faith. In personal discussions as well as in formal devotions, an emphasis was regularly placed upon such Reformed hall-marks as God's sovereignty and grace, the unique saving work of Christ, and the covenant God has established with his people. Ministers spoke earnestly about the covenant families in their congregations, the covenant children and covenant youth, and all of this in conscious distinction from the rampant individualism of modern evangelicalism. This was most encouraging to observe and share in.

## Saturated with prayer

A noticeable difference from our own classical meetings was the place given to worship, devotion, and prayer. The Western Classis opened with a 10-15 minute devotional. This was followed in the evening by an official worship service, much like we have prior to the opening of our General Synods. Each morning, devotions are led by one of the ministers, and throughout the day elders are called upon to pray at various points. Very striking was the amount of prayer dedicated specifically for the individual congregations. Each minister is required to verbally present a written "Parochial Report," outlining his activities and the general goings-on in his congregation. After every two readings, an elder was asked to lead the assembly in praying for these congregations. (As an interesting aside, the standard posture for prayer was for all to stand up). These prayers were often quite detailed. In this way, every church and all concerns were earnestly brought to the throne of grace in intercessory prayer, a beautiful and needful thing.



*RCUS church building, Shafter, CA*

## Parochial reports: joys and sorrows

Each minister is required to submit their Parochial Report in advance to the President of Classis. Unlike the moderamen of our classes, the elected officers of an RCUS Classis retain their positions from one meeting of Classis to the next. Thus the President does much preparatory work before the meeting of Classis in the way of compiling and summarizing the Parochial Reports of the ministers. Reading through this written summary of the President gives one an overview of ecclesiastical life in the Western Classis.

## The chapels

What comes out in the President's Report are both the joys and sorrows of various congregations in the past year. The most recent report mentioned that while one chapel rejoiced in receiving a new minister for full-time service, another chapel sadly noted the withdrawal of two families from its fledgling ranks, a considerable set-back. This will likely mean the minister there will have to take-up part-time work outside of the ministry in order to make ends meet. A third chapel, after having been bounced around several worship locations, remains unable at this time to

secure proper facilities for worship. In addition, its minister has had to labour outside the ministry half-time for some years in order to sustain his family. Meanwhile the fourth chapel struggles to gain new members.

When I inquired further about the financial concerns of two of these chapels, I learned that this was not uncommon. A minister in one of the other chapels had only recently "retired" from his "other" job to take up the mission work full-time. Apparently, with a small membership, it is not possible for the Western Classis, even assisted by their (General) Synod, to give full financial support to these chapel ministries.

## Desire to reach out

Knowing that the historical roots of the RCUS lie in Germany, and how even many of their people and churches in the mid-west still have a strong German heritage, I was struck by the lack of that here in California. This became clear to me when no one was found who could pronounce (unaided) my rather German surname! The cultural milieu of the Western Classis is much more mixed than their long-standing heritage would suggest.



President Rev. Jim West reads out the licensure agreement for student Gil Baloy.

This likely also accounts for, or perhaps arises from, the very strong move toward planting churches. Considering the relative size of the Western Classis, they expend considerable resources and energy in this area. They have four chapels and four ministers actively working exclusively in these charges. Additionally, a number of churches make use of both radio and television to promote the gospel, while many more maintain a presence on the Internet. It was clear from the President's Report that mission work is a vital concern for the churches and is seeing the blessing of the Lord. Such an example of Reformed evangelism should serve us well as we look for ways to fulfil also this command of Christ in our country.

### The churches

Several churches this year reported very positive things about their congregations. Noteworthy is that the financial support for the ministry has increased over-all, but not yet to the point of complete self-sufficiency throughout the Classis (see above). Others experienced modest growth in numbers. In another church, the covenant education of the young people in Christian day-schools is a growing concern. At this point there are no Reformed Christian schools among the

RCUS in California, but the desire for such is growing. Perhaps the most joyful event among the churches is the report that a struggling, embattled congregation of the past few years received a new minister. Under God's blessing, his ministry there has led to the stability and even growth of this church, a real turnaround from even one year ago!

*A noticeable difference from our own classical meetings was the place given to worship, devotion, and prayer.*

Amidst the joy, though, there were and are struggles. One church building was badly burned due to arson committed by one of its own members, a disturbing development. Several churches reported increasing numbers of discipline cases; sadly, a considerable number of members had to be "erased under discipline."<sup>2</sup> While these figures are distressing, it demonstrates that the RCUS is committed to maintaining the true discipline of the church. For this we can express our appreciation and offer our encouragement.

### City seminary

Mentioned in the Parochial Reports and also explained to me in conversation was a relatively recent project – City Seminary of Sacramento. The RCUS is just now at the point of trying to establish its own "denominational" seminary in the mid-west, but several years ago some active members of the Sacramento congregation came with a different concept: a seminary for the local people, for the "city." The Seminary is staffed by ministers from the RCUS with the intention of providing a distinctively Reformed curriculum. The purpose is to provide training for the ministry, but not just for members of the RCUS and/or affiliated churches. Rather, the target student body is students and/or ministers of other "branches of Protestantism"<sup>3</sup> within Sacramento. The idea is to, through their own (re-)trained clergy, bring the teachings of the Reformation back into what are viewed as churches historically deriving from the Reformation.<sup>4</sup> At the moment they have approximately 30 students (both full and part-time) – a rather amazing number given the newness of this venture!

### Another harvester prepared

In my first visit to the Western Classis last year, the assembly was able to witness and conduct the final stages of a licensure examination for student Gil Baloy. In a rather unusual situation, brother Baloy had been sustaining his examination over a number of Classis meetings, going back four or five years. This was necessary because he needed to work full-time to support his family while furthering his studies. Over the years, some areas needed re-examination and further work and so the process was quite drawn-out. While I was present, br. Baloy was examined in the areas of Hermeneutics (20 minutes), RCUS

Practical Polity (20 minutes), as well as Doctrinal Standards and RCUS Constitution (30 minutes), in a similar fashion to our own classical examinations. The questioners asked probing questions, putting the student through the paces, fleshing out the competency of his knowledge and ability to function as a Reformed minister. At the end of it all, brother Baloy was granted a license to preach and also to receive a call – a special moment for the churches! Even more gratifying and joyful was when, in the subsequent year, Candidate Baloy received a call from and was recently ordained in the Covenant RCUS, Sacramento.

### Greetings extended

On behalf of Classis Pacific East I was given the opportunity to address the Western Classis as a fraternal delegate. Over the course of two visits I presented both an outline of our ecclesiastical life in British Columbia and Washington as well as a summary of recent General Synod decisions of interest to the RCUS brothers – mainly those pertaining to our ecclesiastical contacts and relationships.

### Lasting Impressions

My overall impression of my visits to the Western Classis is very favourable. I truly met in the brethren there a heart for the Reformed faith, a genuine desire to conduct themselves in accordance with God's Word, summarized in the Confessions of the church. For this I am very thankful and could thus joyfully fulfil my appointment as fraternal delegate. I have the impression, too, that my visit was well-received by the RCUS brothers. They expressed appreciation for the time and effort made to attend their assembly.

### Furthering contact

I sensed a growing familiarity with us as churches and with it a growing appreciation for the fellowship. They have strengths from which we can benefit greatly, and we have things to offer which may be able to serve them well too. I hope that under the blessing of the Lord

our contact can continue and so benefit each other in these and other ways.

On that front I'd like to make two concrete suggestions for all members of our churches to consider. While it's good that ministers are beginning to take part in pulpit exchanges, and so develop the relationship from that end, it's also valuable when all brothers and sisters can familiarize themselves with our sister churches abroad. A very simple and inexpensive way to do this is to subscribe to their monthly church periodical, *The Reformed Herald*.<sup>5</sup> For a mere \$10.00 (US) annual subscription, you can get to learn more about how they think, what their issues are, and generally what goes on in their churches. I can attest to the solid, edifying articles that appear in it – worthwhile reading!

A second suggestion is for travellers to take time to look up these churches and spend a Sunday with them in worship and fellowship. It's not uncommon for folks in western Canada to head to California for vacation. Occasionally even people in Ontario find themselves travelling across the American plains. From the RCUS general website ([www.rcus.org](http://www.rcus.org)) you can find

addresses for all their congregations. Why not plan ahead and try to be present near one of their churches on the Lord's Day? I'm confident you won't regret it, and it will do much to develop ties between our federations.

It truly is a blessing to come to know brothers and sisters in the Lord whom you never even knew existed. It shows the powerful and glorious church-gathering work of our Lord Jesus Christ. I sincerely hope that our contact may increase and become more fruitful for our mutual benefit and to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. May He bless this relationship richly.

<sup>1</sup> Statistics are taken from Abstract of the Minutes of the 256th RCUS Synod, Sutton, Nebraska, May 20-24, 2002. They have been rounded up slightly to account for any growth since then.

<sup>2</sup> See *Acts of General Synod Neerlandia, 2001*, p.203 for an explanation of "erasure."

<sup>3</sup> Official pamphlet of City Seminary, Sacramento

<sup>4</sup> Read more about this project on the Internet: [www.cityseminary.org](http://www.cityseminary.org)

<sup>5</sup> To subscribe, contact Rev. Frank Walker, 6121 Pine Vista Way, Elk Grove, CA, 95357. e-mail: [walker@cityseminary.org](mailto:walker@cityseminary.org)



*Delegates (including fraternal ones) to the Western Classis, 2003*

Reviewed by C. Bosch

### **Let Holy Scripture Speak**

**By John Werkman**

(Available, \$15.00 Can. from the author at 8639 184 Street, Edmonton, AB T5T 1J9))

Once in a while a delightful surprise comes one's way. Such is John Werkman's little treasure *Let Holy Scripture Speak*. In the foreword to his booklet, the author writes, "In a lifetime a person can never learn everything revealed in God's Word." We readily agree and are thankful for this book, which lists Scripture references for more than seventy-five topics relevant to walking in truth in the joy and fear of the Lord.

Werkman's book is a practical help for all Christians for, as the author attests, "Scripture knowledge is not a luxury, it is a necessity." There ought to be no doubt about that. Therefore I believe this topical guide to Scripture will be appreciated greatly by the special office bearers in the church – especially those who are new to their calling. It contains an appendix containing biblical directions for "home visitation" as well

as, "Questions for Young People, Parents and Older Members" and a variety of other topics.

Our brother in Christ, showing a practical bent, kept notes over the years as an elder preparing for this publication which he calls "A reference tool for the defence of Holy Scripture." Though there are other such tools available I appreciate this one for its simplicity in design, its care in the selection of Scripture texts and its usability. Though it doesn't pretend to be an exhaustive catalogue of all the Bible says about these topics, it does more than skim the surface. Interspersed are thought provoking questions – "Are you giving in accordance with what you receive from the Lord?" "Do you see it as a great privilege to attend a Christian or Reformed School?" Although the author points to Scripture as the primary source for the answers he doesn't fail to point to the Reformed Confessions as well, maintaining these are faithful summaries of what the Bible teaches.

Order your copy today for it is definitely recommended.

## **Church News**

Called by the Free Reformed Church of Darling Downs, Australia:

**Rev. C. Bouwman**  
of Kelmscott, Australia.

The Rev. Dr. A.J. de Visser will, D.V., be installed as a minister of the Word in Ancaster Church on August 22, 2004, 9:30 a.m. service. He will be charged with the special ministerial task of teaching at the Theological College. Dr. de Visser will preach his inaugural sermon in the 3:30 p.m. service.

Declined the call to Burlington (Fellowship), ON and to Carman-East, Manitoba:

**Candidate R. Bredenhof**

Accepted the call to St. Albert, Alberta:

**Candidate R. Bredenhof**

Called (a second time) by the church of Neerlandia, Alberta:

**Rev. J.D. Louwerse**  
of Fergus, Ontario.

