

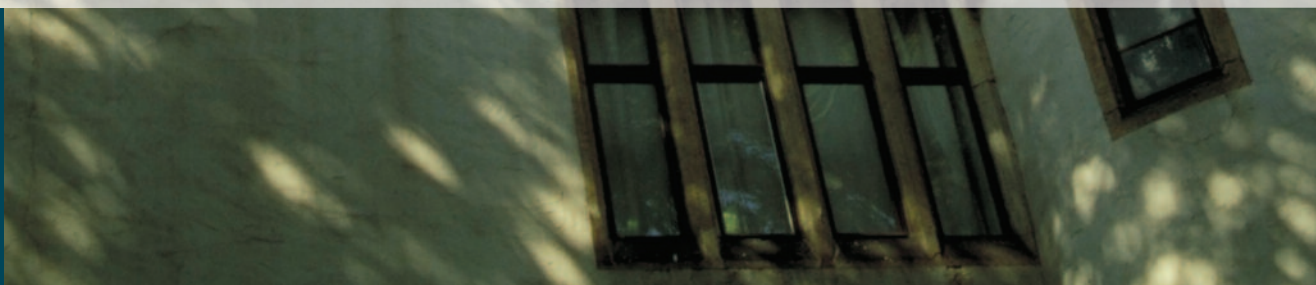
*Semper
Reformanda –
A Reformed
Legend?*

Lasting

*An Outward
Piety*



Wittenberg's Luther House





E. Kampen

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Semper Reformanda – A Reformed Legend?

Reformation is not just a one time event

October 31 has a special place on the unofficial Reformed ecclesiastical calendar. While the world around us is busy with Halloween, we remember how Luther's actions on the night of October 31, 1517 proved to be a catalyst leading to the reformation of doctrine and organization of the church.

Cherished phrase

Now a cherished phrase among the heirs of that Reformation is the phrase *Semper Reformanda*. The basic meaning is usually given as something like, "always reforming." The phrase is meant to make clear that reformation is not just a one time event but it is something the church should always be busy with.

It is interesting to see how the phrase is actually used. Searching the last ten years of *Clarion* issues revealed how the phrase is used in quite contrasting ways. The phrase appears especially in connection with developments in the sister churches in The Netherlands. For some, *Semper Reformanda* seems to mean the church should make sure it stays with what was gained in the Reformation. Due to the inclination to deformation, the church thus must constantly be busy going back to its Reformed foundations.¹ For others, *Semper Reformanda* is a motto to justify changing with the times. The idea is there that the church cannot stand still but must constantly reform itself so that the message God wishes to convey to the world through the church may sound loud and clear, in covenant circles and in the world at large.² In another context, the phrase is used in a complementary way with reference to positive developments in another sister church.³

The ready embrace of the phrase *Semper Reformanda* indicates that it is considered a self-evident truth. The frequency of this phrase and the way it is used to support a position easily gives the

impression that it might be based on a particular Scripture reference or that perhaps it was used by men like Luther or Calvin, or some other leading figures in the Reformation of the sixteenth century as some application of a biblical principle. Yet, one will look in vain in the Scriptures to find any reference to this phrase. Furthermore, a search in the writings of the Reformers of the sixteenth century will prove to be a fruitless exercise.

Historic basis

One can see that the historic basis of this phrase is suspect when one compares the various versions going around. All who use the phrase acknowledge it is part of a longer sentence. One version is, "*Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est secundu Verbum Dei*," which is said to mean, "The reformed church is always being reformed according to the Word of God."

We would do well to cease using it as a self-evident truth

Another version reads, "*Ecclesia reformata quia semper reformanda est*," which is said to mean, "The church reformed because it must always be reforming." A third version reads, "*Ecclesia, quia reformata, semper Reformanda*," which is said to mean, "Because reformed, a church always in process of being reformed." The simplest formulation is "*Ecclesia reformata semper Reformanda*," which is said to mean "the church always being reformed." The meanings therefore range from the church being passive in that it always is being reformed to a call to the church to be active in the process of reformation. The variety of versions, however, underlines the



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dubious background of this phrase. The matter could be resolved by a simple reference to where the words can be found, but such a reference does not exist.

While *Semper Reformanda* does not appear in the writing of the sixteenth century, one does come across it in connection with developments in the seventeenth century. In particular, it is linked to what is called the Dutch Second Reformation, also known as the "Further Reformation." This movement has similarities to the English Puritanism of the seventeenth century. In the introduction to a series of books on figures of the Dutch Second Reformation it is stated that from "its teachers came the watchword of post-Reformation piety: *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*."⁴ Regrettably, however, no citation is provided as to where this exact phrase was used. In another book on the Dutch Second Reformation, the phrase is linked to the writings of Jacobus Koelman (1632-1695). Again, there is no quotation involving this phrase. Rather, he is said to have written "that we must be called Reforming, and not only Reformed, so that we must always be Reforming if we want to be Reformed and worthy of that name, because we are striving after it."⁵ To understand what he meant by this, one needs to be aware that the aim of Koelman and others in his time was to let the Reformation permeate the lives not only of individuals but also of society. The Reformation of the sixteenth century had brought about a reform in the doctrine and government of the church, but that did not mean that it had penetrated the lives of the people. It has been estimated that only about ten percent of the population of The Netherlands was Reformed by conviction, while the rest had become Reformed by the simple fact that the local church and the ruler had become Reformed. The focus was thus on the reformation of daily life of the members. In all this, however, it has to be said that while Koelman's words might remind one of the phrase *semper reformanda*, no concrete reference is given that either he or his contemporaries ever used the phrase. Furthermore, even if they did use that phrase, it was used in a different context as their concern was to improve the piety of the people, or, one could say, to bring the nominally Reformed to become Reformed by heartfelt conviction. Lacking any concrete reference, it is very well possible that the words *semper reformanda* are actually used by authors today to describe what they observed in the Dutch Second Reformation.

It appears that not until the nineteenth century is there verifiable use of the phrase *semper reformanda*. One author observed that the use of the phrase

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"signaled an attempt to move away from the received truth."⁶ When one searches the Internet for use of this phrase, it is noteworthy how it is often used by those advocating changing with the times. It is interesting that this phrase is used by an organization like the World Alliance of Reformed Churches as a way to stir up its membership to face the new realities in the world. Further, on a website from the Reformed Church of America, the phrase is considered as proof of a "built in principle of self-criticism and change..." in the Reformed tradition.⁷

Conclusion

In light of all this, it appears that when it comes to the phrase *semper reformanda*, we are dealing more with a Reformed legend than with solid historical facts. If those who study the Dutch Second Reformation are right in that the phrase was the watchword for post-Reformation piety, then we need to do a rethinking of how we use that phrase. It has nothing to do with going back to the foundation, or redefining the foundation for a new time. It would point to a building of true Reformed piety on the foundation of Reformed doctrine. One thing is for sure, we would do well to cease using it as a self-evident truth, a slogan to give weight to our actions, whether that be to go back to what is seen as lost or to promote change. There is no historical basis for this phrase.

Even more significantly, there is no scriptural basis for it. In the end, the church is not built on slogans, no matter how profound they sound, even when they are in Latin. If we wish to prove our point, we should not do that by slogans but by careful use of the Word of God. The strength of the Reformation was that it wished to be guided only by the Scriptures, or, as the saying goes, *sola Scriptura*.

¹ This seems to be the meaning implied in the Dutch magazine *Reformanda*, addressing concerns in the Reformed Churches (Liberated) in The Netherlands.

² See *Clarion*, July 18, 2003, 359; cf. Aug 5, 2005, 373, 374.

³ *Clarion*, Oct. 12, 2001, 556.

⁴ For example, see introduction to: Willem Teelinck, *The Path of True Godliness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 7.

⁵ See T. Brienens et al, *De Nadere Reformatie en het gereformeerde Piëtisme* (s'-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1989) 16. "Binnen haar kringen spreekt men over het *semper reformanda*, als aanduiding 'dat wy Reformeerende moeten genoemd worden, en niet alleen Gereformeerde, zo dat wy altijd moeten Reformeeren indien wy Gereformeerde willen zijn, ende die naam waardig, om dat wy er na poogen'"

⁶ David W. Hall, *The Arrogance of the Modern: Historical Theology Held in Contempt* (Oak Ridge, TN: The Calvin Institute, 1997), 298.

⁷ See www2.rca.org/leaders/ministry/fries.html



Left to Right: Philip Melancthon (1497-1560) Martin Luther (1483-1546) Pomeranus (Johann Bugenhagen 1485-1558) and Cruciger (Gaspard Creuziger 1504-1548) the four great German Protestant theologians shown working on Luther's translation of the Bible.

W.M. Wielenga

Lasting



MATTHEW 13:52

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“The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.”

1 John 2:17

What is lasting? What is not? We like to know that about many things. If we enjoy something, we hope it lasts. If something hurts we hope it doesn't last long; we hope it goes away soon.

But liking or not liking something is not the only, or best, way to evaluate the lasting and not-lasting things. Sometimes we can be fooled by our likes and dislikes – we fool ourselves. We feel something is good for us simply because we enjoy it. We wish it would last forever. But in reality it may be destructive to us and damaging to others. We can also fool ourselves the other way. We don't like something. We wish it would go away. But it may really be very good, beneficial. What lasts, what doesn't: we have to learn that not all things that seem or feel good should last. And we have to learn that some things we dislike should last.

God's Word reveals what we wouldn't come up with ourselves about the most important lasting and not-lasting things. From the Lord we must learn about a whole world that won't last. About who alone belongs to the lasting world.

The world and its lusts are passing away. The world is mankind in rebellion against God. It is the system of sinful human existence that has pushed God out – or tries. It is the way of life lived by the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life (v16). Feelings, appearances, and

self are first. Lust and pride: living out of desires, living for self. Man's desires set on the creation but not on its Creator. Lust: desire apart from God, desire without God. And pride: boasting not in God but in man, in self. Self is the highest good. That whole system is passing away, says the Word of God. It has the seed of death and decay in it. Here is not where to invest, where to find oneself. This world cannot give life and this way of living is not the goal of life. Living according to this world's system is death and decay and destruction. It is not of God; it doesn't want Him, can't stand his involvement, and won't have his rule. And therefore He will not let it go on. It cannot go on, because it does not have eternity in it.

The one who does the will of God remains forever. Here is what is lasting. Here is who is lasting. Why? Because this is from the eternal God. Because the person who does the will of God is in line with God's order of existence. This way of being has, as it were, eternity built into it. Whoever does the will of God is in fellowship with the eternal God and so partakes of eternity – eternal life.

Who, then, does the will of God so as to remain forever? We all are by nature from the world. Lust and pride have been our own close companions. And therefore we are of the passing away, decaying order. But God has sent us the one for us, who is of God, who is God –

the eternal Son. He, the eternal, abiding one, came for us in our flesh. He did God's will perfectly, while dying for our sin – our lust and pride. He came to live his life in our flesh, submitting his desire entirely to God's will, humbling Himself to the bitter and shameful end. No lust, not pride for Him. He in our flesh partaking of eternity, the abiding life above, in communion with the eternal God, in absolute conformity to God's will. Now He abides forever in the presence of God. We abide forever in Him: by God's grace, through faith in the eternal Son. We have been taken out of the passing away world and been joined to the eternal, abiding life. Abiding in the Son by faith, we are counted as those who do the will of God—and so we also abide. And this will be seen and experienced more and more. We are joined to the one who did the will of God and He lives in us and we are in Him. Eternal life, Christ, his Spirit, has taken hold of us and shapes us. We are of a different world. From the world above. The will-of-God world. Lust and pride give way to fear of God and praise for Him. The passing away things pass away from us. The abiding life takes hold and abides in us.

The lasting and the not lasting. They are worlds apart. What a wonder of grace to belong to Christ, the abiding Life in our flesh, in whom we may belong to the abiding world above.



An Outward Piety (Part 2 of 3)

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The office bearers of Israel encountered in their wards an outward piety, a service to God that did not take God's identity all that seriously.

One wonders how the office bearers of the time responded. Certainly they could spell out to the people that nominalism was not pleasing to the Lord and let's assume they did so. But the very nature of nominalism is that one doesn't get zealous for the Lord's service; nominalism thrives on the notion that God is not so particular about how one serves Him. So admonitions from prophets and priests and elders can be acknowledged – and safely ignored.

God's response

That's why in turn God's response is so intriguing – and instructive. For into the midst of this nominalism the Lord God sent the prophet Isaiah (amongst others) with the mandate to draw for Israel a picture of who the Lord God was. In the course of the Old Testament the phrase "the Holy One of Israel" occurs a total of thirty-two times – and twenty-six of these are in the prophecies of Isaiah. It's even how Isaiah begins his prophecy: "Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the Lord; they have spurned *the Holy One of Israel* and

turned their backs on him" (1:4). God's identity as God comes up repeatedly as the prophet lists Israel's sins (1:24f; see also 2:11, 17, 19, 21; 3:13f; 5:16). In fact, this theme of God's identity as the Holy One of Israel comes powerful into its own in that overwhelming presentation of God's majesty in chapter 6. See there *the Lord's antidote to Israel's nominalism*.

The Lord

Scarcely had the king who illustrated Israel's nominalism been buried when Isaiah "saw the Lord." The Lord: that's the sovereign one, the master of the entire world – King of kings, Lord of lords! Emphasis is placed on his majesty and royalty, for the God Isaiah saw was "seated on a throne." This Lord is not out fighting in order to establish or exert or defend his lordship; He's seated on a throne and therefore presented as King of kings, sovereign ruler over the whole world, unchallenged and triumphant.

The sovereign one he saw upon the throne, says Isaiah further, was "high and exalted" (see Ezekiel 1:26). Isaiah is not looking at this throne at eye level, but sees it far above him. And the longer you look up, of course, the smaller you feel, and the wobblier you become on your legs. Such a throne is overwhelming, because the God on

that throne is so exalted. As Calvin put it: Isaiah saw "the inconceivable majesty of God."

We'd love for the prophet to tell us more detail of what this glorious God looked like. But Isaiah gives us no further detail about God Himself. Why not? Why do we read no description of what the Lord on the throne looks like? It is as God said to Moses, "No one may see me and live" (Exod 33:20). For God is simply too awesome for human eyes to behold and survive! Isaiah cannot focus his eyes on God and pick up his details, no more than we can focus our naked eye on the sun to discern its fire spots. So glorious is this God that Isaiah must avert his eyes from Him and be content to focus on God's surroundings instead.

Yet those surroundings are so revealing. The surroundings you choose, the company you keep, reveals something about you and indicates who you really are.

Surroundings

What strikes Isaiah first is "the train of his robe." It "filled the temple," extended to its every corner. So exalted is this God that even his clothes make an overwhelming impression – to say nothing of his person!

Above this exalted God were seraphs. These angelic beings are not mentioned elsewhere in Scripture, but the term itself

means "burning ones" (see Ezekiel 1:13). Fire is mentioned repeatedly in Scripture to indicate the presence of God (cf Gen 15:17; Exod 3:2; 14:24; 19:18). Those in the presence of such a God cannot help but reflect what He is like; He's a consuming fire.

At the same time, the identity of these seraphs is clear; they are angels, beings God created in the beginning to inhabit heaven with Him. These particular angels have six wings each. With two they cover their faces and that's to say (suggest the commentators) that they as creatures cannot look upon God and survive. If that's indeed the case, they point up with this action how gloriously awesome the Lord God is! With another two wings they cover their feet, an action (suggest the commentators) that gives expression to their awareness that they are but creatures and therefore unworthy to stand in the presence of such a God. To survive in his presence they need to hide something of their creatureliness, lest they perish. With the third set of wings they fly and that's to say they give instant obedience to carry out any command such as God may give.

While these angels of fire cover their faces and their feet and while they fly to obey, they at the same time keep on calling out to each other about the God in whose presence they live. "Holy, holy, holy," they say endlessly. The term "holy" appears three times, the Hebrew way of expressing the superlative, *most* holy. There is something about the God in whose presence these angels of fire are that *overwhelmed* them, that

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

Isaiah 6:1-8

demanding all their attention so that one thing alone was on their minds: what a God this is! So they kept calling out to each other about the majesty and greatness of this God – and all the while kept their faces and their feet covered.

Nominalism thrives on the notion that God is not so particular about how one serves Him

Why do they keep saying that God is holy? Why do they not remind each other that He is mighty, wise, good, or just? The term "holy" catches the notion of his being different, wholly other, and unique; there is none like Him in all creation. "To whom will you

compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One" to Isaiah some chapters later (40:25; cf Hos 11:9). That's an echo of the song Moses that the Israelites sang after their deliverance from Egypt: "Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory. . . ?" (Exod 15:11) Again, their song reflects the command God gave to Israel at Mount Sinai to consecrate themselves because God Himself would come to them on the mountain (Exod 19:10) – and the word "consecrate" translates the same the same Hebrew verb: to be holy. That the angels, then, repeatedly use of the word "holy" serves to point up the *Godness* of Him who sits on the throne. In his *Godness* He's so overwhelming, so incomparable, so awe-inspiring that you cannot help but be *taken* by that *Godness*.

Yet at the same time the unending song of the angels carries such glorious gospel for Isaiah. For heaven's angelic choir sings not simply of the unique Godness of the Lord on the throne; that choir sings of the *relation* this God of glory has established with people on earth. Notice that the angels refer to this thrice-holy God with his covenant name, LORD printed in upper case letters. This is the Almighty who from his throne on high imposed a bond of love upon undeserving creatures, promised to be *their* God, their Father in Jesus Christ. This God is not too lofty and exalted to bother with people (let alone sinful people!), but his very name speaks of his bond with this people. No wonder "the whole earth is full of his glory!" Who has ever heard of so exalted a being gathering undeserving creatures under his wings to protect and to nurture them, to empty Himself to save them? Yet that gospel was the glorious message of the sacrifices burning endlessly in the temple!

As they sang the doorposts and the thresholds of the temple shook. Where sinners entered the presence of God to hear of his greatness, where creatures passed to see the gospel of reconciliation with this God enacted in the sacrifices – there the points of entry rattled and trembled. And lest anyone still miss the awesome identity of the inhabitant of this temple, the smoke filling the temple should drive the message home – for smoke speaks of fire, that recurring symbol of the presence of God as pointed up at the burning bush and on Mount Sinai.

Woe

Isaiah's reaction was instant. Since the days of his youth, Isaiah had rubbed shoulders with Israelites – covenant people – who did the God-fearing thing on the outside (especially on the Sabbath) but didn't have time and passion and vision to have their thoughts and their words and their conduct *driven* by the greatness of the God who adopted them for Himself. We don't know whether Isaiah had a period in his life when this same ho-hum-ness about the Lord's service characterized his approach to life. But when this sinner from Israel saw and heard the reality about God – countless angels so overwhelmed by the identity of God that their every thought and

Atonement for sin against such a God can never be cheap

every word and every deed were determined by their conviction that the God in whose presence they lived was infinitely *God*; doorposts and thresholds of wood and stone so *taken* by the identity of their inhabitant that they rattled and shook – when Isaiah saw and heard this he was overwhelmed by the magnificence of this God. This God who was so imposing in his presence, so crushingly there! "Woe to me!" this hapless sinner cried. "I am ruined!" This is the end – why? "For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."

Sproul has put it well, "For the first time in his life, Isaiah really understood who God was. At the same instant, for the first time, Isaiah really understood who Isaiah was."

Is having unclean lips truly a problem? Is living among a people of unclean lips a problem? Sinners don't experience it as a problem. To sing the Lord's song one day and the Baal's song another, to read Scripture in the morning and with the same lips cut the neighbour to shreds in the afternoon – it was acceptable behaviour to the Israelite of Isaiah's day and nobody fell dead on account of letting praise and cursing flow from the same mouth (James 3:9ff). But when Isaiah saw who God was, when the inexpressible greatness of Israel's God hit Isaiah between the eyes, he suddenly realized the impossibility of unclean lips. He knew: God's glorious identity demanded the eternal death of every sinner in all creation! "Woe to me!"

Gospel

This, we need to know, ought to be the end of the vision. Now should be fulfilled the prophecy of 2:10f: "Go into the rocks, hide in the ground from dread of the Lord and the splendor of his majesty! The eyes of the arrogant man will be humbled and the pride of men brought low; the Lord alone will be exalted in that day." Isaiah ought now to perish, to be crushed under the weight of God's infinite majesty.

How delightful, then, the words of verse 6! One of those seraphs who endlessly sang around the throne of God – "Holy, holy, holy is

the Lord Almighty" – who all the while covered his face and his feet and instantly did whatever command the Almighty gave, flew to Isaiah "with a live coal in his hand." He'd retrieved the glowing coal from the altar of the temple, the altar upon which sacrifices for sin were burnt, and the gospel of redemption through the blood of another was proclaimed. Upon command of his God, the angel touched Isaiah's unclean mouth with that burning coal. The lips are so sensitive, have so many nerve endings; one can scarcely imagine the pain that will have jerked Isaiah's face away from the hot coal in the angel's hand. While the burning pain demanded his focus and the acrid smell of burnt flesh rose to his nose, Isaiah got to hear a word from the angel that riveted his attention: "your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." Atonement for sin against such a God can never be cheap, as the burning on the lips made clear. But the servant of this God-of-glory left no room for doubt: your sins, Isaiah, are really gone!

What delightful testimony concerning the greatness, the uniqueness, the holiness of this God! Here is forgiveness without cost to the sinner! A representative of a people smitten by skin-deep service of a God of overwhelming glory receives forgiveness of sins freely, by grace, through a declaration from holy God: that's the gospel in all its splendour! And that gospel, even more than the exalted elevation of the throne and the unending song of the angels and the continuous rattling of the doorposts points up how different,

how unique, how holy, how awesome, how *other* this God actually is! Wonderful is his Name!

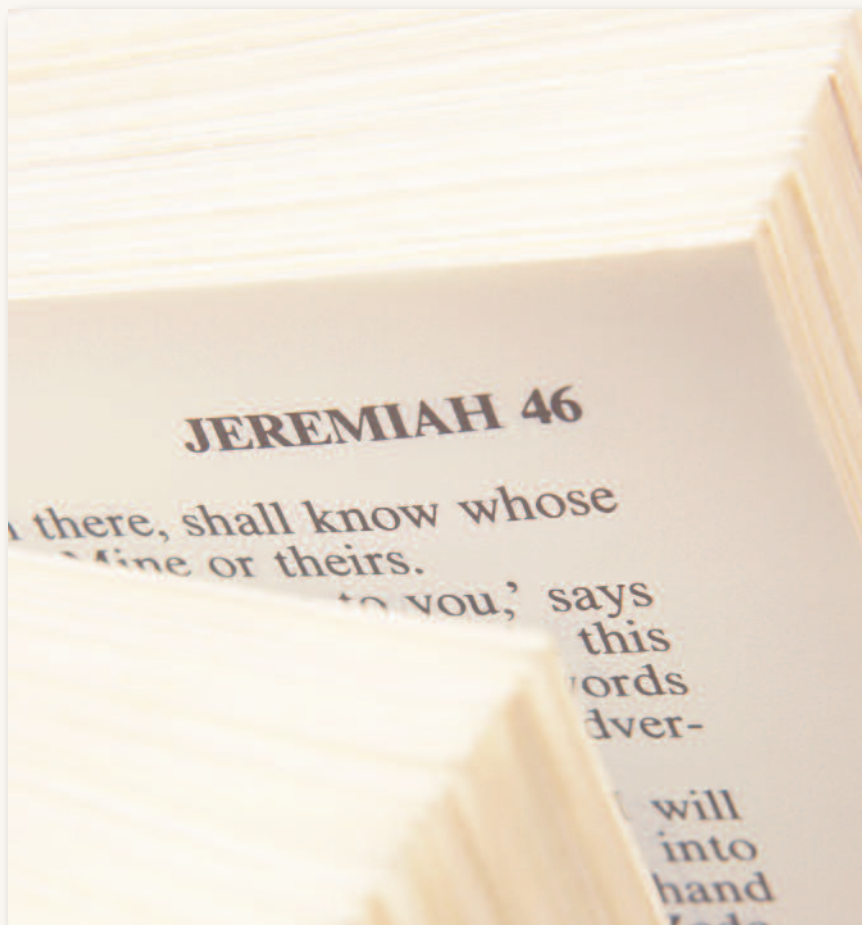
A willing office bearer

Isaiah, of course, is not the only one who needs grace from God. The song of the angels is interjected by the voice of the Lord on the throne: "Whom shall I send?" Isaiah's response is immediate. Up goes his hand; "Here am I," he volunteers. "Send me!"

Intriguing. Why does Isaiah not ask a couple of questions first?

The obvious question is: Lord, where to? Another is: Lord, to do what? But Isaiah doesn't ask. He doesn't consider whether he has the necessary gifts for the task, doesn't ask what's to become of his family and his daily work, doesn't ask whether the assignment will take long or be difficult, doesn't negotiate pay or holidays. He's simply eager to serve.

Why? I'll have to give the reader time to reflect on what the answer might be. I hope to be back next time. . . .



Psalms 1, 3, & 4

PSALM 1

(Strasbourg, 1539 / Geneva, 1551)

1. How blest is he who shuns the path of sin,
Who spurns the counsel of unrighteous men
And will not seek the company of scoffers;
Their way of life to him no pleasure offers.
But in the law of God is his delight;
He meditates on it both day and night.
2. Those who the precepts of the LORD obey
And from His good commandments do not stray
Are like a tree which, planted by a river,
Is lush and green: its leaves will never wither,
And it in season yields abundant fruit.
So they will thrive, whatever their pursuit.
3. Not so the wicked! For like chaff are they –
Like worthless chaff. The wind blows it away.
When judgment comes, they'll stand condemned
and humbled,
Cast out from where the righteous are assembled.
The LORD will guard the pathway of the just;
The way of sinners leads to death and dust.

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PSALM 3

(Strasbourg, 1539 / Geneva, 1551)

1. How countless are my foes!
O LORD, how many those
Who rise up to accuse me,
Who point at me and shout,
"God will not help him out!"
They with their taunts abuse me.
But You, O LORD, will be
A shield to cover me
When I am faint and weary,
For when You hear me sigh,
You lift my head up high;
You are my power and glory.
2. I cry to God, and He
From Zion answers me,
Not leaving me forsaken.
In Him I put my trust:
I go to sleep and rest
Until at dawn I waken.
By thousands I'm beset,
But God will not forget
To be my strength and tower.
Though foes in fierce array
Encircle me as prey,
I do not fear their power.
3. Arise, O God of might,
And put my foes to flight.
Let all their host be scattered!
For You uphold my cause:
You strike them on the jaws
And leave their teeth all shattered.
The LORD will ever be
The one who sets us free
When enemies oppress us.
O God in whom we trust,
In You shall we find rest.
May You forever bless us.

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PSALM 4

(Strasbourg, Geneva, 1542 / Geneva, 1551)

1. O righteous God of my salvation,
Be merciful and hear my plea!
In times of trouble or oppression
You sent me help and consolation.
Be gracious now and answer me!
How long, O men, will you bring sorrow
And turn my honour into shame?
How long yet will you love and follow
Lies and illusions, vain and hollow?
How long will you revile my name?
2. Know that the LORD in His good pleasure
Has set the righteous ones apart:
He claims me as His own, His treasure.
In mercy great beyond all measure,
He takes my misery to heart.
Do not let wrath breed sin and violence.
Restrain your anger and be still;
Lie down to meditate in silence.
Place in the LORD your sole reliance.
Bring Him your off'rings. Do His will.
3. So many sigh, "O who will ever
Show any good to us again?"
O LORD whose mercy fails us never,
Bestow on us Your love, Your favour,
And cause Your face on us to shine.
More joy and gladness You have sent me
Than all the joy of those who feast
On grain and wine in days of plenty.
LORD, in the safety that You grant me,
I sleep in peace, from cares released.

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Further Discussion

Dear Editor,

The editorial of C. Van Dam in *Clarion* (August 3, 2007, pages 390-393) raises a provocative question ("Has Mid-America Reformed Seminary Changed its Course?") that deserves an answer.

By way of introduction, we note that his difficulty in locating the *Doctrinal Testimony Regarding Recent Errors* (hereafter, *DT*) on the Seminary's website has been remedied (see <http://midamerica.edu/pubs/errors.pdf>). Moreover, readers should also note that our response is probably not the most appropriate occasion for engaging those matters of ecumenical discussions that properly belong to ecclesiastical assemblies.

The essence of Prof. Van Dam's concern, expressed in the concluding paragraph of his introduction, is that "some of the theology defended in this document strikes at the very heart of our own relatively recent struggles for biblical doctrine in the Liberation of 1944. It, therefore, cannot but raise a needless obstacle to our heartfelt desire for unity with our brothers and sisters in the URCNA" (p. 390). For the following reasons we believe this assessment is both narrow and inaccurate.

The wider context

Clarion readers would have been helped to understand the *DT* more fully if they had been given clearer indication of what kind of document the *DT* claims to be. It is

neither an ecclesiastical nor a confessional statement, but an institutional and theological declaration formulated in the context of erroneous teachings involving principally, though not exclusively, the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Someone needs to inform *Clarion* readers about the many discussions that have been occurring beyond their circle, throughout most of the present decade, regarding these contemporary erroneous teachings. Numerous Reformed and Presbyterian authors and church assemblies, including the general assemblies of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in America, have alerted people to these errors. It is puzzling that Prof. Van Dam seems unaware of these discussions and seems unwilling to evaluate the *DT* in terms of this wider contemporary context.

In light of contemporary debates in A.D. 2007, it was unhelpful for Prof. Van Dam to narrowly focus his complaint on how the *DT* is allegedly incompatible with the Canadian Reformed doctrinal struggles in A.D. 1944, as though such struggles supply the lens through which all contemporary Reformed and Presbyterian church history and theological debates must be viewed.

Prof. Van Dam complains that the *DT* pays "very little attention to Scripture itself" (p. 391). This complaint appears rather strange in view of the document's explicit

statement that our use of the Reformed and Presbyterian confessions was not in lieu of appealing to Scripture, since these standards regularly adduce the very biblical passages which teach the doctrines being defended.

Less charitable, however, is Van Dam's suspicious innuendo suggesting that "[o]ne could almost come to the conclusion that Mid-America Reformed Seminary has decided to prioritize the Westminster Standards and is disengaging itself from its original and specific Reformed moorings as found in the Three Forms of Unity" (p. 391). The *DT* itself explains the reason for using the Westminster Standards and numerous other Reformed confessions—namely, once again, the wider context of the contemporary discussion. For it is the case that many who defend these contemporary errors live within Presbyterian churches or claim to be committed to the Westminster Standards. For those reasons, the *DT* responds in terms of the broad consensus of confessional Calvinism represented by both the Reformed and the Presbyterian traditions. We are confident that when *Clarion* readers read the *DT* for themselves, they will discover it to be a responsible and faithful attempt to fulfill the very subscription vows that every Reformed office-bearer makes before God and the church.

Covenant children

Under attack today, among other matters, is the biblical teaching that not all covenant

members (believers and their children) participate in the covenant in the same way, that not all covenant members enjoy the fullness of salvation in union with Christ. This explains the particular emphasis in the *DT* on the relation between divine election and the covenant of grace. If the *DT* had intended to set forth a complete biblical and confessional explanation of the doctrine of the covenant, it would surely have achieved the balance and fullness that Van Dam seeks. But *Clarion* readers already know that the Faculty and Board of Mid-America Reformed Seminary are wholeheartedly committed to the Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Confession, which entails a commitment to the biblical teaching that God establishes his covenant with believers and their children.

Realizing that the *DT* does not claim to present everything being taught by Mid-America professors regarding covenant children, Prof. Van Dam could easily have directed *Clarion* readers to the abundant evidence of this commitment to the Three Forms of Unity. The views of Dr. C. P. Venema on this matter are accessible in his essay, "The Election and Salvation of the Children of Believers Who Die in Infancy: A Study of Article I/17 of the Canons of Dort" (in *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, 17 [2006]: 57-100). Similarly, Dr. J. M. Beach has translated *A Sign of Faithfulness: Covenant and Baptism*, by H. Westerink (Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Publications, 1997). An essay by Prof. A. D. Strange, "Baptism as a Seal" (in *New Horizons in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, 21.7 [July/August 2000]: 3-4) clearly explains how God establishes his covenant with believers and their children. In addition, a recent article in *Christian Renewal* (25.15 [May 2, 2007]: 26-27) by Dr. N. D.

Kloosterman sought to defend accurately the view of K. Schilder regarding the variegated status within the covenant of baptized children. Together these writings establish beyond doubt that Van Dam's suggestion, especially in the form of a provocative question, of a "change in course" is the product of an incomplete and prejudicial analysis.

The editorial expends much effort in reminding *Clarion* readers of their own doctrinal and ecclesiastical history, expressing alarm that the *DT* "takes its starting point in election when speaking of the covenant of grace" (p. 393), as happened in 1944. This alarm arises, however, from the fallacy of fixing theological meaning on the basis of similar sounding formulations. Failing to distinguish carefully between the problematic claims made in the 1940s and the explanations advanced in the *DT* in response to recent errors, Van Dam attempts to draw a straight line from the objectionable synodical views of 1944 to the views found in the *DT*. Unlike the doctrinal teachings resulting in the Liberation of 1944, however, and contrary to the allegation repeated in the *Clarion* editorial, the *DT* nowhere teaches that the promises of the covenant are restricted only to the elect, or that the baptism of non-elect infants is a false baptism. But it does teach that the promises of the covenant of grace are redemptively efficacious unto the elect alone, and that the benefits of salvation through the mediatorial work of Christ are realized in the elect alone. Because this is the catholic confession of the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions, we do not understand how this emphasis can properly be interpreted as striking at the heart of the biblical doctrine defended in the Liberation of 1944, unless that defence was itself imbalanced at certain points.

Finally, as Prof. Van Dam himself acknowledges, there is no contradiction between viewing the covenant as being made with Christ and in Him with the elect and viewing the covenant as being made with believers and their children. Both of these views together contribute to the fullness of historic Reformed teaching. As indicated in the commemorative essay by N. D. Kloosterman, referenced in the editorial, such catholicity existed within the Dutch separation of 1834 (the *Afscheiding*).

The fact that the *DT* emphasizes the former view can be explained from the contours of the theological debate – not the debate that occurred in 1944, but the one that is occurring in 2007. These are not the same. To portray them or to interpret them as if they were the same debate may serve the purposes of some people, but is nonetheless seriously misguided.

Part of the historic mission and uniqueness of Mid-America Reformed Seminary consists in serving the catholic Reformed confessional community with a theological education that equips men to minister God's Word among churches of Reformed and Presbyterian commitment and ecumenical vision. To the extent that the *DT* offers a corrective to any erroneous theological narrowing, we pray that it will remain useful to God's people.

So with confidence we answer the provocative question raised by the editorial, "Has Mid-America Reformed Seminary changed its course?" this way: By God's grace, in loyalty to God's Word and to the Reformed confessions in their catholicity, and in humble gratitude, we answer: No!

Fraternally,
The Faculty
Mid-America Reformed Seminary
Dyer, Indiana
+

Further Discussion

A Response

I thank the faculty of Mid-America Reformed Seminary for responding and affirming that they have no intention of changing their Reformed direction. It is very good to read this. Their response however does not answer all my concerns and in the interest of promoting understanding, I wish to reply briefly. It hardly needs to be said that I do so as a brother and fellow colleague of those who labour at Mid-America for the cause of Christ's church.

One preliminary matter: The brothers at Mid-America suggest that readers of *Clarion* should be better informed about the Federal Vision. That may happen. But one should realize that the so-called Federal Vision is not an issue in the Canadian Reformed Churches.

Context and balance

I agree with the faculty of Mid-America that context is important. I did indicate in my editorial the context in which the *Doctrinal Testimony (DT)* was issued, be it apparently not in the detail that the brothers in Mid-America would have preferred. I am therefore grateful for the additional information that they have now provided. I would however like to point out as additional information that the Preamble of the *DT* concludes with the faculty's hope that the *DT* be "a clear

statement of the gospel of salvation, and [we] invite all who read this to embrace fully the richly biblical truth confessed among the Reformed churches." So while the immediate context is the issue of the Federal Vision, there is a wider concern at work. The *DT* presents itself as a clear statement of the gospel of salvation as understood by Reformed churches.

Now when something like the *DT* is intended to be a theological declaration to combat errors and in the process be a clear statement of the gospel of salvation, it should, in my view, also be balanced. The Reformed confessions were all conceived and born in the crucible of a battle for the truth, but they are all balanced, reflecting the balance of Scripture. In my view, the *DT* does not do this. In my editorial I used the example of the covenant of grace. By not mentioning that God made a covenant with the believers and their seed, but only noting that God made a covenant of grace with Christ and in Him with all the elect, the *DT* emphasizes election to the detriment of the covenant responsibilities which God places on all those with whom He has made his covenant. The emphasis on election derives from the Westminster Standards and not from the Three Forms of Unity. Hence my editorial suggestion (not intended as an innuendo) that Mid-America seems to be prioritizing

the Westminster Standards and having a looser relationship with the Three Forms of Unity. More generally speaking, it can also be noted that the Westminster Standards seem to be quoted far more often than the Three Forms of Unity and usually the Westminster Standards are mentioned first.

Method

I did mention in my editorial (contrary to the impression given in the faculty's response) that the *DT* was designed to appeal to the confessions rather than Scripture. But I object to this method in the present context. Without anchoring our confessional language in the Bible, we easily fall into the danger of theologizing and going where Scripture does not take us.

Furthermore, the need to be precise and to show exactly where Scripture says such and such is important because those presumed to be of the Federal Vision often complain about being misrepresented or that critics miss the point they make. That is also why I deeply regret that the *DT* never specifies its sources for the errors it alleges. In my view, this method undermines the credibility of the *DT*. The response of the faculty was also not forthcoming in this respect. Because of this omission, the *DT* is not helpful in moving whatever discussion there is forward to more clarity on the issues and an eventual resolution.

An underlying issue

The *DT* is combining two Reformed confessional traditions as if they were identical. This is quite a challenge, for the traditions are not identical. They arose from different historical contexts and met different needs. However, if one nevertheless combines the traditions, then it is all the more imperative to give the necessary balance to the teaching of Scripture. The covenant does not function as an organizing principle in the Three Forms of Unity; it does in the Westminster Standards. This means that some things in the Westminster Standards will be stated as biblical truth, but those adhering to the Three Forms of Unity may not agree. The example I chose was the Westminster tradition stating that the covenant of grace was made with Christ and in Him with all the elect. Now there is no clear biblical evidence for this formulation anywhere in Scripture, a fact which makes it imperative that such a statement be balanced off with the truth that the covenant is made with the believers and their children. Why is this balance so important?

If one insists on the greater detail of the Westminster Standards which does not directly derive from a clear biblical passage then those adhering to the Three Forms of Unity may feel their freedom of exegesis and their consciences being violated. To put it differently, distinctives of the Westminster Standards which are open to discussion should not be imposed on those who are not convinced that this is the best way to express the biblical truth in

question. Unpleasant consequences can follow.

Let me give a concrete example. If I was a minister of a United Reformed congregation supporting Mid-America Seminary then I would feel constrained by this *DT* because it appears to take away from me the freedom of interpretation that the Three Forms of Unity give me. The *DT* takes this away by insisting, for example, that I accept the formulation that the covenant is made with the elect. This raises all kinds of questions. For example, is there one covenant with the elect and another one with the believers and their children, or is there an inward and outward covenant? Questions come up. However, given the solemn and heavy language of the *DT*, it is quite conceivable that if I were to publicly express my concerns or even disapproval with parts of the *DT* that then my orthodoxy would be questioned and I could quite possibly be placing myself under a cloud of suspicion. After all, the *DT* identifies itself as a "clear statement of the gospel of salvation" and "the biblical truth confessed among Reformed churches" which all should embrace (p. 23).

The faculty of Mid-America in their response correctly reminds us that both views of the covenant (made with the elect and made with believers and their children) functioned in the churches of the Secession of which heritage the United Reformed and Canadian Reformed are heirs. That being the case, then both views should be presented in the *DT*. Including both views will not only maintain the

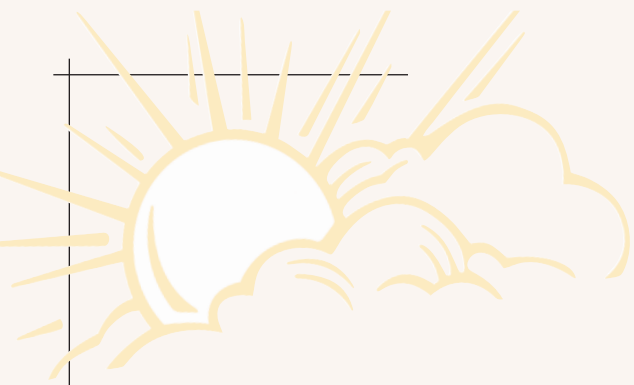
freedom of interpretation and conscience of those who are expected to assent to the *DT*, but it will also demonstrate true catholicity in doctrinal discussion. Furthermore, it will prevent the *DT* unintentionally becoming an instrument of sowing suspicion on those who are less than enthusiastic about the emphases in the current *DT*.

In conclusion

Since the majority of the faculty of Mid-America belongs to the United Reformed Churches, the *DT* is important to us for we are very interested in knowing as much as possible about those with whom we are seeking unity.

My original article may have sounded harsh by putting a somewhat provocative title above it. However, one should realize that the editorial was in a sense *un cri de coeur* (a cry from the heart). If I may make a personal comment, as far back as 1991 I have been involved in a wide variety of ways for the cause of understanding and ecumenicity between those who are now United Reformed and the Canadian Reformed Churches. While I accept the assurance of the faculty that they do not want to change direction, I continue to see the *DT* as a significant step backward in the process of an eventual unity. At the very least it is most unhelpful. A document like this gets a life of its own with all the negative implications that can follow. If there is to be an eventual unity, it must be on the basis of the common confessional basis of the churches. No more and no less. May the Lord grant his blessing as we all seek to do his will.





Ray of Sunshine

By Mrs. Corinne Gelms and Mrs. Erna Nordeman

*“Cast all your cares on the LORD and He will sustain you;
He will never let the righteous fall.”
Psalm 55:22*

Psalm 55 was written by David many years ago. He wrote this during a time when he was surrounded by enemies. He was greatly troubled and his heart was in anguish. The wicked were everywhere; even his best friend had deserted him. Through David's trials, he knew God would always hear his prayer. David's testimony in verse 22 shows his deep trust and confidence in God.

This beautiful testimony of faith still applies to us presently as well. Within Christ's church there also may be many cares and anxieties due to many various circumstances. We often spend countless hours in thinking and worrying about all our troubles and cares. This is all part of our sinful nature; we think we can fix all our own problems. We have been given a simple instruction: to cast all our cares on God. This should assure us in all of life, but is at times so difficult to do.

The more we read God's Word, the more we realize how much God cares for us. We can also see how dependant we are on Him. Many times we hear about the providence of God. Providence has everything to do with the hand of God. Everything, not only heaven and earth but also all the creatures, are in his hand. The Lord's hand is strong. He has the power to hold all things in his command. Nothing happens by chance; everything is upheld by God's mighty power.

God knows our heart as well as our deepest thoughts and emotions (Ps 139). Heart and hand go together. He knows what lives within us and He wants to guide, direct and love us by leading us by his hand. We do not need to wander about aimlessly or in fear of everything that might happen. We may simply take the hand of our heavenly Father and walk with Him daily in humble obedience.

Why can we be so confident of our Father's care? Because his hands are locked in the hands of his Son and it is these hands of the Son that were nailed to the cross. The hands of our Father's only begotten Son! These hands were empty so that ours could be filled. These hands were let loose, so that ours could be

taken. When our Saviour called out to his Father, the Father pulled back his hand so that He could extend his hands to us. We may go on in confidence knowing we may always look up to our Father who reaches out to us with open arms.

Our cares of this life are not worth comparing to the joy that will one day await us. Our journey in this life may never be easy, but we look to the cross of Christ. He died so we may live in peace with our Father in heaven. Through our troubles we are taught in Scripture to be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and have a firm confidence for the future.

We know we cannot do this on our own, but need the daily guidance of our Father. He will sustain us, for He promised to hold on to us with everlasting arms till the end. We know that everything is *in* his hand; therefore everything also comes *from* his hand.

Let us continue to live in true faith knowing our lives are completely in his loving care! Thanks be to God alone for this comfort we have in Christ Jesus!

*In God alone my soul finds rest,
For in His faithfulness I trust;
From Him, my God, comes my salvation.
He only is my rock, my stay,
My fortress and my help for aye,
And none shall move my place and station.*

Psalm 62:1

Birthdays in November:

3 WILMA VAN DRONGELEN will be 50
306-33375 Mayfair Avenue, Abbotsford, BC V2S 1P4

Congratulations Wilma with your birthday. May our heavenly Father continue to guide and bless you in this new year. We hope you have an enjoyable day together with your family and friends.

Till next month,

Mrs. C. Gelms and Mrs. E. Nordeman
548 Kemp Road East, RR 2, Beamsville, ON LOR 1B2
Phone: 905-563-0380
Email: jcorgelms@porchlight.ca



Through the Generations

44th Annual League Day of Canadian Reformed Women at the West Coast

Held on June 21, 2007 in the Maranatha Canadian Reformed Church of Surrey, BC

At ten o'clock the pews were still well-nigh empty. But Michelle Faber, the chairlady, was not remotely fazed. With a series of cheerful calls from the pulpit she convinced the happily socializing crowd in the back of the church building to take their places in the pews. As a token of her gratitude she extended a cordial welcome to the 160 visitors, which included not only many women from the Fraser Valley and Lynden, but also some from Vernon and Grand Rapids, as well as a few guests from local United Reformed congregations. In her prayer Michelle expressed our wonder for the Lord, who led us from different areas and backgrounds to become one in faith and one in purpose.

Marcelle Togeretz took over the chair on behalf of the Women's Society of Yarrow. She introduced



*Michelle Faber,
charmingly in charge*

us to the speaker of the morning, Wendy Winkelaar, who had prepared the topic together with Anita DeLeeuw. By reading several Bible passages (Deuteronomy 6:1-9, Ecclesiastes 12:1-8, Philippians 2:1-4 as well as Lord's Day 21, Q&A 55), Marcelle focused our attention on the task of all members of the congregation to look out for the other.

Without delay Wendy Winkelaar captured our attention with her insightful speech, "Through the Generations, Bridging the Gap." By show of hands it became apparent that the audience was a healthy mix indeed, ranging in age from around twenty years old all the way to those over eighty. The quick poll further indicated that the age groups were reasonably well mixed throughout the pews. The findings gave substance to Wendy's claim that many of us have interactions with other age groups, even when we are at the extremes. However, each age has its own characteristics: people change throughout their lifetime in spiritual and physical ways. The gap which these changes might create must be bridged.

Wendy described the task of every woman in raising the youngest generation. From the words of Deuteronomy 6, "Impress these commandments upon your children," she concluded that raising children is the task of the whole congregation, not only of the parents. Children have to learn how to show respect to the Lord, which includes proper prayer



*Wendy Winkelaar,
encouraging the audience to bear
in mind the interest of others.*

posture and routine. Most importantly, children have to be taught that Christ is our Saviour, who earned us forgiveness.

As the golden rule for living with each other in the body of Christ, Wendy pointed us to our reading of Philippians (2:4), "Each of you should not only look to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." Everyone is connected. Also single women can play a crucial part in the shaping of young and teenaged children.

Wendy provided the audience with a close-up view of the position of single people within the congregation. As there should not be a gap between young and old, there should not be one between married and single either. Though Paul states in 1 Corinthians 7:17 that it is better to be single, he also points out in Galatians 3:28 that we are all one in Christ Jesus.

With her apparent eye for the practical Wendy went on to describe the physical aging process of women, from the teenager who looks forward to reach the ripe age of twenty-one, to the middle-aged woman whose

muscles lose their elasticity, to older people who pride themselves that they still can move about without assistance. Along with these obvious changes there is a change in attitude. Young people look down on parents, while middle aged people treasure the wisdom of their esteemed father and mother.

With a continued stress on application, the speaker emphasized the need to step out of our comfort zone. The gap between families needs to be bridged as well, especially when an individual or family does not have relatives in the congregation. As Wendy remarked, "We all have a job to do. God has made us that we need to interact with each other. We do not need self-help books, but help-the-other books. Look up Lord's Day 21 – we are duty-bound to go out of our way for others; that is building bridges." Members of the congregation will stay on task and remain considerate when they build each other up in the name of the Lord Jesus (Col 3:17).

As a fitting conclusion to the speech we sang from Psalm 71, "Thou from my youth, O God, hast taught me, and I do still proclaim, thy wondrous deeds, thy fame. Now that I'm old, Lord, and grey-headed, do not forsake and leave me, when foes and haters grieve me."



Intense group discussion

The audience responds in song



Photographs courtesy of Corrie Faber

At this point each member of the audience had to leave their place in the pew and find the group to which they were randomly assigned. Each group had an opportunity for in-depth discussion and application. Upon returning to our seats we were treated to some entertainment from the Abbotsford Women's Societies under the jovial direction of Magdalene VanderLinde. At her prompting we discovered how certain family customs can easily be tracked by means of some simple cross-generational research.

After a most delicious lunch we came back for the general discussion. Marcelle Togeretz, the discussion leader, reported that several groups had dealt with the reluctance of some members to visit or be visited. As Marcelle gave this remark into general discussion, many aspects and scenarios were

brought forward. It was discovered that there are numerous differences that could lead to gaps. We examined quite a number of situations: gaps with handicapped people, gaps with people about whom we have hard feelings, gaps between urban people and rural people (dress code), gaps with people who recently joined our churches. Wendy, the speaker, reiterated that we must always be empathetic and try to reach out.

The discussion found its conclusion with a reference to Philippians 2:5-11. When we in humility put others first, like Christ, we will see many opportunities to bridge the gaps. We concluded our reflections on the communion of saints with the singing of a few stanzas of Psalm 78.

Under the capable leadership of Michelle Faber we dealt efficiently with all matters of general business. After Wendy Winkelaar closed with us in prayer, we showed our spiritual union by singing our League Song, in the translation of Rienk Koat. Our dependable organist, Jenny VanDriel, added her inspiring enthusiasm to the words of our song: "One in faith and one in Spirit." In truth, there is no doubt that the Spirit will show us the way to stay connected, to Christ and to each other.



Reviewed by W.L. Bredenhof

Rev. W. L. Bredenhof is
co-pastor of the Canadian
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British Columbia
wbredenh@telus.net

***The Hidden Smile of God:
the Fruit of Affliction in the
Lives of John Bunyan,
William Cowper, and
David Brainerd, John Piper.***
(Wheaton: Crossway Books,
2001).

**Additional Information:
Hardcover, 176 pages, \$12.40**

This book is the second volume in a series of biographies entitled, "The Swans are Not Silent." John Piper originally wrote these sketches for a pastors' conference that his church (Bethlehem Baptist in Minneapolis) hosts each year. Though they were originally written to inspire pastors, they are definitely suitable reading for a general Christian audience.

In this particular book, Piper takes on the subject of suffering. Each of the men he's writing about knew suffering in great measures. Bunyan (author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*) spent over twelve years in prison. William Cowper (author of many well-known hymns) spent much of his life under the darkness of depression, even to the point of attempting suicide on several occasions. David Brainerd died at age twenty-nine. As a pioneering missionary to the native peoples of the eastern US,

he was a shining light snuffed out in his prime. Moreover, in the years leading up to his death, he suffered horribly with physical and mental anguish.

Martin Luther taught that three things were necessary for growth in the Christian life: prayer, study, and suffering. This book prepares us for the last of these elements and also gives us the proper perspective on afflictions we may have endured in the past. Myriads of saints have gone on before us and many of them have suffered at least as much, if not more, than we

have. We can learn from their experiences and their faith (Heb 13:7).

This is a powerful little book that can be recommended for devotional reading. It would also serve well as a timely gift for those enduring hardships. I appreciate Piper's candour, clear writing style, historical consciousness, but most importantly the fact that he keeps bringing us back to the Word of God even while he is sketching the life of some well-known saint. May God give us many more authors like him!

God Moves In a Mysterious Way

By William Cowper

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

*The traditional tune for this hymn is Dundee;
it is the same tune used with Hymn 54 in the Book of Praise*



J.L. van Popta

From Principle to Preference



In 1968, the synod convened at Orangeville decided that the churches must have a theological school for the training of ministers and they commissioned a board of governors to proceed with the establishing of a Canadian Reformed theological college. The Synod at Smithers, in 2007, has now said that this college is no longer a necessity (Article 103). Since the time of its forefathers, our church has held to the principles that it is the duty of the church to ensure that men with the necessary gifts are urged and directed to enter the ministry and that the church must maintain a school where the federation is able to control and direct the education of those students.

In The Netherlands, where our churches' roots lie, the churches of the Secession held to this principle doggedly. Their school for training ministers was established in Kampen and provided faithful preachers for decades. During the unification talks between the Secession and Doleantie churches in the late nineteenth century, the Secession churches would not give up this principle. By then Abraham Kuyper had started a theological department in his Free University of Amsterdam. He did not think that the new union federation needed a theological school. He strongly defended the principle

of the autonomy of theological study. But, throughout the debates, the Secession churches maintained the principle – not a preference – that the church should train its own ministers. In the end, a compromise allowed graduates from both the Free University and the Theological School in Kampen to be admitted to the ecclesiastical examinations (W.W.J. Van Oene details this in *Patrimony Profile* pgs 179ff.). The events of 1944 saw Dr. K. Schilder, a professor of the school at Kampen, deposed along with many others. After its Liberation, the church immediately re-affirmed the Theological School at Kampen as a school for the churches. The Liberated church maintained the Secession principle: the church must train its own ministers.

Coming to Canada, members of the Liberated churches continued to adhere to this principle when they set in motion events that led to the opening of the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Hamilton. Although the college came into being in 1969, its origins lie in the first synod, held fifteen years earlier. It received a proposal from Classis East "to probe the possibility of

founding our seminary as soon as possible" (Article 88). This synod then set in place the foundations of a Canadian Reformed theological college. For the fledgling federation it was a bold move, but it maintained the principle found in Article 19 of the Church Order: the churches should train their own ministers. Since its establishment, the college has served us well. A complete generation of ministers is faithfully and fruitfully serving the Chief Shepherd as they work in the congregations. It is difficult to imagine our churches without the college.

In the United Reformed Churches of North America (URCNA) there is a different history. These churches have broken away from the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) which also has a federational school: the Calvin Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. But liberalism crept into that seminary and the federation would not, or could not, effectively deal with the shift. Concerned members established Mid-America Reformed Seminary. This newer seminary became the school where many of the congregations that

left the CRC found their ministers. Although it is a Reformed seminary that we can respect, it is not, however, controlled by the church. It exists alongside the church and is what is called a “para-church” organization.

In the unity talks with the URCNA, the histories of our two churches brought the discussion of the training of ministers to an impasse. The committee for theological education representing our church held to the principle that there should be at least one federational school for the training of ministers. On the other hand, the URCNA committee passed a motion declaring that they, as a committee, were not prepared to entertain any proposal for theological education that mandated at least one federational seminary. There was no possible agreement and the two committees broke off their talks.

In an effort to break the impasse, our committee brought a challenge from the URCNA committee to Synod Smithers: our church should show from Scripture where our principle to maintain a school for the training of ministers came from. What they were really saying was that in order to be a principle, our practice had to be based on a text in the Bible; if it was not in Scripture it could not be a principle. Synod 2007 concluded that the principle was not based on a text in the Bible and agreed that because of this our practice was not a principle. Instead, the synod conceded that our principle must actually be a preference, albeit a strong one.

With this disastrous decision, the synod let itself be trapped by what is known as a “false dilemma.” This is the logical fallacy of the excluded middle; something must be either this or that. The fallacy lies in the idea that there is no possible third option, or more even. Of course there are more options. A principle, by definition is any belief or action based on a fundamental truth. Many of the practices of our church are based on what is called a regulative principle and is described by the Heidelberg Catechism in this way: “We are to worship God in no other manner than he has commanded in his Word” (LD 35). For example,

The Secession churches maintained the principle – not a preference – that the church should train its own ministers

the Bible knows nothing of the Apostles’ Creed, yet there is good and proper inference that we can read or recite the Creed in our church services. Likewise, there are no commands in Scripture for a confession of trust and greeting at the beginning of the service, or for the reading of the Ten Commandments. Yet we can say that we worship God in no other manner than he has commanded in his Word without conflict of conscience. To think that there must be a text for every element of

the worship service would be giving in to a false dilemma.

That is exactly what happened at Synod 2007 when that decision was made concerning our college. Because the maintenance of a federational school for the training of ministers became a preference rather than a principle, the URCNA synod could say that we, their Canadian Reformed brothers, had removed a roadblock to eventual unity. Wanting us to agree that our principle is only a preference does not mean, as some might suggest, that the URCNA synod only wanted give their para-church seminaries equal footing with our college. No, the URCNA’s theological education committee does not want a federational college at all; and we conceded this point to them. No, there is no text for our long held principle; but there is good and proper inference from Scripture that the church of the Lord Jesus should be training its own preachers. That task should not be out-sourced to any para-church seminary, regardless of how good the school might be.

I, for one, think that our Synod 2007 was way off the mark in their decision. Even though we can’t support it with a text, we need to maintain our principle that the church should control the education of its ministers. The para-church, independently educated model supported by the URCNA should be soundly rejected by us. If the URCNA’s refusal to accept our principle puts our unity with them into question, so be it. Deserting our principles is too high a price to pay for unity.

