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*All psalms are appropriate for
Christian public worship*



Inside this issue

- Threshold
- Do You Dance? ■ Children at the Lord's Supper?





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Threshold

Lowering of the threshold invariably means that things will be greatly simplified

It seems that the *threshold* in the church has to be lowered. I had heard and read about this and so, forgive me, I came closer to have a first-hand look. If things have to be altered, I want to know about it, even when it concerns a lowly threshold.

Thresholds do have a function. Mostly they function as deterrence for dust, insects, and rodents. The point is not what comes *out* of the building, but what goes *into* the building.

Thresholds are not unimportant. Do you remember that the captured Ark of the Covenant was placed in Dagon's temple in Ashdod with the result that Dagon crumbled and parts of his corpus fell on the *threshold*? That is why, we read in 1 Samuel 5, "to this day neither the priests of Dagon nor any others who enter Dagon's temple at Ashdod step on the threshold."

Zephaniah 1:9 speaks about God's punishment that will come over "all who avoid stepping on the threshold." It would appear that the Israelites had incorporated some Philistine practices in their worship of the Lord. High-stepping heathendom had entered the holy house of God.

What is meant by the "threshold"?

Of course, we all understand that "threshold" in this case does not mean something physical or material. The threshold is a spiritual matter. The threshold marks the *dividing line* between the church and the world. If the threshold is *too high*, it is said, people from outside the church will not enter or stay in the church. Church growth will be only an internal matter.

Lowering the threshold means that the church will become more user-friendly. People will come, feel at home, and will stay in the church. They will go farther than merely standing at the door, afraid to cross the high threshold.

We will see in a moment where all this can lead. But lowering of the threshold invariably means that things will be greatly *simplified*. There will be no more difficult words or ecclesiastical language. People will hear and understand. It becomes much easier for outsiders to participate in the liturgy and in the other activities in the church.

The call to lower the thresholds does not come from the multitudes. It comes from the upper echelons of leadership. Often this call is connected to the missionary character and task of the church. If we want to be attractive to others, we must lower the threshold.

A church with a low threshold

The lowering of the threshold is seen first and foremost in changing the existing liturgy. To be sure, key elements are not removed, for example, the preaching of the gospel and the prayers. These still stand central. But things have been rearranged and shuffled.

The length of sermons has become shorter. The role of the *preacher* has diminished. The style of preaching has changed. The minister pays special attention to the children, the youth, and possible guests. Sermons are more practical and less dogmatical.

Some churches have two morning worship services with the annotation: 9:00 a.m. traditional service; 10:30



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a.m. contemporary service. Ever seen a sign with that message? The afternoon service is definitely up for grabs. The contemporary service is the most "inviting." The auditorium becomes a rec-room.

If there is a second service, its function and purpose is rather unclear. It is hard to convince newcomers that two full services are to be held each Sunday. Our sister church in Amsterdam (*Titus Kapelle*) has decided that the Sunday afternoon service must be replaced by something else. It will most likely be something contemporary. Perhaps it will be like a "vesper," a brief twilight gathering once every six weeks which focuses on song, meditation, fellowship, and prayer. In and out. Fast-food style. Everything old is new again.

The purpose of a higher threshold

Is the threshold too high in our churches? Do visitors turn away because our style is rather old-fashioned? Or do they stop at the threshold because they simply do not like the Reformed doctrine?

When I began in the ministry in the 1970s, it was custom to address the congregation as a mature body of members. The level of preaching was set to reach people from twenty to thirty years with an average attention span of twenty-five to thirty minutes. Using props or gimmicks was forbidden, because the Word had to be preached earnestly and soberly.

What about the youth and the children? They were perhaps particularly addressed when the text warranted this, but otherwise not specifically targeted. Nowadays in Christian day schools and with catechism classes the youth are addressed according to their needs but in the church services we address them as young members of Christ's body. This may not always be the best method or what everyone likes, but it is the best we can do.

Some churches have "seeker services" which cater to the needs and wants of those attending. I think of the mega church at Willow Creek which organized massive services and ran special programs to attract outsiders. The church catered to the seekers but neglected those who believed and needed further instruction.

In the services of the church, we address the entire congregation as the body of Christ. Having a high threshold prevents us from falling into the use of marketing strategies and demographics to determine what the church needs.

In This Issue

Editorial – Threshold — Cl. Stam250
 Treasures, New and Old – Do You Dance?
 — M.R. Jagt253
 Psalm-Singing Churches? (2) — W.L. Bredenhof254
 Children at the Lord's Supper?
 — C. Bouwman255
 Roadside Assistance – Why Don't We Fast?
 — M. de Visser259
 Letter to the Editor260
 Music Review — Reviewed by T. Lodder262
 Book Review — Reviewed by W.L. Bredenhof263
 Press Releases – Classis Ontario West,
 Central Ontario.....264

Understanding the real threshold

Please do not think that I am against innovation. I have been criticized for addressing the congregation as “brothers and sisters, *boys and girls*.” I would like to see more traditional hymns added to the Augment. If you wish, I can give some examples. I think that it is good when ministers welcome everyone present in the service. Perish the thought that anyone would be considered unwelcome.

Do visitors turn away because our style is rather old-fashioned? Or do they stop at the threshold because they simply do not like the Reformed doctrine?

The special welcome may give a wrong impression, however. It almost seems as if the consistory is thankful that people show up while, in fact, it is their God-given duty. The Lord does not invite people but He *calls* his church together. It is a summons. But, okay, a hearty welcome is good.

There are areas of the liturgy where some good suggestions have been made. We could recite the Lord’s Prayer together. Someone other than the minister can do the Bible reading. In our Dutch sister churches it is not uncommon that a female member of the church does the reading. It kind of blew me away, I admit, but eventually one gets used to these things.

More innocent ideas? An office bearer can do the prayer before the sermon. A responsive “Amen” is not out of the picture. A small chorus may present some canticles. These matters may increase the involvement of the members.

But *the real point of the church service is the praise and worship of God’s Name*. The congregation must be led to sing this praise. Worship means first of all giving glory to God. There’s the real threshold. Organizing “seeker-services” simply misses the point.

It is good when the services are inviting and involving. At the same time we must keep the goal in mind and set the threshold accordingly. Whatever does not glorify God or edify the members is definitely out.



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Do You Dance?



MATTHEW 13:52

“David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the LORD with all his might, while he and the entire house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sound of trumpets.”

2 Samuel 6:14-15

Now and then in Scripture we see people dancing. Miriam and other women, for instance, grab their tambourines and rejoice after Pharaoh and his army are destroyed. After David kills Goliath and the Israelite men rout their enemies, women come out to meet the soldiers, dancing and singing: “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands” (1 Sam 18:7).

There are different types of dances. The Hebrew word used in Exodus and Samuel seems to indicate a ring or circle dance. These aren't waltzes or salsas – they're victory dances. Women in particular would dance them as they celebrated the triumphs of their men and their God.

Perhaps you can see why King David in 2 Samuel 6 dances before the ark of the Lord – and also why his wife Michal mocks him. Just as the women danced before him, David now dances before the Lord. David's making it crystal clear that God is the source of all his success. God is the Great King in the land. The battle and the victory belong to Him.

Michal, however, can't fathom David doffing his royal robes and whirling about. “Real men don't dance like this” she thinks, “Certainly not the king!”

Your teenager then, who wants to go out to that nightclub, would have a hard time proving his or her point from this passage. David isn't just having fun. He's humbling

himself in order to boast in the Lord and give all glory to Him.

This scene of 2 Samuel 6 is an Old Testament shadow of the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. Just as the ark of the Lord goes up to Jerusalem, the royal city, so Christ has gone up to heaven in the triumph of victory.

And it's a time for dancing! In fact, in Psalm 24, a song for this very occasion, even the might of heaven is urged to lift up its head before the coming King of Glory. In this Psalm, David calls out to the “everlasting gates.” It's likely he has more than the earthly Jerusalem in view. He's prophesying about a greater ascension, a heavenly one, where angels too must hail the Great King.

Do we see that at the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ? Only partly. There are clouds, divine chariots that tell us our Saviour is no mere earthly ruler. We see two angels, just like at the resurrection of Christ. The disciples, Luke tells us, return to Jerusalem with great joy. They know Christ has not simply left them, but ascended to his throne.

But yet something seems missing, doesn't it? Where is the dancing? Where is the great parade? Where is heaven's might, the cherubim and seraphim? We do know that as Christ ascended the heavens rejoiced (Rev 12:12). And so we sing in Hymn 31, “The heav'ns with joy received their Lord/ By saints, by angel hosts adored.” But 2 Samuel 6 and Psalm 24 seem to call for more.

Take a look at what we learn in Scripture about the return of our Saviour. The angels tell us that He will return in the same way as He went up. On that day when Christ descends, the full glory of his ascension will be manifest. All of creation will hail the King Jesus. His kingdom will have fully come.

Paul tells us that the Lord Jesus will come with a multitude of his holy ones (1 Thess 3:13). Picture a king and his commanders, in the flush of victory, in royal procession. And finally, like latecomers, the people of God will be caught up with Christ in the clouds (1 Thess 4:17).

What will we be doing in the clouds? Let me suggest that it'll be the equivalent of dancing before our Lord! We will meet the departed saints who are already reigning with Christ. We will all be transformed in glory. And will we dance before Him, as He makes his way to the great white throne of Revelation 20:11. It will be a round dance, the dance of women, the dance of David. A dance that makes it clear Christ was our strength, our victory, our boast! It will be our joy – together with David! – to humble ourselves and bring glory to our ascended Saviour, not to us. “Hence we will honour and adore Thee/ And cast in gratitude before Thee/ The crowns by grace bestowed on us” (Hy 22).

Do you dance? One day we will, like we never have done before!





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Psalm-Singing Churches?

(Part 2 of 3)

In the first instalment of this brief series, we considered that psalm-singing churches are characterized by the priority given to the singing of psalms.

Next, it means that *in principle* we sing all the psalms. As a university student, I had a Jewish Hebrew professor who gently mocked Christian churches for their squeamishness about so many of the psalms. He said that he had never seen a Psalter used by Christians that included a straight-forward rendition of Psalm 137, babies being smashed against the rocks and all. He was not a little surprised to hear about the Canadian Reformed *Book of Praise*.

Of course, in practice, how often do we sing Psalm 137? Like many of my colleagues, I keep track of the number of times that I pick a psalm for public worship and I have selected this psalm once, and that was only because I was preaching on it. Now I should say that there could be other appropriate times to select it. For instance, one could select this psalm in connection with Lord's Day 21 – after all, it is a psalm about love for the church. Perhaps one could also select it then for the beginning or end of a worship service. Doing so, however, would definitely mean that a minute or two of explanation would be in order. In fact, that holds true for many of the psalms.

There is often a dissonance or a disconnect between the psalms and our contemporary understanding of the Christian life and that may prevent us from a meaningful “off-the-shelf” use of the psalms in our public worship. Think about it: almost anyone can see that most of the 150 psalms are laments. Where can we find a place for lamenting? Or does the fact that we can't envision lamenting as part of public worship indicate some deficiency in how we conceive of worship, or perhaps how we have been adversely influenced by our therapeutic culture and, more particularly, the broader “Christian” sub-culture? The psalms are there to teach us how to communicate with God and how to relate to Him in all the weals and woes of life. When the church ignores large portions of the Psalter and fails or refuses to sing them, are not God's people being impoverished? Are they not being deprived of the voices that will lead them to respond biblically to adversity?

So, *in principle*, we sing all the psalms. Historically, we have recognized that all the psalms are appropriate for Christian public worship because God Himself has said that they are appropriate. That is why we have a complete Psalter with all 150 psalms. We have not deleted the parts that moderns (or post-moderns) may find offensive. It

could be argued that some of our renditions leave something to be desired in terms of faithfulness to the original Hebrew, but also that it is in the process of being remedied at this very moment.

My Hebrew professor was wrong in his generalization about Christian Psalters, but he was correct in putting his finger on Christian squeamishness about the psalms. There is no sound biblical reason for it. The psalms are God's inerrant Word. They are inspired compositions given to the people of God for worship. They are God's Word given to teach us, to reprove us, to correct us, to instruct us in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16-17). They are God's Word given to us so that we can encourage, teach, and admonish one another as we sing (Eph 5:19, Col 3:16). The psalms are infallible witnesses to us of Jesus Christ (Luke 24:44). When we hold the psalms and psalm-singing in contempt, we are holding God's Word in contempt and that is *always* a bad idea.

Note to the reader:

Psalm 137 (mentioned in the above article) is an imprecatory psalm. For more information about imprecatory psalms and their use in the Christian church (including worship), I highly recommend *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lessons from the Imprecatory Psalms*, James E. Adams (Phillipsburg: P & R, 1991).





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Children at the Lord's Supper?

For centuries on end, a significant portion of the church membership has not attended the Supper of the Lord Jesus Christ. Shortly after the Great Reformation in the sixteenth century, Reformed Churches of The Netherlands agreed at the Synod of Dort to the following practice: "None shall be admitted to the Lord's Supper except those who. . . have made Confession of Religion" (Article 61). This limits attendance to about half of the church membership; children are not permitted to attend. This practice continues to characterize Reformed churches around the world.

In North America today there are a group of churches and/or theologians who have come to new appreciation for the wealth of the covenant. Much of what adherents to Federal Vision say (for that's how their view is known) is strikingly similar to the way Canadian Reformed people have come to think and speak of God's gracious covenant with man; that reality in turn generates in me considerable sympathy for this Federal Vision. However, the stand many proponents of Federal Vision take in relation to children at the Lord's Supper leaves me distinctly unhappy. In their zeal to give expression to the good news that "redemption from sin and the Holy

Spirit, who works faith, are promised to [children] no less than to adults" (as the church says in Lord's Day 27), these brothers and sisters swing through – in my judgment – to the opposite extreme so as to have children included in the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

They seek to build their case on Scripture.¹ They refer to the Old Testament sacrament of Passover (in place of which Christ has instituted the New Testament sacrament of Lord's Supper) and point out that the Lord commanded children to participate in this celebration. Exodus 12 contains this command from God in preparation for the Passover: "Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household" (v. 3). The terms "family" and "household" invariably include the children. That's confirmed, we're told, by the implication of verse 26: "When your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord.'" We're further reminded that children were to be present at other feasts of the Old Testament (see Deuteronomy 12:6f, 12, 18 and Deuteronomy 16:11, 14). Since the New Testament nowhere forbids children's participation in the

Lord's Supper, we're to conclude that the Lord would have the practice of the Old Testament continue – and so parents ought to take their little ones with them to the Lord's table.²

One wonders: have the churches over the centuries in fact misunderstood God's intent in relation to Lord's Supper attendance? Does God indeed wish the younger ones of the church also to eat and drink of the body and blood of the Lord? I'd like to engage the question on two levels, the first exegetical and the second doctrinal.

Exegetical

I will not dispute that the little ones of Israel were present at – and so free to participate in – the eating of the Passover lamb on the night when the Lord God delivered Israel from Egypt. That's indeed the inference of Exodus 12:3. It is also true that in Israel's subsequent annual memorial of the Passover the children had to be in a position to ask questions about this feast (Exodus 12:26). But we are to note that children asking questions about Passover (and so knowing about or being present at the meal) does not mean that the children also participated. In fact, there are indications in Scripture to the contrary.

Consider the instruction of the Lord at Israel's first memorial celebration of the Passover one year after their exodus from Egypt as recorded in Numbers 9. The people of Israel were camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai, God had established his covenant with his redeemed people, and the tabernacle was just completed (Exodus 40:17). Then God told Moses, "Have the Israelites celebrate the Passover at the appointed time. Celebrate it at the appointed time, at twilight on the fourteenth day of [the first] month" (v. 3). Yet as the people set about to celebrate the Passover, some learned that they "could not celebrate the Passover on that day because they were ceremonially unclean on account of a dead body" (v. 6). They wished to participate and so sought Moses' guidance as to what the will of the Lord might be for them. God's answer was this: "When any of you or your descendants are unclean because of a dead body or are away on a journey, they may still celebrate the Lord's Passover. They are to celebrate it on the fourteenth day of the second month" (v. 10f). It's clear from this passage that the Lord God did not wish his people to celebrate this sacrament thoughtlessly or robotically; they were in some way to consider whether they were in a position to eat the Passover lamb. Those who had become defiled through contact with a dead body were unclean before holy God and so not to eat the lamb.

One can understand why this was God's will. The annual memorial feast recalled the first Passover, when God's angel of death went through the land of Egypt to kill the firstborn of each

house on which there was no blood on the doorframe. All Egypt deserved to die, not simply because they persecuted God's chosen people, but rather because every Egyptian was sinful – and the wages of sin is death (Genesis 2:17; Romans 6:23). For this same reason every Israelite ought to die also; they were just as evil in God's eyes. But the Israelites would be spared because the blood on the doorframe would remind the angel of death that another would die in place of the Israelite. The substitute was ultimately not the lamb slaughtered on the night the angel passed over Egypt, but the Lamb of God who would one day come into the world, Jesus the Saviour

One wonders: have the churches over the centuries in fact misunderstood God's intent in relation to Lord's Supper attendance?

(John 1:29). Yet God in his judgment would not continue to pass over those who did not hate the uncleanness of sin. That's why God, through his commands about what is clean and what is unclean (see Leviticus 11-15), taught Israel to hate sin. Those who disregarded God's holiness and his hatred for sin could ultimately not stand before his judgment and so had to be cut off from his people. But then they could not eat of the Passover Lamb until such time as they were

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clean – and that's in turn symbolic of repentance from sin. This much is clear: to participate in the annual sacrament of Passover, the people of Israel needed to examine themselves as to whether they were unclean. This involved by definition a measure of knowledge and/or maturity.

The second annual memorial celebration of Israel's escape from Egypt (and from the angel of death) did not occur two years after the initial Passover, but happened instead some forty years later (Joshua 5:10ff). This was due to the people's rebellion after the return of the twelve spies. God's judgment was: "In this desert your bodies will fall – every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me" (Numb 14:29). God added: "As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them

in to enjoy the land you have rejected" (v. 31). What is striking is that though those under twenty years of age would not perish in the desert with their parents, they did not receive opportunity to celebrate the Passover until they in adulthood entered the Promised Land.

Again, when the Lord gave Israel instructions about how they were to do things once they entered the Promised Land, God's instruction about the annual Passover celebration was this: "You must not sacrifice the Passover in any town the Lord your God gives you except in the place He will choose as a dwelling for his name. There you must sacrifice the Passover in the evening" (Deut 16:5f). This was the place where the tabernacle was to stand, the place where God Himself lived with his people. The implication is travel and travel-by-foot by definition brings challenges for mothers and

God's word in the sacraments requires a human echo

their little ones. So Elkanah permitted Hannah to stay home with Samuel for some years (1 Samuel 1:21ff). And Jesus, we're told, went with his parents "to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. . . when he was twelve years old" (Luke 2:41f).

From the above material, the conclusion evident to my mind is this: it is too simplistic to conclude on the basis of Exodus 12 that God wanted all children in Israel to participate in the Passover – and

then conclude in turn that this pattern holds true for the New Testament dispensation as well. On the contrary, Paul's warning to the Corinthians against eating the bread and drinking the cup of the Lord "in an unworthy manner" and his injunction that "a man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup" (1 Cor 11:27f) has roots in Numbers 9 and implies a continuing need for some maturity and/or knowledge.

We turn now to second argument that Federal Visionists supporting child participation at the Lord's Supper neglect.

Doctrinal

Sacraments, the church has learned from Scripture, "were instituted by God so that by their use He might the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel." The promise God communicates in the gospel is delightfully rich: "God graciously grants us forgiveness of sins and everlasting life because of the one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross" (LD 25). With this confession the church acknowledges that in all sacraments God is the "Speaker." Sacraments are not about people stating something (e.g., there is faith in my heart, hence I'll be baptized; we want to appease God's anger, so we'll sacrifice Christ anew, etc); sacraments are about God coming to wavering sinners with his sign and seal of reassurance concerning the truth of the gospel. Isaac as an infant of eight days old did not "say" anything in his circumcision, but God did all the communicating – for He impressed on Isaac through the sacrament that He truly claimed Isaac for Himself in his covenant of grace. Peter and

Andrew and James and the other disciples did not "say" anything when they received the bread and drink from the Lord's hand, but the Lord did all the communicating – for He impressed on his disciples through the sacrament that He gave up his body and shed his blood for them. In sacraments God does the speaking.

Faith needs time to appear and grow

Yet every word from God by definition demands a response from people, for no creature may ignore God when He speaks. The response God seeks is an echo of the content of what He said. God in his covenant claimed Isaac for Himself in the sacrament of circumcision and so Isaac was obligated to acknowledge God's claim and echo God's words with his own reply: I belong to God. Jesus Christ told Peter and Andrew and James and the rest that his body was broken for them and his blood shed for them and they were obligated to acknowledge the validity of Jesus' statement and echo his words with their own reply: my sins are washed away through Jesus' sacrifice. God's word in the sacraments requires a human echo.

That echo is, of course, not to be mechanical but sincere. This echo begins in the heart where the promise of God communicated in the sacrament is embraced in faith. From the heart this echo receives voice and/or action through the sound of the voice and/or the movement of the hand. In the sacraments God is the Speaker and the person He speaks to speaks in

reply – echo in faith what God has promised.

Isaac could not echo God's promise on the day of his circumcision – for the child was but eight days old. His echo of the Speaker in the sacrament of circumcision had to come in the course of years, as Isaac grew in knowledge and maturity. The people of Israel, though, who received from God the instruction to fetch a lamb for the Passover and eat it (and so be reminded that they deserved to die but were spared through the blood of another), did not receive the option to delay their response to God's good news. Instead, they were obligated to respond immediately through obedience and God's intent was not that this obedience be mechanical but heartfelt; the Israelites were to embrace in faith God's gospel of redemption and express their acceptance of this gospel through their obedient eating. The disciples also to whom Jesus extended the bread and the cup did not receive the option to delay their response, but needed to reach out their hands to accept the elements of the Lord's Supper and eat it. Yet their reaction too was not to be automatic but one borne from a heartfelt acceptance of the Saviour's glorious good news.

We have a difference in timing of one's response to God's speaking in the sacrament. The Old Testament sacrament of circumcision (and its New Testament replacement of baptism) knows a *delay* in response, while the Old Testament sacrament of

Passover (and its New Testament replacement of Lord's Supper) demands an *immediate* response to God's gospel. The delay in the reply given to the first sacrament is based on the need to reply *in faith* (and *with faith*), and faith needs time to appear and grow. The churches over the centuries have understood this need and so insisted on an event known as "profession of faith." This profession of faith is a child's response to God's promise in baptism and signifies the child's echo of what God has said. It is a response the child makes from a position of knowledge (hence the instruction given by parents and the church). It is a response the child makes sincerely (hence the conversation with elders of the church). It is a response not meant to be perfunctory and passing, but genuine and lasting (hence the *public* profession of faith in the presence of the rest of the congregation). Once the child has come to that stage in life where he could respond in faith to the promises of God in baptism, he's also able to respond *immediately* to the Lord when He in the other sacraments presses on him (again) the reality of Jesus' sacrifice for him. That is why the churches have historically said *not only* that baptism should precede attendance at the Lord's Table, but *also* that one needs to respond to one's baptism before one attends the Lord's Table. Hence Article 61 of the Church Order as mentioned before.

Age

Of course, one can debate at length at what age one can or ought to respond to God's promise to you in baptism. That's a subject of its own which I'll not engage at this point. For now it is enough to conclude that there are strong and valid reasons why the church has not instructed parents to take their children with them to the table of the Lord. That brothers and sisters within the Federal Vision movement yet open the Lord's Supper to those children of the congregation who have not professed the faith before the elders and the congregation is regrettable and does not do justice to God's revelation and the confessions of the church.

¹ See, for example, Robert S Rayburn, "A Presbyterian Defense of Paedocommunion," in Gregg Strawbridge, *The Case for Covenant Communion* (Monroe: Athanasius Press, 2006), pg 3ff, and the numerous references mentioned in his footnotes.

² As to the practice of the church in the New Testament dispensation, Rayburn writes, pg 12: "It is admitted by everyone that from the mid-third century onward the practice of paedocommunion was commonplace in the church," with footnote to Christian Keidel, "Is the Lord's Supper for Children?" *Westminster Theological Journal* 37, no. 3 (1975), pg 301ff. But this statement turns out to be untrue. See the rejoinder from Roger Beckwith, "The Age of Admission to the Lord's Supper" *Westminster Theological Journal* 38, no. 2 (1976), pg 123ff.





roadside assistance

the magazine for Reformed young people

How can a young man keep his way pure?
By living according to your word. Ps 119:9

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Why Don't We Fast?

Marise de Visser

As we walked into our minister's house for our youth group's Bible study, the scent of fresh coffee and delicious *gebakjes* welcomed us. The topic for the evening: fasting. What is the purpose of fasting? Should we still do it today? These were some of the questions that we hoped to discuss before the end of the evening.

- We started by looking at some examples in the Bible:
- Moses, who fasted for forty days and forty nights when he was on Mount Sinai receiving the commandments from the Lord (Exod 34:28)
- Daniel, who did partial fasting along with his three friends by not eating royal food or drinking wine while they were being trained for entering Nebuchadnezzar's service (Dan 1)
- When Esther had to request the king's favour, she asked all the Jews in Susa to fast for her for three days and three nights (Esth 4:15-17)
- David fasted after he had sinned with Bathsheba, when their child was dying (2 Sam 12)

- The people in the city of Nineveh, after Jonah told them that the Lord would overturn their city (Jonah 3)
- Paul and Barnabas, who with fasting and prayer committed the appointed elders to the Lord (Acts 14:23)

There are more examples throughout the Bible, but already through these examples you can see that there were many different occasions in which fasting occurred (mourning, danger, sin, seeking direction, sickness, etc). It is also important to note that fasting could take place either because of a personal decision or because of an order by a ruler.

Isaiah 58

One important passage in the Bible about fasting is Isaiah 58. This beautiful text tells us about a time when the Lord's people were fasting, but felt that He wasn't noticing or doing anything to help them. The Lord then explained to them that He did not like the way in which they were fasting: "On the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your

workers. Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife. . . Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for a man to humble himself. . . and for lying on sackcloth and ashes?" (v. 3-5). The Lord then gave them clear guidelines for the manner of fasting that He wanted to see: "To loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke. . . to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter" (v. 6-7).

It was an interesting discussion. We went home motivated to give this issue some more thought. For example, what can we learn from these biblical examples? Fasting helped believers to grow closer to the Lord. How do we grow closer to the Lord?

Fasting today

Isaiah 58 gives us important guidelines for fasting. For example, when we fast, do we take the food that is saved and give it to those who are hungry? Or do we even consider fasting? This is an important question, because when

you think about fasting, the main point should be that you desire to spend time in prayer and in studying God's Word.

Fasting is a time to re-focus your life in following Christ. For instance, around the time of Good Friday it may be a good idea to fast, in order to seriously consider the indescribable amount and

intensity of suffering that our Lord Jesus Christ went through in order to pay for our sins. Fasting should be a way for us to focus more on Christ and what He has done for us. I know that for myself, I often don't really and truthfully regret my sins. It is important for us – and I think that this is often a hard thing to do – to

confess our sins and to be truly repentant. When we understand the seriousness of our sins, only then can we truly be thankful for what our Lord has done for us on the cross.

Maybe we could reconsider fasting as a spiritual and physical act of worship to our King and Saviour.



Letter to the Editor

Letter to the Editor

Who would not be delighted to read on the front cover of *Clarion*, February 27, that "Christians have a biblical duty to be caretakers of the world"? I, for one, was eager to read about the marvels of creation and man's responsibility to care for the environment. But alas, I was disappointed in the article by Dr. F.G. Oosterhoff: "Remembering Creation: Caring for the Environment." The article is based on and recommends the book *Remembering Creation: God's World of Wonder and Delight* by Rev. Scott Hoezee. The concern is raised that "Christians allow unbelievers to set the pace in celebrating the beauty of creation, in taking seriously our duty to protect it, and also in acknowledging the great gift we receive in the scientific study of nature." If so, it would be good to encourage readers of *Clarion* to become more aware of the beauty of creation and our role as stewards.

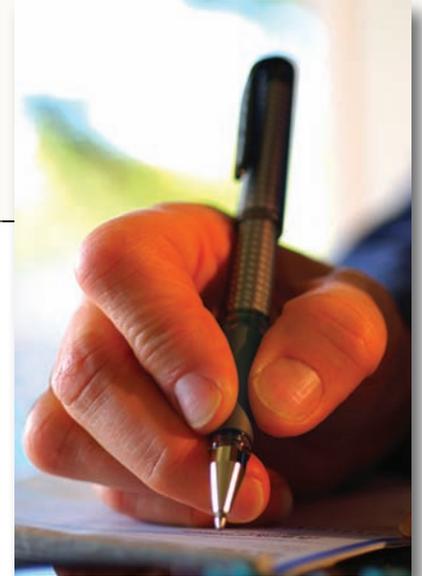
To my amazement, Dr. Oosterhoff, and apparently Rev. Hoezee, contrasts interest in origins versus interest in the environment. What is more, the interest in origins is denigrated, while environmental interest is lauded. One wonders if these writers would consider it possible for one to be interested in origins and in the honour of God as the creator as well as take delight in the beauty of God's creation.

The suggestion that those interested in creationist literature are not "acknowledging the great gift we receive in the scientific study of nature" is condescending. I would suggest that any

one reading Michael Behe's book *Darwin's Black Box* demonstrates a significant appreciation for the gift of science. *Darwin's Black Box* is mentioned in Rev. Hoezee's book (p. 1) as being an

indicator of a misplaced interest in origins. What I could read into such interest is an indication of excitement, amazement, and appreciation of God's work that moves us to worship the Creator. In the study of creation we may observe that "all creatures great and small, are as so many letters leading us to perceive clearly the invisible things of God" (Romans 1:20, BC Art. 2). Interestingly enough Behe writes about very minute "biochemical subcomponents, the complexity of which, Behe believes, could not have formed through Darwinian evolutionary development." This quote from Rev. Hoezee is used to demonstrate the problem of there being a lack of, or interest in, "books dealing with a Christian view of ecology or celebrating the beauty of God's handiwork. . . ." These quotes by Rev. Hoezee lead me to question both his motive in criticizing interest in origins and his contention that interest in origins limits the Christian's appreciation for God's creation.

According to Rev. Hoezee, as quoted by Dr. Oosterhoff, "Christians who are most concerned



about the authority of the Bible tend to be least concerned about the dangers of the environment. In fact, fundamentalists and other believers in biblical inerrancy are not infrequently hostile to environmentalism." This would appear to link those who consider the importance of how "He (God) makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word" (BC Art. 1) with environmental disinterest. The question is: why are Christians hostile to environmentalism? Are they not interested in God's creation or in being active as stewards?

The article refers to reasons why Christians might oppose environmentalism, yet suggests that we jump on the environmental bandwagon. Christians who acknowledge God as Creator should delight in his Creation; they should be stewards, but they should also be very much aware of the anti-Christian attitudes that shape environmentalism. Accepting God as the Creator of this world allows us to be active as stewards to God's honour. Without acknowledging God as Creator, I may be "environmentally active" while worshipping creation rather than the Creator.

My concern was heightened upon taking Rev. Hoezee's book out through inter-library loan. The environmental movement and this book, in particular, require a more thorough critique. Such would show why Rev. Hoezee's book ought not to be recommended.

*Yours in Christ,
John Helder, Edmonton, Alberta*

Response

This letter shows such a profound misunderstanding of both Hoezee's book and my review of it that it would have been wiser, in my opinion, if it had not been published. Now that it does appear, I will have to respond. In what follows I will occasionally give references to Hoezee's book (the numbers between brackets are page references). These references are not exhaustive.

1. Hoezee does not make that contrast, nor does he "denigrate" interest in origins. He clearly states that because of the errant claims of Darwinism, Christians most certainly have a stake in the origins debate (pp. 2f.). He is concerned, however, about what he sees as an imbalance: Christians who are most concerned about the question of origins, he writes, tend to be least concerned about the environment. To

substantiate this statement, he refers, among other things, to the "Top 25" lists of books yearly published by *Christianity Today*, which show the readers' overriding interest in books about origins. Books on the environment, he writes, have never yet made the list (p. 1).

2. The status assigned to Behe's *Darwin's Black Box*, Hoezee adds, is a case in point. Behe's study, "a highly technical, scientific book," deals with Darwinism and therefore with origins, and the fact that this work was chosen as "Book of the Year" (1997) constitutes for Hoezee further evidence of the *CT* readers' one-sided interest in origins at the expense of concern for the care of creation as it exists at present (p. 1). He certainly does not criticize Behe's book. He only mentions that it does not deal with environmental protection.

3. This is more or less what Hoezee is saying. I am sorry, however, that this paragraph ends with two rhetorical questions. I was looking for answers. Specifically, I would have liked to hear if it is true that Christians who are most concerned with origins are least concerned with the care of creation – and if so, why.

4. The suggestion that according to Hoezee Christians should "jump on the environmental bandwagon" is another regrettable case of misunderstanding. Hoezee leaves no doubt whatsoever that he abhors the prevailing radical, pantheistic, neo-pagan streams in secular environmentalism (pp. 9f, 62f.). He makes clear that Bible-believing Christians, including he himself, do not believe in a "Mother Earth," but in God the Creator. And therefore, although using the term "environmentalist," he suggests that a better term would be "creationist" (p. 87). In short, here as elsewhere Mr. Helder reads messages into Hoezee's book that simply are not there.

5. What I am saying in this response about Hoezee's book I wrote in far more detail in my review, which can be found in *Clarion*, February 27, 2009, and also on the following websites: www.covenantteacherscollege.com and ReformedAcademic.blogspot.com (in both cases follow the links to International Apologetics Project and "Defending the Faith," #5). In my review I described the book as honest, biblical, and altogether timely. I continue to do so. Mr. Helder's accusations at Hoezee's address (and at mine) are unfounded.

F.G. Oosterhoff

*Letters to the Editor should be written in a brotherly fashion in order to be considered for publication.
Submissions need to be less than one page in length.*

Music Review

With Songs of Praise: Singing of Genevan Psalms with Frank Ezinga

Recorded by Audiocraft Productions, November 2008

Organist: Frank Ezinga;

Trumpet: Ken Linde

Total Length: 72:13

Available at

www.churchmusic.ca

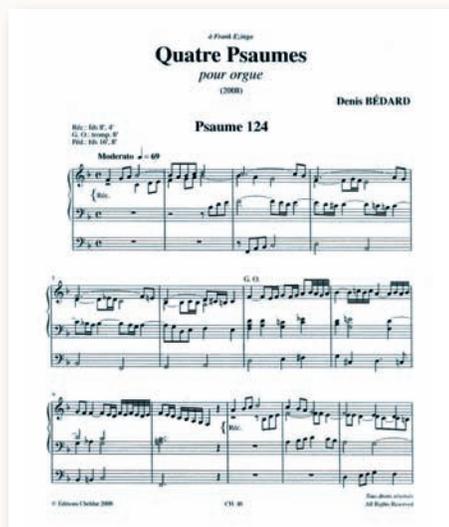
Denis Bédard, *Quatre Psalms pour orgue*

Éditions Cheldar, CH. 48, 2008

Available at

www.cheldar.com

I was just given a sweet gift. One part of the gift is an audio recording entitled *With Songs of Praise* with Mr. Frank Ezinga at the organ and another is the sheet music for *Quatre Psaumes* by M. Denis Bédard.



The first is a quincenary tribute to John Calvin, born five centuries ago in 1509. This recording is a fitting tribute to this servant of God who was instrumental in bringing about a renewal of the singing of the biblical psalms in Christian worship.

The *Anglo-Genevan Psalter* contained in the *Book of Praise* is intended to keep alive the legacy of nearly five centuries of Reformational psalm singing, a legacy which over the centuries has spread world-wide from its birthplace in France and Switzerland.

A revival of appreciation and love for the Genevan psalms is afoot, not only in the Canadian and American Reformed Churches, but also world-wide by those who in the past have known only little or nothing at all about them. This recording is a happy reflection of this movement.

If I may digress for a moment, the recent *Band Together* performance by high school students from across Western Canada and North-Western Washington was also a heartening indication of this movement. These talented young men and women played enthusiastic arrangements of Psalms 2 and 133, composed by Mr. Kent Dykstra and under his baton.

With Songs of Praise was recorded on the West Coast by Harpert VanderWel of Audiocraft Productions at the Langley Canadian Reformed Church. Some of the psalms are sung by the *Laudate!* choir, others by an assembly of several hundred members from various Reformed



congregations in the Fraser Valley. Some selections are accompanied by Mr. Ken Linde on trumpet, a nice touch.

The most attractive feature of this CD is the performance by Langley's resident organist Frank Ezinga of the *Quatre Psaumes pour orgue*, Four Psalms for organ, by Vancouver organist and composer Denis Bédard. These compositions on Psalms 124, 91, 86 and 100, commissioned by the Langley church for the inauguration of their new pipe organ, include for each psalm both a pleasing chorale and a sparkling arrangement that is suitable for before the service, during the collection or perhaps even as a prelude before congregational singing.

I had the pleasure of attending the inaugural concert of Langley's new Casavant, where the composer gave his premiere performance. Trained organists, with some disciplined practice, should be able to learn these compositions.

Organists won't be disappointed with the sheet music and listeners will enjoy the recording.



Reviewed by W.L. Breidenhof

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***A Case for Amillennialism:
Understanding the End Times,*
Kim Riddlebarger, Grand
Rapids: Baker, 2003**

**Additional Information:
Paperback, 271 pages, \$14.51**

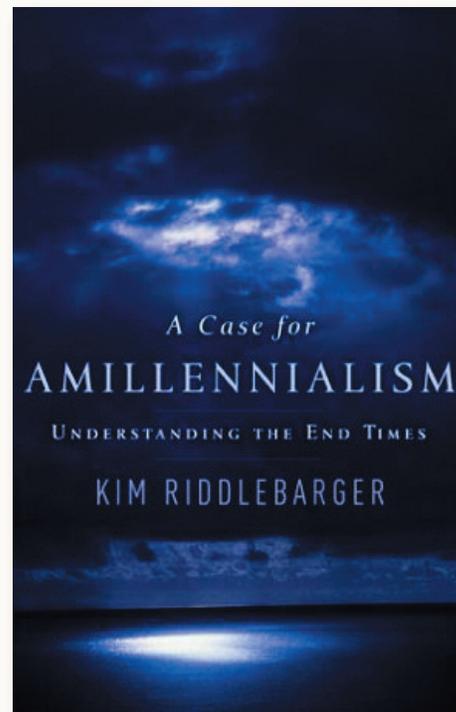
Books and other resources dealing with the doctrine of the end things (eschatology) from a Reformed point of view are relatively scarce. This area simply hasn't received a lot of attention from Reformed theologians. The same can be said for Reformed pulpits. Few of us, for instance, have probably ever heard a series of sermons on the Revelation that went beyond chapter 3. On the other hand, there are scads of books and other resources out there in the broader Christian context which teach defective eschatologies. One only needs to mention the wildly popular *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. As a consequence of this imbalance, there is an increasing tendency for Reformed believers to adopt these other perspectives by default, mostly because they haven't been taught a Reformed perspective.

Dr. Kim Riddlebarger (URC pastor in Anaheim, CA) grew up as a dispensationalist and became Reformed later in life, not only in terms of how he views salvation, but also in how he views eschatology. Riddlebarger is known as one of the foremost expositors of Reformed eschatology

in our day. He's led numerous conferences, appeared on various radio programs (including the White Horse Inn, which he co-hosts), and has written two books on the subject.

This particular book is a detailed exposition of Reformed amillennialism, which states that the 1000 year reign of Christ described in Revelation 20:1-10 is a present reality. This contrasts with premillennialism (Christ will return and establish a 1000 year reign on earth) and postmillennialism (a 1000 year reign is coming and then Christ will return). There's a lot more to amillennialism than a position on the millennium, but to find out the details, you'll need to read the book.

One of the strengths of this book is its insistence that the disagreements between amillennialists and premillennialists (and to a lesser degree, postmillennialists) boil down to how one reads the Bible. Does one read the Bible on its own terms or on our terms? Your theory of Bible interpretation (hermeneutics) will have an enormous bearing on your eschatology. Another strength is the fact that Riddlebarger fairly represents the positions with which he respectfully disagrees. Further, Riddlebarger provides extensive expositions of the key biblical texts: Daniel 9:24-27, Matthew 24, Romans 11, and Revelation 20:1-10. Finally, he also presents some interesting thoughts on why amillennialism is not



widely accepted in the broader, non-Reformed, Christian context and some critical analysis of how amillennialism has been argued by Reformed theologians in the past. For instance, he notes how Louis Berkhof and Herman Bavinck pointed to the fact that there was no new nation state of Israel as proof that dispensationalism was wrong (p. 243). This view is obviously problematic today in view of the establishment of modern Israel in 1948.

A Case for Amillennialism puts forward a good overview of what the Bible teaches on a neglected, but important subject. If you want to brush up on a Reformed view of the end times, this would be an excellent primer. Once you're finished, I can also recommend Riddlebarger's related book, *The Man of Sin: Uncovering the Truth About the Antichrist* (Baker, 2006).

**Press Release of Classis
Ontario West, March 11, 2009
in Kerwood, ON**

On behalf of the convening church of Grand Rapids, Rev. John Ludwig called the meeting to order by welcoming guests and led in opening devotions by inviting the assembly to sing Psalm 81:1, 13, 14, reading Joshua 5:1-12, and leading in prayer.

Having examined the credentials, the delegates from the church of Grand Rapids reported that all the churches were lawfully represented. Classis was declared constituted and the following officers were appointed: Chair: Rev. Henry Versteeg; Vice-chair: Rev. Bill DeJong; Clerk: Rev. Doug Vandeburgt.

The chair thanked the church of Grand Rapids for convening Classis and preparing the agenda and the church of Kerwood for hosting Classis. Under memorabilia it was noted that Ancaster's call to Rev. Peter Holtvlüwer and Providence's call to Rev. David De Boer were both declined. These vacant congregations were wished God's blessings as they continue their search for a pastor. It was noted that Rev. Richard Pot has accepted the call from the church of West Albany, Australia (FRCA) and that the church of London, like the church of Chatham in view of Rev. Versteeg's imminent departure, is preparing for pastoral vacancy. Transitions at the Theological College were observed in terms of Rev. Jason Van Vliet's acceptance of the call to serve as professor, as the replacement of Dr. Niek Gootjes. It was noted with sadness that this replacement was necessitated by Dr. Gootjes' failing health. Similarly, mention was made of the declining health of Dr. Jack DeJong, who was recently relocated from his home to Shalom Manor, and of

Rev. Clarence Stam, emeritus minister of the church of Hamilton. Each of these individuals and their families were committed to the Lord's care. Lastly, the chair remembers the work of missionaries, noting in particular Rev. Bram De Graaf's service in Brazil on behalf of the calling church of Cornerstone-Hamilton.

The agenda was adopted with necessary amendments.

Upon receiving the necessary documents Classis proceeded to examine the following men for consent to speak an edifying word: Tony Roukema, Tim Sikkema, Jason Vandeburgt, Sean Wagenaar, and Arend Witten. After each of them presented satisfactory sermon proposals – Roukema on Joshua 5:13-15; Sikkema on Matthew 22:1-14; Vandeburgt on Luke 15:1-17; Wagenaar on 1 Timothy 4:6-8; Witten on Matthew 2:17-18, each was examined in the area of Doctrine and Creeds – Roukema on the doctrines of the Canons of Dort; Sikkema on the confessions and the sacraments; Vandeburgt in the area of the person and work of Christ; Wagenaar in the area of regeneration and conversion; Witten in the area of the doctrine of God. Jason Vandeburgt did not sustain his exam.

Having sustained their examinations, Roukema, Sikkema, Wagenaar, and Witten were granted by Classis consent to speak an edifying Word. After they were congratulated by the chair, they each promised not to preach anything contrary to the Word of God as confessed in the Three Forms of Unity. In each instance, a song was sung and a prayer of gratitude was offered.

Question period according to Article 44 of the Church Order was observed. The churches affirmed that the ministry of the office-bearers is being fulfilled and that

the decisions of the major assemblies are being honoured.

A request from the church of Chatham to ask Synod to appoint a committee to operate the fund for needy students is denied. The church of Chatham is directed by Classis to revise the request, taking into consideration points raised in discussion.

A proposal from the church of Glanbrook regarding a classical policy for remuneration for classical pulpit supply and reimbursement for related travel is adopted.

Classis extends its permission to Rodney Vermeulen to speak an edifying Word until June, 2009.

An appeal is dealt with in closed session.

In response to a request from the church of Chatham, Classis grants Rev. Henry Versteeg, in view of his acceptance of the call from the church of Toronto for missionary service in Papua New Guinea, classical release, as per Articles 5 and 9 of the Church Order. Rev. Versteeg is thanked for his service within our classis. Classis grants the church of Chatham's request for monthly pulpit supply.

In response to a request from the church of London, Classis grants Rev. Richard Pot, in view of his acceptance of the call from the church of West Albany, Australia (FRCA), classical release, as per Articles 5 and 9 of the Church Order. Rev. Pot is thanked for his service within our classis. Classis grants the church of London's request for monthly pulpit supply and appoints, as requested, Dr. Gerhard Visscher as Counsellor.

Rev. John Ludwig reports on his visit to Covenant East Classis of the RCUS on March 3, 2009.

The Auditor's report regarding the Fund for Needy Churches is received from the church of Ancaster with gratitude.

The convening church for the next classis meeting is Cornerstone – Hamilton. The suggested officers are: Chair: Rev. John Ludwig; Clerk: Rev. Cornelis Kleyn; Vice-chair: Rev. Doug Vandeburgt. The suggested date is June 17, 2009. The church of Kerwood is appointed to represent Classis at Rev. Versteeg's farewell service in Chatham on May 31 PM; the church of Ancaster is appointed to represent Classis at Rev. Pot's farewell service in London on June 7 PM. The chair notes that censure, per article 34, is unnecessary and expresses appreciation for the fraternal cooperation which characterized the meeting.

The Acts were read and adopted. The Press Release was read and approved. The chairman invites the assembly to sing Hymn 64:1-2 and then leads in closing prayer.

*For Classis,
Rev. Bill DeJong, vice-chair*

Press Release of Classis Central Ontario, March 13, 2009

The classis was convened by Fellowship Church of Burlington. On behalf of Fellowship, the Rev. J.L. van Popta called the meeting to order. We read Psalm 133 and sang the same. Rev. van Popta recalled the memorabilia: Dr. J. de Jong has moved to Shalom Manor; the Rev. J. Mulder could celebrate his eightieth birthday and faces some health concerns; Rev. G. Nederveen could celebrate his twenty-fifth anniversary in the ministry; the Burlington-Waterdown Church continues to experience a vacancy in the office of minister; Jubilee Church in Ottawa has celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. Rev. van Popta then led the assembly in prayer.

The delegates of Ebenezer Church reported that the credentials of the churches were in order and that all the churches were duly represented. Thus Classis could be constituted. Appointed as officers were Rev. J.L. van Popta as chairman; Rev. G.Ph. van Popta as vice-chairman; Rev. J. de Gelder as clerk.

The agenda was adopted.

Brother Ryan Kampen, student at the Theological College, presented himself to be examined for permission to speak an edifying word in the churches. After ascertaining that his supporting documents were in order, he was allowed to present his sermon proposal on Luke 7:31-35. During closed session, it was determined that the sermon was sufficient.

The student manifested an aptitude for preaching the gospel. Classis, then, proceeded to the oral examination on doctrines and creeds. This was led by the Rev. de Gelder and focused on how the Reformed confessions speak about the person and work of the Holy Spirit. In closed session it was determined that the examination was sufficient. On the basis of the examination, and in open session, Student Ryan Kampen was granted permission to speak an edifying word in the churches. Brother Kampen then signed the Form of Subscription for Students and Candidates in Classis Central Ontario. An opportunity was given for the brothers to congratulate Brother Kampen.

Classis welcomed the Rev. R. Anjema, representing Classis Southern Ontario of the United Reformed Churches, who brought greetings on behalf of his classis. As he is the pastor of Hope United Reformed Church of Woodbridge, he spoke thankfully about the very blessed contact between the United Reformed and the

Canadian Reformed churches in the greater Toronto area. Rev. W. den Hollander spoke some fitting words in response expressing thanks to the Lord for the growing fellowship among the churches.

Under Question Period Church Order Article 44, the churches reported that the ministry of the office bearers is being continued, that the decisions of the broader assemblies are being honoured, and that there is no need for advice from Classis for the proper government of their churches.

Bethel Church requested that the Rev. S. 't Hart be released from service as minister. Rev. 't Hart has served as missionary in PNG for more than eleven years and has accepted a call to Baldivis Church in Western Australia. As all the documents were in order, Classis granted this release and commended the Rev. 't Hart to the Lord for his continued ministry of the word and sacraments. Rev. 't Hart has served as a faithful missionary-minister, and words of thanks were expressed to the Lord for what He did through his servant.

Burlington-Waterdown is appointed to be the convening church for the next classis which will be on either June 12 or September 18, 2009. Suggested officers are: chairman, Rev. W. den Hollander; vice-chairman, Rev. J.L. van Popta; clerk, Rev. G. Nederveen.

No questions were asked during personal question period. The chairman ruled that there was no need to exercise censure ad Church Order Article 34.

The acts were adopted and the press release approved.

After Classis sang Hymn 40:5, Rev. de Gelder led in closing prayer.

*G. van Popta
Vice-chairman, e.t.*

