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of Worship?

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Clarion

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YOUR SISTER IN NEW ZEALAND



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Should We Accommodate to a More Evangelical Style of Worship?

Our first duty when facing such questions is to examine ourselves and our worship services and fellowship to make sure that we are not causing an unnecessary offense to those who feel compelled to go away

It is a disconcerting but undeniable fact that over the past number of years not a few Reformed believers have been migrating to evangelical worship services. You may know them as family members or friends. The hemorrhaging continues, especially in urban areas and mostly among the younger members. What is the attraction? Why are they leaving?

Although this is part of a larger cultural pattern as church loyalties weaken everywhere, our first duty when facing such questions is to examine ourselves and our worship services and fellowship to make sure that we are not causing an unnecessary offense to those who feel compelled to go away. Is the preaching clear enough? Is the full gospel proclaimed? Is the proclamation relevant for the needs of the day and the challenges members face in the world in which they live? Have those who are on the way out been given a cold shoulder and no longer feel welcome in the church they have always called home? Asking ourselves these type of questions is critically important. We must not too quickly come to the conclusion that all is well. A church must always be prepared to align itself ever closer to the clear demands of God's Word, also when it concerns public worship and the functioning of the communion of saints.

Having done that and making any necessary improvements, the question also arises whether we should accom-

modate to a more evangelical style of worship in order to keep especially the young people. In answering that question, it is of benefit to touch on some important aspects of worship and compare the classic Reformed understanding with a typical evangelical one. Let us begin with the fact that we meet God in worship.

In the presence of God who is holy

Sunday worship means coming into the presence of God. As the Psalmist exhorted: "Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care" (Ps 95:6-7). As the psalmist indicated, worship involves humbling oneself before God: bowing and kneeling. God after all is our Maker, our Creator, and we are but creatures. Approaching God must therefore be done in awe and reverence. "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God." After all, he is God who "is in heaven and you are on earth" (Eccl 5:1, 2).

Not only is God our Creator who lives in heaven above, but he is also holy and we are by nature sinful. How God's holiness was evident to Israel at Mount Sinai as God came close to his people but warned them not to touch the mountain lest they die. In order to be present before God, the people had to be consecrated and wash

their clothes. God's awesome holiness was such that after God himself spoke the words of the Ten Commandments to his people they trembled and said to Moses, "Let God not speak to us again" (Exod 19-20). Isaiah also experienced something of the overwhelming sense of God's holiness when he saw the Lord seated on a throne with angels crying "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty." Isaiah cried out: "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips." In response, an angel touched his mouth with a live coal and said:

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This issue's editorial is a question: Should we accommodate to a more evangelical style of worship? Dr. Cornelis Van Dam takes a look at the movement of some members to churches with a more evangelical style. In the coming months he will continue this topic in his editorials.

Another question: Were Early Churches Ruled by Elders or a Single Bishop? This article by Michael J. Kruger of the Presbyterian Church in America was originally posted on the author's blog and we are grateful for his permission to reprint.

This issue brings readers the beginning of a series by members of our Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad (CRCA), with updates on the recent developments in some of our overseas sister churches. The first one: "Your Sister in New Zealand" by Rev. Arend Witten.

We are publishing an excerpt from the introduction of a new book entitled, *The Bond of The Covenant Within The Bounds of the Confessions: A Conversation Between the URCNA and CANRC*. Issue 18 also contains Treasures New and Old, Clippings on Politics and Religion, Ray of Sunshine, and You Asked.

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“Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for” (Isa 6:1-7). To come before holy God means one’s sins have to be removed. “Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart” (Ps 24:3-4).

To come before holy God with clean hands and a pure heart involves an enormous cost.

The cost of coming into his presence

God’s Old Testament people knew what that meant. The cost was horrific. Sacrifices had to be brought day after day for the forgiveness of sins. Blood had to flow to atone for transgressions. Israel could only continue to come near to worship after blood had been spilled and the life of countless animals taken away so that they could live and not die in God’s presence. This reality made coming near to God a very solemn and sober experience.

The enormous price that has made our worship in God’s presence possible means we can never take this privilege lightly

If anything, approaching God is or should be an even more solemn experience today. God is still the holy One. When we come near to worship, we are not just drawing near to God at the cost of animal blood. We can only approach our Creator and Redeemer because of the bloody sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Every time we worship it is only possible because our Saviour cried in death agony: “It is finished!” (John 19:30). It was our sins that caused his anguish, suffering, and death. It was our miserable condition that caused the sacred blood to flow. The enormous price that has made our worship in God’s presence possible means we can never take this privilege lightly. We have no real idea of the cost of the hellish suffering and agony involved. So we need to be sober and reverent, coming into the presence of holy God humbly. “Let us be thankful and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:28-29). As the Heidelberg Catechism puts it, “We must use the holy name of God only with fear and reverence” (Q/A 99).

This sober reality does not exclude the joy of salvation. The psalmist exhorts us: “Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs!” (Ps 100:2). But this joy is the profound joy that knows some-

thing of the enormous cost of the LORD being our God and shepherd whose love and faithfulness endures forever (Ps 100:3-5). It is a cost which we owed but which Christ took to his own account.

A seeker-friendly service?

The secular world does not know of true reverence and awe for God. We live in a time of irreverence and lack of respect for what is holy. The current godless Western culture derides the sacred and has no patience with it. It even exults sin. That means that biblical worship is counter-cultural and out of place in our society. Those who do not know God and are flippant and casual about things divine would therefore feel totally out of place in divine worship.

Churches who want to reach the unregenerate (and don’t we all want to do that) therefore face an enormous temptation to try to bridge the cultural divide by making the worship services more attractive to those outside. They want to be a “seeker-friendly church” by importing into Sunday worship elements that may make outsiders feel more comfortable. The worship “culture” can change with such simple things as encouraging people to dress down on Sundays so those coming in from outside feel less embarrassment for not being in their Sunday best. The minister attempts to be a bit more casual and sound not quite so authoritative. The sermon becomes the message with lots of anecdotes. After all, people expect to be entertained. Furthermore, the message must be very simple to understand for people are not used to doing a lot of thinking. Quick sound bites of catchy, down-to-earth advice go over best. It must especially be practical. Since people want to have variety and be amused, replace the organ and piano with a band and / or soloist or choir. After all, such an arrangement also allows more people to participate. After all, we live in a democratic culture where everyone is expected to take part.

The list of suggested changes goes on. You could also introduce a coffee hour before the service to encourage people to come or even allow them to take the coffee with them into the service. You get the idea. Make the church more friendly, more like those “successful” evangelical churches that attract so many people. But, in so trying to reach the outsider, the focus shifts from God and his holiness and the need for repentance and renewal to having a good time together, listening to a snappy, easily digestible message with lots of good concrete advice, interspersed

with enjoying some of the best musical talent available in the congregation. The imagined needs of the unconverted becomes the focus, even to the point that a popular evangelical church in our area holds three identical services: late Saturday afternoon and two on Sunday morning. You can have the Sunday “off” if that’s more convenient and keep the Saturday more or less for yourself by attending worship on that day around supper time.

Churches face an enormous temptation to try to bridge the cultural divide by making the worship services more attractive to those outside

It goes without saying that we should welcome guests with open arms into our church services and pray that the gospel may reach their hearts and lead them to faith in Christ. But we need to keep in mind that the purpose of a church service is to worship God by coming into his holy presence with awe and reverence and according to the demands of his Word. By worshipping, the church members separate themselves from the world and show that ultimately their allegiance is not to the culture and likes of this world, but to the one true God. A church service underlines the line of antithesis and hostility that exists between the world of sin and the congregation of

the Lord. Since the purpose of a church service is to worship God, its first function is not to attract outsiders and win converts. The fact of the matter is that a holy solemn assembly in awe before the living God is simply not appealing to the unbeliever.

It has been rightly said that “worship is a subversive and counter-cultural act of an alien people, who forsaking the world, listen to the voice of her master saying: ‘follow me.’ True worship, then, will be odd and perhaps even weird to the watching world. This oddness is not lamentable but essential to the church’s faithfulness and witness. For if the gospel is foolishness, it is foolish only to those who do not believe.” Furthermore, “the church must reject the claim that the worship is old-fashioned, irrelevant, and isolated from the ‘real world.’ For believers, the church at worship is the real world. The gathering of the saints in the holy of holies is the eschatological foretaste of the new heavens and the new earth, the reality to which all history is headed.”¹

To answer the question of the title of this article: no, we should never accommodate nor take the first steps to a more evangelical style for our worship service. Too much is at stake. Proper worship is about meeting God and is at the heart of who we are as his people in his presence. There is of course more to this topic, but that will have to wait for another time.

¹ D.G. Hart and John R. Meuther, *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (2002), 34. C





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Christ is the Bright Morning Star

***Jesus testified, "I am the Root and Offspring of David,
and the bright Morning Star."***

(Revelation 22:16)

In Scripture the Lord Jesus is called by many different names. Each of them tell us something about who Jesus is, or why he was sent into this world. In Revelation 22:16 we have one of the most interesting names given to Jesus. Jesus says, "I am. . . the bright morning star." What does that mean? Why does Jesus call himself by this name? Does the fact that Jesus is our bright morning star give us any comfort or hope for the future?

To understand Jesus' words we need to go back to a prophecy made by Balaam in Numbers 24. King Balak of Moab hired Balaam to curse the Israelites. Yet the LORD did not allow Balaam to curse his people. Instead the LORD caused Balaam to bless them. Balaam spoke about what he saw in a vision from God. He said, "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the sons of Sheth." (Num 24:17). With these words Balaam proclaimed the coming of the Messiah, the Redeemer of God's people. What is noteworthy is that the Messiah is pic-

tured as a star coming out of Jacob.

The days before Christ's coming were a time of great Messianic expectation. This was heightened by the arrival of wise men from the east. They came to Jerusalem saying, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." (Matt 2:2). In ancient times the sighting of a new star was associated with the birth of a king. Thus it is through the wise men that the Lord revealed the fact that Israel's Messiah had been born.

All this provides a background for the fact that Jesus calls himself "the bright Morning Star." The connection between Jesus and the morning star is made more often in Scripture (2 Pet 1:19; Rev 2:28). Do you know what the morning star is? It is a reference to that bright "star" that appears in the sky at certain times of the year. It is one of the brightest stars in the sky. Actually it is not really a star, but the planet Venus. It reflects the rays of the sun just before the break of a new day.

We know that the Lord has given

the sun to shine by day, and the moon and stars to illumine the night. Yet the morning star serves a different purpose. It signifies the coming of a new day. Soon after you see the morning star rise up, the birds will begin to sing. Within an hour of the appearance of the morning star, the sun will begin to rise. The context in Revelation 22 is filled with references to the fact that the Lord Jesus is coming soon.

Thus the fact that Jesus calls himself the bright Morning Star comforts us with the glad tidings that our Saviour is coming again on the clouds of heaven. No matter what struggles and sorrows we face in this life, a better day is dawning. Christ is the Dayspring from on high, who will comfort us by drawing nigh. He will disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and death's dark shadows he will put to flight. Every time we see the bright morning star in the sky, we are reminded of how our Saviour is coming again. He is coming to bring us life and light.



For Further Study

1. If Christ is our bright Morning Star, how can this name also be attributed to Satan in Isaiah 14:12?
2. Peter talks about the morning star rising in our hearts (2 Pet 1:19). What does he mean by this?
3. How does the fact that Jesus is called our bright Morning Star comfort you and give you hope?

Were Early Churches Ruled by Elders or a Single Bishop?

This article was originally published at www.michaeljkruger.com on July 13, 2015. It is reprinted with permission.

There is a (seemingly) never-ending debate amongst theologians and pastors about the proper form of government for the church. For generations, Christians have disagreed about what leadership structure the church ought to use. From the bishop-led Anglicans to the informal Brethren churches, there is great diversity.

And one of the fundamental flash points in this debate is the practice of the early church. What form of government did the earliest Christians have? Of course, early Christian polity is a vast and complex subject with many different issues in play. But, I want to focus in upon a narrow one: Were the earliest churches ruled by a plurality of elders or a single bishop?

Now it needs to be noted from the outset that by the end of the second century, most churches were ruled by a single bishop. For whatever set of reasons, moniscopacy had won the day. Many scholars attribute this development to Ignatius.

But, what about earlier? Was there a single-bishop structure in the first and early second century?

The New Testament evidence itself seems to favour a plurality of elders as the standard model. The book of Acts tells us that as the apostles planted churches, they appointed “elders” (from the Greek term πρεσβυτέρος) to oversee them (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2; 20:17). Likewise, Titus is told to “appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5).

A very similar word, ἐπισκοπος (“bishop” or “overseer”), is used in other contexts to describe what appears to be the same ruling office (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:1-7). The overlap between these two terms is evident in Acts 20:28 when Paul, while addressing the Ephesian “elders” (πρεσβυτέρος), declares that “The Holy Spirit has made

you overseers (ἐπισκόπους).” Thus, the New Testament writings indicate that the office of elder/bishop is functionally one and the same.

But, what about the church after the New Testament? Did they maintain the model of multiple elders? Three quick examples suggest they maintained this structure at least for a little while:

1. At one point, the *Didache* addresses the issue of church government directly, “And so, elect for yourselves bishops (ἐπισκόπους) and deacons who are worthy of the Lord, gentle men who are not fond of money, who are true and approved” (15.1). It is noteworthy that the author mentions plural bishops – not a single ruling bishop – and that he places these bishops alongside the office of deacon, as Paul himself does (e.g., Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:1-13). Thus, as noted above, it appears that the bishops described here are essentially equivalent to the office of “elder.”
2. A letter known as *1 Clement* (c.96) also has much to say about early church governance. This letter is attributed to a “Clement” – whose identity remains uncertain – who represents the church in Rome and writes to the church at Corinth to deal with the fallout of a recent turnover in leadership. The author is writing to convince (not command) the Corinthians to reinstate its bishops (elders) who were wrongly deposed. The letter affirms the testimony of the book of Acts when it tells us that the apostles initially appointed “bishops (ἐπισκόπους) and deacons” in the various churches they visited (42.4). After the time of the apostles, bishops were appointed “by other reputable men with the entire church giving its approval” (44.3). This is an echo of the *Didache* which indicated that bishops were elected by the church.

3. The *Shepherd of Hermas* (c.150) provides another confirmation of this governance structure in the second century. After Hermas writes down the angelic vision in a book, he is told, “you will read yours in this city, with the presbyters who lead the church” (Vis. 8.3). Here we are told that the church leadership structure is a plurality of “presbyters” (πρεσβυτέρων) or elders. The author also uses the term “bishop,” but always in the plural and often alongside the office of deacon (Vis. 13.1; Sim. 104.2).

In sum, the NT texts and texts from the early second century indicate that a plurality of elders was the standard structure in the earliest stages. But, as noted above, the idea of a singular bishop began to dominate by the end of the second century.

What led to this transition? Most scholars argue that it was the heretical battles fought by the church in the second century that led them to turn to key leaders to defend and represent the church.

This transition is described remarkably well by Jerome himself:

The presbyter is the same as the bishop, and before parties had been raised up in religion by the provocations of Satan, the churches were governed by the Senate of the presbyters. But as each one sought to appropriate to himself those whom he had baptized, instead of leading them to Christ, it was appointed that one of the presbyters, elected by his colleagues, should



be set over all the others, and have chief supervision over the general well-being of the community. . . . Without doubt it is the duty of the presbyters to bear in mind that by the discipline of the Church they are subordinated to him who has been given them as their head, but it is fitting that the bishops, on their side, do not forget that if they are set over the presbyters, it is the result of tradition, and not by the fact of a particular institution by the Lord (Comm Tit 1.7).

Jerome’s comments provide a great summary of this debate. While the single-bishop model might have developed for practical reasons, the plurality of elders model seems to go back to the very beginning.

C



Your Sister in New Zealand

CRCA series

Dutch scholar Herman Selderhuis has compared the Reformed church structure to Ikea furniture. “It fits everywhere,” he says. “You see it all over the world.”¹ It is not tied to a particular culture or political system, but comes from Scripture. And so in very different countries we have Reformed sister churches with Reformed church government not only fitting but thriving. This article is the first of a series by members of our Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad (CRCA) with updates on the recent developments in some of our overseas sister churches.

The Reformed Churches of New Zealand

The Reformed Churches of New Zealand (RCNZ) have been our sister churches since Synod Smithers 2007. Like us they were established in the 1950s with the wave of post-war Dutch immigration. With a membership of around 3500 persons spread across some twenty churches they are organized into three presbyteries on the North and South islands of New Zealand. Interestingly the nomenclature of presbytery and session is used in New Zealand instead of classis and consistory, reflecting the confluence of Presbyterian and Dutch Reformed folks in the formation RCNZ. These churches met in Synod in Bishopdale (just outside of the city of Christchurch) from September 11-18 2014. I was sent as a delegate by the CRCA for the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC).

Although half a world away, Synod Bishopdale could express appreciation for the privilege of cooperating with the CanRC in the work of mission. A kiwi missionary Rev. Alan Douma serves alongside Revs. C. Kleyn and H. Versteeg in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. Along with PNG the New Zealand churches are involved in work in the neighbouring Solomon Islands and a Radio Ministry in South-East Asia. Their synod exercises oversight over the work of mission and Synod Bishopdale also adopted a comprehensive missions handbook to guide this work. An edition is available at www.rcnz.org.nz.

The RCNZ presently enjoys sister church relations with a number of church bonds in other parts of the world. Representatives were present from the OPC, the URCNA, the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia, and the Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika (GKSA). These relationships are taken seriously. A strong appeal was given to the GKSA on the matter of women serving as deacons. Concern was also expressed about developments in our mutual Dutch sister, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (RCN). The RCNZ expressed concern that “the RCN synod has not clearly rejected the hermeneutical foundations of the conclusion and recommendations of the ‘Men/Women in the Church’ report.” Synod instructed the Inter church Relations Committee to “seek clarification from the Committee on Relations with the Churches Abroad of the RCN regarding these decisions, since unless they constitute a clear withdrawal from this hermeneutical direction. . . our sister-church relationship may be affected negatively.” Also present as at Synod Bishopdale was our other sister church in Australasia, the Free Reformed Churches of Australia (FRCA) represented by Rev. R. Pot, and Br. M. Bax.

The CanRC Synod Carman had mandated the CRCA to encourage the RCNZ “to continue to find ways to grow closer to the FRCA” because as yet they were not sister



churches. The impediment for the FRCA has been that the RCNZ has had a sister church relationship with the Christian Reformed Churches of Australia (CRCAus). This connection goes back some sixty years and so there are many close ties. Families have members on either side of the Tasman Sea, and also ministers have moved back and forth. But the ecclesiastical relationship has been under strain in recent years and Synod Bishopdale finalized and adopted rules which placed that relationship with the CRCAus on a different footing. They are no longer sister churches and have adopted safeguards for future cooperation. (Since then the FRCA have entered into a sister church relationship with the RCNZ, at Synod Baldivis in June 2015).

Presently the RCNZ do not have their own seminary for the training for the ministry. They send their men overseas. Our Synod Carman 2013 decided to invite them to become acquainted with CRTS, if it might be of benefit for RCNZ students. In 2014 one RCNZ student was studying at the Reformed Theological Seminary in Geelong, Australia and two at Mid America Reformed Seminary in the United States. In the recent past RCNZ churches have supported their young men at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in the U.S. The RCNZ deputies for the training of the ministry endeavour to supervise the training of the ministry by visiting the students at these seminaries where possible and keeping in contact with the faculty. Realistically to add another seminary such as CRTS to their list might spread their resources thinner. And so at this time our institution may not be needed by the RCNZ. They also enjoy close ties to the URCNA (with two former OCRC/URCNA ministers in their ranks) and to conserv-

ative American Presbyterians (OPC ministers Revs. G.I. Williamson and J. Sawyer having served in RCNZ).

Contrary to first impressions in Australasia they also speak the English language and so like us they were faced with choices about their English Bible translation. Up till now, the RCNZ had formally adopted the NASB and the 1984NIV. But in view of the 1984NIV becoming unavailable, the ESV and NKJV were added as acceptable translations for use on the pulpit. The 2011NIV, however, was rejected.

This is also the season, it seems, for new song books in English speaking Reformed churches. Some twelve years in the making, Synod Bishopdale could receive with much joy and thankfulness a new song book, called *Sing to the Lord*. It comprises the 150 Psalms and some 380 hymns. Some songs are familiar and some are relatively new, such as the well known hymns by Stuart Townend and Keith Getty. The new volume was used with frequent and good effect throughout Synod.

The Reformed Churches of New Zealand is a federation separated from us by the Pacific Ocean, yet they face similar questions and challenges to us. They seek to be faithful to Scripture as summarized in the Reformed confessions in their church life. That's an approach we trust is even more durable than Ikea furniture.

¹ Selderhuis, H 2013, 'The Heidelberg Catechism: The secret of its success.' Speech presented at the 2013 "Your Only Comfort Conference – Celebrating 450 Years with the Heidelberg Catechism," 18 January 2013, <http://www.heidelberg-catechism.com/en/2013-conference.html>.





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Iran's Designs on Israel

Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, who holds the most powerful political post in that Islamic nation, has written a book (published in July 2015) in which he lays out his plan for Israel and Palestine. Veteran Iranian-born journalist, Amir Taheri, highlights some of the contents of this book on the website of the Gatestone Institute. This is a non-partisan international policy council and think tank dedicated to educating the public on what the mainstream media fails to report. It promotes, among other causes, democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. This article quotes Taheri's analysis of the book.

Khamenei makes it clear in his book that Israel has no right to exist as a state. Taheri notes that Israel is considered an enemy for three reasons. First, "It is a loyal 'ally of the American Great Satan' and a key element in its 'evil scheme' is to dominate 'the heartland of the Ummah,'" that is, the collective community of Islamic peoples. Second, "Israel has waged war on Muslims on a number of occasions, thus becoming a 'hostile infidel.'" Third, "Israel is a special case because it occupies Jerusalem, which Khamenei describes as 'Islam's third Holy City.' He intimates that one of his 'most cherished wishes' is to one day pray in Jerusalem." He claims he is not anti-Semitic, but is guided by "well-established Islamic principles," such as, that once a country was under Islamic rule it should never again be ceded to non-Muslims.

The Ayatollah insists that he is not interested in massacring the Jews in traditional warfare, but that he is waging a war of attrition against the Jewish state so that life becomes so unpleasant in Israel that people decide to leave.

Khamenei boasts about the success of his plans to make life impossible for Israelis through terror attacks from Lebanon and Gaza. His latest scheme is to recruit "fighters" in the West Bank to setup Hezbollah-style units. "We have intervened in anti-Israel matters, and it brought victory in the 33day war by Hezbollah

against Israel in 2006 and in the 22day war between Hamas and Israel in the Gaza Strip," he boasts.

Khamenei describes Israel as "a cancerous tumor" whose elimination would mean that "the West's hegemony and threats will be discredited" in the Middle East. In its place, he boasts, "the hegemony of Iran will be promoted. . . ." In Khamenei's analysis, once the cost of staying in Israel has become too high for many Jews, Western powers, notably the U.S., which has supported the Jewish state for decades, might decide that the cost of doing so is higher than possible benefits. Thanks to President Obama, the U.S. has already distanced itself from Israel to a degree unimaginable a decade ago.

Khamenei's wish is a single state called Palestine. It "would be under Muslim rule but would allow non-Muslims, including some Israeli Jews who could prove 'genuine roots' in the region, to stay as 'protected minorities.'" A referendum would be held in what is now Israel and the West Bank and Gaza in which "all Palestinians and their descendants, wherever they are, would be able to vote, while Jews 'who have come from other places' would be excluded.

"Khamenei does not mention any figures for possible voters in his dream referendum. But studies by the Foreign Ministry in Tehran suggest that at least eight million Palestinians across the globe would be able to vote, against 2.2 million Jews 'acceptable' as future secondclass citizens of the new Palestine." And so the Ayatollah "is certain of the results of his proposed referendum."

Should Khamenei's book be taken seriously? Certainly. Iran is already actively seeking political and religious domination over the Middle East. In any case, its continuing and unwavering support for terror strikes against Israel from Gaza and Lebanon should leave no doubt about its designs on that nation.

C

Correction: In the article "The Politics of Sex Education" (*Clarion* August 14, 2015, p. 445) the government of Premier Wynne was wrongly identified as being NDP. It is of course a Liberal government.

cvd

California Covenant Conversation



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This is an excerpt from the introduction of a new book entitled, The Bond of The Covenant Within The Bounds of the Confessions: A Conversation Between the URCNA and CANRC. Ordering information is at the end of the article.

On a hot summer night in Visalia, California four men sat down together for a theological conversation, a colloquium. The night was June 4, 2014. The discussion, or colloquium, took place in the middle of the schedule of the Synod of the United Reformed Churches in North America, in the presence of all of its delegates and before a number of interested guests. The conversation that night focused in on the doctrine of the covenants in Scripture. This has always been a hot topic among the Reformed churches, and sadly, a teaching that has been at the centre of theological disputes and church schisms throughout the generations.

On this particular evening, however, cooler heads prevailed. To be sure, the discussion was not cold, or cold-hearted. Not by any stretch of the imagination. How could it have been as the dialogue partners engaged one another on that which is most fundamental to the Reformed faith, yes, to the Christian religion – the blessing of our fellowship with the living, Triune God, in Christ! The discussions were calm and careful, but appropriately warm and engaging as the participants engaged one another winsomely and in a brotherly fashion with the Scriptures, and our Reformed Confessions.

The participants in the dialogue were four theological professors who had come to this conversation in California from across North America. Two represented the United Reformed Churches in North America, Dr. Robert Godfrey, president of Westminster Seminary in California, and Dr. Cornel Venema, president of Mid-America Reformed Seminary. The other two came from Hamilton, ON, Canada; Dr. Ted Van Raalte and Dr. Jason Van Vliet, are both professors of the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary.

In context of the ongoing merger discussions between the Canadian Reformed Churches and the United Reformed Churches, the challenge for the evening was to seek to give an answer to the question, whether there is agreement between our federations of churches within the confessions on the doctrine of the covenant? In a warm, congenial, and fraternal manner, the discussion partners were able, not superficially, but seriously and honestly to engage the issues. They were able to do so comfortably, with helpful injections of humour, demonstrating their mutual respect and appreciation for one another as brothers. The end-result was a blessing both in its clarifying of the issues and in the way it helped to remove a deterrent in the ongoing challenge to pursue more complete unity. The upshot of the discussion was that the colloquium participants, as careful scholars and respected leaders and churchmen in our respective federations, could together conclude that for whatever differences of expression on the matter, and despite differing historical developments, we are confessionally united.

The background

The United Reformed Churches and the Canadian Reformed Churches have been in a Phase 2 – Ecclesiastical Fellowship relationship since the decisions of their respective synods (Neerlandia and Escondido) in 2001. The hope and expressed commitment of the churches when entering into such a sister-church relationship has always been that, should the Lord in his grace bless and prosper our efforts as churches, one day full merger or organic union would come to pass, making the two bodies one. Since the 2001 decisions, the Lord has blessed and prospered the relationship between our churches, especially in Canada where our respective churches, being in close proximity to one another, have come to know and appreciate each other more and more. It is significant that the closer and more frequent the interaction has been, the greater is the interest and openness toward pressing onward in this endeavour.

On the broader level, our relationship has not been without its challenges, however. We have been learning over the years that this is a relationship that needs the Lord's blessing and must not be pursued lightly, superficially, or hastily.

The challenges

From our observations and experience, we would characterize three types of concerns that have developed and persisted over against the prospect of full unity between these two federations. The first is theological, pertaining to the doctrine of the covenants. The second is church political. Given negative past experiences with hierarchicalism, there are continued fears concerning perceived hierarchical tendencies in the Proposed Joint Church Order. The third has to do with the will to ecumenism generally; some are not convinced that churches that share a confession are required to seek organizational unity. Our conviction is that if the first two types of objections could be addressed to our mutual satisfaction, many of the hesitations with regards to the third could also be alleviated.

The intent of the *Colloquium* was to address the first, foundational matter, namely the doctrine of the covenants. With the appearance on the North American scene of the Federal Vision movement, and with the response to these developments by the United Reformed Churches in the way of Pastoral Advice (Synod Schererville, 2007) and Doctrinal Affirmations (Synod London, 2010), the perception has arisen among some that the Canadian Reformed Churches are more tolerant of Federal Vision teachings than are the United Reformed. At the same time the Canadian Reformed, given their own experiences historically with the Liberation of 1944, have expressed their own apprehensions, particularly in terms of their general aversion to what they perceive as the a danger of making extra-confessional statements. Is it possible that in our respective concerns over against one another, we have ended up speaking past one another? Certainly, if there is to be ecumenical progress between us we need to be convinced that the doctrine of the covenant taught in our respective churches can live healthily side by side in one federation within the bounds of our confessions.

The Colloquium: A conversation proposed

In order to face the challenge directly and thoroughly, a colloquium was organized, to be held in the context of a URC synod. Four men were assembled for the task, all of whom were at the same time reputable scholars and respected churchmen. In preparation for the colloquium, each pair of men was asked to interact with the other pair in an effort to come to an agreement together concerning the matters of potential concern. Papers and responses were then prepared and distributed to the consistories of the churches in preparation for the URC synod, where the four professors discussed their conclusions, concerns, and interacted with one another publicly before the delegates.

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The hope and expectation was that such a discussion would promote greater confidence in our mutual adherence to our confessions. The participants, as men of eminent qualification and ability, as well as of integrity, were not asked to participate in a sell-job for unity. They understood very clearly that they would serve the Lord and the churches best with a clear articulation and engagement of the concerns. We believe they succeeded in helping the churches both better to understand the issues and to be the more convinced of the confessional unity enjoyed between our federations.

The fruitful contribution

A word is in order regarding the particularly helpful contributions of the participants.

Dr. Venema, with his breadth of knowledge and experience in the field of Reformed Dogmatics, served the colloquium very well, both in getting the discussion going as well as in having it focused on the areas of greatest



Dr. Ted Van Raalte, Dr. Jason Van Vliet, Rev. John A Bouwers, Dr. Cornel Venema, Dr. Robert Godfrey

potential challenge. We would not have been helped by skirting the challenges. Dr. Venema's appreciation, Bavinck-like, for something of the historical Reformed consensus on the matters that most needed to be discussed among us, provided the indispensable foundation that enabled a discussion of considerable substance and profit to take place.

Dr. Godfrey's contribution was also significant. His remarks regarding the URC being the more *presbyterianized* over against the Canadian Reformed who have not experienced as much of that influence, were very trenchant and will continue to serve us in our understanding of each other and in the way forward. It was particularly helpful that these remarks of Dr. Godfrey were made in the context of his recognition of and deepened appreciation for the confessional unity that exists between us and the Canadian Reformed Churches. Dr. Godfrey's expressed challenges to the Canadian Reformed brothers in the three areas of objectivity vs. subjectivity, communal vs. personal and the area of ecclesiastical exclusivity,

were helpfully pithy and focused the dialogue profitably. His periodic injections of humour helped us to be comfortable with each other and contributed wonderfully to the fraternal spirit we enjoyed together.

Dr. Van Vliet and Dr. Van Raalte are to be thanked for their patient willingness to be placed on the hot seat in the midst of the URC synodical assembly, to face the difficult questions, and, even for the way in which they could face challenging anecdotal questions that were later directed to them from the floor. Their kind, gracious, thorough, and helpful answers modelled a spirit of Christ-likeness that was an encouragement to all of us, set an excellent tone for the colloquium and exemplified the grace we all continue to require, going forward.

Dr. Van Vliet began his verbal presentation with the awe of Abraham in Genesis 15:12 in order that we might keep perspective and approach the wonder of God's grace to us in covenant with a deep sense of awe! His patient, thorough instruction was flavoured with down to earth and fruitful analogies. Most helpful of all were his repeat-

ed relevant references to Scripture, to our confessions and even to our tertiary standards, the liturgical forms.

Dr. Van Raalte's use of Scripture, confessions, and our liturgical forms was equally prominent and helpful. The particular portion of the pre-synod write-up that has proved very helpful was where he wrote: "We agree that in the decisive matter of the believer's justification, law and gospel are antithetical concepts." What also served the advancement of our discussion is Dr. Van Raalte's familiarity and comfort with the developments of Reformed theology in the Scholastic period of the Reformed Orthodox. We trust his interest and expertise in this area will continue both to serve the Canadian Reformed Churches as well as our developing relationship, ecumenically. Finally, Dr. Van Raalte's words at the closing of the colloquium evening directing us to Christ from John 12:21 – "Sir, we would see Jesus" – gloriously brought our discussion full circle and left us with the focus where it should be, on our faithful Saviour.

The outcome

So what was accomplished?

Much in every way. When the participants were able to conclude that in spite of our historical differences and varieties of expression (and there are varieties of expres-

sion *within* each federation as well), we do nevertheless find each other's positions within confessional bounds, it means we have, and ought to enjoy, fundamental confessional unity.

This is a far reaching conclusion that must not be overlooked or forgotten. The universal response communicated to us subsequent to the colloquium, by both ecumenical enthusiast and skeptic alike, was that the colloquium was a resounding success, a seriously helpful contribution and a tremendous blessing. We ought to rejoice in it. We need to hold each other to it. We need to stand upon it and live out of it. Ecumenically speaking, as we live up to and out of our confession, we can see that we have a place to stand and a place from which to move forward, in God's good time.

Dr. Alan Strange, the Orthodox Presbyterian ecumenical delegate to Synod, remarked to several of us afterward, that the Holy Spirit's blessing on the colloquium compelled him to say that that day was his best personal experience at an ecclesiastical assembly, ever. The lesson, of course, is that as we wait for, pray for, and look for the Spirit's blessing, not forcing the issue, but thoroughly working matters through, we can anticipate even more fruitful progress, with the Lord's blessing in the Lord's time.



The book *The Bond of The Covenant Within The Bounds of The Confessions* (150 pages, edited by John A. Bouwers and Theodore G. Van Raalte) includes all of the pre-colloquium documents, the colloquium and discussion, and some further exchanges.

It can be ordered in hard copy for 6.00 USD or 8.00 CAD plus shipping from major retailers like Amazon, Barnes & Nobles, etc. It is also available as an ebook in various formats for about \$2.00.



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Q

Could you tell me what the significance is of the handshake before and after the service between the minister and the serving elder? I have been told that it's a sign of theological assent to what will or has been said. Is this true?

A

The handshake in the Reformed churches is a unique (or perhaps a peculiar) custom or tradition, the origin of which is rather nebulous. There are quite a number of explanations going around about its history, meaning, and significance, yet none of these can be adduced with any status of authority or with any measure of certainty. As far as its origin is concerned, the most plausible explanation would be the one that points back to the days of the Great Reformation when in many places worship services were conducted in secret or in places outside the public eye. Ministers in these days had to go “underground” so that few people knew them. As sign of recognition and authorization one of the elders would shake the minister's hand to indicate that he was known to the Consistory and would be speaking with their permission legitimately.

Whether this historical background is correct or not, the common understanding of this practice still attributes to this handshake the aspect of *extending authority* to the minister. The elder who shakes the minister's hand represents the consistory (and in them the congregation) and *authorizes* him to officiate in the worship service, proclaim God's Word, and lead in the ministry of the prayers for and on behalf of the congregation. At this time the handshake just signifies this authorization, even though an elder may add to this a word of encouragement, saying “Strength!” or “Blessings!” Hence, on behalf of the consistory and congregation the minister leads in the ministry of the Word and prayers. Ultimately it's Christ who through his office bearers and congregation gives the minister the mandate to lead in worship and proclamation.

The handshake at the end of the service also comes with a variety of meanings and explanations. It's seen mostly as a *confirmation* of the fact that the minister has officiated on behalf of the consistory and the serving elder expresses this by the handshake. The handshake could also be interpreted as an expression of *blessing* or of the *desire* that the Word as proclaimed may *be blessed*. The minister fulfilled his mandate and carried out his task and the serving elder expresses by his handshake the involvement of the consistory in this task (it's been called “the hand of communion” in that understanding).

The handshake is not meant as a public testimony of agreement or an endorsement (or not) of the message proclaimed; even less should the elder use the handshake or the refusal of it, as an act of censure in the event the elder disagrees with the ministers exposition of God's Word. This is not to say, however, that there are examples and incidents where an elder disagreed with the message so much that he refused to shake the minister's hand. There are other ways in which such disagreement should be conveyed and presented, namely within the meeting of the consistory. In such a situation the elder would be wiser to shake the minister's hand (as an acknowledgement that he officiated on behalf of the consistory) and convey to him in the consistory room that he would like to discuss the sermon with the minister in the presence of the other elders who also share responsibility for the worship service.

*Is there something you've been wanting to know?
An answer you've been looking for?*

Ask us a question!

Please direct questions to Rev. W. den Hollander
denhollanderw@gmail.com
23 Kinsman Drive, Binbrook, ON L0R 1C0





Janell DeBoer

Hi, my name is Janell DeBoer. I live in St. Ann's with my parents, two sisters, and my brother on a pig farm. I am thankful the Lord has been with me for the last twenty-five years, and pray he will continue to guide me in my life. I have spina bifida, which has resulted in no feelings or movement from my waist down. I face many challenges with spina bifida; in January of 2014 I went on dialysis because my kidneys

failed. For over seven months I would go on the machine for three hours every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Then in September I had a successful kidney transplant. A big thanks to my mom who donated her kidney! For six months I couldn't go to the school to volunteer because my immune system was down, but now a year later I thank the Lord that I am very healthy.

I am able to enjoy many activities throughout the year. During the school year, I volunteer at Attercliffe School for three days a week. I do marking for the teachers, answer phones, and help in the library. I love interacting with the kids, and sometimes I read them stories. At home I enjoy doing latch hooking and making cards. I also enjoy swimming in our pool during the warm weather or going in my scooter to visit my grandmother down the road. I sometimes go shopping and play games with my sisters. I graduated from ACRES and Guido de Bres High school. I would love to chat with you, and you can contact me through email at janell.90@gmail.com.

October

- 3 JANELL DEBOER will be 25**
6311 Silver Street, RR 2, St. Ann's, ON L0R 1Y0
- 3 JEANETTE WIERINGA will be 21**
610 Belsyde Avenue East, RR 4, Fergus, ON N1M 2W5
- 6 HENRY VANDERVLIT will be 48**
c/o Anchor Home, 361 Thirty Road
RR 2, Beamsville, ON L0R 1B2
- 12 LEONA BARENDREGT will be 32**
Box 2184, Smithers, BC VOJ 2N0
- 13 NANCY SCHIPPER will be 59**
c/o Beacon Home
653 Broad Street West, Dunnville, ON N1A 1T8
- 17 ALAN BREUKELMAN will be 49**
19th Street, Coaldale, AB T1M 1G4
- 21 CAMERON DANTUMA will be 24**
c/o Lighthouse
6528 1st Line, RR 3, Fergus, ON N1M 2W4
- 22 NELENA HOF SINK will be 55**
c/o Bethesda Clearbrook Home
32553 Willingdon Crescent, Clearbrook, BC V2T 1S2
- 28 MARY ANN DEWIT will be 59**
31126 Kingfisher Drive, Abbotsford, BC V2T 5K4

Congratulations to the many of you celebrating a birthday this month! We wish you the Lord's blessing and a wonderful day with family and friends.

If you have somebody to add to the birthday list or contact information that needs to be changed please let me know.

A NOTE TO PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

If there are any address or other changes that I need to be aware of please let me know as soon as possible.

Rachel Vis

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