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Preaching To Covenant Children

There is a right way and a wrong way to use the precious doctrine of the covenant. The right way is to stress the particular spiritual advantages which our covenant children enjoy. Priceless is the Christian upbringing; the hearing from infancy on about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and the salvation God provided through His only Son. Also stressed must be the special responsibility placed upon those in the covenant that, as heirs of God's kingdom, they are to respond to the promises of God.

Unfortunately, there is often a dis-

inction made between covenant preaching and evangelical preaching. This distinction is based upon a misconception of the relationship between the covenant and the Gospel.

The covenant promise given to our children should not be weakened by explaining away its meaning. This is often done by teaching that when, upon coming to the years of discretion, they believe in Jesus Christ, they will be saved. If this is all there is to the covenant promise, there is no advantage whatsoever in being a covenant child. Such a promise is

nothing more than the gospel invitation that comes to all people everywhere, whether they are born in God fearing or godless families.

We do not do the covenant justice when we declare that the only advantage given to our covenant children is that of their Christian training. Certainly we expect that through our Christian schools, catechism, Sunday Schools, etc., it is much easier for our children to turn away from sin and on to God than for those who are born and raised outside of the Christian Church. Yet, we must realize that if that is all there were to the covenant, the advantages would be negligible.

The covenant, in the narrower sense, refers to the privileges of the



Volume 54, No. 7 (ISSN 8750-5754) (USPS 633-980) "And the three companies blew the trumpets...and held THE TORCHES in their left hands, and THE TRUMPETS in their right hands...and they cried, 'The sword of Jehovah and of Gideon'" (Judges 7:20).

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children of believers. Never absent from these privileges should be the presentation of the Gospel. To say that the Gospel is summed up in the words, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" ignores the fact that Paul added these words: "you and your household" (Acts 16:31). Many Christians fail to realize that God intends to save families, not merely individuals. One of the greatest weaknesses in American Christianity is that it has lost sight of the covenant in the narrower sense. Individualism rules in America. That is why we see such a breakdown in Christian education, catechism teaching, and family devotions.

Our baptized children, like the children of the Old Testament, are sons and daughters of the kingdom. There was a time when many Christians of Reformed persuasion did not understand that the children of believers were "holy seed"; that such children have special promises and privileges; that as a rule God elects His people from among the sons and daughters of those who are members of His church; and that the Holy Spirit works His saving grace among the lambs as well as the sheep.

Covenant children have the promise that God will be their God. To them is the promise of the Holy Spirit, according to Peter's emphatic declaration in his Pentecost Sermon (Acts 2:39). That means that the Spirit of God works in the hearts of believers and also in the hearts of their children. The evidence for this is clear and undisputed.

True enough, experience shows plainly that not all baptized children

are regenerated. Some do fall away. But it also proves just as conclusively that the great majority of Christians are those whose parents feared God and believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. God perpetuates His Church from generation to generation through the children of believers. There is only one explanation for this: God is forever fulfilling His promise that He is the God of believers and their seed.

Certainly, there are those who have received baptism as infants who go astray and die in their sins. Every church consistory has had to deal with them. Even in the Old Testament, there were those in the covenant who sought their own pleasure rather than the things of God. Esau and Achan come quickly to mind in that respect. Nevertheless, God's promise to the covenant child is a very definite and a very sincere promise.

What then is the right way to preach and teach the covenant? We are to do full justice to the covenant promise. We must maintain that our children are to be regarded and dealt with as holy seed. We need entertain no doubts concerning the salvation of covenant children who die in infancy. For those who grow up, we must hold unwaveringly that they are children of God until they plainly show by their attitude and conduct that they are not lovers of God.

But when do our sons and daughters begin to show this? When they, coming to years of discretion, refuse to

confess Christ and they do not forsake this sinful world for His sake. There have been instances where baptized but non-confessing members of the Church, who were well beyond the age of discretion, who have died without giving any definite proof of loving Christ nor His kingdom, were pronounced saved on the grounds that they were covenant children. This seems to be a serious misuse of the doctrine of the covenant. It rests upon the wrong assumption that the prerogatives of the covenant make regeneration and conversion unnecessary - as if it were some kind of short cut to salvation for the specially privileged or a substitute for the harder road of personal repentance, conversion, and the Christian lifestyle. Public profession of faith must be the fruit of conversion, not its substitute.

If such an erroneous view of the covenant should prevail among us, our preaching and teaching would lose their evangelical flavor. The summons to conversion will either not be heard or it will become a muffled sound. Genuine covenant preaching must be thoroughly evangelical. It must stress the need for new birth, repentance, and conversion.

The many warnings against covenant unfaithfulness given to God's people by the prophets and by Jesus along with the intense evangelical earnestness that characterized the preaching of John the Baptist and Paul should make us aware of the need to proclaim the gospel

Public profession of faith must be the fruit of conversion, not its substitute.

The Issue Driven Church

promise in its entirety to each generation of covenant children. Jesus demanded faith as a condition for salvation. His preaching was characterized by evangelical fervor, tenderness, and earnestness.

Is it impossible to combine full emphasis on the covenant privileges of our children with real evangelical fervor? Certainly not. We need evangelical earnestness, emphasis on the need of the new birth and of conversion as a turning from the world in a complete surrender to Christ. Not only must the Gospel invitation be stressed, but also the great responsibility of those who are “near to the kingdom of God” by virtue of the covenant.

Such preaching may be difficult; for we are all inclined to be one-sided, to slight one truth at the expense of the other. But it would be impossible only if the covenant position of our children made regeneration and conversion unnecessary. The grace that God promises to His covenant children is precisely the grace that is needed in our preaching. God’s grace alone can provide a new heart and a new life to those within and also those outside the covenant. Let the preacher exhort all God’s children with an earnestness to pray and to seek for that grace, pleading on the promise of their covenant God.

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All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

Philippians 3: 15-16

By the time you read this devotional summer will be well under way. In fact, it will soon be coming to an end. Summer is the time when local church ministries seem to take a break from the regular classes and Bible Studies and when major church assemblies meet.

These assemblies supposedly meet for the benefit of the local churches they represent. As I reviewed the synodical agenda of my federation before Synod, I had to ask myself if the items on the agenda were reflective of where most local churches and councils focus the lion’s share of their energies and resources. I wonder if our churches in the United Reformed federation, to which I belong, are driven primarily by certain ‘issues’? In other words, was this year’s synod agenda and, by the same token, are the monthly consistory and council agendas in the local churches, maintenance or ministry driven? Can we say that in our churches we seek to build, nurture, and give birth to new churches as our primary objective?

I praise God for the new churches that have been organized and instituted and were welcomed at this summer’s synod in Calgary. But reflecting some more on the synod agenda outline, one can see how we think about church ministry. The ‘reception of new congrega-

tions’ falls under ‘Initial Business’. From there we move to the truly weighty: ‘Matters Before Synod’, which include various report and overtures and appeals. I simply observe that the bulk of our time at this synod will again deal with internal ‘issues’ that reflect how introverted we are.

I think there is a danger for us as conservative, reformed people to become issue driven rather than ministry driven. The church that is issue driven is seldom effective in the ministry to which it is called under the headship of Christ. Issues may have their own validity, but they must not be made into ‘a hill to die on’ unless the confessional integrity of our church(es) is indeed at stake.

Some of the ‘issues’ that drive churches’ ‘agendas’ today range from debating and arguing over home-schooling, admission to the Lord’s Supper, exclusive psalm singing, Bible translation, women covering their heads, pictures of Christ, views of creation, and musical style in worship.

Some hold very strong opinions that they believe all the rest should conform to without exception. People take position and party formation rears its ugly head.

In Paul’s letter to the Church at Philippi, the apostle gives a piece of



solid advice, which we ignore to our peril in the church today.

In Philippians 2: 15-16 Paul writes:

All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

When we read Paul's letters, we come to know a man who is always on the go. Until the very end of his life Paul was driven by a passion for the church's day-to-day ministry. Clearly, Paul is *ministry* rather than *maintenance* oriented. For this reason, Paul seriously warns against those who bring about divisions by quarreling and arguments (See: I Corinthians 1:10; Philippians 2:14; II Timothy 2: 14; Titus 3: 9-11).

Inevitably, in every church there will be issues that spring up from time to time. In one church the issue may be doctrinal in nature when in another church the issue is truly a matter of Christian liberty. But notice how Paul argues from a common starting point from which we ought to be viewing differences of opinion that arise among us. Paul states in Philippians 3:15-16: "All of us who are mature should take such a view of things..." (NIV). Paul assumes that all who receive his letter are *in principle* 'mature'. This common basis allowed for differences of understanding concerning certain matters without saying that all opinions were equally true and valid. They, like Paul, have each been called (see Romans 8:28) to eternal salvation (v.14) and this past event has

placed them together in the same 'mature' category. Therefore, the believers in the church in Philippi have something in common, which Paul describes in verse 16 as "what we have already attained."

Therefore, Paul does not mean that each member in the church is fully sanctified. Paul knows that he himself has not attained *that* 'maturity' himself either (3:12). Rather, the maturity, which all believers share, calls them to close ranks (Philippians 3:16) and to be looking ahead, striving toward their eternal reward (3:13-14).

When the church maintains that forward *outlook*, it will also know what to do about the differences of understanding that will be found among them. "And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you" (3:15).

Paul's word of warning reduces the importance of all the issues that drive us to their real proportions! To heed Paul's counsel will halt a deepening crisis growing inside our reformed churches worldwide.

John Calvin who comments on this passage echoes Paul's pastoral wisdom:

Let us in the meantime learn also from this passage, that we must bear for a time with ignorance in our weak brethren, and forgive them, if it is not given them immediately to be altogether of one mind with us. Paul felt assured as to his doctrine, and yet he allows those who could not as yet receive it time to make progress.

What counts, says the Reformer, is that all involved manifest a willingness to be taught (*docilitas*) by Scripture. Let us all be students of Scripture with the mindset Paul prescribes and trust that the Lord, who has guided His church through the ages, will also make clear the things on which we think differently.

The Reformed answer to the church's present day crisis is old medicine. The church needs *Reformation and Revival*. One can not take place without the other.

When we follow Paul's exhortation we immediately begin to enjoy the rich benefits it brings. Our focus changes away from self to serving the church and the world to the glory of God alone.

May Paul's "*only* let us live up to what we have already attained" (3:16) be the driving impetus to sacrifice our energies and resources for the sake of the growth of Christ's church in this world. And in doing so may we all the more eagerly, along with the apostle, "press onward toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called [us] heavenward in Christ Jesus" (3:14).

Rev. Fritz Harms is the pastor of the United Reformed Church of Champlain Valley in New Haven, Vermont.

Paul Schneider, the Martyr of Buchenwald

Few in North America know the name of Paul Schneider, the first Protestant pastor murdered by the Nazis. Fewer still know the remarkable trial of faith that marked the life of this Reformed minister of the Gospel.

From an early age, young Paul set his sights upon the ministry, listing “the pastorate” as his chosen field of study when he passed the school-leave exam to enlist in the war effort during the First World War. Though wounded and awarded the Iron Cross, Paul remained in service until the end of the war. When he was discharged in December 1918, the young man who returned to the university was an intense and troubled soul, soon swept up in the political and social turmoil of the times.

His lifelong friend, Emil Weber, would write;

From high-school on we had a very close friendship but in the semesters at Giessen this came close to destruction because of the radical liberalism to which Paul had completely given himself over. Not a day passed without vehement theological confrontation, on the way to and especially from the university to the station and then on the train.

The following years were tortuous for the young seminarian who, at one point, abandoned his studies to

take a job as a common laborer in the mistaken belief that only workers’ socialism would rescue Germany from the despair he saw all around him. But God had a different plan for his life. Returning to school in 1920, Paul Schneider took a room at the manse in Weilheim. There he made the acquaintance of his future wife, Margarite. It is during this period that the Lord began again and again to bring Schneider into contact with genuine believers. In one such encounter, following his assignment to the Berlin City Mission work, Schneider would write;

Whenever I have wanted to march out of this remarkable Berlin with its remarkable people, just then God has given me courage refreshed once again, and now I will certainly not leave here before I have gone to the wall with this confrontation. There are actually people here who maintain that they not only intend to know Jesus and seek to follow His teaching, but also to possess Him as the living power of their life [they] leave the impression that they really have delivered their lives over to Jesus, loved only Him alone, and that they have really died to everything of their own in wish, thought or feelings.

They impress me as being truly saved. They prove their

Christianity in great sacrificial strength and joyfulness. In a quite childlike way they deal with the Savior as with a near and truly living friend who surely listens to all their concerns. I have to say to myself: you are not such a child of God. I feel as if some excommunication ... as by so many as yet unexpressed sins, so much hanging onto my own wishes, so much presumption in my own thoughts of Him.

So it has happened that I have now been changed from the subject to the object of the mission.

At the death of his father, the Reformed congregations of Hochelheim and Dornholzhausen issued a call to the young graduate who, according to the rules of the Reformed church, would now be permitted to marry. He was installed on September 4, 1926. We also see a profound difference in his apprehension of the demands of the Gospel.

Schneider immediately began to institute reforms into the congregation, launching Bible studies among the young people of the church, and encouraging them to seek fellowship within the covenant community. Public morality had suffered greatly following the war, and unbelief was rampant. The young pastor and his wife were determined to restore the church to the center of public life in the community, and to reinvigorate catechetical instruction. Little could they have known that the renewed emphasis on the Heidelberg Cat-



echism would cost the young pastor his life.

1933 saw radical change in German life. The Nazis lost little time in consolidating and extending their reach into every sphere of public life. Although Schneider sought nothing more than to serve faithfully as pastor of a small village Reformed church, God chose to place him squarely in the path of the Nazi state. Knowing the folly of political salvationism, Schneider penned a circular letter in which he asked;

Where are those Christian consciences who judge righteously, who take the standard for their politics neither from National Socialism nor from socialism, but rather from the Gospel?

While Schneider did not seek conflict, neither did he run from it if the witness of the Gospel was at stake. He refused to ring the church bell, as required, to signal the beginning of Nazi meetings. He would not return the Nazi stiff-armed salute, and tendered his resignation from church organizations taken over by the “German Christian” movement.

After running afoul of the German Christian-dominated Konsistorium for publicly disagreeing with brownshirt leader Ernst Roehm, Schneider was placed on leave of absence from his ministry. When he returned on January 28, 1934, he preached a stunningly powerful message that shook the Nazi establishment to its core, proclaiming,

Dear congregation, in the last months no thinking, attentive Christian has failed

to notice that in our Evangelical church we are being summoned to battle, to witness, to confession To be sure, many still sleep ... they simply want to accommodate themselves to the church regardless of the practice of the ‘German Christians.’ They must undergird this practice with false teaching: that the foundation of the Church is not the Gospel, the joyful offer of Jesus Christ, the healer of sinners, and the Kingdom of God alone, but rather nationality and the Gospel. Whenever they place blood and race and the history of the people as a source of revelation next to God’s Word, next to His will revealed to us in the words of Scripture alone, next to Jesus as the unique Mediator between God and man, then in truth they fall away from the living God and His Christ

Schneider then launched a truly controversial reform for the times, “fencing” the communion table against those in the community who presented themselves for the Lord’s Supper only at holidays, but who were otherwise absent from the life of the church. For his actions, the Konsistorium transferred Schneider to pastor the tiny villages of Dickensheid and Womrath. Four short weeks later, the faith of Paul

Schneider would again be sorely tried when, filling in for an ailing pastor, Schneider was forced to rebuke Nazi officials who insisted on invoking Nazi language at the funeral service of a young man who had been in the Hitler Youth.

The final straw came, however, when Schneider took the extraordinary step of asking his church council to begin church discipline against a member who withdrew his son from catechism class. The father, a Nazi sympathizer, placed his son in the Thuringer (Nazi) school, instead. The act of discipline would have to be read publicly three times. After Schneider announced the disciplinary action the first Sunday, he was arrested.

When even the “Confessing” Church leaders backed away from him, Schneider was comforted only by his faithful wife and local church congregations. When he refused to recant, he was subsequently sent to Buchenwald concentration camp. It was in the face of certain death, that the testimony of Paul Schneider was tried, and found to be the most precious gold and silver.

Beaten and humiliated, Schneider never wavered in his Christian testimony. When he refused to remove his cap at the prisoner’s assembly when the Nazi anthem was played, Schneider was beaten severely, and placed in solitary con-

Although Schneider sought nothing more than to serve faithfully as pastor of a small village Reformed church, God chose to place him squarely in the path of the Nazi state.

finement. A fellow inmate at Buchenwald, Alfred Leikam, remembers the day clearly;

Wholly without fear, he bore witness of his Christian faith to the SS. In this frankness, he was probably unique in Germany. He called the devil by his name: murderer, adulterer, unrighteous, monster. Throughout this witness, in which he presented the grace of Christ together with a call to repentance, Schneider was exposed alternately to severe bodily tortures, humiliations, and agonies heavy beatings, dangling up off the floor at the window crossbars.... Schneider was utterly tireless, always calling out words of Scripture to other prisoners, especially mornings and evenings at the count for roll call

On a January morning in 1939, when two prisoners who had escaped and been captured were murdered in the cell block, Schneider called out during the roll call "In the name of Jesus Christ, I bear witness to the murder of the prisoners," before he was silenced and subjected to a new round of beatings. The Konsistorium proceeded to formally remove Schneider from his pastoral charge.

In the month before his death, his condition deteriorated, as he was placed under the personal oversight of SS-Sgt. Martin Sommer, a notoriously abusive bunker guard. In July, 1939, Schneider was ordered to walk the half-mile journey from his cell to the camp infirmary, where he was to be "treated" by the camp

physician, Dr. Ding-Schuler. An inmate medical secretary, Walter Poller, writes;

I received Paul Schneider for the first time face-to-face. He was suddenly brought into the prisoner sick-bay by SS-Sergeant Sommer. What an appearance! ...how could this man be alive? In this condition, unaided and tottering but still in his own strength, how could he have walked the long way?

Paul Schneider never left the infirmary of Dr. Ding-Schuler alive. On July 18, 1939, Margarite Schneider would receive a telegram announcing the death of her beloved husband, and advising her that she must pay within 24 hours to recover his body, or it would be cremated.

The body of Paul Schneider, in a sealed casket, was returned to Dickensheid. The elders of his church bore the casket through the streets to the church filled to overflowing with his parishioners. At last emboldened, his fellow pastors found their courage as more than 170 in their pastoral robes and another 30 in plain clothes followed the casket through the streets. As the procession passed the Roman Catholic church, the priest fell into line in the procession, followed by his congregation.

In his poignant telling of *Paul Schneider, The Witness of Buchenwald*, Rudolf Wentorf notes that commandant Koch, of the Buchenwald concentration camp, was eventually accused of corruption by the Nazis, and executed shortly before the war's end.

Dr. Ding-Schuler was arrested as a war criminal, and hanged himself.

The bunker guard Sommer was transferred to the front, and severely wounded. Tried in 1958, his unspeakable atrocities were made known before the world.

Unable to care for himself, Sommer spent the rest of his life in a nursing home run by Christians.

Mr. Wayne Johnson is an elder at Sacramento Covenant Reformed Church (RCUS) and a member of the Board of Governors of City Seminary of Sacramento.

The First Christian Reformed Church of South Holland, Illinois, is seeking a new pastor who prizes the preaching of the Word of God and is willing to lead our congregation in meeting the challenge to be a witness in our community. Our congregation is wholeheartedly committed to a Reformed approach to worship and life. If interested, please send your inquiry or profile to: Search Committee, c/o Neal Van Drunen, First Christian Reformed Church, 16248 South Park Ave., South Holland, Illinois, 60473. Email inquiries may be sent to nealvandr@aol.com.



The Passion of Christ - Now on DVD

On Ash Wednesday, February 25 of 2004, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ exploded on to the popular culture scene with the release of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. Moviegoers flocked to theatres across the nation to witness Gibson's cinematic portrayal of Christ's suffering and death. American evangelicals were quick to recognize the evangelistic potential of the popular film. One organization boldly labeled the film "the best outreach opportunity in 2,000 years." Many churches cancelled services for the Sunday following the film's release and purchased seats in local theatres for a Sunday morning showing, so that congregants might invite unsaved friends and family to view *The Passion* for free. Pamphlets and tracts were written to supplement the film, and church members were offered instructional classes on how to maximize the evangelistic potential of the film.

Now that *The Passion of the Christ* is coming out on DVD, the evangelistic fervor surrounding the movie has once more left many Reformed believers in an uncomfortable position. Reformed churches have traditionally prohibited images of Christ as a violation of the second commandment. The Westminster Larger Catechism forbids "making any representation of God ... or of any of the three persons" (Q. 109). Raising questions about the propriety of representing Christ visually in film, in the midst of

such excitement about *The Passion*'s potential to reach the lost, may appear tantamount to a lack of concern for evangelism. And besides, haven't some within the Reformed tradition suggested that images of Christ are not a violation of the second commandment? As one Puritan theologian reasoned, "Christ was a man like one of us, so He may be pictured as a man." Christ's true humanity, according to this line of argument, implies that visual representations of Him in His humanity are not inappropriate. In any case, should not interest in the church's evangelistic task override any qualms one might have over visual depictions of Christ? With the Evangelical world once again enthusiastically embracing *The Passion* as an "outreach opportunity," Reformed Christians may be tempted to imitate their Evangelical brothers and sisters without seriously considering whether the film is an appropriate means for evangelism.

In this essay I argue that the Church should not use *The Passion of the Christ* as a tool to fulfill her evangelistic task. I argue, first, that Gibson's portrayal of Christ's suffering and death is not in fact the gospel that the Church is called to preach. I argue, second, that God has appointed a specific means (namely, the ministry of the Word) to advance the gospel of His kingdom, and that the Church undermines God's own appointed method for evangelism to the extent that she

embraces alternative means. My consideration of *The Passion of the Christ* focuses narrowly on the question of whether the Church should use the film as an instrument for evangelism. I am not directly addressing the question of whether Christians are morally prohibited from viewing this film altogether. My consideration of *The Passion of the Christ*, however, has broader implications for the question of whether any cinematic or dramatic presentation of Christ's life, death, and resurrection is an appropriate means of evangelism. I believe that the arguments I advance against using this film as an evangelistic tool could be applied to other films depicting Christ, or even dramatic representations of Christ in a Church context.

A Transition in Culture

We live in a culture that is increasingly dependent upon images for communication. Neil Postman, a critic of culture, describes "the decline of the Age of Typography and the ascendancy of the Age of Television." Americans today view television and films far more frequently than they read any printed works. The numerical statistics indicating the amount of time average Americans devote to viewing television and films are staggering. As a result, "we are now a culture whose information, ideas and epistemology are given form by television, not by the printed word." America has become a culture enslaved to images.

Postman suggests the negative effect the triumph of the image over the word has upon culture: "Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have

been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business, largely without protest or even much popular notice.”

Others are less pessimistic about culture’s increasing dependence upon images for communication. Roman Catholic author Anthony Schillaci also recognizes the transition “from a verbal, literary culture to a visual one.” Schillaci, however, suggests that living in “the age of the image” creates positive venues for educating people by the use of images. Schillaci is especially interested in how the Church might employ images to reach a “visually oriented generation” with its message.

Schillaci boldly suggests that the message of Scripture “can no longer be entrusted exclusively to the printed page, but must incarnate itself in the moving image if it is to speak to a generation whose patterns of perception have been conditioned by film and television.” Furthermore, “the Word will have no effect today unless it is communicated by means of the central medium of the day, the moving image. The historical situation has demanded the wedding of the Image and the Word, and it is only those who lack the dynamism of a historical sense who will oppose the efforts to bring these two into fruitful combination.”

Perhaps Schillaci’s basic presupposition explains the zeal with which evangelicals have embraced *The Passion of the Christ* as “the best outreach opportunity in 2,000 years.” Many believers are likely to agree with Schillaci that “the historical situation” demands “the wedding of the Image and the

Word.” If the “central medium of the day” has become the “moving image,” then certainly the Church must accommodate itself to the culture by communicating the gospel by means of moving images. There is a danger here, however, of never pausing to question whether the “central medium of the day” is even capable of communicating the gospel. In other words, the message communicated by *The Passion of the Christ* may in fact not be the gospel at all.

Sending the Gospel in Smoke Signals: An Insufficient Medium

The Passion of the Christ is narrowly focused upon Christ’s suffering and death. The film covers the short period from Christ’s arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane to His death on the cross. The film’s graphic nature in depicting what Jesus went through in His suffering and death has left audiences literally speechless. The film has undoubtedly been a powerful and emotional experience for viewers. But does the film communicate the gospel message?

J. Gresham Machen, in *Christianity and Liberalism*, notes that “the full meaning” of Christ’s death “could be made clear only after the event had taken place.” The meaning of Christ’s death upon the cross is not readily apparent from the event itself. It became the task of

the apostles to explain how Christ’s death reconciled sinners to God. The apostolic writings are largely devoted to explaining the full implications of Christ’s death. This suggests, then, that a cinematic presentation narrowly focused upon Christ’s death does not constitute the gospel message. The “good news” that the apostles proclaimed to sinners is not merely that Jesus died, or even that Jesus was crucified, buried, and rose from the dead. The “good news” is that forgiveness of sins and everlasting life are freely offered to sinners on the basis of Christ’s substitutionary death as an atonement for sins. *The Passion of the Christ* lacks the necessary prophetic and apostolic interpretation of the event it depicts to be considered the gospel. In short, *The Passion of the Christ* is not the gospel.

Some have suggested that the film does not communicate the gospel because of Gibson’s self-consciously limited focus. But perhaps there is a more substantial reason why the gospel message is not communicated by Gibson’s film. Postman has argued that certain media are inherently incapable of communicating some messages. He suggests “the primitive technology of smoke signals” as an illustration. Smoke signals, he observes, are not capable of conveying sophisticated philosophical arguments: “Puffs of smoke are insufficiently complex to

There is a danger of never pausing to question whether the “central medium of the day” is even capable of communicating the gospel.



express ideas on the nature of existence, and even if they were not, a Cherokee philosopher would run short of either wood or blanket long before he reached his second axiom.” Certain media of information, in other words, are inherently ill suited to convey complex messages. Postman identifies television (and by implication, film) as one such medium that is insufficient for communicating sophisticated ideas.

The failure of *The Passion of the Christ* to communicate the gospel message is not merely the result of Gibson’s self-consciously limited focus. The medium employed is itself insufficient for conveying the gospel message. A cinematic presentation of Christ’s life, death, or resurrection is inherently incapable of communicating the richness of the prophetic and apostolic interpretation of the Christ event. The spoken or written word is a means more suited for explaining what Christ’s death means than the image.

This truth becomes evident even in considering the narrowly focused content of *The Passion*. Gibson captures the physical anguish that Christ underwent in His suffering, making the film a powerful, emotionally wrenching experience for viewers. But does the film capture the reality of the spiritual anguish that Christ experienced in taking upon Himself the wrath of His Father against sin in the place of His people? No, because the medium is intrinsically incapable of communicating that content.

Those who desire to use *The Passion* as an evangelistic tool need to recognize that the film is not the gospel. The mere event of Christ’s

death, as depicted in the film, is not in and of itself the “good news” the apostles proclaimed to sinners estranged from God. Some interpretation of the meaning of Christ’s death is necessary to constitute the gospel message. Furthermore, the “central medium of the day, the moving image,” is a means intrinsically unable to convey the complexity of the gospel message. The Church, for this reason, should not

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seek to use *The Passion of the Christ* as an evangelistic tool.

**Bringing Dry Bones to Life by
Images: An Inappropriate
Medium**

In response to the question of where faith originates, the Heidelberg Catechism explains that “the Holy Ghost works faith in our hearts by *the preaching* of the Holy Gospel” (Q. 65, emphasis mine). This answer emphasizes not only the agent (the Spirit) in creating faith and the message (the gospel) by which faith is created, but also the method (preaching) by which God engages sinners with the gospel message. The Westminster

Confession of Faith emphasizes the same methodology when it states that saving faith “is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word” (14.1). The Reformed Standards are unanimous in recognizing that God has appointed a specific means for evangelism, the preaching of the Word. The Standards reflect Scripture’s own testimony to the efficacy of the preached word as the means for converting sinners.

The word’s power to convert sinners is vividly portrayed in the prophecy of Ezekiel 37.1-10. God brings the prophet Ezekiel to a valley scattered with dry and lifeless bones, and instructs him to prophesy to the bones. As Ezekiel proclaims the word of God to the dry bones, the Spirit of God brings life to them: “And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them.” The prophet continues to preach, and the dry bones ultimately “lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.”

It is the Spirit that brings life to the dry bones. The means by which the Spirit works, however, is particularly noteworthy. The Spirit brings life to the dry bones by having the prophet preach to them. The prophetic vision of Ezekiel 37 finds its fulfillment in the New Testament era.

Following Christ’s resurrection and ascension, the apostles, commissioned by Christ, became ministers of the word. On the day of Pentecost, Peter received the promised

Spirit and preached to the multitudes. Through his preaching the people were “cut to the heart,” ultimately repenting and putting their faith in Christ as a result (Acts 2:14-37). At Pentecost, then, we see the word, empowered by the Spirit and administered by the apostle Peter, bringing life to the dead (converting sinners) in fulfillment of Ezekiel’s vision. Many of the Jews present at Pentecost may have actually witnessed Christ’s brutal death. The sight of His death, however, was not the means by which they were converted, but rather the preached word.

Subsequently throughout the New Testament, we find preaching identified as the means used by God to create faith in those whom he effectually calls. Paul notes that “God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe” (1 Corinthians 1:21). The apostle also insists that “faith comes through hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” And “how,” Paul asks, “are they to hear without someone preaching?” (Romans 10:14-17). Paul even suggests that through his own preaching ministry, Christ himself came and “preached peace” to sinners estranged from God (Ephesians 2:17). And by his preaching, Paul reminds Galatian believers, Christ was “visibly portrayed as crucified” before their very eyes (Galatians 3:1). According to John Calvin, Paul understood that “the actual sight of Christ’s death could not have affected [his hearers] more powerfully than his own preaching.” God has clearly appointed preaching as the method by which sinners are converted.

God has designated a particular means by which He transforms sinners from darkness into the kingdom of his Son. Is *The Passion of the Christ* consistent with the means God has appointed for effecting this transformation? *The Passion* depicts the suffering of Christ visually. But God has appointed the preached word, not the visual image, as the effective method for evangelism. While Paul

Many of the Jews present at Pentecost may have actually witnessed Christ’s brutal death. The sight of His death, however, was not the means by which they were converted, but rather the preached word.

insists that “faith comes through hearing,” Anthony Schillaci would have us believe that in our unique “historical situation” faith more likely comes through seeing.

In the Evangelical embrace of *The Passion* as an evangelistic tool, we see a rejection of God’s own appointed means for evangelism in favor of a means perceived to be more effective in our unique “historical situation.” The Church cannot substitute alternative means for communicating the gospel, no matter how effective she might perceive them to be, for the means God has appointed. In contrast to Schillaci’s assertion that “the Word

will have no effect today unless it is communicated by means of the central medium of the day,” the Church should insist that the preached word remains powerful and effective precisely because God has appointed it as the means for advancing his kingdom.

Conclusion

We live in a culture where correct motives tend to justify any methodology. If a person earnestly desires to advance Christ’s kingdom, we feel hesitant to criticize his message or his method. The apostle Paul, however, appears far more concerned with the message and method than with the motivation of the person who proclaims that message. In fact, he seems relatively unconcerned that some “preach Christ from envy and rivalry” (Philippians 1:15). He is less tolerant of those who tamper with the gospel message or the gospel method. He condemns even himself if he should proclaim “a gospel contrary” to that which he had already preached (Galatians 1:8,9). And he insists upon the “foolishness” of preaching as the method of the gospel, in distinction from the “wisdom of the world” (1 Corinthians 1:20).

The Passion of the Christ, if used as an evangelistic tool, undermines both the message and method of the gospel. It undermines the message because it is not the gospel. The film depicts the event of Christ’s physical suffering without any interpretive context in which to understand that suffering. The particular medium of film, I have argued, is inherently incapable of communicating the gospel message. Using *The Passion* for evangelism also



undermines the method of the gospel. *The Passion* represents a means for evangelism contrary to that means which God has appointed for evangelism. God has appointed a specific medium for communicating the gospel to a dying world. To the extent that the church seeks alternative media for communicating the gospel message, she undermines the specific medium that God has established. To capitulate to the needs of a “visually oriented generation” is to embrace the “wisdom of this world,” contrary to God’s design.

The Church must jealously guard both the message and method of the gospel. Believers, then, should not seek to use *The Passion of the Christ* as an evangelistic tool. Certainly the film’s popularity may engender opportunities for individual believers to proclaim the gospel to lost friends and family. I am not

suggesting that Reformed believers form picket lines to prevent people from seeing the film. Nor do I believe that believers must plug their ears and run from the room the moment unbelieving friends mention the film. But Reformed believers cannot follow the example of the Evangelical world in embracing *The Passion* as “the best outreach opportunity in 2,000 years.”

A cinematic or dramatic presentation of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection should never replace the normal ministry of the Word by ordained ministers each Sabbath day. Neither should believers put their confidence in God working through extraordinary means to save sinners, although He is free to do so. God may work through extraordinary means to convert sinners, but He has promised to work through the ordinary means of gospel preaching to convert sinners.

Believers must resist the temptation to believe that “the central medium of the day” will prove more effective for reaching the lost than the means that God has chosen. God will continue to frustrate “the wisdom of this world” by converting sinners through the seemingly “foolish” means of preaching. Believers should promote and rely upon those means, trusting that God will remain faithful to the method for evangelism that He Himself has established.

Mr. Aaron Denlinger graduated from Westminster Theological Seminary in California this past May. He lives in Escondido, California and is a member of the Christ Church (PCA).

Sound Bites - 1986

January 1986

“Long ago ... Uzziah held out his hand to steady the ark. He only wanted to give the Lord a little help, but was struck dead for his improper help We may not play lightly with the Lord’s designated methods of saving souls. Don’t say, “A little help is OK.”

De Koster on Report 44
Peter De Jong

“If parents do not take their Christianity absolutely seriously, why should they expect any more from their children? ... The blame for a lack of commitment on the part of their youth, is not on the

church or school, but squarely, on the home.”

S.W.I.M. - 25 Years Later
Ivan Mulder

February 1986

“It is very important to realize that the Muslim religious tradition not only denies the crucifixion of the Messiah, but the necessity of redemption.”

Rethinking Missions Today
Bassam M. Madany

March 1986

“Just as we must make our stand against those who would take away from Scripture, so we must be care-

ful that nothing be added to it.”

* * * * *

“It has become not uncommon to find instances of Christian scientists allowing less room for theories of theistic evolution than their theological counterparts.”

A Creation Creed
David A. Kloosterman

“Do not accuse those of splitting the church who hold to the historical interpretation of Scriptures; who believe all the articles of the Belgic Confession; and who hold to the Church Order! The danger does not come from this source. I have thought about this matter for a long time and hesitate to say it, but it must be said: THE SYNOD OF

(continued on page 31)

Looking Above

A Series on The Revelation of Jesus Christ

The Church in the Midst of the World: Where Satan Dwells
Revelation 2:12-17

“There is not a square inch in heaven or on earth or under the earth in which there is peace between Christ and Satan.” These were the words that Abraham Kuyper used to describe the warfare that exists between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of Satan. It is this battle that we have before us in Revelation 2:12-17, the letter to the church in Pergamos.

“And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, ‘These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword: ‘I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells’ (2:12-13).

Two times in verse 13, we are told that Pergamos was the place where Satan had his throne, the place where Satan dwells. Why would John call the city of Pergamos the throne of Satan? Why would John tell us that Satan dwelt in Pergamos? There are several reasons.

The City of Pergamos

Pergamos, like Smyrna and Ephesus, was one of the leading cities of the day. In fact, it was the Roman capital of Asia Minor. The governor of Pergamos had “the

right of the sword.” He had the right to determine and decide who lived and who died. Bear in mind the fact that Caesar claimed to be god, demanding that his subjects worship him. If a Christian refused to do so, the governor had the right to put that man to death by the sword. Hence, persecution came to the church in Pergamos; we are even told of a certain “Antipas” who was put to death because of his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is with good reason that Pergamos is described as the place of Satan’s throne.

Pergamos is also described as the place where Satan dwells. Many gods were worshiped in Pergamos: Dionysius (whose worship led to great sexual immorality), Aesculapius (who was represented by a serpent that supposedly brought healing), Athena, Demeter, and Zeus. Indeed, Satan had his throne in Pergamos. His dwelling there was abundantly evident: a pantheon of gods, idolatry, false worship, and sexual immorality.

We may conclude, and rightfully so, that Pergamos was a terrible place. But is it really any different from the world in which we live today? Does not Satan have his throne in this world? Does he not dwell in this place? Is not Satan the “ruler of the darkness of this age”? (Ephesians 6:12). Is not Satan the “prince of the

power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience”? (Ephesians 2:2). 2 Peter 5:8 tells us that he is like a roaring lion prowling about seeking whom he may devour. His tactics are subtlety and deception; he is the father of lies. Though grotesque, he masquerades as an angel of light. He walks to and fro upon the earth (Job 1:7; 2:2). Satan has his throne here in this present fallen world.

We still do battle with that ancient enemy of our souls. For despite the opposition of the gates of hell, Christ continues to build His Church; the church of Pergamos was living proof. She was commended for holding fast to her faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and not falling away under the attacks of the devil. She withstood the external pressures to compromise the faith. But a greater danger faced her. The Christians at Pergamos allowed compromise within. They were brave in waging war against the devil in the world, but they were not awake to the dangers of compromising with the devil in the church.

Condemnation

Satan wages war not only in the world, but also in the church. Christ says in verses 14-15, “But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.”

Remember the story of Balaam?



Though he appears quite righteous in Numbers 22-24, we learn later of the wickedness of his heart. Immediately following his story, we read in Numbers 25, that the children of Israel were enticed to join with the Moabites in sacrificing to their gods, to eat the meat that was sacrificed to their gods, and to engage in sexual immorality. Only later, in Numbers 31, do we learn that Balaam was the one who enticed the Israelites to do so.

Now we read that the church in Pergamos has among it those who hold to the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Remember Dionysius, who was worshiped in Pergamos? His worship demanded the eating of foods sacrificed to idols, and sexual immorality.

The temptations were great for the Christians in Pergamos to compromise; in fact, there were some within the church itself calling for such compromise. The etymology of the names that are given here provide a warning in and of themselves. The name Nicolaitan comes from two Greek words which literally mean “he overcomes the people.” In rabbinic literature the name Balaam was etymologized to mean “he who consumes the people.” Are not these the wolves that come dressed in sheep’s clothing to devour the flock? There were those among the church in Pergamos that said “a little compromise won’t hurt any at all!” A little compromise here, a little compromise there, and life would be much easier in the world.

This was the danger that faced the church in Pergamos, and it is the danger that faces the church in the world today. Satan and his minions have slithered into the church: they have taken their seat in the pews, they have mounted the pulpits of our land. The “spirit of the age” has so infiltrated the church that many are crying out “Peace! Peace!” when there is no peace. The antithesis has been forgotten, and the church increasingly becomes like the world.

Warning

It is because the threat is so great that Christ’s warning is equally great: “Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.” How appropriate these words! While the governor of Pergamos may have had the right to the sword, there is a sword that is far greater: it is the sword of Christ’s mouth, the Word of God. The Word is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart (Hebrews 4:12). By that Word Christ separates the true church from the false. He fights against those who belong to the false church with His Word, even separating them from the true church.

While the judgment upon the false church is great, how much greater the blessings that are given to the true church - to those who overcome. “To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except

him who receives it.”

“There is not a square inch in heaven or on earth or under the earth in which there is peace between Christ and Satan.” These were the words that Abraham Kuyper used to describe the warfare that exists between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of Satan. It is this battle that we have before us in Revelation 2:12-17, in the letter to the church in Pergamos.

It is this battle in which we are now engaged! Do you understand the serious nature of that which we have before us, and of that in which we are engaged? There is no neutral ground - not even a square inch. May God make us ever vigilant in the battle, and may He give us grace to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Rev. Brian Vos is the pastor of the Trinity United Reformed Church in Caledonia, Michigan. He also serves as the President of the Board of Reformed Fellowship.

URCNA Classis Reports

Report on Classis Central US

On June 1 and 2, 2004 the 14th meeting of Classis Central US was held at Lynwood URC, Lynwood, Ill. The meeting was chaired by Rev. Jason Tuinstra of Community URC, Schererville, Indiana. The vice-chairman was Rev. Peter Kloosterman of Grace URC, Waupun, Wisconsin.

Classis was called to order at 6:00 PM by Rev. Keith Davis, Chairman *pro tem* with the reading of Scripture and prayer. The meeting adjourned for the night at 9:30 PM and reconvened at 8:00 AM on Wednesday, June 2, 2004.

The main item on the agenda for this Classis meeting was the examination of Mr. Doug Barnes from Community URC in Shererville, Indiana and Mr. Dan Donovan from Oak Glen URC in Lansing, Illinois. Before the examination occurred, Classis received various reports including those of her officers, the church visitors, and fraternal observers. One item worth noting is that the term of Rev. Ralph Pontier of Redeemer URC as stated clerk has come to an end. His report was the last for the term. The chairman noted with gratitude his service of the Classis for the past six years.

Classis was privileged to hear the greetings and reports of fraternal observers throughout the meeting. We received greetings from Mr. Keith LeMahieu for the Midwest Presbytery of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC). Rev. Harold Miller of Wellsburg URC in

Wellsburg, Iowa reported on his visit to the Presbytery of the Dakotas of the OPC on April 6, 2004. Rev. Larry Johnson of Doon URC in Doon, Iowa reported on his attendance as a fraternal observer to the Covenant East Classis of the Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS) on March 4, 2004. Rev. Keith Davis of Lynwood URC in Lynwood, Illinois reported on his fraternal visit to the Midwest Presbytery of the OPC on March 19, 2004. Later during the meeting, Rev. Bill DeJong of Covenant Reformed Church in Kansas City, Missouri reported on his observance of the meeting of Classis South Central of the RCUS which he attended on March 23, 2004.

When the reporting was finished, Classis proceeded with the examination. The men seeking candidacy were examined in accordance with *Church Order*. Following the examination, the Consistories of Community URC and Oak Glen URC, with the concurring advice of Classis, declared respectively that Mr. Doug Barnes and Mr. Dan Donovan had sustained their examination and are candidates for the office of minister of the word in the United Reformed Churches in North America. The Classis also waived the need for an ordination examination should either candidate receive a call to a church in Classis Central US. The examination and deliberation about these candidates was concluded with a prayer of gratitude to God for His blessing.

Other business that took place at Classis was the advice concerning

discipline matters. One church requested advice regarding discipline. Classis advised the church to proceed to the second step of discipline and prayer was offered for those involved.

The delegates from Covenant Reformed Church in Kansas City, Missouri requested the privilege of the floor. This was granted by the chairman. At this time Rev. Phil Groetenhuis updated the Classis on his work in Springfield planting a church under the oversight of Covenant RC. Rev. Bill DeJong also spoke about the needs of Covenant regarding assistance with planting this church. Both men requested prayers that the Lord would bless this endeavor.

Lastly, Classis deliberated a late overture from Covenant Reformed Church in Pella, Iowa. The first matter to be decided was whether the overture was legally before Classis. According to the *Rules of Procedure (II.B)* for Classis Central US, a late overture that is not published on the agenda may be considered by way of exception after evaluation by classis of the reasons given for its lateness. The Classis deemed that there was sufficient warrant to consider the overture. The overture read as follows: The Consistory of Covenant Reformed Church of Pella, Iowa, overtures Classis Central US to impanel a committee with the mandate to study and submit recommendations on the administration of the Lord's Supper to members in good standing *ex ecclesia*

The grounds for this overture arise from a growing pastoral difficulty regarding the practice of administering the Lord's Supper to those



confined to their home, a hospital or other health care facility. After discussing the overture, it was adopted and a study committee was appointed. Those elected to the committee are Dr. Nelson Kloosterman, Rev. Patrick Edouard, Rev. Ralph Pontier, Rev. Jacques Roets, and an elder to be appointed by the Consistory of Covenant Reformed Church in Pella, Iowa. Rev. Harold Miller was appointed as an alternate. This committee was directed by the chairman to report to the next Classis meeting.

The next Classis meeting is scheduled for January 11, 2005 at Hills URC in Hills, Minnesota. The Classis encouraged the Consistory of Hills URC to sponsor an educational/inspirational meeting in conjunction with the next Classis meeting. Classis adjourned around 3:00 PM.

May it please the Lord Almighty to bless His bride through these efforts.

Rev. Peter Kloosterman,
Stated Clerk

Clerks of Classis of Reformed and Presbyterian federations or denominations are encouraged to email summaries of their classis meetings to: editor@reformedfellowship.net for publication in The Outlook.

Classis Michigan Summary

June 1, 2004

Following a wet May, the first day of June was sunny as delegates met for the fourteenth session of Classis Michigan. The Rev. Rick Miller of Dutton URC chaired the meeting, leading delegates from twelve churches through the heavy agenda that consisted of one candidacy exam and two colloquium doctums.

A special welcome was given to Rev. David Klompfen, the new copastor of the Dutton United Reformed Church. Over a half dozen other ministers and visitors were also welcomed.

The Clerk, Treasurer, and Church Visitors gave their reports. Rev. Gene Crow of the Lakeshore URC in Muskegon was elected as the new Clerk. The Treasurer also gave a report on the Classis Health Insurance Program.

After examining the seminary graduate, Classis Michigan met in executive session for an hour and a half to discuss how the Church of Jesus Christ and the prospective candidate would best be served by classis. Everyone agreed that the young man has a deep love for the Lord and that he is called to the ministry. Delegates, however, remained uncomfortable in sustaining him in the examination because of some weaknesses they perceived in a few areas of the exam. In the end, it was voted to inform the Mid-America Reformed Seminary graduate that he did not sustain his exam at this time. The classis encouraged him to study the areas in which he was weak

for a re-examination in October, or sooner if he would so desire.

Two colloquium doctums were also conducted during this session. Upon hearing the godly testimonies of Rev. James Admiraal and Rev. Aaron Kayayan, classis was honored to be able to welcome these two emeriti ministers into the URCNA.

An overture from the Cornerstone URC of Hudsonville to redefine the job description of the Classis Treasurer was approved. In addition to what he already does, the Treasurer will now also be in charge of the Classis Health Insurance Program, the Classis Dental Program, and the Classis Disability Insurance Program.

The next meeting is scheduled for October 12, 2004 at the Eastmanville URC in Cooperstown, Michigan.

Since meeting, Cornerstone has called a special meeting for the re-examination of the seminarian in the areas in which he was considered weak. That meeting is scheduled for August 3, 2004 at Cornerstone URC.

Respectfully submitted,
Rev. W. H. Oord

Reports on the URCNA

Report on the Synodical Decisions

The mountains that were waiting for the delegates to the 5th Synod of the United Reformed Churches in North America meeting in Calgary, Alberta Canada were of two kinds. The one kind, called the Rocky Mountains, were visible to all and rose majestically in the distance just west of the city. The other kind of mountains were visible to all who saw the Agenda for Synod. For those who looked, this kind of mountain was no less imposing. As the delegates arrived they knew their work was difficult, detailed, and demanding. They also knew the Lord of the church actively gathers, defends, and preserves His church. These truths would be born out in the activities of this broadest assembly of the URCNA as it met June 15 - 18, 2004.

Gracious Hosts

It bears mentioning up front that any church which plans or hopes to host a meeting of our Federation's broadest (and thus largest) assembly should strive to emulate what Bethel, Calgary achieved. The logistics of the meeting were carried out without a hitch. Within Bethel's beautiful and highly functional facilities the delegates carried out their duties in comfort and with very little delay. Even the twenty-something minute rides from the hotel to the church and back again were made convenient by a pre-arranged shuttle service.

Meals and snacks were all excellent and one could not help notice

the "Dutch" (that is, "strong") character of the free-flowing coffee. Of course, with all that strong coffee the septic-system company was called out late on Wednesday afternoon to relieve the tanks, but the meetings went on un-hindered.

Opening Matters

The 151 delegates filled the foyer with warm greetings on Tuesday morning as well as the spacious sanctuary with robust singing throughout the week. Indeed, the camaraderie and Esprit de Corp was one of the highlights of the meeting, especially given the difficult and sometimes contentious issues that were dealt with. The delegates always handled themselves and others with the honor and dignity which befits office-bearers of the Church. Congregations should be very proud and indeed thankful for the level of godly maturity witnessed at the meeting and that each man strove to always *speaking the truth in love* and to *serve wholeheartedly, as if serving the Lord, not men*. This Christ-like attitude was joy to behold and to be involved in.

Eighty-four congregations had some representation at synod. Three new congregations, who were provisionally accepted by their respective classes, were ratified by the delegates of synod: Covenant Reformed of Pella, Iowa; the United Reformed Church of Thunder Bay, Ontario; Grace Evangelical Church of Torrance, California. Another congregation, the Evangelical Reformed Church

of Tacoma, Washington which was also provisionally accepted by Classis (Western Canada) became a question to the delegates at Synod. More on this congregation later. Synod noted that two congregations had no delegates at Synod and nine congregations sent only one delegate.

Much of the rest of the first afternoon (Tuesday) was spent nailing down functionalities and committee assignments. Chairman *pro tem*, Rev. Joel Vander Kooi of the Bethel congregation handled his duties with grace and precision. He peacefully handed over the chairmanship to the man elected by the delegates, Rev. Ron Scheuers. An Elder, Mr. Chuck Dykstra was elected as the Vice-Chairman. As noted by the Chairman and acknowledged by the delegates, the Federation was well and faithfully served by her former and long-time Stated Clerk Rev. Jerome Julien. Also, Synod gave hearty approval to the work of the interim Stated Clerk, Rev. Bill De Jong. The Federation was saved several thousands of dollars by using electronic means of transmitting and producing the many pages of documents the delegates would need.

The delegates got a glimpse of some of the tense struggles that were ahead of them during the time of assigning committee responsibilities. Since the convening Consistory (in this case Bethel, Calgary) is tasked with arranging these assignments before Synod begins these duties are somewhat "set" when the delegates arrive. However, several motions and amendments kept the delegates and



the new chairman busy shifting and clarifying who would serve on which committee and, indeed, if each delegate would serve on some committee.

The delegates wrestled with how to direct the committees charged with advising Synod regarding the appeals that appeared on the agenda. The question with which they wrestled was this: do the pre-advice committees need to first decide the admissibility of the appeals which were brought to Synod? It was decided to task the pre-advice committees with answering just that question of each appeal - the committee would bring advice to the whole body saying yea or nea, this appeal is properly before Synod. By the time these issues were sorted out it became clear to the delegates that much wisdom, patience, and forbearance would be in order in coming hours and days if everything was to be done decently and in good order. Further, the need for the enabling grace of the Holy Spirit was apparent.

Fraternal and Ecumenical Observers

Synod noted with joy the participation of several Fraternal and Ecumenical observers including representatives of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Church in the United States, the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches, the Free Reformed Churches in North America, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, Liberated (GKNV), the Reformed Churches in South Africa (GKSA), the Reformed Church in New Zealand (RCNZ), the Presbyterian Church in America, and the Church of Jesus Christ Among the

Tiv (NKST of Nigeria).

There was one Official Observer in the Independent Christian Reformed Church of Ancaster and one Fraternal Delegate in the Canadian Reformed Churches. These delegates spoke at various times during the week and in addition to them several greetings came from other groups by way of letter.

All of this before a delicious dinner on the first day! Your delegates were very busy. But we were also very blessed with excellent food and fellowship, not only at that meal but indeed every meal. After that first meal break Synod reconvened for an inspirational meeting of song and the Word with Rev. Vander Kooi of the Bethel church preaching from Isaiah 52.7 *“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of Him who brings good news.”* The delegates returned to their lodgings full and tired. Day one was over.

The delegates began their second day by making it longer. At the chairman’s advice a motion was adopted to shorten the lunch break time to an hour rather than an hour and a half. This effectively lengthened the delegates work day. Later Synod would also lengthen the evening work session from 9:00 p.m. to 9:30.

The Appeals

The first committee to chime in with completed work brought two recommendations regarding an appeal about the text of the New Testament (**Appeal 4** in the agenda). The appellant argued that it should only be legitimate for the URCNA to use but one New Testament text, the “Received” text. This member

had previously brought his concerns before Classis Southwest U.S, who denied his motion and he was now appealing that classical decision. The committee of pre-advice advised synod in these two ways: First, that the appeal was legally before synod, noting that article 31 of the church order grants the appellant the right to take his concerns to the broader assemblies. Second, the pre-advice committee advised that synod not sustain the appeal of the member. In a very pastoral way the committee said, and synod agreed that

1. The brother is confused as to the difference between the inspiration of the original writings and the divine preservation of the text.
2. He assumes that providential preservation has ceased with the Received Text.
3. His arguments assume that all copyists of the Received Text are infallible and no other could be.
4. It renders all non-Received Text based translations heretical.

In this way synod put to rest the concern of the brother that the URCNA ought only to use one text of the New Testament.

Having dealt with the first of five appeals, synod had yet four difficult complaints on it’s agenda. Before the end of the second day each pre-advice committee brought to the delegates advice that each appeal was properly before synod. One of the pre-advice committees was given duties to sort out three of the appeals (and one overture), since these agenda items dealt broadly with the same matter, *young children coming to the Lord’s Table*.

This same committee was also given the duty to bring advice to synod regarding the Evangelical Reformed Church of Tacoma, Washington (as mentioned above). When this congregation was provisionally accepted by classis Western Canada that classis alerted the Tacoma church about two matters that needed attention by her Elders: one was adherence to Article #37 of the URCNA church order which says that *The Consistory shall call the congregation together for corporate worship twice on each Lord's Day.*

Three men from Tacoma were present at Synod. They gave the pre-advice committee a variety of reasons why they were not currently able to be in full compliance to article #37 and assured the committee that they were moving toward full compliance. The second issue of concern for the classis in accepting the Tacoma church had to do with her Elders interviewing young children for admission to the Lord's Table.

The committee of pre-advice looked at the issues and brought to the floor of synod a recommendation *not to receive the Evangelical Church of Tacoma*, and gave as its grounds: *They are not in current compliance with the requirements of Church Order Article 37, which requires two services each Lord's Day.* However, a motion was made and adopted on the floor of synod to table a decision about the Tacoma church until *the issue of admission of young children to the Lord's Table is addressed.* Thus it became somewhat obvious that the issue of young children coming to the Lord's table weighed

heavily on the minds of many of the delegates.

As already mentioned three of the remaining four appeals dealt with young children at the Lord's table. The appeals numbered 1, 2, and 3 in the agenda were studied by a pre-advice committee which brought recommendations to the floor of synod.

Appeal #1 came from the consistory of the Covenant Reformed Church, Grand Prairie asking Synod to declare that its classis, Western Canada, erred in sustaining the appeal of a member of the Grand Prairie congregation who had earlier appealed a decision of his consistory. As you read this you can begin to realize that this was a complicated matter for the committee and synod to sort out. The Grand Prairie consistory had earlier decided to interview young baptized members who desired to profess their faith. This action of the consistory was questioned by a member of the congregation. Having received an answer not satisfactory to him from the consistory, the member appealed to classis. Classis sustained the appeal of the member against the consistory. Thus, the consistory appealed the decision of the classis to synod, seeking to have the classical decision overturned. The pre-advice committee agreed with the appealing consistory and advised the body of synod to sustain the appeal of the Grand Prairie appeal.

The discussion on the floor of synod about this matter took two separate tracks: one was the question asked by some delegates about what authority the classis had to overturn a

decision of the consistory on a matter not clearly defined in our church order. There was concern that such a decision of classis intruded on the freedom of the local consistory. The other issue the delegates wrestled with was that of "at what age may a baptized member be granted access to the Lord's table. The delegates seemed to want to say "not as young as Grand Prairie has done" (as young as 10 years old or perhaps younger). A motion to empower a study committee to bring advice to the consistories as to what age would be appropriate was not approved and the body also defeated the motion of the pre advice committee. Therefore, the appeal from the Grand Prairie consistory was not sustained by synod.

Appeals #2 and #3 were of very similar substance. Both appeals sought to have synod declare that Classis Western Canada erred in regards to the status of a statement of advice given to a man during a candidacy exam in 2000. During the exam, the examinee asked a question for clarification. He asked if signing the form of subscription meant that the signatory was confessing that the Reformed confessions exclude non-professing members from participating in the Lord's Supper. The advice given was exactly that - "the Confessions exclude non-professing members from participating in the Lord's Supper." Then Classis Western Canada (Salem 2003) was asked to clarify the *status* of the advice given to the examinee. Was that advice to be seen as prescriptive and thus binding? Did the advice assume the status of "extra-confessional"? The answer which



classis Western Canada composed was that

This decision is not an “extra-confessional” statement that somehow has special status alongside of our Confessions. It is rather an affirmation of the Confessions themselves on a specific point of their teaching. Therefore, agreement with this teaching of our Confessions as recognized and affirmed by classis has a bearing on Confessional Subscription. Any candidates or office bearers who cannot affirm what classis has affirmed regarding the Confessions on this point cannot properly subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity.

The pre-advice committee agreed with the above statement of the classis, saying also that it *does clarify that status of the Classis 2000 decision*. Thus, the pre-advice committee advised synod not to sustain appeal #2 from the Grand Prairie consistory, nor appeal #3 from the Grace Reformed Church of Leduc, Alberta Canada. Each of these motions from the pre-advice committees to not sustain the appeals was adopted on the floor of synod.

Having then dealt with four of the five appeals on the agenda, there was but one more difficult matter for synod to adjudicate. This was an appeal regards the Confessional accuracy of a sermon. In answering **Appeal #5** synod said the following:

1. Synod affirmed that the Scriptures and Confessions (Heidel-

berg Catechism Q/A 59-62; Belgic Confession articles 20-23) teach the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, based upon the active and passive obedience of Christ alone.

2. Synod declared that the sermon under consideration is unclear and confusing on the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone.
3. Synod advised the consistory of the minister who wrote the sermon to work pastorally with him to bring any divergent view that he may have on this issue into conformity with what Synod here affirms.
4. That this be Synod’s answer to the appeal.

It seemed as though Synod had already “said” a great deal in answering the five appeals. But the delegates would need to say quite a bit more. As they were prayerfully deliberating the five appeals they were also dealing with 13 overtures, standing committee reports, and financial matters. The men still had more mountains to climb.

[continued next month]

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Thoughts about Synod 2004

The man behind the ticket counter at the Kalamazoo Airport asked for our birth certificate or passport. Mr. Visser, the Elder delegate from our church, and I had neither. Our wives offered to run home to get them, after all the airport is only fifteen minutes away and we were over an hour early. “No, that won’t be necessary,” the ticket master said, “your driver’s license and voter registration will be enough.” “Are you sure?” we asked. “Yes, it only became a law last month that Canada needs a passport.” That resolved, we sat in the Kalamazoo airport for an additional two hours awaiting our delayed flight. Plenty of time, I might add, to return home for whatever documents might be necessary for transcontinental travel.

After additional delays in Chicago, we arrived in Calgary, the site of the 1988 Winter Olympics and the 2004 URCNA Synod. The immigration officer was not impressed with our lack of proper documentation. “After all,” he said, “we haven’t accepted voter registrations as a valid ID for over a month.” After answering some questions, I asked the officer if we would be able to get out of Canada with the documents we had or if our wives would have to overnight our birth certificates to us. He assured us we would have no trouble leaving Canada.

The next day I awoke with the sunrise. Remember we were a long ways north and the sun rises before 5 a.m. I did some reading, familiar-

izing myself with the material assigned to the committee to which I had been appointed. I highlighted and made marginal notes on matters I thought should be discussed. Synod Calgary began at 1 p.m. One of the first matters of business was to remove me from my assigned committee and place me on another one.

Things progressed slowly, as can be expected when almost ninety ministers get together. It seemed as if everyone had come with the idea of bringing up “points of order” as often as possible. Rev. Ron Scheuers, of Chino URC was elected as President of Synod and immediately brought a calm to the deliberations.

My overall assessment of Synod was that we are a very divided federation over minor issues but very united on the serious issues. Many times the Chairman had to ask for a show of hands because of the close vote. Often that was on matters that involved word changes, amendments, and, yes, even the week the next Synod will meet. However, on matters such as justification through grace alone by faith alone and who is permitted to partake of the Lord’s Supper we were very united.

Synod agreed that a public profession of faith is required before one may come to the Lord’s Table. This decision was made by Synod in response to an overture seeking to respond to the paedocommunion debate raging through several reformed denominations, including our own. Although it did not set an age limit, it was clear that Synod believed a thorough examination

should take place prior to admitting anyone to the Table.

In response to an appeal about a sermon which may have led people to think that the minister was preaching justification by works, Synod affirmed that the Scriptures and Confessions clearly teach justification by grace alone, through faith alone, based upon the active and passive obedience of Christ alone. In addition, Synod advised the consistory to deal pastorally with the minister to bring any divergent views he may have into conformity with the Word of God and our Three Forms of Unity.

Synod was very deliberative in discussing the major issues before us. Delegates spoke in love and always with the good of the Church of Jesus Christ in mind. One example would be the postponement of receiving a church into our federation. It is no easy thing to tell a church that longs to be a part of the URCNA, “No, not yet.” Every denomination and federation wants to grow. We are no exception. Yet, after three days of discussions, Synod expressed its love for a church, but withheld her membership into our federation.

One of the more confusing things to take place at Synod was the way it addressed two overtures from Classis Michigan. In two separate overtures, Classis Michigan asked Synod to declare that homosexuality and abortion are sins condemned by the Word of God and our confessions. The grounds for these overtures were: The Word of God clearly speaks to the issues of homosexuality and abortion; and the confessions are

clear on these matters. These two overtures were rejected because, Synod said: “Scripture is clear with respect to the sinfulness of homosexuality/abortion” and “our three Forms of Unity sufficiently address our federative beliefs about homosexuality/abortion.” So, basically Synod declared that it would not say that Scripture is clear on homosexuality and abortion because Scripture is clear on homosexuality and abortion.

The most exciting event of Synod took place after Synod had adjourned. Rev. J. Gangar showed home movies of his recent visit to India. The videos were of several tent meetings that Rev. Gangar and his brother, a minister in the Free Reformed Church, gave while in India. How exciting it was to see entire villages come to hear the Gospel message. After spending four days in meetings dealing with the mechanics of the church, it was a delight to spend an hour watching the mission of the church.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the efficiency of the Bethel United Reformed Church of Calgary, the host of the 2004 Synod. Laptops were provided for every committee reporter which helped facilitate discussion in plenary sessions. The food was excellent and the 200 delegates and visitors were all fed delicious meals within 45 minutes. It was amazing to see how fast, resourceful, and competent the kitchen workers were!

On Saturday, Mr. Visser and I rented a car and drove through the mountains. We were truly amazed by the magnificence of God’s cre-

ation. Words cannot describe, nor pictures show, how beautiful the mountains are! On Sunday, we were brought to an even higher mountain when we were able to hear the lively and clear preaching of the Word by Rev. Wynia and Rev. Gangar.

And finally, there was the way home. You may recall that all we had with us was our drivers license and our voter registration card. U.S. Immigration was not impressed. Mr. Visser got through quickly, but I was detained. The officer asked me how long I had lived in Michigan. I told him for almost fifteen years. He asked me the following questions about the state I live in: What Detroit mayor needed more armed body guards than the President of the United States? How did the town of Novi get its name? How much does it cost to cross the Mackinaw Bridge? What is the name of the bridge that crosses into Canada at Windsor? After hemming and hawing and being unable to answer any of the questions, I finally said, in desperation, "Look at the name on my drivers license [Wybren Hotze Oord]. If I were a terrorist or a spy trying to sneak into the United States, would I make up a name like that?" He chuckled and let me go on to our waiting plane.

It was a blessing to be able to go to Synod. We have seen the leading of the Lord in many decisions made by the delegates. We have witnessed His care for His Bride, the Church. May the Lord continue to watch over the URCNA as we strive to be faithful to Him.

Review of the 258th Meeting of the Reformed Church in the United States

The 258th meeting of the Reformed Church in the United States opened on the evening of Monday, May 10, 2004 with worship. The president of the Synod, Rev. Vernon Pollema, preached the Word of God from Joshua 23 and 24. Therein the delegates and members of the Manitowoc, Wisconsin congregation were instructed to maintain faithfulness to God. Particularly in a time when the difference between the world and the church is increasingly apparent, the church must be certain to know Joshua's command in chapter 23:11 "Therefore, take careful heed to yourselves, that you love the LORD your God."

Although we may not usually think of committee meetings, speeches and voting as acts of love for our God, Rev. Pollema's stricture was apt not only for the RCUS in general, but also specifically for the work of May 10-13. The genius of Presbyterian church government is a mutual submission in the love of God whereby the decisions of the broader assemblies are used to promote and advance the cause of Christ in local congregations. Therefore it is of utmost importance that "careful heed is taken." The love of God must not only be evident in well reasoned deliberation, it must also be promoted by careful decision. The following review will focus on four particular reports and their decisions in which the synod attempted such careful heeding.

The following review of the synod is not intended to be comprehensive. There were many other decisions made which also affect our congregations. It is expected that by the time the members of the RCUS read this report pastors and elder delegates will have reviewed the events of the synod with their congregations. Additionally there will be the abstract of the minutes of the synod available in printed form or on the RCUS website (www.rcus.org) soon enough. Interested parties from outside of the RCUS may also consult those resources with a thorough account of all the particulars.

The Special Committee to Study Justification

The most significant report which came before the Synod this year was a partial report from a special committee which had been assigned the task of studying the doctrine of justification. This assignment had been given not because of a lack of clarity in the Three Forms of Unity or our common understanding of the Scriptures, but rather because of a pair of uncertainties which have arisen in evangelical Christianity.

The first of these uncertainties centers on former professor at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia and retired minister in the Christian Reformed Church in North America, Rev. Norman Shepherd. Since 1975 there have

been questions about Rev. Shepherd's doctrine of justification. Particularly, some have wondered about his understanding of the relationship of our good works to God's work of justification. In 1982, Rev. Shepherd was dismissed from his teaching position at Westminster Seminary because of these uncertainties.

Since his retirement in 1998, Rev. Shepherd has published a small book entitled *The Call of Grace*, authored various periodical articles, and spoken at a number of conferences. These occasions have made his particular understanding of justification more apparent; and these clarifications have not only caused some limited difficulties in the RCUS, but a number of denominations with which we have fraternal or corresponding relations have ministers and elders who are convinced that Rev. Shepherd's view of justification is biblically accurate (even if not in full accord with the Reformed Confessions). Therefore at the 257th meeting of Synod there was a general consensus that a report would not only be helpful to our congregations, it could prove necessary for our continuing relationship with various other denominations.

Time has made it apparent that Rev. Shepherd commits some grievous errors in his formulation of the doctrine of justification. He dismisses the concept of merit including the meritorious work of Christ on the cross, even though the Confessions (e.g. Heidelberg Catechism Q&A's 1, 21, 37, 60, 63 etc.) teach that Jesus' work merited our eternal life. Rev. Shepherd further teaches that faith and good works are parallel, in that what is true of faith is also true

of good works. Our Confessions, however, summarize the Scriptures in telling us that faith is the only means by which we receive new life while works are the fruit thereof (e.g. Heidelberg Catechism Q&A's 21, 63, 86 etc.). Finally, Rev. Shepherd dismisses the active obedience of Christ, even though this is clearly taught by the Confessions (e.g. Heidelberg Catechism Q&A's 35, 37, 44 etc.).

After some minor additions and corrections to the committee's report the Synod adopted the following four resolutions:

Resolution 1: That we reaffirm the truth of the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone including the necessity of the imputation of Christ's active obedience as a necessary element of our righteousness before God as it is expressed in the Three Forms of Unity.

Resolution 2: That we find that Rev. Norman Shepherd for many years has taught a confused doctrine of justification, contrary to the Heidelberg Catechism, The Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dordt.

Resolution 3: Therefore, we also resolve that the teachings of Rev. Norman Shepherd on justification by faith are another gospel and we admonish Rev. Shepherd and call upon him to repent of his grievous errors.

Resolution 4: That the Reformed Church in the United States recognize these Romish, Arminian, and Socinian errors for what they are and urge our brethren throughout the world to reject them and to refuse those who teach them.

It bears noting that there was an evident unity in the adoption of these resolutions by the Synod. The discussion about the report was limited to minor additions and corrections; no one gave evidence of opposition to the resolutions because of a different theological persuasion. For this agreement we must be thankful for the convincing and convicting work of the Spirit, through whom our Savior continues to keep his promise to the church (John 16:13,14).

The full report of the committee, as well as all of their recommendations, will be published in the forthcoming abstract as well as will be available on the RCUS denominational website (www.rcus.org). The committee was also continued to consider the New Perspective on Paul for next year's meeting of the synod.

The Special Committee to Study the Establishment of a Denominational Seminary

At the 256th meeting of Synod, an overture was received which requested the establishment of a denominational seminary. Synod then established a special committee to consider that request - a study which was not completed until this year's meeting.

Two reports were received. The majority report recommended that the RCUS move ahead with the immediate establishment of a denominational seminary, designate which seminary that would be, and then create a committee to determine how to fund the institution and what the relationship of the seminary to the denomination would entail.



The minority report recommended that the Synod consider other ways of training students beside a denominational seminary and give the Permanent Education Committee the responsibility to suggest when the time might be right to establish a denominational institution.

There was vigorous debate on both sides of the issue. Those who favored the establishment of a seminary argued that the Bible requires the RCUS to have its own seminary. Further, our denomination has gone too long relying on independent institutions providing us with able men. Now that we are capable of having a denominational seminary, we should proceed with doing so.

Those on the other side of the issue countered that the system we have in place is doing a better than credible job. We have received men into the pastorate from independent institutions who are orthodox and capable. Additionally, the yearly funding required for a denominational institution could be in the range of half (around \$300,000) of our yearly synodical budget. And it was also suggested that the biblical case for a denominational seminary was overstated.

In the end, on a 37 to 35 vote, it was determined that we would approve the concept of establishing a denominational seminary. At next year's synod meeting a committee will bring information about the proposed structure and funding of a denominational seminary. At that time it will be determined whether to proceed with the establishment of a particular institution.

Neither side in the debate questioned the potential effect of a de-

nominal seminary on the future of the RCUS. The RCUS seminaries of the past have done some good but a great deal of harm. It is important for all of the members of the RCUS to be in prayer for the decision anticipated at next year's synod.

Home Missions

The third report that we will consider together came from the Standing Committee on Home Missions. We currently have nine home mission works which receive funding from the synod and their respective classes. In addition there are a number of other works which do not receive funding, but continue to bring the gospel to places which do not yet have that light.

Even though our established churches are not involved in the day to day work of these mission works, yet in a very real sense we are striving together for the sake of the gospel. Approximately a quarter of our yearly synodical guidelines are sent to home mission works. This is in addition to the amount that each classis provides to the works within its borders. These works rely on the spiritual and financial support of each member of the RCUS.

Later on in this year there will be a Sunday dedicated to prayer on behalf of these works with an offering collected for the home mission work of Calhan, Colorado. We should give generously of our prayer and money to support these works.

In connection with the work of home missions it was also decided at Synod to fund the creation of a series of radio programs. These

programs will be designed for play on radio stations in cities where we already have established RCUS churches and are capable of at least another church. It is the hope of the Home Missions Committee to focus on four or five cities, buy time on radio stations to air the series of programs, create additional interest in a RCUS work in another part of the city, and then work with the established church to create a new work. Although this is somewhat different from our recent approach to home missions work, the committee was of the opinion that using this strategy in select areas might assist us in being more faithful to our missionary command.

Foreign Missions

The last report was from the Foreign Missions Committee. Many of the readers of this periodical will be familiar with the work that has taken place in Kenya and the Congo.

Perhaps the greatest need that is evident in those places is orthodox Reformed teaching. It had been hoped in previous years that we might meet this need through the sending of a missionary. However this year the permanent committee brought a recommendation to send two sets of two men to Kenya for one month each to provide instruction to these brothers and sisters.

At the time of this writing it has yet to be determined who will be sent to do the work. It will not be easy for any of our pastors to leave his church and family for an extended period of time. Yet our God has given us the privilege and responsibility of working with those across the world of the same faith. We do

ask that God will raise up men from our churches who will be willing and ready to do this work. Perhaps a word of encouragement to your pastor or a capable elder would be the way in which God would provide for this need.

At the end of each meeting of synod there is always a sense of accomplishment mixed with expectation. There is gratitude for work finished. There is also a relying upon our God to bless what has been decided. May our God establish the work of our hands (Ps. 90:17).

Review of the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America

Both present members of the Christian Reformed Church and former members take a keen interest in that denomination's Synod which took place in Grand Rapids, Michigan this past June. One hundred eighty-eight delegates from forty-seven classes in the United States and Canada met at Calvin College to work through the lengthy agenda. As an outsider, I did not attend any of the sessions nor hear any of the debates. This article is gleaned from the Synod issue of *The Banner* and articles written by Mr. Charles Honey, religious editor of *The Grand Rapids Press* which were mailed to me by a friend.

Rev. Joel Boot of Jenison, Michigan was elected as the President of Synod and Rev. Emmett Harrison of East Side CRC in Warnesville Heights, Ohio was elected as the Vice-President. Rev. Harrison is the first Afro-American to be elected to an office at Synod. Together, these men would lead the delegates through various key issues that lay before the Synod including the ministry shortage in the CRC; question & answer 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism; and what to do with *The Banner*.

New CRC Ministers

One of the biggest issues facing the Christian Reformed Church is the many vacant churches within the denomination. Synod approved thirty-one new candidates for ministry. It is always a delight to see

how the Lord continues to provide for His church by calling to the ministry members from among His elect. We pray that the Lord will use these candidates to advance His kingdom and bring glory to His Name.

Of those declared eligible for call, five were women. In order to appease those who are opposed to women in ecclesiastical office, Synod voted to approve the candidates one at a time rather than as a group. Rev. Ron Meyer of Drenthe CRC in Michigan was quoted in *The Press* saying that "this would allow conservatives like him to vote only for those who are biblically qualified." In spite of their silence or their "Nay" vote, all thirty-one candidates were approved.

In the next four years nearly two hundred CRC ministers will retire - that's an average of fifty per year. Even if every candidate graduating this year would get a call in the next year, there would still be an additional nineteen vacant churches. Add that to the 130 already vacant churches, and by the end of the year almost one out of every six churches will be without a minister.

Responding to this shortage, Synod set up a committee to oversee and recommend new ministers to the denomination. Whereas, this once was done by Calvin Theological Seminary Board of Trustees, the authority to present Synod with pro-



spective candidates was now placed in the hands of a Synodical Ministry Candidacy Committee. Although delegates agreed that Calvin Theological Seminary is still the preferred way for educating future ministers, Synod voted to create long distance programs for non-resident students and less time consuming course requirements for those transferring from other seminaries.

Opening the door as wide as it dared to allow for more ministers, Synod turned down a proposal that would permit graduates from Mid-America Reformed Seminary from entering the ministry without taking the required year at Calvin Seminary. It is interesting to note that in the past few years the Christian Reformed Church has done a host of colloquium doctums, gathering in new ministers from a variety of backgrounds, but men who receive a solidly reformed training at a seminary other than Calvin must be placed on hold before they can proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Popish Mass

Discussion over question & answer 80, which calls the Catholic Mass a “condemnable idolatry” [already water down from the “accursed idolatry” of earlier translations], has been going on for a long time. Way back when Andrew Kuyvenhoven was editor of *The Banner*, there was a plea to remove this question and answer from the catechism.

I remember when I was in Seminary we discussed this very question in our Heidelberg Catechism class. Most of the students were rather lenient toward the Roman Catholic Church in their view of the

Mass until. Then Seminarian Kirk MacNeil spoke up. He had grown up in the Roman Catholic Church. Kirk convincingly explained the beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church and how still today they believe the bread and wine actually turn into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Still today, he said, they believe in salvation through the sacrament. As I read the discussions of Synod concerning this matter, I could not help but think of how providential it was that the now Rev. Kirk MacNeil would be a delegate at the Synod discussing this question of the catechism. His name appeared in the newspaper article frequently as he claimed that still today the popish mass is a condemnable idolatry.

Delegates, however, disavowed question and answer 80 of the catechism. According to *The Press*, Synod claimed that the text “does not accurately and fairly represent official Roman Catholic teaching.” If I read the articles in *The Press* correctly, it seems like there was some debate after the disavowal as to what the Roman Catholic Church actually believes concerning the Eucharist. Although he did not quote anyone, Rev. George Vandervelde said, “Catholics know the body of Jesus is not splintered up in a million little pieces all over the world.”

Back in 1987, in response to Rev. Kuyvenhoven’s article in *The Banner*, The Fidelity Forum of West Michigan took out a full page ad in *The Grand Rapids Press* explaining what the Roman Catholic Church believes. In defense of the Eucharist, they wrote: “Speaking on behalf of the millions of Catho-

lics throughout the world, who daily worship our Lord, in the holy Eucharist - not just the symbolic presence, but in fact His true presence (Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity)...”

Perhaps Rev. Mariano Avila, professor at Calvin seminary summed it up best when he said, “It is ironic that we want to change our confessions to be in good relationship with a church that will never see us as a proper church.” In the end, Synod asked for input from the churches and will discuss the issue again in two years.

The Banner

I have long said that the reason so many conservatives remain in the Christian Reformed Church is because they do not read *The Banner*. If they read their denomination’s periodical and knew what was going on in their churches, they would cry out for change or leave the CRC. Members in the CRC will no longer be able to use ignorance of their denomination as an excuse for remaining. Synod voted to send *The Banner* to every household.

Conservative CRC members will apparently receive plenty of material to get their dander up. Rev. Robert De Moor, who recently published an article suggesting that gay couples should be legally recognized as domestic partners, was appointed the new editor. When interviewed, Rev De Moor said, “We must allow for disagreement.”

Gary Mulder, executive director of CRC Publications claims that sending *The Banner* to every household “won’t cost the CRC more, because \$600,000 per year spent on a

new religious education curriculum will be diverted to *The Banner*.” I have no doubt that over time that new religious education curriculum will be approved and the expense will be passed on to the churches in the form of Ministry Shares.

Conclusion

Reading the different articles from *The Banner* and *The Grand Rapids Press* concerning CRC Synod cannot help but leave an empty feeling in one’s heart. The Christian Reformed Church is a church that desires to remain faithful to the Word and the Three Forms of Unity. Yet she seems pulled in so many different directions that she doesn’t know where to turn. She still knows what is right and what God’s Word requires, but wants so badly to be a part of the big picture that she is willing to compromise her roots in order to be recognized by the world.

Evaluating the New Perspective on Paul (13)

Theological Corollaries

The biblical basis for the doctrine of imputation includes more passages than those we have had occasion to consider briefly. However, these are sufficient to illustrate the biblical teaching that the justification of sinners occurs by means of the reception of the righteousness of Christ, granted and imputed to them by God and received through faith. No other basis than that of Christ’s righteousness—comprising the entirety of His mediatorial work, not only His death for sin but His perfect life of obedience—can make a sinner acceptable to God.

The importance of the doctrine of imputation can also be confirmed by its intimate connection with other biblical and theological themes. Consequently, we conclude our treatment of imputation by noting its relationship to several theological corollaries.

Sola fide, solo Christo

In the classic reformational view of justification, the expressions “by faith alone” (*sola fide*) and “on account of Christ alone” (*solo Christo*) are used to affirm precisely what the doctrine of imputation affirms. We are said to be justified “by faith alone” (*sola fide*), not because the faith that alone justifies is an alone faith (without works), but because it is the exclusive instrument or means to *receive* the free gift of righteousness that is the basis for our acceptance with God. If the doctrine of imputation emphasizes that the ground of jus-

tification lies outside of us in a righteousness that God grants and imputes to us, then *faith alone* answers to the nature of the act by which God justifies sinners. A gift can only be received. It cannot be earned. Faith, therefore, as a receiving instrument is just the response that answers to the granting and imputing of righteousness that justification requires. Similarly, to say that our justification is “on account of Christ alone” (*solo Christo*) is equivalent to saying that it is on account of the righteousness of Christ that becomes ours through imputation. The doctrine of imputation serves as an indispensable safeguard against the teaching that sinners can find acceptance with God on the basis of any righteousness other than that of Christ alone.

Substitution, Union and Imputation

Even as imputation affirms what is expressed by the language of “faith alone” and “Christ alone,” it also affirms what belongs to the biblical doctrines of Christ’s substitutionary atonement and the believer’s union with Christ. If Christ’s life, death and resurrection occurred by God’s design *for* or *in the place of* his people, then it follows that all that He accomplished *counts as theirs*, so far as God is concerned. How could Christ’s work on their behalf and for their benefit not be reckoned to their account, if indeed it is *just as though they had performed it!*



Furthermore, when believers become united to Christ through faith, they come to participate in all the benefits of his saving work. Faith is the “empty hand” by which believers acknowledge and receive all that Christ has accomplished for them. To say that God grants and imputes the righteousness of Christ to believers is, accordingly, to acknowledge what is required by the doctrines of Christ’s substitutionary atonement and the believer’s union with Christ through faith.

Luther, in his well-known sermon, “Two Kinds of Righteousness,” illustrates this point by appealing to the analogy of the bride’s intimate union with the bridegroom:

Therefore a man can with confidence boast in Christ and say: “Mine are Christ’s living, doing, and speaking, his suffering and dying, mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, suffered, and died as he did.” Just as the bridegroom possesses all that is his bride’s and she all that is his—for the two have all things in common because they are one flesh—so Christ and the church are one spirit.¹

A “legal fiction”?

The biblical doctrine of imputation is often charged with being a “legal fiction.” God is said to regard sinners *as though they were righteous*, even though they remain sinners still. For the same reason that many object to the imputation of the guilt of Adam’s sin to his posterity. The guilt is “alien,” not personal and real—imputation is often decried as a cold, legal transaction that leaves

sinners in the same condition as before.

There are two critical problems with this objection. The first problem, which is not so much our concern here, is that it ignores the way Christ by His Spirit simultaneously sanctifies the believer whom He justifies. God, who declares the sinner righteous in justification, also makes the sinner righteous through the process of sanctification. The second problem, which is our concern, is that this objection ultimately charges God, who *declares the ungodly righteous on account of the work of Christ*, with declaring to be real what remains only a fiction. The same objection in principle could be offered against God’s declaration that all are subject to condemnation and death on account of the one trespass of the one man, Adam.

However, the verdict of innocence that God pronounces in freely justifying sinners for the sake of Christ’s saving work is no fiction. Rather, it is a divinely ordained and accomplished reality.² What could be more real than the perfect obedience and satisfaction of Christ, which are graciously granted and imputed to believers who place their trust in Christ alone? Perhaps the best answer to this objection, therefore, is to reply in the words of the apostle Paul: “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us?” (Romans 8:33-34).

Conclusion

The story is told that J. Gresham Machen, shortly before his death, sent a telegraph to his colleague John Murray with the words: “I’m so thankful for active obedience of Christ. No hope without it.”³ Though Machen’s words express the truth more poignantly and personally than does the language of “the imputation of the righteousness of Christ,” they capture the heart of this biblical teaching. The doctrine of imputation is simply a way of asserting that Christ’s life, death and resurrection are the sole basis upon which sinners are set right with God and become heirs of eternal life. Clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ, believers may have confidence in the presence of God. They know that the wages of their sins were fully paid by Christ. They know that the obligations of obedience were perfectly fulfilled by Christ. They know that Christ, as their Advocate, continues to intercede for them before God. In short—being found in Christ, they *know* with the confidence of faith that “[t]here is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). And so they sing:

*Man’s work faileth,
Christ’s availeth;
He is all our righteousness.
He, our Savior, has forever
set us free from dire distress.
Through His merit, we inherit
light and peace and happiness.*
(Fortunatus, c. 530-609)

Endnotes

¹ “Two Kinds of Righteousness,” in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. by John

Dillenberger (New York: Anchor, 1961), pp. 86-87.

² Cf. James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker reprint, 1955 [1867]), p. 337: "When we are brought face to face with such realities as these, it is vain to talk of 'legal fictions,' whether under the Law or under the Gospel; for while condemnation, on the one hand, and justification, on the other, are strictly forensic or judicial acts, and must necessarily have some relation to the Law and Justice of God,—and while the representative character both of the first and second Adam, and the consequent imputation of their guilt and righteousness to those whom they respectively represented, can only be ascribed to the sovereign will and appointment of God,—yet the results are in their own nature real and true, and not, in any sense, fictitious or imaginary."

³ As quoted by Ned B. Stonehouse, *J. Gresham Machen: A Biographical Memoir*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987 [1954]), p. 508.

Dr. Cornelis P. Venema is the President of Mid-America Reformed Seminary where he also teaches Doctrinal Studies. Dr. Venema is a contributing editor to *The Outlook*.

Looking Out and About

• Mid America Reformed Seminary held its nineteenth commencement exercise on Friday, May 21, 2004. Eleven men were awarded the Master of Divinity Degree. The commencement speaker was Rev. David Feddes, Radio Pastor of the Back to God Hour. Rev. Feddes chose as the theme of his address, SHOW AND TELL based on I Timothy 4:9-16. A large audience joined with the graduates in celebrating this significant event.

• On May 26, 2004 Rev. David Klompjen was installed as co-pastor of the Dutton United Reformed Church, Dutton, Michigan. Rev. Klompjen had formerly served as pastor of the Magic Valley United Reformed Church, Jerome, Idaho. Among the participants in the installation service was Rev. Klompjen's father, the Reverend Carl Klompjen, pastor of the First Christian Reformed Church of Hull, Iowa and also the Reverend John Klompjen, Pastor of Discipleship, First Christian Reformed Church, Byron Center, Michigan who is a brother of the new pastor at Dutton.

• Rev. Randal Lankheet who has served as the pastor of the United Reformed Church, Ontario, California since 1989 has accepted the call to the Covenant Reformed Church (URC) of Toronto, Canada.

• Mr. Charles Byrd a recent graduate of Mid America Reformed Seminary has accepted the call to

serve the Reformed Heritage Church of Holland, Michigan.

• Mr. Daniel Donovan who also recently graduated from Mid America Reformed Seminary will be serving the Providence Reformed Church (URC) of Winnipeg, Manitoba.

• Mr. Daniel Rogers who graduated from Mid America Reformed Seminary in May has accepted the call extended to him by the Emmanuel RCUS in Sutton, Nebraska.

Mrs. Mary Kaiser Retires

Saying good-bye to a person who has devoted almost half her life to Reformed Fellowship is not an easy thing to do. In this issue, however, we bid farewell to Mrs. Mary Kaiser, our faithful secretary for over thirty-two years. In that time Reformed Fellowship has seen many changes. When Mary started, she mailed out all the magazines from the office; did all the sorting and labeling; and filled out the necessary forms for the post office. For that, we paid her \$1.50 per hour. Out of that, fifty cents an hour went to her baby sitter. Truly her work was a labor of love.

That labor of love continued through the years as Mary watched the circulation of the magazine grow to over 7,000 during the controversies of the Christian Reformed Church and then drop down after the URCNA organized. She has outlasted four editors, supplied tick-



ets to banquets at a time when over three hundred people attended, and worked in three different offices. In all those years, Mary was the hub of Reformed Fellowship, making sure that the magazine got out as soon as possible, Bible Studies and books were mailed out, and the bills were paid.

We, on the board, truly express our thanks to the years of service given to Reformed Fellowship by Mrs. Kaiser. Her diligence has been greatly appreciated and we will miss her expertise in many areas.

Thank you Mary.

From the Board

Sound Bites

continued from page 13

1984 SPLIT THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH! Splitting the church is not something future, it is in the past tense - it has already happened!"

Whither the CRC?
Henry Vander Kam

July/August 1986

"Today [our] doctrinal foundation is being displaced within our churches by appeals to human experience, with that experience being used as a basis for criticizing doctrine. What is being forgotten is that defective experience results from defective doctrine, and that our experience must be evaluated, channeled and directed by God's Word."

*Our Heritage, Predicament
and Future*
Peter De Jong

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3. Manuscripts should be between 1,500 - 2,000 words.
4. No author may send more than one manuscript.
5. Manuscript must be original material.
6. Author must guarantee that their manuscript contains no copyright material without receiving full permission for its use.
7. Manuscripts must be received by the editor by September 15, 2004.
8. Manuscripts are preferred on disc in Microsoft Works or Rich Text Format or emailed to editor@reformedfellowship.net If no computer is available, send manuscript to Rev. W. H. Oord, 7724 Hampton Oaks, Portage, MI, 49024.
9. Manuscripts become the property of Reformed Fellowship and will not be returned.
10. Regular contributors and family of Board members are not eligible.
11. By submitting a manuscript, all contributors accept the rules and conditions of this contest.

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October 1986

“When we claim biblical authority for teachings which say exactly the reverse of what the WORDS of the Bible say, we are being most essentially the opposite of Reformed. When we acquiesce to such teachings with the excuse that they have been approved by church councils and synods, we are being the opposite of reformational. Church councils can no more make a woman into a man than they can create purgatory or release a soul from the same by the sale of indulgence. What the church says, it says ONLY by and with the authority of God speaking in the words of the Bible.”

The Problem is the Bible
 Robert Grossman



The Board of Reformed Fellowship would like to welcome a new secretary in our midst. Her name is Mrs. Shellie Terpstra. Shellie is a member of Bethany United Reformed Church in Wyoming, Michigan.

We would also like you to take note of our new business mailing address: 3363 Hickory Ridge Ct. Grandville, MI 49418. Our phone number remains the same: (616) 532-8510

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