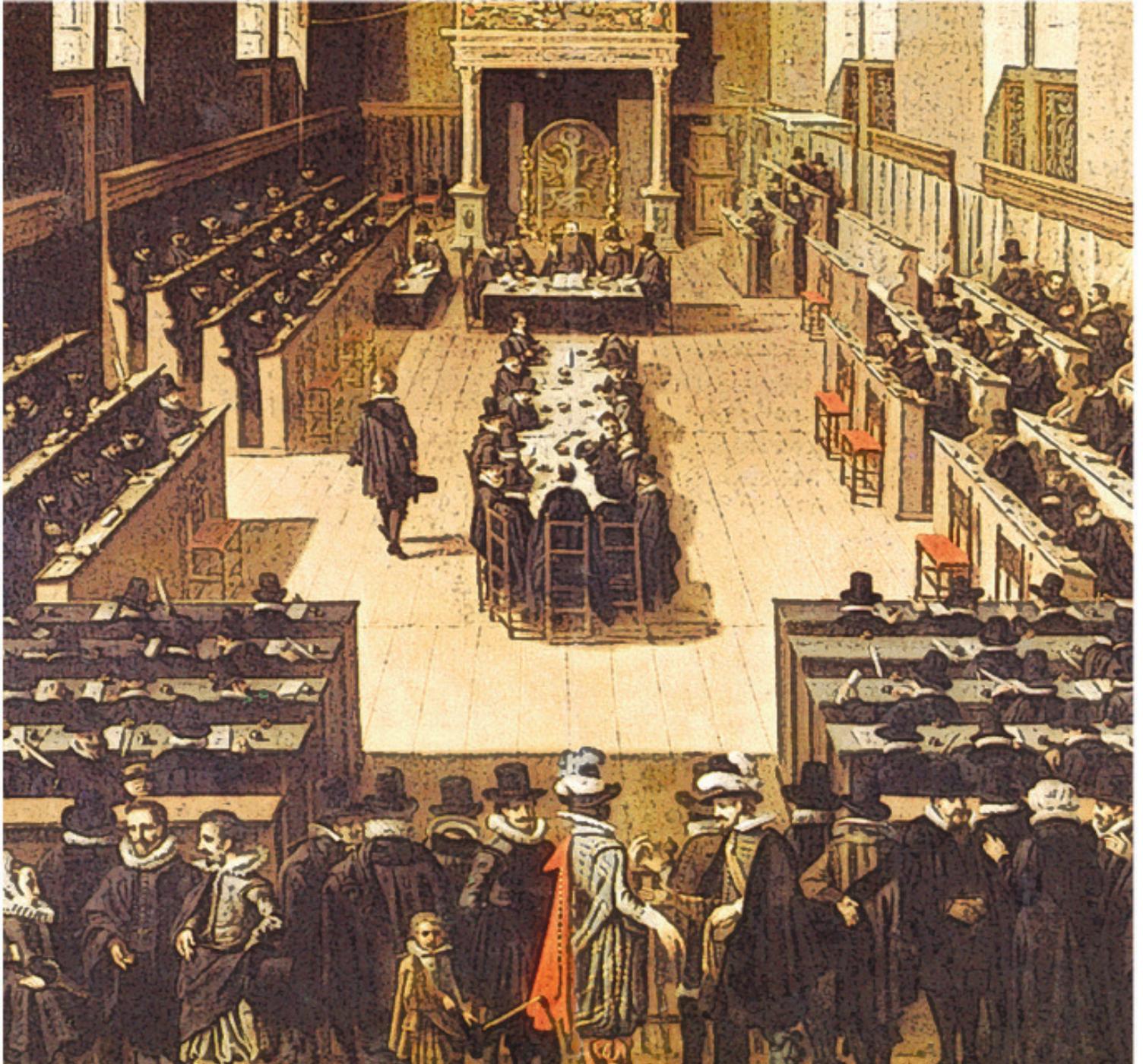


September 2007 • Volume 57 • Issue 8

The Outlook

Dedicated to the Exposition and Defense of the Reformed Faith



♦ The Man on the Right ♦ What is Reformed Worship (IV) ♦ This, The Rhythm of My Soul ♦ The Eighth Plague: The Destruction of Egypt
♦ Bible Studies of Joseph and Judah ♦ Reports of Synods; CanRC, 35th General Assembly of the PCA and URCNA ♦ The Elephant in the Room

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(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).

Journal of Reformed Fellowship, Inc.

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Cover Design: Mr. Jeff Steenholdt

This periodical is owned and published by Reformed Fellowship, Inc., a religious and strictly non-profit organization composed of a group of Christian believers who hold to the Biblical Reformed faith. Its purpose is to advocate and propagate this faith, to nurture those who seek to live in obedience to it, to give sharpened expression to it, to stimulate the doctrinal sensitivities of those who profess it, to promote the spiritual welfare and purity of the Reformed churches and to encourage Christian action.

The publishers of this journal express their adherence to the Calvinistic creeds as formulated in the *Belgic Confession*, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the *Canons of Dort*, and the *Westminster Confession* and *Catechisms*.

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Subscription Policy

The Outlook (USPS 633-980) is published monthly by Reformed Fellowship, Inc. (except July-August combined) for \$25.00 per year (foreign subscribers please remit payment in US Funds). Unless a definite request for discontinuance is received, it is assumed that the subscriber wishes the subscription to continue without the formality of a renewal order and he will be billed for renewal. Anyone desiring a change of address should notify the business office as early as possible in order to avoid the inconvenience of delayed delivery. Zip Code should be included. Periodicals postage paid at Grandville, MI and an additional office.

POSTMASTER:

Send address changes to *The Outlook*, 3363 Hickory Ridge Ct., Grandville, MI 49418; OR in Canada to *The Outlook*, P.O. Box 39, Norwich, Ontario NO1J0. Registered as International Publications Contract #40036516 at Norwich, Ontario.

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The Man on the Right

“And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church.” (Ephesians 1:22)

Both the Old Testament and the new Testament abound in passages that refer to the kingly character and the rule of Jesus Christ. Isaiah, for example, wrote that the government would be upon His shoulders. The Psalmist, in Psalm 24, referred to the Christ as the King of Glory and the Lord of Hosts. When on trial before Pontius Pilate, Jesus declared Himself to be a King. In the Book of Revelation, we are reminded that Jesus has been given authority over all things. He has the keys to death and hell. He has the power to withhold or to send out the angels of destruction. He alone has authority to open up the scroll that bring on the four horsemen, the seven trumpets, and so on.

This authority is given to Jesus because, as we confess in the Apostles' Creed, He is at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. His name is above every name. He is the One before whom every knee shall bow, either now, or when He comes again to judge the living and the dead. He is the One whom every tongue will confess as Lord to the glory of God, either now, or when He comes again to judge the living and the dead.

Paul assures us in Ephesians that Christ is both the Head and the King of the church. He is the Head of the Church because the life and growth of the church both proceed from Him. He is the King of the Church because He rules and gov-

erns the church. Indeed, He is Lord of lords and King of kings. Every sphere of life, every realm of thought, every part of creation is now under His rule and reign.

For Our Benefit

As the great and glorious Ruler over all creation, Christ pours out His blessings from heaven upon His church. By means of the Holy Spirit, the church is instructed concerning sin and misery, deliverance, and gratitude. Regeneration, conversion, faith, humility, peace, joy, patience, etc., all are gifts showered upon the church through the power and authority of Jesus Christ.

In His present position as ruler, Christ has all of heaven's resources at His disposal. Those resources are made available to the church. Christ supplies the church with everything she needs so that the church may endure, grow, and be victorious. In this issue of *The Outlook*, there are some reports of Synods and General Assemblies. Many decisions were made by many men who gathered together in service to the Kingdom. Obviously not all those decisions were unanimous. But the glorious truth is, that in spite of our disagreements the church will continue to endure, grow, and be victorious because Christ is the Head of the church.

Not only does He shower us with His blessings, but He also restrains the enemies of the church so that

they are unable to do any ultimate harm to His church. That certainly does not mean that we will be spared all pain and suffering; nor does it mean that we will be free from persecution or martyrdom. Many are the stories of men and women who were persecuted and killed because they took upon their lips the confession that Jesus Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords.

Jesus did not send out His followers under any false pretenses. He tells them, “I send you out as sheep among wolves.” He said, “If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you.” No sooner did Jesus ascend into heaven than Peter and John were arrested and thrown into jail. A short time later Stephen became the first martyr of the church. One of the great leaders of the established church at that time was a man whose soul was aflame with a bitter hatred toward Christ and the followers of Christ. He sought to put them in jail and to have them killed. Then, by the grace of God, he was confronted by the King of the Church on the way to Damascus. No sooner did Saul the Persecutor become Paul the Christian and he became one of the persecuted. II Corinthians 11 gives a list of some of the things that Paul endured for the sake of the Gospel. Even as Paul writes his letter to the Philippian Church, he rejoices. He rejoices in spite of the fact that he is in chains. He rejoices in spite of those chains because, on account of him, the gospel is advancing.

We have this glad assurance that Jesus Christ is the King of the church ruling and over-ruling in the affairs of Man. Whatever happens

to us as individuals, the Church of Jesus Christ will prevail. She will continue to exist. She will continue to grow. She will continue to be victorious in spite of us; and when we are faithful, through us. The King will use the very persecution that we are facing to advance His Kingdom.

This world does not run by its own laws. At the center of history is Jesus Christ ruling the world. His focus is upon His Church—that the church may be full, complete, and kept safe through His power and His grace.

Rev. Wybren H. Oord is the pastor of the Covenant United Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He is also the editor of *The Outlook*.

What is Reformed Worship? (IV) It is Covenantal

Jesus changed everything. His coming turned the world upside down: the poor became rich, the blind were given sight, the lame were made to walk, the mute were restored to sing, the outcast was welcomed, the weary were given rest. Because of what He accomplished, we now have free access into the very presence of God (Eph. 2:11–22; Heb. 10:19–22). Our worship, then, is a direct result of the Gospel.

Christians Need the Gospel Too

As a community of faith, we gather each and every week to hear the evangel, that is, the good news of the gospel. True evangelical, gospel-centered worship publicly portrays Jesus Christ in His saving work before the people of God (Gal. 3:1). Because the gospel has center stage, all worship is evangelistic. God’s covenant people build up in their faith while the Spirit of the Lord draws unbelievers into the community. The gospel is not just the part of the sermon in which the pastor seeks a decision from the audience. The entire worship service preaches Christ! This is one of the reasons for public confession and absolution. As one writer commented upon the 1552 *Book of Common Prayer*, “Cranmer placed confession at the beginning to remind us that we are gospel people.” This was the Reformed liturgical way of expressing justification by faith alone.

Evangelism by Being Church

The Scriptures clearly envision that the center of the local church’s evangelistic ministry is not found in “planned” activities such as passing out tracts, street-witnessing, VBS, or any other program, as helpful as these may be, but in the public worship of the Triune God of grace. I am convinced that if we as Reformed people start to view worship as the central theme of who we are, then things like evangelism will not be ominous topics, but the effects of what we already are and do. After all, even Calvin himself spoke of worship, not even the doctrine of justification by faith alone, as the most important part of the Reformation work of the sixteenth century in his 1544 treatise to Charles V, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*. The voluminous material of such men as Martin Bucer and Thomas Cranmer advocates and defends the Reformed conception of worship as the distinguishing mark of the Reformed churches.

Think of public worship as the hub of a bicycle’s wheel. From the hub, all the spokes go out and receive strength to do what they are supposed to do. Worship is like that hub. From it everything else goes out – such as private and family prayer, reading of Scripture, fulfilling your calling in life, fellowship together as believers, assurance of salvation, good works, and evangelism in the world.

Israel and the Temple

Beginning with the call of Abram, the LORD brought salvation to one family and through him, one nation of the nations of the earth. Thus, the history of Israel was very exclusive. Of course, God had a purpose in working this way. It was to bring to the world the Messiah.

With the command to construct the Tabernacle, the LORD localized His gracious presence in the midst of His peculiar people (Ex. 25-31, 35-40). After entering the land of promise, the LORD commanded one central, permanent location in which to “put His name” (Deut. 12:5). The holy place of worship was not just in the midst of the people as they wandered in the wilderness, but now it had a permanent place in the midst of the holy land. Therefore, we read of this exclusivity in words such as, “In Judah God is known; His name is great in Israel. His abode has been established in Salem, His dwelling place in Zion” (Ps. 76:1-2). We also read verses that extol the LORD for His exclusive work among the nation of Israel: “He declared His word to Jacob, His statutes and rules to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know His rules. Praise the LORD!” (Ps. 147:19-20)

The Prophets and the Temple

With the coming of the latter prophets, the outlook of Israel and her worship is expanded to be inclusive of the nations. Their anticipation was that on the horizon a day would come in which the efficacious grace of the Holy

Spirit would go out from Israel, for salvation is from the Jews (John 4:22), to the entire earth (Joel 2) and people from every tribe, tongue, language, and nation would worship the LORD who had redeemed Israel, and created them.

Central to this universal outlook of worship was the fact of the centrality of the temple in the center of Zion, which was also envisioned as being in the center of the earth. This is explained in Isaiah 2:2-4, when, “In the latter days” (a prophetic phrase that

The Church, by being Church, would be the means of the LORD’s salvation in the last days.

tells us he is speaking of the New Covenant), the “mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains” (v. 2).

The “high places” in Scripture, of course, are where the nations built their altars and temples to their gods because the tops of mountains were closer to heaven. Yet in Isaiah 2 the vivid imagery is of Mount Zion being elevated above all other mountains. This meant to convey that a day would come when the nations, not just Israel, would see the LORD of this holy mountain and come to Him, the King of kings and Lord of lords. And so Isaiah wrote, “all

the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that He may teach us His ways...’” (vv. 2-3). Something new would happen “in the latter days” as the unclean nations would go up to the dwelling place of the LORD, the place they formerly were not admitted; and be taught by the LORD Himself.

In Isaiah 56:6-8 the LORD says He would gather the outcasts into His holy mountain and accept their sacrifices and prayer, for “my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (v. 7). A day would come in which the priests of the LORD would not be from one family line of one tribe of the nation of Israel, but from all peoples who previously were excluded.

The attraction that would draw the nations to the temple would be the LORD Himself and His Word. The nations would be drawn to Zion’s worship and through it, to Zion’s LORD. This was a revolutionary way of thinking and a radical shift of how Israel had operated. A day would come in which the enemies of the LORD, Egypt and Assyria, those who made the Israelites their captives in a foreign land, would bring sacrifices and prayer to the altar of the LORD (Isaiah 19:18-23)! A day would come when those who were far off would be brought near (Eph. 2:13) and they would all sing in the language of Zion as the one people of the LORD. As the prophet Zephaniah said, “For at that time I will change the

speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call upon the name of the LORD and serve Him with one accord” (Zeph. 3:9). The Church, by being Church, would be the means of the LORD’s salvation in the last days. And it would be the Church as it was inspired by the means God had provided that would be attractive. When the Church becomes like the world, adopting the world’s message and methods, its power is lost. We have to remember that the Church is in antithesis to the world, and when that dividing line is blurred, a worldly church results.

In the last days, the days our Lord ushered in, the Gentiles would not only be converted but they would join the people of God in worship, drawing near to the temple and offering sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. And the means by which they would come to the LORD was through the worship of the LORD. Evangelism would be firmly fixed to corporate worship.

The Songs of the Temple

Far from being just a far off theory or prophecy, that had no immediate relevance for the common worshipper in the pew, this outlook of the Gentiles joining the Jews in worship was a part of the piety, prayers, and corporate songs of the people in worship. Israelites not only heard this truth, they sang it and longed for it.

Throughout the Psalter this hope is expressed in song. The sons of Korah sang of this day when they harmonized that the LORD, the Most High, who is to be feared above all because he is the King

of all the earth, would sit upon his throne and be approached in worship by “the princes of the peoples” who would be “as the people of the God of Abraham” (Ps. 47:9).

The shortest of the Psalms, Psalm 117, opens by saying, “Praise the LORD, all nations! Extol Him, all peoples!” (v. 1) It is amazing that this is one of the Hallel Psalms, which are those Psalms traditionally sung at the Passover feast. It is as if the Israelites were singing, “The LORD has brought us out and now it is your turn!” Even more telling is verse 2. After calling the nations to worship the LORD, verse 2 gives the reason why: “For great is His steadfast love *toward us*.” The Lord keeps His covenant with His people, and we are to sing to Him for that; as well. That is a reason to call the nations to experience this same covenant love.

Psalm 96 addresses the covenant people; yet notice how its focus moves from Israel (“Oh sing to the LORD a new song,” v. 1) to the nations (“sing to the LORD, all the earth,” v. 1), from the covenant community to the communities of the earth. This is a call to worship that extends to all mankind, for the chief end of *man*, not just our cozy congregations, is “to glorify God and to enjoy him forever” (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q&A 1).

The Psalmist calls all people to sing this new song of the new age unto LORD because of who the LORD is. He is glorious (v. 3), He has done marvelous deeds (v. 3), He is great (v. 4), He made all

things (v. 5), He is known for His splendor, majesty, strength, and beauty (v. 6). Notice how verses 2-3 link this worship of this all-glorious and majestic LORD with evangelism. Synonymous with singing this new song is “tell[ing] of His salvation from day to day” and “declar[ing] His glory among the nations, His marvelous works among all peoples.” As we sing to the LORD in heaven for all He has done we are imploring the nations to join us and ascend the heavenly mountain in worship.

We see this in all the imperative verbs in this Psalm: sing (v. 1), bless (v. 2), tell (v. 2), declare (v. 3), ascribe (vv. 7, 8), bring (v. 8), come (v. 8), worship (v. 9), tremble (v. 9), say (v. 10), be glad (v. 11), roar (v. 11), exult (v. 12). It is as if the Psalmist were saying, “In every way you know bring the nations before the LORD with you in worship.”

What we are talking about here is what has been called “doxological evangelism,” that is, worship that is so focused upon the beauty and worthiness of God that it inevitably is also evangelistic.

New Testament Fulfillment

We see this nexus between worship and evangelism clearly illustrated in the New Testament. In Acts 2:5 we see those who had gathered to worship according to the Old Covenant feast of Harvest, but who did not yet believe in Jesus Christ, hearing the mighty works of God in the praises and proclamations of the disciples in the Upper Room. As the church extols and lifts up the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the nations

are drawn to the Lord through their praise and adoration.

Even more, the apostle Paul speaks in this way in 1 Corinthians 14:24-25, where he is correcting error in the Corinthian church. What is important to recognize for our thesis of worship being evangelistic is that Paul assumes the unbeliever, the outsider, would be in the midst of the covenant people in worship. What he points out so clearly is that the worship of the church must be intelligible. The gift of prophetic preaching in the language of the people was more to be desired than that of speaking in foreign languages. In this way the unbeliever who comes into our midst will clearly understand what is going on, who God is, and where he stands before Him. The result would be that he would be without excuse and fall down and confess the Lord's presence among His people (cf. Zech. 8:23).

Two Extremes

This is the biblical picture of evangelistic worship, which steers us clear of two problematic views of worship in our day. On the one hand, there is the seeker-sensitive approach in which worship is seen *as* evangelism. Thus, everything is calculated to make the unbeliever feel comfortable. Services sing modern rock songs or praise songs set to rock tunes, because they are familiar, the "preaching" is focused on how to live successful lives, and all types of activities abound to get children into the church. Yet this view of worship does not build up the saints, who are simply there to bring unbelievers.

We may not be so affected by this view, but with the second we are. In Reformed churches, we tend to treat worship *as* edification and instruction of the saints. We think it is only for the covenant community and so we view our worship service as if only believers were there. What happens in this understanding is that the lost in our midst are bored and do not understand what is going on.

What are we to do to both instruct the believer and lead the unbeliever to Christ in our worship at the same time? As Timothy Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, says,

If the Sunday service aims primarily at evangelism, it will bore the saints. If it aims primarily at education, it will confuse unbelievers. But if it aims at *praising the God who saves by grace*, it will both instruct insiders and challenge outsiders. Good corporate worship will naturally be evangelistic.

Rev. Daniel Hyde is the Pastor of Oceanside United Reformed Church in Oceanside, California.

This, The Rhythm of My Soul

This, the rhythm of my hour,
this the only certain power,
Jesus Christ forgives my sin,
I am trusting all in Him;
My heart He promises to rule,
saying like a herald true:
"Repent, believe,
and trust anew."

This, the rhythm of my day,
this the only faithful way:
Holding sin I seek my Lord,
resting in His faithful Word;
My heart He promises to mend,
saying as a faithful friend:
"Repent, believe,
and trust again."

This, the rhythm of my years,
this amid the daily tears,
Falling once again to sin,
trusting once again in Him;
My heart He promises to save,
saying on the weary days:
"Repent, believe,
and trust always."

This, the rhythm of my soul,
this the garden of my hope,
Dying I will die to sin,
heaven thus to enter in,
My heart He promises to cure,
saying softly at the door:
"Rest, my son,
repent no more."

Rev. Russel St. John is the Pastor of the PCA Church in State College, Penn.

The Eighth Plague: The Destruction of Egypt

Exodus 10:1-20

When reading the book of Exodus it is important to keep in mind that the Exodus event represents a great contest. The ten plagues and the exodus event were confrontations between the God of the Hebrews and the false gods of Egypt. The gods of Egypt include Pharaoh, as the incarnation of Ra, Horus, and the various other gods personified in the elements of nature. Several of Egypt's false gods were personified through the Nile river, the waters of Egypt, the land, and the sky. Through the means of the ten plagues Jehovah was systematically confronting and destroying each of the false gods of Egypt.

In the last series of plagues, which originated with the sky, Jehovah was making a mockery of the Egyptian deities associated with the sky. In the book of Exodus the conflict was not just a local or regional conflict. The conflict included more than just the land the sea and the sky; the conflict was designed to determine who was sovereign over the cosmos.

God gave two reasons for this plague. First, this plague was a judgment against Egypt. The verb translated "to deal harshly" in verse 2, bears a sense of mockery. Brown, Driver & Briggs; the standard Hebrew Lexicon, translate this clause: "how I have made a toy of Egypt." Through the plagues, God has humiliated

Egypt, as if Egypt were a toy. But the humiliation of Egypt was not yet complete; there was still more judgment and humiliation to come.

The second reason for the eighth plague had to do with Israel. We are told that God had hardened Pharaoh's heart and the hearts of his officials so that He might perform miraculous signs, "that you might tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians., that you may know that I am the Lord" (10:2). God intended that the plagues would be used to educate the Israelites and their children, so they would know that Jehovah is the Lord. The broader purpose of the Exodus was being brought to light. God's redemptive purposes extended beyond the Exodus generation.

Judgment Against Egypt

When Moses and Aaron confronted Pharaoh, they asked him this question "How long will you refuse to be humble before Jehovah? Let my people go, so that they may worship me." Up to this point Pharaoh had refused to humble himself before the Lord of creation. There was a striking contrast between Moses and Pharaoh. In Numbers 12:3 we read, "And the man Moses was more humble than any man who was upon the face of the earth." Pharaoh was the total opposite of Moses. Pharaoh denied the existence of Jehovah, and when he finally acknowledged His exist-

ence, he denied His right to rule. By the seventh plague, Pharaoh pretended to humble himself by claiming that he has sinned, but it was only an act. Pharaoh's only tool at this point was deception.

There is a sense of poetic justice in this passage. The verb "to humble" was first used by Pharaoh regarding the Hebrews. Pharaoh attempted to humble the Hebrews by placing taskmasters over them. Pharaoh's actions, however, came back to haunt him. Instead of humbling the Hebrews, Pharaoh was being humbled.

The nature of the eighth plague was clearly spelled out: "God will bring locusts upon the land of Egypt. The locust will cover the face of the ground so that it cannot be seen. They will devour what little you have left after the hail, including every tree that is growing in your fields. They will fill your houses and those of all your officials and all the Egyptians-something neither your fathers nor your forefathers have ever seen from the day they settled in this land till now."

The plague would affect all of Egypt; the plague would effectively destroy any vegetation left intact from the hail. The devastation from this plague would have been extreme. The locust swarm has always been one of the worst scourges to afflict humanity. An area of one square kilometer can contain fifty million such insects. In a single night they could devour as much as one hundred thousand tons of vegetation. If this plague had stood alone it would have been devastating, but Egypt

was already in ruin. Any vegetation that remained following the hail would have been destroyed by the locusts.

The climate in Egypt was ideal for locusts. As a result the Egyptians looked to the gods for divine protection from locusts and other pests. The eighth plague made a mockery of the Egyptian gods responsible for defending Egypt against insects and other pests. By now, this had become a pattern. Most of the plagues were an assault upon the Egyptian gods. The plagues showed that Jehovah is the Lord. Through the eighth plague we continue to see how God was judging Egypt, and defeating Egypt's false gods.

Moses gave Pharaoh no time to respond. He knew how Pharaoh would respond. God had said He would harden Pharaoh's heart. There was no reason for entering into dialogue with a man that God was hardening.

At this point Pharaoh's counselors stepped in to give advice. They ask a similar question to the one that God raised earlier when God had asked, "How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me?" In like manner, Pharaoh's officials asked Pharaoh, "How long will this man be a snare to us?" The court officials had no desire to accede to the demands of the Hebrew prophet. They recommended that Pharaoh let "the men" go, referring only to the adult males. Pharaoh's officials were advising Pharaoh to negotiate a compromise with Moses.

Notice the scorn in the way that the officials referred to Moses.

They did not call him by name, but merely said "this one". It is clear that Pharaoh's officials had not humbled themselves before the Lord. There was no fear of God in their hearts. They continued to wallow in their sin. This was consistent with the introductory comments regarding the reason for the plagues. "God has hardened Pharaoh and his officials that he might perform these miraculous signs that you may tell your children and grandchildren, that you may know that I am the Lord."

If this plague had stood alone it would have been devastating, but Egypt was already in ruin.

Pharaoh was still trying to act as if he was in control. First he had Moses and Aaron brought back to the court. Then, he tried to send them out of the land, but he did so in such a way that he would still be in control. He tried to determine who would go and who would stay, but Moses rejected any conditions or limitations set by Pharaoh. God had commanded that all His people should go. Moses made the point that the Hebrews would celebrate a festival to Jehovah. There is a note of sarcasm, because the celebration would be at Pharaoh's expense.

Pharaoh's response is bitter and condescending. He denies Jehovah's existence and His im-

minent presence with His people. The king of Egypt commands the Hebrew men to go, but he is unwilling to release the women and children. Pharaoh knew that the men would never leave their families. He held the men in subjection by holding their families hostage. After giving this command Pharaoh drove Moses and Aaron out from his presence, as if he were in control.

In response to this, Moses stretched out his rod upon the land of Egypt. Jehovah blew an east wind on the land all that day and night, and when it was morning the east wind delivered the locusts to Egypt.

This was the first time Jehovah employed a secondary means--an east wind. This was important because locusts usually approached Egypt from the south; therefore their coming from the east indicated an abnormal condition. An east wind was later used to divide the Red Sea (14:21). The east wind appears throughout the Scriptures as a means of God's judgment. The Lord shattered the ships of Tarshish with an east wind (Ps. 48:7). In the book of Jonah an east wind was used as a means of judgment.

As the plagues intensified, Pharaoh's response became more and more desperate; he called Moses and Aaron in haste, he said, "I have sinned against Jehovah your God, and against you." While there may have been desperation in Pharaoh's response, there was no true repentance. This was the second time that the king acknowledged his own sin. This time his confession was fuller than it

was before. Pharaoh admitted that his sin had been directed against Jehovah and His servants, Moses and Aaron; but he does not acknowledge any wrongdoing against God's people. The king acknowledged his sin, but there was no true remorse. He did not seek forgiveness, and there was no repentance. Pharaoh acknowledged limited responsibility for the eighth plague, but he never confessed his sin regarding the first six plagues.

The fact that Pharaoh admitted wrongdoing is significant, given the prevailing belief that he was sinless. The ancient Egyptians believed that Pharaoh was divine and sinless. As a result it was impossible for Pharaoh to face judgment even at the time of his death. Upon his death, it was believed that he would be fully deified and transformed into the god Osiris. Osiris was the god who presided over judgment and death. At this point in the exodus narrative it is easy to see how the exodus stands in opposition to Egypt's religious foundation. In the exodus, Pharaoh is depicted as an enemy of Jehovah. Pharaoh represents the seed of the serpent, and he is deserving of God's righteous judgment.

Sometimes we forget that the unregenerate may appear to us as nice people, and by our standards they might be, but fundamentally they stand in opposition to Christ. The foundation of their thinking is based on a belief system that is in opposition to Christ.

In response to Moses' prayer, God made a change in the wind. The prevailing winds in Egypt came from the direction of the Red Sea.

This verse literally says that "Jehovah turned the very strong wind of the sea." In other words, the Lord changed the direction of the wind to carry the locusts into the Red Sea.

This event foreshadows what God would do to Egypt's army. Jehovah would hurl Pharaoh's most elite fighting men into the Red Sea; not one of them will survive the waters of judgment. The drama of the exodus continues to escalate. Twice in this passage we are told that God had hardened Pharaoh's heart and the hearts of his officials. By beginning and ending with the same theme, the Scriptures emphasize that although Egypt had been destroyed, the unbelieving leaders failed to comprehend what was happening to them. They had a distorted view of creation and the operation of the universe. This continues to be true of unbelievers today. They do not realize that a sovereign God is in control of history and creation. Their hearts are hardened toward God.

In the book of Revelation, John describes how God will employ locusts once again, at the end of time. "And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes a man" (Rev. 9:3-5).

In the book of Exodus, the locusts devoured every remaining form of

vegetation, but this is not true of the locusts at the end of time. At the end of the age, the locusts will torture ungodly men and women lacking the seal of God on their foreheads. There is a dramatic increase in the intensity of the plagues as we move from Exodus to the book of Revelation. The locusts associated with the end of time, in Revelation, will sting men, their sting is compared to the sting of a scorpion.

In the Old Testament the Israelites were condemned for rebelling against Jehovah and not remembering God's mighty work of salvation. Likewise, we too should not forget God's work and how this work is fulfilled through Jesus Christ. It is necessary and good that we reflect upon God's redemptive work, and that we teach our children about the mighty acts of God. This is vital if we are going to teach our children about God's redemptive plan, and how Jesus Christ has fulfilled this plan.

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Bible Studies on Joseph and Judah

Lesson 1: Young Joseph is Both Loved and Hated

Read Genesis 37:2-11

Introduction

We turn here to the stories that will revolve mainly around Joseph and also Judah. But again, we must be alert to what God is doing to advance His cause and His Kingdom in and through Joseph and Judah. The Bible does not give us interesting biographies of the “good guys” and the “bad guys.” The Biblical story is tracing a covenant line that will draw our attention always forward to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, His Person and work, and the coming of the Kingdom of God.

There are two things to notice about the opening verses of Genesis 37. First of all, Jacob is brought back into the story after we have read through the “account of Esau (that is, Edom),” which occupied Genesis 36. Esau and his descendants, the Edomites, will occupy land to the south of the Dead Sea. But Jacob will occupy Canaan, the Promised Land, where his own father Isaac had lived throughout his life. Second, note that in verse 2, we have the last of the “accounts” (or, “generations”) of the book of Genesis. We met the first one in Genesis 2:4, the “account (or, generations) of the heavens and the earth.” These several accounts had given textual shape to the book of Genesis as matters continued to narrow down to focus the readers’ attention upon the family of Jacob, the people of

Israel. These accounts provide a name, and then tell us “what happened” to him and his family. So we will see Jacob in the Biblical story here, but attention will soon focus on Joseph and Judah and how God will use these two sons. Judah, we remember, is the fourth son of Jacob, while Joseph is the “younger son,” the son of Jacob’s favorite wife Rachel.

What do we mean here in saying, “younger son?” First of all, we recall that Joseph is in fact the oldest son of Rachel and Jacob. Rachel had been unable to have children for some time, and this had caused her great distress (see Gen. 30:1-8). Yet in time “God remembered Rachel,” she gives birth to her firstborn son, Joseph (“may He add;” Gen. 30:22-24). In relationship to the other half-brothers, Joseph is the youngest son. Some day he would, in God’s marvelous plan, become the powerful ruler of Egypt, and his brothers would serve him (cf. Gen. 25:23).

Genesis 37:2-11 divides into two parts: the first part focuses on Jacob’s love for Joseph, while the second part reveals the message that comes through two dreams. Both sections in these verses have one thing in common: the hatred the sons of Jacob have against their own half-brother, Joseph.

The father’s love, the brothers’ hate (37:2-4)

Jacob is an old man at this point, and he loves the “son of his old age,” whose status is enhanced by

the fact that Joseph is the son of his beloved wife Rachel (now deceased; see Gen. 35:19). Jacob loves him more than all of his older sons, a fact not unnoticed by those sons, something that is not lost on them and their attitude. We meet Joseph now, after his birth notice, when he is a teenager, a boy 17 years of age.

There is an earlier account of a parent showing favoritism to a particular child. Jacob’s own father Isaac had loved Esau more because of the tasty wild game that Esau could catch, prepare and serve as food. Jacob, on the other hand, had been loved by his mother. Those dynamics of favoritism had let lose in the family some very unhealthy things. Now Jacob shows his own love to this younger son, Joseph.

He makes it blatantly evident by the special coat that he prepared for Joseph. Some translations have called it a “coat of many colors,” but this is not likely the translation. The same phrase of description is given to the kind of garment that Tamar, the daughter of King David, would wear later (see 2 Sam. 13:18). Some have suggested that the coat was ornamented with long sleeves and would indicate a person of royal position. While we cannot be dogmatic here, it is likely that Joseph was “dressed like a king,” and that by his own father. And Joseph is certainly not in the position of being the oldest son: there are ten older brothers ahead of him! Brotherly jealousy and resentments are somewhat understandable.

But there are other reasons that the text gives for why the brothers hate

Joseph. While he helped out by working with his half-brothers who were the sons of the concubines, he brings back a “bad report” about his brothers to his father. Our culture generally hates a snitch, a tattletale, but it is not clear if that is the way we should read and hear this story. On the other hand, we also value the “whistle-blower” who calls the dishonest to public account. In either case, the exposure of the brothers’ evil (whatever it may have been) is something they hate. Civil conversations between the brothers and Joseph were no more (verse 4).

“I had a dream... and another dream” (37:5-11)

The two dreams are further reasons for the brothers’ hatred against Joseph. Even father Jacob is made thoughtful about what this all means. Dreams will play a significant role in the entire Joseph story (cf. the dreams of the two royal prisoners, and the dreams of the Pharaoh). Joseph’s two dreams basically have the same message. In each, something that represented Joseph himself receives the bowing down of the other objects that represent his family members. Joseph’s sheaf stands, and his brothers sheaves bow to his sheaf. In the second dream, the celestial “governors,” the sky rulers—the sun, the moon, and the stars—bow down to Joseph. If God had sent such dreams to Joseph, then God is saying that Joseph will someday be a great ruler. Jacob had honored his son with his love and with a special coat. Now it appears that God will greatly honor him as well in the future. There are two reactions in the family: the brothers only use the dreams of Joseph to fuel their hatred and jealousy, while father Jacob is perplexed, perhaps wondering if things are now beginning

to get out of hand, or thinking that Joseph’s dreams may have only exaggerated the honored position that Jacob had given him. It is one thing to claim that Joseph will rule in the future, but will Jacob himself actually bow down to Joseph? Jacob does not forget this: he pondered these things in his heart.

Mary, the mother of our Lord Jesus, will do a similar thing later at the birth of Christ. Read Luke 2:19 and 2:51.

Pondering and meditating upon the revelation of God is, in fact, the attitude of a good, submissive disciple.

Pondering and meditating upon the revelation of God is, in fact, the attitude of a good, submissive disciple. A good disciple will take the revelation of God and store it in his heart, like seed that falls on good soil. Such a disciple can then produce a bumper crop for God’s Kingdom. Is this what will happen with Jacob? Jacob ponders these things, but his sons do a slow simmer of hatred.

Covenant sons that are like their “father”

We begin to feel at this point that we have been here before. In a covenant home where the true God should be known, loved, worshiped, and honored, we find instead the things of the ancient Serpent, the devil, coming to expression. Jesus told the Jews the truth, and that truth sets anyone free

(John 8:31). But the Jews rejected both the message and the Messenger, Jesus. Yet they claimed that they remained Abraham’s children. Jesus’ reply is telling: “You belong to your father the devil... he was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44).

Spiritually, Cain acted like the devil when he murdered his brother and then lied to God. A similar thing will happen in Genesis 37 when the brothers of Joseph will wish to kill him and then lie to their own father. The power of evil is great, even in the lives of people who should know and live according to the Kingdom of God.

Jesus also faced lies and plots of murder. Yet the grace of God is greater than all the sin and guilt that exist in this world. God reveals His perfect will so that we might live by it. The wicked will reject God’s will because they act according to their nature. By nature we all hate God, His Son, His message, and we hate our neighbors as well! This does not stop our great God: He works even through human wickedness to bring His perfect designs to pass. Acts 2:22ff. and Acts 3:18 (cf. Acts 4:28) tell us that the Jews handed over God’s righteous Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to wicked men, even after God had accredited Jesus in the presence of all. But it was precisely through these actions, wicked in their motive and method, that God worked out the salvation of all His elect through the Cross and the resurrection. This is grace: God’s riches established at Christ’s expense. Indeed, God moves in a mysterious way!

Lesson 1: Points to ponder and discuss

1. In the ancient world it was commonly understood that the gods could communicate their wills to people by means of dreams. In fact, God had appeared to Jacob in a very important dream at Bethel (Gen. 28:10ff). If this is so, why did Joseph's brothers not understand these two dreams in a similar way? In other words, if dreams are from God, then the family must submit to God's plan and not "hate the messenger" (Joseph), right? What does this suggest about the spirituality of Joseph's brothers? What reaction do modern church members have to God's revelation today, especially when it "steps on our toes?"
2. God made His plan known for Joseph by means of dreams. Does God still make known His will today by means of dreams? (Yes, there are people today who profess the Christian faith and who attach significance to dreams!). How do we understand Hebrews 1:1-3 in this regard?
3. Joseph's brothers hated him. How is it possible for brothers who are raised in the same "Christian" home to hate their own flesh-and-blood to such extent as we see in this chapter? What can parents do when they see such hatred beginning to show itself?
4. We see a gradual escalation in the levels of bitterness that arise in the sons of Jacob. Apparently none of them try to check this hatred and stop it. There is such a thing as "mob violence" and "mob (or group) hatred." How does this appear today? Where have you seen or experienced this yourself? Can "coffee cup gossip" about certain people be a subtle form of such hatred? How do cliques, closed circles of friends, become a negative thing in school or in a congregation?
5. Jacob's favoritism to Joseph plays a role in the brothers' growing hatred against Joseph. Is this then a story about "bad parenting," or is it a story about the covenant seed, that is, the family line that carries God's redemptive plan? What is this "covenant seed" like in Genesis 37? Are they being influenced perhaps by the ways of the Canaanites?
6. Commentators are divided in their evaluation of Joseph's personality in Genesis 37. Some see him as a proud and arrogant snitch, one who did not handle the message of the dreams in a responsible way. Others see him as a faithful and dutiful son, one who obeys his father, knows what is evil and will not stand for it (even in his brothers). How do you read this part of the story, and why? In the end, is the focus on the person of Joseph, or should we ask how the Spirit of Jesus is working here in the people and events of this story?

Bible Studies on Joseph and Judah

Lesson 2: Jacob's Sons Attempt to Rid Themselves of Joseph

Read Genesis 37:12-36

Introduction

In the opening verses of Genesis 37 we are given a glimpse into the attitudes that lived in the household of aging Jacob. He has children from four different women, two wives and two maidservants. But Jacob loves the firstborn of his beloved wife Rachel, and he does not hide that fact in any way. The text makes clear that a series of events (e.g., a special coat, two dreams, etc.) cause brother hatred to escalate against Joseph. Yet the clear message that comes through is that some royal role belongs to young Joseph. Father Jacob seems to want it, and, if dreams come from God, then this royalty appears to have divine approval as well.

Jacob sends Joseph on a mission (37:12-14)

Joseph's brothers take their father's flocks to graze near Shechem (the city where the massacre had occurred in Gen. 34). The household of Jacob is semi-nomadic; that is, they lived in tents in a particular area as long as enough water and grazing area exist for the flocks and herds. If necessary, a nomad like Jacob would move around, or move his flocks, to any place where supplies of water and grazing fields were available. Jacob has been living near Hebron; his sons must take the herds to an area in central Canaan, just over 50 miles (over 80 kilometers) to the north.

Jacob sends Joseph to check on the well-being (*shalom*) of his brothers and the flocks. Interesting irony: earlier in verse 4 the text notes that Joseph's brothers could not speak a "kind word" (literally, *shalom*) to him. We wonder whether it is possible that Jacob does not know how intense the hatred is by his sons against Joseph. Could that fact have simply gone over his head? It is hard to believe that Jacob is completely unaware of the brothers' intense dislike of Joseph. If he is aware of it, why does he send young Joseph to the brothers? Or is it the case that Jacob is, in fact, aware of family friction (normal, isn't it?), but that he believes his sons would never do anything harmful or malicious to Joseph? In any case, he sends young Joseph to find them.

He came to his own, but... (37:14-20)

The brothers have in fact moved on from Shechem to Dothan, almost 15 miles (about 24 kilometers) north of Shechem. An unnamed man helps Joseph find the brothers, and they in turn see him coming from a distance. Although they do not have binoculars, apparently Joseph comes to them wearing the special coat that his father had made for him. This coat was only one of the reasons that the sons of Jacob hate Joseph. What should catch our attention is the fact that his mere appearance causes their hatred to flare up. Verse 18: "But they saw

him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him." Joseph does not have to say a word to his brothers before they have murderous thoughts come out. One does not have to pinch or probe deeply at all in the souls of these brothers for there to be an eruption of murderous scheming. With sneering sarcasm, they call him a "master of dreams, the dreamer," thinking that by killing him they could snuff out any prospect of his dreams coming to fulfillment. Clearly they do not believe that the dreams are from God.

Reuben plans to rescue Joseph (37:21-24)

Reuben, the eldest brother and thus the "one in charge," persuades them not to kill Joseph for the moment, but only throw him into an empty cistern (his first "prison"). Reuben wants to pull them back from personal bloodguilt and rescue Joseph later. But Reuben leaves the area for a while. Joseph is stripped of his special coat, that hated symbol of the father's special love. If it is possible that Joseph was not sure of what his brothers thought of him before, there cannot be any doubt now. At this point Joseph could only wonder if they were leaving him to die of hunger and thirst, or if they would actively take his life. He would cry out from that cistern for mercy, but his brothers would turn a deaf ear to his cries.

"Let's make deal" (37:25-28)

It's time for lunch, and the brothers eat together. Joseph gets nothing. This sets us up for a great irony later on when the brothers would stand in Egypt, "hat in hand" so to speak, asking Joseph for food because of the great famine that would strike the land. But that is

later. There are more ironies to come.

Canaan is strategically located as a place where several trade routes exist between Egypt and Mesopotamia. We are not surprised to read that a trading caravan is spotted on its way to Egypt. The identity of these traders may be confusing to some readers, as well as who sold whom. The explanation offered here is that “Ishmaelite” and “Midianite” are basically interchangeable terms. Both Ishmael and Midian are children of Abraham (see Gen. 25:1ff.). It may be that Ishmaelite came to be the more general term, while Midianite was a more specific term (cf. the use of terms “Arab” and “Iraqi,” or “German” and “Bavarian” to illustrate the general and the specific identifications).

When these traveling merchants are spotted, it is Judah who comes up with the idea to sell Joseph. To him and his brothers, this seems to be a “win-win” solution: we don’t actually kill Joseph, but instead we get some cash out of selling him. In other words, he is out of our life forever, plus we get some pocket change!

Joseph is sold for 20 pieces of silver. Later in the law of Moses, a male slave (between 5 and 20 years of age), specially dedicated to the LORD, was valued at 20 shekels (ages 5-20). According to the Hammurabi law code, this was the price of male slaves in the ancient Near East at that time (prices for slaves would rise over the centuries, of course). Joseph would later describe this event as being sold into Egypt, clearly against his will (see Gen. 40:15 and 45:4,5).

Torn and blood-stained clothing (37:29-34)

Reuben returns to his brothers, only to find young Joseph gone, now in chains and on his way to Egypt. Reuben tears his clothes as a sign of his grief. His plan to spare Joseph’s life has now come to nothing. Reuben did not have the courage to stand up to his murder-plotting brothers. He did not rebuke them firmly for their plans, and now the result is the loss of Joseph. Reuben must now, probably with great reluctance, go along with the clever strategy of his brothers to deceive his own father.

This seems to be a “win-win” solution: we don’t actually kill Joseph, but instead we get some cash out of selling him.

But there is more. The brothers take Joseph’s special coat, kill a goat and use its blood to stain the coat. When they confront their father with this coat, their words are clever in the sense that they say nothing that is contrary to fact. “Examine it to see whether it is your son’s robe.” They do not even use his name “Joseph.” He is “your son,” not, “our brother.” Jacob recognizes it and then makes the conclusion that the brothers had hoped he would make. “It’s Joseph’s coat; a wild (literally, ‘evil’) animal has eaten him.”

There is an irony here: Jacob had used goat meat and goat’s skins (clothes) earlier to deceive his father Isaac

(Gen. 27:16) to obtain the blessing. Now another goat dies to provide the blood to deceive another father, but this time the father is Jacob! Jacob now tears his own clothes as a sign of grief.

Grief carried to the grave (37:34-35)

Those who grieve go through various stages of mood. When one loses a precious family member or beloved friend, you know these moods of grief. There is perhaps denial, anger, depression, a general melancholy. The passage of time may help, but usually some kind of emotional scar remains. We need to work through this grief, and the presence of family and friends can help. Jacob’s children surround him to support him, comfort him, and help him through his understandable grief. This old man Jacob has lost the beloved son of his favorite wife. He has seen many blessings from God over the years, but now he refuses to accept anyone’s comforting words or gestures. Jacob is prepared to carry this grief into his grave, the realm of the dead.

Sold as a slave (37:36)

Genesis 37 ends on a sad, ominous note: Joseph is sold in Egypt to a very high ranking official of the court of Pharaoh. We will say more about this man Potiphar in a later lesson. Psalm 105:17 notes that Joseph has been reduced to slavery. He has moved at the beginning of this chapter from being the beloved and favored son of his father to utter humiliation. Such a descent into slavery was at the hands of his blood brothers! And yet, the fact that the man who purchased him was an official of Pharaoh carries rich possibilities. At least Joseph is not sold into obscurity, to slave away his young life

for a few years and then die unknown in some remote village of Egypt. The last verse of Genesis 37 tantalizes the reader and sets us up for the further developments of Genesis 39.

Since nothing comes to us by chance, but everything by God's fatherly hand, we know that some divine plan is being worked out. But God does not appear to any of the characters, neither to Joseph nor to Jacob, to inform them of what is happening. Other Biblical characters may have reassuring visits from God's angels or even a divine voice ("Don't be afraid!"), but such a visit or such a voice does not come forward here. We can only wonder what may have passed through Joseph's mind in these days, weeks, and months. His situation plummets from royal riches, so to speak, to wretched rags in this chapter. Did these kinds of questions nag at his soul: "Why did my own brothers do this to me?" "What kind of God do I serve?" "Is there no justice in this world?"

It is one thing to fall under difficult circumstances in life and see God's disciplinary hand as rightly there. But it is quite another thing to suffer for no apparent reason. And God remains silent. Can any human faith suffice then to hold onto God? If Joseph is to survive both spiritually and physically, then a power and strength greater than anything Joseph has must be with him. But such is God's grace.

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Lesson 2: Points to ponder and discuss

1. How can we explain Jacob's decision to send Joseph off to visit his brothers? Is Jacob completely unaware that his sons loathe Joseph? Do parents sometimes act "in denial" about realities that anyone else can see? Or, can parents simply fail to pick up on the important personal life clues that close family members can give?
2. This family of Jacob is the church! Or is it? What explanation can we give to the fact that the desire to kill Joseph—or at least be rid of him—has the overwhelming support of most of Jacob's sons? We will see something very similar when Pharisees, people who said that all Israelites must live pure and holy lives, will actively plot to kill the Lord Jesus Christ. How can such murderous hatred exist among people who profess something else?
3. Read Exodus 21:16 and Deuteronomy 24:7 (cf. Deut. 23:15). Stealing property is an economic crime, but kidnapping and selling human beings was a capital crime. What is the difference between being a "servant" who works off a debt, on the one hand, and the kind of selling of people condemned in the law of God, on the other hand? Can human beings ever be viewed as property?
4. The movie "Amazing Grace" tells the story of the British Christian leader, William Wilberforce, who labored to rid the British Empire of slavery in the 19th century. What kind of slavery existed historically in the United States? What evils were let loose by such slavery? Why was it defended even by some Christians? Does such trafficking in human beings continue to this day?
5. The blood-stained coat convinces Jacob that Joseph is dead. His grief is quite understandable, is it not? Yet he refuses to be comforted. Could he wonder how his sons could have ever found this coat in all the countryside of Canaan? By refusing the comfort of his children, is it possible that Jacob may harbor a sneaking suspicion that somehow, somewhere, his own children were involved in the death of Joseph? Could the sons of Jacob pretend also to mourn? Many issues remain unresolved...
6. Look over Genesis 37 again. Is God ever mentioned in this chapter? How is God working in these sad events? What providences happen in this story that will work out a good result, even if it is very hard to see it at this point in the story?

Reports of Synod

Canadian Reformed Churches of America Synod Smithers 2007

The most recent synod of the Canadian Reformed Churches convened on May 9 in the northern town of Smithers, BC to deal with appeals against decisions of minor assemblies and matters in common among the churches. Over the past years various synods have appointed committees to perform tasks on behalf and for the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC), especially in contact with other churches and federations. Reports from these committees also formed a significant part of the agenda for synod. Other committees that sent reports dealt with Bible Translations and the Book of Praise.

It is impossible in one readable article to touch on all the matters that were dealt with over a period of two weeks by six internal committees who provided proposals to the plenary sessions for final decisions. However, as the decisions that have been made affect the churches in common, as well as churches in ecclesiastical fellowship and especially churches seeking federative unity, a summary will be useful. To that end we will begin with the decisions made by Synod Smithers with regard to relations with other churches and federations.

Committee for Contact with Churches Abroad

Based on a common language and history, as well as the length of the relationship, an argument can be made that the churches in Australia

are in many ways the closest to those in Canada. Hence it was no surprise that synod decided to maintain the existing relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship (EF) with the Free Reformed Churches in Australia. Appreciation was expressed for the continued support for, and the extensive use made of, the Theological College in Hamilton by the churches and members in Australia. The Standing Committee for the Book of Praise was also urged to maintain regular contact with the Australians.

The existing relationship of EF with the Free Reformed Churches in South Africa was maintained. Knowledge about these churches was enhanced by the presence of Rev. Klein. He gave a presentation to the congregation of Smithers and synod delegates about the circumstances of the churches in South Africa and their extensive mission work.

It was decided to continue the relationship of EF with the Free Church of Scotland (FCS), but to acknowledge that Synod Chatham 2004 had erred by “continuing” a relationship of EF with the Free Church Continuing (FCC) which, in fact, did not exist, and therefore to discontinue that relationship with them and to express regret for the error and any hurt that may have been caused.

A delegation of four highly placed officials in the Presbyterian Churches of Korea (PCK) (Kosin)

also visited Synod. The size and presence of this delegation was intended to show the value which this federation of churches places on its relationship with the CanRC. Synod decided to continue the relationship of EF and express appreciation for the efforts made to visit our synod. The contact committee was mandated to work diligently on improving our relations with the PCK. They are to contact those sister churches who have relations with the PCK with the request that we alternate with them in visiting the General Assembly of the PCK. With regard to some outstanding differences the contact committee was mandated to send a copy of our agreement with the OPC to the PCK and to ask for their reaction and possible agreement to it.

Another long-standing relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship exists with the Reformed Churches – Liberated in the Netherlands. The splitting off of approximately thirteen congregations from this federation to form a small federation called the Reformed Churches – Restored has caused considerable unrest among the Dutch churches and has not left the Canadian churches unaffected. As the Restored federation claimed to be the legitimate continuation of the true church of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Netherlands, synod had a request from them to enter into a relationship.

Synod first dealt with the Liberated churches and decided that they continue to be faithful churches. At previous synods concerns had been expressed about the increased number of hymns being introduced into the Dutch churches. This time

The vast multiplication of hymns does nothing to advance the priority of psalm singing.

synod decided that this subject had been sufficiently discussed but wanted the contact committee to still send the reminder that the vast multiplication of hymns does nothing to advance the priority of psalm singing and places the principle to maintain it as a priority at risk. The committee was also instructed to pay attention to the content of the hymns.

A new mandate was given to the contact committee to discuss with their counterparts in the Liberated churches the new approach to divorce in order to get answers to the hermeneutical concerns highlighted by the committee in its report to synod with respect to “the style-of-the-kingdom” approach to divorce and remarriage. Attention is to be paid to the suggested revision of the Church Order about discipline in cases of divorce and remarriage.

As a result of various concerns addressed to synod by a number of Canadian churches, the committee was also mandated to generally monitor the situation in the Liberated churches. At the same time synod expressed appreciation for the way the Liberated churches have sought to engage the new Restored churches in unity talks by means of an appeal by Synod Amersfoort.

Based on the decision that the Liberated churches remain faithful churches, synod logically concluded that those leaving such a federation are schismatic. Yet, see-

ing the concerns that have been expressed by a number of churches, previous Canadian synods, synods from other countries, and the additional concerns presently being expressed by concerned members within the Liberated churches themselves, a case was made that to accuse the Restored federation of being schismatic was too strong a term. However, after protracted discussion and two tie votes of 12 – 12 which defeated the amendments to omit or to ameliorate the strong language, it was concluded to maintain the position that to leave a faithful federation is schismatic. It follows that also the request from the Reformed Church – Restored to enter into a relationship with the CanRC was denied.

With respect to the *Gereja-Gereja Reformasi Calvinis in Nusa Tenggara Timur* (GGRC-NTT), even though the church at Smithville informed synod that they have “a mission field in Timor and [have] regular contact with the GGRC through [their] missionary, Rev. Edwer Dethan, and through visits of several members of the Mission Board of Smithville to Timor,” synod decided not to accede to the request for EF until contact and discussions about these churches have been had with other churches in EF, especially the Australian churches. The contact committee was also urged to clear up a number of outstanding local issues.

Upon recommendation of the Committee for Contact with Churches abroad synod decided not to enter into EF with the Presbyterian Churches of Eastern Australia and to inform our Australian sister churches about this. Synod also declined EF with the United Reformed Churches in Myanmar and the Independent Reformed Church in Korea (IRCK). In both cases very little benefit would be derived from EF with these churches, while contact can still be experienced at ICRC meetings.

Synod did, however, accept the invitation from the Reformed Churches in New Zealand (RCNZ) to enter into a relationship of EF. It was also decided to send a delegate (delegation) to the next synod of the RCNZ in order to formalize relations and visit the churches. Rev. Agema, as chairman of synod, addressed Rev. Hoyt, the RCNZ delegate, and expressed thankfulness that we could enter into ecclesiastical fellowship with the RCNZ.

Committee for Contact with Churches in the Americas

The Committee for Contact with Churches in the Americas also reported on contacts and discussions it has had over the past three years. The *Eglise Reformee du Quebec* (the Reformed Church in Quebec) has been in discussion with the CanRC for many years. A few of the individual churches, and especially the church in Owen Sound, have established a strong relationship. There has been a desire to work toward EF for some years, but due to the relatively small numbers in the ERQ it is difficult for them to deal with all the questions and outstanding matters quickly. Although

synod wavered on the issue for a time, it was decided to accept the offer of EF from these churches. Synod also charged the contact committee to express to the Interchurch Committee of the ERQ a willingness to provide encouragement and assistance in the adoption of the liturgical forms presently being reviewed in the ERQ and to respond if specific requests for assistance and advice are made about matters of confession, church polity, liturgy, and mission, as per the Rules for EF.

The contact committee had also been mandated to seek out the Korean Presbyterian Church in North America as they are affiliated with the Kosin church in Korea with which the CanRC presently has EF. However, synod decided not to renew this mandate with the consideration that even though the KPCA membership lives in North America, cultural and language barriers presently hinder contact.

The work of the contact committee with respect to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) has dealt with the establishment of a synopsis that deals with the history of the contact and discussions between the two federations about the differences that have been encountered. The synopsis wants to show the history and the progress of the discussions. Synod accepted the synopsis and appreciated the fact that it had been sent to the OPC for

concurrence. Synod also pointed out that, as churches in ecclesiastical fellowship, there are presently a number of new issues within both the OPC and the CanRC that need each other's attention. For example, both federations are working on a new or revised Song Book, both are in various stages of unity talks with the URCNA, both are working on revisions to their respective Church Orders. In an existing relation of ecclesiastical fellowship, these topics-of-the-day need attention as much as the outstanding matters of confessional membership and supervision of the Lord's table.

It is interesting to note that synod did not always speak in one line. In some of the decisions, it was good to consider a mandate about broaching an issue with churches in EF to be concluded. Yet when it comes to the Reformed Churches in the United States (RCUS) synod spoke a different language. This difference has nothing to do with the church federation in question but a lot more to do with the synodical subcommittee that dealt with the different federations. Here it can be seen how the pressure of compressed time frames leads to failure to draw straight lines in all the deliberations and decisions. With regard to the RCUS synod thought the following (paraphrased for easier reading):

The contact committee has addressed the topics mandated to them by the previous synod, and requested that synod consider their work complete in relation to each topic. The churches that wrote to synod about the RCUS request that the topics not yet be considered closed. It is not necessary to state that discussion on particular topics is completed. In the dynamic of church life, opportunities to speak about differences between our federations will remain beneficial. As churches in ecclesiastical fellowship, we are obliged to "assist each other in the maintenance, defense and promotion of the Reformed faith in doctrine, church polity, discipline, and liturgy, and to be watchful for deviation" (Rule 1). As the contact committee carries out the CanRC's responsibility towards the RCUS according to this rule, attention can continue to be given to the topics mentioned by the churches when necessary and appropriate.

It is gratifying to note that, while a young federation invariably has many difficulties to overcome, the *Igreja Reformadas do Brasil* (IRB) gives evidence of striving to go in the way of the Lord. Synod therefore expressed gratitude to the Lord for the continued desire and effort within the IRB to serve Him in sincerity and truth, and mandated the contact committee to continue the Relationship of EF with the IRB either directly or via the sending churches for mission work in Brazil.

Topics-of-the-day need attention as much as the outstanding matters of confessional membership and supervision of the Lord's table.

While the contact committee has become acquainted with the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA) synod was not ready to enter in EF with this group of churches. Synod considered that Christ prayed that His followers would be one in faith. It is therefore the duty of His church to observe where the Lord Jesus Christ is busy gathering His church, and unite with those who are obedient to Him. Since the initial conclusion of the contact committee is that the RPCNA exhibits the marks of the church, we are called to consider further whether one can in fact recognize the RPCNA as a church of the Lord, and if so, to pursue unity. However, a number of churches suggested that the contact committee should be instructed to study the status and content of *Testimony* in the RPCNA, including what it says about the covenant. Concerns about exclusive psalmody ought to be investigated further, as ought their views on ordaining women as deacons. Hence the request to establish ecclesiastical fellowship with the RPCNA was considered premature.

Historically, the CanRC have declined to be involved with North American Reformed and Presbyterian Council (NAPARC) because the Christian Reformed Church of North America was a member. In 2002 the expulsion of the CRCNA from NAPARC was confirmed. In 2002 and 2003 CanRC observers first attended NAPARC, and reported positively to Synod Chatham 2004 of their experiences. The contact committee reported to Synod Chatham that this fellowship of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches is fully committed “to the

The request to establish ecclesiastical fellowship with the RPCNA was considered premature.

Bible in its entirety as the Word of God written, without error in all its parts and to its teaching as set forth in the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms.” Similarly, “all actions and decisions taken are advisory in character and in no way curtail or restrict the autonomy of the member bodies.” The foundation and authority of NAPARC are not hindrances to membership. The current membership of NAPARC consists of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, *l’Église Réformée du Québec*, the Korean American Presbyterian Church, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church of America, the Reformed Church in the United States, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America and the United Reformed Churches of North America. The CanRC have close contacts with five of these eight churches. The contact committee also reported that their participation at the meetings of NAPARC has given them opportunity to interact meaningfully with sister churches as well as with other churches with whom contact has been established. Issues of joint concern, as well as matters wherein differences exist, have been and can continue to be discussed in this forum. The committee was mandated to apply for membership in NAPARC.

Committee for Promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity

A special committee had been appointed several synods ago to deal with federative unity. This committee’s mandate deals mainly with the United Reformed, Free Reformed and Orthodox Reformed Churches. The fact that there has been little contact or interest from the latter two saddened synod and led them to mandate no further contact with those churches at this time. However with respect to the effort toward federative unity with the United Reformed Churches of North America (URCNA) much work had been done and appreciated. However, synod recognized the difficulty of establishing a definite time frame for the final act of federative unity, but encouraged the various committees to work diligently toward that goal.

There was expression of gratitude for the efforts of the three sub-committees that dealt with Theological Training, a Common Song Book, and a Revised Church Order. The main stumbling block that threatened progress appeared to be the desire in the CanRC to maintain a church-run seminary while the URCNA position was not to have such a seminary at all. Synod expressed appreciation for the fact that it can not be scripturally proven that a seminary must be operated by the church(es), however, based on a positive experience with this concept it maintained a strong preference for such a seminary in a

proposed united federation, conceding that it need not be the exclusive training facility for future ministers.

In the matter of a common song book, synod continued to express a strong preference for a complete Anglo-Genevan Psalter within the Common Songbook; however it stipulated that this may not be a defining obstacle to federative unity. Synod also expressed appreciation for a suggestion by some of the churches about the possibility that “for every one of the 150 Psalms in the Book of Praise, one selection be made from the most loved and well-known psalms in the URC repertoire.” Other possibilities which include the 150 Psalms in the Book of Praise can also be considered. Synod further agreed that the Common Songbook should be the exclusively used songbook of the united federation but acknowledged that such a rule does not exclude exceptions, which would be regulated by a proposed church order. Although a completed Common Songbook before federative unity is most desirable, a clear commitment to an eventual Common Songbook by both federations is sufficient to enter into federative unity. It should be remembered that at present churches in both federations are worshipping with accepted collections of psalms and hymns, and it is feasible to continue in this way in a united federation until a Common Songbook is attained.

Having received the Proposed Church Order and the four-column document of comparison, as well as the minority report, synod agreed that these documents should be sent to the churches for discussion and evaluation with a view to the eventual adoption of a Church Order by Synod 2010. Synod was grateful for the URCNA Protocol Procedure Proposal and is hopeful that the time frames expressed therein—including the recommendation of the proposal that the URCNA adopt the Proposed Church Order by 2010—can be met.

Although this has been a rather extensive list of contact with other churches, it is what the Canadian Reformed Churches are about at present. A large amount of the total time of synod was taken up by this work and a report about the synod with this coverage is just not accurate. As a matter of fact there were considerable submissions by individual churches interacted with by synod in its Considerations that may well be of value and interest to the reader. These can all be found in the Acts of Synod 2007 on the CanRC web site: www.canrc.org.

Other Items of Interest

Eighteen appeals from churches and individuals were addressed to synod. Some were considered inadmissible but most were answered.

The Board of Governors of the Theological College in Hamilton

recommended the establishment of a fifth professorate. This professor would function as a professor of Biblical and Theological Studies and would be appointed at synod 2010. However, synod thought that it would be better if the justification for an appointment were not recommended from within a department or school but from an external assessment. The recommendations from the Board of Governors do not have the required distance to give the sense of an objective recommendation.

Synod decided not to agree with the recommendation of the Board of Governors to add a fifth professor but to mandate the Board of Governors to initiate a full and independent review that considers all aspects related to the work of the College and that this review and its recommendations be presented to General Synod 2010. It also mandated the Board of Governors to review the appointment procedure for faculty members to insure transparency within the generally accepted academic appointment process. This review should include the possibility of appointing an academic search committee and a short list of candidates to be presented to the churches.

Synod Chatham 2004 gave the Committee for Bible Translations (CBT) the mandate to do a preliminary investigation of the English Standard Version (ESV) and to provide Synod 2007 with a report on the ESV translation, using input solicited from the churches. In its report the CBT stated that the ESV seems to “show a much greater respect for the Bible as the Word of God than the RSV.” They believe that the ESV is, in many

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respects, a considerable improvement over the RSV, especially in key matters of theology and text. However, given that Synod 1995 found that the RSV could no longer be recommended because there were “better translations available” and given that the ESV is built upon the RSV, the CBT wonders whether it is truly worth the time and effort to engage in a full investigation. Further, the CBT wonders how thorough the ESV revisions of the RSV truly are and gave some examples supporting their concern. The CBT believes that the churches are well-served by the New International Version (NIV). It stated that “after a decade of usage, our members are finally getting used to it and are making it their own.” They do not believe that it is healthy to frequently change the recommended translation of the Word of God for use in the churches. Since the last synod, the CBT has not received any communications from the churches in regard to problems with the NIV. This demonstrates that the vast majority of the churches in the federation are content with the NIV as the recommended translation for the churches.

Synod Fergus 1998 indicated that besides the NIV, other approved translations include the NKJV and the NASB. Synod decided to continue to recommend the NIV for use within the churches but to leave it in the freedom of the churches, should they feel compelled to use other translations that have received favorable reviews in the reports of the CBT, namely, the NKJV, the NASB or the ESV.

The request by one of the churches to include churches in EF in the discussion about Bible translations has

merit, especially with respect to the work of the Common Songbook Committee. Working toward a common songbook for the CanRC and the URCNA will eventually require a common Bible translation for biblical passages cited in the confessions and liturgical forms.

The Standing Committee for the Book of Praise proposed twenty-eight new hymns. Synod approved them for testing in the churches over the next three years. Churches are encouraged to evaluate them and send their comments to the committee in time for it to deal with them in its report to synod 2010.

The vast majority of the churches in the federation are content with the NIV.

A letter from one of the churches requested that a committee be appointed to continue a study about the possibility of women voting for office bearers in the church. This matter had been studied twice in the past and many felt that no new grounds had been raised in order for this proposal to be admitted to the floor of synod. Yet, after considerable attempts by the synodical sub-committee to present something that synod could agree upon it was decided to accede to the request to appoint a committee to examine the biblical teaching on headship and voting and also study the following questions:

- With regard to headship: What is the position of widows and single

female communicant members?

- With regard to headship: What is the relationship between husband and wife when they discuss who to vote for - doesn't the husband therefore show and practice equality as joint heirs of the grace of God?

- With regard to voting: What do the Bible and our Church Order say about congregational participation in electing office bearers?

- With regard to voting: What is the relationship between congregational (a) nomination, (b) election process, (c) ratification/approbation, and (d) the final appointment by council?

The committee is to present its conclusions on this matter to the churches six months before the next general synod.

For a more detailed understanding of the deliberations of Synod as well as a treatment of those items not dealt with in this article the interested reader is recommended to view <http://www.canrc.org> and click on Synod 2007.

Mr. Pete de Boer is an Elder in the CanRC at Willoughby Heights. He was one of twenty four delegates at Synod Smithers.

Presbyterian Church of America 35th General Assembly

The General Assembly is the highest court of the Presbyterian Church in America, and it takes place every year for the governing of the Church, the promotion of the Gospel, and our mutual edification. This year's General Assembly met in Memphis, Tennessee on June 12-14.

Unlike some other Reformed denominations, the PCA does not have representatives from the presbytery or classis attend the General Assembly. Every minister (teaching elder) may attend as well as two ruling elders per congregation or more if the congregation is larger than 350 communicant members.

The first part of the work of the Assembly took place on Monday and Tuesday when the committees of commissioners met to review the work of the permanent committees and make recommendations to be taken to the floor of the General Assembly. Our committees include Covenant Theological Seminary, Christian Education and Publications, Reformed University Ministers, Mission to North America, and others.

On Tuesday night, the work of the General Assembly began with a worship service. The moderator of the previous year's General Assembly (this year it was Dr. Dominic Aquila, president of New Geneva seminary in Colorado Springs, CO) always gives that first sermon. After the worship service

a moderator was elected and the docket was adopted. E.J. Nusbaum, a ruling elder, from Village Seven PCA in Colorado Springs was elected moderator.

On Wednesday, the most extended discussion of the Assembly took place when the ad interim committee on the New Perspective on Paul (NPP) and the Federal Vision (FV) gave its report and recommendations. The 34th General Assembly had formed this committee to determine whether the viewpoints of the NPP and FV were in accord with or hostile to the Westminster Standards and to produce a statement regarding these issues.

The committee issued a report explaining the views of the NPP and FV and comparing them to the Westminster Standards. Their conclusion was that the NPP and FV are hostile to the system particularly in the areas of covenant and election; justification and union with Christ; and perseverance, apostasy, and assurance. Their conclusions, as chairman TE Paul Fowler noted, were very similar to the conclusions of the OPC and the RCUS and the faculties of Westminster East and West and Mid-America Reformed Seminary.

The committee recommended that several actions be taken. First, they recommended that the General Assembly commend the report for study. Second, they called on presbyters who were out of accord

with the system to make their views known and for presbyteries and sessions to keep in mind their duty to preserve the peace and purity of the Church and to exercise pastoral care over those subject to their authority. The committee's recommendations passed by a margin of over ninety per cent.

Some may wonder about the standing of such a committee report. As RE John White, a member of the committee, pointed out, the *Book of Church Order* clearly explains their status. It says, "Actions...such as deliverances, resolutions, overtures, and judicial decisions are to be given due and serious consideration by the Church and its lower courts when deliberating matters related to such action" (BCO 14-7). Thus, it is to be taken seriously and given due weight but does not add to the Confession.

After the report on the NPP and FV, the General Assembly went rather quickly. Business was completed around 3:00 the next day. One of the reasons for this is the change in the rules that only allows three options in the consideration of any question from a committee. The motion may be approved, rejected, or referred back to the committee.

In addition to the Assembly business, there are always many other activities going on at the time of the General Assembly. Every evening there is a worship service. This year, Dr. R.C. Sproul and Dr. Bryan Chapel preached in our worship services. There are also many opportunities to hear what is

going on in various seminaries and committees over free luncheons and dinners. Finally, there is the exhibit hall where various booksellers, seminaries from around the world, and other ministries set up display tables. It is an exciting opportunity to see the work of God in the Reformed Church throughout the world.

I would encourage you to pray for the PCA and that the Reformed witness on our continent would increase in faithfulness, in numbers, and in grace. Please pray that we would be faithful to the motto set forth by our founders that we would be “faithful to the Scriptures, true to the Reformed faith, and obedient to the great commission of Jesus Christ.”

J. Wesley White is the Pastor of the New Covenant Presbyterian Church in Spearfish, South Dakota.

United Reformed Churches in North America Synod 2007

When Synod Schererville 2007 convened on Monday, July 9, at Trinity Christian College, its delegates raised their voices in psalms extolling the unity of God’s people. An exhortation by Rev. Paul Ipema called delegates to remember the blessing of the unity which they have – and which they must cultivate – in Christ.

But exhortations notwithstanding, the agenda before delegates to the URCNA’s Sixth Synod evidenced a fair degree of *disunity*. A great bulk of the disagreements centered around ecumenical matters. Of the seventeen overtures facing delegates, two sought to change the URC’s guidelines for ecumenical relations, two sought to tighten the required ratifications for entering ecumenical relations, and two sought to re-focus the Songbook Committee on producing a songbook for the URC, rather than one for the URC and Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) together.

Ecumenical Rules and Church Unity

Arguably the matter with the greatest potential to divide at Synod 2007 was the call – from two classes – for revising the URC’s guidelines for ecumenical relationships. Prior to synod, the URC’s Guidelines for Ecumenicity and Church Unity were matters of intense debate. Those guidelines included three phases.

1. Phase One called for correspondence and dialogue between the URC and another federation, so that mutual understanding and appreciation might grow between them.

2. Phase Two brought another federation into a “sister-church” relationship in which the URC recognizes it as a true church and encourages closer relationships between the two federations. In its pre-synod form, this phase was explicitly declared to be “in preparation for and commitment to eventual integrated federative church unity.”

3. Phase Three called for movement into full integration between the two federations.

A pair of overtures sought to alter Phase Two by removing the phrase “in preparation for and commitment to eventual integrated church unity.” Supporters of these overtures argued that this explicit “commitment” to full unity was akin to being engaged to marry several women at once. Such a weighty commitment was said to cause confusion about the nature of a sister-church relationship; and some blamed it for what they regarded as excessively rapid progress in uniting with the CanRC.

Along with removing the commitment language from Phase Two, the

overtures called for Phase Three to become a multi-step process of preparing for and entering into full unity. After significant debate, and with input from those both strongly favoring and strongly opposed to the proposed changes, the advisory committee offered a precisely worded compromise.

Phase One remained unchanged. The new rules for Phase Two declare that: “The intent of this phase is to recognize and accept each other as true and faithful churches of the Lord Jesus, in acknowledgment of the desirability of eventual integrated federative church unity, by establishing ecclesiastical fellowship.” Although the language of *commitment* was removed, yet the *biblical mandate* calling for the reunion of separated churches was preserved.

The rules for Phase Three then were amended to create two steps. In the first step, a plan of ecclesiastical union would be developed to outline the timing, coordination, and integration of six broad areas of the structure and life of the two federations. The second step would involve implementing the plan of union. Ratification by the consistories, according to Church Order Art. 36, would be required to enter Phase Two and to begin both of the steps in Phase Three.

Having adopted those changes, Synod 2007 addressed a point of possible confusion: the work already performed with the CanRC.

Since 2001, several committees have been laying the foundation for union with the Canadian Reformed Churches. Under the new rules, the work of those committees properly

belongs to the first step of Phase Three – yet the URC has only approved Phase Two relations with the CanRC. To clarify the relationship and safeguard the work of the committees, Synod 2007 approved an exception to the newly adopted guidelines. That exception allows the current committees to continue working with their corresponding CanRC committees while the two federations remain in Phase Two. This would pave the way for when the URC does move to Phase Three with the CanRC.

The URC Church Order requires ratification by a majority of Consistories for decisions to enter into ecumenical relationships with other federations (Art. 36) and ratification by two-thirds of consistories for decisions to change the church order (Art. 66). However, these requirements have occasioned debate because the Church Order never specifies the basis for calculating the required majority or super-majority. Should the majority be calculated on the basis of the total churches in the federation, or from the total number of those who voted?

Those who argue for basing the majority count on the total number of churches in the URC said ratification is a *positive* action. For a consistory to decline to vote is, in effect, a vote against ratification – because the consistory has opted not to express its favor of the action. However, those who favored basing the majority count on the number of churches that vote argued that participation in such a process is a responsibility of member churches. They said those which fail to respond ought not to

be “rewarded” by having their inaction counted as a vote.

In answer to three overtures, Synod 2007 approved amendments to Church Order Art. 36 and Art. 66 that specify that the number of consistories required for ratification shall be judged according to the number “of the *synodically-approved* Consistories in the federation.” With these changes, a consistory which declines to ratify a measure under Art. 36 or Art. 66 effectually counts against ratification. Before taking effect, however, these changes will require ratification by two-thirds of the churches.

Ecumenicity and the Canadian Reformed Churches

Synod also addressed a number of matters related to the committees tasked with creating closer ties to the Canadian Reformed Churches.

The greatest amount of time was spent clarifying the mandate of the URC’s Songbook Committee. Synod St. Catharines 1997 created the Songbook Committee, mandating it to begin exploring what would be needed to obtain a new songbook for the URCNA. That mandate was refined by subsequent synods. Notable among those refinements was the decision by Synod Escondido 2001 to have the Songbook Committee work with the Canadian Reformed Book of Praise Committee and consider for inclusion the 150 Psalms in metrical settings used by the CanRC. Since that time, there has been some debate concerning whether the committee was to produce only a joint songbook for the URC and CanRC, or a URC song book that

Synod addressed a number of matters related to the committees tasked with creating closer ties to the Canadian Reformed Churches.

is developed in consultation with our Canadian sister churches.

The measure adopted by Synod Schererville answered the debate by calling the committee to work with and consult the CanRC committee, but to produce a new song book specifically for the URCNA. At the same time, Synod affirmed the URC's commitment also to continue dialoguing with the Canadian Reformed Churches regarding a song book.

The Theological Education Committee also received clarification on its mandate. The committee had been working with a CanRC committee in an attempt to find agreement regarding the means of educating ministers. To date, the committees have been at an impasse, with the CanRC committee maintaining that Scripture mandates at least one federationally-controlled seminary, while the URC committee maintained that it does not. Synod Smithers 2007 of the CanRC recently removed that roadblock. While affirming their "strong preference" for at least one federationally-controlled seminary, Synod Smithers acknowledged that this is not a matter of principle, but of application. Therefore, it declared that this matter should not impede movement toward unity between the URC and CanRC. Synod Schererville 2007 delegates affirmed six points of agreement between the URC and CanRC committees and affirmed the URC

committee's position that a federationally-controlled seminary is not Biblically mandated.

Other Ecumenical Avenues

The URCNA's ecumenical endeavors are not directed only toward the CanRC. The URC also has "corresponding relations" – its lowest phase of active ecumenical relations – with five federations of Churches; and it is in Phase Two, Ecclesiastical Fellowship, with not only the CanRC, but also the Reformed Church in the US.

Synod Schererville 2007 took steps to draw closer to several like-minded federations. The most weighty step was a move to enter Ecclesiastical Fellowship – the second of its three phases of ecumenical relations – with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

The URCNA has been in Phase One, Corresponding Relations, with the OPC since 1997. That phase is intended to be one of exploration through correspondence and dialogue. By agreeing to enter Phase Two with the OPC, the URC would formally recognize that denomination as a true church and would encourage closer relationships between the two church federations. Before this action becomes official, however, it will require ratification by a majority of the URC's consistories.

Synod 2007 also asked its ecumenical committee begin dialogue with the Korean American Presbyterian

Church and the Heritage Reformed Congregations. These two join the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in America as federations on the "to-do list" of the URC Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity.

Looking abroad, Synod Schererville 2007 agreed to enter Phase One, Ecumenical Contact, with two overseas federations. The first of these is the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (vrijgemaakt), the Dutch parent-federation of the Canadian Reformed Churches. The second is the Reformed Churches of New Zealand.

Delegates also voted to ratify the entrance of two denominations – the Free Reformed Churches and the Heritage Reformed Congregations – into the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC).

Current Controversies Concerning Justification

Over the past few years, a number of Reformed and Presbyterian federations have expressed concerns about the movement known as the "Federal Vision." That matter was brought before Synod Schererville 2007 via an overture requesting the body to adopt a 2004 report of the RCUS. That report focused on the teachings of Rev. Norm Shepherd, a retired CRC minister who often is identified with the Federal Vision movement.

At the advice of its advisory committee on the matter, synod declined to endorse that overture. However, delegates then adopted without dissent two affirmations regarding the URCNA's understanding of the doctrine of justification.

The first of these was simply the re-statement of a statement adopted at Synod Calgary 2004: “that the Scriptures and confessions (Heidelberg Q/A 59-62) teach the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, based upon the active and passive obedience of Christ alone.” The second offered further clarification by affirming: “that the Scriptures and confessions teach that faith is the sole instrument of our justification apart from all works (Heidelberg Catechism answer 61, ‘Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith, but because only the satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ is my righteousness before God, and I can receive the same and make it my own in no other way than by faith only.’ Cf. Belgic Confession Articles 22, 24).”

Synod also agreed to remind and encourage both individuals and Churches of their responsibility to follow the Church Order’s procedure for addressing office-bearers who are suspected of deviating from or obscuring the doctrine of salvation as summarized in our confessions.

Synod then adopted as pastoral advice a series of nine “rejections of error.” That statement said:

Synod affirms that the Scriptures and confessions teach the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith

alone and that nothing that is taught under the rubric of covenant theology in our churches may contradict this fundamental doctrine. Therefore Synod rejects the errors of those:

1. who deny or modify the teaching that “God created man good and after His own image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness,” able to perform “the commandment of life” as the representative of mankind (HC 6, 9; BC 14);

2. who, in any way and for any reason, confuse the “commandment of life” given before the fall with the gospel announced after the fall (BC 14, 17, 18; HC 19, 21, 56, 60);

3. who confuse the ground and instrument of acceptance with God before the fall (obedience to the commandment of life) with the ground (Christ who kept the commandment of life) and instrument (faith in Christ) of acceptance with God after the fall;

4. who deny that Christ earned acceptance with God and that all His merits have been imputed to believers (BC 19, 20, 22, 26; HC 11-19, 21, 36-37, 60, 84; CD I.7, RE I.3, RE II.1);

5. who teach that a person can be historically, condition-

ally elect, regenerated, savingly united to Christ, justified, and adopted by virtue of participation in the outward administration of the covenant of grace but may lose these benefits through lack of covenantal faithfulness (CD, I, V);

6. who teach that all baptized persons are in the covenant of grace in precisely the same way such that there is no distinction between those who have only an outward relation to the covenant of grace by baptism and those who are united to Christ by grace alone through faith alone (HC 21, 60; BC 29);

7. who teach that Spirit-wrought sanctity, human works, or cooperation with grace is any part either of the ground of our righteousness before God or any part of faith, that is, the “instrument by which we embrace Christ, our righteousness” (BC 22-24; HC 21, 60, 86);

8. who define faith, in the act of justification, as being anything more than “leaning and resting on the sole obedience of Christ crucified” or “a certain knowledge” of and “a hearty trust” in Christ and His obedience and death for the elect (BC 23; HC 21);

9. who teach that there is a separate and final justification grounded partly upon righteousness or sanctity inherent in the Christian (HC 52; BC 37).

Delegates adopted without dissent two affirmations regarding the URCNA’s understanding of the doctrine of justification.

Finally, Synod 2007 appointed a study committee to examine the Federal Vision and similar teachings regarding the doctrine of justification. The committee was asked to bring a clear statement concerning this matter to the next synod.

Doctrine and Membership

Synod also agreed to form a second study committee, this time to examine the level of doctrinal commitment advisable for those seeking communicant membership in URC congregations. The study proposal arose from questions being faced especially by congregations involved in Church planting. Overseeing consistories have had to wrestle repeatedly with whether to admit prospective members who agree in most doctrinal points but disagree on several key areas. The overture before classis noted that the practice of historically reformed churches has not been uniform.

Canadian Concerns

Two actions of Synod Schererville 2007 were of distinct interest to the Canadian churches. The first item involved the addition of a phrase to Church Order Art. 48, governing the solemnization of marriage. While the article itself would remain unchanged, it would be prefaced by the statement that “Scripture teaches that marriage is designed to be a lifelong, monogamous covenantal union between one man and one woman.” Those who proposed and favored the overture noted how advocates for same-sex “marriage” have become increasingly hostile toward those who oppose them. This is so especially in Canada, where the law currently permits the practice.

Synod adopted as pastoral advice a series of nine “rejections of error.”

This new phrasing in the Church Order is intended to demonstrate that ministers who refuse to solemnize such relationships are acting in agreement with what the URCNA as a whole has stated concerning the Bible’s teaching on marriage.

A second measure aims to ensure that the URC’s Canadian congregations are complying with Canadian laws for transferring funds between churches in different nations. That was accomplished through the adoption of a Joint Venture Agreement for the URCNA (Canada) and the URCNA (US). This agreement creates a legally recognized connection between URC congregations in both nations.

In line with the terms of this agreement, Synod 2007 appointed five members to the U.S. Board of Directors of the URCNA. A Canadian Board of Directors had already been appointed. Synod appointed the Consistory of Bethany URC in Wyoming, MI, to implement the Joint Venture Agreement.

Other Actions of Synod

There also were a number of actions that fall into categories of their own. These actions include the following:

1. Military Chaplaincy

Synod approved a measure intended to enable URC ministers to become chaplains in the U.S. military.

2. URCNA Website

Synod 2007 took fairly decisive action by appointing the consistory of Grace URC of Waupun, WI, to be the oversight consistory for the Website Committee. It also adopted a number of recommendations to guide the Website Committee as it builds an Internet presence for the URCNA.

3. Classis Pacific Northwest

Synod agreed to a request to form a new classis from 12 Churches that had been part of Classis Southwest US and Classis Western Canada. These congregations are located in California, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington.

4. Synodical Rules

Synod provisionally adopted its newly drafted Regulations for Synodical Procedure. These new rules for how URC synods are to operate will be used until amended or adopted by the next synodical meeting.

Looking to the Future

Despite a number of significant issues – including several that could have been divisive – God’s guidance was evident. Although the assembly convened with the possibility of deep disunity, it adjourned in the wake of principled compromises – and a renewed sense of unity.

The officers of Synod Schererville 2007 were used in fostering that unity. Synod was ably chaired by

The Elephant in the Room

Review of Synod 2007 of the URCNA

Rev. Ronald Scheuers of the First URC in Chino, Calif., with Rev. Ralph Pontier of Redeemer URC in Orange City, Iowa, as Vice-Chairman. In addition, Elder Edwin Kreykes of Cornerstone URC in Sanborn, Iowa, served as First Clerk, while Rev. Doug Barnes of Hills URC in Hills, Minn., as Second Clerk.

Keeping things running smoothly behind the scenes was Mr. Bill Konynenbelt, whose role as stated clerk for the federation was re-affirmed with election to a second term. Rev. Dennis Royall of Cornerstone URC in London, ON, was elected as alternate stated clerk.

And without a doubt, the glue that held it all together was Community URC of Schererville, IN, which served as the convening Church. Consistory and laity alike worked countless hours to ensure that the delegates were able to perform their business with ease and efficiency.

The next synod is slated to occur in the summer of 2010, under the supervision of Cornerstone URC in London, ON, which was named as the next convening church.

Rev. Doug Barnes is the pastor of Hills URC in Hills, Minn. Although he served Synod Schererville as clerk, this summary reflects not his official role, but his personal observations as a delegate.

The title of this article is taken from the fable in which several people have gathered together in a small room to talk. In the room is an elephant that constantly gets in the way. While craning their necks, shouting to be heard, and awkwardly moving around the obstacle in the middle of the room, no one dares discuss the problem that is facing them all: the giant elephant in the room.

I mention this fable because, as deliberations took place at the 2007 Synod of the United Reformed Churches in North America, I became burdened by the giant elephant in the room. The elephant was introduced when Synod adopted proposed "Regulations for Synodical Procedure." An Advisory Committee appointed by the Synodical Interim Committee to review the regulations recommended over a dozen changes be made. It was argued from the floor of Synod, however, that these changes were beyond the scope of the advisory committee and that any changes to be made to such rules should come from the local consistories.

Agreeing that Synod can only address matters that come to its attention via the proper channels (consistory to classis, etc.), the advisory committee's recommendations were defeated and the original "Regulations for Synodical Procedure" were approved.

The Canadian Reformed Churches

For many, the giant elephant in the room is the Canadian Reformed Churches in North America (CanRC). Indeed, a fisherman's estimation of the agenda would claim that well over half the agenda and ninety per cent of our deliberations on the floor of Synod focused in one way or another on matters related to the CanRC. Items such as theological education, a new song book, justification, ecumenical relations, how to enter Phase 3, and a host of other items all touched on how we deal with our brothers and sisters in the CanRC. A fraternal delegate of the CanRC even sat in the Advisory Committee that dealt with our Website.

In all of the deliberations it was very clear, even stated, that we must make our decisions carefully, lest we offend our brothers and sisters in the CanRC. The question that we dare not ask, however, is whether or not we want to proceed in our alleged courtship with the CanRC. At coffee time and over lunch, many delegates quietly whisper to one another that they are delighted that the URCNA is in Phase 2 with the CanRC, but they have no intention of allowing us to move ahead to Phase 3.

Unfortunately, as soon as we breathe a word of hesitation concerning complete federative unity, we are told that we do not understand the high priestly prayer of Jesus. One delegate who ex-

pressed his concerns was told he was “immature and didn’t know what was going on.” As a delegate from Michigan, I have been told that I really do not know the CanRC and should stay out of the debate.

Such a mindset is insulting to churches in the United States that have made an effort to get to know the CanRC. The church that I serve in Michigan has had a minister from the CanRC lead a worship service where he spoke to us an edifying word. We have had a CanRC pastor lead a Bible Study and discuss our differences and our similarities.

Personally, I have conducted funeral services and have also worshipped in CanRC churches with my family on both coasts, and in Michigan (Abbotsford, Blue Bell, and Dutton) long before the URCNA ever began. When I mention this to those who are pushing hard for complete federative unity, I am told, “Well, you can’t judge the CanRC by *those* churches!”

Oh, and I should add, it was a delegate from Michigan who tried to get on the floor of Synod 2007 the motion to move to Phase 3-A with the CanRC only to have it defeated on a technicality. It remains my conviction that before we have federative unity with the CanRC, we need to have more federation unity within the URCNA.

The New Song Book

Another matter that is often considered to be the elephant in the room is the new song book. A committee has been formed to come up with a new song book for the URCNA. When we entered Phase 2 with the

CanRC, this committee was told by Synod to work with them in developing a new song book together for us when we become one. This synod decided that the committee should return to its original mandate in producing a song book for the URCNA.

The federation’s treasurer in the United States, Mr. Peter Moen, Jr., argued that there was no interest in the new song book. As evidence he reported that last year eighty-seven per cent of the churches in the US chose not to give to this fund. He

As a delegate from Michigan, I have been told that I really do not know the CanRC and should stay out of the debate.

also noted a similar lack of support north of the border. Members of the Hymnal Committee agreed that support was low but argued that it was not because of lack of support, but rather due to a lack of any product. They assured us that in three years they will have a hundred hymns for us to look at and approve.

I contended on the floor of synod that the reason finances were lacking was not because we do not have a product but because we do not have a need. I then made a motion that we take a straw poll to determine how many churches

were in favor of a new song book, and how many would replace the song books in their pew with the new song book when it came out. My, my, my. The reaction was overwhelming! One Hymnal Committee member practically pushed me out of the way so that he could get to the microphone to call my motion out of order. Others also scrambled to the various microphones throughout the auditorium to ask the chairman to declare my motion out of order. “After all,” many of them argued, “we do not know what our elders think in this matter.” I would counter that after discussing the Agenda for Synod, which contained the committee’s report and several overtures concerning the new song book, any astute pastor should know where his consistory stands on this matter.

Although my motion did receive support from the floor, it was completely ignored as the chairman moved on to the next item on the agenda. Interestingly enough, I can not tell you how many delegates came up to me during the next coffee break to tell me how much they dislike the idea of a new song book, and “you’ll never see it in our church!”

The Overture on Justification

Sold on the floor of Classis Michigan as a way to see just how close we really are to the Reformed Church of the United States (RCUS) and “if we can walk together,” the overture on justification hardly raised an eyebrow on the floor of Synod. Delegates quickly voted not to accede to the overture. However, Synod then went on to affirm “as pastoral advice” nine statements concerning the doctrine

of justification by grace alone, through faith alone. As far as I could tell, I was the sole dissenting voice.

The reason for the dissenting vote was not because I had anything against the statements; after all, how much studying can a person seriously do in just a few hours. I have to admit, I did not take Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* with me nor any of the other books that I would have liked to have been able to consult concerning doctrinal statements. Sadly, I could not even find a copy of the Heidelberg Catechism or the Belgic Confession to see if they had been quoted correctly.

Instead, the negative vote came because the statements were totally unrelated to the overture. The overture from Michigan did not ask synod to make any statements concerning justification; it asked Synod to adopt a specific report. That is a significant difference! For example: let us suppose that a classis would overture synod to declare that the sky is blue. The role of synod is to say one of two things: "Yes, we agree that the sky is blue," or "No, we do not agree that the sky is blue." Synod does not have the authority to say, "The sky is green." By synod's own definition in the adopted Rules of Procedure, an overture is "a written proposal to a synod, originating from a consistory and processed through a classis, requesting a definite action..." That definite action was the request by Classis Michigan to adopt the RCUS Report. Once Synod said "no" to the report, the work of that committee concerning that overture should have been finished.

Some argued that Synod Escondido 2001 adopted statements concerning creation in response to an overture presented there. Careful review of what took place in Escondido will reveal that Synod was specifically asked to make statements on creation. No such request came to Synod 2007.

I found the debate on the floor of synod rather ironic. When synod was asked to take a straw poll on what the churches thought about a new song book, protests were raised that "we don't know what our Elders think on this matter." Yet, when major statements are proposed that can change the course of the URCNA's future, and it was mentioned that perhaps these statements should go back to the consistories for review, the sentiment seemed to be, "We don't care what our Elders think in this matter."

The Real Elephant

And that, dear readers, is the real elephant in the room. It is not our relationship with the CanRC, the new song book, nor statements on justification; it is the role of synod. After synod adopted the nine statements on justification, I was called aside and asked why I voted against adopting them. I explained that I remembered a time when I was a member of another denomination and the seminary professor of church polity of that denomination was quoted as saying, "Synod can do whatever synod wants to do." That explanation was not received well.

Imagine my utmost surprise, when on a completely other matter, the Vice-Chairman of Synod brought up the exact same reference only to be

ignored by the delegates. More and more, as synod progressed, I saw her taking on power and authority that had not been delegated to her. This is what we left! Top down government led to many of us becoming frustrated with our former denomination in order to start a new federation. I recall how early in our history we insisted that elders be the officers of our assemblies. Now we seem to be working to silence them.

It is not that I do not trust the delegates of Synod 2007. I believe they are doctrinally sound and seek only the good of the church. In fact, it was a joy to meet so many young ministers who were first time delegates and talk with them about their ministries. Still, I could not help but think that many of these young ministers who spoke so freely on the floor of Synod were too young to remember the Alliance meetings where we had drilled into us the necessity for Elders (not synods) to be the ruling body within the Church of Jesus Christ. If future synods continue to take upon themselves authority that belongs in the consistory, the URCNA will soon be like the churches we have left.

Rev. Wybren H. Oord is the pastor of the Covenant United Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He is also the editor of *The Outlook*.

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