Editorial

CONFRONT-CONSOLIDATE-CONTINUE

After many years of struggle over the issue of women in church office, Synod 1994 of the Christian Reformed Church stated unequivocally that it is the clear teaching of Scripture that only men shall occupy the authoritative offices of minister and elder. They buttressed their position with ample evidence from Scripture. And, although there was an immediate rumble of dissatisfaction with synod’s decision in the July-August issue the title, “Window of Opportunity.”

Predictably the next year brought counter challenges to the 1994 decision. But none of us as conservatives could have dreamed of the brutal and illegal action of Synod 1995 in which they ignored the decision of 1994, surreptitiously altering the Church Order, not by changing it as they should, but by adding a temporary supplement which contradicted the provision of the Church Order that only men may occupy the authoritative offices of the church. The result was that they reversed the 1994 decision illegally and rashly - not giving the church the prescribed time to prevent this move. The title of the 1995 editorial, reflecting on the CRC synod of that year, was “Take It or Leave It.” It was the conviction of the editors that, in view of thearchy which had prevailed at synod, overthrowing any semblance of covenant order in the church, we as conservatives had only two choices - to take it (submit and pay the bills) or leave it. Many concerned officebearers met for an Inter-Classical Conference in South Holland, IL in November of that year to issue a call to repentance and reversal of the action of Synod 1995.

Synod 1996 is now history. Not only did they ignore the pleas of the Inter-Classical Conference which had met in South Holland, November of 1995, but they decisively reaffirmed the decision of 1995 and declared three women candidates for the ministry in the CRC - CONTRARY TO OUR OWN CHURCH ORDER WHICH STILL HAS NOT BEEN CHANGED, and WITHOUT EVEN DECLARING THE WORD “MALE” INOPERATIVE (supplement adopted in 1995), WITH NO BIBLICAL GROUNDS ATTACHED.

What now? In his new book, Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought (p. 40), author John Frame states that Cornelius Van Til said many years ago that there are three stages in the reformation of the church: first, confrontation, second, consolidation and third, continuation of what was consolidated.

CONFRONTATION

We believe that the first stage, confrontation, has been completed. It would be utterly foolish and fruitless to try to come to any subsequent synod trying to change the position on women in church office. That case is closed. Other issues will and are already arising of course: the inerrancy of Scripture, gender inclusive language for God, Jesus Christ as the exclusive way of salvation, evolution, to say nothing about life issues such as homosexuality, abortion, euthanasia and others. But the battle for the clarity of Scripture and its authority to speak to these issues has been lost on the women in office issue. There are still some that disagree with this, but history will confirm it. And, while confrontation on other issues should occur, its outcome will be compromise at best. Contenders no longer have recourse to the Bible or the Church Order. We are already being told that the Bible is not clear on homosexuality. In this issue of The Outlook you will read a clever argument by Dr. Klaas Runia regarding a lack of clarity in the Scriptural presentation of Jesus Christ as THE ONLY way of salvation - and on and on.

The period of confrontation is over. We lost - not in a fair debate or in a clean fight, but we were betrayed by those who want their own agenda and are determined to get it regardless of how they do it.

CONSOLIDATION

Now we must consolidate. We want to call all those who feel betrayed by synod to consolidate. We will have another meeting of the Inter-Classical Conference in South Holland, IL in November. The agenda will be determined by an executive committee soon.

There are some observations which I would like to make. I have been a pastor in good and regular standing since October 1961. I have been a member of the CRC since birth. I made profession of faith in this church. This body has been my spiritual mother. I had deep affection for her. My wife and I and others have fought hard to preserve the faith, rooted in the Word of God, centered in Jesus Christ, expressed in the confessions. But what makes me feel so utterly betrayed now is that the majority has determined something to be right without compelling Biblical warrant. The majority can put into a supplement to Church Order Article 3a something which contradicts Article 3a without providing the church with any opportunity for ratification. We are betrayed because we are not playing on a level field. The majority gets its way. So, confrontation is over and we lost, not because we failed to debate properly, but because the rules were changed to give the other side the advantage. So the fight is over.


CONTINUATION

The future of the Reformed faith is bright, however. It might not flourish any longer in the CRC as it once did. But it will flourish. Those who have pledged their lives to uphold this faith are not going to withdraw into a small hurt minority which licks its wounds. Not at all. We will hold forth the great truths of the Reformed faith, probably with others who share this great heritage. There are people who must hear the gospel. There are children and young people to be taught and inspired. We must get on with the Great Commission both in terms of the cultural mandate and the spread of the gospel. The work must be done. We are eager for it.
Synod 1996: No Turning Back

Cornelis P. Venema

From a historical point of view, it was perhaps one of the more poignant moments in the sessions of the 1996 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. In the context of this synod’s debates regarding interchurch relations and the contentious issue of women in ecclesiastical office, a portion of a letter from the 63rd General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church was read. In this letter, which appealed to the synod to reverse the actions of Synod 1995 in permitting churches and classes to ordain women elders and ministers, the Assembly concluded with the words, “It is our earnest prayer that you will withdraw from the precipice, repent, and again contend for the biblical order Christ has commanded for his church.”

These concluding words of the letter of the General Assembly of the OPC were preceded by the communication of two actions of the Assembly — to suspend relations with the Christian Reformed Church during the next year and to sever all fraternal relations in 1997, should the synod of the CRC not reverse itself on the issue of the ordination of women.

The poignancy of this moment, from a historical view, points, time-wise in two directions: past and future. From the point of view of the past, it was noted in the letter of the OPC that at its fourth General Assembly in 1938, shortly after the founding of the OPC in the struggle with liberalism in the old Presbyterian Church, that the Synod of the CRC communicated its best wishes in the words, “May grace, mercy and peace be multiplied to your denomination, in standing for the old time religion, as expressed in the standards of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches.” This was a reminder to synod of the significant and meaningful fellowship that the CRC has enjoyed with the OPC in the past.

However, from the point of view of the future, it suggested that the CRC was at a point of crisis in its history, at a precipice from which it was urged to withdraw. Subsequent events at Synod 1996 would suggest that, at least for now, the CRC is not of a mind to turn back from the course on which it has embarked in recent years. Not only did Synod 1996 not withdraw from the precipice, but it also overwhelmingly demonstrated that this course will continue. Synod 1996, to extend the language of the OPC General Assembly’s letter, decided to plunge over the precipice.

A REVIEW OF THE MAJOR DECISIONS OF SYNOD 1996

Though it is difficult to evaluate in a report such as this the significance of the actions of a particular synod, any such evaluation must begin with a review of the major decisions taken. What matters finally, when it comes to the meeting of any synod, are the decisions that are made. Sometimes interpreters of synods are tempted to try to read between the lines or discover the hidden motives and implications of decisions that are made. However, it is always best to note carefully what was actually decided and to analyze only subsequently the meaning of these decisions.

Consequently, I will divide my report as an observer for The Outlook into two distinct parts. I will begin with a review and summary of the major decisions of Synod 1996. Then I will turn to an analysis of some of these decisions, seeking to interpret their significance for the present and future direction of the Christian Reformed Church. In this second part, I will hazard — for it is indeed hazardous to do so! — a few comments about the future course for those who wish to be historically and confessionally Reformed but are still members of Christian Reformed congregations.

A Diverse Family of God

A prominent agenda item for Synod 1996 was the issue of the diversity of the family of God, the church of Jesus Christ. In various ways, including a multi-ethnic service of worship on Sunday evening, this synod was asked to face the challenge of racial and ethnic diversity and the gospel promise of reconciliation and unity between nations and peoples in the one Lord Jesus Christ.

Among the first actions of this synod was the adoption of a series of recommendations to approve and implement the decision of Synod 1995 to have “ethnic advisors” appointed to serve synod with advice and counsel from the perspective of various racial and ethnic groups (e.g. African American, Native American or Aboriginals, Korean, Hispanic and others). Synod decided to appoint five ethnic advisors who were responsible to serve on synodical committees, were given the privilege of the floor but not the right to vote, and were to attend the plenary sessions to advise synod either by their own request or that of the president.

In addition to the appointment of such ethnic advisors, Synod 1996 also adopted a comprehensive statement of “Biblical and Theological Principles for the Development of a Racially and Ethnically Diverse and Unified Family of God.” Structured according to the historical sequence of creation, fall and redemption, this statement begins with an affirmation of God’s original purpose in creating one, though diverse, created reality and human race. Noting how the fall into sin has ruptured this unity, the statement gives sustained attention to the way in which God is reconciling all things and all peoples in Jesus Christ. After adopting these principles, synod also adopted a series of recommendations that were directed to the implementation of them among the churches and classes of the denomination.

In a related action, synod adopted a recommendation to accede to an over-
ture from Classis Lake Erie, asking the Board of Trustees to appoint a small sub-committee to “maintain a database of gifted and/or trainable people, concentrating primarily on those who reflect the gender, ethnic, and racial diversity of the denomination, including those with disabilities.” This committee is mandated to assist in ensuring that committee appointments in the Christian Reformed denomination be sensitive to and inclusive of the various ethnic communities.

Finally, among the items relating to the ethnic diversity of the Christian Reformed denomination was a proposal to form a Korean-speaking classis in California. This proposal was the subject of an extended debate, since many delegates were concerned that the Korean churches be fully integrated into the denomination. Synod gave its approval to this proposal, but stipulated that it would be for a maximum period of fifteen years. It should be noted that not all the Korean churches will be members of this new classis. At present, twelve churches have expressed their desire to join.

Inter-church Relations

Another item that captured synod’s attention and consumed a considerable amount of its time, was the matter of inter-church relations. Since the fellowship of the Christian Reformed denomination with other churches is such an important indicator of its sense of identity and purpose, it is not surprising that synod faced the challenges on this level that it did.

Once again this year’s synod faced the nettlesome question of fraternal relations with the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN). Since 1983, when synod suspended two of the six features of inter-church relations, pulpit and table fellowship, there have been continuing discussions with the GKN regarding its positions on women-in-office, homosexuality, euthanasia and the exclusiveness of salvation through Jesus Christ. At Synod 1995 the relations between the two denominations had been strained further by the candor of Rev. Richard Vissinga, fraternal delegate of the GKN, who spoke in defense of his denomination’s willingness to tolerate homosexual practice, euthanasia, and other views at odds with the historic consensus of the Reformed churches. Rev. Vissinga addressed this year’s synod again, though in a more conciliatory manner, even apologizing for the offense that he might have occasioned by his speech the year prior. However, he did not apologize, as some of the delegates noted later in debate, for the things that he had said, noting that the Dutch churches have to struggle within the context of the secularism of modern European culture.

Subsequently, on Monday of the second week of synod, a lengthy debate took place regarding the Christian Reformed denomination’s relations with the GKN. The first and most significant recommendation adopted further restricted relations with the GKN by discontinuing the practice of exchanging fraternal delegates at major assemblies and placing a moratorium on new joint ministry projects. After passing this recommendation by a margin of nineteen votes, synod also decided to intensify its conversations with the GKN through the Interchurch Relations Committee.

Closer to home, Synod 1996 had to address a number of issues relating to its fellowship with the member denominations of the National Association of Reformed and Presbyterian Churches (NAPARC). Notice was taken of the communication from the 63rd General Assembly of the OPC, in which synod was informed of its decision to suspend fellowship with the CRC and to terminate relations in 1997, should the 1997 General Assembly determine that intervening actions of the CRC do not warrant a reversal. Synod also adopted a recommendation to declare the CRC’s willingness to discuss several disputed issues (women in office, homosexuality, church discipline) with the OPC. However, the language of this recommendation noted that the CRC was “not inclined to reopen issues already decided...” Among other decisions in respect to NAPARC and its member churches, synod also reminded the churches of the “Golden Rule Comity Agreement” (not to compete but to cooperate in the establishing of new churches); disapproved a proposed change in NAPARC’s constitution that would permit the discipline of member denominations; refused to accede to an overture from Classis Illinois to “terminate CRC membership” in NAPARC; and approved a letter, responding to a communication from the PCA, in which synod expressed its disagreement with the PCA’s call for it to “repent and rescind” the action of Synod 1995.

In the midst of these evidences of strained relations with other denominations, Synod 1996 was able to act to restore relations with one denomination with which relations have been strained in recent years. At the recommendation of its advisory committee, synod decided to lift the suspension of relations and to reinstate all provisions of fraternal fellowship with the Reformed Churches in South Africa. This decision was based upon the grounds that the circumstances in South African society and in the RCSA have changed sufficiently to warrant the re-institution of fellowship with this denomination.

Education and Ministerial Training

Recent synods of the Christian Reformed denomination have confronted in a variety of forms the problem of providing for the training and preparation of ministers. This problem has been aggravated by a number of factors: the increase in ministers, often from ethnic minority backgrounds, seeking admission into the ministry of the CRC; the reception of ministers from other denominations by way of Article 7 and Article 8 colloquia docta (“doctrinal conversations”); the existence of other Reformed seminaries where students can be prepared for the ministry; the growing number of vacancies in the denomination due to the drop-off in the number of candidates for the ministry and the large number of demissions from the ministry in the CRC. Synod 1996 was compelled to face this problem for several reasons. Not only did Synod 1996 have to approve the entry of twenty-seven people into the ministry through some other route than the normal program of training at the denominational seminary, but it was also faced with an overture from Classis Illiana, asking for the revision in the present requirements to allow students the freedom to obtain their education at other seminaries.

Amidst expressions of concern by James De Jong, president of Calvin Theological Seminary, and Henry De Moor, professor of church order at the same seminary, synod appointed a study com-
committee “to examine routes presently being used to ordained ministry in the CRC and related denominations, to define standards for effective ministry ... in the CRC, and to propose any changes in present policy that they judge to be necessary.” The concerns of De Jong and De Moor were that the CRC, though historically committed to the principle of a thoroughly (academically, vocationally) and uniformly (in knowledge of CRC distinctives, history and polity) trained ministry, was tempted to downgrade the requirements for ministerial candidacy. The decision to appoint this committee is potentially of great significance, not only for the admission of ethnic minority candidates to the ministry (as noted in the decision’s grounds) but also for the training of students at seminaries other than Calvin Seminary.

This year synod delayed its action on declaring the candidacy of students for ministry until after the debate regarding women in office. After its decision on Tuesday (June 18) to affirm the decision of Synod 1995 to permit the ordination of women ministers and elders by way of exception, synod approved twenty-one men and three women as candidates for the ministry. When synod made this decision, the question was divided and the male and female students were voted upon separately. This permitted those opposed to the ordination of women on biblical grounds to vote no, which many of them did, despite the recommendation of Synod 1995 that they simply abstain. President James De Jong of Calvin Seminary noted, in something of an understatement, that the presentation of these candidates to synod on Wednesday was a “historic moment.”

**Church Order Matters**

As has been the experience of many synods in recent years, Synod 1996 was compelled to address a number of Church Order matters, some of more long-term consequence than others. Since one of these — the legitimacy of forming classes along lines of theological affinity rather than geographical proximity — is of special importance, I will consider it separately after simply noting a series of Church Order decisions made by this year’s synod.

The Church Order decisions of this year’s synod that are worthy of some notice were the following:

- Synod declined to change the provisions of Article 47 in the Church Order, so that changes in the Church Order, its supplements, the Form of Subscription and the creeds and confessions could only be made after the approval of the majority of consistories in the denomination.
- Synod amended the supplement to Church Order Article 47 by adding as item “f” the following: “If a proposed change is rejected by a following synod, that change (or one substantially similar) is not available for adoption by a succeeding synod unless it has been first proposed once again by synod.” This supplement was added to clear up an ambiguity in the present rules which might permit synods to alter the Church Order immediately, without giving prior notice to the churches, by acting upon an action of a previous synod that had in the interim been revised or left unratified by an intervening synod.
- Synod acceded to an overture asking that Article 36 be amended so that councils, consistories and diaconates could elect any member of their body to be president. The present reading of the Article says that “[a] minister shall ordinarily preside at meetings of the council and the consistory....” The most far-reaching church order issue that faced this synod was one presented in several overtures, namely, that synod permit churches to form classes according to theological affinity rather than geographical proximity. This proposed change was discussed and recommended at the Inter-Classical Conference held in South Holland, Illinois, in the fall of 1995, at which representatives of churches throughout the denomination debated their responses to the actions of Synod 1995. Synod was asked to change Article 39 and/or its supplement to permit churches the freedom to align themselves with and be members of classes in which the word “male” in Church Order Article 3 remains operative. Since many churches whose councils are opposed to the ordination of women on biblical grounds may find themselves in classes where this practice is permitted, synod was asked to make allowance for such churches to transfer to classes more congenial to their biblical convictions on this and perhaps other matters.

Synod’s response to these overtures was twofold. On the one hand, synod chose not to accede to the requests to make a change in Church Order Article 39. On the other hand, this synod reminded the churches “that any request for transfer to another classis may include grounds that go beyond the sole matter of geographic proximity and that synod is at liberty to consider such grounds in its disposition of the request.” In connection with this second response, Synod 1996 also placed a supplement to Article 39 in the Church Order, noting that synods have this latitude in dealing with requests for transference to another classis. Judging from these decisions and the discussion on the floor of synod, it would seem that the idea of classes formed along lines of theological affinity was resoundingly rejected, though individual churches were given some freedom to transfer to another classis, should they find themselves in strong disagreement with the actions of the classis relative to the ordination of women. One interesting feature of this decision is that it might permit a kind of “two-way traffic” between classes. Just as a “conservative” church might transfer to a more “conservative” classis, so a more “progressive” church might transfer to a more “progressive” classis.

**Homosexuality**

For some time, it has been argued that the next controversial issue to trouble the Christian Reformed denomination will be that of homosexuality and ministry to homosexuals. Some have suggested that the kind of approach to the Scriptures that has characterized the CRC’s handling of the women in office issue will render the denomination vulnerable when it confronts this issue. Others have argued that the one issue has no real connection with the other. The actions of this year’s synod relative to the issue of homosexuality indicate that there may be further troubled waters for the CRC, but now with respect to a different issue.

Synod 1996 was asked by Classis Wisconsin to declare that the advocacy of homosexual practice, even within the context of a committed, monogamous relationship, was a form of false doctrine...
that would merit for its advocate the admonition and discipline of the church. The classis wanted synod to strengthen its actions in 1973, when "homosexualism" or homosexual practice was "condemned as incompatible with obedience to the will of God as revealed in Holy Scripture" (Acts of Synod 1973, p. 52), by declaring the advocacy of such sinful practice to be a disciplinable offense. Synod refused to accede to this overture, though it did note that "[a]dequate provisions for dealing with denial of biblical teachings are made in Articles 65 and 78-83 of the Church Order."

However, synod did respond favorably to an overture asking that a study committee be appointed "to give direction and for pastoral care of homosexual members in a manner consistent with Synod 1973." Not only did the decision to appoint such a committee evoke considerable discussion among the delegates, but it also proved to be a contentious issue when, toward the close of the synodical meeting, the delegates were asked to approve the committee's membership. After a surprisingly lively debate (synod was about to adjourn when the issue of the committee's composition came up for discussion), the whole matter of the committee's membership was referred to the Board of Trustees for their action. Two things complicated the debate of synod at this point. First, the chairman and reporter of the advisory committee made their recommendation without consulting the whole committee membership and without ascertaining whether the names proposed were of individuals who agree with the decisions of Synod 1973 on this issue. And second, synod narrowly defeated an amendment to add the name of Rev. James Lucas to the committee, though uncertain as to his agreement with Synod 1973, only to decide subsequently to refer the whole matter to the Board of Trustees.

Observing the actions and decisions of Synod 1996 relative to the matter of homosexuality, it seems fair to conclude that this issue will be the next to test the resolve of the denomination in respect to its biblical and confessional commitments. What the outcome of this new study process will be remains to be seen, but it is likely that new and more vigorous voices will be raised, asking the denomination to consider forms of ministry to homosexuals that do not insist upon celibacy or repentance within the context of a believing response to the gospel promise of forgiveness and mercy.

Revising the Confessions and Gender-Inclusive Language

One of the more hopeful and surprising decisions of synod was its non-acceptance of a "Report Regarding Gender-Sensitive Language in the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort." Without any significant dissent, synod judged that the CRC Worship Committee had violated its mandate by "in some cases changing the theological intent of the confessions. Such changes were cited in the confessional descriptions of the creation and fall events, as well as in the citations of Scriptural references. At one point in the debate, a motion was made to place an asterisk by these confessions with a note, indicating that the language of the confessions is "not gender-sensitive by twentieth-century standards." Wisely, synod withheld action on this motion so that the matter is presently off the synodical agenda.

Women in Office: Case Closed

Tuesday of the second week of Synod 1996 was devoted, at least for most of the morning and afternoon sessions, to deliberating the issue of women in office and synod's response to a variety of overtures relating to the decision of Synod 1995.

As has customarily been the case throughout the history of the CRC's debate regarding women in office, synod was confronted with a choice between a majority and a minority advisory committee report. The majority asked synod to affirm the actions of Synod 1995 relative to this issue. The minority asked synod to return to the position of Synod 1994, when the ordination of women was declared to be in conflict with the teaching of the Word of God. It became apparent already at the end of the morning session that the majority recommendation would be adopted. Before the noon break, a motion to go to the minority recommendation was overwhelmingly defeated, 51 yes to 128 no. This vote was prophetic of the afternoon's decision, when the first, and decisive, recommendation of the majority was adopted, again by a similar overwhelming margin, 122 yes to 54 no. The main motion adopted with its grounds was as follows:

That synod not accede to overtures which ask for a revision of the decision of Synod 1995 regarding women in office, but that Synod 1996 affirm the 1995 decision: "A classis may, in response to local needs and circumstances, declare that the word male in Article 3a of the Church Order is inoperative, and authorize the churches under its jurisdiction to ordain and install women in the offices of elder, minister, and evangelist." Grounds: a. Previous study committees ... have established viable biblical grounds for this position. b. It has not been proved that this action is in violation of the Church Order. c. The denomination is not well served by continual reversals on this issue.

Though I will reserve further comments on the significance of this decision until later, the reason this motion was adopted was readily evident from the synodical debate. Those who genuinely advocate the ordination of women on what they believe to be adequate biblical grounds were joined by many others who believed this was the only way to bring "closure" to this divisive debate. The sentiments expressed in a speech by delegate Cal Compagner perhaps caught the thinking of this latter group. Compagner mentioned a conversation with lay people who were conservative and even opposed to the ordination of women. However, these people thought it "wise to leave 1995 alone." We must remember, he added, that the "mission of the church is most important" and Synod 1995 had found an "ingenious and creative" way for permitting people to live together with integrity, despite their disagreements over this issue.

A Miscellany of Synodical Decisions

In addition to these synodical decisions and debates, Synod 1996 dealt with several other important matters. Though no report on the meeting of a synod or general assembly can claim to be complete, the following miscellany of syno-
odical decisions and actions is offered in the attempt to be as complete as possible:

- In its opening session, synod elected the following officers: Rev. John Van Ryn, president; Rev. Gordon Pols, vice-president; Rev. Ken Koeman, first clerk; and Rev. Henry Admiraal, second clerk. Rev. Van Ryn proved to be a fine choice, leading the deliberations of synod with a calm, fair and yet adequately firm hand.

- Synod refused to accede to an overture from Classis Wisconsin, asking that the book, *Christian Faith, Health and Medical Practice*, edited by Calvin professor, Hessel Bouma III, and authored by the 1985-86 team of the Calvin Center for Christian Scholarship, be declared in opposition to the position on abortion of the CRC.

- Synod decided to continue the tradition of holding a denominational day of prayer for crops and industry on the second Wednesday in March, noting that churches were free to observe this purpose in conjunction with the US National Day of Prayer if they so desired.

- Synod approved a proposed constitution and bylaws of the Board of Trustees of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (formerly known as the Synodical Interim Committee). However, the proposed Article V was not adopted, but a recommendation passed to provide for an election procedure for board members that would be similar to that used presently for the election of Calvin Seminary board members. It was judged that the proposed procedure removed the process of nomination and election from the classes in their respective regions.

- In a complicated and puzzling debate, synod first considered the adoption of the proposed change in Article 51a to read, “The congregation shall assemble for worship, ordinarily twice on the Lord’s Day, to hear God’s Word....” Then synod reconsidered the matter with a grammatical change. When it was pointed out that the proposed change amounted to a substantive change in the Article, synod returned to the original language and approved it for inclusion in the Church Order. It was noted in the debate that this change in Article 51a not only removes the requirement of two services on the Lord’s Day, but also makes it possible for a church council, without violating the letter of this new Article, to choose to hold no services on the Lord’s Day, should local circumstances and their judgment lead them to do so.

- In adopting a recommended ministry share (formerly “quotas”) for 1997, synod chose to leave the amounts the same as they were for 1996 ($244.99 per professing member, $567.29 per family).

- Synod heard a farewell speech from Dr. Joel Nederhoed, emeritus director of ministries of the Back to God Hour.

- Synod decided to permit all the boards of the denomination’s agencies to retain their present structure and classical representation.

- A schedule for a one-calendar week synod was adopted, calling for synod’s sessions to begin in the afternoon of the second Saturday of June and adjourning by noon on Saturday of the following week.

- After a lengthy debate, synod “provisionally adopted” a new set of abuse guidelines which set aside the guidelines presented to Synod 1995. These guidelines are to be reviewed and revised for final adoption by Synod 1997. Among the concerns cited in the debate were the applicability of the guidelines in various states or provinces whose legal requirements vary widely, and the danger of the presumption of guilt in the instance of unsubstantiated accusations of guilt.

**ANALYZING SYNOD 1996**

Having summarized the decisions and actions of Synod 1996, I would like to turn to some comments of a more interpretive nature. What significance do these decisions have? What do they portend for the future of the CRC? Obviously, various interpreters of Synod 1996 will give differing answers to these questions. But they are questions that cannot be avoided.

**The Wrong Approach to Diversity**

My first observation has to do with the emphasis at this synod upon ethnic diversity and representation. I am somewhat hesitant to make these comments, but they relate to what I regard to be the wrong approach to diversity.

I am hesitant to make these comments because they could easily be misinterpreted. There were many things said and done at this year’s synod regarding ethnic diversity with which I am in considerable agreement. The Christian Reformed denomination is a fellowship of churches whose membership is more ethnically diverse than was once the case. There are predominantly Hispanic, Korean, Native American, Afro-American, Laotian and Vietnamese congregations. Though only comprising approximately five percent of the membership of the CRC, the existence and growth of these congregations is an occasion for thanksgiving. It is also an occasion to be reminded that the church is a people comprised of believers from a multitude of tribes and tongues and nations. In Christ not only has the dividing wall of partition been broken down between Jew and Gentile, but also between diverse peoples and nations.

Furthermore, there can be no doubt that the Christian Reformed denomination has often confused its ethnic heritage with its confessional and biblical heritage. There have been many — and there are still too many — who think of the denomination in ethnic and cultural terms, and whose conduct betrays an unwillingness to embrace a diversity of ethnic groups within the denomination. Much of what Synod 1996 declared and affirmed in these respects can be applauded and approved. In my own experience, some of the most blessed occasions of my life are inextricably joined to the Friendship House Christian Reformed Church, an inner-city mission congregation to Native Americans, where my father was a missionary pastor in the 1960s. To worship as a teenager in a Reformed congregation which confessed its “only comfort” in belonging to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ, comprised as it was of members from various Native American tribes, was a grand and delightful experience. Simi-
larly, as a pastor for a number of years in southern California, friendships with and opportunities to work with many Korean congregations was also a wonderful thing.

I can say, therefore, with conviction and from experience that the Reformed churches must be multi-racial and multi-ethnic in their composition. Nothing less answers to our heritage in the Scriptures and the confessions. When Reformed churches have been sinfully ethno-centric and racist, whether overtly or more subtly, they should humble themselves in shame and repentance before the Lord.

However, there was in the actions of this year's synod a tendency to address the issue of ethnic diversity in ways that are problematic. For example, it was hardly acknowledged in the synodical deliberations that, through the Korean churches represent today almost fifty percent of the ethnic membership of the CRC, they have been deeply troubled and divided by the actions of synods respecting issues like women in office. Almost one-half of the membership of these Korean churches has seceded in recent years from the denomination.

One of the ironies of the recent history of the CRC is that, by the standards of the denomination as a whole, the ethnic churches and members tend to be more conservative and traditional in their convictions than many others. Indeed, the CRC has enjoyed the greatest "success," if I may use this term advisedly, in attracting new members of ethnic communities because of its strong tradition of biblical and confessionally Reformed preaching and teaching. The likelihood of any great continuing success with such ethnic peoples diminishes as the denomination becomes more progressive and liberal on a variety of issues. Rev. Randy Young, a Chinese-American pastor in Southern California, made a similar point in the debate regarding women in office, when he noted that it is often the "new" believer who is most disturbed to hear that the denomination of which his congregation is a member permits the ordination of women and the like.

However, in addition to this irony, Synod 1996 on several occasions fell prey to the temptation to redress past wrongs in racial and ethnic relations by moving in the direction of employing quotas and forms of "affirmative action" that are troublesome. Not only did synod appoint ethnic advisors, none of whom represent in the Church Order sense the churches or classes of the denomination, but it also appointed a committee to serve as a kind of clearing-house to gather the names of ethnic persons who would be able to serve on a variety of denominational agencies or committees. In the consideration of proposed committee assignments, delegates went so far as to ask for a breakdown of the racial and ethnic composition of the names being recommended. In all of this, the fine line between a legitimate desire to provide for fair and meaningful representation and a kind of reverse racism was not always acknowledged. When, in the interests of racial and ethnic diversity, people are considered and appointed primarily for reasons of race and ethnicity, the specter of new forms of racial discrimination begins to loom large.

In summary, Synod 1996 would have served the cause of racial and ethnic diversity better by calling for a more vigorous missionary proclamation of the gospel according to Reformed convictions among the diversity of people groups in North America. Only through the development and growth of Reformed congregations which participate fully in the life of the denomination will the legitimate goal of diversity be realized.

Indecision is the Key

A second observation about this year's synod is that it continued a tradition of indecision that has characterized recent synods of the CRC. The indecisiveness of this synod was evident on a number of fronts.

When confronted with the request that fraternal relations with the GKN be terminated, Synod 1996 hesitantly re­stricted relations further, but did not finally agree to this request. The retention of fraternal relations with the GKN was not based upon any clear biblical and confessional grounds, but upon the grounds of sentiment and past history. Two delegates well summarized the indecisiveness of the CRC in its relations with the GKN. One asked the obvious question, what would the GKN have to do or what views could it tolerate before the CRC would actually sever inter-church relations? Another observed that, were the arguments used by many del­egates for maintaining ties with the GKN to be used with respect to other denominations, there would not seem to be any reason why the CRC should not have inter­church relations with Lutheran, Baptist and Presbyterian churches (PCUSA), many of which have true believers and congregations in their midst.

Similarly, when synod was given an opportunity to make a clear declaration regarding the issues of abortion and homosexuality, indecision again was the key. As long as Calvin College remains a parochial school, whose employees are formally employees of the Christian Re­formed denomination, it is difficult to understand why, when a professor con­tradicts the official stand of the denomination, he is not liable to some form of censure or discipline. Why should "ministry shares" go to pay the salary (even if it be only a minuscule portion of that salary, or to offset other costs so that tuition monies can be used for this purpose) of such a professor? Synod also had the opportunity to declare that the teaching of the permissibility of monogamous, homosexual relations is a form of false teaching that makes the teacher liable to the church's discipline. But it declined to do so.

As is often the case in such circumstances, synod found a variety of reasons to avoid doing what it was asked to do. Some of these reasons may even have a measure of validity. However, it is impossible to suppress the conviction that these instances of indecision on Synod's part are symptomatic of a pattern of indecision and uncertainty to speak directly to the contro­versial issues of the day. At no previous synodical assembly that I have observed was the appeal to the text of the Scrip­tures or the confessions as "absent" as it was at this synod. The reason for this absence is not hard to discover — the Christian Reformed denomination is no longer marked by an exegetical and confessional consensus on the issues before it. The glue that holds the denomination together is increasingly composed of historical and institutional ingredients, decreasingly of biblical and confessional ones.

No Turning Back on Women in Office

Not much needs to be said by way of interpretation regarding the issue of women in office. Whatever cliche comes to mind — "the die is cast," "the case is closed" — it is evident that the CRC has no desire to turn back from the course set for it at Synod 1995. There are several observations, however, that I believe need to be made here regarding the con­sequences of this decision.

First, let no ink or paper be wasted on writing overtures or appeals to synod on this issue asking for a revision and a return to the historic position. The time for battling the issue of women in office in the Christian Reformed denomination is, hu­manly speaking, over. Here conservatives
can almost agree with the progressives in concluding that a continued fight about this issue would be a fruitless diversion of the churches’ energy and resources.

Second, it should be observed that Church Order Article 3 will likely soon be changed to bring the Church Order into conformity with the denomination’s practice. This may even occur before the year 2000 which Synod 1995 declared to be the year for reviewing its decision. As I noted to one observer of synod (somewhat facetiously), “If you believe Synod 2000 will reverse the action of Synod 1995, I have a lovely 1983 Olds I would like to sell you...”! No one should be so naïve as to believe that there is any turning back on the issue of women’s ordination in the CRC.

Third, the manner in which this decision was made and re-affirmed suggests that the CRC has no Church Order on which conservatives can rely for protection or redress of wrongs. I have no doubt in my mind that the decision of Synod 1995 was made in direct contravention of the requirements of the Church Order and good order in the church. As one delegate to this synod wisely observed, the supplement added to Church Order Article 3a does not provide for an exception to the requirement of this Article but for an “option” to do the opposite of what it requires! No amount of posturing or rhetorical flourishing will change the fact that two successive synods of the CRC have violated, in an unconscionable and ruthless fashion, the terms of the Church Order, the only meaningful glue that can hold a body like the CRC together. No new or sufficient grounds were presented either in 1995 or 1996 for this decision. No provision was made to allow the churches to approve or “ratify” the change that has been effected in the Church Order. The basic dictates of honesty and integrity (“let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes,’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no’”) would demand that the present supplement to Article 3a be unanimously rejected by every assembly (whether council, classis or synod) of the CRC. However, Synod 1996 chose to follow the precedent of Synod 1995 (and now fourteen classes, at last count) in declaring, so far as this issue is concerned, the Church Order of the CRC to be of no effect.8

And fourth, it should not be lost upon anyone that the CRC has altered its historic position on the ordination of women without so much as a shred of synodically approved biblical evidence to warrant this alteration. Neither in 1995 nor in 1996 were the decisions relative to the ordination of women made upon the basis of biblical arguments. Admittedly, broad allusions were made to grounds ostensibly set forth in previous study committee reports and overtures. But none of these grounds has ever been endorsed or approved as a ground for the synodical decisions that have permitted the churches the option to ordain women. In short, the actions of Synods 1995 and 1996 on the issue of women in office were made in violation of the Church Order and without any explicit biblical warrant.

I make these observations here in order to underscore the futility of attempting to reverse the course of the denomination on this issue. What new or sufficient evidence or grounds could be produced? Why should anyone confidently expect future synods to honor the Church Order rules relating to changes in its articles?

For the Historically Reformed ("conservatives") — What Now?

If the preceding analysis of Synod 1996 and its significance has merit, it raises rather directly the question — what now, for those who desire to be biblically and confessionally Reformed, but still remain members of the CRC? In my view, there are, broadly speaking, only two possibilities, the one irresponsible, the other responsible.9

First, conservatives in the Christian Reformed Church can always pretend that things are not as bad as they seem. Perhaps some may find decisions of this synod that show promise of a continuing biblical and confessional commitment in the CRC. Others might point (with genuine merit) to the many good things that still belong to the CRC, its institutions and agencies. Still others might think that they can simply learn to live with the ordination of women to office. There are a variety of avenues that could be taken, in other words, to go on with “business as usual” in the CRC. But to do so would be the height of irresponsibility.

Second, conservatives in the Christian Reformed denomination could meet together in order to determine what course is now demanded of them.10 The only question on the agenda for such a meeting would be: how can we responsibly secure for ourselves and those in our sphere of responsibility (our children and congregations), the prospect of a vital Reformed witness and ministry for years to come? To this question, there are only two answers that begin to answer the need of the hour.

One would be for the conservative churches of the denomination to join together in a provisional fellowship which would remain within the CRC for the time being, but under terms that would be clearly delineated. At the least, such a provisional fellowship of churches would have to inform the assemblies of the denomination that their participation in the denomination’s life and ministry would henceforth be selective. They would have to inform the denomination that they could not recognize or support the unbiblical ordination of women ministers, elders and evangelists. This fellowship of churches would also have to inform the denomination that they reserve the right to declare inoperative those sections of the Church Order and its supplements that restrict the freedom of access to their pulpits of men who meet the biblical requirements for office and have been examined by their churches.

The other responsible course for these churches would be for them to resolve to enter into discussions with existing or newly emerging Reformed denominations, who share their historic biblical, confessional and church order commitments. The purpose of such discussions would be to separate from the Christian Reformed denomination and join a more biblical and confessionally Reformed communion of churches.

FOOTNOTES

1 I use the language “historically and confessionally Reformed” as an admittedly cumbersome way of referring to those who are usually termed “conservatives.” Though “conservative” is the common and unavoidable term, it does connote something that I believe confessionally Reformed people should always repudiate — traditionalism, a way of thinking and acting that unthinkingly prefers the ways of the past to those of the present and future. A true “conservative” rejects traditionalism but affirms a way of thinking and acting that seeks to honor the supreme authority of Scripture and the subordinate authority of the historic creeds and confessions of the Reformed churches.

2 The two recommendations adopted by the General Assembly were: “1. That the Assembly suspend the relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the Christian Reformed Church in North America...2. That, unless the 1997 regular General Assembly determines that intervening actions of the Christian Reformed Church in North America warrant a reversal of this action or a continuation of the period of suspension, the relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the Christian Reformed Church in North America shall be terminated with the close of that assembly.”

3 Late in its sessions synod appointed the following members to this Committee: Bill Van Groningen, Ricardo Pigna, John Bolt, Robert den Dulk, David
Ten years ago, the Supreme Court upheld a Georgia law that criminalized homosexual practice. Now, in a 6-3 ruling, the Court says a majority of Colorado citizens cannot pass laws that "discriminate" against people engaged in practices it acknowledges can be labeled "criminal."

How can this be since certain rights — such as voting, obtaining credit or getting security clearances — are denied to other classes of people who commit acts deemed by states to be criminal?

Writing for the majority, Justice Antonin Scalia said that Coloradans could not amend their constitution to ban laws protecting homosexuals from discrimination because it "unfairly singles out a single trait — homosexuality — and then denies them the possibility of legal protection across the board." Yet, aren't homosexuals asserting "rights" based on that same "trait"? And if people can change their behavior from the practice of homosexuality to heterosexuality or celibacy, why do they rate special protection given to no other behavioral class?

In his dissent, Justice Anthony Kennedy said that Coloradans could not amend their constitution to ban laws protecting homosexuals from discrimination because it "unfairly singles out a single trait — homosexuality — and then denies them the possibility of legal protection across the board." Yet, aren't homosexuals asserting "rights" based on that same "trait"? And if people can change their behavior from the practice of homosexuality to heterosexuality or celibacy, why do they rate special protection given to no other behavioral class?

In his dissent, Justice Antonin Scalia said that if it is rational to criminalize the conduct, "surely it is rational to deny special favor and protection to those with a self-avowed tendency or desire to engage in the conduct."

Scalia added that the Colorado constitutional amendment was designed "to prevent piecemeal deterioration of the sexual morality favored by a majority of Coloradans. Striking it down is an act not of judicial judgment, but of political will."

This ruling again grants to homosexuals a special class status that makes the political playing field uneven. They get laws protecting not only their behavior, but they get to propagate their way of life as normal in public schools and in our culture. Meanwhile, the same courts deny those who disagree with them to pass laws that sustain a moral code in which they believe. Justice Scalia says the decision imposes upon all Americans the pronouncement that "animosity toward homosexuality" is evil. He called the amendment "Colorado’s reasonable effort to preserve traditional American moral values" and added that it was not the Court’s business "to take sides in the culture war," which, of course, is precisely what it has done — in violation of the very Constitution for which the Court claims to speak.

How quickly politics and political pressure can change a judge not rooted in the Constitution’s original intent can be seen in a 1980 ruling delivered by Justice Kennedy when he was a member of the Court of Appeals. In Beller vs. Middendorf, a case involving the discharge of homosexual members of the Navy, Kennedy wrote, “Nearly any statute which classifies people may be irrational as applied in particular cases. Discharge of the particular plaintiffs before us would be rational under minimum scrutiny, not because their particular cases present the dangers which justify Navy policy, but instead because the general policy of discharging all homosexuals is rational” (italics mine). Some may have thought that, after two Republican presidents, the days of legislating from the bench were coming to an end and that the powers reserved to the states under the 10th Amendment were being recovered. But Justices Kennedy, David Souter and Sandra Day O’Connor are all Republican appointees who voted with the majority. Obviously these judicial elites believe such issues not addressed in the Constitution are too important for mere citizens and their elected leaders to decide.

White House spokesman Mike McCurry called the Colorado law “bad policy...inconsistent with our common values.” And a case could be made that they are rapidly changing to the point where they are more common than valued.

The ancient Roman Empire had many sign posts on the road to its demise that it chose to ignore. This ruling (with legalized homosexual marriage sure to be next) is just the latest on a similar road. Instead of turning back, we seem intent on increasing our speed.

Los Angeles Times Syndicate
Berkouwer on Providence and Election

In this discussion of Dr. Berkouwer's view of Providence and Election, Dr. Carl Bogue points out Berkouwer's unwillingness to accept reprobation as the flip side of God's election. The "hard sayings" of the Canons of Dort, the idea of reprobation, the rejection of some, is a problem to Berkouwer.

But at the same time, Berkouwer considers election the very "heart of the church." To solve the tension between a predetermined election and reprobation, Berkouwer proposes an understanding of election "in faith" which emphasizes a "doxological approach" versus a decree fixed in eternity.

It is this "doxological approach" that we find Scripture's teaching on election to be only pastoral in nature, that is, it is only encouragement for the persecuted and embattled church. "Chosen in Christ" cannot mean that Christ is the means or medium through whom an eternal decree would be effected. Even in a case where a person "hardens" his/her heart or "rejects" the gospel, the situation could still be described as "open."

This example of Berkouwer's view of election/reprobation again illustrates not only the fluidity of his approach, but how far afield he has wandered from the clear testimony of Scripture and the confessions.

The Editors

PROVIDENCE AND ELECTION: A CASE STUDY

Prior to the latter volumes on Scripture, the area where Berkouwer's correlation principle of viewing all theology "in faith" (as defined in the June issue) was most visible is in the areas of providence and election. These are crucial areas which deserve some special attention at this point.

In a chapter entitled "A Third Aspect," Berkouwer treats the concept of "concurrency" as a way to express God's exercise of providence in the world. This is an important chapter. The problem arises of "whether total human dependence upon God leaves room for significant creativity activity .... " Berkouwer's concern is to avoid "speculation." Given the biblical a priori that "God is not the author of sin," how do you "conceive of divine cooperation in sin?" "Is sin wholly a product of the first as well as the second cause?" According to Berkouwer, "the dilemma is usually construed as: determinism or indeterminism."

Berkouwer, not wanting indeterminism, is reacting against what he feels is a logical consequence of all determinism, namely, a kind of causality that excludes human responsibility and makes God the author of sin. In this reaction he makes several crucial assertions. "The essential error of identifying the Providence doctrine with determinism is the de-personalization of the God-concept." The Reformed confession of Providence does not reason from the idea of causation. It simply recognizes the invincibility of God's sovereign activity. "... The use of the terms first and second causes implies that God is only the most important cause among equal causes. This brings God even less disguised down into the world-process." For Berkouwer there is apparently a contradiction between Creator and cause. Concerning the biblical reference to Jehovah as the "first and the last," he says, "The word first points to the absolute Creator, not the first cause of all things." At best one can agree with these statements if qualified. At worst one sees caricatures and false dilemmas.

Berkouwer apparently is convinced of the inescapable dilemma, however, since he seeks a way out, a third or middle way. The problem, he says, is not properly formulated as determinism-indeterminism.

The alternatives, determinism or indeterminism, are true alternatives only on a horizontal, anthropological level. They pose a dilemma which is resolved in the relationship that man sustains to God. This vertical relationship between God and man alone gives possibility to a correct understanding of the problem of freedom. Both determinism...and indeterminism neglect the religious aspect of the problem.

"Faith knows its boundaries," says Berkouwer. "Rational conclusions ... give way to living faith in Him." The problem is resolved, though not rationally, in confession of guilt and in faith. There is a solution, but it is the solution of faith, which knows its own responsibility—as it knows the unapproachable holiness of God. He who does not listen in faith to God's voice is left with an insoluble dilemma.

We are again struck with the conclusion that Berkouwer's solution, the "religious" approach "in faith" contra "rational conclusions," has ended in the subjective, noumenal sphere.

When we turn to the doctrines surrounding election, we would expect to see a similar pattern, and this is the case. Lewis Smedes's summary may serve as a helpful starter.

Perhaps the most significant contribution that Berkouwer has made to the doctrine of election is his rescue of it from the doctrine of reprobation as its logical corollary. The notion of reprobation as a logical consequence...
of election is inescapable, as long as election is viewed as an arbitrary selection of individuals. To Berkouwer this is as objectionable as it is logical.72

One must understand that Berkouwer moves back and forth on these issues in a way that is hard to pin down. He writes a chapter on “Election and Arbitrariness” and states as a priori evidence that God is not arbitrary.73 “Arbitrary” seems to be a word to be avoided, whatever the qualifications, even though it has been used, properly qualified, within the Reformed tradition. Berkouwer accepts Calvin’s expression that “God is a law unto Himself” as a rejection of “potentia absoluta” as well as a law above God.74 “The protest against the term potentia absoluta was not directed against the absoluteness of divine power, but against its unbiblical formalization.”75 Berkouwer seems thus to open the door for a qualified arbitrariness, but he insists that despite qualifications, the concept brings into question “the stability and trustworthiness of God’s revelation.”76 “...We shall not be able to discuss the election of God properly without continually reminding ourselves that there is no arbitrariness in God’s acts.”77

In the statement of Smedes quoted above one spots a problem. Apparently the “absoluteness of divine power” which Berkouwer affirms cannot be understood rationally without falling into the “error” of arbitrariness, potentia absoluta, and formalization. What is significant is that Berkouwer does not deny the logic of it. It is not sloppy thinking. In Smedes’s words, “this is as objectionable as it is logical.” Our problem is not in not seeing that logic (Kant’s phenomenal world?) is a secondary reality. “There is a third way,” says Berkouwer, “between the potentia absoluta and the subjection of God to a law. The third way is the way of revelation.”78 Thus, logic is set over against revelation; the “noumenal” realm of a third way, a “religious” and “in faith” way, is set over against rational conclusions.

Much of the election doctrine centers around “the boundaries of reflection.” When Berkouwer deals with the Synod of Dort, the issue of “good and necessary consequences” is at the forefront. The “hard sayings” of Dort as deduced from Scripture as consequence, culminating in the phrase “predestined to sin,”

is an area that disturbs Berkouwer. The issue of reprobation, the rejection of some, is crucial.

In an important chapter on “Election and Rejection,” Berkouwer defines the issue as symmetry versus asymmetry. When the Canons of Dort speak of election and rejection, “we could get the impression that we are confronted with an obvious duality of two symmetrical ‘decrees’ predestinating to life and to death.”79 Reformed theology rejects the idea that election and rejection occur “in the same manner,” and Berkouwer attributes this to its desire to reject deterministic interpretations. The Scriptures, says Berkouwer, are asymmetrical. God is the “cause” of salvation; man is the cause of unbelief and hence rejection.80 Our criticism of Berkouwer must not be affirming symmetry or a determinism that makes God the author of sin. Berkouwer’s method is again at issue. We do not escape determinism by indeterminism. Reformed theology, he says, affirms asymmetry, and “in doing so, it reaches beyond the dilemma between determinism and indeterminism.”81 The use of causality can never bring us to a solution.82 The rising above the dilemma, however, is back in the subjective realm. We must, he insists, rediscover the “doxological connections.” “... We cannot discuss the election of God apart from faith.”83 No metaphysics, but confession. Referring to the words of adoration which Paul speaks in Romans 11:33, he states: “That is for us men-with all our problems-the profoundest exegetical secret of Romans 9 to 11.”84

But more than an acknowledgment of the mystery of election is being set forth. Smedes says of Berkouwer’s teaching: “God is the source of election. Man is the cause of his reprobation.”85 H. Berkhof says Berkouwer’s book on election “is built on asymmetrical confession, inspired by ‘the boundaries of Scripture,’ that God elects whom he will and rejects those who reject him.”86 That sounds orthodox enough if interpreted in an orthodox manner. However, couple what we have seen with this statement:

Scripture showed us that in the doctrine of God’s election the issue is not a decreum absolutum, abstracted from Jesus Christ, neither a necessitas rerum which cannot be changed under any circumstances, nor a dark and irrational power of the potentia absoluta. Rather, Scripture points in its doxologies and songs in praise of the free election of God.87

One gets the impression that Berkouwer tends to be a Calvinist in election and an Arminian in rejection. But if God’s election is not something “which cannot be changed” (i.e., election can be changed?), even his doctrine of election as Calvinistic is suspect.

Berkouwer would reject such conclusions and say we are not looking in the way of faith. Faith sees things differently, not in causality but in doxologies that point to a way that is true but not transparent to rational considerations. We have yet to apprehend adequately what that means, but apparently one must risk the loss of objective certainty and take the existential leap of faith into the realm of theological (noumenal?) understanding.

It is worth noting that in Van Til’s book on Berkouwer and Dort he gives an account of Woelderink’s 1951 work on Election which shows his move from the historic Reformed faith to Barthianism. The causal question is called unibiblical and equated with determinism which is limited to the non-human realm of the I-it dimension. Election transcends causal thinking. “We are referring to the noumenal not the phenomenal realm.”88

Though our criticism of Berkouwer has been based largely on his book on Divine Election and is admittedly drawing implications, the validity of our fear is illustrated by Van Til’s comparison of an earlier and later Berkouwer with the position of Woelderink.

It is of interest to note that in 1955 Berkouwer defended the Synod of Dort as having the concrete biblical view of election against the charge of determinism launched by Woelderink, while in 1965 his criticism of Dort was practically the same as that of Woelderink.89

Van Til equates Berkouwer’s terminology with that of neo-orthodoxy and places him within the Kantian framework of modern theology. Still, the “hole in the dike” was there in the “earlier” Berkouwer, and subsequent writings differ by degree rather than reflecting an essentially new position. Nor was Berkouwer unaware that he was traveling “other routes.” He
states in A Half Century of Theology that the publication of Divine Election in 1955 was "not without hesitation and persistent questions." At the risk of some repetition we should not overlook what he says about this doctrine in his survey of the last fifty years. Here we have the advantage of an autobiographical reflection of his mature thought, the vantage point of the "later Berkouwer," as he views the "half century."

It is Berkouwer's conviction that election is the very "heart of the church," and it should therefore be a doctrine of comfort rather than something to dread. There is, therefore, a strong pastoral emphasis in relation to questions that are seen as problems, "questions about the certainty of one's own salvation, about the 'book of life' in which names of only certain persons had been written, and questions about the secrecy and mystery of election." Berkouwer cites an experience of his first congregation of the man who argued, 'nothing could help him if he were not elect and his own break from the church could not hurt him if he were elect.'

Berkouwer seems to view such "problems" as inappropriate for a doctrine that is the "heart of the church." He says he probably counseled the man against caricaturing and pointed to the "relation between election and responsibility," but then concludes that "pastoral warning is really powerless over against this sort of logic." Such concerns have led Berkouwer to see the problem not so much in his parishioner's caricatures as in the traditional statement of the doctrine. One "solves" the problem aspect by denying the orthodox doctrine of election.

The orthodox statement of the doctrine, the "form" if not the "content" (intent) of the Canons of Dort, is dominated by arbitrariness.

By arbitrariness we have in mind the "once-for-all" decision made in eternity that seats the lot of all people forever. The eternal decree of predestination (or predetermination) has its logical corollary in reprobation. The question is: Does not double predestination render pointless everything people decide to do?

Berkouwer believes that is the result, and since the Bible teaches "tension and struggle" rather than "self-evident reason for indifference or complacency," double predestination cannot therefore be Scriptural. The Biblical call for response evaportes "by the thought of that decree, fixed from eternity...that determines everything and every person, a decree that must be realized in history." In the notion of double predestination we have something else on our hands than a hymn of praise to God's gracious election. The question is whether the notion of double destiny does not turn divine freedom into divine arbitrariness.

It is apparent that Berkouwer's desire to retain the doctrine of divine election as the heart of the church will necessitate a concept of decree quite different from what is normally understood. Berkouwer now decries a resorting "to obtuse explanations" and a striving "toward an elusive harmony and synthesis" in the doctrine of election. Kuyper's language is charged as being essentially the same as "arbitrary determination of an 'absolute might.'" Berkouwer claims to be questioning the form, not the content, of the sovereignty of God, and it is not a desire "to replace determinism with indeterminism." To negate so much of the doctrine of election and yet boldly affirm it, one has to move "above" the rational-historical realm into the "Kantian noumenal realm"; that is, it must be seen "in faith." Piety is set over against rational harmonization.

Once understanding "in faith" is seen as incompatible with understanding in rational knowledge, many new directions are open for biblical reflection. Commenting on Matthew 20:15, where Jesus says, "Am I not free to do what I choose with what belongs to me?" Berkouwer rejects the "logical" conclusion which is double predestination and declares instead that freedom means the goodness of God. Similarly, he denies that Paul could conclude Romans 9-11 "with a breathtaking doxology" if his intention was to teach "that the destiny of everything and everyone is sealed from eternity." Apparently we cannot truly praise God if He "ordained whatsoever comes to pass."

Noordmans is said to have been "ahead of his time" in teaching that the "pre-" of predestination "is a 'pre-' of divine desire, not of logical determinism." Predestination, therefore, is not choosing some and rejecting others, but merely "desiring" something in regard to sinners without being the cause of it. The "pre-" of predestination as set forth in the Canons of Dort "does not let the grace of election come to its own," and "grace takes a back seat because of the double focus of the divine decree." Reprobation is made incompatible with God's grace.

In view of the a priori decree of election and reprobation, universal proclamation is not possible, so long as the seriousness and genuinely intended offer of grace is concerned. The offer of grace could not be directed to people who were excluded from salvation by God's decree.

Against this background, Berkouwer says he published Divine Election, "not without hesitation and persistent questions," surely aware that he was changing not only the form but also the content of the Reformed doctrine of predestination.

Berkouwer believes he has growing support for choosing a doxological approach versus a decree fixed in eternity. Thus the reconsideration of election has tended for several years, not in the direction of a double decree that merely waits to be executed, but in the direction of grace as the nature, the character of election.... I cannot help noting that this shift... has gained an encouraging consensus, supporting my own efforts to understand the meaning of the confession of election....

In private conversation, Berkouwer mentioned James Daane's The Freedom of God as an English language work reflecting his view. But he especially mentioned Herman Ridderbos in this connection as one who arrived at a similar view of election on exegetical grounds. In A Half Century of Theology Berkouwer says their mutual understanding occurred before the publication of Divine Election in 1955. "Our discussion was supportive for me in my conviction that my rejection of consistent views like Hoeksema's and
Not surprisingly, we find Ridderbos writing in a similar vein:

In “election” there is not of itself the thought of a decree...

The purport of Paul’s argument is not to show that all that God does in history has been foreordained from eternity and therefore, so far as his mercy as well as his hardening is concerned, has an irresistible and inevitable issue... It is evident that one may not identify the omnipotence and sovereignty of God’s grace thus upheld on the one hand and of his reprobation and hardening on the other with irrevocable “eternal” decrees, in which God would once and forever have predetermined the salvation or ruin of man....

There is...an inner contradiction, if one conceives of the divine purpose and the number of the elect in a deterministic sense as an immutably established decree of the counsel of God; or if, on the other hand, one supposes that without the individual’s power of decision human responsibility toward the gospel becomes a fiction. 108

Neither determinism nor indeterminism! Ridderbos, like Berkouwer, has sought a third way. What that way is remains elusive and protected in the “storm-free harbor of suprahistory.”

FOOTNOTES

62 Ibid., p. 126.
63 Ibid., p. 131.
64 Ibid., p. 152.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid., p. 155.
67 Ibid., p. 158.
68 Ibid., p. 145.
69 Ibid., p. 146. The Kantian roots of this mentality are illustrated in a summary of Kant’s agnosticism in Norman L. Geisler, “Philosophical Presuppositions of Biblical Errancy,” Summit Papers, p. 11.15. “Hence, I can know the ‘thing-to-me’ but not the ‘thing-in-itself.’ One can know what appears to him but not what really is. The former Kant called ‘phenomena’ and the latter, ‘noumena.’ Between the phenomenal and the noumenal realms there is an insurpassable gulf fixed by the very nature of the knowing process.”
70 Ibid., p. 159.
71 Ibid., p. 133.
72 Smedes, Creative Minds, p. 78.
73 Berkouwer, Divine Election, p. 53.
74 Ibid., p. 59.
75 Ibid., p. 62.
76 Ibid., pp. 62-63.
77 Ibid., p. 87.
78 Ibid., p. 86.
79 Ibid., p. 175.
80 Ibid., pp. 181ff.
81 Ibid., p. 182.
82 Ibid., pp. 188, 190.
83 Ibid., p. 25.
84 Ibid., p. 65. Cf. Faith and Justification, pp. 31-32.
85 Smedes, Creative Minds, p. 78.
86 Berkhofer, Ex Auditu Verbi, p. 49.
87 Berkouwer, Divine Election, p. 172.
89 Ibid., p. 40.
90 Berkouwer, Half Century, p. 100. In an interesting distinction Berkouwer says he was “wary, not of logic, but of certain logical consequences.” How one can be for logic and not logical consequences is puzzling.
91 Ibid., p. 78.
92 Ibid., p. 80.
93 Ibid., p. 81.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid., pp. 82-83.
96 Ibid., p. 83.
The Need for a Sure Word

Bret McAtee

"Bend me, shape me, anyway you want me..." So crooned the 1960's group, American Breed. What was once a snappy sing-a-long chart buster has somehow become the marketing jingle for many Evangelicals' attitude toward the Bible. Among many who were once the most orthodox, the Bible has now developed an incredible elasticity lending new meaning to the idea of contextualization. This has become so true in some Evangelical quarters, that God's unchanging Word can be viewed like the local weather: "If you don't like it, just wait. It will change."

Once upon a time the Bible was rightly understood to have meaning independent of any interpreter's presuppositions. God's Word burned away like chaff those presuppositions of the interpreter which were inconsistent with the presuppositions of the Bible. Those days are gone. Now we bring our own agendas to God's Word; we twist Scripture and discover interpretations and apologetics for things that nobody in the last 500 years of orthodox hermeneutics would have attempted to justify. If anyone doubts the validity of this, ask yourself if forty years ago one could have ever found the term "homosexual Christian" sprinkled throughout Evangelical publications? Could anyone have found an apologetic forty years ago for the kind of excesses that are going on in Toronto and Toronto "wannabe's"? Would anyone have understood the term "Evangelical feminist" forty years ago? Forty years ago would anyone have seriously considered asking the question whether or not the Bible is insensitive to women by referring to God as a "He"? Forty years ago did anybody know what a deconstructionist was, and if they did, would they have thought it sane for such a person to claim Christ? If Luther was right in saying that, wrongly used, "reason is a whore," then the irrationality passing for much of current Evangelical hermeneutics must surely be the whole brothel.

Still we are told by those whose compassion out-distances their hermeneutical moorings, that we live in modern times and our culture demands a new sensitivity from the Bible. The Word must be sensitive to the homosexual who "loves Jesus," sensitive to the person who is clucking "in the Spirit," sensitive to feminists who arrogate to themselves positions of authority, and sensitive to those who find God's masculinity offensive. And of course, being sensitive these days is code language for, "agrees with." In the midst of this incredible mardi-gras of horizontal sensitivity, will anyone ever again be vertically sensitive to the God of the Bible, who has revealed Himself as less progressive in His sensitivities towards hermeneutical flights of fancy than we have made Him out to be? More likely however, our sensitivity will only be reserved for the cultural dictates of our times.

It is in the "cultural dictates of our times" that the problem of weakening Biblical authority lies. If we desire to return to a time which recognizes the Bible for what it never ceases to be, we must simply get over our love affair with cultural anthropology. The church too often acts like the sky above is brass, and the only way to interpret God's Word is by making culture king. Some people think that because all cultures are not alike, therefore one must conclude that God's Word is not absolute, but relative to the culture or sub-culture one finds oneself in. This has the net effect of turning God's Word into an onion which disappears as one layer after another is peeled off to make the Word palatable to each culture. Our hermeneutics must return to the truth that every culture is subordinate to Scripture, and not the other way around. It must be culture that plays the part of the onion, finding itself peeled by the authority of God's Word. If we keep insisting that culture is normative, the church will eventually sacrifice both the Bible and herself upon the altar of anthropology. The ritual dagger used in this cult sacrifice will be "post-modern hermeneutics," as the church seeks to appease the two-headed god of popularity and relevance. We must realize again that the sky above is not brass, that God has clearly spoken, and that our epistemology is based on revelation, and not culture.

Another way to re-gain a weighty Bible and steal the scepter of authority from the hand of culture is to re-introduce the Reformed principle which holds not only the culture subordinate to the Bible, but the church as well. The church does not confirm the Word, the Word confirms the church. Whenever the church deals with the Word, she never authorizes it, but merely acknowledges its authority. Calvin reminds us:

Nothing, therefore, can be more absurd than the fiction that the power of judging Scripture is in the Church, and that on her nod its certainty depends. 1

This was particularly important in the debate with Rome when the Catholics insisted on the right of filling the Scriptures with a meaning foreign to the original intent of the authors. The Reformers reminded Rome and us, that when the church's hermeneutics makes the Bible

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Academic Dean

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say something other than what it clearly says, the individual believer must call upon the church to repent and return to the authority of the Word. When the church does not repent of unsound Scriptural hermeneutics, she inevitably follows the cultural slide. When the Church does submit to sound Scriptural hermeneutics the Bible is once again weighty.

Some may respond by noting that the Reformers were dealing with issues far more central to the kerygma of the gospel than the kinds of things mentioned in this article. Some will remind us we must not quibble over nonessentials After all, peace is important. One wonders though, how many spokes can be kicked out of a wheel until both hub and wheel are destroyed? As for the cry for peace, why can't we see that the tribute which the twisting of God's Word has already paid to peace in the last forty years, has left truth virtually bankrupt and peace totally immoral? Isn't it time to quibble a little more and roll over a lot less?

Is it the desire for the evangelical church to have a Bible which is relevant and popular? Let us remember then, that relevance and popularity can never be purchased at the cost of revelation. It is only in the epistemological certainty which Scripture affords us that we can find any relevance whatsoever for our cultures and our churches. For the glory of God, for the purity of the church, and for the love of lost souls, let us return to a hermeneutic that allows the Bible to speak for itself.

FOOTNOTE


Rev. McAtee, a graduate of Columbia Seminary, served the Longtown Independent Presbyterian Church in Ridgeway, SC. He currently pastors a Christian Reformed Church in Charlotte, MI and plans to further his education in the area in the near future.

Over recent years, this column has sounded a call for pastoral care by elders (especially). For that period of time, I have argued that many Reformed churches are losing touch with the divine pattern for the care of Christ's church precisely because we have allowed ourselves to think of the eldership as an administrative board, instead of as pastoral in character. I have repeatedly asked the reader to return to two passages, especially, as the foundation for my plea. Those passages are I Peter 5 and Acts 20:28ff.

It ought to be no surprise, then, when I turn my attention in this article to the duty of the eldership to be diligent in prayer for the flock of God. This subject naturally flows from a consistent theme—the elders are pastors—and arises out of both conviction and experience that many elders today simply are not men of prayer.

Now before you protest aloud that I'm not being fair, ask yourself whether or not you really disagree with my analysis. Do you genuinely believe that the elders you know regularly and diligently lift in prayer to the sovereign throne of grace the souls entrusted to their care? Do you believe that those elders universally pray specifically for the problem children in their district/parish/care group? Do you believe that the wounded marriages are held before the sovereign God, pleading for His healing mercy? Do you believe that the elders pray as much for their pastor/teacher as they talk about him?

Unless you have been blessed with remarkably Biblical elders in your experience and in your church, your experience will parallel those of most Reformed Christians I know. And please understand, I raise this issue not in complaint that we have no good or pious elders, but in hopes that the godly men that God has called to that office among us will become better: more Biblical in their understanding of their work, more humble in their approach to their people, more sensitive in their listening heart, and more bold in their prophetic address to the situations in the lives of the flock.

**PRAY FOR SPIRITUAL PROTECTION**

We take our cue from the pastoral prayer of our Lord Jesus in John 17 (a very good place to learn how to pray as His representatives); we will learn much about prayer for the flock. The first lesson appears in verses 11-12:

...they are still in the world...Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction...My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.

Notice what Jesus asks? Protection, that His flock will be kept safe after His ascension just as He was able to keep them safe while with them. Certainly He speaks of more than physical safety. In fact, in other Scripture passages, He specifically predicts physical danger and hardship. Rather, He prays here for spiritual safety: that His flock will be spared from the destructive powers of the Evil One. It is in connection with this concern that His prayer for unity is impressive. Unity is one of the sovereign God's gifts for spiritual protection! When the church is united in the truth, it will be protected from the Evil One! Jesus' prayer in John 17 is reflected in the charge of St. Paul to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:29f. He tells them that savage wolves will come in among the flock, so "be on your guard." We ought to understand that, expect it, and pray accordingly!
**Prominent GKN Minister Regrets Synodical Action**

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (June 17, 1996) URNS — “It’s a pity,” said Dr. Klaas Runia, retired rector of the theological seminary of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN) at the Dutch city of Kampen, regarding the decision of the CRC synod to intensify restrictions on fraternal relations with his denomination.

Although a large GKN delegation had been in Grand Rapids for the Reformed Ecumenical Council until Monday morning, Runia was the only GKN leader able to stay until completion of the synodical debate on the GKN and was not an official fraternal delegate to the synod.

“It is better for delegates of synod to see and hear delegates of a sister church personally than to read about them in the advice of committees,” said Runia.

According to Runia, the CRC has a wrong idea about ecumenical relations between independent denominations. “Churches should accept each other in inclusive of the differences,” said Runia.

So, lesson one: pray for the spiritual defense of those members of Christ’s church living in a difficult world. Do so regularly. Do so with full and studied awareness of the spiritual struggles they face. Study them, study their circumstances, study their weaknesses. Study all these things diligently...so that you can pray well!

**PRAY FOR SPIRITUAL JOY**

Jesus also prays for spiritual joy for His disciples. In v. 13 of the same prayer, He asks:

...that they may have the full measure of my joy within them.

For what is the Savior asking here? Is He asking that His disciples will always have fun? Hardly. Read John 15:20 before you ever tell anyone (or believe yourself) that the Christian life is all roses without thorns. Rather, He is asking the Father to give them the deep and abiding conviction that those who are in Christ are certainly victorious, no matter what the world does to them! That brings joy, pure and unending.

**PRAY FOR EFFECTIVE WITNESS**

Jesus does not only pray for protection and joy for His disciples and for us, but also for effectiveness in the purpose of the Christian life He calls us to lead. Consider vv. 20-21:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

Notice that Jesus prays not only for His immediate disciples, but for us, who believe because of the power of the apostolic Word. And He prays that we will remain in Christ and in His Father (as branches in the Vine) so that the world may believe! And, of course, there is no way to remain in Him without remaining in His Word. Believers whose faith is firmly founded in the Scriptures are believers who will not falter.

So, lesson three: pray that God’s people will remain in the Word so that they may be effective in advancing the reputation of our God. That is the best description I’ve heard yet of the Biblical call to “witness.” So often we view it as a canned, cold, memorized presentation. Better that we view it in a judicial sense: we are on the witness stand every day of our lives. On trial is the honor of God. What witness do you bear by the life that you lead? How about your people?

The point of all this is that the work of an elder is empty and vain unless it is grounded in the same soil as the work of our Lord. Jesus grounded His entire ministry in prayer; we must too. The early apostles appointed deacons so that they could devote themselves more to the ministry of the Word and prayer (Acts 6:4). We must too. And our prayers must be specific, pastoral, and seek the Father’s blessing for the defense of the flock, for the spiritual joy of their Christian service, and for the effectiveness of their witness for Him and for His name in this world.

Do you pray like that? Allow me to challenge you specifically. If you are an elder in the church of our Lord Jesus Christ, set aside time every day for prayer on behalf of the flock. When you begin, be intentional: have the list of your district members before you. Reflect (even take notes if necessary!) on their specific struggles and needs before praying for them. And if you cannot make it through the entire list, pray for one or two every day.

Several things will immediately happen. First, you will be a better elder when you visit among the flock. You will be more sensitive to their needs and struggles; you will listen better when they speak, for you will be listening in order to bring them before the King; and, you will be more specific in your pastoral advice, rebukes, and/or challenges, since your focus will be the specific concerns we raised above: protection from the Evil One, joy in their hearts, and effectiveness of their living witness.

Dr. Sittema, editor of this department, is pastor of Bethel CRC in Dallas, TX.
Faith on Trial: The Sufferings of John Calvin

W. Robert Godfrey

Calvin’s later years were marked by growing bodily afflictions. In spite of his weakness he kept up a remarkable schedule of preaching, lecturing and dictating until within a few months of his death on May 27, 1564. His friends urged him to rest more when he was sick, but to that advice he responded: “What, would you have the Lord to find me idle?”

In his will, dictated just a month before his death, he summarized his life and the gospel he preached:

I give thanks to God, that taking mercy on me, whom He had created and placed in this world, He not only delivered me out of the deep darkness of idolatry in which I was plunged, that He might bring me into the light of His gospel, and make me a partaker in the doctrine of salvation, of which I was most unworthy; and not only, with the same mercy and benignity, kindly and graciously bore with my faults and my sins, for which, however, I deserved to be rejected by Him and exterminated, but also vouchsafed me such clemency and kindness that He has deigned to use my assistance in preaching and promulgating the truth of His gospel...I have no other defense or refuge for salvation than His gratuitous adoption, on which alone my salvation depends. With my whole soul I embrace the mercy which He has exercised towards me through Jesus Christ, atoning for my sins with the merits of His death and passion, that in this way He might satisfy for all my crimes and faults, and blot them from His remembrance.

On May 11, Calvin, knowing that his death was near, wrote one of his last letters to his old friend, William Farel: “I draw my breath with difficulty, and am daily waiting till I altogether cease to breathe. It is enough that to Christ I live and die; to His people He is gain in life and in death.”

At the heart of Calvin’s faith was the confidence that for the sake of Jesus, God was his loving heavenly Father. But that confidence had to surmount the temptations and sins, the frustrations and losses, the weakness and death that made up so much of his life. He knew that his struggles were the very ones that all God’s children faced: “…the godly heart feels in itself a division because it is partly imbued with sweetness from its recognition of divine goodness, partly grieves in bitterness from an awareness of its calamity; partly rests upon the promises of the Gospel, partly trembles at the evidence of its own iniquity; partly rejoices at the expectation of life; partly shudders at death” (Institutes, III. III. 18).

But faith overcomes that division. With great assurance Calvin declared: “For the end of the conflict is always this: that faith ultimately triumphs over those difficulties which besiege and seem to imperil it.”

Dr. Godfrey, president and professor of church history at Westminster Theological Seminary in Escondido, CA, is a contributing editor of this magazine.

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Can Non-Christians Be Saved?
Reformed Ecumenical Council to Debate Question of Uniqueness of Jesus Christ

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (June 7, 1996) URNS — A few short weeks after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the apostle Peter declared to an astounded crowd in Jerusalem that "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Nearly two thousand years later, the meaning of that passage in Acts 4:12 has become a subject of intense debate among professing Christian theologians. If a recommendation of the REC theology conference is adopted, it will also become a subject for study in the Reformed Ecumenical Council.

In a June 7 presentation to the Reformed Ecumenical Council, its theology conference reported that "in view of the growing importance of the subject a study committee should be appointed by the interim committee to make an indepth study of a) the many-faceted problems of religious pluralism, b) the biblical view of other religions, c) what all this means for the communication of the gospel to the present world." The theology conference also suggested "that the REC print and distribute widely the papers read at the theological conference and ask the General Secretary to bring it to the attention of the member churches."

The three papers mentioned are a speech to the full session of the Reformed Ecumenical Council by Dr. Klaas Runia, retired rector (president) of the theological seminary of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN) at Kampen, and papers presented to the theology conference by Dr. Raymond Van Leeuwen of Eastern College in St. David's, Penn., and Dr. Allan Harman of the Presbyterian Theological College in Australia.

Runia — long regarded as one of the most prominent conservatives in his denomination — surprised some delegates by the closing paragraphs of his speech.

Runia noted that professing Christians have historically taken three approaches to the relationship between Christ and adherents of other religions: an "exclusivist" approach declaring that there is no salvation apart from the explicit profession of the name of Christ, an "inclusive" approach which appreciates non-Christian religions but "refrain from saying that the non-Christian religion can itself save a person" and that "it is always Christ who saves by his hidden presence in the other religion," and what Runia termed "the 'pluralist' or 'liberal' approach" which "no longer has place for the unicity of Jesus Christ."

While noting that "the exclusivist approach was generally held by the Christian Church up to the Middle Ages and by the Reformers" and "is also held by the great majority of evangelical theologians," including those who drafted the 1974 Lausanne Covenant, Runia said the "inclusive" position dates back to the second-century theologian Justin Martyr and is held today in various forms by a number of Roman Catholic leaders. Runia cited W.E. Hocking, William Cantwell Smith, John Hick, and Paul Knitter as examples of modern "pluralist" theologians — Hocking going to the point of stating that "the missionary will look forward, not to the destruction of these religions, but to their continued existence with Christianity, each stimulating the other in growth toward the ultimate goal, unity in the complete religious truth."

How do such theologians deal with Scripture passages such as Acts 4:13, John 14:6 and I Timothy 2:5 which appear to teach exclusive claims of Christ? Runia cited Knitter as an example of a Roman Catholic theologian who "believes that these passages apply to Christians only."

"When Christians see Jesus as the way, the life, and the truth, they actually say no more than that this is the way they personally experience Jesus," Runia said regarding such views. "Knitter ranks it with the exclamation of a husband to his wife: 'You are the most beautiful woman in the world.' We have to do with 'love' language, which means that the passages I quoted should not be taken in an absolute sense, but as confessions that hold true within the Christian community only."

Runia's paper clearly distanced himself from such views. "This is the reason I take my starting point in the resurrection of Jesus Christ," said Runia. "This, in my opinion, is the only proper point of departure for getting a good and reliable picture of the real Jesus."

However, Runia was not willing to go as far as many exclusivists in declaring that no one can be saved apart from an explicit profession of faith in Jesus Christ. "Does this mean that there is no truth in all the other religions and that all the adherents of the other religions will be lost forever?" asked Runia.

Runia noted that "some of the 'exclusivists' do take this position, citing a statement by the 1960 Congress on World Mission at Chicago that 'in the years since the war, more than one billion souls have passed into eternity and more than half of these went into the torment of hell fire without even hearing of Jesus Christ, who he was, or why he died on the cross of Calvary' and a special hymn sung by the 1968 World Congress on Evangelism in Singapore 'that spoke of the billions that were lost.'"

"I believe such statements go beyond what we are allowed to say," said Runia, citing Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck's statement in his Reformed Dogmatics that "with regard to the salvation of the heathen and of children dying in infancy, we can, on the basis of Scripture, only refrain from a definite judgment, in either a positive or a negative sense." In support of his view, Runia also cited statements by Bavinck's nephew J.H. Bavinck, Hendrick Kraemer, and J. Verkuyl.

"I am not sure whether we have the right to be so expansive," said Runia regarding some of the views cited, "but I do know that if it is possible that people
of other faiths may be saved, they most certainly will not be saved by their own religiosity, by their own religious experiences and rites, but only because the Spirit of Christ was active in their lives and because by his work the secret of Christ became manifest to and in them, too. For it remains true for all times and all people: 'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.'

In the follow-up question period, several delegates asked Runia whether views other than that of the "exclusivists" were destructive to missionary work. Dr. Eugene Rubingh, vice-president for translations of the International Bible Society, noted that much of Christian mission work was done in a context of radical Muslim antagonism toward Christianity. "If a Muslim calls out in a moment of crisis, 'Allah help!' who is that called directed to?" asked Rubingh.

"I would certainly not exclude the possibility of a Muslim in his deep distress calling out to Allah, that his prayer is heard by the God in whom we believe," responded Runia.

RESPONSES TO THE "UNIQUENESS OF CHRIST" DEBATE

Not everyone at the REC Assembly was equally willing to allow room for people to be saved apart from an explicit profession of faith in Jesus Christ. "I think the gospel stands or falls on this issue," said Dr. Roger Greenway, professor of missions at Calvin Seminary in Grand Rapids and convener of the REC committee appointed after its 1992 Assembly to draft a document on the uniqueness of Christ. "This is not a peripheral issue, and if we hedge on this we are forfeiting our right to be called Christians."

Greenway agreed with other speakers that much of the debate arose from the fact that most modern Christians did not have close contact with adherents of other religions until recent years. "A lot of Christians have not thought this through because they have not been confronted by other worldviews," said Greenway. "Neither Bavinck nor Kuyper dealt extensively with other religions, so we need to look at this ourselves."

However, Greenway was willing to grant Runia's point that some Dutch Reformed theologians had not been insistent on the "exclusivist" position. "I have not been very satisfied with the history of Reformed theologians to be clear-cut in their presentation and defense of exclusivism," said Greenway. "They have held back in a way I find surprising."

Greenway predicted that the issue of the uniqueness of Christ was likely to become a divisive issue in the Christian community. "I think there's going to be a refining in both ways, some will come to a clear and more articulate faith and others will say it really isn't that important after all," said Greenway.

In a later press conference, the REC officers also agreed with Greenway that the issue of the uniqueness of Christ was crucial to the work of the Reformed Ecumenical Council.

"I expect that in the next 25 to 50 years this will be the main issue confronting the churches and in comparison with that all these other issues, women and worship, will pale into insignificance," said REC moderator Dr. Henk de Waard of Australia. "Here is the very essence of the churches and what we are all about."

REC vice-moderator Dr. Douwe Visser, formerly a missionary of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN) to the African nation of Zambia, also concurred on the centrality of the issue. "It's all coming up: what is our identity as Christians, what that relationship is of salvation in Christ, is really foundational for missions and the whole life of the church," said Visser.

However, de Waard cautioned that Runia had presented a "responsible paper" on the subject.

"The paper was focused on the uniqueness of Christ, but also not wanting to be dogmatic about the salvation of those outside the reach of the gospel," said de Waard. "I don't think it was a new view or even a very radical view."

"At the council level there would be a greater level of toleration than we would allow on a local level in our own denominations; that's part of what it means to have an ecumenical organization," said de Waard. "There is diversity, but within limits."

De Waard did affirm that "there are a range of Scriptural doctrines on which there can be no compromise."

"If any church would say we no longer believe in the deity of Christ or the physical resurrection, I have no doubt that would be dealt with," said de Waard.

RESPONSE BY RUNIA

Runia gave further explanation to his views in subsequent conference sessions. "I think in our Reformed tradition, and rightly, we always wanted to keep the Word and the Spirit together," Runia told the theology forum. "On the other hand, we are not about to limit the possibilities and say Spirit and Word belong together so the Spirit cannot do anything without the Word. We have always said that the children of believers are saved, not by the Word but by the Spirit."

"Those who have not heard the gospel will be judged according to the standards they had," said Runia. "What the outcome of that judgment will be I don't know, but Matthew 25 makes me want to be very mild about that. Those who thought they knew the Lord were told they do not know him and those that thought they did not know him were told they did."

In a subsequent interview, Runia confirmed his quote regarding the possibility of the Christian God hearing prayers to Allah but gave further explanation to his views. "I don't want to identify the concept of God in Islam with our concept," said Runia. "The fact that we have Jesus Christ makes our concept of God so different from theirs."

"Would the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ not hear such a cry? Would he close his ears?" asked Runia. "I don't think so. I can't believe that God would not have heard the cries of the Old Covenant people when they cried out in Auschwitz."

However, Runia said he put a different interpretation from that of some others on a highly-publicized change in the church order of his denomination, the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN) regarding missions to the Jews. "In the past our church order said we have to witness to Jews on the basis of Christ, we now say we bear mutual witness," said Runia. "I don't think the idea of the change in the church order was to say there are two ways of salvation. Some people in the churches may hold that view but I don't think that was the intent of the change."

Darrell Todd Maurina, Press Officer
United Reformed News Service
Classis Toronto Examines Ruth Hofman for Ordination as First Female Christian Reformed Minister of the Word

WILLOWDALE, Ontario (July 9, 1996) URNS — For all intents and purposes it was a typical Christian Reformed ordination examination. Delegates offered sermon evaluations, questions were asked in the areas of practical and biblical and theological competency. What set the July 4 exam apart, however, was the fact that a woman was answering the questions.

Ruth Hofman became the first female candidate to be examined by a CRC classis for ordination to the ministry of the Word and sacraments in the 139-year history of the denomination. Hofman’s examination was preceded last March by that of Lesli van Milligen of North Hills CRC in the Detroit suburb of Troy, who was ordained by Classis Lake Erie as an evangelist — a limited office allowing persons to preach, administer the sacraments, and do most forms of pastoral ministry in emerging mission churches or as staff assistants in organized churches.

The event came during a special meeting of Classis Toronto just weeks after the 1996 CRC Synod said “no” to 24 overtures requesting a change to last year’s decision on women in office which allowed churches to ordain women as elders and ministers by, in effect, bypassing the church order. At the same time at Synod 1996 three women were declared candidates for the ministry in the CRC.

Twenty-four years after the debate over women in office began in earnest, and dozens of study committee reports later, Hofman faced an audience of her colleagues, fellow ministers, elders, members of her home congregation, First Toronto CRC, and other interested observers. After two-and-a-half hours of fielding questions ranging from her own spiritual development to specific points of theology, the chairman of the meeting, Rev. Jack Vos of First CRC in Barrie, entertained a motion to accept Ruth Hofman for ordination as a minister of the Word and Sacraments in the CRC.

After a brief executive session in which delegates discussed and voted on the motion, Hofman entered the sanctuary of the Willowdale CRC to a standing ovation and sustained applause.

Explaining the decision of classis, Vos said the delegates asked themselves a basic question: “Are we persuaded that the Lord has laid His hand on you to become His servant?” The decision, said Vos on the part of the majority of the delegates, was obvious from the applause.

Long a proponent of women’s ordination, Vos offered two words of pastoral advice to Hofman: “Preach the Word with passion,” and realize that “it will take time for people to get used to the idea of women preaching” in the CRC. Hofman said she did see some hope that over time opinions and attitudes would change. He mentioned the example of his mother-in-law, an opponent of women in office, who told him that if she was to hear a woman preach “she was likely to listen better, and would not focus on the gender of the speaker.”

Vos called the declaration of ordination, “a rich moment that you will treasure, and that we will treasure as well,” although in reference to the intentional absence of delegates from two churches in particular, Vos said “it is unfortunate that there are some who could not participate in good conscience.”

Two churches, Maranatha CRC in Woodbridge and Springdale CRC, both located north of Toronto, sent letters to classis expressing that position. The Springdale letter stated the matter in no uncertain terms: “We cannot participate in an action that is unbiblical.” Woodbridge consistory’s letter explained that “the decision of the 1994 Synod accurately reflects our position and we can’t in good conscience participate.”

That synod took a strong position against women in office when it stated that “the clear teaching of Scripture prohibits women holding the offices of minister, elder and evangelist.” Three other churches did not send delegates. Covenant CRC in Barrie offered no reason to classis for its absence; Orillia CRC informed classis that no one was available to attend, and the Chinese CRC in Toronto attended but did not send delegates. After reading the letters of the two churches, Vos expressed what he said were the feelings of classis. “While we regret the lack of participation of the two councils, we do respect their position.”

Called by First Toronto as an “ex-pounder” three years ago based on the so-called “compromise decision” of Synod 1992, Hofman has pastored the church since that time and is no stranger to the classis. Her church is also home to a homosexual support group called AWAre, or “As We Are,” headed by church member Dr. Hendrik Hart, who is also a professor at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto. The group is controversial for many because of its non-judgmental stance toward homosexuality.

Although appearing initially tentative at the beginning of the examination, Hofman relaxed as the examination progressed, choosing her words carefully in response to various questions. Rev. John Luth, co-pastor of First Barrie, was the questioner in the area of practical, and Rev. Paul Stadt, co-pastor of Georgetown CRC, led the questioning in the areas of biblical and theological matters.

On a number of questions Luth seemed to leave the door open to Hofman to comment on the last two decades of debate over women in office, but Hofman chose not to enter. Luth asked if there were hindrances to the gospel in the CRC. Hofman answered simply, “We’ve been stuck on issues, but they won’t hold us back if we are a praying church.” Asked about the “general health of the CRC,” Hofman said she believes the Spirit is equipping the church. “We are said to be an argumentative church, one that airs its family laundry,” said Hofman, but “we don’t have any arguments that aren’t around trying to understand what God is saying in His Word.”

It was under Stad’s questioning that certain “sticky” issues were broached. Asked about her response to the charismatic movement and particularly the phenomenon called the “Toronto Blessing,” Hofman said that she has attended the “Toronto Blessing” meetings, and would not discourage anyone from attending. “I don’t know what God might have in mind for any of us....said

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Hofman, referring to the movement of the Spirit in people’s lives. “Go,” she advised, “but go with discernment.”

Asked about the growing movement toward cooperation from some in the evangelical community with Roman Catholics, Hofman said that the Catholic Church was not the same church “that it was when we protested it” at the time of the Reformation, and said that there is more attention to the Word of God in the Catholic Church than there once was. “We’re a lot closer together than we once were.”

Although not asked directly about her position on the issue of homosexuality, Stadt instead asked for Hofman’s opinion of the 1973 synod report on homosexuality.

Hofman tiptoed delicately. “For its time it was ahead,” said Hofman. “There were few churches at the time addressing those types of concerns. It was very well done in terms of its conclusions from Scripture.”

Making reference to the recent decision of synod to appoint a committee to restudy the issue, Hofman said that the church needs to be more prayerful, mindful and pastoral to homosexuals. “I presume the study coming forward will note that we are not as pastoral as we should have been,” said Hofman.

Asked about her views on feminism, Hofman again walked delicately through the potential mine field, focusing instead on those in the feminist movement who feel the need to change their image of God in the face of what they consider to be inequality and an imbalance in the church. Hofman firmly disagreed with that position. “I don’t need to change my image of God….I know that my God is a transcendent God.”

Synodical deputy Dr. H. Vander Plaat representing Classis Niagara, reopened the homosexuality issue when he posed a question that was raised in the debates over women in office in his classis a few years earlier. “What do you say to the argument that the issue of women in office necessarily opens the door to the acceptance of homosexual ministers?” asked Vander Plaat.

“I don’t see the consequence is necessarily there,” said Hofman, citing examples of denominations which for years have ordained women ministers and yet do not have homosexuals in the pulpit.

Comparing the state of women in creation and the state of homosexuality, someone asked “Is homosexuality a distortion of God’s creation?”

“Yes,” answered Hofman, whereas the state of women in creation is not a distortion. “We have different discussions there,” said Hofman.

Later in the evening, Rev. Herman Van Niejenhuis, pastor of Willowdale CRC and co-author of a report on homosexuality for Classis Toronto, asked Hofman for a one-word answer to the question, “Is your sexuality distorted?” “And I want a one-word answer, yes or no,” said Van Niejenhuis. Appearing somewhat flustered, Hofman hesitated, attempted to qualify her response, was cut off by Van Niejenhuis, and finally answered, “Yes, it is.”

Hofman, the first “official” woman minister in the CRC, is to be ordained at First Toronto CRC on Saturday, August 24.

John Van Dyk
Managing Editor, Christian Renewal
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Youth Services Begins Ministry, Selects Director

HUDSONVILLE- Reformed Youth Services, a new youth ministry designed to assist youth leaders and young people in churches dedicated to the historic Reformed faith, commenced its ministry on May 1. Ed DeGraaf, Jr. was appointed as director of Reformed Youth Services.

According to Rev. Stephen Arrick, board chairman, Reformed Youth Services will serve as a reference point for like-minded youth leaders.

"We hope to provide the resource support for local church youth groups which will help them to be more effective in their ministry," Arrick said. "We need material that is Reformed, things people are able to use and do without hesitation. Our hope is that this organization will develop a ministry that is distinctly Reformed."

The director, who will be accountable to a board representing six churches, as well as to the council of Cornerstone Church in Hudsonville, MI, is expected to seek out the development of Reformed youth curriculum, Bible studies and speakers, review and recommend existing materials, coordinate special events and initiate and organize service activities and projects.

Reformed Youth Services will publish leader and youth newsletters as well as a variety of other publications. The director will also serve as a liaison to the Kyrie youth convention by serving on its planning committee.

DeGraaf, 38, is a 1980 graduate of Calvin College where he majored in Sociology and minored in English. From 1989 to 1992, he served as a publications editor for the Young Calvinist Federation, editing its leaders' newsletter and various related publications.

Ed and his wife, Cheryl, have been senior high youth leaders at Cornerstone Church since 1992 and have been members of the Kyrie convention planning committee since its inception in 1994. A former deacon, Ed has also covered high school sports for weekly newspapers in the Grand Rapids area on a full or part-time basis for the past 11 years. The DeGraafs are expecting their first child in late July.

Charter member churches include: Bethel IRC, Jenison; Beverly CRC, Wyoming; Cornerstone, Hudsonville; Cutlerville IRC; Eastmanville Reformed Bible Church; First CRC, South Holland, IL; Immanuel Fellowship, Kalamazoo; Kettle Lake IRC, Alto; Lynwood CRC, Lynwood, IL; Oak Glen Covenant Community, Lansing, IL; Messiah's IRC, Holland; Pompton Plains Reformed Bible Church, Pompton Plains, NJ; Seventh Reformed Church, Grand Rapids; and Trinity Reformed Bible Church, Byron Center.

The idea for RYS originated at Seventh Reformed Church as an outgrowth of the Kyrie convention. In October of 1995 Cornerstone Church's council agreed to be the supervising council for the ministry.

Reformed Youth Services will benefit leaders by serving as a network of encouragement and support. "It gives them an opportunity to share ideas," said Andrew VanderMaas, youth director at Seventh Reformed Church. "Reformed Youth Services can also provide direction in the area of resources. Plus, it will hopefully encourage connectedness among Reformed youth by sponsoring special events."

The ministry will be housed in Bethel Independent Reformed Church in Jenison, MI.