

The Outlook

DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE IN THE CRC
A NEW SALES PITCH FOR MODERN THEOLOGY
FACING THE ISSUES



MAY - 1977

DEVOTED TO THE EXPOSITION AND DEFENSE OF THE REFORMED FAITH

DIVORCE and REMARRIAGE

in the
CRC

(1)



REV. JELLE TUINGA

Rev. Jelle Tuininga is pastor of the Christian Reformed Church of Smithers, British Columbia. He served as a delegate from Classis British Columbia at the 1976 CRC Synod. His article on "Divorce and Remarriage in the CRC" is being presented in two installments, the second scheduled for next month.

History — Up till the present, the stand of the CRC has been that adultery constitutes the only legitimate, "biblical ground" for divorce. Prior to 1956 it was also held that persons who were divorced on unbiblical grounds and who were subsequently remarried, were *living* in a state of *continual* adultery, and in order to demonstrate genuine repentance would have to break this second, "adulterous" relationship and return to their first partners. Synod of '56 came to the conclusion that "no substantial and conclusive Scriptural evidence" was available to show that such persons were "living in continual adultery" and should, therefore, cease living with their present spouses and return to their original partners "in order to prove the sincerity of their repentance" (*Acts '56*, p. 59).

I believe Synod was right in making this decision. Sinful as the original act of divorce was, and sinful as the subsequent *act* of remarriage was, I don't think the Scriptures demand that this latter marriage (or marriages, in cases where both partners have remarried) must again be broken or dissolved in order to show genuine repentance. Murray comments in this connection that "it must at least be said that the first remarriage was adulterous and had the effect of dissolving both marriages (in a case where two couples are involved, J.T.). The second pair of marriages are to be regarded as the only ones that are *de facto* existent. It would only aggravate the guilt of all concerned to try to remedy the situation by the method proposed" (namely, that they all resume their first marital relationships) (*Divorce*, p. 114).

However, by making this decision, Synod in no wise *justified* such divorces and remarriages, as though

the church could lend its blessing to such actions. And that is now what the 1976 Report would have Synod declare that the blessing of the church be extended to a remarriage also where it involves "the so-called innocent person in a divorce granted on *grounds other than unchastity* and who had sincerely sought reconciliation in attempting to preserve the former marriage." The same blessing would also extend to "the so-called *guilty party* in a divorce (including divorces on grounds other than biblical, J.T.) who has manifested genuine repentance . . . (*Acts '76*, p. 486).

Divorce — It is clear that the proposals of the study committee report would involve quite a change from our previously held position. Till now the church gave its blessing for remarriage only to the "*innocent party*" in a divorce on "biblical grounds." Under the proposed rules, the "*guilty*" party in such a divorce would also be able to remarry with the blessing of the church. And what is more, this would even be the case where the divorce took place on *non-biblical* grounds.

If now this proposed change was clearly based on Scripture, or even if it could be reasonably deduced from Scripture (as e.g. the change made in '56), then I would be ready to accept it. But the Report has not only failed to convince me of this; I find its exegesis very weak and its deductions far-fetched.

I should point out that the Report contains much that is worthwhile. It makes some very valuable contributions to our understanding of the problems surrounding marriage and divorce. Especially the first part of the Report is very good. The authors also have a point when they say that in a marriage breakdown there is really no "*innocent*" party. It takes two to fight, and two are usually to blame for the ensuing divorce also. That's why I used quotation marks around the adjectives "*innocent*" and "*guilty*" above. Nevertheless, it seems to me, we will have to retain the concept in some form or another if we are to take Jesus' *exceptive clause* ("except it be for adultery") seriously. There is something about the act of adultery (sexual infidelity) on the part of one of the marriage partners that really strikes at the very heart of marriage. The Report itself recognizes this:

Implicit in this view is the basic importance of the physical act of sex in marriage as the highest symbolic act in regard to the meaning of marriage. Physical union in sexual activity becomes the central symbol of two people becoming one flesh. In that sense, physical fidelity to the marriage partner has a unique status among all the "*faithful acts*" in a marriage. Physical union brings all of the rest into focus as the most full and free expression of love and fidelity. . . .

Physical infidelity symbolizes the epitome of unfaithfulness and strikes at the very heart and center of the marriage relationship. As the supreme act of infidelity it may be evidence for the fact that the marriage breakdown is so complete that the restoration of that marriage relationship becomes impossible (p. 475).

I believe this is exactly what the Bible means by the "one flesh" relationship in marriage (cf. e.g., I Cor. 6:15-17), and because adultery strikes right at the heart of that "one flesh" relationship, it stands in a class all by itself as regards marital unfaithfulness, and I believe this is what Jesus is referring to in the exceptive clause. To be sure, there may be, and often are, extenuating circumstances in the marriage relationship which are conducive to adultery or at least open the door to its possibility, but that in no way diminishes the gravity of such an adulterous act. Both parties may, and often do, have a share of the guilt involved in such a breakdown, but nevertheless the act of physical infidelity alone constitutes a radical break of the "one flesh" relationship in marriage. And in that context the church has traditionally spoken of an "innocent" party. Not unjustly, it seems to me.

Now to say that this exceptive clause is *not* an exception, but that it stands for marriage breakdown in general; to say that "adultery" covers "all the ways in which infidelity in marriage can take place" (as the 1973 Report did, Cf. Acts 7:3, p. 598), not only reduces the force of Jesus' words entirely, and fails moreover to appreciate the unique "one flesh" relationship of marriage, but it is also patent nonsense. It really makes Jesus say: Divorce is wrong except when your marriage breaks down (for whatever possible or impossible reason). It's like saying: Marriage is permanent except when it won't work. Or: Marriage is permanent except when it isn't; divorce is wrong except when it's right.

Such argumentation makes a farce out of Jesus' words. If that's what Jesus meant He would have said so, and there would be no need to add the exceptive clause. Because then there are no exceptions: then burning the potatoes or failing to balance the budget also suffice as reasons for divorce. But Jesus is saying that marriage is *for life*; it is indissoluble; what God has joined together, let not man put asunder. That's the divine rule. And the only possible exception to that is when adultery breaks apart that most intimate one-flesh relationship. That and that alone strikes at the very core and center of marriage.

I spoke of a "possible exception." We used to speak of "biblical grounds for divorce." The 1976 Report calls it a "possible permissible ground for divorce." There are those who take exception to both phrases. They say there are *no "grounds"* for divorce. Perhaps they have a point. Ideally, marriage is permanent. That's the way God made it in the beginning: the man shall cleave unto his wife and the two shall become one flesh; and what God has joined together, let no man put asunder. It's only because of sin that the ideal is not always reached. Notwithstanding this, one has to take seriously the exceptive clause in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, and then I see no great obstacle in the way of speaking of a legitimate biblical ground for divorce, provided it is correctly understood. It is well to keep in mind what Murray says in this connection:

What is of paramount importance is that however significant is the exceptive clause as guard-

THE

OUTLOOK



"And the three companies blew the trumpets . . . and held THE TORCHES in their left hands, and THE TRUMPETS in their right hands . . . and they cried, The sword of Jehovah and of Gideon" (Judges 7:20).

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ing the innocence of the husband in dismissing for sexual infidelity, it is not the exceptive clause that bears the weight of the emphasis in the text. It is rather that the husband may not put away *for any other cause*. It is the *one* exception that gives prominence to the illegitimacy of any other reason. Pre-occupation with the one exception should never be permitted to obscure the force of the negation of all others (p. 21).

Even though adultery has often been used as an “escape hatch” to get the court to sanction a divorce (sometimes it is even “invented” in order to end an undesirable relationship), this in no way relaxes the biblical concept of it. Misuse does not annul proper use. It is somewhat ironical that though both the 1973 and 1976 Reports hesitate to speak of “grounds” for divorce, *in practice* they are recommending all kinds of “grounds” (causes) for divorce, besides adultery.

The 1976 Report, in contrast to that of 1973, wants to restrict “*porneia*” to adultery. “Thus there is much in favor of, and nothing against, understanding the *primary* reference of *porneia* in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 to be ‘adultery,’ that is, sexual infidelity on the part of one of the marriage partners.” Again: “If our interpretation of the sense of the exceptive clauses in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 is correct, then physical infidelity, precisely because it is unique and symbolizes the epitome of unfaithfulness, may be reckoned as a permissible ground for divorce. We argued that it was so regarded because physical sexual union symbolizes the quintessence of the marriage union.” It is therefore the more surprising and strange to have these authors go on to say:

There may, however, be other kinds of actions, situations, and conditions that in the judgment of a consistory can only be judged to be the *equivalent* of unrepentant unchastity in signaling the complete breakdown of a marriage and the unlikelihood of its restoration. Exactly what actions, circumstances, and situations would qualify for being the equivalent of unrepentant adultery would be difficult to say. . . . Certainly in the case of *willful* (prolonged and unrepentant) desertion, any kind of meaningful marriage relationship is impossible. It is conceivable that other actions, circumstances, and situations could likewise be judged to be the equivalent of prolonged and unrepentant unchastity. In such cases then, also, divorce might be recognized as the only valuable course of action (p. 476).

That seems to me to be a big (and illegitimate) jump from “physical infidelity” which “symbolizes the epitome of unfaithfulness and strikes at the very heart and center of the marriage relationship.” I can see consistory members pulling their hair out trying to determine what exactly those “actions, situations, and conditions” are that can “be judged to be the equivalent of unrepentant unchastity.” Is it even the task of the consistory to judge this, and may they ever give their consent or approval to such actions? I think not, and it seems to me the committee is

treading here on dangerous ground, and opening a Pandora’s box of evils.

It may legitimately be asked, it seems to me, if *one* single act of adultery constitutes what Jesus is referring to in the exceptive clause, but to go to the other extreme and speak about the “equivalent” of unchastity is something else. And it should be said, of course (if it needs saying) that Christians should not see adultery either as an excuse for divorce, nor as a basis for the *necessity* of it. Even in the face of adultery, Christians should be ready to forgive and seek reconciliation.

As far then as the teaching of our Lord in the gospels is concerned, I can agree with the author who says:

The teaching of our Lord . . . is that a man may divorce his wife on the ground of her adultery. Fornication (all kinds of illicit sexual intercourse, for the married person this amounts to adultery) is unequivocally stated by Jesus Christ to be the only legitimate ground for which a man may put away his wife. . . . Notice that (it) does not say a man *has* to put away his wife—he is not under obligation to do so, but it does say that adultery is the *only reason* for which he may put her away. . . .

The man who divorces his wife on improper unbiblical grounds commits adultery and causes his new wife to enter into adultery, when he remarries. Thus this man is not free to marry again any more than his improperly divorced wife as Matthew 5:32 indicated also. For, in reality, before the sight of God he is still the husband of his divorced wife. The illegitimate divorce has not dissolved the original marriage. For this man to remarry then would be an act of adultery. But the man who divorces his wife on the proper ground of adultery does not himself commit adultery when he remarries. Divorce on this Biblical ground affords to the innocent spouse the right and liberty to remarry.

(Ken J. Campbell in *Trowel & Sword*, Dec. ’73)

This has been the position of our church up till now, and I believe it is the only legitimate interpretation of the various passages in the gospels (Matt. 5:32; 19:9; Mark 10:2-12; Luke 16:18). It may seem unduly harsh in our permissive age, and we may grumble with it, but before we change our stand it must be shown conclusively *on the basis of biblical evidence* that our previous stand was wrong. Neither the 1973 nor the 1976 Report has done that in any satisfactory way, it appears to me. I believe one of my colleagues had a point when he said: “We simply don’t like what it says, and that’s why we try to change it.” Everyone knows that in practical life, also in the CRC, the guidelines of our church are often violated. Several unbiblical divorces and remarriages take place. But let’s not try to justify that by committing another error—that of trying to change our stand to accommodate the facts. Rather, let’s change the facts to fit the stand.

And in the practical exigencies of life, when we are sometimes faced with tremendously difficult and

complicated cases, we do well to remember what Rev. Elenbaas wrote in *The Banner* (June 4, '76):

These are the cases where our commitment to the transforming power of God's grace will be proved by fire. "Incompatible," "irreconcilable differences," "dead marriage," "no reasonable hopes," are terms that don't even belong in the vocabulary of those who believe that "with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26). [and don't forget that the disciples here were "exceedingly astonished, above measure" at the words of Jesus!, J.T.] We betray a very humanistic view if we use these words from secular courts to deny that the Holy Spirit can bring about in either or both of the former partners the kind of character change needed to restore the broken marriage.

(To be continued)

Editorial

Facing the Issues

JOHN VANDER PLOEG

Issues — life is full of them, and not the least in religion and in the church. Some are real, others imaginary. Wise men recognize the difference — and they also step forward to face an issue when they know they must.

Horace Mann, American educator of a little more than a century ago, offered a wise guideline for recognizing issues that are real when he once said: "Keep one thing forever in view — the truth; and if you do this, though it may seem to lead you away from the opinion of men, it will assuredly conduct you to the throne of God."

The truth — Whenever and wherever the truth is at stake, the discerning and dedicated believer knows that the time has come to face an issue. Our Lord, whose we are and whom we serve, is the Truth, as He has plainly stated: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

Think then of what is at stake whenever an issue concerns the truth. At such a time our Lord Himself is once again on trial. James Russell Lowell recognized something of this when in *The Present Crisis* he wrote:

*Then to side with truth is noble when we share
her wretched crust,
Ere her cause bring fame and profit, and 'tis
prosperous to be just;
Then it is the brave man chooses, while the
coward stands aside,
Doubting in his abject spirit, till his Lord
is crucified."*

More than conquerors — There will be issues at the forthcoming 1977 CRC Synod that the delegates (elders as well as ministers) will have to face up to

if they are to be worthy of being there. The "nice guys" and "ja-broeders" who are content to let others do their thinking for them and whose only concern is to be on the winning side pose a threat to the future of the CRC as well as they have been such in other denominations that have been sold down the river for the price of a peace and harmony that have always proved to be a cruel deception.

We have just commemorated the resurrection of our Lord who is the Truth, and in this month of May we commemorate His ascension to be seated at God's right hand in glory and to send forth the Holy Spirit of Whom Jesus said: "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he shall guide you into all the truth..." (John 16:13).

Think then of what all this should mean to us in facing the issues when *the truth* is at stake. As often as we lose a *battle*, we may nevertheless go forward in the confidence that we shall surely win *the war*. Shortsighted unbelief must give way to the long range point of view of those who know that, being on the side of Christ who is the Truth, at last they shall be "more than conquerors" in Him.

Issues at Synod — Because I do not at the time of this writing have access to the *1977 Agenda for Synod*, my knowledge of what the issues will be is limited. However, we do know that outstanding among matters to be considered is the question of "Marriage Guidelines" and what has come to be known as "the Verhey case."

From other articles appearing in *THE OUTLOOK* our readers are in a position to know what is at stake in these two items. In the "Marriage Guidelines" matter, the delegates must face up to the question of whether the CRC is now ready to liberalize its stand on divorce and remarriage or whether it will reaffirm its historic position that has been maintained as Scriptural for more than a century. The "Verhey case," in which Classis Grand Rapids East, the Dutton consistory, and the 1976 Synod are involved, is basically a question of whether or not the CRC will maintain or liberalize its high view of Scripture as the Word of God.

Another issue that could arise at Synod pertains to the nomination of Rev. Philip C. Holtrop of North Haledon, New Jersey, by the Calvin Board of Trustees for a teaching position at Calvin College. In an article elsewhere in this issue, Rev. Peter De Jong calls attention to this issue in view of a recent article by Rev. Holtrop in *The Reformed Journal* of February 1977 under the title: "A strange language; toward a biblical conception of truth and a new mood for doing Reformed Theology."

Without attempting to present or to refute precisely what Holtrop's article is pleading for, I do believe that the 1977 CRC Synod, in considering his nomination, should give the most careful consideration to his position that leads him to make such statements as the following:

1. *Form of Subscription* — Rev. Holtrop writes: "What do we do with a teacher, preacher, elder,

student, or housewife who, in the interest of Christian piety, because he or she loves the Lord and wants sound doctrine in the sense of doing the truth, takes issue with a certain accepted statement? The answer, of course, is that we get disturbed. That person has given 'sufficient grounds of suspicion' (to quote the Form of Subscription which Reformed churches inherited from Dort). He or she does not 'heartily believe . . . that all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the Confession and Catechism of the Reformed Churches, together with the explanation of some points of the aforesaid doctrine made by the National Synod of Dordrecht, 1618-19, do fully agree with the Word of God.'

Holtrop continues: "Please ponder those words for a moment — 'do fully agree with the Word of God' — and you will see that what we have here is an agreement or correspondence theory of truth. Historically, the Form of Subscription presupposes the revival of Aristotle at the Geneva Academy and other Reformed institutions after Calvin, and that revival was essential to the Reformed orthodoxy or scholasticism that followed. The spirit of the Form, and orthodoxy, is essentially the spirit of Aristotle."

Holtrop goes on to say about the Form of Subscription: "Existentialism and romanticism are biblically inadequate. But so, too, is the 'objectivity' of Reformed orthodoxy. That should not be our presupposition when we are asked, for example, to sign the creeds or a form of subscription."

2. *The creeds* — In setting forth what he advocates as "a new mood for doing Reformed theology," Rev. Holtrop comments as follows on the creeds: "I have high regard for creeds, but I do not equate them with 'the truth.' They are expressions of my community's odyssey, and they are beacon-lights at critical junctures, especially in moments of high threat. But the word 'creed' comes from *credo* — something I do, believe, in an historical situation. I am always historically contingent. And so is a creed."

". . . I recognize that the Canons of Dort present us with a certain view of the relation of eternity and time, a view which I, along with others, want to challenge today on the basis of Scripture. . . ."

3. *Berkhof's Systematic Theology* — Professor Louis Berkhof served as a teacher at Calvin Seminary with great distinction from 1906 until his retirement in 1944 during which time he produced his monumental work, *Systematic Theology*, which for years has been held in high esteem both within and also beyond the borders of the CRC. As he goes on to advocate his "new mood for doing theology, Rev. Holtrop has the following to say about Berkhof's work:

"In candor, in eighteen years since leaving the seminary I have rarely consulted my copy of Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*, except to find appropriate proof-texts or inappropriate ways of organizing theology, or fascinating lines of connection between the emerging orthodoxy of the post-Reformation and a modern version of Reformed scholasticism.

I have found other sources — mainly the Bible — immeasurably more helpful and stimulating."

If, in reply to all this, the familiar charge is made that these statements are quoted out of context, I would urge especially the delegates to Synod to look into this for themselves and determine whether or not this is so and then face up to the issue that confronts them with respect to Rev. Holtrop's nomination.

The challenge — There is a challenge that is crystal clear in Scripture for all of us as followers of Christ and as members of His church to face up to issues as these continually confront us. God in His Word leaves no doubt that He is highly displeased with fence-sitters and middle-of-the-roaders when His truth and the welfare of His church are at stake.

Think, for example, of Elijah's ringing challenge for the people of Israel. "How long go ye limping between the two sides? if Jehovah be God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (I Kings 18:20). And think also of our Lord's scathing denunciation of the church in Laodicea: "So because thou art lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spew thee out of my mouth" (Rev. 3:16).

The need of the hour is to face the issues. Ambiguous or umbrella-like decisions at Synod when issues are concerned do more harm than good. The favor of the Lord cannot possibly rest upon them and our problems will only mount and multiply instead of being solved. The matter is extremely urgent. Become informed about the issues, take a stand; and, as long as you are truly convinced before God that you are right, never budge an inch from the position you have taken. ●

THE MARRIAGE GUIDELINES REPORT

JOHN H. ELENBAAS

At the CRC Synod of 1976 it was decided to "submit the report on Marriage Guidelines to the churches for one year for study and response." This year's Synod will therefore now be expected to make a decision on this crucial matter. Rev. John Elenbaas was a delegate from Classis Northcentral Iowa at the 1976 Synod. Of this report on Marriage Guidelines, he states in this article: "I believe this new study ends in disaster. The church is asked to bless the very thing most characteristically called 'adultery' in the Bible — remarriage." Rev. Elenbaas is pastor of the Second Christian Reformed Church of Wellsburg, Iowa.

The Christian Reformed Synod of 1977 will again be faced with one of the most emotional and recurrent

issues of our time, and with the recommendation of a study committee to make a drastic turnabout in disciplinary policy.

■ There are many good things about the report that can be appreciated, but these are thrown away by the questionable conclusions. There is a beautiful section on the Biblical teaching regarding marriage. But in the paragraph on Headship of the Husband (IC), it follows the popular line of evading the plainer teaching on the husband's authority as head of the home in Ephesians 5:22ff by including it under the overriding theme of *mutual subjection* supposedly derived from Ephesians 5:21, "submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of Christ." Husbands must even *merit* the respect of their wives, and respect can only flourish where the husband lives in imitation of Christ — in contradiction of I Peter 3:1.

If Synod should adopt this section as requested, a section which wasn't even in the mandate originally given to the committee, then it will also have decided prematurely one of the chief problems in the women-in-office issue and also give implied orders to the Liturgical Committee to leave the wife's obligation to obey her husband out of the new form for marriage being prepared.

■ The report can be commended also for its intensive study of the Biblical teaching on divorce, which lays the groundwork for its recommendation to reaffirm the long held position of the Christian Reformed Church that persistent, unrepented fornication is a Biblically permissible ground for divorce and frees for remarriage. I expect this will face opposition from two sides — from those who would recognize almost any divorce, and from those who by a line of reasoning I cannot grasp insist that the Bible allows *no* ground for divorce at all.

In this connection, I wonder why it is necessary for the committee to spend so much effort arguing that the exceptive clause of Matthew 19:9, "Except for fornication," was really the word of Jesus. This report is addressed, after all, to the Synod of a church that confesses that all the words ascribed to Jesus in the Bible have full authority. The problem for us is how to interpret them and obey them, not to decide whether Jesus really said them.

■ After arguing for the church's historic position on divorce, the committee doesn't follow its own conclusions when it discusses what other actions might be equivalent to fornication. The final recommendations appear to limit the equivalents to certain sex-related acts and to wilful and prolonged desertion (in itself a great change), but the discussion on page 476 (*1976 Acts of Synod*) which Synod is being asked to approve as Biblical, leaves the whole matter wide open for consistories to judge for themselves.

In my opinion, the most drastic change being asked — and with the flimsiest Scriptural "evidence" — is the discussion and recommendations on remarriage (Section III). Here counsel is being given to disobey the ordinance of Christ by even blessing

remarriages when certain conditions are met. These conditions are whether over a "reasonable period of time" a sincere effort has been made toward reconciliation, or where repentance has been demonstrated by a Biblical attitude toward the permanency of marriage.

■ What does the committee do with all the Scripture passages which make remarriage the crowning act of adultery (Matthew 19:9, Mark 10:11, Luke 16:18a)? It simply dissolves the thrust of these verses in a fog of guesses on how they could mean something else. On page 480 we find this amazing statement, "In the light of the above evidence, the committee concludes that each consistory must make an individual judgment with reference to those seeking remarriage after a divorce granted on grounds not considered legitimate in the Bible." And what is this terrific "evidence" that allows the committee to advise departure from 100 years of Synodical stands?

Listen to this profound reason! Speaking of Matthew 19:9, Mark 10:11, and Luke 16:18a, they say, "this close connection of divorce and remarriage suggests that Jesus is speaking specifically against people dissolving their present marriage with a view to remarriage." This insertion of intention is pure invention in my opinion, especially when even a third party is warned it will be adultery for him to marry the divorced person.

■ Then note how the committee evades the command of Paul in I Corinthians 7:10, 11, "Let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband." "There is some evidence in this text that the advice to remain unmarried should not be regarded as a principle of universal application." That "evidence" is that Paul is known to have a preference for the single state. If such a preference were operating in his mind here, how could he have said in the words immediately following the command to remain single, "or else be reconciled to her husband"?

"Evidence" in the committee's mind is being able to come up with some suggestion backed up by a commentator somewhere which will weaken our certainty as to what the text really means. Can you imagine scrapping a position held as Biblical by the Christian Reformed Church for over 100 years, and which endured through many careful studies by reputable scholars because someone somewhere can come up with some other *possible* meaning of the text? Is not this in conflict with *Church Order* Article 30?

■ The committee has not studied sufficiently the matter of how improperly divorced people stand before God. Are they still married in God's sight or not? Does a mere piece of paper granted by the state dissolve what God has joined together?

The committee fails to study or apply one of the most important passages of all on remarriage — I Corinthians 7:39, "A wife is bound for so long time as her husband liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is free to be married to whom she will; only in

the Lord." If in God's sight they are still married, no church has the right to set time limits on this or to say when it becomes too much of a hardship not to marry someone else. If in God's sight they are married no longer, then no church has the right to require certain conditions to be met before they can marry others. To do either is to presume an unwarranted authority for the church more like papalism than Reformed ethics.

One condition that must be met before a consistory can judge that a remarriage can not only be permitted, but even encouraged and blessed by the church is a repentance that has been accepted by the church and demonstrated by the new couple's attitude toward the permanency of their marriage. "If a person does not regard the new marriage as a permanent union, then it is sinful." But this could be said of *any* marriage, first or second! It completely misses the point of when a remarriage is sinful. It is not just a matter of attitudes, but where any old obligations are being repudiated, whether the duty to seek reconciliation is being spurned, whether hope in God's grace to remedy the disaffection is being abandoned.

The seriousness with which we view the permanence of marriage will be proved by whether we permit remarriage to those divorced for reasons not recognized as legitimate in the Bible. We will not encourage our repentant divorcees to add a new sin by closing the door to reconciliation by marrying someone else.

■ In spite of a good beginning, and an attempt to state more carefully the meaning and Scriptural foundation for our traditional stand on grounds for divorce, I believe this new study ends in disaster. The church is asked to bless the very thing most characteristically called "adultery" in the Bible — remarriage.

The 1973 Marriage Guidelines Report insisted that there are no grounds for divorce at all, but then threw it all away by the idea of a "dead marriage" which ought to be recognized by allowing divorce and remarriage.

The 1976 Marriage Guidelines Report began on a more purposely Biblical note. But it too throws it all away by introducing equivalents to fornication and allowing for remarriage under conditions specified by the church. So we are really no further along than in 1973. I hope Synod will have the courage to reject this report as unscriptural and self-contradictory.

The gospel first entered a world with a very corrupt moral climate. It didn't win over that world by accommodation, but by offering forgiveness, fellowship, and the power of God's grace to live holy and without blemish in the world. ●

○ ○ ○ ○ ○

Sunday? Let's sneak a peek. The score, let's see — Lord purge our Ball-Idolatry, And help us worship only Thee.

S.C.W.

WHOSE CHILDREN ARE THEY?



REV. GARRETT H. STOUTMEYER

"And he [Esau] lifted up his eyes, and saw the women and the children; and said, Who are these with thee? And he [Jacob] said, The children whom God hath graciously given your servant" (Gen. 33:5).

It may seem to some especially shortsighted to turn back the pages of the years almost to the beginning of time itself, to learn how to be a Christian parent, especially when so much free advice is being offered to help us today. If we read everything that is being written today on the subject of marriage and the home, husband and wife relationships, parents and children, etc., we would have no time remaining for the serious work of building our home for the Lord Jesus Christ.

It may seem in this revolutionary age that the nomadic life of Jacob and Esau is a far-cry from life lived in a busy city, a teeming ghetto, or the shadows of a violent city. Yet, human life, ancient or modern, city-spent or country-lived, tent- or apartment-dweller, etc., is much the same! Because human nature is essentially the same, whether lived 2000 years before the cross of Calvary or 2000 years after.

One of the truly "great" nights of the Bible had just ended. Jacob had been changed by his God to Israel, "prince with God," and now the morning brought the reunion of two men who had not seen each other for approximately 20 years. As the one surveys the possessions of the other, he is moved to ask the question that is still so vitally relevant today: "Whose are the women and children with thee?" Jacob's inspired answer, is in reality twofold: first, children belong to God; second, children belong to us as God's gifts.

Children are first, primarily, and eternally God's heritage!

Jacob was returning to his father's country a far different man than when he went out. Instead of a solitary fugitive he was coming home a rich man. With such personal riches that he, with commendable caution, divided his great company into three

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groups, and with rare chivalry placed himself in front of the foremost company. However, God having met Esau first, Jacob had nothing to fear for their meeting was as friendly as any encounter has ever been. And as they embraced, the eyes of Esau fall upon the company of his brother who had gone out unmarried and fatherless, but returns home with wives and children. When inquiry is made concerning the origin of this company, the old boaster and proud schemer answers his brother in words that trace these and all our possessions to the All-Bountiful Giver: "These are the children whom God hath graciously given your servant."

When Jacob calls children "the gift of God," he sounds, does he not, a note directly opposed to most of modern thought? In this day of what has been called the "sexplosion," the day of pressure for relaxed abortion laws in practically every segment of our society, the day of continuing debate within the church over birth control legislation, the role of the homosexual in society and church, etc., it certainly doesn't seem very modern to look upon children, ours or anyone's as really belonging first and primarily to God, does it? And to say the least, it certainly is foreign to the Women's Liberation Movement!

The independent "Committee for Women in the Christian Reformed Church" in its publicly distributed bibliography advocates the reading of Betty Fredian's popular book, *The Feminine Mystique*. In recommending this and other secular books, the committee's rationale is this: "It is highly recommended that Christian women acquaint themselves with this secular source in order to have a more balanced perspective of the entire women's movement." Well, because I too wanted to get that "more balanced perspective" I went to the library to secure the book and this is what I discovered: "The feminine mystique says that the highest value and the *only* [italics mine] commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity" (p. 43). That certainly "fits" in well with this era of smaller families, with married women who deliberately exclude themselves completely from motherhood as slavery and bondage, and with couples who speak of their family planning as though children are the whims of biological union, rather than as the Bible teaches, the creation of God!

These are the children whom God hath graciously given!

Mother's Day 1977 is, therefore, a beautiful reminder of the Lord's heritage. Just travel this mother's day briefly through Scripture and listen:

- the first woman who ever cradled a baby in her arms was mother Eve and she exclaimed: "I have gotten a man child from the Lord";
- or hear Sarah who receives the son of promise in her old age and sings: "God has made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me. . . . I have borne him a son in his old age." And she called him "Isaac" meaning laughter, joy, happiness so that all who saw him would remember his parents' happiness when he was born.

— or hear Rebecca, leaving home to become the bride of Isaac whom she had never seen, and as her relatives bid her good-bye they confer upon her this blessing: "Be thou the mother of thousands of millions."

— or listen to Rachel, Jacob's favorite, when her son was born she said: "God hath endowed me with a good dowry!"

— or re-read Psalm 128 for our Mother's Day table devotions and the description of the happy man with his wife and children round his table, as branches of the verdant olive-tree.

— and what shall we say of the others? the Shunamite woman? Hannah? Elizabeth? Mary?

Parents, don't sell our children short of their birth-right! Teach them as they are being taught today apart from the Christian classroom that they are the product of their environment and the outcome of an evolutionary process and you will soon account for the animal behavior of today's society. But tell them, beginning at home, and re-enforced at church and in the Christian School, that they are the Lord's, and they will see themselves in the beautiful context of Psalm 8. Each precious child, a gift from the Lord with an eternal soul, an eternal place in His Kingdom, etc. Are you daddy's girl? Mommy's boy? Grandpa and grandma's darling? Tell them and tell them early that they are children of their Heavenly Father!

Yes, a heritage received. But a heritage to be guarded for one day that gift(s) will have to be returned to the Giver. We have our children only as trusts, and that for only a very brief time. One day we are going to give our account to Him what we did with the gifts we received from Him, and what a terrifying guilt will be ours if we failed to point them to their Heavenly Father faithfully and daily! That is why God in His sovereign wisdom saw fit to give His children, not to the state as in communist controlled countries, nor even to His church, but to parents who had better hold them close to their heart and prayerfully close to the heart of God.

Esau said: "Whose children are these?" In this month of May as another Mother's Day approaches and fades, shall we answer with Jacob: "They once were God's; now they are mine for a time, but whose will they be when they grow up?"

Dear Lord, I do not ask

*That Thou shouldst give me some high work of Thine
Some noble calling or some wondrous task
Give me a little hand to hold in mine.*

*I do not ask that I should ever stand
Among the wise, the worthy or the great;
I only ask, that, softly, hand in hand,
My child and I may enter at Thy gate.*

*My opportunity? I need not seek it far
I hold it in my arms each day.
Dear Lord, two trusting hands uplifted are
A little child — my opportunity!*

AUGUST INSTITUTE

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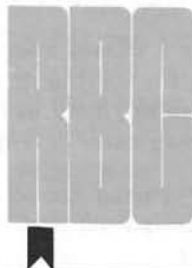
First Session, August 10-19

- 7:30 a.m.
to
9:45 a.m.
1. HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE
Dr. Paul Bremer, RBC Bible Department
 2. TEACHING THE BIBLE WAY CURRICULUM
Mrs. Cecelia Mereness, Education Committee, Chr. Ref. Church
 3. UNDERSTANDING THE COVENANT OF GRACE
Rev. David Doyle, Seminario Juan Calvino, Mexico City
 4. WHAT SAY THE PREACHERS? (A view from the pew)
Rev. George Kroeze, RBC Bible Department
- CHAPEL
- 10:15 a.m.
to
12:30 p.m.
5. CONDUCTING THE CHURCH CHOIR
Jack Van Laar, RBC Music Department
 6. ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE
Staff Instructors
 7. GREAT LEADERS IN CHURCH HISTORY
Eugene Ver Hage, RBC History Department
 8. THE PSALMS FOR TODAY
Nelle Vander Ark, RBC Bible Department

Second Session, August 22-31

- 7:30 a.m.
to
9:45 a.m.
1. CROSS-CULTURAL URBAN EVANGELISM
Rev. Timothy Monsma, RBC Missions Department
 2. ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE
Staff Instructors
 3. UNDERSTANDING BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY (Doctrine of Last Things)
Dr. L. Oostendorp, RBC Bible Department
 4. USING AUDIO-VISUALS IN THE CHURCH TODAY
Burt Braunius, RBC Education Department
- CHAPEL
- 10:15 a.m.
to
12:30 p.m.
5. THE BOOK OF REVELATION FOR TODAY
Katie Gunnink, RBC Education Department
 6. DEVELOPING THE CHURCH LIBRARY
Joanne Boehm, RBC Librarian
 7. GOD HAS NOT REJECTED HIS PEOPLE (Christians and Jews)
Dr. Richard De Ridder, Calvin Theological Seminary
 8. PURITAN WRITERS
Harold Bruxvoort, RBC Communications Department

Register for one or both sessions. Guest rate: \$20.00 per course (audit and credit rates are higher). Married couples and families welcome. Room and meals available on campus: \$50.00 per adult, per session (\$90.00, both sessions). Write for complete information on courses and costs.



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WHAT WE Believe



(3)

REV. ELCO H. OOSTENDORP

OUR TRIUNE GOD

This is the third in a series of articles on Reformed Doctrine, under the heading *What We Believe*. The familiar question-and-answer method, used so effectively by Bosma's *Reformed Doctrine* of a bygone day, is being followed. Rev. Elco H. Oostendorp (retired) of Hudsonville, Michigan, deals with "The Doctrine of God" in these opening articles.

What is the unique confession of Christianity concerning God?

The doctrine of the Trinity, that is, that there is only one God, who subsists in three Persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Although the idea of God revealed in the Bible is different from those of non-Christian religions in many other respects also, this is the distinctive Christian confession in contrast to Judaism and Islam, which also are monotheistic. Dr. Charles Hodge says, "It is not too much to say with Meyer, that 'the Trinity is the point in which all Christian ideas and interests unite; at once the beginning and the end of all insight into Christianity.'" (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, p. 448).

Which are the ecumenical creeds, accepted by the Reformed churches, in which this confession about God is stated?

The Apostles' Creed, The Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. These creeds were formulated by the ancient church as the result of prolonged struggles against various heresies regarding the doctrine of God. They are called ecumenical creeds because they are accepted by all branches of the Christian Church, except that the Orthodox or Eastern Churches have reservations about the "*filioque* clause" in the Nicene Creed, that is, the statement that the Holy Spirit also proceeds from the Son. The so-called Athanasian Creed reflects the thought of St. Augustine. Although there have been controversies concerning the being of God to the present, the Church has not been able

to improve in any significant way on the statement of the doctrine formulated in these confessions. All that later creeds and theologians do is elaborate on the Scriptural sources of this doctrine, and its theological and practical implications.

Isn't the teaching that God is "The great Three in One" illogical?

It would be if we believed that God is three in the same sense that He is one, or one in the same sense that He is three. Christianity does not teach that there are three Gods who are also one God. The unity of the divine Being is in His essence or substance, that is, in what makes God, God. God is not divided into three gods, but the Bible insists that there is only one living God who possesses all the divine attributes. The three Persons in the Godhead are all equally God, but they are three in their personal properties as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Although there is no equivalent relationship in creation, there are instances where we can also say of created things or beings that they are a unit in one respect and multiple in another respect. To be sure, in the Trinity this is beyond any earthly and finite analogy, but analogies do show that when we speak of unity in one respect and complexity in another we are not talking nonsense.

Is the triune nature of God revealed in the Old Testament?

In the light of the New Testament fulfilment and full revelation we can see many indications of the Trinity in the Old Testament. Space does not allow listing texts, but there are passages where God speaks in the plural, e.g., Genesis 1:26, "Let *us* make man in *our* image"; where one Person speaks about the others, e.g., Isaiah 61:1, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me," (cf. Luke 4:18-21); where the three Persons are mentioned, e.g., Psalm 33:6, "By the *word* of the Lord were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the *breath* of his mouth," where the word is the Son (cf. John 1:3) and the breath the Spirit (cf. Genesis 1:2). Such examples can be multiplied.

Is the Trinity revealed in the New Testament in a few texts?

No, there is no one text which teaches the complete doctrine of the Trinity, nor even a combination of two or three. It is true that there are several passages which mention the three Persons in one sentence, notably the Baptism formula of Matthew 28:19 and the apostolic benediction in II Corinthians 13:14. However, the reason the Church felt compelled to formulate a doctrine of the Trinity lies especially in the fact that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, who came in the flesh. In Him the Father was revealed and He and the Father are one. This appears from such events as Jesus' baptism when the Father spoke from heaven, "This is my beloved Son," and the Spirit descended in the form of a dove (Mark 1:9-11). The birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus are the revelation of the Son, and the outpouring

of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost the revelation of the Third Person. Thus the reality of God's triune Being and activity is involved inextricably with the very heart of the gospel, the good news of salvation. This appears in a beautiful way from passages like Ephesians 1:3-14, where the Apostle Paul blesses God the Father who has blessed us in Christ and sealed us with the promised Holy Spirit.

How are the three Persons of the Trinity distinguished from one another?

First of all, in their relationship to one another within the divine essence or being. These relationships are called their personal properties. The Father is the First Person, not in time but as the One who has life in Himself and gives it to the Son as His Only Begotten Son. The personal property of the Son is His sonship, or filiation. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son and therefore His personal property is called procession. Second, in relation to creation and redemption, the three Persons differ in their works. While all three as the one God are involved in all divine activities, the Heidelberg Catechism is both Scripturally and experientially correct when in Answer 24 it states that in the Apostles' Creed we confess our faith in God the Father and our creation, in God the Son and our redemption, and in God the Holy Spirit and our sanctification.

Isn't the doctrine of the Trinity as formulated especially in the Athanasian Creed an exercise in Greek philosophy without warrant in Scripture?

No doubt there is a danger that all the distinctions made in this creed can be discussed in a speculative and scholastic spirit, but we can surely agree with Calvin in his *Institutes* (I, xiii, 3) when he says, "What forbids our expressing, in plainer words, those things which, in the Scriptures, are, to our understanding, intricate and obscure, provided our expressions religiously and faithfully convey the true sense of the Scripture, and are used with modest caution, and not without sufficient occasion?"

The history of the struggle to come to an understanding of this cardinal doctrine illustrates that what purport to be new and biblical insights about the nature of God are often old errors. We can thank God for the leading of the Spirit which gave us these statements to help us understand correctly, even though we can by no means comprehend, the wonderful mystery of God's triune Being and work. It is significant in this connection that some of the greatest hymns of the Church center in this mystery. Even the small children can sing from believing hearts: "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow, Praise Him all creatures here below, Praise Him above, ye heavenly host, Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen!"

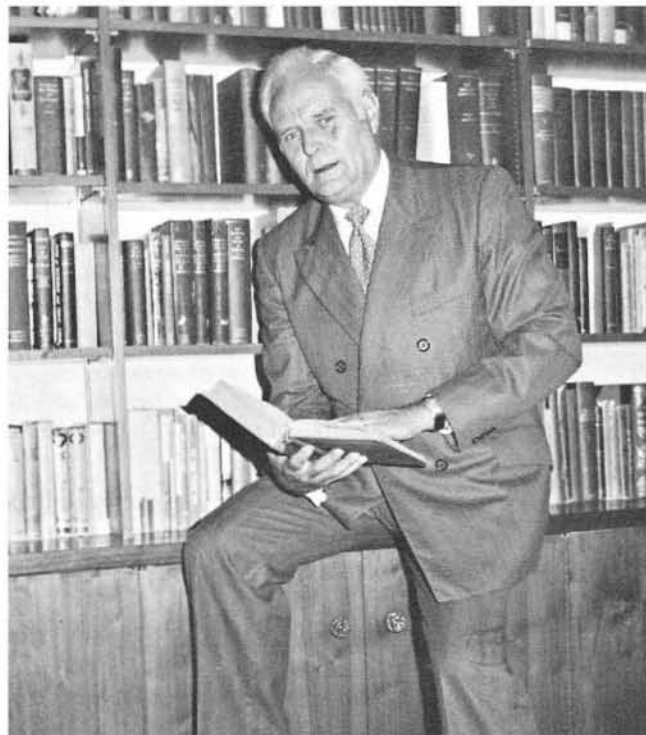
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*Yes, mothers and daughters are a sacred relation,
Of which there's no parallel in all creation.*

S.C.W.

the Verhey Case

DUTTON, G. R. EAST,
SYNOD 1976



REV. HARRY VAN DYKEN

In this article, Rev. Harry Van Dyken discusses what has come to be known as the Verhey case. He writes: "Classis [Grand Rapids East] and Synod [1976] have both declared that a candidate holding the views alleged concerning Dr. Verhey can be ordained to the ministry and receive the approval of Synod." Rev. Van Dyken is pastor of the First Christian Reformed Church of Mount Vernon, Washington.

On September 18, 1975, Classis Grand Rapids East of the Christian Reformed Church examined Candidate Dr. Allen Verhey for ordination to the ministry of the Word and sacraments in the Christian Reformed Church. Having examined the Candidate, Classis decided to approve him for ordination. It seems that not all the delegates to that meeting of the Classis were in agreement with Classis' decision. It seems also that the synodical examiners, while concurring in the decision of Classis, had some serious concern over certain expressions of the Candidate in responding to examination. This concern was expressed in a communication to the Consistory of the calling church. This communication stated that "the

brother had expressed ambiguous and imprecise views of inspiration.”

It seems obvious that the Consistory of the calling church, the Neland Avenue Christian Reformed Church, had no particular problem with the decision of Classis. In a communication to Synod 1976 they stated, “Allen Verhey was, at the time of his examination, and is now, firmly committed to the sound doctrine of the Scripture as set forth in the Reformed confessions and the doctrinal deliverances of the synod of the CRC.” Understandably and correctly, therefore, they proceeded to the ordination of the Candidate.

Dutton Protest — Subsequent to the meeting of Classis Grand Rapids East, the delegates from the various churches reported to their consistories concerning the action Classis had taken. This is important to note since Synod in ground a., supporting recommendation I. (Acts of Synod, 1976, p. 95, E., 1., a.), states that the decision of Classis “stood unopposed up to and including the time of his [Dr. Verhey’s] ordination.”

Classis is an assembly that gathers and disperses. At the time the Consistory of the Dutton Christian Reformed Church met and received the report of their delegates, Classis had long since adjourned. A protest could only, in the nature of the case, come to the next meeting of Classis. The Dutton Consistory did lodge a protest with the next meeting of Classis on January 15, 1976, as did also the Consistory of the Cascade Christian Reformed Church. This was the first opportunity for a protest to be lodged by a consistory. Obviously, no delegate at Classis was able to say that the consistory he represented would protest the action at hand. He must first consult with his consistory. By that time the meeting of Classis had adjourned.

Action of Classis G. R. East — It strikes one as strange that a classis, receiving a protest from one of its constituent consistories, which bases its protest on the Word of God, the confessions, and the doctrinal deliverances of Synod, should receive such a protest as information. Yet this is precisely what Classis Grand Rapids East did. Certainly such a protest must either be proven wrong, or it must be sustained.

In the meeting on May 20, 1976, Classis decided to formulate and adopt two grounds for its action in January. The first of these grounds states that Classis’ decision was taken “on the basis of a majority vote and did not involve the approval of specific positions held by him [Candidate Verhey].” But is not that just what a classical examination is all about? Is it not to determine whether, yes or no, the “positions” held by the candidate are in agreement with the Word of God and the Reformed confessions? And, when a classis approves such a candidate, it says that it approves the positions held by that candidate and sends him with God’s blessings to the pulpits of the churches.

The second ground stated that the protest was “not accompanied by an appeal or request for action on the part of classis. . . .” But surely any protest against a decision of an ecclesiastical assembly is a request to declare that the decision was wrongly taken. Whether or not the decision can be rescinded, depends on how far the decision has been executed. Other action than rescission may, indeed, be needed. Such action would have to be determined if, in fact, the protest was sustained.

Decision of Synod — This is the matter which came to Synod 1976 by way of an appeal from the Consistory of the Dutton Christian Reformed Church. It was an appeal to Synod to declare that the decision of Classis Grand Rapids East was a wrong decision. This is precisely the nature of an appeal. The appeal was clearly not an action taken against the Rev. Allen Verhey. This was true in the protest to Classis. It was true in the appeal to Synod. The report of the majority of the advisory committee of Synod indicates that they had taken full cognizance of this fact. We read on page 94 of the Acts of Synod, 1976, “The advisory committee, expanded by the addition of the officers of Synod, also interviewed Dr. Verhey, *after giving him firm assurance he was to be treated as a witness to what took place at the classical examination with reference to the disputed statements.*

“The protest, we must remember, is lodged against Classis Grand Rapids East. The appeal asks Synod to disapprove the action of this classis in confirming Candidate Verhey for ordination. *Let us be clear that it is not our task to try Dr. Verhey. His statements come to our attention as evidence against the classis, not as evidence against him*” (italics added). These observations of the committee are entirely correct. They are, in effect, saying, “A crucial matter here in the Consistory’s case against the classis is the correctness of the Consistory’s reporting of the events in the examination.” Or, to put it again in the words of the committee, “His statements come to our attention as evidence against classis.” Yet, when the committee reported to synod, they never revealed, as far as the record is concerned, whether that evidence supported the Consistory or the Classis. They left it out entirely!

In making their recommendations to Synod, recommendations which Synod adopted, the committee urged Synod not to sustain the appeal of the Consistory on the grounds: a. that classis followed proper procedure; and b. that the procedures of the Form of Subscription should be followed.

On the matter of ground a., the Consistory in its appeal never questioned the *procedures* followed by Classis. How can this, then, be a ground for not sustaining? The Consistory was maintaining that the decision of the Classis brought them into conflict with the Scriptures, the Reformed confessions and the doctrinal deliverances of Synod. This, quite obviously, has nothing to do with procedure.

In ground b., the committee, and Synod in adopting the committee’s recommendations, completely

switches its position. It had maintained, as noted above, that the appeal of the Consistory was not against Dr. Verhey. Now they, and Synod, tell the Consistory that they must follow a different way "if a minister's loyalty to the confessions is called into question." Note once again that the committee said, "His [Dr. Verhey's] statements come to our attention as evidence against the Classis, not as evidence against him."

The second recommendation of the committee as adopted by Synod restates this same matter as found in ground b., and directs the appellants to receive it as an instruction if they wish to carry this matter any further.

This is confusion! — This is how the matter now stands. A Consistory submitted an appeal to Synod which was properly before Synod. This appeal, by its very nature, asked Synod to declare that the decision of Classis Grand Rapids East was in conflict with the Word of God, the confessions, and the doctrinal deliverances of Synod. Such procedure is altogether proper and is guaranteed to the Consistory by article 30 of the *Church Order*. Synod on the one hand recognizes that this is the case and yet treats the appeal as if it is against a man rather than against a decision of an assembly.

This is confusion! Evidently Dr. Verhey clearly expressed his views. Dr. Verhey did not make the decision approving ordination. Yet Synod says, "You must address yourself to him and his views if you remain convinced that it must go further." Had Dr. Verhey withheld or camouflaged his views at the examination, and then expressed them later, the position of Synod would be correct. Classis could not have known it at the time of examination. As it now stands, certainly the Classis should either be cleared of blame, if its decision was not in conflict with the Scriptures, etc., or Classis must bear the blame if it was.

This whole matter weighs heavily upon us in these times, particularly because we find a strong tendency to accommodation to the world on many fronts. We see compromise in many areas for the sake of "better" relations. The worst of these efforts, worst because it is so basic and because of its results, is compromise of the Word of God. Such compromise is rampant in many churches today, seeking a synthesis of the wisdom of men and that of God; seeking the approval and respect of those of whom the Apostle Paul said that they consider the wisdom of God as foolishness. A compromise that can only bring a harvest of destruction in the churches.

"Report 44" ambiguous — It has been maintained by some that the Report which Synod adopted on the Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority leads us in this direction. I personally strongly believe this is the case. The synodical examiners observed that Candidate Verhey "expressed ambiguous and imprecise views of inspiration." One has only to read all the different views of scholars as to what "Report 44" means to realize its ambiguity and imprecision.

Synod 1977 will certainly be faced with appeals from the churches to reconsider its decision regarding the appeal of the Dutton Consistory. It ought to reconsider and face squarely the charge the Consistory makes against Classis, i.e., that the decision of Classis is in conflict with the Scriptures, the Reformed confessions, and the doctrinal deliverances of Synod. Synod ought also to face that, in approving the action of its synodical examiners it has, in very fact, approved this decision of Classis. Surely synodical examiners are not merely sent to the classes to see to it that the classes follow proper procedure. This may be important, but there are matters far more important. Surely Synod, in approving the work of its synodical examiners, is not merely approving some procedural matters. The question that we must face is: Did the Classis arrive at a decision which is in harmony with the Word of God, the Reformed confessions, with the Church Order? In approving the work of its examiners in this case, Synod has, in effect, declared that she is satisfied that there is no conflict here with the Word of God. This is disturbing. Synod ought to reconsider this decision!

And finally, ought we not, in looking forward in the life of the Church of Jesus Christ and the Christian Reformed Church in particular, erase Report 44 from the records with all its ambiguity, with all its irreconcilable tensions, and consider adopting a precise, unambiguous statement of our belief concerning the nature and extent of biblical authority?

And what about Dr. Verhey? He is a minister in good and regular standing in the Christian Reformed Church. It is his position on Scripture which is in question, but he did not make the decision to approve himself for ordination. He must be approached by way of the Form of Subscription. But, if the decision of Classis Grand Rapids East retains its present approval by Synod, first of all in refusing to sustain a protest against the decision and, secondly, by the approval of the work of the synodical examiners in their concurring with this decision, then any effort by way of the Form of Subscription or Articles 89, 90, 91, or 93 of the *Church Order* must prove fruitless. Classis and Synod have both declared that a candidate holding the views alleged concerning Dr. Verhey can be ordained to the ministry and receive the approval of Synod.

These are difficult matters. Anyone who has been involved in casting a vote on a candidate for ordination knows how hard it is to bring one's self to vote against such ordination. It must, however, be much harder for any of those charged with this work to send men to the pulpits of our churches who do not sound a clear, unambiguous voice. Paul's epistles to Timothy alone makes this abundantly clear. ●

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*Check your check stubs and declare
What you spent, and how and where.
Who received the greatest share?
The Cause of Christ? or You? Compare!*

S.C.W.

OUR QUESTION



REV. HARLAN G. VANDEN EINDE

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This department is *for everyone*. No signatures are required and no names will be published. Your questions will be gladly received and answered as promptly as possible.

I am grateful for the interest shown in this section of THE OUTLOOK, evidenced by the fact that I have about a dozen questions on hand. Some of you have sent multiple questions; and, though I appreciate that, in order to give more readers an opportunity to participate, I will select those which I believe will have the most general reader interest. I will also try to answer questions in the order in which I receive them, so if it takes some months before your question appears, please be patient.

Question — From a Michigan reader comes this letter: "I can find and see God so much easier in nature than in reading my Bible. A sunset on a clear, perfect night, or a baby's little hands, can make shivers run all over me, and tears come to my eyes. All I can say then is 'O my God, how great Thou art!' It does trouble me sometimes."

Answer — God has revealed Himself to us in two ways: general revelation, by which we mean the created world; and special revelation, by which we mean the Bible. Since God created the world and everything in it, we may say that nature is like a book in which God has written something of Himself in letters large and small, and from which we may learn of His wisdom, goodness, and power. But that "book," of course, has been affected by sin. Corruption entered that beautiful handiwork of God and obscured it. In nature we are still pointed to the Divine Creator, but not as perfectly and clearly as before the Fall. And, because man is also blinded

by sin, he cannot read that divine script. In fact, that general revelation will never point us to the Christ who is the only way of salvation. We may learn of the wisdom, goodness, and power of God from nature, but we will not learn of saving grace, pardon and redemption from it. General revelation is insufficient to bring us to Christ and that is why we need the special revelation of God as He has preserved it for us in the Bible.

Without belaboring further the distinction between general and special revelation, which I trust is well-known by the reader, let me comment on your letter.

You indicate that you can find and see God easier in nature than in reading the Bible. I think I know what you mean, but I am going to suggest just a little different wording of that statement. Isn't it true that you can find and see God easier in nature *because* you have found Him in the Bible, or rather, have been found by Him? There are many people who would and do not see in the sunset or a baby's little hands the things you see, because they do not know God in Christ Jesus. But because you know Him as Creator and Redeemer, you are able to see and appreciate His beauty also in the world of nature, and that is cause for gratitude.

John Calvin wrote in his *Institutes* (I.VI.1), "Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God." So the Scriptures are the "spectacles" through which we must view the created world in order to understand and appreciate it.

So rather than being "troubled" by the fact that you can find a deep appreciation for God in nature, be grateful for it, and give thanks to God for enabling you to "see" Him everywhere. But don't neglect His Word on that account! It would be a tragic mistake for a person to think that because he has initially come to know God's redeeming grace from His Word, now he can set that Word aside, and live only by "feeding" on general revelation. The Holy Spirit works His sanctifying grace in our hearts through the Word of God, and our understanding of God's wisdom, power, and goodness as we see it in nature will only be enhanced as we come to know Him better from His Word and experience a greater measure of that sanctification. ●

* * * * *

*If worries were pennies I'm sure,
Our pennies would make quite a sum.
And one would think it a permanent cure,
When we found all our worries were dumb.*
S.C.W.

FOR ELDERS AND DEACONS

(9)



REV. HARRY G. ARNOLD

Elders – Shepherds of the Church (3)

In this ninth article in his series, *For Elders and Deacons*, Rev. Harry G. Arnold writes: "The discipline of the church is a painful but necessary task. No church can be healthy and strong without it. We must remember this especially today. The emphasis presently is on church growth. In the interests of church growth some are apt to lessen the requirements of sound doctrine and godly life among the members.

In the last two articles the emphasis has fallen on the fact that the spiritual care of the church has been committed to the elders. Of course, these elders include both ruling and teaching elders or what we customarily call elders and ministers. Together this body of men must take the oversight of the church of Christ. Up to this point we have seen how they must perform their task with regard to public worship, catechetical instruction, family visiting and spiritual counsel.

It is hardly necessary to mention that there are many aspects of spiritual oversight which may be classified as "housekeeping details." Such matters as membership transfers, recording of births, deaths, baptisms, etc. may be considered as part of good housekeeping. While these are important matters and should be done carefully for the efficient operation of any congregation, it is probably wiser to pass by them at this time.

Since we are still emphasizing the shepherding task of the elders, it is better that we now consider the task of the elders in the admonition and discipline of the church. Both of these relate to the spiritual care of the church.

The Different Kinds of Discipline – The term "discipline" has a wide variety of meanings. One of

the meanings of discipline is: "Eccles. the system of government regulating the practice of a church as distinguished from its doctrine" (*Random House Dictionary – Unabridged Edition*, sub "discipline"). On the basis of that meaning some denominations have labeled their church order "The Book of Discipline." This meaning of the term is broad and covers all activities of the church and may be called administrative discipline. This is not our concern just now.

Our *Church Order* speaks of "admonition and discipline" as one section of church regulations. In so doing it means to use the term "discipline" in the sense of judicial discipline, or that kind in which a judgment is made regarding a person's confession or conduct. This kind of discipline is meant to reprove a person's erroneous confession or misconduct and to bring him back to the right way.

This formal discipline of the church makes use of various steps of censure which finally lead to the excommunication of the impenitent. Since the *Church Order* distinguishes "admonition" from "discipline" it must be that admonition refers to that reproof of one's conduct or confession which is without formal censure. Admonition is also an aspect of discipline but it is pastoral rather than judicial. Admonition, then, may be regarded as that aspect of the church's discipline which is pastoral and which comes to the erring by way of reproof and which precedes formal censure.

Admonition is one kind of discipline, however, since it – like discipline – aims at warning the sinner of the error of his way and of correcting his life according to the Word of God. On the one hand, therefore, all admonition – whether by preaching, teaching, counselling, or warning against sin – is a form of discipline. It is intended to reprove and correct another's doctrine or morals. Thus, the preaching of the Word – especially its admonitions – is often referred to as "the discipline of the Word." On the other hand, when the *Church Order* speaks of "discipline" in distinction from "admonition," it has in mind the steps of discipline which lead to excommunication. This kind of discipline is formal and judicial.

Formal discipline of members is always preceded by admonitory discipline. If the erring member responds "favorably to the admonitions of the consistory," then he or she "shall be reconciled to the church upon sufficient evidence of repentance" (Article 84). In other words, when the admonitions of the consistory serve their purpose to correct the sinner, then formal discipline is not necessary. But when the admonitions to the erring member prove fruitless, then the consistory must proceed to the formal discipline.

The initial step in formal discipline is usually referred to as "silent censure." It is a temporary suspension of all membership privileges such as "partaking of the Lord's Supper, responding to the baptismal questions, and exercising any other rights of membership" (Article 85). During this period of suspen-

sion further admonitions are given by the consistory. When these fail, then the consistory must proceed to the steps of discipline which lead to "the extreme remedy" of excommunication.

Needless to say, the formal discipline of members is a serious matter and ought to be done with great care and forethought. For that reason the *Church Order* stipulates that "Disciplinary measures shall be applied only after an adequate investigation has been made and the member involved has had ample opportunity to present his case" (Article 82). The *Church Order* further requires that before anyone is excommunicated, several announcements must be made according to a certain order. This is spelled out in Article 86b as follows:

The consistory, before excommunicating anyone, shall make three announcements in which the nature of the offense and the obstinancy of the sinner are explained and the congregation is urged to pray for him and to admonish him. In the first announcement the name of the sinner shall ordinarily be withheld but may be mentioned at the discretion of the consistory. In the second, after the classis has given its approval to proceed with further discipline, his name shall be mentioned. In the third, the congregation shall be informed that unless the sinner repents he will be excommunicated on a specified date.

It must be understood that between these announcements many more admonitions are given by the consistory. Also many prayers are offered in behalf of the erring one by the congregation. The intent of the announcements is not only to impress upon the sinner the seriousness of his sin, but also to allow the membership to exercise its general office of believer by admonishing the erring one. Unfortunately, it is my observation that few people in the congregation take this aspect of their office seriously. For the most part, there is silent acquiescence in the consistory's announcements, but no effort on the part of the congregation's membership to reclaim the sinner on a one-to-one basis.

It was this particular concern for mutual discipline on the part of believers that motivated Classis Quinte to overture last synod for some changes in the *Church Order* which would have emphasized this responsibility. While synod did not adopt the overture with its recommended changes in the *Church Order*, it did have this to say to the churches:

That synod acknowledge the concerns expressed by Classis Quinte and urge the churches faithfully to teach and preach the importance of self discipline, mutual discipline, and ecclesiastical discipline taught in God's Word.

Ground: The substance of the report of Classis Quinte is of such a nature that it deserves the special attention of the churches. *Adopted.*

(*Acts of Synod 1976*, Art. 51, III, p. 53).

The above advice of synod is wholly in accord with what is already stated in Article 78b of the *Church Order*:

The exercise of admonition and discipline by the consistory does not preclude the responsibility

of the believers to watch over and to admonish one another in love.

It would be fruitful for our elders to discuss such matters as mutual discipline and ecclesiastical discipline either at their meetings or at elders' conferences.

The Purpose of Discipline — In view of some incidents in past history when physical means were used to enforce conformity to church doctrine, it is well to remind ourselves, first of all, that "the admonition and discipline of the church are spiritual in character and therefore require the use of spiritual means" (Article 78a). The church bears "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God" (Eph. 6:17), and not the sword of civil punishment which belongs to the state. Therefore, the church must use the Bible in its admonition and discipline. The church may censure those who offend "in doctrine and life" but it may not punish them in any physical manner.

Discipline is necessary to the health of the body of Christ. Discipline always serves a good purpose in life and it does the same in the church as Article 79 of the *Church Order* states it:

The purpose of the admonition and discipline of the church is to maintain the honor of God, to restore the sinner, and to remove the offense from the church of Christ.

It should be noted that in mutual discipline and pastoral admonitions, the welfare of the individual sinner receives the priority. However, in the judicial discipline of the church *the honor of God* comes first. The honor of Christ, the Head of the church, must be upheld in the midst of the congregation. It is out of concern for Christ's honor that the sinner must be brought to repent in the body of Christ. Likewise, it is out of concern for Christ's honor that the purity of the church must be maintained over against the offending member, who will not repent of sin, and therefore, must be excommunicated from the body of believers. It is true, of course, that the sinner remains the focus of attention in the disciplinary process. Nevertheless, he always remains the focus of attention in respect to the Lord, whose law he has broken, and in respect to the church which is the body of Christ.

Only when we see discipline in its fulness of purpose can we be rightly motivated to exercise it in the church. There is no doubt that the rank individualism of our age has had a detrimental effect on the faithful exercise of church discipline. Besides, admonition and discipline is unpleasant work and we all like to avoid doing it. Faithful elders, however, will have to be motivated to do it for Christ's sake, as well as for the purity of the church, while seeking to reclaim the sinner.

The discipline of the church is a painful but necessary task. No church can be healthy and strong without it. We must remember this especially today. The emphasis presently is on church growth. In the interests of church growth some are apt to lessen the

requirements of sound doctrine and godly life among the members. The *Church Order* begins with the confession that Christ is the Head of His church. We may, therefore, assume that if we are faithful to His directions, He will add to the church those who will be saved. Our emphasis must remain on obedience to the will of Christ in the church, which is His body.

The church that is faithful to the will of Christ in exercising admonition and discipline will grow, and it will be healthy and strong in the Lord. Our *Church Order* assumes that the Spirit of God will use the key of discipline to bring sinners to repent and to reclaim those who have been excommunicated. That is why provision is made in Article 87 for the readmission of those who have been excommunicated. Ministers and elders should be alert to opportunities to reclaim the excommunicated for Christ. God's providence often softens those who were previously hard of heart. Sometimes sickness, economic reverses, or family problems become doors of opportunity for Christ's servants to walk through and minister to those who have been excommunicated from the people of God. Every member of the church—including the shepherds of the church—should take seriously the instruction of the *Form for Excommunication* which says, regarding the excommunicated:

... yet count him not as an enemy, but at times admonish him as you would a brother. ●

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*It's odd, the movies we condemn,
As bawdy, vile, unfit.
So Satan moved the movie in,
The very room we sit.*

S.C.W.

ten commandments for visitation

GARRETT H. STOUTMEYER

In the all-wise but often mysterious working of God's providence I was recently a patient for several months. Instead of regularly visiting others in joy or in sorrow, in sickness and health, etc., I found myself on the "receiving" end. I received many visitors and was blessed greatly by their visits. This was not the first time either that I had found myself a "disciplinee" of our Heavenly Father. Reflecting on the numerous visits of which I have been the recipient there is nothing that I wish to write that would in any way reflect adversely on any visitor or visit. However, I am hopeful and prayerful that something I may have learned as a patient rather than as a visitor will prove helpful to others, especially to the large number of Consistory members who have joined the readership of this magazine through the free subscription offer.

I shall never forget that I had been in the ministry for six years, and in those years I made numerous calls on the sick, shut-ins and sorrowing, etc. I conducted close to 50 funerals. However, it wasn't until the Lord suddenly took my mother to Himself at a relatively young age that I really "knew" what the bereaved actually suffer. For the first time I "sat where they sat." Since that time the Lord has entered our family circle on several occasions and removed very close family members, and each additional experience has been a learning experience. I was learning personally the hard way what it means to suffer. Whether we are pastors or elders, counselors or friends, I am sure that everyone of us wishes that we have faithfully kept the "rules" which follow, only we know that we are far from reaching the ideal! However, the most faithful practice of these rules will, I think, bless those whom we visit and our own hearts as we follow in the footsteps of our Blessed Master.

Rule No. One: You Must Visit!!

Perhaps no one needs this injunction! It may be taken for granted that every reader is thoroughly convinced by the Scriptural givens. Beyond the solemn charge given in ordination to every office-bearer in the church of Jesus Christ is the greatest example set for us by our Lord and Savior while He was here on this earth. It was fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy that "He took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses" (Matt. 8:17). The immediately preceding verses of the Matthew 8 passage describe how in Simon Peter's home the Savior healed Peter's mother-



in-law, and the story concludes with the declaration "he healed all that were sick."

Is the ministry of visitation, however, restricted to clergy and/or Consistory members? A careful reading of Matthew 25:36 and following verses is sufficient proof that *no one* is exempted from Christ's sweeping declaration, "I was sick and ye visited me not." Will anyone of us in the day of judgment be among the self-righteous who will ask the King, "When saw we thee sick?", and hear that awesome "depart from me, ye cursed"?

Rule No. Two: Do pray and bring consolation from Scripture!

Our presence in a sickroom or a funeral parlor will be meaningful in terms of friendship and certainly this element of visitation should never be minimized! But what greater strength is derived by both patient and visitor if together we turn to that "friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear."

If we experience difficulty expressing ourselves particularly in prayer, often under the most difficult of circumstances, and do not know what to pray, can we not learn together to make our prayers both simple and brief? Pastoral prayers in their usual longevity are entirely out of place at the bedside of one who is sick. Virginia Womach in her book, *Tested by Fire*, which she co-authored with her husband Merrill, writes that when she didn't know what to pray for her critically injured husband she would simply repeat this petition, "Dear God, please help Merrill."

Rule No. Three: Do not preach!

It seems that those visitors who are most apt to use the sickroom as a pulpit use one or both of two

favorite subjects, namely, patience and faith. How often we almost glibly say to others, "You must have more patience!" "You must be submissive!" "You must have faith!" If the patient is a born-again child of God he/she knows that all too well without a bedside sermon. Besides and more importantly this is the work of the Holy Spirit and all our personal striving to achieve greater patience on our own effort will be in vain. Unintentionally some visitors can be so insensitive.

Rule No. Four: Do be cheerful!

As ministers and elders we must especially be on our guard that in moving from one pastoral call to the next we do *not* bring tales of woe from one sufferer to another. Merrill Womach in the previously mentioned book writes: "visiting preachers were sometimes the most depressing . . . their looks of grave concern left me feeling I should comfort them. . . . I wanted to say something to give them hope, to cheer them up."

Rule No. Five: Do not "play" physician!

The last thing anyone of us as visitors should do is undermine the patient's confidence in his/her doctor(s) and/or the treatment being administered, etc. If we are genuinely concerned and convinced that the person we are visiting is not receiving proper or necessary medical attention our concern should be conveyed *only* to a member of the patient's family and then most cautiously!

Positively, however, there are occasions when such misgivings must be expressed. I am personally indebted for life to a minister who some years ago was deeply convinced that I was receiving the wrong hospital and medical treatment because an incorrect diagnosis had been made. He conveyed his convictions to my wife and together after thorough discussion and consultations made the arrangements for my transfer to the Mayo Clinic. Their convictions were correct. A complete mis-diagnosis had been made, even after nearly four months of hospital confinement, and the treatment being administered would have most likely contributed to my death. But we must always use great caution in a field where we are not trained.

Rule No. Six: Do be understanding!!

Never forget the assurance of Scripture: "Thou feedest them with the bread of tears" (Psalm 80:5). Tears are sacred to more than one occasion. Tears of penitence? Indeed! Tears of sorrow? Indeed! Our Savior wept, did He not, as He stood before the grave of His friend Lazarus? But tears of sympathy, understanding? etc. Indeed! Are there not occasions when a sympathetic embrace, handclasp, etc. are more sacred and meaningful than many words? Let the Savior again be our great example.

Rule No. Seven: Do not prolong your visit!

A brief visit in most instances is much to be pre-

ferred, especially by those who are very weak and tired. It is not the length but the quality of our visit that counts.

Rule No. Eight: Do not bear false witness!!

If we promise to make a return visit we should do everything within our power to faithfully keep our word. If we promise to perform some type of service we should again keep our word. If circumstances develop which prevent us from keeping our word a phone call or card explaining our absence or inability will be much appreciated. The best intentions are worthless if our practice is empty or hollow.

Rule No. Nine: Do be helpful!!

Unconsciously it seems we have permitted an almost worthless offer to grow up among us. How often haven't we said "if there is anything I (we) can do, just call me (us)"? A well-meant offer? Probably!! But why must we wait for a call that seldom if ever comes? As often as we make that offer, how often has someone called us to ask for our help or assistance? Not very often! Do we have to be asked before we see the need of bringing in a warm meal? Providing transportation to members of the family? Accompanying a wife on a dark night to the hospital while she visits her husband or parent or child? etc. In short, must we as church members ask or beg before our brothers and sisters in Christ come to our assistance? Our offers are too often blank checks that are never cashed because they are worthless!

Rule No. Ten: Do remember the entire family!!

Don't forsake the other family members when one family member is sick. Don't leave anyone alone! The person, for example, who is hospitalized will normally receive cards and letters, flowers and visitors, etc. But what of the children who are shifted from one sitter to another? Isn't it more than possible that they may feel abandoned and unimportant?

May our Lord use each of us in a more faithful and blessed ministry, to the sick and the shut-ins, the sorrowing and the rejoicing, the tried and the tempted, the weak and the strong. As family and friends may we rally to meet the challenge of following faithfully in the steps of our Savior. James, the Lord's brother, declares that this is "pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father" (James 1:27).

* * * * *

*From first to last, from A to Z,
The Bible is the book fore me.*

S.C.W.

* * * * *

*Indeed it's nice,
To push a button on some device.
But automation,
Can never work out our Salvation.*

S.C.W.

A New Sales Pitch for

MODERN THEOLOGY



REV. PETER DE JONG

In this timely and informative article, Rev. Peter De Jong calls attention to and gives a critical evaluation of a recent article in *The Reformed Journal* by Rev. Philip C. Holtrop, pastor of the North Haledon (N.J.) Christian Reformed Church. Rev. Holtrop has been nominated for a teaching position at Calvin College. Rev. De Jong now asks: "Will the 1977 Synod by its decision approve the views and teachings which this [Holtrop's] article reveals, as acceptable to prepare its young people for leadership, or will it investigate and reject them?"

The "New" Look — 10 Years Ago — One of the leading features of much, possibly most, modern religious thinking is that it is no longer interested in facts but only in human relations and how people feel. In the January 1971 issue of *THE OUTLOOK*, I called attention to this movement in an article entitled, "The Inroads of Subjectivism." An unusual clear explanation of the movement was given by Rev. John Timmer in the December 1969 issue of *The Reformed Journal* in which he quoted Dr. Cornelis Van Peurseem, professor of philosophy at the Free University. Dr. Van Peurseem writing in 1967, observed that whereas people used to think "ontologically," in our time they think "functionally." Whereas people used to be concerned about definitions, about understanding what *is*, all that is now past. In our present "functional" stage of thought man is only concerned about what *works*. Now "Real is what directly relates to us. Real is what functions in our life. . . ." "Reality is that which functions. . . ." "Functional man does not ask: who or what is God? but: what does God do?" Similarly, concerning man he observed: "Man's time and context co-determine who and what he is." The modern mind no longer thinks in terms of "being and substance," but it "thinks in terms of event and action. Our thinking is dynamic rather than static."

It was Dr. Van Peurseem's contention that we

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share this transition with other men of our time. "We hear the Bible through the patterns that we share with our contemporaries." "If we are to witness effectively to our generation we must do this in the language and thought patterns in which modern man feels at home." Rev. John Timmer cited this analysis of Van Peurse as very helpful toward gaining an understanding of Berkouwer and the new theological trends in the Netherlands and he heartily recommended that we go along with this movement.

Again, the Same "New" View of Truth—What now again brings this matter to our attention is an article in the February 1977 issue of *The Reformed Journal* by Philip C. Holtrop, pastor of the Christian Reformed Church of North Haledon, New Jersey, entitled, "A Strange Language: Toward a Biblical Conception of Truth and a New Mood for Doing Reformed Theology." In this article Rev. Holtrop, who for some years took graduate work at the Free University, sets out to defend and promote the "new view" of truth as a biblical teaching which we ought to adopt. Notice the similarity between what he writes and what Dr. Van Peurse wrote in 1947.

In the article the claim is made that the old idea that truth is what "is" is an erroneous Greek idea. The Bible's teaching, it is alleged, is that truth is rather a matter of "doing" and "living." "Truth in Scripture, not merely *is* objectively. It cannot be identified with the correspondence of intellectual knowledge and facts. It must be done. It is *in actu*." "For the Greeks, by and large, truth was an ontological category. For the Scripture, by and large, it can be experienced, known, and found in the realm of what you do. Christ is called the Truth because he is the great Act of the Father toward us."

Proceeding from this view of "truth," Rev. Holtrop goes on to criticize our traditional views of "sound doctrine," of a "form of subscription," and of creeds. "Sound doctrine"—in contrast to Reformed (or any other) scholasticism—must be seen in the light of . . . 'doing the truth.' It can only be understood in the sphere of living in a covenantal relation or response to God and my fellow-man. That means that doctrine and Christian living, faith and life, 'orthodoxy' and 'orthopraxis' cannot be separated, held in balance, or even considered apart from each other. Here we see, in my judgment, a fundamental error of Reformed Orthodoxy. If I tell the 'truth' apart from love and piety I am not 'doing the truth' at all, and consequently I am not telling the truth, according to the Scriptures."

Accordingly Holtrop criticizes the statement of the Form of Subscription that we "heartily believe . . . that all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the Confession and Catechism of the Reformed Churches, together with the explanation of some points . . . made by the National Synod of Dordrecht, 1618-'19, do fully agree with the Word of God," as embodying this old "agreement or correspondence theory of truth," "presuppositions" which are "wrong,"

and therefore produce the "disastrous" results of heresy-hunts and trials.

Although he qualifies this sweeping judgment, saying, "My point does not minimize but maximizes the importance of correct statements in most contexts," yet he maintains that "on the basis of Scripture I do not identify those statements with the truth. . . ." "When John tells us to 'test the spirits' he is not commanding us to be suspicious of other people and their intellectual formulas. Orthodoxy has shown confusion at that point." Although he admits that "even Scripture, on rare occasions," may "speak of truth as accurate expression" (I refer in passing to Mark 5:33 and II Corinthians 12:6) he insists that "truth is a relational, covenantal concept."

Of creeds Holtrop says, "I have high regard for creeds, but I do not equate them with 'the truth.' They are expressions of my community's odyssey, and they are beacon-lights at critical junctures, especially in moments of high threat." From this point of view he says, "I recognize that the Canons of Dort present us with a certain view of the relation of eternity and time, a view which I, along with others, want to challenge today on the basis of Scripture. But I do not want to change the Canons. . . ." "I acknowledge that the creeds are historical and were not dropped from heaven."

Realizing "the radical implications" of what he is saying, Holtrop pleads for "a new mood for doing Reformed theology," one having "to do with living relations and not primarily abstract definitions and essences." "A compartmentalized loci-theology, with its heady accent on definitions and the 'system of Reformed thought,' is simply 'not where the action is'; hence it is irrelevant, the reason being that finally its overarching concept of truth is more Greek than biblical. (In candor, in eighteen years since leaving the seminary I have rarely consulted my copy of Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*, except to find appropriate prooftexts or inappropriate ways of organizing theology, or fascinating lines of connection. . . .)" "We need a renewed Reformed theology—partly to free scholarship for responsible activity; partly to liberate the scholar from unbiblical threats and reprisals and to open a life of joy and doxology; and certainly to provide a foundation for Christian personal and social action and thus to serve the entire community by dealing with life 'where the action is.'"

An Evaluation—What shall we say about this argument and its proposals? Is it true that the Bible teaches us to see truth as something to be lived? Indeed, it is. Recall James' "Be ye doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding your own selves" (James 1:22). Does the Bible stress love? Of course, it does. Have Reformed theologians in the past at times become abstract, speculative, and gone beyond what the Scriptures teach? They have. Is it true that creeds arise in historical situations and are in that respect limited statements of truth not to be placed beside or over the Scriptures? It is.

Must we therefore conclude that Rev. Holtrop has proved the correctness of his view of truth and the rightness of the policy he is advocating? He has done neither.

Bible Truth Is Factual as Well as Relational — As to the nature of truth, although the Bible teaches us that the truth must be “done” it teaches us just as plainly that truth involves statements about facts which must be believed. Remember Jesus’ rebuke to His disciples, “O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken!” (Luke 24:25)

God’s revelation of Himself reveals *Who* and *What He is* (“I am” — Ex. 3:14; compare Rev. 1:8) as well as *what He does*. He is concerned with what *is* as well as with what *happens*. He is not only concerned about fidelity to Him and to one’s fellow men, but also with our believing and speaking what conforms to what He has created and revealed. One may not dismiss this concern as the product of an unbiblical, pagan, Greek philosophy. It is expressed in the Bible from the very beginning. God said, “In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die,” and was contradicted by the devil’s lie, “Ye shall not surely die.” God is concerned about both proper relations and speech that conforms to fact.

The commandment, “Thou shalt not bear *false witness against thy neighbor*” is concerned about both conformity to fact and human relations. The devil is both the “father of lies” and “a murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44). This concern of the Bible about fidelity to facts as well as about relations is not “rare” as the article suggests, but the assumption from one end of it to the other. The last chapter of Revelation classifies “everyone that loveth and maketh a lie” beside the “fornicators, and murderers and idolators” as barred from the Lord’s city (Rev. 22:15). Ananias and Sapphira were confronted with the question “whether ye sold the land for so much.” Peter condemned and the Lord destroyed them for “lying” about the price they had been paid. The point here is that truth is conformity to fact, not merely relational. The Gospel of Luke begins by informing us that the writer has “traced the course of all things accurately from the first.” And the word translated “accurately” means “carefully, exactly, strictly,” indicating the kind of careful attention to detail that characterizes responsible historians. And the purpose of the writing was to assure the reader of the “certainty concerning the things” in which he had been instructed. This cannot possibly be twisted to mean anything other than a concern about the facts. Watch Paul in I Corinthians 15 muster the evidence to establish the facts with which the whole Christian faith stands or falls. Listen to Peter (II Pet. 1:16) insisting that he and his companions “did not follow cunningly devised fables” (literally, “myth”) but were speaking and writing the things they had seen as “eye-witnesses.” The Bible is as concerned about establishing facts through the testimony of reliable witnesses as any court of law is supposed to be.

God’s Covenant Too Includes Facts, Definitions and Laws — To observe, as the article does, that the Bible is concerned about God’s covenant relations does not imply that its “truth” is not conformity to facts or that it excludes precise definitions and prescriptions. It implies the exact opposite. That “covenant” revelation included laws divinely formulated and expressed in words. Think of Psalms 1, 19 and 119 which express the believers’ “delight” and enthusiasm about exactly the clear and carefully defined character of God’s revelation to His people in contrast with the murky confusion of surrounding paganism — and, one might add, of too much modern religion.

Paul in Galatians 3:15 compares God’s covenant with human contracts and similar legal documents: “Brethren, I speak after the manner of men: Though it be but a man’s covenant, yet when it hath been confirmed, no one maketh it void or addeth thereto,” and he grounds his further argument on the difference between a singular and a plural in the formulation of God’s promise. The argument runs that if even human contracts are treated with a concern for the accuracy and precision of their statements, much more must we receive God’s covenant revelation with such an appreciation of and attention to the verbal accuracy and precision with which He caused it to be expressed and written.

The Lord Jesus was just as insistent that in this inscripturated covenant revelation even the “jot” and “tittle” (Matt. 5:18) mattered. The gospel as Christ came to fulfill it must be preached and taught “holding the pattern of sound words” in which it was embodied “in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.” This “pattern” we must “guard through the Holy Spirit which dwelleth in us” (II Tim. 1:13, 14). The “Spirit of Truth,” promised and given, to remain with believers for ever (John 14:16), would work and has worked with the church through the centuries in its efforts to formulate, preserve, and teach its doctrines through the centuries of history. This is what our creeds and “system of Reformed thought” for which the writer expressed such scant appreciation, seek to express and preserve. The Bible’s concern with both facts and relations is well reflected in the Heidelberg Catechism’s characterization of “true faith” as “not only a sure knowledge, whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed to us in His Word, but also a firm confidence . . .” (Qu. 21).

This “New” View of Truth Comes From Modern Philosophy — The notion that “truth” in the biblical sense is not concerned with definitions, accuracy or even means conformity to facts does not arise out of the Bible at all but it is the product of modern existential philosophy. Taken over by liberal theologians, it had a strong appeal, for it enabled one to claim all of the old Christian tradition and at the same time join the mainstream of modern anti-Christian thinking in repudiating every biblical fact and doctrine. It justified saying from the pulpit, “I believe,” and at

the same time explaining, "Of course, I don't believe it happened in the way the Bible tells it or that it means what people used to think it did." This had a special appeal to the ecumenical movement which tried to bring churches together, because it reassured uncritical orthodox who had their minds put at ease by hearing the traditional Christian words, and it accommodated the liberals who knew that everyone was free to make of those words whatever he pleased. It is probably not an overstatement to say that this modern redefinition of "truth" is one of the most successful methods the devil ever devised to create confusion within Christian churches, to break down their faith and silence their gospel.

An Old and Common Liberal View — These allegedly "new" ideas are not new. Almost thirty years ago Dorothy Sayers, looking at the demoralized church scene in England wrote, "Take away theology and give us some nice religion' has been a popular slogan for so long that we are apt to accept it, without inquiring whether religion without theology has any meaning. And however unpopular I may make myself I shall and will affirm that the reason why the Churches are discredited today is not that they are too bigoted about theology, but that they have run away from theology. . . . It is not true that all dogma is 'hopelessly irrelevant' to the life and thought of the average man. What is true is that ministers of the Christian religion often assert that it is, present it for consideration as though it were, and in fact, by their faulty exposition of it make it so."

Dorothy Sayers saw the result of this state of affairs: "Theologically, this country is at present in a state of utter chaos, established in the name of religious toleration, and rapidly degenerating into the flight from reason and the death of hope. We are not happy in this condition and there are signs of a very great eagerness, especially among the younger people, to find a creed to which they can give wholehearted adherence" (*Creed or Chaos*, pp. 29, 30, 32).

In our time Francis Schaeffer has been pointing out to an ever increasing audience, especially of interested young people, this course of modern philosophical and religious thought. Near the end of his early book, *Escape from Reason*, he calls attention to the fact that even the name "Jesus" is being "used as a contentless banner." "There is no rational, scriptural content by which to test it, and thus the word is being used to teach the very opposite things from those which Jesus taught." Schaeffer wonders whether this movement is not that of Anti-Christ predicted in the Scriptures. "If evangelical Christians begin to . . . separate an encounter with Jesus from the content of the Scriptures (including the discussable and the verifiable), we shall, without intending to, be throwing ourselves and the next generation into the millstream of the modern system" (pp. 78, 79).

The view of truth Rev. Holtrop is advocating as new is not new but an old commonplace in the liberal

movement. Glancing over a recent issue (March 21) of the Lutheran *Christian News* I noticed an article discussing the Liberalism of Professor Uitti (p. 13). It includes the observation, "He supports the position of 'contemporary scholarship' that ultimately revelation lies in relationship, confrontation, communion, rather than in communication of facts." "Uitti argues that any idea of abstract, absolute, propositional 'truth' in a 'Hellenistic' sense is not present in the Bible."

A Road to Ruin instead of Revival — Rev. Holtrop believes that if our churches will adopt this view of truth, that it is concerned with relation rather than with facts, they will be freed from the frustrations and annoyances of heresy cases and will find new joy and progress in the Christian faith and life.

Most liberal church leaders of the past and present have expressed the same expectations, but has the experience of churches that followed their lead ever fulfilled such expectations? Every report we get from the old mother churches in the Netherlands as they pursue the course being advocated in this article tells not of growth and progress, but of increasing troubles and general decline. The history of other churches around us who have been following this course shows the same kind of result.

How could we expect anything else? How could subjectivizing and relativizing the very meaning of truth, and minimizing all doctrines and creeds possibly strengthen anyone's or any church's faith an influence? That course is contrary to God's Word and must lead to His judgment. We can only expect new life and influence for the Christian church when we begin to take much more seriously God's Word as His Truth, "truth" both in the sense of relatedness to Him and His people and of faithfulness to what He has said and revealed.

Time for Decision — Our churches are increasingly being compelled to decide whether we are going to return to a deepened and renewed commitment to the Bible and its truths or get further away from them. Our Synod will face decisions again in June regarding which course we will take. One point at which such a decision will have to be made will be when the Synod is asked to approve the Calvin Board's recommended appointment of the writer of this article, Rev. Philip Holtrop, to a teaching position at Calvin College. Will the 1977 Synod by its decision approve the views and teachings which this article reveals, as acceptable to prepare its young people for leadership, or will it investigate and reject them?

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*We'll tip the waitress, cute, petite,
Serving swiftly hands and feet.
Ten, fifteen percent — or more,
But, tithing for God seems a bore.*

S.C.W.

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