

Van Bruggen and Bible Translations--Ignored or Forgotten?

By Wes Bredenhof

During the 1970s two very important books by Dr. Jakob Van Bruggen appeared--The Ancient Text of the New Testament (1976) and The Future of the Bible (1978). Dr. Van Bruggen is an influential man in the worldwide Reformed community, having served for many years as a professor of New Testament at the Theological University in Kampen, the Netherlands. Naturally then, Van Bruggen's work has not gone unnoticed. A Reformed discussion on Bible translations and textual issues simply cannot overlook Van Bruggen. However, it seems that his work is being increasingly either ignored or forgotten.

In the two above-mentioned books, Van Bruggen takes a different approach to the issue of Bible translations and textual issues. Whereas many scholars follow the mainstream trend in asserting the superiority of the Alexandrian text-types, Van Bruggen breaks from the pack. Many times we can hear that these manuscripts are older and therefore better. However, Van Bruggen takes a different tack: "One of the first things a student must learn regarding the textual history, is the distinction between the age of the manuscript and the age of the text offered in that manuscript. A rather young manuscript can give a very old type of text."¹

VanBruggen argues that the age of the manuscript is really quite irrelevant--what we should be concerned about is the age of the text in that manuscript. Using this reasoning, Van Bruggen concludes that the Church should return to the Byzantine text--which is essentially the basis for the Textus Receptus (upon which the KJV and NKJV are based) and the Majority Text.

Van Bruggen also criticizes very heavily eclecticism in textual criticism. Eclecticism is simply picking and choosing a text where there are several variants. Modern scholars often subject such choices to a vote among themselves. He says that "Eclecticism is always a subjective matter and only creates new mixed texts. The criteria of eclecticism also contradict each other."² Rather than creating an eclectic text, Van Bruggen prefers the use of a Majority Text, whereby the number of manuscripts determines the text to be used where there are variants. Inevitably this Majority text would be predominated by Byzantine text types since these are the most numerous.

Van Bruggen refers to the Byzantine text as the "Church text," since it is the Greek text of the New Testament which has been used by the Church for centuries. Van Bruggen pleads for a rehabilitation of this "Church text": This text deserves to remain recognized as reliable, unless real contra-proof can be given from a recovered better text. However, there are no better texts. There are theories about a better text and there are reconstructions of such a text, but they can not conceal the fact that, over against the rejection of the ancient, well-known text of the 20th century, only the embarrassment of eclecticism and of a renewed conjectural criticism is left over. Over against this modern textual criticism, we plead for rehabilitation of the ancient and well-known text.³

Van Bruggen believes that God has not left His church with an inferior New Testament text for hundreds of years. At the end of *The Ancient Text of the New Testament* he writes, "We can only conclude with the absolute certainty, that the ancient text of God's inspired Word both now and in the future will remain an object of God's special care."⁴ Note here the echoes of Isaiah's words in the 40th chapter of his prophecy: "The grass withers, the flower fades: but the word of our God shall stand for ever."

In his second and much more popular book, Van Bruggen tackles many more aspects of the Bible translation/textual issue debate. *The Future of the Bible* was written in 1978. Since that time, many new translations have appeared. At the time of the writing of this book Dr. Van Bruggen only had access to a NIV New Testament, so his comments on that translation are not complete. Neither was the NKJV available at that time. Just the same, Van Bruggen's comments in this book can be extrapolated to cover the entirety of both of these newer versions.

More than anything else in this book, Van Bruggen argues that it is the Church which should be responsible for the preservation of God's Word. He therefore has a great deal of problems with Bible Societies making translations. He believes that translations should be done by those within the Church and under the auspices of the Church, since it is the Church which has been entrusted with God's Word to begin with. He quotes the words of A. Noordtjiz: "To her (the church) the words of God have been entrusted and they must take care that their members can read and enjoy the Holy Scriptures in the purest possible form...the church must take care that this work is not taken out of her hands."⁵

Moreover, Van Bruggen notes that most Bible Societies are guided in their scholarship by the principles of dynamic equivalence translation, a method for which he has very little positive regard. Van Bruggen adequately demonstrates for the reader the results of using such a method by comparing translations such as Today's English Version (TEV), the NIV and others. Van Bruggen states that the NIV is not much better than the TEV in its employment of the dynamic equivalence method.⁶

Van Bruggen also stresses in this book the need for Bible scholarship which is guided by the Holy Spirit. Not only translators, but also those who work with the texts themselves must be true believers (cf. Art.29, B.C.)--they are not handling human documents but the very Word of God. We must therefore be suspicious when our Biblical texts are being produced by scholarship which is essentially unbelieving.

The final chapter in *The Future of the Bible* is a plea for a "Church Bible," "one reliable translation in all churches."⁷ Van Bruggen argues for a translation which can replace all others as a true "standard." He emphasizes that such a translation would have to be made by the Church, and not by a Bible society. There are many things left unsaid here. One can only assume that Van Bruggen is arguing for the True Church (cf. Art. 29, B.C.) to work on a new translation in English (since he has confessionally bound himself to that definition of "Church"). One wonders why Van Bruggen's pleas have gone unheeded and ignored.

A final thing to note in Van Bruggen's popular work is his positive attitude towards the King James Version. In the second appendix of *The Future of the Bible*, Van Bruggen compares the KJV with five modern versions. Van Bruggen's conclusions are surprising, especially for our day and age where there is virtually no end to the reverent negative view on the KJV⁸: "The language of the KJV is antiquated and should be improved for the twentieth century, but as a translation it is the most reliable one in use."⁹ As was mentioned earlier, this was written before the appearance of the New King James Version. One can only speculate that Van Bruggen would be satisfied with the NKJV, since it basically follows the KJV and the Greek text upon which it was based.

It seems rather strange that Van Bruggen is not more influential in his views on Bible translations and textual issues. His views are by and large supported by Scripture. He builds his arguments on Scriptural and Confessional foundations. To the knowledge of the present writer, no Reformed scholar has ever gone on record as openly engaging his arguments.¹⁰ Is Van Bruggen being forgotten or ignored? Perhaps some of both. Let's hope and pray that Van Bruggen's work receives more of the close attention which it well-deserves.

1 Ancient Text of the New Testament, p.22.

2 Ibid., p.38.

3 Ibid., p.36.

4 Ibid., p.40.

5 *The Future of the Bible*, footnote 25, pp.65-66.

6 With regards to Luke 9:46-48 : "Neither is the NIV very faithful to the form of the text...The TEV and the Living Bible have readings similar to the NIV." (p172). With regards to Luke 9:49-50: "The NASB and the RSV are nearer to the KJV in faithfulness to form than the NIV." (p.175). With regards to John 3:5: "The RSV and the NASB offer a literal translation, and the TEV and the Living Bible take the same course as the NIV." (p.184). With regards to Romans 1:16-17: "The NIV and the TEV offer a translation that does not reproduce the distinct words of Paul."(p.185). With regards to 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12, "The NIV, like the TEV..." (p.189). Van Bruggen contrasts the KJV (and RSV and NASB) with the NIV (and TEV and the Living Bible). He does grant that the NIV is less influenced by doctrinal considerations in its use of dynamic equivalence (p.192) than the TEV, but his conclusion is still that the KJV is the most reliable translation available (despite his comment on p.147 that the book is not meant to defend or suggest a particular translation).

7 Ibid., p.143.

8 Reverent negativity = "The King James Version has with good reason been termed "the noblest monument of English prose...Yet the King James Version has grave defects." (Preface to the RSV, p. iii).

9 Ibid., p.192.

10 Others have critiqued his work, see for example, "The Majority-Text Theory: History, Methods and Critique," Daniel B. Wallace, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Vol.37, No.2 (June 1994).

QUIA or QUATENUS

[This is an article which appeared under “Pers Revue” (Press Review) in the Gereformeed Kerkblad (Reformed Church News) for Overijssel, Gelderland, Utrecht, North Holland and Flevoland (the Netherlands). It was taken from “Die Kerkblad van de Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Africa”; and was written by prof. V. E. d’Assonville, who attended the I.C.R.C. in Langley some years ago. It was written in the Dutch South African language.]

More than one hundred years ago a deplorable disdain prevailed (in the Netherlands, but also on other continents) regarding the Reformed Confessions. Liberalism about the doctrine of the Church also brought licentiousness in life style. For the Church leaders this even became a battle about the difference between the QUIA and QUATENUS. This simply means that in the first instance a person undersigns the confessions because they are in accordance with God’s Word, and in the second case in-as-far as they are in accordance with God’s Word. In the last case a person would be free to decide for himself what is acceptable in the confessions, and what is not.

During that time of neglect of the confessions, the Reformed Churches became involved in a severe battle against liberalism. Dr. A. Kuyper, in his “Treatise of the Reformation of the Church” (1884) strongly pointed out the extreme danger of the crippling of the Reformed Confessions.

The Over-Estimation of the Confessions

In the first place the danger exists that the Church’s only source from which she derives her doctrine are the confessions, and not the Bible. Then the Church’s “confessionalism” will be no more than a sham. Although the confessions are completely based on the Bible, they must always be proven by that Word. The Three Forms of Unity, which we all underwrite, have no authority over the Holy Scriptures, but Scripture has authority over the Confessions. It is plainly not true that there exists some kind of a dubious uncertainty here.

It could be compared to a compass and a map. The directions of the compass are always stable and based on the map. Only a foolish traveler in a strange country will solely depend on a compass and discard the map. But it is also foolish not to look for possible mistakes in it. All ministers (also elders and deacons) must, therefore, promise with their signatures, that in case they have some misgivings regarding these teachings, that they will not “openly or in secret, in preaching or in writing” expound these objections, but bring them first to the attention of the major assemblies (See art. 53 and 54 of the Church Order. They deal with the subscription form for professors, ministers, elders and deacons). This is the order of Christ’s Church - the beautiful and honest method for raising objections. As long as this route is open in the Church, the Confessions will never attempt to overrule the Bible.

The Confession as a False Flag

The greatest danger in the first instance (especially in this day and age) is that the nerves of the Reformed Confessions will be severed. The Church will then become paralyzed. Then a

disease has infiltrated the Church, which gradually will become more severe if nothing is done against it. This is the road to deformation. When the nerves of the Confessions are severed, then it is possible that the Church theoretically still glories in them, but in practice the Confessions are not being preserved anymore. "Reformed" then becomes a nice fashionable appellation; the ornate Banner to navigate the ocean. Church leaders then profess with abundant bravery "We are Reformed" but this is only a classification to distinguish them from other denominations. It may also be expedient from a historical point of view to consider oneself "Reformed", but it is all one big parody. The banner only covers the cargo, but does not expose what actually goes on within her walls.

Here we have precisely one of the most deadly dangers which has threatened the Reformed Churches over and over. History is telling us a sad story. Armenius, who was a minister of the Reformed Church in Amsterdam, and later became a professor in Leyden, was once able to declare, with his hand upon his chest, that he adhered to the Reformed Confessions, but at the same time openly disputed God's sovereign grace. This dispute ended at the Synod of Dordt in 1618-1619.

Imagine that it is possible, even today, in the Reformed world, to ascribe to the name "Reformed" and at the same time deny the Scriptures, with all sorts of human intellect to mutilate the Bible... That it is possible in this world to "fight", as they call it, for the Reformed principles in doctrine and in life, and at the same time gloss over horrible sins such as abortion, homosexuality, gambling, etc. This is what makes the situation in the world and our country so dark and grim today - also, frequently in the Reformed Churches!

Many men, throughout the history of the Church, have called those deviations a "Confession Disease". Today we are suffering from the same malady. Often the name "Reformed" has been cheapened. This is confessional apostasy. If the title "Reformed" is only used as a pretention then this is also apostasy from God's Word. Reformation means return to God's Word. At the same time this will be a return to the confessions. For then the importance of the "Map" in the history of the Church will be understood again. Then there will be appreciation for the Apostolic Creed... the Athanasian Creed... the Nicene Creed... the works of Luther and Calvin...the Belgic Confession...the Heidelberg Catechism...and the Canons of Dordt. Then we will clearly see the beauty of the Reformed Confessions when they appear in the proclamation of the minister on Sundays and in the words of the faithful elders and deacons in their visits in the congregation.. Then we will recognize them when the sacraments are faithfully administered and when church discipline is exercised. In your local congregation you will discover the great value of the Confessions and from them you will have not trouble discovering where the true and the false church are (Art.28 and 29 of the Belgic Confession).

Submitted by A.Heetebrij

The Message

Say to my people, there is a tempest in the air
- But Lord, for years on end the storms already roar -
Again: There will be greater tempest yet
-But Lord, they don't believe it anymore

This is a people after games and bread:
Not only once, but most repeatedly.
No matter how I waste my warning words of threat
It laughs and plays...denying Thee persistently.

Oh yes, I see some faithful ones among the others
But, Lord, they are so few and far between
And mostly they are children with their mothers -

Prophet, stand up! Prophet, prophesy I say
For ere I come as the Almighty Judge
My people must return to me in every way.

1 Kings 18:21

Andries Dongera

[Submitted by A.Heetebrij, translated from the Dutch as it appeared in Reformanda]

REPORTS FROM SYNOD IN THE NETHERLANDS

The prayer meeting for the synod was held on April 9th. It was lead by Rev. Sliggers, chairman of the last held synod. Wednesday April 10th synod was constituted. Chosen to moderamen were:

Ds. Tj. Boersma	Chairman
Ds. P.H.R. van Houweling	1st Clerk
Ds. C. van den Berg	2nd Clerk
Ds. P.Niemeijer	Assessor

One primus delegate was replaced by a secundus for the duration of synod. Ds. L. Sollie (Meppel) replaced Ds. K.J. Kapteyn (Hoogeveen)

The closing date for the agenda was set at April 15. No less then 265 letters/appeals have been received. Many deal with items that have to be discussed at synod. Part of the reason for this is that deputies here try to publish their reports six months before synod. These reports don't just go to the consistories, but anybody can buy them and read them. As a consequence church members can already make their feelings known before synod has discussed the reports.

Many expect the synod to last past the summer.

Remember the synod in your prayer

Based on e-mail received from David de Vos, Amersfort, the Netherlands - PdB.

Pursuing Ecclesiastical Unity

On Saturday, April 20, 1996, Dr. J. de Jong of the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches spoke at an office - bearers conference at the Maranatha Church building in Surrey, British Columbia. His topic, Pursuing Ecclesiastical Unity, was divided into three sections: Obstacles, Possibilities and Strategies. At the outset of his presentation he indicated that his

remarks would focus on the discussions and relationships between the Canadian Reformed Churches and the Fellowship of Uniting Churches. This latter group is a new federation formed in 1995 by a number of congregations that had left the Christian Reformed Church in Canada and the United States. Many of them had been in existence as Independent Churches.

Although the hosting minister, Rev. Van Spronsen, thanked the speaker at the end of the conference for abiding by the request presented to him at a short meeting beforehand - to present a balanced approach to the subject - in retrospect one wonders if this request led to the minimal emphasis on the first section of the outline of the speech. The outline noted that there are Confessional Obstacles and Church Order matters. During the speech Dr. de Jong explained that there are not really any Confessional Obstacles. He did note that the expression "sanctified in Christ" has been eliminated from the questions asked at baptism. He also noted that some among the Uniting Churches recognize a theology of covenantal presumptiveness among the Canadian Reformed.

The focus of the presentation was that we should strive for immediate unity with this new federation. The main reason for such a strategy was considered to be their positive action in adopting the Church Order of 1920 which is very similar to the Church Order of Dordt. As there had been a strong movement toward a newly drawn up church order, Dr. de Jong saw positive signs in their rejection of such a direction. At the same time he warned that reluctance to act in the present may provide sufficient time for a new church order to win acceptance among the Uniting Churches in the future. If that were to happen, and if it were to resemble the one suggested at the inaugural synod of this new federation, he envisioned much more difficulty along the road to unity.

Among some of the issues that would come up for discussion in the process of uniting, four concerns were addressed. Dr. de Jong felt that their use of the 1957 Psalter Hymnal for the time being would not be objectionable. We, on the other hand, should not easily give up the gains we have made in our Book of Praise. This matter would have to be given time and might not be resolved totally for a generation or two.

Although the Unity Churches consider us too strict in the matter of (travel) attestations for the admission to the Lord's Supper table, Dr. de Jong indicated that we should be able to convince them of the wisdom of such a practice. We ought to be able to show them from Scripture that both doctrine and life come into play in this regard.

The desire to exchange pulpits should be considerably restricted according to the speaker. He reminded the meeting that the training for the ministry among the Uniting Churches was varied and that access to our pulpits should be severely limited as the preaching of the Word is one of the means of grace and should not be treated lightly.

Finally, it was noted that this new federation does not stipulate that the Heidelberg Catechism should be preached about once per Sunday. On the other hand, the proposed, new church order would include an agreement to preach once per Sunday from the Three Forms of Unity. Discussion about this matter should lead to agreement rather easily.

Towards the end of his presentation Dr. de Jong touched on a Dutch proposal to establish a federation of federations. Although he did not want to discard the idea completely he did indicate a number of difficulties and redundancies with this idea.

In conclusion, Dr. de Jong emphasized the need for federative unity as opposed to individual or independent unity. He reminded his listeners of the duties of the individual churches to their present federative partners. This responsibility is to be seen as analogous to a marriage relationship. Although there has been considerable call for local initiative in contact between churches, he stressed that the local situation should be dealt with in conjunction with the respective federations. In this regard Dr. de Jong feels that a consistory may recognize another congregation as a true church, but ought not to take independent action until it is ratified by major assemblies.

The ensuing discussion reflected the presentation. Although there was a rather meager turnout, those who did come showed a keen interest in the topic.

PdB