SYNOD NEERLANDIA 2001

CANADIAN / AMERICAN REFORMED CHURCHES

A prayer service will be held in the Canadian Reformed Church at Neerlandia, Alberta, Canada on April 30 at 8:00PM. Rev.R.Aasman will conduct the service in which the Lord will be implored for a blessing over the work of Synod 2001. It is not unusual to ask the Lord for a blessing over work in the Church. It is the expected address for all our help. Every Lord’s Day we are reminded of and confess together that “our help is in the Name of the Lord Who made heaven and earth.”

Synod will begin its work on Tuesday, May 1st. Sixteen delegates will meet until the complete agenda has been dealt with. Before the meetings and discussions have begun the best estimate is that they will last at least two weeks and everyone would like to be home again by the holiday weekend in the third week of May. The sixteen delegates consist of eight ministers and eight elders. Each delegate has been mandated by their respective Regional Synods (East and West: four ministers and four elders from each.)

As a delegate to Synod and an avidly interested church member one soon comes to the realization that without that very ‘help’ of our heavenly Father the Church and its members are busy with a losing proposition. The sin and its effect have taken a toll in all aspects of life. The Evil One surely attacks throughout the battlefield of mankind, but he definitely does not leave the covenant people of God alone. Where defense of the truth is desperately pursued, the devil is bound to be near by.

The agenda of Synod speaks clearly about the hopes, dreams and struggles of the Church and its members. Based on the clear injunction of Scripture that all God’s people must be one in faith, the Church continues to struggle for unity with all that show a sincere desire and effort to worship the one true God according to His Word. There is likely no one among the believers in Church who does not hope for a unity with so many who have the Reformed understanding of God’s Word. Surely there are also many that visualize the effect that, according to human standards, unity of believers can have on the work of the Church.

But there is also a great struggle that accompanies the pursuit of unity. No one will agree that unity must be attained even at the cost of compromising the truth. At the same time many will explain that numerous differences are not of an essential nature. One must expect that the work of the Lord that has taken place in various countries and on different continents will have some differences. In the pursuit of unity the struggle of the Canadian Reformed Churches has been to unite in an approach toward other federations. This struggle is obvious when the agenda of the upcoming Synod is scrutinized.

Since the establishment of the Canadian/American Reformed Churches (CanRC) in the 1950’s unity with others has been a matter of the agenda of Synods. Throughout the years committees have been established to approach other federations and their committees for discussions and interaction. At Synod 2001 in Neerlandia an extensive report will be tabled from the Committee for Contact with Churches in the Americas (CCCA). This committee will report on discussions with the committees for contact of the Eglise Reformee du Quebec (ERQ), the Reformed Church in the
United States (RCUS) as well as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC). With all of these federations contact has been ongoing for numbers of years. New contact has also been established with the Independent Church of Mexico.

A variety of appeals and overtures from churches and individuals regarding the CCCA report and decisions of the last Synod (Fergus, 1998) will have to be dealt with. Most of these deal with issues that are seen as hurdles to some and obstacles to others. The fencing of the Lord’s Supper table has become a pivotal issue in many of the discussions with Presbyterian churches. It appears that many of the issues would fall away if agreement could be reached about what the Church really is, according to God’s Word. The matter of pluriformity of the Church has not been in focus during the discussions but does appear to be the fundamental theme that lies behind the difficulties in coming to grips with the matters that are to be dealt with. Concerning the RCUS the discussions include the fencing of the Lord’s Supper table as well as some other differences in practice. Synod could well establish Ecclesiastical Fellowship with both or either the OPC and/or the RCUS. On the other hand, the number of appeals and overtures regarding the recommendations of committees and subcommittees does indicate an active disagreement within the federation. The struggle of unity seems to include disunity within the CanRC.

At the same time the Committee for the Promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity (CPEU) will report on discussions they have had with the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA), the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches (OCRC) and the Free Reformed Churches in North America (FRCNA). This committee has also had contact with churches within the CanRC to give guidance and conformity with regard to local contacts with these three church federations.

The CPEU has come to the point of agreeing to a specific agenda for full federative unity with the URCNA committee for contact. Both committees have addressed their respective Synods for approval of the timetable they have agreed to. Such approval would mean that the CanRC and the URCNA would unite into one federation in the year of our Lord 2004. Who would not rejoice at such an occasion? Yet, there are voices that question the speed of this agreement. Discussions and public meetings have also been held with the FRCNA. Also in the discussions of the CPEU the matter of pluriformity lies at the background.

An other committee that has brought an extensive report is the Committee on Relations with Churches Abroad (CRCA). Their report deals with Church federations that the CanRC already have sister-church (Ecclesiastical Fellowship) with. They are the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland – Vrijgemaakt (GKN), the Presbyterian Churches of Korea – Kosin (PCK), the Free Reformed Churches of South Africa (FRCSA), the Free Church of Scotland (FCS) and the Free Reformed Churches of Australia (FRCA). This committee also deals with the membership of the CanRC in the International Council of Reformed Churches (ICRC).

With regard to the GKN the committee has reported on a number of decisions made at the recent Dutch synods that have raised some question about the direction being taken. As many of the members of the CanRC have a common heritage in the GKN, developments in her midst are not only of an ecclesiastic concern but also touch the human emotion. Many expressions of surprise and sadness have been heard when word of the various decisions has come to the churches whose members have their roots in those churches. Issues of concern in the report of the committee
include a change in understanding of the fourth commandment. A change in the marriage form has also taken place. The number of hymns for the worship services has increased dramatically. Women as well as the men are voting for officers of the church. In some cases Synod did not follow the accepted practice for receiving material and recommendations for change via the churches (the concern of hierarchy has been expressed). Concern has also been expressed about the lack of communication and cooperation in the establishment of relationships between the GKN and churches where the GKN already has sister churches. One of the adopted rules for Ecclesiastic Fellowship states that such communication and discussion is to take place before further relationships are established.

The reports concerning the Australian and South African churches are heart-warming. Even though the South African churches have gone through difficult times in the past years it appears that the Lord has given them a period of relative peace.

Developments in the relationship with the Scottish and Korean churches are a bit more troublesome. In Scotland the FCS has suffered a terrible split. At present there are two separate groups that claim to be the continuation of the original Free Church. At the same time the lack of correspondence with the Korean churches brings up questions about the purpose, function and benefits of ecclesiastic fellowship with this federation.

As mentioned the CRCA has membership in the ICRC as part of its mandate as well. There has been some discussion about our involvement in recommending new members to this organization. Some argue for a restricted involvement while are others would like to see a broader involvement. This will also have the attention of the delegates at Synod.

The only standing committee in the CanRC is the Committee for the Book of Praise (CBOP). This is because the CanRC consciously strive to prevent hierarchy. All committees are reappointed and mandated at Synod. The exception for the Book of Praise committee is because of the legal requirement to have an entity to address and be responsible for the patents and other legal issues that surround such a book. It was mandated by the previous Synod to aspire to a book with musical notations on all pages. Although this mandate has not been fulfilled, work towards this goal is ongoing.

Synod will have to deal with a request from the eastern regional synod that asks for an increased mandate for the CBOP to cover the handling of proposed changes that may come from a variety of sources. At present the committee does not have such a mandate and those who wish to propose changes are left with no other alternative but to address Synods. Some changes are also suggested for the Church Order. (This has to do with accepting ministers from other federations when they come without a congregation.) Amendments have also been suggested for the language in the Heidelberg Catechism.

A suggestion has been made to standardize the Subscription Form. At present there is no uniformity in this matter, although the gist of all the subscription forms in federation is the same.

The Board of Governors regularly reports to the Synods. The College belongs to the Churches and as such the Board of Governors is appointed by the various Synods, as needed. At this Synod a new
appointment will have to be made for professor in the New Testament department. Prof. Geertsema will be retiring.

Regional Synod East has asked Synod to appoint a committee to once more study the matter of women voting for officers in the Church. One of the reasons they express is the fact that the GKN has recently adopted this practice. Synod will have to decide if this is sufficient ground to reconsider the issue as it has been dealt with at several Synods in the past.

The Committee on Bible Translations reported to Synod that they have had no correspondence from the Churches. They feel their mandate has been fulfilled and see no need to be reappointed.

Some correspondence and private appeals round out the balance of the agenda for Synod. One can hardly disagree that the foregoing is a formidable task for any group of sixteen men, no matter how learned they may be. Only in the strength of the Head of the Church can this task be undertaken. As the brothers study and prepare, discuss and debate may our Father and the Lord of heaven and earth strengthen and encourage them. May they be blessed with wisdom from above, basing all their decisions on the Word of God and to the glory of His name.

PdB

THE SUFFERING OF CHRIST

A Men’s Society introduction on John 18 and 19 by Pete Jansen

In the previous chapters we saw how Christ instructed His disciples in a kind of farewell address and concluded these discourses with a prayer commending them and the church to His Father. He is their Protector. At the end of the Passover meal Christ sings His own Psalms, the songs He has made by the hand of David. They (Psalms 113 - 118) are called the Hallel. They either start or finish with the words “Praise the Lord” and were always sung at the Feasts of Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles or Dedication. Also our song at the end of each Lord’s Supper table is not an empty gesture giving elders a chance to bring back the beakers, but it is in keeping with the liturgy. We can hear Christ sing His own words, for example, in Psalm 116, “I am O Lord, Thy servant, bound yet free” or “The cords of death encompassed me, the terrors of Sheol came upon me.” How meaningful these words must have been for Him! Incidentally, the Psalms 146 - 150 are called the Great Hallel and are sung on the Sabbaths.

Jesus and His disciples then cross the Kidron Valley and climb the slopes of the Mount of Olives to the Garden of Gethsemane. This forms the center of the world. The Lord knows full well that Judas will seek Him there to betray Him. Luke records that it was dark, which means more than that it was before sunrise. The hour of darkness has come at God’s time. Jesus is in full control of events that are to take place. He takes the initiative. When the temple police and the soldiers arrive it is He who asks: “Whom do you seek?” Again we hear three times the Godly Name “I AM”. Three is the number of completeness, especially with reference to God. As soon as they hear, “I AM HE”, those who are to arrest Him fall down before His Majesty. The Lord is in full control of
the situation, in contrast to Peter who later on is totally lost and ends up in a terrible denial using the words “I am not” three times. But Christ is sovereign in the whole situation, even in the hour of arrest and death, totally committed to the will of His Father. This is also evident in the fact that He tells Peter to sheathe his sword, for He is determined to drink the cup the Father has given Him.

Then Christ performs His last miracle by healing the ear of Malchus. This miraculous deed is completely ignored and Christ is bound like a criminal. But God’s Word is not bound. Samson’s hands were bound, but he receives the strength to easily shake off these bonds. Peter also when he was imprisoned later on is set free by the Lord. But the ropes around Christ’s hands cannot be untied. Yet as a King who cares for His subjects He makes sure that His disciples go free, not only physically, but also with a deeper meaning of spiritual well-being. We think here of His High Priestly prayer in Chapter 17: 12: “I guarded them and none of them perished, but the son of perdition.”

When Jesus is standing in front of Annas He is questioned about His teachings. Also here He speaks with authority, and when an attendant strikes him He challenges their injustice. For Christ has openly taught in public and no one (who has heard the gospel) can get away from the Words He taught.

John makes no further record of the trial before the Jews. You can hardly call it a hearing, for Christ is ‘ex lex’, outside the law. He stood condemned even before He had a trial. During His ministry Jesus was continually on trial and a death sentence was already predetermined (John 11). But the Lamb of God cannot do without the High Priest for He is to be slaughtered according to the law of God, outside the gates of Jerusalem (Lev. 16:27). That which is unclean is thrown outside on the dunghill, which is a symbol of hell (Jeremiah 7: 31, Isaiah 66: 24). John also tells us in detail how Peter denies the Lord. Again Christ is in control. Every minute counts - the denial, the rooster that crows, Christ looking down at him. Peter is mingling with the “world” and warming himself at their charcoal fire in order not to look conspicuous. As we already mentioned, he lost control and leaves weeping bitterly. Later on after the resurrection the disciples sit around another charcoal fire, prepared by the Lord and it is then that Peter is reinstated, also in triple form.

Next we see Jesus before Pilate. The Jews stayed outside, for they did not want to be defiled by entering gentile places. John skillfully relates in detail what is taking place, structuring it in 7 parts, like a chasm.

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<td>A 18:28-33</td>
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<td>C 18:38b-40</td>
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Jesus is scourged
What dominates the trial is Jesus’ Kingship. For John that means the same as Messiah-ship. He is truly Israel’s King, but not in the worldly sense. We have seen some of it in Nathaniel’s confession and also in the triumphant entry into Jerusalem on a donkey. Now the theme of kingship comes to a climax. It is in the first question Pilate is asking, but then in relationship to someone as a national leader. In His answer the Lord makes it very clear that such an idea belongs to the world. His kingship is not of this world, and only those who are of the truth will recognize His voice. Pilate demonstrates his exclusion from Christ’s kingdom when he asks the next question “What is truth?” Even worse, the Jews exclude themselves by their cry of allegiance to Tiberias “We have no King but Caesar.” It is tragic that the Jewish prayers of later times address God as their King. When Pilate presents our Lord to the Jews, “Behold your King”, they respond with the words “crucify Him”. In reality they reject God as King. Pilate, realizing that Jesus is innocent, wants to solve the problem by putting forward Barabbas in order to set Jesus free. But in Chapter 18 verse 40 we read: they ALL cried together, the public as well as the rulers: “Away with Him, not this Man, but Barabbas!” Pilate now wants the chief priests and councilors to take the responsibility, but they quickly let him know that he cannot escape responsibility either. In a last effort Pilate threatens our Lord with his authority and power. Christ then speaks the last words in His trial: that God is in control and to Him alone belongs honour and authority. Then, when Pilate feels uncomfortable about his position, he wants to outwit the Jews and says, “Behold your King”. Do you really expect me to crucify your own king? Then the High priest receives from God the terrible privilege of having the last say: “Bow before Caesar”. The official decision has been made.

In John’s gospel Christ’s Kingship keeps coming to the fore. His theme of kingship is further shown in the crucifixion. Pilate insists on the superscription of the words, “the King of the Jews”, written in 3 languages for the whole world to see. The cross is where Christ draws all nations to Himself. All aspects of life are represented in the three languages: In the Roman, the judicial; in the Greek, the commercial; in the Hebrew, the liturgical. Several times John mentions Christ’s words that the Son of Man must be lifted up. He is, as it were, exalted on the cross. John gives us the impression of a coronation, an enthronement from where Christ issues orders, “woman behold your son, Son behold your mother.” Here we think back to the wedding at Cana where Mary came to the Lord with a request. At that time the hour had not yet come, but the hour is now that the promise of salvation is to be fulfilled in Christ’s death. Mary becomes a symbol of all that come to the cross of Christ in faith and are directed to the care of the Beloved disciple, who is the guardian
of the revelation of Jesus. In Matthew and Mark mention is made that Jesus rejected the wine offered to Him. In John 19: 28, 29 we get the impression that the Lord drank of this wine. Now suppose that Christ as Priest had actually permitted Himself to be dulled, doped - then He would have been dismissed from the priesthood. The priest may never be drunk in the House of God. Do you recognize the satanic temptation in this sedative drink? The first Adam was told ahead of time not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, but the second Adam was unaware of the sedation in the cup. As soon as He realized it, He obediently refused to drink it.

It is Luke who mentions, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”. Of the 7 words that Christ spoke on the cross, the one that speaks about forgiveness is by far the best known. Everybody may sing along with Handel’s Messiah: “Thou shalt dash them to pieces”, but sadly enough many consider this “Old Testament stuff” and say we must come to the real heart of the gospel, “Father forgive.” K. Schilder tells us about 2 different meanings of the Greek original for “forgive”. The one is a legal setting free of all previous charges, the other a temporary suspension of the charge of sentence. He goes on to explain that we can understand the phrase in this way. “Father let the tree of Israel stand today in order that there may be occasion for grafting new shoots to the old trunk and in order that thereafter the dead branches may by a more conclusive gesture be thrust into the oven. In our eyes everything on earth seems to go around in the vicious circle of Eccl. 8. But our Lord Jesus Christ has put an end to this endless repeating of things. But remember postponement is not cancellation. He calls the councils together (eg: Nicea, Chalcedon, Dordt, 1944) and he wrote by the hand of John on Patmos: “Come Lord Jesus, yea, come quickly!

RESTING - THE ESSENCE OF THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT

There was a time when Canadian provinces had a Lord’s Day Act in their repertoire of enactments. In these pieces of legislation provisions were made to limit unbridled commercial activities on the Sunday. That time seems far behind us now when in this age of secularization not only in Canada but also elsewhere the special status of the Day of the Lord is being dismantled. Concerted efforts are made to eradicate all distinction between the Sunday and the other days of the week.

In the Netherlands these efforts are in full swing and it is therefore not surprising that also there more and more situations arise in which church people become involved in conflicts regarding their efforts to maintain the Sunday as the Day of the Lord. Even the last general Synod of the Dutch Liberated Reformed Churches had to deal with such situations and in the ecclesiastical press ample attention was devoted to these matters.

Recently there has been an intense polemical discussion between Dr. J. Douma, emeritus professor at the Theological University of our sister churches in Kampen and Dr. P. van Gurp, editor of the periodical “Reformanda”. The bulk of this article is a translation of an article published in Nederlands Dagblad with regard to their discussion.

The issue regarding the Sunday as Christian Sabbath is not primarily the freedom and opportunity to attend worship services, but the state of rest as contained in the wording of the fourth commandment. Dr. Van Gurp sets this forth in reaction to the position taken by Dr. J. Douma.
Since the last Synod it is allowed in the Reformed Churches (Liberated) that in one church the message is proclaimed that the Word of the Lord demands that we shall rest on the Sunday. In an other Church the congregation gets to hear that the Lord does not command us to rest on the Sunday. It is only important that we attend the worship services. Dr. Douma now primarily advocates mutual tolerance between the adherents of both directions. He advanced several arguments for this.

The first is that according to Dr. Douma there has always been difference of opinion about the significance of the fourth commandment for the New Testament Church. But, although it is true that there have been some differences about limitations and exemptions regarding the application of the rest in the celebration of the Sunday, there never was any difficulty about the principle question of whether there was a commandment of God regarding resting on Sundays.

**Spiritual Significance**

Dr. Douma points to the difference between the Westminster Confessions and the Heidelberg Catechism. The former state very clearly that man must rest on Sunday. But the Heidelberg Catechism does not say this according to Dr. Douma. It only stresses the obligation to attend the worship services and the spiritual significance of the fourth commandment for the New Testament dispensation. However, when the catechism teaches us the spiritual significance of resting then this definitely does not mean that the fourth commandment contains only this aspect. Even though it is not stated in so many words that the Lord instructs us to rest in the fourth commandment it must be said that the first and foremost aspect of the this commandment is the rest. The abundantly plain wording of a commandment does not need to be repeated in the explanation of it.

**Fourth Commandment Fulfilled**

But surely the fourth commandment has been fulfilled in and by Christ, Dr. Douma says. Yes, all commandments have been fulfilled in and by Christ. But this definitely does not mean that they now are not valid anymore. What the Lord Jesus Christ has accomplished for us by His resurrection is this, that now we may continue to share in the state of rest that we hear about after the creation. He has made all things new again. That is also why He has moved the day of rest from the seventh to the first day of the week - the day of His resurrection - the Day of the Lord!

Nobody has been able to provide any Scriptural proof for the opinion that there would be no commandment of the Lord to rest on His day. The texts advanced by Dr. Douma - and others - are indeed cited because their sound effects give a vague impression that these texts have a bearing on the subject under discussion, but which is not the case. These texts deal with the observance of the ceremonial service of the Old Testament. There is on the other hand very clear Scriptural proof for the opposite. We read: “You shall surely observe of the Sabbath a perpetual covenant, a sign forever (Ex.31:16 & 17). Here the same expression is used that we find in Gen.17:7 “I will establish My covenant ... for an everlasting covenant.”

**Resting and Celebrating**

Dr. Douma repeatedly stresses that resting is necessary to enable us to celebrate the Sunday as festive days. First, the Lord says that we must remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy. This day
must be set apart from the other days as especially intended for the service of the Lord. As far as this relates to the Church services, it is of course necessary that you not be at work all day.

But if that would be all, then, consequently this would mean that you might go to work on Sunday without any qualms, as long as you attend the worship services. We know that since the Synod of Leusden here and there ides of this nature are promulgated from the pulpits in our churches. But these two notions do not do justice to the command to rest. It is exactly the idea of resting that makes up the essential meaning and objective of the observance of the Sunday as the Christian Sabbath.

Conversely, the worship services are needed to teach us what this resting on Sunday means. Resting on Sunday is defined and characterized by these worship services. For this resting is a following in the footsteps of the Lord. It simply means - stop working!

Of course this does not mean that on Sundays we all can become couch potatoes. The essence of the resting by God after creation was contained in His observing of all that He had made and how good it was. It was the joyful contemplation of His work of creation. The Lord wants that we do likewise and share in His joy.

Now that Christ has risen from the dead on the first day of the week our rest and joyful contemplation of God’s creation is an enduring reality. Re-creation has been accomplished in principle and all things are being and will be made new.

If it had only been the intention of our Lord in the fourth commandment that we should attend the worship services would that not have been more clearly spelled out in the commandment? After all, the Lord does not say anything in the fourth commandment about the worship services. But a service of worship was nevertheless already instituted in Old Testament times. When the Shunamite wants to go to Elisha because of the death of her son, her husband surprisingly asks: “It is not Sabbath is it? (2 Kings 4:23). On the Sabbath the prophet apparently held a service. Even so, in the days of the Lord Jesus Christ there was a ‘church service’ on every Sabbath. The gospels clearly make mention of this fact.

Tolerance?

Dr. Douma advocates tolerance for those who are of the opinion that they may work themselves or have others work for them on Sunday and also put this opinion into practice. He also advocates tolerance for preachers who proclaim in the Lord’s Name that He does not command us to rest on the Sunday.

How can there be tolerance in the Church to allow one minister to proclaim that the Lord orders us to cease from all labour (except works of necessity, charity and religion), while a second minister assures congregations that the Lord does not give command about resting on Sundays?

This is not a matter of difference of opinion but of contradiction in the proclamation of the Word of God - thus says the Lord!

The example of tolerance with respect to consumption of meat definitely does not fit in this context. Whoever tries to take this as point of departure for the discussion in this matter has already accepted as proof that which still has to be proven. This is called an instance of “petitio principii” or
“begging the question”; and instance of advancing a phony argument. In the question of consumption of meat in the letters of Paul the issue was about meat which had been offered to idols. Such meat had not become inedible, as it did not change in character at all. But in the matter we are discussing the issue has to do with something the Lord has expressly commanded - that we shall rest on His Day.

Missionary Significance

We still want to point out the missionary significance of the observance of the Christian Sabbath. It would not only be a disaster for the Church if the idea that a commandment of the Lord to rest on the Sunday does not exist were legitimized. It would also be a disaster for the world. When Israel were disobedient with regard to the Sabbath when they were in Babylon the Lord warned His people that thereby the salvation of the heathen people of Babylon was put at risk (Isaiah 56:1-8). There the Lord speaks about the eunuchs (who from of old were not allowed to enter the sanctuary) and also about the heathen ‘foreigners’, that they will obtain joy and gladness in God’s house of prayer as if belonging to His people. That will happen, says the Lord, “when they keep from profaning my Sabbath.” This is mentioned by Him as a summary of “choosing what pleases Me and holding fast My covenant” (vs 4).

At the last Synod serious warnings were spoken. The churches were warned that, especially as consequence of the decisions regarding the fourth commandment, they are in imminent danger of internal estrangement, of growing apart. There is only one way to avoid this, namely by a repeal of Synod’s decision regarding the fourth commandment.

Then still enough accommodation can be provided to discuss questions as to whether certain modes of work on Sunday are within the limits of work of necessity, charity or religion. But the contents of the fourth commandment must remain the confession of the Church as God’s Word. On that day we shall rest. We and our families and those employed by us. That is definitely not a typically Dutch tenet of faith. It is confessed worldwide; also in Korea and France and Scotland, also in Canada, Australia and South Africa; wherever God’s law is still respected and upheld.

LvZ.