

Was Abraham Reformed ?
A practical way of reformed thinking
Rev. H.J.J. Feenstra



Preface and Translator's Notes

This is a translation of a Dutch booklet under the title “Was Abraham Gereformeerd?” by the Reverend H.J.J. Feenstra (b. Dec 9, 1943), published by “Woord en Wereld,” Ermelo, the Netherlands.* Translated by Dennis Teitsma. Typeset by Mrs. W. Raap (2004). The translation was requested by Piet Jansen from Langley B.C. It has been permitted and approved by the author.

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The question: “Was Abraham reformed”, does at first seem theoretical and illogical. Nevertheless, the Rev. Feenstra did not pose this question to invite a theoretical discussion.

The author leads the readers to a practical way of ‘reformed thinking’ with the use of concepts such as core sense, historic sense, church sense, and norm sense. These expressions are not common in English nor in Dutch (kernbesef, historisch besef, kerkbesef, normbesef). Nevertheless, the author systematically explains these concepts and he uses them to place questions about our identify as ‘reformed people’ in a surprisingly clear light. All of this is illustrated with striking examples and the author provides clarity and courage to answer today’s urgent questions.

The term sense (‘besef’) means an awareness, recognition or mental discernment, realization and comprehension of something, as for example in the expression of ‘having business sense’.

The term ‘reformed’ relates to the Great Reformation and is therefore equivalent to ‘scriptural’ or in accordance with the Bible. In Dutch it is customarily shown without a capital. Therefore, also this translation uses the term ‘reformed’ in the lower case.

The author graduated from the Theological University at Kampen, the Netherlands, in 1971. During the eighties, he wrote this booklet when he was minister at Berkel-Rodenrijs and editor of *Kerkelijk Leven*, a church magazine for the Reformed Churches (Liberated) in the four southern provinces of the Netherlands.

D.T.

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I What is the intent?

The title of this booklet is a question.- That question will have to be answered.- That answer cannot just be yes or no. - More will have to be said. - Explanation and enlightenment are needed. In turn, such enlightenment demands infrastructure, elaboration and immersion. Therefore, the title of the write-up does not cover the total content.

The title question serves as a point of departure.- It leads to a set of ways, ways of thinking. Those ways form a pattern. They are differentiated, but also mutually joined together. Then they touch each other, join together or cross each other. - Such will not always be noted. The reader will himself have to be the traveller. To put it concretely, was Abraham reformed?

Consideration of this question leads to further views of four symptoms, namely, the awareness or a sense of essence, history, church and norms. - That is mapped out in Chapter II. - The four identified symptoms of thought patterns are subsequently dealt with in Chapters III through VI. - Finally in Chapter VII, we look at the fact that the title-question is not quite original.

We will also briefly touch on another Abraham. The title-question is concerned with our father-in-faith whom we know from the Bible. In Chapter VII we hear Abraham Kuyper about the thesis: “Jesus was reformed.” In 1880 he dedicated three articles to this subject in “De Heraut” (a newspaper). Briefly, the intent of this booklet is to promote reformed thinking and living.

II Was Abraham reformed?

A strange question! Initially, you are tempted to right away answer: no. The term “reformed” has existed for about four centuries. Many centuries ago in the time of Abraham, such an indication did not exist. Nobody who knew Abraham personally ever said that this man was reformed. You could imagine Abraham under a vine or fig tree, but not with a reformed church book in his hands.

Therefore, the question presents a lot of problems. The historical distance and the difference in circumstances cannot be ignored. But at the same time, it is an irrefutable fact, that there are connections between Abraham and us, between his days and ours. He is “the father of us all.” That is how God’s people read it in the Bible, in Romans 4:16. Throughout the ages there is communion of faith. As church, we sing about that, for example after a baptism with the words of Psalm 105 stanza 5, in Dutch,

’t Verbond met Abraham, zijn vrind, bevestigt Hij van kind tot kind.

(The above versification is based on Psalm 105:8,9 “He remembers his covenant forever, the word he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant he made with Abraham.”tr.)

Also that reality must be acknowledged. Therefore, there are differences as well as similarities between Abraham and us. Historical distances plus principle connections. Let’s for a moment glance back at the question. Was Abraham reformed? He never bore that name. That’s obvious. Is Abraham, therefore, not connected with us? He certainly is! And by our title of “reformed,” we are connected with him! He was never called “reformed.” Still, we belong together. We have to think about that some more.

In our relation with Abraham, the issue is greater than just a term or a matter of bearing such a title. *What is in a name?* Now this question comes to the fore. What does it identify? And was Abraham aware of that? Via the name, we must push through to the core, and the essence or the point of the matter; what is the nucleus at the centre of the issue.

Let's identify this with the term *core sense* (Dutch: kernbesef, an awareness or recognition of the nucleus or the heart of the matter, tr.). What is, therefore, at stake here, is that we don't stop at the outside or regard only the appearance of things, but that we penetrate what it holds in store. In the same way we study the relationship between us and Abraham.

To continue, Abraham's time is long gone. Nevertheless, we may not consider the subject closed with respect to his name, his faith and his life. Today we are people that have a past. The church has a long history. Therefore, to live consciously, to think and to believe, we must not only possess a core sense but also a *historic sense*. That too will further be considered.

We mentioned church and its history. When did that history start? We take the answer from the church's book of instruction, which is, at the same time, the book of comfort.

“What do you believe concerning the holy catholic Christian church? I believe that the Son of God out of the whole human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, defends, and preserves for Himself...a church chosen to everlasting life.”

Then we and Abraham belong to the same church! It is no surprise that historic sense goes again hand in hand with *church sense*. What does it mean to be a church-member?

It appears to be a generally accepted and settled matter, that in all this pondering and with all these considerations, we let ourselves be guided by God's Word. In practice, this seems to be not that simple. It really takes some doing to accomplish what the apostle Paul presents us in II Corinthians 10:5,

“We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.” (NAS)

Faithful thinking and acting is the norm. It is listening to the norms that come from God. That too we will further consider, namely, *norm sense* (the awareness and recognition of norms, tr.).

We started with the question whether Abraham was reformed. A picture of the answer is already slowly emerging in this way, that he was not called reformed. But when we consider the core of being reformed, or the essential content and meaning of being reformed, then we may consider an affirmative reply.

Along with that, we take into account the historic distance between Abraham and ourselves. But also the fact that he, as well as we, have to deal with the same God and the same church.

We will further consider that, and we will occupy ourselves more closely with core sense, historic sense, church sense and norm sense.

III Core sense

What is the core of the title “reformed.” What does it really mean? When we seriously consider that, we can also determine whether we can attach this title to the church-patriarch Abraham. There is a brief and clear answer to the question, of what reformed is, namely, everything biblical is reformed.

The reformed confessional forms do nothing but refer to the Bible. They summarize and verbalize what is found in the Bible. Therefore, being bound to these forms means nothing else than a binding to God's Word. A general or summarizing reference is found in the Belgic Confession, Article 7.

“We believe that this Holy Scripture fully contains the will of God and that all that man must believe

in order to be saved is sufficiently taught therein.”

What is reformed? Answer: everything biblical. In the Bible we find the will of God. The Bible is revelation of redemption. It is not just for a special interest group, but it is a universal matter. Again, read the sentence quoted from Art. 7 and note the term ‘man’.

What is reformed? *It is to take God at his Word*, totally and with nothing else. That’s what you build on. You trust that His Word will never ever mislead you. It will always turn out all right. In the same Art. 7, the Bible is called, “this infallible rule.”

Now, what do we read about Abraham? Didn’t he do the same thing? The LORD let him look up at the eastern starry skies and promised him, “So shall your offspring be.” And then we read about Abraham that he “believed the LORD” (Genesis 15:5, 6). In his days, also Abraham had to do what we must do in our time, namely, to believe the Lord according to his Word.

However – a new question arises – is that Word not very different? Not only did Abraham have no reformed church book, he had no Bible either. At least not our Bible with all its 66 books and in two parts, namely the Old and the New Testament. That’s true. But in principle, in essence or *at the heart of the matter*, was it not the same Word? There is a difference, even a great difference in *quantity*. Abraham had to do without what the prophet Micah said about Bethlehem Ephrathah. But still, Abraham knew the gospel, the gospel of Christ. And not only Abraham knew it. We can go further back in history. *Adam* knew the gospel too. It’s not another gospel than the one we know! No, it is one and the same gospel. There is no doubt about it. Refer to the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 6, question and answer 19. There it is: God Himself first revealed the gospel in Paradise. Later, He had it proclaimed by the patriarchs (Seth, Noah, Shem just to mention a few) as well as by the prophets. He also foreshadowed the gospel by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law. Finally, He had it fulfilled through His only Son. Throughout time, it is and remains the one and only gospel. It is just like a flower. A grower delivers the flower when it is still in the bud stage. But when that flower, displayed in your vase, opens up to show its splendour, then you’ll see a lot more than the grower did. However, both he and you did see the same flower. That is also the way with the gospel. Everything was contained in it, in the promise of the seed (moeder belofte – mother promise). Adam did really hear *the gospel*. With that gospel of the promised Redeemer, he had enough courage to give his wife a new name, in spite of knowing, you could say, that she would only procreate children who had to die. That new name, Eve, meant something like “mother of all living” (Genesis 3:19, 20). At that time, the gospel had only just budded so to speak. Abraham already knew more about it. To him the bud had opened somewhat. (By the way, an example always has limits. Notice only the point of comparison about bud and flower. For example, thoughts about an organic growth from within may not be attached to it.) It is clear that Abraham did not know the Old and New Testament. In that respect, we are richer. But is that a matter of quality or quantity?

Was the gospel for Abraham less than for us? Thinking about Lord’s Day 6 of the Heidelberg Catechism, the answer is, no. It was indeed less extensive. A lot of it was still closed and had to be unfolded by the LORD. But in essence, it was the same gospel. When we realize the core, it was the same Word of God. How else could Abraham, and with him still many others, appear as witness of faith facing the New Testament church?

Think about Hebrew 11.

What sense would that witness make for us, when it dealt with another faith or an out-of-date faith? There

is one faith. There is one church of all times. However different these times are, that church must always do one thing. That one thing is the core of its existence, namely, to believe the Word of the LORD God. When being reformed means to take God at His Word and to serve Him in your life, then this was not any different for Abraham – in another age, in another culture, or on another stretch of the church’s voyage through the ages. Then he too was, so to speak, reformed.

Core sense used by Prof. Dr. S. Greijdanus

Someone may remark that for once it may be cute to call Abraham “reformed,” but then it is time to get back to the matter at hand. In other words, what is the sense and benefit of such a title? What matters to me, is that we realize that this is all about a way of thinking, which should be applied more often. This way of thinking is not to stop at the periphery of things, but to come with penetrating questions. We question the essence of a name, a fact and a phenomenon or symptom. It is a good thing to train ourselves in core sense. We will then discover relationships and structures. You ask, was Abraham reformed? And then you have to give yourself an account of the essential connections between him and us, and between now and then. You see a lot of differences, but above all you notice a deep and essential unity.

Prof. Dr. S. Greijdanus is obviously using that same kind of thinking, questioning or searching, especially in his booklet, Wezen van het Calvinisme (Essence of Calvinism), Franeker, 1941. Already the title clearly shows what Greijdanus wishes to focus on, namely, not to stop at the surface of a historic phenomenon (Calvinism) with a name tied to a person (Calvin). Rather, push on to the core of the matter. Ask, what exactly is Calvinism? What is the issue at rock bottom? What is the heart of the matter? Therefore, core sense!

In his booklet, Greijdanus right away starts to differentiate between Calvinism and a Calvinist. The essential (nuclear) content of Calvinism cannot be gathered from the first Calvinist you meet.

“The essence of Calvinism and the essence of Calvinists are not identical...Anyone who calls himself a Calvinist is not truly or a 100% Calvinist in his thinking and lifestyle, or in his inner self and outward behaviour. In this respect such is even lacking with all Calvinists...Moreover Calvinism is way too rich in principles, ideas and energetic strength for any one person to embody or actualize it.”
(p. 3)

You can say the same thing about Christendom and a Christian. You can catch many a Christian with unchristian beliefs and conduct.

“Moreover, (says Greijdanus) Christendom is taken for Christian truth, as Gospel, so glorious, great and rich in all kinds of blessings, that the whole congregation of the Lord of millions and billions of believers is needed to know and exhibit something of its fullness. That whole congregation could not ever complete that fullness. (p. 4)

Compare Ephesians 3:16-19.

Therefore, the essence of Christendom, as well as Calvinism, must be differentiated from the individual application in belief and conduct of people, however faithful, Christian or Calvinist they may be.

Greijdanus states, “Therefore also the H.C. Lord’s Day 7 does not ask, what is a true or upright believer, but, what is true faith?” (p. 4)

How often doesn’t it happen, however, that such a differentiation is *not* made! When a church member does some unpleasant thing, then an outsider often reacts with, “If that’s Christianity, I don’t need it.” Another example: somebody is known as a Christian, a believer. But he propagates unbiblical ideas. Then you should not really criticize or say something about it, because he is after all also a Christian. He believes too, you know. Therefore, it is ever so important to develop core sense! Greijdanus states,

“Calvinist and Calvinism are...not synonymous. They do not express more or less the same thing in a similar way. These terms...cannot be interchanged.” (p. 5)

We’ll give two examples to further explain this way of thinking and this kind of approach. First, you may read or hear about euthanasia that, “Christianity is very much divided about this issue.” What is meant is to notice an observable fact. At the same time it poses an idea for general consumption, which must first be proven to be tenable. The idea is that Christianity consists of all who call themselves Christians. The one Christian is in favour while another opposes euthanasia. Don’t forget, both are Christians. Even an issue that costs human lives may not undermine that realization. But *core sense* makes us question first of all, if any one, who presents himself as a Christian is a Christian indeed. In the church you learn to talk and think differently. More like Heidelberg Catechism, answer 85.

“According to the command of Christ people who call themselves Christians but show themselves to be un-Christian in doctrine or life, are first repeatedly admonished in a brotherly manner. If they do not give up their errors or wickedness, they are reported to the church, that is, to the elders. If they do not heed also their admonitions, they are forbidden the use of the sacraments, and they are excluded by the elders from the Christian congregation, and by God Himself from the kingdom of Christ. They are again received as members of Christ and of the church when they promise and show real amendment.”

Therefore, Christianity has limits! Not everything may be called Christian that presents itself as such. It is no surprise that such a statement as “Christianity is divided about this or that,” is used at a time when ecclesiastical discipline has disappeared in several denominations.

Secondly, everyone knows what the ecclesiastical map of the Netherlands looks like. The term “ecclesiastical division” is really a miserable term. For it contains the thought that in spite of the divisions, they all are church. That makes for a lot of variations under one theme. All are church and the existing differences, are called differences in spirituality or tradition.

Core sense, however, makes us ask first, what is the essence of the church. Can anything from that viewpoint really bear the name church?

“We believe that we ought to discern diligently and very carefully from the Word of God what is the true church (responding obediently to its calling), for all sects which are in the world today claim for themselves the name of church.” (Belgic Confession Article 29)

In that way core sense, which is also norm sense in this case, helps us to get the correct starting point for approaching the so-called “ecclesiastical divisions” in a fundamental, truly ecclesiastical way.

Was Calvin really a Calvinist?

Again we go back to Greijdanus. For the most interesting part is yet to come. We saw that the terms Calvinist and Calvinism do not coincide. Greijdanus applies that also to Calvin himself. Was Calvin always a Calvinist? He writes,

“Calvinism may thank Calvin for its name, but that does not take away that what is identified as Calvinism could be more profound and all embracing than what Calvin himself thought, taught and started. It could at times also be somewhat different, in as far as Calvin deviated from it in his opinions and conduct, or that it was older than Calvin.” (p. 5)

Now that’s real core sense: Calvinism “older” than Calvin. It existed already before Calvin did. Then the name Calvinism did not and could not yet exist. But Greijdanus argues that the issue did indeed exist at that time already.

“To really get to know *Calvinism to its core*, however, we must observe that it will not teach anything different than what God reveals in Holy Scripture” (p. 7).

Therefore the essence of Calvinism exists, not bound to the person of Calvin, but bound to the Word of God, for which Calvin gave his life. We may call Calvinistic everything that is also called Christian, biblical or reformed.

Therefore Calvin was not always Calvinistic in his doctrine and conduct. He was wrong in 1545, when he showed himself to be a supporter of conducting witch trials in Peney near Geneva (Kurt Kaschwitz, Heksen en heksen processen, Amsterdam 1981, p. 311 ff). If the term Calvinism is allowed to be dissolved into all that the person of Calvin did or taught, then you are to defend holding witch trials as a good and, Calvinistically, responsible issue.

So, is development of core sense important or what!

Greijdanus writes,

“Also whatever Calvin said, did, or wrote must be tested by Calvinism itself, in order to know if it is correct and justified, and before it can be acknowledged as true Calvinism.” (p. 6)

Even Calvin may not simply be called a Calvinist. That too has to be verified.

The core of Calvinism

Every historian who studies the operation of power in history, will also come across Calvinism. The influences and enlightenment of Calvinism are impressive. How much did Calvinism not accomplish in domestic life, social life, in politics and society? Therefore, doesn’t it make sense to ask questions about the deepest essence of that Calvinism? What is it really in principle, or what is it at the heart of the matter? Then it appears that the power of Calvinism is the power of the gospel, the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16). Greijdanus states,

“Calvinism is ... not just a political endeavour nor a social movement, and not even a world-view. It is all of that as well, but it is more. In the first place, it is more fundamental. At its core it is faith; it is religion. It is Christian faith and Christian religion at its purest and at its best.” (p. 14)

Therefore, we are here not dealing with a fringe phenomenon at the sideline of our full and busy life. Faith and religion places us in the realm of God’s work that includes heaven and earth. Because Greijdanus in the end says,

“In its views and enunciation of faith, Calvinism wishes only to present a clear example of what God reveals in His Holy Writ about Himself and about the world in its creation, fall, re-creation and glorification, as well as God’s call of man and the world to serve and glorify Him.” (p. 79)

But that issue, and living with that understanding, is older than Calvin. Also Abraham Kuyper recognized that,

“At its most inner core, Calvinism was grasped already by Augustine. Even before Augustine, it was proclaimed in Rome by Paul’s epistle to the Romans, and it goes back to Israel’s prophets, yes even to the tents of the patriarchs” (Dr. A. Kuyper, Het Calvinisme, p. 26; - Six Stone lectures, delivered in October 1898 at Princeton, N.J.)

The conclusion is that it is of great importance to inquire after the core of things or the heart of the matter. It saves us from small, limited, and wrong thinking. When you don’t inquire after the *essence* of Calvinism, it can easily be viewed as a movement, that started in the 16th century. Calvin lived in that century, didn’t he? However, essentially you would have wronged Calvinism. You would also have minimized God’s deeds, which are one, and which span centuries.

Was Abraham reformed? At first glance, this is perhaps a strange question. But you should indeed think about the question who Abraham was and why he lived. As a reformed person, you must also for yourself give account of the questions: who am I and what is the purpose of my life?

Is being reformed a four-century-old phenomenon? Did the LORD God start his work only in the 16th century? We really know better.

Just as Abraham Kuyper viewed Calvinism going back to the tents of the patriarchs, so can we too come across “being-reformed” in Abraham’s tent, as long as we look past the names and inquire after the core of the matter. It is an issue of core sense.

Core sense and the Bible

In I Chronicles 16 we find the song that was sung when the ark of the covenant was taken to Jerusalem. It is composed of parts from several psalms. It starts with the first part of Psalm 105. After mentioning the name, the power and the wonderful deeds of the LORD, as well as His covenant with Abraham and His eternal covenant, this passage follows, namely,

“When they were but few in number, few indeed, and strangers in it, they wandered from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another. He allowed no man to oppress them; for their sake he rebuked kings: Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm.” (NIV)

What are the patriarchs called here? They are called “anointed ones” and “prophets.” So we search the book of Genesis to discover the anointing of the patriarchs, as well as their office of prophet. And what do we find? Nowhere do we find anything about an anointing, and an indication of “prophet” appears only once for Abraham in Genesis 20.

In Genesis 20 we read that the LORD addresses Abimelech, the King of Gerar who had taken Sarah, Abraham’s wife. He says, “Now return the man’s wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live...” (vs. 7). What does the name “prophet” mean? That is what the patriarchs are called, says Calvin in his commentary on Psalm 105, “...not only because God revealed Himself to them but also because they faithfully proclaimed the divine truth, so that the memory of it might survive and flourish

after their death.” In his Handelingen der gewijde geschiedenis (p. 50, 51), J. van Andel explains the meaning of the title “prophet” in connection with the patriarch’s blessing. It is unique and totally different than just good wishes. It conveys the covenant promise and the promised inheritance to descendants.

So that is how the title “prophet” is assigned, but what about the assignment of “anointed”? We don’t read anything about a formal anointing of patriarchs. That originated in later days. Even if title and usage are not yet there, then the matter itself did still exist! It exists, as long as we penetrate to the core, the essence and the real intent of the anointing, that became customary later on.

Let’s listen to Calvin’s commentary on Psalm 105,

“Anointing, it is true, was not as yet in use, as it was afterwards under the law; but the prophet teaches, that what God at a subsequent period exhibited in the ceremonies of the law was really and in very deed in Abraham, even as God engraves the mark of sanctification on all His chosen ones. If God’s inward anointing was of such powerful efficacy, even at the time when He had not yet appointed, or delivered the figures of the law, with how much greater care will He defend His servants now, after having exhibited to us the plenitude of anointing in His only begotten Son!” (translation by the Rev. James Anderson, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, p. 183).

Take note of the expression “really and in very deed.” That’s core sense from Calvin, initiated by Psalm 105. Presented by the Bible! Nowhere do we read that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were approached with a horn of oil and anointed as patriarchs, prophets. But what was shown in later times by the anointing ceremonies, was certainly there. Because the divine appointment to a task in God’s service and for the salvation of the church, was certainly there. The patriarchs were called by the LORD and appointed to pass on the Word and the covenant promise on the way to Christ’s coming into the world. Therefore, even kings could not lay a finger on these men. That is core sense in the Bible!

Avant la lettre

I cannot deny that this heading is foreign, because these are three French words. Together they form an expression even Dutchmen may use. It means something like: before there was any talk about it, or before it had that name or title. Van Dale (Dutch dictionary, tr.) mentions as an example a sentence taken from Gossaert, i.e., “De la Court and his city, as well as fellow citizens, were liberals *avant la lettre*.” In those days they were not called liberals, but indeed they were just that. This “*avant la lettre*” symptom we have already come across. Was Abraham reformed? He was not known as such in Canaan. But even with historic differences, in principle and at the core or the heart of the matter, he was reformed, reformed “*avant la lettre*.”

Was Augustine a Calvinist? Ambrosius never called him that, that’s for sure, but considering the core of the matter, then the answer is, yes, he was a Calvinist *avant la lettre*. Were Abraham, Isaac and Jacob “anointed men?” The psalmist looking back in time says, yes, in good faith, I call them that. It was a title and identification from a later time. They were anointed *avant la lettre*.

So we are dealing with this phenomenon, namely, that we describe the *past* with *present* indicators. But there is another way. In order that core sense functions properly, we must also fully grasp that other way, namely, these past titles have later on greater value than they possessed originally. They become more meaningful. They receive a specific content. They become, as it were, “concepts.” Two examples are

the names Zion and Egypt. Originally these were two geographic names. We are talking about a hill and a country. Mount Zion is one of the hills of Jerusalem and Egypt is the land of the river Nile running into the Mediterranean Sea. But in the Bible they no longer are geographic names. They become spiritual terms. The Holy Spirit enlisted them in His service and gave them a value greater than the geographic one.

Zion

What became the 'City of David' was originally the fortress of the Jebusites (2 Samuel 5:7). The temple sprung up on the hill that was called by that name. Subsequently the name Zion was used to indicate the city of Jerusalem and its inhabitants,

” Extol the LORD, O Jerusalem, praise your God, O Zion.” (Psalm 147:12)

What makes Zion so special, so really special and as exclusive as possible? It is that the LORD himself makes it His residence – a place on earth, where He can be found, where a meeting with Him may and can take place. It may and it can take place. This does not happen just like that. There is only one possible way, namely, via the administration of reconciliation. Without reconciliation, provided and administered by the LORD, God’s residence on earth and with sinful people, would not be possible (Leviticus 17:11, “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar, it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life”). That is the one message of the whole book of Leviticus. By all these sacrifices, these cleansings, this total package of cultic regulations, we can be together. I, the Holy God, with you, an unholy people. There is no other way.

That turns Zion into Zion! That is more than geography. Therefore, the exuberant enthusiasm of Psalm 48, (tr., a Dutch rhyming is quoted based on the following),

“Walk about Zion, go around her, count her towers, consider well her ramparts ,
view her citadels that you may tell of them to the next generation.

For this God is our God forever and ever; He will be our guide even to the end. (verses 12-14)

Hence, God’s partiality for His earthly address, “The LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob “(Psalm 87:2). What is impossible to man happens. The church is born there. Psalm 87:5, “Indeed, of Zion it will be said, ‘This one and that one were born in her...’” That is how Zion’s spiritual name approaches us in Psalm 133, “For there the LORD bestows His blessing, even life for evermore.” Those who wish a blessed life, therefore, must go to Zion. Psalm 134, “May the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion.”

These psalms we sing in church. In the twentieth century. In the Netherlands/Canada. We do that without realizing that something is not quite right. Actually we should take a plane and fly to Israel, and geographically-correct, report at the hill of Zion, because *there* the LORD bestows His blessing and eternal life. You are welcome to fill in the name of any geographic name instead of Zion. Where two or three gather in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, He will be among them. There His reconciliation will be administered. So there you find what the core of Zion means. Zion is right there.

Therefore also in the New Testament we can come across Zion in a veiled way. Not veiled in the sense that the matter is hazy, but veiled in this sense, that the name stays in the background, but the heart of the matter comes to the fore and even in new testamentic attire. We’ll see that by comparing Joel 2:32 with Romans 10:12-15.

Joel 2:32a has been known to be used to promote an indifferent attitude with respect to the church. Joel says: “And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.” This is then worked out to mean, that it does not matter, therefore, what church you attend on Sunday and what you think about the church, as long as you know how to pray and to have a personal relation with the LORD. However, that story does not fit.

Read also the second part of the text, Joel 2:32b, “for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the LORD has said, among the survivors whom the LORD calls.” So Joel right away adds the address where such a calling on the LORD is to take place. That calling on His name is not up in the air or left to individual application.

Moreover, the term “calling on the name of the LORD” is by itself already church oriented. Since Genesis 4:26 it is an almost technical term for holding worship services! What Joel means is clear. In and among a lost world there is the miracle of salvation. There is deliverance! For that purpose the LORD refers to the atonement He has provided. That reconciliation is administered at the address of Zion. There the LORD Himself wishes to reside and there it is possible for Him and His people to meet and assemble.

In Romans 10, Paul quotes Joel. Joel’s Pentecostal perspective (*everyone* who calls on the name of the LORD) is taken over by Paul and developed. Romans 10:12-13,

“For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on Him, for ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”

Now, to also fully comprehend what follows, we must realize that citing a passage from the Old Testament in the New Testament often occurs in an *evocative* way. What does that mean? An evocative citation means, that not only that one word or text comes to mind, but that it evokes much more. Also the context of the quotation resounds and is recalled.

Therefore, an evocative quotation certainly calls on our Bible knowledge. Such should not be fragmentary. It should not consist of knowing a text here or a word there, or knowing a smattering of it. We must know complete extracts and maintain the context. We must have a scriptural faith, not a faith of texts.

We saw how Paul quoted Joel 2:32a in Romans 10:12, 13. To fully understand Joel 2:32a we also saw that we must read further and also read 32b. Paul did also quote that verse. For with his knowledge of the Scriptures (not separate texts), Paul was immediately reminded of also verse 32b. He literally quotes 32a. That quotation is evocative. Also what follows in verse 32b is recalled, as Paul was immediately reminded of it. *He quotes that too*. However, not literally, but in an elaborated format.

It is adapted to God’s ongoing work in history. Like Joel, Paul also mentions Zion, but in a veiled way. The name itself is not mentioned. What does indeed come to the fore, is what Zion really means, its core and the heart of the matter. Zion means, the place where reconciliation is administered. Therefore it is the gathering place where there may be communion between God and his people. However, in Paul’s days, that did no longer happen in the temple and on the geographic hill of Zion. But it happened where the Spirit sends Paul and other preachers with the Word of redemption, the message of Christ crucified (Acts 16:6-10). In that way, “Zion” of Joel 2:32b is quoted by Paul in a New Testament translation in Romans 10:14, 15, as follows,

“How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the One

of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’”

So, in the way of the new covenant, the address for escape and the way of calling upon the Lord that Joel talked about, re-appear with Paul. Also a word quoted from Isaiah is added to it.

Joel 2

Romans 10

verse 32a	◇	verses 12, 13
verse 32b	◇	verses 14, 15
O.T. Zion	◇	N.T. Zion

Egypt

A similar story can be told about “Egypt.” Every Sunday the congregation hears the ten words of the covenant. Its heading is: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” At that time, those who are listening are people who were never in their life in Egypt. Already in the book of Exodus, the core of the name “Egypt” becomes clear. Its greater value rises above the geographic indication. The name “Egypt” becomes the identification of the concentration and growth of the power of sin and Satan. It is the power that wants to block God’s work and prevent God’s people from reaching the, then still old testamentic, freedom of the glory of God’s children.

That Egypt undergoes the LORD’s judgments. From that Egypt the LORD delivers His people. He leads them out. That is God’s work and it is a deed of grace, namely, the blood of the lamb of the Passover paves the way.

The exodus from Egypt is the great fact of salvation of the old covenant. It is one continual proclamation of Jesus Christ and the deliverance by His blood. In that framework, the name Egypt gets its greater value, its deeper meaning. Hosea has to prophesy later about the kingdom of the ten tribes,

“...but the LORD is not pleased with them. Now he will remember their wickedness and punish their sins. They will return to Egypt.” (Hosea 8:13)

J. Ridderbos (Korte Verklaring) notes,

“Egypt is probably taken here as the classical country of oppression. Therefore this is a figurative indication that the Israelites, like their fathers in Egypt, will return to servitude. And the favours granted by and after the deliverance from Egypt will be taken away.”

Or to use the words of the Reverend P. Lok,

“This land (Egypt, F.) will continue to be known as the place of servitude for the sake of sin. When God’s church becomes unfaithful (to the covenant God), then it shows itself to be unworthy of the freedom as covenant grace. Then God will let His people return to their previous state, prior to their deliverance (from Egypt).” (P. Lok, De Kleine Profeten (The Minor Prophets), Groningen 1984, p. 45, 46)

The LORD gave the kingdom of the ten tribes over to their sins. It was carried off into Assyria and then scattered among the peoples. Assyria was the LORD’s instrument to restrain the ten tribes in the power of

sin, the bondage for the sake of sin (= Egypt). Just read Hosea 9:3,

“They will not remain in the LORD’s land; Ephraim will return to Egypt and eat unclean food in Assyria.”

Notice the parallel Egypt-Assyria! In Assyria Israel finds a second Egypt! We also read in Hosea 11:5,

“Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent?”

In the same chapter we read verse one,

“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”

So then Israel is “my son” (lower case s!), the people of God. When Matthew quotes this in his gospel (2:15), then the Bible translator should not change it to an upper case (“my Son”). This would mean bringing in a different idea. It must remain (it is a quote!) “my son” and so it means: God’s people. Therefore Matthew 2:15 says: the escape to Egypt prevents that the Lord Jesus will be murdered by the sword of Herod. Why? Because He must be saved for another death, the expiatory death on the cross. Therefore the literal passage to Egypt is so illuminating and full of proclamation. *He must go into Egypt.* He must be made into sin. Under God’s wrath He is being turned over into the power of sin and death.

However, His action is mediatory, that is, *in that way, God’s people may leave Egypt!* And continuing to write “son” in the lower case (which presents no problem with the original text), to indicate God’s people, then we read in Matthew 2:15 the gospel of the substitutionary service of the Surety, Jesus Christ (cf. J.W. Smitt, Opdat vervuld zou worden I, Groningen 1975, p. 79 ff).

When we practice core sense, new perspectives open up! We also will protect ourselves from misunderstanding the exodus from Egypt. These days we hear talk about messianic liberation movements. We notice politicized theology. We come across modern exodus theories, which relate Bible information about the exodus from Egypt to revolutionary violence of “liberation movements.”

When liberation movements apply themselves against ill-fated situations in the world, then this does not license them the use of violence, taking the law in their own hand, and proving all of this with Scripture. Nobody can take God’s place. No liberated ideologist can proclaim himself Messiah. The self-liberating theory is wrapped up in the modern liberation ideology. It is impossible to relate or connect this theory to the Bible’s account of God’s gracious deliverance of His people from the power of Egypt, the power of Satan, sin and death. In order to see that, core sense is necessary!

Spiritual names

The figurative use of names also occurs in the Bible. Its appearance as such is mentioned in Revelation 11:8. We read (NIV),

“Their bodies will lie in the street of the great cities which is figuratively (RSV allegorically, NAS, mystically) called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified.”

Greijdanus comments in the Korte Verklaring,

“This city is called Sodom for its moral depravity (Genesis 18:32 - 19:3ff; Isaiah 1:10), Egypt for its suppression of the Lord’s people (Exodus 20:2; Isaiah 10:24). These names are not used in their literal sense, but spiritually. The issue is what Sodom and Egypt were intrinsically. The point is their offences of opposing and sinning against what belonged to the Lord. The phrase ‘where also their Lord was crucified’ must have a similar purpose, that is, not a local indication, but to serve as a

spiritual or figurative characterization.”

It is clear, the Bible knows this phenomenon of spiritual name giving.

Article 25 Belgic Confession and the Jews

We are training ourselves in core sense. We learn to inquire about the inside, the nucleus of names, things, situations, phenomena, or events. We are looking for the essence, the core or the heart of the matter. One could say that we inquire about “the truth and substance” of things. That is the way it is called in Article 25 of the Belgic Confession. Core sense is our confession! That is of great importance, because it is all about being able to spiritually name the Old Testament. It is like the foreshadowing worship and ceremonies prescribed by the law. There are all kinds of regulations in Leviticus that we no longer follow. How do we deal with the loops and clasps, the whole tabernacle, which is elaborately and twice described in Exodus?

Could we not do without that by now?

There are no churchgoers who attend church services on Sundays with a sacrificial animal. At the entry, there is no minister at the ready with a sacrificial knife. Still we cannot do without Leviticus, neither Exodus, nor any other “ceremonial” Bible section. We need them to be able to make sense of the epistle to the Hebrews. We must use them to understand the person and the work of Jesus Christ. They wish to pass on their message to us, even now. The message is reconciliation by atonement. That is the message of Christ, the Saviour. He is “the truth and substance” of it! He constitutes the essential significance, the core of those testimonies of the Law and the Prophets.

It is because of the lack of this core sense that most Jews did not recognize and acknowledge Jesus Christ as the Messiah. They knew the Old Testament, but they did not see its core. Even though the core was clearly identified to the Jews in the following words of the Lord Jesus,

“You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me...”

There it is! The whole Old Testament’s essential content or its core, is the person and the work of Jesus Christ. But to the Jews the Lord had to add these words,

“..., yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” (John 5:39-40)

They knew the Old Testament inside out. They did not know it from the outside in.

Working with core sense

Everything is coming at you. Every day again. You hear opinions. You see behaviour. You are informed about events, facts and symptoms. You observe thought patterns and behaviour patterns.

You can accept it all as it happens without further considering it or thinking about it. But when you possess core sense you want to press on deeper into what you hear, see, read or whatever. You inquire further. You look closer. You search for the heart of the matter.

There is a man who is unfaithful in church attendance. He shows up once in a while, but that is it. Church members and elders talk with him in an admonishing way. The minister sees him sitting in church one Sunday. It so happens that there is a passage in the sermon about church attendance. On purpose, the minister elaborates on that part, because he must make the best of the situation. He hammers it home:

church attendance is a necessity. The Lord requires it. You cannot put His laws aside with impunity.

However, all those warnings from the congregation and by the office-bearers did not have the expected effect. Then it is high time to develop core sense in two directions,

- a) with respect to the conduct of the particular brother;
- b) with respect to church attendance as such.

Concerning a), you can go on admonishing that brother. Formally you are right to do so, but there is no improvement. Just analyze it for a minute. Just thoroughly find out what is really going on. What is at the core of the man's behaviour pattern? The problem is this: the man is annoyed about the *requirement* of church attendance. He cannot deny its necessity, but he has a deep-seated dislike and a strong resistance against the fact that he *must* attend. Also in his youth he was forced, or so to speak, kicked to church. He never grasped anything about a Father in heaven, Who loves to have His children near Him. When the church doors opened, the threat of *force* appeared at the same time. That is how he grew up and went off track.

The exhorting talks and the emphasis in the sermon have only a negative effect with this brother. After all he thinks, "There it is again. You must just simply do what you are told, and as a good boy stay on track. If not, there will be a lot to pay."

However, the minister visited that brother and calmly talked with him while he *listened* with this question in mind: What is it really all about? Then it became clear to him, why a raised finger and a thunderous sermon were useless. The core of the matter became clear. With that, also the approach becomes clear. So we arrive at point b), the development of core sense with respect to church attendance as such.

Church attendance is indeed necessary. It is a duty. But the heading of the Ten Commandments refers to God's deliverance of His people. The Commandments are surrounded by a certain light. That light must start to shine also for that brother. The commanding God is first of all the delivering God! The Judge is the Saviour! Church attendance is necessary just like medication. It does you a world of good. Church attendance is a task but it is also a feast. To serve the LORD means obedience, but that obedience is saturated with love, with giving from the heart. You must have a good recognition of the core of church attendance when you have to talk or preach about it.

God is good. His laws are not meant to tease you. A slave driver as well as a father can impose laws. But there is an essential difference. When it is made clear who God is and what His deeds are, then it can be, that the term "church attendance" does not even come up. At the same time, the practice of church attendance is then only promoted.

Another example. Materialism is prevalent in the congregation, as well as greed and stinginess. Then the minister could consider to especially point this out on several Sundays and hammer at it, that the Lord does not want to see these things among His people.

The words materialism, greed and stinginess may not even have to be used when he delivers a few sermons on Genesis 1, about the creation. Also then he addresses the problem, but in its core and therefore in a deeper, more fundamental and more effective way. With all this, I do not deny that sins and problems can simply be identified and mentioned. Neither do I deny that it can be accompanied by the acknowledgement, that the Lord does not want this. I also do not say that the above is the only possibility

and a sure recipe to be followed. Variations and combinations are possible. As long as it is clear, that when ten church members are unfaithful in their church attendance, you can be quite sure that this is based on ten different motives.

Core sense points the way toward a correct approach and it opens perspectives to find answers for the different motives. Pose the discerning and centralizing question: What is it really? What exactly is at the heart of the matter? Do not stop at the superficial facts as such.

Elijah

Was not Elijah the cause of no rain in Israel for three years? The drought, thirst and hunger were certainly thanks to him. Did he not indeed pray that it should not rain in the land for three years and six months (James 5:17)? Elijah – that trouble maker, who plunged Israel into misfortune. That’s how they talked about Elijah. And was it not obvious? Were these not the facts?

However, only when you ask – what is it really – only then the pieces fall into place. Then it becomes clear what it really is. King Ahab did not only express his own opinion when he came face to face with Elijah at the end of that disastrous time. He said, “Is that you, you troubler of Israel?” Elijah replied “I have not made trouble for Israel, but you and your father’s family have. You have abandoned the LORD’s commands and have followed the Baals” (I Kings 18:17, 18). Therefore it was a problem of core sense.

Christian communism?

As yet, here is another example of working with core sense. Do we not come across a kind of Christian communism in the congregation at Jerusalem as we read it in the initial chapters of Acts? I’m reminded of Acts 2:44, “All the believers were together and had everything in common.” This is again noted in Acts 4:32. Similar signs of the Christian church:

“...No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.”

Land and home owners sold their possessions. The proceeds were distributed by the apostles according to need.

Does communism not want to do the same? Do they not want an ideal society where everyone’s needs are satisfied, whereby either production or goods or both become the property of society? So they also have all goods in common, share and share alike. Still it is not the same! There rather is a deep rift, a radical contrast between the two. The results seem to be alike, but they are not. For the starting points are totally different. And that continues into its result.

In the Christian church the rule of the Lord Jesus applies. It is better to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). In love and freedom there is care for others and their needs. In love of God first and consequently in love of the neighbour (Matthew 22:37-39). In freedom, for Ananias and Sapphira were not forced to give up their possession for the diaconal service of the church.

“Then Peter said, ‘Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal?’” (Acts 5:3, 4)

Personal property is not abolished in or by the church. At the same time it is freely available for the community. That is what's so beautiful and great. The stark reality of the historical development of communism presents a totally different picture. There is no love, no liberty, no personal property, but a forcefully imposed equality and an enforced communion, that absolutely cannot conjure up a real community.

They remain to be two different worlds, even though the results may appear similar! When you do not question the heart of the matter, you might fall for it. Someone may say it is true, that in Acts 2 and 4 we come across a kind of communism so therefore communism cannot be all that bad....

The tree and its fruit

All right, one may say, I admit that the starting point of Christendom and communism are radically different. But couldn't you still say how nice it is that as yet both end up at the same spot? After all, in everyday life you may also hit it off together. Why then make it so difficult and say that the results *appear* to be the same, but they *are* not the same? Let's say you go one way around a traffic circle, and I the other. Don't we then meet each other again?

I say, well forget that circle, for in this case it is a confusing picture. Rather say, a tree is a tree and fruits are fruits, but there is a great difference between a good tree with good fruit and a bad tree producing bad fruit. A prophet brings a message. That message starts to work. If that message is positive, then good fruits will appear, but if it is negative, then only bad fruits will grow. Read Matthew 7:15-20.

If that traffic-circle story was correct, than Ananias and Sapphira did not need to fall down and die. Then the rule is that it does not matter in whatever way or for whatever reason they contribute as long as they participate. Eventually it may be said that they are not quite there yet, but they are beginning to learn.

However, they did indeed fall down and die! A severe punishment. They *appeared* to participate. They too put money at the feet of the apostles. But consequently they themselves fall down on that spot, because they soiled the *starting point* and they took the wrong *road*. They had precisely belied the miracle that *gave birth* to that communal ownership idea. They denied the congregational lifestyle as fruit of the work of God the Holy Spirit, by putting in its place their own smart calculative ways instead. The LORD does not want that tree, nor its roots where it all started. Neither does He want the process from root to fruit. The LORD made short work of it. Results *may* look alike, indeed, but that still does not mean that they are! A bad tree cannot bring forth good fruit!

In this connection, I am thinking about Heidelberg Catechism, question and answer 91 which deals with good works, that are only good when they are God directed. In that light, look at your neighbour who wears himself out in cordiality and charity. It is "only" too bad that he does not believe in the Lord God.

Also think here about being involved in a reformed way with history, wherein all kinds of ideas and concepts are meaningful and lead to results. Then we have to mention the name of Groen van Prinsterer. Not only Matthew 7:15-20 but also Jeremiah 6:19, Psalm 81:13 and other texts were to him starting points of his view and description of history. They were not cheap and transparent due to pious devotion, but historically, scientifically responsible. And then it is well thought out in a real Christian way. That is clear from his books of which some have been reprinted (some re-edited): Handboek der Geschiedenis van het Vaderland (publ. Kool, Veenendaal), Vrijheid, Gelijkheid en Broederschap (edited by G.J. Schutte, publ. De Vuurbaak, Barneveld) and Ongeloof en Revolutie (edited by H. Smitskamp,

publ. Wever, Franeker). Whoever wishes to know more about this outstanding personality, I advise to read the book by G.J. Schutten, Mr. G. Groen van Prinsterer (Gues, 1977) and the one by J. Kamphuis, Evangelisch Isolement (Groningen, 1976).

A final example of working with core sense, is the Anabaptist way of thought and their way of life based on it. It is still as relevant as ever! The core of Anabaptist thought is the holy congregation, set aside or secluded from the world which lies in sin and can be written off as hopelessly lost (just an aside: Anabaptist ideas existed before the rise of Anabaptism in the 16th century; I recall the movements of Donatism in North Africa in the fourth century AD, with whom Augustine had his hands full). The communion of saints portrays a new life, a new society, a new world. From this core of Anabaptist thought, there are two possible attitudes towards the ancient world which remains in the grip of the evil one. It is either to radically discount it by revolution, even with harsh violence, briefly, put the sledge hammer to it. Or, ignore the world as radically as possible, break with it and start to shun the world. This can seem to be quite humble, but it can also be very haughty. But now we don't want to touch on that any further.

There is a lot more to say about Anabaptism, and by the above sketch many nuances may just like that disappear. Still I feel that I touched the heart of the matter. And why is that important? Because you may be mistaken when you do not see through it, that those two attitudes, either revolutionary violence or passive world avoidance, spring from one and the same root. Therefore they are closer to each other than it appears. It might look as if these two attitudes are two extremes or two different worlds, that have nothing to do with each other. You might abhor the Anabaptist radicals, who act with revolutionary violence. You might be charmed by the quiet and passive people, who are just a bit world-shy, but otherwise they are nice folks. In the meantime, however, they have the same background, the same motives. Both do the same. They reject the world only in different ways.

Now you cannot say that the end result is what counts. Because what is behind it all is included. And that comes out just like that. This is the opposite of an earlier example. Then it concerned two totally different roots. Christian faith and communist conviction cannot really lead to one and the same result. Now it is one and the same root cannot lead to two completely different outcomes.

And that is evident too. For example, take the “Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij, the SGP” (a political party). Among them we notice world avoidance. This appears, for example, in making no use of the means of radio and television. So we know the SGP members as quiet, calm and somewhat world-shy people. Nevertheless, they are still decent or sound and often agreeing with us in concrete political matters. People who indeed also wish to take a strong stand in favour of God's honour and of His Word. For I read in Article 2 of the SGP program principles,

“The SGP's goal is to have the principles of God's Word in the political field made known in our country on a larger scale.”

What is close to their heart is expressed in Article 1,

“The SGP strives to have our people governed on the basis of God's revealed statutes in the Holy Scriptures and therefore [the SGP] advocates maintaining the unabridged Article 36 of the Belgic Confession.”

The SGP wishes to maintain precisely that, which we scratched in 1905 (refer to B.C. Article 36). That sentence concerns the task of the government,

“...all idolatry and false worship may be removed and prevented, the kingdom of antichrist may be destroyed.”

That sentence can be scripturally understood and consequently its deletion might be regrettable. However, that is now not the point. In SGP circles this sentence is viewed as a description of a direct task of the government, which has the sword, and when necessary should also use it in this situation. Therefore Article 4 states,

“The government will also in its office be judged by God’s law and as His servant it has to take care that this law is upheld. Therefore, among others, it is called to

a) make the profaning of God’s name and His day a punishable offence.

and a little further on,

f) to prohibit in all gatherings the propagation of principles that attack God’s honour and the authority of the government.”

Here we find the Anabaptist thought defined, so that church and state are mixed up or confused. The office of the secular government and the ecclesiastical office-bearers are blended together. In SGP circles, they often refer to the theocracy of Israel. A right view of the task of the present government, should apparently benefit from the example of the reign of King David, King Hezekiah and King Josiah. They do not take into account that those were unique and completed periods in the history of salvation.

Let’s for a moment reflect on Article 4 of the SGP’s program of principles. That means definitely, that the government must halt the idolatry of the mass in all Roman Catholic worship services. Political meetings where anarchists try to sell their ideas or where opinions are propagated that arise from the perspective of sovereignty by the people cannot be tolerated.

There are numerous meetings where either the honour of God or the authority of the government, or both, are threatened, undermined or attacked. And all that should be prohibited according to the SGP principles. This again shows the importance of the question: What is it really? For they seem to be miles apart, that is, at the one end the world avoidance, not to use radio and television, and at the other extreme, the threat of the power of the sword, for without it, Article 4ff is just an idle slogan. However, these are two shoots from one and the same root. Now one might remark, that it won’t come to that with Article 4ff, for it is just a statement. Besides, practical politics will no doubt halt political theory.

In the meantime it is in black and white. We may no doubt accept that the SGP appreciates being taken seriously.

Now if the SGP would get 74 seats in the “Tweede Kamer” (just theoretically, for the Netherlands would be quite different) could we then, at election time, cooperate in one way or another to help them get the majority? Or should we really want to prevent that, shuddering at the thought of the spiritual terror of Article 4f

It still is an important question: what is it really? This is not a question of being suspicious, but it questions the essence of things or the core of the matter. That makes life exciting. You become more conscious of life. It saves you from superficiality, which accepts everything. It protects you from incorrect diagnosis and it prevents disappointments, even if core sense is still patch work and imperfect.

IV Historic Sense

Without historic sense it is impossible to be reformed. How else could you sing Psalm 48, or Psalm 133 and 134? How else would you listen to the ten words of the covenant with that historically coloured heading? In the previous chapter we touched a few times on historic sense. In the framework of the development of core sense, we touched on Calvinism before Calvin, a reformed Abraham, and movements such as communism and Anabaptism. Development of core sense was not possible without involving historic sense. When we look for the essence of things, then we often dive into history.

History is not behind us like a done deal. Why not? Because also in the past our God was there. Also then, He was at work. Because also then, He caused the gospel to have an effect in the world. Also in the past, He gathered, defended and preserved a people. Also then, the people were there for Him, for His name. It would be simply irreverent towards God and His deeds, to act as if God performed his deliverance operations in Jesus Christ only today and only for us. Whoever could wish to be called after Him, a Christian, without historic sense? That's just not possible. It is around two thousand years ago, that He became man and that he lived among us on earth. At that time things happened that secured our salvation. I cannot live today, and I also have no future, if the past of Jesus Christ was not also my past.

I must have historic sense, because I have my Bible. As soon as I open it, I read about the beginning of heaven and earth. About creation. About my first ancestors. By looking at the past and listening to God's story about the past, I arrive at the discovery of who I am today. Because when I want to live consciously, should I not know who I am as a human being? Where do I come from? Why am I here? What do I do in this world? And what's the purpose of things that are going on? Why is there so much misery or distress? And how will it ever be fixed?

These are burning questions today. But I cannot answer them and I can't live with them, when I know nothing about the past. How we live today and how we look at tomorrow is also determined by yesterday. How else could it be? When I am a Christian, then I belong to Him. About Him it is written in Hebrews 13:8,

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”

Therefore, a definite track runs throughout all of history, the path of Jesus Christ. Along that line there was Abraham in his days. There was also Paul, many ages later. Moreover, further along that same track, there was Calvin. And today, there we are. Let us also view *our* position along that guide line.

Historic events

We have seen that even singing psalms is an historic activity. Israel did that too. It is an historic event. We profess our faith together in church. Not only because we see the historic line run from creation to eternal life (Article 1 and 12 of the Apostolic Creed), but also, because we see ourselves becoming part of an age-old tradition of speaking or singing these well-known words. They were spoken before us, ages ago. In all kinds of places, in many languages and under varied circumstances.

Every baptism is yet another one in an endless string of baptisms throughout time. Even earlier, before the institution of baptism by the Lord Jesus Christ. Due to the unity of the covenant of grace, we see beyond the baptism the circumcision. Abraham circumcised his son Ishmael (Genesis 15:25) and his son Isaac (Genesis 21:4). He administered to them the “sign of the covenant” (Genesis 17:11).

That sign of the covenant is still being administered today. Even if the handling of a knife and the drops of blood have become a water ceremony, it is at bottom still about the same thing. It is about the LORD, who gives Himself to us and who demands from us that we give ourselves to Him. And then, living becomes real living again! That's how Abraham had to understand it already. When he had to start the practice of circumcision, the image of the circumcision was certainly not unknown to him. Also in his time, circumcision occurred among different peoples. It happened with a more or less religious flavour and in relation to hygienic purity and fertility. It was also done to mark the transition from childhood to manhood. In such a case the circumcision indicated that a boy was from then on regarded to be a man. He was counted as part of the family, the tribe or society. He was regarded to be able to procreate. From then on, he was taken for a mature person. He became a somebody. Life opened up to him.

The LORD said to Abraham, when a little boy is one week old, he must be circumcised on the eighth day. Abraham was possibly surprised at that early date. But he must clearly have seen the meaning, namely, if a life is to open up, or if a life is to be fruitful and marked by purity, then God Himself must get involved. Then, He, the Almighty, must tie Himself to that human life from the very early days on. And that person has to give himself over to God the Almighty with his whole being and with everything he has. Then there is perspective. Then there is a future. Then life is again real living.

A child is being baptized in church. Without God, the child has no life. Just look, a soul's uncleanness is depicted. But also the washing away of sin is shown. There is cleansing and salvation. Without that child's awareness it is baptized, immersed in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Father will care for his child in good or evil. The Son washes and cleanses it. The Spirit will lead it into everlasting life. That is seriously promised. Life opens up.

Every baptism is again an historic event. What was present in the circumcision, is also present in the baptism. In Jesus Christ.

The holy supper celebration is an historic event! A long chain of celebrations lies behind us. It goes back to the table attended by Christ Himself with His pupils. At that time, He presented the Holy Supper. He gave it to the church. He instituted it with ingredients from the Passover meal which He held with His disciples. He gave something new. But in that newness, the old was preserved, namely, the Passover of Israel. There is unity in the feasts of God's people throughout history. Passover as well as the Holy Supper can be framed within this one formula, namely, the LORD gave the feast of deliverance by the blood of the Passover lamb. Under that formula Israel celebrated the Passover. Under the same formula we celebrate the Holy Supper.

So we hear Paul say in 1 Corinthians 5:7-8,

“...our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us keep the Festival...”

The Passover was the celebration of THE salvation fact of the old covenant, the exodus from Egypt. We know what “Egypt” stands for, and how this deliverance threw its shadow ahead to the exodus which the Lord Jesus Christ was to accomplish. Egypt means the power of sin and death, a concentration of rebellion against the Lord God. So in the Holy Supper and in the footsteps of Israel we celebrate our exodus from slavery of sin and death. We also celebrate the breaking apart of the concentration of the rebellious power against God (refer to “the slavery of sin” in Article 24 Belgic Confession). Therefore with the Passover, it was all about *remembering* that powerful fact of salvation. And with the Holy Supper it is the *remembrance* of Christ. Concerning the Passover we read in Exodus 12:14,

“This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD – a lasting ordinance.”

Remember and celebrate, that was the command. The Lord Jesus extends and deepens this commemoration and celebration by letting the Passover go over into the Holy Supper. “Do this in remembrance of me,” He says (Luke 22:19). From this, Paul desires that the life of the church becomes a celebration. He says, that also our Passover lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed, therefore, let us celebrate. Remembering and celebrating, that’s the point. Precisely in that remembering, that commemoration, we are shown that it is all about historical events. For what is so typical about commemoration is, that it bridges centuries of history. Remembrance of Christ’s death is namely more than thinking back about His death. An example to make this clear is a couple married for 25 years. They look at their wedding picture. Then they look at each other and say: “that’s how we married.” They remember their wedding day. But there is more than thinking back to the day 25 years ago. For they can never say to each other, oh well, that is 25 years ago, that is past or that’s a done deal. No, it is not a finished matter. That day still has significance. The event of that day still has power over their lives. They are still married. Every day they deal with that day of the past. That is commemoration.

Commemoration is seeing, confessing, acknowledging and celebrating how past events have meaning today, how they exercise authority, and how they press on for a response. That is something to commemorate and to celebrate. For it is deliverance from the slavery to sin and death. Slavery held God’s people prisoner. The people could not move an inch. The people could not escape from that clenching power. They even deserved to also go down under the LORD’s judgment. The fact that Israel escaped the judgment, is only thanks to God’s election and His grace.

The blood of the Passover lamb on the door jambs – the sign for Israel, Exodus 12:13! – averted the judgment. Israel was allowed to set out and arrive at the freedom of the glory of God’s children, but the way had to be cleared by the blood of the sacrifice, the blood of the Passover lamb.

In the Holy Supper we celebrate deliverance. Our liberation was accomplished by the blood of the covenant, the blood of the Passover lamb, Christ. Except, however, was it not terrible what happened in Egypt? There was not a house and not a barn without a dead body. Besides, why did Israel get the command to celebrate? Why not a remembrance of the dead? Was it not terrible what happened on Golgotha? And do we then in church have to celebrate? Well that is now exactly the point. It was terrible. That’s how terrible sin is. That’s how terrible the rebellion against God is. When we see how God breaks through all this by clearing a way to a new life, restoration and deliverance, then we will celebrate. We will celebrate to honour Him, to praise Him and to thank Him. When we pray the prayer from the form for Lord’s Supper, we comprehend the secret of our Surety, “...in this supper we cherish the blessed memory of the bitter death of Thy dear Son Jesus Christ...”

Living today with yesterday

That is the core of commemoration: living today with yesterday. It is not to regard “yesterday” as a done deal. I still wish to widen the scope beyond the Passover and the Holy Supper. View the Old Testament as a whole and the historical parts in particular. Also look at the New Testament especially at what it presents in relation to history. We would not get a message from it if it only dealt with an ancient story of a people in earlier days. Were it only a human story, it would only touch us like the history of Nepal. But it records

for us God's deeds. The history of revelation shows us who the LORD is. Today He is still the way He was before. When I hear or read an ancient story about the LORD's forgiveness, love, punishment and mercy in the life of people and nations, then it is useful to me. From it, I learn to know God. God does not change. His past deeds help me today. Just read how the poet of Psalm 77 overcomes problems and questions by looking at the past. It is radiating from the middle and the conclusion of that psalm, Psalm 77:12; "I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds."

It is the church's privilege to be allowed to think and commemorate historically. For in this, the Israelite is in principle distinguished from the Babylonian and the Egyptian. Whatever they recorded of their history served at most to remember the acts of kings in their country. Those kings were polished up a lot. Great were their conquests, majestic their structures, impressive and beneficial were their initiatives for worship and religion. But the defeats they suffered, and the misdeeds they committed, were hardly mentioned or cleverly covered up. An example? First read Isaiah 36 and 37. Then read what was recorded about it in the royal library of Assyria. We hear Sennacherib,

"Concerning Hezekiah, the Jew, who did not subject himself under my yoke, I lay siege to 46 of his fortified cities, walled-in fortresses and countless villages and I conquered them.... He himself, I locked up in Jerusalem, in his royal residence, like a bird in a cage. I constructed entrenchments to prevent any rally (uitvallen – sortie of troops, F)...."

Isaiah 37:36-37 is not recognizable. They fled the country, in panic. And then to brag like that about locking up Hezekiah like a bird in a cage! To make much more of it was impossible. Jerusalem was not captured.

They had their kings praised to the skies, extolling their deeds among Israel's neighbours. That was the purpose of recording history. They did not record what their gods did for the people, but their real story was what the people did for their gods.

In Israel, that's totally different. Not the people are made to shine. Their troubles are not covered up. Only one thing is important and it is always validated, namely, God's deeds are being told. In the book of Deuteronomy there are many calls to recount the deeds of the LORD. In the book of Joshua, there are monuments and memorials. In the Psalms we repeatedly come across remembering the LORD. Just read Psalm 78 and Psalm 105. The monumental prayer from captivity in Isaiah 63 is full of it.

There is also a flip side. Scripture calls it: - forgetting the deeds of the LORD. Then you are actually *not* captivated by who the LORD is and what He does. Then we hear the story of disbelief and rebellion. For example, Psalm 106 describes this in a stirring way. When forgetting the LORD's deeds comes into view, we are not talking about loss of memory. No, then the problem is that the heart no longer seeks the LORD. We no longer live with Him.

Conclusion: now, what exactly is remembering the deeds of the LORD? It is to trust Him and to keep His commandments. Like it says in Psalm 78,

"Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget His deeds but would keep His commands."

Where do I belong?

It is a festive Sunday. Young people profess their faith. They respond to their baptism. They say

“amen” to God’s “yes”, as in 2 Corinthians 1:20. From here on, they are communicant members. Of what? What do they rightfully belong to? Is it a church association that started in 1944? Was there nothing before that date? We are called “reformed.” That is an old name. That name is about four centuries old. Do I, therefore, belong to a movement that is about four centuries old? Of course not, for an answer was also given to this question,

“Do you whole heartedly believe the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confessions and taught here in this Christian church? Do you promise by the grace of God steadfastly to continue in this doctrine in life and death, rejecting all heresies and errors conflicting with God’s Word?”

That does indeed mean: did you see God? Did you see Him coming with His gospel? Did you also see Him coming towards you throughout the centuries (Old and New Testament)? Did you see the Christian church from the beginning of the world? Isn’t that overwhelming that all of this now also reaches you? And that in this great and powerful entity God also gives you a place? And that you too are taken along in the history which He makes with His church?

It is not for nothing that this is the first question for doing public profession of faith. It is only the third question that asks for a declaration of love from the one who professes his/her faith. This question is not vague with all kinds of room for self-made additions. It is not indeterminate like, do you love Jesus? Neither is it Arminian, like: did you let Jesus into your heart? No.

“Do you declare that you love the Lord God and that it is your heartfelt desire to serve Him *according to His Word*”

Above all, you must see God coming to you. You must first see His acts, His history. How could you profess your faith without historic sense? Over and again, a cardinal mistake is often made, namely, when the doctrine of the Word of God is let go by deviation, apostasy, or when it is mutilated or stowed away. It may be covered, therefore, as by a layer of snow, until there is a return, a reformation. Then those, who reform and who return to what was before, are often accused of introducing new things! Would we have started a new church in 1944? Come off it! Did Hendrick de Cock set up a new church in 1834? Not at all! It is the *deviation* that is the new thing, the change. When such deviation goes on for a long time, only then the abnormal is taken for the normal. In the 16th century, the reformers and their followers were the people of the so-called new doctrine! However, just listen how Calvin unmask this idea in his letter to King Francis of France, the letter that accompanied his famous work, the Institutes. He presents that work to the king for his review and consideration. The king had taken sides with the Roman church and he was ready to back it up with fire and the sword. Calvin really liked to see that the king would discover the true situation. He writes that,

“...very important questions are at stake, namely, how God’s glory on earth may be kept safe, how God’s truth may hold its dignity, and how Christ’s kingdom may be kept unblemished among us.”

So only after having shown its framework, he discusses the accusation as if he had come up with novel and deviating things. Then we read this,

“First, by calling it “new,” they do a great injustice to God, whose Sacred Word does not deserve to be accused of novelty. Indeed, I do not at all doubt that it might be new to them, for to them both Christ Himself and His gospel are new. But he, who knows that Paul’s preaching is from of old, that ‘Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again for our justification’ (Romans 4:25), will find nothing new among us. That it was unknown and buried for a long time, is the fault of man’s impiety. Now

when it is restored to us by God's goodness, its claim to antiquity ought to be admitted at least by right of recovery."

This is clear language, which brings to light the true state of affairs in a brief and powerful way. If people would only listen and really consider what also Guido de Bres wrote in his letter attached to the Belgic Confession, presented to King Philip II,

"For concerning the fact, that we are persecuted, not only as enemies of your Crown and government, but also as enemies of God and His work, we humbly request your judgement in accordance with the Confession that we (hereby) present to you. We are ready and willing, if necessary, to seal it with our own blood. For we maintain and confess, not only the most important points of the Christian faith, included in the (Apostolic) Symbol (=confession, F) and catholic faith, but also the complete proclamation revealed by Jesus Christ for our life, our righteousness and our salvation. It is proclaimed by evangelists and apostles, sealed with the blood of so many martyrs, purely and soundly preserved in the first (=old, F) Church, until it was corrupted by the preachers' ignorance, greed and ambition as well as by human inventions and institutions in conflict with the true gospel.

Our opposition, however, shamelessly denies that this is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes that gospel. And they deny that by condemning us and killing us, because we do not maintain what it does not contain."

That is how Guido de Bres showed historic sense! He wrote to be ready and willing to seal the Confession with His own blood, if necessary. That was no boasting. He did it.

He did it in the power of faith in the one, the same, the age old and ever again new gospel.

The oldest documents

It is a tremendous thing to be able to know God as Father and the church of our Lord Jesus Christ as mother. But what does church mean these days? In our secularized society it is a fringe phenomenon. Indeed we are getting more and more into a position, that we should be happy for still being tolerated. The anti-discrimination legislation can so easily undermine the freedom of religion. Politically, we are, as reformed people, regarded to belong to the "far right" (Dutch: 'klein rechts' – the insignificant right). Now it is quite favourable to regard yourself as insignificant. But when you allow such identification, and even adopt such language, then it can have a negative effect on the principle salvation of your own position. Because, if we want nothing but to defend the name and the affairs of the Lord God, also politically, then we shall not go on to live with it as something typically insignificant or small. Or as something that occurs on the sidelines. That does not interact well with the greatness and the centrality of what we advocate. Imagine that Calvin and Guido de Bres would have only considered number ratios and general opinions. Let's not even think about it! (See Belgic Confession Article 7 about "the great multitude!")

Who are we, as church? What do we represent? Let's not judge that by the number of times we appear in the news, but let's keep on reading it from the Word of God. Then historic sense is helpful, also here! The church possesses the oldest documents, not the world. The church existed first, not the world.

The initial worldly person was a church deserter, excommunicated. He was cut off by church discipline, exercised by the LORD God, Himself. And he was afraid, scared to death. He had no idea how to live outside the church. We are talking about Cain, about the history of Genesis 4.

The announced battle between the woman and the serpent (Genesis 3:15) is set ablaze. The seed of

the woman and that of the serpent separate. The breach is executed at the altar. Cain and Abel, two sons of Adam and Eve are to offer to the Lord. (Between the lines we read that there are more relatives. We are only told about the names of Abel and Cain in Genesis 4, because it is all about these two. The book of Genesis is not written for the Central Bureau of Statistics.) We get the impression that Cain takes whatever is at hand. He gathers a few things and offers them and then he has done his duty. On the other hand, Abel selects carefully. Only the best is good enough. Outward behaviour betrays a difference in inner attitude. "By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did" it says in Hebrew 11:4. The LORD accepts Abel's sacrifice, but not Cain's. How that was shown, I don't know. Genesis 4 doesn't mention it. The story that the smoke of Abel's sacrifice went straight up while the smoke of Cain's fell down, comes out of the world of illustrations in children's Bibles. At any rate, Cain became aware of it. And it did not lead him to repentance, but to anger. He becomes furious. The LORD continues in the way of admonition and reprimand, and warns Cain in plain language, that sin should not reign over him, but that he must reign over sin. Again Cain refuses to listen and lures Abel into the field where he murders him. Here starts the stream of the blood of the righteous. The Lord Jesus spoke about it later (Matthew 23:35). The LORD calls Cain to account. Cain still has an opportunity to repent, to confess his guilt and to ask for forgiveness. But he hardens himself to the limit. He knows nothing. Does he have to take care of his brother?

The LORD makes Cain responsible for his deeds. And He cuts him off as church member. Cain did not want to listen to the Lord. He refused to be called to return. He turned away from the church. And then also the Lord closes the church door behind him. The LORD says:

"Listen, your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth" (Genesis 4:10-12).

To correctly comprehend these words we must differentiate between, on the one hand, the term "ground" and on the other the indication "earth." Cain has to get away from the *ground* and be a fugitive on the *earth*. The term "ground" (Dutch: "aardbodem" and "bodem") obviously means a piece of "earth." The area that is cultivated and where one lives, resides and works. The civilized place, with people, homes and families. Where people live who know God and serve Him. Where one sacrifices. Where one lives in the knowledge of the promised seed (the "mother promise"). The "ground" is the land of the church. Messianic civilization (or land of culture). The earth stretches out to the horizon and beyond. That is where Cain has to go. Away from the "ground." Cursed away by the LORD Himself.

And how does Cain take that? He is scared to death. He does not know how to do that. Until that moment there is still only the church. Mankind, that lived before the face of the LORD. The "world" does not yet exist. Cain is the first worldling. He must find his way on his own. He goes into the world bearing the curse of the LORD God. (So living outside the church is not that pretty.) Cain is at a loss. I cannot do that, he says desperately. "My punishment is more than I can bear." I'll collapse under it. "Today you are driving me from the land and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me." Cain expresses his despair.

The LORD prevents that Cain may be killed by anyone or by whoever might high-handedly avenge Abel. Already here, the LORD says, vengeance is mine, I will repay. Cain has to live under that

postponed judgment. (Life outside the church can be so enormously attractive, but what is here so glamorous?) That is how Cain moves away, with his wife. Maybe with his household. Statistical information is missing, for that is not the point.

The story of Genesis 4 shows the relationship between church and world and how it got started. Cain became a wanderer, a fugitive, even though he later built a city and named it after his son. He was still a fugitive, also in that city, like the Shah of Persia at one time. The Shah certainly did not live like a homeless hobo, but he still was a wanderer, a fugitive, because he could no longer enter Iran.

However, let's look at the development of Cain's family, the seed of the serpent. Their anxiety diminishes. Fear disappears. They get used to living outside the church. They find their comfort zone, those Cainites. They make their own life. They go to the other extreme. They no longer consider God at all. The worst form of enmity against God is the consequential disregard, which will no longer get excited about the question if there is a God. "God is dead." The flood will soon come over the world. The law of the jungle starts to rule. Lamech boasts and brags. Music and technical development take flight. But the question is, for what purpose are they used? Personal violence increases. Amusement does not become more refined. A woman must make herself look good and not be slovenly. For when she is what she is called, "Ada," and the first wife of Lamech is just that, then she is 'showy' and 'made up', a woman who only lives for her clothes and cosmetics to show off her femininity. Naamah is also mentioned and she must have been some known beauty.

At the end of Genesis 4, the roles are reversed. There is a big world with a lot of noise and boldness. It is a world wherein a man idolizes himself, assaults others and one wife is not good enough for him.

We also see a small church: Seth and Enosh. Enosh, a meaningful name. It means as much as a weak, frail human being. Psalm 8 states, "What is man (enos) that you are mindful of him?"

Nowadays when we feel small and much to the right, let's fully realize how it all got started. We are weak people, who together form a fringe phenomenon in society, but who in reality live in God's strength for His cause, rather than the great life in a great world under God's deferred judgment.

The roles are again reversed!

On the way to tomorrow

In order to be able to face the future with confidence, historic sense is necessary!

B. Holwerda pointed out that it is typical for pagan religions to be especially future oriented. They say, as it were, if only we know what will happen tomorrow then we can be at ease today. Or, if the veil over tomorrow could only be lifted then nobody would have to be anxious today. Therefore, there are fortune tellers and oracles. They study the flight of birds, the rustle of leaves of holy trees to extract from it all messages about the future.

"The great tree of Moreh at Shechem" must have been such a tree. Over against that, Abraham places his altar to the LORD (Genesis 12).

Let's not think that wanting to know and to conjure the future only happened in the old world, with the heathendom of that day. Also today there is a lot of superstition and magic to get a handle on the future. For example in the sports world. A soccer player or a football player must sit in the same spot in

the dressing room and put his shoes on in the same way. Otherwise he might as well forget the next match. A team that made a good start in the tournament, will painstakingly take note that before the next match, they follow the same route to the stadium and that they stick to the exact same routine. Otherwise things go wrong. Others might wear the same worn-out outfit, but never replace it, for then things go wrong.

In that way there are many other variations. Not everyone in sports may be like that, nevertheless it happens more often than you think. Moreover, it is seriously believed, even though repressed by snickering.

Whether it is about ancient or modern paganism, it is the same trend, the same desire, namely, wanting to get a grasp on things to come. Tomorrow is uncertain. Tomorrow can even cause anxiety. The horoscope is read avidly.

How is that among us? Are we rather the people of yesterday? It all depends on what is meant. We are the people of tomorrow! Who else has more, or a more beautiful future, than a church member? But the reason why a church goer does not lose his nerve about the question what may happen tomorrow, is that it is all about yesterday! Christians can confidently face the future, because they have a past. God was there! Already and always. He was for ever faithful as well. He never disappointed. You can count on that. For today and tomorrow. Read Joshua 24. In my Bible it is entitled "Covenant renewal at Shechem." It is about twenty years after entering Canaan. The LORD again wishes an answer to the question: do you still love Me? (A question that is regularly posed in a good marriage.)

How are you going to make it in Canaan? How do you face the future? Joshua takes the initiative "...as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." The people join him, "we will serve the LORD our God and obey him" (Joshua 24:24). That is the way or the line for the future.

So on what basis do Joshua and Israel face the future? On the basis of the past! On the basis of history! Just read how Joshua reminds Israel about the deeds of the LORD in earlier days. Israel is faced with their own history. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are passing the review and so are also the oppression of Egypt, the liberation, the desert journey and the entry into Canaan. After relating all this, Joshua *then* states that to him and his household it is clear. They will serve the LORD. With such a past you can face the future. It must succeed. It cannot fail.

The past provides peace for the future. For life in the present and for looking at tomorrow, knowledge of yesterday is indispensable. Historic sense is not something for people whose hobby is history, but it is a charge for every believer who wishes to live consciously and confidently. Today and tomorrow. B. Holwerda stated,

"...the heathen soothsayer is especially interested in what divinity will do TOMORROW. What will happen to us tomorrow? The veil to the future must disappear.

The prophet of Israel, however, speaks about the name of the Lord, that is, what the Lord has done in the past and therefore what He demands TODAY. He practically predicts nothing. The demands of the present are based on the deeds of salvation in the past. Also compare 'do-this-in-remembrance-of-me' with almost each one of the twelve articles (of faith) that point to what God did in the past. The whole church is based on that" (Seminary dictations with Joshua 23:7).

V Church Sense

What is church sense? In brief it is the awareness that the church is Christ's business. Abraham was in his days already involved in it, and so am I nowadays. I am involved in it. Not for my own feelings. No, it is a given fact. I am involved in it by God Himself. He placed me in the expanse of the church. He incorporated me by baptism.

Then I received a place in it. Together with many others from earlier days, such as Abraham. And with contemporaries as well as all those who are yet to come. Christ will also use me for His cause, for His church. I also have been called to be church member. In worship. At congregational meetings. At the church study society. But also elsewhere. In all directions. I am a church member wherever I am and in whatever I do. On the job, in leisure times, where I reside and live. That is what the heart of church sense is about, namely, that I may stand up for Christ's church.

Not the other way around. The church and everything it has to offer, is not there for me. It is not a subcontractor delivering religious commodities. Goods that I might use with more or less enthusiasm and desire.

The fact that I may stand in the expanse of the church is the miracle of God in my life. I must be ecstatic about it, that I too may find a place among the totality of the saints, and that I too may share in all that it entails (see Ephesians 3:18, 19).

Let us now further explore that expanse.

Abraham in the waiting room

Abraham, our father in faith, is also our brother in church, the church of all ages. We cannot do without him. And he can't do without us. After the line-up of witnesses in faith has been reviewed in Hebrew 11, including Abraham, we read in the verses 39 and 40,

“These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us they would be made perfect.”

Here B. Holwerda remarks

“God wishes to lead His whole church in one moment into perfection, that is, one does not come to triumph without the other (...). Be aware, this beautifully maintains church sense, namely, the communion, also in entering the glory (...). Also the believers who die are not yet triumphant. They are only on leave. Nobody will separately receive the fulfilment of the promise. The one must wait for the other, because the *church* must triumph (...), the communion of saints...”

Also the fifth seal in Revelation 6 is mentioned by Holwerda. John sees under the altar the souls of those, who had been slain because of the Word of God. They call to God to avenge their blood on the inhabitants of the earth. And they are “told to wait a little longer until the number of their fellow servants and brothers, who were to be killed as they had been, was completed” (verse 11).

Holwerda writes,

“So they have to wait until the number of God's children is complete. Only then the conquest of the last enemy will come, at the same time as the conquest of others....

I believe that this is very significant for our view of the church. We think so individualistically, namely, we are satisfied as long as the soul at the time of death arrives in a safe harbour....

That is pure individualistic thinking. ‘I made it.’ And we are not worried about the Church that stays behind or that passed on already. But Scripture says: none of them made it yet.... The one has to wait for the other....Nobody journeys on into glory by his lonesome self. That is what church sense teaches us....We are no longer concerned with little incidents of our own life, but with the great fortune of the church.... Even Abraham and Moses...are involved in what happens to the church today. For as much as the struggle of salvation proceeds here, so also approaches the end of their wait.” (B. Holwerda, De betekenis van verbond en kerk voor huwelijk, gezin en jeugd, [The meaning of covenant and church in marriage, family and youth], Goes 1958, p. 11-14)

Me too!

Is my salvation, therefore, not important? And is my faith not a personal matter? After all, can I be saved on the basis of someone else’s faith? And can another be saved because of my faith?

Such is not denied nor undermined. Only this: faith is not only an *activity*, worked and guided by the Spirit. It also has *content*. That, I share with others. Jude calls it “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude: 3). So the Nicene Creed in the reformed Book of Praise again shows the plural, “*We* believe in one God...” etc.

Okay, someone may say, but the Apostolic Creed is in the singular, “I believe in God the Father Almighty....” Indeed, that certainly shows faith as a personal matter. Each human being lives his/her own life with its own history. With one’s own faith and struggle of faith. But that faith does not come up from within yourself, nor does it continue within yourself. The personal is never separated from the communal. Everyone is responsible for his own track to the Lord’s Table. But you may not keep the bread and wine for yourself. You have to pass it on. In church you live together in the one and the same Christ. Such a personal, as well as communal, aspect is also tied to the apostolic creed. When it speaks of “I,” it says repeatedly, “I as well”.

Because, where did these twelve articles come from? They were born from the practical church life of the old Christian church and moreover as a *baptism confession*. The church grew a lot from the outside. Outsiders came to faith, and after doctrinal instruction, they were admitted to the church by the way of profession of faith and (adult) baptism. That baptism-confession is now the point here.

According to information from the year 217, the persons receiving baptism were asked to answer these questions: Do you believe in God the Father, the Almighty? Do you believe in Christ Jesus, God’s Son, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary; crucified under Pontius Pilate and that he died, and arose from the dead, ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy church and the resurrection of the body? Each of these questions were answered with the words: “I believe,” to express agreement with the one faith the church received from the apostles. Upon that confession, baptism was administered and received. The repetitious “I believe” was not my private manner of believing, the most individualistic expression of the most individualistic feeling of faith. No, it was: I *also* wish to believe in this way. Together with others in church, I search for just that community. The communion of faith.

The church *is* the communion of saints. That does not push the personal out of the way. It gives it its place. This is so nicely and strikingly formulated in the Heidelberg Catechism, question and answer 55. “What do you understand by the communion of saints? First, that believers all and everyone as members

of Christ have communion with Him and share in all His treasures and gifts....”

All and everyone! The one is not a threat to the other. It is not a dilemma. It is not either the community or the individual. Especially in church one can, as a person, be oneself again.

All together and each personally

We quote the following pronouncement by the Rev. J.J. Arnold,

“Unbelievers are, at bottom, alone in the world.... They are individuals, who have individualism in their blood.... If left to themselves, they are one by one people whose goal is to hate God and the neighbour. They are without fellowship or community, even though they may copy it and look for pseudo-communities, for they cannot be alone.... Believers are not alone in the world. They are members of one body, joined together with others to the Head. They stand in a relationship as part of a community. In as far as they are able to exercise that fellowship, is another matter, but they are not alone in the world.” (J.J. Arnold, Als de kerk kerk is [When the church is church], Goes 1985, p. 23, 24)

The believer looks for fellowship. By faith we are grafted into Christ (Heidelberg Catechism question & answer 20). Absorbed into His body – to say it in an unusual way. Therefore, we must look for His body. And that is the congregation. The congregation is addressed with the words, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27).

It is striking, how Paul views the personal and the communal woven together. The communal, THAT is the miracle of the church.

“For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Corinthians 12:13).

The miracle of Corinth! That’s how it surely may be called. For what message did they have for each other, those Jews and Greeks? Did they not live their own lives? Was there not a social chasm between slaves and free men? They were all baptized “into one body.” They professed their faith, were baptized and they all entered the church in the same way. It is the miracle of a community that is humanly speaking impossible to realize. That communion exists in accordance with God’s providence. The words “Now you are the body of Christ” does not contain the balance of what the Corinthians together made of it. But it is the apostolic proclamation of God’s dispensation over the Corinthians. This includes the call to search and exercise that fellowship. The *personal* is there also in accordance to God’s providence.

“But in fact God has arranged the parts of the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be” (1 Corinthians 12:18).

Now that might be called the pluriformity or multiformity of the church, i.e. in the church. Multicoloured diversity in the service of the one common body. It is always by sin when the diversities turn into divisions (social differences, or differences in character, background or origin, etc.). Paul also warns for two wrong attitudes that ruin the miracle of the church,

- a) others can do without me (1 Corinthians 12:15 ff)
- b) we would be better off without him/her (1 Corinthians 12:21 ff)

Each person and all together, joined to Christ and so bound together with each other.

That does not only occur in the congregation of the new covenant. Here too, the afore-mentioned

Psalm 77 is important. How personal is its beginning, “I cried out to God... When I was in distress I sought the Lord...” (1, 2). But it is not a single individual person who speaks. No, it is a church member. Just listen how the psalm ends, “You led your people like a flock...” (verse 20). The psalm poet knows himself included among that flock.

It is no different in Psalm 130. “Out of the depth, I cry to you, O LORD...” (verse 1), but the end reads, “O Israel, put your hope in the LORD...” (verse 7). When you are attentive, while reading the Bible, then you will see how often the personal and the communal are intertwined. I live my life and not the life of someone else. But I am a church member in everything and always. Now and in the future. Question and Answer 54 of the Heidelberg Catechism reads, “And I believe that I am and forever shall remain a living member of it.”

Mother and Son

Once there was a mother with great worries for her son. The boy was about to say goodbye to God and break with the church. He saw no point in faith anymore. He would regularly criticize or snap at people in the church. He did not need it anymore.

When the occasion arose, his mother seized the moment and had a talk with her son. The boy respected his mother and her faith. She really meant it. He had often noticed that. She also tried to live accordingly.

It turned out to be a long talk. Actually a monologue. Mother talked and her son listened. Mother told him in essence one thing, namely, what faith meant to her and how she could never be without it. She related things that she never talked about before, that is, about several crises in her life which her son had no inkling about. Especially what her faith meant at those occasions. How it kept her afloat, above water. And how she experienced everyday living, without a crisis. She exhausted herself. She did her utmost to make it clear to her son how poor he would be without faith.

At the end of the talk the boy expressed a kind of jealousy. If it could be like that, perhaps it would be meaningful. But, and that was the point, all of it meant nothing to him. He was unaware of those things. He had no such feelings, such experiences. He had very different experiences. If only he could tell a story like that. But he was not able to do that.

The result of the talk was not positive. While his mother tried to draw her son to the faith, it only moved further away from him. He became more unapproachable than he had been before. *Because he was not his mother!*

Something went wrong in that talk. Mother talked only about herself, about her faith experiences. The boy could do nothing else but also look at himself with the question: Am I also aware of that, or do I know about that too? Mother presented herself. In that way he also was thrown back onto himself. The fellow heard nothing about the great, miraculous deeds of God throughout the ages. The church only played an indirect role, as far as it fit into her faith experiences. The story of his mother’s subjective experiences prevented the outlook on what is objectively presented in Word and sacrament, in church and office. *Church sense* could have directed the attention to what is in common, which unites.

Church sense encourages and humbles

If it depended on the “personal” to be first and final, then Moses would have talked differently in his prophetic song, which we know as Psalm 90. It is often understood to generally address our fleeting life and so it is used as the New Year’s Eve psalm. However, the key to the psalm is Numbers 14:30-34!! Psalm 90 speaks about *that* anger and *that* vanishing life. Israel is making a funeral or death journey through the desert. A trail of graves is left behind. Until all the older generation is extinct. For the measure was full when Israel above all followed the majority report of the ten spies instead of the faithful minority report by Joshua and Caleb. For these two men, it almost cost them their life (Numbers 14:10). During that journey of death through the desert, Moses leads the people of the LORD. Also pastorally. The prophetic song of Psalm 90 provides pastoral guidance to a people doomed to death,

“Teach us to number our days aright” (verse 12).

That is the prayer for a faithful taxing of one’s own days, to know and confess the LORD, also is His judgments.

“All our days pass away under your wrath.... The length of our days is seventy years – or eighty, if we have the strength;”

They did not get older than that under God’s wrath, while Moses, Aaron and Miriam died when they were about forty years older. Moses turned 120, his father Amram 137, Aaron 123, Miriam a bit older, and not to mention others, Joshua died when he was 110 years old.

Those Israelites, what did they live for? Only to die? To secure a grave in the desert? So is there only dismay and fatalism? Moses teaches the people to take courage. Be it that the elder ones no longer saw the Promised Land, their children certainly did. When you only think about yourself, all perspective is put at risk to fade away. However, when you have *church sense*, there is a future.

“May your deeds be shown to your servants, your splendour to their children” (verse 16).

The children will soon enter Canaan. The *church* will shortly enter Canaan. Moses teaches the Israelites to think ecclesiastically. They must even see and confess glory. Glory for their children. That is *their* glory as well. The glory of all of them during the expedition of punishment in the desert. No fatalism.

“...establish the work of our hands for us – yes, establish the work of our hands” (verse 17).

There was work to be done in the desert. Bring up children and nurture them. Teach a trade or profession. Instruct them in all kinds of competence which they would soon need in the new land. In days of distress and misery, church sense shows ways into the future!

Church sense *encourages*. Church sense is no less *humbling*. If the “personal” is the point as first and foremost, then Moses would not have spoken *plurally* in Psalm 90. By itself it is only a small matter, such plurality. But it is significant. By attentively reading the Bible you learn to notice such small matters and work with them. Which plural is the point here? For example verse 7, “We are consumed by your anger....” We! Moses includes himself. And he also includes Joshua and Caleb. It is not, YOU are consumed by his anger; we don’t belong to that, Joshua and Caleb, Aaron and I. Joshua and Caleb did *not* die in the desert. They played an important role in Canaan.

Still, here is that plural “we.” And throughout the whole psalm. The distress of the church is also Moses’ distress. And that of Caleb. There is no talk in the way of: I experience things differently.

No, it is church sense. I do not stand before the LORD as a single person, with only my life. I stand before

Him as church member. In union with the church. In the communion of saints. Moses submits himself with the church under the judgment. Caleb sang along. Joshua joined in prayer. “*We are consumed by your anger.*”

Church sense comforts

“When Abraham is about to slaughter his son (Genesis 22), the pain penetrates through his father-heart. But he comforts himself. With what? Is the grief of the father perhaps alleviated? Does *he* as *father* get his son back? Or does he soon get another son in his place? Oh no, in his *office*, Abraham must be *above all*, the father of *believers* and act accordingly; only in the *second* place is he Isaac’s father. To let him fulfil that *first* mandate, God has called him to that second position. And now Abraham considers (...) *What* does he consider? *That God is mighty to raise the boy from the dead* (Hebrews 11:18). He does not know when and how. *If it’ll happen in his days*, and if *his old eyes* may as yet see it, *that*, he does *not know*. But what counts is that it *could* be. From this boy *will* indeed as yet come a great church people. *That* is promised and *that* will also certainly happen. *That* boy *will* nevertheless get children, even though a knife will presently cut off his young life.

Now here we have “*faith* accounting.” The *fatherly* grief does not know if it will be relieved. But the need of the *church*, THAT will be looked after by God Almighty. Will the *father* get his child back? Nothing definite can be built on that. But the *church* – it will most certainly get back its child. And so Abraham’s *faith*, in the capacity of *church member*, comforts the *father* in Abraham (...). Abraham comforts himself in his sacrificial service, for the ‘*totality*’ of promise-and-demand come to mind in its widely explained *relation*. He thinks about the past, when Sarah and himself were ‘*graves*,’ that nevertheless opened up according to promise (Romans 4:17).

In line with this fulfilment of the promise in the past, he also thinks about the future, namely would not also Isaac’s grave open up? He ‘*sees*’ the glimmering realities of Christmas as well as Easter (John 8:56; Hebrews 11:18). God’s deeds of creation and re-creation he has seen and considered (Romans 4:17) and applied to himself. That is something else, than...being incidentally restored at a certain psychic point by an instantly active medicine.”

So far K. Schilder in Heidelbergsche Catechismus I, p. 21-22, speaking about the comfort of Lord’s Day 1. In it, he distances himself from the opinion that that comfort was meant to let man, as religious subject, come to himself and to his harmonious balance. The comfort of Lord’s Day 1 comes from the fact that the believer knows himself part of God’s universal work of redemption. That is what this confession is all about.

The above is one of the many moving paragraphs written by K. Schilder. And it is educational to us! Abraham’s *church sense* comforts him when he travels with Isaac to the place of sacrifice.

Always the church?

Does it always have to be about the church? Such a sigh regularly surfaces.

The answers are all over the Bible. The point in Scripture is God and His deeds; and then it is repeatedly about His covenant and His people. The church is not a “subject” that gets the attention once in a while in Scripture. The ecclesiastical is there all the time. The epistles of the New Testament are not pamphlets. They are directed to congregations. Let nobody keep to himself what is written in them. The

church is addressed, admonished and encouraged.

In the Old Testament it is no different. It describes the one story of God and His people. The personal word of David is rather touching, with everything it entails in Psalm 23, “The LORD is my Shepherd.” But a shepherd is and remains to be a man with a *flock*!

The psalm ends with a reference to also the house of the LORD. It is not any different with the Good Shepherd from John 10. With the picture of the vine and the branches, John sets before us the secrets of the church, namely, that with the number of church members, mentioned with each church in the Yearbook, one more must be added, namely, the Lord Jesus Christ (see J. Kamphuis, Uitzicht uit het dode dal [View from death’s vale], pages 171-177). Much more could be mentioned. As long as we see how the ecclesiastical aspect runs through all of Scripture, and just in *that* way, it conveys church sense to us.

Those who gave us the “Statenvertaling” (Dutch State Bible translation of 1637) had an eye for that. It is clearly shown in their “Annotations,” which still proves to be a worthwhile reference. H.J. Schilder brought out this aspect of the Annotations in an essay which I highly recommend to be read and considered. It is entitled “Always the church??!!” It is published in his book Het kerkship biedt vaarwel, [The church vessel bids farewell] Kampen 1981, p. 155 ff.

Jeroboam and the misery of denominations

The Bible teaches us to see the glory of the church as the work of God and Christ, and to speak highly of the church. But how sorrowful it is in practical terms. Countless church communities populate the ecclesiastical circuit. What then is there left of all that exalted language taught in our Bible?

That proud or boastful language is not overdone! Unless we have to cover up that Christ’s church exists today (and in the future, for the LORD guarantees it). It is the church that is known by the marks God expects and prescribes. Refer to the Belgic Confession, Article 29. There are still many reasons for such lofty language, as long as I may

“...dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek Him in His temple” Psalm 27:4 NIV (quotation was from the Dutch versification, Psalm 27 stanza 3, tr).

That comes first of all. Furthermore, Scripture knows the phenomenon of denominationalism. In the days of Rehoboam and Jeroboam a division occurred in Israel, that is, the northern kingdom of ten tribes and the southern kingdom of the two tribes. The house of David kept only two tribes. That was punishment and humiliation for the king’s house, which had started so gloriously with David and Solomon. A *political* division. *The worship service was to remain one and the same!* Concentrated in Jerusalem. But Jeroboam turns the people of the LORD into a victim of his own political considerations.

“Jeroboam thought to himself....If these people go up to offer sacrifices at the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem, they will again give their allegiance to their lord Rehoboam king of Judah. They will kill me.... After seeking advice, the king made two golden calves. He said to the people, ‘It is too much for you to go to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’ One he set up in Bethel, and the other in Dan. And these things became a sin.... Jeroboam built shrines on high places and appointed priests from all sorts of people even though they were not Levites...” (1 Kings 12).

Strikingly it states: “*And this thing became a sin.*” The LORD may no longer determine where, when and how He and His people come together. The duties of office bearers are changed just like that. The misery of denominationalism has arrived. Sin against the second commandment! That’s not how it was presented. It would have been proposed as attractive and convenient, that is, no long distances, all the way to Jerusalem. Also, what would it matter? We all still serve the same God, don’t we? Just a little differently, and at another place, is that then so bad? But the Holy Spirit had the author of the book of Kings write: “*And this thing became a sin.*” And time did not heal this wound. When another king appears who continues like Jeroboam, we hear every time again

“He did evil in the eyes of the LORD. He walked in all the ways of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, and in his sin, which he had caused Israel to commit.”

Time and again it returns. Up until the last king. To all Bible readers it is a well-known refrain. But the repetitious refrain is a revealing message even into our own time with its multitude of church denominations. The message is this: the misery of denominationalism may not become commonplace or familiar. It remains to be sin, always. The Holy Spirit does not allow the view that as long as you serve the same God, it does not really matter, where, when and how you do that.

Therefore, it is also a sin these days to escape into the doctrine of the invisible church, which runs through all church institutes. Or in the doctrine of the pluriformity of the church. Or to leave the Sunday church attendance and the choice of church to each private domain and to experience the spiritual unity, over and across all church walls on special demonstration days of, for example, a broadcasting association (“EO – more than a broadcast”) [an apparent slogan of Evangelische Omroep tr.]. When there is supposedly so much spiritual unity, why then can we not together be obedient to the LORD God? And seek Him together at the place where we are *foremost* to experience unity: in church?

Why are those, who in the Netherlands these days keep on bringing up the church question, viewed as trouble makers, peace breakers, and mood spoilers? Then the Holy Spirit is that too, as the Spirit pounds on it all the time,

“He did evil in the eyes of the LORD. He walked in all the ways of Jeroboam and in his sin, which he had caused Israel to commit”.

A refrain becomes monotonous. That’s why it is a refrain. And its monotony becomes disturbing: there he is at it again! Wear and familiarity easily win out. Then here too, church sense is needed out of respect for Scripture, which can never get used to the misery of denominations.

Church and peace

Therefore, the church-question keeps popping up. And that is a good thing too. For what a tremendous calling does the church have to fill, that is, maintaining the truth of God. And so to teach peace to the world. The world yearns for it. Even in children’s songs,

“as all the children on earth / go hand in hand together / so life increases all its worth / and peace will finally get there.”

The world bulges with conflicts and wars. On a small scale between individuals. On a large scale between peoples. Who would not hanker after a world wherein “swords are beaten into ploughshares” and “spears into pruning hooks”? Turning warfare into agro tools? How can we get rid of threats of war? Who

will save us from that oppressive threat? That was the mood in the years before World War II. That's how it was in the days of Isaiah, when the world power of Assyria was increasing in a threatening way. Isaiah may show the way, in chapter 2:1-5, "the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills."

God's house, where the gospel is proclaimed and secured and where reconciliation is administered, has to attract the attention of a world in distress, "The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem." Through the word and the law, through revelation and instruction, the world must hear about peace and learn it. "He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples."

The LORD will indicate: *this* is good – *that* is wrong. *This* is the right way – *that* way is not. The LORD will judge. He shall designate the place of things. He makes peace on earth. In Jesus Christ.

Peace – that is not a feeling. It is a situation. Well-being, prosperity, positive and stable relations. Everything in its place. In harmony. Everyone in his element. Life is a feast.

How does it come about? It requires divine energy. Only in Jesus Christ will a new world arrive. And on its way to a new world, the church has been entrusted with the message of the true peace. Such a task! To be an eye-catcher and a source of information for a world in crisis. Only from within the church, true peace can again make way – also to government and to society. No wonder that Isaiah says,

"Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD."

Let us exalt the truth, radiate peace, and truly be the church. Then it can happen that in the world it is said, there is still something we miss. The work of a reformed parliamentarian with his church background and reformed roots will be respected and accepted.

"In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.'" (Zechariah 8:23) God's peace in Christ may spread from the church into the world! But it is an peculiar peace. Matthew 10:34-36 demands attention for that,

"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword...a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man's enemies will be the members of his own household."

This also belongs to the peace of Christ. It remains to be a totally unique kind of peace. Would Christ, who was adorned with a crown of thorns, ever have been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize? His peace is by far not always accepted. Jesus Christ's peace and the world's peace movement usually collide. John 14:27a is not for nothing followed by verse 27b. John 14:27a states, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives." Verse 27b states, "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

This peace is, after all, indissolubly tied to the war between the woman and the serpent (Genesis 3:15), between the woman and the dragon (Revelation 12). If it is true peace then there is no peaceful co-existence between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. Therefore, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you" (Luke 6:26).

This is, for example, because you did not say what had to be said to strive for true peace. It's because you kept your mouth shut "to keep peace for dear peace's sake." It's the dear peace of the unlimited tolerance. Unholy peace. Living from the peace of Christ means war against the world, the devil and your own flesh. Church sense teaches you to wage war on account of peace!

VI Norm Sense

God speaks in His Word. We may not add nor subtract anything from that. Neither change it. As God says it, so it is true and right. We have to accept that and stand by it. That is norm sense.

Norm sense demands an obedient listening attitude. All too often the term *obedience* is by many written off as insensitive. For it might right away suffocate all creativity and spontaneity. But the Bible clearly knows otherwise.

Hebrews 11:1 gives an indication about what faith is. Question & Answer 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism gives a description of faith. Of true faith – note the normative distinction. You might also say it in this way: faith is obedience. A believer is a person who is again obedient to the LORD. From that viewpoint Paul describes his career, Romans 1:5, “...to call people from among all Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.”

He concludes the same epistle by again pointing at exercising faithful obedience, Romans 16:26! Such obedience does not counteract spontaneity and creativity. On the contrary, as the apostle Peter reminds us, obedience evokes spontaneity and creativity.

“Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brother...” (1 Peter 1:22).

What is more creative and spontaneous than love? Obedience is not stale and dull. On the contrary, it is enriching. It gives perspective. It is alive and effervescent or bubbling. Let’s just finish that text of 1 Peter 1. It continues as follows,

“love one another deeply, from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.”

That is where it all comes from. From the Word of God. That Word has to be heard and heeded. That Word must be guarded, retained and observed. Retention through thick and thin, that is norm sense.

Facts are not norms

Anyone who considers this will agree. The fact that something happened, even on a large scale, does not yet mean, that it is also allowable. There is an apparent tendency to just not make a fuss about “proletarian shopping under ten bucks”. (This appears to refer to the “laity” visiting other “denominations” at times, tr.). The fact exists, that many in the Netherlands start thinking like that. But for reformed people it certainly is not the norm.

However, when it is about the church, facts can so easily push aside the norms. Because what do the actual facts tell me about church membership? Looking at the facts, it is this: I am a member of a sub-, sub-, sub-section in the realm of religion. For there are numerous world religions, and Christianity is one of them. Christianity recognizes three main streams, namely, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant churches. Each has its own tradition. Looking more closely at the Protestant branch, it again branches out into different directions, that is, Reformed, Baptist, Evangelical...etc. Following the reformed line it divides again into all kinds of variations (Old-Reformed, Christian Reformed, Dutch Reformed, Liberated Reformed, etc.). A booklet exists which describes this area under the title: “Ten Times Reformed!” So of what am I a member? Am I a member of those reformed varieties under the heading Protestantism, while Protestantism is a sub-section of Christendom? And that Christendom better

not pretend to be the only religion in the world.

However, starting from the field of *norms*, it becomes a whole different story. Then I listen to the Bible. And the Bible tells me what religion is and what the church is. That is summarized and explained in the confessions of the church. If these determine my church position, then only one thing is important, that is, what does the LORD want? What does the church have to be according to Him? What are the norms for that? And if, in that light, I embark on my Sunday course, then I realize that I am part of the world wide Holy Catholic Christian Church. Then I know that I am not a member of one or another religious sub-sub-section. Because, facts are not norms!

Opinions of equal merit?

Many people are religious or they want to be religious. They have their own ideas. About God, about the Bible, about faith and about the church. Often very different ideas. As a reformed person, I have reformed ideas. And it's okay to have them. Everyone will grant me that. As long as I, at one or the other occasion, keep them to myself. And not try to impose them on someone else. When someone else thinks differently about it, then that's his business. I have to leave it alone. After all you should let people be what they are. But the point is, do we then together leave God for what *He is*, as the One who speaks His Word as the *decisive* Word?

Let's say you study theology in Kampen. On Friday afternoon you hitch-hike home. You are picked up and quite soon you are in conversation with the driver. Where are you from? What do you do? Oh, theology. Interesting. In some way the man believes as well. You keep talking until the time when he says: as long as you are happy, stick with it, but allow me my opinion. At that moment you want to go on. You have to try to explain, that your opinion is not yours at all or that it is not on the same level as other opinions. No, in self-denial you learned to rather look away from all kinds of personal opinions. For you embraced Christ and you accepted the doctrine of the Old and New Testament as the complete doctrine of salvation.

The situation on the front seat of the car is not a kind of going back and forth of ideas or an exchange of ideas of equal value. But there is an "opinion" coming down from on high, the "opinion" of the Holy Spirit, of the Word of God. Moreover, one of the two on the front seat already capitulated to that, and the other did not yet. That's the situation! To clearly see that, you need norm sense!

The angels and the women

The Easter message by Luke is that, early on Easter morning, women go to the grave to complete, in a fitting way, the hurried funeral of Friday night. They want to go and anoint the dead body of the Lord Jesus (cf. Mark 16). But the angels must coach them away from that idea. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5)

A remarkable expression. A lot more can be said about it than is possible in this context. Nevertheless, it shows this aspect, namely, that the angels do not adapt to the women's way of thinking and the pattern of their expectation. The angels just start from the basis of God's truth. The true state of affairs. Christ is not dead. He lives. The women are looking for the living, even though at that moment they think otherwise. And they look for such a living among the dead. Now that is odd. Who would want to embalm a living person? The angels do not even try to put themselves in the place of the women. They

talk so completely differently than people who wish to give others freedom of expression. Also, people would allow each other to have their own opinion, even when they talk about God, about Christ and about all kinds of matters of faith. Is that not the way it often goes? “Is that how you think about it? Fine with me. But give me as well some space for my way of thinking. Should we not leave each other free in that?”

The consequence is that in our world there is a lot of letting people have their say and getting nowhere. Even in church circles and meetings. The one thinks this way and another that way. But beware when you say: “This is it and nothing else.” Then a storm threatens! How dare you condemn another person like that? You have to respect each other.

In the meantime the truth is disappearing from the world with those endless seminars and that limitless chatter. The truth of God’s Word is conferenced out of the world.

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

They could indeed know it, those women. They belonged to the “followers” of the Lord Jesus (Luke 23:55) and they could be aware of what is said, for example, in Luke 18:31-34. But the disciples did not understand it. And neither did the women. Words that are not understood are forgotten. But that should not be a defence or an excuse. That’s how you talk the truth away, out of existence. Was the announcement of Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection so unclear?

Where were Abraham’s children, who against heaping hopes had believed incredulous things?

Dissidents

All this does not have to be minimized to arrive at a thoughtful approach of “dissidents.” “Let your gentleness be evident to all” Philippians 4:5. The tone of voice, the way you look, the courtesy you exercise – let it be there. But regarding *content*, let it be noticeable that God’s Word is the truth. Departing from that, you cannot, you will not and you may not. Above all, you stick to that. In everything. You insist upon it, without physical force (Zechariah 4:6, Matthew 13:30). The church and church people have a call to witness, that is to say, that they must pass on facts. They must make known, and hold high, the true state of affairs between heaven and earth, as revealed.

We take our measurements from that. With that, we will weigh, illuminate and diagnose. Also towards “dissidents”, those of a different persuasion. That does not go naturally. It must be learned.

In a school paper, of a reformed association of schools, a student wrote about a pop group, “I agree with you that the text does not render a Christian view point. However, you must regard it from their point of view.” And a bit further, “It is not Christian, but you cannot really blame them as unbelievers.”

That’s written by a high school student who could next year attend university. Norm sense is not as easy as pie. The writer fully understands that everything is not Christian, but he did not take a normative approach. He got stuck on the facts.

Application of norms

Norms are upheld by applying them. That happens in the multi-coloured aspects of life. At times it may mean a diversity in the application of norms. It can happen, that one norm is applied in more than one way. This may quickly evoke a reaction of measuring with different measuring rods. Still, that is not true and such must be acknowledged. You keep using one measuring rod, but the result may differ at times.

This demands wisdom, insight, love and sensitivity. It profits nobody to have an application of norms with short-sightedness and brute-force. Paul would definitely have refused to circumcise Titus in Jerusalem (Galatians 2:3 and 5:2), but he circumcised Timothy “because of the Jews” (Acts 16:3)!

Was that measuring with different measuring rods? Paul applied one and the same ruling, namely, the honour of God and the spreading of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That phrase “because of the Jews” does not mean, let’s do what the Jews want and drop what God wants. However, Timothy, as uncircumcised, could never act as a missionary co-worker. As such he was not permitted to take the pulpit in the synagogue. They knew Timothy. Paul, who had shown up with this uncircumcised, and therefore apostate Jew, might as well forget about mission work among the Jews. Entry would be denied. In addition, Timothy was a Jew via his mother, whereby his circumcision would not carry the significance it had when a heathen like Titus would be circumcised. So not Titus, but Timothy can be circumcised. Because of the progress of the gospel. One norm, two applications.

In 1 Corinthians 10:25-30 it can also look like “measuring with different rods” or capitulation to situation ethics. On the one hand you may liberally buy and consume sacrificial foods consecrated to Greek idols. On the other hand you must refrain from consuming when the heathen table companion points out to his Christian neighbour that the meat is consecrated meat. Still, it is one norm in both cases, namely, not to cause damage to the name of God, to serve Him, to seek His honour. A dual practise under one norm. That’s possible. It happens. Children experience that. Their parents forbid something. The children say: “It was allowed before, why not now?” But the parents have good reasons for their nuances in behaviour. Therefore, Paul prayed this prayer for the congregation:

“And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight so that you may be able to discern what is best...” (Philippians 1:9, 10)

The finality of the norm

After the above, does not everything become rather shaky? No. Because the point is not that the norm may be unattainable so we diminish it somewhat. It is this way: we maintain the norm, but we differentiate between the letter and the spirit. The norm stays norm. Even allowing nuances in its application, there still will be opposition to the norms. Those who keep on maintaining the norm may be called critics, who spoil the companionship, disrupt the snug cosiness. The books by K. Schilder about Christ’s suffering are admired and valued by friend and foe. His tender, touching description of Christ’s passion remains impressive. But whenever Schilder wrote about grace (i.e. against “gemene gratie” [common grace]) or about the church (e.g. opposing the idea of pluriformity of the church), then you thought you were dealing with a totally different Schilder. An intolerant critic, who always wanted to engage in sharp polemics.

But he was not a different Schilder. He was the same Schilder, moved and seized by the gospel. The sharper the view of the dear blood of the covenant, the more intense the attention for the bride of this Christ. Whoever is seized by the blood of the covenant, cannot and dares not putter with grace, with covenant, with God’s Kingdom or with Christ’s church. Many stumbled over such absoluteness or finality of Schilder. But it indeed was the finality or decisiveness of the norm which comes from God! Therefore, just to make it once more concrete: as long as Psalm 16:4 is in my Bible, I am not accepting an invitation to the opening of a mosque. Also civil decency cannot compel me to blur the norms. I will talk with any

Muslim who wishes to talk. But in another framework than the mosque where Allah is worshipped.

The Lord's Prayer - no chameleonic prayer

Every reformed preacher must have on his bookshelf the catechism explanation of his former colleague Bastingius. I possess the reprint of the second edition of 1594, edited by F.L. Rutgers i.e. Verclaringe op de Catechisme der Christelicker Religie door Hieremiam Bastingium, Amsterdam, 1893. So, an old book. But after the publication, it received much praise and it was also translated into German and English. Also, reading it is still very much worth the effort. It helps us to think scripturally and that does not age. It rejuvenates!

In the prayer the Lord taught us, we pray for the coming of the kingdom of God. Therefore, we ask for the explanation in the Catechism, such as,

“...preserve and increase Your church. Destroy the works of the devil, every power that raises itself against You....”

In the 16th century days of Bastingius, the Lord's Prayer was prayed in the persecuted reformed church. Three blocks over, it was also prayed in the Roman Catholic cathedral. There too: “Your kingdom come.” But they prayed it against themselves. Against their own activities of persecuting and harassing the people. Because they prayed the prayer which the Lord Jesus taught His disciples. They put in their mouth what *He* said. And then also what *He* meant by it. The only correct meaning. *Your* kingdom come. Preserve and increase *Your* church! With the second petition there is no multiple choice to pick whatever you wish. The ‘Lord's Prayer’ is no chameleonic prayer that takes on the colour of its surroundings.

“Your kingdom come. Preserve and increase Your church. Destroy the works of the devil....”

In that way it is still always prayed in church. At countless places. By people, Romans, Baptists, Remonstrants; by followers of the liberation ideology, black theology and feminism. What a cacophony of sounds there must be resounding in God's ears. For is everything that is presented as such, really God's kingdom? Does everything also really *serve* the coming of God's kingdom as well as the preservation and increase of God's church? The destruction of the works of the devil?

He who prays the Lord's Prayer, puts Jesus' words in his mouth. For they remain *His* words, the prayer He taught. Then it is all about *His* kingdom and *His* church. It is normatively defined. As there is one body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God and Father, so there is one kingdom of God and not a multitude of chameleonic–coloured kingdoms.

That's the track Bastingius places us on, when he writes in his commentary on Lord's Day 48 with regard to the Roman Catholics:

“...and they still even pray Your kingdom come, while they do the opposite, for they refuse it, oppress it and they would like to have it wiped off the earth.

But if they correctly understood their situation, then they would notice that, by praying like that for the future of God's kingdom, they desire from God to have Him stretch out His arm against them, as enemies of His kingdom, and to take revenge on them, since they place themselves in this way over against His kingdom (p. 745)”.

That is norm sense!! There will be “Lord, Lord-sayers” who will get to hear: “I never knew you.” This is the gravity of Matthew 7:21-23.

VII Was the Lord Jesus reformed?

Let's look back for a moment at our starting point. It was the question: Was Abraham reformed? Another Abraham, Abraham Kuyper, busied himself with a similar question in 1880 in three long articles in *de Heraut* (#132,133,134 of June 20, 27 and July 4, 1880). So our starting point was not that original.

I'll quote a few paragraphs from his first article, not only out of curiosity, but above all for the manner of thinking Kuyper uses,

“To some people in the country it seemed amazing, strange and even sacrilegious that I dared to relate the term “reformed” to *the person of Jesus* (...). But still we ask in all seriousness, can a reformed church rest, before it learns, in complete righteousness and with unwavering determination, to literally repeat this: ‘Jesus is reformed and so am I’? Also, do those who oppose this not realize how they become guilty, over against their reformed brothers, of malicious mistrust by stumbling over this word? After all they then imagine that these brothers would be zealous for reformed principles without the confident certainty in their soul, that these reformed principles are *the principles of Jesus Himself* (...). And they impute to us nothing less than that we would strive, struggle and suffer for something that, in accordance with our own witness, would not be covered completely by the name of Jesus.

It is one or the other, right? Either admit that for reformed brothers there *is no difference* between the ‘principles of Jesus’ and the ‘reformed principles’; or, as argued, that also *these* brothers recognize this difference (...).

But ... if the first is true, then one may *not* accuse the reformed brothers of such a sacrilegious game. And when the ‘principles of Jesus’ (in their conviction in the most complete sense) *coincides* with ‘reformed principles,’ my dear oh dear, what is then so exaggerating, so untrue, and so far-fetched, in revealing from the bottom of our hearts, and to use the more drastic expression without hesitation: ‘Jesus Himself was reformed!’”

So far Abraham Kuyper.

Was Abraham reformed? That's how this booklet started.

Was Jesus reformed? That's how this booklet ends.

Is the one question simply tied to the other? Are they on the same level? I would like to say this about it, there is a difference between Abraham, our father-in-church and Jesus Christ, our *Lord*. Both, we and Abraham, are subject to this Lord.

The question, was Jesus reformed, leads to misunderstanding when thereby we enclose the Lord Jesus Christ in what we make of “being reformed!” However, Kuyper meant the opposite – his thinking is normative. Therefore, his intentions are acceptable. He truly lets us see that reformed faith is nothing else than the catholic, undoubted, Christian faith; the one universal faith, that is in everything joined to Jesus Christ.

“One Lord, one faith!” (Ephesians 4:5)