

# REFORMED CONTINUA

Magazine of The Reformed Churches (restored) of The Netherlands

Proverbs 8:32

- Volume 20 - June 2016 -

## From the editor

June 2016

Dear readers,

We are happy to present to you the 20th edition of the magazine *Reformed Continua*. We are thankful to the Lord that He gave and gives us the strength to be able to continue with this work.

We are also thankful that the magazine is well-received, at home and abroad. In this way we can give you information about our churches in the English language of which there is a great shortage.

This issue contains two articles by Rev. S. de Marie that were published recently in *De Bazuin*. These are:

- 'To change: adapt or return'
- 'Is 'Evangelical' in accordance with the Gospel?'

In the writing and publishing of all this we may know and experience that it is the Lord Himself

Who preserves His Church to the end. It is His merit that there are still many possibilities to let His Word be heard.

We hope and pray that also this edition may firstly be to the honour of God and also to the up-building of the churches world-wide. That it may be well-received and that eyes may be opened to the true vision on the Church.

*Joh. Houweling, Bleiswijk*

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# To change: adapt or return?

by S. de Marie

## A new book

A new book with the title *Zie hoe alles hier verandert. Het verloop van de gereformeerden* ('See how everything changes here. The course of the Reformed people'), was recently published, written by Prof. Dr. G. Dekker, emeritus sociologist of religion at VU University Amsterdam (Kok, Utrecht, 2016). In this book he describes how Reformed and experiential-Reformed churches have changed in recent years. On the book jacket we read 'Is there a future for the liberated Reformed Churches ('Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt'), Netherlands Reformed Churches ('Nederlands-Gereformeerde Kerken') and the Christian Reformed Churches (Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken)? These churches have long resisted all cultural changes, but presently the life of faith in the orthodox and experiential groups is radically changing.'

In *Reformed Continua* we have previously paid full attention to Dekker's book which specifically dealt with the GKv, titled *De doorgaande revolutie* ('The ongoing revolution', see vol. 12, May 2013, From Reformed to secularized churches? 1-7). In that book Dekker has demonstrated, with many documented examples, how the GKv has adapted to the world, to the thinking and lifestyle of the man of these times.

In this new book Dekker wants to delve deeper into the changes. In it he includes his reflections across the board of what he calls 'the reformed world' of 'orthodox-reformed' and 'experiential reformed'.

Dekker presents himself as someone who, due to his scientific background, can evaluate things from a distance. From his book '*De doorgaande revolutie*' we know that he is certainly not negative about the changes that he perceives! Unfortunately, Dekker does not use Scripture for a correct judgment. He looks approvingly at it, based on a sociological assessment. Yet his previous book testified of a sharp analysis of the developments in the GKv and the underlying causes.

That alone makes it worthwhile to see which changes Dekker sums up in his new book, which causes he points out for these, and which assessment he gives

on this. After all, we are exposed to many of these same influences that have led to changes that have occurred and still occur in the aforementioned churches. We will now briefly mention his findings.

## Which changes?

After two introductory chapters, an account follows about the developments within the Reformed Churches (synodical) after the Second World War. First about the progressive magazine *Voorlopig* that first appeared in 1969, and according to Dekker played a pioneering role. The developments that they already had in mind largely became reality later on. It is striking that Dekker himself was one of the editors of this magazine, along with people such as H.M. Kuitert, G.H. ter Schegget and H. Wiersinga.

Subsequently in the fourth chapter he outlines the nature of the changes that in the course of time in religious and church life have occurred and still occur.

Firstly there is the shift of attention from doctrine to life. It is not about what is truth, but about how you live. That does not only apply ecclesiastically, but also personally. The importance of the confessions for today is seen less and less. Even if mutually there are differing insights regarding doctrine, these are preferably passed over rather quickly. People are not affected by much anymore, such as the doctrine of election. Or causes them to be embarrassed, such as the doctrine of providence. '*Churches no longer threaten to break up over questions about baptism, Lord's supper, redemption or election, but about questions on how one must view homosexuality and whether abortion and euthanasia are justified.*'

As a second important change, Dekker mentions the role of personal experience in faith. In faith it is less and less about truths that apply to everyone, and that ask only faithful acceptance. Personal experience and own feeling eventually became decisive. One no longer therefore wants to be 'saddled up' with a Scriptural doctrine.

Related to this is a third change that can be mentioned: that, according to Dekker, 'Reformed people' became increasingly open to the convictions of others and so started to put into perspective their own manner of faith.

Together this led to the fourth change: a growing uncertainty and doubt with regard to faith. In this way one came to the proposition that faith is not a sure knowledge, but a searching, a longing for. Doubt and uncertainty certainly fit in with this. This can go so far that one sees faith as a projection, or that one doubts the existence of God.

As a fifth shift Dekker mentions that one focuses more on the here and now, and less on the hereafter. According to him, the certainty of the existence of a heaven and hell is decreasing and one concentrates more and more on earthly life. In this way even the supernatural loses its place. According to Dekker, this is also the cause that society comes in sight much more and one focuses more on the world and its culture.

The role of the church has also changed (sixth). One chooses a church himself, or no longer participates in a church anymore.

The seventh change Dekker considers as the most important: the attitude towards, and the dealing with the Bible. This has greatly changed and still is changing.

Summarizing all seven points, Dekker posits that a shift can be seen from a focus on God towards a focus on man and the world. Connected with this is a shift from a focus on the doctrine and confessing to a focus on life and conduct.

### Which backgrounds?

Dekker mentions three important backgrounds for these changes.

1. The giving up of the isolation of Reformed people in society and a greater openness towards, and cooperation with, the world. By this, the influence of all kinds of ideas that live in the world increased. Initially there was resistance against this. Dekker: *One has always tried as much as possible to fence himself from the influences of the world. One tried to keep alive the awareness that one does live in this world but is not of this world. One has tried as long as possible to maintain his own (Reformed or Christian) organizations so that Reformed people could, as long as possible, be active together in society, in their own manner, without having to accommodate to the ideas of others.*

But this process was eventually breached, although in different degrees, for the various Reformed

church federations:

*The two extremes are formed by the members of the early Reformed churches on the one hand, and the experiential Reformed people, organized in various Reformed churches, on the other hand. But the trend is unmistakable.*

2. The changed culture in society has in this way had its influence on the Reformed people. Dekker mentions two points: the increased assertiveness in the world, and the decreased inquiry into the purpose of life, whereby much more attention is given to what is useful. That would pave the way for a relativistic thinking about God and the supernatural.

3. The changed manner of dealing with the Bible is certainly the most important cause of the shift. Dekker points to the important role of the report *God met ons* ('God with us') from the Reformed Churches (synodical) in 1981. It contains the so-called 'relational concept of truth'. That is to say that the truth of the words of Scripture depend on the circumstances in which they were written. Scripture has become a human time-bound book. It does not teach us an objective, always valid truth. In changed situations the commandments, for example, must be altered or cancelled.

Dekker gives the example of the position of the woman in 1 Cor. 11. In line with this report, one then posits that Paul merely wanted to respond to the public opinion of days. What is written there has a different effect for today.

Dekker believes that the change in the authority of Scripture is a revolutionary change. *Probably all changes that can be seen in the Reformed world are - directly or indirectly - related to the changed vision on the Bible. Therefore, the importance of this last change cannot be overestimated.*

There would, in my opinion, be more important backgrounds that could be mentioned, for example postmodern thinking and modern media.

### Assessment of the changes

The fifth chapter on the assessment of the changes, unfortunately, just as in the previous book, lacks any Scriptural test. Dekker solely thinks in sociological and psychological terms. He now comes to highly questionable and reprehensible thoughts. Dekker's idea is that you cannot stop the changes, at least not as long as you want to participate in society. As soon as you want that, you cannot avoid the change.

Among Reformed people there may be apprehension towards changes, but that is – according to him – due to a wrong image of the Bible and system of faith. As an example of unjustified resistance, Dekker mentions the defense of the historicity of the first chapters of the Bible, where one says: 'if we no longer believe this, then later on we will not believe in the resurrection of Christ either'.

Dekker disputes this proposition by pointing to the changes that have always taken place. In the Middle Ages, for example, one believed very differently in a heaven and hell. That depended on the different worldview one had at the time.

Furthermore he points to the present day influence of the doctrine of the free will (Remonstrant ideas repudiated in the Canons of Dort). Nowadays this same doctrine simply enters into the GKV through the evangelical movement.

Dekker sees the resistance to this as 'unhistorical'; by not going along with change, you are not doing justice to history.

Moreover he finds this 'unreformed'. He thereby quotes the slogan 'semper reformanda': *changing, both in ecclesiastical and in religious respect, is therefore an essential feature of the reformed faith.*

### *Return*

While Dekker really knows how to describe many matters of faith in a good manner, even though he does not agree with them, here he completely misses the point. Reformation is not equal to change in the sense of taking over from the world! It is nothing more than returning to Scripture. That this, at the same time, includes a *renewal* for the believer, does not pertain to the world, but points to the work of the Holy Spirit who together with God's Word bends the will again to Scripture. Precisely due to the ongoing attraction to the world and its thinking, this return is always needed, time and again: *semper reformanda*.

A liberation is also a return, namely a return to Scripture and pure religion. The Holy Scripture itself clearly indicates what we have to do with regard to changes in the world that go against God's Word. It is following the line of the antithesis that God Himself already prescribed in paradise. Where response is given to the call in Rom. 12:2:

*And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.*

### *Adapt*

Dekker argues that the changes he describes and promotes within the 'reformed world' do not contain any adaptations. According to him you must first test the changes in the world. But in my opinion this proposition is difficult to maintain. His examples all speak of an adaptation to worldly thinking that goes against Scripture. Yes, at least if you still want to see Scripture as the infallible Word of God, as absolute truth and not a human word that you can adapt to your own liking.

A final qualification that Dekker applies to the resistance to go with change, is: 'unwise'. According to him it even brings damage to your faith. A living faith calls for change:

*One does not, or not sufficiently, realize that religiousness is a part of our entire culture and that the personal life of faith is a part of our entire way of thinking and way of life. That also all our forms and expressions of faith are time- and culture-bound, and therefore must change with changing times. That therefore our faith must change... if at least one wants to be able to continue speaking... of a personal faith.*

Dekker is of the opinion that any tension caused by differences between faith and culture calls for a solution. That would be unavoidable, otherwise one will not be able to get along in society.

Everything that changes in culture (e.g. the position of women) and science (e.g. evolution theory) imposes itself on the believer, must bring him to adjust what the Bible teaches. Only in this way can the one be brought into conformity with the other ('harmony'). If one deals with this in a different way then, so Dekker says, this leads to a loss of faith or an impoverished faith. Or with total resistance to change it leads to a fundamentalistic faith.

It is clear that what Dekker advocates emanates from man and affects the essence of Scripture. Unfortunately this is also the path that the GKV is following with regard to the developments in the world, such as can be seen in the new hermeneutics, the changed conception of creation, the position of the woman, homosexuality and other things.

There is but one remedy: reformation through a return to God and His Word!

It is not about whether we can or cannot get along with the world, but whether we still show

obedience of faith to our heavenly Father. Whether we truly continue to follow Christ where He goes, even if we cannot buy or sell (Rev. 13:17). Whether we truly keep God's commandments and have the testimony of Jesus, even if it costs us our life (Rev. 12:7, 20:4). We will have to flee from what is not in agreement with God's Word (1 John 2:15-17, Rev. 18:4).

It is of utmost importance for us that we continue to see this clearly. Because the plan, the form of this world is passing away (1 Cor. 7:13). This means: everything that the world has to offer, will pass away. Not the church and Scripture must adapt to this world, the opposite is true!

### *Evangelical movement*

We could write more about what is written about the developments within the experiential Reformed churches and the GKv, the predicted dismantling of the reformed world and how Dekker ends up with Bonhoeffer, but we have run out of space here.

We do still want to point to the important influence that Dekker attributes to the evangelical movement. He posits that the life of faith of the liberated people and the 'orientation of faith' of many local churches of the GKv has come to display a strong 'evangelical character'. He finds, with the adaptations one makes, that this connects completely to the 'culture of emotions' in which we live:

*If namely in religious terms one 'adaptation' to the changed culture takes place (a culture in which experience and emotions and personal development take up such an important place), then it would be the ongoing evangelical character of religious life.* Dekker concludes that the ongoing evangelical character does damage to the identity of the liberated Reformed Churches (GKv). Unfortunately, we have to agree with him on this.

In a following editorial we would like to elaborate on this evangelical movement.



*Photo taken during the closing session of Synod Groningen, held at Zwolle on 13 June 2015.*

# Is 'evangelical' in accordance with the Gospel?

by S. de Marie

## Landslide due to growing evangelical influence

Lately it has become clear from various sides how much the influence of the so-called evangelical thinking has caused previously Reformed churches to follow another course and continues to do so.

Firstly in the book by Prof. Dr. G. Dekker (*See how everything changes here*, see the first editorial in this issue of *Reformed Continua*). He describes how the evangelical thinking plays a major role in the changes in the Reformed churches. Not only does Dekker conclude that the GKv has become radically 'evangelical', but also, according to him, the Gereformeerde Bond (the orthodox flank) of the PKN (Protestant Church in the Netherlands) and the experiential Reformed churches are slowly but surely moving in this direction. This is partly due to the youth being attracted to the EO (Evangelical Broadcasting company), namely the EO Youth Days. Also partly because experiential thinking is susceptible to emotional religious experience that occurs among evangelicals.

In addition to this comes the disclosure of Prof. Dr. A.L.Th. de Brujne, who, in a newspaper article (*ND*, 9 April, 2016) speaks of reformed 2.0. In it he wants to characterize the protestant churches that have loose (or lacking) ties with the reformed confession. According to him, this type of church has long been seen in evangelical-reformed churches, but also in NGK (Netherlands Reformed churches). He notes with satisfaction that in the meantime the GKv churches are moving in the same direction because there is much more openness to other Christians who do not consider themselves bound to the reformed confession. He himself feels very much at home in this new type of being 'reformed', where the Reformed confession is not seen as truth for all times but as a product from the time of the Great Reformation that has its limitations.

Here at last is a public acknowledgment that the GKv has let go of the foundation of its Reformed confession. At the same time shocking, because here it concerns a landslide.

The desired openness that Dekker as well as De Brujne speak about, has become an openness to all winds of doctrine. In the previous editorial we discussed various adaptations that can be observed. In this article we will pay attention to the influence of the evangelical movement.

## Free Evangelical Congregations

Which driving forces has this evangelical movement exerted on the above-mentioned churches? To start with, how do they see the confession of the church? And how do they see the church?

There are many types of evangelical congregations and groups. In this article we can only speak in general terms of their way of thinking.

In general the Bond van Vrije Evangelische Gemeenten (VEG: Bond of Free Evangelical Churches) is considered the closest to the mentioned Reformed churches. There are even congregations that work together with the NGK, with combined worship services, such as in Amsterdam.

Through websites of the VEG we come to know the following on their vision of a confession: they do not have any written confession! Because, they say, faith is experienced differently in different times. 'God guides us by the Spirit again and again to new forms of confessing.'

'Believing is dynamic'. Where you are and when you live, colours your faith'. 'Free Evangelicals stand for a personal faith'.

But is there something that binds them together, a common foundation? According to them, that is limited to the statement: 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior'. Thus, a mini-confession. Is there more? 'We further discover from our own life story what God expects from us and what we may expect from God'.

This is, in our opinion, a matter of a subjectivist faith that one may fill in according to one's own ideas and needs. No demarcation of errors. Obviously one has the idea that man is able to find out for himself what God demands. That can be different for everybody, depending on the situation and time.

How can one ever call this 'reformed'? It appears rather post-modern: the truth is multicoloured,

changes over time, and is dependent on the situation.

### Origin

What is the origin of this 'evangelical' thinking and what are its characteristics?

The origin is complex. If we limit ourselves to the VEG then we see, schematically speaking, Dutch roots and American influences.

The Dutch origin of the VEG begins with the 'Reveil' in the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (Dutch Reformed (State) Church) in the 19th century. That Reveil was a revival movement from Switzerland. Influenced by this, several congregations under the leadership of J. de Liefde, H.W. Witteveen and H.J. Budding separated themselves from the NHK. The most important reasons for this were state interference and modernism. They did not join the Secession however, but sought independence. They wanted to finally be free. In 1881 the bond of the VEG was established. But this is not a church federation as the Church Order of Dordt prescribes. The congregations retain a great deal of independence (congregationalism or independentism).

Also one does not want to bind himself to the confession. The 'offices' come out of the congregation itself and there is much room for the deployment of individual members of the congregation.

### American Evangelicals

Multiple influences throughout the course of time have affected the VEG. Firstly, the Maranatha movement of Johannes de Heer, with emphasis on personal religious experience, evangelism activities, and acceptance of chiliasm (the doctrine of the Millennial Kingdom).

In more recent times the influence of the 'evangelicals' from America can especially be identified. This American movement (which is very diverse) has its oldest origins in the Puritans that came to America from Scotland at the end of the 16th century. In reaction to the weakness in the Anglican state church they placed much emphasis on sanctification. Later on that brought on traits of perfectionism: as a converted person you no longer sin. Conversion becomes more of a one-time event. The necessity of daily forgiveness is seen less and less.

Christ has overcome the power of sin; it is now up to you personally to sanctify your life, such as through actions to bring others to conversion or to do good to others.

In this way you can answer the question: 'What have you done for Jesus?'

Due to the strong emphasis on this 'activism' the place of atonement and justification is pushed aside.

Up until recently the orthodox evangelicals placed much emphasis on honoring the authority of Scripture. But that does not mean that their doctrine is Scriptural. For Scripture, through their subjective experience, is strongly selectively applied. With the result of an insufficient understanding of the unity of Scripture and the unity of the old and new covenant. That contributes to deviating views, such as the position of the state of Israel, the importance of infant baptism and in looking forward to the return of Christ (adventism and chiliasm).

Besides baptist thinking, remonstrant thinking also ties in with the emphasis on personal faith and sanctification. The believer's own choice receives a more important place than God's covenant promises. That leads to a relativation of infant baptism, with a preference (or not) for adult baptism. Many evangelicals have no place for original sin. That also applies for election. Many adhere to a general atonement: 'God loves everyone'.

How do evangelicals see the church? Well, it is clear that so much individualism stands in the way of the true vision on the church. In general churches are seen as cold, rigid and impersonal. There is far too little experience. And if one was a member of a church, then one wants to be free from confession and church federation. Contact with others can be done through interdenominational activities and events.

### Attraction

Another important element in evangelical thinking is that the Spirit is also seen as working separate from the Word. Some teach a so-called (second) baptism by the Holy Spirit that does not coincide with coming to faith, but which you receive in further sanctification.

Much significance is assigned to the so-called direct inspiration of the Spirit. He lets someone know in his or her heart what he or she must do at a given moment. For example to make a trip to a far off country to convert people.

Also expressions of happiness (handclapping) and performing charismatic acts (driving out demons,

faith healing, speaking in tongues) must make the presence of the Spirit visible and tangible. For them that intensifies the faith experience. Among some evangelical movements (i.e. Pentecostal churches) this is stronger than among others. Many reformed people look with envy at such spontaneous expressions of faith. That's where there are signs and that's where miracles happen!

For a long time those in reformed circles positively appreciated the strong emphasis on the authority of Scripture and sanctification, as two important characteristics of the evangelicals.

Also evangelism campaigns (for example those of Billy Graham) drew attention.

### *EO, EH, Alpha-courses*

Since 1960 the American evangelical movement in the Netherlands was directly reflected especially in the EO (Evangelical Broadcasting company) and the Evangelische Hogeschool (EH: Evangelical College) and the Alpha-course.

Unfortunately in those early days also in the GKv the reaction to this was too positive. Members were encouraged by one of the professors to become a member of the EO! It is true that there were warnings against the unreformed subjective thinking, but at the same time it was often stated that you could still learn a lot from the evangelicals.

Their openness, their freshness, their public defense of God-given life (against abortion and euthanasia) were issues that appealed.

Systematically the evangelical way of thinking, by way of the EO, entered into the living rooms of reformed people. 'EO, more than a broadcast', was the slogan; and indeed, it transformed the reformed world into an 'evangelical' world.

The Alpha-course was welcomed with open arms, not only for evangelism purposes but even as catechism instruction for own baptized members. The following statements from this course illustrate the remonstrant (1,2), charismatic (3) and subjective (4,5) thinking:

1. 'Each person has a choice to do good or bad with his or her life'. Against this see: Canons of Dort I,9,11; III-IV, 10-14).
2. 'If Jesus is with us, we can turn our backs to evil'. Against this see: Heidelberg Catechism, LD 44.
3. 'The mark of the Holy Spirit is speaking in tongues'.
4. 'Which way does God direct me today? God

gives me a feeling that a certain way is the right way'.

5. 'Young people seek kicks, they only believe when they see that it works'.

### *No longer Reformed, no longer Evangelical*

Unfortunately in the last twenty years there is not much left of the two previously mentioned positive characteristics (authority of Scripture and sanctification). The secularization has not only hit hard in the Reformed churches but also in evangelical circles. The difference between the EO and the NCRV (National Christian Broadcasting company) or even with a non-Christian broadcast is often difficult to indicate.

The EO and the EH, meanwhile, have surrendered to the teaching of evolution (theistic evolution). The EO announced this through the public statement by A. Knevel in 2009; the EH last year at the presentation of C. Dekker's book.

We see another public expression of secularization in a annual event, the Passion, where the Christ's suffering is used for public entertainment by playing on human emotion.

EO-Youth Days are barely distinguishable from worldly entertainment, where youth may indulge and live it up. That Christ's name is still used here is more of a shame than an honor.

In the course of the last few years there are, unfortunately, few within the GKv whose eyes have been opened to this. Now that there is an open declaration of love for the evangelical way of thinking, the vast majority feels happy with this ongoing evangelical character. All sorts of elements of the above mentioned process are appreciated by the post-modern man, even if he was previously Reformed. We will sum up some important consequences of this:

- \* Giving first place to own feelings and own faith experience.
- \* Freedom of confession and church order.
- \* Applying a mini-confession 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior', where each individual can give his own interpretation.
- \* Exchange of adherence to certainties of faith for an awareness of its limited and temporary nature.
- \* Openness to new forms of doctrine, adapted to the times.
- \* Attach less importance to knowledge of sin and misery.

- \* Finding it unnecessary to spend much time on deepening the knowledge of God's Word.
- \* Giving preference to actions: discipleship and being a missionary church; 'being there for the world'.
- \* Expressing spontaneous and contemporary experience during the worship services with visual and active elements.
- \* Appreciation of charismatic matters in the congregation.
- \* No longer opposing adult baptism or re-baptism.
- \* Emphasis on the independence of the own congregation.
- \* Openness towards others outside the own church walls, with inter-church collaboration and open Lord's Supper.

The question is now: what you are then left with as far as church and faith is concerned, is that still

reformed? Is that still according to the Gospel; is that still according to Scripture? Or has man replaced the Gospel with 'another gospel' where not God and Christ and God's Word are central, but man, with his own personal feeling and experience? Man with his own choice and will. If then God's Word and His commandments are also let go of, isn't this then nothing less than self-willfulness?

The described process of an ongoing evangelical character is a big warning also for us as reformed believers who live in a post-modern age. We should not underestimate this great attraction for ourselves or for our youth.

Let us therefore bring into practice in every direction, for now and the future, what the apostle John teaches us in 1 John. 4:1:

*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.*

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## REFORMED CONTINUA

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