

Appendix 4

Theological University: response to foreign sister-churches

1. General

In this document the Board of Trustees (BoT) of the Theological University in Kampen (TUK) seeks to fulfill the request of the Synod of Ede, 2014, to formulate a response to the criticism from our foreign sister-churches concerning publications by lecturers and researchers at the TUK. In its request, the Synod stated that this response should take the form of a extensive exposition, accessible to a broad audience, and that it should address the various letters which have been sent. By foreign sister-churches are meant the Reformed Church in the United States, the Canadian Reformed Churches, and the Free Reformed Church of Australia. We gladly comply with this request.

The Synod of Armadale, 2012, of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia mentions in its letter dated April 22, 2013, the names of Dr. K. van Bekkum, Dr. S. Paas, Rev. J.J.T. Doedens, Dr. A.L.Th. de Bruijne, and Dr. G. Harinck. These brothers were also mentioned in the letters from other foreign sister-churches in the past few years, in connection to objections to publications by TUK lecturers. Most of these objections have been replied to in the past. The General Synod of Ede, 2014, judged it important to address the issues raised by the foreign churches, and to give a clarification concerning the way these objections have been addressed. The BoT desires to cooperate in this endeavor, but also wants to emphasize that this clarification cannot provide legitimate grounds to reopen a procedure concerning matters that have been addressed in the past. The purpose of this letter is to give a clear description of how the objections have been handled, and how, according to our firm conviction, they have been answered adequately. The BoT wants to give a description that is clear to all, and the BoT also hopes that the foreign sister-churches will come to the conclusion that the churches in The Netherlands, and in particular the Theological University in Kampen, have handled the criticism of the past fourteen years with integrity and thoroughness. Since the beginning of the discussions about these matters, the brothers involved have also made new and significant contributions to the development of Reformed theology. The paragraphs that follow discuss: 2.1. the appointment of Dr. S. Paas; 2.2. the dissertation and appointment of Dr. K. van Bekkum; 2.3. Rev. J.J.T. Doedens; 2.4 Prof. Dr. G. Harinck; and 2.5. Prof. Dr. A.L.Th. de Bruijne.

2.1 The Appointment of Dr. S. Paas

The letter from the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, mentioned above, states that, although many serious objections to the dissertation and appointment of Dr. S. Paas had been made, these objections were never addressed by a Synod, and that for solely formal reasons. But this assessment can be shown to be incorrect. In a letter dated March 26, 2012, we explained to the Canadian Reformed Churches how the Synod of Harderwijk, 2011, and the Board of Trustees and the Board of Directors dealt with the objections. The letter was a response to the letter of the Canadian Reformed Churches of March 9, 2011. In line with the letter of March 26, 2012, we make the following statement:

The appointment of Dr. S. Paas as lecturer at the university was discussed at the General Synod of Harderwijk, 2011. No objections to this appointment had been submitted to the Synod, but at the request of the moderator of the General Synod, the Board of Trustees presented an additional confidential report, which addressed the main considerations in the appointment of Dr. S. Paas as lecturer at the university. We highly value a good relationship with the churches in Canada and with the sister seminary in Hamilton, but it would be asking too much to give you access to a confidential report written only for the Synod.

As Board of Trustees and Board of Directors we believe we should give you a response to some of the key points.

1. First it must be noted that Stefan Paas received his doctorate from the University of Utrecht. His dissertation was written according to the guidelines of that institution. He received his doctorate in 1998, many years before he was appointed in Kampen. The grounds for his appointment in Kampen included his publications in the field of missiology, which were all written after his dissertation. The dissertation of Paas is a contribution to the field of the history of religion, rather than theology (even though his doctoral study took place in the Department of Theology). In this work he opposes, on history-of-religion grounds, the common Higher Critical view concerning the historical origin of belief in God as Creator in Israel. At the request of the Board of Trustees, the Kampen Old Testament professor, Prof. Dr. G. Kwakkel, addressed the various issues that could be raised about this dissertation. In doing so, he concluded that Paas had written his dissertation within the framework of the academic study of the history of religion, without making explicit his personal faith commitment. He has done the latter in other publications, which shows clearly that he is willing to be guided by the language of Scripture. Paas declared that Kwakkel's articles give a fair representation of his position. Naturally, Paas's choice for a purely history-of-religion approach is open to criticism, but given this approach and his explicit justification of it, there is no ground for the accusation of adhering to Higher Critical theories. On the contrary, one should appreciate his courage to show, in a Higher-Critical setting, and in a manner acceptable to Higher Critical scholars, that Israel's belief in God as Creator is much older than is generally claimed by such scholars.
2. The failure to adequately take into account the context within which Paas wrote his dissertation, and the limited scope of the focus of his study (that is, the prophets, not the Torah), is evident in some of the objections raised to the way in which Paas speaks about the historicity of the Exodus and the conquest of Israel in the book of Exodus. On the basis of texts that are generally regarded as old, and archeological digs, Paas concludes that there are good reasons to view the Exodus as an historical event. He did not subject the Biblical texts about the Exodus to historical analysis, and therefore did not cast any doubt on them either. Rather, he wanted to contribute to the defense of the historical reliability of the Old Testament at one specific point, namely the dating of the conceptions of God as the Creator.
3. The same can be said for language about God in Israel. The thesis that "Yahweh was probably a branching off from the Canaanite king-god El" is supposedly in direct contradiction of God's self-revelation in his Word. Paas's treatment of this matter in his dissertation is the maximum which an academic historian of religion is able to say on the basis of the principles and methods of this field of study. It says nothing about the theological issue as to whether Yahweh really is the one true God, and whether He always has been that. Every orthodox Bible believer affirms that God is the only true God, and Paas does the same in heartfelt faith. Nor does it say anything about the issue as to what the *historical* process may have been. Rather, it only speaks to what people believe they can say *within the framework of a specific methodology, with all its limitations*. History-of-religion research deals with religion, not with God. In his dissertation, Paas adopts the scientific jargon common among the academic audience for whom he wrote this work.
4. You write: "We would have expected that as a Reformed scholar he would have stated clearly that although he does not adhere to the religion-historical approach, he will use this approach in order to show that even on the basis of those presuppositions one can defend a creation belief in eight century prophets." (p. 3) The point is that this is precisely what Dr. Paas wanted to do, according to his own testimony. He wrote this even more emphatically in the revised and translated version of his dissertation in 2003, in which (among other things) he forcefully criticizes the literary-critical method. One may debate whether Paas should have made this more explicit in 1998 within that context, but from his own declaration it is perfectly clear that this was his objective. Naturally, he could not have known what role his dissertation would play in the later discussions in the GKv (of

which Paas is not a member), and with what questions in mind people would read his dissertation many years later. The context of his dissertation and the people for whom he wrote are entirely different from the context of the later debate surrounding his dissertation in the GKV and its sister churches.

5. On p. 5 you also mention the article by Paas in *Wapenveld*. In the context of his appointment, we had a thorough discussion with Paas about this. This conversation showed to our satisfaction that Dr. Paas wants to understand Scripture according to God's intention, also concerning Genesis 1 and 2. That does not remove the possibility of disagreement about the concrete way he does this in this article. Such disagreements have always existed among orthodox Reformed theologians.

The Board of Trustees and Board of Directors concluded that the Theological University in Kampen had welcomed in Dr. Paas a valuable lecturer, who has deep reverence for the Scripture as the Word of God, and who knows himself bound to the Reformed Confession. By opposing Higher Critical theories on their own turf he actually supported scholarship that is faithful to the Bible.

In addition to this letter from 2012, the BoT emphasizes that the Synod of Harderwijk, 2011, deliberated in closed session about the objections to the appointment of Dr. S. Paas, which had been raised in letters to the BoT as well as in public articles. The clarification and defense of the BoT and BoD concerning this matter was approved by the Synod as part of the reports from the Theological University. In this way justice was done to the objections coming from the churches, and at the same time to Dr. Paas, who in 2008 was appointed by the Board of Directors.

2.2. Dissertation and appointment of Dr. K. van Bekkum

The letter dated April 22, 2013, from the Free Reformed Churches of Australia also mentions the 2010 dissertation of Dr. K. van Bekkum, as well as his 2011 appointment as lecturer at the university by the Synod of Harderwijk. The BoT points out that Prof. Dr. H.G.L. Peels, professor of Old Testament at the Theological University in Apeldoorn, had previously published a very favorable review of this dissertation in *Theologia Reformata*.¹ This document of the BoT focuses on the way in which the university and the churches have dealt with Van Bekkum's dissertation and his subsequent appointment. In the aforementioned letter of March 26, 2012, to the Canadian Reformed Churches, the BoT and BoD also addressed this matter, and in line with this letter we would like to say the following:

In your letters you also make some remarks concerning the dissertation of Dr. K. van Bekkum. In particular, you write that the distinction Van Bekkum makes between a "truth claim" and a "truth value" "does not reflect a high view of Scripture and should be rejected."

For the sake of clarity: a Board of Trustees of a university does not evaluate dissertations; neither does the Curatorium. The scholarly evaluation belongs to the thesis committee and the university senate. This includes the assessment as to whether the dissertation fits into the confessional framework of the university. In academic publications discussions are held about the results of academic investigations and methodological principles. Dissertations defended in Kampen must likewise be able to stand the test of such academic criticism. Hypotheses and models that are defended can also be attacked in that academic debate. The articles about Joshua 10:12-14 by E.A. de Boer and P.H.R. van Houwelingen, which you mentioned, were not published in an academic journal, but are illustration of a discussion that may be had about results of academic investigation. On a side note, they also state that Van Bekkum does not deny that God performed a miracle in response to Joshua's prayer.

¹ H.G.L. Peels, *Bijbeltekst, geschiedenis en archeologie* [Bible text, history, and archeology] in *Theologia Reformata*, vol. 54, issue 3, 306-314

The BoT and the Curatorium seek to be informed about the criteria and principles used by the supervisor of a dissertation and the senate of the university. To respond your questions concerning the dissertation by Dr. van Bekkum, we include in this letter the statement by his supervisor, professor of Old Testament Dr. G. Kwakkel:

1. At the core of Reformed theological study of the Bible—in agreement with the Bible passages quoted by the Canadian brothers as well as Belgic Confession, art. 3-7—is the question, "What does the text mean?" What do the texts intend to say? Following the Old Testament scholar Long, you can formulate this as the question regarding the "truth claim": what exactly is the "truth" the text "claims" to communicate? This comes with the question of the nature of the "truth claim"; for instance: does the text intend to communicate a historical or ethical truth, a combination of those, or perhaps something else? That question, regarding the content and nature of the "truth claim," you may discuss together as long as you want, as long as you are willing to listen carefully to the texts.
2. For me as a Reformed theologian it is *a priori* evident that anything belonging to the actual truth claim of the Scripture must therefore be received as true, directive, and normative, because God himself teaches it to us. In that respect a discussion about the "truth value" is really no longer necessary, for I assume from the start that the "truth claim" is correct.
3. Still, in some cases it can be useful to investigate this "truth value" after all, for instance by comparing the Scripture's testimony about historical data to the results of archeological research. Regarding this additional research, for example, in a dissertation, I do not need to convince myself of the factual "truth value" of the concrete text of Scripture. Its use is of a different nature and twofold:
 - a. In a discussion with others who do not share my *a priori* convictions concerning the "truth value" of a text, I can show them, to some extent, that there is more support for this "truth value" than they think. This is what Van Bekkum does in his dissertation. Or, if I fail to say more about the "truth value," I realize even more that I really take Scripture and nothing else as my starting point, and that therefore faith is truly the only, all-decisive factor.
 - b. A potential *occasion* to check my view concerning the nature and content of the "truth claim." For instance, if it appears that archeology presents a very different picture from what I think the Bible text presents, then I do well to check once again whether I have really understood the intention of the Bible text. If so, then I make peace with the (for me) unresolvable difference between Bible text and extra-Biblical academic research. If not, then I am grateful for my increased understanding of the Scripture. But in all this it remains so that I believe and accept the claims of Scripture "for their own sake," not on the basis of other evidence. (Here ends the statement by Prof. Dr. G. Kwakkel.)

As has been stated before, the BoT of the TU does not evaluate dissertations; nor do the churches at their Synod. The academic evaluation belongs to others. The BoT considers the statement above of Prof. Kwakkel a sufficient answer to the objections from the churches, in particular on the matter of the authority of Scripture and the relationship between what Scripture says and the results of archeological research.

A separate point of interest is the appointment of Dr. K. van Bekkum as university lecturer on the Old Testament. An appointment at the TU in Kampen follows a certain procedure, in which the evaluation of the Curatorium is also asked. In this situation, in part because of some critical reviews of the dissertation, there was a conversation between the Curatorium and Dr. K. van Bekkum, which also concerned his dissertation. This conversation resulted in a positive advice from the Curatorium to the Board of Directors and the Board of Trustees regarding the planned appointment at the Synod of Harderwijk, 2011.

Our conclusion is that the Synod itself did not give an elaborate assessment of the objections from the churches. These objections were not on the agenda of the Synod, either. But in the entire process leading up to the appointment by the Synod, careful consideration was given to the objections that had been published. In the closed session at Synod, the BoT gave an account of this; the Synod subsequently approved the plans of the BoT.

Additionally, Van Bekkum interacted extensively with expressed criticism early in 2014, with the approval of the Board of Directors.²

2.3. *J.J.T. Doedens*

The name of Rev. J.J.T. Doedens is brought up regularly. In 2002 he published the article *Taal en teken van trouw, over vorm en functie van Genesis 1* [Speech and sign of faithfulness: on the form and function of Genesis 1.] The article is part of *Woord op schrift: Theologische reflecties over het gezag van de bijbel*. [Word inscripturated: theological reflections on the authority of the Bible.] At the time of publication, the Curatorium established that Rev. Doedens was not connected to the TU, so that the Curatorium had no responsibility for this publication.

Individual church members did try to obtain an ecclesiastical decision. The Synod of Zwolle-Zuid, 2008, declared the letter of objection to be inadmissible. Grounds for this decision can be found in the Acts of Zwolle-Zuid, 2008, Art. 54.

2.4. *Prof. dr. G. Harinck*

In your letters you mention the name of Prof. Dr. G. Harinck, in connection with a number of statements in the press about a controversial approach to Scripture dealing with homosexuality. These statements were made in a radio interview with Dr. G. Harinck, part of which was published in the *Nederlands Dagblad* of January 26, 2008. On February 6, there was a conversation between Prof. Harinck and all those involved with his position as professor. This resulted in a declaration, which was also published in the *Nederlands Dagblad*. The BoT includes the second part of this declaration in this letter:

The Bible

In the conversation about dealing with the Bible and the way in which Reformed Christians use the Bible, Dr. Harinck declares that he certainly acknowledges the normative character of God's Word and the force of specific texts. This applies both to living with trust in the Lord, and to theological and ethical reflection. His comments on the Bible passages that deal with women were not meant as a personal hermeneutic, but as a reflection of his personal position in this matter. Earlier in his life he had arrived at an opinion about "woman and church office" on the basis of Scripture. Naturally this involves more than the one text he mentioned in the interview. He wanted to say that he is personally not interested in revisiting that kind of debate, with a repetition of mostly the same arguments. Although he has his own view, he accepts that in the churches to which he belongs women cannot be office bearers. As for the male homosexual friendships that Dr. Harinck called unobjectionable, he declares that he meant a relationship of friendship, and not a relationship comparable to that between a man and a woman. On this point, Dr. Harnack agrees, the Bible clearly rejects homosexual behavior.

Roman mass

In the conversation about "partaking" in a Roman Catholic mass, Dr. Harnick states that he did not mean participation in the Eucharist, but rather visiting a Roman Catholic service. "If that is convenient," he added in the interview, referring to a situation where it is impossible to attend a different church service.

² <http://oud.tukampen.nl/uploads/documents/389.pdf>. Also published in *Lux Mundi* 33.2 (2014), 44-50.

Careless

Initially the university understood the interview very different than Dr. Harinck intended, according to his later explanation. They were not the only ones. Some reactions to the interview were quite disturbed and vehement. Under pressure of these reactions Dr. Harinck wrote his further explanation in the paper of February 5.

The next day a conversation took place in Kampen, in which we spoke to one another in a vigorous but brotherly manner. By means of this candid discussion, we found one another in our love for the Word of the Lord and for the churches. In this setting Dr. Harinck acknowledged that his careless formulations and lack of consideration of the ecclesiastical context had led to misunderstandings concerning his views. He regrets this, and it was not his intention.

Trust

Together we realize that the current situation calls for much trust in the churches. These are important matters that have harmed the name of the Lord and of the churches, as well as the name of the university and of Dr. Harinck himself.

We emphatically expressed to one another the intention to proceed together in subjection to the Word of God and in adherence to the Reformed Confession. We also want to relate this renewed commitment to Scripture and confession to the churches.

There is homework to be done on both sides. We have concluded that the mutual fellowship in Kampen needs strengthening. We hope that, having learned from the intensive process of the previous weeks, we may be able to continue in a more united way in our concrete tasks in the service of church and society. This intention we have clearly expressed to one another. And we also express it to the churches. We ask that you give us the necessary trust, as well as your support through prayer and words of encouragement.

May our gracious God help us through his Spirit.

This declaration was signed by Professor G. Harinck, by Rev. P. Niemeijer on behalf of the Board of Directors, by Mr. J. Messelink on behalf of the Committee for Archives and Documentation, by Rev. E.A. Boer on behalf of the Board of Trustees for the lecturing position of the ADC, and by Prof. Dr. C.J. de Ruijter as the director of the Theological University.

The letter from the churches of Australia calls this declaration unsatisfactory. While a foreign sister-church may certainly evaluate critically an event that took place in the churches in The Netherlands, that same church ought to accept the judgment of the Dutch churches that the case has been resolved. In the same year, 2008, the National Synod of Zwolle-Zuid decided to reject the objections to Dr. Harinck's statements, with a reference to the Declaration quoted above (Acts Zwolle-Zuid, 2008, Art. 105, decision 3). Moreover, at the request of the Curatorium of the university, a decision was made to continue at the TUK the special lecturing position originating in the Center for Archives and Documentation (ADC) of the Reformed Churches. This lecturing position has been extended for another six years. In 2014, the Synod of Ede-Zuid adopted a similar proposal. The continuation of the lectorate also implied the continuation of the appointment of Prof. Dr. G. Harinck. Looking back on the 2008 declaration, the BoT wants to state that the trust expressed at that time has been confirmed. Our Lord has heard the prayers addressed to Him at that time, and He gave restoration and renewal.

2.5. Dr. A.L. Th. De Bruijne

The contributions of De Bruijne to *Woord op Schrift, Theologische reflecties over het gezag van de bijbel* [Word inscripturated: theological reflections on the authority of the Bible], ed. Dr. C. Trimp, Kok Kampen, 2002, were the occasion for many objections. The letter from the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, dated April 22, 2013, says that these objections were rejected on the grounds that the matter had already been dealt with by

the Board of Trustees of the Theological University, and also because the objections were submitted too late. It is indeed the case that the Synod of Zwolle-Zuid, 2008, did not itself deal with the objections to these teachings.

In 2003 the Curatorium dealt extensively with the four objections submitted against the contributions of De Bruijne. The Curatorium wrote a lengthy response to all four of them. On May 17, 2003, a conference was organized by the magazine *De Reformatie* and the TUK (cf. *De Reformatie*, vol. 78, issues 33-41). At that conference De Bruijne was able to clear up a number of misunderstandings.

The Curatorium did not receive any further reactions to this response from the authors of the objections. No objections to the response of the Curatorium were sent to the General Synod of Amersfoort-Centrum, 2005. Neither did the Synod receive complaints concerning the way in which the Curatorium had defended the confessional character of the education and research at the university.

Although no objections to the actions of the Curatorium in this matter were before the Synod, the synodical committee dealing with matters related to the TUK was asked to give special attention to the way in which the Curatorium had handled the objections to De Bruijne. The committee received the letters of objection and the responses of the Curatorium, and was able to gather information from Kampen. From this information they concluded that the Curatorium had carefully dealt with the matter. The Synod granted the proposal of the Drenthe committee to approve the actions of the Curatorium, and to discharge them from their duties. That this included their handling of the objection to De Bruijne is clear from the second ground of decision 1: "Deputy Curators have carefully and adequately handled the submitted objections" (Acts Amersfoort-Centrum, 2005, Art. 122, decision 1).

Subsequently the Synod of Zwolle-Zuid, 2008, rejected as inadmissible a letter of objection by certain brothers to the statements of the Curatorium concerning publications of Dr. De Bruijne. The ground for this was that the appeal against the statements of the Curatorium should have been submitted to the next meeting of its supervising body, in this case the General Synod of Amersfoort-Centrum, 2005 (Acts Zwolle-Zuid, Art. 105, decision 1, ground 1).

The BoT would like to point out that the Synod of Amersfoort-Centrum, 2005, already had arrived at an explicit conclusion concerning the dealings of the Curatorium of the university concerning the objections to the articles by De Bruijne. This can also be gleaned from the minutes of the discussion in the Acts of Synod.

3. Conclusion

In an additional document (Appendix 3) sent to the foreign churches, you will find a description of how the General Synod attempts to ensure that the education given in Kampen is Reformed in character. You will also find instructions concerning how to submit an objection, as a church member or consistory, to the writings of a professor. Such a document makes clear how the responsibilities are structured.

The BoT hopes to have made clear in this letter how the university and the churches have dealt with objections to publications and appointments of lecturers in the past 15 years. Even when the objections had not officially been submitted, the various Synods of the Reformed Churches have always dealt with those objections. Once every three years, the BoT and its predecessors gave an account of the way in which they had responded to objections of concerned church members. And the Synods discussed these accounts and approved them.

The BoT sincerely hopes that this document makes clear to you, as foreign sister-churches, how the churches in The Netherlands have responded to objections that you have raised in previous years. Even if this overview does not change your evaluation of the matters involved, the BoT hopes to be able to terminate the discussion with you regarding matters of the past. The university in Kampen is certainly willing to continue the academic

debate with theologians connected to the churches who have expressed their objections. The continuation of that debate will serve the development of Reformed theology worldwide.

The Synod asked us to formulate a response to the foreign churches that would have the character of an extensive exposition, accessible to a broad audience. By means of this extensive overview we as the BoT believe we have fulfilled this request. Moreover, the BoT would like to point out that the TUK continually gives an account, also to a broader audience, of the developments in education and research as it takes place in Kampen. Anyone interested in further information can consult the Annual Reports published on the university's website. We also refer to the Hamilton publication *Correctly handling the Word of Truth* which was recently published, and the projected publication of a collection of articles on hermeneutics in the middle of 2015.

The BoT hopes that you will receive this letter with an open heart, and that it will serve to terminate the discussion about matters of the past. The BoT also hopes that you will find an occasion, at your convenience, to encourage the professors and researchers at the university in Kampen. Like everyone else, theologians, too, need now and then to hear positive words of appreciation. That would also help create space for mutually edifying conversation, including the occasional critical questions.

Rest assured that we have written this letter in cordial union with you in Christ.

On behalf of the Board of Trustees of the Theological University,

Zwijndrecht, 8 november 2014

Rev. J. Ophoff, president

E.W. Evers, clerk