

SECTION A: REFORMATION AND REVIVAL IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

1. THE IDEA UNDERLYING "NOOITGEDACHT"

Opening address

Prof. B.J. van der Walt*

Dear Conference-goers, there is something of incredulity expressed in the name of the place where we are now meeting: "Nooitgedacht!" Never would have thought it! Why this farm should originally have been called this I have not been able to ascertain. I am, however, also surprised today, even though the amazement has a completely different origin.

I would never have thought that I would be welcoming so many people here today as I am doing.

I do know that none of you present here came without making some sacrifice or other. The year is nearing its end, and the end-of-year pressures are causing all of us to look forward pantingly to some well-earned rest. Some of us have come from very far away (even from Zimbabwe and Malawi), while others have devoted many hours of work to their papers. Many who would have liked to have been here, and who originally accepted the invitation, were forced, because of pressure of work or other more urgent obligations to cancel their participation.

To all of those who could make it: a very hearty welcome! The IRS feels itself highly honoured by your presence.

The theme of this brief introductory address is **The idea underlying Nooitgedacht**. I would like to highlight just three points: (1) the **background** to this meeting, (2) the **aim** of the conference, and (3) the **character** which it should bear.

The background

This meeting represents the third concrete step in the course of the past year by the PU for CHE and the IRS to devote serious attention to the meaning of the reformatio-nal vision of life for Southern Africa.

Those of you who could not be present personally will have been kept up to date about the first IRS Conference, held on 4 and 5 November 1983 through the medium of

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Orientation (No. 32, March 1984). This conference had also been held at Potchefstroom.

Our Registrar, Prof. E.J. Smit and I have just returned from a Southern African trip of almost three weeks to Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi, a trip undertaken at the behest of the Committee for Foreign Relations of the PU for CHE. The purpose of the trip had been to establish contacts with Christians - especially those working in the field of Christian education - and to determine how we could be of assistance mutually.

This third step which is now being realised at Nooitgedacht had already been planned by a committee elected during the Conference last year. In the course of the last ten months the IRS has been carrying out the arrangements to the best of its ability. We are overjoyed that, where the first conference really lasted only one day and was only attended by 32 people from all the population groups in the country, we were not only able to extend this conference to four days, but that we were also able to find the funds to double the number of participants.

The IRS as a non-ecclesiastical organization is pleased that it has been able, in our politically and ecclesiastically divided Southland, to have gathered together so many Christians.

We do not plan to stop after this third step. We know that the way entered upon can become a long and arduous journey. We do not as yet have much clarity about a fourth step. One of the tasks of this meeting will therefore be to reflect together about this.

The idea is that the IRS should not make a decision in isolation, but should make a carefully-reasoned decision with your help. There has been talk of ambitious plans, such as for example a subsequent conference involving all the countries of Africa. Or of a correspondence course about the meaning of the reformational vision of life for the whole of Africa, which can be compiled by leaders from all over the continent. It might be, however, that more urgent immediate matters might determine the short term future strategy.

In the group discussions and the resolutions and recommendations of each group you must therefore also, apart from offering responses to the various papers, still reflect on the "next step". If, for example, you would like to give consideration to the idea of a correspondence course in Christian lifeview and lifestyle, then do make your recommendations within your group, and offer concrete suggestions as to how the

relevant paper(s) under discussion could be adapted to become an elementary course (even accessible to high school pupils).

The resolutions and recommendations of each of the discussion groups will, as they are handed in, be typed, duplicated and made available to all conference-goers. You are requested to read them carefully, so that on Sunday we should be able to make a few carefully considered and yet fairly rapid resolutions and recommendations on behalf of the whole conference. (We distinguish between "resolutions" in which decisions are based on principle, and "recommendations", in which more practical suggestions are made.)

The aim

The most important point on the agenda for the following four days is clearly formulated in the theme for this conference: **The meaning of the reformational vision of life for Southern Africa.**

During the previous IRS Conference a year ago we decided that the reformational vision of life did have significance for Southern Africa. (This is not to be confused with a reformed doctrine and theology, being a far wider concept.) In the course of this conference we have to reflect on what precisely this significance is. The present conference is therefore not as general as the first, but it intends to indicate in concrete terms, with reference to certain specific topical problems, what the contribution of a radically-Biblical view of life can be in finding a solution for our most profound issues. You will appreciate that we are confronted with a very real challenge here!

Before going on to look at the specific problems of South Africa in the light of the Scriptures, we should first cast a wider glance and see what we can learn from the situation of (especially reformed) Christianity pertaining in the rest of Africa. Unfortunately Prof. P. Rubinga (of the Central African Republic) because of a language problem, and Dr. S. Talitwala (Kenya) because of a political problem have been prevented, at a late stage, from joining us here. We are glad, nevertheless, that we could receive their papers so that we could be brought up to date with the situation in respectively the French-speaking Western and Central Africa and also Eastern and Northern Africa. We are very pleased that the Rev. H.Y. Hara from Malawi is here personally to address us about the situation in Central Africa. Prof. T. van der Walt will conclude the survey on the situation in Africa with his paper on the position of Christendom in Southern Africa.

Please give me the opportunity in a few minutes to explain in the light of John 4:1-42

(of which we together read a part at the opening ceremony) our aims with this meeting.

Living water

Jesus asked the Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob near Sychar to give Him some of the water she had drawn from the deep well.

Jesus replied that, if she had known who He was she would have asked water from Him (instead of the other way round), and He would have given her living water. By "living water" He meant flowing or life-giving water, that is, water that can cause new life to sprout (being the opposite of stagnant rotting water which is bad for man, animal or plant). For that reason too water serves in the Bible as the symbol of spiritual life. In Jeremiah 2:13 God called the source of living water. From John 7:38 and 39 we can deduce that this is also true of Christ, of his Spirit. In John 6:63 we also read that "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing", meaning that man himself cannot induce life.

The Samaritan woman, however, initially thought that Jesus was talking of ordinary flowing water - perhaps deep in the well, that she might not have been aware of. Therefore she said, with just a tinge of sarcasm, that Jesus did not even have something to draw water with from a depth of over 50 meters. Upon Jesus' tranquil reply that He could give her not only living water but water which would stop her from thirsting forever, the woman asked Him to give her some of that water, to stop her from having to come to the well every day to fetch water. The woman still did not understand properly. Perhaps her faith was contaminated by the pagan thought that there could exist some kind of magical water which could offer one a long life or even perhaps immortality. Or did she simply pretend not to understand? She well knew of the great thirst in her life: men! She also knew how she could not slake her thirst at the well of sin: six men!

You know the rest of the story. The woman finally realized that it was not an ordinary man talking to her. She even thought of the Messiah awaited by the Samaritans as well. And Jesus revealed Himself to her as the Christ: "I that speak unto thee am he" (verse 26).

The woman was so excited by her tremendous discovery that she even left her waterpot at the well - she had discovered better, living water! She hurried to the city of Sychar to carry the good news to her compatriots. The erstwhile immoral woman now became a carrier of the gospel. It is striking to note that she did not tell them of all the other things that Jesus had told her, but simply of what He had done in her own life. He knew everything about her life. He revealed her sin and convinced her that her way of life up

to then could never allow her to slake her thirst. In this way then he also released her from her burden of sin.

On the basis of her testimony many Samaritans came to the well to see Christ and to listen to Him. They invited Him, a Jew! to stay in their city for two days. The last part of this section states that they knew that "this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world" (verse 42).

The Samaritan woman and her compatriots really did drink of the living water of the Holy Spirit.

But whosoever receives the Spirit does not only drink. He becomes a fountain himself, for streams of living water will flow from him (cf. John 7:38b, and also John 4:11b and Isaiah 58:11b).

Demolishing walls is necessary for reformation

We have however, anticipated the story of the Samaritan woman. Many obstacles had to be removed by Christ before she could drink of the real living water.

It might well be that in our own country too this could be the reason underlying the deathly desolation of the churches and among many believers. Only radical reformation could reopen all the rusty taps so that the life-giving water can start flowing again.

Let us see whether the walls which Christ had to demolish in the life of the Samaritan woman do not perhaps exist today in the South African society.

If I read correctly, there were four such obstacles that He had to demolish: a wrong relationship with the Jews, wrong traditions, a wrong personal lifestyle and a wrong concept of God.

A wall between nations

For the Jews the Samaritans were dogs, and vice versa. Samaria was the area of the Ten Tribes (Israel). In the time of the kings already there had been incessant warfare between Judea and Israel. After Israel had been taken away into exile, the king of Assyria settled nations in Samaria. These strangers mingled with the remnants of Israel and also introduced pagan elements into the Jewish religion. In the course of the reconstruction of Jerusalem the Samaritans also offered their help, but Serubabel

rejected it. From that time onwards there had been bitter enmity. The Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerizim, and never returned to the temple in Jerusalem. In their turn the Jews, if they wanted to travel from south to north, chose to go by a roundabout route through heathen territory rather than to take the short route through Samaria on this side Jordan.

So there was a wall of hate. The spiritual dividing walls are, as you well know, of greater breadth and impenetrability than physical walls of fortified cement with barbed wire on top.

How refreshing then, to read that Christ paid no attention to the man-made dividing walls between the two nations. He simply travelled northwards to Bethel and from there through Samaria. The road led through the mountainous area and between the two well-known mountains Ebal and Gerizim. At the foot of the latter mountain lay the city of Sychar and to the south of the city the well of Jacob on the tract of land which Jacob had given to Joseph (Joshua 24:32).

This was his first step in ignoring the isolation and the polarization between the two nations. His second step was not only to travel through the country, ignoring the people, but to engage a Samaritan, a woman, in conversation: What was more, this was an immoral woman. He also paid no attention when the woman exclaimed in surprise, asking Him how he, a Jew, could ask her, a Samaritan woman, for water to drink. There were more important issues at stake...

Christ's third "revolutionary" deed was that he accepted the invitation of the Sycharites to stay in their city for two days. His disciples could not have liked that idea very much.

And this was not the only time that Jesus would involve himself with the despised Samaritans. In Luke 10:25-37 we read his well-known but always gripping parable of the good Samaritan. This too should have made the vengeful Jews blush (in anger or shame!). Luke 17:11-19 does not only tell a parable but of a true event. Only one of the ten lepers whom He had cured took the trouble to return and to thank Him warmly. And this man had been a Samaritan! To the shame of the proud Jews this man was given not merely an earthly cure but everlasting life.

Dear Conference-goer, do we not today have precisely the same situation here in South Africa? Mistrust, denigration, hate among the various races and nations in the country have caused skyhigh walls to come into existence dividing even the Christians among us. May we draw courage in faith from the example of Christ to send

our bulldozers fearlessly in to demolish these walls of racism and other ideologies.

To build a fence around oneself has one great problem: it always excludes more than it includes. One impoverishes oneself unnecessarily by cutting oneself off from other people and nations.

But the walls tend to become so high after a while that one cannot catch a glimpse any more of the open sky above. Then we finally reach the point which the Jews and the Samaritans had reached: each nation has its own temple where he can worship alone. With our separate churches and divine services we stand precisely where the Jews and Samaritans stood then. Instead of our being enriched by diversity, we simply created division.

May this conference make a modest contribution towards true reformation in this field. May it demolish the walls of hatred and replace them with bonds of love.

The wall of traditionalism

This we see from the reaction of the woman when Jesus said that He would be able to give her living water: "Art thou greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank thereof himself..." (verse 12).

By referring to Jacob as her ancestor she wanted to make the Jew understand clearly that Jacob had not been only the ancestor of the Jews. She also wanted to rub it in that it was the Samaritans and not the Jews who were living in the original region of father Jacob.

Oh, tradition, hallowed tradition! How have we not become mired in it in South Africa today. Do we not also have our Jacobs, our saints from the past, to whom we ascribe superhuman powers and insight? In the case of the Jews and the Samaritans they were still able to put the halo around the head of just one man. In our country we have a whole congregation of saints for practically each nation. I do not need to mention examples. You can think of a whole string of them without much trouble - from the ranks of political and church leaders from both sides of the fence of race.

If one desires to reform, neither past, present nor future should be the criterion, but only the infallible Word of God. Our leaders of the past were also fallible human beings, children of their own times. We ought to be able to see more clearly than they could.

May God grant us the grace during this conference that we will be able to rise above our pet traditions and discover brothers and sisters in the faith on the other side of the wall.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek (nor Samaritan, Afrikaner, Englishman, Black man, Coloured, Asian, Chinese or Korean), there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Jesus Christ. And if ye be Christ's then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:28, 29).

The wall of our personal sins

One can so easily try to divert attention from oneself and one's own sins as the Samaritan woman tried to do with Jesus. One might be involved in converting the world, and then forget that reformation starts with the self - otherwise reformation of the world around one's self is a mere mirage, an empty word.

Like Gideon (Judges 6:25-28) we first have to remove the idols from among us before we can go on. The greatest danger in his day had not been the Midianites, but the Baal service of the Israelites themselves. In the same way we are today our own greatest enemies.

Once we have seen and realized this - the corruption within our own lives and our own homes - then we can more easily cure ourselves of the typically South African trait of looking for the threats outside ourselves only.

The Samaritan woman needed Someone to expose her sins. In the same way we still have the need today for fellow-believers to look at us objectively and to point out our mistakes - even though this might hurt. Let us not be euphemistic at the conference, but open and honest - without being of necessity hurtful and reproachful - in pointing out the mistakes of all the groups mutually. And: May God grant us the mercy not to look only at others but also to look deep into our own dark and sinful hearts.

The wall of religion

Do not be surprised if even the most holy of things, one's service to God, can be a divisive wall. This is the final - and the most impenetrable? - obstacle which Jesus had to break down in the Samaritan woman. "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship" (verse 20).

Here we have perhaps the greatest tragedy of the division between nations who cannot find each other. How many sacred places (many of them already historical monuments!) do the various nations in South Africa not have. You know them so well that I

do not need to name them. It is especially my own Afrikaner nation who is so good at maintaining these shrines.

But the most tragic of all is that this sort of thing is not limited to places of worship. God Himself, and the very act of worship come in time to be annexed for one's own nation. Thus the fact that in South Africa today we find such widely divergent images of the true God. For one group God is the god of the status quo, for another He is the god of liberation!

How liberating could not the words of Christ to the Samaritan woman be for us. The place where one worships does not determine whether one's prayer is heard or accepted. Because even if we should wish to appropriate God for ourselves and for our cause, we can never succeed in something like that. God is spirit, and for that reason He is not bounded by place. He is omnipresent, present all over, and always ready to listen.

Prayer also has nothing to do with ritual prescriptions and outward show. The only requirement is that it has to take place through the Spirit and in all truth (verse 23). The Spirit has to call to God the Father through us. And when a prayer is made in truth, without hypocritical false intentions, God will not be deaf to us. The Samaritan woman was able to elevate her heart to God right there at the well.

May this conference - and also our lives following this event - be a voice calling through the Spirit from the depths of our hearts. May we be granted the strength so that we may not at the conference only pray as one of our activities, but that the conference in itself will be in the largest measure a prayer of itself.

If God grants us this grace, we can be assured of the fact that we will not only demolish the four walls mentioned here, but also all the barbed wire fences (by means of which we try so hard to protect ourselves) will melt like wax in the heat of the Sun of Justice.

Christ's food and drink

My heartfelt wish is that we, in the course of this conference, may drink of the true Fountain of life. And also that we might discover the food which Jesus mentions in this gripping chapter when his disciples could not understand why He did not wish to eat anything: "My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work" (verse 34).

This is the food and drink which will give us the strength in the next four days and in our

lives to follow: to revive and to reform, to erect modest signs of his wonderful kingdom on the southernmost tip of Africa.

The name of this beautiful farm on the banks of the Vaal River (one of the most important sources of water in the country) is (still in the Dutch) "Nooitgedacht". This name may attain symbolic meaning, and the place may attain historical importance if the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ will also inspire all of us here present...

The character

You have made sacrifices - another conference right at the end of the year! - and the IRS has made sacrifices: months of preparation with a total cost in the region of R15 000. It would be good, then, for us to reflect in advance on what we hope to achieve here. I hope that, in conclusion, I could also sum up your expectations in the following seven catchwords:

A reflective conference

You will be aware of the fact that you are not here for a four-day fishing excursion on the banks of the Vaal River. You have already been required to study a number of papers in some detail. In the days to follow our grey matter will really be extended if we want to open up, intellectually, new ways for Christendom in Southern Africa. Special inputs will be required of you, such as for example to lead Scripture study, to be chairman for certain sessions or to act as scribe or chairman for a discussion session. We need the brain power of all of you. We do not wish to think **for each other**, but **to think in concert**, and in the next 96 hours to see a true intellectual community of Christians being deployed.

And if at the end of four days you should say that you would never have thought (Nooitgedacht!) that one could think so hard, I still hope that the farm atmosphere will offer some measure of recompense, so that all the hard work might be done in an atmosphere not of tension, but of relaxed goodwill.

A praying conference

Without a constant flow of prayer to God, all that we might contrive will be hollow, empty and useless. The prayers of thanksgiving, too - how many Christians still have the opportunity to be together under these conditions? - may not stay out.

A singing conference

To ensure this, we have had a special hymnal compiled, and asked somebody to prepare

to act as leader. Let us not underestimate the value of hymns of praise and joy. The future need not only be thought open - it can be opened up by song too!

A listening conference

In the first place we are able here, far from the hubbub of the city, and even the noise of Potchefstroom, to listen serenely to God and his Word. But we should also listen carefully to each other. Our Saviour did not give us one mouth and two ears for nothing. In South Africa especially, it is essential that Christians should listen to what others are saying.

A discovering conference

There are high, impenetrable walls between some of us. I have mentioned a few of these in the speech with reference to John 4, which we have just read again. We live together in the same town and country and have not yet met each other really. We often discover each other in another country, only to start fighting there. It is the wish of my heart that we should discover each other here as brothers and sisters in Christ, so that we should not only demolish the man-made dividing walls, but that we should also create real bonds of faith. Do make it your purpose to get to know each and every conference-goer personally.

An opening-up conference

If we have succeeded in attaining the previous objectives, then we should also be able to open up each other. Do not be afraid to speak the truth baldly. Do remember, however, to look at the truth always in love. Then I am certain that this conference will indeed be an opening-up in the sense that a new vision of the future will dawn for Southern Africa among us.

An enriching conference

I do hope that when we close the proceedings you should also share in the sense of incredulity that the name of this farm inculcated in me: I would never have thought that this meeting would mean so much for me! May all of you, even though you may be physically exhausted by Sunday, leave here spiritually enriched: inspired by new perspectives, strengthened with new enthusiasm, fired with a message of new hope for our Southland...

And this, conference-goers, is, in brief, the "Idea behind I would never have thought..."

May this vision be realised in the days to come through the grace of the living God