6-17-1981

Cook, James I Oral History Interview: Theologians of Hope College and Western Seminary

Carol Bechtel

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The Hope College Oral History Project was designed to record and transcribe for permanent collection the living heritage of Holland, Michigan. Since the project's birth in 1977, Hope student researchers have interviewed people with various perspectives on Holland's history. Past projects have included:

- Former Hope Faculty Members & Personnel - 1977 - Nancy Swinyard
- Past Executives of the Reformed Church - 1978-79 - Conrad & Derk Strauch
- Important Women of Holland, Michigan - 1980 - Carol Bechtel
- Links Between Hope College and Western Theological Seminary - 1981 - Carol Bechtel

The persons interviewed represent a vital, but non-renewable resource, whose reflections will provide primary material for future historical research.

Upon the completion of each interview session, the taped conversation was transcribed and edited by both the interviewer and the interviewee. Some alterations concerning accuracy of detail may have been suggested by the interviewer during the editing process, but at all times the viewpoint of the interviewee has been maintained. If the researcher should discover discrepancies between the interviews and published materials, it must be remembered that some divergence may be expected due to the highly personalized perspective of the interview. No claim is made that the information contained within these transcripts is absolutely accurate. No two people share identical viewpoints, and the interval of time between the interviewee's experiences and the events mentioned can sometimes intensify this divergence. Tapes of all the interviews are stored in the Hope College Archives in Van Zoeren Library.

Without the support of Dr. Jacob E. Nyenhuis, Dean of the Humanities and the Fine Arts, and Mr. William K. Anderson, Vice President of Business and Finance, this project would not have become a reality. Dr. Elton Bruins has given generously of his time and expertise as the advisor to the student interviewers. Finally, the success of this project must be attributed to the efforts of the interviewees - each gracious, receptive, and cooperative.
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INTRODUCTION

One only needs to skim the index of this interview to perceive that James I. Cook is a man of many interests and abilities. Although he is perhaps best known in his role as an ordained minister in the Reformed Church in America and Anton Biemolt Professor of New Testament at Western Theological Seminary, these titles by no means complete his portrait. In this interview Dr. Cook treats us to some less-known glimpses of himself. In the process he takes us all the way fromoboing up and down the streets of picturesque Austrian villages to his literary love affair with American literature. Perhaps it is this breadth of understanding and experience that contributes to his reputation for honesty, compassion, and humility. In any case, when one combines the above characteristics with his sincere love and dedication to God, it becomes clear that Dr. Cook is a man of inestimatable value. Perhaps it was a corporate realization of this that led the 1981 RCA General Synod to elect him as Vice-President of that body. It is certainly safe to say that anyone who knows Jim Cook could second the sentiments of his wife Jean in not being a bit surprised at that election. He is, without question, the right man for the job.
Name: James I. Cook

Birthplace and date: Grand Rapids, Michigan - March 8, 1925

Education: 
Elementary - Hall Street School, Grand Rapids, Michigan
High School - South High School, Grand Rapids, Michigan
Graduate Studies - Michigan State University M.A. (1949)
   Western Theological Seminary B.D. (1952)
   Princeton Theological Seminary (1964)
   Institute for Mediterranean Studies, Jordan & Israel,
   (Summer, 1966)
   University of Durham, England (1976-1977)

Professional Experience: 
Minister - Blawenburg Reformed Church
   Blawenburg, New Jersey
   Professor of Biblical Languages and Literature
   Western Theological Seminary
   Anton Biemolt Professor of New Testament (WTS)

Parents' Names and Occupations:
Father: Cornelius P. Cook - Automobile & Truck Mechanic
Mother: Cornelia Cook - Homemaker

Family Information:
Spouse's name: Jean (Rivenburgh) Cook
Date of marriage: July 8, 1950
Children's names and present occupations:
   Mark J. - Manager Hope-Geneva Bookstore
   Carol J. - Graduate Student, MSU
   Timothy S. - Employee, Haworth, Inc., Holland
   Paul B. - Retail Clerk & Art/Design Student - Kendall School of Design

Professions Experience since 1953, including committees and assignments:
Minister - Blawenburg Reformed Church, Blawenburg, NJ (1953-63)
Church Extension Committee, PSNJ, Chairman (1961-63)
Member, Theological Commission, RCA (1967-1973)
Member, Theological Commission, RCA (1979- )
Theological Commission, RCA, Chairman (1980- )
Vice-President, General Synod, RCA (1981-1982)

Affiliations: Society of Biblical Literature
   Institute for Biblical Research

Honors:

Present Activities:

Thank you for your cooperation,

Carol M. Bechtel
James I. Cook
Anton Biemolt Professor of New Testament
Western Theological Seminary, Holland, Michigan 49423

Personal background:
Born March 8, 1925 in Grand Rapids, Michigan
Nature and membership in the Grace Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Family:
Married in 1950 to Jean Rivenburgh (A.B., Hope College) of Chatham, New York.

Education:
Hope College, Holland, Michigan, A.B. cum laude, 1948
Michigan State University, M.A., with distinction, 1949
Western Theological Seminary, B.D., 1952
Princeton Theological Seminary, Th.D., 1964
Post-doctoral studies:
Institute for Mediterranean studies, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Summer, 1966
University of Durham, England, 1976-77

Professional:
Service positions:
Church Extension Committee, Particular Synod of New Jersey, Chairman (1961-63).
Particular Synod of New Jersey, Vice President (1961-62).
Member of the Theological Commission of the Reformed Church in America (1967-73).
Member of the Theological Commission of the Reformed Church in America (1979--).

Positions held:
Minister, Blawenburg Reformed Church, Blawenburg, New Jersey (1954-63).
Instructor in Biblical Languages, Western Theological Seminary (1963-65).
Assistant Professor of Biblical Languages, Western Theological Seminary (1965-67).
Professor of Biblical Languages and Literature, Western Theological Seminary (1967-77).
Anton Biemolt Professor of New Testament, Western Theological Seminary (1977--).

Publication:
Books:
Articles:


"A Field-Oriented Core Experiment," *Theological Education* 7 (1971), 268-278.


Interview with
James I. Cook
in his office at
Western Theological Seminary
Holland, Michigan
on
June 17, 1981
with
Carol M. Bechtel
BECHTEL: Dr. Cook, I'd like to start out by asking you a little bit about your biography. The logical place to start, then, is to ask where were you born and when?

COOK: I was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, March 8, 1925.

BECHTEL: What was your family setting like?

COOK: Well, I am the fourth of five sons—there were no daughters in our family. We lived on a little one block side street in South/West Grand Rapids. Both my parents were born in this country; their parents were born in the Netherlands. Originally, our name was spelled Kok but was anglicized to Cook before my time. My parents had what I guess was quite typical by way of education in that day—no schooling beyond the seventh or eighth grade. My father was an automobile mechanic. My mother was born in Holland, Michigan and reared in the Christian Reformed Church. I believe my father was also Christian Reformed originally. He belonged to a mechanic's union, and I remember him telling me about being visited by the minister of the Grandville Avenue Christian Reformed Church located at what we used to call "the limits," because that's where the city limits were as you went on the old highway from Holland to Grand Rapids. The minister insisted that as a member of the church my father could not belong to what he termed a "secret organization." I recall my dad saying, "I got out the by-laws," and told him, "Here, it's not a secret organization—you can read all about it." But that didn't seem to make any impression.... So, that as I remember was what led them to change from the Christian Reformed Church to the Reformed Church.
BEXTEL: Was that when all the Masonic controversy was taking place, or was it later than that?

COOK: I really don't know, Carol. It sounds as if it was a part of that controversy....

BEXTEL: Or at least a rendering of that same kind of thing....

COOK: I don't know the precise dating. Elton Bruins would be able to piece that in for us. 1 But apparently it was that kind of thing - that some put unions in the category of secret organizations.

We had a very small house - just one floor, two bedrooms. There were seven of us living in that house, the four older brothers sleeping in one bedroom and my youngest brother sharing the bedroom with my parents. That's the way it was until the older ones got married and began to move out.

My parents were members of the Grace Reformed Church, which in those days was on the corner of Caulfield Ave. and B Street in Grand Rapids. (Grace has since relocated and is now in Wyoming, Michigan.) They were solid members of that church. My dad sang in the choir and also played both mandolin and violin. He organized a Sunday School orchestra in the church which had orchestral arrangements for the hymns. The Sunday School opening exercises were held in the auditorium following the morning worship with all ages present. The orchestra accompanied the hymn singing, and when the people were dismissed, the orchestra played marches. All five boys at one time or another were a part of that orchestra. We also all sang in the choir through the years. So, our church life was a matter
of morning and evening services, Sunday School, Christian Endeavor, Saturday morning catechism, and prayer meeting Wednesday night.

BECHEL: Were any of the services in Dutch?

COOK: Not in my memory, and I doubt that they ever were at Grace.

BECHEL: I'm curious as to what you played in the orchestra?

COOK: Oh, OK. I began playing the clarinet, but at the urging of Glenn B. Litton, who was for many years the band and orchestra director at South High School in Grand Rapids...and who had never had an oboist, I switched over to oboe. And then, due to the fact that in those days oboists were not only rare at South High School but also generally, in my last two years of high school I became second oboist with the Grand Rapids Symphony.

BECHEL: Really?

COOK: ...which says something about the desperate straits of that orchestra in those days as over against now. (laughter) Now they're a very professional group and I don't think that kind of thing could ever happen.

BECHEL: Have you kept up with your music otherwise?

COOK: Well, I've not done much with oboe since the Forties. I am a member of the choir at Hope Church and enjoy that very much. I played with the Grand Rapids Orchestra at least three seasons and that gave me a music appreciation course second to none. It's rare that I go to a concert and don't know very well at least one of the pieces being performed.
BECHTEL: How about your schooling? Since your parents didn't have the opportunity to have very much, were all of the children in your family given an opportunity to go through high school?

COOK: Yes, they all were. My oldest brother, Peter, who represents a special link with Hope College, would have loved to attend college, but he graduated from high school at the height of the Depression. He had to go work to help support our family of seven. Nevertheless, he did pick up some business courses at Davenport College in Grand Rapids later on. My second brother, Art, chose a career in tool design with Lear-Sigler. My brother Bob is a college graduate and has been teaching for years at a small college in Louisiana. My mother was the real driving force behind our education. I guess it's the kind of thing you associate with immigrants - wanting their children to do better...to have more than they experienced. She was always enthusiastic about education and did all that she could to see that we at least finished high school. I associate that concern with her much more than with my father. My younger brother also graduated from high school and later took some business courses, although I was in the Army during those years and I'm a little fuzzy on just what his experience was. At any rate, he is an accountant....

BECHTEL: So you did go into the service?

COOK: Yes, this was way back in World War II. (laughter) History for you!

BECHTEL: Between high school and college then?
COOK: Partly. I got out of high school rather young. I was seventeen in March of 1942 and graduated from high school in June. They were drafting people at eighteen, so I was not eligible. I entered Grand Rapids Junior College. At that time, I was thinking about a career in music. I recall auditioning at Michigan State University and was granted a tuition scholarship by the music department. But because I had absolutely no money for room, board, books, and all that, I simply could not go. So, I entered Grand Rapids Junior College and took the general, introductory college courses, plus piano (which I had never had) as a college freshman. By the time I turned eighteen in March I was within two months of finishing the school year, so I asked for a deferment. The draft board granted it to me, and I was not actually called into service until the following September. So, I did manage to complete a year of college before I was drafted.

BECHTEL: So, where did you go?

COOK: I could talk about this at great length, Carol. You see, you'll have to tell me when we're straying too far afield from Hope College and Western Seminary. We all find it easy to talk about ourselves....

BECHTEL: But like I said, you're a living link, so anything you'd like to tell us about you is fine.

COOK: Well, before going into the service, I had learned that the Navy had a V-12 Program, and the Army had one called ASTP, that is, Army Specialized Training Program. These programs represented a concern that the military draft not create a serious future shortage of college trained
young people. I remember taking a test in Grand Rapids and then being informed that I had been admitted into the ASTP. This meant that when I was drafted I was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia for a thirteen week infantry basic training, especially set up for the ASTP. We went through an abbreviated regular infantry basic training - M-1 rifles and rolling tents and close order drill and hikes and all the rest. At the end of that time we were sent to various campuses. My assignment was to the State University of Iowa at Iowa City. Most of the male students were gone, so, they moved us into fraternity houses. We ate in the student union, and after fourteen weeks at Fort Benning this looked like heaven itself.

BECHTEL: What year was this, just out of curiosity?

COOK: This was late 1943 and early 1944.

BECHTEL: OK.

COOK: We attended classes at the University - Physics and Math, etc. I think I got in about the equivalent of one semester, or maybe a little less than that. Then there was some trouble in Europe. The D-Day invasion had taken place, but there had been a set-back. The German counter-offensive caused the powers that be to scratch these educational programs. The result was some sudden and unhappy changes in my life. We were put on trains and sent south...it was very, very hot I remember. We wound up on the Central of Georgia railroad and finally were delivered by trucks and were unloaded at night in the woods along the Sabine River, which is the border between Texas and Louisiana. The ASTP group that I
was in had summarily been made a part of the 44th Infantry Division, which was then on maneuvers getting ready to be sent overseas. So, there I was with duty officer tending a little camp fire, paired off with another soldier I had never seen before who was very, very bitter about it all.... The outside of an infantry pack, in which you roll your blanket, etc., is called a shelterhalf, or one half of a pup tent. So, my new buddy buttoned our shelterhalves together and pitched our pup tent. And that was that - sleeping on the ground - just out in the woods. So, in 72 hours I went from a rather posh fraternity house and university setting back into the infantry in the woods. We were now part of a 12-man rifle squad in a regular line company. The 44th Division was in process - they were an old New York/New Jersey national guard outfit that had been successfully avoiding going overseas for about three years. But now the needs in Europe were so great that they had to go.

From Louisiana we went to Salina, Kansas, which served as the final staging area before shipment overseas. Well, I did not particularly relish the idea of being part of a rifle squad in an infantry line company, so I began to think about music. I nosed around to discover if the outfit had a band. A division is made up of three regiments, and at one time there had been regimental bands. Now, I learned, there was one divisional band. I found out where it was and went over and talked to the people in charge. In the Army all organizations are put together by spec. (i.e., specialist) numbers, and the band was no exception. There was one spec. number for an oboe and another for a bassoon. Well, despite the
fact that this outfit had been together for several years, they had never had an oboist or a bassoonist. The warrant officer in charge said, "We have an oboe on requisition and as soon as it comes we'd love to have you come over and audition with us." I said, "Well, that's fine, but I do own an oboe, which I would be very happy to send for if that would help." "Oh," they said, "fine." So, I telephoned home and my parents sent the oboe. The band was scheduled to play a concert in a Salina park. I joined them. There were a couple of oboe solos in the concert and they were impressed. I had kept all this a secret from my infantry company - just in case it didn't work out. The first thing they knew about it was the orders that came through to the effect that James Cook, was hereby transferred to division headquarters. So I packed up my stuff and went with joy!

The 44th Infantry Division Band was soon sent on ahead to Boston, which was to be our port of embarkation for Europe. We played the troops all off the trains which were arriving at the port, and played them all on board the ship.

We crossed the Atlantic in convoy in ten days. The invasion had taken place, so they landed us at Cherbourg, France. All the equipment and supplies for the division were coming off the ship in huge crates - an incredible sight. Each outfit needed someone in these staging areas to sort out their crates. Henry Wiggins, the young bassoonist who had also just joined the band and myself were, of course, the "kids" of the outfit. So, they left us in the channel area to collect our crates. We pitched our pup tent there while the rest of the outfit moved on.
After a few days I began to have ear trouble. It was very, very damp along the English Channel, and I had apparently picked up an infection from sleeping on the ground. My earache grew increasingly painful, until I just couldn't stand it. I reported to the field medical unit. I was passed through a series of these until I was taken to the city of Cherbourg, where there was a general army hospital. A major who was an ENT - Ear, Eyes, Nose, and Throat specialist, said I had an abscess. He lanced it...a blinding shot of pain, and then, relief!

Then they sent me to a rehabilitation hospital to recover. I was there for some weeks, showing up a few times a day to have my ear looked at and treated. I had no idea where the band or the division was and, as it turned out, they had no idea where I was.

General Eisenhower was the supreme commander in Europe, and he had issued an order that hospitalized soldiers were to be returned to the outfit to which they belonged. So they sent me across France through a series of replacement depots, by truck and by train. I remember sleeping in boxcars, in chateaus, and in factories. At one depot they decided to permit us to visit Paris on a weekend pass. Somehow I came up with the first one! So I went off to Paris...on a train. I didn't know what I was doing.... I didn't know any French or quite were I was going, but I made it. I remember that I found the Paris Opera and saw they were performing Boris Godinov. I went in. It was, of course, marvelous. But I knew that I could not stay until the end if I was to catch my train. I cut it too close, then got mixed up in the Paris subway system, and missed the train. There was no other train until the morning, so I had
to sleep in the rail station. I took the first train out in the morning, but of course, I was late. I was the first one out on this new program and I had blown it. I was punished. I remember that every night for a week I had to load gravel on trucks. They were making gravel paths around the depot. I couldn't really object to that - I felt terrible about what I had done.

I spent New Year's at that depot...that would have been New Year's Day, 1944. And by golly, eventually I caught up with the band. They were in Alsace-Lorraine then, some members doing guard duty at division headquarters, and some working at processing those who were killed in action. We didn't have our instruments because music was now a luxury. But I did rejoin them, and they just couldn't get over it. For months they had been forwarding my mail to England where they understood I had been sent. I had had no mail for months...Christmas had come and gone...I's been writing home, but I received no mail. That was a difficult part of the whole experience. In the spring of 1945, the allies mounted their grand offensive and by May the war in Europe ended. Then, the division became part of the occupation army. We were in the Innsbruck, Austria area with the absolutely unbelievable scenery of the Alps. Now that the war was over, parades and reviews were back. So we got our instruments and began functioning as a band again...serving the scattered parts of the division.

But the war was still going on in the Pacific. More troops were needed. A point system was developed which made troops with the least amount of service eligible for transfer to the Pacific Theatre. Since
I had been in the Army a little more than two years I was among the eligible. Naturally, we had priority in transportation. I was shipped to Southampton. At this time the Queen Elizabeth - the largest ship in the world - was being used as a troop ship. But Cunard, its owners, would not bring it into the English Channel because of the danger of floating mines. They did bring it to Glasgow, Scotland - and not into the harbor even there, but off shore. We were ferried across the English Channel, put on trains and taken all the way up to Glasgow. We were ferried out to the Queen Elizabeth. They had twenty-thousand men on that ship, the equivalent of a full division plus. The crossing took only five days, because the Queen Elizabeth was pretty fast. I remember that our arrival was pictured on the front page of the New York Times... the Queen Elizabeth coming into New York harbor, with the fire boats and a blimp and a grand "Welcome Home!" Because we were on our way to the Pacific theatre, we were given thirty days leave. I came home to Grand Rapids, and while there on leave, the atom bomb was dropped, Japan surrendered, and the war in the Pacific was over. There I was at home while all the poor guys who had been in the Army three and four years with the high points were still in Europe. So, I was sent to a separation center for discharge.

I now had to decide what to do. The only thing I was sure of was that music would be an avocation rather than vocation. I had always liked the idea of more schooling. I chose Hope simply because one of my brothers suggested it. Although I had been in and out of Holland all my life because my mother was a native of Holland, I don't think I was aware that there was a college there. I came to Holland and entered Hope, I believe
in the second semester of 1946. After completing that semester I then stayed on for two years, summers and all. This, plus my Grand Rapids Junior College and ASTP credits, enabled me to graduate in June of 1948.

RECHTEL: So you were part of the influx of veterans, then, that I've been hearing about from other people?

COOK: Yes, the era of the T-dorm, the Quonset huts for married people, and a lot of crowded conditions. There was a period when we ate in the Temple Building downtown next to the post office. And there were co-eds living in an unused school building, now torn down.

RECHTEL: Your bill was probably footed too, wasn't it? Or at least partially?

COOK: Oh, yes. The G.I. Bill carried me through, which was wonderful. I also worked the weeks after summer school in Grand Rapids at the Nash-Kelvinator Plant.

RECHTEL: What was the campus like back then, besides what you've described already? The social life....

COOK: Well, the YMCA and YWCA were live organizations on campus, and the fraternities and sororities were also big. The Arcadian fraternity was born during our years here.

RECHTEL: Did you belong to any of those fraternities?

COOK: Yes.... (laughter)

RECHTEL: You were hoping I wouldn't ask that?
COOK: Well, I was a Knick. (Knickerbocker) And I actually served as
president of that organization, I'm proud to say.

BECHTEL: Well, so what were the Knicks like in those days?

COOK: Well, they were a great bunch of guys. For some reason my close
friends in college - with few exceptions - were from the East Coast. I
roomed a couple of years with Bill DeMeester, for example, who was ex-
tremely bright and extremely personable...a good ping-pong player - we
played hours and hours of ping-pong together. Bill, the, went on to get
a doctorate in chemistry at the University of Vermont, and was employed at
DuPont for a while. The next time I ran into him he had been awarded a
Rockeyfeller grant for administrative training in higher education. The
next thing I knew, he was on the staff of Parsons College in Iowa. Then
he became the first president of Albert Lea College in Albert Lea, Min-
nesota. From there he came to Hope and worked in the development office
for some years. From Hope he went to York College, Pennsylvania, where
he now is the Academic Dean. Bill came from Paterson, New Jersey.

And then there was Don Walchenbach, who came from Pittsfield, Mas-
sachusetts, who is now director of Blodgett Hospital in Grand Rapids.
Another friend and Knick was his brother Roy, who's a surgeon in Pitts-
field. There were also Dick Fairchild from New York, who became a research
chemist, and died at an early age, and Roger Decker, who was in college
administration the last I knew. These were the guys that I was close to.
They all gravitated into the Knicks, so it was not so much a matter of
joining a fraternity as joining my friends.
Later, I recall eating in the Voorhees Hall, where I began to develop some social graces. Friday was dress-up night. The men wore coats and ties and the women, dresses. We gathered in the lobby and all went in at one time and took our places at tables. The man and woman at either end became the host and hostess. The plates were stacked and the host and hostess served the table. Having been reared with boys only, social graces and manners were not a high priority; so, Hope also served as a kind of finishing school, for which I'm grateful. I regret that that kind of gracious living is no longer a part of the college experience.

The present cafeteria may be an efficient system, but there isn't anything gracious about it. In those days meals were also bracketed with devotion, that is, prayer and the reading of scripture - the kind of thing that many people did in their homes.

BECHTEL: Were you ever caught in the host position before you felt ready?

COOK: I'm sure I was, Carol, because I had nothing to prepare me for that kind of post. I guess the way I got ready was by watching others do it. I'm sure I hoped that I would not have to do it any more than necessary. But it was very good for me.

BECHTEL: Was there anyone around who officially critiqued what kind of a job you did?

COOK: No...nothing like that.

BECHTEL: Oh, that's good.

COOK: Maybe they were watching and we just never knew! (laughter)
That could very well be.

Dorm hours, of course, were a very big thing. The women had to be in at nine or ten o'clock on week nights - eleven or midnight on week-ends. It was sign out, sign in - which wasn't all bad either. Of course, it was resisted and made fun of. Nevertheless, it's like all parenting - it says somebody cares enough to put some restrictions on.

Chapel was then compulsory, which again I think can be argued both ways. There were people who didn't want to be in chapel and let the fact be known by reading newspapers or books during the service. There were other people who were happy to be there. And then there was that middle group who were only there because it was compulsory, but who were neither rejoicing nor rebelling. Compulsory chapel did offer that large group an opportunity for spiritual growth.

All they needed was just a little bit of a prod.

Or, I would say that at least they were exposed to many good things. A couple of years ago I was recruiting for the Seminary and had opportunity to visit the campuses of Central College and Northwestern College. At Northwestern chapel is still compulsory, and it was rewarding to go there and talk to seven hundred people. If you have something to say it's kind of nice to have seven hundred people present, some of whom may hear it. So, in spite of good arguments on the other side I still think a case can be made for compulsory chapel attendance.

What did you major in?

OK. I didn't have any definite goals in mind when I arrived at
Hope. So, I floated around, taking the required work and searching for direction. Since I did think about the ministry at times, I took Greek as my language requirement, just in case. Hope had no one to teach Greek when I arrived in February. So they brought the president of Western Seminary, Dr. John R. Mulder, across the street to start us out. Looking back, I'm sure that Dr. Mulder had not done anything with Greek for who knows how long, but, as far as I knew he knew all the Greek there was. It was in Greek that I first met Bill Hillegonds, and made a friendship which continues to the present. By the next fall Dr. D. Ivan Dykstra had arrived on the scene fresh from graduate school. And he really did impress us. I remember him standing at the window of the second or third story classroom - looking out over the campus. A student would be reading Plato aloud - with much stumbling and stopping. Dr. Dykstra would, without turning his head, correct the student - from memory. Very impressive and very intimidating.

In the meantime, I had met Dr. John Hollenbach and took a course or two with him. He opened me to the genius of literature and poetry. Up until then I thought poetry was just a matter of rhyming words. But when we began reading Emily Dickinson and Herman Melville he turned on the lights. I recall going in to see him on day and dropping some great profundity like, "I don't want to know how to earn a living, I want to learn how to live." It was really through his influence that I became an English major. When I graduated, he encouraged me in that direction and I decided to go for a Ph.D. in English - or more specifically, in American literature, and become a teacher. Dr. Hollenbach recommended the University
of Wisconsin as the best place to go for that. But again, I had absolutely no resources. So, he recommended me for a graduate assistantship at Michigan State, where years before I had been for a musical audition and scholarship. I received the assistantship and took an M.A. in English there, mostly in American Lit.

BECHTEL: I have some more questions to ask you about those years getting your Masters. I wondered if there were any authors in particular that stand out as being influential for you, and why that is so?

COOK: Well, I think Emily Dickinson was important to me for her use of imagery and clean, spare language. Edwin Arlington Robinson and Carl Sandburg also had an impact. And as always, the poets have the insights. I think there's a very fine line, if indeed there is a line at all, between poets and prophets. It's not by accident that the Bible's prophetic literature is poetic and vice versa. So, Dickinson, Sandburg, Robinson, and Melville were important. And of course, because of my natural theological interest, the beginnings of American literature - Bradford's Journal, the Plymouth Plantation, the Mathers...these people for whom America was the Promised Land - the New Canaan, - their "wedding" of religion and life was of deep interest. At Thanksgiving Day services in church, I have at times read from Plymouth Plantation and called them "American Scriptures." Nothing shows more clearly what religion meant to these people and how their faith sustained them in the midst of settling this wilderness.

BECHTEL: How about Hawthorne?
COOK: Hawthorne, yes. Melville's Moby Dick - I remember our study of that as an experience I have never quite gotten over.

BECHTEL: Did these influences have any effect that you can trace on your later teaching of New Testament?

COOK: Well, occasionally I have been able to perceive where it may be helpful to make reference to some poetry or prose.

BECHTEL: In your own mind I'll bet that happens more often than you actually express to your class.

COOK: Yes, I think that's true. And also, I think that my literary training both at Hope and at MSU has done something for me as far as style is concerned, both in preaching, teaching, and writing. I think this is a fallout of which I am not even aware. My own theory as to why many of our students simply do not write well and even do not spell well is related to the fact that we're in a visual age - television oriented. In his autobiography, Ben Franklin tells how he taught himself style - by copying out pages of some established author whose style he admired.

BECHTEL: That's a tedious way to learn it.

COOK: It is indeed, but you either have to do that or else read a good bit, until you finally develop an innate sense as to what reads well. I think that spelling is also best picked up that way - unconsciously rather than memorizing a list of spelling words. Pretty soon, you can look at a word and sense from its appearance that it's not spelled correctly. There is nothing quite so valuable as exposure to people who write well.
BECHTEL: When did you decide to come to Western Seminary, then?

COOK: Well, in the fall of my senior year at Hope, I met Jean Rivenburgh, a Sophomore from Chatham, New York. When I went to Michigan State she was in her junior year. I came home to Grand Rapids almost every weekend. She came there by bus from Holland and stayed at the home of my brother and sister-in-law. So, we at least spent weekends together.

I was still attempting - before taking the big step to Wisconsin and a Ph.D. in English - to settle the matter of the ministry. If I entered seminary I would be in Holland for Jean's senior year. So, in retrospect, how much I wanted to try seminary and how much I really wanted to be near Jean, I can no longer judge. But I suspect that was an important factor.

In those days Western had its own Board of Trustees, and when one entered the seminary a committee of the board asked about your motivation. I remember telling them that I was not at all sure about what I was doing, but that I did have enough inclination in that direction to want to give it a one year trial. I thought that by the end of the year I would know. The board graciously accepted me on that basis, and, sure enough, by the end of the year, the decision to stay was clear.

BECHTEL: When were you married, then?

COOK: In July of 1950 - between my Junior and Middler years at seminary. I had a summer assignment at Laketon Bethel Reformed Church in Muskegon. A couple whose children were grown offered me a bedroom and breakfast in their home. Other members of the congregation invited me for lunch or dinner. I did that for six weeks. During this time wedding preparations
were being made in New York. The first week in July I drove out for the wedding, and a week later we were back in Muskegon. We finished my second six weeks under the same arrangement, only now as a married couple... the same bedroom and the same meal arrangements. By that time, fortunately, the meal schedule was pretty well set so we were at least going to the same homes each week.

BESCHTEI: That would be tiring - meeting new people....

COOK: But it was also wonderful. We still have some really good friends in that congregation.

BESCHTEI: Who were some of your most influential professors at Western?

COOK: At Western? That's pretty easy to answer - Richard Oudersluys and Lester Kuyper. Each in their own way.... Dr. Oudersluys tended to be a bit more private. He had a study at home and loved to read and work at home. In those days we always found him a little more awesome and less approachable. Lester Kuyper was always a very social person. He loved to be around, was very approachable, and we always seemed to be on the same wavelength. And he set something of a tone for my understanding of ministry. I saw in him a graciousness, gentleness, patience, honesty, and integrity that I wanted for myself. I got to know him better than I did Dr. Oudersluys in those years. I still remember a sermon that he preached on Hosea 11 at Garfield Reformed Church in Grand Rapids. I had ridden in with him in order to teach a Sunday School class there. That sermon left a mark... gave a direction, set a tone for my ministry.
BEXHTHEL: What do you remember... well, this would probably be during your years as a professor at Western.... What do you remember about the so-called "heresy" controversy about Dr. Kuyper?

COOK: Well, probably the worst years for him were the years that I was in New Jersey. But when I came back and we were teaching together there was a whole new dimension to our relationship. We were teaching Hebrew together, and in the process did a lot of talking. Jean and I grew very close to him and Helen. He told me about some of the terrible things that happened. He was on Holland's school board, I know, when school dances were an issue. Perhaps you know about this.

BEXHTHEL: No.

COOK: During that conflict he was visited by a committee which urged him to oppose dancing. When they were unsuccessful, one of the clery prayed for his enlightenment in his own living room. He never forgot that affront. He also let me read a paper of about 100 pages, written by a member of Western's Board. It sought to demonstrate why he was unworthy of teaching at Western Seminary.

BEXHTHEL: I believe that centered around the Genesis 1 and 2 controversy.

COOK: Yes, and it is a matter of fact that there have been students who have come to Western having been warned by their ministers about what Dr. Kuyper might teach them.

BEXHTHEL: What do you think of all that?

COOK: Well, I surely regret it. It's remarkable, I think, that Lester
was able to keep his cool. And I think it's a little difficult for those who know him in these mellow years to recognize...I think he would say that about himself...that he found a certain delight - which he apparently inherited from his father who was a kind of maverick, free-thinking spirit in his local church - he found a delight in taking another look at something that was just believed traditionally and unquestioningly, and saying, "If you really look at that closely and are honest...that it 'ain't necessarily so.'"

BECHTEL: The whole thing just amazes me. He seems to have such a gracious way of saying, "It ain't necessarily so."

COOK: And I guess what I'm saying is that there may have been more confrontative years. I've only known him intimately in the more mellow years, and what you say is very true. He's a gracious, patient spirit. I don't know if you were on the floor of Synod when the abortion issue was discussed. I would characterize the remarks that I made as trying to do the kind of thing that Lester Kuyper has taught me needs to be done - that when people - well intentioned - begin to say, "The real trouble with you people who don't see an issue as I do is that you don't believe the Bible - that you don't take it seriously, because it is oh, so clear...." That that can be an unfair thing to say and that that needs to be pointed out to people who are beginning to think, "My gracious, everyone who does not see it that way obviously doesn't believe the Bible." I want to stand in the tradition that says that it's just not true and that's an unfair way to argue.
BECHTEL: I was going to ask you about that. That moment at General Synod stands out in my mind as a very instructive one. As I remember, the debate was going something like, "Things are very black and white about this issue..." And your comment consisted of, "Maybe it's grey." Could you expand on that a little bit?

COOK: As I recall, the people who were arguing so strongly for the Constitutional amendment were saying, "We don't understand how this makes sense. The Synod has spent hours trying to decide whether to ask President Reagan to cut off military aid to El Salvador. And we also got ourselves involved in the Middle East crisis, lest there be nuclear war and a terrible loss of life. Again and again the Synod declared itself in favor of saving people's lives. How is it, then, that at this point we suddenly stop?" All I was saying was, that that is only one of two paradoxes. There is another paradox of which others are aware. How can so many people who are in favor of sending military aid to El Salvador and of arming this country to the teeth and tend to be rather hawkish in general with the resulting loss in human life, be so concerned about human life when it comes to the abortion issue. My concern was not to say that our group is right and the other wrong, but rather to say, "Remember that we're caught in a double paradox here." After the session, some pastors were telling me some horror stories, terrible incidents stemming from the present abortion situation. I could only remind them that other pastors from other cities can match their horror stories with experiences of theirs - and they are on the other side of the issue. So, I only say....
BECHTEL: There are horror stories from the other side of the issue too.

COOK: Right. And therefore it is not clear and simple. It's an extremely difficult issue.

BECHTEL: From my perspective, being on the committee and sitting in the back of the room watching the debate go on that day, I thought you were one of the few people there who really knew what was being discussed. And I appreciated your standing in the tradition of Lester Kuyper. I think you're in good company.

COOK: I hope so.

BECHTEL: Very good company. Going back to the heresy question - I hesitate to call it that, but I think that's how many of the people in the church remember it - why do you think that kind of thing has not gone on or has not been as prevalent since it happened with Lester Kuyper? Do you have any theories as to why that type of thing has died down?

COOK: I suspect it's due to several things. First, looking at the early chapters of Genesis in other constructive ways has simply been around a lot longer now, and that helps. It's no longer a new idea. You can disagree with it, but you can't call it new. A large part of biblical scholarship, and a large part of the church has dealt with the issue and moved along long ago and often can hardly believe that in certain pockets or places that's still a significant issue.

BECHTEL: I'm from one of those pockets - I guess that's why I'm interested.

COOK: Yes, I am too. Second, I think that many of our students have been
exposed to contemporary biblical interpretation at Hope College as well as at Central and Northwestern and have worked through the issues so that it's no longer a big deal. I also think that the generations of students that have gone through this school with Richard Oudersluys and Lester Kuyper and subsequently with some of us who teach here now, are now in the church and are beginning to make a difference in what happens at classis and synodical meetings. Our goal is not to brainwash people. There are good Christians who insist that there was a serpent in Eden which talked, or who will never accept anything other than that Moses wrote every word of the Pentateuch. And I have no desire to tell them that that's somehow wrong or benighted, or somehow unChristian. I have no trouble accepting a person who is absolutely convinced that Moses wrote the entire Pentateuch. I only ask that people who are so convinced not question my Christian integrity or my view of the Bible as Holy Scripture because I do not believe exactly as they believe. In that regard, I wish the Covenant Life Curriculum had had a larger hearing in the denomination. I don't know just how fruitful or influential it was, but the adult study book by Arnold Rhodes - *The Mighty Acts of God* - did a masterful job of dealing with these inflammatory issues in an honest and constructive way, and saying, "Here are the reasons people look at it this way - here are the reasons other Christian people look at it that way, and you can make your choice." He then concludes by saying, "As for me, it seems to me this is the best way to look at it - but you must make up your own mind."

BECHTEL: I noticed the Bethel Bible Series material you've got here in
your office. Are you involved in that?

COOK: Yes, in my local church - Hope Church here in Holland. There were a number of members who wanted to get into the Bethel Series, among them our son Mark and his wife. Neither of the pastors felt that they had the time to do it. (Mark, by the way, is also a link with Hope College, since he manages the Hope-Geneva Bookstore.) I thought about it a good bit and decided that since the Bethel Series is being used with enthusiasm in many of our churches by many of our graduates, and that since our son and daughter-in-law were interested along with some other fine Hope Church people, I would teach the two year teacher training program. Jean and I went to the Yahara Center, Madison, Wisconsin and had a delightful two weeks there - an incredibly rich Christian experience. It's not really a study program. I would say that it's more an orientation - a selling of the Bethel Series. I think anybody who had been through those two weeks with those very, very competent and lovely people could not hear criticism of the Bethel Series without feeling that it was criticism of Harley Swiggam or Betty Brinkman or the other people participants come to know and love in those two weeks. It's a rich ecumenical fellowship, an absolutely magnificent facility, and led by people who are so good at what they're doing that it was a delight to be there. We're within three months of completing our two years. I've had a really remarkable class of ten from Hope Church, including Hope College people like Eloise VanHeest (the wife of the college chaplain), Carol Myers (wife of Prof. David Myers), and Michael Gerrie, Dean of Students. They are all college graduates, and so I really target them on a seminary level for the most part.
BEXTEL: Have you been able to monitor any of the effects of those people being exposed to the Series in your congregation?

COOK: In a limited way thus far because they don't become teachers until after the two year training period. I don't know what will happen. Much will depend on how many people sign up for the congregational phase. But I do know that class members feel they are beginning to know what the Bible is all about. I've been told that one member of the class has become a lively participant in her church discussion group as a result of Bethel training.

BEXTEL: You mentioned earlier at least one advantage of the Hope Religion Major would be that people had fought through that kind of thing before they got to seminary. How do you feel in general about the Religion Major at Hope as a preparation for seminary? I know there was some controversy about that, and maybe you can speak to that as well.

COOK: I think the controversy or the resistance was inherited from the former AATS - The American Association of Theological Seminaries, whose position was that the best preparation for seminary was a broad liberal arts education. I think that that is, to a degree, a defensible position, because one soon becomes fairly narrow in theological studies. I think that it's the people who have some knowledge of the sciences and literature (including stage and films), and history that do the best preaching and teaching. Therefore, I think it depends on the religion major. In this case, Hope's Religion Major is a good one because it's a relatively broad major with requirements in a number of areas besides religion. I
think the Religion Department has managed to bring together the best of both worlds. People who want to start serious theological study have a chance to do that with a major with the same integrity as majors in other departments. They are not sent off to major in philosophy or English or sociology with the attendant possibility - to speak selfishly - that they may become engrossed in one of those areas and somehow short-circuit what started out to be a promising career in theology or ministry. I think Hope's religion major does demand of us that we do not simply repeat the same material. We have to make sure either that we're operating on a deeper level, or if that's not feasible that we offer the student an alternative track. The problem is complex. If all our students were Hope religion majors, we could handle the situation easily. But we have Hope religion majors who are at one level, and religion majors from other schools that are at another level. Plus, we have students who are not only not religion majors, but who do not even have a liberal arts background. What may be old stuff to a Hope religion major may be brand new to his classmate. At the same time, it's obvious that we cannot offer a dozen separate tracks. So, it's a difficult problem. I think that a liberal arts program is a good preparation, generally, because I don't think that our students tend to read novels or read poetry once they are here.

HECHTEL: I understand that you're quite a ping-pong player. This next section is going to seem a little bit like a ping-pong game. We'll be jumping from topic to topic, but that way we'll get some refreshing variety.
The first thing I wanted to ask you about has to do with your position in the classroom. I wondered if you have any kind of a theory or philosophy of teaching which you abide by in the classroom.

COOK: Nothing that I could put a label to, or say "this educator," or "that theory...." I remember when Gordon Timmerman went through Western after having taught school for years puzzling over the fact that although ministers often spend lots of time teaching, they can go through college and seminary and never take an education course. That was true of my training, so I have no formal educational theory. My own style is to combine lecture and discussion, and maintain a balance between academic content and practical application.

BECHTEL: How about women's presence in your classroom...has that made a difference in the atmosphere? Has it been a tension-filled thing at all?

COOK: Over-all I don't think there's been a lot of tension, at least in my experience in the classroom. There are in the nature of the case some women among us who are sometimes more, sometimes less militant. Once in a while one of the more militant personalities comes into conflict with others in the classroom - with both men and women.... I say both men and women because sometimes women who are less militant are in a more difficult position than the men. Much also depends on the background and attitude of the male students. There are some men who come out of churches where women are not as yet elected elders or deacons let alone accepted as ministers of the Word. They naturally have to make quite an adjustment when they are suddenly in class with women who are fully accepted as
candidates for ministry.

We've also been blessed with some very fine women students, and I think when men are open to appreciate their gifts they have been encouraged to see the benefit of women exercising these gifts in ministry. I have seen in a recent class an excellent relationship between men and women candidates. There was not only cooperation and respect, but also admiration and affection. That, I think, is a wave of the future.

BECHTEL: That's great, Dr. Cook. From what I have heard, however, there was a day in which the question of women's ordination was much more hotly debated at Western Seminary. When was this and just how did the debate progress?

COOK: Perhaps the most serious internal stress concerning the women in ministry/ordination of women question came following our Fall Institute on that issue. Professor Paul King Jewett of Fuller Seminary came knowing that all the participants in the institute had been mailed a copy of his book and asked to read it. The other major speaker, Professor Knight, had also printed a lecture on the opposite viewpoint and that was also sent out. I think that Prof. Jewett made a fatal mistake in assuming that everyone had in fact read his book. He therefore made no presentation, but instead offered himself and said, "Here I am - is there anything that you want to ask about or discuss about my book?" Professor Knight, on the other hand, wisely read his lecture to us word for word (even though his was a much shorter piece which probably a higher majority of people had read over against the book). The result was that Professor
Jewett, who was arguing for women in ministry, proved to be in a very weak position. And Professor Knight delivered the cause of women's ordination a very telling blow. As a result, a conference which I think was aimed at offering some new approaches and opening up some new thinking about women in ministry actually reinforced people who were opposed, and made a strong negative impression on people who were in the middle. I think the women in the seminary felt dreadfully let down, and the male students who were wondering about their presence here at all felt that much stronger against it.

BECHTEL: I warned you that we would be playing ping-pong, so this is pretty much what I'll be doing in the next few questions.

I understand that you were involved with the topic of Biblical criticism, and I believe you have a lecture at a seminary entitled, "Biblical Criticism and Faith." What seminar was that, and what in general did you say?

COOK: It was at our Fall institute on "Biblical Interpretation," which was held in October of 1977. The two major lecturers were Jack Rogers of Fuller Seminary and Donald G. Miller, formerly Professor of New Testament at Union Seminary in Richmond, Virginia - and more recently the president of Pittsburgh Seminary. They each gave two lectures, and I, representing the faculty, gave this one. The purpose of it was to try to defuse and deal rationally rather than emotionally with what we mean by "Biblical criticism," since so many folk immediately have a negative reaction to the term itself. My lecture was, first of all, an attempt to
say that criticism per se, is not a negative activity, but rather is the use of the best resources and tools and gifts that we have in trying to understand the Bible.

BECHTEL: Were some of those discussions ever communicated to the churches?

COOK: Was the lecture ever communicated to the churches? Only through those who were at the lecture or who wrote for a printed or taped copy.

BECHTEL: That's too bad. It seems like a valuable insight.

COOK: Well, maybe next year I can do something about that. The lecture took a look at the criticism of the Bible, not as a bad thing but as a good thing. It argued that the fundamental issue is not whether to study the Bible critically, but rather the question of what presuppositions you bring to your study. If one comes with a proper set of presuppositions then we need not fear to use the findings of criticism, and can, in fact, profit from them.

BECHTEL: OK. There was another institute on the charismatic movement, wasn't there?

COOK: Yes.

BECHTEL: Your lecture at that one was, I believe, "The Fruits of the Spirit in the Life of Believers." First of all, I'm curious as to what precipitated that institute?

COOK: Our institutes have, when possible, tried to address a live issue in the Church. At that time we heard a lot about the charismatic movement,
far more that I do now...although, I don't think it is by any means passé or dead.

BECHTEL: Oh, I still hear a lot....

COOK: Fair enough. In any case, that's why the institute was devoted to that subject. I remember three things about the program. First, President Hesselink introduced the matter from a Reformed point of view. Second, I recall that the Rev. Ron Brown, who was himself a practicing charismatic, spoke to an overflow audience. Third, I recall my lecture.

BECHTEL: What were some of the insights that came out of your lecture?

COOK: I spoke about the fruit of the Spirit as described in Galatians 5. I pointed out that although there was always, even in the Old Testament, a strand of ecstatic experience (Saul, e.g.), there was also another strand which emphasized understanding the will of God. The New Testament exhibits that same double strand. It documents ecstatic experiences, but I think emphasized much more the non-ecstatic experiences that the Apostle Paul talks about: love, gentleness, patience, self control, and so on.... And that on balance, the New Testament comes down on the side of the so-called "ordinary," non-spectacular gifts related to covenant life.

BECHTEL: How did your position as editor for the two books about Dr. Oudersluys and Dr. Kuyper come about?

COOK: Both tasks came at the invitation of President Hesselink, who not only has a fine sense of history, but also recognizes that publication is good for the school. When Dr. Kuyper's retirement was nearing,
President Hesselink, Professor Bruggink, and I discussed the possibility of publishing a Festschrift for Professor Kuyper. We drew up a list of prospective contributors and set up a luncheon meeting with Mr. William B. Eerdman. He agreed to publish the volume. I'm not certain why I was asked to edit it, other than that I was very close to Lester Kuyper and was willing to try it. Having done that, it was a natural next step to do the same for Dr. Oudersluys since I've come to love and respect them both so much. And so, we basically repeated the process. The volume honoring Dr. Kuyper is entitled Grace Upon Grace and appeared in 1975; the one honoring Dr. Oudersluys is entitled Saved By Hope and appeared in 1978.

BECHTEL: What was involved as editor? Did you have to choose which articles, or...?

COOK: Again, John Hesselink and I sketched out general areas because it's a delicate thing to ask people to contribute when there is no honorarium involved other than an opportunity to be published. Some of the people we were after were of such stature that they did not need that. So, we suggested areas - but of course, in the last analysis, we were happy to have distinguished participants. We were not able to have a single theme. It was a combination of suggesting on our part and also accepting such things as we could get. Professor James Muilenburg is a good example. We very much wanted him in the Festschrift because he comes out of the Reformed Church, he was one of the most distinguished Old Testament scholars of our day, and because he had spent a semester at
Western Seminary a few years before. His reputation was such that it would naturally honor Lester to have him included. Well, by the time of our invitation, his health was too poor to persuade him to produce anything new. I asked if we could reprint an especially significant article that had appeared in a journal. He agreed, and that's what we did.

BECKTEL: You've recently done a book, I understand, on Edgar J. Goodspeed. This was for the Society of Biblical Literature on American Biblical Scholars. Could you tell me something about that?

COOK: More than you want to know, probably! (laughter) I did my doctoral dissertation at Princeton on Goodspeed, largely, as the result of the good counsel of Dr. Oudersluys who had had Goodspeed as a professor in his graduate study at Chicago. Goodspeed died in 1962 and at that time I was also making a transition from one major professor to another (Otto Piper to Bruce Metzger). I stopped by to see Dr. Oudersluys that summer and asked if he had any suggestions. He said, "Well, Edgar J. Goodspeed has just died and nobody has ever evaluated his work. How about that?" The suggestion appealed to me and was acceptable to Prof. Metzger. So, I did a critical evaluation of Goodspeed's contribution as a New Testament scholar. This led me into five areas: New Testament translation, the Aramaic background of the Gospels, the Apocrypha, Goodspeed's Ephesians hypothesis, and his "Life of Jesus." I found it to be, if not a profound dissertation, a very useful and helpful undertaking for my own preparation in New Testament studies.
That was done in 1963 and '64 and has been gathering dust until last year when the Society of Biblical Literature marked its centennial. As part of its publication program for that centennial there was a sub-series on American Biblical Scholarship. I was invited to submit sample material on Goodspeed - which I was happy to do - and they were enthusiastic about it, so they gave me that assignment. The book has been in print for months and is due for publication by late 1981.

BECHTEL: Do you have any other pet projects going on now?

COOK: I'm kind of like William Barclay who loved to say he never wrote a book he wasn't invited to write. The Theological Commission has embarked on a modest publication project to publish a theological history of the Reformed Church, some ten or twelve invited essays covering the historical periods in our history. This volume is to be edited by Dr. James Van Hoeven. We also thought it would be useful to publish in book form ten or twelve of the most significant papers produced by the Theological Commission since its inception in 1959. I am presently surveying those materials, drawing up a list of candidates, and writing introductions. In other words, I am to edit that volume.

BECHTEL: How long have you been on the Theological Commission?

COOK: This time I came on in...1979. Previously, from '67 to 73.

BECHTEL: What have been some of the major issues during the years in which you've been a member of that commission?

COOK: When I came on the commission in '67, Carol, it was in the final
stages of producing a contemporary confession of faith. After that, we did a major study on the nature of ministry which resulted in some major revisions in The Book of Church Order. We also revised the so-called formula for ordination/installation of Ministers of the Word and Professors of Theology. That was back in 1967. When I came back on the Commission in 1979, I participated in the final stages of another major study on the nature of ecclesiastical office. This study was intended to modify the functional emphasis of our earlier study. I think both studies are very well done - and that both emphases are valuable. And then just last year the commission issued an excellent statement on the nuclear arms race.

BECHTEL: How do you like working on a commission like that?

COOK: It's the only commission I've ever been on, so I cannot compare it to others. It's always been a very enjoyable commission - a happy combination of serious theological study and lively discussion. There's a good bit of congeniality between the members, which I value very much.

BECHTEL: What do you perceive to be the Theological Commission's duties?

COOK: The Commission does two things: It studies and responds to matters referred to it by the General Synod and it initiates studies it judges to be needed. When the Theological Commission was created in 1959 the General Synod had received overtures asking for a denominational statement on the historicity of the book of Genesis and the inspiration of Scripture. Both of those overtures were immediately referred to the new Commission. Thus, the Commission is the denomination's theological
In that sense it communicates only with the General Synod. That is, the Commission does not respond to requests from individuals or lower ecclesiastical judicatories. The line of communication and responsibility is really between the Commission and the General Synod.

The other duty that is much more occasional is the Commission's prerogative to generate theological studies from within itself. An example would be the recent one dealing with the nuclear arms race. No General Synod had asked the Commission to do that; it was generated from within the Commission itself.

BECHTEL: OK. At the recent General Synod in June, you were elected as Vice-President. First, I just wondered if you could repeat the comment you made at that time regarding your wife. I thought it gave such a beautiful insight into your relationship.

COOK: I'd be happy to do that, Carol. After thanking the Synod in behalf of all of us who work in Theological education, I also thanked them on behalf of my wife Jean, who was not present, but who I said, "loves me so much that she would not be surprised at what they had done."

BECHTEL: That's great! What are some of your hopes and fears as you go into that role...that position?

COOK: Well, there are two ways of coming at that. On is personal... the hope that I will be able to do what has to be done and the accompanying fears of inadequacy. At that point I feel I must trust the Synod's discernment. If they placed that kind of trust in me, the, I guess I
had better act as if they are right.

The other set of hopes and fears has to do with the denomination. I think right now the church reflects something of the mood of the country. And the issue that I recall as evoking the most emotion at Synod was the issue of abortion. I fear that that may continue to polarize the church, and my hope is that we can continue to maintain a middle or moderate stance.

I think that the issue of inclusive language in Bible translation is also potentially polarizing. It's much too early to say what that will actually come to. At this point the National Council of Churches is only talking about producing a lectionary. I imagine that the use of even that would be divisive both in local churches and in the denomination. And then if the next step should be an inclusive language edition of the Revised Standard Version, which might carry that concern to extremes, then I think we have the possibility of a very nasty situation indeed. And I see a whole new liberal-conservative battle shaping up to replace the women's ordination battle or the church merger battle. I would hate to see us have to fight the whole battle of the RSV all over again, particularly now that it has won such widespread acceptance. The whole issue could be very, very damaging since it involves the Bible and so is at the root of our faith and life together.

So, I approach my role in the denomination as a middle-of-the-road person, and the mood of the country and the church may make middle-of-the-road positions increasingly difficult.
BECHTEL: Well, I'm glad you're in the middle. Perhaps you're just what we need.

COOK: Thank you.
NOTES

1 The Masonic controversy centered around church disapproval of membership in so-called "secret organizations" such as the Masons or the International Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF). The focus of this controversy was mainly in the Midwest, reaching its highest intensity in the Holland/Grand Rapids area. In 1867 the Christian Reformed Church voted to ban all members of such organizations from its rolls. The Reformed Church, while frowning on such memberships, left the final decision up to local consistories. Although this controversy reached its peak around 1881-82, the repercussions and bitterness of the dispute carried over well into the 20th century.
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