James I. Cook
Jim Cook has been my friend for forty-three years. What a delight and privilege it is to reflect on the seasons of our friendship!

First we were students together. We met in the summer of 1952 at Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey. We both were candidates for a doctoral program there in New Testament studies, feverishly preparing for our comprehensive exams, the final gateway into graduate study. I was relieved to discover that he shared some of my fears and self-doubts. What if we had come all this way, laden with graduate fellowships, had studied all summer, and then flunked the exams? It was a daunting prospect. But, pooling our anxieties, we were able to give each other at least a measure of reassurance.

Our principal mentor was Dr. Otto Piper, world-renowned German scholar. Each Friday afternoon, we graduate-school-hopefuls met for tea with Dr. and Mrs. Piper at their home. We were in awe of this great man—so learned, so profound, so gruffly mysterious. We were apprehensive each week lest he should ask us something beyond our depth. He always seemed to assume that we knew much more than we did. We shared puzzlement at some of his allusions and mirth afterwards as we compared notes about our confusion. We shared relief that we had been able, at least partially, to mask our ignorance. And so we made our way through graduate study, surprised and grateful at each stage that we somehow got by.

Next, we were pastors together. During that summer Jim began to preach at Reformed churches in the Princeton area. Before he was called to serve in a continuing way at the Blawenburg Reformed Church, he had ministered on several occasions at the Second Reformed Church in Lodi, New Jersey. When he asked if I would preach there in his place one weekend, I accepted, felt immediately attracted to the people in Lodi, and eventually became their pastor.

Until that time, I had for all my twenty-four years belonged to Presbyterian churches, both north and south. Jim was my welcomer to the Reformed Church in America. After I led worship one morning in the Princeton Seminary chapel, Jim had spoken glowingly about the service. He was sure, he said, that the Reformed Church greatly needed what I could offer. And from what we had seen in Jim and Jean, Helen and I felt that the Reformed Church would surely be a good home for us. The Cooks served in Blawenburg, we in Lodi, as Jim and I continued our doctoral work. We were learners together, and mutual encouragers, in pastoral ministry.
Before many years had passed, we were to be professors together. Jim came to Western Seminary in 1963 to teach in the New Testament department. I became Western's professor of preaching in 1964. For the next ten years, we were together as faculty members. Jim has described that period as one of the seminary's "golden decades." It was surely that for me, a time of fulfillment and joy in ministry to students, and of rich collegiality within the faculty.

Jim and I did many things together beyond the strictly academic. I recall sizzling Ping-Pong matches. We often stole away in the afternoons hours with Garry Wiltdrink for sessions of bumper pool. And then there were heroic exploits together on the volleyball court as we contended against the Hope College giants across the street. Jim was always a helpful, affirming teammate, easily our best "set-up" man in volleyball. And in one-on-one contests, he was such a gracious competitor that he could make you feel like a winner when he had just beaten you!

During those years we inaugurated "Fun Night." Once each month, the Wilterdinks, Cooks, and Brownsons met together for dinner in one of our homes. Then followed an evening of assorted games. We carried on that tradition for almost twenty years until Garry died in 1989. The remaining five of us have continued the tradition to this day. It's hard to describe the sheer hilarity of these occasions. Imagine the same persons, the same places, the same silly games, but in it all, a marvelously enriching joy. During these years each family has passed through deep waters. We've known disappointment, heartbreak, the death of dear ones. But these gatherings for food and fun have unfailingly nourished us all. It's the blessing of the Lord. It's the chemistry of deepening friendship.

As I think about that, I realize that we've also been sufferers together, bearing each other's burdens. When our Billy died suddenly in 1977, Jim and Jean were gracious comforters to us, sharing our grief, loving us through it. When some years later their son Paul lost his long, brave struggle with cancer, we could be there for them as well. We felt together what it means to say goodbye to a well-loved son. One more life-experience to share, one more strong strand in the ties of friendship.

During recent years, Jim and I have been churchmen together, sharing in denominational leadership. For several years our terms overlapped on the General Synod Executive Committee. That gave us occasion to work side by side on matters that concern the whole church. Along with everyone else on that committee, I listened with special attentiveness when Jim spoke—on any issue. What he said was always carefully thought out, touched with grace, and humbly offered. Sometimes his characteristic dead-pan humor cracked us up!

Jim, as a past president, was serving on the executive committee when I was elected vice-president of the General Synod in Pella, 1983. Our son Jim happened to be a delegate to the same assembly. I'll never forget the warmth
of the moment when those two escorted me to the platform. I remember saying in my words of address to the synod that they were my "two favorite Jims in the whole world."

I’ve been thinking about why that is so, why Jim Cook has been such a treasured friend through the years. Robert Bellah notes in his book Habits of the Heart that "the conception of friendship put forward by Aristotle, elaborated by Cicero, understood for centuries in the context of the Christian conception of personhood . . . has three essential components: Friends must enjoy one another’s company, they must be useful to one another, and they must share a common commitment to the good."

Jim is a man whose company I have always enjoyed. Maybe it’s because he so often has a slant on things that stimulates my thinking. Maybe it’s his taste for beauty and his ready wit. Maybe most of all, it’s the way Jim always seems so glad to see me when we meet. Who doesn’t enjoying warming his hands at the fireside of a caring heart? After forty-three years, it’s still fresh, still fun, when we get together.

Friends, we’re told, have to be "useful to one another," genuinely helpful, personally enriching. A friend is one with whom you can share your heart. Jim has been that for me. I remember long walks and late evenings when we talked about the things that mattered most to us. We went on and on about the church, our struggles and our hopes. He gave me often a truly listening ear.

A friend will tell you the bald truth, even when it hurts him or her to say it. I’m thinking now of the time when I had accepted the call to Words of Hope, but was still teaching at the seminary. Jim couldn’t understand why I would leave my post at Western, as he put it, "for a microphone." I think he wanted me to stay. But when I asked him what he thought about my trying to continue in both jobs, he was straight with me. He told me what I knew, but hadn’t fully accepted. I had to make the break: "It’s cleaner that way," he said. And it was.

At times we’ve disagreed—strongly. On rare occasions we’ve felt hurt or let down by each other. But we could never leave things there. We had to talk it out, struggle to understand each other, anguish together over the breach, because the friendship was such a priceless gift that we couldn’t stand to see it damaged.

How much this friend has taught me! About nuances in the Greek text, about the priority of grace, about "partaking worthily" at the Lord’s Table, about appreciating drama, about faith and about life. Jim is a man of keen discernment, quick to detect pomposity and humbug. But he also has a marked capacity to admire, to see beauty and excellence, to marvel at the gifts and graces of others. In his presence I have felt not only accepted but also esteemed and celebrated.
Jim Cook uses words like a craftsman. When I hear him preach or lecture, I find myself wanting to capture this turn of phrase, to file away that happy expression. And it's always eloquence blended with graciousness. When I was given my own retirement party a few months ago, Jim's words about me were embarrassingly generous. But they were spoken with such warmth and genuineness that I could tell he meant them. They surround me still like a benediction.

The man is astonishingly humble about himself and his abilities. Would you believe that this multi-talented, hard-working man has struggled, he says, with the secret fear that he would some day be "found out," discovered to be only a pretender in his profession as scholar and teacher? Jim blesses and shames me with his abiding sense of wonder that he has been given the opportunity to serve, with his glad surprise that he should ever be recognized and honored.

The last component in this time-honored view of friendship is a "common commitment to the good." C.S. Lewis, in *The Four Loves*, reminds us that people don't usually enter into friendship by searching for a friend. No, it's when we discover a common interest, share a compelling vision, stand shoulder-to-shoulder in a great cause, that our hearts are knit together. Before we realize that it's happened, we're friends.

As much as anyone I've known, Jim Cook strikes me as a man "committed to the good." I've found in him a heart for the gospel, a loyalty to the church, a concern for truth and justice, a love for Christ and for people that have helped to awaken and kindle those passions in me.

"What is the secret of your life?" asked Mrs. Browning of Charles Kingsley. "Tell me," she went on, "that I may make mine beautiful, too." His reply: "I had a friend." I resonate with that. I've had one, too, "a friend for all seasons," and soon for one more: we'll be retirees together!

It was said of the king in Shakespeare's *Othello*, "He hath a daily beauty in his life. . . ." Many of us have glimpsed something of that in our brother, Jim Cook. And whatever we may be today, we're all something more—and better—because of his friendship. Thanks be to God!