

Clarion

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CANADIAN REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

*ministerial training
by the churches
for the churches*

REFORMED HERMENEUTICS TODAY



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Healthy Fear

*We have peace with God through Jesus Christ
 and no enemy can ever take it away*

There is a refrain that I keep hearing lately and I can't seem to get it out of my head. It goes something like this: *fear is a bad counsellor. Or: we shouldn't operate out of fear.* I hear this in various church discussions like whether women should participate in voting for office bearers or, more recently, in the matter of how to interpret Scripture (i.e. principles of hermeneutics).

For instance, when an argument is raised expressing concern for where a position might lead in the future, the response is: we shouldn't argue out of fear. When the risks of a certain position are pointed out, even showing examples from the past, they are dismissed with a wave of the hand: fear should not dictate our course! And please, don't even bother mentioning the "slippery slope" for you will only be met with rolling eyes, snickers, and wagging tongues: there is no such thing as a slippery slope! Christians, we are told, should not be *'fraidy cats*. With that, the discussion is suddenly closed.

But should it be?

Fear not

Now, on the one hand, Scripture tells us not to fear. In fact, one of the most repeated commands in the Bible is, "Do not be afraid," and it is deeply comforting. God commands us not to fear our enemies. Or our guilt. Or his holy presence. Fear caused by our sin, fear caused by Satan and the existence of evil, all of which are threats to our eternal safety, *that* fear is cast out by the Lord Jesus Christ (1 John 4:17, 18). And what a wonderful thing! Our three sworn enemies have been defeated by our Saviour and ultimately there is nothing left to dread or be in terror of. We have peace with God through Jesus Christ and no enemy can ever take it away. Thank God for this!

Fear God

But the Bible also speaks of fear in another way, a fear that does us good, a healthy fear. First and foremost we are commanded to "fear God." It is repeated often in the Bible. This does not mean to stand in terror of him, but it does mean to have a deep, from-the-heart reverence and awe for the Lord. He is the Almighty, we are helpless creatures. He is magnificent in his holiness, we are sinful in our depravity.

In Scripture, any time a human even comes close to the presence of God, there is full humility, a great sense of wonder and of being over-come, and often a trembling before the greatness of his majesty. Just think of Moses before the burning bush or Isaiah in his vision of God's throne-room or even Peter before Jesus when the Lord caused the huge, miraculous catch of fish. All had a very healthy fear of God.

Out of this great respect for God, we obey his commands. Practically speaking, this is what "to fear God" often means in the Bible. It's a synonym for walking in his way or listening to his Word. Ecclesiastes 12:13 is one of several texts that show this, "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."

Fear sin

The Scriptures go further. Having this fear of God should lead us to a fear of sin. That is, we should be afraid to sin against our awesome and loving God! Moses makes this connection in Exodus 20:20 when the Israelites were literally trembling in fear before the thundering voice of the LORD coming from Mt. Sinai. God had just spoken the Ten Commandments from the mountain-top and then we read, "Moses said to the people, 'Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you

may not sin.” On the one hand the LORD in his grace does not want us to be terrified of his majesty. On the other hand, also in his grace, he does not want us to get comfortable or complacent when it comes to keeping his commandments, for much is at stake.

The LORD knows our hearts, how our thoughts are evil from our youth on (Gen 8:21), and so he works to instill in us a sense of fear to keep us from sin. Sin leads us away from God and into trouble, misery, and even damnation. We need a sense of caution, a sense of risk and danger when it comes to breaking any of God’s commandments, for by nature we don’t have it. We are warned not to play with fire. Instead, we are called to develop a healthy fear of our own weakness and how easily we can be led astray, as Paul says, “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor 10:12).

There is another reason to be afraid to sin: because of our love for God. This is even the primary reason. When we as believers realize what sin does to our heavenly Father, we will hate it, flee from it, and be afraid to fall into it (see Lord’s Day 33). Our iniquity is a great offense to God (Ps 51:5). Our evil deeds cause God sorrow and pain (Gen 6:6, 7).

INSIDE THIS ISSUE...

In his current editorial, Rev. Peter Holtvlüwer asks what role fear should play in our decisions and discussions. Is fear a bad counsellor, or is fear healthy?

In January of this year, our Seminary hosted its fourth annual conference, this year on the theme: “Correctly Handling the Word of Truth: Reformed Hermeneutics Today.” This issue includes a summary from Rev. Reuben Bredenhof.

Issue 5 includes the Education Matters column, as well as an accompanying article that was originally a speech by Judy Kingma at the CRTA East Teachers Convention. We also have a Treasures New and Old meditation, a Book Review and a Mission News insert.

Laura Veenendaal

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Our sin grieves his Holy Spirit who lives in us (Eph 4:30). Our sin has cost God the greatest sacrifice he could ever make – the death of his only-begotten Son, so how can he be pleased when his people are careless about sin, flirt with temptation, or dismiss the risk of falling into sin?

Fear of backsliding

The Scriptures teach us to develop an instinct of great caution when it comes to the potential to stray from God's commands. We see this also in the many warnings God sends. Think of the lengthy list of curses for disobedience described in Leviticus 26 and repeated in Deuteronomy 28. Remember the many prophets who pleaded with the people to turn from their wickedness and avoid the punishment God was threatening (based on those earlier curses!). Just read through Christ's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and count all the warnings against breaking God's commandments.

A warning is meant to put us on guard, to make us alert – to raise a level of fear in our hearts so that we do not fall prey to the thing warned against. Christ also warns against letting go of the faith altogether or backsliding. This message comes out clearly in the parable of the sower (Luke 8:1-15) where the sown seed lands on four different soils. Those soils represent the hearts of the hearers and it turns out that three out of four "types" of listeners, in the end, produce no crop. The parable is a cautionary lesson, to warn especially new Christians that backsliding is possible and, unless one grows in faith and produces a crop of good works, the little shoot of "faith" will perish. A professing Christian should heed the warning and be afraid of backsliding.

Isn't that the same healthy fear the Holy Spirit wants to invoke in our hearts in Hebrews 2:1, "Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it"? The author gives this warning more forcefully in 6:4:6,

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

Does this not send a shiver down your spine? It's meant to. It's a healthy thing to soberly consider that by our neglect of God's Word we may forever fall away. Those who profess Christ can't afford *not* to be afraid of sin.

Fear factor

For that reason, we should not simply cast out any mention of risks or potential dangers in our discussions, with-

out any further consideration. A person raising a concern for a possible future development should be given a fair hearing and not be mocked or dismissed.

We do this all the time in other areas. We warn against smoking because it might lead to lung cancer. Is that a logical necessity? Is lung cancer an unavoidable consequence? No. You can find long-time smokers who enjoy good health. However, history shows that a high percentage of smokers develop this disease, so we know that smoking carries a great *risk* and for that reason we counsel against it. And everyone accepts it as good and proper.

Take another example. Kids playing soccer near a busy road is not a good idea because there is danger present. Is it a foregone conclusion that a child will run after the ball onto the road and get hurt? Is an accident inevitable? No. The game could go off without any problems. But every parent knows the risk is high and for that reason will have the kids play where there is no traffic. This is a normal and fitting way to reason things.

Assessing legitimate risks

So, healthy fear, predictable dangers, foreseeable hazards are legitimate things to raise also in church debates. Risk assessment is not just a good practice in our daily lives but it is also biblical wisdom.

At the same time, the concern raised must be well-reasoned and based on something solid like historic trends or parallel circumstances or statistically likely outcomes (for example). The risks believed to be present should be spelled out and the basis for them clearly explained so that they can be carefully weighed by all parties. Before diving in to something new or untried, we should indeed "test the spirits" and that will mean not only testing the arguments for change but also whether the fear of change is valid. And valid risks should factor into our decisions. Precautions may then be taken to minimize the risk of straying away.

I would agree that irrational fears, baseless concerns, and unfounded predictions of a coming deformation should not be our counsellor. That's unhealthy fear and unworthy of Christians. Such talk may even inhibit true, biblical *reformation* as well. It will take wisdom, humility, and prayerful dependence on the Lord to discern the difference at times, but what I wish to plead for most in this editorial is: please, do not throw healthy fear under the bus. Do not write off the "slippery slope" argument simply because you have bought into the notion that fear – any kind of fear – is a bad counsellor.

The fear of God should give us a healthy fear of sin and a warm love for one another also in our debates. We all have the same goal, right? We all want to help the church stay faithful to the Lord's commandment, so let's allow healthy fear into our thoughts and discussions.





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Forgiven All, Loving Much

"Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – for she loved much." (Luke 7:47)

Have you ever done anything extreme for love, with little concern for what others might think? Having a romantic interest might make this happen, where you move halfway across the world to be with the one you love, or you propose marriage by sky writing (or even a flash mob!).

To be sure, the kind of love which the woman of Luke 7 shows toward the Lord is not of the romantic sort. Nevertheless, she does whatever she can to show him her love. And she does so without any inhibitions of what others might think.

The Lord was visiting the home of Simon the Pharisee, to share a meal. This Pharisee wanted to see what this Jesus was all about. At this party, the unexpected happened. This woman from town entered the room. That raised some eyebrows. She had lived a sinful life, and everybody knew what that life looked like. But because she knew Jesus was eating at Simon's house, she came. She knows about Jesus. She must have heard he was a friend of tax collectors and sinners. So she comes to Simon's house to see the Lord.

What this sinner then did would have caused a stir. With an alabaster jar of expensive perfume (costing as much as a year's wages), she attempted to anoint Jesus' feet. But she was so overcome by the opportunity to meet him and anoint him that she bursts into tears. And her tears drip on the Lord's feet. Realizing how wet she made his feet, she unbinds her hair,

wipes his feet with her hair, kisses his feet, and pours perfume on them. This was not intended as some promiscuous act on her part. Her gestures are clearly meant as an expression of deep love. For what? Simon doesn't bother himself with the answer. He's taken aback that a supposed prophet like Jesus would allow a woman like this to conduct herself in this way!

Jesus looks at the situation differently. He came to this world to save sinners. He will shed his blood because of our status as sinners. This woman understood something of that. She was showing her love in response to a complete cancellation of an enormous debt – her sin! She experienced Jesus Christ in his grace toward sinners who are ashamed of themselves because of their sins. Jesus points out that in contrast to Simon, this woman went far beyond the norms of hospitality. This humble woman honoured her Lord. She kissed his feet and anointed them with oil. She shed many tears to express her love.

How did she dare? Wasn't she concerned about being ridiculed because of her history? That didn't hold her back. She was aware of the fact that with the Lord there is much forgiveness. That's why she goes to the extreme. She showed that she believed the forgiveness of sins he had been proclaiming. Jesus confirms in our verse that her many sins have been forgiven. Is this woman's love the *cause* of her forgiveness? No, her love is *proof* of God's forgiveness of her.

Do you see your great need for God's forgiveness? Or do you, like the Pharisee, think that your membership in the church means you don't really sin anymore, that your road to heaven is clear cut? God requires that we see the massive size of the debt we owe him, but cannot even begin to pay. Searching our heart and seeing our sin has to drive us again and again to God in true, heartfelt repentance for our sins, and heartfelt love for God for his forgiveness. Like the woman, have you ever poured out your heart to the Lord and wept because of your sin, because you don't deserve to come before the Lord, yet he has still forgiven you?

Or do you think that's way too extreme? Have you lost a sense of the great sacrifice your Saviour made for your sins? He did not go there because we were righteous, because we were better than others, than this woman. He went because we rejected his holiness and grace, and showed him no hospitality in our life.

Yet he gave us life through his death. Does that not lead you to show overflowing love for the Lord? He wants heartfelt and reverent worship. Above all, the Lord wants a believing, repentant heart. A heart that knows him in his Word. A heart that loves to worship and serve him. A heart that loves him for cancelling the debt that stood against you. Do you know yourself forgiven in Christ? Then are you prepared to do the extreme for love?



Correctly Handling the Word of Truth: Reformed Hermeneutics Today

Fourth Annual Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary Conference



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Ancient book, modern world

Hermeneutics: a daunting word for a conference title! (*Herman who?*) But the subject couldn't be more relevant. As Christians, we're known as "people of the Book," those who strive to believe and live according to the Word of God. Of great importance then, is how we read and interpret that Word. That's what hermeneutics is: the principles and the practice of reading Scripture in a correct way.

How do we know which biblical commands and instructions still apply today? How can we approach those texts that are difficult to understand? How do we arrive at any certainty when the Bible and science say different things—but both with great conviction – about matters like the origins of mankind or the universe? What do we do when the ancient book that is the Bible and our twenty-first century culture differ sharply on subjects like the roles of men and women? Besides these questions, there are a great many things that are defended or promoted or condemned with appeals to Scripture. For instance, one church insists that marriage is between a man and a woman, while the church down the road says it could also be between two people of the same gender – yet both churches will call on the Bible in support. How are we to evaluate these discrepancies? Again, that's where hermeneutics comes in.

As believers we want to reckon properly with what the LORD has said, and also recognize what he hasn't said. All this we do "before God," as Paul says to Timothy (2 Tim 4:14-15), handling Scripture in a way that will meet with his approval, and will be to his honour.

A welcome conference

Motivated by this essential concern of discerning God's truth, the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary (CRTS) hosted its fourth annual conference from January 16 to 18 on this theme: "Correctly Handling the Word of Truth: Reformed Hermeneutics Today." The conference was held at the building of the Ancaster Canadian Reformed Church, which was a good thing, because many people came to hear the various speakers. On Thursday and Friday evenings when there were speeches open to all, the building was filled to capacity. And during the daytime sessions, over 170 pastors, seminary students, church members, and scholars – coming from five continents – were in attendance.

What lent the conference added interest was that professors from the Theological University in Kampen (TUK), The Netherlands, were also present to deliver speeches. In the past the two schools had discussed the possibility of having a conference together, and this now had come to fruition in a memorable way.

From our sister churches were welcomed as conference speakers Dr. J.M. Burger, Dr. A.L.Th. deBruijne, Dr. B. Kamphuis, Dr. G. Kwakkel, Dr. K. van Bekkum, and Dr. P.H.R. van Houwelingen. In addition, Dr. M. teVelde, the principal of the Theological University, and Dr. J. deJong, a member of TUK's board of governors, made the trip to Canada. A little closer to home, Dr. A. Strange and Dr. C. Venema from Mid-America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, Indiana were also at the conference, and addressed the audience.

Each of the five professors from CRTS spoke at the conference, either as a main speaker or as a respondent. Additionally, Dr. C. Van Dam, emeritus professor of Old Testament, and Dr. R.D. Anderson, minister of the Free Reformed Church in Rockingham, Western Australia, were contributors to the conference.

During the eleven lectures a lot of theological terrain was traversed, so after a while an audience member could feel his head spinning with big terms like confessional, soteriological, Cartesian, metaphorical, and post-modernity. It was helpful then, that each of the main addresses was followed by a response from one of the other speakers, someone who'd had a chance to read the lecture ahead of time and zero in on a few areas of special interest – or controversy, as the case may be. And following the response, there was time for discussion where audience members could ask questions or make comments. As is often the case at conferences like these, some of the most interesting bits came during question period, when speakers are unscripted and are called on to address some pointed queries.

The elephant in the room

Sometimes you hear it said after a meeting or social visit that “there was an elephant in the room.” This means that there was some big and obvious topic on everyone's mind, but no one wanted to address it, for fear of offending others or being impolite.

Going into this conference, there was certainly a topic or three that qualified as inviting a frank and hearty debate. Front-of-mind for many conference attendees was the ways in which Scripture is being interpreted among our sister churches in The Netherlands. Several months before, the General Synod in Carman had expressed a real unease with some trends in the Dutch churches, and also at the Theological University. What was troubling, in Synod's view, is that Scripture is being read in ways that depart from faithful Reformed principles of interpretation.

Then, just a couple of months before the conference, a Dutch synodical committee released its report on the roles of men and women in the church. This report was much-anticipated, and because of the direction taken in a preliminary study on the issue, this report was also cause for some apprehension. As the reader might be aware, the report's recommendation to the next Dutch Synod (to be held this year in Ede) is that the special offices of the church – elder, deacon, and minister – should be open to men and women alike. The report argues that such a position is not prohibited but fits within the breadth of Scripture's teaching.

Would it be mentioned? Or would the issue be skirted? With the conference theme such as it was, how could it *not* be mentioned? The conference speakers were united in seeking to handle rightly the Word of God, though they differed on some points in how that handling is to be done. In particular, during the Friday evening session Dr. G.H. Visscher addressed the question of whether Scripture's injunction in 1 Timothy 2:12-15 (and 1 Corinthians 14:33-35) still applies. Must we insist in our times that women keep silent in the churches, not having authority nor being involved in teaching? Or is this one of those culturally-conditioned instructions, given by Paul in a particular context and now superseded by other principles of Scripture, such as the basic equality of male and female in Christ? How do we know?

Dr. Visscher pointed out how Paul roots this teaching in creation, in the nature of how God made men and women. This gives a special weight to the apostle's words. Prohibiting women from church leadership is at odds with our culture, but it is required by the Lord – and as such, we know our obedience to this will receive his blessing. Dr. van Houwelingen, who was one of the contributors to the Dutch committee report, was given an opportunity to respond to the address. He maintained that the first century setting of the church was distinctive in many ways, with unique cultural challenges. Consequently the church today should not be bound by Paul's words in this matter, especially if we don't want to isolate ourselves from our culture, an isolation which would be to the detriment of the spread of the gospel.

On this matter, the dialogue was at times lively, the questions and comments direct. You might say that the elephant was not only acknowledged, it was interviewed and photographed! Certainly the speech and the accompanying response were beneficial for understanding the differing views on women in office, and the hermeneutics that lay behind each view.



From rare steak to cosmology

Not to say this was a one-issue conference – far from it. As mentioned earlier, whether we’re conscious of it or not, hermeneutic principles are being applied whenever we read the Bible. So as the conference unfolded, we could consider what the Scriptures say (and doesn’t say) about all manner of things: everything from eating rare steak and promoting the bio-industry, to the definition of marriage and the nature of the days of creation.

At the Thursday night public lecture Dr. Van Vliet addressed what is called “the two books debate.” If both Scripture and creation are considered “books” (with an appeal to Belgic Confession Article 2), then what if the Bible and creation – or scientific discoveries from it – seem to say different things? Do well-established scientific facts gain divine authority? For example, when science asserts that the earth is x-millions of years old, some argue that this needs to impact how we read the creation accounts of Genesis 1-2: “days” there clearly mean something different than our regular twenty-four hour days. But Dr. Van Vliet explained how the creation authoritatively reveals certain things about *God*, not about any number of other subjects. Special revelation (Scripture) is always clearer than and superior to general revelation, and for that reason it must be used to interpret any theories or findings about creation and the universe.

As readers of Scripture we encounter stories that might be termed “miraculous.” In his speech Dr. Van Bekkum examined the account in 1 Kings 13, where a lion and a donkey stand together beside the corpse of a man of God. The body is not mauled, nor is the donkey chased by the lion – which is not at all what we’d expect. Through this peculiar story, the author is conveying a

message about God’s judgment, his Word, and his mercy. Dr. Van Bekkum intimated the question: Does the story’s theological significance mean it didn’t have to happen exactly as described in Scripture?

Dr. Van Dam addressed this kind of question in his speech as well, responding to those who distinguish between Scripture’s “truth claim” and its “truth value.” Scripture may make a claim, such as in the book of Joshua, that the cities of Canaan were conquered by Israel in a military campaign. This is a claim that has a theological meaning for the LORD’s people. But the findings of archaeology present a different account of how Canaan was subjugated – this is called the story’s “truth value.” Dr. Van Dam argued that this distinction isn’t warranted. Instead of accepting such a dichotomy or depending on archaeology to validate Scripture’s truth, a believing approach to the Bible accepts as historically true whatever it plainly affirms to be so.

Another area where Christians look to Scripture for guidance is in our ethics. The Ten Commandments explicitly prohibit some actions (theft) and attitudes (coveting), but Dr. de Bruijne noted how in our time and situation, new questions are arising about which the Bible does not seem to speak directly. How then can Christians navigate such uncharted territory? As an example, he considered how much more we know today about the origins of homosexuality and about the struggles a person might have with this proclivity. This requires a thoughtful response from the church. While warning against relativism, Dr. de Bruijne encouraged a consideration in our ethics of what would be most beneficial to God’s kingdom.

And more. . .

Because of space constraints, I cannot give a detailed summary about each of the eleven lectures. Videos of the entire conference (speeches and responses) should be available at the CRTS website. Also, there is a plan to publish the conference speeches in book form, so keep an eye open for that in the future.

But to whet your appetite for listening to or reading any of the conference lectures. . . Dr. Burger spoke on how the reality of our personal union with Christ must be paramount when we read Scripture. Dr. Smith tackled the often-contested structure of the book of Jeremiah, proposing that a large portion of it has been shaped along the lines of the Ten Commandments. Dr. Kamphuis addressed how the church’s doctrine is shaped by history, and how the language of dogma is limited because it is

often metaphorical. Dr. Kwakkel demonstrated the role of the reader in interpreting Scripture. Dr. Van Raalte explained how the idea of God accommodating himself to our understanding in divine revelation is treated like a “wax nose” by some, able to be turned whatever way the interpreter pleases; he argued for some clear boundaries in our use of this concept.

What kind of book is the Bible?

Time and again, the speeches and discussions at the conference returned to the character of God’s Word. What kind of book is the Bible? Is it clear in what it affirms for today? Is it complete and sufficient? Is it historically reliable and trustworthy?

As part of his address, Dr. Venema showed that as we study Scripture, we come to it with certain assumptions that affect how we read. Though the Bible is made up of some sixty-six separate parts, with many different human authors, and though it was given over a very long history, we consider it to be a single and unified book. Because of its basic unity and its single Author in the Holy Spirit, we are right to use Scripture to interpret itself: a more difficult text is explained by a simpler one. In this regard the confessions of the church are of great assistance, for we benefit from how the Spirit has also given insight to God’s people in centuries past. Though many today view the Bible as a product of ancient religion and culture – now long past its “Best Before” date – Reformed believers affirm that it is God’s living Word. In the Scripture he speaks to his people with clarity, for life and salvation through Christ. The Word is a great gift to be treasured, studied, and defended.



Dr. teVelde and Dr. Visscher

Photo credit: Michael Zwiep

L-R: J. DeJong, K. van Bekkum, J. Van Vliet, A.J. de Visser, M. te Velde, C. Van Dam, J. Smith, A.L. Th. de Bruijne, B. Kamphuis, G.H Visscher, G. Kwakkel, R.D. Anderson, P.H.R. van Houwelingen, A. Strange, J.M. Burger



Photo credit: Michael Zwiep

A matter of life and death

At the close of the conference the principals of the Canadian and the Dutch institutions, Dr. Visscher and Dr. te Velde, expressed together their gratitude for all that could be shared and discussed over the three days in Ancaster. Indeed, it might be asked if the conference helped to settle any theological disputes, disentangle any hermeneutical knots, or change any previously-immovable minds? Likely it’s too much to expect “instant results” and dramatic overnight shifts in such an area of study as hermeneutics. But certainly the conference speeches and responses prompted much useful dialogue, stimulated many good questions, and fortified the convictions of those in attendance – even if it was sometimes conviction borne out of disagreement.

The Bible is God’s living Word

Hermeneutics is and will remain an essential issue for Christians, one that requires our careful reflection and study. Dr. Kamphuis began his lecture with a reference to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian who was killed during the closing weeks of the Second World War. While Bonhoeffer was in prison, awaiting execution for his part in the plot against Hitler’s life, he wasn’t preoccupied with his own fate, as we might expect. Instead, in his prison cell he thought about and wrote about this very subject: hermeneutics! For Bonhoeffer realized, as we also should, that more important than anything else is doing justice to the power of God’s Word: knowing what he has said, seeking understanding of it, and then submitting humbly to it.





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Rejoice in the Praiseworthy Deeds of our God

CRTA-East Convention, October 24-25, 2013

On October 24-25, 2013, the CRTA-East held its annual convention, hosted by the joint efforts of John Calvin Christian School of Burlington and Covenant Christian School of Millgrove. Over 150 Reformed teachers came to “rejoice in the praiseworthy deeds of our God” so that they could tell of them even better the Monday after. On the Thursday, guests were treated to a *Creative Conversation* between an educator, a theologian, and an architect: Christine vanHalen-Faber, Rev. Dick Wynia, and Malcolm Wildeboer, respectively. The rest of the day was followed by a choice of fourteen workshops. For our *Clarion* readers, however, we pass on key statements provided by each of the three presenters on creativity. On the Friday, Miss Judy Kingma delivered a devotional on the convention theme, *Rejoice!* Her presentation was followed by a choice of sixteen workshops. Miss Kingma agreed to publish an edited version of her devotional separately.

Rev. Dick Wynia

“The question of creativity is tied to the two most important questions in our whole existence as human being: Who is God? and Who are we? As Reformed believers we have spent centuries studying these very questions.”

“Central to our discussion about creativity is the question, What does it mean that God created us in his image? That’s fundamental to who we are, and what our place in this world is.”

“Central to what God reveals to us about himself is his work of creating. So this is also central to what it means to be his image: we are creators.”

“When God created us in his image, and he gave us that task of ruling over the creation, he also gave us the ability, and the command, to create. To a greater or lesser degree, according to the gifts God has given us, everyone of us is creative.”

“It would be hard to find any aspect of human life and activity in which creativity doesn’t play a role.”

“Our creativity is to be used in the service of God and of our neighbour. The great purpose of our creativity is to glorify God.”

Malcolm Wildeboer

“I’m convinced that there are conditions, often natural ones, that allow a child to flourish, to be inspired creatively. A child will draw from this well of early experience for the rest of his or her life. For me, the swamp where I spent my childhood was this place – this well of inspiration.”

“At age seven I knew that the Berenstain Bear-inspired canoe I was crafting in my swamp would never float – but the process was unforgettable! Allow your kids to enjoy the creative process of building “a boat that will never float”! Educationalist Sir Ken Robinson said, ‘If you are not prepared to be wrong you won’t come up with an original idea, kids will take a chance.’”

“The heavens (and the swamp) proclaim his glory and we are created to magnify him! John Piper says it well: ‘As Christians we have the deepest and best foundation for serious (incredible) art (such as architecture)!’ He further defines a trinity of values to help us respond to our God given creative potential, ‘faith, gifting, and diligence.’ Our faith is in our Creator who created from nothing. We create from his creation to magnify him. God gives various gifts and we are to be diligent in developing these, becoming skilled along the way. The growing skills, in turn, liberate us to more fully express our gifts (creatively) and further magnify him!”

“I’m convinced that everyone, at any age, can learn to communicate with drawing. As in any language, when taught from basic principles it can be learned. Not everyone who draws will become an artist just as not every

piano player becomes a professional musician, but all are communicating.”

“As a Reformed Christian community we need to recognize, support, and nurture the God-given creative talents among us. This too is Kingdom work. We need to be a supportive community and by this I mean, encouraging, equipping, and investing in them financially. Our children – God’s children – skilled in their work, will in this life stand before kings (Prov 22:29). . . and before the King in the life to come.”

Christine vanHalen-Faber

1. Our existence:

“Fearfully and wonderfully made. . . brain research indicates that the right and left hemispheres of the brain work together in harmony. Teachers do well to intentionally stimulate both hemispheres in all learners. The creative mind is a mind where analytical thinking is blended with curiosity, expressiveness, and the use of the senses.”

2. Our vocation:

“To be the face of God to our neighbour (Rev. D. Wynia) – also in the way in which we acknowledge and use creativity as a gift from God.”

“I spell creativity d-i-s-c-i-p-l-i-n-e. . . Artists are called by God to be professional imaginers in society, skilled at bringing surprising insights to their neighbours’ attention (Calvin Seerveld).”

“In combining these two thoughts we recognize that in fostering creativity in our students, we are to remind them (and ourselves) that creativity is not a free-for-all.



Rather it has boundaries – boundaries set by the Creator to be observed by us, his creatures.”

3. Communication:

“Speak about creativity with your students. Acknowledge it. Make it concrete. Celebrate it. Creativity is not a magical force given to some, and not to others. Creativity is nurtured by imagination. For it to flourish, imagination requires a sounding board that can be trusted.”

4. Action:

“Our task: To be deliberate in making our classroom into a safe ‘swamp’ in which our students can build boats that do not float. Do this by awakening curiosity in our students, while acknowledging that the end-result may be different from what you, the teacher, had envisioned. Remember that it’s OK for students to just ‘be busy and do’ without the teacher assessing and evaluating everything that’s done!”

5. Application:

“Potter – clay – purpose: Teachers are assistants-to-the-Potter, working within Father’s hands, not afraid to get their hands dirty while observing in awe how each vessel is shaped for a pre-designed purpose. No two vessels are the same. Yet there is a common goal that illustrates there is unity in diversity. . . ‘to the end that man may serve his God’ (BC Art 12).”



Three conversationalists: Christine vanHalen-Faber, Rev. Dick Wynia, Malcolm Wildeboer

The Education Matters column is sponsored by the Canadian Reformed Teachers’ Association East. Anyone wishing to respond to an article written or willing to write an article is kindly asked to send materials to Clarion or to Arthur Kingma akingma@echs.ca.



Rejoice in the Lord!

A different version of this devotional was presented at the CRTA Convention in Burlington, on October 25, 2013.

Are you a rejoicing teacher?

The word “rejoice” and its derivatives appear hundreds of times in Scripture. It may come as a direct command; we also encounter it as a very compelling invitation – so compelling that it demands a response. “Rejoice in the Lord always,” Paul says to the Philippians. “I say it again, ‘Rejoice!’” (Phil. 4:4) In Psalm 66, the psalmist puts it this way: “Come and see what God has done, how awesome his works in man’s behalf! He turned the sea into dry land, they passed through the waters on foot – come, let us rejoice in him” (v. 5-6).

These examples teach us two things about rejoicing. First, we rejoice in Someone – God himself. We “rejoice in the LORD” because he is exactly who he says he is – the Sovereign, eternal, unchanging, and almighty God who is perfect in holiness, power, authority, righteousness, and justice; yet gracious, full of compassion and love. And secondly, we rejoice in his deeds – God’s acts that he has done and continues to do because the Lord, acting according to his nature, does exactly what he promised he would do as the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Renewer of our lives. The praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, who *is* what he does, and who *does* what he is, are an unshakeable, immovable foundation for our rejoicing.

We need an unshakeable foundation for our rejoicing. Life is still so broken that ongoing rejoicing seems almost counter-intuitive. At times life can be almost unbearably sad and difficult. Rejoicing is not the first response that comes to mind, but our covenant-keeping God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow! Not in the circumstances of our lives, but in *him* we rejoice. Our Triune God finishes and brings to completion whatever he starts, whether that be in the creation and preservation of the world we inhabit or whether that be in the re-creation of people it pleases him to transform into new creations made alive in Christ.

So, are you a rejoicing teacher?



Rejoice always?

Certainly we all can recognize reasons for rejoicing in the LORD. But always? Too often neither you, nor I, just don’t see or feel a reason to rejoice. David and other psalmists didn’t always see or feel the urge to rejoice either. Their approach to this very real problem is instructive for us.

Psalm 77 provides a beautiful example. In the midst of his cries for help, Asaph remembers the LORD. Asaph takes himself by the scruff of the neck, so to speak, and sternly stops himself from dwelling on his own sorrows (which are by no means trivial!): “I will remember the deeds of the Lord; Yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds” (v. 11-12). Even though his circumstances have not yet changed, Asaph’s rejoicing in the Lord’s deeds leads him to rejoice in God himself: “Your ways, O God, are holy, What god is so great as our God?” (v. 13)

Giving yourself a good “talking to” through the lens of God’s praiseworthy deeds is sometimes necessary in order to keep rejoicing in the LORD. Just *think* about it! Each one of us is guilty before the holy God. There’s not a person in this room who doesn’t deserve to die for his/her sins. And there’s not a person in this room who can atone for him/herself. Even the best we have to offer God appears like filthy rags to him. *But then!* God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son. Think about what *that* means: Jesus Christ bore God’s wrath and died in my place even though I have done nothing to deserve such love.

Don’t stop – keep thinking: That I can believe that this is really true is yet another of God’s great works. His Holy Spirit works faith in me by the Word. Yes, life hurts and grieves me, but I am being refined in the workshop of the Holy Spirit by the things God puts into my life. I’m a work-in-progress, but I am in good hands. Rejoice, O my soul!

A little story I once heard illustrates this process of refining. An observer of the gold-refining process was watching as impurities were skimmed off again and again from the liquidized gold. He asked the workman, “How do you know when you finally have pure gold?” The workman replied, “When I can see my image in it.” The LORD wants to see his image reflected in the lives of those he is drawing to himself with cords of love. The refining process may be difficult and painful, but rejoice that it is happening! God is at work in you, the teacher of children who belong to him.

Rejoicing has to be learned!

As already suggested above, rejoicing in the Lord doesn’t come naturally to us. It has to be learned from God himself through his Word. Psalm 119 illustrates how the Word – God’s good and perfect law instructs us. In verse 32, the psalmist gives us a beautiful picture of thankful rejoicing resulting from such instruction: “I run in the paths of your commands, for you have set my heart free.”

We enjoy countless opportunities to be instructed by God’s Word. We have the Word in our homes, in our schools. Every Sunday again we have opportunity to learn to rejoice in the God of our salvation through the public proclamation of the gospel. Rejoicing in God’s praiseworthy deeds for our salvation teaches us to rejoice

CALLS EXTENDED

Called by the Fergus North CanRC of Fergus, ON:

Rev. M. Jagt

of Taber, Alberta

Called by the Bethel CanRC of Toronto, ON:

Rev. R. Schouten

of Aldergrove, BC

CALLS DECLINED

Declined the calls to the Flamborough and Coaldale CanRCs:

Rev. R. Vermeulen

of Glanbrook (Trinity), ON

Declined the call to serve as co-pastor of the Langley CanRC:

Rev. R. Bredenhof

of London, ON

CHURCH NEWS

as God himself rejoices in his work. Genesis 1 records that God saw that his work of creation was very good. Similarly, God rejoices over his work of salvation: “As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you” (Isa 62:5b). How fitting, then, to rejoice with him in his wonderful deeds for our salvation: Behold, Lord, your work of salvation is so very good!

An illustration from a sermon makes this teaching-us-to-rejoice function of the Word clear. Leviticus 13 might seem an odd choice for learning to rejoice. It’s about the laws regarding skin diseases, bodily emissions, and contact with the dead – material we don’t often read with spell-bound attention. The test was the command that Moses was instructed to give Israel just before they set out from Mt. Sinai on the long march to Canaan (Num 5:1-4). Israel was to send every person who was unclean by reason of a skin condition, bodily emission, or contact with the dead outside the camp. Why? Israel was going to travel with God in their midst – the holy God who cannot have in his presence any uncleanness resulting from sin.

Amazingly, Israel obeyed, but imagine the scene on any given morning. A woman with her period – Out! A man whose father died during the night – Out! A child with a rash on his scalp – Out! Every man, woman, or child would at one time or other, for one reason or another, experience what it was like to be expelled from the presence of the LORD because he/she was unclean! Only after being declared clean by a priest were people allowed to return to the camp. Lepers, however, remained permanent shut-outs.

It sounds harsh, cruel even, to our ears, this constant cry of “OUT!” These Old Testament shut-outs, however, picture our state before God. We are all unclean and deserve to be sent out of God’s presence.

Then comes the glory of the gospel! Our Lord Jesus Christ entered our existence and took upon himself all our uncleanness. He *touch*ed a leper! He allowed a woman with a twelve-year issue of blood to *touch* him! He *touch*ed a dead twelve-year-old and commanded her to rise! Our Lord Jesus Christ took all our uncleannesses upon himself and to the cross for the sake of those given to him by the Father.

The praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, who is what he does, and who does what he is, are an unshakeable, immovable foundation for our rejoicing

Every Sunday we come into God’s presence as congregations. He, the holy God, meets with us, the people to whom sin still clings. But there is no cry of “Out!” Rather, we hear: “Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.” Reason for rejoicing?

Can we teach children to rejoice?

Still thinking about the question: Are you a rejoicing teacher? It is a question of relevance when we consider our task to assist parents in telling the coming generation about the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD? Psalm 78:4 is very clear about the purpose of this mandate. The students we teach today must instruct the next generation, not yet born, about God’s statutes and laws. To do that, our students must learn to put their trust in God, not forget his deeds, but keep his commands lest they become a rebellious, stubborn people whose hearts are not faithful to God.

Can teachers, however, foster an attitude of delight in God, an attitude of rejoicing in his praiseworthy deeds? Can we do so by the way we design curriculum units and plan daily lessons, or by the way we teach the material? The reality is that we cannot make our students rejoice, no more than we can give them faith. The Holy Spirit does that, but he uses instruments that include teachers. And, I would argue, the most effective teacher instruments are those who themselves rejoice in their God and in his praiseworthy deeds.

Using the curriculum

The school curriculum gives teachers much space for telling about God’s great deeds of salvation (e.g., Bible and Church history, devotions, apologetics). There’s also much space for telling about God’s great deeds in the creation and preservation of the world (e.g., science, geography, history, math). The focus of our teaching, both in its content and its methodology, is to confront our students with the LORD.

Use the curriculum to let students see who the LORD is in all his attributes. His authority and might shine through in the rise and fall of the national powers of this world – think Lord’s Day 10. His astonishing wisdom, majesty, and glory shine through the operation of the water cycle, for example. When you speak about clouds as a water transportation marvel, tell them also that the same almighty God who commands the clouds to drop the rain in one place and to withhold it from another, is their Father in Jesus Christ. And in so doing, you give them reason to rejoice in their God.

Every Sunday again we have opportunity to learn to rejoice in the God of our salvation through the public proclamation of the gospel

Use the curriculum to let students also see God in his righteous holiness and perfect justice. Scripture often speaks of God’s judgments, not only upon the world, but also upon his own people. History speaks of God’s heavy hand against the rebellious peoples of this world. But in every calamity we may hear, like Habakkuk, the footsteps of our coming Lord who in wrath continues to remember his mercy. Why do our students need to see the righteous justice of their God tempered by his mercy? John Calvin puts it this way, and I paraphrase: Only when we see that the punishment of God is real, do we begin to see that God’s mercy and grace are equally real. If salvation were not real, why would God punish the wicked? In salvation, God gives us what we do *not* deserve! Let us rejoice in him!

Use the school curriculum to show them how incomprehensibly merciful, compassionate, and gracious their God is in his dealings with weak and sinful people. And tell them that this same God has not dealt with us either according to what we deserve; rather, he keeps his promises because he is ever faithful!

Rejoicing in Prayer

It is not only curriculum that provides us with opportunities to speak about the praiseworthy deeds of God. Classroom prayers can be offered in an attitude of rejoicing by acknowledging and praising God for who he is and by recounting his praiseworthy deeds. We sometimes run the risk of turning our prayers into a list of requests without actual rejoicing in the God whom we may address as “our Father.”

Scripture has wonderful models for us – think of the prayers of David, Solomon, Daniel, Ezra, and Paul. And then there’s Jeremiah who had to buy a field at a time when the Babylonians carried Judah into exile. He simply could not fathom why the LORD would issue such a command. Before he lays his problem before the LORD, however, Jeremiah acknowledges who God is and what makes his deeds praiseworthy. What happens as he prays in this manner is truly marvellous:

Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you. You show love to thousands but bring the punishment for the fathers’ sins into the laps of their children after them. O great and powerful God, whose name is the LORD Almighty, great are your purposes and mighty are your deeds. Your eyes are open to all the ways of men; you reward everyone according to his conduct and as his deeds deserve (Jer 32:17-19).

In his reply to Jeremiah, the LORD teaches his prophet that by recounting God’s great deeds, Jeremiah has essentially answered his own question: Nothing is too hard for the LORD and that includes bringing Judah back from exile and allowing fields to be bought and sold again.

The Apostle Paul’s prayer is also instructive for us. Paul prays that the Ephesians may be strengthened in their inner being so powerfully that they may “grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of God” (Eph 3:14ff). By holding on to God’s praiseworthy deeds, Paul, inspired by the Spirit, provides a powerful model for us, showing us how to pray with and for our students and each other.

Interaction characterized by rejoicing

The task of the teacher includes our interaction with students, parents, and colleagues. Can we speak as rejoicing teachers to a disobedient or a grieving student? A discouraged colleague? Parents worried about the spiritual life of their child? Let us continually encourage others and ourselves to consider God’s praiseworthy deeds. Guido de Brès does it so beautifully in Article 26 of the Belgic Confession:

There is no creature in heaven or on earth who loves us more than Jesus Christ. . . If, therefore, we had to look for another intercessor, could we find one who loves us more than he who laid down his life for us, even when we were his enemies? If we had to look for one who has authority and power, who has more than he who. . . has all authority in heaven and on earth? Moreover, who will be heard more readily than God’s own well-beloved Son?

What an encouragement to keep rejoicing!

In closing

The words of Psalm 13:5, 6 say it all: “But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me.” And now, teachers, go back to your classrooms as rejoicing teachers to tell the coming generation about the LORD and his praiseworthy deeds! 

You Asked

A New Clarion Feature

Is there something you’ve been wanting to know? An answer you’ve been looking for?

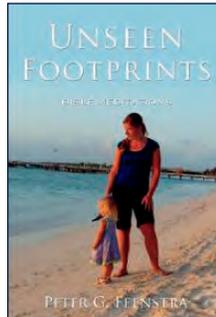
Ask us a question!

Please direct questions via email to Rev. W. denHollander at denhollanderw@gmail.com

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**Unseen Footprints:
Bible Meditations, Peter G.
Feenstra, Xulon Press, 2012**

**Additional Information:
Paperback, 274 pages, \$16.99**



As a pastor, I frequently get asked about devotional books. To be honest, most of the time, I find it difficult to reply to these inquiries. It's partly because I fear that devotionals are often a crutch used to replace the hard work of reading and studying the Bible for oneself. I would rather that believers engage the Bible directly for themselves. But the other difficulty is that there are so few good devotional books that can actually be recommended. This book of meditations by Rev. Peter Feenstra certainly provides a remedy to that last difficulty. This is a reliable set of reflections on Scripture.

The author is the pastor of the Canadian Reformed Church in Grand Valley, Ontario. He has also served a couple of other Canadian Reformed Churches. Rev. Feenstra is the author of several other books including a helpful little commentary on the Canons of Dort, *Unspeakable Comfort*.

Unseen Footprints contains 260 meditations based on various Scripture passages. At the rate of five per week, a family or individual reader could work through it in a year. In the process, the author will take you through most of the books of Bible in succession. Feenstra works closely with the Scriptures and brings biblical teaching to bear on believers as they live in today's world. The book is replete with contemporary application. Most importantly of all, the author is careful to be Christ-centred and typically endeavours to steer readers towards the gospel. Let me give a couple of examples. This first one is from his meditation on Luke 13:23, entitled "Are You Saved?":

God's election to salvation is made effective through the covenant and through the church. Yet we all know that not every member in the church will be saved. We do not enter through the narrow gate in groups or because of our ancestry and family background; as members of the body of Christ we are called to a personal relationship with Jesus. We cannot be saved unless we live by faith in the Lord Jesus. He is our

only hope for the future. Faith is the only means by which we are bound to Christ and receive assurance that we are saved. Faith is necessary for those who are in the church and for those who, at this point, are not gathering with Christ's people. Are you responding to the gospel message and living by faith? (182)

The second example comes from Feenstra's meditation on Romans 1:1, entitled "Wowed by the Gospel":

The real, authentic and everlasting drawing card that separates true and false worship is the gospel. We need to be "wowed" and awed by the gospel. Those who are committed to the Christian faith believe a message regarding the work of Christ. The greatest desire and prayer of parents is that their children will believe the gospel of Jesus. The message we want people in the community to embrace is the gospel of Jesus, the Saviour, and that His coming into the world was necessary to grant forgiveness of our sins. (206)

Those two excerpts express well the emphases of Feenstra in this book and also illustrate his clear writing style.

Unseen Footprints has a Reformed pastor writing for Reformed believers. The meditations often connect with Reformed church life in its different aspects. For instance, the author speaks of how Reformed worship services begin with a salutation that should send shivers of joy down our spines. Elsewhere he writes about the ministry of mercy carried out by Reformed deacons. While certainly Presbyterian and other Christian readers might benefit from these devotionals, Reformed believers will appreciate having a book coming out of their world and intended for them.

As I conclude, let me come back to my first misgiving about books like this. There is no reason why a book of devotions cannot be used alongside regular Bible reading. My concern is simply that this would somehow replace regular Bible reading. But it doesn't have to. Traditionally, books like this have been used around the dinner table by couples and families. They would be a part of daily family worship. That would be the ideal way to use it and it is, in fact, ideally suited for that. Read *Unseen Footprints* together, but then also still be reading and studying the Bible on your own. By doing that, you can daily benefit from your own efforts at digging into Scripture, as well as receiving some helpful teaching from a faithful Reformed minister.

