

Clarion

*Enlightened by the Word
Governing the Church
Formatting Synod Decisions*



Clarion: a trustworthy and engaging magazine, widely spread and read in Canadian Reformed households and beyond.

To equip God's people for his glory, in faithfulness to Scripture, as summarized in the Reformed confessions, Clarion adheres to the following core values:

Confessionally Reformed
Loving in manner
Attuned to current issues
Readable and Reliable
In Submission to Scripture
Open to constructive criticism
Nurturing Christian living

What's Inside

In this issue we are pleased to debut a new column on church government penned by Rev. Jan DeGelder. It may sound kind of boring, but you might be surprised how important (also to you personally!) it is to have sound, just, biblical principles and rules in place. Rev. DeGelder begins by describing the kind of church government we have among our churches (there's more than one out there!) and how we cooperate together. Worthy of consideration!

Part of our church government is for the churches to meet every three years in a general synod (by way of delegation). The Acts of our most recent synod show a brand new (to us) way of formatting decisions—is it a net positive or negative? Revs. John Ludwig and Karlo Janssen (upon request) help us walk through the pros and cons in two separate articles. We'd also love to hear from you on this, dear reader, as people who read the Acts. Which system do you think is better? Write a 300-word letter and we'll add your voice to the discussion in a future issue.

There's lots more too! Mr. Jeff Morris in "Enlightened by the Word" helps us understand that there is no such thing as a neutral worldview and being "secular" is to hold to another religion. Mr. Ed Slaa updates us on one of our Christian schools in

the GTA and how it is being split into two for the good of both Brampton and Toronto communities. Lucas Holtvlüwer presents another podcast review that may interest a broad cross-section of our readership. The ministry among Muslims conducted by MERF continues to make inroads by God's powerful grace—an encouraging read! *Clarion Kids* focuses attention on the kingship of Jesus. And don't forget to stay current with happenings in Alberta via a press release of their latest classis.

I'd also like to welcome to our team of regular columnists Rev. Wes Bredenhof of Launceston, Tasmania, who has agreed to manage our *Book Review* column. He'll be both writing reviews and editing those which are submitted, so if you have a 600-700 word review of a book that fits with *Clarion's* purpose, send it to Pastor Wes for his consideration (bookreview@clarionmagazine.ca). And as we approach Reformation Day, you'll find a meditation by Rev. Julius VanSpronsen and an editorial by Rev. Eric Kampen that fittingly remind and refresh us in the cardinal truths of the gospel that were rediscovered at that time. God bless your reading!

Peter Holtvlüwer

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EDITORIAL

Five “Alones”

If we live as faithful children of God, sooner or later people will ask us not only what it means to be a Christian, but also a Reformed Christian. This question is bound to come out when we say we belong to a Reformed church.

When that question is asked, I usually try to determine what level of knowledge the person has about history and Christianity before answering. Sometimes it works, for starters, to connect Reformed churches and Presbyterian churches. More often, though, one has to put it in broader terms of Protestant in contrast to Roman Catholic. Even that is only for starters.

A helpful way to communicate what we are as Reformed Christians is to use the five phrases which capture the essence of the teaching of the Reformation, the five *solas*. In order to keep it as simple as possible, we do well to just speak English and talk about the five “alones.” As we are at the time of the year that we remember the events that led to the reformation of the church, it is good to refresh our awareness of these five “alones,” so we will be refreshed in our ability to speak to others about the hope that lives in us.

God-given “alones”

First, there is “Scripture alone.” The Reformation was a rediscovery of the Scriptures, which had gotten buried under human traditions and interpretations. The Bible contains all we need to know for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith (e.g., 2 Tim 3:16, 17). While Reformed churches have a number of confessional documents, this emphasis on the Scripture alone is evident in the way they are filled with Scripture references, as well as specific statements affirming this (e.g., BC, Art 2-7). We are people of the Bible, and we live by the Bible alone.

Second, there is “Christ alone.” The Reformation was the rediscovery of the sufficiency of Christ’s one sacrifice to pay for all our sins. There is no need for prayer to saints. There is no need to sacrifice Christ anew in the mass. There is no place for our good works. This is in accordance with the way all Scripture points to Christ and his sacrifice (e.g., Luke 24:27, 44-47; John 5:39). We are a people who speak of Christ, and we find our life in his sacrifice alone.

Third, there is by “faith alone.” This flows out of “Scripture alone” and “Christ alone.” Reading passages such as Romans 1:17, “The righteous shall live by faith,” and Romans 3:28, “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law,” proved life-changing for Martin Luther. He had been living under the impression that his salvation depended upon his accomplishments. Scripture taught him we are saved by faith alone, that is, by trusting in God that our sins have been punished in Christ. We are a people who live by faith alone.

Fourth, there is “grace alone.” Grace means there is nothing meritorious in us that makes God choose us rather than another. As Paul writes in Ephesians 1:4, God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. So, we were chosen before we could do anything meritorious. In Ephesians 2:3, he writes that by nature we are all children of wrath. We are a people who live by grace alone.

Fifth, there is “glory to God alone.” We think again of what Paul writes in Ephesians 1 about God sovereign electing grace. We read in verse 6 that he did this “to the praise of his glorious grace.” In verse 14, we read how our salvation is “to the praise of his glory.” God is to be glorified and praised for saving sinners, the means by which he does it, and the way it bears fruit in the lives of his children. All glory is due to him alone throughout eternity (c.f. also CD III/IV 17; V 15)

Five talking points

So, next time someone asks what it means to be a Reformed Christian, think of these five “alones” as five talking points. Don’t just rattle them off and expect instant understanding. You can’t communicate the gospel in the length of a tweet. Just start with the first and see where it goes and pray that the Holy Spirit will use your words to work in the heart of the one you are speaking to. After all, when you speak about the five “alones” as a thankful child of God, you don’t do it alone. ☺



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A Pharisee, a Tax Collector and Martin Luther

“But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’” (LUKE 18:13)


On one occasion, Jesus told a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector who went to the temple to pray (Luke 18:9-14). He addressed the parable to some who trusted in themselves as righteous and treated others with contempt. As the church commemorates the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation, it is interesting to think about which of the two people praying was most similar to Martin Luther before he came to understand the gospel message.

As we remember the stories of Luther’s anguish and his practice of inflicting pain upon himself as punishment for his sins, it appears that he is most similar to the tax collector in Jesus’s parable. Luther felt far away from the holy God; he was afraid of holy God’s righteousness; he beat himself, and he longed for God’s mercy. However, the comparison between Luther before his awakening and the tax collector in Jesus’s parable fails, because Luther’s anguish over sin was not accompanied by a hopeless view of his own potential. Luther didn’t throw up his hands and give up, but he kept on trying, because he was convinced that he should be able to be righteous enough.

Like the Pharisee, Luther believed that his avoidance of extortion, injustice, adultery, and greed, together with his faithfulness in fasting and tithing, earned him merit before God and were necessary for his salvation. Although Luther was not satisfied with the level of piety he had achieved because he knew it was not yet enough to satisfy God’s justice, he still believed that someday and in some way he too could reach the righteousness the Pharisee in Jesus’s parable was boasting about. He wanted God’s mercy but believed that he had to prove himself worthy of receiving it first. He felt certain that he should be able to do enough to satisfy God’s justice, but his confidence only brought him more despair.

Before he came to understand the gospel, Luther was like the tax collector in his anguish over how his sins offended God, and he was like the Pharisee in thinking that his works could earn him God’s favour. When we find ourselves in a similar situation, loving righteousness but recognizing that even our best works

in this life are stained with sin and deserving of God’s wrath, we can only follow Luther in his great awakening when we understand what distinguished the Pharisee from the tax collector in Jesus’s parable. Whereas the Pharisee believed that God should hear him because of his good works, the tax collector pleaded for mercy because he understood that he had nothing to offer to God. The Pharisee put his trust in his own good works, but the tax collector put his trust in God’s grace.

The gospel message that our Lord Jesus announced is that the tax collector went home justified. Although the tax collector was only a character in Jesus’s parable, the message for the church is clear: we are justified by faith apart from works of the law, out of mere grace. The Pharisee, the tax collector, and Martin Luther were unable to earn their salvation by their works. “For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (cf. Rom 3:21-28). Do you receive Christ’s atoning blood by faith? 

Further reading

Romans 1:16-18; 3:21-26; Philippians 3:1-11

Questions for further study

1. Why is it comforting to know that our salvation is not dependent on being able to be more pious than we are today?
2. What motivates us to keep pursuing holiness in our lives?
3. Why is the doctrine of God’s grace often resisted by people who make great sacrifices to live godly lives?



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Enlightened by the Word

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We live in a country that is underpinned by secularism. Sometimes we get the sense that secularism is a neutral position. The thought is that if you subtract all the elements of Christianity, you end up with the rational middle-ground called secularism. This implies that Christians can meet their neighbours in the ideology of that middle-ground. The reality is, however, the idea that secularism is neutral is false. In fact, secularism is a worldview, and there is no such thing as a neutral worldview. In this article we will explore the broad historical contours that contributed to the rise of secularity. We will also see why secularity is impossible to live out. Finally, since secular ideas are not neutral, we will consider by what measure Christians should assess them.

Historical development

It might be hard to imagine, but scholars argue that the seeds of secularism began with the Reformation. This is not a slight against the Reformation. Indeed, God's providential hand in history is mysterious, for who can trace his plans (Rom 11:33)? Still, a little reflection will show how the Reformation may have sown the seeds of secularism.

The medieval church generally had a mystical view of the world. Medieval theologians taught that God upheld every aspect of creation by his continual conservation. There was a connection between God's sustaining power and nature. At the same time, the church was governed by a hierarchical system that had become corrupt. Religious devotion was reserved for the monks and priests, while the laity longed for a more personal devotion. Also, church leaders used their power to extract labour and money from the peasants through landownership and indulgences. Eventually, a monk named Martin Luther wrote a biblical critique against indulgences and nailed it to the Wittenberg church door. The event caused a firestorm and formal "protest" against the Roman Catholic Church. The Western church split in two, now comprised of Roman Catholics and Protestants.

Religious fighting

To understand the cultural and political significance of the Reformation, it helps to go back in time. After the fall of Rome in the fifth century, the Christian church became the carrier of culture in the West. It became so influential that by the time Charlemagne was made the Emperor of Rome in 800, it was



Festival of Reason at Notre Dame de Paris – Illustration from the 19th century.

People looked for meaning in new places.

Pope Leo II who endorsed the occasion by placing the crown on Charlemagne's head. For centuries, the Roman Catholic Church was the most powerful entity in the West. The church governed countries, owned land, and extracted taxes.

The breadth of the Roman Church's influence could only be matched by the ramifications that followed its split. For the century and a half after the Reformation, Europe would undergo an overhaul of politics, territory, religion, and theology. This period marks a flurry of fruitful theological work from the hands of Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, John Calvin, and Guido de Brès. The notion of justification by faith in Jesus Christ was brought back to the centre stage of Christian thought and remains a hallmark of the Reformation.

At the same time, the Thirty Years' War between the Catholics and Protestants resulted in approximately four to twelve million deaths. Of course, both groups claimed to be the true church,

and both claimed divine authority. This led to a skepticism concerning knowledge. If both groups relied on Scripture and divine authority to make their case, how could anyone know which church was right? At the same time, scientists like Isaac Newton made startling discoveries concerning the laws of nature. For the first time in history scientists perceived that the laws of nature, such as gravity, were the same on earth as they were in space. This led to the idea that the universe is mechanical. Maybe God set up the laws and let the universe run like a clock? The religious wars, growing skepticism, along with popular interpretations of science had sown the seeds of secularity.

Enlightenment

The seeds had been sown, and thinkers spent the next 150 years watering them with the ideas of the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers pushed aside the notion of a personal

Secularism is the thesis that there should be a separation of church and state, and all religious beliefs should be treated with equal weight

God who is concerned with the affairs of man (an affront to Scripture!) and taught that human reason was the arbiter of all truth. If only humans would put every issue under the scope of “reason,” whether religious, moral, or economic, they would find a universal solution. In other words, reason alone could lead to harmony, not the religious fighting over doctrines of justification, the trinity, or the authority of Scripture.

Added to the notion that reason could arbitrate every disagreement was an increasing awareness of the success of the scientific enterprise. While human opinion, uninformed by reason, seemed to shift with the tide, the laws of physics were fixed and agreeable to all. For devoted Christian scientists, the discoveries of physical science increased their awe and reverence for the God who designed the universe with such intricate care, and who gave humans the faculties to comprehend it. For Enlightenment thinkers, the discoveries of science were fuel for the fire, and another reason to idolize reason.

The Enlightenment period marks a time of academic commotion, especially in Germany, France, and England. Oftentimes the academic activity is aimed at unmooring itself from the influence of long held tenets of Christianity. Scholars generally agree that the period came to a head with the French Revolution, when revolutionaries beheaded King Louis XVI and his wife, Queen Marie Antoinette. The revolutionaries went on to execute nearly 16,000 people, including clergy, and erected an idol to “reason” in Notre Dame Cathedral.

Romanticism and the twentieth century

The Western worldview had shifted dramatically. Before the Reformation, God ruled nature, the church ruled the land, and knowledge was sure. Now, nature ruled itself, the church was being stripped of state power, and things could only be known after careful examination through reason. The French Revolution startled many, and some thinkers looked back, longing for what might have been lost through the cold rational mind of the enlightenment. At the same time, there was a sort of chasm between the medieval view and the new modern

outlook. People looked for meaning in new places. They looked to nature, painting, sculpture, and music. The world is sublime, the Romantics thought, and ought to be experienced.

Eventually Enlightenment rationality and the sensuality of Romanticism would be synthesized in thinkers like Schleiermacher and Hegel. Schleiermacher emphasized human experience. Human experience is the measure of all things, including Scripture. Hegel emphasized rationality. Reason unfolds over time, so there is always a thesis, an antithesis, and a synthesis. These were the theologians who set the course for the next century. Eventually thinkers like Feuerbach, Sigmund Freud, and Karl Marx would reinterpret Schleiermacher and Hegel along atheistic lines.

In all of this, German academics became the gold standard of philosophy and theology. Rationalism became ubiquitous all over the West but was especially concentrated in Germany. Unfortunately, the house of cards was built on a lie because, although God’s creation is good, human reason is corrupted by sin and cannot be the arbiter of truth. Human reason needs to be informed by Scripture, and renewal by the Holy Spirit. Plus, true wisdom is the fear of God, not philosophical or scientific sophistication. Still, rationalism held sway through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. Finally, in 1945, things came to a head when the first images of the Holocaust death camps displayed the result of the most advanced thinking people in the world, and the hope of the Enlightenment project was shattered for good. After the Holocaust, thinkers move from an enlightened (modern) to a postmodern perspective.

Secularism

What does all this history have to do with secularism? Secularism is the thesis that there should be a separation of church and state, and that all religious beliefs should be treated with equal weight. Supposedly, this is a neutral position. One could argue that the whole enterprise of the Enlightenment onwards has been to shed the West of her religious “baggage” in search of this so-called “neutral ground.” The success of science was

promoted as the proof that such an enterprise was possible, and the religious wars, at least in part, motivated the search. Still, the Second World War, and especially the Holocaust, showed that there is no neutral ground. But why? Why did the Enlightenment fail? Why is it that there is no neutral ground?

The fact is, humans are fallible subjects, which means that our knowledge can only grasp so much of reality. We are created beings and only God knows all things with certainty. Further, humans are not robots, but are created with certain passions and desires that make each of us unique. These passions and desires affect how we interpret reality so that each of us might emphasize things differently. Added to this, we know from Scripture that humans are corrupted by sin. This means that our rational faculties do not always work properly. In fact, oftentimes our minds are driven by sinful desires such as pride, greed, and earthly ambition. God designed us to love him above all else, and our neighbour as ourselves. Instead, we often conspire against our neighbour, gossip, ignore God, and get lost in self-absorption. Of course, none of this means there is no objective truth to know. But it does mean that without special assistance from God in the form of the Holy Spirit and Scripture, we will not only fail to love God and our neighbour, but we are prone to harm them instead.

In other words, secularism is not neutral because humans are not neutral. And not only are we not neutral, but we are bent toward destruction. The definition of secularism actually displays its own folly. Most definitions of secularism have to do with separation of church and state with a view to upholding all religions. Of course, this won't work because not all religions agree, so who arbitrates between them? If a religion suggests we should banish all the Hindus for being Hindu, should we follow through on this? What parameter should the state use to decide such matters? If they don't rely on religious ideology, they rely on non-religious ideology, but either way, their decision is rooted in some ideology. Further, if the state was interested in including all religions, why shouldn't they take advice from the Christian religion when it comes to sexual education and abortion? We shouldn't let the definition fool us. Secularism is a worldview like any other, with biases and emphases that are shaped by cultural currents and corrupted by sin.

Prayer and Scripture

Even though the Enlightenment project is seen by many scholars as a failure, the luminaries of the Enlightenment loom large, and their ideas have infiltrated deep into Western thought. The notion that humans can achieve neutral knowledge, especially through scientific investigation, is widespread. This means that when secular culture draws conclusions about sexual ethics and abortion, such advocates often think they judge these matters as neutral bystanders. Even so, secular views are not neutral but are motivated by a worldview that is unhinged from Scripture.

Of course, this does not imply that everything your secular neighbour claims is false. Theologians like John Calvin taught that God illumines all humans on some level by his undeserved goodness to all. Still, since God specially communicates his will to us through Scripture, Scripture refines our otherwise distorted worldview so that we begin to see rightly. Perceiving reality according to God's will is not natural to human reason. Rather, Scripture teaches that if we repent from our sin, and place our faith in Jesus Christ, we will be recreated by the Holy Spirit with renewed hearts and minds. Then, with renewed hearts and minds, we rely on the instruction of Scripture and the Holy Spirit, to continually inform our worldview.

Conclusion

We have seen that although secularism claims to be neutral, it is anything but. Secularism is a worldview, and no worldview is neutral. By rejecting Christianity as the foundational worldview, secularism relies on human reason to chart its course. This means Christians should be cautious when secular people claim neutrality. As Christians we should commit to prayer and Bible reading, asking God to illumine our hearts and minds in the true wisdom and knowledge of Christ. By doing this we will grow in our love for God, and love for our secular neighbour, but without compromising God's purity. ☪



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Governing the Church

The Church Order—a Voluntary Agreement

JAN DEGELDER

Editors' introduction: Every church and every federation (or affiliation) of churches has rules and a governing structure, including Reformed churches like ours. But how is our church governed? What are the rules and where did they come from? And how do our rules compare with how the Lord Jesus wants his church to be governed? To help answer these questions and more, *Clarion* has invited Rev. Jan DeGelder to undertake a series of articles explaining the basics of Reformed church government as we have it in our Canadian Reformed Church Order, an order that is based carefully on the historic Church Order of Dort (1619). Rev. DeGelder is well-qualified to help us in this as church polity (government) has been a long-time interest of his and he has often lectured on this subject at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary.

For most students who enter the Theological Seminary, church polity is not at the top of the list of topics they look forward to learning about. Perhaps they think of exegesis as where they'll learn the art of explaining the Bible. Or maybe they are keen on dogmatics where they'll delve deep into the content of what we believe. Great stuff! But church polity? Studying the way the church is governed? Sure, it's part of the program, but what is so exciting about all the regulations in the church?

Some people may go a step further even. Perhaps in a conversation you've heard someone ask: "Do we need a church order?" Some even buy into the myth that once upon a time a general synod put together this book with rules and restrictions to impose on us how to run our churches. They feel it isn't right that some synod is telling our local church what to do.

Spiritual or formal?

Others may go further with their objections. They say that the church is spiritual. It's the body of Christ. It's the work of the Holy Spirit. Church polity on the other hand has to do with structures and the use of adopted forms. To them that seems like such a

contrast. Are those actually compatible—the work of God's Holy Spirit and our rules and regulations? Are we not putting out the fire of the Holy Spirit by having a book of rules and procedures?

To begin with, it is of course true that the church is spiritual in nature. With our rules we will never be able to box in the work of God the Holy Spirit. But that's not the point of church polity and that's not the end of the story either. By his Spirit and Word, Jesus Christ gathers people in his church (HC, Q/A 54). Certainly they are an assembly of believers (BC, Art. 27), but they are just people. And wherever people get together to do things, they need to make proper arrangements to make it work. What that implies for the church is carefully worded in Article 32 of the Belgic Confession: "We believe that, although it is useful and good for those who govern the church to establish a certain order to maintain the body of the church, they must at all times watch that they do not deviate from what Christ, our only Master, has commanded."

So, yes: an assembly of believers is still an assembly of sinners. And therefore: "Those who govern the church must at all times watch that they do not deviate from what Christ has commanded." Christ is the Head of the church, which means that

Are we not putting out the fire of the Holy Spirit by having a book of rules and procedures?

his Word, his authority, has the final say at all times. But on that strict spiritual condition, we also confess in Article 32 that “it is useful and good for those who govern the church to establish a certain order to maintain the body of the church” and that “we accept what is proper to preserve and promote harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God.”

The question is, of course: what is the best way to make that work both locally and as a federation? What does that look like and what does that mean for how we look at our church order and how we practice church polity?¹

Playing soccer

It is actually pretty simple. Practicing church polity is a bit like playing soccer.² What you need first is a ball, a field, a bunch of players, and multiple teams. Those things are indispensable. But then, in order to play games where all players know what to expect, games that don’t become chaotic and are fun to play and watch, everyone needs to agree on some rules. Things like: how wide should the goal be? What to do when the ball goes over the sideline, or crosses the goal-line? Can you use your hand, or your elbow? You get the point.

Are those rules important? Of course they are. To quote the Belgic Confession, they “preserve and promote harmony and unity” on the field (Art 32). Without such rules the game would turn into a mess pretty quickly. But can those rules be changed? Yes, they can. They were initially adopted by agreement of all the participants. In the same way, when all parties agree, many of those rules can be changed. As a matter of fact, over the last century or so several soccer rules have been adjusted. It was generally accepted that those were improvements.

However, two things are not possible: An individual player cannot change the rules on his own. And one single team cannot change the rules either. To play soccer all players and all teams need to be able to trust that everyone plays by the same rules. Now, what if you really dislike some rules and you have tried to get those changed, but that was not successful—then what? Remember: You don’t have to play in this league. No one forces


you to play according to these rules. If you would rather do it differently, you’re free to leave and go play somewhere else.

The “rules of the game”

The character of our Church Order is like the basic rule book for soccer: these are the regulations voluntarily agreed upon by all participants. These are “the rules of the game,” so to speak. All the churches willingly and knowingly adopted this document when they voluntarily joined the federation. This means that “abiding by the Church Order” is not a matter of obeying the rules just because of some distant synodical authority. Rather, keeping the Church Order is simply a matter of keeping your word, of being a reliable partner to your sister churches.

And just as with soccer, some things are indispensable, like our unity of faith, based on our submission to God’s Word and expressed in our creeds and confessions. At the same time, many of the things we have agreed upon in the Church Order can be changed. However, the character of this voluntary agreement means that you make such changes together in careful consultation with the other churches and with mutual agreement (see CO, Art 76).

But one thing is not possible: individual churches cannot change the rules on their own. Nor can any church declare that some rules do not apply to them, or simply act as if that’s the case. Promises are promises. There is much at stake here: can we trust each other as churches to loyally honour our word?

The next question we want to consider is: why is our Church Order put together the way it is? How do these arrangements reflect the purpose, the goal of this document? 



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¹ For a broader introduction see Jan DeGelder, “Church Polity . . . Does It Matter?” *Clarion* (Vol. 68, No. 09 & 10).

² The picture is from Dr. H. J. Selderhuis, professor of ecclesiology at the Theological University of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Apeldoorn, the Netherlands

Formatting Synodical Decisions: Observations, Considerations, Decision

JOHN LUDWIG

Introduction

General Synod Guelph 2022 adopted a new way of formatting synodical decisions—a bold move seeing that for the last fifty-four years synods have been using a tried-and-true method of responding to letters, appeals, reports, and overtures (proposals). As churches work their way through the acts of the most recent general synod, time will tell if the “new” format is a better one. The digital copy of the Acts of GS 2022 is 181 pages in length. By comparison, the printed copy of the Acts of GS Edmonton 2019 is 274 pages long. So, if anything, the new method results in decisions being written in a more concise way. But is something, perhaps, lost in the brevity? Elsewhere in this issue of *Clarion*, you can read what Dr. R. C. Janssen has written about the new format. My purpose here is to lay out a weakness and strength of the traditional format.

Basic structure

If you leaf through the acts of previous synods, you’ll see that decisions were written up in the following way: “Materials–Admissibility–Observations–Considerations–Recommendation(s).” Under the heading “Materials,” all the letters of churches that reacted to an overture or a report would be listed. Under “Admissibility,” the synod decides whether the submission(s) is legitimately on the table, whether it may deal with it or not. An appeal, for example, might be declared inadmissible if it were received by the convening church after the deadline. An overture would be declared inadmissible if it did not follow the ecclesiastical route: church–classis–regional synod–general synod. Under “Observations,” the synod takes note, in summary fashion, of different arguments or points brought forward in the letters of various churches. Those

who raised the same points are grouped together. Under “Considerations,” the synod reacts to the observations; it weighs whether or not they are pertinent to the matter at hand. And finally, under “Recommendations,” the synod decides to uphold an appeal or deny it, to accept the recommendations in a report (with modifications, additions, or deletions) or reject them, to implement an overture or not.

An example

If you look up Article 172 of the Acts of GS Carman 2013, you’ll find a decision regarding the revision of hymn tunes in the *Book of Praise*. “Materials” include: the Report from the Standing Committee for the Publication of the *Book of Praise* (SCBP), and a list of seventeen churches who sent letters to general synod interacting with the report. There is no separate part on “Admissibility,” most likely because it was a report from a synodically-appointed committee which all the churches had ample time to study. The “Observations” are extensive, summarizing the work of the SCBP, as well as meticulously cataloguing what the churches had to say about the suggested changes to specific hymns. Some wished to reinstate breath marks in various hymns (37, 40, 41); one church proposed to alter the melody of Hymn 82, line 5; still another recommended bringing Hymn 29 in line with the blue Psalter-Hymnal, which makes it more singable, and so on. In the “Considerations” Synod interacted with each one of those observations, judging whether they had merit, and if they should be upheld and implemented. The thirty-four considerations correspond to and “answer” the thirty-four observations. Then follow the “Recommendations” (and again there are thirty-four of them), in which Synod decided to direct the SCBP to incorporate specific instructions with respect to the hymns under discussion, namely, to adopt what the SCBP proposed or to adopt what a church proposed.


A weakness

One weakness of the “old” system is that synodical decisions tend to be lengthy and repetitive. Using Article 172 as an example, you need to wade through six and a half pages before you get to the actual decision. In our day and age of digesting only small bytes of information, that can be a challenge.

A strength

One of the strengths of this format is that churches can see that the members of synod interacted with their letter. They may not like or agree with the judgment of the synod, but with the observations laying out the “facts,” and the considerations laying out the “arguments,” the churches can see more easily the reasoning for a decision. This serves to quell misunderstandings, but it also aids those who may wish to appeal. They can clearly address whether the synod (a) misunderstood the facts, or (b) reasoned in an erroneous fashion. For the members of a synod, this method makes it difficult for them to overlook a church’s contribution. It forces them to be very precise in collating, recording, and dealing with each and every submission.

Conclusion

Each synod is free to adopt what format it would like to use. It’s not a matter of one being right and the other wrong. Both are viable ways of dealing with what the churches place on the agenda of the broadest assembly. Perhaps the traditional way of structuring decisions tends to be more comprehensive and thorough, and therefore warrants the attention of future synods. 



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Formatting Synodical Decisions: Decisions With Grounds

KARLO JANSSEN

Back in 2012, Regional Synod West overtured General Synod Carman 2013 to change the format of reporting synod decisions to “Materials–Decision–Ground(s).” RSW 2012 noted that such a change had been made in sister churches in the Netherlands in 1983 and in Australia in 1985, tweaked in 1994. GS 2013 was not convinced of a need for change and decided not to accede to the request.

GS Guelph 2022 was also asked to consider the matter. Now, GS 2013 considered: “The current Guidelines for Synod have no stipulations regarding formatting of synodical decisions. It should be left in the freedom of each Synod to determine how its decisions should be recorded” (GS 2013 Art. 25 Cons. 3.5). Thus, GS 2022 dealt with the matter on the basis of a motion from two members of Synod. As the format of the Acts of GS 2022 testify, the motion was adopted.

Why the change?

Status of an article

The old approach is: “Materials–Observations–Considerations–Recommendations.” The final word of the article will indicate whether the recommendations were “adopted” or “defeated.” The Guidelines of General Synod stipulate that the acts shall contain “all motions whether carried or defeated.” As a result, a reader of acts prior to GS 2022 should actually first consult

the *end* of an article to determine whether what he is reading was decided or rejected.

The new approach indicates up front whether something was decided or rejected.

Accuracy and clarity

In the old approach, the section “Observations” describes the materials submitted. For the sake of the length of the acts, such observations become a summary. Because the process of summarizing is always subjective, it draws into question the accuracy of the observations. In summarizing, an argument may be misrepresented. Further, matters considered vital by some are ignored by others.

Synods are aware of this flaw. Some, rather than summarize reports, simply state that the report serves as observations (e.g., GS 2007 Art. 80 Obs. 3.1). If one can do that with reports to synod, one could do that with all submissions to synod and there is no need for “Observations.”

One may counter: those reports are readily available while submissions by churches are not. However, all submissions to synods are digitized and, at least since GS 2016, have been archived both in hard copy and digitally. Not only reports to synods but also submissions to synods can be made readily available.

Now, omitting the observations from the acts should not mean that the new approach no longer requires an assembly to consider all the arguments presented. It behooves an advisory committee still to go through the process of summing up all the materials presented to synod. That process will be speedier, as it is not necessary for the advisory committee to make it look “pretty.”

With kitchen work left in the kitchen, the acts are more accurate and clearer.

Observation or consideration?

Another concern with the old approach is that observations and considerations are easily confused. “Observations” often contain synod judgments, which belong in “Considerations.” “Considerations” may at times reference matters omitted from the “Observations.” Finally, adopted recommendations at times imply that the synods agrees with the “Observations,” while the “Considerations” do not indicate this. This reality can create problems for those wishing to appeal a synod decision.

Confusion

Another concern with the old approach is that “Considerations” both respond to the “Observations” and serve to provide grounds for the “Recommendations” and the ultimate decision. As the section on “Observations” tend to be lengthy, it becomes difficult to discern how “Considerations” related to the “Recommendations.” For example, GS 2019 Art. 142 has ten pages of “Observations” and less than two pages of “Considerations.” When “Considerations” focus on reacting to “Observations,” the connection to “Recommendations” is not clear. It even happens that an adopted recommendation has no supporting consideration. It also happens that a consideration does not lead to a recommendation.

The format “Decisions–Grounds” forces a synod to be precise in supporting its decisions.

Grounds

The new approach has the acts simply state everything that the synod itself has stated. Arguments brought to its attention and considered relevant or convincing by synod will be found in the grounds. Arguments brought to synod’s attention

but considered not convincing ought also to be listed in the grounds, including reasoning why the counterargument was not considered convincing. Done properly, nothing would be overlooked.

Overlooked?

In 2013 a church expressed the concern that with the new format things might slip through the cracks. That concern was expressed in 2022 as well. It is worth noting that our former Dutch sister churches append to each decision a chronological account of how a decision was reached. They also archive all advisory committee documents (we do not).

Worth noting as well is the 2018 decision of our Australian sister churches that a summary of the materials should be presented under “Materials.” This was something GS 2022 began doing at a certain moment. While some pitfalls of “Observations” remain, confusion with “Considerations” is not possible, as it does not exist.

Readability and precision

The motivation for the change was basically to make the acts of synod more readable and more precise. Those who seek the detail of what others said to synod will likely regret the change. However, they are denied nothing. All the materials referenced in a decision found in the public acts of synod should be available to them. Those who seek to know simply what a synod itself said will likely appreciate the change.

In process

Because the motion was made at the start of synod without delegates being truly prepared to consider it, it took GS 2022 a while through a trial process to figure out how best to do things. One can detect a development in the approach from the start of the acts to the end. No doubt reflection upon what was done could see further tweaking.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating thereof. 🍪



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MERF News

Middle East Reformed Fellowship—“Declaring the Whole Counsel of God”

August 2022



Our Sovereign Lord & the Internet

By Danny Gamal (and his colleagues)

Internet-based media is the most influential means of connecting with the majority of people in the world today. It's also one of the most powerful means used by the devil for spreading poisonous falsehoods and destructive immorality. Sadly, this naturally appeals to our fallen human race, increasingly enticed by anti-faith, anti-christ ideologies which seek to deepen human depravity and enmity to the caring Creator.

Sovereign Agenda

Yet, the agenda of our sovereign Lord and Savior, to gather his people from all nations, will never fail. The toxic efforts of the Evil One are turned around to serve Christ's beautiful agenda of giving life to those dead in their sins and trespasses. So, the Lord is powerfully using internet-based media for fruitful gospel proclamation. The message is penetrating lands in a growing number of key languages throughout the earth.

As a member of MERF's Arabic media team, I am thrilled that the Lord has given us this powerful means to spread the gospel. Our role as servants of Christ is to faithfully use all means available to



Hymns in Your Praise

shine the light in our darkened world. Nothing will succeed in hampering the advance of the gospel of truth and grace entrusted to us to share with others.

Today, the forces of darkness in Arab lands are being shattered. The gospel is prevailing against the gates of hell. Its divine power forces them to open up. Individuals and families, throughout the 22 nations of the Arab League and beyond, are enjoying Christ's liberating and saving power.

Gospel Triumph

It is wonderful to hear from people convicted by the Holy Spirit to embrace Christ's triumph over the enslaving darkness

of oppressive and enslaving religions and ideologies. The Lord has blessed MERF's Arabic media ministry team with a distinctively relevant, biblical strategy and approach, as we share the gospel with millions of people.

It's amazing that we receive similar reactions from people of different levels of education and of different social groups. A very common reactions to hearing about Jesus' life, teaching and redemption. They mostly boil down to such expressions -- "This is wonderful" or "I want to learn about Issa (Jesus)."

Winsome Approach

While sharing biblical truth, we tactfully avoid

negative pronouncements against the religious convictions of the Arab majority. So, we are gaining the ears and attention of those who visit our websites and listen to our radio messages, online or over the airwaves. This openness is seen even among those who are known to have fanatical religious convictions.

Diverse programs and episodes connect with different kinds of people. Some indirectly stimulate the interest of those who initially refuse to listen to or read alternative ideas. These are usually attracted to themes that touch on the impact of sin on the conduct of people and on the creation itself. **Radio Dardasha7** focuses on this



indirect approach. It uses a variety of formats and raises contemporary topics, gently introducing the concepts of sin and grace. This includes the use of short quotes of Christ's sayings and the testimonies of heroes of faith.

Other programs take a more direct approach. **Issa-alMasih** website and its Facebook page focus on the person of Christ in Scriptures. Terms and concepts understandable to the Arab majority are used. Words familiar only to the Christian Arab minority are avoided.

Hearts Prepared

We are excited to see that the Lord has prepared many hearts. He blesses our efforts with much fruit among Muslim people. Daily they connect with us and even ask direct questions which indicate serious interest in following Christ. It's amazing that good numbers go as far as seeking guidance regarding crucial decisions about important matters, such as marriage, divorce, settling disagreements and choosing jobs. Often it is about learning to live the Christian life within the contexts of hostile families or communities.

One of our very effective programs on Dardasha7 is called: "Ihki Brahtak" which means *Feel Free to Talk*. Listeners to the online radio messages and visitors to the website are given a private link to send personal requests about problems they face.

SN of Egypt (in her early 20s) wrote: "I am deeply distressed by my fanatical



Dardasha 7 Arabic program - "Feel Free to Talk"

father's attitude towards me. Nothing I do or say is religiously acceptable to him. He wants me covered from the top of my head to my toes and does not allow me any contact outside our home. I do not know what to do..."

YM of Gaza, Palestine (in his mid-30s): "I have lived very faithfully to my religion - praying and fasting without fail. Still my life has often seemed without meaning. I seriously contemplated committing suicide... What you tell us about following Jesus (Issa) makes me feel hopeful... Please help me understand more how to do this..."

Team Work

We are also encouraged that our new YouTube channel is getting a growing number of followers. As a team, we regularly, prayerfully brainstorm together. Not only in regard to responding to Arabic media ministry contacts, but also to listen to one another's observations and insights and seek to improve the quality of our outreach to our fellow Arab Muslim majority.

MERF is thankful for your prayers and partnership in gospel ministry to Arab and Muslim lands.

"If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."

— John 15:19



Dardasha 7 Arabic program - "Microscope" examines Arab youth issues using real life drama

MERF-Canada

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What's Happening at Credo Christian School in the GTA?

EDWARD SLAA

Introductory note: Many people have been asking "What happening to Credo?" What follows is an article to help everyone understand what has been decided and what comes next . . .

Over forty years ago, parents from the Brampton and Toronto Canadian Reformed Churches decided to start a school that reflected the instruction their children were already getting at home and in church. This was a collaboration to pursue harmony between church, home, and school. So, in 1979, Credo Christian School began its important work. It soon became a rather large school and for many years it successfully served its supporting congregations. Credo has certainly seen the wonders of God's faithfulness in the last forty plus years.

As demographics in both congregations changed, the location of the school was no longer ideal. The church of Toronto built a new building in Richmond Hill and people also began to move further north. Eventually geographical distance became an issue because time spent on the bus for the students had become too much. The number of students also declined to about thirty pupils. As a result, the membership decided to sell the school property and, in September of 2021, voted to split

into two separate locations trusting that each school will be better able to grow when they are closer to home.

After so many years working together, this was done with heavy but trusting hearts. The decision to close Credo's doors was with the intention to begin, in its place, two new school locations that would better serve the geographical needs of the families. In the meantime, we are able to continue to use the current building. DV, in September of 2023, one school will become two, in different communities that both have a need and interest for solid biblical teaching. We praise God for this!

At this time both Brampton and Toronto have appointed Steering Committees to work on getting their schools ready for 2023. The current School Board continues to run the school and set things in order for an equitable division of the assets. Our membership has been extended to include members of NAPARC churches. A Promotion Committee will market the new schools to increase student enrollment.



What's next?

1. Each school will need a new location. Both groups are actively working on plans for their next location to continue the education of God's covenant children and in support of their mission and vision. Other venues are being explored but, if necessary, both schools would likely be able to begin in their respective churches, which are spacious and relatively new. They have many rooms and a fellowship hall. Some renovations may be necessary, but a start in these buildings will hopefully be possible.
2. Each school will need teachers. We have current teachers who will choose if they want to work in the Toronto area or the Brampton area. A shared principal is also an option

that is being considered. With the allure of small class sizes, vibrant mission work going on in both churches, and some special incentives, we hope to attract a few more teachers to the GTA!

3. We continue with our work of "educating our covenant children for the purpose of service in Christ's Kingdom in accordance with the Word of God, as summarized in the Reformed Confessions." 🇨🇦



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CLARION KIDS

AMANDA DEBOER

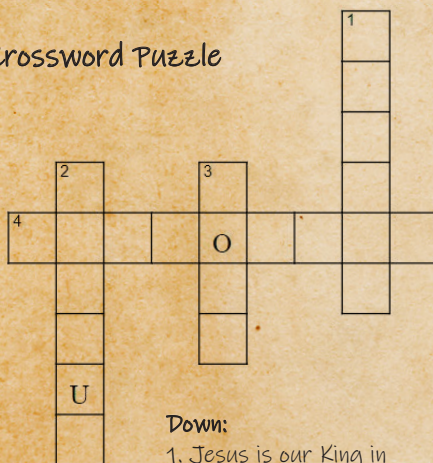
LORD'S DAY 19

Did you wonder something after learning about Christ's ascension in the last *Clarion*? Maybe you wondered how the disciples could be joyful when someone they loved very much just left them. How can we have joy that the Lord Jesus is in heaven? Well, after Jesus ascended, the Holy Spirit was given to all God's people! Do you know another name for the Holy Spirit? The Bible calls him the Comforter. How beautiful! If you are sad or afraid, the Holy Spirit is with you. He will comfort you with the promise of forgiveness. He will give you faith to truly believe that, yes, you are God's child. And knowing that gives you comfort. You may pray for the Spirit's comfort. Another reason for joy is because now Jesus is our King in heaven! He is ruling over the whole world! And he is taking care of us each day.

Fill in the missing letters to learn where Jesus is sitting in heaven (you may use the letter more than once): D, R, T, H

A__ GO__'S __ IG__ __ AN__

Crossword Puzzle



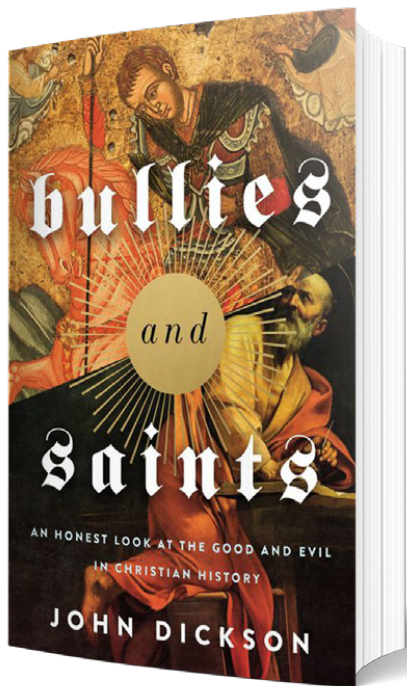
Down:

1. Jesus is our King in _____
2. One feeling we should have when we talk about Christ's ascension
3. The _____ Spirit has been given to us

Across:

4. Another way the Holy Spirit is described in the Bible

BOOK REVIEW



Debunking Myths About Christian History

Bullies and Saints: An Honest Look at the Good and Evil of Christian History, by John Dickson. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021). Paperback. 328 pages. Apprx. \$23.75 CDN.

The young atheist sat across from me in our church's consistory room. One of his friends attended our church and organized for us to meet. The atheist had a list of objections to Christianity and belief in God. Among them: "Religion is behind every war." I was incredulous. I asked him, "What about the Second World War?" He insisted Adolf Hitler was a Christian motivated by the Bible. If I'd had John Dickson's book back then, I'd have given him a copy.


Dickson is a distinguished Australian historian. He's not only an academic, but also an ordained Anglican minister. He's written many books and currently hosts Australia's No. 1 religion podcast.

He describes this book "as an exercise in noticing the 'log' in the eye of the church" (p. 43). It's certainly that, but it's much more. Dickson is honest about the failings of Christians and the Christian church, but he also puts it all into the proper perspective. Moreover, he also debunks many of the popular myths that have developed around the history of Christianity.

Bullies and Saints doesn't waste any time getting into one of the most oft-mentioned examples of "Christian" misbehaviour: the Crusades. Dickson agrees with President Barack Obama's evaluation that, in the Crusades, "people committed terrible deeds in the name of Christ" (p. 22). However, he also points out how the Crusades didn't end by secular critiques, but by those within the church. His chapters on other events like the "Wars of Religion" and the "Troubles in Northern Ireland" are equally insightful.

I must register one disagreement with Dickson. He argues that the Dark Ages probably never existed. Chapter 19 deals with this at length. Dickson maintains that the term "Dark Ages" was prejudicially invented by Renaissance humanists and then

popularized by Enlightenment philosophers and Protestant theologians. He dismisses the legitimacy of its usage by the last category: "The idea of the church gone astray into darkness was an exact parallel to the humanist notion that culture and learning had fallen into darkness in the same period" (p. 216). It's fair to point out that deep intellectual engagement had never really disappeared in said period. I have no problem with that. However, an argument could be made that the medieval period was dark with respect to the true biblical gospel. There were few preaching it and few believing it. Not only that, but the light of the Word of God was dim by virtue of the church keeping it in Latin and out of the hands of believers. One needs to be honest about that too.

I highly recommend *Bullies and Saints* to anyone facing challenges about the alleged damage Christians have done in history. High school history teachers and those studying history in university will find it especially useful. It's an engrossing read that'll equip you to answer sceptical unbelievers learning their history from TikTok videos. And what about Hitler being a Christian? I'll let Dickson answer that preposterous claim: "The occasional attempt to suggest that Adolf Hitler's extermination of millions of Jews was motivated by some form of Christianity faces the impossible task of accounting for Nazism's well-documented hatred of orthodox Christianity" (p. 279). 



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PODCAST REVIEW

Real Christianity

In this segment I would like to draw attention to a podcast entitled *Real Christianity*, hosted by American author Dale Partridge. Available in both audio and video, the show is a weekly podcast hosted by Partridge and often features his wife Veronica as a co-host. The two of them cover many topics important to the life of a Christian such as marriage, family life, devotional habits, education of children, and proper biblical exegesis.

I should note up front that I am covering this particular podcast due to listener feedback and am not as familiar with the history of Dale Partridge and his podcast as I have been with the other podcasts I have reviewed. While I have taken the time to research Partridge and his show, I am open to correction if I have inadvertently missed a key fact or contextual detail. With that in mind, after listening through a selection of *Real Christianity* episodes, I have found that there is a lot of value in the podcast, although there are also things to be wary of.

Positive points

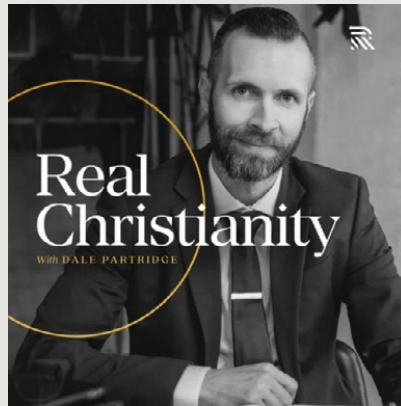
On the positive side, Partridge (and his wife) provide sound biblical advice for many couples and parents, especially for those who are new to the faith or who have not grown up in a church environment with sound doctrine and godly examples of marriage and parenting. They founded a ministry called *Relearn*, which explicitly seeks to meet this doctrine gap by “strengthening biblical and theological literacy in the church” (relearn.org). The majority of the episodes are around the thirty-minute mark and are often part of a series focusing on a specific part of Scripture. In these miniseries, Partridge focuses on important themes for Christians living in today’s culture, such as responding to the challenge of atheism, evolutionary theory, and the confusion around gender roles. In other episodes, he takes a more direct and textual approach, covering topics like salvation, God’s law, love, and forgiveness. Occasionally, Partridge will also interview guests on longer episodes, with the likes of Rebekah Merkle, James White, and Douglas Wilson appearing on the show.

Things to watch for

While there is certainly value to be derived from many episodes of *Real Christianity*, Reformed Christians should also be aware of a few factors when listening to the podcast. Dale Partridge is a Reformed Baptist and is not a classically trained pastor. While his website states that he has “conducted his graduate studies at Western Seminary, The Master’s Seminary, and Grace Bible Theological Seminary” (dalepartridge.com), I can find no proof that he actually graduated. This does not mean that he is incapable of running an edifying podcast (far be it from this writer to claim that), but it is a factor to keep in mind if you discern some questionable theology or exegesis being expressed on the show.

Also relevant is the fact that he has started his own brand of house churches (under the *Relearn* ministry) and runs a “one-year, graduate-level theological school designed to train men to exegete, preach, shepherd, and plant a biblical house church,” despite his lack of formal training or oversight by a larger church (federative) body. While this structure may not directly be a biblical concern, it is a question of wisdom. This model of a start-up church centred around a dynamic pastor has failed many times before (see the Gospel Coalition’s coverage of Mark Driscoll on *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill* podcast), due in part at least to the star power and money that accompanies (temporarily) successful churches that arise in this fashion.

On the whole, this is still a valuable podcast which presses home the overarching theme that Christianity is a 24/7 commitment, not a mere weekly duty on Sunday. A discerning listener, engaged in critical thinking, can certainly be edified and encouraged by many of the episodes of *Real Christianity*. 🗣️



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If you have a podcast you would like reviewed, please send Lucas Holtvlüwer your suggestions at lucasholtvluer@gmail.com. You can listen to *Real Talk* anywhere podcasts are found or by going to realtalkpodcast.ca.

