

Clarion

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Out with the law?

IS ALL SIN EQUAL IN GOD'S SIGHT?

CLARION KIDS

YOU ASKED

The Preaching of the Law

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The strict preaching of the law is an essential component when it comes to living a healthy, vibrant Christian life

I have lost track of just how many times I have preached on the Heidelberg Catechism (or as the purists would want me to put it: “on the Holy Scriptures as summarized in the Catechism”) during my almost forty years in the ministry. Let’s just say that I have covered the same ground again and again.

Be that as it may, I want to share with you something that cropped up recently as I was preparing myself to preach on the subject matter covered in Lord’s Day 47. Specifically, it had to do with Question & Answer 115.

Many of you will be familiar with it. For it goes like this: Question – “If in this life no one can keep the Ten Commandments perfectly, why does God have them preached so strictly?” The answer that follows is this: “First, so that throughout our life we may more and more become aware of our sinful nature, and therefore seek more eagerly the forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ. Second, so that, while praying to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, we may never stop striving to be renewed more and more after God’s image, until after this life we reach the goal of perfection.”

Not a favourite

Now, this is certainly not everyone’s favourite question and answer. As a matter of fact, on more than one occasion over the years I have had parishioners express their displeasure, and sometimes even their disagreement, with it. Admittedly a number of them started out with a built-in bias against the law. Their displeasure increased when the Catechism tied the preaching to it. As well they resented the inclusion of the words “so strictly.” As far as some of them were concerned, Question & Answer 115 is unnecessary and does little else but pour salt into festering wounds.

I disagree. While it may be true that this is not a popular part of the Catechism, I maintain that this is a *necessary* part of the Catechism. The strict preaching of the law is a wholesome thing. Indeed, it is an essential component when it comes to living a healthy, vibrant Christian life.

Now, why do I say that? Even more, how dare I say that? It’s such a counter cultural statement. Who loves the law today? Who identifies with Psalm 119? The current cry is “bring on the gospel, out with the law.”

Nevertheless, a closer look at Answer 115 gives ample reason to resist such a bias. For what this answer teaches us is that the strict preaching of the law produces four benefits in our lives.

Looking inward

First, the strict preaching of the law forces us to look inward. Answer 115 begins, “First, so that throughout our life we may more and more become aware of our sinful nature.”

These are days in which many people spend a considerable time looking inward. They are doing so because they have been told that a lot of hidden treasure lurks on the inside. The optimists tell us that all manner of gifts, abilities, talents, and potential lives within and that these things are just waiting to be discovered and unleashed. Look inside and you will strike gold.

Yet that is not the teaching of the Scriptures, and hence not of the Catechism either. It stresses that what lurks within is not treasure but dross. What lives there is our sinful nature. The Lord Jesus says that our “uncleanness” is not a matter of the outside but of the inside. All sorts of evil and foul stuff comes from our hearts (Mark 7:21).

Is this good news? Of course not! In and of itself it is depressing. And that is what happens to a great many believers who stop here and become pre-occupied with this news. They grow despondent. They feel hopeless. They become fatalistic. They succumb to depression.

Only such is never the intention of the Scriptures nor the Catechism. They do not teach these things in order to drive God's people into a permanent state of sadness. No, they teach this as a precursor and a spring board to much better things. You will never know how great a blessing salvation is if you have never come to grips with your

INSIDE THIS ISSUE...

Our editor, Dr. James Visscher, begins Issue 2 with his editorial, "The Preaching of the Law." The strict preaching of the law can create displeasure or disagreement by some. Yet we confess that the preaching of the law is vitally important. How should we view the preaching of God's law and see just how important it is?

Next we have a second article from Rev. Ryan Kampen, "Is All Sin Equal in God's Sight?"

In news this issue covers the farewell to the Souman family. There are regular columns Treasures New and Old, Clippings on Politics and Religion, Education Matters, *Clarion Kids*, Ray of Sunshine, and You Asked. There is also a letter to the editor, a book review, and two press releases.

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desperate need and your sinful state. The Lord Jesus once wisely remarks that it is not the healthy who need a doctor. It is the sick, and that's us. All people suffer by nature from a sinful nature. All people need help. They need to be told this and they need to acknowledge this. Ignoring one's fallen nature makes one unprepared for salvation. The preaching of the law is meant to address this deficiency.

Looking outward

Yet that is not all that it is meant to do, for Answer 115 points us in another direction as well, and that direction is outward. Take note of these words: "That throughout our life we . . . seek more eagerly the forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ." These things are not found by looking inward. Both forgiveness and righteousness are external qualities. They are qualities that you will only find when you turn to Jesus Christ in faith.

Who has the power to forgive sin? God the Father does, but so does Christ. On more than one occasion in the gospels he is depicted as the Great Forgiver. Consider only that moving episode described in Mark 2 which has to do with the paralyzed man. His friends are determined to get him healed by Jesus. They refuse to take "No!" for an answer. They are persistent, and it would appear that the man they are carrying around with them is equally persistent.

Finally, they find a way to catch the attention of our Lord. With royal authority, he says to the man on the mat, "Son, your sins are forgiven" (v. 5). Forgiveness is ours to seek but his to dispense.

And the same applies to righteousness. Those who believe in Jesus Christ not only long to have their sins for-

given, they also long to have their status changed. They want to see their unrighteousness washed away and they are eager to have a new righteousness take its place. They also know where to find this glorious new

identity. It lies with Christ. "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (Rom 3:22).

Yes, and here the strict preaching of the law pays dividends. It reminds all of us over and over again that the answer to our fallen condition is not to be found only by looking inward. No, we also need to look outward. We need

to look outside of ourselves to Jesus Christ. Only he has the answer and is the answer.

Looking upward

Now, the Catechism could have stopped here, but it goes on to tell us about yet another direction that this law preaching has to include. It needs to remind and teach us to look not just inward and outward, but also upward. This becomes apparent when we take a close look at the next expression, "while praying to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit."

Praying is a vertical matter. A common posture of prayer may be to bow our heads; however, while doing so we need to be thinking up and looking up. Why up? Because help always comes to us from above. Ancient believers used to look to the hills for rescue and relief. Why to the hills? Because beyond them lay Jerusalem, the city of God, and in it was the temple of God, and in that temple was the altar of God. The place of atonement and reconciliation was there.

Since then, however, everything has changed. Jesus Christ has come as the final temple and he has offered that one, perfect, and complete sacrifice for sin. The proof of his successful sacrifice lies in his resurrection and ascension. A less than perfect offering would have produced no victory over death, much less a triumphant procession into heaven (Ps 68).

Today he lives above. He is seated there and he is reigning from there. As a result, our prayers need to be directed there as well. They need to be aimed at him who sits on the throne.

In addition, they need to ask him to be mindful of the needs of us who live below. And what is the best way that he can help us here? It is by filling us with "the grace of the Holy Spirit." Strictly speaking this is not a biblical expression, but it does express a biblical truth most wonderfully. There is such a thing as "the grace of the Holy Spirit." The fact that God should send the Spirit upon his people is all grace. It has nothing to do with merit or desert. It is nothing else than divine, unearned favour.

Yet there is not just "grace" in the giving, there is also "grace" in the gift. What a blessing this gift of that other Counsellor represents! For who regenerates us, renews us, abides in us, supplies us, helps us, and supports us? No one else but the Holy Spirit. He alone is able to fill the shoes of that other Counsellor and thus fill our lives too with grace, mercy, truth, and love.

True law preaching always directs the saints to look inward and outward but also upward to God and to the gifts that only God possesses.

***The fact that God
should send the
Spirit upon his
people is all grace***

Looking onward

Still, this preaching does not stop there either. There is one more thing that it seeks to accomplish and it has everything to do with looking onward. The Catechism echoing the Scriptures says that we should “never stop striving to be renewed more and more after God’s image, until after this life we reach the goal of perfection.” In this connection it is the duty of the preaching of the law to push and prod us onward.

True law preaching will not allow us to rest, to become self-satisfied, to turn complacent, or to coast. No, it will remind us to keep on working out our “salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12). It will encourage us not to give up in our quest for perfection.

It is the duty of the preaching of the law to push and prod us onward

When I preached on this Lord’s Day I reminded my hearers that among other things a believer is in some ways like a golfer. In the game of golf there is no such thing as a perfect game. In that sense it is unlike baseball. For in that

sport if you strike out all twenty seven batters or if you get them out without a hit, you have played the perfect game. That is not possible in golf. Perhaps if you are able to hit eighteen holes in one, you have attained it, but who has ever or can ever achieve that? Perfection in golf is impossible.

Does this mean that people cease to play it? Hardly! Not if I look at how many people are chasing little white balls on all of the golf courses in my neighbourhood. They are filled with striving, They represent a crowd of would be but never arriving perfectionists.

Well, Christians are like that. They strive and they strive. The preaching of the law even urges them to strive. Living a life full of new obedience and daily thankfulness never stops. Listen to Paul: “I press on toward the goal to win the prize. . .” (Phil 3:14).

He presses on and we should press on too, but unlike golf, we will one day reach the goal of perfection. “After this life” it will be reached and realized. Indeed, God will one day crown all of our feeble efforts. Through his Son he will “transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Phil 3:21). One day “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (I Jn 3:2). Perfection is coming. The preaching of the law will help us to get there.

As a result, do not be too quick to ridicule and reject this type of preaching. Of course, if it is legalistic preaching you are right to punt it as far away as you can. But that is not what the Catechism is teaching you here. It is teaching you about a type of preaching that is full of realism (inward), expectation (outward), direction (upward), and hope (onward). Long live such preaching!



An Apostolic Church

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"We proclaim to you. . . so that you may have fellowship with us"

1 John 1:3

This meditation was originally published in this magazine in 2005.

In the opening words of what we call the first letter of John, we hear John say, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you may have fellowship with us." Take note of the way he indicates that the purpose of preaching is "so that you may have fellowship with us." Should the purpose of John's preaching not be that his readers might have fellowship with the Father and the Son? It is true that the Father and the Son soon enter the picture. John continues by writing, "And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." What stands out, however, is the way John puts fellowship with him and the other apostles before fellowship with the Father and the Son.

A reading of this letter in its totality reveals why John expressed himself in this way. His readers were faced with false teachers who promoted what appears as an early form of Gnosticism. They contradicted John's preaching by denying the divinity of Jesus Christ and downplaying the call to love one another. In the process, they drove a wedge between the believers and the apostles, who had preached that Jesus Christ was the Son of God come in our human flesh.

According to John, the apostles form an essential link in the way God grants salvation. They had heard the Lord Jesus preach and teach. They had seen him. They even had been able to touch him. They were the eye and ear


witnesses to the Son of God come in our human flesh. Their unique association with the Lord Jesus put them in a position of being true witnesses to the gospel message. We sometimes use the term "witnessing" to describe evangelizing, but only the apostles were able to witness, as witnessing requires personal experience. In Acts 1:8 we read how the Lord Jesus told his disciples, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

John's words about the importance of the apostles are reinforced by the way Paul writes about the apostles in Ephesians 2. There he describes the New Testament church, made up of Jews and Gentiles. He calls the church "God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. . ." (Eph 2:19, 20). We find this same terminology of the apostles being the foundation of the church in Revelations 21:14, where we read that "The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb."

It becomes clear that we cannot speak about fellowship with the Father and the Son apart from the apostles. They are the link between Christ and the believers throughout the ages. In light of this, we can well understand why the Nicene Creed, when it speaks of the church, speaks of one holy catholic

and apostolic church. The first generation Christians heard the gospel message from the mouths of the apostles. We hear the message from the pens of the apostles as we read God's Word. Lest we think that this makes the Old Testament irrelevant, we should remember that they always explain the gospel message against the background of the Old Testament. Further, when we today read the Old Testament, we always have to do so in light of what the apostles have told us about the Lord Jesus.

It is this awareness of the apostolicity of the church that continues to guide us. It impresses upon us our dependence on the apostolic testimony to Jesus Christ, as found in the Scriptures. We need to hear that apostolic testimony through the preaching of the Word in order to enjoy fellowship with the Father and the Son. We need to place our children under that apostolic testimony if we desire that they learn to know and love the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We can add to this the importance of spending personal time with the apostles through reading the Scriptures. There is also direction with respect to reaching out. To get to know the Lord Jesus and the Father, people need to become thoroughly familiar with the apostolic testimony.

John's words therefore impress upon us that the church is an apostolic church. The more familiar we become with the apostles and grow in fellowship with them, the more we will grow in fellowship with the Father and the Son. 

Is All Sin Equal in God's Sight?

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No one likes discrimination, especially when they are the victim. Yet can it be shown that God himself, in a way, discriminates?

Some say that every sin is the same in the sight of God. “Whether you hate or murder someone, or lust after or sleep with someone, it’s all the same to God. He does not discriminate, or differentiate, between one and the other.” This is said in order to avoid any tone of judgment, and in some cases it’s an attempt to express common ground with an unbeliever: “My sins are as worthy of God’s wrath as yours. So I can’t pass judgment on your sins.”

Is this what the will of God reveals as true? A remark I cited in a previous article remains apt: “A half-truth masquerading as the whole truth becomes a complete untruth.”¹ In conversation we can advance one aspect of the truth over another. And in a case like this, that’s somewhat understandable. After all, God’s Word pulls no punches when it comments on the seriousness of sin: it offends and angers our holy God. Both Paul and James, for example, testify to the gravity of sin. Says Paul, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them” (Gal 3:10). James writes, “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it” (James 2:10). Every sin violates God’s holy law.

But that’s not the whole truth. So we turn to Scripture to see how exactly God views sin in its various forms.

Moses

A place to start is the Law of Moses, at a text that describes two different kinds of sin as well as their corresponding punishments. In Numbers 15:22–31, we find a distinction between sin of weakness² and sin committed with deliberate intent. This latter sin is called a sin “with a high hand.” It is a sin committed in defiant rebellion against God, in contrast to a sin of weakness, committed by a righteous man struggling to live according to the demands of

God. What are the consequences of these two types of sin? A sin of weakness is forgivable through offering (vv. 25–26), but the fallout from a sin with a high hand is a different story. Such a sinner “reviles the LORD, and that person shall be cut off from among his people” (v. 30). Why? He shows a hatred for the word of the LORD (v. 31); hence, the extreme punishment of excommunication.³ Indeed, for such a sin of open rebellion against God, no forgiveness, no offering of atonement is possible.

From this example alone we see that the intent behind a sin was decisive for the extent of the punishment. Not all sins were considered equal, and therefore not all punishments were equal. Beside excommunication was the death penalty, and that for sins like premeditated murder and adultery (Exod 21:12–14; Lev 20:10). For sins less heinous, such as theft, negligence, or disputes, fines or beatings could be punishments of choice (Exod 22:3–7; Deut 25:1–3). Now if all sin were the same, then all punishment ought to be the same. Or at least the LORD ought not to have reserved the word “abomination” for some sins over others!⁴ But indeed, his grace, mercy, and forgiveness could be exhausted; he bears with sin and rebellion only for so long.

Prophets

We see in God’s instructions to some of the prophets an ultimate display of his justice toward defiance. He told Jeremiah no less than three times to stop praying for his people’s forgiveness, because their sins had reached their full measure (7:16; 11:14; 14:11). No amount of sacrifices or prayers, or even the righteousness of Noah, Daniel, or Job, would be enough to deliver God’s people from imminent exile (Ezek 14:14, 20). Their sins were not those of weakness; they had been committing haughty, defiant sins for centuries. As such, there was no room for God to forgive, and so the punishment of exile had to fit the crime of Israel exiling God and his Word from her life.

The Lord Jesus

Typically, we gain (even) greater clarity on any given scriptural motif when we turn the page from the Old to New Testament. When it comes to this question of how God regards sin, however, does the NT data upset conclusions derived from the OT? For what does Christ say in his Sermon on the Mount? Matthew 5:27–28: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” This is a key text used to support equality of all sins.

But what is the Lord really saying? He is not distinguishing between minor and major sins. When he says that to lust is to transgress the seventh commandment, he is not suggesting that it is as sinful as outright adultery. Rather, he is declaring that both actions violate the same commandment. He says this over against the Pharisees who thought that only the deed made a person subject to judgment. The Lord teaches that not just the deed itself but already the intent made someone liable to judgment. He wants to highlight

The Lord teaches that not just the deed itself but already the intent made someone liable to judgment

the depth of God’s law, not the degrees to which it can be broken. Even the slightest violation of God’s law is lawlessness. And that speaks also to the aforementioned remark of James, that “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.” James needs to redress the view that certain laws were non-essential, or “light,” and therefore to break them was alright. So he says, God shows no partiality: the law is a unit, so breaking any one law is considered disobedience and actually a breach of the whole of God’s law.

Later on in the same sermon, Christ considers the sin of unforgiveness a particularly serious sin, since it prevents the sinner from receiving God’s forgiveness (Matt 6:14–15; 18:23–35). Still further in Matthew’s account, Christ sets apart blasphemy of the Holy Spirit as more severe than blasphemy of the Son; indeed, such a sin makes it impossible for a sinner to receive forgiveness (Matt 12:31–32). Sounds something like Numbers 15! God will treat certain sins more harshly than others. Christ says this to his disciples. He says it to the scribes and Pharisees, who “ne-

glected the weightier matters of the law” (Matt 23:23). He even tells it to Pilate. Referring to the high priest Caiaphas, Jesus says, “He who has delivered me over to you has the greater sin” (John 19:11). Thus, in the mind of the Son of God, there are degrees of sin.

And with greater guilt comes greater punishment. Christ said about any Israelite city that refuses to listen to the words of the disciples, “It will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town” (Matt 10:15; see also 11:22). Or consider “that servant who knew his master’s will and did not get ready or act according to his will.” That one “will receive a severe beating,” in contrast to the one who did not know and did things worthy of punishment, but will receive a light beating (Luke 12:47–48). The greater the knowledge, the greater the accountability. God will render to each according to what he has done and known.⁵ That’s only just.

Paul

And this teaching is taken over by his apostles. In Romans 1, Paul speaks of those who “by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” to the point where “God gave them up to a debased mind.” After detailing their various acts of unrighteousness, Paul points to “God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die” (vv. 18, 28–32). Such acts are clearly treated as worse than other sins. Indeed, Paul more often links various sins with the punishment of death or exclusion from God’s kingdom; consider the lists of sins in 1 Corinthians 6:9–10, Galatians 5:19–21, and Revelation 21:8.

Roman Catholic Church

A discussion on degrees of sin would be incomplete without at least a brief glance down the halls of church history. In medieval theology there emerged the distinction between venial and mortal sins, which were officially defined at the very important Roman Catholic council, the Council of Trent (1545–1563). Venial sins are those we commit regularly, yet they do not mean we have lost God’s saving grace. These sins, such as “an idle word, overly boisterous laughter, spontaneously arising desire, outbursts of temper or anger, a very small theft, and so on,” are forgivable, even without confession.⁶ On the other hand, mortal sins are those so serious that they kill the saving grace of the soul (hence, “mortal”). One can think here of idolatry, murder, and adultery. When the faithful of Christ commit these mortal sins they are considered children of wrath, enemies of God. Mortal sin entails the loss of God’s sanctifying

grace, and it severs the bond of love between God and the sinner. Therefore, of these sins confession *must* be made, and that only by the sacrament of penance.

As biblical support for this distinction, Catholic scholars appeal to a text like 1 John 5:16, where the Apostle John presented two categories of sin, “a sin not leading to death” and “sin that leads to death.”

Reformers

It’s a distinction that didn’t wash with the sixteenth century Reformers. John Calvin did not deny that there are degrees of sin; in his *Institutes* (IV.12.3-4) he made a distinction between private and public sins, “mere delinquencies” and “flagrant iniquities,” observing that the New Testament deems some sins more serious than others.⁷ But he said that *all* sin is mortal in the sense that all and any sin deserves death. The smallest sin is an affront to God’s holiness, and so is worthy of death. At the same time, Calvin maintained that no sin is mortal except for the blasphemy of the Spirit, the only unforgivable sin. Thus, he and other Reformers rejected the distinctions Roman Catholics made, but still took the position that some sins are worse than others.

And so it was that also confessional statements of the Reformation followed suit. We can think of the Heidelberg Catechism’s discussion on the third commandment. “Is the blaspheming of God’s name by swearing and cursing such a *grievous sin* that God is angry also with those who do not prevent and forbid it as much as they can? Certainly, for *no sin is greater* or provokes God’s wrath more than the blaspheming of his name” (LD 36, Q&A 100). Or think of the Canons of Dort. In the same chapter, you find an article entitled, “Daily Sins of Weakness” (V.2), and another, “Saints May Fall into Serious Sins.” Our forefathers in the faith were not too timid to broach the matter of degrees of sin, even and especially as it concerns believers.

So what?

Maybe this is then the right moment for us to reflect on why it’s valuable for us to have clarity on the matter. For why bother giving much thought to the whole subject if I’m simply striving to hate sin altogether?

What’s at stake when we say that all sin is equally abominable in God’s sight? If God sees all sin as the same, then so should we. That means there should be no difference between our (and God’s) response to a Mars bar thief and a murderer, to a driver going one kilometre over the speed limit and a rapist. To push the matter even further, consider the characteristic insight of Kevin DeYoung:

Here’s the problem: when every sin is seen as the same, we are less likely to fight any sins at all. Why should I stop sleeping with my girlfriend when there will still be lust in my heart? Why pursue holiness when even one sin in my life means I’m Osama bin Hitler in God’s eyes? Again, it seems humble to act as if no sin is worse than another, but we lose the impetus for striving and the ability to hold each other accountable when we tumble down the slip-n-slide of moral equivalence. All of a sudden the elder

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who battles the temptation to take a second look at the racy section of the Lands’ End catalog shouldn’t dare exercise church discipline on the young man fornicating with reckless abandon. When we can no longer see the different gradations among sin and sinners and sinful nations, we have not succeeded in respecting our own badness; we’ve cheapened God’s goodness. If our own legal system does not treat all infractions in the same way, surely God knows that some sins are more heinous than others. If we can spot the difference, we’ll be especially eager to put to death those sins which are most offensive to God.

DeYoung catches the thrust of the matter: by not acknowledging that some sins are more gross than others, we fail to think God’s thoughts after him, we present his justice in a rather distorted way, we give a false sense of security, and thereby, we dishonour the God of righteousness, integrity, and wisdom. That’s the bottom line.

Profit

That bottom line propels us forward into understanding what is gained by acknowledging degrees of sin. We give greater honour to God, which is job one. His justice demands that the punishment fit the crime, and likewise that the reward (out of grace) fit the good work. Moreover, we come to see more and more like God that all people are sinners, but not all sinners sin to the same degree. Yet as DeYoung implies, we also preserve the holiness of the church by seeking after the repentance and salvation of the sinner, even one who falls into serious sin. It’s this holiness that Jude instructed the leaders of the church to preserve: “And have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by the flesh.”

We refrain from providing anyone with a false sense of security, but look to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15). To confront the neighbour with the weight of his sin is to confront him with the call of his Master to turn to him in faith. Yes, if God discriminates regarding sin, the same becomes our duty as his image-bearers, with humility, in light of what we see of the neighbour.

And oftentimes, that neighbour is the one you and I get to see in the mirror every day. For all who believe, we may be sure that our sins are forgiven, and therefore, this matter of degrees of sin does not threaten our salvation. But what if it calls for self-reflection? God takes our sin very seriously, no matter our standing with him. How earnest are we in hating more and more what God hates, and loving what he loves?

All sin is serious, yet not all sin is equally serious. In effect, all sin is damning, yet not all sin is equally damaging. But from the wreckage of our own sin and misery emerges the Redeemer, the one we so desperately need for every sin we commit. God sent his Son to this fallen, sinful world to ransom sinners. How great his grace, that he forgives all my sins, both great and small! It's my duty and privilege, then, to have the mind of Christ.

¹ J.I. Packer, "Introductory Essay," in *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, by John Owen (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 2.

² See C. Van Dam, "The Meaning of *bishegaga*," in *Unity in Diversity: Studies Presented to Jelle Faber on the Occasion of His Retirement*, edited by Riemer Faber (Hamilton, Ont.: Senate of the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches, 1989), 13–24, for a justification of this translation over sinning "unintentionally."

³ See also Genesis 17:14; Leviticus 17:14.

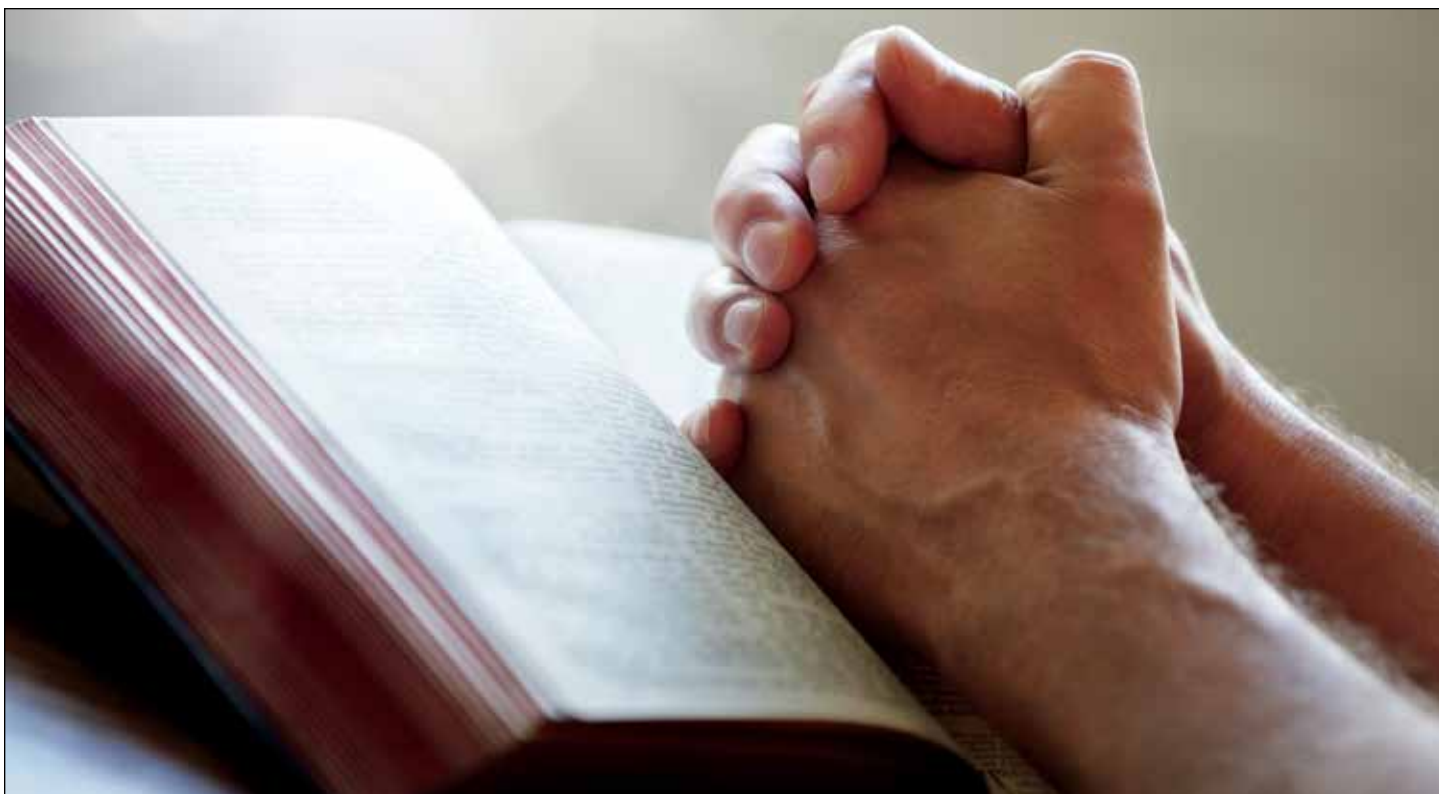
⁴ See, for example, Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Deuteronomy 7:25; 17:1; 22:5; 23:18; Isaiah 41:24.

⁵ See also Job 34:11; Psalm 62:12; Proverbs 24:12; Jeremiah 17:10; Ezekiel 18:30; Lamentations 3:64; 1 Corinthians 3:13–15; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Hebrews 10:28–29; James 3:1.

⁶ Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, and John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 153.

⁷ He cites passages such as Romans 1:28–31; 1 Corinthians 6:9–10; Galatians 5:21–23; Ephesians 5:3–5.

⁸ Kevin DeYoung, *The Hole in our Holiness: Filling the Gap Between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2012), 72.



The United Nations and the Temple Mount

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Since the 1970s the United Nations (UN) has treated Israel as a pariah state, condemned at every turn, even declaring Zionism to be a form of racism. As Joshua Muravchik noted in his survey of UN discrimination against Israel: “To label Zionism a form of racism was to declare Israel inherently illegitimate, regardless of its borders or behavior.” The lack of UN integrity towards Israel is so bad that even its Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon admitted publicly in 2013 that Israel has suffered from bias and even discrimination at the UN. Muravick’s article in the 2013 November/December issue of *World Affairs* gives a compelling historical overview of UN bias against Israel.

More recently the hypocrisy and prejudice of the UN has been exposed in its pronouncements about the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. This is the most holy place for Jews in the world. It is found in the city that David conquered and made his capital. It was the site of Solomon’s temple, destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC. It was also the place where Herod’s temple stood which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. The Temple Mount is central, not only to the history of Old Testament Israel, as well as the modern state of Israel, but it is also integral to the faith of Israel. This was the place of the sacrifices for atonement of sins and reconciliation with God.

Much more recently, Muslims have however also laid religious claim to the Temple Mount. Dennis MacEoin in a recent Gatestone Institute article explains that Muslims today believe that “there is nothing in Jerusalem that belongs to the Jews.” Jerusalem “is seen as one of the holiest cities for Muslims, after Mecca and Medina.” This claim however rests on very dubious historical grounds. The Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount was built in 705, about seventy-three years after Mohammed’s death. Its deteriorated state in the first part of the twentieth century showed that “it was clearly neither cared for nor much valued by the Muslim community.” For centuries, Muslim writers agreed that the site was Jewish. The truth was too obvious to contest.

More recently however Muslims have claimed the opposite. “With enormous effrontery, Sheik Tayseer Rajab Tamimi, the leading religious figure in the Plesinian Authority, stated in 2009: ‘Jerusalem is an Arab and Islamic city and it always has been so.’” He condemned all those who disagreed as “liars” and “accused Israel of distorting the facts and forging history ‘with the aim of erasing the Arab and Islamic character of Jerusalem.’” Such outrageous statements are the consequence of supremacist Islamic thinking that all Israel is Islamic territory. There is to be no sharing of holy sites with the Jews.

Such supremacist thinking has now also been taken over by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). On October 13, 2016, it voted on a resolution which condemned Israeli policies and denied the Jewish connection to the Temple Mount by referring to it only by its Islamic name (Haram al-Sharif). Hamas, a terrorist organization, welcomed UNESCO’s action as “a victory for the Palestinian people” because the Temple Mount was described as “purely of Islamic heritage.” Elliot Friedland correctly noted: “By demanding that UNESCO use only Muslim terminology for the holiest site in the world, erasing the preMuslim history of the site, the Palestinian leadership have shown that they regard the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as one of Muslim domination over Jews and Christians.”

A political storm followed. Jews did not take this lying down. “Tens of thousands of people flocked to the Western wall plaza on Wednesday, October 19, to hear the priestly blessing and to demonstrate against UNESCO’s erasure of Jewish identity.” Furthermore, Israel’s education minister “severed ties with UNESCO in a letter slamming the organization for ignoring ‘thousands of years of Jewish ties to Jerusalem’ and supporting ‘Islamist terror.’”

The optics were so bad for the UN that the Director General of UNESCO felt compelled to criticize the vote of his own organization by stating that “Jerusalem is the

sacred city of the three monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. To deny, conceal or erase any of the Jewish, Christian or Muslim traditions undermines the integrity of the site.”

It is unfortunate but true that, as Friedland wrote: “By supporting the Palestinians in this effort, the powers of the world have shown they are totally unwilling to stand up against Islamist supremacism.” Happily six countries voted against the resolution: Estonia, Germany, Lithuania, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The fact that Canada seems to have absent-

ed itself does not reflect well on our current government. Our country also needs to stand up to Islamic supremacism, at home and abroad.

Sources used include Joshua Muravchik, “The UN and Israel: A History of Discrimination,” *World Affairs*, issue of November/December 2013; Denis MacEoin, “The Temple Mount and UNESCO” Gatestone Institute, August 19, 2016; Elliot Friedland, “Why the UNESCO Vote on the Temple Mount Matters” The Clarion Project, October 23, 2016. All articles are available on the Internet.



Temple Mount



So Long, Farewell, Auf Wiedersehen, Goodbye to the Souman Family

November 13, 2016

Sometimes when a minister accepts a call things move quickly and before you know it the family is gone. In the case of the Souman family and the call to Kelmscott, Australia the congregation of Willoughby had more time to reconcile themselves to the forthcoming loss. After accepting the call in April of 2016 we expected a wait time of nine to twelve months before the finalization of papers. Instead a mere seven months later we assembled as congregation and broader community to bid them farewell.

In his farewell sermon Rev. Souman reminded us that the preacher is not what is important, but the words that are preached. This is certainly true, but that does not mean there is no emotional attachment to the preacher. That the preacher and his family were loved was evident that evening.

Speeches by the Willoughby, Surrey Maranatha, and Langley consistories made it clear that Rev. Souman was a valued member of Classis Pacific West. Rev. Schoof currently of Surrey and formerly a member of Kelmscott helped us all understand the great risk the Soumans were taking in



moving down under. Not only are there many dangerous animals (crocodiles, red back spiders, blue ringed octopus, and more), there are also many members of the Schoof family! A perilous situation indeed!

Representing the congregation of Cloverdale, Kent Dykstra spoke. Having worked with Annette on the school board he ensured that she received honourable mention as well. Her remarkable affinity for suggesting things yet making you think it was your idea has not gone unnoticed and was much appreciated. It seems her influence is already being noticed in Australia before she even arrives: something about a new garden planted and tended by the students in the elementary school. . . .

Contributions by the Young People's, Men's, and Women's Societies made it clear that the whole family had their own special places in our midst. There was a letter written to "Br. Vander Dingo" in Kelmscott letting them know the eccentricities of the ministerial family. The remarkable coincidences that each child is perfectly suited to their biblical



name. For example the eldest son David is a musician with aspirations to national leadership. Hopefully Br. Vander Dingo shares this insight with the entire congregation.

Special mention should be made of Rev. Souman's attempt at time travel. He is supposed to turn fifty this year, coincidentally on November 16 while they are en route to Australia. Somehow they leave Canada on November 15 and arrive in Kelmscott on the 17, completely eluding the momentous November 16 date. Has he discovered the secret to eternal youth? Will he remain forty-nine forever? Will Annette eventually catch up to him? Only those in Australia will know for sure. . . .

Even the hardest of heart could not deny a lump in the throat as the Soumans sang their final farewell, the good bye song from the Sound of Music. The cute younger boys cuckooing from behind their parents, emotion heavy in all their voices. Combine this with the knowledge that they are leaving their two daughters behind makes the farewell all the more poignant.

So long, Soumans, we wish you well. Till we meet again, God be with you.



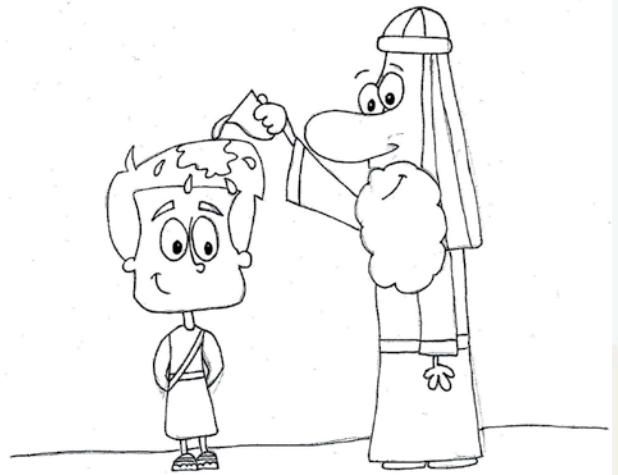
Clarion Kids

David Anointed as King

1 Samuel 16

After Saul had been king of Israel for a while he stopped listening to what God wanted him to do. God sent Samuel to go anoint a new king. He sent him to the house of Jesse in Bethlehem, who had eight sons. God did not want any of the first seven sons of Jesse to be king, even though they were strong and handsome. God chose Jesse's youngest son. His name was David and his job was taking care of his father's sheep. He protected the sheep from wild animals and thieves using a sling and a staff. Samuel anointed David to be the next king of Israel, and God was with David.

Go to www.clarionmagazine.ca to print and colour this picture!



S	L	Z	E	D	Z	K	A	B	T
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N	W	V	U	N	G	T	M	N	I
S	A	Q	G	M	H	H	T	N	O
D	P	G	W	L	A	Q	T	H	N
L	S	A	E	J	E	S	S	E	A
L	A	H	A	K	Q	Q	T	Q	V
U	E	D	R	E	H	P	E	H	S
M	N	V	G	Z	A	N	T	X	A
H	F	I	J	M	F	X	H	E	Z

Find these words!

Anoint	Eight	Samuel
Bethlehem	Jesse	Shepherd
David	King	Sons

Double Puzzle

Unscramble the words. Then use the letters to solve the mystery word!

HHTEEBEML

4

REOTHRSB

2

SELUAM

1

SEJSE

5

DIDVA

6

3

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1	2	3	4	5	6		

by Emily Nijenhuis

Happy Birthday!

Born for a unique purpose you are;
I hope that you will have a wonderful day.
Really glad to have you as a part of my life,
Thankful to GOD for the years HE has given.
Hope and pray that HE will give you many more,
Don't ever forget that you are loved, wished the best.
And today, yes, every day you're given all that you need;
You are fearfully and wonderfully made!



By Connie VanAmerongen

February birthdays

6 TREVOR BUYS will be 37

c/o Anchor Home
361 Thirty Road, Beamsville, ON LOR 1B2

12 CONNIE VANAMERONGEN will 52

c/o Anchor Home
361 Thirty Road, Beamsville, ON LOR 1B2
E-mail: conniev1965@gmail.com

24 FRED LUDWIG will be 65

c/o Beacon Home
653 Broad Street West, Dunnville, ON NIA IT8

Thank you to Connie for writing us a wonderful poem again. You truly do have a talent from the Lord! We hope you have an enjoyable day celebrating your birthday this February. We also congratulate everyone else celebrating a birthday in February! We wish you the Lord's blessing in the year to come.

A NOTE TO PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

If there are any address or other changes that I need to be aware of please let me know as soon as possible.

Rachel Vis

731 Lincoln Street, Wellandport, Ontario LOR 2J0
tom.rachelvis@gmail.com • 905-329-9476



EduSketch

John Jagersma
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Another school year is well under way. Thankfully the Lord has continued to allow our children to have access to faithful, Christian education “from sea to sea.” In this *Edu-sketchn* we’ll take a look at how this education is unfolding in the various schools and provinces with a particular focus on the interplay between government directed action versus local school initiatives.

One area where the juxta-positioning between government and school can be seen is the area of curriculum. In British Columbia a new curriculum is being developed by the Ministry of Education for the high school classes. Drafts of this redesign are available for optional use during this current school year. Alberta has seen a roll out of a new curriculum design plan as well, with six core areas being addressed over the next six years, for kindergarten to grade twelve. Ontario has been in the news over the past couple of years because of the content of their new health curriculum as well. It is increasingly evident that government curriculum is being used to promote a distinct worldview. Words such as “identity,” “diversity,” “inclusion” are vague words that can carry very different meanings depending on who is interpreting the language. As one principal notes, “As the years flow by, one cannot help but sense that the government is increasingly interested in ensuring that children are deliberately shaped as they receive their formal education.”

To balance out, or sometimes counter, the curriculum that is being introduced by government, local schools are working to ensure a distinctly Christian perspective is maintained. A number of schools note in their newsletters that they are working on infusing their curriculum with a distinctly Reformed worldview. This work is ongoing, and as new curriculums emerge it will only grow in importance.

Somewhat aligned to the topic of curriculum is the emphasis on “safe and caring schools.” This would appear to be an area where our schools could closely align with government. After all, as one school’s year theme from 1 Peter 2 notes, “Show proper respect to everyone... The idea of showing respect may be more familiar to students than the

idea of showing honour. Both words have a similar meaning. We must show proper respect to everyone.” However, as one board president notes, “we are seeing more and more pressure to conform to new worldviews of what should be allowed and promoted in schools.”

This contentious issue is particularly evident in Alberta, where the government interprets this perspective very differently from our schools’ perspectives. While all the Alberta schools have submitted Safe and Caring School policies, they are waiting to hear from the Minister of Education whether their interpretation of what it means to be safe and caring is acceptable to the ministry. The acceptance of all lifestyles and sexual orientations and expressions is being emphasized in all the provinces, and will likely be an ongoing area of concern for our schools as they seek to obey the government without compromising their faith.

Another way that our schools are seeking to counter the secular message that is being promoted by government is through an increasingly intentional approach to developing student leadership. One principal, reflecting on a recent conference presentation, noted that “we understand how precious and unique every child is that is entrusted to us. Therefore Christian character is pivotal for Christian education. We are considered partners in the covenant between God and His people, training young believers to be stewards in God’s world, being able to shape professional, practical and societal life.” Other schools have initiated leadership programs in their elementary, junior high, and high school programs. Some of these initiatives select students through applications, others accept all volunteers, while still other schools incorporate the entire student body into the leadership program. A review of school newsletters also shows an increase in political engagement through groups such as “ARPA clubs” and other interactions with levels of government.

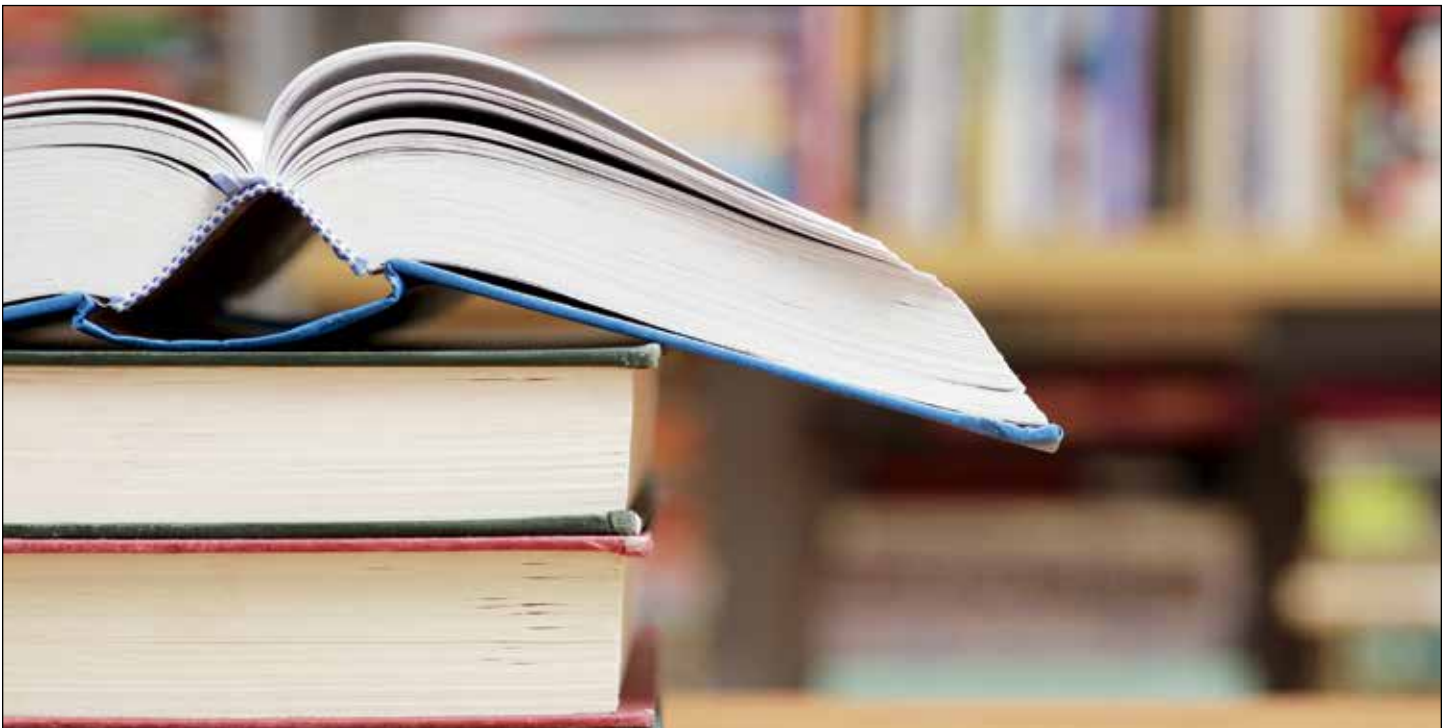
At the recent Canadian Reformed Teachers Association-West convention, a keynote speaker, Mr. P. O’Donnell, put forward the concept that students should be trained to be world-changers. From some of the principal reports

of participating schools, this concept, while not necessarily accepted, was recognized as being an issue schools will need to consider. One principal pondered what it means to be a “world-changer” and what an “ideal” graduate should look like. A more foundational question that was also asked, was whether there was a living unity of purpose among the membership, as to the role of educating covenant children. In an ever changing world, it would appear crucial that school society members work to ensure a clear understanding of the purpose and vision for their schools.

While this cross-Canada scan has focused on broad educational themes that are gaining attention, it is important to note that there are many examples of God’s providence and care for our schools. Schools continue to be able to meet their financial responsibilities. Many of our schools have either recently completed school expansions,

are in the middle of a project, or are having discussions on future plans. These expansion plans also reflect a continued growth in student numbers and membership support. God has provided our schools with the necessary teachers, educational assistants, administration, board members, and volunteers to operate for another year.

I’ll end this *Edu-sketch* with the closing words of a principal’s report that accurately capture a prayer suitable for all those involved in Christian education: “As we take up our respective tasks again this school year, it is my hope and prayer that the Lord bless each of us in our respective roles, and gives to each of us the grace and love that is needed to work cooperatively and joyfully together, educating our children to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for a life of responsible stewardship in God’s kingdom.”



Correction

An old photograph was mistakenly printed in “Guido de Bres Christian High School: Graduation 2016” (Vol 65, No 25, p 651). Our apologies to the graduates for this mix up.

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Q How important is a letter of commendation?

Since the beginning of the Christian church, it was customary to carry a letter of commendation when one moved to the area of another church (Acts 18:27; Rom. 16:1). Even Tetzl (1516) carried such a letter and a century later it was agreed to be incorporated in the Church Order of Dort. Such orderliness appears to be waning these days.

- 1. Members from elsewhere may attend church services, but too often they are not publicly introduced or even acknowledged until many weeks later. Apparently, they do not carry a letter of commendation. Is Article 62 of the Church Order inoperative? Or is a move no longer planned and prepared? Who is slipping, or is this no longer important?*
- 2. Apparently, it is not customary for those from the URC to carry an attestation. However, can the receiving church not request a description of their conduct of life from the previous overseers? Professing faith is one thing, but is it biblical for the conduct-of-life to rely on a self-commendation obtained via an interview? Our office-bearers answer with the comment "to be working on it." But must we wait to see if faith is indeed expressed in deeds and is that causing the delay? Is a lax attitude perhaps becoming a general and acceptable trend or do I worry too much?*

A It is always timely and relevant to alert believers, office bearers, and congregations to certain aspects in church life that could be suffering from laxity, a lackadaisical attitude, or simply slipping in attention. Hence, this question and expression of concern offers a good opportunity to address the importance of a proper handling of attestations. Although there is a variety of scenarios as it pertains to the matter of attestations, it will be beneficial to reiterate the recommended approach and to encourage members and office bearers to deal with this in a responsible and efficient manner. After all, attestations are used for the purpose of a continuous shepherding of the members in Christ's church, of whom no one should be left unattended at any time!

The questioner starts out from the scriptural notion that the use of attestations as letters of commendation is a scriptural and longstanding practice. Attestations are testimonies concerning a member's spiritual health at the time of issuing them. It's a letter from one church to another regarding a member who is leaving one church and seeking to join another church in the federation or sister church. It describes their faithfulness or unfaithfulness in doctrine and conduct. It includes all the details the elders of the new congregation will need to know in order to carry out their task of shepherding the new member(s). It should not "just" be a statement about the member being in good standing (in doctrine and conduct) but also inform the elders regarding the member's involvement, service in office, participation in various activities, church attendance, children's education and attendance in Catechism classes, etc. Hence

our churches should move away from standardized forms with just the basic information to a more extensive testimony which will make the transition conducive for further involvement in the new congregation with gifts and talents for the upbuilding of the communion of saints in it.

From this description of the attestation and the importance of its testimony and function, we can conclude already that for a smooth transition the process of requesting one, issuing it, and submitting it, is very important. A member who knows that a move is imminent should apply for an attestation as soon as feasible. Then in its next meeting the Consistory can determine and adopt the contents of the attestation, inform the congregation, and pass the attestation along with the departing member. This member will then be able to present this attestation to one of the elders of his new congregation in order that he bring it to the next Consistory meeting.

Then it is possible, however, that a few weeks pass by (until the Consistory in the new congregation has met and discussed the attestation), in which the new member(s) attend the services. It would be a matter of welcome and in-

troduction in the meantime to announce the arrival of this member (family), have them stand up in the congregation and recommend that the congregation extend the hand of fellowship to him (them)! This would certainly alleviate the first concern of the questioner (his part 1). And if there is any laxity at any point in this process, let us exhort and encourage each other to greater vigilance and attentiveness!

This can be done in the same way with members who arrive in the congregation from a URC or so. When they request membership it would indeed be a recommended practice that the Consistory requests a similar testimony (c.q. attestation) as is customarily used in our federation. The principle and purpose of the practice of having a testimony about a new member from his former elders remains the same, and in my own experience in this regard the URC Consistory gladly complies with such requests. Actually it would be recommended to have the two consistories inform each other of the process of attestations (issuing and receiving), so to ensure the continuous pastoral care and spiritual shepherding of every member to the utmost of their abilities!

Q How could all the offerings be made by Israel in the OT?

Against the background of Exodus 36–38 (two altars), the different offerings in Leviticus 1–6, and the number of people of Israel as per the census of Numbers 1 and 26, how could all these people do all these offerings?

A Looking at the sheer numbers of people, the literal descriptions of the altars and sacrifices, and the occasions, one would wonder indeed whether there was enough time in a day to do all these offerings. The matter as expressed in this question is a complex one, which as to its related aspects and details could warrant an extensive and complicated answer. Within the parameters of this column, however, I have to restrict myself to the main is-

ssues that are important here (and I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Dr. C. VanDam received for this purpose); that might bring the actual reality and practice to proportions that show how it was feasible.

First, where were the sacrifices and offerings made? Was there but one place, the tabernacle at first and the temple after, or were there more places? As per the special studies of Prof. B. Holwerda (OT Professor at Kampen's Theological Seminary after the the Liberation of 1944, till 1952), when Deuteronomy 12 speaks about "the place which the LORD

your God chooses,” “the place” does not necessarily mean “one place.” Deuteronomy 12 speaks antithetically about “the place where you make your sacrifices,” where you like or where the LORD wants you to do so: you may not do so at the Canaanite hewn stones but at the altar of the LORD in your place. If Israel had to bring all their offerings to one place, then they all, from Dan to Beersheba, would have to travel at least three times a year for the great feasts and at various other occasions to Shiloh/Jerusalem (with their local Levite in tow). This would indeed be impossible, not feasible.

Rather, besides the central sanctuary in Shiloh or Jerusalem there were other places of sacrifices where all offerings could be brought and all worship could be done (cf. Deut 27:4, 5; Josh 8:30; 2 Sam 15:7, 8; 1 Kgs 18:31). Although opinions differ on Holwerda’s position, we may conclude from various occasions described in the OT Scriptures that the official cult was centred at the central sanctuary, yet legitimate worship and altars for sacrifices were found at other sites as well. The priests and Levites in Israel also were not concentrated around the sanctuary but scattered among the tribes in their Levitical cities (Num 35:1-8; Josh 21).

In the second place we note that in *these places*, on “the altar of the LORD” there, the priest offered daily sacrifices for the people, morning and evening (Num 28:3-8; Exod 29:38-42). The Sabbath sacrifice doubled the daily sacrificial materials. Then there were the offerings of the new moon. Further, the major events were celebrated accompanied of prescribed offerings, such as the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Passover), the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), the Feast of First Fruits, the New Year sacrifices, and the Feast of Booths. The Day of Atonement

was celebrated with a holy assembly in the tabernacle/temple (Lev 16). Besides, although there were many sacrifices listed in the Levitical legislation, most of them were *voluntary* sacrifices; that is, *voluntary* acts of worship done in gratitude (cf. NIV Study Bible, p. 150). This voluntary nature is evident from the way each of these sacrifices are introduced in Leviticus 1-6, with a simple “when” or “if” (Lev 1:2; 2:1; 3:1).

Thirdly, the only *mandatory* sacrifices (apart from the three major feasts) for all (private) individuals are the sin and guilt offerings. The sin offering is for “unintentional sin,” or better, it is for the sin of wandering away from the demands of God, a sin which others bring to your attention and you repent of them. This sacrifice was not meant for every unintentional sin (which generally speaking were atoned for by the daily sacrifices and especially on the Day of Atonement!) but for a particular sin in which a person (or ruler, or tribe) had wandered from the norm. The guilt offering is for a specific type of sin which again would only affect a small part of the population. It dealt with making restitution, for instance, for misappropriated property (Lev 5:14-6:7).

Finally, in order to bring the proportions regarding these offerings realistically down to them being feasible and manageable, we could also consider 2 Kings 12:16. This text could infer that money may have been substituted for the physical sacrifice. So instead of an animal, a monetary payment was made which went directly to the priests for their livelihood (cf. Lev 6:24-28; 14:13 – the meat of the sin offering could be claimed by the priest as part of his income). It is possible that those living at a distance from the temple would have made use of this monetary payment, thus greatly diminishing the amount of actual sacrifices on the altar.



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

Ask us a question!

**Please direct questions to Rev. W. denHollander
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John Dickson, *The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission. Promoting the Gospel with More than Our Lips* (Zondervan, 2010)

There are many books about evangelism but this is one of the best ones I have ever read. In our local church, we've had public discussion and group study of this book and it's been a positive encouragement for all of us in our evangelistic task. Dickson is a well-rounded biblical scholar who specializes in mission and apologetics. He holds a reader's attention with ease as he covers a lot of very interesting ground.

The book begins by considering the *ultimate motive for doing mission*. To this end, chapter one contains a most satisfying exposition of Psalm 96. This Psalm expresses the monotheistic faith of Israel and calls all the nations to join in praising the LORD. We do mission out of reverence for the one true and living God. The world, says Dickson, is in the presence of greatness and needs to know it. He paints a picture of Jerusalem as a bustling international city. When worship took place in the temple, the many visitors from nations near and far would hear the invitation of Psalm 96 and others like it to join in praising the true God of the world.

Chapter two takes on the *challenges of religious pluralism* which promotes the notion that all religions are worshipping the same God under different names and with different religious practices. Dickson regards pluralism as a form of intellectual laziness. He states that when you look closely at the various religions of the world, you see vast differences in core beliefs. For example, Hinduism teaches that there are many gods while Buddhism says there is no personal god all while Sikhs say there is only one deity. If there is only one God, there can't be many and if there is no personal God at all, there can't be one or many. One can also consider how Judaism says that the Messiah has not yet come while Christians confess Jesus of Nazareth to be the Messiah. Instead of carefully examining each religion, pluralism assumes they are all really speaking of the same matters. Dickson deals with the topic at a quite sophisticated level but ends by reminding us boldly that "all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens" (Ps 96:5).

In chapter three, the author highlights that being a Christian means following the One who is the "*friend of sinners*." The Lord Jesus became known during his earthly

life for spending time with the wrong crowd. He ate dinner with tax collectors, communicated with prostitutes, and showed grace to those who were living on the edge. Dickson shows that Christ's friendship with sinners gave them a tangible sign of the welcoming grace of God. The Lord did not condone sin but met sinners where they were in order to show them that they, too, could have a welcome with God through the forgiveness of their sins. Dickson also examines passages such as 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 where Paul shows how he follows Christ's example by reaching out to all kinds of people so that "by all possible means I might save some." Dickson ends this chapter by asking: "Is your social life oriented toward the good of others – being with them, befriending them, doing good to them and speaking to them about Christ when opportunity arises? In short, does your life illustrate the friendship with sinners which God keenly desires?" (p. 58)

Chapter four emphasizes *the role of prayer in Christian mission*. Not every believer is called to be a preacher but every single Christian is called to pray for the conversion of sinners. Far from being just a sideline aspect, prayer is a fundamental aspect of mission. Through prayer, we open the way for the blindfolds of unbelief to be lifted and for hearts to be opened to receive the truth. Dickson also shows the importance of praying for mission workers. The Apostle Paul frequently requested prayer for his missionary task (e.g., in Ephesians 6:18-20). In summary, believers are reminded that opening their mouths to God in prayer must precede opening their mouths to their neighbours in witness.

In chapter five, the author takes a close look at Philippians 1:5 where Paul gives thanks to God for the partnership of the Philippians in the gospel. Dickson shows convincingly that Paul's words in 1:5 are about a *financial partnership for the promotion of the gospel* (cf. 4:14-18). This material support for the work of mission is "a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God." Financial supporters are not spectators in the bleachers but players on the pitch. To sum up chapters 4 and 5, Dickson would say that "praying and paying" are, in fact, the most usual ways for most of God's people to promote mission.

In chapters 6 and 7, we find a stimulating discussion about *promoting the gospel through our personal godliness and*

by the organized works of the church. As might be expected, the author begins with Matthew 5:14-16, a passage in which the Lord Jesus calls us to let our light shine before others so that they might see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven. Dickson shows how the charitable works of early Christians were a big factor in the growth of the church. Already at a very early period, believers were actively engaged in the work of relieving poverty, caring for and adopting orphans and abandoned children, visiting prisoners, and so forth. At a somewhat later period, they were taking initiatives like building hospitals. So much did Christian good works affect the pagan world that the emperor Julian feared a stealth take-over by Christians. To counter this possibility, he sent out a panicked letter to all pagan priests, urging them to imitate the social welfare programs of the church. In summary, the general expectation of the Bible is that the transformed lives of Christians will have attractional power – just the sort of thing Psalm 96 would lead us to expect.

If we are called to promote the gospel in word and deed, it follows that we need a clear understanding of the *content of the gospel*. This is what Dickson sets out to provide in chapter eight. Here he capably explores what Jesus meant when he proclaimed the “Kingdom of God.” The author also uses various summary statements of the apostles as starting points for coming to grips with what the gospel really is (e.g. 1 Cor 15:3-5, Rom 1:3-4, 2 Tim 2:8). Unlike many other books about evangelism, Dickson does not reduce the gospel to justification by faith alone or to the forgiveness of sins. Telling the gospel means communicating the mighty works of God including the royal birth of Christ, his miracles, his teaching and his sacrificial death for the sins of God’s people together with his glorious resurrection together and his future return in glory.

In chapter 9, the author demonstrates that *not every believer is called to be an evangelist*. The New Testament makes quite clear that being an “evangelist” was a specific role in the early church. For example, to Timothy the Apostle Paul says, “Do the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim 4:5). Ephesians 4 teaches that our ascended Lord gives varied gifts to his church among which is the office of evangelist. Evangelists have unique gifts including zeal for the Lord plus the ability to relate well to others and to communicate the gospel message in a public setting. Dickson suggests that every congregation be on the lookout for members who display such gifts. He also encourages groups of local churches to band together to call and send out evangelists.

Chapter ten contains a very interesting discussion about *the role of public worship in relation to mission and evangelism*. As we gather together to declare the praises of God, says Dickson, this will have missional effect. Those who

hear the praises of the church are being called to join in the worship of God. Many of the Psalms contain strong exhortations to the Gentiles to join worshipping the Lord and Dickson wants us to realize that these were not just formalities! As he already pointed out in chapter one, there were lots of Gentile visitors to Jerusalem who could not but witness temple worship. As the Lord was praised by his people, these Gentiles would feel the power of the exhortation to join in acknowledging Yahweh as the one true, living and eternal God. Since worship is intended to have evangelistic power, we should do all we can to enhance worship and to be fully engaged in it ourselves. As Dickson says: “If I am not personally inspired by what goes on in my regular worship service, there is little chance I am going to invite friends and family to come and share the experience ... If, however, I am thrilled, challenged, rebuked and uplifted by the prayers, songs, creeds, readings and sermons I hear on a Sunday, there is every chance I will feel confident about mentioning church in conversation and inviting friends to join me there one Sunday” (p. 165).

Chapter 11 deals with what Dickson calls the “*The Apt Reply*” or “*Promoting the Gospel in Daily Conversations*.” Even though not every believer is called to be an evangelist, we are called to speak of our faith as opportunity arises. In this chapter, Dickson gives an encouraging exposition of 1 Peter 3:15, a verse in which the Apostle writes that we should always be prepared to make a defense of the hope that we have in our hearts. What often stops Christians from responding to challenges to their faith is simple fear. For this reason, Peter says in verse 14: “Do not fear what they fear. Do not dread it. The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy.” As Dickson says, when you really know that your Saviour is on the ultimate throne of the universe, fear diminishes!

My review was quite lengthy because I feel this is an important and useful book. Its many strengths include:

- Solid biblical exposition through the book.
- A superbly clear way of writing.
- Interesting historical background sprinkled throughout.
- A healthy mixture of theory and practical application.
- Grounding mission in the life and worship of the local church.
- Showing Christians how they can promote mission through prayer, financial gifts, godly living, and enthusiastic worship.

I hope that lots of people will be inspired to buy the book and read it for themselves. A discussion guide written by Simon Smart is available for free in a downloadable PDF format. Reading this book on your own or in a small group setting may well transform your understanding of your role in the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ.



In a letter to the editor in *Clarion* (Vol. 65, No. 18) Rev. Jan DeGelder writes in connection with Article 3 CO that in four of the five cases where the word “congregation” is mentioned no one has ever questioned that it “simply refers to all the (communicant) members of the congregation,” and that the straightforward meaning of the word “congregation” is “all communicant members.”

Is it that simple? Does the word “congregation” in Article 3 CO refer only to communicant members? I am not convinced that this is the case.

For example, the congregation is given the opportunity to draw the attention of the consistory with the deacons names of brothers deemed fit for the respective offices. It may not be common, but if a letter were to be received from a non-communicant member, nominating a brother or brothers to office, would that letter automatically be discounted? There is nothing in the Church Order to indicate as such.

Or take another example. Prior to the ordination or installation the names of the appointed brothers are publicly announced to the congregation for its approbation. This is where the congregation is given an opportunity to bring forward any lawful objections. If a non-communicant brother or sister knows of a reason why a particular brother should not be ordained or installed to their office, do they not have the same opportunity to bring their objections to the attention of consistory with the deacons? Do they not even have the responsibility to do so? And would consistory with the deacons not be obliged to investigate? Rev. W.W. J. Van Oene affirms this in *With Common Consent* (p. 21), when he writes that “only the male communicant members took part in the voting,” but that “each and every member has the right to bring in objections to the ordination or installation of an appointed brother.”

In the five times that Article 3 CO uses the word “congregation,” only once – when it comes to choosing brothers to office – is the congregation called on to actively make a decision. In the case of a nomination or an objection, consistory with the deacons is presented with information, and it is they who determine the outcome (i.e. whether a particular brother is nominated or whether an objection is sustained). However, when it comes to voting, unless there is a lawful objection, the congregation makes the decision, and consistory with the deacons executes that decision.

The debate as to who should participate in the voting process has been going on for many years. It will likely go on for some time yet. With all due respect to Rev. DeGelder, I believe it is a matter which is more than just emotion or a misunderstanding of the church order, but which involves questions such as to whom has God given the responsibility of providing leadership in the congregation, and who represents the congregation when it comes to making decisions.

Lyndon Kok

Response

I appreciate brother Lyndon Kok’s responds to my letter to the editor (Vol. 65, No. 18), and I thank him for his comments. Yes – I stand to be corrected when he says that the word “congregation” in Article 3 CO does not refer *only* to communicant members of the congregation (my emphasis).

In my letter I did not use the word “only,” but I realize now that my words could be interpreted that way, when I wrote the phrase “simply all communicant members.”

Brother Kok is correct when he points out that when it comes to presenting names of brothers deemed fit to serve as office bearers, and when it comes to the approbation of the appointments, the consistory with the deacons should not ignore letters from non-communicant members. It was never my intention to suggest that letters from non-communicant members should be rejected, and I apologize for the misunderstanding.

However – that does not settle the question why in one out of the five times that Article 3 CO uses the word “congregation” it should refer only to about half of the communicant membership, e.g. only the male communicant members.

Brother Kok is trying to answer this question. He makes a distinction between the one time that “the congregation is called on to actively make a decision,” and the other times, when the congregation can only present information to the consistory with the deacons. Perhaps he sees the latter as a more passive, or at least less active role of the congregation.

He confirms this when he says, “When it comes to voting, the congregation makes the decision, and consistory with the deacons executes that decision.”

But here is a misunderstanding that appears to be pretty persistent in the debate. I don’t believe that the congregation is called to make a decision, or that the congregation actually makes the decision. The only body that makes decisions in


the church is the consistory, sometimes with and sometimes without the deacons. The church is not a democracy.

Article 3 CO stipulates that “the election to any office shall take place with the cooperation of the congregation. . . according to the regulations adopted for that purpose by the consistory with the deacons.” The rest of Article 3 elaborates on this “cooperation” by allowing the consistory with the deacons the freedom to give the congregation the opportunity to be involved at three significant moments of the process: nomination, election, and approbation.

When Brother Kok then reflects on the ongoing debate as to who should participate in the voting process, he expresses as his opinion that this is more than just emotion or a misunderstanding of the CO. As he puts it: “This involves questions such as to whom has God given the responsibility of providing leadership in the congregation, and who repre-

sents the congregation when it comes to making decisions.” I believe that those questions are not so difficult to answer: It’s the consistory, with or without the deacons.

But here is the problem. Over the last decades those and similar questions have been discussed and answered in many reports, articles, and other documents. All the things I wrote above, have been written before. But we do not convince each other. And then it becomes a matter of “we have all different reasons to disagree with each other, but I don’t like your view. . . .” This is what I call an “emotional” argument. But I do agree with Brother Kok that the matter is not just a misunderstanding of the CO. A simple change of Article 3 CO is not going to end the debate.

Jan DeGelder, pastor emeritus
of the Flamborough CanRC 

*Letters to the Editor should be written in a brotherly fashion in order to be considered for publication.
Submissions need to be less than one page in length.*

PRESS RELEASES

Press Release of ILPB Inter-League Publication Board, November 2016 in Fergus, ON

Present for the board, Dick Nijenhuis (chair), Elsa DeGelder and Patricia Gelms, representatives of the Women’s League. Present for the Administration Committee, Paul DeBoer (Coordinator), Brandie Swaving (Treasurer), Henrietta Lodder (Sales), Cathy Jonker (Administrator).

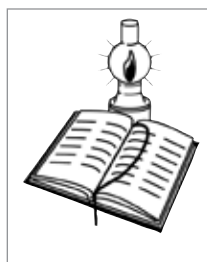
ILPB Chairman, Dick Nijenhuis opened our fall meeting with Scripture reading and prayer, and a welcome to all.

From the committee of administration several reports were discussed.

Progress

Several books are being edited, typeset, and printed, and others are being reprinted. As books are being reprinted new covers are designed and content becomes updated as necessary. Selles’ book on Hebrews celebrates fifty-three

years in publication; it still holds up well this many years later, especially with the revisions he made to include new insight and understanding gleaned over his further years of study. Many of our books are being requested in other countries as a welcome addition to their Study Centres. We have sent books to Cagayan de Oro City in the Philippines, to Rev. van der Linden of the Reformational Study Centre in South Africa, as well as to the Bible College in Papua New Guinea. We are pleased to be able to provide so many desired resources to our brothers and sisters who live and work abroad. Rev. Bédard from the ERQ has also begun the process of translating some of our work into French. We have also transitioned into the world of e-books and are updating and editing our print versions to accommodate that format.



Marketing

The website continues to be up-to-date and has been well-received. New books have been advertised in *Clarion* and previously published books are also being promoted to ensure our readership remains aware of the study riches that ILPB has to offer.

Financial

The treasurer presented the Financial Statement for the 2016 year. Finances are in good order. Past due accounts have been contacted and funds have been steadily coming in. PayPal is available on our website and is working very well. Balance sheet and Income statement were reviewed. Brandie Swaving is nearing the completion of her term and has everything organized and ready for the next treasurer once her replacement has been confirmed. The board expressed gratitude to Brandie for all her work and many hours of bringing the finances into good order.

Sales

Henrietta Lodder reports that sales have gone very well again this past year. She has also completed her three year term and is handing the sales task over to others. We thank Henrietta for her amazing contribution to the committee of administration and the many hours she has invested into selling and shipping hundreds of books across the country, and also abroad.

Closing

With thankfulness the board mentioned that there are books being written by ministers, with the prospect of publishing them over the next several years.

Jovial, friendly discussions, fine tuning, mutual edification, and improving our work was communicated in the ongoing work of the ILPB: promoting the study of God's Word.

Press release read and approved.

Press Release of Classis Central Ontario, December 9, 2016 in Burlington, ON

On behalf of the convening church, Rev. J. Torenvliet welcomed the delegates. The meeting was opened in the usual Christian manner.

The credentials were examined and found to be in good order with all *primi* delegates present. Classis was constituted. The officers suggested by the previous classis took their place: Rev. G. Bruintjes as chairman, Rev. A. B. Roukema as clerk, and elder R. VanderLaan as vice-chairman. The agenda was adopted.

The following matters of memorabilia were noted. The congregations of Burlington South and Ottawa as they await answers to the calls they have extended. We also remember Candidate J. Bruintjes as he deliberates the calls he has. We also remember the many retired ministers and their wives in CCO especially Rev. J. Mulder in his senior years and declining health. The chairman welcomed the fraternal delegate, Rev. D. Ventura of Living Hope URC, Waterdown, representing Classis Ontario Southwest (UR-CNA), and invited him to be seated in the assembly.

The Form of Subscription was read and then signed by Rev. J. Torenvliet.

The Classis ad hoc committee submitted a report on the Lord's Supper admission as mandated by CCO June 10, 2016. The report, which included an appendix from Burlington Fellowship, was deemed admissible. A discussion

ensued. Classis having reviewed the committee report, decided that Burlington-Fellowships practice of inviting guests with only a strong verbal warning from the pulpit is not in line with the Church Order.

Question period according to Article 44 of the Church Order was held. All the churches answered that the ministry of the office bearers was being continued, that the decisions of the assemblies were being honoured. The Bethel consistory requested advice regarding the approbation of Rev. Versteeg's retirement. They are advised to submit this for the June classis.

The following appointments were made:

The convening church for the next classis is Ottawa which is scheduled for March 10, 2017 at Ebenezer Church. Alternate date of June 9, 2017.

The suggested officers are: Rev. A.B. Roukema (Chairman); Ottawa elder (Vice-chairman), Rev. VanderVelde (Clerk).

Question period was not made use of. Censure according to Article 34 was not deemed necessary. Rev. D. Ventura was given opportunity to speak and brought greetings. Rev. J. Torenvliet responded with fitting words of encouragement and appreciation.

The Acts were adopted and the Press Release approved, after which Rev. Bruintjes led in closing prayer.

For Classis Central Ontario,
R. VanderLaan (Vice-chairman at that time) 