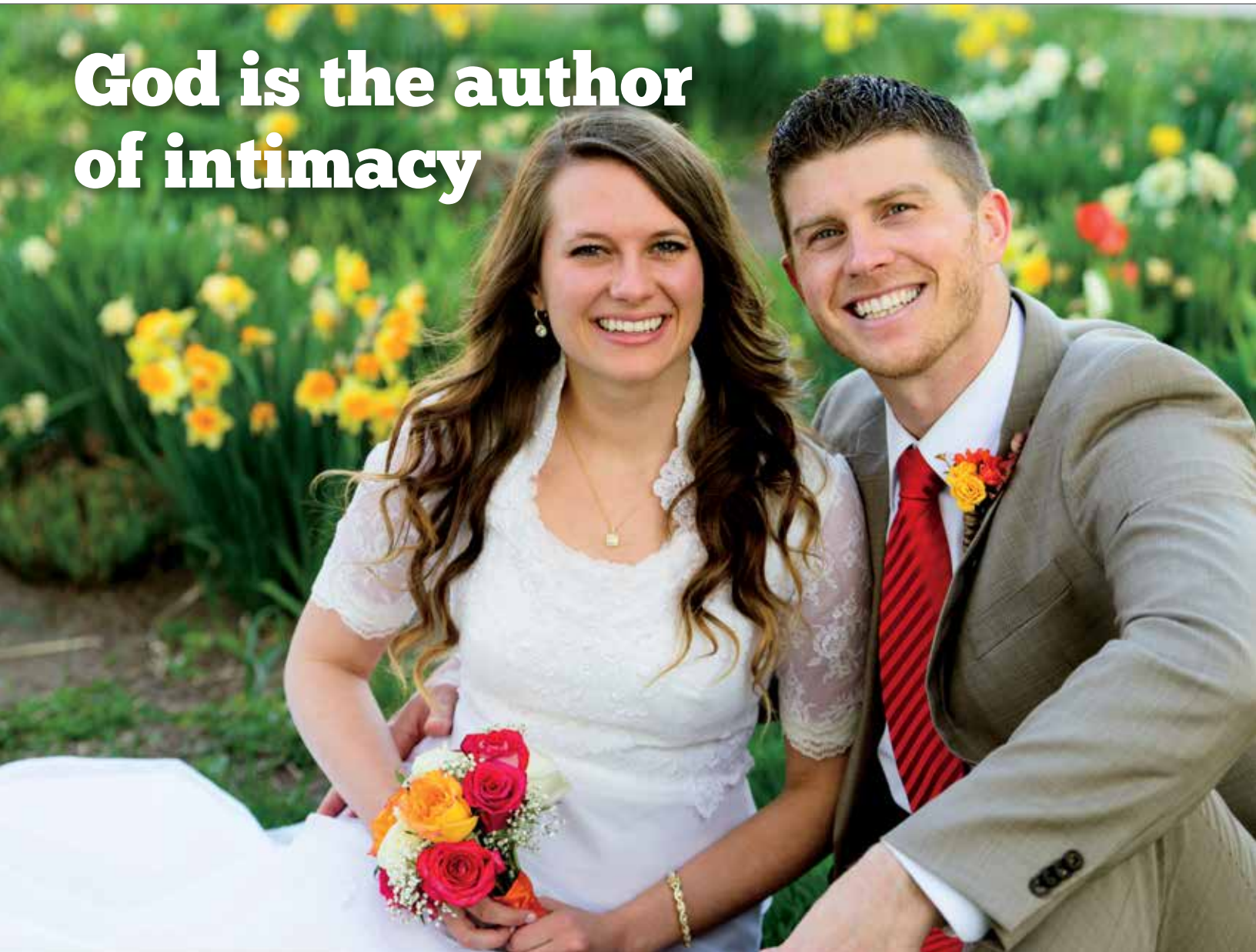


Clarion

THE CANADIAN REFORMED MAGAZINE

V 67 N 9 MAY 4 2018

**God is the author
of intimacy**



**THE GOSPEL OF ASCENSION DAY
THE BURNING OF THE WOODEN SHOES**

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

The last time Rev. Matthew Van Luik wrote an editorial for our pages, it explored our era's views on love and sexuality. Another editorial was promised: this time, "God's Design for Love and Sexuality." To compliment this editorial, Rev. Calvin Vanderlinde reviews a book on the topic of finding a spouse as a believer.

We are thankful to have permission to reprint an article from Reformation21.org, "The Burning of the Wooden Shoes" by Christopher J. Gordon, pastor of the Escondido URCNA.

In news, Calgary CanRC reports on welcoming Rev. and Mrs. Steve and Kryna Van Leeuwen and their family. There is also a MERF newsletter.

Remembering Ascension Day, we have a Treasures New and Old meditation and a canticle. There are also columns Clippings on Politics & Religion, *Clarion Kids*, and *You Asked*.

Laura Veenendaal

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God's Design for Love and Sexuality

Sexuality is a powerful emotion

Our society still has romantic notions about couples who fall in love and live happily ever after. The reality is that most marriages do not last because of unfaithfulness and sexual infidelity. This should not be surprising when we consider that Scriptures already tell many stories of sexual infidelity among God's own people. Wisdom, in the book of Proverbs, gives a strong warning to his son to avoid the adulterous woman who seeks to entice him to his eternal destruction. As believers we hear the biblical warnings against sexual infidelity, but we also need to hear what Scripture teaches about the connection between genuine love and sexuality.

Ignored by the church?

At a time when society openly speaks about their views on sexuality, it is important that we understand God's wonderful design for this gift. Modern views have evolved to the point where former social boundaries on sexual relations have been removed so that, for many, sex has simply become a recreational pastime. The connection between love and sexuality has been broken and the fruit of this new morality is now seen in the many revelations of inappropriate sexual behaviour. The world is not shy about promoting their sexual agenda, while the church has often been quiet on the topic and afraid to talk about a biblical perspective on sexuality.

Last year, I attended a conference for pastors from many different faith backgrounds on the topic of sexuality and the lament was heard that this is a topic that is being ignored by the church. Within the church there is an element of embarrassment and shame at addressing the topic, so that Christian youth are not receiving the direction they need in the difficult social environment in which they live.

If this topic is not addressed from the pulpit and by parents to their children, it leaves our youth without the spiritual defenses they need to keep themselves pure and to understand the proper relationship between love and sexuality.

Addressed by God

Although we live in an intensely sexualized society, questions surrounding love and sexuality are not new for the church. God in his wisdom already addressed this issue in the Song of Songs. This song belongs to the wisdom literature in which God gives his people practical skills for life. The book of Proverbs imparts many lessons on wise living to God's youth, while the Song of Songs intends to help God's people understand how a couple is to love one another. God not only commands couples to love one another, but he also reveals how that love should function in a practical way through this song.

We are comfortable talking about God's command to love, but feel uncomfortable when this song expresses the emotions, feelings, and desires of a couple in love. In the history of the church, there have been different approaches to this song. An old approach understands the song as an allegory that describes the love between God and his people, between Christ and his bride, the church. The result is that sexuality is separated from love, as if love deals with the spiritual aspects of life and sexuality belongs to the earthy, material things of life. The spiritual is placed on a higher level than the physical so that love is good but sexual desires belong to the passions of the flesh. In this song God reveals that genuine love between a man and woman will express itself in a wonderful sexual intimacy. God reminds us that he is the author of all creation and therefore we may not make a separation between the physical and spiritual

as if one is higher than the other, for they belong together. Everything God created, including human sexuality, is good and beautiful. When we separate what God has put together, then a distortion develops in our relationships.

A more modern approach among commentators is to understand the song as erotic literature. They do not think about it as pornographic literature, but the song is dealing

If this topic is not addressed from the pulpit and by parents to their children, it leaves our youth without the spiritual defenses they need

with love as “eros” to convey the beauty of the sexual relationship between a husband and wife. The song is then often used in order to justify certain kinds of sexual activity in marriage. While the song indeed describes sexual desires between the couple, yet it always does so within the context of their mutual love for each other. The danger of this newer approach is to separate the sexual aspects of life from that of

love. Then we end up with the same result as the allegorical approach in which love is separated from the sexual aspect of a relationship.

The marriage relationship restored

In this song, the Lord teaches that the love relationship between a man and woman, that was destroyed by sin in the beginning, is again being restored by the Lord in the lives of his people. In the Old Testament, the Lord compares his relationship with his people to that of marriage. In Ezekiel 16, the Lord describes how he found his people Israel like a newborn child who was abandoned in the field and he rescued her and took care of her, showering his love upon her. When she grew up, God entered into a covenant with her, and, being faithful to his covenant, he lovingly cared for her and adorned her with great splendour and riches. God himself gives the example of how a husband is to love and adorn his wife. In the New Testament, Paul compares the marriage relationship to the relationship of Jesus Christ as the bridegroom to his bride, the church.

When today Jesus Christ enters into a living covenant with his people, God restores us to the most important relationship we can imagine. As Christ restores us to a living relationship with him, at the same time he prepares us to

live in a proper relationship with our spouse. Christ came to redeem us from sin that destroys every relationship on earth in order to restore us to a living relationship with him and with one another. Therefore, in the Song of Songs, we receive this powerful testimony to God’s mighty work in restoring the marriage relationship. It is again possible for a man and woman in Christ to express, although imperfectly today, true love for one another in their sexual intimacy.

We have an expression of that wonderful relationship in the beginning when God made the woman, Eve, and gave her to the man, Adam. It is often said that Adam wrote the first love song when he saw Eve and said, “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman, for she was taken out of the man.” Adam’s heart went out to Eve, for he saw in the woman one just like himself, flesh of his flesh, and yet she was different, for she was a woman taken from the man. God worked in their heart a mutual attraction for each other, so that the man was united with his wife, and they became one flesh. In the beginning it was perfectly natural for the man and woman to have a sexual attraction for one another. Scripture then gives this commentary: they were “both naked, and they felt no shame.” They felt no shame, for all their thoughts and feelings were pure and without a hint of sin. They did not need to hide anything from one another, including their bodies, for they loved each other with perfect love.

Sin’s distortion of God’s gift

Sexuality is a powerful emotion through which men and women become attracted to each other. It is a wonderful gift by which a boy and girl seek each other and desire to become one. But when sin entered the world, this gift became distorted, so that people used it to satisfy their own sinful passions rather than seeking to serve their spouse out of love. Our society treats sexuality as an emotion that is meant for our own personal pleasure. Since I am a sexual person, therefore I can use my sexuality in any way that gives personal satisfaction. Youth are taught that they can experiment with their sexuality outside of marriage for their own personal enjoyment. For that reason, pornography is no longer considered evil, for people are just exploring their own sexuality for their own personal pleasure.

The most serious problem with this approach is that God did not give us the gift of sexuality for our own personal pleasure, but this gift is to be enjoyed in a marriage relationship. While God’s gifts are always a source of much pleasure in our life, yet God does not give us his gifts for our own selfish pleasure but to serve him and to serve our

neighbour. When Adam first saw the woman that God gave him in paradise, his heart went out to her and his desire was to serve her. Eve trusted that Adam loved her with his whole heart and that he would treat her with the utmost respect. The gift of sexuality can only be enjoyed in a relationship in which husband and wife are totally open to one another, because they can trust each other enough to share the deepest thoughts and feelings of the heart.

Shame

That became impossible after Adam and Eve fell into sin, for their eyes were opened, and they realized they were naked. Suddenly shame entered into the relationship. We experience shame only when we are guilty of inappropriate or sinful behaviour. When Adam and Eve sinned, their eyes were opened to their sin and it negatively affected their relationship. Now they have shameful thoughts and feelings deep in their heart that have a negative impact on the relationship. The result of sin is that husbands and wives, in their selfishness, hurt one another, and it causes resentment and anger against one another. When anger and resentment grows against one another, every aspect of our relationship is impacted, including sexual intimacy. In the place of sexual

intimacy, people resort to fulfil their sexual desires by seeking intimacy in another relationship or fulfill their desire through porn.

In the Song of Songs, God encourages us by showing that it is again possible for a husband and wife to enjoy a loving relationship in which they can deeply love and respect one another and mutually enjoy his gift

of sexuality. The goal of sin is to destroy relationships, but the work of Christ is to restore relationships. Sin destroys our relationship with God, but Christ came to restore our relationship with his heavenly Father. He does that by exposing the dark secrets of our heart and offering us his atoning sacrifice to cover those sins in the sight of God. The gospel message is a message of hope, for Christ came to deliver us from our bondage to sin.

Overcoming shame

Christ makes it possible for us to deal with our shame. Our natural instinct when we feel shame is to cover up

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Declined the call extended to him by the Eben-Ezer Canadian Reformed Church of Chatham, ON:

Rev. S. Vandavelde

of the Carman East Canadian Reformed Church, MB.

Declined the call extended to him by Providence Canadian Reformed Church in Hamilton, ON:

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from the Free Reformed Church of Albany, Australia.

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CHURCH NEWS

our sin, for we do not want to expose our shame to others, and perhaps least of all to our spouse. When we come to know Christ, it becomes impossible to continue to hide our shame, for through his gospel Christ exposes the shame in our heart. The gospel teaches us to own up to our sins and seek God's forgiveness. We can now deal with the deep and the dark secrets of the heart. We can now bring them before the holy throne of God and therefore it is also possible to speak about our dark secrets to those who have been hurt by the sinful attitudes in our heart.

Intimacy with God is only possible when you open your heart to the Lord. We can open our heart and lay before the Holy One our daily struggle with sin because we trust God to be compassionate and loving for the sake of his Son, Jesus Christ. He will not reject me because of my sins, but he welcomes me with open arms when I seek his forgiveness and love. On the basis of his love and mercy, the Lord God reveals in the Song of Songs that a man and woman can again experience a wonderful intimacy in their marriage. The Song is realistic. There will be troubles, there will be struggles, but when we truly submit ourselves to Christ, husband and wife will continually search each other out, and becoming vulnerable by opening their hearts to one another, seeking to support and encourage each other out of their love, a love that they have first experienced in Christ Jesus.





The Gospel of Ascension Day

It seems that Ascension Day can sometimes get lost among the commemorations of Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost. The ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, however, is an event of incredible importance to our Lord and Saviour, to our Triune God, and to the story of what God has done, and is doing, in the world. The ascension is part and parcel of the gospel.

As Luke recounts the ascension of Jesus in Acts 1, he puts it in the context of a conversation about the restoration of the kingdom of Israel and the rule of Jesus Christ. In Acts 1:6, the disciples ask: “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” The problem with their question is not that they were thinking of a kingdom. Jesus had been speaking to them about the kingdom of God for last forty days – from the time of his resurrection till that moment (Acts 1:3). It was right to think about the kingdom. The disciples’ problem was they thought too small. They seemed to have in mind this picture of a world where Israel ruled, and the nations were under them. They

were still connected to the kingdom of Israel, not the world-wide kingdom of Christ. Jesus in his answer says, “Don’t just think of ethnic Israel – don’t think of the *land* of Israel – that strip of land called Palestine – don’t think of Israel ruling all the nations. Think of the nations – the ends of the earth – coming into the people of Israel. He says, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). He corrects them in their understanding of the kingdom.

It is right after he says these words that he then ascends right before their eyes and is taken into heaven and a cloud hides him from their sight. This Jesus, the Son of God who has taken on our human nature, enters into heaven as the victorious King and he takes his place at his Father’s side, to the thunderous cheers and majestic praise of all of heaven. Ascension Day is the coronation march of Jesus, the Christ, and he now rules of all things and is at work gathering his people from all times and places into his church.

Our task, our purpose in this world, is completely bound up in his rule. We – his church – the people of his kingdom who are bound to him by faith – are called to live as his subjects, and we long for and work for the extension of his kingdom. We live out of the reality of Christ’s rule in our hearts and announce it as we live our lives. We witness to his kingship in our lives, in our communities, in our city, province, country, to the ends of the earth. We have a holy task in whatever we do. Whether we are preschool children, elementary students, high school students, in college, or in the workplace, whether we are bankers, nurses, students, salesmen, framers, plumbers, preachers, or teachers, we all have a holy task to honour the king in everything we do. We do not work for ourselves, we do our work for the king. That call comes to you today. Look to your ascendant King. See what he is doing in this world. See how he gathers his church from all over this world. See how he fights and join him in the fight.

For further study

1. Would you describe yourself as someone who would be recognized as belonging to the King?
2. Do you see his rule in your heart as you struggle against sin and long to see him formed in you more and more?
3. Do you long to be an instrument in his hands in the cause of the kingdom, and a voice that proclaims that he is the true King – the King our hearts were made and long for?



The Burning of the Wooden Shoes

It was a painful decision for my father to leave the Christian Reformed Church of North America (CRC). He was pulled apart over it. He expressed all of his concerns to the new minister. “The direction you’re taking,” my father said, “is undermining the Great Commission of Jesus.” Immediately, the pastor yelled back, “This is what’s wrong with you Reformed people.” My father retorted, “But aren’t you Reformed?” That is a great question.

By being raised in the CRC I learned a lot about what can happen to a church. I have been a pastor in a confessional Reformed church for almost fifteen years now. As I watch the shifts and listen to the discussions, this all seems like *déjà vu*. What took the CRC thirty to forty years to accomplish, in jettisoning her Reformed heritage, seems to be taking some North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) churches about a decade. I am particularly concerned for the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), but they are not the only one. There are other Reformed denominations following suit, but the PCA, at the moment, appears to be leading the pack.

The most disturbing part is that many seem completely oblivious to the shifts. Among a new generation of Reformed pastors and churchgoers, there seems to be little awareness that the project they are pursuing, and the shifts they are pushing, have already been tried and have ended with catastrophic consequences in the life of a major Reformed denomination.

I write this out of sincere love and concern for my brothers and sisters in NAPARC churches. Don’t do this. I’ve witnessed families, friends, and churches ripped apart by the direction the CRC chose. I know the pressures are great. I too want success in the church. I too want our Reformed churches to be heard. But that desire has to be controlled by what Christ has commanded us to do. I don’t want to see other faithful churches make the same mistakes that led to the confessional demise of the CRC. We need you! As I attempt to be my brother’s keeper, may the Lord use this as

a call to renew all of us together in our commitment to our biblical and confessional identity as Reformed churches.

The CRC Paradigm

To consider what happened in the CRC, the symbol of the wooden shoes may help. The wooden shoes (*klompen*) often found on the doorstep of most Dutch households, has always been a symbol of their rich heritage. As the times changed, many in the CRC were conscious (and weary) of the charge that they were culturally exclusive in their churches. In fact, it was this very concern that motivated the editors of *The Banner*, the denominational magazine of the CRC, to issue its most controversial piece on November 3, 1980 that had a cover photo of *klompen* burning. This was an abrasive call for the CRC to abandon its parochial, ethnic, and cultural identity.

Unless one appreciates the particular ethos of the CRC, it’s difficult to communicate how momentous and offensive this picture was for the CRC. The perception of the CRC as an ethnic, exclusive club became the predominant concern in the denominational headquarters and Calvin Seminary as far back as the early 1930s. The Dutch immigrant members of the CRC were under great pressure to assimilate to American culture. They were concerned by the charge that they were too Dutch and only focussed on their own people. They were facing a crisis of identity and there was a sincere desire to be more welcoming to all peoples, especially when it came to the American church scene. They didn’t want to be considered clannish or sectarian.

Conscious that such a change was biblically mandated, the CRC made a serious overhaul of her identity to be a more “embracing” church. The project, at least from a biblical and confessional perspective, was a failure, and the CRC has followed in the trajectory of other liberal denominations that have stripped away all their particulars until little remained.

The CRC failed to preserve those things that made her distinctively Reformed. Stuffed within the burning shoes

were the very confessions that defined her, resulting in the complete loss of any biblical and confessional identity.

The path was predictable. They began as a confessional Reformed church. In order to fit in with American evangelicalism, she became broadly evangelical and is now assimilated to mainline churches whose theology is increasingly liberal and whose practice is buried under cultural accommodation and social activism.

It will help us to step back and see the doctrinal and practical shifts that occurred in the CRC as she was addressing her own identity crisis and taking on all the social concerns of the day. I count six colossal steps to apostasy in the CRC overhaul:

The abandonment of the authority of Scripture – This was the first domino to tip knocking everything else over. No longer was Scripture the final say regarding doctrine and life, but major doctrines were called into question due to cultural pressure.

The abandonment of Reformed principle of worship – Historic Reformed convictions and principles laid out in the confessions were abandoned based on seeker sensitive assumptions.

The abandonment of the Sabbath and the second worship service – Even the word “Sabbath” was abandoned in embarrassment. The evening service was jettisoned by claiming better opportunities for Bible studies and home gatherings to reach the lost and love their neighbour.

The abandonment of gospel-centred expository preaching – Expository gospel-centred sermons through books of the Bible were replaced with topical messages often addressing the current social justice discussion of the culture.

The abandonment of God-assigned roles in the church (women’s ordination) – The classic distinctions between creation roles and functional hierarchy were abandoned in support of full equality of function in ecclesiastical offices.

The abandonment of moral standards for her members – Those committing gross sins were no longer called to repentance, but instead welcomed into the life of the church upon the assumption that “justice” demands it. Nicholas Wolterstorff, a professor at Calvin College for over thirty years, claimed that biblical justice requires that people of homosexual orientation be granted “the great good of civil and ecclesial marriage.”

Social justice or gospel injustice?

The pressures being laid upon Reformed churches are many. As a pastor, I have felt the pressure to conform to the American way of church. Among the evangelicals in our community, our Reformed church is pegged as the strict church in town doing things that nobody else does. Downgrading those Reformed practices that are the most off-putting is assumed to be the best path forward to reach a broader base of potential churchgoers. This is the very audience the CRC took to evangelicalism. The CRC’s commitment to downgrade became a commitment to the intolerance of its own theological identity, and the toleration of everything else.

The question to be answered is whether other NAPARC churches, like the CRC, have already been sowing these seeds of their own overhaul. In my humble opinion, when I look at the practices of many NAPARC churches, especially when it comes to corporate worship, I see little different from the evangelical church down the street. This is not the case across the board, but neither was it in the CRC. The general trend was clear. Once the CRC hierarchy opened the door to accommodation becoming a more broadly evangelical church, that door remained open for everything else. I fear that history is repeating itself.

The CRC, after remaking itself into another evangelical church, soon found itself absorbed by social justice issues. Synodical meetings were filled with social causes. The irony was, most evangelical churches didn’t fall into social justice as deeply as the CRC did once that door was opened. The thirst for relevance could not be quenched. They were like a man out of prison, running as fast as he can without looking back. Social activism and causes became a dominant focus of church life.

As the present culture is ripped apart with division, especially in terms of race and gender, the church is feeling the pressure unlike ever before. It’s created a kind of perfect storm. Just like the CRC in panic mode, one can see the same pressure to transform. We may not be too Dutch, but we are certainly too white. The last thing the church today can afford to be considered is, especially in our cultural

***The thirst for
relevance could
not be quenched***

struggle, racist. Let's face reality. The church frequently failed in bringing together every people and nation. We're commanded to do this. Racism is sin. Abuse of women is horrendous. It grieves us greatly. The last thing we can afford is to be called homophobic or misogynist. Looking at our terribly slow progress in the Great Commission, there is only one conclusion: we must be doing something wrong. Things have to change – now.

There is no question that social justice in the world should be the desire of every Christian. Every faithful pastor should care to apply the law of God to the gross sins and abuses he sees in the world. And there are certainly societal implications of the gospel as Christians begin to look more like Christ in loving their neighbours. The concern is whether there is, in these discussions, something much more dangerous happening.

Because of these struggles, the answer according to some is to rethink the entire mission and mandate of the church. The answer for many in leadership seems to be to push harder than ever these societal questions upon their congregations. The “gospel” all under the rubric of delivering people from social ills is being redefined. The priority of Jesus' objective work in saving us from our sin by grace alone through faith alone is being sidelined for a “gospel” of deliverance from societal abuses.

Under the new paradigm, many of the classic passages upon which we have relied must be reinterpreted to see that “gospel” is really all about racial reconciliation, equalitarianism, women's rights, eradication of poverty, and environmental care. Familiar Bible passages that we always understood and confessed as teaching our need to be saved from our sins are now being reread through the lens of social abuse, racial injustice, and more. “Gospel” in this approach is being redefined as deliverance from these societal evils.

As a host of new social justice activists use social media platforms, the pressure to transform the message of the church is stronger than ever. For instance, the PCA seems to be subtly beginning the debate regarding women's ordination. Has a study committee been organized as it was in the CRC?

Most painful is that the culture's racial divide has launched the church into a sort of panic that is actually having the effect of “transforming” the church into looking and sounding just like the world in its own divisiveness. In our attempts to accommodate a divided culture, the world's speech appears now to be dictating ours.

The CRC may have rightly burned the wooden shoes of a parochial, ethnic, and cultural identity but made the mistake of leaving in those shoes the very Reformed confessions that gave her a theological identity. In our attempts to accommodate the culture, to address social injustice, some of which may certainly need to happen, we run the risk of burning the Reformed confessions. This is no small matter and, in the end, it has everything to do with what the Reformation helped us recover: the gospel of Jesus as a Saviour from sin.

The best way forward is to remain committed to making known the life, death, resurrection of Christ as the heart of what we do as Reformed churches. The book of Acts teaches us this over and over through the ministry of the apostles. The early church, under the threat of persecution and death, remained committed to the preaching of Jesus to the nations. We too are called by God to continue in what we have learned and firmly believed (2 Tim 3:14). We too are called to remain committed to making known the Word of God “in season” – when things are convenient – and “out of season” – when everything is against us. As Martyn Lloyd Jones once said, “When the Church performs her primary task these other things [i.e. matters of social justice] invariably result from it.”

The greatest way forward is simply to practice what we already know we should be doing without compromise. Holding on to the Reformed confession is most certainly the hardest thing to do in a culture of overreaction.

NAPARC churches should not forget their older brother, the CRC. Unless these concerns are taken seriously, I foresee the PCA and other Reformed denominations following this trajectory heading for fights, splits, and empty pews. They will be on a fast track to becoming just another mainline liberal denomination scratching its head at General Assembly meetings as they desperately try to find answers. I pray that my dear brothers and sisters in NAPARC will hear this humble plea from a brother in Christ who learned how true it is that those who forget their (church) history are most certainly doomed to repeat it.

This article was originally published by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals at www.reformation21.org and is reprinted with permission.

***Is there
something much
more dangerous
happening?***





Christ Went up on High far Above the Sky

An Ascension Hymn

1. Christ went up on high far a - bove the sky.
 2. Christ our na - ture shared and our pain en - dured.
 3. When he did as - cend he gave this com - mand:
 4. From the Fa - ther's throne Christ sup - plies his own.

Sa - tan and his realm he had o - ver-whelmed. As when he was born so on his re - turn
 He bore all our guilt and his blood was spilt. He was cru - ci - fied; as a man he died,
 "You must go and teach, fear - less - ly must preach the good news of me and my vic - to - ry.
 He pours out his grace from that heaven - ly place. He the Spir - it sends who on us descends.

an - gels praised the Lord, who all things re - stored. Him we see no more yet we him a - dore
 but he rose a - gain ev - er - more to reign. He, both God and man, sits on heaven's throne.
 In God's tri - une Name bap - tize those I claim. They who will be - lieve shall new life re - ceive.
 He's our Com - fort - er, our great Coun - sel - lor. Praise the Trin - i - ty for his maj - es - ty!

for he rules as King o - ver eve - ry - thing.
 There he for us pleads, al - ways in - ter - cedes.
 Cleansed from all their sin they'll be born a - gain."
 Praise the Lord our God! Spread his fame a - broad!



The Growth of Christianity in Iran

Iran is a country in turmoil. With high inflation and unemployment impacting the population at large, but not the ruling Muslim clergy class, massive protests and demonstrations have erupted in late 2017 and continued into January of 2018. The protests were not just on economic issues. Frustration was also vented against the intolerant Islamic theocratic regime. Although things have quieted down outwardly, discontent runs deep. Many millions of Iranians (some say as many as sixty percent) are completely disenchanted with Islam and its harsh demands which seem unreasonable. So Western secularism is attractive. The Iranian authorities are fully aware of this, and thus no longer use Islamic slogans to stir public loyalty. Instead, they use nationalistic slogans such as “preserving” or “restoring” the “greatness of Persia.”

In the midst of all of this, many, especially young people, are turning not to Western secularism but to the gospel for hope. They are looking for meaningful purpose and comfort in the spiritual vacuum in which they find themselves. Growing numbers long for a satisfying alternative to the religion they no longer desire to follow. The Iranian government is not standing idly by. It makes concerted efforts to suppress the faith. There is rigorous Islamic indoctrination of the youth in the educational system and massive amounts of money support organizations that promote Islam among young people. But all these efforts are not working as more and more continue to turn to Christ. Even Islamic leaders acknowledge with great regret the exponential rate of the growth of Christianity.

Another weapon the government uses against Christians is harassment and persecution. It has increased pressures on Christian converts, arresting and imprisoning believers. Although Christianity is an officially recognized minority religion in Iran’s Constitution, it is strictly forbidden to evangelize to Muslims. Christians are treated as second-class citizens and Muslims who convert to Christianity are dealt with harshly. Evangelistic activity is very risky.

The secret police regularly call in believers. Some have been jailed for their faith and are intimidated while imprisoned to deny the faith. But intimidation and even imprisonment have not helped in suppressing the work of the Spirit. The church in Iran continues to grow very rapidly, especially among the younger generation. Statistically, it is one of the fastest growing churches in the world.

The efforts of organizations like the Middle East Reformed Fellowship (MERF) are also used by the Lord to bring Muslims to the faith and to encourage and equip them for the road ahead. Their missionary efforts include nightly radio broadcasts in the Farsi language, training and supporting workers inside the country, Bible distribution, and publishing solid Reformed literature. Also, annual conferences are held for Iranian Christians outside their country for periods of training and spiritual nourishment. The lectures of these conferences are distributed within Iran.

MERF has worked to provide Farsi (Persian) language translation of several Reformed works over the past few years. Additionally, MERF operates a Farsi ministry website, reaching out to Iranians, Afghans, and Tajikistanis with hope and truth. This website is updated regularly with articles expounding selections of the Scriptures. Audio files of our Farsi radio broadcasts are also available for Farsi speakers to listen to or download.

Despite forty years of harsh Islamic rule in Iran, Harmoz Shariat, Founder of Iran Alive Ministries, believes Islam in Iran is already defeated: “I strongly feel it will never be an Islamic nation again. The rejection of Islamic rule by the people of Iran is so wide and deep, and it is not going away.” May Christianity come to replace Islam.

Sources used: Stoyan Zaimov, “Iranian Youths Mass Converting to Christianity” at www.christianpost.com; website of the Middle East Reformed Fellowship www.merf.org; Mindy Belz, “Signals of Change” *World Magazine* Feb 3, 2018; “Iranian Church Among the Fastest Growing” (Feb 16, 2018) Farsi Christian News Network (www.fnn.com).





www.merf.org

MERTF News

Middle East Reformed Fellowship—"Declaring the Whole Counsel of God"

March 2018



Abraham's Nation

By PASTOR VICTOR ATALLAH



Some years ago, we aired a series of Arabic radio Bible discussions under the title: *God's Original Purposes for the Hebrew Nation*. It was blessed with much lasting gospel fruit. The Holy Spirit stirred the hearts of many Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa to understand the ultimate purpose of God's call to Abraham -- the coming of the 'Seed' or 'Offspring' -- the promised 'Seed of the woman' (Genesis 3:15). Through His coming, blessing comes to all families of the earth (Genesis 12:3; 22:18).

Planting Churches

Two couples from eastern Saudi Arabia were convert-

ed. At the time, there was no SMS text messaging or internet available in that region. Through postal exchange over many months slowly they were guided in under-

standing of God's Word. They committed themselves to one another for quiet home worship and regular Bible study, fellowship and prayer. The Lord used this

as a nucleus for a growing congregation, mostly made up of extended family members. Through this group another home congregation was started by friends and relatives in a nearby town.

An early message from the two couples said, "...it does not matter to us, and should not matter to anyone else, that God chose Abraham and his descendants for His great plan...We are not Jews, but we are included in the blessing promised to our father, Abraham...We do not know if by blood we are somehow physically related to him, but this does not have any value. He is the father of all believers from all races..."



Twenty-two Nations of the Arab League



راديو الشباب العربي



ابحث هنا

مسابقات

تكنولوجيا

صحتك بنهولنا

شخصيات

مجتمع عربي

برامجنا

الرئيسية

Competing Claims

Lately, renewed turmoil over the status of the city of Jerusalem seems to be heading towards serious conflict in the Middle East. Some expect tensions for a long-time, possibly leading to war. At the heart of the matter are the competing claims of Jews and Muslims over so-called holy sites. Christians are caught in the middle.

Thus, a new weekly Arabic audio program based on the previous series has proven to be very timely. Since both Arabs and Jews claim to be descendants of Abraham, the series takes the form of two people discussing the subject of Abraham's nation. It dwells on God's dealings with and promises to Abraham in Genesis, and on how he understood God's plan. Scriptures teach us that these promises are fulfilled in Jesus' earthly life and ministry in the place of sinners resulting in the Great Commission, which transformed a symbolic, ethnic earthly nation into an all-

inclusive, universal kingdom and church.

Fulfilled In Christ

Jesus clearly spoke of himself as the great "I AM" existing eternally before Abraham who was waiting for his coming and rejoiced in it. (John 8:56-59). New Testament writers affirm what Jesus taught for forty days after His resurrection -- that all Old Testament Scriptures are fulfilled in Him. (Luke 24:44-47)

Born From Above

"Abraham's Nation" is currently the most popular of all MERF's Arabic online radio programs available 24/7 at www.dardasha7.com. Many recommend and share the SoundCloud episodes with their friends on Facebook, Twitter and other social media. The subject of Jerusalem itself is wonderfully explained by the Apostle Paul in the context of his teaching that believers, Jew and Gentile, are God's children and Abraham's offspring (Galatians 3:26-29). This was God's plan long before Jerusalem became the city of David (Galatians 3:15-17). Paul goes on to point out that the free, abiding

Jerusalem, born from above is the mother of all believers (Galatians 4:26) while the unbelieving earthly Jerusalem with her children is in bondage, in the same way Hagar, the rejected slave woman, was. (Galatians 4:30-31).

The Holy Spirit also inspired Peter to declare that Jesus

of the responses:

A lady from Egypt said, "This is great! So, we do not have to fight over earthly Jerusalem."

A listener from Jordan wrote, ".....I love it that Jesus freed us from all the idols of Jerusalem."

A young man from Syria exclaimed, "...Thank God he chose Abraham to bless us all."

الوطن الأصلي لنبي الله إبراهيم:
الحلقة رقم 1

يحاول الكثيرون أن يثبتوا انتمائهم لخليل الله إبراهيم: فهل
تساءلت يوماً عن أصول إبراهيم خليل الله أو عن موطنه
الأصلي؟ #أصل_إبراهيم



24-7 Arabic Gospel Programs can be heard

fulfilled what God spoke through Moses about the kingdom, priesthood and nation in Exodus 19:6. He tells New Testament believers, Jew and Gentile, "... **you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.**" (1 Peter 2:9)

Live Radio

We recently decided to air the program live -- getting immediate interactions with online listeners every Saturday. It's exciting to see the interest and enthusiasm

Hallelujah!

What a joy to belong to Christ's body, from all ethnic groups and nations, the abiding, heavenly Jerusalem.

MERF-Canada

Thank you for your faithful support! Please make cheques payable to MERF-Canada and send them to the address at the bottom of the page.

Online donations can be made to Middle East Reformed Fellowship (Canada) Inc. through www.canadahelps.org



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merf@merf.org

Canadian Reformed Church at Calgary Welcomes Their New Pastor

After 2.5 years of vacancy since the retirement of our former pastor Hans Kalkman, the Canadian Reformed Church in Calgary extended a call to candidate Steve Van Leeuwen, who responded to this call with a visit to the congregation on April 9, 2017. April 9th was a busy day and a day to give much thanks to our heavenly Father for. Candidate Van Leeuwen preached two sermons to the congregation, and a social event was held after the afternoon service to meet with candidate Van Leeuwen. On April 17, 2017 the prayers of the congregation were answered when candidate Steve Van Leeuwen accepted the call extended to him by the congregation here in Calgary.

Fast forward to September. Due to Candidate Van Leeuwen's teaching obligations in Fergus Ontario until the end of June, he would be examined in the next scheduled Classis Alberta meeting that was held on September 19, 2017. Several weeks prior to this classis we saw the Van Leeuwen family move from Fergus, Ontario to Calgary, Alberta. We could give thanks to our heavenly Father that he granted safe travelling to the Van Leeuwen family as they could arrive at their new home on 18 Hart Estates Blvd. NE Calgary, AB. Conveniently convened by the Canadian Reformed church at Calgary, Classis Alberta was held and Candidate Van Leeuwen sustained his preeminent classical examination.

Ordination took place on October 15, 2017 with Rev. J. Huijgen officiating. After receiving the laying on of hands, Steve Van Leeuwen was ordained as Minister of the Word in



his first calling to the congregation here in Calgary. During the afternoon service Pastor Van Leeuwen delivered his first sermon to the congregation.

On November 3, 2017 the congregation could come together in great thankfulness to our heavenly Father to celebrate this joyful occasion in a welcome evening to Pastor Van Leeuwen, his wife Kryna, and their four daughters, Alicia, Andrea, Helena, and Carmen. The evening was opened by the M.C. of the evening, br. Scot Parslow. Various groups, Bible studies, young peoples, and congregational members were give opportunity to show their appreciation and thanks by means of music, skits, speeches, and personal interaction. The Van Leeuwen family is officially welcomed to the province of Alberta by the congregation with appropriate western (Calgary) attire. Br. Eric Veenendaal closes the evening with some words of thanks to God, who has provided for us and with words of welcome and encouragement to Pastor Van Leeuwen and his family. Letters of congratulations and Christian greetings were received from several sister churches and read to the attendees of this evening.

It's been a bit of a long journey for both the Van Leeuwen family and the congregation here in Calgary but we have much to be thankful for; praise be to our God and Father for providing us with Pastor Van Leeuwen as its new pastor, preacher, and teacher.





Q May Reformed Christians support professional sports by attending or watching?

I have often wondered whether we as Reformed Christians may support professional sports as part of our “budget” of time and money by attending and watching games on TV. I would appreciate your thoughts on this important time and money consuming issue!

A This question (or request for my thoughts) addresses a complex issue. Many different aspects can be considered and come to mind when *thinking* on this matter. The questioner poses it in a rather general and sweeping way. The question highlights the point of our faith and life as Reformed Christians, which means that we seek to do all things to the glory of God. Can we do that when taking time to watch a game of hockey or soccer, tennis or golf, or attending a match? Included as well is the question of stewardship, namely spending time and money by attending games or watching them on TV. Stewardship means that we use our God-given time and money for something like a game of sports that we enjoy for sheer pleasure. Another aspect, related to it all, is the question whether we “support” professional sport by watching a game. Can we watch or attend without directly supporting the sport, or the excesses and unethical aspects that can be observed in professional sports?

For starters, we may note that Christians can and may be engaged in sports themselves as a good, healthy, character-building activity. “A healthy spirit in a healthy body” as a general axiom should be pursued by believers too. Those who are involved in a (physical) sport are using their tal-

ents and training, their personal interests and incentives, for achievements, and their progress and pursuit to excel in their participation. The same can be said about those who develop their special gifts, skills, and talents, as well as their personal interests and enthusiasm, for activities such as playing chess, checkers, table tennis, or those who make music, choose the art of painting, sculpting, and the like. In all of these activities it is possible to enjoy the practice, training, exercising, progressing, and engagement in a particular sport or art, which is pursued in a manner that is relaxing, recreational, relational, and God-honouring!

This positive evaluation of sports and one’s participation in it changes when we consider sport as a profession. Of course, in light of the above, it is possible to become a professional artist, musician, or even chess player (who is able to set the times for his games during the week and not on Sunday!), for instance; however, pursuing a professional sport in soccer, hockey, tennis, golf, and the like has become pretty much impossible. The latter is due to the many factors that play a role in professional sports, such as the purpose of playing in it, the money involved, the idolatry of the heroes or sports stars, the sole focus in life, the demands on the player with a view to the club or even the nation, the sanctification of the Lord’s Day, etc. The church, therefore, has always accepted sports as a practice but has

warned against the excesses, the idolatrous aspects, the nationalism, the aggression among players and public, the fanatic pursuit of records, awards, and prizes, to mention a few unethical factors.

Our next question pertains now to the matter of *watching* the games of professional sportsmen, sports teams, or attending them. As a matter of *time* management, we may note that we may certainly do something for sheer pleasure. We don't always need to have a specific purpose or special goal in what we do. Watching a game for recreation or relaxation certainly can have a positive effect, namely in order to function well again in our daily labours and personal calling. Hence time spent by watching a game every now and then can be a blessing and be enjoyed irrespective of who they are that play the game. If they are professional sportsmen or women, it will be enjoyed especially by those who are engaged in the same sport personally and who appreciate the skills and abilities and joys that come with their engagement in the sport – as long as this form of relaxation does not take away from other responsibilities or time commitments, or is practised too often at the expense of one's calling in the context of his entire life.

When considering the matter of “supporting” professional sports with our money, the question really is: are we allowed to attend a game to watch it live and pay for the entrance fee? As a matter of financial stewardship, it makes a big difference whether we can afford it or not; i.e. in what proportion does it stand to our income and cost of living and financial obligations, etc. It should never be at the expense of any of those and other priorities and commitments in life. Having arrived at that conclusion, we may spend money on relaxation, sport, entertainment, and other recreational activities. It is questionable whether in *that* case we spend money “to support” the professional sport when we spend money to watch a *particular* game. Just as with watching a game on TV, also watching a game live in the location where it is played is a matter of enjoying that game for purposes of relaxation, enjoyment, and special pleasure for that particular sport. It is possible to do so, being *detached* from the professional aspects and excesses.

Although it is true that the NT references to games and sports are never direct so that we could base our opinions on what the Scriptures say about them, we do see them being used for drawing spiritual lessons. In 1 Corinthians 9: 24-27, Paul, who may have witnessed the Isthmian Games

in AD 51, called the attention of the Corinthian believers to the vigorous training of the athletes. The athletes exercised “self-control in all things” (v. 25; cf. 1 Tim 4: 7; 2 Tim 2:5). Paul's reference was relevant to these Corinthians, since these games were a Corinthian festival. We may deduce from Paul's reference that he assumes that the Corinthians knew about this, were familiar with the life of the athletes and the demands of the sport. Paul doesn't give a value judgment, but its relevance does imply a *positive* lesson for spiritual purposes. Also in other Scriptural contexts we see this: the foot race (v. 24) to illustrate Paul's not running aimlessly; boxing (v. 26) and Paul's not beating the air; wrestling (Eph 6:12) and chariot racing (Phil 3: 13f) are also assumed to be familiar practices that will help understand Paul's spiritual lesson. It is true, of course, that Paul does not advocate attending these games, yet his use of them as examples does show that a *positive* use can be made of them (of these games that is, which were played by “professional sportsmen”).

Hence, we may come to some conclusions regarding the matters broached in this question (request). If and when someone's conscience accuses him or her that such participation and form of relaxation is not *allowable* within the life of a Reformed Christian (“wrong” stewardship), he or she shouldn't do it. At the same time, we should not be too quick to judge that what *we* do or don't do ought to be done or not done the same way by others. The matters involved in this question belong to those things about which Christians are not in agreement, without the one being able to clearly condemn the other on the basis of Scripture. With the right intent of relaxation, and the right awareness of the downside of professional sports, it should be *allowed* to enjoy some time of sheer pleasure and special interest in a particular sport's activity or game!

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. den Hollander

denhollanderw@gmail.com

23 Kinsman Drive, Binbrook, ON L0R 1C0



Clarion Kids

The Golden Rule

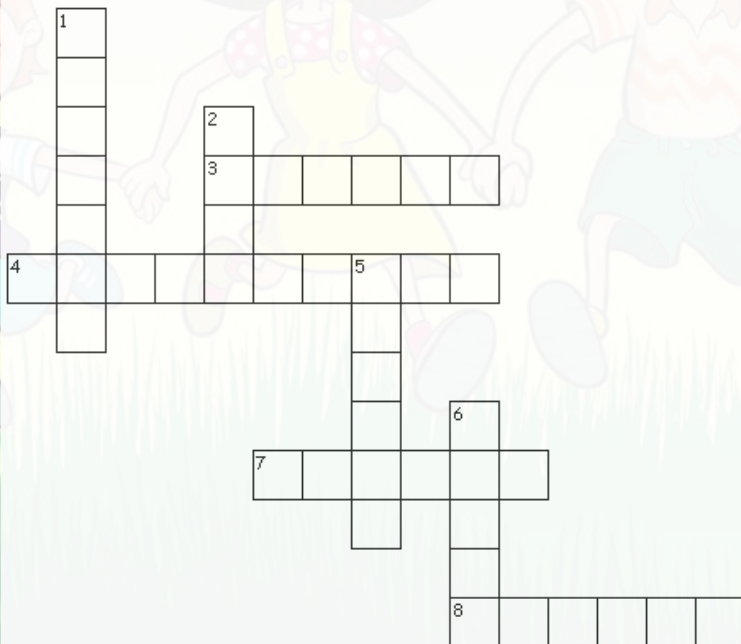
Matthew 7:1-14

The golden rule is very simple: do to others as you would have them do to you. That means if you like it when people treat you nicely, you should treat people nicely too. That doesn't mean we should treat people nicely just so we can benefit ourselves, but we should do it out of love for God. He loved us so much that he sent Jesus to die for us, and we can show that we love him by loving others. Whether someone is nice to you or not, you should always be nice to them. You'll be amazed what a difference it can make!

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



Crossword Puzzle: Solve the clues to fill in the puzzle!



Across

3. Do to _____ as you would have them do to you.
4. Being kind makes a big _____.
7. The _____ rule.
8. The golden rule is _____.

Down

1. We do not follow this rule to _____ ourselves.
2. Treat others well out of _____ for God.
5. Always treat people _____.
6. God sent _____ to die for us.

by Emily Nijenhuis

Your Future "Other Half": It Matters Who You Marry

Your Future 'Other Half': It Matters Who You Marry by Rebecca VanDoodewaard

(Christian Focus, 2014, paperback, 127 pages)

Sometimes one stumbles across a book they wish they had a long time ago, especially someone who considers himself still fresh in both married life and ministry (under ten and five years respectively). *Your Future 'Other Half': It Matters Who You Marry* is one such gem; helpful for anyone looking for good counsel regarding God's will for marriage.

Author Rebecca VanDoodewaard, wife of Dr. William VanDoodewaard and prolific writer and blogger, provides a wealth of easy-to-digest and candid advice to prepare and equip singles for finding the right spouse and avoiding wrong ones. While the book is written primarily for women, there is notwithstanding an abundance of biblical wisdom and invaluable application for men as well.

VanDoodewaard tackles the sensitive issue of who a Christian should or shouldn't date and insists that it is essential to marry someone who not only shares the same Christian faith but also shows evidence of that faith. While realizing that perfection does not exist on this side of heaven and that every marriage is formed between two sinners, nevertheless one can discern the seeds of godliness or ungodliness in a person's life far in advance of marriage and follow the trajectory to where it would lead in marriage if left un-

changed. Upon careful consideration, no one should settle for anything less than the best that God has to offer them.

The book is structured along the lines of the impact of marriage spiritually, emotionally, mentally, physically, and relationally. The author puts a special emphasis on the spiritual impact as that which frames all the other aspects (p. 27). But lest the reader think that a healthy marriage only depends on finding the right suitor, it is incumbent that one also gives due attention to making themselves well-suited for marriage personally.

This reader could find nothing to quibble over in this book. However, the book's title referring to the two "halves" of a marriage can produce the wrong idea that a person is incomplete without having another person in their life. Though the author never suggests this idea herself (and to her credit surrounds this phrase with quotation marks), the wording still has the potential of contributing to this popular misconception.

The book is compact, concise, and cheap (available for \$5.24 on Amazon.ca for a paperback copy and digitally on Kindle as well). The book also contains an appendix of study questions best suited for an unmarried person to consider personally or together with a mentor. For these reasons this book is a great resource for every unmarried person to read and to be shared by elders, pastors, parents, and church libraries. Highly recommended!



NOTICE OF CONVOCATION

General Synod 2019 is slated to be convened by the Immanuel Canadian Reformed Church of Edmonton on May 14, 2019. A prayer service will be held on Monday, May 13, 2019, at 7:30 PM at the Immanuel Canadian Reformed Church building. Synod Edmonton 2019 will commence on Tuesday, May 14, 2019, D.V.

All material for Synod should be sent to the attention of the Synod Organizing Committee at the address of the Immanuel Canadian Reformed Church of Edmonton:
 21112 35 Avenue NW, Edmonton, AB T6M 2P6
 email: clerk@synod.edmontonimmanuel.ca



According to the GUIDELINES FOR GENERAL SYNOD all material for Synod should be received by the convening church (in digital format, and five paper copies) no later than six weeks prior to the convocation date of General Synod. Material received after this date shall ordinarily not be added to the agenda unless Synod is satisfied that the reasons given for later arrival are reasonable.