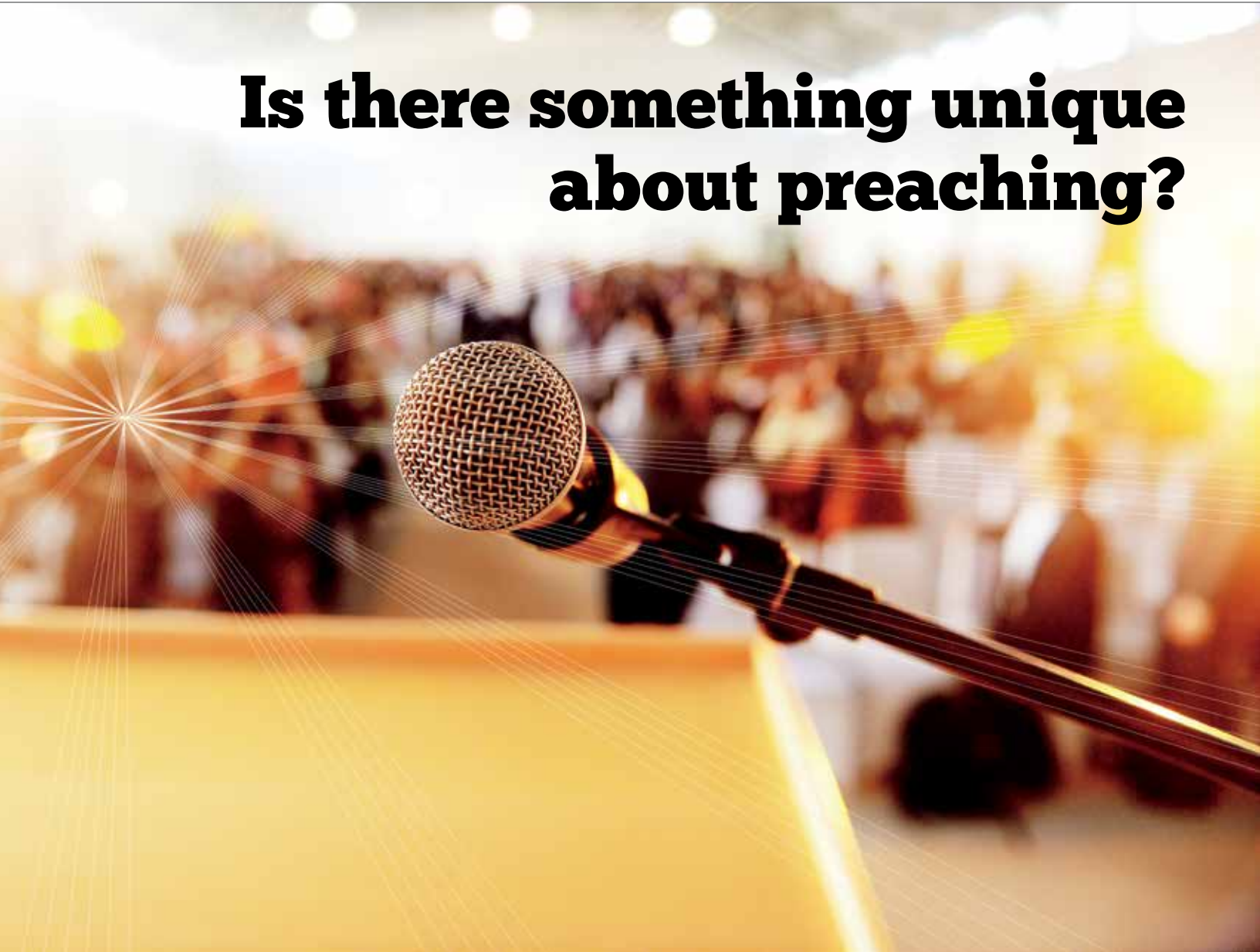


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THE CANADIAN REFORMED MAGAZINE

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Is there something unique about preaching?



*BE ON YOUR GUARD AGAINST ALL COVETOUSNESS
WHAT DO WE SAY TO THOSE WHO LEAVE THE CHURCH?*

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

This issue begins with a guest editorial by Dr. Arjan de Visser of CRTS. He asks the question: Could our ministers learn something from TED talks? These are short, powerful talks of eighteen minutes that generate a lot of interest and millions of views online. In his editorial, Dr. de Visser looks at some aspects which may be of value to our preachers and others which would not work so well.

Issue 16 continues with Rev. Tim Schouten's "Understanding Christianity" series. Parts 4 through 6 take a look at morality, sin, and God's justice. Look for the rest of this series in our next issue!

Our regular columns include Treasures, New & Old, Clippings on Politics & Religion, Clarion Kids, Education Matters, and You Asked. There are also two letters to the editor.

Laura Veenendaal

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Preach like TED?

Could preachers learn something from the way TED talks are delivered?

I am aware that that one of my colleagues at the seminary might be alarmed when he sees the title of this article. So let me explain right away: This article is not about Ted's preaching even though that would be an interesting topic in itself. Rather, I want to discuss the question whether preachers can learn something from *TED talks*.

When TED is written with capital letters, it is not a shortened form of Theodore but an acronym that means Technology, Entertainment and Design. It is the name of an organization that promotes the spreading of interesting ideas in the form of short, powerful talks of eighteen minutes maximum. The slogan of the organization is: *Ideas worth spreading*. TED talks are delivered at conferences and then made available online at the organization's website (ted.com). These talks have become very popular in recent years. Many of them are posted on YouTube and they attract millions of views.

Of course, the phenomenon of TED talks has been noticed by those of us who are in the preaching business and it causes us to reflect. After all, as a preacher you believe you have "ideas worth spreading" as well; even the best idea, the gospel. Could preachers learn something from the way TED talks are delivered? Should sermons be a lot shorter? Should the preacher come away from behind the pulpit and be much more of a "presence" on stage, just like TED speakers are doing?

Nine lessons

In order to find answers to these questions, let's start by taking a closer look at the phenomenon as such. I'm using a book by Carmine Gallo for this purpose, titled *Talk Like TED: The 9 Public-Speaking Secrets of the World's Top Minds* (St. Martin's Press, 2014). Gallo analyses and describes the features

that have made TED talks to be so effective. He summarizes everything in nine lessons, as follows:

One: *Unleash the master within*. This means: Be passionate about your subject because passion is contagious.

Two: *Master the art of storytelling*. Tell stories, because this stimulates the brain and will make it more likely that hearers will identify with your point of view.

Three: *Have a conversation*. In order to connect well to your audience, your delivery should be effortless, and in order for it to be effortless, you need to practice relentlessly.

Four: *Teach me something new*. You need to come with a new solution to an old problem, or a new insight, or at least a fresh way of packaging an old idea.

Five: *Deliver jaw-dropping moments*. Your speech needs to have moments that are shocking, impressive, or surprising – something that is so moving that it grabs attention and is imprinted on the memory.

Six: *Lighten up*. Use some humor. This will draw people in and makes you seem more likeable.

Seven: *Stick to the 18 minute rule*. If you speak longer, people can't handle the amount of information anymore. So keep it short.

Eight: *Paint a mental picture with multisensory experiences*. In order to hold the attention of the listeners you need to stimulate all the senses (sight, hearing, touching, movement, etc.)

Nine: *Stay in your lane*. Be who you are. Be open and authentic.

Evaluation

If we evaluate these nine aspects from the perspective of preaching, we can immediately agree with some of them, as they are common sense. It is true that a preacher should

be passionate about his message (lesson #1), that storytelling is effective (lesson #2), that a sermon needs to teach something new or fresh (lesson #4), and that a preacher should be authentic (rule #9).

Other aspects, however, are questionable. While it is important to have a good audience connection, I do not think that preachers should be expected to “practice relentlessly” in order to be able to “deliver effortlessly” (lesson #3). I can see that someone who will deliver a speech at a TED conference would practice relentlessly in order to be able to deliver his message perfectly. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity! For a preacher who is expected to prepare and deliver one or two new sermons every week, this is simply not doable.

Another difference is that preachers are not in the business of trying to produce jaw-dropping moments (lesson #5). They are in the business of proclaiming the Word of God, which has its own in-built power to stimulate the mind, pierce the heart, and activate the will.

Please do not get me wrong. I’m not suggesting that sermons should be long-winded, boring, monotone, or unmemorable. But there is something unique about preaching that prevents us from simply applying the approach of TED speeches to preaching. Let me work this out by looking at two aspects.

Sermon length

First, there is the question regarding the length of sermons. As we’ve seen earlier, the maximum length of a TED talk is eighteen minutes. Should this be rule for sermons as well? In order to answer this question, we need to take into account that there is an important difference between a TED talk and a sermon. A TED talk takes one main idea and tries to present it powerfully and effectively. This can be done in fifteen minutes. A sermon, on the other hand, takes a passage from God’s Word, explains it, reflects on it, and applies it to the lives of the hearers. This can hardly be done in fifteen minutes. If we agree that preaching should be



expository, it means that we need to give our preachers time to do the expository work and explain what the text means.

Speaking from personal experience, I have to confess that as a beginning preacher my sermons were too long. Over time I have learned to be harder on myself and delete paragraphs and sentences that can be missed. Watching TED talks online has encouraged me to try even harder to prune my sermons. I'm down to 2500 words, but I doubt that I will be able to bring the word count down much further. You come to a point that you can't remove anything anymore without taking away essential aspects of the content. A good sermon is like a meal. It needs to have some substance. If you take away too much, it becomes a snack and people are not appropriately "fed" anymore.

At the same time, I do agree that verbosity (using more words than needed) is an enemy of effective preaching. From this perspective, preachers of the gospel can learn something from watching and listening to TED talks.

Delivery

The second aspect we need to consider is the delivery of the message. If you watch TED talks online, you invariably see someone who is passionate because he or she has a personal connection to the topic. The person seems confident, speaks from memory (without notes), and appears on stage in full view of the audience (without using a lectern.) It's all about being dynamic and making a powerful impression. Again, there are good things about this approach, but it cannot just be applied to preaching. I suggest there are at least three reasons why the delivery of a sermon is different from the delivery of a TED talk.

To begin with, preachers do not present their own ideas. They are supposed to be ambassadors who convey a message which they have received from their Sender. Somehow, this should be reflected in the way they deliver their message. When you are someone else's mouthpiece, it will come out – even in your demeanour – that what you are saying is not your own message but the message of the one who sent you. For this reason, I always appreciate it when during the sermon a minister has a Bible in hand and quotes sentences and phrases from it as he works his way through the text. For the same reason, it is preferable for a minister to stand behind a pulpit rather than to walk about on stage. It helps not to draw too much attention to the person of the preacher.

Second, the character of the message is different. *TED talks* convey "ideas worth sharing" and presenters try hard to convince the audience that what they have to say is interesting and important. *Sermons* do other things. They convey a message that must be accepted for

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eternal salvation. They cause hearts to be pierced and to be "strangely warmed" (John Wesley's expression). They teach, rebuke, correct, and train in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:16, 17). This leads naturally to a different kind of delivery.

Third, when the Word of God is preached faithfully, it comes with an in-built power and authority that TED talks do not have. Faithful sermons proclaim the *Word of God*, and the Holy Spirit makes that Word penetrate into the hearts and minds of the hearers. Therefore, the preacher knows that he does not need to pull out all the rhetorical stops. He has the calm confidence of a salesman who knows that he has a very good product to sell.

In his first letter to the Corinthians the apostle Paul writes: "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. . . . My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Cor 2:1-5). In his next letter to the same church, Paul writes that he does not use deception but that he aims to "set forth the truth plainly" (2 Cor 4:2).

Now, I'm sure Paul was a very effective speaker but, apparently, he did not believe in using rhetorical tricks. He was confident that the combination of Word and Spirit would bring the listeners to faith and repentance. I cannot imagine Paul ever thinking, "I still need to add a jaw-dropping moment to my sermon" or, "I still need to think of a good narrative for maximum impact." Paul did not worry about such things. He knew he had a powerful message that was supremely relevant for everyone listening, and he trusted that the Holy Spirit would cause the message to hit home.

In conclusion, can preachers learn valuable things from watching TED talks? They sure can, as long as they keep in mind that sermons are in a different category. Let preachers preach engaging sermons, setting forth the truth plainly, all the while trusting the power of Word and the Spirit!





Be On Your Guard Against All Covetousness

“Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” (Luke 12:15)

Leading up to the parable that has come to be known as “The Parable of the Rich Fool,” the Lord Jesus made the striking statement that we find in Luke 12:15. This was the initial answer of Jesus to the man who wanted his brother to divide the inheritance with him. In this answer, Jesus goes right to the heart of the issue between the brothers. The main focus of this man who had come to Jesus was focussed only on the accumulation of wealth and possessions. In response, our Chief Prophet and Teacher preaches the necessity of contentment.

However, if we step back and look at the bigger picture, then there is even more that comes out. The apostle Paul, in 1 Timothy 6:8, echoes this concept of contentment, when he writes, “But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.” Especially when we consider the fact that food and clothing are considered to be two of the basic needs of life, then it makes sense to be content with simply the basics.

But while they may be the basic needs, that still does not mean that food and clothing are to be the primary focus of one’s life, as though having an abundance of food and a large wardrobe of clothing are the things that truly matter. There is a difference between being content with what we have and being focussed on what we have. The Lord Jesus addresses that in Luke 12:23, “For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.” So if the main focus of life is not to be found in even the basic needs, then where is it to be placed?

That question is answered for us in Luke 12:31, “Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you.” Life is not about food, or drink, or clothing. Life is not about the abundance of any of our possessions. True life is about the relationship that one has with the Lord Jesus Christ, who bought us with his blood. Life is not about our possessions, it is about whose possession we have become.

This problem of possessions taking over as the focus of life did not only exist during the time our Saviour was on earth. This is a problem that continues to exist today and will continue until our Lord returns. Especially in our world, where so many serve the god of materialism, the temptation is all around us as well to focus on having more and having better. Companies use attractive advertisements to try and convince everyone that we all need the latest and greatest.

But the message of contentment is conspicuously absent. You will never hear a company tell you on an ad to be happy with what you have. That is why it is important that we let our lives be guided by Scripture, where we are taught about what is truly important in life. Life is not about the abundance of what you own. Life is about the one who owns you, having purchased you with his precious blood, shed upon the cross. Let us heed his teaching so that we live in contentment, focussing on the kingdom of God and living as citizens of that kingdom!

For further study

1. How can you tell if your life has become too focussed on what you own?
2. What are some ways in which you can guard against coveting?





Understanding Christianity

What do Christians believe? Why is the cross the symbol of their faith? In this series, originally prepared in ten short parts for the Prince George Citizen, Pastor Tim Schouten explains some of the fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith. In this issue we publish parts 4–6.

Part 4: Morality

Are you a good person? How do you know?

Whenever we ask questions about “good” and “bad,” we are dealing with the topic of morality. And whenever we deal with morality, the fundamental question is: “How do we know?” Who decides what is right and what is wrong?

The answer that Christianity gives is: God decides. God is the only ultimate foundation for morality and it is he who determines right and wrong. Apart from believing this, all our moral judgments are simply personal or cultural preferences.

In the first chapters of the Bible, we see God making statements of value and giving moral commands. He creates the world and calls it “very good.” He places the first man and the first woman in this very good world and gives them one command: “You shall not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” Why did God give this command (or any command)? There are three basic answers.

First, since God is the creator of all things, he has every right to decide what is right and wrong, and therefore give commands. He is the potter, we are the clay.

Second, God has knowledge that people don’t. To protect people, he provides boundaries, just like parents do for their children because they love them. His commands are not arbitrary but are designed to make us flourish.

Third, God created people to love him, and the way we are to express that love is through humble trust. God designed people to glorify him and enjoy his presence as completely dependent children. We are to express that dependence by trusting his judgments and keeping his commands.

God did not create automatons. He did not program us to respond to his love; instead, he created us with our own wills. He wanted us to truly respond to him and love him with our heart, soul, and mind. As part of that, he gave us a choice: Will you accept my moral standards, or will you reject them?

This understanding of morality is fundamental to Christianity. As we saw in the first part of this series, Christians do not believe that humanity is the measure of all things. People do not have the right to determine what is good and what is evil but must leave those judgments to God and live their lives accordingly.

All of this informs the Christian response to the question, “Are you a good person?” as we will see in the next part.

Part 5: Sin

Is it still okay to talk about sin? Or is the topic of sin out-of-bounds?

These are, of course, loaded questions. If talking about sin was out-of-bounds, it would mean that it is a sin to talk about sin.

The definition of sin is that it is the breaking of a moral code. Every person has some kind of individual moral code and every religion and culture has some kind of collective moral code. There are some things that are okay (moral) and other things that are not okay (immoral).

The word “sin” is simply the biblical and Christian word that labels what is immoral according to God’s code. Christians believe that we sin when we break one of God’s commands.

It must be said, however, that the Christian concept of sin goes much deeper than breaking a command. There are reasons why people break commands.

In the third chapter of the Bible, we find the parents of all humanity (Adam and Eve) presented with a choice. God

has told them that they must not eat of a certain tree in the Garden of Eden or they will die. Satan, God's chief spiritual enemy, tells them the opposite: "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Satan begins his argument by casting doubt on God's character. Isn't it the case, he implies, that God is only holding something back from you? That he is keeping all the power and glory for himself? Satan then appeals to Adam

and Eve's pride. He suggests that if they eat the fruit, they will be just as qualified as God to know, and therefore decide, what is moral and what is immoral.

Christians believe that Adam and Eve's choice to eat of the tree was of great consequence for the history of the human race. Our first parents became infected with two

spiritual diseases: (1) a distrust of God and (2) a desire to be like God, especially with respect to deciding good and evil. They then passed on these diseases to their children and the rest of humanity.

It is, of course, impossible for Christians to prove that any of this happened. But when we think about the varying accounts of human origins, we should consider which one best explains what we see in the world today. Why is the human race so fractured and broken and – if this word is permitted – evil?

Christians believe that the biblical account of sin gives us the answer to that question.

Part 6: Justice

Perhaps you've seen these words on a church sign or a social media post: "God is good. All the time."

These words are intended to be comforting. But are they? Perhaps we might think differently if we inserted a synonym for "good." Imagine that we changed the words to, "God is *just*. All the time."

In the previous section, we explored the Christian concept of sin. We now turn to the related topic of the justice

of God and the consequences for sin. As we do so, we'll see that the hardest part of Christianity is the belief in a God who is perfectly and eternally just.

According to the Bible, part of the essence of God is that he does not change. God revealed himself in the Old Testament by the personal name *Yahweh* (usually translated in English as "the LORD"), which means "I AM WHO I AM." He said about himself through the prophet Malachi, "I the LORD do not change."

Another way to think about God's unchanging nature is to think about his faithfulness. He is always faithful – to himself, to his creation, and to his words. It is because he is faithful that the sun rises and sets every day. It is because he is faithful that the seasons come and go.

It is also because he is faithful that he will never compromise his own goodness or justice, and it is this that results in the central problem of humanity. God had said to Adam and Eve about the fruit of the forbidden tree, "When you eat of it you shall surely die." Then they went ahead and ate from it. Now what?

Remember that this was about much more than simply taking a fruit. This one command was a definitive test of their loyalty and loving submission to their Creator. When they broke the command, they consciously rejected his authority and love. In doing so, they fell under the just punishment that he had prescribed. They deserved to die.

In the Bible, death is more than the physical shutting down of our bodies. To die is to be severed from a relationship with God. Since God remains good while people, because of their sin, have become evil, there is a natural separation. This separation from God is death, and it is worse than we can imagine. We experience some of it within this life, but its ultimate form is what the Bible calls hell – the place where we will finally and fully experience the absence of God.

"God is good. All the time." These are hard words. Christians believe that because of our sin we are rightfully separated from God, the ultimate good, the source of all life, and our only true happiness.

Why is the human race so fractured and broken?





Turkey's Persecution of Christians Intensifies

Although Christians are a tiny minority in Turkey, comprising less than half a percent of the population, President Recep Erdoğan and his Justice and Reconciliation Party, the so-called AKP, picture Christians as a serious threat to the stability of the country. Anne-Christine Hoff has documented this troubling development in this member of the NATO alliance in a recent article in the June issue of *Middle East Quarterly*.

She wrote that “with Erdoğan’s jihadist rhetoric often stereotyping Christian Turkish citizens as not real Turks but rather as Western stooges and collaborators, many Turks seem to be tilting toward an ‘eliminationist anti-Christian mentality.’”

After the failed coup in 2016 against Erdoğan’s drive to Islamize the nation, Erdoğan used the opportunity to intensify his persecution of Christians and to make Turkey even more Islamic. He has long hated Christians. As the mayor of Istanbul, he had once said: “Mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets, and the faithful our soldiers” in the war against all non-Muslims in Turkey. At the time (1998), he was put in prison for inciting religion-based hatred, but once in power, “He steadily realized this vision, systematically undoing Atatürk’s secularist legacy and Islamizing Turkey’s public space through such means as the government-operated Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet), which pays the salaries of the country’s 110,000 imams and controls the content of their Friday sermons.”

When the coup against his government failed, Erdoğan “ordered the imams to go to their mosques and urge the faithful to take to the streets to quash the attempted revolt.” Muslim gangs then attacked churches. Istanbul pastor Yüce Kabakçı lamented that “Turkey is neither a democracy nor a secular republic. There is no division between government affairs and religious affairs.” And so the government uses the mosques for its own ends. This pastor added that “anyone who isn’t Sunni [the type of Muslim found in Turkey] is a threat to the stability of the nation. Even the educated classes here don’t associate personally with Jews or

Christians. It’s more than suspicion. It’s a case of let’s get rid of anyone who isn’t Sunni.”

Institutions like the educational system are being Islamized. Schools are used to promote “a distrustful view of Christian Turks and the predominantly Christian West. . . . There is almost no discussion of peace, coexistence, dialogue, or nonviolence. Instead, students were taught to fear differences and to treat their non-Muslim friends as decidedly the ‘other.’ . . . Also government organizations and the military perceive Christians as a threat to Turkish unity.”

Consequently, it is becoming more difficult for Christians to worship. Christians do not have the same rights that Muslim Turks have. “Turks who openly discuss Christianity face harassment, threats, and imprisonment. Most churches are surrounded by high walls and protected by 24-hour guards.” Even retaining ownership of an existing church is not a sure thing. The government can appropriate church property at will. “In April 2016 for example, the authorities seized all the churches in the majority Kurdish southeastern city of Diyarbakir. The historic Armenian Surp Giragos Church, a 1,700-year-old church and one of the largest Armenian churches in the Middle East, was seized by the government.” Recently, “the Turkish government also recently seized multiple properties in the southeastern city of Mardin belonging to Assyrian (Syrian) Christians and transferred them to public institutions: Dozens of churches and monasteries were reassigned to the Diyanet; cemeteries were transferred to the metropolitan municipality. This seizure of church property is one of many indications that the government does not view Christians as part of the broader Turkish community.”

Christians in Turkey find themselves in an increasingly precarious position. These believers in the land of the “seven churches” (Rev 2-3) need our prayers.

Sources used: All quotations are from Anne-Christine Hoff, “Turkey Turns on its Christians” *Middle East Quarterly* 25:2 (2018) available on the Internet.





The Great Reformation and Education: The Impact of Luther and Calvin (Part 2 of 2)

Rev. den Hollander presented this speech at the CRTA convention, November 2017

The progress of the Great Reformation & of scriptural pedagogy

It is sometimes forgotten that the Reformation was as much concerned with school as it was with church and home. Not only Luther, but also Melancthon – sometimes called the greatest scholar among school organizers of the German Reformation – as we saw, actively promoted Reformed education, as did Bucer, Bullinger, Zwingli, and Calvin in their writings and works. It is clear that the sixteenth century witnessed what is perhaps the most concerted effort to reform education according to the norms of Scripture. The early reformers have earned an important place in the history of education, as they were the first ones to express the principles of Reformed education and to develop the objectives and methods according the Scriptures.

Though Luther and Melancthon differed on the value of the classics, they were of one mind on the centrality of Scripture and theology in the curriculum of all ages. In terms of pedagogy, Calvin associated himself in his writings with the mainstream of humanism, which also was Calvin's educational background, namely before his conversion to the Reformed faith! Thus, he was influenced by classical ideas of education after his conversion as well as by Christian ideas of childhood held by the church fathers. Huldreich Zwingli was also influenced greatly by the thoughts of humanism, especially by those of Erasmus, the prince of the humanists. Nevertheless, already in 1523, he wrote his thesis, "On the Education of the Youth." John Knox on the other hand, like Luther, emphasized education in the family. Knox's most important contribution to education was the scheme of national education which he

instituted in Scotland (established and conducted by the church!), for rich and poor, boys and girls, for at least four years, once a week. Calvin was particularly interested in the education of girls (often at special school, included in the curriculum home economics!) with as goal the moral education of the future wives!

When Calvin became involved in such educational matters, there was a great interest in education already evident in French speaking areas, especially in French towns which had commercial relations with Geneva. Unlike Luther, Calvin did not produce treatises directed specifically to education. Yet, we find numerous expressions of concern about it and actions to promote learning. It is most likely that the most potent influence on Calvin's development as a theologian came from Luther directly and from those whose embrace of Protestant doctrine had preceded Calvin's own conversion.

Calvin was indebted to and associated with Bucer, especially during his time in Strassburg, when he also was engaged in teaching actively. Though the reformers wrote little about pedagogy, Bucer did comment on it. His well-known seven methods of teaching – reading, interpreting, Q&A, exhorting, catechizing, debating, and privately admonishing – were derived from the Scripture. Bucer, however, took the verses out of context and imposed his own view on it. He did want to point out, however, that the *methods* of instruction must reflect Reformed conviction. As he said, "All these seven methods of teaching Christ our Lord Himself employed with diligence. In the synagogue in Nazareth He *read* and *interpreted* the 61st chapter of Isaiah (Lk. 4); on the mountain He *explained* the Law of God (Mt. 5); and He frequently *taught, encouraged, censured, and rebuked* from the Word of God. He also *answered* all, those good and bad, who asked *questions*, and in turn *interrogated* Him (Mt. 22) He repeatedly *catechized* His disciples, and was Himself catechized (Lk. 2)."

Calvin's philosophy and views of education, schools, etc.

Perhaps no other leader of the era was better prepared than John Calvin to undertake the task of reforming education. As one admiring biographer remarked – A.M. Huizer, *The Education of Calvin* – “Master of Latin, Greek, Hebrew, his legal mind, fully furnished with legal knowledge, profoundly versed in Scripture, with the whole field of patristic literature at his command, saturated with the principles of the reformation, aware of its conflicting cross-currents, instructed in the views of many sects, he returned to Geneva to stamp his name thereon!” Calvin called the *church* back to its official task of teaching the children committed to its care. The teaching of children is to be instruction of life according to godliness. They must learn what it means to be Christian, and so appropriating God’s message of redemption in Christ Jesus, all of life comes to be lived by them in obedience to the Scripture (“wise unto salvation!”).

Calvin points at Romans 12:1, where the Christian is called to give his whole earthly existence to God as a sacrifice. This, as you all know, has been expressed so beautifully in the emblem portraying his motto: “I offer my heart promptly and sincerely to you.” This emblem and motto is special to me too, seeing that I am an alumnus of Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I should add that, to him, Christian living in this prompt and sincere devotion is a sober, just, and godly life in this world in the anticipation of the coming of Christ (Titus 2:11, 12). This upbringing, instruction, and education must begin at home. The role of parents is embedded in the covenant of the OT, NT. In Genesis 18, God chose *Abram* that he may instruct his *children* to keep the covenant. Calvin’s emphasis – the parental responsibility – is explicitly located in baptism. Baptism is not a vehicle of grace but a sign of covenant responsibility. Calvin took the parental responsibility regarding the children in the broader context that man must serve his Creator. Baptism signifies the meaning of life in Christ’s death and resurrection.

Calvin’s doctrine of children in the covenant, then, is the foundation for Christian education. The covenant makes Christian education possible and demands it for fulfilment. Children cannot be dealt with as if they were without God in the world. Rather, the image of Christ is to be restored in them. The child must be made conscious of his covenant position (which, by the way, is expressed so eloquently in Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 1). Yet Calvin stressed repeatedly that it always is the Holy Spirit who works in us by the means which God has appointed in the covenant. Covenant education is first, last, and always the nurturing of life – a life which God has granted to the

covenant child. This all will be evident in an experiential, growing relationship curriculum, and should be the assurance that the promise (Word) of God and the response of man are always before us. Education at school must be in direct connection and with *family* education: again, the covenant started in Abraham’s *family*!

Calvin believed that knowledge of the Word of God was necessary for understanding the whole spectrum of learning. Schools were established to train children for a life of service. Learning by itself would not lead to faith. The goal of education is to assist the covenant child in growth toward faith and service to God’s glory, to prepare the hearts for preaching, the person for their task in society and for offices in church and state. Religious education is at the core of Christian education. Children must come to a recognition of all this and then, after that, a recognition of their calling.

Another typical Reformed educational idea adopted by Calvin was that children should be schooled in the faith *early on* while they were still young and relatively free of sinful acts (well *before* the age of *six*!). Calvin’s position it was as well that education should be tied to the core areas of Reformed *congregational* practice: i.e. education in the faith. This resulted in the fact that textbooks in addition to the catechism were illustrated books of Bible stories or ABC primer that included prayers and psalms.

For the purpose of education in this setting and pursuit, Calvin wrote his *Instruction in Faith*. In it he used material from his *Institutes in the Christian Religion*; simple, positive, and remarkably free from polemical reference. As the first edition was yet too hard to be memorized by the children, he wrote the second edition, *The Catechism of the Church of Geneva*, with a greater emphasis on the chief end of man, upon knowledge as the response from heart and life to God. In this second version he reversed the order of the Law & the Creed, now placing the creed first, not the law: he placed the law in the light of God’s matchless goodness and grace, the law as rule of life and gratitude!

A special lesson that I have learned from Calvin and applied with great joy in my ministry is his position that Catechism instruction is intrinsically a dialogue between minister and catechumen in the presence of the living God of the covenant, who through his Word of grace and salvation actively engages in molding the hearts and the lives of his people to his praise. Not only the mind but, above all, the heart must be educated! This understanding of catechesis as an intensely personal speaking and listening and responding completely dominates the form as well as the contents of Calvin’s catechism. This is one of his signal contributions to the nurture of children in and by the church. Here the self-revealing triune God is powerfully and persuasively active

through the teaching ministry in drawing the children into conscious fellowship with himself and thus eliciting from them the response of faith, hope, and love.

Calvin was also very consciously aware of the fact that apart from divine grace there can be no successful nurture in godliness. No sacrament can convey this grace. No educational curriculum or methodology can control it. It's God's free gift, which comes to us in the form of his "promise" and summons us to respond in faith and repentance but remains always in his control. The Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ, who makes use of the Word as his saving instrument, infuses it with quickening and transforming power, so that those who are saved glory in the Lord. Hence Calvin's goal with catechesis never was child-centred but always a reflection of the glory of God. Thus, Calvin saw education as a means to the glorification of God and the edification of the church, through the exposition of God's truth in such a way that the people of God might learn to worship and serve him as they ought.

The Great Reformation, the reformers, and today

John Calvin, the "Educator par excellence," strongly pursued that covenant education is the heart of all learning. Calvin's concern for the children of believers reflects the covenantal character of his theology. Calvin maintained the aim of education should be to inculcate the knowledge of truth as God has disclosed it through general as well as special revelation. Knowledge of Scripture is the foundation for education, which must promote appreciation for God's work of redemption along with a grasp of factual content in the various disciplines. While *Luther's* opinion about the relationship between church and state lead to his demand that the state organize, establish, and finance Christian schools, *Calvin* brought the upbringing and education of the youth back under the supervision and discipline of the *church*. Schools were to be reformed, which meant that the congregation had control over the curriculum and that all of the teachers were required to be active members of the congregation. Teachers were placed under the supervision of the clergy and schools under control of the church.

At the Synod of Wesel in 1568 the church had already taken the education and schools under its care and supervision. The leaders in the church had to ascertain that the teachers had made public profession of their faith, that they submitted to the discipline of the church, and that they taught the youth the Catechism and other instructions beneficial for the religious upbringing of the youth. Also, the National Synods of Dordrecht (1576), Middelburg (1578), and The Hague (1586; 1591) dealt with these matters of educa-

tion. Especially the National Synod of Dort, 1618-1619, did a lot of good for the education and the schools. They spoke about the upbringing of God's children at home (the parents are their bishops!) and stressed the unity of their education and the fact that man is one, which should remain a fundamental principle through all the stages of education.

Notably the seventeenth session of this National Synod of Dort, on Friday, November 30, 1618, when speaking about "Living with Christ in the family," this upbringing in the homes and the operation of the schools were the point of intense discussions. Central to these discussions were the unity between home, church, and school. Then they considered the blessing of the Lord in the rapid spread of the Reformation. In that context they considered the question "how this was possible," and came to the conclusion: though the *church* in all its outer and inner existence was apostate and decadent, at the grass roots there still was knowledge. This knowledge may not have been much perhaps, as Luther observed, yet there was knowledge still concerning the three main summaries of faith: the apostolic confession, the law, and the Lord's Prayer. Then the remarkable comment is made that this knowledge existed thanks to "the home Catechism instruction!" In this context we read that the parents, but especially the beloved mothers, had been the most important "house pastors and bishops."

Luther built on this and did so effectively and fruitfully! Calvin made this the heart of his philosophy of covenantal education, and Ursinus, in his *Treasury*, "based the entire catechetical education on LD 1, with the intention that the children make this their own, by the working of the Holy Spirit." Hence covenant education is a "Grace Full Education," indeed, nurturing a life and relationship with God. God's Word and the child's response are central!

Finally, in Luther's as well as Calvin's philosophy of education, the concept of man created and recreated in the *image of God* played a prominent role. In the history of Reformed and covenantal education, Dr. K. Schilder took this over and considered it fundamental as well. He stressed man's restoration as prophet, priest, and king and man's task resulting from this restoration. Man being the image of God must become visible, evident again in his life and lifestyle. Thus, in man, God becomes visible and evident again and becomes known in this world, as man emulates Christ, renewed in his image. In education and instruction, man's task and cultural mandate as ruler, steward, and representative must be central, for the glory of God. Hence, also the education at the schools covenantal and Reformed: instilling the *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *sola Scriptura*, and *solus Christo* of the Great Reformation in the children of the LORD, unto the *Soli Deo Gloria* in all of life! Thank you!



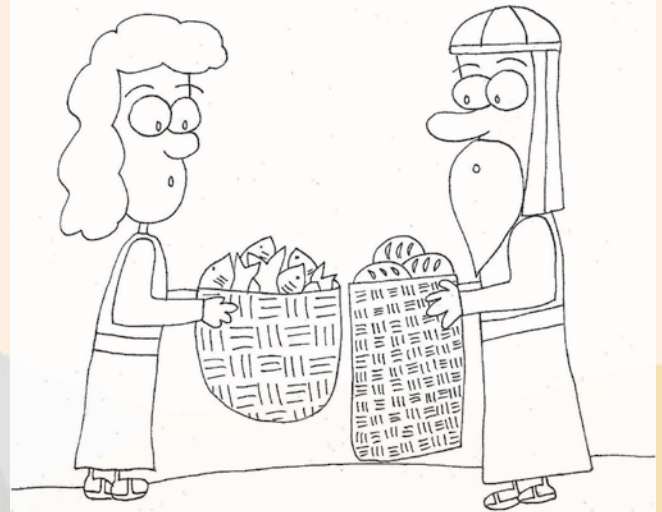
Clarion Kids

Jesus Feeds Five Thousand

Luke 9:10-17, Mark 6:30-43

When Jesus was preaching and healing, he often had large crowds of people following him. One day Jesus had a crowd of about 5000 people follow him to a place in the countryside. They started to get hungry and Jesus told the disciples to feed them. The disciples could only find five loaves of bread and two fish. They didn't think there could possibly be enough for everyone. But Jesus blessed the food and told the disciples to hand it out. Everyone ate until they were full. Then the disciples went around and collected twelve baskets of leftovers! What a miracle!

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



Crossword Puzzle

Across

2. What Jesus did to the bread and fish.
4. The people started to get _____.
5. How many loaves of bread they had.
7. Jesus was often followed by large _____.

Down

1. Who Jesus told to feed the people.
3. Any amazing thing done by Jesus.
5. The kind of meat they fed to the people.
6. How many baskets of leftovers collected.



by Emily Nijenhuis



Q In the light of Hebrews 6:4-6, what do we say to those who leave the church?

In the light of the author's words in Hebrews 6:4-6, do they say that anyone who leaves the church after having been baptized and having made profession of faith cannot repent? Is it useless to admonish them, or should we keep trying to bring them back? Please give an explanation of these verses!

A The words in these verses have been discussed much in word and writing. From the days of the early church, its matter has occupied the minds of believers for various purposes. During the first centuries of the NT church history, many people used this text in the case of believers who, due to persecutions, fell away from the Lord and his church. On the basis of Hebrews 6:4-6, such people were convinced that a member who had fallen in sin due to persecutions could not be readmitted, even if he came in remorse and repentance. The scenario included by the questioner points in the same direction. That, however, is *not* the matter at stake in this text. It is about the impossibility of a second conversion!

In the words of this text, we meet with what is often called the sin against the Holy Spirit. The author of this letter to the Hebrews repeats this matter where he writes in chapter 10:26, "For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins." This, also, is expressed by the Lord Jesus where he speaks about "the blasphemy against

the Holy Spirit," or by the apostle John's words about "the sin unto death." This so-called "unforgivable sin" has given rise to much uncertainty about its actual meaning. In the message of this text, however, the Holy Spirit is coming to us to confirm us in the salvation in Jesus Christ!

The author of this epistle to the Hebrews poses the impossibility of a second conversion as a matter of *fact*, as a fact in the light of the other Scriptures and as a fact in his own practical experience. The verses 4 and 5 articulate that such is the case even though these people who fell away shared in so much richness in the church of the Lord, enjoying so many gifts there. What does the author say they receive? They had become enlightened by knowledge of the truth. They stood in the full and radiant light of the gospel, of the glorious proclamation of God's love. They really got a taste of all the mercies of God, the gifts of grace, the gift of the righteousness in Christ. They shared in the Holy Spirit, who worked in them. They gave themselves to the powers of the kingdom of heaven, which is to say that they got involved: they worked along; they joined in the activities. . . until things started to change. They became lukewarm, cold; they were turned off by one thing or another; they turned hostile to those who

tried to call them back. . . and they broke away. In the author's days this would mean that they fell back into the Jewish conviction, and their hostility grew so bad that they, if they could, would have nailed the Lord Jesus to the cross again! However, then their act was not just crucifying the Lord Jesus again, but crucifying him whom they had learned to know as the *Son of God!* To that knowledge of the truth, the Spirit had enlightened them!

In the Word of God, we find other examples of such an impossible second conversion. King Saul, for instance, comes to mind, of whom we read that "the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him (1 Sam 16:14). An example in the New Testament would be Judas Iscariot, who, as one of the disciples, was blessed with the special privilege of being in Christ's presence constantly, enjoying the most sublime instruction, witnessing his wonderful works. This Judas Iscariot himself did powers and signs, cast out devils, and preached the gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit! Thus, this text also is speaking about those who harden themselves against the LORD *till the end*. It speaks about apostasy, falling away, not about falling into sin: Judas fell away without returning; Peter fell into sin but soon afterward saw the resurrected Jesus. Apostasy is a process, a decline leading to unbelief, to disobedience. It leads to hardening of the heart and the impossibility of repentance. David fell into sin, was convicted, and confessed; even King Manasseh walked in

sin for an extended period of time, yet he humbled himself (2 Chron 33:18f.).

It's the fact of this hardening which the author of this epistle observes. It is this apostasy to which he alerts his readers. Its threat is applied for the benefit of the readers. It's an apostasy which happens after the full revelation of the Christ as the Son of God was given to such Hebrews (cf. 1 Tim 4:1). How come? Why is a second conversion, why is a return to the LORD, impossible? First of all, then, we should realize that we may not separate God's plan for the life of a man from the man's personal responsibility and will: unbelief is disobedience. Man's falling away from the living God is fully his own responsibility! Take note also of what the author wrote in 3:7, 12, "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, *leading you to fall away* from the living God." It is in this warning, threatening way that the sin against the Holy Spirit is brought up in the Scriptures every time. After Pentecost, when they heard the gospel about the Lord Jesus and him crucified, namely the Son of God (!), directly from the Spirit of God, then they cannot hear it *more fully* again! These Hebrews too, who are in danger of falling away after they have come to the full revelation of Christ by the Holy Spirit, fall back into their former Jewish state: there will not be a second possibility of conversion! In the gift of the Holy Spirit of the Word you have it all!



**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
denhollanderw@gmail.com**

23 Kinsman Drive, Binbrook, ON L0R 1C0

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

Please accept my comments in response to the letter to the editor by Josh Sieders, published on June 15, 2018. In his letter he takes issue with the article published in the May 4th edition of *Clarion* entitled, “The Burning of the Wooden Shoes.” Brother Sieders and I share the author’s concern that the CRC is adrift and “that the church’s mission should remain above all preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.” So far so good.

Brother Sieders then takes issue with the Dutch heritage of many members of our federation. Like those in the CRC who thought that their “Dutchness” was an impediment to the spread of the gospel, he questions, “Doesn’t that make us squirm even a little?” Perhaps it is a legitimate question, but I think the answer all depends on where you find your identity as a Christian. Are you Canadian Reformed because you are Dutch, or are you Canadian Reformed because “you wholeheartedly believe the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confessions and taught here in this Christian church?” (Form for Profession of Faith). I can’t speak for others, but I answered yes to the second question. The primary reason that I am a member of the church is not my ethnic background. When I come to that conclusion, being Reformed is actually quite exciting. Affirming the Reformed confessions unites me with believers all over the world.

The Reformed confessions are rooted in the Reformation that transformed much of Europe, not just The Netherlands. They have been instrumental in bringing the gospel to Brazil, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, even China and beyond. The confessions have international status and influence. So, I disagree with the statement that we are merely

retreating “into our own brand of 1950s Dutch immigrant Christian culture.” Our Reformed heritage has a much longer and broader appeal.

The next statement of Brother Sieders is equally concerning. He suggests that “finding security in our “rich Dutch heritage” or the Reformed confessions – both blessings – can also be a case of misplaced identity.” Lumping the Reformed confessions together with our Dutch heritage implies that they are one and the same concern. I understand that being Dutch and not wanting to engage with those of different cultural backgrounds could be a case of misplaced identity, especially since our identity as church is based on faith. I cannot, however, understand how finding my security in the Reformed confessions can be construed as misplaced identity. What is your only comfort in life and death? That I am not my own but belong to my faithful saviour Jesus. I do find my identity in the confessions of the church or at least I should.

In light of this, I think Brothers Sieders has missed the point of Christopher Gordon’s article “The Burning of the Wooden Shoes.” Gordon’s concern was not that they were dispensing with their Dutchness. Gordon was concerned that they were dispensing with their true identity, the confessions of the church. “Stuffed within the burning shoes were the very confessions that defined her, resulting in the complete loss of any biblical and confessional identity.” By suggesting that our adherence to the Reformed confessions can be a case of misplaced identity, I fear you are encouraging the same. As a result, you have not disproven Gordon’s concern. In fact, you have validated it.

Sincerely, Rev. Steve van Leeuwen



Dear Editor,

In his letter to the editor of *Clarion*, June 15, 2018, br. Josh Sieders wishes that we are wrestling with and writing about the questions he poses. I would like to confirm that he is not alone in his wrestling and writing.

Br. Sieders mentions “our own brand of cultural Christianity,” and connects that with Dutch 1950s immigrant culture, as a concern for potentially reaching others. I don’t recognize this Dutch culture, perhaps because I was born post 1950s, or perhaps because I *am* born and raised Dutch. Although I do recognize that the Canadian Reformed churches have a certain culture, as I also recognize a particular culture in other Canadian and American churches.

The rubber hits the road when culture prevents people from “seeing Jesus in us and through us.” However, when a Presbyterian congregation is ethnically primarily Scottish, that would not by definition prevent non-Scottish people from seeing Jesus in that congregation. A church with last names starting with O’ or Mac does not cause an identity problem. A worship service in distinct Afro-American culture does not limit seeing our Saviour either. Nor does the use of an organ, piano, or band, a church order or a confession, or a certain order of worship. As an “outsider” I have experienced other churches’ culture and heritage as a blessing and gift from God, just like ours. We should not squirm about that, but count God’s blessings.

I have seen visitors in church, sometimes with a Tim Hortons cup in hand. Our congregations do open their doors and reach out (Reading Rooms, Christianity Explored, Coffee Break, GEMS, Cadets, Stephen Ministries, Concerts, work with e.g. the Salvation Army). But I agree that there is lots to improve.

Yet, I do not want to relate this to the number of visitors. Br. Sieders did not mention new members, but I have heard this connection elsewhere. On social media we measure our success in followers, or friends, or connections. In business we create brands and have people connect with our brand. Is our faithfulness, our commitment to God, also measured in number of visitors or members? Therefore, congregations with few visitors or declining membership are not on the right track? Are we not too concerned with what God does, and neglect our own responsibility?

Jesus said, “I will build my church” (Matt 16:18). We need to sow – but only God will give the growth (1 Cor 3:7).

We read that churches will find themselves in difficult situations in the last days. Not because they lose members, but to remain faithful (see also Revelations 2, 3). Today’s culture and society clashes more and more with the truth of the gospel. There may come a time that we have to choose between losing members and being faithful.

I would like to echo br. Sieders’ concerns about how the world sees our church, our church members, us. Being transformed by the gospel – how does that look? It is not changing the church – but changing our heart! I recently watched Paul Washer’s sermon again, where he spoke in front of 5,000 young people: transformation is life-changing, it impacts everything we do. But it requires knowledge.

Br. Sieders suggests in his last paragraph that preserving outward uniformity across the federation would make us “fall harder.” Uniformity in a church federation is not a concern: rather, it could be a positive factor for all members and support them in their relationship with Christ, their knowledge of God, and their submission to the Holy Spirit. In the churches where I grew up, we did not stay the same, we did not want to ignore the realities of the world around us. We needed reformation, change. To keep the youth, we changed the songs and the music, we reduced catechism memory work, at Bible study we studied books and videos rather than the Bible; we involved the women because of their unused talents, we shortened our liturgical forms, we became open to other denominations for the sake of unity. Locally congregations could create their own flavour of worship. (Looking back, we did not realize that we were adapting to the culture of the world in a pursuit for change and freedom.) Churches don’t fall because of their ethnic culture, but they fall because of their unfaithfulness and lack of knowledge (Hosea 4:6).

I pray that our wrestle is not with our church culture or our – so called – Dutch identity, but with remaining faithful within a culture that has lost tolerance for God’s laws and that becomes an increasing challenge for people that want to walk in his ways.

Frank Ezinga, Langley, BC

*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.*

