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What's Inside

Dr. Jason Van Vliet leads our issue with an article on congregations facing the battle of sexual temptation. His introduction asks these questions: Do we see the danger clearly enough? Are we taking action? And is it the right action?

We also have an article entitled, "The Principles of Worship" by Mike Janssens. This article compares the regulative and normative principles of worship.

Issue 7 includes a Treasures, New & Old meditation, Clippings, a canticle, a book review, and a press release. There is also a report from the St. Albert Canadian Reformed Church on their welcome of the Wieske family.

Laura Veenendaal

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Every Congregation's Battle: Sexual Temptation

Pornographic websites. Indecent apps. Movies with racy content. Chat groups with lewd language. Sexting. Books that entice rather than entertain. Premarital sex. Extra-marital sex. The list goes on, but it can be summed up in one phrase: sexual temptation.

The title of this article alludes to, and slightly alters, the title of a Christian best-seller: *Every Man's Battle: Winning the War on Sexual Temptation One Victory at a Time* (WaterBrook Press, 2000). Published twenty years ago by Stephen Arterburn and Fred Stoeker, this book has sold more than a million copies. It has also spawned study guides, DVDs, conferences, and other books specifically oriented toward women and teenagers.

Questions have been raised about whether *Every Man's Battle* always uses the most appropriate language and is sufficiently gospel-centred.¹ I share those concerns. At the same time, this book has brought the struggle against sexual temptation into focus.

But do we see the danger clearly enough? Are we taking enough action? The right action? Yes, sexual temptation is every man's battle, but every Christian man lives within a congregation. What are we, as brothers and sisters who belong to the same family of God, doing to protect and help each other?

Alarming statistics

Simply put, the statistics are staggering.² More than one-third of all material on the Internet – thirty-six percent to be precise – is pornographic. The average age at which children first encounter sexually immoral images is eleven years old. Since that is an average, many children are exposed to them at a younger age.

Twenty-nine percent of teenagers (ages thirteen to seventeen) report stumbling across Internet pornography on a daily or weekly basis, *without seeking it out*. Forty-eight percent of young adults (ages eighteen to thirty-four) say they have the same experience. One in every four Internet searches is for porn, and forty-nine percent of Canadians think there is nothing morally wrong with that. In fact, worldwide the “adult entertainment” industry pulls in US dollars ninety-seven billion each year.

Smartphones are making things worse. Back in 2008, only one percent of online pornography was accessed through a phone. By 2017, that same statistic had skyrocketed to seventy-five percent. Why? People have their phones with them all the

¹ See www.challies.com/articles/the-best-sellers-every-mans-battle/

² The statistics in this section are from “How Pornography Harms: What the Church Needs to Know” (Evangelical Fellowship of Canada) and “Porn Stats: 250+ Facts, Quotes, and Statistics About Pornography Use (2018 Edition)” (Covenant Eyes). Both are available online.

time, and it's much easier to retreat to some quiet corner of your house and pull out your phone than it is to cart a laptop around.

One might expect that the use of pornography is higher among unmarried people than those who are married. Yes, there is a difference, but not as much as we might think. According to one study, seventy percent of unmarried men viewed pornography at least once a month, as compared to fifty-five percent of married men. That is still one in every two married men, though! Also, the same study actually reported that *more* married women view pornography than unmarried women. Clearly, marriage does not solve the problem.

These numbers all come from studies of the general population. Are things any better within the church? The humbling truth is that if they are better, it is not by much. Among Christian men, sixty-four percent report watching porn at least once a month, and many of them do it more frequently than that. Fifteen percent of Christian women are involved in the same thing. Studies also indicate that one in every six pastors in North America is struggling with a porn addiction.

True, statistics must be interpreted carefully, but the message is more than clear: sexual temptation is a huge – almost overwhelming – problem. We ignore it at our peril.

Our Heavenly Father speaks

Of course, we did not really need a raft of statistics to teach us that sexual temptation is powerful and pervasive. Long ago our God told us all about this.

As recorded in Exodus 19–20, our Holy God descended upon Mount Sinai and gave ten critically important instructions, one of which was the seventh: you shall not commit adultery. Purity in the sexual realm of our lives is not a taboo topic that warrants little more than quiet whispers. On the contrary, its significance was literally thundered from the top of Sinai (19:19).

Elsewhere in Scripture, the Lord expands this brief command into entire chapters. Chapters 18, 19, and 20 of Leviticus contain repeated, specific warnings against sexual sin. Also, the first nine chapters of Proverbs describe how parents should instruct their children in the ways of the Lord. Almost one-third of this section, the majority of chapters 5, 6, and 7, deals with

real-life situations connected to the seventh commandment. Speaking of numbers, that statistic alone indicates that our Father in heaven wants us to pay ample, not merely occasional, attention to guiding our precious children along the wise path of sexual purity.

Our wise Father also draws a sharp, clear perimeter around what the Catechism calls “a chaste and disciplined life” (LD 41). Consider these two verses. “*Flee* from sexual immorality” (1 Cor 6:18). “Among you there must not be even a *hint* of sexual immorality” (Eph 5:3). The italicized words leave no room for

a moral grey zone: if it's impure, it's out. Or, said differently, if it's racy, run ... in the opposite direction!

This God who speaks to us is our Father. He warns us so strictly because he loves us so intensely. But it does not stop there. Because he loves us so intensely in Christ (Eph 1:4, 5), he also forgives us so graciously and so generously. After describing various immoral lifestyles, the apostle Paul added this liberating good news: “And such were some of you. But

you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:11). Falling into sexual sin is *not* the unforgiveable sin.

This involves the whole congregation

There is a verse in 1 Corinthians that we love to quote. Since we are all members of one body, “if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (12:26). If one member in our congregation becomes seriously ill, we all rally to help: cards are sent, meals are delivered, visits are made. Beautiful. If young people publicly profess their faith, we all share in their happiness. Songs are sung. Handshakes are extended. Gifts are given. Beautiful.

But what if the *suffering* does not involve sickness, but rather the tenacious grip of sexual temptation? Do we also pull together *as a congregation* in that circumstance and do what needs doing?

This question is not irrelevant, because the Holy Spirit placed that famous verse about suffering and rejoicing together in the apostle's first letter to the *Corinthians*. Yes, the congregation in Corinth struggled with various problems, but suffering


Purity in the sexual realm of our lives is not a taboo topic that warrants little more than quiet whispers

from the consequences of sexual sin certainly ranked close to the top of their list. Matters relating to sex and marriage can be found in chapters 5, 6, 7, and 10 of Paul's first letter to this congregation, and they come back again in chapter 12 of his second letter. So, being a hand and foot to each other, as we often say, includes doing what we can to help our spiritual siblings – both younger and older, male and female – flee sexual immorality. "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness." But also "keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted" (Gal 6:1).

To be sure, there are certain complexities here. Sin evokes shame. Sexual sin causes enormous shame. Therefore, unlike the sicknesses that are described on the pages of your church bulletin, most struggles with sexual temptation remain hidden in the dark corners of our lives. How can we assist if we don't know precisely who needs the help? Beyond that, sexuality

does have a private aspect to it. The appropriate manner when responding to illness is not necessarily the wisest approach when dealing with sexual temptation.

At the same time, these challenges can be exaggerated as well, with the net result that little, or nothing, gets done. Brothers and sisters, this is a battle. It is spiritual warfare, plain and simple. In physical warfare, we do not send a soldier out onto the battlefield all by himself. That would be fatally foolhardy! But it is no different in the spiritual realm. Putting on the armour of God is a *communal* activity. The references to "you" in Ephesians 6 are plural, not singular.

So, what should we do? Below is an action plan of sorts. Undoubtedly, incomplete and one that can be refined. But let this article serve as a conversation starter, not a definitive answer. The fact is that many of our brothers and sisters are suffering intensely. Will we walk right past them? Or stop to help? "If one member suffers, we all suffer ... *together*." 

CONGREGATIONAL ACTION PLAN

EVERYONE: pray for each other, both privately and publicly. The battle against sexual temptation will never be won by our own moral exertion. Liberation and sanctification come from Christ and his Spirit, not us (1 Cor 6:11). This battle begins on our knees.

EVERYONE: remind each other of the gospel. Our brothers and sisters struggling in the grips of sexual temptation usually feel defeated. They stumble and fall, and stumble and fall again, more times than they dare to count. Hope shrivels, despair grows. We need to remind each other that our God is abounding in love and forgiveness (Exod 34:6-7). His grace is not stingy.

PASTORS: preach and teach it. In the annual cycle of catechetical preaching

and teaching, the seventh commandment comes around often enough. Yes, preaching about sexual temptation to an audience that ranges in age from three to ninety-three is challenging. Teaching sexual purity to a roomful of awkward, blushing teenagers is not exactly easy either. However, nothing at all is gained by taking vaguely worded detours around this critical topic. There is a thoughtful way to speak about sexuality directly yet appropriately.

OFFICE BEARERS: talk to your sheep about this. Certain areas of our lives are bound to come up in home visits, and rightly so. "Are you being fed by the preaching? How are you using your talents within the congregation? How are the relationships within your household?" Let's add another

one to the annual list: "Do all the electronic devices in your household have both filtering and accountability software installed on them?" Since thirty-six percent of the Internet is pornographic, realistically speaking, there is no other choice. We would never slip a pornographic magazine into the pocket of our spouse or child. Why would we allow an unfiltered smartphone to be slid into that same pocket?

PARENTS: at the appropriate age we teach our children about the birds and the bees, as they say. But that is only part of our parental duty. Even the most advanced filtering and accountability software does not catch everything. Please do not make that very faulty assumption. Routines may have to change, but all electronic devices, including

phones, should be used out in the open, in the family room or at the kitchen table, not in the bedroom or the bathroom. If your furniture needs to be changed to accommodate this, it will be well worth the time and money invested.

CONGREGATION: seriously consider starting a support and accountability group to help members of your congregation who are caught in sexual temptation and are not making much headway in fleeing from it. There is good material out there that will help you organize such a group. Your pastor may well be able to point you in the right direction.

EVERYONE: keep talking and praying about this. "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16).

Father, Forgive Them

"And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34a)

Jesus had just been crucified. Crucifixion is extremely painful, even just on a physical level, without considering what Jesus was going through in enduring the wrath of God against our sins. And yet what were the first words from his mouth after he had been crucified? He prays for those who had crucified him. What astounding compassion and grace at such a moment!

Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." He does not pray for himself. He does not pray for relief from pain, or that he could be taken down from the cross, or for revenge against those who had crucified him. No, instead he prays to his Father in heaven for their benefit, for the forgiveness of their sin of crucifying him.

Jesus prays this prayer out loud. He speaks from the cross in public so that everyone can hear him. This prayer is proclamation of good news. Everyone who hears this prayer of Jesus can hear of his love for the Father, and his obedience to the Father in loving his enemies, in showing compassion to those who are persecuting him and hurting him.

As Jesus prays this prayer from the cross, he is carrying out his work as mediator. Right now, as he is praying this prayer, he is making forgiveness possible in God's sight. He is suffering under God's wrath for our sins.


Jesus pleads with the Father to forgive those who crucified him because they do not really know what they are doing. They do not understand whom they have crucified. They do not understand what God will accomplish through Jesus' crucifixion. They are still acting in the time of ignorance, a time which will soon come to an end with the coming of the Holy Spirit.

After Pentecost, the apostle Peter proclaimed to the people in Jerusalem that they had acted in ignorance, but now they need to repent and turn to God so that their sins would be blotted out and forgiven (Acts 3:17-19).

Let us also heed this call to repentance and turn to Jesus Christ alone for the forgiveness of our sins. For we are also guilty of crucifying him. For Jesus hung on the cross also for our sins. It was because of our sins that he had to suffer terrible agony and endure God's wrath. We no longer live in the time of

ignorance, but we have heard the full gospel and have received the Holy Spirit.

Jesus continues to pray to his Father in heaven on our behalf. In fact, he daily intercedes for us before the Father and asks God to forgive us our sins. He asks God this not because we do not know what we are doing, but because we do know the reality of our sins and repent from them. Now we know where to go for forgiveness – to Jesus Christ alone. Jesus intercedes for those who believe in him and know that he has paid the full price for our sins. Jesus pleads with God on the basis of his completed sacrifice, which God has accepted as payment.

May we daily experience the peace which God alone can provide in the forgiveness of all our sins. Let us rejoice in the Lord and find our delight in serving God by showing our thankfulness to him for everything that he has done for us. May we live a life of forgiving one another and showing to each other the reality of Christ's work in our own lives. Let us pray to God the Father that he will fill us with his Spirit more and more so that we might be set free from remaining weakness and shortcomings and grow in holiness and righteousness also when it comes to forgiving others. How good it is to know that Jesus Christ will continually intercede for us before the Father and enable us more and more to live for our heavenly Father in all of life. Let us go our way rejoicing in the Lord and in the forgiveness he has granted us through his Son Jesus Christ. 

For further study

1. Why did Jesus pray this prayer publicly from the cross?
2. How does this prayer cause you to love Jesus even more?
3. What does it mean to you that Jesus prays for you before his Father?



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Principles of Worship

Scripture has no kind words for those who live their lives without any fear of God, wantonly pursuing their own desires. Neither does Scripture have any kind words for legalistic Pharisees who seek to bind the consciences of other believers with endless regulations. In seeking to structure a worship service, a great deal of dispute has plagued the church throughout the centuries, especially since the Reformation.

Since the Reformation, two primary philosophies have dominated the protestant churches in the structure of worship: the regulative principle of worship and the normative principle of worship.

Exploring the two principles of worship

In the regulative principle of worship, a negative, exclusive view is held that declares that worship is to be structured based only on direct sanctions from God's Word. Anything in worship (candles, dancing, ritual movements, incense, props, PowerPoint presentations, the addition of hymns to the psalter, musical accompaniment, etc.) that is not *specifically* mandated in Scripture is, by its omission from God's Word, forbidden. Therefore, incorporating any of these manmade traditions or practices is a violation of the second commandment because it is worship in a way that God has not required.

Early Calvinist churches after the Reformation were sparsely decorated, hymns and instruments were excluded, and the sanctuary was arranged with office bearers placed around a centrally positioned pulpit to emphasize the centrality of the preaching of the Word.

The regulative principle takes a very high view of Scripture and a very low view of man. It finds a great deal of support from the regulations of the Old Testament, where worship was strictly regulated, and also draws support by way of example in the early churches and the epistles. Since man is fallen, how could anything that does not find direct support from Scripture be introduced into the worship service and be pleasing to God, especially when God himself has made clear from his word that worship is to be rendered to him on his terms alone?

The normative principle of worship takes a different approach. Here, a positive, inclusive view is held that where anything that is *not specifically forbidden* in Scripture is, by Scripture's silence on the matter, permissible in worship. Thus, the introduction of culturally relevant material, the use of technology, candles, incense, hymns, musical instruments, and whatever else may be seen as edifying for the local congregation is permitted as long as what is introduced is not explicitly forbidden in Scripture.

Defense of the normative principle

Supporters of the regulative principle will assume that such a permissive view of worship can only be based on a lax view of Scripture and a willingness to tolerate impure, imperfect practices in worship. Such an assumption is not necessarily accurate. The normative view need not devolve into absurd charismatic “party churches” that seek to draw great crowds with entertainment as the primary means of filling the pews, as is often accused. It is true that such churches prioritize their own edification in their structure (or lack thereof), but this is usually done without any meaningful guidance from Scripture at all, and any part of Scripture that would speak negatively of their wild practices is simply ignored. This is neither a proper exercise of the normative principle nor an inevitable devolution brought on by its adoption. Such a church is no longer a New Testament church, since it is no longer regulated by the authority of Scripture (www.gotquestions.org/regulative-normative-worship.html). To suggest otherwise is to commit a strawman fallacy.

Many normative principle churches have, in fact, a very high view of Scripture, and have the glory of God as a very real priority in their worship. A better example of the normative principle is found in the Lutheran churches. One can rightly criticize their understanding of the Lord’s Supper and question their system of church government, but no honest critic will deny that the environment of their church services is one of reverence and respect, while also following the normative principle of worship. Here, Scripture is used as a guide to worship, not a manual for worship. For example, the Lutheran churches note that the Old Testament church used incense and candles, and sees the same imagery in the apostle John’s vision of heaven found in Revelation, and they incorporate both of these into their worship services today, not on the grounds that Scripture mandates their use (it does not), but on the grounds that such devices lend themselves to the creation of a reverent environment that is suitable for worship since it directs the worshipper’s attention toward heaven as part of a multi-sensory experience.

Many normative principle churches have, in fact, a very high view of Scripture, and have the glory of God as a very real priority in their worship

The biggest risk to a normative principle of worship, if it is adhered to in a way that still holds Scripture in a high regard, is that consistency of the church can be undermined due to the

ever-present license to experiment with alternative ideas for worship – a form of ecclesiastical navel-gazing.

But a key component for consideration here is how the church views the edification of the congregation. Regulative principle adherents insist that the Word is the sole source of edification for the congregation, and that any suggestion that the Word is insufficient to edify is near to (if not outright) blasphemy. The normative principle adherents, on the other hand, suggest that the Word is the primary, but not the sole, source of that edification, and that other practices, insofar as they enhance

the edification that is brought by the Word, are permissible because they are beneficial. In both camps, the Word is central to edification.

Defense of the regulative principle

The criticisms of the regulative principle of worship involve three primary aspects. First, and most commonly, the accusation is made that the regulative principle of worship is often applied in a way that comes off as highly legalistic, robbing the congregation of the joy of worship in its strict rejection of anything not explicitly mandated in the Bible. The worship service becomes a list of rules about what one cannot do. Other criticisms suggest that the formality of regulative principle worship can give an impression that worship is a corporate activity, discouraging the Christian from personal or family worship, since worship is “only a church thing.” Finally, the critics say that the regulative principle of worship cannot be sufficient, since even the strictest church will need to decide for itself matters that the Bible is simply not prescriptive on. They point out, correctly, that even in churches that hold to the regulative principle, endless debate exists on how to implement it. The input of man, after all is said and done, is ultimately required to fill in the blanks that Scripture leaves behind.

The first criticism – legalism – is well answered by Dr. Kevin DeYoung.¹ On The Gospel Coalition website, he argues that, rather than the regulative principle being about restriction, it is about freedom (www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/the-freedom-of-the-regulative-principle/). His defense of the regulative principle shows a viewpoint where the church is free to focus on the Bible itself. While it is true that the formal nature of worship found in regulative principle churches does have a sober tone to it, the image of a joyless congregation sitting under “preaching” that condemns other churches for daring to sing hymns or rails against the use of musical instruments as a violation of the second commandment is far from what regulative principle adherents have in mind. Indeed, such “preaching” – being devoid of a gospel message – would not satisfy the definition of preaching at all and would fall, rather, under the term of “lecturing,” which has no place in God’s church.

The second criticism – corporatism – is based on a misunderstanding of how regulative principle adherents apply the principle. Since the regulative principle of worship is exclusively applied to corporate worship, the accusation suggests that personal or family worship does not exist because the regulative principle does not apply to it. This is an oversimplification. No church that practices the regulative principle of worship properly would ever preach to the congregation that private worship or devotions are inappropriate or that family worship ought not to be practiced. On the contrary, both forms of worship are highly encouraged in both preaching and elder visits. It’s true that while the church would not encourage congregants to set up a shrine in their homes with incense and candles for the purposes of personal worship, they would highly encourage the core of personal worship: the reading of God’s Word and the meditation on it.

The third criticism – insufficiency – is perhaps the most difficult to answer, since honest adherents to the regulative principle will concede that a great deal of debate exists – and persists! – in the Reformed churches about what is and is not appropriate. There is also a varying amount of degree to which churches adhere to the regulative principle. There are

very few Reformed churches left, for example, that practice exclusive psalmody. The answer to this criticism is found in the Westminster Confession:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, *or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture*: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men... (Ch. 1, Sec 6, emphasis added).

Thus, faithful men can deduce from Scripture what Scripture itself is silent on. This, when applied to the regulative principle of worship, tempers the accusation that the Reformed churches are necessarily relying on the normative principle to fill the gaps on matters that the Bible is silent on. On the contrary, if the normative principle of worship were being used to fill the gaps left by Scripture, there would be no need for debate within the Reformed churches at all, since any differences would fall under Christian liberty. Instead, the existence of that debate underlines the commitment of the Reformed churches to the regulative principle of worship, since the matters being debated are constantly being weighed carefully against what Scripture lays out for the churches. Not all the answers are apparent or agreed upon, but the principle of weighing all liturgical practices against Scripture and *only* Scripture is a cornerstone of the debates that rage on within the Reformed church community.

Avoidance of extremes

The regulative principle of worship, in its very wording, is an absolutist position. If *nothing* can be added to the worship service that is not explicitly mandated in Scripture, then an argument can be made that only the most extreme versions of this model are adhering to it at all. If a Reformed church has an organ, includes hymns in its liturgy, or refrains from celebrating the Lord’s Supper every single week, it has departed from the regulative principle of worship unless it can provide a direct, Scripturally-based argument for the change.

Many Reformed churches rely on less than concrete exegesis and hermeneutics to justify the departure from exclusive

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psalmody or the inclusion of instruments.² When those exegeses and hermeneutical arguments are challenged, the church has typically already compromised on the practice and reforming back to the orthodox position would cause serious division within the body of Christ. One can only imagine the cultural outrage in the Canadian Reformed Churches if the next synod were to throw out all the hymns and ask the churches to dismantle their organs. Thus, the deviations are tolerated, then defended, and today, the Canadian Reformed Churches have expanded from sixty-five hymns in their Anglo-Genevan Psalter to eighty-five in the latest version, with already some call for a further expansion.

This is not meant as a criticism, but an observation. The Canadian Reformed Churches show wisdom when they allow for a carefully weighed variation from the strictness of the regulative principle in order to maintain the unity of the church. The regulative principle might very well be the gold standard that the church is to strive towards, but so is a life completely free of sin in thought, word, and deed. Understanding and accepting that human weakness will prevent a perfect adherence to the regulative principle reflects the grace of God and acknowledges that our imperfect worship is sanctified by the Holy Spirit. God will accept our worship, imperfect as it is, on the basis of Christ's work and the Spirit's power. In the meantime, the church is to guard, as much as she is able, against wild and overt attempts to change the worship service into a form of entertainment, and to urge constant vigilance on the part of the congregation so that they guard their hearts from temptations to that end and fortify their minds with the wisdom to see the difference between that which is honouring to God and that which is merely attractive to our own selfish desires.

An extreme and closed-minded insistence on the regulative principle as the only basis for truly God-honouring worship, if it is untampered with compassion toward the weaker brother and the limitations of the human nature, will not lead to a God-honouring worship service.

How to change the worship service of a regulative principle church

If there is a case to be made that the liturgy would be improved in some way, the argument for the change must be rooted in Scripture with the following principles firmly in mind.

First, the change proposed must be demonstrably greater than the current practice in its conformity to Scripture and its level of respect and honour given to God.

Second, the change proposed must have the first point as its *primary focus*, as opposed to being the by-product of some other benefit. For example, if God is glorified because the congregation is better edified, or because attendance in church is improved, or because the church is more attractive to visitors, then the change proposed is at best insufficient in its reasoning, and at worst (and more likely) attempting to use the glorification of God as a rubber stamp instead of a point of fact.

These principles will be explored in the following case study.

Case study: the responsive "Amen"

There is variation in how the Canadian Reformed Churches deal with congregational involvement. A typical service without congregational involvement might look like this: the minister would open the service with a votum based on Psalm 124:8. Next came a salutation, which for the morning service was taken from Ephesians 1:2. At the end of the service, the minister would bless the congregation with the Aaronic blessing from Numbers 6:24-26. In the afternoon service, the salutation at the beginning would be taken from Revelation 1:4-5. The blessing at the end would be taken from 2 Corinthians 13:14.

In all these salutations, blessings, and the votum, the minister alone would speak, appending an "Amen" to each piece. In recent years, changes have been proposed to the format of the liturgy that would involve the congregation in a responsive structure. The votum, prompted by the minister, would be spoken, with the "Amen," by the congregation in unison instead of the minister alone. The congregation also would respond with "Amen" to the salutation at the beginning and the blessing at the end of each service.

The specific reasons for a consistory making these changes might be (and likely would be) multiple. This paper will examine different reasons why this change might be made and weigh those according to the regulative principle.

Good reasons for the change would be based entirely on Scripture and be focussed on bringing glory to God in a way that is more closely aligned with Scripture than the old practice, such as the following examples:

²Relying on a single passage from Colossians 3:16 (sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs) to justify the inclusion of man-made hymns takes the passage out of context and invents a distinction between the three that is not implied by the passage. The Old Testament psalms written by David were referred to by the Hebrew word *Tehillim*, which means "hymns" or "praises." For example see purelypresbyterian.com/2017/09/19/a-concise-case-for-exclusive-psalmody).

1. The new practice more closely reflects the practice of the Old and New Testament church as found in Scripture.
2. The new practice honours God by having each member of the congregation, and not just the minister, respond individually and collectively to God's call to worship, to rely on God for his provision, and to thank him for his blessing.
3. The new practice brings honour to God's majesty by reflecting each member's calling, as prophet, priest, and king, to submit to God's rule in their lives as opposed to placing on the minister a mediatorial role that God has not given him to act on behalf of the congregation.

Each of these reasons, or any combination thereof, are biblically sound, and if the change is made to reflect these truths from Scripture, then the change would be warranted, and should be implemented (while also being commended to the rest of the federation as a superior practice).

However, it is also possible that the reasons behind the change would be focussed, not so much on God and his glory, but on the congregation. These underwhelming reasons might include:

1. The new practice helps the congregation to better understand the responsive nature of the liturgy.
2. The new practice awakens in the congregation an awareness of God's presence, helping them to prepare their minds for worship.
3. The new practice is more likely to keep the congregation's attention on the worship service and free from distraction.

On the surface, these reasons are well-intentioned and may even lead to a better participation in church by the congregation, but the focus is wrong. The congregation's edification is elevated here above the glory of God, and thus places their experience, and not God's glory, at the centre of attention.

One might argue that making changes for the purpose of congregational edification does not, by definition, take away from the glory of God or interfere with the glory of God in the worship service. Granted. But the point being made here is that if the reasons for the change are from the latter list instead of the former, then the church is making decisions apart from the regulative principle of worship and should understand that. In a case like this one, if the rationale given follows the second


set of reasons instead of the first, the change should not be made - not because the changes are not beneficial, but because the rationale given for the change, if accepted, would set a precedent for changes in the future that would also not be based entirely on God's Word. If the church allows a change to be made for extra-biblical reasons once, no matter how well-intentioned, beneficial, and harmless the changes are, the door to extra-biblical changes has been opened and it will prove extremely difficult to close that door again the next time someone comes with similarly extra-biblical arguments for why some other change ought to be made.

Why does it matter? If the changes being made are beneficial to the church, does it matter where the rationale comes from? It most certainly does, for one very simple reason: what is "beneficial" to the church, unless the grounds are entirely scriptural, are subject to opinion, preference, changes in culture and educational standards over time, and the desires of the local church.

Conclusion

The regulative principle of worship is a standard of worship intended to keep the church pure. Extreme adherence to this principle can cause a church to lose an understanding and compassionate heart for her weaker members. Insufficient attention paid to this principle will place the congregation instead of God at the centre of the worship service, which is inappropriate and dangerous.

The normative principle of worship is a standard of worship that is intended to be flexible with the needs of the congregation and still be guided by the Bible. Carelessness with the normative principle will cause the church to degrade the authority of Scripture as the final authority in church life. Extreme adherence to the normative principle will lead to the church engaging in a form of navel-gazing that is unhelpful and ultimately unending.

Whichever principle, or combination thereof, the church adopts and pursues, she would do well to proceed prayerfully, with the law of love guiding them (Gal 5:14). The words of Hebrews 10:24-25 serve as a good final thought: "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." 



St. Albert Welcomes the Wieske Family

June 1, 2003 marked the beginning of the instituted church of St. Albert, a church borne out of the bursting Providence Canadian Reformed in Edmonton. From a church of over 650 members, 177 broke off to start a new beginning, congregating inside a small senior's home community hall. While this relatively small church began facing concerns of age demographics and questions of where future church growth would come from, they began looking to develop deep roots in a city they loved.

October 1999 marked a special occasion in Surrey, BC where a young candidate by the name of Kenneth Wieske, fresh out of the Canadian Reformed Theological College, was graciously being ordained to become a Minister of the Word. The newly ordained Rev. Wieske would not remain in Surrey however, as he would head out to Brazil the following May to take up his post as a missionary in Recife, Brazil. At the age of thirty, Rev. Wieske, wife Tamara, and their young son – with a newborn on the way – would head out to an unfamiliar country to take up God's calling for them: preaching the gospel to lost sinners, training new office bearers, and teaching men to become pastors.

In sixteen years of existence for the St. Albert Canadian Reformed Church, two pastors came and left from its midst. From the seminary, a young Rev. Bredenhof and Rev. Roukema came and served the congregation faithfully before being called elsewhere. During this time, the church moved location to rent the Red Willow Community Church and saw growth of

the church swell to 380 members, eliminating the initial fears of lack of growth for the new congregation.

For twenty years Rev. Wieske worked in Brazil, sharing the gospel and building new Reformed churches and teaching young men to become Reformed pastors themselves. The family built roots in Brazil, being blessed with five children while in Brazil and living life as South Americans, and not as former Dutch Canadians as so many of us within the Canadian Reformed circles.

In 2016, Rev. Roukema left St. Albert to take up his calling in Burlington, leaving St. Albert vacant and on the search for a new pastor. For three years St. Albert remained vacant despite six calls to various ministers, while being blessed with retired ministers filling the pulpit to spare the willing elders of reading services on top of their other tasks.

In 2017 Rev. Wieske was diagnosed with cancer, resulting in his return to Canada in April of 2018 and ultimately making the decision to cease his time as a missionary. He was made available for call to the Canadian churches February of 2019, leading St. Albert to make its providential seventh call for a minister to Rev. Wieske. By April, the call was confirmed and both St. Albert and Rev. Wieske had their future made clear.

A summer of anticipation for both parties ensued. St. Albert finally moved into their new building after renting for sixteen years and then eagerly awaited their long-desired pastor and teacher. Rev. Wieske completed his final surgery in April and then used the following months closing off and saying good-bye to Brazil and preparing to transition to Canada.



Welcome evening


August 29, 2019 became the big night where St. Albert officially welcomed the Wieske family. Siebe Koopman kicked off the evening as Chairman of the night with reading from Romans 15:1-23 and singing of Psalm 84. Immediately afterwards, Siebe ran off to prepare a pot of tea for the Wieskes, following in the spirit of Tamara, who settled into their new home with a pot of tea herself, stressing the point that the “Who” is more important than the “What” in life. Siebe kept the church laughing and the mood light-hearted with flowers and baking for various members of the Wieske family and others celebrating special days of anniversaries and birthdays. Pauline DeHaas gave a historian speech, revealing that St. Albert is the only Canadian Reformed Church that is named after a Roman Catholic church, likely the only church that had three sets of identical twins at the same time, and a reminder that the growth of the church has not just been old Dutch names from abroad, but new members from around St. Albert as well. The history of St. Albert is rich, and we abound in hope and the preaching of the gospel to be a blessing to each other and those around us.

After the historian speech, the church was treated to an impressive choir made up of men from Council, then a PowerPoint presentation of the church life within the St. Albert community, followed by a guess the location picture game. Next up was a question period with Rev. Wieske and Tamara and Siebe, producing more laughs for all. Teen Club then tested the Wieskes’ knowledge of which statement matched which teen, producing more confusion and laughter than correct answers – to the delight of the teenagers. Gifts were then given out to the whole Wieske family, mostly centralized around the extreme weather conditions of different proportions than to what the Wieskes were accustomed to in Brazil.

Finally, Rev. Wieske stood to address the crowd, expressing appreciation for all that had been done to make the family feel welcomed in St. Albert, and how he had told the kids that “they were going home to Canada” and that the kids responded in saying that they were not returning, because they had never lived here. Despite that, the family was feeling the bond and unity with the people of St. Albert. Rev. Wieske reminded us that we Christians are pilgrim people in this life, never settling but always looking forward to God’s perfection that he has laid out for us. That life is about knowing God in love and we will feel the bond and unity in Christ wherever we are on this earth. He exhorted us to rejoice now and look forward to perfection with Christ and to serve one another and bless one another until that time.

Installation

The following Sunday morning during the installation service, Rev. Van Spronsen – preaching from 1 Peter 5:6-11 – reminded us that we are to live in submission in God’s plan. Time in Brazil may be different than God’s plan, but that plan led Rev. Wieske from Brazil, to sickness, and to us in St. Albert, preparing us together. Rev. Van Spronsen exhorted Rev. Wieske to preach to the glory of God faithfully and in his perfect timing, reminding us all that while the devil attacks, we can fight back knowing Christ has already won the battle and equips us to fight the good fight.

A church in the north of Alberta, a missionary family from South America, joined together by God’s providential guidance. Pilgrims on this earth, bonded by the one faith, one hope, and one baptism that God has gifted us. May God equip us all to work together, looking forward to God’s perfection for us all! 

United Methodists Hold Firm

Methodism's roots are with John Wesley (1703–1791), a man of matchless energy and organizational ability. Wesley used to write his letters while riding his horse from one town to another, where he regularly preached every day of the week. Sometimes a crowd awoke him at 5 a.m., begging him to preach a sermon. You could call that every preacher's dream, or nightmare!

Wesley belonged to the church of England and sought to work reform within it, not to start another. But by his death, his followers had already begun forming the Methodist churches, named after Wesley's "methodical" approach to Bible study and personal holiness. Unfortunately, Wesley was openly Arminian in his doctrine of salvation.

Failure to approve same-sex marriage

The reason why Methodists have been in the news in the last year has to do with the failure of the General Conference of the United Methodists in February 2019 to approve a proposal of its own bishops to allow churches and pastors freedom on the question of same-sex marriage. The conservatives – a fair term to use in this case, for they are seeking to conserve or preserve moral orthodoxy, as defined by the Methodists' own standards – actually defeated the bishops' proposal, fifty-three to forty-seven percent. A big part of the explanation was the role of the African and Asian delegates. The results flummoxed the bishops and those in the church's bureaucracy. In January 2020, the leadership proposed to split the church over the issue, letting churches that could not accept same-sex marriage leave, keep their assets, and receive, as a group, a payment of twenty-five million dollars. This proposal is likely to be approved in May 2020.

Renewing the United Methodist Church

On the conservative side of the United Methodists is an American Professor of Wesley Studies named William J. Abraham. In a lengthy essay published on the blog of The Institute on Democracy and Religion, Abraham wrote about the task that

now lies before the conservatives.¹ They will come into power in place of the current liberal leadership. Thus, writes, Abraham, they will need to work constructively towards the renewal of their church. Abraham thinks of this critical moment as an opportunity to move into an even more biblical direction this remaining church that is holding fast to the biblical ethic. His article aims to equip fellow church leaders to withstand opposition and press forward well.

How the debate is framed

Abraham writes about the wave of attacks coming against traditionalists from "progressives" in the church. "Our current political culture of incivility, ignorant criticism, and moralistic shaming has erupted.... The temptation to rush in and seek to make peace where there cannot be peace must be resisted ... our critics have effectively framed the debate in terms of inclusion and exclusion. This is a godsend because it allows them to run a narrative about slavery and women in ministry." The progressives frame any opposition to same-sex marriage and all the rest of the sexual revolution as an oppression of minorities, an unjust exclusion, an evil akin to slavery and every other kind of exploitation. Abraham responds to this:

This whole way of thinking needs initially to be seen for what it is, namely, a toxic combination of persuasive definition, virtue-signaling story-telling, and fallacious reasoning. The ultimate issue for the conservative is none of these moves, much less a combination of them. The crucial issue at the end of the day is one of faithfulness to our Lord and to the tested tradition of the church. The failure to recognize this is an egregious error. It is the old game of Sein and Schein ... so that what seems to be true is not true.

The issue is faithfulness to God and the Word

Abraham realizes that the very idea of what is "faithfulness to our Lord" is fundamentally contested. The progressives have a

¹See <https://juicyecumenism.com/2019/03/17/mountains-climbed-next-united-methodism>. Accessed 7 March 2020.

counter narrative by which they also claim that they are pursuing “faithfulness.” They distort every appeal to the gospel, to notions of equality and justice, to Scripture, tradition, experience, reason, inclusion, and the like. Abraham refuses to let this cloud the issue: “To ignore that faithfulness is the real issue for conservatives is to poison the wells at the outset.... The real issue is accountability to church teaching and practice. Failure to frame this issue initially in this way constitutes an elementary blunder in the interpretation of what is at stake.”

One must not give up basic convictions

Because the progressives frame the conservative position “as one of causing harm,” says Abraham, “we face an unavoidable dilemma. We speak, and we are accused of causing harm; we stay silent, and we are accused of collusion with oppression.” This shows the totalitarian nature of the worldview that promotes the sexual revolution – if someone simply does not get on board with it and promote it, that person is colluding with the oppressors. He or she is evil. There is no neutral position. The only way for a conservative to “stop causing harm” is to endorse the opposite point of view, but that of course, “is precisely to ask conservatives to give up their moral and theological convictions.... However, to insist on this is intellectual madness; it is a case of cooking the books by means of moral and emotional blackmail. Frankly, we have had enough of this verbal bullying; it is time to confront this form of intellectual malpractice and refuse its assumptions.”

Cross-bearing is unavoidable


One can appreciate that Abraham writes with the confidence that divine revelation is dependable and that he has correctly understood the biblical norms. There is no other way forward; one needs to ask God for the ongoing conviction that only the Holy Spirit can bring, so that those wanting to hold to Scripture will indeed do so; they will be faithful. Although faithfulness will bring suffering, “cross-bearing is unavoidable for Christians; it is doubly assured for those who would lead the church into a better future ... adversity has always been the lot of those who engage in ministry.” Abraham also knows that the turmoil faced by the conservatives in the United Methodist Church is showing up all over Christian churches. This is one of the reasons why his writing should be consulted by those in other churches who are seeking to remain faithful in the midst of the current revolution of morals.

Most readers of this magazine can thank God that we do not face from within our own churches what Abraham faces from within his. But the nature of the opposition he faces is much the same as what we face in the world around us. It should be obvious that liberal Christians of the kind Abraham opposes have completely imbibed the secular standpoint. In some cases, liberal churches such as the United Church of Canada have been ahead of the cultural curve in their support of the ongoing sexual revolution.

Reflections

Next time I will share a few other thoughts from Abraham’s essay. Right now, I’m thinking of John Wesley. Was it even possible for Wesley, who died in 1791, to have imagined that the churches that followed him would one day have the majority of the bishops in favour of same-sex marriage? I am certain he could not have even imagined this. As little as forty years ago, no one even mentioned same-sex marriage. As little as a decade ago, transgenderism was unknown. But now, in the name of “inclusion,” these personal choices about sex and gender are equated with the categories of race, ethnicity, male, and female. To criticize an act is to demonize a person. To insist upon any moral standard except personal consent and inclusivity is to oppress others, indeed, to assault their very identity.

Wesley’s insistence on holy living could never have abode such a re-casting of Scripture, such an abuse of Scripture, by which the principle of inclusiveness is filled with anti-biblical and immoral content and then claimed still to be a central biblical principle. Wesley would be thankful for those who are standing firm, including William Abraham.

We can note that many of the same issues arise all over Christian churches whenever change is pursued apart from a serious return to the Word of God. Inclusivity seems like such an indisputably Christian value—and its roots are indeed Christian – but Satan knows very well that the way to make people pursue evil is to give it the appearance of the good. After all, God made us to pursue all that is good and true and beautiful. We should never be surprised when Satan appears as an angel of light. 



By Ted Van Raalte *Professor of Ecclesiology*
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I Am the Gate

Text: Based on John 10:7-10 So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

George van Popta, 2019

Tune: V. Schumann's Geistliche Lieder, 1539

LM
Von Himmel Hoch

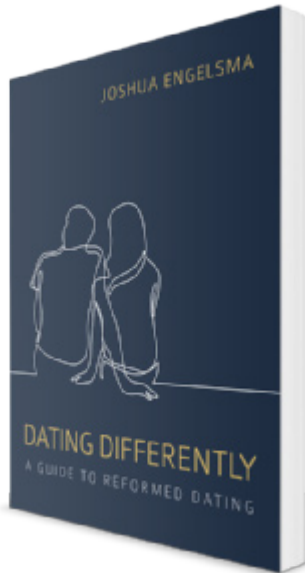
1. I am the gate for all the sheep. I will my own in safe - ty keep.
 2. They will find pas - ture down to lie. Up - on the shep-herd they re - ly.
 3. O come to me and be set free. En - joy full life a - bun - dant - ly.

All they who en - ter in through me will be re - deemed e - ter - nal - ly.
 They will not lis - ten to the thief for he would cause them un - told grief.
 I am the gate, for you I've come. O en - ter now to find your home!

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Dating Differently:

A guide to Reformed dating



Dating Differently
A guide to Reformed dating

by Joshua Engelsma
Reformed Free Publishing
Association (2019)
160 pages; softcover


This book transported me back to my years of teaching teens: Bible 12 classes exploring Song of Songs; Health Ed and Career courses with grade tens. Dating, a challenging but always engaging topic. So, is Dating Differently different? Yes, different from the typical fair readily available at Indigo or Amazon, but it falls in line with solid biblical principles about the relationship between a young man and woman.

This brief book covers a lot of ground in a conversational, pastoral tone. Joshua Engelsma unabashedly states his focus: outlining and explaining biblical parameters to guide a young couple in learning to know each other well. He has little issue with the term “dating” as opposed to “courtship” but maintains that the overarching purpose of dating is to move toward marriage.

Engelsma addresses more than a half dozen topics each in the form of a question. When should I start? Maturity is essential. Who’s the one? Someone of the opposite sex, a believer. He suggests: “The focus is less on finding the right one and more on ourselves becoming the kind of mature believer that a fellow believer would want to date. We should give more thought to becoming someone rather than finding someone” (p. 66). He gives some practical ideas on what to do on a date. He takes a strong position on the leadership role of the man, also in these decisions. Parental guidance remains important. He insists on sexual purity until marriage and gives some helpful suggestions on the discussions a couple could have in order to set clear boundaries. He briefly addresses the question, “What if I’m single all my life?” He rounds out his advice with a chapter on the right time to get married.

Engelsma writes in an accessible style. The chapters are brief and divided into sections with headings that make for easy reading. He covers a topic sufficiently so that real guidance is provided. Detailing some of his own experiences, he demonstrates he has not forgotten the anxieties and insecurities that face a couple as they move from the early stages of dating, through engagement toward marriage. He is not afraid to admit mistakes. The willingness to share speaks of a pastoral heart. Each chapter closes with a series of four or five pertinent questions. These serve as review for the reader, but would function well as discussion points for a couple or for their parents, elders, or pastors to use in a broader educational setting.

Are there points on which to quibble? Perhaps. Referring to sexual relations as icing on the cake is rather a minimizing of the integral and glorious role of physical intimacy in marriage. And the advice to those who struggle with same sex attraction was minimal and pretty blunt. But then, these were not the focus of this book. Dating is the subject and the author gives a trustworthy, reliable guide for young folk: a helpful resource for teens, their parents, teachers, and pastors.

One last thing. *Dating Differently* is a great title, but I wonder if the added descriptor “A guide to Reformed dating” is as inviting as it could be. It suggests a narrow audience – those of Reformed persuasion. Why not call it *Dating Differently: a guide for young Christians*. Hopefully it will be received as such by many. 



By **Sarah Vanderugten**
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Meeting of the Board of Governors of the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary held on January 16, 2020

The chairman of the Board, Rev. J. Louwerse, led in opening devotions. All governors were present. Dr. Van Vliet was present as Principal and sr. L. Kuizenga was present as requested to take the minutes of the meeting.

Information was shared about the personal circumstances of emeriti professors, as well as widows and families of professors.

The minutes of the meeting held on September 5, 2019 were approved. The agenda for the meeting was established.

The Board noted that a report was sent to the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). The ATS is responsible for providing CRTS with accreditation and will do a site visit at our seminary in March. The Board noted their thankfulness to the staff and faculty for all the work done on this report, particularly Margaret Alkema, who was responsible for coordinating the ATS self-study report.

The Board received correspondence from the Senate detailing the establishment of the Canadian Reformed History Collection (CRHC) committee. It was formed for the purpose of establishing a collection of historical items relating the Canadian Reformed Churches and their members. The CRHC has a longer-term vision of forming a relationship with all the churches via general synod, perhaps as a standing committee. Yet in the interim, the Senate requested that the CRHC be considered an ad-hoc committee of the Library Committee of CRTS and be allowed to use some of the Library's space to house its collection. With some provisos, the Board gave approval to the Senate's proposal.

The Board spent considerable time discussing an update from the committee tasked to investigate Distance Education. The Board instructed the committee: (1) to define more precisely the end goal with respect to distance education so that interim steps will lead to that goal; and (2) to consult with a professional online course designer to get help and advice. The Board looks forward to receiving a full report from the committee for its September meeting.

The Board decided to delay its strategic planning session from September 2020 to September 2021. This is due to the ongoing work committees are still busy with from the last strategic planning session, and to the work that will need to be done implementing various proposals made to ATS.

The chairman reported on a positive follow-up visit made to the principal in connection with his responsibilities as principal of CRTS.

Revs. J. Louwerse and C. Vandervelde reported on lecture visits to CRTS on November 12-13, 2019, as well as on visits with the five professors. This report was received with thankfulness.

The Finance and Property Committee provided minutes of the recent meetings they held. They were received for information.

The Governance Committee was requested to update the provisions in the CRTS Handbook for resolutions by mail, as these are quite outdated. Various proposals for other updates to the CRTS Handbook were adopted.

An assessment report on the functioning of the Board of Governors was received with thankfulness and briefly reviewed.

Margaret Alkema reported that in response to the Board's request for a workload study she has drafted a survey, and that the results will be shared with the Senate and the Board in due time.

Dr. J. Van Vliet principal's report was presented and received with thankfulness. The Board approved a proposal for CRTS to communicate with members of the churches via a newsletter/postcard.

The Board received a report from the Senate. It approved a sabbatical proposal for Dr. A. J. de Visser for the fall of 2020. One of Dr. de Visser's normal responsibilities is to lead the sermon sessions each week. In connection with this, the Board accepted a recommendation from the Academic Committee that the faculty organize Dr. de Visser's sabbatical in a manner that does not adversely impact the workload of the other professors.

Dr. T. Van Raalte reported on a visit to the Australian churches. It was received with thankfulness.

Four of the professors reported on attending various conferences. These reports were received with thankfulness.

The completion of the Press Release was delegated to the vice-chairman in consultation with the Executive and the Principal. Rev. J. Slaa closed the meeting with prayer.

On behalf of the Board of Governors of the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary,

Rev. J. Poppe Vice-chairman/Corresponding Clerk

