

Clarion



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CLARION Premier Printing Ltd. One Beghin Avenue
Winnipeg, MB Canada R2J 3X5
Phone: 204-663-9000 | Fax: 204-663-9202

Subscriptions subscriptions@clarionmagazine.ca
Advertisements ads@clarionmagazine.ca
Website clarionmagazine.ca

2020 SUBSCRIPTION RATES

	Regular Mail	Air Mail
Canada	\$49.00*	\$ 82.00*
U.S.A. U.S. Funds	\$69.00	\$102.00
International	\$98.00	\$171.00

*Applicable GST, HST, PRT taxes are extra. GST/HST no. 890967359RT

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Full Colour Display Advertisements: \$21.00 per column inch.

Published biweekly by Premier Printing Ltd. Winnipeg, Manitoba

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We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada.

Agreement No. 40063293; ISSN 0383-0438

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What's Inside

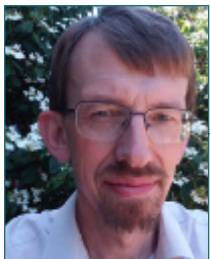
Issue 15 begins with a guest editorial from Dr. John Smith. In his article, he compares the blessing of fellowship lost by lepers in Old Testament Israel to what we face today with COVID-19. Can ceremonial laws regarding clean and unclean give us any help or insight for today's situation? What testimony can we now take from leprosy laws?

Rev. James Zekveld has prepared an article for our magazine entitled, "At Least Weekly," and it is written as a call to restore the Lord's Table to weekly worship.

The issue also contains a Treasures, New & Old, the Ray of Sunshine column, a canticle, and a press release. The You Asked column also makes an appearance for the first time in quite a while. Rev. den Hollander is always ready to take your questions, so keep them coming!

Laura Veenendaal

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COVID-19 and the Leprosy Laws

“Unclean! Unclean!” That’s what a leper had to say in Old Testament Israel, to warn people to keep their distance. Yes, the leper had to practice social distancing, even self-isolation: he lived alone, outside the camp. And he had to cover the lower part of his face. It all sounds eerily familiar, doesn’t it? We often hear it said that we live in unique times: a pandemic of such proportions that the economy is virtually shut down, social gatherings are impossible, schooling is done at home, and normal worship services cannot be held.

Yet those who study history know that history repeats itself, and those who read the Bible know that there is nothing new under the sun. The ancient Israelites already took precautions against the spread of infectious diseases. The Lord himself commanded them to do so. As we read in Leviticus 13, “The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean!’ He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp” (ESV).

So, can the leprosy laws of the Old Testament help us in the COVID-19 crisis? In some ways the answer is no: the differences are too great. COVID-19 is a new illness, caused by a coronavirus, that affects the lungs and the airways, but what the Bible calls leprosy is an ancient disease of the skin. Further, the leprosy laws of the Bible were meant to deal with individual cases of sickness, whereas COVID-19 is a worldwide pandemic. Even more importantly, the leprosy laws were written for God's people under the old dispensation. They were ceremonial laws that required separation of the clean and the unclean; they required sacrifices and ceremonies to make a person clean again. We, however, live in the new dispensation; we are cleansed in the blood of Jesus Christ, who has fulfilled these laws. As we confess in Article 25 of the Belgic Confession, "We believe that the ceremonies and symbols of the law have ceased with the coming of Christ, and that all shadows have been fulfilled, so that the use of them ought to be abolished among Christians."

This does not mean, however, that we can close the book on Leviticus, ignore the leprosy laws, and find our own way. No, for Article 25 continues, "Yet their truth and substance remain for us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have been fulfilled." We can still use the testimonies taken from these laws, "both to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel and to order our life in all honesty, according to God's will and to his glory." We confess, therefore, that the leprosy laws can still help Christians today. They can help us to believe the gospel, and they can help us to order our lives. How so? To answer that question, let's dig a little deeper. What was leprosy exactly? How did the Israelites deal with it? And what testimonies can we take from these laws to help us believe in the gospel and to order our life of faith?

What was leprosy?

To begin with the first question, leprosy was not exactly leprosy. That is to say, what the Bible calls leprosy is not the same disease that is called leprosy today. Modern-day leprosy, also known

as Hansen's disease, is a long-term infection that damages the skin and the nerves, especially on a person's face and limbs. It develops very slowly, causing numbness of the skin, and eventually the skin may become thick and discoloured. Because of the numbness, a person may injure or even lose fingers and toes. Contrary to popular belief, Hansen's disease is not easily transmitted, and it can to a certain extent be treated with antibiotics.¹

Those who study history know that history repeats itself, and those who read the Bible know that there is nothing new under the sun

What about leprosy in the Bible? According to the most recent dictionaries, the Hebrew word usually translated as leprosy (*šaraat*) does not mean leprosy at all.² So where did this translation come from? It goes all the way back to the first translation ever made, the Greek Septuagint, which was made in the third century before Christ. There the Hebrew word *šaraat* was translated with the Greek word *lepra*, which became Latin *lepra* in the Vulgate, which became "leprosy" in English translations of the Bible. So, did the Septuagint get it wrong? Not really. You see, the Greek word *lepra* simply refers to a condition of rough or scaly skin.³ It wasn't a bad translation.

Confusing, I know, but it just goes to show that the *history* of a word does not always match the *meaning* of a word; meanings can change over time. The point is that we shouldn't think of modern leprosy or Hansen's disease when we read about "lepers" in the Bible. That's why some translations, such as the NIV, have done away with the word leprosy and speak instead of "an infectious skin disease." But old habits are hard to break: we've become so used to the word leprosy, that we cannot avoid it anymore.

So, what was this disease in the Bible? It could refer to a variety of conditions. It could be a swelling or rash or bright spot that turned out to be more than skin deep and that began to spread, and the hair on the skin became discoloured. Or it could be a boil or a burn that became diseased, or a sore that would not heal. In all such cases, the person was brought to the priest who examined him and put him in quarantine, outside the camp. The condition could also be found in fabric, or in leather, or even in the wall of a house. If it did not clear

¹The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners Complete Home Medical Guide, p. 302.

²Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*; Clines, *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*.

³Liddell, Scott, Jones, *A Greek - English Dictionary*.

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

up within a week or two, the item would have to be destroyed. It should also be noted that the condition was not necessarily fatal. People could sometimes recover from it and be admitted back into the community. That is clear from Leviticus 14, where we read about the sacrifices and ceremonies that had to be performed after the person had recovered:

The priest is to go outside the camp and examine him. If the person has been healed of his infectious skin disease, the priest shall order that two live clean birds and some cedar wood, scarlet yarn and hyssop be brought for the one to be cleansed. Then the priest shall order that one of the birds be killed over fresh water in a clay pot. He is then to take the live bird and dip it, together with the cedar wood, the scarlet yarn and the hyssop, into the blood of the bird that was killed over the fresh water. Seven times he shall sprinkle the one to be cleansed of the infectious disease and pronounce him clean. Then he is to release the live bird in the open fields (vss. 3-7, NIV).

That was only the first step. Read Leviticus 14, and you will see that the leper had to go through a very elaborate process to be readmitted to the camp and declared clean again.

Another thing to keep in mind about this disease is that it was not necessarily a punishment from God. Sometimes it was: the Lord struck Miriam with leprosy for opposing Moses; leprosy broke out on King Uzziah's forehead when he tried to offer incense in the temple, and he spent the rest of his life in a separate house, unable to function as king; and Gehazi received Naaman's leprosy as punishment for his greed. But at other times the disease was simply an affliction that came upon a person in the providence of God. Think of what the Lord said in Leviticus 14:34: "When you enter the land of Canaan,

which I am giving you as your possession, and I put a case of infectious disease in a house in that land, the owner of the house must go and tell the priest." The words in italics remind us that illness and affliction belong to the providence of God. Or think of Naaman, of whom Scripture says that he was "highly regarded, because through him the Lord had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy" (2 Kgs 5:1). We may think here of what Jesus said about the man who was born blind: "This happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life" (John 9:3).

How Israel dealt with leprosy

To be sure, an Israelite afflicted with this disease was unclean and had to live alone, outside the camp. This provision was not unique to Israel. The Greek historian Herodotus, writing in the fifth century before Christ, described how leprosy was dealt with in Persia: "The citizen who has leprosy or the white sickness may not come into town or mingle with other Persians. They say that he is so afflicted because he has sinned in some way against the sun. Every stranger who gets such a disease, many drive out of the country" (*The Histories*, 1.138). Living alone not only prevented the spread of contagious diseases, but it also prevented the Israelite from participating in worship. Such a person was deprived of the blessing of fellowship with God and the neighbour. Besides the physical suffering, there was also the suffering of loneliness and ostracism.

Yet being declared unclean did not mean the same thing as being excommunicated. After all, under the laws of Moses even the most pious Israelite could not avoid becoming unclean. For example, we read in Numbers 19 that whoever touched a dead body became unclean for seven days. That was bound to happen from time to time! But such a person could become

clean again by having the water of purification sprinkled on him with a hyssop plant. He was sprinkled twice – on the third day and again on the seventh day – and then he became clean again. But, says verse 20, if he refused to cleanse himself, then he “shall be cut off from the midst of the assembly, since he has defiled the sanctuary of the Lord.” So, there was a difference between “being unclean” and “being cut off from the assembly.” There was a difference between a person who is unclean and wants to become clean again, and a person who has the *opportunity* to become clean but doesn’t want to.


Testimonies from leprosy laws

Today we might say that there is a difference between people who are not able to go to church due to the pandemic, and people who don’t *want* to go to church because they don’t value the cleansing work of Jesus Christ. I imagine that during the past months most of us would much rather have been in church on Sunday, singing and praying and sharing together, as we used to do. We can start to imagine what life must have been like for lepers, when the blessing of fellowship is taken away. And yet we are much better off than lepers – yes, even in the midst of a pandemic! You see, the leper of Leviticus 13 was unclean in the eyes of the Lord, but those who believe in Christ have been washed clean in the blood of Christ. We are no longer subject to the ceremonial laws of clean and unclean. Christ went outside the camp for us when he was crucified. He was forsaken by God that we might never more be forsaken by him. He gave us the sacrament of holy baptism to assure us that our cleansing and salvation is to be found outside of ourselves in Jesus Christ. And therefore, infectious diseases do not make us unclean before the Lord anymore. The believer who suffers from COVID-19 has been cleansed in the blood of Jesus Christ just as much as the believer who stays healthy. Churches that had to make do with livestreamed services, that had to put sacraments, professions of faith, and ordinations on hold, and that dearly missed the communion of saints in public worship, those churches never missed out on communion with Christ, not for one moment!

That is the testimony of the gospel that we can take from the so-called leprosy laws. We learn again how much Christ has done for us and how rich we are in him. We can also learn

something about how to order our life. Life for us is no longer governed by the shadows and ceremonies of the Old Covenant but by the reality of our cleansing in Christ. This does not mean that we can turn a blind eye to the pandemic. Believing in Christ does not make us immune to illness. Diseases will remain for as long as this broken world remains, and our bodies are just as susceptible to them as the bodies of unbelievers are. We do not need to be afraid of illness: COVID-19 shall not separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. But we do need to be vigilant and to do what we can to stop it from spreading. In the Old Testament this meant going to the priest. It was the priest who diagnosed the disease, who imposed social restrictions, and who lifted the restrictions again when the disease was gone.

In the New Testament age, this aspect of the priestly office has not been given to the church. The civil aspects of this task now belong to the government. Perhaps for some of us this is disconcerting. We worry that the government might use the pandemic to take away our freedom of religion. Be that as it may, we may be thankful that it is not up to our church councils to decide what is lawful in the context of a pandemic. Otherwise there would be much division among the churches. We should not wish for more responsibility than we can handle. It is enough for office bearers to apply the guidelines that the civil governments have given and to continue to shepherd the flock through it all. We need to be diligent in prayer for our governments, that they exercise wisdom, and that they remember to protect the church and its ministry, “in order that the kingdom of Christ may come, the Word of the gospel may be preached everywhere, and God may be honoured and served by everyone, as he requires in his Word” (BC, Art 36). We also need to pray for our church councils, that they might give wise leadership as the restrictions are gradually lifted again.

One thing is sure. Christ as the Head of the church will not be content to let the social restrictions remain in place indefinitely. He is a bridegroom who wants communion with his church, and the public worship service is the best expression of that communion on this side of eternity. He is working toward the day when faith will become sight, diseases and death will be no more, and his bride will stand before him in perfect purity. Let us pray for that day to come soon! 

My Times Are in Your Hand

"But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in your hand; rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my persecutors! Make your face shine on your servant; save me in your steadfast love! (Psalm 31:14-16)

The COVID-19 pandemic which swept across the globe has taught us that our lives can be turned upside down very quickly. As the pandemic spread, it filled people with fear and anxiety. We too were deeply concerned about all the death, sickness, and upheaval. As Christians, we confess that our times are in God's hand and on the basis of that confession we pray to God for his help in difficult circumstances. Confession and prayer go together. That's clear from Psalm 31.

Whatever David's specific situation was, it weighed heavily on him: "For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing" (v. 10). Even David was brought to the point of sometimes asking where God is: "I had said in my alarm, 'I am cut off from your sight'" (v. 22). Nevertheless, throughout it all, David held on to his confession that God was his God and that his times were in God's hand. David placed his trust in the Lord.

When David says, "But I trust in you, O Lord" (v. 14), he uses God's covenant Name "Lord" – "Yahweh" in Hebrew. This is the Name of God which points to God's constant faithfulness toward his people. It's the Name which means "I am who I am" and thereby indicates that God is the unchanging God who is true to his promise of being near to his people who look to him in faith and obedience.

David says, "I say, 'You are my God'" (v. 14). David is not just telling the Lord this, but David also himself – as if to reassure himself in difficult circumstances. David can say this because God himself first said to his people that he would be their God (Gen 17:7). It's a deeply personal confession: "My God."

Then David goes on to say, "My times are in your hand" (v. 15). David is referring to the seasons of life, i.e., good days and bad, health and sickness, riches and poverty. It's all in God's hand! The reference to God's hand is beautiful imagery to convey that God holds and guides our lives. This is the loving hand of the God who is our Father through Jesus Christ our Saviour!

David's confession of faith leads to a prayer. Because David knows that his times are in God's hand, David also knows to whom he can pray. David prays for rescue from his particular situation and says, "Make your face shine on your servant..."

(v. 16). Whatever our situation is, we may pray to the Lord in the Name of Jesus Christ our Saviour to deliver us from our problems.

This does not mean that the Lord will always give us what we ask of him in prayer. Sometimes the Lord leads us through deep and dark valleys because that is part of the Lord's way of working out his plan of salvation in the lives of his people and in the history of this world (Rom 8:28). But we may be certain that God's face shines upon us in Jesus Christ! God sent his Son into the world to save sinners eternally from sin and all the brokenness of life in this fallen world.

This means that our happiness and joy are not dependent on our present circumstances, because the gospel message transcends our present circumstances and ultimately points us to the new earth which will come when Christ returns in glory. Then there no longer will be economic hardship, sickness, death, or any other adversities. In that faith, we can face our present adversities without fear and despair and can go forward with hope, confidence, and joy. **C**

For further study

1. Look up Numbers 6:24-26. Explain the connection between God's face shining upon us and the reference to God's grace and peace. How is this fulfilled in Jesus Christ our Saviour?
2. Look up Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 10. What imagery does it use to explain the doctrine of God's providence? What does it benefit us to know that God upholds all things by his providence?



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At Least Weekly:

A call to restore the Lord's Table to our weekly worship

The churches ought to receive the nourishment of Christ at the Lord's Table at least weekly. Calvin wrote, later in life, of the practice of celebrating the Lord's Supper four times a year, "I have taken care to record publicly that our custom is defective so that those who come after me may correct it the more freely and easily." In my experience, though Scripture is clear on this question, the correction of this defect has not been as free and easy as one would hope.

As Canadian Reformed Churches, we have an opportunity to correct this oversight on the part of our fathers. Within our tradition, we have had the voice of Deddens, Van Rongen, early on. More recently, Theo Lodder and Paul Aasman encouraged us to reassess our practice.


I am arguing that the church ought to celebrate communion at least weekly. There is room to do it more often. Preaching was never limited to Sundays in the history of the church. Neither

should communion. We may celebrate the Lord's Supper at any assembly of the saints. Weekly preaching without the supper should be as inconceivable to us as a weekly celebration of the supper with monthly preaching.

I do not intend to make an argument from the history of weekly communion. Many have done an excellent job in proving that this practice is universally commended in the church, even though it is not always practiced. Instead, I would like to focus on the argument from Scripture. I will give four arguments: an argument from precedent, an argument from meaning, an argument from order, and an argument from the call of the gospel.

The argument from precedent

The New Testament church practiced weekly communion. We can note three places in the New Testament where we see this practice implied. We see it most clearly in Paul's discussion



The breaking of the bread and the pouring out of the wine are integral to the life of the church because they so clearly demonstrate our union with Christ and his righteousness

in 1 Corinthians 10 and 11. 1 Corinthians 11-14 contains Paul's warnings about how the Corinthians meet with each other for worship. In 1 Corinthians 11:20, Paul assumes that the Corinthians celebrate communion whenever they come together. If the pattern of weekly gatherings holds, they also had weekly communion.

We see weekly communion in Acts 2:42, "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and the prayers." The breaking of bread here is a reference to the Lord's Supper. In his article, defending more frequent communion, Paul Aasman (*Clarion*, March 7, 1997) argues that this is not a sound argument for weekly communion because of the regular use of the phrase "breaking of bread" for a fellowship meal. He fails to fully see how the whole story of Luke-Acts presents the development of the fellowship meal into a sacramental meal. The connection of the breaking of bread to the worship of the church in Acts 2:42 underscores that point.

This is the way things develop in Scripture. Common phrases take on new meaning in light of new events. The Lord's Table is closely tied with the fellowship meals Jesus had all through his ministry. It is, in fact, a transformation of the fellowship meal. The breaking of bread has a new meaning now. Now the kingdom has come and the Promised Spirit, which allows the disciples

to eat with Christ. What better way to do that than through the way of the breaking of bread, which Christ established on the day of his death.

In verse 46 of the same chapter, we see a daily breaking of bread, which I understand again as a reference to communion. God tells us this to demonstrate the devotion of the early Christians. They are excited about the new kingdom that God has established and wish to celebrate it daily. We can also gather from this that the Lord's Supper is certainly not limited to Sunday celebration.

As time went on for the New Testament church, it seems that communion was more closely tied to the first day of the week. In Acts 20:7, we see this: "On the first day of the week, we came together to break bread." We see an implication that the practice of gathering together had become a weekly practice. There was a natural connection between coming together and breaking bread.

Like the practice of infant baptism, the frequency of communion is implied rather than directly commanded. We infer infant baptism from the continuity between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. It is the same with weekly communion. This is not surprising when we consider Old Testament worship. Eating was part of one's worship before God in the temple. We can

particularly think of something like the peace offering, where worshippers would partake of the animal that they had offered to God. To worship God was to participate in the festival of God.

To early believers, the gathering of believers is temple worship. We can think of Christ's conversation with the Samaritan woman in John 4. Christ says that a day is coming where all men will worship in spirit and truth. Through the Holy Spirit, God now permits sacramental worship wherever one lives. We see this in Hebrews 11, where the people of God approach Mt. Zion to hear the words of Christ. Now that churches can have temple worship wherever they worship God, eating becomes a part of that worship. Weekly communion naturally flows from the new order that Christ has established.

Now, we may respond by noting that we do not have a direct command in the New Testament to practice communion weekly. We only have the phrase "as often as you do it." We need to be careful with such an argument. As we know well from our Baptist brothers, there is no direct command to baptize babies either. We imply that.

We can also note that the New Testament does not directly command the weekly preaching of the Word. It does not give commands regarding the frequency of either the Lord's Supper or the preaching of the Word, other than the call to do it regularly. Strictly speaking, even the call to meet together in Hebrews 10:25 is not a warning against the neglect of preaching and the Lord's Supper, but the neglect of meeting together. Contextually, there is a lot more here, but we need to bring in the rest of Scripture to understand that.

In terms of worship, the church has always worked from the assumption that the pattern laid down in Scripture is there for our benefit. We should have an excellent reason to depart from that pattern. In the matter of proclaiming the gospel, we rightly follow the example that the Spirit laid down for us in the New Testament. We are suspicious of those who try to minimize the importance of this example, whether they argue for one service a week, sermons that do not find their primary source in Scripture, or those who promote the ten-minute sermon.

Why do we question the presented patterns of communion? If we bring this kind of suspicion to the text of Scripture, we

may lose the strength of the argument for a weekly half-hour sermon, much less two half-hour sermons. To argue that the frequency of communion is an example we can take or leave is a self-defeating argument.

An argument from meaning

The Lord's Supper pictures Christ's gift of himself to us for the sake of our life in him. It's helpful here to see the connection between the two sacraments, one applied externally (I speak physically here), and the other applied internally. In baptism,

Christ washes us, declaring us clean before God. The sign is applied externally because it demonstrates the promise of Christ's covering. It is the declaration of the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is an initiatory rite. It marks the beginning of our relationship with God. The Lord's Supper keeps the bonds of that union tight. Through the Lord's Supper, God continues to confirm our faith in our hearts through the promise of union with Christ.

The Lord's Supper pictures a taking in of Christ. An image that, through the Spirit, becomes a reality. In the Lord's Supper, we internalize the promises of Christ. It declares to us that Christ is our only spiritual sustenance. In the words of Belgic Confession Article 35, we receive nothing less than Christ himself in the Lord's Supper, "who nourishes, and sustains the spiritual life of the believers, when he is eaten by them, that is, spiritually appropriated and received by faith." All our salvation is from Christ. We cannot justify ourselves, and we cannot sanctify ourselves. The Lord's Supper reminds us that everything we have comes from God's grace.

The whole point is the assurance of this grace. It is not I who live, but Christ, who lives in me. I must put my flesh to death on the cross of Christ. I must find life in Jesus. Of course, we hear that in the word, but we also need that confirmed to our hearts every week. The breaking of the bread and the pouring out of the wine are integral to the life of the church because they so clearly demonstrate and our union with Christ and his righteousness. We want to be fat with the assurance of the gospel of Jesus, not always on a diet.

The church has always worked from the assumption that the pattern laid down in Scripture is there for our benefit

I sometimes wonder if the reason our churches struggle working through the connection between justification and sanctification is found in that we do not live out those doctrines in weekly communion. We know that sanctification flows from justification in our minds, but do we have a “from the gut” understanding of these truths?

We might object: weekly communion isn’t necessary for a positive Christian life. Neither are churches who practice weekly communion shining examples of God’s goodness. On the one hand, churches without weekly communion have lived out the gospel. They have kept the importance of God’s Word as a guide for all of life. On the other hand, churches with weekly communion have not. In the latter, communion was used for its own sake and was not used to point the congregation to Christ.

Weekly communion does not magically make us better Christians, but then again, neither does the practice of having two services every Sunday. The point is that weekly communion will strengthen those churches who do have the gospel. In the same way, churches are more greatly edified by having both a morning and an afternoon service. We can also bring up the example of those churches that lack infant baptism. Many Baptist churches do have the gospel, but if we believe that the practice of infant baptism is good, we must also say that they weaken themselves through withholding the gift of infant baptism to their children. Even though a given church that baptizes their infants may be spiritually weaker than a given Baptist church, that does not make the practice of infant baptism per se unhealthy. Like the Baptist who chooses not to baptize their infant, we choose spiritual weakness by offering Christ’s self-gift in communion so infrequently.

An argument from order

We emphasize the importance of the Word in our tradition. We are right to do so. The practice of the Lord’s Supper without the Word is worse than useless. It is a horrible misuse of God’s gift. The Lord’s Supper is treated as a magical pill for spiritual life, rather than lifting the heart of the recipient beyond the symbols of bread and wine to the true source of sustenance at the right hand of God.

How do you get the Word inside of you? Through taking in the bread and the wine. The Word and sacrament belong together. Weekly preaching without the supper should seem as inconceivable to us as a weekly celebration of the supper with monthly preaching.

Although not as bad, the reverse is also profoundly defective. Throughout the Scriptures, the Lord often confirms his Word to his people with signs. I focus on the Exodus: we have the Passover, we have the manna, the water from the rock, and the whole temple system as an extended sign from God until abrogated in Jesus Christ. It is not surprising to find the same pattern of Word and sign in the New Testament. Word is always followed by sign and seal.

According to Hebrews 4, the Word pierces and the Word divides. We might think of the high priest killing and dividing the sacrificial animal. Here we are the sacrifice, the living sacrifice that is being offered through the Word to God. This is followed by the feast in which we are restored to the communion Adam had with God. We are given healing and wholeness in the Lord’s Supper. Crushed like grains that go into the bread, then baked into one loaf.

We might make one more analogy; that of the head and the heart. The Word speaks to the head, specifically to the ears. We are to hear the Word and comprehend it through our minds. But it can’t just go in one ear and out the other. Through our minds, it reaches our hearts. The sacrament confirms the Holy Word to our hearts. The Lord’s Supper helps me to understand how the factual and historical death and resurrection of Christ are working itself out in the spiritual death and resurrection, the regeneration that is going on in my heart right now.

Word and sacrament belong together. Let us not separate what God has brought together.

An argument from the call of the gospel

God’s invitation to the sinner is not only an invitation to receive forgiveness of sins, but it is an invitation to a feast. You can already see this in the Exodus where Moses’s original request to Pharaoh is that Israel goes into the desert for a feast unto God. Likewise, Scripture pictures the holy land as a place of food and feasting.

Look at Jesus’s invitation in John 6, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall not thirst.” This episode is shortly after he had miraculously provided food to the five thousand. Again in John 4, he offers the Samaritan woman living water. Now, Jesus is speaking of spiritual food and drink, but the physical food and drink of the Lord’s Supper is what he gave as a reminder that we need to find our spiritual nourishment in Christ.

We see this again in Matthew. We can think of Matthew 22, one of the many places where the kingdom of heaven is compared to a wedding feast. Of course, there are many other examples of this comparison. We can look at Luke 14. There Jesus is encouraging his disciples to invite all to the banquet of God, the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. When one who is eating with Jesus hears this, he says, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" This nicely ties in with Revelation 19, where we see the wedding feast of the lamb. The Lord's Supper is that wedding and is a promise of that wedding.

Jesus gives us a table that is at the centre of his ministry. The Lord's Supper only continues the festal reality that our Lord is with us. He comes eating and drinking because he, the bridegroom, is here. When we worship God, we have a promise that the bridegroom is there. Why don't we eat with him?

The penultimate words of Scripture are an invitation to a feast. Verse 14, "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life." Verse 17, "Let the Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come' ... let the one who desires take the water of life without price."


The Lord's Supper is an invitation for the nations to join in and receive healing from the Tree of Life. It is a reminder to the congregation that they have received the goodness of God. Further, in their transformation into the image of Christ, they also become rivers of living water. Our failure to regularly celebrate the Lord's Supper undermines our message to the nations about the goodness of our God.

What to do

As far as I can see, there is no principled stance against weekly communion, only a pragmatic one. That is not how Reformed ministers are supposed to argue for or against a practice in worship. I believe the arguments laid before us demand a serious response. We find frequent communion in the pattern of Scripture, and we find it a deeply edifying practice for the church of God. We ought to have weekly communion embedded in our church order. I give the caveat that we would have to give years, perhaps decades, to work through that transition.

There are practical problems to work through. One major one would be re-working our form to better suit a weekly celebration. God is patient.

At the same time, I do not believe that this is something worth dividing the church over. Although it is clearly a defect, analogous to belief in credo-baptism, it does not depart from true worship to the same degree as something like credo-baptism or other defective forms of worship in our day. I do not intend to break with my brothers over this even though their stubbornness saddens me.

Yet I do have hope. Recently, I came upon Nehemiah 8:17, when reading Scripture, "And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in booths, for from the days of Jeshua, the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing." It seems that even though the feast of booths may have been celebrated, it was not done in the way God called Israel to practice that festival until the time of Nehemiah. One may wonder why David or Solomon or Hezekiah did not follow this institution of God, whether it was the stubbornness of the people or their lack in zealously following all the law of God. But God was gracious. In restoring his people after the exile, he also gave them a fuller experience of his blessings than they had enjoyed before. 

POSTSCRIPT: If you would like to dig into this matter, especially the history of the matter, I can recommend Paul Aasman's (1997) and Theo Lodder's (2008-2009) series of articles in *Clarion*. I would also recommend looking up Michael Horton and Robert Godfrey, who also delve into the history. There are many others, as well. I'll also be posting an extended version of this article on my blog at jameszekveld.com.



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Church Discipline and Withdrawal from the Church

Why is it some people are said to be withdrawn from the church by their actions, while others are put under discipline and eventually either withdraw or are excommunicated?

The questioner includes a few different scenarios in one question. These scenarios, however, usually pertain to the matter and process of church discipline. Starting out from the regular process of church discipline, it is the church's key of the kingdom of God (LD 31) to bring a sinner back to the way of salvation. Either in the way of the steps of Matthew 18, in which a fellow-member seeks the confession of a (secret or private) sin and the repentance from this sin of which he is aware in the life of a brother or sister, or in the way of the consistory seeking this confession and repentance from a public sin, the sinner is admonished and/or rebuked (i.e. disciplined, disciplined) to return in his/her life and submit to the Word and will of God. Only in the case of a persistent hardening in sin and an impenitent way of life does this process lead to the act of excommunication.

The purpose and objective of this practice of church discipline is the salvation of the sinner. In it, the Word of God is applied most personally to the sinner's life and walk in sin (or deviation from the true doctrine of salvation). Hence, many visits and admonitions with the Word of God are involved in


this spiritual exercise of church discipline. Every step of the way according to Matthew 18 the repentance from sin and the return to God's will and way of salvation are pursued with the Word of God. This applies to the initial steps made by the fellow-member, the involvement of witnesses, and to the steps taken by the consistory eventually (with the involvement of the congregation by prayer and admonition), which could lead ultimately to the sinner's excommunication. When exercised faithfully and steadfastly, this process could take long and could be painful and strenuous. Yet, the sinner's salvation is worth it!

Indeed, it happens that within this process the sinner who is being disciplined withdraws from the church. In Reformed church polity, this has been understood to mean that this member places himself/herself outside the reach of the office bearers and congregation (though not outside the reach of family, friends, acquaintances, among others). According to some, the discipline should be continued in spite of the fact that a person has notified the consistory that he/she no longer wants to be a member of the church. This opinion dates back to the Roman Catholic understanding that the church

and salvation are one, and the church determines and decides whether someone can be saved or not. The Reformers, however, rejected this Roman Catholic teaching, stressing that salvation depends on God's Word, on a life in faith and obedience to God's Word. When one has broken with the church, he/she has thereby also withdrawn from the authority of the consistory, and the consistory cannot do anything but acknowledge the fact and acquiesce. Membership of the church is a voluntary thing. God will judge those who have placed themselves outside the church and the authority of the office bearers; when the hardening of hearts persist, his judgement can not be escaped.

In this process of exercising church discipline, the members and office bearers will do everything they can to keep contact, pray, and visit, admonish, and involve whoever might be helpful in the pursuit of discipline with the Word of God. When dealing with members who are spiritual and who know the purpose and objective of this process of discipline, namely his/her salvation, these members will cooperate and facilitate, listen and heed the admonitions. At least, that's the ideal and that's what everyone

prays for! In the actual reality of this practice, however, it alas happens in some cases that there is no cooperation but a frustrating attitude of avoidance, escape, annoyance, animosity, hostility, etc. impeding this process.

From experience, I know how difficult it can become sometimes, and how impossible it is for anyone to contact, even to admonish members under discipline, and pursue this spiritual process of discipline. Phone calls are not answered, messages are ignored, letters are returned to sender, the minister is threatened with a suit for harassment, or such a member leaves town and disappears from the radar completely. Sad though this is, after a long time of many an attempt to contact, this member is considered as having withdrawn him/herself from this congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ. Spiritual discipline is done with the Word of God. Visits and admonitions for discipling the sinner in the way of salvation are requisite for the proper exercise of discipline. They seek the life and repentance, the salvation and reconciliation of the sinner, by the means God has given for that purpose; i.e. the keys of the kingdom of God. 



ASK A QUESTION

Is there something you've been wanting to know?
An answer you've been looking for? Send us your
most thought provoking questions to explore
in our **You Asked** column.

Please send questions to **William den Hollander**, *Minister emeritus*
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“Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing” (1 Thess 5:11).

During the last few months, when we could not fellowship with our fellow believers in church like we were used to, we realized all the more what a gift being with others was. This is a reminder for us to feel so blessed for our fellow believers, church, our homes, and our families. Our God has blessed us richly in that we can help each other to serve him!

I hope we have all been able to get used to this strange time and use it as a time to reflect on our many rich blessings; but especially help us to look to our Heavenly Father above. Even amongst this difficult time we have our Heavenly Father with us every step of the way. He has a plan for each and every one of us and can be our strength and guidance.

For each one of us, our circumstances were different, some of us were out of work, and most of us could not see our loved ones or friends for some time, and all of us were not able to go to church. This can all be challenging, but we can be thankful we are in a time with technology. We can still connect with our loved ones and fellow church members. Even as things start to settle we need to remember each other, and be there for one another.

There are also many of you who will be missing out on Anchor Camp this year. We know how much many of you look forward to this time away to fellowship with your fellow friends and believers. I hope you can also see God’s plan in this and can find joy in all God has given you. I am sure there are other ways you can take a time of relaxation and fun and connect with your friends. “Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near” (Heb 10:25).

August Birthdays

Congratulations to those of you celebrating a birthday in August! We wish you all the Lord’s blessings in the coming year. May you always look to our Heavenly Father for all of your cares and concerns.

4 Terence Berends will be 44

c/o Lighthouse
6528 1st Line RR 3
Fergus, ON N1M 2W4

5 Philip Schuurman will be 61

1156 Diltz Road
Dunnville, ON N1A 2W2

9 Rose Malda will be 63

Mt. Nemo Christian Nursing Home
4486 Guelph Line
Burlington, ON L7P 0N2

23 Jack Dieleman will be 48

c/o Harbour Home
42 Spadara Drive
Hamilton, ON L9B 2K3

31 Kristi Oosterhoff will be 30

c/o Harbour Home
42 Spadara Drive
Hamilton, ON L9B 2K3

The Song of the Three Young Men in the Furnace

Then with one voice the three who were in the furnace praised and glorified and blessed God

1. Oh bless - ed be the Lord our God_ of all our fa - thers, him we
 2. All in God's tem - ple shout and sing_ praise to their Lord, the might - y
 3. O an - gels, join the cher - u - bim_ and sing a - long with ser - a -
 4. May all the skies and plan - ets sing_ and glo - ry to their Mak - er

5
 laud. Praise him glad - ly! Al - le - lu - ia! And bless - ed be his ho - ly
 king. Praise him loud - ly! Al - le - lu - ia! Praise him who sits on heav - en's
 phim. Praise your Mas - ter! Al - le - lu - ia! Ex - tol his name for - ev - er -
 bring. Let them praise you! Al - le - lu - ia! The sun and moon and eve - ry

9
 name from age to age al - ways the same._ Praise our Sav - iour for his
 throne. All praise be - longs to him a - lone._ Praise the Fa - ther and no
 more. Let an - gel songs from heav - en pour._ Praise your rul - er, your Com -
 star, the spheres and orbs both near and far._ Praise your Sov - ereign, heav - en's

fa - vour! Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia!
 oth - er! Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia!
 mand - er! Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia!
 Cap - tain. Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia!

George van Popta Minister emeritus Jubilee Canadian Reformed Church, Ottawa, Ontario gvanpopta@gmail.com

**PRESS
RELEASE**

Short Report of Classis Manitoba held on June 26, 2020

On behalf of the convening church, Dr. A. J. Pol welcomes all the delegates. He reads Psalm 122 and invites all present to sing Psalm 122:1-3 and leads in prayer. Dr. Pol notes the following memorabilia: Rev. S. C. Van Dam is welcomed to Classis, as this is his first meeting. Rev. J. Slaa, the minister elect of Carman West, is welcomed, as he is present by video call. It is noted that Carman West has extended a call to Candidate Kelvin Dekker to serve as co-pastor. It is further noted that Rev.

H. J. Vanderhorst has been granted temporary release. Dr. Pol wished him a good recovery and the Winnipeg Grace church the Lord's blessing during this time. Finally, it is noted that Rev. J. Poppe has received a call from the church of Chilliwack, BC.

The credentials are examined and found to be in order. All the churches were represented by two delegates; the delegates from Denver are present via video call. Rev. Vanderhorst from Winnipeg Grace and Rev. J. Zekveld from Winnipeg

Redeemer are welcomed as advisors. Rev. D. Vandeburgt and Rev. J. Van Spronsen are welcomed as the deputies of Regional Synod West; they are present via video call. Rev. R. Anjema is welcomed as fraternal delegate from the Providence Reformed Church of Winnipeg. Rev. Van Dam signs the subscription form.

Classis is declared constituted and the following officers take their place. Dr. Pol is the president, br. Case Vanderpol clerk, and Rev. Van Dam vice-president. The agenda was adopted.

After some deliberation, it was decided that the church at Carman West would come back to Classis in September with some further refinements in the retirement provisions for Dr. and Mrs. Pol.

The necessary documentation associated with the arrival of Rev. Slaa is found to be in good order.

The report of the classis treasurer is received with thankfulness.

The report of the church for the inspection of the treasurer books indicates that the books are in good order.

The report of the church for the inspection of the archives notes some items which need attention. The report of the deputy for contact with the Manitoba provincial government is received with thankfulness.

In closed session, Rev. Vanderhorst presents the church visitation report brought to the church at Carman West on May 19, 2020. Dr. Pol presents the church visitation report brought to the church at Denver (via video call) on April 24, 2020 and to Winnipeg Grace on February 12, 2020. Rev. Vanderhorst presents the church visitation report brought to the church at Winnipeg Redeemer (including the work at Ambassador) on February 12, 2020. These reports are received with thankfulness. Elder Trevor Veenendaal leads in intercessory and thanksgiving prayer.

The church at Winnipeg Redeemer proposes to formally approve the updated version of the classical regulations to reflect the fact that the number of deputies for contact with

neighbouring classes/presbyteries has been increased to four. Further this same church proposes to add to the mandate of these deputies that they bring an annual report of their activities to the churches via the Manitoba Church News. These proposals are adopted by Classis.

The church at Winnipeg Redeemer proposes to change Article 55 of the Church Order to add as a first sentence to this article: "The 150 Psalms shall have the principle place in the singing of the churches." After some discussion, it is decided that Winnipeg Redeemer would further finetune this proposal for a future classis.

The president asks the questions re Article 44 of the Church Order. One church asks advice regarding matters of pastoral oversight. In closed session, advice is given.

On behalf of the URCNA Classis Western Canada, Rev. Anjema addresses Classis with words of Christian greetings and fellowship. Rev. Poppe responds with fitting words of appreciation for the bond which we may share with the URCNA and leads in thanksgiving prayer.

The convening church of the next classis is the Emmanuel American Reformed Church at Denver, Colorado. The date is scheduled for September 25, 2020 with an alternate date of December 4, 2020. The suggested officers for the next classis are: Rev. J. Poppe as president, Rev. S. Vandeveld as vice-president, and as clerk a brother yet to be determined by the convening church.

Personal question period is made use of. The president notes with thankfulness that nothing censurable was said or done during the meeting. The Acts of Classis will be finalized by the moderamen. The press release is presented and approved. The president requests that the delegates sing Hymn 9. The vice-president closes the meeting with prayer.

For Classis,

Rev. S. C. Van Dam, vice-president at that time

