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What's Inside

What was life like before COVID? Chances are that you feel life was better before the pandemic hit. Dr. Jason Van Vliet discusses this question in his lead article, "Christ Before COVID."

The Asia Mission Board has prepared a press release which we include in Issue 20. It has been released because they have become aware of controversy surrounding the Canadian Reformed Churches and their approach to the doctrine of the covenant.

Dr. David Robertson of the Free Church of Scotland has written an article entitled, "A Tale of Two Buildings." Keep reading to see what the Hagia Sophia and his old manse in Dundee have in common.

In federation news we have a report on the fiftieth anniversary of Vineyard Canadian Reformed Church. Issue 20 also includes Treasures, New & Old, You Asked, and a canticle.

Laura Veenendaal

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Christ Before COVID

Do you still remember what life was like before COVID? I am sure you do. But let's briefly review. *Before COVID* we went to a church building twice every Sunday to worship our God together. Not every other Sunday. Not some percentage of the congregation. But all of us, every Sunday. Sometimes we had to add more chairs for overflow, not rope off pews for physical distancing.

Before COVID our children went to school. All of them. Every day. No mask policies. No staggered schedules. No cohorts. Students secretly shared snacks on the bus, joyfully high-fived each other in hall, and competitively rubbed shoulders on the soccer field.

Before COVID all we had to do before dashing off on an errand was to grab our wallet on the way out. Now, depending where you live, you have to remember to check the web for modified hours, to tuck a mask in your purse or your pocket, to sanitize your hands before entering the store ... and yes, you still need your wallet.

We are still somewhere in the middle of this global pandemic. In many places it is better than it was. In other places it is worse. Many are bracing for a second wave. It's different, isn't it? Somehow, we cannot help but feel that life was better *before COVID* - better for worship, better for family relationships, better for our elderly, better for our schools, better for our businesses, better for pretty much everything. Who would disagree? Not me.

Another angle

So, chronologically speaking, what stands before COVID? A less regulated time? A (more) golden age? From one perspective we might quickly exclaim, "Absolutely!" From another, inspired angle there is

For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. 1 PET 2:25



something more to say. But then we need to change the question. In the first place, it is not *what* stands before COVID but *who* stands before COVID. Consider Colossians 1:17, “And he [God’s beloved Son, v. 15] is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

“All things” is, obviously, all-inclusive. We tend to think about this phrase *collectively*. In our minds “all things” equals all creation, or the universe, or the cosmos. Following through with this line of thought, the apostle Paul is saying that the eternal Son of God existed before the heavens and the earth, and that all that they contain were created (Gen 1-2). That is correct. We also confess this in the Belgic Confession, “He who is called God, the Word, the Son, and Jesus Christ, did exist at that time when all things were created by him” (Art 10).

At the same time, we can also think about “all things” *particularly*. That is to say, before a particular man named Abraham was born, the Son of God already existed and acted in grace and power (John 8:58). Before a particular preacher named John Calvin ever delivered a sermon, the Son of God was busy gathering his church. Similarly, before this particular COVID-19 pandemic hit, the beloved Son of God was authoritatively ruling over every single event that eventually led to the crisis. Ever since, he has been governing over every single consequence of it.

Take a glance in the rear-view mirror of your life. Do you see the golden hue of a happier, pre-COVID era? Or, in the first place, do you see your risen Saviour, the beloved Son of God? If we see Christ before COVID, our perspective on today and tomorrow changes for the brighter.

Christ, the co-Creator of all things

Precisely who is this Son of God who is before all things? The Holy Spirit describes him in three distinct ways in Colossians 1. In the first place, with God the Father, he is the co-Creator of all things, both visible and invisible (v. 16). That means he has *infinite capacity and power*.

To the naked human eye, the coronavirus spreads invisibly. This generates fear for many people. Is the virus on a doorknob that I touched? Is it floating somewhere in the air that I am about to breathe? Who knows? Yet whether something is as large and visible as an elephant or as little and invisible as the coronavirus, this co-Creator stands before it all and understands the intricacies of it all. We need not fear.

At the same time, this microscopic virus is causing a myriad of problems on a global scale. It affects supermarket prices, supply chains, business planning, medical procedures, elderly care, vacation plans, school organization, family relationships,

office bearer work, and last but not least, worship services. Is there any area of life that has not been touched by this virus? Yet even if the consequences of COVID appear universal, in fact, they are much smaller than the universe itself. Calculate the size of our globe using the measuring stick of the Milky Way and suddenly even a global pandemic is not as big. COVID is big; Christ, the co-Creator of the cosmos, is infinitely greater. We need not be anxious.

Christ, the Ruler of all things

Yet what is powerful capacity if it is not coupled with purposeful direction? Thankfully, all things were not only created through the Son, but they are also held together by him (v. 17). A good ruler has a clear plan. The Ruler of heaven governs everything, including this pandemic, with *cohesion and coherence*, a trajectory and a telos.

Coherent purpose is exactly what seems to be missing in these days. No mere human knows where this is all going. Second wave? Third wave? No more waves? Governments react to new data and scramble to develop policies and financial packages. At times one initiative ironically undermines the next one. Where are we going with all of this? Earthly rulers do not really know, and the honest ones are the first to admit it. But the Ruler of the Universe does know. What seems chaotic to us is all coherent to him. We can sleep well at night.

Christ, the Reconciler of all things

But what, specifically speaking, is the Son's goal? In a word, it is reconciliation. The almighty Creator of all things is also the merciful Reconciler of those same things – all of them. That is the striking message of verse 20: "And through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross." Obviously, he is not finished his reunification work yet. Tension is still rampant and animosity is all too common. Still, Christ is pursuing the reconciliation of the entire cosmos with laser-like intent. As mysterious as it may seem, COVID-19 is one divine step along that glory-focussed path. We can be filled with hope.

Follow in his footsteps

In addition to being the almighty co-Creator, purposeful Ruler, and cosmic Reconciler, Christ is also our Good Shepherd. Where

the shepherd walks, the sheep do well to follow. "For you were straying like sheep but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (1 Pet 2:25). So, are we, too, walking the path that leads toward the reconciliation of all things?


After the initial shock of COVID, we slowly realized that, in all likelihood, we would have to settle in for the longer haul. The longer we need to endure, though, the more wedge-driving issues seem to threaten the peace of Jerusalem. Here's a short list. I know I'm missing some.

- Is worship via livestream legitimate worship?
- Do we have to obey all the regulations that the governments set in place? What if my conscience accuses me that some of these rules and restrictions are dangerously foolish or even based on false information? Where do we draw the line and say, "Enough is enough"?
- Do we really have to wear masks to worship our God?
- Since COVID-19 spreads in sly ways, is singing still an integral part of worship or is it now a threat to my fellow believers' health?
- Do we put our children back in the classroom or keep them home?

Let's be honest, different saints are coming to different answers on these topics, and we are not always being so patient and kind with each other as we do so.

The issues are often as complex as the opinions are strong. It is really no surprise that multifaceted problems lead to less than consistent solutions, also within the household of God. But step back for a moment. Where are we going with all this? Following the Reconciling Shepherd to the green pasture of eternal peace or wandering off into the desert of increasing animosity?

Christ is *before* COVID. He is also *after* COVID. He is pre-eminent *over* COVID (Col 1:18).

Let us, then, also look to him *before* and *after* and *over* any and all issues related to COVID. Christ is working toward cosmic reconciliation. What about you? Take a COVID issue, any COVID issue, and see what you can do to build consensus in the church. That is the direction in which our Shepherd is going. Come, let's follow him. 

The Ideal Deliverer

"So the land had rest forty years. Then Othniel the son of Kenaz died." (Judges 3:11)

Othniel, the first judge, was the ideal judge. He came from the ideal *family*: he was the nephew of Caleb, who with Joshua had spied out Canaan and been the only one of their generation to survive the wilderness wanderings. Othniel had the ideal *marriage*: he married Caleb's daughter Achsah, a faithful, resourceful woman of her generation (1:13-15). His marriage to her stood in stark contrast to what his fellow Israelites were doing – intermarrying with Canaanite women. Othniel was also the ideal *fighter*: instead of cohabitating with the Canaanites, he learned to wage holy war against them, capturing Debir in southern Judah (1:13). And lastly, Othniel was from the ideal *tribe*, Judah, the tribe singled out for leadership in the opening two verses of the book. So Othniel is the ideal man, with the ideal background, experience, and connections.

And he was the judge who obeyed the LORD fully. With the Spirit of the LORD upon him, he judged Israel. He waged war against and prevailed over Israel's tyrannical enemy, Cushan-rishathaim of Mesopotamia. Othniel trusted and obeyed, he did what he was supposed to do.

Then the land had rest for forty years. The number forty is a number of completeness in the Bible. A complete, yes, even *ideal*, length of time. A time of rest from war, and therefore attack, oppression, and affliction.


But then, Othniel died. His death brings into view a hugely significant problem in the book of Judges. Rest can never be permanent in a world where death has invaded. And the mention of the death of a leader resounds throughout the book. There will be no lasting deliverer for Israel. None of the judges brought lasting peace for Israel.

Why focus your attention on this verse, then, in an issue on Thanksgiving? Well, because this verse points up for us nothing less than the gospel!

Verse 11 shows us the problem with every human leader of God's church. However Spirit-empowered an office-bearer may be, whether elder, deacon, or minister, he won't last forever. And he is woefully unable to meet the needs of the flock. It's easy for us to look to our leaders to satisfy our needs, to lead us. But it is only the Lord who can do these things.

Christ Jesus fits the profile of the perfect, the unfailing, the unfading judge and Saviour of his people. Like Othniel, Jesus was from the tribe of Judah. But unlike Othniel, Jesus was also from God. And so he came as both Judge and Lord. He came as one filled with the Spirit. And he came to save God's people not merely from a city whose leader was a tyrant. He came to save us from the prince of this world, the greatest tyrant of all, Satan.

And the way he saved us? Not *apart* from his death, but precisely *by* his death! That's what was needed in order for the idolatries of Israel and us to no longer be held against us. The cross was where sin and self-worship as lords and masters of the lives of God's people were crucified. Jesus came to be the deliverer greater than any judge or king. And by his *resurrection* he has secured our *rest*, a rest we now enter into by faith now, and by sight later.

And so we are pointed to look to the One who says to his people, "I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!" (Rev 1:18). He's the deliverer we need. He's the one in whom our thanksgiving finds its basis, and also its fulness. Meditate upon your Saviour. Find your delight in him. He is enough for you today and offers you the only rest that will never end. 

For Further Study

1. Have you ever placed your confidence more in what man could do instead of what God has done?
2. Compare the length of the land's rest under Othniel with the length of Israel's enslavement to Cushan-Rishathaim (3:8). What does this say about the grace and kindness of the Lord?
3. How should the fact that Christ is the "Living One" factor into your Thanksgiving celebrations?



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CHURCH NEWS

ELIGIBLE FOR CALL

Br. Daniel Shin has sustained his Preparatory Examination (according to Art. 4 C.O.) and has been declared eligible for call in the Canadian and American Reformed Churches.

CALL ACCEPTED

Candidate Kelvin Dekker accepted the call extended to him to serve as pastor for the Free Reformed Church of West Albany.

Candidate Aidan Plug has accepted the call extended to him to serve as pastor by the Langley Canadian Reformed Church.

Rev. Jonathan Chase of the Elora Canadian Reformed Church has accepted the call from the Aldergrove Canadian Reformed Church to serve as a second missionary in Brazil.

CALL DECLINED

Rev. Ben Schoof of the Maranatha Canadian Reformed Church in Surrey, British Columbia has declined the call extended to him by the Houston Canadian Reformed Church.

Rev. William Boekestein of Immanuel Fellowship United Reformed Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan has declined the call extended to him by the Fellowship Church of Burlington.

Rev. Hendrik Alkema of the Free Reformed Church of Albany, Western Australia has declined the calls extended to him by the Trinity Canadian Reformed Church of Glanbrook and Smithers Canadian Reformed Church.

The Asia Mission Board (appointed by the Canadian Reformed Churches of Cloverdale and Langley, BC), June 25, 2020

The Doctrine of the Covenant in the Canadian Reformed Churches

It has come to the attention of the Asia Mission Board that there is controversy in certain parts of the world about the Canadian Reformed Churches and their approach to the doctrine of the covenant. The following accusations are being levelled:

- (a) The Canadian Reformed Churches teach a one covenant view as opposed to a two or three covenant view;
- (b) The Canadian Reformed Churches are legalistic;
- (c) Dr. Klaas Schilder, a founder of the Canadian Reformed Churches, denies both the covenant of redemption and the covenant of works, and by extension the Canadian Reformed Churches defend and promote these denials;
- (d) Dr. K. Schilder agrees with the teachings of Karl Barth on covenant;
- (e) The book written by the Rev. Clarence Stam, *The Covenant of Love*, represents the official and common view on matters of covenant in the Canadian Reformed Churches.

Some preliminary remarks

For openers it needs to be understood that the Canadian Reformed Churches have never formulated and adopted a series of statements or a specific theology of the covenant. As churches, they confess that the Holy Scriptures are the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word of God and that the creeds (Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, Athanasian Creed) and confessions (Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and Canons of Dort) are faithful summaries of the Word of God.

What this means is that, as churches, they adhere to whatever the Word of God reveals and whatever doctrines and teachings that the creeds and confessions include and summarize. The same adherence is expected of all ministers, elders, and deacons in the churches. Hence, what the Scripture and confession teach on such doctrines as the Triune God, creation, fall, redemption, repentance, faith, justification, and all the rest is to be faithfully taught and defended.

And that includes what is said about the covenant. The Scriptures of course say a great deal about covenant, although this is neither the time nor the place to cite and summarize it all. The creeds and confessions say far less. As a matter of fact, there are

no direct references to covenant in the creeds and only a few references in the confessions.

What the Heidelberg Catechism says in Lord's Day 27, Q&A 74 about the "old covenant" and the "new covenant" comes to mind as the clearest and most direct statement; the word is also used in Lord's Days 25 (68), 29 (79), and 30 (82). As for the Belgic Confession, there is a reference to it in Article 34. The Canons mention it in Chapter 1, Article 17, and in Chapter 2, Article 8, as well as in Rejection of Errors Chapter 2 (2, 3, 4) and 5 (1). In addition, it is also mentioned in the Forms of Profession of Faith and the Lord's Supper, with a more elaborate treatment in the Form of Baptism.

The upshot of it all is that while the creeds and confessions (as well as the forms) of the Canadian Reformed Churches refer to the covenant, there is no detailed and worked-out article or chapter on the doctrine of the covenant. For a fuller treatment, one will have to turn to other and later confessional documents, such as the Westminster Standards. One may regret this (and at times we do), but such is the reality.

Do the Canadian Reformed Churches promote the one covenant view?

What all of this means is that there is no such thing as a carefully defined and agreed upon "Canadian Reformed view of the covenant." To say, as some people are saying, that "the Canadian Reformed Churches hold to a one covenant view" is simply not true. Within the Canadian Reformed Churches there are members and ministers who hold to different views on the covenant. Some favour one covenant. Some lean towards a two covenant view (covenant of works or favour and covenant of grace). Still others have embraced a three covenant view (covenant of redemption, covenant of works/favour, covenant of grace).

What this means too is that it is incorrect and an over-simplification to assert that all who are members or office bearers in the Canadian Reformed Churches are one covenant view upholders and defenders. The implication is, then, that this must be the official stand of these churches. *To say it again, the Canadian Reformed Churches have never gone beyond their confessional documents and adopted a particular view on the covenant.*

Now, some will regard this as a deficiency and blemish. But are they any different than other Reformed federations? The Canadian Reformed Churches have two sister churches in North America that also adhere to the Three Forms of Unity such as

the Reformed Church in the USA and the United Reformed Churches of North America. Have these two Reformed federations adopted either a one covenant view or a three covenant view? The answer is "No!" they have not, and neither have most other Reformed federations around the world.

The reality is that on certain doctrinal matters or interpretations the Canadian Reformed Churches and other Reformed churches leave their members and officers free. They do not bind beyond what they confess. They recognize that, as on a number of other doctrinal matters, there are different views/interpretations. At the same time, they have made no particular attempt to canonize one particular view and raise it to confessional status.

Are the Canadian Reformed Churches legalistic?

Now, there are some who also say, "The consequence of the Canadian Reformed Churches adopting a one covenant view is that they are legalistic or neo-pharisees." As such, these are serious charges, but they are false. First, as mentioned above, the Canadian Reformed Churches have never officially adopted either a one, two, or three covenant view. The second is that they ignore the fact that the Canadian Reformed Churches believe strongly that salvation is by grace alone and categorically reject legalism in all of its forms. The third is that such statements are being made without proof. We have heard the charge, but we have not seen any evidence. If you are of this conviction, please be so kind as to furnish us with the proof for such an accusation.

Naturally, this is not to say that there are no believers with flaws in our churches. The Canadian Reformed federation is composed of sinners. But that is not the point. The issue is whether or not one can brand a whole federation of churches as being legalistic or neo-pharisaic without giving any supporting evidence for such a claim and judgment.

The role of Dr. Klaas Schilder

In the course of this discussion, one also comes across any number of accusations hurled in the direction of Dr. Klaas Schilder. Space, however, does not permit us to give an accurate and complete profile of this formidable church man. For something like that we would direct our readers to one of the pioneers of the United Reformed Churches, the Rev. H. Vander

Kam, who wrote a book on Schilder in 1996 entitled, *Schilder: Preserver of the Faith* (New York: Vantage Press).

Now, it is true that Klaas Schilder is an esteemed figure in the history of the Canadian Reformed Churches. He was a theologian/professor in the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands and later in the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands (Liberated). He also played a pivotal role in the Liberation of 1944. Seeing that the Canadian Reformed Churches emerged out of the immigrants from the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands, he is also viewed by some to be the founder of the Canadian Reformed Churches and one of its leading theological voices.

With regard to these last assertions, some qualifications need to be made. As important as K. Schilder was in the Liberation and as esteemed as he may be in the history of the Canadian Reformed Churches, he is not its founder. One should not exaggerate his role or single him out as if he were the only leading figure. In the first place, there were other ministers and professors who also played important roles in the Liberation of 1944. In the second place, it is hard to establish the extent of Schilder's influence. This is due to the fact that his published works, even in Dutch, do not make for easy reading. As for his translated works in English, they are few, and the translations often do not convey the exact nuances of Schilder's theological thinking and literary style.

As for the influence of Schilder on the Canadian Reformed Churches specifically, that too is hard to gauge. Most of the younger ministers in the federation do not read Dutch. All of their information about Schilder is second hand. The same applies to most English theologians who criticize him. Most of them are relying on second-hand sources because they are not able to read Dutch, much less make sense of Schilder's often convoluted way of writing.

When it comes to Schilder's view on the covenant, there is also a lot of confusion. Part of the reason for this is that Schilder never wrote a systematic treatment on the covenant. Most of his comments on this subject need to be gleaned from here and there.

As for whether he promoted a one covenant view, it has to be said that he allowed for the idea of one covenant, but then it was that of one covenant with different phases. On the one hand, Schilder defended the fact that God's covenant dealings form a unity. Just as there is one faith, one baptism, one Lord, so there is one covenant. And yet, on the other hand, within that one covenant there is also an element of diversity. What

happened before the Fall with Adam is to be distinguished from what happened after the Fall with Christ.

As for whether he denied the covenant of redemption (*pactum salutis*), such a denial is not supported by the evidence. Schilder loved to speak about the decrees of God and especially the interaction between the three Persons of the Triune God in relation to our salvation.

As for the covenant of works, here one of his main problems had to do with the word "works," as if Adam could somehow work or merit his own salvation. The result is that he often refers to "the so-called covenant of works." So, did he deny a pre-fall covenant? No, as S. A. Strauss states in his dissertation on Schilder and the covenant, "he retained the phrase 'covenant of works.'"

(For more insight into the view of Schilder on covenant, please read, S. A. Strauss, *Alles of Niks: K. Schilder Oor die Verbond* [Bloemfontein, South Africa: Patmos, 1986 – forthcoming in English]. Also S. A. Strauss, "Schilder on the Covenant" in *Always Obedient*, edited by J. Geertsema [Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1995].)

Schilder and Barth

Among the strangest accusations directed at Schilder is that he was somehow in step with Karl Barth, the Swiss neo-orthodox theologian, on the matter of the covenant. Again, nothing could be further from the truth. As a matter of fact, Schilder was one of the first theologians to see through Barth's dialectical theology and pinpoint its heretical nature, especially its wrong view on truth. In his dissertation on "paradox" and in his magazine columns, he exposed the flaws in Barth's views on a regular basis and left no doubt that he considered much of what Barth said to be heretical.

Stam and covenant

Finally, there is also the fact that a Canadian Reformed minister, the late Rev. Klaas (Clarence) Stam, wrote a book on the covenant called *The Covenant of Love*. In this book he passes along a number of insights that he gleaned from Schilder. He combined them with any number of his own thoughts such as his preference for the term "the covenant of love." In addition, it should be noted that Stam, while not denying the existence of a pre-fall covenant, joins Schilder in not liking the term "covenant of works."

So, can it then be said that Stam reflects the current thinking in the Canadian Reformed Churches on the matter of covenant?

Again, that is hard to determine and even doubtful. There have been no polls or studies done to determine exactly what the covenant theology of the majority of Canadian Reformed ministers looks like. To what extent do they agree with Stam or what Stam writes about Schilder is not known. What is known is that any number of ministers have also been influenced by the writings of Herman Bavinck, Louis Berkhof, and Geerhardus J. Vos, as well as others. What is also known is that some do not agree with Schilder's one covenant view and its different phases, developments, or dispensations. In our midst we have one covenant men, two covenant men, and three covenant men, but we give them the freedom to express their views.


The covenant in discussion

It may also be of some benefit for the readers of this document to know that the doctrine of the covenant has received special attention in the unity talks between the Canadian Reformed Churches and the United Reformed Churches of North America. A highlight of these talks was a public symposium on that topic held in California a number of years ago. An extensive report of that symposium, including questions asked and answers

given, can be found in the book, *The Bond of the Covenant Within the Boundaries of the Confession*, edited by John A. Bouwers and Theodore G. Van Raalte (St. Catharines: Church Unity Publications, 2015).

Most of those who attended this symposium came away with the conviction that whatever nuances there are in the presentation in the doctrine of the covenant, there is *heart-felt agreement* between the Canadian Reformed and United Reformed Churches on the truth of the gospel: salvation is by grace; legalism is out; a Spirit-enabled life of sanctification and obedience is out of thankfulness and is not done to merit salvation in any way.

In conclusion

We hope that this short article has clarified a number of matters currently being discussed in certain circles overseas. May the Lord continue to bless all those who seek to be involved in Christ's church gathering work and keep them faithful to his Word and what the Reformed/Presbyterian churches confess and uphold in their confessions. 

A Tale of Two Buildings –

The Hagia Sophia and the Free Church Manse

Christians everywhere should be concerned about Hagia Sofia's conversion to a mosque

In a significant and shocking moment for Muslim-Christian relations, Turkey's President Erdogan has announced that the Hagia Sophia, the beautiful and grand former cathedral, is to be turned into a mosque – again.

The first church on the site was founded in AD 360, with the present building dating back to the sixth century, and was the centre of the Eastern Orthodox Church for over 1,100 years – until Mehmed II conquered Constantinople in 1453. From then

until Atatürk in the twentieth century, it was a mosque but for the past eighty-five years it has been a museum and is currently a designated UNESCO World Heritage site.

But with President Erdogan wanting to appeal to his base at a time of waning popularity, he is now going to turn it into a mosque again – much to the dismay of Christians, not only in Turkey but throughout the Middle East.

Christians in the Middle East

The continued persecution of Christians in the Middle East is one of the great underreported stories of the twenty-first century. The Assyrians, for example, have shrunk from 1.3 million in Iraq to less than 250,000. They have scattered over the world. There are around 40,000 Assyrians in Sydney – one of whom is my barber! In Turkey, Christians are systematically persecuted. Foreign church workers are arrested and expelled; evangelical churches are regularly attacked by extremists. To even suggest that the killing

of over one million Armenians by the Turks in 1914-1923 was genocide will result in you going to jail. I recall in 2007 being in Ephesus just after three Christian leaders had been brutally tortured and killed – the fear amongst the Christians was palpable.

I suspect that turning the Hagia Sofia into a mosque will only make things worse, as it will encourage the more radical Islamists to fulfil their dream of a society where Sharia law is fully enacted, and the Christians and secularists are removed. Another Hagia Sophia in Nicaea, where the Second Council



of Nicaea was held in 787, has already been turned into a mosque. It is a concerning development which raises a number of questions.

Turkey has, like China, signed the UN's Declaration of Human Rights, which, amongst other things, guarantees freedom of worship, expression, and belief. Like China, it appears that its signature is meaningless.

Lack of freedom

Another area of concern is the problem of the lack of freedom in many Islamic countries. In the West, Muslims are rightly free to worship and build mosques – something I have defended in the past and will defend again.

But what about the right of Christians to worship and build churches in Muslim countries? What about the rights of Muslims who wish to become Christians? Can they do so without incurring punishment from the civil authorities? What most Western liberals, brought up on a doctrine of religion as a private, personal, spiritual matter, do not get that Islam is not just a religion. It is a way of life, politics, and government. There is no separation of religion and state in Islam. All belongs to Allah and must be governed in submission to his law and those who follow him. It's a coherent and consistent view.

When Muslims live in a country which is not Islamic, they are to abide by the laws of that country – but a religious Muslim will live in the hope that the country and its laws will eventually become Islamic. However, even in a “free” country like the UK, where it is legal to change your religion, a Muslim runs a great risk if they decide to become a Christian. I think of one girl who became a Christian and had to be taken into a police protection programme to save her from violence and abuse.

Back to Dundee

All of the above made me think of my former home – the Free Church manse in Dundee. It's not exactly on the same level as the Hagia Sophia and I suspect will never be declared a World Heritage site, but it is important to me! I lived there for twenty-seven years and recall with happiness every single room. Our neighbours were Muslims. They were good neighbours and we enjoyed sharing the same street as them. Over the years, more and more homes in the street were occupied by Muslims.


When we left, the Church decided to sell the manse. It was sold to some of our Muslim neighbours. And I found myself having a reaction which surprised me. I was and am deeply disappointed that this has happened. Some reading this will immediately and unthinkingly suggest that this is because of ingrained racism, an accusation I utterly reject – unless you are prepared, in that smug way that Western liberals have, to regard Islam as a race, not as a religion. I could not care less about the skin colour or ethnicity of whoever bought the house. But religion is a different matter.

Why? I used to sit in my study in the early morning, reading my Bible, singing psalms, and praying. Through the wall I could hear the Islamic call to prayer. I admired the devotion, but not the content – I've actually read the Koran. Our neighbours built a “garage” in their garden – a garage which was really a place of worship. They belonged to a particular Islamic sect which had their own prophet, and when he came to visit, all the followers of that group throughout Scotland would gather. Of

course, it was never designated as a place of worship, but no councillor or authority would ever dare question its use lest they face the charge of Islamophobia, which in today's political culture is career suicide! On the other hand, if we had built a small church in our back garden without a change-of-use permit, I suspect we would have been ordered to tear it down.

But it does disturb me that the rooms in which we used to praise Jesus, show hospitality to his people, and share the faith with others, will now be used to promote a different religion – one which is bound up in so much of the persecution of the Lord's people. Is it wrong for me to feel that sorrow? I loved my Muslim neighbours and longed for the best for them – that they would come to know Christ. They at least had a couple of Christian neighbours to help with that. But I fear that as the street becomes more and more Islamic, the opportunities for that kind of engagement will disappear. Ghettoisation and a kind of cultural apartheid is not helpful for evangelism, nor is it conducive for a liberal, tolerant society.

A secular friend told me about a gay couple in the North of England who owned their own home. They were happy to see that it was a multi-ethnic and diverse community. But over the years that changed, until eventually they were the only non-Muslim couple left in their area. They were later approached and



We need to
make the
most of every
opportunity


asked if they would sell their house. They refused because they loved where they were, but they then experienced a degree of abuse and threats which caused them to call in the local councillor. To their shock, he told them that they should move as the area “now belongs to us and different standards apply!” It was a vastly different experience from our own.

A bigger issue

There is a bigger issue here. I have no problem with there being different religions within a pluralistic and tolerant society. But what if that religion itself is opposed to pluralism and tolerance, which I argue Islam is, and seeks to impose its own Sharia law? Is it even wrong to ask that question? Of course, we should recognise that there are many differences within Islam, but it nonetheless remains the case that Islamic teaching about law, religion, and state is diametrically opposed to the Western liberal view (stemming from Christianity) of pluralism, tolerance, and freedom of religion.

Douglas Murray, in his insightful book *The Strange Death of Europe*, warns us that there is a real danger of Europe losing its

Christian roots, values, and freedoms, something which he as a gay atheist deplores. I fear that the conversion of the Hagia Sophia into a mosque is a sign of more troublesome times ahead.

I once had Muslim neighbours; I no longer do. They once had Christian neighbours; they no longer do. All of this should remind Christians that we need to work while it is day, because the night comes when no-one can work. We need to make the most of every opportunity to tell of Christ, because the days are evil. Let us love our enemies and pray for those who oppose and spitefully use us. Let us care for the refugee, whatever their religion, but let us never forget the God whose Word is truth, whose Son is life, and whose Spirit brings hope. Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever. 



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Lydia Schulenberg

Fiftieth Anniversary of the Vineyard Canadian Reformed Church of Lincoln





When the Vineyard church was first instituted back in 1970, we were members of the Canadian Reformed Church at Smithville. This church was growing tremendously, and something had to be done. Thus, some congregants agreed that Lincoln was a great place to start a new congregation. We began on August 16, 1970 with a small group ... thirty-nine families and four singles.

The congregation grew steadily in the following years. Membership rose to over 500. Soon crowding became a problem. The solution? Start another church. On December 31, 1990, several families left the Vineyard church and began a new congregation (Spring Creek Canadian Reformed Church), which presently meets on Spring Creek Road in Vineland. A second "baby" was born when the neighbouring church of Smithville (also suffering from overcrowding) met together with some of the Vineyard congregants to begin a new church, this time west-ward. Thus, the Covenant Canadian Reformed Church in Grassie was established.

As we reflect on the fifty years here in this community, we see the Lord's hand in preserving the congregation here in this place. For this reason, a history book, "Out of Many Berries," has been published depicting major events in the life of our church. To honour this event, we had a two day celebration on Saturday, August 15 and Sunday, August 16, 2020.

Beamsville, Saturday, August 15, 2020

At around five o'clock pm, about seventy people had assembled in the front of the church on John Street, Beamsville. Among them, federal Member of Parliament, Dean Allison, the Legislative Assistant (Mike Zwiép) to MPP Sam Oosterhoff, and our mayor, Sandra Easton. As the founding members: Harry and Cisca Devries, Bert and Tiny Mans, Eric and Grace Stieva, and Wayne and Helen VanSydenborgh.

After some picture taking of the founding members, the rest of the attendees were invited forward by the MC, Lydia Schulenberg.

Our pastor, Rev. D. Wynia, opened with the reading of a Scripture passage that emphasized the importance of roots, which provide nourishment and stabilization in the life of people and of the church itself (also with a side reference to the tree to be planted). The community representatives addressed the attendees with congratulations of having reached this milestone.

They emphasized the importance of the position churches and their members take up in society. They wished the congregation blessings for the years ahead also in the support they gave in many opportunities in society as a whole.

Then followed the physical tree-planting, which had been prepared beforehand to minimize the physical strain of the founding members. Pictures were taken again, and, after a good job done, refreshments and ice cream were available for all present.

Sunday, August 16, 2020

The actual day of celebration.

In the morning Rev. D. Wynia preached from Eph. 3:14-21, which points out Paul's prayer for the church, that Christ may dwell in our hearts, that we may be grounded and rooted in love to him and one another.

In the afternoon, our former pastor, Rev. G. Wieske, preached from Malachi 1:1-5, where the Lord shows his love for his people despite the actions of the world around. In the end they will say: "Great is the Lord!"

After both services there was opportunity to view a picture gallery about the past fifty years of Lincoln church. Coffee, ice cream, *gebak*, and drinks were available to all, while interacting socially outside.

It is our prayer that our Heavenly Father will continue to bless the Vineyard Canadian Reformed Church here in Lincoln, and that she will be able to, in the future, celebrate a 100-year anniversary. 🇨🇦

Confessing Sola Scriptura what about the clarity of Scripture and its many interpretations?

What is the scriptural basis and understanding of Sola Scriptura? With the near infinite number of interpretations, how can we reconcile this with the clarity (perspicuity) of Scripture? Does it follow from Sola Scriptura that every individual is ultimately responsible for interpreting the Scriptures themselves?


The Holy Scriptures are our supreme and only rule of faith and life. They determine our faith and command our obedience. Hence, we test our beliefs and practices by the Holy Scriptures. We receive the Bible "not as the word of man, but as what it really is, the word of God" (1 Thess 2:13). As we confess in Belgic Confession Article 5, "We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith" (2 Tim 3:16, 17; Rom 15:4). Scripture is the guide we keep before us always (James 1:22-25), the rule by which we work (Gal 6:16), by which a young man keeps his way pure (Ps 119:9). It is the fire that makes us burn for God inside (Luke 24:32), the sword with which we fight (Eph 6:17), etc. As John Calvin put it, "No other word is to be held as the Word of God, and given the place as such in the church, than what is contained first in the Law and the Prophets, then in the writings of the apostles; and the only authorized way of teaching in the church is by the prescription and standard of his Word" (Institutes, 4.8.8; Luke 24:44; BC Art 7). Indeed, the Bible alone – Sola Scriptura – is the fountain for all authoritative teaching and tradition!

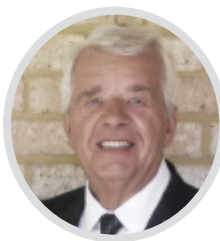
The clarity or perspicuity of Scripture is testified first of all by the Scriptures themselves. Psalm 119:105 says, "You word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." Proverbs 6:23 says, "For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light." With Christ's coming into the world, this light became even more abundantly clear (Isa 9:2; Matt 4:13-17), and the Lord Jesus testified of himself, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). In John 8:31 Jesus also says, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Peter also compares "the word of prophecy" to "a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Pet 1:19). This, therefore, we must believe and confess first of all concerning the clarity of Scripture.

The Scriptures also show us that not all things are equally clear, as Peter shows in 2 Peter 3:16, when saying about the apostle Paul who "wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand...." Though by nature we are blind and unable to understand all things clearly,

the Bible is clear. Those who have the Spirit of God dwelling in them “have the mind of Christ,” and as believers, they are able to understand the Scriptures (1 Cor 2:14-3:3). The veil has been lifted from their hearts, and by the Spirit they behold the glory of Christ and are transformed into his likeness (2 Cor 3:14-18). The principle of interpretation is known as the “analogy of Scripture.” If the great doctrines of the Bible are clearly taught in some texts, then it follows that darker or less clear passages in the Bible can be properly interpreted by the clearer texts. Scripture itself is the interpreter of Scripture! Cross-reference, however, must be used carefully and with an awareness of context, giving priority to references in the same book, then the same author, and then the same part of the Bible, before bringing in cross-references from distant Scriptures.

Thus, God’s Word calls for teachers gifted by the Spirit, ordained as ministers of the Word in the church, diligent in their study of the Word, and faithful in proclaiming it. Such men are the gifts of the ascended Christ to build up his body (Eph 4:11-13). The Bible, however, is the treasure of the whole family of God. It is God’s will that all his people, young and old, small

and great, hear and read his Word (Deut 31:10-13; 2 Kgs 23:2; 2 Chron 34:30; Neh 8:1-8, 18). Enlightened by the Holy Spirit, who inspired these Scriptures, the hearers and readers of God’s Word receive the treasures with anticipation (Ps 119:18), assured that the simple and humble will be able to understand them and make its truths their own. They don’t receive these truths as results of their own interpretation but as the revelation of God’s Holy Spirit that is clear enough for children to learn, understand, and personally appropriate. This they can do because the Word of God is *clear*. 



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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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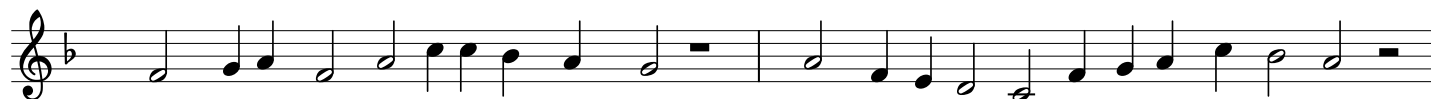


Psalm 119:8-14

Part 2 of 3

An Acrostic

(H-N)



8. How I do prom-ise to o-bey your words! Heart-felt is my en-treat-y for your fa-vour.



Hav-ing con-sid-ered all your prom-is-es Has-ten will I to keep all your com-mand-ments.



Heark-en, O Lord, when I a-rise at night Hap-py to join in prayer with those who fear you.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>9. In faithfulness you dealt so well with me.
Instruct me in your knowledge all-surpassing.
I went astray before you punished me.
It was to teach me, that I was afflicted.
Is not your law worth more to me than gold?
Indeed, I value it beyond all measure.</p> | <p>12. Lord, fixed in heaven is your faithful word.
Long as the earth endures it stands forever.
Lest I should perish you've shown me your truth.
Life-giving are your precepts and commandments.
Lend me your aid for I belong to you.
Limitless are your laws and all your teaching.</p> |
| <p>10. Just as your hands have made and fashioned me
Join to my knowledge love for righteous living.
Joy is for those who walk in godly ways.
Judge all the insolent who wronged your servant.
Journey with me for I do love your word.
Jealously keep me close to you forever.</p> | <p>13. My greatest love is for your perfect law.
More wisdom have I than all of my teachers.
Methodic'llly I keep your flawless word.
Made wise by you I shun all that is evil.
Mindful of how your words are sweet to me
Morning till ev'ning I will be your student.</p> |
| <p>11. Keenly my soul waits for your saving grace.
Knowing your goodness, I trust you forever.
Keep close to me, heal all my bitter pain.
Kindle in me a love for all your statutes.
Knaves plot and scheme for my demise, my death.
Kind as you are, save me from wicked plotting.</p> | <p>14. No lamp gives light like your pure radiant word.
Never will I take back the oaths I promised
Nor will I speak against your chast'ning hand.
Now I will give my freewill gifts to praise you.
Notorious men may lay their snares for me
Nevertheless I'll serve my LORD forever.</p> |

Text: Psalm 119:57-112 Geneva, 1551
Vers.: George van Popta, 2020

Geneva, 1551

