

Clarion



Clarion

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What's Inside

We are reaching the last months of 2020, which has certainly been a year unlike others. Our lead article, from Dr. James Visscher, discusses a topic that is always relevant to our church, though perhaps even more so this year: loneliness.

From Mrs. Rebecca Bredenhof we bring you an article on calls to ministers ... from the perspective of a minister's wife. We also have an article by Rev. Jim Witteveen, "The Church in a Propaganda Society."

Issue 24 includes a report from Ancaster, welcoming the Holtvliwer family. There is also a Treasures, New & Old meditation, the Ray of Sunshine and You Asked columns, and a press release.

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Are You Lonesome, Tonight?

Elvis

I know, I know, the title of this article dates me. Some of the older ones among us may go back in our memory banks and recall that Elvis Presley once had a hit song under that title. Now, I am not endorsing Elvis. Indeed, my late father would be appalled if he knew that one of his sons was endorsing anything to do with that man known for his swivelling hips and gyrating pelvis. Nevertheless, I could not help it when my mind went back to this song as I was reflecting on the topic of loneliness.

Dying of ...

Still, that was not the only memory that crept into my mind. There was another from the early days of my ministry in southern Alberta during the 1970s. Every two weeks I would step into my car and drive from Lethbridge to the town of Taber in order to visit church members there. On one occasion I also had to pay a visit to a parishioner in the main senior's home in town. In the course of doing so, I struck up a conversation with an elderly lady who appeared to be in deep distress. Over time I observed that she was dying. Only it was not of cancer or some other pernicious disease. No, she was dying of loneliness!

The fellowship will seek out the lonely and the lonely will seek out the fellowship and together they will speak and live out the confession: "I believe the communion of saints."

You see, her two children had decided that she needed to be under care and in a home. So, they pressured her into making a move. Only, it should be noted that one of these children lived in Vancouver and the other in Montreal. In addition, they rarely called and never visited. Yet they were all that she had in this world. She had no other family, no siblings, no grandchildren, just two far, far away children who seemed to have forgotten that they still had a mother – somewhere in a Prairie town.

And today?

Sad, right? Distressing, is it not? And yet it is nothing new. Indeed, our world today is fast becoming a lonely place for even more people. If you thought that the 1970s were bad, this new decade, which opened with the COVID crisis, is even worse. Talk to any number of social workers, nurses, doctors, and whoever and you will soon learn that loneliness is an epidemic today. The world is filling up with elderly people who are shrinking and shrivelling due to a lack of love and attention.

For loneliness saps our will to live. It affects us adversely – mentally, socially, physically. Lonely people will tell you that they really have nothing to live for.

Every new day is filled with the same emptiness. The past may be a source of endless recollection, but the future is filled with darkness and dread. What is there to live for when you have no one to talk to, share with, lean on, look to, or interact with? Little wonder, then, when that old Elvis song is sung with that loaded title, "Are You Lonesome, Tonight?" many nod their tired heads in agreement and whisper under their breath, "Yes, I am." What a tragedy!

Not part of God's plan

At the same time, it also has to be said, "How far away this is from the nature and intentions of our God and heavenly Father." Holy Scripture reveals in any number of places that our God is a God of fellowship. He has always had fellowship with the Son and with the Holy Spirit. Turn to John 17 and you receive a peek into the marvellous and mysterious communion between the Son and the Father. Read Revelation 22 and you can hear the Son and the Spirit working together and uttering the same

invitation – "Come!" Within the three persons of the Triune God, there exists perfect fellowship.

And there is no doubt that it was out of this perspective that God the Father empathized with Adam. Here he was made in the image and likeness of God, but he lacked something. He lacked true companionship. Adam looked to the animals for solace, but they failed to fill the vacuum. He was lonely. God saw it too. He even pronounced his first negative judgment when he said that something was "not good." The solution? He decided to create Eve – the woman. Yes, and no sooner does Adam set eyes on her, he bursts out with a cry of enthusiasm and relief, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!" In other words, "God, you have finally gotten it right. Here is what I need to make me whole."

The need for community

At bottom the Lord God knew that Adam needed to live in community. He knew then and he knows now that loneliness or solitary confinement is a terrible curse. His creatures are made to live relationally. Why do you think he called Abram out of Ur of the Chaldeans and turned him into a great nation? Why did he go out of his way to liberate, rescue, and redeem the people of Israel?

Why did he send his Son to gather a new humanity? It was so that he could have fellowship with them, they with him, and they with one another. We can even go out of our way and say that the Lord hates it when people wall themselves off from one another. He despises it when they think only of themselves and forget the One above them, as well as those around them. Why else can the law be summarized into two great callings – the call to love God and the call to love one's neighbour?

Modern influences

Still, as we are considering this matter of fellowship, we also need to look further afield and ask, "Why is loneliness such a big plague today?" Naturally, there are many factors that can be cited. Take the matter of modern living. We tend to build our modern homes and apartments in such a way that people are often isolated from one another. Besides occasional meetings in the hallway or chatting over the fence after mowing the lawn, there is little or no interaction. We close our front doors

We should take
a good hard
look at our own
style of relating

and garage doors, hang up our stuff, turn on the television, and snuggle up to Netflix. But since when can movie providers, Internet games, and glamour shows take the place of real face to face human interaction?

Looking inward

Of course, sometimes we inflict solitude on ourselves. Bullying at school may make us crawl into a shell and shun any semblance of community. Marriage troubles or family tensions may make us too embarrassed to be around other people, much less open up to them. Personal arrogance also plays a role in that some look down their long noses at the rest of humanity and scoff at their inferiority or ignorance.

Hence, it is not out of place for us to take a good hard look at our own style of relating. What do I mean? Well, how about this: Do you invite people over? How often? What do you talk about? Is it perhaps only about you – your life, your experiences, your children, your grand-children? Do you ever turn around and ask, “And how about you and your family? How are you doing?” Do we take a genuine interest in the lives and needs of others? Sadly, so often it’s all about us, and only us. It’s what one might call one-way fellowship.

Should we then be surprised when others detour around us? With such an approach we are setting ourselves up for nothing else than a lonely life. Who wants to be friends with those who show not an inkling of interest in you and are consumed only with themselves?

Looking upward

So, what is the answer? As believers is it to be found in living our lives more and more in harmony with the will of God? How does God want us to live? How does he want us to deal with our neighbour? The answer can be found in many places in the Bible. Consider for a moment the fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22-24: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control ... those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”

Notice how each one of these qualities or fruit describe what should be happening in our inter-personal relations. As we socialize with one another, we are to remember and put into practice these virtues. And when we do, we will discover that there will be no lack of fellowship. Qualities such as love, kindness, goodness, and gentleness cannot help but make us look


to the needs and the burdens of others. Exercising them will get us out of our shells and into the lives of others. Qualities such as joy, peace, patience, faithfulness, and self-control will make us a joy to be with and not a bother or a burden.

In short, pursue these fruits and you will impact the lives of others, and that includes the lonely. They will force you out of your comfort zone and direct you into the lives of others.

Other things

But while loneliness is best combatted by being Spirit-filled people, other things can also counteract the dread of loneliness. Here are some suggestions: (a) Volunteer – if you have time on your hands and do not know what to do, then seek out different organizations in the community that need your help. One thinks of thrift stores, drivers for cancer patients, mentors for young people, skilled workers (plumbers, electricians, carpenters) offering their services free of charge and enabling the elderly to stay in their homes. The opportunities are endless. (b) Join a care group – more and more of our churches are realizing that in today’s world Bible study groups need to spread their wings and be more than debating clubs. Members of such groups should strive to come alongside one another to encourage, listen, help, and pray for one another. (c) Spend time with loved ones – one would think that this is something that happens automatically, but unfortunately that is not always the case. At times loved ones are too busy even for one another. At other times loved ones have falling outs and thus avoid one another. Frequently too we are so absorbed with our own lives that we forget about others, even those we love most.

A different example

In a world in which people are literally dying of loneliness, in which people seek an antidote for their loneliness in the bars and discos of society, it behooves the children of God to set a different example. We have been gathered into the church, and what is the church but a community of sinners taken out of this world and seeking to live a new life thanks to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ? In such a community we get to share in the fruit of the Spirit and we are called to share out the fruit of the Spirit. The fellowship will seek out the lonely and the lonely will seek out the fellowship and together they will speak and live out the confession: “I believe the communion of saints.” 

Is the Extra Mile Extra?

"In my distress I called to the LORD... my cry came before him, into his ears." (Psalm 18:6)

In the previous meditation on Psalm 18 we saw the importance of immediately crying out to the Lord for help when we are in trouble. That's what David has always done. The trouble that he faced is severe. Very deadly peril is described in verse 4: "The cords of death entangled me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me..." David knows what to do! "I cried to my God for help" (v. 6). And: "From his temple he heard my voice."

Given the sensational depiction of God in the following verses, it is quite incredible that he would hear the cry of one desperate man. But the anguished cries of Jesus on the cross are again our proof that God will also hear *all* our cries. Jesus's sacrifice for our sin proves God loves us, and those he loves he hears. And he helps.

In verse 7 God rouses himself and comes down to rescue. At his coming, the earth trembles; the mountains quake in terror. For God is coming. And he is angry. Why? Because David his beloved child is in peril! Like a mighty dragon smoke rises from his nostrils, consuming fire blasts out from his mouth. With almighty power he commands an army of angels: mighty cherubim are his chariots. He comes with hailstones, bolts of lightning, and thunder. As a divine warrior he shoots his arrows and scatters the enemies. Even the very earth is blasted apart; the seas are uprooted because of the Lord's anger.


Maybe you have felt an earthquake, or seen the devastation that hailstorms or tsunamis can bring. Just one of these things coming against you is terrifying. And here it all comes at once! But what is unimaginably terrifying if it comes against you, is unbelievably comforting if it is for you. All of this terror is directed against David's enemies trying to kill him.

But for David himself, God "reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters" (v. 16). Like a hurricane, in God's wrath everything is laid waste. But in the eye of the storm it's calm. And God reaches down and rescues

David and brings him to a spacious place. "He rescued me," says David, "because he delighted in me."

And that, then, is the key. If God delights in you, you're safe in the eye of the storm. Carried in his arms. If not, you're out there in the terror.

Does God delight in you? The answer to that, we know in Christ, is yes! Maybe you suffer so much sickness, pain, or loss that you sometimes wonder if God does hear your cries for help. We all suffer at times in this life, from sickness or sin, and everything in-between. But in suffering don't despair! When you are in distress, in every new deadly peril cry out to the Lord. He will deliver. In fact, his wrath against those who hurt his children is terrifying!

Because of Christ, who suffered the terror of God's wrath for us, God delights in you. So, he will reach down in the day of disaster, he will take hold of you, and bring you into a spacious place, for he delights in you. 

For Further Study

1. Do you find yourself terrified in times of storm and disaster, or comforted in God's love?
2. Do you believe that God always hears you when you call to him? What prayers has he answered for you in the past?
3. If you feel that God does not always hear you, can you meditate on God's wrath towards Christ, and so his love towards you?



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On Calls

The settling

I'm sure you are all acquainted with the process of calling a minister. Perhaps in the past your minister has been called by another church. Or perhaps your church is currently vacant and you've extended a call to a minister, hoping and praying that he will accept and come to be your minister. Maybe you are experiencing a long string of declined calls to your congregation, or your minister is experiencing a long string of calls extended to him. You might enjoy perusing the Yearbook and figuring out which ministers would be considered "eligible for call" – you know, the ones who aren't too close to retirement, have been in their congregation for five years or more and are possibly ready to move on. Maybe you even like speculating with your friends about the likelihood of this or that minister accepting or declining the calls he's received. There can be no denying that "calls" are a familiar pastoral scene in the Reformed landscape.

But I'd like to deepen your acquaintance with this familiar scene and provide you with an insider's perspective. Being

married to a minister, I'm in a position to share things with you about the ins and outs of considering a call, things you may not have thought about. Perhaps, beyond being glad that you haven't had to consider a call, you've never thought too much about what it would be like. And so, to give you a better appreciation for the process from our perspective, I invite you to spend a figurative three to six weeks as a fly on the wall in the manse while we deliberate.

Moving in

First, we need some context. Since a call is usually extended to a minister after he has been serving in a certain congregation for some years, let's back up and think about what he and his family have invested in this congregation from around the time they first moved here. Moving to a new place requires a lot of effort in organising, decluttering, gathering or buying boxes, packing up the contents of the old house, then physically shifting (moving day is often stressful...) and finally unpacking all those boxes,

The unfamiliar slowly becomes the new normal, and we gradually experience a sense that this place is starting to feel like home.

setting up the new living space, and getting settled. There are nearly always some purchases to be made when old furniture doesn't fit properly in the new home, more lamps are required, or an area rug is needed – moving is not a simple process!

The stress of moving is amplified if the move is over a great distance. The new city streets are unfamiliar. Our regular supermarket might not have a branch in the new place. Indeed, depending on how far we have moved, the grocery store can feel like a whole other planet! Capsicum and rockmelon? Topless pineapples? For each relocation over the years, shortly after our arrival we have needed to obtain new drivers' licenses, health cards, library cards, bank cards, credit cards, health insurance plans, doctor, dentist, and orthodontist. (Once, we even had to learn to drive on the other side of the road!) And while this list may sound exhausting, it's by no means exhaustive.

Getting settled

At the same time, my husband is settling into his new job, and my family and I are finding our way in a new congregation. My husband's beautiful calling is to preach God's Word to this "new" flock, to minister to them from the pulpit and in their homes, to rebuke and exhort, to comfort and admonish. To do his task effectively, he needs to know God's people, to be able to identify what lives and moves in their hearts and lives.

So, while we are accomplishing all the tasks connected with our move, we are simultaneously trying to acquaint ourselves with the members of the congregation, mostly by visiting them in their homes. Some visits we do as a couple, some as a family; regardless, in the first year or so, we are out visiting a lot. There are many wonderful aspects to this! We may enjoy the gift of fellowship, breaking bread with our brothers and sisters in the Lord, getting a small taste of their home life, and seeing God's work in the lives of his children, here in this place.

Busy times

But it is so busy. And sometimes our family life suffers, when we spend too much time out with others and not enough

time alone. Struggles that the children may be experiencing – perhaps with making new friends or missing the old – can get lost in the shuffle, crowded out because there is so little "down

time." Visit after visit after visit is draining on the family, for at each address in the church directory everyone and everything is new and unfamiliar. Though we may be getting weary of it all, we must be polite, maintain a happy face, and hope our children do as well! Still, the gift of fellowship is sweet, new relationships are born, and the challenges of this period of acquaintance pale in comparison to the blessings we experience in what we have come to call the "honeymoon" period in a new congregation.

This honeymoon period lasts for at least a year, and often more. The months go by,

the number of visits slowly dwindling as we work our way through the many Vs and closer to the Zs in the directory. We find ourselves at home on the weekends a little more frequently, the pace is slower, quieter, and as a family we are able to catch our breath at last. The novelty of the move has worn off; the congregation has gotten used to us and we to them.

After the honeymoon

In my experience, this is when homesickness hits pretty hard. The quieter evenings and the slower pace, while right and good for our family (for who can sustain such a busy social life any longer?), leave me feeling strangely bereft and a little lonely. It's not that I want another invitation out for the evening or another serving of cake and coffee, soup and buns in between church services. No, what I crave is to spend time with my extended family, or with old familiar friends with whom I can put up my feet, let down my hair, and simply relax. Comfortable, deep relationships need to be steeped in time and shared experiences, and our whirlwind year of many and varied social calls has not been able to provide these just yet.

And over the next few years, this is what begins to happen. We reside in this new-to-us community of believers and slowly but surely build relationships with our brothers and sisters as we live our lives side by side. We study the Bible together, worship and pray together, chat while we wait for our children

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at the bus stop, enjoy fellowship through shared meals, visits, and church events, encourage one another in our Christian walk of life. As we do these things, we build on the shared foundation of Christ and our love for him. The unfamiliar slowly becomes the new normal, and we gradually experience a sense that this place is starting to feel like home. The strangers that warmly welcomed us upon our arrival those few years ago have become our beloved church family. For the most part, life has settled down into a stable and comfortable routine.

And then, the phone rings.

The unsettling

All too soon we have come to the end of the “safe zone,” if you will, the time when we are still settling in and there is little risk that my minister husband will be called elsewhere. The five-year mark has been reached, when unfamiliar phone numbers with unfamiliar area codes may start to light up our phone screen. Sure enough, caller ID is informing us that it’s not Gramma and Grampa on the line calling to catch up on how we’re doing.

No, this ringing phone ushers in the not-entirely-unexpected moment of “the call,” when routine life as we know it is flipped on its head for a time. The church in Timbuktu-Kalamazoo needs a minister, has done some research, and has deemed my husband a suitable man for the task. They have extended a call, and we’ve got three weeks to decide what to do. Twenty-one days to determine whether we are going to stay where we are or uproot our family and start over in a new place. 504 hours, give or take, to seek God’s guidance and wisdom as we choose path A or path B.

I’ll be honest: for me, dealing with calls is probably the hardest part of being married to a minister. In the first number of days after the call, my feelings vary from anxious and jittery, to sad, uneasy, and sometimes angry. With nervous energy, I find myself reorganising random cupboards in the house (I promised you a fly-on-the-wall experience...) or wandering around aimlessly, unfocussed and fretful. My gut reaction is almost always an unequivocal “No! – things are just fine here, thank you very much!” My initial (and ultimately selfish) desire is to stay where it’s familiar and comfortable. But before we begin deliberating, I need to be in a place where I am willing to go where God wants me to go, even if it might not be what I want. I ask God, “Help me align my will to yours, to truly desire your will, for it alone is good.” It’s only after a lot of soul searching and fervent prayer that I can face the upcoming decision with the peace and courage that God our Father provides.

Pulled in two directions

And so it begins. While my racing thoughts flit from here to there, trying to picture this unknown congregation based on the scant details we’ve been given so far, arrangements are made for us to visit and find out more. This usually involves attending a consistory meeting, a congregational “meet and greet,” and sometimes a separate social to meet the senior members of the congregation. If the church is far away, we must ship out our children to various homes as we travel to Timbuktu-Kalamazoo and stay a few days. While visiting, we are usually given a tour of the manse, the church, the school, the retirement home if there is one, and are sometimes treated to a social dinner with the consistory members and their wives. For a few hectic days, we are bombarded with information as we try to get a sense of what lives and moves in this congregation. It’s all a bit overwhelming and not a little daunting.

Because *of course* they need a minister – every congregation does! Our hearts are touched and tugged by these brothers and sisters in Christ who crave the preaching of the gospel every Sunday again, who desire to have a pastor and teacher guiding their flock. When the members share their needs and their struggles and their yearning for a minister, it’s impossible not to feel pulled to accept the call.

Yet, from the other side, there are the appeals from our own congregation, from emails, text messages, and chats with the people we know and love: “Please don’t go!” We wonder how we can even *think* about leaving these people, who have welcomed us and loved us and made us part of their church family!

So, how do we decide? Borrowing Gideon’s fleece, or using the Urim and Thummim to ask God for clear direction on where he wants us to go would quite handily remove all the hard work of painstaking deliberations! But God created us as thinking beings, with the ability to carefully contemplate the best path forward. As God wanted for his people Israel, “If only they were wise and would understand this and discern what their end will be” (Deut 32:29)! The Lord also promises to provide his divine guidance: “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go” (Ps 32:8). And, so, we trust God to lead us.

Balancing the scales?

But we still need to make the decision, and without fleece or ephod. There seems to be a common misconception that deciding on a call is as straightforward as weighing the needs of the one congregation against the needs of the other. Picture an old-fashioned balance scale with a plate on either side, one for each congregation. There are quite a lot of seniors in one congregation, so add some weight to one plate. To the other

side add a couple of broken marriages, and a number of discipline cases. Single parent families, divided consistory, serious sicknesses, many young people, recent deaths – all these add their weight to one side of the scale or the other. But when we place all concerns on the scale, will this truly give us an objective picture of which congregation is needier? Is there any accurate method to measure needs in a quantitative way? I don't think so.

Further, there is much more to think about than simply the needs of each congregation. It is also wise to consider the strengths of the minister, and if his strengths will meet the nature of the various needs in a place. Does it seem like his personality will work well with the consistory? As time has passed, his knowledge of the flock has become more intimate, and his relationships in the congregation have deepened. He knows well their struggles and temptations and can tailor the preaching to suit his audience, comforting and challenging when and where they need it most. Would it not be good to stay longer, build further on these relationships, and continue to preach God's Word to them boldly and pointedly? On the flip side, it's also helpful to honestly consider if his work is still effective in his current congregation – if it's not, maybe it is the right time to move on. And what about his family – are his children at a good age to relocate, or would it be a real challenge for them to move now? Where are they at in their schooling? Are there options for post secondary education in the area, if desired? Are there boyfriends or girlfriends in the picture? Certainly, none of these matters are insurmountable, but it's good to reflect on how they all relate to the big picture: where can we best serve God and bring glory to his Name? And, so, we pray: "Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths" (Ps 25:4). And we know he will.


Can you appreciate how hard it is? To be faced with two paths, where it's not a question of good or evil, right or wrong? To be pulled between two congregations, both wanting and needing a pastor for their flock? To be willing to do the will of God, and at the same time trying to suppress our own desires for ease and comfort? Someone is always going to be disappointed, whatever we decide, but we need to lay that aside too, and focus on what really counts. It is not men we seek to please, but God!

A call for change

Several years ago, Rev. P. Holtvlüwer wrote an editorial for Clarion entitled "Call Fatigue" (May 23, 2014) in which he

outlined the shortcomings of the calling process in our churches. He gave numerous ideas for changes to the process that would cause less upheaval for ministers, their families, and even their current congregation. If you don't remember much about it, I highly recommend that you dust it off and read it again! My favourite proposal of his was to introduce a "calling cycle." In theory, a calling cycle is a bit like trading season in major league sports. For a few months per year, calls are permitted. For the rest of the year, *sorry, our offices are closed*. This would give the minister, his family, and the congregation a break from the unrest and instability that a call produces. It might also be useful to create an online database / information board that lists all calls extended, accepted, and declined in both the CanRC and the FRCA. This would help prevent consistories from calling a minister that has recently been called by another church. Admittedly, there is no quick and easy solution to the difficulties that come with calls, but I do believe that there is much room for improvement.

An answer to the call

Our three weeks of decision making are nearly up. Three unsettling weeks of intense thought and discussion – amongst ourselves, with our children, with members of both congregations. During this period, our schedules and especially our minds have had room for little else, even though the regular routines of daily life did not pause for us. We have prayed, weighed, contemplated, deliberated, debated, discussed, distressed, wrestled, and finally rested in the knowledge that God guides and provides. If we stay, life will carry on, business as usual, until the next call – however soon that may be. And if we decide to go ... well, I had better start packing some boxes! 



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The Church in a Propaganda Society

We live in a propaganda society, and we are constantly being bombarded with information. But that flood of information is not merely a collection of brute facts being delivered in a neutral way, simply to inform. The information we receive is transmitted in the form of messages that are meant to influence, to convince, to appeal to our already existing understandings and biases, and to change the way we think about issues, great and small, significant and inconsequential. And this constant barrage of messages isn't limited to one specific area of life – it impacts every aspect of our existence.

What is propaganda?

Propaganda is political. It's economic. It's philosophical. It's religious. It seeks not only to influence our understanding of the world at the broadest levels, but also to influence our decisions about things as inconsequential as what brand of flavoured sugary carbonated beverage we choose to consume. And one of the fascinating things about propaganda is that it often works on these two, seemingly distinct, levels at the very same time (for example: <https://youtu.be/ib-Qiyklq-Q>).

It is absolutely essential that we be conscious of the fact that we are living in a society saturated with propaganda

French philosopher Jacques Ellul defined propaganda in this way: "Propaganda is a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated into an organization" (*Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, p. 78).

That's a complicated definition, but, to put it a bit more simply, organized groups (like political parties, government bodies, non-governmental organizations, and corporations) use the psychological methods of propaganda to achieve the results they desire for society as a whole. The goal of propaganda is to have everyone think the same way – to achieve unity among the masses, and to minimize dissent or opposition.

Writing in 1965, Ellul saw how propaganda was coming to define the nature of societies, especially with the development of new technologies and the increasing presence of mass media all over the world. One important aspect of propaganda, Ellul explained, is that it "tries to surround man by all possible routes, in the realm of feelings as well as ideas, by playing on his will or on his needs, through his conscious and his unconscious, assailing him in both his private and his public life" (p. 34).

Ellul wrote in the age of newspapers, radio, and television. Today, in the Internet Age, the reach and impact of propaganda has only increased, and increased exponentially. The global reach of mass media means that the propagandists' message is no longer limited to a single country, region, or language group. In minutes, a message can "go viral" and spread around the world.

Living in a connected age

We live in an era of constant connection. The vast majority of us use social media not just on a daily basis, but on a constant basis throughout the day, every day. We have accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. We participate in online discussion groups. We use search engines like Google and receive regular updates from news and information websites multiple times per day. We use sites like YouTube for entertainment, to search for information and the latest news, and to

access our favourite political and social commentators. And all of our online actions, the sites we visit, the stories we view and comment on, the interactions that we have with others, are monitored and used to direct the messages that we receive.

The technological advances of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century have made it possible for the propaganda machines of this world to truly "surround man by all possible routes," as Ellul said. As the techniques of propaganda have been perfected, technological advances have made possible the ever-increasing efficiency of those who employ them. Thus we can truly say that we live in a "propaganda society" – in advertising, in politics, in education, in social causes, in the arts, and in science – all of which are dominated by the interests of the propagandists.

So, what does that mean for us, both as individual Christians, and as the Church of Christ in general?

Awareness

The first key for us as individual believers is awareness. It is absolutely essential that we be conscious of the fact that we are living in a society saturated with propaganda. As people who have grown up knowing nothing else, propaganda is the air that we breathe. If we are unaware of what's truly happening all around us, we will very easily fall prey to the ever-present message of the propagandists. And, so, we need to somehow take a step outside of the culture in which we are immersed, and examine it critically from an outsider's perspective, using specifically Christian principles.

Think of this in terms of literacy. The Protestant Reformation led to an explosion of literacy among the common people of Europe. The Reformed churches encouraged literacy on all levels of society, because they strongly believed in the priesthood of all believers. All believers, and not just the clergy, needed to be able to read and understand the message of God's Word and apply it in their lives. In the same way, the Reformed churches of the twenty-first century need to encourage cultural literacy among our members – the necessity of understanding and interpreting the "spirit of the age" in the light of God's Word.

In his recently published book *Seeing Through Smoke: Living the Truth in an Age of Deception* (available for free

online at <http://potiphar.jongarvey.co.uk/seeing-through-smoke/>), British author Jon Garvey argues that Christians can be particularly vulnerable to propaganda. Many Christians prefer to believe the best about everyone and assume that others are motivated by the same things that motivate them. They do not want to be seen as being overly critical, or contrarians, or as “cranks” who are always complaining about the state of the world. They’re taught that they should promote peace and respect the authorities, so they may hesitate to question authority in any way. Or, as Garvey writes, they “may simply reflect the lazy norms of their social peers.”

And so, when you combine all of these attitudes, you end up with a person to whom propaganda is virtually invisible, and therefore extremely effective. The messages with which we are bombarded are simply absorbed uncritically, without being subjected to the kind of logical scrutiny that is absolutely vital to the cause of truth.

Dealing with propaganda

All of us deal with propaganda in one of several ways. The “Manipulators” know the “game,” and participate in it for their own benefit. The “True Believers” believe in the propagandists’ message and believe the techniques and messaging of the propagandists are justified for the “greater good.” But then there are those who are simply naive – people who don’t question the messages that are being communicated by people or groups that are in positions of authority. It’s in this latter group that many Christians find themselves.

So, at the most basic level, in order to avoid falling into this latter category and being seriously led astray, we need to begin with awareness. The first part of that awareness is understanding that in a propaganda society, propaganda isn’t the sole property of one political side or another – it is everywhere, on the right and on the left, among liberals and conservatives. In the United States, it’s not just the Democrats who deal in propaganda; the Republican party does the same. In Canada, it’s not just the Liberal Party or socialists

who engage in propaganda; every party plays the same game. And what’s more, political propaganda is not “just politics” and therefore something that can safely be disregarded. It is all-encompassing, and, as mentioned previously, it impacts every part of our lives.

Be critical evaluators

Therefore, as Christians we must be critical evaluators of the messages that bombard us, regardless of their source. We must ask difficult questions. What is the worldview of the person, organization, or political party that is communicating the message? What are they trying to convince us of? What are the techniques that they are using in order to convince us? What do their slogans really mean? How is the truth being twisted? How is the message being manipulated? What emotions or feelings or ideas are they appealing to, and trying to influence?

When we understand that everyone who communicates with us has their own agenda, and when we understand that that agenda is never neutral, but often directly opposed to the biblical Christian worldview, we are beginning the evaluation

process from the correct starting point, and we are putting ourselves in a good position in terms of cultural literacy.

And, as the Church, we have a serious decision to make. In a propaganda society, once the techniques of propaganda and the messages of the propagandists take over, it becomes almost impossible to combat the propaganda of our opponents without engaging in counter-propaganda. In the early twentieth century, the Nazis and the Communists became masters of propaganda. In response, the West battled the propaganda of the totalitarians by developing and disseminating propaganda of their own. Logical arguments and accurately presented information no longer could make the impact they once did. And, so, propaganda became ubiquitous on all sides.

So, it may seem that in order to “compete” in a propaganda society, in order to even be heard, the Church will also have

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“For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor 1:22-25).

to engage in propaganda herself. It's a dilemma, because the preaching of the gospel, the teaching of Christian doctrine, and the painstaking process of Christian discipleship are out of step with the methods and techniques that are everywhere today – techniques that “work.”

Jacques Ellul explained it well: “When it uses propaganda, the church succeeds, just as all other organizations. It reaches the masses, influences collective opinions, leads sociological movements, and even makes many people accept what seems to be Christianity. But in doing that the church becomes a false church. It acquires power and influence that are of this world, and through them integrates itself into this world” (p. 242).

The challenge of preaching

The fact is, in a propaganda society, the preaching of the gospel, which demands a whole lot more than sound bites, slogans, repetition of simplistic messages, appeals to emotion, and manipulation of its hearers, remains foolishness. Yes, our world is very different in many ways from the world in which the New Testament was written. But one constant remains: our task is to “preach the word, being ready in season and out of season; reproving, rebuking, and exhorting, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Tim 4:2).


In a propaganda society, making headway using the ancient method of patient preaching and teaching may be a great challenge. But that's nothing new – it always has been!

“For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks,

Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor 1:22-25).

Looking to the Spirit

In a world that is drowning in propaganda, we rely on the work and presence of the Holy Spirit. As individuals, we must pray for insight from the Spirit, so that we will not be “conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewal of our minds, that by testing we may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2). And as the Church, we trust in the work of the Holy Spirit, who will bless the faithful use of the means that he has provided. Even in a propaganda society, the Church's faithful obedience, however counter-cultural, however “out of step” it may appear with current trends and movements, will bear fruit.

So, personally and corporately, we must be conscientious objectors living within the propaganda society. We must continue to love the truth, to proclaim that truth, and to boldly and joyfully live out that truth! 



Jim Witteveen *Missionary in Brazil*
Sent by the Aldergrove Canadian
Reformed Church
jimwitt71@gmail.com



Ava Pierotti

Meet Ava, our youngest of five children.

Ava was born with a very rare condition called SCA19, which, among other things makes her very hypotonic and struggle with ataxia. This means she can have stiff muscles, and a lack of muscle control.

It has never stopped our determined little girl! At five weeks old, after surgery, the doctors placed a breathing tube in her nose, which she successfully pulled out all on her own, despite the doctors taping it firmly to her face.

And that was the way it was to be, defying the doctors and pediatricians, and determined to roll over, sit, and eventually to crawl to get around.

She spoke her first word at the age of two... and hasn't stopped talking since.

She figured out how to eat by mouth shortly after ... and hasn't stopped eating since.

Today Ava primarily uses a wheelchair, but still prefers to leave it behind in preference to crawling and scooting along the floor.

She loves all things to do with colouring, stickers, play dough, and crafts that make a mess :). She goes swimming at least once a week, where, for a while, she's freed from the limitations of her body as she can swim with the best of them. She's fearless, determined, and has a sense of humour that quickly draws people to her.

What a life-altering moment when Ava came on the scene. What grace and love from our Heavenly Father as he showed us the immense blessings we, and so many others, have experienced since. We thank God that he has cared for her this far and it is our prayer that he will grant her many more years!

John and Rieta Pierotti

December Birthdays

3 Janell DeBoer will be **30**

6311 Silver Street RR 2
St. Ann's, ON L0R 1Y0
Email: janell.db90@gmail.com

10 James Kamminga will be **35**

Box 1125 Carman, MB
R0G 0J0

15 Julie Kamminga will be **31**

c/o River Road Place
440 River Road
Winnipeg, MB R2M 3Z9

17 Ava Pierotti will be **13**

7761 Regional Road 20
Smithville, ON L0R 2A0

*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth! Serve the Lord with gladness!
Come into his presence with singing! Know that the Lord, he is God!
It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep
of his pasture.* Psalm 100:1-3

Ancaster Welcomes the Holtvlüwer Family

By **Adrian Bartels**

Installation service - August 23, 2020

The installation of our new pastor and teacher Rev. Holtvlüwer took place on a beautiful, sunny Sunday morning in August. Rev. den Hollander, our interim pastor the year prior, and who recently filled our pulpit for much of the past four months, graciously agreed to lead us in worship that Sunday and to install Rev. Holtvlüwer. The sermon text he used was Acts 20:28, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." In this sermon the office-bearers and congregation were reminded to: Guard Yourselves! Guard the Flock! and Guard the Price!

After the installation service, Br. Steve Kampen, the Chairman of Consistory thanked Rev. den Hollander for his beautiful work in proclaiming the riches of the gospel from our pulpit for much of the past year as well as assisting the office bearers in pastoring the flock and offering advice as needed. Brother Kampen gave opportunity for Rev. den Hollander and representatives

from neighbouring churches to say a few words of congratulations and encouragement to Ancaster and the Holtvlüwer family. Many local churches shared congratulatory letters which were also read publicly.

In the afternoon, Rev. Holtvlüwer preached his inaugural sermon on Exodus 28:12, 28-30: The gospel of a High Priest who remembers us before the LORD. In this sermon, he showed the congregation, through the imagery of the Old Testament priest's clothing, that our Saviour carries us in compassion and defends us in love.

With thankfulness to the Lord, we were able to worship in person with the entire congregation for both of these services by opening up the overflow room and equipping the fellowship hall with live video feed. With this additional capacity we were able to satisfy the government's current COVID-19 capacity restrictions. What a blessing it was to worship and sing altogether again!



Welcome Day - September 12, 2020

On a beautiful Saturday afternoon in September, the Ancaster church hospitality committee organized a COVID-19-friendly welcome event for the Holtvlüwer family. This welcome day was held at Landon and Kristen Wiese's beautiful rural property, which was decorated with a white food tent, straw bales, outdoor couches, flowers, standing bar tables, etc. The setup was picturesque - overlooking an expansive bass pond complete with a large dock. The hospitality committee had pre-portioned food available in the food tent and candy for the children (and adults) - it felt like a carnival! The first half of the congregation was invited from 1-3 pm and the other half from 4-6 pm, with an hour in between for clean-up, sanitizing, etc. In this way we were able to meet the current government restrictions.

Rev. Holtvlüwer, along with his wife Erica and their six children, Lucas, Noah, Elliott, Gabriel, Susanna, and Angelina, were able to mingle with the congregation and get to know everyone a little better. Some live entertainment was provided from a

particularly brave duo who crafted and sang a welcome medley to the Holtvlüwer family complete with guitar and harmonica accompaniment by the talented Rich Vandasselaar. In this song, the umlaut (the two dots above the "u" in Holtvlüwer) came under close scrutiny. The Psalms project that Rev. Holtvlüwer has recently completed also received some promotion in this song. Evidently, the Holtvlüwer family is quite fond of music and their eldest son, Lucas, came up and joined the band in some guitar playing and song singing.

Overall, it was a beautiful day and, considering the current restrictions we are living with, the event went swimmingly. All praise to our Heavenly Father for his abundant goodness! Ancaster is humbled and grateful for the manifold blessings of the Lord in his provision of a new pastor and teacher. It is our prayer that the Ancaster congregation and the Holtvlüwer family may be mutually blessed and that the name of our Heavenly Father is proclaimed and exalted. 🇨🇦


Do the Creeds and Confessions Have Any Authority of Their Own?

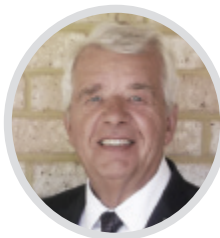
Do the creeds and confessions have any authority of their own or are they merely adhered to because a church adopts them and each individual in the church agrees that they are in alignment with the Scriptures?

When speaking about the authority of the Bible and of the confessions, we distinguish between God's Word having divine authority while the confessions have ecclesiastical authority. Their authority is derived and must always be subordinate to Scripture, which possesses intrinsic, divine authority. The Reformed confessions that we have adopted (the Three Forms of Unity, i.e. the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort) and the ones we have recognized as full-out Reformed confessions (the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Larger Catechism, and the Shorter Catechism) display a remarkable unity of Reformed doctrines among its diverse adherents. Reformed and Presbyterian churches are confessional churches, committed as they are to the Bible as the inerrant Word of God and its teachings as set forth in these confessions. The churches that adopt such confessions give them authority in the churches, as standard of a true and faithful summary of the teachings of God's Word.

These confessions help us approach and read the Bible with the insights and understandings of age-old confessors who have faithfully articulated the rich doctrines contained in God's Word. We do not approach the Bible as blank slates, but with these insights and understandings as our guide. When studying a point of doctrine, we go back to the creeds and confessions of the church and read the relevant portions carefully. They represent the church's accounting of the system of doctrine found in the Bible. They reflect the best wisdom of the ages

and often provide deeper insights into biblical truths. They also guard us against repeating the imbalances, errors, and heresies of the past or wandering into idiosyncratic teachings that very few Christians have ever held. In them we pass on the apostolic deposit of the truth (2 Tim 1:13; 2:2; Jude:3)

This ecclesiastical authority (i.e. the authority in the church, the *ekklesia* in Greek), then, is expressed implicitly by the signing of the Subscription Form adopted by the Canadian (and American, Australian) Reformed Churches (Church Order art. 26) and to be signed by all office bearers. The federation of churches is based on the unity of faith as summarized in the creeds and confessions. This subscription by the office bearers preserves and protects this unity of faith. The true doctrine of the Scriptures must be believed and adhered to, and errors, heresies, deviations must be recognized and rejected, to which the office bearers commit themselves by their signature of the Subscription Form. In this way the office bearers acknowledge this authority of the confessions in the federation of churches, affirming not only that they believe and confess them but that they will also defend them, promising to maintain this doctrine and refute errors conflicting with it. 



William den Hollander, Minister emeritus
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Press Release of Classis Central Ontario September 18, 2020

Rev. Clarence VanderVelde, on behalf of the convening church, welcomed all the delegates and opened the meeting with the communal singing of Hymn 52:1 and 2, Scripture reading from Ephesians 4:1-16, and prayer.

Flamborough-Redemption reported that the primi delegates are in attendance with the exception of three alternates. Additional instructions were read into the meeting.

Classis was constituted. Rev. Clarence VanderVelde was appointed as Chair, Mr. Rick Ludwig as Vice Chair, and Rev. Bill DeJong as Clerk.

The agenda is adopted with the addition of two items.

Memorabilia: Rev. Bill Boekestein recently declined the call from Burlington-Fellowship. The churches shared in this disappointment and encouraged them in their continuing search for a pastor and for the ministry of the church during the ongoing vacancy. It was also noted that Rev. John van Popta recently delivered his final sermon at Burlington-Fellowship due to ongoing health concerns.

Reports: The churches in turn reported on their foreign and local mission activities and following each report their efforts were prayed over by a delegate from a neighbouring church.

Burlington-Fellowship church reported that the classis archives have been inspected and were found to be in good order with the exception of a short list of items. The missing document list was reviewed in respect to the classis guidelines. A request was made for the clerks of the respective classes where documents were missing to forward them to the archivist.

The Treasurer's report was received and reviewed. The assessment proposal of \$3 per communicant member was approved. Rehoboth church reports that the records have been reviewed and are in good order. Mr. Jack Spithoff was thanked for his work.

The Committee for Needy Churches reported on its activities for the past year. There has been no activity for the fund in the past year. Mr. Kent Baartman is due for retirement from the committee. Burlington-Rehoboth reported that the financial records were reviewed and found in good order. Mr. Kent Baartman was thanked for his work.

Question period according to Article 44 C.O. was held. All the churches gave their responses in turn. Hamilton-Blessings requested advice on the requirements of Classis for the institution of Mercy Church and the installation of Rev. Ian Wildeboer as minister of the Word. This is a unique situation in the federation as this is a church plant that is becoming an instituted church. Discussion was held and advice was given.

Proposals or Instructions of the churches: Flamborough-Redemption submitted a proposal that Classis strike a committee to study guidelines and propose changes for classical examinations. Classis supported the proposal. A committee was appointed as follows: Rev. Jake Torenvliet (Convenor), Rev. Bill DeJong, Rev. Winston Bosch. The committee is instructed to report on their progress to the next classis.

Toronto-Bethel requested moving up the church visitation schedule due to the missed visits in 2020 because of the pandemic restrictions with the goal of reporting at the classis of March 2021. Classis supported this request, keeping in mind the ongoing fluctuation of pandemic restrictions and how they may affect the scheduling of visits.

Correspondence received: A letter was received from Orangeville in essence appealing a decision of CCO, March 2020. The matter of admissibility was discussed. A committee was formed to draft a proposal. A proposal was discussed and a decision was made that the appeal was inadmissible based on the stipulation in Article 31

C.O. that an appeal of a decision of a minor assembly should be brought to the broader assembly (i.e. Regional Synod East).

Appointments were made for the following:

Committee of Examiners: Rev. Clarence VanderVelde, Rev. Bill DeJong

Church Visitors: Rev. Clarence VanderVelde (Convenor), Rev. Bill DeJong, Rev. Tony Roukema, Rev. Gerrit Bruintjes (alternate)

Church to inspect Archives: Burlington-Fellowship

Treasurer: Mr. Jack Spithoff

Church for inspecting Treasurer's books: Burlington-Rehoboth

Committee for Needy Churches: Mr. Ed Jans (Chair), Mr. Fred Lodder, Mrs. Aafke Spithoff to replace Mr. Kent Baartman

Church for inspecting books of Fund for Needy Churches: Burlington-Rehoboth

Committee for Appeals: Rev. J. deGelder (Convenor), Mr. Rick Ludwig, Mr. Andre Schutten, Alternates - Rev. Dr. Gijsbert Nederveen, Rev. John vanPopta, Mr. Leo Kampen (in that order)

Delegates for Regional Synod East: (Ministers) Rev. Winston Bosch, Rev. Clarence VanderVelde, (Alternates) Rev. Bill DeJong, Rev. Tony Roukema (in that order)

(Elders) Mr. Ed Jager, Mr. Rick Ludwig, (Alternates) Mr. Jamie Harsevoort, Mr. Marcel Kampen (in that order)

Convening church for next classis: Flamborough-Redemption
Suggested officers for next classis: Rev. Bill DeJong (Chair), Flamborough-Redemption Elder (Vice Chair), Rev. Winston Bosch (Clerk).

Date of next classis is set D.V. for Friday, December 11, 2020 at 9 a.m. at Ebenezer Canadian Reformed Church (alternate date March 26, 2021).

Question period was held. Censure according to Article 34 C.O. was reviewed by the Chair with thankfulness. The Acts will be finalized by the Classis officers. The Press Release was read and approved. Mr. Rick Ludwig led in closing prayer. The meeting was adjourned.

Reporter: Rick Ludwig

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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