

Clarion



FILTER NOT FUNNEL

READY FOR BLUE MONDAY

INTERNET GIANTS KNOW EVERYTHING

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What's Inside

With a new year we begin a new volume of our magazine: Volume 70! Issue 1 starts out with a lead article by Rev. Peter Holtvüwer on the role that a classis or regional synod should play in bringing overtures to a general synod.

Rev. Arend Witten has written an article entitled, "Ready for Blue Monday?" The third Monday of January approaches, a day that has been identified as the most depressing day of the year. How do we as Christians approach such information?

Thank you also to Dr. Ted Van Raalte for his interesting article, "A Story About a Pastor and a Pandemic." In addition, this issue has reprinted an article from Dr. David Robertson about the Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma*. Issue 1 also includes the You Asked column from Rev. William den Hollander.

Laura Veenendaal

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Clarion

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LEAD ARTICLE



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Filter not Funnel

From time to time a local church puts forward a proposal for change that is intended to find its way to the agenda of a general synod. These proposals are usually called “overtures” and have to do with matters that have been designated by the Church Order as being for the whole federation or, more technically, matters for the “churches in common” (Church Order, Art. 30). Some examples of such issues are the songs we sing in church (Art. 52), training students for the ministry (Art. 19), and how we interact with faithful churches abroad (Art. 50). Changing something in the Church Order itself would be another example (Art. 76).

Suppose, then, that a church wishes to change an article in the Church Order. A general synod is the assembly that would have to decide on this matter, but how does the local church place its overture on the agenda of the next general synod? In the history of our federation, this has been a sometimes hotly debated point. Two different options have vied for supremacy based on an interpretation of Article 30: 1) churches are to present such an overture directly to a general synod for its consideration; 2) churches are to present such an overture first to the minor assemblies (classis, then regional synod) in order to be assessed and passed along

If a classis or regional synod does not endorse the proposal, it has every right to decline to pass it along

if the minor assemblies are in agreement with said proposalⁱ. After a kind of see-saw battle between these opinions at various general synods over several decades, a hybrid of the two approaches was tried by General Synod (GS) 2010. However, this was appealed by various churches and overturned by GS 2013, which clarified that option 2 is the proper way to understand Article 30.ⁱⁱ

Mailman?

It seems that since GS 2013 this issue has been more or less settled in our federation, since there have been no appeals against the decision made then. Also, at the two general synods since that time (2016 and 2019), several overtures from both regions of our federation (east and west) have wended their way from consistory to classis to regional synod to general synod. So far so good. But as this process becomes more settled and commonplace in our federation, the question has come up:

what is the role of classes and regional synods in reviewing overtures generated by a consistory and bound for general synod? Is it just to certify that the subject matter of the overture indeed properly belongs on the agenda of general synod, or is it more hands-on and in-depth than that? Are classis and regional synod essentially like a mailman?

To ask it differently: is the work of these ecclesiastical assemblies basically to forward valid overtures on to general synod without much ado (or decline to do so for matters which don't belong at a general synod)? Or should a classis and regional synod carefully examine the overture on its merits and see whether each can support the overture? Does the overture from a consistory get taken over by a classis and then by a regional synod? Are those latter assemblies free to make changes to a consistory's proposal? By the time it comes to the table of a general synod, whose proposal is it: the consistory's or the regional synod's?

Consider and evaluate

A review of what our synods have said makes it clear that the classes and regional synods are much more than mailmen. The very purpose of having overtures work their way through the various assemblies is to weed out unsupported overtures and send along only what is agreeable to each assembly. Already at GS 2004 we find this concept put forward in the proposed joint church order (with the URCNA). Regarding agenda items for general synod it states, "All such matters must originate with a consistory and must first be considered by a classis and a regional synod before they may be considered by a general synod" (Acts, p. 218). This was further clarified by GS 2010 when it adopted the following revision of this same point, "All matters that pertain to the churches in common must originate with a consistory and must receive the support of the narrower assembly before being considered by the broader assembly."

ⁱ The battle between these two opinions has played out in a number of general synods as indicated by this summary in the Acts of GS 2010, Art. 76, "Past Synods have been inconsistent on admitting materials as per Article 30 CO. Some Synods have accepted submissions directly from churches on matters of the churches in common (e.g., Synods 1974, Article 84; 1977, Article 27; 1992, Article 36; and 2007, Article 136) using Article 30, and other Synods have rejected similar submissions pointing to the very same Article 30 (e.g., Synods 1995, Article 51; 1998, Article 110; 2001, Article 101). No Synod has proven that the other (opposite) interpretation of Article 30 is faulty; each Synod has gone by its own opinion. This inconsistency should be addressed."

ⁱⁱ GS 2010 implemented this hybrid approach in Article 62 (which also gives a detailed history of the battle between the two views) but GS 2013 repealed that change in Article 99. In eliminating the guideline previously adopted by GS 2010, GS 2013 stated the correctness of the view "that having matters go through minor assemblies has worked well and will eliminate unnecessary matters before synod" (Art. 99, Cons. 3.2).

The idea is clear: if classis or regional synod does not endorse the proposal, it has every right to decline to pass it along.

But there is more involved. Aside from “considering” and simply voting “yes” or “no” on the proposal as it stands, the broader assemblies may – and are intended to – sift through the arguments of the overture and evaluate them. GS 2010 spoke in this manner when considering the benefits of having an overture go through the minor assemblies: “The desire to have submissions first be tested, evaluated and filtered by the minor assemblies is beneficial in that it will ensure that only proposals which have won the support of a large number of churches reaches the broadest assembly” (Acts, Art. 62. Cons. 3.6). “Tested,” “evaluated,” and “filtered” are active verbs indicating that the proposal may be trimmed or augmented in order to strengthen it.ⁱⁱⁱ Essentially, the proposal becomes the “property” of the classis (and later the regional synod, if supported) and each assembly, by evaluating (and possibly amending) it, adopts the overture as its own before sending it along (or, conversely, rejects it and does not forward it). The broader assemblies serve in this respect as a filter, not a funnel.

Fair play

All of this naturally raises the question: how much of the overture can a classis or regional synod change? The original authors of the proposal (consistory with the deacons of a local church) may wonder about this because it started out as “their” proposal. They may feel a little protective. However, the local church must realize that it seeks a change that will affect all the churches (i.e. it’s a matter for the “churches in common”) and thus all the churches have the duty to consider it carefully and the right to weigh in on the issue. For those reasons, an overture that is submitted to a classis is first sent around to all local churches in that district for their evaluation and input. The same is done when classis submits a proposal to regional synod. And when a regional synod sends a proposal to the next general synod, it must first send the overture to all the churches in the federation for their consideration, evaluation, and possible input to the next general synod.^{iv}

With that in mind, it is good and right that a classis and a regional synod take time to evaluate and possibly amend the overture. If adopted, it does become that assembly’s overture. Yet, fair play dictates that care should be taken to maintain the integrity of the original proposal. The broader assemblies should not be callous or cavalier in making just any change but should carefully honour the work of the originating church as much as feasible. Each broader assembly should first decide whether it supports the thrust of the proposal (i.e. whether it’s essentially sound and acceptable) and, if yes, then decide if any details need to be adjusted to make it a better proposal.

No bail out

On the other hand, the broader assembly should not be expected to fix all the problems with a shaky overture either. The originating church’s idea and proposal needs to be able to stand on its own two feet, so to speak. If the proposal is too weak to withstand scrutiny or leaves too many unanswered questions or contains other difficulties, then the classis or regional synod should not take it upon itself to do the legwork to patch it up and “redeem” it. That’s not the task of those assemblies. There’s a big difference between *tweaking* an essentially sound proposal and *bailing out* a troubled one, and broader assemblies should avoid the latter. Otherwise, they run the risk of imposing something that was never intended by the original church and never seen by the other area churches in advance of the current assembly. That kind of tinkering would open the door for a hierarchical approach to creep in at the broader assemblies. Instead, the overture should simply not be adopted and the reasons for that spelled out. In that way the originating church can know what the issues are and, if desired, have an opportunity to correct the overture’s shortcomings and submit a revised one to a subsequent classis.

The idea in all of this is that the overtures reaching a general synod will arrive there in their strongest form and with as much support in the churches as possible. Good filtration will help us reach that goal. **C**

ⁱⁱⁱ The concept of filtration and building a consensus through discussion and decision-making at classis and regional synod (often called the “ecclesiastical way” or “route”) ahead of consideration at a general synod is present in a number of decisions of GS 2013. See Art. 125, Rec. 4.5; Art. 173, Cons. 3.5; Art. 184, Rec. 4.3; Art. 110, Cons. 3.7; see also Art. 99, Obs. 2.3. for a challenge to the idea that the minor assemblies are for “filtering” matters first. The challenge did not stand (see Cons. 3.2, 3.3).

^{iv} *Guidelines for General Synods* 1.F as found in Appendix 22 of the *Acts of General Synod Edmonton-Emmanuel* 2019 (p.227).

Eternal Weight of Glory

“For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen.”

(2 CORINTHIANS 4:17-18)

At the time of writing, we were faced with additional restrictions, lockdown, overwhelmed hospitals, and arising cases of the coronavirus. Whatever our views on the whole situation might be, there is real hardship for many people in various ways. Some have lost loved ones or have significant physical health concerns, while others are faced with tough economic times, and still others are dealing with depression and additional serious psychological effects.


If we focus only on the troubles of this life, things can quickly become overwhelming and unbearable. Therefore, it is so good, and indeed vital, to heed the Word of the Lord here “to look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen” for those things are eternal and will last forever.

The apostle Paul exhorts us to look up to heaven with the eyes of faith. We are all on a journey to the heavenly Jerusalem. How important it is that we keep in mind the destination and really dwell upon this destination and actively consider its tremendous glory which is beyond all comparison. Let us not quickly dismiss heavenly glory as being irrelevant to our life now. May we now already begin to savour it and enjoy it. That will help us to view our current challenges and troubles in the proper perspective.

Paul was no stranger to hardship. Later in this letter, he gives a vivid description of how much he suffered in his life for the sake of Christ (2 Cor 11:23-27). At the same time, in chapter 12 he speaks of someone he knew (many commentators think it was Paul himself) who was caught up into paradise and experienced such bliss and glory that he was unable to speak about it (2 Cor 12:4). Yet its reality was confirmed for him and helped him to see the present day struggles in their right eternal context.

May we be encouraged by Paul’s example and look to the things of the Lord which are unseen with the eyes of faith. Our present sufferings of whatever kind they may be, are only light and momentary when compared to the eternal weight of glory

which will be revealed to us in the next age. Paul is not minimizing our present sufferings but rather the point is that he is really emphasizing the greatness of eternal glory which is beyond all comparison. The weight of eternal glory is so great, so marvelous, so enduring that even the greatest sufferings now are as practically nothing when compared to the riches God has in store in heaven for those who love him.

Paul writes that the light and momentary affliction of this age “is preparing for us” an eternal weight of glory. As we go through struggles and trials in this life, we realize anew that this is not paradise and we grow to long for eternal glory. We start to realize more and more that truly the best is yet to come. Then we will experience God’s love and nearness and presence in its fullness. Then we will see God face to face. Then we will be able to talk directly to Jesus Christ himself. Then there will be no more sin, no more pain, no more death, no more grief or depression. And this won’t last for just 10,000 years or even a million years but it will last for all eternity forever. In that perspective our struggles now are indeed light and momentary. Fix your eyes upon Jesus Christ our risen ascended Lord and know that he is coming soon to usher in eternal glory! 

For Further Study

1. How is the Lord preparing you for eternal glory now?
2. What can you do to help focus more on the unseen realities in your present life?



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Ready for Blue Monday?

Bells ping as lycra-clad cyclists weave between strollers and rollerbladers. Screaming children pile on the balance bar yelling for Dad to weigh in. Does the whole city report for duty outdoors on the first sunny spring day? Springbank Park, near our home, crawls with smiling people. Fresh leaves, blue sky, and warm sunlight speak of new life and cheer. It is not hard to imagine why “light” is symbolic of life (Ps 56:13) and salvation (Ps 27:1).

However, this paradisaical scene, dear readers, is yet two, three, or four months hence.

In 2004, Sky Travel asked psychologist Cliff Arnall to develop a formula to predict the bluest day of the year. They didn’t mean bright sky blue, but a dreary, melancholy blue, ideal for booking a tropical getaway. According to Arnall’s calculations, the third Monday in January is the most depressing day of the year. PR firms have capitalized on Blue Monday to market everything from sushi and burgers to aromatherapy products. Arnall’s “formula” has been decried as bogus and he has acknowledged that, as a self-fulfilling prophecy, Blue Monday is not particularly helpful.ⁱ But “Blue Monday” persists.

A common malady

Residents of northern latitudes are not surprised. For some, the winter months coincide with a downturn in mood or a blue feeling. Although many love the fresh crisp white winter days, you may know others who suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder, a type of depression. When serving in overcast northern Scotland, Dr. David Murray remembers pastoring saints who struggled with this affliction.ⁱⁱ In Canada, we experience the same. With this article I hope to make you aware of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) and share a number of things that others have found helpful.

Dr. Norman Rosenthal led the team of psychologists who first described the condition in 1984. He says symptoms may include feeling depressed most of the day, nearly every day. Some people have problems sleeping or oversleeping, feeling mentally foggy, hopeless, sluggish, pessimistic, agitated, worthless, and guilty. Where does winter come into it? It is believed that the reduced daylight levels in northern latitudes may disrupt a person’s circadian rhythm, change melatonin levels, or reduce serotonin levels. Dr. Rosenthal discovered that the prevalence of SAD increases the further people live from the equator. In Florida, the prevalence was only 1.5% of the population, whereas in New Hampshire, it was almost 10%.ⁱⁱⁱ

Your thoughts?

Now, as one learning to be content in all circumstances, what do you think about this? We believe that our heavenly Father created us with bodies and souls. We are complex beings. In the Scriptures, we find believers melancholy due to guilt (Ps 32:4), but also when suffering illness (Ps 116:3) and being separated from the house of God (Ps 42). The physical can affect the soul, and vice versa. There are a multitude of factors that shape us. Stress, discontentment, shame, lack of sleep, trauma, thyroid disease, and childbirth can all influence a person’s mood. And so we might ask, is it the winter blues? Or was it the family Christmas dinner? Christian counsellor Dr. Winston Smith cautions against falling “in love with single factor theories.”^{iv} A

ⁱ Olivia Petter, “Blue Monday: Is the most depressing day of the year just a PR stunt?” *Independent*, January 20, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/blue-monday-real-truth-depressing-day-21-january-truth-facts-bills-work-christmas-a8736531.html>.

ⁱⁱ David Murray, “Seasonal Affective Disorder Epidemic,” *Head Heart Hand*, February 14, 2014, <https://headhearhand.org/blog/2014/02/14/seasonal-affective-disorder-epidemic/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Norman Rosenthal, “What is Seasonal Affective Disorder?” Accessed November 24, 2020, <https://www.normanrosenthal.com/about/research/seasonal-affective-disorder/>

^{iv} Winston Smith, “Understanding the relationship between Seasonal Affective Disorder and depression,” Christian Counselling and Education Foundation. Podcast audio, June 27, 2016. <https://www.ccef.org/podcast/understanding-relationship-between-seasonal-affective-disorder-and-depression/>

There are a multitude of factors that shape us

Christian worldview is open to recognizing a variety of physical and spiritual factors that shape us.

But people have been living through winter long before the 1980s. “Why” you ask, “did Dr. Rosenthal have to invent an illness for it? Isn’t this evidence of a coddled culture?” Previous generations, it is true, had fewer descriptors for mental health. But perhaps some families could have benefitted from some more awareness in this area. The fact is, keeping a stiff upper lip has not always engendered a home of warmth and joy.

Solutions?

So, what things have others found helpful? Light. Doctors may prescribe light therapy as treatment for SAD. This means sitting by a specialized lamp for a certain period each day to mimic the light from the sun. It is a simple treatment and for some quite effective.

Regular physical exercise, sufficient sleep, and a healthy diet are also helpful in managing SAD. Being active requires more effort through the winter months, but it helps many to feel well. Taking a class, joining a gym, or signing up for a team can give us a helpful nudge out the door. Similarly, unhealthy eating may give a short-term boost, but in the long term it makes us feel poorly. Really, the things that are conducive to good physical and mental health apply with Seasonal Affective Disorder. In some circumstances, it can be wise to visit a counsellor. Talk therapy (or psychotherapy) with a Christian counsellor can explore patterns of thinking and behaviour that may contribute to melancholy. Some Christians have found a physician-prescribed antidepressant a valuable help to keep their mood steady.

We live in a world that is broken and groaning because of the fall (Rom 8:22). We ourselves are broken in different ways:

spiritually, physically, and mentally. It comes as no surprise to learn that something environmental like the changing of season could affect a person. But thinking biblically also makes us hopeful. Suffering is not wasted by God. It is one of his instruments to shape us after the image of Christ. In Romans 5, the apostle Paul traces the positive development worked by our Father through sufferings: patience, endurance, character, and hope. So, when the apostle writes that they are “sorrowful but always rejoicing” (2 Cor 6:10), that wasn’t double talk, but faith.

Psalms as therapy

Through the centuries, believers have testified to the comfort of the book of Psalms in difficult times. The Psalms express personal emotions and struggles to God, and teach us how to cry out to him in prayer. In Psalm 42, for example, the Psalmist takes himself in hand and asks “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? (Ps 42:5) Commenting on this verse, John Calvin writes, “When we are quite downcast, we are not free of a feeling of disquietude, which leads us to murmur and complain. The remedy to both of them is here added, hope in God.” This alone, Calvin writes, can give believers “confidence in the midst of the greatest troubles;” and “by the exercise of patience, preserves them in peace.” David insists he shall praise God. This shows the power of hope to elevate “our thoughts to the contemplation of the grace of God, when it is hidden from our view.”

So, we’re confident that in two, three, or four months, winter will give way to the bright newness of spring (Gen 8:22). With it you will witness a burst of new energy and renewed enthusiasm for life. Yet, our Christian faith has even greater hope for the future. It is there even “in the midst” of troubles when the grace of God seems “hidden.” You have a hope strong enough for dark days.

This groaning, broken world is passing away! One day we will live where there is always light. Trees will yield fruit each month for the healing of the nations. Night will be no more. We will need no light of lamp or sun, for our loving God himself will be our light. We are getting ready for paradise restored. 🌞



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A Story about a Pastor and a Pandemic

The city had been in tumult for months. The Duchess was beside herself with anger at the rebukes that she was receiving from the fearless pastor. He was about to be dismissed. And then the pandemic hit.... What happened?

Neuchâtel, Reformed city

The year was 1539, and the city was Neuchâtel, a Swiss city north of Geneva. Some nine years earlier, in 1530, it had chosen to follow the way of reformation under the leadership of Guillaume Farel. Soon, the city council had established four ministers to serve the population. One would think that by 1539 Neuchâtel had come to be quite Reformed, but real change takes time, and the morals of the people left a lot to be desired. Besides, their reformer Farel had gone on to Geneva to secure it for the Reformation as well. He had worked in Geneva from 1533 until April 1538, when he, Courault, and Calvin were dismissed, not for any fault of theirs, but because they refused to administer the Lord's Supper with the city full of tumult and the people refusing

to swear to their confession of faith. The three preachers had been banished from Geneva, and thus Farel had returned to Neuchâtel to take up the ministry there once again.

Confrontation with nobility

But now, after only a year, Farel was in danger of being dismissed from Neuchâtel as well. The wife of the governor, the wealthy Duchess Jehanne de Rives, was complaining about his rebukes. She had written to the four ministers, asking that Farel be replaced. Why? Her second daughter had married a nobleman, had two children with him, and then left him. It appears she was living at her parent's home (more details not known). Farel found this to be unacceptable and began to rebuke her privately. After some months, he began to preach about faithfulness in marriage, without mentioning names. In defense of her daughter, the Duchess then incited a mob to assemble in front of the church building after one of Farel's sermons, shouting that it was time for Farel to go.



Guillaume Farel (1489-1565)

Advice from friends

Farel asked his friends for advice. Calvin and Viret advised him to stand firm, mentioning for comparison that Herodias's daughter had wickedly led Herod to behead John the Baptist. They also referred to the governor as a Judas, who was betraying the Lord's cause. But there was one more player in this game: the powerful city of Bern. Technically Farel was their missionary, and they advised that he should go elsewhere. Farel refused. Calvin's most detailed biographer writes, "Berne could not but have had a certain respect for Farel, for this daring missionary who had conquered for the Reformation ... nearly all the Swiss Romande, always in the midst of great struggles, often in danger of his life. But Bern was animated by a very authoritarian spirit...."

The Lord may use these situations to increase the hunger for the gospel

Farel and his friends appealed to all the surrounding churches in the Swiss Romande and received support. The churches recognized that it was important for Farel to establish some kind of discipline, that high morals and good order were essential to the reformation, lest the Roman Catholic accusation that the Reformation bred disorder and immorality should prove true.

Take a call?

The difficulties continued for two years, during which Farel never ceased his preaching or pastoral work. The Reformed churches of the area supported Farel, as did his colleagues. On August 30, 1541, the church of Geneva asked Farel to help Calvin in his return to Geneva. Farel's opponents in Neuchâtel seized the opportunity to induce Farel to take a call to Geneva. He absolutely refused to consider it, being convinced that the troubles in Neuchâtel were an indication of how greatly the city needed his preaching, whether at great personal cost to himself or not. To leave would dishonour the call he had received and the very Word he had preached. It would represent the triumph of the papists and the ruin of his ministry. Yet even this wonderful commitment on Farel's part would not quiet his foes.

The pandemic hits

Then the pandemic hit. The plague – the bubonic plague, in its second wave, far more deadly than COVID-19. A sixty to ninety percent death rate. In late October 1541, this deadly plague stole into Neuchâtel. The best advice was to flee town as fast as possible, wait it out, and return slowly. What about the pastors? The city council of Geneva at that time forbade Calvin from visiting at their hospital, in order to spare him. This did not sit well with his conscience. Three years earlier, Farel had visited his own nephew, who was within a day or two of death by plague. About six months prior, two good friends of Farel had died from the plague. These men knew how deadly the plague was, but they also felt that God called them to comfort the sick and dying.

Faithful, loving shepherd

What to do in Neuchâtel? What would a good shepherd do, as he follows Christ? Farel fearlessly visited the sick and comforted them. He did not in any way exclude those who had opposed him. He wanted all who died to die in the faith, right with God, at peace. Farel's love was noticed. A few months later, his colleagues would reflect, "Already, by the grace of God, the people were running more fervently and numerous to hear the Word, not only because of the sermon, but because this pastor was so attentively visiting the sick every day and comforting them in keeping with all his duty and all his love. What is more, according to the precept of Christ, if anyone had been violent in his enmity against him, he was pursuing him with a very great affection, and tried very hard to give more of his service."

Guidance for visiting the sick

Such actions of Farel were in keeping with his own guidance for fellow pastors, as contained in some directions he gave for visiting the sick. These were added to a collection of liturgical forms, first written by hand in 1528 and then published in 1533. There Farel wrote,


The one who bears the word of our Lord ... must also teach from house to house and everywhere, as Jesus and his apostles did, comforting the afflicted and above all those who are sick. To them he must announce the very great goodness and mercy of God, demonstrating

that nothing but good can come from him who is the fountain of all good, and that he who is almighty is our ever-merciful Father. He must show that our Father is more attentive to us than any father or mother was to his or her son, reminding them that although a mother may forget her child – and a mother nurtures the very one that nurses at the breast, that she carried in her womb! – yet our Father will not forget us, turning everything to our benefit, sending everything for our advantage...

Therefore we must submit our spirit to him and believe firmly that he loves us, and loving us, he chastens us... that we are all the more in his grace, looking not to those who flourish in this world with their comforts, but to Jesus.... The true evangelist must work faithfully in this to draw and carry the poor sick one to our Lord, exhorting the servants who are near the ailing patient to comfort him and exhort him in our Lord. And if the minister has something with which he can offer comfort – also bodily – such as bread, wine, fruits, or anything else, he shall spare nothing, showing to all a true example of love. He shall frequently visit the sick to comfort and strengthen him as much as possible by the word of our Lord and wherever possible also help the poor afflicted body.

Pastor Farel confirmed in his office

Farel's love for his flock, including for his opponents, did not go unnoticed. On November 26, 1541, the Council of Neuchâtel decided that "the said Farel must always remain and continue in his ministry and office, all the more because we cannot mistrust him nor take anything away from his life and doctrine, considering also that he is the first one who brought to us the gospel truth and by him the Lord God showed us great grace and mercy."¹

It goes without saying that the love of Christ must be shown to all those who are sick, especially in a time of crisis. The Lord may use these situations to increase the hunger for the gospel. He will give us increased opportunities to share the gospel message. Let us take some encouragement from the fact that the church has faced much worse pandemics than what we are facing today, and our loving heavenly Father carried his people and their pastors with the good news of Jesus Christ. 

¹ For sources of this article, see Émile Doumergue, *Jean Calvin: les hommes et les choses de son temps* (Lausanne: Bridel, 1902), 2:735-9; Comité Farel, *Guillaume Farel: 1489-1565*, Biographie Nouvelle (Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1930), 47-54; Jason Zuidema and Theodore G. Van Raalte, *Early French Reform: Guillaume Farel's Theology and Spirituality* (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2011), 220-22.

The Internet Giants Know Everything About Us and that should worry everyone

The film everyone needs to see

Every now and then a book or a film comes along that is transformative - both at a personal and societal level. Douglas Murray's *The Madness of Crowds* is one such book published this year.

As for films, the Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma* is perhaps the most important film of the decade. It is a stunning film. I have watched it twice, firstly to see what the fuss is about, and then to take out the personal and societal lessons for myself, which I now share with you.

The film begins with a quote from Sophocles: "Nothing vast enters the life of mortals without a curse."

It then goes on to discuss the idealism, creation, and fall of the big Internet and social media giants. Interspersing the confessions of a number of the original creators of Google, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. with their impact on a fictional family,

The Social Dilemma brilliantly sets out the ethical concerns and dangers within the industry.

The whole film is revealing, not least in the key questions it asks but fails to really answer - what is the problem? And what is the solution?

What is the problem?

I don't think they really get to the heart of the matter, although they do identify many symptoms or secondary problems: the fact that our screens are devised to make us addicts is one key symptom; that the creators of the Internet are now about making money; the monetisation of data; the development of surveillance capitalism; the incredible influence that fifty mainly white guys in California have on the thinking of two billion people.

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They have more information about us than has ever been imagined in human history

.....

The expert who most impressed was the dreadlocked Jaron Lanier, author of *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts*. One former exec speaks about how after decades of making products, for the best of ten years the businesses now sell their users - "If you are not paying for the product then you are the product."

But Lanier goes further: "It's the gradual, slight, imperceptible change in your own behaviour that is the product."

In other words, they are selling the ability to change your behaviour.

There is a fascinating insight into the work of the Stanford persuasive technology lab, whose purpose was to combine what we know about psychology and build that into technology.

Shoshana Zubuff, the author of another influential book, *Surveillance Capitalism*, points out that the Internet companies "sell certainty. That depends on predictions. For that you need a lot of data. This is a marketplace that trades in human futures."

It is not our data that is being sold but models that predict our actions. Everything people are doing online is being monitored, measured, tracked, and carefully recorded. They know when people are lonely, depressed etc. They have more information about us than has ever been imagined in human history.

These companies have been so successful that they are now the richest companies in human history and, in some instances, more powerful than many governments.

How do they do it? Lanier argues that "manipulation, deceit, and sneakiness are at the very centre of our culture."

Take, for example, tagging photos on our smartphones. The phone is designed to create unconscious habits: you are being programmed at a deeper level. It's like a slot machine; it's designed to draw you in: "If you get an email saying your friend had tagged you in a photo, then of course you are going to look at it. But why is the photo not just in the e-mail?"

We have moved from a tools-based technology environment into an addiction and manipulation environment. Social media becomes a drug. We have a basic biological need to directly connect with other people, and when we do, it releases dopamine.

The consequences of this are devastating. Last year, I heard Jonathan Haidt, the American psychologist and author, talk about the large increase in depression, anxiety, and suicide among teenage girls in the US - something which he associated with, amongst other things, the "like" button on Facebook.

Another key aspect which the film exposes is the distortion of truth that social media and the Internet enables. Fake news on Twitter spreads six times faster than the truth. Why is that? The film suggests that it is because falsehood sells. But that just begs the question, why does falsehood sell? Why do people prefer lies before truth? They have no answer, but the Bible does: "You love evil rather than good, falsehood rather than speaking the truth" (Ps 52:3).

The Truman Show states: "We accept the reality of the world we have been presented with."

Indeed. That's why people are atheists! We are presented with lies by the father of lies and the mastermind of deception and darkness. The film talks about living in a world where no one believes that anything is true, where everything is part of a conspiracy. Indeed. That is the world without the One who is The Truth.

Lies lead to polarization. It's not just that people have an opinion and then Google for articles that confirm their bias. It's that the algorithms search out the articles, and like-minded people and groups, for them. We become so convinced of the truth of our own opinions that we say: "How can those people be so stupid? Look at all this information I am seeing." But the trouble is that those people are not seeing the same information.

It is little wonder the politics has become so polarized - and little wonder that authoritarian governments love Facebook, which may be "the greatest tool of persuasion ever created" and the most effective for controlling populations. We also now live in a world where one country can invade another without doing it physically.

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We become so convinced of the truth of our own opinions that we say: “How can those people be so stupid?”

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It's interesting that the whole issue of fake news and truth itself demonstrates the polarization. It's always the other side who are being misled by fake news, not ours! People blame the Russians, Chinese, etc. for Brexit, populism, and Trump. And yet the giant Internet corporations are invariably “progressive” and supportive of the Left. Perhaps when they get their censorship act together, they will end up controlling the whole of society and technocracy will replace democracy?

The answer to the question of what is wrong with the world is simple and deep. It is sin, rebellion against God, spiritual deadness. It's me and you and them.

What is the solution?

Our repentant technocrats struggle to answer.

“We need some shared reality....”

“The answer is not in technology ... AI will not know truth. AI cannot solve the problem of fake news. AI doesn't know what truth is. If we don't agree on what is truth or if there is such a thing as truth, then we are toast.”

One expert recognizes that society cannot heal itself. Another argues that we can. One argues that we are heading for civil war, another that we can step back from the brink of oblivion and create utopia through a “humane” Internet. But the truth is that we are trapped by a business model which makes it impossible for these companies to change. The Internet is like a giant shopping mall. There has to be something more to it than that?!

The Social Dilemma ends with a few hopeful wishes and some practical advice about how not to be manipulated. It's striking how many of the creators of social media do not let their children have smartphones! Their comments are good but fairly superficial. Some Christians are ahead of the game here. For example, an essential practical book for any Christian thinking about these things is Tony Reinke's *12 Ways Your Phone is Changing You* and his recently published article: crossway.org/articles/10-things-you-should-know-about-the-danger-of-media.


For me the most challenging question is, “Are we the last generation of people who are going to know what it was like before this illusion took place?” and, “How do you wake up from the matrix if you don't know you are in the matrix?”

There is an answer.

It is perhaps best summed up by two of the most profound and radical statements ever made. Statements which shatter the matrix. The first: “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27).”

We are not just computer nodes to be manipulated and used. We are made in the image of God, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. We need that image to be restored and renewed.

The second: “Jesus answered, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me’” (John 14:6).

We need to know the truth, so that the truth will set us free. We need the light, so that we can overcome the darkness. We need the love so that we can overcome the hatred. We have all of this in Christ. Let's tell the world the Good News! 



David Robertson *Former Moderator*
Free Church of Scotland
Director of Third Space
Sydney, Australia
blogger at theweeflea.com

Clarion

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YOU ASKED

IS THERE SOMETHING YOU'VE BEEN WANTING TO KNOW? An answer you've been looking for? Ask us a question!
Please direct questions to Rev. W. den Hollander, denhollanderw@gmail.com 23 Kinsman Dr. Binbrook, ON L0R 1C0

Where do we draw the line between the sin to simply be covered and the sin which should be exposed?

The Bible seems to contradict itself with Peter saying that a multitude of sins be covered (1 PET 4:8; CF. PROV 17:9) while Jesus says they are to be shouted from the roof top (LUKE 12:1-3), and Paul saying that sin be exposed (EPH 5:11). Could there be a difference between the fifth petition *“Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors”* and the meaning of the petition that we used to say: *“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”*? Is this the difference PSALM 19:13 seems to imply?

We should start with the observation that the Bible does not contradict itself; when it “seems” it does, we should discern the difference by considering the contexts. When the Lord Jesus is speaking in Luke 12 about things done in the dark or whispered in a private room that will be brought to light, proclaimed on the housetops, he is saying this with a reference to the hypocrisy of the Pharisees: their feuding and plotting will be brought to light. The same applies to the unfruitful and shameful works of darkness Paul is speaking about, which the believer must discern and expose in order to avoid and stay away from. This is all part of the believer’s calling to test the spirits and see whether they are from God. It’s a call to walk circumspectly, know the will of the Lord, because the days are evil.


There is no difference between the fifth petition as found in Matthew 6 or Luke 11 either. The formulation in Luke 11 is different from what the questioner mentions as the petition they “used to say.” The correct formulation is, “Forgive us our sins as

we forgive those who are indebted to us.” In both formulations the petition articulates the sins we commit; the Luke 11 formulation speaking about sins in general while Matthew 6 speaks of sins as debts. Both refer to sins, i.e. thoughts, words, or deeds, that “miss the mark,” miss the purpose, the goal God has with our life. We often distinguish them as “sins of omission” and “sins of commission” (sins of omission being “debts” and sins of commission being “transgressions”). These are sins committed against God and/or against the neighbour. Among these sins there are those of which we are aware (Ps 19:13, “willful sins”), yet there also are many sins of which we are not aware (Ps 19:12, “who can discern his errors?”). It also is true that we can’t know all our sins and confess them to God, yet it is possible as well that we keep silent about our sins to God (Ps 32).

In the life of the neighbour also there are many sins of which they are not aware and which we need to cover under the cloak of love. At the same time, there are sins the neighbour commits and that are evident or blatant and we have to deal with them in

the way of exposure, confronting him with them (Matt 18:15-20). These could be sins he commits against you, or sins that show in his life, his conduct. Then we deal with them as a miserable sinner ourselves, in a spiritual way (Gal 6:1), by the same grace of the Holy Spirit by which God deals with us, and in a forgiving attitude (i.e. not harshly, insensitive, intimidating, and demanding total repayment in every way possible, Matt 18:21-35). A forgiving attitude shows the true gratitude for the treasure of the forgiveness of sin. The Lord Jesus, in the prayer he taught us, shows that our petition for the forgiveness of sins is connected to our forgiving of our brother or sister.

In the church you may speak to God about your sins openly and honestly; the righteous may do so, and the godly should do so! In the church, James says, you must also confess your sins to each other and pray for each other that you may be healed (5:16). That's why the rule applies to the church, to the communion of saints, that "love covers a multitude of sins." Love is the root, first of all love to God, also love to the neighbour, i.e. to concrete people, sinners! The brotherly love that's present in

the congregation must be exercised, practised (1 Cor 13:4-7). Love is patient, enduring, and won't remember wrong! "Love covers all offenses" (Prov 10:12); it covers over those matters that cause friction. Peter's saying goes back to the Lord Jesus's teaching, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy" (Matt 5:7). In the Old Testament, the notion of "cover of sins" is synonymous with forgiving and restoring the communion (Deut 13:8; Ps 32:1; Prov 17:9, "Whoever covers an offense seeks love"). James also shows that this love functions in the congregation; when you bring a sinner back from his wandering from the truth, you save a soul from death. Then you may know that God covers a multitude of sins! 



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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*
Bethel Canadian Reformed Church, Toronto, Ontario

23 Kinsman Drive, Binbrook, ON L0R 1C0 | denhollanderw@gmail.com



Principal Vacancy (commencing January 2022) John Calvin School, Albany, Western Australia

The committee of the Albany Free Reformed Church Education Association invites applications for the position of Principal commencing in January 2022, although an earlier handover/training period may be considered.

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Applications are to address the following selection criteria:

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- Be an effective team member, able to both accept and provide direction and support
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- Demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of staff, curriculum and student welfare issues
- Demonstrate the ability to lead improvement, innovation and change
- Possess high level adaptability, planning and problem solving skills

Desirable

- Demonstrate experience and expertise in the day to day management of a school which will require significant strengths in educational administration and the management of people
- The successful applicant will need to be a confessing member in good standing of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia or a recognized sister church, and will demonstrate in their life a whole hearted commitment to providing Godly support to covenant children.

For further information please contact: Russell 't Hart (Chairman)
Email: russell.thart@board.jcsa.wa.edu
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Attention: **Mr. Nathan Kok**

Or Emailed To: principal@dufferinchristian.ca

For more information, please contact: Principal:

Mr. Nathan Kok at 204-745-2278

Chairman: Mr. Anton Borst at chairman@dufferinchristian.ca



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THE ALBERTA ADVANTAGE

Located east of the Rockies and a little over an hour from the bustling hub of Edmonton, Covenant Canadian Reformed School of Neerlandia welcomes you to its quaint rural community.

Dedicated teachers are paramount to meeting Covenant's continued needs and to expand the school and its programs for over 260 enthusiastic covenant children. This is recognized by a supportive community who loves, celebrates, and values its teachers.

Currently accepting applications for Elementary and High School teachers for the 2021/2022 school year.

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Parkland Immanuel Christian School invites applications for

Junior High Teacher

PICS offers a vibrant, exciting atmosphere with a strong focus on professional development, collaboration, and relationships. Our mission is to create an environment where everyone is inspired and challenged to use their God-given talents in service to God and their neighbour.

*For more information, visit
www.parklandimmanuel.ca/job-postings/*



Trinity Reformed Church
of Lethbridge, Alberta is prayerfully seeking a

Full-Time Pastor of Congregational Life

to serve alongside our Senior Pastor under the guidance of the Consistory in shepherding God's flock. The Pastor of Congregational Life will direct his attention to the counselling needs of the congregation in addition to preaching approximately 25% of the Lord's days. Other aspects of the ministry, such as visitation and education, will be shared with our Senior Pastor. The ideal candidate would have a heart of love for Christ and his people, be an ordained minister of the Word, or ministerial candidate, and be committed to the Reformed faith as expressed in the Three Forms of Unity. Training in Biblical Counselling would be an asset.

Expressions of interest along with a CV can be emailed in confidence to callingcommittee@trinityurc.ca. This position will remain open until a suitable candidate is found.



Immanuel Christian School
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

*The Board of Immanuel Christian School
invites applications for*

Teachers

with duties commencing August 1, 2021.
Teaching arrangements can be adapted to fit you.

**We would love to bring you to
Winnipeg to discover our beautiful
community and city.**

Immanuel Christian is a K-12 school supported by members of Canadian Reformed and United Reformed churches. At present we have 250 students in single grade classes. Teachers are supported by an extensive resource program as well as educational assistants for students with special needs.

**Interested persons requiring more information
or wishing to apply should contact:**

Mr. Mark den Hollander, Principal
principal@immanuelchristian.ca
Phone 204-661-8937 (school), 204-619-0776 (home)

Mailing address: **Immanuel Christian School**
215 Rougeau Avenue, Winnipeg, MB R2C 3Z9



"See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone and the one who trusts in Him will never be put to shame." 1 Peter 2:6

We are inviting applications to fill the position of:

Grade 5/6 Teacher
(Combined Grades)

due to the joyful news of an impending maternity leave.
Position available May 1st, 2021.
(start date is flexible, with the possibility of an August 1st start)

We are also accepting applications for the position of:

Special Education Resource Teacher

We are looking to fill this role at 50% with the possibility of additional in-class teaching. Position available August 1st.

Cornerstone operates a K-8 school with double grades and currently has a student body of 86 students. We seek qualified applicants who love to teach and desire to support our community in its mandate to raise our children in the fear of the Lord.

For further details please contact the Principal

Mr. John Van Iperen

Phone 519 837 4092 (school) or 289 527 2102 (home)
principal@guelphcornerstone.com

Applications should be sent to

Cornerstone Christian School

108 Forest Street, Guelph, ON N1G 1H9

Attention: **Mr. Joel Linde**

edcom.chair@guelphcornerstone.com

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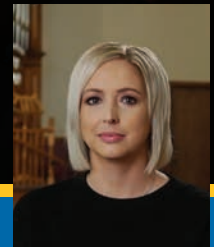
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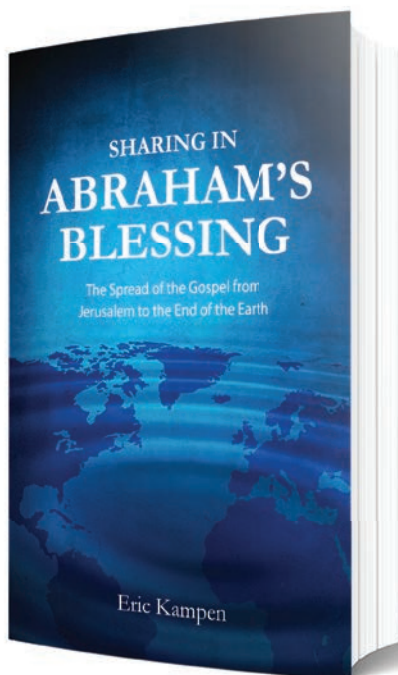
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