



Clarion

413 DELIBERATELY WELCOMING *416* HOME RENOVATIONS

427 SUMMIT REFORMED YOUNG ADULTS CONFERENCE

contents

what's inside

Allow me to start with a little pitch: do you like *Clarion*? Do you find it a blessing to read? If so, after you're finished reading this issue, could you pass it on to a church member less familiar with it? Please consider making a habit of this and encourage others to subscribe if they can. Part of our aim is to unite believers across our federation but to do that we need to get them reading the magazine. If our labour of love (*Clarion*) is meaningful for you, perhaps regularly passing it on could become your labour of love. Thank-you!

Inside issue 10 you will find a marked emphasis on mission work. Julius VanSpronsen summarizes the practical strategies for welcoming visitors while Micheal Cooperwhite shares with us his own story plus what he does as a mission worker in Brampton. What does church life look like in the setting of foreign mission work? William Gortemaker gives us glimpse into a Brazilian *Concílio*. CFAM also shares an update on mission work in Thailand and Pakistan. There is also a MERF newsletter.

Clarion also gives attention to developing our personal walk with the Lord by way of the guest editorial ("The Blessing of Confessing"), the meditation on how we are equipped for service, and a devotional piece comparing the process of sanctification to a home renovation. Two book reviews point us to resources for Christian living and another is about the event where all our individual, personal worship becomes the collective worship of the church. Worship brings to mind singing, and one reader offers some pushback on the Reformed principle of the priority of Psalm-singing as promoted in recent articles. Reader interaction is always welcome.

There are a few other nuggets mixed in, but I'll let you discover them for yourself. May the Lord grant a refreshing summer to you and yours, and may this issue be part of that. Best!

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Clarion

A trustworthy and engaging magazine, widely spread and read in Canadian Reformed households and beyond.

To equip God's people for his glory, in faithfulness to Scripture, as summarized in the Reformed confessions, Clarion adheres to the following core values:

- C**onfessionally Reformed
- L**oving in manner
- A**ttuned to current issues
- R**eadable and Reliable
- I**n Submission to Scripture
- O**pen to constructive criticism
- N**urturing Christian living

THE BLESSING OF CONFESSING

I remember well our grade 12 French trip to Québec City. I won't mention how long ago it was. Among other activities, we visited the Roman Catholic basilica of Sainte-Anne-de-Baupré. I recall being impressed by the neo-Gothic architecture, especially the soaring arches inside the auditorium. I also remember sneaking into one of the confessional booths to "take confession" from one of my fellow students, until we were sternly warned to leave. It wasn't to be my last experience with confession, thankfully.

CONFESSING SIN TO OTHERS

In February of 2020 I had the privilege of leading a men's retreat in the Fraser Valley, the annual Men of Integrity conference. The theme for the weekend was Real Christian Brotherhood. As I was reflecting on how to deepen our fellowship together as brothers and sisters, I stumbled across James 5:14–16, "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, *confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.* The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working."

I'm sure I had read that passage many times before, but it hadn't registered until then. Apart from my facetious foray into the booth as a teenager, I'd never given much thought to confessing sins to anyone apart from God himself. But I found myself reflecting more deeply about the purpose of the Spirit's command through the apostle James. Why would God connect confessing sins to another with forgiveness of sins and healing? And why wasn't I confessing my sins to brothers or sisters in Christ? What was I missing out on by ignoring this relatively clear instruction?

That weekend we made a beginning together. After one of the sessions, each of us went off with a brother and found a quiet spot. We confessed our sins to each other. We bared our souls. We admitted our weaknesses. We acknowledge our struggles. And we prayed for each other. And we reminded each other of the good news. We assured each other that, "If we confess our sins [to God], he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). We held out to each other the hope of the gospel: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1). And we believed it

more deeply. We *experienced* the forgiveness of sins and received healing in a fresh way.

LOVING FELLOW SINNERS

In his book *Life Together*, on the sweetness of Christian fellowship, the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote (and I paraphrase), "The word of Christ in the mouth of my brother is stronger than the word of Christ in my heart." What he meant to say was that I more readily believe the gospel when I hear it from my brother or sister than when I try to convince myself of its truth. When I confess my sins not only to God but also to my brother, and he reaffirms for me the grace and love of God for penitent sinners like me, I find myself more firmly confident that God has granted the forgiveness of sins, "not only to others, but also to *me*" (LD 7). What's more, when my brother, who now knows me more intimately than he did before, continues to love me as a brother in Christ, I catch a faint glimmer of the much deeper love of my Father, who knows me *completely* and still loves me fully.

These days I have in my calendar a regular meeting with a dear brother. We've committed to confessing our sins to each other and we delight together in the grace of Christ for sinners like us. We rejoice in Christ's perfect obedience, our righteous robes. At home too, we practice confession. In our family worship around the dinner table, one day a week is called "Wicked Wednesday"¹. On Wicked Wednesdays we (strive to) share openly where we've sinned, against God and against each other, and where we need to grow up into Christ. Then we pray together. "With confidence [we] draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4:16). And so, we have fellowship with each other, not just as saints, but also as sinners in need of God's grace.

Have you experienced the blessing of confessing? 



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¹ This follows Magnificent Monday and Troubling Tuesday, and comes before Thankful Thursday, and Fellowship Friday. With thanks to Thaddeus Williams!

EQUIPPING THE SAINTS FOR THE WORK OF SERVICE

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ – EPHESIANS 4: 11, 12

It has only been a short while ago that new elders and deacons were ordained in most congregations. The apostle Paul indicates that there is a close relationship between the task of the office bearers and the task of the congregation. Christ gave the office bearers to serve the members of the congregation so that the members of the congregation can serve one another. The office bearers are Christ's gift to equip the saints for the work of service.

Christ gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the shepherds and teachers to his church as gifts after his ascension into heaven. Christ gave those gifts at Pentecost with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, when people were equipped to function in those positions of which Paul speaks.

When Paul speaks about the apostles, we should think about the twelve; when Paul speaks about the prophets, we should think about New Testament prophets such as Agabus (Acts 11:27, 28; 21:10); and when Paul speaks about the evangelists, we should think about people like Philip (Acts 21:8) and Timothy (2 Tim 4:5). Those offices belong to the early period of the New Testament church, and we do not have them anymore. Paul also speaks about "the shepherds and teachers," and the fact that one definite article ("the") governs both words indicates that Paul is speaking about one person who is both. He is speaking about present-day elders and ministers, each of whom shepherd and teach.

Paul's point is that these office bearers have been given "to equip the saints for the work of ministry." Paul expands on the task of believers by adding, "for building up the body of Christ." Don't be confused by the word "ministry"—the original could just as well be translated as "service." All office bearers are servants appointed by God to serve God's people, but service is not something only for office bearers. Paul indicates that every member of the congregation is to be involved in the work of service.

How do the office bearers equip the members of the congregation for the work of service so that the members can build up the congregation? The minister does this through the preaching of the Word. When the gospel of salvation from sin and death is proclaimed, this includes a call to thankful service because Christ gave himself completely for our sake. The elders do this when they come into your home with the gospel to encourage, instruct, and

perhaps admonish regarding this work of service. We may include the deacons here too because part of their task is to exhort the members of the congregation to show mercy and to promote the unity and fellowship the congregation enjoys at the Lord's Supper (*Form for Ordination*, 626).

So, the work of service in the congregation is everyone's task! It isn't just the work of the office bearers. For the church to be built up—edified—and to flourish, this requires the involvement of the whole congregation. It's good for each of us to take inventory of how we have been serving the brothers and sisters in the congregation. Besides attending church, are we involved in the church?

"Service" is a broad term. What Paul is aiming at is that we help fellow members mature in the faith and grow in the Lord Jesus Christ (4:13–16). Are we a constructive influence in someone else's life? Do we help others understand Scripture and what it means for our daily lives? Do we try to have a positive influence on those who are straying from the faith? Do we look out for those dealing with specific difficulties and who may need a word of encouragement?

Christ gave office-bearers to the church to equip the members of the church to serve one another. 

FOR FURTHER READING

Ephesians 4:1–16

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. How does the meaning of 4:11,12 change entirely when a comma is incorrectly placed in 4:12 so that it reads: "to equip the saints, for the work of ministry?" (The King James Version places a comma there in its translation.)
2. What are you doing to be of service to the members of your congregation?



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Deliberately Welcoming

A STRATEGY FOR CHURCHES

JULIUS VANSPRONSEN

In his convocation speech, “Enlarge the Place of Your Tent, Do Not Hold Back,” Dr. Arjan de Visser suggested that churches need to welcome the growing number of visitors to our worship services and “develop strategies, that, by God’s grace, they can find a home among us” (published in *Clarion*, Vol 72, No 13). What kind of strategies does your church have in place to welcome visitors?

OUR DIVINE CALLING

When we talk about welcoming visitors to our worship services, it is important to be clear about our reasons for interacting with visitors. In order to make a plan of action, we need to have a goal in mind. Although that goal may be worded in different ways, it will probably include such things as obeying the Great Commission and manifesting the love of God to our neighbours as lights in our community. Whatever approach or strategy we take in interacting with visitors, it must serve the goal of bringing the reality of God’s gracious work to our neighbours, so that more people may enjoy the blessing of the forgiveness of sins in Christ and the hope of eternal fellowship with God and his people.

Do the strategies you have in place assist visitors to see and know God?

Do the strategies you have in place assist visitors to see and know the Triune God as he has revealed himself in his Word? Are visitors being welcomed when they make their initial contact with the church either online or in person? Does the church provide visitors with instruction in the faith so that they are equipped to make a sincere profession of faith? Is there a plan and method in place to ensure that new members are integrated into the congregation?

WELCOMING STRATEGIES

Most Christian churches have spent a lot of time creating and maintaining websites with worship times, live recordings of worship services, and some information about the history and beliefs of their church. When visitors and guests walk into a church building, they are often greeted at the door by people designated for this task, and much effort is put into ensuring that visitors are offered a place to have lunch. Many churches also have visitor cards or a table near the entrance where visitors can receive information about the church and indicate whether they would like to be contacted by church members. Ushers handing out bulletins, liturgy sheets, Bibles, and *Books of Praise*, are standing ready to explain the order of worship to visitors and to help them find a seat where they feel comfortable. It is certainly a very welcoming environment!

When a visitor comes to the worship services several times, churches usually appoint an office bearer to make a connection with them in case they are interested in becoming members. When visitors do express this interest, then the elders will ensure that they are equipped through a type of new members' class offered annually until they are able to make a sincere public profession of their faith. When a visitor is received as a member into the congregation, he or she is added to a ward, the congregation is directed to include them in their social lives, and the new member is encouraged to participate in the life of the congregation like any other member.

Overall this strategy works when there are a few visitors a year, but when new visitors can be spotted in the church building every week it doesn't work so well. Although visitors are always warmly welcomed by greeters and ushers, usually invited somewhere for lunch, and often connected to an elder, it is difficult to move beyond superficial and sporadic interactions with a lot of visitors every Sunday. Everyone thinks everyone else is reaching out, but no one knows for sure, many visitors don't feel comfortable going to a stranger's house for lunch, there is rarely any follow

up contact during the week, and many elders are overwhelmed by the two-to-three visitors on their "watchlist" who are added to their regular responsibilities. Finding ourselves in such a situation, the Edmonton-Immanuel church decided to develop a more deliberate strategy going forward.

WELCOME CARE TEAM

One thing we noticed in our city is that many of the people visiting our worship services are from different countries, many are professionals who speak English well, many come from some kind of Christian background, and they are all longing to join the church as members so that they can also be a part of the community. Reformed churches that submit to the Word of God, preach the gospel, and value the communion of saints are often exactly what they are looking for. However, since these churches look very different from most that they have been in before, and close-knit communities are not easy to join without friends who bring you along with them, some kind of guidance and introduction is always very much appreciated. This observation led us toward a friendship-based strategy in welcoming visitors.

The basic idea of the latest strategy that Immanuel is trying out is to be proactive in creating a team of volunteers (called a "Welcome Care Team" in our church) with the goal of establishing and maintaining ongoing friendships with visitors. Volunteers who have received some training or direction from the council are matched with visitors and new members so that everyone has the opportunity to receive the support they need for spiritual growth. A constant stream of volunteers take their turn in welcoming new visitors in the foyer of the church, developing friendships with visitors who come to church regularly, walking beside catechumens, and ensuring that new and existing members who would like a closer connection to the congregation are included in the different activities of congregational life. The work of the volunteers lightens the burden on the elders, who are kept informed of what is happening but only get directly involved with those who have expressed interest in becoming members. In order to ensure that no one is missed someone keeps records of who is visiting the congregation, their level of interest, and who in the church is maintaining contact with them.

DEVELOPING FRIENDSHIPS

Although many churches have greeters who are at the entrance to the building and ushers at the door of the auditorium, their need to remain at their posts makes it difficult for them to walk with

the visitors through their first experience of the church building and worship service. In order to meet this need, the Immanuel congregation makes use of welcome team volunteers who gently approach visitors and offer to accompany them before, during, and/or after the worship service. These volunteers are prepared to answer visitors' questions, learn about their situations, provide information about the church, and introduce them to other members of the congregation. Since the church's foyer is large, a WhatsApp group keeps everybody informed and makes it easy to call in "back-up" if the number of visitors exceeds the number of welcoming volunteers. At the end of the day, welcome greeters report on who they met, so that other team members can know their names, possible friendship "matches" can be found, and the report can be added into the "new visitor" category of the shared spreadsheet for future reference.

Visitors and new members who have expressed interest in meeting more people are contacted by volunteers of a similar age or family situation who are genuinely interested in the visitor's wellbeing. In an offer of friendship, volunteers will send a text message or two during the week to ask how they are doing and to follow up on any concerns or plans the visitor(s) spoke about. They offer to meet them at the next worship service and invite the visitors to join them in Bible studies or other social events such as a Christmas meal or an outing to the lake. If the visitor expresses interest in learning more about Christianity or the Reformed faith, their new friend in the congregation will connect them with Reformed teachers online and/or one of the different introductory classes that the church offers. When a friendship is established, the member's name will be removed from the "active volunteer" list so that they can give due attention to the visitor and other members in the congregation can have an opportunity to volunteer.

TOWARD MEMBERSHIP

When visitors express interest in membership in the church, and remain convinced of this even when they know what steps are involved (we found it helpful to publish this in a prominent place on our website), the consistory is notified, and a representative of the consistory meets with the visitors. Visitors who show evidence of a sincere commitment will be received by the consistory as catechumens and arrangements will be made to ensure that they are equipped to make a credible profession of the Christian faith. When they are presented to the congregation as catechumens, they are also added to Church Social and joined to a Fellowship Group to facilitate further friendships and integration. By the time the visitors make a public profession of their faith, they already have several Christian friends who will continue to support and encourage them as fellow members of the same congregation.

FELLOWSHIP FOR ALL

The last step in our strategy ensures that every new member to our congregation, including those who have come to us from other Reformed churches, and any existing member who feels isolated from the congregation, receive the same offers of friendship that visitors receive. Sometimes we can all use a friend reaching out to us during the week to ask us how we are doing, to encourage us to attend a Bible study, and to invite us to different social activities. Most members are willing to be involved in extending offers of friendship, but they do not always know who would benefit from such regular contact. The strategy in place to develop friendships with visitors can also be used to strengthen ties among members.

FINAL OBSERVATIONS

So often we see a new person in our church building that we cannot talk to because we are already talking to a visitor or getting to know a new member. Elders, too, often find it difficult to keep in touch with all the different visitors who come at different times, in addition to the people in their own ward. It's so good to know that someone is actively focused on meeting the visitors and new members, that they will give a report of who they met, and that follow up efforts are being made. Knowing that there is a plan in place also makes members feel more confident in inviting coworkers, neighbours, and even strangers to the worship services, even when they don't think they themselves will have the time or resources to keep up contact with them throughout the week. Finally, when many people in the congregation are in regular contact with visitors and members who are interested in more connection with their congregations, we also become increasingly sensitive and compassionate towards one another.

It is very easy to be deliberately welcoming. It doesn't take a lot of time to send a friendly text message to a new friend once and a while, to walk in and sit beside someone for a worship service, Bible study, or speech you were going to be at anyway, or to set a few extra settings at your table or chairs around the fire pit in your backyard. These are things we are doing anyways. But for someone who has finally gotten up the courage to check out the church, or for new or lonely members of the congregation, it can have a major impact on their lives forever! 🗨️



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Home **RENOVATIONS**

RICK LUDWIG



Knowing Scripture is not equal to believing it

HEART RENOVATIONS

Renovation or renewal is hard and unsettling work, and yet it is also a crucial and expected part of the Christian life. Having just finished the late Dallas Willard's *The Divine Conspiracy* (HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), I have a newfound respect for its importance and urgency. Willard addressed his concern with the modern church in America, which encourages *come as you are* as the way into a relationship with Jesus Christ but is content to settle with *stay as you are* in order to keep the gospel as comfortable as can be for as many as possible. Building on Jesus's model of discipleship, which starts with repentance and belief, he explored the content of the Sermon on the Mount as Christ's introduction to the renovation of the heart that is needed for living in the kingdom of heaven already today. The spiritual transformation that is required cannot simply be described, learned, and appropriated. It will only well out of a growing love and devotion for our Father in heaven as he is revealed to us through his Son. It is modelled and made accessible to us by our Lord Jesus. He did not only teach the way for kingdom living but he also set the example for loving his Father. "Follow me" remains the call for all who put their trust in him and join his family in the church.

CHEAP GRACE

The entranceway into a life with Christ is God's free grace. In Reformed theology, grace comes first and must stand alone. Co-mingling grace with works to begin and maintain our relationship with God will always put us on shaky ground. Willard contends, however, that distancing the two unnaturally is also not scriptural and can lead to cheap grace. This can also be called inconsequential grace. We may more commonly recognize this as faith without fruit. Thankless faith. The apostle James called it "dead faith." Or maybe even empty religion.

Knowing as much as you can about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, understanding it in the context of the Scriptures, accepting it as truth (getting it right doctrinally) is not equal to believing it. Repenting and believing include our heartfelt regretting of the past and our wholehearted embracing of a changed future. Jesus dramatically proclaimed this to Nicodemus as the need to be born again. A fresh start. The apostle Paul framed it to the Galatians as a "crucifixion of the flesh" replaced with walking

If you have ever endured a home renovation you may relate to this experience. There is a lot of excitement at the outset, dreaming about the possibilities, drawing up a plan, weighing the costs, and then committing to the project. Day one of the demolition is jarring but thrilling at the same time. As the work continues, challenges emerge which can dampen the enthusiasm. Poor or even toxic insulation is discovered, along with aluminum wiring, lead pipes, mold under the floorboards or in the walls, and some shoddy workmanship is exposed from earlier efforts at improvements. The costs go up or the plans get trimmed back. The joy of the work crew showing up early each day diminishes as time goes on and they simply become harbingers of more dust, disruption, and delays. This is often the point where you would be willing to go back to the way it was if you could just get out of the mess. Perseverance is required to see it through to the end. It is no wonder many prefer to watch the trials and tribulations of home renos on HGTV from their comfy sofa rather than live through it.

by the Spirit, and to the Colossians he likened it to getting a new wardrobe, putting off the old self and putting on the new self. He told the Ephesians that they are re-formed as Christ's workmanship, created in him for good works. Life in the kingdom has the consequence of a radical personal overhaul, inside and out.

HOLY WORK

Coming to faith in Christ is the start of our renovation project. Faithful living according to God's commands is the ongoing work and it remains messy because of our sin. There is crucifying and dying and undressing followed by birthing and resurrecting and clothing that occurs on a daily basis for the disciple of Christ. If you live alone that is complex enough. If you live with other ongoing renovation projects in the same home, there can be days where it seems impossible and unending. Will the dust ever settle? Sometimes the devil tries to convince us that it would be easier to go back to Egypt and just embrace our old way of living, in our slavery to sin. Give up on restoration. Thankfully, our Lord Jesus sent the one most qualified to manage our internal makeover, his Holy Spirit. The apostle Peter described his work as our being built up as a spiritual house. Paul also encouraged the Romans by telling them that the Spirit of God had gone so far as to make his home *in them*. His holy Word, the sacraments, and fellowship in the body of Christ are the tools he masterfully uses to make us into something new from the inside out. Paul also assured the Hebrews that any work that the Lord Jesus starts he will never abandon. He brings it to perfect completion.

BUILDING INSTRUCTIONS

During his time on earth, Jesus was known as the carpenter's son, and it is often presumed he wielded the craftsman's tools before his ministry began at age 30. There is no clear evidence of this, although he did provide some sound construction guidelines in two of his parables. He noted that a person would look foolish building a tower without counting the cost first. Starting a project without sufficient funds or materials to finish it would simply mean the development of an incomplete monument to your own foolishness that others would mock. Entering a relationship with the Lord is not a casual or impulsive activity. It requires thoughtful commitment. The other well-known parable warns about having a secure foundation under your home. A house built on sandy shores is destined to collapse when the rains come down and the floods come up. Building on a rock gives a permanent and solid footing

to your home. Even the little children know what this means: build your house on the Lord Jesus Christ! And building requires work.

CO-WORKERS

It is a great irony that the only lasting woodwork connected to our Lord Jesus is not a vestige of his glorious temple in Jerusalem but the cross of Golgotha with the carpenter's nails piercing his hands and feet for our sake. This dubious and rustic construction allowed for the highest price that could be paid to cover our sins and make possible the most miraculous renovation possible: the restoration of lost sinners to God. The unclean purified. The filthy white-washed. The broken reassembled and repaired. The unholy restored to righteousness. And then Christ went on ahead to build our heavenly home, his Father's house with many rooms. Renovations have been made with space enough for all God's children!

Believing this truth about Christ's accomplished work for us necessarily draws our response. What should it be? God has guaranteed his workmanship, and he calls us now as his co-workers to be busy with him ushering in the kingdom of heaven. It is our lasting joy to be a part of this amazing world-wide project. Love for God compels us forward. There is no need for kingdom workers to lay back passively or look back pensively. There is plenty to do each day in God's service. He has prepared works in advance for us to do. And one day he will make all things new. It will be the most splendid re-creation and we will not only be part of it, we will be eternally amazed by it. We can sing along with all the saints,

*Christ Jesus full atonement made
and brought to us salvation.*

*Each Christian therefore may be glad
and build on this foundation.*

Thy grace alone, O Lord I plead.

Thy death is now my life indeed,

For thou hast paid my ransom. 🎵



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HONOUR

the King

JAN DEGELDER

In an earlier column we looked through a church polity lens at the relationship between church and school (CO Art. 58). This time we want to look at another relationship, the one between the church and the state, or to be more precise: church office bearers and civil authorities. We find this in Article 28. Both articles illustrate the reality that the church is present in and operates within the world.

The Bible makes clear that, yes—our citizenship is in heaven, and our destination as people of God is the kingdom of heaven, to be experienced in the fullness of its glory on the great day of Jesus's return. We are pilgrims indeed. However, that perspective does

not mean that we have nothing to do with earthly authorities as we walk through this life. Remember Jesus's words in Matthew 22 about rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, words that are affirmed by the apostle Paul in Romans 13:7.

SEPARATION, BUT HOW?

That being said, history shows that throughout the centuries the question of how the relationship between church and state ought to function has been answered in wildly different ways. Also, how this relationship has worked in practice has been incredibly diverse. The separation of church and state as we know it today



An artist's rendering of the Canadian Parliament buildings in Ottawa

only developed in the nineteenth century. The point was to set the church free from state supervision.¹ But it also implies that the church should not have any authority in state matters. Yet, it's good to be alert here. In our secular society we are often told: "leave your Christian views and morals out of the political discussion, because we have separation of church and state." But that's not what that expression means or ever meant. My Christian conviction cannot be isolated from my political choices, which are often also moral choices, in the same way that an unbeliever's convictions can't be separated from his political choices, moral or otherwise. What you believe to be right or wrong, based on your faith, will unavoidably influence your political choices and decisions.

CO ARTICLE 28 ≠ BC ARTICLE 36

How does all of this affect the application of Article 28 of the Church Order? To begin with, does this article actually belong in the Church Order? In his lecture notes on the Church Order, Dr. F. L. Rutgers² simply says, "no."

Some have said that the first part of Article 28 (summarizing the duty of the civil authorities with respect to the ministry of the gospel) does not belong in the Church Order since the church cannot instruct the civil authorities how to deal with

Christians and the church's ministry. Others say that this opening sentence simply reflects what we confess in Article 36 of the Belgic Confession about the civil government, and in this way provides the "basis" for the second part of the article, about the duty of the office bearers.

But is this a valid argument? Article 36 of the Belgic Confession says that "the task [of the civil government] includes the *protection* of the church and its ministry," whereas Article 28 of the Church Order says that "it is the office of the civil authorities to *promote in every way* the holy ministry." That's not the same thing: "promoting" assumes a much more active role towards the church than "protecting." Is that significant? I think it is. All the Bible passages that refer to the civil authorities are about our attitude towards these authorities.³ Christians are instructed to obey, submit, respect, honour, pay taxes to, and to pray for the authorities.

That does not mean that the Bible has nothing to say about the role and responsibility of the civil authorities. They are instituted by God who gave them authority to govern. They must therefore be respected and honoured as God's servants. They are appointed to punish those who do evil and praise those who do good, so that we may lead a peaceful, godly, and quiet life and enjoy freedom to

¹ Recommended reading to learn more about this: Cornelis Van Dam, *God and Government*, Eugene, Oregon, 2011.

² Frederik Lodewijk Rutgers (1836-1917) was a Dutch theologian. Between 1879 and 1910 he was professor in church history and church polity at the Free University in Amsterdam.

³ Rom 13:1-7; Acts 5:29; John 19:10-11; 1 Pet 2:13-17; Daniel 4:17; Matt 22:21; 1 Tim 2:1-3; Titus 3:1; Eccl 8:2-4; Matt 17:24-26; Matt 20:25-26. In the O.T. the Israelite kings were spiritual leaders of God's people, but the theocratic kingdom of Israel cannot serve as model for governments in the NT era. This is not to deny that also today God is the King who rules all the nations. See Van Dam (note 1), p.66-70.

worship.⁴ But Scripture does not directly address the civil government about its duty towards the church or Christians.

IDEAL ≠ PRACTICE

This triggers the question: how did we end up with the line in Article 28 that “it is the office of the civil authorities to promote in every way the holy ministry”? It is interesting to note that no one knows how or why this article was inserted in the Church Order. Most articles came up out of the churches and, via classes and synods, were eventually finalized by the Synod of Dort 1618/19. Not so with Article 28. No church had asked for it and there is no previous history concerning it at minor assemblies. Most authors suggest that Synod added it to please the authorities so that the government would approve the Church Order. Although the Church Order of Dort reflects the desire to decrease government influence, Synod was facing the reality that the political authorities still wielded significant power in church matters.

After all, the Synod of Dort was not convened by the church but by the States General, and political officials kept an eye on the proceedings. Also, for 200 years after Dort the civil authorities prevented the church from convening a subsequent general synod, despite the stipulation in the Church Order that a synod should be held every three years.

In the old Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches, Article 28 was exactly the same as the Dort original. Even the thorough revision of the CanRC Church Order adopted by GS 1983 left Article 28 basically the same. The wording is somewhat more contemporary and the description of the office of the civil authorities is a bit shorter. Interestingly, until 1983 the office of the civil authorities is characterized as “promoting” and “protecting” the church, whereas GS 1983 keeps “promoting in every way” but deletes “protecting.”

GS 1994 of our Australian sister churches adopted the version of Article 28 (their Article 27) as it had been revised by GS 1978 of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands:

The office bearers shall impress upon the congregation its obligation to be obedient and show respect to the government, because God has instituted it. They must set a good example in this regard and by means of proper communication invoke the government to protect the ministry of the church.

Here it no longer directly describes the duty of the office of the civil authorities, but the entire focus is on the duty of the office bearers, which is also the case in the second part of our Article 28.

RESPECTFUL INTERACTION

As mentioned earlier, as God’s church under the headship of Jesus Christ as our only King, we do live in this world. We live in a particular country, province, and municipality, where we all as Christians and corporately as churches interact with the civil authorities God has appointed to rule over us. Article 28 of the Church Order highlights the important role office bearers are to play in this interaction. The article points at two things all office bearers are to do. They are to lead by:

1. Teaching the congregation

They are to impress on the congregation obedience, love, and respect. Ministers do this by regular prayer for the authorities, but also in sermons. Elders address this at home visits. How do we talk about government officials? What does respecting them look like when we are critical of their policies? They may stimulate respectful interaction with the local MP or MPP/MLA or the use of the freedom of demonstration by getting involved in things like the annual march for life.

2. Being examples to the congregation

How do the office bearers themselves interact with the civil authorities? What do you do as elder, deacon, or pastor to leave the authorities with a positive impression of the church? Make it a point to connect once in a while with your MP or MPP/MLA and your city or town councilor. Let them know: as church we pray for you. And then there are occasions when we need to communicate with local officials. We need building permits for churches and Christian schools. Are we doing everything according to building codes, fire safety regulations, etc? Do the civil authorities know: we can trust those people to keep their word and submit to our regulations? This will be good for the reputation of the church, and thus for the reputation of Jesus Christ.

And as we do all these things we do so with the one provision that we must disobey any government demand that is in conflict with God’s Word (Acts 4:19–20; Acts 5:29; see BC Art 36). 



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⁴ Faithfully summarized in BC Art. 36.

The Earth, O Lord, Is Your Dominion

1. The earth, O Lord, is your do - min - ion,
yours all the full - ness it con - tains,
from high - est peaks to deep - est can - yons,
from rag - ing seas to plac - id plains,
from bright - est day to dark - est night.
You brought all forth with glo - rious might.

The musical score is written on six staves in a single system. It begins with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The melody is simple and hymn-like, with lyrics printed below each staff. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

2. You cause new life to be awakened:
a garden blooms near open grave.
Seeds, dying in the ground forsaken,
yield golden wheat in rustling waves.
We by its many grains are fed
when they together form one bread.

4. Let then my heart be your possession
and grant that I may see and hear
the signs and wonders of creation
with open eyes and open ears,
for earthly life is truly good
when heavenly hints are understood.

3. The flowers that adorn creation
you have most royally arrayed.
Birds blithely sing the proclamation
that you uphold all you have made.
In this a parable we see
transcending earthly mystery.

Text: William Helder, 2023
Translation of "Aan U behoort, O Heer der heren," by Jan Wit, 1973
Tune: Wer weiss, wie nahe mir mein Ende? *Musikalisches Handbuch*, Hamburg, 1690

Mission Outreach in BRAMPTON

ILSE VANDERMEULEN



To aid Pastor Eric Onderwater in his tasks for his growing congregation, in 2023 Grace Canadian Reformed Church in Brampton hired Micheal Cooperwhite, 37, to serve as their mission outreach worker. *Clarion* met with Micheal to hear more about his work and a summary of that interview follows.

Clarion: *First of all, what's with the name?*

“Yes, my name is spelled with ea and not ae,” Micheal confirms. “My mom wanted it that way, but I always have to spell it for people!” The elder at Grace church, and now also a mission outreach worker, focuses on discipleship (caring for people), street evangelism, and community engagement. “And I am splitting membership class duties with Pastor Eric so he can focus on the preaching and teaching.” At Credo Christian School Micheal teaches Bible classes. This new Christian elementary school is facilitated in the church building. Micheal is married to Victoria, and they are raising two sons aged 9 and 7.

Micheal Cooperwhite



Micheal Cooperwhite at ECHS

IMMIGRANTS

Like many CanRCs, Grace was established in the fifties by immigrants from the Netherlands fleeing the devastation of WWII. A few years after their institution, the congregation purchased its first building on the corner of Creditview (now Salvation Road) and Bovaird Drive. In 2019, their new building opened at Creditview and Fairhill.

Not only did the place of worship change—the former building now serves as a mosque—so did the neighbourhood. Half a century ago, the church stood in the middle of acres of farmland, but Brampton amalgamated, and its population grew tremendously. What was once a rural congregation became an urban church. Over the years the membership dwindled and changed from mostly Dutch descendants to include people from many different ethnicities and backgrounds. The congregation actively reaches out to people in Brampton to welcome them to their church community and disciple them. Micheal: “The Caucasian part of the population

in Brampton is now 20–30%. We deal with Sikhism, Hinduism, and Islam. We meet people from many different backgrounds, but it’s the same gospel for all!”

DRUGS & GANGS

Micheal knows personally what it means to be drawn to Christ through the work of the Spirit and become a member of a Reformed, Christian church. He grew up with his native Ojibway mother in several places all over Canada. “I ran away at 16 and started living with my dad in Toronto, in the Weston Road and Eglinton area. There is a high crime rate there and the neighbourhood is rampant with drugs, gangs, and broken homes. The situation is very bleak, and you get caught in a generational cycle.”

Young people in this area end up either selling drugs or playing sports. “I thank God that I had a good jump shot in basketball and drugs was never something I was involved in,” he says. In those days, making money provided security and sports was Mike’s



idol. Nine of his close friends have died since high school, only one from natural causes. “The rest were either drug deals gone bad, ending in fights leading to stabbing or shootings. The one that especially stands out is my good friend who was shot in the head twice while simply out walking his dog. The two guys who did it were just joyriding and looking for something to do.” He remembers the judge in the case stating that this young man was killed in cold blood, not because of anything he did or said. Not because he was involved with drugs or gangs, but simply because of the area in which he lived.

REFORMED

Micheal was able to move to Brampton in 2009. Even more important than enabling Micheal to escape his neighbourhood, God interfered in Micheal’s life to bring salvation to his soul. After a serious accident slowed him down for months, out of pure boredom Micheal started to read the book of Romans. “My heart and mind were captivated,” he remembers. “I didn’t quite understand what I was reading but from what I could understand I was moved to my core. I started investing 16 to 17 hours a day reading and studying. I joined an online course and learned about Reformed theology and doctrine. I felt this immense passion for understanding the Word so I could teach the Word. Almost immediately I was telling those around me about the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Micheal found resources by men like R. C. Sproul, John Piper, John MacArthur, and Paul Washer. He started reading works by theologians like Charles Spurgeon, John Knox, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. Caring brothers at his online course encouraged him to find a local Reformed church and a Google search revealed

a Reformed church five minutes down the road: Grace CanRC. “My wife and I attended one Sunday and, together with our two boys, have been members since 2020. Reverend Matthew VanLuik and Reverend Eric Onderwater have disciplined me and helped me grow in my faith and doctrine, including paedobaptism.” Micheal now serves as an elder and outreach worker. He is an ordained chaplain through the Chaplains Office of Canada and attended the Christian Leaders Institute in Michigan and received mission training through the HeartCry Missionary Society.

GREAT COMMISSION

At Grace making disciples according to the Great Commission is an important part of the church’s vision. “I can not overstate that. We are all about teaching people to observe and obey all that Christ commanded. And then these disciples go and disciple others.” In today’s society, many feel you can not impose your personal convictions on others. How does he see this? Micheal: “When I go out, the Word of God is my authority. I am sent out by Jesus Christ to proclaim the good news. He did not put guidelines in the Great Commission, despite how people might perceive this. Also, we can only do the work of discipling and teaching in the authority of Christ.”

The outreach worker immediately adds that even though we have Christ’s authority to share the gospel, we need to be wise when we evangelize. “You cannot hammer people with the Bible and say: if you get upset, that’s your problem. No, there is a way to come across as loving yet bold. Have conversations. Reason from the Scriptures like Paul did. I’m not looking for a debate or a confrontation.” He refers to Matthew 10:16, where Jesus tells his disciples to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

For evangelism, he has developed several materials, including a welcome brochure for visitors. Micheal does prayer walks and street preaching at three locations in Brampton. He hands out the materials to invite people to church. The brochure is also distributed door-to-door so everyone in the area knows about Grace church. “Our success rate is not measured in numbers. Our standard is to honour God and do what he asks us to do. The rest we leave with God.”

Micheal believes the gospel itself will pierce people’s hearts. “You have to be bold but loving. I don’t believe it is biblical to say: Jesus loves you as you are. If that’s the case, you don’t need Jesus. People need to see how terribly they fail the standard of God’s law. Like the apostles in the New Testament preached the gospel: Jesus is Lord, he died for you, he rose again, and all men are commanded to believe in Jesus Christ! There is a boldness to that.”

LESSONS

Being actively involved with newcomers taught the people at Grace some lessons. For example, they have come to realize that membership classes and discipleship need to go hand-in-hand. Micheal: “I love the catechism. I love teaching it, and its importance cannot be overlooked. But we found that before we get into teaching it, we first have to show who Jesus is and listen to get to know our visitors: hear their hurt, pain, and struggles, and sprinkle some gospel seed in there. Then it makes much more sense to go through the catechism to explain more about what we believe.”

Further, the congregation pays more attention to how new members are connected after they become members, so they continue to learn. Micheal: “The great commission says to not only make disciples but also to teach them to observe all that Jesus has commanded. That is why we encourage them to keep learning, and we plug them into groups with other church members. Even long-time members can always learn a thing or two.” Grace equips its members with resources through Ligoniers Ministries, including online courses.

NEXT GENERATION

Clarion: *You have a heart for youth and have done several speaking engagements. What draws you to young people and what message do you have for them?*

“Yes, I really do have a heart for our youth. They are the next generation of Christians who will need to proclaim, defend, and live out their faith in a watching world that is growing more and more resistant toward the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our young people are facing so many challenges. The number of young people with anxiety, depression, and thoughts of suicide has been steadily increasing year over year since 2012. It’s important to me that our young people know what they believe, why they believe it, how they can live it, and how they can share it. I am grateful to my consistory for allowing me to meet and speak with young people regularly.”

He warns young people not to piggyback on their parents’ faith and simply parrot the things they hear at church and Christian school. “You need just as much theology as adults do to know the work of Christ by the grace of God. You need to know that your identity should not be bound up in the temporal things of this world that pass away. You need to be reminded of who you are in Jesus Christ.”

RELATIONSHIPS

He has a couple of tips for churches and Christians who want to share the gospel. “Listen first,” he says. “No matter anyone’s background or culture, every human understands relationships. Ask people if you can pray for them, let them know you care. Then you can teach them about the whole person of Christ. And do that out of humility.” Micheal also stresses that you need to know the

Bible very well. “You have to know what you believe: tell me the gospel in three minutes, go! Make it make sense. Tell me about justification, sanctification, propitiation. But you need to be able to explain it in terms people on the street understand.”

He encourages churches to look for opportunities in their community and raise awareness for their church. “Let the community know you are their church in town and that you are there to help. Pray for people and encourage them. Be visible.” Grace church is placing basketball nets on their parking lot, for example, to attract local youth. Micheal: “Organize events that people can attend. Open up your doors. Organize a seniors’ day or pancake breakfast. My wife and I have been to each police station and fire station in the area to thank police and firefighters for their services and tell them we are praying for them.”

LEADERSHIP & PRAYER

While raising awareness, the outreach worker stresses that it is important to equip members of the congregation to welcome and interact with strangers and put people with the gift of evangelism to work. “Leadership is very important. If you see your pastor or elders talk to strangers, it’s easier to follow their example.” Pastor Onderwater taught a class in Brampton on “How to love your neighbour.” Micheal: “That has been so helpful. Now, when new people come in, many church members will talk to them before we even get to meet them and that warms our hearts as leaders!”

And most importantly for mission: “Start a prayer group to surround evangelism in prayer. Pray for your community. Not in general—be very specific. Pray for your pastor, pray for the people you have been in contact with and their joys and struggles. Mission needs prayer. The Lord answers our prayers!”

Clarion: *What is your hope for Grace and the neighbourhood it serves?*

Micheal points to 1 Corinthians 1:23: “We preach Christ. Here at Grace, we serve to be a haven for the hurt, a lighthouse for the lost. We seek to make Jesus known to our neighbourhood and community around us. We are so thankful every time we hear a new visitor come in and comment how at home they feel.” 

Micheal is available for speaking engagements at churches and youth events. You can reach him at micheal116@icloud.com and 416.556.3837.



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The graphic features a dark background with colorful paper-cut mountains in red, orange, and blue. Below the mountains, the word "Summit" is written in a large, white, serif font. Underneath "Summit", the words "Reformed Young Adults Conference" are written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. At the bottom of the graphic, the word "Summit" is repeated in a large, white, sans-serif font, with the letters appearing to be cut out of paper and standing on a surface.

Summit

Reformed Young Adults Conference

MAGGIE VANDENBERG

On Thursday evening, February 15, 2024, roughly 150 young adults made their way into the pews of the auditorium of Calgary's Bethel URC. Laughter, nerves, and yawns filled the space; some people had traveled twenty minutes to get there, some over fifteen hours. Plenty of faces were unfamiliar. I recognized a few from attending past conferences, but most names escaped me.

This evening marked the beginning of the third annual Summit Reformed Young Adults Conference. Specifically catering to single young adults (post-high school to 30ish), RYAC is organized by a committee of seven young adults with the assistance and guidance of Pastor Keith Davis and his wife Laura. As stated on the Summit Young Adults website page, the conference's mission is to "Glorify and honor God, strengthen the faith of our young adults, deepen their love for the Lord Jesus Christ, and foster and promote fellowship and friendship."

My brother Jonas sat to my right. Much like me, he was tired from the drive (we're from Smithers) and a bit on edge at being in the presence of so many people after a long day. We don't find ourselves in atmospheres like that often; it's been a while since high school, and our church has less than twenty people our age

who are unmarried. So, what would the weekend ahead look like? What was in store for us over the next few days with this big group of strangers?

FACES & FOOD

Naturally, meeting people was a big aspect of the conference. Folks introduced themselves over the breakfast table, or while waiting in line to defend and dominate in the game of 9 Square. We learned about each other, the Lord, and our Christian calling as we went over questions with our discussion groups after speaker sessions, as well as in regular conversations. There was ample time to relax, too! Each day, downtime bolstered mingling, playing volleyball or tossing beanbags in the lobby, and enjoying board games. New friendships were born, and old friendships strengthened.

A wonderful team of volunteers saw to the feeding of 150 young adults; an impressive feat for one meal, let alone a whole weekend of them! Snacks were often available, and I myself was delighted by the frequent appearance of chocolate milk at the drink station. Thanks again to all those involved in providing refreshments for us!

ACTIVITIES

Friday, the first full day, saw some of our young adults experiencing the beautiful resort town of Banff. Mountains formed the grand backdrop to their explorations as they walked the streets, popping into various boutiques, souvenir shops, and restaurants.

Others donned their snow gear for an afternoon of outdoor fun at the Mt. Norquay Ski Resort, where they sped down Alberta's longest tube lanes on inflatable tubes. Jonas was in this group: "The music was like this head bopping stuff," my brother said. "And the weather was sunny with a few clouds, beautiful."

I was a part of the crew that "Entered the Game" at Calgary's active gaming facility *Activate*. The time flew; I could have happily spent another hour darting around neon-coloured grids, dodging

lasers, problem solving with my fellow glowing teammates (the cosmic lighting and electronic wristbands really sold the whole Sci-Fi setting), and getting in a good workout while enjoying interactive technology.

Was that the only day with a special activity? Certainly not: Saturday evening had us all together in the gym for some good old square dancing! I went into this incorrectly thinking I was familiar with the style (turns out I had only learned *folk* dancing, not *square* dancing), but it was simple enough to catch on to; and when mistakes were made, it only added to the fun and laughter. Our instructor and his wife/dancing partner were fabulous, and a palpable energy filled the room as we wove, spun, and promenaded.





Rev. Paul and Julie Murphy



Top: Main session with Rev. Paul Murphy; Ladies only with Julie Murphy.

SPEAKERS & SESSIONS

Rev. Paul Murphy and his wife Julie have ministered in Manhattan, NY for twenty years. Rev. Murphy became a believer at the age of 29, and is the pastor of Messiah's Reformed Fellowship, which he founded in response to the attack on the Twin Towers (and originally planted near Ground Zero). As you can imagine, Paul and Julie have gained much insight into what it means to be "in the world but not of it" and were well positioned to speak to us on the subject.

The theme of this year's conference? ***Set Apart.***

Rev. Murphy broke it into several sessions, following the theme verse of Deuteronomy 14:2. "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth."

Set apart from the world

We cannot be set apart for God if our hearts belong to the world, but we cannot hide away from the world either. The remedy to worldliness is not willpower, but to replace the love of the world with a love for Christ.

From square dancing to cornhole, there were activities for everyone.

Set apart unto Christ

Rev. Murphy encouraged us to spend time in prayer, to ask, "Why me, God? Why did you love me?" The answer, he said, will always be the same: "Because I love you. For my own good pleasure; that is it."

Set apart for a life of service

Rev. Murphy called us to accountability with Romans 12:2, teaching that not only are our lives supposed to be worship; we are to be *transformed*. "Are you loving God with your mind, or are you amusing yourself to death?"

Set apart by personal holiness

The women's session, led by Julie Murphy, focused on the Lord's sovereignty: "The cultural message of 2024 is, "it's all about you" . . . but Jesus is not only our Saviour. He is Lord over every aspect of our lives."

The men's session focused on leadership in the home and church, and the need to be constantly challenging yourself in your spiritual life.

Maggie Vandenberg



Singing together

TESTIMONIALS

“I am so thankful for the ministry of RYAC and Summit. I always leave the conference encouraged to stand on the solid rock of Christ, put on the full armour, and continue to run the race that Christ has placed before me. Being a young adult who works to build relationships and work alongside our elected representatives to see a more Christ-like approach to government is so rewarding but also taxing. Being involved in politics besides a busy work life on the farm, encouragement to continue on a path that honours and glorifies Christ in all that I say, think, and do is always welcome. A highlight would be the worship through singing and digging deeper into the word.”

Nicole den Toom

“I’ve been to several RYAC conferences now, and the feeling of connection to the larger church always amazes me. Being able to connect (or reconnect) with young adults from across Canada each year in a wonderful, fun, Christian environment is such a blessing in my life.”

Sarah Tuininga

“RYAC is a fun and exciting experience to meet new people, make new friends, and talk about our LORD and Saviour Jesus Christ. The atmosphere is very warm and welcoming. With all of the breakout sessions and free time activities, there is plenty of time to get to know people you haven’t met before.”

Ethan Schreuders

“Coming from someone who didn’t grow up in a United Reformed Church, RYAC has been incredibly influential in my life. The powerful teachings of the speakers are always very relevant topics for us young people, as we live in this world but not of it. The community of like-minded believers is also very uplifting and encouraging.”

Liz Wikkerink

“The RYAC weekend was filled with godly wisdom and insights not only on how we are to be set apart from the world, but also on our roles in the church, the home, and the workplace. It was an amazing time of Christian fellowship where we could encourage and be encouraged in the faith. Rev. Paul Murphy’s words and advice were inspiring, thought-provoking, and challenging. I couldn’t recommend the experience more to any young believer.”

Nathan Veenstra



Break time

WHAT IS A BRAZILIAN *Concílio*?



Clockwise from top: Maragogi area with a view of the Atlantic Ocean; Venue of Concílio in Esperança;; Concílio in session.

The *Igrejas Reformadas do Brasil* (“IRB”—Reformed Churches of Brazil) held its assembly, *Concílio*, from May 6 to 9. Due to their origin in the mission works of the Canadian Reformed Churches, the close ties, and the mission works still actively led by Aldergrove and Hamilton, the last CanRC general synod mandated the Committee on Ecumenical Relations (CER) to visit the IRB twice between our general synods.

Henry Schouten and I were delegated to make the second of these visits. Unfortunately, at the last minute, Henry was prevented from making the trip to Brazil, and travel plans had to be changed.

Concílio was hosted by the church of Esperança, a five-hour drive northwest from Recife in the northeast of the country. Esperança being a bit inland, the weather is somewhat milder than the coast, though it remained in the mid-to-high 20s Celsius. The venue allowed for a good breeze as the weather cycled between

sun, cloud, and rain. I was received at the table as a fraternal delegate and asked to stand to indicate my fidelity to the Three Forms of Unity and the creeds.

VISITORS & TOPICS

The conversations were too complicated and fast for this delegate—with only limited Portuguese—to follow. Pastor Jon Chase, an observer at *Concílio*, was willing to translate most of the goings-on to English and answer my questions for clarity in a Google document. This worked very well and I’m grateful to Pr. Jon.

There were several observers at *Concílio*, other than members of the Esperança congregation: members of the congregation in nearby João Pessoa (under supervision of Esperança); a minister, elder, and deacon from an independent Reformed church in Olho



Clockwise from left: Concílio delegates; Evening worship service in Maragogi; Advisory Committees at work.

d'Água das Flores; and a minister of an independent Reformed church in São Luíz, which has requested to join the IRB.

Like our general synods, *Concílio* receives letters from the churches, reports from committees, and it deals with matters which belong to the churches in common. During the assembly, it also appoints advisory committees to propose decisions on the various items on the agenda. But it's also like our classis meetings. The IRB does not have classes or a regional synod, so its agenda is a combination of what we would see at classis, regional synod, and general synod. This means that there are also agenda items such as church visitors reports and request for advice on matters of discipline.

I'll note a few items from *Concílio*. The IRB is finalizing a psalter-hymnal complete with creeds and confessions, liturgical forms, and church order. *Concílio* dealt with a report and recommendations regarding theological education at the seminary, Instituto João Calvino (IJC). The IRB has begun interesting contacts with a group of Reformed churches in Venezuela. There was discussion on how to properly handle cases under Church Order Article 7 (our Article 8, "Exceptional Gifts").

GREETINGS & PRAYER POINTS

I addressed *Concílio* on behalf of the CanRC (in English, while the delegates read a translation prepared by Pr. Jon), bringing greetings and encouragement, updating them on happenings in North America, and asking whether we are a good and helpful sister to them. They responded affirmatively and with thanks for our presence at *Concílio*. They also asked me to bring warm greetings to the CanRC churches.

The *Concílio* of Esperança translates literally to English as "the Council of Hope." I did indeed come away very hopeful for our

brothers and sisters. They take the work of the church seriously and desire to be faithful. And I noted that they do this with comparatively more limitations than we have in Canada and the United States. Resources are generally somewhat thin. That's not just in finances. In a discussion after the assembly wrapped up, a delegate asked me how many elders and deacons we had in my church. He described my answer as "a luxury." The IRB needs more men, especially as elders and deacons. In most churches, a heavy load falls on relatively few. Some work in much isolation from others. For this reason, the delegates experience *Concílio* as a welcome opportunity to build and renew relationships, to give and receive encouragement. We should remember to thank God for the blessings we have received and to pray for these blessings on the IRB.

Before leaving Brazil, I had the opportunity on Sunday to join the congregations in Barra Grande and in Maragogi for worship. From the Word of God—in a sermon translated to Portuguese from a CanRC minister—we were each encouraged to recognize the gifts God has given to us and exhorted to use them for his glory and the upbuilding of the church. Brazilian culture is a very open and friendly culture. The church members there love to see their brothers and sisters from the CanRC churches. If you have the opportunity, your visit would be welcome. And hopefully you will get to enjoy *churrasca* – Brazilian barbeque, an hours-long affair with great fellowship and a steady stream of different meats coming off the grill. 🍖

William Gortemaker
Member of the Committee for Ecumenical Relations



CHRIST FOR ALL
MINISTRY

April 2024

1 Corinthians 12:12-13 "The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit."



First Fundraiser of the International Food Festival



Message from Founder, Chairman Naeem Zafar

Dear supporters, we are incredibly grateful for the wonderful turnout at our First Fundraiser of the International Food Festival, featuring delicious Pakistani, Indian, Chinese, Canadian, and Dutch cuisines. Despite their busy schedules, the support from such amazing individuals is a true blessing for our ministry, and we deeply appreciate it. All glory to God. We express our heartfelt gratitude to our dedicated team in Pakistan for their unwavering commitment to reaching more families and children, especially those enduring poverty, persecution, and discrimination. With tremendous support, we've launched three new mobile Sunday schools, expanding our outreach. In Thailand, our Bible study skill programs in English and Thai are ongoing, complemented by the remarkable efforts of our volunteers to spread the Gospel among the Thai community.

As we strive to extend our impact, we are actively seeking volunteers and passionate individuals to join our executive board. If you feel called to serve, please reach out to us. Additionally, we are eager to partner with more churches. If you're interested in supporting our mission, please don't hesitate to contact us. For additional details, please visit www.christforallministry.com.



We feel incredibly blessed to witness the overwhelming turnout at our food festival fundraiser. The atmosphere was filled with excitement and joy, and we're truly grateful to God for bringing us together through Christ. The children were especially thrilled about the color contest.

Prayer Request: Prayer for the persecuted families in Pakistan. Pray for the safety of our team in Pakistan. Prayer for the Christian refugees who are suffering around the world especially those who are in Prison in Thailand.
Prayer for recent brothers who were falsely accused of blasphemy cases.
Prayer for our bible project.
Please prayerfully consider being a prayer partner

Project Bangkok Thailand

During my short stay in Bangkok, Thailand, I discovered many families grappling with enduring challenges as they seek refuge, often aiming for safer shores like Canada. These families escaped persecution in their home countries and have encountered obstacles in Thailand, especially regarding their children's education. Nevertheless, CFAM is lending a hand by providing Christian education, including Sunday school and bilingual Bible classes in Thai and English, to equip them for the road ahead.



Sunday School for Christian Refugees, and language classes Bangkok Thailand



We've begun sharing the Gospel within the Thai community with our dedicated volunteers. They connect with Thai individuals, sharing the story of Jesus Christ and the importance of His crucifixion. Meanwhile, our art classes, which we launched last year, are well-received and provide a constructive outlet for youth as they await permanent solutions for their refugee status.

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CHRIST FOR ALL
MINISTRY

April 2024

1 Samuel 12:24 – Only fear the Lord and serve Him faithfully with all your heart. For consider what great things He has done for you.



Introducing the concept of Easter to these young ones entails conveying the central message that it revolves around the significance of Jesus Christ.



The recent launch of our New Mobile Sunday School has been met with great enthusiasm and appreciation. We extend our heartfelt gratitude for your support.



Two additional Sunday school openings have been initiated in collaboration with the local church leadership in Punjab, Pakistan.



Poverty Relief: Small Business, Finance Support

Christ For All Ministry is preparing to distribute food packages to aid our brothers and sisters living in poverty. In the picture on the right Parkash is excelling at his motorcycle store.



This year, we've launched a new Bible study book in Urdu, tailored for youth. It features workbooks with answer sections for thorough exploration. Additionally, we've initiated basic study materials for Brickline children's books.



We continue to be able to supply Bibles to Persecuted Churches

Visiting the Bricklin community to understand their challenges and issues.



A women's Bible study group is currently delving into the Book of Genesis.

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All Families of the Earth

By Pastor Victor Atallah



Sudan civil war refugees

T.S. of Khartoum, Sudan, wrote: *“Islam is the only monotheistic religion which is open for all human races.”* He wrongly concluded that the Bible teaches that only the descendants of Jacob’s (Israel) 12 sons are God’s people. He claimed that God *“appointed Mohamad as the true descendant of Abraham, in order to spread the true religion throughout the world.”* Then, he said *“Christianity is a corrupted form of God’s true religion... It is suitable only for white people.”* Like other Muslims, most Jews and many “Christians,” he needs to understand the true teaching of the whole Bible about what makes sinners into the “people of God.”

After the flood, the Lord’s plan to preserve the human race was made clear, despite the fact that *“the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth”* (Genesis 8:22). So, the Lord intervened at the Tower of Babel to save humanity from self-destruction.

Later Abram the Hebrew was called to receive promises of blessing – including *“a land”* and *“a great nation.”* He was assured of guidance and protection throughout his calling. He was then given a universal mission -- *“in you all families of the earth will be blessed”* (Gen 12:1-3). For this reason, his name, *“Abram”*, meaning *“father of a single nation”*

was changed to *“Abraham”*, which means *“father of a multitude of nations.”*

Later, he was told that the promises, including the nation and land, were to be fulfilled many generations beyond his own life time. The Lord said to him: *“Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners (or strangers) in a land that is not theirs, and they will be servants (or slaves) there and they will be afflicted for four hundred years...”* (Gen15:13). Later he learned that the objective of his calling would continue through his descendants – *“and in your offspring (seed) shall all the nations of the earth*

be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.” (Genesis 22:18)

Actually, that single offspring or seed had already been promised long before to come defeat Satan. This was after humanity fell in sin and lost its intimate relationship with the gracious Creator. He was to be *“seed of the woman”* (Gen 3:15). Isaiah specifically prophesized the coming of this seed as the divine *“Immanuel”* (God with us). He was to be miraculously born to a virgin (Isaiah 7:14; 9: 6-7).

In the New Testament Jesus, named by the angel *“Immanuel,”* was born to a

virgin. Forty-two generations from Abraham, Mary and her fiancé, Joseph descended from the line of his great grandson, Judah and the royal line of King David (Matthew 1:1-17).

Writing to Gentile believers in Galatia, the apostle Paul emphatically pointed out that Christ is the promised single offspring or seed of Abraham who brings the promised blessing to all nations. He boldly asserted that all who belong to Christ, regardless of their ethnic background, are not only God's true children but also Abraham's offspring and heirs of all promised to him (Galatians 3:15-29). Paul further calls them the "New Creation." As the "Israel of God," they are receivers of God's "peace and mercy" (Galatians 6:14-16).

The apostle Peter also named as God's people the dispersed and persecuted Christians of both Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds. He did so as he applied key Old Testament

terms distinctively used for Old Testament believers: "... you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1Peter 2:9-10).

John's gospel tells us that most Israelites rejected Jesus. Many persecuted the apostles and other believers. Yet, many more are blessed by trusting Christ, regardless of their ethnic background. We read: "¹¹ He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:11-13).

These important truths protect Christians exposed to different unhealthy views.



Gaza

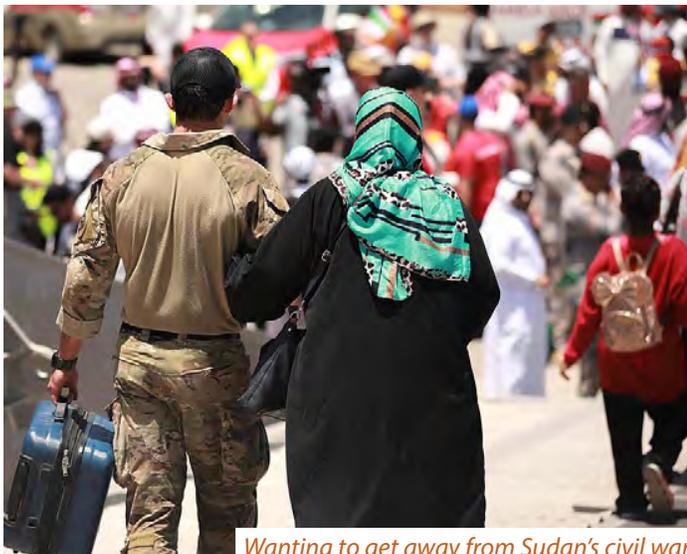
Speculative interpretations of prophecy, by some popular writers and preachers, confuse simple believers, depriving them of assurance of their value in Christ as part of the one "people of God," one "new creation," one "Israel of God," gathered from "all families of the earth" and "sealed with the promised Holy Spirit." They are all richly blessed "in Christ by every spiritual blessing in the heavenly place." (Ephesians 1:3-14)

The simple, straightforward truth about the completeness and sufficiency of Christ and his work liberate Christians from error. This is also vitally helpful to Christian workers seeking to bring a clear and wholesome gospel message to Muslims, Jews and others.

M.M. of Iran, wanted to understand what is meant by believing in a "catholic church." Realizing that it means belonging to the

"universal body" of Christ, he joyously announced "I belong to the King of heaven and earth, I am a citizen the universal Kingdom of Christ. I am one with all who belong to Christ."

These are special days of devastating and divisive wars, hatred, ethnic and religious tensions and pervasive disquiet, even among Christians. Christ alone is the "Prince of Peace." He provides all nations of the world, with a powerful gospel message of truth, justice, peace and self-giving love.



Wanting to get away from Sudan's civil war

MERF-Canada

Thank you for your faithful support! Please make cheques payable to MERF-Canada and send them to the address at the bottom of the page.

Online donations can be made to Middle East Reformed Fellowship (Canada) Inc. through

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RAY OF
SUNSHINE

Rachel Vis



DERRICK VANDERHORST

Hello everyone, I am Derrick Vanderhorst. I live at the Twin Oaks house in Burlington with my friends Ron Dewitt and David Rawson. I also live with Graceful Grace, who makes good meals for us. I also have Margaret Bosscher, who comes in once a week and makes good meals as well. I still do my jobs at U-Haul and Shoppers Drug Mart. I also enjoy landscaping for my parents and their neighbour. I enjoy watching movies in my room or just relaxing in my room.

This year I will turn 37 and even though it is not a big number I believe that birthdays should still be celebrated.

I do my best to get along with everyone here at Twin Oaks. Sometimes we have our moments but then it calms down after a little while.

I am looking forward to a trip to Canada's Wonderland with my oldest brother, Jack Jr., which will have happened by the time

this article is done being published. I am also looking forward to Anchor Camp and having a lot of fun. I enjoy getting company over and interacting with people. I also enjoy riding my bike around a lot.

I will be an uncle to 14 nieces and nephews in July. I am so excited for it to happen.

If you are going to send a card to me, please do not spell it Derek but rather Derrick.

The pictures here show me getting a ride home from work one day last month from my boss in the Corvette. I was very excited! The last picture is of us three guys when we went to the Theological Seminary in April. We had a tour and chat with the professors and students.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY

Today we are celebrating everyone having a birthday in August and September because of how our summer publication dates line up.

So, happy birthday to all of you celebrating a birthday in August and September!

We wish you all the Lord's blessing in the year to come.

Thank you for introducing yourself to us again Derrick.

He celebrated his 37th birthday this past July.

August birthdays

- 4** Terence Berends will be **48**
c/o Lighthouse
6528 1st Line
RR 3 Fergus, ON
N1M 2W4
- 5** Philip Schuurman will be **65**
323 Scott St
St. Catharines, ON
L2N 1J6
- 9** Rose Malda will be **67**
Mt. Nemo Christian Nursing Home
4486 Guelph Line
Burlington, ON
L7P 0N2
- 31** Kristi Oosterhoff will be **34**
c/o Harbour Home
42 Spadara Drive
Hamilton, ON
L9B 2K3

September birthdays

- 6** Katie Deboer will be **24**
3558 Thurston Pl
Abbotsford, BC
V2T 6Y2
- 8** Marsha Moesker will be **47**
c/o Lighthouse
6528 1st Line RR 3
Fergus, ON
N1M 2W4
- 14** Jerry Bontekoe will be **60**
c/o Anchor Home
361 Thirty Road RR 2
Beamsville, ON
LOR 1B2
- 15** Cindy Blokker will be **35**
c/o Harbour Home
42 Spadara Drive
Hamilton, ON
L9B 2K3
- 22** Nick Prinzen will be **52**
c/o Beacon Home
653 Broad Street West
Dunnville, ON
N1A 1T8
- 25** Dave Vanveen will be **54**
c/o Lighthouse
6528 1st Line
RR 3 Fergus, ON
N1M 2W4
- 29** Paul Dieleman will be **55**
c/o Beacon Home
653 Broad Street West
Dunnville, ON
N1A 1T8

CLARION KIDS LORD'S DAY 49

In the Bible God tells us how he wants us to live as his children. This is called God's *will* for our lives. And you know what? Sometimes we can be unhappy about God's will for us. For example, even though it's God's will for us to obey our teachers and do our schoolwork, we don't always like to do it. Have you ever said something like, "Huh, I wish I could play hockey instead of doing my homework!" Well, how wise the Lord Jesus is! He knew we would need help to obey God's will. That is why he gave us the third petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." You see, in heaven, God's angels are happy to do whatever God commands! So, when we pray "Your will be done" we are asking God to make us happy to obey his will, just like the angels in heaven. And we're asking that he help us say "no" to doing whatever we want. The Lord Jesus knew what it meant to let go of what you want. Before he died, he struggled! Look up the passage below and fill in the blanks. Take a moment to read the verse again and see how Jesus prayed but still listened to the Father's will.

Matthew 7:39b

"My Father, if it be _____, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as _____ will, but as _____ will."

Decode the words to learn what the catechism says about God's will:

God's will _ _ _ _ _
 1 12 15 14 5 9 19 7 15 15 4

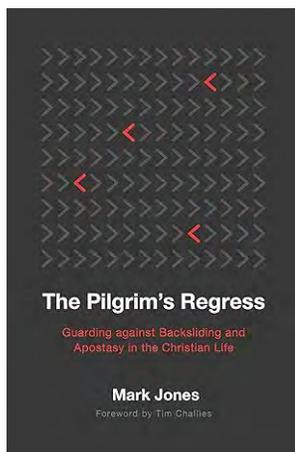
1=A 2=B 3=C 4=D 5=E 6=F 7=G 8=H 9=I 10=J 11=K 12=L 13=M
14=N 15=O 16=P 17=Q 18=R 19=S 20=T 21=U 22=V 23=W 24=X 25=Y 26=Z



HEY KIDS!

Do you have questions about something you have read in the Bible or heard in a sermon? Maybe you are wondering about something you have read in a Lord's Day. We have a new column coming called KIDS' QUESTIONS. We warmly invite you to ask Mrs. DeBoer your question! With your parent's permission, email deboerca@gmail.com and find your question and an answer in Clarion!

AMANDA DEBOER



PRONE TO WANDER

The Pilgrim's Regress, Guarding against Backsliding and Apostasy in the Christian Life, by Mark Jones. (P&R Publishing Company, 2023). Paperback. 211 pages. \$33.95 CDN.

As a child I found the most frightening parable that Jesus shared during his ministry on earth was the one about the ten virgins waiting to meet the bridegroom (Matt 25:1–13). It was jarring to hear the Lord, from behind the locked door, proclaim to the five foolish virgins, “I tell you the truth, I don’t know you.” Lack of preparedness or laziness had left them outside the kingdom! I have to admit that venturing into *The Pilgrim's Regress* awakened some of that old anxiety in me.

SELF-EXAMINATION

Mark Jones, a PhD graduate and senior pastor in a Vancouver PCA congregation, broaches the uncomfortable topic of critically analyzing our own faith lives and that of others. Building on the writings of Augustine, Bunyan, Edwards, Spurgeon, and others he compiles a comprehensive review of scriptural teaching on the realities of spiritual backsliding and its relationship to both hypocrisy and apostasy. He recognizes that delving into this topic will butt up against the treasured doctrine of the perseverance (preservation) of the saints and the all-sufficiency of the grace of God for salvation. However, one can’t argue that the narrative of Scripture is not filled with examples of the progress and regress of God’s people living in an ungodly world. The Bible tells a story of the ongoing intervention of a just and merciful God amidst fickle followers. If we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that we are all prone to wander. Our wandering can easily lead us away from God and, left unchecked or unattended, is not only dangerous but may be indicative of a deeper problem. A vigorous and ongoing self-examination helps us to remain humble and rightly trusting in and following our Lord.

The book is designed to prompt deeper self-reflection and even shared group discovery. Each chapter ends with a specific “application” section and a number of questions to help review the content and make additional personal connections. The topics

addressed include the pervasiveness of our sin, the inconsistency of our love, our overweening pride, a diminished fear of God, our resistance to the dying of our old nature, sloppy prayer life, a lack of love for the Scriptures, and apathy towards the church. Some or all of these in combination can lead to the foolishness of withdrawing from the Lord, deconstructing scriptural truth, or alienating oneself from the people of God. This book makes a good study for those in church leadership—first to help attune their own hearts in humility for the work, then also to gain confidence in observing, assessing, and addressing backsliding in the congregation. Following the Good Shepherd’s example in pursuing the one lost sheep out a hundred is rarely an easy or enviable task. While *The Pilgrim's Regress* may also be intended for Bible study or small group discussions, it would require good leadership and a mature reading audience to be effective.

A GRACE THAT SAVES

While I found the book helpful for taking a personal inventory and enlightening for exposing areas of danger and offering ways to combat them to grow in faith, I found the chapter on *Weak Grace* confusing and not well-grounded. There is an attempt made to identify different types of grace: renewing, restraining, temporary, sanctifying, strong, and weak. Somehow we should differentiate these graces to see which are sufficient and which are not. Which are saving and which are not. The discussion leads to the assertion that even the weakest saving grace can carry us home. While I understand the impulse to try to understand why some who seem to believe at one time abandon their faith, and to also assess what are gracious temporal benefits that everyone may enjoy versus eternal benefits of grace for only those who are chosen, I think this exercise encroaches on God’s secret counsel (election). The Bible speaks more plainly. We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. We perish because of our own sinful stubbornness.

Our faith is evident both to ourselves and to others by the fruit of faith. Where faith is weak, God remains merciful and will not snuff it out. He will use his means to protect his children to the end. What he starts he will finish. The saints in Christ will persevere. Getting caught in the weeds of identifying a variety of graces with varying outcomes will not be helpful for most.

AN OPEN DOOR

The book does conclude with encouragement, not only for people caught in backsliding, but also for those earnestly in prayer for relatives, friends, and neighbours who have regressed in their faith and are losing sight of the Lord. Don't give up! Keep on the lookout for each other. The repentant prodigal child will always be welcomed back with open arms by the Father. What was at one time weak or lost can be restored and made strong. Salvation belongs to the Lord, and it is his marvellous work. He will use the means and habits of grace, also in and through us, to help to

work out his salvation. It is devastating for us to see someone we love reject the grace of God and, even worse, having known him then express hatred or indifference towards him. The outcome of unbelief remains dreadful. In those times we can only bend our knees in humble prayer and in fear of our holy God and Father and trust in his faithfulness, love, and mercy. He cannot and will not make a mistake in bringing his children home. Jesus Christ himself has promised this and gave his life to ensure it! Be vigilant on your pilgrim way and be comforted to know that God's children do not have to live in anxious fear about knocking on a locked door. 



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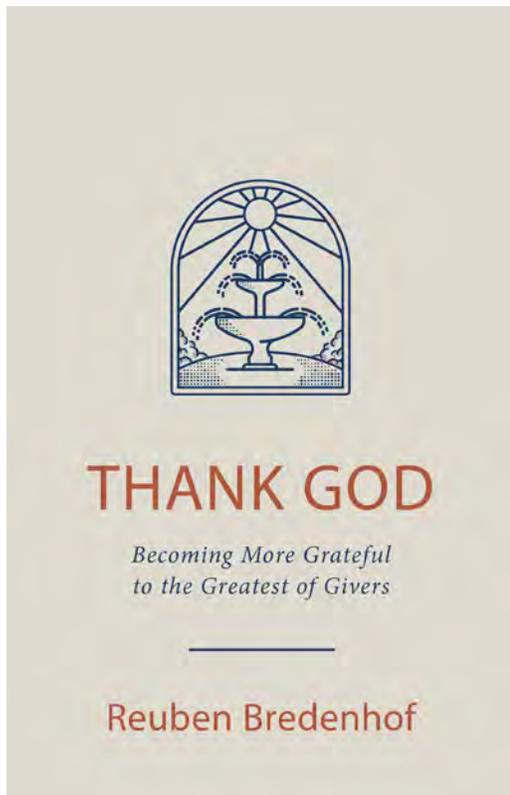
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»	MY NEIGHBOUR





A BIBLICAL ROADMAP TO GREATER GRATITUDE

Thank God: Becoming More Grateful to the Greatest of Givers,
Reuben Bredenhof. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2023).
Paperback. 160 pages. \$18.00 CDN.

C. S. Lewis once described the contradictions within his atheist heart: “I was at this time living, like so many Atheists or Antitheists, in a whirl of contradictions. I maintained that God did not exist. I was also very angry with God for not existing. I was equally angry at him for creating the world.”¹

An atheist angry at God! Some might consider this to be the height of irony. Unfortunately, there’s a surprising contender for that position. Could we not say the same about an ungrateful Christian? An oxymoron like no other! Far too many Christians, me included, do not express sufficient gratitude toward God in our everyday lives. In fact, to an outside observer, our lives might reflect a functional atheism rather than a worshipful posture of gratitude to the Giver of every blessing! How can we grow in gratitude?

In his book *Thank God: Becoming More Grateful to the Greatest of Givers*, Dr. Reuben Bredenhof winsomely engages our ungrateful living by providing a biblical roadmap to greater gratitude. In the opening chapter Bredenhof sets out his objective when he states, “I want to develop and promote the God-given ability to give thanks in all circumstances. I recognize that by nature we’re ungrateful and discontented people. Growth in gratitude requires that we put to death our innate sense of entitlement and give up

our habitual dissatisfaction. Instead, we aim to increase in our loving response to God” (p. 5).

OVERVIEW

Thank God begins with a foundational question, “What do you have that you did not receive?” This is an intensely important spiritual exercise, one that a Christian should cultivate with regularity in their life. Without fail, this question will always yield the same answer: “Everything!” Everything is from God. Next, Bredenhof highlights how meditating on God’s attributes elicits a worshipful response. As we ponder the goodness, graciousness, and generosity of God, we are simultaneously transformed by it. The words of Psalm 34 echo through the centuries, “Taste and see that the LORD is good!” At its core, gratitude is worship! Conversely, ingratitude is sin—idolatry.

Certainly God shows goodness in the way that he cares for all of creation (Ps. 145), but the Christian understands that he has received far more. Bredenhof writes, “But what is God’s central and primary gift? We have received Christ. The fullness of God’s Son fills our emptiness, for we “are all complete in him” (Col 2:10). He is much more than any material possession, earthly position,

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, 1955), p. 115.

relationship, memory, or skill that you might value . . . it is when we foster a delight in Christ that gratitude grows” (p. 34).

When we see how our Father blesses us in Christ with salvation, we gain greater clarity in recognizing how he continues to provide for us in innumerable ways—from the ordinary to the extraordinary. By counting—cataloguing—our blessings, we learn to savour and delight in his abounding grace and provision. Bredenhof writes, “I am convinced that no child of God can grow in gratitude without regularly counting his many gifts. From the seemingly mundane gift of our daily bread to the obviously miraculous gift of adoption into God’s family, a believer’s life is truly overwhelmed with the bounty of the Lord’s goodness” (p. 43). Bredenhof then helpfully demonstrates how we can do this in our own lives by focusing on various blessings we enjoy: the beauty of the earth; technology; a godly spouse; our nation; friends; the path of our life; children; our bodies; work; family; medical technology; human creativity; sleep; ordinary gifts. But life is more than food and drink, so Bredenhof also considers: Jesus; baptism; prayer; providence; freedom to worship; repentance; church family; the Bible; faith; our blessed hope; preaching; election; forgiveness; and the Holy Spirit.

PERSISTENT GRATITUDE

Counting our blessings is important, but it is only the beginning of a more loving response to God. What are fitting—and practical—ways our grateful hearts can respond to these many blessings? By thanksgiving in prayer to God; in songs of praise; toward other people; throughout all our lives; and by persisting deliberately in thanksgiving.

As the reader will know by experience, a general persistence in deliberate thanksgiving is much easier said than done. It requires a thoughtfulness that we often tend to lack. Bredenhof encourages his readers to savour their blessings, and to pay attention to the ways that God often answers prayer. Do you have eyes to see that he hears your prayers? But it’s also important that we speak about the blessings we have received. Or more appropriately, that we speak to others about the Giver.

Towards the end of the book, Bredenhof tackles the thorny issue of trials and suffering. How can we remain thankful in every circumstance? Many of the spiritual exercises mentioned previously continue to apply in difficulties. During periods of adversity we

still need to have eyes to see the “small” blessings we have received. Still, there is something far more foundational. As we suffer we must look to Christ. “It is through our union with Christ that we may always live in gratitude to God” (p. 115). Because of Christ’s sacrificial life and death, God the Father will never allow anything to separate us from his love. He will continue to meet our deepest needs. At the same time, Christ is our sympathetic high priest. He intercedes on our behalf; he stands in solidarity with us, and through his Spirit continues to give us an eternal hope. Because of these realities, in God’s economy of grace, pain and suffering are never wasted. God the Father is working all things together for our good. Through our suffering—through divine discipline!—God the Father is cultivating in us the fruit of peace, righteousness, and holiness. He is tuning our hearts to sing his grace.

In the final chapter of *Thank God*, Bredenhof directs his readers to the horizon of eternity. He reveals that a life of gratitude in this age is but a dress rehearsal for the age to come! We will join the multitude of creatures, angels, elder, and saints surrounding the throne in heaven, and we will sing an unending anthem of gratitude to God, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be to our God forever and ever!”

REFLECTION

The tone throughout *Thank God* is warm, pastoral, and conversational. It is a testament to Bredenhof’s life experience, and his many fruitful years in pastoral ministry. His gentle and thoughtful approach is convicting to the reader. Everything I have received has come from the loving hand of my gracious Father in heaven. Why wouldn’t I want my entire life to be a thank-you to him for what he has done for me in Jesus Christ? *Thank God* can easily be read by an individual, but since each chapter concludes with questions for further reflection it would also be a wonderful book to read as a small group, or for a topical Bible study. I’m thankful to God for Reuben, and his willingness to provide this biblical roadmap to a life of greater gratitude. 📖

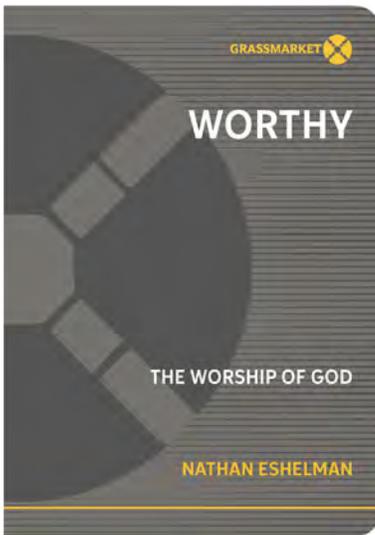


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WORSHIP BY THE BOOK

Worthy: the Worship of God, Nathan Eshelman.
(Pittsburgh: Grassmarket Press, 2023). Paperback.
141 pages. \$10.00 USD.

So many books have been written on worship, including a fair number from a Reformed perspective. However, it strikes me that with almost every new one there are still some insights to be gleaned. Authors often draw our attention to aspects of worship we haven't yet considered. That was certainly my experience reading this new little volume from Nathan Eshelman.

Eshelman is a pastor in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA). There has been contact between the Canadian Reformed Churches and the RPCNA but, as it stands, no formal relationship. If you know anything about the RPCNA, you'll probably be aware that they practice exclusive psalmody and sing with no musical accompaniment. So, you might expect *Worthy* to advocate for these positions—and indeed it does, albeit rather briefly in a chapter on the biblical elements of worship. Whatever you may think of those arguments, there is so much more to this book and the author's position on those two practices shouldn't be considered a reason to pass over it.

The overarching approach in *Worthy* is consistently Reformed. By that, I mean it's solidly grounded on the summary of Scripture found in the historic Reformed confessions. Eshelman rightly emphasizes the importance of the principle found in Lord's Day 35: we are not to worship God "in any other manner than he has commanded in his Word." This is known as the regulative principle of worship (RPW). Eshelman explains how the RPW applies to the elements of Christian worship, but not the circumstances. Elements are the things commanded for us to do in worship, whereas circumstances surround the elements and are variable. An example of an element is preaching; a related circumstance would be whether there is a pulpit or plexiglass lectern. Writes Eshelman, "We can use wisdom for circumstances; we use obedience for elements" (p. 90).

Thus far there's nothing new or extraordinary. Many others have said similar things, also in writings on worship from our circles. But one thing new I did find in relation to the RPW was Eshelman's assertion that it's a matter of God's love for his people. I want you to read the book for yourself, so I'm not going to elaborate on this point. Suffice it to say that it's a thought-provoking contribution.

Another excellent proposition has to do with who leads Christian worship. Normally we describe the pastor (or perhaps someone else) as "the worship leader." But based on Hebrews 2:11–12, Eshelman makes the case that Jesus is our real worship leader. There are valuable lessons flowing from that—read the book to find out what they are.

Not every book on Reformed worship is going to cover every angle. One that's missing from *Worthy* is the covenantal nature of worship. That's something writers from our background have strongly emphasized over the last few decades. I won't fault Eshelman for failing to say everything there is to say, but prospective readers should be aware that they'll have to go elsewhere to find stuff on how Christian worship relates to the covenant of grace, including the covenantal basis of the RPW.

Worthy is written in a popular style for a broad audience. It's an easy and enjoyable read. Most readers will appreciate the personable voice of the author. It's part of the "Bedrock Series" put out by Grassmarket Press. I have several other volumes in that series to read and review and, based on this one, they look promising! 📖



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Readers' FORUM

Thank you, Rev. Holtvlüwer for reminding us of the richness of the Psalms. Who can ignore their depth and beauty? The psalms are so real, raw, and rich. The day we neglect the Psalms is the day we neglect our very salvation.

But I think Rev. Holtvlüwer nonetheless draws too sharp a line between psalms and hymns. Our psalms, as we currently sing them, are still paraphrases of Scripture, some more free than others. Many of our hymns are also paraphrases of Scripture. In addition to the “canticles,” there are hymns that are essentially the Word of God in song. Too many to mention: Hymn 13 (Isa 40:28–31), Hymn 14 (Hab 3), Hymn 15 (Isa 40:1–5), Hymn 19 (Isa 9:2–7), Hymn 23 (Phil 2:6–11), Hymn 24 (1 Tim 3:16), Hymn 35 (Rom 8:31–39) and many, many more. Even a hymn like “Amazing Grace,” which appears more free, is still chock full of Scripture. The first stanza has “wretch” (Roma 7:24), “lost/found” (Luke 15:32) and “blind/now I see” (John 9:25).

Rev. Holtvlüwer deals with the interpretation of passages like Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19. But I believe he concludes too much from these passages.

As an example, commentators generally agree that when Paul tells Timothy to be busy with “the sacred writings” and that “all Scripture is breathed out by God . . . able to equip for every good work” (2 Tim 3:15–16) that Paul is first of all speaking about the Old Testament. But it would be too much to conclude from this that the Old Testament ought to occupy the primary place in the life of “the man of God.” New revelation has been given by the Spirit to capture the new things the LORD has done, in the Lord Jesus Christ. And every man of God needs to be busy with that Word. All of it.

We now live in the new covenant. To insist that the Psalms have the primary place in our worship is simply too much to insist. Yes,

the Psalms are psalms of Christ and speak about Christ. They sing beautifully to us about our Saviour—they are even the songs our Saviour sings (Schilder, *Christ in His Suffering*, ch. XVI.) But the Psalms also speak from a distance, from the time of the shadows (Col 2:17).

Mysteries have been revealed in the New Testament, in the fulness of time (Gal 4:4). Mysteries that angels even only glimpsed and longed to see.

Who would have ever thought that the Creator would become one of his creatures, that the Author of life would be put to death, that son of God would be forsaken by God?!?

Who would have ever thought God’s enemies would be defeated through the shame and foolishness of a cross, that the resurrection, ascension, and return of one man would be the restoration of all things?

These are wonders that we must sing loud and long about—with the angels who now behold them, in their glory.

It is no surprise, then, that in the Revelation to John, the four living creatures, the twenty-four elders, and the multitude of angels around the throne, do not pick up a psalm of David, however beautiful they are. They sing a new song to “the Lamb who was slain!” (Rev 5:9–14; cf. Hymn 27.)

I believe Rev. Holtvlüwer does articulate the principle we ought to hold onto: we sing God’s revelation back to him. God has spoken, in his Word (Scripture), and in his Word, the Lord Jesus Christ. We respond to that best by echoing that Word, as we fill our hearts and voices with the words the Spirit of Christ has given us. As we find it in both the Old and New Testament. 

Marc Jagt

