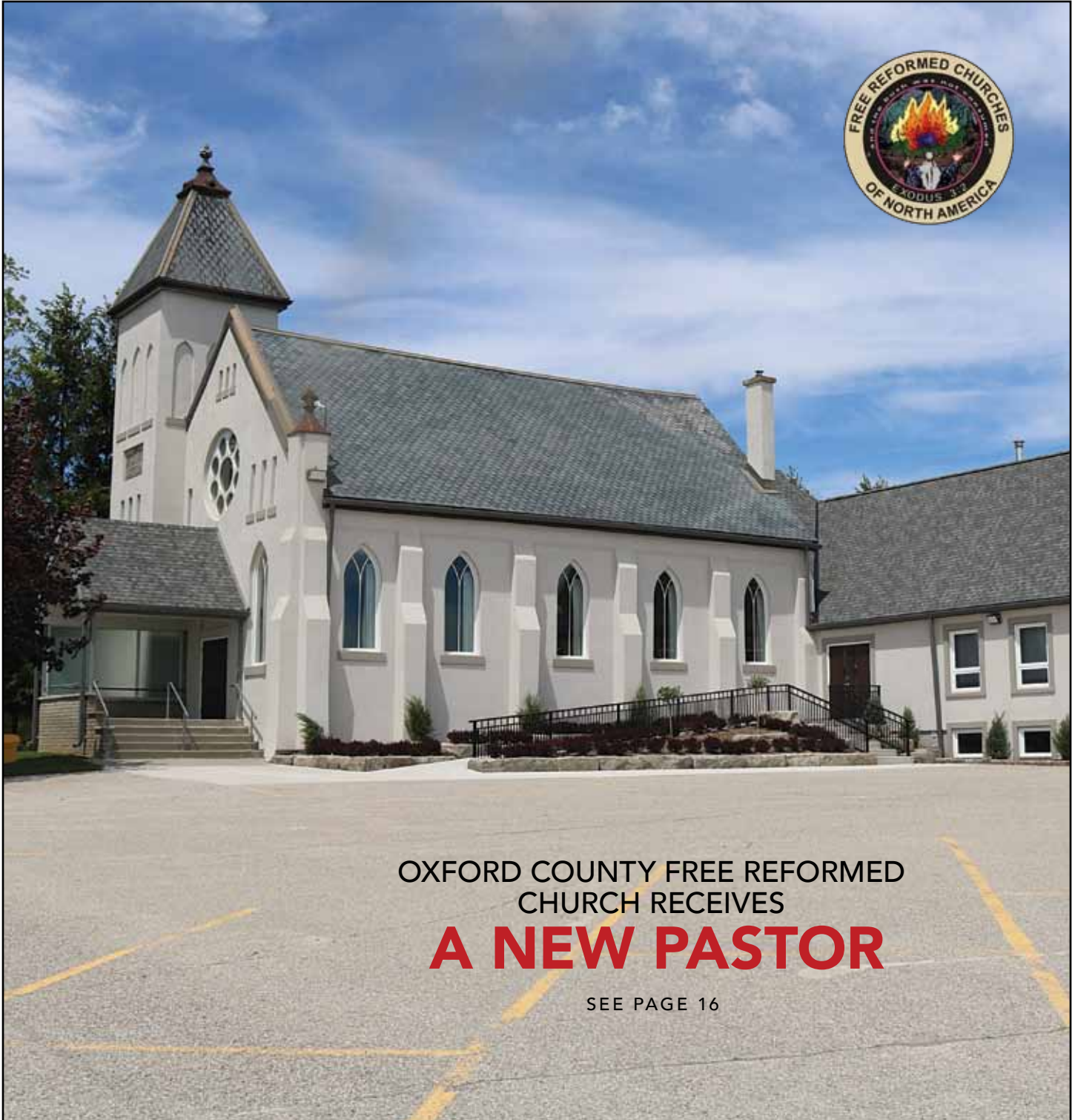


# THE MESSENGER

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## A NEW PASTOR

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# A FRUSTRATED KING

“And the king said unto them, I have dreamed a dream, and my spirit was troubled to know the dream” (Dan. 2:3).

From time to time, we hear about people who suddenly snap, grab a gun, and start killing people. What triggers such behaviour?

Our Scripture tells us about King Nebuchadnezzar who also comes very close to a killing spree. He demands that the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers and the Chaldeans tell him his dream. If they cannot do that, he will have all of them killed.

It is often thought that he had forgotten the dream when he awoke. But that was not the case. The king had not forgotten the dream; he remembered it very well. He demanded a double job from his trained magicians: first they must tell him the dream, which he alone knows; then they must give him the explanation. The wise men point out politely that this is asking too much. Nobody has ever made such an impossible request. But the king cannot be persuaded: unless they do so, they all will be killed.

What makes King Nebuchadnezzar so irritable? What makes him decide to put dozens of people to death because they cannot come up with the dream which he dreamed? Part of the reason is that the king is suspicious that his wise men will give a pleasant interpretation to the dream: pleasant for the king and unpleasant for his enemies. The king figures that his counselors will try to flatter him. How can he ever know that they are speaking the truth when they give him the interpretation?

The king demands that they first tell him the dream. If they do that, he will know that they are not just some men who are clever with words, but have real insight into the deeper matters of life and into dreams.

This is only part of the reason why the king is ready to kill all of them. The real reason is that he is very frustrated. His dream showed a great image. The head of this image was of fine gold, its breast and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, and its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. As he looked, a stone, cut out by no human hand, smote the image at its feet of iron and clay and broke them in pieces; then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were all broken in pieces and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors. The wind carried them away so that not a trace of them could be found.

The stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth. Nebuchadnezzar hardly needs an interpretation of such a dream. Instinctively, he knows that this great and bright image has something to do with his empire, power, and glory. He also senses that the destruction of this great image means the destruction of him and his empire. The dream clearly showed that

all his great power would become like summer chaff spit from a combine.

Imagine enjoying the thoughts of what good might all happen to you in the future. At that point you fall asleep, but in your sleep, you see everything destroyed: your business gone with nothing left of it, the farm gone, everything taken away, or your marriage and your family broken. Then you wake up. Tell me, in what kind of mood do you awake? Likely not a very pleasant one. What you have just tasted is death, as the end of things. You have had a sudden insight into a very possible future. You have seen how meaningless your life is. Here you slave, you try hard, you work hard, you make every effort to build up something, but now you know that sooner or later something or someone will bowl you over and roll right over you. You won't have control anymore; you won't be able to stop those who will pulverize you. You picture yourself lying in a hospital bed with tubes everywhere, and the doctor at your bedside will soon leave you for his nice family, a pool party, or his golf outing.

Thus, Nebuchadnezzar, having sensed the destruction of his empire, power, and life, suddenly hates these well-fed, whimpering, so-called wise men. They are only interested in protecting their position and use the very One who rules the world.

This is what happens to people when they suddenly realize that they are really nothing, that their very existence is threatened, or that they are being ridiculed. That is why some people, at some point in their life, grab a gun and do not care who they shoot.

Everybody who lives without the Lord God comes to see this. They may not take it out on others like the mass-murderer or Nebuchadnezzar, but they do live under the curse of God's absence. Thorns and thistles, darkness and frustration grip their lives.

How can we live without the fear of frustration? By living out of the resurrection. The resurrection is the answer to the death on the cross. The death on the cross is like the image pulverized to summer chaff. The death of Christ on the cross is utter frustration for those disciples who watch Him die, hanging there accursed of God. But the resurrection on the third day is the message of the Lord God that, in and through the Lord Jesus Christ, the power of death, the great frustrater, is broken for good. Jesus shall reign until all His enemies are under His feet. He shall reign, and so shall all who are united to Him by faith.

It takes very little to become a frustrated little king or queen like Nebuchadnezzar. We all like to be in control. There may be a pecking order in the family or at work, but we all have our little territories, our little empires, where we are the boss! Let not anyone intrude there! But the Lord God, by holding before us the example of king Nebuchadnezzar, points out to us what this frustration can lead to: we can suddenly become very destructive in our relationships in the family, at work, and even in the church. We suddenly can hate the healthy, the wise, the calm, and the ones who seem to have it all together.

The Lord God tells us that we all have some hidden anger in us. It can come out so suddenly, seemingly from nowhere. But He also tells us that there is a way to live free from frustration: when we stop living for ourselves and begin to live for Christ. That does not mean that you have to become a minister or missionary. But it does mean that we give up trying to secure our own little kingdoms; instead, we join the Lord God in working for His kingdom. That kingdom is secure through the death and resurrection of Jesus. For that reason, Scripture, after a glorious chapter on the resurrection, encourages us, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58).

In his fallen nature, man wants to control not only his own life, but also the world around him, be it little or big. Like Eve and Adam, man wants to be God. Yet, sooner or later, he finds out that he never will reach that level, but instead he faces being pulverized as summer chaff behind the combine. But nobody needs to live that way. When we embrace the Lord Jesus by faith, our scary dreams shall cease, for the word of God shall sink deep into our being so that, in the Lord, our labour, yes, our life, is not in vain. <sup>1</sup>

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## CONTENTIONS AND DIVISIONS IN CHURCHES: SATAN'S TACTIC TO WEAKEN AND RUIN (3)

*In the last two installments, we have seen how Scripture teaches us that Christian unity is a gift of the Spirit to be cherished and exercised, and secondly, how Satan uses divisions to try to weaken and ruin the cause of Christ. In this final installment, we wish to see what Scripture calls for in order to avoid divisions and heal those that have developed.*

We should not even need an article on how to heal divisions. After all, the Bible teaches us that believers have inward instruction from God how to love one another. Paul writes to the Thessalonians: "But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another" (1 Thess. 4:9).

On the other hand, God's Word does give commands regarding, principles for, and examples of how divisions in the body of Christ were healed. That is why this article compiles a few basic directives from Scripture as to how to avoid and seek to heal divisions in the church of Christ, which is His body.

### **Avoid Contentious People**

The Bible puts a high value on living peaceably with all sorts of people (Rom. 12:18). Implied in this verse is the notion that it may not always be possible. However, Christians should certainly not be people who are bent on causing divisions wherever they go. In fact, Romans 16:17 teaches: "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them." This is strong language: we should avoid such people.

Though we should all contend for the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3), it is not hard over time to identify persons who are always stirring controversy. Paul is speaking of people that are not following the Scriptures, certainly not as a whole. They may pick and choose texts and issues they are fond of, but they disregard the manner of life and conversation that the Bible lays upon all those who profess to be disciples of Christ. Such people seem to delight in commanding people's attention. They tend to find controversy where previously there was none, and like to put people into one of two camps, "us," versus "them." In addition, they seem to think the essence of Christianity is doctrinal or practical disagreement. They bring more "heat" than "light" to issues, with the result that, where formerly there was unity and respect, now there is heated disagreement. People like this lack humility and proper self-reflection. They freely give criticism and hardly receive it so as to change. They lack proper caution and a charitable spirit in spreading other people's viewpoints.

It is especially dangerous when someone like this comes into one of the offices of the church. 2 Timothy 2:24 says: "And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men." It is important to watch men over time before put-

ting them up for the office. Paul writes: “Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men’s sins” (1 Tim. 5:22; see also 1 Tim. 3:6). Meekness should mark the one who bears office, and that means even that those who are falling to error should be instructed with meekness, not boisterous clamor.

Social media and the internet in general are often places where contentious people seem to garner a following and wreak much havoc. Social media seems to foster an environment where radicalized and polarized opinions garner a lot of attention and end up asserting a lot of force. May the church listen more attentively and precisely to the Scriptures and guard against contentious people. May those in authority warn them as the Bible enjoins, and, if they do not heed warnings, God says we should avoid them (Tit. 3:10).

### Have the Mind of Christ

The Philippians needed to learn to be “with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27). We do not know exactly what had happened to keep the believers from having to “mind the same thing” (Phil. 3:16). However, Paul’s desire and prayer for the Philippians was that they would “be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind” (Phil. 2:2). One of the boldest and richest statements in Philippians is: “For me to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21). Paul speaks these words in the face of preachers who are preaching “Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds” (Phil. 1:16). This would have been a very hard spot to be in. Paul was in prison, and preachers were using pulpits to try to get at Paul, to rough him up, to be irksome to him. It seemed like they wanted to hit him when he was down. However, Paul’s focus and boast turns to Christ. He knows that Christ is his life. He is not his own, but belongs to his faithful Savior. Whatever people are doing to spite him, they end up spiting the One who owns Paul, the One who sustains Paul, the One who turns all the afflictions He sees fit to send Paul’s way to his profit.

Practically speaking, Paul’s mind does not flit about, but he stays upon Christ, the LORD, his God. He believes Christ, looks to Him, depends on Him, relishes Him, and hopes in Him. This is better than life itself, and gives Paul strength, not only to endure the malicious attacks on him, but to enable him to guide the church at Philippi in the midst of their disunity. He has no heart and mind to fight against other Christians, even professing Christians; his own life was hid with Christ in God (see Col. 3:3). That put it in a state of being reconciled with God; he could experience peace in his providence and he could experience peace with other Christians, even professing Christians who thought to injure him.

If Christ is our life, we will also mind Him. People today speak a lot of “mindfulness,” and there certainly is the need to be less hurried, pre-occupied, distracted, etc. However, some generic “mindfulness,” is nothing like having the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5). When Paul pictures the mind of Christ, he traces how Christ, in the glory of the throne room of God, had the mind to make Himself of no reputation, become man, be a Servant, and humble Himself even further, unto death, the death of crucifixion (Phil. 2:7-8). This was a mind that descended spiritually and literally to wash sinners’ feet; to be made sin, and to bear the wrath of God in the place of sinners. We cannot bear the wrath of God, not for ourselves, much less for others; but we can and must humble ourselves, having Christ’s mind. Such a mind did Timothy have, whom Paul gives as an example in the same chapter of how we can look to the things of the Lord Jesus and care for others (Phil. 2:21-22). Likewise did Epaphroditus, who was even near death for the cause of the gospel and was marked by great empathy and care for fellow-Christians (Phil. 2:25-30).

Social media and the internet in general are often places where contentious people seem to garner a following and wreak much havoc. Social media seems to foster an environment where radicalized and polarized opinions garner a lot of attention and end up asserting a lot of force.

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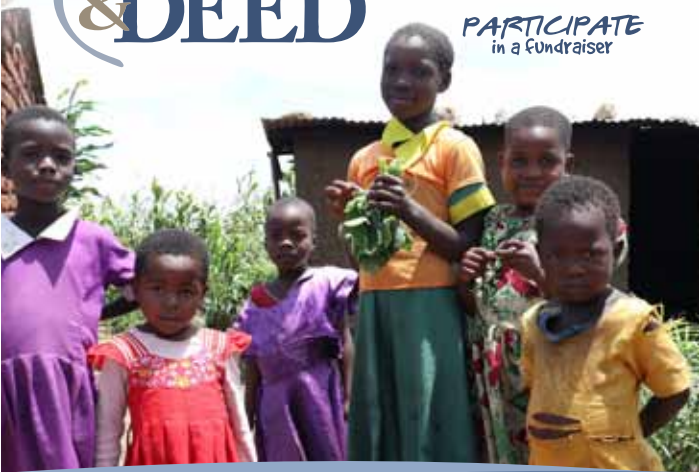
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## Seek One Another in the Strength of Christ

In another instance, Paul sought from out of Christ to see the ruptured relationship between Philemon and Onesimus restored and healed. From what we can surmise about this situation, it looked humanly impossible to get Philemon to even entertain the idea that he should think of Onesimus as anything more than a useless, unprofitable scoundrel. However, grace in both Philemon and Onesimus' life could accomplish what no one or nothing could achieve. Paul writes to Philemon about his love and faith, which he has toward the Lord Jesus and toward all saints (Phm 5), that "the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus" (Phm 6).

Practically speaking, this meant seeing Onesimus as a fellow-heir through Jesus Christ, and, through the gospel and prayer, to see Christ's work of reconciliation reach into the hearts and lives of men who would have otherwise been starkly and irreversibly against each other. A critical phrase is "by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus" (v. 6). That means that here is an abundance of good in Christ, ready for believers to know and experience and use, not only in relationship with God, but also in relationship to one another.

Humanly speaking, Paul did a risky, even fool-hardy thing by bringing Onesimus and Philemon together. But "Christianly speaking," Paul did the right and blessed thing, for as Christ said: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God" (Matt. 5:9). <sup>11</sup>

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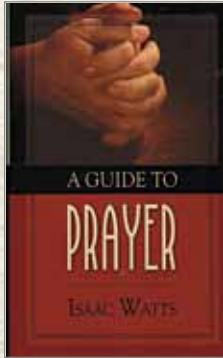


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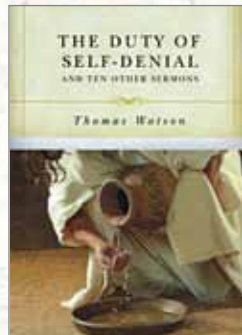
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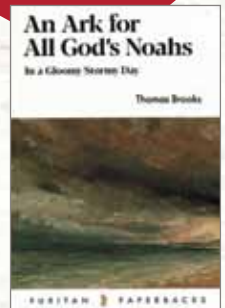
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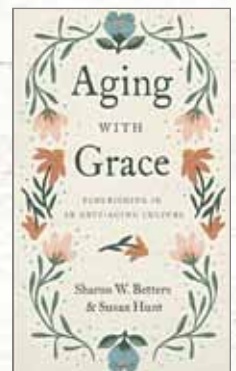
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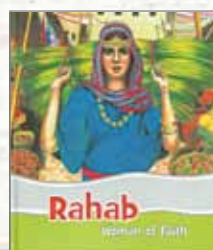
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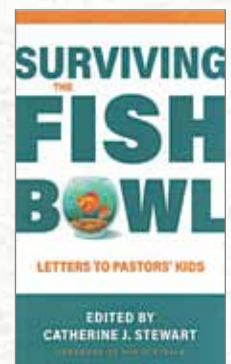
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## PILGRIMS AND PURITANS IN AMERICA (9)

# THE PURITAN CONGREGATIONAL FORM OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT



The first settlers in New England were the Pilgrims. These Separatist Puritans had been “harried” out of England by the repressive ecclesiastical policies of James I. Via an eleven-year long stop-over in The Netherlands, they sailed to America, where they founded the Plymouth Plantation in 1619 and established a church with a congregational form of government. The Pilgrims believed that the New Testament model for churches is to organize as independent assemblies consisting of true believers and their children. They are known as Congregationalists to distinguish them from the Church of England and the Presbyterian Church, both of which have a form of hierarchical or “from the top-down” government.

The Non-Separatist Puritans, who came a decade later and established the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629, also adopted a congregational form of church government. These later settlers had left England for similar reasons as the Pilgrims, namely the ruthless policies of Charles I and his henchman, Archbishop Laud.

### Differences Between Pilgrims and Puritans

While still living in England, the Pilgrims, being Separatists, strongly condemned the non-Separatist Puritans for staying in what they believed was a thoroughly corrupt Anglican Church, while the non-Separatists accused the Separatists of committing the sin of schism for leaving the established Church. But after both groups got settled in New England, they not only learned to live with their differences, but eventually came to a virtual agreement. There were two reasons for this. First, the Pilgrims,

inspired by John Robinson, were not as radical as some of their separatist brethren in England. Second, in New England, the old issue that had divided them in the mother country lost its relevance because they were both distanced from the Church of England and both determined to establish churches modelled after what they believed to be the biblical model. As a result, both groups eventually merged into one Congregationalist federation of churches.

This merger of two formerly opposing factions within the Puritan movement was to have tremendous ecclesiastical and political consequences, not only for New England but for America as a whole. It also impacted the character and influence of the Reformed faith in the English-speaking world.

### Congregationalism

What exactly is congregationalism? What are its main features



and how does it differ from English Anglicanism, Scottish Presbyterianism, or Continental Reformed churches?

All these other churches had in common that they were governed in varying degrees by centralized judicatory structures, whether bishops, presbyteries, synods, or general assemblies. In other words, they all include some form of broader authority structures.

The Congregationalist form of church government is a relatively new phenomenon in church history. The Roman Catholic Church is the complete opposite of a congregational church. But the church that Luther founded wasn't congregationalist either; neither was the Reformed church of Geneva, the Church of England, nor the Presbyterian church of Scotland.

### Early Development

To grasp this subject, we must go back to the early centuries of the Christian church. As the church moved from a small band of disciples in Palestine to a fast-growing international movement, the church had to deal with the very difficult problem of organization. Three hundred years after the first disciples heard the call to follow Jesus, the church was the fastest-growing religious movement in the Roman Empire. It need not surprise us, therefore, that this rapid growth brought with it many growing pains. After Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, many Roman citizens followed him into the church, and, later, when Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of his realm, many more pagans entered the church. Mass baptisms took place and entire tribes converted, so that, by 500 A.D, the church was faced with the task of teaching vast numbers of people, who, in most cases, knew next to nothing about the new religion.

To meet this challenge, the church adopted the Roman structures of civil government. Each part of the empire was divided into small *paroikii*, a Latin term from which we get the word *parishes*. The church made use of this system to organize itself. Each parish was governed by the local priest, who was appointed by the regional bishop, who in turn owed allegiance to the archbishops and patriarchs residing in the major cities of the empire. Rome was the capital with the pope invested with the supreme authority as Vicar of Christ.

This change in government structure resulted in a fundamental change in the nature of the church. As David Weir explains, "The church moved from an organization based on voluntaris-

tic principles to a compulsory organization including all the citizens of a geographical region, whether willing or unwilling."<sup>1</sup>

Suddenly, the church found itself in a position of power. No longer a small, persecuted minority, they were now the majority, invested with both spiritual and political authority and given the means to impose their will on the masses. To implement this new power, they looked to Scripture for guidance and found it in the Old Testament record of the Israelites' conquest of Canaan and the subjugation of its inhabitants. Having looked in vain



Old Ship Church Entrance-1681

for explicit instructions from the New Testament regarding this matter, they did discover enough ideas in the Old Testament that they could adapt to their own new situation. The result was that for a millennium and a half after the conversion of Constantine, the church upheld the political regimes and the latter upheld the church. At times the two battled ferociously, but both ecclesiastical and civil control were exercised at national

and local levels by officials usually committed to upholding the power of both ecclesiastical and civil regimes.<sup>2</sup>

According to Weir, England was divided into some 8,000 parishes, each of which had "as its nerve centre one – and only one – church, which all the people in the parish were obligated to attend and support." Therefore, any attempt to establish and attend a church other than the official "State Church" was deemed illegal and seen as an act of treason against both the Crown and the Church.<sup>3</sup>

This was the ecclesiastical situation in England when the Puritan movement began. Puritanism began with arguments over vestments and worship related issues that smacked of Roman Catholicism. But soon the reformist focus shifted to church government. All agreed that the Church of England still retained too much that reminded of Rome, but there was no agreement on what needed to be changed, also concerning church government. Some wanted to adopt the Presbyterian form of church polity. For a while it looked like they might get their way, but in the end this effort failed. Even after the Long Parliament, which was controlled by Presbyterians, convened the Westminster Assembly for the purpose of establishing a Presbyterian Church for both Scotland and England, the plan was scuttled because Oliver Cromwell, who had defeated Charles I and his Royalist armies, did not relish the prospect of seeing the Anglican establishment replaced by a Presbyterian Church, which he thought had similar hierarchical tendencies.

### Separatist Congregationalists

At the opposite pole were those who were so convinced that the Church of England was beyond repair that they withdrew from local parochial churches to form their own separate congregations. These Separatists chose what later came to be called a congregational form of church government.

An essential characteristic of this type of government is that church membership is voluntary and restricted to those who can give a credible account of their conversion. Each church should be an independent religious community composed of “gathered” believers only, united in covenant with Christ and each other, forming a self-governing body, and electing their own pastors and elders according to the pattern prescribed in the New Testament. Such covenanted congregations should be free from government interference or any higher ecclesiastical authorities. Each congregation should be independent and of equal status with all others. All members were to be equal in status and pastors and officers should have no position of prestige, but only have the spiritual authority to preach and admonish.

### Non-Separatist Congregationalists

Not all Congregationalists were separatists. In fact, most of them wanted to remain in the Church of England. They were prepared to work within the confines of that Church as long as they could focus on their own congregations to promote godliness. They were less concerned with church government than with conversion and therefore they, like the Separatists, insisted on high standards for admission to full church membership.

In 1658, these Congregationalists met at Savoy Palace and produced the so-called Savoy Declaration which adopted the



Old English Church - Stow on the Wold - St Edwards

Westminster Confession and Catechisms minus the articles related to church government and discipline.

The Congregationalists who came to Massachusetts Bay under John Winthrop in 1630 were the early representatives of this group. They were Puritans who regarded themselves as part of the Church of England and under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of London. But since they were now in America, separated from England by a great distance, they were able to operate under principles very similar to those of their Separatist brethren in the Plymouth Colony. This similarity in approach to church polity, as well as basic agreement on Puritan doctrine, went a long way to remove the suspicion with which they had initially regarded each other.

### New England Congregationalism

In both sections of the New England community, churches were



THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S,  
AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF  
PSALM 24:1




established on similar congregational models, beginning with vows like these:

We covenant with the Lord *and with one another*, to bind ourselves to walk in all our ways according to the rules of the Gospel, and in all sincere conformity to his holy ordinances and in mutual love and respect each to other: so near as God shall give us grace.<sup>4</sup>

The key phrase here is “we covenant with the Lord and with each other.” Here we have the essence of congregational ecclesiology. For Congregationalists covenanting was a sacred rite and an integral part of the communion of the saints. As William Ames, the English-born, Dutch Further Reformation theologian, stated in his *Marrow of Theology*:

The instituted church is a gathered group of believers joined together by a covenant, explicit or implied. Such a congregation or particular church is a society of believers joined together in a special bond for the continual exercise of the communion of saints among themselves... This bond is a covenant, expressed or implicit, by which believers bind themselves individually to perform all those duties toward God and toward one another which relate to the purpose of the church and its edification.<sup>5</sup>

Congregationalism as defined by Ames became the dominant view of church government among Puritans in both Old and New England. This represented a shift in thinking, not only with respect to church government, but also church membership. What is meant by joining a “gathered church” and “covenanting with the Lord and with each other”? We will try to answer these and other questions next month, D.V. 

### Endnotes

- 1 David Weir, *Early New England: A Covenanted Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 16.
- 2 Ibid, 17.
- 3 Ibid, 17.
- 4 Ibid, 151.
- 5 William Ames, *Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 179-180.



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John 6:12



## RELATIONSHIPS (3):

# DESIRING CHILDREN

READ: GENESIS 25:19-21

“Chaos around Eros” was the theme of a conference held in The Hague in 1967. Its speakers called for new sexual norms because “the old norms no longer serve a good purpose, but only promote hypocrisy.” Sadly, this new morality has only produced increasing chaos in the realm of *eros*. This confusion has been intensified by the worldwide movement which has identified itself by a series of sexual labels (LGBTQ or LGBTTIQQ2SA). The title seems to continue to lengthen, thereby confirming the increasing chaos that exists.

When we read the book of Genesis, we see that the times it covers also had troubling issues concerning marriage and sexuality. Yet, in a certain sense, many things were simpler. In our text, we meet one man and one woman who together form a family. As husband and wife, they naturally desired to receive children. In withholding children from them, God gives them to us as an example of His grace. Let us see them go in faith and patience with their questions to God in prayer.

### A Matter of faith

The structure of the book of Genesis is shaped like a funnel. As the book progresses, its focus narrows. From all the families of the earth, it narrows down to one family through which God will carry out His redemptive purposes that lead to the coming of Christ. Keep this development in mind when Genesis 25 focuses the spotlight on Isaac. Isaac’s life is ultimately about the coming of the Saviour. That gives special weight to what verse 21 reveals: Isaac could not receive children because Rebekah was barren. This infertility faces them with a double problem. First, they have the deep pain experienced by all couples whose desire for children is unfulfilled. Second, they have the spiritual problem that the promised Seed was to come through them.

Reading Genesis, you may have recognized a thematic line running through it: barrenness appears more often in the family out of which Jesus would be born (Gen. 11:30 and 29:31). This barrenness makes the wonder of Christ’s coming the greater. More often, God works through impossibilities to magnify His grace and power. From verse 21, Matthew Henry also adds that God’s providences and His promises can more often seem to contradict each other. God’s purpose in such dealings is to test the faith of His people and exercise their patience.

Seen this way, we can say that Isaac passes the test by God’s grace. In contrast to how his father, and later his son, went about getting children, Isaac went to the right place. He laid his need before the Lord as an expression of his faith in God.

This approach raises the question: Do we experience in faith what we call normal things, such as the desire for children or concerns about the number of children to receive? Where is the first place you go when you find yourself with the same problem as Rebekah? The gynecologist or the throne of grace? You may go to a gynecologist, but is your confidence in doctors or the God who gives promises? No, we do not have a special promise like Isaac and Rebekah had. But we may plead the power of Him who “maketh the barren woman to keep house, and to be a joyful mother of children” (Ps. 113:9) and who, if it fits



His glorious plan, opens the womb in His time. When God's wisdom leads in another way, He is also the source of grace to entrust that way to Him, even while the pain may remain.

While dealing with the topic of receiving children, we may also note that many may struggle on the opposite front: being fertile and facing the temptation to postpone receiving children while a couple pursues their careers or pays off their mortgage. Instead of being open to receiving children, they adopt the mindset that we can take children in our self-determined time. Living by faith involves not only entrusting all to God for eternity, but also for all aspects of our temporal life and seeking His guidance as we do so. Sometimes that can seem like a leap in the dark, amid many questions about financial, physical, mental, or housing capacities. But those who learn to lay everything in God's hand will not be put to shame.

#### A Matter of Prayer

Notice what Isaac does in faith: he prays. As mentioned already, he has a double reason for prayer: the unfulfilled desire for children also means God's promise remains unfulfilled. That does not make him passive, but active. He does not become active in an unholy way, as occurred at other times in the book of Genesis, when patriarchs turned to handmaids, such as Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah. Isaac becomes active in a holy way as fits what God promises. What God promises is not fulfilled while you lounge with your arms crossed, but in the way of folded hands. God gives prayer something to plead. Jewish tradition says that Isaac prayed on mount Moriah. This is a beautiful thought. There God had said to Abraham: "in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore" (Gen. 22:17). Whether Isaac went to that very mount or not, we can be sure he pleaded the promise spoken there and elsewhere.

Isaac's prayer is also an example for those who are married in that he prayed in the presence of his wife. Isn't that something to practice? You share so much with each other: your lives, your house, your money, your bedroom. God has given you each other to help each other in all things concerning this life and a better life, as we confess in the classic Form for Marriage. Let that desire

show also in praying together. Such prayer enriches marriage. Joint prayer is also a calling for those who are preparing for marriage. Use the time you are getting to know each other to also learn to seek God together. How important it is to be spiritually one before you may become physically one. As Amos asks, "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS


- 01 Matthew Henry comments on verse 21 that God's providences often seem to contradict His promises in order to test the faith of His children and exercise their patience. What examples of such dealings can you give from your own and others' lives?
- 02 In reflecting on lessons from the coronacrisis, many have pointed to how it has struck a blow at the idea that we can increasingly control all of life to serve us. To what degree have such ideas affected us as well? How have they impacted even our view of family and receiving children?
- 03 Why are entreating and pleading powerful ways of praying? How do you practice that?
- 04 If you have children that are quickly growing up, do you speak to them about the spiritual and physical aspects of their (future) relationship? Does the openness of the world about sexuality require us to be open-hearted also about the pitfalls in which we ourselves have fallen?
- 05 Often Scripture gives instruction about God's purposes with "unanswered prayer" and "deferred answers" (e.g. Isa. 30:18, 2 Cor. 12:9). What can we learn from these passages when we do not receive what we request?

#### A Matter of Patience

Maybe by now someone is thinking: "Of course, this is a nice passage, but it seems to be too simple. Isaac prays with Rebekah for a child and God hears. End of story." But we have to read this text carefully. If you compare verses 20 and 26, you discover that a period of at least 20 years passed between his prayer and God's answer.

God knows how to exercise dependent prayer with patience. This can be both an encouragement and a stimulation for those who have eagerly awaited an answer for so long. In prayer to receive a child or in prayer for a child received, prayer for the conversion of a loved one or outcome in the troubles plaguing a relationship, sometimes the heavens seem made of brass, and you struggle with the assaulting thought: is prayer all in vain? We can assume Isaac also had assaults. Twenty years is a long time! Yet, he continued to wait upon the Lord. The Annotations of the Dutch States Bible indicate that the word "entreated" can also be translated as "he kept on praying." In the meantime, God continued going His own wise way, even in His delay. God was testing his faith and teaching him pa-

tience. In the end, Isaac was not put to shame.

Here is a lesson for today for people who are married, courting, or single. Isaac pleaded for Christ's coming. We may plead on the Christ who has come. We may plead His finished work as we pray for ourselves personally and also with a view to our relationships, marriage, and family. We may do so with the confidence that God will certainly hear, and in His time do what is according to His will and to His glory. 

*Rev. A. van der Zwan serves the Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerk of Dordrecht-Centre in the Netherlands. This Bible Study was taken with permission from De Wekker (March 19, 2021), the bi-weekly periodical of our sister churches in the Netherlands.*

## LETTERS TO COLLEGE STUDENTS

**SURVIVING RELIGION 101 – Letters to a Christian Student on Keeping the Faith in College** by Michael J. Kruger. Published by Crossway, Wheaton, Illinois, 2021. Softcover, 262 pages.

This book is written especially for students going to colleges and universities, but not only for them. Rosaria Butterfield, known for her radical Christian conversion from a secular life, writes in her recommendation: “*Surviving Religion 101* is a crucial book for all Christians to read because the world that we inhabit has become the university culture of [the author] Michael Kruger’s in his twenties.... Are we intellectually prepared to understand and respond to the non-Christian thinking that surrounds us? ... Our lack of intellectual preparation may explain why so many [Christian students] have had their faith shipwrecked by so-called progressive Christianity, living now with cultural change and social activism as proof of holiness. And for this reason, this book is as necessary for students entering Christian colleges as it is for those entering secular ones.” This is the motivation of the author, who writes in letter-style to his daughter who is about to enter university. It is also an introductory course on how to survive the onslaughts of a secular and anti-Christian culture that pervades most institutions of higher learning.

The author, a respected instructor at Reformed Theological Seminary (RTS), wants to help prepare today’s Christian students, whom he is afraid are like he was – not well-prepared for the intellectual warfare that is raging against Christianity. “Serious intellectual challenges are coming your way—arguments you’ve never heard, facts you didn’t know, issues you’ve never considered. Beyond this, such challenges are being delivered by professors who are bright, persuasive, compelling, and eminently likeable. Even more, you will hear these challenges repeated over and over ... by your fellow students. And if you don’t change your views you might be regarded as narrow-minded, intolerant, arrogant, and even hateful” (pp. 29-30).

So, what is Kruger’s strategy? Rather than first focusing on an intellectual defense, he wants students to realize that it will quickly become clear that there are many questions they will not be able to

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answer, even about God, such as, if God is good, why there is so much evil in the world, how they know the Bible is true, or questions about human origin. He advises, give yourself a break and realize you are not equipped to debate your professors. Second, “not having an answer does not affect the truth of what you believe. Your beliefs can be absolutely correct, even if *you* cannot explain or defend them” (pp. 31-32). “Third, don’t confuse not having an answer with there not being an answer... A little research will show that Christians have been wrestling with these issues—and offering coherent answers to these issues—for generations... Moreover, there are many Christian scholars out there who have provided comprehensive answers to these questions (though secular professor often refuse to discuss those arguments)” (p. 32). In fact, opposition can be a blessing, and will force you to sharpen your thinking (p. 33). Christians in the earliest generations of the church learned this and it led to statements of faith, such as the so-called Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed of AD 325.


The bulk of the book deals in-depth with these questions and others, such as: “If my professors are so smart, why do they reject the Christian faith?” The answer is that “all people are born with an inherent disposition against the one true God. Because of Adam’s sin, all humanity is born with a dark, fallen heart. And that fundamental reality very much shapes our belief systems... This means that, apart from the Spirit’s help, *people are hard-wired to reject Christianity* ... It’s not just that non-Christians don’t understand Christianity; they are *unable* to understand it” (p. 45); and 1 Cor. 2:14 is quoted as proof.

At university, you will be exposed to atheists, but also to other religions, which some may say, all lead to God. However, “your religious [Christian] beliefs are *exclusive*... In a culture committed to relativism and tolerance, few things are more offensive than the claim that there’s only one right religion” (p.52). You may ask: “My Christian Morals Are Viewed as Hateful and Intolerant—Shouldn’t I Be More Loving and Accepting?” This is the title of chapter 4. The best way to counter this argument is not so much to help your friends understand your views as about helping them understand *your God*. Help them see that God is absolutely good and that he gives moral laws—even laws about sex—for *our good*” (p.74).

In another chapter, the author gives six biblical answers to refute arguments of “Gay Friends Who Are Kind, Wonderful, and Happy—” (chapter 5) and defend their life-style. Other chapters are about defending the concept of an eternal hell (chapter 6), suffering (chapter 7), belief in the resurrection and miracles, the truth of the Bible and so-called contradictions, and questions regarding its text (we have only copies of copies). \*The author does not hesitate to tackle “a new type of challenge [which] has gained momentum, particularly in your generation” (pp. 201-215), such as slavery, women’s position, and so-called genocide in the Old Testament.

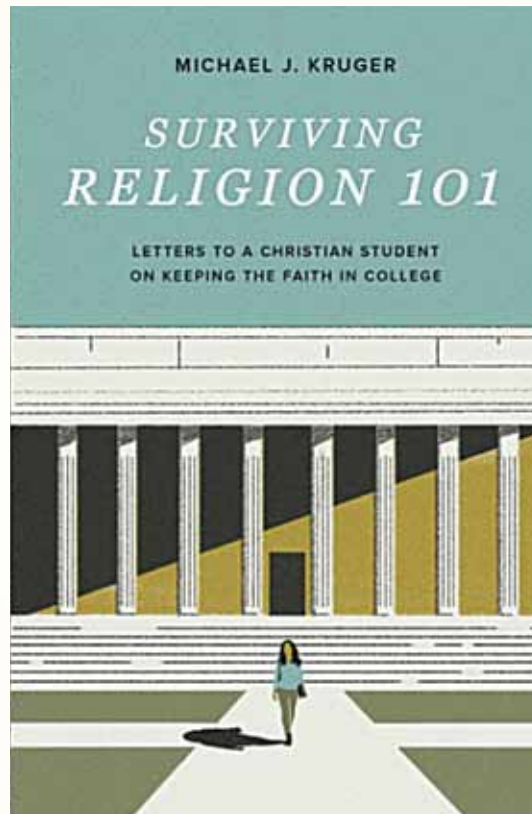
Pastoral, fatherly help is given on how to overcome struggles with doubt and a Postscript reminds the reader that, although this book seems all about the mind, true faith is also about “*your affections*” (pp. 230-241). Jesus did not come to save perfect people, but “he came to save sinners—deep, awful sinners. And even after sinners are saved, they don’t just become different people overnight.... In Romans 7, even the apostle Paul explains how he struggled with the fact that he continued to do what he didn’t want to do. His ‘old self’ was still haunting him... But in the end, Paul leaned on the gospel of grace” (Rom. 7:24-25) (p.238). Christians are often disappointed in themselves, in others, and even in the church, but “we will not be disappointed with Jesus, He is more than enough to satisfy our souls and fill our deepest longings... He is always compassionate, always just, always righteous—the good shepherd who loves his sheep, cares for his sheep, and willingly lays down his life for the sheep” (p. 239).

This is a wonderful book, written in a simple and affectionate style and should be available to every young person, as well as read by adults who care for them. It would be helpful to study this book as an apologetics text already in senior high school.

Highly recommended! 

*\*The author focusses on the numerous amount of ancient texts of the Bible in contrast with a much lesser amount of existing texts of ancient secular documents.*

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## AN OPEN DOOR

# OXFORD COUNTY FREE REFORMED CHURCH RECEIVES A New Pastor



Friday evening, July 9, 2021, was a special evening for the Free Reformed Church of Oxford County. Just 19 days after Rev. Kranendonk preached his farewell sermon, Rev. L.J. Bilkes was installed as pastor and teacher of our congregation. This is an undeserved blessing from the Lord. Sometimes a congregation can be vacant for years.

Rev. Kranendonk, our former pastor, led the installation service. His text for the evening was Ephesians 3:8: «Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.» His theme was “The Unsearchable Riches of Christ.” The gospel minister is privileged to set forth the boundless and inexhaust-



**Rev. & Mrs. Bilkes and their family**

ible riches in the wonderful Person and glorious work of Christ which poor and needy sinners need and may receive by faith.

After his sermon, he then read the form of ordination of ministers and Rev. Bilkes was able to answer “Yes, truly, with all my heart” to the questions he was asked.

Rev. Bilkes then preached his inaugural sermon on Revelation 3:8a: «I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it...»

Rev. Bilkes had as his theme «An Open Door.» There are times when we may feel closed doors all around us. But it is remarkable that there is an open door for the believer. He explained that this door of salvation and communion through which we may enter is



opened by Christ. The Lord also gives His people a door for gospel witness in the difficulties and challenges they may face.

The sermons complemented each other well as there was a spirit of humility from both pastors to recognize how the Lord was instructing them and encouraging them to preach God's Word. Rev. Bilkes asked the congregation sincerely to pray for him as he did not feel that there was strength in him, but that it all had to come from the Lord.

This was also a special time for our congregation as it was the first time since March 2020 that we were able to come together as a whole congregation. The service was held in the building of the Heritage Reformed Congregation of Burgessville so there would be enough room for us and some invited guests. It was very special for Rev. Bilkes to have his parents present at the occasion and he addressed them lovingly from the pulpit.

An in-person address was given by Rev. P. Vanden Hoek, minister of the HRC in Burgessville. He welcomed and encouraged Rev. Bilkes with much enthusiasm and offered congratulations to the Oxford Free Reformed congregation.

Elder S. Bruinsma addressed and welcomed Rev. Bilkes and his family on behalf of the consistory and the congregation of Oxford. He presented him with a book to introduce the members of the congregation more personally. He urged the congregation to pray for their new pastor and to be thankful as it was very unusual to receive a pastor so quickly.

He also read a letter from Rev. Scott Dibbet, pastor of the Free Reformed Church in St. George and counselor for Oxford. Many letters, with congratulations, were received and acknowledged.

Rev. Bilkes thanked everyone warmly and closed the service with the benediction and the singing of Psalter 420:5 <sup>1</sup>

*Rev Bilkes comes to us after being pastor of the Ebenezer Free Reformed Church of Dundas for almost 18 years. He and his wife Ellen have 8 children and make their home in Mount Elgin, Ontario.*



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Email: [kranendonk@frcna.org](mailto:kranendonk@frcna.org)

# OH, FOR A SENSE OF GOD!

"What our generation needs is a sense of God," says David F Wells, who has done more than anyone to analyse the weaknesses of modern evangelicalism. Steeped as we are in atheism and secularism in society and worldliness in the Church, the times cry out for a sense of God. The present situation should vex the souls of the righteous from day to day. Only a movement from heaven is going to change the spiritual climate.

The Reformation was a movement from heaven that turned attention from a man-centred religion to God. "The Reformation represents a move to place God as he has revealed himself in Christ at the centre of the church's life and thought." (Carl Trueman) Wells speaks of the Reformation as the era in which Biblical truths were brought into the most invigorating, health-giving focus. What took place then was first seen in the heart and life of the great Genevan Reformer himself.

## *Experience that is God-related*

John Calvin never said much about himself but we get a rare glimpse of his conversion in his Preface to the Book of Psalms: "God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame ...having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with intense desire to make progress." Calvin suddenly saw and tasted in Scripture the majesty of God. He told the Roman Catholic Cardinal Sadolet that he should "set before man as the prime motive of his life zeal to promote the glory of God." B B Warfield claimed of Calvin: "No man ever had a profounder sense of God than he; no man ever more unreservedly surrendered himself to the Divine direction." Calvin regularly concluded his sermons by saying, "Let us fall before the majesty of our great God."

This true religious experience lies at the heart of what has become known as Calvinism. "It is not," to quote Warfield again, "first and foremost a theological system; it is more fundamentally a religious atti-

tude, an attitude that gives inevitable birth to a particular, precise but gloriously God-centred and heart-engaging system of theology." He goes on, "The fundamental question posed in Calvinism is not, then, 'How can I be saved?' but 'How shall God be glorified?'" It is that sight of the majesty of God that pervades all of life and all of experience. The deepest issue for the Calvinist is what truth or what behaviour will "illustrate the glory of God."

## *Christianity that is man-related*

In the light of this we would again say with J Gresham Machen that "unless there be a place to stand, all progress is an illusion. The very idea of progress implies something fixed. There is no progress in a kaleidoscope." This is where we need to take issue with the stream that has swept through evangelicalism in the last fifty or so years. As one theologian observed: "Evangelical Christianity can easily slip, can become centred in me and my need of salvation and not in the glory of God." Evangelicalism became infected with the culture in which it was living. The vibrant objective Christianity of the Reformation has become reduced to a private, internal and therapeutic experience. It is a 'faith' that is individualistic, self-focused and consumer-oriented. Doctrine is considered as an impediment to reaching out to the new generation. Seriousness is regarded as the death knell of successful churches. We have to be likeable, engaging, and light to succeed and aiming to please the marketing model – 'what the consumer wants'.

## *The truth that is God-related*


Truth must be God-related. The cry today is about how to be relevant, but we should first and foremost be relevant to God and his truth. "My conclusion is that absolute truth and morality are fast receding in society because their grounding in God as objective, as outside of our self, as our transcendent point of reference, is disappearing." (David Wells) The doctrine of a transcendent and holy God stands above everything. The Gospel makes sense only in the moral world. It is God, not the consumer, that dictates the terms. The needs sinners have are needs God identifies for them. This is because sinners suppress the truth about God (Rom. 1:18). There must be conviction of sin. As J C Ryle declares at the outset of his book, *Holiness*: "The plain truth is that a right knowledge of sin lies at the root of all saving Christianity." J H Thornwell reminds us of a truth that needs to resound through evan-



gelicalism today: "The most successful method of preaching is that which aims at thorough and radical conviction of sin."

### **The life that is God-related**

What behaviour will 'illustrate the glory of God'? It must be God-related. A typical Puritan conversion was that of Thomas Goodwin, who wrote that when he was converted "the glory of the great God was set up in my heart, as the square and rule of each and every particular practice." G Vos said that "the work of grace in the sinner *is a mirror for the glory of God.*" As Mark Jones points out in his book *Antinomianism: Reformed Theology's Unwelcome Guest?* there is a great deal of practical Antinomianism in the evangelical world today. John 'Rabbi' Duncan spoke with great perception when he said: "I suspect that, after all, there is only one heresy and that is Antinomianism" (that is the sinner's quarrel with the authority of God). Grace does not free us from the authority of God and His law.

The life of the Christian must be God-centred and God-related. We cannot love the work of Christ for us without loving his Person. He is the Second Person of the Trinity. On the duty to love the triune God with all the heart, and soul, and strength and mind, the same John Duncan declared: "Obligation to discharge this duty is not founded upon grace. Inclination to discharge this duty comes from grace, but obligation to discharge it does not come from grace, but from the eternal and immutable law, as founded on the eternal loveliness of God." It echoes Augustine: "The law was given that grace might be sought; grace was given that the law might be fulfilled." The fourth commandment is the most neglected of all the commands of the Decalogue today. With a God-related attitude we see it, as Alex Motyer comments on Isaiah 56:1: "*Keeping the Sabbath* is the positive re-ordering of life around God." 

### **"Return, O Lord, how long?"**

*Rev. John J. Murray is a late minister in the Free Church of Scotland Continuing, a denomination with whom the FRCNA has a bond of limited correspondence.*

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**SAFE FAMILIES  
BRANTFORD IS  
HIRING!**



As a Steering Committee we are so grateful and humbled by God's generous provision towards Safe Families Brantford. Due to your incredible support through prayers, finances, and faithful volunteering we have raised enough funds to officially start the process of hiring a director for our chapter. If you know of someone who is interested in applying, please have them contact us at:

**[brantford@safefamilies.ca](mailto:brantford@safefamilies.ca)**

for the complete job description and application details.

The deadline for applications is

**Wednesday, September 15, 2021 at 11:59 pm**

*Please join us in praying that God would provide an individual who is passionate about God and fulfilling the mission of Safe Families, which is to serve "the least of these" within our community of Brantford and Brant County!*

**45TH ANNIVERSARY**

**September 18, 1976 – September 18, 2021**

*"I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye."*

Psalm 32:8

With thankfulness to the Lord, we rejoice with our parents and grandparents



**HILBERT & MARY JONKMAN**  
(nee Lobbezoo)

as they celebrate

**45 Years of marriage** together!

With much love from your children and grandchildren,

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**Christine Jonkman**

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Trevor, Jaxon, Kenzie, Taylor, Grayson

We pray that God would continue to bless you and keep you for many more years!

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**25TH ANNIVERSARY**

**1996 July 11 2021**

*I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye*

Psalm 32:8

**BERT & HELENA VERMEULEN**

(nee Roelofsen)

With love from your children

**Janna, Karla and Esther**

8 Parkland Place, Komoka, ON N0L 1R0  
bvcookies@gmail.com



**OBITUARY**

**ADRIANA (AUDREY) HAMSTRA**

nee Pronk

On the afternoon of June 30, 2021, the Lord took to Himself our dear wife, mother, grandmother, great-grandmother and sister. She is survived by **Peter Hamstra**, her beloved husband of **64 years**. She was the cherished mother of:

**Jerry and Wilma Hamstra**

Nick & Sarah Hamstra (Aria, Rowan, Grant)  
Daniel & Liz Hamstra (Hannah, Braden, Judah, Emma)  
Ian & Cara Hamstra (Hunter, Wila)  
Tamarah & Josh Clarke (Elias, Logan)



**Kim and Jan Hamstra**

Katie & Adrian Pennings (Charlie, Laura-Jean, Clark, Nella, Tilly)  
Peter & Alicia Hamstra (Landyn)  
Ken & Megan Hamstra (Addie)  
Andrew Hamstra

**Anita and Jack Hoek**

Jake & Alison Hoek (Ethan, Mason, Griffin, Zoey)  
Jordan & Stephanie Hoek (Nora, Josie, Asher)  
Samantha Hoek (Connor, Chloe)  
Amy Hoek  
Jesse Hoek

**Peter and Jackie Hamstra**

Tim & Sandra Hamstra (Carter, Julian, Easton, Tucker)  
Carrilyn & Nick Mills  
Matthew Hamstra

**Karen and Jeremy Waanders**

Erin, Jack & Sam

**Mark and Wendy Hamstra**

Pierce, Sadie, Marley & Layla

Dear sister to Neil & Ricky Pronk and Peter & Willy VandenBerg.

A funeral service was held at Grace Free Reformed Church in Brantford on July 5, officiated by her brother, Pastor Neil Pronk. This was preceded by a private burial service at Mount Zion Cemetery and was officiated by her son, Pastor Jerry Hamstra.

The following is an excerpt of his message:

*Our mother is in the presence of God where there is fullness of joy and at whose right hand are pleasures forevermore. We have this hope because Jesus promised His people, "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there you may be also." John 14:3b-4.*