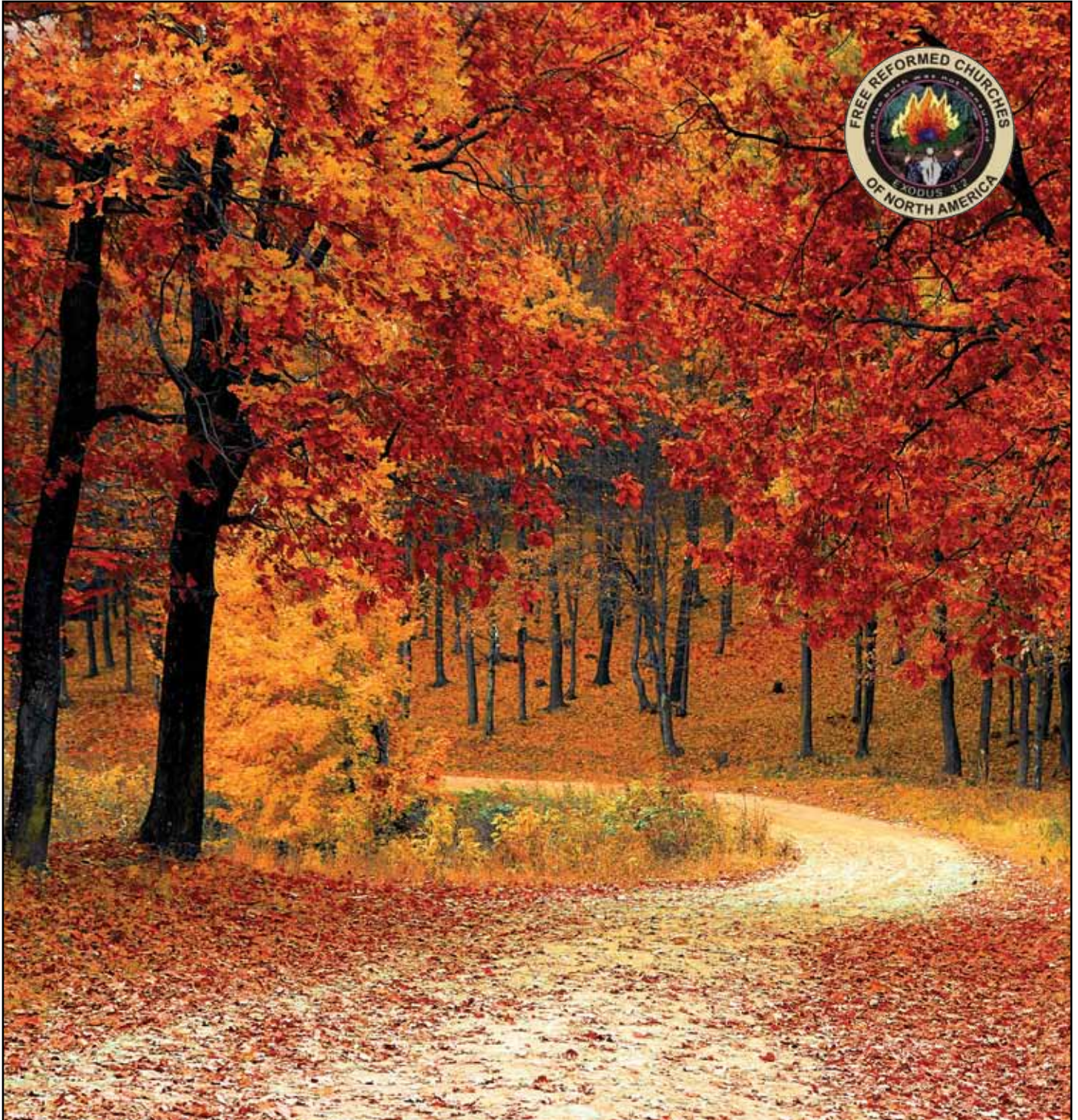


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THE MESSENGER

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"SHALOM!" - JESUS SPEAKS PEACE
INTO OUR RESTLESS HEARTS

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REVIEW

"SHALOM!"

JESUS SPEAKS PEACE INTO OUR RESTLESS HEARTS

“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” ... “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace.” (John 14:27; 16:33)

A brass door knocker on our front door says, “SHALOM” – which means “Peace!” It has some symbols of the promised land anticipated by the 12 tribes of Israel. How those redeemed slaves from Egypt wandering in a weary wilderness longed to be enjoying the fruit of their labors and resting peacefully! (Lev. 26:6)

In times like these, we can feel so restless. We too can deeply long for peace. Not just silence. Nor just a lack of chaotic turmoil around us. But real inner peace. We need the calm assurance that we are completely safe. In this restless world, we need a true rest for our restless hearts.

Our Restless Times

Chaos and calamities are everywhere. People are moved with overwhelming fear and anxiety. The viral pandemic has caused a plague of fear, a panic of governmental reactions, a flurry of media (mis-) information. Medical authorities, doctors and nurses strive to respond with emergency responses, treatments, vaccines, and advised restrictions. Now new “waves” ... and new breaking news: Afghanistan, Taliban, explosions, stranded Americans, Christians fearing death... Add to it wild-fires, earthquakes, flash floods, drought, tornadoes, hurricanes, spreading crime. In a digital world, the news comes to us almost instantly. We are inundated with troubling reports.

How can we *not* feel restless? It can even produce symptoms like anxiety, heart palpitations, agitation, insomnia, impulsivity, and lack of concentration. We do live in a broken world in broken bodies in a broken relationship with God. It is in our hearts that we experience the deepest root of our restlessness. At times, we can feel restless and blame outward things or others, while “the enemy is us.” It’s on the inside.

Our Restless Hearts

Augustine in his *Confessions* (AD 400) wrote: “Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.”

The reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) became fearfully restless. After the sudden death of a friend and narrowly escaping death himself during a lightening storm, he became deeply struck with anxiety about the salvation of his own soul. Luther knew he was in trouble with a holy God. Joining an Augustinian monastery in 1505, he started an agonizing search to find peace for his soul. Following the Roman Catholic path of penance, he put himself through rigorous self-torturing disciplines in the monastery. To meet a holy God, he must become holy. Yet he could not find peace for his soul. While studying *Romans*, he came to Paul’s expression “the righteousness of God.” It made Luther feel condemned as a sinner with no confidence that his own merit would satisfy God’s holy justice. He confessed that he did not love this just and angry God; rather that he hated Him. Trying to make peace with God, he only experienced God’s anger.

In many ways, our world is different than it was in Luther’s time. But man’s biggest problem is still his sin and God is still angry with the wicked every day (Ps.



7:11). The world is in rebellion against God. Sinners are still in the hands of an angry God. It should be no surprise to us that calamities abound all around. Understandably, many feel restless. But where do we turn for peace? Do we listen to the world?

The World's "Peace!"

The world offers a kind of peace. But does it really calm your restless heart?

Jesus said, "My peace I give you, not as the world giveth." People may *wish* us well. They may say, "Shalom!" But does it really *give* us peace? The world offers so many mind-calming remedies. But they do not supply a real peace.

What about the church? Luther tried to achieve peace by following the false prescriptions of the Roman church. Instead, he found the Gospel of peace in the Bible and it sparked the Reformation. Sadly, many churches no longer preach the Bible's answer to Luther's question. In Jeremiah's time, false prophets and priests "healed the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace" (Jer.8:10-12). What is behind this wrong message? "Lo, they have rejected the word of the LORD; and what wisdom is in them?" (Jer. 8:9)

Some religious leaders are trying to accommodate the Christian message to the corrupt cultural context of our world instead of boldly calling the culture to conform to the Bible. They are twisting the Scriptures and call it "new hermeneutics" (2 Pet.3:16). Having "rejected the Word of the Lord," they speak peace to restless consciences. It sounds so "non-judgmental" and "loving." But it is not the peace of Jesus. Troubled minds are being deceived about what the Bible calls sin. Some naïve professing believers feel "affirmed" even "absolved" by their deceptive "priests." But their restless hearts still sense the displeasure of their Creator. Their hurt conscience is only "slightly healed." It is the world's peace.

A peace which leaves us at peace with the world is false peace. It is not the "Shalom" of Jesus. In John 16, Jesus predicts what His true disciples will experience in the world: "...that in me you might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation..." It is a suspicious peace when it is given **by** the world and leaves us at peace **with** the world. How dangerous to souls when the church tries to make peace with the world and its sinful culture!

Real peace with God comes from God and only in Jesus, who is the only mediator between God and man. (1 Tim.2:5)

God Provides Peace in Jesus

Luther tried to earn peace with God by his own efforts. But peace does not come by what we produce for God. It is God's provision for us. Jehovah-Jireh provides the Lamb (cf.Gen.22:8). Jesus is the true Lamb of God. Jesus provides the spotless righteousness and atoning sacrifice we need. God provided for Luther's peace long before he was convicted of sin or even desired peace. Jesus had said, "It is finished." He paid it all. Luther did not have to add anything to it.

But how can this fully paid reconciliation benefit me personally?

Jesus says here, "That in me ye might have peace." When He says "in me" there are two aspects to this. The first is that Christ Himself is the basis and source of peace. Peace comes from Him because it is all "in Him" (objectively) – like water is **in** the well as its source.

The Bible speaks of Jesus as the basis of peace with God. Jesus "*offered one sacrifice for sins for ever*" thereby "*making peace; and that He might reconcile both (Jew and Gentile) unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: and came and preached peace to you*" (Heb. 10:12; Eph.2:15). Jesus truly is the only effectual Peace Maker. There is a sin problem separating God and man. By means of His cross, Jesus solves God's wrath and dissolves man's enmity. The fallen human heart is a fountain of enmity. Jesus is the Prince of Peace and the fountain of it. It is all "in Him." How does it become ours?

Applied Peace

The other aspect of peace is the application of it (the subjective part). This has to do with our personal saving experience of peace with God. The forgiveness and peace which is in *Him* must become *mine*. How is it applied to my lost, restless, sinful heart? How do I experience it personally?

There must be a link between us and the fountain of peace. That link is saving faith. What is in Jesus

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is only applied to me by the Holy Spirit through a living faith. The Holy Spirit applies the Gospel to produce new life, repentance from sin, and faith in the Saviour. Faith comes by hearing (Rom.10:17). Faith links our hearts to the great Peace-maker, the Lord Jesus Christ. Faith binds us to Him so that we are “in Him.”

The Spirit of Jesus uses His Word. We can say that Jesus effectually “speaks peace.” By His Spirit, He “preaches peace” into our hearts (Eph.2:15). Christ does not just offer it, expecting us to do the rest. No, He applies it by means of His Gospel words: *“these things I have spoken, that you might have peace.”*

When God is pleased to initiate His saving work, our conscience is convicted by His words. Our hard heart is softened and made alive by His words of life. We hear Jesus speaking to the waves of guilt and winds of condemnation troubling our soul. He says, “Peace, be still,” and a “great calm,” of spiritual peace settles upon our heart (cf. Mark 4:39). A spiritual rest enters our soul. Only Jesus, the Son of God, can speak with such power. His gracious voice with a sweet persuasive power speaks peace into our hearts. Then a sense of the inexpressible “peace that passes understanding” assures us that we are in sweet communion with our Lord; that we are in Him by the gift of faith and that it is well with our soul.

Spreading “Shalom!” till we “Rest in Peace”

As the joy of peace fills our heart, the love of Christ will constrain us to spread the peace. We tell others the good news of His peace. When we go into homes, we will want to enter the door with the

“Shalom” of Jesus. If the gospel is received, Jesus assures us that “the son of peace” abides there (Luke 10:5-6). Let us always pray for peace. Let us live out His peace. May the Lord use us to speak peace into every heart and into every home.

Without this true peace, how can we ever rest in peace? One day, with our last breath (or when Jesus comes again) the offer of peace will expire. What a terrifying day that will be for those who rejected the Prince of Peace. What awaits them is the hell of tormenting never-ending restlessness. Because they rejected the offer of God’s peace in Jesus.

But what a glorious day it will be for those who by grace embraced the gospel of peace and were reconciled by faith in the only Mediator! *“There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God”* They will join Jesus who “has entered into His rest.” (Heb.4:9-10). With Him, believers will enjoy that eternal “rest of the holy sabbath” (Ex.16:23) for which their Redeemer has labored with the travail of His soul. They will rest with Him in the purest “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (cf. Eph. 4:3).

Until that day, let us all pray that Jesus, through His Word and Spirit by His church, would continue to speak His peace into many restless hearts. “Shalom!” 🕊

Rev. Pieter VanderMeyden is emeritus pastor of Vineland Free Reformed Church, who is also involved in some pastoral ministry in Shalom Manor, a Christian nursing care facility in Grimsby, Ontario.



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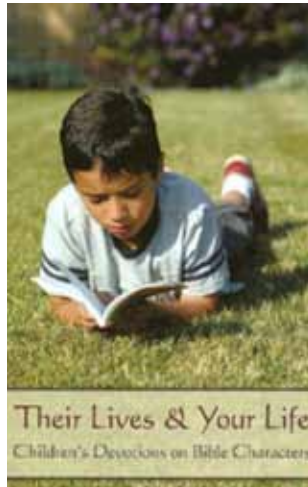
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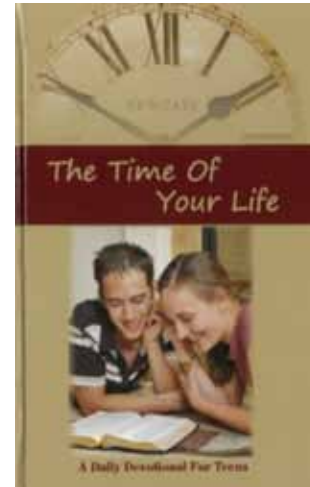
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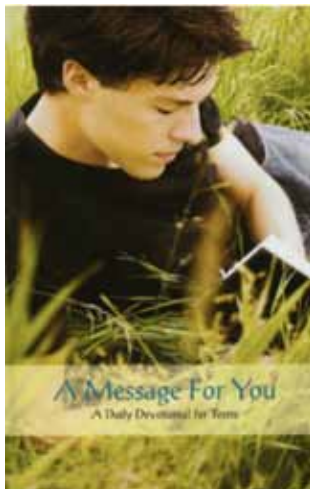
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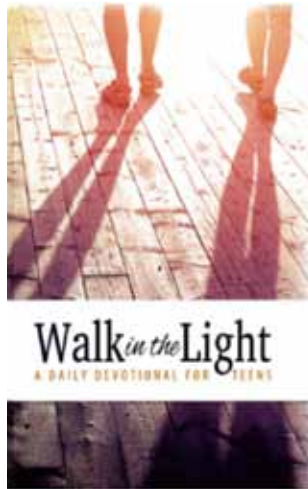
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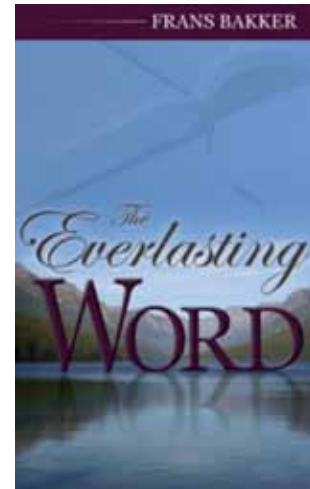
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LUTHER AND ASSAULTS ON FAITH



Many have heard of Luther's freedom that came with discovering the meaning of Romans 1:16-17. While studying the scriptures sometime between 1515-1518, he discovered that the righteousness of God was not his enemy. He wrote: "At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, 'In it the righteousness of God is revealed,' as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live. Then I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates."¹

Many know about this freedom that Luther experienced and preached, and concerning which he even wrote a book entitled "The Freedom of a Christian Man." What many don't know is that Luther continued to suffer many assaults, even from despair at times. The freedom of the gospel was not something that forever drove all clouds away. Quite the opposite was true. Luther had many dark nights of the soul, but through it all he learned that spiritual struggle was a necessary and valuable part of the Christian life, as this article hopes to elucidate.

Luther's Experience

Luther's experience of and thoughts regarding spiritual struggle are encapsulated in the German word "*Anfechtung*," which is very difficult to translate. Though many translate it with temptation or affliction, it means more than that. It literally means "assaults" or "attacks." One Luther scholar, Roland Bainton, defines *Anfechtung* as "a trial sent by God to test man, or an assault by the Devil to destroy man. It is all the doubt, turmoil, pang, tremor, panic, despair, desolation, and desperation which invade the spirit of a man."² In a recent biography on Luther, Eric Metaxas compares it to a depression in which there was "a widening hole of sheerest hopelessness, an increasing cacophony of devils' voices accusing him of a thousand things, and all of them true or true enough – and no way out of it."³

Alister McGrath, another Reformation scholar, clarifies, however, that these assaults are not simply emotions gone awry: "It must be emphasized that Luther does not regard *Anfechtung* as a purely subjective state of the individual. Two aspects of the concept can be distinguished, although they are inseparable: the *objective* assault of spiritual forces upon the believer, and the *subjective* anxiety and doubt which arise within us as a consequence of these assaults."⁴ Certainly this fits with Paul's autobiographical confession in 2 Corinthians 7:5: "Without were fightings, within were fears."

Already in his Ninety-five Theses of 1517, Luther had used the phrase "the horror of despair" (Thesis 15). In the following year, in his *Explanations of the Disputation against the Value of Indulgences*, he elaborated on this reference to despair in a passage that was to become his most famous description of *Anfechtung*.

I myself knew a man [Luther is referring to himself] who claimed that he had often suffered these punishments, in fact over a very brief period of time. Yet they were so great and so much like hell that no tongue could adequately express them, no pen could describe them, and one who had not himself experienced them could not believe them. And so great were they that, if they had been sustained or had lasted for half an hour, even for one tenth of an hour, he would have perished completely and all of his bones would have been reduced to ashes. At such a time God seems terribly angry, and with him the whole creation. At such a time there is no flight, no comfort, within or without, but all things accuse. At such a time, as the Psalmist mourns, “I am cut off from thy sight” (Ps 31:22) or at least he does not dare to say, “O Lord ... Do not chasten me in thy wrath.” (Ps. 6:1). In this moment strange to say the soul cannot believe that it can ever be redeemed other than that the punishment is not yet completely felt. Yet the soul is eternal and is not able to think of itself as being temporal. All that remains is the stark naked desire for help and a terrible groaning, but it does not know where to turn for help. In this instance the person is stretched out with Christ so that all his bones may be counted, and every corner of the soul is filled with the greatest bitterness, dread, trembling, and sorrow in such a manner that all these last forever.”⁵

Gracious God

The worst part of such seasons of *Anfechtung*, according to Luther, was that God’s favor seemed absent. He writes: “My *Anfechtung* is this, that I think I don’t have a gracious God ... It is the greatest grief, and, as Paul says, it produces death” (2 Cor. 7:10).⁶ For that reason, the books of Job, Jonah, and especially many Psalms gave expression to what Luther was experiencing. Of Jonah he writes: “Yes dear Munzter, you have never experienced these *Anfechtungen*, but I sat with Jonah in the whale, where everything seemed to be despair.”⁷

In these times of severe affliction, the Word might be your only comfort; however, the comforts of the Word might also be entirely hidden from you. You cannot sense them, as Luther speaks of in his commentary on Galatians 1:4. The text there speaks of God’s purpose in Christ to “deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father.” However, in his exposition of this verse, Luther tells of a time when the experience of this truth was absent and the very reverse seem to be true to his soul:

These things, as touching the words, we know well enough, and can talk of them. But in practice, and in the conflict, when the Devil goeth about to deface Christ, and to pluck the word of grace out of our hearts, we find that we do not yet know them well and as we should do. He that at such a time of trial could find Christ truly, and could magnify Him and behold Him as his most sweet Saviour, and High Priest, and not as a strait judge, this man hath overcome all evils, and were already in the Kingdom of Heaven. But this to do in the conflict, is of all things the most hard. I speak this by experience.⁸

The Canons of Dort speak very pastorally about this experience. Head 5, article 13 speaks of times when the Lord “should turn away His gracious countenance from [his people], to behold which is to the godly dearer than life, the withdrawing whereof is more bitter than death, and they in consequence hereof should fall into more grievous torments of conscience.” The Canons go on to press the means of grace, the preaching of the gospel, the hearing and reading of God’s Word, meditation, and the use of the sacraments (*Canons*, V.14).

These things, as touching the words, we know well enough, and can talk of them. But in practice, and in the conflict, when the Devil goeth about to deface Christ, and to pluck the word of grace out of our hearts, we find that we do not yet know them well and as we should do.

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He Descended into Hell

The Heidelberg Catechism is no less pastoral when it comes to assaults of faith in believers' lives. In the final Lord's Day (52), the instructors speak about our weakness being such that "we cannot stand a moment, and besides this, since our mortal enemies, the devil, the world, and our own flesh, cease not to assault us." Despite all this, the Catechism helps us to pray that God would "preserve and strengthen us by the power of Thy Holy Spirit, that we may not be overcome in this spiritual warfare, but constantly and strenuously resist our foes till at last we obtain a complete victory." This Lord's Day shows both an honest realism about the struggles Christians face and a strong hope in God alone. Faith cries to God, who for Christ's sake works endurance and experience in the embattled Christian (see Rom. 5:3-5).

The deepest ground of comfort in all our struggles is not what God does in us, but what God did in Christ. The Heidelberg Catechism refers directly to the kind of deep struggles Luther and many others of God's children have experienced. In answer 44, the soul-physicians that composed the Catechism explain the value of Christ's descent into hell as follows: "That in my greatest temptations (original word: "Anfechtungen"), I may be assured, and wholly comfort myself in this, that my Lord Jesus Christ, by His inexpressible anguish, pains, terrors, and hellish agonies, in which He was plunged during all His sufferings, but especially on the cross, hath delivered me from the anguish and torments of hell."

Our greatest ground of comfort when all light is hidden from us is not that we were or are believers. It is the truth of Christ entering into, enduring, and emerging from the terrors of hell, as Victor over the dark domain for sinners like you and me. On this Christ, embattled sinners can rest their tempest-tossed heart and head, whether they feel Him or not. ¹¹

Endnotes

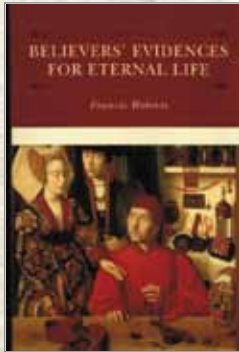
1. *Luther's Works*, vol. 34 (St. Louis: Concordia House, 1960), 336-337.
2. Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon, 1950), 42.
3. Eric Metaxas, *Martin Luther: The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017), 28.
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5. *Luther's Works*, 31:129-130.
6. *Luther's Works*, 54:75.
7. Quoted in Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church, 1532-1546* (Trans. by James L. Schaaf; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 110. Sebastian Munster was a Swiss philologist, with whom Luther had a debate about the meaning of the text of Jonah.
8. Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (Paisley: John Neilson, 1786), 68.

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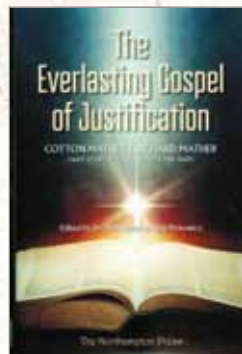
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PILGRIMS AND PURITANS IN AMERICA (10)

THE HALFWAY COVENANT (I)

Main Reason for the Puritans Coming to America

The New England Puritans believed that they had a divine mission to establish a truly Christian commonwealth dedicated to the proper worship of God under a government structured by biblical laws. God had made a covenant of grace with them and their children and they had entered into a church covenant with each other, committing themselves to strict obedience to God and holding each other accountable for living up to their obligations.

New Englanders saw themselves as God's chosen people, related to but separated from Puritans in England who had failed to reform the Church of England due to governmental and ecclesiastical regulations. Having settled in America, they were positioned to accomplish this goal because they could "start from scratch." They could organize churches from the ground up, making sure that membership in these newly instituted congregations would be restricted to true believers.

Being members of God's covenant and having covenanted with each other as well, church membership had to be voluntary. No one could be forced to join a "gathered" church, nor could such a church be forced to receive anyone who sought membership in it unless he or she met certain entrance requirements. What were these requirements?

Changing Standards for Church Membership

Initially, the New England churches continued to accept new members without asking too many questions regarding their motives and spiritual convictions. As David Boorman writes, "There were no rigorous tests for membership, for most believed as Thomas Hooker, that a man should not 'search into the heart of another which no man can know.'" Boorman continues that,

Over the first decade or so following the migration to New England the churches they came to ask much more of candidates for membership than a profession of faith and an outwardly godly life. Each prospective member was also required to give a 'relation', or testimony, of his experience of grace, a public declaration of God's manner of working upon his soul.²

To qualify as "visible saints," as they were called, they had to be able to convincingly recount a "new birth experience" – reflecting their personal journey from a despairing sense of utter worthlessness to joyous union with Christ.³

Gradual Easing of Membership Standards

While everyone could attend church – in fact, church attendance was mandatory in New England – only the full members were given access to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. They could also vote for and serve as office bearers in both church and state.



As it turned out, however, the New England Puritan establishment was not able to maintain such purity and exclusivity. During the first generation of immigrants who had arrived in the 1630s, the percentage of those who passed the test for full church membership remained high. But even before the second generation of settlers had reached maturity, there were signs that the number of young people coming to personal faith was not enough to perpetuate the succession of true saints. Many who had been baptized as infants because their parents were believers were not able to testify to having experienced the new birth themselves. They wanted very much to have their children baptized, but unless they could prove to the satisfaction of their elders and the congregation that they possessed grace, the church would not administer the sign and seal of God's covenant to their offspring.

The issue first surfaced in 1634 when John Cotton allowed a grandfather, who himself was a full member, to claim the right of baptism for his grandchild, whose parents did not profess saving faith. Cotton granted this man's request on the condition that he raise the child. However, he granted this request reluctantly because he believed that "an infant's right to baptism ordinarily came from the covenant of the next immediate parents (or of one of them at least)."⁴ This decision caused no small stir in the colony and opinions remained divided, especially when not only other grandparents, but also parents came with similar requests.

The issue created a dilemma for the leadership. As Mark Noll explains: "Steadily the fear grew that the Puritan's interlocking network of covenants would unravel. If there were no new converts, there could be no covenanted church; if there could be no covenanted church there could be no godly society."⁵ The question that needed to be answered was whether the children of unconverted though baptized church members should still be regarded as covenant children or whether they had to be expelled from the covenant along with their unbelieving parents? Had such children lost all rights to the means of grace? These questions continued to be debated for several years until, in 1657, the Court of Massachusetts called a meeting of ministers and elders to discuss the matter. A majority of the delegates ruled that all baptized but unconverted members in good standing had the right, upon becoming parents, to present their children for baptism.

The Road to the Halfway Covenant

This decision so troubled the dissenting minority in the churches

that the Court was forced to reconvene in 1662 to come up with a final solution to this vexing problem. This Synod reaffirmed the



earlier decision and issued seven propositions, of which the two most important ones are the fourth and fifth.

Proposition four states that "Church members who were admitted in minority, understanding the doctrine of faith and publicly professing their assent thereunto, not scandalous in life, and solemnly owning the covenant before the church, wherein they give up themselves and their children to the Lord and subject themselves to the government of Christ in the church, their children are to be baptized.

Proposition five adds: "Such church-members, who either by death, or some other extraordinary providence, have been inevitably hindered from publicly acting as aforesaid, yet have given the church cause, in the judgment of charity, to look at them as so qualified, ... [their] children are to be baptized."

This fifth proposition is the crucial one because it opened the door for unconverted but baptized parents to request baptism for their children, provided that these parents were not "scandalous in life," gave assent to the teachings of the church and submitted themselves and their children to church discipline. This decision, which later became known as the "halfway covenant," represented a fundamental change in New England theology and practice.

Three Contributing Factors to the Halfway Covenant

According to David Boorman, three emphases in early New Eng-

land thinking help us understand what led up to the adoption of the Halfway Covenant.⁶

1. Their concept of the church covenant.

The Puritans who settled in New England were resolved to establish a church comprising “a company of saints by calling, united into one holy body by a holy covenant.” Their visible churches were to be comprised of truly converted men and women who voluntarily entered covenant with God and with each other.

2. Their very high standards for church membership.

New England Congregationalists required more than a profession of faith, evidenced by an outwardly godly life. They required a public testimony of one’s experience of grace. When accused of setting the standards too high, the church replied that it was better to be too strict and run the risk of excluding a true believer than to be too lenient and risk admitting a hypocrite.

These high standards for membership were applied to three categories of people:

- a. those who applied for church membership for the first time;
- b. those who wished to transfer their membership from other churches;
- c. those who were already members by baptism but who lacked the qualifications for partaking of the Lord’s Supper and having their children baptized.

3. Their teaching on the Covenant of Grace.

Baptism is not the door of entrance into the visible church. Baptism is a seal to confirm God’s covenant to those who are already within the church and included in the covenant of grace.

Covenant membership precedes baptism.

They emphasized the great importance of baptism. According to Thomas Shepherd, a leading theologian in New England, baptism seals the membership of children in four respects:

- a. with respect to God. In baptism, God shows the riches of His grace towards covenant children by adopting them to be His children and giving them many promises.
- b. with respect to their parents. Baptism gives parents hope that their children may be saved. They may pray with confidence that God will do them good. Shepherd sees no reason why any man should doubt the salvation of his child if he dies or that God will do him good if he lives.
- c. with respect to themselves. Baptism is a special means and motive to prevent sin and a special help to turn them to God with repentance.
- d. with respect to others: Baptized children are cared for and prayed for by the whole congregation.

While preachers often reminded their hearers of the promises, they tended to direct them to search their hearts for evidences of regeneration (and thus election) rather than urging them to look away from self to Christ.

Shepherd’s Additional Qualifications

As wonderful as these benefits are, Shepherd adds two qualifications:

- 1. He distinguishes between membership in the external and in the internal covenant.
- 2. The privileges of the external covenant

are both conditional and absolute. They are absolute in that God outwardly reckons covenant children as His own, pruning them, and improving the means of grace to their eternal good unless they refuse and resist those means. They are conditional in that they need to be appropriated by faith which only God can give.⁷

Practical Tensions Developing from the Halfway Covenant

1. Tensions in the preaching.

While preachers often reminded their hearers of the promises, they tended to direct them to search their hearts for evidences of regeneration (and thus election) rather than urging them to look away from self to Christ.

Many pastors gave the impression that they did not expect much from the covenant promises to children of believers. John Cotton, for instance wrote: “In conversion all confidence we have in Abraham’s covenant is burnt up.”⁸ In other words, do not attribute any real value to God’s promises to covenant children unless they can produce evidence that they belong to the “elect seed.”

2. Tensions regarding church membership.

Many baptized members were discouraged by the high standards for membership. Questions arose regarding the membership status of children of non-communicant members.



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Were they still in the covenant with God? If so, why could they not be baptized? Does the covenant extend only to the believers' immediate seed? To refuse baptism to serious but unconverted covenant children places them on the same level with pagans and amounts to unwarranted strictness.

3. Summary of the Two Positions.

John Cotton taught that children of unconverted covenant children may be baptized on the ground that God's covenant continues "unto a thousand generations," and ceases only when parents renounce the covenant or are cut off by excommunication. The Old Testament embraces as covenant children even those whose parents and grandparents had become idolaters.⁹

Thomas Hooker, on the other hand, said that church membership remains restricted to those who have been effectually called and baptism is to be administered only to such members and their immediate seed. His grounds was that the New Testament churches differ from the Old Testament Israelites in that the former "are by Christ's appointment cast into a congregational and more spiritual form and therefore not capable of being propagated and continued in a lineal succession by natural generation."

According to Charles Chauncy and John Davenport, supporters of Hooker, circumcision was first instituted for a "domestical" or family church, then for a national church, but baptism is an ordinance for a congregational or *believers'* church. Although they did not deny that there was some connection between baptism and circumcision, they believed the latter was a more carnal and *external* Old Covenant ordinance, while baptism was a New Covenant sacrament of a greater spiritual and *inward* value. "The similarity," they said, "runs not on four feet."¹⁰

By taking this stand, they had, in effect, shifted from a Reformed to an essentially Anabaptist position. Calvin's view that "baptism is come in the place of circumcision"¹¹ was called into question. The implications of this change were significant and had lasting effects on the development of covenant theology within the Reformed and Presbyterian churches. We will explore some of these implications in our next issue, D.V. ①

(Endnotes)

- 1 David Boorman, "The Halfway Covenant," in *The Puritan Experiment in the New World*, 75.
- 2 Boorman, "Halfway Covenant," 75.
- 3 Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The settling of North America*, 180.
- 4 E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America*, 54.
- 5 Mark A. Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World*, 40.
- 6 Boorman, "Halfway Covenant," 74.
- 7 Boorman, "Halfway Covenant," 79,80.
- 8 Boorman, "Halfway Covenant," 81.
- 9 Boorman, "Halfway Covenant," 85.
- 10 Boorman, "Halfway Covenant," 92.
- 11 *Form for the Administration of Baptism*, in *The Psalter*, 127.

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"Behold, children are an heritage from the Lord." Ps. 127:3

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RELATIONSHIPS (4):

PARENTS AND CHILDREN

READ: GENESIS 25:22-28

One of the remarkable differences between the Bible and the Koran is the way they speak about “believers.” While the Koran pictures Allah’s servants as steadfast in their loyalty and devotion, the Bible gives another picture of God’s children. By grace they may experience repentance and faith. But Scripture is also honest about what becomes of them when their old man shows itself. Think of people like Lot, Samson, David, and Peter. We see this in Isaac and Rebekah as well. Until now, we have read such beautiful things about them. Yet, when we see them as the parents of Esau and Jacob, we realize they also are not perfect. Neither are their children. This passage about their family life is also instructive for us.

The Love of the Parents

Rebekah is pregnant! What a fruit of at least twenty years of waiting. Better said: this is the fruit of twenty years of expecting and prayerfully pleading God’s promise. God is the Fulfiller of His Word!

Already before her pregnancy is over, the next trial comes. She has a difficult and painful pregnancy. The twins she is expecting already seem to be struggling with each other in her womb.

How beautiful and characteristic of Rebekah that she goes to the Lord in prayer with this struggle. In answer to prayer, God makes clear that what is occurring in her womb will later occur between these two sons. These two children will become two nations, whereby the power-relationship will turn out to be much different than might be expected.

What we miss in this account about Rebekah’s prayer is that we do not hear of Isaac’s involvement. Is that an indication that they are growing apart spiritually? Such distance will show itself later in their different perspectives on their two sons (v.28).

“Over time we have grown apart.” How many couples have complained that? Sometimes that distance is given as a reason for divorce. How did this distance come about? Sometimes through the pressures of (financial) worries, differences of character, concerns about the children, or responding differently to a joint crisis. The marriage of Isaac and Rebekah gives us this reminder: realize the importance of praying together. If Isaac and Rebekah had both heard God’s answer to prayer (v.23), they would have had an extra weapon against the assault on their marriage that would later come (v.28).

The preference that each parent developed for one of the sons relates to the differing characters of the sons: The bold hunter verses the homebody. Did Rebekah’s preference also have spiritual motivations? That is not stated. I cannot think of a single good reason for parents to favour one child over the rest of their children. That applies for Isaac as well. His favouring of Esau does not seem to have any spiritual aspect to it. In his old age, he seems to be inclined toward Esau more by his stomach than his heart. Whatever the precise reasons for Isaac and Rebekah, all parents learn from this

account that favouritism is disastrous.

Naturally, everyone has certain sympathies and antipathies within and beyond family relations. Some may be more “your type.” But God’s command is very clear: Love your neighbour as yourself. Seek the welfare of all your neighbours and treat people with fairness rather than favouritism.

The Love of the Children

Let us now look at both sons in this family. It is fascinating and even beautiful that there can be such different children within one family. Every set of parents can be amazed at these differences in character, interests, gifts, and choice of career. Concerning careers, everyone is free to choose a different career, as long as it fits with the focus on God’s name, God’s Kingdom, and God’s will in the first petitions of the Lord’s prayer. Those petitions are also to govern the relationships we establish with others.

This focus on God raises increasing questions about Esau’s choices. Genesis 26:34-35 will speak about his choice of wives. In our passage, he also makes several choices. Well-known is the history of the pottage and the rights of the firstborn. Esau’s immediate physical desires weigh heavier on him than long-term spiritual benefits.

Esau’s choice of career may also say more about him than appears at first sight. He becomes a hunter who spends his time roaming the land, but has less interest in that land than in the wildlife which he hunts. That is striking for someone who belongs to a family which has a divine promise concerning the land.

What can be said about Jacob? That he is not perfect shows in his sly dealings with Esau in verses 29-34. These dealings anticipate his later deception of his father in Genesis 27. These dealings might make us wonder why this Jacob is characterized as an “upright man” (v.27 – KJV translates this expression as “plain man”). After all, “Jacob” means deceiver and his actions show it. The word translated “plain” or “upright” is not a normal character trait. It is used for Job as “upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil” (Job 1:1). This uprightness characterized ones such as Noah and Abraham, who stood in a right relationship with God and consciously lived in reverence before God’s face and were concerned to know His blessing. Jacob was far from the ideal picture of that uprightness. Yet, the longings that Noah and Abraham had also constituted Jacob’s deepest motivations. These were the desires expressed

in Psalm 27:4: “One thing have I desired of the Lord.” That is why an English translator has translated this word in our text as “single-minded.” This is the description of one whose heart has been won over to God, His service, and His will. Such single-mindedness influences every aspect of life. Our relationship to God is determinative for all our other relationships.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 01 Can you give more factors that lead spouses to grow apart? How can these be overcome?
- 02 More often in the Bible we find believers who decline spiritually in their old age (e.g. Gideon, Solomon, Asa, Hezekiah). What can we learn from these examples?
- 03 In what ways do the Lord’s prayer petitions influence your practical decisions?
- 04 “Those who do not know God have a heart that desires a thousand things; those who may know God by grace have a heart that at bottom has one desire.” What do you think of that saying?
- 05 Why is God’s election not to be compared to Rebekah’s preference for Jacob? How do you find comfort in God’s eternal love? What consequences does that have for your relationships and dealings with others?

The Love of the LORD

Reading to the end of Genesis 25 changes our impression of the marriage and family of Isaac and Rebekah. We can even begin to think: What a family? Must God carry out His redemptive plan through this family? That is what you might also think when you look at your own marriage and family. More personally, if the Lord uncovers your own character-faults and sins against God and others, you can wonder: What good can come of me?

Clearly, in the family of Isaac and Rebekah, good could only come through God’s steadfast love – a love that flows from his electing good pleasure. Verse 23 already alludes to that electing love and Romans 9 cites this account to show even clearer that God’s election is not based on the behaviour of Jacob or Esau. This love was there “the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth”

(Rom. 9:11). You cannot use God’s “preference” for Jacob to justify Rebekah’s preference for him. Rebekah’s preference has a totally different source.

This love of God gives amazing hope not only for “for ones like Jacob, but even for ones like Esau.” The first thing that both Jacob and Esau encounter in their lives is not God’s secret decree, but God’s covenant promises. In the way Jacob and Esau treat those promises, the Lord shows that He takes seriously our responsibility to have Him in the centre of our life. Like with Jacob, the bond with Him must be supreme. Where that is so by grace, that bond will determine all other relationships we have with others. Those who learn to live by God’s unconditional love learn also to love others unconditionally. ①

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.



SYNOD 2021

In God's faithfulness, we as a denomination were able to hold Synod meetings again in 2021, this year in the Grace Free Reformed Church of Brantford.

Many of us may think of Synod as a single thing. However, Synod 2021 included 42 delegates from 21 churches, plus numerous advisors. Because of God's kindness, we were able to have hundreds of pages of reports from eleven standing committees and five ad hoc committees. Hundreds of ballots elected our four executive positions. There were hours of debates on four overtures. There were dozens of people viewing the live stream. The financials revealed thousands of dollars contributed and expected. And then, imagine how many synod related words and pages Pastor Pronk has processed in 52 years of synod meetings! The pieces that make up Synod are numerous.

And while the various numbers are significant, and reflect many individual aspects, Synod is not just a singular event. There is a much bigger picture that appears when we start to reflect along four lines that were apparent at Synod 2021.

First: The foundational principle underlying all Synods is the kingship of Jesus Christ. This was again realized this year. We were reminded of Christ's headship already in the pre-synod prayer service, led by Pastor Bilkes: *Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever* (Heb. 13:8). Delegates and churches were encouraged to continue looking to this King and call our families to faithful obedience, worship, and attendance. Though some issues are worked through with painstaking detail, the over-

arching goal of every Synod remains the glory of the King of the Church.

Second: The office-bearers come as unique individuals, with unique gifts and experiences. However, all share the desire to serve the Lord Jesus. Such service is only possible through the grace of the Lord. Again this year we were reminded that God does provide richly such needed blessings. Three new pastoral delegates were present: Pastors Hicks, Neels, and VanLiere. Pastor Hans Overduin received emeritation status after 35 years of faithful service. Pastor Gerald Procee was present after receiving such status in the CGK and moving back to Ontario. Pastor Young Jae Lee reflected on unique opportunities to serve because of COVID. Professors Bilkes and Kranendonk were able to provide updates about their work in the seminary. John Wilbrink provided invaluable help for the setup and control of electronics. Various elders and pastors were able to express thoughts and opinions; yet it is the love of the church that still binds us together.

Third: Community is important. This is true as Synod considered the requests of individual churches and heard of the common challenges facing every church. While we were glad that Pompton Plains could join through Zoom, we missed the true camaraderie with their delegates that comes from face-to-face interaction. The combined consistory reports and the efforts of the Refugee Committee as well as Urban Missions reflect community that is building. The blessing of community was highlighted by the various representatives of the Heritage Reformed, United Reformed,



Canadian Reformed, and Presbyterian Reformed denominations. Efforts at community building were apparent through formal greetings and committee work, as well as the interdenominational psalter. The blessing of such community is magnified as delegates and visitors chatted together during breaks and sat around common tables during meals. Incidentally, those meals included the traditional soup and buns, but also such Dutch treats such as croquettes and stroop wafels, and non-traditional offerings like chicken wings and Pita Pit!

Fourth: The worship that happens at Synod is beautiful. This year, opening devotions were led by Pastor Vanderhoek of the Burgessville HRC, Pastor Wullschleger of the CGK, and Pastor Vandermeiden of the Vineland FRC. We were pointed to look to God, to depend on God, and to remember the presence of God. This year, the delegates also spontaneously joined together in a time of concerted prayer for each other Thursday evening. That, together with the voices of 48 men who love to sing the goodness of God, was a highlight!

These four things are not the full picture, but they are the outlines that display the multi-faceted nature of Synod. What appears from these four outlines, along with the hundreds of individual pieces, is a beautiful picture: King Jesus is providing for, sustaining, and blessing His church. We are grateful to be a little part of that, even as we look for the day that He appears again. ①

Rev. D. VanBrugge is pastor of Grace Free Reformed Church of Brantford, ON.

ADDRESS OF PASTOR H. OVERDUIN TO Synod 2021

Dear Mr. Chairman of FRCNA Synod 2021, esteemed delegates, advisors, and visitors to this meeting,

Thank-you for your consideration and acceptance of my request for emeritus status as of January 1, 2022. Thank-you, Rev. Schoeman, for the words just now spoken also in regards to this request and to the whole of my ministry within the FRCNA in the three congregations I have been privileged to serve: first in Chatham, then in Chilliwack, and the last twelve years in Calgary.

I wrote down a few thoughts as to what I might say and wish to convey at this admittedly significant event in my life. There are several thoughts which I would like to bring forward.

The first is that coming to this point and actually having this request processed for my emeritus status is something I almost myself cannot believe is happening and has happened just now. I mean with that: Where have the last 35 years almost gone? How quickly they have passed by! In each of the churches I have been given to serve, the weeks of work went by quickly. O how soon Sunday came every week again and you needed two new sermons ready! There was always so much else to be done as well. But given strength to plod on steadily and steadfastly, and with each consistory's help and encouragement, the weeks and months and years went by, and here I am, asking for emeritus status at age 67, for the reasons stated as you could read in the Agenda for Synod 2021. The older ministers here, my esteemed seven emeritus colleagues will hardly be able to accept, that yes, now I am joining your ranks too! Brothers, as Moses teaches in Psalm 90, about our lives, truly, "it is soon cut off, and we fly away" (v.10) and James likewise says about our lives, "It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away" (4:14b). Isn't the application for us all here, what Moses says in verse 12 of Psalm 90? "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." May even my emeritus request now drive just this lesson home to us all!

A second observation is how indebted I am to God Triune for the years of ministry He allowed me to serve. I can tell you, and quite likely I don't need to tell you even, that there is nothing in and of myself that ever made it possible for me to become a minister of the gospel. And there is nothing about myself that brought about this reality that I may ask for honorable retirement status as gospel minister. Dear ones, it is God's grace from beginning to end that I stand here today for this matter at hand! To God be the glory for teaching me the absolute necessity, precise perfectness, and infinite preciousness of the gospel doctrine of complete justification by faith alone in Christ alone. (Q&A 60 of the Heidelberg Catechism is such a precious gospel gem, ever to treasure in this regard!) Grasping this gospel doctrine by God's grace and Spirit for a lost, guilty, vile sinner like myself by nature, and growing in realizing its constant worth and comfort during all my years in the pastoral



ministry is where I stand also at this point in my life. It is the source of all my hope and peace and joy.

In this regard, in asking now for emeritus status, as I wrote in my communication about this request, please know it is not that I am looking to stop labouring in God's church and kingdom. *No, the good news of the gospel is too wonderful for that!* I pray, God helping me, I may continue to serve in proclaiming the good news of the gospel as God gives me still the opportunity and ability to do so.... But it may be in a different capacity and perhaps with somewhat less pressure every week. Along with all the other emeritus ministers, asking for emeritus status is not to cease from gospel ministry, but to change our pace in gospel ministry and perhaps broaden our gospel ministry in specific areas of interest.

The third comment I would like to make is just to explain more clearly what I meant when I wrote in my request for emeritus status: "While very appreciative of our FRCNA background and its balanced, well-rounded emphases, always in ministry I strove not primarily to be an FRCNA minister of the gospel, but a gospel minister in the FRCNA." With that statement I meant and mean the following: on the one hand, how much I love our FRC churches and our faithful, Biblical, Reformed, confessional, experiential, Trinitarian, church-orderly, head-heart-and-hands Christian heritage! I really mean this with all my heart. Never can I thank the LORD enough for raising me within this federation of churches. As the years go by, I do not prize it less so, but more and more so. On the other hand, no church or federation of churches is perfect and without faults and blots (just read Rev. Pronk's book on our secession church history) and no heritage (however good) is something we should glory in. In a way, that can actually obscure the very gospel and gospel message we desire so much to proclaim and pass on to the ends of the earth and to the generations following. Too much exclusively focusing on our so-called distinctives can ironically take away from what we are distinctly wanting to advance as Reformation/Secession gospel churches of the FRCNA. Plus, a wonderful reality which we learned over the years and decades in ministry is that the gospel emphasized heritage we so value and rightly see as constantly most important is found also in other churches and denominations. Faithful ministries like the Banner of Truth book ministry and their conferences, Ligonier ministries, HRC contacts, PRTS and other related ministries have all been so encouraging and uplifting in this regard! So, this explains my saying that I see myself as a gospel minister in the FRCNA more than a FRCNA minister of the gospel. By saying this, I am not in any way speaking negatively of the FRCNA, but only highlighting the greatest matter of all, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the one and only Saviour of sinners for all who have ears to hear.


Then a fourth observation is one where I have to draw from a card my mother wrote probably in the late 1980's following a Sunday when preaching in London FRC where my dad and she were members in their senior years. I don't know what I preached that Sunday that led her to



write this note, but this is what she wrote: "I wanted to say yesterday, you glorified Christ, but I thought, no, only God does that, that is not for us, because God IS glorious. But today, we read in the meeting [I am presuming it was a Bible study meeting], John 16:14. [There Jesus says of the Holy Spirit, 'He shall glorify Me: for He shall receive of Mine, and shall show it unto you.'] And that is what I felt (I see now) the Holy Spirit used you to make Christ more glorious in my view and experience. Love, Mom." Well, as you might understand, I have always valued that note from my godly mother. It shows (doesn't it?) the amazing wonder of the gospel ministry by God's grace and Spirit. God is pleased to use the foolishness of preaching to exalt Christ and draw to Him as the only Saviour and Lord (1 Cor. 1:18ff). The preaching of the gospel is the Lord's chief means of grace to lead people to Christ and to feed and comfort and equip in the way of

Christ. It is a high calling and who is sufficient for this calling?! But the LORD is pleased to use sinful, weak, and ordinary men for this holy task and humble service of being His under-shepherds in Jesus' Name. How we should all thank the LORD that He gives men for this calling. As Jeremiah says in Jeremiah 3:15 and Paul says also in Ephesians 4:11-13, this is His gift to His church – His underserved gift and mercy for His church. "And I will give pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding." "And He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."

Now this leads me to my fifth and last comment which relates to the need for men for the gospel ministry. How thankful I was that also in the pre-Synod prayer service, Rev. L.J. Bilkes remembered this need in his prayer. Do we realize right now, with my becoming emeritus, we have room for 6 ministers? I am thinking of Bornholm, Calgary, Dundas, Grand Rapids, Monarch, and their coming daughter church in Picture Butte starting later this month, God willing. We have presently two students. For both of them we are thankful, but even should they both go into gospel ministry next year, still there would be four vacancies. "I have a dream!" No, I should say, I have a prayer and care that before my earthly pilgrimage is done, I may live to see the day when all our churches have their own pastor to shepherd them with each consistory through the preaching and pastoral care given. Let us all pray fervently for this blessing. As emeritus ministers, we need not worry either for there is still lots of work to be involved with and that can be done. May the Lord graciously provide for us all and may we see young men from our churches truly converted, heartily called, providentially prepared, and Spirit-led as lovers of Jesus and the gospel of God Triune, wholeheartedly giving themselves for pastoral ministry. - Thank you.

Let me close by asking that we rise and sing at this point a family favourite of ours, Psalter 431:1, 3,4,6. 

SYNOD 2021 and COVID-19



Covid-19 has led to unprecedented upheaval in society and the church of Christ. The worldwide shutdowns and regulations have forced us all to think. Part of the challenge is that any possible conclusion on this matter becomes vehemently controversial to others. No matter what this article says, some of its readers will be convinced that it is unfaithful to Christ, His word, and His church. Though it is tempting to curl up in a corner and sing “O that I had wings like a dove, for then I would fly far away, and seek for the rest that I love, where trouble no more could dismay” (Psalter 150:2), it is still a valuable exercise in Christian charity and bearing with each other to give an overview of the Covid-19 debate during Synod 2021.

The church of Christ has not escaped the debates that have torn families, political parties, and workplaces. This has impacted weddings, funerals, and most significantly, physically gathering for worship. Office bearers in our churches located on any point of the spectrum of views on Covid-19 restrictions have received letters and phone calls that have sorely lacked Christian love and kindness (James 1:19-20) to the point that some have resigned their office, unable to cope with the hostility expressed by church members.

It is no surprise that Synod 2021 struggled with this issue too. The Chilliwack overture was debated every day of Synod for hours, until a compromise motion was passed. At times delegates of the same consistories argued and voted for opposite points of view. No one was totally satisfied, but we were able to agree, at least in part, on key principles.

To understand the synodical deliberations, it is helpful to outline first the spectrum of views within the churches. On the one end of the spectrum are those who believe that any kind of compliance to government regulations about worship is a ceding

of Christ’s kingship in His church to the government, of saying Caesar is lord instead of Jesus is Lord. If they are correct, anyone who complied with government regulations could be on the road to apostasy. They quote passages such as Acts 5:29 and Daniel 6 and Belgic Confession articles 28 and 32. If this conclusion is biblical, no consistory may ever forbid healthy people from physically attending a worship service.


On the other end of the spectrum are those who believe that the kingship of Christ requires obedience to government regulations on public health, even when these restrict public worship for a time. They quote passages such as 1 Peter 2:13-17 and appeal to the background of articles 28 and 32 being Catholic government banned of Reformed worship for theological reasons rather than health ones. They appeal to the same Reformed fathers who wrote our confessions and who also believed government has authority during emergencies to temporarily restrict worship. They see non-compliance as rebellion against the God who gave us our governments (Rom 13:1-7) and consider the technological possibilities of livestream a sufficient temporary measure for edifying the flock during a pandemic. If this conclusion is biblical, a consistory does have reason to ask for compliance, since our conscience must be held captive by the Word of God.

Others fall somewhere in between, and are willing to accept some restrictions, convinced that, on matters of public health, consistories and governments have overlapping jurisdiction from God. The challenge here is that both sides of the spectrum consider the brethren in the middle guilty of compromise.

In the end, all could agree that Christ is king of the church and that it is essential to church life to physically gather for worship. Christ alone decides the elements of worship: singing, preaching, prayer, etc. What remains controversial is whether Christ our

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king has given the government authority to temporarily restrict the circumstances of worship (masking, distancing, capacity limits) during emergencies.

It does not help when secular governments consider the church of Christ no more essential than the local chess club, and, in some situations, as the least essential part of society (in British Columbia). It deeply troubles me when brethren in the east hastily judge our brethren out west without understanding their situation. Nor does it help when extended lockdowns are controversial even among expert epidemiologists.¹

This discussion is not over. With further humble prayerful study of God's word and the greater clarity that hindsight provides, a greater consensus could be achieved. It will not be achieved by impatiently hurling Twitter sized slogans at each other, but only by patient careful listening to each other.

In my opinion, much of the above spectrum falls within a Reformed biblical response. Local circumstances must also be considered. That is why I consider it a Romans 14:1-13 issue, though my dear brothers closer to either end of the spectrum dispute this conclusion.

Here are points that deserve further thought no matter what your current views are. Some of the very same Reformed fathers who wrote so clearly about worshipping the true God rightly even at the risk of death (reflecting Belgic Confession articles 28 and 32), also wrote about the church submitting to government regulations during wars and pandemics.² Is it honest to ignore this broader context in quoting our confessions? Is it honest to dismiss all defiance of regulations (to obey Christ) without considering the local circumstances involved?

This debate is distinctly North American. In Europe, the churches have almost universally complied with government restrictions, and are startled at the vehemence of our discussions. Are we blinded by our cultural baggage in our views of the relation between Church and state, or are they blinded by theirs?

No matter what your views, the turmoil in the churches should lead us to prayer:

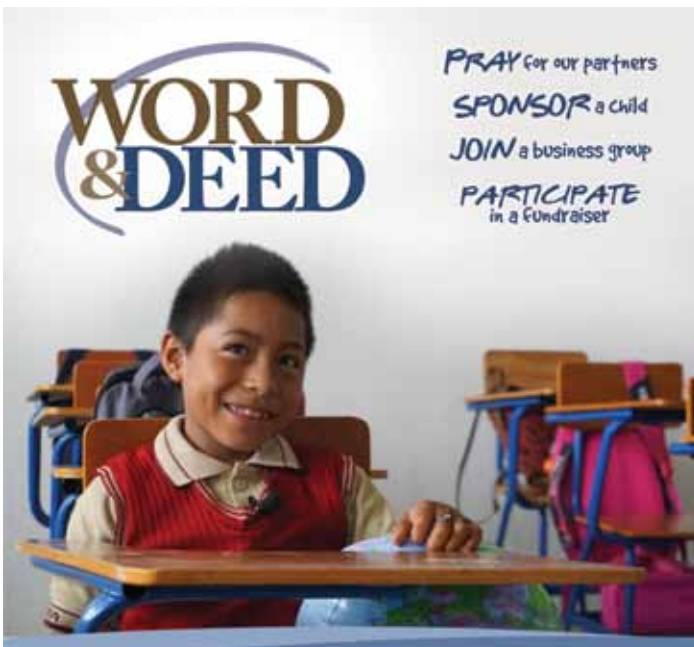
If with love compassionate, We Thy servants mourn her state,
Wilt not Thou O gracious Lord, Help in Zion's need afford?
Lord Thy glory shall appear, Kings and nations then shall fear,
And Thy name shall be adored When Thy Zion is restored"

(Psalter 275:2). ¹¹

Rev. E. Moerdijk is pastor of the Free Reformed Church of St. Thomas, ON

Endnotes

1. The Great Barrington declaration is worth thoughtful consideration – it is no conspiracy theory (<https://gbdeclaration.org/>).
2. I could quote here Richard Baxter, John Owen, Wilhelmus A Brakel, and John Calvin, but that goes beyond the purpose of this article.



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HOW DEVOTED ARE WE TO GOD'S CHURCH?

Devoted to God's Church: Core Values for Christian Fellowship by Sinclair B. Ferguson. Published by The Banner of Truth Trust, 2020. Softcover, 187 pages.

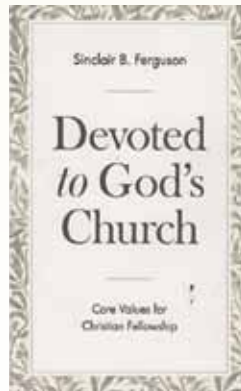
This is not just a book by a well-known theologian explaining what a true church is like. It is all that, but has a special purpose. The author's focus and aim is to suggest that, "There are core values in the New Testament for any size of church, in any part of the world, at any time. No matter what our distinctive view on church government, on baptism, or precisely how we celebrate the Lord's Supper... [we are] to remember that 'Christ loved the church and gave himself for her' (Eph. 5:25). [This] applies not only to the entire church but to our congregation as well... [Furthermore,] we need to be delivered from the myth that 'If only I were a member of *that* church instead of *this* one I would become a much better and more faithful member'" (Introduction, x). Perhaps you wonder how such a formidable task may be accomplished?

By means of sometimes startling statements, based on careful examination of Scripture, citing interesting examples and his own experience, the aim is to help you become a more devoted church member and be a more profitable member of the congregation in which the Lord has placed you. He acknowledges that he was blessed and nurtured by such church members.

The first of the eleven chapters explains that being a Christian means to belong to a congregation. This involves privileges as well as responsibilities, similar to family life. Jesus set high standards: "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:37). This may sound radical, and of course one's own family life is very important, because families contribute to and affect church life. But just as natural families have their interests and priorities, this should be even more so regarding the church and congregation to which we belong. "The church is not simply 'like' a family. It is a family—God's family" (p. 19). "Other churches may have better preachers and pastors; there may be more suitable meeting places; there may be contexts that seem more favourable for service and witness. But so long as the Lord has placed you in the particular family branch to which you belong—it should be your desire ... to be there and serve there" (p. 13). To emphasize this point, Ferguson inserts an appendix of specific rules for membership in a secular organization.

The next chapters flesh out what it means to be a member of God's family—being a Christian. Ferguson asks, "Are You a Christian?" (chapter 2). Examples from Scripture are cited, especially from the apostle Paul. Although Paul's conversion is often seen as a radical conversion, like many of us, Paul was the recipient of tremendous privileges before his Damascus road experience. He was circumcised and heir to God's promises by birth, was a member of a prominent covenant family, highly trained in the law, and endowed with great zeal (Phil. 3:1-11). Yet God needed to bring him by a very hard road to actually know he was not saved; he did not know Christ. Even though our "own story" may be less dramatic than Paul's, most members in the church are led in stages too, so that we learn about the Saviour, discover the truth about ourselves – that we are lost without Christ – and learn to find our righteousness in Christ alone. This chapter is worthwhile reading by itself and is convicting but also inviting. The author concludes by asking: "Are you a Christian? Is there something in your heart that responds, 'Yes! Yes! I am'? If not, put this book down, think about the question, and ask the Lord to help you to see why you need a Saviour, and why it is that Jesus Christ is the Saviour you need" (p. 34).

The next chapter deals with discipleship or being a learner. The goal is high. "Whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27). It means a life of self-denial and self-sacrifice. Another chapter, "What Is a Member?" expands on this and Ferguson calls following Christ and being devoted to him like an addiction. The early church is cited as model in



devotion to the apostles' teaching, love to the fellowship, and diligent worship of God.

Isaiah's experience in being overcome by the glory of God is set as an example for worship (chapter 5). God's glory, sovereignty, and holiness are contrasted against our sin and Christ's costly pardon. These are basic principles on which true worship is based.

Scripture is God's mouthpiece for bringing salvation and transformation. The Word is primary in preaching and teaching and is God's way to rebuke, correct, and train us in righteousness (chapter 6).

The modes of Christian Baptism are briefly dealt with, but the focus is on its meaning, which is explained in detail. "The sign of baptism proclaims the gospel to us; it points us to Christ and all

that faith received from him... So baptism is a sign of Christ and his work and all it may mean for us, as we respond in faith; it is not a sign of our faith" (p. 109).

Prayer meetings or prayer in small groups are seen by Ferguson to be an indispensable part of church life. It is where members can share and unburden their hearts. This chapter is titled, "The Christian's Native Air" (chapter 8).

In the chapter, "Christian Service," the example of the Lord's humiliation, exemplified by His foot washing of the disciples, sets the tone for service in the church. The question is, "Do you share the mind of Christ? Are you willing to begin at the foot? Remember it is the one who is faithful *in what is least* who is given the opportunity to be faithful in what is great (Luke 16:10)" (p. 141). Our attitude is what counts, and therefore every member, including the elderly, can be engaged in service by "a prayerful life, a listening ear, an open heart, shared wisdom, a short note of encouragement — these are often more fruitful forms of service than being the person who is always leading and being seen to be busy" (p. 145).

In the chapter on "Communion," or the Lord's Supper, the author states that not the manner nor frequency are of primary importance. "The most important fact to know about the Lord's Supper is that Jesus Christ himself is present with us when we receive the bread and wine from the table" (p. 156), indicating that Ferguson holds Calvin's view.

Characteristically, in the chapter, "Christian Witness and World Mission" the author does not examine methods, but contends that it is often the Christian's attitude and practice that draws unbelievers [and our children] to the church. Displaying the *power* of the Word and *love for Jesus* in their lives stirs unbelievers to ask questions. "Thus our words about Christ along with our Christ-reflecting actions and dispositions are used by the Spirit to point others to Christ... This cannot be emphasized too strongly" (p. 176). A similar emphasis on the Christian's attitude will motivate Christians in missions. Here Ferguson offers a defense against the charge that "the great missionary movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries destroyed the native culture of the people to whom the gospel was brought," and it merely participated in the "Colonial Period" of that time (p. 184). Not true, he argues.

This book will convict, encourage, and inspire you to become a more devoted member of God's church. It is to such church members that Ferguson has dedicated this book. "With gratitude to the ordinary Christians who showed me Christ, nurtured me in the faith, prayed for me regularly, encouraged me in the ministry and taught me to love the Church" (p. 187).

Highly recommended for every church member and as a possible manual for new members or confession of faith classes. ^{VI}

*These books and others may be purchased in Canada at Reformed Book Services in Brantford, Ontario, and in the USA at Reformation Heritage Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

THREE NEW CHURCH BUILDINGS IN CUBULCO



AUGUST 20, 2021



During the past 30 years that the Free Reformed Mission (FRMI) has been working in Cubulco, seven churches were planted, but around 15 church buildings were erected. Many of you might wonder how twice as many buildings were erected as churches were planted? The reason for this is that many of these church buildings have been built, torn down, and built again several times over. While in North America it is normal to build something that lasts for decades and even hundreds of years, this is often not the case in the rural parts of Guatemala.

Houses and churches in rural villages are usually built of materials found locally. In some communities, the soil might be suitable to make adobe bricks and so the people build their houses and churches from these mud bricks. In other villages, wood is the only suitable material available and so they build their homes and churches from sticks and wood. As time passes, these materials tend to deteriorate. Adobe bricks crack and fall apart after several years due to erosion and living in a country prone to earthquakes. Untreated wood eventually gets devoured by termites and needs to be replaced. It is common to rebuild a house every 10-15 years. In the case of our churches, many of them have been rebuilt for the same reasons, although some have been torn down and rebuilt to make room for a

larger building to accommodate a growing church.

When the first churches were built in Cubulco, FRMI funded most of the costs except for labour and some local materials. Part of the reason for this was that the churches were small and had limited resources. As time passed, the churches grew and when it came time to tear down the old building and erect a new one, FRMI tried to get the people

to contribute more financially while also supplying their own labour. This was not always easy as the people had gotten used to having things done for them. However, FRMI felt it was important that the people raise much of the funds themselves as a way to develop maturity and independence as churches.

In recent years, three churches decided to tear down their crumbling buildings and build larger ones. This time they decided to use materials that would last and withstand seismic activity. Instead of wood and mud, they used steel, stone, cinder block, and cement. As you can imagine, the costs involved were much higher since most of these materials needed to be purchased in town and transported to the community. Thankfully, with the building of new roads, two of the churches now have road access which makes the transport of materials much easier.

While in the past the churches would first turn to the mission to cover most of the costs of building a new church, this time they started with only a plan and then saved up enough money and materials to be able to do most of it themselves. As they neared the completion and faced dwindling resources, they approached FRMI to request help. Each church was required to fill out a project request form outlining their needs and showing their contributions to the project. With the help of Nico Kattenberg, each church filled out and presented the form to FRMI for discussion and potential approval.

In 2019, the church in Pichal requested \$2,000 to put a new floor in their new church building. The church members had invested more than \$15,000 of their own money in the building of the church. FRMI agreed and provided them with the necessary funds to complete the floor.

In 2020, the church in Patuy requested around \$6,000 to put a roof on their new and larger building. The members had invested more than \$25,000 and in the coming years will be investing thousands more to complete it. Again, the mission agreed to help as this church also serves the community through an after-school program for children funded by FRMI and Word and Deed. Furthermore, this church is 3-4 hours on foot from the nearest road, making it require much more labour to bring the materials to the community.



Earlier this year, the mission approved \$5,000 to pay for a new floor, door, and windows for the church in Los Pajales. The members had raised more than \$18,000 to build a larger church.

Seeing the commitment and sacrifice of the churches made it easy for FRMI to approve the funding for these building projects. It is encouraging to see the churches grow in maturity, give sacrificially, and take ownership.

The Cubulco area pastors have asked me to send greetings from their churches to the churches in North America. They are very grateful for the support received and humbled to know that there are churches thousands of miles away who pray and care for them.

May the Lord richly bless each one of you!

“And my people shall dwell in a peaceable habitation, and in sure dwellings, and in quiet resting places” (Isaiah 32:18)

Mr. Nico Kattenberg lived with his family in Guatemala for many years, serving the FRMI work there. He now continues to be involved on a limited scale, as they live in British Columbia.



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September 26, 1986 - September 26, 2021

"Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths." Proverbs 3:5-6



WALTER & DIENE KOPPELAAR

(nee Heikoop)

With much love from your children and grandchildren:

Ryan & Charlotte Koppelaar

(Lucas, Mackenzie, Tessa, and Liam)

Alyssa & Trevor Pennings

(Felicity, Jenna, Ian, Kayla, and Joel)

Darren & Anna Koppelaar

(Dominic, Maverick, and Kate)

Deanna & Trevor Van Lagen

(Connor and Brandon)

Alaina Koppelaar & Sam Kranendonk

Congratulations to you both on your **35th Wedding Anniversary!** Our prayer is that the Lord may continue to bless you and guide you in the years ahead.

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50TH ANNIVERSARY

1971 - OCTOBER 29 - 2021

The eternal God is your refuge, And underneath are the everlasting arms; Deut.33:27

With much joy and thankfulness to God, we wish to announce the 50th Wedding Anniversary of our dear parents, grandparents, and great-grand parents.

ANDREW & NELLIE GROEN

(nee Naves)

We pray that God will continue to bless and keep you in His love and care in the years to come.

Janna & Ken Pennings

Brandon & Laura Pennings (Brooklyn)

Michael, Lukas, Trevor

Dave & Doreen Groen

Andrew & Viktoria Groen (Myles)

Ashley & Phil Kenyon

Jacob & Anna (girlfriend)

Kyle, Samuel

Steve & Anna Groen

Amber, Lorelee, Kate

Suzanne & Gerrit Kleyn

Levi, Caleb, Julia, Jonathan

Gary & Meredith Groen

Abigail, Ethan, Madelyn, Landon

HOME ADDRESS:

773 Foss Road, Fenwick, Ontario L0S 1C0

OBITUARY OF WILLIAM HENDRIK HEIKOOP



"My Flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever." Psalm 73:26

HEIKOOP, William Hendrik. Peacefully, at home, on August 9, 2021, surrounded by his wife and children, the Lord, in His infinite wisdom, has taken to Himself our loving husband, father, grandfather, and great-grandfather at the age of 79. *"All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field." Isaiah 40:6.* During two years of many health issues, each declining his physical abilities, Dad learned to confess with the psalmist of Psalm 116, *"I love the Lord, the fount of life and grace"*.

Beloved husband of **Elizabeth** (nee Van't Foort) **for 57 years.** He loved his large family and showed a keen interest in the lives and spiritual well-being of each one, see family list below.

The funeral service was held Thursday, August 12, 2021 at the Vineland Free Reformed Church, 3685 King Street, Vineland, Ontario with Rev. P. VanderMeyden officiating.

Dear father to:

Dieni & Walter Koppelaar

Ryan & Charlotte (Lucas, Mackenzie, Tessa, and Liam)
Alyssa & Trevor Pennings (Felicity, Jenna, Ian, Kayla, and Joel)
Darren & Anna (Dominic, Maverick, and Kate)
Deanna & Trevor Van Lagen (Connor and Brandon)
Alaina

Martha & Arie DeHaan

Rachelle & Michael Brouwer (Carter and Callum)
Sarah & Corey Schilstra
Brendan & Grace (Payton and Isla)
Arielle, Andrew

Maria & Jeff Sommer

Nicole & Scott Oosterhof (Mateo)
Joshua & Amber Sommer
Trevor & Sierra Sommer
Ian, Tanner

Susanne & Bill Eckhardt

Natasha, Alexander, Ashley

Rick & Joanne Heikoop

Ciara, Aiden, Natalia, Victoria

A brother to Sue and John VanGameren, Martin and Toni, Henry and Coby, Marie, Emma, Nellie, and Jack Tamminga, Gary and Jackie. A brother-in-law to Klazien and Kees* VanBeek, Evert* and Janice Van't Foort, Jack and Hanneke Van't Foort, John and Henny Van't Foort, Dick and Wilma Van't Foort, Dianne*, Wilma, and Wim Overbeek. *deceased

