

VOLUME 68 NUMBER 11 · DECEMBER 2021 EDITION

THE MESSENGER

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE FREE REFORMED CHURCHES OF NORTH AMERICA



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THE FATHER'S GIFT

John 3:16 - “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Christmas is the season for gift giving and many people take it seriously. Last year the *CPA Canada Holiday Spending Survey* recorded that the average Canadian planned on spending \$588 on Christmas gifts! For many Canadians, the weeks leading up to Christmas are filled with scribbling down wish lists, dreaming about potential presents, and fretting over what to buy for loved ones. All of this internal energy is then transferred into the hustle and bustle of people scurrying through stores and scrolling Amazon’s website looking for the right gifts.

While there are often fond memories associated with this gift giving, we must not let these gifts crowd out the real Gift of Christmas – The Father’s Gift. Let’s take some time this Christmas season to unwrap the Father’s Gift and see again the depths of His love for His people.

1. The Father Gave His Son

“God so **loved** ... that He **gave**.” True love always gives. In this well-known text, John draws a direct connection between the Father’s love and the Father’s gift. The Father was not the reluctant, uninterested gift-giver. He did not need to be coerced into giving. He is not the stingy, cold Father that Satan and our sinful minds often make Him out to be. Here, the Holy Spirit emphatically identifies divine, undeserved love as the source of the Father’s gift.

While true love always gives, the measure of love is displayed in the extent of the giving. “God so loved ... that He gave **His only begotten Son**.” These words are an invitation to marvel at the intensity of the Father’s love. His gift is His only begotten Son. There is nothing more precious, more valuable to the Father than His Son. More than any other biblical author, John goes out of his way to repeatedly express the depths of the Father’s love for His Son. Verse 35 says, “The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into His hand” (see also John 5:20; 10:17; 15:9-10; 17:23-26). God the Father loves His eternal Son more than any other father has ever loved their son. His Son is the unique, one of a kind, eternally begotten Son. Thus, the Father has loved His Son with a constant, overflowing love that we fail to grasp. And yet, the Father’s chosen Gift for this world was ‘His only begotten Son.’ That should make our hearts sing, “How deep the Father’s love for us!”

2. The Father Gave His Son to Sinners

When we give our gifts, they are usually directed to family, friends and loved ones. In sharp contrast, the Father gives His gift to His enemies – “God so loved **the world**.” Through the Fall, the world has declared war on God. We are by nature hostile rebels to God. Rather than loving God and His law, we are bent on hating God and His law. John further describes the world as those who ‘loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil’ (verse 19). This is the tragic, universal character of all sinful humanity. This is the dreadful news about ourselves and who we are by nature.

But “God so loved the world!” It is precisely to such evil, rebellious sinners that the Father has given His greatest Gift. Instead of giving the world the punishment that it deserves, He gave the world His one and only Son. Were it not for the Father’s love for the world, there would be no hope for this world or for you and me this Christmas season! Have you received the Father’s gift with the empty hand of faith? Then what reason to sing, “How deep the Father’s love for us!”

3. The Father Gave His Son to Die


Gifts are usually measured by their price-tag. The costliness of the gift speaks of its value. The Father’s gift came at a supreme cost, because He gave His Son to die in the place of sinners. When the Father, in eternity, appointed the Son as the Mediator of His elect, the Father knew what that meant for His Son. He knew the long, hard road that ran from the manger to the empty tomb. The Father knew every ounce of suffering that His Son would bear. He knew the rejection that His Son would face – ‘He is despised and rejected of men’ (Is 53:3). He knew the names that His Son would wear – ‘a Man of Sorrows’ (Is 53:3). He knew the cry that His Son would utter – ‘My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?’ He knew the wrath that His Son would endure. And yet, the Father gave His Son. Oh, “how deep the Father’s love for us!”

4. The Father Gave His Son to Give Life

The purpose of the Father’s gift is “that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” The Father gave His Son to welcome sinners into His everlasting life. The great purpose that moved the Father to give His Son was His desire to turn foes into family. Through Spirit-worked faith in the Son, His Father becomes our Father and we are brought into His heavenly family. Through Christ, our mountain of guilt is fully forgiven and our record of sin has been nailed to the cross once and for all (Col 2:14). In union with Christ, we receive His righteous robes that make us holy in the Father’s sight, and we are given Christ’s Spirit to progressively transform us into His image. All of this is bound up in embracing the Father’s gift. If you have the Son by faith, you have everlasting life. You have both endless duration of life and the greatest quality of life. Beginning in time and lasting for eternity, you have the gift of knowing and enjoy God which is eternal life (John 17:3). Thus, if you have Christ, you have the full treasury of Heaven. He truly is the Gift that keeps on giving!

As we celebrate the Christmas season and maybe also enjoy a time of giving gifts to family and friends, let us do so with the Father’s gift in our hearts and minds!

How deep the Father’s love for us
How vast beyond all measure
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure

Romans 8:32 – “He that spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?” 

Rev. M. Wagenaar is pastor of the Zion Free Reformed Church of Fenwick, Ontario.

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SPIRITUAL- MINDEDNESS

The Banner of Truth Puritan Paperback series is a classic series of shorter, pastoral works by various Puritans. One book in this series is John Owen's Spiritual-Mindedness. This topic is so important. So much takes place within our minds and impacts our entire life. Let us first review John Owen's life and then learn from this particular book.

Owen's Life

John Owen (1616-1683) was the son of a Puritan pastor. At age 12, he entered Queen's College in Oxford. Throughout his teen years, he studied 18-20 hours per day and received his M.A. degree at age 19. What drove him? He later said it was ambition rather than godly zeal.

In his early twenties, God showed him his sin. His conscience was so tormented that he avoided others to be alone for several months. Slowly, the Holy Spirit began to show him the Saviour of sinners. But he continued to struggle until, at the age of 26, he went with his friend to a church in London to hear a famous preacher. However, in the place of that preacher appeared a man whom Owen did not recognize. Owen's friend urged him to leave to hear another famous minister, but Owen stayed and the preacher preached on, "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" God used this unknown minister's sermon to fill him with the light of Christ.

Owen was married and received eleven children, of which only one daughter survived to adulthood. Even she died before her parents.

In the 1640s, Owen became a leading minister in London. He also went as chaplain with Oliver Cromwell to Ireland and served as a preacher to the government and vice-chancellor of Oxford University. After Cromwell died, he lost favour with the new government and king, but was allowed to continue to preach, and especially write. His standard set of works contains sixteen volumes.

Owen's Concern

At the age of 58, he witnessed his wife pass away. Two years later, he married a widow. In his last years, he suffered from asthma and gallstones, which sometimes kept him from preaching. He later wrote during a time on a sickbed: "I was every way unable to do any thing for the edification of others." He feared he would not recover. Yet, on that sickbed, his meditations were exercised on the theme of spir-

itual-mindedness. He found these meditations a blessing to his own soul in his sufferings. When he recovered, he was inclined to preach on this theme.

He did it not only because he had been blessed, but because he was convinced this theme was important for the congregation. He found the world pressing itself on people's minds in many ways. He knew that if the world succeeded in filling minds, some would be hardened against all faith and obedience and others weakened in their graces. He found much changing in his society, noting: "the world is at present in a mighty hurry" to throw away long established foundations. In that context, he found people "walk and talk as if the world were all," and, coming to church with all their thoughts and desires toward the earth, were not being blessed in church. He found people making a profession of religion, but in their habits, priorities, dress, conversations, "over-liberal entertainment of themselves," and many things they betrayed carnal minds.

You might think he was writing about our day. Then he has a message for us today. We can be thankful he was led to not only preach but write on this theme. His point is that, unless we have a measure of spiritual-mindedness, "no grace will thrive or flourish in us, no duty will be rightly performed by us, no condition sanctified or improved, nor are we prepared in a due manner, or 'made meet for the inheritance of the saints in light.'"

Key Words

Owen based his book on Romans 8:6: "For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace." Here is a great contrast between two minds: carnal and spiritual. Carnal means fleshly. The contrast is not physical versus spiritual or body versus soul. The contrast is between two types of minds. One is governed by the flesh and the other is governed by the Holy Spirit.

Flesh represents what we are by nature. Flesh is the depraved nature we received from the first Adam through our original sin. It is so bad that verse 7 confesses that "the carnal mind is enmity against God." The natural mind is hatred against God, being adverse to God's glory and work. The result is that "they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh" (v.5) and "walk after the flesh" (v.4). Depravity governs mind and heart and life and all!

Spirit is what the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of sinners. He makes His people spiritual. He renews the mind, overcomes enmity, works spiritual life, dispels spiritual darkness, and gives light. He subdues rebellion and gives submission. He makes all things new. What He works is spiritual in the sense of being influenced and governed by the Holy Spirit. Owen says it is "the holy, vital principle of new obedience, wrought in the souls of believers by the Holy Ghost, enabling them to live unto God" (Works, 269).

"Mind" is the mind, with all its powers to think, but also our "habitual frame and inclination of the affections." It involves not just what we think, but our love and desires for the things about which we think.

Owen observes: "The difference between these two states is great, and the distance in a manner infinite, because an eternity in blessedness or misery doth depend upon it." The most basic question is whether we are still carnal or have become spiritual. At the same time, one who is renewed and has the Holy Spirit working life will find the principle of the flesh within him. That is why those who have received the Holy Spirit are called to be more spiritually minded.

What is Spiritual-mindedness?

Spiritual-mindedness involves two main aspects.

1. A mind drawn to think of spiritual things.

Our mind is filled with thoughts as a tree is covered with blossoms. Words and deeds are the fruits of those blossoms. There are always many more blossoms than fruits, more thoughts than deeds. Spiritual-mindedness focuses on the character of the blossoms in the mind which are bound to bear fruit in our life. The character of the blossoms determines the character of the fruit! The character

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SUBSCRIPTION RATE
Canada & U.S.A. - **\$33.00 ANNUALLY**
PER SUBSCRIPTION The Messenger is
published 11 times per year (July & August
issues are combined).

SUBSCRIPTIONS/REMITTANCES
Subscription requests, invoices, and
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**SUBMISSIONS/ANNOUNCEMENTS/
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announcements, obituaries, anniversaries,
and non-commercial advertisements for
the **JANUARY 2022** issue should reach the
editor no later than **TUESDAY, DECEMBER**
7TH, 2021 and should be sent to:
Mrs. Rhonda Kroesbergen
(Messenger Administrator)
E: messenger@frcna.org

OPEN WINDOWS
This bi-monthly publication for children is
under the direction of the Free Reformed
Publications Committee:
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of the blossoms is a clear indication of the condition of the heart. “As [a man] thinketh in his heart, so is he,” Proverbs 23:7 states.

More specifically, “thoughts which are voluntary, unforced, and arise naturally – because they are delighted in and bring satisfaction to the mind – these are the thoughts which show us the real truth about ourselves” (p.8). A spiritual mind is one that naturally rises upward to spiritual things in the sea of this world, rather than naturally sinking to the mud below.

Thus, spiritual-mindedness is more than thinking about spiritual things because we have to. A businessman is not necessarily unspiritual because he has to think about his business, and a minister is not necessarily spiritual because he has to think about the Bible. A minister may be unspiritual if he only thinks of spiritual things because he has to do so for his work. A businessman may be spiritual when his heart naturally goes upward amid his work and in his spare moments (8-9).

We are carnally minded in church if our heart is not in it. We are spiritually minded when walking through the grocery store and moved with the thought that all those people have a soul. If we only think of God when we have to, we show we are carnal. We show a spiritual mind when our thoughts rise to God.

Let us ask ourselves: what do I think of when I have nothing to think of? What are my first thoughts when I wake up and last thoughts when I go to sleep? What are my thoughts when I drive

around in my car or walk from one place to another? “Consider how much time you spend thinking about spiritual things compared to how much time you spend thinking about other things” (p.36). The carnal mind sinks down to sin, or at best the earth, and the spiritual mind rises to God. Owen writes: “many complain that when they think of spiritual things, worldly thoughts intrude. Well then, when you think of worldly things, do spiritual things intrude? If they do, then there is evidence that you are spiritually minded” (37).

Spiritual-mindedness is different from giftedness. A person can have a gift to teach or pray without a heart drawn to the things above. Owen says: “when gifts...stir up grace, they are wonderfully useful. But if gifts take the place of grace, then they damage our souls” (20). Let us remember the words of the Lord Jesus: “where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:21).

2. A delight in the beauty of spiritual things.

Spiritual-mindedness is about having a sense of the excellency of spiritual things so that you value them. As a result, your mind and heart are set upon them.

The carnal mind cannot understand the things of God. It cannot see their value and therefore cannot delight in them. Our nature is contrary to them. But when God renews our heart, we come to delight in them. “All spiritual and heavenly objects are from God in Christ and therefore have an infinite beauty, goodness and loveliness about them which makes them powerfully attractive to renewed spiritual desires”

This esteem of these treasures makes spiritual-mindedness so delightful. Spiritual-mindedness gives a relish and delight in thinking of God because it flows from love to Him! It does not involve forcing our thoughts to think of unpleasant things, but being filled with a sense of their beauty!

Spiritual-mindedness gives delight in the use of the means God is pleased to bless to show Himself: prayer, hearing, reading and meditation. It “delights to meet with God through Christ in every duty of religious worship, whereas the tamed heart is only concerned with the outward observance of the ceremony of religious worship, appreciating nothing of its spiritual significance” (165). The spiritual mind does not just go through religious motions, but aims to find God through Christ in those duties. The spiritual mind is not just filled with doctrines and ideas, but longs for communion with the One who reveals Himself in His Word. “A renewed heart loves spiritual things because God is in them. It loves God for himself and not for what he does for us” (161).

Spiritual-mindedness delights in the things of God and therefore is drawn to think of them and to the God of them.

What reason this subject gives to heed God’s call: “If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth” (Col. 3:1-2). ¹¹

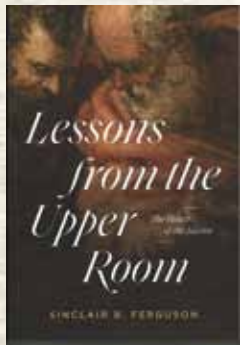


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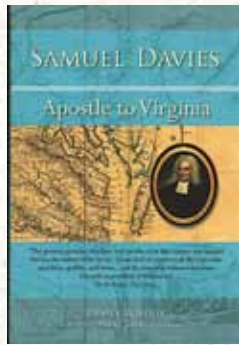


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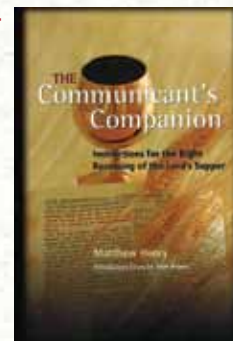
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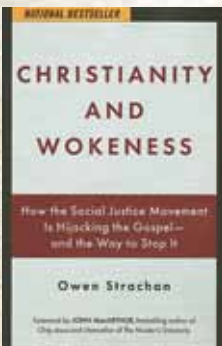
from cradle to grave. With the publication of this biography, the great Samuel Davies will no longer be an obscure figure from the past. It deserves a place on the bookshelves of those who have read the biographies of Whitefield, Spurgeon, McCheyne, Edwards, Lloyd-Jones, and other great Christian ministers. Hardcover, 436 pages, Soli Fide Publishers. **RBS Price \$33.00**

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By Matthew Henry

Matthew Henry (1662-1714) is best known for his commentaries on the Bible, wherein he applied his pastoral gifts to providing a practical and devotional commentary for all to read. In this magnificent work, Henry provides that same pastoral insight on the topic of the Lord's Supper. He explains the nature of the Supper, how one should prepare his heart before taking it, the responsible way to receive it, and the benefits granted to worthy partakers. Softcover, 298 pages, Solid Ground Christian Books. **RBS Price \$20.00**



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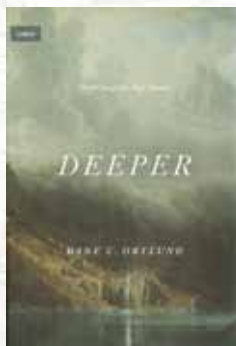
Christianity and Wokeness: How the Social Justice Movement is Hijacking the Gospel - and the Way to Stop It
By Owen Strachan

The "wokeness" that emerged from the social unrest of 2020

has swept through schools, businesses, and even sports. Grippled by a desire for justice and rightly grieved by past evils like slavery, many pastors are preaching the woke gospel-identifying "whiteness" (an imaginary concept) with "white supremacy," calling bewildered Christians to repent of their supposed guilt for the sins of past generations. But as theologian Owen Strachan makes clear, this is not true justice, nor is it true Christianity. While wokeness employs biblical vocabulary and concepts, it is an alternative religion, a potent blend of racism, paganism, and grievance. It is not simply not the Gospel; it is anti-Gospel, as Strachan explains. Hardcover, 243 pages, Regnery Publishing
RBS Price \$25.00

Deeper: Real Change for Real Sinners
By Dane Ortlund

How do Christians grow? Few question the call of the Bible to grow in godliness, but the answer to exactly how this happens is often elusive. In this book, Dane Ortlund points believers to Christ, making the case that sanctification does not happen by doing more or becoming better, but by going deeper into the wondrous gospel truths that washed over them when they were first united to Christ. Drawing on wisdom from figures throughout church history, Ortlund encourages readers to fix their gaze on Jesus in the battle against sin, casting themselves upon His grace and living out their identity in Christ. Hardcover, 185 pages, Crossway. **RBS Price \$19.00**



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By Alistair Begg

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PILGRIMS AND PURITANS IN AMERICA (12)

THE THREE MATHERS: RICHARD, INCREASE, AND COTTON

A survey of leading New England Puritans would not be complete without “the three Mathers”: Richard, Increase, and Cotton. For almost a century, the Mathers were leading lights in the firmament of the Massachusetts Congregational churches. As George Harper writes, “From Richard Mather’s arrival in 1635, through the long, fruitful pastorate of his son Increase, to the death in 1728 of his grandson Cotton, they were a spiritual dynasty.”¹ The following is a brief sketch of the lives and influence of these three eminent servants of the Lord.

Richard Mather (1596-1669)

Richard, the founder of this ecclesiastical dynasty, was born in 1596 near Liverpool, in northern England. He came to faith in his late teens and his change from darkness to light followed the common Puritan pattern. Richard’s grandson, Cotton, describes his grandfather’s conversion as

a thorough and real conversion...occasioned by observing a difference between his own walk and the most exact, watchful, fruitful and prayerful conversation [conduct] of some in the family of the learned and pious Mr. Edward Aspinwal, of Toxteth, where he sojourned. This exemplary walk of that holy man caused many sad fears to arise in his own soul that he was himself *out of the way*. The troubles of soul which attended his new birth were so exceedingly terrible, that he would often retire from his appointed meals unto secret places, to lament his miseries; but after some time, and about the eighteenth year of his age, the good Spirit of God healed his broken heart, by pouring thereinto the evangelical consolations of His great and precious promises.²

After his studies at Oxford University, Richard Mather was ordained in 1619 to the ministry in the Church of England. For over ten years, he performed his ministerial duties faithfully in accordance with Scripture and the Reformed Confessions. This got him into trouble with archbishop William Laud, who suspended Richard from his position in 1633 and removed him from it permanently a year later. Like many other Puritan ministers who endured a similar lot, Richard decided to move to America, which he did in 1635.

Shortly after his arrival in New England, Mather was installed as pastor of the small congregation of Dorchester, on the outskirts of Boston, Massachusetts. He soon earned his reputation as a leading minister in the colony.

Among his most important accomplishments were the following:

1. He insisted that applicants for church membership provide evidence



RICHARD MATHER

of their conversion to ensure that the church would continue to be composed of “visible saints” only.

2. He became the main contributor to the *Cambridge Platform*, a document containing rules and regulations for the government of New England’s Congregational Churches.
3. He subsequently modified the *Platform* to allow baptized non-members who were unable to testify to a conversion experience to present their infants for baptism. This modification was known as the *Half-Way Covenant*.

Cotton Mather sums up the impact of his grandfather’s ministry this way:

His way of preaching was very plain, studiously avoiding obscure and foreign terms...and aiming to shoot his arrows, not over the *heads*, but into the *hearts* of his hearers. Yet so scripturally and powerfully did he preach his plain sermons, that...he saw a great success of his labours, in both Englands [Old and New], converting many souls to God.”³

Richard Mather died in 1669 as one of the last of that first generation of spiritual giants.

Increase Mather (1639-1723)

Increase Mather was born in Dorchester, Massachusetts on June 21, 1639, as the youngest son of Richard Mather. He entered Harvard in 1651 and graduated in 1656. In 1657, on his eighteenth birthday, he went to Dublin, Ireland to study at Trinity College, where he graduated a year later with an M.A. Although he was offered several attractive ecclesiastical positions in England, he turned them down because they were conditional on conformity to the regulations of the Established Church. He returned to America the winter of 1661-1662.

After preaching at Second Congregational Church of Boston for two years, he was ordained there on the May 27, 1664, and remained in that congregation until his death. As a delegate to the Synod of 1662, he opposed the *Half-Way Covenant* adopted by the Synod and defended by his father, Richard Mather. However, he was eventually persuaded to go along with the decision and even be-



INCREASE MATHER

came an ardent exponent of it.

He became bitterly opposed, however, to the liberal practices that followed the *Half-Way Covenant* and rejected especially the doctrine of “Stoddardianism,” taught by Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729), who said that all “such Persons as have a good Conversation and a Competent Knowledge may come to the Lord’s Supper,” only those of openly immoral life being excluded. Increase Mather was afraid that giving the unconverted access to this sacrament would undermine the purity of the church. His fears proved to be well-founded.

Like his father, Increase’s fame rests mainly on his preaching gifts. During his fifty-year long ministry at the Boston church, he spent most of his waking hours in his study “preparing the biblically

grounded, theologically sophisticated sermons his flock demanded.”⁴

In 1685, Increase was elected president of Harvard College and helped to appoint two very able men to the faculty, a decision he later regretted. Because he insisted on retaining his pastorate in Boston, his absence at Harvard made it difficult for him to stay in touch with what was happening. As it turned out, the two professors began to flirt with broad-church rationalism, which resulted in some of the students joining the Church of England. Increase raised his voice in defense of Calvinist orthodoxy, but his absence from the campus made it very difficult for

him to mount an effective and sustained offensive. The result was that, in 1701, his progressive opponents were able to engineer his ouster from the college. For Mather, this was the low point of his ministry.

When he died in 1723 at the age of eighty-four, Increase was mourned by many, even by those who had opposed him on some important issues. One of them, Benjamin Colman, referred to him as “the patriarch and prophet among us, if anyone might be so called.”⁵

Cotton Mather (1663-1728)

The third member of the Mather dynasty was Cotton. Born in 1663 in Boston, the son of Increase and grandson of Richard Mather and John Cotton, after whom he was named, young Cotton showed great intellectual prowess early in life. He graduated from Harvard at the age of fifteen! Having experienced con-



COTTON MATHER

version as a teenager, he followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather and became a minister of the Gospel. After he had overcome a speech impediment at the age of seventeen, Cotton was invited to preach in the Boston churches and was well received. He was ordained in 1685 and became associate pastor with his father at Boston's North Church. Cotton shared his father's commitment to orthodox, experiential, and evangelical Calvinism.

Yet, significant differences existed between father and son concerning methods, emphases, and priorities. As Dr. Beeke explains, "Increase Mather focused on preaching and corporate worship; Cotton focused on outreach, going door to door in Boston, evangelizing the unchurched... Whereas Increase's sermons were plain and direct, Cotton's were flowery and ornate, full of literary references and theological tangents." According to Beeke, Cotton Mather also differed from his father in that he dabbled in mysticism. His diaries make mention of meetings with angels, one of whom even told him that Christ would return in 1776.⁶ Strange as this sounds, Cotton was nevertheless a faithful and dedicated preacher and pastor with a burden for the souls entrusted to his care.

His main legacy as a Puritan divine, however, consists of the numerous books that he wrote during his forty-year long ministry: 469 volumes containing biblical expositions, theology, church history, biography, science, and philosophy. His most famous work is his *Magnalia Christi Americana* or *The Great Works of Christ in America*.

Sadly, critics of Puritanism have very little good to say about especially Cotton Mather. His name is forever associated with the Salem Witch Trials, which resulted in the execution of nineteen alleged witches in 1692. It is true that Cotton, like most of his contemporaries, believed in witches and that he wrote in defense of the Salem trials. What is usually not mentioned, however, is that he denounced the way these trials were conducted and insisted that the judges should base their verdicts on more objective and credible evidence. It is also a fact that the united opposition of Boston's clergy led to the termination of the trials, thereby saving dozens from the gallows.

Despite certain weaknesses and flaws in his character and ministry, Cotton Mather was a true servant of God who contributed greatly to the cause of Christ in New England and even in America as a whole. Drawing from English Puritans like Richard Baxter and German Pietists like August Hermann Francke, Cotton Mather was instrumental in forging a distinctively American evangelical spirituality. For many years, he prayed and laboured for a spiritual awakening in New England. He did not live to see a mighty outpouring of the Spirit.

His death in 1728 brought an end to the Mather dynasty, but, as Beeke writes, "only twelve years after Cotton Mather's death, great revival did come to New England. The Great Awakening that followed extended Mather's vision into all the colonies."⁷

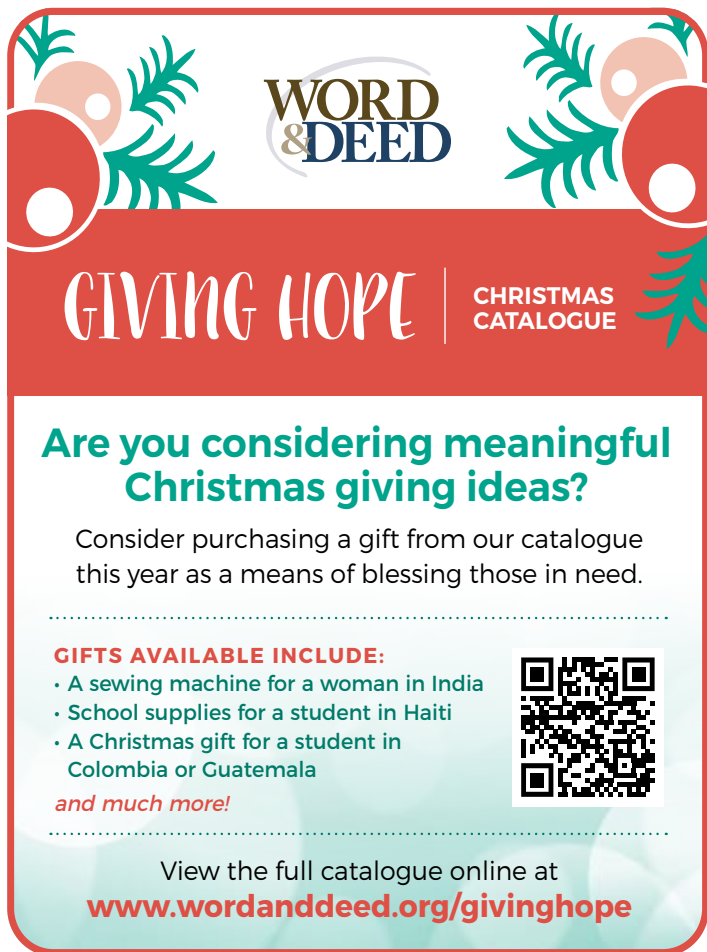
(Endnotes)

- 1 George W. Harper, "New England Dynasty," *Christian History* 41 (1994): 23.
- 2 Cotton Mather, *The Great Works of Christ in America*, vol. 1: 445-446.
- 3 Cotton Mather, *The Great Works of God in America*, vol. 1: 452.
- 4 Harper, *Christian History*, 21.
- 5 Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 421.
- 6 Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 421.
- 7 Beeke, *Meet the Puritans*, 425.

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A LIFE OF SELF-DENIAL AND COURAGE

Ann Judson: A Missionary Life for Burma by Sharon James. Published by EP Books, Welwyn Garden City, UK. 2017. Softcover, 286 pages.

It has been said that we should read at least one good biography annually to be motivated for Christian service. I believe this book is one of them. It is already in the seventh edition and includes copious selections from the memoir and letters of the main character, Ann Judson, who was also a talented and prolific writer. Sharon James has done us a great service by bringing the life of this self-sacrificing missionary wife to our attention.

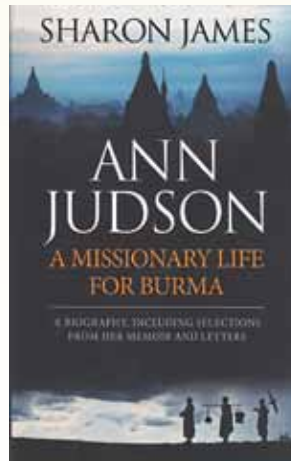
Ann Judson's life was relatively brief. She was born in New England in 1789 into a well-to-do Christian home. She was popular and enjoyed parties. She wrote in her diary that she thought of herself as "the happiest creature on earth" until she was sixteen and a new teacher at the academy she attended challenged the students with the truth that unless they "were converted they would be eternally lost" (p. 16).

Many young people, including Ann, were converted during this early period of the Second Great Awakening in the New England colonies. She went through great soul struggles, but already as a young teen read books by Jonathan Edwards, John Bunyan, and others, deciding to live a life of service by training as a teacher. She confides in her journal: "As Providence has placed me in a situation of life, where I have had an opportunity of getting as good an education as I desire, I feel it would be highly criminal in me not to improve [use] it. I feel also that it would be equally criminal to desire to be well-educated and accomplished, from selfish motives, with a view merely to gratify my taste and relish for improvement, or my pride in being qualified to shine" (p. 31). At age 21, when she was serving at a "General Association of Congregational ministers, four young men were offering themselves for a lifetime of overseas missionary service, the first Americans ever to do so" (p. 35). One of the students was Adoniram Judson.

In 1812, she married Adoniram and they were commissioned to set sail for India, despite the prevailing opposition of family and friends. "No female had ever left America as a Missionary to the heathen" (p. 37). They set out from Salem, New England in August 1813 in "a two-masted ship with square-rigged sails" (p. 49). The journey to Calcutta took nearly six months. During the voyage, Ann recorded in her journal: "Sea-sick all day, and unable to do anything. My thoughts more than usual, fixed on divine things. Longed for the enjoyment of God's presence on our passage, that we may be preparing for usefulness in future life. In the night, had many distressing apprehensions of death. Felt unwilling to die on the sea, not so much on account of my state after death, as the dreadfulness of perishing amid the waves" (p. 49). She also knew that the East India Company, a prominent British trading company, was "violently opposed to missions, and have barely given liberty to their own countrymen to settle here [India] as preachers" (p. 51).

At Calcutta they entered an unknown world of culture and language without even a specific destination. The Judsons were on their own. "We have nothing to expect from man, and every thing from God," Ann wrote (p. 55). They spent a night with Dr. Carey, a British missionary, and then travelled on another long and tortuous journey to Burma (present-day Myanmar), an isolated pagan country between India and China, surrounded by mountains. Here they met with seemingly insurmountable obstacles, not the least of them the gruesome sacrificial rituals of human torture and the inhumane methods used to administer justice – so horrible that one shudders to read the details Ann records in her journal.

Adoniram soon realized that if he was to help the Burmans to understand the Gospel, he needed to have the Scriptures in their own language. This eventually led to a first conversion in 1819, six years after their arrival. Slowly,



a little, feeble, solitary band, the first Burmese "church" was started in 1820.


Thirteen years after their arrival, Ann died in Burma at the age of 37, while her husband was away exploring a new settlement for mission work in Burma. For the previous two years, no one had known whether they were alive or dead. They had been trapped in the capital of Burma when the first Anglo-Burman war broke out in 1824. Only afterwards did the true story of Adoniram's horrific imprisonment and Ann's fearless and persistent efforts on his behalf become known. Ann's knowledge of the culture and language, which was written in a completely different script, was the means the Lord used to keep her husband alive in the much-feared *death* prison, where he was tortured and shackled because the Burmans, who were enemies of the British, could not distinguish between them and Americans.

Day after day, exposed to the very hot climate, Ann had walked the journey to the prison to bring food to her husband and visited numerous authorities begging them to release her husband. During this time, Ann gave birth to her second baby (the first one had died due to poor nourishment a few years earlier). Just then, a medical doctor visited the area, and she wrote: "My recovery seemed to myself and all around me a perfect miracle" (p. 218). Miraculously, Adoniram escaped beheading because the Burmans realized his knowledge of English might help them to receive favours from the English conquerors.

Afterwards, Ann became so ill with cerebral spinal meningitis that when Adoniram was freed at last, he found her in what seemed to him "the last degree of emaciation." The hardships, especially the continuously hot climate, as well as the primitive medical methods practiced during this time had taken a toll on Ann. Slowly, she recovered and then faded away and died while Adoniram was on a months-long journey to negotiate the new mission field. When he came home, he found Ann had died a month earlier. Adoniram was heart-broken with grief, and soon, six months after her mother, his little Maria also died. In a letter, he bemoans the loss of Ann and his little daughter, stating that "we know assuredly that we shall die no more, we shall make heaven's arches ring with songs of praise to Him, who hath loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood" (p. 245).

Adoniram continued his mission work and established churches in Burma with the help of two successive wives, who carried the torch by also enduring the hardships of mission work.

We might ask, what did this dreadful suffering accomplish? In Appendix I, Sharon James answers this question. First, Ann was a great help to her husband especially in teaching, personal work, and translation into both the Burmese and Siamese languages. Judson's Bible translation is still considered to be very accurate today. Second, humanly speaking, only her tireless effort and knowledge of the Burman culture and language during the English/Burman war preserved Adoniram's life. Third, her writing motivated others in America and the United Kingdom to pursue mission work. Fourth, she was a passionate advocate of female education, as she explains in an address recorded in Appendix II. We might add that the churches that were planted in Burma continue to the present.

Ann Judson was a woman who loved intensely. She loved her husband, loved her children, loved the people of Burma, but above all, she loved God. "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord..." Revelation 14:13. 

This book may be purchased in Canada at Reformed Book Services in Brantford, Ontario, and at Reformation Heritage Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, U.S.A.

THOUGHTS ON FUNERALS



Our FRCNA is a relatively young federation. Our oldest congregation is remembering their centennial this year (2021). Many of our congregations were founded in the 1950s, and many of the generation which originally formed our congregations have passed away. Every year, we can read in our federation's Yearbook the number of members we lost to death. In 2019, we lost twenty-eight and in 2020, twenty-seven members passed away. Funerals are becoming more common among us.

Our church order does not give much guidance for funerals, simply stating that these are not worship services but family affairs. The question remains then, what characterizes a Christian funeral? The Bible describes numerous funerals in which the bereaved laid to rest their loved ones by placing their bodies in sealed caves or burying them in graves. The respect for the body is evident throughout Scripture. Consider the burial of Christ's close friend, Lazarus, or the burial of Abraham's wife, Sarah. Considerable care was taken to prepare the bodies of loved ones for their burial. Think of Christ's burial in a new, never used tomb!

At the time of the death of a family member, emotions are often raw and clear thinking becomes a challenge. It is so helpful and advisable for us to pre-plan our funerals. Those of us who know Christ as their Saviour and are looking forward to being with Him may view their death as a preparation for their wedding of the bride to the eternal Bridegroom. Planning a fu-

neral for those who die in the Lord includes the truth that their death is precious in the sight of the Lord (Psalm 116:15). We love to sing Psalter 32, a versification of Psalm 17: "When I in righteousness at last Thy glorious face shall see, when all the weary night is past, and I awake with Thee to view the glories that abide, then, then I shall be satisfied."

All funerals are solemn reminders of our mortality as we are confronted with the wages of sin. Those of us who have sat by loved ones as they breathed their last and have seen the great change that comes over the body have those sights etched in our minds. For the survivors, death seems so final. We are separated from the ones we love. Funerals ought to be solemn. Our Lord wept at the graveside of His friend Lazarus.

What should be included at our Christian funerals? The Bible suggests the placing of the body in the earth. Funeral homes can assist with the preplanning and knowing the cemetery rules which vary among municipalities. Funeral costs can be prohibitive but preplanning with prepaying can lessen the financial burden on the family. A message to the living is most appropriate as funerals are often also family reunions. Many who may not regularly attend worship services may be addressed with the gospel. Christ ought always to be the focus at Christian funerals – not the deceased. A Christian brother or sister would not want it any other way. Funerals may be led by family members

or friends of the deceased, but, since the gospel may be proclaimed, having an ordained pastor has been our common practice. The congregation of the deceased expects their pastor or counsellor to conduct the service and he has been professionally trained to do so.

In North America, we have plenty of space for burials in cemeteries. There are places, however, where space is very limited. An example is the city state of Singapore, where the officials, though allowing burials, encourage cremation. Is that a biblical alternative? Our confessions and the Scriptures do not specifically address this question, but when we think of our Heidelberg Catechism question and answer 1, we must conclude that our bodies belong to the Lord and are precious to Him. Question 57 also strongly implies that the body is to be buried and will rise from the grave to be reunited with the soul. The familiar confession of Job 19:25-26 also focuses on the resurrection of the body. We know that the power of Christ to reunite soul and body in the resurrection is not hindered by our turning to dust or being burned to ashes. Consider our persecuted brothers and sisters throughout the ages who were burned to death. In the past such a death was considered a curse, as it was in the Scriptures (see Amos 2:1). Yes, the miracle of the resurrection will most definitely be realized (1 Cor. 15:42-57). Nevertheless, Christian burial is certainly the biblical choice, not cremation!

During our lives, while our minds are still healthy, we owe it to our loved ones to tell them of our saving relationship with Christ. It is so difficult to prepare a funeral message for the family if they do not know that their loved one is with the Lord. This, dear reader, is a gospel call to you today. If you are still shackled to your sin or a tradition of unbelief, now is the time to cry out to God, "Lord, save me from myself, my sins, my unbelief". Christ calls you today. If you hear His voice, harden not your hearts but repent and live! (Psalm 95:8, Psalter 255:4)

Let us honour God with our confession and with well-prepared, Christ-focused funerals.

Free Reformed Publications has a booklet that is a tremendous help for funeral preparations, entitled *My Wishes: A Guide for Arrangements after I Die*. Filling out this booklet lets your loved ones know your wishes concerning the announcing of your death, visitation hours, funeral, and other arrangements. This 23 page booklet is available from Free Reformed Publications for \$5.00 per copy. ①

Mr. Henk Kleyn is new publications coordinator for Free Reformed Publications.

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RELATIONSHIPS (5):

A BROKEN FAMILY

SCRIPTURE READING: GENESIS 27:41-28:9

We usually speak of a broken family after a divorce, but there are also other causes that break up families and estrange family members from each other. These causes can include personality clashes, conflicts over inheritances, mistreatment, or abuse within a family. In Genesis 27, we see that a family is broken. Was this a personality conflict between sons to which the two parents responded differently? Or was there more behind this conflict?

Ultimately it concerned who would be the spiritual heir of Isaac. The way Rebekah and Jacob dealt with this conflict had great consequences for the entire family. For Jacob, it meant having to leave home. These events teach us a lot about the theme of “relationships,” including our relationship with God.

What Jacob’s Brother Wished

Sometimes the only apparent solution for a family in a bind is for one of its members to live elsewhere (for a time). This arrangement can be a constructive “time-out,” especially if there is not only verbal but even (threatened) physical abuse. This was the situation at the end of Genesis 27. After Jacob carried out Rebekah’s plan of deception toward Isaac, Esau was furious! He uttered threats of murder.

These threats arose not only from a deeply rooted hatred of Jacob, but also from Esau’s determination to get his first-born rights back. He now values them more than he did when he sold them for some pottage, and, if he kills Jacob, he will be the only heir.

Thankfully, Jacob’s hasty flight prevented Esau from carrying out his threats and led Esau to take a different approach. He realized that his parents had sent Jacob to their relatives in Padan-Aram to find a wife from among them. This action is a repetition of Genesis 24. Esau feels that this arrangement is related to Jacob’s future position as the heir of Isaac. He also knows what his parents think of the two Canaanite wives whom he has married already. Genesis 28:8 repeats that Esau’s parents were not happy with these marriages, to put it mildly (cf. Gen. 26:34-35). This disapproval explains why Esau now marries Mahalath, a grandchild of Abraham (Gen. 28:9). Was this attempt to regain Isaac’s approval successful? Without realizing it, Esau had failed. All attempts to be “spiritual” in our own way are doomed to similar failure.

What Jacob’s Mother Prays

The mother of this family also had to learn the fruitlessness of trying to attain in her own way what can only be received by grace. Genesis 27 is not flattering to Rebekah in her calculated attempts to get what she wanted. Her love to her husband and her relationship with God are at a low ebb. To accomplish her objective, she does not even hesitate to use lies. This event also sheds some light on a character trait that frequently surfaces in Jacob. He did not get his

deceptiveness from a stranger. This reminds us that we are not only born with sin, but also learn it from others. Jacob received his deceit from his mother by both inheritance and example. How important then is the example we show as parents to our children! Our language, what we listen to and watch, and how we relate to the church and to each other exert a quiet and yet powerful influence on our children. What reason we have to prayerfully and conscientiously raise our children. Sometimes even the most subtle patterns of life can have long-standing influence. God is also pleased to use positive examples for the good of children. Let that be our desire.

Let us also not overlook the positive aspects which Rebekah still reflects in this account. Despite all that was wrong, Rebekah did have an eye for God's blessing and for a life that fits with that blessing. She understands that her sons will not be blessed marrying Canaanite wives. That is why she comes up with a plan to send Jacob to Padan-Aram to find what her father-in-law had also desired for her husband: a wife with whom he could fear and serve God.

What Jacob's Father Gave Him

Amid the shadows of this account, one point of light is Isaac and Rebekah's full agreement in sending Jacob to their relatives. Isaac was open to his wife's arguments. His willingness to agree with her is striking in its relation to both Rebekah and Jacob. When he speaks of Jacob, he issues no rebuke. This approach was wise. In being led by his own culinary tastes and family preferences, he had lost sight of God's purpose and will, but now he had recovered his sight again. That is why his silence was not a sign of weakness toward his son. Instead, Isaac bows in acceptance of God's will. How we need to learn to bow under God, whether in initial repentance or ongoing repentance.

We also see that Isaac not only passively accepts God's arrangement, but he actively gives a gift along with his son. Before sending him to his relatives in Haran, he blesses him again. If you listen well, you will notice this blessing differs in tone from that pronounced in Genesis 27:28-29. In hindsight, the first blessing was more focused on the earth, which is not surprising given Isaac's earthly-mindedness at the time. In Genesis 28, God has made Isaac more spiritual again and that shows in his blessing, which has a more spiritual tone. This blessing is not about prosperity and success, but the blessing of Abraham. It is the blessing of the "seed" and the "land" which God promised to Abraham while he was a pilgrim on earth (Gen. 28:4).


What Jacob's God Sent Him

With that blessing, Jacob set out on his journey. What more could Jacob desire? To have God's blessing is to have everything! But as he leaves, he does not feel how rich he is. He must leave his familiar surroundings. He had to leave the tents in which he gladly dwelt (Gen. 25:27). He had to leave his parents, including his mother whom he would never see again. He has a blessing pronounced upon him, but heads out as a penniless wanderer. He is promised authority, but must serve as a servant of Laban.

Some may say: "That is what he deserves for his deceit! God is punishing Jacob's sin in this way." It is true that God's children do not sin cheaply. Yet, God did not only send him punishment. Along this way, God would instruct him and make him grow spiritually. He empties him to make room in his heart for the fulfilment of His promises.

Is that not an essential aspect of the relationship between God and His children? Promised blessing and salvation must be applied. Room must be made for that blessing. That is why Jacob must set out on his journey. This journey will not simply bring him to Haran, but also to Bethel and Penial. Jacob does not realize that at this time, but

God will teach him much on his journey.

In these ways, this historical account not only shows us the varying fruits of Isaac and Rebekah's upbringing, but also something of the way in which the heavenly Father raises His children. He raises them by making them small. He is wise, patient, and full of love and the best of intentions for His children. 

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 (April 16, 2021), the bi-weekly periodical of our sister churches in the Netherlands

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 01** In 1 Corinthians 2:14, Paul states that the natural man does not understand the things of God. How does that truth show itself in Esau? What can we learn from that?
- 02** Sinful conduct is both inherited and taught. Secularists see it as only taught. What dangers are there in seeing it as only inherited?
- 03** In the past, parents saw it as a sign of weakness to admit their sins and shortcomings towards their children. Why is that an unbiblical approach? What is the right way?
- 04** As parents, have you drawn from God's dealings with you practical lessons for the raising of your children? If so, what lessons?

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The 100th Anniversary of the Pompton Plains Free Reformed Church



On November 7, 1921 the Free Reformed Church (Vrije Gereformeerde Gemeente) of Clifton, New Jersey was instituted. Around twenty years ago it relocated to Pompton Plains, New Jersey. This makes the Pompton Plains congregation the oldest in our federation, the second oldest being the Grand Rapids congregation (established June 28, 1944). As denomination we give thanks to the Lord for the many ways in which this congregation and its office-bearers have been a blessing to us and commend it to the Lord, as “our hope for years to come.” Below is an address given by their pastor, Rev. J. Lewis, on the occasion of their 100th anniversary.

Introduction

My dear congregation,

Psalm 118 is believed to be written as an antiphonal hymn. This means it was a chant, sung responsively, from the priests to the people and the people to the priests, on some joyful occasion marking a memorial. Psalm 136 is also an antiphonal psalm, from the first verse to the last.

Psalm 136 and then Psalm 118 captured my attention as I thought of what this evening means. Especially Psalm 118:5: “I called upon the LORD in distress: the LORD answered me, and set me in a large place.” As you know, our church name, at her birth, was Rehoboth, “the LORD has made room.” Indeed, He has made room for us. Yet more striking to me than the room He has made for us over the past century is the refrain of verses 1-4: “that his mercy endureth for ever.”

This, dear congregation, should be our lasting refrain. It is this subject that we hope to meditate on this evening, as we 1) remember our past, 2) pray for our present, and 3) hope for our future.

Remembering our Past:

“that his mercy endureth for ever”.

Some have asked why we have not made more of this event than

we have. Others have written books or done something far grander than this secluded gathering of a little flock. But we believe this honors God best. When we survey the 100 years of our congregation’s history, there are many reasons to rejoice, but also many reasons why we should have been cut off long ago, even at our inception. We are truly a picture of Israel of old.

The failings of Israel’s leaders, the complaining of her members, their idolatry, unbelief, and trusting in man, each could have caused the cloud and pillar to be removed from Israel’s midst. Likewise for us, with no ground to claim as merit, the covenant-keeping Jehovah has not removed His candlestick. Instead He has done far more than we deserve. Truly, He has shown us that “His mercy endureth forever.”

As an immigrant church, many events of our past show us this mercy. We faced a new land, new language, and new opportunities as we formed a gathered-out community. A coming of age followed, with a change of location and situation, many afflictions and blessed recoveries, many sins and pleadings for forgiveness. For our congregation, birthdays, death-days, wedding days, loss of parents, family, friends, property, and Old and New Year’s days have rolled on one after another for a century. So many confessions of faith, baptisms, and Lord’s Suppers took place. Eight

ministers, some 25 elders, and 40 deacons served our flock. These all seem like suitable reasons to pause and say, “His mercy endureth forever” toward to an undeserving and unfaithful people.

Remembering our Present: “that his mercy endureth for ever.”

We have grown and changed as a congregation. In many ways, we have begun to emerge from our Dutch subculture, engaging our society more. This is necessary. While our beginning was needful, the Lord never intended that we should remain as we were. Our hope for the present ought to be that we retain all that was precious in our past and freshly apply it to our present. What was said of King David in Acts 13:36 should be our desire, “For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep, and was laid with his fathers.” We must focus on the rising generation.

Yes, we are burdened for our youth, as many are. We see many of our young people, and even ourselves, standing with one foot in the world and one foot in the church, torn between two wills and ways. The modern church says that we need to become more relevant to keep ahead. But don’t we need more of the Spirit’s presence, more sincerity in life, humility in conduct, brokenness for sin, earnest and humble prayer, a lively faith, greater sanctification, and a pleading of the promises?

That we have been blessed in retaining most of our youth is proof that “His mercy endureth forever.” Yet our greatest challenge is to find *new feet walking on old paths*. A conveying of that single, timeless truth of the one thing needful and preaching 100% law and 100% gospel in their place.

We can say that our greatest *external* enemy is not persecution, but worldliness. The inordinate amount of influence upon us from the prevailing culture will, if the Spirit does not move afresh, engulf us. Complacency is our great enemy within. Revelation 3:2 should be our watchword and encouragement, “Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I

have not found thy works perfect before God.”

Among our older and elderly, the Spirit has untied many knots bound up in our past. More is still to be done in this regard. Rightly understanding our Three Forms of Unity is key, only second to rightly dividing the Word of Truth and applying its message. In this we must continue, praying the Spirit will shine His light on many more to show the willingness of Christ, the accessibility of Christ, and to lead many, to quote our Saviour, “to strive to enter in.”

Our Hope for the Future: “that his mercy endureth for ever”.

This means that He who has been our help in ages past is still our hope for years to come. With this promise, we may look to a rising generation. It shows the same power of His mighty deeds of the past and present.

For the future generation, nothing has changed in God’s eyes. The object of His care has been and will always remain “His people.” If He tarries, may He yet have a people among us – a people whom He has chosen for His own and eternally set apart for His praise – a future people in Pompton Plains Free Reformed Church as those whom He has purchased by His blood and rescued from every bold foe – a future people whom He has called out of the world, separated from old sinful ways, and set apart for His service and praise – a future generation with whom He has entered covenant, saying, “I will be thy God, and thou shalt be my people!”

Then they too are His own, in the highest, holiest, and most blessed sense. For them, may the process be the same. Like Israel of old, may they be brought into a wilderness; that is, that the world would become a wilderness *to them* as a result of His precious work *in them*. In that wilderness, may they experience spiritual hunger and thirst and often sigh for God’s full and fitting supplies.

Yes, many enemies will meet them, oppose them, and come into conflict with them. Dangers in every direction will encircle them,

POMPTON PLAINS PASTORS:

C. Densel 1921-1933

B. Densel 1933-1964

C. Smits 1969-1971

K. VandenBelt 1973-1979

T. Joannides 1980-1983

G. Hamstra 1985-1992

L. Roth 1993-2005

J. Lewis (2010-present)

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and many painful hardships will be felt by them. This will discourage them. But this is always the way to the promised land, past, present, and future. For His faithful church to come, Egypt must be left, the wilderness traveled through, and Canaan with all its glory set before them.

We know how He will lead them, if they “go on to follow the LORD.” He will use the cloud by day and pillar of fire by night, by His Word and Spirit. In time, the ark will lead them across the final Jordan. All these events will speak of Christ, of mercy, and of unmerited grace.

My dear flock, after we are all gone,

and our pews filled by others, may the LORD of Hosts lead them by new and faithful servants, by His providence, and especially by His Word and Spirit.

Oh, rising generation, may you look to Him, and say with Hosea, “*Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the LORD: his going forth is prepared as the morning; and he shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth*” (Hosea 6:3).

My prayer is not that you would follow behind us, but that you would surpass us in purity, faithfulness, and experiential knowledge. My prayer is that you would be a Hezekiah generation, tearing down our idols, and a Joshua generation proclaiming, “*As for me and my house, we will go on to serve the Lord.*” Would it be that in 100 more years, for those that are not even born yet, that they would be able to say of their generation, “*His mercy endureth forever!*”

“His mercy has been fixed upon us also and chosen us for His own. His mercy has watched over us, leading us to the promised land which is Christ. His mercy has continued with us, through our own long, tiresome, and trying journey. His mercy is glorified in us, in His faithfulness and power to meet our every need. May His mercy still lead us, to try, prove, and humble us, to do us the greatest good.»

My dear flock, whether it be it past, present, or future, the Lord always makes this world a waste howling wilderness to His people. May we never feel at home here or succumb to the temptations of the evil one. Like our forefathers, we learn His ways in the wilderness. In that wilderness, we learn to trust in Him, to look to Him, and to expect our all from Him.

Oh, that for the next generation, He would become everything! May they learn the creature’s weakness and the Savior’s almighty strength. May they never trust in man whose breath is in his nostrils (Isa 2:22)

He may not lead them by the shortest way, or by the softest way, but, oh, may we plead that He will lead them in the right way. Because His mercy endures forever may they escape dangers, find full supplies, conquer difficulties, overcome their enemies, and arrive with certainty at their journey’s end.

My dear flock, whom I love, we are debtors to mercy. Let us then prize that mercy, praise that mercy, and sing of that mercy in preparation for the song of the redeemed in heaven. Tonight, as we think upon a century of undeserved compassion, is this present world home or a wilderness to us? Are we this world’s citizens, or strangers and pilgrims here?

My dear congregation, Pompton Plains Free Reformed Church is nothing. Christ is everything. This 100-year-old gathered flock is a mere tool in the hand of the Lord to bear many precious sons and daughters to Himself from the past,

present, and, we pray, the future. May the Lord make more room for us as a flock.


Let us sing together...

Give thanks to God, for good is He,
His grace abideth ever;
To Him all praise and glory be,
His mercy faileth never.
His wondrous works with praise record,
His grace abideth ever,
The only God, the sov’reign Lord,
Whose mercy faileth never.

Amen ①

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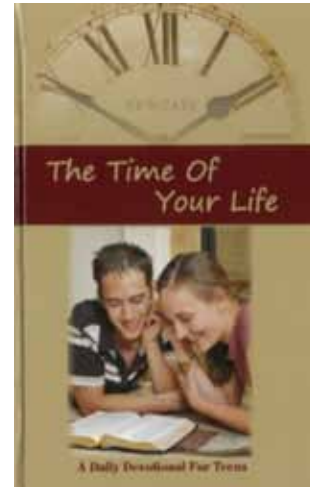
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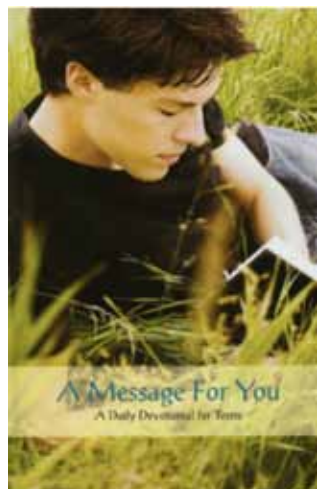
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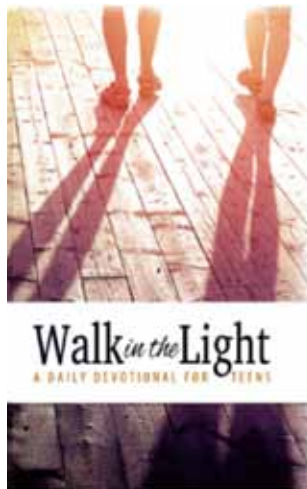
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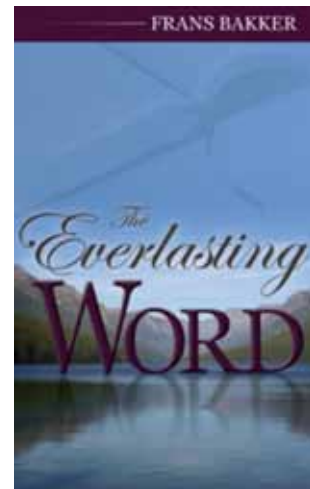
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CONFERRING IN DAYS OF DISTRESS

THE FIRST DUTCH SYNOD OF EMDEN, 1571

Many people have worries about the future. Amid the rapid developments of our day, many have a sense that our days are getting worse than ever. Some are even gripped with intense fear. We do live in days of outbreaking iniquity, but at the same time we still enjoy many privileges which only a few people in this world enjoy. We do well to be sober minded in our assessment of the state of affairs in our country. We can also be helped in that activity by considering the past. In other days, far worse calamities were endured.

Historical background

As churches rooted in the Dutch Reformation, our spiritual and/or biological ancestors went through great turmoil in the sixteenth century. The Reformation started relatively late in the Netherlands. While the Reformation was well under way in Germany and France during the 1520s and 1530's, the Reformation hardly grew until a generation later in the Netherlands. Especially in the 1560's, itinerant preachers proclaimed God's Word in the open air and crowds began gathering. This led to the well-known iconoclasm of 1566 which destroyed many images and paintings in Roman Catholic churches.

At the time, the Netherlands were ruled by King Philip II of Spain. As a devout Roman Catholic, he was determined to root out Protestantism. In 1567, he was bent on punishing the Dutch population for the iconoclasm and sent the Spanish Duke of Alva to be governor of the Netherlands (1567-1573). Dutch protestants called him "the Iron Duke" because of his harsh rule. He arrived with 10,000 men to rampage through the rebellious Netherlands. Many citizens were killed and some cities were massacred. Estimates are that about 20,000 people lost their lives due to these persecutions.

To make the misery worse, at the end of October 1570, a terrible natural disaster occurred. On the Roman Catholic feast of All Saints (November 1), a terrible flood caused around 100,000 people to be drowned. In addition to this, in 1571 there were again devastating floods and crop failures. On top of that, the bubonic plague had again raised its ugly head. In the midst of all these disasters, there were divinely taught men who were focused upon the well-being of God's church.

Organizing church life.

In these perilous days, the newborn Reformed church of the Neth-

erlands desired to organize itself. Persecution made many Reformed people flee to Germany or England, but they had a burden to see the Reformed churches grow in their native land. They needed unity among the churches. Already in 1568, some ministers and elders secretly met together in the German city of Wesel, where they drafted guidelines for the organization of Reformed congregational life in the Netherlands. This led to a formal synod in 1571, which became known as the Synod of Emden. This was the first official Reformed synod. As such, it has weight in our federation, since we adhere in principle to Reformed synodical decisions of the past.

Exactly 450 years ago, this first Reformed synod was constituted. This was a milestone in the development of Reformed church life, and today we still stand on the shoulders of these brave men who, in spite of all the calamities falling upon the nation in those days, were fixated on the well-being of God's church.

This synod took place in the city of Emden along the northwestern coast of Germany. Since on October 1, 1571, an international fair was held in Emden with many visitors from far and near flocking to the city, elders and ministers from congregations in the Netherlands and beyond could easily slip into the city and convene secret meetings without being noticed.

The synod chairman was Gaspar van der Heijden, a minister of the refugee congregation at Frankenthal, Germany (close to Heidelberg). The vice chairman was Jean Taffin, minister of the refugee congregation at Heidelberg. John Polyander, minister of the refugee church at Emden, was the secretary. Twenty-nine delegates attended. The great achievement of this Synod was to draft a church order which still forms the basis for our current church order.

Initially, the Synod was in danger of failing. In a letter written to the ministers of the church at Frankenthal, Gaspar van der Heijden wrote that he arrived in Emden on October 1. For three days, he and Jean Taffin sought out delegates and urged them to convene knowing that by God's grace and through the power of His Spirit the synod would be blessed.¹ The main task of the Synod was to organize biblically-based churches and to have this reflected in a solid confessional foundation and well-structured church order.

Proceedings of the Synod

The synod finally convened on October 4, 1571. The original copy of the acts of this synod has not been preserved. We know that the original acts were written in Latin. Today there are still two surviving copies of the Acts of the Synod of Emden in the original Latin rendition.

All delegates signed the Belgic Confession and it was decid-



ed that, in the future, all office-bearers upon their installation would sign this confession confirming their agreement. Regarding the catechism to be used for instruction of the youth, churches closest to France were allowed to use the Catechism of Geneva, while the Dutch churches would instruct from the Heidelberg Catechism. Some churches used other catechisms, which was deemed permissible, as long as these catechisms were fully Scriptural.

Practical questions were also handled. For instance, the French-speaking congregation at Antwerp asked what to do with a woman who claimed that her husband had already been killed five years earlier in the war but she could not prove this. Can she remarry? The Synod referred to the local government to solve this issue. Other churches had questions as to when widows could remarry. Caution was suggested, especially regarding pregnant women, so as to ascertain who the father would be. The church of Aachen, Germany, requested advice on what to do with an ungodly wife of a minister. Synod referred this to the discretion of the consistory to apply church discipline. Important decisions were made about how to exercise church discipline with members living in sin.

Achievements of the Synod

The main achievement of the Synod of Emden was a compilation of a Reformed church order.

Striking was their emphasis on the parity of the offices, meaning that no office bearer may lord over another office bearer. Other Reformed church orders continued this golden rule and it still remains of great importance today. The Emden church order stated this principle in the first article, while later church orders moved it toward the end. Though our church order states it in article 85, this was the first article approved by our fathers at Emden.



The exact wording is as follows: “No church shall Lord over another church, no minister, no elder, no deacon shall have authority over the other, but everyone shall guard himself against any suspicions of lording over the other.”

This anti-hierarchical principle is foundational for Reformed church order. Only Christ is Head and Lord of His Church. No person or no ecclesiastical gathering can be head of the church of Christ. They are all only ministers of His Word and there is no hierarchy between them. Christ is the Head; His Church is the body. The members of the body cannot exist independently from Him and from each other.

This principle also shows the anti-independent concern of this church order. Over time, this concern would be fleshed out in the presbyterial, synodical, ecclesiastical structure. Christ rules His Church and the office bearers must seek to do His will by the guidance of the Holy Spirit in clear concurrence with God’s Word.

They also stipulated that no local congregation can change the church order on its own volition. Changes to the church or-

der must be made by a full-fledged Synod.

Synod

The decrees of the Synod of Emden 1571 were considered to be binding on all Dutch Reformed churches. Especially the refugee churches expressed agreement with these decisions. Later on, some churches in the Netherlands had difficulties with these decisions. But ultimately, this church order would gain full acceptance among the early Reformed churches.

Along these lines, the Reformed Churches of the Nether-

lands could organize themselves independently of the government. Separation between church and state was achieved, although they recognized that the government was called to root out false religion, according to article 36 of the Belgic Confession of Faith. The churches of the Reformation desired liberty for the churches. As a result, many Reformed adherents joined the general revolt against Spanish tyranny.

The Synod of Emden also made clear that, not only the churches, but also individual members of the churches were to be under the strict authority and supervision of God’s Word. God’s Word should rule not only church

life, but also its members’ lives. Another new development was that office bearers, chosen from among the common people, could participate in the government of the church, while in the Roman Catholic church this government was exclusively allotted to the clerics.

We may be grateful to the Lord that, in His grace, this Synod convened, in spite of the turmoil of those days. We still reap the fruits of the labors of these brave men. May the Lord give us grace that we would be such men of conviction and that we would be faithful in the personal fear of the Lord and in seeking the well-being of our churches, whatever turmoil may be around us. ①

Endnotes

1. *Documenta Reformatoria*, 1:192.

Rev. G. R. Procee is emeritus pastor of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken. He resides in Tillsonburg, Ontario, which enables him to serve our churches.

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

FOR UNTO US A CHILD IS BORN, UNTO US A SON IS GIVEN:
AND THE GOVERNMENT SHALL BE UPON HIS SHOULDER: AND
HIS NAME SHALL BE CALLED WONDERFUL, COUNSELLOR, THE
MIGHTY GOD, THE EVERLASTING FATHER, THE PRINCE OF PEACE.

ISAIAH 9:6

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OBITUARY

Psalm 25:15a (Wedding Text)

Mijn ogen zijn gedurig op de Heere.
My eyes are ever toward the Lord.

In His appointed time, our heavenly Father
peacefully called home



ADRIANA (JANE) PENNINGS

March 23, 1928 – September 30, 2021

In her 94th year

For this is God, our God forever and ever;
He will be our guide even to death.
Psalm 48:14

Beloved wife of Jan Willem (Bill) Pennings for
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- Ina & Bernie Pennings
- Eric & Carla Pennings
- Linda McIntyre (Ron deceased)

The Lord blessed her with 21 grandchildren
(one deceased), 33 great grandchildren, and
3 great-great grandchildren.

Expressions of condolences can be sent to:

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