

THE MESSENGER

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE FREE REFORMED CHURCHES OF NORTH AMERICA



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THE ASTONISHING SUCCESSFUL SUFFERING SERVANT OF THE LORD

“Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, He shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high. As many were astonished at thee; His visage was so marred more than any man, And his form more than the sons of men: So shall he sprinkle many nations; The kings shall shut their mouths at him: For that which had not been told them shall they see; And that which they had not heard shall they consider.”

- Isaiah 52:13-15

Our Lord Jesus Christ is one of a kind in every way as the King of kings and the Lord of lords (Rev 19:16). By coming lower than any of them voluntarily, He towers above all of them irrevocably. His exaltation and suffering, His lordship and His dying, blend together a complete picture of His glory.

The French Revolution was ignited by a queen who was told her people were starving, had no bread to eat, and that the royal house should ease their tax burdens to keep them alive. Caring only about her own luxuries, she is said to have sneered: “if they have no bread to eat, then let them eat cake.” Never mind that if they could not afford to bake bread, they certainly could not bake cake. This royal house cared only about itself.

God will reign by sending a Servant to save sinners. The French queen was brutal to victims of her own power, seeing them as slaves who should die for her luxuries. Jesus Christ lays down his life in appalling suffering, so that hell deserving sinners can be saved from themselves and enter eternal joy and glory.

While the chapter division does not reflect this, Isaiah 52:13-15 introduces the famous suffering servant of the Lord passage in Isaiah 53. Before the reasons for and the depths of Christ’s suffering is unforgettably described there, we are first told of His prudence and exaltation (52:13) and His striking success that stuns the kings of the earth to silence with its unprecedented and inimitable salvation (52:15).

This text sandwiches a short summary of this suffering between two declarations of Christ’s exaltation. As we enter the season of the year when we especially remember the suffering of Jesus Christ, we must

frame it within His glory and wisdom so that we marvel at Him again. Let us pray that as gospel saturated people we will have our hearts strangely warmed and melted because of Him!

Immeasurable Glory

First, consider Christ’s immeasurable glory. I once heard an Ivy League snob sneer to a Christian apologist, how can the death of a man save anyone? The answer is, Christ’s death was much more than the death of a man. Isaiah 52:13 describes God’s suffering servant as “exalted, extolled, and very high.” Two of these three words were used in Isaiah 6 to describe God Himself on his throne, high and lifted up, so that cherubim chant unceasingly with awe His holiness. Isaiah the man with the cleanest lips in all Israel is crushed by the holiness and glory of the king, and even the door posts of the temple shake. John tells us Isaiah saw the preincarnate Christ there (John 12:41). Modernity seeks a user friendly cuddly ‘God,’ who allows us to define ourselves and our lives totally on our own terms, and who exists like a waiter in a restaurant to move at our beck and call. This is blasphemous slander of the Almighty.

An anthill cannot fit into the same picture frame with mount Everest. A candle can’t give any light in the blazing noonday sun. A grain of sand on truck weigh scale does not register, nor does a drop of water in a bucket attract notice. This is how lowly we are compared with the exalted Son of God (Isa 40:12-17).

This Christ is described as the arm of God bared for salvation. Imagine a big burly man sitting down for an arm-wrestling competition. His competitor takes one look at his arms and says, I give up. In a far, far greater way, when we consider the cross of Christ in this time of year, we should see Almighty God the Son baring His holy arm. One look at that arm and you realize, He must and shall win. This means that when a child of God gets discouraged, weary, or overwhelmed with her own sins, unbelief, pride, and weakness, she need not despair. God has provided the answer, in One whose arms are the arms of the Almighty! He will have total success in all He undertakes. Every earthly ruler either dies in weakness or is voted out as no longer able to pass the smell test. But this Lord Christ has only an almighty arm and prudent success in all He does! He has undertaken your complete salvation, and so He will finish what He began for you (Phil 1:6).

Immeasurable Condescension

Now this high and exalted One, lifted on the throne, comes down to experience appalling suffering (Isa 52:14). This Christ of eternal glory, God the Son, unwrapped the visible display of His glory and hid His divinity within His servant-humanity (Phil 2:5-8). Flashes of His glory were glimpsed by His people (Joh 1:14), yet the average person saw lowliness deserving stoning (Luke 4:22,28-9), a mere man with *pretensions* of being God (John 5:18, 10:33). Isaiah 52:14 describe it like this: “many were astoned at thee: his visage was so marred, more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men.” You could translate it like this: “Many were appalled at Thee: His face was brutalized beyond human resemblance, and His form from the sons of men.” Seeing Jesus in the depths of His suffering, it was possible to ask, is that even a man? The Lord of glory sunk to such suffering by choice.

Considering the details of Christ’s suffering from the gospel quickly yields a gruesome picture – the kind we would not put on social media or in this periodical. His back was ripped open by the scourge. They yanked tufts of hair from his beard and hair. His face was black and blue from being punched and slapped. The crown of thorns pressed rivulets of dried blood on his face. Dried spittle lingered there. He was stripped naked on the cross. He was mocked with every cruelty human viciousness could invent. He was given the death of a slave and revolutionary terrorist; it was not even legal to crucify the average person. Let us not say “they” did these things to Him. Isaiah 53 keeps saying “we” (53:2-6).

This is how humanity sees God after our foul revolt. In our culture, debate is often bypassed by dismissing as “haters” those who disagree with us. The cross reveals we humans hate God. This is what we sinners do when God comes within our reach. Let no one say sin is harmless, cute, or understandable. Our modern slogans of tolerance and freedom are abandoned the moment we think God gets in the way. Be astonished then at your own sin here!

Now this high and exalted One, lifted on the throne, comes down to experience appalling suffering (Isa 52:14).

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MEDITATION

Yet don't weep for Jesus Christ. With power and wisdom He is doing what He came to do. He is "sprinkling many nations" (Isa 52:15). This is the priestly language of the temple with its atoning sacrifices. Jesus Christ is paying the price that sin deserves. A judge that lets criminals roam free to brutalize and murder again arouses only outrage, even from those who want to "defund the police" but who change their minds when they are assaulted themselves. God should deserve our outrage if He let sin go unpunished. Yet He punished it to the full. He did not go easy on Jesus Christ because His own Son hung there (Rom 8:32). Since this salvation is based on payment in full, it must be totally successful (Isa 53:11). It is finished!

Who of the rulers of this world would lay down his or her own life to save not just subjects, but rebels, not just criminals, but terrorists whose dearest ambition is to kill these leaders?

Glorious Salvation

This appalling suffering produces glorious salvation further described in Isaiah 52:15. Kings will shut their mouths at Christ. Why? He is utterly unique; He acts in ways none of them would ever contemplate, imagine, or do themselves. Remember the sneer: "if they can't afford bread, let them eat cake!" The kings of earth say they are acting for the good of their subjects. The elected leaders of society claim to be doing it for the people. However so often they think the rules don't apply to them, and they exploit those they rule. How many leaders would never run for office if they knew no honour or power was involved? Who of the rulers of this world would lay down his or her own life to save not just subjects, but rebels, not just criminals, but terrorists whose dearest ambition is to kill these leaders? Kings shall shut their mouths at Christ! He alone will be the Lord of lords and King of kings on judgment day. He will show them up and expose them. Even those who rule with integrity and faithfulness will say, we never considered this. Every knee will bow and every tongue confess this Jesus the crucified has the name above every name!

This Christ, instead of saying to the suffering and dying victims 'let them eat cake', says to sinners who deserve to die, let them sit at my table. Let them eat the symbols of my broken body and poured out blood. Let them know, I have given myself for you. I will as surely nourish your hungry and thirsty souls to life everlasting as you eat with your mouth in remembrance of Me!

When you are overwhelmed with "politics as usual in this world" or with your own sins and shortcomings, then bring it all before this exalted One who sits on the throne with nail-pierced hands and a sympathetic heart, ready to give you grace and help in your need (Heb 4:14-16). Let us trust in Him ourselves and then proclaim Him as one of a kind in a politics as usual world! ①

Rev. Eric Moerdyk is pastor of the Free Reformed Church of St. Thomas, Ontario.

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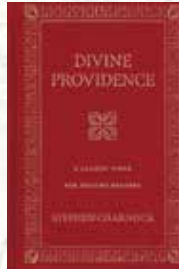


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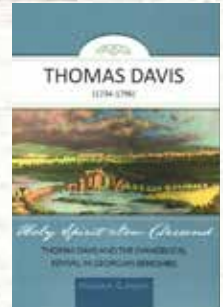


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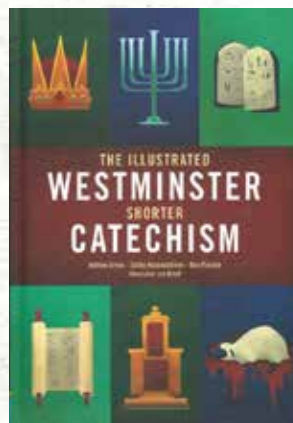


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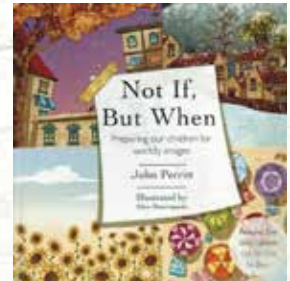
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arrassed or felt ill-equipped to deal with this subject, so they don't talk about it at all. This book is meant to be read alongside your child. It is pitched at seven to twelve-year-olds. While you may protest that seven is too young, please note that the average age of porn exposure is now eight years-old. Plus, wouldn't you want your children to be exposed to the truth of God's Word about sex before they hear lies from the world? Hardcover, 56 pages, Christian Focus Publications

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REMEMBER THE YEARS OF GOD'S RIGHT HAND (I)

“And I said, This is my infirmity: but I will remember the years of the right hand of the most High. I will remember the works of the LORD: surely I will remember thy wonders of old”

(Psalm 77:10-11)

We are beginning a short series of editorials aimed at being reoriented through remembering some of the most important things. Each editorial will focus on something God's Word tells us to remember.

All of us are prone to forget, especially the things we should remember most. The Bible is filled with calls to remember the works of the Lord (e.g. Ps. 143:5) and the commands He has given (e.g. Mal. 4:4).

Preachers have an equally hard time remembering. Our people might think we have lots of time to review and ruminate over many things; however, a faithful minister can easily get so swallowed up in the demands of the moment that he forgets some of the most basic things. This is so, unless, of course, we intentionally and regularly call to mind the most important things the Lord wants us to know and wants us to have our people know.

Wrong Remembering

Before we look at the right kind of spiritual memory that God commands, let us first see some wrong kinds of remembering that the Bible censures. First of all, the Bible does not call us to simply dwell on the past as if those were better days. The Bible says: “Say not thou, What is the cause that the former days were better than these? for thou dost not enquire wisely concerning this” (Eccl. 7:10). We should also not simply fill ourselves with nostalgia about the past as if the present and future are not essential parts of God's plan and purpose.

Secondly, we should not always imagine that God's works in the present will in every respect parallel the former days. God says through Isaiah: “Remember ye not the former things, neither consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing; now it shall spring forth; shall ye not know it?” (Isaiah 43:18-19).

Thirdly, we should not dwell on the difficulty of the past or our sins so as to despair. This is what Jeremiah is speaking of in Lamentations 3:18-20: “And I said, My strength and my hope is perished from the LORD: Remembering mine affliction and my misery, the wormwood and the gall. My soul hath them still in remembrance, and is humbled in me.”

Finally, we should certainly not idealize and idolize the past in a way that is simply not true. Sometimes we can act as if the church in the past has not had sin, strife, struggle, or failings. Well-meaning Christians can easily let church history become a hagiography in which we colour as thick a gold halo around every Protestant as the Catholics do around their saints.

Remembering Through Sense

Remembering can reorient us. We need that, especially when so much disorients us. Psalm 77 is a magnificent instance of how God can use spiritual memory to reorient a disoriented believer. Asaph experienced a time of real trouble, and in bitterness cried to the Lord. In the process of seeking the way forward, he initially set himself to remember different things, but these memories gave him greater trouble. We can read of this in the first section of the Psalm (1-9). Take note of the following:

1. He remembered God and was troubled (Ps. 77:3).
2. He remembered the days of old, the years of ancient times but that didn't seem to help him yet (Ps. 77:5).
3. He remembered his song in the night, but again experienced no deliverance (Ps. 77:6).

These attempts at remembering proved that spiritual remembering is not a switch that we can simply flip to make everything well. Spiritual remembering is not the equivalent of an aspirin we take so that the throbbing spiritual pain is gone in twenty minutes. For Asaph, it seemed that things first began to worsen before they became better.

We live in a world that promotes instantaneous cures and remedies and often this is what our hearts desire. But true spiritual remedies often take time and things often get worse before they improve. Let us remember that also when dealing with others who are in spiritual distress. That they do not feel relief after an hour, week, month, or year does not necessarily mean that they are going about things the wrong way or that they are "greater sinners" than the rest of us. Job, Jeremiah, many Psalmists, and others were "plagued, and chastened every morning" (Ps. 73:14). When the Bible says "weep with them that weep" (Rom. 12:15), the original uses a form of the verb that means continual, ongoing weeping: "Be weeping with those who are weeping." As ones who acknowledge the sovereignty of the Lord over all things, also in the afflictions of His people, let us not try "to make that straight what [the Lord] hath made crooked" (Eccl. 7:13).

Remembering through Faith

Verse 10 forms the hinge of Psalm 77. Part of the turn is Asaph remembering "the years of the right hand of the most High." He further explains what he remembered, namely "the works of the LORD ... thy wonders of old" (v. 11), "all thy work," and "thy doings" (v. 12).

On the surface, this might not seem much different from what he had been remembering earlier (see vv. 5-9). Yet, there is a difference. Now Asaph looks at the things that have been happening from the perspective of *what God's hand is doing in it all*. God's hand is unseen, and therefore we need faith to see things in relationship to the Lord's hand. Faith sees God where sight does not. This is exactly our struggle in times of unbelief. We see everything only with our natural eyes, but God is Spirit. "Thy footsteps are not known" (v. 19), that is, not known by physical sight. "Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear" (Heb. 11:3).

The turning point then for Asaph is to look at the history of God's miraculous works in redemptive history. He mentions *years*, meaning that God's miraculous dealings with His people were not just a short span of time such as a day or two. No, God's works span a long time of many years. These works are the works of a Most High God, the God who is supreme over all. By faith Asaph looks *long* and he looks *high*. The look of faith makes all the difference in his perspective and it gives him hope.

Remembering God's Right Hand

To look at things from the perspective of the Lord's hand means you focus on His power, wis-

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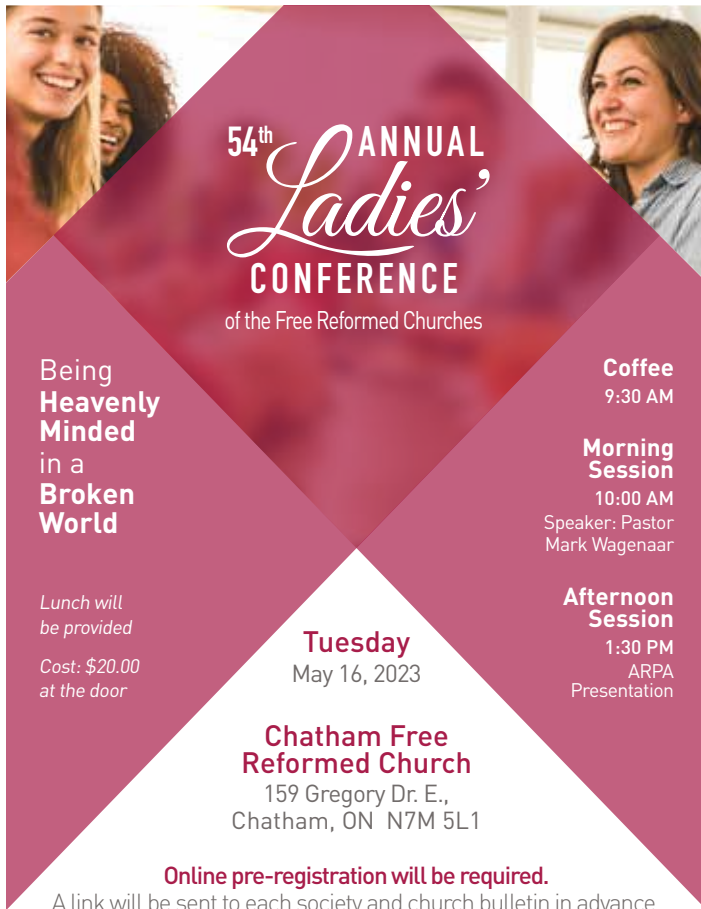
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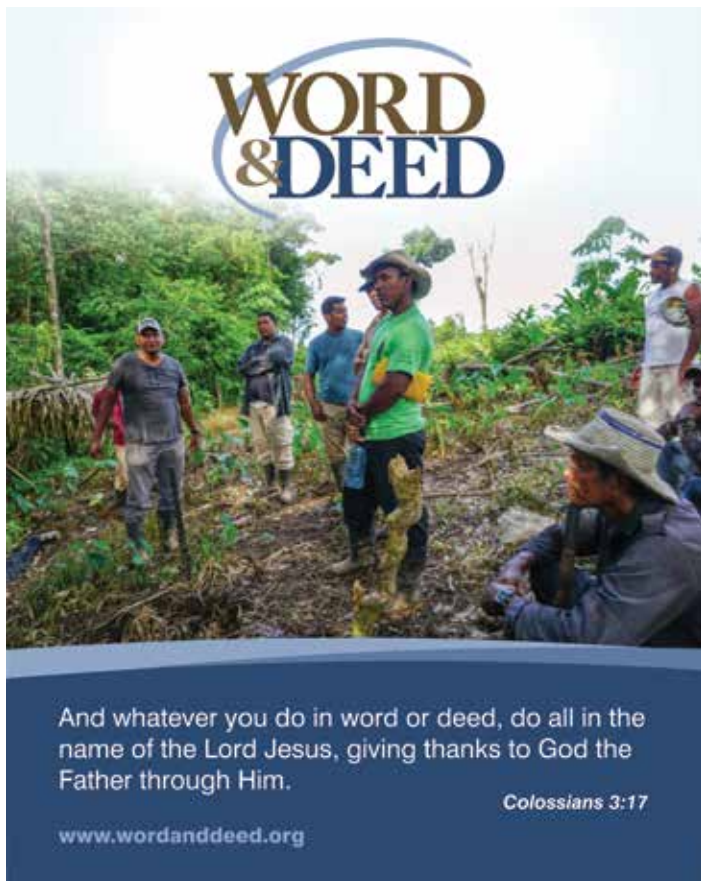
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And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

Colossians 3:17

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dom, and plan. God’s hand, especially “his right hand,” is usually synonymous with His redeeming power (see esp. Ex 15:6; Ps. 74:11; Ps 89:13; Ps. 98:1; Ps. 118:16; Ps. 139:10; Isa. 41:10). In other words, God’s right hand is the hand that works powerfully, especially when man’s abilities utterly fall short and when God turns man’s devices to nothing.


Man is often so big in our minds – whether man be ourselves or others. Not only is man big in our minds, but also other forces like the trouble or tribulation that loom ahead of us or bear down upon us in the present. We wonder how anything can ever come right for ourselves or in the world at large. When we add thoughts of God to this focus on man and tribulation, our trouble only becomes greater (v. 3). We need to turn away from man and focus on the hand of God, specifically the right hand of His righteousness (Isa. 41:10).

When we do that, we see that the works of the Lord are indeed mysterious, but in a way that gives hope and perspective. They are mysterious in that they are past finding out, and that is good. If our minds could figure out the works of God, we would be God, but we are not. We are mere creatures of the dust, and sinners at that. God’s works come forth from the sanctuary of the Lord (v. 13). We need humility to even consider them. To use a biblical expression, we need to take the shoes from off our feet. God’s works have a separateness, a holiness about them because they proceed from the holy God, who alone does wonders. As William Cowper wrote:

God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform.
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

There is no searching of His understanding. He gives power to the faint (Isa. 40:29). Let us stop searching, acknowledge our weakness, and wait to know His power. To remember the works of the Lord in this way gives hope and courage. Are waters going over your soul? Remember the years of the right hand of the most high. “The waters saw thee, O God, the waters saw thee; they were afraid” (v. 16). Are the depths about to swallow you? Before Him, the depths will be troubled (v. 16). Are the clouds hiding the sun? He can make the clouds pour water (v. 17). Is your enemy convinced he will defeat you? The most High can make the skies send out a sound and shoot arrows at the fiercest enemy (v. 17).

Ultimately, God’s right hand (Acts 5:31) exalted the Savior, crucified by us, to be a Prince and a Saviour, in order to give repentance and remission of sins. In this way, God leads His people like a flock by the hand of His exalted Prince. A flock might be troubled and forget its Shepherd. Yet, the right hand of the Shepherd does not depend on them.

Though I am weak, God is most high,
And on His goodness I rely;
Of all His wonders I will tell,
And on His deeds my thoughts shall dwell.
(Psalter 210:5) 

HOLDING TO THE TRUTH IN A CULTURE OF LIES

The Lies we are Told, the Truth We Must Hold by Sharon James. Published by Christian Focus Publications, Ross-shire, Scotland, 2022. Softcover, 302 pages.

This recent book by Sharon James helps the ordinary reader make sense of what is happening today and provides tools for combating this chaos of ideas with truths from God's Word. Dr. Carl Trueman has written insightful books that analyze the current worldviews that have invaded and seem to overpower Western culture and Christianity.ⁱ In an endorsement of James's book, Trueman states: "In this book she achieves a remarkable feat: she addresses the lies that our culture currently exalts as truth and does so in a way that crosses the generational divide and will be helpful both to young people and those who wish to understand them and help them think through the deepest challenges of our day."

Before delving into details, Sharon James uses a helpful teaching method by telling the reader in a ten-point outline what she is hoping to achieve with this book under the title, "Chapter Summaries." In the first of the ten points, she states that she will deal with the consequences of the acceptance of evolutionary theory in the 19th century instead of a Creator God. In the second point, she will show how the denial of the existence of God and an absolute moral code led to the horrors of the inhuman torture and annihilations of groups of peoples. In point three, she shows how the godless philosophies of leaders such as Nietzsche, Freud, and Margaret Sanger led to the celebration of power to exploit the weak, violence, and unlimited sexual freedom. The next point deals with postmodernism, which pioneered critical theory, holding that all inequalities in outcome can be removed by questioning all objective truth. The next point (5), explains that critical theory, taught in the universities, has reached popular level in institutions and society. This gave rise to 'identity politics,' the West being thought of as inherently evil (racist, patriarchal, capitalist), leading to efforts to destroy societal structures such as the family and law and order, smashing statues, and revising, distorting, or even negating history altogether. In point six, the author explains how this view, sadly, started to creep into churches, so that God's ultimate truth is denied and the authority of Scripture is rejected and eternal judgment is mocked (pp. 13-14).

These topics are discussed in detail in Part 1 of the book, under the title of "The LIES We Are Told." Here James expounds the views of thinkers, activists, and leaders who promoted these lies and shows how these lies were perpetrated. She sums it up with the Scripture verse: "The fool says in his heart: 'There is no God' Ps. 14:1" (p. 25).

Part Two, entitled, "The TRUTH We Must Hold," covers the rest of her main points. She begins by quoting Proverbs 9:10: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of Wisdom" (p. 189). This part is actually an apologetic of a biblical world and life view. God, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, is the supremely Intelligent God. "The created order not only reveals the Creator's wisdom in the complexity in every cell, and His power in the universe, but He also reveals His beauty, so admired by the psalmist in Psalm 148. There is a God, and there is objective reality. God is there, and His creation reveals His power, glory and infinite wisdom" (p. 200). Many Puritans in the past and Christian scientists and theologians today affirm that biblical Christianity and science are compatible.

We are sinners, but were created in the image of God, a "little lower than the angels" (Ps. 8:5; Heb. 2:7). "We are created to relate to God, and we have been given souls that will never die" (p. 205). "God has placed awareness of His moral law in the conscience of every human being. We all know there is a difference between right and wrong" (p. 208). It is true: "In a fallen world, tragically, we do find sexism, racism, and other evils. Sometimes such abusers, and others, characterize whole groups or societies, even nations. But the idea of 'collective guilt' is a travesty of justice" (p. 210). "When a sense of individual moral responsibility is lost, civic life is undermined... Instead of teaching youngsters virtues such as character and resilience, all too often adults rush to 'validate' whatever they are feeling. This creates individuals who are in continual need of therapy and support" (p. 211). These are loaded statements, but they are followed up with the calling for compassion and relief of abusive situations. This is to be applied to everyone who is in need, because the human race has a common origin as even DNA discoveries appear to confirm. This rules out racism and encourages compassion for everyone placed on our path. This duty is explained and illustrated

by the supreme example of Christ's obedient life and suffering. "His perfect obedience to the law of God is reckoned to those who look to Him for salvation. His sacrificial death paid the penalty of God's wrath" (p. 218).

The next chapter focuses on the purpose of authority structures in the home, church, society and civil government. God's design for humanity starts with the family: husband, wife, and their children.

No other institution has the ability "to transmit what is pivotal—character formation, values, virtues, and enduring love—to each new generation" (p. 222). God's design is to bless others instead of solving the gap between prosperity and poverty by the "progressive" demands to "smash capitalism." "Capitalism is simply the free exchange of privately held goods and services. Free exchange allows for personal incentive... If nations are to escape poverty, they need to be free to increase the production of goods and services" (p. 235). Moreover, "A just society should provide equal opportunities, including education."

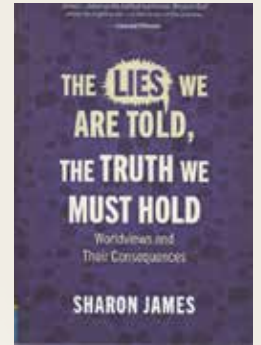
Examples of how this was accomplished are provided from the eighteenth and nineteenth century evangelical revivals as well as churches and Christian agencies today. Among many insightful observations, the author suggests that "Shutting down a city congregation will often damage a neighborhood's viability and socio-economic health, whereas active churches, religious schools, and church-based ministries have a positive impact on local communities" (p. 242).

History teaches that "Cultures influenced by a biblical Christian worldview recognize the importance of taking responsibility. They encourage qualities such as hard work, perseverance, generosity and courage" (p. 243). James even comments on the current focus on globalism. "Diversity between nations is not intrinsically negative. The vast variety of cultures and social systems reflects the diversity found throughout the created order" (p. 251). God is King over all. The Father has exalted His Son, Jesus Christ, to have authority over all other rulers (Psalms 2, 110).

Readers will find many insightful perspectives in the Christian worldview described by James. She sees fear as the biggest problem, also in reference to Covid, which led to half of the world's population to be directed or forced to stay home. When a worldview dominates in which death is the end, "fear of death becomes a 'lifelong slavery' [Heb. 2:15]" (pp. 255-56). But fear isn't exclusively found with unbelievers. The devil, too, wants to discourage Christians because a demoralized army will never gain ground. "But it's wrong," she states "to be paralyzed by pessimism in the here and now... Christ's final command to His disciples was that they should go to all nations," with the promise of His continued presence and universal authority (p. 256). The last chapters of the book are full of optimism regarding the power and spread of the Gospel, which will have its final fulfilment in the establishment of the new heavens and the new earth after the second coming of Christ. Gloominess and lament about the prospects of God's kingdom betrays a failure of faith. "With God's people in every age we are to live by faith and not by sight" (p. 258).

So, how are we to live as Christians? "Be Prepared!" Follow the example of the early Christians who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire (1 Pet. 1:1; 4:12). They were abused and rejected for their lifestyle, but they did not retaliate (1 Pet. 3:9, 14-16). Prepare your hearts, and keep a clear conscience: *Fear the Lord!* "Having prepared our hearts, we also need to prepare our minds" (p. 271) and be informed about the predominant worldview that is taking over our culture. Primary is knowing Scripture and live courageously as Christians with a humble heart.

This is a wonderfully helpful and instructive book. Not only helpful are its contents, but also its teaching methods, such as summarizing each chapter, giving examples of current events, supplying brief historical accounts, listing references for further reading, illustrating with helpful graphs, and interspersing facts with real life anecdotes and stories. By adding a bibliography, lists of authors and subjects, this book is actually a "world-view course 101," very suitable for young adults and anyone who is troubled and baffled by what is happening in our Western culture. Therefore, I could not agree more with Carl Trueman's endorsement.



THE ORDER OF SALVATION (7)

THE MINISTRY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN RELATION TO REGENERATION

Last time, we learned that regeneration is a sovereign act of the Holy Spirit whereby He creates eternal life in dead sinners' hearts without any cooperation from them. But how does the Spirit perform this miracle? Does He make use of any instruments or means? Does He not involve the Word of God in a similar way to when the world was first created? If so, how do the Spirit and Word relate in the re-creation of fallen man?

Most Reformed theologians agree that the Spirit indeed makes use of the Word in regeneration, since calling is followed by regeneration. A minority, however, disagree with this sequence and reverse it by placing regeneration before calling. They argue that spiritually dead sinners are unable to respond to the gospel call. Regeneration, therefore, can only take place when the Spirit first creates new life in sinners' hearts *before* using the Word as an instrument for change. This line of reasoning seems logical, but it fails to recognize that by *effectually* calling the dead sinner to life, the Spirit can and does use the Word as a means whereby the miracle takes place. Seen in this light, calling and regeneration occur simultaneously and may be viewed as distinct aspects of the same divine act.

Immediate or Mediate Regeneration?

The issue here is whether Reformed theology should subscribe to an *immediate* or *mediate* view of regeneration. In the Netherlands, the debate on this issue rocked the Reformed community, especially during and after the merger of the Secession and Doleantie Churches in 1892.

At the center of the debate was Abraham Kuyper's concept of *immediate* regeneration by which he taught that the Holy Spirit works regeneration *apart* from the preached Word of God. The Secession leaders held to *mediate* regeneration, by which they meant that the new birth is brought about by means of the preaching of God's Word applied by the Holy Spirit

Kuyper argues for immediate regeneration by claiming the biblical doctrine of man's total inability necessitates that the Holy Spirit regenerate without the medium of the Word. The Spirit plants the seed of regeneration into the elect sinner's heart prior to his birth or baptism and this seed is subsequently brought to fruition by the Word preached. Once the elect infant is able to understand and obey the call to faith and repentance, the Word joins the Spirit in producing conversion as evidence of the new life.

This view of immediate versus mediate regeneration led to the acceptance of what many thought was a new doctrine, called pre-

sumptive regeneration. The implications of this teaching were far-reaching and caused much discussion and discord within the Reformed community before and after the Union of 1892.

Against this background of controversy, Dr. Herman Bavinck, one of the most important Dutch Reformed theologians, wrote a book, *Calling and Regeneration*, in which he issues a strong warning against Kuyper's teaching of immediate regeneration and its implications for the spiritual health of Reformed church life.

Immediate Regeneration in Dort Theologians

Although Bavinck's main purpose of the book is to defend the doctrine of mediate regeneration, Bavinck admits that in regeneration the Spirit does sometimes seem to work apart from the Word. He explains that during the time of the Synod of Dort (1618-1619), some Dutch Reformed theologians were compelled to speak of an immediate operation of the Holy Spirit because the Arminians were so emphasizing man's role in salvation (e.g., his supposed ability to believe the Word) at the expense of the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. In response, some well-known Further Reformation theologians like Voetius, Maccovius, and Comrie did sometimes speak of regeneration as the Holy Spirit's immediate work apart from the Word. But they did so for a reason. They had to refute the errors of the Arminians, who claimed that regeneration was contingent upon man's decision.

As strange as it may sound, the Arminians were the ones who insisted that the Word of God is the means God uses to regenerate sinners. But what they meant was that Gospel preaching serves as a means to *persuade* sinners to accept its offer of salvation. In other words, in their view, the efficacy of the Word depends on man's willingness to comply with its demands.

To combat this serious Arminian error, the Reformed used the term immediate regeneration. Yet they insisted that Word and Spirit were both involved in producing the new birth and therefore continued to place calling before regeneration in the Order of Salvation.

Immediate Regeneration According to Kuyper

While Kuyper could appeal to some Reformed divines for support of his teaching on immediate regeneration, he used this concept for different reasons than they did. Kuyper used this concept to defend his view of presumed regeneration, namely, that infants were presumed regenerate prior to being baptized and hearing the gospel. This view was related to his view that a member of the covenant of grace is per definition elect and therefore justified from eternity. Thus they are united to Christ from birth and already regenerated.

The danger here is that all covenant children are viewed as re-

generated from birth without ever being confronted with their lost state and condition and may never hear what Jesus said to Nicodemus and other sinners, namely "You [plural] must be born again."

The Issue of Infant Salvation

Bavinck deals extensively with the question regarding the salvation of infants. His opponents argued that surely, in their case, regeneration precedes calling and therefore must be viewed as *immediate* in the sense that it takes place apart from the ministry of the Word. For Bavinck, this reasoning is false because even though our infants have no knowledge of God's Word when they receive baptism, they are baptized in the context of the Word of God and its sacrament of baptism, which seals the promise of salvation to them.

This promise, Bavinck says, is offered to them as children of believing parents. They are baptized, not on the basis of their presumed regeneration, but on the basis of God's covenant promises. "The sacraments mean nothing and are not sacraments if they are isolated from the Word. Sacraments are seals of the Word, follow upon the Word and are connected indissolubly to the Word."

Kuyper's Concept of Dormant Regeneration

Bavinck also warned against Kuyper's concept of a so-called *dormant* regeneration. According to Kuyper, God can implant the seed of regeneration at an early age, even at conception, at which time the child receives what Kuyper calls the faculty of or propensity to faith. Examples are John the Baptist, the prophet Jeremiah, and the apostle Paul. He writes,

Persons who received the life-principle early in life are no longer dead, but alive. Dying before actual conversion, they are not lost but saved... However, they have no conscious faith, nor knowledge of the treasure they possess. The new life is present, but dormant, kept not by the recipient, but by the Giver – like seed grain in the ground in winter; like the spark glowing under the ashes, but not kindling the wood; like a subterranean stream coming at last to the surface.

Bavinck could not agree with this view of dormant regeneration, even while warning against attempts to pinpoint the timing of regeneration. He quotes Calvin, who writes: "Those who imagine that some sort of seed of election was sown in them from birth itself, and that by its power they have always been inclined to piety and the fear of God, are not supported by Scriptural authority and are refuted by experience."

Most Reformed theologians agree that the Spirit indeed makes use of the Word in regeneration, since calling is followed by regeneration. A minority, however, disagree with this sequence and reverse it by placing regeneration before calling.

Returning to the statement made earlier that our infants lack the knowledge of God, our Form for the Administration of Baptism elaborates on that statement this way: “Although our young children do not understand these things (the doctrines of Scripture), we may not therefore exclude them from baptism, for as they are without their knowledge partakers of the condemnation in Adam, so are they again received unto grace in Christ.” This important statement tells us, as parents and teachers, what we need to teach our baptized children when they “shall arrive to years of discretion.”

F. M ten Hoor, a Secession preacher and strong opponent of Kuyper, first in the Netherlands and later in America, where he served many years as professor at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, warned future ministers:

If it is assumed that those who hear the Word are already in a state of grace, preaching does not have to deal with the necessity of a new heart. The focus, therefore, is on the spiritually alive...and the preacher may not assume that any of the elect are still dead in trespasses and sins. The problem is, then, that the elect are not always aware of their being regenerated and justified from eternity, or at least it is not always clear to them. Therefore

Speaker Pastor Pieter VanderMeyden	Coffee 9:45 AM,
When Tuesday May 2, 2023	Morning Session 10:30 AM Speech in English
Where Dundas Free Reformed Church 253 Weir's Lane, Dundas, ON L9H 5E1	Afternoon Session: 1:30 PM Q&A followed by a Dutch hymn-sing.

preaching is focussed on the mind and seeks to convince and persuade the hearers of their privileges as children of God. The preacher’s task is thus to remove problems caused by ignorance and doubt.... Because the preacher assumes he is dealing with Christians, he is confident about their salvation. Their state for eternity is secure and he does not need to be worry about that.

The Biblical Method

The proper way is to remind our baptized covenant children that they and their parents “are conceived and born in sin and therefore are children of wrath in so much that we cannot enter into the kingdom of God, except we are born again” (Form for Baptism). This biblical method requires the use of Scripture as the means to bring lost sinners to salvation. In other words, *not immediate* but *mediate* regeneration is God’s ordained way.

God always uses means, both in nature and in grace. Our Canons of Dort (III/IV.17) draw a parallel between the activities of God in nature and His operations in grace. Nature reveals a two-fold activity of God. Every living organism first comes into existence, and then is also maintained in that existence. So also in spiritual life, God makes use of means: the preaching of the Word and the Holy Spirit’s application of that Word. The Spirit uses the Word effectually to call sinners to life in Christ and, once the sinner has been born again, to feed and nourish the believer. We recognize God is able to regenerate without the preached or read Word ones such as very young children and those born with physical or mental handicaps but these exceptions confirm the general rule.

The Free Reformed Churches firmly believe that mediate regeneration is the teaching of Scripture, as have most Reformers and Puritans. We believe that God is free to regenerate sinners whenever He chooses, whether early or later in life. He is sovereign in everything. But we also believe that He usually works through the preaching of His Word. A good example is the conversion of Lydia, the seller of purple, recorded in Acts 16. Her heart was opened by the Holy Spirit while Paul was preaching the Gospel. By the special, miraculous operation of the Holy Spirit she received a new heart.

This is how God usually works. We are on safe grounds when we hold to the teachings of the Word of God confessed in the Canons of Dort which say that the gospel is both the seed of regeneration and food for the soul (see James 1:18; Rom. 10:17; 1 Pet. 1:23). As a rule, the Holy Spirit works where the Word of God is faithfully preached, where the sacraments are regularly administered, and where God has established His covenant. This makes our duty toward the means of grace very clear. If God has appointed these means, we are bound to make faithful use of them. Let us use those means whenever the Word is preached, when we assemble for worship on the Lord’s Day, and during the week when we have ample opportunity to hear and study the Word. ①

INSTALLATION AND INAUGURATION OF PASTOR BARTEL ELSHOUT AT KALAMAZOO REFORMED CHURCH

Kalamazoo Reformed Church is an independent Reformed church in Kalamazoo, Michigan – fifty miles south of Grand Rapids. This church has a close ecclesiastical relationship with the Free Reformed Churches and Heritage Reformed Congregations. A moderating committee made up of two Free Reformed and two Heritage Reformed pastors also serve it with advice and as a body to which appeals can be made. Its pulpit supply has been mainly Heritage Reformed and Free Reformed pastors. Some months ago its consistory of three elders and two deacons nominated a duo of Pastor G. R. Procee and Pastor B. Elshout. The Lord clearly inclined Pastor Elshout to accept the call he received such that he could be installed as a pastor “on loan” from the Heritage Reformed Congregations. We share in the joy of this congregation upon receiving their first pastor and wish them God’s richest blessings in and through Christ Jesus. Below is report of Rev. B. Elshout’s installation and inauguration.

The Kalamazoo Reformed Church had the joy of receiving their first minister when Pastor Bartel Elshout was installed by Pastor Brian Najapfour on Sunday, January 29, 2023. Since first being established as a preaching station in November 2020 and then being formally incorporated as a congregation in May 2021, Kalamazoo Reformed Church has been blessed to receive a steady supply of excellent preaching. Although the flock was being faithfully fed, they began to feel the burden of the empty office among them and longed for a pastor of their own. After careful and prayerful consideration and a congregational meeting on August 29, 2022, a heartfelt call was sent to Pastor Elshout on September 1.

The congregation and consistory already felt a considerable bond with Pastor Elshout, who had played a notable role in nurturing and advising the fledgling church, and continued in prayer that the Lord might indeed call him to serve as their full-time minister. Little did they know how God’s Providence would be revealed, until they received Pastor Elshout’s acceptance letter, in which he stated, “Ever since I served your congregation for the first time, I have increasingly sensed that the Lord was binding your congregation upon my heart.” Even before receiving their letter, Pastor Elshout was convinced that, “if your congregation were ever to call me, I would have to accept that call.” As a result, on January 29, the congregation of Kalamazoo Reformed Church gathered together with many beloved guests for the installation and inaugural sermon of Pastor



Elshout.

Pastor Brian G. Najapfour clearly preached the gospel from 1 Corinthians 15:1–4 in his Lord’s day morning installation sermon. He first explained what the gospel is: it is all about the person and work of Christ. In Mark 1:15, Jesus says, “repent ye, and believe the gospel” with the implication that you will be saved. When the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, “what must I do to be saved?” they replied, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:30–31). Using these two texts, Pastor Najapfour showed that to believe the gospel is to believe on Christ, because the gospel is Christ

and Christ is the gospel. After defining the gospel, he gave six elements of it: Christ’s birth, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and second coming. Jesus was born to die for our sins, and His burial proves his death’s reality. But He rose from the dead to show how He overcame death, our last enemy. He is now at the right hand of God, making intercession for us (Rom. 8:34). Someday He will return to receive us to Himself, so that where He is, there we may be also (John 14:3).

Pastor Najapfour concluded his message with a passionate plea to the congregation to accept the gospel not partially but fully, because the gospel is “worthy of all acceptance” (1 Tim. 1:15). Citing Augustine of Hippo, he said, “If you believe what you like in the gospel and reject what you don’t like, it is not the gospel you believe, but yourself.” Sadly, Jesus “came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name” (John 1:11–12).

Toward the end of the service, Pastor Najapfour charged his father-in-law to preach the pure gospel, practice it, and protect his pulpit and flock from “any other gospel” than what he has received from the Lord (Gal. 1:8–9). Woe to us, if we preach not the gospel!

Following this, Dr. Gerald Bilkes and Dr. Adriaan Neele spoke a word of welcome on behalf of the FRC and HRC denominations respectively, and the service was concluded.

Pastor Elshout began his message by emphasizing that God has sent him to us with the sacred mandate to preach Christ – to proclaim Him fully, to offer Him unconditionally, and to urge sinners to embrace Him unreservedly. Therefore, he chose as the text for his inaugural service John 14:6: “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me,” expressing his desire to preach this Christ to our congre-

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"Let the people praise Thee, O God; let ALL the people praise Thee" Psalm 67:5

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gation. The theme of his sermon was "Christ's Declaration Regarding Himself," in which Christ declares Himself to be 1) the Way to the Father, 2) the Truth about the Father, and 3) the Life with the Father.

In his inaugural sermon, Pastor Elshout began by emphasizing that the Father's objective in sending His Son to be the Redeemer of sinners is to restore fallen sons and daughters of Adam into a Father-child relationship with Himself. However, to pave the way to the Father, Christ had to traverse the way to the cross, where He was forsaken of His Father so sinners could be reconciled with His Father and restored in His favour. Christ's fervent desire is that reconciled sinners in Him might also know His Father.

After exhorting the congregation that we must personally and experientially know Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, Pastor Elshout spoke a personal word to our congregation, our consistory, family members, and his wife, Clarice.

To that end, He came forth from His Father's bosom (heart) to declare Him to us (John 1:18), prompting Him to respond to Philip, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). Finally, Christ's ultimate objective is that in Him, as the revelation of the Father, reconciled sinners would live in fellowship and communion with the Father.

After exhorting the congregation that we must personally and experientially know Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, Pastor Elshout spoke a personal word to our congregation, our consistory, family members, and his wife, Clarice.

Elder Gijs VandenBogerd then gave a welcome address to Pastor and Mrs. Elshout on behalf of the consistory and congregation, and the service was concluded.

Kalamazoo Reformed Church was sent a gracious letter from the HRC congregation of Hull, Iowa, where Pastor Elshout was previously serving. "You have received a pastor who is tireless in serving his Master and his Master's flock," they said, which Kalamazoo Reformed Church has already experienced to be true. The congregation extends a warm and thankful welcome to Pastor and Mrs. Elshout, with prayers for the blessings of the triune God to follow his ministry to this new flock, and that "as thy days, so shall thy strength be" (Deut. 33:25).

Mr. Bill Thies is an elder of the Kalamazoo Reformed Church and manager of the Church Embedded MDiv Program at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary.

CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH IS THE MODEL FOR MARRIAGE

by Rev. Tom Aicken



If we want to understand the essence of marriage, the uncompromising love which is meant to bind it and the unwavering commitment to preserve it, we do well to look at Ephesians 5:25, which tells us that Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for her.

Love gives. Notice, first, the One who gives: Christ Himself. The kings of this world often expand their kingdoms by taking. They capture people of foreign lands and seize their property. But Jesus, the Son of God who is King of kings and Lord of lords, who rides forth and has still to conquer (Rev. 6:2), advances not by taking but by giving, not by suppressing but by transforming, not by forcing people against their will but by pouring out His Spirit upon them and making them willing in a day of His power. The people of His kingdom are not coerced from the outside, but are recreated in Christ and made new on the inside. As a result, they are His willing subjects who have tasted the goodness of the Lord and are granted to know the blessing of trusting in Him. They are moved with their whole heart to say in the words of Sir Henry Williams Baker (based on Psalm 23),

The King of love my Shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am His, and He is mine forever.

Let us proceed, secondly, to what Christ gave. He provides everything the sinner needs, so that the sinner saved by grace is complete in Him who is the Head of all principality and power (Col. 2:10). Yet, first and foremost the Lord Jesus gave Himself – He gave His own life. This is the crowning act of love and the foundation of everything else He gives. This is the ultimate gift, Christ on the cross. There can be no salvation for anyone apart from that gift.

Unparalleled Love

Earthly kings expand their kingdoms not only by seizing land

from foreign powers, but also sometimes by way of purchase. They take the public funds entrusted to them for the provision and protection of their citizens and spend them to buy their way to greater power and prominence. But Jesus, the only Mediator between God and men (1 Tim. 2:5), the only way to God the Father (John 14:6), and the only One under heaven by whom sinners may and must be saved (Acts 4:12), gave Himself. Think about it. He came into the world to be the sacrificial Lamb, the Substitute for sinners, in order to offer up His own body on the cross to pay the penalty in full for all their sins. He gave himself so that by His death they might have life. Sinners therefore are not “redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold ... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Peter 1:18-19).

Let us examine, thirdly, **for whom** Christ gave Himself. He gave Himself for “the whole world” (1 John 2:2), for people of every tribe and tongue and nation (Rev. 5:9), but not for everyone without exception. The gospel call is freely and sincerely offered to all, to be sure, but Christ Jesus died and secured the salvation only for all whom His Father would give Him (John 6:37), for all whom the Father had chosen in Christ from the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4) and were appointed to eternal life (Acts 13:48). These and only these are the ones who would ever come to Him. Everyone else in the hardness of his heart refuses to do so.

Jesus gave Himself, as our text says, for the Church, His Bride, and how amazing it is that He should ever do that! Are Christians inherently more deserving than others? No – a thousand times, No! Each and every one of us is the chief of sinners along with everybody else (1 Tim. 1:15). As Paul wrote the Christians in Rome: “For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commended his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:7-8).


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Love as Christ loved

Let me draw your attention now, dear reader, to the fact that this text, Ephesians 5:25, appears in the midst of a passage with specific instruction on marriage (vv.22-33). This verse is here to tell us about marriage. We are told in no uncertain terms, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the Church and gave Himself for her.”

Our Lord’s atoning sacrifice is set forth here as the model and impetus for our own marital wellbeing. We may be very much aware of how indispensable the cross of Christ is to salvation, but are we aware as well of how vital it is for laying the groundwork for marriage and showing us what is so crucial about it? We may even think that our commitment to our spouse is somehow in tension with our devotion to the Lord. However, in reality, our commitment to our spouse (if we are married) is an essential part of our devotion to the Lord. To be careless about or negligent of our spouse is a failure to be faithful to the Lord. If we have problems in our marriage, let us not look to our neighbours for answers, or to what our culture dictates, but to what the Bible says of Christ and His Church. Let us look to what Scripture says of what He has done for her, to see the kind of commitment we need in order to set things straight with the one to whom we have been united in marriage.

Give, Give, Give

A common thought is that marriage is all about “give and take.” However reasonable that may sound, it is usually people who continue to have troubles in their marriage who give that advice. The problem with this counsel is two-fold: (a) it is never clear when to “give” and when to “take” and on the bigger issues people almost always want to take; and (b) because of those bigger issues which rarely go well, the bickering too often leads to deep-rooted resentment, frustration, and even divorce. Is there a better way?

Yes. We do not have to look beyond this passage in Ephesians 5 to find a much better way. Marriage is not about “give and take,” but is all about “giving” – period. Just think of giving. Let a husband give himself fully and completely to the wellbeing and happiness of his wife (vv.25, 28). Let him “spoil” his wife, as one counsellor put it – not his children, but his wife. As long as it is understood what is meant by that, it is good advice. “The best way to be a good father to your children,” said another counsellor, “is to be a good husband to their mother.” That is so true. Oh, that such a principle might be put into greater practice! I have often said to prospective bridegrooms in premarital counselling, “Never let your wife-to-be know a single day when she is not very thankful that she is married to you!”

Of course, it works best the other way as well. Let a wife give herself fully and completely to the betterment and fulfillment of her husband also (vv.24, 33). As in all relationships, marriage is a two-way street; marriage prospers and grows increasingly better when both partners are fully committed to each other. I am not suggesting that any of us does this as fully or as consistently as one should. We are all sinners and our depravity has ways of display-



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 Psalm 90:17

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SCHEDULE

Friday
 7 - Topic
 8 - Campfire
Saturday
 7:30 - Breakfast
 9 - Topic / Breakout
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 4 - Topic
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TOPICS
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 Our Identity
 Our Inhibitions
 The Bigger Picture

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ing itself in even the most treasured relationships. Nevertheless, those husbands and wives who are most committed to each other have found the very course it takes to encourage each other in continuing to grow, blossom, and be fruitful in that relationship. Slackness in either partner encourages slackness in the other and generosity in one also encourages generosity in the other. That benefit is not the reason for generous giving, but it is one of its countless benefits.

As the passage before us makes so clear, marriage is all about giving – not taking, but giving, giving, and giving again to each other. Those Christians who have learned to do so in marriage have entered what one more counsellor has described as “the hallowed halls of highest human happiness.”

With such an emphasis on giving, however, one might wonder if in time it will simply drain us of all our resources and leave us with nothing left to give. No, that is not so. On the contrary, giving replenishes our resources. If a husband and wife are giving themselves fully and unreservedly to each other, what each is receiving is far better, more satisfying, and refreshing, than anything either one could ever take. Taking, you see, is losing. Verse 28 says taking from your spouse is taking from yourself, whereas the receiving that comes of someone else’s love-filled giving is winning and reaps the richest rewards that any friendship can produce.

Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for her. In a few words that lies at the very core of what we need to know about marriage. It may be that a husband will be called to lay down his life for his wife, but mainly his calling is to live for her, to provide for her, to do that to the glory of God and to the end that they might both grow in their enjoyment of Him. This should not sound strange, for they have been made one after all (vv. 28-31). Why then should they not live as one and share together their enjoyment of the Lord?

The Ultimate Bond

It is true that only in this life are we given in marriage to one another. Believers, men and women, will be joined to Christ Himself in the world to come (Rev. 19:9). Are you a Christian? If not, that bond with Christ is what you need to be with Him forever, but also to be what you are called to be in relation to others now. Only through His giving of Himself for you and to you, will you be able to give yourself to others. Look to Him.

If you do belong to Christ, keep your eyes fixed on Christ and seek what is yet ahead. As every engaged couple looks forward to their wedding day, let us with even greater anticipation look forward to the marriage supper of the Lamb where, in His banqueting house and under the banner of His love, we will at last be presented faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy!

“I nothing lack if I am His and He is mine forever.” ①

Rev. Tom Aicken is an emeritus pastor of the Free Reformed Church of Langley, BC.

FREE REFORMED SYNOD 2023

Synod 2023 is scheduled to be held **June 5-8, 2023, DV, in the St. George Free Reformed Church building.**

As the calling church for Synod 2023, we request that submissions be sent to erin@salemastudios.ca no later than April 14, 2023. Submissions are to be sent in Microsoft Word format (.docx) or Microsoft Excel format (.xlsx) for financial reports.

The Calgary Free Reformed Consistory



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Listening to What is Not Said (I)

Listening to others is an important part of life. We listen in the store, on the street, at school, at work, at home, among friends, at the club, in the doctor's office, in politics, and at church. We can include reading in listening as well since we spend a lot of time reading what others have written in texts, emails, reports, articles, blogs, and books. Though some may not like to read, just like some find it difficult to listen, preferring to speak themselves, listening and reading are important human activities.

This article will focus on the way we listen (and read). More specifically, the focus is on listening to what is not said or written. Is that permissible? Or does that easily lead us to do injustice to the speaker or author?

That danger is certainly real. But if we only listen to what is said, there is also a danger, namely, that a speaker seeks to persuade us of something without telling us everything we need to know about it clearly and honestly. A person can – consciously or unconsciously – withhold important information, thereby setting his hearers on the wrong track. That is why listening to what is not said is sometimes necessary, provided that we do no injustice to the speaker.

Nebuchadnezzar

I began thinking of this theme when I preached a sermon on King Nebuchadnezzar's "confession of faith" at the end of Daniel 4. While preparing the sermon, I found a variety of opinions among commentators. Some cautiously infer from the king's words that he had changed. Others are less cautious, and are convinced Nebuchadnezzar came to true conversion to God.

When we listen to Nebuchadnezzar's confession, we hear very true things coming from his mouth. He proclaims God's omnipotence and eternity, His sovereignty, truthfulness, and justice. He even speaks about these things in a way that we may sometimes find difficult to imitate. Amid the painful riddles of life, do we never have the inclination to question God's wisdom and suspect the Lord? Amid trials, do we always bow and confess with Nebuchadnezzar that all God's works are truth and His paths are right?

Well, judging solely from what Nebuchadnezzar says, we may side with commentators who say Nebuchadnezzar was truly converted. But other commentators highlight what he does not say and what is not said about him, and therefore are more hesitant to make a pronouncement concerning his heart. If we do not read of essential aspects of conversion, can we be sure it was a true conversion?

By now, someone might think: Does it matter whether we know Nebuchadnezzar's "conversion" was real or not? Does it not matter that we are reconciled to God for ourselves in the way of repentance and faith? Of course, the latter is true. But then I would

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ask: How do we know whether our conversion is “true” and our faith “real”? We have to be able to test that against the Bible. To do so, we must know what the Bible calls “true” and “real.” Then we are still left wondering whether Nebuchadnezzar is an example of true conversion or not.

Don't We All Do It?

Another question is whether we are being honest when we expand our attention from what is said to what is not said. Can we not be expecting too much of speakers? They can't say everything! However, even unawares, we often listen to what is not said. We do so because we know that we cannot trust everything we hear. Perhaps in our naivete we were quick to give credence to someone's words because they seemed so believable, but afterwards we were deceived by them. Such experiences make us cautious and even suspicious at times.

With some people we are more cautious than with others. Some people we take “with a grain of salt.” Others, we do not let easily convince us, as we remember the proverb: “When the fox preaches with passion, guard your chickens.” For example, when politicians speak passionately or the media argues convincingly, do we take it all at face value, or do we wonder: what are they ignoring or hiding? Why does the media make a big deal about one event and ignore another? Why do they have different standards for people they support than for ones they oppose? Sometimes negative things are magnified tremendously and when the truth turns out to be more nuanced, the media remains silent. We are then upset with “what is not said.”

We may also listen to what is not said in the doctor's office. Sometimes the doctor cannot say everything because he does not know everything or because he feels it is not wise to tell everything at that moment. Optimistic ones may interpret that silence positively and pessimistic ones may do so negatively.

More areas could be mentioned where we apply or should apply listening to what is not said, but our focus in this series will be on listening to what is not said in church, during elder home visits, in the raising of children, or when we talk together about spiritual matters and what we experience in our dealings with the Lord.

I hope it is clear that listening to what is not said is not simply permissible but important, especially when important things are at stake, such as true spiritual life and real salvation.

Take Heed How You Hear

The Lord Jesus Himself exhorts us to listen extremely carefully, especially to the teaching of God's Word. In Luke 8:18, He calls: “Take heed therefore how ye hear.” That was the concluding call after He explained the parable of Sower and the four types of soil, as well as how God reveals the things concealed. This call means it is not enough simply to hear His teaching, but that what is heard must also be processed and spiritually understood. The seed must bear fruit. Since Christ reveals what is hidden, this call means we have to listen carefully.

The apostle John understood Christ's exhortation. He wrote: “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God” (1 John 4:1). Then the apostle reminds us that there



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are also false prophets.

These teachings of Scripture must convince us of the necessity of listening carefully, including listening to what is not said. So how do we apply this? First, in the church, where we hear the preaching.

The Preaching

The importance of listening in church is unmistakable. Just read Romans 10, where Paul writes that faith is by hearing and hearing is by the Word of God which is proclaimed. Because Christ Himself sends preachers, something of vital importance is to be heard in the church. The message concerns our salvation.

This importance calls for great precision. We must be properly informed. Never forget that the devil will do anything to keep sinners from hearing the whole counsel of God concerning salvation. He will do all he can to keep sinners in the blindness of ignorance. He knows that when the gospel is God's power to salvation, he has lost hold of another sinner. That is why if he cannot prevent sinners from hearing the gospel, he will try to twist the message or cause them to misunderstand it. He works on our ears to try to close them or be selective in hearing. He also works on the mouths of preachers to get them to deliver a twisted or at least an incomplete message.

Yes, there is something to be heard in the church, at least, if the church is faithful to its calling and has not given in to the ever-changing tastes of churchgoers. If it caves in, it often diminishes its preaching and increases its sights, ceremonies, and entertainment to try to draw and keep people coming to church. In doing so, the church drifts far from the apostles and the simple methods they employed. Paul did not feel the need to make use of the artifices of the Greek wisdom teachers. His preaching was not "enticing words of man's wisdom" (1 Cor. 2:4). Although he apparently lived in a time when arts and visuals were valued, the apostle rejected all that as not helpful in the proclamation of the Word. He preached. And what happened? God blessed it. The Holy Spirit opened blind eyes and worked faith and repentance in unbelieving hearts. Through the preaching of the Word, applied by the Spirit, Christ built His church. So, are we going to build it differently now?

If preaching is essential, listening is also very important. At stake is our salvation and God's glory. How then should we listen? Can we believe everything unquestioningly and uncritically?

Elders

Returning to the devil's activities in church, I risk coming across as negative. But I do it because we need to be mindful of the devil's devices. I am reminded of the moving chapter where we are told of Paul's farewell to the elders of Ephesus (Acts 20). In his parting words, he calls those elders to take heed to themselves and to the flock over which the Holy Spirit has appointed them overseers (v.28). That call gains the more force when Paul adds that he foresees that other men will lift their voices in the church after he departs. They will speak wrong things in order to draw disciples after them. In other words, the church is in danger of being turned away from the truth. Paul has no good word to say about those who lead

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others astray. He does not express tolerance for these teachers as well-meaning, erring brothers. He calls them wolves who do not spare the flock.

Since this is about to happen, the elders have a great responsibility. In their care for the flock, they must ward off dangers and make sure it receives healthy food. They are responsible for what the congregation hears. The form for the confirmation of the elders rightly points this out: "Thirdly, it is also the duty particularly to have regard unto the doctrine and conversation of the ministers of the Word, to the end that all things may be directed to the edification of the Church; and that no strange doctrine be taught, according to that which we read, Acts 20, where the apostle exhorteth to watch diligently against the wolves which might come into the sheepfold of Christ."

One of the responsibilities of elders is to listen keenly and test what is heard against Scripture. Does that mean they have to criti-

cize everything? Of course not. Particularly with young, inexperienced preachers of the Word, some leniency may be shown. Everything may not be crystalized, clear, and in its right place. Who can say they have everything clear? Patience is necessary, especially with young preachers, provided that the "root of the matter" is in them. Yet, vigilance is always needed. This vigilance includes listening to what is not said.

That is not just the task of elders. Every churchgoer bears his or her own responsibility. What Christ said applies to all of us: "take heed therefore how ye hear"! ¹¹

Rev. P. den Butter is an emeritus pastor in our sister churches in the Netherlands. He served the Free Reformed churches of Toronto (1975-1978) and Hamilton (1978-1982). This series is a condensed version of articles published as "Luisteren naar wat niet gezegd wordt" in Bewaar het Pand (2002).

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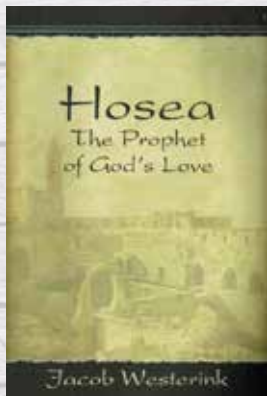
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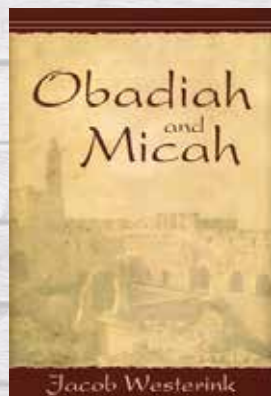
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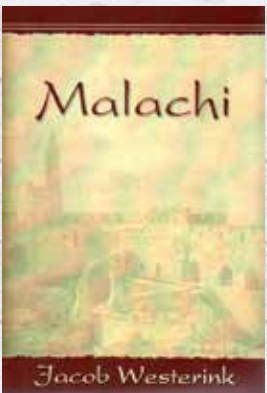
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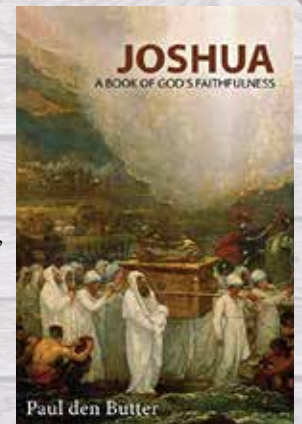
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OBITUARY



WILLEMINA GROENEWEG
(VANDALEN)

On Tuesday, December 13, 2022, the Lord took to Himself our dear Mother, Oma and Great Oma in her 92nd year. She was the beloved wife of the late **Markus "Max" Groeneweg** and dearly loved mother of Bastiaan (Marilyn) Groeneweg, John (Karen) Groeneweg, Pete (Marcella) Groeneweg, Adriana (Frank) Pennings, Theo (Yolanda) Groeneweg, Arnold (Henrietta) Groeneweg, Wilma (Arie) van Eyk, and Connie (Ron) Prol.

She is lovingly remembered by 32 grandchildren and 68 great grandchildren, nieces and nephews. She was the dear sister of Leen[†] and Betz VanDalen, Sya[†] and Piet Groeneweg, Pieta[†] and Theo[†] Plazier and Arnold[†] and Coby VanDalen and dear sister-in-law to Bastiaan[†] and Janie[†] Groeneweg, Mike and Eva De Vries, John[†] and Coby[†] Fondse, Corrie Davelaar, John and Donna[†] Greenway, Jan[†] and Nellie De Boer, and Dick and Truus Groeneweg.

Willemina was born in Holland on June 24th, 1931, daughter of the late Jan[†] and Adriana[†] VanDalen.

The funeral service was held at the Free Reformed Church, St. Thomas, on Monday, December 19th, 2022, with Pastor Eric Moerdyk officiating. The interment service was at Elmdale Memorial Park Cemetery, led by Pastor Arie van Eyk.

*"I will lift up my eyes to the hills,
From whence comes my help?
My help comes from the Lord,
Who made heaven and earth."
Psalm 121:1 -2*

OBITUARY



LAURINA J. VANDER SLOOT
(nee Van Kempen)

At age 80, Laurina went home to be with her Lord and Saviour on December 31, 2022. She had great love and was devoted to her husband, children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren. Many remember Laurina for her compassion for children as she drove bus for Lamont Christian School for 45 years and went on many mission trips to Guatemala. But the source of her love was found in the relationship with her Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Laurina is survived by her husband of nearly 60 years, Paul; their children **Paul & Laurie Vander Sloot, Mary Jo Vander West, Karen Vander Sloot, Mark & Michelle Vander Sloot;** grandchildren and great-grandchildren Jennifer & Tony Scheidel (Ajay, Halia), Corey & Melissa Vander Sloot (Letty, Graham), Caleb & Stephanie Vander West (Bristol), Victoria & Riley Fish (Easton, Saylor), Rebecca, Anna, Stephen and Abigail Vander Sloot; brother and sisters Pete & Minnie Van Kempen, Johanna & Ben Schipper, Pauline & Dave Wallinga; brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law Jack (Jan) Vander Sloot, Dave (Marlene) Vander Sloot, Jane (John) Koomans; as well as many nieces, nephews, cousins and friends.

Her funeral service was held Thursday, January 5, 2023 at the Grand Rapids Free Reformed Church, led by Dr. G. M. Bilkes. To share a memory or sign her guest-book, visit www.heritagelifestory.com.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

OBITUARY



"Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul..." Psalm 131:2

On Wednesday, January 25, 2023,

ARENTJE (ATTIE) ANTJE KOOPMAN (Roffel)

passed peacefully into eternal glory in her 84th year. Our deep loss is her incredible gain, as she is now at eternal rest with her Saviour. Mom is free from the sufferings of this life, and is before the Throne of God worshipping in perfection with a clear mind and sinless heart. We praise God for His amazing grace and steadfast love! We will miss her dearly, but are filled with great joy for Mom.

Mom was born in the Netherlands on May 19, 1939. She immigrated to Canada at a young age, and married Meindert Koopman on April 14, 1961. They resided in the Chatham area for most of their married life before moving to St. Thomas in 2009. They attended the Free Reformed Churches in both Chatham and St. Thomas. In 2015, Mom took up residence at Valleyview Nursing Home.

Attie was predeceased by her dear husband, **Meindert Koopman**. They were married 54 years.

She leaves behind her six children and their spouses, grandchildren and great-grandchildren:

Jim & Audrey Koopman - Peter & Andrea (Liam, Beckham), Sam, Naomi, Claire

John & Sue Koopman - Scott & Jen (Jenna-Grace, Mayelle, Owen[†], LilaJoy, IvyFaith, EmmaRose), Ben, Josh & Naomi (Amelia, Florence), Erin & Thomas, Caleb
Cindy & James VanderHeide - Brianna & Jacob (Tali, Sloane, Kinsley), Danielle & Matthew (Ephraim, Isaiah, Malachi), Nicolas & Michelle, Brayden, Kierra, Kaitlyn, Serena, Jaxon, Moriah

Carol & Paul Laman - Hadassah, Josiah & Grace (Andrew), Shifrah

Mel & Monica Koopman - Jared & Leasa (Kaison), Wyatt, Zoe

Mark & Linda Koopman - Alex & Hannah, Carsten & Nadia, Savannah

Attie is survived by her sister, Anne Koomans, and in-laws: Ge Koopman, Grace Koopman, Marg & Hielke Zuidema, and Grace & John Pennings.

She was predeceased by her parents, John & Siemkje Roffel and her in-laws, Jacobus & Geertruida Koopman, as well as brothers and in-laws: John & Mabel Roffel, Harry & Diane Roffel, Harry Koomans, Pearl & George Greevink, John Koopman, Tom Koopman, Wiecher & Jannie Koopman, and Trudy & George Brink.

The funeral service was held Monday, January 30, 2023, at the Free Reformed Church of St. Thomas with interment at the Elmdale Cemetery.

OBITUARY



ENGELINA VAN ESSEN

August 16, 1927-January 26, 2023

On January 26, 2023, Engelina Van Essen

was called home to glory. She was the beloved wife of the **Rev. Henry Van Essen**.

Dear mother of :

Martyn (Mary) Van Essen, Barrie Joan (Derk) teBokkel, St. Thomas Walter (Marsha) Van Essen, Mitchell Miriam Van Essen, Alberta

Loving grandmother of 14 grandchildren and 20 great-grandchildren.

The funeral service took place at the Mitchell Free Reformed Church, on Tuesday, January 31st, with the Rev. H. Martyn Van Essen

officiating. An artist in her own right, Engelina never tired of trying new ways to express herself, with the ultimate goal of giving glory to God.

Psalm 91:1-2

He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in him I will trust."

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