

VOLUME 72 NUMBER 05 · MAY 2025 EDITION

# THE MESSENGER

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE FREE REFORMED CHURCHES OF NORTH AMERICA



**02** MEDITATION:  
FINDING COMFORT IN THE  
ASCENSION OF JESUS

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# FINDING COMFORT IN THE ASCENSION OF JESUS

*“And he led them out as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy: And were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God. Amen.” Luke 24:50-53*

## **Finding Comfort in the Ascension of Jesus**

When you truly love someone, will it make you happy or sad if they leave? The answer isn't hard. When you truly love someone, you will be sad if they leave. But if this is true, how can you and I make sense of the disciples' reaction when their beloved Saviour left them for heaven? Luke records their response: “And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.” How could they rejoice? And then what about you and me? Can we rejoice with them in the ascension of Jesus? In our world of trouble, would it not be so much better to have Jesus with us in the flesh? Is there comfort for you and me in the ascension of Jesus?

## **Yes! In His Place of Departure**

On Easter morning, Jesus' day of victory over death had finally come. As the hymn says, “Up from the grave he arose, with a mighty triumph o'er his foes!” The disciples then spent forty days with their beloved Lord. But all too soon Jesus led them as far as Bethany, and there, before their wondering eyes, physically ascended into the sky until He was hidden by a cloud. But here is a question we would do well to ask: why Bethany? Why did Jesus leave from there?

The answer is a comforting one. To the east of Jerusalem is a ridge of hills overlooking Jerusalem called the Mount of Olives. It was there that Ezekiel stood when he saw the glory of the Lord depart from Jerusalem. It was there that Jesus stood while teaching His disciples about the impending destruction of Jerusalem. It was there that Jesus stood as he wept over Jerusalem. It was on this hill that the Garden of Gethsemane, meaning “oil press”, was situated. It was here Jesus went the night before His crucifixion, following the footsteps of His weeping forebearer David. There His suffering pressed out from Him great tears, great drops of blood, and great agonizing prayers. It was on this hill also that Jesus was betrayed by His own familiar friend. Bethany, meaning “house of sorrows”, was also located at the base of this hill. There it was recorded that Jesus wept. If we consider all the scriptural data, we might say it was from a mountain of sorrows, near the house of sorrows, that the man of sorrows left a world of sorrows, for a heaven of joy.



Now why would Jesus choose to leave from this place filled with memories of sorrow? There are three comforting things it seems Jesus was communicating to His disciples both back then and also today. First, I am not ashamed of and will never forget the world of sorrow in which you now live.<sup>1</sup> I will gladly enter the gates of glory with the dust of Bethany on my feet. Second, if you also wish to enter heaven do not consider it strange that you like me “must ascend thither from the house of sufferings and sorrow.”<sup>2,3</sup> Third, just as I now rise in triumph above this world of sorrows, so also will you.<sup>4</sup> Don’t be discouraged when you find yourselves living in places of sorrow. Look to me, the Author and Finisher of your faith.<sup>5</sup>

### Yes! In His Manner of Departure

And there is much more comfort to be found when we consider the way in which Jesus ascended into heaven. Luke records that He lifted up His hands in blessing over His disciples, and in this posture was “parted from them and carried up into heaven.”<sup>6</sup> What was Jesus communicating to His disciples? He was saying this: “I am leaving you, yes; but in my departure I am bestowing upon you my High Priestly blessing.”

Now, when pastors today raise their hands in blessing over their congregations, they do so representing God to the people, just as the priests in the Old Testament.<sup>7</sup> But when Jesus ascended with hands outstretched in blessing, He did so as God Himself.<sup>8</sup> The last memory He left with His disciples, and so also for you and me, was this comforting reminder: even when our world is covered with clouds of suffering, yet above the clouds God’s face still shines upon us in blessing.<sup>9</sup>

Even more than that, consider this remarkable fact: even as our Lord raised His arms in blessing, the disciples could not have missed, and nor may we, the holes in His hands. What did those holes communicate? They said that no matter what your future holds, it is finished for you. You may suffer many things, you may struggle much with sin, you may experience many sorrows. In these holes, however, you have the very signature of the Almighty that your sins are paid for, you are reconciled to God, and every one of your sorrows will work together for your good.<sup>10</sup> Those holes cried out to God above and man below this same comforting message: my High Priestly blessing on my disciples is absolutely irrevocable. No wonder the disciples rejoiced when Jesus left! To them and to us Jesus was giving this clear message: yes, you will live on in your house of sorrows, but be of good courage, I have overcome the world!<sup>11</sup>

### Yes! In His Reason for Departure

These two comforts, dear friends, receive an exclamation mark at their end when we ask and answer that all-important “why” question. Why did Jesus leave His disciples? Consider these five comforting reasons. First, in Him we now have our glorified flesh in heaven and so are given a sure pledge that we also, body and soul, will one day enjoy the great comforts of heaven.<sup>12</sup> Second, in Him we now have the comfort of knowing that our victorious King has entered into and passed through the heavens, openly displaying His triumph over sin, Satan, and death.<sup>13</sup> Third, in Him we now have the comfort of knowing that Jesus has been seated at the right hand of God and given all authority to subdue His and our enemies, turn our evil into our good, and bring glory to His name.<sup>14</sup> Fourth, in Him we now have the comfort of knowing that, even at this moment, our advocate, with those nail-pierced hands of blessing, intercedes for us with a perfect success rate before the throne of God.<sup>15</sup> Lastly, in Him now, all who ask with faith may receive that promised New Covenant comfort of the greater outpouring of the Spirit of Christ Himself.<sup>16</sup>

### Conclusion

And this all brings us back to that simple question we began with: when you truly love someone, will it make you happy or sad if they leave? The answer is this: you will certainly be sad. But then

**Now, when pastors today raise their hands in blessing over their congregations, they do so representing God to the people, just as the priests in the Old Testament. But when Jesus ascended with hands outstretched in blessing, He did so as God Himself.**

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## MEDITATION

why did the disciples rejoice, and how can you and I find comfort in Jesus' departure from our world of sorrows? The disciples rejoiced, and we can be full of comfort, because when Jesus left as a man, He did so to procure and bestow upon you and me saving blessings with far more comfort and power than had He stayed. And the heart of that comfort is this: He left his troubled, weak, and sorrowing people so that by His Spirit He could return in a far more intimate way into the hearts of His people.

Do you as a Christian find yourself today in your own Bethany, your own "house of sorrows"? Do not despair. Instead, diligently ask your ascended Saviour for His great comforts. Ask Him, most of all, for Himself. Here is His promise to you in John 14:14-18: "If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it. If ye love me, keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you"<sup>17</sup> 11

*Rev. Isaac Epp is pastor of Shiloh Free Reformed Church, Picture Butte, Alberta.*

### Endnotes

1. Hebrews 4:14-16.
2. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 1914.
3. 1 Peter 4:13-14.
4. John 14:1-2, 16:33, Psalm 30:5.
5. Hebrews 12:1-3, 1 Thessalonians 1:10, Habakkuk 2:3-4.
6. "He came on earth to bless and not to curse, and blessing He departed." J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, vol. 2 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1879), 525.
7. Leviticus 9:22, Numbers 6:23-27, 2 Corinthians 13:14.
8. John 14:9-10.
9. John 16:33, John 1:14-18.  
William Cowper: "Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace; behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face."
10. John 14:2, Romans 8:28.
11. John 16:33, Romans 8:31-39, Psalm 27.
12. Ephesians 2:6, Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 49.
13. Psalm 24:7-10, Colossians 2:15, Psalm 68:18, Hebrews 4:14.
14. Psalm 2, 110, 1 Peter 3:22, Romans 8:28, Genesis 50:20.  
Westminster Shorter Catechism Answer 28: "Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies." Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Edinburgh Edition* (Philadelphia: William S. Young, 1851), 396.
15. Hebrews 9:24, 7:26, 1 John 2:1, Romans 8:16, 26-27. "Arise, my soul, arise; shake off thy guilty fears; the bleeding Sacrifice in my behalf appears: before the throne my surety stands, before the throne my surety stands, my name is written on His hands" (Charles Wesley).
16. Joel 2:28-29, Luke 11:13, Acts 2, Ephesians 3:16, 4:7-16, Colossians 3:1.
17. John 14:14-18, c.f. Matthew 5:4.

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**1:30 pm**  
Afternoon Session Speaker:  
Kara Dedert

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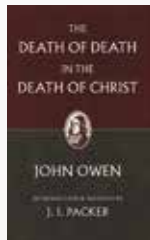
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This is a polemical work, designed to show, among other things, that the doctrine of universal redemption is unscriptural and destructive of the gospel. Some may find this thesis shocking so that they will not want to read this book, but there are signs of a new upsurge of interest in the theology of the Bible, and a new readiness to search the Scriptures and to think through the faith of Scripture. To those this book will appeal and have great value. John Owen was born in 1626, and his national influence continues to merit the appreciation of great theologians in his time as well as today. This work is one of his most acclaimed treatises. Softcover, 384 pages, Banner of Truth Trust

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### **Thoughts on Religious Experience**

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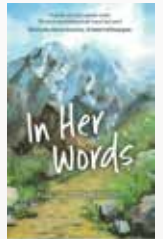
## RECENT BOOKS

### **In Her Words**

By Patricia St. John

Patricia St. John was an English writer. She worked most of her life as a Christian missionary in Morocco. She was a master storyteller, and her books continue to captivate readers even today. Her books for children and adults continue to be reprinted. Her personal story is no less exciting than one of her fictional tales. It is full of adventure, larger-than-life characters and exotic destinations. But this isn't some unimaginable far-flung lifestyle. Central to her story is the work of God in her life and in the lives of those she met. This is her story, told in her own words and in her characteristically engaging and gripping style. Discover the inspiration behind Patricia's classic tales and be challenged by her commitment to service, her desire to make Jesus known, and her willingness to follow God wherever He leads. Softcover, 330 pages, 10 Publishing

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### **But Now I See: Eye-Opening Light from the Gospel of John**

By Gerald M. Bilkes

The Gospel of John witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet it is apparent from John's account that not everyone who perceived Jesus with their physical eyes saw Him for who He truly is. In But Now I See, Gerald Bilkes walks us through a study of this gospel, sharing the same intent as the apostolic author, "that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing ye might have life through his name" (John 20:31). As you read about how Jesus is the Light, the Lamb of God, the Way, the Truth, the Life, the Resurrection, the Vine, and so much more, may you also come to say, "We beheld his glory" (John 1:14). Softcover, 191 pages, Reformation Heritage Books

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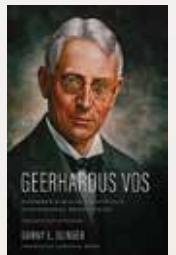
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#### **Reformed Biblical Theologian, Confessional Presbyterian**

By Danny E. Olinger

Before Vos was thirty years old, Herman Bavinck urged him to come and teach at his institution. He was highly acclaimed by Benjamin Warfield, who called him "probably the best exegete Princeton ever had." Abraham Kuyper, J. Gresham Machen, and Richard B. Gaffin proclaimed Vos "the father of Reformed biblical theology." Notwithstanding such acclaim by these and other leading Reformed theologians, and his teaching at Princeton Seminary from 1893 to 1932, Vos was increasingly marginalized during his lifetime. In this book, Danny Olinger tells the story of Vos's life and analyzes his theological contributions. Olinger further details Vos's significant influence upon the Orthodox Presbyterian church and Westminster Theological Seminary, despite not joining either one. Hardcover, 325 pages, Reformed Forum

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# GENDER CONFUSION AND OTHER IDOLATRIES OF SELF

Today, even most church-going people find it hard to believe that in the 16<sup>th</sup> century people would fight over the proper view of the Lord's Supper. If the Reformers knew that people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, also in church, would be fighting over the definition of gender and whether people can choose their gender, they would find it impossible to believe.

Yet, that is where we are in the Western world. Admittedly, there has been considerable push-back against this trend, even recently in the Supreme Court in the United Kingdom. Yet, the wording of their ruling would still provoke utter consternation among not just the Reformers but everyone living in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Still in many parts of the world, including Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, the notion that people can choose their own gender is taken as a sign not just of moral, but intellectual bankruptcy. How do people get to where something so straightforward to the rest of the world and the whole of history can get called into question?

This is a symptom of a serious problem that we read of in the prophecy of Hosea. This prophet came face to face with the stubborn bent of a nation that had been the Lord's bride, yet turned to everything and everyone but Him. He writes about those called after God's name: "They will not frame their doings to turn unto their God: for the spirit of whoredoms is in the midst of them, and they have not known the LORD" (Hos. 5:4).

## Who Am I?

Only a few years ago, most of us would have thought it unthinkable to be questioning things like gender. However, when we look at the last century or more, we see how the deepest questions of human identity have not been answered with an appeal to God's Word. Instead these questions, such as "Who am I?," "What am I," "Why am I?," have been answered by more modern criteria, such as evolutionary "science" and "personal feeling or desire." Rather than looking narrowly at those who are confused about their gender, we need to register that societies as a whole have been on a quest of self-authentication, where the sky isn't even a limit. Nothing is. Yet, in a certain sense, the Bible addresses this in advance, and unmask it for what it truly is in God's sight.

Hosea shows the basic problem: “They will not frame their doings to turn unto their God” (5:4). In other words, the framework for our lives excludes God. The picture of spiritual adultery, so fundamental to the book of Hosea, explains the power of the idolatry of self. Hosea says: “[T]he spirit of whoredoms is in the midst of them, and they have not known the LORD.” This was not just true in Hosea’s day, but is true in all of us by nature. It is a vivid picture of our society’s approach to gender confusion and so much more.

### Self-Authentication

The problem of self-determination or autonomy is not just the problem of a few. One can be clear that their true gender is indeed their biological gender, and yet buy into the lie that you need to discover yourself and live life as you determine it should be lived. Your highest good then is the sense of personal fulfillment. This can even be fostered in Christian terms and phraseology: “Live your best life now.” “Pursue your dreams.” “God wants you to feel fulfilled.” The ancient lie of Satan, “Ye shall be as gods” (Gen. 3:5) underlies it all. People want spirituality without the supremacy of God. People maintain their rights, while rejecting God’s rule. By nature, we want affirmation without transformation, grace without repentance, and satisfaction apart from divine salvation.

Israel pursued after idols that flattered their own sense of worth. We do so in a multitude of ways, all of which are idolatry. Religion itself can be a way of self-flattery, making a comfortable life for yourself in which your conscience is appeased. All the while, there is no submission to God’s verdict and values for ourselves and for life. In the end of the day, unless we reckon with God as Creator and ourselves as His creature under Him and accountable to Him, we will not frame our doings to turn unto the LORD. We will try to be our own creator and saviour. We will seek to define ourselves in a way that sets aside biblical revelation.

### Rejection of Creation

You need to set the Bible aside if you wish to embrace gender fluidity. The first page tells us that God created human beings as “male and female” (Gen. 1:27). That means that whether we are male or female is determined by God as Creator. Along with everything else about creation, this was deemed good by God, and thus it is essential and purposeful.

In addition, though our bodies are created by God and ought to be valued and honored as God’s creation, we are more than bodies. We are living souls, and we may not pit one aspect of our created being against the other. Today many practically deify the body as the medium for our ultimate satisfaction and happiness. As a result, some people have taken this to its logical conclusion: we need to change our bodies if they stand in the way of our attainment of self-actualization. The Epistle to the Romans uncovers the rebellion behind seeking to change the truth of God into a lie (1:25). Placing undue worth upon our bodies and imagining that we can determine our own gender is part of what it means to worship the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Just think of how God has covenanted with us and showed Himself to be the One and only God, who alone should be worshipped! To worship ourselves is to deal treacherously with Him and really with ourselves (Hos. 5:7). When our feelings matter more to us than God’s truth, we are despising the love of a covenant God in the gospel. His redemption of His people is the only way and means by which we can be freed from the slavery of sin, which will otherwise prevail and strengthen. “Let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our maker” (Ps. 95:6).

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**PER SUBSCRIPTION** The Messenger is published 11 times per year (July & August issues are combined).

**SUBSCRIPTIONS/REMITTANCES**  
Subscription requests, invoices, and payments should be addressed to:  
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**SUBMISSIONS/ANNOUNCEMENTS/NOTICES:** All articles, notices for family announcements, obituaries, anniversaries, and non-commercial advertisements for the **JUNE 2025** issue should reach the editor no later than **TUESDAY, MAY 6<sup>th</sup>, 2025** and should be sent to:  
Mrs. Rhonda Kroesbergen  
(Messenger Administrator)  
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This bi-monthly publication for children is under the direction of the Free Reformed Publications Committee:  
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## Mercy and Identity

Like all of us, those who struggle with their gender or other parts of their identity need the gospel of Jesus Christ. We need the honest and forthright preaching of law and gospel that uncovers the idolatry of the human heart and points to the Lord Jesus Christ.

God's mercy is revealed on the cross, where sin was atoned for and where new life was made manifest for sinners like us all. Some who have long gone down the path of self-actualization and self-defined gender could by grace press into the kingdom before many who pursue idols in religiously acceptable ways.

In Hosea's day, the wayward people of Israel needed to return to the Lord. Healing is in the way of repentance (Hos. 12:1-8). Our identity is not to be discovered in ourselves, but received from outside of ourselves in Jesus Christ by faith in Him (Gal. 2:20). This grace enables us to discover the true joy that comes through repentance, the mortification of the old, and the quickening of the new man (Lord's Day 33).

## Conclusion

Like the Lord did with the people of Israel in Hosea's time, He is pursuing us until we leave off our old patterns of unfaithfulness and idolatry. He is calling us to turn to him and frame our doings according to His Word. May we hear His voice today. Then we may understand better the beauty and glory of the sacrament of Christ's broken body. Rather than trying to pursue hopelessly some satisfaction through our own broken bodies, we will be healed by the Christ whose body was broken for His sinful people. ❧



### MARTHA'S HANDS MARY'S HEART

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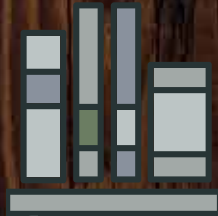
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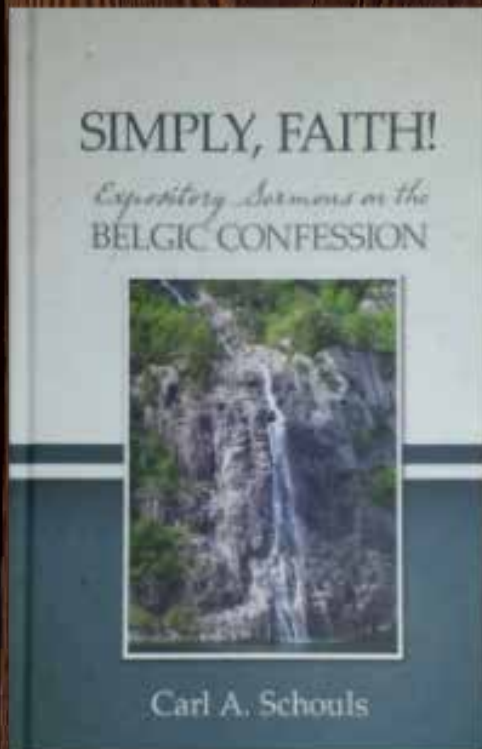
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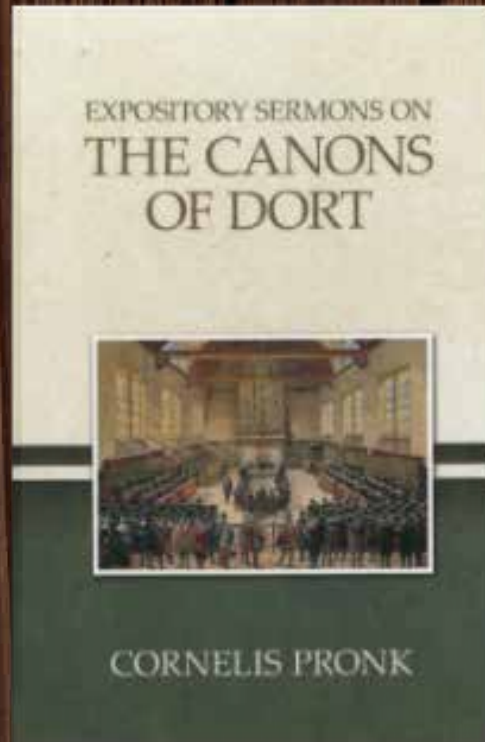
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# HOW CHRISTIANITY TRANSFORMED THE WORLD

*How Christianity Transformed the World* by Sharon James. Published by Christian Focus Publications, 2021. Softcover, 204 pages.

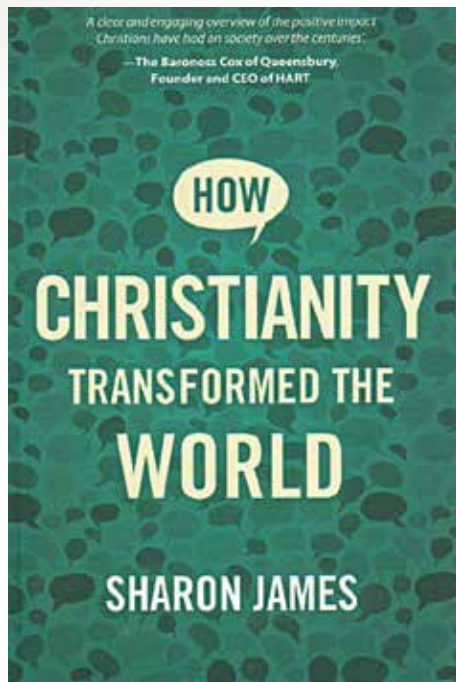
A huge challenge today is to give answers to people's questions. Believing Christianity is real and has the best answers for society and the world. By looking back over the past two thousand years of history, this book covers matters which have troubled people from time immemorial. In ten brief chapters, the author addresses issues such as freedom, religious liberty, justice, the dignity of women, healthcare, education, and the value of work, with evidence that Christianity has been influential to transform these basic human values.

Sharon James (PhD, University of Wales) is eminently qualified. She works as a policy analyst for the Christian Institute, United Kingdom, a worldwide evangelical Christian charity. She is also the author of biographies of men and women who changed the world through missions. She has written on gender issues in "Lies We are Told, the Truth We Must Hold: Worldviews and their Consequences."

Basic to her writing this book is that "the liberties and rights that we value in free societies are to a great degree based on the biblical conviction that all humans, made in God's image, are equal in dignity (Gen. 1:26-27)" (p. 22; cf. p. 85). Furthermore, "the incarnation of Christ confirms the significance of our human condition. God taking human flesh underlines the dignity of the human person" (p. 23).

In each chapter she defends this Christian conviction, showing the sharp contrast with the culture of the ancient world. Human **slavery** is one example of denying human dignity. Marxism is another. The facts of history are illustrated throughout the book with real personal incidents and historical accounts. Slavery is the ultimate denial of human liberty. It was rampant in the ancient world and propagated by Greek philosophers Aristotle and Plato. In contrast, the apostle Paul declares that "in Christ we are all one, whether slave or free" (Gal. 3:28). Therefore, the Church Fathers and early medieval kings influenced by Christianity opposed slavery, although the author doesn't ignore the sins of Christian nations and individuals regarding slavery. Nevertheless, through the persistent and heroic efforts of Christian leaders and missionaries, slavery was finally outlawed in western countries. Sadly, it still persists at an alarming rate in the worldwide exploitation of women and children in the sex trades.

**Religious liberty** is another value highly prized by Christians. By issuing the Edict of Milan (313 AD), Emperor Constantine became the champion of Christians. He allowed all his subjects to have the free



and unrestricted right to follow their choice of religion. Sadly, Christians did not always exercise this tolerance towards those with whom they disagreed. James argues that the Anabaptists in the fifteenth century powerfully pleaded for religious freedom. However, this freedom did not come to full expression even during the Puritan era. She insists "that religious freedom, or liberty of conscience, is a natural right that belongs to all people made in the image of God. A biblical understanding of this principle is the only sure bulwark against totalitarianism" (p. 55). Tied to these principles is justice for all. "Our triune God is characterized by perfect righteousness. He is the greatest lawgiver. The Creator has placed His moral law on the hearts and consciences of all the people He has created (Rom. 2:15)" (p. 59).

Closely related to these Christian values is the **protection of all human life** (Chapter 4). We bear the image of God and He alone disposes of life or death. Protection of human life is enshrined in the sixth commandment of the Decalogue. The protection of life practiced by the early Christians appears a significant factor in the extraordinary growth of the early Church. Early Christians saved countless unborn infants and their mothers (p. 73). The theory of evolution and the rejection of Christian and God-given values have led to the legalization of euthanasia becoming a frightening reality.

Regarding **women's dignity**, she begins by stating that, when Christianity entered the Roman world, especially through the apostle Paul, the position of women in the Greek and Roman world was abysmal. Paul's teaching transformed women's position in marriage, in the family, in the church and society. She mentions how Christ respectfully dealt with women. However, due to this book being restricted to the New Testament period, the favoured position of Israelite women in contrast with surrounding heathen nations is lacking. James points out that as Christianity spread, women became more thoroughly involved in the family, church, and society. They often excelled in mission activities. The New Testament's teaching transformed pagan Roman and Greek culture of oppression. Such a culture is seen today in Muslim and Hindu cultures, where women are still oppressed and considered inferior. Sadly, Christianity is struggling to withstand an unbiblical view of women and human dignity by the promotion of transgenderism and sex slavery.

Despite man's fall from God in paradise and the consequent effects of sin, God is good to all. He has **compassion** on all He has



made (Ps.145:8,9). Love to our neighbour is embedded in the Ten Commandments. Compassion characterized the ministry of Christ. In contrast, pagan society had a high regard for qualities of strength, courage, and self-control; compassion was seen as a weakness. If benevolence was extended, it generally was for selfish reasons, to obtain public good or recognition. Therefore, Christian compassion, as practiced by the early Church, transformed culture and became a major factor in the spread of Christianity. Throughout church history, philanthropy, "the outpouring of mercy and compassion," marked the Church. This compassion was especially strong during eighteenth and nineteenth century revivals in England and in America. It led to thousands more people on both sides of the Atlantic converting to living Christianity (p. 111). The author relates stories of prison reform and Sunday schools for the poor. She cites the impact of Scottish Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847) on marriage and family relationships. The outpouring of charity even extended to "animal welfare," restricting cruelty to animals. Today, Christian compassion is demonstrated by a multitude of world-wide Christian organizations to help the world's poor, especially amid war and natural disasters. Interesting is a recent study indicating that "shutting down a city congregation will often damage a neighbourhood's vitality and socio-economic health. Active churches, religious schools, and church-based ministries have a positive impact on local communities" (p. 123-24).

Christian **medical care** went hand-in hand with healthcare. The oath of Hippocrates of Cos (c. 460-377 BC) is still known: doctors would "do no harm, ... would not procure abortions, [and] they would protect patients from exploitation" (p. 128). At the time, it included mostly the wealthy. As Christianity spread, hospitals were established, so that by the fourteenth century, "England alone, with fewer than four million people, had six hundred hospitals" (p. 132). The nursing profession also became a highly valued commodity. Today, medical care is in crisis and increasingly euthanasia is promoted as a solution. An interesting sidenote is that, during the Chinese Covid outbreak, medics sought to save patients in the Wuhan Union Hospital, founded by Welsh missionary Griffith John in 1886 (p. 127).

Why should Christians value **education**? One reason is that the "Cosmos Is Ordered" (p. 146). Being created as rational beings, we are able to study God's creation. The biblical mandate to subdue and

exercise dominion, stewarding and managing the earth on behalf of our Creator is still in effect (cf. Gen. 1:27,28). Every child has unique gifts which are to be developed to fulfil this mandate. Missionaries promote literacy to enable people to read the Bible for themselves. The church has always been intent to carefully instruct converts and ministers for their calling. Calvin argued Christians can learn from unbelievers because truth is God's truth and may be discerned best by Christians. Christians founded universities, which now, sadly, are being eroded by the inroads of anti-Christian unbelief.

God has distributed **talents** in various ways to His creatures. Not all are called to be highly educated; some have been given skills in industry and labour. "The biblical worldview offers an inspiring vision of work. It is not just a means by which we survive. When we work, we reflect and honour our Creator," at least we should (p. 169). The biblical view of work begins with the recognition that God Himself works. On the seventh day, God had finished the work He had been doing and rested from all his work (Gen. 2:2-3). Jesus was born into a carpenter's family and did manual work. Since the Fall, humans have exploited other humans and therefore the Bible has many admonitions for work-givers to make their employees flourish (cf. Deut. 28:1-14; Prov. 12:10; etc.). Lifting people out of poverty is achieved mainly by helping them to developing their skills rather than giving handouts.

The book ends with a chapter, "History: The Triumph of Christ." In it, the author addresses the onslaughts of atheists, unbelievers, and a materialistic world view. There will be "final judgement and the righting of wrongs. Christ is King and He will triumph over all evil and has done so on the cross" (p. 194). Looking back, "we admit that human sin has often spoiled the testimony of God's people. There is no room for pride. But by God's grace, His people have often had a transformative effect" (p. 198).

The book is enriched with numerous quotes and booklists for further reading. Although it does not have discussion questions, it would be an excellent resource for senior high school students to learn about a Christian world view and would be great for a "book study." <sup>M</sup>

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



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# THE REFORMED FORM OF BAPTISM

## —4

Having studied the first part of our Reformed Baptismal Form, which focuses on the Triune God's promise in baptism, we now turn to the section that explains the significance of infant baptism. The early Reformers viewed the doctrine of justification as the article by which the Church of Christ stands or falls. That is why they rejected Rome's teaching on the sacraments, including baptism. Rome taught and still teaches that the sacraments are channels through which God pours His grace into the recipients. Provided one has not committed any mortal sin and is on good terms with Mother Church, this grace is communicated via the sacraments almost automatically and mechanically.

### **Infant Baptism Requires Faith**

Over against this dangerous teaching of Rome, the Reformers stressed that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. Baptism does not automatically give grace apart from faith. This teaching was taken further by Anabaptists who said, if faith is so important, how can infants be baptized? Martin Luther tried to solve the problem by saying that infants possess unconscious faith. But Scripture knows nothing of that kind of faith.

Another Reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, defended infant baptism by teaching that regeneration gives the infant inward grace; however, that infant may remain passive until it exercises faith later in life. This view was to eventually lead to the doctrine of presumptive regeneration.

Calvin disagreed with both Luther and Zwingli and was convinced that sacraments are signs and seals of the covenant of grace. In this covenant, God promises salvation to sinners who are brought to faith in Christ by the Holy Spirit. In this way, Calvin maintained the centrality of faith. But if faith is essential to salvation, why should we baptize infants? Is it not much simpler to wait until our children come to faith and then baptize them? Aren't our Baptist friends right after all? The answer is no. We baptize our infants because the covenant of grace covers both dispensations with similar requirements: circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New Testament.

### **Circumcision and Baptism**

Baptism has taken the place of circumcision. So, since Old Testament children were circumcised as covenant children, we may not exclude New Testament covenant children from baptism. Our Form for Baptism draws the following analogy: "Although our young children do not understand these things, 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 is a powerful argument against those who restrict baptism to believers only.

According to our Baptist opponents, without conscious faith, no one can be a partaker of Christ and His grace, nor belong to His flock. Infants, therefore, are excluded from the blessings signified and sealed by baptism. The point made here in the Form for Baptism is that if children share in Adam’s guilt and condemnation without being aware of their plight, they can also share in the benefits of salvation in a similar way, i.e., unaware or unconsciously. These benefits are summed up as “being received again unto grace in Christ.”

What does this mean? Some people think it means that at baptism our children receive the grace of regeneration unconsciously. But that is not true. We must keep in mind the parallel between man’s condemnation in Adam and his restoration in Christ. Believers and their children are brought to faith and adopted into God’s family.

But how can our infants be brought to faith? To answer this question, we need to compare baptism with circumcision. Both are sacraments of the covenant of grace to which both parents and their children belong. In Genesis 17:7, we read that God made His covenant with Abraham and his offspring. “I will establish my covenant,” He said, “between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.” The apostle Peter also stresses the certainty of God’s promise with these words, “For the promise is unto you, and to your children” (Acts 2:39).

### Thomas Boston on the Promise

Boston interprets these encouraging words this way: “The apostle lays down for the foundation of faith, to those who had even imbrued [stained] their hands in the blood of the Lord of glory... the promise is to you and everyone of you, even the promise of the testament, and ye have access to claim it by faith, as your own legacy, your own mercy.”<sup>1</sup>

Boston means that both parents and their children receive promises from God at their baptism. But what about these children? They have no faith and are still spiritually dead. So, what can they do with those promises? What exactly does God promise them and how? While the parents believe the gospel promises consciously and with varying levels of understanding, their infant children receive baptism unconsciously without any awareness of their spiritual needs.

### Abraham Kuyper’s “Solution”

For many Reformed believers, the only “solution” to this problem is Abraham Kuyper’s view that infants receive the seed or kernel of faith by regeneration, which will come to fruition later as they mature.

However, our baptismal Form teaches that the position of infants depends not on God’s grace in them, much less their consciousness of it, but what God says to them. Concerning their position as Adam’s children, God’s view of them is most serious. They are children of wrath by nature, “subject to all miseries, yes, to condemnation itself.”



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

## OUR FORMS

This judgment of God is valid, regardless of whether our children are aware of their plight or not. In the same way, the position of children of believers is determined by what God promises to do for them at some *future* time. He says of them, "they are Mine!" As young and ignorant as they are, the Lord receives them in His grace as children of His covenant. The reference here is not to some kind of inward grace, but to God's gracious and loving disposition towards believing parents and their children.

The emphasis, then, is on what God declares about our children. In Adam they are condemned and judged; in Christ they are acquitted and received in grace. The condemnation is solemnly announced by the Law. The acquittal is joyfully proclaimed by the gospel. Both, however, must be believed because both can be and often are rejected in unbelief. Our young children do not understand these things, but they must come to know them. They may not remain ignorant. As they grow up, they need to know about their condemnation in Adam but also that they have been received again unto grace in Christ.

## Matthew Henry's View of Baptism

We can learn much from Matthew Henry's excellent *Treatise on Baptism*. Speaking of the benefits of baptism for both believers and their children, Henry writes:

I look upon it [baptism] to be the door of admission into the visible church, so that all who are duly baptized are thereby admitted as visible church members gathered under the wings of the Divine Majesty; and the new covenant being externally administered in the visible church, it is conditionally sealed to all who are baptized, particularly to the seed of believers upon the parents' faith: the parents' will being accepted for the child's, and the parents' present consent and dedication, laying an obligation upon the child for the future. This then, is the efficacy of baptism; it is putting the child's name into the gospel grant; and thus, it is a sealing ordinance and a binding ordinance. The child's actual faith and repentance and obedience are thereby made debts to be paid at a future time. And surely this is abundantly sufficient to invite and encourage parents to dedicate their children to God in baptism.

May we take these words of Henry seriously. Let us teach our children that the basic meaning of their baptism is that God loves both parents and their children and promises salvation to them if they believe the gospel and repent of their sins. That God's promise of salvation is made to all members of the visible church is clearly mentioned, not only in our Form for Baptism, but also by the Word of God preached by the apostle Peter in Acts 2:39: "For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call."

## Matthew Henry's Critics

Some people have a problem with Matthew Henry and even with the inspired apostle Peter. If the promise of salvation is made to everyone who is baptized, how can this promise be fulfilled in the lives of those who reject it in unbelief? Is God's promise and offer



of grace not only for God's elect?

John Calvin disagrees. According to him, even when a baptized person rejects God's well-meant offer, that offer still stands. The gospel remains the gospel and Christ remains Christ even though many reject both. Likewise, the sacrament remains a seal of God's covenant and promise, even though many despise both their baptism and God's promise in it.

God is in earnest when He seals His promises in baptism to us and to our children. Because of our unbelief and hardness of heart the promises are of no effect to us. As we read in Hebrews 4:2, "For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them:


**The emphasis, then, is on what God declares about our children. In Adam they are condemned and judged; in Christ they are acquitted and received in grace. The condemnation is solemnly announced by the Law. The acquittal is joyfully proclaimed by the gospel.**

but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it." Therefore, the promises sealed in baptism are offered to all, but according to God's sovereignty, they are fulfilled in the elect.

Yet, election should not be our starting point. The Canons of Dort take the right approach with this warning. They say, "As many as are called by the gospel, are unfeignedly called. For God has most earnestly and truly declared in His Word, what

will be acceptable to Him, namely that all who are called, should comply with this invitation. He, moreover, seriously promises eternal life, and rest, to as many as shall come to him, and believe on Him" (III-IV, Art. 8).

How grieved Jesus was when, after repeated invitations to come to Him, Jerusalem's covenant children rejected Him (Matt. 23:37). How sad our Saviour is when today's covenant children refuse to show any interest in the blessings promised by baptism! But how glad He is when others embrace His frequent offers of mercy!

Jehovah's mercy floweth, like a river,  
From everlasting, and abideth ever  
On those that love and worship Him with awe.  
His righteousness shall bless the habitations  
Of children's children through the generations  
That keep His covenant and obey His law.  
(Psalter 444:7) 

*Dr. Cornelis Pronk is emeritus pastor and member of the Grace Free Reformed Church of Brantford, Ontario.*

## Endnotes

1. *Complete Works of Thomas Boston*, 8:540.

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# A HARVEST FOR THE KINGDOM: MUKHANYO GRADUATES EQUIPPED FOR MINISTRY



Mukhanyo Theological College, a leading institution for theological training in Africa, is committed to equipping pastors and church leaders with the knowledge and skills to serve effectively in their communities. Situated in the heart of South Africa at its KwaMhlanga Campus, a quiet sense of joy and accomplishment filled the air at the college's graduation ceremony in March. Eighty-seven students, representing various campuses and learning sites across the region, stood ready to step forward, not just as graduates, but as dedicated labourers in the Lord's harvest. This occasion marked the fulfilment of years of study, hard work, and spiritual growth, preparing them to be effective and faithful ministers of the gospel in their communities and churches.

Mukhanyo Theological College has a clear mission and vision that guides its efforts to provide high-quality, accessible theological education. The mission of Mukhanyo is simple yet profound: *Mukhanyo Theological College gives glory to God by equipping pastors and other Christians in Africa.* Through its multi-campus approach, Mukhanyo offers theological education that is relevant to the diverse contexts of Southern Africa. Whether in urban centres or rural areas, Mukhanyo provides church leaders and believers with the tools they need to engage with Scripture, teach others, and lead effectively.

In its vision, Mukhanyo aims to be a decentralised training network with multiple sites of delivery throughout Africa. This allows the college to serve a broad spectrum of individuals, from pastors to lay leaders, all of whom are in need of sound, biblically-based education. Mukhanyo's emphasis on in-service training means that individuals can continue working in their communities

while studying, ensuring that education is accessible and practical.

The objectives of the college are clear and ambitious: Mukhanyo seeks to provide relevant, high-quality, and affordable training that addresses the practical needs of church leaders. This includes equipping leaders to apply biblical principles in their own contexts, empowering them to promote development projects, and strengthening the overall health of the Church. The college's focus on holistic education is reflected in its offerings, which include both theological study and leadership development.

Dr. Brian DeVries, Principal of Mukhanyo, reflected on the significance of the graduation: *"Each graduate is a testimony to God's faithfulness. It is a joy to witness how the Lord has equipped these men and women to serve in His kingdom. We are truly blessed to be part of their journey."*

Among the graduates were individuals whose stories of transformation and perseverance serve as an encouragement to the Church. One such graduate is Mogomotsi Ditlopo, who completed the Higher Certificate in Church Ministry at the KwaMhlanga campus. His life is a testament to God's redemptive power. Once deeply involved in the Rastafarian movement and lost in atheism, his life was turned around when the truth of the gospel penetrated his heart. His encounter with Christ completely transformed his perspective on life, guiding him to serve the Lord with a passion for ministry.

Mogomotsi now serves in his local church, teaching Sunday school and nurturing young hearts with the Word of God. *"Mukhanyo gave me the opportunity to deepen my faith and prepare for ministry,"* he said. *"I want others to know that there is always hope in Christ, no matter where they are in life. God is*



*faithful, and He can change anyone's story, just as He changed mine."*

Mogomotsi represents just a small portion of the diverse group of graduates who, through their studies at Mukhanyo, have gained more than just academic qualifications—they have been equipped to serve in ways that impact their communities, churches, and even wider society. From full-time pastors to young leaders just beginning their ministry journey, Mukhanyo continues to provide biblically faithful theological education that is both academically rigorous and deeply practical. The college's commitment to training men and women to serve with integrity, wisdom, and a deep understanding of the gospel is evident in the lives of these graduates.

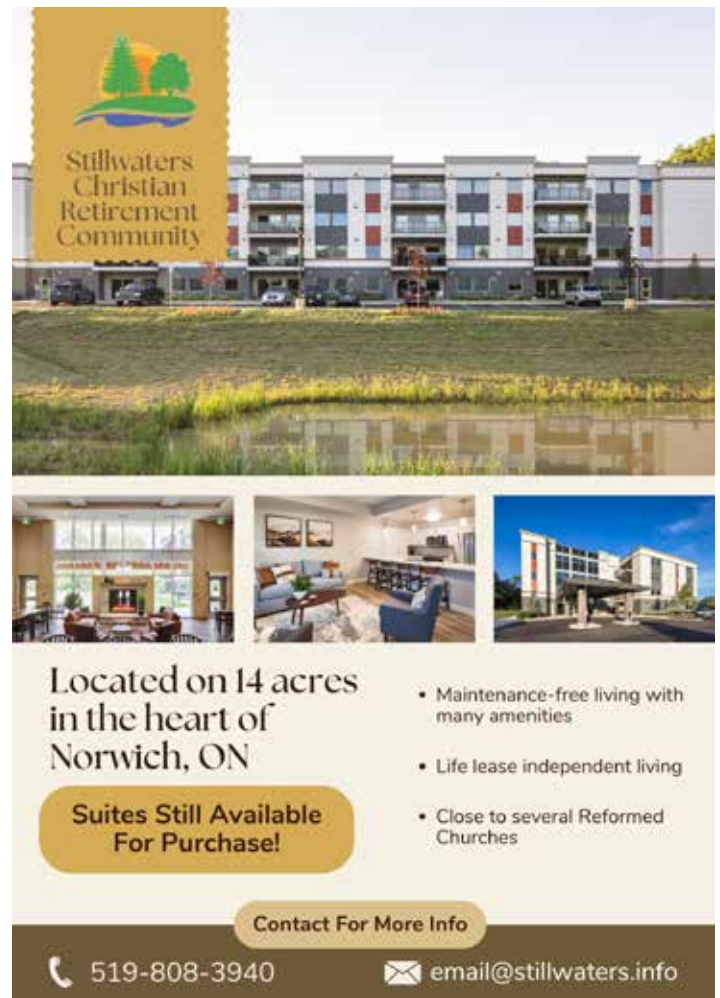
Dr. DeVries noted, *"The need for well-equipped church leaders in Africa is great. We pray that these graduates will go forward boldly, proclaiming Christ and strengthening His Church."* His words ring true for the continent of Africa, where the Church is growing rapidly, yet often faces challenges such as a lack of trained leadership and theological education. It is through institutions like Mukhanyo that these challenges can be addressed, equipping men and women to shepherd their flocks with wisdom, biblical integrity, and a servant-hearted attitude.

At the heart of Mukhanyo's educational philosophy is the desire to serve the local Church. Mukhanyo recognises that the Church in Africa is not only in need of pastors but also of leaders who are equipped to engage with the broader issues facing their communities. By focusing on the practical application of biblical principles, Mukhanyo equips its students to make a tangible difference in the lives of those they serve.

As these graduates return to their churches and communities, they carry more than certificates and diplomas. They carry the light of the gospel, the call to shepherd God's people, and the deep conviction that His Word is sufficient. In their hands, they hold the potential to bring about transformation—both in their congregations and in the wider society. It is this transformation that Mukhanyo has been working toward for years: the transformation of lives, communities, and ultimately, the Church, all for the glory of God.

Dr. DeVries concluded with a heartfelt prayer for the graduates: *"May the Lord bless their ministries, and may His kingdom continue to grow through their faithful service. We trust that, as they go out from this place, they will not only be servants of the Word but also servants of Christ, doing His work with all their hearts."* His prayer echoes the mission of Mukhanyo: to equip men and women to serve faithfully and effectively in the Kingdom of God. As these graduates take the next steps in their journey, the impact of their ministry will extend far beyond their immediate communities, advancing the work of Christ across the continent. ①

*Mr. Rob Van der Kooy serves at Mukhanyo Theological College in South Africa.*



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## SHOULD WE MOVE?

More and more people seem to have moved in the past few years. In urban centers and their suburbs, the cost of living is growing and real estate is becoming unaffordable for many families. There also seems to have been a multiplication of crime, traffic congestion, and regulations. Some believers are also beginning to feel like Abraham's nephew Lot, who lived in the city of Sodom and "...dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds" (2 Pet. 2:8). In America, many have moved from "blue states" like California to "red states" like Florida or Texas. In Canada, many are moving to more rural areas. This is not entirely a new trend. Several of our urban churches struggled for decades, or even closed, due to families finding homes in suburbs or rural communities. But how do we make the decision to move? What about when it means leaving behind parents, grandparents, churches or Christian schools? Does the Bible help us to make such decisions?

First, we should be careful about advising others to move away from certain regions. It is worth noting that the New Testament epistles do not exhort believers to move out of cities. These letters were written to believers who lived in very corrupt places like Rome or Corinth. Challenges with the influence of pagan neighbors are very evident in the letters. Their marketplaces and streets were filled with temptations. The apostles, however, did not call Christians to move away or form separate Christian communities in new locations. In time, Christianity actually transformed those cities, at least to some degree! We should encourage and strengthen those Christians who have chosen to be salt and light in difficult locations: "...let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not" (Gal. 6:9). Staying put is certainly a good option for many, even if it comes with challenges!

Second, we maintain that Christians do have the liberty to move. It may be a matter of wisdom for some to consider a change. Moving away from home is not actually a new trend. Sometimes, during wars or disasters, moving has even been necessary to preserve life. The Lord arranged that Joseph would provide a new place for his family: "Thou shalt dwell in the land of Goshen" (Gen. 45:10). The Lord Jesus warned the disciples, "Let them which be in Judea flee into the mountains" (Matt. 24:16). Some first century Christians were forced to move. Many of our own grandparents or parents were also immigrants. Some left behind war torn, overcrowded, or dangerous places for the sake of their own children. When



Huguenot Christians fled France in the 17th century, they established strong Christian communities which endured for centuries in Africa and the Americas. Some Christians have moved out of areas earlier than others, having a strong sense that to remain where they were would lead them or their children into great difficulty. First Corinthians 7:21 exhorted slaves, "...if you can gain your freedom, take the opportunity for yourself."\* Christians do have the liberty to change jobs or locations.

Given that there is liberty in this area, how do we make such a decision? Perhaps you have grown increasingly uncomfortable in your community and yet recognize that moving would come with challenges as well. Should you move to a different place? What considerations should guide us?

First, remember that the first family in the Bible, Adam and Eve, ended up making a move for very bad reasons. They ended up in exile, and it is possible that a literal move could end up all too similarly. This happens when a move is rooted in covetousness rather than wise considerations. This may happen if someone flees a solid church community for a weak one, or no church at all. Whether we are looking at moving to a new house down the street, or even from a rented apartment to our first home, covetousness is never a good motive. Covetousness is a selfish desire for what does not belong to us, and for what God has not given us. Do not allow an "Eve" mindset of desiring what seems to look good from a distance to dominate family decisions. Consider your conscience and decision-making process before the face of God. Are you moving to flee His presence, or will your move allow you to draw nearer to Him in truth? Will you search the Scriptures, pray, and listen to godly advice?

Second, take stock of God's providences. It may be best to do this by praying, taking out a notepad, and actually taking the time to write down pros and cons. What will be gained, and what will be lost? Will there be a strong, Bible believing church and Christian accountability where you move? Will you lose friendships or relationships that you depend on practically or emotionally? If a family member who lives back home is critically ill, dying, or grieving loss, how will you handle that? Are you able and willing to forge new relationships with people who will think differently than back home? Are jobs or business opportunities reasonably plentiful in the area to where you are moving? What will you spend in time and money on travel if it is a sparsely populated area? What are the costs or benefits of changing to a new real estate market?

Third, do not underestimate some of the positives of a move. Moving, even a smaller distance, can give opportunities for a fresh start. One can meet new neighbours, build new relationships in a community, and try different routines. Integrating into a new church can bring blessings and


challenges that aid spiritual growth. There are even benefits and new challenges to learning how to do things like gardening or keeping chickens. Some families in busy regions are so caught up in activities such as sports, music, church events, family gatherings, or school life that they hardly have time to breathe. Family and married life may actually be strengthened by a move.

Fourth, realize that moving affects marriages both present and future. For those who are married, make sure that your marriage can sustain and even potentially be strengthened by a move. Be certain that both spouses are on the same page, and willing to work through challenges together. Can your marriage sustain a time of upheaval and then a time of relative quiet? Are you "best friends" with your spouse so that loneliness is less of an issue? You may have to work very hard, and be very busy for a time. How will that affect your marriage? Also think of the future. Will your children have a thriving social circle and have potential marriage partners in due time?

Many of us who have lived in rural areas for some time do enjoy the different pace of life and some peace and quiet. Most express thankfulness for having made the move, with a few reservations. At the same time, more than a few times, we have ended up saying to each other, "It's interesting how most of our problems follow us up north." We need to know that a geographical move is not a way of salvation. We take ourselves with us wherever we go and we are our own worst problem. Geographical moving is not necessarily a move towards greater sanctification.


Wherever we live on this earth, we need to learn that trusting and seeking the Lord Jesus Christ and traveling on our pilgrimage towards His presence is most needed: "For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come" (Heb. 13:14). ❶

*\* Author's paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 7:21. The grammar of this passage favors this interpretation, which is also consistent with Exodus 21:2 which gave slaves the choice of freedom after seven years of slavery.*



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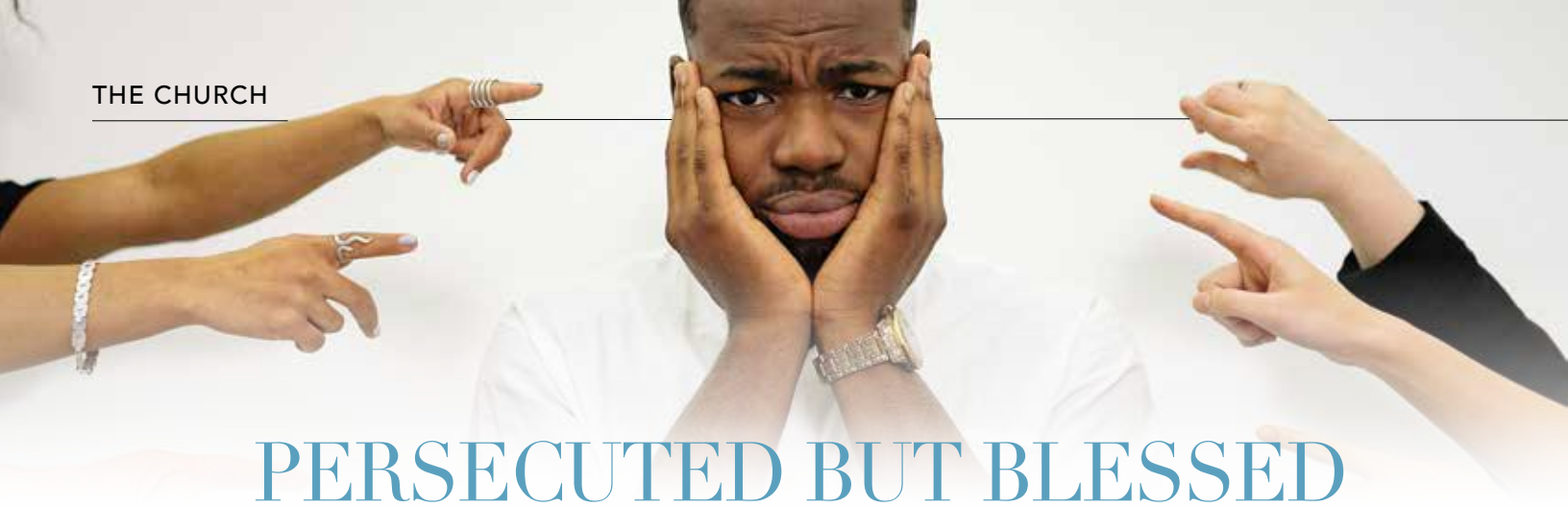
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## PERSECUTED BUT BLESSED

Writing to the persecuted churches, Peter said he was “a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed” (1 Pet. 5:1). Jesus said in Matthew 5:10-12, “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so they persecuted the prophets which were before you.” Believers may be despised and persecuted on earth but are partakers of an eternal glory much greater than we can comprehend. Yet, how difficult it can be to keep that perspective when faced with the reality of persecution on earth.

### Real Life Examples

In February 2025, Open Doors reported that 70 Christians were found beheaded in a church in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). A militant group entered the village of Mayba, capturing 20 people. A short while later, 50 more believers were captured as they gathered to discuss what to do. They were taken to a Protestant church where all 70 were killed. One elder said, “We don’t know what to do or how to pray, we’ve had enough of massacres.”<sup>1</sup>

Ten years before, in February 2015, 21 Christians were murdered in Libya by the Islamic State, ISIS. While working in Libya, they were abducted and demanded to deny Jesus, convert to Islam, or be killed. For months, they were tortured, deprived of sleep, and beaten. Eventually, they were lined up on a beach and beheaded. Sharing the hope of eternal life, many cried out, “O Lord Jesus,” before they died! Barnabas Aid reports that when the last man was asked to renounce Christ, he responded, “Their God is my God,” and was also killed. The persecutors posted videos of the killings online attempting to scare other Christians and cause them to deny the faith. Instead, the believer’s witness of Christ was spread around the world by the very people who were trying to silence their confession.

Open Doors reports that 4,476 Christians were killed worldwide last year for their faith. Currently, 16.2 million sub-Saharan African Christians are displaced by violence and conflict. However, Peter reminds the believers not to think that something strange is happening to them, but says in 1 Peter 4:13,

“But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.”

### A Spiritual Perspective

In this world, we see such a great contrast between the rich and poor, between the persecuted and the persecutors. But our eye of faith must remain on the greater and eternal contrast between anything in this world and the eternal glory that God reveals in Christ. No suffering or glory in this world can compare to what God has in store for His people in eternity!

Many Christians throughout history can relate more to the suffering mentioned in Peter’s letter than we can. As you hear of their suffering, you think of how they must long for the hope of glory to come. The world cannot see this glory, but by faith God’s people can eagerly wait for the glory to be revealed (Rom 8:25). The saints in Hebrews 11 looked for this glory to come as they “were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy)” (Heb. 11:35-38).

They are persecuted, tortured, and killed because the world considers them not worthy to live on the earth. Hearing of such suffering raises the question: how long will the wicked triumph? In Revelation 6:9-10, John “saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held.” They cried out with a loud voice, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?” When will He execute His justice on the earth and deliver His people? If we say that in the good times in which we live, what must their cry be as they endure these fiery trials and are being beaten for their faith! How long, Lord?

The martyrs in Revelation 6:11 have already entered the eternal rest and partake of the glory. “White robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.” They were not the last saints to enter glory through laying down



their lives for Christ's sake. Through Christ, they have overcome the world, though they were mercilessly slain by the world. They each have received a white robe washed in the blood of Christ who also was slain, but He was slain as the one sacrifice for their sins. As Revelation 5:9 indicates, "Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation."

That contrast was also evident when Christ was in this world. John says he beheld His glory, but to the common eye they saw only His poverty and the suffering inflicted by the rulers. Through the injustice of both the Jewish and Roman governments, He was falsely condemned. The Lord of glory was crucified as not worthy of being in this world, but the world was not worthy of Christ!

That contrast still exists today in God's children. When you were unworthy of entering heaven, when your sins barred you from God's presence and His wrath hung over you like a sword, then the world's arms were open to receive and welcome you. Then you were considered worthy of their praise, money, land, and homes. But when you learn to know Christ's renewing grace and His blood washes you from all your sins, the gates of heaven are opened to you, eternal glory is laid in your heart, and the eternal inheritance is laid up in heaven for you. Then the world's doors slam shut in your face! Then you are no longer considered worthy to live here. You are rejected. The world's threat is convert back or be killed.

As we learn of the many believers who face the violent opposition of the world, Hebrews 13:3 calls us to "remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body." As we hear the reports of the persecuted Christians around the world, including those who lay down their life for their witness to Christ, are we also partakers of that eternal glory with them? Do we have an eye of faith on that glory in Christ's presence? Do we, like Moses, esteem the reproaches of Christ greater riches than all the treasures in this world?

### How can we serve?

How can we serve our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world, to offer a cup of cold water to the least of these (Matt 25:40), recognizing that Christ calls them blessed?

First, begin by keeping informed. We can easily take for granted our relative peace and prosperity, but be aware of what is happening to believers around the world. Various websites, such as Open Doors, Barnabas Aid, and International Christian Concern, can keep you informed. This will help you pray for specific needs or make use of opportunities to help.

Second, pray. Pray that they would be kept by the power of God to be faithful and persevere to the end. Pray that God would use even their persecution for the building up of His church.

Third, get involved. City of Refuge is one of the ways our churches can help some of these suffering Christians by

sponsoring them to emigrate to Canada. Sponsoring a family can help provide a place of refuge from the threats they face. Many have already fled from their home country and are living in refugee camps where there is very little hope.

Sponsoring refugees can be a daunting and labor-intensive undertaking. It does not always go the way you might imagine. It costs us our time, finances, and comfort. It can be challenging to bridge the cultural and language barriers. There can be differences between our perception and their understanding of Christianity. But it is a small sacrifice compared to what they are facing. In this world, you are their family, as fellow believers and children and heirs with Christ. Look for these refugees as they seek to make a new start here in Canada. Take the opportunity to be hospitable and receive them into your home and community. They need you and you need them. They have much to teach us about looking for the blessed hope of glory that shall be revealed. <sup>11</sup>

### Endnotes

1. "70 Christians Found Beheaded in Church in DRC," *Open Doors UK & Ireland* (blog), accessed March 13, 2025, <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/latest-news/drc-attack-church/>.

At Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, a Congolese student often requests prayer for this area - Editors.

*Pastor Ben van Liere serves on the "City of Refuge" Refugee Committee of the Free Reformed Churches of North America.*

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# A REFLECTION OF THE ONTARIO FREE



On the weekend of November 14-16, I was able to join with approximately 60 other women at the Five Oaks Retreat Centre near Paris, Ontario for my first FRC Women's Retreat. Organized by ladies from our Mitchell congregation, the weekend was a wonderful mix of rest, fellowship and studying God's Word in a beautiful setting of 116 acres of our Lord's glorious creation, along the banks of the Grand River.

From the time we entered the retreat center, we were encouraged to spend time getting to know one another and make new acquaintances. One of the opportunities to do this was during one of the many wonderful meals that we were treated to during our stay. Upon our arrival, we discovered that there were name tags at the dinner places, and so by sitting down to a meal we were seated with a crop of new faces. These place cards were collected after each meal and re-assigned to different spots for the following meal. This was a wonderful opportunity to get to know different sisters in the Lord representing many of the FRC churches across Ontario.

The theme of the weekend was "Hopeful Living in an Anxious Age" and our speaker was Arlene Jonkman. We were richly blessed with a thorough examination of the theme using four group teaching sessions. Before each session began, we enjoyed a time of praise and

worship. Lead by our gifted pianist Leanne VanDrongelen, lifting our voices together in song to our wonderful Lord was an amazing experience.

On Thursday evening we studied the endless demands, stresses and uncertainties in life, and the Comfort of the God of Hope. We were reminded of our place in God's story, the natural responses of being broken people living in a broken world, and how God consistently reminds us in His Word to "Fear Not" for "The Peace of God will guard our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus". In this we always can find hope and comfort.

On Friday morning we were blessed in session two with instructions for hopeful living, by being assured of God's promise to finish the work in us. Arlene reminded us that the process can be compared to a renovation in your house – between the beginning and the end, things can be broken and messy in the middle. But God values the process, knowing that according to His purposes we might gain, know and attain Christ Jesus our Lord, and be brought into a perfect, living relationship with our Creator again.

Following the group session, we were able to separate into smaller groups and discuss some of these themes in greater detail. It is always a wonderful opportunity to discuss matters of faith with fellow



# REFORMED WOMEN'S RETREAT – 2024



Christian women, who bring different perspectives to the table based on personal experience and their stage of life. Learning from and sharing with each other was truly a blessing. Following lunch, we were given a few hours of free time, with a few organized activities to choose from. There was an escape room challenge, an opportunity to make a craft to take home, and jigsaw puzzles to complete. Others took advantage of the cozy space and simply indulged in some reading time, playing board games or having conversations with friends old and new. The grounds of the retreat center were also lovely, and there was an opportunity to walk the trails there.

After supper we dove into session 3: Experiencing the supernatural peace of God. We started by looking into Philippians 4 as Paul reminds the church not to be anxious about anything, but with prayer and petition, to bring our requests to the Lord with thanksgiving, who will then bestow on us a supernatural peace. God's peace is a calm; a filial relationship with God that doesn't depend on our circumstances. We are to turn our problems into prayers. Prayer is the conduit to helping us receive the peace of God. Cultivating contentment and living a life of thankfulness, is an important part of the journey to a calm and resting heart.

After the evening session we had the opportunity to hear some of

the wonderful stories that Arlene had to share about their time in the mission field in Ecuador. It was a great blessing to hear of the many occasions where the Lord guided their ways and protected their lives during their time there. The evening was completed with more social time, snacks, fellowship, and a very lively (and loud) Dutch Blitz tournament.

On Saturday morning, after breakfast we headed into Session 4, where Arlene spoke on Suffering and Glory, with Final Redemption as our greatest hope. The way to endure the suffering of life is to keep our hearts firmly fixed on what we are doing, where we are going, and who is waiting for us. As with the glory and blessings that are part of this life, the sufferings are part of the package. But for our sufferings, we are given His consolation. At the end of the day, today's sufferings cannot be compared to our future glory. Our redemption is secure, and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

As our time together drew to a close, I left for home very grateful for time that we had been able to spend together as FRC ladies, learning from God's Word, and making new friends. I hope that we will have the opportunity to gather together again in this way on a regular basis. <sup>VI</sup> *Written by Sharon Burggraaf (Chatham FRC)*



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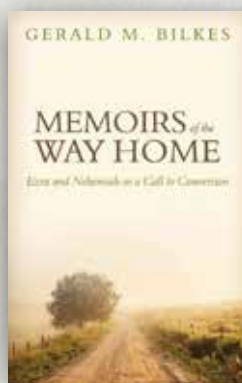
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2 Thessalonians 1:12

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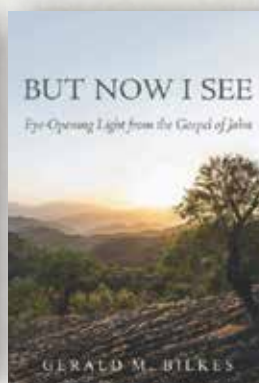
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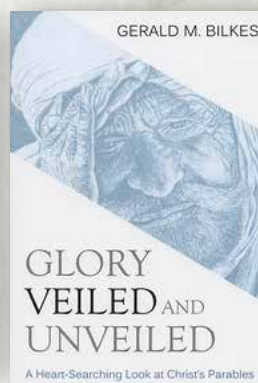
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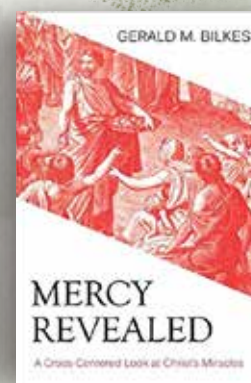
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