

Clarion

THE CANADIAN REFORMED MAGAZINE
Volume 63, No. 1 • January 17, 2014



DECLARE THE PRAISES OF HIM WHO CALLED YOU



James Visscher
Minister emeritus of the
Canadian Reformed Church
at Langley, British Columbia
jvisscher@telus.net

Reaching Out ⁽¹⁾

Are you committed to reaching out?

At the beginning of a new year it is always a good thing to stand back and reflect on life's priorities and what lies ahead. Doing so is good for our personal lives and also for our church life.

Looking at things personally, "How is your life going? In particular, how is your life going with the Lord? Is there daily communion with him? (Do you pray?) Is there daily listening to him? (Do you read his Word?) Is there daily service for him? (Do you seek to do his will?) Has this been your pattern in 2013 and is this also your aim in 2014?"

Looking at things church-wise, "How is it? Are you faithful in worship? (Do you make good use of every Lord's Day?) Are you involved in the fellowship? (Do you use your talents and gifts for others?) Are you committed to reaching out? (Do you walk and talk the Christian life?) How well did you do church in 2013 and what about 2014?"

Hitting a snag

To be honest, it's probably on that last point just mentioned that your life hit a snag. I am referring to the reaching out part. Our involvement in worship may be satisfactory and our efforts for other members may be there, but it's the speaking out and standing out part that needs work.

Isn't that true? Some of us are shy, others are easily tongue-tied, also there are those who are just too self-conscious, and then there are those among us who are just plain scared. We don't dare! It's not that we don't care. It's just that we don't know where or how to begin.

"What if the other person gets angry? What if they feel offended? What if, what if. . . ?"

Now on one level all of this is understandable. On another level it's not. Take our churches as an example. How much effort, time, prayer, and money are not expended doing mission work at home and abroad. Locally we have Streetlight, Campfire, Prince George, Stepping Stones, and all sorts of other evangelistic projects. Abroad we have our missionaries working in Brazil, China, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea, as well as supporting mission and mission aid projects around the world. No one can say that as a whole the Canadian Reformed Churches are falling down when it comes to outreach.

But then there is the personal dimension, and that's often another story. We may have no trouble sending money here, there, and everywhere. We may pray regularly for God's workers all over the place. We may be in attendance when missionaries and mission workers come to town and make their stirring presentations. But personally talking to others around us about faith things? Well. . . ? Talking about Christ to our neighbours, co-workers, friends. . . ? Inviting them to a Bible study or to worship with you. . . ? That just does not happen.

Options?

So what do we do? Leave it alone? Let the few who are bold carry the ball? Leave it to those who have "the gift of the gab" to step up to the plate for the rest of us?

Yet that cannot be! At bottom we know that it's a rationalization, and in the end it does not sit well with

our souls, does it? For we know what our Lord said, “You are the salt of the earth. . . You are the light of the world” (Matt 5:13, 14). We know what Acts says, “Those who were scattered preached the word everywhere (literally, “they brought the Good News everywhere)” (8:4). We know what Paul writes about the lives of believers and about them shining “like stars in the universe” (Phil

INSIDE THIS ISSUE...

“How is your life going? In particular, how is your life going with the Lord?” This is what Dr. James Visscher asks readers in his first editorial of the new year. In particular, are you committed to reaching out? Do you walk and talk the Christian life?

Dr. Arjan de Visser also asks a question: what are Christians to make of Nelson Mandela. Since his death, there has been an outpouring of both accolades and criticism. In this article Dr. de Visser takes a closer look at what Nelson Mandela did for South Africa.

Issue 1 brings you the regular Treasures New and Old meditation, as well as the Education Matters column. We also have a Reader’s Forum on some of the decisions made at Synod Carman 2013. In addition, there is a letter to the editor and two press releases.

Laura Veenendaal

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EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

Editor: J. Visscher; Copy Manager: Laura Veenendaal
Coeditors: P.H. Holtvliuwer, E. Kampen, K. Stam, C. Van Dam

ADDRESS FOR COPY MANAGER

Clarion
8 Inverness Crescent, St. Albert AB T8N 5J5
E-Mail: veenendaal@telus.net

ADDRESS FOR ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

CLARION
Premier Printing Ltd.
One Beghin Avenue
Winnipeg MB Canada R2J 3X5
Phone: (204) 663-9000 Fax: (204) 663-9202

Subscriptions clarionadmin@premierpublishing.ca
Advertisements clarionads@premierpublishing.ca
Website www.clarionmagazine.ca

2014 SUBSCRIPTION RATES

			Regular Mail	Air Mail
Canada			\$49.00*	\$ 82.00*
U.S.A. U.S. Funds			\$69.00	\$ 92.00
International			\$98.00	\$154.00

***Applicable GST, HST, PRT taxes are extra.**
GST/HST no. 890967359RT

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PUBLISHER

Published biweekly by Premier Printing Ltd.
Winnipeg, Manitoba

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We acknowledge the financial support of the 
Government of Canada through the Canada
Periodical Fund of the Department of Canadian Heritage.

Agreement No. 40063293; ISSN 0383-0438

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2:15). We know what kind of compliments Peter dishes out when he says about us – “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet 2:9).

And finally, what about the words of our Lord, “Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven” (Matt 10:32). Ouch! Are shut lips and closed mouths not in the same category as “disowning”?

No matter how you look at it, this is serious stuff. Muted saints are not just weak saints, they are endangered saints. They are in danger of being dismissed, discarded, and even disowned.

So really, if you consider yourself a child of God, you have no options here. By the very nature of your calling as such a child you have been endowed with a royal, priestly, and prophetic office (cf. HC, LD 12). You have a duty to fight like a king, offer like a priest and speak like a prophet.

Out of the comfort zone

But how? How does a speechless prophet find his voice? How does a comfortable saint move out of his comfort zone?

You can say that it begins with living a three directional life. What do I mean? Well, first, you need to look *down*. You need to look deep down into your own soul. You need to ask, “What lives there? Is there real faith in Almighty God? Is there deep love for the Redeeming Saviour? Is there true dependence on the Invigorating Spirit?” You see, at bottom, it’s all a matter of the heart. “Is your heart in tune with God? Is it right with God? Is it awed and amazed by his grace and love to you in Jesus Christ? Is it brimming over with thankfulness and gratitude?” We begin then by looking down at ourselves and deep into ourselves.

Only we do not stay there. For there is another direction, and it is *up*. Indeed, it is way up, up, up to God and to his throne. We look up to him in prayer and we assault his throne with our pleas. What kind of pleas? We utter pleas for courage, conviction, boldness, wisdom, discretion, gentleness, patience, and so much more. For after all, what makes us really effective as kings, priests, and

prophets does not come from below but from above. It’s not a matter of discovering a hidden talent or awakening a sleeping gift. It is a matter of God coming down from on high with his Spirit and working in us. Only he is able to empower us. So look up, look up every day and draw your strength down from the One who sits on the throne.

What’s next? Or is that it? Is this not enough? As long as we know ourselves and we know our God, we can stop and be satisfied – right?

Wrong! We cannot stop. God’s people are not just a committed people and a connected people, they are also a commissioned people. The third direction of the people of God is always *out* and outward. We need to, as the title of a book written by one of our past and venerable leaders said, “GET OUT!” Here Psalm 96 comes to mind, “Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous deeds among all peoples” (96:3). As another venerable Christian leader said about these words, “This is our national anthem as Christians!”

Now, I know that there are a few among us who think that this is only a national anthem for pastors, missionaries, and other ordained folk. They do all the talking for us, and we can just sit back, praying and paying our way into the kingdom of heaven. But that runs counter to the entire thrust of biblical revelation. In the Old Testament God did not just call on the important people or the leaders to be “a light to the nations.” This was a national task and a corporate calling. And the same applies even more in the New Testament. All believers are called to be “lights.” Everyone who, by faith, is plugged into Jesus Christ “the Light of the world” cannot do anything else but glow. Not to glow as a believer requires a really big bowl or bushel (cf. Matt 5:15).

Remember then, these three directions: down, up, and out.

Get to work

What’s next? You and I need to get to work.

Where? Why not start with those who are closest to you. Begin with your friends. Do you have unbelieving friends? How have you been acting around them? Have you been living a double life around them? You know what I mean.

Two sets of friends

Often Christians have two sets of friends. They have church friends and world friends. They meet their church friends on Sunday, using one kind of language with them (clean, pious, upright) and doing certain special things with them (worshipping, Bible studying, fellowshiping). They meet their world friends, using another kind of language with them (coarse, off colour, and crude) and doing different things with them (bar hopping, pot puffing, violent/profane video watching). In short, these Christians are mutants. They mutate depending on the company they keep.

If you consider yourself a child of God, you have no options here

Interesting? Yes! Deadly? For sure! Hell bent? Afraid so! There is only one solution to this kind of double life and it is called “repentance.”

If you are living this kind of a double, two-sided, hypocritical life, you need to change. You need to “fess up,” as they say; that is, you need to own up to your sin and ask God for forgiveness. You also need to confess to your worldly friends that the double sided game is up. You are going straight.

Now, this does not mean that overnight you have to become a Bible thumper or a hell fire and brimstone preacher. It does mean, however, that you need to begin to model and live a new and different life before the eyes of your world friends. It also means adopting an attitude filled with wisdom, humility, and patience, coated in prayer and steeped in holiness.

Will they reject you? Some might, but others may not. Indeed, some may want to have what you are now showing. After all, the worldly life is not all that it is cracked up to be.

Neighbours

But if there are friends, there are also neighbours (the people who live next door and the people you work with). We all have them, but do you know them? Do you go out of your way to know them? Or, as so many Christians do, do you simply write them off? Imagine if the

Lord Jesus had adopted that kind of an approach with his neighbours long ago? Where would they be, and where would we be today?

All believers are called to be “lights”

No, our calling is to get to know them. Learn their names, listen to their stories, lend a helping hand, invite them over. “Sounds dangerous!” you say. Not if you take an approach called “critical participation.” What this means is that you show that while you are in the world, you do not necessarily share all of the sentiments of this world or take part in all of the activities in this world. Love them, but without compromise. Love them, but without being judgmental. Love them, but without approving of everything. Speak out whenever necessary, but with kindness, concern, care, and understanding. Regard your neighbourhood as your mission field.

But then there is also the matter of the local church, only we will leave that, the Lord willing, to the next time.

C





Reuben Bredenhof
Minister of the Canadian Reformed
Church at London, Ontario
reuben.bredenhof@canrc.org

Paul, the Basket Case

"But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall. . . ."

2 Corinthians 11:33

Before the Battle of Britain, when the Germans would repeatedly bomb London but be repelled by the Royal Air Force, Winston Churchill predicted that it would be said of those heroic pilots, "This was their finest hour." At the time their country needed them, they'd step up. And they did. Probably we all like to imagine ourselves being heroic like that, if we really needed to be – that in the hour of need we'd be brave and willing.

The Apostle Paul might've been tough, as shown by his years of ministry. Comparing himself to the rival ministers in Corinth, he says, "I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again." But so that no one thinks he's bragging, his list of sufferings ends like this: "In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands."

The story is familiar. After coming to the Christian faith, Paul's life was in immediate danger, and the believers in Damascus helped him get away. They put him in a big basket and lowered him out of the city. It's memorable, but seems curious here in 2 Corinthians. What's the big deal? In talking about his suffering, why would he put *this* very last, as the climax of the list? Given the choice, I'd take evacuation in a basket over flogging any day!

The apostle wants to show that he was no hero. Mentioning this, he's probably thinking of something from the Roman military. When the legions would besiege and attack a city, the first soldier up the ladder and over the wall was given great honour. For that was a fine act of bravery! The first one over – if he survived, anyway – might be given a small crown as reward.

But Paul? He wasn't the first one up, he was the first one out! He didn't storm up a ladder in boldness of heart—he was let down in a basket through the window! To be sure, God delivered him that day. But in Paul's eyes, like so many events in his life this was an example of personal vulnerability. He was dumped out of the city like a common fugitive.

This was not his finest hour, and *it didn't matter!* Because Paul boasts in the things that show his weakness. His rivals might've been outwardly impressive, but he'd celebrate his mediocrity. He would, because then God's glory would be most clearly seen. His weakness meant people should expect victory from Christ alone, not his human servants!

Sounds good, but it's hard to accept. For it's natural to look at things like the Corinthians did, who were drawn by charisma and eloquence. We want riveting speakers and engaging personalities. But the only real strength and wisdom come through Christ and his supremacy. This lesson applies not just to office bearers,

but to us all. We'll always try to be strong, and imagine ourselves doing great things for God. We want to be the hero. At the very least, we want to be respectable! But if we're Christ's followers, we first need to be covered in shame. A person who admits he needs rescuing looks like a loser. Yet God says good things come from being humbled. Paul might've been weak, even a basket-case, yet God blessed his labours for many years.

Knowing the certainty of God's strength, we too, can boast in our weakness. We can finally admit that we don't have the ability to convert our neighbour. And we can't save our family. And it's not up to us to build the church. To God we can confess our emptiness, for then we'll be ready to trust in him.

That's what Christ said to Paul when he prayed that his "thorn" be taken away. The thorn hindered the apostle and his work. But instead of removing it, Christ said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness!" It was all the Lord needed to say: "Rely on my grace." For that's where the strength is for every weak Christian. When we finally stop focusing on what we can accomplish, and acknowledge that we can't do it by ourselves, God begins to show his grace in new and surprising ways. Then we say with Paul, "When I am weak, then I am strong." It's our finest hour.



Nelson Mandela

1918-2013



Arjan de Visser
Professor of Diaconiology at the
Canadian Reformed Theological
Seminary in Hamilton, Ontario
ajdevisser@crtcs.ca

Now that Nelson Mandela has been buried, the time has come for another look at his role in South African politics during the last sixty years. Predictably, the accolades awarded to him during the days of mourning were somewhat over the top. He was eulogized by many as the man who single-handedly saved South Africa from the brink of disaster – a statement that ignores the role of other leaders such as Bishop Desmond Tutu, President F.W. de Klerk, and the constituencies they represented. Some went even further: The British newspaper *The Telegraph* compared Nelson Mandela to Jesus Christ. When the author of the article was mocked and criticized, he wrote another article stating that there were “many Christ-like qualities in Nelson Mandela that are not present in the rest of us.”¹

On the other side of the spectrum there have been very negative evaluations of the former president. Mandela has been described as a communist and terrorist who was responsible for the deaths of many people in South Africa. Other detractors have called him a socialist who introduced laws allowing abortion and prostitution in his country: in short, a man with blood on his hands. Again, some took these criticisms to the extreme. Quite a few people in South Africa believe that Nelson Mandela was an instrument of the devil. If you are interested, do a Google search with the combination “Mandela” and “Antichrist” and you will get more than 200,000 hits!

Unsurprisingly, Christians in North America struggle to make sense of these differing opinions. What are we to make of Nelson Mandela? Didn't he come out of prison with a remarkable spirit that caused him to seek reconciliation with his enemies rather than revenge? Or should we assume that he outwitted everyone by just pretending to be forgiving? Was it all part of some devious and diabolic plan to grab power and then destroy Christianity in his country?

It is indeed hard to get a handle on Mandela. He was the son of an African chief, received his basic education at Methodist mission schools, joined the ANC and became involved in political resistance against apartheid, joining forces with communists along the way. All these experiences influenced Mandela and should be taken into account when we seek to understand him.

In his famous “An Ideal for Which I am Prepared to Die” speech in 1964, Mandela described himself as someone who admired the Western ideal of democracy as well as the communist ideal of a classless society. He stated that he had been influenced in his thinking by both West and East, adding that he wanted to borrow the best from both sides.

As Christians we thank and praise God for using Mandela as an instrument in his hand

While Mandela has been quite open about the political influences that shaped his thinking, he has never said much about his religious beliefs. Perhaps, now that he has passed away, we will get to hear more about this from people who were in his inner circle. In the meantime, we can only work with the few statements he made on the subject and with the way he conducted himself in his private and public life.

A man of faith?

Was Nelson Mandela a Christian? When journalists asked him this question he never gave a straight answer. He would simply say that faith is a private matter. Mandela often praised the church for its role during the apartheid struggle, but as far as I know he never made a clear

positive affirmation of his own faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is not a good sign, of course. A true Christian is one who professes the name of Jesus Christ.

At the same time there are indications that he considered himself part of the Christian community. Speaking at the 1994 Easter conference of South Africa's largest church, the Zion Christian Church, Mandela referred a few times to "our risen Messiah" and "our resurrected Lord."² But he always remained the politician. In his keynote speech at the 1999 Parliament of the World's Religions in Cape Town, Mandela praised the major books of religion (explicitly mentioning the Bhagavad Gita, the Quran, and the Bible) for teaching fundamental principles of human behaviour.

Some have argued that Mandela was a "closet Christian," a Christian believer who kept his faith to himself. South African media reported that a Methodist minister administered the last rites to Mandela shortly before his death. A minister who was very close to him said that Mandela loved to hear the priestly blessing (Numbers 6:24-46) recited to him.³ It is also striking that many Christian hymns were sung at Mandela's funeral, including the favourite hymn of Mandela's mother.

We must keep in mind that Christianity in Africa is often syncretistic. This is true for Mandela's church, the Methodist Church in South Africa, as well. Many members of this church still venerate the ancestral spirits. In a display of such syncretism, Mandela's funeral was a mixture of Christian and pagan rituals. When Mandela's body was transported to Qunu for the burial, a tribal elder came along to talk to the "spirit of Mandela" and

keep him informed about where he was going. On the morning of the funeral, before the ceremony, an ox was slaughtered and a family elder kept talking to the spirit of the deceased. These things are typical signs of African traditional religion.

Was Mandela a Christian? Ultimately, the Lord knows what was in the heart of Mandela and we know that the Lord is gracious and just.

Mandela influenced by Christianity

There is more to say, however. As mentioned earlier, Mandela received his childhood education at Methodist mission schools. In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, he describes how the church played an important role in his early life.

When he was seventeen years old, Mandela became a student at Clarkebury Institute, a Wesleyan high school. The principal was a certain Rev. C. Harris, a man respected and loved by the Thembu people. Mandela commented: "As an example of a man unselfishly devoted to a good cause, Reverend Harris was an important model for me."⁴ After that, at age nineteen, he enrolled as a student at the Wesleyan College in Fort Beaufort. The principal of the school was a Methodist clergyman named Dr. Arthur Wellington. In this case, Mandela's evaluation was less positive. He described the principal as "a stout and stuffy Englishman who boasted of his connection to the Duke of Wellington."⁵

Obviously not everything that Mandela experienced at the Christian schools was positive, but the Christian education which he enjoyed and the Christian examples which he saw had a profound influence on him. In later years, when people asked him why he did not take revenge on his former enemies after he came out of prison his answer was, "The Methodist missionaries taught me forgiveness."⁶ Think about that comment as a background for the peaceful transition of power in South Africa! Contemplate what would have happened if Mandela had received his childhood training at a communist or Islamic school! South Africa would be a different place today.

God's providence

This leads us to reflect on God's providence in the peaceful transition of power that took place in South Africa in the 1990s. I lived with my family in South Africa during those years and I remember how many whites feared a bloodbath. There were casualties, for sure, but in general things were peaceful. After the 1994 elections Mandela became president and many people feared that he would use his new-found position of power to oppress the whites in the country. Only when Mandela publicly



In this picture from his days at the Methodist College in the Eastern Cape, Mandela is in the back row, fifth from right.



supported the South African rugby team during the World Cup of 1995 (it was still a mainly white team at the time) did people start to realize that the man really wanted peace and reconciliation. The picture of Mandela warmly congratulating Francois Pienaar, captain of the Springboks, memorializes a symbolic and emotional moment.

God's Word teaches us that the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases (Prov 21:1). A striking example of this was Cyrus, king of Persia. In Ezra 1:1 we read that "the LORD *moved the heart* of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation" that allowed the Jewish exiles to go back to Jerusalem and Judah. Later in the same book the Lord "*changed the attitude* of the king of Assyria, so that he assisted them in their work on the house of God, the God of Israel" (Ezra 6:22, see also 7:27).

What the Lord did in the days of the Old Testament, He can still do today. We believe that the Lord heard the prayers of many Christians, both black and white, and that he moved the heart of Nelson Mandela to seek peace and reconciliation for his country after he came out of prison. In the Lord's providence this already started during his childhood. Mandela's mother was a member of the Methodist church, and he enjoyed all his early education at Methodist schools and colleges. Even though he embraced socialism and flirted with communism later in his life, he nevertheless acknowledged the influence of the Methodist missionaries on his thinking. Whatever the mix of convictions in Mandela's mind and heart, God

used him to protect his people (black and white) in South Africa from a bloody revolution. While the world may credit Mandela for the peaceful transition of power in South Africa, as Christians we thank and praise God for using Mandela as an instrument in his hand.

Looking back on the political developments in South Africa during the 1990s, there is much reason to praise the Lord. He heard the prayers of his people. He provided leaders on both sides of the political spectrum who were influenced by Christian principles and thus able to steer the country through a difficult process of transition of political power. For that we praise the Lord. May he continue to protect and bless his people in South Africa also in the years to come when the country is governed by lesser minds.

(Endnotes)

¹ *The Telegraph*, December 11, 2013. <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/peteroborne/100250173/of-course-nelson-mandela-wasnt-jesus-but-his-suffering-brought-him-closer-to-christ/>

² Text of speech available at South African History Online. See <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/speech-nelson-mandela-zionist-christian-church-easter-conference-0>

³ Verashni Pillay, "Mandela and the confessions of a closet Christian," *Mail & Guardian*, December 13, 2013.

⁴ Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 18.

⁵ Mandela, *ibid.*, 33.

⁶ See, for example, Raymond Heard, "Farewell, Madiba." *National Post*, Dec. 5, 2013

Decently and In Good Order

It is the will of our Heavenly Father that everything be done “decently and in good order,” especially in his holy church. In his book *Christ and Culture*, Dr. K. Schilder mentions “God’s great gift of reason.”

Synods seek to employ “God’s great gift of reason” in dealing with the items on their agenda, under three headings: Observations, Considerations, and Recommendations. If the Observations and Considerations are both valid, the Recommendations *must* be valid. However, if either the Observations or Considerations are not valid, the Recommendations have not been proven or established.

The term “Recommendation” used in the *Acts* is imprecise. A better term would be “Resolution.” Synod does not recommend, but it resolves or decides.

A review of Article 110 indicates some inconsistencies in this process.

Issue 1 – Women’s voting as a matter for the churches in common

Synod Observes – 2.2.1 “Women’s voting has always been considered a matter of the churches in common.”

Synod Considers – 3.2 “This matter in the past has always been regarded as a matter for the churches in common. Numerous synods in the past have implicitly accepted or explicitly considered this to be a matter for the churches in common. This is a matter of common concern.”

However: *Synod Further Considers* – 3.3.2 “None of the synodical pronouncements mentioned above have explained why the churches have considered this matter as belonging to the churches in common. But over the years this was the commonly accepted practice. The process has the more authority because churches repeatedly stated that the matter was federalational.”

No matter is proven to be true just because it is considered or regarded to be so – and it does not gain authority by being repeated. Whether it is, or is not, has not been established by Synod. It is simply repeating opinions. Truth is not established by opinion!

Secondly: C.O. Art 3 states that the elections shall take place “according to the regulations adopted for that pur-

pose by the consistory.” If elections are regulated by the local consistory, does Synod have the authority to override the C.O. and impose a regulation? Currently, the regulations for elections are not the same in every congregation. It might be nice if they were; however, must they be? Does Synod have authority to impose that? We also do not celebrate Lord’s Supper, or even admit guests in the same manner. Should we? Must we?

Issue 2 – Article 3 C.O. and elections

Synod Observes – 2.2.2 “Article 3 C.O. . . . uses the word ‘shall’ as implicating an obligation or directive.”

Synod Considers – 3.3 “The election has a binding character. The word ‘shall’ used in documents like the Church Order expresses what is mandatory.”

In Article 3 C.O. it is not the congregation who is speaking, but the consistory. It is not the congregation directing the consistory in what it shall or is mandated to do. It is the consistory telling the congregation what it promises and resolves to do. The Church Order is not a charter of rights for the congregation!

As outlined in Article 76, the Church Order is a form of government which has been adopted with common accord (by common consent) by the consistories in the federation. It outlines how the consistory has agreed to govern affairs within the congregation, and within the federation. There are no congregational “rights” in the Church Order.

Issue 3 – Is voting exercising authority?

One of two things *must be true*. Either voting in the election of office bearers is exercising authority – or it is not. This is basic logic. It is not possible to have two different answers to the same question. (See HC, LD 11, Q&A 30 for a wonderful application of this same irrefutable logic.)

If, by voting, a congregation member is exercising authority, then this view has inevitable logical consequences. It means that the congregation – and not the consistory – has final authority in the church. It means that we have abandoned Reformed church polity and moved on to congregationalism.

It is interesting to note the comment in a recent *Clarion*. An ad for Rev Van Oene's *With Common Consent* states that: "This Church Order is not a 'Constitution and Bylaws' but is a document that contains the conditions the churches have adopted for living together in one federation. These autonomous churches have neither surrendered nor transferred any of their God given authority to anyone" (p. 543).

Issue 4 – The role of women in the church

Synod Observes – 2.2.2 "It has been generally assumed in Reformed churches that C.O Art 3 means the male communicant members of the congregation when it speaks of 'congregation.'"

To "generally assume" is not valid logic.

Synod Observes – 2.3.1 "The men are addressed as the representatives of the whole congregation and there are no unambiguous examples in the Bible demonstrating that females too represented the congregation." 2.3.2 "...which translates into the prescription that women are to be silent in the church."

We learn from 1 Timothy 2:12 that a woman is not to take a position of authority in the church. There are however numerous examples of the involvement of women in the life of the congregation. Synod's statement in 2.3.2 is unfounded. Are the words of our Lord in Matthew 18 not also for women? If she is aware of something wrong in my life, should she be silent?

In his *Institutes* John Calvin writes about the importance of congregational involvement in the election of office bearers. Nowhere does he say – or even suggest – that this should be by men only.

Issue 5 – The role of women in society

Synod Observes – 2.4.3 "Some churches add the element of culture to their appeals. They assert that Synod 2010 erred when it concluded that the historical practice of not allowing women to vote was based on cultural rather than biblical principles. It is stated that cultural or societal influence should have no part in resolving issues in the church."

Synod Considers – 3.8 "The churches should not be led by developments in culture and those developments should not determine the way in which we understand Scripture."

The Greeks held a very low view of women; also in Roman law a woman had no rights. For over 2000 years, this cultural mindset prevailed in western society.

This is not how it was in Old Testament Israel.

In Proverbs 31 we read about a wife who is busy for the wellbeing of her family. In verse 16 we are told that "she considers a field and buys it." She was able to buy real property. By God's law she was also entitled to honour and respect from her sons and daughters.

One hundred years ago, in Canada, a woman could not "consider a field and buy it." She could not buy real property; she could not open a bank account; she could not enter into a legal contract. One hundred years ago, in Canada (and in most of western society), a woman did not legally exist.

Because she did not legally exist, a mother was not the guardian of her own children, only her husband was. If she became widowed, her children became wards of a male relative, or wards of the state! One hundred years ago, in Canada, this Greek and Roman mindset still prevailed.

Synod 2010 was correct when it stated that "the historical practice of not allowing women to vote was based on cultural rather than biblical principles." This was "accepted" or "tolerated" by the church for 2000 years.

Issue 6 – Synod's recommendations

Synod Recommends – 4.1 "That Synod Burlington 2010 erred on church political grounds in its decision to leave women's voting in the freedom of the churches."

Synod Recommends – 4.2 "That Synod Burlington 2010 erred in stating that the exegetical sections brought forward in both the majority and minority reports are 'hardly relevant or decisive for the matter of women's voting.'"

Synod Recommends – 4.3 "That the churches should return to the voting practice as it officially was before 2010, namely male communicant members only voting."

Items 4.1 and 4.2 are not Recommendations or Resolutions, rather, they are unsupported Considerations, and should have been placed elsewhere.

Item 4.3 declares that before 2010 the official church position was voting by male communicant members only. This is not true. If that had been officially established by a previous synod, why have we been discussing it for the past thirty years? This position – and resolution – is not substantiated by Synod. It does not logically follow from Synod's Observations and Considerations.

A proper application of "God's great gift of reason" would have provided more clarity to these matters, and would have helped the federation come to a better resolution in this important area of church life.

We pray for God's guidance as we move forward on this issue.

Harry Harsevoort, Hamilton, Ontario **C**



Student Leadership in Reformed Schools

John Jagersma
Principal of Parkland
Immanuel Christian School in
Edmonton, Alberta
jjagersma@parklandimmanuel.ca

The role of students in education is changing. The shift that is occurring is moving students from being passive recipients of instruction to active participants in their own learning. Simply googling the terms “speak up,” “speak out,” or “personalized learning” will bring up examples of new initiatives that various provinces have introduced to give students a more dominant voice in education. Other examples are student leadership teams, service projects, and Ministry of Education student forums. Changes to teaching practice such as student-centred instruction, teaching for multiple intelligences, and differentiated instruction also emphasize the role of the individual student in the classroom. While some of these initiatives have appeared in the past, today there is an intentional, systematic movement to significantly alter the role of the student.

Now many of you may be wondering why we need to concern ourselves with trends in public education. But before we dismiss the topic out of hand, we need to look more closely at the practice in our own schools. Here too the movement is gaining popularity. While the more drastic components of these initiatives (which would see the child deciding what to learn, how to learn it, and when to learn it) do not live in our schools, some of the more subtle changes are certainly present. In particular, the concept of student leadership has gained momentum in Canadian Reformed schools in the last few years. Have these changes occurred in isolation, or are our schools subtly buying in to the broader movement to empower students? In either case, does student leadership fit with our vision for Christian education? In order to take a position on this topic, we will need to consider where the movement of empowering students in educational decision making comes from, why it is gaining momentum, and what the perspective of parents and teachers who support and maintain covenantal education should be on this concept.

A major shift

If we were to take a walk down memory lane, most readers would likely agree that the teacher was traditionally the dominant individual in the classroom. It was the teacher, as the central dispenser of knowledge, who provided students with the information they needed to learn. There might have been a few research assignments, and the odd hands-on learning activity, but by and large, the teacher stood at the front of the classroom and taught. This is no longer the model for educating students; instead, the role of the teacher is often referred to as that of a learning coach or guide. While there may still be a lag between new educational theory and what is actually occurring in our classrooms, the focus of education programs and professional development opportunities has certainly shifted in this direction. A major impetus for this shift was the introduction of child-centred learning. Although earlier educational theorists laid the foundation for this new approach to education, it's only in the last few decades that the movement has really caught on.

Does student leadership fit with our vision for Christian education?

Although some schools have pursued the concept to the extent of giving the child full decision making power (research Sudbury schools to see some examples), most haven't gone that far. The emphasis of placing the student at the center, however, has become the common philosophy in education. The new BC Education Plan clearly emphasizes this with the statement: “it's all about putting students at the centre of education.” The focus on the child can also be found in the United Nations deci-

sion to adopt the “Convention on the Rights of the Child” in 1989. Article 12 of this document declares that “state parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.” In the last few years provincial governments have begun to create a more powerful role for students through programming options and social media forums.

Growing popularity

Besides the overt, stated history for the movement to empower students, I would also suggest there are more subtle reasons for why the concept has grown in popularity. For starters, there is a societal shift occurring that is actively promoting individualism. This individualism has trickled down to our teenagers and young adults as well. This increasing emphasis on individualistic wants and needs (see Sir Ken Robinson’s speech on TED.com as evidence of this) has created pressure to change an educational system that was built on a group instruction model. At the same time, the attack on the nuclear family has left many students without strong parental involvement. Recent statistics show that in the USA nearly forty percent of children are born out of wedlock. The Canadian scene is no better with statistics for both divorce rates and children born outside of a two-parent family on the rise. There certainly isn’t a direct correlation between non-nuclear families and parental involvement in education, but there are complications that arise when children don’t have two supportive parents in the picture.

Coupled with this increasing emphasis on individualism is the loss of the teacher as knowledge dispenser. The growth of technology over the last ten years has been staggering. It used to be that the teacher dispensed information piece by piece to a child, but now students can find information on their own in seconds on their phone or laptop. The shift in education is towards teaching the necessary skills for students to access the information, compile and analyze the data, and discern implications based on the information they have collected and considered. The focus has also shifted away from

ORDINATION EXAMINATION SUSTAINED

Examined by Classis Northern Ontario of December 11, 2013 and granted permission to be ordained to the ministry of the Word and sacraments

Candidate Theo Wierenga

Examined by Classis Alberta of December 10, 2013 and granted permission to be ordained to the ministry of the Word and sacraments

Candidate Calvin Vanderlinde

CALLED

Called by the Emmanuel CanRC at Guelph, ON:

Rev. Bill De Jong

of Cornerstone CanRC at Hamilton, ON.

Called to the Immanuel CanRC of Edmonton, AB:

Rev. R.J. denHollander

of the Grace Canadian Reformed Church, Winnipeg, MB.

CHURCH NEWS

one label of intelligence to a broader understanding of talents and abilities. Teachers are now being challenged to differentiate their instruction to cater more to individual students.

On a more positive note, the shift towards increasing the role of students as decision makers has also been driven by a desire to increase their engagement in learning. Although not a lot of research has been done on the correlation between empowering students and engagement, there is evidence of a positive impact on engagement when students are allowed to have a say in their education. On an intuitive level, this will resonate with many of us. From planning family holidays, to choosing suppers or desserts, to selecting what chore they will do, we can find plenty of evidence in our own homes that children respond well to having input in the decision making process. The intentional placement of children at the centre of education, the collapse of the nuclear family, increased individualism, and a desire to foster engagement have together pushed the student into the spotlight in educational planning and decision making.

An opportunity

So what should we as Christians think about all of this? As I noted earlier, the temptation may be to dismiss it all as post-modern tripe and new age philosophy. In my view, doing so would mean missing a significant opportunity. Granted, in certain aspects the discerning Christian parent would be right to be skeptical. The first criticism should likely be that we don’t have the

student in the centre of education; rather, we reserve that place for God. This is a significant difference in perspective. It means that the parents, through the school board, may make choices that aren't necessarily popular with students but are still deemed to be necessary for a God-glorifying education. Some examples of this might be mandated community service hours, zeroes for missed assignments, or mandating that students take a second language or a fine arts course. As Christians we also hold up our elders as ones who provide leadership and advice rather than expecting this leadership from children. For example, Proverbs repeatedly calls on children to heed the instruction of their parents, and Corinthians speaks of the difference between childish thoughts and mature thoughts (1 Cor 13:11).

Our worldview permeates everything we do

As well, we don't encourage an individualistic focus in our schools, churches, or homes. The leadership structure of all three institutions is built on a biblical understanding of respecting those in authority over us. In the home, this means the parents have the responsibility to lead their families; in the church, this means that the authority lies with the consistory; and in our schools, this places authority with the parents through the school board. Much of the movement towards empowering students in the public education sphere is based on a narcissistic desire for self gratification and on individual wants and needs.

Simply because the secular interest in redefining the role of students is misguided, however, doesn't mean that the concept itself has no merit. When other educational topics have arisen, our schools have had to consider what aspects fit our worldview, and which portions we needed to discard. This has been true when dealing with topics such as discipline techniques, extracurricular activities, assessment practices, teaching students with special needs, and differentiated instruction; it should also be our practice when considering student leadership!

Some in our communities would suggest that there is no place for such a concept in our schools and that the school is purely an institution that provides academic instruction from a Reformed perspective. I respectfully dis-

agree. I believe that our schools do need to take an active role in fostering the growth of our children as leaders. Most Christian parents would agree with the statement that our worldview permeates everything we do; this is one of the reasons it is so important to us to have schools that teach from the same perspective as the home and the church. The same is true about our walk of faith. If it is true that we can't separate our words and deeds (I think here of the instruction found in the book of James), then it is vitally important that we consider how our schools can equip our students not only to have a proper perspective on God and his creation, but also to develop the skills and confidence to live a life of faithful service.

Student leadership

Evidence suggests that many of our schools are trending in this direction, from which I infer that this belief is more widespread. At the classroom level, many of our teachers already use student feedback techniques to inform their practice; however, it is the increased emphasis on student leadership in broader school activities that I would highlight in particular. A review of monthly magazines from a selection of our schools shows students being involved in leadership teams and other student council type organizations. These groups often take a lead role in planning fun social activities for the student body,

It is time to embrace an intentional approach to fostering student leadership

or work with teachers to organize assemblies. Elementary schools are encouraging students to participate in, or lead, parent/student/teacher conferences. Students are being challenged to raise money for mission work, to participate in short term mission trips, or to actively play a role in volunteer service in the broader community. Courses on leadership are being offered. If our practice reflects our vision, I would suggest that the vision of educating our students is broadening to move beyond the boundaries of instruction based on a Christian worldview and curriculum.

While the practice of expanding the role of the student in our schools may support my assertion, I wonder if the current trend of empowering students in broader school roles is a product of an intentional plan. Or could

it be that this trend is simply proving the age-old saying that “when it rains in the world it drips in the church” (or in this case the school)? Perhaps schools are bending to student or parent requests for increased leadership activities without asking what the philosophy for doing so should be. With the altering technological and pedagogical landscape in education, the pressure to change will come whether we prepare for it or not. Curriculum choices and ministry of education decisions will increasingly emphasize the active involvement of students. The ready access to information isn’t going away. The social alterations to the family that are occurring in Canadian society are only going to increase the emphasis on individualism. While not every model for empowering students is appropriate to our school context, I would suggest that it is time for our parents and school boards to embrace an intentional approach to fostering student leadership in our schools.

In the school I work, we surveyed parents to see what skills, traits, and virtues they would most want the school to work at developing during their child’s school age years. Not surprisingly, academic skills and Christian apologetics were at the top of the list. But right behind them were volunteerism, empathy, and leadership; I suspect the same results would be found in most of our school communities. In our churches this issue of leader-

ship is also prevalent; the growth in popularity of mentorship, office bearer training sessions, and young adult retreats all hint at a desire to better equip the younger generation to lead. We may not buy into the popular philosophy of giving students a voice because we believe they inherently “deserve” one, but we desire to see our children grow into confident, articulate, service-oriented, godly adults, a goal to be shared with our homes and churches.

Parents, school boards, staff, and, dare I say, students, need to decide if this is really the vision they have for Christian education, and if so, how it will be worked out in our schools. As we consider our children’s education, is there a desire and a plan to also use our schools to equip our children so that they may grow to fulfill the challenge given by Paul to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:12: “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith, and in purity”?

The Education Matters column is sponsored by the Canadian Reformed Teachers’ Association East. Anyone wishing to respond to an article written or willing to write an article is kindly asked to send materials to Clarion or to Arthur Kingma akingma@ech.ca.



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

In his recent editorial “Seminary: A Spiritual Greenhouse,” Rev. E. Kampen argues that our seminary may be compared to a greenhouse where the students, like little seedlings, are placed in a sheltered environment in which to grow up, too vulnerable to be placed out in the open. I believe that this is far from the reality, and is also deeply problematic. Seminary is not a place for seedlings, but for men who have already shown themselves to be “hospitable, lovers of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined” (Titus 1:8 ESV) – presumably in the context of the battles of daily Christian life. There, these men are trained and disciplined in using the tools they have been given.

Etymology aside, a much better metaphor for the seminary experience is that of a military boot camp. Students are not sheltered, but rather challenged, trained, and pushed beyond their comfort zone. In a greenhouse, seedlings need to be sheltered and nurtured so that they will grow and flourish – and this is a good analogy for the Christian home. However, seminary is not a place for children, but for men. These are men with diverse backgrounds and already a degree of experience in fighting the good fight. However, they need knowledge, training, and discipline, and seminary is a place where they are equipped with these tools. As in boot camp, the drill instructors (think: professors) have to make the workload as painful and difficult as the battle itself. Thus, the reason that these men are capable of leading the church is not that they are especially sheltered, but because they are especially trained.

In practice, this means that students at seminary are challenged with the philosophies that drive other religions, the ideas promoted by other denominations, and the most difficult questions that face regular church members week after week. This year, for example, students have visited Hindu and Sikh temples, a Muslim mosque, and numerous local churches of various denominations in Hamilton. Seminary students are expected to defend their faith against these philosophies and interact with these issues.

To be sure, the rigorous theological program can lead to a degree of social isolation; however, this real-

ity is seen not as a benefit to be celebrated, but a danger to be avoided. Students are encouraged to build relationships within the congregations and with their unbelieving neighbours, and to seek opportunities.

I don't believe that Rev. Kampen had intended to argue that seminary is a soft environment, but I know that this is a widespread assumption. I hope that readers were not given this impression from the article, and that they may be encouraged by this brief letter that the professors and curriculum at our seminary form a rigorous training program for the good fight of faith in which we are engaged.

Jonathan Chase
Seminary Student



Response

I very much appreciate the interaction to my editorial by Br. Jonathan Chase. It is satisfying to know that what one has written is being read and thought about, also by those in the spiritual greenhouse. Let me simply say this: I was in seminary once too. In my days, our professors had wise sayings to indicate seedlings don't always get the full perspective on life in the ministry from inside the spiritual greenhouse. It didn't take me long to realize that once I had been placed in one of God's fields.

Perhaps we should both mark a date somewhere in 2024, when, DV, I will have come to the end of active service in a field and Br. Chase will have been allowed to serve eight years as a labourer in one of God's fields, and compare notes. Without doubt, seminary years are times of rigorous training. I suspect that after some time in a field of God, rather than using militaristic language to describe seminary years, there will be a renewed appreciation for the language of nurture contained in the word “seminary.”

Rev. E. Kampen **C**

*Letters to the Editor should be written in a brotherly fashion in order to be considered for publication.
Submissions need to be less than one page in length.*

Press Release CERCU/CCU November 2013

The annual meeting of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) once again provided a venue for representatives of the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA) and the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) to meet and discuss their efforts toward merger. Those present from the URCNA's Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity (CERCU) were Rev. Bill Boekestein, Rev. John Bouwers, Rev. Dan Donovan, Rev. Casey Freswick, Rev. Dr. Michael Horton, Rev. Rick Miller, Rev. Bill Pols, Rev. Ralph Pontier, and Rev. William Van Hal, while Rev. William den Hollander and Rev. Clarence VanderVelde were present as the CanRC's Coordinators of the Committee for Church Unity (CCU).

Meetings were held on the evening of Monday, November 18 and the afternoon of Wednesday, November 20, 2013 in Flat Rock, North Carolina. The focus of the meetings was how we can best move forward in our relationship leading to merger. Rev. William den Hollander reported on his visits to URCNA classes and churches in the United States since our meeting a year ago. So far he has visited all the American classes, except Classis Pacific Northwest which he hopes to visit in the spring of 2014. Rev. den Hollander has also used those occasions and other occasions to preach in American churches and attend ministerials of the URCNA. These visits served

as excellent opportunities for brotherly interaction about the issues involved in the efforts toward merger. These invitations were issued in light of Synod Nyack 2012's mandate to the churches "to continue to engage the issue of an eventual merger."

In an effort to understand one another better, we discussed covenant views in the CanRC and the URCNA. The discussion then moved on to why the CanRC dislike extra-confessional statements. We also discussed the status of the doctrinal statements adopted by recent URCNA synods.

We discussed CERCU's intention to move the relationship to Phase 3A, which would mean a commitment to making concrete preparations for an eventual merger. It is CERCU's intention to present Synod Visalia 2014 with a preliminary outline of such a plan leading up to a finalized proposal to Synod 2016. Part of this plan would be to encourage URCNA churches to interact with those issues that need resolution before merger. Furthermore, to enhance understanding of the issues involved, the hope is that a colloquium can be held at Synod Visalia 2014 in which two representatives from the URCNA and two from the CanRC will address covenant views and perhaps other theological issues.

As we work toward merger, may the Lord bless our humble efforts in such a way that they serve as a witness to the world and for the glory of his Name.

Press Release of Classis Niagara, December 11, 2013, Attercliffe, Ontario

On behalf of the convening church, Rev. Jan Huijgen called the meeting of the delegates to order. He asked the delegates to sing Hymn 25:1, 3, read from Romans 16:20-27, and spoke some words on this passage. He welcomed everyone present.

As memorabilia he mentioned that the church of Grassie remains vacant, there was a graduation at the

seminary with the appointment of a fifth professor, that the seminary is putting on a conference around the important topic of hermeneutics, and that Candidates Vanderlinde and Wierenga both sustained peremptory examinations at other recent classes.

After the credentials were all found to be in order, Classis was declared constituted. Rev. Huijgen served as chairman, Rev. Peter Holtvlüwer as clerk, and Rev. John VanWoudenberg as vice-chairman.

After the adoption of the agenda, Attercliffe reported on invitations sent out to other churches for fraternal delegates. Several churches sent in letters of regret that they could not attend.

In connection with Article 44 of the Church Order all the churches indicated that the ministry of the office-bearers is being continued and that the decisions of the major assemblies are being honoured. One church asked for and received advice in a matter of discipline.

Classis dealt with a request from the church of Dunnville to rescind the decision of Classis Niagara September 11, 2013 to delegate Rev. VanWoudenberg as fraternal observer to an upcoming classis of the RCUS in Iowa, considering Dunnville's supervision at Bluebell. Dunnville noted that:

- a. no church suggested that Classis send a delegate to this RCUS classis;
- b. The Church of Dunnville in particular, though tasked with the supervision of Bluebell to which there is a bit of a RCUS connection, did not ask for anything like this;
- c. The churches in Classis Niagara are quite far removed from this RCUS classis;
- d. The RCUS and the Canadian Reformed Churches already have contact via committees of the broadest assemblies, and via classes in Western Canada and Western USA.

Classis decided to not rescind this decision as the rationale was not deemed convincing. It was noted that as of March 31, 2014, the church of Dunnville will cease providing oversight to the former Bluebell congregation.

Classis received an audit of the classical archives. This audit reported that some documents were missing. Classis requested the church caring for the archives to get the archives up to date.

Br. Ludwig reported on a very positive visit he made as a delegate from Classis to Classis Ontario East of the United Reformed Churches of North America.

The following arrangements were made for the next classis: convening church: Dunnville; date: March 19, 2013 (alternate: June 11, 2013); chairman: Rev. Wynia; Vice-chairman: Rev. Holtvlüwer; clerk: Rev. Huijgen.

The convening church for the next classis was instructed to invite fraternal delegates from the URCNA, OPC, and RCUS, as well as an observer from the FRCNA.

Rev. Huijgen was delegated to serve as fraternal delegate to the upcoming URCNA classis in this area if this happens before next Classis Niagara.

After the Acts were adopted and Press Release approved, prayer was offered and thereafter the meeting was closed.

Rev. John VanWoudenberg (vice chairman) 