

# Clarion

THE CANADIAN REFORMED MAGAZINE  
Volume 63, No. 16 • August 15, 2014



MORE HYMNS?



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# Wisdom re: Adding Hymns

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*The testing and learning of new hymns takes much time, it can create unrest in the churches, and it comes with a certain financial cost*

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The Synod of Carman 2013 made some important decisions regarding the *Book of Praise*. The Psalm and hymn sections were finalized and the Standing Committee for the *Book of Praise* (SCBP) was mandated to publish a definitive 2013 version. We understand that the SCBP and the publisher are working hard to get the work done. Rumour has it that the new *Book of Praise* will be available some time during the fall of this year.

One of the more unexpected decisions of Synod of Carman 2013 was that the process of looking for additional hymns (above and beyond the current eighty-five) is terminated. Just to refresh everyone's memory, the Synod of Burlington 2010 had mandated the SCBP "to seek, receive, evaluate and recommend additional hymns to be compiled and proposed at a future date for testing by the churches" (*Acts of Synod 2010*, Art 142). The Synod of Chatham 2013, however, decided not to renew the SCBP's mandate in this respect. In other words, we have eighty-five hymns, and that will be it for the time being.

Why this turnaround? In *Acts of Synod* we read that nine churches had asked for a moratorium on adding new hymns, while two churches asked that more hymns should be added yet. Synod considered that some of the arguments against adding more new hymns have merit: The testing and learning of new hymns takes much time, it can create unrest in the churches, and it comes with a certain financial cost. Synod clarified that "the adding or not adding of additional hymns is not a matter of principle but a matter of wisdom. It is not desirable to have a constantly-changing hymn section nor is it desirable to close the door entirely to additional suitable hymns at some point in the future" (*Acts of Synod 2013*, Art 173)

## Wisdom

I am thankful that Synod stated that there are no *principal* arguments against adding more hymns, and that in the future the door to adding more hymns is still open. It is understandable that there is not much appetite in the churches for starting another round of testing new hymns, going through another *Augment*, consistories having to deal with all kinds of letters about the proposed changes, etcetera. In other words, there is some wisdom in Synod's decision.

As Synod indicated, the wisdom argument depends in part on the circumstances. In the current situation it is deemed wise to stop the process of looking for more hymns but "at some point in the future" the situation may be different. At that time wisdom may dictate that the process of looking for additional hymns should be rekindled.

I have a feeling that such a day may come sooner than we think. The main reason is that the recent addition of nineteen hymns has not really satisfied the hunger for more hymns. Granted, there are some beautiful hymns among the nineteen, and our hymn collection has been enriched as a result. But by and large, those among us who were hoping to get more hymns were expecting a different kind of hymns. They wanted more of the classic English hymns (*Amazing Grace*, etc.) and perhaps a few contemporary worship songs (such as *In Christ Alone*). When the *Augment* came out in 2007, there was a general sense of: okay, great, but why *these* hymns?

Readers of *Clarion* may remember what Rev. Stam wrote in an editorial last year: "I think that the church



today for the sake of catholicity should sing the great hymns that have come to us through the ages. Guests who come to our church services may recognize some of the old hymns. Let me give you a few examples of what hymns I mean: Abide with me, The Lord's Prayer, Amazing Grace, It is Well with my Soul, Rock of Ages, O Sacred Head, The Old Rugged Cross, and When I Survey the Wondrous Cross. These are only a few examples; there are more but this is enough for now" (*Clarion*, Vol 62, No 1).

This illustrates what I'm trying to say: The recent addition of nineteen hymns has not addressed the desire to have more hymns in the *Book of Praise* that are already well-known and well-loved

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE...

The issue in your hands begins with a guest editorial from Dr. Arjan de Visser, taking a look at decision making regarding the hymn section of our *Book of Praise*. Many of our Seminary's professors have taken time in their summer months to contribute a guest editorial for *Clarion*, and it is much appreciated.

Rev. Peter Holtvliwer continues his NAPARC Neighbour series, this time on the PCA. The two-part series on Biblical Womanhood concludes in this issue. Also from Rev. den Hollander is the You Asked column.

Issue 16 includes several other regular columns: Treasures New and Old and Clippings on Politics and Religion. Readers will also find a letter to the editor, Further Discussion on women's voting, and a book review.

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## 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

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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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among our people. Some people feel so strongly about the need for more hymns that they feel justified in leaving the church over this issue (perhaps among other issues). While we do not condone such a decision, it should nevertheless make the churches think. And let's not forget our young people. Many of them are very familiar with contemporary worship songs such as *In Christ Alone* and *How Deep the Father's Love for us*. Increasingly also, as they attend youth conferences with young people from the URC, they learn to appreciate hymns from the *Psalter Hymnal*.

Synod did not close the door permanently on adding more hymns. Synod even suggested a "mechanism" that could be used to get the matter on the agenda again: Churches can follow the ecclesiastical route of bringing overtures for new hymns to the minor assemblies: from consistory to classis to regional synod to general synod (*Acts of Synod*, Art 173). I'm not sure that there is a great deal of enthusiasm at grass roots level to follow this approach. After all, there is a good chance that somewhere along the line the wisdom argument will again be used to stop such initiatives.

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### *In the future the door to adding more hymns is still open*

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So we are kind of stuck in a difficult situation at the moment. On the one hand, there still is a desire to add more hymns to our federational repertoire. On the other hand, there is little appetite in the churches to go through another round of testing new hymns.

#### **Ecumenical**

What should be done in the present situation? Well, perhaps we should all sit back a little and have a fresh look at the situation. I'm not suggesting that we should give up on any of the principles that have guided us in the past. For example, the fact that the Psalms have the principal place in our worship should remain untouched. But when it comes to choosing new hymns, I would ask that the principle of ecumenicity should play a more important role than it has in the past. I believe this is what Rev. Stam referred to when he used the word "catholicity."

It is a beautiful thing if we can sing a hymn that was already on the lips of believers in the time of the Reformation, for example, Luther's hymn *A Mighty Fortress*. Some hymns go back even further, for example Bernard of Clairvaux's *O Sacred Head* (which is not the *Book of*

*Praise* yet). This is a practical way of experiencing the fact that we believe and profess "one catholic or universal church" (BC, Art 27).

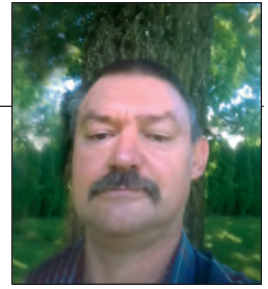
The principle of catholicity does not just make us look back. It also makes us look around to church federations with whom we have ecclesiastical fellowship at the present time. The Canadian Reformed Churches have close ties with the United Reformed Churches (URCNA) and with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC). These two federations are in the process of adopting a Joint Songbook. A few months ago, the General Synod of the URCNA and the General Assembly of the OPC both adopted the first part of the new songbook: the *Psalter*. It is expected that the second part of the songbook (the *Hymnal*) will be adopted in 2016.

It is my hope that the CanRC would follow these developments closely. Based on what we believe about the ecumenicity of the church, we should be interested to see what hymns will eventually be included in the URC/OPC *Psalter Hymnal*. I would put it even stronger: When the time is ripe for the CanRC to look at adding more hymns to the *Book of Praise*, we should be looking closely at the hymns that are sung in the URCNA and the OPC.

There are various reasons why this is important. First, from an ecumenical perspective, if we are serious about seeking unity with the URCNA, it would help if we were already singing many of the same hymns that they are singing. Second, from a liturgical perspective, if we trust the URCNA well enough to want to unite with them, we should also be able to trust that in liturgical matters they are able to select songs that have good quality. Third, from a pastoral and missional perspective, Rev. Stam's comment about guests visiting our worship services is important as well: It will help them to feel more at home among us if they can sing some of the old songs.

We do not know what hymns will be part of the 2016 URCNA/OPC hymnal. Hopefully, it will be a good collection of solid Christian hymns. If we go by the result of the first phase of the Joint Songbook project (the *Psalter*), it is clear that the URCNA and the OPC are serious about honouring the principal place of the Psalms. I had opportunity to browse through the new *Psalter* and I was pleasantly surprised to find that the new *Psalter* contains about twenty Genevan melodies. Some of the versifications have been taken over from the CanRC *Book of Praise*. Hopefully, in the future we will also see a more significant overlap between the URCNA and CanRC songbooks with respect to the hymn sections.





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# Born Again

***"When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these'."***

(Mark 10:14 )

When people bring little children to Jesus, and when the disciples rebuke those people, the Lord answers: "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." Does this mean infant baptism? Of course not! But the kingdom of heaven does belong to people who are like those little children. Nobody has to grow up first. Nobody has to accept Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour first, and commit their lives to him first, before they can belong to the kingdom of heaven. Instead, the kingdom of heaven belongs to your children and my children, now already, today, and to all other people who are like those little children in our text. If the kingdom of heaven has no "second-rate citizens" – and it surely does not—then we cannot escape this fact: everything that Jesus gives to adults who believe, Jesus gives to their children as well! Because they all belong to God's kingdom.

But there is more. The Lord doesn't say that the kingdom of heaven is for children as well as for adults. Instead, the kingdom of heaven belongs *only* to them. For immediately the Lord adds, "I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (v. 15). That means it's not children who need to change. It's not children who must grow up first. Instead, to the disciples, to the grown-ups in the congregation,

to the office-bearers of the church – and indeed to every adult – the Lord says: if we want to enter the kingdom of God, we must change and we must become like those little children!

And this is ultimately the issue that we must consider whenever we discuss infant baptism. The disciples were thinking that little children must grow up first (and become like the disciples) before those little children could have meaningful contact with the Lord. That would still be a logical reason to deny infant baptism: if they must first know God, and if they must make a mature and responsible decision to serve God before they can enter his kingdom, then we shouldn't baptize our children. But Jesus says the opposite! Everybody must be born again, and after that happens to us, then surely we're not like adults anymore. Instead, when we're born again we're like newborn babies.

So the doctrine of infant baptism doesn't only concern children. Instead it concerns us all. For when we sit in church and witness the baptism of babies who belong to the congregation, and when we hear God's promise to be a Father to those babies, then those babies become examples for us. God wants us to become like them! Newborn babies cannot find food for themselves, cannot clothe themselves, cannot earn their own keep. Instead, all they can do is eat and sleep and cry – sound familiar,

moms? – and yet God accepts them. They are helpless, and God accepts them in their helplessness.

The point is that baptism marks the beginning of the Christian "journey." Not so that we might grow up and become good people, hard workers, and productive church members, but instead the baptism of children brings us back, again and again, to the very heart of the Christian faith. Namely, we must repent in the sense that we (again) know ourselves to be as helpless as those little babies, and (again) learn to depend on the gracious care of our heavenly Father! In order for us to be saved, the question is not: Who is old enough or good enough to be a Christian? The question is not: Who knows enough, or who is doing enough, or even whose faith is strong enough? Instead, the question is: Who is small enough and weak enough in his own eyes that he can depend wholeheartedly on Jesus Christ?

And then our children, our newborn babies, are the first ones to qualify. Not because they have childlike "faith," for what do we know about the faith of those children who were brought to Jesus? But they qualify precisely because they've got nothing to offer. That is what the Christian faith is all about, is it not? Today and tomorrow, and every day in our lives, we must again become like them! May the Holy Spirit work powerfully in all of our hearts to make this happen. **C**



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# Biblical Womanhood: The place of the woman in creation and recreation (Part 2)

*This two-part article was originally a speech delivered at the District Meeting of the Women Societies in the Niagara Peninsula on May 1, 2014.*

## **The recreated woman in the NT church**

Does this gospel regarding womanhood still apply today? Can we maintain these priorities in our day and age in which feminism has changed the general opinion about the place and task of the woman? In the NT also, the Lord Jesus and the Apostle Paul speak and teach about this place of the woman in the same way. In fact, reading 1 Timothy 2:11-15, to which I made reference a few times already, we hear the Apostle reiterate the same gospel, the same teaching! Feminists, however, can no longer accept a position of quietness and full submission. They adduce that times have changed, the culture has changed. The idea that Paul's instruction is bound to the different time of his days is historically incorrect. Paul's time was a new time! He was living among a new culture. The spread of Hellenism was accompanied by revolution, by the liberation of slaves and soldiers. It also was a time of selfishness and discontentment. Athens and Rome were seeing the emancipation of the woman and of her leadership in public places. Paul's epistle hints at many of these trends as well.

It's in that kind of a situation that the Apostle Paul is coming with his instruction to the congregation. It's apostolic instruction! It's for the purpose of salvation that he writes. In dealing with the position of the woman the Apostle goes back to the creation and fall into sin. He does so because he is seeking the salvation of all women, the restoration from sin for all times! Hence, the message is not time bound; rather, since we share in the begin-

ning of creation and fall, we also are united with Timothy's congregation. Paul's epistle speaks to the whole congregation about a great variety of matters to show "how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household," i.e. the church (3:15). Paul is speaking about some liturgical matters: the prayers, the petitions for everyone, for those in authority, and how the men should make their prayers. The life of the whole congregation is in focus there, that all may lead peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. Paul is pursuing godliness for all! This godliness means that the whole walk of life of those who are in Christ Jesus shows respect for what God has established. That applies to the slaves, the rich, the men; it *also* requires of the women godliness in their outer and inner appearance. It's in that context that Paul instructs the congregation about the peculiar place of the woman in the congregation. They are saved under a life-giving condition, in a life-giving position!

## **The place of the woman recreated as woman**

The purpose of the gospel is salvation, life-giving powers! The women in the congregation may look at this aspect first: they *may* hear the Word! They too *may* learn Jesus Christ! That's the grace of God in which the woman may share too! The Lord Jesus came to redeem the *women* as well! He came to lift them up from the position of humiliation, of exploitation by men. The Saviour came to lift them up from conditions of corruption and death to the height of praising God, of doing good works, of living to the glory of God again! "A woman should learn," "let a woman *be* taught," the Apostle says literally. That's her blessing, first of all! When the Lord Jesus happened to be talking with a Samaritan woman, the disciples were



amazed to see him speak with a *woman*! Their amazement resulted from the wrong view of women, as taught them by the Pharisees and rabbis. In matters of teaching and the law women should stay away. At times like that they should withdraw to the kitchen. The Lord Jesus, however, came to save, save the *women* too, with his Word! Hence He does not admonish Mary when she's sitting at his feet to listen, but He exhorts Martha, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken from her" (Luke 10:41).

When the Lord Jesus wants to save woman, He wants to save her *as woman*! He wants to save her *womanhood* as well. It's again the fault of feminism that it works on improving the circumstances, removing so-called miserable conditions for women, without retaining the peculiar nature and position of the woman. Feminism does not save; it distorts God's creation even more! Christ came to save, and it is for that reason that he wants to restore the woman in her rightful position. That's giving life in a world in which all relationships are dominated by sin and death. That's why we must stress Paul's argument for the peculiar position of the woman: he looks back at the *creation* ordinance! The reason for doing this is not the establishing of male superiority; on the contrary, I should say. The history to which Paul refers shows us Adam, who could not handle the situation by himself. He needed help. Men should not boast in the fact that the woman was created for man; they should be thankful for it!

### ***The place of the recreated woman in the church today***

Now, for the relationship between man and woman in the *congregation* Paul adds yet another argument: "And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner." Paul is addressing the church, the congregation of those who are to be *saved*. In *that* assembly, Paul says, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man." Why not? Well, because the women are daughters of Eve, and in matters of instruction they should not take the lead. For when that happened once in Paradise, and Adam accepted her instruction, all things went wrong. The fall into sin was not just the eating as such, but also the fact that she took the lead and that she talked Adam into eating, instructing him unto evil. We should have no repetition of this.

Therefore, in the congregation in which the proclamation unto salvation takes place, the woman must be silent, should listen! Even that command is God's command of salvation! The woman should resume her place from before the fall. That's not her punishment but her life, her office, her position of love!

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***Submission does not denote inferiority;  
rather her respecting the position given  
by God to the man***

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So, the woman's listening in quietness and full submission does not denote inferiority; but rather her respecting the position given by God to the man. Now, however, this cannot be done otherwise than with difficulty. For that which before was an unmixed blessing – namely that Eve by virtue of her creation constantly followed Adam – is an unmixed blessing no longer. Now she, who by her sinful example, chose to rule him who at that moment was still her sinless husband, must obey her sinful husband. It's the life-giving condition in the *church*, however, which helps them in this difficulty, and saves them unto such obedience! Thus in the *congregation* the woman's life-giving condition is that she may learn her position and may function in the church in the proper way. She may not have authority there, lest salvation is jeopardized again!

Does that then mean that the woman is *muzzled* in the midst of the congregation? Not at all! Though her position is restricted for the sake of her salvation, she may share in the life of godliness "with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God" (10). Listening does not imply listening all the time. In other places the Apostle Paul praises the work of women in the spreading of the gospel (Rom 16:1). He also reminds Timothy of the good instruction he received from his mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois. Paul instructs Timothy as well to exhort the older women to teach the younger women. The book of Acts also shows us women who received the gift of prophesying and who used this in the midst of the congregation, as for example the daughters of Philip the deacon. There we read about Priscilla too, who together with her husband Aquilla explained the full gospel to Apollos, a man who had heard about the baptism of

John only. It is a good work when sisters use their gifts for teaching in the midst of the congregation. It is a good work when sisters teach the children in the households. It is a good work and enhancing godliness when older and younger sisters in the congregation edify each other in a women's society. Their activities are restricted, however, by the Apostle Paul in the congregation, restricted on the basis of the creation ordinance. Women may not occupy the offices of the church, but only men.

### ***The place of the woman in the church: a calling for the men***

This implies then also an indirect command to the men! For we may look disapprovingly at trends in certain denominations toward women in office, denouncing it as being against Scripture, yet do we realize that a major cause behind this development was the trend among the men to forsake their leadership position? In 1 Peter 3:7 we see that the husbands are to lead their wives wisely, i.e. with knowledge of the Word; reality, however, shows that in many cases the study of the Scriptures in the family is dropped soon after the wedding day. In this passage we see that the woman's condition of submissiveness is a life-giving condition under the headship of the husband, but then the husbands must save their wives indeed by their spiritual leadership. We also see that the woman's condition in the church under the authority of men is a condition of grace and salvation, but then there must be men available all the time and with good calibre! Then we must learn our lesson today from the developments in other denominations where the issue of women in office arose not only from a new hermeneutic but *also* out of a need and lack of leadership among men!

It was the man who sang about his wife when he first received her. It was also the man who sang about his wife after they had heard the gospel of salvation: Eve, mother of all living! From this Eve the seed of life was to come as one of those born of her. The peculiar position of the woman after the fall was a position of bearing children! When we read regarding the men, therefore, in chapter 3:1, "If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task," we may see in this passage how beautiful it is for the *women* to aspire for motherhood. "Women will be *saved* through childbirth." Of course, that does not mean that childbirth is a condition for salvation in Jesus Christ. Paul doesn't say that in motherhood salvation is guaranteed. No, Paul continues in the line of Adam's ex-

clamation, namely that in the way of birth the Son of life would come; and that in the way of childbirth the seed, the generation of the living would come! Instead of the death-penalty that woman deserved, the Eves receive the perspective of life through childbirth!

### ***The place of the recreated woman today: conclusions***

A word like this often causes problems. God does not give marriage to every woman. God does not give children in every marriage. Does that mean that to them salvation is denied? Of course not! God calls the women to various tasks, and every woman may be fruitful in her personal task in the service of God. That too is her life in grace! Of this we sing in Psalm 113, "That his favour makes the barren spouse a joyful mother in her house."

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### ***It is a good work when sisters use their gifts***

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Also the barren woman can be life-giving in ways of service and good works. Many children may receive the life-giving Word from women whose position in God's plan it is to remain single. The mother with children does not look down upon the women without, for what she has in husband and children is received only! Likewise, the married woman need not boast over the unmarried. On the other hand, for the same reason of grace, this gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ helps to overcome all jealousy and bitterness. For bitterness would take away thankfulness for the gift of life, and jealousy would paralyse the giving of life in other ways. No, God does not give to every woman the joy and trouble of motherhood. However, the Apostle Paul does stress in the context of the position of the woman in this dispensation of salvation that in motherhood God works out his plan of salvation!

We have to take that Word seriously in this day and age in which motherhood is being shoved aside on purpose, because it's not desired! Such deliberate despising, in a situation in which there is no danger, is a sin before God! For it despises the way that God wants to see the increase of the congregation. Fruitful service in a life-giving position is not found in designing one's own purposes, establishing one's own tasks. When we limit our families unnecessarily or when married women prefer their career over an



increase in work at home, we do not see our position in faith and love and holiness any longer. It is in the way of love when we desire to build the congregation in our God-given position! That's not an easy way. Indeed, childbirth involves a lot. It can dominate a woman's life completely.

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*Every woman may be fruitful in  
her personal task in the service of God*

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Children tie you down. It also may hamper your personal development, perhaps, when there does not seem to be more than the house, the kitchen, and the stores. Then faith is required more than ever, especially while living in the midst of all those pleas for emancipation: "Why not let your hubby share the cooking and the chores!" The society outside and the challenges of a job may seem very attractive when you feel locked up at home.

However, don't underestimate the significance of child birth. True Christian faith, much love, and genu-

ine holiness are required for it! Children need more than food to live; they need the Bread of Life, piece by piece! Mother's words, mother's stories, and mother's ideas are of the greatest importance for a true, healthy, spiritual life! Remember mother Eunice and grandmother Lois again for the functioning of Timothy in the church. Don't underestimate your task and your peculiar position with the church of God. Inferior? More superior than all works in society when it is carried out in godliness! Childbirth begins with the curse of pain reminding us of the fall into sin, but in faith it is a blessing when done in the service of God, the blessing of salvation. That faith will give the strength for it as well to those who sacrifice in love their own strength to the glory of God's Name. For to that glory we were created in the image of God as men and women; to that glory we are set aside as men and women; to that glory we are saved married or not, with children or not, that we may all use our position in the congregation of Christ in submission to this life-giving Word!





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# NAPARC Neighbour – PCA (Part 5)

*Note: This is the fifth in a series of articles on NAPARC. Having explained what NAPARC is and does, this and following articles aim to introduce the member churches.*

If you’ve ever vacationed in Florida or driven through the American South, chances are you’ve seen and perhaps visited a Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). The PCA has a close affinity with several other Presbyterian bodies such as the OPC, RPCNA, and ARPC and, from a size perspective, can be seen as their “big brother.”

## By the numbers

Numerically, the PCA is the largest of the NAPARC churches (and one of NAPARC’s charter members).<sup>1</sup> 2012 statistics show a total church membership of more than 364,000, made up of more than 1,700 congregations and mission works. For many years, the PCA has shown steady growth and now averages organizing one new church per month. Recently they added their eighty-second Presbytery. Among the many Presbyteries, eight (within the US) are entirely Korean speaking, making up fifteen percent of the PCA!

Although the heaviest concentration of PCA churches is in the American South with the most-per-state found in Florida, their congregations are spread broadly within the US and also within Canada. The PCA website ([pcaac.org](http://pcaac.org)) shows seventeen congregations in our country from coast to coast. A closer look shows that the CanRC and the PCA have churches near one another in the Fraser Valley (BC), Edmonton, Calgary, Lethbridge/Coaldale (AB), Hamilton, and Toronto (ON).

## 1973 beginnings

While most Presbyterian churches (including the PCA) can trace their ancestry back to England, Ireland, and especially Scotland, the existence of the PCA as we

experience it dates back to 1973 when it emerged from the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS). The PCUS was in a liberalizing trend, moving away from adherence to the Reformed confessions and allowing unorthodox positions to be promoted within its ranks. On December 4, 1973 a group of churches came out and called itself the Presbyterian Church in America.

## Reformed evangelical

The newly minted PCA took a stand against the encroachment of liberalism and that continues to mark it to this day. As a denomination, they have adopted this motto: “Faithful to the Scriptures, True to the Reformed



faith, Obedient to the great commission of Jesus Christ.” In opposition to the PCUS, the PCA went back to the historic confessions of the Presbyterian world and affirmed their commitment to the doctrine of Scripture summarized in the Westminster Confessions.

This commitment becomes clear, for example, in the PCA’s refusal to allow women to be ordained to the teaching offices and even to the office of deacon. In recent years, the PCA has also affirmed the Bible’s teaching that homosexuality is a sin and that marriage is between one man and one woman only. The PCA has taken the position that divorce is sin except in the case of adultery or unlawful desertion. Similarly, the PCA takes a firm stand that euthanasia and abortion are murder.

At the same time, it has been said that the PCA allows for differences where more conservative Presbyterian/Reformed churches would not. For example, the belief that the special gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the New Testament continue today is not officially sanctioned by the PCA but is openly tolerated so long as it is not promoted within the denomination. The belief that children of believers should be permitted to partake of the Lord’s Supper is likewise allowed to exist so long as it is not taught. Among office bearers, it is possible (at ordination) to declare an exception to something stated in the Westminster Confessions and thus to be exempt from that point (although the brother would promise not to teach it either).

## **Mission**

With a firm commitment to the Westminster Confessions as a denomination, the PCA has sought to put the mandate of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) into practice. Outreach, evangelism, and mission work are major emphases throughout the denomination. New church plants open regularly (though, to be sure, others close, too, for lack of sustainability) and the PCA conducts mission work in some sixty countries. Through its centralized agency, Mission to the World, the PCA sends out over 600 missionaries.

The PCA is also aware that the Great Commission is more than making converts, that it involves making *disciples* of all nations. That requires long, steady training from generation to generation. To that end, they have set up a publishing house known as Great Commissions Pub-

lications which aims to help educate new and existing Christians in being obedient to the Lord.

## **Church life**

What can you expect in a typical PCA worship service? The short answer is: it varies from church to church. There is no “typical” worship service in the PCA, in part due to its large size and in part due to its allowance for differences in certain areas (liturgy is one of them). Though the main item will be an exposition of the Word of God, PCA worship styles range from the traditional-conservative (more Psalm singing), to conservative-modern (more hymn-singing and choirs) to a contemporary style of worship including bands, music leaders, and over-head projectors. Much will depend on the location, the make-up of the people, and the leanings of the local leadership. The PCA leaves much about the local worship service up to the local session.

## **Seminary training**

In 1982, the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, was received into the PCA and with them came their long-standing seminary, Covenant Theological Seminary (in Missouri). This remains the national seminary of the PCA while other independent seminaries are on a list of approved institutions, such as Reformed Theological Seminary (Jackson, Mississippi), Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) and Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary (South Carolina).

The PCA has a number of prolific theologians whose works are often found on our shelves too: Francis Schaeffer, R.C. Sproul, Tim Keller, D. James Kennedy, Peter Leithart, Philip Ryken, Ligon Duncan, and more. If you would like to learn more about the PCA, consider getting their free denominational magazine (available electronically), *byFaith*.

As noted above, the Korean influence within the PCA is considerable. Next time we’ll look at two separate Korean Presbyterian denominations which are either in or applying to be in NAPARC.

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<sup>1</sup> The basic information for this article is a summary of the data found in the annual reports of the PCA to NAPARC as well as what can be found generally on the Internet. **C**





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# Persecution of Christians in Indonesia

Tensions are rising in Indonesia between Christians and the Muslim majority. Although historically Christians have made significant contributions to the development of Indonesia, today their influence continues to decrease due to their minority status. Nationally, Christians form about ten percent of the population, but regionally the percentage varies widely: ninety percent in northern Sulawesi and forty-two percent in eastern Indonesia to less than one percent in densely populated Java and Bali. It is of course in eastern Indonesia where much Reformed missionary work took place, including our own, in Irian Jaya, now called Papua. Also the mission work in Timor is in eastern Indonesia. However, in this vast country of thousands of islands, the Muslim majority is increasingly pressuring the Christian minority, which at ten percent of the population numbers about twenty-five million.

In a recent post on the Clarion Project website (not to be confused with our magazine!), Ryan Mauro, the ClarionProject.org's National Security Analyst, shared his research in an article with the title "Indonesia Destroying Churches as Islamist Influence Grows." What follows is taken from this post.

Churches are being shut down in Indonesia at a rate of 40 per year, according to an Indonesian thinktank promoting religious tolerance. . . . The information comes from Bonar Tigor Naipospos, the deputy director of the Setara Institute. He says that the actual statistic may be higher because not all churches make official reports when they are closed by the authorities. "There is a growing tendency towards intolerance among the public. There are many factors behind this such as. . . the spread of radical thoughts and the prevalence of hardline group. . . ."

The Islamists are exploiting a 2006 decree passed by the Religious Affairs Ministry and Home Affairs Ministry that places tight regulations on houses of worship. The burdensome per-

mit process is known to take five to 10 years for a church. When a church is going through the process, the Islamists pressure local government officials to deny the applications. The decree requires that houses of worship not be a source of sectarian tension and have local community approval. Signatures from 60 local households of different faiths are required, as are endorsements from several local officials. They are also required to get permission from the community's ironically named Interfaith Communication Forum. Islamists usually serve on these bodies, giving them veto power over any churches. The Islamists are also reporting churches without permits to the authorities and pressuring them to take action.

Churches that have existed decades before the 2006 decree have even been closed. Last month, the authorities closed seven Protestant churches in West Java for not having the necessary permits. Several of them were constructed before the law was made.

In some cases, the local authorities defy the orders of their superiors in order to persecute Christians. The country's Supreme Court has twice ruled in favor of a church in Bogor accused of violating local regulations but city officials keep it closed to the public.

Local Islamist hordes are known to use force to stop church construction as well. On February 17, the first stone was set down for a church in South Sumatra Province. Hundreds of Islamists with weapons took over the two acres where construction was to start.

Aceh Province is the only Indonesian province that officially has sharia governance. It has a morality police that punishes people for "deviancy" and "blasphemy. . . ." In February, Aceh Province enacted a new law requiring even nonMuslims to obey

sharia. NonMuslims that are prosecuted are not required to have their trial in a Sharia court, but supposedly “secular” courts still make their rulings according to shariabased legislation.

This means that nonMuslims can be prosecuted for adultery, alcohol consumption or wearing un-Islamic dress. The punishments are likewise based in sharia, leading to nonMuslims being potentially whipped, stoned or having their limbs severed.

The source for this persecution is Islamist doctrine.

The majority of Indonesia’s Muslims follow the Shafi’i school of Sunni Islam. It rules that Islamic states must prohibit the construction or repair of future churches and there must be no display of crosses outside churches, ringing of church bells, recitation of the Gospel aloud or public Christian celebrations. Christian houses of worship must also be smaller than nearby

mosques, and it is illegal to proselytize to Muslims. It is also illegal for nonMuslims, including Christians, to say “something impermissible about Allah” or openly declare their Christian beliefs. . . . the blasphemy laws mean that anyone convicted of proselytizing can be thrown in prison for up to five years.

Although many Christians live in the eastern parts of Indonesia where they form a larger percentage of the population and thus experience more tolerance, the current trends are not promising for these regions. Many Indonesian Muslims are migrating to Papua and Islamising the indigenous Christian Papuans wherever possible. Even West Timor, which has an overwhelmingly Christian population, is seeing a slow but persistent erosion of the dominance of Christianity. The central government also encourages Muslim migration to this island and funds the building of mosques, a funding not available to churches.

C

*Jakarta, Indonesia: colonial buildings on Kali Besar canal*



### Mr. Editor,

In the latest issues of *Clarion* (Vol 63, Nos 10-12), Dr. Visscher addresses the question, “Should Sisters Vote for Officebearers?” and “Is Voting Governing?”

There is a lot of helpful information that he passed on to us through this article. However, I do have a few concerns that I would like to address.

First, if Synod has decided against the voting of sisters in the congregations, why is Dr. Visscher again bringing this up and promoting it? Is this not using false dilemmas as a way to advocate change?

Second, he bases part of his article on the fact that “[Women] are allowed to [express their preference] when it comes to suggesting brothers who are nominated; no one bars women from speaking up at a congregational meeting when they have views about the life of the church.” In my humble opinion, I believe that in these instances as well Scripture teaches that women should remain silent, and if they have something to say or suggest, should let their husbands speak on their behalf (1 Tim 2:9-15). This is not to say that women are less than their husbands; rather this is being said to recognize that each gender has their respective place and duty before God – the man to lead as a covenantal head, and the woman to be in submission to her husband, and assisting him as best she can. Paul also recognizes the place of women and her wonderful God-given task when he expresses that “she shall be saved in childbearing” (v 15).

Third, Dr. Visscher seems to suggest that rather than seeing that God uses the church (and I believe that this is the vocal portion of the congregation) to indicate their choice for those most suitable for office, he is suggesting that the elders or the consistory chose the new elders, thus limiting the church to the consistory only.

I am afraid that there are going to be some serious problems if we open the door to women’s voting.

First, women will then be placed in a position in which they can negate the vote of their husband when they disagree with him.

Second, the Bible calls women to be keepers at home, meaning that their “realm” is the home and not the church. God has given men the duty and responsibility to be keepers over his church and women the duty to be keepers of the home, under the covenantal headship of their husbands. Yes, I do recognize that there are those women who do not have a husband, but exceptions should not make the rule, and the biblical principle still applies even with these situations. Sadly we seem to be losing this view of men and women as shown in the Scriptures.

Third, it appears to me that we are losing sight of what the vote really is. We need to remember that it is God who chooses the elders and deacons to watch over his church. Even though the means that God uses is voting, or maybe better yet the casting of the lot, God is ultimately the One who chooses the brothers and equips them for their task. With the discussion on women’s voting are we failing to see that God’s ways are higher than our ways?

My prayer is that we will do things in accordance to the whole Word of God, and not do things in order to adapt to the egalitarian culture of today. Women have a wonderful and beautiful task which they have been given; why then should they take upon themselves the responsibility of men?



Roelf Kars Janssen 

*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.*



# Is Voting Governing? A Response

In recent issues of *Clarion*, Dr. G. Visscher has written three articles on the matter of Synod Carman's decision relating to women's voting for office bearers. This submission is mainly in response to the first article that addressed the question "Is Voting Governing?" Dr. Visscher answers that question in the negative and focuses on three major, and interrelated, points:

1. By means of the vote the congregation is only advising through an expression of preference;
2. The congregation is not a decision making body (Congregationalist structure) because our Reformed church polity clearly recognizes all authority in the office bearers only;
3. Therefore, since the vote is not governing, sisters in the congregation should also be permitted to express their preferences.

This article will endeavour to show that voting is indeed a component of governing in the church, an exercise of authority. But first, full disclosure. This writer was a delegate to Synod Carman but what follows should not be interpreted as a defence or explanation of the General Synod decision regarding women's voting, but only as a firm personal conviction that the decision is solidly grounded. Additionally, Dr. Visscher and I are brothers-in-law, and the reader may think this a family feud. Not in the least. Our family gatherings are many and always positive, albeit at times with much energetic conversation.

Dr. Visscher devotes much of his article to quotations (Rev. VanOene, Synod Smithville 1980) to substantiate the position that voting is not a decision of the congregation, but only an expression of preference that a consistory with the deacons can use to make appointments. If voting is indeed a decision, Dr. Visscher maintains that would make the congregation a "fifth assembly" in the governing of the church, which would make us "Congregationalists," and that would be contrary to Scripture and confession.

Regrettably, Dr. Visscher omits the most essential quotes of all; namely Church Order Article 3 and its clear application in Consideration 3.3. Article 3 (CO) states (in part): "Those elected shall be appointed by the Consistory with the Deacons in accordance with the adopted regula-

tions." There is no choice in the matter. The results of the voting are not taken as further input to a final decision by the consistory with the deacons, but they are taken as decisive. In my experience no consistory with the deacons has ever overturned the results of voting, except if lawful objections were subsequently raised from out of the congregation (more on this later). In fact, in many congregations the brothers who are elected are appointed immediately after the vote through a quick meeting of the consistory with the deacons (not even a formal meeting) and already announced as appointed in the afternoon service if the election took place right after the morning service. Consistories do not typically have a (regular) formal meeting sometime after the election and say "OK brothers, we have had letters of nomination, we have made our own suggestions, we have prepared both a gross and a final list, we have had elections, now who do we appoint based on how we see the needs in the congregation?" No, the results of the vote are decisive and the elected brothers are appointed. The congregation is then given an opportunity for lawful objections.

General Synod Carman, in Consideration 3.3, makes clear reference to this understanding as follows: "However, it should be granted that this article (CO, Art 3 – LK) gives an indication that if the Consistory decides to call an election according to Article 3 of the Church Order, this election has a binding character and cannot be seen as advisory only. By allowing the congregation to vote, the Consistory gives the congregation influence in the process of calling brothers to the office and the Consistory shall abide by this decision of the congregation." Rev. Dr. Janssen had two extensive articles in *Clarion* on this very matter in the August 2011 issues. The results of the voting are decisive, not advisory.

The very essence of voting then, is that "I have a say" with regard to who will be in the governing body. Historically the concept of voting is "government by the people for the people." Therefore, if I have a part in determining who sits at the governing table, I have a part in governing, in "exercising authority." It is true that the consistory with the deacons determines the slate of nominees, but this is

typically done with some very clear, and limited, criteria. For example:

1. Does the brother meet the scriptural requirements as set out in 1 Timothy and Titus 1?
2. Are there health, family, educational, or work related issues that might prevent the brother from serving effectively in the office at this time?
3. If the brother has served before, was he able to perform his duties?

These criteria however, do not address all the issues that members of the congregation may consider important for the health, well-being, and spiritual direction of the congregation or of the federation. To illustrate some possible issues that may well affect whom I vote for once the list of nominees is published:

1. Is he in favour of, or against, women's voting?
2. What are his views with respect to children's participation in the worship services?
3. Is he a promoter of evangelism and outreach, or given to "keep things as they are"?
4. Does he connect well with the youth? With the elderly?

By my vote therefore, I participate in deciding who sits at the table and makes decisions such as the ones above (or that result from positions taken with respect to the sample issues above), and thereby I am part of the governing.

A very clear illustration of the above is that we are all happier when the Prime Minister of Canada or the President of the USA appoints conservative-leaning judges to the Supreme Court because we anticipate decisions more in keeping with our scriptural beliefs. Neither the Prime Minister nor the President actually makes the legal rulings that result from such appointments, yet there is no doubt that each of them will clearly have affected the outcome of such rulings.

From the foregoing it becomes apparent that it is incorrect for Dr. Visscher to contend that the consistory with the deacons exercises the full governing function simply by putting out a list of qualified nominees who are "faithful and suitable brothers that it will gladly appoint" (p 252). It is not the determination of who is qualified that is at issue here, but it is the final determination of who actually gets into office that is relevant with respect to governing. The voting members of the congregation make that final decision, and this is because of Article 3 (CO) and because (Dr. Visscher's words) "the consistory promised to do that." Yes, promised to abide by the voting members' *decision*. The matter of qualifications is simply preliminary, but far from final.

Interestingly in Dr. Visscher's second *Clarion* article he writes "In voting, a consistory simply asks each person for his/her preference and *obligates* itself to appoint accordingly" (p 275, emphasis mine). This "obligates" is even stronger language than his phrases "The consistory prom-

ised" and "We will gladly appoint the ones you choose" (p 252). Dr. Visscher's choice of words clearly, and correctly (ad Art 3 CO) indicates that the vote is decisive, is an "exercise of authority," and cannot simply be relegated to an expression of preference that the consistory will keep in mind. Dealing with a matter of "preference" is markedly different from dealing with a matter of "obligation."

Does this now imply that we are Congregationalists? Has the GS "regrettably veered off in a direction that contradicts the federation's foundational Reformed principles" (Dr. Visscher, p 253)? This is a totally false dilemma. The consistory with the deacons sets the rules and regulations for the voting. It may set rules that it deems appropriate, provided that the rules do not contravene Scripture (e.g., women are not to rule in the church) or the Church Order (e.g., Article 3). It may decide that a majority is required, or that those are elected who receive the most votes. It may decide that blank ballots count or do not count. Etc. The point is that the consistory with the deacons establishes the rules and regulations and it can change them as it deems necessary. By allowing for a vote, the consistory is in essence deciding to extend the decision-making function, for purposes of appointing office bearers, to those who are permitted to vote. The consistory delegates the final decision. This is not unusual in the life of the churches as the following two examples illustrate:

1. Calling of a minister: The consistory may be convinced that it would be good to call Reverend XX to fill a vacancy but first seeks the approbation of the congregation. In this instance the voting members of the congregation make the decision.
2. Church expansion: The consistory may determine that it would be best to build a new church but decides that it will not proceed unless at least x percent of the congregation is in favour. The consistory sets the rules and extends the final decision to the voting members of the congregation.

Dr. Visscher uses as his example the kindly grandfather who offers to buy his grandchildren an ice cream cone. If this illustration is meant to parallel the voting for office bearers, it is seriously flawed. Yes, the grandfather decides to buy ice cream for the grandchildren (the consistory with the deacons decides that there will be voting for office bearers); the children can choose from a display having all the available flavours (the congregation can choose from a consistory-determined list of nominees); the grandfather buys *exactly* what the children select (the consistory appoints exactly those who were elected). Dr. Visscher cannot interject a grandfatherly choice here because the consistory has no choice in whom to appoint. So, if the illustration is to be appropriately parallel we need to say the grandfather made the decision to buy, but what ultimately was bought was decided by the children. The grandfather does not just

“keep their preferences in mind” (just as the consistory does not just keep the voting preferences in mind), but he abides by their preferences completely. Article 3 (CO) was missed in Dr. Visscher’s quotations at the beginning of his article, and its stipulation is entirely overlooked in developing the grandfatherly illustration.

But then, what about letters of nomination and letters of lawful objection? These can be submitted by sisters in the congregation, yet these sisters cannot vote? Right, because such letters are “information only” for the consistory with the deacons, and they are in no way decisive. Even non-communicant members, regardless of age, can submit such letters. The consistory receives these letters and acts on them as it sees necessary solely at its own discretion: in the one instance it may or may not add the nominations to the gross and/or final list; in the other instance it may investigate the alleged lawful objection and determine to maintain or rescind the appointment. But the decision is totally within the consistory, whereas the results of the voting for office bearers are decisive in themselves.

Dr. Visscher also writes “. . .for if it becomes evident (as it sometimes does) that a certain brother has done something that actually disqualifies him from office, the consistory can refuse to appoint him and reconsider the matter” (p 252). This sentence is somewhat unclear. If the disqualifying deed becomes apparent before the election, the consistory is obliged to delay the election and to present a revised list of qualified nominees at a later date. If the disqualifying deed becomes apparent after the election, then it becomes a matter of a lawful objection.

Therefore, voting is a part of governing, an exercise of authority in the congregation, because the outcome is decisive. And since voting is an exercise of authority the sisters may not participate according to the stipulations of 1 Timothy 2:12. This is the most essential point made by GS Carman, and the other considerations, though relevant, are secondary.

Finally, a few remarks concerning Dr. Visscher’s third article which has a decidedly different slant because its focus is: “Synod Carman has gone off in a direction that is less than Reformed” (p 302). This statement is a serious accusation.

In order to keep this submission within limits, I will avoid copying quotes (unless necessary) but encourage the reader to read the relevant paragraphs carefully (page 302), and then also to read the *Acts of General Synod 2010*, Article 175, Observation 2.12. On that basis, the following remarks:

First, GS Carman used, as one supporting argument for male only participation in voting, the statement that since this matter of voting was contentious “it is desirable that a decision of a synod has broad support in the churches.” Therefore the overwhelming preference communicated in the letters was referenced, and is this not “edifying to the churches”? The letters were not decisive nor were they treated as votes; rather, they served as an indication of preference in GS Carman’s deliberations. In this regard, the considerations set out by GS Cloverdale 1983 (page 118) are especially pertinent.

Second, GS Carman stating that women’s voting is indeed a matter for the churches in common is not simply an assumption flowing from this having been said so often over many years and many synods. A complete reading of Consideration 3.2, and indeed of all the Acts of general synods that have dealt with the women’s voting issue, will give the reader a clear indication that this matter of the commonality of the issue has been vigorously and thoroughly stated and defended time and time again, in consideration after consideration. It is not an “odd line of reasoning” (Reference *Acts GS Smithers*, 2007, p 96).

Lastly, Dr. Visscher points to another alleged “odd line of reasoning” by GS Carman: Consideration 3.7 (p 303). He contends that if GS Carman accepts that the issue of women’s voting is a matter for the churches in common, “then according to our own church polity, it belongs at the broadest major assembly – general synod” according to Article 30 (CO) (p 303). Therefore, according to Dr. Visscher, when GS Carman says any further discussion on this matter should first follow the ecclesiastical way via classis and regional synod, we are witnessing a significant shift in church polity. This seems to be further evidence of being neither scriptural nor Reformed (p 304).

Not at all. GS Carman was (again) complying with the considerations and decisions of previous synods. The decision of GS Burlington 2010 in Article 62 clearly shows that GS Carman is in full compliance with our church polity on that matter: let further discussion on the women’s voting issue first be tested, evaluated, and filtered via the ecclesiastical assemblies.

Dr. Visscher’s criticisms of being unscriptural and unreformed are not warranted.

*Respectfully submitted,*

*Leo Kampen* 

*From time to time Clarion will publish longer responses to articles received.*

*The decision as to which responses to publish will rest with the Editor.*





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# Q

Is cremation an option vs. burial for us?

We take our norms from Scripture which is burial.

The Apostles Creed makes mention that Christ was buried.

A friend that I went to Young Peoples with was cremated and this was something that gave me a real chill; was this decision he made correct before the Lord?

# A

There is no explicit command from God to bury the dead, not in the OT either, even though burning the dead has been a long-standing practice in 1000 B.C. and earlier. Cremation as the practice of burning the corpse in an oven to the form of ashes dates back to the nineteenth century. When Christianity entered the Roman Empire and spread throughout the countries around the Mediterranean Sea, the burning of corpses was banned and by the fifth century had disappeared. Burning did occur in Christianized countries only as punitive measure with people who had been in conflict with the church (e.g. John Hus, Savonarola), as they did with witches. In the nineteenth century the practice of cremation was addressed by one of the well-known Grimm brothers, while in Italy cremation was introduced for reason of hygiene and economy, as well as a weapon of materialism to oppose the Roman Catholic teachings about the spirit, soul, and body of man. In 1874 Abraham Kuyper strongly opposed the practice of cremation in a series of articles. In the twentieth century, however, the position concerning cremation has changed among Christians, including those of the Reformed persuasion.

In the Bible the overriding practice is the one of burying the dead. In Old and New Testament we see God's people pay close and careful attention to the burial of their loved ones. God himself buried Moses, we read in Deuteronomy 34:6. From the stories about John the Baptist, the young man in Nain, Lazarus, and Stephen, we see that by burying them God's people honoured their dead. Also surrounding the death and burial of the Lord Jesus we see the same love and care expressed in various ways (by Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, the women). The Lord Jesus praises Mary in her anointing him in preparation for his burial. Following Jesus' burial and resurrection, the Apostle Paul links and emphasizes the burial *and resurrection* of those who die in the Lord (Rom 6:4; Col 2:12;

1 Cor 15). In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul highlights the symbolic meaning of burying in the comparison with the sowing of a seed: "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. . . . So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body" (36, 42-44).

The Scriptures also speak about the *burning* of the body; however, not in a positive way as regarding burial but in terms of punishment, shame (Gen 38:24; Lev 20:14; Lev 21:9). The burning depicts the total annihilation of the one who is punished (Josh 7:15; 1 Kgs 13:2; 2 Kgs 23:16). Although there may have been different reasons for the burning of the bodies of Saul and his sons (whose ashes were buried nonetheless, 1 Sam 3:13; 2 Sam 2:5; 2 Sam 21:13), the ultimate burial of their remains shows the same preference, honour, love, and care as in other examples of burial. Hence, even though the Bible is not *prescriptive* concerning burial (there is no explicit command), the scriptural and *descriptive* evidence as well as the added symbolism and significance of burial in the NT, shows us that burial is a *testimony* of our faith in Christ's resurrection and in *our* blessed resurrection. As Dr. C. Van Dam put it so well (*Clarion*, Vol. 63, No. 7, p. 172), "We sow the body in quiet triumph. We do not cremate or burn it. A practice like cremation does not testify of the hope that is in us. We do not seek the destruction of the body, but we sow it for the day of harvest, the day of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:42-44)!"

*Is there something you've been wanting to know?  
An answer you've been looking for?*

### **Ask us a question!**

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### ***Creature of the Word: The Jesus-Centered Church* Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2012**

#### ***Ecclesiology of the New Calvinism***

I recently finished reading a book entitled *Creature of the Word: The Jesus-Centered Church* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2012). Authored by Matt Chandler, Josh Patterson, and Eric Geiger, this book could be considered a popular introduction to ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church). The authors are associated with New Calvinism (a.k.a. Young, Restless, and Reformed) and even might want to describe themselves as being “Reformed.”

There are many good things to say about this book. Chief among them would be the way in which the authors argue that biblical churches need to be focused on the Saviour in every aspect of their existence. The authors have a high view of Scripture and that leads them to see rightly many aspects of the doctrine of the church. For example, they argue for the centrality of preaching and the necessity of biblical church discipline. As I was reading *Creature of the Word*, there were several times where I had to stop and share with my Facebook friends some of its excellent insights.

And yet this book also highlighted for me some significant differences between confessionally Reformed churches and much of the New Calvinism. While there are many things we can appreciate about this movement, there are also points of departure. They call themselves Calvinists, and in terms of the doctrine of salvation they are. However, I’m quite confident that Calvin would not want his name associated with this book. Let me highlight the main problems under three headings.

#### ***The beginning of the church***

In the first chapter of the book, the authors make a distinction between Israel and the church. They write, “In Acts 2, the Word of God formed a people yet again” (14). Shortly thereafter, they write, “God spoke to Abraham and created Israel; and in the same way, God created the Church through the proclaimed gospel of the revealed Word, Jesus Christ” (15). In case there should be any doubt, consider this question they ask, “What makes

the Church able to succeed where the Israelites so often failed?” (16) It is quite evident that the authors take an approach where Israel and the church are considered as separate entities. With this view, the church only comes into existence in the New Testament era. This is a common view, influenced by dispensationalism, but it is not the Reformed view of the church.

The Reformed view can be found in this line from Article 27 of the Belgic Confession: “This church has existed from the beginning of the world and will be to the end, for Christ is an eternal king who cannot be without subjects.” This is a fine piece of logical argument and it likely came into the Belgic Confession via the influence of John Calvin. He mentions the same argument in one of his sermons on the ascension of Christ. The argument is simple and biblical:

*Premise one:* Christ is an eternal king

*Premise two:* By definition, a king needs to have subjects

*Conclusion:* Christ the king has always had subjects.

Those subjects are those whom he has gathered into his church.

This view is not only found in Calvin and the Belgic Confession. It’s also in the Heidelberg Catechism. In Answer 54, Reformed believers confess that “the Son of God, out of the whole human race, *from the beginning of the world to its end*, gathers, defends and preserves for himself, by his Spirit and Word, in the unity of the true faith, a church chosen to everlasting life.” The church begins in Genesis, not in Acts. This has always been the position of Reformed churches. The position of Chandler et al. actually has more in common with Anabaptism than historic Calvinism. I should point out, however, that there are many New Calvinists who would share my critique of the authors of this book on this particular point.

#### ***The membership of the church***

The vast majority of the New Calvinists are Baptists. Even though they don’t use the word “Baptist” in the name of their church, these New Calvinists adopt a

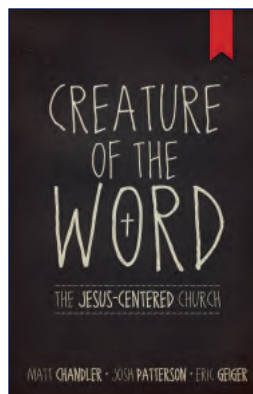
Baptist perspective when it comes to the membership of the church. *Creature of the Word* reflects that same perspective. The membership of the church is made up of baptized believers only. The children of believers are not included. Now interestingly, *Creature of the Word* does have a chapter on ministry to children and there are many good things written there. The authors emphasize how “moral training” should not be the goal or *modus operandi* of church ministry to children. Instead, the focus needs to be on the gospel. That’s an excellent emphasis. However, it could be sharpened dramatically if the children are regarded as covenant children, members of the church. Then the children can be addressed on the basis of their *already existing* covenant relationship to God and urged to the way of life within that relationship.

Certainly, it has always been the position of confessionally Reformed churches that all the children of believers are real members of the church. In Answer 74 of the Heidelberg Catechism we confess, “Infants as well as adults belong to God’s covenant and congregation.” Calvin wrote in the *Institutes* (4.16.5), “But if the covenant still remains firm and steadfast, it applies no less today to the children of Christians than under the Old Testament it pertained to the infants of the Jews.” Though the New Calvinists might want to take the name of Calvin, Calvin himself would strongly disavow any effort to exclude children from the membership of the church.

## The worship of the church

*Creature of the Word* has an entire chapter about worship. Again, many good and true things are said in this chapter. Things like this:

A church worshipping as a Creature of the Word doesn’t show up to perform or be entertained; she comes desperate and needy, thirsty for grace, receiving from the Lord and the body of Christ, and then gratefully receiving what she needs as she offers her praise – the only proper response to the God who saves us. (42)



However, there is also something deeply ironic here. While the book is entitled *Creature of the Word*, there is nothing in this chapter about how or whether the Word directs our worship. Early in chapter two, the authors discuss the first commandment and the fact that we are commanded to worship God, but they entirely miss the second commandment, the one about how we are to worship God. This is more typical of broader American evangelicalism than it is of Calvinism, of the confessionally Reformed faith.

Listen to what the Heidelberg Catechism says about how we are to worship in Answer 96: “We are not to make an image of God in any way, nor to worship him in any other manner than he has commanded in his Word.” The Creature of the Word must abide by the Word alone in her worship! We call this the regulative principle of worship and it is a mainstay of Reformed liturgical teaching. It is sometimes mistakenly rooted in the teachings of John Knox and the Puritans. The reality is that Knox (from whom it passed to the Puritans) learned it in Geneva from Calvin. In Article 17 of his Confession in Name of the Reformed Churches of France, Calvin wrote: “. . . If we would render a well regulated and acceptable sacrifice, we hold that it is not for us to invent what to us seems good, or to follow what may have been devised in the brains of other men, but to confine ourselves simply to the purity of Scripture.” This is absolutely foundational for a Reformed approach to worship.

## Conclusion

I liked many things about this book. It’s a fresh, helpful, and often biblical approach to the doctrine of the church. There are many things that a confessionally Reformed reader can appreciate and I wish I could recommend it wholesale. However, no one should think that this is fully representative of the biblical Reformed faith as handed down by the Reformation. There are some commonalities, but there are also significant differences and departures. While we can learn from some of the good emphases in *Creature of the Word*, we can also urge the authors to more carefully study the heritage of the Reformation and search the Scriptures with a Berean attitude to see whether Calvin and the Reformed confessions have perhaps been too easily dismissed on some of the important points mentioned above.

