



Clarion

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THE CHURCH IS
A WORK IN PROGRESS



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A Letter to Jamie

*The Lord God has arranged each of us in
 his church according to his design*

Dear Jamie,

I hope this letter finds you well. It's been a little while since we've spoken face-to-face and I thought it might be good to write you about the weighty things on your mind. You've been talking about withdrawing your church membership and, as your pastor, I am naturally very concerned. You are part of this body of Christ, a member of our church family, and neither I nor any of the congregation wants to see you go. As your brothers and sisters in the Lord, we do love you and care about your well-being.

I'm glad to hear you say that our church is not teaching anything unbiblical. As I understand it, the problem for you is that you find certain things lacking in what we do as church and so you are considering worshipping somewhere else. I know you'll agree with me that as Christians we ought to do everything according to God's Word. Are you willing to examine your motives and actions in the light of Scripture? Please, take a walk with me through the issues with the Bible as our guide.

Not enough evangelism

Jamie, you've mentioned to me three reasons for wanting to leave. The first is that our church doesn't do enough evangelism while other churches do a lot more. We're okay at foreign mission, you say, but have too little home mission to speak of. Some community churches you know constantly draw new people in and get them involved right away in Bible study and outreach. Everybody is expected to fully participate. You like that and think it's good. So do I. I would love it if our members filled the Bible study groups and spoke freely about the gospel with all their neighbours! I would love it if more were invited to church and if more were willing to come!

More importantly, the Bible calls us to shine our light in this dark world (Matt 5:16) and the Lord Jesus has commanded the church to "go out and make disciples of all men" (Matt 28:19). The church, and all the members of it, are to collectively be "fishers of men" (Matt 4:19), so your

eagerness to share the gospel with others – and have the church do the same – is good. But let me ask you: does it help our congregation to improve in this area if you leave? And even more to the point: does God in Scripture give you the right to simply walk away from your local church when something is less than it should be?

It's important to remember that the church, just like every individual Christian, is a work in progress. The church is made up of imperfect, sinful people. Please don't misunderstand – I'm not trying to make excuses. Where we fall short, we must make changes. Where we are not promoting the gospel in our communities to the best of our ability, we need to correct that. Where we are sinning, we must repent. That is true for me personally, for the congregation, and also for you – and yet we may not walk away from each other!

Don't forget that the Lord God has arranged each of us in his church according to his design. 1 Corinthians 12:18 says plainly that "God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be." Paul explains in verse 27 that the "body" he refers to is the local church in Corinth! This means that you and I are members in this *local church* because God put us here. It is not an accidental or haphazard arrangement but a God-given placement and responsibility. For that reason, we can't abandon our fellow members! We can't just leave our family simply because they're not doing a good enough job!

Think of it from my perspective as a minister. If I found something lacking in a church member, even frustrating, would it be right for me as pastor to say, "I'm going to quit working with this person and work with someone who has it 'together'?" If I had to speak to you about a shortcoming in your life but after two years didn't see any progress, would you find it Christ-like of me to just give up and walk away? Every week I preach to a congregation of sinners (myself included), exhorting church members to trust more fully in the Lord and live more godly lives and yet it sometimes seems as if change will never come.

Would the Good Shepherd say to me: "It's okay now. Just leave off your work and find another church where things are changing for the better"? That is not in the character of our Saviour who died for us while we were still enemies (Rom 5:10) and so it may not be in our character either as his people!

Jamie, please ponder what God calls us to do with fellow church members in Ephesians 4:2, "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." You are frustrated. You want action. I can understand that and I am willing to continue to work with you to improve our evangelism efforts. Yet are you loving the church in the same manner as Christ does? Is it not Christ-like to stay for the long-haul and work on solutions? Don't forget, others also have to bear up in love with your weaknesses.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE...

Issue 12 begins with an editorial from Rev. Peter Holtvliwer written in the style of a letter. The missive is from a pastor to a young congregation member who is considering withdrawal of membership.

We conclude our three-part series by Prof. Bruce P. Baugus, "An Orientation to China's Reforming Churches." In this section Prof. Baugus focuses on the church's mission to both share the good news and establish a well-ordered church in China. This series is reprinted with permission from the blog *Reformation 21*.

Treasures New and Old appears as usual in Issue 12. We also have the Roadside Assistance column, a book review, and a Canticle. And from a *Clarion* reader comes an article on being a single member in the church.

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Not very welcoming

A second reason you've mentioned is that you don't find us as a church very welcoming or outgoing to visitors. This relates to the first reason, for when strangers come in, we can be kind of cold and distant. By contrast, certain churches you know are super-welcoming and go out of their way to make sure a guest doesn't go unnoticed or unappreciated, and that attracts you. I can certainly see why. And to those churches who show that kind of welcoming spirit I can only say, "Bravo!" I'd love it if our congregation could do the same and I try to encourage it in the preaching whenever I can!

The Bible certainly calls Christians to be hospitable. In fact, church leaders like elders are to be known for this quality (1 Tim 3:8). And the whole church is to be characterized by it as Paul writes, "Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality" (Rom 12:13). Already in the Old Testament God commanded his people to take care of foreigners in their midst (Deut 26:11ff). And the New Testament church is to continue in the same vein as Hebrews 13:2 spells out, "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it."

So you are quite right that we should be a warm, friendly, and welcoming church – but again, will your leaving help change that? And, to be fair, can you see that you are part of the problem? When you accuse our congregation of not being welcoming, you accuse yourself, too, as part of it. Would it not be much better to start working on change by showing a good example? Would the Lord Jesus commend you for leaving one of his churches which struggles with hospitality? Rather, you and I have a calling to stimulate our church family to do better, so please stay and help!

Better music

The third reason you've talked about is the great music they have in other churches. Some of our Genevan tunes are okay, you say, but you like their praise songs and contemporary hymns. They are so upbeat and help lift up your spirit. When you've suggested singing these kinds of songs, people give you funny looks. And the elders tell you it's not permissible because of what we've agreed to in the Church Order.

Now, I admit it's quite plain that different people will have different tastes in music. And there is no doubt that some tunes will be more to our liking than others – but that will be the case in any church we attend. No matter the hymn book or psalter, no matter the selection of contemporary praise songs, you, I, and everyone will always have our preferences. That holds true for the tunes as well as the lyrics. But is it a solid, biblical reason to leave a faithful church of the Lord? Will our heavenly Father rejoice that we've cut ties with one of his churches because we don't care for the tunes?

There's another, more pressing issue: for whom do we sing? For whom is the music? While we church members certainly are affected by it and are to be edified by it (Eph 5:19), isn't it true that God commands us to sing and make music for *his glory*? The Psalms everywhere speak of this purpose. Think of the well-known Psalm 100:1, "Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs" or Psalm 113:1, 2, "Praise the LORD. Praise, O servants of the LORD, praise the name of the LORD. Let the name of the LORD be praised, both now and forevermore!" Don't forget the famous Psalm 150 which is a standing call to praise the LORD with all our musical efforts!

So when it comes to our view of music and singing in church, the first question we need to ask ourselves is this: am I focused first and foremost on the glory of the LORD or my own spiritual happiness? Again, please don't misunderstand me. Church music and singing is meant to also lift up our spirits and bring encouragement and comfort to our souls, but only as we direct all praise and honour to our God! The lyrics direct our attention to God's Person and his work of salvation and from that we derive tremendous consolation and strength.

And what better way can we glorify God than to take the songs he has given us, the 150 Psalms, and sing them back to him in praise? This is what the Lord Jesus himself did (Mark 14:26) and what Paul commands in Ephesians 5:19, "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." This doesn't exclude the singing of hymns carefully based on the Bible's teaching but it certainly is a command to sing those 150 Psalms, which is something – by God's gracious providence – we are able to do in our church federation.

I am not saying the music in other churches is all bad – not at all! But I am saying that the music and song in our church most certainly strives to glorify God. It's true, the Genevan tunes are not the only valid tunes to sing the Psalms to, but they are well-suited to highlight the majesty and honour of God. With a little effort they can be sung by anyone (think of how the kids easily learn them in school). And – let's be honest – what other church in the community is singing the Psalms of David? Isn't Psalm-singing a true gift of God which he has allowed us in our congregations?

Jamie, this letter has become long enough. I hope it comes across in a spirit of Christian love, for that is how I intend it. Please reflect on these things carefully with Scripture in hand. Pray for wisdom and grace to do what pleases him. Feel free to contact me anytime and please know that I will be praying for you too. Your pastor and brother in Christ. . . .





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Longing for Home

***"I will set out and go back to my father and say to him:
'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.'"***

(Luke 15:18)

After the younger brother quickly squandered his wealth in wild living in a distant land, there was a severe famine in the whole country. He finds work on a pig farm that, from a Jewish perspective, is offensive since they are unclean animals. In desperation he even longs to eat the food given to the pigs, but no one gives him anything.

Finally he comes to his senses when he says, "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!" (v. 17). He begins to long for home when he remembers the situation in his father's house.

God created mankind with a need for rest that can only be found in him. When people do not have rest in God, they become restless. Augustine, an important early church father, prayed, "O Lord, you made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." Augustine recalled how he spent his youth in wild living and experienced great restlessness during that period of his life. He did not experience rest until he turned to the Lord in faith, and discovered wonderful peace with God. Then he learned, "Our heart is restless until it rests in the Lord."

The younger brother became restless in that distant land, so he longs to return home and enjoy the rest he remembers. With this parable Jesus explains to the Jewish leaders

why the tax collectors and sinners were coming to him. A life of sin does not give peace, but it only leads to a feeling of terrible emptiness. There is no joy in being a rich tax collector, hated by others. There is no security in a life of prostitution, and no stability in adultery. Neither was there any way for these sinners to be accepted back into Israel, for they were despised and rejected.

But they noticed something different about the preaching of Jesus, for he showed that he really cared about them. He took compassion on their situation and held out hope for them by revealing that he came to open a place for them in his Father's home. They flocked to the Lord Jesus because he proclaimed to them the grace of God. This parable reveals God's grace when the younger brother repents and says he will go back to his father: "I will say to him, 'I have sinned and therefore I am no longer worthy to be called your son, just make me one of your hired men.'" When he returns home, his father already sees him in the distance, and immediately runs to his son, throws his arms around him, and kisses him.

Before his son even uttered one word, the father had already accepted him. He says, "My son who was lost has been found." The father freely accepted him, not because he was worthy, but the father took him

back out of grace. The son had longed for his home, and the father now accepts him again as his son with open arms. Our salvation does not depend on whether we are worthy or deserving, but the Father in heaven accepts all those who come to him in faith.

Many who have left the church in disobedience find it difficult to return, for they feel they will not be accepted. We can make it difficult for people to return to the church because of our attitude. With the attitude of the older brother, we can convey the message, "What are you doing here?" We can act like the Pharisees who did not make it easy for sinners to come back to the LORD's ways.

So what do we do about those who have left the church? Do you pray for them? Do you ever follow up with them and encourage them to return and experience God's grace? After many years, there may be a longing in the hearts of many to return to the Father's home but they are afraid to do so.

It is important that they know there will be great joy when those who are lost are found. Christ reveals how the Father rejoices whenever one of his lost ones returns, and that he will accept them back with open arms. If the Father rejoices at the return of the lost, then we too, must rejoice when the lost return to him.



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An Orientation to China's Reforming Churches

The Chinese Context (Part 3 of 3)

This three-part series is reprinted with permission from the blog Reformation 21. Reformation Heritage Books plans to release a lengthier publication of this topic, set for Spring 2014.

The need for church development, so acute in China, exists wherever the gospel is bearing fruit. Indeed, the proper goal of the church's mission is not just to announce the good news to those who have not heard or to call unbelievers to faith and repentance; the church's mission has always included establishing a well-ordered church in every land for the welfare of God's people and perpetuation of the ministry.

A well-ordered church is a church ordered by Scripture. Such a church is not an isolated, autonomous gathering of individual believers but a disciplined body before God, under the watchful care and ministerial oversight of a plurality of ordained elders, connected to other like bodies throughout the region (and beyond), worshipping God in spirit and in truth and carrying out the work of the ministry centred around the core devotions of Word, sacraments, and prayer, in fellowship together. In other words, the church of Scripture – the visible church Christ is building on earth until he returns – has a particular nature and shape to it: it is an organism with an institutional structure set by God.

Jesus Christ, in whom all authority in heaven and on earth resides, is the head of this institution, which has been entrusted with the ministry of Word and sacraments in order to make disciples of all nations, gathering in and building up God's elect wherever they are found throughout the world. So, the visible church not only has a particular institutional shape, but a unique role to play in God's redemptive program. This role is so vital to that program that outside the visible church "there is no ordinary possibility of salvation."¹ In other words, by God's

own design, the life and health of the body of Christ and household of God is provided for and sustained through the well-ordered institution of the church.²

Presbyterianism, with Chinese characteristics

The point here is this: the institutional form of the church outlined in Scripture and tersely described above is presbyterian. Particular Presbyterian and Reformed churches have developed highly refined polities applying the basic principles of presbyterianism to the circumstances of their respective bodies and cultural contexts. No doubt, in time, Chinese Presbyterian or Reformed churches will do likewise – they already are. Just how presbyterianism will be expressed within the quickly-evolving circumstances of mainland China is not clear, and is for our Chinese brothers to determine "by the light of nature, and Christian prudence."³ By presbyterianism I only refer to "the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed,"⁴ as they relate to the proper order of Christ's church and thus church development, and not to any particular, existing denomination – hence the lower-case "p."

Under this qualification, the need for church development in China, then, is a need in large part for the development of a healthy and robust presbyterianism.⁵ As such, this need must be addressed through a deepening understanding of the biblical theology of the church as articulated within the Reformed tradition. Encouragingly, an increasing number of Chinese ministry leaders are turning to the resources of Reformed theology as they face the need for better order and further church development. A church ordered by Scripture is a church capable, by the grace and power of God, of guarding the faith, maintaining the peace and purity of the body while

realizing its unity and catholicity, and building up its members to carry on the work of the ministry. Somewhat surprising, then, is what little attention church development has received in the mission to China.

Presbyterianism and the mission to China

Historically, Presbyterians have almost always attempted to establish a biblically-ordered, presbyterian-type church wherever they have laboured, and China was no exception in the pre-Mao era. Yet, since its reopening in the 1980s, the mission to China has, until recently, been a notable exception. There are several reasons for this.

First, and most obvious, China is officially a closed country and missionaries have laboured under severe restrictions. Although an opening exists for personal evangelism, which is legal under certain conditions, foreign religious workers are rarely granted visas. Consequently, much of the mission to China has focused on placing Christians in the country to do the sort of things they would do anywhere, encouraging them to witness as opportunities arise. That many foreign English teachers in China, for example, are Christians eager to evangelize to their Chinese neighbours on the side is no secret. Chinese authorities are often eager to promote knowledge of English for economic purposes and many Christians are more than willing to do the job. The practice is well known and widely tolerated.

A consequence of this practice for the mission to China is a foreign Christian presence dominated by young, adventurous, short-term workers with little to no training in church development or even pastoral experience and no access to the Chinese church. (Foreign passport holders are restricted to worshiping in churches exclusively for foreigners.) There are relatively very few ordained ministers on the ground and most mission agencies strongly discourage or even forbid their workers from seeking contact with unregistered congregations or developing close working relationships with local Christians. This is done for at least two reasons: to protect their access to China by not running afoul of government strictures and out of concern for the security of Chinese believers, contact with foreigners being just the sort of thing that still tends to attract unwanted attention from the authorities.

Intimately related, a second reason for the general neglect of church development in the current mission to China is that Chinese believers have not enjoyed a wide

liberty to assemble and organize along biblical lines. TSPM congregations are permitted to exercise rights of assembly and association, and have been given some room to negotiate polity under the auspices of the China Christian Council (CCC), but unregistered churches do not enjoy these advantages. This has not, however, prevented them from multiplying rapidly and forming networks with meaningful connections, appearing and functioning more and more like full-blown, Western-style denominations. Still, church development among the unregistered congregations has been limited and remains a delicate matter throughout China. Even where unregistered churches are openly tolerated, forming connections between churches, assembling councils of church leaders, operating schools for training ministers, and other similar activities are frequently not tolerated and often harried by a paranoid state when attempted. Yet the work of the ministry must go on and so also the institutional development of the church along biblical lines, and such development is occurring and will continue to do so despite the challenges.

The church's mission has always included establishing a well-ordered church in every land for the welfare of God's people and perpetuation of the ministry

This brings us to a third reason church development has been much neglected in the post-Mao mission to China: the significant influence of post-war American evangelicalism. While the remarkable accomplishments of evangelical missionaries ought not to be overlooked, on the one point in view here – the lack of attention to church development in the mission to China – some friendly criticism is in order. Highly individualistic and pragmatic, American evangelicals (and Pentecostals) tend to have a low view of the church and lack the biblical, theological, and historical perspective needed to appreciate her crucial role in God's redemptive program. It is not surprising, then, that American evangelicalism frequently suffers from a low esteem for and lack of confidence in the ordinary means of grace God has appointed for the work of the ministry.

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The consequences are numerous. Defining the mission of the church without reference to the church's role in God's redemptive program, evangelicals have at times operated with a missiology focused almost exclusively on evangelistic activism – a kind of counting coup approach to missions. Though many evangelical groups have come to see the need for what they term “follow-up” or “discipleship,” they have not always focused on developing the church to this end. Or, sometimes when they do pay attention to the need for church development, it is only to serve these narrowly defined pragmatic ends, leading to relatively light, flimsy, storm-tossed congregations ill-prepared to defend the faith, maintain the ministry, or sustain the ongoing mission into the next generation. Meanwhile, evangelism and other aspects of the church's mission are carried on in the a-ecclesiological contexts of various parachurch organizations. Finally, even among those evangelical groups that do acknowledge the desirability of engaging in some measure of church development, this work sometimes has such a low priority that when it proves costly and difficult, as it inevitably does, it is readily laid aside as a kind of luxury we can get along without rather than being indispensable to Christ's redemptive work on earth and the mission he has given his people.

An increasing number of Chinese ministry leaders are turning to the resources of Reformed theology as they face the need for better order and further church development

Again, it is not surprising that Chinese ministry leaders are turning to the resources of Reformed theology and Presbyterian polity in their vital work of founding sustainable institutions to serve the needs of tens of millions of Chinese believers. Here they find a much stouter evangelical tradition with an ecclesiology grounded in Scripture and built to last; and they are encouraged to find that God speaks to the kinds of challenges and problems they are facing in their pastoral ministries. God is not indifferent about these matters and has not left his people fumbling around in the dark about how the church should be ordered and go about the work of the ministry.

The fourth reason for the underdevelopment of the contemporary church in China is perhaps the most important – and certainly the most encouraging: the rate of numerical growth has effectively outstripped the development of the church at almost every level except the often hasty formation of congregations. These congregations come in many shapes and sizes. Often they are thrown together as loose associations of believers and function more like a campus ministry or men's or women's fellowship group might in America. A common claim is that in China the two-year old Christian teaches the one-year old Christian. That is becoming less common over time, but many of today's house church leaders more or less stumbled into this circumstance in just such a way.

Conversely, some veteran church leaders have spent time in prison or been tortured for their faith. Not long ago, such experiences were nearly viewed as qualifications for leadership positions. More to the point, more and more congregations have trained ministers, spiritually mature lay officers, and regular administration of the sacraments. A few even maintain active membership rolls and practice church discipline, though this remains relatively rare. And, as already noted, extensive networks of house churches are widespread. Yet the majority of believers are first generation Christians and the situation is vastly different from places where the church has been long established and is well served by numerous institutions and resources firmly in place.

Cultural Christianity, Chinese style

Not all the current interest in Reformed theology is driven by the practical demands of pastoral ministry and church development, however; there is another distinct and perhaps complicating driver. Some of China's cultural elite believe they have found, in Reformed Christianity, a resource not just to support healthy church development but for reconstructing China's culture.

Maoism is dead. Most Chinese know this but no official dares admit it in so many words and some citizens still do not want to accept it. The problem runs much deeper than the awkwardness of the ruling party admitting it long-ago traded its name-sake ideology for pragmatism. Chinese society, from top to bottom, is founded on materialistic principles that have proved culturally

bankrupt. Capitalism is quite compatible with materialism, so for all the outward changes the shift in economic policy has generated, the deeper and more threatening issues to China's society remain unaddressed. Wealth has perhaps delayed a cultural crisis a few decades, but many believe one is nonetheless on its way as the latest form of materialism exhausts itself.

What can replace materialism and stave off the coming cultural collapse? Different answers are proposed from different quarters, but one proposal that attracts an astonishing amount of support is Christianity, and among those advocating this answer most vigorously are a number of university professors, lawyers, writers, journalists, and the like, who advocate a distinctively Reformed brand of Christianity. Even as elite society in the West has largely turned against Christianity, especially in its Reformed strands, at least some elite society in China is embracing it. "In China now," as one commenter put it, "this kind of Christianity is seen as forward-looking, rational, [and] intellectually serious."⁶

Reformed theology is being embraced throughout China

What will become of this phenomenon is unclear. It is not even clear that all those advocating the Christian option are themselves believers.

Even some non-Christians are raising the question: "What can Christianity do for China?" Reflection on this question has given rise to the "Cultural Christian," who may not participate in the life of the church but is otherwise sympathetic to the teachings of the faith and optimistic about their transformative power.⁷

For many, that transformative power is most clearly and forcefully expressed in certain strands of the Reformed tradition. The potential politicization of the Reformed brand could harm the vital, ongoing work of church reform and the subjection of the church and her mission to a cultural-changing agenda could undermine it.

Conclusion

At this moment, however, a notable reformation is underway: Reformed theology is being disseminated and embraced throughout China; distinctively Reformed confessions of faith are being translated or written and adopted; new attention is being paid to worship, preaching, and leadership; local congregations and in a few cases entire networks are being organized or re-organized along Presbyterian lines; Reformed seminaries are being established

throughout the country; a Chinese Presbyterian polity has been drawn up; Presbyteries are being formed in various places, and in communication with one another; ministers are being trained, examined, and ordained; and the great works of the Reformed tradition are being brought into open circulation. All of this is just the beginning of an attempt by Chinese pastors and church leaders to meet the needs of God's people and lay a firm foundation for the future. Despite their vigorous efforts, every one of them "would agree that the church is struggling to keep up with the demand for trained leaders and other resources" as the gospel continues to spread and grow in the world's largest mission field.⁸

These are China's reforming churches. Seizing this moment of profound need and remarkable opportunities amid China's fast-changing culture, they are transforming not only the nature and scope of the Presbyterian and Reformed mission to China but the future of Christianity and the Reformed tradition globally. Complex challenges demanding thoughtful and decisive action abound, but the vital work of developing ecclesiastical structures capable of supporting the present and future ministry needs of the Chinese church is moving forward. Surely this is one of the great kingdom projects of our generation.

¹ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 25.2.

² To insist that the church has a particular institutional form is not yet to specify what that form is. Though unique, it appears throughout Scripture that the church is most like a family. While sometimes compared to a school (Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.4), hospital (Augustine, *Homilies on John*, 41.13), or some other institution, healthy families function as schools and hospitals too, and the family seems the closest analogy to the church in Scripture. This family-like dimension of the institutional church is beautifully expressed in biblical presbyterianism.

³ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.6.

⁴ *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.6.

⁵ For a recent and highly readable description of presbyterianism see Guy Prentiss Waters, *How Jesus Runs the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011).

⁶ Andrew Brown, "Chinese Calvinism Flourishes," *Guardian: Comment is Free*, May 27, 2009: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/andrewbrown/2009/may/27/china-calvin-christianity> (accessed November 30, 2012).

⁷ Brent Whitefield, "Chinese Protestants and the West since 1949," originally accessed at *ChinaSource*, the article is now available at *God Reports*: <http://www.godreports.com/ministry-update-view/1140> (accessed Dec 3, 2012).

⁸ Brent Fulton, "The Facts about the Church in China," *ChinaSource*, September 27, 2012: <http://www.chsource.org/en/articles/church-in-china/item/82-the-facts-about-the-church-in-china> (accessed Dec 7, 2012).



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Canticle

Ephesus

Revelation 2: 1-7

1. These are the words of him who holds the sev-en stars in his right hand, who
 2. "Yet this I have as my com-plaint: You have for-sa-ken your first love. Re-
 3. "Let him who has an ear give ear and lis-ten to the Spir-it's word. Let

walks a-mong the lamps of gold, the sev-en lights up-on their stands: "I
 pent and love with-out re-straint, with god-li-ness taught from a-bove. If
 all the church en-sure she hears and pays at-ten-tion to her Lord: To

know your deeds and faith-ful-ness. The wick-ed you can't tol-er-ate, re-
 you re-fuse to turn to me I'll take your lamp-stand from its place. La-
 him who ov-er-comes I'll give the bles-sings of the tree of life. In

ject-ing all un-right-eous-ness and ap-os-tol-ic coun-ter-feit.
 ment your sins and thank-ful-ly re-ceive for-give-ness out of grace.
 Par-a-dise he'll al-ways live as Vic-tor o-ver ev-ery strife."

Text: Revelation 2: 1-7; vers. George Ph. van Popta, © 2012
 Tune: Joseph Barnby, 1872

JORDAN
LMD



Note from writer: “This story is not only a personal account but it also comes from speaking to others at single Christian adults socials. It also was written in memory of a brother who took his own life as he struggled greatly with his singleness.”

It is finally spring! Another long Canadian winter is over. All the migrant birds are back, the tulips are blooming, trees are budding, you can see buds appearing in your rose bushes, and the spring season’s fresh smell is in the air. Even though in your youth you claimed to have enjoyed ice skating, skiing, sledding, and perhaps even snowmobiling, you are older now and fully embrace spring after a cold frosty winter. The season brings you back to your employer as well as you are classified as a seasonal worker and that means long hours are now ahead, and you are hoping that with everything coming alive new around you, this also means your love life will come alive too.

For many of your friends, during the past winter the Thanksgiving and Christmas family gatherings held plenty of laughter, food, and reminiscing on the year. Not with you, though. These dates for you are far too often lonely times filled with tension. It seems like during these times, everyone expected you to show up with a date. And sadly there is not someone special in your life yet. The whispers are getting louder and, yes, even rumors are starting to gain steam as your every move is scrutinized and your good intentions with the opposite sex in church may even be misunderstood more often than not.

Right now you do not fall within the qualifications set in God’s Word to serve as an office bearer, as these offices are often set aside for married men exclusively. Is there a possibility you can serve in some way, and not be counted on for more than a musician to accompany the congregation’s singing?

Many people presume you are single and are content with your life. And yet you are not. Alone you drop your façade.

You can look back and give thanks to the Lord for his blessings, but you are also growing a bit cynical, too. It appears to others that all is well and that everything is fine in your life; yet you are hurting deeply inside for a warm embrace, a mate to share your dreams with, and you really are struggling to keep up appearances. Shed-

ding tears is common but to those around you who may not see them, you seem fine. All around you couples are doting over one another. Often after work you arrive at home to emails and voicemails from family and friends who have become engaged, announcing their wedding plans, inviting you to be maid of honour or best man or an usher and are sending you invitations.

Friends and family also send birth announcements of their being entrusted with a covenant child, and you feel even emptier. In time you may be even teaching their children as you are at the Christian school that their other children currently attend.

One day you are at the local Christian bookstore on your own time, and with the wide range of reading material available to you, you can’t but help but notice the relationship section. You think to yourself perhaps there is a self-help book here that may assist in your pursuit to date, eventually get engaged and finally marry. You casually look and make a note of some of the titles but won’t purchase them today as you are too embarrassed. . . and may order them online. This way you can have them delivered in privacy to your home which you no longer share, as your roommate relocated elsewhere after they too recently got married. You are praying that your Father’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven in your daily prayers, which includes a petition about a mate for you. And yet it appears after long waiting for years that your prayers are not being answered. You continue to wonder and ask why me Lord as you trust and obey as you wait on him.

Someone suggests to you to try the newest fad, look for your missing mate online. You see no reason to be skeptical as you are somewhat computer savvy, but you wonder if there such a thing as a Reformed website exclusively for singles. There is – and it is called Sovereign Grace Singles. . . you try it. How much is too much information on my profile? You don’t want come across too strong, or worse yet, be seen as desperate versus waiting on the Lord.

You begin to believe that God can help you, even via a website. But he can’t place that missing person in your life unless in faith in him you don’t take action yourself. So you go ahead and place your profile on various sites hoping that by doing so you may find your mate. Slowly but surely you may draw out a few interests and narrow your search down. You began by being very cautious but

you are now slowly gaining confidence, having cast aside those who are not within your faith mindset for fear of reprimand. Distance always has restricted you too due to finances, fear of flying, and fear of the unknown. All this gets you frustrated, and you become despondent and wrong thoughts come quick to mind.

So what do you do when you are single in the Reformed church that you have not done already?

You feel as though you have no one but God to talk to, and even then you in faith do take it to the Lord in prayer again, it appears he is not hearing your petitions, or is catching your tears. You don't feel comfortable discussing this subject with your pastor as it is breaking your heart. You dread home visits as they are similar to parent-teacher interviews and some brothers are now placed in the same category as the parents of the children you grew up with. Counselling is not an option as the only therapists are those within your denomination and others may not be considered as they are not Reformed Christians. All the Reformed single adults you know do not seem to be interested in you and you don't want to go through the rest of your life saying, "What if I did this or that. . . ." And yet you are still single in the Reformed church.

Do you feel by reading this you have gotten inside the mind of a single person in the Reformed church? How about their frequent emotional valleys or the sways between hope and despair? Or their trying to figure out what God has for them?

If this is you, and you are single in your walk with the Lord, take courage. God knows you intimately, he

knows if you are genuinely seeking a godly spouse for the right reasons, and he is watching over your needs. As you pray and seek, and take appropriate and respectful actions with the opposite sex (whether met in person or online), he is there to help. As you seek counsel from Christian friends and family, God will also help you there. Do not give up!

At the same time, know that you are highly treasured in God's sight, single or married. Your status in that area does not make you any more or less valuable in the kingdom of God. In fact, while you are single there are many opportunities to serve you would not otherwise have time for. Try to take hold of the ways you enjoy serving, while waiting on God for your mate. And with God's help and the help of your friends, try to avoid the negative feelings that will make you a lot less attractive to any potential mate!

As you begin to drop the façade and be honest about where you are at with these things, *seek contentment versus resentment and live for Jesus a life that is striving to please him in all that you do, not in your own strength but in his*. While you may engage in using an online website to seek a mate, or prayerfully date within in your denomination those that may be interested in you, remember to focus on God's will first. This is the pathway of blessings for you and your heart shall become his throne as you live for God's glory and not man's approval.

Remember with God *all things are possible*, and that you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you – this includes your enjoyment in being single in the Reformed church.



Roadquest Response: Homosexuality and Us

Lyndsay Oosterhoff
is from
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In issue 6.4, we published a Roadquest seeking your response regarding the subject of how we, as Christians, relate to homosexuals. This is one reader's response.

Does Luke 10 apply to our treatment of homosexuals? In this passage, Jesus affirms that we are to love our neighbour as ourselves. The lawyer testing Jesus takes this further, asking, "And who is my neighbour?" Many a Christian may ask a similar question, "Is the homosexual my neighbour?" After all, one might reason, God "gave them over to shameful lusts" (Rom 1:26). Does this mean we can write them off? Ignore them? Be un-neighbourly?

So who are our neighbours? Wouldn't it be nice if our "neighbours" were those that are easy to be neighbourly to? Our family? Our friends? Fellow Christians? But, as John Calvin puts it, "The neighbourhood, which lays us under obligation to mutual offices of kindness, is not confined to friends or relatives, but extends to the whole human race" (*Commentary of a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Vol. III*).

Jesus leads the lawyer to this conclusion by telling the parable of the good Samaritan. We all know the story. A man travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho is beaten by thieves and stripped of his clothing. Both a priest and a Levite pass by the man and cross over to the opposite side of the road, leaving him in his misery. However, when a Samaritan comes upon the man, he has compassion on the wounded man and takes great care of him.

It is no secret that the Jews bore much hatred towards the Samaritans and would have been loathe to demonstrate love to them as "neighbours." And yet, the Jewish lawyer is forced to admit that it is the Samaritan in the parable that proves to be the neighbour, not the Jewish priest or the Levite. If the Samaritan demonstrated neighbourly love to the wounded Jew, it stands to reason that the Jews should demonstrate neighbourly love

to Samaritans as well – whether or not they believed the Samaritans to be deserving of their love.

Similar to the way in which the Jews viewed the Samaritans, we may find homosexuals undeserving of love. But so are we. The very chapter describing the "shameful lusts" of homosexuals, who "were inflamed with lust for one another. . . [committing] indecent acts with other men, and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their perversion" (Rom 1:26, 27) also declares,

They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. (Romans 1:29-31)

Who hasn't committed at least one of the sins in that long list? Disobeying your parents puts you in the same category as homosexuality – that of a sinner deserving God's wrath.

Paul goes on to say, "[F]or at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things" (Rom 2:1). Paul isn't saying that we must not make moral judgements – he has just made a rather lengthy list of them – but that we need to avoid self-righteousness. We need to be aware that we too are sinners and that, but for the grace of God, we too would not retain God in our knowledge (see Romans 1:28). Apart from Christ, we all would live in darkness, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23).

If we refuse to demonstrate love to homosexuals, we have clearly lost sight of our own unworthiness and do not properly appreciate Christ's work for us. As Christians we must love the homosexual person and we must point him to the "redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:24).



Killing Calvinism

***Killing Calvinism: How to Destroy a Perfectly Good Theology from the Inside*, Greg Dutcher, Cruciform Press, 2012**

Additional Information: Softcover, 107 pages, US \$8.45 from Cruciform Press website

Recently I came across a newly released book with a provocative title, *Killing Calvinism*. Wow, what a sensationalized title indeed! And the subtitle is even more intriguing; “How to Destroy a Perfectly Good Theology from the Inside.” So after I read a number of glowing reviews (including from John Piper), I just had to order a copy of the book to find out what this new book was all about and whether it was at all relevant to our church life.

Several days into the new year I finally received my copy of *Killing Calvinism* in the mail. Immediately after opening the package, I sat down on my comfortable lounge chair and read the book – all of it. All finished in one reading! No, it’s not that I am a fast reader; rather, it is because the book is short and concise (about 100 pages), but also because it is a compelling read. I must admit to being totally absorbed in this book; I simply couldn’t put it down. In fact, I must have pondered over the content of the book for several weeks, wrestling with its thought-provoking content, and evaluating my own attitudes and experiences as a Calvinist. It’s just one of those must-read books!

So what is the book about? Simply put, it is a timely critique and heartfelt warning from one Calvinist addressed to fellow Calvinists, young and old. It is a remedial call to avoid the potential pitfalls of misusing or even abusing the doctrines and teachings of John Calvin – and the danger that can easily warp our theological convictions and undermine of witness to the world.

The context of this warning comes from a predominately North American perspective with the resurgence of Calvinism in the broader Evangelical circles. After generations of teaching a shallow, feel-good gospel, the so-called YRR (Young and Restless and Reformed) have embraced the intellectual qualities of Calvin’s systematic approach to the gospel. As such Calvinism has experienced an upswing in North America, so much so that it made *Time* magazine’s list of most influential philosophies in the world (“The New Calvinism” was number three in the Top Ten Ideas Changing the World Right Now. www.time.com, 2009). With so many newcomers embrac-



ing the Reformed teaching of Calvin, it is clear that some are getting it wrong. However, this book is just not addressing newcomers to the Reformed faith; it also confronts those who have long been established in the Reformed faith and yet may have become stuck in our Calvinistic traditions.

Killing Calvinism is published by Cruciform Press, a relatively new publisher that describes itself as being “explicitly Reformed in its theology,” which they say means that they have “a solid grounding in the core theological tenets of the Reformation: the doctrines of God, of Man, of Scripture, of sin, of salvation, and of the role of the Church” (www.cruciformpress.com/about/). Cruciform was co-founded by Kevin Meath, Bob Bevington, and Tim Challies).

The author, Greg Dutcher, a pastor of an Evangelical Free Church in the USA, is also relatively new to the doctrines of Calvin. In many ways the book is derived from his personal experiences and shortcomings in embracing and sharing Calvinism. He outlines eight ways that we can mess up the teachings of Calvinism:


1. By loving Calvinism as an end in itself.
2. By becoming theologians instead of disciples.
3. By loving God’s sovereignty more than God himself.
4. By losing an urgency in evangelism.
5. By refusing to learn from non-Calvinists.
6. By tidying up the Bible’s “loose ends.”
7. By being a bunch of arrogant know-it-alls.
8. By scoffing at the emotional hang-ups others have with Calvinism.

In his own unpretentious way, Dutcher spends eight chapters expounding in a clear and teachable manner the need for Calvinists to live a humble, loving, and God-glorifying way. Each chapter ends with a thoughtful yet pointed prayer that calls the reader to self-examination and to contemplate the matters seriously before the Lord. There is much to love about this book – it’s extremely readable, and written in a personal manner, almost like having a conversation with the author over coffee.

At the end of the book, the author notes that his list of eight ways we can kill Calvinism is not exhaustive or complete and therefore he urges the reader to share further examples. I would encourage all readers to take up that challenge, as it is a great way to personally benefit from the book within your own personal context. For me, I can kill

Calvinism by being slow to discuss but quick to label. It is always much easier to label a brother instead of engaging in a frank discussion and learning together from the Scriptures and our confession and even from our church history. (Fill in the blank yourself – we all do it, don't we? Liberal, Traditionalist, Conservative, Radical, Evangelical, etc.)

All books require discernment, and *Killing Calvinism* is no different. While I appreciate that we can learn from others who are not Calvinists (chapter 5), I did not find the defence of Bill Hybels (of Willowcreek Church fame) as edifying – the point could have been made with a less diverse illustration. While not a fundamental issue, some readers may not always appreciate the author's candid style of writing, which can come across too casual, too personal, and a little too trendy at times.

In the end, *Killing Calvinism* by Greg Dutcher is an engaging book that is worthy to be read and discussed amongst our Canadian Reformed church circles. We are not immune to twisting the teachings of Calvin with our favourite slant or to over emphasising one of his doctrinal teachings at the cost of another. Often we do it without intention, yet that is precisely why the warning of this book is applicable. *Killing Calvinism* is an excellent resource providing practical help of how to rightly live out the doctrines of the Reformed faith (in word and deed) to the glory of God and for the wellbeing of our neighbour. After all, wasn't that the very intention of John Calvin's doctrine and teaching – all to the glory of God? To that end, this book is heartily recommended. 

The Flowering Almond Tree

This is the Seniors Club in Smithers: The Flowering Almond Tree. Our Seniors Club is now forty years old.

The reason we are dressed up is because the town of Smithers is one hundred years old. Most of us have lived here over fifty or sixty years. We love the mountains and

the scenery. We are grateful to our Heavenly Father in looking after us, allowing us to have our worship services in freedom, and in maintaining a school for the children and grandchildren.

*Submitted by
Ploon Hofsink*

