

Clarion

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THE HORRORS OF THE TRENCHES



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"On the Wire"

*On November 11 Canadians stop to pause and
remember the fallen*

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War (June 28, 1914 – November 11, 1918). On November 11 Canadians stop to pause and remember the fallen. WWI has often been called "The Great War" because of the high number of casualties. At that time no one knew that soon the Second World War would commence to claim even *more* lives. Usually around Remembrance Day many artificial red poppies are sold to benefit the veterans and/or their families. The idea came from a poem titled "In Flanders Fields," written by Lieutenant-Colonel John McRae at the occasion of the burial of a good friend and fellow soldier (May 3, 1915). The poem is the most popular and most quoted writing from WWI. It is short and sweet and is recited often at war memorials.

Sometimes I have a feeling that "In Flanders Fields" does not capture the true sense of horror that was experienced by many soldiers, most of them spending years in the infamous trenches. The Western Front in WWI was fought mainly along a large trench that ran from the North Sea to the Swiss frontier (of France). The trench was over 240 miles long, and it is in these trenches that millions of men fought and died.

Today such battles are no longer fought. With current massive air power and swiftly moving vehicles the fighting does not anymore take place in trenches. German *Blitz Krieg* put an end to the trenches, already years ago. Trench warfare is a slow long-drawn out affair that for quite a long time was actually a stalemate. It is in the poetry about this trench warfare that the true horror of this war becomes evident.

"On the Wire"

Perhaps high school history and English classes can read and study Robert W. Service's poem entitled "On the Wire." I know that many scholars do not really consider Robert Service's poetry as being true poetry in the classical sense. It is perhaps amateur rhyming and some of the lines are stilted and awkward. I am not an English scholar but I do appreciate most of Service's work.¹

It is a poem that most realistically conveys the horror of (trench) war. This poem gives us the thoughts and struggles of a wounded soldier who is enmeshed in barbed wire and cannot break free. He knows that in this position he will soon be killed. He longs for death. At the officer's command, soldiers rushed out of the trench only to meet gas, bullets, and barbed wire, certain that their lives will be snuffed out.

In this poem, which has five parts, the writer calls out *to God*. As Gomer Pyle reportedly once said, "There are no atheists in a foxhole." Well, the man that Service describes is caught on the wire and cannot break free. He senses that he is doomed. He is suffering extremely in the hot sun, and he asks "O God, take the sun from the sky! It's burning, scorching me up. God, can't you hear my cry?" The man is in need of immediate help. What is more, he feels that God has abandoned him.

There are many bullets whistling by over his head. Why does not one bullet pierce his head and "finish forever my pain?" He asks, "Why must I suffer so? Is it God doesn't care? Is it God doesn't know?" Enough of this hanging on the wire! Let me die, now. Death will be a release from unbearable suffering.

He asks God that the sun may soon set that he may get some relief from the heat. In the dark he does not see all the dead around him, and not even his own body on *the wire*. His body is now a thing of horror. He dreams of night and death. "Night that will bring me peace, stillness and death's release." But the night brings only another attack wave from the enemies' trenches. Someone lands beside him, also enmeshed in wire. That soldier soon dies, and the other realizes that the man has shot himself in the head to

INSIDE THIS ISSUE...

2014 – it has been 100 years since the First World War began. For Remembrance Day *Clarion* brings our readers an editorial by Rev. Klaas Stam and a Treasures New and Old by Rev. Jan DeGelder.

On these pages you will find an article from Dr. Wes Bredenhof, "A Special Sort of Unbelief." We also have an article about the new *Book of Praise* by Rev. George van Popta, who has served as chairman of the Standing Committee for the *Book of Praise* since 2001.

Issue 22 features the Clippings on Politics and Religion, Education Matters, You Asked, and Ray of Sunshine columns. There is also a report on the welcome of Rev. Doug Vandeburgt to Langley, BC, a report on the annual Denver Family Camp, as well as a book review.

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Cover photo: First World War Trench, Flanders

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die. The endless agony leads to thoughts of suicide. I need to print the entire last stanza of Service's poem:

Hark the resentful guns!
Oh, how thankful am I
To think my beloved ones
Will never know how I die!
I've suffered more than my share;
I'm shattered beyond repair
I've fought like a man the fight,
And I demand the right
(God! how his fingers cling!)
To do without shame this thing.
Good! there's a bullet still;
Now I'm ready to fire;
Blame me, God if you will,
Here on the wire. . . the wire. . .

Perhaps later some obituary was published in a home-town paper: "Killed in Action, Fighting bravely till the end." But no one knows he ended his own life while hanging on the wire.

God! how his fingers cling!

What does the poet mean with the words, "God! how his fingers cling!"? Does he mean that he feels God restraining him, holding on to him that he does not commit this final act of his life? Or is he referring to his deepest desire to survive the wire and live? "His fingers" would then be the fingers of the poet hanging on to the wire in the hope that he might yet break free and survive?

In any case, it is clear that this poem gives a true experience of war. You are with him in the trench. You are with him on the wire. You are slipping into death. We see the foolishness of war. We taste the agony of the wretched night on the wire. Never again! said many. But the agony continues until he comes, the Prince of Peace.

Blame me God, if you will

Suicide is not an accepted action. We have no right to take our own lives. But let it be clear: those who do die by their own hand have suffered untold mental and physical anguish. Who can understand the deep and desperate agony of someone on the wire who takes his own life? Even the man on the wire understands that God could blame him for his final deed. But he will risk it. *Blame me God, if you will.* I get the feeling that he senses that God will not blame him.

He faces God as he raises his pistol, fires, and dies. There is a silent prayer, "Forgive my sin, O Lord." The epitaph is correct: "Killed in Action." He is victim of the horror of trench warfare. Every November 11th I wonder how many men died like this man "on the wire." Many were only seventeen years old, unprepared adolescents from peaceful country fields. Few died alone, many by the thousands, as they climbed up and over the trench wall. But every death was *personal*.

Under common circumstances no one wants to die. But death was the only escape from the putrid stench of death and decay, the lingering smell of poison gas, the diseases and infections, the presence of legions of rats, lice, flies, maggots, and frogs. The trenches were always waterlogged, and the soldiers developed a deadly fungus called "Trench Foot." It led to gangrene and amputations, people literally rotting away.

Service lets the soldier on the wire say, "I *demand* the right to do without shame this thing." I find this an amazing line. Is it defiance? Is it anger? Is it desperation? Does anyone in any time have the right to kill himself? Here's where I must put my hand on my mouth and lay my pen on the desk.

Remembrance Day. Who really knows? God remembers each and every one. I pray that many of the legions who died are now at peace with God. From the wire into the arms of God.



Robert W. Service

¹ Robert W. Service was an English-Canadian poet (1874-1958), often dubbed "The Bard of the Yukon." His most famous poems are written about the far north where he spent most of his life. He wrote: "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" and "The Cremation of Sam McGee." Service was a prisoner during the Boer war (caught together with Winston Churchill). After publishing "Songs of a Sourdough," Service became wealthy and famous. He was fourteen when WWI broke out. He wrote "Rhymes of a Red Cross Man" dedicated to his brother who was "killed in action" in France in 1916.





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Imprisoned, but Free

"As a prisoner for the Lord, I urge you. . . ."

(Ephesians 4:1)

Earlier this year the Institute for Economics and Peace released the Global Peace Index. It shows that the world is becoming less peaceful. Safety and security are deteriorating, and more and more nations are becoming involved in wars and military violence. 500 million people live in war zones. The increasing instability in the world is scary.

This is the world in which we celebrate Remembrance Day. This is the world in which we remember those who sacrificed their lives to protect and defend the freedoms we enjoy today. In light of the current situation you might wonder how valuable these sacrifices were. Sure, in the countries where most of this magazine's readers reside there is relative peace and security, but this is more the exception than the rule. And it can change quickly! The sacrifices that we remember came with dreams and expectations of a better, safer and more peaceful world for the next generations. What happened to the human dream? And where does that put us as God's children and Christ's church?

We can and should be grateful for our political freedoms. Remembrance Day is indeed a day to praise God for the gifts of peace and security. At the same time it is good to remember that political freedom isn't a goal in itself. As Christians our goal is to live day by day in the freedom of Christ, obtained by his sacrifice on the cross. This kind of freedom often leads to persecution, and the end of your political freedom.

Not right now in Canada and the U.S., but many of our brothers and sisters in this world know what the inside of a prison cell looks like.

Those who follow Christ, confess him as their Saviour and enjoy the freedom of the gospel, will often face the resentment of the world. But don't become discouraged. Your freedom in Jesus Christ cannot be curtailed by political and military powers.

In Ephesians 4:1 the Apostle Paul talks about himself as a prisoner. This epistle is one of several letters Paul wrote when he was in jail, most likely in Rome. In 6:20 he calls himself "an ambassador in chains." Does he complain? Does he feel sorry for himself? No! He points at his humiliation to reinforce his message. He uses his captivity to urge his readers to pay close attention to what he is saying. Isn't it remarkable? A prisoner has no say. He has lost his freedom to go where he wants to go and do what he wants to do. Yet here Paul's words become more powerful, just because he is imprisoned! "As a prisoner for the Lord, I urge you."

Yes, the apostle is in chains, stuck in a prison cell for the sake of Christ. His enemies had arrested and imprisoned him to silence the gospel. But the Word of God is not chained (2 Tim 2:9). And God Almighty had his own plan for his apostle. He brought Paul there for the sake of the progress of his work in this world.

In the weakness and vilification Paul experiences, Christ demonstrates

his power. It is the power of him who humbled himself, became obedient to death, and is now exalted to the highest place, where he reigns in glory. Imprisoned by the Romans, the apostle remains under the rule of him who has been given all authority in heaven and on earth.

From his prison cell, the apostle can therefore proclaim the gospel of true freedom with more boldness and authority than ever. That's why we can also translate the words "prisoner *for* the Lord" as "prisoner *in* the Lord." Jesus Christ took hold of Paul. He became his Master. Whatever Paul says or writes, he says or writes "in the Lord." His message from prison comes with the authority of Christ.

This gives him the boldness to urge the Ephesians and to urge us all not to be discouraged when God's enemies threaten the church, and when God's children lose their political freedoms. "I urge you," he says, "to live a life that reflects the true freedom you were called to in Jesus Christ."

Powerful people will try silence the gospel, but the imprisonment of his servants doesn't restrict the power of our Saviour. The Lord of the gospel remains free and his work goes on. With his precious blood he continues to set his people free from all the power of the devil (HC, Q&A 1). Christ's Word cannot be silenced and his liberating power cannot be restrained, not even by the walls of a prison cell. Celebrate your freedom in Jesus Christ – every day!





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A Special Sort of Unbelief

Recently many concerns have been expressed about the direction of the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands. Our sister churches were entertaining a proposal regarding women in office and this caused alarm and dismay with many of us. This proposal was only the most recent in a string of disturbing events, books, statements to media, and articles. Many fervent prayers have been offered up for our sister churches, praying that God would lead them in the right direction. My purpose in this article is not to comment on the Dutch situation as such. Rather, I want us to consider where we're at in Canada. Sometimes our Dutch brothers and sisters can be heard saying things like, "You just wait ten or fifteen years. Then you'll see things our way." Or things like, "The immigrant churches are always lagging behind, but they will catch up." Could there be some truth to these sentiments? For example, could the seeds for something like women in office have already been planted and permitted to grow among us?

Looking back

Back in the early 1990s, I was a student at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. *The Gateway* was the student newspaper and a prominent writer there was an up and coming law student named Ezra Levant. Perhaps partly through his influence, *The Gateway* was remarkably open to publishing a variety of perspectives, including openly Christian ones. Homosexuality was a hot topic for discussion already in those days and I wrote something for *The Gateway* presenting the biblical perspective. This was published and I was not dragged before a human rights commission.

However, what I wrote did stir up a response from a group on campus, the Student Christian Movement (SCM). The students involved with SCM were mostly affiliated

with the United Church, though perhaps there were some Anglicans and others as well. SCM wrote something for *The Gateway* arguing that the perspective I expressed was not representative of all Christians. They affirmed that many Christians have no problem with homosexual behaviour and see it as a healthy form of human sexuality. They offered a pamphlet to interested readers that would explain their position further. I took them up on this offer. Let me share some quotes from that pamphlet:

While the Bible obviously is familiar with homosexual relations, it seems to know little about homosexuality as such; this may be one of the reasons why homosexual acts are condemned as wilful transgressions of God's orders for God's people.

At best, the story of Sodom is very slim evidence for the notion that homosexuality is considered a "sin" in the Bible.

Today we know a great deal more about the motives behind people's actions than did the biblical writers. Economics and psychology have given us insights into behaviour that Paul did not have.

. . .homosexuality is no "sin" unless it becomes a false god . . . human sexuality is sinful only if it stands in the way of love and justice.

Essentially, the SCM pamphlet said, "Yes, we know what the Bible says, but we know more than the biblical writers and so we can readily accommodate homosexuality in our ethical beliefs."

I wrote a response to this pamphlet. I argued that the Bible itself claims to be the inspired and inerrant Word of God, not merely the religious or ethical views of human biblical writers which you can take or leave. Therefore,

ORDINATION EXAMINATION SUSTAINED

Examined by Classis Alberta of October 14, 2014
and granted permission to be ordained to the
ministry of the Word and Sacraments:

Candidate Tyler Vandergaag

CHURCH NEWS

the Bible has to be our starting point and we have to take the Bible seriously on its own terms. Scripture is rather clear about the sinful nature of homosexual practice. For instance, the SCM pamphlet argued that the great evil in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah was the fact that they were so inhospitable. That position conveniently ignores the clear teaching of Scripture in Jude 7. It leaves readers with three options: you can accept that unambiguous teaching, you can pervert it to fit your own agenda, or you can argue that the biblical writers were ignorant. SCM's approach was a blend of the latter two options, depending on what was convenient. In the end, however, one can only say that this was a sort of unbelief when it came to the text of the Bible.

Our Reformed faith requires us to honour the Word of God by putting it first in every field of study

The university environment was often hostile to an acceptance of the Bible as the Word of God. That hostility was what led me to begin studying apologetics, the defense of the faith. Through some study of the Christian Reconstruction movement, I had come across the name of Cornelius Van Til as a teacher of Reformed apologetics. I read his book *The Defense of the Faith* and it blew me away. He argued that any defense of Christianity has to start with the Word of God. The inerrant Word must always be our foundation and starting place. Early in my academic career, then, I became convinced that our Reformed faith requires us to honour the Word of God by putting it first in every field of study, whether apologetics or anything else. To do otherwise is to betray our commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord of all wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3) – it would be a sort of unbelief.

This bit of biography illustrates where I'm coming from. I have long been convinced that the Bible is the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word of God that must be our starting place in any endeavour. As Proverbs 3:5,6 puts it, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." We acknowledge him by honouring his Word and giving it priority in everything! As Psalm 36:9 says, ". . . in your light do we

see light." It's in the light of God's Word that we find our way in any endeavour, including academic pursuits. That has been my conviction and I have also sought to apply that conviction to issues like homosexuality.

Today

That conviction has been repeatedly challenged and it still is. The thing that has changed is that the challenges no longer come from outside, but from within. For example, I recently received an e-mail from a Dutch ministerial colleague. He chided me for simply wanting to accept the plain teaching of Scripture regarding origins. He expressed his surprise that a doctor of theology would simply urge people to believe what the Bible plainly teaches. He argued that I need to take into account the conclusions of science as well. After all, science has made it clear that the Bible cannot be taken at face value on questions pertaining to origins. Moreover, he told me, many young people will not accept that answer. They will turn away from the church if you tell them to just accept and believe what the Bible says about this. When I introduced him to the idea of simply believing and starting with the Word of God (as taught by Cornelius Van Til), he indicated that he had never heard of that concept before. Sadly, he was not convinced.

Either the text of Scripture is twisted to support the teaching, or the text of Scripture is dismissed as being ignorant of contemporary scientific knowledge

Now we could say, "That's not surprising, coming from The Netherlands." However, this allergy to starting with the Word of God exists among us in Canada as well and this is no secret. We have those among us who are either open to theistic evolution or actually hold to some form of theistic evolution. Theistic evolution is the idea that God used evolutionary processes to create human beings and other creatures. This teaching exists among us. It can only exist among us for the exact same

reasons that the Student Christian Movement could hold that homosexual behaviour is not an abomination before God. Either the text of Scripture is twisted to support the teaching, or the text of Scripture is dismissed as being ignorant of contemporary scientific knowledge. Either way, what we have again is a special form of unbelief when it comes to the Word of God. It's a refusal to humbly come before the Word with faith and accept it at face value as the faithful and inerrant Word of our Father. Something else is put before his Word.

Looking ahead

This is my *cri du coeur*, my cry from the heart for the Canadian Reformed Churches. I do *not* believe that what some of our Dutch brothers and sisters are saying is necessarily true. I do *not* believe that it is inevitable that we

We need to maintain a high view of Scripture

will be entertaining women in office in the next decade or two. It does *not* have to be that way. But there are two very important things that need to firmly in place for such a development to be stymied.

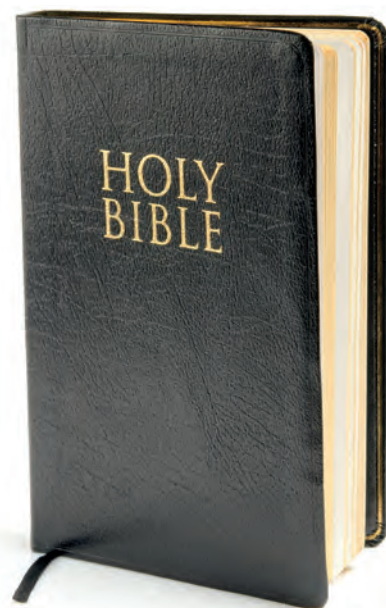
First, we need to shore up the wide-spread conviction in our churches that the Word of God is our ultimate authority and therefore needs to be our starting place *in everything*. Members need to hold this conviction and grow in it. Ministers and elders need to reinforce it among their congregations through teaching and preaching. We need to maintain a high view of Scripture which includes a child-like faith in its plain and clear meaning, despite whatever unbelieving scholarship may introduce to shake our faith. We must not be deceived into accepting that we are somehow intellectually lacking because we simply take the Scriptures at face value.¹

Second, careful vigilance is required with respect to our seminary. At the moment, we have every reason to be confident in our seminary professors and their teaching. We can be thankful to God for these faithful men who

do have a high view of Scripture and who teach accordingly. We need to pray that God would continue to keep them faithful. They are only men and they need strength from above to remain steadfast.

Moreover, these particular men will not be there forever. The time will come when they need to be replaced and they will need to be replaced with equally faithful men. When you have a federalional seminary, this is of the utmost importance. Virtually all of our ministers take their theological training in Hamilton. As a result, if that training is not sound, our churches will not be sound for long either.

Let me conclude with some words of Scripture my father-in-law would often quote to me. We would often discuss developments in the Christian Reformed Church, especially relating to women in office and theistic evolution. He would always say that we need to be humble and be on guard, because Scripture says, "Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor 10:17). There is no getting around the clear message of *that* text.



¹ Naturally, we recognize that the Bible includes a variety of genres and our understanding of any given passage has to do justice to this and other contextual factors. But this does not take away from the fact that many biblical teachings (for instance, regarding origins, sexuality, roles of men and women) are abundantly clear and have been clearly understood by the church for generations. For more on a Reformed approach to Scripture which begins with Scripture and honours its perspicuity, see "Dr. Seakle Greijdanus on Scripture Interpretation," <http://goo.gl/t8Pv6F>.

The New Book of Praise



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At long last, the new *Book of Praise* is printed and ready for shipment to the churches. Orders are being sent in to the publisher, and soon we will all be singing from the 2014 version. This is the third complete edition, after the 1984 and the 1972 editions, and the hope is that it will serve the churches for many years.

The committee is thankful for the tremendous amount of feedback, encouragement, and cooperation it has received from the churches throughout the past thirteen years, as well as the good guidance and leadership given by the General Synods convened during this time. Above all, praise and gratitude is due to our heavenly Father for providing the churches with a songbook that will be used weekly and daily, in church, school, and home, to praise his most holy Name.

Roots

The *Book of Praise* is rooted in our Reformed past. The first complete Genevan Psalter was published in French in 1562, and since then versions have appeared in many languages used by churches throughout the world. When our parents and grandparents landed on these shores with the waves of immigration from The Netherlands after the Second World War, and felt obliged by the Lord to establish the Canadian Reformed Churches, they also felt strongly led to produce an English version of the Genevan Psalms. They had been singing them in Dutch all their lives and were not inclined to give them up. Acting in faith, some may say, audaciously, the far-flung federation of a handful of churches set out in the 1950s to produce an English Calvinistic songbook where the Psalms were to be set to the beloved Genevan tunes and which would also include hymns faithful to Scripture. We are the heirs of our fathers' vision.

2001 to 2013

The Standing Committee for the Publication of the *Book of Praise* of the Canadian Reformed Churches (yes, that is its real name; "SCBP" for short) received from recent synods the mandate to add some more hymns to the sixty-five of the 1984 *Book of Praise*, to revise and improve the Psalms, and, recently, to amend all the biblical text references to the ESV (from the NIV). From the perspective of the SCBP it was an interesting task. It could be said that the whole federation was turned into a huge super-committee as the work progressed over the years from Synod 2001 to Synod 2013.

*Praise and gratitude is due to our
heavenly Father for providing the churches
with a songbook that will be used weekly
and daily, in church, school, and home,
to praise his most holy Name*

The most significant part of the work was the revision of the 150 Psalms. About fifty of them required little revision, about fifty needed some revision, and about fifty were completely redone. The SCBP was able to engage Dr. William Helder for this work. Many will know that Dr. Helder has been involved with the *Book of Praise* for many years. In his work, Dr. Helder did not especially use any one English translation of the Psalms; rather, he used a large number of English, Dutch, German, French, Latin, and other translations. At times ministers on the committee would give him a literal translation of the Hebrew from which he would then work, and the Hebrew scholars at CRTS were always ready and willing to help.

In 2010 Synod Burlington instructed the SCBP to publish an Authorized Provisional Version (APV) which the churches were then to use for three years and submit comments on to the committee. The result of this three year “test-drive,” comments to the committee, the report of the SCBP to Synod 2013, and the decisions of the synod, is the new edition of our songbook.

APV to 2014 edition

To become more particular, the differences between the APV (2010), and the new (2014) edition can be summarized thus:

1) Changes to the Psalms:

- a. In about twenty stanzas in the Psalm section some words, or a couple of lines, have been changed as compared with the APV.
- b. In Psalm 17 significant changes were made to the text of stanza 5.
- c. Psalm 25:6 was replaced with entirely new text.
- d. Psalm 81:6 was also replaced with entirely new text.
- e. In Psalm 90 the first stanza has been changed back to the 1984 version and the second stanza has been deleted. Consequently this Psalm is significantly different from that found in the APV.

2) Changes to the text of the hymns:

- a. In about five stanzas some words, or a couple of lines, have been changed as compared with the APV.
- b. The lyrics of Hymns 58 and 77 have received significant and substantial changes.

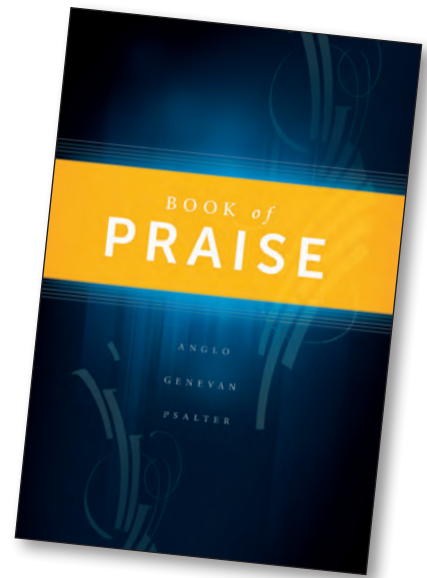
3) Changes to the melodies of the hymns:

When the SCBP, in the APV, returned many of the melodies to their original composition, some churches objected to the changes. The Committee, being sensitive to these objections and not wanting the music of the *Book of Praise* to be a divisive issue, recommended to Synod 2013 that some of the corrections be undone. Synod adopted these recommendations and added others as well. Undoubtedly, the local organists will point these out to their respective congregations.

Incompatibility

Once a church has decided to adopt the new edition for use in the worship services it will not be possible for

members to continue using the APV. The significant changes to the text of the Psalms and hymns as well as to the melodies of the hymns make it impossible to use the two versions together without creating confusion in the worship service. Using both songbooks at the same time to sing would be unedifying for the worship service because of the difference in some lyrics. Similarly, the changes to music, rests, and fermatas in some of the hymns would also be a cause for unnecessary confusion. Further, due to content and formatting changes in the 2014 *Book of Praise*, the page numbering in the two editions is no longer the same. The APV and the new edition are not compatible.



Digital

Premier Publishing has also produced a digital version (a tagged PDF) which can be bought and downloaded from <http://bop.premierprinting.ca>. This version is suitable for tablets and smartphones.

A few churches project the text of the Psalms and hymns in the worship service. While the SCBP had originally expected that the tagged PDF would be suitable for this use, some have indicated that this may not be the case. The SCBP will be discussing this at its fall meeting and is committed to accommodating the needs of the churches that make use of projectors.

Thankfulness

The SCBP is thankful that the *Book of Praise* continues to be a blessing to the church of Christ. Above all, may our God be “enthroned on the praises of Israel” (Ps 22:3) also through the use of our songbook. To him alone be all glory, now and forever!





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Shariah Law in Europe

While we may have a creeping recognition of Shariah law in Canada, as seen in a previous issue of *Clarion*, in parts of Europe there is open conflict about the advance of Muslim law. This is no surprise when you consider the large number of Muslims that have immigrated there. The numbers are becoming so large that Muslims feel empowered to forbid non-Muslims to enter certain parts of major cities.

Soeren Kern, a political scientist and, among other positions, a Distinguished Senior Fellow of the Gatestone Institute, posted an article on the Institute's website, "European 'No-Go' Zones for Non-Muslims Proliferating." Here are some excerpts from this article.

Islamic extremists are stepping up the creation of "no-go" areas in European cities that are off-limits to non-Muslims. Many of the "no-go" zones function as microstates governed by Islamic Sharia law. Host-country authorities effectively have lost control in these areas and in many instances are unable to provide even basic public aid such as police, fire fighting and ambulance services.

The "no-go" areas are the by-product of decades of multicultural policies that have encouraged Muslim immigrants to create parallel societies and remain segregated rather than become integrated into their European host nations.

In Britain, for example, a Muslim group called Muslims Against the Crusades has launched a campaign to turn twelve British cities – including what it calls "Londonistan" – into independent Islamic states. The so-called Islamic Emirates would function as autonomous enclaves ruled by Islamic Sharia law and operate entirely outside British jurisprudence. . . .

In the Tower Hamlets area of East London (also known as the Islamic Republic of Tower Hamlets), for example, extremist Muslim preachers, called the Tower Hamlets Taliban, regularly issue death threats to women who refuse to wear Islamic veils. Neighborhood streets have been plastered with posters declaring "You are entering a Sharia controlled zone: Islamic rules enforced." And street advertising deemed offensive to Muslims is regularly vandalized or blacked out with spray paint. . . .

In France, large swaths of Muslim neighborhoods are now considered "no-go" zones by French

police. At last count, there are 751 Sensitive Urban Zones (Zones Urbaines Sensibles, ZUS), as they are euphemistically called. A complete list of the ZUS can be found on a French government website, complete with satellite maps and precise street demarcations. An estimated 5 million Muslims live in the ZUS, parts of France over which the French state has lost control. . . . In Paris and other French cities with high Muslim populations, such as Lyons, Marseilles and Toulouse, thousands of Muslims are closing off streets and sidewalks (and by extension, are closing down local businesses and trapping non-Muslim residents in their homes and offices) to accommodate overflowing crowds for Friday prayers. Some mosques have also begun broadcasting sermons and chants of "Allahu Akbar" via loudspeakers into the streets. . . .

In the Belgian capital of Brussels (which is 20% Muslim), several immigrant neighborhoods have become "no-go" zones for police officers, who frequently are pelted with rocks by Muslim youth. In the Kuregem district of Brussels, which often resembles an urban war zone, police are forced to patrol the area with two police cars: one car to carry out the patrols and another car to prevent the first car from being attacked. . . .

In the Netherlands, a Dutch court ordered the government to release to the public a politically incorrect list of 40 "no-go" zones in Holland. The top five Muslim problem neighborhoods are in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Utrecht. The Kolenkit area in Amsterdam is the number one Muslim "problem district" in the country. The next three districts are in Rotterdam – Pendrecht, het Oude Noorden and Bloemhof. The Ondiep district in Utrecht is in the fifth position, followed by Rivierenwijk (Deventer), Spangen (Rotterdam), Oude Westen (Rotterdam), Heechterp/ Schieringen (Leeuwarden) and Noord-Oost (Maastricht).

The situation is just as bad or even worse in Italy, Germany, and Sweden. The article from which the above excerpts were quoted was written about three years ago, but it is even more relevant today. Things have not gotten any better. These developments should make Christians and all Canadians and Americans very sensitive to the issue of creeping Shariah law in our own country and work to protect our freedoms. **C**

Rev. D. Vandeburgt Installed as Second Pastor in Langley

“How beautiful are the feet. . . .” (Romans 10)

Worship services

It was a celebratory day in Langley on Sunday, September 14, 2014. After a two-year vacancy, Langley received and installed her second pastor in Rev. Doug Vandeburgt. The Word was faithfully preached, the fellowship was warm, and the weather was spectacular; what a day of our Lord!


Pastor DeJonge led the installation service in the morning (Colossians 4), focusing on how the preaching of the gospel needs to be Christ-centred and effective in terms of making an impact on us as his people. The congregation was exhorted to pray fervently for that gospel, which is not only for people “out there” but for us, here and now, and all the time. Soon after, Rev. Vandeburgt said “I do!”

In his inaugural sermon, Rev. Vandeburgt spoke personally, referring to the Apostle Paul (Titus 1) and reminded his new flock that his task was primarily to “activate” our faith. Why does our faith need to be active? So that our hope is certain! An active faith will lead to godliness, and a wonderful sense of confidence in him. It is the true preaching of the Word that will lead to a life of faith, and the resulting life of godly obedience and joy.

Welcome evening

That same evening, the festivities continued. With a full house in attendance, a series of brief presentations made the evening flow well, in deed. Despite the fear of such an evening being “lame” it was in fact a great evening of Scripture reading, music, art, video, and yes, speeches.

Ron de Haan opened the evening, noting the gratitude the congregation felt for receiving a pastor. With a congregation of this size (750, and growing) the need was acute. Several members then read from Scripture and, then, without an MC, the program unfolded almost seamlessly: Sr. Linda VanSpronsen introduced the Vandeburgts, skillfully reminding us about their roots in the city and the country; the elementary kids wonderfully sang “By Faith” led by Vanessa Rook, Caroline Visscher, and Alyson Bosch; David Torenvliet spoke a few words about the teen program Youthlight; the Young People’s Society demonstrated how much they had in common with the Vandeburgts; a talented group of ladies, led by Ginny Vanderhorst, pulled off the amazing with a song embedding every surname in the congregation (150, no less!); this was followed by a secret mission video involving gifted spies Yan, Oug, and Ack – hilarious!

Various pastors then spoke brief welcomes: Rev. Schoof for Classis PW, wondering if Rev. Vandeburgt had followed him here on purpose; Rev. Lodder, who studied with our new pastor back in the day; Rev. Visscher whose own first installation coincided on the day of Pastor Vandeburgt’s birth! Rev. DeJonge then shared with us his immense gratitude and excitement about the new reality of having someone with whom to share the load. While all these presentations were flowing along, a live art presentation was carried out by Ashley Bulthuis. The audience was enthralled by the unfolding of a beautiful sketch of the Great Potter: Stunning! Finally, Rev. Vandeburgt responded to the evening with “It was awesome!” He, too, felt grateful to be among God’s people in Langley and was looking forward to working with Rev. DeJonge. Chester Baarda closed the evening in thanksgiving prayer, and the usual dash for refreshments made the evening complete. Praise God from whom all blessings flow! 

Denver Family Camp

The second week of August 2014 the Denver church held their seventh annual Denver Family Camp. With God's blessing we had another amazing camp with wonderful fellowship, uplifting speeches, and group discussions in the midst of God's creation.

Our speaker was Rev. Joe Poppe and we were blessed that his wife and children were able to join us. The theme for this year was "Spiritual Warfare and Victory in Christ." This centred around our daily strife in this world against Satan and sin and the things we deal with as Christians. But we again learned that we do have a victorious King and Saviour and in him we can do all things because he strengthens us. Knowing all this, we as Christians, must arm ourselves with the armour of God as spoken of in Ephesians 6. "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes" (Eph 6:10-11). What a comfort to come to the realization that while there is spiritual warfare in this life, we stand victorious, fighting not in our own strength, but in the strength of the Lord.

This year's summer camp was a huge success in every aspect. It has become tradition for the Family Camp to start the weekend on Thursday evening. We had a pool party hosted by the Temu family where everyone had a chance to meet and get to know each other. Then Friday morning we held a pancake breakfast at the church where the families of the church brought food and the teens helped by cooking all the pancakes.

The Family Camp officially began Friday afternoon. The year's theme was incorporated into the many different activities, group discussions, and times of fellowship. We had many opportunities to delve into the Scriptures to learn God's will for our lives. There were activities for all ages such as the Great Sponge War, Lantern Sneak, and of course Nine Square. Games were also made just for the kids and created a way for the visiting families and our Denver church family to get to know each other. The main challenge for the kids was the scavenger hunt.



Each team had to solve puzzles in order to find the hidden materials. These materials had to be used by each team to create the Armor of God as spoken of in Ephesians 6.

After the talks there was group discussion. In each group we discussed questions Reverend Poppe had written and handed out in the beginning of the camp. The teen group was led by Johan Bruintjes. The teens shared about the temptations they deal with in this life and how the Armor of God is a shield and protection, giving comfort and security. After the discussions everyone came back together for a wrap-up session. Each group shared questions and ideas and were given a chance to ask Reverend Poppe his view or understanding of the questions.

Sunday night, at the final closing, there was the awards ceremony for the Mystery Box, Scavenger Hunt, and every other crazy award the camp committee had made. Needless to say every one received some kind of prize from candy to kites.

No one was really ready to say goodbye at the end of camp. As always it was wonderful to connect with all the families that came from far and to feel that bond of Christian love! We praise God for his abundant blessings and goodness after another uplifting and encouraging camp! To him be all the glory!

C



Edu-sketch

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Twice a year an attempt is made to capture some common themes or trends from our Canadian Reformed schools across the country. By gleaning information from monthly newsletters and websites, it is possible to draw some highlights and conclusions around what is occurring in our schools. This article will focus on the summer/fall school news.

The start of the new school year emphasizes a beautiful trend in many of the schools, namely, the focus on a common theme text. While each school has its own character or style, our common Christian bond can be found in our school themes. A quick scan shows selections such as “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess 5:16-18); “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil 4:8); and “Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:18). God needs to be at the centre of all that we do; this is also true of Christian schooling and school themes are just another method of ensuring that this is the case. Many of the schools use the theme as a springboard for assemblies, devotions, and hallway displays but there are other ways to incorporate the theme as well. As one principal noted, as a school community they “hope to memorize our theme text, we hope to become more aware of our actions of compassion, kindness, and of being humble and kind.”

The start of the school year is also a common time to inform the school societies about the work that has occurred during the summer break. Many of the board presidents noted with appreciation the hard work done by volunteers to fix, clean up, and generally prepare the school for the coming season. As one president summed it up, “With the closing of the school the work could begin for the annual clean up. An army of volunteers were hard at work, under the direction of the caretaker, to make the

building look spic and span; and spic and span it does look. We would like to offer a word of appreciation to all those who helped with this task.” Besides words of appreciation, a number of schools offered volunteer appreciation activities, such as open houses and barbecues. The reality is that all our schools deal with financial challenges, and the support and effort of the many volunteers is vital to maintaining our schools.

Besides all the work done to clean, repair, and prepare the schools for use, quite a few schools are also looking at expansion, dealing with ongoing projects, or enjoying recently completed projects. In our schools in BC, William of Orange and Credo Elementary are enjoying new renovations and additions; John Calvin School, Yarrow, is planning for possible expansion, and Ebenezer in Smithers just received their building permit for a new project. As we move east across the country we see Parkland Immanuel in Edmonton opening up six new classrooms, and we hear the community in Coaldale, Alberta considering an ambitious expansion plan. In Ontario, Attercliffe Canadian Reformed School has added a four-classroom addition. John Calvin Christian School in Burlington and Covenant Christian School in Flamborough have plans to build a newly amalgamated school to be completed the Lord willing in 2016. Emmanuel Christian High School in Fergus recently bought the old public high school and they have begun a refurbishing and addition project to be completed the Lord willing by September 2016. We can continue to see how God is guiding our families, churches, and schools, also through this time of growth. All this expansion work also requires many additional volunteer hours. Many schools note with thankfulness that capable men and women are stepping forward to help make also our physical properties and buildings into places that foster quality Christian education.

In connection with the topic of volunteerism, the work done by transportation committees is also often an under-appreciated task. Each summer these men and

women need to plan routes, incorporate new families and locations, track driving times, look after driver training, vehicle insurance and maintenance, and other administrative items and generally work to ensure a smooth pick-up and delivery of the children. One transportation committee member summed it up nicely: “We spent a considerable amount of time working on the bus routes this year. When the bus routes are planned, there are many variables that play into how we set up the routes. Many times while making them, we would have the routes set up and then find that one was way too long and another too short. This made for many late nights and even an early morning to complete them.” It is worthwhile to remember these efforts and to make a conscious effort to thank the transportation committee members and bus drivers for their work, and, as quite a few reports suggested, remind your children of the rules and expectations for riding the bus.

*God needs to be at the centre
of all that we do*

Although many of the themes presented thus far are found in most of our schools, there also a few “sub-themes” mentioned in the school magazines. One is worth noting here. It’s the topic of school evaluation. This evaluation is a tool for school improvement that is gaining traction in our school societies. A number of schools have already created policies and procedures based on a “continuous improvement” model. Others have either done school or administration evaluations themselves, or brought in outside experts to conduct such reviews. This year at least three more schools are pursuing some form of school evaluation. As one board president expressly stated, these reviews are not being completed because of concerns around administration competence; rather, they are doing the evaluation because “it would be good

to have a thorough assessment in order to promote administrative effectiveness in [the principal’s] task at the school.” As schools we have been historically quite good at setting a clear goal, mission statement or vision for our schools; this more recent trend of structured evaluation will hopefully work as another means of ensuring that we are meeting our expectations.

*Make a conscious effort to thank
the transportation committee members
and bus drivers*

As a concluding point, it is worthwhile to recognize God’s faithfulness to two specific schools. Emmanuel Christian High School in Fergus, Ontario, is celebrating its tenth year of existence. As their principal, Mr. Henk Nobel, aptly notes, “This being our 10th year tends to lend some more significance to the year, as we humans often measure years that are multiples of five and ten, as being significant milestones. We tend to pause somewhat longer at these numbers and reflect on our Father’s goodness and blessings in what He has granted us.” These same sentiments would also apply in abundance to John Calvin School in Smithville, Ontario, which recently had a celebration in recognition of being able to offer Christian education for the past fifty years! While these anniversaries rightly cause additional focus and attention, it is worthwhile each year again for all our school communities to reflect on the blessing of Christian education, and to lift our voices in prayer and thanksgiving to our Father for his grace towards us.

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





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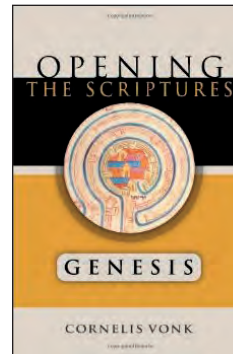
Opening the Scriptures

**Cornelis Vonk, translated by Theodore Plantinga and Nelson D. Kloosterman,
Opening the Scriptures: Genesis,
(Grand Rapids: Christian's Library Press, 2013)**

**Additional Information: Pp. xxiii + 266
ISBN 978-1-938948-29-9**

Dutch readers may well remember a set of blue hard-cover books called *De Voorzeide Leer*. Perhaps some of you have them, or have seen them on the shelves of your parents or grandparents. They're a series of commentaries written for ordinary church members. Many of the volumes were written by Rev. Cornelis Vonk (1904-1993), who for many years served a Reformed congregation in Schiedam, The Netherlands (even, for a short time, as co-pastor with the late Rev. Van Oene). The Dutch title means "The Aforesaid Doctrine," taken from the third question of the Form for the Baptism of Infants: "Do you promise as father and mother to instruct your child in the aforesaid doctrine, and to have him instructed therein to the utmost of your power?" Vonk published a popular textbook on the Heidelberg Catechism under that title in 1950, and then continued to use the title for subsequent volumes on the Belgic Confession (1955, 1956) and the books of the Bible, starting with Genesis and Exodus in 1960. I have the series on my shelf, but, to be truthful, I never paid much attention to them. Till now, that is.

The books are now receiving a new life and reaching a new public under the title, *Opening the Scriptures*, owing to the sponsorship of John and Jenny Hultink and the translation efforts of Dr. Nelson Kloosterman. *Genesis* and *Exodus* have already appeared, both in paperback and electronic form (they're available for Kindle and Logos Bible Software). I recently read the *Genesis* volume, translated by Kloosterman and the late Dr. Theodore Plantinga, and must say that I quite enjoyed it. I rather expected that a book translated more than fifty years after it first appeared in Dutch would show its age – out of touch with current debates and antiquated in diction. That, at least, is the risk one takes. But *Genesis* comes across as neither dated nor dry, thanks in no small



part to the author's lively, even blunt, conversational style, well-suited to the popular audience for whom he writes. In a more polished work, for example, one would not expect to

read the following comment (on Genesis 4:17, which says that Cain lay with his wife): "First a tiresome question – or rather, a question often raised by tiresome people. Young Christians like to ask their elders, 'Where did Cain find himself a wife?' Cain chose a wife from among his sisters, of course. . . ." (147)

Vonk is not afraid to address perennial questions, such as the relationship of Scripture and science to account for the origin of the world. He warns against the temptation to reject Scripture in favour of science, or science in favour of Scripture, as well as the temptation to bend either to match the other, offering an intriguing analogy to let both stand side by side:

Imagine a great industrialist, someone like Henry Ford, sitting in his old age among a group of his grandchildren, who are ten or twelve years old. They ask their grandfather how he managed to build up such an enormous industrial empire and make such a name for himself. What can the grandfather tell his grandchildren to give them some idea of how he laid the foundation for that industrial empire? He begins to tell them stories, speaking to them not as his equals but as children. Limiting himself to their capacity to understand, he tells them a few things about his company with which they are also familiar, giving them some understanding of the company as an international automobile manufacturer. But imagine now that two of these grandchildren later attend university and study economics and related sciences. Armed with this scientific background they plunge into their grandfather's enormous business archives. One of them might well come across material that gives him a different impression of the company's history from the stories his grandfather

told him when he was ten or twelve, and he might then come to doubt his grandfather's word. The other grandchild might look for all sorts of explanations to make the whole picture fit together so that he can still protect his grandfather's honor. But is all this argument really necessary? Did the grandfather tell these stories – on a child's level – intending them to be subjected to the critique of economists later on? (100-101)

In short, God condescended to tell the creation story at a level that the children of Israel could understand. Is the analogy convincing? You be the judge. I found it interesting that Vonk elsewhere rejected the notion of divine condescension in favour of a more literal interpretation. Over against Herman Bavinck, who said that the Scriptures reveal God in an *anthropomorphic* way, Vonk favoured the view of Benne Holwerda that the Scriptures reveal humanity to be *theomorphic*. That is to say, humans were made in the image of a God who has a real form and who really walked and talked with them in the garden (88, 161-164).

Despite its lively style, Vonk's work betrays its historical setting. On the one hand, *Genesis* was written by a *vrijgemaakt* (liberated, as in the Liberation of 1944) minister who rejected the Kuyperian theory of presumptive regeneration and who embraced a covenantal and redemptive-historical approach to the Old Testament. This approach is one of the strengths of this book: it explains each passage within the greater context of God's progressive revelation of salvation. On the other hand, *Genesis* was also written by an independent thinker who within a few years (1968) would become *buiten verband* (outside the federation of churches) on account of his views on the intermediate state (the state of the believer in the time between death and resurrection). Genesis 2:7 says that man "*became* a living being," not that he *received* a soul, from which Vonk concluded that the soul can in fact die, an idea that he further developed in his commentary on Leviticus (not yet published in English) and in his later book, *De doden weten niets* (The dead know nothing).¹ Vonk resisted dogmatic constructs that, in his view, went beyond the teaching of Scripture, such as Witsius' detailed explanation of the covenant of works (132-135), and he repeatedly emphasized that the Bible does not always answer the questions we might put to it. Healthy and humble though such an emphasis might be, one can imagine that provocative comments such as the

following will not have endeared him to his readers: "We would need a separate volume for narrating and showing that in practice, Reformed churches have been governed for centuries in a manner more dictatorial than presbyterial" (136).

Genesis is not a verse-by-verse or chapter-by-chapter commentary, but rather a topic-by-topic commentary loosely arranged according to the contents of the Bible book. It begins with three introductory chapters, on the New Testament's view of the Old, on the five books of Moses as a whole, and on the date and structure of *Genesis*. All three are worth reading. Vonk was not afraid to address scholarly questions, such as whether Moses wrote the Pentateuch as we have it today, presenting his own answers in clear and simple language. One result of Vonk's topical approach, however, is that the book comes across as rather uneven. Some passages are discussed in great detail, others give rise to lengthy rabbit trails, and still others are passed over in silence. The commentary is heavily weighted towards the first half of *Genesis*: of Vonk's eleven chapters, the last, barely eight pages, briefly surveys *Genesis* 20-50.

Vonk's interpretations of Scripture display keen insight and breadth of knowledge. To be sure, the editorial decision not to translate the footnotes of the Dutch original leave the unfortunate and mistaken impression that the author expressed his opinions with little recourse to contemporary scholarly literature. The footnotes in the original not only cite Vonk's sources (German, French, and English, as well as Dutch) but also offer more detailed and nuanced information, so to include them would surely have enhanced the quality and credibility of the English edition.

The English translation reads well. The translators do take occasional liberties, changing obscure Dutch references to more familiar English ones, for example, replacing a sentence about the *Staten Vertaling* with one about the King James Version (166). Yet the effect is a translation that reads easily for a North American audience, which, after all, was the intent. Though not supplied with a discussion guide, Vonk's book could function reasonably well as a lively tour guide to accompany a Bible study group through the first half of *Genesis*.

¹ Frans van Deursen, "Vonk, Cornelis," in *Biografisch Lexicon voor de Geschiedenis van het Nederlandse Protestantisme* (ed. C. Houtman et al.; Kok: Kampen, 2001), 5:545-47.

Luke 2:11-14

“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

This passage is very familiar to us isn't it? When we read this then we know that this is the angel of the Lord who appeared to the shepherds of Bethlehem announcing Jesus' birth. The song following the announcement must have been a melodious and well-pleasing song. It is important for us to think about the message of the song: Glory to God, this is the focus of Christmas and our celebrations can centre on God and giving him glory. When God receives glory then peace will descend on earth and among men. Peace is given to the broken hearted and now God's people can enjoy fellowship with him again. The month of December is approaching and with that comes a time of looking forward to Christ's birth. Let us focus our celebrations on God and giving him glory for restoring peace and fellowship.

Hymn 21:1, 5, 6

*While shepherds watched their flocks by night,
All seated on the ground,
An angel of the Lord came down
And glory shone around*

*Then with the angels, all at once,
Appeared a mighty throng –
A glorious heavenly multitude,
All praising God in song:*

*“All glory to our God on high
And on the earth his peace
For men to whom he favour shows
Which nevermore shall cease.”*

We look forward to celebrating many birthdays during the month of December. I hope that you have a fantastic day enjoying peace, fellowship, and community with your loved ones. May the LORD bless you with strength and health and joy as you live for his glory.

December 2014

- 1 SANDY SPYKSMA will be 33
Peace Haven Homes
6 Oneida Drive
Brantford, ON N3S 7X8
- 10 JAMES KAMMINGA will be 30
Box 1125
Carman, MB ROG OJO
- 15 FRANK ZEGERS will be 56
6528 1st Line
RR 3, Fergus, ON N1M 2W4
- 16 JULIE KAMMINGA will be 26
Box 1125
Carman, MB ROG OJO



A NOTE TO PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

If there are any address or other changes that I need to be aware of please let me know as soon as possible.

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Q In recent Canadian Reformed discussions about whether women should be eligible to participate in electing office-bearers, no one seems to be questioning the tradition which allows communicant male church members to vote regardless of their age. If I am not mistaken, more and more of our young people publicly profess their faith at a younger age than was customary in the past. It is therefore not unusual nowadays for boys as young as sixteen or seventeen (often grade twelve students) to take part in congregational elections. Our current practice appears to be a development that has escaped any ecclesiastical scrutiny. The impression that something is awry here is accentuated by the fact that in our churches communicant teenage boys are permitted to vote while women in authority over them, particularly their mothers and female Christian high school teachers, are not allowed to do so.

A prominent URC minister and seminary professor pointed out in his blog some time ago that the practice of tying congregational voting to the public profession of faith is a relatively modern trend. In this connection he mentioned that according to John Calvin children should be ready for admittance to the Lord's Supper by age ten (see *Institutes*, IV. xix.13). This same professor reported that his own children "came to the table at about ages 11-13," implying that in at least some URC congregations the right to vote is exercised at a later stage. Apparently our way of doing things is not the only Reformed way.

Is it not time for our churches to re-examine their traditional voting regulations (in which age is currently not taken into account) and to spell out scripturally defensible criteria for eligibility to participate in congregational elections?

A In my investigation related to this question I came across the comment in *Gereformeerde Kerkrecht*, Vol. 1, p. 539, by Dr. H. Bouwman, showing that in the past there was a disconnect indeed between the status of communicant member and the age at which male members were eligible to vote; it was set specifically at age twenty-three. He also mentions the Reformed churches in Germany and Hungary as specific examples. As well, I learned from an article written by Dr. A. Kuyper in 1867, "*Wat moeten wij doen: het stemrecht aan ons zelve houden of den kerke raad machtigen?*" ("What should we do: keeping the right to vote to ourselves or

authorize the consistory?" Translation mine, WdH) that in passing he makes a comment about the age restriction of twenty-three and he does not like it (his argument: having admitted someone to the Lord's Supper and all the other benefits of being a communicant member, how can you exclude him from voting?).

Considering the more recent dealings with this matter, from the 1995 *Acts of the General Synod of the CRC* (p. 762) I noted that they changed their Church Order to make age eighteen the age for entering upon all "the full rights and privileges of such [i.e. communicant] membership." Apparently this was the result of years of debate (cf. p. 712f, giving the history) whether participation in the Lord's Supper should be on the basis of covenant

status or an expression of faith. They opened the door to younger child communion on the basis of a profession of faith that did *not* include commitment to the Reformed confessions. But when those who had been admitted to the Lord's table on the basis of an age appropriate expression of faith, reached the age of eighteen, *and* made a commitment to the *confessions*, then they could have all the rights and privileges of communicant membership (i.e. voting and serving in office).

It is possible that among the few full congregations that joined the URC from the CRC after 1995 there may be some who had adopted the policy of not voting until age eighteen while in the CRC and continued it in the URC. I do know about the congregation of which this "prominent URC minister and seminary professor" is a member that adopted a motion back in 2004, showing that the bylaws of this URC congregation "provide every confessing member of the congregation the right, the freedom, to vote in congregational meetings (regardless of age)." It is interesting to note as well that in the grounds is stated that "while this motion has application to all confessing members of. . . , it has particular application to the growing number of young people who have made profession of faith but who may not have adequate life experience or education to apprehend the issues facing this congregation. Though they have the right to vote, it would not be wise for them to vote." In an additional ground it is stated that "previous efforts to restrict the right to vote based upon age have been defeated."

Overseeing all of the above, I believe that we should *not* engage in a re-examination of the traditional voting regulations (in which age is currently not taken into account). These historical data already show us that a

disconnect between communicant membership and the eligibility to vote leads to arbitrary decisions on age, on life experience, education, and the like. Although it may be true that the age of our young people making public profession of their faith has become younger than was customary in the past, the catechizing of the youth of the church, the required knowledge of the Scriptures and of the doctrine of the Old and New Testament as summarized in the confessions (i.e. the Three Forms of Unity), and the interview by the elders regarding their personal walk of life, piety, and ability to "discern the body of Christ" (i.e. both the meaning of Christ's sacrifice on the cross in all its depth and consequence, as well as the meaning of his body, the church!), should cover sufficiently that they are able to participate knowledgeably in congregational affairs and elections.

The same criteria I know to be the position and practice in the federation of the United Reformed Churches in North America (witness their *Doctrinal Commitment Study Report* of 2012). Of course, through continued study, growing in the knowledge of salvation, and by the weekly instruction in the Heidelberg Catechism, their competence to do so should grow. And finally, the aspect mentioned by the questioner regarding the voting privileges of male members as presently in practice in our churches, namely that "something is awry" with a view to the position of mothers and teachers in regard to women voting, has been labelled "an emotional argument," which should have no bearing on the discussion of voting privileges for women. It's been difficult and complicated enough already as it is, "to spell out scripturally defensible criteria for eligibility to participate in congregational elections."



Is there something you've been wanting to know?

An answer you've been looking for?

Ask us a question!

Please direct questions to Rev. W. denHollander

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