

# Clarion

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**IS THEISTIC EVOLUTION  
A MATTER OF DIVINE DESIGN?**



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# Without a Doubt?

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## *The real issue is the authority of Scripture*

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It is my understanding that a recent classis in Ontario has adopted a proposal that an emendation be made to our confession by our next general synod adding a section to the text of the Belgic Confession as we have it in Article 14 about the creation and fall of man. The addition is necessary, I read, to prevent the proliferation of the so-called theory of theistic evolution.

I love deep and fancy words, and so I immediately sat up straight. What in the world is “theistic evolution”? It sounds a bit scary and somewhat pompous, but that is not decisive. We do need to define terms so that we truly know what is being meant or suggested.

How can it be fairly explained? Surely you have heard about the theory of evolution? Let’s start there. This theory, promoted by Charles Darwin, suggests that all creatures evolved over millions of years. By a process of natural selection the fittest and strongest life forms survived and so we come eventually to the development of mankind. I think that Chuck was less certain about the exact origin of species, but he wasn’t a theologian.

Evolutionism itself is by definition *ungodly*. It is based on the belief that there is no “god” and that all things developed slowly and naturally over periods of millions of years. Those understand that evolutionists have only disdain for the Word of God. See also the heresy of Deism, the underlying religion of evolutionism.

But *theistic* evolutionism has taken unbelief out and put God back in. At least, so it seems. It is the claim of theistic evolution that the world and its inhabitants did evolve over millions of years but did so *under the guidance or with the involvement of God*. That’s where the “theistic” aspect comes in. Theos is God, theistic is godly. It is an important adjective. Evolution is now a matter of divine design and guidance. Saved by the bell?

Not quite, I’m afraid. When I read about “common ancestry” of apes and men, I do become a bit worried. And when I hear that we must necessarily accept the existence of “pre-Adamites” of some form or stature I wonder where the “theism” has gone. Long time passing. When I then also read that death must have been existent *before* the fall into sin as described in Genesis 3, I understand why the amendment was proposed. Bob Dylan would say “Now is the time for your tears.”

We should lay blame where it belongs, with those who do not show that they accept all the Scriptures *without a doubt*. Perhaps the Lord is unclear in his Word. Or – perish the thought – perhaps the scientists are wrong. May I say that whenever there is trouble brewing in the church, it is usually not caused by the men and women and children in the pew? Well, I’ve said it anyway and I have been around the block.

## **The authority of Holy Scripture**

Let us first consider another article in the Belgic Confession. The Holy Scriptures did not come by the impulse of man. In Article 5 of the Belgic Confession, we confess that the Scriptures need to be received as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith.” Then it follows “we believe *without any doubt* all things contained in them. . . .”

Without any doubt. All things. That’s a pretty strong position. What is revealed in the Bible is the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Anything that conflicts with this word should be dismissed immediately, on a personal basis and as a community. You have to stick to the Bible. If you do not understand something right away, do not go borrowing from other sources. You must stay with the Bible. Consult with those who unconditionally accept the Bible as the true Word of God.

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## INSIDE THIS ISSUE...

Issue 7 begins with an editorial from Rev. Klaas Stam, discussing a proposed amendment to the Belgic Confession. And on the subject of confessions: Rev. Clarence Bouwman shares his thoughts on the place of the confessions in our church's heritage.

On these pages readers will find part 2 of Dr. Wes Bredenhof's "Outward Looking Church" series. There is also a Further Discussion article from Dr. Ted Van Raalte responding to a previous article by Rev. Stam.

There is a report from Women's Savings Action. In addition, Issue 7 contains Treasures New and Old, Clippings on Politics and Religion, Ray of Sunshine, and the You Asked columns as well as a Mission News insert.

*Laura Veenendaal*

- 179 EDITORIAL**  
**Without a Doubt?**
- 181 TREASURES NEW & OLD**  
**Knowing Jesus as Lord**
- 182 Dreaming**
- 185 Outward Looking Church: Current Craze or**  
**Christ's Commission? (2)**
- 188 CLIPPINGS ON POLITICS AND RELIGION**
- 189 FURTHER DISCUSSION**
- 192 Women's Savings Action Newsletter**
- 193 RAY OF SUNSHINE**
- 194 YOU ASKED**

The Holy Scriptures do not allow for any evolutionist teaching, classical or theistic. That is my firm conviction. But, someone says, not all passages in the Bible are clear in these matters. Well, they are clear, and should you be ever confused, go with the biblical account. We believe the Bible without a doubt and that is equally true for commoners and academics. What we all need is simple humility, bowing before Scripture.

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***Anything that conflicts with this word  
should be dismissed  
immediately,  
on a personal basis and as a community***

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Does the Bible answer all our questions? It does not. Does the Bible give room for evolutionist thinking, theistic or not? It does not. Even if you put “theistic” before “evolution” many questions are still left unanswered. Our understanding still remains limited. Our conclusions may be wrong. This holds true also especially for scientists who have developed some expertise in a particular field. They must still bow before the truth of Scripture, and not adapt Scripture to their way of thinking. The truth is above all (Art 7, BC). That is the only way to being and remaining a *Christian* academic. The real issue is the authority of Scripture.

### **Amendment needed?**

With this in mind I'd like to make a few remarks about adding a line or so to the Belgic Confession. It is true that over the centuries not many amendments were proposed with respect to the Belgic Confession. Overall the text of the creed satisfies as a faithful summary of Scripture. Is it true that the present formulation regarding the creation of all things is unclear? I don't really think so.

I read about a dissertation which urged the churches to write new confessions that suit the emphases and needs of our time. To keep a creed fresh and lively, we need to blast away the cobwebs from time to time. There are new issues which must be properly tackled to keep everyone in the fold.

Flashback. I remember how Synod 1983 struggled to arrive at a mutually acceptable *revision* of the creeds, forms, and psalms. It is the longest Synod on record. There was great commitment to have the entire *Book of Praise* revised. Not only did Synod 1983 struggle bravely, but also many committees and consistories spent countless hours preparing and revising submissions to Synod. If this was the case with only a revision, imagine what complete re-writing of the confessions will lead to. I was recording clerk of that assembly, and I still have PTSD from the experience.

The current proposal to amend Article 14 of the Belgic Confession was immediately attacked on social media. Classis on Facebook, what's next? Soon all kinds of people will renounce the proposed amendment. Now you know that I do not easily back down in a skirmish. But Klaas is not on Facebook. Neither does he have a blog. I get only one kick at the can. I ask myself if it is necessary and wise to propose an amendment in this manner. Can we find a less painful route?

### **A lesson from the past**

From the classical documents we know that a Dutch Synod in 1905 took out some words from Article 36 of the Belgic Confession. This had to do with the task of the government. When you consider the history of this deletion, you will notice that many were happy with it, but also many were against it.

I am more interested now in the way the matter was resolved. The offending words were deleted, but were also mentioned in a footnote. Perhaps that is the way we ought to go now, if a change is really necessary. After the first paragraph of Article 14 a brief note can be added. “*Synod 20??*” of the *Canadian Reformed Churches* decided with respect to this article: the confession of God's creation and providence excludes any teaching of evolutionism, be it natural or theistic.”

This editorial is not intended as the final word on this issue. But it is my final word. Perhaps this proposal can find some broader discussion in the churches. We should not have undue haste but carefully prepare together what needs to be said. So that we all continue to confess that we believe *without a doubt* all that has been revealed in Scripture. *For that is the bottom line.*







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# Knowing Jesus as Lord

***"Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God'."***

John 20:28

How do you know Jesus? Is it a private knowledge that you find personally "in your heart?" How would you convince a skeptic who needs evidence? How will you convince yourself on those days when Jesus seems far away and out of sight?

Thomas, the Lord's disciple, was a skeptic. He wasn't there when Jesus revealed himself to the other disciples after his resurrection. Those disciples were filled with joy and were excited to tell him, "We have seen the Lord." But Thomas is not convinced.

Thomas reacts the same way I'm sure most people today would, "unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." He wants solid objective proof that Jesus rose from the dead.

Then, lo and behold, Jesus comes for another visit. He says to Thomas,

"Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." You want the facts? Here they are.

What has Jesus done for Thomas? He has given him a precious gift. The gift of visible proof to confirm the testimony that he is alive. But it's more than just the gift of physical evidence. I mean, we still haven't really talked about why it matters to Thomas that Jesus has risen from the dead. A bystander might wonder what all the commotion is about. Sure, it's a miracle, great! But Thomas' reaction goes way beyond just seeing a miracle.

How does he know Jesus? Suppose you learn that the person you've been talking to is the Prime Minister of Canada? You might finally say, "I know you!" But what if you learn that the person you are talking about is your long lost brother you thought you

would never see again? You know your own brother in a very different way. It's the kind of knowledge that comes from being very close to a person, from loving him.

That's exactly what Christ's self-revelation does to Thomas. Seeing the risen Jesus standing there puts Christ's life and ministry in proper perspective. He knows there is only one way this person could be Jesus and that's if he is also his Lord and his God.

What has Jesus done? So much more than simply scientific proof could do. Jesus reveals himself and Thomas responds with a confession of faith in the Lord he loves.

How do you know Jesus? Where do you meet him? Read his Word and he fills you with a knowledge that can only come from faith and love.

When you encounter the risen Lord on those pages, you can answer him too, "My Lord and my God." **C**

## For Further Study

1. Why do some people read the Bible and believe, while other may read the Bible and not believe?
2. Why do we need the Holy Spirit to read the Bible?
3. How has reading the Bible brought you closer to Jesus?

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# Dreaming



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One has those days when one dreams away the time, and my summer holiday provided precisely that opportunity. The holidays are long past, but the dream isn't; in fact, with the passage of time it slowly crystalizes.... Mind if I share?

## FIFA

I guess it all started with the FIFA cup last summer. Folk whose ancestors migrated to Canada several generations ago proudly sported flags supporting their favourite overseas team. You saw them everywhere: German flags, Italian colours, Dutch shades. In the Niagara Peninsula there are obviously many folk with roots in The Netherlands; the red, white, and blue distinctives of the Dutch flag were everywhere. Even the parking lot of the Dutch church in town was awash in orange; a Dutch connection now embarrassed no one!

It got me thinking. Is there anything else in our Dutch parentage that could make us proud enough to wear our colours boldly? The world cup is exciting enough to awaken our roots, but surely there's more in our heritage worth celebrating than Holland's excellence at soccer.

## Liberation

I know there is. Seventy years ago this past summer the Lord granted in The Netherlands an event that's become known as the Liberation of 1944. It's not to be confused with the Liberation of 1945, when with the assistance of Canadian soldiers The Netherlands was finally freed from German oppression – an event, by the way, we may not forget! The Liberation of 1944 described a release from a different sort of oppression, one where church leaders (in the form of a synod) sought to hold people in bondage to a teaching simply not found in Holy Scripture. I need not give much detail of that event now, but remind you only of this essential element: the people who experienced the Liberation as a *liberation* did so because the event gave them the freedom again to take

God's Word at face value. And that Word spoke so richly about the bond of love God sovereignly and graciously established with sinners; *he* claimed particular persons, no better than any other, to be his children-by-covenant. On the strength of *his* promise, these persons may dare to say: "I belong, with body and soul, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ." That means in the ups and downs of daily life: "He preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head, indeed, all things must work together for my salvation." You'll recognize the language of Lord's Day 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism. In fact, parents can teach their children on God's authority to get really personal when they recite Lord's Day 1, or Psalm 23: "The Lord is *my* shepherd." For believing parents and their children this glorious gospel is so comforting!

## We belong!

This is the wealth that our fathers took along when they migrated to the New World in the decade after the closing of World War II. This is the wealth our parents sought to pass on to our generation, and it's the wealth we seek to pass on to those who follow us: *you belong!* We try to pass it on in the preaching of the gospel and the Catechism classes, try to pass on this perspective in the parenting of the home and in the education in our schools. Neither the present nor the future generation should doubt their identity; those after us should dare to join us in saying that we belong to Jesus Christ! It gives a perspective of comfort to all of life. It's a heritage that makes it worth flying some Dutch colour! So there's the stuff that floated through my mind when I left for my summer vacation. . . .

## Envy

And as I was doing things I don't normally do, my thoughts went back to conversations and experiences of the past, and a golden thread began to tie the events together:

- A native of India I had met during my time in Australia connected with me some weeks earlier. He's currently running a seminary in Hyderabad and had just welcomed forty-seven new students on the day I spoke with him. Could I please, he begged, please come and teach the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort in his school? Why me, why a Canadian Reformed minister? His point: we want your heritage!
- Rev. Dong has connections with numerous Christians in the Far East, through very little effort of his own to find these contacts. Why do these Christians seek out Rev. Dong? (There are, after all, numerous options available to them; many, many churches are busy in that vast land.) But they seek out Rev. Dong because they hear a perspective in his work that they don't hear elsewhere – and that's the heritage we are so used to. The point: they want our heritage!

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***Neither the present  
nor the future generation  
should doubt their identity;  
those after us should dare to join us  
in saying that we belong to Jesus Christ!***

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- A couple of years ago a certain Rev. Gelm Melo from the Philippines fronted up in Ontario. He was in our midst looking for ways to tap into our Canadian Reformed heritage so that he could pass it on to folk in his homeland. Currently the Providence Canadian Reformed Church in Hamilton, in conjunction with the Free Reformed Church of Baldivis (Australia), is satisfying Rev. Melo's hunger for our heritage. Last fall Providence sent Rev. de Gelder to the Philippines to teach for a few weeks. Same point: they want our heritage.
- Half a dozen years ago four Koreans spent three days in my office in Yarrow. Via the Internet these men had discovered the heritage we take for granted, and now came to learn how we go about sharing that heritage through the preaching and teaching ministries of the church as well as through the training parents give their children at home and the education those children receive at school. On behalf of the Committee on Churches Abroad Rev. Souman visited with (some of) these same

men some months ago. Again, they want our heritage!

- I sat in Pastor Adriano's living room in Recife half a dozen years ago, and we got to talking about what shape the mission work in Brazil needed to take in the years to come. He was categorically insistent: no matter what shape that mission work takes, you (Canadians) must make it Priority #1 to pass on your heritage. Do not, he pleaded, leave us to discover it for ourselves; it's far too rich for that, and we need it now. Teach us, tell us, impress it on us! He went so far as to call for help in getting this across in the classroom.

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***There's now an easily accessible  
window of opportunity in many countries  
of the world to speak about  
and spread the good news taught  
in the Confessions***

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- Within our sister churches in South Africa an emeritus minister (Rev. Jopie vander Linden) scanned the (English) volumes of his library into his computer, and via the Internet began offering assistance to ministers across Africa who have no access to the books needed to make a sermon. He supplies them with distinctly Reformed material, including anything from our churches he can lay his hands on. He has so many requests for help that recently a second man (Rev. Eugene Viljoen) was devoted full time to assist with this work. A group in Lincoln has spearheaded support for this second man. The point is the same: across Africa there is enormous hunger for the very heritage we take for granted.
- The Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad (appointed by our General Synod) receives periodically requests from who knows where for assistance in relation to the Reformed faith. This Committee has only very minimal ways at its disposal to provide assistance to those longing for the Reformed heritage.

### **Lesson?**

To me, these examples make clear that perhaps we need to fly our colours a bit more proudly. We're typically somewhat apologetic about our Dutch connection, and would much rather be known simply as Canadian

churches. I absolutely want us to be known as a Canadian church, but I don't for a moment believe that we ought therefore to minimize the treasure that crossed the ocean with our (grand)parents. On the contrary, confessional standards of the Great Reformation as the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort have coursed down the rivers of Dutch Church History for centuries, and long ago appeared on the shores of our continent. But via the Secession of 1834, the Dolientie of 1886, and the Liberation of 1944, the Lord provided our parents with a depth of scriptural insight that today is the envy of so many fellow Christians around the world – especially as it unpacks how those Confessions capture what the Lord has revealed in Scripture about his covenant with undeserving sinners. That depth of insight travelled the Atlantic in the luggage of our fathers – so that today that wealth is, by God's grace, *ours*. It's nothing to be ashamed of; it's instead reason to fly our Dutch colours with gratitude – and then to do all in our power to share that heritage with any and all who hunger to own it with us. And there's where the dreaming continues. . . .

## Share?

How shall we go about sharing this wealth with the envious of the world's farthest corners? And what could we do to broadcast this wealth to others who don't know about it? I see some challenges here:

- Do we need to do more on the Internet? If so, how does one get that going? And who finances it?
- Do we need to write more material that communicates the wealth of our heritage? If so, how do we make sure potential authors have the time they need to

do the required research and put pen to paper? Does that require realigning some expectations amongst our professors and ministers? If yes, how ought we to finance that? Or do we need to set aside a minister or three for the work of teaching internationally? Again, how do we organize that? Is there room for such a concept in the Church Order? Better: would such an effort be helpful in God's kingdom?

- How do we communicate to foreign cultures a heritage that has flowed through western (Dutch) culture? That may require more "translation" than simply one of language. What's it take to make that happen?

## Window

The world has become rather small, inasmuch as one can today quickly get to places that took days or even months to access not all that long ago. That, of course, is due to air transport, plus (in many places) relatively open borders. As a result there's now an easily accessible window of opportunity in many countries of the world to speak about and spread the good news caught in the Confessions: *I belong!*

The world, however, is changing at a rapid rate, so quickly that today's windows of opportunity may be tightly closed tomorrow. If anything is to be done, it seems to me that we need to think and act on it sooner rather than later. My thought: the time has come to do some serious brainstorming on these questions, and then take action while the opportunity is there. Our orange colours shouldn't get stuffed into a closet. Good dreams need better endings than that.

**C**







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# Outward Looking Church: Current Craze or Christ's Commission? (2)

*Revised from a presentation for the Spring Office Bearers Conference held March 22, 2014 in Burlington, ON.*

## How do our confessions answer?

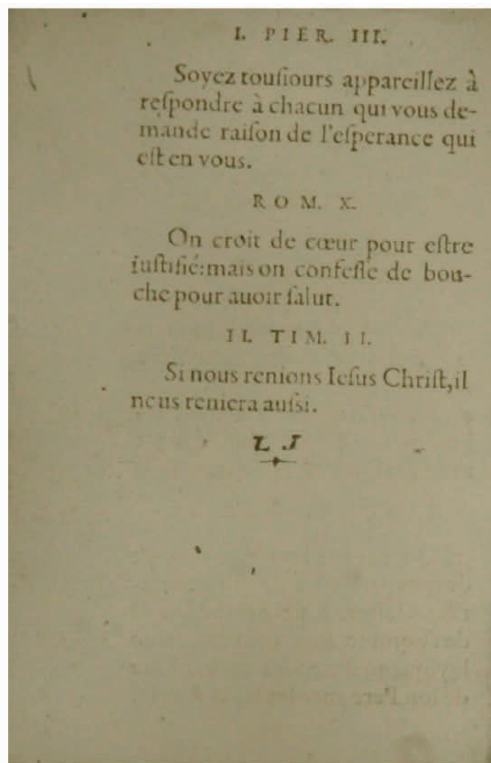
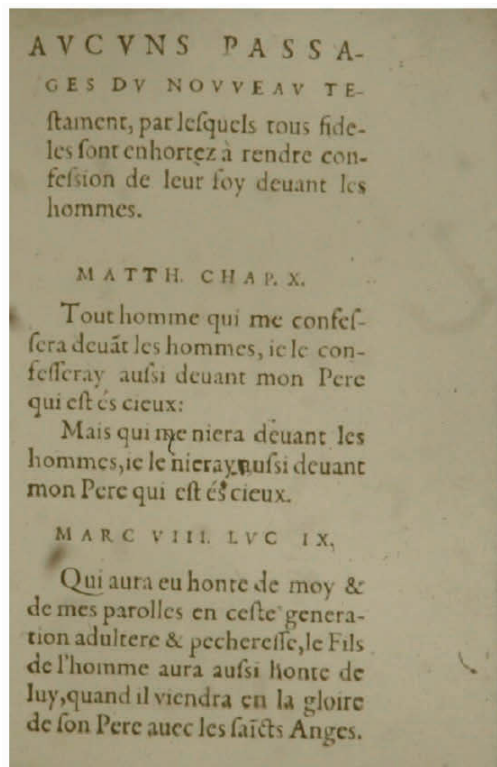
Since I phrased my thesis in terms of the confessions, it makes sense to start there. There is a lot that could be said. Appeal could be made to Lord's Day 12 of the Catechism and how it speaks of the three-fold office of Christians. As prophets we are to confess the name of Christ. Who are we to confess the name of Christ to? This obviously has an outward looking orientation. We could go on and think of Lord's Day 32 and how winning our neighbours for Christ by our godly walk of life is part of the reason we must do good works. There again at least part of the perspective is looking outward. Or we could spend some time on Lord's Day 48, dealing with the second petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Your kingdom come." We confess that this includes asking our heavenly Father to "preserve *and increase*" his church. The word "increase" there refers to numerical increase and that implies a certain orientation among those who pray along the lines of this petition.

We could move on from the Catechism to the Canons of Dort and the same perspective is in evidence there. It comes in connection with the doctrine of election. There are those who say that election knocks the motivation out of outreach. Maybe you've heard Reformed churches mockingly referred to as "the frozen chosen." But that can only be true if we don't take our own confession seriously. We believe and confess that God uses his church and her witness to draw in the elect. Election becomes evident (or comes to expression in history) through evangelism. Article 5 of chapter 2 of the Canons of Dort is clear enough on this point:

The promise of the gospel is that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life. This promise ought to be announced and proclaimed universally and without discrimination to all peoples and to all men, to whom God in his good pleasure sends the gospel, together with the command to repent and believe.

Our confession says that we have a gospel promise which we are obligated to announce universally, to all peoples, all men. The language is undeniably clear. So also if we take the Canons of Dort seriously, they should produce an outward looking orientation in the church.

Indeed, we could spend a lot of time on what the Canons and Catechism have to say about this. But I want to focus our attention on the Belgic Confession this morning. Let me first explain the rationale for doing that. The period of about 1950 to 1990 was one of widespread deconfessionalization in the Christian Reformed Church. For many CRC members (but by no means all), the confessions became museum artifacts, pieces of CRC history and heritage, rather than a living expression of the biblical faith of the church. In that forty year period, many claimed that the CRC had basically become a Dutch ghetto. The perception was that the church was turned in on itself, too often only inward looking. Discussions took place at various levels and in various venues about why this was. Blame was often assigned to the Three Forms of Unity and especially the Belgic Confession. One CRC seminary professor (Robert Recker) wrote that with the Belgic Confession we're faced with a church "talking with itself rather than a church before the world."<sup>1</sup> Influential figures in the CRC agreed with Recker. So, in other words, if you want to know why the CRC became a Dutch ghetto turned in on itself, look no further than the



*Early printings of the Belgic Confession included these two pages of Scripture passages encouraging believers to profess their faith before men.*

Belgic Confession. Then the solution also begins to suggest itself: we can hold on to the Confession as a museum artifact, something that shows something of our history and where we came from, but for today we need a new confession which will really help us be an outward looking church. That partly accounts for the development of the “Contemporary Testimony: Our World Belongs to God.” This new confession in the CRC was adopted in 1986 and its history is rooted in dissatisfaction with the Three Forms of Unity on certain points. That included a perception that the Belgic Confession is an exercise in ecclesiastical navel-gazing. That historical episode puts the question squarely before us this morning: what orientation *does* the Confession provide for the church?

When we think of the Belgic Confession today, we typically think of a section at the back of our *Book of Praise*. This is true of all our confessions. For us, they’re embedded in a rather large book. However, around the world, in different places, these confessions are being printed separately in convenient, cost-effective formats. For example, there is the Heidelberg Catechism in Spanish

produced by CLIR in Costa Rica. There is also the Belgic Confession in Russian, produced by the Evangelical Reformed Church in Ukraine. Both are in a convenient and cost-effective format so that believers can share them with others. There’s an outward looking, evangelistic intention here. They didn’t make these booklets for church members, but so that church members could share their faith with outsiders. That fits precisely with the history and original intentions of these documents, especially the Belgic Confession.

When the Belgic Confession was first published in 1561, it didn’t appear as part of a *Book of Praise*. It was published as a booklet in a convenient, cost-effective format. It was designed for mass distribution, not just amongst Reformed believers, but also with their friends, family, and neighbours. We know of two printings of the Confession in 1561, from two different Huguenot cities in France, Rouen and Lyons. Only one copy remains of each of those printings. We might ask why. We don’t know how many copies were involved in those first printings – it’s impossible to tell. We do know that the printing

## ACCEPTED

Accepted the call to Immanuel CanRC of Edmonton, Alberta:

**Rev. J. Van Spronsen**

serving in Brazil as a missionary of the Aldergrove CanRC.

## PHONE NUMBER UPDATE

The study phone number for **Rev. D. Wynia** should be 905-348-6884 not 905-563-6166.

## CHURCH NEWS

from Rouen included at least 200 copies. We know that because there is a report from the Spanish authorities saying that they found some 200 copies in the library of Guido de Bres. The Spanish authorities burned those. But other copies *were* circulating; we just have no idea of how many. We do know they were printed cheaply and quickly. There are a couple of possibilities to explain why we only have one copy from each of the two printings in 1561. One would be that the Spanish destroyed most of them. Another might be that they were so widely used and distributed that they fell apart and didn't fare well over the following decades and centuries. It could be a combination of both and maybe there are other factors besides. What is clear is that, from the beginning, it was designed as a document with an outward orientation. The format speaks to that.

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***There was an acute self-awareness that the Reformed churches existed in the midst of unbelief and their confession was addressed to that lost world in darkness***

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This is confirmed when we look closer at the Confession as it first came off the press. On two of the first pages of the booklet, we find a collection of Scripture passages. Over these passages were these words, "Some passages of the New Testament in which the faithful are exhorted to render confession of their faith before men." Then followed Scripture passages: Matthew 10:32-33, Mark 8:38, Luke 9:26, 1 Peter 3:15, Romans 10:10, and 2 Timothy 2:12b. Each of these passages has an outward perspective. The point being made is that confession of faith is inherently an outward action. We confess our faith "before men," to the world.

Oftentimes when we think of the Belgic Confession, we think of it merely as an effort to gain tolerance for the Reformed faith. The Reformed Churches in the Low Countries were persecuted by the Spanish led by Philip II, and they wanted to reassure the authorities that they were not rebellious. Instead, they were simply God-fearing people who believed what the Bible teaches. In this

understanding, the Confession is simply a defense. But this understanding doesn't do full justice to the original intent of the Confession. It was not simply to gain

tolerance that the Confession was written, it was also to win converts. There was an acute self-awareness that the Reformed churches existed in the midst of unbelief and their confession was addressed to that lost world in darkness. Throughout the Confession, you find the words "we believe," and those very words signify that there is a body of believers confessing together, confessing together to a pagan world in need of the gospel. Whenever you see a believing "we" in the Confession, you should also think of the lost "them."

Based on these general considerations, P.Y. DeJong was exactly right when he wrote a commentary on the Belgic Confession and entitled it *The Church's Witness to the World*. Earlier I mentioned the deconfessionalizing of the CRC, but you may remember that I was careful not to paint everyone in the CRC black. In that forty year period, there were men like P.Y. DeJong who stoutly resisted the deconfessionalization of the church. They argued that the Confessions were misunderstood and undervalued. Later, men like P.Y. DeJong would become founding fathers of the United Reformed Churches. Having been through a struggle in the CRC, they maintained that the Confessions, when they're rightly understood, do not produce ecclesiastical scoliosis, a dysfunction where the church is curved in on itself.

But that's about the broad nature and historical intent of the Confession, what about the actual content of the Belgic Confession? Does that say anything to the question before us this morning? Since we're speaking about the church, let's just focus on the ecclesiological articles of the Confession, Articles 27-32. We'll do that in the next installment.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Recker, "An Analysis of the Belgic Confession As To Its Mission Focus," *Calvin Theological Journal* 7.2 (November 1972): 179. **C**



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# America's Misguided Cultural Imperialism

Nigeria's struggle against Boko Haram is well-known and the media regularly cover the atrocities committed by this Islamic terrorist organization. It is trying to establish an Islamic State in Nigeria and neighbouring countries. In the process these Muslims have killed thousands of civilians, mostly Christians. In January of this year they slaughtered at least 2,000 civilians in one town, Baga, in just four days. These terrorists rape, murder, kidnap, and displace thousands of people in the north of Nigeria. The kidnapping of 276 girls in Chibok, a mostly Christian village, made headlines worldwide but the terror goes on and on. Nigeria itself is incapable of stopping it.

It gets worse. President Obama has apparently made it clear to Nigeria that America will not help Nigeria to fight Boko Haram unless Nigerians adopt Obama's views on homosexual rights. According to Bishop Emmanuel Badejo of Oyo, Nigeria, as reported on February 17 on the Aleteia website, "the United States has made clear it will not help Nigeria fight the Boko Haram terror group unless the country modify its laws regarding homosexuality, family planning and birthcontrol. It's very clear that a cultural imperialism exists. In fact, I think that Africa is suffering greatly from a cultural imperialism that threatens to erode our cultural values." He went on to say, quite rightly, that "I think, to say the least, it is criminal."

The bishop also underlined the hypocrisy of Obama saying that he is committed to human freedom and then refusing Nigeria the freedom to draft and maintain laws that reflect biblical morals on abortion, gay marriage, and homosexual practice. Only if Nigeria legalizes abortion and allows the killing of children not yet born will the current American administration help prevent the killing of Christians in Nigeria by Muslim terrorists.

This is not the first time that this charge has been made against Obama. Back in August, 2014, World Net Daily reported that Steve Stockman, a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, had said that the Obama was not helping Nigeria because it objected to Nigerian policy. That policy, as leaked anonymously, was "Nigeria's determination to affirm traditional marriage and reject same-sex unions along with nondiscrimination statutes that endorse homosexuality."

If this is all true, and there seems to be no reason to doubt it, given current American inaction to the slaughter that continues in Nigeria in spite of Nigeria's plea for help, it is a very sad commentary of what America has come to. What used to be a world beacon of peace, hope, and basic Christian values, has become an aggressive exporter of unbiblical morals and pornographic filth. While Scripture teaches that government should protect life, the Obama administration is not only aggressively promoting the abortion agenda within America, it is also exporting it to the rest of the world, especially the developing world, with a vengeance. Access to abortion is a consideration for foreign aid. The same goes for so-called homosexual rights. It has become a key component of American foreign policy in Africa where the vast majority of that continent's nations are against granting homosexuals special rights.

America was once a great nation and functioned as a beacon of hope and decency. That country has been given much. But much will also be required of it. May the Lord have mercy on this nation and raise godly leaders. That country (and also our own!) need our prayers. **C**



# A Covenant of Works?

## Affirming the Covenants of Works and Grace

In a recent *Clarion* editorial Rev. Klaas Stam challenged the idea that there ever was a covenant of works. This topic was one of several discussed in a special colloquium by some seminary professors at the URCNA Synod Visalia in June 2014.<sup>1</sup> It's only natural that Rev. Stam would respond to this discussion, since his own book, *The Covenant of Love*, takes the position that there was no covenant of works (except perhaps at Sinai).<sup>2</sup>

Instead, Rev. Stam argues there that there is only one covenant before the fall into sin and after it, what he calls the covenant of love. I appreciate that Rev. Stam, in spite of illness, continues to write in *Clarion* out of love for Christ and his church. In this case, however, I would like to offer some counterpoint in order to bolster ecumenical relations, to explore what fits within our confessional boundaries, and to remind us that Rev. Stam's mono-covenantal position is quite in the minority among Reformed theologians. Meager support, of course, isn't decisive; exegesis is.

The issue at stake is clear: was there ever a covenant of works? In order to answer such a question one needs a clear description of the thing. Rev. Stam writes, "It goes like this: before the fall man was called to work and so to merit eternal glory. This was called the covenant of works" (58). Later, he makes a contrast, "The covenant is not a contract, but a relationship" (61). His definition, however, doesn't account for what defenders of the covenant of works usually say, and his contrast is open to question. Nevertheless, his view and the traditional Reformed view may be compatible; I'll suggest how near the end of this response.

## Matters of definition: merit

Very few, if any, Reformed theologians would speak without qualification of Adam *meriting* eternal glory. Unqualified or strict merit would require that Adam produce something new, something which did not grow out of what God had already given to him, something *ex nihilo*.

This is impossible. No one can put God in debt in this sense. Thus, when Reformed theologians spoke of Adam meriting something from God, they usually did so with utmost care, speaking of a "merit" by virtue of God's covenanted promises.<sup>3</sup>

## Matters of definition: contract or relationship?

Is the covenant a relationship? I would rather say that the covenant establishes the *terms* of a relationship. The relationship is already there by virtue of creation; the covenant regulates the relationship. Is the covenant a contract? Not merely, but then a contract is not the opposite of a relationship, but actually a species or kind of relationship. The cry that the covenant is a relationship, not a contract, is a false dilemma that opposes a caricature of covenant theology. I am most familiar with this claim being made by Barthian historians such as Holmes Rolston III and Thomas Torrance, who wanted to jettison covenant, predestination, and the entire Westminster Confession.

## Adam's works as leading measure of faithfulness

Why the term covenant of *works*? Even the Westminster Confession uses "covenant of life" as well (WLC, 20), so the term is not cast in stone. Whatever term is used, who could quibble with the Westminster statement that God required "personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience" of Adam? As for Adam's pre-fall works, surely they would also have to meet the standards of Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 91 – out of true faith, to God's glory, and according to God's law. God wanted Adam's heart, after all! Dr. Van Vliet and I argued the matter this way at Synod Visalia: God demanded of Adam the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and love. We wrote:

When Adam obeyed God he did so out of a heart of trust in God. His calling was to have that faith in God which took God at his Word, that hope which looked in faith to the time of "immutable fellowship," and that love which flowed out of such faith. In other

words, while the leading measure of Adam's faithfulness was his "personal, perpetual, and perfect obedience" (WCF 7.2, WLC 20), this loving obedience could only have been present together with faith and hope, and particularly as the fruit of such faith/trust.

Of course prior to the fall, Adam's faith was not in Christ our Redeemer, yet he had to exercise faith in God and the words that God had spoken. Adam's works may thus be considered the *leading measure* of Adam's faithfulness, for he was able to do them, and they were to be the fruit of his faith and hope.<sup>4</sup> The term "covenant of works" emphasizes that Adam could perform the required obedience.

### Why distinguish pre- and post-fall covenants?

Let's now consider why one would distinguish the nature of the covenant with man before the fall and after the fall. The main reason flows out of the threat God made in Genesis 2:17, before the fall: "In the day you eat of it, you will surely die." Rev. Stam writes that, "This means that there is only one obligation in this relationship, namely that Adam and Eve recognize the Lord God as *Sovereign*" (60). But Rev. Stam's deduction is rather minimalistic. Any command of God can be reduced to the requirement to recognize God as sovereign. Yet the contents of each command will remain. In this case, the Lord tells his perfect creatures that it is possible for them to disobey and it is possible for them to die. In fact, if they disobey, they most certainly will die. The possibility of sinning clearly indicates that Adam and Eve *could* turn away from God. Their fellowship was not yet immutable; it could change. They ought to have found all their stability and strength in the Lord, but they were *able to sin*. For almost two millennia theologians have said that prior to the fall Adam and Eve were *able to sin*, whereas after the fall they (and we) were *not able not to sin*. In Christ we are *enabled not to sin*, and in glory we will be *not able to sin*. So the distinction of "able to sin" and "not able not to sin" points to a decisive difference pre- and post-fall.

Further, God threatened, "you will surely die." He did not say that he would bring his people back if only they would repent, as he later did for his people Israel (e.g., Deut 30). This is another major difference between the pre- and post-fall situations. The older theologians would say that this pre-fall covenant "admits of no repentance." Thus it had to be ended because its terms were perfect, personal, and perpetual obedience *or* death. There was no third possibility for continuing the relationship with

God under the terms of *that* covenant. When God gave his promise that the Seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent, he was announcing a new kind of covenant, one that would depend entirely on himself, on his grace.

This entire dependence on grace cannot be emphasized enough, and forms one further reason for the distinction of a covenant *of grace* from that of works. Rev. Stam's mono-covenantal construct is all about love ("we must *respond to this love*. . . walk in good works," p. 61). This love motif can easily lead to a lack of emphasis on the essential roles of God's grace and our faith in salvation. Life in the covenant is not just about responding to love with love, but about emptying oneself of any claim on righteousness and relying only on Jesus Christ.

### Fullness of life in Paradise?

The question of what Adam and Eve would have gained if they remained obedient is easily dismissed among us Canadian Reformed folk. After all, didn't they have the fullness of life already? Didn't the tree of life represent to them that God was sustaining them in fullness of life? What more did they need? Well, actually, they needed a lot more! As Dr. Lane Tipton of the OPC recently pointed out at the 2015 CRTS conference, in the garden Adam and Eve lived under threat of the devil disrupting everything, under the threat of death if they disobeyed, under the realization that their fellowship with God was mutable, and with the task to guard the garden against these threats (as Rev. Stam agrees, 60). They lived in danger, the danger of death and broken fellowship lurking at every corner. Reformed theologians have typically argued, contrary to the Lutherans, that this was *not* the fullness of life.<sup>5</sup>

One would certainly not want to live forever under such conditions. Given God's loving nature and given his plan to have a finite number of elect persons dwell with him in all eternity, it's really quite sensible to speculate that at some point God would have finally declared that mankind had met the test, if we had not fallen in Adam. But as we know, that wasn't his plan. Fullness of life would come only in Christ, for the glory of our electing, redeeming, and renewing God.

### Mono- and bi- or tri-covenantal views compatible?

What I've outlined above is not in all respects *demand*ed by our three confessions of faith. But it certainly

satisfies them and it is in the mainline of Reformed orthodoxy as it developed from the late 1500s onward.<sup>6</sup>

What Rev. Stam proposes is different, but let me be irenic and suggest how our accounts may be coordinated. When I read that Rev. Stam believes that the covenant of love was “safeguarded in Christ before the creation of the world” (60), that he agrees that “God entered into this relationship with Adam and Eve well before the fall” (61), and that the covenant is of course now “made with believers and their seed” (61), it leads me to suggest that his “covenant of love” operates at an upper or overall level, while the traditional covenants of the two or three covenant view – a covenant of redemption among the Persons of the Trinity, covenant of life/works/favour/friendship in Paradise, and covenant of grace in Christ – operate at a lower or more specific level. In other words, he uses “covenant of love” as a broad rubric to encompass the other three covenant constructs typically used by Reformed theologians. I wonder whether he would consider this suggestion. After all, several times he calls the covenant of love “eternal.” And I think the traditional arguments for the two or three covenant view, some of which I’ve brought forward here and which he does not consider either in his book or his article, are compelling. I especially want to hear from Rev. Stam more about grace and faith within the covenant, as these are the only possible sources for our covenanted love.

## Ecumenical relations

Perhaps our discussion here can assist ecumenical relations by showing how differing accounts of covenant may yet satisfy the clear scriptural doctrines of creation, fall, sin, predestination, grace, faith, Christ’s merits, justification, and our glory. We do well to test ourselves against Scripture, the confessions, and the history of exegetically-grounded Reformed theology, in order to help us determine the limits of what we should consider acceptable and edifying. This is exactly what the discussion at Synod Visalia set out to do.

Theodore G. Van Raalte

<sup>1</sup> Klaas Stam, “Was There Ever a Covenant of Works,” *Clarion* 64:3 (Feb 13/15), 58–61 (bracketed page numbers in this article refer to said editorial). For some reflections by one of the professors that participated in the colloquium at Synod Visalia, readers may consult Jason Van Vliet, “Postponement or Progress? Personal Reflections on Synod Visalia 2014,” *Clarion* 63:14 (July 18/14), 350–354. Some further discussion also ensued in *Christian Renewal*. The documents that were exchanged by the professors Godfrey and Venema (URCNA) and Van Raalte and Van Vliet (CanRC) prior to the Synod are available online at <https://www.urna.org/urna/Synod2014/Reports/CERCU%20Synodical%20Colloquium%20Document%20-%20Synod%20Visalia%202014.pdf>. Accessed Feb 20, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> In one place Rev. Stam calls the Mosaic covenant a covenant of works (58). In contrast, the Westminster Standards themselves affirm that the Mosaic covenant was an administration of the covenant of grace (WCF 7.5). I find Rev. Stam’s assertion surprising, but I doubt that he means to join those theologians at Westminster West who have recently asserted that the Mosaic covenant was a republication of the covenant of works.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Herman Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man* (Escondido: Den Dulk, 1990), 1.4 (pp. 67–78).

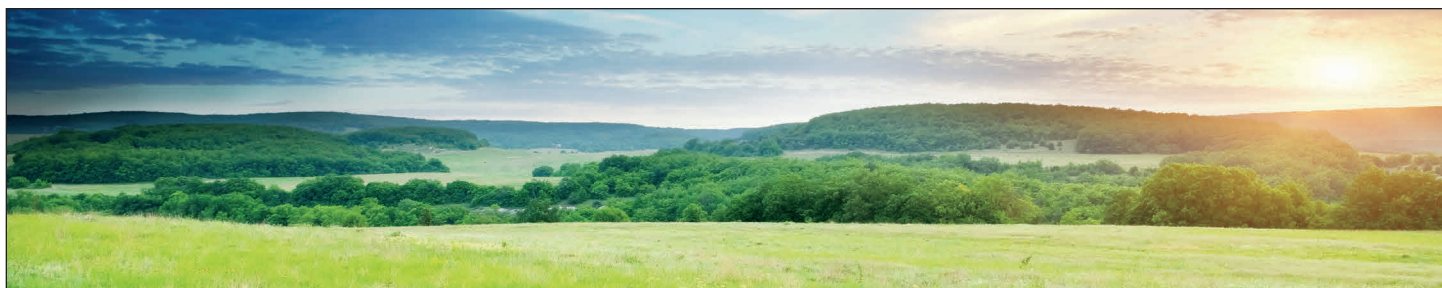
<sup>4</sup> Rev. Stam considers whether Genesis 2:15 “to work the garden” can be used to undergird the covenant of works (60). I am not aware of any theologian who has equivocated between “work the garden” and “covenant of works,” so this seems to be beside the point.

<sup>5</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), vol. 2, pp. 572–6.

<sup>6</sup> Contrary to Rev. Stam’s assertion (58), one can find the tri-covenantal view and the covenant of works overtly defended in a continental Reformed confession, namely, the Helvetic Consensus Formula of 1675.

*From time to time Clarion will publish longer responses to articles received. The decision as to which responses to publish will rest with the Editor.*

C





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Joanne Van Dam,  
Chris Nienhuis,  
and Janet Van Vliet

# Women's Savings Action Newsletter

"And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ." (Eph 1:9, 10)

In high school we were taught that our worldview affects everything we do. The way our teacher worked it out made a lot of sense, and we could appreciate that belief in Jesus Christ affects every choice that we make. It affects not just our personal lives but shapes the direction our society takes as well.

When you haven't been in school for a number of years, it takes something to spark thinking about these kinds of things. Life goes on day by day with its routines and special challenges that come – sometimes in bunches, sometimes farther apart, so you tend to take worldviews for granted. There's just a lot of work to be done, so there is little time for meditation or musing.

When reading an article in *Clarion* about Islam, the importance of correct theology became very clear again. It reminded me of that Grade 12 history course and our discussion of worldviews. As a Muslim you would believe that God "rules with absolute will. . . we can only submit to that will." As a result the Muslim person is fatalistic. The article gives the example of car accidents in Saudi Arabia. One does not talk about the person responsible in a crash since it simply was God's will.


How blessed we are to have the confessions to summarize our theology so that we can avoid becoming entangled. How blessed we are to have preachers to preach the gospel every Sunday, and to teach the Word of God to help us understand. God has a purpose and plan: the mystery of his will. We are not controlled by fate, but by God the Father who works all things for the good of those



who love him (Rom 8:28). Yes, our Father is sovereign over all, and that means he not only provides us with all good, but can even turn adversity and evil to our good. That's not fate. That's all-powerful, paternal care!

As ladies all involved in the Women's Savings Action, our part seems so small in the grand scheme of teaching and training men to preach the gospel and to instruct according to sound doctrine. Yet, our little calling in each of our churches has a purpose and really, maybe it's not so little after all. We too have a helping role and responsibility to fulfill. May we all be encouraged and strengthened by God to work for him!

You will no longer see the list of contributions made by each congregation published in *Clarion*. We hope to publish the total collected during the fiscal year. Throughout our fiscal year from July 1, 2012 to June 30, 2013 a total of \$35,798.66 was collected. This total is down from previous years.

With the funding the library received, \$24,679 was spent on books, \$6,268 on periodicals and \$10,097 on on-line data bases and periodicals. Adding up these numbers comes to \$41,044. Printed books, periodicals, and electronic subscriptions become more expensive each year. With the Lord's blessings, we hope that with everyone's involvement the total can be raised in 2015. At the last convocation in September we were able to present \$37,000 to the principal. Thank-you for all your efforts in order to make this donation possible. Your work has shown God's goodness to the Seminary as well as the federation. 



*"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless,  
Christ died for the ungodly."*

Romans 5:6

This month the poem I want to share reminds us of Christ's sacrifice made on the cross. God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

*There are no depths  
to which I have gone  
or to which I could go,  
but Thou, in Thy fathomless  
mercy and love  
didst still sink below  
plumbing the depths  
for a sin-ruined heart  
indifferent to Thee;  
draining the dregs  
of God's holy wrath  
that I might go free.*

Ruth Bell Graham

Forgiveness of sins makes our celebrations in life even richer. I wish you a wonderful birthday this month and hope that you enjoy your special day celebrating with family and friends. On your birthday, take a moment to reflect on God's mercy in your life: God has given you another year but more than that, he has given you everlasting life.

## April birthdays

### 2 DEREK KOK will be 45

653 Broad Street West  
Dunnville, ON N1A 1T8

### 23 ARLENE DEWIT will be 54

31126 Kingfisher Drive  
Abbotsford, BC V2T 5K4

### 29 BRYCE BERENDS will be 40

6528 1st Line, RR 3  
Fergus, ON N1M 2W4

## 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** The Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20 is often used to say that the church as an institution and as individual members has a call to go and do as the apostles were charged to do. What is the most biblically appropriate exegesis of this passage? Is it meant for the apostles alone? Missionaries? Or all Christians? The question is not meant to try and shirk personal responsibility but to know what a responsible exegesis and therefore application of the text is.

**A** The first question to be answered is this: is the task mandated here in Matthew 28:19 a truly *apostolic* task? We observe that here Matthew reports that “the disciples” were there in Galilee. Earlier in his account Matthew uses the term “apostles” only in chapter 10 (Mark only in 6:30, while Luke distinguishes between the twelve as apostles, in 6:13, and the other followers as “disciples”). The task description, too, the Lord Jesus does *not* express in terms denoting a special or even exclusively apostolic task. Making disciples is a general activity and *not* to be equated with the proclamation of the gospel; it’s connected, of course, but as the *fruit* of this proclamation. The proclamation wants to bring *to* discipleship (Acts 14:21). Baptizing is not a special apostolic activity either (cf. 1 Cor 1:14-17), while teaching is a general concept, namely teaching the Word for appropriation and application (again, bringing to discipleship as fruit of the proclamation). Hence, our initial answer to the question is: Christ does not present anything specifically apostolic here.

What, then, is a specifically apostolic task? Being ear- and eye-witnesses! In Matthew and Mark this specific task is not mentioned, while Luke only mentions it in 24:46-48 (and in Acts 1:8, 22). The gospel according to John speaks of the mandate to testify with eye-witness accounts in 15:26, 27, and John presents himself that way in 19:33-35; 21:24a. And indeed, we see the apostles function as such in

Acts 2:32; 3:15; 5:31, 32a; 10:40-42; 13:31, in their message to the *Jews* (just as Matthew shows in chapter 10).

So, what about the Great Commission, saying “make disciples of all nations”? The eleven in Matthew 28 are addressed by the Lord Jesus *not* in their capacity of apostles; i.e. the “Go and make disciples” is *not* a mandate that’s given specifically to the *apostles* but to the entire NT church! Christ was addressing the eleven at that moment as *representatives*, the first-fruits of his NT church, giving them this mandate. The Lord Jesus gave a similar command to the twelve in Matthew 18:15-18, in which Christ addresses the church (v. 17 especially). Likewise, the Great Commission is not an exclusive mandate to the disciples but to the entire NT church. Matthew shows in chapter 10 the task of the apostles among the people of *Israel*, the cities of *Israel*, which task is now articulated as a task for the entire NT church, namely to “go and make disciples of all nations.” Then the “Go!” applies primarily to the crossing of the boundaries of Israel.

The work of the Apostle Paul shows how the first mandate (chapter 10) agreed organically with the second (Matt 28), and could be extended organically in the second. Then Paul *organizes* this task so as to make it function in the NT churches: in the tasks of the special office bearers *and* in the calling of the general office of all believers. In this approach, men with a special mandate can be set aside to bring the gospel (and baptize) to the ends of the earth (missionaries), while in the midst of the churches *established* in this way men are called to be

pastors and teachers, and others as elders and deacons. They motivate and mandate the NT believers to share the testimony of the Lord (received from ear- and eye-witnesses) with others, "making disciples" of the Lord Jesus, i.e. calling people to follow Jesus and live as children of the kingdom of heaven. The NT believers thus are the light of the world!

The Great Commission therefore is not a mandate to each and every believer to preach, baptize, and teach, but a mandate to the NT *church* to go and have the *church* make disciples among the nations. Through the preaching of the gospel people will be brought to discipleship.

Baptizing and teaching determine the two sides of this discipleship: God's side and man's side. These disciples are claimed by God (baptism) and they increasingly experience and practise this discipleship by teaching.

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

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

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Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the  
earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.  
Psalm 90:1-2*

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*So, now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest  
of these is love. I Corinthians 13:13*

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April 10, 2015

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own  
understanding. Proverbs 3:5a*

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50<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary of our loving parents

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*Eric and Amber, Sabrina and Kierian, Todd*  
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