

Clarion

THE CANADIAN REFORMED MAGAZINE

V 66 N 11 JUNE 2 2017

Is Grace alive and well?

HOLY
BIBLE

THE DARKNESS IS MY CLOSEST FRIEND

CLARION KIDS

YOU ASKED

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Is Grace Well and Alive Among Us?

Grace is alive and well in the scholarly world

No, I am not writing about a lady blessed with such a name, but about the most Gracious Lady ever: *the doctrine that salvation and life come to us by no other way than by grace alone. And by no other merit than the merit of Jesus Christ.* Is *that* really alive among us? I hope it is, but sometimes I wonder. I think it's often threatened, not only in the academic world but also on the pulpit.

New Perspective on Paul

Let me talk first a bit about that academic world. For the last forty years, the doctrines of grace were thought to be threatened by a movement within scholarly circles called the New Perspective on Paul. The idea was that for centuries we have been reading Paul's writings quite wrongly. We had read him entirely through the lens of the Reformation, imagining that Paul's struggles were the same as Luther's, and that the Pharisees in the New Testament period were exactly the same as the Roman Catholics of the Reformation period. Luther and Calvin often equated their contemporary opponents with the opponents of Jesus and Paul, and the church has made the same mistake since, said men like E.P. Sanders, N.T. Wright, and James Dunn. Instead, when we read the gospels and Paul's letters on their own terms, they maintained, we see that they are not about people trying to earn salvation by works; rather the point of controversy is about certain works which were considered significant because they were thought necessary in order to be Jewish. When you translate that to Christianity, the question became *not* "are there certain works you need to do to be saved?" *but* "are there certain (Jewish) works you need to do to become part of Christianity? The dispute, they said, was all about whether Gentiles who became Christians had to do things like circumcision, fasting, and sabbath observance. Against his opponents, they say, Paul is saying: "No, faith is the only thing that matters."

All of this has produced a mountain of scholarly discussions in the form of books and articles, creating a resurgence of interest in New Testament studies. Why? Because it was thought that the first-century issue was not about the relation between grace and works after all. The Jewish people had that matter figured out quite well, they said. Paul was not just all about salvation by grace through faith. The Reformed confessions seemed to need major revision. And so, no lack of volumes rolled out. Least among all these studies was also my 2008 dissertation*, in which I reviewed a key passage of Paul, namely, Romans 4. You see, my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Stephen Westerholm of McMaster University, had maintained that this was the passage which proved the New Perspective writers wrong. So, in this book, I reviewed the works of scholars who were in favour of the new approach to Paul and scholars who were against, and then offered my own analysis of the debate and the passage of Scripture. But in this article now, I don't want to talk about that book. I just want to assure you that, in my judgement, the battle is over and Grace is alive and well in the scholarly world. The Reformed confessions *are* on the mark.

Beyond the New Perspective

How so? Well, we are now in a period being called "*Beyond the New Perspective*" and scholars are suggesting that there are elements that are true in both the traditional approach and the New Perspective. Perhaps scholars in earlier days did not pay enough attention to issues of race, and how the doctrine of justification by faith through grace was formulated especially in the context of Paul's work among the Gentiles. And to suggest that every person in the New Testament is busy with the question "how do I get to heaven?" might be an exaggeration. But, on the other hand, to suggest that the issue in the New Testament is *only* about race and not about grace is quite wrong, a growing number of scholars

are now rightly saying. It has been shown that the Judaism of the New Testament was not unlike the semi-pelagianism that preceded the Reformation; so the issues were very similar. John M.G. Barclay, in a delightful, weighty book called *Paul and the Gift*¹ rightly concludes that both the traditional approach and the New Perspective were on to something. The issue in Romans is not just the sinfulness of all humanity and the possible pretension that one might have some degree of meritorious works to boast about (Rom 3), but also a possible arrogance based on ethnic differ-

INSIDE THIS ISSUE...

In his guest editorial, Dr. Gerhard H. Visscher writes about the doctrine of grace, both in the academic world and the preaching of grace from the pulpit. Is the doctrine being threatened, and is it being preached to the full extent?

Rev. Rob Schouten continues his series, "Sermons: A Listening Guide." This article gives wise and thoughtful advice on how to proceed when sermons are, unfortunately, poorly written or presented.

We have various regular columns in Issue 11; Treasures New and Old, Clippings on Politics and Religion, Education Matters, *Clarion Kids*, and You Asked. There is also an article on the upcoming ICRC general meeting, a book review, a letter to the editor, and a Canticle correction.

Laura Veenendaal

- 318 GUEST EDITORIAL**
Is Grace Well and Alive Among Us?
- 321 TREASURES, NEW & OLD**
The Darkness is My Closest Friend
- 322 The ICRC is Coming to Jordan Station**
- 323 Canticle correction: The Flood Prayer**
- 324 Sermons: A Listening Guide (4)**
- 326 CLIPPINGS ON POLITICS AND RELIGION**
- 327 EDUCATION MATTERS**
- 330 CLARION KIDS**
- 331 YOU ASKED**
- 332 BOOK REVIEW**
- 334 LETTER TO THE EDITOR**

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

Subscriptions subscriptions@clarionmagazine.ca
Advertisements ads@clarionmagazine.ca
Website www.clarionmagazine.ca

2017 SUBSCRIPTION RATES

			Regular Mail	Air Mail
Canada			\$49.00*	\$ 82.00*
U.S.A. U.S. Funds			\$69.00	\$102.00
International			\$98.00	\$171.00

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

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PUBLISHER

Published biweekly by Premier Printing Ltd.
Winnipeg, Manitoba

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We acknowledge the financial support
of the Government of Canada.



Agreement No. 40063293; ISSN 0383-0438

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ence (Rom 2). The judgement of God will “take no account of the ethnic differences between Jew or Greek (2:6-11, p. 467). Paul’s point then truly is that works don’t merit anything before God. Earning salvation is a dead end, but being Jewish or having covenant status does not merit either. Race is irrelevant. *All that really matters is the free grace of a God who has given the gift of grace in Christ.* The Giver regards neither ethical nor ethnic privilege when he graciously bestows life in Christ. New life “is experienced by human beings only inasmuch as they share in, and draw from, a life whose source lies outside of themselves, the life of the risen Christ” (501).

What does it mean? It means that in the scholarly world, Grace is alive and well. It means that in the ecclesiastical world, preachers can and should pull out all the stops when it comes to preaching Grace. Not that Reformed preachers haven’t, but I think sometimes it’s not just academics that might make them reserved, but it might be the folks in the pew or perhaps in the elders’ bench.

For example, we often say that what we need is a balance between law and grace, and preaching that has that balance. But the gospel is not fifty percent law and fifty percent grace. And preaching does not need to strike this balance. That approach betrays the fact that we have not sufficiently abandoned the legalism whereby we attempt to make ourselves right with God by what we do or do not do. Rather than being a balance between grace and law, we need to see that “it is the good news of grace that results in grateful lives of godliness”² Paul says in Romans 3:20, “No one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands”(NLT), and then begins to talk about justification by faith through grace alone (Rom 4, 5, 6). He hits the nail on the head when he points out (very contrary to his opponents) that “you are not under law, but under grace” (6:14). If there is a context in which the law functions productively for the people of God, it may be in terms of exposing sin (Rom 7:7) and in terms of living out the life of grace (Rom 13:8f.), but it has no role to play in terms of our deliverance. Likewise, in the second part of the catechism, the only place the law comes up in any way is when it describes the obedience of Christ (LD 23) – we are saved through his obedience to the law, not ours. Likewise, the catechism is not attempting to put us back under law when it discusses the ten commandments in LD 34-44; rather, it’s trying to show us how the Christ who has redeemed us (LD 6-31) “also renews us by his Holy Spirit to be his image. . .”(LD 32). Just as God sought to keep the people whom he had freed from slavery (Exod 20:2) away from sin by giving them the ten words of the covenant, so he does with respect to those who

have been freed in Christ. The law is useful as a gauge of the Christian life, but only the grace of God in Christ can give us and keep us in that Christian life.

Perhaps what we keep tripping over is the fact that in our circles we often speak about conditions of the covenant, and we do talk about promises *and demands* of the covenant. Here too Barclay can be helpful. Whereas the modern idea is that in order for something to be free and of grace, it has to be without any expectation of any kind of payback in return, Barclay points out that this is not how Paul or any of the ancients understood *grace*. In a patron-client society, there was always the expectation of some kind of return to the giver. So too the apostle. The God who freely gives his grace does expect a return on his most gracious gift. It is intended to lead to “the obedience of faith,” which refers also the faithful service that flows out of faith. The clearest expression of that is perhaps in Titus 2:11-13: “The grace of God. . . teaches us to say ‘no’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in the present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearance of our great God and Savior. . . .” As Barclay puts it in a compact sentence, Paul “simultaneously emphasizes the incongruity of grace and the expectation that those who are ‘under grace’ (and wholly refashioned by it) will be reoriented in the ‘obedience of faith’” (562). So we can refer to that as “conditions of the covenant” if we like, but we must never understand those to be conditions that grant us entrance or earn us merit. It is thoroughly and always a covenant of *grace*.

In truth, we owe *everything* to that lovely lady named Grace. The basis for our redeemed status is not even minutely due to merit, or race, or covenant status, or church membership, or anything else in all creation other than Grace – the grace of God in Christ. It’s not works. It’s not race. It’s Grace. Even as God continues to work in us and through us, it’s his grace that is operative in us.

So preachers really need to be wedded to Grace; every comfort, every admonition has to be placed in the context of the grace of God that comes to the undeserving of every race. As Hebrews put it, strikingly, in 12:15 (NIV84), “*See to it that no one misses the grace of God. . . .*” Preach it, brothers!

¹ My review of *Paul and the Gift* (Eerdmans, 2015) will appear in a future edition of *Unio cum Christo: International Journal of Reformed Theology and Life*.

² Bryan Chappell, *Unlimited Grace: the Heart Chemistry that Frees from Sin and Fuels the Christian Life* (Crossway, 2016) loc. 1699.



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The Darkness is My Closest Friend

"You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend." Psalm 88:18

This meditation was originally published in this magazine in 2005.

The Psalms are often shocking in their honesty. They show us that sometimes God's children have difficult lives. Now of all the Psalms, Psalm 88 is the darkest. Unlike the other Psalms, this one does not end on a note of hope, praise, or thankfulness. Heman concludes his Psalm with the words, "The darkness is my closest friend."

A friend is someone with whom you share deeply. Friends are faithful when others are not. They celebrate the joys of life with you and mourn with you in your grief. In this Psalm, Heman concludes by saying that the darkness is his closest friend. He says this because his soul is full of trouble (v. 3). He is also estranged from others (v. 4-5). This isolation is explained in verse 8 where he says, "You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them." In verse 18 he picks up on this again, "You have taken my companions and loved ones from me."

On top of this he is also isolated and estranged from God. In verse 6 he tells us that the Lord's wrath lies heavily upon him. He's overwhelmed by God's anger and it puts him in the darkest depths. In verse 14 he takes it a step further, saying that God has rejected him and hid his face from him. And in verse 16 he says that God's terrors have destroyed him.

Heman experiences a deep terror and sorrow, and is utterly alone. There is no one who really understands, no one who really cares, no one who can help. When he looks at his life he says, "Yeah, I've got one friend. His name is darkness." He is living in his own private little hell, and no one really cares.

This is an appalling Psalm because it describes the life of a believer. Psalm 88 was inspired by the Holy Spirit, and included in the Bible. God is telling us here that even though he comes to us with a message of hope, peace, and joy, these are not the experience of every believer. Sometimes Christians suffer intensely in a broken world. Some Christians are depressed and suicidal; they feel abandoned by family and friends and even by God himself. Some Christians feel that the darkness is their only friend.

If you have ever felt that the darkness is your closest friend, the Lord is saying to you: that does not mean that you are not a Christian. Psalm 88 confronts us with the reality that being in a covenant relationship with God doesn't mean we will escape the brokenness of a fallen world.


So how are we to move forward if we find ourselves in Heman's situation? In the first place we should appreciate the darkness of this Psalm. Those people who are deeply depressed or troubled can find real solace in this Psalm because it gives an accurate portrayal of


their feelings. By including this Psalm in the Bible, God shows us that he really does understand the most desperate cries of the human heart. Even if there is no one else who understands, He does.

We should also notice that Heman takes his darkness to the Lord. In verse 1 he says, "O Lord, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before you. May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry." God is teaching us here that if we are severely depressed, suicidal, anxious, or if we are surrounded by terrors, then we can take that to him and he will help us. This is an important thing to bear in mind. Sometimes we face the seductive temptation to turn our back on God. If we have sinned terribly or if we are severely depressed, we can think that the Lord doesn't care about us any longer. But in Psalm 88 God teaches us there is still hope. Our Father hears with patience and mercy the most desolate cries that come to him. He never minimizes or mocks or misunderstands our struggle. The darkness doesn't blind his eyes, or prevent his care. The Lord wants us to understand that there is no thought so distorted, no emotion so powerful, no circumstance so horrible, no action so twisted that it stands outside the reach of the Redeemer and his grace. He promises, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Heb 13:5).

The reason God hears our cries is because of his Son Jesus Christ. When Christ was in this world, he suffered very intensely. He too was despised and mocked. He too was abandoned by family and friends. He experienced a

darkness and terror much deeper than what we experience, for he was subject to the full wrath of God against sin. Our Lord Jesus was rejected and forsaken by his Father. The Bible tells us that Christ has suffered and been

tempted in every way as we are (Heb 4:15). But He came through his darkest hour victorious. He defeated sin and the devil and so is able to set his people free. It is for Christ's sake that God will hear us and help us. 



James Visscher
Corresponding Secretary

The ICRC is Coming to Jordan Station

This summer the ninth general meeting of the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC) will be coming to Jordan Station, Ontario, from July 13–19. The Immanuel United Reformed Church will be acting as the host church on behalf of the federation of United Reformed Churches in North America. The Heritage Christian School will serve as the site for daily meetings and meals.

Seeing that there are many member churches in the Niagara area (Canadian Reformed, United Reformed, Free Reformed, Heritage Reformed, and Orthodox Presbyterian), the delegates and official observers will be housed in local homes. No doubt it will prove to be an enriching international experience for both guests and hosts.

The gathering will be preceded by a Prayer Service that will be held, the Lord willing, in the Immanuel United Reformed Church (2850 Fourth Ave) on Wednesday evening at 7:30 p.m., July 12, 2017. The Rev. Raymond Sikkema will be the preacher.

On Thursday morning at 9:00 a.m. the meetings will commence. At the moment the ICRC is composed of thirty-two member Presbyterian and Reformed churches from around the world. Each continent is almost equally represented. Three new churches from Australia, Myanmar, and Uganda are applying for membership.

Various speakers have also been invited to speak in the evening and the public is invited to attend. On Thursday evening, July 13, the Rev. Hiralal Solanki will be speaking on “A Brief Overview of Christian Missions in India.” On Friday evening, July 14, the Rev. Dr. Derek Thomas will be speaking on John Calvin’s preaching and the book of Job. On Monday evening, July 17, Prof. Dr. Matthew Ebenezzer of India will be speaking on “Bringing the Reformed Faith to India.” Finally, on Tuesday evening, July 18, the Rev. Dr. Joel Beeke will be speaking on “Reformed Piety: Covenantal and Experiential.”

During the day the Conference will be dealing with a number of reports on theological education, foreign missions, diaconal aid, website development, as well as the regional conferences. Panel discussions will also be held on theological education and growing future leaders for the Reformed faith, the ministry of mercy and the Reformed faith, bringing the Reformed faith to Asia, the future of the ICRC. In addition, constitutional matters will be on the agenda, as will new member applications and introductions, publications, and financial matters.

The topic of the next meeting of the Conference will also be on the agenda. In the past the Conference has met in South Africa, Korea, the United States, Canada, The Netherlands, Scotland, Wales and New Zealand. Two countries are vying for the right to host the 2021 meeting, namely India and South Africa.

One of the great benefits from a meeting such as this has to do with networking. To that end there will be ample time given for inter-church relations committees to meet, as well as for all sorts of other formal and informal gatherings. For smaller churches that cannot afford to send representative around the world to meet their sister churches, the ICRC offers a great opportunity to do a lot of church work at a minimum cost.

Another benefit in getting together in Jordan is that small churches can build relationship with larger churches and thereby hopefully gain access to a greater pool of resources in such areas as theological teaching, missionary partnerships, and diaconal assistance.

Overall the ICRC is about promoting the bond between faithful Presbyterian and Reformed churches around the world. In a time when the Christian faith is under attack from many quarters there is a need to support one another

through doctrinal dialogue, mutual encouragement, financial assistance, and ongoing prayer.

For those who are interested in more information on the ICRC, please go to www.icrconline.com. There on the opening page you will also find the purpose of the conference which is:

- to express and promote the unity of faith that the member churches have in Christ;
- to encourage the fullest ecclesiastical fellowship among the member churches;
- to encourage cooperation among the member churches in the fulfillment of the missionary and other mandates;
- to study the common problems and issues that confront the member churches and to aim for recommendations with respect to these matters;
- to present a Reformed testimony to the world.

So, if you have the opportunity, why not come to Jordan Station in the beautiful Niagara region of Ontario and attend some or all of our evening presentations.



The Flood Prayer – Correction

This Canticle was published in Issue 9 but unfortunately included a major error in the musical score. This is the corrected version.

Text: George van Popta © 2017
Based on "Prayer Before Baptism," Book of Praise, p. 598

GENEVAN 103
Strasbourg, 1539 / Geneva, 1543
Harmony: Claude Goudimel 1565

Sermons: A Listening Guide (4)

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As we have seen in previous issues, preaching and listening are a joint venture through which God builds up his people in faith, in hope, and in love. So far, our discussion has assumed that the sermons we hear are faithful and clear. When a sermon is not only true to Scripture but also engagingly presented, when it has a clear focus and a logical flow, when the language is lively and the applications are sound, then it is indeed much easier for the listener to gain the benefits which God has assigned to the means of grace.

When sermons are poorly made or poorly presented

As both preachers and listeners realize, however, not every sermon is a gem. In fact, only a few are truly memorable and many are quite weak. Sometimes, a minister will lack intensity and enthusiasm. He may present a sermon that is poorly structured. It may be hard to follow because it jumps around a great deal without much in the way of transition. He may speak too loudly or too forcefully or too timidly. The message may be very dense, cramming in far more information than people can absorb. On the other hand, it may be superficial, like a thin soup, devoid of all edifying substance. Even worse, in the words of Jay Adam, it may be like a “thin soup served cold.”¹

From time to time, even the best of preachers will deliver underwhelming messages. The reasons can be quite diverse: he had an upset stomach on Wednesday afternoon and Thursday morning, his wife was ill, his children were having difficulties, he had too many pastoral crises, or he was dealing with some spiritual struggle of his own. Whatever the reasons, you can notice the difference. Usually, he’s clear but today it all seems rather muddy. Usually, he’s fired up but today he seems drained. Usually, he has something fresh and inspiring to say but today his message is full of platitudes and banalities.

So the question is: how do we profit from poor sermons? Is that even possible? I would say that yes, this is indeed possible. By the grace of God and the power of the

Spirit, we can profit from the weak work of our preacher. To see how this is possible, we can begin by highlighting the virtue of patience. We should be patient with our pastors. When they aren’t fully in the zone, accept their weakness. Furthermore, when the sermon is not as clear or engaging as it could be, consider that a challenge for you. Your own work as a listener will become more intense. You will have to apply yourself even more diligently than usual to gain the promised benefits of the Word of God.

If the sermon seems to lack focus, try to pick up the nuggets of truth, even if they are somewhat randomly presented. If there is a lot of repetition, remember that repetition is the mother of learning. If there is too much information, seek to zero in on one central insight. If there is no clear application, seek to make it yourself. Ask yourself what God is calling you to believe in this passage. What is he revealing about himself? What is he telling you about your Saviour? What is he asking you to change in your life? Even a thin, cold soup has some nutritional value, so open wide your mouth to receive it.

Long term weakness in the pulpit

If you find that your difficulties in processing the sermons you hear are not occasional but consistent, you need to think about ways of engaging with your pastor. One principle to keep in mind is that it’s more beneficial to encourage what is positive than to complain about what is negative. For instance, if you say to a preacher, “I found it really helpful when you used the image of a builder and a hammer when you explained verse five,” you will be encouraging him to use concrete language and word pictures. If you say, “I really appreciated that you remembered the boys and girls in the congregation,” he will likely do more to remember the youth of the covenant in his preaching. If you say that the first point was very meaningful to you but you got lost in the second and the third, he will probably think long and hard about the reasons for the difference. If you say to the preacher that you would really benefit from hav-

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CHURCH NEWS

ing a copy of the outline of his sermon, he will feel healthy pressure to be more organized.

In general, your pastor will be much more receptive to your suggestions for improvement if you have a track record of praying for him and encouraging him in his difficult calling. If he never hears from you except when you have something to criticize, it will be very tempting for him to dismiss your concerns. That's a tendency we all have.

To be sure, there will be times when you have to express your concerns and frustrations. You may just have to schedule a visit and tell the pastor that you find his sermons hard to follow. You may have to indicate your concern that the sermons don't really exalt Christ in the glory of his Person and the sufficiency of his work. You may express a desire for the sermon to be more strongly connected to the actual words of the text. You may plead for sermons that are shorter, more compact and more efficient in their use of words.

Whatever it is that seems to be missing in the sermons, make your case respectfully and give the pastor room to give you his response. Perhaps you will find out through further dialogue that notwithstanding the weaknesses of the sermons, you have some room to grow as a listener as well. Sometimes, the effort you put into having a respectful and meaningful relationship with the pastor will of itself subtly alter the way you experience the messages which he brings.

When to go further with your concerns

If you've prayed earnestly for your minister's work as a preacher and have discussed your concerns in a respectful manner, and yet there are no positive changes, it may be time to involve the elders of your church. You could share your concerns with them in the course of an ordinary home visit or you might request a special visit. When such a visit happens, you need to be specific and clear in expressing your concerns. You should be able to give examples of the problems you are seeking to identify. You should be able to summarize the discussions you've had with the pastor about these matters.

If the elders agree with your concerns, it becomes their responsibility to bring these matters again to the attention of the minister. It may well be that the same concerns have been raised previously within the church leadership on occasions when the preaching was formally reviewed and evaluated. Through their own analysis² and through

their interaction with the congregation, the elders are well-placed to give constructive criticism to preachers.

In cases of ongoing dissatisfaction, the elders have any number of options. They can give concrete suggestions for improvement. They can ask for outside evaluation of their minister's preaching (with his full awareness and agreement). They could provide more frequent sermon evaluations. They could offer the minister a time away from preaching in order to provide opportunity for further education in the work of the pulpit. They could evaluate the minister's workload to ensure that he has sufficient time for the work of preparing his messages. They could ask him to drop some of his administrative activities in order to focus more energy to his central task of preaching.

In some difficult situations, when, over a period of months and years, every effort has been made and every opportunity given for improvement, the conclusion may arrive that the minister is not able to continue in his work of preaching. In such cases, the provisions of Article 11 of the Church Order come to bear on the situation. It is best when the conclusion that a minister cannot serve the congregation "fruitfully and to its edification" is one about which the minister and consistory agree.

Dismissal from ministerial service is very painful for everyone involved and should not be done without full regard for due process. As a federation of churches, we need some serious and open discussion about this matter. Hopefully, that discussion won't be long in coming. Otherwise, the danger is not imaginary that the provisions of Article 11 would be used to run a man out of town simply because he is not well-liked by a sector of the congregation or because he has inadvertently stepped on some toes in the church community.

***How do we
profit from
poor sermons?
Is that even
possible?***

¹ Jay Adams, *Be Careful How you Listen. How to Get the Most out of a Sermon* (Solid Ground Christian Books, 2007), pg. 69.

² Help for office-bearers called to oversee the preaching of the gospel can be found at the website of the Canadian Reformed Seminary. See here: <http://www.canadianreformedseminary.ca/contact/preaching-availability/Sermon-Evaluations.html>.

Sudanese Reformed Church Faces Huge Challenges

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The 2016 Annual Report 2016 the Sudanese Reformed Church (SRC), which I recently received, gives a troubling look at what is transpiring in that new nation, as well as in the Muslim state of Sudan with its capital in Khartoum. However, amidst the gloom of atrocities, there is also hope as the church grows. What follows is taken from his report.

In Muslim Sudan, Christians are being persecuted and marginalized because of their faith. By law churches are not allowed to acquire new lands and they are not even permitted to renovate their existing church buildings that were built in better days by missionaries. Christians are virtually always denied employment in both public and private sectors. The SRC in Sudan is laboring in an intolerant and hostile society.

Tragically, the situation is quite challenging for the SRC in South Sudan as well. A mere two years after this country achieved its independence from the Muslim state of Sudan, this new nation has erupted into a violent tribal civil war. A lot of atrocities have been committed against civilians. There has been wide spread targeting ethnic killing. Many have been displaced due to their homes and churches being burnt. Sexual violence and looting is rampant. There is untold human suffering, poverty, severe food insecurity, major malnutrition crisis, and now a looming famine.

In the midst of all this the RCS struggles on. Many areas are too insecure for trying to plant new churches. The church has no adequate buildings, office equipment, or even a vehicle to facilitate its work. Because of the war, many church members have become impoverished and the thirty-two pastors and evangelists of the SRC have no financial income. Some feel totally abandoned and cut off. Although the SRC has some international connections with the global Reformed family, she considers herself in fact an orphan. She has no parent or mature Reformed denomination that stands with her in the current crisis.

But in spite of all the difficulties and suffering, the SCR is by God's grace alive and growing. Even though the situation seems bleak, new congregations are emerging in the internally displaced persons (IDP) and refugee camps. The membership of the SRC has grown rapidly. Before the eruption of civil war in South Sudan, membership stood at about 3,000 but is now more than double that number. In the midst of the chaos, war, suffering, and persecution, opportunities to witness to the true hope have multiplied. Bibles have been distributed to key leaders who are leading small groups in these camps. There are even plans to establish two primary schools for the IDPs in Juba, the capital of South Sudan. The SCR is a growing church in the midst of great tribulation. The hope is nourished that the ministry of the SRC is passing this test of faith and will eventually be able to be an effective instrument of the Lord to promote the Reformed faith in both Sudan and South Sudan.

One of the major challenges the SRC faces in 2017, its 25th anniversary year, is its lack of properly educated leaders. The level of theological education is poor and so plans are being made to establish a good training centre as soon as there is an opportunity to do so. Such a centre would produce more qualified ministers and leaders for the church.

There are currently four congregations in Sudan and twelve in South Sudan. Furthermore, there are eighteen small groups in IDP camps run by the United Nations and two churches in refugee camps in Kenya and Ethiopia. The SRC is also a member of the International Conference of Reformed Churches.

We need to keep these churches in our prayers and if possible extend to them any tangible help that we can. **C**

Amazing Blessings – John Calvin School, Smithville

George Hofsink
*Principal of
John Calvin School*



Why we do what we do

Reformed education consists of four hallmarks. These hallmarks (covenantal, confessional, antithetical, and a unity of purpose shared by church, home, and school) are based on God's infallible Word and its explication in the ecumenical creeds and confessions of the Reformed faith. They form the basis for the Reformed, Christian education that is being carried out on a daily basis at John Calvin School. The hallmarks are also reflected in the school's mission statement: "The purpose of John Calvin School is to assist the parents in the nurture of their children, to help develop in them the talents freely and graciously given by God, to the end that they may serve Him in a life of responsible, Christian stewardship."

History

At the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year, John Calvin School entered its fifty-third year of providing Reformed, Christian education, making it one of the longest serving schools in Ontario, second only to our sister school

in Burlington, which began operating in 1962. John Calvin School was built in 1964 by the members of the Canadian Reformed Church and School Society of Smithville. It began as a two-story building with four classrooms on the upper floor for the school. In the basement were located meeting rooms, a nursery, and a place to hold the Dutch worship services for the Smithville Canadian Reformed Church. In fact, at the very beginning, the principal (Mr. M. VanderVelde) and his family lived in the basement.

Steady growth necessitated the addition of another four classrooms in 1970. At the time, John Calvin School was serving two congregations, Smithville and Lincoln. During the 1970s, 1980s, and into the 1990s, growth continued in the Niagara Peninsula resulting in the institution of two more congregations, Attercliffe and Tintern (Spring Creek). Growth reached its peak in the 1994-1995 school year. John Calvin School was operating fourteen classrooms and a full-time special education program for 335 students taught by a staff of fifteen full-time and three part-time teachers. During the course of this school year,



the Attercliffe congregation began its own school society and built an eight-classroom school. The split became a reality in September 1995, when the school in Attercliffe began to operate with approximately 125 students spread over five classrooms.

With the opening of ACRES, the pressure was temporarily relieved, but the school population soon began to grow again. All the while, a long-standing desire to expand the facilities and include a gym also grew. It didn't take too long before enrolment once again approached 300 students and portable classrooms were once more in use. With the institution of Covenant Canadian Reformed Church in Grassie, John Calvin School once more had four supporting churches.

In the spring of 2002 a membership meeting was presented with a proposal for expansion which was approved with a significant majority. The new facility was to add six classrooms, a gymnasium, a kitchen, offices, and a staff room. Work got underway in late July of 2004, and the final touches were made to the gymnasium, the final stage, in September of 2005. By that time, students and teachers were already busily working in the new classrooms. The school ground also received a significant renovation, with the addition of a 400m track, two full soccer fields, and two baseball diamonds.

With this new addition, John Calvin School became a central facility for the wider church communities as well as well as the local community. Many weddings, anniversaries, and special celebrations have been conducted specifi-

cally in the gym, often transformed into a festive community hall by the decorating committee and usually catered by the JCS Catering Committee. The gym has garnered the attention of others in the community and we are pleased to serve our neighbours in this way as well.

Fifty years

In 2014-2015, John Calvin School could celebrate fifty years of covenantal education in Smithville and the surrounding district. Praise God from whom all blessings flow! Recently, the hall outside the staff room was transformed into Memory Hall with the hanging of more than fifty years of graduation pictures.

The Lord continued to bless the growth of John Calvin School. In the 2013-2014 school year, Kindergarten was added to the school making John Calvin School a K-8 school. In that same school year, the membership of the school society voted in favour of adding a Special Needs department to the school. In order to accommodate the Special Needs department, and because of a continuing increase in enrolment, another addition needed to be built. An expansion committee was struck and planning began to add a new wing to John Calvin School. The committee adopted the slogan, *Building on Blessings*, for the fundraising campaign to raise the necessary funds for the addition. In a year's time, the necessary monies had been donated or pledged and construction could begin. In January of 2016, the shovel went into the ground and building began. Construction went smoothly and the new wing was completed





by the beginning of August, in plenty of time to receive the Special Needs students and the students in Grades 7 and 8 for the 2016-2017 school year. We thank and praise the Lord for this great blessing.

John Calvin School continues to experience growth, not just in size of building but also in size of enrolment and number of staff. As of January 2017, the enrolment of John Calvin School is at 311 students along with twenty-six staff (nineteen full-time and seven part-time) in eighteen classes from Grades K-8, plus full day Special Education classes and a full-day Special Needs program. Projected enrolment for John Calvin School indicates that in three year's time the enrolment will increase to approximately 350 students, D.V.

Today, John Calvin School continues to serve four congregations: Grassie, Lincoln, Smithville, and Spring Creek. May it continue to serve its immediate and broader purpose for many years to come, and be a unifying factor for the community at large.

Programs and activities

We feel blessed that John Calvin School is able to provide education for the special needs children in our community. As John Calvin School is one of the only League of Canadian Reformed schools with a designated Special Needs room and program, interest in the program has been expressed from families with special needs children outside of our catchment area. (We hope to be able to serve them, too, in due time.)

When you walk through the school, you will be impressed with all of the student art and other projects adorning the walls, including a large reproduction of Van-Gogh's *A Starry Night* painted by one of our Grade 5 classes. Further down the hall and into the new wing you will discover the Grade 8 classes working on their PBL (Project Based Learning) project, *Lyme Disease Awareness*. Two parents from the John Calvin School community are afflicted with the disease so the Grade 8 students (and their teachers) have embarked on this project, the end goal being to share with various schools and communities in the Niagara region in order to increase awareness and help to raise funds to assist those fighting this disease. They hope to complete it by May which also happens to be Lyme Disease Awareness month.

Conclusion

The building of the new wing added significantly to the footprint of John Calvin School. For those who have been in the school and have seen all the pieces that have been added over the years, they can testify that we are an "a-maze-ing" school. If you haven't been to visit John Calvin School in Smithville, Ontario come on down and check us out or visit our website at www.johncalvin.ca.

We pray our Heavenly Father continues to bless the work done at John Calvin School, and all its facilities, as we continue to provide covenant education in Smithville and the surrounding district for years to come, D.V.



Clarion Kids

Esther

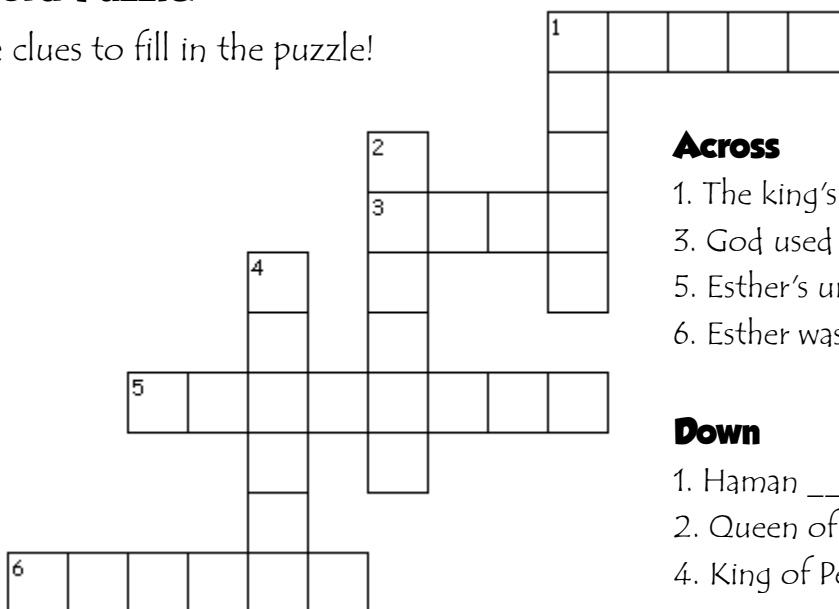
Esther was a brave and beautiful young Jewish woman who became the queen of Persia. King Xerxes did not believe in God, but Esther did. Xerxes had a helper named Haman who hated the Jewish people very much. Esther had an uncle named Mordecai who knew that Haman wanted to kill all the Jews. He told Esther about Haman's plan. Even though Esther was afraid, she trusted in God and asked the king to join her at a banquet with Haman. Then she told Xerxes about Haman's plan and told him that she was also a Jew. Xerxes was very angry and had Haman put to death. God used Esther to save his people!

Go to www.clarionmagazine.ca to print and colour this picture!



Crossword Puzzle:

Solve the clues to fill in the puzzle!



Across

1. The king's helper.
3. God used Esther to _____ his people.
5. Esther's uncle.
6. Esther was a _____ woman.

Down

1. Haman _____ the Jews.
2. Queen of Persia.
4. King of Persia.

by Emily Nijenhuis

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Q Could there be reasons for declining the calling to office?

Is it OK to say no to a nomination or appointment to the office of elder in the church? Do we always have to see it as a calling? Could it be my "calling" to continue in my work in a committee, the school board, or in my family that needs extra attention? Is it wrong to request the elders to give me a break after many years as elder and/or board member? Is it a matter of faith and trust only or may personal feelings play a role?

A The issue that's expressed in these questions is very common and relevant for the process towards the nomination for office bearers. It is a matter of calling on the one hand and a matter of personal responsibilities, limitations, and circumstances on the other. As a general rule and principle, we may pose that the nomination for office is an honour and the election to office a calling (not only from the congregation but especially a divine calling)! At the same time, we must take the first question in the Form for the Installation of Office Bearers seriously. The candidate office bearer has to be able to answer this question wholeheartedly: "Yes, I do believe that I am called by God via the election by the congregation." It's at this point that many a candidate office bearer has a struggle, a problem.

In the brother's life there may be issues that could complicate the matter of his election and hamper his sense of calling. These issues could be very practical and be related to the brother's health, professional activities, courses of study, or moving plans. It would be a wise practice, therefore, when elders in their annual home visit inquire whether there is anything in the brother's life or family that could be in the way of considering him for nomination. In the context of such an inquiry the brother (or his wife!) could

share with the elders the fact that due to his involvement in the school board or education committee (or both) it would be impossible to add the eldership to it. The simple reply could then be that the office of elder trumps the membership of a board or committee, but in the reality of life the situation of the board or committee could be such that for the well-being of the school his continued engagement in that work would be essential and crucial (at that time!).

This is often one scenario that figures large in the so-called nomination meeting of the consistory. Especially when the elders reported on these findings in a family, or in the life of a brother, these considerations must be taken seriously. And they can be taken as such if and when there is a good pool of brothers that are available for nomination. Sadly enough, however, this is not always the case. Ideally speaking there are a lot of gifts and talents available among a congregation of living members in Christ. Many tasks can be carried out and many functions can be filled by brothers *and sisters* in the office of all believers. The preaching and the leadership of the congregation should do everything to stimulate and motivate and mobilize these members to engage themselves with these gifts for the well-being of the congregation.

For the *office bearers* it is wise and advisable to give serious consideration to the personal needs, requests, and circumstances of the individual brother. If at all possible

they should avoid burdening him unnecessarily; especially when he is already an active and fruitful member among the communion of saints. It is not wrong, therefore, to grant a brother his request to continue in a board or committee, or even to accept his need for a break, to benefit him in his family or to prevent burn-out, caregiver's fatigue, or the like. On the other hand, however, it will be necessary for the *brother* to consider the wisdom of the office bearers and the needs of the congregation when despite his request he still ends up on the nomination and is elected. Then, indeed, it is God's will to place him before an appointment which he should then see as a divine calling. He may be as-

sured then also that God will provide others for his other functions while sustaining him with the necessary faith, trust, love, strength, and endurance to accept the calling to this special office!

*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. den Hollander
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BOOK REVIEW

A New Book about Reformed Worship

Rev. Peter Feenstra of Guelph, Ontario, has written a helpful primer on Reformed worship. It is entitled, *Come, Let us Worship the Lord*. Reflections on Reformed Worship (Tellwell Talent, 2017). Based on talks given in his own congregation, the book aims to give both current church members and newcomers a better grasp of the underlying principles and structure of the sort of worship service one finds among the Canadian Reformed churches.

The book is divided into two parts. The first is entitled "The Essentials of Worship." In this section, the author discusses the significance of corporate worship in the Christian life. He emphasizes that the focus of Reformed worship is not on the worshiper but on the Lord of glory. Within this framework, he shows the festive nature of worship and urges his readers to see it as the true highlight of each week.

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Rev. Feenstra goes on to discuss the allure of new forms of worship and suggests that the most important question in evaluating them is not, “What do I want in worship?” but rather “What does God want?” In his judgment, certain worship practices of the contemporary church do not arise in an organic way from the Word of God but reflect, instead, the influences of entertainment culture and individualism. To counter such tendencies, the author reminds his readers that not the culture of the day but God’s Word alone must determine how we worship.

In subsequent sections of Part I, the author highlights significant biblical themes pertaining to worship. In brief but engaging comments, he discusses worship from the angle of “Beholding the Beauty of the Lord,” as a “Sacrifice of Praise,” and of being drawn “Into the Presence of God.” In contrast to the unbearable lightness (my words) that can sometimes be encountered in contemporary worship, this book points us in a steady way to the reverence and awe that is appropriate for believers in the presence of a holy God.

Other matters covered include the role of the Holy Spirit in our worship, the Lord Jesus Christ as our worship leader, and the dialogical character of worship. As a covenantal meeting between God and his people, worship seeks to glorify God but the result will also be the encouragement of believers as God ministers to them through the means of grace. In contrast to the philosophy of the church growth movement, Rev. Feenstra argues that the first purpose of worship is not outreach. While expressing caution about many trends in contemporary worship, the author states that the worship which God requires of us should not be characterized as either contemporary or traditional but simply as orthodox.

Part 2 of the book deals with the “Elements of Worship.” In this section, Rev. Feenstra provides brief yet edifying explanations of each component of a typical Reformed worship service, demonstrating that each of them have deep biblical roots. While acknowledging that the New Testament does not give us an exact template for worship, the author believes that there are good reasons for having an established order of worship that is used throughout a federation of churches.

Within the overall order, however, he sees room for flexibility and diversity. For instance, he states that it would be appropriate, from time to time, to read the ten words of the covenant toward the end of a worship service instead of near the beginning. This would enable the congregation to see the law of God not only in terms of the knowledge of sin and misery but also as the rule for our gratitude as the redeemed people of God. He also suggests that since the Catechism is the confession of the people of God, it would be appropriate for the congregation to recite the Catechism in unison in the afternoon services of the Lord’s Day. In regard to the offering, Feenstra feels that the significance of this part of worship would be better expressed if some appropriate verses are read before the offering and a prayer offered by a serving deacon when the collection is complete.

While brief, this book covers a lot of ground and reflects a good deal of study and reflection by the author. It accomplishes very well what it sets out to do which is to give a foundational understanding of Reformed worship to both newcomers and long-term members of Reformed churches. Available from your online bookstore for \$13.38 CA (paperback) or \$5.32 (Kindle).



What is Halal?

In a recent article dated April 7, 2017 titled “May we eat Halal meats?” Rev. den Hollander seems to suggest, in his closing remarks, that “we should have no problem eating (it),” referring to Halal meat.

The writer of the question is concerned, stating that “this food has been dedicated to Allah before slaughter, i.e. after sacrifice to a pagan god (idol).” In my opinion the question on this subject is not so much of what we learn from Scripture where the Apostle Paul forbids the “strong” believers in Corinth not to participate (Rom 15:1), but in his foregoing epistle (Acts 15:20, 29), where the apostle instructs them to “abstain from things offered to idols, blood, from things strangled...” (see also 1 Thess 5:22). Then it becomes clear that if the focus of that which is eaten is directed to idols, one must, without reservation, abstain from eating what is offered, be it meat, milk, or any food dedicated to Allah. Rev. den Hollander is of the opinion that there’s no problem, “since for us it is undone and unrelated to any overtones.” Really?

I am of the opinion that this question remains unanswered. Here is why: Let’s look a bit closer to the true meaning of Halal, just for the sake of clarification, i.e. the Muslim method of slaughtering animals for human consumption, a method which differs from that of the customary Western practice. I urge the reader to see further the Halal slaughtering methods and related information on this topic: www.islam4infidels.com.

Muslim ideology can be described as an evil empire, note recent articles from Dr. VanDam on Islam ideology and its impact on Europe and the West. It is most certainly not a “religion of peace,” as they claim it to be, but a movement determined to destroy Western civilization and culture, which is opposite from the freedom and liberty we (still) enjoy today. Furthermore, eating these food products is problematic because of the fact that Halal is a created brand name by the Muslim Brotherhood only for the West. In the Middle East and Far East people are not familiar with Halal. It is generating billions of dollars globally (in the free world), which is mainly used for terrorist purposes and to promote and push Islam worldwide and make it a world “religion”! Large grocery stores are being engaged in spite

of the large fees needing to fund the Muslim Brotherhood, because of profitability due to the rapid growing Muslim population. The main prerogative is to annihilate Christianity as we see on a massive scale happening in the Middle East, Europe, and many other places in the World.

The instruction from the Apostle Paul is to be followed when eating foods which knowingly are dedicated to idol(s). However, we may not, without further research, assume that “. . .for us it is undone and unrelated to any overtones.”

Reader beware, knowing this we should conscientiously not purchase anything Halal, and remain mindful the prophesy contained in Revelation 13.

H. De Vries

Response

Br. DeVries did not read my answer very closely. The Apostle Paul does *not* forbid “the strong believers” in Corinth to eat when it is clear that in the setting in which they are there is no connection to the religious slaughter or temple sacrifice but just good meat is served. Paul exhorts “the strong” not to eat when “the weak” still do make the connection, thus to abstain in *love* for the weak, and not because eating the meat would be wrong. In his dealings with this issue Paul does not pay attention to the way the meat may have been slaughtered or sacrificed. As far as the meat is concerned, for “the strong” it’s nothing else but good meat as gift from God that may be enjoyed with thanksgiving.

In analogy, we don’t need to know or investigate or consider what has happened to the meat that’s labelled as Halal. We also do not need to know what the seller in the grocery store or the owner of the wholesale company or processing plant is doing with the money he makes (possibly supporting the Muslim Brotherhood). Just as we don’t take into account what others say about products made by Proctor & Gamble or sold at Walmart and the causes they supposedly support, thus recommending a boycott of these companies. The question that was asked pertained to the religious and spiritual overtones Halal products have today (and not the ideological or political aspects that could possibly enter the picture for some). In answer to that question Paul’s advice to “the strong” still stands, while to those for whom there are such religious connections the same applies: don’t burden your conscience and don’t buy the meats labelled as Halal.

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

