

Clarion

THE CANADIAN REFORMED MAGAZINE

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**Have you been
a bully?**



**WHO SHOULD I DATE?
IS INDIVIDUALISM GAINING GROUND?**

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

"Bullying" – our editorial from Dr. James Visscher – takes a hard look at how bullying affects us. Not only the immediate effects on children, but the long-lasting effects that change who we are, even years after the bullying has taken place.

Rev. Eric Kampen writes about the problem of being too late in reaching people under church discipline or who are thinking of withdrawing their membership. What is the solution? He writes that discipline must begin at the grassroots; read "Mutual Discipline" to see what he means.

There is an article from Rev. Clarence Bouwman entitled, "Dating – Who?" This article covers the first and second commandment and how they relate to choosing the person you will (or will not) date.

Issue 18 also includes the columns Treasures, New & Old, Clippings on Politics & Religion, *Clarion Kids*, and You Asked, as well as a Canticle and two letters to the editor.

Laura Veenendaal

CONTENTS

- 483 EDITORIAL**
Bullying
- 485 TREASURES, NEW & OLD**
Passing Through the Waters
- 486 Discipline is a Matter for the Whole Body**
- 488 Dating – Who?**
- 491 CLIPPINGS ON POLITICS & RELIGION**
- 492 CLARION KIDS**
- 493 CANTICLE**
- 494 YOU ASKED**
- 497 LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**



Bullying

We have a ways to go on the road to perfection

A painful encounter

We had agreed to meet at a local coffee shop. So there we sat, I as the pastor and the other person as the straying church member. After some opening pleasantries we got down to the matter at hand, namely “How come he was no longer attending the worship services on Sunday and involved in church activities during the week?”

The answer that followed was long in coming and painful to hear. He said that it started early. His parents enrolled him in the local Christian primary school and before long he was being bullied. Some of the other students in the class picked on him on an almost daily basis. They called him names. They shoved him when the teacher was not looking. They looked at him in a mocking way and laughed.

He did not know exactly how to react so he withdrew into himself and stuck pretty much to himself. Going to school every day was far from a happy prospect.

Over time his parents noticed that he was acting differently. They asked him why he was saying and doing certain things at home. He did not really answer them. And, besides, there was no way that he was going to tell his parents what was going on at school. If he did, he knew they would talk to the teacher, and the teacher would talk to the offending students, and life at school would become even harder.

I then asked him about his high school years. He said that they were even worse. At the local Christian high school he had to deal with the same bullying students. They never let an opportunity to put him down pass them by. As a matter of fact, things got even worse. The insults hurled were more painful. The things said about him on Facebook

hit deeper. The physical treatment at school was more aggressive. In short, he characterized his years at school as “hell on earth.”

Well, you can understand that all of this was very distressing to hear as a pastor. My heart went out to the fellow.

But then at a certain point I asked him, “But what does all of this have to do with the church? Why are you no longer attending and involved?”

The shocker

The answer that came out shook me to the core. He said, “Because some of the people who bullied me all during elementary and high school are now sitting in the elder’s pew! They have never apologized to me for what they put me through. So, every time I come to church, there they sit, and the pain is unbearable. I just can no longer bring myself to go to church on Sunday.”

Of course, in telling this true story I am not implying that all elders are guilty of this sort of conduct – far from it. Rather, what I am trying to do is to direct your attention to the reality of bullying in our midst and to the pain and damage that it causes.

Now, you may think that all of this is unnecessary. According to you what I just cited is very much an isolated episode. Bullying rarely happens, so why bother to deal with rarities?

But is this true? I have not done any surveys or taken any polls, but there are indications that it may be more of a problem than you and I think.

Now, in a way this should not surprise us. After all, we live in a fallen world as fallen creatures. True, believers have been redeemed in Christ, but our redemption is far

from complete. We have a ways to go on the road to perfection. Yes, and along the way we often stumble and mess up, also in our inter-personal relationships.

Looking at the Bible

A brief look at the Bible makes this obvious. It is not as if bullies and bullying are unheard of. Consider Cain's vile treatment of Abel, the Egyptians' harsh enslavement of the Israelites, Hophni and Phinehas's disgusting dealings with tabernacle worshippers, Queen Jezebel's cold-blooded dealings with Naboth, the Pharisees' condescending approach to the masses.

The Lord knows all this. He knows how badly people deal with one another. No doubt that is also why there are two fundamental commandments in his law. There is the first and the great commandment to love God totally and utterly. But there is also that second great commandment to love our neighbour as much as we love ourselves.

Some interpret that second commandment as a call to love oneself. In other words, before you can love someone else you first have to love yourself. Sounds like psycho-babble to me! Instead, the Lord is saying that as people we naturally tend to love ourselves first, to think of ourselves first, to cater to ourselves first, and his call to us is that we should love those around us with the same measure that

we love ourselves. Or, in the words of our Lord as uttered in the Sermon on the Mount, "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matt 7:12).

When it comes to bullying, the questions are as follows: "Would you like to go to school every day and be picked on? Would you love it if you had no

friends? Would you like it if people were constantly putting you down? Would you appreciate being mocked, insulted, sneered at every day?" In the end, bullying is not so far removed from murder. Oh, I know you are not actually beating anyone to death with a stick, but you are killing his inner person, destroying his happiness, and beating his self-confidence to a pulp. In Lord's Day 40 of the Heidelberg Catechism mention is made of "the root of murder." What is that?

It includes such things as "envy, hatred, anger, and desire of revenge," and then it adds that God "regards all these as murder" (A. 106). In Lord's Day 41, we are urged to "do what I can to defend and promote my neighbour's honour and reputation" (A. 112).

What about you?

Search your heart, reader! Have you acted as a bully in the past? Are you acting as a bully today? If it is either one or the other, or both, you need to repent. If you have been a bully you need to be man enough to go to your victim and ask for forgiveness. If you are a bully now, you need to stop your disgusting behaviour this very instant. Live as a child of light and not of darkness (cf. Eph 4).

For parents

Yet if there is a word for offenders here, there is also a word for parents. First, if your child hates going to school and has a personality change as a result of school, do not stick your head in the sand. Observe his or her behaviour carefully, collect information quietly, and investigate cautiously. It may be other things, but do not right away rule out bullying. Second, if your son or daughter makes known their disdain for a fellow classmate do not be blind to the possibility that he or she may be acting as a bully at school. In other words, do not be so naïve as to think that your darling Johnny or Sally would never, ever do such things. Sin, original and actual, lives in all of us, and also in our children.

Indeed, it would be a good thing if all parents would regularly enter into discussion with their children not just about what they are learning but also about how well they are getting along with the other students in the class. Are all the students involved and included? Are there any that are being picked on or shunned? And if the latter is the case, challenge your son or daughter to buck the trend and to befriend the bullied student.

In short, we do not need any more cases of people rejecting the church or the community of God because they have been maltreated in a school that calls itself "Christian" but fails to live up to its name. Remember the wise words of our Lord in Matthew 7:12, "Do to others what you would have them do to you" and apply them to your life and to the lives of others.





Passing Through the Waters

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you."

(Isaiah 43:2)

One thing the Bible never does is sugar-coat the reality of life in this broken world.

Even David, in the well-known twenty-third psalm, understood that God not only leads us in the idyllic settings of green pastures and beside still waters, but also ushers us through the valley of the shadow of death.

The words of the LORD through his prophet Isaiah strike a similar balance. Notably, he does not say, "if you pass through the waters," but "when you pass through the waters." And what was the secret for not being overwhelmed, burned, or consumed? The answer offers a precious and reassuring promise: because "I will be with you."

The imagery invoked here was powerful indeed! We are reminded of the days of Noah when only those who took shelter in the ark survived the Great Flood. Fast-forward to Pharaoh's genocide, when the baby Moses was protected from the waters of

the Nile in an "ark" of a different kind (Exod 2:3). Later also, during Israel's exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land, the Lord marvellously provided passage through the waters of the Red Sea so that no Israelite drowned, but all walked across on dry ground.

Now in the dark hour of Israel's exile, the Lord reassures his people that he would lead them back through the waters and through the fire. This promise was fulfilled when the Lord did indeed bring his people back from exile to their former land. But the greater fulfillment of this prophecy is found in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came to earth to suffer and die to bear the judgment and wrath of God for our sins. In this way, Jesus Christ was our trailblazer. He walked through our deep waters and passed through the flames. There is no danger he has not seen, no weakness he has not experienced, no temptation he has not faced.

What does this mean for our pilgrimage? We know the path is long and winding and strewn with many challenges from which we will not be free until the end. God has never promised to spare us from the sorrows and suffering of life. We will have to go through those waters and through those flames – but he will be with us.

To imbed this in our minds, consider the fact that many church buildings were designed and constructed to capture this reality. With their arched ceilings and the slope and pitch of their roofs, the architecture was meant to represent the underside of an ark. What a fitting depiction for what the church is – a place where people find their help and refuge when passing through the storms and choppy waters towards salvation. In the bitter realities of life, what could be better than knowing that you are eternally safe in Christ?

For further study

1. Throughout Scripture, water was an agent for destruction and deadly judgment upon sin. How does this shape the meaning of baptism?
2. What does *emerging* from the waters teach us about grace and gratitude?
3. How must we warn people in our pluralistic society of the danger of being outside the ark?





Discipline is a Matter for the Whole Body

The issue

One of the sad situations in the life of a congregation is when it gets to hear announcements of discipline or withdrawal. The first announcement of discipline expresses this sadness by stating: “The consistory informs you with sorrow that a brother (sister. . .).” The sadness and sorrow are also expressed at the beginning of the second and third announcement, and it pervades the Form for Excommunication. The congregation is urged to pray for the person in the first announcement, but only in the second announcement is the name given and is the congregation urged to also exhort and admonish the individual.

When it comes to announcements of withdrawal, the same sadness is present, as the congregation is informed that those who have travelled together with the congregation for many years have decided to part company with their brothers and sisters. In some cases, consistories receive a letter of withdrawal as the process of church discipline is about to culminate in excommunication. In many

It may be too late

other cases, however, letters of withdrawal are received after a period of interaction with office bearers about various matters and concerns that have arisen in the life of an individual or family.

There are also cases where a letter of withdrawal catches the elders by surprise, as there had been no indication of the intent to leave. In some congregations, the announcement of withdrawal is phrased in such a way as to give the congregation an opportunity to address the individuals, calling them to repentance, before membership is ended. Whatever the situation may be, either through the process of excommunication or by withdrawal, the result is that those with whom we used to worship our God and live in fellowship have departed.

While the intent of this process is to give the congregation opportunity to address those who are leaving, the problem is that it really is too late in the process. By the time the name of a brother or sister is mentioned in the second announcement, years may have passed since the consistory formally began to admonish and exhort. As for withdrawals, a letter of withdrawal has been sent, often with clear wording to indicate no further contact is desired. The nature of life as a congregation is that we don’t know every member equally well. It may, therefore, be rather awkward suddenly to seek to speak to a person with whom one had no relationship beyond being members of the same congregation. Even for those who knew the individuals well, it may be too late to address them.

The solution

It is a sad reality that there will continue to be those who stray, calling for church discipline, and those who decide they want to part company by withdrawing from the church. It will not help to tweak the *end* of the process. The place to address it is at the *beginning*, in the hope of nipping a problem in the bud. This calls for remembering that we live together as members of one body. Paul describes the church as a body in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. Among the actions called for by Paul in Romans 12 is that of exhorting one another. As members of the body of Christ, we have a responsibility for one another’s spiritual welfare. We are accountable to one another and are to call others to account when their walk and talk in life is not in accordance with the Christian faith they professed. Church discipline is not just the work of elders, but also the work of the whole congregation. It must be done together, with members and leaders working with the same principles and convictions. If there is any disconnect between the members and the leaders, you get a dysfunctional church that will not show the third mark of the church anymore.

Discipline must begin at the grassroots. We can also say that discipline must begin at home. In Deuteronomy 13, Moses instructed Israel that even if your own family member, or your own spouse, was guilty of ungodly conduct, they should be reported and dealt with. In Deuteronomy 21:18-21, he instructed fathers and mothers to report their own disobedient sons to the elders. After all, it is in the family circle that we know each other best. We may know of certain struggles and can help one another in those struggles. We also will know of certain sins which call for admonition.

Let's get practical

If we think through how this works practically in our setting, we can see that mutual discipline works in concentric circles. The inner circle is the Christian family. Husband and wife are to encourage and exhort one another to walk faithfully before the Lord. The same goes for parents and children. Parents will be the first to know if their son or daughter has begun to embrace an unchristian lifestyle. It should not be left to the elders to find this out by detective work or by rumour; there should be communication with the ward elder to let him know when efforts to bring repentance are met with deaf ears.

The second circle is the wider family. While it is true that not every family or member in a congregation has a wider family in the same congregation, many do. Sinful conduct and unreformed doctrine cannot remain hidden for long. Again, there is a need to hold one another to account. It may be necessary to speak about unchristian conduct in a marriage relationship or unchristian conduct in the way of parenting. It may also be necessary to call family members to be true to their commitment to Reformed doctrine when conversation reveals they are enamoured with wrong ideas.

The third circle is the circle of friends within the congregation. It is well possible that members have closer contact with their friends than with family members. The same type of situations as described for the second circle apply. In love, one does not merely let others think what they want to think or act in the way they want to act. We must call each other to be faithful to God's Word.

A fourth circle is the circle around us when we sit in church each Sunday. Most of us are creatures of habit and sit in approximately the same spot, surrounded by the same fellow members. We may not know them well or socialize

with them, but we see them, sit behind them, in front of them, beside them. One thing we do know is whether they are in church each Sunday. We will be the first to know if their attendance slips. This gives us a responsibility to seek them out if they are not showing up. Perhaps they are dealing with illness. Well, that is a good time to move from nodding good morning to making a visit. Frequent or extended absence may also be the first indication they are slipping away from the Reformed worship of the Lord. This is even more of a reason to move from nodding good morning to seeking out contact. Perhaps it can be the beginning of a deepening relationship. At the very least, there is an obligation to hold each other to account to be there on Sunday to worship the Lord.

Bold love

If we are sincerely involved with one another in these four circles, then surely somewhere along the line we will notice very early in the process that someone is drifting away. Surely their conversation or their conduct will have given some indication. If, for example, someone is always singing the praises of how they do it in non-Reformed churches, or how great the writings of various non-Reformed authors are, or if they frequent non-Reformed places of worship, that should ring as loud an alarm bell as to a wife whose husband is always singing the praises of another woman. Bold love demands that we speak the truth to each other in love. Yes, it may get someone upset and it may bring tension in the relationship. This, however, is unavoidable. If we don't say anything, then we simply are not honest in our relationship and the hard feelings will come eventually anyway.

Just as with weeds, when it comes to sin, we must nip it in the bud. When a member is cut off from the congregation by excommunication or cuts him or herself off by withdrawing, there is sorrow and pain. When we live together in harmony and love, there is joy. We all have a role to play in preventing sorrow and pain and promoting joy. This requires that we be ready to exhort one another and speak the truth in love, so that we may grow up into him who is the head, into Christ (Eph 4:15).

***Discipline
must begin
at the
grassroots***

C



Dating – Who?

A recent discussion around the Consistory table revealed that the elders in Smithville are concerned about the ease with which our young people (and some not so young) strike up a romantic relationship with a person outside the church. As a result of that discussion, the elders have encouraged me to republish an article first published in early 2015 about dating. The brothers wish the members of our congregation to remind each other that dating someone outside the faith is sin before God and to understand too that dating someone from an unfaithful church is also contrary to God's revealed will. In the slightly reworked article reprinted below, I'll draw attention to what the first and second commandments say about dating and then I'll wrap it all up with some specific detail.

First commandment

The Lord was emphatic to his people Israel that they were to "have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:3). As God's people, they were to be so devoted to him that they were not to develop friendly relations with the nations around them. "You shall make no covenant with them. . . . You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods" (Deut 7:2-4). Notice the reason the Lord gives for this instruction. He says Israel is too weak to stand up against the religion of the nations around them. There's something in the human heart that finds the ungodliness of the Canaanites more attractive than the gospel of the redemption-from-sin-through-blood as taught in the tabernacle.

The apostle Paul builds on this instruction. "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God" (2 Cor 6:14-16). Paul's reference, of course, is not just to marriage, but is to any alliance between

believers and unbelievers, children of God and children of Satan. But his words most certainly do apply to marriage also. And if they apply to marriage, they obviously apply also to the dating that leads up to marriage. Let's face it: two people date not for entertainment (isn't it?!), but in order to grow closer together with a view to marriage.

Perhaps you say: but isn't connecting with an unbeliever a good way to bring her to the faith? I know I'm strong, we say to ourselves, and I'll do what it takes to show her the privileges and glories of the faith. If it turns out she doesn't want to serve God with me, I'll break it off. There are a couple of things to say in reply.

1. In different yet parallel circumstances, Paul challenged people who thought they could convert their loved one: "How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?" (1 Cor 7:16) His point is simple: you have no guarantee you can; on the contrary. The point is identical today: what makes you think that you can bring your boyfriend to faith? Or your girlfriend? That's ascribing to yourself the work that belongs to the Holy Spirit.
2. But if your boyfriend does not become a believer, you obviously can't marry him. Meanwhile, in the months of dating, you have entangled your hearts around each other's so that breaking up is exceedingly painful – too often too painful to do. So, you end up stuck between a rock and a very hard place. The inevitable result of the pinch will be wounds and scars. There's wisdom, then, in making sure you don't set yourself up for finding yourself in that spot to begin with.

The long and short: The Lord forbids that his people establish a romantic relationship with someone not committed to him. You simply can't date an unbeliever.

Second commandment

The Lord was equally emphatic in the second commandment he gave his people at Mt. Sinai: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything. . ."

(Exod 20:4). The point of this command is that we're not to form an image of God in our minds as if he's like _____ – you fill in the blank. For Israel it was a calf; for us it can be an indulgent, forgiving grandfather figure. Whatever the image we form, he is no longer *different, unique, holy*. If we form a mental image of him as an indulgent grandfather who quickly forgives his grandchild's foibles, then we'll end up serving him as one who doesn't take our sinful quirks seriously.

But God is too much *God* for that. So, he tells us in detail how we are to serve him. That's why the church confesses in Lord's Day 35 that in the second commandment the Lord instructs us not to worship him in any other manner than he has commanded in his Word.

Part of how God has commanded us to worship him is the question of where we are to go to church. The Lord has revealed that he works and strengthens faith through the Word (see Romans 10:17; 1 Peter 1:23-25). It's not that God is limited to the Word; if he could create the world from nothing, he can create faith in my heart through nothing – and strengthen and grow that faith through nothing too. Similarly, he is mighty to work and strengthen faith through a warped presentation of the Word, a presentation (for example) that doesn't talk about sin, or that insists that Jesus was a social reformer who died for his cause and arose only in the minds of his disciples. With God nothing is impossible. And yes, across our country there are plenty of churches that proclaim such messages, and perhaps plenty of people in these churches who still know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour.

But the fact is that to work and strengthen faith, God is pleased to use the Word as he revealed it in Scripture. So, it's my obligation, according to the second commandment, to be where the Word is fully and faithfully proclaimed. Where I go to church is not a matter of personal choice but is a matter of obedience to God. Again, if I am obliged before God to be in that particular church of town where the Word of God is proclaimed and has the final say, then my neighbour is equally bound to frequent that same church. A couple of consequences follow:

1. I am not allowed to be Canadian Reformed (or whatever church it is I attend) on the sole ground that my family and friends attend that church. That reason will do for a child, but not for an adult (and that includes those of dating age). Before God I need to make a conscious decision that I frequent *this* church because I'm convinced

that in *this* church the Word of God is proclaimed fully and faithfully. My spiritual health and so the glory of God demands it.

2. The person one dates is equally bound to the second commandment. She too has to be in that church where the Lord is at work through his self-designated means of the Word. But if she answers the question of where God's Word is faithfully and fully proclaimed differently than I do, we have a fundamental clash right from the start. It is a clash on that very commandment in which the Lord speaks about being jealous and visiting iniquity of the fathers upon the children. Marriage wants children, and I am foolish to set my children up for being on the receiving end of God's jealousy.

Of course, one could say: But I'm going to take him to my church. And one can add: If he doesn't want to join, I'll break off the relationship; for my part I'll never leave my church.

Actually, the comments made above in relation to one's ability to bring about obedience to the first commandment would apply just as accurately to one's ability to bring about obedience to the second commandment. None of us have any idea whether we can convince a dating partner to join "our" church and become a living member of it. Meanwhile, the longer you go out, the more hearts get entangled (what else is dating for!). To disentangle hearts when you find out that she will not eagerly join your church will invariably hurt. It's far wiser not to set yourself up for that ordeal.

The long and short: as the Lord is particular in how his people serve him, he would not have his people develop a romantic relation with a person who serves him differently than he has commanded.

Who?

Please do not conclude from the above material that any person will do, provided he or she is a member of your church. The simple but sad fact is that in the church too are persons who are not committed to the Lord alone (contrary to the first commandment), and there are also persons who worship the Lord in their own self-chosen manner (contrary to the second commandment). As one looks for a partner within the circle of the church, one needs to be convinced that the person of your choice in fact serves the Lord God alone in all of life, and does so in a manner consistent with God's instruction.

Perhaps ask yourself these two questions: Could that girl be a fitting help to me in God's service? Would I love to entrust my children to her care and instruction for the first twenty years of their lives? And flip side: Could that guy be a fitting leader for me in God's service, so that with him I feel cared for, protected, and safe – emotionally, physically, spiritually? Would I love to see him guide, lead, and develop my children through their childhood and teenage years? You need to be able to answer those questions with a confident "Yes" – and if you doubt you can, don't start a relationship.

Of course, one always needs to leave room for growth. And growth, by the grace of God, will happen within the

heart of one committed to God. But if one is not *committed* to God, there is no guarantee that repentance and commitment will one day occur.

Prayer

Where does this leave us? Let parents from time to time make the matter of who their children should date a matter of conversation and family prayer. Giving the topic that kind of profile helps impress on the children that they need to factor God's will into the matter. It helps, too, in teaching the young to *trust* that the Lord in his time will provide the boy/girl of his choosing. There is something so rewarding about *receiving* a partner from God's hand. **C**





Nigerian Genocide of Christians

From January to early July of this year, more than 6,000 Christians have been slaughtered in Nigeria. The Christian Association of Nigeria, an umbrella group of Christian churches, calls it “pure genocide” and states that “there is no doubt that the sole purpose of these attacks is aimed at ethnic cleansing, land grabbing and forceful ejection of the Christian natives from their ancestral land and heritage.” Furthermore, the majority of those massacred this year were “mostly children, women and the aged.”

Raymond Ibrahim reported on the Gatestone Institute website that the details of these murders are seldom reported but they are “often grisly; many were either hacked to death or beheaded with machetes; others were burned alive (including inside locked churches or homes); and women are often sexually assaulted or raped before being slaughtered.”

Why is there no international outcry about this ongoing horrific tragedy? A basic problem is that these killings are typically portrayed both inside and outside of Nigeria as “territorial clashes between the haves (apparently always Christians) and the have-nots (apparently always Muslims).” However, those living in the areas affected strongly deny that this is the situation. They know that this is Islamic jihad.

The National Christian Elders Forum (NCEF) in Nigeria is an organization comprised of representatives whose average age is seventy-five and who come from Nigeria’s six political regions. They have been around and know the history and situation first hand. They met with the British High Commissioner, Paul Arkwright, on May 2, 2018, with the hope of getting the support of the British for setting up a Truth, Peace, and Reconciliation Commission in Nigeria to address the escalating violence and to secure the release of the remaining 113 Chibok girls still captive to Boko Haram. In their summary of the issues addressed, the elders noted that they had “served the nation in various high ranking capacities.” In other words, they are well equipped to know the issues. They note that it is clear to them that

Jihad has been launched in Nigeria by the Islamists of northern Nigeria led by the Fulani ethnic group. This Jihad is based on the Doctrine of Hate taught in Mosques and Islamic Madrasas in northern Nigeria as well as the supremacist ideology of the Fulani. Using both conventional (violent) Jihad, and stealth (civilization) Jihad, the Islamists of northern Nigeria seem determined to turn Nigeria into an Islamic Sultanate and replace Liberal Democracy with Sharia as the National Ideology. The object of course, is to supplant the Constitution with Sharia as the source of legislation.

The elders further observed that since “Christians constitute over 50% of the Nigerian population, the goal of the Islamists is bound to create serious conflicts which if not checked is capable of escalating into another civil war.”

The elders also appealed to the West. “It is in the best interest of Western powers to intervene before the situation spirals out of control. Presently, Muslim persecution of Christians in northern and MiddleBelt Nigeria by Boko Haram and Islamist Fulani herders contributes to making these regions some of the most dangerous places on earth to be a Christian.” They further asserted that “Christians are willing to live in peace with all other citizens of Nigeria, irrespective of religious beliefs or cultural affiliation. We expect our fellow citizens to reciprocate. To date, we have been severely provoked by the Islamists who seem to translate our patience into weakness. We should make clear that we shall not fold our hands and watch all that we hold dear, primarily our liberty and right to live, trampled upon by religious extremists.”

Until the West acknowledges that the root of the problem is not poverty but the ideology of Muslim jihad, the killing seems likely to continue.

Sources used: “Jihad in Nigeria: NCEF Meets British Government” on Christian Association of Nigeria website; Raymond Ibrahim, “International Community Ignores Genocide of Christians in Nigeria” on Gatestone Institute website; Internet.

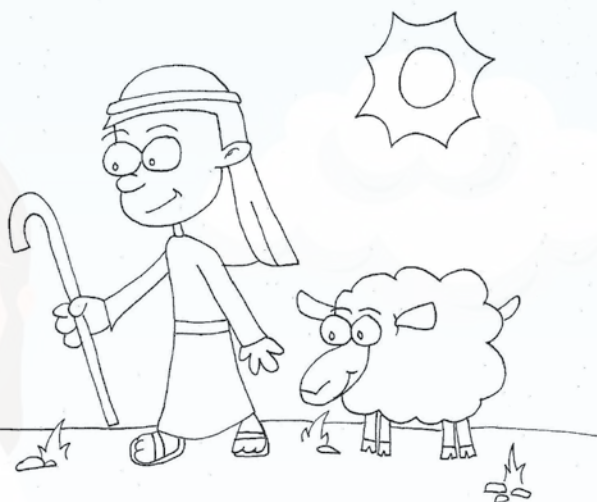


The Parable of the Lost Sheep

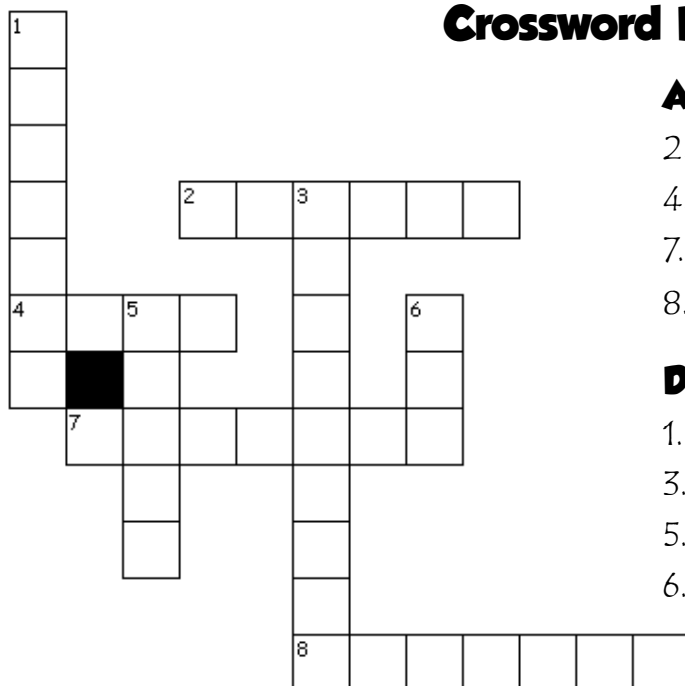
Matthew 18:10-14, Luke 15:1-7

The Pharisees were angry that Jesus talked and ate with sinners, so he told them this parable: If you have a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, wouldn't you leave the ninety-nine, and go after the one that is lost, until you find it? And when you find it, you bring it home with great joy, and call together your friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Jesus said there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

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



Crossword Puzzle



Across

2. Jesus is glad when sinners _____.
4. The shepherd searches for his _____ sheep.
7. Jesus' response when sinners repent.
8. Jesus ate with _____.

Down

1. A story with a message.
3. People who were angry at Jesus.
5. What was lost.
6. How many sheep were lost.

by Emily Nijenhuis



Shout and Cheer, O Zion's Daughter!

1. Shout and cheer, O Zi - on's Daugh - ter! Praise your King, Je -
 2. God will take a - way the char - iots from his peo - ple,
 3. When he comes a - gain in glo - ry he will sound the

ru - sa - lem! See, he's com - ing as your Sav - iour. Sing a -
 E - phra - im. His de - cree will be all glo - rious and will
 trum - pet call. He will lead us to our vic - tory and his

loud with song and hymn. On a don - key, meek and hum - ble,
 bless Je - ru - sa - lem. Christ brings peace a - mong the na - tions
 en - e - mies' down - fall. Je - sus Christ him - self will save us

comes your King, low - ly and gen - tle. Not for him a
 which will last for gen - er - a - tions. He has shed his
 from all those who would en - slave us. He will us with

might - y horse! Not for him great show of force!
 blood for you, for both Gen - tile and for Jew.
 glo - ry crown from his splen - did heav - enly throne.

Text: George van Popta © 2018; based on Zech. 9:9-17

Tune: Johann Schop, 1590-1667; harmony, Johann S. Bach, 1685-1750 (from BWV 147)

Dedicated to my good friend Peter Buist for his 65th birthday.

87 87 88 77
 JESU JOY



Q Are men created in a way more suitable for dealing with authority?

I have met people who said that they feel men fulfil leadership roles in our churches because they are more suitable than women to hold these positions. They feel men are created in a way that they can deal better with authority, responsibility, and possible stress that comes with the offices. Is there any biblical basis for this reasoning?

A In 1 Peter 3:7 we read Peter's exhortation, "Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honour to the woman as *the weaker vessel*, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life. . . ." When hearing that expression, husbands tend to put on a smile of "Ah, see!" While the wives can hardly suppress their smile, thinking "Yes sure, wait till he has a flu or so!" What's easily overlooked when reading this exhortation, however, is the fact that the comparative "weaker" implies that the husband is weak too. The husband's condition in the Lord isn't strong either. That's how the apostle Paul takes this expression of the weaker vessel. In 2 Corinthians 4:7, Paul calls himself a jar of clay, adding the words "to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." Paul, an earthen vessel, denoting his weakness, is nonetheless a chosen instrument of Christ (Acts 9:15). Husband and wife both are weak vessels yet restored as instruments of the Lord. Both are made of dust, of clay, yet the woman is the "weaker" one, not in the sense of quality but of tenderness, preciousness; she is the more exquisite!

Already in the Old Testament the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah used this image of "vessels" because man is a fragile creature, pottery in the hands of the great Potter. Physically the woman is weaker than the man, generally speak-

ing. His body is of a heavier structure. The danger, however, looms when the man starts using his physical prominence as argument for his preferred position. That's when the respect and submission of the other (his wife) or others (inferiors) becomes forced and manipulated. The roles and positions people receive as instruments (vessels) of the Lord are not determined by their physical conditions but by the place the Lord assigns in the relationships. Indeed, then God's Word teaches us the leadership role of the men in their marriage, calling them to be loving leaders (Eph 5:25-33) and to show sacrificial love and understanding and wisdom. In the church Holy Scripture also assigns the position of office bearer to the men (1 Tim 2, 3; Titus 1; 1 Cor 14), *not* because they're more able and capable for physical or mental reasons (on the contrary, as Paul acknowledges in 2 Cor 4:7) but because of God's assigned roles in the church.

When we consider other roles and positions of leadership, however, we should observe in Scripture that God gives people different gifts and talents. To women in the church a variety of tasks and responsibilities may be assigned depending on these gifts, be that gifts of service, of care, of prophecy, in which they may be used as instruments of the Lord for the upbuilding of his church and the furtherance of his kingdom in this world. Then it's not a question of them being a woman and not a man whether they're able to handle the stress of a teacher, a principal, a nurse

or head nurse, a manager or a board chairlady, but rather a matter of their physical, mental, and emotional condition (besides having the required gifts for such tasks). I am sure that in everyone's experience there have been women who dealt with these and other roles and positions of leadership better than some men would have been able to.

Of course, then there may still be differences in the way such roles are handled, but that's then not so much a

creational issue but a matter of personality, character, and gifts and talents! As the apostle Paul writes Timothy (2 Tim 2:20f.), "In a great house there are not only *vessels* of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honourable use, some for dishonourable. Therefore, if *anyone* cleanses himself from what is dishonourable, he will be a *vessel* for honourable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work."

Q Is individualism gaining ground in the church?

As churches we have agreed that the covenant of God is to be "sealed by baptism to the children of believers as soon as feasible" (CO, Art. 56, 57), yet baptism is being postponed for a variety of reasons more and more.

Could these reasons warrant a delay or is this another sign of individualism creeping into the church today?

A In an accompanying letter, this questioner adduces a number of reasons that are given to explain the postponement of the administration of baptism: the local minister is out of town, the grandparents can't be there on that Sunday, the official visit by one of the office bearers couldn't be made yet, some of our close friends will be out of town that day and shouldn't miss out, etc. Thus it happens that couples are in church, yet they don't have their two-week (or three-week) old baby baptized. Could these and other such like reasons warrant a delay?

The matter of the timing of the baptism of a newborn in the family has a long history in the church. The fact alone already that it's included in the Church Order of Dort testifies to this (dating back to 1618/1619 and beyond!). Yes, originally it read that this baptism should be administered

"as soon as *possible*," so that babies would be presented sometimes two or three days after their birth. At least that was the practice when I grew up; being one of eleven children, in my family my mother has never attended the baptism of any of her children but was always present "in heart and mind spiritually."

God's Word does not give us an explicit command regarding the timing of the administration of Holy Baptism (neither does it tell us how often we should celebrate the Lord's Supper). *Some* adduce as directive the timing of circumcision in the Old Testament on the eighth day (Gen 17:12), i.e. as soon as mother and child were free from uncleanness. Because the content of circumcision and baptism is identical, this text has value in the new dispensation also. *Others*, however, consider this directive differently and say that since the New Testament is a much *richer* dispensation, NT believers should show greater love and gratitude

to the LORD of the covenant for the privilege of receiving one of his children and show this by seeking baptism as soon as possible.

This question certainly is as good an opportunity as any for us to have a closer look at this matter of the timing of the baptism. It is good and helpful to give this agreement in the Church Order – as soon as feasible – renewed attention. Then we should realize first and foremost that *the LORD* should come *first* in our consideration: he wants his children distinguished from the children of unbelievers. The children God entrusts to believers are *his* children! He gives them “in loan” to the parents, implying that they remain the LORD’s, who makes a covenant with the child the promises of which are so rich that they should be first and foremost in the consideration of baptism. The result of parents understanding the riches of God’s covenant will surely be that they present their child for Holy Baptism and do so as soon as feasible.

In the second place, baptism is administered with a view to the *congregation* in which they are included. Children of believers are born “in the congregation;” they’re members of the flock. Sacramentally they are being incorporated into the congregation. Also the parents belong to this congregation in which they see the administration of Holy Baptism regularly for the strengthening of their faith. By baptism the LORD wants to seal his covenant and thereby strengthen the faith; hence the congregation has the right to receive this strengthening and see this sealing of God’s promises in the covenant to which they all belong.

Thirdly, the right of the *child* should be recognized. As a child that belongs to the LORD, it should receive the sealing of this status and the public confirmation of the LORD’s promises to this one of his children as soon as feasible. In the event of us receiving any special gift or award or legacy or privilege we seek to obtain it too as soon as feasible! When later on the child learns about its baptism and its rich meaning and the LORD’s rich promises in order to *use* its baptism, it should also be able to conclude from its parents’ eagerness and gratitude and honour to the LORD that they had sought the administration of its baptism “as soon as feasible” because it was so important to them!

When the baptism of infants is considered a family affair, an occasion for parents and their child, individualism indeed has crept into the church. Baptism, however, is in the first place a matter for God and his congregation of which the child is the latest enrichment! This then also gives the office bearers in the church an opportunity and obligation to instil this understanding in the parents and congregation, to instruct them in the riches of the covenant, in the status of the child “entrusted” to them by the LORD. Indeed, as the Church Order articulates as well, the *consistory* shall ensure that the covenant of God is sealed by baptism to the children of believers as soon as feasible! Also the Form for the Baptism of Infants professes that children of believers “*ought* to be baptized.” Why would you leave a child of the LORD unbaptized if you know that it ought to be baptized?!



Is there something you’ve been wanting to know?

An answer you’ve been looking for?

Ask us a question!

**Please direct questions to Rev. W. denHollander
denhollanderw@gmail.com**

23 Kinsman Drive, Binbrook, ON L0R 1C0

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

Recent articles in *Clarion* (“Preventing Article 11” by Peter H. Holtvlüwer; Church Conflicts and Acts 15 by James Visscher) explore strategies to resolve church conflicts, though I’m sure neither author has any pretention that he provides a fail-proof template. Holtvlüwer, for example, believes that the prerequisites of humility, selflessness, a willingness to learn, and prayer will (help) prevent Article 11 dismissals. James Visscher, on the other hand, uses the example of the conflict that was resolved in Acts 15 as a model for the resolution of church conflict. Though both authors mention a number of commendable strategies, both, I fear, fail to move us closer to preventing or resolving church conflicts. Let me explain.

Peter Holtvlüwer writes about three main areas that have apparently contributed toward Article 11 dismissals: preaching, catechetical instruction, and pastoral visitation. Concerning preaching, he queries, “If he (our minister) is clearly preaching the pure Word of God, is the Lord happy with our discontentment?” With respect to catechetical instruction he asks, “But so long as the pastor faithfully teaches the correct doctrine as confessed by the church, does it please God that we are bothered by the manner of his instruction?” And then concerning pastoral visits he writes, “We might be irritated by our pastor’s personality or his manner in the way he makes his visits, but if he sincerely opens the Word and prays with us, is our irritation justified?” In each example, what the pastor does is indeed important. But is it fair to pastors, or congregants, to reduce the minister’s acceptable performance in such a minimalistic fashion?

In addition to his minimalistic acceptable pastoral performance standard, Pastor Holtvlüwer disparages the discontent of congregants when he assumes that this criticism is a product of a consumerist mentality: “In the West, we are immersed in an age of consumerism, individualism, and entitlement, and it seems to be affecting us in this area as well.” There is no substantiation for this charge, which, at best, appears to me to be simplistic. Has he considered the fact that the “consumer products” to which he refers (sermons, catechetical instruction, pastoral visits) are not described. I.e., what are the elements of a proper sermon: content, delivery, relevance, etc., what does effective catechism teaching look like and sound like? This lack of definition, I believe, is one of the biggest causes of irresolvable church conflict.

Conflict is an inevitable reality in human relations. Professional conflict resolution facilitators, however, advise us that we have to step back when we think of conflict. Though the word “conflict” is often viewed pejoratively, it does not have to be. Professional facilitators tell us that the rise of a conflict signals a lack of clarity in the performance expectations that two conflicting parties have. In contractual work relations in business or education, this means that the two parties (e.g., employee and employer) who have agreed to submit to a contractual work relationship need to clarify their expectations. That is why schools have detailed job descriptions for their teachers and principals, and school boards provide their staff with detailed contracts that describe the boards’ responsibilities toward their employees: work conditions, remuneration, etc.

Unfortunately, in the work relationship between pastors and their councils such performance details are vague and, beyond the letter of call, largely non-existent. Therefore, neither the minimalistic expectations posed by Pastor Holtvlüwer nor the resolution strategies described by Pastor Visscher will succeed unless we back up and begin by providing properly defined performance expectations. Most professional organizations have painstakingly formulated detailed job descriptions. Consequently, those who are evaluated, know *a priori* what their employers may expect, and where they will have to improve after a performance evaluation. Pastor Peter Holtvlüwer doesn’t pretend to provide a job description for pastors, but suggests via the rhetorical questions that these minimalistic expectations should be acceptable. Even with a proper dose of humility, selflessness, willingness to learn, and prayer his strategy will not avoid Article 11 dismissals. In the latter context, he wonders whether the Lord would appreciate our irritation, or dissatisfaction. Even though these thoughts are posed as rhetorical questions, are the implied answers not presumptuous?

In an earlier issue of *Clarion*, in an article by Paul Murphy entitled “Orthodusty” (Vol. 27, No. 12), the author is brutally blunt about Reformed/Presbyterian preaching: “You get a lecture with an academic-type exposition of the Word and usually, if one was honest, you find yourself hard pressed not to fall asleep.” Is this description a caricature? I hope so. Murphy’s challenge to pastors is significantly different from Holtvlüwer’s: “The way to do it right is having the ability and capacity to meet people where they are and lead them to the place Christ wants them to be.” Whether we apply this advice to preaching, catechetics, or pastoral visitation, he clearly embraces a different minimum measure for

the pastor's performance than Peter Holtvlüwer. He's using a totally different rubric.¹ Murphy's measure will require relevance, active engagement with the congregants, and authenticity. Holtvlüwer's minimalistic sermon that proclaims the pure Word may have those attributes, but maybe not. That dilemma is problematic.

Can the desirable performance attributes for pastors be described in well-designed rubrics so that ministers and consistories (in the first place) will be able to read what these attributes look like and sound like? Indeed it can be done. To what advantage? Pastors can use such instruments to inform their practice, consistories can use them to help pastors grow. In their absence, people work with subjective gut feelings that are far from helpful in preventing or resolving conflicts. Ten elders in a consistory could come with ten different sets of expectations, changing with every change in the consistory. How can a minister meet all these changing expectations?

Clear performance expectations are like being on the bridge of a ship with good navigation maps and guides, so that the captain can avoid reefs and treacherous currents that could sink the ship. And thus, his ship will reach its destination. Ah! But ships still sink, some astute observer will declare. Indeed. But usually that happens because the captain or navigator didn't read his charts. And if he is not able to read and implement the requirements of navigation, should he be on the bridge?

Pieter H. Torenvliet
Abbotsford, BC

¹ In the context of this article, a rubric is a detailed and analytical description of the performance expectations. Rubrics are very commonly used in education to describe various levels of outcomes. Teachers or university profs will inform students that if they want an "A" for their assignment, the following elements will need to be evident in your product.

Re: Book Review, *Christ's Psalms, Our Psalms* Devotional

Dear Editor:

I read with interest the review on this devotional by Sarah Vandergugten.

I commend the writers and the editor for the time taken and effort made to provide believers with good daily spiritual food.

We are in possession of this book. We also have a parallel devotional on the Psalms called *Hearts Aflame* by John Calvin. As we are empty nesters, we have decided to take the extra time to read both devotionals at the same time. Possibly at the end of a year we could offer a qualified opinion on this new book.

Different people look for different things in these daily devotionals. Some may look for an in-depth explanation of a Scripture passage also with direct reference to Christ. Others may look for the more subjective and daily life application. (What would you do? How would you feel?) The age and Christian maturity of the reader in some ways determines the type of material used.

I realize that when someone writes an article, it is usual practice to start with an opening comment. I found Sarah's opener did not promote the neighbour's honour. That is what I would like to address.

One of the elders ("a helpful church member") was doing his task by also promoting good Christian literature. He introduced the devotional *Nearer to God*. This devotional comes in two-month issues and is written by Reformed ministers, some URCNA, ARPC, CanRC. The opening statement reads, "This devotional takes a Reformed view of the Bible."

From the devotional, I quote, "There are many good songs, but the theme of this one is none other than the Son of God. Jesus said the Scriptures 'testify of me' (John 5:39), and yet this best of songs testifies of Christ in a way that is deliberately unique and gloriously rich."

The comment "There is only so much allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs that a Reformed person can handle" was uncalled for.

Yours in Christ,
Rick VanOene

*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.*

