

Clarion

A CANADIAN REFORMED MAGAZINE: TO ENCOURAGE, EDUCATE, ENGAGE, AND UNITE

**There will be no harvest
without planting**



VOLUME 68 • NUMBER 6 • MARCH 22, 2019

**COMMEMORATING THE CANONS OF DORT
FAITHWORKS HAMILTON 2018**

Clarion

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

2019 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
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Agreement No. 40063293; ISSN 0383-0438

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

This issue is a special one, commemorating the 400th anniversary of the Canons of Dort. Rev. Eric Kampen put this issue together and leads with his article, "God's Means Unto His End." Many thanks to the other contributors for our special issue: Rev. Clarence Bouwman ("Jacob Arminius and the Synod of Dort"), Dr. Jason Van Vliet ("Loved by the Church, Hated by Satan"), and Dr. Karlo Janssen ("Dort Policy – Running a Reformed Church").

Regular columns Treasures, New & Old, *Clarion Kids*, and Ray of Sunshine appear in Issue 6, as well as a book review and two letters to the editor. There is also a report on a Faithworks trip.

Laura Veenendaal

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God's Means Unto His End

*Whenever we have a reference to means, we see the
role and place of human activity*

We are all familiar with various expressions using the word “means,” in the sense of method, process, or way of going about something. For example, there is the expression “the end justifies the means.” When we hear that, we tend to get uncomfortable, for it is easily used to justify improper methods and tactics, where people may get hurt. More positive is the expression “the means unto an end.” This refers to the process that needs to be followed to achieve a certain goal. It applies to a situation where some event is planned and the question that needs to be addressed is, “What means are needed to achieve our goal?”

It is not only for human plans and goals that we speak of the means unto the desired end. This is also true for God. He uses means to accomplish his end.

Use of means in daily life

We see God's use of means in daily life, such as in the birth of children, our daily food, or our health. We recognize that God uses certain means to bring these about. This was made clear already in the creation commission, when God said that man was to be fruitful and multiply and to exercise dominion over the earth. Children come into the world through human activity of marriage and procreation. We receive our food through the activity of farming, which includes ploughing, planting, cultivating, and harvesting, as well as many other human activities. For our health and strength, we need to eat our daily food. That was part of his plan. It shows us God entrusted mankind with a glorious, important task. This task remains even in the fallen world, as is evident in the way David sings about it in Psalm 8. The proper attitude, therefore, is to be busy with whatever task lies before us and to ask God to give his blessing so it will be successful. As Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 3:7, man plants, waters, and cultivates, but only God can give the growth.

Use of means in salvation

Paul's words from 1 Corinthians 3 also bring out that God uses means to an end when it comes to his plan of salvation. He refers to the work done by other servants of God, such as Peter or Apollos, as they worked in God's field, that is, the congregation. The workers have a role to play. They are the means that God uses. It should never be forgotten, however, that God alone gives the growth.

It is good to reflect on the way God uses means to accomplish his purpose as we continue to mark the 400th anniversary of the Canons of Dort. The Canons speak of God's sovereign plan of election. That plan finds its origin in God's election from before the foundation of the world. Article 7 of the first chapter sums up this plan. Election is the unchangeable purpose of God whereby he has, according to his sovereign good pleasure of his will, out of mere grace, chosen in Christ to salvation a definite number of specific persons. Also the faith, by which one is justified, is a gift from God. At the same time, the Canons impress on us God's sovereign electing grace in Christ does not take away that he uses certain means to accomplish his purpose. Whenever we have a reference to means, we see the role and place of human activity.

We see how God uses means already in Article 3 of the first chapter. It states, “So that men may be brought to faith, God mercifully sends his heralds of the most joyful message to whom he will and when he wills.” The article concludes by quoting from Romans 10:14,15, “For how will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?” This reminds us of the way the Lord Jesus commissioned his disciples to go into the

world, making disciples of all nations, to be his witnesses unto the end of the earth (Matt 28:19, 20; Acts 1:8).

We see further reference to God's means in Article 5 of the second chapter, "The promise of the gospel is that whoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish but have eternal life. This promise ought to be announced and proclaimed universally and without discrimination to all peoples and to all men, to whom God in his good pleasure sends the gospel, together with the call to repent and believe." We see again that God's means is the preaching of the gospel.

The Canons of Dort are not some cold and abstract document that makes us feel like little chess pieces just being moved around the board by God

The preaching in itself does not guarantee that all who hear will believe. It is just like the planting of seed. Planting does not guarantee the seed will germinate. Yet, as there will be no harvest without planting, there will be no repentance and faith without preaching. The activity of preaching is critical, and preaching requires preachers.

The importance of the preaching as God's chief means to accomplish his purpose comes out in Chapter 3/4. We see it mentioned in Article 6. It is stated that what "neither the light of nature nor the law can do, God performs by the power of the Holy Spirit through the word or ministry of reconciliation, which is the gospel of the Messiah, by which it has pleased God to save men who believe, both under the old and under the new dispensation." The word or ministry of reconciliation refers to human activity.

The chapter concludes with an article devoted to the use of the means. It starts off with the same comparison made earlier in this article, when it states that the way God "brings forth and sustains our natural life does not exclude but requires the use of means, by which he ... has willed to exercise his power." The article then mentions how God uses the gospel, which he has ordained as the seed of regeneration. The apostles reverently instructed people concerning the grace of God and kept them under the admonitions of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is then said that "grace is conferred through admonitions, and the more readily we do our duty, the more this favour of God, who works in us, usually manifests itself in its lustre, and so his work best proceeds."

The emphasis on God's means to accomplish his purpose also is found in the last chapter, which addresses the reality that believers do stumble and fall into sins. It is stated in Article 7 that "through his Word and Spirit [God] certainly and effectually renews them to repentance." The second last article of this chapter once more speaks of the means of God when it states, "Just as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the preaching of the gospel, so he maintains, continues, and perfects it by the hearing and reading of his Word, by meditation on it, by its exhortation, threats and promises, and by the use of the sacraments."

Praise to God and direction for us

As we reflect on this, we will see that the Canons of Dort are not some cold and abstract document that makes us feel like little chess pieces just being moved around the board by God. Rather, the Canons bring out the majesty and marvel of God's work and give us hope and direction in our activities. Just as confessing the providence of God does not stop young people from marrying and having sexual relations, on the assumption that God will give them children if he desires, and just as the providence does not stop the farmer from being busy on his farm on the assumption God will give crops if he desires, so it is in his work of salvation. Parents diligently instruct their children in the way of the Lord. Ministers faithfully proclaim the gospel, showing the covenant promises and demands. Elders humbly and lovingly admonish. We read our Bibles at meal times. We offer up prayers. We use the sacraments. We make efforts to bring the gospel to others, near and far. We pray for the conversion of many. The doctrine of election does not undermine it. Rather, the doctrine of election encourages us as we use God's means of grace, for it assures us that it will bear fruit.

So, hopefully, the various articles on the Synod of Dort have renewed appreciation of the Canons it produced. They faithfully echo the gospel of God's sovereign grace in Christ, and how the sovereign God uses means to accomplish his purpose. In this way, the Canons encourage us to be busy with the gospel in our own lives, the lives of our children, and to proclaim it wherever we can. This is how God does his sovereign work. We do well, therefore, to finish with the last words of Chapter 3/4, Article 17, "To God alone, both for the means and for the saving fruit and efficacy, all glory is due throughout eternity. Amen."





Behold, My Servant!

“Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.” (Isaiah 52:13)

It can be very tempting during this season of Lent to think upon our crucified Lord with a measure of pity. And yet as far as Old Testament prophecies of his sufferings go, this emotion hardly enters the picture. At least not for Isaiah.

The well-known Isaianic prophecy about the Suffering Servant begins not in Isaiah 53:1, but in 52:13-15. It's the prologue to this beautiful song, except remarkably it's more like a *conclusion* to the song. It describes the *end* of the whole story – the Suffering Servant's *exaltation* – with merely a parenthetical remark about his humiliation. In other words, God begins with a breathtaking picture of the appearance of the Messiah, the one who would be exalted. Thus, our Lord would have us regard this servant not with *pity*, but as the object of *worship*.

And so God begins: “Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.” Who really is this servant? This is now the fourth Servant Song in Isaiah. In the first song, Isaiah presented the servant as the *whole* nation of Israel (41:8-9). In the next, the Lord calls his servant Israel to be a light to the world, and to open blind eyes (42:6-7). Yet Is-

rael did not fulfill her calling. Rather than being a light to the nations, Israel herself became blind. So instead of bringing God's salvation to *others*, Israel herself now needed someone to bring *her* back to God. Who would do all that?

The answer comes from what follows in Isaiah. God is no longer going to look to the nation as a whole, but now to one individual *within* that nation. He's going to call upon one individual who will fulfill God's calling – bring Israel back to God and be God's light to the nations. This individual is introduced in 49:5-6, the third song. He is to reconcile Israel with her God, and then deliver the gospel of grace to the ends of the earth.

And so now when he's introduced in the fourth song, the Lord says, “Behold, my servant!” “Because of what *this* one is going to do, fix your every bit of attention on him!” This servant of the Lord has an important office, and he is the *one* Israelite who would *not* fail. Look at him, the one whose food and drink is to do the will of him who sent him.

This one “shall act wisely.” Or as the ESV footnote says, he “shall prosper.” There's a sense in which both ideas are

present here. The servant will not merely be a wise man, nor will he merely be a prosperous man. This servant will both *know* and *do* the right things to accomplish the purpose for which God called him. He is going to act *wisely* and *successfully*. In the Hebrew language, when you say someone acts wisely, *that means they act successfully* (see Josh 1:8).

And the proof of his success? “He shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.” That might sound somewhat repetitive. But the Lord is far from being so. These verbs are not synonymous; they are sequential. The Lord is going to exalt his servant, high, higher, then highest. Could this be a hint already centuries before Christ of the stages of his exaltation: resurrection, ascension, and session at the right hand of the Father?

This will be the extent of the servant's success! The servant of the Lord is going to come, he is going to act intelligently and successfully, he's going to accomplish the work God gave him to do, and God will crown his efforts with success upon success! “Behold, my servant,” God says! He will be victorious.

And so, this Lent season, worship the servant who came to be King! **C**

For further study

1. What prerequisite to success does a passage like Joshua 1:8 mention, and how might that relate to this passage?
2. How might this passage correspond to the words of Paul in Philippians 2?



Jacob Arminius and the Synod of Dort

This article is excerpted from the author's latest book, God's Glorious GODness: revisiting the Canons of Dort. The book will shortly be available in Canada from Premier Printing and in Australia from Pro Ecclesia Publishers.

The people warming the pews of Reformed churches in The Netherlands in the early part of the seventeenth century were restless and unhappy. That's because of the mixed signals coming through the preaching they heard. The man stirring the pot – and so unsettling the pew – was Jacob Arminius. I'd like to introduce him to you.

Youth

Jacob Arminius was born in Oudewater in the Dutch province of Utrecht in 1560, a few short years before the death of the great reformer John Calvin (1564). Young Jacob was orphaned at the tender age of 14, then taken in by a Reformed minister who, in 1576, sent Arminius, at age 16, to the University of Leyden. Chief instructor at this University was the theologian Casper Koolhaas.

We need to know that with the arrival of the Renaissance a century before, European scholarship allowed itself to be influenced and guided by the philosophy of long-dead Greeks as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. This influence popularized in Europe the notion that the human mind is able to sort out and resolve the deep questions of human existence. Those who embraced this Greek influence were known as *Humanists*; they typically agreed that humans are good, they defended the doctrine of man's free will, and they questioned man's need for God's grace in order to achieve any form of salvation – for man had it within himself to save himself from whatever perils life put to him. Koolhaas embraced this Greek influence eagerly, and did not hesitate to press this man-centric confidence upon his students, including young Jacob Arminius.

It's not that young Arminius (or even the older Koolhaas, for that matter) disavowed his Christian heritage totally in favour of full-blown Greek paganism. On the contrary, Arminius trained to be a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ within the Reformed Church in The Netherlands. But his education taught him how to mix elements of humanism with his Christianity, and it's that mix that produced the variant known as Arminianism. To put it differently, his training under Koolhaas led him to find the Calvinism of the Reformation as too stuffy, so that in turn he sought to blend Calvinism with humanism.

Pattern

After his graduation from seminary in 1587, Arminius became minister of a large Reformed Church in Amsterdam. This congregation already had another minister in the person of Peter Plancius. The consistory quickly recognized Arminius' exceptional gifts, and so requested their young minister to evaluate the publication of a person by the name of Dirck Coornhart (1522-1590). The Consistory sought an opinion on this publication because of what it said about human nature, free will, and the need for God's grace.

Arminius' response to Coornhart's book exposed the fact that Arminius himself held faulty positions on man's free will, depravity, and God's grace. As a result, Plancius faulted his co-pastor minister for holding to the general goodness in man, that man had an ability to use his free will, and that man could cooperate with Jesus Christ in attaining salvation. Plancius referred to Article 15 of the Belgic Confession, a document that Arminius had also once signed: "We believe that . . . original sin. . . is a corruption of the entire nature of man and a hereditary evil which infects even infants in their mother's womb. As a root it produces in man all sorts of sin." He drew attention also to the Heidelberg Catechism's answer to the question "But are

we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil?” as an emphatic Yes, unless God works upon us by His Holy Spirit to regenerate us.

In his response to Plancius’ criticism, Arminius claimed he fully agreed with the confessions. He stated that though he would prefer to see some changes made to the confessions, he certainly knew himself bound to the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism, and so he would teach and preach in full agreement with those confessions. This response turned out to be typical of Arminius’ manner of working; he was not truthful, and so what he really thought was extraordinarily difficult to pin down. This pattern repeated itself in the years that followed, and all the while the little humanist seeds Arminius sowed grew and bore fruit among his audience.

Professor

In 1603, two of three professors at the University of Leyden died as a result of a plague. Arminius was appointed to replace one of them. The remaining professor at the University, Franciscus Gomarus (1563-1641), was unhappy with Arminius’ appointment. The powers that be, however, refused to give Gomarus’ concerns a hearing unless he could demonstrate, after a discussion with Arminius, how

Does the Bible teach, or even leave room for, a God who needs people’s participation and consent before he will save them?

Arminius erred. Gomarus’ experience was similar to that of Plancius. He could not nail Arminius down to any error because Arminius repeatedly voiced his agreement with the Confession. At the same time, though, he shied away from openness. At Leyden he taught his students in private, and they were not permitted to publish his lecture notes.

Arminius died in 1609. His teachings, however, did not follow him into the grave. He had taught future ministers for six years, and through them his blend of humanism



with Calvinism lived on. There were those in the churches who were content with this blend and many who were not. That brings us to another angle of the background to the Synod of Dort, and that’s the role of the national government. I might first add: the vacancy at the University of Leyden Arminius left at his death was filled by Simon Episcopius (1583-1643), a fellow humanist who cheerfully carried on where Arminius left off. And yes, he was a government appointee. . . .

The national government

For a thirty-two-year period beginning in 1586, Holland’s strongman was Johan van Oldenbarnevelt. Theologically he was also a humanist, and so believed that people are essentially good, have a free will, and are able to decide between good and evil. So, it’s no surprise to learn that his government was much more favorably inclined to the Arminian variant of Calvinism than to true Calvinism. Furthermore, since ministers of the gospel were on national payroll, government officials insisted they determine which minister would serve in which congregation. Given the kinship between the Arminians and the government, it invariably followed that vacant congregations found themselves saddled with an Arminian minister. As the average labourer in the land struggled with his sins and his conscience, he was discouraged to hear Sunday by Sunday that he had to

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contribute something himself to receiving forgiveness for his sins; he knew from bitter experience that he could not achieve a sense of having a strong enough faith.

The resulting unhappiness across the land prompted calls for a national synod, a meeting of the churches to settle the question whether there was room in a truly Bible-centred church for Arminian thinking. Does the Bible teach, or even leave room for, a God who needs people's participation and consent before he will save them? Do people even have it in them to contribute to salvation? Despite the pressures rising from the common folk of the land, the government of the day – walking in lockstep as they did with Arminian humanism – refused permission for the churches to meet together in synod to deal with such questions. The government insisted: the state, not the churches, has the final authority in all matters of the land, including church matters. So, no synods could be held between 1586 and 1618 – to the great dismay of so many Bible students in the land who learned from Scripture that the government had no God-given right to interfere in church matters.

A synod!

Given the opposition of Oldebarneveltdt's government to a synod, one wonders how a synod nevertheless could be convened in 1618. The story is intriguing, and highlights the gracious and mighty work of God.

As the first decade of the 1600s gave way to the second, Oldebarneveltdt's leadership became increasingly oppressive for those who embraced the ultimate authority of God's Word. So opposed was Oldebarneveltdt to the doctrine of man's total depravity that he set about oppressing those who embraced it. By 1617 the pressure on the faithful Calvinists was so acute that the truth of Scripture was close to being snuffed out in The Netherlands. No, the government did not impose a death penalty on those who humbly embraced God's revelation. But to be simply biblical was not cheap; embracing the faith of Scripture could cost one one's job, one's land, one's comforts. These were dark, very dark days for the godly and for the gospel of grace that formed the core of what Martin Luther and John Calvin had rediscovered in the Great Reformation.

In the midst of the darkness, the Lord God sovereignly continued his work. The royal house (under Philip William, Prince of Orange) quietly supported the Arminians and so condoned the strong handedness of Oldebarneveltdt over

against those who would be humbly Reformed. But as the cry of those who sought to be faithful to God's revelation in Scripture went up to the Lord, he in mercy reached into the royal house to elevate a man who sympathized with the Calvinists. The prince's brother Maurice was not given to religious business (he was a man of the military), but he did habitually go to church – with the Arminians. But when Prince Maurice internalized what he heard in church (man is basically good) and at the same time took in what "his"

What Arminius really thought was extraordinarily difficult to pin down

Prime Minister Oldenbarnevelt was doing to crush those who insisted man is evil to his core, his sympathy gradually shifted to the oppressed Calvinists – so that in time he came to embrace Calvinist Reformed thinking. He concluded that Oldenbarnevelt's conduct in relation to the Calvinists was unjust – so that at length he publicly went to church with the Calvinists in order to show his allegiance with the oppressed. When Philip William died in 1618, this Maurice became Prince of Orange.

Upon ascending the throne, Maurice swore an oath to defend the Reformed faith, and now he made clear what he understood by the word "Reformed." When Oldenbarnevelt shortly thereafter encouraged his people to take up of arms to free Holland of the hated Calvinists – and even hired soldiers to help achieve that goal – Prince Maurice took bold action; to prevent civil war from tearing up his country, he had Oldenbarnevelt and his assistants imprisoned. With that action the political strength of both the humanists and the Arminians was broken, and so the Calvinists could breathe a deep sigh of relief. Maurice gave his blessing to the convening of a synod, exactly because he saw the need for the churches to examine God's own Word on the points of doctrine that had caused so much tension in the country.





Loved by the Church, Hated by Satan

The Canons of Dort are well-known for their careful and comforting summary of the doctrine of election. But they contain more than that. They also explain Christ's atoning work and the Spirit's preserving power in ways that deepen our appreciation for the grace of our Triune God and strengthen the health of our souls. Let's take a closer look at these treasures from the Synod of Dort – four hundred years old yet still entirely relevant.

Did Christ die for everyone?

Simply put, the second chapter of the Canons deals with this question: *for whom* did the Lord Jesus Christ die? Here is how the Remonstrants, popularly known as Arminians, answered that question: "Jesus Christ the Saviour of the world died for all men and for every man, so that he merited reconciliation and forgiveness of sins for all through the death of the cross" (*Remonstrance 1610*). Let's be honest, that teaching sounds attractive, doesn't it? It sounds fair and inclusive.

But did the Arminians mean that every person in the whole world will be saved? Well, no, not exactly. Here is their further explanation: "Though Christ has merited reconciliation with God and remission of sins for all men and for every man, yet no one, according to the pact of the new and gracious covenant, becomes a true partaker of the benefits obtained by the death of Christ in any other way than by faith" (*Sententiae 1618*). So, the Remonstrants taught a distinction between the salvation that Christ *merited* for everyone and the salvation only believers *partake of*. You could also say it is a difference between salvation *obtained* for everyone but only *applied* to believers. Once more, this sounds very inclusive. The message becomes: Christ gained salvation for each and every person in the world; but now it's up to you whether you make good use of his atoning work.

What does the Bible say?

No matter how attractive it sounds, the slogan, "Christ died for every single person," still must be compared to the

truth of Scripture. Consider this passage: "I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life *for the sheep*" (John 10:14-15; see also v. 11). The Great Shepherd did not lay down his life generally and indiscriminately, both for the sheep and the goats. On the contrary, he had a specific group in mind. He called that group "my own" (v. 14) and "the sheep" (vv. 11, 15) and his "one flock" (v. 16).

Even more tender-hearted is what the apostle Paul says in Ephesians 5: "Christ loved *the church* and gave himself up *for her*, that he might sanctify *her*, having cleansed *her* by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present *the church* to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that *she* might be holy and without blemish" (vv. 25-27). What the Holy Spirit describes here is not universal philanthropy, but the special care of a Bridegroom for his Beloved. He loves *her*, and he loves her *exclusively*. Here being exclusive is not a bad thing. Quite the opposite, that's what a Groom should do for his one-and-only Bride.

A groom's devotion and Satan's deceit

Interestingly, the Canons of Dort skillfully weave the Groom-Bride language of Ephesians 5 right into its second chapter covering limited, or particular, atonement: "This church shall steadfastly love and faithfully serve him as her Saviour (*who as bridegroom for his bride laid down his life for her on the cross*) and celebrate his praises here and through all eternity" (CD, II/9). Gloriously gracious, isn't it? It's everything a Groom should be, and more!

But, no surprise, Satan is right there with his attacks, trying to throw the Bride of Christ off course by whispering in our ears, "Did Christ really say he only laid down his life for a *limited* number of people, *only* his flock, *just* the sheep?" Then Satan increases the pressure, adding, "That sounds rather unfair, don't you think? It sounds like Christ does not even give everyone a fair chance." Satan prattles on, and the objections pile up in our minds.

But what happens if we refocus our view on this through the scriptural lens of Ephesians 5 and the Greatest Royal Betrothal in the history of the world: the commitment of Christ, the Groom, to his beloved Bride, the church? When you look at it through that lens, then the Groom's love-to-the-point-of-death sacrifice for *his own cherished* bride is not uncharitable unfairness. On the contrary, it is the epitome of marital faithfulness.

As the redeemed Bride, let us not question our Groom's particular devotion for us, but rather praise him for it. This all-sufficient, unfailing love of our cherished Husband is truly "a treasure of inestimable value" (CD, V/15). We would not, and should not, trade it for all the gold in the world!

But what if?

With the Father's electing love of his children (chapter 1 of the Canons) and the Son's atoning devotion for his Bride (chapter 2 of the Canons), do we still have to worry about making it to the finish line of final glory? The simple answer is *no*. But life is rarely that simple, is it? Sometimes we do worry, don't we?

Have you ever struggled with thoughts such as the ones below?

"Yes, I do sincerely love my God and my Saviour, but my old sinful nature is still so stubbornly strong. *What if* one day my sinful nature gets the better of me and I wander from the faith?"

"I do believe in our Triune God, *but what if* one day Satan launches an attack that is so subtle that I don't see it coming and he slowly erodes my faith in God?"

"I do trust in God who sealed his promises to me at my baptism, *but what if* one day the persecution in Canada really becomes so severe that I buckle under the pressure?"

But what if . . . ? Some days those three little words really threaten to damage our spiritual well-being.

Constantly reorient toward God

The fifth and last chapter of the Canons of Dort recognizes full-well that these "what if" questions do come up, also in the minds of true believers. In fact, the questioning can become so intense that "believers in this life. . . do not always feel this full assurance of faith and certainty of perseverance" (CD, V/11).

Take note, though, of the very next words in that article, "*But God. . .*" (V/11). Dear reader, you cannot put a price tag on those two, small words: *But God!* Where do so many of our spiritual struggles come from? They come from thinking too often about all kinds of other things and too infrequently about our God.

We dwell on *ourselves*, all our weaknesses and vulnerabilities, all our stumbling and wandering.

We become wrapped up looking at *this world full of temptations*, a world that is rapidly sliding back into the depravity of the pre-Flood era. We wonder: how will we, our children, and our grandchildren ever survive, spiritually speaking?

We focus on *Satan*, our old, battle-hardened, arch-enemy, who may well recycle old temptations and heresies but who never, ever gives up.

Yet, based on God's Word, the fifth chapter of the Canons teaches us to reorient and say, "*But God. . .*" It comes back time and again in articles three, eight, and eleven. It is true: with respect to ourselves, falling away from the faith could happen easily; in fact, it inevitably would. *But God. . .*

Actually, this is the whole point of faith. We look *outside* of ourselves and rest in our triune God. His power is all-mighty. By comparison even Satan is weak. His mercy is new, every morning again. So even when we stumble for the four-hundredth time, the well of his compassion has not run dry.

Satan tries but ultimately fails

Satan takes sadistic pleasure in leveraging your "what if" questions just as much as he can. He wants to pull you away from your God. He wants to throw you back on your own meager resources. He wants to intimidate you with his incessant, deceptive whisperings.

However, the Canons of Dort give us the response we need. Satan hates hearing it, but we do not need to feel sorry for him. We step right up with our trustworthy Canons in hand, and we confess: *But God. . .*

But God the Father will not abandon his elect children, even when the going gets rough.

But God the Son will never let his own beloved Bride be snatched; he simply loves her too much.

But God the Holy Spirit will not forget or abandon the work he has begun; he does not perform half-jobs.

A treasure of inestimable value

Don't let your Canons of Dort collect a thick layer of dust. It's far too precious for that. Some of the hardest, most heart-wrenching, most soul-contorting struggles are addressed on the pages of this confession. Some of the best and biblical answers ever articulated are also found in this little document. Take your Canons in hand and imprint its truth upon your heart. Your spiritual health will be so much the stronger for it.





Dort Polity – Running a Reformed Church

May 13th. This year, that day is earmarked for the prayer service prior to General Synod Edmonton-Immanuel. That day will also mark – exactly – the 400th anniversary of the Synod of Dort’s decision “to review and examine the canons of the last synod.”

No, that is not a reference to some statement of faith lost in the mists of time. “The canons of the last synod” is the Church Order of General Synod The Hague, 1586. So, as our synod opens, we celebrate the 400th anniversary of Dort’s decision to revise the Church Order.

What went before this revision? What were some of the things decided and why? What lasting impact did this have for us, the Canadian Reformed Churches?

Principle

The church practice adopted by the Synod of Dort, commonly referred to as Dort polity, finds its source in the Scriptures, as confessed in the creeds of the Dutch Reformed churches at the time: the Belgic Confession (especially articles 27-32) and the Heidelberg Catechism (especially Lord’s Days 21, 26-31, 35, 38 and 48).

Of foundational importance is the following conviction, expressed in Belgic Confession Article 32. “We believe that, although it is useful and good for those who govern the church to establish a certain order to maintain the body of the church, they must at all times watch that they do not deviate from what Christ, our only Master, has commanded.” On the one hand this conviction speaks of it being “useful and good” to establish “a certain order.” Herewith the Dutch Reformed took position over against the Anabaptists, who tended to denounce any order in the church.

On the other hand, the Dutch Reformed were convinced one should not deviate from what Christ, who is the only Master, has commanded. With this they took position over against the Roman Catholics, who burdened the churches with law upon law.

French roots

The Belgic Confession was penned in 1561. At that time, the French speaking churches of the southern Low Lands (today’s Belgium) tended to associate with the French Reformed churches (formed in 1559). Just as the Belgic Confession was in many ways built on the Gallican Confession, so the polity of the churches in the Low Lands drew on that of the French Reformed.

The French Reformed, in turn, had borrowed heavily from the Ecclesiastical Ordinances, developed under Calvin’s influence in Geneva. Further, it is quite possible that when it comes to the way churches within the federation relate to each other, they learned lessons from the Waldensians. These were churches in south east France and northern Italy that had always resisted bowing to Roman Catholic rule and had joined the Reformed in the 1530s.

Dutch growth

Men from the Dutch speaking Reformed churches came together to organize their churches. This meeting is known as the Convent of Wesel, which is said to have happened in 1568. This meeting made preparations for the first formal synod of the Dutch Reformed. To that end, the convent produced a document, known as the Articles of Wesel, outlining the way those churches would be organized.

The first formal synod was that held in Emden, in October of 1571. It reviewed the Articles of Wesel. Thus, the practice was born of revising the polity of the churches at each next synod. Indeed, the church order was revised at every synod prior to Dort 1619: Dort 1574, Dort 1578, Middelburg 1581, and The Hague 1586.

After 1586 the civil government prevented the convening of a national synod. It was the Remonstrant controversy that had the States General convene a national synod. Once convened, this synod determined to do what previous synods had done: review the existing church order.

State and church

Originally Dutch church polity was shaped by contrasts with both Anabaptist and Roman Catholic polities. At the Synod of Dort another contrast was present. Remonstrants tended to favour a polity that allowed a larger influence of the state in church affairs, in some ways similar to that practiced by Lutherans and Anglicans. Contra-Remonstrants defended the Calvinist position that in polity and practice, church and state are independent.

The Church Order of Dort gives us a glimpse of how the men at Dort felt things could be. As best they could, Dort sought to have governors leave their scepters at the consistory door. The adopted church order expressed an ideal. Yet the very way in which Dort functioned as a synod – convened by the government and with government delegates present – made clear they could not achieve that ideal.

History also made it clear practising Dort polity was yet out of reach. For example, though regulated to be once every three years, it was not until the 1800s that a next national or general synod was convened; over 200 years later!

Particulars

It is not doable in this article to cover all the particulars of Dort polity. We look at a few things, just to get a taste of Dort's wisdom and its continued relevance for today.

Who runs the church?

The Reformed Churches confessed: "We believe that there should be ministers or pastors, . . . elders and deacons who . . . form the council of the church" and "we believe that [they] ought to be chosen to their offices by lawful election of the church" (BC, Art. 30 and 31). Thus, Dort recognized the office bearers as those with authority in the church.

Consequently, there is no description of what we tend to call a "congregational meeting." Its existence is assumed in the election of office bearers, but for nothing else. In Dort polity a "congregational meeting" is actually "a meeting of the consistory with the deacons to which the congregation has been invited and at which congregational members may voice an opinion." This is why in the Canadian legal context, under Dort polity, a church would not be a "society."

Interestingly, Dort diverged from the Confession in its description of the ruling body of the church. Its polity makes no mention of the "council." Rather, it tends to speak of the "consistory" as the ruling body, that is the ministers and elders.

This tension between the BC and CO is still felt in our churches today where the precise role of the deacons in the ruling of the church is concerned. For example, right now the question is no doubt being raised to what extent (if at all) deacons should be involved in local discussions of reports to general synod.

Election

The churches in the Low Lands had varying practices. Where the influence of especially the French and Flemish churches was felt, the consistory was more directly involved. Where the influence of the London refugee church was felt, the congregation was more in the forefront. Thus, Dort had to decide on a proper election process. Here Dort allowed wriggle room: it was considered a minor point of church governance.

Forwarding to today, it was with the revisions of the Church Order in 1905 in The Netherlands and 1914 in North America that things became confused, in part because of "democratic tendencies" in society. Things became even more confusing when, in 1983, the CanRC adopted formulations which turned the voice of the congregation from advisory to authoritative. This impacts the discussion on "women voting."

Scripture alone

When delegates from churches come to a major assembly, they have a credential with them. This credential states who has been lawfully delegated to attend the major assembly and assures the assembly that the delegating churches will abide by decisions of the major assembly, unless these are contrary to Scripture or the agreed upon order. Often a credential would also contain instructions regarding matters which those delegated to the major assembly had to place on the agenda.

(Yes, it does mean that back then one did not know precisely what an assembly would deal with until the assembly was actually convened and the instructions read.)

When the delegates from the provincial synod Overijssel presented their credential at the Synod of Dort with instructions, there was concern. For the credentials stated that the members of Dort "shall judge according to the Word of God and the analogy of faith in the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism." Was not Overijssel elevating the confessions to the level of Scripture? Overijssel was asked to explain. Thankfully the delegates from Overijssel agreed the wording was unfortunate: of course, one judges matters by God's Word only.

Subscription

Adherence to confessional statements was a hot button issue for, in the run up to Dort, the practice of subscribing to the confessions by means of a form had been adopted in many parts of the Low Lands. The Remonstrants objected: they considered it a confessionalist practice, contrary to Belgic Confession Article 7. Dort disagreed, as clear from the fact that it adopted into the Church Order the requirement for ministers and others to sign a form for subscription.

Another place where the underlying principle of Scripture and Church Order is felt is in Church Order Article 31. This article concluded with the line: “Whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order.” Note how the creeds and confessions are not mentioned in this line. That is because the truth is to be judged by Scripture alone, and practice by the agreed upon order alone.

After Dort

State interference hampered the functioning of Dort polity between 1619 and 1836. Governments involved themselves in the election of office bearers. They often prevented major assemblies from being called. They involved themselves in matters of worship and matters of discipline.

In some places, the Church Order of Dort was parked, as civil governments imposed their own church order. Thus, the national federation of Dutch Reformed churches assembled at the Synod of Dort fell apart into provincial or

even classical federations of churches that corresponded with one another as sister-churches do today.

To illustrate, in the late seventeenth century Rev. B. Bekker of Amsterdam denied the existence of angels and demons. He was deposed, but the magistrates refused to fill his vacancy with another man until he died. It was in part in response to Bekker’s teachings that in 1695, Classis Walcheren in the province of Zeeland adopted the Articles of Walcheren, a brief confessional statement to be considered by a national synod once called. A classis did this, because Zeeland would not allow a provincial synod to take place. As to the national synod, the dust had settled by the time General Synod Amsterdam 1836 of the Seceders was convened.

Yes, it wasn’t until 1836 that the polity of Dort was again reviewed and examined. That reflection and revision is an interesting story with international dimensions, reaching all the way to the Proposed Joint Church Order. A story for another time.

Conclusion

With Belgic Confession 32, we confess that it is “good and useful” for there to be “a certain order.” The order Dort decided to adopt has served the churches well for the roughly two centuries it has been practiced (that’s since 1836). In obedience to God the churches have, with common consent, agreed to abide by the adopted order.

May this heritage of Dort continue to be a blessing for our churches until Christ returns.



Faithworks Hamilton Trip 2018

Our third yearly Faithworks Local Trip to downtown Hamilton, October 25-28, 2018, was an enjoyable one. Faithworks (subcommittee under CRWRF) started this trip a few years ago, in response to a need seen by the committee and others in the Canadian Reformed Church community for local mission involvement. The goal of this trip is to facilitate ways that church members can serve in their own neighbourhoods and be opened to the work that God is doing in our own country.

The group started off meeting on Thursday night at Streetlight Christian Centre, where Pastor Paul Aasman and youth worker Erik Hoeksema spoke to us about the various ministries conducted at Streetlight, and different ways for us to get involved if we would like to. This grassroots church draws in a lot of members from the Beasley community through its children and youth programs, Bible studies, summer soccer program, and of course Sunday worship services. Pastor Paul and Erik then took us on a neighbourhood walk through the streets around Streetlight church. A young man came up to us at the skateboard park, asking if we were doing a ghost walk because it was close to Halloween and it was a bit strange to see a big group just walking around. He also told us they had lost a friend to suicide that



day and the beer cans set up along the walls of the skateboard park were their candle tribute to him. The men at the Good Shepherd shelter also called out to us, wishing us a good night. We went by the Good Shepherd food bank, Barton Street Jail, and the community Victory Gardens. It was a good glimpse of the area where Streetlight ministers.

Friday was a packed day. We met at Blessings Christian Church for breakfast together and then split up to have one group go to Helping Hands Street Mission to sort some clothes for the clothing store, and the other group get a tour of Pregnancy Support Services of Hamilton (now the Atwell Centre). We reconvened at 10 AM at Living Rock Ministries, a youth centre, and got to watch a donation ceremony by Home Depot, and then work in the kitchen with their chef, Daniel. Daniel is a very spunky and fun-loving guy who loves cooking (and passing on that love to others), and also loves youth. He is great at mentoring and befriending all who come to the centre. We got to meet several youth who hang out there and cleaned out the walk-in fridge, learned a new way to peel garlic, and helped make a giant caldron of chili.



Mission Services Food Bank

Next, we went for lunch to 541 Eatery and Exchange, a low-cost restaurant with great food and sense of community. In their basement meets a group called GOHOP (Greater Ontario House of Prayer). One of their staff explained to us the different styles, forms, and times of prayer they facilitate both in that space, and different parts of the city, including a prayer truck, and a two-week 24/7 prayer vigil at the “Homeless Jesus” monument at St. Patrick’s church. At 3 PM we went to Mission Services and got a tour of their various programs and ministries, including Willow’s Place (a women’s drop-in centre), 196 (an after-school kids program), the community kitchen, addiction support services, and food bank. They are a very large organization, also running a women’s and a men’s shelter elsewhere in the city, and have many opportunities for volunteers. At the end of the day we went back to Blessings Church for dinner and watched *The Soloist*, a thought-provoking movie highlighting the complexities of homelessness.



Eatery & Exchange

Saturday morning we met for breakfast at 541 again, and reunited with a young man whom we had met at Living Rock the day before. He joined us for devotions and shared his testimony, which was really neat. Then we went to Wesley (formerly called Wesley Urban Ministries), that works to help people find housing. Finding affordable housing is becoming a big problem in Hamilton, as the city is being built up and inhabited by more wealthy people. Wesley also provides temporary housing and runs health clinics and a community kitchen.

Mid-morning we went to a newly started thrift shop called The Giving Closet. They hadn’t opened to the public yet, but were sorting through mounds of clothes, books, furniture, CDs, etc, so we helped organize things for about



City Kidz Saturdays

an hour. It was fun to do something with our hands and see the church community that had come together to open this affordable store. We ate our packed lunches in the parking lot and then headed to City Kidz for their afternoon program. We got to watch the high-energy show and learn about the impact City Kidz has on the children of Hamilton. Our Saturday activities ended there, and we finished off the weekend with the Sunday morning church service at Streetlight Ministries. That was a good way to bring the trip full circle, and end in worship together.

We are very grateful to all the ministries who hosted us so cheerfully and shared with us the work that the Lord is doing in and through them in the city of Hamilton. All the trip participants enjoyed observing, but also learning how they can pray for and participate in the many ways to get involved in local ministry. If you are interest in more information about this trip, a presentation, or involvement contact Faithworks at servewithfaithworks@gmail.com.



Clarion Kids

The Ascension

Matthew 28, Mark 16, John 20

One day Peter and John were going to the temple to pray. There was a man begging for money outside the temple gate. He had not been able to walk since he was born. The man asked Peter and John for money. Peter told him he had no money, but he would give him what he had. Then in Jesus' name he told the man to get up and walk. Peter took him by the hand and helped him get up. His legs and feet became strong and he was able to walk on his own. He went walking and leaping through the temple praising God. Everyone who saw him and recognized him was amazed.

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



Word Search

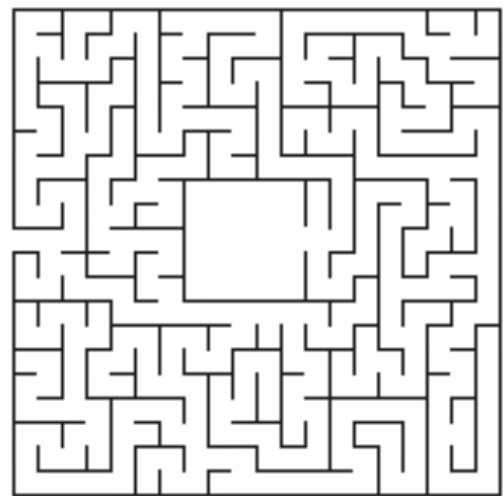
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Beggar
Leaping
Strong

Crippled
Peter
Temple

John
Praising
Walk

Maze: Follow the path through the maze as the beggar goes leaping and praising God through the temple!



by Emily Nijenhuis

Happy birthday to the three of you celebrating a birthday in April! We wish you the Lord's blessing in the coming year, and a wonderful day with family and friends. We can be so thankful each year that the Lord has given us another year. May we all be a blessing to one another as we live on this sinful earth. May we live a life pleasing to the Lord, serving him in all that we do.

This month I do not have a biography for you to read. I would like to use this article as a reminder to always keep our members with a disability in our minds. Just a quick phone call or a simple birthday card can mean so much. I used to work for the Anchor Homes and some of the residents would be awaiting the mail every day for the week of their birthday to see if any more birthday cards had arrived for them. Coming for a visit to their home is another way to show our love and care. This visit can be for their birthday, but also any other time of the year. Our lives can become so busy and we can become wrapped up in them but let us try and be a light to those around us. Each one has different talents so let us use them to the honor and glory of our Heavenly Father; whether it is a card, a phone call, a visit, or another gesture.

Let us also remember all those who are the caregivers for those with a disability. This is not always an easy task and needs much patience and strength. We can also give them our love and support through many different ways. "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt 5:16).

I would also like to use this month to ask those of you who are caregivers to those with a disability to contact me if you would like them featured in the Ray of Sunshine. Or if you know of someone who could be featured here encour-

age them to contact me. This is a wonderful way to witness the communion of saints in our church communities.

We can be so thankful for each and every individual who is celebrated in the Ray of Sunshine. Whether they are not able to walk, or cannot express themselves properly. They are all made in their own unique way and are here on this earth to serve the Lord. May we be a blessing to them and they in turn will be a blessing to us. One bright smile from them is enough to light up anybody's day.

April Birthdays

2 Derek Kok will be 49

c/o Beacon Home
653 Broad Street West
Dunnville, ON N1A 1T8

23 Arlene DeWit will be 58

31126 Kingfisher Drive
Abbotsford, BC V2T 5K4

29 Bryce Berends will be 44

c/o Lighthouse
6528 1st Line, RR 3
Fergus, ON N1M 2W4

Congratulations to all of you celebrating a birthday in March! May the Lord bless you in the coming year and give you all you need to serve and honour him.

We think of the Boone family and wish them strength and comfort in the loss of their son, brother, and friend. We can be so thankful for the comfort we have that he is now at peace in the Lord's care.

A NOTE TO PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

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

Rachel Vis

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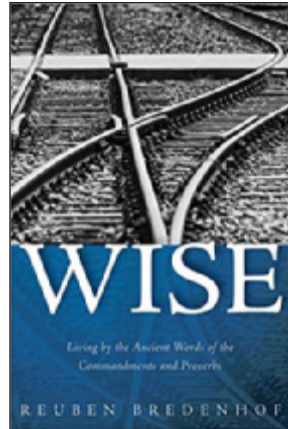
Wise

Living by the Ancient Words of the Commandments and Proverbs

Is it possible to hear a fresh perspective on the Ten Commandments? After hearing (and perhaps writing) hundreds of sermons and reading many books on the Decalogue, one might think there isn't much new to say on this topic. However, reading Rev. Reuben Bredenhof's new book *Wise. Living by the Ancient Words of the Commandments and Proverbs* shows that it is indeed possible to dig new treasures out of the familiar territory of God's law.

In this book of some 120 pages, Bredenhof goes through each of the Ten Words of the law. By connecting each of the commandments with various passages from the book of Proverbs, he gives the reader new angles from which to appreciate the teaching of God's law. The overall effect is a deepened awareness of the depth-dimension of each commandment.

Since I knew that the fourth commandment is not mentioned in the book of Proverbs, I was curious how Bredenhof would proceed in this regard. Does Proverbs really have any teaching that can help us to live out the fourth commandment? Bredenhof's method here was to focus on the worship activities of the Lord's Day which all revolve around the Word of God and then to find passages in Prov-



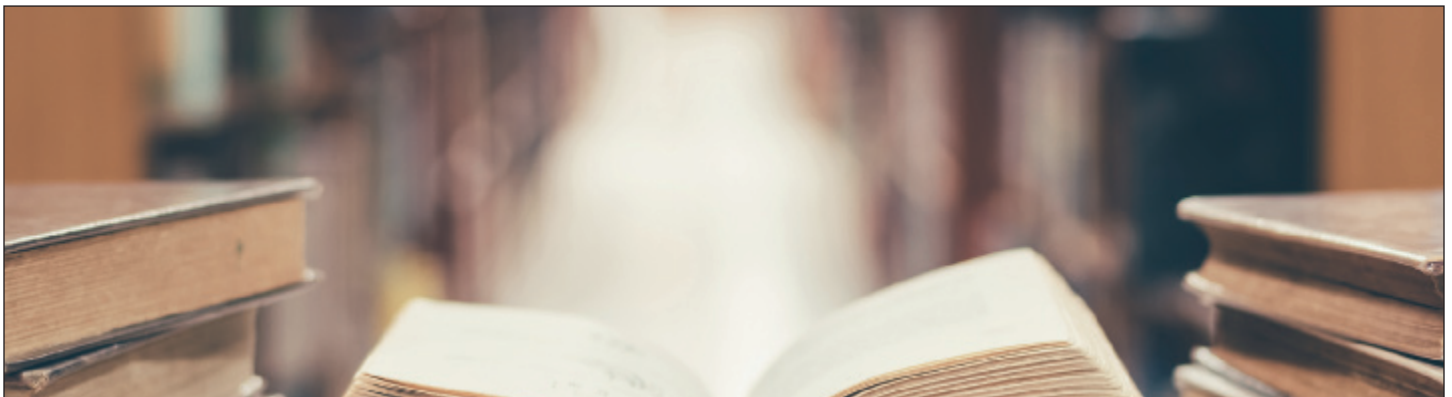
erbs which relate to the theme of God's Word. Suffice it to say that the connections made were natural and refreshing.

Throughout this book, we see the fruit of the work of a careful and studious minister of the Word. The author has drilled quite deeply into the book of Proverbs. He is clearly delighted with his discoveries and shares them with his readers in a very pleasant and engaging manner.

Fresh light is indeed shed by him on the Ten Words of the covenant. Readers will benefit from the many practical insights about how to live a life that is not only obedient to God's law but also full of wisdom. The book will help all readers to live a believing and pious life before the face of God.

Rev. Bredenhof's book will be beneficial to nearly every kind of church member. It's the rare sort of book that young people will read but from which pastors also will benefit as they look for fresh perspectives in their preaching of God's law.

The book was published by Wipf & Stock (2018) and is available from your local Christian bookstore for about \$22.



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

I'd like to thank Prof. Van Dam for drawing our attention to some of the changes in the air in our federation and the tensions that exist when diverse congregations enter a covenant to help each other.

Prof. Van Dam describes part of the tension that exists in a federation. The tension between the autonomy of the local church and the covenant of cooperation between multiple (dispersed) churches. Take autonomy too far, says Van Dam, and you have a congregation that acts in isolation with no regard for others. I wonder if we shouldn't also consider the other extreme where a "covenant cooperative" enforces conformity with no regard for local congregations' particular circumstances, constraints, or peculiarities – where the process of cooperation becomes one of seeking approval rather than advice. It becomes quite impossible for local leaders to serve their communities in an effective and timely fashion when any meaningful innovation is subject to a laborious approval process of an entire federation.

Is our federation really so fragile as Van Dam suggests? Why is it so threatening to the federation that a local congregation might choose to break from the norm and do something differently or even unprecedented from time to time? Is "unity of faith" still the glue which holds us together or are we actually holding onto "uniformity of practice" as the tie that binds? The warning against taking autonomy too far is legitimate. So too is the warning against conformity. I wonder if our federation is not, in fact, leaning more toward the latter.

With grace and maturity, I think we can cooperate with one another while maintaining the autonomy of the local church. There is a tension between autonomy and cooperation, but it is a healthy one. Autonomy and conformity, however, are rather incompatible.

*Jason Bouwman
Grassie, ON*

Dear Editor,

Over the last few months, several letters, articles and editorials have been written concerning some of the things happening at Blessings Christian Church. There seem to be a lot of people who love to put pen to paper in addressing the errors of our church as we worship and do our work of seeking the lost in Hamilton. I don't aim to refute the specific charges here, as I will leave that to people much smarter than I. I do, however, want to point out a few things that are very troubling to me.

As most of you likely know, Blessings is in uncharted waters for a member congregation of the CanRC. I am going to use the term "Missional" here, which seems to be a disputable term, but I think most of you know what I mean. We can argue about what to call it, but I don't think you can argue with me when it comes to results. I'll use one example to illustrate my point. If a pastor in your typical CanRC church throws in a little Dutch joke, or uses either word *doekje* or *boterkoek*, I would wager nine out of ten people in the pew will understand.

There seems to be a lot of concern about our relationship with our Baptist brothers and sisters. But are Baptists (or other Christians) really that scary? How many CanRC members are not spiritually fed either on vacation or by podcasts on their way to work by some of the well-known Baptist (or other denomination) preachers of today? My wife and I have been tremendously privileged to have a couple from Stanley Ave join our small group a year and a half ago. This couple is godly and caring; they are followers of Christ with wisdom and Christlike attributes that I can only dream of attaining. We know we have different interpretations of some things, but we also know that we have so much more in common. We are able to open and study Scripture together, pray together, and I thank God for having brought them into our lives. (For more information on how our relationship with Stanley Ave Baptist Church came to be, see Pastor George VanPopta's blogpost titled "Miracle on Locke St" www.vanpopta.ca).

Throughout the New Testament we are told to live lives of unity, grace, gentleness, humility, etc. Would that not look

like opening Scripture together? Praying together? Looking at our differences, learning from our differences, and despite all that working together to further the work of Jesus Christ here on earth? Blessings has been able to partner with Stanley Ave Baptist Church on many outreach initiatives in the Kirkendall neighbourhood. Directly through this work we have had individuals come to our church to hear the gospel! Praise the Lord! However, the majority of unchurched guests and visitors that are with us each Sunday and each week in our small groups come for the first time through a personal connection with our members. If our church leaders spend all their time fretting on how we need to separate ourselves from anything different, then how will our members (the body of Christ here on earth) go out into all the nations? Will they not follow suit and just huddle together, afraid of the outside world? Today the nations are all around us, in our neighbourhoods, and they need Jesus.

I said I would not argue any specifics in this letter but one I do need to give some attention. Rev. Steve van

Leeuwen mentioned in his response about how Blessings co-sponsored an event with the local CRC (on the Heidelberg Catechism might I add) and went on to make a very condescending remark “like we’re in the same camp.” Like it or not despite our differences, the CRC and CanRC are very similar. And at the end of the day, the only camp that matters is Camp Jesus. Camp CanRC, Camp CRC, Camp Baptist doesn’t matter one bit. Jesus Christ did not die for only CanRC members. I assume Rev VL doesn’t believe that, but when he makes a comment like that, it sounds like he does.

The letters posted in *Clarion* over the last months have done damage to the CanRC in the minds of those looking in from the outside (the CanRC). Given a lot of what was said it seems we don’t care what those outside the federation think of us. As we profess to be a part of Camp Jesus, I pray this is not true.

Gerben DeGelder
Hamilton, Ontario

*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.*

