

Clarion

YEAR-END 2019





**Best Wishes and the Lord's blessings
in the year 2020 to all our readers.**

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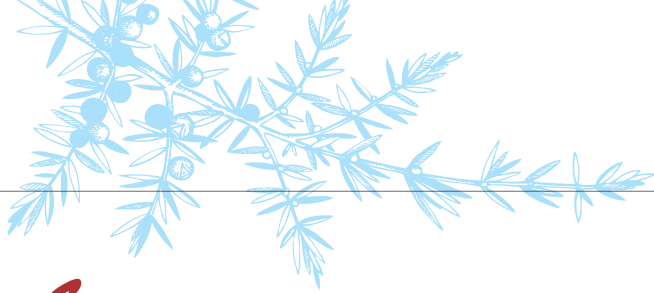
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Christmas:

The Appearing of the Glory of God

The Christmas story begins with the announcement of the birth of Jesus. God sends the angel Gabriel to Mary with news that she will conceive and give birth to a son. This is not the first birth announcement God has sent. When God addressed the serpent in Genesis 3, he announced that the offspring of the woman Eve would crush the head of the serpent's offspring. At the beginning of human history, God declared that the woman would bear a son who would deliver his people from the power of sin and darkness.

Many generations later, God appeared to Abraham in Genesis 18 to announce that he and Sarah would bear a son in their old age. He would be the fulfillment of God's covenant promise, through whom God's promise of deliverance would be accomplished. God announced to King David in 2 Samuel 7 that he would receive a son. This son would rule from his throne for eternity. These announcements revealed that the Lord God would intervene in the history of this world by raising up a redeemer to save his people.

The Lord God would intervene in the history of this world

The birth announcement

God comes to Mary to tell her that he is about to intervene in the world by giving her a son (Luke 1:31). God declares that a great and wondrous event will soon take place in this world. The Holy Spirit will come on the virgin Mary, and the Most High will overshadow her so that the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. His name will be Jesus and he will be great and be called the Son of the Most High. The angel announces the glorious birth of the Saviour of the world. In him, the glory of the Lord will appear on the earth.

This is the good news for which the people of Israel have been waiting for generations. The people have experienced darkness since the glory of God departed from Israel. The prophet Isaiah is called by God in chapter 40 to proclaim comfort to the people. Why this message of comfort? It is because the people experienced the glory of the Lord departing from Israel. Assyria, followed by Babylon, came and destroyed the land;

Jerusalem and the temple of God were in ruins. The glory of God had left the temple and departed from the land. God's own people were taken out of the land and sent into exile through the whole earth. The psalmist weeps in 137:1, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept, when we remembered Zion."

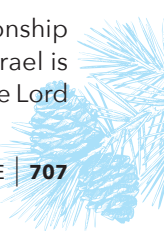
God's glory came to Israel

It had become dark in Israel. The nation did not start out that way. While Israel grew as a nation in Egypt, they endured a difficult time being enslaved and oppressed. The Lord heard the cries of his people and came to them through his servant Moses. God revealed himself as the God of Israel by delivering them from bondage. In the wilderness he commanded the people to build a tabernacle as his dwelling place with Israel. Exodus 40:34 tells us that the cloud, by which the Lord was leading Israel through the wilderness, covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Here was a visible manifestation that the glory of God has come to Israel. God dwells in her midst with his glory.

Later King Solomon built a beautiful temple for the Lord God, one of the most beautiful buildings in the world. When the temple was completed, the cloud filled the temple of the LORD (1 Kings 8:10). The priests at first were not able to perform their service because of the cloud, "for the glory of the LORD filled his temple." These were momentous occasions in Israel. The glory of the Lord has come; he now dwells with his people in glory and they are greatly blessed. To know that the Lord lives with them in glory brings great joy.

The glory of God departs from Israel

There is no other nation who has this wonderful relationship with the living God. In the presence of God's glory, Israel is safe and secure. But the sad reality is that the glory of the Lord



slowly departed from Israel step by step. God describes this gradual withdrawal of his glory to Ezekiel in a vision. Ezekiel sees the glory of God above the cherubim, where it had always been, move to the threshold, that is the door of the temple (9:3). The cherubim above the ark protected the mercy seat of the Lord in the Most Holy Place in the temple. But the glory of God moves from its proper place in the temple to the door of the temple. God's glory is beginning its withdrawal from the temple. After some time, it withdraws further, when the glory of God departs from the threshold and moves to the east gate of the court (10:18-19). Finally, the glory of the Lord departed from the holy city of Jerusalem and stopped above the mountain east of it (11:23). Gradually, step by step, the glory of God departed from the temple, then from the city, and finally from the land of Israel. This is Israel's Ichabod (1 Sam 4:21), for "the glory has departed from Israel."

The darkness will again turn to light

This vision mirrors the history of Israel as the people progressively turned away from the Lord. The wickedness in Israel became greater as each successive king "did evil in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father had done," until finally the Lord brought his wrath on Israel, destroying Jerusalem together with his temple. In exile, the people experienced despair, for the nation has been destroyed, the kingdom has disappeared with the removal of the king. Israel has fallen into a dark period in which the light of God's glory disappeared.

The glory of God will return to Israel

The prophecy of Ezekiel ends on a note of hope as the Lord shows him a new temple. He is given a tour of the temple, which is more glorious than previous temples, and in chapter 43 the glory of the Lord returned, entering through the east gate from which it had departed. Isaiah 40 reveals how this will be fulfilled in verse 10. "See," he says to the people who mourn and weep, "the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm." The Sovereign Lord himself will return to his people, he will deliver them from their misery and despair, for he comes with power and a mighty arm.

The darkness will again turn to light, for, "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary... (40:28)." God himself is coming to his people, therefore they are to "prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God (40:3)." God prepares Israel for his coming, when his glory will again appear on the earth.


The glory of God appears

This is the background to the events of Luke 1. Mary will conceive and give birth to a son; she is to call him Jesus. "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High." He will be great, for he comes with power and a mighty arm, for he is the Son of the Most High. This Jesus is no ordinary child, but he comes in glory, for he is our Immanuel, God with us.

The greatness of his glory becomes clear in comparison to the glory of Moses, the great mediator of Israel. When Moses went to speak with God on the mountain (Exod 35) and returned to the people, the people saw that his face was radiant, for it reflected the glory of God. Over time that glory faded, for it was not his glory but the glory of God that was reflected from his face. But with the appearance of Jesus Christ, a mediator greater than Moses has come, for the glory of Christ never fades. His glory is intrinsic to his being the very Son of God. John writes about him, "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father full of grace and truth" (1:14).

In Christ Jesus, the glory of God has returned to Israel. A great light is shining in the darkness to restore the hope and joy of his people. Therefore, the angel coming to the shepherds in the darkness of the night says to them, "I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people." In this dark world living under the curse of God, the glory of God suddenly appears on the earth. With the appearing of the Son of the Most High, a new hope is restored, for God is with us.

The angel says to Mary, "The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever, his kingdom will never end." Here we get a sense of the greatness of this child. He comes with the purpose to restore the kingdom of God on this earth. Things began relatively well with David and his son Solomon, but the glory of God progressively left Israel as David's descendants did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord. The kingdom of Israel was destroyed, the hope of Israel faded, but now the Son promised to David has come. God will now give to him the throne of his father David and he will rule over his people forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

The glory of Christ today is visible in the life of his church. Wherever Christ gathers his people, there the glory of Christ appears on the earth. Wherever the hearts of mankind submit to Jesus Christ as King, there we see the glory of the Son of the Most High. Therefore, Christmas restores joy to the hearts of all God's people, for in him the glory of God has appeared. The darkness has been turned to light as the glory of God continues to shine in this world. 

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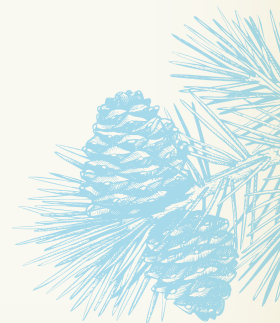
DEAR READERS, you hold in your hands the final Clarion issue of 2019. We are thankful throughout the entire year to see material come in that we may prepare for our readership. As we reach the Christmas season and approach the new year, it is our pleasure to put together an issue of Clarion that celebrates the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, reports on the year coming to a close, and looks ahead to 2020.

With Christmas in mind, our pages are filled with articles about the birth of our Lord. As always, our dedicated editor has written a Year End Review for our church federation. There are also reports of various graduations, conferences, and highlights from CRTS.

It is a joy to bring another volume of Clarion to you. On these pages you will find a note from the publisher, greetings from members of our churches, and I take this opportunity to do the same. To all our readers, I wish you a blessed Christmas season. God keep you in his care in the coming year.

Laura Veenendaal

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Are You Ready?

*"But the day of the Lord will come
like a thief..." (2 Peter 3:10a)*

IT IS THAT TIME of year where we frequently hear the question, "Are you ready?" Some people ask, "Are you ready for Christmas?" What many mean with that question are things like: Do you have everything ready for Christmas dinner? Are you ready for the family gatherings?

Or some will ask, "Are you ready for the new year?" They may be thinking whether you are ready for what this new year might bring. Are you ready for the joys or the troubles, whatever lies ahead?

However, this is also an important question we each need to ask from the perspective of the faith. And based on what the apostle Peter writes in 2 Peter 3:10, we should ask, "Are you ready for the return of Jesus Christ?" It is an important question, because the truth is that no one knows when our Saviour will return. It will come like a thief, very suddenly and without warning.

With these words, there is no doubt that Peter is thinking back to what the Lord Jesus himself said in Matthew 24:43-44, "But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

Yet in spite of our Lord's reminder that his return will be so sudden, it is easy for believers either to forget about his return, or to fall into the frame of mind that it won't be happening any time soon. If that mentality takes root, then there are no preparations being taken, and we think that we have all the time in the world to make those preparations later.

However, by telling us that the return of the Lord Jesus will be like a thief coming in the night, the inspired apostle is


really forcing believers to continually ask, "Are you ready for the return of our Saviour?" We don't know the exact moment he is coming back. Trying to predict the time or the date is an exercise in futility because it has not been revealed to us.

In fact, by telling us that his return will happen like a thief coming in the night, Jesus Christ is telling us that we should always be ready! There is not a day that should go by where we are unprepared for the fact that he could return at that very moment.

If a person knows exactly when a thief is going to break into their house, then everyone would agree that it would be sheer foolishness for the homeowner to be asleep at that time. Instead, if the time of thief's arrival is known, the homeowner will be taking every precaution he can to make sure the thief cannot get in, or that the would-be thief is scared away and doesn't come near.

Now, what is true on that kind of practical level ought to be even more so as it concerns our life of faith. The Master who bought us with his blood has promised that he is coming soon and that he will take us to himself. That is the comfort and joy of the gospel, that at his return we can look forward to life in his presence forever.

But such knowledge also must serve as motivation for us to continue growing in the grace and knowledge of our Saviour (2 Pet 3:18). If we know that Christ is going to return soon, then the last thing we want is to be found spiritually asleep or even lethargic when he does in fact return. Rather, we look forward to that great moment, with our eyes of faith wide open, doing whatever we can to prepare ourselves and remain spiritually wide awake!

So we ask the question one more time. Are you ready? 

For Further Study

What might be some reasons that we are not ready for the return of Christ?

What are some ways that we can continue to remain focussed on the return of Christ?

A Four-Term Pregnancy



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COUPLES LONGING FOR children will be very excited when pregnancy tests come back positive. At the same time, while there is excitement, there is also the awareness that there are many things that can happen that would bring about a miscarriage. Mothers, therefore, will begin to take extra precautions to give the new life growing in their womb as safe an environment as possible. There is thankfulness as the pregnancy progresses, until the happy day when the parents hold their newborn in their arms.

This time of the year, we think of the special pregnancy of Mary, leading to the birth to our Saviour Jesus Christ. The gospel of Matthew and Luke tells us how this pregnancy came about in a special way, as the child in Mary's womb was conceived by the Holy Spirit. The gospels do not give us any indication of how Mary's pregnancy went, but we do read that when the time for delivery came, there was no room in any lodging. The baby Jesus spent his first nights in a manger.

We need to realize, though, that the announcement of the pregnancy leading to the birth of our Saviour did not begin when the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary. It was announced not long after the creation of the world. Aside from the unusual start of Mary's pregnancy, it seems to have progressed in an uneventful way until the birth. That cannot be said, however, if we look at the bigger picture, beginning with the first announcement of that pregnancy near the beginning of the world.

The first birth announcement

The first announcement was made by God himself, when he told the serpent in paradise, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen 3:15). Here is the announcement of a special child who will undo the damage caused by the serpent. If we catch this birth announcement, then we can see that the rest of the Old Testament is the account of a pregnancy. This is how it is described in Revelation 12, where John saw a woman, about to give birth, confronted by a dragon, who tried to devour the child. The Old Testament shows us that this pregnancy was in constant danger.

A four-term pregnancy

While a normal pregnancy can be broken into three terms, we can break the pregnancy account of our Saviour, recorded in the Old Testament, into four terms.

The first term is the period from the announcement of the birth to Abraham. Like in any pregnancy, this was a most vulnerable time. Genesis 4-6 records how evil multiplied rapidly. By the time of Noah, there were not many left who served the LORD. It led God to decide to destroy the world he had made. We can even put it in terms of God almost deciding to abort the whole project. In his grace, however, he spared Noah and his family and in this way the pregnancy continued, as the human race was not totally destroyed. The pregnancy faced danger again when people decided to build a tower in Babel to serve as their point of unity. God intervened, bringing division by multiplying languages.

God never forgot his promise

The second term is the period from Abraham to David. In his opening chapter, Matthew sums up this period by mentioning fourteen generations. It had many tense moments. Abraham himself experienced a degree of anxiety as to how God would fulfill his promise when his wife Sarah was beyond the age of giving birth. Tensions arose between Jacob and Esau, and at times Jacob's life appeared in danger. The most dangerous time was when the people of Israel were in Egypt and the Pharaoh planned a slow genocide, demanding all the baby boys be cast into the Nile. Once Israel was in the Promised Land, Israel endangered the pregnancy itself by repeatedly turning away from serving the LORD. In his grace, the LORD preserved his people and promised that the offspring would come from the line of David.

The third term is the period from David to the Exile. By this time, the pregnancy was well along the way and becoming increasingly visible with Israel, as God's people, reaching their peak under King Solomon and the building of the Temple

in Jerusalem. Yet, it all unravelled quickly as the kingdom was divided after Solomon's death, and both kingdoms spiralled downward, as the people turned away from the LORD. When Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, it looked again like the pregnancy would be aborted, with the LORD causing it, for he sent Assyria and later Babylon to punish his people for their unfaithfulness.

The fourth term is from the deportation to Babylon to the birth of Christ. The LORD, through his prophets, had spoken of a remnant, and how there would arise a shoot from the stump of the house of Jesse. A remnant was allowed to return, and they began to rebuild the temple and Jerusalem. In terms of how long the pregnancy had been going on, by this time, you would expect the pregnancy to be the most visible, but in comparison to earlier times of glory, it didn't look like much. Except for a relatively short period of time in the second and first century BC, the people from whom the promised child would come were just a minor part of large empires.


Time for delivery

God, however, never forgot his promise. Just like any pregnancy comes to the point where the baby comes into the world, so it was with the child promised by God in paradise, a promise repeated to Abraham and later to David. Paul writes in Galatians 4:4, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." We should note that expression, "when the fullness of time had come." Our first mother may

have thought it had come when she gave birth to her first child. Abraham may have thought the time had come when Isaac was born. That, however, was not the time. The fullness of time was when Mary gave birth to God's own Son, in our human flesh, in Bethlehem.

Pregnant with hope

If we have an eye for this quadrimester pregnancy, which began when the LORD spoke of the offspring of the woman, then we can read the Old Testament with renewed appreciation. Here is the unifying thread to all the events recorded, the various sacrifices and ceremonies, the many prophecies. When we don't know what to make of a part of the Old Testament, we will do well to ask ourselves how the passage helps us understand what God was doing to fulfill his promise to bring forth the Saviour. You could say that all the roads of the Old Testament lead to Bethlehem, to the birth of our Lord.

At the same time, we realize that the coming of our Saviour into the world is not the end of the story. In Revelation 12, we read how the child was caught up to God in heaven, so that the dragon, which is just another name for the serpent, was not able to devour it. The dragon in his fury goes after the woman that brought forth the child; that is, he goes after the church, God's people. God, however, protects his people from being totally devoured. For God's New Testament people, there is no longer the hope of a pregnancy coming to term. Rather, the New Testament church is pregnant with hope of the return of the child, born in Bethlehem, who now rules at God's right hand, in the fullness of God's time. 

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”



The Gospel of Our Saviour's Family Tree



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AS BABIES ARE born, more people enter the world. More than that, though, certain families become larger. Even though these babies are not yet fully aware of it, they have been born into a network of relationships. These newborns have parents, perhaps some siblings, likely some grandparents, maybe even great-grandparents, and often uncles and aunts and cousins, too. As these little ones grow, the concentric circles of immediate and extended family will become a significant part of their identity.

Jesus and genealogies

The same is true of our Lord Jesus Christ, although in an entirely unique way. Isn't it striking that when the Holy Spirit tells us about the birth of Jesus, he puts a genealogy right in the context, even twice? Luke 2 is the most famous passage in the Bible about the birth of our Saviour, and the very next chapter gives an extensive genealogy of Christ.

Similarly, and somewhat surprisingly, in the gospel of Matthew the Spirit of God puts the genealogy of Jesus Christ first (1:1-17) and the account of his birth second (1:18-25). That's not the order we would naturally expect, but it does certainly highlight the importance of our Saviour's family tree.

Interestingly, our Catechism also emphasizes the significance of these family relationships. After describing the miracle of the incarnation, the second part of Answer 35 goes on to highlight that when the Word became flesh he also become "the true *seed of David*" and "like *his brothers* in every respect, yet without sin." Clearly, these family facts are noteworthy. As we hope to see, they are actually part of the abundant riches of our salvation.

Son of Adam

From Luke 3:38 we learn that Jesus is not only "the son of God" but also "the son of Adam." This connection between our Redeemer and our first father comes at the end of a long genealogy that traces back his family history through several millennia and some seventy-five generations. It's an impressive list with both obscure and illustrious names!

In many ways, the last few verses of this genealogy are a mirror reflection of another genealogy, found in Genesis 5. Genesis

5 starts with Adam and moves forward through the generations to Noah, while Luke 3:36-38 begins with Noah and works back to Adam. Yet if you read both passages together, you will notice one big difference. Repeatedly in Genesis 5 we hear the refrain: "and he died." Truth be told, this family history is as much a necrology (a record of deaths) as it is a genealogy (a record of births).

What is more, no generation is exempt from the mortality. As surely as Adam died when he was 930 years old, so surely did Lamech die when his earthly sojourn reached a total of 777 years. As the apostle Paul would say later, "Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to *all* men because all sinned" (Rom 5:12). That misery-filled truth is engraved all over the place in the necrology of Genesis 5.

Yet there was one exception: Enoch. In his case, the expected "and he died" was replaced with "and he was not" (Gen 5:24). This means that an exception to the rule of death is possible – very rare but still possible.

It makes Christmas even more special

Exceptions are nice, but victory is far better. By God's gracious decree Enoch bypassed the grave on his way to glory. But what about the rest of us? Well, this is where the gospel of Christ's family tree begins. As a result of Adam's sin, death reigned from Adam to Moses (Rom 5:14) and still holds sway over humanity today. But in the great Son of Adam, Jesus Christ, something else begins to reign: "Much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness *reign in life* through the one man Jesus Christ" (Rom 5:17).

Through Adam, sin and death reign over us. Through Christ, the chain of death is snapped, and we begin to reign in life – an abundantly grace-filled and righteousness-formed life. That's a radical, redemptive reversal, and it is even far better than the one-time exception that Enoch received. It also makes Christmas even more special.

Son of Abraham

Being part of Abraham's family means that you are part of a family with promise – an immeasurably great promise. To be more specific, here is the promise as the LORD first revealed it to Abraham: "I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted" (Gen 13:16). In slightly different words, the LORD confirmed the same promise a little later when he said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number... so shall your offspring be" (Gen 15:5).

Some of our readers may come from large families. Sometimes extended families grow so large as to include a couple hundred members who are all still alive. But this promise of the LORD is on an entirely different scale. Even though the final tally includes both the living and the dead, God assures Abraham that the network of his family relations will become so vast as to be *uncountable*. Now *that* is a big family!

When was this promise fulfilled? A couple of generations later, in the days of Jacob, the family grew to be seventy in total (Exod 1:5). Large, but not uncountable. A few hundred years after that, when the family had become a nation that was leaving Egypt, the number had risen dramatically. Now it was 603,550 men, besides women and children (Exod 12:37; Num 2:32). Much larger, but still countable. Later, after the exile, the number dropped dramatically again, and one tally came in at 42,360 (Ezra 2:64). Still lots of people, but if you're patient you can count them all.

Our Father has accomplished astonishingly great things

Did this family promise go unfulfilled? Thankfully not. In Revelation 7:9, we read that John looked and behold, "a great multitude that *no one could number*, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."

One question remains, though. If all these people are from different nations, was the promise to *Abraham's* family truly fulfilled? Yes it was, because, as the apostle Paul explains, "If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal 3:29).

Through the great Son of Abraham, Jesus Christ, we also become part of Abraham's family. Imagine that. When Abraham looked up at the stars, and listened to God's promise, he could hardly imagine where all his uncountable grandchildren would come from. But now we are seeing this great divine promise being fulfilled before our very eyes. As the gospel of the Child born in Bethlehem is being proclaimed all around the world, the multitude of Revelation 7 is being assembled, one believer at a time.

Son of David

By the power of the Holy Spirit, the baby Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, and by that very fact he was also born within the household of Joseph, Mary's betrothed. This meant that he was born into a royal household, the family of David. Both Matthew and Luke make special mention of this (Matt 1:1; Luke 1:32).


Now, you would think that being born into a royal household would come with all kinds of perks and privileges, but when Mary gave birth to our Redeemer, the house of David was not much more than a fallen, ruined tent (Amos 7:11). The silver spoon and the silk sheets were exchanged for a feeding trough and some swaddling cloth. Nevertheless, royalty is royalty, and dynasty is dynasty. Moreover, unlike every other fragile and transitory throne, the Lord clearly stated to David that *his* throne "would be established forever" (2 Sam 7:16).

Given the way that kingdoms rise and fall, this all seemed rather unlikely, at least until the great-grandson of David was born to Mary. At that moment, the dynasty of David took a turn for the eternally-established good. At first, God's people still couldn't see it. How could an itinerant preacher from Nazareth ever secure David's throne, both now and forevermore? Yet, after he died, and particularly after he arose and ascended, God's plan became apparent. Seated at the right hand of God, he now rules over all creatures, both visible and invisible. No one, not even Satan, will be able to depose him.

Still there is more. Through the working of the same Spirit who initiated the life of our Mediator in the womb of Mary, we are now co-rulers with Christ, provided we also persevere in faith and love, for "if we endure, we will also reign him" (2 Tim 2:12). Indeed, listen to these words of the eternal Amen: "I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne" (Rev 4:21). It's hard to imagine what it will be like to sit with Christ on *his own* throne. Final glory is always hard to comprehend, but it is equally exciting to anticipate!

Son of God

When Mary laid the swaddled baby Jesus in the manger, another person entered the world. But so much more happened than that. Exploring his divinely-ordained family connections to Adam, to Abraham, and also to David, we realize that our Father in heaven has accomplished astonishingly great things through the Child once born in Bethlehem. What is more, in his sovereign grace, God has included us, yes even us, in all the great family promises and prospects that flow through this unique Son.

How is this possible? Well, there is a definite hint in the final phrase of our Mediator's genealogy in Luke 3. The Son of Mary, who is the Son of David, who is the son of Abraham, who is the son of Adam ... is also "the Son of God." And with God all things are possible! That's how. 



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When God Does More Than Whisper

Can you believe it?!

Do you know how many galaxies there are? Take a guess, before you look further. Astronomers used to think there were about 125 billion. Now they estimate it's closer to two trillion! How do they know? They train telescopes on a small area and do a crude estimate of the whole sky. The better our telescopes get, the more they show that what first appears to be empty, dark space, is surprisingly not.

Our galaxy, the Milky Way, has about 400 billion stars, if you're wondering. So, when you look up at a starry sky, you could think: there are five galaxies for every star you see. Each filled with millions or billions of stars.

It's a bit of an understatement, then, to say the universe is huge. The universe is gigantically enormous. Next to the starry sky, we human beings are absolutely microscopic, tiny specks of dust on a little piece of dirt we call Earth.

Hmmm...

Now this raises some interesting questions, especially concerning God and faith.

On one level, I think it supports the belief in God. If there is a God who is infinite and eternal, you would expect his creation to show some of those characteristics. The cosmos as we are coming to know it seems to be just the thing you would expect from God.

But it also raises at least one question – for Christianity, in particular. The good news of Christianity is that the Creator actually entered his creation and became one of us. The one who was with God, the Word, “became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). And as Paul says, great is the mystery of godliness: “He [God] was manifested in the flesh” (1 Tim 3:16). A truly great mystery indeed!

Just a legend?

But is that really believable? The universe tells us that God must be absolutely immense, and humans are teeny. How can the Infinite become infinitesimal? How can God become a baby? I've heard atheists and Muslims alike argue that this is irrational, a logical contradiction. They say it belongs more to the realm

of legend or myth. It seems like the sort of thing that humans with too big of a view of themselves and too small a view of the universe would invent.

More than whisper

Can we really believe in the incarnation – the Creator becoming one of his creatures? Here's a few things to consider.

First, a passage from the Bible, the book of Job. Job is suffering – and he even questions God about it. The answers of his friends have been no answers at all. But Job learns not to judge God by human standards. At one point, he tells himself to look at God's creation. “And these are but the outer fringe of his works; how faint the whisper we hear of him! Who then can understand the thunder of his power?” (Job 26:14)

As Job wrestles with God – and with his doubts – he concludes that in creation, in the universe, we only glimpse what God can do. He is foolish to judge God by his own ideas and standards.

The billions of galaxies, then – rather than making the incarnation doubtful – should do the very opposite. If the universe is only a whisper, surely when God speaks more loudly, he can do something even more mind boggling, like take on our flesh and blood!

Who can limit what this love can or will do?

Lessons from Dr. Seuss

The incarnation means Divinity becomes dust. But that isn't an “easy” miracle, if there is such a thing. This is just the kind of thing you would expect the God who made the universe, the God who is greater than we can imagine, to do.

It was C. S. Lewis who noted that great love and great empathy require a great being. You don't ask a horse to sympathize with a child. You don't imagine a dog becoming an ant. But the mark of a great person is that they can also enter the world of those so small.

Perhaps you know of that Dr. Seuss book, *Horton Hears a Who*. It was made into a movie in 2008. While splashing around in a pool, Horton the elephant hears a tiny speck of dust talking to him. On the speck of dust are tiny creatures called “Whos.” No one else can hear them, but Horton can – he’s an elephant, with elephant ears, after all.

Let me take the book in a direction Dr. Seuss didn’t go. Horton hears the Whos – but yet he can’t enter their world. Not because he is too big – but, actually, because he is too small. Elephant ears are one thing – but this ability is beyond him. It would take a far greater being to not only hear the Whos but become one of them.

God’s greatness

And that is what Scripture reveals. The Word of God is constantly a word about the greatness of our God. It tells us there is a God who has so much power that he can do what seems to us to be almost a “logical contradiction,” namely, become one of us!

And also, that there is a God who has that much love. We tend to have little idea of God’s love. That’s what sin in human beings destroys. But God has a far greater love for us than we could imagine. If God is love – and he is (as we read in 1 John) – who can limit what this love can or will do?


The God of love did not delegate the task of saving us to someone else. God didn’t send an angel. God came himself, just as

he promised countless times in the Old Testament. Isaiah says the Saviour will himself be “Mighty God” (Isa 9:6). The LORD says through him, “My own arm has worked salvation.” “Who is like me?” (Isa 63:5, 44:7)

You ain’t seen nuthin’ yet

Now that contains an amazing promise. It means that in the incarnation, in Jesus Christ, though he is a man from Nazareth, we can know the very love and power of God himself! Jesus is not just another speck of dust on a little planet. In him, we are found by God, we have the promise that we will taste of God!

And that brings us to another incredible miracle. The King of Kings became a servant, the Author of Life was put to death. He entered our world, with all its misery and evil. So that – and here’s the second miracle – you and I could enter his world. He became like one of us – so that we might become like him!

We live in a world that is perishable. Death is our lot. Weakness and frailty overcome the strongest of us. That goes hand in hand with our sin, our turning away from God. But Jesus Christ took on our flesh – so that he might also take on our sin and weakness, our darkness and death. He did this so that in him, we, little specks of dust, might again share in something far greater than the billions of galaxies. He did this so that we might share in the life of God, the life of worship and love (2 Pet 1:4). He came to give us eternal life that will endure even when the galaxies have been rolled up “like a scroll” (Rev 6:14). 



The Tender Mercy of Our God (Luke 1:78)



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AFTER THE BIRTH of his son, whom we know as John the Baptist, Zechariah's tongue was loosened and he burst into a song of praise to the God who redeems: "Blessed be the God of Israel who has visited and redeemed his people" (Luke 1:68). In this song, Zechariah links the knowledge of redemption with the forgiveness of sins. Zechariah's son would "give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace" (v. 77-79).

No redemption is possible without forgiveness of sins, and forgiveness of sins is possible only because of the tender mercy of our God. God cannot forgive our sins because we are good, or because we are sorry for our sins. Our sorrow and tears can never balance out our transgressions. God forgives only because of his tender mercy. God delights in forgiving sinners! He is a God who takes pleasure in his people (Ps 149:4).

Do you need proof? Then look to the cross! To know how gracious your God is, look to the cross. To know the character of your God, look to the cross. To really know the depth of God's tender mercy for sinners, look to the cross! There God's tender mercy was displayed in a manner that simply stuns the imagination, for there the Father sacrificed his Son for the sins of those who hate him. Who can ever fathom such grace and love? When you look to the cross, it leaves you speechless ... and all this, because of the tender mercy of our God! Isn't there something in those words that makes you stop in your tracks? God's tender mercy?! Wow!!!

His tender mercy is the mercy that comes from his heart, from his inmost being. Mercy is who God is, it is part of his divine essence. As surely as the Lord lives, so surely will he grant mercy and forgiveness of sins to those who fear him. And that is music to a sinner's ears. If "mercy" is music to our ears, then God's "tender mercy" must be the sound of angels singing: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

In his tender mercy, God has visited his people. Mary received a remarkable visit from the angel Gabriel, who told her she would bear a son whose name would be Jesus, the Son of the Most High. God's tender mercy shines in the coming of Jesus Christ. There can be no sweeter sound to the sinner's ear than the name of Jesus. "The name of Jesus calms our fears and bids our sorrows cease; 'tis music to the sinner's ears, 'tis life and


health and peace" (Hymn 81:3, Book of Praise). The sunrise from on high has visited us in the person of the Son of God!

God does not merely love us from a distance. God's tender mercies have not remained far away from us. In the person of Jesus Christ, we have received a divine visit from God. How awe-inspiring is that! After all, who are we to deserve such a visit? "What is man [O Lord] that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?" (Ps 8:4). But the LORD does care; the LORD cares enough that he came to earth in the person of his one and only Son.

The King of all the earth stooped down and visited his subjects, and even assumed their nature. What king would think of taking upon himself the poverty, sickness, sorrow, and miserable conditions of his subjects? But Christ did! In his tender mercy, he adopted our life. He entered into our condemnation, appeased the wrath of God, and took the curse of sin in our place. Then he visited his tender mercy on those who are not merely undeserving sinners, but hell-deserving sinners. In his tender mercy, God gave of himself so completely, so fully, he poured his heart and soul into the redemption of his children.

If you want to know God's tender mercy, you need to study the cross. If you want to feel close to God, then you need to make yourself a student of the gospel of the cross. On Golgotha, the character of God is expressed in capital letters. The cross on Golgotha is the beacon that lights this dark world, and the sacrifice of the Son of God is the light shining for those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

People who sit in darkness are people who sit in despair. They hide in the dark because they feel hopeless. The shadow of death brings fear of the unknown, and fear of the future. But in his tender mercy, God has come to those who are in the darkness of sin. Now Christ's light shines in that darkness and dispels the gloom of death. The light of the gospel of the cross fills our souls and removes the darkness of despair. And this glorious good news is only possible because in his tender mercy God visited us in the person of his Son. Immanuel - God with us! Christmas reveals God's tender mercy.

Today, every time you hear this good news, you are being visited by God! In the preaching of his Word, our Saviour visits us with his tender mercy. He visits us and gives us light to guide our feet into the way of peace. How blessed we are to have received the tender mercy of our God. "Blessed be the God of Israel who has visited and redeemed his people!" 

Imagine ... True Peace in This World



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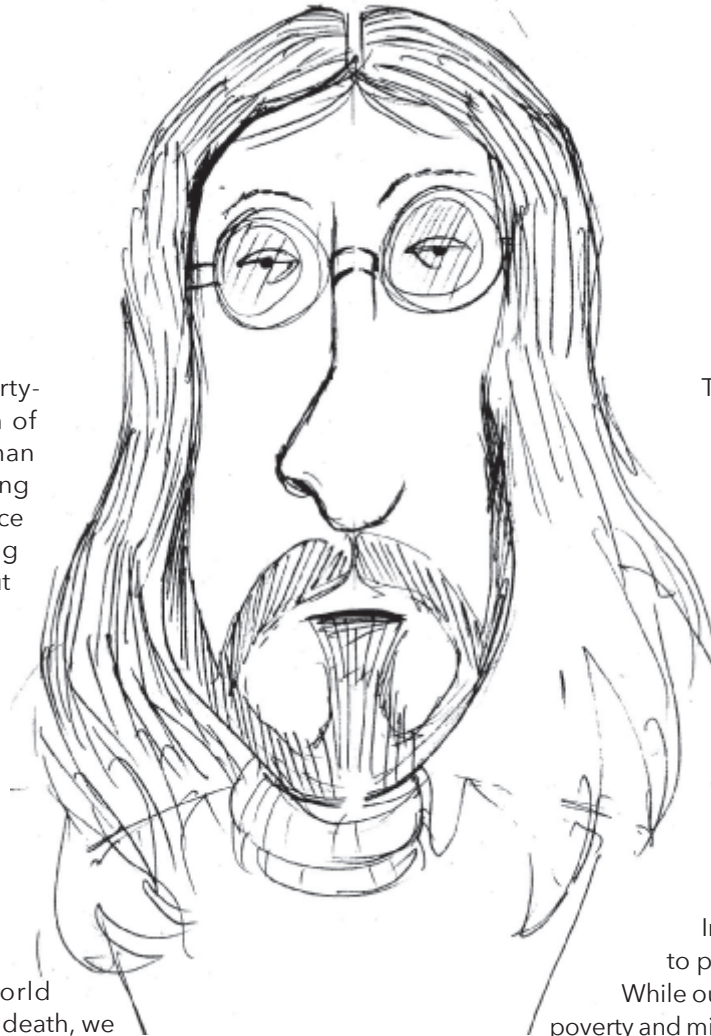
THIS MONTH MARKS the thirty-ninth anniversary of the death of John Lennon (Dec 8, 1980), a man made famous as much for leading the Beatles as for leading the peace movement. The overwhelming thing that people remember about John Lennon is the use of his considerable talent to promote peace in this world. His famous song, "Imagine" still captivates the thoughts of many today,

*Imagine there's no countries,
It isn't hard to do,
Nothing to kill or die for,
No religion too,
Imagine all the people
living life in peace...*

But, sadly, if we survey the world almost forty years after Lennon's death, we can find little proof that his dream is coming true. The world at large has not become safer but more dangerous. We went from the Cold War to the War on Terror. Some might say we're back in the Cold War again. Battles and wars used to be fought with a common rule book, but now all the rules have been thrown out of the window and even the "good guys" fight dirty.

A better place?

And if we look at our own country, has it become a better place to live? More peaceful? Canada is lauded as one of the best places to live in the world and yet many francophones in Quebec wish to separate and the folks living in the west feel alienated.



The United States is so divided between right and left that government shutdowns are a regular occurrence. Factions on both sides are moving the extremes to dangerous limits not seen.

Politically, Canada is more divided now than when Lennon drew his last breath. Social conditions in our cities and on First Nations' reserves have declined rapidly to the point where Amnesty International feels compelled to point out Canadian hypocrisy.

While our government pushes to end poverty and misery in Africa, Amnesty tells us these realities thrive right in our own backyard. Just check any courthouse even in the smallest towns on court days - there is always a long line-up!

People have dreamed of peace, but it has not come

What about average people like you and me - are we feeling better about life than we did forty years ago? Is our society happier? Rates of depression are going up, not down. Teenage suicide has long been a concern and in the last decade there has been an alarming increase in the suicides of middle-aged

men in America (www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db330.htm). Now that Canada and many US states have made euthanasia legal, the media is pressing on with talk of legalizing assisted-suicide. People seem more focussed on dying than on living – not a sign of a happy and content world!

True peace will never be obtained by imagining there is no heaven but only by appealing to the God of heaven!

Many have tried

And all of this is not for lack of effort. Many people have worked for peace, many have even died for peace. Governments across the world have tried to solve the problems of poverty, homelessness, drug abuse, and prostitution but the troubles seem to stay the same or worsen. Prescription drugs are manufactured by the dozens to help offset depression. Rock 'n roll stars have held concerts, millions have given millions to Africa and Indonesia, and yet the poor remain, the misery remains, and the evil heart of man remains – witness only the brutality in Rwanda, Darfur, and more recently in Syria, Yemen, and Egypt. People have dreamed of peace, but it has not come.

That's because John Lennon and many others went looking in the wrong place for answers. John Lennon assumed humanity is *able* to live peacefully together, if only everybody really tried. He thought people *capable* of turning off their selfishness, their greed, their lust, their hunger for power and wealth, so as to live peacefully with one another. He thought if only humanity willed it, it *could* happen. But John Lennon was wrong – absolutely wrong. Peace will never come out of the heart of man because the heart of man is desperately corrupt, and no man can tame it (Jeremiah 17:9).

Evil is inside

If we are honest, we know that from experience. But let's take it first of all from our Creator, who tells us that man's heart is not basically *good*, as many suppose, but *evil* (Gen 6:5). And if the heart is basically evil, we can never expect it on its own to live a basically good life, a life in harmony with God and with our neighbour. The Lord Jesus himself, as the only man with a perfect heart, understood our compromised condition and would not entrust himself to men (John 2:24, 25). The apostle Paul called it like it is, "There is no one righteous, not even one" (Rom 3:10).

If we want peace, true and lasting peace, then we cannot look *inside* our heart; we must look *outside* of ourselves, to Jesus Christ! Man has no power to change his own heart, but Jesus


the Saviour does – and that's where true hope lies! God's angels announced the purpose of Jesus' birth to the shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14). The peace we desire between people in this world can only begin to happen when we have peace with our God, and that's something only Christ can do!

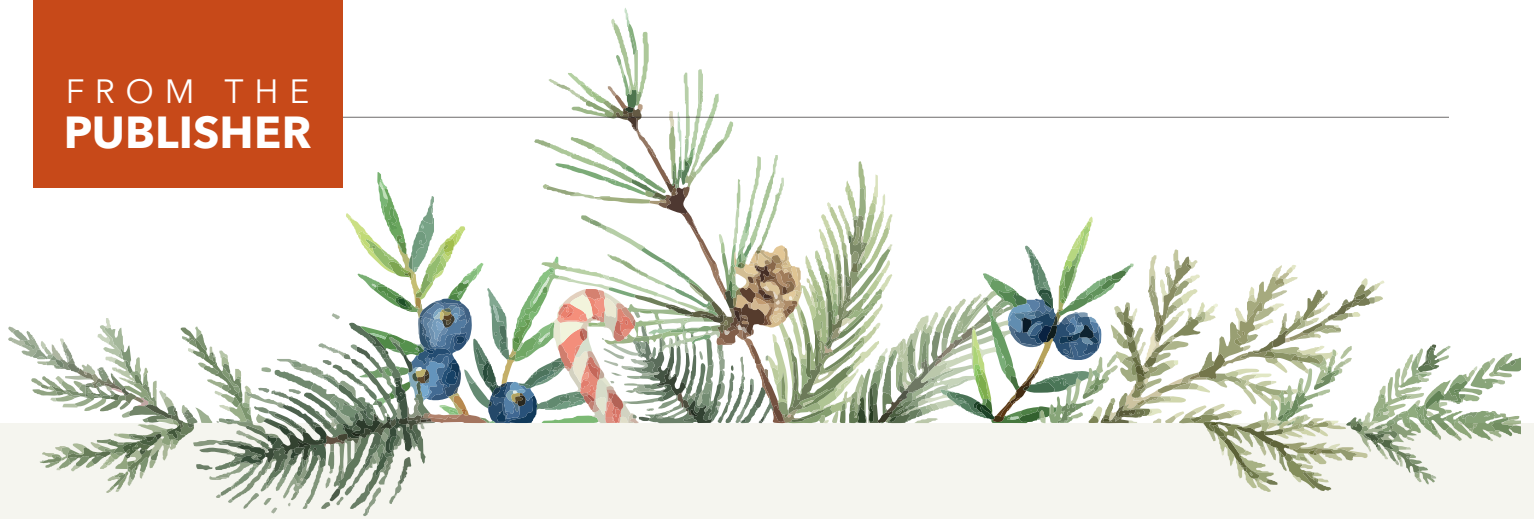
Depression no doubt has its chemical roots (and Christians can be depressed too), but doesn't it also have spiritual roots for many? If people don't know why they are alive, if they don't know for whom they are living, it won't take much to be down. Listless. Directionless. A purposeless life is dreary. If life then becomes hard and there is no pleasure in it anymore, and you don't think there is a God, it's not difficult to think about checking out, permanently. Why let this terrible life drag on? Why go on suffering? But when you understand that you (and everyone) have been created by Someone, that the Creator cares for you, calls out for you to come to him, and has a plan for a better existence in the future, that makes an incredible difference in how you look at life!

Help from outside

This Creator has sent the help we so desperately need. God sent his Son Jesus Christ to the earth to bring forgiveness, healing, and the transformation of our evil hearts. He did that and is still doing that through his blood and Spirit. When Jesus willingly gave up his life on the cross shedding his blood, he did that as a sacrifice in our place. He did that to pay the penalty for our sin so that in God's eyes the debt is cancelled! Everyone who trusts in that will have peace with his Maker, a peace that starts from inside our heart and works its way out into our lives. This is for everyone – yes, you too!

And as Christ's blood covers over our guilt, Christ's Spirit enters into our hearts to live with us, bring comfort to us, and help combat the sin which remains. The Spirit is, so to speak, cleaning house. He is changing our hearts, transforming our thinking, and reversing our attitudes so that we begin to love both God and our neighbour. We begin to show kindness, gentleness, patience, goodness, mercy, and compassion to all those around us – imagine that! True peace will never be obtained by imagining there is no heaven but only by appealing to the God of heaven! Only by throwing yourself upon his mercy and trusting in his Son.

This is why we have Christmas. This month marks the death of one man, but long before him it has marked the birth of another Man, the Prince of Peace. One man came and left, his power gone. The other Man has come and remained as King in heaven! It's *Jesus's* birth, it's *Jesus's* life that is of critical importance for any true peace movement. Let's join together in celebrating the birth of the Prince of Peace, and let true peace take hold in your life! 



Dear reader: It is customary for the Publisher to write a few words of meditation on a Bible text in our Year-end Issue. This year, we have news to share that will preclude the customary meditation. Change is afoot for *Clarion*.

Dr. Cornelis Van Dam has decided the time has come to “retire” from our Editorial Committee. He served in this capacity from mid-1986 to mid-2000 and then again from 2006-2019, for a total of 28 years. But his contributions to *Clarion* were not limited to these periods. A quick search indicates somewhere around 600 *Clarion* articles from him to date. As a matter of fact, his first article appeared in *Canadian Reformed Magazine* (the precursor to *Clarion*) when he was a seminary student in 1969 – 50 years ago! Thank you for your dedicated service, Dr. Van Dam.

From the outset of our publishing of *Clarion*, it was our desire to have our seminary represented in our Editorial Committee. We thank Dr. Jason Van Vliet, who has joined the Committee in anticipation of Dr. Van Dam’s absence and will take up this role more fully in 2020.

At Premier Printing, our team is also changing. Tina Harke has taken care of layout and typesetting of our magazine for quite some years. After a time, she also took on some of the administration tasks for the magazine, not to mention that of other church-related projects. Tina, we thank you and wish you a blessed retirement.

As Publisher and Editorial Committee we have given thought to other media and models for distributing *Clarion*. Stay tuned for some announcements on that front in early 2020.

What hasn’t changed is that preparing a biweekly magazine is no small feat. It takes dedicated effort from the members of our Editorial Committee – Editor Dr. James Visscher, Copy Editor Mrs. Laura Veenendaal, and

Co-editors Rev. Peter Holtvlüwer, Rev. Eric Kampen, Rev. Matthew Van Luik, and of course Dr. Van Dam and Dr. Van Vliet. None of them suffer from a shortage of work to do. Thank you, brothers and sister, for making this work a priority as well.

In addition, we are blessed with regular contributions via the coordinators and writers of our regular columns: Rev. Richard Aasman (*Treasures, New & Old*), Dr. Ted Van Raalte (*Clippings on Politics & Religion*), Rev. Carl Van Dam (*Church News Review*), Mr. Arthur Kingma (Education Matters), Mrs. Emily Nijenhuis (*Clarion Kids*), Mrs. Rachel Vis (*Ray of Sunshine*), and Rev. William den Hollander (*You Asked*). Thank you, coordinators and contributors, for the wide variety of excellent material.

We also thank the advertisers who make use of our magazine and thus support it. We hope that you will likewise find support among our readership. Finally, dear reader, thank you for participating in our goal of encouraging, educating, engaging, and uniting God’s people for his glory, in faithfulness to Scripture, as summarized in the Reformed confessions.

Greetings

On behalf of the Premier Printing team, we extend our warm greetings to you and our prayer for the blessings of our Father in the New Year. “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17). 🍷

William Gortemaker

Guido de Brès Christian High School: Graduation 2019

ON TUESDAY, JUNE 18, Mohawk College's McIntyre Centre was packed full with family, friends, staff, and students all eager to celebrate Guido de Brès Christian High School's Class of 2019.

The ceremony started with Board Chairman Dave Kampen reading from Psalm 136 and then presenting a question to the graduates. He asked them what they wanted from their life on this important milestone of graduation? He reflected briefly on the consistent refrain of Psalm 136 and urged the graduates to remember that God's steadfast love for them does endure forever. Whatever plan God has for them, whatever path they will travel, may their hearts long more and more for the Lord and may their love for him grow stronger and deeper.

Principal Jason Heemskerk spoke next, using a curious head-cheese metaphor to describe the messiness that school can sometimes be. He admitted that not all their high school experiences would be remembered fondly and that there were undoubtedly failures and shortcomings that are the result of this sinful and broken world. However, he encouraged the graduates to remember the valuable teaching that they had received, especially concerning the love that God has for them and to eagerly tackle their next challenge in life with the knowledge of God's unfailing love for them.

Next Kennedy Dekker sang the song "There Will be a Day," accompanied on the piano by Chantal Lof, before another





short meditation on Psalm 136 by Pastor C. J. VanderVelde. He spoke about the importance of the repetition "His love endures forever" - how this represents God's faithfulness to his promises, seen especially in the sending of his Son Jesus Christ. He urged the graduates to live their lives knowing that this God is their God and that they are forever a part of his team or his army battalion. This idea was cemented nicely by the words of Hymn 77:2 that we sang immediately after this address: "When perils o'ertake us, you will not forsake us, and with your help, O Lord, our battles we win."

The next order of business was the handing out of diplomas, to lots of cheering and applause for this significant achievement. Academic scholarships and other awards were presented to many students in recognition of dedicated use of the many gifts that God has blessed these graduates with. It was a great opportunity to reflect on how many students have been able

to work diligently and serve faithfully over the past four years, both at school and in their communities. To God be the glory!

Following these presentations, Jonathan Hofsink came forward with a valedictorian speech which contained some more clever metaphors and funny stories and overall showed the appreciation that the graduates have for their time at Guido. He reflected on the ways that the graduates had changed over their high school years and encouraged them as they go forward from here. After this address, Kendra VanderHoeven and Melanie Vanderboom sang "My Heart is Filled with Thankfulness" accompanied again by Chantal Lof and the program ended with a closing prayer and recessional.

Congratulations to the Guido Class of 2019! May God's enduring love for each of you encourage and guide you as you live in his service. 🇺🇸

ECHS Graduation 2019

Walking on the Path

A LIGHT DRIZZLE may have dampened the spirits of many, but not for some. On Friday, September 27, parents, board members, and staff gathered in the gym of Emmanuel Christian High School (Fergus, Ontario) to meet and greet fifty Grade 12 graduands and to treat them to a festive graduation dinner. What a joy it was for all to see another class congenially congregate and catch up with the latest since June, when they left ECHS after their last grueling exam. They looked classy, a little older and a little more mature, perhaps only because they were all dressed up! Students dressed in black and white mingled in the crowd with trays of appetizers, urging young, older, and old to select treats from the platters.

Once Mr. Stephen Deboer invited all to dinner, graduands took the lime-lit seats in the centre, and parents, staff, and board members sat at round tables surrounding the grads. After thanking our heavenly Father for allowing all present to celebrate this momentous evening, all participants indulged in the food that the present Grade 12 moms prepared for this occasion. It was delicious.

Before the desserts were shared, Mr. Gerald Alkema projected the traditional staff-prepared jeopardy game on the screen, and the grads had a delightful time reviewing quirks, incidents, future careers, Nancy names, and teachers' views of themselves. They were rewarded with dessert, and after a





Presentations of the Awards

Honours Achievement Award

Elissa Bos, Christine Faber
Mackenzie Feenstra, Seth Harlaar
Alison Jonker, Tristan Knol
Amy Kottelenberg, Stefanie Kuizenga
Hannah Medemblik, Anna Meerstra
Natasha Prinsen, Lauren Scheper
Sydney Van Dyk, Brooke Vanleeuwen
Justin VanWoudenberg
Dederic Vellema, Deborah Wanders
Aaron Westrik, Jason Westrik
Thomas Wildeboer

Royal LePage RCR Realty Business Excellence Award

Brooke Vanleeuwen

Post Farm Structures Award

Aaron VanSydenborgh

L. Martin Toet Memorial Athletics Scholarship

Alexandra Sikkema, Aaron Westrik

Governor General's Academic Medal

Brooke Vanleeuwen

Jordan Hutchinson Memorial Academic Proficiency Award

Thomas Wildeboer

Lieutenant Governor's Community Volunteer Award

Cornelius Feenstra

Golden Eagle Award

Alexandra Sikkema, Aaron Westrik,
Jason Westrik, and Reuben Westrik

Citizenship Award

Aaron Westrik

Stewardship Award

Aaron Westrik

closing prayer of thanksgiving, all dinner participants jumped in their vehicles and drove to Lakeside Church in Guelph for Graduation Ceremonies.

Graduands donned their caps and gowns, received the last-minute instructions from the principal, Mr. Henk Nobel, and then, upon a musical cue, entered the auditorium to take the reserved seats, front and centre. After the official opening of the commencement by the Board Chair, Mr. Duane Koster, Mr. Jasper Harlaar provided the audience with the parent address, entitled "The Path." He used the Bible passage, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." He spoke of the walker's path, the spaceship's path, the mountain climber's path, and of the symbolic path – the direction of life. Whether one is on a literal path or a symbolic one, all need to have a sound knowledge of the path, especially of that path of life. Not knowing that path or direction can be unsettling. Hitting bumps in that path can be testing. But having the right mindset, trusting in God's providential care, walking obediently, forgetting yourself, disciplining your mind and heart, choosing righteousness every minute, accepting each day, and showing gratitude in all situations are all guiding tips to walking this God-given path of life.

Before they could receive their ECHS diploma and their OSSD, graduands and audience spent a few reflective moments listening to the Principal's address. Mr. Nobel spoke of wisdom, focussing on the metaphor of wisdom as a tree of life (Prov 3:18). He connected that tree to two other trees, the one in the Garden of Eden, and the other in Revelation 22 where the leaves of that tree are for the healing of the nations. The tree of life, he said, gives life. We know that that tree of life is the Word, the gospel of Jesus Christ. That wisdom is the foundation necessary to know the right and wrong action in a given situation, the foundation to make decisions in the complexities

of this broken life. Mr. Nobel concluded his speech with the advice, "Be a humble student. Get wisdom."

Finally, the graduands could come on stage to receive their diplomas. After the Vice-Principal announced their names, the projector displayed an official photo, the photographer snapped a picture, and the Board Chair and the Principal offered congratulations. One by one, the students came up, and once all fifty were on stage, the audience gave one final round of clapping and celebratory noise.

After Mr. Theo Hopman and Mr. Stephen Deboer presented awards to various students (see side bar for detailed information), the student-selected Aaron Westrik came to deliver his valedictorian speech. He used the metaphor of shoes. Sure enough, he showed the audience and his class his characteristic red crocs. He spoke briefly about the students' journey through the grades and the different school buildings, then he spoke endearingly about teachers (and their shoes or the lack of them), and lastly, thanked parents and staff for providing them with good paths to follow. He concluded his speech with both a quote from Corrie ten Boom, "If God sends us on stony paths, he provides strong shoes," and a question to all his classmates, "What shoes will you wear?"

After giving thanks to God in praise and prayer, and after singing our national anthem, the audience followed the graduates into the large vestibule where all could congratulate them. Handshakes and hugs abounded. Coffee and refreshing drinks parched dry throats and baked good satisfied the palates of many.

What a joyous evening of celebration and thanksgiving. It's one of those evenings where an observer can see a whole community come together – siblings, graduates, parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and friends. An observer could also emotionally and spiritually experience the gratitude: To God be all the praise. 🍷

The 2019 Eastern Ministerial Conference



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"LIE DOWN ON the ground. You've been shot."

These were only a few of the words that were heard over the course of this conference. And what a powerful conference it was.

This year, ministers from all across the East (mostly Southern Ontario, but also even New York!) gathered together at the Ben Miller Inn near Goderich, Ontario. The beds were comfortable, the meals delicious, the company and conversations were delightful, and the fellowship we enjoyed was rejuvenating. But nothing was quite as inspiring and engaging as the speeches that we were able to experience.

Dr. G. Visscher opened the conference on Tuesday evening with the topic: "What We Can Learn from Paul About Leadership." With passion, conviction, and years of personal ministerial work to reflect on, he encouraged us with regards to the power of the grace of God. "If you know the grace of God, you will not minimize the possibilities.... Grace alone has the power to transform." If this becomes the heart and soul of your ministry and your leadership, he stated, the peace of God *will* go with you and your congregation.

The following day began with the panel discussion on church planting. Drawing from a wealth of experience, the panelists Bill DeJong, Tony Zekveld, and Winston Bosch enjoyed a free-flowing conversation with the audience members. They spoke of bringing in speakers to train congregation members in speaking with sex traffickers in downtown Hamilton, Ontario. The power of organic growth through relationships in Repentigny, Quebec. The mental shift towards "gospel planting" instead of "church planting" that has borne fruit (by God's grace) in Brampton, Ontario.

After this, they fielded questions like: "How do you have time for this? How do you let the community or neighbourhood know you are there? With multiple pastors: how do you make team ministry work?" and more. Each pastor present responded well, giving thoughts and ideas while pointing us time and again to the one who is ultimately in control.

Much practical advice was given and received, but as is so often the case, it can leave you with a feeling of how far we as individuals still have to grow. There is so much work that

can be done and probably *should* be done. It's exciting, but if we're honest, probably somewhat overwhelming at the same time. Who is equal to such a task?

In light of these thoughts spinning through our heads, the speech that was the most personally encouraging was the speech which followed the panel discussion. And that was the personal testimony of Sabrina Jaspers.

Sabrina was one who lived away from the church as a young woman. As this was the case, she could speak clearly about what impacted her the most in God's bringing her into his kingdom family. And at the end of the day, it wasn't programs, events, tasks, or any other such thing. These may have been helpful, but they weren't central. Rather, it was the quiet faithfulness of followers of Christ, shining his light towards her in love. A woman who smiled at her as she walked by a church in the street and offered to sit with her in the pew so that she wouldn't be alone and confused as she began worship. The ones who freely invited her to church events, showing hospitality, love, and a community bound together by Christ. Elders who washed and dried dishes with her in the kitchen while joking, laughing, and horsing around, showing her that the gospel is *not* all about being serious and keeping rules and laws, but that there is real joy and fellowship granted to us by Christ. Wise, kindly, and loving older women, whom she observed laying their hand on the shoulder of younger women and briefly speaking words of encouragement into their lives in the church hallway – even as those younger women may be pinning down a squirming child, trying to put a snowsuit on them. Through these and many more experiences, she not only heard the gospel spoken, but she saw the effects of it on peoples' lives. She saw men and women living out of gospel-drenched lives. As that very same gospel touched her life, the Spirit convicted her and brought her home.

Programs and events may get us into contact with one another, but the love of Christ and the gospel spoken and lived is what has the greatest power. Because through the gospel, the Spirit works.

This encouraged us deeply. Why? Because it reminded us that the Spirit is *already* working among us. Programs and events are not intended to do the work for the Spirit. Rather, they are

intended to extend the impact of the work of the Spirit that is *already* happening in *our own* lives, as we live under the gospel of Christ.


That Wednesday evening Dr. Visscher closed the day's conference once again, this time with a speech that was directed mostly at the ministers. In preaching the gospel of Matthew: how do we see the parts? Do we see them as individual portions, or do we see them in light of the whole? What are the overarching themes? Do we see how Matthew uses these themes to direct Old Testament readers to Christ? And with this on our hearts and minds, we once again crawled into our beds.

Thursday, as the last day of the conference, we spent a good portion of the morning enjoying a meal, fellowship, and packing up. But that was not all. At the last speech of the conference, we received words of warning and encouragement from André

Schutten of ARPA Canada under the heading: "Living Under Caesar's Sword."

Moving the chairs aside, he went through a vivid demonstration: having us, one by one, be pictures of what was happening to the persecuted church. That was how I ended up lying "shot dead" on the ground this conference.

The persecuted church, he told us, asked us not to pray that they would be delivered into freedom and prosperity. They didn't want to be like us. They, in fact, had great concern for us. Rather, they asked that we would pray for them to be bold witnesses for Christ even in the face of persecution and suffering.

From beginning to end, this conference was about being and growing in Christ. Let us praise God for his work in our midst and pray that he would establish the work of our hands. May our efforts be to the spread of his kingdom and to his glory. 



A Year-End Update from CRTS



Jason Van Vliet

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THINGS ARE SETTLING down again at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary. Back in September, there was an extra buzz of activity in our seminary community with the celebration of our golden anniversary. The special convocation with the male choir from our student body, the open house, the publication of *Your Word is Our Light*, our anniversary book, and sprucing up some areas of our building: these were all joyful events that we look back on with much thankfulness to the Lord. We also remain grateful for everyone who joined in the celebrations with us, either in person or via livestreaming.

By the way, if anyone wants to purchase our anniversary book, it is now available on Amazon. Just search for the title, and perhaps add in the name of one of the editors (Van Dam or Van Vliet), and you should be able to find it. Everyone who has picked up a copy comments about how enjoyable it is to read and how it is packed full of photos – historic ones, current ones, serious ones, and more than a few comical ones. Elsewhere in this issue readers can also find a review of the book.

A new school year

However, now it's back to regular programming, and the first semester of a new school year will already be finished by the time you read this. The Lord has given health, strength, and religious freedom so that the daily lectures and seminars could continue unhindered. Our twenty-four students have been busy with their assignments and sermon proposals. Such blessings may seem routine, but they should never be underestimated.

In addition, we are putting the finishing touches on our self-study for ATS. In short, this amounts to a very thorough exercise of self-examination as a seminary in order to pinpoint the areas where we can, and should, improve. This process will culminate in a visit from a team of four individuals, chosen by ATS, who will come in March 2020 in order to evaluate how we do things and point out any weak areas that we have overlooked.





Some highlights

Allow me to share a few more highlights. This year the wives of the seminarians surprised us all by offering to serve the entire community a special lunch on the Friday of the Thanksgiving weekend. It was a classy meal with an absolutely delicious menu. Thanks ladies! We really appreciate your generous care that helps build the sense of community at our seminary.

Another special occasion was the fortieth anniversary of Dr. G. H. Visscher's ordination as minister of the Word. In true seminary style, this occasion was marked by an abundance of tasty treats. Also from this corner we offer our sincere congratulations to Dr. Visscher and his wife, Teny. May the Lord bless you richly as you look forward to more years in his service. This ongoing service will be in a slightly different mode starting in 2020 with the upcoming retirement of Dr. Visscher and the arrival of Dr. W. den Hollander. But we're not there yet, so we won't get ahead of ourselves.

Visitors

From time to time we receive guests from our local Reformed schools. On October 18, we welcomed about twenty students from Guido de Brès High School in Hamilton. They attended a lecture on evangelism and watched as two students defended the theses that they had crafted for their dogmatics class. They also participated in several information sessions that introduced them to various aspects of studying for the ministry and seminary life. May the Lord so work in their hearts that we see some of them back as students at CRTS in years to come.

About one week before the high school students visited, we had a group of about forty students come from John Calvin Christian Elementary School in Smithville. From time to time we have groups of elementary students come through the building, and we welcome that. The extra noise and energy that forty Grade 4 students bring is a good reminder to everyone in the building why we exist: to serve the churches, including

the up and coming generations. And who knows, with some seeds planted in their young minds, perhaps we'll see some of those boys back as young men studying for the ministry in fifteen years or so.

We've also had two special guests leading a chapel for us. First, we welcomed Rev. Victor Atallah, the general director of the Middle East Reformed Fellowship (MERF), who gave a special lecture on Islam, a topic on which he is very well-qualified to speak. Then he also encouraged us with a very earnest and edifying chapel message. More recently, we also listened to Dr. Robert Godfrey, a URC minister and the president emeritus of Westminster Seminary California. He spoke from Luke 6:43-7:10 and entitled his chapel message, "Jesus and the Word." I'm sure I speak for everyone in attendance that we were convincingly refocussed on the divine power of the preached Word. Without a doubt, this stands at the centre of all proper seminary training.

Our travels

Our professors have also made some travels in the past months. Dr. Van Raalte made a trip to Australia, where he could speak at a ministerial retreat in Western Australia, as well as a conference in Tasmania where he spoke on the "Early Dutch Reformation and Persecution." He also gave public lectures about how Christians should respond in a biblical way to the LGBTQ+ movement, in addition to preaching in some congregations and visiting the John Calvin School in Tasmania. Overall it was a very blessed time with our brothers and sisters in Australia. We continue to deeply appreciate their involvement with, and support of, our seminary.

Dr. Van Vliet travelled to Montreal to attend the conference of CHEC, an association for Christian Higher Education Canada. One of the main purposes of this association is to promote the value of institutions of Christian higher education in our country, as well as doing what is possible to guard the freedom to have such schools in our land. Given recent political pressures in Canada, and many other countries, against Christianity, it was good to think about ways to highlight the fact that Christian education not only benefits those who attend those schools but actually has many spin-off benefits in society at large. We do well to respectfully remind our governments about this truth.

Looking ahead

At CRTS we are also preparing for our next annual conference. This time around we are focussing on world mission. The theme is "Discipling the Nations: Reformed Perspectives on World Mission." It will be held January 16-18. We have an excellent line-up of speakers with firsthand experience in mission work from Asia, Brazil, Papua New Guinea, South Africa, and Canada. Please join us. All the details, as well as registration options, can be found on our website.

Finally, as we celebrate the birth of our Saviour and look to the opportunities that he will set on our path in the new year, we want to extend a special word of greeting and gratitude to everyone in our supporting congregations. It is truly a testimony to the work of the Holy Spirit that brothers and sisters from Australia, Canada, South Africa, the USA, and elsewhere work together, in various ways, to support a seminary dedicated to training faithful and effective ministers of the Word. May the Lord bless us all in this special time of celebration. 🇨🇦



It's Just a Picture!

THE STUDENTS LISTENED with rapt attention as the teacher told them a Bible story. He was well prepared: he had studied the context, gained an understanding of the main points, and effectively conveyed the message of the story to his class. He transported their minds to the story's setting, activating their imagination. The story came alive!

Christian teachers want their students to appreciate and understand redemptive history as revealed in God's Word, to believe that the stories in the Bible really happened thousands of years ago, and to be aware of the holiness of God. Teachers need to keep all of this in mind as they teach the next generation.

Now what?

How does a teacher follow up to help students remember the story and the message? How do teachers assess the students' understanding of the story? What details will they remember and take to heart?

The older grades may follow up with questions to answer. The teacher may further the study with texts to look up and a discussion. The younger grades, especially kindergarten, may follow up by drawing or colouring a picture.

Drawing a picture gives the teacher some understanding of what the student remembers of the story. "Tell me about your picture!" "What's happening in your picture?" At the beginning of the year, as students are learning to print and sound out letters, she may print on the picture or in a journal style notebook what the student says the picture is about. As the year progresses, the students begin to sound out words and print the words themselves; or they may copy key words or a sentence that the teacher has printed on the board. Perhaps the students will do a craft that relates to the Bible story, or simply colour a picture.

So how do parents, VBS coordinators, Bible Story Hour leaders, and teachers choose an appropriate picture to colour? That is the focus of this article. A whole other article could be written on whether pictures are even needed as a follow-up to the telling of a Bible story, or if pictures should even be used as visual aids to tell the story. Should you decide to include a colouring page in your Bible lesson plan, how much thought is given to your choice?

Google "Bible story pictures to colour" and you will have a plethora of pictures to choose from. Sift through twenty years worth of kindergarten files and you will soon come to realize there are as many personal preferences as there are teachers who came before you. Some prefer the cute "precious moments" style pictures, with their doe-like oversized eyes. Others lean towards cartoon drawings. Others are adamant the pictures should reflect real people in real historical settings.

Do we have guidelines to follow? Are picture choices left up to the individual educator's personal preference? It's just a picture ... or is it?

A questionnaire

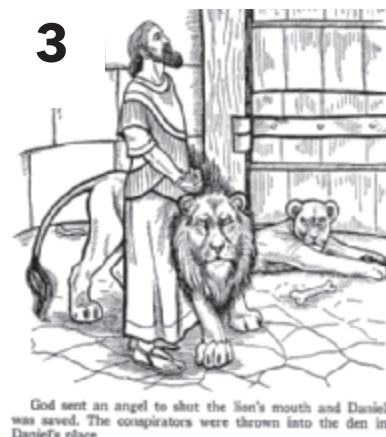
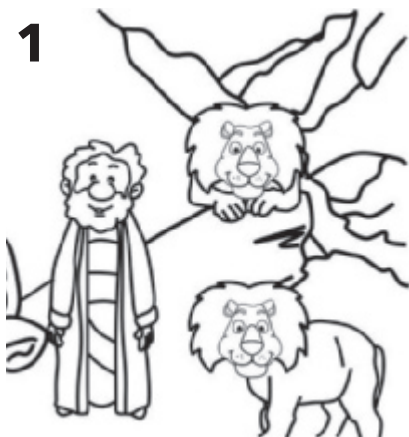
A questionnaire was circulated among Christian schools in Canada and Australia for teachers and student-teachers to weigh in on the topic of choosing Bible pictures for students to colour. It is clear that educators are divided on what they consider acceptable or unacceptable.

The first question queried respondents as to what they would consider when choosing appropriate Bible story pictures to colour. Then respondents were asked to look at five colouring pages from the biblical story about Daniel in the lion's den and give their opinion on each one. As you look at the five samples of colouring pages what goes through your mind? The third question related to the use of cartoon style pictures. The fourth question dealt with whether we ought to have pictures of the Lord. A fifth question asked for suggested websites and books for reference. The insightful replies regarding depicting our Lord would warrant a separate discussion article. Following is a summary of the replies to the first three questions.

Question 1. When choosing Bible pictures for children to colour, what all do you take into consideration?

Age appropriateness Kindergarten students would need easy-to-colour pictures accommodating their developing fine motor skills; older students would enjoy more detailed pictures.

Accuracy of the picture Does the picture accurately portray the account in the Bible? "Accurate portrayal should not only consider whether it is congruent with the facts as stated, but also in view of the bigger redemptive-historical picture taught



in Scripture as a whole. The picture should help the students form a proper perspective on the story it tries to represent" (respondent's reply).

Portrayal of biblical people – Many respondents steer clear away from "cartoony" pictures, favouring a realistic portrayal of the people written about in the Bible. Many suggested the drawings should be realistic and respectful. Though, realistic is "based on a deep understanding of the actual circumstances, dress, and context. Here is an inevitable measure of guesswork on the part of the artist that comes into play" (respondent's reply).

What is the focus point in the picture? – For example, the lions should not be the focus point in Daniel in the lion's den.

Is God or Jesus in the picture? – Most respondents would not use colouring pages that depicted God or Jesus.

Appealing to children A few respondents would consider how attractive or interesting a picture is in the eyes of a student.

Details that bring out theological ideas – e.g. someone praying.

Aid in recall – Will the picture enhance the Bible lesson and help the student recall details of the story?

It is interesting to note that some respondents admitted they'd never stopped to think about what they should consider when selecting Bible story pictures.

Let's have look at the variety of answers to the second question. Please note similar answers have been combined and some rephrased.

Question 2. Looking at the five samples of colouring pages of Daniel in the lion's den, which ones would you choose for your students? Why? Are there some you would not choose? Why not?

Picture 1

- I like the simplicity of this picture, but I do not like that it is a cartoon. It doesn't accurately portray the scriptural account.
- I would not choose this one ... the lions look like they are having too much fun. It appears babyish and too happy. Not realistic! Daniel looks like a lion whisperer with his pets. Characters look goofy.
- I would pick this one ... it's simple. The kids would love it!

Picture 2

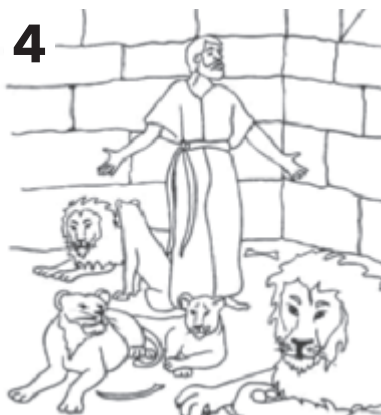
- I would not choose this one ... it is drawn in a cartoon manner.
- It's not accurate ... the Bible gives no indication Daniel was thrown into a forest with lions. He looks like a warrior fighter. The lions are meant to kill, they look too friendly. The lions are the wrong size; Daniel looks short and squat. It's not realistic. Too fictional – the lions look too relaxed. (Editorial comment: The "forest" may simply be pillars of stalactite and stalagmite joined together.)
- I would use this picture because it looks accurate to the events of the story. I'd have a discussion about the word "hero" though. Daniel is not the hero; it is the Lord who saved Daniel.
- I like that the colouring page has a title but I wouldn't pick this one ... Daniel's stand and clothing are odd. It really comes down to a personal preference.

Picture 3

- This one is more realistic than the first two. It's simple yet has perspective. It shows Daniel in a praying stance and the lions appear harmless yet still fierce looking. The picture looks historic though probably not an accurate portrayal of the lion's den. The picture, in a sense, points to God as having answered Daniel's prayers and shut the lion's mouths.
- I like the summarizing sentence on the bottom of the page. It reminds students that this is a Bible story picture they are colouring. The text draws attention to the point it seeks to make.
- I like the amount of detail for an older class, although the door is not accurate. The Bible refers to a stone laid on the mouth of the den.

Picture 4

- I like this one. It is realistic and simple for young students. Daniel is praying and looks like a man of faith. It portrays a den for Daniel to be taken up out of and the lions do not look like household pets. The drawing is not top quality but realistic enough.
- The lion's faces look strange. Is Daniel praying or preaching to the lions? Is there a window in the den? Were the lions not interested in Daniel? It was clear their hunger was unabated when Daniel's enemies were thrown into the den. Do not use!



Picture 5

- I like this one because it is more realistic than the other choices. It looks accurate and is suitable for an older class. Nothing wrong with this one. I would distribute it in a heartbeat.
- This one is fine, but I prefer pictures three and four. I like that Daniel seems to be praying yet seems a bit worried, which is understandable, and that the lions look realistic.
- It looks like a throne room with a stage for each lion. Daniel is meditating – is he calling on God? Don't use this one! It's not accurate ... God shut the lion's mouths and yet there is a roaring lion.

So, does it come down to personal preference? Let's have a look at the third question.

Question 3. What are your thoughts on biblical people drawn in a cartoon style, such as this one (Picture 6)? Or portrayed in a comic book style?

Most respondents did not appreciate biblical people drawn in cartoon or comic book style and would never consider using such pictures in their classroom. Some saw no problem at all with cartoon style Bible story pictures. They say it is just another way to explain the Bible, as long as the picture is respectful and the Word of God is not cheapened. Following are some of the comments.

- Comic books and cartoons are for entertainment. Cartoon characters are used when telling or writing fictional story-books for children. Bible stories are nonfiction texts and so the pictures that accompany them should be factual too; realistic and historically accurate!
- The cartoon picture shown is all "precious moments sweetness" that doesn't show antithesis or the real battle going on that day in the lion's den.
- Cartoon style pictures of Bible pictures seem disrespectful. Some colleagues say these types of pictures connect with the non-reading students in the higher grades. Is it a personal preference? I can't say it is absolutely wrong.


- Do drawing Bible stories in cartoon style give children the impression these are on the same level as fairy tales? Mythical? Not taken seriously?
- It is just another way to explain the Bible. As long as the picture is respectful and the Word of God is not cheapened. As long as we receive it with respect and thankfulness. Presentations in comic form can be useful in getting the message across without compromising these principles. It's important to remember that we can smile or even perhaps chuckle at the wondrous ways in which the Lord deals with his people at times.
- Do we want to portray biblical people, or even Christians for that matter, as unrealistic, unthinking characters whose eyes are drawn too big for their faces and are wearing goofy smiles?

Clearly, by reading the above comments the reader will see that the answers are varied and do not agree.

Conclusion

Are we over-thinking this? Are we over-analyzing children's colouring pages? Are they just colouring pictures to which we all have and may have a personal preference?

Many children enjoy colouring. Pictures can contribute to the learning experience for a child in any subject. But when we are dealing with pictures about the stories from God's Holy Word, is it not prudent to scrutinize each picture and ask ourselves why? Why did I choose this picture as a follow-up to the Bible story or as a visual aid to telling the story? As one respondent wrote, "As teachers we must place emphasis on the fact that the Bible is first and foremost the LORD's divine Word and it must be upheld in honour, and not a mere book of stories. When using pictures to demonstrate Bible stories, it is most important to explain to the students the reason for using the picture and to teach the students that the pictures are only the artists' perceptions."

God is holy, holy, holy (Isa 6:3, Rev 4:8)! We teach our children the wonders of creation, the glory of God, the gift of salvation. We teach redemptive history from God's Holy Word. Honour him in how you tell the biblical stories and in all follow-up activities. 

Happy New Year!

He, our GOD, is with us still;
Always present, rain or shine.
Prince of Peace is He, so kind,
Powerful to save, thru any storm;
Yes! You and I can really trust Him!

Never will our Saviour leave His chosen ones alone.
Every morning brings new mercies from on high.
Wonderful are His works, wise is His counsel to us!
Year in, and year out, our GOD is always the same;
Emmanuel - "GOD with us" - He is always near by.
All-knowing, Almighty, Eternal Father, Heavenly King;
Reliable Redeemer, Very Faithful and Loving Friend!

Connie E. Van Amerongen - 1/1/2019

January Birthdays

6 Jason Herrewynen will be **46**

c/o Harbour Home
42 Spadara Drive
Hamilton, ON L9B 2K3

7 Christine Breukelman will be **48**

2225-19th Street
Coaldale, AB T1M 1G4

13 Ben DeJong will be **29**

c/o Harbour Home
42 Spadara Drive
Hamilton, ON L9B 2K3

14 Stephen Dykstra will be **37**

Box 3573
Smithers, BC VOJ 2N0

17 Henry Driegen will be **64**

PO Box 2532 Station A
Abbotsford, BC V2T 6R3

17 Grace Homan will be **64**

c/o Anchor Home
361 Thirty Road S.
RR 2 Beamsville, ON L0R 1B2

19 Edwin Schutte will be **36**

844 Bowman Road
Abbotsford, BC V3G 1S9
northchilliwackhome@bethesdabc.com

19 Janine Smid will be **50**

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

26 Katherine Nijenhuis will be **54**

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

30 Tyler Hoeksema will be **31**

6755 Lorne Dr
Sardis, BC V2R 2G3

HAPPY BIRTHDAY to the many of you celebrating a birthday in January! We thank the Lord for blessing you with another year. I would like to take this time to also wish all of our readers a Merry Christmas and a blessed New Year. May we all strive to serve our Heavenly God and Father in all we do this year, looking to him alone for everything.

**George van Popta**

Minister emeritus of the Jubilee Canadian
Reformed Church at Ottawa, Ontario
gvanpopta@gmail.com

Your Word is Our Light

ON THE OCCASION of its fiftieth anniversary (1969-2019), the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary (CRTS) produced this commemorative volume that chronicles its history. The first Canadian Reformed churches were established in 1950, and it was not long before there was talk about a seminary. The idea was on the agenda of the first synods, and in 1969 the dream came true when the seminary was opened for the first time, in Hamilton, Ontario.

Besides the two editors, seven others contribute various chapters. The opening chapters address the questions of why it is good to remember, and why the Canadian Reformed churches opted for a federational seminary.


Four chapters recount God's faithfulness through the decades. At the outset, the nascent seminary – indeed, the whole federation – was staggered by the sudden and shocking deaths of two men appointed as professors, while later years were marked by incidents of debilitating illness of some of the faculty. And yet, God was faithful throughout the years. Some, at first, questioned the wisdom of the small federation founding its own seminary, but before long everyone was on board and could witness what a blessing CRTS was to the Canadian Reformed churches and beyond.

The next three chapters outline the teaching that goes on at CRTS, in the classroom, through internships, and via mentoring.

Then there are some chapters on how the seminary functions, about the board of governors and the senate, the library, student life, and the alumni fellowship.

The final two chapters are about how CRTS became an institution accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), and about prospects and challenges for the future.

This is a great book to spend a while browsing through, as it includes many historical photos, vignettes, and stories both funny and poignant. A slower and deeper reading of it will pay dividends as one comes better to understand the reason for and development of this distinctively confessionally Reformed institute of learning and pastoral training.

As one of the ~140 alumni, I am thankful that I could have spent my four seminary years at CRTS. I pray that it may continue to train men to serve in the pulpits and on the mission fields for many more years as we eagerly and expectantly await the return of our Lord and Saviour on the clouds of heaven. 



Your Word is our Light: *Celebrating Fifty Years of the Canadian Reformed Seminary*

by Cornelis Van Dam & Jason Van Vliet (editors)
© 2019, Lucerna (CRTS Publications)

Additional Information: hardcover; 462 pages
available from Amazon, Book Depository
Chapters-Indigo



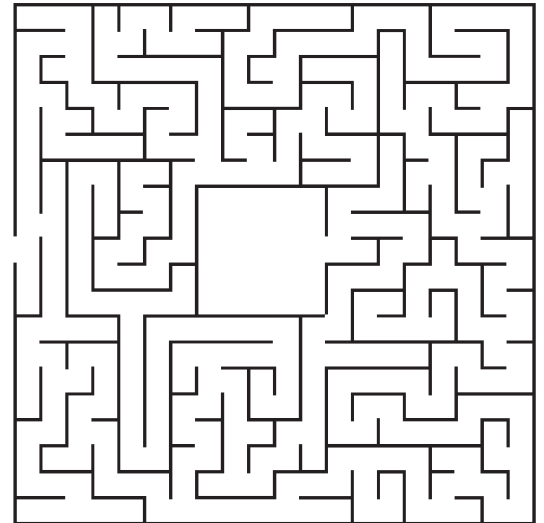
Go to clarionmagazine.ca to print and colour this picture!

The Birth of Jesus

Matthew 1:18-25

Every year at **CHRISTMAS** we celebrate the **COMING** of our **SAVIOUR** into the world. **GOD** sent His son **JESUS** to the **WORLD** in human form to **SAVE** us from all our **SINS**. God **SENT** an **ANGEL** to Mary and **TOLD** her she would have a **SON**. Jesus was **BORN** in **BETHLEHEM**. The **KING** at that time was named **HEROD**, and when he **HEARD** that **JESUS** had been **BORN**, he was very **ANGRY**. He sent **MAGI** to find out where **JESUS** was so he could **KILL** him. The **MAGI** went and **WORSHIPPED** Jesus, but they **LISTENED** to God and did **NOT** tell **HEROD** where to **FIND** Jesus. **JESUS** and his **FAMILY** were able to **ESCAPE** to Egypt **SAFELY**, and **JESUS** grew up **HEALTHY** and **STRONG**.

MAZE:



Follow the maze to help the magi find their way to the baby Jesus.

WORD SEARCH:

N	O	A	J	M	M	O	B	A	V
L	Y	R	D	E	I	Y	N	A	E
M	C	N	V	H	S	G	R	T	B
G	V	A	H	E	E	U	R	A	U
N	S	D	Z	L	D	D	S	K	M
I	P	E	O	H	I	G	A	M	H
K	S	I	F	T	S	P	W	M	E
S	J	M	Y	E	O	O	B	G	R
Y	N	P	F	B	J	P	S	H	O
S	A	V	I	O	U	R	F	B	D

ANGEL	BETHLEHEM	HEROD
JESUS	KING	MAGI
MARY	SAVE	SAVIOUR

BY EMILY NIJENHUIS

Year in Review 2019



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A step closer

We measure the passage of time most often from the year of our birth. People will ask us how old we are (at least if we are male) and we will respond with, "I am such and such an age." What this means is that time is viewed from a perspective of the past. We look at our birth year, consider the present year, subtract, and – viola – that represents our age.

But there is another, and I believe a better, way to measure time, and that is to see it with an eye to Christ's return. The year 2020 then does not so much mean that we are another year older, but another year closer. It signals the fact that we are moving nearer and nearer to that day and moment when our Lord and Saviour will appear again.

Thankfully, when he does so, it will not be in weakness, vulnerability, poverty, and privacy, but in power, strength, glory, and public view. Every eye will see him. Every knee will bow before him. Every tongue will confess his name. What a day it will be! What a future we have to look forward to! After all, Christ will not come alone. He will come with the saints of the past and will call up to himself the saints of the present. Indeed, all who are his will be gathered together. The great Shepherd will be united at last with all of us who are his sheep.

Well now, it is out of this broad perspective that we may review the events of the year gone by. As always, it was another busy and eventful year.

Looking to the east

We begin our review of church life this time in the east and move west. The Fellowship church of Burlington remains vacant after the retirement of their pastor, the Rev. John van Popta, in the previous year. His retirement was moved up a few years due to health concerns relating to Parkinson's Disease. In the meantime, he has been operated on and there has been some improvement in his condition. On the whole, however, challenges remain, and we wish him heavenly help with them. As for the Fellowship church, it continues to call and looks forward to the coming of a man of God's choosing.

The Redemption church of nearby Flamborough has a different issue, as they have been trying for years to find or build a place of worship. They are currently using the fine premises of Grace Christian School but would love to have a more permanent site.

It would seem that Redemption's difficulties in finding a church home is becoming increasingly common across the country. First, there is the ever-increasing cost of land. Second, there is the fact that you cannot build a church building wherever you like. Zoning is becoming a bigger hurdle all the time. Third, there is the sad development that even if the zoning is right you may still not get approval to build. More and more towns and cities are reluctant to give the green light to new church buildings because they collect no tax revenue from religious organizations.

Speaking of buildings, it may be reported that the Orangeville church is in the throes of a major renovation. Most of the old building has been demolished and is going to be replaced with a brand-new worship space. Needless to say, the costs will be great but there was really very little alternative as the old structure had seen its best days.

To the south of Orangeville lies the Brampton church. Apparently, the members there are very happy with their new place of worship. In addition, they are also happy that Candidate Eric Onderwater has accepted the call to serve as minister of the Word with a focus on mission. If my information is correct, he will assist primarily the Brampton church and the Toronto church in their plans to evangelize their neighbourhoods. In the meantime, he has gone through all the ecclesiastical hoops and is now the Rev. Eric Onderwater. We wish him well!

Further south and east we come to the Niagara region. The Glanbrook church is now vacant with the departure of the Rev. Rodney Vermeulen to the Attercliffe church. The Smithville church finally has its second minister with the ordination of Candidate Cody Swaving.

I have also read that church boundaries between a number of area churches are under discussion and review. How successful this will be remains to be seen. If history teaches us anything it is that this is usually a very touchy subject. Over time members develop roots in their local church and this makes pulling up stakes difficult.

In addition to boundary discussions, a committee has also been struck to investigate the feasibility of instituting a new church in Niagara South.

Going west in Ontario, we come to the churches located in Classis Ontario West. The Chatham church is looking forward to the day when Candidate Arjen Vreugdenhil can be ordained as their minister. The Ancaster church became vacant when they severed ties with their minister, the Rev. John Ludwig. Local ministers have been helping out since then, but the work of calling another minister is not far off.

Next door in the Providence church a historic event took place when Dr. Jeff Temple was ordained and became the Rev. Dr. Jeff Temple. How did this happen? For a number of years, Dr. Temple worked as a history professor in London, Ontario, but over time it became increasingly obvious that he also had skills that would serve him well in the ministry. With the encouragement of any number of ministers, he was urged to go the route of Article 8 of the Church Order. This Article allows men with exceptional gifts to enter the ministry without pursuing the regular course of study.

Dr. Temple decided to heed the advice given and in due time became the first minister in Canadian Reformed history to be ordained via Article 8. In the past, two other Article 8 ministers have served well in our churches, namely the Rev. Hendrik Scholten and the Rev. Willem Pouwelse; however, their entry into the ministry occurred in The Netherlands.

Looking to the west

If you are ignorant when it comes to geography you might think that moving from Ontario to Manitoba is just a hop, skip, and jump. Those who have driven, especially the Trans Canada Highway, know differently. It's a long way from the churches in Ontario to the churches in Manitoba. Still, the drive is worth it.

In Manitoba the Carman and Winnipeg churches are doing well and supporting the outreach work being done in Niverville and Rivers (near Brandon). The Rev. James Zekveld is hard at work in the former place trying to establish a Canadian Reformed presence in what has traditionally been a Mennonite bastion. In Rivers near Brandon, a group of believers are trying to get a church off the ground with the support of the Carman West church.

It may also be noted that the Carman East church is slated to receive a new pastor and teacher in the person of the Rev. Carl Van Dam. It had previously been served by the Rev. Steve Vandeveld, who accepted a call to the Denver church. Next door in the Carman West, church preparations are underway for the upcoming retirement of the Rev. Dr. Andrew Pol. This church is still hoping to have a second minister in place to work beside Rev. Pol and so smooth out the transition.

Skipping over Saskatchewan (thankfully there is a URC presence in Regina), we come to Alberta. In this oil rich province, we encounter a number of changes. The St. Albert church received both a new minister and a new church building.

The Rev. Ken Wieske repatriated from the mission field in Brazil and became the new pastor. In addition, a new and beautiful church building was constructed on the outskirts of Edmonton-St. Albert and is now in full use. Further north, in the church of Neerlandia South, they also have a new pastor in the person the Rev. John Ludwig. After his departure from the Ancaster church, he had the opportunity to move either to New Zealand or Neerlandia, and he chose the latter. May the Lord bless his ministry there.

Another development of note is the fact that a new church is in the process of being instituted in the city of Devon. This city lies to the west of Edmonton and has a goodly number of people who at present are members of the Immanuel church of Edmonton. Next door in the Providence church there is a new face on the pulpit, the Rev. Mark ten Haaf. He takes over from the Rev. Richard Aasman, who served this church well for many years but has now retired.

Those who keep up with federation news will know that the Immanuel church is looking for a Community Outreach Worker. Should the position be filled, this person will be joining a growing group of local workers across the country (more on this later).

Leaving Alberta behind, we come to British Columbia (Canada) and Washington (USA). Up north the Houston church will soon be saying "farewell" to the Rev. Carl Van Dam and his family and looking for a new pastor. The Smithers church continues to struggle with a membership that is too large for its church building. Various proposals are being considered, including one to split the church into two.

Further south and east the Vernon church has received a new pastor in the person the Rev. Iwan Borst. He graduated from CRTS a number of years ago and decided to pursue further studies at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. He also assisted the Rev. Tim Schouten in Prince George for a while. He hopes to feel at home soon in the sunny Okanagan.

In the Fraser Valley, change is in the air as well. The Chilliwack church became vacant with the departure of the Rev. Abel Pol to Australia. Thus far their calling work has been without success, but they know that perseverance pays off. Next door in Sardis, there is a new church which brings together members from both the Chilliwack and Yarrow churches. Due to difficulties finding a place to worship in Sardis, the church is meeting at 2:00 and 5:30 pm. Although these are not preferred worship times, the congregation is making the best of it.

The Rev. Dave DeBoer, who serves the Abbotsford church, has been under medical care for severe headaches. The result is that he has been given some extra time off for rest and recuperation. Shrinking the size of the congregation or some extra ministerial help would appear to be items for consideration.



To the south of Abbotsford, the Nooksack Valley church is now meeting in the building of the Sumas Christian Reformed Church. Their worship times too are unusual, as they meet at 8:45 am and 2:30 pm. Because this is a new and vacant church, the members are actively working on getting their first pastor. The process, however, is made more difficult by the presence of the border. Currently it is not easy for them to call from Canada or further abroad. The immigration hurdle represents a big challenge.

Further west and north, the Langley church responded with mixed feelings to the news that General Synod 2019 had appointed one of their pastors, the Rev. Dr. William den Hollander, as the new Professor of New Testament Studies at CRTS. As time goes on, feelings are changing and work has commenced on finding a new pastor for the largest church in the federation. Next door, the Cloverdale church has a new pastor and teacher in the person of the Rev. Jeremy Segstro. Their former pastor, the Rev. Dr. Theo Lodder, decided to leave the federation and joined the Presbyterian Church in America. In the most westerly church in the federation, the Surrey church, efforts are being made to work among the Korean population. Elder Jerome Lee (aka VanderLee) is spearheading this work.

Church plants and projects

As can be gleaned from the above, there are an ever-increasing number of church plants and church planting work being done throughout the federation. In the west, there are new efforts being launched in Surrey and Edmonton. In the east, things are happening in the Brampton/Toronto area. To this one needs to add what has been going on already in Prince George, Niverville, Rivers, and Hamilton (Streetlight).

As such, all of this indicates that a shift is taking place. In the past, the mission efforts of the federation were almost entirely directed overseas and to foreign lands. Now that there is such a great need in our own country for the gospel and seeing that the nations are coming to our doors via emigration, more emphasis is being placed on reaching out in one's local area.

This is not to say that foreign mission efforts are decreasing but rather that they are being complimented by internal efforts.

Looking at some of these efforts in so far as we have information, the Prince George church plant headed by Pastor Tim Schouten is busy urging more families to move into the area. While they have a good core group, they would really like to add to it and thus be better able to expand their work. So, if you have itchy feet, give some thought to moving to the centre of BC.

The Niverville church plant led by Pastor James Zekveld is spending a lot of time making itself known in the area, as well as meeting with contacts and giving instruction to some in the Reformed faith. They too would dearly love to have some more committed families from elsewhere move into town.



The Streetlight effort in Hamilton guided by the Rev. Paul Aasman is located in one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Canada. This means that outreach involves not just teaching but a lot of mercy work as well. For along with poverty comes drug addiction, mental health issues, and criminal activity. In short, this type of evangelism is among the most challenging. Bringing the gospel to people living in a secular culture is hard enough, but when you add poverty, addiction, and mental health issues to the mix, it becomes almost insurmountable and calls for lots and lots of prayer as well.

Foreign mission

Brazil

Looking at foreign mission, our attention is drawn to a number of places. The Aldergrove and Hamilton churches, supported by other local churches in Western Canada, continue to work in Brazil. Pastor Jim Witteveen is busy in Recife, where much of his energy is directed at the John Calvin Institute. In addition to teaching any number of courses, he oversees the overall work relating to admissions, educational standards, student recruitment, teacher assignment, as well as other more practical matters. He can also be found presenting lectures and delivering speeches far and wide. Then too there is the work of advising churches and pastors. Little wonder that efforts will soon begin to find him a helper in the form of another pastor and teacher.

Further south in Maceio, the Rev. Bram deGraaf is busy church planting, making presentations, translating material, writing new material, and acting as a hand and foot to fledgling churches.

It should also be noted that both Aldergrove and Hamilton go out of their way to assist local churches financially. Many of these churches are located in areas of poverty and cannot support their own pastors, much less afford to rent their own church buildings. Help is needed and help is given. In almost all cases, a contract is drawn up between the mission board and the church specifying the conditions: the amount of aid that will be given, the length of time, the frequency of reporting,

the keeping of records. The overall aim is to provide temporary relief and not to create situations of continual dependence.

Papua New Guinea

The Toronto church, along with its supporting churches, continues to work in Papua New Guinea. Their missionary, the Rev. Cornelis Kleyn, is teamed up with the educational worker, Mr. Mark Mulder. In some ways it is a unique combination, but then, they work in a unique situation. Seeing that most of the work there relates to training men for the ministry, it was deemed beneficial to have a theologian and an educator working together as partners.

Still, the mission work involves more than teaching and training young men for ministry, it also means getting involved in all kinds of situations relating to health and wellbeing, strife and violence, witchcraft and superstition.

At the same time, there are also family needs. Two of the Kleyn children, Jonathan and Judah, had to be flown to Cairns for medical attention. It can be reported that all went well, and they have since recovered.

Indonesia

The Smithville church continues to oversee the work being done in West Timor. In addition to training future church leaders, the Rev. Edwer Dethan is involved in many other things as well: preaching, lecturing, administering, counselling, and administration. In short, there are always many things happening. Yes, and this applies to radio work as well. A regular program is hosted called Sahabat FM and many people are required to make this program a regular reality. Some of these people are being trained at the Elpida school as operators, script writers, and announcers. Seeing that all of this is happening in a predominantly Muslim country that is not friendly to the Christian faith means that a great deal of wisdom and skill is required to get out the message of the gospel.

China

The Cloverdale and Langley churches remain in the forefront of the outreach work to China. Unlike the previous efforts, this work is not financed by route of regular assessments from church members but by the support of the two aforementioned churches, as well as other caring churches and generous individuals across Canada who want to see the gospel flourish in the most populated nation on the face of the earth. It should also be said that financial support for this work comes from two Australian churches in Kelmscott and Mount Nasura.

So how is the work in China going? From various sources we learn that it is going very well. And that is remarkable. Why so? Because, at the moment, Christians in China are being persecuted in many different ways. No doubt our readers

have read about this in the various news sources: churches demolished, crosses pulled down, church leaders arrested, detention camps erected. The list goes on and on. For whatever reason, the Communist authorities fear the Christian church and are doing their utmost to control it. What they do not seem to realize is that there are no better citizens than Christian citizens. Are they not taught from Holy Scripture to pray for their rulers, to obey the law, to pay their taxes, and to love their neighbour?

Nevertheless, as all of this oppression is going on, the church in China continues to grow. The number of contacts made increases almost daily. The churches committing themselves to the Reformed faith are multiplying. A new federation is coming into existence. Ministers and elders are being ordained. Books are being translated, printed, and distributed. Students are enrolling in ever increasing number in the China Reformed Bible College. Truly, the foundation is being laid for what hopefully will one day be known publicly as the Reformed Church of China.

Mexico

The Abbotsford and Vernon churches have initiated mission work in Mexico. At the moment, Mr. Scott Bredenhof is in Mexico where he is learning the language, getting acquainted with the culture, being mentored by a URC missionary, and applying for visas. The result is that it will be some time before a plan can be developed and adopted as to where to begin the work, what approach to take, what priorities to set, and so forth. We wish Scott well in this formative stage of the work there.

The Philippines

The Providence Church in Hamilton has been active in the Philippines for some time now. Most of their work relates to sending teachers to that part of the world to give instruction in various aspects of the Reformed doctrine and life.

This work, by the way, is being done in cooperation with the Free Reformed Churches in Australia, the Reformed Church in the US, and the United Reformed Churches of North America. One can only hope that with all of this involvement the lines of communication are wide open, that needless duplication is being avoided, and that all parties are on the same page theologically.

What do I mean by the latter? It has to do with the fact that at times Reformed churches in various parts of the world can undermine each other's work. To give you an example: how many covenants are there? Is there one? Are there two or three? This matter of the number of covenants recently caused some believers in a certain country to call others in the church "heretics" and to leave the fellowship. Those who left had been taught by a theologian in America that you must believe in at least two or three covenants (a covenant between the Persons of the Triune God, a covenant of works, and a covenant of

grace). To believe in one covenant (the covenant of grace) was deemed to be a serious error. Do you see how foreign influence can sometimes go awry? Instead of sticking to the Bible and our confessional documents, we get into issues of dogmatic and historical theology that should be debated in the classroom and not fought about on the mission field.

South Africa

The Dunnville church (and several others, like the Lincoln church) became involved some years ago in supporting mission work in South Africa. Dunnville called the Rev. Ryan Kampen and set him aside for work at the Reformational Study Centre. What this Centre does is compile and make resources available for needy pastors across Africa. Often these pastors are poor and working in remote regions. They cannot afford to buy books and study material. Hence the Centre supplies them with the biblical and exegetical tools needed to craft a sermon.

Mission Aid work

As far as I am aware it is only the Aldergrove church, through the efforts of Mission Aid, that still supports a Mission Aid Worker, Mr. Chris Boersema, in the field. As such, his work is quite diverse, as he serves as an elder in the Marigogi church, functions as a board member of the local Christian school, holds seminars in financial planning, serves on any number of mission organizations, and manages some of the financial side of the mission work in Brazil.

In connection with the latter, it so happens that it is becoming more and more difficult to fund foreign mission projects. The Canadian Revenue Agency is concerned about the laundering of dirty money, as well as the flow of money to terrorist organizations, and thus has come up with any number of new regulations and requirements. Long gone are the days of simply sending a wire transfer overseas. In today's world, you need to keep a record of precisely what monies are being sent, where exactly it is going, and particularly how it is being spent. Failure to comply will sooner or later cost a charity its tax-exempt status.

The Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary (CRTS)

The year 2019 was a significant year for the school of the churches, namely the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary (CRTS), in that it could celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. In September of 1969 what was then called The Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches opened its doors. The first faculty was composed of the following full-time professors: the Rev. Francois Kouwenhoven as Professor of OT Studies, the Rev. Lambertus Selles as the Professor of NT Studies, and the Rev. Dr. Jelle Faber as Professor of Dogmatics, and the following part-time lecturers: the Rev. Gilbert VanDooren as Lecturer in Diaconology (Practical Theology) and the Rev.

Hendrik Scholten as Lecturer in Ecclesiology (Church History and Church Polity). It should also be remembered that the first designated Professor of Dogmatics, the Rev. Jelle van Popta, died before he could begin his teaching career at CRTS. The original student body consisted of Mr. Jan Gottschalk, Mr. Wietze Huizinga, Mr. Cornelis Van Dam, Mr. James Visscher, and Mr. Menno Werkman.

In the years that followed institution, the Seminary experienced any number of setbacks: the death of Professor Kouwenhoven, the debilitating sicknesses of Prof. Dr. Jack DeJong and Prof. Dr. Niek Gootjes, the departure of Prof. Hendrik Ohmann, as well as meager enrollment. Nevertheless, the Lord proved faithful and continued to sustain this small college with the result that today we see a faculty of five full-time men, an administration of three full-time women, and a student body that numbers close to thirty men and women from all over the world. In addition, the college, or CRTS as it is now called, has become a fully accredited institution of higher learning recognized by its peers everywhere. There is indeed much to celebrate.

At the end of the first week of September, celebrations were in full swing. On Friday evening, September 6, the Fiftieth Anniversary Meeting and the Forty-Fifth Convocation was held at Redeemer University College in Ancaster. Master of Divinity degrees were awarded to Mr. Chauncey Knecht, Mr. Eric Onderwater, Mr. Jeremy Segstro, Mr. Filip Sylwestrowicz, Mr. Mark ten Haaf, and Mr. Nathan Zekveld. A Bachelor of Theology degree was awarded to Mrs. Leana VanAmerongen.

Admitted to the M. Div. program were Mr. Caleb Kos, Mr. Mark Vanderlinde, Mr. Adam Werkman, Mr. Matthias Schat, Mr. Timothy Slaa, and Mr. Faustin Emadjeu. As well, Mr. Dan Dery was admitted to the B.Th. program.

The faithful service of the Women's Savings Action also needs to be recognized. For fifty years they have been collecting monies, first pennies and now larger amounts, for the library. In this special anniversary year, they outdid themselves, as they presented a cheque for \$100,000 to the Principal. A generous donor had stepped forward and offered to match dollar for dollar an amount up to \$50,000.

The following day the doors of CRTS were open to guests from far and wide. They could survey the library, sit in on any number of classes and generally experience a little of what seminary life is like. Lucky for them they could also sample a bit of the anniversary cake. The new lectern given to the seminary by the alumni was on display. Copies of the special anniversary book were also available for purchase. All in all, it was a fitting celebration.

Not to be forgotten during all of the celebrations was the fact that earlier in the year CRTS had organized another fine annual conference. This time the theme was "'Do Not Hinder Them:' Children and the Church." In addition to speeches from faculty



members, there were presentations from the Revs. Bill DeJong, William den Hollander, and Tyler Vandergaag. Other speakers included the Revs. Robert Rayburn and Eric Watkins, as well as Mr. Ben Harsevoort. A unique feature of this conference was the fact that it was hosted in two different places: Burlington, Ontario and Langley, British Columbia. As this is being written the organizers are hard at work organizing the 2020 Conference on the theme: "Discipling the Nations." This will be a joint conference, as it is being sponsored by both the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary and the Canadian Reformed Missions Association (CRMA). With a line-up of current topics and great speakers, it promises to be another sterling event. Circle your calendars for January 16, 17, and 18.

General Synod Edmonton 2019

The year 2019 was also a synod year in the life of the Canadian Reformed Churches. From east and west the brothers gathered in Edmonton, Alberta during the month of May to represent the churches and to work for the churches. And it has to be said that in a little less than fourteen days they accomplished a lot. They did seminary business, appointing a new Professor of NT Studies in the person of the Rev. Dr. William den Hollander. They waded through all sorts of material sent to them by CRTS: administrative matters, accreditation items, reports on the Pastoral Training Program and the Needy Student Fund. They dealt with issues relating to the Book of Praise. They tackled the ever-complex area of interchurch relations. They wrestled with a number of difficult appeals. They listened to a lot of fraternal delegate speeches.

As always, some decisions were more vexing and controversial than others. The decision to terminate ecclesiastical fellowship with the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands saddened one and all. In some ways, these churches represent our mother. This is where we came from. This is where our roots lie. This is where our forefathers lived. This is the federation that shaped our theology and church life in so many ways. And now it was time to cut the tie and break the bond. Over the years mother and daughter had grown apart. They started to read and apply the Scriptures differently. Specifically, they clashed on who is eligible to serve in the offices of the church. In classic literature Juliet says to Romeo that "parting is such sweet sorrow" but in this case one could say that "parting is such bitter sorrow."

On a happier note, the Canadian Reformed Churches also have a new sister church or, as it is officially called, a new church in "Ecclesiastical Fellowship" (EF). It was extended to the Reformed Calvinist Churches in Indonesia (GGRC). The situation is made complex by the fact that we already have an EF church in the same country called the Reformed Churches in Indonesia (GGRI). In addition, as a result of the mission work done by the Smithville church, we now have a third federation called the Reformed Churches in Indonesia - Timor (GGRI-T) that also claims to be Reformed and wants to enter into EF with us as well. In its decision Synod did not go so far but promised to assist the GGRI-T in joining the GGRI.

Synod also instructed its Committee on Contact with Churches in North America (CCCNA) to accept the invitation of the Free Reformed Churches of North America to enter into Level One correspondence, to continue its dialogue and contact with the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARPC) and the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America (RPCNA).

I feel sorry for the CCCNA that in spite of all of the work they have done on the RPCNA file no progress has been made and they have been told to do the same thing yet again. Over the years different synods have instructed different committees to study these covenanting churches. And always the results are the same: the committees hold extensive talks with these brothers, are impressed with their commitment to the Reformed faith, and recommend that synod offer EF to the RPCNA, but synod after synod says "No!" Why is it always "No!"? Because a number of local churches in our federation repeatedly make noise about the RPCNA having women as deacons and about a document called "The Testimony." Meanwhile, they ignore the fact that within the structure of the RPCNA deacons do not exercise any ruling function in the church whatsoever and that The Testimony is a historic document linked to the RPCNA's covenanting roots that has no real confessional authority. Just imagine being a committee member and being told to discuss the same matters repeatedly. I have been there, and it is not a pleasant task. I wish the committee members well and future synod members some boldness and backbone.

Synod Edmonton 2019 was also inundated with letters from the churches regarding the Book of Praise and related matters. Any number of churches zeroed in on the hymn section and requested Synod to allow the churches the right to make use of the hymns in the new OPC-URCNA Trinity Psalter Hymnal. Synod did not go so far but responded in part by charging the Standing Committee on the Book of Praise to “seek, receive, evaluate and recommend proposals for changes to the hymn section to be compiled for possible submission to a future Synod” (Acts, Article 145, 4.2.5).

Will this decision calm the waters in the churches when it comes to what we sing in worship? I doubt it. For all the effort over the years, the Book of Praise continues to have both its strong defenders and its critical detractors. Most agree that the work done on the prose or versification part of the Psalms has been done very well, but there are always those persistent complaints about some psalms being too hard to sing and about why do we need to use Genevan tunes to sing the Psalms. Also, the comment can be heard that the hymns that were added a number of years ago were great but that the Committee did not go far enough. What about other classic hymns? What about some of the modern hymns? And behind it all is the bigger question: why is this a matter of the churches in common or general synod and why can this not be a matter of the local church? In short, there are lots of questions but few solutions on the horizon. Patience and understanding will no doubt need to be there in rich measure for this matter to be resolved.

In spite of all this it would appear that Synod 2019 made a lot of good decisions. Did it manage to satisfy everyone? Unlikely, as in the cases above. Indeed, I suspect that there has never yet been a general synod that managed to make everyone happy. Did it cover all of the bases? No, I am still looking for the synodical decision relating to the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC). Oops, it would appear to have been overlooked. Better next time.

Ministerial conferences

It has become a custom by now for the ministers in both east and west to gather together in a central spot at least once a year. Many Ontario pastors, both Canadian and United Reformed, came together in October for three days of meetings in Goderich, Ontario. Prof. Dr. Gerhard Visscher spoke on “Paul and Leadership” as well as on “Matthew’s Gospel.” Mr. André Schutten spoke on the work of ARPA. Miss Sabrina Jaspers spoke on “Counselling.” A panel discussion on “Church Planting” was also well received. Altogether the speeches were edifying, the fellowship was great, and the food was fantastic. Now, it is back to work with batteries recharged.

In November, pastors from both federations in the west are slated to meet together in Cedar Springs, Washington for three days. The theme this year is “The Supremacy of Jesus Christ Over the Principalities and Powers in the Heavenly Realms” and the speakers will be the Revs. Carl Van Dam, Rob Schouten, and Tim Schouten. (Since this is being written before the meeting, a report on how well it went cannot be given to our readers at this time.)

Christian education

A brief glance at the back pages of Clarion immediately tells anyone who is looking that the teacher shortage in our midst is as great as ever. No matter how many students graduate from the Teacher’s College and from other schools of higher education across the land, there just never seems to be enough new teachers entering the system. I suppose that in a way this is a good sign, as it indicates that the demand for Christian education is still great, but for those schools that cannot fill their ranks with qualified teachers, it remains a vexing problem.

Speaking of the Teacher’s College in Hamilton, it continues to play a vital role, especially in supplying new teachers for the Ontario market. Unfortunately, its graduates cannot teach elsewhere without special ministerial consent. It is to be hoped that this will change in the near future. Recently the Teacher’s College submitted a huge brief to the Ontario government requesting permission to be given degree-granting status. Such a step, if it comes about, would no doubt increase the enrollment numbers and also make hiring possible across the land.

One positive that may be reported on the Christian education front comes from Alberta. Those news hounds in our midst will know that the Alberta government and the Christian education movement were at serious loggerheads. Any number of schools were resisting the social engineering attempts of the government in the area of parental rights and sexual education. Thankfully that government, which was socialist and interventionist in nature, has since been defeated and the new government appears to be more sensitive to the values of the Christian schools. Needless to say, this is a real answer to the prayers of many.

While all of this was happening the regular things of school life continued. Children were being educated. Teachers were hard at work. Boards were meeting regularly. Parents were busy supporting and transporting their children. In addition, membership meetings were held, and teachers’ conventions went on as planned. In Ontario any number of teachers got together for the CRTA Convention of 2019 in Hamilton, Ontario. The keynote speaker was Dr. David Zietsma, who spoke on the topic: “A Whole New World: Why Christian Education Matters Today.” The devotional address was handled by the Rev. Darren Feenstra, a pastor at Cornerstone church in Hamilton. Similar events were hosted or planned on the Prairies and in BC.



Youth work

Once again, the various camps in our midst had successful years. Campfire! in Ontario attracted its hundreds of youthful campers, its many camp leaders, and its host of volunteers. Camp Stepping Stones in BC also saw its site in Deroche filled with the sounds of many youthful voices and countless activities. Plans to erect a new Lodge and main building are moving forward as the fund raising makes progress and as a building permit has now been secured. The Denver Camp also went well as children and adults came from places near and far away.

All in all, these camps do great work. In particular, the youth camps have over the years had a very positive influence when it comes to developing the leaders of the future. Educators regularly tell me that they can easily identify the kids in their class who have been to camp. They show a greater degree of Christian commitment and involvement. They also have a wholesome influence on their peers and fellow students. So, if you are a skeptic when it comes to Campfire! or Stepping Stones, talk to some of the teachers. They will convert you.

Senior places

If youth camps target one end of the age spectrum, then senior's homes target the other end. And just like the one fills a need, so does the other. It is good that in our community there is both thought and action when it comes to the greying crowds. As a result, in almost every place where our churches have a presence there are quality care homes.

In the Burlington-Hamilton area many are busy trying to cope with a burgeoning senior population. If my information is

correct, then in the future Mount Nemo will be closing and a new care home will be erected in the Hamilton area not far from the Cornerstone church. It will supplement Christian homes in Brampton, Grimsby, and elsewhere.

In Manitoba, Alberta, and BC new care homes are being built and some are being renovated and expanded. It is all a sign that the Baby Boomer generation of the post WW II years has arrived.

Special homes

Speaking of care homes for seniors also brings us to special homes for the handicapped. In that connection, kudos go out to the staff and management of Anchor Homes in Ontario, to Rehoboth Homes in Alberta, and to Bethesda Homes in BC. In all of these places, residents receive a level of care and love that is so hard to find elsewhere.


Political and social action

An article such as this would not be complete without mentioning the ongoing and ever-expanding work of the Association of Reformed Political Action (ARPA). Also in 2019, ARPA has been busy acting as an intervenor in various court cases dealing with human rights and freedoms. It also continues to do research work into the issues of the day (abortion, euthanasia, assisted dying, transgenderism, discrimination, etc.) as well as produce position papers on pertinent subjects. Promotional meetings are held on a regular basis across the land.

Seeing that 2019 was a federal election year in Canada, ARPA was especially busy educating its supporters across the country. The results were encouraging as many ARPA members, along with other citizens, cast their ballots and elected three members of the Canadian Reformed Churches as Members of Parliament: Tamara Jansen (Cloverdale-Langley City), Tako van Popta (Langley-Aldergrove), and Arnold Viersen (Peace River-Westlock). Blessings and strength to them as they take up their formidable tasks in Ottawa! Oh, and by the way, do you realize that the Canadian Reformed division of the Conservative Party is as big as the Green Party?

In closing

Once again, our tale has been long. No doubt it is incomplete as well. There are so many things happening in our federation that it is hard to keep track of them all. So, if I forgot an important event in your church, school, or home, kindly forgive me. Or, better yet, you can volunteer to take my place as I am not getting any younger.

Enjoy what remains of 2019 and may the Lord bless and keep you all in his care as we enter and move into 2020. 

A winter night scene with a starry sky and a snow-covered landscape. The sky is a deep blue, filled with numerous stars and the Milky Way. In the foreground, a snow-covered field is visible, with a wooden fence running across it. In the background, there are snow-covered evergreen trees and a small building with a chimney.

Season's Greetings

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