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Ordination of Rev. Arjen Vreugdenhil

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What's Inside

"There is," writes Rev. Peter Holtvliuw in his lead article, "a feeling of meeting exhaustion that's laying us low." Between our church and school committees and various responsibilities, we as a church community spend a good deal of time in meetings. While these meetings are no doubt important, there are perhaps some things we could implement so that they take up less of our time.

Starting in the first issue of our volume, Dr. Cornelis Van Dam has been writing a series on children and the Lord's Supper. We now come to his fourth and final part: "Who Attends the Lord's Table: The Central Issue." There is also an article from Dr. Arjan de Visser, "Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology."

In federational news, we have a report from Chatham on the ordination of Rev. Arjen Vreugdenhil. Issue 4 also contains a Canticle from Rev. George van Popta, a meditation from Rev. Randall Visscher, the Ray of Sunshine column, and a letter to the editor.

Laura Veenendaal

- 95 Death by Meeting
- 98 TREASURES, NEW & OLD
- 99 Who Attends the Lord's Table:
The Central Issue (4 of 4)
- 101 Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology
- 105 Ordination of Rev. Arjen Vreugdenhil
- 107 CANTICLE
- 108 RAY OF SUNSHINE
- 109 LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



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Death by *Meeting*

It is, I grant, a provocative title. Please believe me that I do not wish to make light of death. But by using this hyperbole, I think I'm catching a sentiment that many in our church and school communities share: a feeling of meeting exhaustion that's laying us low. As we say, it's killing us. And I think it's time we work on fixing this.

In church life, we meet separately as consistories, councils, and deacons. In both church and school there are often also administration meetings, planning committees, vision evenings, board meetings, executive sessions, and strategy gatherings. There can easily be separate department meetings, leadership seminars, team-building exercises, staff meetings, and one-on-one consultations. If you are active in both church and school, you can find yourself doubling up on many of these sorts of meetings. We're so busy attending meetings that we kid with friends who want to get together that we'll have to meet on our way to a meeting!


On the other hand, meetings are important. The bodies that meet have tasks, often vital ones, and to execute their tasks, group discussion is necessary. We meet to discuss, deliberate, and take action on matters under our authority, so meetings properly used are very useful. Yet the trick is to use them well – with crystal-clear intention and an effective strategy to meet that intention. Since I'm a pastor, permit me to suggest in what follows some ways in which church meetings can be made more efficient and effective.

Purpose

Why, exactly, are you meeting? This is fundamental to a valuable meeting: only meet if there is a clear purpose. And then be

sure that the meeting serves that purpose. For example, what is the purpose of a consistory meeting? To oversee the spiritual care of the flock. The task of elders is to shepherd the sheep of Christ, to see to their spiritual welfare. Whatever goes on in that meeting should serve that purpose. Things like elder/minister visit reports and discussion of pastoral concerns or discipline matters fit this perfectly and should be central points on the agenda. Review of preaching and catechism instruction should also turn up regularly. But things like issues at the local Christian school or town council or an invitation to volunteer in a thrift store (however important these things are in themselves) do not serve the purpose of a meeting of the elders and thus should not take up precious meeting time.

It's the same with deacon meetings and meetings of council (i.e. consistory with the deacons). Deacons discuss the ministry of mercy-period. Councils discuss matters of church government outside of what strictly belongs to the elders or to the deacons. This is the meeting in which to consider things like mission/evangelism work, federation responsibilities, broader assemblies (classis, etc.), liturgy matters, and building maintenance. Councils struggle at times with all kinds of requests from many kinds of organizations seeking support or a chance to somehow promote themselves among the membership. Just because a random group sends in a piece of mail, that does



One of the things that kills enthusiasm for meetings is that they tend to drag on and on.

not make it a legitimate agenda item. If it's not a matter related to local or federational church life, it can be discarded. Avoid agenda creep.

Efficiency

One of the things that kills enthusiasm for meetings is that they tend to drag on and on. This is compounded when the cause of a long meeting is a lack of preparedness or organization on the part of some or all of the attendees. A crisp and focused agenda is a good start, but alongside it what's needed are well-prepared participants and a chairman who keeps the agenda moving along. I think in church life we should aim for two-hour meetings (tops!) and nothing past 10pm. The brothers need mental rest, to get home in time to (if they are married) have a relaxing chat with their wife before turning in for a good night's sleep. Besides that, most decisions past 10pm are poorly made and often have to be revisited. No doubt there will be exceptional moments when a meeting must run longer, but from month to month I don't see a need for church meetings to go beyond two hours.

How can this be achieved? By distinguishing between what needs to be *digested* and what needs to be *discussed* and *decided* upon. Too often we spend meeting time sharing information that attendees need to mentally digest before the matter

can be adequately discussed. If the issue is of any significance (and many times it will be), it takes time for every participant to get a handle on it and then give meaningful, thoughtful feedback. If information is distributed days in advance of the meeting, all of that necessary digestion and consideration could take place earlier *outside* of the meeting. And what's left then is to dive right into discussing the issue and arriving at a decision. That's the unique value of a meeting and that's what our time together should be spent on.

In other words, use meeting time for the things that cannot be done outside of the meeting: discussion and decision making. For example, minutes and proposals can be circulated in advance via email so they don't have to be read aloud or introduced at the meeting. Electronic "paperwork" is here to stay, and we should use it to our advantage. Using a combination of password protection and dedicated email accounts, a level of confidentiality similar to keeping hard-copy notes in a consistory binder (as has often been done in the past) can be maintained. Minutes can then be quickly corrected and approved. Informed discussion of proposals can begin forthwith. The same approach can be done with elder reports (and deacon reports too) on visits made: circulate them via email a few days in advance of the meeting. All the office bearers can

take the time to absorb these reports and come to the meeting prepared to discuss the situations that truly require dialogue. In the meeting itself, then, no time is needed to *present* the reports. This should not only speed up the meeting, but actually allow more quality discussion of the challenging cases and therefore bring about more well-considered decisions.

Chairman

Every chairman will have his own style but, to have a meeting completed within two hours, he will need to keep one eye on the clock and the other on the flow of the discussion. I have found that a gentle reminder at the start of a meeting for participants to a) aim to be succinct and to the point in their remarks and, b) not to repeat what has already been said really helps to bring everyone on board. It then becomes a team effort to have a truly good, upbuilding, and proficient meeting. There's little more frustrating than dialogue that goes around in circles or that goes off on an unrelated side tangent. The chairman needs to find a brotherly way to prevent repetition, to keep the discussion from going down rabbit holes, and to keep the meeting focussed on working toward a decision (or at least a conclusion). Everyone at the meeting, I'm sure, will share the goal of getting through the agenda in a responsible but timely fashion, not rushed but not never-ending either. A chairman should not hesitate to kindly reel in a brother who has gone off on a tangent, however impassioned he may be. In the end, even that brother will be grateful for a well-run meeting that ends in good time.

Don't get me wrong: I'm not advocating a business-style approach to a meeting where speed is everything and discussion is always curtailed and pushed to a vote. Instead, I favour consensus-building discussions but ones which are gently but firmly directed in a line toward a conclusion. Fulsome discussion that is efficiently worked through to arrive at a well-supported decision – to me, that's the sweet spot.

Beware emergencies!


Another big factor which tends to wear people out is too many meetings of the same body. In church life, this can happen for instance when a matter arises that appears to be urgent and so the moderamen will hastily call an "emergency meeting." To this I would say: be very slow to call such meetings and be sure they are true emergencies. Consistories, councils, and the deaconry meet as a rule once per month and that's a pretty good

frequency to keep the governance of church life moving along well. Just because someone raises an issue of concern, even a serious one, that doesn't mean it has to be dealt with right away. Most things can wait. In fact, having time for the office bearers to ponder the concern can be beneficial in eventually arriving at a wise decision. The truth is, hastily called meetings tend to lead to hastily made decisions which in turn often cause more trouble than they are worth.

Avoid extra nights

One way to avoid extra nights out and yet keep consistory oversight operating in a timely manner is – when there is something deemed time-sensitive but not overly heavy – to deal with it right after a council meeting in a brief meeting of the elders. Usually council meetings are shorter than consistory meetings and so it's not a hardship for the elders to stay afterwards for ten or fifteen minutes. When the elders are properly informed in advance of the item to be discussed, it can often be dealt with in short order. This avoids unnecessary delays in the pastoral care of the flock and no office bearer has to give up another night. It has the additional value of removing that item from the next full meeting of consistory.

Another more common way for meetings to multiply is when agenda items are carried over to the next meeting because of shortness of time. Doing this tends to compound the issue for then the next agenda becomes that much longer and that much more difficult to complete in a timely fashion. Extra meetings may then need to be held simply to complete the agenda. This means another night out and becomes a real drain on the participants. No doubt holding the occasional agenda item over will be unavoidable, but I would urge office bearers to work together efficiently and, of course, judiciously, with the aim to complete each agenda within the allotted time of two hours. This will mean less meeting nights which in turn means more nights to do the vital work of the good Shepherd by visiting within the congregation (or even shepherding the family at home!).

These are ideas I've gleaned from watching, observing, and participating in countless meetings over twenty years of ministry. Perhaps some of them can transfer over to the school setting. Maybe a seasoned educator can write in with his/her own ideas for that setting. To be sure, I'm still working on putting all of them into practice myself (especially as chairman), but the closer we come to the above goals, the more all the office bearers like it and, I'm convinced, the better the church is served. 

Your Sins Are Forgiven

"And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'" (Mark 2:5)

In Mark 2, Jesus encounters a group of people who thought it was vital that a paralyzed man had a face-to-face encounter with Jesus. They were so sure that Jesus could help him that they tore a hole in the roof of the house where Jesus was staying. Jesus responded to their faith by saying to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."


Not exactly what you would expect, right? As a kid, I always imagined that this statement would have been something of a disappointment for the paralytic and the people who had brought him to Jesus. After all, Jesus had been healing so many other people in the region of Galilee. I used to imagine that the paralytic heard Jesus's words and thought, "Well, that's nice, but not really what I was hoping for." Now, I think differently. I think the paralytic was truly relieved and grateful to hear that statement, even though he probably didn't expect it.

It's worth considering how people thought about disabilities and hardships in Jesus's day. The Jews in that time generally assumed that a terrible condition, like paralysis, was a result of sin. Consider how Jesus's disciples reacted when they came across a man who was blind from birth (John 9). They asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" They assumed that the man's blindness must be rooted in a sin, the only question was, "Whose?"

Later on, the Jews condemn the blind man after examining him; they tell him, "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" (John 9:34) They don't tell him, "You were born in utter sin" out of some conviction regarding original sin; they tell him he was born in utter sin because he had been born blind. Physical suffering was often seen as divine judgment against sins.

We can imagine that the paralyzed man in Mark 2 would have been haunted by the idea that his paralysis was the result of some sin against God. Hearing from Jesus, "Your sins are forgiven," would have been a great comfort. In Matthew's account of this event, Jesus says to the paralytic, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven" (Matt 9:2). Jesus fully and reasonably expects the man to be encouraged by this surprising forgiveness of sins because it was a message the man longed to hear.

I suspect most of us have been taught that sickness and disabilities are not a sign of sinfulness. We know, on an intellectual level, that bad things in our lives are not always a direct response to sin. But I think we still wonder sometimes whether God hates us when he allows terrible things to happen in our lives. We face sickness, disability, or death and we wonder, "Has God abandoned us?"

We sometimes forget that we are now adopted children of God the Father. While God does discipline us at times, and while he does test us, he only does so out of a genuine love for us. We might reflect on the words of Hebrews 12:11, "For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." By his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ has confirmed to us the love the Father bears for us. We should not see suffering or hardship as a sign of God's wrath, but as a sign of his desire to purify us and remind us of what truly matters. 

For further study

1. Are there things we would value more than the forgiveness of our sins?
2. How do we react when God sends sickness or other hardships our way?
3. How does Jesus Christ confirm to us that the Father loves us?



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Who Attends the Lord's Supper: *The Central Issue* (Part 4 of 4)

Those in favour of child participation in the Lord's Supper have made no secret of the fact that they believe this is proper simply because children are members of the covenant and therefore should have the right to the Lord's Table.¹ In our first article, we saw that this was also the thinking of those promoting child communion in The Netherlands. In other words, there is no need to argue about the age of discernment. Anyone who is baptized has the right to partake of the Lord's Supper. Is this assumption biblical?

Baptism and Lord's Supper

It needs to be noted that although children are certainly part of the congregation and can be reckoned as Christian children, they are so due to God's having embraced them in holy baptism and giving them his promises. They are passive recipients of divine grace and have not yet responded publicly by professing their faith and thus showing the biblically mandated discernment which would qualify them for admission to the Table (1 Cor 11:27-29).

The push for paedocommunion indicates a misunderstanding of what baptism signifies. Children by virtue of having been baptized are not to be considered regenerated. Their baptism is

a sign and seal that God's promises are not just for their parents, but also for them (Acts 2:39). They are children of the covenant; they are holy (1 Cor 7:14); they have been received "into grace in Christ." But this identity does not mean that they are automatically going to be believers. God does not promise that all

those baptized in the covenant community will embrace his promises (cf. Rom 9:4-7). Life experience confirms this truth. As those baptized grow up, they need to respond to God's gracious promises and make them their own. In this way they gain admission to the Table of the Lord. It is, after all, with the mouth of faith that they are to partake of the body and blood of Christ (cf. John 6:47-58; Luke 22:17-20). But it is precisely the need to respond to God's promises with faith that those arguing for paedocommunion deny as being necessary for admission to the Table.

Furthermore, to insist that any baptized member of the church should attend Lord's Supper overlooks the fact that this is a new sacrament for a new age as part of the new covenant. All participated in the feast of the Passover, remembering the physical Exodus out of Egyptian bondage; in the case of the Lord's Supper, only those participate who, in full awareness

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¹ This article is part of a shortened and popular version of a chapter that will appear in the forthcoming publication of the speeches of the 2019 CRTS conference which had the theme: "'Do Not Hinder Them:' Children and the Church."

and appreciation of having escaped the spiritual bondage of sin and judgment in the fullness of time, have consciously committed their lives to Christ and are thus able to discern the meaning, seriousness, and glory of the Lord's Table. It is the sacrament commemorating *the* Exodus from the bondage of sin and judgment. Not all in Israel are of Israel. In the new covenant, the standards for admission to the Lord's Table are different from those to the Passover. A living faith and discernment of the body of Christ are now needed.

Time or age of admission

Scripture does not give any specific age for admittance to the Lord's Supper. God's Word does give some indication that children do not have the necessary maturity or discernment (cf. Deut 1:39).

Many factors are of course involved when evaluating Christian maturity. That includes clear indications that a covenant child has been born again and has actively embraced the baptismal promises received as an infant. Such an embracing typically happens during the critical time of puberty when life-impacting decisions are often made and admission to the Lord's Table is sought.

What is considered an appropriate age of discretion has varied somewhat in Reformed churches through the centuries. In Calvin's time, the average age of publicly professing one's faith seems to have been about fifteen. This took place after catechetical instruction. Infants and very young children were not admitted to the Table.

Today, the average age of admission to the Lord's Supper tends to be higher - around the age of eighteen, in the Canadian Reformed Churches. This may be due to different factors such as greater expectations of not only knowing the essentials of the Reformed religion, but also of giving evidence of a mature conviction of the faith. In this context, it is interesting to observe that the stage of adolescence seems to be extending beyond the teenage years so that mature discretion takes longer to develop. Transitioning from childhood to adulthood takes more time than ever before. Consequently, there is a significant delay in role transitioning, including completing one's education, entering into marriage, and parenthood. How these developments impact the maturation of one's Christian faith is open to discussion.

In any case, what is critical for admission to the Lord's Supper is a credible profession of faith: not the biological age as such, but the spiritual maturity of the person. A young person's ability to discern can be evaluated by the parents, who know the person best, and by the consistory, whose responsibility it is to examine and judge such a person's qualifications for admission to the Lord's Supper. There are many factors to consider, but at the heart of it all lies evidence of true faith, which is

both a sure knowledge as well as a firm confidence (HC, Q&A 21).

It is a great privilege to partake of the Lord's Supper. It is not automatically open to everyone who is baptized, but only to those who have consciously accepted the baptismal promises, are able to "discern the body of Christ" and are committed to lead a Christian life. To that end, godly upbringing and example in the parental home and catechetical instruction are important. All members of the church should be encour-

aged to seek admission to the Lord's Supper and so receive the benefits of this sacrament as well.

Concluding summary

At the time of the Exodus, the Passover was celebrated in the homes of the Israelites and the entire household seems to have been involved, including children. However, the norm in the Promised Land was that only mature males needed to celebrate the Passover and they had to do so at the central place of worship which for most of the history was Jerusalem. In other words, the Passover had been removed from the home setting. This reality shows that participation by women and children was not a high priority for the LORD in Old Testament times. The possible attendance of children at Old Testament Passover meals is therefore hardly a strong argument that they are expected to be or must be present at the Lord's Table.


Furthermore, the Lord's Supper is not a New Testament version of the Passover. It is a new sacrament and is the fulfillment not only of the Passover but of all the sacrificial laws of the Old Testament. The fact that Christ in instituting the Lord's Supper alluded to the sacrificial meal on Mount Sinai in the presence of God underlines the discontinuity between the Lord's Supper and the Passover. Furthermore, the Lord's Supper fulfills the entire sacrificial service of the Old Testament. It is a new

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sacrament and one cannot appeal to the Passover feast to justify the inclusion of children in its celebration. This new sacrament has new rules.

The instructions that the New Testament gives regarding the observance and attendance of the Lord's Supper are normative for us living in the final age before Christ's return. Any possible analogies with the Passover festivities are not normative. We have the new and better covenant (Heb 7:22; 12:24). Now that the sacrifice has been made by our Saviour, it is not surprising that more stringent requirements are in place for admission to the Table of the Lord. There is the serious need to examine oneself, lest one fail to discern the body of Christ and be guilty

of the body and blood of the Lord and so bring judgment on oneself (1 Cor 11:27-32). The historic position of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches has been that children are not capable of this type of self-examination and discernment. This position is biblically justified and should be maintained.

The key factor for determining admission to the Table of the Lord is not one's biological age, but a sincere and knowledgeable faith in the Lord Jesus which is also evident from one's walk of life. Parents and office bearers should be engaged in educating the youth in the faith and encouraging them to profess their faith and commit their lives to Christ and so also benefit from the signs and seals of the Lord's Supper. 



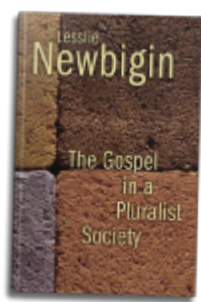
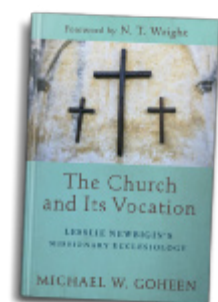
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Lesslie Newbigin's *Missionary Ecclesiology*

Lesslie Newbigin is well known among a broad spectrum of Christians as an ecumenical church man who was the inspiration behind the contemporary missional movement. Newbigin worked as a missionary and bishop in India almost forty years. During that time, he played a role in the unification of various denominations that resulted in the formation of the Church of South India. At the international level, he was active in the World Council of Churches. After retiring and returning to the United Kingdom in the 1970s, Newbigin started a second career as a lecturer and writer. He became known as a critic of modern Western culture and a prophetic

voice that encouraged the church to stand firm and live up to its missionary calling.

Already before Newbigin's death in 1998, people were writing books and dissertations about him, and during the last few decades many more have been published. Michael Goheen's doctoral dissertation on Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology was published in 2000. Goheen has since written and spoken on Newbigin on many occasions. Recently he returned to his subject again with his new book: *The Church and Its Vocation: Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology* (Baker Academic, 2018).



Uniqueness of Christ

An aspect of Newbigin's writing that we can appreciate is his defense of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the Saviour of mankind, as he did for example in his book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Newbigin described his own position as "exclusivist in the sense that it affirms the unique truth of the revelation in Jesus Christ" (*Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 182). He rejected the kind of inclusivism which regards non-Christian religions as vehicles of salvation. It was courageous on Newbigin's part to take this position. It must not have been easy to defend the uniqueness of Jesus Christ within the circles of the World Council of Churches circles at a time when pluralism was gaining the upperhand. Although Newbigin's struggle in the WCC did not have the desired effect, we appreciate that he spoke up against the views of pluralists like John Hick and Paul Knitter.

For the purpose of this article, I'm using Goheen's new book as a window into the theological views of Newbigin, especially his missionary ecclesiology. Apart from Goheen's book, I have also used two books by Newbigin himself: *Foolishness to the Greeks* (1986) and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989).

Western culture

Another aspect of Newbigin's writing that we can appreciate is his ability to analyze modern Western culture, as he did for example in *Foolishness to the Greeks* (1986). Goheen summarizes this in chapter 6 of his book (chapter entitled "A Missionary Encounter with Western Culture.") Having lived and worked in India for close to forty years, Newbigin was able to see Western culture with the eyes of a foreign missionary. He considered Western culture to be the most dangerous foe the church has ever faced (Goheen, p. 164). He also judged Western culture to be more resistant to the gospel than any other culture in the world (p. 165). In Newbigin's judgment, the church in the West has become syncretistic: "Instead of confronting our culture with the gospel, we are perpetually trying to fit the gospel into our culture" (p. 167). Newbigin offered a penetrating analysis of modern Western culture: how it has been influenced by the Enlightenment, how it has relegated religion to the category of values (not facts), and how Western culture is based on hidden faith assumptions even though it claims to be neutral and objective. In sum, Newbigin did a good job at unmasking Western culture as idolatry.

Salvation

This brings us to a key aspect of Newbigin's theology: his view of the identity and mandate of the church (ecclesiology). In order to get a handle on this, a good place to start is where Goheen starts as well: Newbigin's view of salvation. Goheen observes that Newbigin wanted to stay away from an individualistic understanding of salvation, as if salvation were limited to the personal salvation of individual people (p. 41). Newbigin would not deny that there is "some truth in this" (according to Goheen, p. 41) but he would insist that "this is an entirely too reductionistic view of the gospel" (p. 41).

Newbigin describes the gospel message in much broader terms. In his view it is a message "about the fullest revelation and the final accomplishment of the end of universal history – the comprehensive restoration of all creation and the whole of human life in the kingdom of God – present and coming in history in Jesus Christ and by the Spirit's power" (Goheen, p. 42).

The biblical support for this view is taken from the announcement by Jesus, made at the outset of his public ministry: "The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:14-15) But what is the kingdom of God? In Newbigin's view, the kingdom of God consists in *corporate and cosmic renewal*. In Newbigin's own

words, the very essence of salvation is "that it is corporate and cosmic, the restoration of the broken harmony between all men and between man and God and man and nature" (p. 59).

Newbigin's view of salvation contains important biblical aspects, but in my estimation the emphasis is problematic. It appears that Newbigin's aversion against an individualistic understanding of salvation has caused him to be one-sided. He focusses on Christ's announcement of the kingdom, but he says little about the atonement, the need for personal faith in Christ, the promise of forgiveness of sin and guilt, the prom-

ise of indwelling by the Spirit, and the coming wrath of God for those individuals who do not repent. I am aware that one should be careful with criticizing a theologian for what he is *not* saying. At the same time, when certain aspects are always highlighted and other aspects largely ignored, things get out of sync. In this regard, I found Goheen's observation to be revealing: "Newbigin does *not* [emphasis mine, AJdV] move from Christ to the application of Christ's work and the distribution of various salvific benefits to individuals" (p. 54).

This is illustrated by Newbigin's discussion of the work of the Spirit. Goheen observes that Newbigin describes the work of the Spirit in eschatological, missional, and communal terms. While Newbigin acknowledges that Christ's work brings benefits to individual people, Goheen nevertheless feels that Newbigin's references to the Spirit's work in individuals are "infrequent" at best (p. 54).

Election

Another important aspect of Newbigin's theology is his understanding of election. In his book *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, he devoted a chapter to this theme entitled, "The Logic of Election." In this chapter, Newbigin is at pains to point out that the doctrine of election should not be understood as some

"Instead of confronting our culture with the gospel, we are perpetually trying to fit the gospel into our culture"

people having a privileged status before God while others don't have that status. Quote: "To be chosen, to be elect, does not mean that the elect are the saved and the rest are the lost" (*Gospel in Pluralist Society*, p. 86). One wonders how Newbigin would feel about the statement in the Canons of Dort that election is the "purpose of God whereby, before the foundation of the world, out of the whole human race ... he has chosen in Christ to salvation a definite number of specific persons..." (CD, I 7; emphasis mine, AJdV). Once again, Newbigin seems to be fighting against what he considers to be an individualistic view of salvation.

What, then, is Newbigin's own understanding of election, stated in positive terms? In his view, "To be elect in Christ Jesus means to be incorporated into his mission to the world..." (*Gospel in Pluralist Society*, 86-87). It seems to me that this is a reductionist view of election. To be God's elect means more than being sent on a mission. It means to be adopted as sons of God through Jesus Christ (Eph 1:5) and this sets the elect apart from the lost. Our Lord himself, in the prayer that is recorded by the apostle John, said that the Father had given him authority "to give eternal life to all whom you have given him" (John 17:2).

Church

Newbigin's views of salvation and election influence his understanding of the nature of the church and its calling in the world. Goheen quotes a statement by Newbigin to the effect that the church "does not exist for itself or for what it can offer its members" (p. 122). Rather, the church exists to carry out God's mission in the particular place in which it is set (p. 123). When the apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth or Ephesus, Newbigin takes this to imply that the church exists *for* Corinth, *for* Ephesus, etc. The church must be church "for its particular place" (p. 123). This does not mean that the church simply goes along with the world. Rather, the church will live in a painful tension (p. 142): the church is *for* the world and identifies with the world; at the same time the church is *against* the world and confronts its idolatry. Newbigin has a high view of the calling of the church: The church has to claim the high ground of

public truth. It is called to represent the kingdom of God in the life of society (*Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 222, 226). In order to do this, the church will be "a community that does not live for itself but is deeply involved in the concerns of its neighborhood" (p. 239).


We can appreciate Newbigin's call to the church to be relevant and active and to confront the world. At the same time,

he seems to be overstating the case when he says that the church exists "for" the place where it is planted. The church exists for God and for its Saviour, and therefore it is called to build itself up to the measure of the fullness of the stature of Christ (Eph 4:13). The church should not feel guilty when it invests lots of time and energy in the edification of its members, worship, pastoral work, and diaconal work. After all, the church is the bride of Christ. He gave himself up for her, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Eph 5:27). In other words, the church is not merely an instrument in the

hands of the Lord to reach the world! God gave Christ as head over all things to the church, which is "his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph 1:22,23).

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Conclusion

In sum, I appreciate the fact that Newbigin defended the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as Saviour of mankind. I also appreciate his efforts to unmask the idolatrous nature of Western culture and the task of the church to take a firm stand on this. There is a lot that is good about his call to the church to reclaim its missionary calling. At the same time, Newbigin's views of salvation and election are lacking in biblical balance. His aversion against a so-called "individualistic" view of salvation goes hand in hand with a view of the church that sees its *raison d'être* mainly in what it does for the world. The church fathers and the Reformers (see Calvin's *Institutes*, part 4) were more balanced and emphasized that the church is called to be the "mother of believers." She is called to nurture her children! As a result, we cannot but draw the conclusion that there are significant weaknesses in Newbigin's ecclesiology. 



By **Mike DeBoer**

Ordination of Rev. Arjen Vreugdenhil

After two years of pastoral vacancy, it was with great joy that the Eben-Ezer Canadian Reformed Church of Chatham welcomed its new pastor, Rev. Arjen Vreugdenhil, on Sunday, December 8, 2019. After accepting his call to our church in December of 2018, Candidate Vreugdenhil sustained his peremptory examination on November 20, 2019 and was set to become our new pastor.

Ordination

The congregation at Chatham was blessed to hear Dr. Gerhard Visscher, the Professor of New Testament at the Canadian

Reformed Theological Seminary, lead the morning ordination service on December 8. Dr. Visscher chose to preach a sermon on 1 Peter 5:1-5. In this text, we see Peter make a call to action to the leadership of the churches in Asia Minor to “be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be” – as well as to the members of these churches to “submit yourselves to your elders.”

The service opened with the reading of the form for ordination. In this form, we read that “the exalted Christ gathers his church through his Word and Spirit, and in his grace uses the



ministry of man." These ministers of the word are given to us by God, "who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18-19). What a blessing it was for the church in Chatham to witness Rev. Vreugdenhil begin his career preaching Christ's ministry of reconciliation among us. After the reading of the form, we were blessed to witness the laying on of hands by Dr. Visscher, along with all the elders of the congregation. We then responded by singing Psalm 134:3, where we exclaimed "Praise be to him the LORD Most High." Certainly, a fitting song for such a thankful occasion!

The congregation then stood to receive Rev. Vreugdenhil "with all joy" and to "take heed to receive the Word of God which you shall hear from him," and "to accept his word." Dr. Visscher then prayed for Rev. Vreugdenhil and the congregation before proceeding to preach his sermon on 1 Peter 5:1-5, in which Peter urges the shepherd and the sheep to humbly obey the great Shepherd. This message is two-fold: for the elders and ministers of the word to lead the flock with humility and love, and for the flock to humbly follow and submit to the elders, who are appointed by Christ as overseers.

After the worship service, we received greetings from a number of congregations in the area and within Classis Ontario West. Brother Jacob Lenting of the Kerwood Canadian Reformed Church presented greetings from that congregation, reading from Isaiah 52:7: "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'" We also received greeting letters from the Canadian Reformed Churches at Ancaster, Glanbrook, Hamilton Cornerstone, Hamilton Providence, and London, the United Reformed Churches of Brockville and Strathroy, as well as the Free Reformed and Associate Reformed Presbyterian

congregations in Chatham. Brother Mark Malott, council chair, concluded with greetings and congratulations to the Vreugdenhil family on behalf of the council and congregation of Chatham.


Celebration

In between the morning and afternoon services, the congregation and guests were invited to attend a celebration luncheon in the newly built gymnasium at Eben-Ezer Christian School next door. Together over a delicious lunch of soup and buns, we celebrated the Lord's grace in providing us a minister to shepherd our flock, and to lead us in fellowship together.

Introductory sermon

We then gathered together in the afternoon to witness Rev. Vreugdenhil raise his arms to give the greeting of the LORD, and to lead his first worship service as an ordained Minister of the Word.

Rev. Vreugdenhil preached his sermon on 2 Corinthians 4, which teaches us what the focus of the Christian preacher ought to be: Jesus Christ as Lord. The message of the gospel – that Jesus Christ came into the flesh to grant us eternal life – is the only true message a preacher of the Lord should teach. Paul teaches in 2 Corinthians 4 that there is no room for the preacher to pridefully preach himself. The one task of every preacher of the Word is to let the people see Jesus as he is revealed in the gospel through the content, glory and form of his preaching. We pray that God will use Rev. Vreugdenhil to reveal the light of the knowledge of God's glory through his ministry among us.

After the afternoon service, the congregation again gathered together, this time in the church fellowship hall for a time of celebration over cake and coffee. What a joyous occasion to welcome a new pastor to our church and community here in Chatham, and may God grant Rev. Vreugdenhil all that he needs to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. 

I Am the Bread of Life

Text: Based on John 6:25-59

George van Popta, 2019

(Tune: George William Martin, 1862)

SMD
LEOMINSTER

1. I am the bread of life; I fill the hun - gry soul.
 2. The work of God is this: Be - lieve in me, his Son.
 3. No one can come to me with - out my Fa - ther's will.

6
 My Fa - ther sent me from his side to make the sin - ner whole.
 Eat of the bread from heaven a - bove, from me, the Son of Man.
 But those whom God gives un - to me I shall with man - na fill.

11
 You ask: "What must we do? What does our God de - mand?
 My blood is last - ing drink, my flesh is liv - ing food.
 The one who comes to me I'll ney - er cast a - way

16
 What are the works that he re - quires? Oh tell us his com - mand!"
 Who - ev - er eats and drinks from me will have their life re - newed.
 but raise them up to end - less life on that great fi - nal day.

George van Popta Minister emeritus Jubilee Canadian Reformed Church, Ottawa, Ontario gvanpopta@gmail.com

Tineille VanRootselaar

Hi readers,

I recently celebrated my twenty-fourth birthday! For three-and-a-half years now I have lived in a home provided by Community Living in Dunnville. My needs couldn't be met by the Anchor Association, so my parents had to make the decision to find housing elsewhere. But we are very happy to report that things have worked out very well!!

I live only a few blocks from the Beacon Home, allowing me to participate in many activities with my friends.

I spend my days going to a local day program, bowling with my Anchor friends, going to fun night at the Beacon Home once every few months, doing art classes, attend friendship group, and many other activities.

My staff brings me to church every Sunday morning and after church I go to my parents' for lunch and then staff picks me up again at 1 pm so my dad can have his Sunday nap ;).

I am an aunt to nine nephews and nieces and love attending family functions.

I also LOVE getting my birthday cards from the *Ray of Sunshine* friends! My mom says it's a great way to witness to my staff about the communion of saints! So again I'm looking forward to receiving many cards to show my staff!



March Birthdays

Congratulations to all of you celebrating a birthday in March! We wish you the Lord's blessing and a wonderful day with family and friends.

- 3 Trevor Hofsink** will be **42**
14407 McQueen Road
Edmonton, Alberta T5N 3L3
- 9 David Rawson** will be **58**
c/o Twin Oaks
3217 Twin Oaks Cres
Burlington, Ontario L7M 3A8
- 12 Gerry Eelhart** will be **58**
10952-125 Street NW
Edmonton, Alberta T5M 0L6
- 13 John VanWyngaarden** will be **42**
c/o Beacon Home
653 Broad Street West
Dunnville, Ontario N1A 1T8
- 14 Tineille VanRootselaar** will be **24**
219 Lock St W
Dunnville, Ontario N1A 1V2
- 14 Lisa Alkema** will be **39**
c/o Harbour Home
42 Spadara Drive
Hamilton, Ontario L9B 2K3
email: lhalkema@gmail.com
- 15 Jim VanderHeiden** will be **61**
c/o Beacon Home
653 Broad Street West
Dunnville, Ontario N1A 1T8
- 30 Dennis Egerter** will be **32**
53255 Winger Road
Wainfleet, Ontario L0S 1V0
- 12 Connie VanAmerongen** will be **55**
c/o Anchor Home
361 Thirty Road
Beamsville ON L0R 1B2
e-mail: conniev1965@gmail.com

Dear Editor,

Re: *Year in Review 2019, Year-end Issue*

Let me say right up front, thanks Rev. Visscher for an informative year end review. I enjoyed reading the updates from across the country. I'm sure that takes up time and energy. While I also have the utmost respect for Rev. Visscher, I nevertheless beg to differ on a few points he made in his submission.

Rev. Visscher writes on page 741 (last paragraph) that he "feels sorry for the CCCNA ... on RPCNA file...." I do as well, but perhaps not for the same reasons. He continues: "Because a number of local churches in our federation repeatedly make noise about the RPCNA having women deacons and about a document called 'The Testimony.' Meanwhile they ignore the fact that within the structure of the RPNCA deacons do not exercise any ruling function in the church whatsoever and that the Testimony is a historic document linked to the RPCNA's covenant roots that has no real confessional authority."

First, regarding "repeatedly making noise." This comment sounds a bit dismissive; I think those churches may have a point... even a scriptural point. If you take away "any ruling function," then why call them deacons? If you take away the ruling function of elders, then why call them elders? If you take away authority from pastors, why call them pastors? The Bible makes it clear, by the very nature of their listed qualifications in 1 Timothy and elsewhere, that all special offices have a serving as well as a ruling capacity. Should we accept changes which complicate scriptural norms?

For a couple good reads on this I would recommend: "Women in Church Office" by Rev. Ron Cammenga¹ and "Does the Bible Support Female Deacons? No" by Guy Waters.²

Secondly, I wonder about Rev. Visscher's comment that the RPCNA's document, the Testimony, "has no real confessional authority." One can read³ the Westminster Confession of Faith (Adopted 1648) and The Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (Adopted August 1980) are featured side by side in parallel columns. In the Testimony Introduction, point 12, it states: "All of these documents, the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Testimony of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, are of equal authority in the church; except that where noted, earlier documents are to be interpreted by the later ones."

Equal authority is given to the Testimony document and states that later documents are to interpret earlier ones... "except that where noted." The Testimony would then interpret

the WCF, since the Testimony was adopted later. I would think that most of us are familiar with the WCF but would be somewhat in the dark on the contents of the Testimony. Do other documents exist which might corroborate what Rev. Visscher says, namely that these documents have "no real confessional authority"? Yes, I feel for those on that committee who are called on to sift through all this.

Yours in his service,
Aubrey Vandergaag

¹prca.org/pamphlets/pamphlet_70.html

²thegospelcoalition.org/article/bible-support-female-deacons-no

³rpcna.org/history/constitution.pdf

Response

Dear Aubrey,

Thank you for your letter. On the matters you raise, let me say the following:

- (a) It is true that the expression "repeatedly making noise" can be taken as dismissive. I did not mean it in that sense. My reference was to the fact that there are some churches in our federation that are always raising the same objections on certain matters without supplying new grounds. As a result, they seem to ignore what it says in Article 33 of the Church Order;
- (b) While I consider the offices of elder and minister to be ruling ones, I do not believe this to be so of the office of deacon. I know you have written about this before in Clarion, but I remain to be convinced;
- (c) With regard to the Testimony, I should have added something to my comments, namely that this document has "no real confessional authority *outside the bounds of the RPCNA*." In other words, in exercising their inter-church relations they do not require that other churches, foreign or domestic, need to embrace the Testimony;
- (d) As for the Testimony itself, it is an interesting historic document that is used as a further amplification on the Westminster Standards. In many places it does this well; whereas, in other places, not so well. In any case, it is an internal document that the RPCNA deems as necessary to safeguard its distinctiveness as a covenant church.

James Visscher, Editor

