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EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

Editor: J. Visscher; **Copy Manager:** Laura Veenendaal
Coeditors: P.H. Holtvliuwier, E. Kampen, J. Van Vliet, M. VanLuik

ADDRESS FOR COPY MANAGER

CLARION
8 Inverness Crescent, St. Albert AB T8N 5J5
Email: veenendaal@telus.net

ADDRESS FOR ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

CLARION Premier Printing Ltd. One Beghin Avenue
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What's Inside

As Issue 5 of our volume came together it became clear that several articles shared some common elements. Our lead article from Rev. Matthew Van Luik is entitled, "Headship and Submission: Outdated or Fundamental for Marriage and Family?" We also have the first of a two-part article from Dr. Cornelis Van Dam, "Who is this Woman? Listening to Proverbs 31:10-31 Today."

This issue includes a Further Discussion on the topic of opening the doors of Reformed schools. We also bring readers a Treasures, New & Old meditation and a book review.

Laura Veenendaal

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Matthew Van Luik *Minister*
Canadian Reformed Church
Brampton, Ontario
mvanluik@rogers.com

Headship and Submission:

Outdated or Fundamental for Marriage and Family?

In our modern culture, people do not want to speak about submission. The concept of submission is felt to be outdated and belonging to a patriarchal society. Society no longer speaks about submitting to one's boss, or to governing authorities. As Christians, we do not necessarily lament this change, for we often see abusive relationships in which people with authority act in authoritarian ways over others. Scriptures speak about God's demand to have mutual respect for each other, so that we look out for the needs and well-being of others, irrespective of a person's position in society.

While there is a desire to change the structures in our society today, the reality is that society can only function when people maintain different roles. We still have employers and employees, governing authorities and citizens, parents and children. In a previous article¹ I examined the order that God set in creation, for God gives everyone their own role. According to God's order, some are called to rule and others are called to submit. That is true with regard to government and work and it applies within marriage and family, as well as the church.

When we maintain God's order, we experience great blessings in our relationships, but when we refuse to submit to the order given by God, the result is much pain as relationships disintegrate. For example, a government official receives

authority and citizens are blessed when they obey their authorities, but if the official is not faithful in carrying out his authority as God demands, his rule will become a curse rather than a blessing.

God's order in our relationships

Every relationship has a certain order that Scriptures speak about as headship and submission. We discern this already within the Godhead when the Lord Jesus says that he came not to do his own will, but the will of his Father who sent him. While Jesus and the Father are one, yet as the Son, Jesus submits to the headship of his Father. The relationship between Christ and the church is that we submit to the headship of our Lord Jesus Christ. Within the church, the members submit to the

¹ Roles in Marriage and the Church in a Modern Culture, *Clarion* June 14, 2019, Vol 68, No 12



rule of the elders who have been appointed by Christ. And within marriage, a wife submits to the good rule of her husband, recognizing him as her head; children submit to the authority of their parents.

This concept is foreign to many in our culture. People like to speak about equality, and by that they mean that no one needs to submit to the rule of someone else. Equality becomes the slogan by which people seek to free themselves from the social structures in our society. The result is that, also within the church, believers can feel uncomfortable to speak about headship and submission. We would rather do away with those “old-fashioned” words that are no longer understood by society and more often than not are the source of ridicule. People understand headship to mean that the husband is the ruler who dictates whatever he wants his wife to do and that submission means a wife must submit to whatever her husband demands from her.

Biblical characterization of headship and submission

Such a characterization is not found in Scriptures. Some suggest that we should find alternate words to combat this stigmatization,

but other words cannot do justice to what the Lord teaches. Instead of being afraid of being counter-cultural, we are called to unashamedly promote the order God has given us and joyfully speak of the freedom Christ has restored to us in our renewed relationships. It is only in Christ that true headship and joyful submission is again possible. Without Christ, every relationship descends into a miserable power struggle that destroys people’s lives.

Scripture describes all relationships in terms of headship and submission. Headship describes a position of leadership and authority. Paul in Ephesians 1:22 writes that “God placed all things under his [Christ’s] feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church.” Christ receives the first place in the universe, he receives authority over everything so that all things are put in submission under his rule. He receives authority to rule over the whole earth. Later in the same letter, when Paul describes the relationship of the husband to his wife, he uses the same terms in writing that the husband is the head of his wife, as Christ is the head of his church. In other words, the Lord gives to the husband the role of leadership in his family, which means he is to care for his wife and family as one who is given authority.

Submission

The term submission means to place under and so to be subject to another person. In Ephesians 1:22, Christ is the head and God placed all things in submission under his feet. When Jesus Christ was still a boy, he came in conflict with his parents when he stayed behind at the temple in Jerusalem, but Luke writes in 2:51 that he went back home with his parents and was obedient, or literally, submitted himself to them. The Lord Jesus humbly submitted to the will of his parents, which means that he recognized their authority and obeyed them. Now Paul commands wives in Ephesians 5:24 to submit to their husbands in everything even as the church submits to the rule of Christ. There is no way to soften the language Scripture uses with regard to headship and submission, even if that may be our human inclination.

We have to acknowledge that this scriptural language is offensive for all those who do not have knowledge of Jesus Christ. It is in our human nature to resist being subject to anyone, for we want to be free to follow the desires of our own heart. Originally in paradise Adam and Eve wanted to free themselves from submission to God in order to pursue their own will. Since the fall into sin, people have striven to free themselves from submission to the cruel oppression of those who have misused their authority for their own sinful purposes.

It is only through Christ and the power of his Spirit that abusive relationships can again be restored to something beautiful and wonderful. That is why Paul does not just say in Ephesians 5 that husbands are the head of their wives and wives are commanded to submit to their husbands, but he connects it to the relationship between Christ and his church. Christ has come to restore that pattern to our relationships.

Christ's role in headship and submission

The Lord Jesus Christ makes it possible for husbands and wives to again function properly in their relationships. A husband does not choose to be the head of his wife; whether he likes it or not, that is his role. He can choose not to function as the head of his wife, but that does not change the fact that he is the head of his wife and his actions will impact his relationship

as her head. Can you imagine that, in our physical bodies, the head says that it refuses to act as the head? It is impossible for the head of a body not to function as a head. Whatever the head does will affect the whole body, for good or for bad.

Whatever the husband as the head does will impact his wife and family, either for good or bad. In some families, the husband may be absent from his family, so there is an empty

chair in the household; that empty chair will have a huge impact on his wife and children. In other instances, a husband may act as a tyrant and dictator, and this will have a great impact on his wife and family. I have never heard wives complain that their husbands are acting as the head of their family, but their complaint is that their husband is not fulfilling his responsibility as the head. When a husband does not fulfill his responsibility, that means he leaves all the responsibility to his wife. That is a burden no wife is able to bear, although there are many women who

valiantly work to keep everything together without the proper support of their husband.

Husbands, as the head of your wife, Christ calls you to love your wife as Christ loves the church. Christ reveals the attitude that needs to live in your heart. Christ says he came not to be served but to serve (Matt 20:28). Paul writes that Christ gave himself for the church – he laid down his life and sacrificed everything for her. That is the attitude that husbands are to have for their wives.

A new attitude

Husbands are to have this attitude not because their wives are always wonderful and lovable. Our wives are sinners as much as we are, and therefore we are to love them by sacrificing ourselves for them. Love means that we truly care for our wife and children and we are willing to sacrifice everything, even being ready to give our life to protect them and provide for their wellbeing. As Christ's love for us came at a great expense to him, so husbands are to pattern their love for their wives.

This is a radical concept that society cannot understand. The natural inclination of our sinful heart is to watch out for our own happiness and seek our own fulfillment. It is only through the

In Christ, we find our greatest joy and fulfillment in looking out for the needs of our wife and children and serving the well-being of others.

work of Christ that we receive a new perspective on what it means to love Christ as well as our wife and children. In Christ, we find our greatest joy and fulfillment in looking out for the needs of our wife and children and serving the wellbeing of others. Headship means that I now joyfully take responsibility for the wellbeing of those the Lord has placed under my care.

So, how do I as a husband understand the needs of my wife? Too often husbands think they know what their wife's needs are and impose their own will on their spouse. A loving husband is to act as Christ does; you are called to know your wife. Consider what Christ did; he came to intimately understand our needs. He learned how the effects of sin had destroyed our lives and therefore he gave himself on the cross for our sins. But he did not only pay for our sins; he also showered us with the blessings of his Spirit. With the gifts of the Spirit, our Lord equipped us for wonderful service in the kingdom of God. And so, husbands need to become sensitive to the needs of their wives. You can only do that by creating an intimate atmosphere in your relationship, in which your wife is totally secure and feels completely safe to speak to you about herself and the struggles in her heart and life. Intimacy comes only through loving care and understanding. As you better understand the needs of your wife, it is your role not only to give her what is necessary materially, but also to support her emotionally and to lead her spiritually.

Rooted in the love of Christ


A husband can only act as a true head when he is grounded and rooted in the love of Christ. That is the foundation for a new attitude that makes it possible to act responsibly as the head of your wife and family. It is also the attitude that is needed for men to act as responsible leaders in the church. The same attitude that you have for your wife and family is the attitude that leaders must display within the church of Christ. Elders and deacons are to love the flock of Christ. To love precludes lording it over others. Elders who love the flock take time to listen and understand the struggles and needs of those under their care and to give them the support and direction they need. The people of God need to feel that they are being cared for

by the servants Christ has called to watch over them. There is no greater privilege than to share in the joys and troubles of others, in order to encourage them with the glorious gospel message in Christ Jesus.

Now, when it comes to the point of wives submitting to their husbands, it should become clear that submitting to one who loves you, who cares for you, who gives you a sense of security and wellbeing, becomes a source of joy. How can that be a source of joy, you ask? Although we know that husbands

are also sinners, and do not always act as they should, nevertheless, a husband who truly loves his wife will treat her as his equal and show her respect. In this relationship, there is no longer a power struggle, but a mutual working together. Submission in the biblical sense does not mean that a woman should become a doormat who grudgingly follows the demands of her husband.

The Lord gave the man a wife as a helper who is fit for him. God gave her to her husband to assist and help him to fulfill his calling. I am reminded of the opening words of the Song of Songs, where the woman commands her husband, "Take me away with you – let us hurry!" This woman is no wallflower; she commands the one she loves to take the lead in fulfilling her own desire. She does not take the lead but urges her husband to take the lead. And so, wives who love their husbands do not usurp their authority, but they encourage and even challenge husbands to take the leading role. Just as headship is about serving others, so submission is also about serving others. Headship and submission are about working together in love, not to fulfill our own needs, but to work together in marriage to further the work in the kingdom of the Lord.

That applies also within the church. Men do not have leadership roles because they are stronger or better, but because that is the role the Lord has given them. When they are faithful in their role, then the people of God will experience it as a great blessing. Then together we are working for a common goal, which is to praise and glorify our Lord and Saviour as we await the return of our bridegroom. That is the focus each day; we serve our Lord and Saviour together with great joy and expectation. 

Men do not have leadership roles because they are stronger or better, but because that is the role the Lord has given them.

Confession Starts with God

"You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you." (Nehemiah 9:6)

Although Reformed churches do not have confessional booths, confession has historically been an important part of Reformed private and public worship. The art of sincere and specific confession is an important piece of the gospel puzzle, because it means you are taking your sin seriously. But the "how-to" of confession can be tricky. Confession can go wrong quickly. On the one hand, it can become a meaningless list of sins in which the believer just goes through the motions without much grief. On the other hand, people can look back on their past and try to come up with excuses or even think God is to blame for putting them in difficult circumstances.

Nehemiah 9 gives a great example of confession done right. In this passage, the people of Israel had come to grief by hearing God's Word read (Neh 8), and now had reached the appropriate time to express that grief. In corporate prayer, the Levites begin in a very important place. They begin with addressing who God is in Nehemiah 9:6.


In this verse, the Levites describe God as the only God, as the creator of all things, and as the one that is worshipped by angels in heaven. Later it would go on to describe God's gracious calling of Abraham into a covenant (Neh 9:7-8).

To start confession with God like this is really important, because it serves to balance what comes after. You will not be able to blame God for putting you in difficult situations when you have just finished going over his perfect wisdom and grace in not only creating you but in making a covenant with you.

Picture having a beef with certain decisions of some leader. You arrange a time to meet at that leader's office. However, over the phone, the secretary arranging the visit is cheerful and speaks wonderfully about how hard-working and yet caring their boss is. The secretary knows that their boss will be willing to speak with anyone that has concerns, because they always make time for their people. Then, on arriving at the office, you run into another office employee and they share how busy the office has been lately, and how their boss has been working late hours but has still been trying to find time for their family. The employee praises their boss's dedication and love for the people that work in the office.

By the time you are welcomed into the office, you almost feel bad for using up some of this person's precious time. But that person is gracious and sincere, listening carefully to everything you have to say. As you start working your way through the complaint, however, you realize how pedantic and trite the complaint really is. You realize that this person has probably weighed all kinds of options and tried to make the best decision possible. By the time you are done, you end up apologizing and telling this person that you are thankful for the work that is being done and you are praying for that person's task. Your opinion of that person completely flipped on your way to bring the complaint.

In the same way, the Israelites come before God, and before anything can go wrong, they are reminded of God's immense power, and of all the angels that are praising God in the heavenly host, and how gracious God has been despite his people's sin. There is no room to blame God or make excuses for your sin then. You know that it is completely your fault, and the seriousness of your sin becomes all the more clear.

In your confession then, remember to begin with God. Remembering who he is and what he has done can prepare your heart to be more accurate and honest about your sin as you seek forgiveness in Christ. 

For further study

1. How would you compare the beginning of this confession to Daniel's in Daniel 9:4?
2. How does your minister prepare the congregation for confession in his prayer in the worship service?
3. How can the teaching of starting your confession with God help you prepare your own heart for your private confessions before God?



Jeff Poort Minister
Grace Canadian Reformed Church
Kerwood, Ontario
jeffpoort@gmail.com



Cornelis Van Dam *Professor emeritus Old Testament*
Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary
Hamilton, Ontario
cvandam@canrc.org

Who is this Woman? Listening to Proverbs 31:10-31 Today (Part 1 of 2)

I was asked to speak on “Being Worthy of the Calling of Christ,” with a special focus on the task of women, in whatever state of life, to be a support and encouragement for male leadership in the church.¹ That’s quite a topic! To keep the issues involved focussed on Scripture, which is our norm and compass, let us concentrate on Proverbs 31 and as needed turn to other Scripture so that the broader topic of being worthy of the calling as women also receives attention.

Reading Proverbs 31 can be discouraging! Who can live up to such expectations? For one thing, it’s obvious that this woman of Proverbs 31 was wealthy! What am I as a wife to my dear husband to do with this part of the Word? And what if I’m not married? What does this part of Scripture say to me? Is there a message here for all of us today? There most certainly is. Actually, more than we can adequately cover in the time available to us. So, let us consider some highlights to show both the challenges and encouragement this passage gives to believing women.

This section of Proverbs is an acrostic, that is, each couplet starts with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in sequence. So, the first couplet begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and the next one with the second letter, and so on. By the end of this section, all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet have been used. This feature underlines the unity of this passage. It deals with one topic, the worthy woman mentioned in the beginning verse. One could therefore say that this part of Scripture is literally the A-B-C of what it takes to be an excellent wife or woman (the Hebrew word can be translated either way) according to God’s expectations.

The question

The woman of Proverbs 31 is introduced by way of a question: “An excellent wife/woman who can find?” (v. 10) Literally it says: “A woman of strength who can find?” Virtually every modern translation downplays the force of the original text. The word used to describe this woman means, among other things, “power, might, strength.” She is a “woman of strength.” This strength can be evident in a physical way, or in practical competency, or in strength of character. The strength of this woman is her solid character that shows itself in her various activities. For that reason, translations often render: “excellent wife” or “wife of noble character” and similar renderings. But we need to remember that it literally says: “woman of power.”

“A woman of strength, who can find?” The expected answer to this rhetorical question is either that such a woman cannot be found or is extremely rare. Put another way, the woman here described is the ideal woman, the perfect one, so to speak. Where is such a woman who can do all the things that this passage mentions? Where is this woman of whom it can be said “many women have done excellently, but you surpass them all” (Prov 31:29)?

If we step back from Proverbs 31 for a moment, and consider all of Scripture, then the perfect, godly woman, who can at least make a beginning of what is all recounted in Proverbs 31, is someone who has been gifted, renewed, and empowered by the Spirit of God. Only the Holy Spirit can recreate a woman so that she functions as God had intended Eve to function for her husband Adam. Put differently, only the Spirit can make a woman a person of strength according to God’s design. Only

¹An abbreviated version of a presentation for the 58th Annual Women’s League Day held on Wednesday, October 23, 2019, in Hamilton, Ontario.

Proverbs 31:10-31

An excellent wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels.

The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.

She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.

She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.

She is like the ships of the merchant;
she brings her food from afar.

She rises while it is yet night
and provides food for her household
and portions for her maidens.

She considers a field and buys it;
with the fruit of her hands
she plants a vineyard.

She dresses herself with strength
and makes her arms strong.

She perceives that her merchandise
is profitable. Her lamp does
not go out at night.

She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.

She opens her hand to the poor
and reaches out her hands to the needy.

She is not afraid of snow for her household,
for all her household are clothed in scarlet.

She makes bed coverings for herself;
her clothing is fine linen and purple.

Her husband is known in the gates
when he sits among the elders of the land.

She makes linen garments and sells them;
she delivers sashes to the merchant.

Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at the time to come.

She opens her mouth with wisdom,
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.

She looks well to the ways of her household
and does not eat the bread of idleness.

Her children rise up and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her:

"Many women have done excellently,
but you surpass them all."

Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the
Lord is to be praised.

Give her of the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise
her in the gates.


the Spirit can incline the heart completely to the service of the Lord in the true and humble fear of the Lord and so have true wisdom. Only then is one truly equipped to handle the many tasks and duties that belong to being a woman. It takes true, godly wisdom. After all, that is what the book of Proverbs is all about – the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And so, Proverbs 31 pictures a woman as God intended, one endowed with the Spirit of wisdom, as summarized in verse 30: "A woman who fears the Lord is to be praised."

Now, this truth encourages and gives hope. What is normally impossible for us as fallen human beings is possible in the renewing Spirit of Christ. Although this passage speaks of a married woman, it certainly has application for single women as well. The Spirit also recreates and renews them to God's standards.

Proverbs 31 tells us about the place and task of women in a very practical way by taking us into the nitty-gritty of daily life in ancient Israel. Remarkably, God used a woman, the mother of King Lemuel (Prov 31:1), for this part of his revelation. Her teaching was meant in the first place for her son, King Lemuel, traditionally identified with Solomon. Her instruction is now part of God's Word.

A helper fit for him

It is noteworthy that one of the very first things that is said about this ideal woman or wife is that "the heart of her husband trusts in her" (Prov 31:11). This is so because "she does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life" (v. 12). This woman's life is completely devoted to her husband and his wellbeing. Her chief concern is to be of help and assistance to him. And is this not what God had in mind when he presented the first man, Adam, with his wife, Eve? She was made with the express purpose to be "a helper fit for him" (Gen 2:18). And so, this woman of Proverbs 31 is there for him "all the days of her life!" Not just on sunny days, but also when there are tensions, worries, and hardships.



Only the Spirit can make a woman a person of strength according to God's design

Proverbs 31 indicates that when a woman gives her all to her husband to help him in every possible way, then the results are amazing. He is able to fully develop his gifts and also make a difference in the community. Because of the support his wife gives him, he can assume a position of leadership in the nation. "Her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land" (Prov 31:23). His wife's selfless dedication makes this possible. She has a lot to do with his success. He does not need to worry about all the things his wife so capably handles. In other words, the wife makes a name for her husband by her contribution. Do you as a wife want to encourage and help your husband to take positions of leadership in the church? The first step according to Proverbs 31 is to be a helpmeet for him in the most comprehensive sense of the word.

Now, it is possible that a gifted man who has a less than ideal marriage might still rise in public life. But Proverbs 31 clearly ties the wife's help to his success. As a current saying puts it: "Behind every successful man is a great woman." Not always so, but there is some biblical truth to it. The same goes for the world outside marriage. Women who are competent and give their all as an employee enable those to whom they have to report to excel in their specific responsibilities, because they know that their subordinates do excellent work.

When a wife is truly a helpmeet for her husband according to God's creation ordinance, then there is reciprocation. "The heart

of her husband trusts in her" (Prov 31:11). He has complete confidence in her as his equal in the marriage with the gifts specific to her. Whatever he can, he leaves in her care. Indeed, you as women need responsibilities to flourish and to use to the utmost the gifts God gave you. And look at the responsibilities this husband gives to his wife! He gives her the charge of the entire household. She doesn't say, "I don't really have a job because I'm only a homemaker and work at home." She does not look down on housework. No, she capitalizes on the possibilities her husband gives her in being in charge of domestic affairs. She makes the most of it!

With her gifts, she could have taken the easy way and become lazy and self-indulgent. But no, she takes ownership of her task. She gives leadership in buying the necessities of life, rising early in the morning and working until late at night. As funds allow, she even gets into business dealings, buying a field and planting a vineyard. It is all for the husband and the family. Their interests and welfare dominate her life. Consequently, we read in Proverbs 31:28, "Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her." She truly fulfills God's creational expectations for her. Charm and beauty are less important. "A woman who fears the Lord is to be praised" (Prov 31:30).

When you reflect on all her responsibilities, there are more applications for us today.

Spreading her wings

This woman makes the most of the possibilities, and you as women and wives may do the same, keeping in mind the biblical priorities. Let's just pause for a moment at what this woman all does.

She is not afraid to seize the opportunities that present themselves. She's a businesswoman. "She seeks wool and flax and works with willing hands" (Prov 31:13). Whether she gets this material from the family farm or purchases it, she's an active woman, not just in her home but also outside of it. "She is like the ships of the merchant; she brings her food from afar.... She considers a field and buys it; with the fruit of her hands she plants a vineyard" (vv. 14, 16). Besides her primary task of being a help for her husband in the home and for the immediate domestic affairs, she goes beyond her homemaking and also enriches the family with her labours outside the home. The wool and flax she goes out to get she uses to make clothes and articles for the home (vv. 22, 24). In her prosperity, she does not forget the poor, but is generous towards them (v. 20).

It is a remarkable fact that all these business and humanitarian dealings in and outside the home by a wife is in Scripture not just permissible, but to be applauded. These are good activities and this woman is held up as "excellent," a woman of strength; an ideal wife, a perfect life companion. As mentioned earlier, such a woman is rare. "Who can find someone like that?" (v. 10).

On the other hand, it does happen that women with such gifts exist. God can raise up godly women, renewed with the Spirit, who have extraordinary gifts and true wisdom and who can run an immaculate household and at the same time be busy outside the home as well. Such outside work can involve helping her husband in his business, whether on a farm or in an office. But such outside work can also mean that she has the gifts to run her own business on the side, as the woman in Proverbs 31 did without shortchanging her husband or children. As Christians, we should exalt and emphasize the place of a mother, a homemaker, and so being a helpmeet for her husband in domestic affairs. But Scripture here teaches that a woman's gifts can also be used beyond the home without jeopardizing her primary responsibilities. Indeed, she can in this way benefit the home also financially.


In this connection, Lydia of Thyatira comes to mind. She was a trader of purple goods who believed and, along with her household, was baptized (Acts 16:14-15). There is no mention of

a husband. She may have been a widow or she may have been a single woman. Whatever the situation, she had a household and dependents and servants living with her. She is therefore an example of a woman who had business gifts and ran what must have been a very costly enterprise for purple dye was extremely expensive in antiquity.

Christian women today can have the same freedom as the woman of Proverbs 31 and Lydia of Thyatira, as long as the biblical priorities are met. If the gifts are there, and the opportunities present themselves, women are free to exploit them and so benefit from their labours. The Bible does not know of a so-called glass ceiling that has to be broken for women to succeed in the world of economics and business. There are hints of this in Proverbs 31. This woman is in all kinds of business. She may have had male employees or perhaps slaves under her. She tells them what to do. She is in charge. That is the whole tenor of Proverbs 31 in characterizing this woman. Indeed, another example is Abigail, who also had male servants who obeyed her (1 Sam 25:19).

There is a remarkable characterization of the Proverbs 31 woman. "She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong" (v. 17). She is described as men are often described in Scripture when they undertake arduous tasks. Literally this verse reads: "She girds her loins with strength." This is a powerful metaphor to prepare for difficult action such as for battle (Jer 1:17) or running long and fast (1 Kgs 18:46; 2 Kgs 4:29). It is even used of God who "has girded himself with strength" (Ps 93:1). So, this description of her girding her loins with strength says something about her being an equal partner in the marriage and also made after God's image.

As can be expected, this woman of strength is no slouch. "She rises while it is yet night" (v. 15); "her lamp does not go out at night" (v. 18). She does all kinds of menial tasks. "She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle" (v. 19) and makes bed coverings (v. 22). She's not afraid of work. She'll do whatever it takes. In the process, she entered the economic and business world and had a position of leadership and authority. Though married, she had the gifts to combine her domestic responsibilities with her business opportunities.

Such a combination is rare. "A woman of strength, who can find?" (Prov 31:10) We therefore now need to go back to one of her primary tasks as a woman who is married and has children, namely her responsibility as a mother. That and other issues will be dealt with next time (*to be continued*). 



The Assurance of Salvation
Biblical Hope for Our Struggles

by Robert A. Peterson
Zondervan, 2019
191 pages; softcover


How Can I be Sure that I'm a Christian?

How can I be sure that I'm saved, that I'm a Christian, that I'm really a child of God? These are not unusual questions as believers struggle through their earthly pilgrimage and meet all kinds of obstacles that challenge their very identity. Unexpected hardships such as sickness or severe depression can, for example, make one call into doubt their being a child of God. How can I be sure that God loves me?

Reformed theologian, Robert Peterson, meets these issues head-on in his popularly written, *The Assurance of Salvation*. The book begins with Peterson describing some real-life situations which create doubt and confusion in the life of a believer. He identifies major troublers of assurance in five categories: difficult backgrounds, intellectual doubts, sensitive hearts given easily to doubt and fear, hypocrisy and apostasy leading to doubts, and overconfidence leading to false assurance of salvation. The examples are well-chosen and sympathetically presented, making it easy for readers to identify themselves with whatever situation is appropriate.

The main body of the book is devoted to listening to what God's Word has to say on the issues, and this is the major strength of this book. With pastoral compassion, Peterson highlights the glad tidings of the Saviour who came into this world to save sinners. Ultimately, assurance is found only in Christ. Those who believe in him can trust God's promises of forgiveness and salvation. Of course, even stating these truths can raise questions and objections from those struggling with doubt, and Peterson patiently goes through the Scriptures to address all sorts of issues and time and again shows the comforting message that the Lord gives us in his Word. The book is basically full of very edifying mini-Bible studies, highlighting the work of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Peterson also rightly addresses the role of good works in assurance and the enormous blessing of being a member of the body of Christ, the local church. The public worship service with its proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments are also powerfully used by God to assure his people of their salvation.

Peterson lets the light of the Word shine on the questions and troubles that believers encounter in a very compassionate, practical, and understandable way. He writes in a down-to-earth style and this book will undoubtedly be a blessing for many. May many benefit from it! 



Cornelis Van Dam
Professor emeritus Old Testament
Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary
Hamilton, Ontario
cvandam@canrc.org

By Mark Wanders

Open the School Doors!

A note from Editor Peter Holtvlüwer By way of introduction, br. Mark Wanders has submitted the piece below in response to my editorial titled, "Open the School Doors?" (Vol 68, No 23, Nov. 15, 2019) He has essentially taken what I wrote there and, in the words of his email, "modified most of what [I] wrote" and then put his own "spin on it." As he also wrote, "We end up in a very different place!" I welcome the discussion and would like to interact with his modifications on a point-point basis to make it easier for the reader to follow the dialogue. *My response is in italics.*

Has enough thought been given to what would be gained if the confessional basis of our schools is shared?

But first a brief story. Last week, our foster boy, nine years old, came home from his public school claiming as fact that the world is millions of years old. I asked him, "How do you know that?" He said his teacher said so and it says it on the Internet.

Public schooling is a slow, steady, and effective training up of children in the way designed by the government. No God in the picture. We've shared many Bible stories and always talked creation with our boy. It's disturbing to witness how quickly that can be undone in the daily teachings of evolution imbedded in public education. We need to open the doors of our schools to the children of our communities.

In many Canadian Reformed communities across the land, we enjoy the privilege and blessing of Reformed, Christian education in our day schools. With the Three Forms of Unity as the basis, and parents, children, and staff all belonging to the same church community, the children are instructed in line with the church's faithful biblical confessions. Most people have a high level of appreciation for the faithful, quality teaching our children may receive in a loving, nurturing environment. In fact, the Lord has blessed us with such a good thing that sometimes

voices are heard calling for the doors to open to children from other denominations or even the community at large. There are various reasons offered, but the core of many of them is that we should not keep such blessings to ourselves.

Thinking that through, what would that do to the confessional basis of the school? The desire to admit children either from other churches or those just getting to know the Christian faith would enhance the importance of being committed to the Three Forms of Unity and highlight the importance of sharing such a commitment. A more general statement of faith could be shared, but the importance of specifying Reformed education would be paramount.

Is this a way we could go? Perhaps. But it would take a lot of work ... seeking to train up our children in the ways of the Lord and then sharing that with others in the classroom who may not understand or appreciate the ways of the Lord could get a little challenging. Are we willing to take the risk?

Br. Wanders is eager to share the Reformed faith - and so am I! But we disagree on the means to do that. In the above, he seems to suggest that it is possible to have a school committed to the

Three Forms of Unity but still open the doors to people from all denominations. Yet he recognizes a tension in this very assertion when he writes, "A more general statement of faith could be shared, but the importance of specifying Reformed education would be paramount." Already the Reformed basis would be undermined, as all the non-Reformed students only share a "general statement of faith." He then describes the tension that would result right in the classroom as being "a little challenging," involving a measure of "risk." This is an understatement. When students and teachers come from different denominations (more on this below), truth and error will be mixed together - and how easy will it be for our children and teens to discern the one from the other? For instance, we have more than a few adults in our churches who, despite years of Catechism training and sermons, think that believer's baptism is biblical. How then do we expect our (immature) children to be able defend against this or other errors? It would appear that br. Wanders basically wants to turn our Reformed schools into inter-denominational or even outright mission schools, both of which go against their very constitutions. Our schools are meant to be safe places to train up children of God's covenant in light of the fullness of God's Word (and not merely some basic biblical truths) so that, once they have learned and matured, they can go out into their communities and be light and salt. To knowingly expose children to the risk of erroneous and possibly ungodly influence of fellow students is unwise. Am I against evangelism? Of course not. But our schools are not the vehicle to evangelize. They are the vehicle to prepare our young people for their task of "confessing Christ's name" (LD 12) in all spheres of life.

Consider a few highlights:

1. Increased collaboration amongst church, school and home

The three-legged stool of church, home, and school would stand firmly on Jesus Christ and his message to bring the gospel to the places in which we live. Our churches and homes and schools would be places where newcomers and neighbours could be invited into, to participate in what we do as a community of Reformed believers. One church among many pointing to the truth of Scripture, directing us to walk in the ways of Christ. Board and staff could be drawn from many areas, but a close bond would need to be maintained around our grounding confessional

statements that point out the truth of Scripture. Cooperation between teachers, principals, parents, and office-bearers regarding challenging behavioural situations would be strengthened as all work together. Catechism instruction overlapping school hours could be made available to students unfamiliar with it.

Songs sung in the classroom from the cherished Book of Praise could be shared, as well as the students introduced to a variety of new songs. Our schools and churches and homes would grow in the relationship of working together as we would take on an increasingly different cultural demographic.

When br. Wanders says that "Board and staff could be drawn from many areas, but a close bond would need to be maintained around our grounding confessional statements that point out the truth of Scripture," I become even more concerned. Sourcing teachers "from many areas" seems to indicate "from many denominations," for he immediately emphasizes that a close bond would need to be maintained with "our grounding confessional statements." But that instantly raises the question: how can teachers from non-Reformed backgrounds be expected to teach in line with the Reformed confessions when they themselves don't profess the Reformed faith or abide by those same confessions? How can you expect a Baptist to teach our children accurately about the covenant, or the sacraments, especially baptism? How can you expect a Pentecostal to teach about the Ten Commandments, the Holy Spirit, or spiritual gifts according to the truth of Scripture? How can you expect an instructor who attends a non-denominational, community-church to guide students faithfully in the doctrine of the church or church history? Such believers hold fast to erroneous teaching on these and other points. It simply won't work. Either these topics will be avoided, or they will get watered down and the confessional basis of the school will only be a reality on paper, but not in practice. The only way to ensure Reformed teaching is to insist that the board, teachers, and all staff actually believe and are fully committed to the Reformed confessions.

As to the assertion that having numerous denominations supplying the school with students would lead to an "increased collaboration amongst church, home, and school," no proof has been offered for that. Br. Wanders believes that the three-legged stool will still be standing. But let's consider how this would unfold in reality. Parents from various denominations would decide to send their children to our Reformed school. This would be a decision made as parents on their own, wouldn't it?

Neither their congregation nor their church leadership would be consulted much less invested in the school community. Presently we have entire congregations praying for our schools and members of those congregations teaching and volunteering at and sending their kids to those schools. Members of the churches financially support the schools to a significant degree. The principal can call up the local pastor or elder (in consultation with the parents) any time to discuss how best to help a troubled child. In a multi-denominational school, this close bond would disappear, and church connections would be haphazard at best. In a multi-denominational school, the stool will be balancing precariously on two legs only.

2. Anchoring in biblical truth

In a school with teachers, parents, and students coming from different backgrounds, Bible teaching would remain intentional, and upheld as of primary importance. By implication, we would have to be able to defend what we believe as we teach it and share it with those who may be new or newer to the faith. Controversial topics would have to be approached with care. The doctrine of the covenant of grace, which Reformed believers hold so dear as a major theme of Scripture, would play a major part as difficult topics are taught and discussed. How beautiful it would be to share the beauty of God's covenant promises and embrace that together as an increasingly diverse community. Imagine what's possible for the community as we would share things like God's decree of election, the sacraments, and the Ten Commandments to mention a few. Outside of Reformed communities these biblical truths are little known or even outright rejected! What reason to share!

I have to admire the passion of br. Wanders, a passion I share. But for the reasons mentioned above, this is simply not workable. Do not Baptists, Pentecostals, and Mennonites (I'm thinking of the evangelical ones that can be found in many communities) have their own deep-seated convictions? Is it realistic that they will give them up readily once the Bible has been clearly explained to them on these points? Anyone who's tried to sit down with a Baptist to convince them of the truth of infant baptism will know how incredibly difficult that is. Or try to convince a Pentecostal that there is no such thing as speaking in tongues today. Or that the Ten Commandments are still God's will for Christians to live by. Br. Wanders suggests that harmony will develop in the classroom, but it's much more likely that divisions will remain along

denominational lines. Truth and error will mix. Confusion will result for the many young, impressionable children. And both the Bible and history teach us that our default human disposition is to swing over to error. It takes a miracle of God's grace to embrace the truth of Scripture, but every human is inclined to accept distortions and lies.

3. Open door for Christ-centred education

With a solid statement of faith guiding the board, staff, and teachers, the school would have the capacity of spreading the impact of Reformed education in the local community through the children. This is effective in many other nations and is one of the key ways the gospel goes out, combined with education, in the global ministry of Edu Deo Ministries.

Think of the influence in the many areas of the daily life of a child when careful interpretation of Scripture is taught regarding creation, sin, free will, true faith, salvation, regeneration, the five solas, and many other facets of the Reformed faith, all foundational to a Christian worldview. "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it."

I note that br. Wanders no longer speaks of the confessions of the church serving as the basis for our Christian school but rather a "solid statement of faith." The tension noted earlier is thus resolved in favour of a general Christian confession. This at best will allow for a general Christian school, but not one which is truly Reformed. A general Christian school will simply avoid the particulars of the Reformed confession (mentioned above) and stick to matters generally agreed upon in the statement of faith. A general Christian school may indeed have many benefits in places where, as yet, no Christian school exists or Reformed school is present. But when we are already so blessed with Christian schools committed from top to bottom to the full truth of Scripture, why would we give that up? Why would we water that down?

4. Appearance of psalm-singing in town

Reformed churches have always treasured psalm-singing, and for good reason have given preferential treatment to the singing of the Psalms over hymns. It's regular practice in our Canadian Reformed elementary schools to have students memorize the Psalms as sung in the Book of Praise. Benefits include helping students commit the Word of God to memory with further connection singing these psalms again in church on Sundays.

Outside of the Reformed or Presbyterian churches, psalm-singing is virtually unknown, so inviting neighbours and newcomers to join us and learn the beauty of this as they are educated will allow for psalms to literally be sung in the homes of our community, the children even bringing it home to their parents! From the lips of children come the praises to our God!

I love that br. Wanders wants to share the ancient church practice of psalm-singing! But again I ask: is that realistic in a general Christian school where teachers and students come from all sorts of denominations? Let's face it: the Gettys, with all their resources and massive conferences, have their hands full convincing committed evangelicals to start singing psalms in their own circles, to their own tunes. If we open the school doors and become interdenominational, are such Christians likely to embrace our Book of Praise? Will the Baptist or Pentecostal teachers teach the Genevan psalms to our children? Or even teach the Psalms by other tunes? Psalm-singing is a foreign concept to them. Historically, those who embrace psalm-singing are those who see both the Old and New Testaments as on an equal footing, who see the Bible as one continuous story moving from the old covenant to the new covenant with Christ in the centre, who see the church of Israel and the church of today on one line, and thus the Psalms as also our fully Christian songs still today. This is simply not how most evangelicals look at the Bible or the Psalms. They would have to first become Reformed before psalm-singing would become their passion.

Conclusion

With all that in mind, I would like to urge the members of our church to keep our Reformed schools confessionally grounded. We have much to share with our community. And those in our community who are serious about wanting to have their children attend our schools will also find the doors to our homes and churches open. No matter where they meet us, we are ready to invite them in and share with them the good news of the gospel. The three-legged stool of home, church, and school remains strong and integrated, relying on each other, but most importantly relying on Jesus Christ for the harvest! As our communities are introduced to the beauty of the gospel, the children who will grow into adults, given a biblical education as a child helping form a biblical worldview, will find their way into the workforce and be a positive contribution back into the community and continue to spread the salt and light of the

good news of the gospel that they received at a very young vulnerable age as we embraced them with the love that only God makes possible and only God can give.

So, let's be willing to open the doors of our schools and watch how God goes to work in us and through us, even among the children!

As far as I can see, the conclusion of br. Wanders does not follow from his arguments. I see here an unresolved tension for now again he speaks of keeping "our Reformed schools confessionally grounded" whereas earlier he had spoken of sharing a "general statement of faith." Which is it? It can't be both. The three-legged stool only works if all three parties (church, home, and school) share the same confession. A number of denominations of varying confession simply cannot function as a single leg to this stool, but churches bound to one another around the Reformed confessions can (and do!).

If Christians from the community are keen to have their children educated in accordance with the Reformed confessions, the door stands wide open to them – by way of joining the local Reformed church. We can help them if needed and encourage them in this, no problem. This may be a process that requires patience and we can work with that and make allowances. But if they have no desire to join the Reformed church, that's a choice they make, and by so doing keep their children out of our schools. Having a confessional standard in our schools for teachers and students alike is nothing to be ashamed of. It is a great blessing that from generation to generation the Lord allows us to educate our children in accordance with the full truth of Scripture. That's the primary blessing we need to keep in view.

I would like to repeat that I fully stand with br. Wanders in wanting to share the Reformed faith as much as we can. I heartily support being creative while remaining faithful to our confessions. Let's think together about appropriate vehicles to spread the gospel – why not after-school programs for local teenagers? Or maybe a "coffee-break" for mothers in the community, or even a cooking class for (single) moms who simply have never been taught the basics of providing good nutrition for their kids? Could we run a Saturday Bible school year-round to support the annual VBS? Can we invite men in the community to learn a skill (wood working? mechanics? business accounting? gardening?) while also sharing the gospel? Let's keep our schools fully Reformed and as our students graduate, let's work together to share the riches of the Reformed faith in our neighbourhoods. 