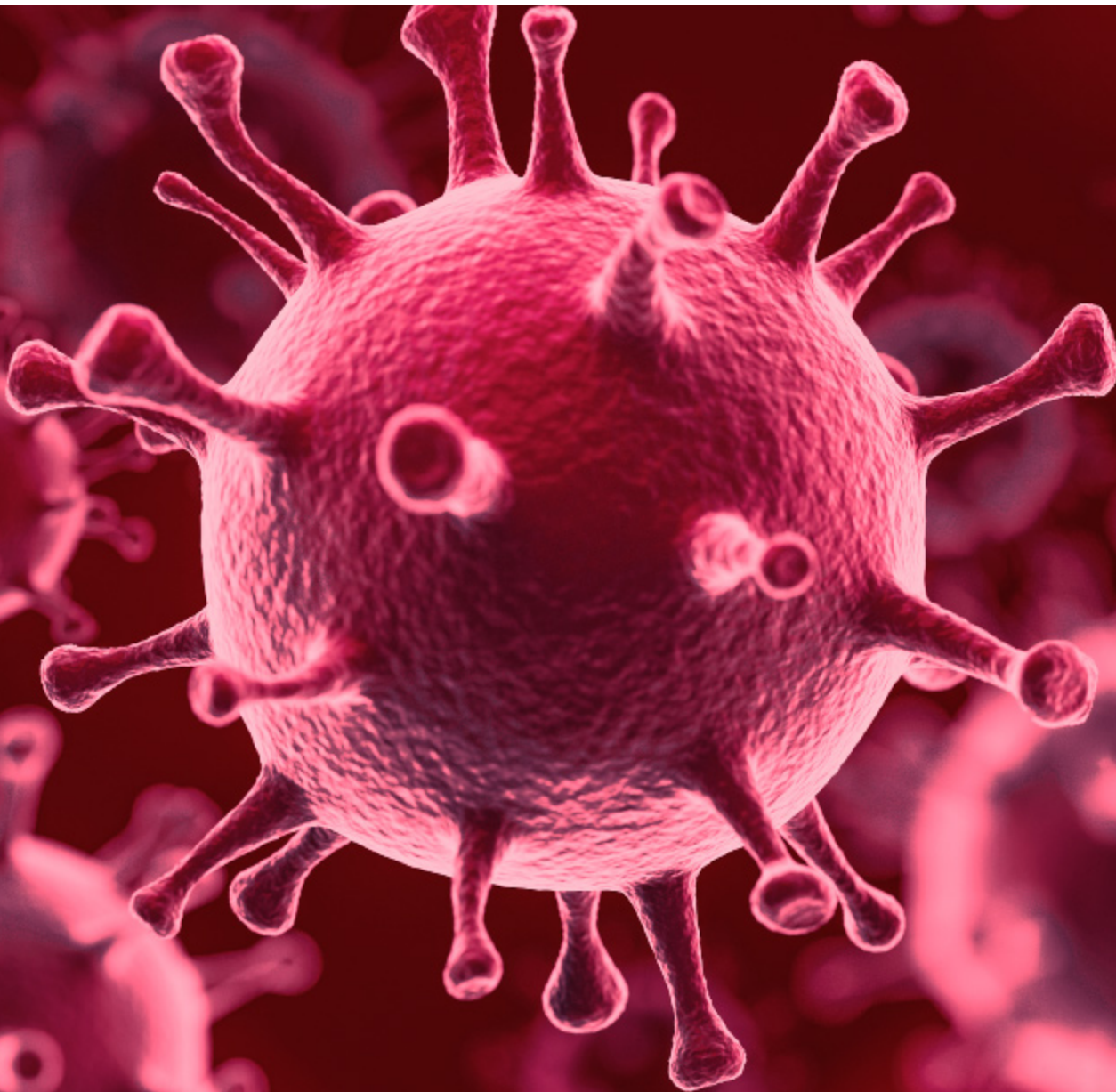


# Clarion



## Certainty in Uncertain times

# Clarion

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## What's Inside

We live in uncertain times: between the spread of COVID-19, economic worries, and political uncertainty, it seems there is a lot to worry about. But we do have certainty, as Rev. Eric Kampen writes in his lead article: certainty that God's hand is in all and that he has all in hand.

In this issue and the next we will have a two-part series from Dr. Gerhard H. Visscher, "What Can We Learn from Paul About Leadership? Paul, Grace, and Conflict." There is also a report on the Ministerial Forum held in January.

Our Treasures, New & Old meditation focusses on Christ's resurrection. Other regular columns include Clippings on Politics & Religion and Ray of Sunshine. Issue 8 also contains a canticle, a letter to the editor, and a book announcement.

Laura Veenendaal

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# Certainty in Uncertain Times

In his letter, Jude indicates that although he was very eager to write about our common salvation, he found it necessary to write about something else. In his case, he found it necessary to appeal to his readers to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

I found myself in a similar situation. I was almost ready to send out my next article for *Clarion*, when the government's efforts to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, radically altered how we go about our daily activities. Effective March 15, the restrictions on the size of crowds made gathering for public worship impossible. Thanks to the Internet and live streaming, most of the congregations were able to conduct virtual worship services. It is not surprising that a Day of Prayer was called for March 22, as the presence of this general calamity and affliction was, and is, felt throughout the churches (CO Art 54). While I write this in the week after the Day of Prayer, the way this virus has been spreading throughout the world suggests that by the time you read this, we will be experiencing the many consequences of the restrictions placed on our lives by our governments to contain the virus.

Our certainty is not based on our experiences, but on what God has revealed about himself.

## Uncertain times

As the government began to impose restrictions, we frequently began to hear people say we are living in uncertain times. We are uncertain how widely the virus will spread and how many deaths will result. We are uncertain how long the current restrictions on crowds and the stress of social distancing will remain, impacting our daily activities from visiting our family to work, to school, and gathering as congregation.

We are uncertain about the economic impact and how to meet all the obligations of life. There will be uncertainty about the health of loved ones, especially those most vulnerable, that is, the aged and those with ongoing health issues that weaken their immune system.

Indeed, we live in uncertain times, with uncertainty far surpassing anything most of us will have ever experienced. Most of us have grown up in a time of economic and political stability. Uncertainty was something that marked the lives of people far away, people whose lives were tossed upside down by war or natural disasters, where they lost everything, being forced to flee and perhaps ending up living in refugee camps. It did not mark our lives to any great extent.

## God has his hand in everything

As children of God, however, we know that we can speak of certainty in this uncertain time. That certainty is found in knowing that everything is in God's hand. When we say "everything," we mean exactly that. God did not just involve himself at the beginning of the world and after that left it alone. No, he continues to be involved in every aspect of life in the world, the good and the bad. He upholds the world he made as if it were by his own hand. Not only does he uphold it, he is also governing the world, that is, he is steering it to the destination he has set. This means he also has his hand in the current crisis that has gripped the world due to the coronavirus.

Our Father's involvement in the daily details of life is clearly attested throughout the Scriptures. He opened the floodgates of heaven and let it rain for forty days, along with unleashing the waters below the earth. He kept Sarah's womb closed for many years and then opened it, so she gave birth to Isaac. He sent the ten plagues upon Egypt. God allowed Satan to take away Job's wealth, family, and health. In the Psalms, it is confessed that it is God who sends the snow and in due time

causes it to melt (Ps 147:16-18), who gives the rain for the crops and who controls the return of spring each year (Ps 104:13, 30).

In terms of involvement in history, God was the one who defeated the inhabitants of Canaan and gave it to his people Israel. He summoned the Assyrians and later the Babylonians against the people of Israel. In Isaiah 7:18, it is said that God whistles for them like a person might whistle for a dog, which will then come running. In due time, the LORD would punish Assyria and send wasting sickness among its soldiers (Isa 10:16).

For some examples from the New Testament, the Lord Jesus indicated that in the case of the man born blind, his blindness had been at God's direction (John 9:3). The apostles acknowledged that while Pilate and the Jewish leaders

had conspired against the Lord Jesus, it took place according to God's eternal plan (Acts 4:27, 28). When preaching to the Athenians, Paul said that God has allotted each nation its time and place in history (Acts 17:26). The opening chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, in speaking about God's plan to save people in Christ from before the foundation of the world, indicates that even the fall into sin took place under God's ultimate control.

Our Catechism, when it explains what we mean by the providence of God, confesses that he upholds all things and governs "leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, health and sickness, riches and poverty" (LD 10, Q/A 27). This impresses upon us that he has his hand in the big things and the small things, the good as well as the bad.

## He has everything in hand

As these examples from Scripture show that our Father has his hand in everything, we should also see how they show he has everything in hand. That's important. We may see a person who seems to be having trouble managing a difficult situation. He may put us at ease by saying, "I know what I'm doing. I have the situation in hand."

To see how God has everything in hand, we do well to read through Job 38-42. We read there how the LORD spoke to Job of his work of creation and upholding creation. Being reminded of the majesty, intricacy, and wisdom in creation made Job realize God's ways were way beyond man's ways.

Certainty is found  
in knowing that  
everything is in  
God's hand

# If You But Let the Father Guide You

1. If you but let the Father guide you,  
relying on his faithfulness,  
he will be evermore beside you  
in all your sorrow and distress.  
He who on God Most High depends  
builds not his house on shifting sands.
2. Will anxious care or bitter sighing  
at any time give true relief?  
And what avails us our decrying  
each morning's evil, trouble, grief?  
We only add to grief and stress  
by discontent and bitterness.
3. Be still! What God in his good pleasure  
to you in wisdom may impart  
is given you in perfect measure;  
thus be content within your heart.  
To him who chose us for his own  
our needs and wants are surely known.
4. With song and prayer, in faith progressing,  
in all you do God's will obey.  
Expect from him alone your blessing:  
he will renew it every day,  
for God will never those disown  
who put their trust in him alone.

1641, Georg Neumark; translated by WWJvO, 1979. © 2009, SCBP

## Certainty based on God's self-revelation


It is the confession that our Father has his hand in everything and has everything in hand that gives us certainty in times of uncertainty. We will realize our certainty is not based on our experiences, but on what God has revealed about himself. After all, our experience right now is one of uncertainty. We must remind ourselves that we live by faith, not by sight. This faith overrules our feelings that come from our experience. In faith, we think of our Father's power, shown in creation, shown in so many passages that speak of his control of nature and history.

In faith, we think of our Father's love shown in sending his only Son, fulfilling his promise made to our first parents. And then we take a deep breath, and we ask the Spirit to let that revelation be the handkerchief, the spiritual medicine we need, so that we may be patient in uncertain times. In faith, we hold on to the bigger picture, so we don't get bogged down in our little scene in that picture. To us, of course, that will look like a big picture, as we must live it. Our lives, however, are no more than a pixel in the big picture being drawn by our Father, whose ways are way beyond our ways, and whose power is immeasurable.

## Certainty about the future

Knowing that God has his hand in everything and has everything in hand also gives us certainty for the future. We seem to be on the edge of not just a recession, but an economic depression. Financial security has turned to insecurity, with stock markets in a deep dive. If you think about all the current problems and possible future problems at once, you may never have a good night's rest again. Perhaps we have lost sleep already, and children are getting anxious, as they hear all this talk about the situation we are facing.

But then we may think of our Father, upholding and governing, steering the ship of earth to its destination. It is especially with a view to the future that it is so good to know that our Father has everything in hand. This is the basis for Paul's confident words in Romans 8, as he was certain that nothing could separate him from the love of God in Jesus Christ. He lists all sorts of possible dangers, but he feared nothing, not even death. There is also the promise of our Lord Jesus that our Father knows our needs and he will provide for his children. Our task is to seek his kingdom and his righteousness, that is, to trust him and walk in his ways, and he will provide for our needs. It may not be at the level we would like or have grown accustomed to, but our Father will look after us.

In this uncertain time, then, let us remember that our almighty Father has his hand in everything, and he has everything in hand. This is a rich confession that enables us to be patient in uncertainty, and certain about the future, just as the believers have been throughout the ages, facing far greater uncertainty than we can imagine. In that certainty of our Father's care, we can sleep peacefully every night. For, as is expressed in Hymn 65, "Will anxious care or bitter sighing at any time give true relief?" It then concludes with the words, "For God will never those disown who put their trust in him alone." 



# Raised For Our Justification

**"... who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification." (Romans 4:24-25)**

**T**he central benefit of Christ's resurrection is the forgiveness of our sins. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15 that "if Christ has not been raised from the dead, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Cor 15:17).

Why is this actually the case? We can tend to think of Christ's death and sacrifice as the real reason why our sins are forgiven. Jesus Christ had to pay the price of our sins through his death. He had to offer the perfect sacrifice so that the wrath of God would be turned away. It is through the shedding of blood that our sins could be atoned for. It is certainly true that Christ's suffering and death are necessary for the forgiveness of our sins. And yet his suffering and death would have been in vain, if he had not been raised from the dead. For how can a dead Saviour actually give us his righteousness? How can he be our righteousness before God if he remains in the grave and is defeated by death and is swallowed up by death? He cannot actually defeat sin and death if he remains dead himself. He can only defeat death by rising from the dead and conquering it completely by emerging from the other side of death as someone who is alive and glorified and unable to suffer death again.


God raised his Son Jesus Christ from the dead and so showed that he had accepted the offering and sacrifice which he had brought to him. His raising Jesus from the dead was his official endorsement that Jesus had accomplished all righteousness and he paid the penalty. His resurrection is proof positive that full payment had been made. His resurrection is a living proof of the new life that has been achieved for those who believe in Jesus Christ.

Since this new life has come, as shown in Christ's resurrection, therefore we can be certain of the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus Christ has removed the barrier to fellowship with God and new life in him.

At the end of Romans 4, the apostle Paul speaks clearly about this connection between the resurrection and justification. He writes that Jesus Christ "was delivered over to death for our sins

and was raised to life for our justification." Christ's death and his resurrection are very closely linked and cannot be separated. He was raised from the dead because his death was sufficient in God's sight but his resurrection was also necessary for his death to have its effect for all those who believe in him. Without his death, there could be no new life. But there could also be no new life without Christ's resurrection.

We can only believe in Jesus Christ and receive forgiveness of sins through him because Jesus Christ is a living Saviour. How could we ever receive benefit from a dead saviour? Such a saviour would be no saviour at all. It is only because we are united with Christ our living Saviour and share in him that we may be justified in God's sight. God's gift of grace and righteousness through Christ can only come to us because Christ lives!

The forgiveness of sins opens the way to life with God. Live out of that peace and surety all your days. Through the power of Christ's Spirit, strive to make your own the new life which Christ has obtained for us by his resurrection from the dead. 

## For further study

1. How are justification and resurrection connected?
2. What did God the Father show to mankind by raising Jesus his Son from the dead?
3. What is our living Saviour doing for us now in heaven?



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# Living in the Light of Grace

## *Paul, Grace, and Conflict* (PART 1 OF 2)

This article was originally a message delivered at the Eastern Ministerial of CanRC and URC pastors, October 2019.

Imagine if your doctor could tell you that there is a way to be pretty sure that you will never have cancer – that cancer cells will never take hold and grow in your body. Especially those among us who have faced cancer in one of its many forms will recognize that to be pretty amazing. We would love such a doctor.

But now imagine that someone could tell us as church leaders that there is a way to at least lessen the probability of *conflict* in your church. That if you would approach the pastoral ministry in a certain way, that if we would listen more closely to the apostle Paul, it is less likely that you will wake up one day and realize that you and your ministry is so embroiled in controversy that you have only two choices: either to leave or to quit. No doubt, we all want less conflict just as we want less or no cancer.

And we wish to have that not only in the church, but also in the manse. Conflict in the church eats away like a cancer in all the homes of a church, no doubt, but it affects no home more than the manse. As one pastor was heard to say some years after leaving a church, quite humorously but very sadly, “I actually had to leave that church for *health* reasons; I was sick...of them and they were *sick* of me.” It’s even true of our federations: there will be more conflict if we fail here, less if God blesses us in seeing this.

### So, what is the secret?

If you analyze the writings of Paul very carefully, you will discover that there is one theme that underlies all his writings, and that theme is the *gospel of the grace of God*. His letters and his conflicts always seem to centre around this matter. Do we realize, and our hearers realize, that there is nothing they are, nothing they have, that did not flow out of the grace of God (1 Cor 4:7)? Do we live in the light of that grace?

Consider, for instance, the comment of Dean Fleming: “Paul leaves little doubt that ‘the gospel’ was the singular passion of his life and apostolic ministry (1 Cor 9:23). If we want to discover the coherent element of Paul’s thought, the matrix that gives shape to everything else, we must find it in ‘the gospel.’”<sup>1</sup>

### Romans: All about the gospel

To see this, we should journey over to Paul’s letter to the Romans. If we want to get at the heart of the wonderful book of Romans, we need to think of Paul’s accusers. Romans 3:8 gives us the best window into what’s going on in Rome when Paul says: “Why not say – as some slanderously claim that we say – ‘Let us do evil that good may result’? Their condemnation is just!” We need to remember that in the first century the chief conflict was the conflict between Jew and Gentile. “Throughout the

<sup>1</sup>Dean Fleming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (InterVarsity Press, 2005) 92.

centuries so far, the church had always been a Jewish thing," Paul's opponents said, "but now people like Paul are bringing in all these Gentiles and changing the church by maintaining that those Gentiles do not need to be circumcised and do not need to do all those things that Jews always did. It's a message of grace which is far too easy-going. This Paul has no eye for law and the commandments. He promotes evil in the name of good." "Let us do evil that good may result" is what he says. In their mindset, the way to better behaviour is more law. Law, and more law. "But this Paul is ignoring the law." As Thomas R. Schreiner puts it: "They accused Paul of teaching an antinomian gospel because of his emphasis on divine sovereignty and the inability of human beings to keep God's law."<sup>2</sup>

The apostle calls them out, saying that this is slander for which they ought to be condemned (3:8). He continues to wrestle with their accusations of easy grace throughout the letter: "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may result? By no means." And again, even to 16:17, where he warns Romans Christians to "watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned."<sup>3</sup>

What is Paul's larger argument against his opponents? His argument is that it is not the law but the gospel that is the great motivator of Christian behaviour. His answer is to proclaim the gospel of what God has done in Christ. Romans 4: all those who believe in Christ are children of Abraham, justified by faith. Romans 5: believers are united in Christ. Romans 6: believers have died, been buried, risen with Christ. Romans 8: believers are sons and daughters of God who owe to this God and his gospel of grace a tremendous debt of gratitude. We have an obligation, not to the flesh but to God and his grace and Spirit, the God who has accomplished a new and wondrous thing in Christ (8:12f). Even in Romans 9-11 his message really is: if you know the grace of God, you will not minimize the possibilities of what God might just yet do with his Jewish people in future days. The grace of God can do anything (Rom 11:1-28). And the message of chapter 12 and following is: see what the grace

of God does to a church. His message throughout is: *the grace of God can do what the law can never do.*

Law, to be sure, can make people a bit better. It can give them the odd nudge in the right direction. But *the grace of God can do what the law can never do: make people new and cause them to live new lives.*

We can even see this from the very controversial chapter seven. I have wrestled with this chapter often enough with students to know: you don't unpack it very tidily if it is approached with the usual questions: is this the old Paul, the new Paul, the Jewish Paul, a schizophrenic Paul? Then we are

asking questions of Paul that he is not answering and that is always a fruitless conversation. Instead, the chapter needs to be read with two questions in mind. The one question is: (1) What about the *law*? Is the law good then, Paul, when you talk this way? And the second one is: (2) What about the *flesh*?

And the resounding answer comes in Romans 8:3: "God has done what the law, weakened by the *flesh*, could never do.

By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the *flesh in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us.*" These latter words are truly astounding: the righteous requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us. Whereas the law by itself offers a bit of help at best, the gospel makes it possible for Christians to fulfil the requirements of the law. The gospel of grace can and does what the Law can never do: raise people up to a new and better life to the praise of God. And chapters 12-16 prove it!

## Grace vs. law?

Strikingly, the Reformers saw all of this quite clearly, perhaps more clearly than we see it today. Think of III/IV, Article 5, of the Canons of Dort:

### The Inadequacy of the Law

What holds for the light of nature also applies to the Ten Commandments, given by God through Moses particularly to the Jews. For though it reveals the greatness of sin, and more and more convicts man

The law functions to tell us when and where we have departed from the ways of grace.

<sup>2</sup> *Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Baker, 1998) 153-4.

<sup>3</sup> See Gerhard H. Visscher, *Romans 4 and the New Perspective on Paul: Faith Embraces the Promise* (Peter Lang, 2009) 79-97 on this. Cf. Brian Rosner, *Paul as Pastor*, p. 36,37



of his guilt, yet *it neither points out a remedy nor gives him power to rise out of this misery*. Rather, weakened by the flesh, it leaves the transgressor under the curse. Man *cannot, therefore, through the law obtain saving grace*. (Italics are mine; The Canons of Dort footnote Rom 3:19-20; 7:10, 13; 8:3; 2 Cor 3:6-7.)

It should be said that a proper exposition of Lord's Days 23, 24, and 32 would convince us of the same. The Law has a role to play in the first and third parts of the Catechism, but it has no role to play in the second part, no role in the question of real salvation and life in Christ. It's based on Paul. The law exposes sin, and the law comes back for Paul, too, in gratitude once we are changed by the grace of God (think of Romans 12, Ephesians 4, Colossians 3, etc.). But it always has a minor role to play since the primary agent in the renewal of the people of God is Christ who renews his people through his Spirit according to the law (LD 32, Q/A 86). *The law itself cannot create and define new life for the people of God, but the Spirit certainly can through the gospel*. It's why "gospel preaching" is so needed in the church today.

We should be alert against any kind of law/grace dualism or tension. Christianity is never about a certain percent being law, and another percent being grace. It is one hundred percent grace. Whether you were OT Israel or are post-Paul Christians, the law functions to *tell us when and where we have departed from the ways of grace*. Old Israel was redeemed from Egypt by God's grace; the same grace delivers the New Israel through the resurrection of Christ. The commandments function simply as a barometer of whether we are living according to grace. Those who persistently curse, murder, steal, etc., have in their own actions evidence of their departure from the ways of grace that God set them upon.

This is what Paul is talking about when he speaks about "my gospel" in 16:25. He's not being sectarian, but in the face of opposition he is laying claim to an interpretation of the gospel which is both catholic and classical (16:25 and 26). "His gospel" can accomplish what the law can never accomplish in a thousand years.

I believe you could work something like this out in every letter in ways that would not be very far removed from this. Why does Paul seem so angry in Galatians? Because the Judaizers are


teaching the congregation that the gospel is not enough, and that law and circumcision needs to be added to it. It's Romans dialed up many notches.

And what's Ephesians about? It's Romans in Readers Digest Forum, where some think their lives are controlled by angels and devils, creatures in the spiritual realms. His answer? It's all "in Christ." It's in the gospel.

The message is the same in Colossians. Same thing: "In Christ all things hold together ... your life is hid with Christ in God" (1:17, 3:3).

And what's this old man to Timothy in the pastorals? Stick to the gospel, Timothy. Preach it. Look out for old wives' tales and stupid controversies. The manner in which it may be presented changes because of the context of Paul's readers, but underlying it all, always, is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

J. Gresham Machen puts it all very well. Against the liberalism of his day, he argues very similarly for the primacy of grace and the gospel and says that the difference between Paul and the Judaizers is a very subtle one. A logical, perhaps temporal, one. "The Judaizers said that a man (1) believes on Christ and (2) keeps the law of God the best he can, and then (3) is justified." But, says Machen, Paul said that a man "first believes on Christ, (2) then is justified before God, (3) then immediately proceeds to keep God's law."<sup>4</sup>

And so the question needs to be asked: week after week in the churches, from the pulpits, what message is going out? What message are they receiving? The difference is subtle, but it's still true that the one is the gospel, the other is heresy. The one is chasing after wind. The other is unleashing a power. We'll say more about that next time. 



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<sup>4</sup> Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Eerdmans, 2009) 24.

# United Methodists:

## Mustering Their Best Intellectual and Pastoral Resources


William Abraham, professor of Wesley Studies at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, Texas, has written an excellent essay on the challenges faced by conservatives in his own United Methodist Church.<sup>1</sup> The church is almost certain to split in May 2020, with conservatives then needing to fill the church's leading positions. In the last issue of *Clarion*, we reviewed Abraham's call for conservative United Methodists to remain faithful to Scripture and their own tradition.

His essay is rich in content and warrants another brief review. Key to this review is his statement that the renewed church "will need the best intellectual and pastoral resources we can muster to tackle the challenge posed by the sexual revolution of the twentieth century." The nature of the opposition leads him to say this. Consider what Abraham writes about the methods of the liberals:

Critics are piling on with a host of stereotypes and narratives that undermine precisely the sense of [scriptural and orthodox] identity I enumerated.... The litany is laid out in terms of lack of love, bigotry, rigidity, inconsistency, legalism, bribery of African delegates, Trumpism, colonialism, and the like.... We have witnessed the physical take-over of meetings, the intentional misrepresentation of the due diligence undertaken at the General Conference, the demonization of the various renewal groups, the deployment of false piety, the fear-mongering, the shameful use of parliamentary obfuscation and delaying tactics, and the carefully orchestrated interventions of agencies, seminary leaders, and youth petitions ... *the incessant use of non-rational means* to achieve the relevant ecclesiastical results *and the constant resort to emotion and narratives of victimhood* (replete with charges of oppression and hatred) carefully placed to inhibit serious engagement with the painful and complex issues involved. It is patently obvious that for the most part all this represents the public practices of the progressive elites of North American parochial culture.

I italicized Abraham's mention of "the incessant use of non-rational means" and "the constant resort to emotion and narratives of victimhood." What he is noticing is exactly the sort of approach we should expect from post-moderns, who think that truth is created by those in power. It is also the approach one can expect of adherents to critical theory (that's another movement that's especially been gaining ground in the twenty-first century, and I hope to review it in this column sometime soon). If truth is created by those in power, then any successful means of obtaining power will put one's own favourite truth on the throne of society. On this view, Christian truth has "oppressed" society for long enough; it's time to get rid of it, by hook and by crook, by verbal assault and physical assault, by lawful means and unlawful means, by fallacies, emotions, etc. Whoever is in power *determines* what is right and wrong.

In Abraham's experience, this is the understanding behind the methods of the progressive elites. Using rational means – carefully arguing one's case based on Scripture – is treated as another kind of "oppression." In a worldview rooted in evolution, raw power is all there is. And progressives use it well.

One can readily ascertain that the higher commitment of the liberals is not to inclusivity and diversity, but to the utter destruction of biblical sexual morals. This is evident from the way that the progressives have treated their African colleagues and from the kinds of indecent and abusive theologies and ethics they are willing to explore. Understanding these things well and countering them is not easy, but this is why Abraham insists that conservatives "will need the best intellectual and pastoral resources we can muster to tackle the challenge." 



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<sup>1</sup>The essay is hosted on the blog of The Institute on Democracy and Religion. See <https://juicyecumenism.com/2019/03/17/mountains-climbed-next-united-methodism/>. Accessed 9 March 2020.

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# A Ministerial Forum

## Koinonia

Back in the olden days, before the Internet and before email, there was a magazine called *Koinonia*. Koinonia is a Greek word for “communion” or “fellowship.” The magazine was not pretentious. However, it was special: the word *Koinonia* was even out in Greek characters on the cover page.

*Koinonia* was special, for it served as an in-house magazine for ministers of the Canadian Reformed Churches. Yes, besides *Clarion* for Canadian Reformed members, and *Diakonia* for Canadian Reformed office bearers, there was also *Koinonia* for Canadian Reformed ministers. What made this magazine special was the fact that it was a “secret” magazine: whatever was published in it was strictly confidential.

*Koinonia* was a laboratory of sorts where ministers could air thoughts and ideas produced by their study and experiences. They could articulate these without troubling the churches, should these thoughts and ideas be out of line with Scripture as confessed. It created a closed room in which discussions could be held, where ministers could sharpen one another the way iron sharpens iron. It was a forum where ministers, as academics (they all do have an M.Div.), could exercise peer review.

## The ministers’ list

With the onset of email, a new forum was found. It has no formal name, it’s simply “the ministers’ list.” An email sent to the list is sent to all who are registered with the list. To be registered, one needs to be a minister in the Canadian Reformed Churches. The function of the list is broader than *Koinonia*. Mostly it is a place where ministers can drop a question and get some feedback: what’s a good book for a marriage preparation class, which commentary would you recommend on Romans, what’s the best process to deal with a GKv member requesting to attend the Lord’s Supper, that sort of thing. Sometimes a comment or question will spawn discussion.

## “Let’s get together”

The problem with discussions via email is that they easily become rambling. If the topic is sensitive, things can get heated.

There is also lots of potential for misunderstanding one another. Thus, during a discussion in early 2019 the idea was born to convene a physical forum, just for Canadian Reformed ministers. It would be good to speak with each other face to face rather than keyboard to keyboard. Face-to-face makes joy complete (2 John 1:12).

It is no secret that within the Canadian Reformed Churches there is a measure of divergence. With some sixty churches and church plants and well over eighty ministers (active, missionaries, professors, and retired) there are a lot of opinions. Meeting in person would help ministers understand one another better and build trust among them. Many, it would seem, agreed. The forum was held January 14-15, ahead of the annual CRTS conference. It was attended by almost sixty ministers. Seminary students also attended many sessions, bringing the number at one stage to over eighty.

The January ministerial was called a forum on purpose, not a conference. The plan was not for ministers to listen to speeches and then debate them. The intention was that together we would reflect on various issues and share our thoughts about them. That way we hoped to build understanding and trust among ministers. As the schedule for the forum indicated, the intention was not to (re)solve issues. As such, the forum was simply an “in-person” version of our email list.

The large attendance meant the forum created an extra benefit: the ministers in the federation got to know each other more personally. It was helpful for someone like myself; I grew up in Australia, lived in Ontario for just four years (1993-1997) and only as a student, and served the first ten years of my ministry in The Netherlands. The forum allowed me to get to know colleagues “over east.”

## What did the ministers do?

The two days were basically spent as follows. Our timeslots were roughly 1.5 hours long. Each would begin with a twenty-minute introduction by a single speaker or a fifteen-minute introduction with a five-minute response. Following the introduction, there was opportunity to ask questions and share thoughts. At the



opening and/or close of each session, we united our voices in song. Following both lunch periods, all attendees were divided into groups of five individuals and would meet for forty-five minutes for prayer.

On Tuesday morning, after some devotional words drawing on 1 Corinthians 1, and some introductory words by Rev. Matthew VanLuik, Rev. James Visscher reflected on the history of the Canadian Reformed Churches, especially on how we viewed our identity. Next, Rev. Clarence VanderVelde spoke on the doctrine of the church. Following lunch (at the venue) and prayer session, Rev. Karlo Janssen spoke on the polity of the church, with a response by Rev. Eric Kampen. Next, Rev. Bill de Jong spoke on being a missional church, with Rev. Marc Jagt as responder. After dinner (served at the venue), Rev. Winston Bosch spoke on fencing the Lord's table, with Rev. Joe Poppe as responder. Rev. Karlo Janssen led the first day in closing devotions.

On Wednesday morning, Rev. Ben Schoof opened the day. During the first session, Rev. Matthew VanLuik introduced the topic of receiving and integrating newcomers into the church. During the second morning session, Rev. Hilmer Jagersma reflected on various aspects of worship, with Dr. Cornelis VanDam as responder. After lunch and the prayer session, Rev. Ian Wildeboer spoke on missional and covenantal preaching, with Rev. Henry Versteeg as responder.

## Gratitude

The second afternoon session was spent reflecting on the forum: many participants took a minute or two (more time they did not get) to say what they thought about the experience. Overall, those who had attended were very appreciative of the two days. Gratitude was expressed for the work of the organizers, to Rev. Tony Roukema for running tech and other janitorial duties, and for sr. Annette Keep, the secretary of the Hamilton-Blessings CanRC, for taking care of the food (yes, no Ladies Aid, we had our own schedule for dishes duties). Rev. Marc Jagt led in closing devotions, after which dinner was served and we parted ways.

As mentioned, CRTS students were also present. The organizing committee had decided, after the query had come from CRTS, that they could be present but would not be allowed


to participate in the session discussions. That seems to have worked well. The students were appreciative of the fact that they could "listen in" and become acquainted with how ministers labour with "what lives in the churches." They also got to know the men who one day might well be their colleagues.

## Looking ahead

Will the forum become a fixed item of a typical CanRC minister's year? It could. The suggestion to do it once every five years was met with some protest, that's far too infrequent. Thinking it through and having experience with organizing conferences myself for the Western Ministerial and the Reformed Bible College, we probably don't need two days. However, a one-day forum on the Wednesday prior to the annual CRTS conference makes good sense. Many ministers come out for the CRTS conference, and the ministers who serve on the Board of Governors would be in town as well. Maybe do it twice every three years (skipping the year of general synods)? We shall see.

"The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, and sincere."

## It was good

All up, the experience was beneficial. Ministers could freely converse, and it was clear that we do appreciate one another and seek what is best for each other. And that is helpful for the churches. Prior to the conference one minister, who could not make it, pointed the ministers' email list to James 3:13-18. It also had our attention during one of the devotional moments. Its closing words are instructive: "The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace." 



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# I Am the Good Shepherd

1. I am the Good Shep - herd— I lay my life down  
 2. The wolf and tears scat - ters the flock— Je - sus loves  
 3. I am the Good Shep - herd— I know all my sheep.

6  
 for all of my sheep, those whom I made my own.  
 but Je - sus is rul - ing from heav - en a - bove.  
 For them I a - rose, them in safe - ty I'll keep.

11  
 The false shep - herd cares on - ly for his day's pay.  
 He gath - ers his peo - ple from Gen - tiles and Jews,  
 My sheep fol - low me for they know my kind voice.

16  
 At first hint of dan - ger he runs far a - way.  
 one Shep - herd, one flock whom the Fat - her did choose.  
 We'll all be to - geth - er and al - ways re - joice.

Text: Based on John 10:11-18; vers. George van Popta, 2019  
 Tune: Ira David Sankey, 1877

11.11.11.11  
 HIDING IN THEE

## Dear Editor,

I have read, with interest, the discussions regarding admitting children from other denominations into our Reformed parental day schools. I must admit that I am somewhat surprised by the vehement opposition that comes from my brother Pastor Holtvüwer. In my estimation, it is inflexible, unbending, and less charitable than I am used to from this otherwise gracious pastor. Kindly allow me the opportunity to contend with some of Pastor Holtvüwer's assumptions and contentions.

First things first, it is always good to state unequivocally the areas where we agree wholeheartedly. I stand shoulder to shoulder with Pastor Holtvüwer in his conviction that in a Reformed day school the faculty must of necessity be confessionally Reformed. In our case, that means that they must be teachers from either the CanRC or the URC. It therefore also stands to reason that the constitutions of our schools need to strongly and unapologetically maintain that same scriptural and confessional basis. Pastor George van Popta accurately assesses that "our fathers wisely and safely set the bar of confessional basis very high." This, however, is where Pastor Holtvüwer and I start to deviate in our agreement.

Pastor Holtvüwer seems to acknowledge that the "bar may be high" but quickly points out that it is "not out of reach." This language is not helpful, and it actually serves to foster uncertainty and fear. Either the bar is set high and we express gratitude for this faithful and wise decision, or we contend, as Pastor Holtvüwer seems to suggest, that it's not quite high enough. I'm sure that my brother would not want to intimate that a bar, set upon the highest rung of Scripture and confession, would be somehow not lofty enough.

Pastor Holtvüwer seems to be overly concerned about the will of the membership degenerating to the extent that we would fling open the membership doors without restraint. Wise and prudent decisions will always of necessity recognize that, practically speaking, we will only be able to accommodate so many people from other denominations. Admissions must first of all acknowledge that priority be given to children of the Reformed membership and only after that can we deal, on a case by case basis, with applications from other denominations. I will go out on a limb and suggest that our school societies always have capacity for a small number of applicants and that our websites give some indication that we would actually even consider admission to non-members. Currently, on most of the school websites, this is not the case.

It is, however, precisely those applications that get to the scriptural heart of the matter. Pastor Holtvüwer says that "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." I wholeheartedly agree with this statement, but when did we come to believe that the Canadian and United Reformed Churches comprised the totality of God's covenant children? There is an underlying inference here regarding the exclusivity of God's covenant. The record needs to be set straight here, and we need to wisely speak with inclusive language. I'm not suggesting that we cannot use our Belgic Confession, as Pastor Holtvüwer says, to help us choose which churches we would accept admissions from, but we need to be very careful who we consider a true and a false church to be. It might be helpful when quoting Article 29 that we read a little further and realize that it also speaks about the marks of a Christian. When we weigh that reality in the balance, I think it will be a little harder to justify the kind of language that suggests that admission from churches other than Reformed ones is to subject our little ones to "ungodly influence of fellow students."

I'm glad to hear that Pastor Holtvüwer is not against evangelism, but for the purpose of this discussion, it is not germane to the subject. The question is whether or not Christians from other denominations have a right to share in the gracious blessings of a scriptural, Reformed worldview. My contention is that they do, under strict, clearly defined parameters which places church membership as the only basis for school membership.

Anecdotally, my wife and I both attended a Mennonite high school because neither her Christian Reformed church nor my Canadian Reformed church had high schools at the time. This was a hugely formative time for our faith life, as we were able to bring a thoroughly scriptural, Reformed, confessional perspective to our multi denominational classroom. I will never forget the positive acknowledgement of our Mennonite teachers regarding our catechetical instruction and how our Reformed worldview informed the rest of our class, not the other way around. We need a little faith that our rich heritage is not so easily broken down by weak theology so evident in many evangelical denominations. I am grateful that when our parents had no other choice but the public school that there was a Mennonite school society who saw their responsibility to a brother and a sister and allowed us to share in the blessing of a general Christian education (heavily weighted in Anabaptist theology). How much greater our responsibility to share the blessings of a particular, specific scriptural and Reformed education to the few who might seek admission.



I often reflect upon the teaching of Christ regarding the Good Samaritan and how Christ points out the teaching of the Law regarding loving our neighbour as ourselves. We do well to ask the question "Who is my neighbor?" as it relates to admission to other Christians in, not our school, but God's school.

*In Christ,*  
Trevor Schriemer

## Response

I'd like to express my thanks for the letter of br. Schriemer. We have a good deal in common, for which I am thankful, so I will concentrate on the areas of disagreement. With respect to the question around the high bar set in the constitutions of our schools, br. Schriemer seems to misunderstand me. I have no dispute with the standard of Scripture and confession. In fact, I'm writing to ensure that we keep this very foundation. My only point was that constitutions can be changed. It may take a high percentage of the membership or even 100%, but we should not fool ourselves into thinking that this is out of reach. There is a desire among us for change, as the various letters to the editor demonstrate, and if that desire grows strong enough, pressure will come to bear on school constitutions which may then erode that Reformed foundation. I only wish to safeguard the same by encouraging practices consistent with it.

The main point of br. Schriemer's letter is his contention that "Christians from other denominations have a right to share in the gracious blessings of a scriptural, Reformed worldview ... under strict, clearly defined parameters which places church membership as the only basis for school membership." There are two problems I see here: on what basis would Christians from other denominations have a "right" to the education privileges in Reformed schools? The very constitutions of our schools point to their purpose as vehicles to educate the children of members of Canadian Reformed Churches and, by extension, their sister churches. Even that is not a "right" but a privilege! How much less, then, can anyone from any other church background claim enrollment therein as a right?

Second, if br. Schriemer truly believes Christians from other denominations have a "right" to send their children to our Reformed schools, then why does he insist that a family can be permitted to enroll their children but not be permitted to be a member? If access to our schools is their right, then they should be all in, admission and membership, and the doors wide open to any Christian. But br. Schriemer doesn't draw that conclusion.

Inconsistently, he insists that only those who are confessionally Reformed should be allowed as members. With this I am in full agreement. This is the standard laid down in the constitution. All I am saying is that this same standard should be applied consistently to both admission of students and membership of their parents. Christians who do not share the Reformed confession (which is simply the faithful teaching of Scripture), and who have no desire to do so (this is an important consideration!), keep themselves away from the blessing of Reformed education. It is not us denying them their so-called right; it is they who choose to deny themselves the blessing.

There is one other matter to touch on, namely, how to view Christians outside of our Reformed churches. Br. Schriemer infers from my earlier writing that I have "come to believe that the Canadian and United Reformed Churches comprise the totality of God's covenant children." That inference is simply not correct. Numerous times I acknowledged in my editorial and following pieces that there are Christians in other denominations. In this I follow Belgic Confession Article 28 which calls "all believers ... to separate from those who do not belong to the church and to join this assembly wherever God has established it. They should do so even though rulers and edicts of princes were against it, and death or physical punishment might follow." Here we all clearly confess that true believers exist all over the world (it is the catholic church after all, Art. 27), including in assemblies which do not bear the marks of the true church. When we meet such believers in our communities, we should share with them the riches God has given us in the Reformed faith and call them to unite with us in the faithful local church. Those believers have a God-given duty and calling to unite with the true, catholic church. But if those true believers stubbornly maintain their place in assemblies which do not bear the marks of the true church, then again it is they, by their own convictions and choices, who keep themselves separate.

Maintaining a confessional standard for membership and enrollment does not make us bad neighbours, as br. Schriemer alleges in his closing remarks. The door to the school stands open to those neighbours by way of the local Reformed church. We may even point to it and encourage them in taking this route. But if they choose not to enter that doorway, that is their responsibility.

*In the Lord,*  
Peter Holtvlüwer

## May Birthdays

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

**1 Clarence Zwiep** will be **66**

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

**4 Debbie Veenstra** will be **46**

4238 2nd Concession Road  
Sherkston, ON  
L0S 1R0

**10 Rob De Haan** will be **55**

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

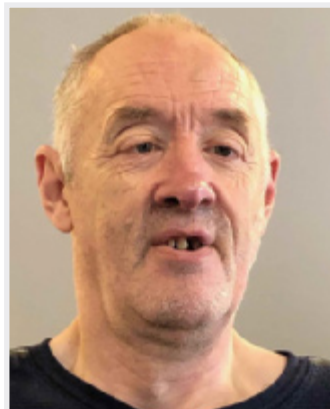
**21 Eddie Van Rootselaar** will be **27**

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

**30 Bernie De Vos** will be **45**

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

## Clarence Zwiep



Good day! My name is Clarence Zwiep and D.V. I will be 66 on May 1st! I can't believe I'm that old - I don't feel that old.

I attend the Dunnville Canadian Reformed Church and I have lived in the Beacon Home for fifteen years now.

I come from a family of nine kids and often visit my siblings, which is something I love because my family is very important to me! I am also an uncle to many, and great-uncle to many others as well. I also spend time with some of my cousins on a regular basis.

I am a very social man and know a lot of people who also remember me with visits, phone calls, and cards!

I work at Rosa Flora and also deliver flyers. This past year I have slowed down my work as I am beginning to feel my age, even though I don't really want to admit it. I keep busy at home with cutting newspaper for a local dairy farmer, as well as cleaning around the house. My staff always tells me my mom trained me well with cleaning because you don't have to tell me what needs to get done - I see it and just do it.

I really enjoy receiving your birthday cards and look forward to it all year! I keep them and recycle them for craft projects as well.

I am loving our new kitchen, living room, and dining room at Beacon as well, especially with our current quarantine due to the coronavirus.

I ask that you continue to remember me and Anchor Association in your prayers. Thank you for taking the time to read this!

*Clarence*

# Bannière Réformée Francophone and *The Covenant of Love*

Covenant theology is central to our understanding of God's plan of redemption. However, very few books about the covenant exist in the French language.

With the support of Reformed churches and individuals, we have published *The Covenant of Love*, written by the late Rev. Clarence Stam.

The book was first recommended to the publishing committee by ERQ pastor Paulin Bédard. However, translating and publishing this volume would involve significant financial resources. An appeal was made via *Clarion* and *Christian Renewal*, as well as email contacts. Many individuals and local congregations responded generously, enabling us to raise the required \$23,000.


As we pursued translating *The Covenant of Love*, the Lord opened a door for its publication and distribution. An evangelical French publisher, *Publications Chrétiennes* (PC), offered to start a line of books of Reformed conviction: *Éditions La Rochelle* (*La Rochelle* is the name of the first French Reformed confession penned primarily by John Calvin). Not only would PC provide us with a professional publication, but they also assured advertising and sales throughout the province of Quebec, Haiti, France, Switzerland, and French Africa.

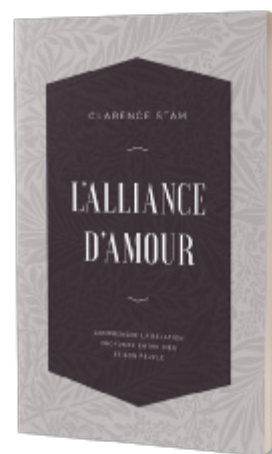
In November, *L'Alliance d'Amour* rolled off the presses. Several free copies were distributed to the ERQ churches. PC advertised the book on its website and its weekly newsletter. A second evangelical publisher in Europe carried the article in their monthly newsletter – a rare event! Furthermore, the full text will be available online via the site *Ressources Chrétiennes* in order to make it more readily accessible, particularly to believers and pastors in French Africa and Haiti.

The adventure does not stop there. Developing our initial publishing project, we have revamped our committees, refined our mission and vision, defined goals for publishing, and even gave ourselves a new name: *Bannière Réformée Francophone* (BRF – Reformed Francophone Banner). Lord willing, we can develop a working partnership with Ligonier Ministries, who recently launched a French language website.

Recent publications include infant baptism, Reformed evangelism, and an exposition of the Canons of Dort written by Paulin Bédard. We would like to publish more original works, besides translations. We're eager to publish more texts on covenant theology, particularly the application of covenant promises and principals to raising our children. (Suggestions welcomed!)

Financing our publications remains a challenge, since the readership market is very limited. The ERQ synod has granted BRF significant funds. Churches and individuals are invited to give to the ERQ synod, or to make a direct contribution to the overseeing church, *Église Réformée St-Marc*.

Continue praying that the exposition of the Word of God in preaching, teaching, and reading would edify God's people in Quebec and throughout the French-speaking world. 



## To learn more visit:

**Publications Chrétiennes**  
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**St-Marc's Reformed Church  
of Québec City**  
[stmarc.erq.qc.ca](http://stmarc.erq.qc.ca)

**The Reformed Church  
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