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CLARION Premier Printing Ltd. One Beghin Avenue
Winnipeg, MB Canada R2J 3X5
Phone: 204-663-9000 | Fax: 204-663-9202

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

2020 SUBSCRIPTION RATES

	Regular Mail	Air Mail
Canada	\$49.00*	\$ 82.00*
U.S.A. U.S. Funds	\$69.00	\$102.00
International	\$98.00	\$171.00

*Applicable GST, HST, PRT taxes are extra. GST/HST no. 890967359RT

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Published biweekly by Premier Printing Ltd. Winnipeg, Manitoba

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We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada.

Agreement No. 40063293; ISSN 0383-0438

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What's Inside

Ongoing conversations regarding the current restrictions we are facing personally, at work, and as churches reveal a dilemma among us: how do we balance our response to these restrictions when we need to think about the fourth, fifth, and sixth commandments? This is the topic of our lead article, "More Birds than Believers in Church" by Dr. Jason Van Vliet.

In the previous issue we began a series by Rev. Clarence Bouwman. He continues in Issue 13 with "Why Are We *Still* Canadian Reformed?"

Our issue also brings readers the regular columns Treasures, New & Old, Clippings on Politics & Religion, and Ray of Sunshine. There is a canticle, a film review, and also two letters to the editor.

Laura Veenendaal

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More Birds than Believers in Church

This past Sunday I had the privilege of leading worship in my home congregation just outside of Hamilton, Ontario. I arrived about ten minutes before the service began. Everyone was already in church ... all three of them! One elder, one brother taking care of sound and video, and one sister playing the piano. No more fellow believers joined us in the church building, although with a congregation of some 450 members, many were joining us from their homes via a livestream connection.

Alas, we have been living with this reality for about ten Sundays in a row here in Ontario. It is much the same in many other – but not all – places. To curb the spread of COVID-19, governments around the world have restricted large public gatherings. In Ontario (at the time of writing), no more than five are permitted to gather publicly. That is why there were only four of us in church.

But what about the birds? As I entered the building, one brother cheerfully quipped, “You have competition this morning. The birds are back.” You see, at present our congregation worships in a gymnasium. Resourceful feathered creatures sometimes discover a little gap somewhere up there in the roof. Are you also thinking of Psalm 84? The sparrow finds a home to rest / The swallow builds herself a nest (*Book of Praise*). By the volume of sound coming from that avian choir in the rafters, I would hazard an uneducated guess that there were more birds than believers in church this past Sunday.



In Article 27 of the Belgic Confession, we affirm that the church is “a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian *believers*.” When more birds than believers have assembled in a church building on Sunday, we have reason to grieve.

Caught between commands?

At least three divine commandments intersect in this circumstance. As part of the fourth commandment, we confess that we must “diligently attend the church of God to hear God’s Word, to use the sacraments, to call publicly upon the Lord, and to give Christian offerings to the poor” (LD 38). So long as you have a good Internet connection and your local congregation has livestreaming equipment, you can still see the preacher and hear the preaching quite well. Similarly, the minister can still lead us in public prayer, and by sending an e-transfer we can still give Christian alms. All of this is not nothing.

But so much is missing as well. In places where the restrictions are more severe, it is well nigh impossible to administer the sacraments. We sing psalms and hymns in our homes, but it does not even come close to the uplifting experience of singing together with hundreds of fellow believers in a building that is acoustically alive.

In short, did we “attend the church of God”? Well, sort of but not really. Psalm 122 rings in our ears and weighs down our hearts: “I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord,” not stay in our own houses.

At the same time, in the fifth commandment, the Lord requires us to respect and obey our governing officials. Consider the words of Romans 13: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.... Therefore *whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment*” (vv. 1–2). Those words are both blunt and inspired.

This command still applies when governing authorities are unjust or unwise. The apostle Peter wrote, “Be subject to your

masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust” (1 Pet 2:18). But there is a limit to this, as well, for the same apostle said to the Sanhedrin, “We must obey God rather than man” (Acts 5:29). Do we have to break the fifth commandment and contravene the restrictions on public gatherings in order to keep the fourth commandment and assemble in church to worship God?

Answering that question is already complex, but now add the sixth commandment. This command not only prohibits murder but also calls us to “protect [our neighbour] from harm as much as we can” (LD 40). What now? If we fulfill the fourth command-

ment and attend the church of God, do we (potentially) break the sixth commandment by putting fellow believers, and by extension others with whom they may have contact, in harm’s way?

We feel caught between the commands. Our consciences are hung up on the horns of a three-way dilemma. What is a sincere Christian to do?

Some historical perspective

As the Preacher teaches us, nothing is new under the sun (Eccl 1:10). Serious pandemics have afflicted the world before. For the sake

of public health, governments have shut down church buildings before.

For example, between 1576 and 1578, during the plague of Milan, fifteen percent of that city’s population died. At the peak of the infection curve, the city closed all “non-essential shops” and put into effect a “general quarantine,” which also meant that public worship services were not permitted.¹ Sound familiar?

The archbishop, a certain Carlo Borromeo, co-operated with local officials and organized the publication of booklets containing penitential Bible passages, prayers, and songs. These were then distributed, free of charge, to the citizens. At set times, when the church bell rang, everyone was to come to the doors and windows of their homes. Together the city recited prayers and sang songs. The cobbled streets of Milan, rather than the marbled nave of its cathedral, resounded with congregational singing. Can you imagine?

Be assured
that there is
no three-way
dilemma in
the Word of
our God

¹Chiu, Remi. “Singing on the Street and in the Home in Times of Pestilence: Lessons from the 1576–78 Plague of Milan,” in *Domestic Devotions in Early Modern Italy*, ed. Corry, Maya (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 28.

Similarly, in the fall of 1918 the so-called Spanish flu ravaged Philadelphia. On October 3, the city officials closed all schools. On October 4, they closed all saloons, theaters, and churches as well. For the balance of the month, everyone lived through a complete lockdown, other than doing what was necessary to feed their families and care for the sick, the dying, and the dead.

By the end of the month, though, the infection rate subsided and things opened up again. As a sure sign of a different era, “the *first step* in removing the ban allowed churches and synagogues to open,” although, at least in the case of the churches, “...without Sunday school.”²

History is interesting and instructive. We are certainly not the first generation to live through times like these. Still, history is not authoritative. The question remains: in the sight of our God, what are sincere Christians to do?

Do not subdivide the commands

Difficult circumstances can either push us apart or pull us together. Let us earnestly pray that it would be the latter. It is hard, though, to keep our minds simultaneously focussed on *all* the commands involved.

One believer quickly zeroes in on the fourth commandment: God calls us to assemble for worship, therefore, we *must* assemble for worship. The heart of the next child of God, though, is gripped by the truth of the fifth commandment. God warns that if we resist the authorities he has put in place, we will incur judgment. Surely we need to take that seriously, don't we? Then, yet another brother or sister in the Lord feels the burden of the sixth commandment, being concerned that he or she might seriously endanger someone else's health. Asymptomatic transmission is a reality, after all. Different people emphasize different commands, and if they do it too aggressively, they may inadvertently push us apart from each other. We will need to have patience with each other and be mindful of each other's consciences.

Beyond that, though, be assured that there is no three-way dilemma in the Word of our God. Just as surely as Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35), it cannot be sub-divided either.

The whole law is fulfilled in one key word: love (Matt 22:37-40; Gal 5:14; LD 2). Intertwined love for God and our neighbour will provide the unifying departure point for us all.

Walk forward in love

“I love the Lord” (Ps 116) and “I love your saints” (Ps 16) are the twin-engines of holy desire that propel us out of bed, into our cars, and on toward our church buildings twice a Sunday. Right? But that plush recliner in my family room is more comfortable than the oak pew in church, isn't it? And an extra hour of sleep on Sunday morning is rather nice, too, isn't it?

The Lord can, and will, use the COVID-19 pandemic to refine our love-filled loyalty to him and burn away all dross of custom, superstition, or hypocrisy in our obedience of the fourth commandment. If our souls are yearning to be back in the courts of our God with our fellow believers (Ps 63), then our God is fulfilling his promise to take evil and turn it to our benefit.

Next, holding the fourth and sixth commandments together is already familiar territory for us. I long to attend the church of God, but if I'm seriously sick with an infectious disease I'll have to stay home or take other significant precautions so that I don't

harm others. In such a case I am not breaking the fourth commandment in order to keep the sixth. Why not? Because in God's law love for him and love for the neighbour do not compete; instead, they complement.

For example, in the OT when some of his own people had serious diseases, God himself quarantined them “outside the camp,” thereby also keeping them away from public worship (Lev 13, 14). To be sure, these laws were more than a public health matter. They also involved other, deeper, spiritual lessons. But as a loving Father, our God also ensured that public worship gath-

erings would not become seedbeds for the spread of serious sickness. Under certain circumstances, then, loving *both* God *and* our neighbour means we may need to stay away from public worship.

These biblical principles also apply as we deal with COVID-19. On the one hand, excessive fear of viruses should not stop us from assembling for worship. The Holy Spirit teaches us that the

May our God
swiftly bring the
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²Stetler, Christina M. “The 1918 Spanish Influenza: Three Months of Horror in Philadelphia.” *Pennsylvania History* 84, no. 4 (2017): 477.


wise man will not be immobilized by unwarranted fear of lions on the road or, by extension, of viruses in the pews (Prov 26:13). On the other hand, love for the neighbour *and* for our heavenly Father who upholds our neighbour's health will compel us to exercise all due caution. In short, love and wisdom pave a path that holds the fourth and sixth commandments in harmony.

Fulfilling the fifth commandment in these present circumstances is more challenging but not impossible. In the final words of his *Institutes*, John Calvin reminds us that government officials may well have to correct some of their fellow officials when they act unjustly or unwisely (*Institutes* 4.20.31). Faced with the double affliction of both plague and persecution, Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor, also recommended working through the "lower magistrates" in order to redirect "higher magistrates," who may fail to uphold what is right and wise in the eyes of God.

This approach fits well with Romans 13. In verses 1-2, we read how the Lord instituted "governing authorities," not authority. The plural noun is significant. No one, single person in authority embodies all the wisdom required to rule, especially in challenging circumstances like COVID-19. If some governing officials are

acting unwisely or unfairly toward the church, even if their intentions are noble, then believers can work with and through other officials in order to promote the necessary corrective re-balancing. In this way, we honour *all* the authorities in their God-given calling and in doing so, honour God himself. Again, love for the neighbour and love for God cohere rather than conflict.

Thankfully, in some areas, we even have members of our Reformed congregation serving as government officials in town councils, provincial, and federal parliaments. Without denying the value of other efforts and initiatives, let us earnestly support and spur on these fellow believers, as well as any other elected representatives who will lend a sympathetic ear. The goal will be that, under the Lord's blessing, as soon as it is safe to increase the size of public gatherings, the church will be the first in line to benefit, not the last. This approach also holds together the fourth *and* fifth and *sixth* commandments.

May our God swiftly bring the day when the believers again far outnumber the birds in church. And may our chorus of congregational praise soon drown out their beautiful little chirps with a mighty sound that shakes the ground (Psalm 150, *Book of Praise*)! 



You are invited

to send us your most thought provoking questions
to explore in our **You Asked** column.

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The Long Way Home


"When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, although that was near. For God said, 'Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt.'" (Exodus 13:17)

A wild wilderness adventure – maybe that sounds like a fun thing to do with a couple friends, and with all the necessary supplies and the right vehicle to tackle the terrain. But a wilderness adventure was the last thing the Israelites wanted as they left Egypt. They just wanted to get home, to the Promised Land. Yet God had other plans. In Exodus 13:17-18, we read of how God takes his people on a detour. He takes them the long way home.

Now, the nearest or shortest route for the Israelites to take was to first travel north out of Succoth – where they currently were (cf. Exod 12:37) – towards the Great Mediterranean Sea, and then go straight east along the coast till they came to the Promised Land. With good travel conditions, it would take about two weeks to arrive. But in Exodus 13:17, we learn that God doesn't lead them along the coastline. Though it was shorter, this road would take them straight into Philistine territory. This was part of the Promised Land, to be sure, but the Philistines were one tough bunch. They were skilled warriors. Even after Israel took control of the Promised Land, they struggled to control the land of the Philistines for lengthy periods of time. So the Philistines weren't going to fall over and play dead if the Israelites showed up on their doorstep. They would send out their Goliaths and fight to the bitter end.

And, if truth be told, the Israelites were no match for the Philistines. They weren't ready for war. They were fresh out of slavery. They could make bricks without straw, but they didn't know how to swing a sword, let alone fight a battle! The Lord God knew this better than anyone. This is clear in the reason God gives for this detour in Exodus 13:17, "For God said, 'Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt.'" Yes, God knew that if he took his people on the shortest route, they would have to face war with the Philistine giants,

and, in all likelihood, end up high tailing it back to Egypt. Back to Egypt – that's the last thing the Lord wants for his redeemed people: to run headlong back to Egypt and be enslaved, oppressed, and mistreated all over again!

As those who have been redeemed with the precious blood of Christ, that's the last thing the Lord wants for us. The last thing he wants is for you and me to run headlong back into the country of sin and the arms of the devil. That can happen if you try to take the shortest route in your walk with the Lord and refuse to follow his lead. Taking short cuts in your devotion and walk with the Lord might seem like the easiest route to take initially, but we must have the eyes of faith to see that if we persist in taking short cuts, eventually we too will be high tailing it back to Egypt, back to slavery to sin and the devil. So let us be careful not to take short cuts when it comes to our devotion and walk with the Lord. Instead, as God's redeemed people, we must take the long way home through true repentance and faith in Jesus Christ who is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). 

For further study

1. What short cuts in your walk with the Lord are you tempted to take?
2. What steps can you take to prevent taking these short cuts?

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Why Are We *Still* Canadian Reformed?

In a previous article, I drew out how we became Canadian Reformed. The Lord nudged our fathers (after their migration from Holland) first away from the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) and then away from the Protestant Reformed Church (PRC). The fathers saw no other church in the existing Canadian ecclesiastical landscape that they could conceivably join, and so formed a new federation of churches now known as the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC).

All of that was some seventy years ago. The passage of time presses another question on us: why are we *still* CanRC? Or has the Lord in these seventy years raised up other churches in this land he'd have us join?

As it turns out, there are indeed at least three new federations of churches in our land with identical confessional signatures to the CanRC. In historical order, they are the Free Reformed Churches of North America (FRCNA), the Heritage Reformed Churches (HRC), and the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA) – none of which existed when the CanRC was

first instituted. I'd like this time to introduce you to the FRCNA, keeping in mind the question whether the Lord wants us to remain CanRC.

Who are they?

The membership of the FRCNA (just like the CanRC) consists largely of postwar migrants from The Netherlands. These migrants opted not to join the fledgling CanRCs but, together with two existing independent churches in the United States, started a new federation on the confessional basis of the Three Forms of Unity (Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort) and the Church Order of Dort. Currently there are twenty-one churches (including mission posts) in this federation.

Two questions arise: 1. Given the identical confessional basis between those churches and ours, what contact has there been between the FRCNA and the CanRC? And 2. Why did their migrants not join the CanRC to begin with (or we join them)?

Contact

In the 1990s, close relations developed between the CanRC in Langley on the one hand and the FRCNA of Abbotsford on the other, so that these two churches recognized in each other the marks of the Lord's church as confessed in Article 29 of the Belgic Confession. As a result, active contact developed on a national level between these two federations of churches, lasting from 1998-2008.

In 2008, formal contact between our two federations fell apart from FRCNA side. Deputies from our side sensed that the reason for terminating official contact was because "we do not seem to speak the same language."¹

Different language?

I can perhaps illustrate the point the best by referencing the hesitation found within FRCNA circles to address the congregation the way we commonly do (though there's variation throughout the federation). One of the Canadian Reformed men mandated a dozen years ago to develop closer contacts with the FRCNA put it like this: "In their sermons they usually do not address their members as 'brothers & sisters' as we do." Why might that be? His answer: the FRCNA believes that we in the CanRC "too easily accept the members as believers and therefore as being saved."² To use a term I mentioned in the previous article: the FRCNA fear that we in the CanRC embrace a form of *presumptive regeneration*. To understand their concern, we need to reach back into some history.

History

As mentioned, ancestors of most CanRC and FRCNA members hail from The Netherlands. In fact, ever since the time of the Great Reformation of the sixteenth century, CanRC and FRCNA ancestors were members of the same church for more than two centuries - that being the original Reformed Church in Holland (the *Hervormde Kerk*). In the course of the eighteenth century,

deformation overcame this Reformed Church so that Christ's atoning work was no longer proclaimed; instead, preachers hailed Jesus Christ as simply a good example for all people to follow - love as he loved, even to the point of death.

As a result of this deformation, Rev. Hendrik deCock led a group out of the Reformed Church in a movement known as the Secession of 1834. Ancestors from present-day CanRC as well as FRCNA members were largely part of that Secession. The church that developed out of this Secession became known as the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* (CGK, which translates literally as Christian Reformed Churches; when Secession migrants settled in North America, they took the name with

them to the New World - and that church of course still exists today as the Christian Reformed Church of North America).

Fifty years later, Dr. Abraham Kuyper led a second exodus out of the Reformed Church in a movement that became known as the *Doleantie* of 1886 (our English word "doleful" captures the mood of the movement; people were downcast on account of the apostasy dominating the Reformed Church). The bottom issue was again that the gospel of redemption through the

Saviour's blood was not being forthrightly proclaimed from the pulpits of the nation.

These two groups - those of the Secession of 1834 and of the *Doleantie* of 1886 - merged into one church in 1892 to form a federation called the Reformed Church in The Netherlands.³ However, a small number of churches from the Secession group declined to join the merger. This group continued to use the old name *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken*. These are the fathers of today's Free Reformed Churches. Meanwhile, the fathers of today's CanRC predominately went along with the Union. That brings us to the vital question: why did this small group opt not to join the Union? The answer to that question goes a long way to explaining why the CanRC and the FRCNA are two separate federations today.

On the doctrine concerning the church, Kuyper spoke of the church as visible and invisible.

¹Report to General Synod 2007, Vol 3, p. 106.

²Rev. W. Slomp, *Clarion*, Vol 55 No17, p. 404.

³The Dutch language has two words that translate as "Reformed." The initial church formed after the Great Reformation was called the *Hervormde Kerk* (Reformed Church). The churches merging in 1892 called themselves the *Gereformeerde Kerk* in Nederland (Reformed Church in The Netherlands).

The issue

Abraham Kuyper was the dominant man in the *Doleantie* churches, to the point that his understanding of particular doctrines defined and described the popular position on a given matter within the *Doleantie* churches. On the doctrine concerning the church, Kuyper spoke of the church as *visible* and *invisible*.

Visible and invisible

The visible church was the church as people see it Sunday by Sunday, made up of those who sit in the pew; that would be believers and their children, those with whom God had established his covenant. As you'll recall from the previous article, on the topic of the covenant, Kuyper distinguished between an *inner* covenant and an *outer* covenant.

Those in the inner covenant were actually the elect of God; they would one day respond in faith to the promises given at baptism. Those in the outer covenant were those in the church whom God did not elect to salvation; these would never respond in faith to God's promises. Kuyper added that when an elect infant was baptized, the Lord sovereignly placed a seed of regeneration in the heart of that child. That seed could lie dormant for many years, but eventually it would germinate and grow so that this child would profess the faith. Both those of the inner covenant (the elect, who carried a seed of regeneration in their hearts) and those of the outer covenant (the non-elect, who carried no seed of regeneration in their hearts) sat in the pews of the church – and no one really knew who was elect (regenerated) and who was not till adulthood would reveal the presence or absence of that seed.

God alone saw where the seed was, and so he alone saw who really made up the church; that's the church invisible, the church as God sees it.

Evaluation

The *Doleantie* people accepted what Kuyper taught; he, after all, was the man who showed them again the gospel of grace and led them to reformation. Most of the Secession people took the view that the Union should occur on the basis of the Three Forms of Unity and Kuyper's view (being the view of one man) could be discussed further after the Union was complete. CanRC

ancestors largely shared this view. The small group that declined to join (that's the ancestors of the FRCNA) took the position that Kuyper was so dominant a man that one had to realize that Kuyper's teachings would in fact become the de facto official position of the united church regardless of what was written in the Three Forms of Unity. More, the leaders in that minority group were convinced that Kuyper's error would greatly affect how preachers would need to approach the congregation seated in the pews in front of them in a detrimental fashion. So, they pressed for the continuation of the CGK.

Preaching

How would it affect the preaching? A farmer seeking a crop from his field knows what he has to do: prepare the soil, sow the seed, and (let's say) water his land. But if someone convinces him that the seed is already in the soil, his job description changes; all he needs to do is keep the soil damp. Well now, if the preacher is convinced that a seed of regeneration is already planted in the hearts of the elect in the pews before him, he need do nothing more than keep the soil damp with the good news of Jesus's victory. He need not call his audience to faith and repentance – for the non-elect, outer-covenant members won't/can't

respond, while the elect, inner-covenant members will respond at God's time anyway since there's an indestructible seed of regeneration in their hearts already. The preacher may presume the regeneration of all the elect and so of their conversion and faith in due time, no matter what he does.

The CGK men said (rightly): that's not biblical. The Scripture does not teach that the Lord places a seed of regeneration in the hearts of the elect upon their baptism. Since there's no seed there, the preacher needs to sow the seed (preach the gospel) and in the process call the entire congregation to repentance and faith.

As it turns out, in insisting on this point, the CGK men ended up belabouring for their congregations how to distinguish true faith from a false or temporary or historic (etc.) faith, and equally how to distinguish true repentance from a false or temporary or worldly repentance. In so doing, CGK preaching over the years came to differ from preaching typical in the Union churches as they placed emphasis on what you need to *experience*, i.e., what

Christians from other churches at times look inside the CanRC and scratch their heads at some of the fruit they see.

evidences within yourself you were to look for and find before you could be sure you actually had *true* faith and were actually *truly* regenerated. And so, some words used in church contexts also received a different loading. Today, folk in the FRCNA hear something different in words such as “experience,” “experiential preaching,” and “spiritual unity” than folk in the CanRC hear.

Liberation 1944

In 1944, a group left the churches united in 1892. Those who left (yes, CanRC ancestors) largely had their roots in the Secession of 1834 – and so shared a large chunk of church history with the CGK people. A major contributing factor leading to the Liberation was the rejection of the inner/outer covenant doctrine of Abraham Kuyper. Predictably, those of the Liberation sought contact with the CGK to consider merging. But the CGK people had no interest in such a merger. Why not? Because suspicions remained that those who liberated themselves in 1944 remained too infected with the teaching of Abraham Kuyper. Specifically, the suspicion remained that though the Liberated rejected presumptive regeneration in infants (see previous article), they continued to embrace the presumed regeneration of communicant members. That has remained a suspicion the FRCNA has had of the CanRC for many of the years of our joint sojourn in Canada. That’s why the CGK people upon their migration to Canada did not join the CanRC.

CanRC

All of this presses this question: What evidence might the FRCNA see to justify their suspicion that the CanRC *presumes* the *regeneration* of our communicant members? I suspect they would level the following criticism at us (even though some are not accurate at all):

- Once our Young People have finished the preconfession course, we let them make profession of faith *without asking about how those youth experience faith*, i.e., what changes faith has made to their lifestyle.
- Our preaching does not sufficiently call for repentance and true faith. That would include that our preaching seldom distinguishes between true/historic/false faith, true/worldly regeneration, etc.


- Those who once professed the faith can attend Lord’s Supper for the rest of their life, unless they really go off the rails – and that despite the FRCNA seeing worldly behaviour happening in these communicant members.

Back to the question

Would the Lord have us remain CanRC? I’m happy that as of last year official contact between the CanRC and the FRCNA has been restored. Merging our two churches is, though, still a long way away. Should we meanwhile remain as we are? Or is there something we can actually learn from the FRCNA – and perhaps move a bit in their direction? Is there a kernel of truth in their suspicion that we presume the regeneration of our communicant members? How else can you explain the following realities in our churches:

- Alcohol is much abused today and in parts of the country CanRC members are not known to be any different.
- Hockey is a much-loved sport, but some CanRC teams have a reputation of playing a mean game in distinction from other teams.
- Some among us dig deep into our collective pockets to support church and school, but wrapping our minds around finer points of God’s revelation for our salvation and manner of living takes more energy and concentration than we can muster.

Jesus did say that a good tree bears good fruit and a bad tree bears bad fruit. Christians from other churches at times look inside the CanRC and scratch their heads at some of the fruit they see.

The Lord has put the FRCNA beside us in our country. Would he nudge us to learn something from the brethren in that church? I do think we need to spend some time contemplating that question. 



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ARPA on Conversion Therapy Bans

The phrase “conversion therapy ban” has been popping up all over the West in discussions around sexual orientation and gender identity. Conversion therapy is banned in commercial spaces in certain Canadian cities; some provinces have banned their professionals from providing conversion therapy; the federal government introduced legislation on March 9, 2020, to *criminalize* conversion therapy.

A lot of people are confused about this. If one hears the phrase “conversion therapy” in the midst of the discussion about transgenderism, one can be excused for thinking that this conversion refers to the attempt to convert a biological male or female to the opposite sex.

However, in a cruel twist of words, the conversion therapy that is being criminalized is rather any attempt to help someone who is confused about their sex and gender to accept the body with which God created them. Canada’s Bill S-202 defines conversion therapy as follows:

In this section, conversion therapy means any practice, treatment or service designed to change an individual’s sexual orientation or gender identity or to eliminate or reduce sexual attraction or sexual behaviour between persons of the same sex. For greater certainty, *this definition does not include a surgical sex change or any related service.*¹

One must realize that “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” are about how one *feels* about one’s sex and gender, not about one’s biological structure. The language is so twisted that the bill itself had to specify that “conversion therapy” does *not* refer to “a surgical sex change or related service.” Rather, *merely counselling anyone against* a sex change is being criminalized. In one notorious case in Canada, a fourteen-year-old girl has been receiving hormone blockers against the will of her father, and the father has been legally restrained from referring to her according to her biological gender (female)! This shows that the ban is already happening, legislation or not.

At the end of 2019, ARPA Canada produced an extremely thorough policy report for parliamentarians dealing with this topic. It opens with the question, “Should parents, counsellors, doctors, and others be forbidden to help children love the body they were born with?” The policy report then clearly explains the issue, “Recently enacted or proposed conversion therapy bans forbid counselling that helps children and teens love their bodies and feel comfortable in their own skin. They prohibit particular methods of alleviating gender dysphoria, which an astonishing number of children now experience.”²

“Conversion therapy” is a broad term, encompassing not only the efforts of psychiatrists and family doctors, but also of

¹See parl.ca/DocumentViewer/en/43-1/bill/S-202/first-reading. Accessed May 14, 2020 (italics added).


²See arpacanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/ARPA-PolicyReport-ConvTherapy-CIT-PR-hyperlinked.pdf. Accessed May 14, 2020.

anyone in a position of trust and authority (a parent, teacher, pastor, or counsellor).

ARPA agrees that conversion therapy practices of long ago, such as electric shock therapy, should be banned, but the fact is that the legislation seeks to criminalize even talk therapy. "Such body-affirming counselling is condemned by some for not being 'trans-positive' and for failing to accept and affirm a child's self-reported identity. What such counselling does, however, is respect the child's biological identity. This is in the child's best interest – physically, emotionally, and mentally."

What needs to be realized is that, "A multitude of studies demonstrate that 80-90% of all children suffering from gender dysphoria 'desist' and identify their gender in accordance with their biological sex by adulthood." Thus, it is very unwise, indeed, it can be argued that it is actually abusive, to remove perfectly

healthy body parts. Hormone blockers, too, have permanent effects. We should acknowledge, as the report rightly states, that, "humans were *created* binary – male and female" (italics added).

ARPA's policy reports are all of excellent quality and this one is no exception. Go online and read it. Let us pray for those who have the responsibility for legislation and for ARPA staff, and let us pursue truth and goodness in Canada. 



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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters to the Editor should be written in a brotherly fashion in order to be considered for publication. Submissions can be sent to editor@clarionmagazine.ca and need to adhere to a **750 word limit**.

A response to *Salvation Issues*

In the May 1, 2020 edition of *Clarion*, Rev. Holtvlüwer provided an article titled "Salvation Issues." I thank him for bringing to discussion this often-cited phrase, but I think he misses the mark when he claims "'that's not a salvation issue' is unbiblical." While I agree that calling something a "non-salvation issue" is not an excuse for stopping ongoing conversations, we need to further discuss that there are indeed some doctrines that are more critical than others. I would like to use this letter to emphasize that we ought to be careful on how we approach and engage in discussion on the understanding of different doctrines and consider carefully secondary distinctions between Christians at the expense of Unity in Christ.

In its simplest form, there is only one "salvation issue," our faith (bestowed by grace) in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Romans 3:22-24 puts this very clearly, "This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

The saving knowledge of this justification, forever declaring us right and holy in the eyes of our awesome God, brings forth a lifetime of learning, studying, delving into, and discussing God's Word. However, the act of understanding the Scripture and working to our utmost ability in order to understand God's

Word, while commendable and worthwhile, is not in itself salvation. That is why we need to approach one another in love and grace when we have conversations surrounding doctrine. It is the precious sacrifice of Christ which saves, not knowledge for its own sake. Considering this, we ought to approach doctrinal differences in a spirit of humbleness when we encounter and engage others in the wider Christian community (read: catholic church).

Mark Ross, in an article on the Ligonier website entitled "In Essentials Unity, In Non-Essentials Liberty, in all Things Charity," puts it this way: "The diversity among Christians is due to our lack of conformity to Christ. He has chosen to sanctify us gradually in this world. As the progress we make in sanctification varies both in doctrine and in practice, there must always be a need in this world for those who are united in Christ to live in love with one another while dealing with differences." Elsewhere he mentions "where Christ is truly preached, there is the gospel; and where the gospel is truly believed, there is the church." That is why lovingly defending our biblical positions with fellow Christians on things such as infant baptism, women in office, or six day creation should be done out of joy and love for Christ and his Word, and may be a gradual process. But we need to be careful in distinguishing between heresy and other Christian errors; or, if you like, salvation issues or non-salvation issues. Agreement in these areas, while weighty and worthwhile to pursue, may not undermine one's salvation, or deny God his glory. Often, fellow Christians from different traditions will be biblically convinced on their stance, albeit different than ours. We believe our confessions are true to the Word, and we should defend them ardently, but does that mean disagreement with some doctrines, which have varying degrees of interpretation, puts someone's salvation into question? I think that is the root of what people mean when they say "salvation issue."

Now, what are these "salvation issues"? Are there some more critical doctrines that must be upheld? For sure! Absolutely

anything that undermines the true gospel of salvation and takes away from the finished work of Christ is critical and will be cause for division. That is where a clear line needs to be drawn in the sand. However, we also know that not everything in God's Word is required to be perfectly understood/interpreted for our salvation. The apostle Paul recognized this when discussing how to lovingly work with the "weaker brother" abstaining from meat in Romans 14. Paul did not say "salvation issue" verbatim, but he certainly required charity and tolerance on a point of difference between two Christians. While I agree that, since God is the author of the Word, there must be only one true doctrine, this does not take away from the ongoing maturing process of all believers that Mark Ross mentions above. In fact, this process will not be complete for any of us, or the church of Jesus Christ, until we are glorified with Christ. Shouldn't we be careful then not to feed division, and unnecessarily imply that unless everyone agrees with us, they are not saved? This approach may even undermine our confession regarding the holy catholic Christian church of all times and all places (LD 21).

It would be incorrect to think that the church has held identical beliefs on all things since the time of the early church. Just think of the journey that the church has taken through the past synods which clarified and solidified so much of what we confess today, by the grace of God! Should we worry about the salvation of generations before these critical synods? No. God's grace and Christ's work is sufficient.

Faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ is the salvation issue, and by grace through this faith the gathering of the elect brings ultimate glory to our heavenly Father. Let us carefully consider our conversations about "salvation issues" and joyfully, patiently, and lovingly engage other Christians in the life-long journey of growing and abiding with Christ.

Greg Morris
Hamilton, ON

Response

I appreciate br. Morris's desire for further discussion and the kind tone of his letter. I'm happy to see that we agree that calling something "a non-salvation issue" is no excuse to stop discussing doctrine. Doctrine is important, we both agree. However,

br. Morris appears to distinguish between doctrine which saves (what he calls the "saving knowledge of justification") and other doctrine which has no impact on a person's salvation (such does "not undermine one's salvation"). So, he is still operating out of

the basic mindset of: does this teaching affect a person's salvation, yes or no? To that I ask: is that the mindset God teaches us to adopt?

This is a key point I challenge in my editorial: does the Bible teach us to examine every teaching through the lens of: this one is important for salvation (i.e. a salvation issue) and this one is not? Does Scripture teach us to divide the commands and promises and other teachings (i.e. doctrines) of God into "essential" and "non-essential" matters? I still do not see this in Scripture. Br. Morris points to Romans 14 for support, but is Paul distinguishing here between "essential" and "non-essential" teachings of God? No, this passage isn't even about the teachings of God. This passage is about "opinions" (v. 1 ESV) or "disputable matters" (NIV), not teachings given by God. The context makes clear that the issues at hand were "eating only vegetables" (v. 2) and "esteeming one day as better than another" (v. 5). These were matters early Jewish Christians struggled with as left-over from growing up under the laws of Moses which taught such things. The coming of Christ had fulfilled all these laws and abrogated them (see Mark 7:19; Acts 10:10-16), but some still thought it was beneficial to hold on to them. These were matters

of their personal conscience, a "weakness" (v. 2) in that respect, and not a matter of calling into dispute something the Lord actually taught. Paul says that the "weak" and the "strong" could abide by their own opinions on such matters so long as they were intent on glorifying God and did not look down or otherwise "judge" the other (vv. 5-9). There is nothing in Romans 14 that instructs us to discern between certain doctrines that are supposedly "secondary" and thus "non-essential" or those that are "primary" and thus "essential."

As far as I can see, asking whether a certain doctrine is a so-called "salvation issue" is simply the wrong question to ask. What is crystal clear is that the Bible repeatedly calls us to obey the Word of the Lord in all things (Matt 5:19; 23:23; 28:19-20; Heb 5:9; 1 John 5:2). The natural question that arises from that, and which should be a concern to every Christian, is: are we being obedient to our Lord? Do we believe and practice what our God has taught and commanded? When that is our focus, won't our unity as believers become readily apparent too?

With Christian greetings,
Peter Holtvlüwer

Psalms, Hymns and Hierarchy

A response to "A Better Way?" by Rev. J. Visscher

March 20, 2020 Vol. 69, No. 6

Rev. J. Visscher poses some interesting ideas on broadening the scope of what to sing in the churches. I do agree to keeping the Book of Praise (BoP) as is and not adding and deleting songs and issuing a new BoP every so many years. Good or bad, I also think there is a growing acceptance to sing more and more hymns, but that is not the issue I wish to draw to your attention at this moment. I hate to pick on Rev. Visscher again, but I have a question on what he

raised in the section "A synodical model." He asks us to consider what it says in Article 55, "The metrical psalms adopted by general synod shall be sung in their worship services." He asks, "On what is this based? Are there some Scripture passages out there which say that what we sing in worship must be approved by a general synod?" He then seems to give credibility to the accusation by "a well-known figure in the OPC ... that really Article 55 of the Church Order was proof of hierarchy."

As far as I know, the Canadian Reformed Churches together have agreed on what to sing in their worship services. Are federated churches not allowed to make agreements via their synods without being accused of hierarchy? The churches collectively have agreed to a church order and then hold each other accountable to what was agreed on. Is that not the way it works? Synods are then disbanded and have no jurisdiction over local churches. Mutual agreements can hardly be considered hierarchical. If that were so, then we could consider the entire church order hierarchical, not just one article.

The Presbyterian system of church government, by contrast and by their own admission, is an example of hierarchy. They have set up higher and lower courts. In their Book of Church Order (PCA BCO 14-1), "The General Assembly is the highest court of this church, [which] represents in one body all the churches thereof." Any decisions made by their lower courts can be overturned by the higher courts. Local churches do not have the final say. The Reformed community has consistently been at issue with this hierarchy and here are a few examples:

1) Bound Yet Free: Readings in Reformed Church Polity, Dr. S. Greijdanus (p. 58): "In this respect, the Westminster Synod (Chapter 31) was totally mistaken when it claimed, in the Westminster Confession, that 'the decrees and determinations' of synods and councils 'are to be received with reverence and submission, not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power of the assembly whereby they are made.'"

2) The late Dr. Faber challenged the Presbyterian brothers in Essays on Reformed Doctrine (p. 111), where he asks this about the Westminster Confession (Chapter 31): "The question is this: Does the juxtaposition 'not only ... but also' not give synods and councils a power that is reminiscent of hierarchism?"


3) A 2001 URCNA-OPC Study Committee Report states this in their report, "In the URCNA, the local church is viewed as complete and independent in that it receives direct authority from Christ. However, in the OPC, the general assembly seems to hold or at least to exercise authority over all the churches. It is one thing for churches to meet together for deliberations and commit themselves to certain procedures; but it is altogether another matter for a non-local assembly to exercise ecclesiastical authority over a congregation. This divergence deserves further discussion with the OPC, in order to remove misunderstandings and to understand more accurately the differences and similarities."

In the last paragraph with the heading, "A synodical model," Rev. Visscher suggests, "We may need to look deeper than new psalms and hymns, we may need to consider foundational matters, such as synodical control over what we sing. In addition, we may also need to reflect on giving local churches more of a say in what they sing." There is a lot in that suggestion, and it would likely generate a lot of discussion. The only thing I would point out at this time is that since the churches have mutually agreed to the Church Order, so changes should be done by mutual agreement as well. That may take some work and lots of patience, especially as the number of churches grow and more diversity sets in, but that is the challenge the Canadian Reformed Churches have "signed" on to, "for better or for worse."

Blessings,
Aubrey Vandergaag

Response

It would appear that br. Vandergaag (as well as Rev. D. Wynia – see Further Discussion, Vol. 69, No. 12)) is being a little alarmist in his reaction to my article, "A Better Way?" I make reference to an interaction with an OPC colleague on the matter of hierarchy and the inference ('it seems') is drawn that I am accusing

our Church Order of being hierarchical. What I was doing was not levelling an accusation but passing along a perception. To any number of OPC and URC members, our Church Order appears to be hierarchical when it restricts the matter of what we can sing in worship to the jurisdiction of general synod. 

I Am the Vine

1. I Am the vine. A-bide in me that you may live a - bun-dant ly.
 2. But those who did not bear him fruit he will cut off; them he'll up - root
 3. Re - main in me and in my love. Then God will bless you from a - bove.
 4. You did not choose me as your Lord but I chose you by my own - word.

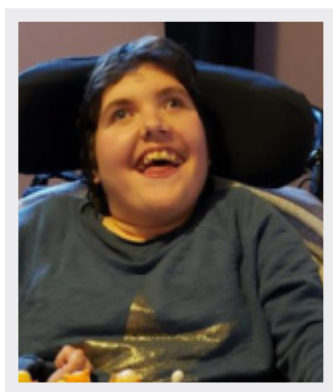
The gar - den - er, my - Fa-ther, will prune and make you more fruit - ful still.
 and cast a - way in - to the fire there to be burned in God's hot ire.
 O - bey my word and my com - mands to prove that you are my true friends.
 I have com - mis - sioned you to go so that your fruit may ov - er flow.

Text: John 15:1-17; vers. George van Popta, 2019
 Tune: Traditional English melody (early 18th century)

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 O WALY WALY

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

Sarah VanderGugten



Sarah lives at home in Smithville, Ontario with her parents, Henk and Louise, and older sister Michelle. LORD willing, Sarah will be twenty-five years old this year!

Sarah sits in a wheelchair and is fed through a G-tube, relying on others to care for her needs. She can often be seen sucking her thumb, waving her arms in front of her face, kicking out her legs, or banging and playing with the toys on her tray. Though she is legally blind and cannot speak, Sarah makes lots of noises to let you know she is there and how she is feeling! When

she is excited and happy, wants attention, or when she is tired of something, Sarah will scream very loudly to communicate that!

Just as she makes lots of noise, Sarah has a keen sense of hearing and loves listening to all kinds of different noises as well, the sillier the better! She has many toys that make various sounds and a big smile and laugh come across her face when someone plays with her. Sarah also loves listening to music, whether it be children's CDs or the radio. Old MacDonald is her favourite song! In addition, Sarah enjoys going out for walks in the neighbourhood and rides in the van. She sits contently without making a sound, unless we've stopped for too long! Sometimes we'll stop for ice cream and Sarah will get a few licks of Mom or Dad's as a yummy treat.

Sarah attended the special needs class at Gainsborough Elementary and Beamsville High School. She currently enjoys going to Community Living in Beamsville three days a week, where they do activities and go out on trips in the community, whether it is to the mall, an animal farm, a grocery store, or a walk by the beach.

Though not without its challenges, Sarah has been such a blessing to our family and we thank God for continued strength to care for her each day.

July Birthdays

Happy Birthday to the many of you celebrating a birthday in July! We wish you the Lord's blessing the coming year, and a wonderful day with family and friends.

4 James Buikema will be **59**

c/o R. Jager
627 Maple Ave
Burlington, ON L7R 1M7

11 Jeffrey Jansema will be **23**

158 Lane Road
Dunnville, ON N1A 2W1

14 Sarah VanderGugten will be **25**

23 Jane Street
Smithville, ON L0R 2A0

20 Charlie Beintema will be **45**

29 Wilson Ave
Chatham, ON N7L 1K8

20 Derrick VanderHorst will be **33**

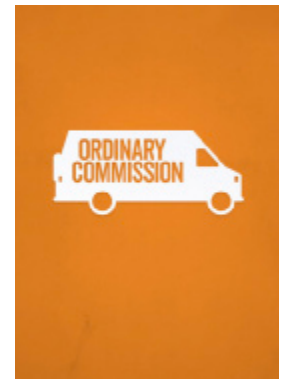
c/o Twin Oaks
3217 Twin Oaks Cres
Burlington, ON L7M 3A8
derrickvanderhorst@gmail.com

25 Joel Slomp will be **35**

316 Church Rd
Apartment 102
Spruce Grove, AB T7X 0G2
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25 Julie Ostermeier will be **32**

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



ORDINARY COMMISSION
Ephtwoeight Productions
Written and directed by
Jacob Valk & John-Michael Bout

To watch online visit:
ephtwoeight.com

Ordinary Commission

Throughout our Reformed congregations and communities, more and more attention is being given to the call to reach out to our neighbours in the Name of Christ. Congregations and councils are talking about what they can do in their particular locations. There is a shift from relying exclusively on ordained missionaries and organized mission projects to being active as individual believers.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:16: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." Paul instructs slaves in Titus 2:14 that they ought to behave in such a way that they "adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour." These words suggest that one way, at least, in which we are to make the gospel

known involves simply living our day to day lives as believers where people can see us, and get to know what makes us tick, namely, the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

According to a book that we studied recently as ministers in the Niagara area, personal interaction and personal relationships are aspects of the best kept secret of Christian mission.¹ You don't need special training; you don't need to learn any strategies or particular skills. You just need to take an interest in the people around you in your neighbourhood, your university, or workplace, and invite them to get to know you, and to observe as you live the Christian life. A recent book by Rosaria Champagne Butterfield² promotes hospitality as a very practical way for ordinary people to create a context in which this kind of interaction can take place.


This is what two young filmmakers from southern Ontario, Jacob Valk and John-Michael Bout, call, the "Ordinary Commission." In an effort to learn how "ordinary believers" can personally fulfil the great commission, Jacob and John-Michael customized a 1977 Dodge van and travelled to mission conferences in Florida and Texas. They chronicled their journey and their findings in a twenty-two-minute documentary, *Ordinary Commission*. At the conferences, they encountered two organizations that were established to provide ordinary Christians an opportunity to reach their communities with the gospel. The communities in question are made up of people who have hobbies in common: surfers and video gamers.

These are admittedly hobbies that come with several question marks, and even if a believer involved in these activities would avoid the pitfalls stereotypically associated with them, it would no doubt be a challenge to maintain the posture of being in the world but not of the world. By reputation, at least, there are questions about the content and the character of video games, and gamers spend an inordinate amount of time alone or in a virtual community. That raises questions about the appropriateness of deep involvement in video gaming. No one disputes that surfers and gamers need the gospel, or that Jesus associated with people considered undesirable by the religious community. It's also true that there are many "respectable" hobbies that can consume an inordinate amount of our time and money.

However, it's clear that before Christians immerse themselves in any activity, they should consider the implications and possible complications. How do we handle ourselves in clubs or groups that have questionable priorities, such as a community hockey or softball team that has a "win at all costs" ethic? What are some of the ethical barriers that could stand in the way for believers to become involved in community activities – for example, Sunday games or meetings?

For their part, Jacob and John-Michael do not intend to endorse these particular organizations or hobbies. They only want to use them as illustrations of how believers can fulfill the Ordinary Commission. That's the basic message of the documentary: we should look at the various communities in which we are involved as mission fields. The principle illustrated by organizations such as Christian Surfers and Love Thy Nerd can be applied to all kinds of communities, such as neighbourhoods and workplaces.

The point is that we all have neighbours in one context or another. Some live next door, down the hall, or down the road; some play hockey or bridge with us or belong to the knitting club; some work or study at the same place we do. The documentary makes it clear that our involvement in these communities gives us the opportunity to take up the Ordinary Commission and bring the gospel to our neighbours.

The documentary is accompanied by a workshop (i.e. leader's guide and questions), intended to facilitate a discussion of the Ordinary Commission and encourage viewers to think of ways in which they can carry it out. The workshop could be improved by including questions which encourage participants to reflect on the challenge of being "in the world, but not of the world" as we involve ourselves in various hobbies and activities. It might be helpful, for example, to include some reflection on the implications of Paul's warning in 2 Corinthians 6:14, "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers." Highly recommended for small groups and for study societies. 



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¹John Dickson, *The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission*

²Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*

