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What's Inside

Our issue begins with "Doctrinal Issues and the Canadian Reformed Churches" by Dr. James Visscher. He discusses how our federation deals with doctrinal issues that come up in our churches and why the CanRC does not tend to release theological statements of faith as other Reformed and Presbyterian sister churches have done.

Both sacraments are topics of these pages. There is an article by Dr. David W. T. Brattston entitled "Infant Baptism in the Early Church." We also have a letter to the editor and reply from Rev. James Zekveld on weekly communion.

Issue 19 reports on Spring Creek's farewell to the Holtvliuwer family. There is a Treasures, New & Old meditation, a canticle, a book review, and the You Asked and Ray of Sunshine columns.

Laura Veenendaal

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Doctrinal Issues and the Canadian Reformed Churches

Putting matters in context

From time to time the question comes up as to how the Canadian Reformed Churches deal with doctrinal issues. Why, for example, do the Canadian Reformed Churches not join their sister churches, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Church in the USA, and the United Reformed Churches in North America, in issuing periodic doctrinal statements at a synodical level on controversial theological issues?

For example, these three sister churches all issued detailed statements on federal vision, but the Canadian Reformed Churches remained silent. Some people have interpreted this silence as acquiescence or agreement. So, does the fact that the Canadian Reformed Churches refrained from making a statement mean that they secretly agree with federal vision?

Silence does not mean agreement

The answer is that this silence does not mean agreement. What observers need to realize is that as Canadian Reformed Churches we take a different approach to this and other matters of theological controversy.

What does this approach consist of? In the first place, it needs to be understood that the Canadian Reformed Churches are generally averse to making synodical statements and pronouncements. If people ask, "Where do the Canadian Reformed Churches stand on this or that issue?" they will usually be pointed in the direction of Holy Scripture and the Three Forms of Unity. It will be stated, "This is what we believe and confess! This is also what we will stand behind and defend." In other words, the stress is on being *confessionally* Reformed and no more. So, no quasi confessional pronouncements or extra doctrinal statements are common in the history of the Canadian Reformed Churches.

Still, this aversion is related not just to the confessions, but also to history. It needs to be kept in mind that many older members in the Canadian Reformed Churches went through a traumatic experience in The Netherlands in the 1940s that left a clear stamp on them. In those years, the church federation of which many of them were members made a number of doctrinal decisions at the synodical level. In and of itself that might not have been so bad, but then they proceeded to make these synodical decisions *binding* on all office bearers. They made it into official church doctrine. The approach was “bow and agree with this or you are out of the church.” The result was that many, many people said in good conscience that they could not bow, and thus they were expelled.

To give you a concrete example, my pastor while growing up in Ontario was at one time a minister in one of these Dutch churches, but he too refused to accept those synod decisions. The result was that one day he came home and found all of his furniture and possessions sitting on the sidewalk! He (and his family) had been evicted from the parsonage and he was no longer considered a minister in good standing in the federation.

The fallout from this experience in “the old country” is that many in what is now the Canadian Reformed Churches developed an aversion or a serious allergic reaction to extra synodical statements. Adopting such an approach brings back bad memories and exposes hidden fears.

Can heresies run rampant?

Yet some may wonder about this reaction and ask whether or not it will allow heresies and false teachings to run rampant in the Canadian Reformed Churches. The answer to that comes in understanding how the Canadian Reformed Churches handle controversial issues.

Normally, if someone teaches or preaches matters that are suspected to be a denial of Scripture and/or confession, the matter will be brought to the attention of the elders of the local church to judge. If their judgment is negative, then the offending brother or sister will be told to cease and desist. Failing that, he or she may, depending on the nature of the teaching, be

placed under church discipline. Should worse come to worse, excommunication will follow.

But now let us say that the offending party disagrees with the judgment of the elders; what can he or she do? They are free to appeal to the area churches meeting in classis. If they fail there, they are free to appeal to a forthcoming regional synod. Should they fail to win their case there, they can then appeal to the general synod for justice. In short, there are at least three or four opportunities to appeal a judgment of the elders. Why, if these members can find new grounds, they may even appeal to a subsequent general synod.

Erroneous doctrinal teachings

But now let us change the scenario. A brother or group of brothers comes up with a new doctrinal teaching and claims that it is orthodox and in step with the confessional basis of the church. Others, however, disagree and begin to accuse the brothers of heresy. Soon other members and churches become involved and controversy threatens to engulf the federation. What now?

It is again a matter of local adjudication in the first place. If and when the elders of a local church become aware of what might be deemed “false doctrine,” they will need to evaluate it and render a judgment. Should that judgment be negative but certain members still insist that they are in the right, they may appeal and follow the ecclesiastical route all the way to general synod.

It may also happen that a number of churches in a certain area or throughout the federation (classis or regional synod) impacted by the same suspect teachings appeal to synod to appoint a committee to study the matter and come with evaluations and recommendations.

A synod may concur and decide to appoint a committee to undertake such a study. Should the subsequent report identify the presence of heresy, it will report this to synod, calling on it to condemn said teachings.

The local churches in the federation are then expected to act on the decisions of synod. If there are members in their churches who are defending and promoting these erroneous

Adopting such an approach brings back bad memories and exposes hidden fears

teachings, they will be expected to renounce their errors. Failure to do so may result in church discipline being exercised.

Such, in simplified form, is the church political approach to doctrinal error in the Canadian Reformed Churches.

So, what about federal vision?

Keeping all of this in mind, we may do well to return to the matter of federal vision. Why was a study committee not appointed by one or other general synod? The reason is quite simple: no church or churches in the federation decided to bring this matter to the attention of a general synod. Why not? The simple reason is that federal vision never caused unrest or controversy in the Canadian Reformed Churches.

Now, there were members who asked about it and tried to understand it. There were also some who dabbled in it. A few ministers expressed appreciation for certain aspects of it. Yet none of this was of such a nature that disagreement, unrest, and

division arose in the churches. Nowhere did consistories feel the need to spring into action or experience pressure to restore “the peace of Jerusalem.” There was simply no theological fire burning in the churches that needed to be put out.

As a result, there were no requests from local churches for a synod to study this matter and no appeals against consistories for not acting or acting improperly in judging this matter. Unlike what was experienced in our sister churches to the south, federal vision never really took root north of the forty-ninth parallel.

As for the future?

Of course, no one can guarantee that as Canadian Reformed Churches we will continue to exercise such restraint in the future. Still, it can be expected that for the foreseeable future our churches will remain averse to issuing doctrinal statements. If and when they depart from that approach, it should only be on issues that come to general synod by way of the churches. **C**

MATTHEW 13:15
**TREASURES
NEW & OLD**

Enslaved for Lack of Knowledge

“And there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel.” (Judges 2:10b)

The term “generation gap” was coined in the 1950s, in relation to the baby boomer generation. The 50s and 60s were a time when apparently the younger generation liberated itself from much of what its parents had held dear in terms of music, values, politics, culture, religion, etc.

Generational change, though inevitable, often yields some level of disgruntlement among the older generation. Most of us are familiar with the remark, “Kids are different today. This would have never happened in our day.” Now, even though generational change can also bring positive developments, in

some cases the olden days were definitely better. We find that in the book of Judges. The generation of Joshua “had seen all the great work that the Lord had done for Israel” (2:7). They had seen Joshua’s victories over the kings of Canaan. They thus experienced firsthand the mighty power of God, which shaped them in a God-honouring way.


But then Joshua died. And this is where the problem began. After Joshua and his generation were gathered to their fathers, a huge gap emerged. 2:10b is a blaring statement that what Joshua and company had begun, the next generation would not rise up to complete. They did not know the Lord, abandoned the Lord, did evil in the sight of the Lord.

A heartbreaking commentary! Oh, the narrator does not mean that the generation after Joshua did not know *about* the Lord or his great works. They could *hardly* be ignorant about Yahweh or the facts of Israel’s history, like the exodus, the crossing of the Jordan, and the initial conquest of Canaan. But to know God is more than knowing about him. To know God is to also and especially trust him in a bond of intimate communion. Israel’s problem was that they cared nothing for the Lord and his work. They had forgotten that they were saved from slavery in Egypt, set apart at Mount Sinai, and ushered into the Promised Land of rest by their gracious, mighty God.

Judges 2:10 makes plain what happens when the Lord’s children don’t know their God. Sin takes a foothold, and enslaves its victims on account of their lack of knowledge. 2:11-15 confirms this as the distressing pattern in the cycle of the judges. God’s people are destroyed for lack of knowledge (Hos 4:6).

In what way do you know the Lord, who has made himself fully known in Christ? Knowing Christ is more than being able to clearly state the gospel of Christ crucified and raised. It is more than being able to smell unsound doctrine a mile away. You can know a great deal *about* Christ without much knowledge *of* him. True knowledge of your Saviour includes also trusting in him *alone*. To know the Lord is to have a concern about him

that engages the mind, the will, and the heart. Such knowledge is what frees the child of God from an enslaving cycle of sin. Knowing Christ is what will enable us to identify the false gods around us and help us to engage in holy war against the gods through the Word and prayer.

“This is eternal life,” Jesus prayed, “that they may know you, the one true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3). May our desire to know Christ reach beyond the belief that he is our Saviour, and *truly* know him – what pleases and displeases him. We all have the calling to know him who first knew us. Indeed, Christ as Saviour triumphed in his death and resurrection, with his people on his heart. This is the Christ who now sits in heavenly glory, and there meditates upon his people. And he prays that we might know him and delight in him, as the one to whom we belong. 

For further study

1. Which generation do you think has more zeal for the Lord – yours or the generation that precedes yours?
2. Compare “did not know” in 2:10 with the exact same phrase in 1 Samuel 2:12. How does the context there confirm the meaning of the phrase here in Judges?
3. Can you say with the apostle Paul, “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ my Lord” (Phil. 3:8)? If not, what might be preventing you from counting all as rubbish in favour of the inestimable worth of knowing Christ?



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Infant Baptism in the Early Church

Christian unity among Protestants becomes strained on the issue of the baptism of children too young to speak or to understand the ceremony. Although it is firmly established among Reformed, Lutheran, and Anglican – and even Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox – it is opposed as contrary to Scripture by Baptists and other denominations which trace their practice no further back than the sixteenth or seventeenth century.

Opponents of infant baptism make the following arguments: Infant baptism is not authorized in the New Testament; The Bible requires a living faith in Jesus and repentance to precede the sacrament; Young children are intellectually incapable of the required faith; Babies cannot tell right from wrong and hence cannot repent; All baptisms recorded in the New Testament are of believing adults. They claim their practice is more scriptural, but Calvinists who baptize children (paedobaptists) make the same claim for their own practice.

The paedobaptist Reformed often point to household baptisms in the Acts of the Apostles and a letter of Paul, which narrate that whenever a spouse/parent was converted and baptised, so were the rest of the family: Acts 10:44-48, 16:14-15, 16:30-34, 18:8; 1 Corinthians 1:16. The problem here is that the Bible does not explicitly state that any of the family members were under the age of discretion.

There is also Luke 18:15-17:

Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."

This passage has led to many interpretations, one that Christ has already received little children and hence they do not need baptism, and on the other hand, the church should not forbid parents from bringing their babies to the baptismal font. In fact, the difference among denominations is all a matter of Scripture interpretation. How can we determine which interpretations and arguments are correct?

Consulting sources

Consulting early postbiblical Christian sources helps give us a better idea of the meaning or the most accurate meaning of New Testament teaching. The early non-canonical sources reveal the presuppositions shared by the New Testament personages and their original hearers, and thus disclose the interpretation and lesson that persons contemporaneous with the biblical writers were intended to draw from them.¹

¹ Craig A. Evans *Noncanonical Writings and New Testament Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992) pp. 4, [178]-188.

To avoid reading into the early Christian past, or any past, only what we want to see there, we must obtain knowledge of the real past, based on the best evidence obtainable of what that past really was. Drawing from sources originating centuries after the events can yield errors and misconceptions. Better evidence comes from people who were personally acquainted with the characters, thought, and events of the era, or at least not many hands removed from them. Thus, consulting the earliest nonbiblical sources about the New Testament is superior to consulting ones that came much later in time, in which there was opportunity for misconceptions, deceptions, unwarranted assumptions, and other errors to creep in and distort their perceptions and knowledge, or render them wildly incorrect.

It is more probable that the teaching of Jesus and his apostles was preserved among Christians who were contemporary with them or with the first few generations of Christians after them, instead of the true faith and practice disappearing around the death of the last apostle, then long afterwards being perfectly restored by Mohammed in the seventh century or by Joseph Smith of the Latter-Day Saints in the nineteenth. Similarly, it is infinitely more credible that the correct interpretation of the Bible was preserved by these early generations than suddenly lost and came to light over fifteen centuries later.

Where the early Christian authors agree among themselves, it must be concluded that their interpretations were made within a structure received from the apostles not many years earlier. A consensus of early Christian authors on a point indicates what all wings of the ancient church agreed on. The fact that they agreed on certain things indicates that these things were handed down intact from apostolic times, for if all had departed from the original faith, they would have evolved separately and randomly and thus contradicted each other on significant points.²

Such writings can often break the tie between two equally-probable mutually-incompatible interpretations of Scripture. It certainly does so on the issue of paedobaptism vs. Baptists, Pentecostals, Mennonites, and others.

Practice of the early church

Churchmen in the first two centuries of Christianity spoke of the baptism of children as a given, and not a matter of dispute. The first was Irenaeus, who received Christian training from the pastor who was probably “the angel of the church in Smyrna” in Revelation 2:8, who in turn had been a disciple of the Apostle John. Irenaeus was later a pastor-bishop in France for many years. In the AD 180s, he wrote about the full humanity of Christ and the importance of this doctrine to readers, saying:

He came to save all through means of Himself—all, I say, who through Him are born again to God—infants, and children, and boys, and youths, and old men. He therefore passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, thus sanctifying infants; a child for children, thus sanctifying those who are of this age, being at the same time made to them an example of piety, righteousness, and submission.³

Hippolytus’s writing dates to the first three decades of the third century, in the century after Irenaeus, and an overlapping generation after Tertullian. He was a prominent pastor-bishop near the city of Rome, and for about twenty years was a rival bishop of the city, the first “antipope.” Around AD 217 he compiled a book drawing on earlier customs and routines, for the purpose of codifying the procedure for baptism and other church matters as they had descended from Christ’s first disciples. He meant it as a guide for clergy, and to enable laity to detect and rectify deviations from the heritage of the apostles. In describing the ceremony for group baptism, his book stated that the practice of church of his day, and presumably of the apostles, was to ask questions of the candidates about their faith and intended future practice. It stipulated: “The children shall be baptized first. All of the children who can answer for themselves, let them answer. If there are any children who cannot answer for themselves, let their parents answer for them, or someone else from their family. After this, the men will be baptized.”⁴

² Craig A. *Tertullian De praescriptione haereticorum* 28.

³ Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 2.22.4.


⁴ Hippolytus *Apostolic Tradition* 1.2.

⁵ Hippolytus *Apostolic Tradition* 21.4-5.

Baptism of babies is mentioned as a universal practice of the church around the turn of the 200s, as indicated even by a sectarian who opposed it. Tertullian had been a prominent lawyer in the city of Rome who, upon conversion to Christianity, became an elder in Tunisia. He was the most prolific ante-Nicene Christian author writing in Latin before Augustine, and is called “The Founder of Latin Christian Literature.” Partway through his writing career, he left the main body of the church and joined a sect that criticized the majority for moral laxity, lack of spiritual enthusiasm, slackness in religious observance, and for accepting the word of the established clergy instead of the revelations claimed by a prophet in the AD 170s. Tertullian’s books analyzed and contradicted the majority church, giving examples of where he thought it had gone wrong, often quoting its own words. While a dissident from the orthodox church, Tertullian advised against infant baptism on the principle that baptism cleanses from all previous sins. The church of his day imposed heavy penances for each individual sin committed after baptism to give proof that a backslider was really, thoroughly repentant.⁵ In fact, Tertullian counselled for delay in baptism at any age except in old age, when the possibility was remote of sinning further.⁶ By giving such advice, Tertullian indicated that baptism of children was already well established by the turn of the third century, even though some heretics thought it a bad idea. Their objection was not based on arguments that babies have never sinned, or are incapable of believing or of repenting, or that it is against the teaching of the apostles and New Testament, but because it increased the amount of

mortifying the flesh and good works necessary for regaining a right standing with God and the church.

Toward the end of our period of study came Origen, who was the foremost Christian Bible scholar and teacher of the first half of the third century AD. He was the leading church father of his own day and influenced the church for centuries afterwards. In his *Sermons on Joshua* he said as an aside that his hearers were infants in baptism.⁷ Elsewhere, he wrestled with the problem of how babies could be baptised for the remission of sins when they did not know right from wrong and lacked the physical and mental ability to break God’s law.⁸ After discussing the matter, he concluded that infant baptism was right because the church had always done it and therefore it must have descended from the apostles.⁹

Thus, we witness what was a universal practice in the second and third centuries, but no record of when it began, and no word of a first instance of baptising a baby, or protest that it was an innovation. There is recorded opposition to the beginning of instituting special buildings for Christian public worship (“churches”) in the middle of the third century,¹⁰ but none against the beginning of infant baptism. 

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⁶ Didascalia 6, 10; Hippolytus Commentary on Daniel 1.25.4; Irenaeus Against Heresies 1.13.5, 7; 3.4.3; Origen Homilies (or Commentary) on First Corinthians 24; Origen Homilies on Jeremiah 2.3.2, 12.3.3, 12.5.3, 16.7.1; Origen Homilies on Leviticus 11.2.6, 15.2.6; Origen Homilies on Psalm 37 passim; Tertullian On Modesty 5; Tertullian On Repentance 9, 11; L. Michael White, “Penance” Encyclopedia of Early Christianity, edited by Everett Ferguson (New York; London: Garland. 1990) p. 708.

⁷ Tertullian On Baptism 18.

⁸ Origen Homilies on Joshua 9.4.

⁹ Origen Homilies on Leviticus 8.3.4; Origen Homilies on Luke 14.5.

¹⁰ Origen Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans 5.9.1.

¹¹ Origen Against Celsus 1.5, 3.34; Origen Commentary on Matthew 16.21–22. The earliest known building given over exclusively to Christian worship was not erected until after AD 240.

Psalm 119

Part 1 of 3

An Acrostic Poem

Psalm 119, as is well known, is an acrostic poem. It is an extended meditation on the Torah, the “law” or “teaching” of the Word of God. It uses eight synonyms for Torah: law, commandment, statute, precept, testimony, word, promise, and teaching. It consists of twenty-two stanzas of eight verses each. In the first stanza each sentence begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in the second stanza each sentence begins with the second letter, and so on through the whole alphabet. The Hebrew alphabet is made up of twenty-two letters, and hence the twenty-two stanzas and 176 verses.

This version uses the English alphabet, which includes twenty-six letters. For the song to have twenty-two stanzas, like the original and Hebrew version, it was possible to avoid having to use the four letters Q, X, Y, and Z.

The well-known Genevan 119 tune is used for the musical setting because of its close association with the psalm. Whereas the metre of Genevan 119 was used, the rhyming scheme was not, largely because an acrostic poem puts the emphasis on the first letter of the line rather than on the rhyming of the final syllable of the line.

Using the parameters of acrostic and tune the result is likely more of a hymn based on Psalm 119 than a strictly literal versification of it.

George van Popta

An Acrostic

(A-G)



1. All they are blest who walk o-be-dient-ly

Ac-cord-ing to God's cove-nant tes-ti-mon-ies.



A-against what's wrong they stand whole-heart-ed-ly

Ad-vanc-ing on-ly praise to God in heav-en.



And so I know that I won't be a-shamed.

Al - le-lu-ia, do not for-sake your ser-vant!

2. But how can youth remain pure all their days?

By careful reading of your perfect precepts.

Beyond all measure is your holy law.

Buried and stored, your word is like a treasure

Blessed are you, oh teach me your decrees

Basking in joy I'll not forget your judgments.

3. Come and deal richly with your servant, LORD.

Close not my eyes so that I'll see your statutes.

Comfort this pilgrim as I walk the earth.

Consumed am I with longing for your guidance.

Chasten the proud who wander far astray.

Counsel all those who keep your testimonies.

4. Dust is the substance to which my soul clings.

Devoted am I to your ordinances.

Direct me to your wondrous works and ways.

Deliver me from all that's false and treach'rous.

Delightful is the pure and faithful path.

Do open wide my heart for your commandments.

5. Expound to me your statutes, which I'll keep.

Enlighten me that I may know your precepts.

Each of your laws are my delight and joy.

Establish now your promise to your servant.

Enable me to turn to you my eyes

E'en as I long for all your perfect rulings.

6. Fulfill to me the promise that you made

For then I will have answers for my taunters.

Forsake me never but give me your word.

Forever will I walk before my Saviour.

Fearless I'll be to speak before the kings

Flinging to you my hands in love and worship.

7. Good is your word in which you've made me hope.

Great is the comfort that your promise gives me.

Gone are the traitors who derided me.

Gleefully will I sing about your statutes.

Gloom of the night cannot erase my joy.

Grow greater love in me for all your precepts.

Text: Psalm 119:1-56

Vers.: George van Popta, 2020

Geneva, 1551

Give Thanks!

God is always so good to me;
I will praise him all day long!
Victory is mine though Christ;
Even when things are dark, he is ever near.

Though underserved, treasures abound;
Have everything I need, and so much more.
And yes, Jesus loves me the Bible tells me so,
Never will he leave me, and his promises are true;
Keping his unsleeping eyes on the whole world; I'm
Singing joyful praises to Almighty God day and night!

By **Connie Van Amerongen**

October Birthdays

3 Janell DeBoer will be **30**
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Happy birthday to the many of you celebrating a birthday in October!
 What a blessing it is every year to celebrate another year in the service
 of the Lord. We wish you all the Lord's blessings as you celebrate your
 special day with family and friends.

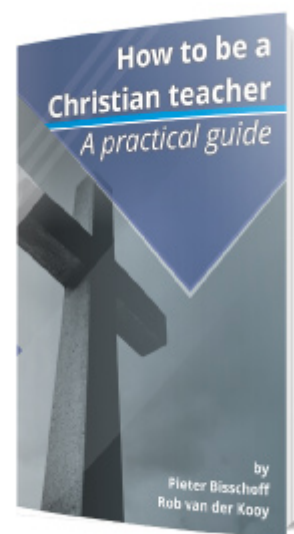
How to be a Christian Teacher: *A practical guide*

Between the two of them, Pieter Bisschoff and Rob van der Kooy have close to half a century of experience as Reformed Christian educators in South Africa. Many of these years included positions of leadership, at least in part as colleagues. Their book aims to clarify “what it means to teach as a Christian and elaborating on the richness and benefits of Christian education.” They have a practical rather than a theoretical mindset, thinking of teachers in both Christian (including missional) and publicly funded schools. This target audience inevitably overlaps only partially with what Canadian Reformed schools identified as the “Signifiers of Reformed Education.”¹

The book allows for topical study but also for systematic conversation. It has five parts: Defining a Christian school, the Task and role of the Christian teacher Forming and guiding learners, Subject approaches for primary and secondary teachers, and Foundations. Each part has ten brief chapters, which, in turn, state objectives and suggestions for further discussion. The Christian view is clearly present throughout, often with fitting Scripture references. The *Foundations* part addresses topics such as the roles of the Bible, worldview, science, government, and the history of education, but also Bible instruction and telling Bible stories.

The part on *Defining a Christian school* suggests core elements of its mission. In summary, the authors include three elements that must be “kept alive in the hearts of the teachers, parents and learners:” (1) faith in and submission to the Triune God as he sovereignly gathers his church; (2) recognition of the triad of sin-salvation-service and its application in the cultural mandate under God’s providential care; and (3) a focus on Jesus Christ and his sovereignty in all subject areas and its meaning for parents and teachers. Throughout the book, mission schools are implicitly in view, but it is precisely in the focus on reasons for and practicalities of such schools (pp. 128 ff) that these three elements find application. This part also addresses aspects such as the reasons for and the role, character, and management of the Christian school, and how to self-assess based on ten relevant characteristics.

This is a practical book, written in an African context, but much of what it offers is equally edifying in other parts of the world. The text is very accessible, and can be downloaded for free at christianstudylibrary.org. While you are at it, you may want to explore what else christianstudylibrary.org has to offer. Warmly recommended for all who are involved in Reformed education! 



How to be a Christian Teacher * *A Practical Guide*

By Pieter Bisschoff and Rob van der Kooy
Publisher: Koers
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235 pages

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¹These signifiers include that Reformed schools are covenantal and confessional, recognize the Antithesis, and pursue unity of purpose between home, church, and school. That is, they exist to teach children of the covenant (i.e., church members) on the basis of the covenant; they unabashedly bind themselves to the Reformed confessions and aim to instruct their students accordingly; they are acutely aware that, until Christ’s return, the struggle of Genesis 3:15 continues unabated both within God’s people and between those who seek God and those who counsel together against the Lord and his Anointed; and, finally, they work together with the homes and the church community to bring up these children in the fear of the Lord.

* Download your free copy here: https://www.christianstudylibrary.org/files/pub/articles/Pieter-Bisschoff_How-to-be-a-Christian-Teacher.pdf

What do we mean by our references to the Three Forms of Unity and Articles of Faith?

Today we refer to the Three Forms of Unity as the confessions mentioned in the forms for baptism, profession of faith, and the Lord's Supper. Did we at one time speak of the Articles of Faith? Why is it so important that we now have the Three Forms of Unity referred to?


It is important indeed that we know what we mean when referring to "the confessions" (as taught here in this Christian church) as in the question in the Form for the Public Profession of Faith. Indeed, in this particular form (as in the Form for the Baptism of Infants), the original expression "articles of the Christian faith" was changed by the GS Cloverdale 1983 to "the confessions." In the Form for the Baptism of Adults these articles were called "articles of the Christian religion," which also was changed to "the confessions as taught here in this Christian church." The original expression, however, referred to the Apostolic Confession (Apostles Creed, one of our Ecumenical Creeds) while now the expression "confessions" implies a reference to all the "confessions," i.e. the Ecumenical

Creeds and the Three Forms of Unity, as the "confessions" adopted by our federation of churches.

Not to confuse the matter, I will refrain from elaborating on these changes, which happened, rightly or wrongly, to bring all these forms together with a *unified* expression: "The confessions taught here in this Christian church" (a contested matter to this day, to be sure), and to have a *broader* basis for our life of faith in the more recent and extensive confessions of the Reformation. The question, however, is seeking clarity on the expressions *per se*. And these confessions as adopted by our churches are being used indeed to teach the youth of the church and to instruct the congregation in the afternoon services of our churches, while they are also used to instruct inquirers and new converts. In the

instruction of the latter category the Heidelberg Catechism especially is used as a didactic summary of the doctrine of salvation, while such inquirers are made familiar with the other “confessions.” At least, that’s how I have always used our confessions in order to equip them before their public profession of faith when they will be asked the question: “Do you wholeheartedly believe the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confessions and taught here in this Christian church?”

The Three Forms of Unity is a unifying name for the three Reformed confessions our churches adopted as faithful expression of the doctrine contained in the Old and New Testament: the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort. The Ecumenical Creeds contain the *articles of faith*, articulating the teachings of Scripture as adopted by the early synods of the Christian church (first to fourth century AD). Through our ecclesiastical fellowship with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church we have also become familiar with the so-called Westminster Standards (“standards” being another equivalent of the name “confessions”): the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Larger

Catechism, and the Shorter Catechism. In the history of the church, especially in the days of the Great Reformation, churches in Europe adopted other Reformed confessions, such as the Confessions of Zwingli, of Calvin, of France, of England, etc. or the Lambeth Articles, the Irish Articles, the Augsburg Confession, the Helvetic Confession, to mention a few. So, just as our churches in The Netherlands, and subsequently continental Reformed churches in North America, adopted the Three Forms of Unity, churches in other countries adopted their own (the Westminster Standards, for instance, adopted by Presbyterian Churches in England, have been characterized as well as “full-out reformed confessions”!). 



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ASK A QUESTION

Is there something you've been wanting to know?
An answer you've been looking for? Send us your
most thought provoking questions to explore
in our **You Asked** column.

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Farewell to the Holtvlüwer Family

By Harold and Joyce Olij


On July 12, 2020, our congregation heard the last sermons from Rev. Peter Holtvlüwer as our pastor. Due to the COVID-19 restrictions, half the congregation could attend in person and half via livestream. The previous day, congregation members in groups of up to ten at a time visited the Holtvlüwer family to bid them farewell. Our church family in Spring Creek has grown and changed much over the almost ten years that Rev. Holtvlüwer served in our midst. As well as those who joined our congregation, many loved ones were born into our families. Approximately seventy of our members joined with members of the Dunnville congregation to start a new church in Niagara South (Welland). In addition

to his preaching and teaching, the sacraments of baptism and Lord's Supper were administered faithfully through his years of service. We were taught how to serve and show Christian love and discipline. Through his preaching and teaching, our hearts and minds were brought again and again to the Word of God.

Rev. Holtvlüwer began his last sermon noting that it was fitting that the text for his last sermon was Lord's Day 1. It had been his privilege and pleasure to preach the gospel summarized so well in this Lord's Day – what is your only comfort in life and in death. During his ministry, we could be fed with the good news from all parts of Scripture, both the Old and New Testament, the gospel of the wonderful redemption and new

life the Lord gives in Jesus Christ. His theme for the sermon was "My only comfort is that Christ has set me free. I am free from the devil's grip, the devil's threats and the devil's service." The gospel contains spiritual comfort that lasts. Jesus sets us free from the bondage to Satan! He has freed us from the judgement we deserve because of our sin, by which we are enslaved to Satan. As believers, we now belong in body and soul to him. This not only gives us great comfort, but also calms our fears. We no longer need to fear death or the threats of Satan, who has been disarmed by Christ. Death is now an entrance into eternal life. And not only that, now that we belong to Jesus, our lives here on earth are protected. Even the hairs of our head are numbered. So, we can live each day knowing that whatever happens, God our heavenly Father will be near to us. He gives us the strength to live for him, freeing us from the service to Satan. Let us continue as congregation to live for Christ! Even though Rev. Holtvlüwer may be leaving, that does not change our relationship with Christ. We belong to him, and that is forever.

Following the service, we had the opportunity to express our gratitude for the gifts that were given to us in our pastor, Peter, his wife Erica, and their family. Songs were sung, there were several presentations, and letters of blessing and encouragement were read from neighbouring Canadian and United Reformed congregations. The letters spoke of the appreciation of the work of Rev. Holtvlüwer within the neighbouring churches and in Classis Niagara, and also wished our congregation in Spring Creek the Lord's blessing in searching for a new pastor and teacher. We also especially enjoyed a video of children in the congregation reciting verses from Psalm 33. It was beautiful and heart-warming to see the parents teach their children texts from the Word of God. Fond words of farewell were spoken by the pastor and his wife, Erica. We enjoyed ice cream bars and socializing (at a distance) following the service. From the congregation, the Holtvlüwers received gifts including a bird-bath inscribed with Matthew 25:41.

May the Lord bless Rev. Holtvlüwer and his family as they take up their new pastorate in the town of Ancaster. 



Dear Editor:

I read with interest Rev. Zekveld's article advocating for weekly use of the Lord's Supper (*Clarion*, Vol 69, No 15). He makes many good points in support of more frequent observance of the sacrament. However, I became troubled by the strong words in his conclusion. At the risk of coming across as stubborn, errant, and defective in theology, I will attempt to point out several flaws in his reasoning.

First, I can agree with Rev. Zekveld that there are many patterns laid down by Scripture for our benefit. Calvinists in general subscribe to the "regulative principle of worship" to various degrees. But it does not follow that every pattern narrated in Scripture is prescriptive. Polygamy, slavery, and treating women as property are patterns laid down in Scripture but are neither condoned nor commanded. Today the church rightly abhors them as antithetical to the creation order. To use New Testament examples, are we neglecting to make room in our weekly liturgy for speaking in tongues, interpretations, and prophecy (1 Cor 14)? Are those women who refuse to cover their heads when they pray in church stubborn, errant, and theologically defective (1 Cor 11:2-16)?

Second, Rev. Zekveld makes no convincing argument that the frequency of the Lord's Supper (beyond a "regular observance") has any bearing on its effectiveness. If it was to our benefit to celebrate it more often, there would be no principled argument, only a pragmatic one, against the practice of observing the Lord's Supper all day, every day.

Rev. Zekveld concludes that there is "no principled stance against weekly communion." That is a straw-man argument. To

my knowledge, no one has suggested that weekly communion is biblically unprincipled. The author is also trying to prove his stance from a negative. If he is accusing others of being errant and defective in theology, it is incumbent upon him to do more than simply prove that his position is scripturally consistent. He must prove that all other practices are scripturally inconsistent. In my view, he has failed to do so.

Finally, Rev. Zekveld makes an egregious false equivalence with believer's baptism. Believer's baptism is an entirely different man-made sacrament, with entirely different meaning than biblical baptism. It denies the covenant with believers and their seed. It demonstrates a synergistic understanding of regeneration. It focusses on man's decision rather than God's promises. These are truly errors and defects of theology. Adjusting the frequency of the Lord's Supper is comparable to a young couple who delays their baby's baptism by a week for pragmatic reasons. Though we could quibble about the timing, the forms do not change, the administration of the sacrament stays the same, and the meaning is preserved.

A better equivalence would be the argument for an exclusive psalmody, or for unaccompanied congregational singing, or for a shared cup at the Lord's Supper. All these positions are theologically sound and have strong historical precedents. However, just as the case of weekly communion, there is no compelling evidence that these practices are strictly prescribed in Scripture.

Neil Dykstra
Smithers, BC

Correction In a recent issue of Clarion (Vol 69, No 17) the incorrect author line and photo was placed with the article *Why Would a Christian Sing?* The article should have been attributed to Rev. Clarence Bouwman. Our apologies to **Rev. Clarence Bouwman** and **Rev. Clarence VanderVelde** for the mix up!

Response

Thank you for your letter. I'm glad to get some pushback because it means we are both serious about what God calls us to do in worship.

Brother Neil Dykstra is not so concerned about a more frequent practice of communion, but rather is concerned about how I bind the conscience of the Christian in this matter. He is correct to see that thrust in my argument. I am not saying frequent communion is a good idea. I am saying that communion is what it is to worship God with his body. We see this in the Old Testament in the peace offering and other eaten offerings. When you approach God, you eat before him. We see this in the New Testament. We are now in the very courts of Mt. Zion. Now we eat with him. In this aspect, the issue is even weightier in the New Testament.

Now, Brother Neil's objection is very reasonable, but one that I believe is wrong. As Canadian Reformed Churches, we bind ourselves to two services every Sunday. If we can do this, we ought to also bind ourselves to a frequent practice of communion, at least weekly. The Word and the sacrament are always deeply connected in Scripture.

Now, I have a question for my brother: What does God want us to practice in worship? (I am speaking of corporate worship here.) Surely worship has some content that we are called to practice. Is it worship if there is no prayer? Is it worship if there is no Scripture? Is it worship if there is no fellowship? If you believe corporate worship should have some content, then without that content, worship cannot fully be worship.

Brother Neil is giving priority to the wrong question. Before he asks what is necessary to worship and what is not required in worship, he needs to ask, "What is worship?" or, "What is the content of worship?" Once he knows the nature of the matter, then he can begin to distinguish between the weightier and

less weighty matters of the administration of God's work of reconciliation.

I assume with many of the Reformed that Acts 2:42 provides the basic elements of worship that God calls his people to devote themselves. These are the Apostles' teaching, the breaking of the bread, the fellowship, and the prayers. We have content for our devotion.

The Reformed have not taken the discussion in 1 Corinthians 11-14 in the same way. That describes a local manifestation of worship, which, though it included the elements of Acts 2, also had other features which other churches did not necessarily practice. There are also other questions about how these elements are time-bound. Many theologians have recognized that certain aspects, such as tongues and prophecies, are bound to that time. I say this to demonstrate that I see a distinction between the particular reform I am arguing for and the various issues Brother Neil raises.

All this is bound up in remembering God. We remember him through his Word, through his meal, through his fellowship, and his prayers. It's not about having a rule and a regulation; that was the Pharisee's understanding. It is about genuinely desiring to remember God. If we have that desire, we will want to have the fullness of worshipping God. What does it mean to "love God with all our heart soul and mind"? How do we fail to do that?

For a different example: Think about personal prayer. The only thing I would say off the pulpit concerning prayer would be "pray without ceasing." If somebody prays three times a day or four times a day, perhaps, given the circumstances, once a day, I think it is reasonable to say that they take this command seriously. If somebody prays once a week, even once every other day, I believe I am justified in saying that this person fails to remember God.

It's similar with communion: the Bible establishes a pattern of regular communion. I'd be happy to say a church obeys God if it practices seven times a week, or three times a week, or once a week, possibly even bi-weekly considering the reasons. Most of us would have a similar judgement if a brother went to a church where he received one ten-minute sermon every week. The failure to demonstrate our desire to serve God fully in this matter points to a failure in our hearts.

How do we know whether we are seeking to obey God in these things? I have a couple of initial theses that might help.

A weekly pattern is a good place to start because that is a pattern we already observe and that has been observed from the beginning.

If a church refuses to practice communion more frequently because of a tradition of quarterly communion, they resist the pure administration of the sacraments. As soon as we begin to resist a more frequent communion according to the commandments of men, we demonstrate a heart problem.

If a church refuses to practice communion more frequently because of particular formalisms that have attached themselves to the Lord's Supper, they resist the pure administration of the sacraments. Once again, there is a dependence on the commandments of men here. We have our forms, and they make it hard to do communion every week. The natural answer is we must change the forms. In the Canadian Reformed Churches, that is a bit of a process, but it is a process we must work through. The basic form of communion our Lord gave us in Scripture is simple, straightforward, and easily translatable into many different contexts.

If a church refuses to practice communion more frequently because they fear how visitors will respond, they resist the pure administration of the sacraments. Once again, we have a fear of

man that is greater than the fear of God. God promises to use our worship to advance his kingdom. He promises that through communion, we announce the work of Christ until he comes. That is something we do by faith, not by sight.

If a church is willing to practice communion every day, they should not be despised, but honoured for their devotion to God. We give the caveat that they do so with good order, recognizing that the place of the preaching of the Word in connection with communion, and particularly the truth that the sacrament is the seal of the Word. It should be assumed that I would do the same for a church that provides sermons every day.

There is a place for pragmatism. In general, we cannot have a full corporate service every day. Even if we did, I believe that there is a place for a shortened service, which will miss some of the elements. If four elements are worship, practicing one of those elements as a body is still worship. There is also a natural order of the elements, with the Word taking primacy, meaning that if we want to worship with one another more, we will prioritize the Word. This is all due to human weakness, which is not in itself sinful. I speak of the fact that we are flesh, something we share with the pre-fall Adam.

The question is contextual. I believe that we disobey God, not because, strictly speaking, we do not practice communion weekly, but because of the how, why, and where of our practice. We claim to be people of the Word, and yet we do not show our devotion to God through one of the great means of grace given by God. We do not desire to follow the traditions that the apostles patterned for us.

Calvin is right, "Our practice is defective." We must reform our practice.

In Christ,
James Zekveld

