

Clarion



What's Inside

Issue 3 of our volume is led by Rev. Matthew Van Luik's editorial, which contrasts life under the law and life led by the Spirit.

Rev. Clarence Bouwman poses the question: "Do We Need to Go to Church?" His answer? Yes and no. Read on to find out why. Next, we have "How to Respond to Conspiracy Theories" by Ilse VanderMeulen.

Nooksack Valley reports on the installation and welcome of Rev. Calvin Vanderlinde as pastor. Our issue also contains a book review and a Treasures, New & Old meditation.

Laura Veenendaal

Clarion

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LEAD ARTICLE



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Led by the Spirit and Not Under the Law

One of the amazing aspects about God's Word is that we can read the same words many times, and still discover new and fresh perspectives. This often happens because the message is speaking into the experiences of our life. Recently I was preparing to preach on the Holy Spirit, and read the words of Paul in Galatians 5:18, "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." Paul writes this in a missionary context where he has witnessed hundreds of men and women come to faith. They did not come to faith because he preached the law, but through the preaching of Jesus Christ. It was not the law that changed them, but the Spirit who changed them into new people.

The reason for my own new appreciation for these words of Paul is simply witnessing how people who did not know Christ come to submit their lives to Christ. Their lives changed not as a result of preaching the law, but through preaching and teaching Jesus Christ. When the Spirit leads people to Christ, their new desire is to submit themselves to Christ.

He gives us the Spirit, for it is the heart that needs to change

Contrast: the flesh and the Spirit

Paul contrasts the lives of those who live by the desires of the flesh to those who live by the Spirit. He says in Galatians 5:19 that the acts of the flesh are obvious. Everyone knows what the acts of the flesh are; they flow naturally from our hearts. He says they are things like sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, hatred, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissension, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and the like. When you follow the desires of your heart, these are the kind of things you will do.

On the other hand, those who live by the Holy Spirit live a different life. Paul writes in verse 18, "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." After Paul writes about the sinful desires of the flesh, we would expect him to write, "and this is how you are to live according to God's law." What may be surprising to us is that Paul does not characterize the life of a Christian as that of law keeping. He does not say that you know one another as Christians by the fact that you keep all the laws of God. Too often, in our minds, we think about Christians as law keepers, who are really good at obeying and keeping the law of God.

Law keepers

Some of the best law keepers in the world were the Pharisees and leaders of Israel. They even had rule upon rule to make sure they kept all the laws of God. The purpose for keeping the law was to be worthy of God's salvation. The sinners and tax collectors therefore became outcasts in Israel, so that law-abiding citizens in Israel would never associate with such people. The danger continues to exist that as Christians we act as if the way to salvation is to keep the laws of God and follow the right rules in our lives. This perspective can reveal itself in an attitude of pride when we look down on others who have fallen into sin or struggle to lead a life by the godly standards we

have in our own minds. This attitude is also displayed by God's people when they feel they are not worthy of God's grace: if God knows my sins, it is impossible for God to show his grace to me. We feel in our hearts that God's grace is only for those who are excellent law keepers.

The reality is that God demands much more from us than just being good law keepers. That is the reason he gives us the Holy Spirit, for it is the heart that needs to change. Keeping rules and laws are surface things, they are outward actions that put a nice veneer on our lives. Remember what Jesus said to the Pharisees and leaders of Israel who prided themselves on being great law keepers: "You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean" (Matt 23:27). Jesus says, this is what religion often looks like. Beautiful on the outside but filthy inside; it looks pure on the outside but is corrupt inside. The law can never change what is inside of us, it can never change your heart. We need to be changed from the inside out, and that can only be accomplished through the power of the Spirit. Then, from our heart, we will begin to produce the fruit of the Spirit.

The fruit of the Spirit

The fruit of the Spirit is "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such there is no law" (v. 22). Paul adds, "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." The Spirit's work takes place in our hearts. There, Paul says, he crucifies, or he puts to death the flesh with its passions and desires. The desires of the flesh he wrote about earlier are put to death and he raises up a new desire in our heart that produces the fruit of the Spirit.

When you look at the list of that fruit, you will notice they are not a new list of rules, but they describe new attitudes at work within us. The Spirit changes the whole attitude of our lives. When love begins to rule in our hearts, then the works of the flesh such as hatred, jealousy, rage, (things that naturally live in us) are put to death. When love is the new attitude in us, then we do not just serve God according to his law, but now I want to give my whole life, I want to sacrifice everything for the sake of my Lord. Now I serve God, not because God commands me to, but because it is my utmost joy to serve my Lord. The work of the Spirit does something to you that goes way beyond anything that the law can do in you.

Can you imagine, instead of having anger that continually boils to the surface, I now learn to show kindness to the person

who just hurt me! Without the Spirit my heart would be filled with hatred, but now through the Spirit my love for others is so great that I desire to serve him or her. It means that I now learn to be gentle and patient when before I could be impatient and harsh. In the past I had no self-control over my sinful desires, but through the Spirit I learn self-control.

Listening to the gospel

This work of the Spirit becomes visible in the life of new believers. In our society, people think about Christians as law keepers who seek to force their laws on the rest of society. Something very interesting happens when people come to listen to the gospel. The gospel is not the proclamation of God's law, but it proclaims the saving work of Jesus Christ. When people come to know the Lord Jesus, the Spirit immediately begins to work faith in them. Faith in Christ changes their view about the world and their understanding of themselves. The new life they have in Christ begins to produce fruit in which they begin to love God and to love their neighbours. Instead of using God's name in vain, they now speak his name reverently. Instead of speaking in hurtful ways against those who have hurt them, they now desire that such a person also comes to know the love of Christ.

When we finally come to teach new believers about the law (third part of the Heidelberg Catechism), they discover that the


from the inside out so that we have a new attitude towards the wealth he gives us.

Parents and children

This has implications for other areas of life as well. As a parent, your role is not just to raise your children to be great law keepers. Children who only do what they are told out of fear are not taught what it means to live out of thankfulness to the Lord. Our goal as parents is not to instill in our children the rules they need to follow, but it is to teach them about the motivation in their heart. You cannot help your children deal with the motivation in their heart unless you first teach them about the love of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, one of the most important things you can do for your children is to pray for them. Intercede with the Lord to work in the heart of your children with his Spirit so that they may grow up with love in their hearts for their Saviour. Then they will not become law keepers, but children who desire to worship and serve their Lord with their whole heart.

Ministry in the church a reflection of Christ's love

It also has implications for the work of ministers, elders, and deacons in the church. Our calling is not to make everyone in the church perfect law keepers. The reality is that you will deal both with weak and strong members in the church, some who struggle with sin and others who may seem to be strong in their faith. Notice that those who came to Jesus Christ were not the great law keepers in Israel, but it was the sinners and outcasts. They came to him, for although Christ was the sinless one, yet he understood the struggles in their lives. He did not change them by imposing impossible demands upon them, but he showed them his love.

He walked alongside of them, he spoke to them about his love, and he told them what he would do for them; he would give his life for them. The Spirit opened many hearts so that many followed their Lord out of love for him. Their lives were changed because of the compassion of their Saviour. As office bearers, as brothers and sisters, the Lord gives us the privilege to walk alongside fellow believers who are suffering as a result of their own sins, and to offer to them the grace of God in Christ Jesus. Only when we are led by the Spirit can we truly change and devote our whole life to the Lord. "O Spirit, by your power our faithfulness increase, and reap in us your harvest of love and joy and peace" (*Book of Praise*, Hymn 48). 

Something very interesting happens when people come to listen to the gospel

Christian life is not about rule keeping but it is a matter of serving God and our neighbour out of love. When God commands, "you shall not steal," he does not just forbid us from taking other people's money, but God demands that we use the riches he has given us to serve others. What is most important is our attitude towards the riches that God gives to us. The Spirit is working

Freed from the Fear of Death

“Since therefore, the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.” (HEBREWS 2:14, 15)

Does the fear of death master your life? Over the last year, society has been governed out of a fear of death. Every behaviour was scrutinized with fear: “How likely is this behaviour to spread COVID-19 and cause death?” In some cases, showing love was prohibited for the sake of preserving life. The fear of death forced a certain approach to life. Love was redefined as helping others avoid death at whatever cost. The fear of death is a powerful influencer.

Apart from Jesus Christ, the grim reaper guides your path. Wherever people see the grim reaper, they shy away from the path – even if the path is good and right. People make “bucket lists” because death is coming. Relationships are broken because we “only have one life to live.” Ears are shut to the cries of the suffering because we must take care of our own life first. The fear of premature death leads people to prioritize themselves over others.


Who is the puppeteer making humanity dance to the fear of death? Hebrews 2 tells us, “The one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.” What is the devil’s power of death? It is not the power to number a person’s days, to end life. No, that power belongs to God alone. God spoke to Adam and Eve and told them: the day you eat of the fruit you will die (Gen 2:17). God’s Word makes clear that death is God’s judgment on sinners (Ps 90:3; Rom 6:23).

So, what is Satan’s power of death? It is the lie that you have only one very finite life to live. It is the lie that you must get everything out of life now because the coming tomorrow is never promised. It is the lie that if you miss out in this life, you will forever miss out on life. It is giving in to sin’s temptation, to have your best life now. And so, humanity dances to the devil’s lies and makes decisions guided by their fear of death.

Hear the truth of Hebrews 2 and be set free. Jesus Christ, a true human being, shattered the chains of death. He lived a perfect life and died on the cross in our place. As he breathed his last, his perfect life was offered as the necessary atoning sacrifice for all those who loved their own life more than the

love of God. Three days later, he rose from the dead. Death could not hold him (Acts 2:24), for death had no rightful claim upon him. Through his death, he destroyed the one who had the power of death over you.

By faith in him, you are forgiven and forever set free from the punishment of death. In Christ, death has no claim on you and no power over you. You are set free from the fear of death. You are set free to live and love without the fear of death unduly influencing you. Because he lives, you also will live (John 14:19). Through the blood the lamb, we do not love our earthly life so much as to shrink away from showing love because of fear of death (Rev 12:11). Instead of being mastered by Satan or by his instrument, the fear of death, our Master is Jesus Christ and he guides us in perfect love without fear of death.

Yes, we will one day die. But the believer’s death is qualitatively different. As the Heidelberg Catechism states so simply: “Our death is not a payment for our sins, but it puts an end to sin and is an entrance into eternal life” (LD 16, Q/A 42). Our dying is a door to eternal glory. 

For Further Study

1. Does it change how you view the fear of death when you see it is a powerful instrument wielded by Satan?
2. What decisions have you made recently where your fear of death was a major factor?
3. In what practical ways does freedom from the fear of death allow you to live a life of sacrificial love?
4. What does a life free from the fear of death look like to you?



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Do We Need to Go to Church?

The question atop this article may raise an eyebrow among the readers – for the answer is surely so obvious: of course we’re meant to go to church. I agree. In Lord’s Day 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism, we’ve captured the will of God as revealed in Scripture: “...on the day of rest, I diligently attend the church of God...”

And yet ... I’m going to say that the accurate answer to that question is both “Yes” and “No.” There’s a distinction here that speaks specifically to the restrictions we’ve been (and maybe still are) experiencing across our land. I’ll try to work this out.

Yes

The Lord God instructed his people Israel to treat the Sabbath as a day of “solemn rest, a holy convocation” (Lev 23:3). The term “convocation” translates the word *assembly* (see NIV). The people were to assemble not for a soccer match but for worship; it was a *sacred* assembly. Obviously, as long as Israel was in the wilderness, the people were to assemble around the tabernacle. God also specified that additional offerings (visible preaching of the gospel, with explanation from the Levites; Lev 10:11) were to be sacrificed on the Sabbath. Once in the Promised Land the people were to gather specifically in whatever place the tabernacle was (Deut 12:5-12). That place was ultimately Jerusalem, where the temple was constructed. So, the child of God desired to gather with the saints in the presence of the Lord, as illustrated in Psalms 84 and 122.

The New Testament saints understood this need to gather together. The 3000 converted on the day of Pentecost made it their business to “fellowship” “together” (Acts 2:42, 44). The saints in Troas “were gathered together” on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7). As Paul sought to instruct the Christians of

Corinth about right behaviour, he referred in passing to “when you come together” (1 Cor 14:26). In fact, the Greek word translated for us as “church” (the term is *ecclesia*) actually means “assembly” (see Acts 19:32, 39, 41). The apostle writing to the Hebrews even instructs his readers to be mindful of “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some” (Heb 10:25). So, the church has understood that it is the will of the Lord that his people actually gather together on the day of rest – and we catch that in Lord’s Day 38, as quoted above.

Do we need to go to church? The answer is an unequivocal Yes.

But no...

The church of which I’m currently a member (Smithville) has just over 600 members. Where, I wonder, does Scripture require that all 600 members of our church in Smithville are to meet Sunday by Sunday *at the same place* and *at the same time*? We all realize that there is nothing biblically illegitimate for our congregation to meet in two separate buildings of, say, 300 each. There’s also nothing scripturally wrong about our 600 members meeting in the same building but at different times (as we had been doing with our two morning and two afternoon services to accommodate Ontario’s thirty percent capacity rule). If that’s the case, why – in principle – can’t we meet in ten services of some sixty people each or sixty services of ten each, distributed over multiple addresses that may or may not be at the same time? That’s why I think we’re very hard pressed to say to the authorities that we *have to* be in church – where “church” is understood as 330 Station Street and “we” is all 600 of us at the same time.

The events described in the book of Acts are quite instructive on this point. From its small beginning of 120 persons before

the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the church grew in the city to include thousands of persons (3000 in Acts 2:41; 5000 in 4:4; “multiplied greatly” in 6:7). Yet, this group is continually referred to using the singular word “church,” denoting a single gathering (cf 5:11; 8:1,3; cf Gal 1:13). Once the persecution under Saul broke out and the Christians were scattered throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria, we suddenly find the plural word “churches” (cf 9:31; cf Gal 1:22). That is to say: now the believers of necessity assembled in multiple locations. The persecution in Jerusalem necessitated a different way of “doing” church, in the sense that one assembly became multiple assemblies. Or to say it differently, the practice of congregating all together was exchanged for the practice of congregating together-in-smaller-numbers.

We look back on these events as recorded in the book of Acts as simply how things were. Yet for the early Christians and their leaders, this inability to gather together and the need to rethink how to gather in smaller groups was undoubtedly somewhat traumatic; there were difficult adjustments to make in how to do church rightly.

From elsewhere in Scripture, it is evident that the early Christians learned the lessons the Lord taught through the persecution instigated by Saul. Years later, the same Saul – now the apostle Paul – wrote a letter “to all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints” (Rom 1:7). At the end of his letter, he gives instructions to extend greetings to Prisca and Aquila and “the church in their house” (16:5). The fact that Paul mentions several other families in the list of those who were to receive greetings suggests that these families were also assemblies of Christian believers.¹ From archaeological studies, we learn that early Christians did not have separate buildings for worship (“churches” in our language) till somewhere in the third century. Instead, they commonly met in the homes of the more well-to-do, those who had room for a small crowd. The story of Eutychus falling out of the window provides an example of the saints gathering in someone’s home (Acts 20:7ff).


So: do we need to go to church? If by the word “church” we mean our customary church *building*, then no, before God it is not imperative that the saints in a given community assemble at that address. There is ample biblical warrant for meeting elsewhere than in a particular (large) building of brick-and-mortar custom built for 600 persons to gather for worship. In fact, the wider community around us knows that’s what we actually believe, for they see us being away for holidays.

Yet ... yes

If now we define the word “church” as assembly irrespective of size or place, then, yes, we most certainly are obligated before God to gather together. Like a body, each member of the church needs other members (1 Cor 12:12ff). That’s why we confess in the Belgic Confession that “no one ought to withdraw from [this holy assembly and congregation], content to be by himself, no matter what his status or standing may be.” Instead, “all and everyone are obliged to join it and unite with it” (Art. 28). This is the “fellowship” so prized in Scripture where saints gathered to eat meals together, instruct one another from the Word, and pray together (see Acts 2:42). This is the force of the passage quoted earlier from Hebrews 10: “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another...” (vv. 24f). This does not need to happen in a mega-church (where the personal connection with another actually is easily missed; ask some of our members!), but can better happen in small(er) groups where each can develop personal relations with another for mutual honesty, accountability, and encouragement.

What’s the lesson?

We have been accustomed for years and generations to have churches of numbers way too large to meet in members’ homes. There’s nothing inherently wrong with that. In fact, we’ve become very comfortable with this way of doing church.

We need now to come to grips with the fact that the Lord our God has reached into our lives with COVID-related instructions from the authorities to limit the size of our gatherings. We do not know how long these restrictions will remain, nor do we know what the new normal will be. So, I leave you this question to think on: how can we maximize the current reality so that fellowship amongst us does not unduly suffer? 



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¹ See Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: the Early House Churches in their Historical Setting* (Eerdmans, 1980), pg 35ff.

How to Respond to Conspiracy Theories

Christians have often been connected to conspiracy theories. Think of the rumour spread by Caesar Nero that the Christians burned down Rome in A.D. 46. Sadly, though, Christians have often aided in spreading unfounded conspiracy theories as well and our day and age is no exception. There was an uptick in conspiracy theories after 9/11, and with the worldwide pandemic we are facing, conspiracy theories spread faster than the coronavirus itself, also among fellow believers. Let's take a look at what conspiracy theories are, what makes them so appealing, but also at what we should do with them and how they can damage the witness of the church.

When I attended an evangelical Christian college for journalism in the nineties, one professor taught us a course on how to be vigilant against the New Age movement. It was his conviction that everything in society, including our language, entertainment, politics, and trade was saturated by New Age, and eventually – like a seesaw – our existence as we knew it would flip over into a New Age world order. Alas, no such thing ever happened, and I threw out his syllabus, wondering if we could have used our time in his class a bit better.

Conspiracies are as old as the world. Satan introduced his theory of how God was supposedly using his power to keep humans subdued when he talked to Eve in paradise. Satan is the father of all lies (John 8:44) and he has not stopped confusing people through lies. It is, therefore, very concerning to see how readily information from very questionable (news) sources is shared among Christians and even believed, feeding into bias and heated discussions. More so, it pains me to see the extra anxiety these theories create during this already challenging time. I hope this article provides some context and practical tips on what to do with misinformation and conspiracy theories, helping us to speak to each other in humility so we can build each other up (Eph 4:29).

What is a conspiracy theory?

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a conspiracy theory explains an event or set of circumstances as the result of a secret plot, usually by powerful conspirators. While a conspiracy is a plot or secret plan, conspiracy theories are hypothesized conspiracies that have specific characteristics: The

theorist explains an order of events instigated by a “power,” like a bureaucracy, the “elite,” or big companies. The accused power is posing a threat to humanity, or specific groups in society, like children, Jews or Christians, or our capitalist society. Another characteristic of a conspiracy theory is that the hypothesis is not based on proven facts, but on claims of access to information not accessible to the general public, and it opposes facts presented by people who are qualified to analyze the theory like historians, journalists, or scientists.

Conspiracy theories are first found in the Roman world and have existed since, depending on three factors. First of all, conspiracy theories depend on forms of mass media (a public sphere) to distribute ideas and gather a following, for example pamphlets, later printed materials, and now the Internet. Secondly – conspiracies started when governments became large interpersonal systems of power. Especially during war and unrest, conspiracy theories are on the rise and target the status quo, even more so after the French Revolution. And thirdly, conspiracy theories need so-called “brokers” to adopt the theories and “market” them broadly to the public, such as publishers, social media influencers, or disgruntled groups in society. In some instances, even political parties and religious groups put their weight behind a conspiracy theory as well.

Conspiracy theories appealed to people in the fringes of society, but they have become more mainstream in the twentieth and twenty-first century, mainly because the Internet makes them accessible and easy to spread. Some theories deal with worldwide events, like the Great Reset theory, or blow over from other countries like the United States, including the infamous QAnon theory. Some are closer to home, like the idea that governments are inflating COVID numbers to gain more control or that the Canadian government is building internment camps to deal with the pandemic.

Why so attractive?

In a world that is getting more complex and difficult to understand, conspiracy theories offer some explanation of what we experience around us. There are several factors that explain why these theories are attractive.

First of all, conspiracy theories give us back a sense of control. We feel insignificant in the face of global events or huge impersonal bureaucracies and processes in our Western world, and economies run by large multinational corporations. We try to make sense of the news and developments around

us. Instead of feeling helpless in what to think of it all, a conspiracy theory can give a (misguided) sense of knowing: “what is really going on.”

Second of all, conspiracy theories make us believe we are smart instead of being part of the “gullible masses” who mindlessly accept what mainstream media or the government is “feeding” them. In an article called “We the Sheeple? Why Conspiracy Theories Persist,” philosopher Edward Feser writes: “A clue to the real attraction of conspiracy theories, I would suggest, lies in the rhetoric of theorists themselves, which is filled with self-congratulatory descriptions of those who accept such theories as ‘willing to think,’ ‘educated,’ ‘independent-minded,’ and so forth, and with invective against the ‘uninformed’ and ‘unthinking’ ‘sheeple’ who ‘blindly follow authority.’” In other words, the theory appeals to you that you are either smart and intelligent or you accept popular opinion and therefore are dumb and pretty ignorant. For the conspiracy theorist, there is no third option.

Thirdly, conspiracy theories almost always contain a grain of truth, big enough to make the theory worth a second thought. For example, the world forum in Davos did indeed discuss “resetting” our world in an attempt to build a more healthy and equitable future. However, the arguments around a conspiracy theory are carefully crafted not to serve its readers with the truth, but to feed into doubt, suspicion, and unrest based on an event or alarming development. And more so, there is always a group that is being threatened and, therefore, the theory contains a moral call to stand up for this group, for example children (QAnon) or the church (threat to religious freedom). The theory claims to have information for the conspiracy that the normal crowd does not have access to. So, at first glance, it is hard to believe it is not true and ignore the call to action for this seemingly good cause.

And, finally, in the oversaturated information market that we live in, conspiracy theories and misinformation are simply attractive because they are juicy. Our brain is inundated with information through our phones, the news, TV, the Internet, and so on, and it picks the dramatic stories that grab our attention. It is much easier to read the so-called “click bait” or grabbing posts on Facebook than a sturdy analysis based on carefully laid out facts through research from reliable sources. And once you are following certain stories, the algorithms feed more of the same information to our phones and computers, making it hard to separate fables from facts.

It is important to see the difference between suspicion and being critical

So what?

Many of us shrug our shoulders at conspiracy theories and wonder what the harm is if we or others believe them. However, there are risks involved and they affect our reputation and witness as Christians. There is always an element of radicalization in conspiracy theories, starting with a strong call to action to stand up for a group that is threatened according to the theory. Instead of civil dialogue, conspiracy theories tend to be polarizing. When change doesn't come, followers can jump to action. The mob at the recent riot at Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. contained conspiracy theory supporters from QAnon and Proud Boys. But it's not only white supremacists who become violent protesters; also concerned citizens, believing against all odds their biased views, feel that they can do what they deem necessary and ignore law and order. Misinformation and conspiracy theories can make us feel entitled to defy our government or health care professionals; for example, if we feel threatened or even persecuted by all the restrictions around the pandemic.

In Christianity Today, Ed Stetzer, the Dean of Wheaton College in Illinois, concludes that Christians are disproportionately fooled by conspiracy theories. "Gullibility is not a fruit of the Spirit," he writes. "As followers of Jesus, we are people of the truth. Falling for (and spreading) conspiracy theories does not honor the Lord, but it does cause people to question our judgment." How can we confess the resurrection of Christ in the same breath as an unproven theory that COVID is a hoax or that we end up with a chip in our arm when we get the COVID vaccine? Stetzer: "We damage our witness and that of our church when you focus on unproven theories and

speculation more than the good news we've been commanded by our Lord to proclaim."

How to respond?

So, what should we do when someone posts a questionable article on Facebook or sends us a link that we "should read"? First of all, check if the source and the story match the characteristics of a conspiracy theory. Are they painting with a big brush about "the government" or "those multi-nationals" or "the medical world" or other entities? Does the information appeal to you to be smart, think, and distinguish yourself from the masses? Do they claim to know more than the mainstream media or other sources? If the answer is yes, don't waste your time, and move on.

Secondly, it is important to see the difference between suspicion and being critical: are you willing to test what you read before you share a link? Or is your mind made up, and are you only looking for arguments to prove your own opinion? Are you willing to honestly look at both sides of the theory or only what suits your impression of the truth? If you are suspicious, you are not interested in facts, but in the information that confirms your bias. If you are critical, you are willing to look at both the facts that confirm but also challenge your hypothesis.

Be open minded: don't ignore mainstream media and scientific resources to test your opinion, and don't put your trust only in obscure media outlets or posts online by disgruntled people who are very clouded about where they find the information they are passing along. What you allow yourself to read and watch can become your truth.

And, finally, listen to the old age adagio: if it's too good to be true, it probably is. Conspiracy theories make you blind to the complexity of reality. Our world is very complex, with many large and small entities at work. There are checks and balances in place, in the forms of the democratic process, independent media, watchdogs, and ombudsmen. Our reality is too complex to simply be explained by a conspiracy theory feeding into our fears and unrest, ignoring the unexpected or the complexities that make up our existence and human history.

Reliable sources of information

Many stories I have seen or received over the last months are quite easily proven false after verifying the information being presented. Media outlets often have fact check services going back to the source of the theory, how the story evolved, and

Let us be discerning instead of gullible

explaining where the weaknesses in the theory lie. However, when pointing this out, I've heard many times that "we cannot trust our mainstream media." Let's unpack that argument a bit further.

It is clear that in Canada media sources have become secular and often liberal or left wing. Our experience as Christians is that our arguments are not always heard or represented in the news, and I have noticed a rising level of mistrust towards mainstream media. For example, notice how little reporting happens around pro-life events or about groups standing up for principles that are not in line with the popular opinions in society. However, let's not throw out the baby with the bathwater and let us become more discerning, instead of gullible. The independent media has a role to play to keep other powers in society accountable, an example being the SNC Lavalin affair that came to light through the Globe and Mail. Also, trained journalists follow a journalistic process on how to represent facts, one of the most important ones being verification of the source and fact-checking the information. Journalists are accountable to those principles and standards set by organizations such as the Canadian Association of Journalists.

Some point out that the media is funded by the government, and therefore nothing more than an outlet for the Liberals or whatever party is in charge at the moment. The reality is, every media outlet is funded by some source, whether public funds, advertising by commercial businesses, or donations and subscriptions from people supporting that channel. Reliable media outlets are very clear about their sources of income and how they guarantee journalistic independence for their editors and reporters. Do some research if you doubt a media source (on all sides of the spectrum) to see how they protect their journalists so they can publish their stories independently and perform their research free of interference. When in doubt, cross reference a few news sources on a topic, including a foreign platform to check the validity of a story, like press agencies, BBC,

or NOS (Dutch). Many news outlets publish the email address of the journalist to ask further questions and journalists welcome that. Also, look for reliable podcasts and other resources for more perspective on both sides, and sources who are willing to take a different look at events, but be aware that everyone can put out opinions and their version of the truth.


Having a conversation with someone convinced of a conspiracy theory can be very difficult, because this person is convinced he or she knows the truth. It is better, then, to focus on the methodology of how the facts of the conspiracy theory are gathered. Ask questions about how reliable the sources are on which the theory is based. Challenge them to consider counter arguments. Conspiracy theorists and followers are typically not willing to check their theory and often become offensive if challenged, and that is a clear sign something is not right. That someone believes and promotes a theory with conviction does not make it true.

Be sober minded

Joe Carter, editor of the Gospel Coalition, writes: "Ultimately, though, all slanderous conspiracy theories originate from Satan. If we are a people filled with the Spirit of truth (John 14:17), we won't spread messages from the father of lies (John 8:44)." He warns not to commit a sin against the eighth commandment and to repent from these sins.

Just believing something to be true is not an excuse. Carter: "God ... doesn't give Aunt Karen or Pastor Bob a pass on slander simply because they believe the falsehoods they are spreading. They have a duty to determine the veracity of a claim that is potentially slanderous. After all, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak (Matt 12:36)." This includes what we post or share on social media.

The apostle Peter, when he warns us for the devil, the father of lies, calls us to sober minded and watchful, casting all our anxieties on him, because he cares for us (1 Pet 4:6). If we feel strongly about an issue and want to share our points of view, we have to speak the truth in love, so we grow closer to our Head, Christ (Eph 4:15).

The New Age movement never got the power my professor feared. Neither did fundamentalist Muslims infiltrate and overturn Western governments following 9/11, and I personally do not see all of us speaking Chinese in twenty years under a communist regime. May we be sober minded and discerning as followers of Jesus Christ, keeping our testimony pure. 



Words of thanks from Rev. Vanderlinde

Nooksack Valley Receives a Pastor

By Wayne Chase

The LORD is good and evermore his love and mercy will endure." With those beautiful words, the congregation of the American Reformed Church at Nooksack Valley, Washington celebrated the arrival and installation of their pastor, Rev. Calvin Vanderlinde, on Sunday, November 8. After a little more than two years following the institution of this church from out of Lynden American Reformed Church, the Nooksack Valley congregation could attest to God's faithfulness. His leading along the way was evident in his provision for leadership from Council, facilities for Sunday worship, pulpit supply, and finally bringing about in his own good timing the necessary immigration approval for our pastor to work in the United States.

Installation

Our former pastor and classis-appointed counsellor, Rev. Bill Wielenga, led the installation service on Sunday morning. The text for his sermon was 2 Corinthians 4:7, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves." Rev. Wielenga pointed out that the apostle Paul, writing to the Corinthian congregation, directs their attention to the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the power of God through the gospel that saves those who were perishing, and it is the power of Christ's gospel that transforms the lives of his people who are being saved. The apostle Paul acknowledges that he has become a




Young Children's Chorus

minister of the power of the gospel not because of himself (for he is but an earthen vessel), but because of God's purpose to bring the gospel to the Corinthian congregation. Likewise, Rev. Wielenga indicated that the pastor to be received and installed at Nooksack Valley is a minister of the gospel, called by God to reveal the treasure of the gospel of Christ for the congregation.

Rev. Vanderlinde officially opened his ministry at Nooksack Valley as he preached from Psalm 95 in the afternoon worship service. He called the congregation to "heed the call to worship as purpose and privilege," and noted that worship necessarily directs the congregation to rejoice in God's great worth even as the congregation reflects on the great works of God. Finally, he pointed out that Psalm 95 concludes with God's warning about the consequences of unbelief. How powerfully the morning and afternoon services directed the congregation to focus on the ministry of the Word of God, the gospel of salvation!

Welcome evening

Following the afternoon service, the congregation enjoyed a time of fellowship before the Council Chairman Bob Lodder opened the Welcome Evening program by asking us to join him in singing those beautiful words from the well-known hymn,

"Great is Thy Faithfulness." After a few opening remarks, he handed the direction of the meeting over to the MC, Peter Kingma, who introduced the Vanderlinde family to the congregation, while injecting his own brand of humor into the occasion. The evening continued with presentations from a Young Children's Chorus, the Young People's Bible Study, the Ladies Bible Study, and the Men's Bible Study. Following these events, an opportunity was given for guests to offer words of congratulations. A number of email congratulations from nearby Canadian Reformed churches were read, and words of congratulation and encouragement were expressed by representatives of Lynden American Reformed Church as well as Lynden United Reformed Church and Bellingham United Reformed Church. Following the presentation of a framed work of art from the well-known artist of the Pacific Northwest, Randy Van Beek, Rev. Vanderlinde was given the opportunity to say a few words. The evening was closed in song with those magnificent words, "Praise God from Whom all blessings flow!" Truly, the congregation of the American Reformed Church at Nooksack Valley rejoices with praise to God for the blessing of a minister of the gospel of Christ, and a pastor and teacher for the flock. 

BOOK REVIEW

With All Your Heart

Orienting Your Mind, Desires and Will toward Christ

This book review was originally published in *Ordained Servant Online*, December 2020 and is reprinted with permission.

Every redeemed saint aspires to love God with all his heart – nothing is more precious to him than cultivating a heart for God. But what is the heart? Like so many frequently used words, it can be spoken without much thought. For many, loving from the heart is to have strong feelings for someone else – like a romantic attachment or friendship. At best this is an incomplete understanding and will not satisfy the Christian.

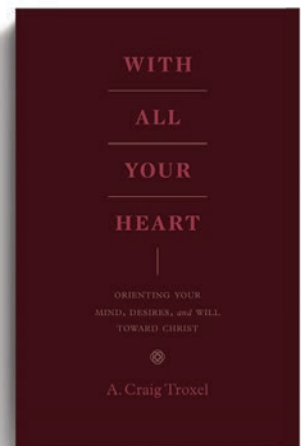
For readers who long for a deeper understanding of the heart, Craig Troxel's *With All Your Heart* will prove valuable. With the skill of a mature physician of the soul, he explores what God's Word reveals about the human heart. This is no small task. Formulating a definition of *heart* taxes the intellect. After all, the various Old and New Testament words for it appear nearly 1,000 times (p. 17). So, the author surveys biblical vocabulary and usage, and concludes that the heart is "the governing center of the person. When used simply, it reflects the unity of our inner being, and when used comprehensively, it describes the complexity of our inner being – as composed of mind (what we know), desires (what we love), and will (what we choose)" (p. 21).

The hero of this book, if I may use that term, is the Lord Jesus Christ, as he executes his offices of prophet, priest, and king. The author demonstrates that as a prophet, Jesus teaches and assures sinful minds; as a priest, he redeems and renews iniquitous hearts; and as a king, he subdues and strengthens rebellious wills (p. 22).

Although mind, desires, and will can be distinguished, they can never be separated. They are interrelated aspects of the human heart and together provide the inner direction of a man (p. 47). This threefold "unity of the inner self" furnishes the structure of the book: the heart *knowing*, the heart *loving*, and the heart *choosing* become the headings of the book's first three sections.

The heart knowing

In his treatment of the mind (the heart knowing), the author offers a much-needed corrective to the prevalent misconception that the mind is wholly distinct from the heart, the former distinguished by thinking and the latter by emotion. Frequently, the two are pitted against each other, as when a person says, "I know in my mind that what you're saying is true, but my heart just doesn't feel it" (p. 35). With ample biblical support, the author demonstrates that "if [the] heart principally does one thing, it thinks" (p. 25). Jesus's interaction with the scribes provides an example: "But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, 'Why do you think evil in your hearts?'" (Matt 9:4)



With All Your Heart: Orienting Your Mind, Desires and Will toward Christ, by A. Craig Troxel. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020, 220 pages, \$13.39, paper

Reviewed By Charles Malcolm Wingard

Senior pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Yazoo City, Mississippi (PCA), and associate professor of pastoral theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi.

As prophet, the Lord Jesus confronts foolish thinking. He transforms us by the renewing of our minds (Rom 12:2). The eyes of our hearts are enlightened (Eph 1:17-18). The Lord sets right twisted views of God, his Word, and world. He punctures inflated opinions of self. Reasons to disbelieve or disobey are overcome. To be certain, "We do not know anything perfectly, nor can we see as God sees, perceiving everything fully and clearly.... But we are getting to know Christ and his truth, better and better. And that is more than those in this world can ever claim, offer, or know – unless the Lord of the heart opens their eyes" (p. 63).

The heart loving

Next comes the critical matter of desires (the heart loving). Mature believers know that the heart, with its desires and affections, is the great battlefield upon which the struggle for holiness is fiercely fought. Whether born again or not, "what the heart enjoys is what the heart will explore" (p. 47). What sinners need and find in Jesus is the priest who redeems "from sin's condemning power and corrupting power" and who "now continues to purify [the heart] from sin's residual power" (p. 96). By his Word and Spirit, Christ enables believers "more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness" (WSC, 35).

Many Christians struggle mightily – as they should – to put to death sinful desires. But mortification is only half the struggle. Ungodly desires must be replaced with godly ones. Love of the world must give way to love of God and his kingdom. Holy virtues must be cultivated with diligence.

The heart choosing

Section three, with its study of the will (the heart choosing), completes the author's exposition. As Sovereign King, the Lord Jesus delivers the proud and defiant heart from its bondage to sin and renews the will. Sinners are enabled to receive Jesus Christ, offered to them in the gospel, and are strengthened in the inner man to follow him in obedience. Terms that many modern Christians buried long ago – submission, self-denial, self-control, and self-discipline – are unearthed and given both their appropriate prominence and urgency. Christ's renewal of the believer's will is a foretaste of heaven, "for the day will come when Christ will return and bring us into our Father's heavenly presence. It is there, in that state of glory, that the will of every Christian will be 'made perfectly and immutably free to good alone.' It will be a life of glorious and sinless fellowship with God and one another" (p. 149-50, citing WCF 9.5).

Keeping the heart

With All Your Heart concludes with an eminently practical section on keeping the heart. Three organs – the eyes, the ears, and the mouth – demand our utmost attention. The author identifies the eyes and ears as the heart's gatekeepers. Through them pass the impressions of the world around us. With the eyes we can observe what is beautiful, noble, and godly. We can also fix them on what defiles both body and soul. With the ears we can hear the Word of God and speech that edifies. They can also be open and welcoming to degrading language.


The author's comments on media are timely:

Ongoing vigilance is absolutely required. There is no escape from all the media by which the temptations of the world find their way into our hearts. There is also no escape from the ready alliance between the world's attractions and the sin in our hearts.... What we take to heart will, in large measure, come down to how well our gatekeepers do their job (p. 178).

The eyes and ears are sentinels. Train them to do their duty! If the eyes and ears guard the heart, the mouth is "the ambassador of the heart" (p. 179). It broadcasts the heart's condition, and a believer will monitor it carefully. When words reveal the sinfulness of the heart, an opportunity presents itself to the believer: first, to repent, and then to walk in renewed obedience to the Lord.

I enthusiastically recommend this book. Life presses upon us its urgent concerns, fierce temptations, and harsh setbacks. The succession of trials is never-ending. In the midst of all the tumult, we dare not neglect the heart – which is why the author will not let us forget that "as goes the heart, so goes the man" (p. 20). Failure to tend to the heart leads to ruin. But joys forever belong to those who trust in their Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is our prophet, priest, and king.

To a previous generation, J. C. Ryle wrote, "There is nothing in your heart that the Lord Jesus cannot make right" (p. 103). The author shares Ryle's commendable and biblical confidence. To be sure, there are no quick fixes: no instantaneous paths to triumph that put us beyond the reach of sin and temptation. But the Lord Jesus, who desires our holiness more than we do, will never abandon us or cease his work in us. The good work begun in us now will be brought to completion in the age to come (Phil 1:6).

If you long to love your Lord with all your heart, then you will treasure this book. 

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