

Clarion



FAMILY DEVOTIONS

THE STATE OF THEOLOGY

NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES

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What's Inside

This issue is led with an editorial from Dr. Jason Van Vliet, "Family Devotions: Room for Growth." One silver lining of the current pandemic situation is that for many of us we have experienced the slowing down of a too-hectic life. This article asks an important question: Are we using this time as an opportunity to draw closer to the Lord in devotions?

Continuing from our last issue, we print the second of three parts of the "State of Theology" survey data from *Tabletalk* (magazine of Ligonier Ministries).

Issue 5 also contains the Treasures, New & Old meditation, the You Asked column, and a press release.

Laura Veenendaal

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Clarion

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LEAD ARTICLE



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Family Devotions: Room for Growth

These days most of us are spending more time at home. Of course, we wish the COVID-19 lockdowns would lighten and our freedoms would enlarge. But, to look at one bright side for a moment, spending some more time with our families is a good thing, isn't it? Under normal circumstances life easily becomes so hectic: work responsibilities, after-school activities, committee meetings, sports teams, shopping excursions, and social outings. One event blurs into the next, and before you know it your house turns into a big, revolving door with family members dashing in and out, pausing briefly for hellos and hugs in the foyer.

But then the government suddenly clamps down on mobility. Our cars spend more time on the driveway than the freeway, and general attendance at mealtimes trends upward. As hard as this pandemic has been on everyone, many families have commented that they do enjoy having some more quality time together.

But what about quality time in family devotions? How do we participate in them and where we can improve?

Different households but the same Lord

Before going too much further, it is good to acknowledge that our households differ greatly. Some of us are single; others are married. Some have children at home; others do not. Among those who have children, some have little ones, while others have young adults in the house. Some have regular, predictable work schedules. Others have shift work, night shifts, or seasonal work.

These differing circumstances impact how family devotions shapes up within a household. At a Bible study, one father may say, "We have fifteen minutes of Bible reading, discussion, prayer, and singing after supper each day, and it's such a great blessing for our family!" Meanwhile, another man in the study group thinks to himself, "Yes, but you're home for supper at 5:30PM every day. My commute is so bad I'm rarely home before 7PM. I'm just glad if I make it home in time to give our little ones a quick hug yet before they fall asleep."

Family devotions will not be identical from household to household. Still, it *ought* to be there because every covenant household has the same Redeemer and Ruler, and he deserves our devotion and thanksgiving each day again: "great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised!" (Ps 48:1)

Listening to the LORD first

When it comes to family devotions, a good place to start is Deuteronomy 6: "These words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall *teach them diligently* to your children, and shall talk of them when *you sit in your house*, and when *you walk by the way*, and when *you lie down*, and when *you rise*" (vv. 6-7). Let's take a closer look at the phrases in italics.

From the Heart

"Dad, I have to leave soon, can you hurry up and do devotions?" Have you ever heard something like that at your table? Time quickly slips away on us, especially if our meals are full of animated discussions. Still, it is obvious that family devotions are in a different category than clearing the table and doing the dishes. The latter are chores, while the former is worshipful thanksgiving within the family setting.

Whether at meal times or at other points during the day, family devotions are not a box to be checked off on our to-do list. It is a sacrifice of praise to our God, the fruit of lips *and hearts* that acknowledge his name (Matt 15:8, 9; Heb 13:15). If the Word of God is on the tablet of our hearts, as the Lord says in Deuteronomy 6, then we will be motivated to make sure our family devotions are heartfelt rather than hasty.

Teaching

Especially when there are children in the household, parents ought to be actively *teaching* God's Word to the next generation. Fathers have a leading role in this instruction (Eph 6:4), but mothers also have a vital and central contribution to make (Ps 128:3). Teaching God's Word starts with reading it, but it also involves explaining Holy Scripture, engaging in discussion about it, and exploring how it applies to our daily lives. Are we still taking time to read *and teach* God's Word? Yes, our pastors and our

Reformed school teachers are busy with this, too, and we can be very thankful for that. But in Deuteronomy 6, our covenant God is addressing fathers and mothers, in the first place. Parents, our Lord commands us to teach his Word to our children, who are ultimately his children. Are we obeying our heavenly Father?

Yet what if there are no (longer) children in the home? That may well change the character of the teaching, but regardless of age or circumstance, we all still have a lot of learning to do. Discussing a Bible passage rather than simply reading it promotes deeper learning.

Set times of the day

For most of us, the hours at which we *lie down* and *rise* are fairly routine. By connecting Scripture reading and prayer to these particular moments in our day – our morning and evening devotions – we establish healthy routines that promote ongoing spiritual vitality. Our medical doctors remind us that eating a solid meal, three times a day, is good for our bodies, much better than sporadic snacking and occasional binge eating. Likewise, our LORD teaches us that having a disciplined devotional life is healthy for our souls, also the tender, young ones that the Lord has placed within our nurturing care.

Also, connecting family devotions to our mealtimes has much to commend to it. After all, the apostle Paul reminds us that food is to be received with thanksgiving (1 Tim 4:3), and our Saviour himself gave thanks before he broke bread and portioned out the fish (Matt 15:36).

Of course, we need not restrict our devotions to the morning and evening hours or our mealtimes. The phrase in Deuteronomy 6, "when you lie down and when you rise," is a merism. In other words, it is a figure of speech in which two parts, waking up and going to sleep, are used to refer to the whole day. The point is that devotions should be consistent and frequent. The apostle Paul also confirms this when he writes, "pray without ceasing" or "pray constantly" (1 Thess 5:17).

Woven into daily activities

Finally, there are *spontaneous*, or perhaps better said, unplanned yet most appropriate times of family devotion. These happen *as you sit in your home* and *as you walk by the way*. Situations arise, things happen within a family. None of it occurs by chance for all things come from our heavenly Father's hand. As such, there are numerous opportunities to offer a prayer to our God or to make a connection to his Word.

Sing to the Lord!

Scripture reading, discussion, and prayer are staples of family devotions, but what about song? In Ephesians 5 the apostle

Paul gives us a clear instruction to sing, “Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart” (vv. 18-19).

One of the most enjoyable and edifying ways to fulfill this command is by participating in congregational singing. (And during COVID restrictions, oh, how our hearts yearn to join the festive throng of Psalm 42 and sing together!) But is congregational singing *the only way* to fulfil this command? It is interesting that Ephesians 5:20 continues, “... giving thanks *always* and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” To state the obvious, we are not always in church. We spend many hours at home. That logically leads to the question: are we also singing in our homes?


Now, if we have school-aged children at home, then including singing in our family devotions comes more naturally. Students in our Reformed elementary schools memorize psalms and hymns. Among many other blessings, this excellent custom brings worshipful singing into some of our homes. But what about the many other households that do not have elementary-aged children? Is singing to the Lord also heard within those walls? If not, how can grow in the joy of household singing?

Despite the many negative effects of COVID restrictions, one positive outcome can be that we are prompted to sing – somewhat hesitantly perhaps – more psalms and hymns in our homes during the livestreamed worship services on Sunday. But what about the rest of the week? When the Holy Spirit summons us to sing, he does not limit this only to Sundays. Let God’s people sing during the rest of the week, too!

Some households are more accustomed to singing together than others. To be sure, singing with five or seven around the table is so much nicer than with one or two. Yet our motivation for singing to the Lord is not the quality or quantity of our voices but rather the marvellous and merciful works of our God. So, what can we do to enhance psalm singing in our homes?

See sidebar.

During this pandemic many have asked: are we heading into a *new normal*? Will our routines ever return to their pre-COVID rhythms?

Maybe there is another way of looking at it. Will the rhythms and routines of our daily devotions grow and improve during this time of COVID restrictions? And even if, one day, all the restrictions are gone, will family devotions within our households settle into a *new and improved normal*? Let us pray that it will be so. 

Practical Encouragement

Recognizing that things will work out differently in different households. Here are some concrete suggestions:

- **Be purposeful about setting aside sufficient time for family devotions.** Establish regular times for family devotions. If at all possible, seek out at least one time every day that the entire family can participate. Shape up everyone’s daily agendas *around* that time. If Dad is out of town, consider bringing him in via video chat. Having Dad join, and even lead, family devotions when he is out of town is one (and perhaps the only) good use of a cell phone at the dinner table.
- **Include Scripture reading and teaching, prayer, and singing in your family devotions.** If teaching and discussing Scripture passages, as well as singing, are not presently part of your family worship, adding them in may be initially challenging. Be encouraged, it will feel more natural over time. Also, there are helpful resources. Solid, Reformed, devotional books can prompt and enhance teaching and discussion. Moreover, if the voices in your household need musical guidance or augmentation, consider purchasing CDs of the psalms and hymns or searching online for MP3s to download. Thinking outside the box for a moment, maybe our local Reformed schools can find a simple way to record the children singing their memory work and then make this available to all the households in their supporting school communities. We certainly have the technology to bring accompaniment and additional voices right into our homes. Can we find a way to do this, so that it is more enjoyable for all of our households to sing praises to our God?
- **Give our utmost for his Highest.** There is a classic, daily devotional by Oswald Chambers entitled *Our Utmost for His Highest*. In reality, though, our devotional times do not always have that “utmost” feeling to them. Younger children can be cranky and tired around supper time. Older children may have schedules for work and lectures that are all over the map. Moods can be sour, negatively affecting not only the atmosphere at the table but also devotions after the meal. Yet we need not despair. The atoning grace of our Mediator, Jesus Christ, also covers the deficiencies of our family devotions. Moreover, we pray for his Spirit to help us mature daily in knowing our Lord and praising him.

Humiliation

“Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself and come down from the cross!” (MARK 15:29-30)

The people yelling these words from Mark 15:29-30 added to the immense humiliation that Jesus experienced on the cross. What makes these comments uniquely sharp is that they take hold of words Jesus spoke himself and attempt to “throw them back into his face,” so to speak. “Jesus, you said you were powerful, but it is clear you were completely wrong!”

Christians can sometimes look at Jesus Christ’s humiliation exclusively as a big theological concept: the pre-incarnate Son of God humbles himself to become a human being, and to suffer and die on a shameful cross. A humiliating descent into hell. This is the message of Philippians 2:6-11 and this is indeed the great humiliation of Christ. But the danger of only looking at Christ’s humiliation in these terms is that it could become something completely unrelatable to us. In some respects it is unrelatable, given how glorious Jesus was and how far he humbled himself, but we can quickly lose sight of the fact that in Jesus Christ “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses” (Heb 4:15). To put it another way, Jesus knows what it is like to be teased and mocked unjustly for things he said that were true. Jesus also knows what it is like to have people bully him and use words to try to make him feel like something less than dirt.

If you have ever experienced public and unfair humiliation, whether it was in a group of friends in your high school, or maybe somebody said something that ridiculed you at a public meeting, the first temptation is to want to strike back and vindicate yourself somehow.

Romans 12:19 reminds Christians to never avenge themselves, but leave it to the wrath of God. Jesus Christ displays this as he hears these taunts on the cross. He doesn’t need to vindicate himself, even though of all people he was the most capable of doing this. He could save himself. He was going to rebuild the temple in three days. But Jesus leaves it in his

Father’s hands and endures this shame so that all sinners can cling to his suffering in their place.

The second reaction that people who are publicly humiliated have is a tendency to slink back and close up. They harbor resentment inside. This latter option leaves a person feeling very alone and rejected and not knowing who to turn to. Many people have suffered humiliation in life-scarring ways.

But the gospel reveals a Saviour who has endured all degrees of humiliation, and can sympathize with us as no other can. He is not indifferent to our humiliation. No, he cares more than all others because he himself has experienced that pain in far greater ways than any of us.

We are sinners who are part of a sinful human race that has brought these kinds of experiences into God’s good creation. As much as we may have incurred humiliation in some unfair way, no one is faultless; no one, except of course the one who is like us in every respect, yet without sin (Heb 4:15). We can bring our burdens humbly to him, trusting that as our best brother, he will always care about those who turn to him for help. **C**

For Further Study

1. **What forms of humiliation have you experienced? Has it affected your confidence? Do you fear being publicly ridiculed for lack of knowledge?**
2. **How does what Jesus Christ did for sinners affect how you will respond to those that attempt or even succeed at humiliating you?**



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THE State OF Theology (2 of 3)

Every other year since 2014, Ligonier Ministries has partnered with LifeWay Research to survey the beliefs of Americans on a number of theological and ethical issues. Like past surveys, the 2020 State of Theology survey reveals some encouraging results, but it also reveals confusion and a lack of theological knowledge among evangelicals. In this article, we will take a look at each of the thirty-one questions on the survey in an attempt to help readers understand the orthodox Christian view on these issues as well as the biblical grounds for it.

To take the survey yourself and explore the data, go to www.thestateoftheology.com. New this year is the option to create a group survey that you can send to your friends, family, or church. It's completely confidential and is a great way to start a discussion on what the people in your community believe.

This article was first published in *Tabletalk*, the Bible study magazine of Ligonier Ministries. Find out more at TabletalkMagazine.com or try it free for three months today at TryTabletalk.com.

By Keith A. Mathison *Professor of systematic theology at Reformation Bible College in Sanford, Fla.*

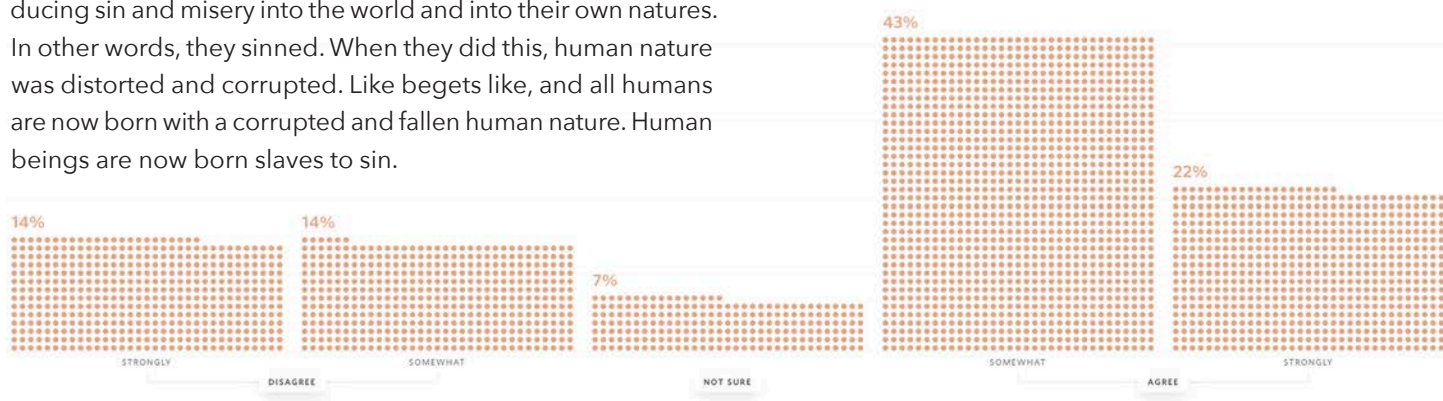
Dr. Mathison is author of several books, including *The Lord's Supper*.

11. Everyone sins a little, but most people are good by nature

The idea that people are basically good by nature echoes the ancient Pelagian heresy, which affirmed that Adam's sin affected Adam alone. According to this view, human nature was not affected by Adam's fall. Scripture teaches otherwise, asserting that Adam's sin affected all his natural-born posterity (Rom 5:12-14). By nature, human beings are "children of wrath" (Eph 2:3). This is the theological point behind the phrase total depravity – the T in TULIP. This doctrine is found throughout both the Old and New Testaments (e.g., Gen. 6:5; Ps 14:1-3; 143:2; Eccl 7:20; Isa. 64:6; Mark 7:18-23; Rom 1:21-32; 3:10-18, 23; 8:5-8; Gal 4:3; Eph 2:1-3; 4:17-19; Titus 3:3).

Christians can become confused because Scripture teaches that human beings were created by God in his image (Gen 1:26-27), and God calls all that he created good (v. 31). If everything that God created is good, and if God created human nature, then isn't human nature necessarily good? Yes. As originally created, human nature was good. However, part of human nature is the human will. The first human beings had the responsibility to align their created wills perfectly with God's will – to obey him. Instead, they disobeyed God. Like Satan, they turned their will, as it were, perpendicular to God's will, introducing sin and misery into the world and into their own natures. In other words, they sinned. When they did this, human nature was distorted and corrupted. Like begets like, and all humans are now born with a corrupted and fallen human nature. Human beings are now born slaves to sin.

This is why the claim that "everyone sins a little" is also incorrect. We tend to measure ourselves against other human beings, and we like to pick the absolute worst specimens for comparison. We like to compare ourselves to people like Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, or Mao Zedong. It's easy to feel good about ourselves if the standard is refraining from killing millions of human beings. But this is not the standard by which the Word of God measures sin. The standard is God's will, and the requirement is perfect obedience to that will. "Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it" (James 2:10; see Gal 3:10). The question is not, Did you refrain from murdering millions today? The question is, Did you perfectly "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" today, and did you perfectly love "your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:37-39)? How often did you fail to do this perfectly? Was it just "a little"? No. We fail to do this a lot, and that means we sin a lot. This is why we need the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. He is the only One who has ever perfectly fulfilled the law.



12. Even the smallest sin deserves eternal damnation

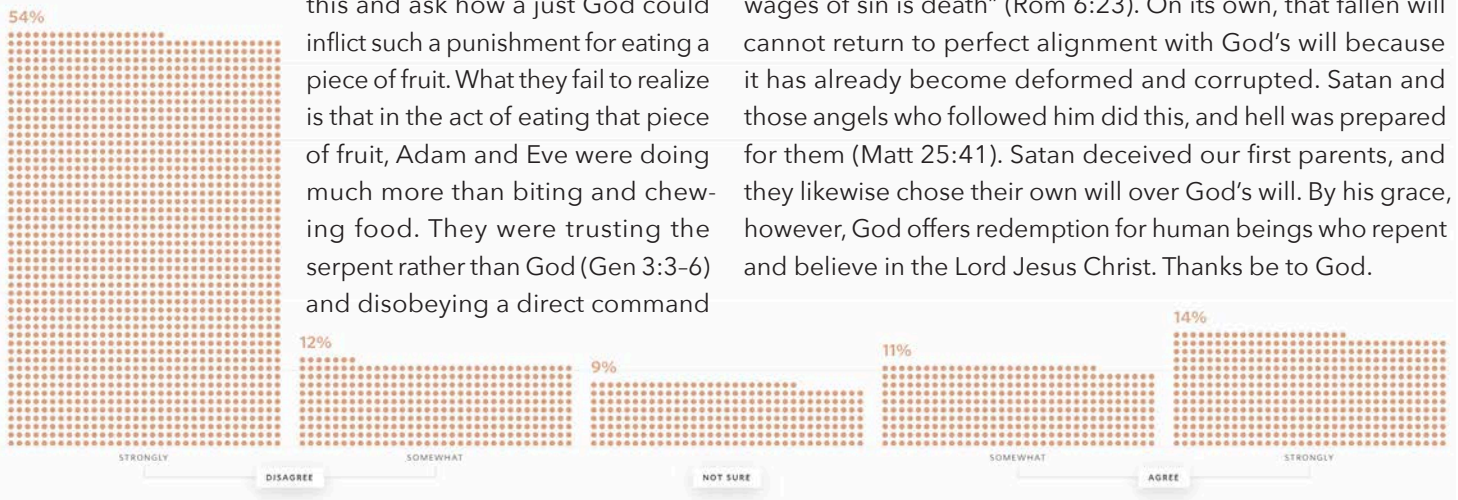
This statement is difficult for some Christians to affirm because we frequently lose sight of the true nature of sin. We fail to grasp the true nature of sin because we do not grasp the true nature of the holiness of God. When we begin to understand better the holiness of God, we begin to get a clearer understanding of how utterly evil sin is. To be as blunt as possible, all sin is satanic. Every time we commit any sin, we are following in Satan's footsteps. We are turning against our holy God, spitting in his face, and defiantly saying to him, "Not Thy will, but my will be done."

A seemingly "small" sin, eating a piece of fruit, led to the fall of humanity and the curse under which all creation still groans (Rom 8:18-24). Many people, even Christians, look at

this and ask how a just God could inflict such a punishment for eating a piece of fruit. What they fail to realize is that in the act of eating that piece of fruit, Adam and Eve were doing much more than biting and chewing food. They were trusting the serpent rather than God (Gen 3:3-6) and disobeying a direct command

of God (2:17). In doing so, they were choosing to follow Satan rather than God. The moment they acted on that temptation, they became, in effect, Satanists and "children of the devil" (1 John 3:10).

Because God is holy, his will is completely holy. It is perfectly pure and good and beautiful. It is light without any darkness (1 John 1:5). To depart from it in any way, even to the smallest degree, is to blasphemously declare that our fallen and corrupt human wills are to be preferred to God's will. Yes, there are degrees of sin (John 19:11). But all sin is a choice of our will over God's will. Once the created will has chosen itself over God, holiness and justice require that it be judged, and "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23). On its own, that fallen will cannot return to perfect alignment with God's will because it has already become deformed and corrupted. Satan and those angels who followed him did this, and hell was prepared for them (Matt 25:41). Satan deceived our first parents, and they likewise chose their own will over God's will. By his grace, however, God offers redemption for human beings who repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God.



13. God counts a person as righteous not because of one's works but only because of one's faith in Jesus Christ

This statement concerns the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone. Westminster Shorter Catechism 33 provides us with a good concise summary of this doctrine: "Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone." Justification is an act of grace (Rom 3:24). Grace, by definition, is a gift, not a wage earned for works we have done (4:4). By this act of God's grace, He pardons all our sins (vv. 6-8), and in him we "become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). This is because Christ's perfect righteousness is imputed to us (Rom 4:11; 5:19). We receive this by faith alone (Gal 2:16; Phil 3:9).

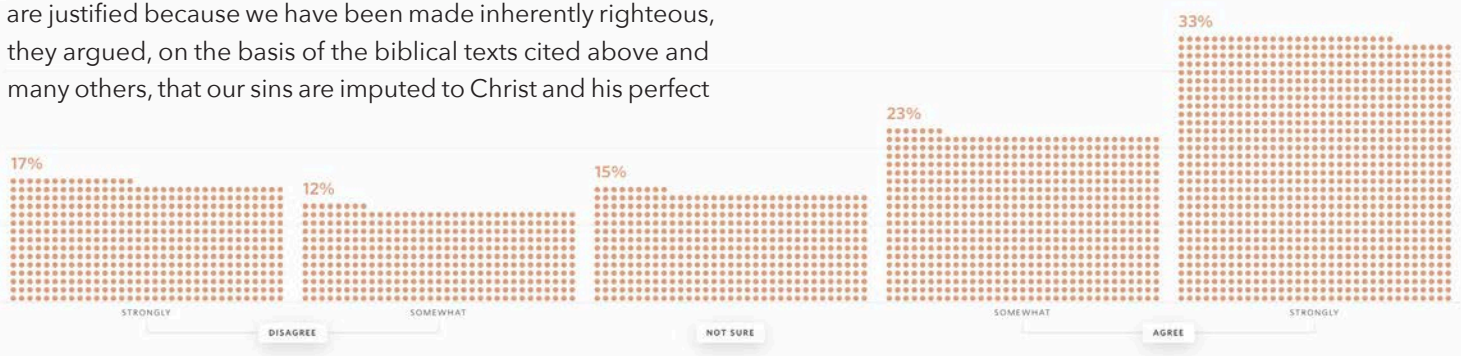
The doctrine of justification by faith alone was at the heart of the sixteenth-century Reformation debate. Over time, Roman

Catholic theologians had conflated justification with regeneration and sanctification and had developed a complex doctrine of grace and salvation rooted in their sacramental system. According to Rome, redemption was accomplished objectively by Christ. Its application to people is called justification. This subjective aspect of redemption requires the cooperation of man. In Roman Catholic theology, there are a number of different categories of grace, but key to the doctrine of justification is the idea that grace is God's supernatural gift to man in the work of redemption. The most important distinction for the doctrine of justification is the distinction between actual grace and habitual grace. Actual grace is a gift from God that enables us to act as we ought. Habitual grace is sanctifying/justifying grace that is infused into the soul, thereby changing the soul and restoring it. The Council of Trent,

a sixteenth-century Roman Catholic council, defined habitual grace's effects in terms of regeneration and sanctification. One receives this grace by means of the sacrament of baptism, and if it is lost through mortal sin, it can be regained through the sacrament of penance (i.e., confession or reconciliation).

The Protestant Reformers rejected the idea of human cooperation in the work of justification and distinguished justification from regeneration and sanctification. Instead of saying that we are justified because we have been made inherently righteous, they argued, on the basis of the biblical texts cited above and many others, that our sins are imputed to Christ and his perfect

righteousness is imputed to us. We receive this righteousness by faith and by faith alone. Therefore, we are declared righteous (justified) on the grounds of Christ's perfect righteousness that has been imputed to us. This justification cannot be separated from regeneration and sanctification, but it must be distinguished from them.



14. The Bible, like all sacred writings, contains helpful accounts of ancient myths but is not literally true

The root of the mistake in this statement is the assumption that the Bible is one among many in the broad category of "sacred writings." Christians reject that premise. The "sacred" writings of other religions are nothing more than the works of human imagination. Holy Scripture, on the other hand, is absolutely unique in that it is theopneustos or "God-breathed" (2 Tim 3:16). Above and behind its human authors stand the divine Author (2 Pet 1:20-21). It is, therefore, the very Word of God.

The phrase "literally true" is often used by Christians in ambiguous ways that can cause confusion. Everything the divine Author

intended to affirm as true in Scripture is true, but sometimes the divine Author chose to use metaphors and other figurative language to teach these truths. Isaiah 55:12, for example, speaks of a time in the future when the hills will sing and the trees will clap their hands. That which God intends to teach here is true, but he uses figurative (nonliteral) language to do so. As John Calvin said about the language in this verse, "They are metaphors, by which he shows that all the creatures bow to the will of God, and rejoice and lend their aid to carry on his work."



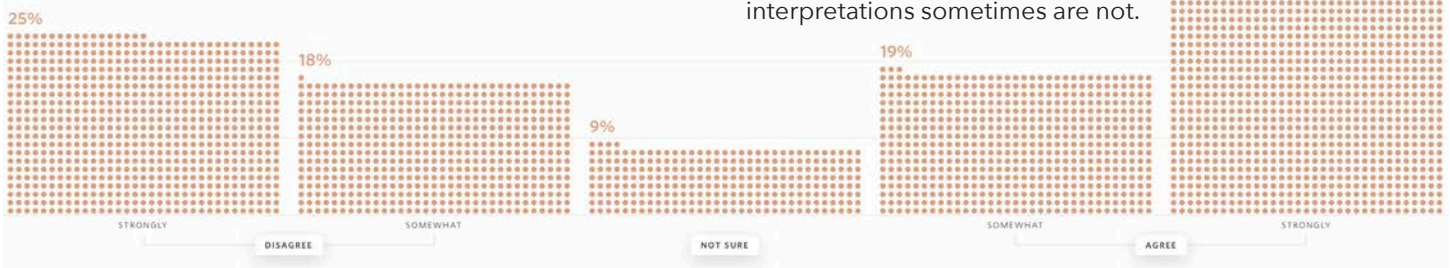
15. The Bible is 100% accurate in all that it teaches

The easiest way to understand why Christians rightly affirm this statement is to substitute the word God for the Bible in the statement. God, of course, is 100 percent accurate in all that he teaches. No Christian would deny that statement, but is the substitution of those words legitimate? Yes, because the Bible is God's Word. Paul writes: "All Scripture is breathed out by God" (2 Tim 3:16). Peter explains how this relates to the human authors: "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet 1:21).

God, then, is the primary author of Scripture, and his Word is truth (John 17:17). He cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Heb 6:18). Based on the fact that Holy Scripture is God-breathed, the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy states: "We affirm that Scripture, having been given by divine inspiration, is infallible, so that, far from misleading us, it is true and reliable in all the matters it addresses" (Article 11).

In order to understand what "100 percent accurate" means, we also have to keep in mind other relevant facts about Scripture. For example, God accurately reveals some truths by means of figurative language. This means that to understand what the Bible is accurately teaching, it is absolutely necessary to understand the various genres found in Scripture. Poetry, for example, is not interpreted in the same way that historical prose is interpreted. Both are accurate, but each follows different rules appropriate to the genre. Furthermore, some of what is found in the biblical prose narratives are records of sinful thoughts, words, and deeds. These sins are accurately reported, but they are not commended.

In short, Scripture is the authoritative Word of God, and everything God intended to teach in it is 100 percent accurate. Readers, however, have to understand some of the different ways that he taught truths in the Bible. God is always accurate. Our interpretations sometimes are not.



16. Modern science disproves the Bible

To get to the heart of this statement and discern whether it is true, we have to take a step back and look at the various relationships among aspects of God's creation, God's Word, and the human interpretations of both. God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them (Gen 1:1). God also breathed out the Holy Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16). God reveals himself in both (Rom 1:19-20; Exod 34:6-7). God's revelation of himself in his created works is called general revelation. His revelation of himself in Scripture is called special revelation. Since God is the One revealing himself in both, his general revelation and his special revelation cannot contradict each other. Things get more complicated, however, when we bring fallible human beings into the picture.

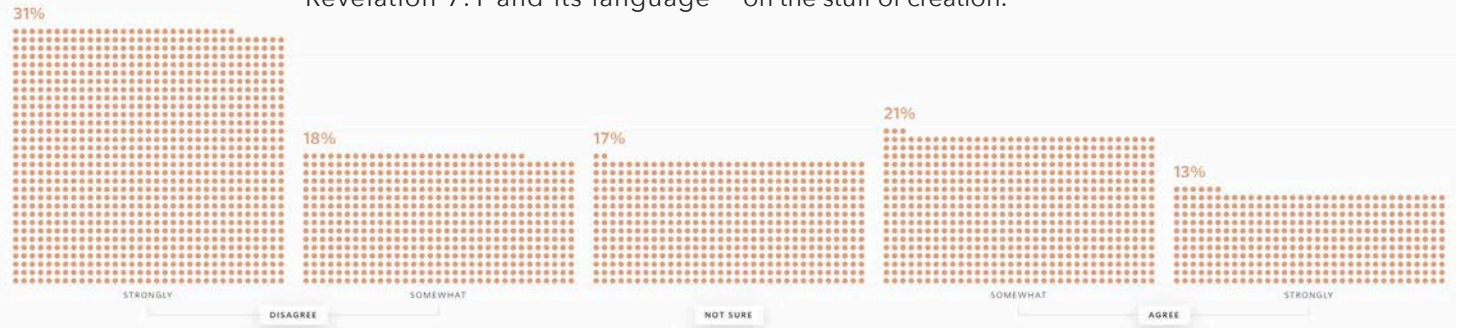
Human beings can study the stuff of creation (the works of God's hands) and/or what God reveals about himself in those works. The natural sciences study the stuff of creation (stars,

rocks, oceans, animals, energy, molecules, etc.). Natural theology studies what can be known of God through a consideration of these created things. In a similar way, human beings can also study the materials used to write the Bible and/or what God reveals about himself in the Bible. Papyrology, for example, studies the physical materials used to write the Bible (papyrus, inks, etc.). The fields of biblical theology and systematic theology study what can be known about God through a consideration of the content of the biblical texts. Because all these studies are carried out by fallible human beings, the results of any of them can be mistaken. Natural scientists and natural theologians can each misinterpret the stuff of creation in their own particular ways. Papyrologists and theologians can each misinterpret Scripture in their own particular ways.

Modern science, the fallible human study of creation, cannot disprove the Bible, which is God's special revelation. The only

thing that science can potentially disprove is fallible human interpretations of the biblical text, but it has to be remembered that the scientists are also fallible and capable of misinterpretation. Scientists can disprove incorrect interpretations of creation by other scientists. Sometimes science can disprove incorrect interpretations of the Bible. If, for example, someone reads Revelation 7:1 and its language

about the four corners of the earth and concludes that the earth is actually a flat square, then the natural science that studies the planet God created can correct that misinterpretation and help us see that Revelation must be speaking metaphorically here. Science cannot disprove the Bible, but it can occasionally disprove faulty human interpretations of the Bible that touch on the stuff of creation.



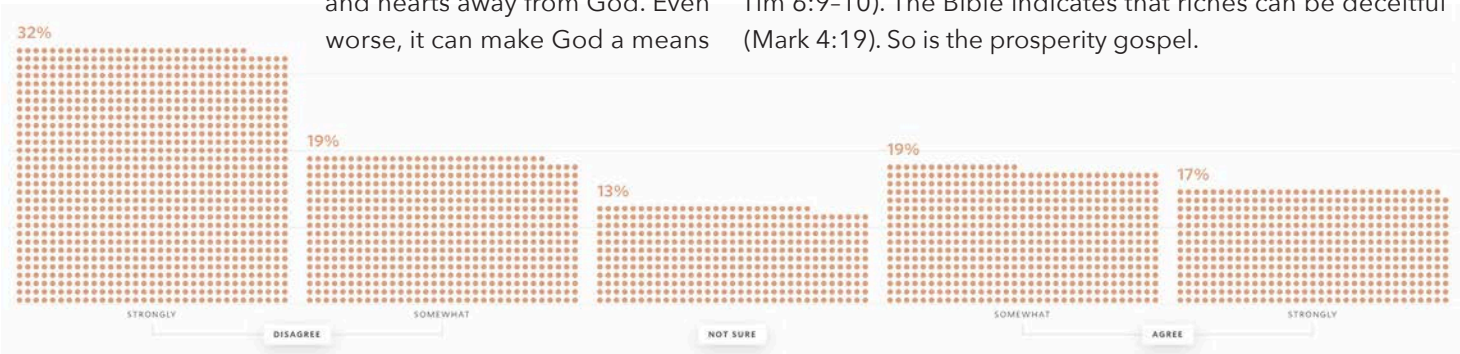
17. God will always reward true faith with material blessings in this life

This statement reflects the teaching of the so-called prosperity gospel, which is in fact a false gospel. Those who are teaching it are twisting Scripture to make themselves wealthy. God certainly does pour out his blessings on the faithful, but it is not always great material wealth. Paul, for example, proclaims the “unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph 3:7-8). He is not talking about Jesus’s money. He’s talking about Jesus. The pursuit of the “riches of Christ” is to be our priority, and that is very often accompanied by suffering and persecution, not fabulous wealth (Matt 5:10-12; John 15:20; Rom 5:3; 2 Cor 1:6; 12:10; Phil 1:29; 1 Thess 2:2; 2 Tim 2:3; 3:12; Heb 11:36; 1 Peter 3:14; 4:16, 19; 5:9-10).

Jesus himself warned us of the danger of putting material wealth before God. He said that we are to lay up treasures in heaven rather than on earth (Matt 6:19-21). But how can earthly treasure be dangerous? Because it can subtly takes our eyes and hearts away from God. Even worse, it can make God a means

to a worldly end. True blessing is being content regardless of how much or how little material wealth we have (Phil 4:11-12). Those who are rich in material goods are called not to trust in those riches but also to be rich in good works (1 Tim 6:17-19).

The prosperity “gospel” creates an unbiblical attitude toward the poor. It implies that those who are poor must not have enough faith. This ignores the entire tenor of Scripture. Consider, for example, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). Which of these two was truly blessed? The rich man who refused to help the poor and who went to hell? Or Lazarus, the one who prosperity preachers would say didn’t have enough faith but who went to heaven? Over and over, Scripture warns us that material riches can be a danger to faith. Jesus said it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 18:24-25). Paul said that the love of money is the root of all manner of evils (1 Tim 6:9-10). The Bible indicates that riches can be deceitful (Mark 4:19). So is the prosperity gospel.



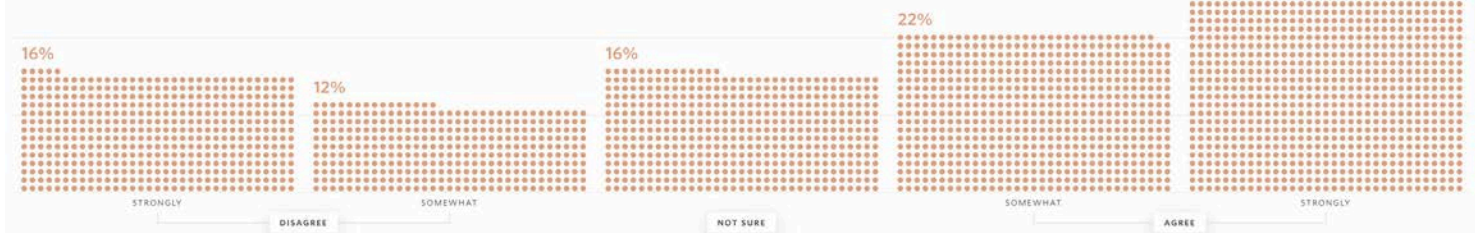
18. Hell is a real place where certain people will be punished forever

There are few doctrines that are more commonly denied by professing Christians today than the doctrine of hell, yet Christ himself said more about the subject than anyone else in Scripture. If Christians, by definition, are those who follow Christ, we cannot simply ignore what he said on this subject. Jesus himself spoke of hell as a fearful reality, a place of eternal punishment for those who die without faith and remain unrepentant.

Jesus speaks of hell as a reality in his Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:22, 29-30). A little later he says: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (10:28). Jesus describes hell as a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (13:42). He

says physical mutilation would be preferable to hell (18:8-9; Mark 9:43). Regarding how long the punishment of hell will last, Jesus says that it is as eternal as the bliss of heaven will be for the redeemed (Matt 25:46; John 3:36). The same word describes the duration of both.

Jesus, who would know better than anyone else, told us in no uncertain terms that hell is real, that hell is eternal, and that hell awaits all who reject him. We may find this teaching disconcerting. We may find it disturbing. But if we reject it, we are calling Jesus untruthful.

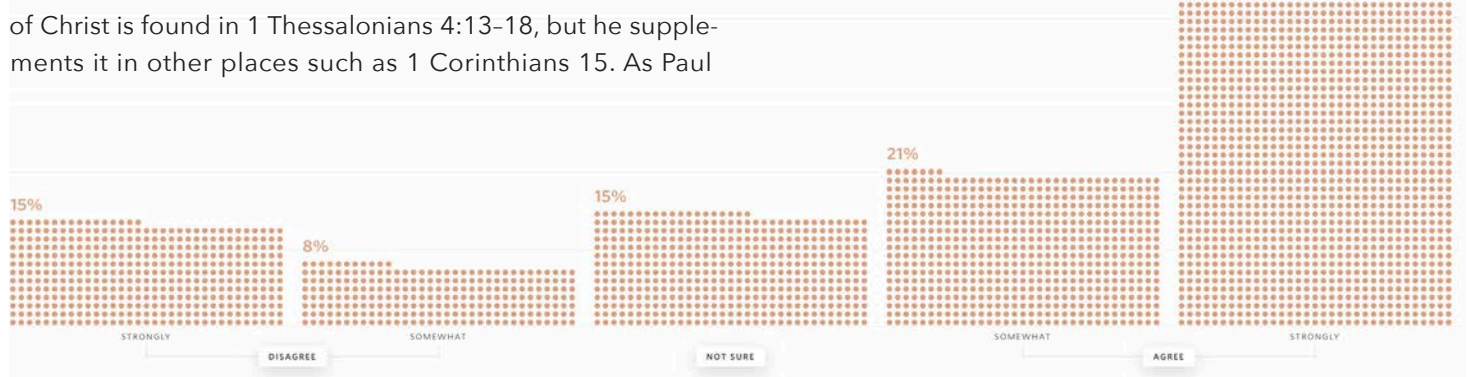


19. There will be a time when Jesus Christ returns to judge all the people who have lived

In the Nicene Creed, Christians confess that we believe in one Lord Jesus Christ who, after his death and resurrection "ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead." This creedal statement is a concise summary of biblical doctrine. The biblical account of the ascension of Christ is found in Acts 1:9. The same passage promises that Jesus will return at some unspecified time in the future (Acts 1:11). Peter's sermon in Acts 2 speaks of Christ's being seated at the right hand of the Father (vv. 34-36). That is where he is now. He has received his kingdom and all authority in heaven and on earth (Dan 7:13-14; Matt 28:18). He is now putting all enemies beneath his feet (1 Cor 15:25).

Paul's most extensive discussion of the future second advent of Christ is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, but he supplements it in other places such as 1 Corinthians 15. As Paul

explains, at the second advent of Christ, the dead in Christ will be raised first, and then those Christians who are alive at the time of his return will be caught up with him (1 Thess 4:16-17). The dead in Christ will be raised imperishable, and those who are alive will be changed (1 Cor 15:52). At the final judgment, Jesus will be the judge (John 5:22; Acts 10:42; Rom 2:16; 2 Cor 5:10). The nature and results of this final judgment are vividly described in Revelation 20:11-15. All stand before the Great White Throne. Those whose names are not found written in the Book of Life are cast into the lake of fire. The redeemed will enter a new heaven and new earth where they will be face-to-face with the Lord forever (Rev 22:1-5).




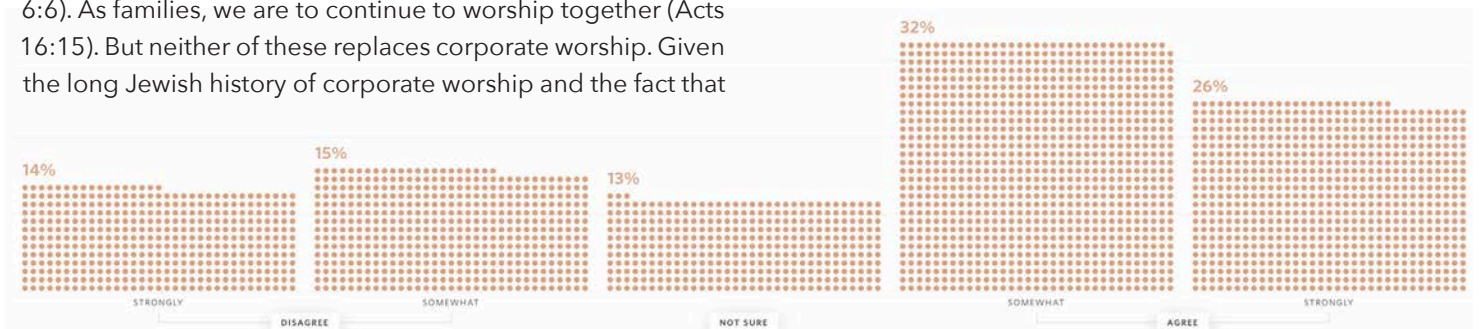
20. Worshipping alone or with one's family is a valid replacement for regularly attending church

Worshipping alone and with one's family is encouraged in Scripture and in the Reformed tradition. In fact, the Westminster Assembly produced a short Directory for Family Worship that explains both. We see the beginnings of family worship very early in Scripture during the patriarchal period under the leadership of men such as Abraham, who was required to circumcise the males in his household (Gen 17). At the time of the exodus, each family was to observe the Passover in their home (Exod 12:3, 26–27). All families were to teach their children the law (Deut 6:6–7). Jewish worship became more institutionalized with the establishment of the tabernacle, the priesthood, and the sacrifices, but individual worship, family worship, and corporate worship were all observed. After the destruction of the temple, the synagogue was established as a form of corporate worship and was still in existence at the time of Christ and the early church (Matt 4:23; 9:35; Acts 13:5; 17:7).

All three forms of worship are still to be practiced today. As individuals, we are to worship God in private prayer (Matt 6:6). As families, we are to continue to worship together (Acts 16:15). But neither of these replaces corporate worship. Given the long Jewish history of corporate worship and the fact that

the first converts to Christ were Jews (2:41), God would have to have stated clearly that a radical change had taken place in what he expected if corporate worship had suddenly been made optional for Christians. This did not happen. And the early church "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (v. 42).

Paul's writings assume corporate worship. In 1 Corinthians 11:18, he writes, "For, in the first place, when you come together as a church...." It is assumed that the Corinthian Christians will be coming together to meet as a church. The same is assumed in 1 Corinthians 14:23 when Paul discusses worship in the corporate gatherings. Corporate worship is required for differently gifted believers to build one another up. It is why the author to the Hebrews writes, "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, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Heb 10:24–25). 



YOU ASKED

What Should We Take From Near Death Experiences?

As Reformed believers we do not speak much about heaven or what it will be like to be in heaven. What, then, should we take from Near Death Experiences (NDE)? Many give amazing pictures of heaven. Some as well horrifying pictures of hell. Many also believe this is what the apostle Paul had in what he describes in 2 Corinthians 12.

Let me start out by reflecting on the reference to Paul's description of a Near Death Experience (NDE) in 2 Corinthians 12:1-4. Who wouldn't wish to experience something like that, so that you would really know that God exists? Some people do have an experience like it, and they can tell you about it afterwards. Mysterious stories they are – though, sometimes you can recognize the circumstances. Someone who was in the hospital, sick, miserable, between consciousness and unconsciousness, and all of a sudden he sees a bright light. People who were in coma for a while but who came out of it afterward and then tell a story like this: they were walking through a long hallway or corridor and at the end they saw a wonderful light, a beautiful garden. Impressive! Unforgettable! Ever since they had an experience like that, they're not afraid of death any longer.


How do we deal with stories like this? Do we advise people to be silent about their special experiences to protect others from envy, discontentment, or feelings of doubt? So, what about Paul, what about the Scriptures? This is exactly what he is speaking about, right? In his epistle to the Corinthians, Paul is dealing with opponents who were boasting in their experiences, spiritual and otherwise. Paul only came with the gospel (and not very eloquently at that), the fulfilment of the Law, etc. All he could boast about was the Lord! O sure, the story of his conversion on the way to Damascus was something, or the event of the earthquake in the jail at Philippi, or the times that he spoke in tongues; those were nice stories. Paul, however, didn't really want to talk about them; Paul wanted to be a servant rather than talk about himself. All he wishes to speak about was Jesus Christ and him crucified. And yet, now we hear him speak about such a special experience.

Indeed, Paul is speaking about an NDE; it's part of what he calls his discourse in foolishness. He tells about a vision he has had some time ago. His approach is peculiar, though. He wants to avoid every impression that he is boasting in himself. That's why he packages his story in a report on what happened to someone, a man in Christ, who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. "A man in Christ," he says, but from the whole context it's clear that he is speaking about himself. Every commentator as well is convinced that he is sharing a very special experience he himself has had. He heard inexpressible things, he says, which is something Paul himself only can know. You can deduce it from the verses 6 and 7 too, "So no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, to keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations." Just imagine the experience though: caught up to the third heaven; that is God's heaven, the highest heaven, the heaven where God's throne is! How did it happen, and where and when? In Lystra, for instance, where he was stoned and dragged outside the city for dead? Who knows? It was terrific, though, wonderful, and glorious!

Do they really happen, special experiences like that? Yes, they do! People do see those bright lights, experience unforgettable events, and mind-boggling visions! What do you do with them though? Nothing much when it comes to other people. It's something very personal. Yet, no one can verify, really, whether it is true, or can imagine what it's like. Paul, therefore, doesn't want

to boast about it, even if he could, "So no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say." That's a very important statement! In the church, Paul says, it's not about personal experiences but about things that we can enjoy together. In the church it's not about personal revelations but about the Word of God that's proclaimed. That's how God works!

Why, then, does the apostle Paul share this experience? Well, he does so reluctantly, he says in verse 1, and there is nothing to be gained by it. Hence, he takes the personal aspect out of it and pretends that he is sharing someone else's experience. It's not about me, he shows, but about Christ, Christ and his salvation. That can be verified, and its fulfilment can be shown. On the basis of God's Word, it can benefit the readers and listeners. In the church it should not be a matter of my personal experiences but about what we all share in Jesus Christ, and what we all have in common in his Word and through his Spirit!

Well, in this Word of God we read of many who received more than just NDE. We even read of resurrections and visions of heaven in the Bible. You can think of the widow's son (1 Kgs 17:17-24), Jairus's daughter (Matt 9:18-26), the unnamed saints (Matt 27:52-53), or Lazarus (John 11:1-44), Dorcas (Acts 9:36-42), and Eutychus (Acts 20:9-12). No one who came back from the dead in Scripture gave an account of the afterlife, including Lazarus, who spent four days in heaven. All those who had visions only showed fear, reverence, and worship (Isa 6:5; Rev 1:17; Ezek 1:28; Dan 10:9). The focus was on God and his glory! We will not question whether someone had an NDE, but we can evaluate the phenomenon and accounts of NDE in light of Scripture. Those in Scripture who had NDE, or had died and were resurrected from the dead, or had visions of heaven, did not give detailed accounts of the experiences. The Bible alone is sufficient for Christian faith and life (Rom 10:17; Heb 1:1-2). The Holy Spirit works through the Word of God, not someone's NDE! 



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Press Release of the Meeting of the Board of Governors of the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary held on January 14, 2021

Opening and roll call

The chairman of the Board, Rev. J. Louwerse, led in opening devotions. All governors were present. Dr. Van Vliet was present as Principal and administrative assistant L. Kuizenga was present to take the minutes of the meeting.

Memorabilia

Information was shared about the personal circumstances of emeriti professors, as well as widows and families of professors.

Minutes and agenda

The minutes of the meeting held on September 10, 2020 were approved. The agenda for the meeting was established.

Decisions, reports, agenda items

1. The Board received a letter from Dr. A. J. de Visser in which he requested that he be allowed to retire when he turns 65. This would mean that he teaches until the end of the 2022-2023 academic year (two and a half years from now). Normally a professor is required to give two years notice. Dr. de Visser is giving notice of his request early due to the fact that Synod is scheduled to meet in 2022 and needs to appoint his successor. The Board decided to grant Dr. de Visser's request. This will result in an upcoming vacancy in the role of professor of Ministry and Mission. According to CRTS protocols, the Academic Committee appointed a search committee, which will consult with the Senate and the churches in Canada and Australia, seeking suggestions for those who might serve as professor of Ministry and Mission. Currently, Dr. de Visser has already served at CRTS for sixteen years.
2. The Board received a letter from the staff at CRTS, asking for improved communication between the Board and

staff. They ask that staff be given access to Board minutes and non-confidential reports so they are more aware of decisions made which might affect them in their tasks. The Board approved this request.

3. The Distance Education Committee gave a brief update on their work. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, CRTS has made a solid start in offering hybrid education. All students who are able to attend in-person and on campus do so, while online learning is available for foreign students who are not able to come to Hamilton due to difficulties or delays with student visas. The online option is also used when the pandemic makes it impossible to meet in-person. This follows the approach the Board adopted in Sept 2020: on campus as much as possible, online as much as necessary. The investment in video/audio hardware and software allows for an interactive integration of online and on-campus students. The new learning management system and student information system allow automatic recording of lectures and access to these both when they are delivered and afterwards. A hybrid education survey was conducted among the students (both those in person and those studying online). The Senate reflected on survey results and made some notes for the Distance Education Committee to consider. There is help available to our faculty for course design and further consultation in offering hybrid education. The Board had a discussion about setting a minimum standard of on-campus study in order to receive a degree at CRTS. The Distance Education Committee will present a full report on hybrid education at the September Board meeting.
4. The Committee appointed to investigate the expansion of the Pastoral Training Program reported that they had met and would report further at the September meeting.

5. An update was given on the proposed strategic planning session, planned for September 2021. Decisions were made on a proposed schedule, agenda, and on the list of attendees at strategic planning. The brothers were to come with a further proposal at our September meeting.
6. The chairman reported on input given to the Deputies for Training for the Ministry of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, who are finalizing a report for their synod. The Board appreciates the collaborative manner in which CRTS can work with these deputies, and for the continued support of the Australian churches.
7. A report, with input from the Senate, was presented to the Board on the faculty's workload. This is a matter that has had the Board's concern. We would prefer our professors to be busy teaching, researching, and publishing, and not to have too much of their time taken up with administrative matters. This report quantified how much time our professors spend on administrative tasks and proposed some matters that could be done by others. Some improvements were suggested. This matter will receive further consideration by the Senate at our next strategic planning session.
8. Revs. C. J. VanderVelde and M. H. VanLuik reported on lecture visits to CRTS on November 4-5, 2020, as well as on visits with four of the five professors (Dr. de Visser was on sabbatical). This report was received with thankfulness.
9. The Finance and Property Committee provided minutes of the recent meetings they held. They were received for information. They also presented a proposal to amend the current investment policy. This was adopted and will be passed on to the governance committee for inclusion in the handbook and regulations of the seminary.
10. The Governance Committee made proposals to change the CRTS Handbook to reflect changes with respect to the composition of the Publication Committee, the role of the librarian, and the librarian's freedom of inquiry. These proposals were adopted.
11. Margaret Alkema joined the meeting. Last year CRTS was blessed with receiving accreditation from the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) for the next ten years. CRTS is required to follow this up with reports on various matters. A plan was adopted, assigning these reports to members of the Board, faculty, and staff.
12. The Board received survey results on a Board evaluation of itself and by the Senate. This report was received with thankfulness.
13. Dr. J. Van Vliet presented his principal's report, and this was received with thankfulness.
14. The Board received a sabbatical report from Dr. de Visser, and an evaluation of it from our principal. This was received with thankfulness.
15. The Board received a report from the COVID committee. It was received with thankfulness. An institutional readiness plan with respect to COVID-19 was put together to allow foreign students to receive visas to travel to Canada. Before we received approval, the government amended the process, putting in place a list of requirements that a college or university needed to meet to be approved. To get approval the principal was required to sign an attestation saying CRTS met those requirements. This has been done, and the expectation is that CRTS will soon be put on the approved list.

Press release and closing

The completion of the Press Release was delegated to the vice-chairman in consultation with the Executive and the Principal. Rev. J. Slaa closed the meeting with prayer.

On behalf of the Board of Governors of the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary,

Rev. J. Poppe (Vice-chairman/Corresponding Clerk)



Clarion

To equip God's people for his glory,
in faithfulness to Scripture, as summarized
in the Reformed confessions, Clarion
adheres to the following core values:

Confessionally Reformed
Loving in manner
Attuned to current issues
Readable and Reliable
In Submission to Scripture
Open to constructive criticism
Nurturing Christian living