

Clarion



Clarion

What's Inside

Dr. Jason Van Vliet opens our issue with his lead article, "Why?" When we struggle to understand why we face the troubles and issues that arise in our lives, this is the question we ask. For guidance on this topic, Dr. Van Vliet turns to the Belgic Confession in his article.

Continuing on a similar topic from last issue, Rev. Tyler VanderGaag's second article is entitled, "Bride of the Master." Issue 11 also brings our readers the columns Treasures, New & Old, Ray of Sunshine, and You Asked. This issue contains a MERF newsletter as well as an article from Rev. Samit Mishra, minister in the Presbyterian Free Church of India. There is also a letter to the editor.

Laura Veenendaal

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LEAD ARTICLE



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Why?

Little children often ask, “Why Dad? Why Mom?” Recently I came across a phrase I had never heard before: “why-weary parents.” Parents of preschoolers, though, can likely identify with that description.

Why do young children ask *why* so much? There is a good reason. They are learning to think at a higher cognitive level. The question “What is this?” only expands a mind so far. It teaches children about objects and actions. They learn that “this is a rose” and “that is running.”

Such knowledge is a valuable start, but more is required. As they mature, children need to familiarize themselves with causes, connections, and consequences. The *why* questions probe these deeper matters. “But why do I have to hold your hand, Dad?” “Because if you don’t, you might slip off this narrow path, fall down the steep hill, and hurt yourself.” In this way, asking the *why* question is all about learning to connect the dots of life in meaningful and helpful ways.

As we all know, though, asking *why* does not stop once we enter kindergarten. Adults also are struggling to understand why our Father in heaven sends so much suffering and pain into our lives, yes, also our lives as his dear children and heirs. *Christian* families break apart. Congregations of *Jesus Christ* tie themselves up in knots of controversy. *Godly* parents die while they are still relatively young, leaving behind devastated spouses and broken-hearted children.

Why? O heavenly Father, why?

With this question we step into the realm of *theodicy*. Theodicy aims to explain how and why our good and gracious, all-powerful and all-wise God puts such soul-wrenching adversities on our paths. For guidance concerning this difficult topic, let us turn to the Belgic Confession.

Good is
not just something
that God does
from time to time –
good is what
God is

This good God

In Article 13 of the Belgic Confession, the church summarizes what she believes about God's providence, including how our heavenly Father "ordains and executes his work in the most excellent and just manner, even when devils and wicked men act unjustly" and, if we may add some phrases from our Catechism, also when we experience "drought ... barren years ... sickness ... and poverty" (LD 10). This brings us to the heart of the matter. The actions of demons and demagogues are not good. They are sinful and, at times, atrociously so. Similarly, the deep valley of affliction may contain many things that are not good. We certainly believe that God uses trials for our good (Rom 5:3-5), but that does not make cancer or controversy, in and of themselves, good things. Far from it!

With this in mind, we should not overlook how carefully Guido de Brès, the author of the Belgic Confession, crafted

the opening sentence of Article 13. He wrote, "We believe that *this good God*...." Most directly, that demonstrative pronoun, *this*, refers back to the previous article. The God of creation (Art. 12) is the God of providence (Art. 13), but it does not need to stop there.

In fact, the phrase, "this good God," reaches all the way back to Article 1. There we confess the one true God who simply is eternally and infinitely good – so completely good, in fact, that he is "the overflowing fountain of all good." Good is not just something that God does from time to time. On the contrary, good is what God *is*. God was good before there was any evil. God continues to be overflowingly good, even after the Fall plunged this world into an overflowing cauldron of corruption (Gen 6:5). Through it all, right up to this very day, God remains the great I AM WHO I AM. In short, if God would not be good, he would not be God. But he *is* truly God, and therefore, he is also truly good – always and without exception.

Back to why

Sometimes, though, we shape up our understanding of who God is from our personal analysis of how he governs the events of our life. Not unlike toddlers, we observe what is happening to us and we repeatedly ask, "Why? Why? Why?" Step by step, we connect the dots, but the picture that emerges in our mind is not necessarily pretty. In our estimation, the path of our life looks far less than ideal and maybe even not good at all. Then we run stuck. If these things happening to me are not good, and they all ultimately come from God's hand, how can he himself be perfectly good? Doubts surface in our minds. Maybe the misgivings stick around and refuse to leave.

But do you see what we are doing? Perhaps unwittingly, we start with our own assessment of God's government over our lives and then use our evaluation to outline our understanding of who God is. Or, in the words of Article 2 of the Belgic Confession, we intently study a "beautiful book," namely God's creation and his reign over it, but we temporarily forget that "he makes himself *more clearly and fully* known to us by his holy and divine Word." We pour over the pages of general revelation, only to circle back, some time later, to special revelation, God's Holy Word.

But we really need to turn that order around. We must begin with what is most clear, namely holy Scriptures, and then delve, so far as we may, into the matters that are much less clear to us, namely the inner workings of God's providential ways.

God's revealed Word is perfectly clear. "No one is good except God alone" (Mark 10:18). Moreover, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change" (James 1:17). No matter how we may analyze, or become confused by, the pieces of providence that fill our lives, those truths stand firm, fixed in heaven and on earth forever!

Recognizing and respecting our limits

Repeatedly the Belgic Confession prompts us to remember who is the Potter and who is the clay. Actually, no less than five reminders are found in Article 13 on God's providence: "beyond understanding," "surpassing human understanding," "not curiously inquire farther than our capacity allows us," "judgments of God which are hidden from us," and "without transgressing these limits." Clearly, the child who has just entered kindergarten should not expect to master the mathematical functions that support quantum mechanics. That is for later in life ... if ever.

Likewise, all the interconnected whys, hows, and wherefores of God's design for our lives are so infinitely complex that, by comparison, quantum mechanics is child's play. Yet we struggle to accept the obvious: when we try to sort out our God's providence, we run up against our limits very quickly. The sooner we recognize this, the sooner we will experience the quiet calmness of the weaned child in Psalm 131.

The answer in Christ

But is that all we can say to someone whose heart is torn in two by the hardships of this life? "God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts." "Leave it to the LORD. He will take care of it in the end." Can we offer any more comfort than that? Yes, we can.

At a certain point, Article 13 of the Belgic Confession says, "We content ourselves that we are pupils of Christ." That is a striking little detail, isn't it? Given that providence comes from God's *fatherly* hand (LD 10), we might expect our confession to recommend that we content ourselves to be *children of our heavenly Father*. The heavenly Father knows best, we often say. To be sure, this is entirely correct. Yet, when it comes to providence, we also confess ourselves to be pupils of Christ, God's only-begotten Son.

Pupils should learn something from their teacher. So, what lesson is our Chief Prophet and Teacher giving us? Let us stand for a moment at the foot of the cross, looking with the eyes of faith and learning with regenerated minds. The men who

arranged for Christ's crucifixion were evil. The Jewish leaders raged against our Lord with jealousy and murderous intent. The Roman soldiers made sport of the Messiah, God's own Son. The whole event was saturated with wickedness.

More than that, the holy wrath of God against the sin of the whole world (LD 15) pierced his body and crushed his soul (Isa 53:5). All the rebellion. All the greed. All the idolatry. All the lust. All the deceit. Christ bore the weight of God's righteous wrath against everything that was, and still is, evil in the entire history of mankind. In other words, the cross was a concentration point, an indescribable concentration of all that is hellishly awful and agonizing (LD 16, Q&A 44).

On that cross our Chief Teacher asked one question. He spoke seven times, but he only asked one, single question: *why?* "My God, my God, *why* have you forsaken me?" When our Saviour asked his crucial *why* question, no answer came from heaven above. Just silence. Agonizing silence.


Yet the pages of Scripture are full of the answer. "My God, my God, *why* have you forsaken me?" That was the question. The answer? For us. And for our salvation. That is *why*! God turned agony into atonement. He transformed the darkest moment into the brightest light. That is the answer!

Ready to learn, eager for comfort

As pupils of Christ, are we learning? Are we content with the answer that he is giving us? Out of one specific moment - the unspeakable agony of Golgotha - our God brought forth the most inexpressible gift (2 Cor 9:15), all-encompassing forgiveness and everlasting glory for the sake of his Son.

Still there is more. To use the words of the baptism form, this same good God will assuredly take all the sorrows, all the sufferings, and yes, also the evils, that plague our path and most certainly turn it to our good, also for the sake of his Son. Do you sometimes have your doubts? You are not alone; we all do. But the cross of Christ is the indubitable evidence. "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Rom 8:32)

As our minds anxiously scrutinize the pages of providence, our hearts often cry out, "Why? O heavenly Father, *why?*"

Our Father answers, "My dear child, stay in the classroom of Christ all the days of your earthly sojourn. His cross has something to teach you. As your sovereign Creator and Redeemer, I can, and I *will*, transform evil into good. Golgotha is the proof that none can refute. Remember, believe, and be comforted." 

Kicking Against the Goats

“And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’” (ACTS 26:14)

In Acts 26, Paul describes what happened to him when the Lord Jesus confronted him on the road to Damascus. Among other things, Jesus told him that he was “kicking against the goads.” That is what an ox or a mule does when he stubbornly no longer wants to follow his master’s commands. A goad was a sharp stick which was used to prod the animal to quicken the pace and to be more compliant. Feeling the goad, the animal would sometimes kick back and thereby wound himself even more severely.

Metaphorically, this saying applied to Paul because of the way he conducted himself. He acted like a stubborn ox. Of course, Paul did not see himself in that way. Paul was sincere in what he was doing. He was not a hypocrite. No, in persecuting the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, he was convinced that he was doing the right thing. He stubbornly held on to the false belief that he was doing God’s will.

Then suddenly the resurrected and glorified Jesus appeared to Paul and stopped him dead in his tracks, telling him that he was Jesus, whom Paul had been persecuting. This totally changed everything for Paul. He could no longer deny the truth about Jesus and everything Christ stands for.

Jesus of Nazareth, whom he thought was dead and buried, now stood before him alive, in heavenly glory. And now the Lord Jesus pointed his finger at him and accused him.

Only a little while ago, Paul had heard the preaching of Stephen, who eloquently spoke as he proved from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah, the long-awaited Saviour of the world. Yet he had condemned him to death for following Jesus. He had shut his ears and closed his eyes.

And now Paul stands before Jesus as a condemned man. He is stripped naked before his Lord and Master. That once proud Pharisee lies prostrate on the ground. He knows that he deserves to die. He is completely at God’s mercy. All that he has ever done means absolutely nothing. It has all been a complete failure. All he has to offer God is rubbish (Phil 3:8).

And here, on the road to Damascus, Paul’s eyes are opened to the unspeakable riches God has to offer him through Jesus Christ. Miraculously, the Lord God does not consume him in his anger. No, instead he wants to use him to bring the glorious message of the gospel to the world. He is commissioned to tell the world about Jesus and the glory and riches of his kingdom.

But the only way that he could do this would be through humiliation and self-denial. He had to submit his will to God’s will.

In his living Word and by his Holy Spirit, God also confronts us. As sinful human beings, we too, time and again, stubbornly go our own way. We get into wrong habits and into wrong ways of thinking. Too often we think that we are doing God’s will whereas, in reality, we are doing our own will.

And so, we too must allow the Lord God to confront us with our sins, and to have him open our eyes. Time and again we must allow him to test our thoughts and our actions on the basis of God’s Word. Jesus must have priority over everything. We must renounce our own will and all our earthly goods, including our loved ones, our children, our marriage partner, our parents, our farm, our business, our friends, our own reputation. We must put it all at his disposal. We must deny our own sinful flesh. It is only when we lose our life for Jesus’ sake that we will gain it (Matt 16:25). **C**

For Further Study

1. In what way did Paul “kick against the goads”? What happens when you do that?
2. Can you think of how you yourself have kicked against the goads in your own life?
3. What needs to happen time and again for us to get us back on the right track? What will we gain?



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Bride *of the* Master

“I am a rose of Sharon... a lily among brambles” ~ Song of Songs 2:1-2

Introduction

In the last article on biblical slavery, we looked at the general laws regarding slavery in Exodus 21:1-6. Those general laws applied to both male and female slaves (Deut 15:12). Now, if slavery in general still makes us a bit uncomfortable, then even the thought of selling a daughter into slavery is surely utterly repulsive. Who in their right mind would do such a thing? John Calvin calls this “an act of barbarism.” Yet this is the very thing the

Lord God permits in Exodus 21:7-11. Now, without minimizing our deep reservations, when we look carefully at these laws, we cannot help but see the compassion and care of the Lord. He ensures that should such a barbaric act occur, the daughter is not only protected from abuse and mistreatment but treated with care, respect, and dignity. In addition, viewed in light of the gospel, these laws help us get to the very heart of Christ’s love for his bride, the church.

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# We have a wonderful master in the Lord Jesus Christ, who became a slave for us and our salvation. He did so not only as a gracious master, but as the loving bride- groom of the church.

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A slave-bride

It was possible that instead of a man selling himself into slavery to pay off a debt, he could sell his daughter instead (Exod 21:7). When this happened, special laws applied. When a daughter was sold as a slave, it was done with the clear understanding that she would eventually become the wife of the master who bought her. Exodus 21:8 speaks of the master who “has designated her for himself.” Designating here is in the sense of selecting her to be his bride. So, although she was sold as a slave, she was also sold as a future bride.

Now, although it’s not explicitly stated, we should not necessarily assume that the man involved in buying this daughter and designating her to be his wife was already married. This is certainly possible given the examples of Abraham and Jacob (Gen 16:3; Gen 30:4, 9), but the man could just as easily be an unmarried man and eligible bachelor.

Whatever the marital status of the man might be, given the traditional system of dowry gifts given to the bride’s father, the act of selling a daughter into slavery may not be as barbaric

as we might think. Instead of receiving a dowry price for his daughter, the man waives the dowry fee for his daughter’s suitor in exchange for his debt being cancelled. It’s a win, win. The financial crisis is averted for one and the other now has a future wife awaiting him.

The man who buys the young lady and designates her to be his wife was not forced to marry her. If she does not “please her master ... then he shall let her be redeemed” (Exod 21:8). There does not seem to be any sexual undertones here, although some have suggested as much. It’s not so much that he’s not pleased with her in bed, but that he does not think she will be a suitable wife for him after all. In such cases, he can decide not to marry her and “let her be redeemed.” It’s unclear who would redeem her – probably her father or another suitor. What is clear is that he cannot sell her to foreigners (Exod 21:8).

All this helps us realize that the daughter was not betrothed to the man who bought her like Mary was to Joseph, which in biblical times meant that the only way to end the relationship was divorce (Matt 1:18-19). It would be more accurate to think of this as an engagement to be married that could be dissolved if things went sour, without the need for divorce.

A slave-bride for a son

Now, it could also happen that a married man buys a young lady as a slave with the intention of her becoming his son’s wife. If that’s the case, the man must not treat the young lady as a slave. He must “deal with her as with a daughter” (Exod 21:9). This makes perfect sense. If all goes according to plan, in due time she will marry his son, become his daughter-in-law, and a full-fledged member of his family.

Things don’t always go according to plan, however. So, what happens if that son doesn’t want to marry her and he takes another wife instead of this young woman his father designated for him? In such circumstances, the master must provide the young girl with the things listed in Exodus 21:11 – food, clothing, and a third thing that’s hotly disputed. Some translate the third thing as “marital rights,” which implies a sense of sexual intimacy. Marital rights makes sense if the young man was married to this girl, but there’s nothing that suggests he was. This girl was simply designated to be married to him, but they weren’t married. So why would this young man have to provide marital rights to a woman he’s not married to? Instead of marital rights, a much better suggestion for this third thing is housing or possibly oil. John Calvin provides another alternative. He too

dismisses the view that marital rights are in view and instead suggests “compact” or “agreement” – which he further explains is a reference to the dowry amount for which she was originally purchased. Whatever the case may be, if she is not provided for in these three ways, she’s free to go, “without payment of money” (Exod 21:11).

In all this we see the compassionate care of the Lord God to daughters who were sold into slavery. Daughters were not allowed be sold as ordinary slaves, but with the clear understanding that they would become a wife either to the man who bought her or his son. Whatever the case was, the girl was to be treated with care and dignity and even as one of the family!

Slave-brides and the gospel

When we step back and view the treatment of slave-brides against the backdrop of the gospel, a beautiful picture emerges. God the Father designated the church to be the bride of his only-begotten Son. This means that God the Father treats us like his own daughter and grants us the rights of a daughter. We are part of his family. We are cherished, loved, and cared for by him!


What joy to also realize that although the church was not pleasing to look at with all her sin and unholiness, God’s Son didn’t select another woman to be his bride. Though Jesus Christ had every reason and right, he didn’t break off the engagement! “From heaven he came and sought her to be his holy bride; with his own blood he bought her and for her life he died” (Hy 52:1).

The result of the Son of God’s transforming work on his bride is nothing less than spectacular. Paul describes it for us in Ephesians 5:25-27: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.” Loved. Holy. Clean. Splendid. Spotless. That’s beauty beyond compare! This is the gospel. The church is the slave-bride that Christ refused to reject, but instead selected, embraced, loved, cherished, sanctified, and made beautiful through his death on the cross and resurrection from the dead. Now, there’s no bride on earth as attractive and beautiful as his! We – the church – sparkle and shine like jewels in a crown (Zech 9:16). Christ has made us “a rose of Sharon” and “a lily among brambles” (Song 2:1-2).

So, not only is Christ our gracious Master, he’s our loving bridegroom and we are his beautiful bride. He’s the man every woman dreams of marrying! There’s no need to ever leave him, to look to anyone or anywhere else to supply us with our needs! He loves us, nourishes us, strengthens us, protects and cares for us. He supplies us with all we need for body and soul. He feeds us with his Word. He clothes us with his righteousness. Until he returns in glory, he’s also advocating for us at God’s right hand and spoiling us with gifts from above. Why would we ever dream of leaving him? He’s made us his beautiful bride and now we look forward – with all the church – to the wedding feast of the Lamb when his bride will be ready and dressed in fine linen, bright and clean (Rev 19:7).

Conclusion

There is, to be sure, much more to say about biblical slavery than these two brief articles. We may even still have some lingering concerns with it all. I trust, however, that you’ve come to realize that slavery in biblical times wasn’t the kind of slavery that we sometimes imagine it to be. It wasn’t nineteenth century America. The Lord made sure that slaves were protected, provided for, and treated with love. He did the same with daughters sold into slavery as future wives. They were not to be mistreated or sold to foreigners, but treated with dignity and respect and even as part of the family.

What is more, I hope you have seen the gospel shines through in these slavery laws. We have a wonderful master in the Lord Jesus Christ, who became a slave for us and our salvation. He did so not only as a gracious master, but as the loving bridegroom of the church. He bought us to be his bride. As slaves of Christ and the bride of Christ, then, we can go our way with open ears, declaring, “I love my master,” and with the confidence that he will supply us – his beautiful bride – with all we need in this life and the next. 



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COVID Chaos *and* the Church

By **Samit Mishra** *Minister in the Presbyterian Free Church of India*

Editor's Comment: On the early morning of May 12, 2021, I received this very painful email from a friend and colleague in India. The Rev. Samit Mishra is a minister in the Presbyterian Free Church of India. This church is a member church of the International Conference of Reformed Churches. He sent it to me as Corresponding Secretary of that organization and asked me to pass it on to other member churches. As such this email speaks for itself. It is a devastating report of what COVID is doing in India. Your prayers and help are urgently needed. May our God come to the rescue of this suffering nation! JV

The door is shut; people are terrified, the pandemic is ramping with brutality and raising questions in all aspects of life. Nothing seems to be improving. The words dreadful, serious, worst, tragic, etc. appear to lose their meaning. We are paralyzed politically and being defeated medically every day.

How about the church, one may ask. It's not better either. Promises of God that used to flow heavily on social media last year are rarely visible and circulated at this time. There is a huge lack of interest in attending online worship and events. Not much community service is done due to fear of infection and busyness in caring on. Spiritual leaders are emotionally down and theologically dumbstruck, as many of their people are finding the words of comforts unrelating to their present experiences. The surrounding noise of screaming people, ear-deafening sirens of ambulances and heart-piercing reports of

infection and death rise have made the church sit indoors and limit the ministry mainly to prayer.

Painful experiences

Listen to the following heartbreaking realities to sense the atmosphere we are breathing in.

First, in the town where I serve is a place called Gokalpur. The main residents of this section are people who catch and sell fish to earn their living. Just in a blink COVID broke out in the colony. Within a week, almost every family got a COVID positive. The numbers kept increasing as there was no proper facility of isolation within their houses. The richest among poor in the village lost five of his family members, including his wife, sister, and brother. Some families escaped to other places. Few others moved to nearby forest to live in camps and minimize the possibility of infection. Yet, things remained same. COVID is conquering many lives.

The second story comes from Jabalpur. A staff member of the Bible Society of India passed into glory due to COVID infection. His young daughter died just two months ago. The only person to remain in the family is a severely ill woman – a wife and mother left alone. Three pastors approached her to comfort her after the funeral service. The woman challenged their preaching and promises of God, "How do all things work for the good of those who love God? How can God do well to me by taking away my husband and daughter? Is there any divine good for me to be alone at home with no one to care and comfort in my illness?" No pastor dared to put the promise into the immediate context of the verse and explain it with theological, linguistic, and hermeneutic excellence. They had no words to comfort, even no prayers to offer. They were hard struck; the tearful questions of the women were imprinted in their hearts. They left the graveyard, echoing the same "Why" questions.

The other real story comes from Agra, a city famous for the monument of love, the Tajmahal.



A woman named Renu Singhal took her husband to the hospitals in an autorikshaw. She could not find a bed in hospitals. Seeing her husband struggling to breathe, she started giving him oxygen from her mouth. She was not afraid of getting infected. She just wanted to save the life of her husband. Her husband finally gave up, he died without a bed, an oxygen cylinder, or medical treatment. As he died on the lap of his screaming wife, the monument of a historical love lost the battle. Agra will now be remembered more for the love of a poor and helpless wife than a love of wealthy king. We witness all these on television as losers, hopeless and scared citizens.

The other story visualizes another aspect. In this time, the greatest blessing one can have is someone in the family working in a hospital. It is easy to get bed and all other medical facilities if one of your family members is employed in hospital. However, the blessing for one can be counted as curse to other. There have been cases where a patient is treated and recovered well, but due to his relationship he or she can continue to occupy the bed and facility for few extra days. There is a fear that if the bed is left, it will be difficult to get back, in case if it is required again in next few days. In present scenario, the concern can be validated from many ways, yet in the process, there is huge possibility of someone missing the immediate medical care and, even, losing life. Saving self is preferred over serving other.


On top of all these, here is another truth of the community. The biblical call to mourn with those who mourn seems to be at halt. Those who die, they die alone. Those who bury their dear ones do it all alone. Even when the death is not caused by COVID! The broken reeds are left alone in their pain and cry. Very few hands join them in their sufferings. Even the silent presence during the mourning season is not possible or preferred practically in most of the cases. The virtual presence is not much help either! It is impossible, impractical, and inhumane to speak words of comfort and peace when you are standing far off from the sea

of sorrow, without being immersed into the atmosphere of grief the words of comforter may feel like a noisy music - irritating and frustrating.

Church's response

These incidents raise many questions. They question the health care system in India. They argue against political agendas that political parties set in this nation. These stories also have the capacity to raise hard theological questions; they can be used to challenge God's goodness, justice, sovereignty, and providence. Of course, as learned theologians, many of us are experts in answering such questions. However, it's easy to verbalize all the confessional answers, but very hard to justify them in reality, especially to those hit by COVID waves. Some of the answers may even hurt the questioner more than bringing comfort. There is a possibility that, in the process of defending God's truths, we may accuse the sufferer and cause more pain than peace.

Recently, we attended a virtual international conference: "Corona, Connection, and Cross," organized by DVN and Kampen Theological University, Netherlands. It was excellent! The emphasis of the conference was that church is to be active in bringing in God's Shalom in the world and in community, minimizing the gap between rich and poor, defending and advocating for the rights of the marginalized, promoting love, justice, equality, and harmony in the community. We finished feeling more responsible congregationally, but, at the same time, with high potential to be more silent theologically.

It is not a time to speak much. It's not a time to get engaged in theological debates, but it's a time to love and serve with Christ-like compassion. It is a time to be more active as church, demonstrating the gospel, caring the society, loving the enemy, and spreading God's goodness and providential care through our personal, congregational, and community resources, (see next page sidebar). 

Looking into the vast need of the Indian society, we request your financial support. Your little aid has the capacity to bless and serve multiple people in needs. We can offer help to in many dimensions, depending on your preferences. Please let us know in which area you want to serve India and we will make sure to get you a budget on the same line and use your aid towards that direction only. Please continue to pray for India! "Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the LORD, 'You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you'" (Ps 16:1-2).

The need of the society

The following material will help us visualize the need and serve accordingly.

1. Poverty is killing more people than COVID. A family owning a one or two room house cannot follow the isolation and sanitization guidelines. One positive case in the family infects many at home and causes loss of employment, finances, and many deaths in the same family.
2. Lack of medical facility and support. Many people have died because they could not get timely treatment.
3. There is a lack of oxygen and other required medications. Due to the high demands of medical equipment, the prices are five times higher than the actual cost. There are some people who are involved in making false medical instruments and medicines, selling them for higher prices.
4. Due to lockdowns, migration, and loss of family breadwinners, there is a significant increase in poverty and challenges in livelihood. This has raised a need for dry rations, vitamin supplements, and assistance for over-stretched mission hospitals and support for church members and leaders suffering from severe mental health issues.
5. Many independent churches and their leaders are also in dire need as they do not have structural support during this pandemic.
6. Death of several Christian ministers and church leaders in the second wave. Over 350 Christian ministers have died due to COVID.
7. Many pastors are exhausted and drained; they are at high risk of breakdown. Christian leaders are exhausted as they try to address the spiritual and material needs of their congregations.
8. Fear and anxiety among church leaders and members due to the spread of the COVID-19. Many people are isolated; they are deprived of proper support – spiritual, material, medical, and psychological concerns.
9. The church has economically suffered a lot during the pandemic, especially a loss of income due to the death of family breadwinners. This wave has increased the number of widows, orphans, and physically challenged. There is an urgent need for physical, spiritual, and material requirements for Christian community as well.
10. Likewise, the Christian schools in rural areas are suffering a great loss. Despite government and court issuing decisions in favour of the schools, the parents remain reluctant to pay the fees.
11. The parents keep arguing for “No School, No Fee” The government and court had reduced the fee to 30% and asked the parents to pay, but only monthly tuition fees. Still, the problem prevailed; the government and courts can decide in favour of the school, but they cannot force parents to pay fees by any lawful provisions.
12. Despite huge financial deficit, the schools have to continue to pay the salary of the staff and the Employment Provident Fund. There is no financial aid given to the private schools for their financial survival.
13. This year there seems to be no hope of getting the school to full capacity. Consequently, many Christian schools serving in tribal or rural belts will collapse financially.

To support, please contact: Presbyterian Free Church- Central India Free Church Mission Education Board
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www.merf.org

MERF News

Middle East Reformed Fellowship—“Declaring the Whole Counsel of God”

April 2021



Arabic Media Follow-Up

“Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”
— Luke 23:34

يَا أَبَتَاهُ، اغْفِرْ لَهُمْ، لَأَنَّهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ مَاذَا يَفْعَلُونَ

www.issa-almasih.com

Over 90% of Arabic-speaking people identify themselves as Muslims, although few have strong commitment to Islam. The vast majority have had little or no opportunity to read the Bible or interact with followers of Christ. All, but a few, live in the 22 nations of the Arab League – from northern Africa in the west to Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula in the east.

It is a rapidly growing population. Sixty percent are under the age of 25. These young people are the target group of MERF's Arabic Media Ministry. Most of the high volume of responses to MERF's radio and online programs are from this group, but some are older.

Electronic Contact

The main goal is to bring Christ to the largest possible number of listeners and internet browsers. Tens of thousands are reached daily. The questions and discussions generated from these Arabic programs provide wonderful opportunities to explain biblical truths in terms understandable to Muslims.

A great number of young people respond by text messages via popular social media such as Instagram and Facebook Messenger. Some communicate by WhatsApp, Viber or email. Now electronic media enable direct interaction with immediate response, publicly

and privately. This provides both great challenge and great opportunity. Follow-up of responses is key.

Dardasha7.com

(Chat 7) and the related Facebook page provide short audio segments with indirect Christian content. The page has over 1.3 million followers. The audio programs deal with subjects reflecting the impact of sin on people and the creation. Subjects include: hatred, conflicts, wars, crimes, diseases, pollution, injustice, adultery, divorce, abortion etc. Such subjects generate many questions and much discussions.

Follow-up of responses to

indirect programs first involves friendly interactions to stimulate questioning of common assumptions. This encourages the listener to search for the True Living God and listen to more engaging programs to promote dialogue. Short videos bring many comments too. The follow-up team responds to all comments.

Issa-almasih

(Jesus the Christ) Facebook page has close to 1 million followers. Over ten thousand make contact every month. Almost all are Muslim. It more directly presents the gospel message. A sizable number of Islamic fanatics send negative messages. The staff and other believers view this as a positive

شبكة برامج درداشة7 إبتداء من أول مارس وإبريل



Announcing Dardasha7 new programs

sign. To them it indicates that the gospel message is getting through to challenge fanatic convictions. At the same time, many more respond with sincere interest. *Issa-almasih.com* website provides audio messages and Bible readings, focusing on Jesus' sayings and teaching as well as those about Him.

Diverse Formats

Programs on the direct Arabic gospel site give rise to the most engaging interactions. Teams of trained Arab staff and volunteers coordinate follow-up over the internet. Production centers in Cairo, Egypt and Beirut, Lebanon work jointly. All programs are promoted over various social media with short, thoughtprovoking video advertisements. Each program invites the listener to think. This stimulates frank dialogue about Christ and His claims. For example:

MERF-Canada

Thank you for your faithful support! Please make cheques payable to MERF-Canada and send them to the address at the bottom of the page.

Online donations can be made to Middle East Reformed Fellowship (Canada) Inc. through www.merf.org/support

A *Call to Reflection* is a program challenging inherited religious convictions and assumptions. It calls for deeper thinking about their validity or compatibility with the holiness, wisdom and absolute justice of God Almighty. Every episode invites the listeners to think and reconsider one assumption.

52 Questions About Faith in Christ is promoted by: "Do you know about Jesus the Christ? What do you know about the beliefs of His followers? You may have a lot of questions. The answers are found in this short program."

Engaging Chats

There are all kinds of public comments on these and other programs, some positive and others negative. Brief expressions of opinion are welcomed. Insults, threats and Islamic treatises are deleted. The follow-up team tactfully interacts with the hundreds of comments. Their short replies draw those who respond into further conversation. Many appreciate the opportunity to continue private discussions with the follow-up team, but not all have a serious interest in the gospel. Types of responses:

- An Islamic caller exhorts to repent in response to unIslamic ideas.
- Others have an academic interest in understanding Christian teachings.
- Some Muslims are afraid to

listen to the programs, lest they corrupt their minds, but still write to object, without even hearing the episode. Their idea that the Bible is corrupted dominates.

- Some ask for aid to get married or travel abroad or solve financial problems.
- Another is curious about our Christian faith, and wonders "Who is Christ to you?"
- A person of Christian background insults the page name *Issa-almasih* and insists on using terms exclusively understood by Christians.
- Some aimlessly discuss anything and everything.
- A Muslim who knows a little about the Christian faith wants to know more.

Committed Care

Individual conversations may go on for days, weeks or even months. Some communicate very regularly, others sporadically. On average, every day about forty people privately ask questions and discuss Scriptures with the team. Over time the gospel message is clearly communicated, sometimes more than once. Some lose interest. Others want time to think. Others hear the message and respond positively. With these the entire gospel of Luke is explained.

In this way, the wonderful message of the Savior is fully shared. Those who come to faith in Christ often write letters of encouragement and thanks. These new believers often lack fellowship. Please remember them in prayer.



Judging Ideas

YOU ASKED

How Should the Meetings With or Without the Deacons be Announced and Reported?


In church announcements and reports we have been hearing the word “council” replacing the term “consistory” and signifying elders and deacons. We have also noticed that some decisions are made by councils that should only have been dealt with by elders and not deacons. Since the deacons have no authority, should there not be a definite distinction between the consistory with the deacons and the consistory?

Indeed, when reading brief reports and press releases, there appears to be a difference in the way the place and involvement of the deacons is expressed. They either articulate the difference in the meetings reported on as “council” and “consistory,” indicating the meeting was held respectively with or without the deacons, or it is reported as a meeting of “consistory” and a meeting of “consistory with the deacons.” One way of explaining this difference would be by pointing to a long-standing difference in the formulation of the Belgic Confession and the Church Order. The Belgic Confession uses the name “council” in Article 30: “There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; there should also be elders and deacons who, together with the pastors, form the council of the church.” This being expressed under the heading of the article as “The Government

of the Church” could also give the impression as if the deacons are included in the “government” of the church.

In light of this expression in the Belgic Confession, it is acceptable to use the distinction of “council” (i.e. a meeting with the deacons) and “consistory” in the announcement or report on a meeting with or without the deacons. The Church Order, on the other hand, speaks in Article 38 of the meeting of “consistory, composed of the ministers of the Word and the elders,” while the heading of Article 39 uses the expression “Consistory and the Deacons.” With a view to the expression in the Church Order, therefore, it is also correct to show the distinction in the meeting that is announced or reported as a meeting of “consistory” or a meeting of “consistory with the deacons.” Hence, the usage of these different wordings should not be too difficult to understand or accept.

Underlying this difference in the wording, however, is a difference of opinion regarding the question whether the deacons belong to the “governing” body of the church or not. The Belgic Confession speaks of the “government” of the church, yet means it in a broad sense of the word. This can be illustrated well with the final statement in the article: “By these means everything will be done well and in good order when faithful men are chosen in agreement with the rule that the apostle Paul gave to Timothy.” This includes the work of the deacons, who are addressed in Philippians 1:1 with the elders, as the leaders of the congregation, and in 1 Timothy 3, where the qualifications for the office of elder are followed by the words that “likewise deacons” (v. 8) need to meet certain criteria. In a broader sense of the word, the deacons help in the “governing” to ensure that all things pertaining to Word and deed, to proclamation and ministry of mercy, will be done well and in good order. In that sense all three office bearers are colleagues who together form the council of the church.

In the Church Order, on the other hand, the authority of each office needs to be regulated and articulated. In that regard, the correct position of the deacons shows that they don’t “govern” the congregation in the strict sense of the word. Though they assist the elders in some of the aspects of leadership, such as the nomination of office bearers or the calling process for a minister of the Word or the annual budget, the elders have a specific role and authority in the church. The office of the elder is a ruling office that comes with governing authority and a responsibility for all that occurs in the flock. The deacons have the authority to request, collect, and distribute monetary (and other) gifts to the needy. Both elders and deacons have their own specific authority, task, and office in the service of Christ. 



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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor of *Clarion* magazine,

In the Volume 70, Number 03 issue of *Clarion*, an article was published entitled “How to Respond to Conspiracy Theories.” This article was an attempt to address what the writer considered suspicious rumours being circulated amongst Christians.

Considering that COVID-19 is indeed a virus that is making its rounds worldwide, we do not dispute the threat to our elderly and health-compromised population. However, it was written with the premise that there is a deadly pandemic that has been

claiming the lives of many more people than in previous years. A quick search in death rates over the past few years tells us otherwise. The term “conspiracy theories” is used to paint, with a very broad brush, both the ridiculous theories that we all know are complete nonsense as well as the proven events and facts that are not theories at all but are indeed happening. For example, calling the Great Reset a conspiracy theory when it is already well underway, or saying that the government’s inflation of COVID numbers to gain more control is a theory when it is factual, discredits her own points.

If the writer had done a little more research before sending this article in to be published, she would have retracted a lot of what she said or perhaps not sent in her article at all. She would do well to take her own advice and check her sources, stop putting mainstream media over other sources, be willing to honestly look at both sides of the "theory," and be open-minded. Advising the readers to trust the media's "fact-checking services" is not something that Clarion should have allowed to hit the press. Does the author not understand that there is a very good reason why many Christians and other truth-seeking citizens do not trust anything that gets spewed out on the mainstream TV news outlets, newspapers, magazines, etc.? Does she not realize that these media platforms are all controlled by our government – the same government that promotes all manner of evil these days? She mentions that all media is funded by some source; we would rather trust the sources that are funded by Christians with discerning minds than sources that are funded by left-wing Liberals.

Response

Dear Gord and Charlene,

Thank you for your letter to the editor. In the first place, you remark that you are "alarmed at the one-sided slant this response took." In the second place, you wonder why this letter received an "immediate reply from the editor."

Let me explain by saying that Diane Breukelman in her letter to the editor objected to the fact that Clarion "allowed this article" (a reference to Ilse VanderMeulen's article called "How to Respond to Conspiracy Theories" Volume 70, Number 03) to be printed. Seeing that I am the editor, I received Ilse's article and approved it for publication. Thus, when Diane objected to my placing it, I felt that I had the duty as editor to answer her. Hence, I wrote a short "response" saying that I disagreed with her and explained why the article had been placed in Clarion.

Looking back now, and with the benefit of 20-20 vision, I should have given a longer and more nuanced "response." It certainly was not meant to be either "final" or as a "fact-checking" reaction. Neither was it meant to stifle constructive criticism or to be censorious.

This brings us to the response. A few issues later in Number 06, a letter to the editor was published raising concerns about this article. It was a well-thought-out response to the article, written out of love and encouragement. Immediately following this letter was a response from the editor, which came across as very final. First, we are alarmed at the one-sided slant this response took. Secondly, since when does a letter to the editor get an immediate reply from the editor without even giving readers (and especially the original author of the article in question) a chance to reflect on the comments and reply? Does the editor now act as a "fact checker" and take on the position of censoring letters written out of genuine concern? Will our well-loved Canadian Reformed magazine stay true to its core values (as cited on the back cover of every issue) of being attuned to current issues, reliable and open to constructive criticism?

We would appreciate an ongoing discussion about these matters before the topic on conspiracy theories is closed.

Blessings,

Gord & Charlene Tenhage

Let me further explain that Clarion takes every submission that we receive seriously. When I am in doubt about something submitted, I will ask our Contributing Editors to give their opinion before coming to a decision. When we receive something that is controversial, we still bend over backwards to print it. We always try our best to include all submissions received.

So, let me reassure you that Clarion is not out to muzzle or censor anyone. We want to serve our readership in the best way possible. We have always been and remain open to constructive criticism. Even in these controversial times we are receptive to different views. If someone else had submitted a letter / contribution as to why Ilse VanderMeulen's article was wrong or one-sided, we would have printed it. In short, we are open to hearing all sides, and will only reject that which goes against what we believe and confess. Thank you once again for your letter and for giving me the opportunity to clarify.

If I can be of furtherance assistance, do not hesitate to write me at jvisscher@telus.net or call me at 604-576-2124.

Blessings, James Visscher, Editor

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