

# Clarion



# What's Inside

**W**e are thankful to lead off our issue with a guest editorial from Dr. John Smith, the Professor of Old Testament Studies at CRTS. The topic of his article is the creation of heaven and earth.

Dr. Cornelis Van Dam begins a series of articles in this issue on being a Christian. The first article is entitled, "Early Christians and Their Prophetic Testimony."

Our next article, "Proper Preparation," is by Sarah Hutten. She writes that while our church community generally does well in encouraging young married couples to pursue the blessing of children, we have done less well in preparing them for the other side of the equation: that in a broken world we will no doubt encounter brokenness when it comes to childbearing.

Issue 15 also includes for our readers the Treasures, New & Old column, Ray of Sunshine, You Asked, a MERF News, and a book review.

*Laura Veenendaal*

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# Clarion

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LEAD ARTICLE



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# Heaven *and* Earth *at the* Beginning

This coming fall, the Lord willing, I will teach a course called, “Old Testament History of Revelation.” The purpose of this course is to see how God’s revelation unfolds in the Old Testament Scriptures. As every teacher knows, the more you teach the more you learn, and it simply will not do to use the same lessons over and over again. So, this summer I plan to write some new lectures for this course, tracing some of the major themes that run through the Old Testament and into the New. It’s exciting to study the Bible with fresh eyes, and I hope that the course will help the students to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ from all of Scripture.

# The world was designed for covenant fellowship

## In the beginning, God!

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). The first thing to note about this verse is what it reveals about God. God's existence is not explained but assumed. He precedes humanity; he precedes the cosmos. His existence is not contingent upon anything, but he is self-existent. He simply is who he is, and he is the maker of all things. The things that exist are not an extension of him, nor do they emanate from him, but they are the product of his Word and his work. Thus Genesis 1 establishes the uniqueness of God as the *sole Creator* of all else; the *Eternal One*, who works in time, sets the markers of time, and finishes his work on time; the *Limitless One*, who makes spaces and places and reveals himself within them; the *Sovereign One*, who can accomplish all that he plans without inhibition or external pressure; and the *Perfect One*, who both defines and creates what is good.

This uniqueness of God has several implications for Old Testament revelation. One implication is that revelation involves divine *accommodation*. The God who is "uncreate" must "stoop down," as it were, to reveal himself in language that humans can understand and in appearances that humans can perceive. Thus, God often made use of created phenomena when he revealed himself to people, such as thunder, lightning, and clouds, none of which belongs to his essence. Another implication is that divine revelation involves *polemic*: God revealed himself within

The first theme for the course will be heaven and earth, or, more specifically, the relation between heaven and earth. Why start there? For two reasons: first, this topic forms the bookends of the history of salvation, which begins with the creation of heaven and earth and ends with the creation of new heavens and a new earth in the *eschaton*. Second, this topic is the setting for the history of revelation: the very fact that we have a history of revelation in the Scriptures assumes that heaven is connected with earth. In this article, we will consider the creation of heaven and earth in the beginning. We will see that God so designed the world that he could reveal himself to his people and his people could respond to him. In other words, the world was designed for covenant fellowship. Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.



the cultural context of Israel to show that he is truly God alone and to set Israel's creation story over against the pantheons and cosmologies of the religions of the ancient Near East.

Now, these two features of accommodation and polemic can raise historical and literary questions in our minds. They can make us wonder to what extent the creation of the world happened as it is told in Genesis 1, and to what extent the language of accommodation and polemic obscures what really happened. I would give a twofold response to such questions. The first is that we need to keep a humble spirit. Through science humanity has made tremendous progress in understanding the features, uses, and history of the world in which we live, and we can make thankful use of its findings, but we remain finite creatures who need precisely the *accommodated* Word of God because of our limitations. Our task as preachers and as Christians is not to reconstruct what "really" must have happened or to harmonize Scripture with the findings of science as though the two were on equal footing. Its very character as divine revelation places Scripture above science, and its superiority is evident from its power to offer things that science cannot, such as knowledge of the unseen spiritual realm, the ability to change hearts and lives, and the blessing of relationship with God. My second response is that the point of Genesis 1 is precisely to establish the power and trustworthiness of God's Word – *power* in the sense that it can bring into being things that are not, and *trustworthiness* in the sense that God does all that he says, and thus his Word is unfailing. None of his words falls to the ground. So, Genesis 1 already reveals God as One to be trusted and obeyed.

### Heavens above!

"God created the heavens and the earth." The phrase "the heavens and the earth" is generally understood to be a *merism*, that is, a literary feature in which two contrasting parts describe the whole. For example, to say that someone searched "high and low" is to say that she searched everywhere, and thus to say that God created "heaven and earth" is to say that he created the whole world. Yet, to call the phrase a merism is not to deny the *reality* of the two contrasting parts, but simply to express the comprehensiveness of God's creative work, which comprises both heaven on the one hand and earth on the other. That "heaven and earth" refers to two realms is confirmed in verse 2, which continues, "now the *earth* was formless and void." In short, the effect of the merism is to tell us that heaven and earth

belong together. They have the same beginning, and they run the same course of history.

Genesis 1:1 also presents us with the thorny problem of the ambiguity of "heavens": does it refer to the dwelling place of God, or does it refer to the sky? On the one hand, it seems that the heaven of verse 1 is different from that of verse 8. After all, in verse 1, heaven is juxtaposed with earth, while in verse 8, heaven is the firmament or expanse of the sky. On the other hand, the same word is used in both verses. In many places of the Old Testament, it is not altogether clear whether heaven refers to the sky or to the angelic realm. One often gets the impression that heaven is an extension of the sky. Linguistically, this is no surprise, given the twin features of accommodation and polemic that I mentioned earlier: God uses the familiar term for the visible sky to reveal something of the invisible realm beyond. But there is also something cosmological about it. The Bible sometimes uses the phrase "heaven of heavens" in the superlative sense of "highest heaven" (Deut 10:14; 1 Kgs 8:27;

## The sovereign Lord makes heaven accessible to those who believe in him

Neh 9:6). Some passages suggest that there are gradations of heaven. I think of Psalm 148, which calls upon the entire cosmos to praise the Lord. The first half of the psalm is about praising the Lord from the heavens, and the second half about praising the Lord from the earth. What's interesting is that the first half of the psalm subdivides heaven into three realms. Verse 2 says, "Praise him, all his angels," so that's the invisible realm of

the celestial beings. Verse 3 says, “Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars,” so that’s the distant realm of the heavenly bodies. And verse 4 says, “Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies,” so that’s the realm of the sky. There are levels of heaven.

Taken spatially, this would imply that what we call heaven is located beyond the stars. For us twenty-first century people, with our knowledge of modern astronomy, this presents a problem: heaven is then very far away indeed. Just imagine the distance that an angel would have to cover to get to earth, or that a human soul would have to travel to be with Christ! In our scientific world, can we say anything meaningful about the location of heaven? In response, I would make three remarks. First, also in the Bible the location of heaven is shrouded in mystery. “Enoch was not, for God took him” (Gen 5:24). Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind, and the company of prophets could not find his body back, though they searched for three days: he was gone (2 Kgs 2). The wise man Agur asked, “Who has gone up to heaven and come down?” – a rhetorical question that expects the answer, “No one” (Prov 30:4). And when Christ ascended before the eyes of his disciples, a cloud took him out of their sight (Acts 1:9). Heaven is invisible and out of reach for mankind. Second, the concern of Scripture is not with the *location* of heaven but with *access* to heaven, and its message is that the sovereign Lord makes heaven accessible to those who believe in him. Third, for the people of God, heaven is not remote but close by, only just beyond the clouds, as it were, and we do well to keep that perspective of faith.

### “All the world’s a stage..”

No sooner does Genesis 1:1 mention that God created the heavens then it shifts the focus to earth and spends the rest of the chapter there. The creation account is geocentric: it locates the Spirit of God over the face of the waters, and it describes from earth’s vantage point the alternation of day and night, the erection of the firmament, the emergence of dry land and vegetation, the role of sun, moon, and stars, and the formation of the creatures that inhabit the waters and the land. We hear no command for the angels, but we do hear a mandate for the man, who is made in the image of God and is commanded to be fruitful and multiply and to rule over the creatures God has made. We learn that the earth is the stage on which the history

of revelation will play out. Heaven is, as it were, “backstage.” To stretch the metaphor, it may be said that God plays multiple roles in the drama of revelation: he built the theater, he wrote the script, he directs the play from behind the scenes, and he shows himself on stage at various times and in various ways. As readers of Scripture, we are like spectators who can see the stage and its props because we live on the same earth that the people of the Bible inhabited. We cannot see the people of the Bible anymore, but we can read of their lives in the Script, and we discover how God directs the drama of our salvation as we await the grand finale.

## What would the relation of heaven and earth have been like if Adam and Eve had not fallen into sin?

To be sure, the metaphor of “stage” and “backstage” has limited value and can easily be misused. Leaving aside its limitations and potential misuses, its purpose here is to show that heaven is not a static place, nor is it disconnected or disengaged from the earth. It is rather a dynamic place, fully concerned with and engaged in the events of the history of salvation as they take place. Klaas Schilder was quite right to speak of the history of heaven.<sup>1</sup>

The creation of a world with the two realms of heaven above and earth below is the set-up for a covenantal relationship between God and man. First of all, it will be a relationship characterized by divine sovereignty: God could be called upon, but he was not at man’s beck and call. Man could not ascend to heaven, but God could descend to earth. It was to be

<sup>1</sup> Klaas Schilder, *Wat is de Hemel?* (2nd edition; Kampen: Kok, 1954), chapter 5. See also J. Kamphuis, “Schilder on Heaven,” in *Always Obedient: Essays on the Teachings of Dr. Klaas Schilder* (ed. J. Geertsema; Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1995), 101–112.

a relationship of unequal parties. Thus, the cosmos is *designed* for covenant – both its unilateral character as instituted by God and its bilateral character as a true mutual relationship.<sup>2</sup> Its design is therefore evidence for the Bible’s teaching that God is love (1 John 4:7–10). Secondly, the separation of heaven and earth indicates that man was destined for a life of obedient faith. Though God endowed them with many gifts, he nevertheless made humans as creatures with limitations: they could not always see him and could not go wherever he went. They had to trust in God even when he was, so to speak, “not there,” and to obey him even when he was, so to speak, “not looking.” Thus, the creation of Genesis 1 sets the stage for the probation of Genesis 2 and 3.

## What if?


What would the relation of heaven and earth have been like if Adam and Eve had not fallen into sin? It is impossible to give a proper answer to this question, because the pre-fall history of revelation is so short, and because the history of revelation tells us what did happen, not what might have happened. But, if I may indulge in a bit of historical imagination based on what Scripture *does* reveal, I will try to give an answer via man’s three-fold office of prophet, priest, and king. As prophet, he would have had free and full access to the counsel and will of God insofar as God would reveal it, and thus he would have grown in the knowledge of God, asking questions and listening to God in childlike obedience and trust, upholding the truth of God’s Word over against the serpent, responding to God with perfect praise, and teaching his children to do likewise. As priest, he would have had unrestricted access to the person of God whenever God would permit, and so he would have grown in love for God, enjoying friendship and communion with him, responding to him with wonder and worship, and presenting his children to God to receive his blessing. And, as king, he would steadily and joyfully have gone to work with God’s creation, exercising ever-growing dominion over the creatures of the earth, yes, also over the serpent. With the joys of discovery, there would have come growing wisdom in all kinds of endeavours, and, as his family increased, he would have assigned responsibilities to his children, and they would have brought the fruits of their labour joyfully before the throne of God. There is reason to believe that

God would have sent forth his host of angels to serve Adam and Eve and their family wherever they were working in the world (cf. Heb 1:14).

I have two reasons for seeing things this way. The first is that Genesis 1 presents the activities of God in terms of words, works, and worship (“God said,” “God made,” “God rested”), so it stands to reason that man, as the image of God and in covenant fellowship with him, would have responded to God with *words* of prophetic praise, would have gone to *work* building God’s kingdom, and would have rested with God in priestly *worship*. The second reason is that subsequent revelation depicts heaven in terms reminiscent of the three-fold office: heaven is God’s council room where prophets receive access to his will and Word (1 Kgs 22:19; Isa 6); heaven is God’s temple, to which the smoke of the atoning sacrifices and the intercessory prayers ascend (1 Kgs 8:45; 1 Chron 21:26); heaven is God’s throne room, where he presides as King and Judge (Ps 9:7; Dan 7:9–14).

In short, had the fall into sin not happened, man would have grown and developed in his threefold office, and would eventually have come to a state of blessed perfection and immortality. As Geerhardus Vos put it, “Man had been created perfectly good in a moral sense. And yet there was a sense in which he could be raised to a still higher level of perfection.”<sup>3</sup> To make sense of this, remember that Jesus too was conceived and born morally perfect, and yet the Scriptures can say that “he grew in favor with God” (Luke 2:52) and that “he learned obedience” (Heb 5:8). Surely this would have been true of the first Adam as well. God did not intend to leave the human race in its infancy and innocence, but gave man a mandate to fulfill with a view to attaining full maturity in his person and full achievement in his task. And, to return to the point, heaven and earth were so designed to make this possible.

## A small beginning

Having explained the theme of heaven and earth in the context of Genesis 1, the next step is to trace it through the history of revelation, to Christ the mediator of the new covenant, who has passed through the heavens, and to the creation of new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness dwells. I think it will be a challenge to keep the lectures short! 

<sup>2</sup> J. Faber, “Newer Studies on God’s Covenant,” *Clarion* 28.2 (January 27, 1979): 26; S. A. Strauss, “Schilder on the Covenant,” *Always Obedient*, 25–27.

<sup>3</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (2nd ed.; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 22.

TREASURES NEW &amp; OLD :: MATTHEW 13:52

# Brightest Brightness Over Against Darkest Darkness

*“And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” (REVELATION 21:1-4)*

**T**he apostle John sees glorious and unimaginable things regarding the everlasting church of God. He sees a new heaven and earth, and the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven. The city has “the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal” (21:11). John is putting in human terms the heavenly things he sees! We attempt to get a sense of that glory. We are allowed to think about it – it is described here in the Bible.

John sees the holy city, the renewed, redeemed, perfected, glorified church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Already in the Old Testament the church was represented by the symbolism of a city (e.g., Ps 48, 122). A city calls to mind concepts of permanent residence, great numbers of inhabitants, safety, security, protection, fellowship, and beauty. The opposite is living in a tent, a symbol of temporariness and vulnerability. Through the apostle God gives us a glimpse of the lasting and eternal glory of the Holy City Jerusalem and the holy nation it represents.

The glory is so magnificent because of the contrasting setting and context. This most glorious vision follows some of the most horrible images John has seen in previous visions. It is brightest brightness over against darkest darkness. Day versus night. Life versus death. In the final judgment, before this glorious city appears, God will cast all the wicked into the “lake of fire that burns with sulfur” (19:20b). An even darker vision is the actual binding of Satan himself, the ancient serpent, the devil, who was “thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (20:10). Further, there is the death of Death itself, which also is thrown into the lake of fire (20:14,15). How horrible for John to see the devil, death, and the judgement of the wicked in full display! Clearly, the context provides for a great contrast, in which the new Jerusalem is revealed in all her radiant glory, where only righteousness dwells! A city with twelve gates, which are twelve pearls, “Each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass” (21:21). What a contrast!

The glory of the New Jerusalem is also magnificent in relation to our human experience. The church as we know it today

is not what John sees coming down from heaven! John sees a holy city, with all the purity of a bride adorned for her husband. He sees a separation from sin (and its consequences) and total consecration to God. But what John knew in his time, and what we know today, is a church consisting of people who sin and who experience different measures of pain, suffering, hurt, disease, and seemingly every form of brokenness – as expressed in verse 4, a life consisting of tears, death, mourning, crying, and pain. That is not merely a description of the nightly newscast, but a true documentary of our personal and corporate experience! When the loud voice proclaims that the former things have passed away, those former things are the present things and our experiences of this life. In John’s vision, in the New Jerusalem, the Holy City, all these things no longer exist. They have gone away! They are no more! Passed away! What a contrast!

John sees the future and glorious church of Jesus Christ! The promise of this vision gives unspeakable hope. All that we know currently, all that stands opposed to and contrasts with God’s glory, will pass away, and the world, the nations, and all believers will be renewed!

Next time we will consider the meaning of “new” in new heaven, new earth, and new Jerusalem. We will also contemplate God dwelling forever with the inhabitants of this city. **C**

## For Further Study

1. Can you imagine what the New Jerusalem will look like based on the description given in Revelation 21?
2. How will life as we know it today be different from how it will be then? What two significant elements stand in contrast to John’s vision?
3. What is expressed in the wiping away of every tear from the eyes (4)?



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# Early Christians *and their Prophetic* Testimony

**I**t is not without reason that our modern post-Christian Western context is often compared to the pagan society in which the early Christian church found itself. There are some striking similarities. It may therefore be beneficial for us to consider in a series of brief articles how the first believers after Pentecost functioned and how the Christian church fared in its first centuries, and then to ask ourselves whether we can learn from their testimony and witness. Since believers share in Christ's prophetic, priestly, and royal offices, let us consider the evidence within that framework. Next, we will reflect on how our situation today compares, what we can learn from the witness of the early Christians, and the challenges we may face in the future.

## **The hostile environment of the first Christians**

Believers in the Lord Jesus Christ "were first called Christians" in Antioch (Acts 11:26). The passive ("were called") indicates that this designation was given by those who were not followers of Christ. Also elsewhere, an outsider, King Agrippa, is the one who used the term, probably with a hint of derision (Acts 26:28). The use of the name "Christian" by outsiders seems to indicate that it was meant in a derogatory sense, given by those who had no use for these people who were always talking about Christ, that criminal who was crucified outside Jerusalem. If you had that name, you could be expected to suffer society's derision and hostility (1 Pet 4:16). The first known use of the designation

## God used ordinary Christians and their fearless testimony

"Christians" within the circle of believers is in the second-century by the church father Ignatius.

Being a Christian in the first centuries after Pentecost was not easy. Immediately after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, believers experienced the persecution and hatred of the Jewish establishment. Stephen was stoned to death, followed by James (Acts 7:58-60; 12:1-2). They were the first of many who would become martyrs for Christ. At first the Roman world considered Christians to be a Jewish sect. Since Judaism was tolerated, so initially were Christians. But that situation changed when it became obvious from Jewish hostility and the confession of Jesus as absolute Lord over one's entire life that Christians were a group apart from all others. By the time Peter sent his first letter in about AD 63, the mere fact that you identified as a Christian could make you subject to harassment or worse. He wrote to Christians scattered abroad: "If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.... If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name" (1 Pet 4:14, 16).

In view of the vast differences in worldview and worship between the typical citizen of the day and Christians, the Roman empire came to consider those of the Way (Acts 19:9) with suspicion. They were a people apart. Although integrated into society, they were nevertheless separate with their own identity. They repudiated the worship of any god but their own and were therefore accused of atheism. They refused to worship the emperor and thus were considered treasonous and charged accordingly. As the Lord Jesus predicted, persecution was often the lot of the early Christians (Matt 10:16-22). "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). Although living in the world, Christians were distinct from it. Christ said: "If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the



An oversized sculpture of the head of Emperor Constantine

world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:18-19). And so, the early Christians found themselves marginalized, regarded with suspicion, and not really belonging to the society of which they were part.

### The triumph of the church

And yet, at the end of the day, the head of the church, Jesus Christ, caused the Christian faith to triumph over paganism, superstition, and idol worship and those who were despised became leaders in the empire. Under Constantine (who died AD 337), Christianity was officially tolerated and became more or less the imperial religion. What means did the Lord use to bring about such an astonishing development? How was such a dramatic turn of events possible? Historians have pointed to social and economic factors that facilitated the spread of Christianity, such as the common language and the incredible Roman road network that bound the far-flung empire together and made the rapid spread of Christianity possible. However, ultimately all such factors would be irrelevant if it were not first of all for the faithful witness of individual Christians who spread the good news. God used ordinary Christians and their fearless testimony of the crucified Christ who rose for the salvation of those who believe in him to change the entire world in a manner unprecedented in ancient times.


The teaching of the Lord Jesus also pointed in this direction. Christ said that those who believe in him are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt 5:13–14). Military force did not conquer the powers of darkness, but the faithful testimony of countless Christians simply and obediently living out their lives in faith did. As Gerald Sittser put it in his book *Resilient Faith*, the early Christians “immersed themselves in the culture as followers of Jesus, and agents of the kingdom, influencing it from within both as individuals and as a community.”<sup>1</sup> To put it differently, to change the world God used young and old who honoured their identity as sharing in Christ’s anointing and exercising their office as prophet, priest, and king. In order better to appreciate how the Lord used the faithful testimony of ordinary Christians to actually change the culture and government of the Roman Empire, let us consider how God used their identity as prophets, priests, and kings in Christ.

## The prophetic testimony

Because of the prophetic testimony of God’s people to Christ and their refusing to be silent, persecution resulted. After the Jews killed Stephen and intensified their persecution, many Christians fled from Jerusalem to escape (Acts 8:1). But they were not silenced. Those who were scattered travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, “preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:20–21). It is striking how this growing Christian proclamation is described: “The word of God continued to increase” (Acts 6:7). This does not mean an increase of written revelation. Rather, this description underlines how the Word, the gospel, was so evident in the lives of the Christians that, wherever they went, they visibly took the Word with them and so enlarged its impact. In this way “the word of God increased and multiplied” (Acts 12:24) and continued to “prevail mightily” (Acts 19:20). Indeed, “the word of God sounded forth” from the early Christians (1 Thess 1:8).

It is small wonder, seeing the zeal which believers had for the Word of God and for Christ that they were called Christians. They stood out because they were different and full of Christ, their Saviour. Their testimony to him could not be suppressed. As Sittser noted: “[Their] public contact was inherently evangelistic, as natural as neighborliness when walking a dog or companionship when joining a climbing or a quilting club is

today” (p. 112). When the seed of the Word is sown, in God’s time it will germinate and bear fruit (cf. Isa 55:11).

But in order to fulfill their prophetic calling of confessing their Saviour, they needed to be equipped. The reading and proclamation of the Word on the Lord’s Day were important in that regard. This practice was of course already a reality in New Testament times (1 Tim 4:13–14; 2 Tim 4:1–2) and the post-apostolic church continued this practice during their worship services. For example, Justin Martyr (second century AD) wrote in his *First Apology* (§67): “On the day which is called Sunday we have a common assembly of all who live in the cities or in the outlying districts, and the memoirs of the Apostles or the writings of the Prophets are read, as long as there is time.” This reading was followed by an applicatory message. Teaching the faith to equip the saints for their prophetic calling was also a major activity of the leaders in the church (Acts 11:26). An early example of a manual to train Christians in the faith is the *Didache* or *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, which begins with these telling words: “There are two ways, one of life, the other of death, and between the two ways there is a great difference.” From this and other early Christian sources, it is clear that the church “developed a rigorous training program to form people in the faith, to prepare them for church membership, and to equip them to be effective witnesses in the empire” (p. 156). This was a three-year program which immersed them in the Word of God and the central doctrines of the faith. It also included spiritual formation. Giving this type of intensive education to new believers was a top priority for the teachers of the day. The development of such solid training was consistent with the apostolic command: “Train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come” (1 Tim 4:7–8). 

*Next time: the priestly and royal service of the first Christians.*



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<sup>1</sup>Gerald L. Sittser, *Resilient Faith: How the Early Christian “Third Way” Changed the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2019), 174, also see 101–8.





# Proper Preparation

*Walking Into Parenthood with Eyes Open and Hearts Ready*



# What brought loss, confusion, and tested your faith?

**A**s a Reformed, Christian community, I believe we have a strong handle on encouraging our young couples to pursue children, and do well as we teach the blessings of them. After the engagement of a young Christian couple, we have found our groove in rejoicing together. As the wedding approaches our ministers have struck a balance in their prayers, asking God to bless them as a couple, but also hopeful that he will provide children for them. Further, as friends and family, we have been able to stand on common ground as we hope and dream for these things alongside our loved ones. From where I am sitting, and I think we can all agree, this is something our churches, communities, and families do well.

## A balanced conversation

But here's the thing: that's only one side of the equation. We haven't been giving our young couples the whole picture; we haven't been properly preparing them.

As those who respect the inspired Word of God, we understand that in order to know what God intended to teach through a verse, we must also look at the context he places it in. This rule applies to our lives as well. We are forgetting the context we live in. God has given us that context in Genesis 3:16, "To the woman he said, 'I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, but he shall rule over you.'"

God specifically spoke on childbearing because he knows us. He understands how deeply this part of our lives affects us. We need to enter into this world, send our loved ones into this world, with an understanding of this context. We should not be trying to hide the brokenness that we experience in our lives.

Rather, we should prepare for it, and give anyone and everyone the tools to shine the light of Christ through that brokenness.

## Godly desires vs. God's plan

Have we forgotten that godly desires and God's plan are two completely different things?

There are many different paths to get from the godly desire of wanting children to holding them in your arms and watching them grow. My personal experience was filled with infertility, bedrest, a traumatic birth, severe postpartum depression, and ultimately a decision to no longer pursue biological children. This list doesn't even begin to touch on the concept of miscarriage and enormity of that loss. Take a moment, and dwell on where the road changed course for you and your spouse on the road to children, what came on your path that brought loss, confusion, and tested your faith?

Even amidst the weeds of these paths there are details and stories to be told; warnings, caution, and knowledge that might prepare someone who comes after us. I'm not talking about doomsday stories, crushing dreams, or pessimism. I am talking about well-rounded knowledge, honest stories, proper perspectives, and hearts that want to truly prepare those in our life for hardships of this life. This is not a call to flip the scale, and forget the goodness of God, or lose hope in his plan. This is about leveling out a conversation that has been one-sided for too long.

## Pattern of vigilance

How often do we hear in the Bible this pattern, to be ready, to be vigilant? How often do we see lessons in the wars of the Bible, of those who were prepared and properly equipped? How often have you thought to yourself, "If only I had known this when I was younger"? Let's offer all of these things, readiness, vigilance, preparation, tools, and knowledge, to our young couples, who so tenderly long to have children.

Let's offer it to them, because we can see a pattern in the Bible that calls us to it. But let's also offer it because this next generation is ready for openness, crying out for it louder than ever before.

The hope is that they might possibly see coming some of the heartbreak and unmet expectations that we were never told could be part of our story, and know where to turn, and how to handle those things. This openness doesn't need to mean that you are sharing your story with everyone you meet either. This openness that you have to offer is for those in your life that you

# We need to stop treating brokenness as the exception to the rule

have deep, meaningful relationships with. This openness is for those people that you can be a blessing and a help to.

Please know, this message isn't just limited to young women either; this awareness and preparedness is also important for the young men in your life. They are also entering a new stage of life unaware of what their wives' bodies, hearts, and minds will be going through, let alone their own fertility, emotions, and faith. When given the opportunity, bring them in on this conversation.

## Four parts of this preparation

In setting out to be part of this preparation, there are a few specific things we can do. First, we need to seek understanding and empathy for someone else's experience. This takes work on our part, because if we are to prepare those in our life we need to reach outside of our own experience and actively seek this full picture, and full spectrum of experiences.

Second, we need to educate on the intricacies of this pursuit. There are so many things our bodies can go through before, during, and after having or even losing a baby. Once again, that puts responsibility on those who are ready to open up about ourselves and what we've gone through with each other.

Next, we need to be honest. This component of preparation really spreads across the board. We need to continue to encourage these big, beautiful things in their lives, but we need to start being honest about what that can all entail. We need to be honest about where our hearts were at. It's amazing to be able to say, "God was with us," but walk them through how you are able to say that today. Guide them through the heart-work

that needed to happen, the type of support you reached out for, and end with that amazing, "Amen."


Lastly, we need to stop treating brokenness in the pursuit of children as the exception to the rule. This is not the exception, this is our context, and this is where we sit in redemptive history. This last part is not to instill fear and resignation in our young women; rather, use this part of preparation to spur them on to seek the strength and guidance that comes from God alone, as they begin this exciting new chapter.

When we begin to pair our celebration and rejoicing with preparation and honesty for our young couples entering marriage and desiring children, we offer them the gift of foresight. By doing this, we are calling them to begin their lives together leaning on the strength only God can provide. We also take away the lie that if you love God, and desire children, something he loves and calls us to, that it is a guarantee in your life. Talk to enough people in our community and you will see brokenness in everyone's story, everyone's path to children. But talk to those to whom God has said "no," and you will begin to understand why the full-equation approach is so very necessary.

## Living with open eyes

Even as we live in the context of Genesis 3:16 and move through this life with open eyes and understanding hearts, we yearn for Revelation 21:1-4, where the pains of this life and the brokenness of beautiful things will be wiped away.

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.'"

We need to strike the balance in this conversation better as a community. Are you ready to share the broken and hard things of your life, in order to shed light into the lives of those you love? Because this next generation is ready and waiting. 

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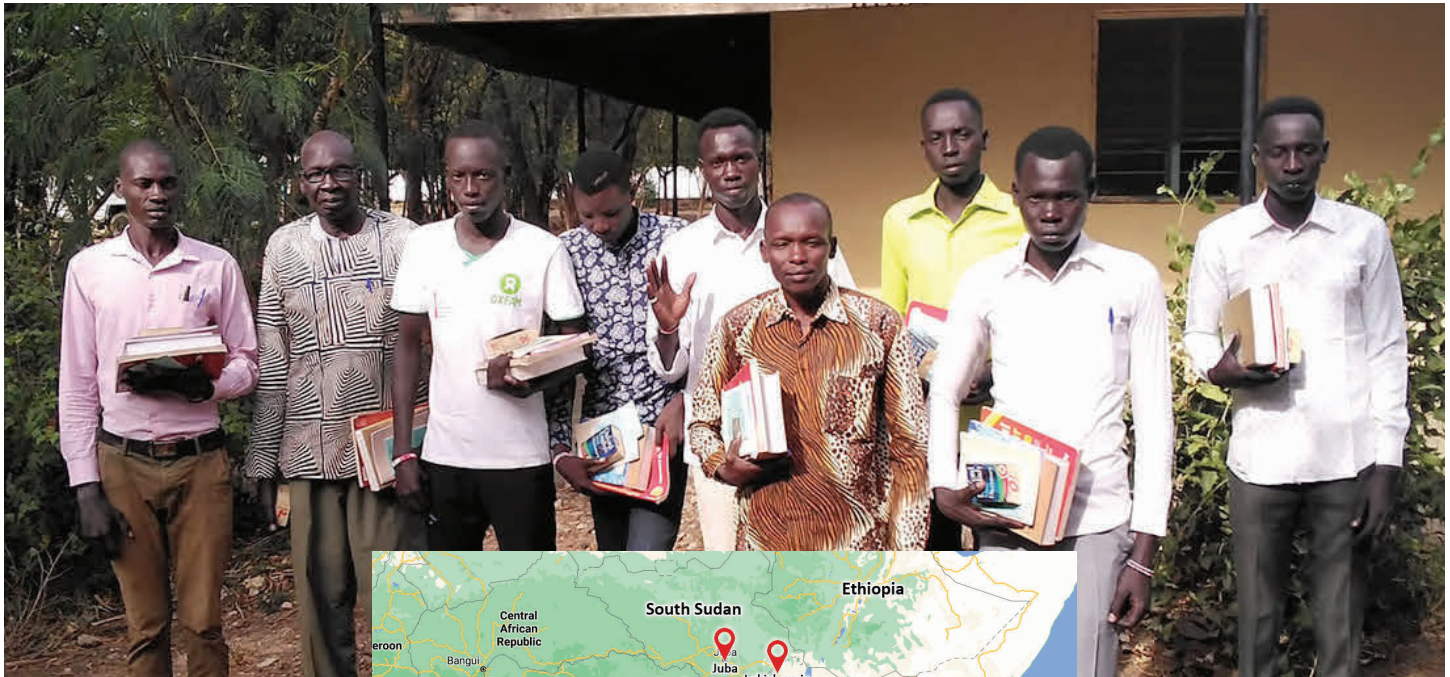


www.merf.org



## Loki and Lockdown: God Has No Limits

by Graham Lodge, Vice-Chair MERF Board



*New Loki trainees with their books ready to study*

**N**orth Kenya borders South Sudan. Strategically it is a great place to situate a training center for pastors and church leaders from wartorn South Sudan plus others from East African countries. MERF's ministry and training center is in Lokichoggio, Kenya, nicknamed 'Loki'. It is approximately 550 miles (900 km) from Kenya's capital, Nairobi. Roads are rough and life is simple, without many modern amenities. Yet MERF biblical training, local outreach and Nuer gospel radio ministry have continued steadily for nearly 20 years.

Loki is mainly populated by the Turkana, traditionally a tribe of nomadic herders. Many of these previously unreached tribal people have come to faith in Christ over the past two



decades. Landing at the local airport, one looks down on the semi-arid terrain with scores of round straw huts next to a few other simple sheet metal and block structures. The airport terminal building is constructed of repurposed shipping containers. It is only 3km to MERF's Ministry Center.

### MERF Loki

As well as a building for local church worship, classrooms and a library for biblical train-

ing, the MERF compound accommodates trainees, guest instructors and the Nuer gospel radio broadcast team. There is also a broadcasting recording studio. Additionally, the center serves as a hub for evangelistic work among the largely unreached Turkana peoples and for distribution of diaconal aid when needed.

South Sudanese Pastor David Wat leads the team at the Loki Center and the Nuer language Radio Broadcast work. Kenyan Simon Mueba serves

as Physical Plant Manager. He ensures that the compound is well maintained and carries out projects to make the center more practical and efficient to cater for the many ministries and the people who use it.

### Biblical Training

Along with the regular local activities, there are scheduled 3-month intensive biblical training courses that follow the **Augustine Program**. Normally trainees are taught by well-chosen English-speaking pastors. They are volunteers sponsored by their churches to fly in to the Loki Center and stay to teach a portion of the course for typically 3 to 6 weeks.



*"Make me to  
know your ways,  
O LORD; teach  
me your paths."*

— Psalm 25:4

Trainees are selected by their home churches on the basis of practical evidence of commitment to serve the church and to study the Scriptures in their native tongue and simple English. Most come from across the vast rural areas of wartorn South Sudan, where rapidly growing churches have created a desperate need for spiritual leaders trained in the Bible. (Due to years of armed conflict, few South Sudanese have had opportunity to learn to read, nor is the entire Bible yet translated into all of the many South Sudanese languages.) From a dozen to thirty trainees are typically picked up by a small charter plane from Juba, the South Sudanese capital and/or several dirt airstrips near major rural communities and brought to the MERF center in Loki. Others come by the long road from Tanzania or elsewhere in Kenya. They start with introductory intensive English studies and remain for about 3-months of concentrated biblical training.

By Western standards MERF Loki facilities are basic, but are very comfortable for rural Africa, especially for the many who have faced trials of inadequate shelter and hunger due to conflict in South Sudan. Students greatly appreciate the good accommodation and being fed well, which in turn, enables them to learn well.

*As with all MERF ministries, through the prayerful support of God's people, the objective is to train indigenous people in God's Word so that they can serve as faithful witnesses to Christ in their local communities and beyond. This bears gospel fruit in a very cost-effective manner.*

The **Augustine Program** Coordinator for biblical training is Pastor Timothy Burden. Building on years of experience teaching different Bible units to trainees at the Loki center, he continues to develop teaching materials suitable for trainees to take home and share with others. His wife, Rosalind often helps by teaching English and with ministry to local women.

### Loki Lockdown

The past year MERF Loki center activities have been impacted by the COVID pandemic. Following Kenyan government guidelines, the first 2020 training course ended two weeks early and the others were cancelled. In January 2021 train-



South Sudanese pastor and church choir excitedly receive the charter airplane

ing resumed. However, travel restrictions prevented guest instructors from coming from other countries. Therefore, locally available men stepped in to teach using the **Augustine Program** materials. Another lockdown at the end of March 2021, again shortened training by two weeks. Thankfully Nuer gospel radio broadcasting into South Sudan continued without interruption. This month the Loki center was reopened for training. Charter planes brought men sent by their churches from across South Sudan for the second 2021 MERF Loki biblical training course. *Please pray that they will be thoroughly grounded in God's Word and well-equipped to share the gospel and teach others.*

The Loki lockdowns have brought about alternative opportunities and allowed time to focus on the development and sharing of training material online. For example, Video Lectures on Hebrews; PowerPoints and notes to support the **Augustine Program**; *The Minister's Cat* Echism Family YouTube series and support of the translation of Luke Studies into the Nuer language.

The **Augustine Program** has also been shared in Ethiopia, which has proven to be an encouragement as the work continues to expand. *Pray that many more Christians and churches will be built up by these ministry resources.*

### Praise & Prayer

We are grateful to God and praise Him for the provision of the Loki Center, its location, the staff, trainees and guest instructors, through MERF's programs. This has benefited so many pastors, elders and evangelists over the years. Now they are back with home congregations using and sharing what they learned. *Pray for MERF's Loki Ministry Center to continue to be a blessing for the spread of the gospel and building up of the church among remote tribal peoples in northern Kenya, South Sudan and other East African nations through biblical training, gospel radio and local evangelists.*



Graham Lodge with his wife Catherine

### 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](http://www.merf.org/support)



Turkana families are thankful for safe drinking water given freely from the MERF Loki well





## August Birthdays

Happy birthday to Terence, Philip, Rose, Jack, and Kristi! We wish you all the Lord's blessing as you celebrate another birthday this August. May the Lord be with you and sustain you in the coming year. We hope you all have a great day celebrating with family and friends.

**4 Terence Berends** will be **45**

c/o Lighthouse  
6528 1st Line  
RR 3 Fergus, ON N1M 2W4

**23 Jack Dieleman** will be **49**

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

**5 Philip Schuurman** will be **62**

1156 Diltz Road  
Dunnville, ON N1A 2W2

**31 Kristi Oosterhoff** will be **31**

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

**9 Rose Malda** will be **64**

Mt. Nemo Christian Nursing Home  
4486 Guelph Line  
Burlington, ON L7P 0N2

**A NOTE TO PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS** If there are any address changes that I need to be aware of please let me know as soon as possible.

**Rachel Vis** >> 731 Lincoln Street, Wellandport, Ontario L0R 2J0 | [tom.rachelvis@gmail.com](mailto:tom.rachelvis@gmail.com) | **905-329-9476**

## YOU ASKED

# How and When Do We Teach and Admonish One Another?

*Paul exhorts believers, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom....” How do we do this “teaching and admonishing one another”? When is it necessary? Where should this be done? Could you also say something about biblical mutual accountability? Colossians 3:16*


**T**he apostle Paul is exhorting the congregation regarding the new life in Christ. The only way we will grow in such a life as brothers and sisters in the Lord is when we grow in Christ. Then Paul explains how this growth, this ongoing change and renewal, can take place: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” The Word of Christ is Christ himself, and in this unity with Christ in our new life his Word must be there all the time. Christ requires that room permanently! “Forever more I here will dwell,” he promised in the OT (Ps 132), implying that he does not want to dwell in his church, in his people, *once in a while*, like in a weekend cottage or on Sunday only, but *continuously*. His Word must be at home with us, and we must be at home with his Word! It has to dwell with us, not just being there, but functioning too, interacting with our life constantly.

It happens that some people think they have quite a bit of knowledge of the Scriptures, but if it doesn’t *function*, live, in their life, it’s just baggage. When it fills our life, however, and determines the atmosphere in our house, the attitude, the tone, etc., then it changes us. If it stays in the background somewhere, in one of the rooms or closets of our life, then division, disputes, and disunity arise. When it *functions*, Paul says, we *use* it to help each other, to teach and admonish one another.

“Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, *in all wisdom* teaching and admonishing one another.” The love in the church is not like the love in the world, which is blind; no, in the church the love for one another sees the error, the sins, and the weaknesses (seeing them in love, with forbearance, compassion, considerateness, of course, as it sees one’s *own* faults and weaknesses sharply). Then it takes the (practical!) wisdom of God’s Word to learn to help each other, teach each other, and admonish one another. Then admonitions and mutual discipline is done in a totally different attitude and approach. The wise brother or sister also knows the times and occasions at which it is conducive to do so.

So, the wisdom of God’s Word and the Spirit of Christ must live in us richly. You receive this wisdom (that is, in a truly *practical* manner as the scriptural *wisdom* denotes) when you let this Word dwell with you, work in you; when you give it all the *room*

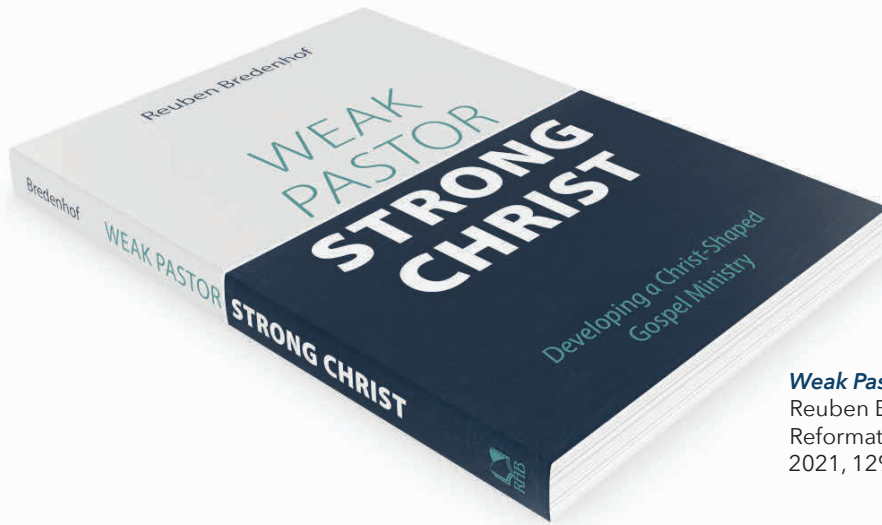
in your life! Wisdom is so important in the way we deal with each other. Just saying what’s wrong is not enough, but saying it with sensitivity, gentleness, considerateness, that requires wisdom. Then we address the right things without involving all sorts of details, secondary factors, which don’t help. Then we seek to build each other, grow together in the Lord, in the Word, when we admonish one another. As James puts it in his epistle, “The wisdom that comes from above is first of all pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere” (3:17). This wisdom puts us *beside* one another, seeking peace for each other, admonishing in love! That’s why the Word of Christ must dwell in us richly.

Paul’s teaching was done with a view to admonishing; his admonition was rooted in teaching. Admonishing for Paul means to warn, to stimulate, and to encourage, doing so pleading with people, even shedding tears, gently, like a father dealing with his children. It is remarkable how often Paul links his admonishing with his teaching concerning the person and work of Christ! The same also applies to the point of mutual accountability. This may include what James mentions in 5:16, “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another,” and as Luke reports in Acts 19:18, “Many of those who were now believers came, confessing and *divulging their practices*.” Hence, people in crisis situations, or suffering from addictions, could seek an accountability partner, to whom to divulge their struggles, seek assistance in them, or confessing their stumbling to them! Then it’s interesting also to hear Paul himself give account of his dealings with the people (a practice that was common already in the OT; 1 Sam 12:3-4). Mutual accountability serves to maintain integrity, honesty, and a continued living in harmony and unity with one another, desiring as we do to live in accordance with God’s will, in the love of Christ! 



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## BOOK REVIEW



***Weak Pastor, Strong Christ***  
 Reuben Bredenhof, Grand Rapids:  
 Reformation Heritage Books.  
 2021, 129 pages.

# A Guide for Pastoring the Modern Church


**T**he other day I received a double surprise in the mail. The first surprise when I opened the package was a book with a pithy title from a former parishioner and student, Reuben Bredenhof, who is now pastoring the Free Reformed Church in Mount Nasura, Western Australia. The second surprise was on the third page. I will not tell you what it is. You will have to buy the book in order to discover it.

In any case, on examining the outside of the book I saw a number of glowing endorsements and recommendations from some very reputable teachers and scholars in New Testament studies and practical theology. When I turned to the inside and started reading, I could see why. For, in a very succinct and clear manner, my younger colleague has managed to blend together biblical exegesis and pastoral insights.

For many reasons, this is unusual. Often books on pastoring start with the modern setting, make mention of the biblical and move on to the practical. This book, however, grows out of an in-depth study of what the apostle Paul wrote in II Corinthians. Of all his many books or epistles, it is easily the most pastoral and personal one. Well, Bredenhof researched this Pauline letter thoroughly while working on a thesis for his Master of Theology degree. Later he took up the suggestion of his wife,

Rebecca (good wife), and did something more with it, and here it is!

In eight chapters the author explores such pertinent subjects as serving under pressure, building a ministerial identity, pastoring like a father, preaching for the glory of Christ, facing a barrage of criticism, handling money wisely, suffering willingly, and working with a purpose. Each one of these chapters is solidly grounded in what Paul wrote long ago and draws valuable conclusions for ministry today. Time and time again one encounters precious insights and apt applications. In the end, the reader cannot but come away with some precious lessons on developing a Christ-shaped gospel ministry.

In summary, Reuben Bredenhof is to be commended for writing this excellent book and giving the modern church a sure guide for pastoring in the twenty-first century. Highly recommended! 



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# 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:

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**A**ttuned to current issues

**R**eadable and Reliable

**I**n Submission to Scripture

**O**pen to constructive criticism

**N**urturing Christian living

