

# Clarion



# What's Inside

Our issue leads with a guest editorial from Dr. William den Hollander. He writes about the first letter of Peter, written to a church of "exiles," and discusses how this epistle might "help us navigate our present circumstances, living as strangers in the very world we seek to reach, presenting the hope of the gospel to a culture that is increasingly hostile to our Christian convictions." Interestingly, readers will find a number of parallels between our lead article and Dr. Cornelis Van Dam's second article in his "Being a Christian" series.

Issue 16 brings you the first half of "Remaining Reformed in America" by Keith Sikkema; Mr. Chris DeBoer introduces readers to River's Edge Haven of Hope; there is also a Treasures, New & Old meditation, a letter to the editor, and a note from our publisher regarding digital subscriptions.

*Laura Veenendaal*

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# Clarion

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GUEST LEAD ARTICLE



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# To the Exiles:

## *A First Century Letter for the 21 Century Church*

Over the last decade my family has called four different places home. Three of those times we moved into established neighbourhoods and were the new kids on the block. But our latest landing point is a brand-new community just outside of a small town in southern Ontario, so new that houses are going up almost daily. Everyone's a stranger. What's more, as we develop relationships with our neighbours, we're discovering that this is even truer than we first realized. Many are immigrants. We have different accents, different histories, different cultures. If you stop any of us on our little street and ask where "home" is, you'll get a host of responses.



## First Peter: far from home

Moving here has provided fertile ground for thinking more deeply about “home.” That’s one of the reasons why, when I had to select a New Testament letter to study with the seminary students in our exegesis class this past semester, I gravitated to First Peter. When Peter, the apostle of Jesus Christ, addresses the Christians living in modern-day Turkey (ancient Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia), he calls them “exiles” (1:1; 2:11) and “sojourners” (2:11). He characterizes them as part of a Diaspora or Dispersion (1:1), calling to mind the scattering of the Israelites after their exiles into Assyria (eighth century B.C.) and Babylon (sixth century B.C.). All told, Peter is writing to people who are not at home.

He isn’t the only Scripture writer to speak this way. You can think of the author of Hebrews, who uses the same language of “strangers” and “exiles” (11:13) to describe Christians, who are like pilgrims “seeking a homeland” (11:14), who “desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (11:16). The apostle Paul uses a different metaphor for the Philippian Christians, but with a similar meaning, when he writes, “our citizenship is in heaven” (3:20). These writers, like Peter, remind us that this isn’t our eternal home, but we are awaiting the new heavens and earth that will be ushered in with the return of Jesus Christ (a reminder we need!).

This letter of Peter is, however, unique in its emphasis. He’s addressing Christians who not only have the identity of exiles, but also are experiencing the reality of being away from home. Not only *are* they sojourners, but they also *feel* like sojourners. And that is the touchpoint with the church today. We live in a post-Christian world, a secular age, and that means we now feel more acutely what has always been true, that we are exiles in this world, not (yet) at home. It’s not surprising, then, to discover that Peter speaks with special force into our contemporary experience, even as his pre-Christian world mirrors our own in striking ways. How then might First Peter help us navigate our present circumstances, living as strangers in the very world we seek to reach, presenting the hope of the gospel to a culture that is increasingly hostile to our Christian convictions? That, at long last, is the question I want to consider with you.

## “Intolerance” will not be tolerated

### The (twenty)-first century church

Before we get into the particulars of Peter’s exhortation to exiles, it’s helpful to illustrate, however briefly, parallels between pre- and post-Christian experiences. First, the early church was often misunderstood. Rumours abounded about the gatherings of Christians. There were suspicions that they were cannibals (eating and drinking body and blood) and murderers (drowning children). The charge of incest was frequently leveled at them, perhaps in connection with the custom of addressing each other as brother and sister and greeting each other with a holy kiss or kiss of love (1 Pet 5:14). Worst of all was the frequent accusation that Christians were atheists, because their exclusive allegiance to the Triune God was misunderstood. How could anyone worship only one God to the exclusion of all others? The ancients, it seems, couldn’t tolerate those they judged intolerant. With all this in mind, it’s not surprising that the Roman historian Tacitus would describe Christians as “a class hated for their abominations.”<sup>i</sup>

A generation ago, such a characterization of Christians was completely foreign to our experience. Not so today. Perhaps the most startling change in our circumstances in the twenty-first century Western world is that we have gone from simply being “strangers” to “bad guys,” as it was recently expressed.<sup>ii</sup> Conservative Christians, according to the predominant (or at least loudest) view, stand in the way of progress, are against inclusivity, oppose love, and undermine the very possibility of human flourishing. It is perhaps just a matter of time until the Bible itself, which is abundantly clear on what (sexual) morality should (and should not) look like, is classified as hate speech. “Intolerance” will not be tolerated.

<sup>i</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.

<sup>ii</sup> Stephen McAlpine, *Being the Bad Guys: How to Live for Jesus in a World That Says You Shouldn’t* (Surrey: The Good Book Company, 2021).

A natural reaction to all this would be to retreat, batten down the hatches, and wait out the storm. You can imagine the temptation for those early Christians living in modern-day Turkey to do just that. While they weren't facing official persecution at this time, and indeed formal persecution was rare in the first centuries, their lives as Christians were not easy because they were living in a society that was fundamentally opposed to their deepest held convictions. The safest and most obvious options would have been surrender or withdrawal. Enter First Peter.

Obviously we can't consider the whole of Peter's exhortation to these beleaguered Christians in what space remains. Instead, I want to draw out two principles for strangers living a world that is not our home: holiness and hope. Both are predicated on believers being "sent *into* the world" while not being "of the world," as Jesus expressed it (John 17:14-19).

## He calls the church living in exile to do good in a way that is distinctive and visible

### Holy exiles

Holiness runs through the letter like a golden thread, both as an identity and as an imperative. It's expressed most clearly in 1:15-16: "As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'" Holiness is the foundation for the virtues that Peter urges on us throughout the letter. Our identity as a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession"

(2:9) compels us both to proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of the darkness and into his marvelous light *and* to pursue holiness in our thoughts, words, and actions (2:9-12). Peter focuses especially on the outward display of our holiness, namely our words and actions. He calls the church living in exile to do good in a way that is distinctive and visible. Strikingly, he connects it more than once with our witness to the watching world.

Thus, he writes, "keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (2:12); later on, he says much the same: "This is the will of God, that by doing good, you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people" (2:15); and finally, regarding our conversations with unbelievers he writes, "Do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame" (3:15-16).

Holiness, displayed in doing good, is compelling. The experience of the early church is again instructive, because even while early Christians were hated for their abominations, their neighbours also found themselves strangely attracted by their goodness and the love. While it was a common practice for the ancients to get rid of unwanted infants, especially daughters, by "exposing" them at the local garbage heap, Christians were known for rescuing those children and raising them as their own. While most fled the cities during the great epidemics of the second and third centuries, many Christians stayed behind to tend to the sick. Their neighbours noticed. In fact, the fourth century emperor Julian, known as the Apostate for abandoning Christianity, strove endlessly to see the establishment of pagan charities that could match the goodwill of the Christians, but failed miserably. He wrote, "The impious Galileans [=Christians] support not only their poor, but ours as well; everyone can see that our people lack aid from us" (*Letter 22*).

Christian marriages stood out in the ancient world too. While pagans valued female chastity, they expected men to satisfy their sexual desires with whomever they desired, prostitutes or slaves, male or female, young or old. Christians, however, rejected this double standard, condemning premarital sex and marital infidelity for both women and men alike. The famous second-century physician Galen even commented with

# Our holy and hope-full reaction to hardship may well be our most compelling witness to the watching world

admiration on Christian “constraint in cohabitation.”<sup>iii</sup> Against the immoral pagan backdrop, the instruction of Peter to wives and husbands (3:1–7) is all the more striking, and it’s not surprising that many women were drawn to Christianity, perhaps in part by the beauty of Christian marriage.


Today too, in our post-Christian age, we have the call and the opportunity to exhibit a beautiful, compelling alternate way to live, and as church to be a community that is strangely attractive even to those whose understanding of human flourishing is worlds apart from our own. Even as we stand firm in our scriptural convictions and speak truth to our culture, we must let the song continue to be true: “They will know we are Christians by our love” (cf. John 13:35).

## Hope-full exiles

Attraction also lies at the heart of the second principle I want to draw out briefly. When Peter envisions unbelievers approaching believers, it’s their hope that he has them noticing when he writes, “In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you” (3:15). Hope, Peter makes clear, is visible, unusual, and appealing.

In a fascinating study of the social causes behind the rise of Christianity, sociologist Rodney Stark identifies hope as a leading factor in why pagans were drawn to Christianity. He writes, “The epidemics swamped the explanatory and comforting capacities of paganism and of Hellenic philosophies. In contrast, Christianity offered a much more satisfactory account of why these terrible times had fallen upon humanity, and it projected a hopeful even enthusiastic, portrait of the future.”<sup>iv</sup> Crises, personal or collective, provide the opportunity for Christians to demonstrate hope in contrast to the fear and anxiety that are our natural (fallen) response. As believers we “cast all [our] anxieties on [God], because he cares for [us]” (5:7). Thus, Peter spends much time encouraging Christians to respond appropriately, faithfully, to suffering in the Christian life, especially at the hands of unbelievers (4:12–19). He counsels believers, for whom Christ himself suffered, to “follow in [Christ’s] footsteps” (2:21) by enduring and refusing to react in kind. In short, he calls for Christian hope to be perceptible.

To those facing the very real possibility of future suffering for the sake of Christ in our time, Peter’s call to patient endurance and to rejoicing in the sharing of Christ’s suffering is timely and convicting. Our holy and hope-full reaction to hardship may well be our most compelling witness to the watching world. As Stark points out regarding the much more challenging circumstances of the early church, “By voluntarily accepting torture and death rather than defecting, a person sets the highest imaginable value upon a religion and communicates that value to others.”<sup>v</sup> Or, as the second-century North African theologian Tertullian more famously put it: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”<sup>vi</sup>

As we live as strangers in this world, then, let our hope be visible and attractive. There is no room for pessimism or despair when we have a living hope, rooted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, which looks forward to an inheritance that will never perish, spoil, or fade, kept in heaven for us (1:3–4). For when Christ Jesus appears and his full glory is revealed, our present joy will be eclipsed, and we will be home at last. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!” (1:3) 

<sup>iii</sup> Richard Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 15.

<sup>iv</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 74.

<sup>v</sup> Stark, *Rise of Christianity*, 174.

<sup>vi</sup> Apology 50.13. He actually wrote, “The more often we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.” But the paraphrase has become proverbial.

# All Things New

*“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” (REVELATION 21:1-4)*

**T**he sea is a symbol of God’s creative power and an emblem of beauty, vastness, recreation, commerce, etc. It can also be, as it is here, a reference to the dwelling place of wickedness, the place where the devil and his cohorts dwell. It is a body full of hostility and destructive power. The raging tempest-tossed waters symbolize the nations of the world and even the Christian church in conflict. But the sea “was no more.” In the new heaven and earth, all that pertains to sin, brokenness of life, the fomenting and agitation of mankind, is removed.

That John sees a “new heaven and a new earth” does not indicate a replacement, meaning that the old is discarded. It means they have become new *again*. Renewed. Rejuvenated. Purified. Cleansed. Every stain of sin, every scar of wrong, every occasion of conflict, every stab of pain, every trace of death is removed. The weeds, thorns, and thistles are all gone. The old bodies of believers are raised up, purified, cleansed, and restored to original shine and glory!


This newness is expressed with the image of a *tent*. Literally, verse 3 states, “Behold, the *tent* of God is with man. He will *tent* with them....” Here “tent” does not indicate temporariness or vulnerability but indwelling. God will make his sanctuary and dwelling place among men. In the new Jerusalem, in the new, perfect, and everlasting church of Christ, God will dwell right there in her midst. Paradise will be restored!

It is a most beautiful scriptural theme: the desire of God to dwell with his creature. The ultimate Paradise is where God walks and talks with man forever. Whereas sin drove man away from God, and fellowship with him was destroyed, God in his grace will restore that covenant fellowship. The earthly tabernacle in Shiloh and the more permanent temple in Jerusalem on Mt. Zion, with all its sacrifices of bulls and lambs, were not sufficient to restore that fellowship. No, God still needed to promise Emmanuel, “God with us.” This was fulfilled in the coming down of God himself, in the incarnation of his eternal Son Jesus Christ in the form of man.

Think about what the same apostle John wrote in his gospel, 1:14, “And the Word became flesh and *dwelt* among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Here too the original makes the same connection. Literally, the Word became flesh and *tented* among us. The Son of God “pitched his tent” among us.

This first dwelling of God with man in Jesus Christ was not the perfect completion, because although sin and death were conquered by Christ, its remnants remain with us, so that church and world still experience them today: tears, death, mourning, crying, and pain. At the second coming of Christ, in the new heaven and earth, all these remnants of sin will be removed, truly and for good. The purifying wrath of God will remove it all. He will restore heaven, earth, and the church to pristine beauty and glory, which can never again be corrupted, because it is transformed and raised imperishable with Christ!

We, God’s people, will be raised up to newness of life, a newness that will never again show signs of oldness. It will be an eternal glory in which to praise God forever. It comes to us through grace alone in Jesus Christ.

In this vision John has a picture of the fullness of what we are already now beginning to experience in this life. One day we believers will get to enjoy all this beauty, perfection, and divine presence together in the glorious heavenly Jerusalem! That will be the new place we call home! 

## For Further Study

1. Are the new things promised in this vision something of the future only, when Christ comes again? How can we experience this newness already today?
2. How does this vision give comfort in the time of loss of a believing loved one?



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# Early Christians

*in Priestly and Royal Service*

**H**aving seen in the previous issue of *Clarion* the early Christian prophetic testimony, we now consider their priestly and royal service.

Christians in the early history of the church showed their priestly identity in Christ by displaying love and compassion for their fellow human beings, whom they recognized as also being made in God's image. Such an exhibition of love and care for others was very counter-cultural. The classical world had no religious

or ethical motivation for helping those outside their immediate family. Those without such family connections were in a precarious position if they became destitute or sick. There was no public provision for them. Even during the plagues, municipalities took no responsibility to bury the dead who were simply left on the streets. Within this context Christians demonstrated incredible love, not only for each other but even for their enemies.



## Sacrificial love

Such sacrificial love was evident during the great plague that swept through the Roman Empire in the mid-third century. It was a catastrophe of epic proportions, which decimated the population. In some places, those who died outnumbered the living. People were simply left to fend for themselves. The pagans abandoned the sick and threw the bodies of those who had succumbed out of their homes and on to the public alleys or streets. The response of Christians was radically different. In spite of persecution, they did what they could for the sick, often at the cost of their own life. Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria, wrote of elders, deacons, and church members helping the sick without regard for their own safety. Indicative of the tremendous devotion to show the love of Christ to others, Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, urged Christians in that city to help not only their fellow believers but also their persecutors and he organized the care of the sick for the entire city. No distinction was to be made between Christians and pagans.<sup>i</sup>

Christian compassion for their fellow citizens seemed boundless. Not only the sick but also the lives of orphans and unwanted children, left to the elements to die, were cared for in orphanages that were being developed. Immediately after Pentecost, diaconal aid had already been organized and help continued to be extended to those in need, also outside the church. Given the Christian ethos, it is not surprising that the origin of the hospital is distinctively Christian. It was Basil the Great, later Bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, who established the first hospital in the Western world in about 369 AD.<sup>ii</sup>

The zeal with which Christians showed their love for others in so many ways, which consequently won many converts, was such an embarrassment to the pagans that Julian the Emperor even had to take note. He sent a letter (number 22 in modern editions) to Arsacius, the high priest of Galatia, in which he lamented that “the Hellenic religion does not yet prosper as I desire” and observed that Christian “benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done most to increase atheism [i.e. Christianity]. I believe we ought really and truly to practise every one of these virtues.” He also noted that “it is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans [Christians] support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our

people lack aid from us.” Such an embarrassing situation had to stop. So, he made extra food available and, among other orders, he commanded: “In every city establish frequent hostels in order that strangers may profit by our benevolence.”

But the Roman Empire could not compete with the love and compassion shown by Christians for each other and for those outside the fellowship of the saints. Pagan religion and culture simply did not provide the fundamentals for that kind of altruistic service. The Lord blessed the Christian witness. Their sacrificial service earned them not only the grudging respect of pagans, but it was also a compelling testimony of the reality of the gospel which God used to convert many to the faith.

## Royal authority and power

The early Christians also showed that they participated in Christ’s office as king in various ways. There was a regal dignity in the way they powerfully confessed Christ as Lord overall. The firm conviction with which they stood up for their Saviour moved many pagan hearts to admiration. It also aroused interest in the Christian faith, and conversions often followed.

Official persecution by Roman authorities was sporadic before AD 250, since Rome then did little to enforce the state religion. It was, however, as Tertullian (ca. AD 160–225) made clear in his *Apology* (§2), an offense in the Empire simply to be a Christian. If accused and brought before a judge, you were even forbidden to defend yourself. The mere confession of the name of Christ was sufficient to convict you and only the specific denial of the name of the Saviour was enough to secure your release. As Emperor Trajan’s letter to Pliny, the Younger (Letter 97) in about AD 112 made clear, Christians were not to be the special object of persecution. However, if one was accused of being a Christian, then a trial should take place, and, if convicted, one would be executed. Release from the charges was always possible if one denied being a Christian and gave proof by honouring the Roman gods. Otherwise, condemned Christians were killed, sometimes by wild animals in an arena as sport for the pagan populace. Two examples of martyrs illustrate the point that simply being a Christian was enough to be condemned to death.

<sup>i</sup>. For this and other examples, see Gary B. Ferngren, *Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 118–19.

<sup>ii</sup>. Ferngren, *Medicine and Health Care*, 124–27.

## Polycarp

The elderly Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, was arrested in about AD 167 during a local persecution against Christians which was probably incited by Jews. According to a contemporary eyewitness account as recorded in *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, when those seeking him found him in a cottage, he offered his captors food and drink and asked time to pray before they took him away. This request was granted. His age and the regal courage and graciousness which he displayed made his captors beg him to save his life by denying his faith. "Why, what harm is there in saying, 'Caesar is Lord,' and offering incense' (and other words to this effect), 'and thereby saving yourself?'" But he refused. Once in the arena, the proconsul repeatedly tried to persuade him to deny the faith. "Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile Christ." But Polycarp responded: "For eighty-six years I have been his servant, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" The proconsul tried again and again to dissuade Polycarp from his Christian faith, threatening him with wild beasts and fire. To which Polycarp responded: "You threaten with a fire that burns only briefly and after just a little while is extinguished, for you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and eternal punishment, which is reserved for the ungodly. But why do you delay? Come, do what you wish." The proconsul's herald proclaimed three times to the entire arena: "Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian." The crowds were in a great hurry to gather wood, with the Jews being especially zealous. He was tied to a stake to be burned alive as "a burnt offering prepared and acceptable to God." He prayed to God, thanking him to be counted worthy to be a martyr and to be received "in your presence today, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice." When his prayer was finished, the fire was lit.



The type of Roman altar (early second century AD) on which incense to the Roman gods was offered. Christians who refused to do so faced death.

## Vibia Perpetua

Another early famous martyr was Vibia Perpetua, a young, twenty-two-year-old noblewoman who was married and had an infant whom she nursed. She and her pregnant slave Felicity were arrested for their faith in AD 203. While in prison awaiting death, Perpetua kept a diary. She recorded how before being jailed her anguished pagan father pleaded with her to renounce her faith. "I said: 'Father, do you see that container over there, for instance - a jug or something?' And he said: 'Yes, I do.' And I said to him: 'It can't be called anything other than it is, can it?' And he said: 'No.' 'So too, I can't call myself anything other than

I am: a Christian.'" During her imprisonment, she had a hearing. Her father tried again to dissuade her from maintaining her faith. "My daughter, have pity on my white hairs! Show some compassion to your father, if I deserve to be called father by you.... Look at your son, who won't be able to live if you die. Don't flaunt your insistence, or you'll destroy us all." Out of devotion he kissed her hands and flung himself at her feet. She wrote: "I comforted him, saying: 'At the tribunal things will go as God wills: for you must know we are no longer in our own hands, but in God's.' He left me, grief stricken." At the tribunal her father again tried to dissuade her. The governor, Hilarianus, who was the judge in

# The day of their death was the day of their victory!

her case, sided with the father and pleaded that she renounce her faith. "'Perform the ritual for the Emperor's welfare.' And I answered: 'I will not perform it.' Hilarianus: 'You are a Christian then?' And I answered: 'I am a Christian.'" She was condemned "to the beasts of the arena." "And joyful we went back to prison." She knew herself safe in God's hands. "I knew I should have to fight not against wild beasts but against the Fiend; but I knew the victory would be mine."

Tertullian, a contemporary of Perpetua, describes how both Perpetua and Felicitas, who had in the meantime given birth, conducted themselves. "The day of their victory shone forth, and they proceeded from the prison into the amphitheatre, as if to an assembly, joyous and of brilliant countenances; if perchance shrinking, it was with joy, and not with fear." The day of their death was the day of their victory!


## A difficult testimony against the powers of darkness

Such devotion to the cause of Christ was, however, not always exhibited. When Emperor Decius issued an empire-wide edict in January AD 250 that everyone had to offer pagan sacrifices to show their loyalty to the Roman gods, many Christians could not stand up to the pressure and offered the required sacrifices.

But, many also stood firm and became martyrs. Decius's religious policy was a failure and ended with his death in AD 251. Subsequent attempts to crush the church also failed. Although there were lapses, even significant ones in times of persecution, nevertheless, the overwhelming message which pagans received from Christians was their faithfulness to their Saviour no matter the cost.

In regally standing up to paganism and its gods, Christians showed that they shared Christ's royal office as those who would defy the foe. They realized that their struggle was not "against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). Armed with the sword of the Spirit, God's Word, strengthened in the Spirit by their prayerful walk with God, and showing in every possible way the gospel of love and peace, they were able to extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one (cf. Eph 6:13-18).

The unquestioning dedication and loyalty to the Lord confounded the enemy. They simply could not comprehend what made Christians behave the way they did – even dying for the faith. But those who took the trouble to seriously investigate, experienced God's mercy and converted to the faith. They realized that a martyr's death was a triumph over the evil one (cf. Matt 16:24-26). Indeed, historians agree that every public martyrdom of Christians was a successful opportunity for the church to gain converts. The human army of Jesus Christ gradually increased in number until the days of Constantine; the Empire officially became Christian.

The fact that individual Christians faithfully exercised their office as prophets, priests, and kings determined the identity of the church as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Pet 2:9). This identity of the early Christian church as a whole merits some reflection in our next article. 



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# Remaining Reformed in America (1)

In 1950, the Canadian Reformed Churches chose their name with care. *Reformed*: Editors of its first synod's Acts (1954) acknowledged that it "struggled faithfully to keep the Word of the Lord purely in this world and to let the Word alone rule the life of the Church" (p. 3, 63). They intended to address issues on the Reformed basis of Scripture as summarized in the Three Forms of Unity, and in line with the (to be Canadianized) Church Order (Art 5, 94). Canadian: The Dutch Acts actually included an English translation and also a decision that led to a complete English *Book of Praise* by 1972 (Art 56). The earliest Reformed Churches in North America had taken much longer: The first congregation was instituted in 1628, but they took till 1764 to receive their first English-speaking minister. Culturally, they were slow to assimilate American ideals, character, and ways of doing things. Some believed that Dutch was the only language in which Lord's Day 1 could be properly explained. In two articles I highlight historical aspects of the Dutch Reformed Church in America,<sup>i</sup> with a view to remaining Reformed.

## Dort and Reformed

Rev. Jonas Michaelius (1577-16??) prepared for the ministry in Leyden, and, after twenty years of service in Holland and abroad, he accepted Amsterdam's call to New Amsterdam in the New World. He was around when the Synod of Dort had settled the Arminian controversy. It had also checked the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism for biblical faithfulness. It vetted the Church Order. It gave well-considered direction for liturgy (all psalms on Genevan tunes, just a few hymns, and liturgical forms) and educating the youth. It planned an improved and annotated Dutch Bible translation. It told the government to make sure there would be a minister for evangelizing the heathen in the colonies. Michaelius likely knew what it was to be and to remain Reformed.

What is *being Reformed*? Rev. Feenstra<sup>ii</sup> captured it in four traits of awareness: 1) essential awareness (being deliberately and exegetically biblical, without sectarian binding of consciences, BC 7, 2 Tim 3:16, Heb 4:12); 2) historical awareness (seeing

<sup>i</sup> The name "Reformed Church in America" (RCA) was adopted in 1867.

<sup>ii</sup> Feenstra, H. H. J. (1987). *Was Abraham Gereformeerd?* [Was Abraham Reformed?] Ermelo, Woord en Wereld



oneself as an integral part of the one catholic and apostolic church of all places and ages, as in Acts 7); 3) church awareness (seeing Christ's work today for "all the saints" and not just individuals, Eph 3:18, 6:18); and 4) normative awareness (accepting all that God says as good and true always). Abraham aligned with these traits, Rev. Feenstra argued, and so did Dort.

## Challenges

Dort did not bring perfection. For instance, while the Church Order promoted good relationships between the church and civil authorities (Art 28, BC 36), and condemned lording (Art 84, BoP 74), magistrates privileged Reformed churches and took on domineering roles. Classis Amsterdam only relinquished its patronizing role in America after the American Revolution. Further, Arminianism was condemned, but humanism and rationalism freely flourished. People were still depraved, and Satan still sought to devour.

There also were practical challenges. How does one minister to dispersed and uprooted people lost in a foreign wilderness? How does one encourage communion of saints among a mix of privileged and destitute, Belgian French ("Walloon") and Dutch speakers, refugees, escapees, adventurers and speculators, slaves and indentured servants, and company – and civil servants – all inclined to love themselves more than God or the neighbour? How does one apply a church order not developed for distant colonist-churches, in a classis influenced by power and business interests, and with a profit-oriented business that must provide church finances? How does one prepare ministers for such challenges, or even find one – especially when the Dutch West India Company is notoriously reluctant to properly provide? Being Reformed was tough.

In 1624, Classis Amsterdam had sent cloth-maker Bastiaen Janszoon Krol (who could pray, comfort, and read, but was not ordained) to lead services and read sermons as a comforter-of-the-sick in the fledgling colony. He had special permission to solemnize marriages and baptize. In 1626, Jan Huygens joined him. Huygens came with his Walloon brother-in-law, Peter Minuit (who represented the Dutch West India Company and "bought" Manhattan). The pastoral arrangement changed when Rev. Michaelius arrived in January 1628. He immediately instituted the church in Manhattan with Minuit as elder and Krol as deacon and administered the Lord's Supper to fifty members. Admission was based on public profession of faith, a written attestation, or a testimony of trusted others. Rev. Michaelius tried, but soon deemed it impossible to evangelize Indigenous

people: "They are entirely savage and wild, strangers to all decency, yea uncivil and stupid as garden poles...." He also had a dispute with Peter Minuit and another elder and left within four years. When he volunteered to return in 1637, Classis approved, but the Company did not – and won. Mission work was hindered by linguistic and cultural barriers, the unchristian lifestyle of settlers, territorial disputes, and European political conflicts. Yet, by 1697, the Iroquoian Onondaga people actually requested a missionary.

For more than a century following Rev. Michaelius's tenure, the oversight of Classis Amsterdam allowed the (mostly rural) settlers to remain distinctly Dutch, even as "New England" was becoming increasingly English. The English won the colony in 1664, allowing the Reformed Church to stay, but ending company funding. Its legitimacy was confirmed in 1696, when (Dutch) King William III of England granted Manhattan's Collegiate Church a Royal Charter as a legal entity allowed to own property, receive donations, and remain "Dutch." By that time, there were about 1500 families associated with the Dutch Reformed Church, in twenty-three congregations with nine ministers. Many people stuck to Dutch or Reformed ways out of custom and tradition rather than a living love for the Lord. Squabbles were inevitable.

## Disputes

Differences involved non-essential sentiments or foundational issues, or both. Settlers found sermons too long or too short and ministers too strict or too easy on morals. Relationships between ministers and the Dutch West India Company were frequently strained for not fixing the church or the manse, for not paying the stipend, and worse. In the case of Rev. Bogardus (public drunkenness and insubordination) and former Company Director General Kieft (massacre of eighty Algonquins), both were on the way to Amsterdam in 1647 to address charges – and perished in a storm off Wales, along with many congregants.

Serving in the Netherlands, Rev. Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen (1691–1747) had a German Pietist background. Along with leaders of the Dutch Second Reformation, he believed that true Christians must have experienced a conversion with an acute awareness of their sinfulness, remorse, and God's love. Ignorant of where it was, he accepted a call to Raritan, New Jersey, arriving in 1720. His convictions and moral standards soon clashed with the dead orthodoxy of colleagues who meticulously followed Dutch traditions and liturgies but were easy on Christian living: *This called for conversion!* He

# The church consists of weak and sinful people and Satan takes pleasure in ripping it apart


also found Dort's prescribed liturgies and prayers stifling and adjusted them with gusto – but without collegial support or Classis authorization. To his peers, he was a troublemaker; to others, an early leader of the Great Awakening.

Shortly after, a decades-long controversy developed around whether or not the churches should remain under Classis Amsterdam. An American-minded and progressive "*Coetus*" party of some ministers pushed for an independent synod and local training for English-speaking clergy. They finally welcomed their *first* English speaking minister, Rev. Archibald Laidlie, in 1764. A Dutch-minded conservative "*Conferentie*" party of some other ministers favoured remaining strictly Dutch, under Classis Amsterdam and in close adherence to established traditions. Rev. John A. Livingston, a Leyden graduate, helped find a compromise in 1771: Queen's College (later Rutgers College and New Brunswick Seminary) would help fill the need for American ministers with Classis Amsterdam's approval. (He also promoted missions, added hymns to the psalter, and introduced liberties with the prescribed liturgy.) In the subsequent American Revolution (1776-1783), church members were divided between pro-English Tories (often *Conferentie* supporters) and Revolutionary Patriots (often *Coetus* supporters). While only a minority took up arms, the church controversy now inevitably shifted to flesh-and-blood battlefields. Ephesians 6:12 comes to mind. Afterwards, hundreds of "Dutch" Tories left the United

States as United Empire Loyalists to the Belleville-Kingston area in Canada. There, they later joined the Presbyterians. They chose not to be American.

Early in the nineteenth century, a quarrel arose around matters of doctrine and conduct. Those who valued remaining Reformed found that discipline and practice were substandard, and that it allowed denial of original sin and total depravity. In such situations, people pray, argue, agonize, get angry and embittered, and sin, in part because non-essential practical matters, sentiments, and characters get entwined. Satan likes that. Around 1822, it led to the formation of the doctrinally strict True Reformed Dutch Church (TRDC) under leadership of Rev. Solomon Froeligh. He was a controversial Professor of Theology at the Reformed New Brunswick Seminary: It suspended him in 1823 for schism, contempt of ecclesiastical authority, and promoting divisions. In view of passages like Isaiah 48:20, 1 Corinthians 1:10, 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 and Revelation 18:4, as well as Belgic Confession 28, the question arises if, how, and when it is right to leave a church.

## Conclusion

The church consists of weak and sinful people and Satan takes pleasure in ripping it apart. There was not always a vivid awareness of what the church really was in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. There were divisions and provincial power struggles. An emphasis on experiential conversion could distract from seeing the church as the Body of Christ and as communion of saints; traditions undermined living membership. Very personal and very ungodly behaviours and sentiments sometimes prevailed. While Dort had provided strong documents and directions, things were not perfect. Yet, by God's mercy, the churches remained. 



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FROM THE PUBLISHER

# Digital Subscription

Dear reader,

Over the years some readers have asked about the possibility of receiving *Clarion* digitally. We're pleased to announce that we have launched our digital subscription.


As publisher, however, we come at this with mixed feelings. The publishing world has seen sales of e-books plateau, while sales of printed books continue to climb. Studies are not conclusive, but evidence continues to indicate that comprehension and retention are better when reading a physical copy compared to reading on a screen. As a result, advertisers of all kinds have returned to printed media as a way of making a longer and deeper connection with their target customers.

For our magazine, what is important is the content. Our prayer is that you will benefit from reading and considering this content. The medium we use to read *Clarion* is a tool, in itself neither good nor bad. As a whole, our society has embraced the smartphone and tablet on the basis of convenience, without deeply questioning the costs or effects. Many of us, myself included, need less time – not more – behind what Andy Crouch, in his book *The Tech-wise Family*, calls “glowing rectangles.” And

this has certainly not gotten better under COVID restrictions. For many of us, devices are a useful way of getting quick hits, but a poor medium for mindful reading. Further, a printed copy of *Clarion* lying on a table serves a wider audience – perhaps your young or teenage children, who will pick it up and browse through it when “bored.”

For others, especially those with visual impairment, a digital magazine will allow a level of engagement that would not be as feasible from a printed piece.

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*William Gortemaker*

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# River's Edge *Haven of Hope*

**R**iver's Edge Haven of Hope was founded in the spring of 2020. This new organization exists to support children and youth to grow spiritually, mentally, and socially in a unique farm setting. As a Christian organization, our core purpose is to share the hope, love, and saving grace of Jesus Christ in a broken world. We share this hope by matching young people of any age and ability level with adult mentors to explore the beauty of creation in a fun-filled and safe place of adventure and challenge. We respect the dignity of every person and commit to doing our best to encourage growth through the mentoring relationship. To date we currently have sixty participants per week.

## **One-on-one mentoring activities – how it works**

Some of you may wonder, what exactly is done in a mentoring session, or how it exactly works. Most sessions start off with some sort of chore based on the level of the participant. Chores can be simple like sweeping the barn, getting some hay for the horses, scooping manure in the stalls or paddocks. Some participants love to work and we find ourselves working for the entire session! Typically, however, after about fifteen to thirty minutes of work, we engage in an activity; this can be horsemanship, crafts, wood-working, small animal care, kayak, fishing etc. Then, over time, we build a relationship with the participant and are able to speak

into their lives. In some of the sessions we are just having fun working on the relationship; some of the sessions are spent talking about life issues and faith matters. This is varied on the many different types of participants and situations. Horses are a particular asset in helping forge these relationships.

## Who participates in the program?

Our organization is for all ages, however, our core focus is for participants in the age range of six to eighteen. Approximately fifty percent of our participants come from broken homes where either a parent has passed away or there is some sort of separation challenge. Thirty percent of our participants are struggling with anxiety depression or suicide. The remainder come from a past abused situation or struggle with substance abuse. We also have some special needs participants that enjoy the farm for enrichment purposes. Currently, seventy percent of our participants come from the Reformed churches, and thirty percent come from an unchurched home.

## The benefits of equine assisted mentoring


Horses are very empathic and compassionate animals. In mammals and humans, there is a centre in our brain called the amygdala. This is where emotions are given meaning, remembered, and where one responds to these emotions. The horse's amygdala is one of the largest in land mammals. Therefore, because of how God created horses, they are *by nature* very empathic. Secondly, horses are herd animals, meaning they often function in a way that is similar to a family or other social units. Horses want to be with their herd because they feel protected and safe. Horses communicate non-verbally in the herd, especially with body language. So, because God made

horses this way, they have the ability to sense when we are sad, happy, anxious, depressed, angry etc. Horses, therefore, facilitate growth in leadership, compassion, love, respect, problem solving, teamwork, critical thinking, and overcoming obstacles. In this interpersonal growth, the mentor can point the participant to the love of God in Christ and his daily protection and care.

## Staff and volunteers

River's Edge employs three staff members and a number of volunteers. Currently our team sits at about fifteen. We have volunteers who mentor and volunteers who help with the chores. With this model we can service a lot more participants throughout the week.

## What else?

The Board has plans for implementing "secondary ministries" at the farm as well! These events would take place more in the evenings and weekends. They will be more focused on building the communion of the saints in a group setting. For instance, once idea that is being planned is one evening a week barbeque/sing-song by the fire. A variety of groups would be invited through the year to participate. This could be young peoples or the general population from town. Perhaps another month we focus on marriage classes or run an alcoholic's anonymous support group. The idea is having the place busy six days a week! 

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**Support Us** We are thankful for the support we receive. Thank you to those who have come for a tour of our ministry supporting us by your interest and questions! Please continue to pray that the Lord may bless the organization. We welcome all of you to tour our facility and see for yourself what we do. Please call the office 289-426-0481.

Tell your family and friends! Our programming is a free service to families in need. We run completely on generous donations. Consider supporting use financially. A donation of \$280 a month can help one child enjoy a meaningful relationship and have someone to walk along side them!

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## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

**To the editor,**

I was both pleased and surprised in April to see the words “Gender and Sexuality” on the cover of our newest *Clarion*. These topics occupy my thoughts often, and I have longed for a way to bring this more into the open in “our circles.” Let’s face it, we CanRefs do not openly talk about gender and sexuality. Perhaps we might talk to a close friend, it may come up on a home visit, or a pastor becomes a listening ear. This is certainly not a topic that would come up for discussion, for example, on a congregational evening.

You published three well-written articles. I truly thank the ministers who wrote them, and the *Clarion* editors for publishing them together in one issue.

I would like to reflect on the middle article, from Rev. DeGelder, “It Is Not Good for the Man to Be Alone.” Rev DeGelder wishes to reflect on this question: “How does the gospel of Jesus make the church a safe and good place for the lesbian and gay believer, when that church says ‘No’ to homosexual relations?” I applaud Rev DeGelder’s approach to this question. He is very calm and organized in his thoughts. He reflects well on many aspects of the question, going back and forth between the here and now and reflecting back on what God says. The first half of the article ends with “How can we...” questions. “How can we be more pro-active, so this brother or sister dares come to us without the fear of being condemned and rejected? ... Can trust that the church of Jesus Christ is a safe place for him or her?” And more: he then makes a few observations, mid article.

The first observation that he made, and again I quote, “Homosexuals in the church often experience that in the church there is not much understanding for the problems with which they are struggling.”

The second half of the article is a dozen or so considerations, such as “thoughts to consider, think about, pray about, talk about, and perhaps discuss” ... *and perhaps discuss*.


In our congregations, and please correct me if I am wrong, there is little structured discussion. We have no guidance as to how to understand and love our homosexual members. An

informed and concerned church librarian could put informative material on the church library shelves, but having members read this material is another matter.

Church members experiencing same-sex attraction need visible support. They should not be made to feel as though they need to look for support outside the church, nor should they need to be sent to people outside of the church community for help. Are our CanRC pastors and church leaders educating themselves so that they really understand the issues? If so, are they wise in how to speak about them? And if not, they will avoid speaking about these issues all the more.

We don’t need to reinvent the wheel. For example, livingout.org (Sam Allberry) is committed to helping churches support same-sex attracted Christians. There are great articles for both church leaders and church members there on how a church can support Christians who experience same-sex attraction.

My concern for our homosexual brothers and sisters is real. Their struggle is real. They need to feel that they belong. We offer them no support at all when we do not acknowledge their struggle, do not include them in our congregational prayer, and have no one they feel safe to talk to. Everywhere we look in society now, gender differences are out in the open, accepted and included. As our culture moves to accept more and more lifestyle choices, we as church need to have a clear understanding of these struggles and how we can better support and love these individuals. We need to be prepared with scriptural answers for the big questions that are being asked in today’s culture.

And so, I ask, are any of our churches/you actively working on understanding the issues connected to gender and sexuality? Are there congregational evenings, workshops, seminars, support groups, programs that reach out in such a way that people affected are encouraged to come forward? Are you willing to share what you have learned? We could use a common hub where information can be added, accessed, and exchanged. If the Spirit has been nudging you too in this matter, please contact me and we can brainstorm. My name is known to the *Clarion* editors; use [editor@clarionmagazine.ca](mailto:editor@clarionmagazine.ca) and they can reach me. May God be glorified in all we do. 

# Clarion

To equip God's people for his glory,  
in faithfulness to Scripture, as summarized  
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