

# Clarion



# What's Inside

**O**ur editor, Dr. James Visscher, leads this issue with an article entitled "A Tale of Two Churches." He writes that church divisions have historically centred on doctrinal issues; lately, there seems to be a shift from doctrine to ethics as the main focus of divisions, and he gives a current example.

Dr. Van Dam continues his series on "Being a Christian," with this installment focusing on neo-pagan times. We also have an article from Dr. Wes Bredenhof on "Every Believer Evangelism."

Issue 18 includes an In Memoriam for Rev. Dick de Jong, MERF news, a letter to the editor, as well as regular columns Treasures, New & Old and You Asked.

*Laura Veenendaal*

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# Clarion

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**GUEST LEAD ARTICLE**



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# A Tale of Two Churches

For centuries churches divided primarily over doctrinal issues. Whether it had to do with teaching about the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, or such matters as justification, faith, or sanctification, it was always doctrine that was the problem. Indeed, so much so that some commentators went on to coin the phrase “love unites, doctrine divides.”

**T**hese days, however, a shift has and is happening, for that which divides churches is no longer issues of doctrine, but more specifically, matters relating to ethics, especially sexual ethics. Can homosexuals be members in good standing in the church? Can homosexuals be ordained as pastors and elders? Should the church recognize the legitimacy of same-sex marriages? Complicating the matter more recently are all sorts of issues relating to the transgender or LGBTQ movement.

# It is full steam ahead with world conformity when it comes to evolutionary origins, abortion, same sex marriage, women in office, homosexuality, and a host of other gender and ethical issues

For proof that ethics is becoming more prominent than doctrine, one only has look at what is happening to the second largest Protestant denomination in the USA, namely the United Methodist Church. It is considering a proposal to split over the matter of same-sex marriage and LGBTQ clergy. One part of the church would maintain its ban on same-sex marriage and LGBTQ clergy while the other would repeal it.

Still, the United Methodists are not the only ones wrestling with these issues; Presbyterian churches are as well. In that regard, the summer of 2021 was witness to a strange phenomenon, for two Presbyterian churches made decisions on homosexuality but they did so in completely different, if not opposite, ways. Needless to say, that does not happen too often, and it is worthy of a closer look.

## The Presbyterian Church in Canada

One of the Presbyterian churches involved in this development is called The Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC). For many years, the PCC held to the biblical teaching that homosexuality is sin and that those who engage in homosexual acts could not be members of the church in good standing. But then, in 1985, a distinction was made and accepted which said that homosexual orientation needed to be distinguished from homosexual practice. The former was acknowledged and deemed not censurable; the latter was forbidden.

For some thirty-five years, the PCC lived and more or less operated with this distinction, but then on June 7, 2021, all of this changed. It was decided that the old 1985 policy was one of exclusion and needed to be replaced with what was called "covenantal embrace." In a press release issued on June 8, it stated,

*The Presbyterian Church in Canada agreed to make changes to its theology and practice regarding marriage, permitting people to choose to define marriage as either a covenant relationship between a man and a woman or a covenant relationship between two adult people. These decisions provide Presbyterian ministers with liberty of conscience and the freedom to choose to officiate or not officiate at the marriages of same-sex couples .... Additionally, the church agreed that LGBTQI people (whether married or single) can be ordained and are welcome to serve as ministers and ruling elders.... It also agreed that identifying as LGBTQI and/or being in a same-sex marriage is not grounds for discipline and censure in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.*

How did the PCC come to this decision? Did it base it on a careful examination of Holy Scripture, on a thorough study of the teaching of the Westminster Standards, and on a close look at past church history and practice? Not at all! There is every indication that Scripture was all but ignored. And if it was not ignored, it was manipulated. As for the confessional standards of the PCC, they never came into play. Past church history and practice did not so much as receive the time of day.

So, on what is this decision based? More than anything else it is based on diluted theology and on worldly influence. Especially the latter has come to exert a dominant role in the thinking and decision-making of the PCC and many other churches as well. They are no longer listening to and abiding by the Word of God. No, God has become window dressing. Or, as one commentator put it, "(God) has been archived." Meanwhile, what counts today is, "What does the world think?"

Indeed, it is extremely unsettling to see with what speed so many churches today either ignore or twist Scripture so that they might accommodate themselves to current worldly thought and behaviour. When the NT church first appeared on the scene, the dominant mindset in Christian circles was that the world needed to repent and conform to the living Saviour and his Word. There was no way that Christians were going to compromise their beliefs and alter their conduct to suit the world's fancy. Indeed, it was this insistence on Christian doctrine and morality that changed the Roman empire.

Today, however, this commitment is increasingly under attack, and, in many churches, it has been lost altogether. It is full steam ahead with world conformity when it comes to evolutionary origins, abortion, same sex marriage, women in office, homosexuality, and a host of other gender and ethical issues.

## The Presbyterian Church in America


Thankfully, in the midst of this dreary and bleak climate, there is still some light. For the interesting, if not amazing, thing is that while the PCC was heading off in a worldly direction, another Presbyterian church called The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) chose to stay the course. At its 48<sup>th</sup> General Assembly meeting in St. Louis from June 29 – July 2 (consisting of 1,503 Teaching Elders and 613 Ruling Elders) a vote was taken on the following resolution and passed 1438 – 417:

*BCO 16-4 Officers in the Presbyterian Church in America must be above reproach in their walk and Christlike in their character. Those who profess an identity (such as, but not limited to, "gay Christian," "same sex attracted Christian," "homosexual Christian," or like terms) that undermined or contradicts their identity as new creations in Christ, either by denying the sinfulness of fallen desires (such as, but not limited to, same sex attraction), or by denying the reality and hope of progressive sanctification, or by failing to pursue Spirit-empowered victory over their sinful temptations, inclinations, and actions are not qualified for ordained office.*

The Assembly also passed another overture that had to do with requirements for church office. It reads as follows:

*BCO 21-4 e. In the examination of the candidate's personal character, the presbytery shall give specific attention to potential notorious concerns, such as but not limited to relational sins, sexual immorality (including homosexuality, child sex abuse, fornication, and pornography), addictions, abusive behavior, racism, and financial mismanagement. Careful attention must be given to his practical struggle against sinful actions, as well as to persistent sinful desires. The candidate must give clear testimony of reliance upon his union with Christ and the benefits thereof by the Holy Spirit, depending on this work of grace to make progress over sin (Psalm 103:2-5, Romans 8:29) and to bear fruit (Psalm 1:3, Gal. 5:22-23). While imperfection will remain, he must not be known by reputation or self-profession according to his remaining sinfulness, but rather by the work of the Holy Spirit in Christ Jesus (1 Cor. 6:9-11). In order to maintain discretion and protect the honor of the pastoral office, Presbyteries are encouraged to appoint a committee to conduct detailed examinations of these matters and to give prayerful support to candidates.*

It should be noted that both overtures need to be voted on by a two-thirds majority vote of the presbyteries. If passed, a final vote would need to be held at the 2022 PCA General Assembly. So, although the actions of the 2021 Assembly do not end the matter, they do send an important signal throughout the PCA and beyond.

For some years an intense debate about homosexual matters has gone on in some quarters of the PCA, but hopefully what transpired in 2021 is the beginning of a renewed commitment to uphold and defend the teachings of the Scriptures. It is a witness and testimony that also needs to spill over and impact the PCC, as well as other wavering and wayward churches. It is sorely needed in these turbulent times. 

# Think and Act as Christians

*“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*

*What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me – practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.” (PHILIPPIANS 4:8, 9)*

**T**he Christian church preaches Jesus Christ crucified and risen; Christ died on the cross for our sins and arose from the grave as Victor over Satan, sin, and death. How is this gospel supposed to impact our daily lives?

Paul tells us in Philippians 4:8, 9. At the end of his letter, Paul gives a broad and comprehensive instruction, as evident from the use of the word “whatever” six times and the word “any” and “anything.” *“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”*

The gospel of the crucified and risen Christ changes everything in our lives! Christ’s resurrection raises us up to a new life, and Paul speaks about wanting to know “the power of [Christ’s] resurrection” (3:10). Paul says at the beginning of his letter, “Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27). No wonder Paul ends his letter by writing that we are to think and act as Christians.

Thinking about whatever is true, honourable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and praiseworthy means in the first place that we should reflect on the redeeming work of Christ which demonstrates the epitome of those qualities! And from there this command percolates down to every aspect of our lives.


Let’s look at some examples. Do we think about the fact that Christian marriages are supposed to be a reflection of the beautiful relationship between Christ and his church? Do Christian employees think about being honest, reliable, and hardworking? Do Christian employers think about being fair and flexible toward their employees? Do we think about whether our entertainment can stand the test of purity? Do we think about the fact that we are to be responsible stewards of the money God gives us? Are our thoughts filled with jealousy for the things other people have? Do we fill our thoughts with pornographic images, either from the Internet or conjured up by our own imagination? Do we have hateful thoughts toward those who disagree with us and hold different views?

To know what is pleasing and right in God’s sight, we must read and study the Word of God. It also means that we must pray to God for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Paul doesn’t only tell us to make whatever is pleasing to God the focus of our *thoughts*, but also to *act* according to it. Paul had given the Philippians an example of faith in practice, both by his teaching and his lifestyle. As he says, “What you have *learned* and *received* and *heard* and *seen* in me – *practice* these things” (4:9). It’s as if Paul is saying what he said earlier, “Brothers, join in imitating me” (3:17).

Such a life is a blessed life, as Paul goes on to say when he concludes with these words: “And the God of peace will be with you” (4:9). The God who established peace between fallen people and himself through the redeeming work of Jesus Christ – the God of peace will be with us then.

The little word “and” indicates that the blessing is conditional. Paul says, “Think about these things ... practice these things, *and* the God of peace will be with you.” Someone who was baptized long ago but is only a nominal Christian will not be blessed with the presence of God. We must live the Christian faith! That’s the evidence of our faith.

The Christian strives in the power of the Holy Spirit to *think* and *act* like this – not to earn salvation but out of thankfulness for salvation. In Christ we are a new creation (2 Cor 5:17), and this must show in our lives. Think and act as Christians! Does that describe your life? 

## For Further Study

1. Read the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Give examples of how Christ penetrated to the thoughts of our heart.
2. Look up Deuteronomy 11:26-28. How does this relate to Philippians 4:8, 9 and the conditionality of God’s blessing?



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# Being a Christian in Neo-Pagan Times<sup>(3)</sup>

**C**urrent Western culture is slowly but surely heading toward a post-Christian neo-paganism. The Christian faith and its values are increasingly marginalized and rejected. A culture that used to be predominantly influenced by biblical values is being transformed into one that has very little patience with its past, denies it, and even overturns its norms. For example, divinely given protection for life has been removed with unfettered abortion; the institution of marriage is being sabotaged by state-sanctioned same-sex unions; and a person's biological birth sex can be medically overturned by one's perceived gender identity. While the powers that be

promote essentially pagan norms for a largely self-centred therapeutic society, Christians find themselves isolated and seemingly out of place in their own country.

## **Citizens of Zion in a corrupt world**

Of course, an advantage of this state of affairs is that we are in effect constantly reminded that as Christians we are ultimately not of this world, but that "our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil 3:20). Just as the early Christian church, we are a nation of citizens who belong to "a better country" (Heb 11:16); a nation that transcends national

# How are we to respond as believers living in a Western society that is renouncing its Christian past?

boundaries; the innumerable multitude that the Lord is gathering from all peoples and tongues (Rev 7:9).

How are we to respond as believers living in a Western society that is renouncing its Christian past? Since we appear to be heading to a situation that is somewhat similar to what the early Christians found themselves in, can we learn from their testimony and the manner in which Christianity spread so rapidly? The dispersing of the early Christian faith was facilitated by an excellent transportation and communication network coupled with a common language that bound the empire together. We have the same advantage for disseminating the Christian faith today with the incredible possibilities of the internet and the widespread use of the English language. The global village of today shares some of the same beneficial features as the Roman Empire did for the early Christians.

To be sure, there are significant differences. One is the fact that in the West the Christian faith is not a novelty about which people may be curious to know more about. It may therefore be more difficult to reach a society that is consciously jettisoning its Christian heritage than to reach one for whom the Christian faith is brand new. Yet, there are lessons to be had from those first centuries after Pentecost.

The most important takeaway from a consideration of the growth of the early church is a reaffirmation of the central importance of every Christian simply living out their faith as those who share Christ's anointing as prophet, priest, and king. Just as the faithful testimony of ordinary Christians to the risen Christ in their everyday walk and talk made all the difference in the first centuries after Pentecost, so too in our day, the Lord will bless the steadfast witness of Christians to the Lord Jesus today. This reality has several important implications that we need to consider: the place of worship and instruction; the need to be counter-cultural; and being willing to count the cost of being a Christian in an increasingly hostile environment.

## The critical place of worship and instruction

The life and growth of the Christian church was fueled by the Spirit's use of the Word of God in worship and instruction. The Sunday gatherings were worship services in which the reading and proclamation of the Word had an important place. Timothy had to devote himself "to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching" (1 Tim 4:13). Since God's Word is "able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ" and since it is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training righteousness" (2 Tim 3:15, 16), the great significance of preaching in the context of worship is indisputable. As we have already noted in an earlier article, the early Christian church understood.

With the Word of God read and proclaimed occupying a prominent place in their meetings on the Lord's Day, the focus was on worshipping God who is in heaven and listening to him and his salvation. As Sittser noted, early Christians "saw themselves not primarily as consumers who attended worship to hear a good sermon and sing a few familiar songs but as beholders of the unspeakable glory of God." Worship "ushered them into the very presence of God" so that they were prepared "to return to the ordinary life of market, home, and neighborhood as disciples of Jesus."<sup>i</sup> In other words, as Kreiber put it, worship was "the energizing center of Christian communal life." Through their worship services "God changed them and strengthened them to cope with precarious realities and daunting problems of daily living."<sup>ii</sup> Our worship services today should do no less. The only way to ensure this blessing is by keeping the proclamation

<sup>i</sup> Sittser, *Resilient Faith: How the Early Christian "Third Way" Changed the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2019), 174.

<sup>ii</sup> Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 185–86.



# While the early Christian worship service was not trying to be seeker-friendly, they were critical for the growth of the church

of the whole Word of God central. Nothing should diminish its primary importance.

In a previous article, we saw earlier that the early Christian worship service was not trying to be seeker-friendly. Indeed, non-Christians were often excluded from their services. But the Sunday worship services were critical for the growth of the church. In those services Christians were informed, equipped, and encouraged to live the faith joyfully so that they were prepared to defend and explain the gospel “to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet 3:15). Those attracted to the faith, while not always admitted to the worship services, were offered instruction in the Word of God. Indeed, the teaching ministry was called “hearing the Word.” The instruction of those new to the faith was an extremely important feature of the growth of the early church as noted in an earlier article. In terms of the factors that enabled the church to grow, the worship service had a relatively modest place. The increase of the church in the post-apostolic period was by the personal testimony and lifestyles of Christians. Neighbours, fellow workers, and people whom Christians met in the course of the day became interested in the gospel from the behaviour, talk, and joy displayed by Christians. This interest was followed up with biblical instruction.

As Reformed churches, we are blessed with a long tradition of solid catechetical instruction that ultimately goes back to the early church. This practice must continue for the health and, as God wills, for the expansion of the church. We should, however, be aware of the fact that we no longer live in a culture that is familiar with the Bible. In the education that the churches give to non-Christians, absolutely nothing or very little can be assumed. In that respect, our situation today is much closer to the time of the early church than, for example, to the nineteenth century Victorian era when Bible knowledge was widespread. Another important aspect of catechetical teaching in Reformed churches that should continue to be honoured is the systematic preaching and teaching of biblical doctrine as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism in the afternoon services.

The Holy Spirit enables the church to grow through the agency of the Word of God proclaimed in church and exhibited by Christians in their daily life. It is not, for example, our activism or special programs, however beneficial they may be, that will suddenly make the church increase. If the example of the early Christian church is of value, any church growth will primarily be by our daily patient and faithful testimony that exhibits the fruits of the Spirit. One consequence of this reality is that we should not worry too much about whether our church services will attract outsiders. Unbelievers are not normally drawn to biblical preaching. However, as *public* worship services, they should obviously be as understandable as possible for any non-believer who may attend. And then they will hopefully notice that God is really in our midst (cf. 1 Cor 14:25)! They will see something totally different from the worldly culture with which they are familiar. It may cause them to stop and think about the reality of God. A church service is profoundly counter-cultural. Indeed, so is the Christian faith.

## Christianity is counter-cultural

A common mistake which many churches make is trying to make themselves appealing to non-believers. As a result, they profile a culture of entertainment for their worship services or build a following after a popular personality. But if one wishes to be entertained, the world offers plenty of choice. And if a popular personality has created a following, the audience will disperse when such an individual leaves the stage. The temptation to lower the cultural threshold for the outsider can lead to


an accommodation that makes the faith almost unrecognizable as the true and robust Christian faith. The other possibility of seeking accommodation to a worldly culture is that the gospel becomes so hidden within the cultural packaging as to be almost invisible. The clear call to believe and repent and the need to subject all of life to Jesus as Lord is then no longer heard.

Kreider put it well. "Unlike many churches today, the third-century churches ... did not try to grow by making people feel welcome and included. Civic paganism did that. In contrast, the churches were hard to enter. They didn't grow because of their cultural accessibility; they grew because they required commitment to an unpopular God who didn't require people to perform cultic acts correctly but instead equipped them to live in a way that was richly unconventional."<sup>iii</sup>

Non-Christians in the pagan culture of the Roman world and the neo-pagan one of our day can be drawn to a totally different worldview and the culture that Christianity offers if they know enough about it to realize the enormous benefits of true freedom and joy in Christ being offered. After all, what at bottom does a pagan or neo-pagan culture really have to give? Justin Martyr in his First Apology pictured the life of the non-Christian as one in bondage "characterized by addictive practices in four primal areas: sexual ethics, marred by fornication; the occult, trapped by magical arts; wealth and possessions, distorted by competitive acquisitiveness; and violence and xenophobia, filled with hatred and murder toward people of different tribes and customs."<sup>iv</sup> This summary of what was written in the second century AD still rings true today.

It is a current reality that churches which have tried to keep in step with the evolving secular culture are churches that are most susceptible to losing large numbers of members. Two Reformed examples come to mind. Both have been trying to keep abreast of the current societal culture by ordaining women to ecclesiastical office even though this practice is contrary to the explicit teaching of Scripture that the offices are for

males only (1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). The Christian Reformed Church in North America began to open the door to women in office in 1992 and actually did so in 1996. But from 1992 the membership of that church has been steadily shrinking – a twenty-five percent decline between 1992 and 2018.<sup>v</sup> Similarly, the Reformed Churches Liberated in the Netherlands saw their membership decline significantly after deciding to admit females to ecclesiastical office in 2017. The last figures available (for 2020) saw a record 2,262 leave from a total membership of about 112,000. The preceding years were not much better.<sup>vi</sup> To be sure, Christianity is on the whole declining in the Western world, but could that phenomenon not be traced to the abandonment of biblical faithfulness in mainline churches? Recent studies would support that notion and, remarkably, conservative churches that want to be faithful to Scripture are either stable or growing.<sup>vii</sup> Also, maintaining an identity that is distinct from the larger culture contributes to their growth.<sup>viii</sup>

The decline in churches that cater to current secular culture reminds us that those who are spiritually restless and seeking meaning with a new focus for their life are not looking for more of the same culture which they are already familiar with. They are looking for something totally different – something that will give them true freedom, purpose, and the peace that surpasses all understanding. That is the biblical Christian faith, and it is completely counter-cultural and at odds with the current neo-pagan norms. That means being a Christian comes with the price of discipleship. Just as the early Christians had to count the cost, so do we. More about that next time in a final article in this series. 



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<sup>iii</sup> Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 149.

<sup>iv</sup> As summarized in Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 143.

<sup>v</sup> Nathan Stripp, "CRC Membership Decline Correlates with Calvin Enrollment," *Calvin University Chimes*, 26 April 2018.

<sup>vi</sup> Eline Kuijper, "Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt verliezen in 2020 recordaantal leden," *Nederlands Dagblad*, 5 May 2021; Sjirk Kuijper, "Mensen, kerken en trouw," *Nederlands Dagblad*, 8 May 2021.

<sup>vii</sup> For the decline in American mainline churches, but less change in evangelical or historically black churches, see Pew Research Center, *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, Report (2015), 20; for a detailed study focusing on southern Ontario, but also incorporating many other studies, D.M. Haskell, K.N. Flatt, and S. Burgoyne, "Theology Matters: Comparing the Traits of Growing and Declining Mainline Protestant Church Attendees and Clergy," *Review of Religious Research* 58 (2016): 515-41.

<sup>viii</sup> As noted in Haskell, Flatt, and Burgoyne, "Theology Matters," 539.

# Every Believer Evangelism

*“Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.” ACTS 8:4*

Reformed Christians have sometimes been accused of being the “frozen chosen.” Chosen by God’s sovereign grace, we’re frozen when it comes to evangelism. We have cold hearts that don’t care about the lost and therefore do nothing about the plight of the lost in our lives. Unfortunately, I think we have to admit that there’s been some truth to this. To be sure, it’s not because of the doctrine of election. There are other factors at work, some of them cultural, some personal, and some doctrinal.

One doctrinal factor I’ve encountered is a mistaken understanding of how evangelism is described in the Scriptures. According to this view, evangelism is limited to special office bearers like ministers or missionaries. Whenever the Bible speaks about evangelism, it’s speaking only about the official proclamation of God’s Word by one of these special office bearers. Scripture gives no evidence or example of regular believers evangelizing.

At first glance, it may appear that Acts 8:4 supports this contention. After all, it speaks about “preaching” and isn’t preaching something limited to special office bearers? There’s a long tradition in English Bible translation of translating the Greek word used there as “preaching.” It’s a tradition that extends to even before the King James Version, found with Wycliffe, Tyndale, and the Geneva Bible. Despite the tradition, however, it’s arguably not the best translation for this word.

The word in Greek is a form of the verb *euangelizo* – the English word “evangelism” is derived from this word. In general, it means to “bring or announce good news.” Oftentimes it does have the sense of official preaching or proclamation, but not always. Sometimes it simply refers to someone (anyone) speaking a message of good news.

What does it mean in Acts 8:4? Here we need to look at the context. Who were those scattered? That’s referring to the believers in Jerusalem. Acts 8:3 speaks of Saul ravaging the

# No one can credibly claim on the basis of Scripture that God intends for this task today to be limited to men with seminary educations and titles before their name.

church, entering houses, and “dragging off men and women” and putting them in prison. This was the great persecution of the church in Jerusalem mentioned in Acts 8:1, which results in all the believers being scattered except the apostles. So, the apostles were not among those referred to in Acts 8:4. In fact, it appears that this is just referring to ordinary believers from the church at Jerusalem.


In Acts 8:5, Luke draws attention to Philip, who has also departed Jerusalem, and preaches Christ in Samaria. There are two important things to note here. One is that Philip was a deacon, not an apostle, not a minister, and not an officially ordained missionary. He was a special office bearer, but not one normally entrusted with the task of official proclamation. The second important thing to note isn't evident from the ESV Bible translation. In the original Greek, there is a grammatical construction (the correlative conjunctions *men...de*) used in verses 4 and 5 which contrasts the two parties. In simple terms, the grammar prevents one from arguing that Philip is meant as an example of the individuals mentioned in verse 4. He is set apart from them by this grammatical construction. The Holy Spirit still highlights Philip's special role.

It's only natural to conclude that verse 4 speaks of ordinary Christians spreading the message of the gospel. In fact, I haven't been able to find a commentary which asserts otherwise. This is a clear example of believers evangelizing apart from the special offices.

But is the description of Acts 8:4 prescriptive for Christians today? There are two angles we should explore. One has to do

with what the book of Acts is really about. Our English Bibles label the book the Acts of the Apostles. But Luke didn't give it that title, or any title for that matter. In Acts 1:1, he says that his first book was about what “Jesus began to do and teach.” When Luke writes that, he intimates that his second book (Acts) is about what Jesus *continued* to do and teach. We need to read Acts 8:4 in that light. We may just see ordinary Christians spreading the good news, but the Holy Spirit wants us to see Jesus. This is what Jesus continued to do – he worked through these believers who were united to him. As Christians, we're also united to Christ. What we see him doing through these Christians, we ought to be doing in union with him too.

The second angle is closely related. One can hardly imagine that these ordinary believers in Acts needed to be told to evangelize. Because they were united to Christ, they wanted to. They couldn't help themselves. They were compelled by love to spread the good news of salvation – compelled by love for their Lord Jesus, but also by love for the people around them. When you experience the reality of life in Jesus Christ, you'll want to speak about him every opportunity you get. And you'll be praying earnestly for those opportunities.

If we don't have that attitude towards evangelism, we might very well question whether we're even Christians at all. 



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## IN MEMORIAM



# Rev. Dick de Jong

*(October 30, 1927 – July 30, 2021)*

On July 30, 2021, the Lord called to himself his servant, Rev. Dick de Jong, at the age of ninety-three. In 1960, he began his ministry in Middelstum, the Netherlands. Four years later, in November 1963, the Lord led him and his wife Wilma to Canada where he served Christ's church in Brampton, Ontario. From there they moved to Alberta, where he ministered to God's people in Edmonton (1967) and Calgary (1977). While in Alberta, they also adopted two children: Sheila and Donald. In 1983, they moved back to Ontario, where Rev. De Jong preached the good news about Jesus Christ in Burlington Ebenezer. This lasted until his retirement in 1989 when he became minister emeritus. We thank the Lord for his twenty-nine years of active service in Christ's church

## Reflections

My first personal acquaintance with Rev. De Jong goes back to 1983 when I was examined in Classis Ontario North for my admittance to the ministry. He was one of the examiners, and he was fair in giving his assignment and in fielding his questions. It so happened that my first place of ministry was the church in Brampton where he had served from 1963 – 1967. He and his wife attended my ordination service and they happily reconnected with many members they knew from twenty years before.


For five years we served as colleagues in the same classis. Rev. De Jong always showed his love for Christ and his church in how he dealt with the issues at hand in a loving and Christian manner. But who would have thought that I would also become his successor in Burlington Ebenezer? That happened because on September 1, 1989, Rev. de Jong went with early retirement for health reasons.

In 1990, he and his wife resettled in the Netherlands, but we kept in touch by phone or with regular visits to them when we were in Holland. It was good to see that when the pressures of day-to-day ministry were gone, his health returned, and he was active in preaching the good news of Jesus Christ in vacant

churches. Until the age of seventy-five, he often preached twice on the Lord's Day. After that he scaled back to one service per Sunday, and he stopped preaching when he turned eighty. However, our brother was not idle in his remaining years. He kept on posting articles and meditations on his website called BIJBELKNOPENDOOS <http://lewisiana.nl/bijbelknopendoos/>. His last contributions were posted about a year ago.

Rev. De Jong kept abreast with what was happening in the churches, both in Canada and in Holland. Many years ago, he signalled his concern for the way things were going in the *Vrijgemaakte Gereformeerde Kerken* (GKv), our former sister churches. In his local church in Dordrecht, the catechism preaching was largely ignored. When he expressed his dismay to the consistory, the catechism preaching resumed for a while, but in the GKv as a whole too many deviations from the biblical norm were taking place. As a result, he left that church federation in 2016 to join the *Gereformeerde Kerk Nederland*.

In October 2016, his wife Wilma passed away, and shortly thereafter Rev. De Jong began experiencing serious health issues. After the amputation of his right leg, he rebounded and resumed his activities in a Care Centre that was much to his liking. He had a beautiful room where he could study and write. Then, early in June of this year, similar issues started to develop in his other leg. He was willing to undergo another amputation if, he said, that would allow him to continue to be an instrument in God's service. However, the Lord spared him further suffering and surgery was not necessary. Instead, on July 30, the Lord called him home to be forever with Christ.

We thank and praise the Lord for what he has given to the churches in Rev. Dick de Jong as minister of the Word. We extend our condolences to his family. Soli Deo Gloria. 

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## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

**Dear Editor,**

In *Clarion* Volume 70, Number 15 (July 23, 2021), Dr. John Smith, Professor of Old Testament Studies at CRTS, wrote an article with a subheading “What if?”

It surprised me greatly that a minister should give credence to imaginary thoughts. Dr. Smith describes that had Adam not sinned we would have full access to the council and will of God. If that were true, then Adam had full access to the council and will of God. Adam did not make proper use of it, or he would not have sinned. So, the question is: would we be better than Adam? Adam was made by God and without sin – yet he sinned. Would we, born of men, be stronger and thus more able to withstand Satan’s temptation?

Jesus Christ has redeemed us and opened the way for us to have full access to the council and will of God even now. We can ask God to forgive us in Jesus’s name; that means that the way has been opened for us now already.

We have been given Holy Scripture inspired by the Holy Spirit to guide us through this life. Should we then go and look

outside the Bible and use our imagination to learn obedience to God?

When we are using “what if?” we are really trying to shift blame.

“What if” God would have walked in the garden and stopped Adam from taking the fruit? God could have done that, but he didn’t; does that make God guilty? There were lots of trees in the garden; did God plant the tree of good and evil there to tempt Adam? Would it not have been simpler to not plant that tree?

This is what happens when we use “what if?” We go outside of God’s unfailing Word. Anytime we use reasoning of our own corrupted mind we will soon be blame shifting also.

Let us pray for the strength we need to fight our own desires and use only Scripture to guide us on our way.

**Humbly submitted by**  
**Martin Onderwater**  
**Houston, BC**

**Response**

Thank you for your letter. It is true that our faith should be based on what the Bible reveals, not on our imagination. It is also true that the Bible does not tell us directly what would have happened if the fall into sin had not happened, but it does teach us a lot about man’s office of prophet, priest, and king, and my comments were based on this biblical teaching. That is why I wrote, “historical imagination based on what Scripture *does* reveal.” Further, I wrote that man “would have had free and full access to the counsel and will of God *insofar as God would reveal it.*” Adam in the beginning did not have full access to the council and will of God, but he did have the mandate to be fruitful and multiply and to have dominion over God’s creatures,

he had the command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and he also had fellowship with God. We have now received the full revelation of our salvation in Jesus Christ, and that is indeed what we should use to guide us on our way. The section of my article entitled, “What if?” was not intended to shift blame, but to explore what man’s task was in the beginning, and how this task could have been carried out if man did not rebel. In other words, the point is that God’s purposes with man in the beginning were good and for God’s glory, and the blame for the fall rests with man, as we also confess in Lord’s Day 3. I hope that this clarifies my article.

**John Smith**





www.merf.org

# MERF News

Middle East Reformed Fellowship—"Declaring the Whole Counsel of God"

July 2021



## Exciting New Projects



**T**echnology has notably taken a grip on how all of us communicate – especially over this last year. For some time, it has been an alternative to long-distance travel. Since the pandemic, we all rely on it more and more to communicate locally.

Online gospel witness has long been an important part of MERF's ministries. Dedicated MERF staff keep finding new and creative ways to extend the use of this readily available communication tool for faithful, fruitful cost-effective gospel missions. Two specific MERF media projects are in their early days. The target audiences are the Muslim majority in North Africa and the Middle East. Both projects are being developed using video animation.

### Video Animation

Opportunity to use video animation has come at a prime time. Firstly, the technology has advanced greatly and results in good quality output at minimal cost. Secondly, video interviews of Muslims, especially converts, can be risky. So, fewer people are willing to come forward to participate. Animation can bring an interview or story to life safely by providing some anonymity. Gospel witness with animations can be maximized on social media, such as Facebook and YouTube.

### Amazigh (Berber) language - North Africa

Twelve short Amazigh language episodes are planned entitled "Amzruy Amazigh Show." Production of the first

is already in progress. This is a pre-evangelistic series that informs North African Amazigh people of their own heritage. It focuses on outstanding Amazigh Christian people of early church history who have been largely forgotten since Islam swept the North African region at the end of the 7th century.

Currently in North Africa, Amazigh people express growing interest in their past pre-Islamic Christian heritage and civilisation. Animation is useful to tell the story of the lives and service of these historic Amazigh people. Narratives will spotlight on how that heritage significantly contributed to modern Amazigh culture.

This is an amazing opportunity to introduce Christian concepts to those who are only familiar with

Muslim ones. It opens more doors and provides additional contacts for gospel outreach. The aim is to reintroduce the Christian Amazigh heritage to the community and so further revive interest in the Christian roots.

Each video segment will be short, less than 10 minutes. This is a size very suitable to share with friends on social media. Each episode will cover a different historical person who was impacted by



their Amazigh Christian heritage. It will cover personal lives and accomplishments as well as practical applications, including links to learn more. The main purpose of the series is to open viewers' minds to differing opinions that are not driven by Islam.

Using such a creative approach, we pray for the gifted local team as they seek to provide stepping stones towards many hearing the gospel and coming to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

### Arabic Media - 22 Nations & Beyond

With a similar objective, MERF's Arabic Media ministry has established an animation team. Statistics show the presence of Arabs on social media platforms jumped 75% in 2020. The increase was mainly for secular and Islamic content. As millions of Arabs join social media platforms every year, the opportunity to reach them with the message of the Gospel is larger than



*"Nations will fear the name of the Lord, and all the kings of the earth will fear your glory."*

— Psalm 102:15

ever. Animation content on the social media attracts more people than others and is shared the most among young people. With the security of animation, light can be shed on sensitive topics that grasp the attention of Muslims without provoking unnecessary reactions.

The Lord wonderfully pro-



vides gifted people to serve in ways beyond our imagination. A creative and enthusiastic director has become available for this project. He is keen to use in gospel service his gifts and years of experience. The Lord has also provided the resources for equipment

and the space for the needed animation studio. The new staff enjoy the encouragement and support of the rest of the Arabic Media team. Also, MERF's rich library of Arabic audio recordings is a valuable resource. Many of them are relevantly suited for use as the soundtrack for appealing ani-

mated videos.

The new animation team will produce monthly storytelling relevant to the Arab world with a Christ-centred theme; weekly informative videos, such as history and biography; daily short gospel messages or short sermons and regular promotional materials for other Arabic media programs. This material will be freely available for churches and Christians to use throughout the Arab world. The animated videos will also be freely available for other language ministries to simply add a voice over or subtitles.

*With these exciting projects, please pray that the staff faithfully and wisely share the gospel through animation. May the Holy Spirit prepare the hearts of viewers to receive the message of our glorious Saviour.*

### 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)

## YOU ASKED

# What to Think of Public Advertisements in *Clarion* for Vacant Churches to Seek a Pastor?


*I have a question in light of regular public advertisements in Clarion for vacant churches that seek pastors. This is not something that we are used to, and it leaves us with the question if this is the right approach over and against the calling of a minister in person.*

"This is not something that we are used to." Indeed, among our Reformed churches it's uncommon. Yet, from my readings in magazines published among presbyterian churches (e.g. *New Horizons*, by the OPC) this has been practised for many years already. Besides, there are more practices that have changed over the years. It used to be that for a vacancy, churches would put up a "double" nomination; two ministers from whom the congregation would select one to be called. I remember a brother withdrawing from the congregation he belonged to, because this practice was changed in his church to a single nomination. Other practices may have been followed somewhat in the past, yet more often presently, such as contacting a minister to see whether he could consider a call (i.e. whether he was aware of any situation in his present charge which would prevent him from even considering a call from another congregation). This too affects the approach to the calling of a minister directly. The same could be mentioned regarding the possibility of a counsellor or minister in the vicinity of a vacant church being aware of a colleague's desire to receive a call, giving a hint or passing a suggestion to this vacant church.

All these and other (human) ways and means are practised and more or less common in the process and preparations toward coming to a call. Still, it depends on the work of the local search committee and the outcome of it in the council of the vacant church, whether it will come to the recommendation to the congregation to call the nominated minister or not. Then, ultimately, it is in the providence of the Lord and his plans for this vacant church and the minister to be called, that these activities and preparations are instrumental and may or may not lead to a call, the consideration of a call, and the acceptance or decline of a call. That fact remains!

The same should be considered with regard to this "new" approach of placing an advertisement in a church magazine, seeking to fill a vacancy in one of the churches. It may be an opportunity for a minister who feels that his work in his present congregation is no longer fruitful or is conducted with great

difficulty or tensions. There may be a certain specific task and mandate which the advertising church has in mind for their particular vacancy that requires a special skill set, of which a minister feels that he could work there very effectively and fruitfully. In short, there may be a variety of reasons which could make a minister respond to the advertisement. That does not mean, however, that this minister will necessarily receive a call. There may be more candidates who consider this an opportunity for further ministry, yet the calling church still has to do its research and preparatory work as before in order to come to the recommendation to the congregation. Hence, also through this approach to filling a vacancy and coming to a call, the call will come providentially from the Lord. Then also, this call must be considered prayerfully and carefully, for upon closer contact with the calling church the minister who responded may have second thoughts and may feel that this is not the way the Lord is directing him in his ministry.

In conclusion, therefore, this "new" approach of public advertisements is not a matter of right or wrong, but another way in which a council is instrumental under the providence of the Lord as it pursues to fill a vacancy in their church. It also requires of a minister responding to this advertisement that he seriously and prayerfully considers his task and charge in his present congregation before he responds, or in the event he does receive a call. Regardless of the variety of approaches that may have been followed, the minister will be standing before the Lord and his congregation when asked to answer the question: "First, do you feel in your heart that God himself, through the congregation, has called you to this holy ministry?" 



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# Clarion

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