

Clarion



ONE CHURCH

CONSIDER THE CITY

PREACHING TODAY!

What's Inside

While our federation confesses one church in our creeds, we observe that our world is full of many churches and federations. This is the topic of Dr. Jason Van Vliet's lead article, "One Church."

We are thankful to have an article from Rev. Gerrit Bruintjes in this issue, "Consider the City." It is followed by an article entitled, "Preaching Today!" by Pieter Boonstra (translated by Pieter Torenvliet).

Issue 24 contains the regular columns Treasures, New & Old and Ray of Sunshine. There is also a press release from the CRTS Board of Governors.

Laura Veenendaal

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 667 One Church | 675 Preaching Today! |
| 671 TREASURES, NEW & OLD | 679 PRESS RELEASE |
| 672 Consider the City | 681 RAY OF SUNSHINE |

On our cover:

*Wake up for the sunrise,
Juan Rojas, Toronto, Canada.*

Clarion

EDITORIAL COMMITTEE

Editor: J. Visscher; **Copy Manager:** Laura Veenendaal

Coeditors: P.H. Holtvliet, E. Kampen, J. Van Vliet, M. VanLuik

ADDRESS FOR COPY MANAGER

CLARION

8 Inverness Crescent, St. Albert AB T8N 5J5

Email: editor@clarionmagazine.ca

ADDRESS FOR ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS

CLARION Premier Printing Ltd. One Beghin Avenue
Winnipeg, MB Canada R2J 3X5

Phone: 204-663-9000 | Fax: 204-663-9202

Subscriptions subscriptions@clarionmagazine.ca

Advertisements ads@clarionmagazine.ca

Website clarionmagazine.ca

2021 SUBSCRIPTION RATES



Regular Mail Air Mail

Canada \$49.00* \$82.00*

U.S.A. U.S. Funds \$69.00 \$102.00

International \$98.00 \$171.00

*Applicable GST, HST, PRT taxes are extra.
GST/HST no. 890967359RT

Cancellation Agreement Unless a written subscription cancellation is received we assume you wish to continue to subscribe. You will be invoiced prior to the subscription renewal date.

2021 ADVERTISING RATES

We reserve the right to refuse ads.

Advertisements

\$20.00 per column inch

Full Colour Display Advertisements:

\$21.00 per column inch.

Published biweekly by Premier Printing Ltd.

Winnipeg, Manitoba

Copyright © Premier Printing Ltd. All rights reserved.

No part may be reproduced in any manner without permission in writing from the publisher, except brief quotations used in connection with a review in a magazine or newspaper.

We acknowledge the financial support
of the Government of Canada.

Agreement No. 40063293; ISSN 0383-0438

RETURN UNDELIVERABLE CANADIAN ADDRESSES TO:

One Beghin Avenue, Winnipeg, MB, Canada R2J 3X5

Canada

LEAD ARTICLE



Jason Van Vliet *Principal and Professor of Dogmatics*
Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary
Hamilton, Ontario
jvanvliet@crts.ca

One Church



“We believe *one* holy catholic and apostolic church.” We confess this in the Nicene Creed. Indeed, millions of Christians around the world affirm this creed. Still, do you sense an irony here? The millions of Christians who uphold this article of faith belong to hundreds, even thousands, of different church federations. How can we truthfully speak of *one church* when there are so many different *churches*?

How can we truthfully speak of one church when there are so many different churches?

Bringing things closer to home, within our Reformed congregations we commonly sing, or recite in unison, the Apostles' Creed each Sunday. Like its creedal cousin, the Apostles' Creed also speaks of the church of Christ in the singular. In Hymn 1 of the *Book of Praise* we sing, "I believe a holy catholic church," not churches. But is this catholic, or world-wide, church of Christ really one? Worldwide there are about 45,000 different Christian church groups, increasing at a rate of nearly two percent per year.¹ Can we honestly sing about one catholic church every Sunday again?

Despite the apparent irony, the answer is "yes, we can," so long we understand correctly what we are singing. Understandably, our attention is immediately drawn to the word "one," but the key lies in the word "believe." A voice from the past helps us grasp this.

Theses concerning the Church

That there is a church, one cannot see but *only believe*. Every attempt to determine the "essence" of the church ... on the basis of what one observes here in this world, or on the basis of axioms other than those which Scripture has *revealed*, is therefore a work of unbelief – even if the results include a number of truths. Finding (inventing) truths is a form of pride, also in this connection.

Professor Klaas Schilder penned these words back in 1935, but they remain relevant today. The quotation above is the first of his nineteen "Theses concerning the Church."² Overall, these theses offer us a challenging, but valuable, read. In his first thesis,

Schilder drives home one basic point: our teaching concerning the church must arise from what we believe, not what we see, from what God reveals in Scripture, not what we experience in our lives. Also concerning the church, we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Cor 5:7).

Such an obvious truth would not require much emphasis were it not for the fact that all of us forget it so frequently. Listen carefully in the next conversation you have with someone about the church of Christ. How many thoughts exchanged could be prefaced with, "In this particular passage of Scripture we learn the following about the bride of Christ..."? By contrast, how many statements could begin with "In my experience in the church..." or "Based on what others have told me about what happened to them in the church..."?

Please do not misunderstand. It is not wrong to share our experiences. But, as Schilder points out, those experiences and observations do not provide the correct basis upon which to build our doctrine of God's church. As we confess in Lord's Day 7, we believe that which God *reveals*, not that which we observe.

Confessing our God based on our observations?

To make this point even more clear, imagine that we would base our teaching about God himself on what we observe. Close to one billion people go to bed hungry each day. Millions of them die from malnutrition each year. Annually tens of thousands of people die from hurricanes and floods; the winds and the waves sweep away the possessions and livelihood of millions. Based on these observations, can we still speak of a *merciful* God? Or, if he is merciful, can he really be *sovereign* over all things? Also the tsunami that inundates an unsuspecting village of poverty-stricken families?

Of course, we could balance things out with brighter observations. Although many go hungry each day, many more – almost eight times as many – are well-fed. Despite numerous natural disasters, the world economy steams ahead, through bull and bear markets alike. Yet even if we combine this positive data with the negative statistics, are we any further ahead concerning a correct understanding of the one true God? We might well

¹ www.gordonconwell.edu/center-for-global-christianity

² *Canadian Reformed Magazine*, Vol. 21.17 (Aug 19, 1972), 1-3. Schilder's theses can be found online at <https://spindleworks.com/library/schilder/19thesis.htm>.

Building a doctrine of our God based upon our human observations and experiences is an unmitigated disaster

conclude that God is unjust or inconsistent, giving extraordinary riches to some while afflicting others with abject poverty.

Clearly, building a doctrine of our God based upon our human observations and experiences is an unmitigated disaster. More than that, as Schilder would say, it is unbelief and pride. Why, then, would it be any different with the doctrine of God's church?

Confessing God's church based on divine revelation

Thankfully, our ecumenical creeds are consistent and correct. They use the same verb, "believe," concerning our triune God, and the church of Christ, the forgiveness of sins, and the resurrection of the dead.

In this respect, the Belgic Confession speaks the same language. The last sentence of Article 29 easily perplexes us: "These two churches [i.e., true and false] are easily recognized and distinguished from each other." With some 40,000 different church groups in the world, how can that statement ever be realistic? Our ecclesiastical *experiences* indicate otherwise.

However, we quickly forget that this article, just like almost every other article in the Belgic Confession, begins with the words "we believe," not "we see." We affirm these truths not "on the basis of what one observes here in this world, or on the basis of axioms other than those which Scripture has *revealed*."

In Scripture God reveals that his church is one. From the letter to the Ephesians, we learn that just as surely as there is "one Spirit," there is "one body" (4:4), which is "the church ... the fullness of him who fills all in all" (1:22-23). That the church is one also makes perfect *scriptural* sense because the church is the bride of Christ (Eph 5:23-33), and Christ is betrothed to one Royal Lady not many different women (2 Cor 11:2-23).

So long as we profess our creed with the Word of Christ dwelling richly in our hearts (Col 3:16), we should have no

hesitation to sing "And I *believe* a catholic church / one holy Christian congregation" (*Book of Praise*, Hymn 2).

Concerns and conundrums

Yet, shortly after the words of the Apostles' Creed leave our lips, we turn to face the realities of daily life again. We meet sincere Christians who are members of churches that hold to certain false teachings that cannot be squared with Scripture. Now what?

We do not want to come across as sectarian, affirming that our own federation of churches is the only true church, yet when we reach out to other faithful churches and try to express our God-given spiritual unity in a well-organized, ecclesiastical union, the efforts often stall because of present distinctives and past baggage. Now what? (By the way, Schilder himself was a strong *opponent* of sectarian views of the church, as any honest reading of his writings will confirm.)

One small article in this magazine will not solve all these challenges and conundrums. Far from it! The Lord willing, in the new year, in the next volume of *Clarion*, there will be opportunity to work out some practical implications of this in more detail. At a minimum, though, we can now orient our compass in the right direction, in the first place, by identifying the wrong route. Some seek to solve these conundrums with distinctions. They may say the *invisible* church is one, but the *visible* churches are, sadly, many. Or they propose that we enjoy *organic* unity with faithful Christians in other church federations but simply admit that *institutional* union is a bridge too far.

Such distinctions may provide a degree of intellectual relief, for now there is a "system" by which we can start sorting through the complexities of the church "by schisms rent asunder." But from where do these axioms – visible and invisible, organic and institutional – arise? From Scripture? Without slipping into the error of biblicism, we should admit that even if such distinctions

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband

“include a number of truths,” to borrow Schilder’s phrase, they arise more from our observations and our desire to resolve church conundrums than from careful scrutiny of divine revelation. In the end, setting our sights and our hopes on a collection of distinctions will disappoint us and, more importantly, dishonour our God.

Living faith

That still leaves the question, “What now? Where, then, should our compass be pointed?” With the church of all ages and places, we began with “we *believe*,” so let us keep walking in that path of faith, without veering off onto sight-based sideroads.

Faith expresses itself in action, or as the apostle James writes, “Faith apart from works is dead” (2:26). Since God reveals his church to be one, and we believe what God says, we then also strive for fulsome unity without flagging in zeal and without failing to pray (Rom 12:11, 12). We fret not if the progress seems small or non-existent to us. Our Lord has not said that faith apart from “complete accomplishment” is dead, but rather faith apart from “works” is dead. There is a difference. So, we carry on: *ora et labora*.

We strive for fulsome unity that is in complete submission to the Word of God – nothing less and nothing more. Some may regard this as out of touch with reality. Yet, with the Word of Christ in Ephesians, we say, “To this our gracious God has called us.” Surely the bride of Christ “should submit in everything” to her heavenly and perfect Husband (5:24). Indeed, in Article 29 of the Belgic Confession we agree together that we *believe* precisely this: “In short, [the church] governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head.” Walking that path will be hard, but in humble submission we keep following our Head.

So, with the compass of our hearts oriented by faith, we step forward again, confident that one day we will also see. Not today. Perhaps not tomorrow. Perhaps not even twenty years from now. No one knows the day or hour, except God. But one Day, by the sovereign grace of our God and when the angelic trumpet sounds, we will also see *one* church.

“And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a *bride* [not brides] adorned for her husband” (Rev 21:2). **C**

Coming Times of Difficulty


“But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty” (2 TIMOTHY 3:1)

Many people who read what Paul wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:1 might be reminded of our Lord Jesus’s warnings of false Christs, wars and rumours of war, nation rising up against nation, famines, earthquakes, persecution, and betrayal (cf. Matt 24:4-14). Some may even wonder if the COVID virus and its global consequences are a sign of the beginning of these “times of difficulty.” However, although the apostle confirms that the church today is living in the last days mentioned in our text, he also shows that the difficult times are much more pervasive than the events of our day.

When the apostle writes about “coming times of difficulty,” this is not a prophecy of a coming natural catastrophe, but it is a prophecy of increasing godlessness. “Evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” (2 Tim 3:13). This godlessness will even be found among people who call themselves religious and believe themselves to be righteous in God’s sight. People will have the appearance of godliness, but deny its power (2 Tim 3:5). The greatest threat to the church in all times and places in the world, in all its different circumstances, is that godless people gain a foothold and lead people astray in their deception (cf. 2 Tim 3:6-9). More terrible than the uncertainty caused by a virus are the sins that are exposed by our response to this hardship. The Holy Spirit lists these sinful thoughts and attitudes in 2 Timothy 3:2-4 so that we might fight against them in our own hearts.

Paul urges Timothy and all God’s servants to understand that if you desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus, you need to focus your attention on your hearts and the source of your knowledge. When we become overly focused on the debates concerning the interpretation and correct response to challenging times of war, persecution, and natural catastrophes, we end up living a life that is controlled by those circumstances, rather than by God’s Word. Herein lies the struggle. Are our positions and responses to others who are facing the same difficult circumstances determined by our sinful desires (cf. 2 Tim 3:2-4), or by

the sacred writings which are able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Tim 3:15)? If we merely have the appearance of godliness, calling ourselves Christians, but are fighting the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we actually become the difficulty in these last days, and are more dangerous to the church than any virus.

The power of the gospel can be seen when Christians keep in step with the Holy Spirit and distinguish themselves by their godliness. Paul makes a strong contrast between the people with corrupt minds who are disqualified regarding the faith (2 Tim 3:8) and those who follow his teaching, his conduct, his aim in life, his faith, his patience, his love, his steadfastness, and his endurance in persecutions and sufferings (cf. 2 Tim 3:10-11). We are indeed living in very difficult times in these last days before our Lord Jesus returns. Whether we are experiencing peace or plague, people are lovers of self, lovers of money and pleasures, proud, and unkind. May the Lord help his church to stand out for being completely different in these last days. Look to your own hearts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart (2 Tim 2:22). 

For Further Study

1. Use 2 Timothy 3:2-4 to identify the sins you need to fight against in your own heart.
2. What does 2 Timothy 3:10-4:5 highlight as distinguishing Christian characteristics?



Julius VanSprosen Minister
Immanuel Canadian Reformed Church
Edmonton, Alberta
julius.vansprosen@gmail.com



Consider the City

At 8 a.m. on a Monday morning, I stepped on the GO Train at Gormley Station heading south to Union Station in Downtown Toronto. Being a terminal station (Richmond Hill, where I live is on the outskirts of the “city”), the train was empty when I boarded, but at each subsequent station it quickly filled up, with hundreds of people waiting to board. As the train snaked south, green valleys, river crossings, and pockets of forest whizzed by. For a moment, I wondered, “Was I heading into the city?” Then I remembered: railway lines tend to slither through small slivers of “green space” with valleys and trees shielding the view of the city. These spaces are small, but treasured, mementos of nature within city limits. Eventually, the greenery disappeared, and skyscrapers loomed beside railway lines as we approached Union Station.

Union Station in Toronto serves as transportation hub for subway, trains, streetcars, and buses. Over 200,000 people from every tribe, nation, and tongue spill through the Grand Hall on an average business day (pre-COVID). Above ground, trains

and buses rumble in from the surrounding cities and towns to the inner city. Underground, the subway whisks by every two or three minutes, shuttling people throughout the inner city, until, like groundhogs, they pop out streetside into the urban centre next to work or home. An underground network of tunnels, shops, and food courts (the “PATH”) connect skyscrapers in the city centre – making it possible for a person to move about the city without ever braving the biting cold winds of winter.

As I burrowed out of Union Station, I was dwarfed by skyscrapers and crowded by thousands of image-bearers, all making their way somewhere to do something. It being a Monday, there was both a determinedness filling the air and an atmosphere of easy distraction that lingers over memories of the weekend. I made my way to Quantum Coffee, a well-known coffee shop advertised as, “a destination for quality coffee born out of a passion for connecting people and ideas.” There I sat down, paused, and reflected.

I escaped into the city and the city was magnificent.

In the city, people learn to work together, with diverse backgrounds and gifts, to produce works of wonder; a creative wonder made possible as image-bearers of a glorious God.

Iconically, soaring above the cityscape, the CN Tower reaches high into the sky. Tourists stand gazing upward, dwarfed in its shadow. Tickets are purchased, groups are herded into the elevator and whisked to the top. Up high, they stand on the 6 cm thick glass floor and stare 342 meters straight down. They circle the top of the viewing deck and look out to see an endless landscape of skyscrapers, condos, highways, and streets. An imaginative mind can visualize the entire subterranean city of tunnels, pipes, subways, sewers, foundations, and parking garages. Like roots of a tree, the city extends many meters below ground. Toronto, like many great cities, is a modern engineering marvel.

But engineering isn't the only thing to marvel at in Toronto. At the Roy Thompson Hall, the Toronto Symphony Orchestra gives an exquisite, awe-inspiring performance of Handel's Messiah. At the Scotiabank Arena, speed, agility, and reflex combine in another wizardly goal by Austin Matthews. At the Art Gallery of Toronto, exquisite artistry of colour and form capture the imagination and transport tourists to other realms. The Science Centre documents the work of great physicists, chemists, astronomers, and inventors.

And these are all finished products. We haven't toured the countless creative meetings and brainstorming sessions where people are thinking, designing, creating, developing, composing, building, and practicing. In the city, people learn to work together, with diverse backgrounds and gifts, to produce works of wonder; a creative wonder made possible as image-bearers of a glorious God. In surveying the ancient engineering marvel

at Babel, the LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language, they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them" (Gen 11:7, NIV). In the city, a small glimpse of the potential of humanity is seen.

And yet, like a hollowed-out pumpkin, there's a profound sense of emptiness and rot, as if, despite all the striving of busy crowds, the glory is on verge of collapse. The magnificence is somehow missing the mark and lacks enduring quality (Ps 90:4-6).

As a pastor my life is devoted to declaring the glory of God among the nations. Yet how can we do so in a city where everything seems to cry out, "Come and see the glory of man! See the wonders he has done." In nature, the smallness of humanity is clear, and the vast glory of the creative God is on the display. "When I look at your heavens, the works of your fingers, the moon, and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?" (Ps 8:3-4, ESV) Does the city undermine this message, or can we see the same thing in the city? I believe we can.

Allow to me to offer four points for your reflection.

First, the city is magnificent and testifies to a glory

This is unmistakable. The ingenuity, creativity, and ability of humanity is incredible, and time after time, there is something to marvel at. In some ways, a person can have a similar awe-inspiring experience touring the city, surveying the cityscape from the CN Tower viewing deck, enjoying a concert, or visiting an

art gallery as one can have laying underneath a star-lit sky. We should not diminish this truth or feel that we need to suppress the “Ooh” or the “Wow.”

Second, we must remember humanity is part of the “things that have been made” that declare God’s eternal power and divine nature (Rom 1:20)

God created creation, all of it, and Adam and Eve were the crowning achievement of his creation. God declared his glory in creation as he saw what he had made and declared it good. The only part of creation that was not good was a man alone (Gen 1:18). So, God created the woman, Eve, and in her creation God’s glory was magnified. “God saw everything he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Gen 1:31, ESV). God tells us, “God’s invisible attributes ... have been clearly perceived ... in the things that have been made” (Rom 1:20, ESV). This includes humanity in her togetherness.

The glory of God is magnified not only in *what* is created but also *how* it works. A singing bird, an ever-changing fall landscape, the shifting constellations, and the rising and setting sun all function to the glory of God. So also, the work of humanity, in all their ability is a created gift of God. The fruit of their labour is a testimony to the power and divine nature of God. Just as the star-lit heavens declare the glory of God (Ps 19:1), so also created human beings working in community can declare his power and glory simply in the things they do.

Third, stolen glory is common in a godless city

In nature, humanity hears a clear message, “God is glorious!” Although voiceless, nature faithfully communicates this message. It is in the sinner’s heart that this message is suppressed (Rom 1:20). The sinner foolishly redirects the glory elsewhere. Today they try to credit the gods of chance, random mutations, time, and fascinating catastrophes with the ability to create. On the other hand, for believers enjoying nature, the message from nature isn’t suppressed, but embraced and echoed. In nature, we add our voice to the cosmic praise, as we echo the glory of creation and sing, “How Great Thou Art.”

This is different in the city. In a godless city, the messenger is faithless and tries to control and change the message of glory. Although humanity is created by God with amazing abilities to create, compose, and compete, they do not give glory to God for who they are and what they can do. Instead, they steal God’s


glory by trying to keep it for themselves. As buildings are raised, performances are given, and art is displayed, instead of singing “How Great Thou Art,” the predominant message in a godless city is “How Great We Are.” This is stolen glory.

As believers, these faithless messengers can make the city confusing. On the one hand, the magnificence of the city is undeniable – even with faithless messengers, the true message still spills out. On the other hand, it is clear something is wrong. The stolen glory bothers us, and we rightly refuse to join in stealing the glory.

What do we do instead? This leads us to a final reflection.

Fourth, where glory is stolen, our task is not to diminish the wonder, but to be faithful messengers and restore credit where credit is due

Up till now, we’ve primarily focused on the glory of the city. Yet, anyone who has visited a large city knows there is deep darkness as well. In Toronto, you don’t have to go far to find passed out drunks, suffering homeless, poverty, drug addictions, prostitution, greed, arrogance, hatred, and other forms of sin and misery. This truth is part of the city that we should not avoid in a tour of the city. It points to the depravity of humanity and a glory that will quickly fade. The darkness shows the need for the gospel message, calling all people to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and join all nations in declaring the glory of the LORD in all that we do. As the church of Jesus Christ, that is our message.

However, as we expose the truth of human depravity and bring this glorious gospel, we should be careful not to belittle the things that are magnificent in the city. To do so would join in diminishing the glory of the creator. Many things human beings have done is incredible. He has made man “little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor” (Ps 8:4–5, ESV). This magnificence produced by humanity is just one more reason to praise our Creator God. Even though they may not give glory to their creator; we can give glory where glory is due. Praise God for his glorious creation. 



Gerrit Brintjes *Pastor*
Bethel Canadian Reformed Church
Toronto, Ontario
gbruintjes@gmail.com

In the November 2020 issue of *Neder Bekeken*, Dr. Boonstra authored a very crucial article concerning the decisions their most recent general synod that permits women in all offices of the church. In many issues of *Neder Bekeken*, Dr. Boonstra has been a leading critic of many of the changes in the Dutch Reformed Churches (Lib.).

Preaching Today!

In the area of preaching, shifts are taking place; these shifts raise questions. Is preaching, as such, still happening? One can only wonder. I suppose that I could address this question by initiating a discussion of specific sermons. Actually, people send me sermons quite regularly, accompanied with a remark: this is how sermons are preached nowadays.

Alternatively, I could also profile some of the criticism people submit and try to evaluate that criticism. But I won't do that either. In my opinion, it is important, first of all, to explain what preaching actually is. And then focus more specifically on the question that follows: what is *Reformed* preaching? It's important to first

establish that focus clearly (again) to be able to answer the question: what is the state of preaching today?

What is preaching?

Let me begin at a very basic level. Reading from Scriptures is a regular part of the church service, and this reading normally takes place before the sermon. That aspect of the liturgical order tells us two things. In the first place, the sermon is related to that Bible reading, and that Bible passage has a specific role. Traditionally, it's been the assertion that the Bible reading is explained in the sermon. There's more, however. In the current

situation, there's also going to be an application and an appeal to the hearers. Though this description of preaching has its drawbacks, it does indicate clearly that preaching is more than the reading of the Bible.

The second thing that can be said of the church service: preaching is not simply reading a passage from Scripture, nor is it the retelling of a passage from the Bible preaching. A crucial feature of a sermon is that it has an application. What does that mean? I cannot articulate this any better than Prof. Dr. K. Runia¹ once did. The basic pattern of the sermon, he says, is that someone proclaims salvation to me on behalf of God and appeals to me to accept this salvation and practise it. Runia calls this the "indispensable and essential element" of the sermon.² In other words, a sermon distinguishes itself from the reading of Scripture at the point that a minister proclaims a concrete application that is focused on the congregation.³ In this context, the question whether a sermon is still being preached can be defined further: does the sermon still contain a concrete claim rooted in the Bible passage that was read earlier and is this directed to me? Am I being challenged, and called upon to do something? Does he direct an appeal to me?

Problem

When the description of a sermon is expressed in the above fashion, it will become clear that, today, we may be confronted by a problem. The other day I heard a colleague say: "In a sermon, I don't dare to say anymore: 'Thus says the Lord!' Why not? Well, we've discovered that everything is now a matter of interpretation. So, we have to be careful; we are children of our time under the influence of our culture. This culture is what determines our interpretation. We must be wary about being judgemental." More and more people today have embraced this mode of thinking. Last year a Christian periodical placed interviews held with three people who said they were Christians but did not go to church (anymore). One of them explained why: "I have a particularly difficult time with the certainty with which ministers say things from the pulpit as if the minister or pastor knows exactly what God's intention is for me, or for our lives."

What the interviewee continues to say is insightful: "Rather regularly I hear the expression, 'The Bible is quite clear about this.' According to me, the Bible is not clear about anything, which is exactly why there are so many different views and types of churches."

The above statement provides us with the core of this line of thought. Doesn't this thinking appear to make sense? The interviewee has appeared to connect us with sentiments that we may also experience. With regard to the same Bible text, it's possible to present different things. It simply depends on your perspective. Different interpretations are possible, and, therefore, who can say that the preacher is correct in what he tells the congregation, claiming that it's based on the Bible? Is an appeal to another interpretation even possible?

Is everything simply a matter of interpretation?

As logical as this above reasoning may sound, there is, however, a fallacy here. The fact that with the same Bible text you can say different things does not mean that the text is unclear or that you can do anything at all with that text. Compare this problem with the recount of a car accident: Several people have seen it. But everyone has his own story about that same accident. In those stories, people tell their personal view on the matter. To say it in a more complicated way: we must not allow different *perspectives* on the truth to be confused with a fundamental disagreement about what is factually true.⁴ When we apply this principle to a Bible text and a sermon, it's possible to look at a Bible text from different sides and then come with a different appeal to the congregation. That is also why two sermons on the same text can be quite different.

Now, let's apply this problem of perspective to a Bible text and the sermon. The story in Luke 7, about the woman who anointed Jesus, can be viewed from the perspective of the woman, what she does, and at how the Lord Jesus responds. If a preacher takes that approach, he can also proclaim to us, as Jesus proclaimed to the woman: your sins are forgiven – if you believe.

¹ Klaas Runia (1926 - 2006) was a Dutch theologian. In 1956 he was appointed Professor of Systematic theology at the Reformed Theological College in Geelong, Australia. In 1971 he was appointed Professor of Practical Theology at the Kampen Theological University. During his professorship he was heavily engaged in church affairs and was regarded as a leader of the orthodox wing of the Dutch Reformed Church (Gereformeerde Kerken van Nederland). (Wikipedia)

² Dr. K. Runia, *Heeft Preken nog Zin?* (Does preaching still make sense?) Kampen, 1981, p. 39 (emphasis is in the original text). Or, as Prof. W. Kremer stated: "The sermon is not a leaflet, thrown from an airplane, whirling on the wind, hoping that where it lands it will be picked up somewhere by a passerby," in: W. Kremer, *Priestly Preaching*. A collection of his own works, collected and presented on the occasion of his golden anniversary, Amsterdam, 1976, p. 101.

³ What Runia puts into words here is based on what is stated in: HC, LD 25, Q/A 65 and LD 31, Q/A 84, and CoD, V/14.

⁴ Julian Baggini, *Een kleine geschiedenis van de waarheid. Troost in tijden van nepnieuws* (A short history of the Truth. Comfort in times of fake news), Utrecht, 2018, p. 72.

Another possibility is to look at this story from the perspective of the Pharisee, Simon, and his guests. What moves them, what do they think, and how does Jesus respond to them? From this perspective, the preacher will appeal to the congregation in different way: i.e., we should know and realize that we have been forgiven much and that when we realize that we have this grace, it should inform and motivate our actions.

The example from Luke 7 shows us that there are several possibilities. Those different perspectives also provide the reason why sermons can differ from each other. What is important here, however, is that the appeal in the pastor's sermon or the application which comes to me as hearer is legitimate. In other words, has the preacher done justice to the text in the light of the immediate context and in the light of the whole Bible? The hearer can check it out and verify this, as the people in Berea did. Paul had preached a sermon there in which he proclaimed the gospel. Then you read that the people in Berea were "examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11).

This Berean situation also rings true today. When the preacher directs an appeal in a sermon based on a Bible text, then he has interpreted this text in a certain way. Does this mean that there can be a misinterpretation? Of course. Consequently, this may mean that a preacher may speak bold-faced words that do not stem from the text. This problem has occurred in the past, and it can still happen today. That is why it is important that the hearers can examine what the preacher said in his sermon to hold him accountable, as the people in Berea did: is the interpretation that the preacher presented to the congregation in accordance with God's Word? In contrast to the people in Berea, who could only access the Old Testament, we also have the New Testament containing the gospels and the apostolic writings. That situation requires that the hearers have knowledge of the whole Word of God. Only in this way can the hearers judge whether justice has been done to the text and to the Bible as a whole. Or they must determine whether the text has been misused and that there's a misinterpretation.

This thinking should not be done from a motive to "settle the score with the preacher." Rather, the Berean approach is to serve the pastor, that he will explain the text in the sermon as

clearly as possible so that the message he delivers (the appeal) will be justified on the basis of the pertinent Bible text and in the light of the whole Bible. Only in this way can they judge whether justice has been done to the text.

Reformed preaching

We now come to the next question.

In response to the question – what is preaching? – it will be necessary to go into more detail. Why? This additional description is directly related to the fact that we are Reformed churches. Before ministers are permitted to preach, it is still a prerequisite that every minister must officially subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity. And that's not a formality: their signature declares that as a preacher they subscribe to the Reformed doctrines; that has irrevocable consequences for the preaching. The question is then: what are the consequences of this subscription? Or in other words, what is characteristic of Reformed preaching?

In the first place, Reformed preaching is characterized by the Reformed way of reading the Bible. I have written about that characteristic earlier in another context;⁵ therefore, I will only summarize it here. The Reformed way of reading the Bible finds its basis in our confession in which we hold that the Bible is the revealed Word of God as written in the Scriptures (BC, Art. 3). When you've subscribed to this confession, this reality means that you will treat the Bible with the utmost care. You are constrained from self-serving interpretations of the Bible. That is why you look at the text in its context and then you proceed from the text to the whole Bible and back again, in the knowledge that God cannot contradict himself. In all this, the apostolic teaching is our guide. The apostles are our witnesses and teachers. In the words of the above apostles and teachers, we are bound by their perspectives on the truth. Finally, it is important to have an eye for the development of the history of salvation and the central place of Christ in this redemptive history. A Reformed minister has respect for this great narrative of the Bible. Unavoidably, therefore, this consideration and respect will be reflected and heard in the sermons he delivers.

In the second place, Reformed preaching is concerned with the conviction, summarized concisely by Luther, that we are "at the same time both sinner and righteous."⁶

⁵ See Nader Bekeken, Sept. 2018, p. 241ff.

⁶ This conviction can also be found in our confessions: HC, LD 23, Q/A 60; CoD, V/1

⁷ Dr. M. te Velde (ed.), *Confessies. Gereformeerde geloofsverantwoording in zestiende-eeuws Europa*, (Confessions. Reformed Faithful Giving Accountability of their Faith in the 16th Century.) Heerenveen, 2009, p. 189 ff.

Preaching is the means to bring us to salvation

Salvation

This conviction means that a sermon is much more than a moralizing story: a moralistic talk in which attention is mainly focused on what is, or what is not is not allowed. Preaching goes much deeper. Of course, the sermon may proclaim what God says and what he commands. Sometimes there can be an application referencing what is or is not allowed. But that will always be in a larger context, i.e., in the context of our salvation. Preaching is the means to bring us to salvation, as Calvin once said. After all, our salvation is not a simple announcement that you only have to have heard once and needs no repetition. In this sense, the Bible is not to be compared to a novel or to a movie. Reading a novel or watching a movie once is usually enough. Of course, you can read novels or watch movies several times. But at a certain point you know the plot and the various plot twists.


Our salvation is not a reality of which we take possession: i.e., that once and forever God has forgiven me all my sins and that from now on I am no longer a sinner anymore, but a righteous one forever. For a good reason, the Lord Jesus teaches us in the Lord's Prayer to ask for forgiveness and to ask for the power of the Holy Spirit to stand firm in temptation. As believers, we are sinners until we die (cf. Rom 7:24-25). Because our sinfulness is a reality, again and again, we must be called to reconcile ourselves to God. As Paul also says to the church (!) in Corinth: "On behalf of Christ we ask you: Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20). Preaching stands in the context of what Paul calls the "ministry of reconciliation." In preaching, "it is proclaimed and publicly testified to each and every believer that God has really forgiven all their sins for the sake of Christ's merits, as often as they by true faith accept the promise of the gospel" (HC, LD

31, Q/A 84). The Canons of Dordt therefore say quite correctly that the promise of the gospel "ought to be announced and proclaimed universally ... to all peoples to repent and believe" (CoD, II/5).

What is the hallmark of Reformed preaching? That an appeal is proclaimed to the congregation, based on the conviction that the congregation is both righteous and sinful. This appeal does not get bogged down in moralism (you must do this or that). Nor is the appeal to be characterized by the attitude: we've got it all together (don't worry, we are reconciled). Nor should this appeal be invalidated by pretending that no truth exists anymore and that everything is only a question of interpretation. The appeal is determined by the fact that the promise of the gospel must be presented to us again and again and that we must appropriate these promises again and again. In this way, the sermon is a means of grace, bringing us salvation.

One of our Reformed ancestors, Theodorus Beza, expressed the preaching of this promise of the gospel in his confession as follows: "The Holy Spirit ... uses this outward preaching as if it were a conduit. In this way, he can ... penetrate into the depths of the spirit in order that, solely and simply by his grace and goodness, he gives the children of God the ability to grasp and understand this great mystery of their salvation through Jesus Christ. In this way, he also renews their thinking.... Moreover, he corrects and changes their will."

Building blocks

Is preaching still happening? Although the discussion about the sermon is timeless, in our time this question has been posed by quite a few people. With what I have presented, I hope to have provided the first building blocks to begin a conversation with one another. 

Translated by Pieter Torenvliet



Pieter Boonstra Minister
GKv (Liberated Reformed Church),
and editor of *Nader Bekeken*
a church periodical.

PRESS RELEASE

Meeting of the Board of Governors of the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary held on September 9, 2021

Opening and roll call

The chairman of the Board, Rev. John Louwerse, led in opening devotions. All governors were present, except for Rev. Clarence Vandervelde (on sabbatical) and Rev. Rob Schouten (health reasons). Dr. Jason Van Vliet was present as Principal and Administrative Assistant Leanne Kuizenga was present to take the minutes of the meeting.

Memorabilia

Information was shared about the personal circumstances of emeriti professors, as well as widows and families of professors. We express thankfulness that the Lord has blessed Dr. and sr. Gootjes with their forty-fifth wedding anniversary (even though the last years have been severely impacted by Dr. Gootjes's health), and Dr. and sr. Van Dam with their fiftieth wedding anniversary. An academic symposium and a small dinner will be held later this week for Dr. Visscher, with thankfulness for all his work done at CRTS.

Minutes and agenda

The minutes of the meetings held on January 14 and May 25, 2021 were approved. The agenda for the meeting was established. The action log was reviewed.

Decisions, reports, agenda items

1. The Board received two letters from Dr. Ted Van Raalte (May and September), giving an update on his health circumstances. We are thankful for the Lord's care, preserving his life after a snowmobile accident and granting renewed health and strength. Dr. Van Raalte is on partial sabbatical for the fall term, and only has the responsibility of teaching one course. He has been relieved of his administrative duties for the coming school year, and the Board is quietly confident that his workload should be manageable for the fall semester. If possible, Dr. Van Raalte will return to a full teaching load in semester that begins in January. The Board discussed alternative plans should he need some relief.
2. The Board received a letter of resignation from Rev. Rob Schouten due to his health circumstances. It is thankful for the contribution that Rev. Schouten has been able to make as Board member since his appointment last synod and wishes him the Lord's blessing on the treatment he is receiving.
3. The Board received a letter from the Deputies for Training for the Ministry of our sister churches in Australia. They are requesting our cooperation in investigating the longer-term possibilities of setting up an Australian affiliate campus of CRTS in Australia. The Board decided to defer this letter to our January meeting.
4. The Board reviewed the strategic planning that took place on September 7 and 8. The Board discussed and approved a revised vision statement for CRTS. It is: "To glorify our Lord by providing high-quality training for gospel ministry to more students, focussing on the growing needs of our supporting Reformed churches." It also approved slightly amended core values, and some revised metrics. An ad hoc committee was appointed to consider how to address the proposed initiatives and coordinate them with the existing projects we are working on.
5. The Distance Education Committee gave a comprehensive update on their work. Due to the COVID-19 health crisis, hybrid education has become a reality at CRTS. The principle upon which distance education is offered is: *on campus as much as possible, online as much as necessary*. During the past school year, five students studied via distance education full time, while COVID-19 restrictions required the entire student body to transition to distance education at certain times when health restrictions required this. Professors and students have learned how to use the technology, and the systems purchased have served us well. The Board thanked the committee for its extensive work and considers their task complete.
6. Revs. Rob Schouten and James Slaa reported on lecture visits to CRTS from April 13-16, 2021. Due to COVID-19, these visits were conducted via Zoom. They also visited

with four of the five professors (except for Dr. Van Raalte, who was on sick leave). This report was received with thankfulness.

7. The Finance and Property Committee presented the CRTS annual budget for 2022, and it was approved. It presented the financial statements for 2020, and these were formally approved. The Board appointed an auditor to audit the finances of CRTS.
8. The Long-Term Financial Planning Committee presented its report to the Board. It details various financial risk factors to the long-term financial vitality of CRTS and presented strategies to mitigate this risk. The Board made decisions on the proposals presented.
9. A first draft of CRTS's report to Synod Guelph 2022 was presented.
10. The search committee appointed by the Board to come up with candidates who can fill the upcoming vacancy in the Ministry and Missions department presented its report. Decisions on this report will be made at the Board meeting in January 2022.
11. CRTS presented the Association for Theological Schools with an application for Online Education. ATS granted this approval! The Board expresses its thankfulness especially to Margaret Alkema and our principal Dr. Jason Van Vliet, who did most of the work in putting together this comprehensive report. From ATS we received an Institutional Peer Profile and a Strategic Information Report, Zort. These reports help to assess the work of CRTS and to present issues that might need further attention. The reports were received with thankfulness.
12. Dr. J. Van Vliet presented his principal's report, and this was received with thankfulness. The Chairman reported

on a positive review of the work of our principal, who has dealt admirably in his role with all the extra pressures last year, including dealing with COVID-19, the implementation of distance education, and dealing with the effect Dr. Van Raalte's injury had on CRTS.

13. The Board received a report from the COVID committee. The report was received with thankfulness. The committee was reappointed. A fall update was received from the principal detailing how to receive students in the new semester considering the new regulations.
14. The following annual reports were received with thankfulness: course work report, registrar's report, library report, website report, convocation committee report, Faber-Holwerda bursary report, publication foundation report, foreign student bursary report, and the lecture schedule for 2021-22.

Press release and closing

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

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

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



Julie Kamminga

Hi, my name is Julie Kamminga. I'll be thirty-three years old on December 16. I live at Health and Transition Services (St. Amant) in Winnipeg. I have been living here for six and a half years.

I really like having visitors. My Dad and Mom come quite often. Before the pandemic, they would often take me out for drives, which I enjoyed immensely. I also enjoy having Face Time regularly with my parents and my siblings. I am looking forward to the time when I can leave the residence for outings and can have more visitors.

I spend a lot of time watching my favourite DVDs. I also enjoy seeing videos of my nieces and nephews. My friends and I sit together a lot in the lounge on our ward, and we enjoy it when staff entertain us or clown around. I like watching staff put up decorations and I often get to "help" them.

I receive a lot of cards in December for my birthday and for Christmas, and they all get hung up on the wall in my room. Thank you for sending them.



Happy Birthday to the three of you celebrating a birthday in December! We wish you the Lord's blessing in the coming year and a wonderful day with family and friends. May the Lord continue to bless you and keep you safe in his abundant care.

December Birthdays

- 10 James Kamminga** will be **37**
Box 1125 Carman, MB
R0G OJO
- 15 Julie Kamminga** will be **33**
c/o River Road Place
440 River Road
Winnipeg, MB R2M 3Z9
- 17 Ava Pierotti** will be **14**
7761 Regional Road 20
Smithville, ON L0R 2A0

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

Rachel Vis >> 731 Lincoln Street, Wellandport, Ontario L0R 2J0 | tom.rachelvis@gmail.com | 905-329-9476

Clarion

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

Confessionally Reformed

Loving in manner

Attuned to current issues

Readable and Reliable

In Submission to Scripture

Open to constructive criticism

Nurturing Christian living

