

A CANADIAN REFORMED MAGAZINE
TO ENCOURAGE, EDUCATE, ENGAGE, AND UNITE

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Clarion

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what's inside

Happy Ascension Day! Although we do not have a national holiday to commemorate this event in our Lord's saving work (as we do with his birth, death, and resurrection), it's still critical for Christians to pay attention to it. Not only is our Saviour glorified in his ascension, but through it so many benefits flow out to us, his people. To help us consider some of those tremendous blessings, we offer you Eric Kampen's editorial and George van Popta's meditation—please do slow down and take it all in.

We also have five articles on five different topics related to faith and church life: Matthew Van Luik on the intersection between our weekly Sunday liturgy and evangelism; Wes Bredenhof on whether God reveals things to us through scientific findings; John van Popta's discussion on how and how not to interpret the Church Order; Jeff Morris on how recognizing our sin is at the heart of the gospel; and, last but not least, Jan DeGelder's column *Governing the Church* in which he discusses the particular work of the deacons.

We are also happy to present a mission update concerning the Prince George work, an introduction to the small(er) but well-established Calgary Study Weekend for our young people, birthday greetings for our special brothers and sisters, two new songs by Bill Helder, another question asked by our younger set of readers, and a book review. If you like variety, you'll find plenty in this issue. We hope you find it all stimulating reading!

Peter Holtvliwer

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EDITORIAL COMMITTEE:

Editor in Chief: Peter Holtvliwer
E: pholtvliwer@clarionmagazine.ca
Managing Editor: Anna Nienhuis
Contributing Editors: Eric Kampen, Jason Van Vliet, Matthew VanLuik, Jim Witteveen

CONTENT INQUIRIES

E: editor@clarionmagazine.ca

ADMINISTRATIVE INQUIRIES

W: clarionmagazine.ca
E: publisher@clarionmagazine.ca
T: 204-663-9000

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Clarion

A trustworthy and engaging magazine, widely spread and read in Canadian Reformed households and beyond.

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

BEHOLD YOUR *PRIEST & KING!*

The ascension of our Saviour into heaven is an event easily overlooked on the Christian calendar. Some churches hold a worship service on the evening of the actual day. In most cases, however, the ascension is the focus of a sermon on the Sunday before or after the actual date. The Heidelberg Catechism considers it one of the events we need to know in order to live and die in the joy of our only comfort, elaborating on the ascension and the closely related sitting of our Saviour at the Father's right hand (see LD 18 & 19). In a world filled with uncertainty, we do well to reflect on these two steps of our Lord's exaltation and how they benefit us.

JESUS OUR ONLY HIGH PRIEST

First, the ascension of our Lord is tied to his work as our only high priest. This truth is brought out vividly in the letter to the Hebrews. We read in Hebrews 4:14-16, "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens . . . let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." In the following chapters, the author shows how Jesus is a priest after the order of Melchizedek. Jesus entered the heavenly sanctuary and is constantly interceding for us before the throne of his Father.

If we know how great our sins and misery are, and how we continue to struggle with sin and temptation, there is tremendous comfort in knowing we can go to the throne of God, and we will be welcomed. Further, we may be assured that whatever discipline God may send upon us, it is done out of fatherly love, that it may "yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb 12:11).

In short, seeing the connection between the ascension and our Lord's work as high priest in the presence of the Father tells us all is well with our soul. We are at peace with our Father and given unrestricted access to his throne to receive his grace for our various needs.

JESUS IS OUR ETERNAL KING

Second, being a priest after the order of Melchizedek means our Lord is also our king. Our risen Saviour told his disciples that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to him (Matt 28:16). When Jesus ascended into heaven, he was seated at God's

right hand. He was crowned with honour and glory as a reward for humbling himself "by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8-9). John described this coronation in a vision where he saw the Lamb who had been slain, but had become alive again, stepping up to the throne and receiving the scroll with the seven seals. Once he had the scroll, he broke open the seals one by one, which set in motion a sequence of events on the earth (Rev 5 & 6).

In Revelation 19:11-16, Jesus is described as a mighty warrior and "on his robe and his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords." Paul wrote in Ephesians 1:22-23, how God "put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." Christ's power is universal, but he exercises it for the sake of his church. From heaven, Christ our King defends and preserves his church by his Spirit and Word.

STAY FOCUSED ON YOUR PRIEST AND KING

Ascension Day is a good time to imprint on our hearts and minds again that Jesus is our exalted Priest and King, as David described in Psalm 110. We need that reminder because the events in this world and the realities of life often weigh heavily on our hearts and minds. We do well, as the Form for the Lord's Supper reminds us, to lift up our hearts on high, where Christ our advocate is at the right hand of his heavenly Father. The more we see our Saviour in his role as priest and king, the more we will be able to live and die in the joy of our only comfort.

So, when you are feeling down, lift up your heart to heaven and behold your Priest and King! 



Eric Kampen

Minister Emeritus

Grace Canadian Reformed Church of Orangeville

rev.e.kampen@gmail.com

THE ASCENDED LORD GATHERS HIS CHURCH

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying. . . . All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. – Acts 1:12–14

After Jesus ascended into heaven, the apostles returned to Jerusalem. They gathered in the upper room along with the women, Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. The ascended Lord was gathering his church.

Just six weeks earlier, things had looked bleak. The crowds had abandoned Jesus. Even his closest disciples had fled. Mark records those bitter words when the soldiers seized Jesus: “And they all forsook him and fled.” The Shepherd was left with no sheep. He died alone—a leader without followers.

After his resurrection, Jesus sought out his scattered flock. Two had left for Emmaus. Mary was weeping in the garden. Judas had taken his own life. Ten disciples cowered behind locked doors. Thomas had disappeared, convinced all hope was lost.

But Christ gathered them again. He sent the two back from Emmaus to Jerusalem to report that they had seen their Lord. He sent Mary to tell the disciples that he had arisen. He appeared to the Eleven. Now, in Acts 1, we see the fruit of his labour. His church is together again, gathered in the upper room, united in prayer.

Luke names those who were present. Peter, who had denied his Lord three times, was there. John and James, the sons of Zebedee, who once vied for the best seats in the kingdom, were there. Thomas, who had doubted that Christ had arisen, was now worshipping his Lord and his God. Matthew, the tax collector, had not returned to his old ways of exploiting his people. Simon the Zealot, once part of a violent revolutionary movement, had come to see that Jesus would establish his kingdom not by the sword, but by the power of God. The other five disciples, of whom we know little, were also there.

Then there were “the women”—the wives of the apostles who were married, as well as Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and others who had supported Jesus from their own means. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was also there. She, too, had been gathered in—now worshipping her son as her Lord and God.

Even Jesus’s own brothers, who had once thought him mad, were there—James, Judas, and Simon. They now believed, and all three would become leaders in the church.

And there were more. Verse 15 tells us that soon the number grew to about 120—men, women, and children. The ascended Lord had gathered his church.

And he is still gathering it today. Across the nations, Jesus continues to build, defend, and preserve his people—his church, chosen for everlasting life. And we believe that we are, and forever shall remain, living members of that church. **C**

FURTHER READING:

Matthew 28:16–20; Acts 1

FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. How does Jesus’s gathering of his scattered disciples after his resurrection encourage you in your own faith journey?
2. Many of those gathered in the upper room had past failures, doubts, or misconceptions about Jesus. How does this challenge the way we view ourselves and others in the church today?
3. The early church was united in prayer as they waited for the coming of the Holy Spirit. How can we foster that same spirit of prayer and unity in our own churches and communities?



George van Popta

Minister Emeritus

Jubilee Canadian Reformed Church, Ottawa

gvanpopta@gmail.com



LITURGY & THE MISSION CHURCH

(PART 1)

MATTHEW VAN LUIK

Some time ago I addressed the aspect of preaching in a mission context. This also raises a question: what about the liturgy in such a situation? Before we get into this we need to ask: what is a “mission church” in our North American context? One may even wonder if it is proper to speak about a “mission church” as if they are different from a “regular” church.

Let me just reflect on the situation in my own congregation, in Brampton. As the congregation began to dwindle in numbers, the church changed its focus to reaching the people in our community with the gospel. That change of focus did not change the fact that the congregation is an established church with an established liturgy. Our mission worker teaches new believers about the gospel and, in cooperation with the minister and elders, works to integrate them as new members into the congregation.

While some churches have consciously changed their focus to reach the community with the gospel, really this is a task that

Christ has given to every congregation. How can the church be the light of the world as Christ commanded if she does not reach into the world with the message of God’s grace in Christ? The question of liturgy is relevant not only for churches who are focused on reaching their community, but for every congregation working to fulfill their calling to be light of the world.

LITURGY

Liturgy is the order that we follow in the worship service. When I lead worship services in different congregations, I notice there is diversity in the order that is followed and yet the basic structure is generally the same in each congregation. Reformed churches agree on the basic elements of the service, such as the blessings, Scripture reading, sermon, singing, sacraments, and offerings, while there is freedom to determine the order of these elements. But the question arises: if a congregation is more mission-minded,



should that impact the liturgy in some way? What about a congregation with members and visitors who come from many different cultures and backgrounds? Recently, during a Christmas program, the congregation in Brampton heard the gospel story read in 17 different languages, which clearly indicates the growing diversity within the congregation. Should such a church have a liturgy (as some argue) that is contextualized for these different cultures?

What is meant by contextualization? It is to help people from different cultures understand the gospel message. For example, the preacher might compare images found in Scripture to things people can better relate to in their culture. That may be necessary in preaching or teaching, but is it also necessary in the liturgy? Are there things in the worship service that can be done differently to make the worship more meaningful for people from different backgrounds? You can imagine the challenge this presents in the case of a congregation with many cultures.

REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

To work through this question, we first need to look at the biblical principles. The practice in the Reformed church since the Reformation has been to follow the regulative principle of worship. This means that everything we do in the worship service is regulated by God's Word. Each element in the worship service must find its basis in the Word of God, and anything that is not in agreement with Scripture is rejected. This principle was important in the time of the Reformation in establishing true worship over against the Roman Church. The Reformers rejected many of the Roman Church practices because they were not in agreement with Scripture and part of reform was determining the proper form of worship from Scripture.

We can conclude that the liturgical elements in the worship service must be determined by what is revealed in God's Word. That may sound cut and dried, but is it legitimate to accept different practices in churches with multiple cultures? Established churches have developed many of their own traditions, traditions which gives us a sense of comfort and belonging but that may be a hindrance for others to join. Since people today do not have the same attention span as in the past, should we perhaps remove the repetitive use of the 10 commandments, shorten the sermon, or tell more stories? If our culture does not appreciate the music of the church, should we look for something more contemporary, or

if they do not appreciate the organ or piano should we consider using something like a band that may be more appealing?

I do not believe that these kinds of changes fall under the idea of contextualization. Contextualization is about helping people better understand the message and purpose of what is happening in the worship service, while many of the changes suggested are more about making the worship more appealing to people. Here I would add a word of warning: when we try to make the worship service appealing to some, we often drive others away. Many of those who truly seek to understand and live by the gospel will express appreciation for a worship service that is simple and quiet and gives them the opportunity to reflect on the gospel for their own lives. Worship is not about stimulating people to get a great worship experience, but worship is to help them deeply reflect on their relationship with God. People experience the greatest peace when they behold the grace and mercy of God in Christ Jesus.

WORSHIP'S PURPOSE

What is the purpose of the liturgy in the worship service? It is to bring God's people into a living relationship with their Lord. Every element in the worship service brings us into contact with the Lord our God. In the worship service we enter the living presence of the Lord who speaks to us about his tender love and mercy. He is the God who calls us out of the darkness of our sin and misery to give us a glorious hope. In his holy presence, we respond to our God, confessing our own unworthiness and praising him for his grace in Christ.

So, what does this mean for churches working in a mission setting where there are many members new to the faith? It does not mean that they need a new or different kind of liturgy. Our worship of God is not different because we are new to the faith, or because we come from a different culture. Just as new believers need to learn about what the good news means for them, they must also learn what it means to worship God in the worship service. Therefore, it is important during the service that those attending understand how the elements of the liturgy impact their worship of God.

WORSHIP'S MOVEMENT

The preacher leads people along in their worship, so that they understand why they are doing what they do. He should be careful



not to go into long explanations but just naturally move from element to element. If there is a call to worship, the congregation is reminded that God calls us to worship. We confess that our entire life is dependent on God with the words of the votum and that God now greets us with his blessing. When the congregation is called to sing, they are reminded that they are now responding to God. These elements of the service become meaningful for the congregation only when they realize they are engaged in a living dialogue with God.

One way to help worshippers realize there is a dialogue taking place is to have the congregation speak when they are responding to God. When only the minister speaks every part, those unfamiliar with the liturgical movement in the service will not understand their role in the worship of God. By speaking the votum (confession), the congregation is aware they are making this confession to God. By speaking the “Amen” throughout the service, it becomes clear that they are responding with their Amen. While the minister leads the congregation in prayer, he must do so in a way in which the congregation is praying to the Lord. A minister is not praying for the congregation, which is conveyed if he uses “I” in his prayer, but in worship the people *together* lift their voice to God (which is conveyed by using “we/our” in the prayer). Together we confess our sins, and together we lift up our petitions for one another and our praise to God. The congregation brings all this before the throne of God as one.

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

What about the Ten Commandments? The reading of the ten commandments was a regular element in the worship services of Reformed and Presbyterian churches, but many churches today no longer read them on a regular basis, if at all. There may be different reasons for this development, but neglecting the commandments in the worship service can only be the result of not understanding their role in the worship of God. The purpose for reading the commandments is not to educate the congregation about God’s commands, but it is to shape our worship of God in the service. We read the commandments not just to remind the congregation about how God wants us to live but it becomes a part of our interaction with God during the service.

God is speaking to us in the commandments as he did to his people Israel at Mt. Sinai. Was God’s purpose just to instruct Israel how they should live? No, it was much more than that; God entered

a covenant relationship with his people. He said, “I am the LORD your God, who delivered you out of Egypt,” and this is how you are to live as my people. In the New Testament church, God speaks to us as the one who has made a covenant with us in Christ Jesus. The law is a constant reminder that God in his grace has entered into a covenant relationship with us. In his commandments we hear the voice of our God who has delivered us. He delivered us not because we are worthy, for his commands are a constant reminder of my own unworthiness. When God speaks to us in his covenant law, we react to his voice with a humble confession of our sins. We then respond, praising God for his forgiveness in song and prayer.

The commandments therefore are not just an optional part of the worship service, but they form the heart of our relationship with the Lord. They remind each of us why we are worshiping the Lord: he has entered a relationship with me, a sinner. I praise him because “you Lord are worthy of all praise, for you have restored to me hope and everlasting joy.” The minister is to lead God’s people through this glorious conversation with the Lord God. It is the minister’s task to see that the people understand the flow of their conversation with God.

In a mission context, this conversation within the service is important. Of course, this is just as crucial in the service of an established church, but it is important that those who are just learning to understand God’s work understand what God has done and is doing for them in Christ. Becoming conscious of their own sins through God’s covenant law, new believers also receive assurance of God’s pardon through his grace. Every week God’s people need to be reminded that the Lord God has entered into a living covenant relationship with them, that he is a gracious God who forgives their sins, and that he gives them a glorious place within the family of God. They, as do all God’s people, need the constant assurance that God forgives their sins so that, experiencing this joy, they now praise the Lord for his tender mercy in prayer and song. 



Matthew Van Luik

Minister Emeritus

Grace Canadian Reformed Church, Brampton

mhvanluik@gmail.com



IS SCIENCE REVELATION?

Our Belgic Confession speaks of two ways God reveals himself. In Article 2, we confess that God first reveals himself “by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe.” But then we confess that he also “makes himself more clearly and fully known to us by his holy and divine Word.” Often these two ways of revelation are designated general revelation and special revelation.

ONGOING REVELATION IN CREATION?

A question that has sometimes been raised is whether we can regard the results of science as part of the first way of revelation. An affirmative answer has been argued by some in the past. In the early 1990s, the Christian Reformed Church was contemplating the question of theistic evolution and whether it could be tolerated. Some argued that Belgic Confession Article 2 tells us that science is also part of God’s revelation. For example, Robert Vandervennen wrote an article entitled “Not the Bible Alone” in which he argued that “things we experience, the outcome of history, and the results of science are revelations.”¹

Of course, the next step was to argue that general revelation has been ignored by many conservative-minded folks in the CRC

and that consequently Scripture was being misinterpreted. It is the job of scientists, some say, to draw attention to what is often called general revelation and then to interpret it for the rest of us. In all of this, appeal was made to Article 2. In more recent times, a textbook produced by Wheaton College faculty explicitly contends that “scientific inquiry is a form of revelation.”²

Dr. N.H. Gootjes (late professor of dogmatics at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary) dealt with this issue in the first chapter of his 2010 book *Teaching and Preaching the Word*. He concluded that this view is not in harmony with Article 2 of the Belgic Confession, nor with Scripture. With regard to the Belgic Confession, it does not say that general revelation provides additional data to the special revelation found in God’s Word. Moreover, the general revelation spoken of there reveals something about *God*, not about the world as such. It is a revelation *of God*, specifically of his power and glory. Finally, our Confession mentions no need for an interpreter of general revelation. It says, “*we* know him by two means . . .” There is no special office for the scientist envisioned here.³

¹ See *Teaching and Preaching the Word: Studies in Dogmatics and Homiletics*, N.H. Gootjes (Winnipeg: Premier Publishing, 2010), 4.

² *Understanding Scientific Theories of Origins: Cosmology, Geology, and Biology in Christian Perspective*, Robert C. Bishop, Larry L. Funck, Raymond J. Lewis, Stephen O. Mosher, John H. Walton (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018), 63.

³ Gootjes, 6-7

DEFINING OUR TERMS

I am generally in agreement with Dr. Gootjes. However, I would like to build on what he wrote and sharpen it. What his discussion omitted was a definition of science, as well as definitions of related terms such as “scientific results” and “scientific discoveries.” We might also ask: when is a scientist doing science? Or, when is a scientist producing scientific results?

Imagine the following scenario: a geologist who happens to be a Christian is driving down a highway. Let’s say he’s approaching Jasper National Park in Alberta, driving in along Highway 16 from the east. As he nears the entrance to the park, it’s a magnificent sunny day without a cloud in the sky. The mountains are visible in all their grandeur. He looks to the left and sees Folding Mountain. This enormous mountain has visible layers of rock folded one on top of the other—hence the name. The geologist observes this and his mind begins to stir. He thinks of the processes which may have created this remarkable mountain. As the mountain ends up in his rearview mirror, his thoughts end with God and his power and majesty. Did the geologist do science on his way to being impressed with God? Was there any connection between what happened in the car and what we confess in Article 2? Would we say something different if the person driving the car had been a theologian, a musician, or a construction worker? The question is: where do we draw the line between observing and thinking and *scientific* observation and reflection?

ENGAGING IN SCIENCE

These are difficult questions to answer. Let me make an effort. In general, “science” is what people do as they observe, analyze, systematize, and theorize about various phenomena. In the context of our present discussion, we’re especially interested in natural science—which means that the phenomena under consideration occur in nature, in the natural world.

The observation, analysis, systematizing, and theorizing take place through the use of a *scientific method*. In other words, this is carefully thought out. However, one should never regard the scientific endeavour as neutral. There are always presuppositions in play, that is, one’s most fundamental, non-negotiable beliefs. These are the grid through which everything is filtered and by which one’s conclusions are inevitably coloured. By this description of science, the geologist coming into the mountains was not formally doing science (though there may have been elements

of it in his thinking). He just happened to be a geologist driving through the mountains and thinking about them. Those thoughts led to a consideration of God’s power and majesty—as the created world is intended to.

But now let’s say our geologist had parked his car and spent a month at Folding Mountain observing, analyzing, and so forth. Then we could say he was engaged in *science*. Yet, at the end of it, he could still have come away being impressed with God’s power and majesty. No, the results of his study with regard to the world cannot be considered a form of revelation—he is human, both a sinner and a finite creature, and he may have made mistakes in his science. He may have had some wrong presuppositions. But yet he received the revelation about God that these mountains were designed to convey.

SCIENCE ≠ REVELATION

That revelation about God—his eternal power and divine nature—is always there and always speaking. When scientists are doing science or when they’re just passing through Jasper National Park or wherever else, that revelation is constantly present. In fact, that revelation is present for everyone, scientist or not. According to Romans 1, God makes these things plain and they are clearly seen. The problem is that there are those “who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Rom 1:18).

Dr. Gootjes was correct to conclude that science and scientific results cannot be equated with general revelation. They certainly cannot be used as a grid through which to interpret special revelation. Yet there is still an important connection between science and Article 2. At the last judgment, no scientist will ever be able to claim he had no clue regarding God’s invisible qualities, namely his eternal power and divine nature. It was made plain. It was clearly seen. This is true with regard to all scientific work. As Francis Schaeffer famously put it in the title of one of his books, “He is there and he is not silent.” Ever. ☐



Wes Bredenhof

Minister

Free Reformed Church of Launceston, AU

wes.bredenhof@gmail.com

The Calgary Study Weekend takes place at the Lion's Youth Camp located near Cremona, Alberta



CALGARY STUDY WEEKEND

Calgary Study Weekend—it's likely been a minute since you've heard that name, especially if you live outside of Alberta! So, who are we, and why should you (or your child) be interested in attending?

Calgary Study Weekend (CSW) actually dates back to 1988. It was started by the Young People's Society of the Calgary Canadian Reformed Church. Throughout the years, and with God's blessing, this Bible study weekend has grown, and in 2021, we began hosting two weekends in August. "The Original" is for youths ages 16 to 19. The second weekend is designed for those over 19 and in the "College and Careers" era of their lives.

CALGARY STUDY WEEKEND HIGHLIGHTS

The weekend kicks off on a Thursday evening with registration and icebreakers coordinated by the hosts of the weekend. Our hosts are young people from the Calgary congregation who serve as leaders and tour guides for the attendees. The counselors lead campers each night in devotions and discussions, fostering mentorship between generations of believers.

Praising our God with instruments and songs is a significant element of the CSW. This is assisted by campers with musical abilities who have volunteered to play piano, guitar, and lead the singing. Praise and worship events are held multiple times

throughout the weekend and are a highlight for many of our campers. Beyond speeches and sporting events, once the scheduled portion of the day has finished, campers spend the evening in a variety of activities. These include sitting around the campfire, singing songs, playing games (including life-size Dutch Blitz!), and having intense theological discussions that go well into the night.

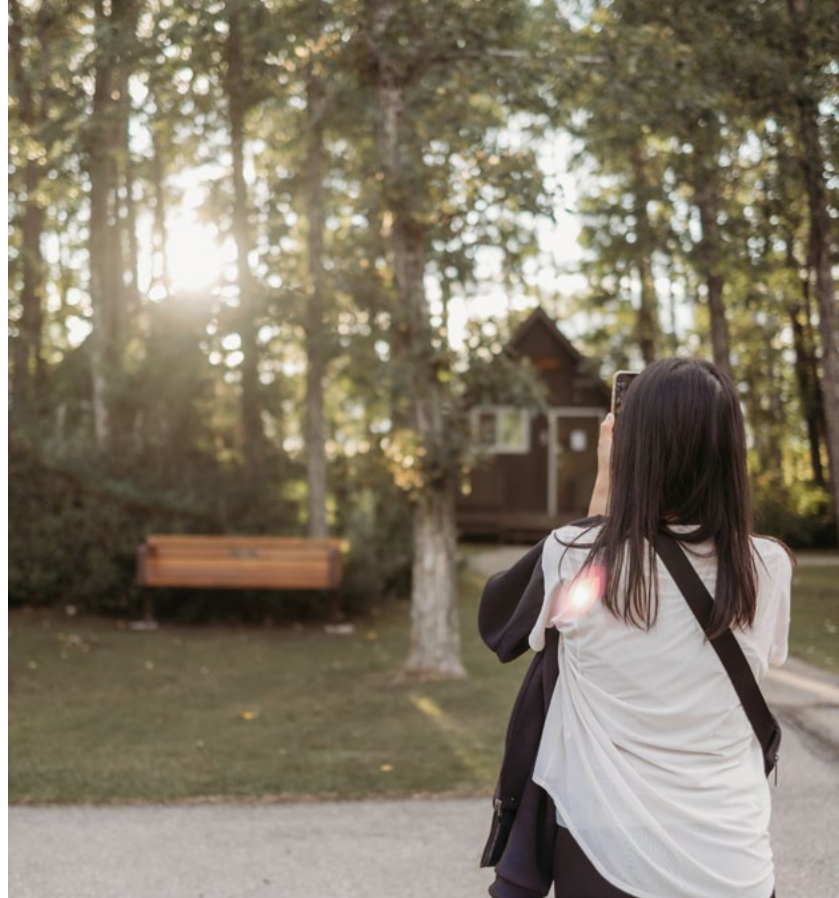
A SMALL ENGINE THAT COULD

Calgary Canadian Reformed Church has always been a somewhat transient “small engine that could” type of church/school community. So why would our Reformed Christian camp be any different? Our goal is to foster Christian growth and friendships in a much more intimate setting. But why should you attend a smaller camp when there are larger conferences that boast many other opportunities?

Attending a small Reformed Christian camp offers several unique benefits that can deeply impact your spiritual growth, community connection, and personal development.

Here are a few reasons why the Calgary Study Weekend could be a great choice for you (or your child):

1. *Intimate Community:* Smaller camps foster close-knit communities where relationships are more personal and meaningful. You get to know the campers and chaperones on a deeper level, which can lead to stronger bonds and improved accountability. It's easier to form lasting friendships and have genuine discussions about faith and life.
2. *Opportunity for Personal Growth:* In a smaller setting, you have more opportunities for personal reflection and spiritual growth. The counselors are often able to spend more one-on-one time with campers, providing mentorship and guidance specific to your struggles and questions.
3. *Intentionality in Activities:* The activities at CSW are chosen with a purpose: whether speeches, Bible study, outdoor activities (go Spikeball!), or praise and worship sessions, we are always aiming to build character, encourage teamwork, and facilitate spiritual development.
4. *Supportive Environment:* CSW provides a supportive and nurturing atmosphere. You'll find a group of people who genuinely care about each other's well-being, spiritually, emotionally, and





mentally. It's a place where you can feel safe, understood, and encouraged.

5. *Experiencing God's Creation:* CSW is set in a spectacular natural environment that invites reflection on God's creation. This provides an excellent opportunity for quiet moments with God, whether during a hike, a campfire, or gazing at the stars.
6. *Faithful Worship:* On Sunday, we worship together with God's people at the Calgary Canadian Reformed Church. In between the services, all attendees are split into groups and are hosted by a Calgary family where the fellowship, mentorship, and fun continue (besides, who doesn't love Dutch meatball soup)!
7. *Clear Biblical Foundation:* Since it's a Reformed Christian camp, CSW will have a strong commitment to biblical authority and Reformed doctrine. You can come to this camp knowing that you have the same foundational beliefs as the person beside you. We are grounded in Scripture and our confessions.
8. *Lasting Impact:* The experiences and lessons you learn at a small Reformed Christian camp are often more impactful and memorable because of the personal setting. Many

people leave with a deeper commitment to their faith, lasting friendships, and a clearer understanding of God's calling in their life.

9. *Cost:* Last but not least, we love that we can offer all of this at a reasonable cost! Summer is "hay-making" season for most young people and we know that taking time off work is a big deal. We've structured the camp to be over a weekend/ Sunday, so your boss doesn't have to get annoyed when you ask for too much vacation time.

While the weekend itself has changed and adapted to the times over the years, one thing remains certain: the Calgary Study Weekend is a time focused on growth in the gospel and establishing friendships with believers across the country in a relaxed and God-glorifying atmosphere.

You can find out more about us on our website: <https://calgarystudyweekend.weebly.com/>

Registrations are currently open for 2025, and we hope to see you there! 🇨🇦

*Laura Kok and Natasha Veenendaal
Calgary, Alberta*

The Spirit

OR

the Text of the Church Order?

JOHN VAN POPTA

In Canada, our Parliament defined marriage as a union between one man and one woman. But the courts redefined marriage as a union between two persons and then ruled same-sex marriage to be protected by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The courts reinterpreted the *Charter*, discovering new rights by following the spirit of the law rather than the text of the law, assigning a newly-discovered intent to the *Charter*.

This is a relatively new phenomenon in Canada. The courts no longer just interpret the law, but actively overhaul laws passed by our democratically elected parliament. They strike down or amend legislation and public policy on various aspects of Canadian society. This action by the courts to “nullify” a decision previously made by elected lawmakers concerning marriage, one of society’s most fundamental social institutions, and then to read into the law meaning not intended by Parliament, is sometimes referred to as “judicial activism.”

In our churches, the broader assemblies deal with two types of agenda items: administrative matters (reports and overtures) and judicial matters (appeals). The benchmarks that delineate their judicial role are the Word of God and the Church Order (CO). That is laid out in Article 31 of the CO, which says, “...whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, *unless it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order.*”

But what are we to do if “judicial activism” enters our church courts? Does it happen? And what are we to do when the broader

assemblies interpret the text of the CO in line with what it determines to be in the spirit of the CO, by discovering some newly perceived intent or principle at work? Let’s have a look.

CHURCH ORDER: A COVENANT DOCUMENT

We refer to ourselves as a federation of churches. The word *federation* comes from the Latin *foedus*, which means *covenant*. First of all, the Church Order regulates our intra-federal relationships. By common accord, the churches have agreed to be governed by the CO and thereby entered into a covenant. And as we know, every covenant has two parts: *promise* and *obligation*. Our *obligation* as churches and office bearers is that we will diligently observe the CO (CO 76); our *promise* is to refrain from lording it over other churches and office bearers (CO 74).

It is, therefore, essential to understand what these articles of the CO mean. What does CO Article 76 mean when it says that the assemblies and office bearers *shall endeavour diligently to observe the Church Order*? What does CO Article 74 mean by *lording it over*? Do we promise to observe the plain reading of the text of the CO, or are we bound by every synod’s new insight into the spirit of the CO? May we bind the conscience of others by a recently discovered intent of the CO? Or does that go counter to our promise not to lord it over others? Does our promise to diligently observe the Church Order include submitting to novel interpretations based on a newly perceived principle?

FOUR AXIOMS¹

The following four axioms should govern the broader assemblies' judicial interpretation of the CO. They serve as protection against judicial activism in the church. We will see that these four axioms are based on decisions of the General Synods in Carman 2013, Dunville 2016, and Guelph 2022, which all overturned decisions based on judicial activism.

Axiom 1. We affirm that the Church Order regulates matters that affect the churches in common. Where there is no explicit regulation, the churches have the responsibility and authority to draft their own regulations independently.

Axiom 2. We affirm that only the Word of God binds us and that we bind ourselves to our own word diligently to observe the Church Order (See also CO 31).

Axiom 3. We affirm that the literal reading of the CO expresses the intent of the articles.

Axiom 4. We affirm that the articles are separated as individual articles for a reason.

GS 2016 AND AXIOM 1

GS 2016 judged that the GS 2013 erred in granting several appeals regarding women's participation in the election of office-bearers. GS 2010 had decided, according to CO Article 3, that whether women could vote was a local matter. That synod had decided

That any arrangement for the election of office bearers that goes beyond what has been agreed upon by the churches in Article 3 CO is a matter of the local regulations adopted for that purpose by the consistory with the deacons.

GS 2013 decided, however, that since the broader assemblies had judged for many years that this was a matter for the churches in common, the churches should revert to the past practice of male-only voting. It made this ruling even while acknowledging that the previous synods had never stated *why* it was a matter for the churches in common. So, GS 2013 overruled the 2010 decision even though that one was backed by the CO. Instead, it based its decision on a newly discovered principle—that of past practice, because (as the synod declared) “practice has authority.”

However, GS 2016 agreed with GS 2010, reiterated the 2010 decision, and defended the freedom of the local church by arguing instead from the authority of the Word of God and the CO. By reaffirming the decision of GS 2010, GS 2016 judged that where there was no explicit regulation in the CO, the churches have the

freedom, competence, authority, and responsibility to draft their own regulations.

SYNOD DUNNVILLE 2016 AND AXIOM 2

Only Scripture and the CO are the touchstones of authority and authenticity, not past practices nor repeated statements of synods. We have promised not “to lord it over” other churches or office-bearers (CO Art 74). That means we will not bind anyone's conscience beyond the Word of God and (Article 76 adds) their own word. We are a bond of churches—a federation—bound together in a covenant by God's Word, and we bind ourselves to our obligation to endeavour diligently to observe the articles of the adopted order (CO 76). With the Belgic Confession, we testify against the tyranny of those who would bind the consciences of others to the traditions of the church.

We confess in Article 7 that

We may not consider any writings of men . . . of equal value with the divine Scriptures, nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God.

Nor do we hold to custom or past practice, or multitude, or history, or great men, or synods, or decrees and judgments above the word we have given in the CO. With GS 2016 and GS 2010, we defend the responsibility and independence, as well as the competence and authority of the local church, within the bond of churches, to draft and adopt regulations for the life of the congregation, even if those regulations do not reflect common practices in the churches or are not modelled after long-standing traditions. Only the Word of God and our own word bind our consciences to observe the adopted CO. This is the heartbeat and the life-breath of Reformed church polity clearly expressed in CO 31: unless directed by the Word of God or plainly set forth in the adopted CO, we bind no one's conscience.

GS 2013 AND AXIOM 3

GS 2013 sustained an appeal against a decision of GS 2010. GS 2010 ruled that

the diligent observation of the articles of the CO (Art 76) frequently requires that their provisions be interpreted and their true intent discerned so that they can be properly applied. In principle, therefore, it was not wrong to speak about “the intent” of [the CO]. The issue, therefore, is not

¹ An *axiom* is a self-evident rule, or a statement that is generally accepted as true.

simply “What does the article say?” It is instead, “How should the churches apply [the CO] ...?”

In sustaining the appeal against GS 2010, GS 2013 judged

It is important that the churches maintain what has been agreed upon in the CO and not move away from the literal reading of its articles by distinguishing between the plain or literal reading and the intent or spirit of the CO. The literal reading expresses the intent of the articles.

GS 2010 made a distinction between “What does the Church Order say?” and “How should the churches apply the Church Order?” Instead, GS 2013 made the ruling that “the literal reading expresses the intent of the CO.”

GS 2022 AND AXIOM 4

On Good Friday 2019, the Flamborough-Redemption consistory invited the congregation to a commemoration service. The consistory did not call the congregation to a worship service. Classis Central Ontario June 2019 denied an appeal concerning this matter.

Subsequently, Regional Synod East 2019 sustained an appeal against the decision of classis. One of its stated reasons was that we must read CO Article 53 in conjunction with CO Article 52. Flamborough-Redemption appealed this decision to GS 2022. GS 2022 sustained that appeal with the following reason:

RSE 2019 is unconvincing in arguing that the churches must read CO Art. 53 in conjunction with CO Art. 52. Distinct articles in the CO are distinct for a reason. If the intent of the CO is to require that the consistory shall call the congregation together for worship on the Lord’s Day and on other days that commemorate events surrounding the life and ministry of Christ, then one article would be sufficient. Nevertheless, there are two articles which are distinct. There are common elements such as a reference to the consistory; however, where the one specifies “shall call,” the other does not. Where one says “worship,” the other says “commemorate.” Where one uses the phrase “in the manner decided upon by the consistory,” the other does not.

Regional Synod East 2019 interpreted Article 53 through the lens of Article 52. This allowed the regional synod to import conclusions not warranted by the articles of the CO. Just because there are common elements in some articles of the CO does not mean that one must be used to interpret the other. This synod judged that we should not read into an article of the CO something regulated by another article. Distinct articles in the CO are distinct for a reason.

CONCLUSION

We have seen how our general synods have consistently granted appeals against decisions that used tradition or past practice as a principle to interpret the CO. They have also rejected attempts to interpret the spirit of the CO or attempts to discover the intent of the CO. We can be thankful for that. From these decisions, we have formulated our four guiding principles, or axioms. Each axiom articulates an affirmation, followed by a subsequent application.

Axiom 1: We affirm that the Church Order regulates matters that affect the churches in common. Where there is no explicit regulation, the churches have the responsibility and authority to draft their own regulations independently.

- *Application:* We will not concede that responsibility and authority where there is no explicit regulation directing the churches to a shared responsibility.

Axiom 2: We affirm that the Word of God binds us and that we bind ourselves to the common consent given in CO 76 (See also CO 31).

- *Application:* We will not bind the consciences of others beyond this (thereby lording it over them [CO 74]). Neither did we agree to bind ourselves to follow traditional practices nor to slavishly uphold the common practices of a plurality of the churches.

Axiom 03: We affirm that the literal reading of the CO expresses the intent of the articles.

- *Application:* We reject subjective arguments based on the perceived spirit of the CO, as well as those dependent on discovered principles or the presumed intent of the CO.

Axiom 4: We affirm that the articles are separated as individual articles for a reason.

- *Application:* We will not read something regulated by one article into another article.

When our broader assemblies judge matters within the framework of these four axioms, the churches will not be tempted to lord it over others. This will ensure a peaceful and harmonious covenant relationship between the various churches in the federation.



John van Popta

Minister Emeritus

Fellowship Canadian Reformed Church, Burlington

j.vanpopta@gmail.com



SIN & JUSTIFICATION

JEFF MORRIS

God came to Abraham and promised to make his descendants a nation. This promise was confirmed to the Israelites at Mount Sinai when God gave them the law. Eventually, certain aspects of the law became prominent Jewish identity markers. Jewish theologians taught that by keeping the Mosaic law one could be righteous before God.¹ In this brief article we will consider one important aspect of what Paul says about justification in his letter to the Romans: how recognizing one's own sinfulness is at the heart of the gospel.

SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

For many 1st century Jews, obeying God was particularly associated with circumcision, Sabbath laws, and dietary restrictions. This meant that not only natural-born Jewish people were

obligated to these laws, but that anyone who desired to convert to Judaism ought to obey them as well. If a Gentile wanted to join the Jewish congregation, they were obliged to keep the law as understood by the Jewish leaders, with an emphasis on circumcision, Sabbath laws, and dietary restrictions. Failure to maintain these laws, whether by choice or out of ignorance, was to fall short of God's righteousness and be excluded from God's covenant people. This is a human doctrine of justification.

The apostle Paul was born and raised a Jew, so he understood the theology and psychology of his own people. After his conversion to Christianity, he detected this critical flaw in Jewish theology, namely a self-righteous pride due to a failure to recognize one's own sinfulness. Many of the first converts to Christianity were Jews, and it would have been difficult for these Jewish Christians

¹ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 368-370.

to grasp the gospel aside from the theology they had been taught for generations. Prominent Jewish Christians likely believed that, in order to be righteous before God, along with believing in Christ, one had to obey God's commands, which minimally meant being circumcised, keeping the Sabbath laws, and obeying certain dietary restrictions.²

Now, in one sense, Paul could agree with the insistence to obey God's commands. Paul understood that there is an important distinction between God the Creator and his creatures. God the Creator is superior in authority over all other beings. Further, God is not only superior, but supreme, which implies that God is perfectly good. Since God has all authority, humans are obligated to obey his commands. And since God is perfectly good, obeying God's commands leads to righteousness.

Paul is at pains to make clear that all people, including Jews and non-Jews, "are under the power of sin" (3:9). Failing to recognize the inclusivity of the adjective "all" was a potentially dangerous blind spot for Jewish Christians.

Still, Paul detected that his Jewish counterparts made a critical theological error in that they overlooked the inclusivity of sin. We notice Paul persuading the Jewish Christians in Rome to avoid this critical error through a carefully crafted argument that runs from Romans 1:18–3:20. The wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness (1:18), including on those who pass judgment, because they do the very same things (2:1). In other words, Paul is at pains to make clear that *all* people, including Jews and non-Jews, "are under the power of sin" (3:9). Failing to recognize the inclusivity of the adjective "all" was a potentially dangerous blind spot for Jewish Christians.

THE POWER OF SIN

Why is failing to recognize that *all* are under sin such a critical blind spot? To be under sin is to be controlled by an impulse to ignore God's will and promote one's own selfish desires, with the result that one falls under the wrath of God.³ Thus, the power of sin prevents anyone from obeying God's law, regardless of one's best efforts, which implies that everyone is under God's wrath. This

means that even the Jewish Christians in Rome who might compel the Gentiles to obey the law or be excluded from God's covenant people, failed to uphold the law, and since they failed to uphold the law, by their own standard, they should also be excluded.

Being under the power of sin also meant that the Jewish Christians might twist God's commands to suit themselves, thereby undermining the law's purpose. As Paul explains, circumcision was not a matter of the flesh, but of the heart (Rom 2:29). Still, under the impulse of sin, Jewish Christian leaders, like those in Galatia (Gal 2:3-7), might be tempted to elevate the outward ritual of circumcision, failing to prioritize and encourage the spiritual act of worship, rather than outward obedience to rules.

Not only that, but leaders who adopted a legalistic doctrine of justification would become prideful, falsely thinking themselves to be righteous for obeying the laws, while looking down on others for failing to do so, not realizing that, in their sin, they themselves had overlooked the spiritual aspects of the law. Thus, instead of reveling in the glory of the gospel, encouraging fellow believers, and contributing to the kingdom of God, Jewish Christian leaders might spend their effort convincing others that, unless they obeyed their man-made rules, they would be excluded from God's people.

THE PUREST GOSPEL

Of course, Paul has good news for the Jewish Christians in Rome, because the fact that *all* are under sin is at the heart of God's doctrine of justification.

Paul explains that God is impartial (Rom 2:11), which means that he will reward each according to that person's works (2:6). Unfortunately, since all are under sin, no one will be justified by works of the law (3:20), which means that no one will be justified by their own doing! Imagine how the Jewish Christians in Rome would have felt if Paul had ended his letter at 3:20. They had gathered, rented space, developed relationships, and as an assembly worshipped and served God. Now Paul tells them that their entire effort is for nothing, because while the Christians in Rome have done a significant amount of organizing, following certain procedures, agreeing upon specific formalities, and so on, *no one will be justified by works of the law!* In other words, neither the work entailed in forming the congregation, nor the Jewish Christians' insistence that the Gentile Christians align with their

² Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 270-271.

³ James Dunn, *Romans*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988), 148-149.

traditional interpretation of the law, counts toward their righteousness, because God is impartial, and *all* are under sin.

What a sense of joy the Romans must have experienced when they finally reached 3:21-22 where Paul explains that a righteousness has been revealed *apart* from the law, through faith in Jesus Christ. Acknowledgement of sin leads one to grasp God's radical doctrine of justification. Yes, we are all sinners. Yes, we are all under the wrath of God. Yes, we are blind to our personal sin, and we sometimes elevate man-made laws for our own pride or benefit. No, we cannot save ourselves by works (1:18-3:20). Instead, God redeemed us by putting Jesus forward as an "atoning sacrifice" to be received by faith (3:25). By sending Jesus as an atoning sacrifice to be received by faith, God's wrath against sin is appeased and he saves us, not because of our works, but because of Jesus Christ (3:25).

So, Paul asks, what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded (3:27). On what principle? Is it because all of our organizing, rules,

processes, policing, and procedures have made us righteous? No, says Paul, our boasting is excluded because we are only justified by grace through faith. In other words, the Jewish Christians in Rome bring nothing to their justification, and neither does the man in the suit, or the woman wearing the dress, or the youth in jeans, or the porn addict, or the alcoholic. Christ brings *everything*, and he covers with his righteousness *all* who put their faith in him. **C**



Jeff Morris

Theologian for the Reformational Study Centre and adjunct lecturer in philosophy at Redeemer University
Streetlight Christian Church, Hamilton
jeffbmorris@hotmail.com

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>>	MY FRIEND
>>	MY BROTHER
>>	MY CHILD
>>	MY GRANDCHILD
>>	MY NEIGHBOUR



DEVON NIEZEN!



Hi, my name is Devon Niezen. I will be 25 years old on June 26th. I am usually quite happy. I love swimming and going for walks and stroller rides. I love listening to music, watching movies, and playing games.

I moved into the Anchor Home in Grimsby on January 20th. It has taken some time to settle in and find a new routine, but the staff and residents are getting to know me and I am gradually learning more things. Staff quickly learned that I love food and can get "hangry." I haven't had a food that I don't like—as long as it is soft I will eat it!

I was born with Emanuel syndrome, which is partial translocation of 2 chromosomes (11 and 22). It affects my physical and mental abilities. I started walking when I was around 5 years old, and I do not talk. Since I moved to Anchor Home, they have been teaching me to try to feed myself. I am non-verbal but I have my ways of getting what I want and need. I need my personal space and at times I will reach out and hit you if you get too close.

I am thankful everyday for Anchor! And I am looking forward to Anchor camp again. I love the pool at camp, seeing friends, singing, and the fire at night. There is always lots to do!!

I have an older brother and sister-in-law and 3 nieces. I love to watch my nieces play, but they know not to get too close to me. God gave me all my difficulties but, with a loving family and the blessing of Anchor, I enjoy every day.

JUNE BIRTHDAYS:

16 Edward Bultje will be 29
c/o Harbour Home
42 Spadara Drive,
Hamilton, ON
L9B 2K3

20 Lars Huijgen will be 34
2629 Aspen Drive
Coaldale, AB
T1M 0A2

30 Beverly Breukelman will be 63
222 5-19 th Street
Coaldale, AB
T1M 1G4

17 Joan Koerselman will be 68
2113-16 Ave.
Coaldale, AB
T1M 1J8

26 Devon Niezen will be 25
c/o Anchor Home
361 Thirty Road
Grimsby, ON
L3M 0L1

Happy birthday to all of you celebrating a birthday in June! We wish you all the Lord's blessings in the year to come.

Rachel Vis

Some of the ladies and children enjoying the weekly coffee social in the church building.



MISSION UPDATE: PRINCE GEORGE

Greetings from Prince George, BC! In the past year we have continued to see good fruit in the mission work here. In general, the past five years have seen continual increase in maturity and numbers. We are very thankful for the progress that has been made.

We have received new members, including converts to faith in Jesus Christ. We have seen lives transformed by the power of God's grace. We have grown in numbers to the point that we have about 65 members. This has included new marriages, many children born, and long-term commitments of young members starting careers and purchasing homes in the city.

Many of our members and guests contribute their gifts regularly in serving one another and ensuring the functioning of the various aspects of the congregation. Our local elders and deacons continue to work faithfully and grow in experience. Improvements have been made to our church building and are continuing to take place.

At this point in the life of our congregation, we are functioning as a fairly established church plant. It is wonderful to be able to describe things in this way, and we praise God for being gracious to us. We pray that He will continue to build us up for the glory of Jesus Christ and the increase of his Kingdom.

DEMOGRAPHIC NEED

At the same time, we still feel our weakness. In particular we notice the lack of members in the age category of 50-70 years old. We are a young congregation with many small children. We are also a congregation of people with little to no immediate family support nearby. This means that most of our members are quite busy, and it can be hard to find extra time to serve one another, reach out to neighbours, and spend time with newcomers.

For these reasons, we have been praying for individuals or couples in their 50s and 60s to move here. God has granted

something of an answer to this prayer by bringing us some local members in this age category. In addition, he has strengthened our existing members to fill in the gaps left by the departure of our mission workers. Nevertheless, we would still benefit from a few more mature members who are willing to offer the gifts, time, and wisdom that God has given them. If you are one of these people, could we ask you to consider if this might be a fit for you?

Of course, it should also be added that if you are outside of this age category (for example, a young family), we will certainly not refuse you! We trust that any who are moved by God to come here will be a blessing to our congregation in Prince George.

By the grace of God, there is a close-knit, familial culture in our congregation. We are thankful for the kindness, service, and love that is present. We pray that we will be able to welcome others over the coming years.

OUR CITY

When people consider moving to a new location, there are many practical matters to consider. Although there are many challenges to moving Prince George, there are also many benefits.

Compared to the rest of British Columbia, our house prices are affordable, with the median list price for a single-family home at around \$475,000. There are many wonderful neighborhoods in Prince George. In addition, the city is surrounded by vast expanses of fields and forest, with acreage opportunities in every direction. Quite a few of our current families live "in the country" (10-20 minutes from shopping, church, etc.).

Prince George offers a great mix of amenities and vast wilderness. There are about 90,000 people in the greater Prince George area. As the "hub city" of northern BC, we have many services and opportunities. Within the city there is a well-established university (UNBC) and an excellent trades college (CNC). We also

have a good hospital and an airport with regular direct flights to Vancouver, Calgary, and Edmonton, as well as some international destinations.

At the same time, Prince George is in the middle of the vast northern BC wilderness, with forests, lakes, rivers, and mountains surrounding us. Members of our congregation have had lynx, fishers, coyotes, deer, moose, bears, and wolves on their own properties just outside of city limits. Even within the city, chances are good that one day you will have a bear or two exploring your yard. Perhaps this is less appealing to some than to others!

There are three Christian schools in Prince George: Cedars Christian School, Westside Academy, and Zion Lutheran Christian School. In addition, there is a large homeschooling community. Currently, almost all of the families in our congregation homeschool. This is not by design, but if you are open to homeschooling, you would have a lot of support here.

There is much more that could be said, but we wanted to keep this short and readable. We are very thankful for the support and interest of so many churches across Canada. Thank you particularly for your prayers.

May the Lord bless us all in our lives together as the church of Jesus Christ, and may he give us much wisdom and strength to promote and proclaim the gospel in our communities.

If you have any questions, please contact Pastor Tim Schouten. 



Tim Schouten

Missionary

Messiah Canadian Reformed Church, Prince George

pastortim@messiahchurch.ca

250-613-1496

messiahcanrc.ca

PRAYER POINTS:

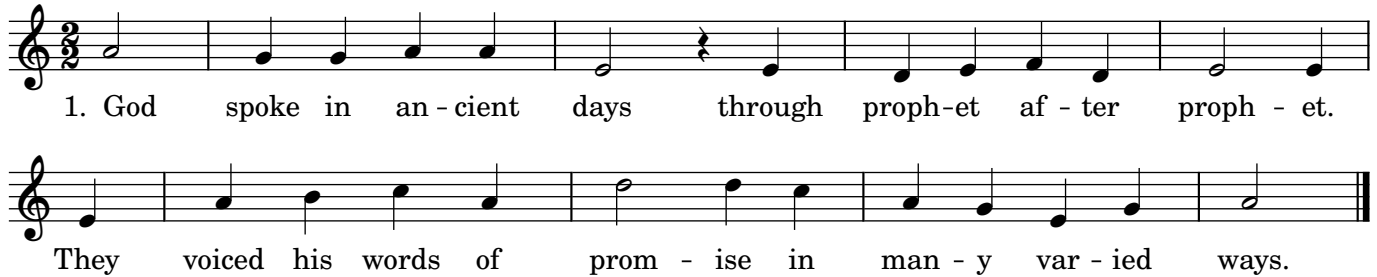
- Pray that more couples in their 50s and 60s would feel called to move to Prince George to help support the Messiah congregation.
- Thank God for the growth and stability he has granted to the Prince George church plant.
- Pray that God would use this congregation as a light in the community and that more people would want to come to know Jesus and be saved.

One of our members organized a pro-life flag display.



In Praise of God the Son

Based on Hebrews 1:1–4



2. Great mercy God has shown.
Now at the end of ages
he clearly and directly
has spoken through his Son.

3. Through him has God unveiled
the grace so long awaited.
What dimly was foreshadowed
has fully been revealed.

4. God's Son, so great in power,
called forth into existence
the world and all the cosmos
where nothing was before.

5. He, crowned as Lord of all,
rules and upholds creation
and on his throne in heaven
has all things in control.

6. His radiance as God's Son
reflects in all its brightness
the nature of the Father.
In glory both are one.

7. When he had with his blood
cleansed us of our transgressions,
he took the seat of honour
at the right hand of God.

8. Raised to the heavenly heights,
he is the king of angels
and bears the name surpassing
all other names in might.

Text: William Helder, 2025
Tune: Gerard Kremer, 1959

O Land, Be Not Fearful

Based on Joel 2:21-27

Guitar chords do not match vocals.

1. ²¹ O land, be not fear - ful. Let noth - ing a - larm you. Re - joice in the
 2. ²² Fear not, herds and flocks. You no hun - ger will suf - fer, For out in the
 3. ²³ *Praise* GOD and be joy - ful, O chil - dren of Zi - on, *Thank Him for the*
 4. ²⁴ *With grain shall your thresh - ing floors ful - ly be cov - ered. With wine and with*
 5. ²⁶ "You'll feast on My plen - ty and nev - er fear hun - ger, And so sing the
 6. ²⁷ "You peo - ple, in whose ver - y midst I am dwell - ing, Shall know that you

LORD as your might - y De - fend - er. For He kept you safe from what -
 mead - ows green grass is ap - pear - ing. The fruit trees their har - vests a -
 rain He has poured from the heav - ens. His mer - cy and faith - ful - ness
 oil shall your vats all flow o - ver. ²⁵ The Lord says, "What swarms of wild
 praise of My love and com - pas - sion. By none will you then be de -
 have on - ly one GOD and Sav - iour, And that by the pow - er all

ev - er could harm you. His love is so fer - vent, His mer - cy so ten - der.
 bun - dant - ly of - fer. The vines and the fig trees their full yields are shar - ing.
 you can re - ly on; He once a - gain au - tumn and spring rains has giv - en.
 lo - custs de - voured — To you I will ren - der as sign of My fa - vour.
 spised an - y long - er, For you I have res - cued from shame and op - pres - sion.
 pow - ers ex - cel - ling You will from all shame and dis - grace be de - liv - ered."

Music: Unknown

Text: William Helder, 2025 © 2025, wllmhldr@gmail.com

TORN SAIL

12 12. 12 12.

AGENTS OF MERCY

JAN DEGELDER

In the previous column on the Church Order we considered what we have agreed to as the core tasks of the shepherds (or pastors) of the congregation (i.e. ministers and elders). This time we look at Article 23 which briefly outlines the duties of the office of deacon.

Just as I mentioned with regard to elders and ministers, the adopted Form for Ordination gives a more comprehensive description than we have in the Church Order.¹ In the Form, the task of the deacons is characterized as “Ministry of Mercy,” a ministry that reflects the biblical vision that “no one in the congregation of Christ may live uncomforted under the pressure of sickness, loneliness and poverty.” That sounds very beautiful. But it also sounds challenging. How are they going to do that? In this article I can only highlight a few aspects.

As far as I can see, I don’t think that in our churches we have fully outgrown the mindset that if a (young) man has served well as a deacon, then, at the next round of voting, he may be promoted to the “higher” rank of elder. This ignores an important observation. Rev. Van Oene makes the comment that the office of deacon often requires more experience and wisdom than the work of an elder, and that in many instances it is more difficult to be a good

deacon than to be a good elder.² He is correct. And that makes it very valuable to have older brothers serve as experienced deacons.

DEACONS AND CONGREGATION

The pre-1983 version of our current Article 23 focused on the deacons visiting and comforting where needed, as well as collecting and distributing the collected gifts among those in need. A good change in this article is that it now also emphasizes the responsibility “to see to the good progress of the service of charity in the congregation” and to “exhort the members of Christ’s body to show mercy.” In other words, showing mercy and helping those in need are not just the jobs of the deacons, but both are the responsibility of all the members of the congregation.

Acts 2:44–45, 4:32–35, and 1 Corinthians 12:21–27 show that a merciful attitude is simply characteristic of what the church is all about. I think it is fair to say that a lot of this is happening already in the churches, even without the deacons exhorting people to do so. At the same time, stimulating and facilitating this remains an important part of the work of the deacons. But how to do that? What is the best way to engage the congregation in this process

¹ And in this case also, several books have been written about the office of deacon, and about the work they do.

² W.W.J. Van Oene, *With Common Consent*, Winnipeg 1990, 109



of growing more and more into the community of mercy Jesus Christ wants us to be?

The most obvious way for the deacons to fulfill this task is to regularly visit all the members of the congregation. Unfortunately, when they try, deacons can still get the reply: “Why do you want to visit me? I’m okay. I don’t need your help!” The answer is, of course: “That’s great, but perhaps someone else might need *your* help.”

Apparently sometimes the deacons still have a lot of educating to do. One way to support these efforts, to create more awareness in the congregation of what the office of deacon is all about, could be distributing a semi-annual newsletter. It could be just one page with relevant information, helpful resources, etc.

DEACONS AND ELDERS

Although we picture deacons as men who collect and distribute money, sometimes money is not the greatest need in people’s lives. When individuals or families have chronic financial needs, those are often connected with other pastoral “problems” they struggle with. This illustrates the benefit of having experienced deacons who demonstrate spiritual wisdom and discernment. But more importantly, here the work of the deacons connects with the work of the elders. To make that function effectively, the brothers need to cooperate closely. As we see elders and deacons working

together, it is good to think a bit more about the relationship between these two offices in the church.

The biblical roots for both elders and deacons are outlined in the Form for Ordination. It’s interesting: we have one Form for both offices, but in the descriptions of duties and responsibilities there is not much in common. The Form clearly separates “the government of the church” from “the ministry of mercy.” Together the deacons form the “deaconry” or “diaconate,” which is a body separate from the “eldership” but not fully independent from it.

This does not only mean that the brothers cooperate where their labours overlap, so to speak, but there is also a formal aspect to this. It does not say so in Article 23, but Article 42 of the Church Order stipulates that the deacons “shall give account of their labours to the consistory.” It does not specify what such “giving account” should look like. Is it a matter of sharing some general information for the consistory to take note of? Or is it a more formal and detailed report which requires the consistory’s approval? To avoid any misunderstanding, with “more detailed” I don’t mean names, amounts, and personal circumstances of persons or families that are financially supported. The deacons have their own responsibilities which must be respected by the elders.

At the same time, Reformed church polity knows only one ruling body in the church which is the consistory, consisting of minister(s) and elders (see Art 38 CO). Christ has entrusted the government of the church to the shepherds. This implies that they have supervision, not only over the service of Word and sacrament, but also over the service of mercy. Again, this is not to micro-manage the practice of how to show mercy, or how much support is given to whom. But in the end, the general stipulations that regulate the ministry of mercy are the consistory’s responsibility. If that were not the case, we would end up with two independent bodies governing the church, which could become quickly problematic, especially in cases of differences or disagreements.

DEACONS AND CONSISTORY

This leads to another question that has triggered some debate over time. Most of us are familiar with the distinction between council and consistory, although some churches intentionally avoid the word “council,” and use the terminology “consistory” and “consistory with deacons” instead. The latter is more in line with the wording of the Church Order, but I am not arguing here about the terms as such. Whether you prefer “council” or “consistory with deacons,” the question is: what is the role of the deacons as they meet with the consistory? “Giving account of their labours”

is stipulated in Article 42. Sure, but that does not require all the deacons to be present at a meeting every month for a whole evening. What else? Does the office of deacon include governing the church? In some instances, it does. In the Church Order we have agreed that the deacons must be involved in all matters that have to do with entering into office, serving in office, as well as leaving office, for all office bearers. This is stated in ten different articles of the Church Order but the scope is actually very limited.

I cannot oversee how it works in all the local churches of our federation, but I think that in practice the deacons are often involved in everything except matters of pastoral care and discipline. Is that a good thing or not? Opinions differ. Let me share two voices.

Rev. Van Oene was convinced that it is a deplorable error that in Article 38 of our Church Order the consistory is composed of the ministers of the Word and the elders, thus excluding the deacons from the general governance of the church.³ Rev. R.D. Anderson (FRCA), on the other hand, concludes that from the beginning of the Reformation the consistory consisted of elders and ministers. At times deacons would attend, but without having any part in governing the church. He suggests a return to the original practice and to following the Church Order more closely. This means that the deacons would only join the consistory for matters pertaining to the ministry of mercy, and for the matters specifically indicated in the Church Order. Without responsibility for the general government of the church, the deacons would be able to focus more on their diaconal task.⁴

DEACONS RESTORED

In the Roman Catholic Church before the Reformation, deacons had become no more than helpers of the bishop. The Reformers restored the awareness that deacons do have an ecclesiastical office, and that they do not rank lower or higher than elders. That's why the apostle Paul addresses his letter to the Philippians to the believers "with their overseers and deacons." And that's why, in 1 Timothy 3, he can seamlessly move from listing the qualifications for elders to those for deacons. However, this does not imply that the task of the deacons includes governing the church. 



Jan DeGelder

Minister Emeritus

Redemption Canadian Reformed Church, Flamborough

jdegelder8@gmail.com

³ Id., 176

⁴ R.D. Anderson, <https://anderson.genevanconsort.com/pdfs/deacons-and-consistory.pdf>

CLARION KIDS ASK!

I wonder how you know the Bible is true?

- Kate, grade 3

Hello Kate,

It is good to ask that question. Your parents teach you to obey the Bible, right? And you should only do that if the Bible is true.

The Bible is God's words written down so that we can read them. When you know God, then you know the Bible is true, because he is perfectly good. And you know God because he gives us the most important thing, which is *faith*. Faith means you believe in God.

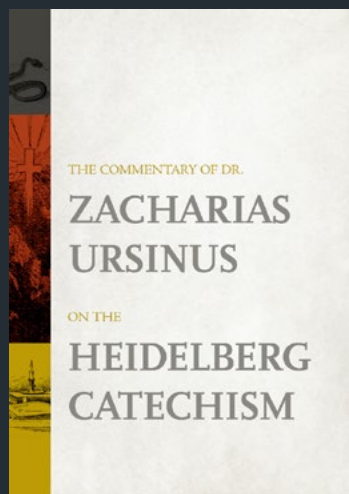
You can also know the Bible is true because you can read the words that God told his prophets and then see that those things came true. I will give you an example: the prophet Micah wrote about a ruler who would be born in Bethlehem. That was written 700 years before Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem! If you read Psalm 22:16–18 in your Bible, can you see whom King David was writing about? He wrote that about 1000 years before it happened!

God gave us the Bible so that we could know who he is and what he has done for us. Every word God speaks or writes is true, so when you read his words you know you can love him and trust him.

Till next time,

Mrs. Veenendaal

Email your question to editor@clarionmagazine.ca
and watch for the answer here in the *Clarion!*



AN ESSENTIAL CATECHISM RESOURCE

The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism, trans. George W. Willard.
Jenison MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2025. Hardcover, 672 pages.

I bought an earlier edition of this commentary in my first year of seminary, way back in 1996. Since then, it has been a go-to reference on the Heidelberg Catechism. It was written by one of the authors (actually the main author) and therefore it has to be regarded as a definitive interpretation—so my reasoning went. Over the years, I’ve often referred to it when preparing for teaching and preaching the Catechism.

This new edition from the Reformed Free Publishing Association is a welcome sight, especially since the commentary has been out of print for a few years. Compared to the earlier P & R reprint of the 1852 American publication, this edition is freshly formatted for easier reading. It contains numerous footnotes indicating original sources. It has corrected the translator’s mistakes. It has translated all foreign language quotations. This edition also includes Scripture and name indexes. If you have the older P & R reprint, it will be well worth your money to buy this improved edition.

For those who’ve never owned it, it’s a great resource, especially if you’re regularly preaching or teaching the Catechism. It’ll be a good addition for church libraries too. But be warned: it wasn’t written as a popular guide to the Catechism. It’s academic and presented in the Protestant scholastic mode. Nevertheless, much of it will still be accessible to most Reformed readers today.

One of the helpful emphases of this commentary is on the historic Reformed distinction between law and gospel. Early on, in the “Prolegomena,” it says, “The doctrine of the church consists of two parts, the law and the gospel, in which we have comprehended the sum and substance of the sacred Scriptures” (p. 4). This is elaborated upon elsewhere; for example, in the commentary on Lord’s Day 34 (pp. 490-498).

There is only one major issue I have with this new edition. The authorship of this commentary is complex and unresolved. It was not actually written by Zacharias Ursinus. Contrary to some descriptions, it is *not* a collection of lecture notes taken by his students either. The most we can say is that it is based on student notes, some of which were later edited and compiled by David Pareus (1548-1622). We have no way of telling which parts of this commentary genuinely reflect the thought of Ursinus, though undoubtedly some parts do. Scholars have therefore suggested that we are better off describing the authorship of this commentary as “Quasi-Ursinus,” or perhaps as coming from the Ursinus community of scholars. Though these issues have been long recognized, there is no mention of them in the foreword from the publisher. Readers should be aware that, given this authorial morass, this commentary is not the definitive word on the Heidelberg Catechism that we may once have thought it was. It certainly originates with Ursinus’ lectures on his own Catechism, and it may roughly correspond to his thinking, but other influences have likely adulterated the text.¹

That last point notwithstanding, I’m glad that RFPA pursued this project. The end product is a fine volume, both inside and out. 



Wes Bredenhof

Minister

Free Reformed Church of Launceston

bookreview@clarionmagazine.ca

¹ For more on this see: Boris Wagner-Peterson, “Zacharias Ursinus und “seine” Auslegung des Heidelberger Katechismus,” in *Geschichte und Wirkung des Heidelberger Katechismus. Vorträge der 9. Internationalen Emdener Tagung zur Geschichte des reformierten Protestantismus*. (ed. Matthias Freudenberg and J. Marius J. Lange Ravenswaay; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2013), 87-109.

