

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

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Clarion

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what's inside

After Ascension Day comes Pentecost—another jewel in the crown of our Lord's great achievements which in turn is a great blessing for us! Winston Bosch meditates on how we can think and act more pentecostally. In two other articles, we back up a little to what our Lord experienced on the cross: just what do we mean when we confess in the Apostles' Creed that "he descended into hell"? Jason VanVliet walks us through the technical side of this ancient question while newly minted pastor Caleb Kos describes just how meaningful this teaching is for us personally. The gospel of Christ's descent into hell gives us great reason for praise and Bill Helder's new rendition of Psalm 57 as well as George van Popta's English translation of the Dutch hymn "Solid Rock My Safe Retreat" help us do just that.

Have you or a loved one suffered from dark feelings after giving birth? Then you may be encouraged by the launch of "Postpartum Pods" which offer Christian support to moms, as Ilse Vandermeulen reports on. Rick Ludwig's review of Kelly Kopic's *You're Only Human* offers its own encouragement in the midst of our often crazy-busy lives. Matthew VanLuik is back with the second part of his "Liturgy and the Mission Church" in which he highlights, among other things, that singing the Psalms is important but that we may need to offer newcomers tunes other than the Genevans. The long-standing priority of singing the Psalms in our churches is not something we should take for granted, as Bram Vegter's translation of a report out of the Netherlands indicates a growing movement in Reformed settings to leave the Psalms behind.

In other offerings, we present a thought-provoking piece by Reuben Bredenhof on the low if not declining growth rate among our churches, an introduction to the brother behind Christ for All Ministry Canada, an encouraging update about the surging growth of a unique Christian school in Vernon, BC, our usual *Ray of Sunshine*, and my own editorial on whether we as churches might give thought to the whole man we call to serve as our pastor and teacher. Thanks for reading!

Peter Holtvliwer

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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

CONSIDER THE WHOLE MAN

At this time of the year, many vacant churches are in the middle of calling a candidate or minister to serve as their pastor. This brings to mind a question: do search committees and the councils who mandate them consider the whole man? I have the impression that calling committees and councils pay thorough attention to the needs and desires of the congregation—which is well and good. But then, when they find a candidate that meets those needs and desires (or close to it), they often simply proceed with presenting his name to the congregation and issuing a call. It can be rather utilitarian: *will he be good for us? Great, let's call him!*

But could the council, search committee, and congregation also ask: would *we* be good for *him*? I'm not asking that ministers be coddled and spoiled—that would be to no one's benefit. Rather, I'm pleading for congregations to help their ministers along with their particular *needs* as well as with their *strengths*. Most ministers come with a Spirit-driven desire to serve and will be reluctant to seek such assistance. But the congregation can take it upon itself to ask: how can we assist this servant—with all that makes him who he is—to joyfully flourish in his work? To ponder such a question would be, I believe, a win-win for all parties, all to the glory of God. Let me suggest two broad areas to consider.

PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Every minister comes with unique personal circumstances. For brothers who are single, would it not be good to tactfully inquire and come to know how this brother functions on his own? Is he lonely or in need of companionship? Would he appreciate being invited over for dinner semi-regularly or does he prefer being on his own? Is he a good time manager? Would he appreciate help with scheduling things or perhaps with organizing his finances? Does he need a sounding board for sermon ideas? While many wives help their minister husbands with such matters, the single minister may (or may not) need a hand.

For a brother who is married with children, what a blessing it is when time is taken by the calling church (especially the council) to get to know his wife and children. Sometimes there are obvious challenges in the family and learning about them and how the congregation may be able to provide support is a great boost for the minister and his wife. At other times the challenges may be much more subtle and yet still have a profound effect upon the pastor (and his wife). When elders know what's going on and

come by regularly to bring a word of encouragement and to pray with the couple, it will be deeply appreciated and go a long way to helping the brother do his work with joy.

TALENTS & INTERESTS

Every minister also comes with his unique talents and interests within the field of ministry—wouldn't it be wonderful for both minister and church if these were noticed, discussed, and given opportunity for development? Some brothers are gifted teachers who would love to offer extra classes for the congregation on things like church history, church polity, outreach, or perhaps one of the confessions. Some men have a talent for counselling, others are drawn to further academic studies, and still others enjoy writing articles or books. Some ministers are keen administrators while others dislike “paperwork” and would rather do “people work”—why not give the minister a chance to play to his strengths (where feasible) and let someone else do the kind of work that is a drag for him (again, where feasible)? If a church council paid attention to and encouraged the minister to explore his ministry-related talents and interests, would that not be a boon for all concerned?

According to our Form for Ordination, every minister is ordinarily called to do three main things: preach the Word and administer the sacraments; teach the Word (to youth and newcomers); and bring the Word in a personal way by visiting in the congregation. No doubt each servant will have parts he enjoys more than others, but with some creative thinking could we not give ministers more opportunities to develop their God-given gifts and interests for the benefit of the church(es)? I'm not speaking about pandering to a man's ego or what tickles his fancy nor allowing him to be lazy. Rather, I'm proposing that we zero in on what he's good at and interested in *within the field of being a minister of the Word* in order to harness his talents in greater service of Christ's church and kingdom.

For everyone's benefit, can we consider the whole man? 🍌



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Pentecostal, not Provincial

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. – Acts 1:8

To be *provincial* is to be narrow minded. It is to think just of your little province, your little corner of the world. To be Pentecostal is the opposite. It is to have an expansive view of the church and to be on mission to the whole world. At Pentecost, Jesus sends the church out the door not just to Judea, but to Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

No one could accuse the apostle Paul of being provincial. In Acts 13:46-47 he says: “the Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’” In fact, Paul took that command quite literally.

What did Paul understand as the ends of the earth? Well, if Paul headed south from Jerusalem to the Red Sea and passed by boat through the Bab al-Mandab Strait, he would hit the Indian Ocean – the end of the earth. If he sailed west from Jerusalem on the Mediterranean and passed through Strait of Gibraltar he would hit the Atlantic Ocean, the other end of the earth. These were the boundaries of the known world talked about in Psalm 72.

Psalm 72 prophesies of a day when the LORD will have dominion to the ends of the earth; a day when the kings of Tarshish (Spain at the Strait of Gibraltar) and of Sheba and Seba (Yemen and Ethiopia on either side of the Bab al-Mandab Strait) would serve the Lord. Paul would have known this psalm off by heart. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Paul made it his aim to obey the command of Christ and fulfill the psalmist’s prophecy.

The last outpost of Roman civilization at the end of the world was in Spain. So that is where Paul resolved in the Spirit to go. In Romans 15:24 he writes: “I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation, but as it is written, ‘Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand’... I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain.”

We don’t know if Paul ever made it to the end of the earth. Maybe he did, and for sure he tried. I like to imagine him singing Psalm 72 along the way: “Christ shall have dominion over land and sea; earth’s remotest regions shall his kingdom be. They that

wilds inhabit shall their worship bring; kings shall bring their tribute, nations serve their king!”

Paul was Pentecostal, not provincial. What about you? What about me? What about our churches? I know for myself it is so easy to be provincial, to focus on my own little corner of the world. Pentecost is the antidote. At Pentecost, Jesus sends us out the door to the ends of the earth! This Pentecost, let’s take the command of Jesus at face value. Let’s follow the example of Paul as he followed Jesus (1 Cor 11:1). Please generously support mission work. Please consider becoming a missionary. Please send out more missionaries as churches. Let’s not quench the Spirit (1 Thess 5:19). Let’s go to the end of the world! Let’s be Pentecostal, not provincial!

FURTHER READING:

Psalm 72

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. After reading Psalm 72, sing it as a Psalm and as Hymns 45 and 46 in the *Book of Praise*.
2. Read Romans 15:24. If you can’t be a foreign missionary like Paul, what can you do?
3. Missionaries can often feel kind of alone. Go to reformedmissions.net, find a missionary, and write them a note of encouragement.
4. Make friends with someone who is not a Christian. Have a coffee or a meal with them. Talk to them about Jesus. Invite them to church.



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Christ Descended into Hell

JASON VANVLIET

The fourth article of the Apostles' Creed affirms that Jesus Christ "descended into hell." For centuries the Christian church around the world has confessed this truth. Yet questions still arise.

To begin with, precisely *when* did our Saviour descend into hell? The order of articles in the Apostles' Creed seems to suggest that it happened *after he died*. The Westminster Larger Catechism goes in this direction, explaining that Christ continued "in the state of the dead, and under the power of death till the third day, which has been otherwise expressed in these words, 'He descended into hell'" (Q&A 50). However, the Heidelberg Catechism focusses our attention elsewhere, placing his descent *before and especially during his death* (LD 16, Q&A 44). So, which one is it? Did Christ descend into hell during or after his death?

Besides the question of *when*, though, we may also struggle with the *how* and *why*. Is it even possible that Christ, who is true God and perfectly righteous man, spent time in the unquenchable fire (Mark 9:43)? Can God dwell in hell, even for a limited time? Moreover, what would Christ achieve in hell beyond what he had already accomplished on the cross? On the cross, knowing that "all was now finished," he proclaimed, "It is finished!" (John 19:28, 30). What part of this finished work still had to be done after his death . . . in hell of all places? These valid questions deserve clear, biblical answers.

DESCENT AFTER DEATH?

God's Word speaks of an unspeakably dreadful place called hell, or *Gehenna* (Matt 5:22; 10:28; 23:33; Mark 9:43–47). In hell, the unrighteous, those who reject Christ as Saviour, are punished. Hell is the place of weeping, gnashing of teeth, and unquenchable fire.

Did our Lord descend to this place of eternal punishment after he died? What does Jesus himself say about this? To the criminal dying on the cross beside him he announced where they both would be in only a few hours when he said: "Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). Without a doubt, paradise is

not hell. Quite the opposite; paradise poetically describes heaven (2 Cor 12:3; Rev 2:7).

While our Lord was still on the cross, mere moments before he died, Jesus once more confirmed that his soul was destined for heaven. He cried out in a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last” (Luke 23:46). The Father’s hands are not found in the prison house of hell. The Father of the Beloved dwells in heaven. So, from our Saviour’s own mouth we hear, twice in fact, that after he died his soul went to heaven.

The Father of the Beloved dwells in heaven. So, from our Saviour’s own mouth we hear, twice in fact, that after he died his soul went to heaven.

What about the body of our Lord? Joseph of Arimathea arranged that Jesus’ body was taken down from the cross and placed in Joseph’s own tomb, located in a garden on the outskirts of Jerusalem (Luke 23:53; John 19:41). This garden cemetery was not hell.

Summing up, while Jesus certainly remained in the state of death for three days, it is equally clear that, after he breathed his last, his soul ascended to the Father in heaven and his body was laid in a tomb near Jerusalem, which is to say that neither his soul nor his body went to Gehenna, the place of eternal punishment, after he died.

Before moving on to our next question, though, 1 Peter 3:18-22 is frequently cited in connection with Christ’s descent into hell. Verse 19 speaks of how Christ “went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.” Based on this, theologians past and present have suggested that after his death Jesus went, in some manner, to hell and announced his victory over the demons. Interpreting this passage is challenging but, sticking for now to the basics, it contains two clear chronological markers: the resurrection of Christ (vv 18b, 21) and the days of Noah (v 20). In the end, however we expound this intriguing passage, no one holds that Christ’s descent into hell happened either after his resurrection or in the days of Noah. Therefore, we will need to look elsewhere in God’s Word to understand this article of the Christian faith.

HOW DID JESUS DESCEND?

If Jesus did not go to the place called hell after he died, why is this article included in the Apostles’ Creed and, for that matter, also the Athanasian Creed in which the church affirms that our deliverer “descended to hell”? To understand this properly we need to step back into the Old Testament. Like every other aspect of our Lord’s atoning work, if we do not pay due attention to the Old Testament, we will miss, or misunderstand, the riches of what he has done for us.

When God’s people in the first covenant speak about facing our last enemy, Death, they often speak about *descending into Sheol* or, as some translations render it, *descending into the grave*. This language occurs at least twenty-five times in the Bible. Here are several examples.

When Jacob supposed that his son Joseph had been torn to death by a wild animal, he refused to be comforted and cried out, “I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning” (Gen 37:35). Likewise, in his agony Job lamented, “As the cloud fades and vanishes, so he who goes down to Sheol does not come up” (Job 7:9).

The Psalms also speak of going down to Sheol. In Psalm 55, David pleads with the Lord concerning those who have betrayed him, “Let death steal over them; let them go down to Sheol alive” (v 15). Yet even the righteous may shudder at the prospect of death. This same David, the man after God’s own heart, cries out, “The cords of death encompassed me; the torrents of destruction assailed me; the cords of Sheol entangled me,” threatening to pull him down (Ps 18:4-5; cf. Ps 116:3). In summary, the Old Testament often connects going down, Sheol, and suffering or distress.

What does all this have to do with Christ’s descent into hell? The answer comes into focus when we put the original Latin text of the Apostles’ and Athanasian Creeds beside the Latin translation of the Old Testament, the Vulgate.

Gen 37:35 – *descendam in infernum*

Job 7:9 – *descenderit ad inferos*

Apostles’ Creed – *descendit ad inferos*

Athanasian Creed – *descendit ad inferos*

Even if you don’t read Latin, you can see how similar the phrases are. The common *Old Testament* language of *descending into Sheol* is being used in both creeds to express a central truth of our Saviour’s saving work. The citation in our translation of Q&A 44 in the Heidelberg Catechism also points us in this direction by referencing Psalms 18 and 116.

SHEOL, GRAVE, OR HELL?

Connecting the ecumenical creeds to the Old Testament is a solid starting point but it does not completely resolve the matter. Descending into Sheol, or the grave, is one thing; all men must return to dust (Eccl 3:20). But suffering the torment of *hell* after death is quite another!

Interestingly, though, the King James Version, first published in 1611 and profoundly impacting the English language, can use both words almost interchangeably. For example, the child of God who loves the LORD cries out, “The sorrows of *death* compassed me, and the pains of *hell* (lit. Sheol) got hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow” (Ps 116:3 KJV). In fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary* still lists the first meaning for *hell* as the “abode of the dead,” leaving the second meaning as “a place of torment, the abode of devils and condemned spirits.”

However, language moves on and, in our day, we do not really use “hell” to refer simply to the grave. So why do we speak of Jesus Christ descending into hell? Why not leave it simply at “the grave” or “Sheol”? The reason is that Jesus Christ is anything but a mere man. Both creeds confess that Christ is the entirely unique one true God and true man, our mediator and deliverer (LD 5–6). He did not *just* die. He died *for us and for our salvation*. Any other mortal may descend toward the grave with various physical, mental, and emotional distresses. But our unique mediator descended toward his grave carrying the eternal punishment for our sins upon his soul and body (LD 15).

Ultimately that punishment was “the anguish and torment of hell” (LD 16). Christ expressed the deepest, darkness pit of this punishment when he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46). The horror of being utterly forsaken by God can only be expressed in one word: hell. As he hung on the cross for us, every hellish anguish, pain, terror, and agony “laid hold” (Ps 116:3) of our Saviour’s soul and body. Jesus did not have to go to the place called hell after he died because as he was dying the fury of hell came to him.

With this in mind, we note that the Westminster Larger Catechism and the Heidelberg Catechism do not directly contradict each other. After all, it is true that Christ descended into the state of death for three days (WLC Q&A 50). We also sing of this in Hymn 2, the rhymed version of the Apostles’ Creed: “he died for us and then was buried / descending into death’s domain.” But there is much more to confess! As part of his descent toward death, our mediator endured hell’s horror so that we would be delivered from it (HC Q&A 44). The latter builds upon the former, and most comfortingly so!

WHY THAT ORDER IN THE CREED?

More than one catechism student has asked, “if Jesus suffered the intense horror of hell *during* his death, why does the Apostles’ Creed put ‘he descended into hell’ *after* his death and burial? Wouldn’t it make more sense to put it *between* he ‘was crucified’ and ‘dead, and buried’?” Good question!

We tend to zero in on chronological succession: what happens first and what occurs next. To be sure, the ecumenical creeds also follow a general chronological line from the incarnation and birth of Jesus Christ to his ascension and return. Yet not slavishly so! For instance, the Nicene Creed places Christ’s suffering *between* his crucifixion and his burial. Clearly this creed is not suggesting that our deliverer only started to suffer *after* the Roman soldiers drove the nails through his hands and feet. To mention only one thing, earlier Jesus agonized intensely in the Garden of Gethsemane. The placement of “he suffered” in the Nicene Creed simply highlights that his most intense suffering occurred on the cross.

In a similar way, the Apostles’ Creed is concerned with more than mere chronology. The punctuation used in the printing of this creed in the *Book of Praise* hints at this by using a semi-colon before “he descended into hell rather” rather than simply adding another comma. As John Calvin once pointed out, the Creed first sets forth “what Christ suffered *in the sight of men* [i.e., crucified, dead, and buried] and then appositely speaks of that invisible and incomprehensible judgment which he underwent *in the sight of God* [i.e., he descended into hell]” (*Institutes*, 2.16.10, parentheses added). So, the descent into hell does not follow his death according to our clocks; instead, it expounds the full significance of his death for our comfort.

CONCLUSION

The phrase “he descended into hell” echoes language commonly used in the Old Testament to describe people being brought down to Sheol or the grave (e.g., Gen 37:35, Job 7:9, Ps 55:15). As the entirely unique person, though, our mediator Jesus Christ suffered not only the terrors of the grave but also the anguish of hell itself as he descended to his atoning death. For this gracious, loving, redemptive act we remain eternally grateful! 🙏



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What a Comfort! Christ Descended into Hell *for Me!*

CALEB KOS

In the previous article, Dr. Jason VanVliet explained some of the controversy, the history, and the meaning of Christ's "descent into hell." My purpose is to build upon his explanation and show the incredible comfort we may draw from confessing Christ's descent into hell. I'll first explain our comfort that Jesus continued "in the state of the dead and under the power of death till the third day" (Westminster Catechism, Q&A 50). Second, I'll explain our comfort that Jesus endured "unspeakable anguish, pain, terror, and agony . . . throughout all his sufferings but especially on the cross" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 44).

JESUS ENTERED DEATH

Scripture tells us that when God created man, he "formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (Gen 2:7). God created us with body and soul and this was "very good." But when we die, "the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Eccl 12:7).

Man, created as a united body and soul, is divided in two. Death is unnatural. It's an enemy that rightfully makes many afraid. Nothing about the state of death is good or proper. Death separates us from loved ones. Many of us have stood at the graveside weeping as we lay the body of a loved one into the ground. Scripture describes death and the state of death (Sheol) as a fearsome enemy (Ps 18:4-5; SoS 8:6). The power of Sheol is irresistible and from the grips of Sheol not one of us could escape (Ps 89:48; Job 7:9). Sheol, the state of death, seemed like an unconquerable enemy.

So, what a comfort the Westminster Catechism's explanation of Christ's descent into hell is! Jesus was in the state of the dead and under the power of death till the third day. Jesus experienced death the same way we do. He did not die only to immediately come back to life. No, his body and soul remained separated for three days.

Jesus is also our sympathetic high priest regarding death. He understands that it is not alright for our souls to exist separate from our bodies. When you see the lifeless body of your mother, your spouse, your child, when you grieve and are even angered by the evilness of death, Jesus knows. He knows even better than you do, because Jesus' lifeless body existed for three days in the tomb, separated from his soul.

How beautiful it is to know that my Savior understands! Jesus knows. Jesus cares.

JESUS CONQUERED DEATH

But Jesus is not just my sympathetic High Priest; he's also my King. And King Jesus has a solution to the problem of death.

The Old Testament hinted at the fact that God would overcome the power of Sheol. Psalm 49:15 says, "But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me." And Daniel 12:2 says: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." What's hinted at in the Old Testament becomes explicit in the New Testament. King Jesus will return, resurrect our bodies from the dead, and reunite them with our souls!

Our King can do this, because he once existed in Sheol himself. Even more, upon his resurrection, Jesus received power over death. Jesus says of himself, "I died," (literally "I was dead," meaning, "I was in the state of death"), and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades" (Rev 1:18). Remember that "Hades" is the Greek translation of "Sheol." And having a key gives you power and authority. You are able to unlock doors and access what's inside. This means that Jesus has the power to release us from death. Previously, Satan had the power of death (Heb 2:14), but through his death and resurrection, Jesus has destroyed Satan and delivered all those who, through fear of death, were subject to lifelong slavery.

It's because Jesus descended into hell, spending three days with body and soul torn apart, that we do not need to grieve as those who have no hope. Jesus has the key; he has the power to unlock the door to death and Hades. And one day our powerful King will do just that. "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord" (1 Thess 4:16-17). And then death and Hades themselves will be "thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev 20:14).

Yes, death and Hades are still the last enemy. Death still brings deep grief and pain. It still even brings some fear; we're uncertain of what our existence will look like separated from our bodies. But we do not grieve and we do not fear as those who have no hope. Each Sunday, when we confess that Jesus descended into hell, we are reminded that he who existed for three days in the state of death, now holds the keys to death and Hades. Praise be to Jesus Christ!

JESUS SUFFERED HELL

Confessing that Jesus descended into hell holds still more comfort for us because Jesus also endured the hellish agony of Sheol while still alive on this earth.¹ He was forsaken by God. He was without any comfort. His soul was in utter, pitch-black darkness. His soul endured all the terror, all the anguish, all the pain and suffering that the damned endure in hell.

Our Apostle's Creed would be horribly impoverished if we lost this article because till this point the Creed focuses primarily on Jesus's *physical* suffering. Even when we read about Jesus' crucifixion in Scripture, it is easy to focus on his physical pain since it's hard to see the agony of Christ's soul. But it is there. And it is far greater than Christ's physical suffering.

In Matthew 26:37-38 we read that Jesus, "taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, 'My soul is very sorrowful, even to death.'" There's no physical cause for his suffering at this point. And yet Jesus is deeply troubled and sorrowful. He feels in his soul the torments of Sheol. Three times Jesus prays fervently to his heavenly Father to take away this suffering.

¹ Much of what follows has been developed from Olevianus's thoughts in *A Firm Foundation: An Aid to Interpreting the Heidelberg Catechism*.



And Luke 22:44 says that “being in agony Jesus prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.” The sorrow of Jesus, the sufferings of his soul, are so great that his body breaks out in a great sweat. How deeply our Savior suffered spiritually!

But Jesus at this point has barely begun his descent into hell. It’s only Thursday night. The torment of Jesus’s soul continues throughout his trial during the night. And before Pilate. Then there’s the march to Golgotha. And finally, the cross. From 9:00AM to 12:00PM on Friday Jesus hangs on the cross, utterly tormented in his soul—and then suddenly comes the darkness. For three hours darkness descends upon the entire land. I wonder if the words of Psalm 88:16–18 went through our Saviour’s mind: “Your wrath has swept over me; your dreadful assaults destroy me. They surround me like a flood all day long; they close in on me together. You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness.”

As our Saviour descended further and further into Sheol, the leaders of Israel gave voice to the thoughts that so often go through our hearts when we suffer: “has God abandoned me to his wrath?” Israel’s leaders mocked: “He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” No wonder Christ cried out from his darkness the words of Psalm 22:1, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!”

JESUS SUFFERED FOR ME

But Jesus was not punished for his sins. He endured the sufferings of hell for *us*. Isaiah 53 says, “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; . . . he was pierced for our transgressions; . . . upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.” Do you see how much your Saviour loves you? He endured all the agony of hell *for you!*

How our Apostles’ Creed would be unbearably deprived if we lost this article! Olevianus writes: “The further Christ humbled himself for us in all his anguish, and the more dearly he paid for our salvation, the more firm our trust in the love of God and in the satisfaction of Jesus Christ becomes.” In other words, the more we see how deeply Christ suffered, the more glorious God’s grace appears, the more awesome his love. The more we see how deeply Christ suffered, the more we see how terribly offensive our sins are to God and how much *we* deserved to suffer. The more we see how much he suffered, the more comfort those words, “It is finished” will hold.

As the Heidelberg Catechism so beautifully puts it: “In my greatest sorrows and temptations, I may be assured and comforted that my Lord Jesus Christ, by his unspeakable anguish, pain, terror, and agony, which he endured throughout all his sufferings but especially on the cross, has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell” (Q&A 44).

Notice how the catechism intentionally switches here to first person pronouns. The rest of Lord's Day 16 speaks of "us" and "our" and "we." But, when the catechism explains the comfort of Christ's descent into hell, it becomes intensely personal: "In *my* greatest sorrow and temptations *I* may be assured and comforted." Christ descended into hell for *me*.

That's the comfort and reassurance my conscience needs again and again, because when temptation is so very strong, I quickly fall into sin. I repent, but that strong pull to sin remains. And in my weakness, my burdened conscience so quickly anticipates the torments of hell. It's so easy to doubt my salvation.

Or maybe you struggle with a terrible sin of the past. Maybe you're reminded again and again of how you grieved your Lord and Saviour and wonder "How can I possibly be saved?" Yes, how many of us don't wrestle with doubt because of those grievous transgressions and sins of our youth (Ps 25:7)? And Satan—the accuser—threatens us; he places the lake of fire before our eyes; he tries to make us afraid. Satan wants us to doubt God's grace.

IT IS FINISHED

When our consciences accuse us, let us rest secure in the sufferings of Christ. Fix your eyes upon the sufferings of your Saviour. Our Saviour was tormented in his soul; spiritually, he suffered the most severe torment possible, so that our consciences may have peace and rest in him. Because you believe in Jesus, you can trust that Christ endured all the anguish and torment of hell that you deserved. There is none left for you.

"Behold the man upon a cross, my sin upon his shoulders; ashamed I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers. It was *my* sin that held him there until it was accomplished; his dying breath has brought me life—I know that it is finished."

Yes, it is *finished*. What a comfort to confess that Jesus descended into hell for me! 🕊



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»	MY NEIGHBOUR



FAITH IN THE FIRE:



MY JOURNEY & THE PERSECUTION OF PAKISTANI CHRISTIANS

My name is Naeem Zafar and I am the Founder and Chairman of Christ for All Ministry Canada (CFAMC). I would like to share with you my journey of faith, perseverance, and purpose. Born in Pakistan, I grew up witnessing firsthand the struggles of Christians in a country where they are a persecuted minority. I am thankful to be able to share my story of endurance through trials, a deep commitment to Jesus Christ, and a calling to serve the persecuted church.

TRANSFORMED BY FAITH

My personal testimony is a testament to God's faithfulness. Raised in a Christian family, I faced societal discrimination and oppression from an early age. The reality of life for Pakistani Christians became evident to me when I saw believers falsely accused under the country's blasphemy laws, their homes burned, and their livelihoods destroyed simply because of their faith.

Despite these challenges, I remained steadfast in my belief that Jesus Christ calls his followers to be salt and light in the world. I was able to study basic theology in Lahore, Pakistan and founded Christ for All Ministries in 2014. In 2016, I moved to Canada, where I started working at Wexxar Bel Packing company in Richmond. I worked there for nine years while also attending the British Columbia Institute for Technology (BCIT) for study. During this time, I was also serving at CFAMC which began its work in 2017 and was officially registered as a charity in Canada in 2018.

I founded CFAMC to provide spiritual and physical aid to Christians in Pakistan and beyond. This ministry focuses on supporting local churches through partnership, Sunday schools, discipleship programs, and providing aid to those in need, including Pakistani Christian refugees in Thailand. I am so thankful for opportunities we have had to support persecuted believers while also sharing and spreading the gospel.

PERSECUTION OF PAKISTANI CHRISTIANS

The persecution of Christians in Pakistan is an ongoing crisis that demands global attention. Numbering around 1.5% of the population, Christians in Pakistan face discrimination at multiple levels—education, employment, and daily social interactions. Many are forced into menial labor, denied access to justice, and live in fear of violence from radical elements in society.

The country's notorious blasphemy laws have been weaponized against Christians, leading to false accusations, wrongful imprisonments, and even mob lynchings. High-profile cases, such as that of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman

falsely accused and sentenced to death before her eventual acquittal, have shed light on the suffering of Pakistan's Christian minority. However, for many, justice remains elusive.

CHRIST FOR ALL MINISTRIES

In rural areas, Christian families working in brick kilns are often trapped in generational debt slavery. These labourers work under inhumane conditions with no hope of escape. Many of their children are unable to attend school, further perpetuating the cycle of poverty and oppression. CFAMC has stepped in to provide food, education, and vocational training to help break this cycle.

Through CFAMC, I have launched several initiatives to bring relief to persecuted Christians. The ministry has established Sunday schools across Punjab Pakistan, currently serving over 700 children, providing them with biblical teaching and basic education. CFAMC also distributes food packages, supports refugee families in Thailand, and prints biblical literature in multiple languages for evangelism.

One of CFAMC's most recent projects includes distributing engraved coins featuring the Ten Commandments and a gospel message to encourage youth to think about God's grace. Additionally, the ministry is working on a sewing center to provide skill training for young Christian women, equipping them with skills for financial independence.

I believe that advocacy is just as crucial as humanitarian aid. I have been actively engaging Canadian officials and Christian organizations to raise awareness about the plight of Pakistani Christians. I urge fellow believers worldwide to pray for, support, and stand in solidarity with those facing persecution.

My life and ministry demonstrate the power of the gospel to bring hope in the darkest circumstances. While the persecution of Pakistani Christians continues, CFAMC stands as a beacon of light, striving to bring the love of Jesus Christ to those in desperate need.

As believers, we are called to remember our persecuted brothers and sisters, to speak out against injustice, and to support ministries that serve them. The need is great, but with God, all things are possible.

In Christ,

Naeem Zafar

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THE LITTLE RED SCHOOL HOUSE



In 2011, Vernon Canadian Reformed Church started a Canadian Reformed School with three eager students. This picture is at the start of year two, when the numbers had already more than doubled!

Nestled in the heart of Vernon BC, surrounded by the stunning landscapes of the Okanagan Valley, there's a school that's proving that big things can come in little red packages.

In 2011, Trinity Christian Academy (TCA) started with just three students and a whole lot of ambition. The first "classroom" was a meeting room in the Vernon Canadian Reformed Church. Imagine three eager little learners and a dedicated teacher making their way through subjects one Bible verse at a time. It was a small beginning but sometimes, that's all it takes.

SMALL BEGINNINGS

The Vernon parents had a vision; to provide a close knit, faith-based educational experience for the children of the Canadian Reformed church. By the following year, TCA had enough support to purchase a portable and make the move into a bigger, brighter space, complete with a washroom and library area. This would be home to TCA for the next three years. The teachers and parents transformed a basic portable into a cozy, engaging, and enjoyable place in which the kids could learn and grow. And grow they did! By the fourth year of TCA the portable became a little *too* cozy and it was clear that a permanent school would be necessary to accommodate the growing number of students and grades.

In 2015, the school society purchased the corner property (complete with an existing house) in front of the Vernon Canadian Reformed Church. With much trust in the heavenly Father, demolition and removal of the house commenced. The construction of the new school came with many challenges and rewards over the next year but thanks to an army of volunteers (builders, suppliers, cleaners, lunch makers, and coffee bringers to name a few), Trinity Christian Academy moved into its new little red schoolhouse in February of 2016. With three classrooms, a staff room, and a library, the teachers enthusiastically ushered students in Kindergarten through Grade 5 into the building. The welcoming and fresh new space symbolized the school's growth and marked a new chapter in its story.

Just three short years later, TCA saw so much growth that expansion was necessary. In 2019, two more classrooms were added and filled quickly with more desks, chairs, tables, and books. By this time, TCA went to Grade 7 with sights set on providing grades 8 and 9 as soon as a certified and qualified teacher could be found. The lot north of the school was also purchased with the hope (and many prayers) of future expansion to accommodate grades 10–12. Through countless generous donations and much fundraising, a playground, gaga ball pit, tetherball pole, bike rack, and sports field were added to the property along the way.

A BLENDED MODEL

Today, Trinity Christian Academy is home to roughly 50 students in grades K-9. TCA is a Distributed Learning (DL) school in a unique “blended model,” a blend of home school and brick and mortar school. TCA is under the supervision of a recognized Distributed Learning school, Traditional Learning Academy (TLA). TLA supplies certified overseeing teachers, but all the subjects are taught by our TCA teaching assistants in the school. TCA has a six-member school board, a principal, vice principal, administrator, certified overseeing teachers, teaching assistants, and learning assistance personnel. All this expertise combines to ensure the children grow in the knowledge and fear of the LORD while also meeting the required BC curriculum standards.

Being a blended Distributed Learning school allows for great flexibility and means that the parents have an active role in their children’s education. A percentage of the schooling is done by teachers and teaching assistants in the school and a percentage is done by the parents at home. The subjects of Bible, Math, Language Arts, Science, Unit Study, French, Spanish, and Art are taught at the school during school hours. Some spelling, memory work, math practice, and special projects are done at home after school with parental guidance. Physical Education and Applied

Skills are the responsibility of the parents outside of school hours. These two subjects allow the children to choose activities they are interested in, and this provides an avenue to explore many different sports and hobbies. Some of the grandparents have even volunteered to share their expertise in things like woodworking and mechanics!

GROWING STILL . . . BY GRACE

Trinity Christian Academy has grown in leaps and bounds in the last 14 years, a true blessing from the LORD. After much prayer and discussion, the parent association of TCA has voted and hopes (DV) to expand into a full K-12 institution by adding grades 10-12 as soon as possible. This will take an immense amount of work and dedication. However, the parents of TCA trust that the LORD will provide what is needed, as he always has. TCA warmly invites you to come and take a tour if you’re ever in the Vernon area! One look at our thriving and lively schoolhouse and we think you’ll agree; great things can come from humble beginnings.

Yolanda Vanderhorst and Kristen Deboersap
Vernon, BC



Trinity Christian Academy has grown into a thriving community serving Grades K-9, with plans to add Grades 10-12 soon.



ARE WE STAGNATING?

REUBEN BREDENHOF

Last year I read a fascinating, if not disturbing, book about the decline of the church in Canada. It was written by two professors of theology from Toronto, Brian Clark and Stuart Macdonald, and called *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances in Canada since 1945*.¹ In general, theirs is not a happy story to tell.

The authors point out that Christianity enjoyed a favoured place in Canadian culture up until relatively recently. For instance, it used to be that many public schools opened their day with the Lord's Prayer. Remarkably, the Centennial celebrations in 1967 opened with a Christian worship service. But this influence has long faded. Many Canadians today have little familiarity with basic Christian truths like the identity of Jesus or the contents of the Ten Commandments. In a real and profound way, Canadian culture has become de-Christianized.

CHURCHES FOR SALE

You are likely unsurprised by such observations. We all know the familiar sight of a boarded up United Church building, or a former Anglican church turned into a trendy cafe. But much more than sharing anecdotes and gut feelings, the authors provide a plethora of statistics from national censuses, household surveys, and denominational yearbooks. Cold, hard numbers tell this story of the decline of Christianity in Canada.

After times of extraordinary vibrancy in the 1950s and 1960s, rates of decline in the so-called mainline churches have been steep. For instance, between 2001 and 2011, the United Church of Canada saw a 24.9% decline in membership, which amounts to a loss of almost 160,000 members.

Even in churches that have enjoyed some membership growth in the last forty years, it is often at a nominal level, typically adding less than 2% per annum over a decade. Evangelical denominations are one of the few forms of Christianity that is growing moderately in Canada, or at least not shrinking. Clark and Macdonald point out that one of the only segments that is growing consistently above minimal levels is Pentecostalism, whose various denominations saw an almost 30% growth in membership between 2001 and 2011.

OUR GROWTH

Reading Clark and Macdonald's account of churches in precipitous numerical decline brought a question to my mind: What about us? What story would be told by our numbers as Canadian Reformed Churches? To answer these questions, at least partially, we can look at the membership numbers that have appeared in

the annual Yearbook of the Canadian and American Reformed Churches, published since 1952.²

Through the 1950s, during the height of immigration from post-war Europe, our churches had an annual rate of increase of around 7% to 9%. To put it concretely, each year about 540 new members were added to the total membership, a trend that continued into the early 1960s. Now, I should note here that I am not distinguishing between communicant and non-communicant members. Also, "new members added" is net of any membership losses due to death, excommunication, or withdrawal. Adding 540 members per year does not sound like a really significant addition, but as a proportion of the total membership, this is healthy growth. When your denomination totals just 3600 souls, for instance, this is a noticeable addition of members.

But then growth began to slow. In each of the subsequent decades, from 1960 to 1990, membership growth stood at about 3% per year. From 1991 until today, the net rate of growth has been hovering around 1.5%, or roughly 240 new members added to the grand total each year.

The numbers fluctuate in curious ways. For instance, from 2023 to 2024, the entire federation gained just 19 members; the following year, 254 were added. It remains in the positive range, but this is minimal. If you picture a crowd of 20,000 people, adding 250 more does not make a significant impact. Congregation sizes are trending downwards too. There are now 70 congregations in our federation, compared to 50 about twenty years ago. Twenty years ago, the average congregation size was 317 members, now it's 287.

A LIMITED PICTURE

The picture from these yearbook statistics is limited, and the numbers invite more questions than they can answer. For instance, on an annual basis, how many people are being excommunicated—or, perhaps more likely, withdrawing—from our churches? Has the rate of departure been increasing, decreasing, or has it been stable over the last few decades? Or how many members are joining from elsewhere, not entering the church through being baptized as infants but later in life?

If it could be done, I'm sure that a study of the meta-data that has been collected by the ChurchSocial app for many of our congregations would reveal interesting trends in relation to birth rates, death rates, the median age of members, etc. For example, it would be a safe wager that the birth rate is falling in our churches, seeing

¹ Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017.

² I thankfully acknowledge Rev. John van Popta's work in compiling a detailed spreadsheet of these numbers and sharing it with me.

as this rate is declining rapidly in almost every Western country. Comparisons of rural, urban, and suburban rates of growth for our churches could also be intriguing. There are economic reasons (such as the cost of housing) for shifts in population, leading some individual churches to decline, others to grow quickly. And no doubt one church grows and another declines because of the “circulation of the saints.”

I have been told that demographics is a complex science, so I’ll stay in my lane. Nevertheless, the nominal rate of growth (1.5%) for our churches across the last three decades causes me to reflect. Every year, babies are being baptized, and every year new members are joining and making public profession of faith. On the other hand, every year there are members whom God calls to himself, and every year there are some who are excommunicated or who withdraw. Even so, one might expect the rates of total growth to be higher. If we gain 250 people per year, this means that on average, each congregation has had a net growth of only 3.5 members—certainly not a skyrocketing increase.

“Numbers” is only one aspect of church growth, of course. Other forms of growth are far more important, such as growth in the fruit of the Spirit. The authors of the aforementioned book respond to the critique that focusing on numbers isn’t the point: “Some may think we are preoccupied—even obsessed—with numbers. But dealing in numbers is the only way to identify trends with precision and to assess their magnitude and momentum. Now, admittedly, faith is a difficult thing to count. Yet the reality is that, like so many things in our culture, we insist upon counting faith or at least various things that we take to be representative of faith” (p. 9).

And when one looks at the cold, hard numbers for our Canadian Reformed churches, decade over decade, one sees only very modest growth. One might fear that we are stagnating. Will the year be soon when we have a net loss of membership?

TOWARDS GROWTH

As churches, it should be our aim to always grow in the faith and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet 3:18). To this end, holding fast to true doctrine and maintaining faithful preaching ought to be our priority. This is particularly so when considering the cautionary tale of those many churches that saw a total membership collapse—often in the wake of accepting liberal theology or

caving in to unbiblical ethics. The book of Acts describes how “the Word of God increased and multiplied” (12:24) and how the churches “increased in numbers daily” (16:5). Jesus said 2000 years ago that the fields are ripe for harvest, and so they remain.

One challenge is that our society is post-Christian. We cannot assume that visitors will have a basic familiarity with Christian teaching and practice. Therefore, we should be ready to receive them with a generous and patient spirit, teaching them well and integrating them quickly into congregational life.

In recent years, many hundreds of thousands of immigrants have arrived in Canada, and a good number seem to arrive with the intent of finding a new church home. This presents us with a wonderful opportunity. A recent Pew Report on migration and religion notes that nearly half of the migrants in this world are Christians. This has potential to reshape the religious landscape in countries like ours, as Christians migrate here from Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Seeking to grow the Lord’s church through preaching and sharing the gospel, we should also promote the increase of families. Our culture values the freedom and autonomy of singleness, and those who do marry tend to marry later in life and to have fewer children. These trends can be countered in the churches only through faithful biblical teaching and mentoring. We should seek to help and encourage our young people to cut against the cultural grain so that we can be fruitful and faithful.

Reflecting on statistics and trends, peering cautiously into the future, we’re grateful to rest in the knowledge that God alone gives the growth (1 Cor 3:6). To him we prayerfully commit the future of our churches, while also accepting his charge to guard sound doctrine, to be fruitful and multiply, and to make disciples of the nations and our neighbours.📖



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LITURGY & THE MISSION CHURCH

(PART 2)

MATTHEW VAN LUIK

Editor's note: This is Part 2 of an article begun in Issue 7, looking at preaching and worship in a mission context. Part 1 considered liturgy, the regulative principle of worship, the purpose of worship, and movement within worship. This article focuses on songs and music within worship.

SONGS IN WORSHIP

When it comes to liturgy in our churches, a somewhat controversial question is the role of music in the worship service. First, what kind of songs should we sing in the worship service? While some insist on exclusively singing the psalms, generally there is an acceptance to include hymns. It was the practice in the early church to sing the psalms and, in the Reformed tradition, the psalms have always had a primary place in the worship service.

Why has the church given the singing of the Psalms the primary place in the worship service? The simplest explanation is that the book of Psalms is the song book of the Scriptures. The Psalms give us license to sing things that no hymn writer would dare to write.

We never need to question the expressions found in the Psalms for we confess that, as Scripture, they are inspired by the Spirit of God, whereas hymn writers are not (see 2 Peter 1:21). The psalmists speak about a range of emotions that often mirror the emotions in our own lives. At times they question God's ways or accuse him of being far from us. The psalmists often give expression to the things that we feel which hymn writers cannot. The reaction of many who come to the faith is that they love to be able to sing Scripture itself. While the psalms look forward to the coming of the Saviour, and speak of hope in God, the hymns give expression to God's completed work in Christ Jesus.



MUSIC IN WORSHIP

The more controversial question is that of the music itself. The early immigrants to Canada of the Canadian Reformed churches devoted much time and effort to produce an English Genevan Psalter. The Genevan Psalter in Europe has its roots in the Great Reformation and they wanted to continue that tradition in North America. Other churches in North America have created different musical traditions. For that reason, Canadian Reformed churches stand out from other Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America regarding the Genevan melodies. Therefore our musical tradition sounds strange to those who come from other Christian backgrounds.

The reality is that, while many guests and new members love the emphasis in the worship service on the biblical preaching and appreciate the style of worship, they struggle when singing many of the Genevan tunes. We might argue about the quality of the Genevan tunes, and the value of the tradition that has been handed down, yet to the ear of many who worship with us, not only does it sound foreign, but some also comment that the music is not uplifting but more like that of a dirge. Perhaps when people learn the tunes, they may begin to better appreciate them, but music is one of the first impressions people have of our worship.

So how should the church approach what is a stumbling block for some to join the church? We need to begin by distinguishing between biblical principles and traditions. The principle is that the church sings psalms, but the type of music we use is determined by our traditions. That explains why other Reformed and Presbyterian churches with whom we have relationships in North America have a different musical tradition. You cannot say that the one is right, and the other is wrong, even though some might argue that one is better than the other. There are guidelines that the churches have used to determine what kind of music is appropriate and not appropriate for worship. If the music falls within those guidelines, we cannot elevate one kind of tradition above the other.

I am not advocating that the church should abandon the tradition of the Genevan melodies. As a new member once said to me regarding the Genevan Psalter, the church should not be ashamed of her good traditions; we may be thankful for that which has been passed down through the generations. But, he also acknowledged

that the Genevan melodies are a challenge for many who come to the church.

The Canadian Reformed churches have now begun to adopt alternate melodies for the psalms which is a helpful step for members who come to us from many different cultural backgrounds. I wonder, since there are many musical talents in the churches today, is it possible to develop new music to complement the singing of the psalms that also recognizes the different cultural background of our new members? Should a church that has a growing diversity in cultural backgrounds not look at incorporating different musical traditions that reflect that diversity?

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS IN WORSHIP

Let me try to tackle another contentious aspect of music in the worship service, namely the use of musical instruments. According to the regulative principle of worship, music in the worship service is to lead the congregation in singing to the Lord. What sets the worship service apart from a choir performance is that there is an interaction between God and the congregation throughout the service. God speaks, and his people respond in prayer and song. Therefore, the focus is not on the music itself, but on the heartfelt response of God's people to the Lord.

In the time of the Reformation, musical instruments at first were forbidden in the worship service. John Calvin equated them with the icons used in the Roman Church. Later, musical instruments such as the organ were used to lead the singing. Today there are still churches, both in Reformed and Arminian theological traditions, that do not use any musical instruments. They follow the regulative principle that if Scripture does not mandate the use of instruments in worship, they should not be used. The advantage I experienced to this approach is that people learn to sing well. I attended a high school in which musical instruments for worship were forbidden, so the students learned to sing by sight and could do so in wonderful four-part harmony.

Although many churches follow the regulative principle, it does not mean that there is always agreement. Others argue that Scripture does not forbid the use of instruments in worship and therefore it is left in the freedom of the church to determine if they are useful or not. When we look at the church scene in North America, there are various practices. Many churches use just one instrument to lead the singing, while others may have a



combination of instruments and many today will have a full praise and worship band with lead singers.

Should we look for a music style that we think will draw more people? I once had a conversation with a man from a Pentecostal background who loved the “powerful” preaching he heard but felt that we could fill the church if we just had a praise and worship band. He had a strong desire for mission and felt that the way to reach people was through music. His focus was on moving the emotions of the people with music rather than having the emotions of God’s people be moved by the gospel message. In the worship service, the focus for God’s people is to lift their voices to praise the Lord their God. Therefore, when we use musical instruments, they need to guide the singing of the congregation. This means that whether we use an organ, piano, or a variety of instruments, they should never overpower the singing but should support the congregation in lifting their voices to the Lord.

The reality is that the kind of instruments we use are not what will attract and hold people to the congregation. There is a very subjective element in the use of instruments. Some like the organ, others prefer the piano and others prefer another instrument(s). Visitors tend to focus on the message and the singing rather than the musical instruments. Therefore the focus for the accompanist is to effectively lead the congregation in singing praise to God.

LITURGICAL FORMS

Another area of concern often expressed in mission situations is the use of the forms for the sacraments. Concerns are voiced that the forms are too long or too difficult. This is being addressed by the churches with the adoption of shorter forms. The adoption of shorter forms will be helpful, but the language also needs to be simple and clear. There are expressions and sentences with which we have become familiar and yet many have trouble explaining them. The point of mission is never to water down the message but always to clearly convey the depth of God’s saving work in Christ Jesus. Our forms should convey the gospel message clearly and concisely for a meaningful celebration of the sacrament.

A unique challenge in a mission setting is how to deal with guests in relation to the sacraments. It is not unusual to have guests request baptism for their newborn child. Some may offer money, but are told baptism is free and only requires a commitment to Christ and his Church. Regarding the Lord’s Supper, the

guests. It is important to clearly convey that the Lord’s Supper is a privilege (as with baptism) for those who have made a commitment to Christ and his Church. The message should also convey an invitation for those who desire to make such a commitment. This has been a real blessing, for after many celebrations of the Lord’s Supper requests for membership are received.

It is important that guests understand that the sacraments are a privilege that comes with the responsibility to make a commitment to Christ. One of the most fundamental aspects of our Christian life is to commit our life to Christ and fulfill our responsibilities within the family of God. When one is faithful in fulfilling their responsibility to him, he grants them the wonderful privilege of sitting at his table. It is the reason that so many respond to this invitation, for they truly seek this gift of Christ.

A “mission church” will experience many adult baptisms. The result is that some will request baptism by immersion. There is no reason for the church to deny such requests, unless the request comes because of superstition. Therefore on the mission field, missionaries have often practiced immersion of adult converts.

CONCLUSION

The Lord God has established a pattern for worship that should be reflected in the liturgy of the church. During congregational worship, the interaction between God and his people should be clearly understood by everyone. In a mission setting it may be necessary to explain what is happening as God’s people move through the elements of worship. Perhaps we should also be careful in assuming that people in established churches always understand what is happening during the service. The liturgy must lead God’s people to experience a living relationship with the Lord their God. We serve the living God, and we have a Saviour who lives and reigns. In his holy presence we eagerly listen to our Lord and respond with adoration and praise. 

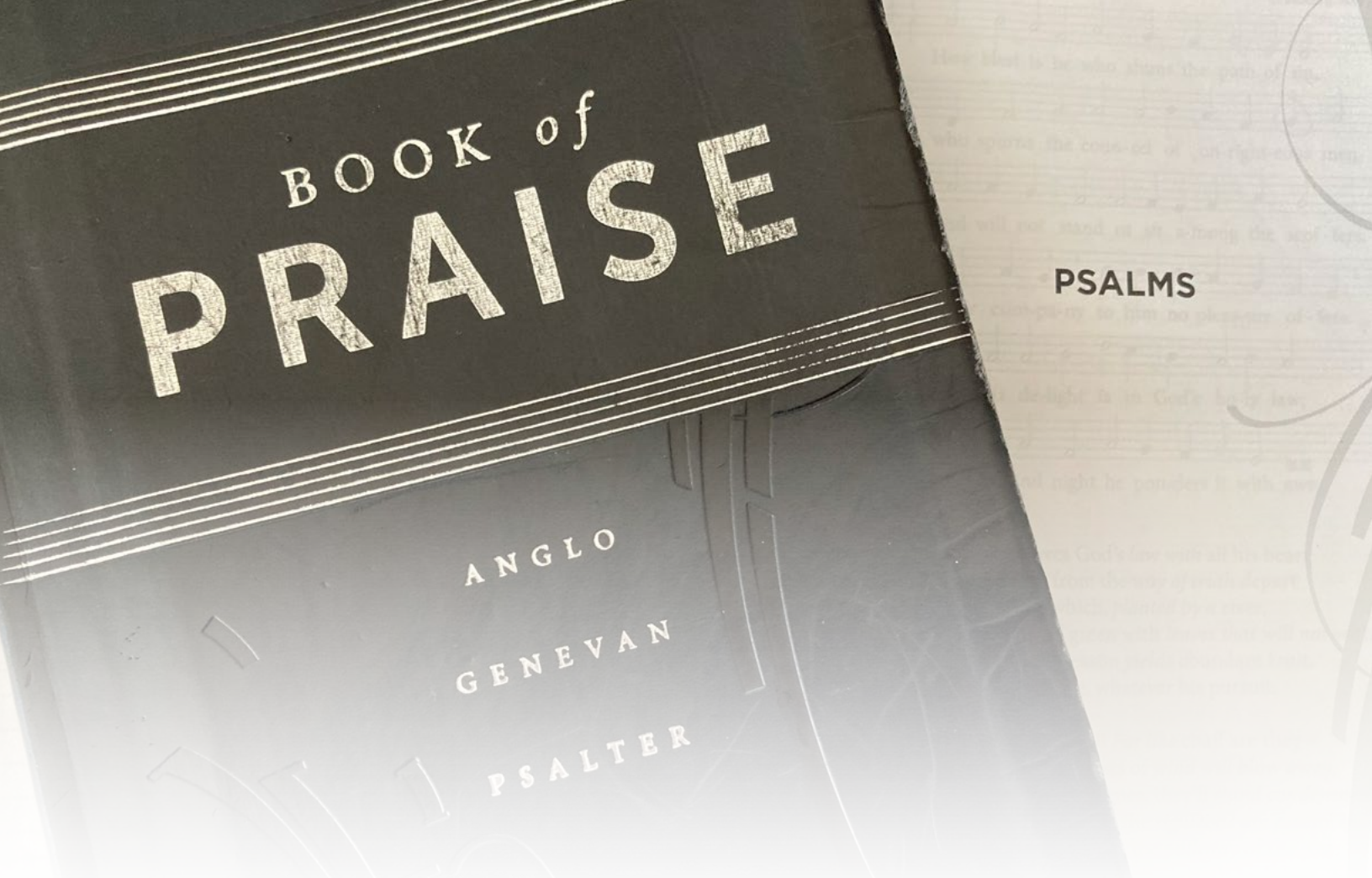


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BOOK of PRAISE

ANGLO
GENEVAN
PSALTER

PSALMS

No Songbook is as Current as the Psalms

Editor's Introduction: This article offers us a cautionary account of how the Psalms are falling on hard times in some Reformed churches. Dutch Poet and song writer Ria Borkent points this out in her Dutch context, showing what a loss it is for the church when the Psalms are seldom sung.

Recently we marked the death of our Lord. In the week from Palm Sunday until Resurrection Sunday we gave thought to the suffering and death of Jesus, with which he fulfills the words of the Psalms and prophets, as the Gospel accounts point out. This week shows the lasting importance of the Psalms. Those rich and rough psalms from the Bible, they have sounded for ages in churches, in homes, and on deathbeds. You encounter all human feelings in the Psalms: despair, trust, unrest, joy. Psalms are big and small, afraid and joyful, just like us.

The *Book of Praise* is no clean, polished songbook—it has its feet planted in the dirt of today. Consider the words from various psalms as put in a singable translation in the *Book of Praise*:

- Psalm 86:5 – “See the proud pursue and hound me; those who seek my life surround me.” Compare with today’s terrorists.
- Psalm 10:3 – “He proudly thinks, ‘I shall forever stand . . . there’s nothing that can stop what I have planned.’ His

mouth is filled with cursing and conceit . . .” How current can one be?

- Psalm 120:2 – “I am for peace, which they abhor; thus, when I speak, they are for war!” Sing this for all soldiers who serve the peace, for those far away from home.

While the anchors of our daily newscasts show us reports of death and violence, the poets of the Psalms bring our suffering and tears to God. We can even work with Psalm 109. There are quotation marks before verse 6 and after verse 19 (NLT), the “counter voice” which can be read like hate mail. And how does the psalmist handle this? He prays to God: “But you, O LORD, my God and Saviour, for your name’s sake, show me your favour! O help me, LORD my God, and hear me. In your unfailing love, be near me” (*Book of Praise*, Ps 109:9 & 11).

WORSHIP TEAMS DON’T WANT PSALMS

The Psalms, who is not familiar with them? Well, many young people in church are not. They sing different songs and are losing the Psalms. There are worship services where no psalms are being sung. What is the benefit of a psalm for children, or young people, perhaps those who are stressed? A psalm can help.

Consider Psalm 141. It’s plain language, “LORD, save me, hear my cry,” is a song for our time of social media influences, rough language use, and bullying. Over against all this, Psalm 141 offers prayer! Give children the Psalms which will support them in their lives through the week. For those who know Dutch, have a look on YouTube for “Music Psalm 141 Frank den Bakker” for a beautiful psalm that children will understand and that can be easily taught and learned.

Sadly, the psalms have become a controversial item. Let me give you some examples from the practice of various churches. A pastor requested a psalm. The worship team wouldn’t play it, saying, “That psalm doesn’t do anything for us.” Another worship team has as policy: *The Psalms* and *The 2013 Songbook* (Dutch church songbooks) are outdated; we do not play those songs anymore.

Psalm 150 encourages us to make music with various musical instruments. That is beautiful. Only it should not mean that the song choice is taken out of the hands of the pastor; he determines the liturgy.

PSALMS CALL FOR CHANGE

A psalm is the voice of the Holy Spirit, says the writer of Hebrews (Heb 3:7): “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says . . .” and

then Psalm 95 follows. When we sing a psalm, we now often sing the half that is nice. The writer of Hebrews, however, does not quote the friendly half, but the second half, the warning from God: “Do not harden your hearts.” This warning part makes the psalm especially powerful and urgent. This is also clearly shown in the *Book of Praise* rendition (Ps 95:4, 5).

Paul writes that, “creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth” (Rom 8:22). Psalms 8, 104, and 148 sing of creation as God’s glory. At the same time, people abuse the earth through greed and power. I am part of the rich west, which profits from wealth obtained through slavery and exploitation. Integrity, righteousness . . . you sing that right into your heart of hearts with the Psalms.

Why, in many churches, do we sing more translated songs from America than psalms? Theologian Alain Verheij wrote: “Theologically, Americans have little to offer us, but we brought in their mega churches, television preachers, praise & worship music, and tent campaigns with much enthusiasm.” The amount of praise & worship music shown on liturgy screens currently sometimes leaves little room for psalms, which, after all, Paul names first in his famous triad of “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.”

TILL THE LORD RETURNS

The Psalms are Jesus’s psalms. As he grew up, he must have realized more and more: these songs are about me. Jesus lived from the Psalms, quoted them, and sang them after the last Passover meal. Pilgrims’ songs, kings’ psalms, history psalms, psalms about creation and the law: they all bear witness to Jesus. This is how the Holy Spirit feeds our soul.

After his resurrection, Jesus said: “everything written about me in... the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44). This continues until the Lord returns! We hear the biography of Jesus in the Psalms! And so, with them, we enter a world of hope. 

This article is translated and reprinted with permission from the author and from the Netherlands Dagblad (Dutch Daily News), where it was printed on April 16, 2025. All psalm quotes are from the Book of Praise © 2014.



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"POSTPARTUM PODS"

COMING ALONGSIDE STRUGGLING MOMS

ILSE VANDERMEULEN





Ibroke down during a doctor's visit, feeling very overwhelmed during my third pregnancy. But I ignored my feelings. I thought: after the baby is born, I will feel better and heal. But after my daughter was born, my anxiety did not go away. It was not until after our sixth baby that I was honest with myself and reached out for more support."

Feelings of anxiety, stress, depression and postpartum rage (responding to an event with uncharacteristic anger) are not uncommon during and after pregnancy. For several years now, small groups of mothers from Reformed churches in southwestern Ontario have been coming together to support each other in the challenges of motherhood. This peer-support system offers a safe place for women dealing with postpartum feelings, struggles after childbirth, or challenges in caring for their families and homes.

Anne Deboer, who denied her feelings until after her sixth child was born, started the first group about nine years ago in Dunnville, Ontario. One Sunday morning, during babysitting duties at church, she opened up to another young mom, Kayla Feenstra, who shared similar feelings. Realizing that more mothers face postpartum challenges, the two ladies decided to start a support group. Anne says, "Whether you have been diagnosed with postpartum depression, or are simply struggling with all the adjustments after having a baby, you are welcome to join the group."

LAMENTING

Anne emphasizes that the group is not meant for complaining about life. "That is not what this is about. I prefer to use the word lamenting. It's about being honest with what's in our hearts, minds and emotions, and asking the Lord to step in and encourage these mothers." She refers to Luke 5, where a group of men bring their sick friend to Jesus by lowering him through a roof. "That's our vision. If you don't have the strength to come to Jesus, we will help you and bring you to him."

Anne had participated in the Life Renewal program, which helped her shape the postpartum group into a safe and confidential space. "We spent time researching what a support group could look like. We received support from the Christian Counselling Centre and great resources from Insight Biblical Counselling Centre in Welland. We have been very blessed by their support for us over the years."

"We had no idea if women would come, but the first night nine women showed up," recalls Anne. Every year so far, she has started a new group in February that runs for ten

months. The first meeting is open to everyone, but after that it's a closed group. The evenings follow the same pattern each time: after a round of sharing honestly about how they are doing that week, the women dive into some cognitive behavioral therapy with the book *Mind over Mood*, learning to process feelings in a healthy way. Anne also reads a passage from Scripture and the women write these verses down to memorize. Afterward, they take time to pray for each other.

PODS FOR NEW MOMS

In 2021, Sabrina Jaspers, a prenatal and maternal mental health professional, put a message on Facebook to ask other Christian women to help her start a network of small groups called Pods for new moms. Anne and Kayla contacted her to work together, and the initiative was picked up in other churches as well.

Newly arrived in Ontario, in 2022 Alexandra Struik decided to facilitate a group in the Hamilton area. She attends Mercy Church and facilitates a group with Larissa Visscher from Blessings Church. "I think it is important to support women, especially in that vulnerable postpartum time. You don't have to be diagnosed with anything. Let's get together and learn skills that help you when your brain is spiraling into a dark place."

GETTING PAST SHAME

Both facilitators noticed that many mothers find it hard to reach out when they are at a low place. "Many women feel shame and guilt for the emotions they are feeling as a mom, but that is not God's intention for you," Anne says. "Let's remember what God promises us: we are his children. He will not forsake us."

Anne sees that women have benefitted greatly from talking to other moms. "The stigma around depression and anxiety is not broken yet. When a mom struggles, she often needs someone else to encourage her to find help. Kayla and I have been so blessed by running these groups. We've heard so many great testimonies at the end of the sessions that had us in awe of God's work. We can see burdens being lifted."

"Peer support is huge," Alexandra adds. "Being able to share how you are doing without interruptions and not being judged or asked critical questions. What I value is that we don't leave you there. Some peer-support groups stop after the sharing; however, camaraderie alone is not enough. The cognitive behavioral training is helping to work through the feelings in a constructive way." To Alexandra, the prayer part is also important: "To pray for each other and feel the Spirit in the room is so, so powerful. God is with us and working in our lives. He will lift you up, also when life is hard."



SHARED EXPERIENCE

The facilitators of all the groups, together with Sabrina Jaspers, organize an annual event called "The Refuge" that is open to everyone, including spouses and office bearers, to promote a supportive environment around mothers. They invite a speaker, some participants give a testimony, and Sabrina Jaspers shares resources. "At these awareness nights, we discuss what is actually beneficial and helpful," says Alexandra. "We did a survey, and it shows that women have very different needs. Some women like visits right after a baby is born, others do not. Some like help cleaning or a meal, others don't. There is no one way. The biggest thing is to have openness as women in the church and ask how we can help each other. Acknowledge that the postpartum stage can be difficult." She encourages everyone to ask a new mom how she and her husband are doing and listen without judgment.



At this year's Refuge event, Winston Bosch, pastor at Streetlight Ministries in Hamilton, spoke together with his wife Berber. He acknowledged that as husband, minister, or office bearer it is difficult to truly understand what women are going through. "As men, we can minimize these feelings, but it is important to break the stigma and talk about postpartum feelings and struggles," he says. "We need to realize these are part of our human experience."

He encourages ministers to pray for mothers. Congregations can also find ways to minister to women in the church. "There are many ways we can come alongside each other. Office bearers can ask their wives to do visits with them or reach out to mothers who are struggling. Or office bearers can work together with older women in the church in the care for younger women."

Winston and his wife Berber encourage women to participate in postpartum pods. "These groups are not about bashing men,

or to get together to complain and sit in misery. New mothers can be fragile and need a safe place to share and receive biblical and positive encouragement."

For more information on the Pods, feel free to email postpartum17@gmail.com. 



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SARAH VANDERGUGTEN



Sarah lives at home in Smithville, ON with her parents, Henk and Louise. Lord willing, Sarah will be 30 years old this year!

Sarah sits in a wheelchair and is fed through a G-tube, relying on others to care for her needs. She can often be seen sucking her thumb, waving her arms in front of her face, kicking out her legs, or banging and playing with the toys on her tray. Though she is legally blind and cannot speak, Sarah makes lots of noises to let you know she is there and how she is feeling. When she is excited and happy, wants attention, or when she is tired of something, Sarah will scream very loudly to communicate that!

Just as she makes lots of noise, Sarah has a keen sense of hearing and loves listening to all kinds of different noises, the sillier the better! She has many toys that make various sounds and a big smile and laugh come across her face when someone plays with her. Sarah also loves listening to music, whether it be children's CDs or the radio. Old MacDonald is her favourite song!

Sarah enjoys going out for walks in the neighbourhood and rides in the van. She sits contentedly without making a sound, unless we've stopped for too long! Sometimes we'll stop for ice cream and Sarah will get a few licks of Mom or Dad's ice cream as a yummy treat. Sarah no longer attends the day program, Covid changed that. She is at home with mom now and loves her walks and drives. Though not without its challenges, Sarah has been such a blessing to our family and we thank God for continued strength to care for her each day.

JUNE BIRTHDAYS:

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| <p>4 James Buikema will be 64
c/o R.Jager
627 Maple Ave
Burlington, ON
L7R 1M7</p> | <p>14 Sarah Vandergugten will be 30
23 Jane Street
Smithville, ON
L0R 2A0</p> | <p>25 Joel Slomp will be 40
316 Church Rd
Apartment 102
Sprucegrove, AB
T7X 0G2
Email: joelrslomp@gmail.com</p> |
| <p>11 Jeffrey Jansema will be 28
158 Lane Road,
Dunnville, ON
N1A 2W1</p> | <p>20 Charlie Beintema will be 50
29 Wilson Ave
Chatham, ON
N7L 1K8</p> | <p>25 Julie Ostermeier will be 37
484 Millen Rd, Unit 5
Stoney Creek, ON
L8E 6G4</p> |
| | <p>20 Derrick VanderHorst will be 38
c/o Twin Oaks
3217 Twin Oaks Cres,
Burlington, ON
L7M 3A8
Email: derrickvanderhorst@gmail.com</p> | |

Be Exalted, O God

Based on Psalm 57

Capo 1: A D A D A F#m

1. God, be gra-cious to me, Be mer-ci-ful and gra-cious. I will take ref-uge with
 2. God will send help from heav'n And shame all my op-pres-sors. He will be faith-ful to
 3. Lord, my heart and my mind Are stead-fast and un-wa-v'ring. I will sing prais-es to
 4. I will give thanks to You, O Lord, a-mong the peo-ples; I will sing prais-es to

C#m D A E A D A D

You while storms are rag-ing. In the shad-ow of His wings My God will pro-
 me and show His mer-cy. Like fierce li-ons are my foes; Their tongues are like
 You with all my be-ing. I will play the harp and lyre With tunes loud and
 You a-mong the na-tions. For Your stead-fast love is great, Is great to the

A F#m B E E7 C#m Bm E A

13 tect me And for me ful-fill, for me ful-fill all His plans.
 dag-gers. They set snares for me, set snares for me, but in vain. Be ex-alt-ed, O
 live-ly And will wake the dawn, will wake the dawn with my song.
 heav-ens And Your faith-ful-ness, Your faith-ful-ness to the clouds.

Esus7 A E/G# B/F# E Bm E A E Bm E

19 God, a-bove the heav-ens; Let Your glo-ry be o-ver all the earth. Be ex-

A Esus7 A E/G# B/F# E Bm E A

26 alt-ed, O God, a-bove the heav-ens; Let Your glo-ry be o-ver all the earth.

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st. 4, *English Standard Version*, 2001 © 2001, Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers

Solid Rock, my Safe Retreat



1. Sol - id Rock, my safe re - treat, when my sins spell my de - feat,
let me lean up - on your grace, find my rest in your em - brace.
Where your blood was free - ly shed, there I find life's foun - tain - head.

2. Jesus, not my work or might,
not the deeds I bring to light,
not the gifts that I may bear,
not my tears, though in despair—
weeping through the darkest night—
save me, Jesus, from my plight!

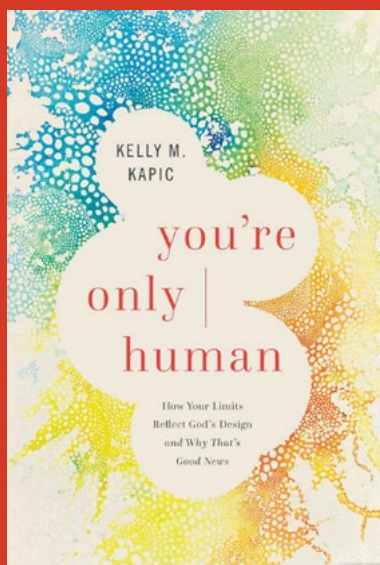
4. When the hour draws near at last,
and my flesh must turn to dust,
then my soul will take its flight
to the Judge's throne of light.
Rock of Ages, strong and high,
hide my soul as death draws nigh.

3. See, no incense, gold, or myrrh
can I bring from what I store.
Empty-handed, faint, and poor,
at your feet I seek your cure.
You who clothe the frail and weak,
grant the life I humbly seek.

From the Dutch hymn, *Vaste Rots van Mijn Behoud* by J. van der Waals (1868-1922),
which was inspired by *Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me* by A.M. Toplady (1740-1778).

Tr. George van Popta, 2025

Tune: Henry R. Bishop (1787-1856)



ENOUGH ALREADY

You're Only Human by Kelly M. Kopic 2022, Brazos Press, 261 pages, Hardcover, \$35.50 CDN

It was a joy to listen to Kelly Kopic speak at the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation fall 2024 conference on *Rest* in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Kopic spoke on the topic of human finitude in a compelling and encouraging keynote address entitled, *Have I Done Enough?* The foundation for his talk was laid on the creation narrative in Genesis 1 and 2, where the relationship between Creator and creature is framed. The Creator is infinite in every way while the creature is made finite, with limits.

Our natural human limitations are part of our original design and are not a result of our sinfulness. God created us with the built-in rhythms of waking and sleeping, starting and stopping, working and resting. He himself patterned for us this rhythm in the description of the six-day creation of the world with rest on the seventh day. And it was all very good! It was, however, this finiteness that the devil poked at with Eve and Adam, suggesting that perhaps God was holding something back; maybe they could be more like God in his infinitude. Well, you know the story. The fall into sin introduced a *restless* evil into the human heart and the world.

It turned out that Dr. Kopic had elaborated on this talk in his book *You're Only Human*, written two years earlier, which I quickly bought at the conference pop-up bookstore at a generously discounted rate. The book's subtitle is *How Your Limits Reflect God's Design and Why That's Good News*.

The book is divided into two main parts. The first part defines the terms and builds awareness of our creaturely limitations. The second part explores the importance of recognizing and enjoying our daily dependence on God. The book leads to thoughtful reflections not only on our creation, but also our dying to self and our re-creation in Jesus Christ, through the power of his indwelling

Spirit. The incarnation of God's Son is highlighted and explained in respect to the infinite one taking on our finiteness unto death to restore us again and reclaim the eternal rest we had forfeited.

Kopic also engages a timely discussion on our human identity, the impact of trauma in our lives, and our individual and corporate embodied worship of God. This is further worked out in practical day-to-day ways of dealing with time management, anxiety, healthy life balances and expectations, growing in gratitude, living vulnerably, and embracing the gift of resting.

There is a lot in this book. Each chapter is well constructed to form its own mini-study, so the book does not have to be digested in one cover-to-cover reading. In this way it is well suited for an ongoing book study with a small group or among friends. It is academic writing, somewhat philosophical and theological, yet has enough personal reflections and anecdotes to make it accessible and engaging. Kopic's gifts as a teacher and public speaker shine through in the narrative.

If you feel the constant pressure of never having enough time, never getting enough done, and never measuring up to your peers or your Creator, then this is a book for you. It comes to you with a big spiritual hug from your heavenly Father and his Son saying that *you are enough already* because he made you and redeemed you! 



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letter to the EDITOR

Dear Editor,

As General Synod Aldergrove 2025 was held literally ‘around the corner’, I could not resist but show up and listen. It was so worth it, to hear the discussions, the struggle at times, the listening to one another, and then the vote, which could often be unanimous. I was impressed with the knowledgeable contributions of the Clerk, and the efficient manner of the Chairman, which resulted in General Synod Aldergrove being done within two weeks!

At my subsequent visit, I brought our daughter, who was delighted to witness the Synod proceedings. She had never been to something like this, and her reaction was a delight: ‘There were many things I didn’t really understand, and with many wise voices in the room I was able to learn so much!’ My wife Joanne also came twice and said, ‘I should have come here days earlier, for this is so interesting.’

I wonder why so many church members did not attend and missed this fine opportunity. Though generally people know, and church gatherings at this level are often prayed for, I also wonder if more can be done intentionally to inform and encourage people to go?

Could pastors perhaps encourage their council members to go to Classis/Synod? Just to observe, as in several years they may be delegated to go there. This could help these men to acquaint themselves with what is going on, and how things are being done.

Lastly, the availability of regularly updated (online) information as to what is being discussed when, in plenary session or in closed session, committee work, etc., helps any visitor to know what to expect (though we understand it may change).

The last Synod in the Fraser Valley was 30 years ago, so this was a real opportunity that was missed by many. Not by the students though! High school students were bussed over to look and listen to Synod proceedings – well done!

Hopefully we have sown the seeds for the future generation. Thank you, brothers, for your time, your wisdom – be blessed!

Bram Vegter

