

Clarion

A CANADIAN REFORMED MAGAZINE :: YEAR END 2025



TO ALL OUR READERS,

Best Wishes

AND THE

Lord's Blessings

IN THE YEAR

2026

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What's Inside

Merry Christmas and happy new year! The world may mean those words in a trite manner but as Christians we embrace their full meaning because of our Lord Jesus Christ. Christmas *is* a merry celebration of the Saviour's arrival, for in Christ we are saved from our sins. And since the new year belongs to our Lord and we belong to him, his joy may be in us all year long (John 15:11).

Matthew VanLuik's editorial anchors us in the confidence that Christ's birth brings while Gerrit Bruintjes' meditation helps us keep the sense of wonder at the eternal Word taking on human flesh. Peter Feenstra's piece reflects on Christmas as an answered prayer and a pledge of Christ's return and John van Popta's article on Joseph's role (or lack thereof) in the nativity story impresses us with how salvation is all of grace alone. John Smith sheds light on a Christmas text from Micah and the comfort it affords us. All of this extra meditation helps us see Jake Torenvliet's point in his advent series, namely that the birth of Christ answers the great lament of Jerusalem's destruction and holds out the sure hope of the Lord's glorious return—perhaps even in this new year!

Are we pilgrims on this earth without a vested interest in the world's well-being? Rob Schouten guides us to a biblical understanding of how we are “resident aliens” in this world. Jeremy Segstro continues a strand of that theme by discussing how we live in a state of tension, being saved already now but yet waiting for the completeness of our salvation to come.

What's it like to be a Reformed Christian serving as an MAF pilot overseas? Read *Witness at Work* to find out. What is the work of Lighthouse all about in Fergus? See for yourself in *Service Snapshots*. You'll also find a number of our regular columns toward the back of the issue, plus a few other goodies—all in all, lots to read, reflect on, and rejoice in.

Our final article is an interview of two delegates to General Synod 2025—brothers who sometimes differ in their opinions—in which they share their impressions of how synod went. May your reading be edifying.

From all of us at *Clarion*, may God bless you and yours!

Peter Holtvliwer

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CLARION (ISSN 0383-0438) is published 16 times per year (tri-weekly) by Premier Printing Ltd., 1 Beghin Ave, Winnipeg MB R2J 3X5.

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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

CHRISTMAS & THE NEW YEAR: *Our Confidence*

The birth of Jesus Christ marks a pivotal historical moment, demonstrating God's supreme power over all things. The event of Christ's birth provides believers the confidence needed as the new year begins. However, when certain churches stopped teaching that Jesus came as the Son of God, born of the virgin Mary, this confidence was shaken. During the 1800s, some Protestant churches rejected this essential truth, resulting in devastating effects on the church's spiritual life. This basic truth continues to be undermined by many churches to the present day.

THE GLORY OF CHRISTMAS

Christmas is the glorious occasion when God himself entered the world. The apostle John reveals that God sent his Son into the world to save the world (John 3:16-17). The Son of God, referred to as the Word, became flesh and made his dwelling among us, so that we might see in him the glory of God (1:14). This is the firm foundation upon which believers are called to build their lives. Ultimately, everything begins and ends with what we believe about Christmas.

Christmas is a reminder of God's ongoing work for the salvation of his people. The birth of Christ was not accidental; God had been preparing for this event from the very beginning. After Adam and Eve rebelled against God's Lordship, God had already resolved to send his own Son to restore his kingdom on earth. The Old Testament sets the stage for Christmas, revealing God's preparation for the coming of Jesus Christ as the ruler over all the earth. When God destroyed the world by the flood, it became evident that humanity could not survive in rebellion against God. God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt further demonstrated his power over the gods and powers of this world.

GOD'S EVERLASTING DOMINION

The book of Daniel contains a vision of four beasts representing the major kingdoms of the earth. These kingdoms, though powerful, were ultimately destroyed. Daniel then saw "one like a son of man" who was given authority and sovereign power; all peoples, nations, and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is everlasting; it will not pass away or ever be destroyed (7:13-14). Christmas, therefore, has profound consequences for world history; while nations rise and fall, the Son of Man receives authority and power over all

peoples and nations. His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom that stands for eternity.

The Old Testament reveals God's control over the nations. They rise and fall at his command, and their power is nothing compared to the might of God. At the appointed time, God sent his Son to rule over all nations. Both mighty men, such as the wise men from the east, and lowly men, like the shepherds, came to worship him who is born King of kings and Lord of lords.

THE ONLY CONFIDENCE

Christmas is essential to the celebration of the new year. Without Jesus Christ, there is no true confidence in entering the new year. The coming of Jesus Christ at Christmas has consequences for our daily life. Pity those who deny the virgin birth of Jesus Christ and refuse to acknowledge his resurrection from the dead. They look to one who has no power over death and is unable to save. In contrast, Jesus Christ—who came in the flesh—now reigns at the Father's right hand in heaven. Praise be to God, who has placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over all things for the church (Eph 1:22).

ASSURANCE FOR THE FUTURE

Believers can approach the new year with confidence, knowing that our king rules all creation. This profound reality enables us to approach the uncertainties of the future without fear. As God has gathered and preserved his church throughout history, we remain steadfast in the belief that he will continue to do so in the coming year. Even though the darkness around us seems overwhelming, the light of the gospel continues to penetrate and transform the hearts of many. While churches that reject Christ's virgin birth and deny his sovereignty as the King of kings falter, the enduring strength of Christ's saving work is evident in churches that hold fast to the glorious truth of Christmas.

We face the future with confidence, fully trusting that the King of kings and Lord of lords is coming. His kingdom will then be revealed in glorious splendour forever and ever. 



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Touching THE *Eternal* *Life*

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life . . . so that you too may have fellowship . . . we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. (1 John 1:1–4).

The birth of a baby is a communal delight. Joy spreads as the news is shared along with the baby's name, weight, and photo. Imagination soars as people discuss family resemblances, the future, and the impact on daily life. Yet nothing quite touches the heart like holding the baby yourself—seeing the exquisite toes, touching the soft, tiny nose, hearing the first breathy cry. The blessing of birth is pregnant with joy and hope for life.

But as the baby grows, reality settles in. The world's brokenness soon shatters early dreams. Life brings disappointments, sin rears its ugly head, and like a worm beneath the surface, the curse of sin quietly consumes life's promise. From generation to generation, the same painful pattern repeats.

Yet for one birth, the opposite is true. For one child, promises of life, filled with joy and hope, only grow stronger as his life unfolds. Surprisingly, the greatest promise is revealed in his death, and confirmed in his resurrection. Who is this child? His name is Jesus, whose birth we celebrate this season. The Apostle John joyfully shares the good news of what he himself saw and experienced in the life of Jesus.

THE ETERNAL WORD

John witnessed firsthand the life of Jesus unfolding: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched, this we proclaim concerning the Word of life."

At first, John's words might sound detached, almost clinical. He does not even name Jesus until verse 4. Instead, he speaks of "that which was from the beginning," "the Word of life," "the life made manifest," and "the eternal life." But beneath that lies astonishment and awe. John can scarcely believe what he has experienced: that he and the other apostles have heard, seen, and even touched the eternal life of God himself.

To help us see this, John echoes both Genesis 1 and his own Gospel's opening line, "In the beginning was the Word." Jesus is the eternal Word of life, the same creative power through whom all things were made. He is the life of God made manifest in human flesh. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." What John heard, saw, marveled over, and touched was not merely a man from Nazareth; it was God himself, united to humanity in Jesus, sharing his life with the world.

SHARE THE JOY

This season, we celebrate this wondrous reality: through Jesus, we are brought into a living relationship with God himself. We

enter divine fellowship with the eternal life of God. John writes, "We proclaim this to you so that you also may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." The eternal Son, who was with the Father from the beginning, became flesh through the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary. He is Emmanuel, God with us, and in him the life of God has been made visible and is accessible for all who believe.

John says, "We write this to make our joy complete." The joy of Christmas is not complete until it is shared. The birth of Christ is a family announcement, an invitation into the household of God. This season, let that joy be shared anew. Hear again the good news proclaimed. As you hear again the news of Christ's birth, pause to consider the magnitude of this moment. That baby born in Bethlehem is the Lord of all creation. See the wonder of God's love made visible. Marvel that you are invited into fellowship with the Father through his Son. Sing in response, "glory to God in the highest" and may your heart rest in the eternal life of God that is yours through the Word of Life. 

FURTHER READING:

Luke 1:26–56; John 1:1–8

FURTHER REFLECTION:

1. What difference does it make to see Jesus not only as the giver of life, but as the eternal life himself? How does this change your reading of John's Gospel and letters?
2. Read 2 Peter 1:4. How does sharing in the "divine nature" connect with John's message about fellowship and life in Christ?
3. John's Gospel was written "so that you may believe . . . and have life" (John 20:31), and his first letter "so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13). How does recognizing Jesus as eternal life himself deepen your assurance and confidence before God?
4. How does the identity of Jesus as the eternal Word of life change the meaning of his birth announcement?



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The Incarnation: GOD COMES DOWN

What is the good news of Christmas? This holiday season is more than just celebrating the birth of a baby named Jesus. It is a celebration of God coming down to earth to redeem and save a people lost in sin and guilt. We refer to this as the *incarnation* because the LORD comes down in the person of Christ and takes on our flesh and blood. For those who eagerly awaited the coming of the Messiah, the birth of Jesus was an answer to the prayer, “Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence” (Isa 64:1). They longed for the day when the LORD would act decisively and intervene.

WHY THE CRY?

The desperate cry for the LORD to open the heavens and come down is part of a prayer that recalls his kindnesses and the deeds for which he is to be praised (Isa 63:7). The prophet remembers times when the LORD sent the angel of his presence to save the house of Israel from their distress. In his love and mercy, God redeemed them (63:9). Yet, instead of worshipping the LORD, the very people who were shown so much grace rebelled (63:10). The only way out of this mess is if the LORD himself comes down to act and save.

The prophet Isaiah pleads with God to come down, make his name known to his enemies, and cause nations to quake like the mountains before the LORD (64:2). At the same time, he reminds the LORD of how he came down in the past and did awesome things they did not look for (64:3–4).

Isaiah explains why the LORD must come down: the people’s sins must be removed. Sin, transgression, and rebellion are at the heart of all the misery they experience. Isaiah says: “Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long

time, and shall we be saved?” and “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment” (64:5b–6).

AN ANSWERED PRAYER

Christmas is the celebration of an answered prayer. It is the climax and culmination of God’s continual coming down throughout the Old Testament era. We read of times that the LORD came down in both judgment and grace, in wrath and mercy. For example:

- He came down to see what the children of man had built at the tower of Babel, and to confuse their language (Gen 11:5–7).
- He came down to deliver his people from the power of the Egyptians, to bring them into a good and spacious land (Ex. 3:7–8).
- He came down from heaven in an awesome display of his power when he divided the waters and led his people of Israel through the Red Sea.
- He came down in the cloud to guide his people through the wilderness.
- The glory of the LORD was revealed to Israel when he opened the skies and came down in holiness and might, speaking to his people through the thunder and lightning at Mount Sinai.

Christmas is a celebration of a profound mystery. When the LORD comes down, he does not appear in a dazzling display of military power but in the simplicity and humility of the incarnation. The fullness of deity comes down in bodily form (Col 2:9). The LORD rends the heavens and comes down in the person of Jesus, who emptied himself of all his heavenly glory for our



sake. Christ knew what awaited him: hatred, misery, and enmity, yet he was willing to stoop below his godly dignity to come down and save us. His coming down would culminate in Christ being lifted up on a cross, despised, rejected, and misunderstood under God's righteous judgment. Yet he never regretted what he came to do because this act was performed out of love for his people. In covenant faithfulness, he acts as the LORD always did in ancient times. He comes to help and act on behalf of those who wait for him (Isa 64:4).

What amazing love! Jesus took on our flesh and blood so that he could be our Saviour in the very nature in which sin was committed. The author of Hebrews puts it this way, "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery" (2:14–15).

THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

When the angel announced to Mary the conception of the Messiah, Mary asked the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" The angel Gabriel uncovers the mystery for her when he says, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

The Holy Spirit comes down and brings about the unity of the Son of God in heaven and the flesh and blood of the virgin Mary. He works something that never happened before and never will again. The Son of God was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary to restore the fellowship the LORD once had with Adam and Eve in paradise.

On the day of Pentecost, Jesus bestows upon us the great blessing of his incarnation by once again opening the heavens and sending down the Holy Spirit. This Spirit, given to us, directs us to look upward and seek all things in Jesus, to set our hearts and minds on things above (Col 3:1–4). Through the power of the Spirit, our thoughts and lives are lifted upward to find hope and comfort in him who, in heaven, bears the evidence that he truly came down. Jesus is worshipped in heaven as the Lamb who was slain. He is now there with the very flesh and blood that became part of him at his incarnation.

ANOTHER RENDING COMING

Christmas is a time to rejoice and celebrate the good news that the LORD opened the heavens and came down. His coming down to earth allows us to approach the heavenly throne of God Almighty. We lift our hearts on high to where Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father. We draw near to the throne of grace through the incarnate Jesus. The incarnation is the mystery from which true godliness germinates. Jesus, the Son of God, brought the Father close to us to live and dwell among us. From him, we can expect every blessing to help us in both our trials and temptations. The apostle James puts it this way, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of heavenly lights" (1:17).

Yet Christmas is not the ultimate fulfillment of Isaiah's plea for the LORD to rend the heavens and come down. It marks the beginning of its fulfillment. The birth of Christ in Bethlehem points ahead to another coming—the return of Christ in glory. Therefore, the Christmas season is not just about remembering Christ's first coming but also about looking forward to his second.

The prayer of the church, "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down," is the bridge connecting the cradle and the crown, the cross and the return of Christ. On the final day, Jesus will come down to judge the living and the dead and, at that time, will permanently open the gates to the paradise of God, where he will dwell with us and we with him.

"Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory" (1 Tim 3:16). As we celebrate Christmas, let us thank God for the miracle of the incarnation by looking up to him who has come down to us. "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down." He answered that petition once, and he will do so again. 



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Lamentations 5:

GOD'S PRODIGAL FAMILY CRIES OUT

Editor's note: This is the final installment in a five-part series of advent reflections on the book of Lamentations.

Have you ever experienced a pain so profound that words fail you? This visceral agony finds its voice in the deep groans of the soul, a sharp expression of our deepest yearnings for God's grace. As John Bunyan wisely noted, "The best prayers have often more groans than words." This profound truth resonates through the pages of Lamentations 5, where a communal lament takes shape, echoing the struggles of a people seeking solace amid devastation.

In Romans 8:26–27 we discover that our Father in heaven perfectly comprehends our groans, responding to our weakest prayers with divine intercession. This chapter of Lamentations is a raw outpouring of emotion, a prayer that emerges from the depths of despair while simultaneously peering through the cracks of hope.

A SHIFT IN STRUCTURE

Lamentations 5 marks a notable departure from the structured acrostics of previous chapters. In the Hebrew text, the absence of this familiar form signals a significant shift—one that Leslie Allen suggests symbolizes "an ending of total grief and an embrace of hope."¹ This chapter stands as a reminder that even amidst profound sorrow, a glimmer of hope can emerge.

The lack of closure can be uncomfortable. We often grapple with how to engage with those who are still navigating the choppy waters of grief or depression. Society pushes for resolution, for a quick return to normalcy. Yet Lamentations teaches us that closure is a process dictated by God's timing, not ours.

¹ Allen, Leslie C. *Lamentations: A Commentary*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

THE CRY OF A PRODIGAL FAMILY

As we delve into Lamentations 5, we encounter a corporate prayer, articulated through the collective voice of God's people. The opening verse, "Remember, O LORD, what has befallen us; look, and see our disgrace!" employs imperative commands that convey both urgency and desperation. Unlike previous chapters, which began with a shocked "How?", this chapter's cries shift toward a resolute groaning.

The language here echoes the Israelites' cries during their slavery in Egypt (Exod 2:23–25), suggesting a deep-seated hope that God might again act on their behalf. When the people implore God to remember, they do not imply forgetfulness on his part; rather, they invoke the covenantal promise that binds them to him. They challenge God to act in faithfulness, a bold assertion of their relationship.

A CATALOGUE OF PAIN

Verses 2–18 serve as a grim catalogue of the aftermath of destruction. The lament lays bare the various forms of suffering experienced by Israel under Babylonian occupation. The people, once the chosen nation, now feel like strangers in their own land—exhausted, vulnerable, and impoverished. They recount their humiliation, oppression, and loss, revealing the depths of their despair.

This section also serves as a sobering reminder of the pervasive nature of evil in the world today. We need not look far to find our own catalogue of grief: from poverty and addiction to violence and systemic injustices, the echoes of human suffering remain all too real. Just as the Israelites recognized that their plight stemmed from their sin, we must acknowledge that our own struggles often arise from humanity's collective rebellion against God.

CONFESSION AND SOVEREIGNTY

In the midst of this anguish, two confessions stand out. The first, "Our fathers sinned, and are no more; and we bear their iniquities" (v. 7), reveals an acknowledgment of guilt. This is not an attempt to deflect blame; rather, it's a collective admission of a shared legacy of sin that leads to their current suffering. The second confession—"Woe to us, for we have sinned!" (v. 16)—captures the essence of repentance.

Following these admissions, verses 19–20 declare, "But you, O LORD, reign forever." Here, the lament simultaneously acknowledges God's sovereignty while questioning his apparent absence. This duality of faith and frustration encapsulates the essence of lament: recognizing God's power while wrestling with the reality of suffering.

A PLEA FOR RESTORATION

As the prayer approaches its conclusion, the poignant request emerges: "Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored!" (v. 21). Strikingly, the Israelites do not ask for the cessation of their suffering or the destruction of their enemies. Their deepest desire is reconciliation—a return to relationship with their covenantal God. This profound longing for restoration encapsulates the heart of lament.

The prayer's closing verse, "Unless you have utterly rejected us..." (v. 22), leaves the reader in a state of tension. While it appears to suggest despair, it is also a rhetorical challenge to God's faithfulness. The lament boldly asserts that restoration is contingent upon God's steadfast love, a reminder that divine grace is our only hope.

AN OPEN DOOR TO THE FUTURE

The chapter concludes with the unanswered question of "Why?"—an echo of the anguish felt throughout the book. Yet, within this unresolved lament lies the promise of future redemption. While Lamentations ends in suffering, it also hints at a greater story.

Ultimately, this door to the future opens to Jesus Christ, the definitive answer to humanity's groaning. In John 10:9, Jesus declares, "I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved." Through him, we find the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to restore his people. Jesus's life, death, and resurrection embody the hope that Lamentations yearns for—a hope that transcends temporal suffering.

In our own struggles, may we remember that our groans are not unheard. The God who understands our pain invites us into his presence, where we can lay bare our hearts and find healing. As we navigate our own lamentations, let us look to the One who calls us home, assuring us that even in our darkest moments, hope is never truly extinguished. 🕯️



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Excluded and Included:

JOSEPH'S ROLE IN MATTHEW'S ADVENT ACCOUNT

JOHN VAN POPTA

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. . . . When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.'" (Matthew 1:18–21a; 24–25)



Much of what the world presents as the meaning of Christmas is shaped by cultural values and societal expectations. Often, the Advent stories become disconnected from the living Word of God and are reduced to sentimental tales. However, when we read the Advent narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, we encounter much more than just sentimental tales. The whole of Scripture points to Jesus. Every account carries theological significance. Every narrative is Gospel, every Advent story is Good News, including the account of Joseph's plan to divorce Mary, his betrothed. And what is the Good News in this Advent story? That the birth of our Saviour is a work of God. Joseph's story highlights this truth. We will explore two aspects of Joseph's experience: his exclusion and his inclusion in God's work.

CONTRASTING MARY AND JOSEPH

The Gospels provide two distinct accounts of the Annunciation. Luke's Gospel focuses on Mary, recounting how the archangel Gabriel visited her and told her that she would have a son. Gabriel's message to Mary reveals that the Spirit of God would overshadow her, and she would become pregnant by God's power. Mary had been chosen and appointed by the Creator God to bring forth a child: the Son of David, the Son of God.

In contrast, Matthew centers on Joseph, describing how an angel appeared to him in a dream, told him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, and instructed him to name the child Jesus. The key question becomes: Why would Joseph be afraid? Understanding Joseph's fear is essential to grasping the meaning of this passage.

JOSEPH'S CHARACTER

Most readers (and commentators) conclude that Joseph believed Mary to be unfaithful and decided to divorce her. In that culture, girls typically married at puberty, around fifteen, and young men before twenty. Betrothals were often arranged a year or more in advance, accompanied by a dowry from the bride's parents. This made the marriage contract secure, annulled only by divorce.

Joseph, described as a just (or righteous) man, planned to divorce Mary quietly. A pregnancy before the wedding was a major scandal. Commentators often highlight Joseph's righteousness in his response to Mary's pregnancy. Even though he was sure that she had been unfaithful, he chose mercy. He did not want to shame Mary publicly for her adultery.

JOSEPH'S FEAR

It is worth asking whether the text supports the assumption that Joseph thought Mary had been unfaithful. A careful reading

suggests otherwise. Gabriel had greeted Mary as highly favoured and God-fearing. Joseph would have known Mary's godly character. As a betrothed couple, would Mary not have told Joseph of the angel's visit and the promise of a miraculous birth? And now Mary was found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit.

Both Mary and Joseph would have been familiar with Old Testament stories of angelic announcements of miraculous births, such as those of Isaac and Samson. Gabriel also informed Mary of Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy with John. When Mary marveled at his words, the archangel assured Mary: "Nothing is impossible with God."

In this telling, Mary and Joseph pondered these events, and they realized that God was doing something very significant, even if the details were unclear. And when Gabriel's message proved true, Joseph became afraid to take Mary as his wife and wanted to step aside. He was afraid that going through with the wedding would interfere with God's plan. God was accomplishing something unique and marvelous with Mary. And Joseph was afraid.

JOSEPH'S EXCLUSION

Joseph is depicted as a just or righteous man, much like Zechariah and Elizabeth. This righteous character is not about being sinless or perfect but about living righteously, mercifully, and humbly. It is about living with undivided devotion to God. The prophet Micah had instructed the people to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God—qualities Joseph embodied.

Joseph was afraid that he was a barrier to what God was doing in and through his betrothed. He was prepared to step aside. He thought he was being excluded; hadn't the angel spoken to Mary, not to him? Rather than publicly accusing Mary of adultery in court, in mercy, Joseph resolved to divorce Mary quietly. Thereby, he would preserve her honour and, in humility, he would bear the shame of breaking the marriage contract, leaving others to believe that he was the father of the unborn child.

This narrative emphasizes the truth and reality of the virgin birth. Its purpose is to make clear that Joseph was not the natural father of Jesus, while Jesus was truly the son of Mary. Only by the power of the Holy Spirit could the Saviour be brought into the world—no human initiative could accomplish this.

This principle also applies to how Christ enters the hearts of sinners, making them children of God. This can only be done by the power of the Holy Spirit, not by human effort. As John writes in his Gospel, "to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:12–13, NIV). The exclusion of righteous

The exclusion of righteous Joseph in bringing the Saviour into the world underscores our exclusion from contributing to our salvation.

Joseph in bringing the Saviour into the world underscores our exclusion from contributing to our salvation. Scripture teaches that salvation comes from God alone. God must act in a great and wondrous way.

JOSEPH'S INCLUSION

The second aspect of Joseph's story is his inclusion. By his care for Mary's honour, Joseph was proven to be a righteous, merciful, and humble man, and was not simply brushed aside. An angel appeared to him in a dream, commanding him not to be afraid and not to leave Mary. Joseph was to take Mary as his wife. As a result, the child would have a legal father, rather than being born to an unwed mother. Joseph humbly obeyed and married his betrothed.

Joseph had a crucial role: he was told to adopt Mary's son as his own, even though Jesus was not his natural child. This is emphasized by the angel's instruction for Joseph to name the child—a father's responsibility. For example, Zechariah named his son, underscoring the paternal role. The angel assigned this same role to Joseph.

ADOPTION

Matthew's genealogy traces the line from Abraham to David, to the exile, and then to Joseph, showing Joseph's descent from David. Therefore, Jesus, as Joseph's adopted son, is included in David's royal house—he is the son of David, the royal king.

This narrative teaches that entrance into God's family is not by natural descent. God the Father promises to adopt into his family all who receive Jesus and believe in his name. Just as Jesus was adopted into the human family as a son of David, all those who believe in Jesus are adopted to be his brothers and sisters: to be God's children.

THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Throughout this story, the Holy Spirit's central role is evident. Just as the Spirit brought Jesus into the world through Mary, so the Spirit brings Jesus into our lives. The miracle of the virgin birth is mirrored by the miracle of new life that the Holy Spirit brings to believers' hearts. Too often, we overlook the significance and the power of the Spirit's regenerating work.

Paul teaches that believers were dead in sin but made alive to God by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Canons of Dort affirm

that the Spirit's regenerating power is no less than that which raises the dead. The same Spirit that brought Christ into the world brings new life from death to us. Human initiative did not bring Jesus into the world; it was the work of the Holy Spirit. Likewise, believers are born of God, not by natural descent or human decision, but by the working of the Holy Spirit.

Just as the Spirit brought Jesus into the world through Mary, so the Spirit brings Jesus into our lives.

God gave a child to the virgin Mary because, as Gabriel said, "Nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37). And Jesus, echoing Gabriel, says this new life is impossible with humans but entirely possible with God (Matt 19:26). He who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, brought to life Jesus in Mary now brings new life to believers' hearts through the power of the self-same Spirit. Joseph's exclusion reflects our exclusion from initiating this new life or even preparing for it.

Joseph, however, also had a role to fill. We, too, have a role. We are called to live righteously, love mercy, and walk humbly with God, not by our own initiative but as a response to the Spirit's work in us. As the apostle says, we are to keep in step with the Spirit.

CLEAR MESSAGE, URGENT CALL

This is no sentimental story. The message is clear—all who receive Jesus and believe in his name are given the right to become children of God. Does that include you? Do you believe in Jesus? The message is clear, but the call is also urgent! All who claim to believe in Jesus are called to a new life in the Spirit. Adopted into God's family, now as the Lord Jesus's brothers and sisters, believers are called to live righteously, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God, keeping in step with his Spirit.

Resolve to live this way: "I will live righteously. I will love mercy. I will walk in humility. I will strive daily to keep in step with the Spirit of God!" 



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NOT JUST PASSING THROUGH: RETHINKING THE

Pilgrim Concept

ROB SCHOUTEN

If you spend time in the church, you will hear it often: “This world is not our home” or, “Come, fellow pilgrims.” The words are pastoral, meant to steady weary saints. Life is hard—fraught with graveside grief, the lure of hidden sin, and headlines brimming with injustice. Christians rightly ache for resurrection life in the world to come. But what happens when pilgrimage language erodes a full-bodied Christian view of creation and culture? That’s the concern driving this article. I’m aiming to deepen, not diminish, Christian hope. Hope, however, must rest on the whole of Scripture.

The biblical narrative begins with a world declared good. It shows how God entrusts humanity with meaningful labour, and it ends not in escape but in restoration. Christian hope, therefore, nurtures a strong sense of calling in this present age.

Scripture does indeed describe believers as exiles and strangers. However, those labels are often lifted out of context and made to mean what they never meant, producing a dualistic faith where work and culture are distractions and our present life on earth no more than a waiting room. The Bible gives us so much more! It summons us to serve the world, steward it, and reflect God’s

image within it. Our destiny is not flight to a heavenly realm but the renewal of the earth itself.

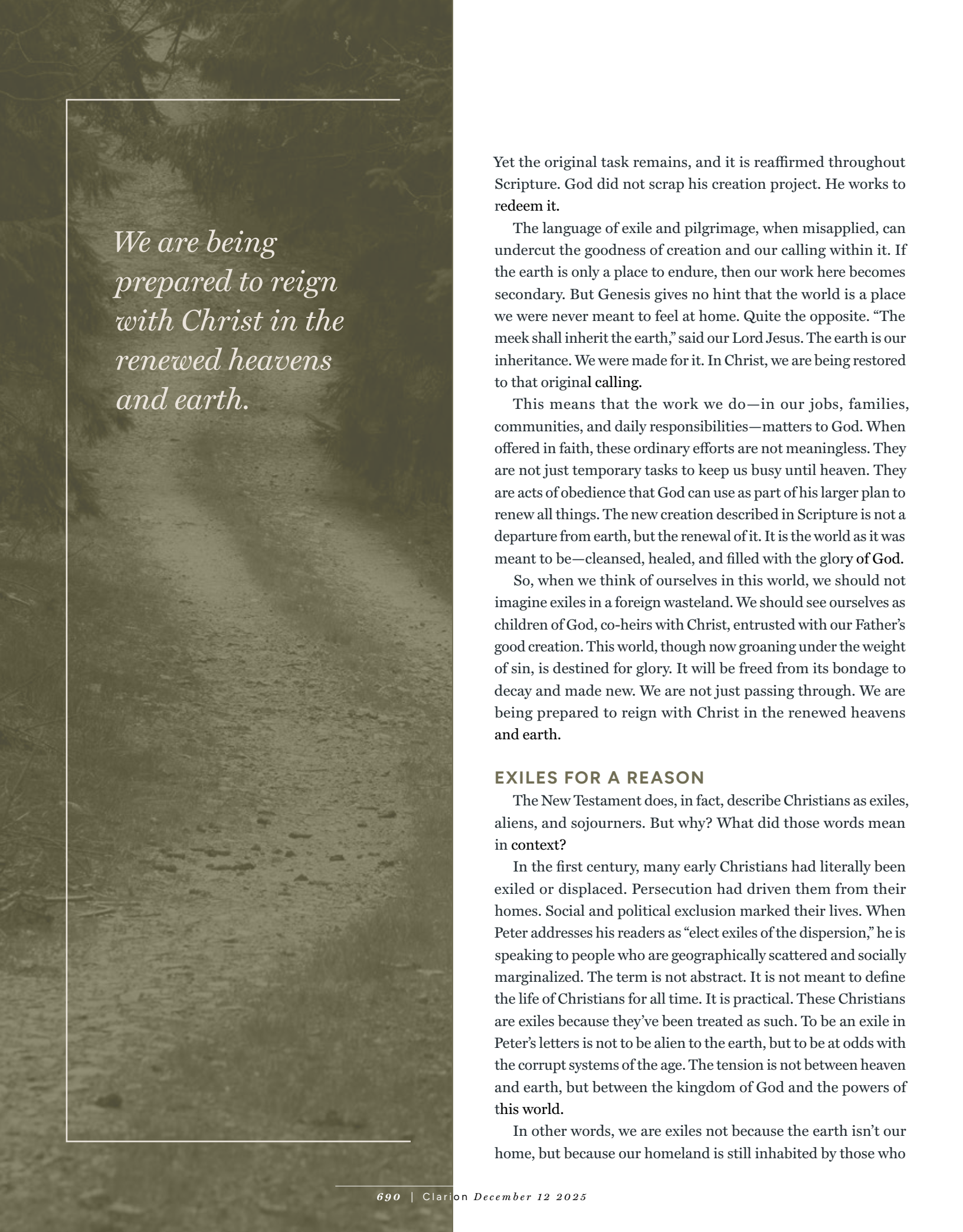
We are not just passing through; we are being prepared to inherit the world—our home.

THE WORLD IS OUR HOME

To understand the Christian’s place in this world, we must begin where the Bible does: with creation. Genesis 1–2 shows us that human beings were made from the earth and for the earth. We are created in God’s image and entrusted with a calling that involves the world: “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion.” This is the foundation of all human vocation.

God’s purpose for us was not to rise above the world in disembodied devotion, but to tend, develop, and beautify it. Adam was placed in the garden “to work it and keep it.” He was not a visitor or a sojourner. He was a gardener, a keeper, a steward. This was not a temporary assignment. It was his destiny.

Of course, sin entered the world and marred that calling. Work became toilsome. Thorns grew. Dominion became domination.



*We are being
prepared to reign
with Christ in the
renewed heavens
and earth.*

Yet the original task remains, and it is reaffirmed throughout Scripture. God did not scrap his creation project. He works to redeem it.

The language of exile and pilgrimage, when misapplied, can undercut the goodness of creation and our calling within it. If the earth is only a place to endure, then our work here becomes secondary. But Genesis gives no hint that the world is a place we were never meant to feel at home. Quite the opposite. “The meek shall inherit the earth,” said our Lord Jesus. The earth is our inheritance. We were made for it. In Christ, we are being restored to that original calling.

This means that the work we do—in our jobs, families, communities, and daily responsibilities—matters to God. When offered in faith, these ordinary efforts are not meaningless. They are not just temporary tasks to keep us busy until heaven. They are acts of obedience that God can use as part of his larger plan to renew all things. The new creation described in Scripture is not a departure from earth, but the renewal of it. It is the world as it was meant to be—cleansed, healed, and filled with the glory of God.

So, when we think of ourselves in this world, we should not imagine exiles in a foreign wasteland. We should see ourselves as children of God, co-heirs with Christ, entrusted with our Father’s good creation. This world, though now groaning under the weight of sin, is destined for glory. It will be freed from its bondage to decay and made new. We are not just passing through. We are being prepared to reign with Christ in the renewed heavens and earth.

EXILES FOR A REASON

The New Testament does, in fact, describe Christians as exiles, aliens, and sojourners. But why? What did those words mean in context?

In the first century, many early Christians had literally been exiled or displaced. Persecution had driven them from their homes. Social and political exclusion marked their lives. When Peter addresses his readers as “elect exiles of the dispersion,” he is speaking to people who are geographically scattered and socially marginalized. The term is not abstract. It is not meant to define the life of Christians for all time. It is practical. These Christians are exiles because they’ve been treated as such. To be an exile in Peter’s letters is not to be alien to the earth, but to be at odds with the corrupt systems of the age. The tension is not between heaven and earth, but between the kingdom of God and the powers of this world.

In other words, we are exiles not because the earth isn’t our home, but because our homeland is still inhabited by those who

oppose the reign of God. We live among people and institutions that do not yet acknowledge Christ as Lord. That's a crucial distinction. It means our exile is not a detachment from creation, but a deep engagement with it under the shadow of opposition. We don't abandon the world—we stay, pray, build, serve, and bear witness until it is renewed.

So, when the apostles call us exiles, they are not denying our place in creation. They are reminding us of our current cultural and spiritual dislocation. We are not yet in the world as it should be. But we are not rootless. We are not homeless. We are heirs, waiting in hope.

NO LASTING CITY?

Hebrews 11 tells us that the patriarchs lived as “strangers and exiles on the earth.” It also says that they were looking for a “better country,” and that “here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.”

At first glance, this seems to confirm the idea that Christians should view earth as a temporary lodging—a place to endure until we get to heaven. But context is everything. Hebrews is written to Jewish Christians who are tempted to return to the old covenant. They are being pressured and persecuted for their faith in Christ. They are being enticed by the stability and familiarity of the religious institutions they once knew. The “city” to which they are tempted to return is not the earth in general, but the earthly Jerusalem with its temple, priests, and sacrifices. The author warns them that clinging to the old system is a dead end. That city is not lasting. The true city is the one to come—a kingdom that cannot be shaken, founded on Christ.

So, when Hebrews speaks of seeking a better country, it is not denying our connection to creation. It is urging us not to locate our security in the institutions of this age—especially those that stand opposed to Christ. Our hope is not in returning to the old covenant way of life, but in pressing forward to the consummation of what God has promised.

This is not world-flight. It is faith in the coming renewal. Abraham stands as the chief example of such faith. He is named in Hebrews 11 not because he withdrew from the world, but because he lived with hopeful trust in God's promises while actively engaged in the world of his time. He was not a disembodied soul longing for heaven. He was a landowner, a wealthy herdsman, a military leader with a private army, and a person who negotiated contracts with neighboring tribal leaders. His longing for a city built by God did not prevent him from investing his time and energy in active participation in life and culture. The same should be true of us.

Like Abraham, we live by faith in promises not yet fully seen—but no less real. His story points forward to the hope we now share: a city whose architect and builder is God. We await a city that will come from heaven to earth. Revelation does not end with the saints escaping to glory but with the Holy City descending to a renewed world. That is our hope—not departure, but arrival.

LIVING BETWEEN THE TIMES

The challenge, then, is to live faithfully in the tension. Christ has come. His kingdom has broken into history. He reigns at God's right hand. And yet, the world is not yet what it will be. Sin persists. Death remains. Creation groans.

This is the “already and not yet” of the Christian life. It shapes our calling. We do not wait for Christ's return with passive detachment, as if nothing here matters. Nor do we try to force heaven's arrival through our own efforts, as if redemption were ours to accomplish. Instead, we live as citizens of a kingdom that is already present in Christ, yet still awaits its full unveiling.

This vision of the kingdom of God means our cultural work matters. Our vocations, our families, our stewardship of the earth—all these are arenas in which we bear witness to Christ's reign. True, they are not ultimate. They will not usher in the new creation. But neither are they meaningless. They are part of what it means to be human in Christ.

At the same time, we remain alert. We know that this present world, though created good and still upheld by God, is marked by brokenness and passing glory. The kingdoms of this age will not endure. So we reject triumphalism—the illusion that we can bring the kingdom sooner by cultural achievement or political might. We do not seize the future; we await it. And while we wait, we live in hope.

To be a Christian is not to wander aimlessly, nor to conquer proudly, but to live as a faithful steward. We are not fugitives, fleeing a world we disdain, nor overlords, claiming it as our own. We are servants—called to care for what belongs to God.

Yes, we are pilgrims, but not because the earth is foreign to us. We are pilgrims because our home is not yet fully healed, not yet fully revealed, not yet fully under the reign of Christ. We are not just passing through. We are being made ready for life in the world to come. 



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Already, But Not Yet

There are things that we say when someone dies in the Lord. We say things like “Now she is with the Lord,” or “His eternal life has now begun,” or maybe “Now he is freed from sin.” And these things are, on the one hand, absolutely correct. But they are just as wrong as they are right. By themselves, they do not capture the in-between time in which we live.

BOTH RIGHT AND WRONG

“Now she is with the Lord” brings to mind Paul’s words in Philippians 1:23—“I am hard-pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.”

“His eternal life has now begun” is a faithful interpretation of Titus 1:2—“in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began.” Eternal life is something to come, for who hopes for what he already has?

“Now he is freed from sin” comes from our knowledge that we have to struggle against sin as long as we live, but when we die, we will no longer struggle. Hebrews 12 speaks of the “spirits of the righteous made perfect.”

So, these are all right things to say. But at the very same time, they’re just as wrong. This is because of the

glorious tension of the Christian life—the in-between time in which we live and die.

THE ALREADY-BUT-NOT-YET

We live in the time in between our Lord’s first coming—a humble and inauspicious coming, born in the little town of Bethlehem, as a baby, helpless in a manger—and his second coming, when he will come as the King of kings and Lord of lords. Then the Son of Man will appear as the glorious figure he is, with eyes like a flame of fire, a voice like the roar of many waters, a sharp two-edged sword coming out of his mouth, and even a name inscribed on his upper thigh (Rev 19:16).

We live in a time of tension because our Lord was born, lived the perfect life, died the atoning death, and came to life again, and through all those things, has given us all things already! But still, there is more to come. Theologians refer to this tension and this in-between time as the *already-but-not-yet*.

It is true that your grandmother, a faithful believer in Jesus Christ from a young age, departed to go to be with her Saviour. But also, she was *already* with Him. All her years here on earth, she had his Spirit dwelling in her

heart. She went from communion with Christ here on earth to even greater communion with him in heaven.

It is true that your grandfather left this life, which is no more than a living death, and entered eternal life. But he *already* made that switch when he came to a true and living faith in Christ, already here, already on this earth.

It is true that the sinfulness of this life doesn't come with us into heaven. Our sinful nature can't "survive the trip" so to speak. But, it was through the death of Christ that we were set free, so we are *already* freed from slavery to sin! Romans 8:2 triumphantly declares: "For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death." When? The next verse explains: "For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh."

This is the age of tension, or, maybe, if we want it put in a nicer way, this is the age of overlap. Glory has descended, is descending, and will descend again. We can take great comfort in this. It's not all just a day away, a year away, a decade away. Already now, we have the things promised.

FAITH FOR TOMORROW AND TODAY

Christianity isn't just a religion of tomorrow. It's a faith for tomorrow *and* for today! While we live here, in this world that is groaning for the world to come, this world that is groaning under the weight of sin, we as believers have both groaning *and* joy inside our hearts.

What precisely causes the joy? The fact that we are adopted (1 John 3:1), saved (Eph 2:8), redeemed (Col 1:14), sanctified (Heb 10:14a), and raised (Col 3:1)!

And what precisely causes the groaning? That we live in a world tainted by sin where our adoption is still to come (Eph 1:5), our salvation is something "future" (Rom 5:9), our redemption awaits us (Eph 4:30), our sanctification is a process that isn't yet complete (Heb 10:14b), and we long to be bodily raised with Christ (1 Cor 15:22).

It's still to come. And it is already. At the end of the year, if you look back with regret, if you look forward with fear, if you are tempted to despair, wondering if someone like you is really loved by God, wondering if the promises of God are just pipedreams, read these glorious truths to yourself! For every doubt, every arrow that the devil shoots at you, you need to have a shield

verse prepared. Speak truth, speak light, speak hope into the darkness that surrounds you. Just a little light chases away a world of darkness.

THE RUNAWAY TRAIN

Think of it like a train. You and I, sons and daughters of Adam, are born onto a train—a runaway train with no brakes. And that train has a destination—hell. You pass a sign that says *Hell: 30 kilometers*. Think of this sign as the Law—it tells you what's wrong, but doesn't provide a solution.

And then, at some point on the journey—maybe you remember it clearly, maybe not—you come to a saving faith in Christ. You love God. You know that he loves you.

Immediately, a change is made. There's a switchman on the tracks. Jesus Christ did what Moses couldn't do, what the prophets couldn't do, what the priests and the kings before him couldn't do. He switched that track and completely redirected your journey.

The sign in front of us no longer says *Hell: 30 kilometers*. There's a different sign on this new track that reads *Heaven: 30 kilometers*. And the insides of the train change too. Instead of darkness and brokenness, there is beauty. There is warmth. There is light. The train is reflecting its new destination. The glow of the destination is spreading, and it engulfs the train. It engulfs you. And that train . . . it still has no brakes. There's no stopping it. But now, that's a good thing.

STILL MORE TO COME

Glory has come . . . and glory is coming.

Glory is ours . . . and glory will be ours.

We get to live every day in the joy of this new covenant, the covenant of *done*, the covenant of *already* . . . and still we get to look forward to the *not yet*, the far, far better rest that we are going to. 



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WITNESS AT WORK

REUBEN VERMEULEN: *MAF Pilot*

ILSE VANDERMEULEN



Reuben Flying

This Christmas, not everyone is able to celebrate the holiday season with family at home in Canada. Reuben Vermeulen (30) is a pilot for Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF) and will spend the holidays with his wife Emma and their three children at their home in Juba in South Sudan, Africa. The Vermeulens are members of Trinity Canadian Reformed Church in Glanbrook and have just signed up for their second four-year term in Africa.

Reuben was born in Western Australia. He moved with his parents and siblings to Canada when Reuben's father, Rodney, started his studies at the Theological Seminary in Hamilton. Reuben attended Guido de Brés High School in Ontario and Prairie College in Alberta, a Bible College where he also obtained his pilot licences and other necessary skills to prepare him for work abroad. Besides his huge love for flying, Reuben enjoys spending time with family, woodworking, reading, and biking.

Q. You work in South Sudan. How is the situation there at the moment?

Sudan split in 2011 into Sudan in the north and South Sudan. The north is mostly Muslim, while South Sudan has tribal religions mixed in with Christianity. Since early 2023, there is a terrible civil war going on in Sudan. We constantly see refugees coming into South Sudan and the stories we hear are heartbreaking. In South Sudan, they have their own trouble, often related to tribal conflicts. We had security issues here earlier this year and in March we woke up to gunfire and the sound of bombings ten kilometers away. We left the country for a while because we did not know if the fighting would escalate.

Q. What do you do as a pilot for MAF in South Sudan?

We live and are based in Juba, the capital, close to the border with Uganda. Together with the team at the MAF-base in Kenya, we fly seven Cessna Caravans. This is a 13-passenger plane, or it holds a ton of cargo if we take all the seats out. On any given day we fly five planes. The maintenance on the planes is done in Kenya.

From Juba, we fly all across the country. About 60% of the flights are regular scheduled shuttle flights to



Reuben with his wife and children

different locations in South Sudan to deliver goods as well as passengers who can buy a ticket to fly with us. The other flights are charter flights, mostly for other organizations who need to go to a specific destination. Many of them are church-related groups. The rest is a mix of aid groups, NGOs, and others.

Our flights are of critical importance because most places we fly to are completely cut off from the rest of the world, especially during the wet season when many roads wash away. The roads are also very dangerous to travel because of banditry and military activities. We receive daily reports of people getting killed on the roads. To reach the vast majority of locations, flying is the only way.

Q. What are some memorable flights you have made?

The shuttle flights are very standard, but the charter flights are often special because we get to spend time with various organizations. Recently, I spent a couple of days with a group called *Every Village*, an American organization that works in South Sudan. They aim to do three things: maintain wells in villages, train pastors,



Reuben at a medical evacuation

and put up radio towers and provide radios for the local population. They also make Christian radio programs with sermons and Christian music in the local languages. Many pastors here in South Sudan have minimum training and don't have the Bible in their native language. To see the smile on their faces with the prospect of training was amazing!

Another organization we work with regularly is the Carter Center, started by former US president Jimmy Carter. I flew a medical team in to a remote location that performed 800 eye procedures in two weeks. People are getting to see again and that is life changing!

There are a lot of organizations doing great work. We are confronted with the needs every day. The poverty rate here is one of the highest in the world. Access to health care and education is abysmal. Playing a small part in making a difference is exciting. Today I dropped off eight boxes of Bibles in the local language and seeing how happy this made the people is exciting.

Q. How is it to live on a guarded compound and how do you stay safe?

There are thirteen homes on our compound, including seven families and twenty-five children. We cannot leave the city of Juba by road for safety reasons, so we spend a lot of time on

our compound. There is also very little to do in the city. On the compound, we do a lot of swimming with the kids, riding bikes, playing soccer, or using the swings or zipline. We also take a week or two of "Rest and Relaxation" every three months or so in Kenya. This is a chance for us to get out of South Sudan and recharge for our upcoming work. On these RnR's, we get to spend time with family, go to parks, hike, and do safaris with the kids.

We do try to get off the compound to connect with our community. We worship at Grace Community Church, a mix of expats and local worshippers. It's a small congregation, but we find it a blessing to go there, despite the differences in worship.

We do what we can to be as safe as possible. There still is a lot of conflict in South Sudan and we are constantly assessing where we can and can't go. Once in a while, we have to cancel a flight. I had an incident a few weeks ago where we were temporarily detained at the airstrip where we landed, because the partner we were flying with didn't have their paperwork in order. It's not common, but it does happen.

Q. What path did you follow to become a MAF pilot?

From a young age, I was interested in aviation. When we moved to Canada, MAF put on an event at the Guelph airport where you

could meet the pilots and go up in a small airplane. My parents took me and ever since I was hooked on the idea of flying in the mission context. From there I made it my goal to fly, all the way through high school and college.

Prairie College offers a two-year program with two semesters of Bible classes. Mixed in are the aviation courses, so I came out with a commercial license. I then worked as a flight instructor in Ontario and did international medical evacuations for a while with a retired MAF-pilot. This experience was very valuable. In those three years, I flew to over fifty countries.

I met Emma in Alberta, and I was quite open about my plans, which included living overseas. She had always thought she would live close to her parents, but she was open to the idea. We spent a lot of time talking and praying about it and it was clear that God was calling and leading us by opening doors in that direction. In 2020, MAF accepted us and we started to fundraise for our work. God blessed these efforts with the support we needed, even though it was in the middle of COVID. Once we had the support in place, we did a few more orientation courses and we left for Africa where I received more training. In 2022, I became operational in South Sudan.

My wife spends most of her time looking after the family, but she is also a nurse and uses her skills working in wound care ministry from our compound. We live on the outskirts of Juba and two mornings a week she sees patients who come in from the country. She dresses wounds and gives medical advice on how to avoid illnesses and infections.

We covet prayers for the work we do across the country, and the place we live and the challenges that come with living here. Please pray for peace in this country and for the people who are suffering because of the conflict. The MAF team also is going through some changes as some team members depart, and others join our team.

Q. What were some adjustments you had to make moving to South Sudan?

Everything is completely different here from what we were familiar with in North America. We spend 90% of our time on the compound, which feels somewhat closed in at times. We do go out, but we are right away the centre of attention with our blond-haired, blue-eyed kids. Driving is a whole other crazy thing: the roads here are bad, and the police stop you regularly. Emma went to pick up groceries the other day and was stopped six times! So, you spend half the morning on the side of the road, trying to explain in broken English that everything is in order.

Time management is horrendous, like in most African countries. Trying to blend that with aviation, which is a time-oriented

profession, is “fun” sometimes. We might show up at an airstrip and ask if a passenger is coming and the answer is “they are on their way” . . . which can mean anything from “they are five minutes out” to “they are still at home and haven’t even thought about packing their bags yet!”

Q. How will you celebrate Christmas?

Christmas looks a little different here in Africa, particularly since it falls in our dry season. During our Christmas season, the temperatures here are above forty degrees! But we still have special family time, a church service, and time with friends and colleagues on the compound. We typically do a night of carols and the telling of the Christmas story and we share a Christmas meal with everyone on our compound.

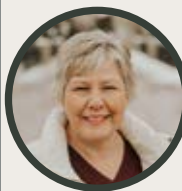
Q. What are the joys of your work?

I love the work, and I love flying. It puts a smile on my face. South Sudan is a beautiful country. There is a lot of brokenness for sure, but also much natural beauty! There is also a sense of adventure: the work is different and challenging. For others that’s a drawback, but when I accomplish something in that context, there is joy in that for me.

This work is very fulfilling. Getting up each morning to fly for MAF, helping other organizations to support those in need and spread the gospel, that makes me smile as well. It’s so exciting to see that what we do makes a difference and hear the stories. It is life changing for many people and that makes everything worthwhile.

In Matthew 25, Jesus says: “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” We get to do that here. We see the need every single day and we get the opportunity to help in Jesus’s name in whatever small way we can. **C**

To read more and support Reuben at MAF and Emma’s Wound Care Program, check out <https://maf.ca/missionaries/vermeulen> or follow them on Instagram and Facebook.



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Meditation: “But You, Bethlehem Ephrathah...

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, insignificant among the clans of Judah, out of you will come forth for me a ruler over Israel, whose origins are from antiquity, from days long ago” (Micah 5:2).

Shortly after the Lord Jesus was born, a group of wise men from the east came to Jerusalem with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They asked, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” The ever-paranoid King Herod called together an assembly of people who might know the answer: the chief priests and scribes of the Jews. And they did! They quoted a prophecy given some seven hundred years earlier by the prophet Micah of Moresheth (see quote above).

The words are reminiscent of David, the shepherd boy of Bethlehem, the slayer of Goliath, the unifier of Israel, the father of a dynasty, the singer of Israel’s victory psalms, the heir of an everlasting covenant, to whom the LORD had said, “I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever; I will be his Father, and he will be my son.”

If Micah’s prophecy had indeed come true, then a king had been born with a pedigree far better than Herod’s own, with a prior claim to the throne. What the magi read in the stars, and the scribes read in the Scriptures, amounted to an uprising. It was a deadly prophecy spoken in dangerous times. And so it was already in Micah’s own time, seven hundred years earlier. Back then, the Davidic kingship was a threat not to Herod, the puppet king of Caesar Augustus, but to Sennacherib, the war-mongering king of Assyria and the conqueror of kingdoms.

PROPHETIC THREAT AGAINST USURPERS

As it happens, we know more about Sennacherib than any other Assyrian king. The annals of his reign have survived in multiple copies on clay cylinders, clay prisms, stone tablets, and steles. Two volumes have recently been published by the RINAP project, the Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period, and they record his vast building projects at home and his ten military campaigns

abroad. Sennacherib was continuing the expansion begun by his grandfather, Tiglath-Pileser III, who had conquered parts of Israel; his uncle, Shalmaneser V, who besieged Samaria; and his father, Sargon II, who finished conquering the northern kingdom of Israel. Father Sargon had died in battle, so now it was Sennacherib’s turn, and he set his sights on Jerusalem.

Sennacherib was waging a two-front war, in the east and in the west, and Hezekiah was a problem on both fronts. Back east, the king of Babylon, Merodach Baladan, was causing trouble for Sennacherib. Remember, Merodach Baladan was the one who sent envoys to Hezekiah, to congratulate him on his recovery from illness, and no doubt to curry his support against Assyria. Sennacherib defeated Merodach Baladan in his first campaign, and again in his fourth. On the western front, Sennacherib had installed a puppet king in Philistia, Padi the king of Ekron, who was bound by treaty to Assyria. But, says Sennacherib in his annals, the people of Ekron had thrown king Padi into iron fetters and handed him over to Hezekiah, who held him captive in Jerusalem.

In response to this rebellion, in his third campaign, Sennacherib invaded Judah and conquered forty-six of its towns. He confined Hezekiah inside the city of Jerusalem, “like a bird in a cage.” He also brought Padi out of Jerusalem, reinstalled him as king of Ekron, and gave him some of the cities of Judah. The Bible does not record these details, but I see no reason to deny them. Scripture does tell us that Jerusalem survived the siege, and Sennacherib also admits that much. Of course, he says nothing about the angel of the LORD who wiped out 185,000 of his troops. He only says that after his departure, Hezekiah sent much tribute after him. All this, in any case, is the historical setting for Micah’s prophecy.

In the face of the Assyrian threat, Micah gave the people of Judah a reassuring message: the Assyrian invasion would not succeed. Judah would survive, at least for now. Already in chapter

Near Bethlehem of Judah

Based on Luke 2:8-14

Guitar chords do not match vocals.

G D Em Bm Em D G D Em

1. Near Beth - le - hem of Ju - dah Some shep - herds liv - ing there
 2. To them with sud - den bright - ness An - gel then ap - peared.
 3. *The an - gel spoke and told them, "There is no need to fear.*
 4. "To - day in Da - vid's cit - y, As prom - ised in God's Word,
 5. *"And this is how you'll know Him: In - side a cat - tle shed*
 6. At once there with the an - gel Ap - peared a daz - zling throng
 7. "To God be all the glo - ry In high - est heav'ns a - bove,

Bm Em Am G C Am G D G

Through - out the night were guard - ing The flocks left in their care.
 God's glo - ry shone a - round them, Which filled them all with fear.
 I *bring you joy - ful tid - ings For peo - ple ev - 'ry - where.*
 Was born to you a Sav - iour— He who is Christ the Lord!
 You'll find a ba - by swad - dled And in a man - ger laid."
 of might - y heav'n - ly ar - mies all prais - ing God in song;
 And peace on earth to those whom He fa - vours with His love."

Music: English traditional melody; arr. David Willcocks (1919–2015) © Oxford University Press
 Text: William Helder, 2025 © 2025, willmhldr@gmail.com

CHERRY TREE
 7 6. 7 6.

4:10 Micah had written, "Writhe and groan, O daughter of Zion, like a woman in labour, for you shall go out of the city, you shall go to *Babylon*, and there the Lord will redeem you from the hand of your enemies." In chapter 5:3, the metaphor of childbirth comes back: it says that the Lord would give his people up, "until the time when she who is in labour has given birth, when the rest of his brothers would *return* to the people of Israel," that is, when the exile would be over. Then, a new Davidic king would be born.

SUDDEN FULFILMENT

Well, the exile came and went, centuries went by, and empire followed empire. How often must the scribes in Jerusalem have read this prophecy of Micah and wondered, "Will it ever come true?" But then come the wise men from the east, and suddenly this prophecy is the word of the hour: the Messiah has come at last!

Let's remember this, as we wait for his return, so many centuries later, when we have our own moments that we wonder, "Will it ever come true *again*?" Remember, our assurance is far greater, because the Christ once born in Bethlehem now sits on David's throne at God's right hand. He is already great to the ends of the earth, and he is our peace. 



John Smith
 Professor of Old Testament
 Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary
jsmith@crtcs.ca



The Lighthouse

The Lighthouse is a beautiful, grand home situated on the outskirts of Fergus, Ontario. We are close to our church, workplaces, schools, shops, and peaceful walking trails. The Lighthouse was opened in 2008 and currently we have eight residents who make their home there. We like to keep busy and active in the home and on our property, but also out in the community. Let me introduce you to our lovely crew!

THE GUYS

Bryce turned 50 this year and celebrated with a trip to Holland, Michigan with two of his friends. Bryce loves genealogies and family, so this was an ideal trip for him. You can often find Bryce working on family trees in his room on his computer. Let me assure you, if there is a way that he is related to you, he will find it. Bryce works at Rona four afternoons per week and does a paper-route another day. Bryce is our handy guy at the Lighthouse and will help lift or carry just about anything, anywhere.

Terence is Bryce's little brother (by just over a year). Terence loves art and goes to a special needs art class once per week. Terence helps to sort recycling at Maranatha school and Emmanuel school once per week. In the summer, Terence joins a special needs soccer class. He is absolutely thrilled to score goals and to have pizza at the end of the season. Terence also goes to the community recreation center once per week to go swimming.

Cameron is a delight to all who meet him. He always has a smile or a mischievous grin on his face. Cameron loves anything with batteries in it (beware though . . . he almost always finds a way to get the battery out!). Cameron sorts recycling at Emmanuel weekly with Terence. He also goes to a day program in Palmerston every week on Tuesdays and swims every Monday with the others.

THE GALS

Lindsay is very bright and cheery and *loves* to talk and sing. She goes to choir practice weekly and sings in concerts. Lindsay sorts recycling every Tuesday with Terence at the Maranatha school and attends a day program every Monday in Orangeville with her sister, Shaelyn. On Wednesdays, Lindsay volunteers at our local Mission Thrift Store where she sorts and prices books.

Shaelyn is bright and cheery too, but quieter. She loves books and reading and absolutely loves art class, where she goes with Terence weekly (she says that going to art class is like a birthday and Christmas all wrapped into one). Some neat art creations are made there weekly by her and Terence. Shae attends a day program weekly with her sister Lindsay in Orangeville. Shae also dusts the church library about twice a month; you can find her there with the music turned up while she is dusting away!

Marsha's smile is as contagious as her zest for life. Marsha puts a lot of kilometers on her shoes every day and is our expert

walker. She keeps our staff in shape by making sure they go out for a walk with her twice per day. Marsha does a paper route weekly with Bryce, and often they can be seen exploring parts of Fergus, Elora, and Arthur afterwards.

Katherine loves books, too. She has hundreds of them and would have more if only she had more room. Katherine loves to craft and has put this skill to good use by card-making for all occasions—birthdays, Christmas, etc. She sells these wonderful creations for a little profit. Katherine volunteers at the Maranatha school once or twice per week as a teacher's assistant and works at McDonalds weekly.

Jeanette is the newest member of the Lighthouse crew. She joined us last year. Her smile is just about as contagious as Marsha's. Jeanette loves everything to do with animals. Jeanette used to work at a turkey farm, but we are currently looking for a job for her. To keep her busy, she helps with all sorts of things around the home, like vacuuming and cleaning, and she loves to help bake and cook (and of course eat the tasty creations!).

FUN & FELLOWSHIP

As you can tell, we are all quite busy! On top of this, we have our regular chores to do. All the residents hang and fold laundry as they are able. Some of the residents help with vacuuming the cars out weekly, other residents help with the planter boxes of vegetables that we have every summer, and some shovel snow on the walkways in the winter. We all like to get out for a walk in the fresh air daily if possible. If it is raining, you can often find a group of us doing indoor exercises . . . it is sometimes a sight to see, especially when the staff do them too!

We have a good complement of staff that support the residents in all their needs. On Sundays, the residents love to go to church. The church is very conveniently located next to the Lighthouse, so we most often walk (unless it is pouring rain or extremely blustery weather). Church socials are a highlight, and the residents love to meet and talk with people from their church community. God has indeed blessed us richly at the Lighthouse. All the glory be to God! 🇨🇦

On behalf of Anchor Christian Homes,

Ewout DeGelder

Executive Director

Fergus

edegelder@anchorchristianhomes.ca



From the Publisher

For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. (2 John 7)

DECEPTION AND TRUTH

Our world is in considerable consternation about the effects of artificial intelligence. The last few years have seen an exponential increase in the variety of AI tools and their capabilities. More than ever before, we now wonder: this song, school assignment, picture, trial exhibit, social media personality—is this real? Or is it generated? Is it meant to convey reality or to deceive?

The ultimate deception includes that of “the deceiver and the antichrist” —denial of the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. This denial is well established in our world. By contrast, the apostle holds out hope to us that we can know the truth, that it abides in us, and that it is personified in Jesus Christ, who came in the flesh: the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

OUR MAGAZINE

The *Clarion* team also desires to serve in holding out to us all our Saviour—not only incarnated, but crucified and resurrected! We aim to cut through the lies of the devil, the world, and our own hearts, and instead point to truth in Christ.

From a business perspective, we thank our faithful subscribers and advertisers. We are doing some creative thinking about how to get our magazine into more hands, how we can continue to truly function

as a means of uniting and connecting Canadian and American Reformed Church members. Please pray for a blessing on this thinking and planning.

THANK YOU AND GREETINGS

We want to thank our Editor in Chief, Peter Holtvliwer, for his leadership and dedication. Anna Nienhuis has seamlessly taken on the role of Managing Editor—thank you! We also thank the rest of our editorial team—Eric Kampen, Jason Van Vliet, Matthew VanLuik, and Calvin Vanderlinde—for your contributions and direction. To our column coordinators and regular writers, many thanks. In particular, we recognize Richard Aasman, who has coordinated our *Treasures, New and Old* column and is now passing the baton. At Premier, Janette and Don in administration and Alexis in design round out the team. Thank you all for your part in getting an attractive and insightful magazine into readers’ hands.

The apostle John encourages us to walk in the truth, to love one another. That is also our prayer as we look forward to celebrations of the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh, and to a new year in his service. Greetings and best wishes! 🍷

Will Gortemaker



THE BEST PRESENT ANYONE COULD ASK FOR!

Almighty God, the One who is, and who was, and who is to come! He is the:

Prince of peace, the heavenly Father's only-begotten Son, the only sinless one, a ransom for sin, who;
Redeems for himself a genuinely repentant people, thus setting us apart from this World; and who promises us
Everlasting life, one where we who truly love him, be with him on the new earth and heavens when our
Saviour, Jesus, he will live with us in eternal joy, unending bliss; "pain and death are no more . . ."
Even now, he, our God is everywhere present, all the time; he, Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
Never will the one and only true God, the three-in-one, leave his chosen people alone! He loves us so;
The victory belongs to our God! Praise be to him alone. "In him, we are more than conquerors!"

Thank you to Connie Vanamerongen for sharing her Christmas poem with us! She lives at the Anchor Home in Beamsville.

JANUARY BIRTHDAYS:

6	Jason Herrewynen will be 5 c/o Harbour Home 42 Spadara Drive Hamilton, ON L9B 2K3	14	Stephen Dykstra will be 43 Box 3573 Smithers, BC VOJ 2N0	19	Janine Smid will be 56 c/o Beacon Home 653 Broad Street West Dunnville, ON N1A 1T8
7	Christine Breukelman will be 54 2225-19th Street Coadale, AB T1M 1G4	17	Henry Driegen will be 70 PO Box 2532 Station A Abbotsford, BC V2T 6R3	26	Katherine Nijenhuis will be 60 c/o Lighthouse 6528 1st Line RR 3 Fergus, ON N1M 2W4
13	Ben DeJong will be 35 c/o Harbour Home 42 Spadara Drive, Hamilton, ON L9B 2K3	19	Edwin Schutte will be 42 844 Bowman Road Abbotsford, BC V3G 1S9 northchilliwickhome@bethesdabc.com	30	Tyler Hoeksema will be 37 6755 Lorne Dr. Sardis, BC V2R 2G3

Happy Birthday to Jason, Christine, Ben, Stephen, Henry, Edwin, Janine, Katherine, and Tyler! We wish you all the Lord's blessing in the coming year. May God continue to bless you in all that you do.

DO YOU KNOW SOMEONE WHO SHOULD BE ADDED TO OUR LIST?

Wishing you all a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! I am wondering if there are more members to add to our birthday list. If you know of someone in your family, church, or friend group with a disability that would love to have their birthday listed in Clarion every year, please contact me. Our church community all around loves to celebrate their birthdays, and loves getting to know them. There are many people who faithfully send cards, and our brothers and sisters all look forward to receiving them.

Rachel Vis, tom.rachelvis@gmail.com



Eastern Ministerial Conference **2025**



The morning came early that Tuesday . . . 4:30 AM, to be precise! My husband Rich and I gathered our luggage in the dark, quiet house and stepped out into a dark, quiet neighbourhood. We loaded up the car and headed to the airport. The flight from Winnipeg to Toronto was smooth, full of sleepy folks heading to the big city. We picked up our rental and joined the flow of cars, battled the chaos of Toronto traffic until finally, closer to Barrie, things quieted down and our excitement built. We love these annual NAPARC ministerials!

HEADING EAST

Being from Winnipeg, right in the middle of Canada, we have the privilege of choosing which conference to go to, east or west. Up until a few years ago we went west, feeling that our identity changed when we moved from Ontario to Manitoba and we wanted to get to know our new classis of western Canada. We loved the sweet fellowship we experienced there! But the last few years have found us heading to the Eastern Ministerial Conference at Muskoka Bible Centre instead, giving an extra chance to visit my elderly mom; these visits are so very special to me. We love the chance to chat with old friends from our beginnings in Ontario, and to make new friendships. An added bonus is that my brother Mark Stewart, co-pastor of Fellowship CanRC, and his wife, also attended this year!

We came a bit weary this year, and I felt the need to talk to other women about ministry, and being ministry families. I needed encouragement from other women who share the same role. The Lord provided abundantly for me, and I am so grateful for his kindness.

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

Dr. Timothy Witmer, Westminster Seminary's emeritus Professor of Practical Theology, spoke to us on the theme of God's sovereignty and the comfort and confidence we can have as we live as "sovereigntists." I still find myself mulling this over, committing to handing my fears and sorrows over to the almighty God who reigns over all the details of our lives. I'm not great at it, but he's helping me train my mind to "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor 10:5). We were encouraged not to overlook the current blessings in our lives, not to doubt God's inherent goodness, and to keep our eyes focused on him in trust. 2 Chronicles 20:12 spoke loudly to many of us: "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you."

Dr. Witmer's wife, Barbara, joined him for an evening session where they walked us through the ups and downs of 50 years of ministry. I'm sure I wasn't the only one who found their banter so fun! We came away with a picture of a couple who, over and over again, submitted their plans and expectations to God—a God who led them down unexpected paths but never left their sides, even when things looked dark.

ENCOURAGING CONVERSATIONS

As we sat around after the sessions, walked outside viewing the gorgeous fall colours between events, and hung out in the Hub near windows overlooking the lake, we had many opportunities to connect. For me, that was the most rewarding. I loved seeing the young pastors' wives, sometimes with a baby on a hip, still in the early years of ministry. I look up to the older pastors' wives who have weathered more years than I have and have words of wisdom, love, and humour to share. All of us are in the trenches of ministry together and the feeling of unity is strong. We share a love for our pastor husbands and a love for the church of Christ. But we struggle in the role God put us in, so often feeling inadequate, less-than, weary, or even bewildered.

Coming together to share with women who understand our circumstances helps to shore us up, to ground us. It gives us someone trustworthy to confide in, someone who will listen with an understanding heart. I came away with a knowledge that I was heard and a sense of oneness with other women just like me. I also have a renewed joy for the beautiful work of ministry and a stronger love for the particular church of Christ that Rich and I have been planted in.

I smile now as I think of the dear sisters and brothers we talked and laughed with, praying that they fix their eyes on Jesus, "the author and finisher of our faith" as they strive against weariness and discouragement. May our ministries and churches be defined by love for our awe-inspiring and majestic God, and by people who serve each other with a true and humble love. 

Cher Anjema
Winnipeg
cheranjema@gmail.com

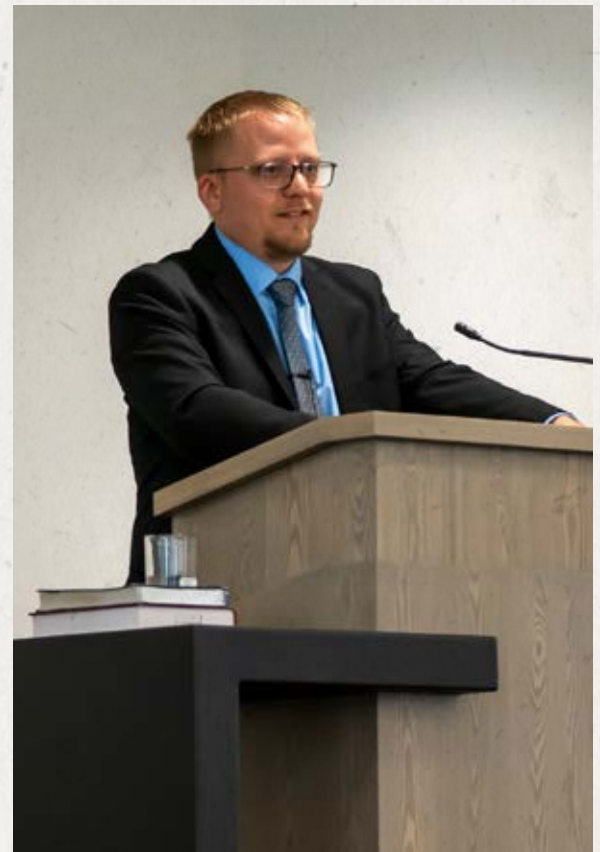
CELEBRATING 75 YEARS OF GOD'S FAITHFULNESS & GRACE

*“... and we his servants will arise
and build” Nehemiah 2:20b*

With joy and thankfulness, the Orangeville Canadian Reformed Church reached a significant milestone on August 13, 2025: 75 years of God's grace and faithfulness. Orangeville joins four other congregations in celebrating this anniversary this year—these five were the first churches that formed the federation of Canadian Reformed Churches.

In recognition of the Lord's work in building and preserving this congregation, a special open house and formal program was held this summer, along with a celebration worship service. Friday evening brought together current and former members, guests, and community friends. The church grounds were lively with conversation, refreshments, lawn games, and laughter. Children enjoyed bouncy castles while others reminisced about the past and celebrated the present.

As the formal program began, the sanctuary quickly filled—an encouraging turnout, especially in the midst of a busy summer! After the initial welcome and opening, a few guest speakers were invited to share a few words. Rev. Mark VanderLinde, our current pastor in Orangeville, spoke first. He reflected on the federation's beginnings: how early immigrants, unable to join or remain with existing churches due to doctrinal differences, committed themselves to building new churches founded firmly on Scripture. Rev. VanderLinde reflected on how society has changed over the decades, and the differences in experiences between the first generations of the church and those that followed. He encouraged unity between the generations, and how unity can come from the pleasure of worshipping according to the Word of God.





PAST PASTORS, HONOURED GUESTS

Three former ministers of Orangeville also shared heartfelt messages and encouragement to cling to the Lord's faithfulness and grace for the years to come. Rev. William den Hollander, who served for seven years, remembered being called by three congregations in the same classis before answering the call to Orangeville 37 years ago. Rev. Eric Kampen, who was part of the congregation for 25 years (and served nearly 17 as minister), shared that he first worshiped in the Orangeville pews as a youth, where he first felt called to ministry. Rev. Richard Pot, currently minister in Bunbury, Australia, sent a video greeting reflecting warmly on his seven years of ministry in his first congregation.

Guest dignitary Mayor Lisa Post of Orangeville expressed her congratulations to the church and also her appreciation for the contributions the church has made in the Orangeville community.

A few memorable moments during the evening included MC Jim Menken inviting all current members to stand. He gradually narrowed down those who had been members for 10, 20, 30 years, and more. While no founding members remain, one individual has been part of the church since 1951! Also enjoyed was a performance by the Orangeville students from Dufferin Area Christian School who beautifully sang "Behold Our God."



JOYFUL WORSHIP

The celebration continued Sunday afternoon with a special worship service focused on the theme: "The good hand of the God of heaven builds his church." The text, Nehemiah 2:20b— "And we his servants will arise and build" —is well known to the congregation, appearing weekly on the church bulletin. The sermon emphasized how God's hand not only provided in Nehemiah's time, but continues to guide his people today. Referencing 2 Chronicles 30:12, Rev. VanderLinde reminded the congregation of how the Lord turns hearts and enables his people to serve.

Times have changed but the Lord remains the same. It was our forefathers who came to this country and heeded the call to build the church. Many years later, we are still called to build the church, to spread the gospel and the work of Christ. We can be certain that when we also heed this call, is it Christ who will allow the church to prosper.

At the end of the worship service, attendees enjoyed refreshments, fellowship, and had the opportunity to sign a commemorative wooden plaque. A special photobook chronicled the history of the church, while a slideshow of photographs played in the background. Attendees also viewed unique historical artifacts—including an old coin roller used by the deacons to count collection money.

The 75th anniversary celebration of the Orangeville Canadian Reformed Church was a weekend marked by gratitude and fellowship. It was a time to reflect on the past and look ahead with hope, knowing that the hand of God has built and will continue to build his church. 📖



Danielle DeGroot
Orangeville



Summit Youth Conference 2025 RECAP

Summit Reformed Youth Conferences has enjoyed another incredible year of spiritual growth, great fellowship and record turn out— all thanks and glory be to God! Here’s a quick recap of the 2025 conferences and a preview of 2026 events.

REFORMED YOUNG ADULTS CONFERENCE (RYAC)

On February 13–16, 2025, Bethel URC in Calgary hosted their 4th annual Young Adults Conference. 162 young adults from western Canada and beyond attended to hear Rev. Paul and Julie Murphy speak on the topic *Maturity in Christ*, based on Colossians 1:28. The conference has lots of free time for games, a very popular square dance, and several Out-Day events like the Banff Gondola, Banff town tour, Activate, and Flying Squirrel.

Mark your calendar for February 12–15, 2026! We are excited to have Pastor Chad Vegas serve as our speaker. He will speak on the topic *God’s Great Love*, based on John 3:16. Sessions include: *The Love of the Father in Sending*; *The Love of the Son in Giving*; and *the Love of the Holy Spirit in Fellowship*. For the fourth session, Pastor Vegas will give his testimony, entitled *From Baptist to Reformed*. Registration opened mid-October 2025; for more information, go to the Summit website (www.summitrefcon.ca) and click on the Young Adults link.

REFORMED YOUTH CONFERENCE

On August 4–8, 2025, 492 young people, young adults, and chaperones attended the 9th annual Summit Youth Conference held on the beautiful campus of Mt. Royal University in Calgary, AB. Attendees had the privilege of hearing Dr. Joel Beeke and Dr. Jerry Bilkes speak on the topic of worship—“Oh Come, Let us Worship”—based on Psalm 95:6.

There were fourteen break-out sessions on various topics related to worship: *Forsaking the Assembly*, *Worship and the Sabbath*, *Worship and the Nations*, *Cultivating Holy Habits*, *True Worship – More than a Feeling*, *Worship and the Psalms*, *Kindness*, *Worship in all of Life*, *Family Worship*, *Worthy of Worship*, *The True Image of God*, *Lessons Learned from the Mission Field*, and *Worship and Modern Day Idols*. All the main sessions and several break-out sessions have been recorded and are available on the Summit Youth 2025 Media Page.

SUMMIT YOUTH 2026

The date for the next Summit Youth Conference is August 3–7, 2026. Next year marks a significant milestone for Summit – it will be our 10th conference! We have invited Dr. Alan Strange to speak again, as Dr. Strange spoke at the first three Summit conferences! Rev. John Bouwers (Hope Reformed Church, URC, Brampton, ON) will be another main session speaker.

The topic for Summit 2026 will be, “Counselor, Comforter, Keeper: The Person & Work of the Holy Spirit.” The break-out sessions will focus mainly on the Fruit of the Spirit. Mt. Royal University continues to undergo massive renovations on their dorms, which affect dorm capacity and sleeping arrangements. We do not know if we will have to cap attendance at 500 or perhaps less. Lord willing, we will know by March of 2026 when we open registration.

CORPORATE & CHARITABLE STATUS

Several months ago, we received the wonderful news that Alberta has granted Summit corporate status. We have now filed for charitable status with Revenue Canada. The Summit Proto-Board Committee continues its work—the next step is to form a



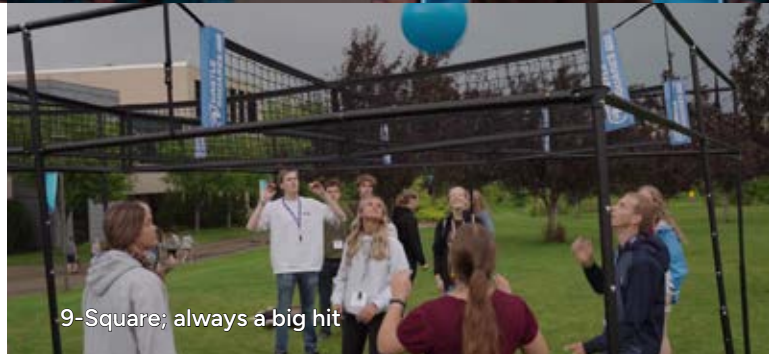
Summit Board. In 2026, Lord willing, we will be asking for Board nominations from supporting churches.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

We give thanks to God for all the generous support we received in 2025. While the registration fees cover dorm rooms, food, t-shirts and Out-Day events, the balance of the cost to operate Summit (\$175,000) is covered annually by church contributions and personal donations.

For 2025, we received approximately 90% of our budget but fell short by \$16,000. In God's providence, we have a budget surplus from previous years to cover this shortfall. If you or your family members have been blessed by the ministry of Summit Reformed Conferences, and you would like to make a donation to support Summit, you can give directly (with no tax receipt) via e-transfer to payments@summitrefcon.org.

If you would like to receive a tax receipt: write a cheque to "Summit Reformed Conferences" and mail it to Bethel URC; 730 - 101 Street SW; Calgary, Alberta (note in the memo that it is for Summit). You will also receive a receipt if you send an e-transfer for Summit to deacons@bethelurc.org. Make sure you indicate that your gift is for Summit and provide contact information. Thank you so much, and we look forward to continuing to serve through Summit! 🇨🇦



On behalf of Summit Youth Conferences,
Keith and Laura Davis

CLARION KIDS ASK!

Why do Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John have the same stories but they say them in different ways?

- Drew, Grade 3

Hello Drew,

When you write a story or a letter, you first think about who is going to read it and what you want them to learn. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were all written with a specific purpose. And because of that, they don't always share the same details.

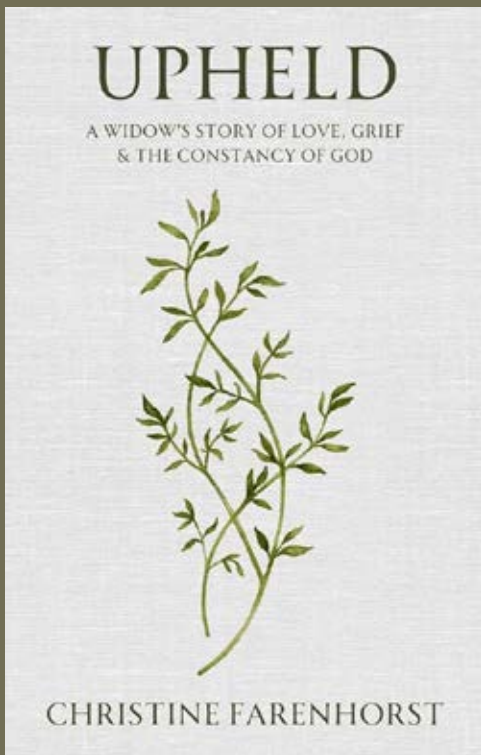
I will give you an example from the Christmas story. Matthew wanted to write his Gospel and show the Jews that Jesus was the promised King and Saviour that they had been waiting for. So, he gives a list of names to show how David had sons and grandsons all the way to Jesus being born. Luke carefully wrote the story of Jesus's life so that all people could read and believe it. You will see a lot of details in Luke's gospel! John wrote his Gospel to focus on Jesus being God, not just man. If you read the first sentence in John's book, can you see what he calls Jesus? The gospel of Mark does not tell the story of Jesus's birth at all because Mark was so focused on telling his readers about what Jesus did to save us and how we need to follow him—so in the first chapter of Mark, Jesus is already an adult!

Maybe this Christmas you can read the first chapter or two of each gospel with your dad and mom and compare them!

Till next time,

Mrs. Veenendaal

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



A TESTAMENT TO *God's Faithfulness* IN GRIEF

Upheld: A Widow's Story of Love, Grief, and the Constancy of God. By Christine Farenhorst, 2025. Christian Focus, 252 pages. \$20.95.

Anyone familiar with Christine Farenhorst's writing will know to expect from her pen a thoughtful blend of insight, poignancy, and faithfulness to Scripture. Her most recent book, *Upheld: A Widow's Story of Love, Grief, and the Constancy of God*, does not disappoint. In fact, it deepens her legacy of faithful storytelling with a raw honesty born of recent sorrow.

Christine's beloved husband, Anco, was called home by the Lord after suffering a massive stroke. The two had been married for nearly 53 years—a lifetime of shared love and labour. In *Upheld*, Christine opens a window into their life together, and into her own journey through grief, anchored by her unshakeable trust in the Lord.

The book is composed of 68 short chapters, each with a meditative tone. Every chapter begins with a verse or short passage from Scripture, followed by a personal story drawn from their life—whether from their courtship, child-rearing years, retirement, or the difficult days leading up to and following Anco's death.

Some of the stories are poignant, some joyful, and some filled with sorrow. Yet in all of them, the constancy of God is evident. The tone is never sentimental or overwrought, but marked instead by a quiet depth. Christine writes with a simplicity that invites

readers into her life and grief—not for the sake of self-expression, but as testimony to the God who upholds his children.

Upheld is, probably, a book to be read slowly, perhaps one chapter at a time, allowing each reflection to settle, although I could not put it down but read it over a few days for I found it so compelling. It is a rich devotional companion for anyone walking through loss, or for anyone who needs a reminder of the faithfulness of God in the ordinary and extraordinary moments of life.

Beautifully written, deeply personal, and spiritually nourishing, *Upheld* is a gift to the church. Readers will come away comforted, strengthened, and reminded that even in the deepest valleys, God's promises never fail. 



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Reflections on **GENERAL SYNOD 2025**

HILMER JAGERSMA & PETER HOLTVLÜWER



Pastors Hilmer Jagersma and Peter Holtvliwer spent a lot of time together as members of General Synod (GS) Aldergrove 2025. This assembly was anticipated by many as a “watershed” synod where significant decisions were likely to be made on key points of church polity and practice. Each brother went into synod with a mixture of feelings—excitement, nervousness, and also concern for how decisions might turn out. Having served alongside each other at Regional Synod East 2024, where some of the main issues were raised and discussed, each pastor was aware of the other’s views. Certainly there was agreement on some issues but on other matters they seemed quite far apart. Yet the Lord enabled them to work with each other and all the brothers at GS 2025 to arrive at most decisions where they—along with a large consensus—could agree. Since many church members across the federation may have had similar feelings ahead of GS 2025, *Clarion* asked these two men to share their experiences of working through this process and their thoughts about the outcomes.

A. APPROACHING SYNOD

What were your initial thoughts and expectations going into GS 2025?

Hilmer: When I first received word that I’d been delegated to general synod, I was genuinely surprised. I hadn’t yet been in ministry for ten years, so I assumed that some of my more seasoned colleagues would be delegated. Thankfully, I was able to turn to them for counsel and advice because I had all sorts of questions! I wasn’t sure when to book flights or how long I would be away from my family—some had warned that it could go well over three weeks. I also had no idea how much preparation was involved. When the first agenda was sent out, I remember opening the email and feeling quite overwhelmed. Thousands of pages of reports, overtures, and appeals lay before us. But mixed in with the sense of nervousness was also genuine excitement. I was eager to learn,

to listen, to develop new relationships, and to see how God might work through the deliberations of his church.

Peter: To be honest, I was worried. I felt the weight of certain issues that were on synod's agenda and was not looking forward to potentially difficult discussions in dealing with them (more on that below). Also, having served at a general synod before, I knew it would be less than pleasant to be away from my wife, family, home, and church for two weeks. I was aware of the enormous amount of energy synod work takes. Up early, to bed late, and pretty much working on this item or that item all throughout the day is rigorous and leaves little time for relaxation. On the positive side, I was looking forward to catching up with colleagues and getting to know elders from across the country. One of the blessings of serving at a general synod is the forging of long-lasting relationships through the grind of two weeks of intense work. To be sure, it is good to contribute toward sound, godly decisions that will benefit the churches but I was daunted by the enormity of the agenda of this particular synod.

What key issues did you anticipate would be the most challenging or possibly divisive? Why?

Hilmer: One of the key issues at GS 2025 was whether there was room to allow greater freedom at a local church level while still maintaining unity as a federation of churches. Two areas in particular illustrated this tension. First, the Committee for Ecumenical Relations (CER) report proposed a change to Article 50 of the Church Order (CO), dealing with the rules for ecclesiastical fellowship. The CER presented compelling arguments for synod to adopt new rules which would allow congregations to develop grassroots relationships with other faithful Reformed congregations—even including the possibility of occasional pulpit exchanges, with classis approval.

A second example was Article 55 CO, concerning the songs that may be sung in corporate worship. Three overtures were submitted, each differing in emphasis. Some of their key themes included preserving our Reformed heritage as psalm-singing churches, retaining the central place of the *Book of Praise*, and allowing local consistories the wisdom to select additional songs that are faithful to Scripture and our confession.

At the heart of both these discussions lay a deeper question: should such decisions be made by a general synod or entrusted to the discernment of local consistories? After all, this is where the tension lies. Personally, I believed there was a need to grant some

more freedom to the local church. I knew, however, that achieving this balance could be challenging.

Peter: One church polity concern I had arose from proposed changes to Article 49 CO. The core ideas were to increase the number of delegates while simultaneously shortening synod (which in principle no one argues with ☺) and to have each classis delegate brothers directly to GS instead of having each regional synod do so. My principal concern was that such proposals combined would effectively move our federation away from having a *deliberative* general synod, which takes time to carefully sift through ideas and arguments while aiming for a consensus, to a model which depends on much pre-work done ahead of synod, less discussion as an assembly, and more votes seeking a simple majority. I did not believe that would be an improvement.

The second polity issue had to do with proposed changes to Article 55 CO (as Hilmer outlined above). None of the overtures presented any concern for the priority of psalm singing, something which Reformed churches have always prized and which our own federation has affirmed repeatedly in decisions of the broader assemblies. I was worried that, like some other Reformed churches in the recent past, our federation would move away from embracing and utilizing the Psalms as God's unique gift to his churches to praise him.

I thought our most challenging, and potentially most divisive, issue was on the proposed changes to the questions (vows) in the Form for Profession of Faith and in the Baptismal Form(s). The proposal was to change the wording from "summarized in the confessions" to "summarized in the Apostles' Creed." On the one hand, the proposal would take us back much closer to the original wording "summarized in the articles of the Christian faith" and may not sound problematic. My concern was mostly with the reasons presented and what appeared to be a move away from having all professing members bound to the confessions of the church, something we've always had as churches. To me, a change of that nature would spell disaster for our federation over the long run, and so I felt this issue was the most weighty.

B. THE SYNOD PROCESS

What stood out to you about the way the delegates interacted and made decisions?

Hilmer & Peter: What stood out most to us was not simply the outcome of synod, but the spirit in which the work was done, and the care with which it was conducted. From the very beginning,

it was evident that the convening church and officers of synod were working hard to ensure that the assembly ran smoothly. The duties were clearly delegated, the chair guided the deliberations with patience and precision, and the result was an atmosphere that encouraged thoughtful participation and orderly discussion. We were also deeply impressed by the amount of preparation that had gone into the proposals. The letters, overtures, and reports showed that the churches had taken their responsibility seriously. We noticed how well-prepared the delegates were. Brothers had read deeply, thought carefully, and came ready to listen.

Throughout our discussions, we sought, as much as possible, to build broad consensus on the decisions we made. While differences certainly existed, there was a genuine desire to understand before responding, to speak carefully, and to avoid the kind of caricatures that can so easily divide. One of the most meaningful aspects for us was the fellowship that surrounded the work—beginning each day in Scripture, spending time in prayer, and getting to know each other better over meals and coffee breaks. In a gathering that could have easily become tense or procedural, we witnessed instead a spirit of humility and mutual trust. It wasn't perfect, but it was beautiful. We left the meeting deeply thankful not only for the decisions that were made, but for the *way* in which they were made.

Were there moments where you personally felt stretched, challenged, or even changed in your perspective?

Hilmer: Yes, there were moments when I felt genuinely stretched and humbled. As this was my first synod, I did not yet know everyone. There were times when I thought a particular brother would lean a certain direction on an issue, only to hear him articulate a perspective very different from what I expected. That was convicting for me and served as a humbling lesson to listen carefully, set aside my presumptions, and appreciate the Spirit's leading in shaping different perspectives for the good of the whole church.

The discussions at synod also opened my eyes to certain blind spots in my own thinking. For example, in the debate around Article 49 and the addition of delegates, I had not fully considered how such a change might impact colleagues in a smaller classis. What might work well for our local church or classis could create challenges or unintended burdens for others. Engaging in conversation, listening to others, and wrestling together with the issue made me realize how important it is to consider the impact of decisions beyond our own local context.

Peter: Definitely! There were 23 other voices around the table and

many times on various issues I heard good men say things I had not yet thought about, things which called for more reflection, and some things which soon began to resonate with me. Frequently such input gave me a new appreciation and even sympathy for the other side of the argument. It did not always lead me to change my mind but I would say that it often led to opening up the final decision to nuances that I had not considered before, but which made for a better decision in the end (in my view). That said, there were definitely occasions where I entered a discussion thinking one way only to end up voting for something quite different—and feeling good about it. I think that is one of the things all delegates to the broader assemblies must be prepared for: to have your mind changed. That requires prayerful preparation that one's heart might be humble and that the wisdom of the Holy Spirit might come to the fore in the careful deliberations of the assembly—and be recognized as such.

C. KEY DECISIONS

Article 55 CO – How do you feel about the revision to this article? (See Acts, Art 97)

Hilmer: I was really grateful for the discussions that took place around Article 55. On the one hand, they showed a deep appreciation for our Reformed heritage, particularly our commitment to psalm singing, and affirmed the important place the *Book of Praise* holds in the life of our congregations. At the same time, the conversations highlighted the practical realities faced by some local churches and church plants. In my own context, where the high cost of housing makes it difficult for many young families to settle, the majority of our growth comes from those who have very little familiarity with our songs. It became clear from the letters submitted by various churches and church plants that others faced similar situations. While all were united in wanting to sing songs faithful to Scripture, many expressed a desire for local consistories to be able to approve additional psalms and hymns suitable for corporate worship.

As I reflect on synod, I'm grateful for the thoughtful and respectful nature of our conversations. It would have been easy to focus on differences, to paint false caricatures, or to question motives. Instead, there was a genuine willingness to understand the concerns raised, to honour our history, and to align our practice in a way that reflects the wisdom of many other Reformed churches. For me, this outcome was encouraging because it forced us to work through what truly binds us together as Reformed churches—our shared commitment to Scripture and faithful

worship—while allowing for some diversity on what this might look like at a local level.

Peter: This is an example of an issue where, after hearing the genuine concerns of various churches in different settings across the federation, I experienced a change of perspective. At first I did not favour any change to Article 55. However, working through the proposals first at RSE 2024 and then again more broadly and in-depth at GS 2025 challenged my thinking. Concerning psalm singing, while I continue to believe that singing our Genevan tunes works in most settings and that in time most visitors and new members can learn to sing them with appreciation, I came to see that in certain contexts such tunes were more problematic for newcomers. For some, hard-to-sing tunes *discouraged* psalm singing, and I have sympathy for that. Some churches expressed the desire to sing the Psalms but would like some freedom to choose other tunes or even sing them in different languages at times. I can respect that since it still honours the Reformed principle of singing predominantly the Psalms. While I remain concerned about the opinion expressed here and there which questions the appropriateness of the New Testament church primarily singing what are regarded by some as “old covenant” songs, I am happy that the churches have now together stated clearly in Article 55 that the Psalms are “foundational to the church’s worship and are to be sung frequently.” To me, this is a vital aspect of staying faithful to God’s Word in the long run.

When it comes to the aspect of allowing each consistory some freedom to choose songs (hymns) alongside the Psalms, I feel that synod reached a fair compromise. On the one hand, Article 55 indicates that the songs adopted for our *Book of Praise* are to “have the principal place in the worship of the church.” So we should still experience a basic unity in our singing across the federation. On the other hand, with each church having its own unique circumstances, the local elders may decide to sing this or that biblical hymn, or alternate psalm, from time to time. This kind of thing is done in a number of our sister churches and seems to work fine. The rationale for the changes to Article 55 are clearly laid out in the *Acts* and I trust that the churches will take the reasons into account and act according to the spirit of the decisions.

Changing the wording in the liturgical forms from “summarized in the confessions” to “summarized in the Apostles’ Creed” —why was this important to you? What do you think this change means for our churches? (Acts, Art 184)

Hilmer: For a long time, I have felt the wording needed to be changed. First, from a procedural standpoint, if the return to the original wording requires the input of all the churches, then the initial change should have also involved their input—which it did not. Second, the Apostles’ Creed occupies a unique historical and theological place as an ancient, ecumenical, and baptismal creed, succinctly summarizing the core truths of the gospel concerning the Triune God and the work of Christ. Including the Apostles’ Creed in the baptismal and profession questions highlights our connection to the catholic church across all times and places. Third, this change helps clarify the distinction between the vows made at profession of faith and those made by office bearers. While we are unashamed of being known as confessional churches, the historic Reformed position is clear that we have not excluded those from membership who are still learning or grappling with particular points of Reformed doctrine, provided they are teachable, submissive to the church’s instruction, and refrain from causing public discord or division. The return to the original wording accomplishes all of these aims: it respects proper procedure, affirms the central place of the Apostles’ Creed in summarizing the promises of the gospel, and preserves a faithful, pastoral understanding of membership in our churches.

Peter: My major concern going into this discussion was that the proposed change appeared to loosen the commitment of professing church members to our Reformed confessions, the Three Forms of Unity (TFU). I was heartened to hear around the synod table and in personal discussions with brothers who supported the overture that such was not the intention. I recognized that prior to 1983 the forms used to read “summarized in the articles of the Christian faith [i.e. the Apostles’ Creed]” and that the URCNA and the FRCNA still have that phrasing while still holding members bound to the doctrine confessed in the TFU. My question was: would that be the case for the CanRC if we go back to the previous wording? I am very thankful that synod’s decision makes it abundantly clear that all church members continue to remain bound to the teaching of our Reformed confessions. So, in everyday church life, I don’t think the altered wording brings much *practical* change to our churches.

That said, I could also appreciate the struggle that some churches brought forward about how much of the confessions a candidate for profession of faith must know before being permitted to make their profession. This is indeed an age-old struggle that every consistory faces. Some felt that the phrase “summarized in the confessions” asked too much up-front knowledge of a candidate. True faith must be there, of course, but how much detailed knowledge of the TFU should a young adult or new believer have? Through brotherly discussion at synod, all came to a better understanding that the level of knowledge may well differ between candidates and it will be a wisdom call on the part of the consistory as to when sufficient knowledge has been demonstrated, but in the end all agreed that all members must agree to remain subject to the teaching of the TFU and continue to grow in understanding. I think this discussion cleared up some misunderstandings among us and brought a lot of us closer together on this particular issue.

D. LESSONS & ENCOURAGEMENT

What gave you the most encouragement during GS 2025?

Hilmer & Peter: We both felt the Holy Spirit at work in creating a humble spirit of openness and willingness to hear one another well. This was to our pleasant surprise. We knew that this synod had to decide some major issues which had been growing in our churches for a while, issues on which opinions were sometimes sharply divided. We both felt the pressure and were expecting heavy debates and perhaps agitated emotions coming out in strong words. Yet the Lord Jesus put us to shame by answering our prayers! (Isn't it humbling to see how the Lord listens to our pleas even when we are not sure that he will?) All throughout synod, our discussions were bathed in earnest prayer. We also regularly meditated together on God's Word and heard from many brothers—including fraternal delegates—a word of encouragement and hope for our work. We really felt our heavenly Father binding us together by way of frank coffee-time chats, meal-time discussions, and open round-table dialogues in the plenary sessions. What we hardly dared imagine actually came about: a strong consensus on all the major issues before synod, all in a spirit of unity—praise God from whom all blessings flow!

How can we maintain unity as we move forward, even as our contexts and perspectives differ?

Hilmer: Maintaining unity as we move forward requires a willingness to engage in genuine dialogue, to set aside assumptions, and to seek a true understanding of the concerns and perspectives of others. My own relationship with Peter is a good example of this: we do not always agree on every issue, yet through years of conversation and listening, I think we would both say that we have been challenged, encouraged, and grown in our thinking. It's easy to focus on areas of differences or disagreements—and there's a place for that. But being at synod also reminded me of the many great things God is doing in our churches. Even with differences in context and perspective, Christ is building his church; many are coming to know him as Lord and Saviour, and in all of this, God is glorified.

Peter: What this general synod taught me is that prayer, searching Scripture, and talking together (especially where differences are known) are critical ingredients in maintaining unity and even growing closer to one another. Too often we do the first two but not the third. By having times (conferences? meetings? coffee chats?) where we can pray together for the gift of true Christian unity and then listen to one another to better understand each other's positions and concerns, I think we can expect the Lord to bless us with what we pray for. More contact, more discussion, more interaction, amidst more prayer, reduces the chance of creating caricatures and bogeymen and opens the way to deepen our unity in Christ. This is true at the level of consistories and minister colleagues but equally among church members generally. Let's pray, listen, and talk more *together*. 



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Season's Greetings

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Season's Greetings

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