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Clarion

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

Vulnerable Sector Check
Eric Kampen

Experiencing God in the Covenant
Rob Schouten

Langley's 50th Anniversary
Jan Broersma

What's Inside

What goes on when we worship? Do we feel God's presence? Should we? How do we assess whether our worship experience is what it should be? Rob Schouten tackles these important questions in "Experiencing God in the Covenant." In a separate piece, Pastor Rob also clarifies a sometimes-misunderstood doctrine of whether life-long Christians are born "dead in sin" and need to be "born again." Eric Kampen's editorial helps us check our doctrine by asking us to check our sources—do we scrutinize with care the voices we allow to influence our thinking and faith?

In terms of meditative pieces, Arjen Vreugdenhil encourages us that the Lord is with us to make us strong and Rick Ludwig finds a fresh way to express the grace of forgiveness out of which we may live each day.

Thanksgiving is in order as we can rejoice with the church in Langley on their 50th anniversary—congratulations! We are also grateful to read about the Lord's work of reformation in Germany, the home of our beloved Heidelberg Catechism. Germany has been a spiritually dry place the last few centuries but, as pastors Heck and Schuster relay to us, the Lord has once again planted Reformed churches there.

Many of our churches support mission work in Brazil and so we're glad to present a glimpse into the life and work one of their pastors, Iraldo Luna. There is also a new parachurch work starting in southern Ontario, providing a Christian day program for adults with intellectual disabilities—see "Purpose Day Program" inside.

You can also enjoy a podcast review, three book reviews, and two new songs. May your reading be refreshing!

Peter Holtvlüwer

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EDITORIAL COMMITTEE:

Editor in Chief: Peter Holtvlüwer
E: *editorinchief@clarionmagazine.ca*
Managing Editor: Anna Nienhuis
Contributing Editors: Eric Kampen, Jason Van Vliet, Matthew VanLuik, Calvin Vanderlinde

CONTENT INQUIRIES

E: *editor@clarionmagazine.ca*

ADMINISTRATIVE INQUIRIES

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

ARCHIVE

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Vulnerable Sector Check

It is common for church members to undergo a Vulnerable Sector Check before they can be involved in church activities that will put them in a position of authority or trust relative to vulnerable persons, such as children, people with disabilities, or seniors. The sad reality is that there have been too many cases of predators who joined church communities with evil intent, leading insurance companies to make these checks a requirement if a church wishes to have proper insurance. Out of love for our brothers and sisters, and for the good name of the church, we will gladly cooperate. But are there other situations where we should also be requiring these checks?

FOR MINISTERS

We may not have thought about it, but in effect we also require a Vulnerable Sector Check for those entering the ministry. Ministers deal with the flock of the Lord Jesus Christ and all the sheep of the flock are vulnerable. Paul warned the Ephesians about fierce wolves coming in among them (Acts 20:29). In his letter to the Colossians, Paul warned about those who put restrictions on foods and marriage (Col 2:16–23). In his letters to Timothy, he had many warnings about false teachers (e.g., 1 Tim 1:3–7, 6:3–10). The church needs faithful, trustworthy shepherds that will not lead the flock astray but guide it on the right way.

Seeing that ministers will be working with a vulnerable flock, the church wants assurance of their integrity and ability. The Church Order has many articles dealing with the ministry of the Word. Two lengthy articles deal with eligibility for the ministry and ordination and installation of ministers. Students must graduate from seminary and then undergo a series of ecclesiastical examinations, with the most extensive one at the end. It may all seem excessive, but vulnerable sheep must be protected from wolves. Anyone who aspires to the office of minister of the Word will gladly cooperate.

FOR OTHERS?

The question that arises, however, is whether we exercise this due diligence with respect to others whom we allow to shape us spiritually. In faith-related conversations, it comes out that people read many different authors, consult many websites, and listen to many podcasts. No doubt, there is much helpful material out there. Truth is certainly not restricted to Canadian Reformed ministers or ministers from churches with which we have ecclesiastical fellowship. The question is, though, whether we have bothered to do a background check on the people we allow onto the pulpit of our heart. We are, after all, a vulnerable sector, prone to being misled. We can easily be guilty of having itching ears and we may look for authors, websites, and podcasters that will scratch those itching ears (cf. 2 Tim 4:3).

DO BACKGROUND CHECKS

Article 27 of the Church Order states that "to ward off false doctrine and error which could enter the congregation and constitute a danger to the purity of its doctrine or conduct, the ministers shall use the means of instruction, of refutation, of warning, and of admonition, in the ministry of the Word as well as in Christian teaching and family visiting." But ministers can't read everything church members are reading. They can't have an informed opinion about every book, podcast, or website.

As members, however, schooled in Reformed teaching, we have tools at our disposal to evaluate what we read in books or come across on social media, websites, and podcasts. It does require, though, that we bother to do a thorough background check.

What does such a check involve? With respect to authors and podcasters, this would involve learning something about their church background. This will give some insight into their theological leaning. It would be good to learn something about their educational background, to get a sense whether they are just putting out some generic pop-psychology or pop-theology, or whether there is substance to what they say. For websites, take some time reading the "About" or "Who we are" sections to find out their theological orientation. And of course, when reading and listening, keep the Reformed antenna up to pick up theological static—even when consuming material from those who claim to be Reformed.

In humility, we should admit that we as sheep are a vulnerable sector. We need to be careful who we follow, careful where we are led. Let us apply rigorous standards of scrutiny to those we grant access to our heart.

Eric Kampen
Minister Emeritus
Canadian Reformed Church of Orangeville
rev.e.kampen@gmail.com

Be Strong & Courageous

"Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." — Joshua 1:9

"Keep going—tap into your inner strength—power through!" You may hear these words of encouragement when you face a daunting task, a difficult challenge. It can be hard to find the strength and courage to keep going. We can sympathize with the situation of Joshua and the Israelite nation as they stood at the threshold of the Promised Land with a tough task ahead of them.

Forty years earlier, their parents had not had the courage they needed. They had refused to follow the LORD and to fight. Now the new generation stands there: the Jordan River in front of them, and beyond it the fortress of Jericho, mighty armies, and rumoured giants.

In that situation, the LORD himself appears to Joshua and says: "Be strong and courageous!" A great message, directly from the LORD. A Bible verse that is so quotable, for people facing difficulties, for children going off to college, and so on.

But what is the basis for that encouragement? When the LORD encouraged Joshua, it wasn't an empty pep talk. It was to assure him of an all-important fact that made all the difference for him and for the Israelites as they took up the work of conquering the Holy Land: "For I am with you."

That promise is the basis of the courage and strength of a believer. It is the basis of the courage Joshua displays. "I will fear no evil, for you are with me," was David's mantra when he faced off against Goliath and so many other enemies. "I am with you"—those are the words God's people need to hear and trust to be strong and courageous.

Our Christian faith is meant to be strong and courageous because it is based on the same promise. That promise became incarnate in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. His name is "Emmanuel," meaning "God with us"! As Christians, we have good reason to be strong and courageous. If we focus on the presence of the Lord in our lives, with his promises and by his Holy Spirit, we can have remarkable boldness and resilience.

However, the call in Joshua 1 has a more specific application. The repeated words, "Be strong and courageous" were not spoken to the people in general, but to Joshua, their God-appointed leader. As the leader and guide of the Israelites, Joshua especially needed strength and courage to take the right initiatives, to keep going without giving up. It takes a special spiritual strength to lead God's people into battle, to guide them on the path of truth and obedience in a hostile world.

Just as the LORD encouraged Joshua, he also encourages the leaders of the church, who by their leadership in word and example encourage the people under their care. The Great Commission in Matthew 28 may not use the words "be strong and courageous," but they are certainly implied. Be strong and courageous, as you go out of your comfort zone and make disciples of all nations. Keep going, even if it is hard! Why? Because our Lord Jesus made that promise that was true for Joshua and is still true today: "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20). C

FURTHER READING:

Joshua 1; Deut. 31:1–8.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY:

1. Soon after the LORD gave Joshua this encouragement, the Israelites crossed the Jordan River and attacked Jericho. In what ways were they reminded that the LORD was with them?
2. Read Judges 6:11–24. How did Gideon appeal to God's promise, but in a critical and disappointed way? How did the LORD prove him wrong?
3. Explore some characters in the Bible who were ready to give up but found strength and courage in the Lord's promises to them. (Hint: Gen. 28; 1 Kings 19.)
4. The Lord Jesus is "Emmanuel", God with us. But he did not remain on earth; he is in heaven. In what way is the Lord with us today, and how does he give us strength and courage?
5. What are some practical ways in which we can remind each other that God is with us, and encourage each other?

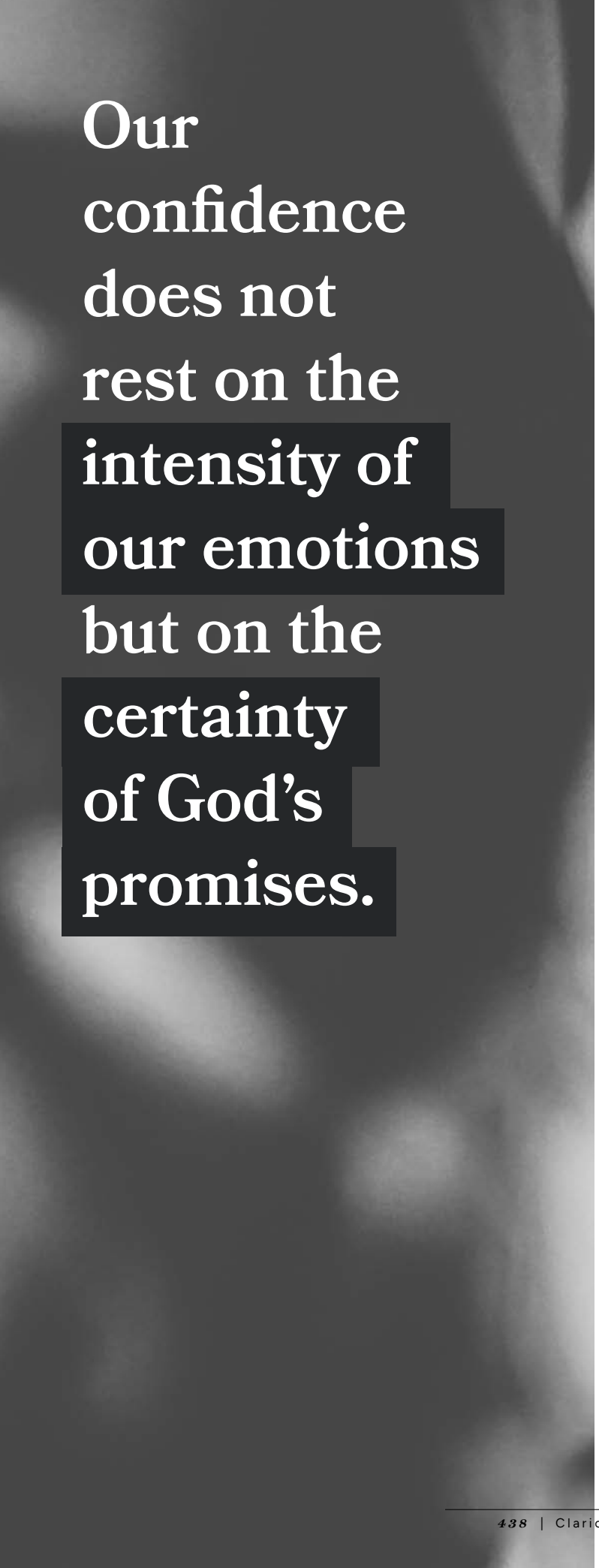
Rev. Arjen Vreugdenhil
Minister
Eben-Ezer Canadian Reformed Church, Chatham
pastorarjen@gmail.com

Experiencing God in the Covenant

ROB SCHOUTEN

In recent discussions about the life of the Canadian Reformed churches, a particular concern has been raised with increasing frequency. Some have suggested that our worship and church life lack spiritual vitality. The critique is that our worship is too structured and restrained, and that our theology places greater emphasis on objective truth than on the experience of God's presence.

Behind these concerns lies a particular way of evaluating worship. We hear comments such as, "I really experienced God today," "The worship felt flat," or "God seemed especially near this morning." Others describe a service as spiritually alive because it stirred deep feelings of joy, peace, or awe. Such observations raise an important question: *How should Christians evaluate their experience of God in worship?* By what standard should we judge whether we have truly encountered God?



Many contemporary approaches answer that question primarily in experiential terms. Worship is judged by the intensity of one's awareness of God's presence. A service is considered spiritually rich because it produced a profound sense of joy, peace, closeness, or awe. Communion with God is measured largely by the depth of one's religious experience.

Scripture gives a rich place to the affections in the Christian life. It speaks often of joy in the Lord, delight in his salvation, peace through the Spirit, and love for God. True worship engages the whole person—mind, heart, and will. The question, then, is not whether worship should stir the heart. It is whether our emotional experience is the proper measure of whether we have truly worshipped or genuinely experienced God's presence.

COMMUNION THROUGH COVENANT

To answer that question, we must first understand how God establishes fellowship with his people. Throughout Scripture, he establishes fellowship by binding himself to his people in covenant. Again and again, God declares, "I will be your God, and you shall be my people." These covenant words express God's gracious commitment to his people. He promises to dwell among them, claim them as his own, and live in fellowship with them. Communion with God therefore begins not with our pursuit of him but with his gracious commitment to us. We enjoy fellowship with God because he has first drawn near and pledged himself to us.

Yet sinners can enjoy this covenant fellowship only through Jesus Christ. He is the mediator of the covenant through whom sinners are reconciled to God and brought into fellowship with their heavenly Father. In Christ, those who were once far off have been brought near. Our communion with God rests entirely on Christ's finished work.

For that reason, the church gathers confidently in God's presence. We do not assemble hoping to discover whether God is near or waiting for a powerful feeling that assures us of his presence. We gather because, in Christ, God has already drawn near to us and invited us into fellowship with himself.

Our confidence does not rest on the intensity of our emotions but on the certainty of God's promises. Whether our hearts are overflowing with joy, burdened with grief, or quietly attentive, the reality remains the same: God is faithful to his covenant. He is present among his people because he has promised to be. Through the preaching of the gospel he speaks to his people. Through the sacraments he confirms his promises. By these appointed means he nourishes and strengthens the faith of his covenant children.

In the ministry of the Word and the sacraments, God meets with his people. He speaks to them, assures them of his grace, and renews their communion with him. This is the deepest intimacy possible: the Creator of heaven and earth giving himself to his people according to his covenant promise.

Because God addresses his people, worship takes the form of a covenant dialogue. God speaks through his Word and sacraments, and his people respond with faith, repentance, prayer, praise, and obedience. Reformed worship therefore gives personal engagement with God its proper shape. He speaks first, and his people answer.

HOW THE SPRIT WORKS

At this point an important question naturally arises. If communion with God is established through the covenant and secured through Christ, what role does the Holy Spirit play?

The Holy Spirit is the one who makes this covenant fellowship a living reality in the lives of God's people. Through the preaching of the gospel, the Spirit opens hearts to receive God's Word. Through the sacraments, he strengthens and confirms faith. He applies the saving work of Christ to believers and produces within them the fruits of faith, hope, love, joy, and peace.

The Spirit ordinarily works through the means Christ has appointed for his church. In the public worship of God's people he speaks through the preaching of the Word and confirms God's promises in the sacraments. The same Word continues to dwell richly among God's people as they read the Scriptures, gather for family worship, and meditate on God's promises in their daily lives.

Through these means the Spirit unites believers ever more closely to Christ. He assures them of the Father's love, strengthens their faith, teaches them to delight in God's promises, equips them to resist sin, and shapes them into the likeness of their Saviour. As he does so, believers increasingly know the joy and comfort of God's covenant promise: "I will be your God, and you shall be my people." Their fellowship with God grows deeper, richer, and more joyful as they learn to live in the reality of that gracious promise.

GOD'S PRESENCE AND OUR FEELINGS

We have seen that Scripture teaches us to understand our experience of God in the light of God's covenant dealings with his people. But what happens when we begin using our experience to judge God's nearness and our communion with him?

Gradually, the believer's assurance begins to rest less on God's covenant dealings and more on his own perception of them. Instead of asking, "What has God done?" believers begin asking, "Do I feel God's presence?" They begin looking to the depth of their experience for confirmation that God has truly drawn near.

This temptation has become especially powerful in a culture that encourages us to look within ourselves for certainty, authenticity, and identity. Increasingly, our inward experience is treated as the most reliable guide to reality. It is therefore not surprising that Christians may begin to evaluate worship in similar terms. The question gradually shifts from, "What has God done?" to, "How can I know that I have truly encountered God?" If the answer is sought primarily in the intensity of our experience, our feelings quietly become the measure of God's nearness.

Pursued consistently, this way of thinking encourages believers to seek certainty of God's nearness in immediate experience rather than in the Word and sacraments through which he has promised to communicate. What begins as a sincere desire for deeper fellowship with God gradually turns our feelings into the measure of whether we have truly encountered him. Yet Scripture never asks believers to assess their closeness to God by examining the intensity of their experience. It directs them instead to God's covenant dealings with his people, culminating in the saving work of Christ and proclaimed in the Gospel.

This shift has significant consequences for the Christian life because our experience of worship is never uniform. Some Lord's Days bring a profound awareness of sin. Others bring comfort, joy, gratitude, or peace. Still others may leave believers emotionally quiet or seemingly unmoved. If spiritual vitality is measured by the intensity of such experiences, believers may begin to doubt God's nearness whenever those experiences are absent. Gradually, they begin looking for certainty not in God's steadfast covenant faithfulness but in the depth of their own experience of him.

Scripture directs believers to a different foundation. In Romans 8, Paul writes to Christians who know weakness, suffering, and uncertainty. He grounds their assurance in God's saving work in Christ. Rather than directing believers to examine the strength of their feelings, Paul points them to the saving realities that are already theirs in Christ: "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1). They have been adopted as God's children and made heirs with Christ (Rom 8:15–17). Nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus their Lord (Rom 8:38–39).

The Spirit's witness, therefore, does not direct believers inward in search of a particular feeling. Rather, he assures them of the realities God has already established through the saving work of Christ. Hebrews 10 makes the same point. Believers are exhorted to draw near to God with full assurance of faith because Christ has opened a new and living way into God's presence (Heb 10:19–22).

They receive something more enduring than a passing religious experience.

They receive the living God himself.

Our confidence rests in trusting the finished work of Jesus, not in the intensity of our experience week by week or day by day.

EMOTIONAL SINGING

This same understanding of worship should also shape the church's singing. The primary question cannot be whether a song creates a powerful emotional response. The question is whether it faithfully proclaims God's truth and gives voice to the church's believing response.

The songs of Scripture are deeply experiential. They express joy, sorrow, fear, gratitude, repentance, longing, confidence, and hope. Yet those affections never stand on their own. They arise from God's mighty acts, his covenant faithfulness, his steadfast love, his righteous judgments, and his unfailing promises. The psalmists do not search within themselves to discover whether God is near. Rather, they rehearse who God is and what he has done, and their hearts respond with praise, trust, repentance, lament, or joy.

The church's songs should follow the same pattern. They should proclaim the greatness of God, the saving work of Christ, the promises of the covenant, and the hope of the gospel. They should also give voice to the believer's response of faith, expressing love, thanksgiving, confession, longing, and praise. In biblical worship, truth and affection belong together. God's self-revelation gives rise to faith, and faith gives rise to holy affections.

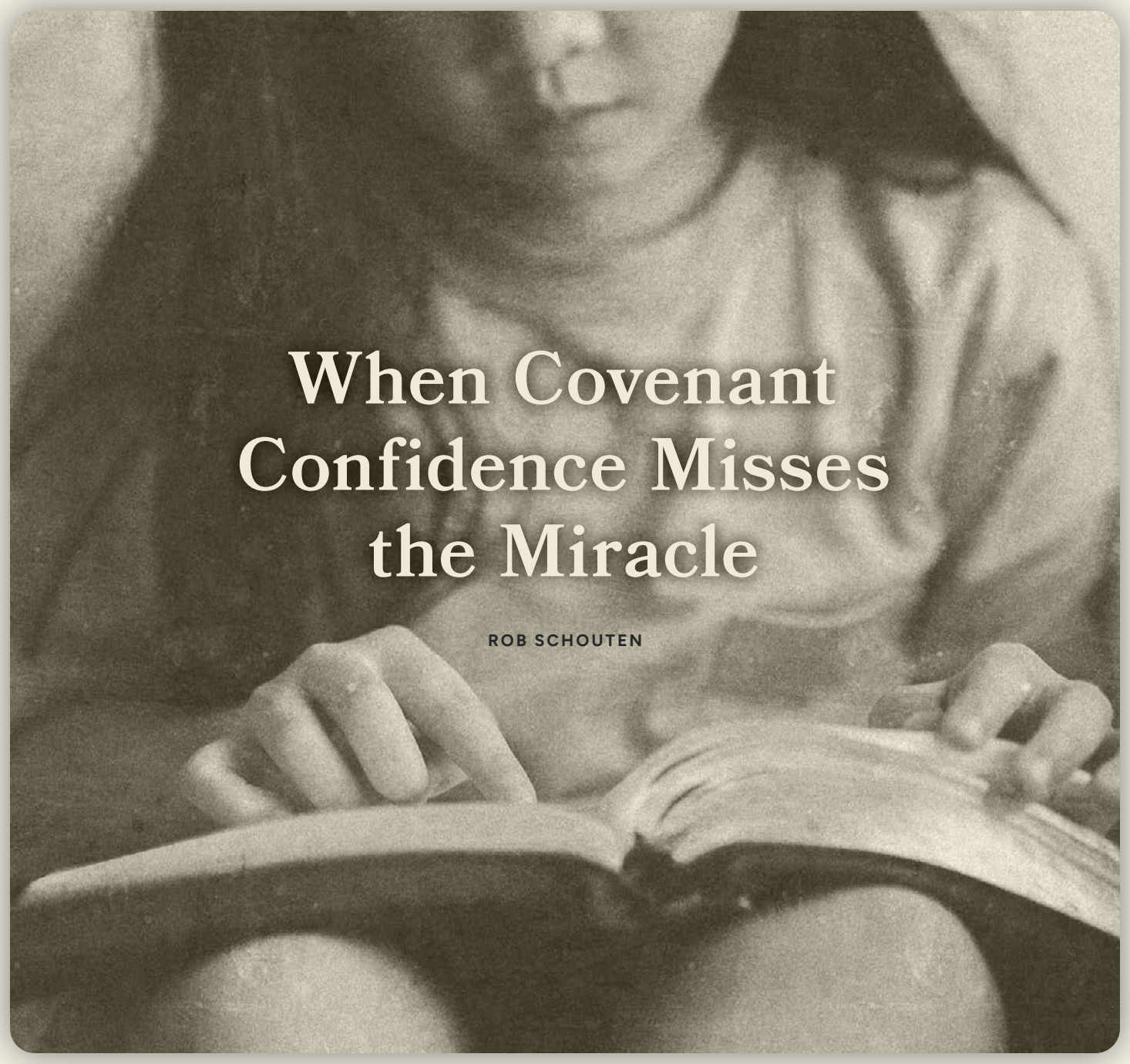
In covenantal worship, the church is nourished by God's self-revelation. The emotions that follow are precious gifts, but they are never the measure of whether God has truly drawn near.

RECEIVING THE LIVING GOD

Christians rightly long to know God more deeply. Scripture encourages that longing, but it also directs it. We do not discover God's presence by searching for ever more intense religious experiences or by attempting to create an atmosphere in which he might seem especially near. God has already drawn near to us in Jesus Christ and continues to dwell among his covenant people.

The church therefore does not need to discover a new path into God's presence. It needs only to walk the path God has already opened through his Son. Week after week the covenant Lord gathers his people. They receive something more enduring than a passing religious experience. They receive the living God himself. C

Rob Schouten
Minister
Aldergrove Canadian Reformed Church
robert.a.schouten@proton.me



When Covenant Confidence Misses the Miracle

ROB SCHOUTEN

Paul's words in Ephesians 2:1–10 leave no room for pride: "You were dead in your trespasses and sins . . . but God, being rich in mercy, made us alive together with Christ . . . for by grace you have been saved."

The apostle paints our story in stark contrasts—death and life, wrath and mercy, sin and salvation. This is not just the story of notorious sinners; it is the story of every Christian. And yet, after hearing these words of Paul, someone was heard to say, "I grew up believing in Christ. I was never dead in my sin."

It sounds grateful, but that statement reveals a basic confusion. It forgets what Ephesians 2 and the rest of Scripture insist upon: no one is born alive to God. Whether faith dawned suddenly or seemed to always be there, every believer has crossed from death to life. God does not save anyone by polishing what was already good. He creates life where there was none.

DEAD IN SIN

When Paul wrote to the Ephesians, his readers came from mixed backgrounds. Some had turned from idolatry while others had long worshiped the true God. Yet Paul did not divide these people into two groups. He said to all: "You were dead in your trespasses and sins . . . you were by nature children of wrath" (Eph 2:1, 3).

"Dead in sin" is not a label for the notoriously wicked. It is a diagnosis of the universal human condition. Apart from Christ, we can think, plan, work, and maybe even pray in some fashion—but

we cannot rightly love God or live under his rule. We can be morally earnest while still devoid of the life given in the gospel.

Paul's words in Ephesians 2 echo through Scripture:

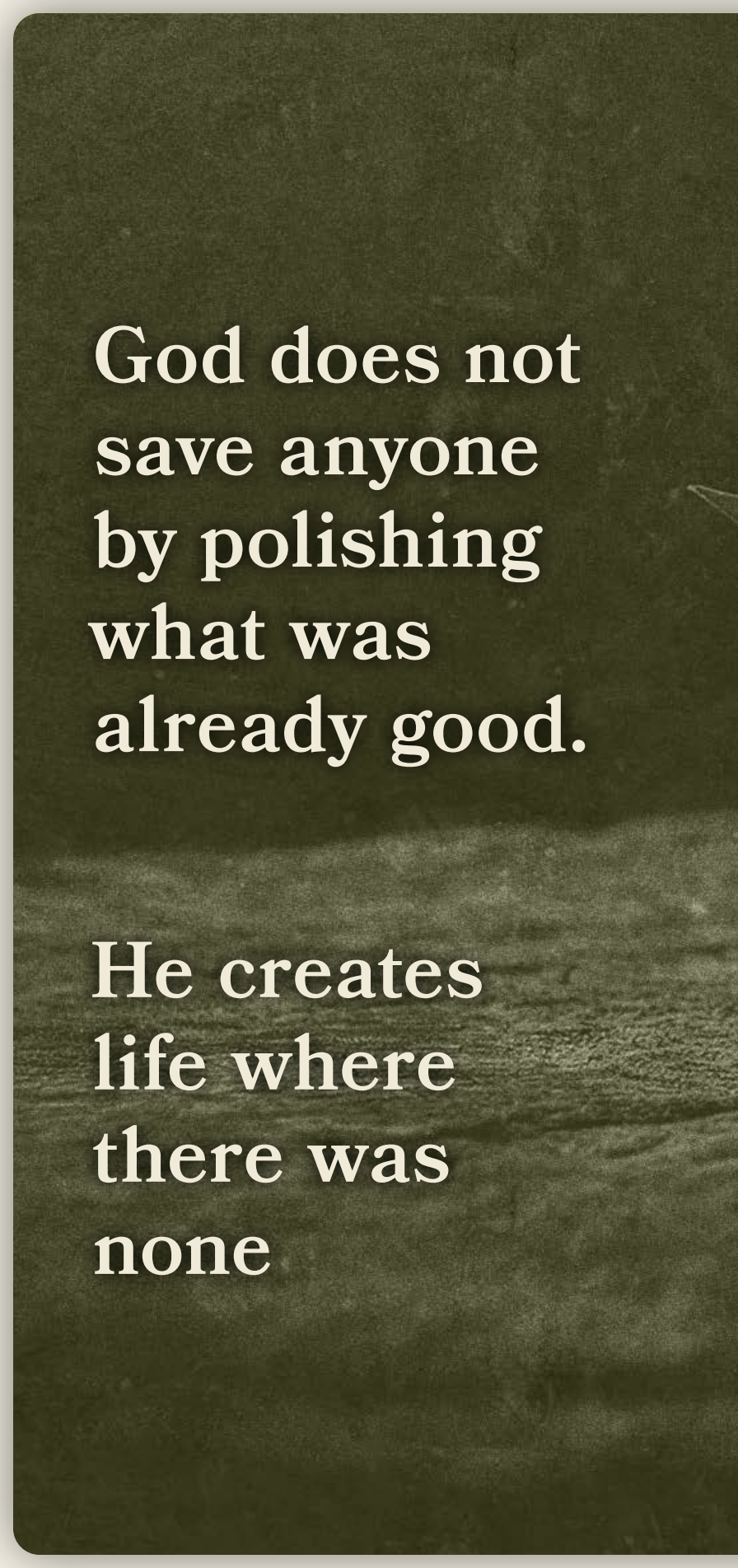
- "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23)
- "When you were dead in your sins, God made you alive with Christ" (Col 2:13)
- "The mind set on the flesh is hostile to God" (Rom 8:7)

Jesus said the same in different words. He told Nicodemus, a respected teacher of Israel: "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3). Nicodemus was not an outsider; he was a covenant man. Yet Jesus told him that religious pedigree and moral seriousness cannot produce life. "You must be born again," Jesus said, and then added the stinging rebuke: "*Are you Israel's teacher, and you do not understand these things?*" (John 3:7, 10).

Nicodemus should have recognized the language. The Old Testament had already spoken of this renewal. Ezekiel 36 promised that God would sprinkle clean water, remove the heart of stone, and give a heart of flesh. Ezekiel 11 foretold the gift of a new spirit. These were covenant promises of inward rebirth and cleansing—truths a teacher of Israel should have known. Jesus was not announcing a new demand but pointing to what Scripture had always taught: all covenant members need the Spirit to give them new hearts.

Our confessions echo the same truth. The Belgic Confession says that, after the fall, "whatever light is in us has changed into darkness," and that "there is no understanding nor will conformable to the will of God unless Christ has brought it about" (Article 14). The Canons of Dort summarize it this way: "All men are conceived in sin, born as children of wrath, incapable of any saving good . . . and without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they neither will nor can return to God" (Chapter III/IV, Article 3).

That is what Paul meant by "dead in sin." Without the Spirit, no one is alive to God—not even those born into God's covenant of grace. The Heidelberg Catechism condenses it beautifully: "Yes, unless we are regenerated by the Spirit of God." (Q&A 8).



WHEN COVENANT PEOPLE FORGET

Why do some church members stumble over this language? When they say, "I was never dead in sin," they are describing their *memory*, not their former *condition.* They cannot remember life apart from Christ—and that in itself is a mercy!

The danger, however, is to treat a lifelong faith as something *natural*. But faith is never natural. It is the supernatural work of God's Spirit. The covenant is the greenhouse of grace—but only the Spirit can make the seed of the Word grow into living faith.

Our Form for the Baptism of Infants begins: "We and our children are conceived and born in sin and are therefore by nature children of wrath, so that we cannot enter the kingdom of God unless we are born again." Baptism reminds every covenant member—young or old—that new birth is necessary. It proclaims both our need and God's grace.

COVENANT AND CONVERSION

Some Christians treat covenant and conversion as though they were rival explanations of how God saves. Scripture, however, holds them together as one work of grace.

The covenant is the setting in which conversion frequently happens. God brings new life to covenant children through his appointed means: the preaching of Christ, the holding forth of the promises of the gospel, the exhortations to repent and believe, and even the warnings that awaken the conscience. In the home, he uses believing parents as instruments of his grace—teaching, praying, disciplining, and modeling faith before their children. These ordinary means are the Spirit's chosen channels for awakening and nurturing life in Christ.

Many covenant children come to faith so early that they never remember a time without it. That does not make their faith less real or less miraculous. It simply shows that grace was at work through the Word, worship, and home sooner than they could perceive.

Whether sudden or gradual, whether in youth or later in life, every true believer has been "born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Pet 1:3). "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth" (Jas 1:18). The Spirit uses the gospel to create what was not there before.

The apostle John often speaks of believers as "born of God." With that phrase, he describes the same miracle Paul calls being "made alive in Christ." It is one work of grace, expressed in two vocabularies. John writes:

- "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God" (1 John 5:1)

- "Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God" (1 John 4:7)
- "No one born of God makes a practice of sinning" (1 John 3:9)

Faith, love, and holiness are not natural growths from good soil; they are the fruit of a new creation. As Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17).

THE MIRACLE WITHIN COVENANT LIFE

Scripture does not divide believers according to how or when faith began. It shows that the same gracious God works through many circumstances—sometimes through sudden conviction, sometimes through long instruction, prayer, and quiet formation. What matters is not how the change came, but that it did: every true believer lives by the life the Spirit gives.

To say, "I was never dead in sin," misses the marvel. The better confession is: "God gave me life so early that I hardly remember the death from which I was raised." The absence of a memorable moment does not mean the absence of resurrection. It means that grace was already at work before we were aware of it—through the Word and Spirit-shaping faith within the covenant community before the age of awareness and reflection began. What some experience as a sudden awakening, others have lived within from their earliest days. Both are miracles of the same mercy, differing only in when and how that mercy was felt.

When we grasp how completely grace has worked, gratitude deepens. We stop measuring it by how memorable or how dramatic its impact was and instead simply rejoice in the sheer miracle of new life from God.

No one is born alive in Christ. But by his mercy, many are brought to life within the covenant of grace before they even know it.C

Rob Schouten

Minister
Aldergrove Canadian Reformed Church
robert.a.schouten@proton.me

DANIEL – SEEING GRACE FOR THE FIRST TIME

Daniel never had a moment when he didn't believe. His earliest memories were of prayer before meals, psalms in church, and talk of God's faithfulness. Faith wasn't something he decided on; it was the air he breathed.

Then, in his twenties, a sermon on Ephesians 2 caught him off guard. "You were dead in your trespasses and sins." He almost flinched. Dead? The preacher wasn't describing his story—or so he thought. But the words lingered. Slowly Daniel began to see that the faith he had always taken for granted was itself a gift of grace, not something he had grown up into by his own power.

He realized that the life he had always known was still a miracle—not less wondrous for having begun early.

MARTIN – FROM FAMILIAR WORDS TO LIVING FAITH

Martin grew up in covenant circles. He knew the psalms, the catechism, and all the right answers. But after leaving home, his heart drifted. By his thirties, he still attended church from time to time, but the gospel felt distant—familiar to his mind, yet not loved in his heart.

Then, through a season of loss and illness, the Word he had long ignored came alive. A visiting elder read John 3 and prayed with him, and something shifted. "For the first time," he said, "I knew the verse was about me—that I needed to be born again."

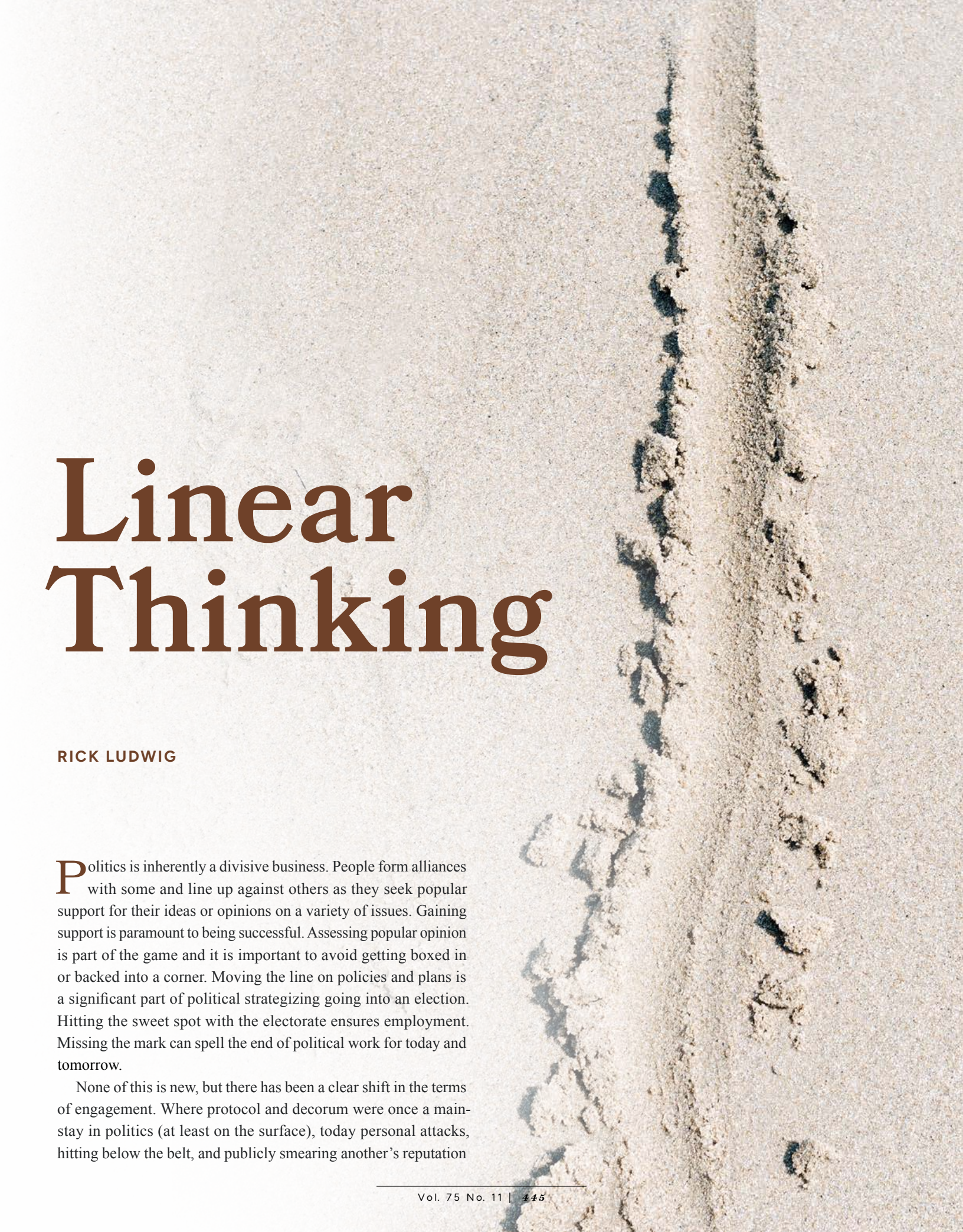
Looking back, he doesn't despise his upbringing. "Those years weren't wasted," he says. "During that time, God was preparing the ground. When faith finally came alive, everything I'd learned suddenly made sense."

LEAH – FOUND BY GRACE AT 28

Leah had no Christian background. Church was something other families did. By her late twenties, she was successful in her work but restless and empty. When a colleague invited her to a Good Friday service, she went out of courtesy. She expected solemn music and moral advice. Instead, she heard a sermon on the crucifixion—on Christ bearing sin and giving life to those who had none. The message struck her like lightning.

Some time later she opened her Bible and came to Ephesians 2. "You were dead in your sins, but God made you alive with Christ." The words seemed written for her. "It was as if someone had described me exactly—dead, but being called to life." She was baptized a year later.

Leah often marvels that the grace that found her so suddenly is the same grace that brings others to life very early within the covenant community. "However we begin," she says, "Christ is the one who makes us alive."

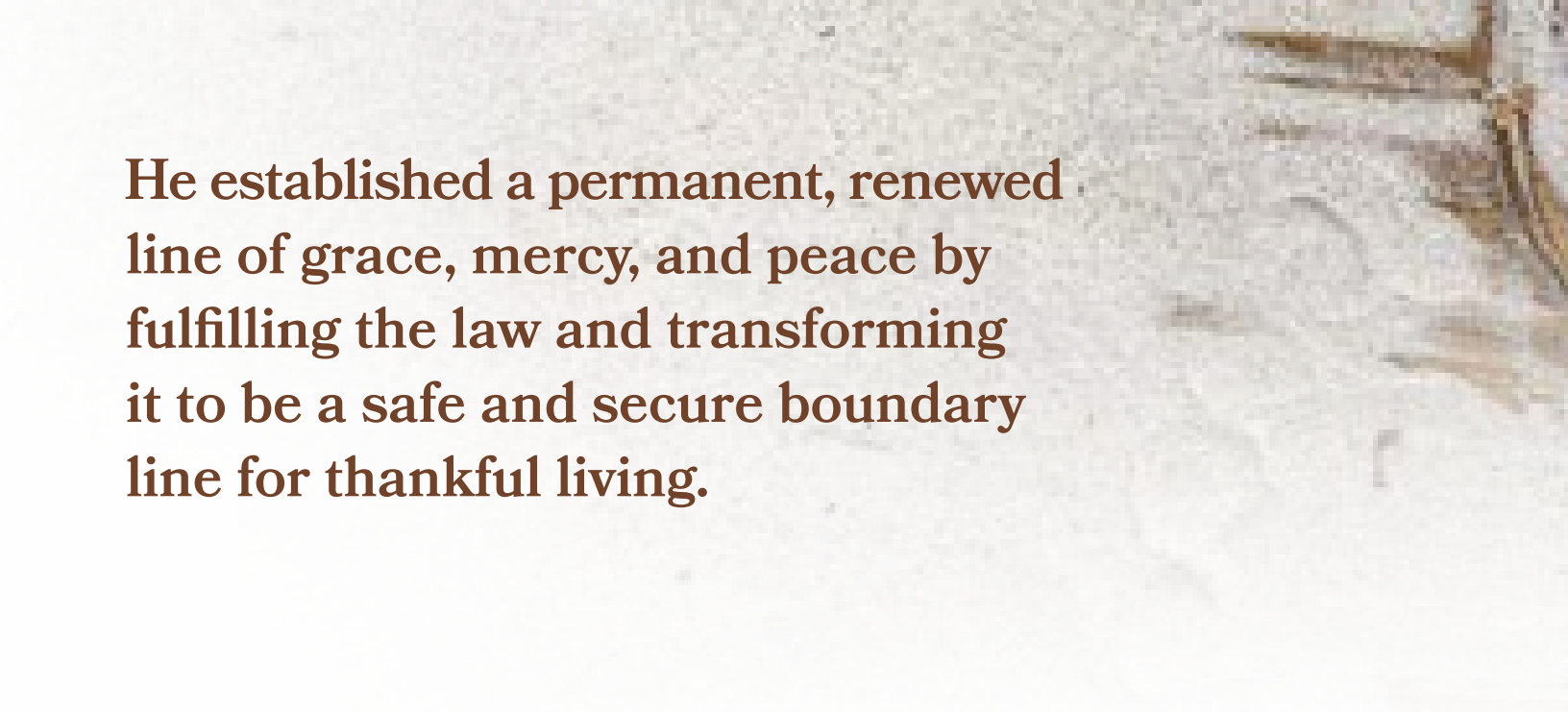


Linear Thinking

RICK LUDWIG

Politics is inherently a divisive business. People form alliances with some and line up against others as they seek popular support for their ideas or opinions on a variety of issues. Gaining support is paramount to being successful. Assessing popular opinion is part of the game and it is important to avoid getting boxed in or backed into a corner. Moving the line on policies and plans is a significant part of political strategizing going into an election. Hitting the sweet spot with the electorate ensures employment. Missing the mark can spell the end of political work for today and tomorrow.

None of this is new, but there has been a clear shift in the terms of engagement. Where protocol and decorum were once a mainstay in politics (at least on the surface), today personal attacks, hitting below the belt, and publicly smearing another's reputation



He established a permanent, renewed line of grace, mercy, and peace by fulfilling the law and transforming it to be a safe and secure boundary line for thankful living.

are all fair game. Building mistrust in your opponent is essential. Sadly, the electorate seems to respond in kind, even in the Christian community. Have political leaders ever been despised more vehemently or embraced more enthusiastically? Certainly, the manipulation of social media plays a significant role, with tailored messages streaming along algorithms to further incense, antagonize, and encourage. This cultural shift plays out in many ways, including a newfound earnestness in *drawing the line*. Judgment overtakes discernment as we hunker down to join the fray.

During the time of Jesus's ministry on earth, political angst and antagonism were also at play. Living under Roman rule, the re-settled Jews navigated oppressive tax collectors and the pandering of their own people and leaders to Caesar's favour, which caused mistrust amongst themselves and even with the religious leaders. The Sanhedrin had to bow to Roman oversight in their local ruling while the Pharisees and Sadducees were busy drawing their own lines for the people to help distinguish the redeemed from the reprobate. Jesus's arrival in the fullness of time coincided with a political landscape that was all set for his phony trial and undeserved execution. Hostility and judgment hung in the air in the social arena and in the temple community. In this harsh environment, Jesus came and spoke words of discernment.

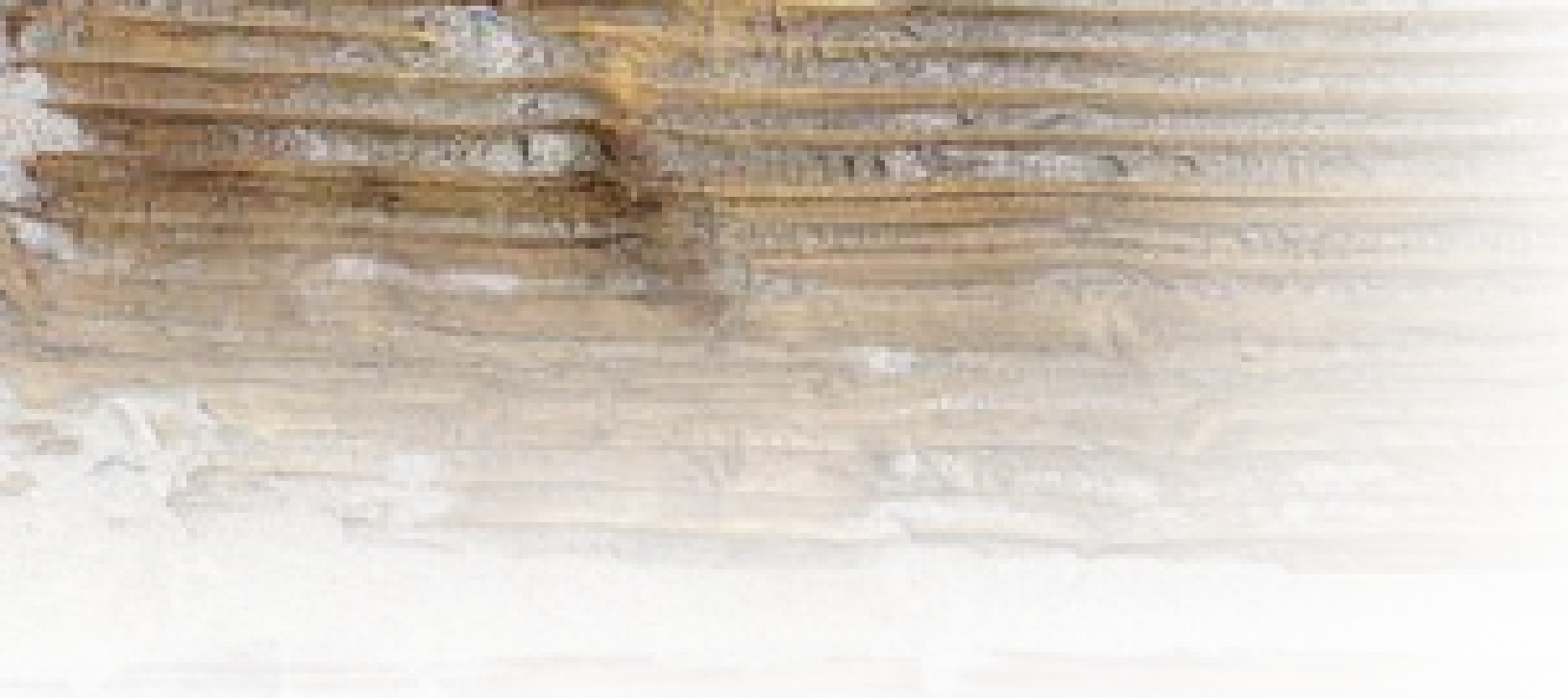
A NEW ORDER

The Lord Jesus introduced the arrival and the coming of the *kingdom of heaven.* This kingdom turned the social order of the day upside down and blew the doors open on its citizenship. There would be no dividing line between poor and rich, male and female, Jew and Gentile. The kingdom would rest on the kingship of Jesus and would be apolitical.

Entrance into the kingdom would be unmerited, not by holding to a particular line. It would be by grace, through faith. This was upsetting news to the Pharisees, who had devised an exclusive system of merit for the people of God. Their Messiah was to come and kick out oppressive rule and be the crowning piece to a new political reality and reign. Jesus's teaching, they argued, should not be trusted. His leadership threatened their worldview. He must be discredited, publicly judged and undermined. If all of that did not make a fatal negative impression, he must be physically killed. A line must be drawn.

Part of the suffering of the Lord was to endure this hateful political and religious climate. To feel the daily oppression of the leaders and their followers. To be mistrusted by those who should have recognized him and his teaching most readily. He endured unfair social and political judgment along the way to the final verdict of the cross. The scribes and Pharisees spent much of their time and energy trying to trap him rather than learn from him, as their hearts were hardened.

Jesus used these oppressive opportunities to teach us to be discerning and not judgmental. One story that comes to mind is in the eighth chapter of the gospel of John. It is contentious in that it was not in the earliest available manuscripts but appeared in later ones, yet it was adopted as fitting with the rest of Scripture. Jesus is in the temple teaching the people when the scribes and Pharisees come forward again to test him in order to publicly discredit him. They present a woman who was caught in the act of adultery and remind him that the Mosaic law calls for her death by stoning. They want to know if Jesus would pronounce that verdict upon this woman, knowing that he has come preaching the forgiveness of sin through repentance and belief. She stands before him accused. The line of judgment has been drawn. Everyone waits for the verdict. There is a dramatic pause while Jesus stoops and writes something unintelligible to us in the sand. Then he invites the accusers to join him in the role of judge. *Let him who is without sin among you be the first*



to throw a stone at her. And then he gets busy in the sand again while everyone waits.

In keeping with their own code, the scribes and Pharisees leave in order of age, one by one. They understand that throwing a stone would mean declaring their own perfection and subsequently their own alienation from their expected Messiah. They have been trapped in their own test and they have to drop the sentence of judgment, even though their hearts remain merciless.

A NEW LINE

Jesus is left alone with the woman standing rightly accused in front of him in the presence of the temple audience. There is no condemnation from the ones demanding a verdict anymore. Jesus remains as judge because he is righteous and capable of throwing the first stone, but he will not. Did Jesus ignore the sin to wipe out the Mosaic line in the sand? No, he sent her away and he remained to stand in her place. You go, I will stay. I will bear the burden of this sin and every other.

We don`t know what Jesus wrote in the sand, but we do know what he proclaimed: the grace of forgiveness. A few verses later, he continues to teach that he did not come to judge according to the flesh, but with a new judgment in truth and in concert with his Father. The new covenant line of judgment for the people of God is clearly scribed in mercy with the blood of Christ, and it is only based on his holiness. Later, the same apostle John writes in his second letter, "Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love" (2 John 1:3).

Jesus teaches us to be careful not to draw harsh lines of judgment against each other. Instead, we need to be more discerning. We live out of thankfulness through the Spirit by having love and mercy for our neighbour while being acutely aware of our own sinful troubles.

Living in the coming kingdom of heaven makes us genuinely appreciative of our new blessed reality. As the psalmist sang, "The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places, indeed I have a beautiful inheritance" (Psalm 16:6). When I consider that inheritance, which has been secured by Christ who stood in my place, I am even more humbled. I find no footing lining up with the accusers, contemplating whether I should throw a stone of judgment against someone. Instead, I sense my desperate need alongside the adulterous woman, ashamed at being caught in my own sin. With her, I look imploringly into the loving eyes of my Saviour who remained and said, "Go, and sin no more!"

And as I go, and keep on going daily, I remember again and again how he bore the burden of all sin, also my sin, on that cruel cross to give me a new life. He toed the line of judgment and paid the price so I would not be tripped up by it. He established a permanent, renewed line of grace, mercy, and peace by fulfilling the law and transforming it to be a safe and secure boundary line for thankful living. How foolish for me to try to set out that old line of judgment again for someone else. If I do, I fall back in line with the scribes and Pharisees who walked away from Jesus and rejected his offer of mercy.

Rather, Peter teaches us, "love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again . . . and this word is the good news that was preached to you" (1 Pet 1:22–25). In a hostile and finger-pointing world, living peaceably with others is our best witness to the coming kingdom of the Prince of Peace. He has shown us the Way.

Rick Ludwig
Streetlight Christian Church
rludwig@kitchingsteepeandludwig.com

Introducing the Free Evangelical Reformed Churches of Germany

As two Reformed ministers from Germany, we recently undertook a trip to Canada. At first glance, this may not seem particularly remarkable. History often works that way, doesn't it? When the Heidelberg Catechism was translated into Dutch in 1563, few could have imagined what the Lord would do through it in the centuries to come. Yet through that translation, and through the unfolding history of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands and later in Canada, the Canadian Reformed Churches came to exist as they do today. And so it was a particular joy for us to visit Canada and become acquainted with the CanRC. By way of this article, we would like to return the favour and introduce ourselves to you.

CHURCH LIFE IN TODAY'S GERMANY

Germany, of course, has a rich and important church history. Many think immediately of Martin Luther and the Reformation. Others remember that some of the earliest and most influential Reformed churches also arose on German soil. Reformed believers around the world generally know these things. What many do not realize, however, are two sobering facts.

The first is that, for nearly the past two centuries, the Reformed church in Germany was "as extinct in the eyes of man" (Belgic Confession, Art. 27). Christianity itself has become increasingly insignificant in Germany, as in much of western Europe, and a truly Reformed presence was hard to find for a very long time.

The second fact is that, in 2010, the Lord graciously began a new work of gathering and planting Reformed churches in Germany through the "Selbständige evangelisch-reformierte Kirchen" (SERK; or, in English, the Free Evangelical Reformed Churches). That year, a confessional Reformed church subscribing to the Three Forms of Unity was instituted in Heidelberg under the ministry of Rev. Sebastian Heck—fittingly, in the very city where so much of our shared Reformed heritage began. Then, in 2017, the Lord enabled

us to institute another church in Hannover under the ministry of Rev. Raphael Schuster.

The first fact—that Germany has become a mission field—ought to move us to sadness and earnest prayer. The second—that the Lord is once again establishing Reformed churches in Germany—fills us with gratitude and joy, and we invite our brothers and sisters in the CanRC to rejoice with us in this.

SEEKING FELLOWSHIP

From our earliest days, we have sought to consciously reconnect with our Reformed heritage and to seek fellowship with faithful Reformed churches abroad. Yet throughout much of Europe, the situation is not very different from Germany. Even in the Netherlands, once home to a strong and vibrant Reformed witness, many churches have drifted away from their confessional foundations. At present, our ecclesiastical fellowship is with the Gereformeerde Kerken (GK), our beloved sister churches. They are a great encouragement to us, yet they too have "but little power" (Rev 3:8) amidst many challenges—just as we do.

Many years ago, when we first learned more about the CanRC, we rejoiced to discover how closely we were united in doctrine, worship, and church life. Our recent visit only confirmed this. We had the opportunity to worship with your congregations, to visit CRTS, to participate in a conference, and to engage in encouraging discussions about how our relationship might develop in the future.

The prospect of the CanRC and the SERK labouring together—perhaps one day even as sister churches—in re-establishing a faithful Reformed witness in Germany has greatly strengthened our resolve and encouraged us to devote ourselves afresh to this work for decades to come, if the Lord wills. More recently, we were also thankful to receive in Heidelberg a delegation from the CanRC's Committee for Ecumenical Relations, together with representatives from CRTS for further discussions. As the Canadian brothers so rightly said in addressing us, we need each other in the calling to be faithful witnesses in the world today!

CONNECTING

As we continue the work the Lord has entrusted to us in Germany, and as we pray and labour toward closer fellowship, we also desire that your churches would come to know us better—and that we might come to know you better as well. We warmly invite you to visit one of our churches, perhaps while traveling to Heidelberg, the city of our beloved and shared catechism. To help North American supporters learn more about this work, we have established an English-language platform called "The Heidelberger Society." You can learn more, read updates, and sign up for our newsletter at **heidelbergersociety.com.**

Above all, we ask for your prayers. We also ask you to consider supporting this work and partnering with us in rebuilding a faithful Reformed witness in the heart of Europe for the glory of God, the strengthening of his church, and the salvation of many.

Sebastian Heck

Minister of the SERK in Heidelberg

Raphael Schuster

Minister of the SERK in Hannover

Rev. Iraldo Luna & the IRB

How life really is in a foreign sister church, told through the eyes of an indigenous man—that's intriguing! The Niagara (not so) Seniors' Club recently enjoyed precisely that privilege as Rev. Iraldo Luna and his wife Anny introduced us to the Reformed Churches of Brazil (or IRB, as the Portuguese name has it). This is the federation of churches to which the Canadian Reformed Churches have sent several missionaries over the span of the last five or so decades, under the leadership of Hamilton and Aldergrove as sending churches.

WHO ARE THE LUNAS?

As with countless people in Brazil, both Iraldo & Anny were born into nominal Roman Catholic homes where the Christian faith played no distinguishable role. With his distinct Brazilian accent, Iraldo shared with us how the Lord brought him to the gospel at 15 years of age and early in his Christian walk awakened in him a desire to become a pastor. We learned about various steps that led him into contact with Rev. Ken Wieske, at that time a missionary from the Canadian Reformed Churches serving in the IRB. Iraldo's path eventually led him to study for the ministry at the infant John Calvin Seminary in Recife, with Pastors Ken Wieske and Julius VanSpronsen as the primary instructors.

With his seminary training complete, Iraldo entered the ministry in the IRB some 10 years ago now. A desire to equip himself for further service in the Brazilian churches prompted him to investigate possibilities for further education. The Lord opened a door for him to receive release from service in his congregation in Brazil's capital city, Brasília, to pursue a master's degree at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary in Hamilton. Since moving here with Anny, he has completed the first of an expected three-year study program at CRTS. Their four children have come to Canada with them and are courageously finding their way in this foreign land (and language).

HOW CAN WE HELP?

The audience filling Lincoln's ample meeting hall listened with rapt attention as brother & sister Luna shared their respective stories about the challenges they faced in church life in Brazil. Using a helpful PowerPoint presentation, Iraldo introduced us to the Brazilian churches about which we knew so little. We learned that this federation is small and weak, with presently eleven instituted churches plus another six non-instituted congregations. All these 17 churches are comprised of low-income families. While there are sufficient men to fill the vacancies, there is not enough money for each congregation to call its own pastor. Yet this land, with its population of some 220,000,000 people, needs the gospel so desperately. How can this tiny federation, with its multitude of weaknesses and its deep poverty, be instrumental in bringing the gospel to their neighbours who are spiritually in the dark?

Perhaps part of the answer is awakening in us in Canada a renewed passion to be in prayer for churches and mission work in distant (from us) corners of God's world. Prayer needs knowledge. Brother & sister Luna are more than willing to bring their informative presentation to any church that is interested in knowing more. Rev. Luna can be reached at his email address: **iraldolira@gmail.com**.

Clarence Bouwman

Minister Emeritus
Smithville Canadian Reformed Church
clarence.bouwman@gmail.com

Celebrating 50 Years Of God's Faithfulness At Langley Canadian Reformed Church

JAN BROERSMA

"Fifty years is a long time."

Sometimes a simple observation (like this comment from Pastor Aidan Plug) is worth digging into. In this case, Pastor Plug was reflecting on our church's fiftieth anniversary, and the significance of the milestone.

"In the Old Testament, fifty years really was *the* big year for God's people," Plug noted. It marked the fifty-year Jubilee—a year that celebrated God's care and provision, and reminded his people of the mercy and love they were called to show. These themes, Plug pointed out, are still very relevant for us: "As we look ahead, we can trust in God's care . . . [and] as his people we are here to show his mercy and compassion."

EARLY PASTORS

Although our 50th anniversary wasn't quite as momentous as a Year of Jubilee, it was certainly worth celebrating. In the weeks leading up to the anniversary date, we as congregation enjoyed decade-by-decade historical tidbits and reminisces in the weekly bulletins, as well as pre-service slides featuring highlights and photos from the past half century. On Sunday, June 21, we officially commemorated the milestone, with a number of original members joining us to celebrate the day.

Our morning worship service was led by our long-serving associate pastor Rev. James Visscher, who preached on 1 Timothy 3:15, encouraging us as church to continue being a "pillar and buttress of the truth." His choice of theme seemed especially appropriate,

as one of the themes that came out strongly during our anniversary celebration was the gift of the faithful pastors who have preached truth to us throughout the years.

Langley's first minister was Rev. D. Vanderboom who, in 1977, as the oldest pastor in the Canadian Reformed federation (though not lacking in energy or enthusiasm!), accepted the call to serve the 203 members of the newest and youngest congregation. When he retired in 1983, Rev. W. Pouwelse came on board.

In 1987, Pastor Visscher became the third minister of our rapidly growing church of now around 500 members. "I promised to help out Langley for at least two or three years," Visscher remembered. "Little did I know that it would end up being twenty-five years (and counting)."

To help with the ever-expanding workload, elder Gerry Vandeburgt served for several years as pastoral assistant. Port Kells (later Willoughby Heights) and Aldergrove churches were instituted in 1990 and 1994 respectively, easing the crowding somewhat, but at one point Langley was holding four services per Sunday (three led by Pastor Visscher).

RECENT MINISTERS

In 2005, Wes Bredenhof joined Langley as a second pastor, marking the beginning of a fruitful co-pastoring arrangement in Langley. As Pastor Bredenhof reflected on his time in Langley, he noted with appreciation, "Though [Pastor Visscher] was by far my senior (after all, he baptized me), he always treated me as a colleague on the same level. . . I believe we worked well together as a team for the good of the church."

Four years later, Pastor Bredenhof accepted a different call, and Pastor Ryan deJonge joined us straight out of seminary. "The word among pastors is that there is something special about your first congregation, and that was certainly true for me," he remembered.

A few years after Pastor Visscher stepped down from full-time work, Pastor Doug Vandeburgt came to share our pulpit with Pastor deJonge. As he reflected on his past twelve years in Langley, Pastor Vandeburgt expressed deep gratitude: "Gratitude to have been able to proclaim the gospel to you, to pray for and with you, to baptize and to bury, to teach the young and the not so young." He also shared his appreciation for many good relationships in Langley, and especially for his co-pastors, past and present.

We've always been sad to see our pastors leave and regretted losing Pastor deJonge in 2016 to the mission field in Papua New Guinea; however, God continued to provide. Pastor William den Hollander joined us for four years (2016–2020) before going to teach at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary. As Pastor den Hollander expressed it, "Although my time as pastor in your midst was relatively short, it was exceedingly sweet."

Most recently, in 2020, Pastor Aidan Plug joined us from the seminary, and he and Pastor Vandeburgt continue to serve us capably and faithfully.

FAITHFUL GOD

Directly after the morning worship service, we enjoyed a short anniversary program followed by refreshments. Highlights of the program included video greetings from several of our former pastors, a short slideshow, historical reflections, and a youth vocal and instrumental ensemble that led us in singing "Christ Our Hope in Life and Death." We also joined in with gusto on a special anniversary song that was the inspiration of Ginny Vanderhorst. Although she admitted that even Chat GPT couldn't help her rhyme all the pastors' names, Ginny's song did remind us of all the things we have to be thankful for: the growing diversity of our church; the place we all have here, whatever our roles and life stages, including the many seniors from nearby Manoah Manor; and all the ways we are blessed by our pastors and many others.

This reminder of all our reasons for gratitude really did sum up our celebration. After all, we weren't celebrating all the blessings and the people and our church so much as celebrating God's faithfulness in providing these things for us through the past fifty years.

After the closing prayer and blessing, we concluded by singing the Romans doxology—because what better way to end a celebration of God's faithfulness in the past and express our confidence in him for the future?

> *For from Him and through Him*
> *and to Him are all things;*
> *To Him be glory forevermore . . .*
> *Amen!*

Jan Broersma

Langley Canadian Reformed Church

Pastors Doug Vandeburgt, James Visscher, William den Hollander, and Ryan DeJonge (2016)

Refreshments after the anniversary celebration

"Christ Our Hope in Life and Death," led by a small ensemble

A few mementoes of our fifty-year history

Harry Moes (charter member) and Pastor Aidan Plug with the ceremonial key to Langley church

SERVICE SNAPSHOT

Purpose Day Program

"I will praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made." Psalm 139:14

Many years ago, Ryenn Jans of Redemption CanRC (Flamborough) attended a Friendship Night with her brother and his best friend. She expected it would be fun, just like every other social event they had attended for adults with intellectual disabilities. What she didn't expect was to also witness a beautiful display of Christ's love that would touch her deeply and direct her steps over the coming years. In the following interview, she explains how that experience led her to start a new program to serve the community.

What experience impacted you so deeply?

At Friendship Night with my brother and his friend, I saw the beauty of childlike faith in a new way. My brother's friend did not grow up in a Christian home, and yet there she was singing *Jesus Loves Me*, folding her hands to pray the Lord's Prayer, and participating with such joy. In that moment, I felt the Lord impress one simple thought upon my heart: *This is enough.*

That evening God planted a seed in me that has never stopped growing. God placed the vision of a Christian day program for adults with intellectual disabilities in my heart, and that calling has remained with me ever since. It led to me now starting Purpose Day Program for adults with intellectual disabilities.

What is this program all about?

Purpose Day Program was created with one mission: to strengthen existing relationships with Jesus while introducing others to the joy, hope, and unconditional love found in him. Every person is welcomed as someone created intentionally by God, with inherent worth and unique gifts.

Purpose Day Program is an independent Christian ministry that I founded and currently operate. As the program grows, I look forward to building a team of staff, volunteers, and supporters who share this vision. I am grateful for the overflowing support and encouragement I have already received from members of our local Christian community and hope to partner with local churches that share a heart for serving adults with intellectual disabilities.

How did the Lord prepare you for starting this program?

My passion for this ministry has grown through both personal experience and years of working alongside adults with intellectual disabilities. My big brother has an intellectual disability, and watching his life and faith has been one of God's greatest gifts to me.

I began working in the disability sector when I was 18 years old and have been blessed to continue in this field ever since. I went on to get my Recreation Therapy diploma and spent three years working at a public day program supporting adults with intellectual disabilities, where I saw firsthand the importance of meaningful programming, genuine relationships, and opportunities for personal growth. Over the years, I have also served as a camp counsellor at Anchor Camp, a Christian camp for adults with intellectual disabilities.

These experiences have strengthened my conviction that adults with intellectual disabilities deserve a community where they are supported not only socially and emotionally, but spiritually as well. That's why Purpose Day Program is designed specifically for adults with intellectual disabilities who are looking for a safe, welcoming, Christ-centred community where they can continue to grow socially, emotionally, spiritually, and in life skills.

What would a Day Program day look like?

A typical day will include purposeful programming such as community outings and volunteering, life skills classes such as cooking and meal preparation, exercise and recreational sports, arts and crafts, games, music, social activities, and cognitive programming that encourages learning and personal growth.

Alongside these activities, our faith will naturally be woven in throughout the day. Attendees will pray together, learn Bible stories, discover what God's Word teaches us about his love, and sing praises together. Our goal is not simply to provide care but to create a

EMAIL:
purposedayprogram@gmail.com

PHONE:
905-906-1055

WEBSITE:
purposedayprogram.com

FACEBOOK & INSTAGRAM:
@purposedayprogram

community where every person knows they are seen, valued, and deeply loved.

How does your Christian faith uniquely influence your day program?

In a world that does not always place equal value on every human life, we want Purpose Day Program to be a reminder that every individual has immeasurable worth. Every person is created in the image of God. Every person has dignity. Every person has gifts to offer.

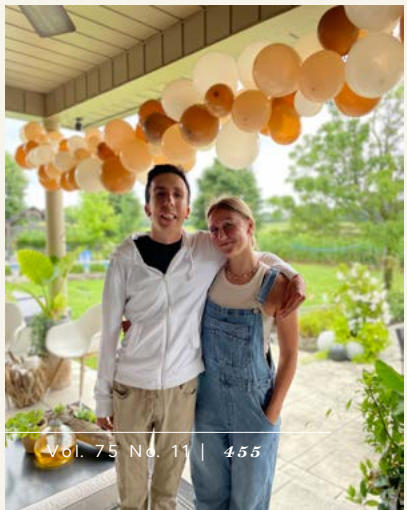
The name Purpose reflects this belief. We were all created on purpose and for a purpose. It is our privilege to walk alongside our participants as they discover the unique abilities and calling God has placed on their lives. We hope families will find not only a day program, but a caring Christian community where their loved ones are encouraged to flourish.

Can other people get involved to support this?

Absolutely! Purpose Day Program is opening September 2026 at 715 Centre Road, Flamborough. If you would like to learn more, volunteer, or inquire about registration, I would love to hear from you at the contacts listed above.

Anna Nienhuis
Sardis Canadian Reformed Church

Ryenn Jans
Redemption Canadian Reformed Church, Flamborough



Where Life & Scripture Meet

In the work the team and I do on the *Real Talk Podcast*, we have seen a growing zeal for "realness" in our churches and communities. This comes out most clearly in conversations about and desire for mentorship, discipleship, and accountability. We know we need others and that we can't do the Christian life alone. Examples of this beautiful growth can be seen almost everywhere you look, and what a blessing it is! Life Renewal, the Strive Conference, Agape Recovery, and Into the Light Ministries are just a few examples, not to mention all the ongoing ministries happening in local congregations, such as prayer groups, discipleship groups, and weekly Bible studies.

One ministry that has been helping Christians help others is CCEF, the Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation, a partner of Westminster Theological Seminary located in Glenside, PA. Since the late 1960s, their desire has been to "Restore Christ to Counseling and Counseling to the Church." They seek to equip pastors, elders, and church members to build up the body of Christ by walking alongside others.

Among the many resources CCEF produces is their main podcast. What started over 15 years ago as their audio ministry, titled *Hope and Help*, has now developed into the *CCEF Podcast: Where Life and Scripture Meet*. Here you'll find a wealth of resources related to biblical counseling.

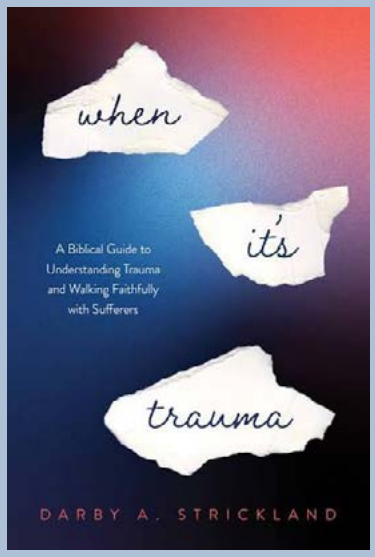
The podcast explores the question of how "the treasures of Scripture connect with the troubles of life." For the last year, the show has been hosted primarily by CCEF's dean of faculty, Gunner Gundersen. Joined by other CCEF faculty in a conversational format, each 30 to 40-minute episode considers "how Scripture meets us in day-to-day life, covering topics such as anxiety, grief, relationships and more."

As the desire for more meaningful relationships grows within our churches, I have heard people say they feel ill-equipped for this task. They're not sure how to best walk alongside others, how to speak words of life. Others are afraid they'll hurt more than help. This is where CCEF's resources have been a true aid to many. I increasingly come across people who have completed CCEF courses, not because they want to become professional biblical counselors, but because they want to grow in their understanding of Scripture, become better friends and listeners, and learn how to walk alongside suffering saints. Although this is not a review of CCEF and all they offer as an organization, *Where Life & Scripture Meet* provides a taste of their heart and mission.

We are all called to grow in our loving service to others. Although not everyone has the opportunity to pursue formal training, podcasts such as *Where Life and Scripture Meet* are a helpful resource for reflecting on this calling and learning how to fulfill it well. If you have ever read and appreciated books by Ed Welch, David Powlison, Tim Lane, Darby Strickland, or Paul Tripp, this is a podcast you will enjoy and find yourself returning to as you seek to walk alongside others.

You can find new episodes of *Where Life & Scripture Meet* every other Monday wherever you get your podcasts or at ccef.org/podcast/. C

mariahtamminga24@hotmail.com
Mariah Oosterhof serves as the producer of the Real Talk Podcast and is a graduate of Reformation Bible College.



Understanding Trauma

When It's Trauma: A Biblical Guide to Understanding Trauma and Walking Faithfully with Sufferers. Darby A. Strickland. Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2025. Softcover, 308 pages. $24 CDN at ReformedBookServices.com.

In my ministry, I've encountered several beloved brothers and sisters who've dealt with trauma. I think of those who experienced trauma from combat, from childhood sexual abuse, from rape, from domestic violence, and from medical procedures. All of these (and more) can produce trauma and so it isn't uncommon. In fact, the latest data from Statistics Canada indicates that over 60% of Canadians have experienced at least one potentially traumatic event in their lives. That doesn't mean that every person goes on to develop post-traumatic stress. However, some do. Are our churches equipped to minister to those who suffer in this way?

This book was written by Christian counsellor Darby Strickland for that purpose. She writes in the introduction that she wrote this book "for anyone who desires to come alongside someone who has been deeply wounded" (p. 9). That could be a church leader, layperson, or counsellor. Since office bearers are called to come alongside the wounded sheep, I'd say that this book will be especially informative for them. Offer to buy a copy for your pastor or your ward elder. Our shepherds need to be "trauma-informed" so they can avoid heaping hurt on the already wounded.

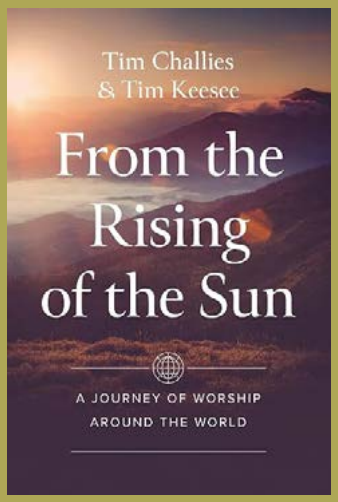
Part 1 introduces the "Foundations of Care," providing a biblical orientation to what follows. In Part 2, "Wounds of Trauma," Strickland thoroughly describes the nature of trauma. Each chapter describes a way people experience traumatic hurt: physical anguish, shame, faith questions, relational hypervigilance, re-experienced trauma, and avoidance. Each chapter explains the wound, shows how Scripture speaks about it, then goes into more detail about its dynamics and impacts, how to assess, and how to help.

Part 3 is addressed to the church. It's about becoming a church that doesn't shoot its wounded but instead offers a safe place for healing with love and compassion. Strickland is wise, practical, and realistic. She acknowledges that many trauma sufferers have also experienced church hurt.

Let me mention three things I appreciate about this book. First, Strickland is working with the Scriptures as her basis and guide. Second, the anecdotes illustrate that she has extensive experience in working with the traumatized. Finally, the book also has several helpful appendices, including one about "Empathy vs. Enmeshment."

Much has been written about trauma and, if you want to become (more) informed, it can be hard to know where to start. I highly recommend starting with Darby Strickland. This is a well-written, compassionate, and biblically faithful guide to a tough subject.

Wes Bredenhof
Minister
Free Reformed Church of Launceston, AU
bookreview@clarionmagazine.ca



Around the World

From the Rising of the Sun: A Journey of Worship Around the World. Tim Challies and Tim Keesee; Zondervan, 2025. Paperback, 172 pages, $25.00 CDN at ReformedBookServices.com.

Jules Verne toyed with the idea of circling the world in his 1872 adventure novel, *Around the World in 80 Days.* Phileas Fogg and his sidekick Passepartout encounter many adventures and interesting characters as they seek to complete their journey to win a wager with friends. In their recently published book, Tim Keesee and his sidekick Tim Challies seek a bird's eye view of what the gathered church looks like from the sun's rising to its setting on any given Lord's Day.

While not limited to 80 days, they did face the constraints of the pandemic and other personal challenges before they could complete this journey around the world over a number of years. The result is an inspiring story of faithful gatherings of God's people in remote places across the globe, along with keen insights into the strengths of scriptural liturgy amid the diversity of cultural expression.

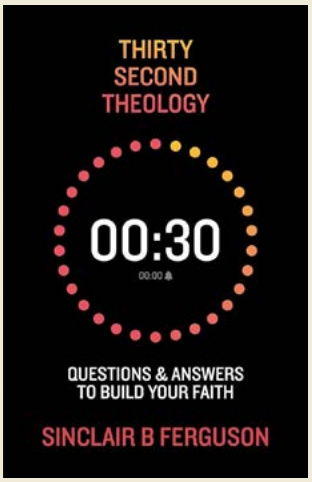
Following an introduction that helps to introduce the travellers and what inspired them to this quest, the book highlights eleven stops strategically selected to span the world's time zones while seeking protestant churches aligned with well-established principles of understanding Scripture and conducting worship.

One of the goals of the trip was to remain open-eyed to God's working around the world and not to be limited to only what is known within a singular denominational framework. This plays out in the book with Keesee sharing the adventure and experience at each stop and Challies following up with a reflection, identifying both congruencies in worship as well as cultural distinctions in communication and practice. At the heart of the chronicle of their travels is a clear commitment to bringing all praise and glory to God while impressing the reader with a notion of God's omniscient view of his church gathered from all times and places.

I found the writing engaging, with stories and characters introduced in each location first, followed by a description of the Sunday worship experience. The local contributors offered insights on how they came to faith personally and how their churches were drawn to assemble. They included both the challenges and blessings in their local ministry. This helped to inform the content of their Sunday services, while also using the gifts of the members of their church. Challies's follow-up commentary each time identifies the binding principles of worship in each tradition while respecting the cultural traditions and local expressions that help to communicate the gospel. He provides three or four questions to challenge the readers to reflect on their own local worship practices, how they are similar and different, and what may influence that.

This book can easily be read in one sitting and makes a nice a gift for any adult interested in fellow Christians and the gathering of the church. It also can be taken a chapter at a time for personal devotional reading with your family or a small group. The questions may lead to greater awareness of the influences on your own worship and a growing heart to know more about the diversity of God's kingdom as he gathers his people from all nations. There is also a video series, either in DVD format or streamed with an access code, to augment the study—an inexpensive way to travel the globe while praising God. Recommended!

Rick Ludwig
Streetlight Christian Church
rludwig@kitchingsteepeandludwig.com



Doctrinal Primer for Youth

Thirty Second Theology: Questions & Answers to Build Your Faith, Sinclair B. Ferguson. Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2026. Hardcover, 88 pages, $17.00 CDN at ReformedBookServices.com.

Though he's one of the world's foremost Reformed theologians, Ferguson has written this book as a simple guide to Christian truth for young people. You'll search in vain for big words like sanctification, justification, or propitiation. Everything important in Christian doctrine is boiled down to the basics.

Thirty Second Theology consists of 78 single-page chapters, which could each conceivably be read in 30 seconds. There is a question and a one paragraph answer, along with a suggested memory verse and additional Bible reading. The questions are divided into 6 sections:

- What We Believe
- Becoming and Being a Christian
- Living for God and His Glory
- The Bible and Prayer
- The Church, the Sacraments, and Our Witness to Christ
- The Future

To give you an idea of how simple Ferguson makes it, this is what you'll find in chapter 17 (see excerpt on the right):

Each of the chapters presents standard Reformed teaching consistent with the Three Forms of Unity and other confessions.

In the introduction, Ferguson says that he wrote this book for teens. Unless I'm wrong about how well we're catechizing our youth, though, I think it would be too basic for most of our older teens. It would be more suitable for 10–13-year-old church kids. It could also be quite useful for instructing newcomers to the church (older and younger) who have had little or no exposure to Christian doctrine—it would be a great lead-in to the Heidelberg Catechism. C

How did Jesus come into the world?

Jesus was born in the same way we are, but he was also God's eternal Son.

Mary was Jesus' mother, but he had no human father unlike us. That is why the Bible says that Mary was a virgin. Jesus was a small, helpless baby who had to grow like us. But, unlike us, he did not start to exist just a few months before he was born. He was always God's Son.

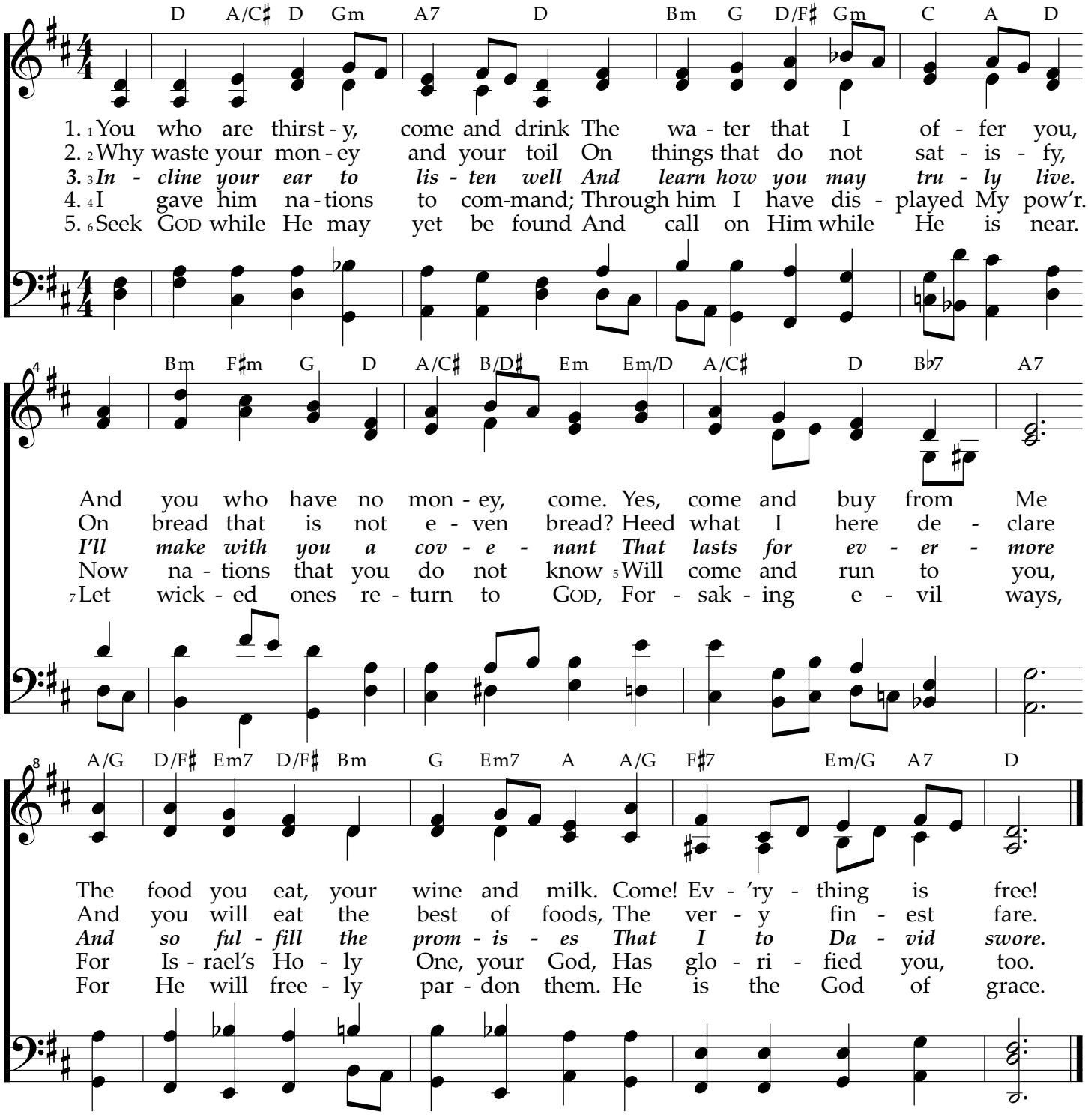
Chapter 17 Excerpt

Wes Bredenhof

Minister
Free Reformed Church of Launceston, AU
bookreview@clarionmagazine.ca

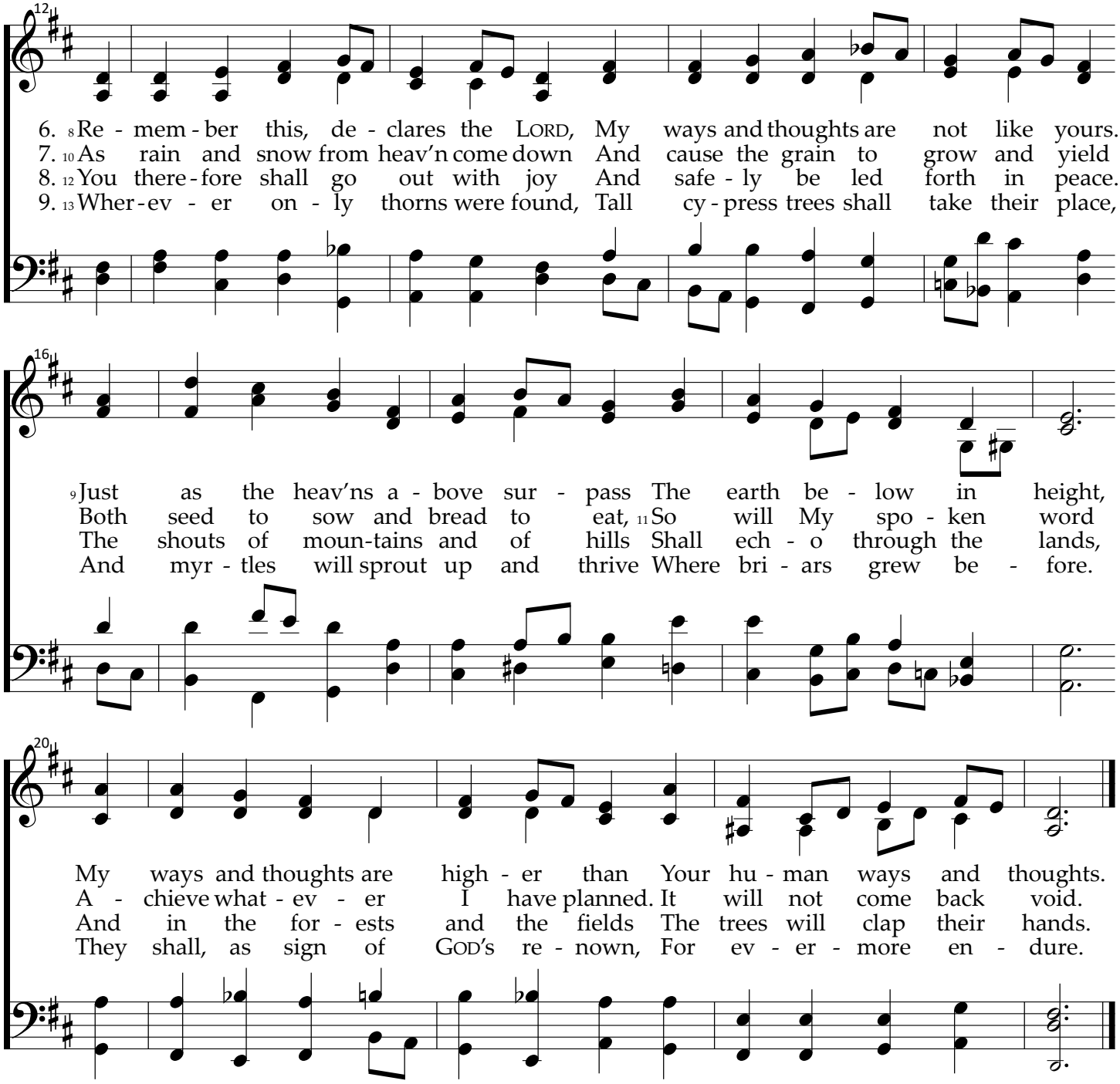
Invitation to the Thirsty

Based on Isaiah 55:1–7



Invitation to the Thirsty

Continued, Isaiah 55:8–13



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