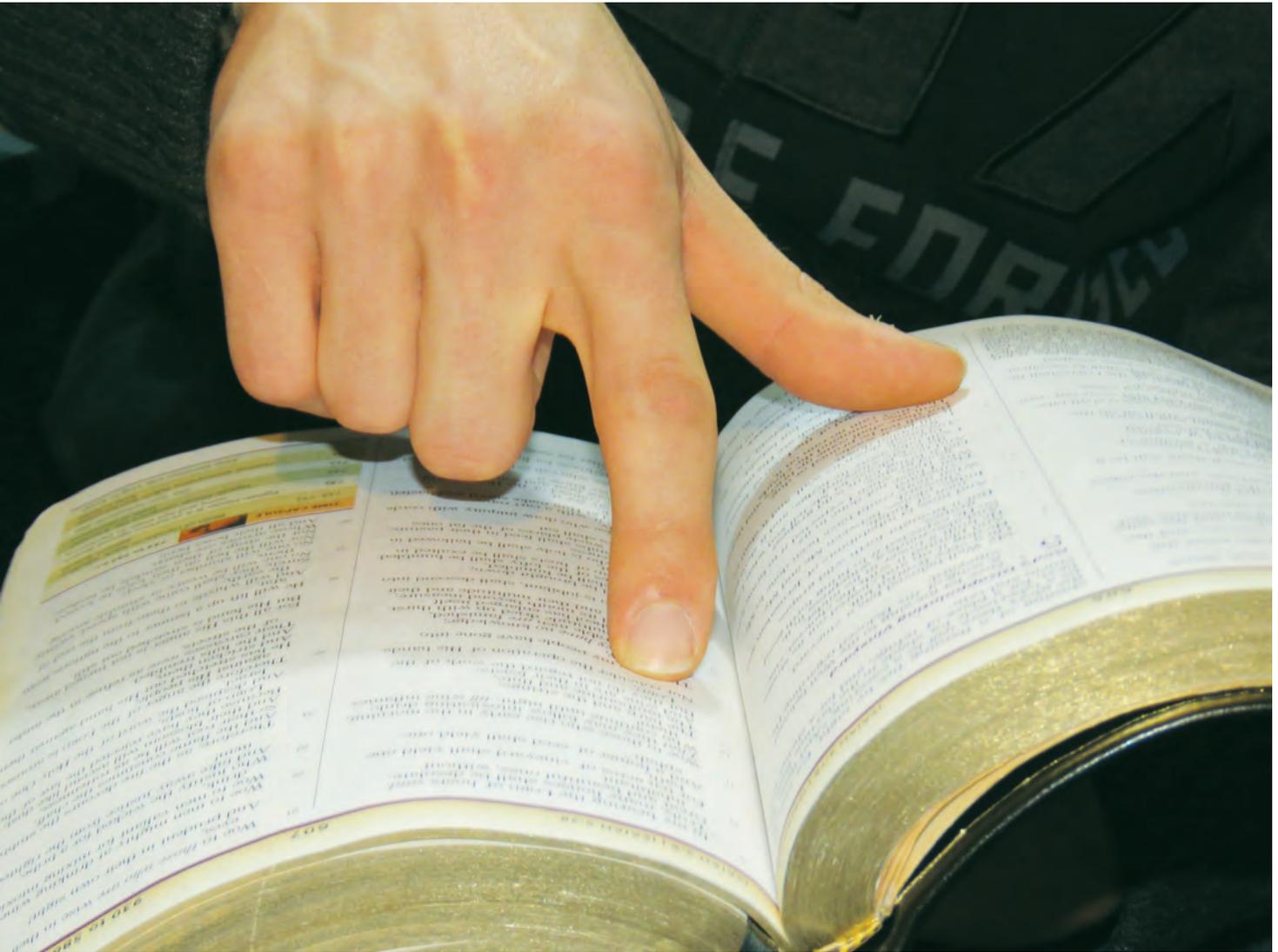


faith in
focus

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of New Zealand

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What was so
noble about the
Bereans?

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Editorial

Who were the Bereans?

If you know your Bible, you will be aware that the Jewish people of Berea are described as being more noble-minded than those of Thessalonica, “for they received the word [Paul preached] with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.”

I know a man who, when he was converted at about the age of 25, without any church background, approached the Word of God with great eagerness, wanting to learn as much as he could in the shortest period of time. He felt that he had to catch up on lost time, and set about reading the Scriptures daily, learning what the confessions of the Reformation were all about, and reading church history to gain a better understanding of what has shaped the church through to the present day.

Up to the present, that man has not passed many days in which he did not read his Bible. As far as I know, he still has the same love for the Word and a deep desire to know the things of God – to know the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Do you, dear Christian brother and sister, have a similarly Berean spirit? Are you one who desires to know the Lord and His Word, to know the greatest love story ever written to fallen man?

Of course, there is more to being a “Berean”, than just reading your Bible. There is also the need to digest it, understand it and live by it – to be a doer of the Word, and not just a hearer. We need more Bereans!

Our contributors write about the setting of the Bereans, and what made them so noble-minded, and worthy of our interest.

Mr Daniel Wilson provides a snapshot of the noble Berean.

Mr Ben McDonald considers how to be a Berean.

Mr Andrew de Vries explains what it means to listen like a Berean.

Mrs Sally Davey passes on some insights from Pastor Ligon Duncan.

Mrs Jenny Waldron examines the cruelty of dementia.

Mr Kim Kuhfuss reviews *The Trinitarian Devotion of John Owen*, by Sinclair B. Ferguson; Mr Jack W. Sawyer reviews *To Win Our Neighbors for Christ*, edited by Wes Bredenhof; Mr J. V. Fesko reviews *Sanctification: Explorations in Theology and Practice*, edited by Kelly M. Kopic.

Focus on home provides some Gleanings and other events to watch out for.

Mr Albert Mohler addresses the gross error that Christians and Muslims worship the same God.

Mr William Boekestein writes about resisting traditionalism and all that goes with it.

The opinions expressed in this magazine are not to be considered the official position of the Reformed Churches of NZ unless they expound the Biblical system of doctrine contained in the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dordt, or the Westminster Confession of Faith, or reflect the successive Acts of Synod of the Reformed Churches of NZ. On the other hand, care is taken to ensure that articles and opinions do not directly contradict the official position of the Reformed Churches as contained in the above sources without attention being called to that fact.

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What was so “noble” about the Bereans?!

Acts 17:1-15

¹ Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² And according to Paul’s custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.” ⁴ And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women. ⁵ But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. ⁶ When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have upset the world have come here also; ⁷ and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” ⁸ They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. ⁹ And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them.

¹⁰ The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. ¹¹ Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. ¹² Therefore many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men. ¹³ But when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there as well, agitating and stirring up the crowds. ¹⁴ Then immediately the brethren sent Paul out to go as far as the sea; and Silas and Timothy remained there. ¹⁵ Now those who escorted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they left.

Daniel Wilson

What does it mean to be “noble” in our day? If I were to call you noble, some of you would respond, “No, I am not royalty!” – but most of you would probably ask for clarification, “What do you mean?” You see, the word can mean that a person is of good character, refined, or moral, but it could also mean a person of noble rank/lineage. We tend to think of someone being noble when they give up something, or when they “take the high road” in an argument or difficult situation. They show their high principles and morality by refusing to stoop to insults or manipulation to get their own way. So, are you noble?

In this issue, we are wrestling with the question: What was so noble about the Bereans? We have often heard it in sermons, and read about it in Acts 17 (see sideline on left) – but what does it mean?! To answer that question, I think we need to step back and ask, “What was so ignoble (or shameful) about the Thessalonian Jews against whom Luke is comparing the Bereans?” The answer to that question will help us narrow in on the core attitudes which made the difference between these two groups of people.

For this to make much sense, you have to first read Acts 17:1-15 – Go ahead, you don’t even have to open your Bible, it is right there in the sideline of this page.

What was wrong with the Thessalonians? Why did they form a mob and try to destroy the mission work of Paul and Silas? Luke tells us in vs.5: “*But the Jews (or Jewish leaders) were jealous...*”

Have you ever seen someone be successful where you failed? How did you feel? Were you super-excited for them? Were you also a bit jealous? Have you ever wanted to trip up a person who was more successful than you – perhaps try to get them into trouble with the boss? If so, then you can probably understand the Jews of

Thessalonica in Paul’s day! You see, these Jews had been preaching and teaching the Old Testament Scriptures for ages – and yet, this new preacher by the name of Paul shows up – preaches for THREE WEEKS and gets a whole lot of followers, even Greeks and quite a few leading women of the city of Thessalonica! How dare he take their audience? Who was this guy to come in and be successful where they had failed! Paul was taking away their audience, and doing a better job at reaching the community. What wasn’t he doing better than these Jewish leaders? And so it makes perfect sense that they were jealous, and that jealousy set them on a dangerous and destructive path. They wanted to stop this Paul fellow and perhaps even kill him, and all because they were jealous of his ministry and his success. They cared more about their position and following than they did about the life-giving word of salvation in Jesus Christ! How sad is that? And yet, how often do we act in similar ways? We get upset when someone else succeeds where we failed and we want them to fall flat on their face – it is the same ignoble jealousy!

Those hateful jealous Jews essentially chased Paul and Silas out of town, but when Paul and Silas arrived in Berea, they received a very different reception. Here in Berea, the Jews and proselytes of the synagogue were not as proud or defensive of their status and power. They didn’t care if Paul came in and was successful – they were primarily concerned with whether or not he was accurate to the Scriptures! And so, they first and foremost took what Paul taught and compared it to the Word of God (the OT Scriptures). Pastor Andrew DeVries has been asked to write an article explaining exactly what that meant, and so you can look it up in this issue. The nobility of the Berean response flows from the priority they placed on the Word of God over and above their own pride/position. They were willing to have another



“I fear that while we all want to be “noble Bereans”, we far too often only have the hearts of those Thessalonian Jewish leaders!”

succeed in the community or to take away disciples from them personally, IF that person was bringing the true Word of God ... which was exactly what Paul was doing! In taking the high road, these noble Bereans have been recorded as the example of how to receive the Word of God from all preachers.

Now, having laid out the difference between the Thessalonian Jewish leaders and the Bereans – it is important for you to recognize that there were good people in Thessalonica as well. In 1 Thessalonians 2:11-14, Paul reminds the Thessalonians of how they responded well to the Word of God preached and taught in their midst – receiving it as the Word of God and not of men. There were many who came to genuine faith, and that is what caused the Jewish leaders to be so jealous and vindictive towards Paul and Silas. Those Jewish leaders were so bitter, in fact, that when they heard the Gospel was being successful in Berea, some of them were willing to travel some 70+ kilometers to Berea to start riots and stir up the crowds. Now, that is dedication! It wasn't an hour or so drive in the car, it was a journey of a few days – just to make a fuss and get Paul and these Christians into trouble.

So, where do your loyalties lie? Do you primarily look out for your own in-

terests? When a sermon is preached that you disagree with, are you quick to look to the Bible for correction? And I don't mean correcting the speaker/preacher, I mean being willing to be corrected yourself – letting the Bible be the authority? Or do you simply look for a few proof texts to prove your point? Are you willing to grumble and complain about the sermon to a friend without ever opening your Bible? I fear that while we all want to be “noble Bereans”, we far too often only have the hearts of those Thessalonian Jewish leaders! The Word of God needs to be primary – even if that means that you have to change your mind/thinking, or that you lose followers to someone else. The best way to cultivate that kind of “God-first” or “Bible-first” attitude is to cultivate a love for your Bible, and you do that by reading it! Thankfully, Pastor Ben McDonald has written an article to explain how to do just that. Take a step in the right direction by taking this issue seriously – Are you noble in the way you approach God's Word? Read. Investigate. Be honest with yourself. Repent where needed, and believe the WORD!

Mr Daniel Wilson is the minister in the Reformed Church of Nelson.

Becoming men and women of the Word

Ben McDonald

I didn't grow up with a habit of Bible reading. My family didn't have devotions at meal times or a regular time of Scripture reading. I didn't just struggle to read my Bible each day – I resisted it. In fact, for a long time, I convinced myself that a daily 'quiet time' wasn't necessary. And that to insist that it becomes a form of legalistic duty.

But I did try though. Sometimes I used a devotional book – a few verses of Scripture to read with some thoughts to reflect on. I tried a few – they have their place. But mostly I found them unhelpful.

A few times I was determined to read through the entire Bible from start to finish.

But then I'd get to the building of the tabernacle in Exodus or, if I made it that far, the priestly laws in Leviticus, and give up. It seemed boring and difficult.

Or I'd miss a day. Then two or three. Then a week. Then... well, you know how it goes. It's easier to stop reading.

Years ago a good friend encouraged me to be a man of the Word – someone like the Bereans in Acts 17. Not just someone who reads God's Word, but someone who loves it and lives it. Not someone who reads the Bible because they have to. But wants to. Not just someone who wants to master the Bible, but someone who wants to be mastered by it.

Many of us struggle to read our Bibles regularly. If that's you, be assured you're not the only one!

In this article, I want to encourage you to be a man or woman of the Word. Not so you can win the Bible knowledge section at the next church trivia night. But because God gave us his Word to know and love him in Jesus, to grow and

prepare us for works of service and to protect us from the overwhelming waves of life and the deceitful schemes of man (Eph 4:11-16).

Luke, the writer of Acts, commends the Bereans. They eagerly received Paul's message. Daily the Berean Jews examined the Scriptures to make sure Paul's message agreed with God's Word. There was no way these believers were going to be led astray.

I want to make two observations about the Bereans that will help us be men and women of the Word. Two things that will help us with our Bible reading, discerning what we hear and read, and not getting swept away with the tide of philosophies and false gospels of our day.

But before we go there I want to probe a little.

Our struggle to read the Bible

Why do many of us struggle with Bible reading or find it hard work?

Have you ever been asked about your Bible reading at a home visit and answered, "I really just don't have time." Or, "I can't get motivated."

Perhaps you've tried to answer honestly: "I know I can do better." But at the same time hiding the fact you don't read it much at all.

Maybe you've even stretched the truth just to keep your elders happy and get them off your back for another year.

I can relate to all of these.

Take a look at Psalm 119:16. "I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your Word."

Sometimes we claim that we'd love to have more time to read our Bible more often. I don't doubt that.

But I'm not convinced time is the reason for our struggle. The problem lies beneath the surface.

"The message they received is the gospel that Paul preached to them — the good news of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection."

“It takes time, patience and endurance to grow. And the grace and strength that God promises to give.”

Put it this way: suppose I gave you \$1,000 today – cash in hand. Not enough to retire on, but enough to occupy your mind with thoughts of how to use it.

Now, honestly, would you take that \$1,000, put it on a shelf and think, “I’d really love to have more time to spend that money”?

I know I wouldn’t. I don’t think we’d have any trouble finding time to make a trip to Mitre 10 Mega or look for a bargain on Trade Me.

Time is not our problem. We often think it is. But it isn’t.

We make time for the things we love and consider important, the things we enjoy and bring us some sort of benefit.

And I suspect that’s why we often struggle to read our Bible – we don’t delight in it, at least, not the way the writer of Psalm 119 did. We consider other things more important. We enjoy other things more. We don’t see the benefit it gives us – we’d rather have instant, tangible results.

When it comes to Bible reading, a change of habit requires a change of heart. We need to fall in love with the Word of God. How does that happen?

They received the message with great eagerness...

Notice what drove the Bereans to their Bible – they received the message with great eagerness.

The message they received is the gospel that Paul preached to them – the good news of Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection (cf 17:2-3,7).

This was probably the first time the Bereans had heard the gospel about Jesus. And when they did, they accepted it eagerly. It struck a chord in their soul. This is what they had been waiting for. This is what they needed – the good news that the promised Messiah had come. Their Messiah. Who suffered and died for them – for their sin. Raised to life for them – for their life before God.

But not only for them – for all who would repent from sin, and turn to Jesus Christ in faith, confessing him as Lord and Saviour.

Sometimes we hear a story on the news or see a post on our Facebook feed and think ‘Meh, whatever.’ And understandably so.

Really, who cares about what Taylor Swift is doing on her holidays – except those who love Taylor Swift or just want



to have a nose? Who wants to watch yet another crazy cat video – except those who love crazy cat videos or take great delight in the suffering of cats?

We lose interest pretty quick when we're not captivated by the news.

Does the good news of Jesus captivate you?

Does it grip you like a vice, showing you the depth of the shame and misery of sin as Jesus bears its curse on the cross in place of sinners like you? And at the same time showing you the depth of the love and mercy of God in Jesus – the love that is so desperately yearned for in today's world, but sought in things that can't give it?

Or do you scroll past the gospel as just another story on your news feed, one you've heard many times before?

Does the song of God's grace in Jesus reverberate through your heart and mind again and again the way doof doof music reverberates from a boy-racer car?

Or has the volume been turned down, drowned out by the song of self and other competing anthems?

Bible reading is a bore when our hearts are captivated by something other than Jesus. Little wonder, then, that we find it hard and struggle.

Someone once told me that we should love God enough to find out what he said in his Word.

God has freely and fully given himself to us in Jesus, that we would know and love him.

When we're drawn to Jesus and held by his power through the Holy Spirit, love for God and his Word is planted in us and grows. Love grows as Jesus becomes more to us and in us, and we become less.

The Bereans received the gospel with all eagerness and it drove them to the Word.

Receiving the good news of Jesus willingly, rather than reluctantly, and being captivated by him, will also drive you to the Bible.

They examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so

How often should we read our Bible? Is it necessary to have a daily 'quiet time' or read through the whole Bible in a year?

Sometimes we might feel guilty if we haven't spent time in God's word each day. Sometimes we have a resistant approach, as I did, thinking we're engaging in legalism.

Let's be clear: no one's name is in the Book of Life because of their great

devotional life. And no one's name is blotted out of the Book of Life because they didn't read their Bible enough or know it inside out.

So why encourage Bible reading? Why be a man or woman of the Word?

Here's the second thing that will help us.

The Bereans examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

The key point here is not that they examined the Scriptures 'daily.' But that the Word of God was their standard. That is, it was what they lived by. It was their protection, the rock on which they built their life (Matt 7:24-27).

My wife and I planted a passionfruit vine in our garden in Wellington. Actually, we're on our fourth one now – we're slow learners. And really like passionfruit.

The Wellington wind stripped the first three vines of their leaves and tender branches. They shrivelled up and died within months. Without protection from the wind, they didn't stand a chance of growing into mature plants and producing lovely, ripe passionfruit.

So with the fourth vine I made a simple, flimsy shelter to give it some relief from the wind. And it's still alive!

Life throws all kinds of storms at us, as well as all manner of claims about God and people and what we're here for. Like a passionfruit vine in a Wellington southerly, we're susceptible to being stripped bare without the protection of God's Word.

When Jesus was tempted by Satan, he responded "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God," (Matt 4:4).

God has given us his Word to live by. Not simply as a book of rules, but as our protection, our comfort, our food and our standard. Even Jesus used it to resist Satan!

A regular time of Bible reading won't make your problems go away. But when we love the gospel of grace and God's Word is our standard, we won't be swayed easily.

It takes time, patience and endurance to grow. And the grace and strength that God promises to give.

Love the gospel. Love God's word. Let it be your standard.

Summary

So how can we get help reading our Bible, becoming men and women of the Word?

Here's a little summary and a few tips: Receive the gospel of Jesus eagerly.

It is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes.

Make God's Word your standard. Let it grow and shape you, humble and discern you.

When you get to the 'boring' bits in the Bible, remind yourself that this is God's Word. And it points us to Jesus, somehow. And Jesus isn't boring.

When you get to the horrible bits, recognise how horrible sin is. And how wonderful Jesus is, that he would come and bear it for you.

When you get to the weird and difficult bits, remind yourself that this is God's Word. And God knows what it means even if we don't. And we can trust him because Jesus did.

Devotional books – some are helpful! I've listed a couple below that I have found helpful:

Seeing and Savouring Jesus Christ by John Piper
The Passion of Jesus Christ by John Piper
Experiencing the Trinity by Joe Thorn
Consider a Bible reading plan (1, 2, 3, or however many years). And if you're like me, one with catch-up days.

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"Puritanism was an evangelical holiness movement seeking to implement its vision of spiritual renewal, national and personal, in the church, the state, and the home; in education, evangelism, and economics; in individual discipleship and devotion, and in pastoral care and competence."

J I Packer

Listening like Bereans

Andrew de Vries

From a preacher’s perspective, you can see different types of listeners as you look out upon the congregation. There is the agreeable listener: they give lots of nods and little affirmations that they concur with what you are saying. There is the attentive listener: they maintain fierce eye contact and their attention never wavers through the entire sermon. There is the suspicious listener: they have that furrowed brow and narrowed eyes suggesting misgivings about just about everything you say. There is the sleepy listener (yes, it is very obvious from the pulpit when you are having trouble keeping your eyes open): the less said about them the better.

But there is also the Berean listener. And I’d like to commend to you their model of listening to the Word of God. Theirs is actually the kind of listening that every Christian’s should be. It’s how we ought to be listening to sermons we appreciate as well as those we don’t. It’s the kind of listening that is going to develop you into a strong and healthy Christian who can withstand the storms of a life in a fallen world. So let’s see what we can learn from the Bereans about how we should listen to the preaching of the gospel.

Firstly, to listen like a Berean is to listen with humility. Remember, that Paul was preaching in the synagogue. He was preaching the gospel to Jews. And he was preaching some outrageous things. Things like: your Messiah was actually an ordinary-looking man born in Nazareth; your Messiah was executed as a common criminal on the cross; you think you understand the Scriptures that speak of the Messiah, but you’ve actually missed him completely. These were all very confronting truths that Paul was presenting. The Bereans needed humility just to sit there and hear these claims. They needed the humility to be open-minded about things that they would

have found very confronting. They didn’t dismiss Paul’s preaching simply because it challenged some long-held beliefs. They gave him a hearing.

That’s of course how we need to be as we sit under the preaching of the Word. When the minister starts to talk about those things that you really don’t like to hear about, are you humble enough to listen? It’s entirely possible to be physically present to hear the Word of God, yet to be closed to what it teaches. You think: ‘Don’t preach to me about church discipline, that’s just unloving. Don’t preach about tithing, who are you to meddle in my financial affairs? Don’t preach about how I use the Lord’s Day, that’s just a matter of personal preference.’ So you check out, and refuse to even allow the Word to confront you. That’s not listening like a Berean. As we come to the Word each Sunday we must come ready to have our thinking, behaviour, and affections challenged. That’s what it means to listen like a Berean.

Secondly, to listen like a Berean is to listen critically. You need to think and exert mental effort in order to listen well to the preaching. The Bereans were critically examining for themselves if Paul’s claims were true. ‘Examine’ is a word that is often used in legal contexts. This is what you do with a witness, you examine them. So Paul is presenting his arguments. The Scriptures are his witness in the dock. And so the Bereans are weighing up what Paul says, with what the witness of the Scripture said. Let’s be very clear, this is not a critical thinking that takes issue with what the Scriptures says. They weren’t saying ‘I don’t like that’. Or ‘modern science couldn’t accept that so I won’t either’. They were accepting the Scriptures as God’s truth, and comparing that with the message brought by Paul.

Notice that the Bereans didn’t say: ‘this is the mighty apostle Paul, who has planted churches, had a vision of the

Lord, so we’ll just accept what he says’. They didn’t say ‘Oh, he’s been to MARS/RTC so we don’t really need to review what he says.’ We are blessed to have wonderful checks and balances on the ministry of the Word. However, if you are a Christian you need to come to worship with a Bible in hand so that you can see for yourself if what is being preached accords with the Word of God. We need to apply the same critical skills to all the sermons we listen to. Just because Tim Keller, or John Piper, or Joel Beeke or Allistair Begg, or whoever your favourite preacher is said it – doesn’t mean you uncritically accept it. You examine the Scriptures to see if what they teach is in accord with the Word of God.

The Bereans were *solā Scriptura* Christians – the Word of God was the final authority in their lives. They weren’t comparing what Paul preached with what Calvin or Berkhof had written¹. They weren’t comparing what Paul preached with their own experience, however impressive or profound that experience might have been. They weren’t comparing what Paul preached with what the majority of people thought was right or wrong. The Scripture was the final court of appeal for them. This tells us something about preaching doesn’t it? A good sermon is not one which has lots of nice illustrations, a dash of humour, and some nice personal stories that move you. A good sermon is one which drives you to the Scriptures. Good preaching ought to have you digging in the text to see if everything your preacher is telling you is true.

Thirdly, to listen like a Berean you must come to worship with a hungry heart. Just because the Bereans were critical, don’t think that they were there to listen coldly and clinically. We are told in v.11 that they received the message with great eagerness. The idea behind ‘eagerness’ is that of rushing forward to receive something. Like when the Boxing Day sales are on and the shop-

pers go rushing forward to take hold of their sought-after bargains. That's how the Bereans approached Paul's preaching. So their critical faculties were being exercised, but there was also a passion to hear the Word. They were thinking about what they heard, but they were also enthusiastic in their hearing.

What a beautifully balanced combination of head and heart. At the risk of being charged with making gross generalisations, Reformed folk are pretty good at the critical side of listening. However, I wonder how good we are at listening with eagerness and enthusiasm. Do we pray on Saturday night that we, and all God's people, might have a hunger for the preached Word. Do we come with the expectation that we are going to hear the risen Christ addressing us, or do we come thinking we've heard it all before? Do we put all distractions aside – the bulletin, the phones, the books – so that we can give our complete attention to the preaching. Are we keen to take every opportunity we can to hear more of the Word – worshipping twice each Lord's Day, participating in Bible studies, going to fellowship groups. I'd

like to commend to you the Berean posture for listening to the Word – not arms folded with a blank expression – but sitting on the edge of our seats eagerly awaiting the riches of God's grace to be declared to us.

Fourthly, to listen like a Berean means to give the sermon ongoing attention. Notice that the Bereans examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. So after they heard Paul, they did some homework. Listening for them didn't just take place in the moment that the gospel was preached. At that time in history, there was no printing press nor a ready available supply of Bibles. These Bereans heard the Word at the synagogue on Saturday. Then they went back to the synagogue to examine the scrolls of God's Word. They were clearly mulling the Word over and testing it, even days after they had heard the preaching.

If we are going to listen like Bereans, we have to do the same thing. We give critical attention to hearing the Word, we cultivate a spirit of enthusiasm for it, but that doesn't mean we are done. When we leave the service we are also

"We too are called to . . . be like the Bereans. Not only by being good listeners, but by responding to the word in faith and obedience."



do something with what we've heard. We can read the text again and see if there are any cross references to follow up. We could think about the aspects of the text that weren't explained in the sermon and give our attention to them. One particular way of giving ongoing attention to the Word is to talk to others about it. Ask someone after worship: 'what did you appreciate about the sermon today?' or 'what most challenged (or comforted) you in the sermon today?' Of course, you need to be prepared to let them know what you appreciated

and were challenged by as well.

There is a great encouragement in this section for each of us to give ongoing attention to God's Word. Because did you notice what this text assumes? It assumes that these Bereans could actually understand God's Word for themselves. The Bible is not some mystery code book that only those who know the secrets can understand. The Bible is not some indecipherable PhD thesis on particle physics that only 3 people in the world can actually read. The Bereans were ordinary people who could under-

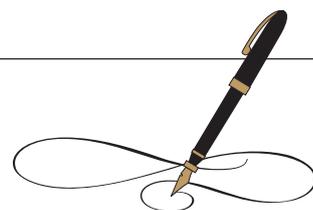
stand that Word of God and assess that with what they were being taught. We too are called to do the same thing. So let's be like the Bereans. Not only by being good listeners, but by responding to the word in faith and obedience.

¹ I am not suggesting that sound theologians have nothing to teach us, but that our first and primary reference for testing what we hear from the pulpit must be the Scriptures.

Mr Andrew de Vries is a minister in the Reformed Church of Bishopdale.

Outward focus

Sally Davey



History helps

For a generation or two Christians have been aware that the western world is in trouble. Once, it seemed, basic biblical morality was unquestioned – now, we can't take for granted that our views are shared by the people around us. Shameful behaviour is no longer shameful; and the moral fabric that once kept society together is falling apart. Furthermore, there are all sorts of tangible dangers looming on the world scene. Terrorism, disease epidemics and powerful countries aggressively flexing their muscles are but three of the troubles featured on television news almost daily. How are we to respond?

Most of us look forward into the future, trying to speculate on what may happen. But we simply don't know; and it may be that our imaginations are letting us down. What we imagine can simply fuel fear. It often seems to me that looking at the past can help us much more. Here is what American Presbyterian minister Ligon Duncan recently wrote for *Mississippi Christian Living*:

We live in a time of odd turmoil and worry. It is not like the Great Depression when there was economic deprivation on a massive scale. It is not like the Second

World War when "the Greatest Generation" heroically worked with our allies to restore peace and order in the world, at enormous cost and sacrifice, and to save millions of people from the designs of brutal regimes. It is not like Vietnam when our country was divided over our involvement in South East Asia, or like the anxiety of the Cuban Missile Crisis, nor even like the social revolution that swept through the sixties. It is something altogether different. But people are worried.

The cultural and political situation of our nation has people across the spectrum nervous, anxious, wondering, unsettled. Christians, in particular, are feeling the pinch of cultural marginalization. Christian ethical views that were once (in fact, very recently) considered mainstream in our society are now looked upon as outmoded, and even bigoted. This has left a lot of Christians more than bewildered. What's happening to our country and culture? What does the future hold? How have we gotten into this mess?

It is important to remember that this is not the first time Christians have felt like this, or have gone through major cultural upheaval. For instance, in the 14th century in Europe, there was massive cultural upheaval. The famed historian

and Pulitzer prize-winning author, Barbara Tuchman, paints a vivid picture of it in her enthralling book, A Distant Mirror (Random House).

That century saw the beginning of successive visitations of the plague to Europe. The Black Death is estimated to have killed somewhere between one-third to one-half of the population of Europe. Can you imagine living through the trauma of that, with the worry and uncertainty that it would bring? The 1300s also witnessed the beginning of the "Hundred Years War" which had massive ramifications for the whole of Europe, not just England and France. It too contributed to loss of life and economic wellbeing in manifold ways.

And the church itself was not immune from trial in this era. This was the age of division in Western Christendom. The so-called "Babylonian captivity of the Papacy" in Avignon, France eventually led to schism in the Western Catholic Church, with Pope set against anti-Pope. It is no surprise that Christians were befuddled and worried by all this. Indeed, many thought that the world was coming to an end.

But, my friends, in hard times, God is always up to something. In the fields

of the turmoil of the 14th and early 15th centuries, the seeds of the conditions were planted that came to fruition in the Great Reformation of the 16th century.

No one could have anticipated that God could work all the bad and hard things of that time for good (Romans 8:28), but he did. The church was renewed, the Gospel went forth, societies were transformed, people were converted, and conditions were established that began a march towards unprecedented freedom and general social improvement in the Western world.

Don't ever doubt that, even in trial and fire, God is up to something good. Paul's counsel to Christians is this: "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7, NLT). And, of course, Paul is saying the exact same thing that Jesus taught in Matthew 6:25-34. In sum, he said, "Don't worry, because God will take care of you."

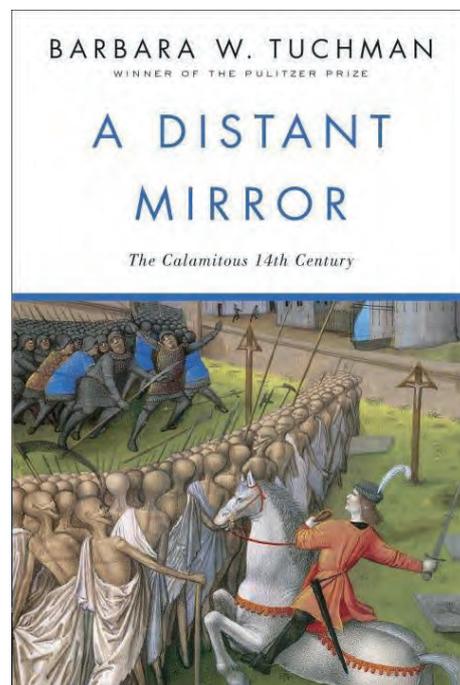
Jesus and Paul had a strong sense of the good, loving, and wise providence

of God over all things. That is, they believed that God was watching over and superintending everything in the believer's life, in a way that is wise, loving, and ultimately for our good. If we believe that, we needn't worry, no matter what is going on in the world, or what is going on in our lives.

So when you look at our world and worry, remember Jesus words, "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in me" (John 14:1). "These things I have spoken to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world, you will have tribulation: but take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).¹

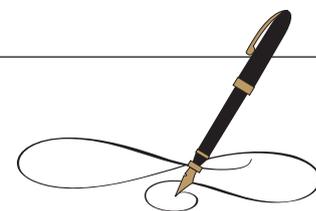
I hope you get the point: if we follow the story of the church through history, and see (with the aid of hindsight) how God used major upheavals to build his kingdom, we find help to face our own trials. History is a powerful source of encouragement for the church. Instead of looking forward in fear, it is often better to look backward at what God has so steadily done in the past.

¹ <http://mschristianliving.com/2016/columns/pastors-perspective-christians-worry-times/>



Feminine focus

Jenny Waldron



A cruel disease

"Who are you? Where is my husband? Why are you here? I want to go home!" the elderly woman demanded. As a young wife she had been widowed and then had remarried. Her husband of 40+ years was devastated as his wife no longer recognised him and was asking for her first husband.

Dementia is a cruel disease that robs a person of their memories and changes the way the brain functions and makes connections. It seems like they get their "wires crossed" or that the "wires no longer are attached".

The Alzheimer's Organisation of New Zealand describes dementia as being an

'umbrella term' (like the term cancer) used to describe the loss of memory, reduced language skills, impaired reasoning and loss of daily living skills that arise because of irreversible and progressive deterioration of brain function.¹ Currently, one in ten New Zealanders over 65 years old and one in three over 80 have dementia and about two thirds of those people have the most common form, Alzheimer's disease. As many as 60% of people in New Zealand will be touched by the disease, either directly or because a spouse, parent or close relative will develop some form of dementia.

As many in our congregations and

communities age, we need to be able to identify the symptoms and be well-informed so we can accept the changes that are likely to occur, either in our loved ones or ourselves. Dementia affects the brain and memory, and eventually will make everyday tasks more and more difficult to accomplish. A person with dementia is still the person we knew and loved, but some of the connections in the brain are either disconnected or have become connected in different ways.

For a person suffering from dementia, it can be terrifying to realise that they are not functioning as they used to, not being able to put words together as they



“The sufferer may become confused and angry and say things that are hurtful (for example not recognising that you are their wife or daughter or accuse you of making up stories about them).”

could in the past or that they can't identify ordinary, everyday objects.

It is important to recognise symptoms early, so that decisions can be made while there is still a choice of living arrangements, and support mechanisms can be put in place. The following list of symptoms from international care group BUPA may be helpful to determine the difference between normal behaviour and possible dementia.

1. Recent memory loss that affects daily life

- It's normal to forget meetings, names or telephone numbers occasionally and then remember them later.
- A person with dementia might have trouble remembering recent events.

2. Difficulty performing regular tasks

- It's normal to make a wrong turn occasionally while driving.
- Someone with dementia might have regular difficulty driving a familiar route.

3. Problems with language

- Many people have trouble finding the right words sometimes.
- ***But someone with dementia might have difficulty following, or initi-***

ating a conversation, or they may speak in their mother tongue but not realise it.

4. Disorientation of time and place

- It is normal to occasionally forget what day it is or where you are going
- ***A person with dementia may be confused about the time of day, and what is appropriate for that time.***

5. Decreased or poor judgment

- Making a bad decision once in a while is normal.
- ***A person with dementia might make bad decisions more frequently and start paying less attention to their physical appearance.***

6. Problems with abstract thinking

- It's normal to have difficulty balancing a budget.
- ***A person with dementia might completely forget what the numbers are and what needs to be done with them.***

7. Misplacing things

- Anyone can misplace their wallet or keys.
- ***A person with dementia might***

repeatedly put things in inappropriate places.

8. Changes in mood and behaviour

- Everyone becomes sad or moody from time to time.
- ***A person with dementia can have rapid mood swings, from calm to tears to anger, for no apparent reason.***

9. Changes in personality

- People's personalities can change a little with age
- ***A person with dementia might have problems in social situations they have previously been comfortable with.***

10. Loss of initiative

- It is normal for people to tire of housework, business activities or social obligations.
- ***A person with dementia may no longer initiate things that they once enjoyed.***²

Some of these symptoms can also be symptoms of other conditions such as depression, so it is important that any personal diagnosis be checked by a qualified medical practitioner.

For the Christian our marriage vows and the commandment to honour our parents do not end just because the person no longer remembers who we are. We remember who they are and were before this disease took hold of their brain. There are no easy answers or quick-fix solutions. Caring for a dementia sufferer is hard, challenging and sometimes heart-breaking and frustrating, but, in God's sovereignty, it may come our way.

Here are some practical tips that may be helpful when caring for someone with dementia.

- Help the person to have moments of pleasure and enjoyment. They may be able to find happiness in a familiar hymn or Bible verse, by talking about a favourite hobby or holiday or by listening/singing to their favourite music. They may well forget it again in a short while but for those few moments they were happy and the effect of the endorphins that were produced, leave them with a residual feeling of wellbeing.
- Help them in their routine, which gives structure to their day.
- Lock away things you don't want them to get into. My Nana lived with my family when I was little, and I had the great responsibility of (a) knowing where the toilet paper was kept and

(b) only winding a small amount on to a roll at a time, because Nana would sit there and unravel it all, every time.

- Don't keep reminding them that they forget things, or they may hide forgetfulness from you or lie to cover it up. Rather, it is helpful to the sufferer to be gracious and kind.
- Follow the fanciful stories, although they may think you have lost your mind when you laugh at them. Remember that it is the connections in their brains that are no longer functioning as they ought, not that they think or know they are telling outrageous lies. It is real to them just like it seems to us when we are dreaming. Their perception of past events can be distorted or completely untrue, but for them it seems real at that point in time.
- Sometimes they may revert to their "mother-language" without realising it, and then become frustrated because no-one understands them. They may need to be gently reminded to speak English to their caregivers/doctors.
- Your Dad asks why your Mum isn't there and wants to see her, even though she died 7 years ago. How do you respond to such questions? Rather than having them go through the grief of learning their spouse has died yet again (and they may ask many times) it may be better to remind them of a happy time they had together, or her favourite hymn or Bible verse.
- Label everyday things around the house. The TV may become an alien spaceship or the fridge, or a wardrobe.
- Some things may make no sense to you (like continual buying of eggs or wearing several dresses at a time) but it makes sense to them. As long as these things aren't putting them in danger, don't be anxious about it.
- As the disease progresses, the sufferer may lose all sense of moral dignity. Your Dad may ask the waitress to have his babies, or your mum may take her top off in public because she is hot. Be quick to apologise and to then forgive. As shocking as it may seem to you, they are not thinking straight.

Moving house/changing residence

When is the right time for an older couple to leave the family home and move into care? Some couples decide to sell up and move into a retirement

"For the carer, anger can easily surface, because you are having to repeat yourself 100 times a day, and then feeling guilty for your reaction. It's quite normal to experience those emotions, because it is frustrating."

village, with various stages of care available (from independent living through to hospital care), while they are still fit and able, before some of the difficult stages of growing old may begin to happen. This enables them to establish themselves into a new community while they are still able to enjoy the benefits of settling themselves into a new home and neighbourhood and to participate in activities that are organised.

However, many elderly people want to, and do, stay in their own homes for as long as possible, until a health issue arises (i.e. a fall or a deterioration in their mental capability) and requires them to make the move. Staying in their own home means that they are in familiar surroundings which can make life for them seem more normal.

When a move from their own home becomes essential, it can be a very stressful thing for them to grasp. It is difficult enough when we are anticipating such a move, but, for them, a move can be completely disorienting. Take some favourite pieces with them, photos, books, a familiar blanket, that comfy old chair, and try to help them adjust to the new environment. They will still ask to go "home" but rather than argue with them, distract them or talk about favourite memories of their old house.

Feelings which may be experienced

The sufferer may become confused and angry and say things that are hurtful (for example not recognising that you are their wife or daughter or accuse you of making up stories about them). Sometimes they lash out but they are not aware of what they are upset at, just that they are angry! A dementia sufferer may become

“There is no easy path nor any simple answers to the complex difficulties that are faced by both the sufferer of dementia and their carer(s). However, we can know and trust in God’s good providence, and care”

very angry at the thought of having to move house and accuse their spouse or children of wanting to “shove them off into a rest home”. It can be a very difficult time for all. If you cannot calm them down, you may need to just give them some space and leave them for a while.

For the carer, anger can easily surface, because you are having to repeat yourself 100 times a day, and then feeling guilty for your reaction. It’s quite normal to experience those emotions, because it is frustrating. It’s not that they are trying to be annoying but rather they have for-

gotten they’ve already said/asked it 99 times before. If you are feeling angry and upset, remember the Lord always offers a way of escape, (take a walk outside, make a cup of coffee or ring someone), so that you do not sin and are able to endure it.³ Pray for the Holy Spirit’s help, comfort and strength so that you in turn can be helpful, comforting and strong. Remember this isn’t their “normal” self speaking but one where their brain is not functioning properly. It is important that you have someone you can talk to and that you too, have care and support. Find out about respite care early on, before you really, really need it.

Caring for the carer

If your father is caring for his wife with Alzheimer’s, it is important for you (and your siblings) to not only discuss with him the care for your mother, but also to put in place respite care for him. The burden of caring for someone can be very heavy, especially if your mum becomes angry, or starts wandering down the street or is demanding. But even the day-to-day running of a household can be exhausting. Look for ways to help with meals, housekeeping, enabling your father to shop on his own while you sit with your mother, or staying the night so he can get some uninterrupted sleep. He needs

time to rest and care for himself but may also feel guilty about taking time out away from his wife. Reassure him, and encourage him to join a Bible study, bowls club, or some other regular social activity so that he has something to look forward to each week and where he can meet with other people. You may also offer to care for your mum, so that he can attend church.

There is no easy path nor any simple answers to the complex difficulties that are faced by both the sufferer of dementia and their carer(s). However, we can know and trust in God’s good providence, and care, and keep our eyes on the gift of eternal life where there is no pain, sorrow or tears and where He will make all things new.⁴ God tells us so many times that He will never leave us nor forsake us and to trust in Him.⁵ He encourages us to be compassionate, kind, patient, bearing with one another and loving⁶, being thankful and doing everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.

1 <http://www.bupa.co.nz/why-bupa/demystifying-dementia/what-is-dementia/>

2 <http://www.alzheimers.org.nz/about-dementia/the-10-warning-signs>

3 i Cor 10:13

4 Rev 21:4-5

5 Joshua 1:5, Ps 40, Ps 4, Ps 25:16-17, Ps 27:10,14

6 Col 3:12-17

World in focus

Kiwi group: Why it’s not yet time to write off the ‘Nuclear Family’

New Zealand’s Family First is warning that recent media headlines such as “Mum, dad and the kids? Not so much ...” “nuclear family a thing of the past” and “the nuclear family has exploded” are misleading because of the shortcomings and limitations of the research that the statements are based on.

“The research comes from a very small sample of just over two hundred 15-year-olds. The study itself states that ‘the sample cannot be generalized to all New Zealand children.’ This is primarily because the 15 year-olds’ parents were

young at the time of their birth, but also because it is not a random sample of NZ teenagers,” says Bob McCoskrie, National Director of family First NZ.

“The mothers’ median age was just 22 and young maternal age is a known marker for increased instability of family life. The study authors state that ‘young parenthood may be associated with educational and socioeconomic disadvantage’. That only 26 percent were living with two biological parents by age 15 may be an effect of this disadvantage and distinct to this sample.”

“Additionally, nuclear families are defined as mother, father and siblings. To highlight the finding that ‘7 percent lived their whole lives in households containing only nuclear family members’ only

tells us that many lived in households including a grandparent or boarder for instance. If we look at nuclear families of the past, the same would almost certainly be true. This is primarily a report on the living arrangements of children,” says Mr McCoskrie.

“Significantly, the study also fails to distinguish between couples who are married and de facto couples.”

“Marriage is an important social good with a smorgasbord of positive outcomes for children and adults alike. This has been discovered from decades of research. In virtually every category that social science has measured, children and adults do better when parents get married and stay married – provided there is no presence of high conflict or

violence. This is not a criticism of solo parents. It simply acknowledges the benefits of the institution of marriage. Governments should develop policies which encourage and support what works best," says Mr McCoskrie.

Despite these shortcomings the study does provide new and useful data about the diversity and frequent disruption of some family households. Participants had lived in an average of 9.1 houses by age 15. Discussion about the impact of changing schools and social networks is raised but left unanswered by the researchers. Ironically a separated mother highlighted in one of the media reports of the study said, 'Everyone is a bit sick of moving I think. The kids want a forever home.'

Family First believes that children want and need stability and security. Study after study shows the nuclear family – with or without Grandma living downstairs – is the best model for providing these.

"It's regrettable that many seem happy to write off the nuclear family. Fortunately they are premature. The number of unmarried births is now falling as are divorce rates."

My Christian Daily Editor

Bibles removed from hotel rooms after atheists' complaint

A group of atheists has successfully campaigned to remove Bibles from rooms at a hotel in Arizona.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) complained about the Bibles and had them removed from rooms in a hotel run by Arizona State University.

The atheist group has previously said that it would rather see Charles Darwin's 'On the Origin of Species' than the Bible in hotels.

Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote to the university complaining that making Bibles available "sends the message that ASU endorses the religious texts".

She added: "State-run colleges have a constitutional obligation to remain neutral toward religion.

"When a government entity like ASU distributes such material to visitors, it has unconstitutionally entangled itself with a religious message, in this case a Christian message."

The FFRF claims that a member of staff was offended by seeing one of the Bibles in a room.

The Bibles had been placed by Gideons International in the rooms of

the Thunderbird Executive Inn.

They have now been removed but remain available at reception.

Iowa State University and the University of Wisconsin removed Bibles from their campus-affiliated hotels in 2014 after the FFRF complained.

In the same year, the UK's Travelodge chain removed Bibles from rooms, despite having not received any complaints from its guests.

The Christian Institute

Arab and Jew 'cross the divide' through shared faith

Hisham*, an Arab, and Miriam*, a Jew, are both 16. They grew up in Israel in a climate where suspicion, even full-blown hate, has set the tone of each towards the other.

The boy and girl are friends now – their friendship has this one thing in common: "Jesus", and a faith alien to the predominant core of their respective cultures.

They have come to know each other through "Musalaha", an organization working in Israel and the Palestinian Territories. True to its name, Musalaha – Arabic for conciliation – aims to bring Israelis and Palestinians together through the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

Established in 1990, the charity runs camps where both Jewish and Arab

teenagers can meet in a new place and learn new things about themselves and the 'others'.

Recently, ten Jewish and ten Arab teenagers, all living in Israel – together with four leaders – journeyed together. All describe themselves as followers of Christ: the Jewish youth are part of Messianic congregations – ethnic Jews who maintain their faith in 'Yeshua' as the promised Jewish Messiah – while the Arabs are members of their community's Christian minority.

Their faith is put to the test to see if their common belief in the Gospel of reconciliation can overcome their opposing communities' entrenched hate.

Miriam lives in a Jewish neighbourhood of Jerusalem. "I hardly meet any Arabs in my everyday life. There was one Arab girl in my school, but she left. No surprise there!

"All the people in my neighbourhood are what I call 'super-super right wing'. All of them hate Arabs and keep telling each other so. If I don't say that I hate Arabs, they really won't understand. That's why I love Musalaha – this is the only place where I meet Arabs and can be friends with them."

Hisham lives in Nazareth, among a predominantly Arab community in northern Israel. For him, though, it is impossible not to encounter Jewish people every day. Since one of his parents is a

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foreigner, it's easy for him to 'disguise' as a foreign tourist. "When I speak English and behave like a foreigner, people are nice. When they find out I'm Arab, they often change their behaviour and begin to distrust me."

Hisham shares how among his fellow Arabs the re-establishment of Israel as a modern state in 1948 is called the 'Nakba' (or 'Disaster'); 700,000 Palestinians fled from their homes making room for more Jews to live therein.

For Palestinians it's a narrative of struggle and fighting in order to return home. For Jews, it's the opposite narrative of making it 'home' again – against all odds – where they can live free after countless massacres.

Hisham comes from a moderate family himself; still many Palestinians remain vengeful, some even violent towards Israelis.

During a Musalaha meeting, they have been discussing prejudices and trying to overcome them, this time through a Biblical narrative that both sides share. Songs are sung, in Hebrew and Arabic, and fierce debates about faith and poli-

tics are not shunned.

Why do many Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts fail while Musalaha seems to be working in bringing the two odd sides together? "We bring our faith into it. That is the difference," Miriam says. "When Christ is in the centre, eventually all differences become less important."

Hisham agrees. "Jesus has come to bring peace among the nations," he says. "He told us to love not only our brothers but also our neighbours, even our enemies. His teaching has helped us to really open up towards each other and to overcome the culture we grew up in."

First step

The first step in fixing problems is to admit them, Hisham explains.

"Most people in our country never get to that first step. Gradually we have learned here to accept that neither of the parties in the conflict is fully right or fully wrong. That's another important step in understanding each other."

"Most people on both sides want peace. They just don't know how to get it." Hisham lives in a relatively easy-going

part of Israel, for an Arab. "For Palestinians living in East Jerusalem, it's more difficult. They are struggling with the conflict every day. It's harder for them to say: 'Yes, we can fix this'. They will be more hardened in their judgement."

Miriam expects more from her Messianic Jewish congregation: "Yes, in our church we pray for peace. But in practice most people will do nothing to achieve it. They just say: 'Let's wait for Jesus to return'; until then they don't feel they should act on it. I say: 'If you really want peace, work on it.'"

Miriam hopes to bring the cross-cultural friendships she gained during the camp back home and build upon them in Israel.

"What we have experienced here is reconciliation built upon the love of Christ."

Pinning her hopes on representatives of two minority communities within their larger communities, she says: "My prayer is that our generation will lead the way to full reconciliation between our people."

**(not their real names, with-held for safety)*

By World Watch Monitor, October 2016

Visiting by the elders

"The elder must know the people being visited long before troubles arise or he walks through that front door."

D. Allan Stares

There are few things as terrifying to the newly minted elder as the prospect of home visits. This fact may, at first, sound strange; after all, we are looking at a simple phrase made of two simple words. Home is where people live. Visit is when you go to where people live and stay there for a bit of time. Home visit is the kind of phrase that should be all fuzzy and warm to the touch, comfortable and scented with coffee and baking, but it is not. At least not at first. At first it is terrifying.

As a newly minted elder, back when the word was young, I must admit that I had not really thought about home visiting as a task. I had been visited while single and again many times with my growing family, but had never really contemplated home visits from the elder's perspective. When that first home visit-

ing season came around, even though I had been paired with a grizzled veteran, I did not look forward to visiting at all. I didn't really know many of the people on our list, and my phone calls to schedule a visit were often the first conversation we had had, and everyone seemed a bit too busy for a visit. I had also read a book on the subject, and though it had a very cheerful title, it did not make the experience sound very cheerful at all. By the time we pulled into that first driveway, bowed our heads in prayer, and proceeded toward the front door, I thought I might be ready. I was to learn something else in the next hour: it is not impossible to conduct a home visit, but until you have, you haven't.

Imagine that you are sitting in a large room full of strangers. In your imagination, turn to the person beside you, look at them for a minute. Now, tell me about their walk with God, tell me the

things that give them joy, and tell me the things that trouble them. It is obvious, even with a good imagination, that this is not possible. We can only get to know these things by talking. It may only be me, but I believe that most people will only truthfully answer these questions in the context of a relationship.

1 Thessalonians 5 gives us some clear guidance regarding how the congregation is to receive the elders when they visit. It also provides an outline for the elder's purpose in visiting. The visited are to show hospitality and reverence and to support their elders in their work. The elders are to counsel the visited to live by their faith, to offer them comfort in adversity, and to give warning against error in doctrine or life. This may seem incredibly simple, because it is. It may seem incredibly easy, but it isn't. Again, until you have conducted a home visit, you haven't.

The factors which make home visits a difficult endeavour are legion. Firstly, all of this, though under the authority of Christ, is being attempted by humans. Elders can be dull, or distracted, or deaf to what is actually being said. This is not due to some nefarious plan, but usually arises from weakness, or nervousness, or busyness, and sin.

Secondly, the home visit can be difficult because of its strangeness. It is not usual for us to invite acquaintances into our home, feed them drinks and baking, and spend an hour being questioned about anything, much less our personal lives. Though our toddlers may be oblivious to this oddness, our teenagers feel it acutely and often react accordingly.

Thirdly, standing firmly in the road of a successful visit is the multi-headed hydra, Pride. Pride rests firmly on all sides here. The elder can be too proud to admit that he may not understand a passage or situation or have a quick solution and may throw up a wall to make sure that this fact remains hidden.

The visited may be hesitant to speak openly about their lack of knowledge or the comfortable little niche they have carved out between what they know is right and what they like to think of as acceptable. No one likes to have their idols challenged, no one likes to feel that their behaviour is being judged. Another thick wall, one that may be years in the making and several metres thick will stand on this side as well. A visit in this situation will end up as two parties busily adding logs to their walls while pretending that they are about to open the front door.

Perhaps we find ourselves in these situations because we have forgotten two very important considerations. The first is in 1 Thessalonians 5:11: "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing." I may be wrong, but I believe that the whole purpose of the home visit is this mutual encouragement. The home visit is indeed a time to learn about the needs of the congregation, provide some instruction, gather reactions to the preaching of the word, and detect problems, but encouragement is its most important function. The elder needs the encouragement of the congregant as much or more than the congregant needs the elder's encouragement. If both parties enter the room with this in mind, the result will always be more than good baking and awkwardness or contention. Most important is a recognition that none of the elder's work here can be done outside of a relationship, and relationships take time and effort. Searching out a family in the fellowship hall, introducing yourself, and trying to learn the names of their children and talking to them, may not be easy, but it is easier than trying to do it in their living room, when you are a stranger. The elder must know the people being visited long before troubles arise or he walks through that front door. Without this relationship, the love that is

required as a cornerstone and a filter to all that happens between us as children of God tainted by sin, is impossible, and frankly, the home visit is doomed.

The people I visit may not know that I love them, but they will certainly know if I do not.

Christian Renewal, September 2016

HUMAN LIFE

A mere puff
of the stuff
we breathe in
and breathe out

Is that all
great and small
tend to call
human life?

Life on earth....
What's it worth
with its pain
in refrain?

What indeed
Lord, I plead
is the sense
of pretense?

We can't cope
with a hope
that is dashed
to the ground:

But there's scope
for a hope
in the Word
of the Lord!

Trust Him!

*John Goris
Nelson, December 1996*

SAVE
THE
DATE

The Silverstream Reformed Church Ladies are hosting the next Women's Presbyterial.

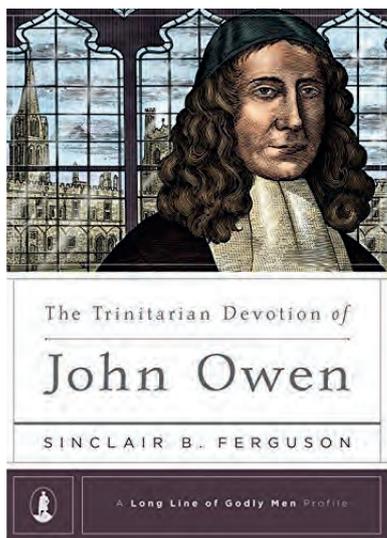
Saturday, 18th March 2017.

"Back to Basics"

is the theme based on Titus 2:3-5.

The Trinitarian Devotion of John Owen

Sinclair B. Ferguson, Reformation Trust Publishing (Ligonier Ministries), 2014. **Reviewed by Kim Kuhfuss**



I had always thought of John Owen as more theological than devotional, but Sinclair Ferguson makes it clear that Owen is both. The very words “Trinitarian Devotion” in the title of this book bring this out.

The bulk of Ferguson’s book deals with writings found in the first three volumes of his collected works, which are the most pertinent to the subject at hand. However, there are also quotes from, and references to, later volumes—and even his seven-volume exposition of Hebrews. All of this points to Ferguson’s comprehensive knowledge of the writings of Owen.

The author makes it clear that to John Owen, the believer’s knowledge of, and communion with, the Trinity is a fundamental part of his Christianity. It is hard to read this book without gaining a deeper hunger and thirst for more intellectual and practical knowledge of the glorious Godhead!

The book begins with a short biography of Owen, and then moves into the main subject. In this section, the first and last chapters deal with the entire Trinity. The three chapters in between deal with each person of the Trinity individually, based on the benediction of

2 Corinthians 13:14.

In the chapter on “Communion with the Father,” the author focuses on Owen’s emphasis on the Father’s love for the believer. This is a topic that believers can never spend too much time thinking about.

The chapter on the Son highlights the grace that is with us. The author brings out what he calls “one of the most important insights in all of [Owen’s] theology.” This is that “grace is, ultimately, personal. Grace is Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ is God’s grace.”

In the chapter on the Holy Spirit, the author reminds us that when Owen wrote his volume on the Holy Spirit, he was treading on ground that no one had really walked on before. Owen, like Calvin, is fit to be called “The Theologian of the Holy Spirit.” The gifts of the Spirit are often emphasized in our era, but Owen reminds us that it is better to concentrate on the person of the Spirit. Ferguson discusses the ten specific works of the Spirit in the life and work of Jesus, as identified by Owen. These are grouped according to the incarnation, ministry, death, and exaltation of Christ.

If you have never read John Owen, I would urge you to read this book, because it will whet your appetite to read more of this Puritan giant. And if you, like me, have read Owen, but have forgotten a lot of what you read, this book will make you desire to go back and read him again.

New Horizons, July 2016

To Win Our Neighbors for Christ

edited by Wes Bredenhof,
Reformation Heritage Books, 2015
Reviewed by: Jack W. Sawyer

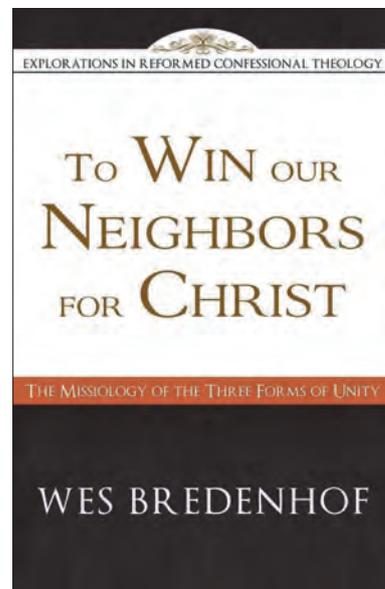
To Win Our Neighbors to Christ is a compact, but compelling apologia for the missionary implications of the Three Forms of Unity. It is a volume in the series *Explorations in Reformed Confessional Theology*. Written by Canadian Reformed pastor Wes Bredenhof, the book rebuts the often heard claim that the Reformation and the confessional documents it produced have little or nothing to say about missions. Bredenhof helps

Reformed believers to understand that their confessions compel them to care about a world lost in unbelief, and he shows how this confessional heritage leads to missionary activity.

In his preface, Bredenhof defines the mission of the church as “the official sending of the church to go and make disciples by preaching and witnessing to the good news of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.” He sees no point in a strict distinction between mission and evangelism. In his view, “The mission of the church is evangelism.” Arguably this definition is too narrow, for the Great Commission clearly has an educative dimension. But no doubt the author would acknowledge this, and he does in fact imply it throughout his brief work.

Since Calvinistic doctrine is sometimes twisted to discourage evangelism and missions, it is refreshing to find in this book an enthusiastic, cogent push-back against such views. Similarly, since the OPC rejected the chapter on “the Love of God and Missions” added to the Westminster Confession by the PCUSA in 1903, I found that Bredenhof provides a helpful impetus for reading our own Westminster Standards in a missional light. (Parenthetically, it is gratifying to note that the OPC has always been unequivocally committed to missions.)

Explaining each of the relevant parts of the Three Forms of Unity and their historical context, the author shows that



as the Reformed believer shares union with Christ, he is compelled to look with care and compassion upon the lost around him, near and far. Also helpful is the care the author has taken to consult active home and foreign missionaries, and he has throughout included their accounts of how they integrate the Reformed confessions into their work on the field. The consistent method of the book is nowhere better exemplified than on page 50, where Question 86 of the Heidelberg Catechism is cited, explained, and applied. This question has to do with the believer's sanctified service and good works. The catechism places in the mouth of the Reformed believer the statement that he does good, "so that by our godly walk of life we may win our neighbors for Christ."

From there comes the title of a book that this reviewer is pleased to commend. It should prove to be a helpful tool for both individual and group study.
New Horizons, June 2016

Sanctification: Explorations in Theology and Practice

edited by Kelly M. Kopic,
InterVarsity Press, 2014

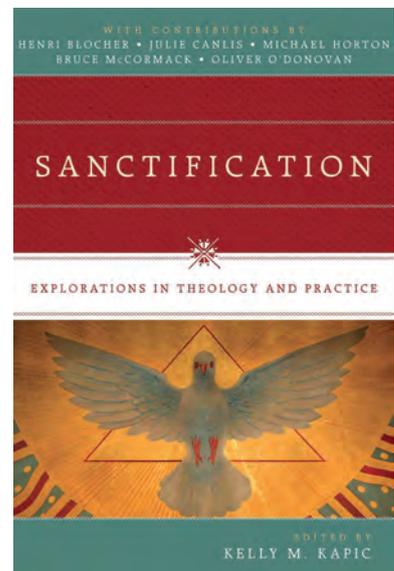
Reviewed by: J. V. Fesko

This book is a collection of essays from the 2011 Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference; other contributions were subsequently added to the book. Contributors include Oliver O'Donovan, Bruce McCormack, Ivor Davidson, Kelly Kopic, Michael Horton, Rick Lints, Henri Blocher, and Brannon Ellis. Kopic, the book's editor, states that no effort was

made to present a unified perspective on the topic (p. 11). Hence, as one can imagine, there is some overlap and unevenness to the book. Moreover, given that most of the book's essays originated at an academic conference, the book is largely aimed at an academic audience. I believe that professional theologians, seminary professors, pastors, and seminarians would profit most from this book, given its technical nature at a number of points. I suspect, for example, that few in the pew will take great interest in McCormack's essay on Barth and Wesley on the conception of Christian perfection (pp. 103–26).

There are, however, several noteworthy essays. The first is by Brannon Ellis on union with Christ. He offers and defends the thesis that being in Christ and belonging to the church are materially equivalent ideas that describe our participation in the covenant of grace (p. 81). He presents thoughtful ideas that deserve careful consideration. Two other notable essays are those by Rick Lints and Henri Blocher. Both write on the much-needed topic of sanctification by faith alone (pp. 35–78). Pastors should read and carefully meditate on these chapters. All too often, people believe that good works sanctify, rather than union with Christ by faith alone, through use of the means of grace: word, sacrament, and prayer. Our own Westminster Confession of Faith makes this very point: "The principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace" (WCF 14.2).

By far the most powerful essay comes



from Kelly Kopic, which is on suffering and sanctification. He writes informed by his own experience with his wife's bout with cancer and subsequent struggle with polyneuropathy (p. 212). His chapter focuses on the ideas of faith, hope, and love, and drawing strength from Christ in the midst of profound suffering. Kopic writes academically, but pastorally, as he draws upon the insights of Martin Luther and the Reformer's own physical sufferings. Kopic encourages suffering Christians to focus on the images of the cross, resurrection, and feast: "Suffering can be like a famine: a famine of comfort and peace, a famine of joy and health, a famine of community and self-worth. To this famine Christ offers the feast of himself" (p. 231). This essay should be read by everyone in the church and is alone worth the price of the book.

New Horizons, May 2016

The Reformed Churches Bible College in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea is looking for a Principal.

The RCBC was established in 2007 and has been blessed with many graduates, who are able to serve the PNG churches in many capacities including elders and most recently as ordained pastors.

The successful candidate must have a teaching and administration background as well as a strong desire to serve the Lord on the Mission field. They must be able to write, present and evaluate the current curriculum and make changes for future enhancements. The candidate must be adaptable and culturally sensitive and must also have the ability and desire to learn another language and culture. This rewarding position will be strongly supported by the team on the field and by the supporting federations' mission boards.

If you are interested, please contact Carol Griffioen at 9 Regis Drive, North York, Ontario, Canada, M2M 3J4 or at carolgriffioen@yahoo.ca



Tropenmuseum, part of the National Museum of World Cultures. commons.wikimedia.org

“There is no question that the Muslim is our neighbor, but there is no way to remain faithful to Scripture and the gospel and then claim that Christians and Muslims worship the same God.”

far surpassed in importance by the fact that Jesus explicitly denied that salvation comes by being merely one of “Abraham’s children” (John 8:39-59). He told the Jewish leaders who rejected him that their rejection revealed that they were not Abraham’s true sons and that they did not truly know God.

Christians do not deny that Muslims know some true things about God. As a matter of fact, in Romans 1:19-20 Paul explains that all people have some real knowledge of God by general revelation, so that they are without excuse. Speaking at Mars Hill in Athens in Acts 17, Paul argued that even some of the Greeks’ own philosophers and poets gave evidence of a rudimentary knowledge of God — but this was not a saving knowledge, and the Apostle was brokenhearted when he saw the Athenians at worship.

In making her claim that Christians and Muslims worship the same God, the professor claimed the authority of Pope Francis, and since Vatican II the Roman Catholic Church has become ever more explicit in its teaching that salvation can come without a conscious and explicit faith in Christ. This is simply not an option for evangelical Christians committed to the authority of Scripture alone and to the Gospel as defined in the New Testament.

Francis J. Beckwith, a leading Catholic apologist and philosopher, defended the claim that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. At one point,

Beckwith argued that two people could have differing knowledge of Thomas Jefferson while knowing the same Thomas Jefferson as the third President of the United States. He continued: “In the same way, Abraham and Moses did not believe that God is a Trinity, but St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Billy Graham do. Does that mean that Augustine, Aquinas, and Graham do not worship the same God as Abraham and Moses? Again, of course not.”

But this line of argument evades the entire structure of promise and fulfillment that links the Old Testament and the New Testament. Abraham and Moses could not have defined the doctrine of the Trinity while they were on earth, but they believed that God would be faithful to all of his promises, and those promises were fulfilled only and fulfilled perfectly in Christ. And, going back to John 8:56-58, Jesus said: “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad ... Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”

Evangelical Christians understand that, theologically, there is a genetic link between Judaism and Christianity. That is why Christians must always be humbled by the fact that we have been grafted onto the promises first made to Israel. In terms of both history and theology, there is no genetic link between Christianity and Islam. The Qur’an claims that to confess Jesus Christ as the divine Son and the second person of the Trinity is

to commit blasphemy against Allah.

Hard times come with hard questions, and our cultural context exerts enormous pressure on Christians to affirm common ground at the expense of theological differences. But the cost of getting this question wrong is the loss of the Gospel. Christians affirm the image of God in every single human being and we must obey Christ as we love all people everywhere as our neighbor. Love of neighbor also demands that we tell our neighbor the truth concerning Christ as the only way to truly know the Father.

We must also understand that the most basic issue is the one Jesus answered with absolute clarity. One cannot deny the Son and truly worship the Father. There is no question that the Muslim is our neighbor, but there is no way to remain faithful to Scripture and the gospel and then claim that Christians and Muslims worship the same God.

For other resources I have written on this topic see:

What Does God Care What We Call Him.

Article citations

Francis Beckwith *Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?*, The Catholic Thing, Thursday, December 17, 2015.

Ruth Graham, *The Professor Suspended for Saying Muslims and Christians Worship One God*, The Atlantic, Thursday, December 17, 2015.

<http://www.albertmohler.com/December 18, 2015>

Resisting Traditionalism



“The Bible nowhere condemns tradition *per se*. . . . Trust in tradition will lead us away from refreshing, renewing life in Christ.”

William Boekestein

The woman had conspired with her husband to commit a slew of treasonous murders. Now, as she looked at her hands, she wondered if she would ever again have a clear conscience. “What, will these hands ne’er be clean?” She asked. “Here’s the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.”

All of us have known the troubled conscience of Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth. We try to wash away our guilt but find it too deep for us to remove.

One of the ways people try to deal with guilt is by observing religious traditions. The religious leaders of Jesus’ day used traditional hand-washing to help make them feel clean before God (Cf. Mark 7:1-23). But Jesus’ wasn’t impressed. He knew that their rituals and

their hearts were disconnected. Jesus’ exposé of their empty ceremonialism can be liberating.

The appeal of Traditionalism

Ironically, in the Old Testament God prescribed ceremonial washings for his people (Cf. Lev. 15:11). Surely he was teaching the safety of sanitation. But at a far deeper level God was cultivating a principle of purity. He was training his people to wash their hearts by confessing their sins and seeking his forgiveness. He was preparing them for the coming of his Son who, with his precious blood, would wash away all his children’s sins. Old Testament handwashing – tied to God’s plan for moral renovation – was far from an empty tradition. Biblically-warranted traditions can become habits that tamp the truths of the gospel to the level of reflex in God’s people.

Here's the problem: According to Jesus, the Pharisees used tradition as an end of religion rather than a means of godliness. They trusted in rituals though their hearts were far from God (Mark 7:6). Though they worshiped God in vain (v. 7), going through traditional motions made them feel comfortable and superior to others. In *Fiddler on the Roof*, the main character Tevye provides an honest commentary on this kind of religion. "Because of our traditions every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do."

But traditionalism is always a lousy substitute for a living friendship with God. Mark tells this story well. Jesus' own disciples had recently preached the gospel with amazing results. Sinful, fearful, and sick people had found hope and wholeness in Jesus (Mark 6:12-13, 56). But having never experienced the beauty of true religion the Pharisees and scribes' could only accuse: "You don't wash your hands right!" What a tragedy.

We can be allured by tradition. Some people try to deal with guilt by means of secular rituals – shopping, exercise, work, hobbies. Others medicate their sins by keeping religious routines. Traditional observance can masquerade as a vibrant walk with God. By maintaining our familiar religious habits we avoid the risks of true discipleship. By judging others whose traditions differ we feel more confident in ourselves. Because customs can make us feel so comfortable we don't always sense their potential danger.

The attributes of Traditionalism

Instead of simply defending his disciples for not washing their hands Jesus used Isaiah 29:13 (Cf. Mark 7:6-7) to expose the hypocrisy and legalism of these religious traditionalists.

Hypocrisy is the lip-service of a disinterested heart. Hypocrites wear a mask of religion to cover their lack of true piety. The great danger of religiosity is that one can go through the motions – attempting to placate God with tithes, sacraments, church attendance, Christian schooling, fancy clothes, and conservative slogans – while wandering far from him. Calvin put it well: "Nothing pleases [God] that is not accompanied by the inward sincerity of heart." God calls hypocrites to de-mask by confessing their sins to God and others. Confession shows that we agree with God about what he sees behind our masks.

Legalism is "teaching "as doctrines

the commandments of men" (v. 7). Legalism makes human tradition weightier than God's word. Legalists require what God does not require or forbid what God does not forbid. Once man-made laws become a tradition, we have a hard time distinguishing them from God's will. Legalism can actually keep us from obeying God by focusing attention more on our rules than on him. With such a mindset it is possible to develop an ethic that strains out gnats and swallows camels (Matt. 23:24).

The absurdity of Traditionalism

Here's why "tradition keeping" is never the same as a true friendship with God: Defilement comes from within not from without (Mark 7:14-23). Anyone can go through religious motions. But if we are unclean inside, all our traditions are a total waste.

Jesus gets to the heart of defilement by listing thirteen sins that flow from the heart, thirteen hammers that smash the idol of traditionalism: "evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness" (Mark 7:21-22). Jesus' closing argument against traditionalism is stunning; clearly unrinsed hands are the least of anyone's problems. Traditionalism can in no way purify our sinful hearts.

The good news is that real purity is

not only possible but promised by God in Christ. In his very next passage Mark tells about a woman whose daughter had an "unclean" spirit (Mark 7:24-30). This family was made clean, not by conforming to secular or religious traditions, but by a living, self-emptying faith in Jesus Christ.

The Bible nowhere condemns tradition *per se*. Traditions can broaden and deepen our Christian experience. They can stabilize us, keeping us from making crazy mistakes on a whim. But misplaced love of tradition can also blind us from God's will, keeping us from exploring alternatives to our well-worn paths. Trust in tradition will lead us away from refreshing, renewing life in Christ. On the other hand, a right use of tradition can help us believe God's promise: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Is. 1:18).

Mr William Boekestein pastors Immanuel Fellowship Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan and is the author of several books including Bible Studies on Mark (Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 2016), from which this article is adapted.

Used by permission. Also appeared in The Christward Collective, September 2016

The Rev. Dirk Poppe, minister of the Free Reformed Church of Southern River, in Perth, Western Australia, spoke to a gathering of members (and visitors) in the Reformed Church of Silverstream on September 28.

Mr Poppe and Mr Archbald had organised a long-distance pulpit swap to further the new sister-church relationship.

Mr Poppe, originally from the Canadian Reformed Churches, was called to the Southern River congregation three years ago. He spoke about the history of the FRCA up to the present day, and what life is like in their congregations. At the end of his talk he warmly invited those present to come to Perth and worship with them in the future.

Ed.



“Then God said, “Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens.”

Genesis 1:20



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