

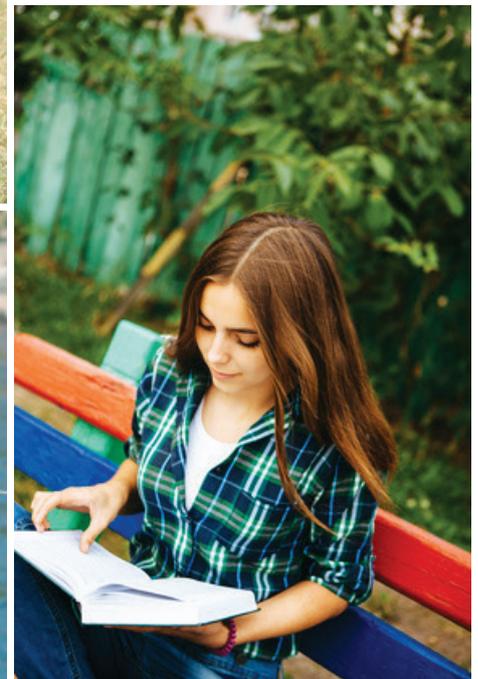
faith in focus

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Reformed Churches
of New Zealand

Volume 44/11 December 2017



Leisure and the Christian



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Editorial

You may think that having articles about leisure is a bit unusual. Do we don't have the wrong idea about leisure or a wrong approach to it? Well, that all depends on what you think leisure is about.

Much of the advertising about leisurely pursuits emphasises what I would call the ME-factor. It is about my enjoyment, my well-being, my pursuit for fulfilment, my way of enjoying my life, etc. In some cases, it involves the purchase of some very expensive toys.

Another aspect of the pursuit of leisure is that it can be more important than our vocation. Work is what we do so that we can have our leisure time, our weekend etc. I remember that in the years of my unbelief, I too lived for the weekend in hot pursuit of all the important pastimes, such as sport, motor vehicles, surfing, diving, the list could go on.

So, the Christian has a better view of leisure, right? I would certainly like to think so. Some time ago, my wife and I went walking up the Rimutaka Incline (Featherston side) with some Christian friends. Not only was it a blessed time of fellowship, encouraging one another in the faith, but it was also an opportunity to observe the majesty of the LORD's work in our surroundings, supplemented with beautiful sunny weather and clean air – it was all quite therapeutic.

The opportunity for us to do other things besides our regular work and enjoy the LORD's blessings and good gifts is indeed good for the soul. It is an opportunity for further thankfulness and an acknowledgement of His goodness and mercy to us. There are just so many ways we may enjoy our leisure, but not apart from our LORD. He has graciously provided opportunities for our leisure which is for our well-being, both physically and spiritually, and so it is important to make good choices as to how we engage in that leisure and not misuse what the Lord give us.

Our contributors provide biblical, practical and personal viewpoints on this matter.

Mr John Haverland puts leisure in perspective.

Mr Michael Willemse writes about leisure as an end in itself.

Mr and Mrs Hoyt share their love of reading for leisure.

Mrs Sally Davey introduces a book written by U.S. Senator Benn Sasse.

Letters from New Zealand looks at what's in a name.

Mrs Jenny Waldron reflects on the subject of adoption.

Christmas 2017 meditation – The beginning of the marriage of the Lamb.

Crossroads Bible Institute provide an update on prison ministry.

Mr Mitchell Ramkisson reflects on the cheerful giver.

Mr Wes Bredenhof looks at the slipperiness of words.

Mr Peter Barnes asserts that the plain truth is what is needed.

On behalf of the National Publication Committee, I would like to extend seasons greetings to you all. May the LORD bless you and keep you all into the year of our LORD 2018 and beyond.

The opinions expressed in this magazine are not to be considered the official position of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand 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 New Zealand. 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.

NB: In line with common publishing practice *Faith in Focus* reserves the right to publish the names of all contributors with their articles, unless compelling reasons are given to the editor for not doing so. This applies to both print and online versions.

Leisure — a biblical perspective

John A Haverland

Protestant Christians are more comfortable talking and writing about work than leisure. *Faith in Focus* has produced a couple of issues on vocation and work but, as far as I can remember, this is the first time an issue has appeared on leisure. As Calvinists we feel uncomfortable with taking time off, guilty about going on a cruise, or sitting quietly reading a book, or just relaxing and doing nothing!

M Weber wrote a book titled, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.¹ He argued that there was a connection between the rise of capitalism and the values of Protestantism such as self-discipline, hard work, the careful use of time, honesty, and faith in the rewards of a just God. His book has provoked a great deal of discussion on this subject. As Calvinists we find support for his thesis in the proverbs that condemn the sluggard and urge him to take a lesson from the active ant (Proverbs 6:6ff; 13:4; 19:24; 22:13; 24:30ff). We support the “protestant work ethic”. We don’t want to be like the lazy man who turns on his bed “as a door turns on its hinges” (Pr 26:14)!

What does the Bible say about leisure? In this opening article I want to answer this question by considering its misuse and its right use. The articles that follow will examine specific leisure activities.

The misuse of leisure

It is not difficult to find examples of a misuse of leisure. Sometimes people will talk about their ‘me-time’, which may be shorthand for self-centered indulgence. L’Oreal products are advertised with the slogan, “Because you’re worth it”! The rich fool in the parable Jesus told said to himself, “You have plenty of good things

laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat drink and be merry.” But that very night God took his life. Jesus warned, “This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich towards God” (Luke 12:21). “God pronounces this leisure enthusiast a fool for his complacent and worldly minded hedonism.”²

In the Bible pleasure seeking is often associated with evil. The apostle Paul warned that in the last days “people



will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful ... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Tim 3:4). He described how, before their conversion, the Christians in Crete were “deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures” (Titus 3:3). The writer of Hebrews commended Moses in Egypt who “chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than enjoy the pleasures of sin

“The purpose of recreation is a re-creation, that is, to restore a person to an earlier condition. Leisure therefore has its reference point in God’s creation: God created us in his image — spiritual, rational, volitional, and emotional. Our leisure helps us in all these areas. We need to use our leisure for our overall well being. How this works out will be different for every person.”

for a short time” (Heb 11:25).

All through history leisure has often degenerated into sexual immorality and debauchery (Gal 5:19f). Solomon pursued a life of pleasure but found it empty (Eccl 2:1-12). Amos condemned the people of Israel for their wining and dining and strumming on their harps, while being oblivious to their poor spiritual state and failing to “grieve over the ruin of Joseph” (Amos 6:4-6).

Leland Ryken has written a very interesting book on this entire subject titled, *Redeeming the Time: A Christian Approach to Work and Leisure*. I recommend it to you for further reading. In it he provides a sobering historical and contemporary reflection on the abuse of leisure in the Roman Empire. “At one point the city of Rome had 800 public baths... The Circus Maximus, the largest arena for chariot racing, accommodated 385,000 spectators Leisure became a means of entertaining and distracting the potentially revolutionary masses. Leisure thus became ‘bread and circuses’ for the masses Here is an early example of a perversion of leisure that is with us today: mass consumption of morally degrading or trivial activities by the masses with modest means, and luxurious self-indulgence by the wealthy minority. This may, in fact, be the dominant feature on the leisure scene today.”³

Leisure time can be very selfish. Men can spend too much of their leisure time absorbed in their own activities rather than spending time with their wife and children. All of us can spend an inordinate amount of money on our leisure, recreation and holidays when there are great needs and opportunities of service in the church and kingdom of Christ. I don’t have a formula for making decisions about these matters but I raise these points for your consideration and reflection. Choosing our leisure activities involves moral choices and must be guided by the principles and commands of the Bible.

With all this misuse of leisure is there a biblical justification for rest and relaxation? Is there a Christian view and use of leisure? I believe there is.

A Sabbath rest

In the fourth commandment we are given this instruction: “Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work” (Ex 20:8ff) The command for a Sabbath rest is based on the pattern that God worked

for six days and rested on the seventh day; “Therefore God blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Ex 20:11; Gen 2:2-3). He rested on the seventh day to enjoy what he had made, to delight in his work, to celebrate his creation. God made the Sabbath day for our rest and refreshment. Our use of it is to be modelled on his; “and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed” (Ex 31:14-17, ESV). On the New Testament Sabbath, the Lord’s Day, we may enjoy what God has made and what we have completed, we delight in his work and ours, and we celebrate his good and beautiful creation. This sets a biblical rhythm of work and leisure.

It is worth considering the proportions God assigned to work and rest; six days of labour and *one* of rest. This indicates that more of our time ought to be devoted to working than to resting and other leisure activities. John Calvin observed that our hearts are idol factories – we can make an idol out of anything and everything. Many men make their work or job an idol; they worship it seven days a week. At the opposite extreme it is possible to make leisure an idol. This is less common but is equally sinful. God has commanded us to work and rest. We are to work more than we rest, but both are important and necessary.

The Sabbath was commanded so we can remember God’s great acts of deliverance through Christ and praise him (Deut 5:12ff; Heb 10:25). This rest is a foretaste of our eternal rest, which will be filled with the worship of God. Joy and festivity characterise the biblical descriptions of the heavenly kingdom (Zech 8:5; Jer 30:18-19; 31:4,13-14). Unbelievers will not enter heaven, and would not enjoy it anyway, because it will involve continuous worship of our triune God. If you have not loved to worship God with his people in this life, you will not enjoy worshipping him in the life to come.

Worshipping the Lord on the Lord’s Day helps maintain a God-centred focus for our lives, including our leisure. Biblical rest is more than the absence of work; it involves physical, spiritual and emotional refreshment. We need to use this day for rest and worship. It is possible to overdo certain activities on this day, either physically or socially, so that we are drained and exhausted at the end of it and we begin the working week on the back foot. Let’s use the Lord’s Day wisely and well.

Holy days and holidays

In the Old Testament the people of Israel were commanded to celebrate a number of feasts and festivals that recalled and/or highlighted God's great acts of redemption, and extended the pattern of Sabbath rest to the land and to the nation of Israel. The major festivals were, in calendar order: the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) and the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles or Ingathering).

These feasts and festivals are evidence that God commanded the people of Israel to take more extended times of rest and celebration in addition to the weekly Sabbath. During the week of the Feast of Unleavened Bread the people did not do any work except for the preparation of food. The Feast of Weeks (Pentecost) took place on the day after the Sabbath. It was a day of sacred assembly in which no work was allowed. The primary focus of the festival was gratitude to God for the harvest. The Feast of the New Moon was held on the first day of every lunar month. It was observed with the blowing of trumpets and a special sacrifice and was a day of rest and of worship (Num 10:10; 28:11-15). The Feast of Booths lasted for seven days and remembered the 40 years Israel had wandered in the desert and had lived in tents. For these seven days the people of Israel lived in huts made from palm fronds and leafy tree branches (Numbers 29:12-40; Lev 23:43).⁴

All of these have been fulfilled by the Lord Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection "so that the use of them ought to be abolished among Christians. Yet their truth and substance remain for us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have been fulfilled."⁵ The days of rest commanded for the people of Israel give evidence that we too need more extended times

of rest and relaxation from our work. We need holy days – holidays.

Resting every day

As I am writing this article I am also finalising four talks I will give in Albany, Western Australia, at a ministers and wives conference of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia. I have been asked to speak on *Longevity in Ministry*. In order to continue fruitfully as preachers and pastors we need to take adequate times of rest. If we don't, we will burn out. 20% of resignations from the pastoral ministry are due to burnout. In my talks I will be emphasising the importance of sleep.

God has commanded and endorsed rest from our work and has set this as a pattern for our lives. He rested at the end of each day; he saw that his work was good and was satisfied with what he had done; "And there was evening and there was morning," another day. God has created us so that we need to sleep each day for the good of our bodies, emotions and mind. Studies have shown that a person needs between seven and nine hours of sleep each night and that sleep has a healing effect on the body and the mind. Sleep is one of the most important forms of rest, maybe the ultimate leisure activity!

Conclusion

In his famous book *The Screwtape Letters* C S Lewis wrote that "man can neither make, nor retain, one moment of time; it all comes to him by pure gift." He also made the point that a Christian is "in theory, committed to a total service" of God.⁶ This has implications for our use of our time. Elsewhere Lewis wrote, "Our leisure, even our play, is a matter of serious concern. There is no neutral ground in the universe; every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan. ...It

is a serious matter to choose wholesome recreations."⁷

The purpose of recreation is a re-creation, that is, to restore a person to an earlier condition. Leisure therefore has its reference point in God's creation: God created us in his image – spiritual, rational, volitional, and emotional. Our leisure helps us in all these areas. We need to use our leisure for our overall well being. How this works out will be different for every person. If you do a very physical job you may want to use your leisure time more quietly; if you do a sedentary job you may want to use your leisure time more actively (I enjoy walking and woodwork as leisure activities). Somewhere between work and leisure there is a category of semi-leisure, that is, activities that are necessary but have some of the positive qualities of leisure, such as cooking, gardening and renovating.

Ryken gives us helpful guidance when he writes, "In our leisure lives we can pursue excellence in our stewardship of time, our experiences of beauty, our physical and emotional health, our minds and imaginations, and care of the earth."⁸ Work makes us want to rest, and rest refreshes us for our work. Let's do both in obedience to God's command and for his glory.

Notes

- 1 Weber, M. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (translated by Talcott Parsons). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958 (originally published as two separate essays, 1904-1905).
- 2 Leland Ryken, *Redeeming the Time: A Christian Approach to Work and Leisure* (Baker Books, 1995) p.187
- 3 Ryken. p.87
- 4 Walter A Elwell, *Entry for Feasts and Festivals of Israel*, Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, 1997.
- 5 Belgic Confession, Art.25
- 6 C S Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, chapter 21, p.107
- 7 CS Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, p.33-34
- 8 Ryken, p.225

God has commanded and endorsed rest from our work and has set this as a pattern for our lives. He rested at the end of each day; he saw that his work was good and was satisfied with what he had done; "And there was evening and there was morning," another day.

Lost in leisure

Michael Willemse

Even a cursory review of the last century reveals huge changes in our way of life in the West. Those who lived a hundred years ago would be hard pressed to understand just how entertainment and leisure have come to dominate our thinking and our lives. Those who lived even fifty years ago would be amazed at the vast array of entertainment choices on offer today and mystified by a generation which is never unplugged. An extended period of peace after two devastating world wars produced a generation determined to ensure that their children would not have to suffer or go without as they had. Succeeding generations developed a sense of entitlement and had

sufficient disposable income (or access to credit!) to indulge their desires. And so, in just a few generations, we have moved from a society which viewed work as a calling to one which is consumed with leisure. This shift in thinking shows itself in a number of common attitudes to leisure. Each offers a helpful pointer to a God-given purpose in leisure when pursued properly.

Leisure as me-time

Where once leisure time was largely social – a time to reconnect with family and friends – today many leisure activities are individually focussed and tend to isolate. People will relax by playing a computer or video game, donning headphones and listening to / watching

the music of their choice, spend hours watching YouTube clips or watching a movie on their “personal device”, or diving into social media to catch up on the latest goss – and they can do all of these without even getting out of bed! Even when sharing an activity with others, their attention is often diverted by snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, text, email etc. Relaxing with others is often an individual pursuit! The result of leisure when viewed as me-time is that, despite being the most plugged-in, connected and accessible generation ever, many people have never felt more alone, isolated and empty.

It is interesting to note that the believers in the book of Acts, many of whom were slaves working six or even seven days a week, used their “spare” time (early morning or late evening) to meet together, share meals and encourage each other (Acts 2:42-47). In fact, virtually all of the “one another” commands in the New Testament can only be pursued in discretionary, leisure time – often in the context of showing or receiving hospitality. Clearly, although there is a place for alone time, it is God’s intention that we use our leisure time to build and enjoy a relationship with him (remember his habit of walking with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day after the work was done? Genesis 3:8) and with others.

Leisure as the goal

A slogan which is often bandied around in our day is “working for the weekend.” It betrays a view of work as a necessary evil and as a way of earning sufficient income to do the things we really want to do. Leisure is no longer viewed as a way to rest and recharge in order to be useful and productive. Instead it becomes the goal, the thing we are living for. Only when at leisure do people really feel alive.

The result of this is that our leisure pursuits reinforce a sense of resent-



ment about our work and often leave us drained instead of energised. Use of sick leave skyrockets after the weekend because people are either unable or unwilling to return to work. Many people return to work in order to rest after their intense leisure activities!

From creation, God established a regular rhythm to life which alternates between work and rest (Exodus 20:8-11). Part of that pattern is taking pleasure in the fruits of his labours and ours, enjoying the results of our work. Leisure is intended to help us be thankful for our work and the God who gave it and blesses it. When used well, our leisure enables us to return to work refreshed, invigorated, thankful and eager to take it up again.

Leisure as escape

Another way that many view leisure is as a means of escape. They see it as a way to block out the ordinariness and emptiness of their lives. For a while they can immerse themselves in another world and escape the disappointments, fears and challenges of life in a sin-scarred world. It is not for nothing that Marvel and DC pump out movie after movie (Marvel speaks of life in “the Marvel Universe”) along with countless TV spinoffs bringing to life comic book heroes and these are lapped up by the public. The more the news is filled with terrorist attacks, mass shootings, escalating international tensions, genocide and natural disasters, the more our appetite for escapist entertainment grows. Similarly, people can turn to drink or drugs to anaesthetise themselves to the oppressiveness and misery that they see themselves as powerless to change (e.g. Proverbs 31:6-7).

While there can be a place for setting aside the challenges of our world and of our own lives for a while, ours is an age which seeks to fill every part of our lives with white noise in order to never have to consider where our lives are headed. In God’s economy, leisure time is intended to give us time for contemplation – time to consider tensions in our relationships, hurtful things we may have said or done, life choices we have made and the results we are reaping. It is in leisure time that we can give thought to our souls. It is often in leisure time that our character is formed and life-changing choices are made – but only if we make a habit of unplugging, switching off and allowing time for contemplation. Socrates said “the unexamined life is not

worth living” but sadly many people use leisure and entertainment to live exactly such a life!

Leisure as excuse for irresponsibility

An expression many of us have heard increasingly in recent time is something like “he works hard and he plays hard.” Often this is used to excuse over the top behaviour during leisure time such as drinking in excess, drug use or permissive sexual behaviour. The rationale is that someone who puts in excessive hours at work is entitled to cut loose outside of work. Playing hard is almost portrayed as a virtue. “They are always carrying such responsibility and under so much pressure that they’re entitled to let their hair down and let it all hang out now and then.” Though, as Christians, I trust we would not hold such an extreme view, we can still view “playing hard” as a right and make excuses to duck our responsibilities at home or at church in order to unwind.

In previous generations, leisure time was often viewed as an opportunity to invest in ourselves: to read good literature, to grow in knowledge and education, to learn a new skill, to prepare for greater usefulness in Christian service or a more responsible job. Thoughtful use of leisure time contributed to our growth as people. American inventor, George Eastman, said “What we do during our working hours determines what we have; what we do in our leisure hours determines what we are.” God is invested in forming godly men and women – an argument can be made that he is more interested in what we are than in what we do (Galatians 4:19-20.)

Leisure as obsession

One feature of our modern world is the passion with which many people pursue their leisure activities – whether it be a rigorous exercise regime, involvement in their favourite sport (e.g. sailing, golf) or leisure activity (e.g. fishing, boating, skiing), or following their favourite rugby team. Many folk will invest huge amounts of time, effort and money pursuing these things and, when speaking of them will light up with enthusiasm. This attitude to leisure was epitomised in an advertisement for Aussie Football League (AFL) which we saw while living in Australia. The ad began with the camera taking viewers down an empty, darkened players’ tunnel. As it emerged into the lighted stadium (also empty), the voiceover said in reverent tones “This

“From creation, God established a regular rhythm to life which alternates between work and rest (Exodus 20:8-11). Part of that pattern is taking pleasure in the fruits of his labours and ours, enjoying the results of our work.”

“Leisure is intended to help us be thankful for our work and the God who gave it and blesses it. When used well, our leisure enables us to return to work freshed, invigorated, thankful and eager to take it up again.”

is my church. This is where I come to worship.” For many people this is an accurate reflection of their attitude – the reverence and awe once reserved for the almighty, creator God is now given to sports stars, singers, movie stars and leisure activities.

Our leisure begins, as Rev. Haverland points out in the opening article, with God’s invitation to us to step back from our work in order to enjoy his work. It is an opportunity to take in his splendour and glory in all that he has made, to remember that “he’s got the whole world in his hands,” that we are dependent on him and not the other way around. It is a call to explore and enjoy the world that he has made and so to glorify and enjoy him.

Conclusion

I hope that it is clear from this short article that leisure is a good gift of God. It is something to be used for our good and his glory. I’d like to close by suggesting some questions to help us consider how well we are using our leisure time. Here are a few to chew on:

- Is my use of leisure time helping me to (re)connect with God and with others or is it isolating me from them?

- Does it enable me to return to my work rested, reinvigorated and ready to continue or does it make me resent my work and undermine my productivity?
- Am I allowing time to think about the big picture and considering where I need to repent, seek forgiveness, change and grow or am I trying to avoid these things?
- Am I investing in myself through my leisure activities, seeking to be more useful to God and to others? Is my use of leisure making me a better (i.e. a more Christlike) person?
- Am I using my leisure time to enter into God’s rest so that it increases my consciousness of his presence, my wonder at his deeds and my awe of him or am I worshipping something or someone else?

All of these questions could perhaps be summed up in one “does my use of leisure time bring me closer to God?” May God grant that we become not only a people who work with purpose but whose leisure leads them deeper into enjoyment of him.

Mr Michael Willemse is the minister in the Reformed Church of Hamilton.

Leisure and the Christian

Family reading – much more than leisure

Bruce and Lois Hoyt

From the beginning of our marriage we have not had a TV in our home. We considered it provided too much temptation to waste time, while we preferred reading as both more productive and more enjoyable. And after reflecting on many years of family life without TV we have been thankful for the benefits to our family, now grown and with families of their own, that has come from a

wide-ranging diet of reading.

What have we read, and how have we done it as a family? In the following paragraphs we will highlight only the reading we have done together, not individual reading.

It was shortly after Laurel, our first, was born that we became members of a Reformed church. We began to read Reformed works to increase our knowledge of the faith and of God’s word. I remember reading D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones’

Sermon on the Mount aloud to Lois while the baby slept. It was a challenging choice for our first read-aloud book (Lois claims she can’t remember it!), but it did help us understand Jesus’ teaching regarding the Law of God. I continued to read Reformed books aloud to Lois during our early years of marriage but interspersed these with Christian biography which was easier going.

As Laurel began to understand more and more words and appreciate picture

books, we enjoyed reading aloud to her. Two years later the family reading included Berwyn. Then after two more years ... The family reading circle kept growing.

We read Bible story books. We read the Bible. We read Dr. Seuss. We read whatever good children's literature we could find in the local library.

When did we find time to do all this reading? After dinner in the evening – remember, no TV, and of course no cell phones or tablets or DVDs in those days! Lois read to the children during the day while I was working or studying at seminary, and – the best day of all – we read Sunday afternoons. What better way to glorify God and enjoy Him than to read of His words and works each Sunday. When the demands of the ministry made reading on Sunday afternoon difficult for me, I began to read to the family Sunday evenings for an hour or more. Since Monday was my selected 'day off', I also read on Monday evenings.

They were great times! At least I thought so, and I think our children would confirm that. Here is a small sampling from a variety of genres.

- missionary stories (*Peace Child*, *No Graven Image*)
- classic children's literature (*Tom Sawyer*, *Oliver Twist*)
- a few novels (*The Yearling*)
- a few sci-fi (*A Wrinkle in Time*, *Starship Troopers* – not the movie, it's rubbish)
- and of course Lewis's tales of Narnia, his 'space trilogy' and Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy

These were times of family bonding. The books were shared experiences that gave opportunities for questions and discussion of values, concepts, and worldviews. Our values were conveyed to our children, and they mulled them over and incorporated them into their own thinking as they matured.

The evenings were times of quiet wind-down for the family before retiring. Those hours of reading together promoted peaceful reflection and maturation of thought in all of our children as they entered into the lives and thinking of a wide diversity of people and cultures through the amazing world of books.

Holidays and travel time (in the days before 'everyone' was plugged into his own device to while away the boredom) provided additional opportunities. We well remember the camping trip during

a term break when some of our boys were at university. The evenings were dark and cold, so we snuggled in the tent and read the first two *Harry Potter* books. It gave insight into what many others were enjoying (or not); certainly we all profited from sharing our observations. After two of those we were ready for a change!

But what do we do now that our children are all grown and departed? These days I usually read while Lois does the dishes, and we continue our habit of reading when we travel in the car. Our selections have changed as we continue to view a panorama of life experiences and perspectives – we learn so much more than we can experience in our limited lives. Here are examples from each of several more categories.



- biographies (*Bonhoeffer*)
- autobiographies of those who have become Christians out of unusual backgrounds or in unusual ways (*The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert* by Rosaria Butterfield)
- understanding of disabilities (*The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* by Oliver Sacks)
- culture (*Country Driving* and *Mao's Last Dancer*, both about China in the last decades)
- politics plus (*The Politically Incorrect Guide to Science* by Tom Bethell)

That last one is a must-read if you want to know something about what goes on behind the scenes when it comes to the hot social and political bandwagons. This one provided lots of stimulus to think through issues and facts – and

to discuss together the validity of what we were reading.

Where do we get ideas for good books to read aloud? First of all, we draw on recommendations by relatives and friends who are more well-read than we are. Or we read suggestions in sources we respect, including *Faith in Focus* book reviews.

Church librarians are another good source of information. One of the best books we have read recently was *Surprised by Oxford* from the Dovedale church library – no easy read for two people without a background in English literature – but it was a welcome education during a period of extended travel as we followed the author on her

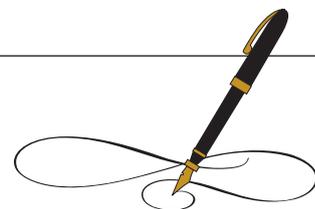
journey from unbelief to Christianity.

Just start asking around. Then let us know some of the books you would recommend! We may add them to our list.

Mr and Mrs Hoyt are members of the Reformed Church of Dovedale. Mr Hoyt is an emeritus minister.

Outward focus

Sally Davey



The Senator speaks

When I heard that a Reformed Christian man was being spoken of as a rising star in the American Senate, I pricked up my ears. I was even more intrigued when I learned of the respect he earned during last year's presidential campaign. He was an independent mind, a Republican willing to call out his party's candidate, which he continued to do even after that candidate was elected and inaugurated as President. I wanted to know more about him, especially when I heard he had written a book highly praised by Christian and secular reviewers alike.

Ben Sasse, a Senator from Nebraska, is a man with an interesting background. He has a German heritage, with an evangelical Lutheran upbringing. He has served as an elder in the United Reformed Church in California; and is now a member of a PCA church in Fremont, Nebraska. Early in his life, he won a wrestling scholarship to Harvard, where he studied before going on to Oxford and then completing a PhD in history at Yale. Following that, he worked in various departments of the federal government, served as executive director of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, an organisation which runs conferences and disseminates Reformed teaching materials; meaning he has worked with men like David Wells, Michael Horton, and R.C. Sproul. Subsequent to that he served for five years as President of Midland College in Nebraska before running suc-

cessfully for the Senate in 2014.

So, what sort of book would a man like this write? It is, as you would guess from his interest in education, a book that explores the way American young people are brought up and educated. Its title gives some clues: *The Vanishing American Adult: Our Coming-of-Age Crisis – and How to Rebuild a Culture of Self-Reliance*. Basically, it is about the problem of delayed adolescence, of young people living lives of sheltered passivity and refusing to grow up. If you have read Kevin DeYoung's *Just Do Something!* you will recognise the problem. Sasse, who together with his wife home-schools his three children, is interested in how best to raise independent, hard-working future citizens who will ensure the ongoing health of American democracy. He is not a zealous home-schooler, simply a parent who finds the flexibility suits his family's weekly commute between Washington and Nebraska. But he has some interesting things to say about secondary schooling as the way to train teenagers.

Sasse first asks how Americans got to the point where so many young people are so passive, so protected from challenge that they are unable to cope with adversity or adapt to changing circumstances. He adds that this is a big problem in a post-industrial society where adults often have to switch jobs or even careers with increasing frequency. There are five factors leading to this

situation, he believes:

First, in an age of great material surplus (regardless of the ongoing effects of the global financial crisis of 2008), young Americans have more ability to buy the comforts of life than any previous generation. Secondly, young people no longer know how to work diligently – and be productive. Living in age-segregated environments, they are less aware of their parents' and grandparents' work ethic than those generations who were with their parents when they worked. The digital world enables them to be "present" more with their peers than with their families, often. Thirdly, families have long been precarious, even falling apart, and this has huge consequences given that a stable home life is crucial for learning how to function as a responsible, adult citizen. Fourth, schooling, compulsory and near-universal since the 1940s, has meant that educational institutions have replaced the workplace and other multi-generational environments as the setting in which coming of age occurs. In addition, the removal of any religious content from schooling has emptied it of character training and even destroyed consensus as to what kinds of citizens we are aiming for. Pressure to conform to peer thinking has filled the resultant vacuum. Fifthly and finally, Sasse writes, "culture wars" over where America is headed as a society and the inability of everyone to agree on a direction permitted "popular culture and the trivial

to substitute as the basis of our shared experience.” (p. 21).

Without putting all the blame on the public secondary school system, Sasse nevertheless believes that these schools bear, since the middle of the twentieth century, much of the responsibility for creating the passive young people who fill the millennial – or even, more generally - the post-baby boom generations. What drove them in this direction was the all-pervasive influence of John Dewey’s educational, social and political ideas. He was a pragmatist philosophically, and viewed schooling as something fundamentally non-ideological. Against what Sasse calls “realists” like Augustine, who knew human nature to be flawed and in need of re-creation, or “romantics” like Rousseau, who had high aspirations for the capabilities of human beings if only trained correctly, Dewey simply wanted to help children adapt to the needs of their environment. He wanted attention taken away from literacy and the transmission of ideas, and towards the acquiring of useful practical skills. He also saw the school as the centre of the world for children – replacing their parents as the great enculturating influence in their lives. What we know as technical education, vocational education, education aimed at preparing children for adult life with a wide range of skills – all this can be traced back to John Dewey. His influence throughout the western world has been profound. Nevertheless, it has resulted in teenagers wasting a great deal of their time in secondary school, supposedly learning everything from bookkeeping to basket-weaving, but missing out on all that is important for making them conscious, responsible citizens who know whence they have come and whither they are going.

So, what does Sasse propose that parents do about this problem? How do they winkle their children away from their glowing screens and prod them into becoming mentally engaged, idea-debating, energetic future citizens? He has a plan, which he offers in five chapters – one major suggestion at a time.

First, he thinks parents would do well to make sure their children spend plenty of time around a range of generations. They should hear about life from their grandparents and their grandparents’ contemporaries. They should see their parents at work whenever possible (Sasse actually takes his small son with him to sit on the sidelines of Senate commit-

tee meetings). They should be taken to rest homes and maternity hospitals when their parents visit. They should be encouraged to experience farm life (his daughter worked on a cattle ranch at age 14), to understand where their food comes from, and to see more of birth and death as well.

Secondly, he urges that kids learn a proper work ethic, especially from earlier generations who worked harder, endured more in their work, and who knew what it meant to defer gratification by putting work, and earning money, before pleasure. Sasse has experienced, first-hand as an employer, what the lack of serious commitment to work responsibilities looks like in even talented young people, and how it limits their opportunities.



Thirdly, he emphasizes that it’s really important to consume less: “Our young are more insulated from necessity, from the need to work hard, from the obligations not to consume more than they produce than any large community ever. Because we are the richest people the world has ever known, our children know few limits. As a result, they breathe the air of a culture that has transformed what used to be ‘wants’ into norms and therefore ‘needs’...” (p. 151). Young people (perhaps in a casual way) have come to believe that capitalism means consumerism, and that getting and spending is the only way of life there is. Sasse advocates saying “no” to your children much more often than “yes”.

Fourthly, he encourages travel – not

Senator Ben Sasse, from Nebraska, being sworn into office by Vice President Joe Biden.

just travel as a pleasurable leisure activity – but travel to see, experience and learn about how the rest of the world thinks and lives. This, in turn, will provide valuable perspective on our own culture. It helps us see our own lives through better lenses – our trials become more trivial, our gratitude for what we have more sincere. It gives us much more compassion for those who have seen troubles, distress and hardship way, way beyond anything that is ever likely to befall us. It takes us right out of our tiny, safe little cocoons.

And finally, Sasse recommends the development of a wisely-chosen collection of important books. Books about the big ideas of life, books that help us become wiser, better-informed citizens. Books that are worth many re-readings; and with which we may grapple and argue throughout our lives. Sasse thinks the choice of a teenager’s bookshelf should not be left entirely to him or his schoolteachers – parents should advise, recommend books, and read them with their young people in order to set debate going about what a good book consists of, and to demonstrate how we should read and interact with it.

It seems to me that these suggestions are all good ones. Sasse is hoping to further the discussion about these things in wider American society: though he is a Christian, and a serious, thinking one, he is not trying to share the gospel in this book, except in a general, let’s start asking questions about life, sense. Nevertheless, much of what he says applies to New Zealand as well, since we are part of western culture and share many

of the same problems. Sasse’s suggestions even apply to some of us in our own church culture. What could we learn and apply?

Probably, as Christians in our particular church environment, we have plenty of multi-generational interaction. We have every age group present at church – we do not have separate services for older people, young families or students, for instance. Furthermore, the youth group frequently cares for older members; and young people assist in the Sunday crèche. Neither are we, of Dutch (and other) heritages, shy of work. For the most part, parents are active in teaching their children about hard work and productivity. Many of us are thrifty, and do not encourage (or allow) teenagers to become big spenders. Deferred gratification is not foreign to most in our churches. So far, the Scriptures are moulding us in good ways.

On a couple of scores, though, we probably have something to learn from Sasse. Many of us travel, as New Zealanders in general do. But how much do we travel in order to be changed by it? Is it merely for pleasure, to see some nice scenery, or to visit relatives? How many of us, as young people, particularly, travel in order to learn about where our culture has come from? Or to see sites where some world-changing events occurred, or where great tragedies happened? And if we do, have we spent time researching these events or tragedies, so that we can better appreciate what we see and experience when we go there? A few years ago, one of my sisters visited Crete with her

husband. They wanted to see Maleme airfield, where her husband’s father had been taken prisoner by the German paratroopers who invaded the island in May 1941. They passed by the graves of the large numbers who had died there, and seeing the ages – 21, 24, 26 – hit her hard, when she thought of her own two sons, then the very same ages. This is the kind of travel we need to do, to realise in a personal way what others experience.

We also need to read more. To read, not just for entertainment, or even to find quick Christian answers to some of life’s worries; but to read for insight into our world and into human nature. How many of us have grappled with great books like Augustine’s *Confessions*, or a novel like Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*? How many of us have learned about the twentieth century through histories like Timothy Snyder’s *Bloodlands*¹ or in absorbing biographies like William Manchester’s life of Churchill, *The Last Lion*? There is a big and complex world out there to learn about, and reading truly significant books is an excellent way to start.

Are you a parent of small children? Do you hope that one day your teenagers will be interesting, well-informed and useful citizens – as well as godly Christians? Read Ben Sasse’s book *now*, then.

Note

¹ Timothy Snyder’s *Bloodlands* (Vintage/Penguin, 2015) chronicles the terrible suffering endured by eastern Europeans during the middle of the twentieth century at the hands of both Stalin and Hitler.

Letters from New Zealand

D. G. Vanderpyl

June 1978

Leafing through one of the latest issues of the Presbyterian Guardian, the denominational magazine of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in North America, I could not help but smile when I came across an article which so accurately identified a problem similar to what we have in our churches here in New Zealand, and I would imagine, in Australia too.

This particular writer felt that his church, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church is in “quarantine” simply because of the adjective “Orthodox” in her name. He even compared it with those signs on the door many decades ago, when the home had to be shunned because of an outbreak of measles or chickenpox. He felt that the name “Orthodox” has that same effect on the people they are trying to reach. According to him, “orthodox” is associated, in peoples’ minds,

with the Greek, Russian or some other Eastern Orthodox Churches. The name causes many people to think that the church represents some particular ethnic group in the USA. So, here you are; we think that we have a problem with the name “Reformed” and you find that in the United States some people have a problem with the name “Orthodox.” You just can’t win, can you?

While the Christian schools appear to flourish in Australia, here in New

Zealand we are having a hard time getting even one off the ground. Time and again, year after year, attempts have been made to get a Christian school established in the Auckland area. For the last few years we possess an Auckland Christian School Trust. We have a plot of land in South Auckland. We even have a school plan on the drawing board, but when applications are made to local authorities, almost insurmountable and ridiculous obstacles are placed in our way to prevent the actual event from happening. This is very frustrating and disappointing, to say the least, to all those who are involved. An appeal has been made again for a re-hearing but there is a continuous postponement of the date of the hearing. We ask our brothers and sisters in Australia to pray with us that one day a Christian school or schools may be established here in Auckland, New Zealand.

July

Recently I listened to a taped address by an American missiologist, discussing the cultural problems faced by missionaries as they present the Gospel on the missionfield. He proposed a test to prove that we live in a culture where acceptance of certain norms does not always apply to other cultures elsewhere. In taking this test, he suggested single people, women and those men whose wives are present should be excluded for reasons you will understand later. This then, is the question:

Suppose you are in a canoe with your mother and your wife. The canoe overturns and neither your mother nor your wife can swim. But you can. You can either save the one or the other. Who would you save? In posing that question to cultured Americans, 93% said that they would save their wives while letting their mother go to the bottom. The same question was asked of a group of people in a totally different culture and almost everybody of that community replied that they would save their mother. And the reason? Well, you've only got one mother, but you can always get another wife. You see, in that second culture, the matriarch is more important than the young and replaceable wife.

This year has seen and will see some more silver jubilees here in our churches. Christchurch came first, and I have in my possession a nice 16-page foolscap history of that church. Wybe

Gorter, who authored this piece of history, admits in his conclusion on the last page that he has only been able to observe the things that happened on the surface. "What really happened," he says, "remains hidden, even to the eye of the sharpest inquirer; home visits, visiting the sick, the comforting words of a friend, the sympathising tear, even the cup of water given to the little ones. And," he muses, "were these the things that kept the church going? The little things experienced by many, noticed by nobody, except by Him whose eyes are like a blazing fire and who knows our deeds, our sinfulness and our perseverance?"

Synod 1977, via the Synodical and Correspondence Committee, issued a "Pastoral Letter" to the churches, challenging all the members in our churches to prayerfully examine our lifestyle in the light of our calling to be Christians. The letter stated, "That we are to be mindful of the needs and rights of others; a simpler lifestyle can at least demonstrate that we want to identify with them."

The Wellington church commemorated, on May the 2nd, with a special thanksgiving Order of Worship. I have not received any further information but I presume that they also had a social evening to celebrate the event. With all the above mentioned celebrations, I would like to conclude this letter with the following narration:

When we as a family returned to the Netherlands some years ago for a visit, a niece of mine told me, "When your mother came back from New Zealand after her first visit to you, about 23 years



ago, she told us that she had lived in one of the first congregations of the Acts of the Apostles (in een van de eerste Gemeentes van Christus). They love each other, they share everything with one another; there are no rich and no poor; they are all equal in everything. It was a beautiful experience to live among these new immigrants."

"But," so continued my niece, "when your mother came back from her second visit to New Zealand, a number of years after that first visit, she said that things had changed and were a bit different now; some have become richer than others, they own more possessions now and they quarrel. And they have plenty of committees in the church now."

That story really shook me.

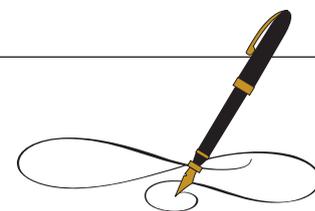
Abridged

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Many thanks to you the readers and those who encourage us on.

On behalf of the *Faith in Focus* team, we wish you all a blessed and safe holiday season, and pray that the Lord will keep you all in His grace in the new year 2018.



ADOPTION – a reason for thankfulness



As you grow up in a family, you see resemblances between family members. When a baby is born, friends and family are looking for “Dad’s nose” or “Grandma’s eyes” or “Uncle Bob’s long piano-playing fingers”. Many years ago we attended our very first family camp at Finlay Park, and when David was introducing me to someone and began to describe our children (who were running around and enjoying meeting new friends), the person stopped him short and said “Oh, yes, we know who your children are. They all look alike!”

Growing up in my family, though, there was/is no resemblance to my parents. I am adopted. I am ½ Maori and my adoptive parents are very fair-skinned, blue-eyed Irish (father) and Scottish (mother). As my four siblings and I are varying shades of brown, strangers would often look at us, look at Mum and Dad, and look back at us, trying to fit the puzzle together (to our great

amusement). As the years passed, we all gained a family resemblance, perhaps not through looks but through our experiences together, our shared family culture and traditions and a real sense of belonging to the Hare family.

Adoption is a legally binding contract where you forsake all rights and privileges of belonging to one family and you take on the legal identity of the new family. Yes, there are physical resemblances to the “birth” family but you take on the attributes of the new. All legal rights have been handed over to the new family. You are not entitled to any inheritance from the birth family. All links to them are severed. You may have contact with the birth family but they have no rights over you.

So, too, when we are born again by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit¹, Jesus becomes our Lord and Saviour and we are adopted into our Heavenly Father’s family. We become an adopted child of God, and because we are adopted by Him, chosen² from before the foundations of the earth, according to His good purpose and will, we belong to Him, body and soul.³ He takes us from our “birth” or “natural” family, which is sinful, and gives us the rights and privileges of an heir of His kingdom. He clothes us with new clothes, and He gives us a new way of living and a new place to live when our physical body dies. Everything is new, pure and washed clean. This is only possible for us because He allowed His only natural Son to take the punishment for our sinfulness, (which we inherited from our “birth” family, down through the genetic line of Adam) so that we could be adopted into His family and enjoy kinship with His Son.

Sadly, so often we hanker after our “birth” family. We find we have more re-

semblance to them than to our adopted family. We identify with our old sinful natures and want to keep doing those things that belong to our “birth” family. It is as if we have not accepted our new birthright but want to keep our bonds with our natural family.

Contact with a “birth” family can be helpful. You can see physical resemblances and mannerisms and the sort of family that you have been taken from. In my case, I have met my birth mother and ½ sister whom I look like, sound quite like and there are other similarities. I have also been doing some research into my birth family’s history and ancestry. The more I find out, the more I am thankful that God pulled me out of that situation and placed me with a Christian couple who were committed to bringing me up in the faith. I can see that God has the bigger picture in mind. Although I struggled with being adopted for many years, and with who I really was, I have come to appreciate the awesomeness of God’s plan for me, in taking me from a non-Christian family and placing me into a Christian one. His plans began before I was conceived! He had already prepared a God-fearing, childless couple who desired to have children, to receive me as their own. They always saw us (my four siblings and I) as special and chosen especially by God, to be in their family, and passed that wonderful legacy onto us.

As we think about our adoption into God’s heavenly family we can be so thankful that He took us from our sinful, totally depraved “birth” family and chose us to be placed into His family. Because He did this for us, we should then be eager to learn about His family history (as revealed to us throughout the Bible). We should embrace our elder brother, Jesus, wholeheartedly and show that we are truly thankful for all that He has done so that we could be a part of

this family. We should want to emulate our new adoptive family culture and traditions. We should want to become more and more like our elder brother, to please our Heavenly Father, to live in the “way” of our family.

God gave us His Word, a living instruction book so that we would know exactly what He has done for us, to know what is expected of us, so that we would truly grasp the enormity of the importance of being adopted into His family.

As we read His Word, talk to Him daily/hourly, and experience His love and joy in our lives, we become more and more like Him.

There are times we look back to our sinful past and take steps back in that direction. We come from the father of lies and his characteristics are sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.⁴ There are times when our Heavenly Father has to discipline us, as all loving fathers do,⁵ to set us back on the right track. So God uses hard times, suffering and trials to teach us deeper truths about Himself and the ways He wants us to resemble Him, bringing us closer to Him and to His family. We will then bear, more and more, His characteristics: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.⁶

As we think of family we not only have a Heavenly Father and His Son but we also have siblings in this new adopted family, our brothers and sisters in Christ. Sadly, like most earthly families, we don’t always get along. We allow petty things to annoy us and estrange us from one another. We may see things differently and let the differences become points of separation. We may feel unloved and become resentful, envious or angry. But

how does our Heavenly Father want His children to behave toward one another? He tells us (in a number of places) to love one another!⁷ So that everyone will know,⁸ because of our love for one another, that we belong to God’s family.

As I think about my earthly adopted siblings, I have appreciated that, as we have become older and more mature, we have become closer, by putting aside, or working through, our differences of opinion and personalities. We enjoy each other’s company, being tied together by our adoption. Our family resemblance is much more than skin-deep; it is our hearts that are bound together by love for one another and our parents.

So too, it is truly marvelous when we meet brothers and sisters in Christ and find we are truly bound together by “family ties”, and we recognise our common adoptive Heavenly Father in one another. As God’s children, we should put away our petty childish squabbles, and attitudes and act like we truly belong to God’s family by showing sacrificial love, deference, humility, gentleness, kindness and grace towards one another.

Are you loving your new brothers and sisters as you ought? Do you still bear a striking resemblance to your “birth family” (and/or hankering after them)? Are you striving to learn more and more about your new adoptive Heavenly Father and His Son? Are you thankful for all that your Older Brother, Jesus, has done of you so that you could be a part of His family?

1 John 3:3-8

2 Eph 1:4-6

3 HC Q&A 1

4 Gal 5:19-21

5 Heb 12:5-11

6 Gal 5: 22-23

7 E.g. John 13:34, Rom 12:10, 13:8, 1 Cor 13:11, 1 Thess 3:12, Heb 10:24

8 John 13:35

There are times when our Heavenly Father has to discipline us, as all loving fathers do, to set us back on the right track. So God uses hard times, suffering and trials to teach us deeper truths about Himself and the ways He wants us to resemble Him, bringing us closer to Him and to His family.

The beginning of the marriage of the Lamb

“...for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people” (Lk. 2:10b)

“Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!” (Rev. 19:9)

By Joh Francke¹

The angel’s “good tidings” bring “great joy” because of what the birth of Jesus means for God’s people. At Christmas the eternal Son of God humbled Himself by coming down from His glorious heavenly realm in order to become a man of flesh and blood to dwell with us. As one of us, He represented us, doing what we should have done – obey God perfectly – and doing what we could never do – suffer and pay for all our sins, and renew us by His Spirit. Yet there is even more. Christ’s physical fellowship with His people, which began at Christmas, is a foretaste of the eternal fellowship we will enjoy with Him in the closest possible unity, the unity of marriage.

John saw it in a vision and it made him ecstatic! (Rev 19) For when the Lord Jesus returns on the clouds He will not only conquer all His enemies, not only recreate heaven and earth in glory, not only cause the New Jerusalem to descend from God out of heaven, not only give His redeemed children new and glorified bodies, not only remove sin and all the tragic results of sin. All this, though unimaginably wonderful, does not yet constitute the complete fullness of joy.

The ultimate joy is when the Lord Jesus Christ comes again to the new earth – coming in the flesh with His glorified human nature and glorious body – to join Himself to His people. For we read, “behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God” (Rev. 3:21). Christ our Lord, who at Christmas began to “tabernacle” in our flesh will then again “tabernacle” on the new earth. His tent will be with ours. The end of the ages brings in the new marriage!

To be sure, we saw a foretaste of this marriage when Jesus was with His disciples and other followers. When asked why the disciples did not fast, he answered that they could not fast while the bridegroom was with them. However, at that time the marriage was not yet what it should be.

Although Christ was without sin, He walked in deep humiliation on account of our sin; He had to endure the righteous wrath of the Father because of those sins. He experienced hunger and thirst and afflictions. He wept at Lazarus’s grave. He had to suffer, to be rejected by his Father, and to die.

And so it was that the Bridegroom experienced many sorrows in His relationship with His bride. The marriage joy was still far from complete. His suffering and death – so essential for the marriage – cast a pall over the marriage, overshadowing its “great joy”. Indeed, it sometimes appeared as if there was no marriage at all, even though the Groom and bride were together!

Moreover, the bride-church herself was still clothed in the body of sin and decay. And this bride-church often understood so little of the Bridegroom and His love. All too often the disciples were unbelieving and foolish. And God’s church had deteriorated so very much. In the end she even turned against her Bridegroom, condemning Him and thrusting him out. She “excommunicated” Him and gave Him a certificate of divorce. What then was left of the marriage? A divorce and a funeral. Christ’s burial became in many respects the end of the marriage relationship. It appeared that sorrow had replaced the “great joy”.

But Christ had promised to return! The marriage feast of the lamb is coming! All those who have gone before us into heaven and who now enjoy Christ’s

initial glory around the Father's throne, and all the true believers on earth, will together meet their Bridegroom and He will never leave them. Suffering and death will belong to the past. The bride-church will also be completely glorified. She will be clothed with heavenly glory radiating down upon her from above. Then she will understand the length and breadth and height and especially the depth of her Bridegroom's love for her. Then through Christ's power and in His love the complete unity will be established through the Spirit of love. And the marriage will last forever, never to be disrupted again. Then, yes, the "great joy" will know no bounds.

For the bride will see the Bridegroom as her King in His beauty. She will walk and talk with Him and always be with Him. They will enjoy one another's presence, not only in the Spirit of God and of love but also in the flesh, in bodily presence, for ever. Unimaginably wonderful! "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him!" Love will be pure in the bond of perfection. The bridegroom will lavish all His love upon His bride and the bride can then give herself completely to her Bridegroom.

That marriage of the Lamb on the new earth is the fulfilment of the "great joy" of Christmas. But already here on earth the meaning of Christ's coming in the flesh in Bethlehem will begin to live for the bride. She understands what it means that He came in our flesh and blood; it was in order to redeem us completely, in order to glorify us completely; in order to clothe us with everlasting life. Yes, even more: He came in our flesh and blood in order to be close to us for ever.

The Son of God had this joyful marriage in mind when He took upon Himself our human nature at Christmas. It was the purpose of all God's beautiful works of salvation. The tidings of "great joy" at Christmas will then become the bride's "joy of contentment". Perfect contentment because we will have nothing more to long for; our holy longing will be completely satisfied and we will revel continuously in what we have.

That hope softens all our present sorrows – our sorrows in personal life, family life, church life, in this full but often so dark life. Indeed, looking forward to the marriage is the great stimulant in our daily life. Wedding guests we are; no, much more: we are the bride-church of the Bridegroom. Today already

the wedding song wells up in our hearts. And although it is often suppressed and drowned out by our sins and sorrows, it remains the joyful keynote of our lives.

Wicked people and those who behave inappropriately, in and outside of God's congregation, can do you much harm. They can rob you of your good name and honour and your earthly possessions. But they cannot touch the beginning of eternal joy you carry in your heart! That joy is given by God, by the Christ, through His Spirit. That "beginning" is the foretaste of the marriage joy, which will turn into full elated happiness at the great marriage of the Lamb. Yes, Christmas is a feast with joyful perspective, a perspective of ultimate marriage joy and perfect bliss which we will enjoy forever in the marriage of the Lamb. Come Lord Jesus! Maranatha!

translated by J Numan

1 Joh Francke, selections from "Het begin van de Bruiloft des Lams" in *leven tot in eeuwigheid* (Scriptural meditations), J Boersma, Enschede, 1973, pp.17-20.

Translated, condensed and submitted for publication by J Numan.

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"That marriage of the Lamb on the new earth is the fulfilment of the 'great joy' of Christmas. But already here on earth the meaning of Christ's coming in the flesh in Bethlehem will begin to live for the bride."

Come Lord Jesus! Maranatha!

The Lord loves a cheerful giver

Mitchell Ramkissoon

The subject of “giving” is one that must be approached with a certain amount of caution, and respect.

Our giving is, in one sense, a private matter. Jesus spoke of “not doing your charitable deeds before men,” and “not letting your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Matthew 6:3). We should avoid seeking public accolades for our giving, and in that sense giving is a private matter between us and our Lord. For others, avoiding the topic of giving might simply be a way of hiding their greed and selfishness, and their lack of generosity.

In another sense, giving is very public matter. How so? Well, whether we are

giving for the right reasons or wrong, or not giving at all, giving is always spiritual matter. In the 2 Corinthians 9 passage quoted above the Apostle Paul (speaking by the Spirit of Christ) makes it clear that this is a topic that is not “off limits” – it is once that Christians can and should discuss.

In this article, then, we want to reflect upon the command in verse 7 to be “cheerful givers.” We will look at what that means, what should motivate us, and some practical application.

What it means to be a “cheerful giver”

Interestingly, the Greek word translated *cheerful* is the same word from which we derive our English word, *hilarious*. When

we think of hilarity we think of laughter, joy. The sense of Paul here, then, is that we are to give *joyfully, with gladness, happily*. Stinginess, covetousness, greed, selfishness are to be far away from us as God’s people.

This principle of cheerful giving is already set out in Deuteronomy 15:7-8 where Israel is told that if there was a poor man among them, they were not to “harden their hearts or shut their hand” from him. Instead they were to “open their hands *wide* to him and willingly lend to him sufficient for his need, whatever his needs” (NKJV). God’s people, then, are to be generous, gladly giving, blessing as we have been blessed, giving our first and best to God.

The opposite of this would be a giving



solely because we have to; to merely keep the elders off our backs. Paul condemns (v.7) giving “reluctantly or under compulsion.” We are not to give out of grudging obligation. The sense of Paul here is that of giving because we have to but we don’t really want to. It betrays an attitude of “What I have is mine, and the more I give means less for me.” One scholar says that, “we give because it’s wrung from our hands.” It’s an uncaring attitude for others because we care more about ourselves.

Far from this kind of a sinful, despicable attitude is the Biblical attitude: giving *cheerfully*. It’s not to be merely a matter of obligation or legislation. We’re to give from a heart that is eager to serve the Lord; that sees how privileged we are to be used in God’s work of establishing His kingdom; that believes that our cheerful giving pleases the Lord.

What should motivate us to give cheerfully?

Here are four motivations for us to give with joy.

1. It’s all His

Why should we be eager to give? Simply put, we should want to give because we understand that it is the Lord who gives first. All that we have belongs to *Him!* “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it” (Ps. 24:1). He says, “The cattle on a thousand hills is Mine” (Ps. 50:10).

2. It’s ours to use here

We are but stewards. God allows us to use His possessions while we are on earth. And one day we will leave all that we’ve pursued and accumulated in this life. And how we use our monetary blessings is quite often an indicator of our comprehension of these simple truths. And, sadly, the state of our hearts.

3. He asks it of us

Also worthy of consideration is the command of God to “Bring an offering and come into His courts” (Psalm 96:8). That is, we’re to come before God (to Church in our context) with a gift in hand. Deuteronomy 16:16 says it even stronger: God’s people “shall not appear before Me empty-handed.”

And so, undoubtedly what we call “The Offering” is a very significant part of worship. Based on such verses we could go so far as to say that if we have not given to the offering we have not worshipped well. And if we are not contributing to “The Budget” there is a failure

to recognize that every one of God’s children is involved in kingdom work.

4. Consider what He has given us!

But of course the greatest motivation to us giving cheerfully is that the Lord Himself has given the best and greatest offering. He “gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16). He “did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all” (Romans 8:32). Hebrews 9:28 speaks of Christ as being “offered once to bear the sins of many.”

We might say, then, that God our Father has set the greatest example of giving in all of history for us. He freely offered up His most treasured possession, the One whom was dearest to His heart: His own Son- the Spotless Lamb.

Some practical application

Practically speaking, cheerful giving it’s a *matter of preparation*. It ought not to be that we think of the offering only when it’s announced. A child of God ought not to be digging around in his/her wallet or purse *seeing what they have handy or can spare*. We ought to come prepared, and decided about what we are going to give to this cause.

In our congregation the deacons give us lists of the offering causes in the upcoming months. They include blurbs about the causes for that Sunday. And they remind us what the causes will be for next week. And so no one has any excuse to show up unprepared. These causes should have been discussed as a family, and prayed about beforehand around our tables.

In 2 Corinthians 9:3ff Paul reminds the Church in Corinth that he was planning to visit them to collect the generous gift that they had promised. But he had sent some brethren ahead to ensure that the gift was ready. There was always the chance that some would simply forget; some would put their money to other uses; maybe some were just procrastinators. And so they needed a little nudging – so they could begin to give, maybe a little at a time, but always moving toward their goal.

Maybe the brethren would remind the Christians of the principle taught by Paul in 1 Cor. 16:1-2:

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come.

“Remember this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” — 2 Corinthians 9:6-7

He says to “lay something aside” on the first day of the week. Out of their earnings there was to be a portion that was given to the work of the Lord’s Church. Based on the principle taught here we could apply this to ourselves this way: *each Sunday* we are to ensure that we bring an offering to the Lord – an amount we have thought about, and prayed about, and given with thankfulness.

Worthy of our attention is what Paul says in v.2 of that passage: “let each of you lay something aside.” He’s addressing every member of the Church – young and old, rich and poor. It doesn’t matter that we belong to a large congregation; and that others do very well and can afford to carry the expenses of the Church. God says, “each of you.” No one is excused. No excuse is valid. Every member is to give.

Notice as well the words, “storing up as he may prosper.” Another way of saying that is, *give according to how much God has blessed you*. Some earn more than others. Some are only able

to give a fraction of what others give. It doesn’t matter to God that we match the other people. What *does* matter is that we give *cheerfully!*

And the more we prosper the more we’re to give. It’s not just a matter of “giving 10 per cent.” Maybe we’re actually able to afford 20, or 25 per cent. In his book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Donald S. Whitney speaks of a lady who realized that she could live on 10 per cent of her income. So she gave 90 per cent to the Church. Not everyone can do that. And the Bible is not saying you *have* to. But we *are* to give in proportion to what we earn. Again, from the heart.

Conclusion

If we struggle to give cheerfully, the question we might want to ask ourselves is this: do I trust God to provide for my needs? Listen again to 2 Cor. 9:6: “he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” And so let us not be afraid to give generously. If we give to God with a thankful and generous heart He will

provide for us.

This is not to promote the “prosperity gospel.” We don’t give to God, as the heretics teach, so that He will in turn make us rich. We give because we trust that He has always, and will always, provide for us His children.

David wrote: “I have never seen the righteous forsaken, nor their children begging bread” (Ps 37:25). Think of the widow that Jesus observed – who put *all she had* into the temple treasury. That’s trust. And if that is our attitude – generous, thankful, and *cheerful* giving we will be blessed – with a greater joy than we could ever have keeping it all to ourselves. We will be growing and rejoicing in the fact that we are storing up *greater* treasures – in heaven. Indeed, we will be learning the truth of what Jesus said: that *it is more blessed to give than to receive*.

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Words can be slippery things

by Wes Bredenhof

It’s happened many times in church history. The theologian says that he believes in the resurrection. But eventually it comes out that he believes that Jesus truly rose from the dead in the hearts of his disciples, but not actually in history. Another theologian insists that he believes in election. But eventually we discover that he believes that God chooses believers, not out of his sovereign good pleasure, but on the basis of foreseen faith.

In his book *Revival and Revivalism* Iain Murray discusses Charles Finney at length because of his role in the Second Great Awakening. Murray notes on page 262 that Charles Finney spoke

of a “vicarious atonement,” which is usually another way of speaking about penal substitutionary atonement, i.e. that Christ took our place on the cross, bearing the wrath of God in our place. But Finney believed nothing of the sort. His language was deceptive. He used the right words, but he meant something completely different.

This strategy gets employed in the debates over origins too. People will insist that they believe that Adam and Eve were real historical people, that they were the first human beings, created in the image of God. It sounds orthodox on the surface. But we need to dig deeper: what do you mean by human being? Was Adam ever a baby nestled at his mother’s breast? Was Eve a toddler



Charles Finney

at some point in her life? Did she have grandparents? What do you mean “created in the image of God”? What does “created” mean in that sentence? You say that you believe God created man from the dust of the earth. Great! But what do you mean when you say that? Asking these sorts of questions will

usually reveal whether things really are what they seem. In theology, we need to be precise – and transparent – with our definitions. It’s not enough just to use the right words, you also have to be holding to the correct understanding of those words. Without that, the true gospel itself is soon lost.

Wes Bredenhof
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Clear truth

Sentimentality won’t take us far

Peter Barnes

In 1923 J. Gresham Machen wrote his devastating critique of liberal theology in *Christianity and Liberalism*. With precision and logic he showed that Christianity and liberal theology were two different religions although they often used similar terms. One often neglected point that he made was: “It concerns the question not of this doctrine or that, but of the importance which is attributed to doctrine as such.” He considered, rightly, that “indifferentism about doctrine makes no heroes of the faith”.

For Easter, the *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof interviewed former US President Jimmy Carter (he was president in 1977-1981). Kristof himself claimed to believe in the Sermon on the Mount and aspired to follow Jesus’ teachings, but added that he was sceptical about the Virgin Birth and other miracles such as Jesus’ walking on water and multiplying loaves and fishes. Furthermore, he doubted the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead. He then asked: “Am I a Christian, President Carter?”

Such was Carter’s impact in 1976, the year he was running for office, that the expression “born again” was oft-cited in secular newspapers. Indeed, *Newsweek* dubbed 1976 the Year of the Evangelical. To return to 2017, Kristof had given Carter a splendid opportunity to explain the gospel. In response, the former president said lamely: “I do not judge whether someone else is a Christian. Jesus said, ‘Judge not.’ I try to apply the teaching

of Jesus in my own life, often without success.”

It is meant to sound humble, but it is tragically weak. Machen warned that the liberal was most dangerous when he was most concessive because then he was not taking truth seriously at all. In Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice tells the White Queen that “One can’t believe impossible things.” The Queen replies that Alice has not had enough practice, adding: “When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” Most people would be inclined to apply that to the resurrection of Christ, but it is not the resurrection but Carter’s logic that is impossible.

There is something wonderfully hard-nosed about the Christian faith. The apostle Paul tells us that “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19). Some people are moved by inspiring stories, whether or not those stories are true. That has meaning for a novel or a poem, but it makes no sense for the gospel. The gospel is about things that actually happened in history: the Son of God became a man; He said things and did things, even miracles; and He was put to death; He rose from the dead, never to die again; and then ascended to heaven with the promise that He would return. Kristof says he does not believe those things; Carter says that he does.

The issue here is not whether Kristof is a Christian – clearly, he is not – but the nature of Carter’s Christian faith. Carter

was trying to be so broad and inclusive that his worldview collapsed in front of him. Professing to endorse the Christian faith, he actually undermined it. In fact, he undermined any real understanding of logic and coherence. Admittedly, Christians are warned: “Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels” (2 Tim. 2:23). However, Paul was not speaking there of the resurrection, but of small-minded commitment to irrelevant minutiae.

The Western world still often likes to think that this is the age of science, but actually sentimentality is doing rather well in many places. After the massacre of 22 people by a suicide bomber at an Ariana Grande concert in May, the singer, Katy Perry called for healing: “No barriers, no borders, like we all need to just co-exist.” For all I know, this may well make her a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize, but those who slept more soundly at night because of such sentiments would do better to investigate 1 Corinthians 15.

In the struggles and trials of life, in the battles against temptation, and in conflict with evil, sentimentality, whether of the Carter or the Katy Perry variety, will do nothing for us except soothe us to sleep in falsehood. What will help us is having our feet standing on Christ, the solid rock.

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*Festival of Lights, New Plymouth.
Photo: W Walraven*

Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.
James 1:17