

faith in focus

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The importance of friendship



Contents

"...There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."	3
Friendship with the World?	5
Outward focus Millenials and the Gospel	9
Letters from New Zealand	11
Review Is Creation a Secondary Issue?	14
Books in focus	15
Vicar Josh Flinn sustains examination	17
Missions in focus Visit to the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Port Vila	18

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Editorial

In looking back on the friendships of my childhood and youth, the reality was that there were good friends and bad friends. That was something that was highlighted by my father, who would readily give his assessment on a friend that I had brought home. He would say, "he is not a good friend for you". I have to admit that I was annoyed at times, but the fact remains, my dad was right most of the time. Bad friendships meant trouble.

Most people like to have friends or even one close friend. I suppose the desire to have friends may possibly stem from the fact that it was not good for the first man to be alone. Adam was created to have fellowship with GOD, and then with Eve his wife, and those around him. That fellowship would be part of how society works, so it would seem natural to seek out friendships.

I heard on Christian radio recently about the increasing problem of loneliness among older people in New Zealand. The information that wasn't given were the factors that have contributed to this situation. I am sure that there are many factors, some of which may be the death of a spouse, or friends moving away, or that older people are forced, because of frailty, to move into a retirement complex, where they feel isolated because of the newness of everything and distance from their familiar surroundings and friends.

Friends are an important part of our lives. It may be that many of you in the RCNZ only have friends that are members in our churches, because you have grown up with them. In other cases when we were converted to Christ, old friends drifted away for one reason or another, and we didn't have the wisdom to know how to deal with our new found love for Christ yet retain our love for our old friends.

May the LORD grant us the grace to know how to maintain our friendships in a way that honours Him.

Our contributors provide us with something to ponder on this subject. I hope you find them edifying.

Mr Timothy Rott looks at the principle of friendship.

Mr Ryan Sparks considers with whom we are friends.

Mrs Sally Davey shares what Tim Challies has written about millenials and the gospel.

I review the DVD, *Is Creation a Secondary Issue*, by RTC professor Dr Martin Williams and Creations Ministries International.

Book reviews are: *Hope and Comfort in the Book of Job* by Cornelis Van Dam, reviewed by Hans Vaatstra; *"I Will Be Your God" An Easy Introduction to The Covenant of Grace ...* by Wes Bredenhof, reviewed by A Terpstra.

Focus on home includes Gleanings, and the Auckland and Wellington Presbytery reports.

Profile of Vicar Josh Flinn, now a minister in our federation.

Clarence and Elise Stolte give a report on their visit to the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Port Vila, Vanuatu.

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.

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The importance of friendship

“...There is a friend
who sticks closer than
a brother.” (Prov. 18:24b NASB95)

Timothy Rott

Why are you friends with your friends? How would you answer that question? Many of us may not be able to identify any particular reason why we befriend someone. People become friends because they have similar interests or hobbies. Others are drawn together by similar situations or experiences, such as those who are brought together for treatment for an illness or disease.

Other questions to consider are: Are you friends with your friends for the sake of your friends? Or are you friends with your friends for the sake of yourself? As long as we gain from the relationship, and not lose, you probably don't really know. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a friend as, “A person with whom one has a bond of mutual affection, typically one exclusive of sexual or family relations.”

Like many other words in the English language, the word “friend” has taken on a whole new meaning. For instance, awesome is used to describe things that really are not actually awe inspiring. You can now be “friends” with hundreds, if not thousands, of people on Facebook. You can befriend someone simply because you are a friend of someone else. Most of the people you are “friends” with on the internet you have probably never met! We might be “cyber-friends” via the internet, but it is impossible to have a “bond of mutual affection,” as described in the Oxford dictionary, through the far reaching connection of the internet.

Scripture has a different definition of

what it means to be a friend. That definition is best seen in the friendship recorded in the Bible between Jonathan and David. These two companions remained friends through very difficult circumstances. Jonathan's father, King Saul, came to hate his Psalm singer to the point of wanting him dead. Although Jonathan's father was king, he did not share his father's anger toward David. Jonathan supported his friend, even though many thought ill of him, as did their king. “A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” (Prov. 18:24, NASB95) Despite the circumstances, public opinion, and even his father's commands, Jonathan remained



“ . . . many of our friendships are self-centered. . . . When there is benefit to be gained by our associations we gladly proclaim people our friends. . . . The “friendship” lasts only as long as it is beneficial to us.”

a friend to David, and stuck closer than a brother.

When a friend, or someone we know, falls on hard times, like David, how do we respond? Suppose that they had sinned or been sinned against, or their lives and reputations called into question. There will generally be two responses. Either friends will abandon a friend, whose character has been called into question, or they will stay by his side in support. In these situations, we, like David, learn that his friends will distance themselves when that friendship becomes a liability, or learn that friends will stand by him even when there is personal cost. In the end, challenging situations will reveal whether we have true friends, or no friends at all.

I fear that, judged by this standard, many of our friendships are self-centered. In the final analysis, we are friends with our friends for the sake of ourselves. When there is benefit to be gained by our associations we gladly proclaim people our friends. But when that association threatens to bring us shame, we quickly deny them. Why? Simply Because our love for our friends is less than our love for ourselves. The “friendship” lasts only as long as it is beneficial to us. A vivid illustration of this is what is happening in America (this obviously reflects my American connection). There are a large number of notable people in politics and actors in Hollywood who have been accused of immoral conduct. They have quickly learned who their “friends” are. For the most part, they have been abandoned by those who benefitted from the relationship. Now, however, there is risk in being associated with such a person and they have abandoned the sinking ship. The offenders deserve to be exposed and even judged, but should their friends forsake them? None of us are immune to falling into temptation, and we must take heed lest we fall! As believers, we need the help of our Christian friends to confess our sins and to walk with the Spirit. “Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.” (James 5:16 NASB95).

The New Testament revelation about Jesus takes us beyond our human understanding of what it means to be a friend. Jesus’ association with His disciples was as Rabbi to disciple, which indicates a hierarchy in their relationship since a teacher is always above his student or

pupil. During their time together, the disciples had come to realize that Jesus, their Rabbi, was no ordinary teacher. When Jesus calmed the waters the disciples were astonished: “They became very much afraid and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey Him?”” (Mark 4:41, NASB9). Peter at another time confessed about Jesus that, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:16 NASB95). It was clear to the disciples that Jesus was no ordinary man.

Jesus, however, had some teaching for His students that is applicable to us as His followers. He had additional truth for them and us: ““This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. “You are My friends if you do what I command you. “No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.” (John 15:12-15, NASB95). Jesus extended their relationship from Master and disciples to one of friends.

The Greek word used by Jesus is *filos* (philos). *Philos* can be translated as loving, dear, or friend. The relationship between Jesus and the disciples He now describes as friends, as those who are dear to Him. They are dear to Him and He no longer calls them slaves, and how they relate to each other takes on a whole new dimension. He would demonstrate how great His love is for His friends was by laying down his life for **His friends!**

But the relationship extends beyond being friends to being brothers. “Someone said to Him, “Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside seeking to speak to You.” But Jesus answered the one who was telling Him and said, “Who is My mother and who are My brothers?” And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, “Behold My mother and My brothers! “For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.”” (Matthew 12:47-50, NASB95). Through faith in Christ, we become children of God, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name,” (John 1:12, NASB95). The Apostle Paul confirms this in his letter to the Romans, “The Spirit Himself testifies

with our spirit that we are children of God," (Romans 8:16, NASB95). But not only are we children of God, but that "...if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him." (Romans 8:17, NASB95). As children of God and heirs with Christ, we are also Christ's brothers (and sisters). We are His friends and brothers! He is the brother and friend who sticks close to us and never forsakes us, no matter what sin we may commit, no matter how we may offend Him, or even demonstrate that at times we do not love Him.

Jesus is, then, the example of how a friend and brother should respond to his friends and brothers in Christ, as Jesus demonstrated His love for us while we were still sinners. So, as we consider the earlier questions of: Are you friends with your friends for the sake of your friends? Or are you friends with your friends for the sake of yourself? The answer is clear that we should be friends with our friends for Jesus' sake. As Jesus, our example did, we should: "...know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." (1 John 3:16, NASB95).

I am grateful to have entered into



a few friendships that I am convinced would endure the challenges of sin. But even more so, I am glad to have entered into the greatest of all friendships with the greatest of all Friends. At a million times and in a million ways I've already given this Friend every reason to forsake me, every reason to walk away, every reason to flee the shame of association with me. But He remains. He perseveres. He refuses to run. He risks his reputation every day. Yet He remains the nearest and dearest of friends. As the old sage says, "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." And praise God, He is my Brother!

The importance of friendship

Friendship with the World?

Ryan Sparks

Jesus the friend of sinners

Jesus was well known (but not always well-regarded) as a friend of sinners.¹

We rightly rejoice in the friendship that Jesus extends – when we see ourselves as the sinners whom he befriends. But the red flags come out when we hear about Christians today who choose to pursue close associations with known sinners. Many church-goers shy away from this sort of thing. We worry about the corrupting influence that friendship with sinners would bring into our lives.

We worry about what other Christians would think and say about us if we were to keep company with these sorts of people. Many of us dismiss even the possibility of striking up a friendship with an unbelieving and unrepentant person. We justify ourselves insisting that the sinners of the world would not be interested in our friendship.

Now that we are onto the topic, let's consider the question: What did Jesus' friendship with sinners look like?

It was no secret that Jesus kept company with large numbers of people who were known to their communities as sinners. This strange custom of his was

gossiped about widely. Three of the four gospels record Jesus' jealous rivals challenging his disciples about this, saying, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"²

For more than three years, Jesus traveled Judea as an itinerant preacher. He went about from town-to-town, from meal-to-meal, and from house-to-house surrendering himself fully to the hospitality of strangers. Those strangers who invited him in became his friends. In Jesus' culture, sitting down with someone inside their home and sharing a meal, was the primary means of solidifying the bond of friendship. We don't have

Many Christians have determined that friendship with unbelieving and unrepentant sinners — just for friendship’s sake, is categorically wrong. The only justification, in this view, for opening the doors of our hearts to sinners is to share the gospel with them.

a complete record of all of the tax collectors and sinners whom Jesus befriends, but we do know about some of them. Here are a few examples...

On one occasion Jesus flags down the most-notorious sinner he can find, shouting out to him: *“Hurry and come down! For I must stay at your house today!”* Everyone in town saw this, or heard about it, and grumbled against Jesus. Once again, he had chosen to associate with an unworthy sinner. Of all the possible homes to stay in, Jesus gives his time and energy to the chief tax collector — the patently corrupt businessmen, whom we know as Zacchaeus.³

On a separate occasion, Jesus spends an afternoon with the town prostitute. This woman is startled that Jesus would have the nerve even to speak with her. But he does. And he does even more than this! He asks for, and accepts, a drink of water from her own jar. (Proper etiquette would never have allowed for this.) After a surprisingly dignifying and intelligent conversation this Samaritan woman gathers everyone who will listen. Together she and the crowd she has gathered petition Jesus to stay with them for a few days. And whose home do you think Jesus was likely to have stayed in for those two days and nights?⁴

On yet another occasion, Jesus was in the home of a devout Bible teacher — surrounded by many of this man’s fine upstanding friends, when a sinful woman quietly comes into their midst. She comes close enough to Jesus to notice that no one had seen fit to wash the dirt and dust of his travels from his feet. (It was a common custom in the day to do this for any houseguests.) This sinful woman then proceeds to wash Jesus’ dirty feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair. Where did she get the nerve to risk drawing so near to Jesus? What would embolden this woman of ill repute to come in uninvited to the home of a devoutly religious man? Why was she so deeply moved, upon seeing the dishonoured feet of Jesus, that she found herself weeping uncontrollably? It is because this unnamed woman knew Jesus to be *“a friend of sinners”* in the best possible sense.⁵ Jesus was the friend to her that no one else would dare to be.

One more example will suffice. On yet another occasion, Jesus crosses Lake Galilee to the pagan region of the ten Roman cities. There he finds, perhaps the most sinful sort of person we might imagine. A man who is no longer recognisable as a man. Possessed by a legion of demons, this man is a danger to society. He has repeatedly broken out of prison.

He sulks about naked and cutting himself. Upon seeing this man, Jesus refuses to turn a blind eye. He will not turn this most-sinful-of-men into an object lesson about the wages of sin. Jesus sees this man too. Jesus loves him. The next thing we know, this dangerous and frightening individual is sitting at the feet of Jesus — the posture of a disciple. He too is scandalously numbered among Jesus’ friends.⁶

The thing that really confused people, the thing that really upset Jesus’ righteous-minded rivals, was not the fact that he interacted with sinners from time to time; but the bond of friendship that Jesus entered into with them. Jesus extended dignity to sinners. He ate their food. He slept in their homes. He gave them his afternoons and his evenings when he could have given that time to “more deserving” people. With a few short sentences Luke summarises all of this for us: *“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’”*⁷

Genuine friendship is not based on a particular outcome

Now I will admit that this sounds pretty radical to many church-goers today. Ok, we respond. We see that Jesus did this. But we remain uneasy about engaging in this sort of thing ourselves. It seems awkward. Difficult. Uncomfortable. Compromising. Dangerous, even. But perhaps, we suppose, friendship for the sake of evangelism might be alright. Sinful people do need the Lord.

In saying this, we reveal an unspoken assumption that many Christians today have made. Many Christians have determined that friendship with unbelieving and unrepentant sinners — just for friendship’s sake, is morally wrong. The only justification, in this view, for opening the doors of our hearts to sinners is to share the gospel with them. Now, if this is your view, I ask you to please reconsider. Jesus befriended sinners apart from this criteria. True, he wanted to save them. But he does not befriend them in order to secure a decision from them.

A friendship for the sake of evangelism is really no friendship at all. All Christians should eagerly desire to share the good news of grace, forgiveness, and redemption, of peace, hope, and joy with anyone who has not heard — with everyone who has not yet accepted it. However, the prospect of making a transaction, even a gospel-transaction, is a poor basis for friendship. This sounds and smells much more like the thought process of a pred-

atory salesperson than it does the heart-
beat of a former-sinner transformed by
the grace and kindness of Jesus.

Let's look again to the founder and
perfecter of our faith. This time we ask
the question: What were Jesus' intentions
as he befriended sinners? What was his
goal? Did he befriend them in order to
convert them? What motivation did he
have in his heart?

We can't read Jesus' thoughts, but we
can read his words. (And there is no hy-
pocrisy in Jesus' words. What he preaches,
he practices.) He sends his disciples to be
in the world as he is in the world, saying
to them: *"Whatever house you enter, first
say, 'Peace be to this house!' And if a son
of peace is there, your peace will rest upon
him. But if not, it will return to you. And
remain in the same house, eating and
drinking what they provide... Do not go
from house to house. Whenever you enter
a town and they receive you, eat what is
set before you."*⁸ Our friends are to be the
ones we meet along the road – without
making use of a checklist of social or moral
qualities. The goal appears to be friend-
ship purely for friendship's sake – without
attempting to predetermine an outcome.

If we are going to be selective about
whom to befriend, Jesus' specifically chal-
lenges us *not* to choose friends who are
like us. We are not to choose friends who
are likely to repay us in kind. *"If you love
those who love you, what benefit is that
to you? For even sinners love those who
love them. And if you do good to those
who do good to you, what benefit is that
to you? For even sinners do the same."*⁹

When challenged directly about his
remarkably lax standards for choosing
friends, Jesus gave the answer: *"Those
who are well have no need of a physi-
cian, but those who are sick. I came not
to call the righteous, but sinners."*¹⁰ Jesus
insists upon choosing unsavoury friends –
not the righteous, but sinners.

When it comes to this aspect of how
Jesus lived – knowingly and intentionally
seeking out the worst of sinners and be-
friending them, we are often unsure about
how to proceed. Yet this principle that I
am describing is central to Christian disci-
pleship. We must learn to be in the world
as Jesus was in the world. Peter teaches us
to follow in the footsteps of Christ.¹¹ John
tells us plainly: *"whoever says he abides
in [Christ] ought to walk in the same way
in which [Jesus] walked"*.¹² Paul echoes
the same when he writes, *"Be imitators
of me, as I am of Christ."*¹³

For many of us, this concept leaves
our heads spinning. Are we really meant

to follow after Jesus' example in our own
personal relationships? I want you, dear
reader, to wrestle with this question: *Am I
really called to become a friend of sinners?*
The answer is: Yes!

How can we know for sure that Jesus'
genuinely loved the people he befriended?
– that he is not using friendship as a
means of gaining more converts? How
can we be certain that he is not manipu-
lating, coercing, sales-pitching, bait-and-
switching, or gimmicking them into the
kingdom?

Consider Jesus' friendship with Judas Is-
cariot. Jesus chose twelve friends to share
his every waking moment with for the
months and years of his preaching minis-
try. These became his closest friends and
Judas Iscariot was one of them. Even when



it is revealed to Jesus that Judas ultimately
will not answer the call to repentance and
faith... Even when it becomes known to
Jesus that Judas will betray him into the
hands of murderers... Jesus does not termi-
nate this friendship. On the same night that
things will later go so horribly wrong, Jesus
shares an intimate meal with Judas confirm-
ing his friendship with him – eating from
the same dish with Judas as his friend.¹⁴

Jesus refused to hollow out and cheapen
his friendships. They were decidedly not a
means of gaining converts. Jesus truly be-
friended terribly corrupt and sinful people!
He did this regardless of whether or not
they would join his cause. He befriended
people in the world, even the most sinful
and unsavoury, simply because it was the
good and right thing to do.

Loving our neighbour implies friendship as well

In the perfection of the Garden of Eden, before there was any sin in the world, God had made the ruling: *“It is not good for the man to be alone.”*¹⁵ It was true then. It is still true today. Jesus teaches us with his actions, and also with his words, to do something about it.

In perhaps his most famous parable, Jesus tells a story about a man who is robbed, beaten, and left for dead by the side of the road. We know little else about him, other than the fact that he is alone – dangerously alone. Jesus teaches us that the good and right thing to do is to be a friend to anyone who has a need – who is alone. The ones in this story who are too hurried, too pretentious, too prim-and-proper, too high-and-mighty to be bothered with befriending such an obvious sinner, pass on by. They fall short of both the Law of God and the path of discipleship that Jesus calls us to.

In this famous tale of love for neighbour it is an irreligious Samaritan who is the hero. Think about this. The Samaritan is the one person who knows with absolute certainty that his way of life is not only different, but entirely at odds with the Jewish man left alone on the side of the road. But this Samaritan is determined not to be selective about whom he befriends. The Samaritan (who would have been despised by Jesus’ original audience) is the hero of the tale. He is the one whom we are called to imitate, precisely for this reason. He does not look for people who are just like himself to give his time, attention, and care to. He has developed eyes to see sinful people in the world – people who are alone on the road of life and in need of a friend.

But many will respond: *Doesn’t it make more sense to stick to the safety, comfort, and community of our fellow church-goers? And especially when it comes to our friendships?*

A warning is not a prohibition

For many who will read this article, the words of Jesus’ brother James have already come to mind: *“Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”*¹⁶

Jesus, the friend of sinners, calls us to his way of life. His brother James, calls us to renounce friendship with the world. The two brothers appear to disagree! These two principles appear to be

working in opposite directions! But, in fact, they do agree. As we all know, relationships are complicated, messy, and at times extremely difficult. Together these two principles provide us with exactly the sort of balanced tension that we need.

Let me explain. Jesus is talking about friendship with *the people in the world*. James is talking about friendship with *the principles of the world*. According to Jesus, we are to honour, pursue, and embrace *people in the world* – no matter how sinful they might be. If we would be faithful to Christ and his way of life, we must befriend sinners. At the same time, according to James, we are to resist, reject, and refute *the principles of the world* – no matter how enticing they might appear to be. If we would be faithful to God as his holy ones in the world, we must reject the ways of the world. This balanced tension is what Jesus has in mind when he prays that we might be *“in the world but not of the world”*.¹⁷ We must find a way to love *the people in the world*; while, at the same time, resisting whatever *principles of the world* our sinful friends have embraced.

This is hard work indeed! We can only succeed in it to the extent that we are walking with our truest friend Jesus – learning from him how to be in the world in his way, and not in our own.

Are you ready to follow Jesus – to become a friend of sinners? Here are a few suggestions:

1. Don’t fill all of your time with church-going activities.

If your church-going activities are taking up too much of your time and availability, consider speaking to one your elders about pulling back a bit. Relationships take up massive amounts of time and space. You need to make yourself available. How can you be a friend to sinners if you never come into contact with them? – if you never have time for them? If you do give up a church-going activity, be sure not to re-allocate the time that you formerly devoted to God to yourself. Be disciplined about giving that time to the people who need your friendship.

2. Don’t isolate yourself from fellow followers of Jesus.

We must be ever-vigilant – watching out for the appealing, but poisonous, principles of the world. In our efforts to befriend sinners we need the mutual support and encouragement of fellow believers. Aware of this danger, Jesus

always sent his disciples out in pairs. Christians are to gather often for the purposes of strengthening and encouraging one another in this way of life. If all of your friendships are with sinners, you are walking a dangerous road that Jesus does not want you to be on.

3. Look for ways to improve your friendship skills.

Many people today are simply not very good at friendship. We have lots of acquaintances, but very few friends. The Bible speaks about the complexities of friendship in many places (including several well-known proverbs). We can learn from these and from one another. But above all else, know this: *A healthy friendship will build you up and draw you closer to God*. Sometimes this happens because your friend knows and loves the Lord. Sometimes this happens because you desperately want your friend to know and love the Lord. Work hard at keeping your friendships healthy. Work hard on improving in the art and skill of befriending people both in the church and in the world.

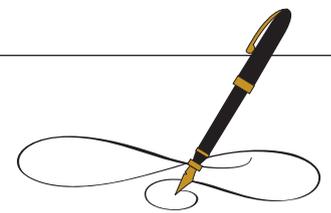
Finally, remember what Jesus, the friend of sinners, has told us: *They will know we are Christians by our love*.¹⁸ Love – in this case, friendship with sinners no-strings-attached, brings glory to God and honour to Christ regardless of whether our friends choose to follow him or not.

May the Lord bless you in all of your friendships!

Notes

- 1 See Matthew 11:19 and Luke 7:34, which both quote Jesus as he references the slander of his enemies.
- 2 Matthew 9:11; Mark 2:16; and Luke 5:30
- 3 See Luke 19:1-10
- 4 See John 4:1-30 and 39-43
- 5 Luke 7:36-50
- 6 Luke 8:26-30 and Mark 5:1-20
- 7 Luke 15:1-2
- 8 Luke 10:5-8
- 9 Luke 6:32-33
- 10 Mark 2:17 (see also Luke 5:32)
- 11 1 Peter 2:21
- 12 1 John 2:6
- 13 1 Corinthians 11:1
- 14 See Matthew 26:20-25
- 15 Genesis 2:18
- 16 James 4:4
- 17 See Jesus’ lengthy prayer recorded in John 17; especially verse 15.
- 18 These are the words to a song of the same name based on John 13:35.

Mr Ryan Sparks is the minister of the First Reformed Presbyterian Church of Bucklands Beach.



Millennials and the Gospel

A week or two ago I was reading, as I often do, Tim Challies's daily blog. The observations he was making about millennials struck me as having exceptional insight. Take a look and see if what he writes strikes a chord with you in your own interactions with millennials at your workplace, in your retail outlet, at your gym — or even in your home . . .

“We hear a lot about the millennials today, don't we? Millennials are that generation born somewhere between the early eighties and around the year two thousand, which means they're mostly young adults today. The way you hear some tell it, you'd think these millennials are the cause of or maybe the solution to just about every single problem in the world. Speaking personally, I love the millennials. Some of my favorite people just happen to be millennials. Well, I recently had the opportunity to spend some time with one of them and as I spoke with her, something clicked and I think I came to understand why that generation seems to be having some common struggles. So let me tell you today about the making of a miserable millennial.

Just a little while ago I was at the physical therapy clinic, getting some work done on my ailing arms and the therapist worked on me for a little while and then he handed off the treatment to this young student. She was there, I guess it was part of her training program. Now, if there's ever a time you feel compelled to make small talk, I suppose it's when someone is massaging your arms, or working over your arms in some way. And so, as she was doing that I started talking and I asked her about her program and about her work-place experience and what she planned to do with her life, and as we chatted, what came across was this deep discontentment. This deep sense of purposelessness. Really it was this deep, deep sadness. And I started asking myself, how did she get there? I know the neighborhood she's from, and I tell you, it's one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in all of Canada. So, it's not like she's lacking for anything in life. She went to a great high school and then had gone on to this higher education at a premier college. She had every privi-

lege. She even had a work placement at what's considered a really good clinic. And yet, as we talked, she was really, really unhappy. So how did she get to be such a miserable millennial?

Okay, I don't want to extrapolate too much from a single conversation. It's dangerous to make one person kind of stand-in for millions and millions. But, I asked her a lot of questions. And what she told me really displayed, and what she said to me was very consistent with what I've seen from so many other people from that generation. So here in my view, is how you go about making miserable millennials.

First, give them the notion that they're all exceptional. You see, for years now, children have been assured, you are special, you are exceptional, you are one of a kind. Really, it's been communicated to them that the world revolves around them. Their parents and their teachers, and even their therapists. Everybody's been making this effort to boost their self-esteem, to make them feel like they are especially amazing people. I found out recently that, at my kid's high school, something like 60 or 70 percent of the students are on the honor roll. Everybody's on the honor roll. Well, that's just in keeping with this whole philosophy of self-esteem. Make everybody special by putting everybody on the honor roll.

The second step is to entitle them. You see, in the past, we used to speak a lot of duty. Duty towards family, or nation, or society. No, no, today, we get rid of all that talk of duty. Instead, we talk about passion. Assure people, if they do have a duty, it's only to themselves. Give them the notion they deserve to be happy. Fulfillment comes really by pursuing your personal passion. Assure them they deserve nothing less than to

dedicate themselves to that thing in life they're most passionate about, the good life, the best life. The only significant life is to pursue that one great passion.

Finally, when you've done all that, make sure you remove any notion of the transcendent. Let them believe that this life is all there is. This life is all that matters. Let them think, if you don't find the highest pleasure now, you'll never find it. If you never find the highest pleasure now, you've wasted your life. And maybe you can allow them to absorb some notion of life after death, maybe reincarnation, or something like that. But certainly, don't let them think that they're accountable to a true higher being, to a personal deity, to somebody who created them and created the world



around them and because of all that, has a claim on them.

And I saw that's exactly where this girl was. She knows, she's convinced that she's special. And she really believes she deserves to pursue her passion in life. She knows that nothing in the world is more important than her own happiness. She knows that her ultimate duty in life is to her own joy. She believes that she's accountable to no one but herself. And that there's nothing for her beyond this life and beyond the grave. So she's been well educated, and she's been well trained and she's got a great job and she's living a good life, but she's miserable. Because she's not sure that she's passionate enough about this job, that she's doing the best thing with her short

little life. And she's wondering, what will her life add up to if she doesn't change the world? If in this short little life she's got, she doesn't accomplish something that's worthy of the history books.

Well, I kept thinking about this, and I thought about how the Bible offers something so much better. The Bible offers true meaning and true hope. See the Bible assures us there is a higher being, there is a personal God who created the world and created all that's in the world. The Bible begins with the words, in the beginning, God created. God pre-existed this world. He formed this world. And if he's the creator, he's got rights over everything that he's made, and that includes people.

Second, the Bible agrees that each of us is exceptional in some way. It tells us we're all created by God, we're all created in the image of God. Each of us, fearfully and wonderfully made, just as God intended us to be. But it also tells us that we're sinners. We've fallen far short of the glory of God. We've rebelled against God. Well, this knowledge then compels us, we must seek a solution to our sin. And that solution is to put our faith in Jesus Christ, to receive His salvation. We understand ourselves best when we understand we're made in the image of God, we've rebelled against God, we've been saved by the kind grace of God.

And finally, that matter of entitlement. As forgiven sinners, we become deeply aware that we live by grace. We now live to bring glory to the one who saved us. We don't need to live out our own passions. Something far better happens. We get to live out God's passion. We don't have to make much of ourselves. Far better, we get to make much of God. We don't have to love ourselves. We get to love God and love others. See, it turns out that our true joy, that our deepest fulfillment comes by living outside of ourselves. We gain this glorious duty, this great delight of living for the good of other people, rather than the good of ourselves. We get to turn our gifts and our talents and our time and our energy and our enthusiasm, everything we are, we get to turn it all to doing good for others, which in turn brings glory to God. And of course, we now believe in someone. Someone who transcends this world. The fact, we're convinced that we will exist beyond this world. We don't need to live our best lives now because a better world is coming. A better world is awaiting

us, where we'll live eternally in a state of perfect harmony with God and man. We don't have to experience every joy in the short time here, but we can wait and we can experience the fullness of joy in the life to come.

So I guess my message to those miserable millennials is to look to the Bible. Pick it up, read it, try it. Why don't you try it? Because within its pages, you'll find out who you really are. You'll find out who God really is. Who He calls you to be. And you'll find how to live a life that is truly satisfying, a life that is never-ending.

27th November 2017, at *challies.com*

I think Challies is absolutely correct when he describes the angst millennials feel: all their lives they have been told they are exceptional, and yet they fear they will not have exceptional lives. Reality can be so disappointing to those who expect so much more for themselves. As we once heard a brother-in-law tell his wife, "You have to realise that the world isn't your oyster — the oyster is your world." What Dick meant was that it doesn't hurt to realise our failings and mediocrity. This is where the gospel makes all the difference in the world. Once reconciled to the glorious God of the universe, we have the honour of being part of his great and truly exceptional plan of redemption. We are connected into the most exciting project that there has ever been: the salvation, and moral rescue, of men and women and boys and girls; and an eternal future in which there is no spot, wrinkle or possibility of failure. Rather than becoming irritated at their arrogance, have compassion for the millennials in your life and give them the greatest news ever. **S.D.**

Letters from New Zealand

D. G. Vanderpyl

September 1978

My apologies for the briefness of these notes from New Zealand this month. The reason isn't that nothing happens or is done in the Reformed Churches in this country. On the contrary, they keep me too busy. Here are a few points I would like to share with you.

In the celebration of the Lord's Supper in our churches, the sanctity of this sacrament must be guarded by the elders of the church. This policy of closed or fenced communion generally allows admittance only upon public profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and the submitting of oneself to the discipline of the church.

Perusing the news bulletins of our churches, it is interesting to note the variety of approaches in the announcements of the forthcoming event of the Lord's Supper. Some churches will just briefly inform the visitors "to see one of the elders at the door". I have often wondered how these elders are recognised at the church doors among the throngs who are entering in. Other churches make it quite clear that visitors may not come to the Lord's Table unless they have asked and received permission from the session. And I guess that this can't be done quickly on the Sunday morning at the entrance of the church. One church stresses the invitation to all who are communicant members, and then follows with the information that believers who are not members, but would like to partake should approach one of the elders.

The best announcement I have seen, is a statement which first sets forth what the Lord's Supper is and for whom it is and then reminds the reader of 1 Corinthians 11:27, requesting visitors to inform the session of their desire to partake. This statement is then concluded as follows: "Although you do not partake, you may profit greatly from listening and watching as the Lord's Supper is administered."

For those who are not familiar with this Scriptural approach, it can be quite upsetting when all of a sudden

they are confronted by our closed communion.

You may be interested to know that the Scottish Fathers were even stricter than we are. They had small metal tokens with a message such as, "But let a man examine himself" engraved on it. The tradition for these so-called "Tokens of Faith" started when members of the Church of Scotland were persecuted in the 17th century. The Highlands were alive with Episcopal spies and in order to keep informers out of secret church meetings, they distributed these mysterious little tokens. A token, held in the palm of the hand, was thus an open-sesame to forbidden gatherings. Each congregation struck their own tokens to include the faithful. Each token bore the name of the church on the front and a Bible text on the back. These tokens even came to New Zealand with the first Scottish settlers in the middle of the last century. For a long time a large number of Presbyterian congregations continued to issue such tokens. These metal membership certificates were handy for the old Scots when they were being interrogated by the elder on door duty before being admitted to the table of the Lord.

Postscript

At the time of typing this manuscript, the following, "Reasons why Reformed Churches practise a supervised observance of the Lord's Supper" appeared in this magazine.

Elders have the responsibility to superintend (shepherd) the Church of Jesus Christ to see that all things are done decently and in order, 1 Corinthians 14:40; Acts 20:28-31; 1 Thessalonians 5:12,13; Hebrews 13:17 and 1 Peter 5:1-4.

Open communion means that the session must measure with two different standards: Local members are under the continuous disciplinary supervision of the session while the visitors are permitted to come to the Lord's Table without any exercise of supervision on the part of the session.

At open communion elders have

no prior knowledge of who partakes of the sacrament, which allows for the possibility that visiting communicants may not have made a credible profession of faith earlier, may be living in open sin, or may even be under discipline elsewhere, all of which desecrates the Lord's Table.

Open communion contradicts the Church Order, Articles 66 and 91 (Reformed Church of Australia), which specify that the session must ascertain whether those who come to the Lord's Table are qualified to do so, namely, those who have professed their faith publicly and who are in good standing in the church.

Open communion contradicts the necessity of discharging and receiving members in orderly fashion by means of a letter or certificate from sister churches.

Open communion contradicts the commandments of love, (Matthew 22:37-40) which indicate that, in order to love God and the neighbour properly, concern for the neighbour should include that he not be guilty of eating or drinking judgment upon himself (1 Corinthians 11:27ff).

Open communion prevents conscientious members from exercising their right to come to the Lord's Table because they do not wish to share responsibility for an improper celebration of the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:30ff).

October 1978

Someone, somewhere, got interested in doing some research on the behaviour of session members. The interest of this researcher came about because in the home he grew up in, the discussion of session members had been a frequent topic. I suspect that this research fellow had been brought up in a manse. Now, because of this strange interest, this fellow gathered quite a bibliography on this wonderful topic and prepared a seventy-page paper. On the basis of his research, he made the following conclusion in the final paragraph, "That it is impossible to predict in advance the behaviour of any session member in any given situation."

So here it is fellow elders; according to this, I presume, pastor's son, we are an unpredictable lot the moment we enter the session room.

This fellow gives us some clues as to why elders and deacons act so unpredictably. For instance, he says, "There are

some 'power structures' or what you may call an 'innergroup of decision makers' in a session." Temperament is given as another clue. "There is the 'plunger' who dives in immediately, aggressively and charges in 'where angels fear to tread.' Then there is the 'watcher', the conservative one who watches to see what happens to the 'plunger' first. He is the mediator and sees which way things are going first. And then, there are the well adjusted people in session, people like you and me."

Of course, session will eagerly point out that this sort of thing is not limited to the inner circle. Which session has not sometimes dreaded the forthcoming annual congregational meeting when beloved brothers and sisters come for their annual "gripe evening" and to quote a quotable quote from the Reader's Digest, "Spend thousands of dollars of emotion on a five cent piece of irritation which had been safely stored away in the freezer compartment of their memory bank for just such a time as this."

About a year ago, Rev. D. J. van Garderen wrote an article in this magazine, "Was your evangelism a flop last year?" He presented some excellent ideas and suggestions to improve the position for the coming year in your church. As a minister in the Christchurch congregation, he called a meeting some time ago of all those who are concerned with reaching out into the community and seeking God's guidance and help in the preparation of a programme. By now they have set up their local Home Mission Committee and must be quite busy organising a number of activities to promote this so important work.

And this is terrific; we hope and pray that this work may be richly blessed.

Our denomination should make it a faith project for the next 25 years, to have just as many evangelists as we have ministers. Evangelists who will concentrate on expansion and extension growth while the ministers work on the internal growth which includes all that happens within the body of Christ among believers, and makes us Christians much better servants of our God and Father in

heaven, at the same time not neglecting what Paul instructs them in his letter to the Ephesians (4:12).

After years of almost nil growth, it would be wonderful to again see a time of additions and multiplications as has been witnessed in the early Church. That ought to be a shared dream and prayer for us all.

Abridged



End Times ... *

This "man of sin" is striding forth
With all his might, for all his worth:
A movement of "religious" kind
To captivate the heart and mind:

A re-birth of rebellious sort,
The righteous seed set to abort
Deceiving those of lawless mould....
To love of Truth they do not hold!

That "man of sin" – doomed as he is –
Assumes that everything is his,
Parading pride on centre stage,
He thinks that he has come of age.

But God... Whose image we possess
-uniquely made in varied dress-
Is sure to raise humanity
Through Christ's atoning victory.

Come. Lord! Oh, with a yearning great,
We eagerly Your Day await!
And so we long for sin's defeat,
That in Your presence we may meet!

*John Goris
Wellington, March, 2017
2 Thessalonians 2

Is Creation a Secondary Issue?

by Dr Martin Williams and Creation Ministries International

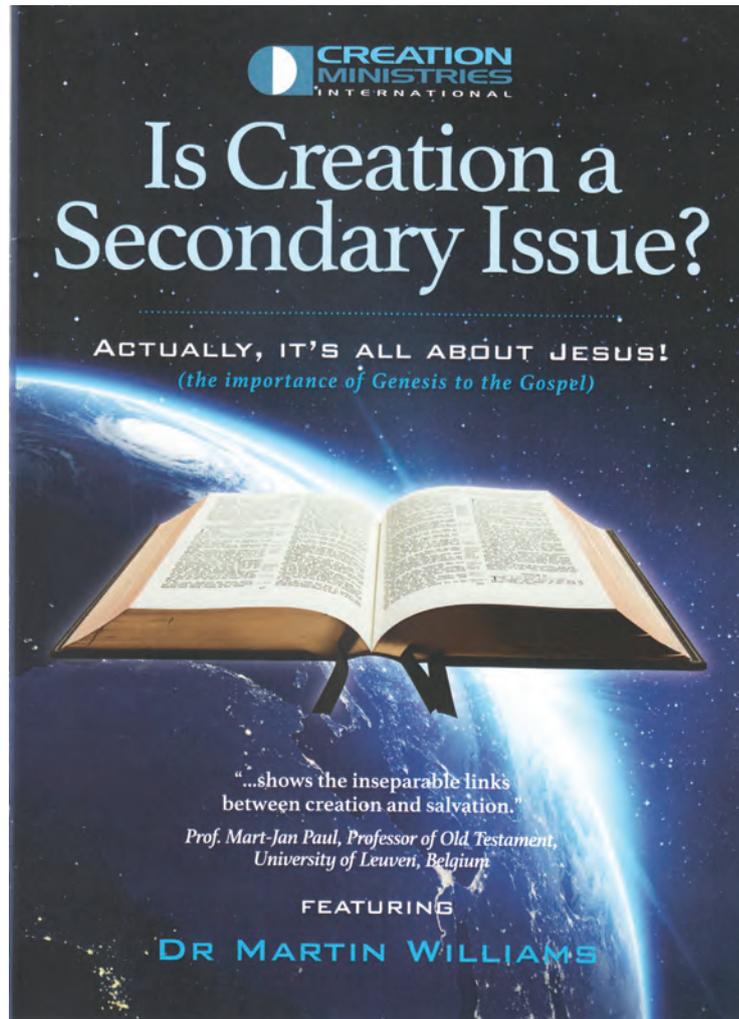
Reviewed by Walter Walraven

Is creation a secondary issue? That is the question that Dr Martin Williams presents to the viewer in this excellent video produced by Creation Ministries International. Dr Williams has served as a pastor and missionary and is currently Head of Theology and Lecturer in New Testament and Greek at the Reformed Theological College in Melbourne, Australia.

As a pastor, missionary and lecturer, Williams has often heard the comment that “the doctrine of creation is only of secondary importance, and that Christianity is really about salvation through the cross of Jesus Christ”. Because of such sentiments, creation is often de-emphasized in the creation/evolution debate and relegated to the status of secondary importance. Some say “it is an issue that does not relate to how one is made right through faith in Jesus Christ, so why get all hung up on it?”

In this video, Williams contends that the creation account is the TRUE story of history which is proclaimed in the Scriptures. He gives a clear, systematic, logical and easy to understand explanation of the implications of holding to theistic evolution or long age thinking, and explains quite clearly what effect it has on the gospel. He comments further that not many people have thought of creation from the perspective of the cross. He then answers the question of why people die, progressing through to the explanation of why Jesus died, moving through to a logical conclusion.

Williams also brings into play the views of prominent evolutionists such as Darwin, Sagan and Alexander, who promote the view that death is a permanent part of this earth’s history over millions of years. Denis Alexander, who seems to hold to theistic evolution, states, “Nowhere in the Old Testament is there the slightest suggestion that the physical death of either animals or humans, after a reasonable span of years, is anything other than the normal pattern ordained by God for this earth.” Williams correctly



asserts that such an idea is clearly contrary to the teaching of Scripture, which teaches that death is actually the result of sin. (Gen 3:17-19)

Maintaining our confidence in the historical narrative of the creation account as presented in Genesis, and understanding why Jesus died according to the Scriptures, is of first importance. It means rejecting evolution or long age thinking, which destroys the gospel.

In closing, I would like to point out, that this is a theological defence of the creation account as it presents itself in the early chapters of Genesis. Williams does not deal with the so-called science of evolution, but with the false view that God as the creator allowed or caused the creation to evolve. I do believe it would be a useful tool for members in our churches in the defence of the gospel

when it is attacked at the foundations. The section containing questions and answers is most edifying and worthwhile to view. I wholeheartedly recommend and endorse this video to our readers.

This video can be obtained from Creation Ministries International as a DVD or MP4. Have a look online:

<https://nzstore.creation.com/catalogsearch/result/?q=Is+Creation+a+secondary>

Books in focus

Hope and Comfort in the Book of Job

by Cornelis Van Dam
**Premier Publishing, soft cover,
CA\$9.00, IN STOCK**
Reviewed by Hans Vaatstra

Hope and Comfort in the Book of Job is a series of eight sermons written by Dr. Cornelis Van Dam former minister in the Canadian Reformed Churches and professor of Old Testament at Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary.

For those who find the long discourses by Job and his friends confusing and the problem of suffering perplexing, this book with its strong historical redemptive emphasis is most helpful. Each sermon is supplemented by a helpful introductory paragraph, questions for discussion and includes a liturgy for worship services at the end. These additions make the book suitable for personal use, group Bible studies or for reading in the worship service.

In his introduction Dr. van Dam wrote "In the case of Job, focussing on God's agenda rather than Job's dilemma gives rich and comforting insights into this part of Scripture. There is much more going on here than the problem of suffering. These sermons intend to highlight some key moments in the Lord's dealing with Job and his interaction with the Almighty. When the work of the Lord in the life of Job is seen as central the book of Job exudes comfort and hope for God's children today."

Reading through the sermons it becomes evident that the focus is very much on the self-revelation of God in the book of Job. Briefly, the first sermon from Job chapter 1 tells us about the Lord's testimony of Job, why God delighted in Job, how Satan challenged God and then how God answered Satan. Van Dam writes, "The first chapter of Job takes us into heaven to the unseen realities that have much influence on things in the world every day." This sermon brings to light the reality that Satan's mission is to harm God's children but that God is firmly in control. He will complete the work he began in us and will not let Satan destroy that work.

The Lord's first victory over Satan

is the theme of the second sermon. It shows how Satan attacked Job by destroying everything; his property, his stock, his servants and even his children and yet Job said, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." (Job 1:21) Why in spite of his great loss did Job continue to praise God? It was because as the author put it, "God's work of renewal, of the new creation made possible in the second Adam, will stand" (pg. 35) This truth is most beautifully expressed in the 6th sermon about Job's confession in the midst of his greatest suffering, "I know that my redeemer lives".

The God centred aspect of each passage of Scripture remains the governing theme throughout the book coming to a powerful climax in the penultimate sermon, *Out Of The Whirlwind* based on Job 38:1 and 40:6 having three main points, "the Lord answers Job revealing; a) his majesty, b) his moral integrity, and c) his mercy". The final chapter is a comforting reminder that though we "pass through the valley of the shadow of death", with the Lord everything 'is made right in the end'.

Not every question which may arise out of the book of Job is answered. That is beyond the scope of only eight sermons, however here is much helpful application for believers today and

the lines to Christ are not missed. For example; "Satan lost the struggle against Job and in many of God's children before and after. And most important he lost the struggle conclusively and definitively in Christ ... For his obedience Christ got the cross as his reward... yet he did not disown God but cried out 'My God my God!' In Christ God showed once for all that those who belong to God can and will serve God even though it does not seem to benefit them." (Pg. 35)

As the title suggests the book is full of hope and comfort for God's people and will surely be encouraging to those who read it. It is available at www.premierpublishing.ca.

"I Will Be Your God"* *An Easy Introduction to The Covenant of Grace ...

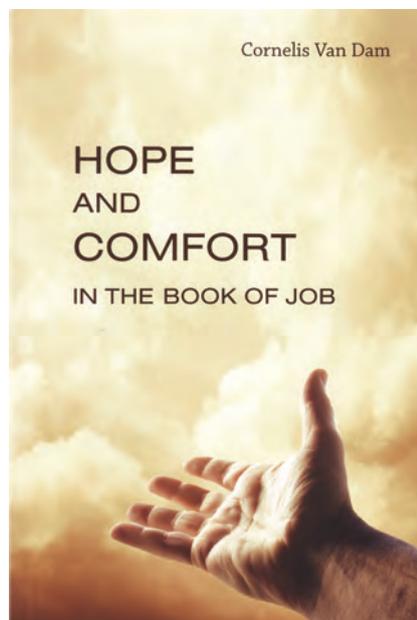
by Wes Bredenhof
Reviewed by A Terpstra

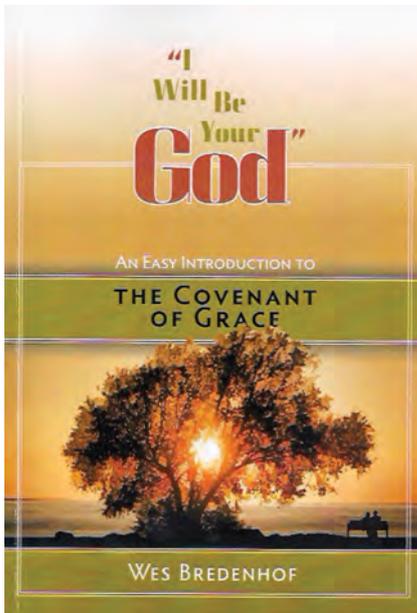
*"I will say ... "You are my people";
and he shall say, "You are my God"*
(Hosea 2: 23).

God, in his great love calls us his own, and we may respond in love and in reverence, to call God our own. It is the essence of the covenant, established between God and his people.

A short while ago in a quieter week I had the privilege of reading Rev Dr Wes Bredenhof's booklet on this subject. Just a few days, with lots of other activity between, saw me absorb from cover to cover what the Scriptures teach on this beautiful subject. The book is short (79 pages), it is personal and it is compelling.

In addressing the subject of the covenant of grace, Wes Bredenhof recognises that it is "a meaty doctrine" (p.11). In a very deliberate manner, however, he sets out to write for "regular church members" (p.11). After all every member of the church belongs to the covenant of grace and needs to understand the wonderful privilege of that position, the high call that flows from such a position of noblesse, and the practical applications that are built on the reality of covenant relationship.





Bredenhof starts out by reminding (or informing) readers that the subject of the covenant was the background to the struggles surrounding the Liberation of 1944. Over time that debate and discussion diminished, as matters do with the passing of time, and with it the understanding of and passion for the covenant also declined. Hence the book; it serves to remind and to reinvigorate members for the covenant.

Besides that, Bredenhof suggests that more than ever we need to be reminded of the scriptural teaching of the covenant. We live in a time and place where there are other Christians and other Christian denominations who confess key reformational truths, but who do not have a sense of the importance of covenant. There is an inherent danger that young and old get caught up in the enthusiasm of meeting other Christians confessing such reformed beliefs, and that we relegate the teachings around the covenant to the background. That's a second reason for the book, to be alert and armed in relation to such contacts and connections.

I can attest to this; in the past decade or so, it has been necessary to discuss with church members the place of infant baptism in our church life. I have heard it said that "infant baptism is a matter of Christian freedom", I have had discussions with brothers and sisters who lost their conviction in relation to the practice of infant baptism and some of them have parted from the Free Reformed Churches, also because of this. I have been and am confronted with Christians from other church denominations who

love what we are but who hesitate to join, because of what we believe about our children.

For that reason I am deeply appreciative of Bredenhof's booklet. In it he draws out and emphasises the wonder of grace on which the covenant is founded. In it he points to the gospel message in the covenant in that is founded on the mediating work of Jesus Christ. He also extols the beauty of living in the covenant and the personal nature of it. Almighty God comes to us and to our children and declares himself to be our God. The theology surrounding the covenant is described in ways that make you as reader feel warm to the very special love of God and to the reality that we may (and do) belong to him. The pitfalls surrounding this doctrine are described in such a way that we learn to see clearly how this special relationship functions.

The references to Scripture, Old and New Testament, and the use of Scriptural metaphors help the reader to see the direct link between covenant teaching and God's Word. Of further interest is the interplay with the confessional standards of our churches. Bredenhof draws on all three standards to indicate how the confessions, whilst they make limited reference to covenant, never the less give very convincing support to this teaching. What I didn't know was that Zacharias Ursinus had actually written two Catechisms, the second one for seminary students and that in the second one he developed the covenant teaching far more than in the one we are better acquainted with (p.10).

In clear prose the book covers the essence of, the origins of, the parties in, the promises contained and the obligations flowing from the covenant of grace. It further speaks about living and dying in the covenant in a very practical and helpful manner. One chapter is devoted to children, as being included in God's covenant and it is described in a manner that must convince every faithful student of the Bible. Parents are appropriately addressed in the section, "how we concretely raise our children" (pp 50 – 54).

In a final chapter, Bredenhof applies the teaching of covenant to the manner of worship that as churches we practice. Worship is easily relegated to tradition or taste, but once seen from the perspective of the covenant conversation, the form that is in use takes on new and rich meaning.

It's here that I express a minor dis-

appointment. Bredenhof makes the case for children to be in the worship service, I totally support that position; what I would have liked to see was some positive direction in relation to involving them in the worship services and making the services more meaningful to them. "Many times ministers will work the kids into the sermons", Bredenhof says (p.53). I wished he was right; in my experience it's the exception rather than the rule, and even when it's done it's little more than a passing reference. If we are serious about this matter then we have to find ways to engage the children positively and productively so that they both know and feel that they belong, not just in the church, but to the LORD, and so impress upon them what a wonderful privilege that is.

By way of this review I want to encourage all members, to obtain a copy of the book, to read it, and to make it a discussion point in the family, and in their wider contacts. Use it to enhance your understanding, to regain passion for this integral segment of doctrine; use it to enhance your living, use it to defend what the Bible teaches on this integral subject. Make it your personal act of commemoration of last years Great Reformation, which was the 500th anniversary of that most significant event in the history of the LORD's church.

Bredenhof, W. (2015) "I Will Be Your God", An easy introduction to the covenant of grace. Fergus, Ontario, Canada: Inter-League Publication Board.

Available from Pro Ecclesia (they have just placed another order) for around A\$9.00

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Reformed Church of New Plymouth

If you are travelling in the New Plymouth area and want to worship at the Reformed Church, they are located at the **Hillsborough Hall, Corner of Egmont and Henwood Roads, Hillsborough** and the worship time is **10:30am**. Other details are on their website: <https://nprc.nz/>

Vicar Josh Flinn sustains examination



Mr Joshua Flinn being congratulated by Mr Paul Archbald (top), and signing the form of subscription (below) with the Stated Clerk of Presbytery, Mr John Holtslag looking on, after passing his final examination at the last session of the Wellington Presbytery.

Joshua felt the call to the ministry when he was 15, while there were still many vacant pulpits in the Reformed churches in New Zealand. On the advice of his father, however, he decided to finish high-school first and try to gain a bit of life experience. He became a

school teacher and had the privilege of teaching History and Classical Studies to high-school students in London, United Kingdom and also Auckland, New Zealand.

Yet as much as he loved teaching, Joshua continued to hear the call to be a pastor. In 2011 his session in the North Shore approved this call and preparations began for him to train for the ministry.

Joshua and his wife Hannah moved to Chicago, USA in 2013 to study at Mid-America Reformed Seminary. The following three years were times of both massive blessing and also unforeseen challenges (not least of all was the birth of their first child).

Over this time they were able to participate in two internships; one in British Columbia under Rev. Steve Swets (at Abbotsford United Reformed Church), and the other at the North Shore under Rev. John Rogers (at North Shore Reformed Church).

After graduating in 2016, God once more relocated Joshua and Hannah to Nelson, New Zealand. Under Rev. Daniel Wilson, Joshua completed a 12 month vicariate and became available for call in the RCNZ.

In July 2017 Joshua accepted a call from Palmerston North Reformed Church to be involved in the church planting work in New Plymouth.

Although he is not unfamiliar with the difficulties and pains of the ministry (his father and uncle having both been ministers), he has been heard to refer to the ministry as a 'dream-job'. After all, in what other job do you get to study the very words of God, get excited about them, and then talk about them to people every week?

He also says: 'Ministers live at the coal face. They might get covered in soot but they're also in the prime location to see the Holy Spirit's glorious work of making diamonds out of lumps of seemingly worthless rock.'

Joshua was ordained into the ministry on the 17th of December last year. To God be all the glory.

Missions in focus

Clarence and Elise Stolte

Visit to the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Port Vila



Clarence with Douglas Kaut (deacon in Port Vila congregation)

We (Clarence and Elise Stolte, from Masterton) had the privilege of travelling in November 2017 on behalf of the OMB to spend time with the Presbyterian Reformed Church in Port Vila, Vanuatu. We are excited to report on our brief visit, and hope and pray that this could be one small step towards a flourishing relationship between the RCNZ, and our brothers and sisters in Christ in both Vanuatu and Australia!

Background

At Synod (September 2017), the RCNZ became sister churches with the Presbyterian Reformed Church of Australia (PRCA). In itself, this is a wonderful step that both denominations are very thankful for!

It so happened around the same time, that it was also brought to the attention of the OMB that the PRCA needed help on their mission-field in Vanuatu. The OMB learnt that, while the mission field there is fairly well established (if you are able, read an article published in the December 2016 *Faith in Focus* which details the PRCA's work in Vanuatu since the 1970s), their only serving missionary (Andrew Fox) had to suddenly leave the field early 2017, due to his son's health.

The PRCA is a small denomination (8 congregations), supporting a large mission field (relative to its own size). Limited personnel and finances led them to approach the OMB for help.

At the OMB's first meeting post-Synod, it was decided that it would help greatly to obtain a first-hand impression of the PRCA's mission work in Vanuatu; and whether involvement there would fit with the OMB's direction and mission policies. Clarence and I were available at short notice, enabling us to meet Andrew Fox in Port Vila while he was there on a quick visit.

Vanuatu

Vanuatu is an island nation in the South Pacific, made up of 83 islands. It is a beautiful country, and has a big tourism industry, however most ni-Vanuatu live far removed from the luxuries that tourists experience there.

Most locals live a subsistence lifestyle; growing, or earning just enough to provide for their families each

day. Most people live in dirt or concrete floor houses without windows, which would be described in New Zealand as “shacks”, but for most of the year the weather is so lovely and warm, they are able to do most of their living outside, including their cooking. Unemployment is high, and education standards are generally poor. The ni-Vanuatu have a strong sense of family and community (we could learn a lot from them!).

Vanuatu has a rich Christian heritage, but despite this, nominalism is a real problem. Attending a church regularly is the cultural norm. In the most popular denominations, a personal relationship with God is not taught, but rather to attend church and do good works. Christ-filled, Biblical teaching is drastically lacking. That is why we find ourselves involved in mission work in a “Christian” country.

There are three Presbyterian Reformed Churches (PRC) in Vanuatu. The congregation in Malakula is the largest, with approximately 60 professing members, one pastor, and three elders. The congregation in Tanna is smaller, with approximately 20 professing members, and one elder. Although it is small, it is a consistent and well-established congregation.

While we would have loved to visit one or both of those congregations, we were only able to spend time in the congregation in Port Vila. This was fine though, for the purpose of our visit, as it is there where most of the need for help lies.

The suburb where the Port Vila congregation is located is a friendly, vibrant and safe community, with many children and young people. In Port Vila the language most commonly used is Bislama, a Pidgin English very similar to PNG’s Tok Pisin. Many people also speak some English or French.

The congregation in Port Vila is small, with only one elder (Josaiiah), and one deacon (Douglas). Because the city of Port Vila is the capital, and a central hub for the whole of Vanuatu, there are often young people and families coming and going for education and work. The congregation is quite transient, with frequent visitors.

While Andrew was still on the field, he was able to run a preaching training course for Josaiiah, and two other men, once a month for two years. Now he has left, Josaiiah preaches nearly every Sunday, along with running a weekly prayer meeting, and other spiritual over-

sight and administrative tasks. This is a weighty task for him to carry alone. He would love further training, but this isn’t possible while he is the sole-serving elder. There are other young men who are interested in studying towards ministry also, if they had the opportunity.

Our overwhelming impression was of a small, faithful group of believers, who are convicted that their Reformed faith is a shining light in a very nominally Christian culture. They however stand at risk of losing their point of difference, if they are not trained and instructed in confessional and Biblical teaching. This is why it would be so valuable to have ni-Vanuatu men trained for ministry.

Due to the OMB’s focus on gospel preaching, training men and a desire to concentrate on spreading the gospel in the South Pacific region, the OMB sees Vanuatu as an appropriate mission field to seek to assist on. The resources of the RCNZ would be a wonderful help to the PRCA as they desire to see the three Vanuatu PRC churches flourish, and continue to be self-sustaining. Therefore, the OMB are looking for an elder to serve in the Port Vila congregation for 2-3 years. This would allow for more spiritual and pastoral care, and encouragement for Josaiiah and the congregation, and the many frequent visitors. In the meantime, the PRCA and OMB will begin researching how the ni-Vanuatu men can best receive ministry training.

Whilst the culture is quite different from New Zealand, the situation would be relatively easy for someone who is willing to transition. The church has a vacant house on site, which has been used by previous missionaries. Bislama is a very easy language to pick up, and the church family is very friendly and welcoming.

Translation work

PRCA missionaries have been working on Bible translation projects over the years, into local Vanuatu languages. Andrew has been translating the first 10 books of the Big Nambas (language of Malakula) Old Testament, but is unsure whether he will be able to complete the OT due to his current circumstances. The entire New Testament has been published in writing for some time.

Imagine wanting to spend time in God’s word, but not being able to read it! Literacy across Vanuatu is incredibly low. The church in Malakula have been given equipment which they are currently using to record the NT onto



A map of Vanuatu showing Port Vila, and the islands Malakula and Tanna.



audio files. This will be completed late 2018, and the audio recording made available on 'Megavoice' (mp3-type solar powered units).

There are a small number of Reformed resources (i.e. Heidelberg Catechism) translated into Bislama, but there is scope for much more to be done!

What can you do?

Please keep the Vanuatu PRC in your prayers, specifically Josaiiah and Douglas in their callings. Pray that they would lead in wisdom and godly example, and that more ni-Vanuatu men will grow in faith and godliness, and be able to be called to serve the churches as elders and deacons. Pray for an elder from the RCNZ who can serve in Port Vila, providing encouragement and support during this critical time.

Please get in touch with the OMB if you would like to understand more about what the elder's role might look like. We would love to hear from you. Please also pray for us as we seek mission work opportunities on your behalf.

If you happen to travel to Vanuatu on holiday (it's only a short flight from Auckland!), be sure to attend the Presbyterian Reformed Church in Fres Wota 5, Port Vila! Introduce yourself as from the RCNZ, and we guarantee you will receive a warm welcome, just as we did!

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(top) Elise with Josaiiah's wife Anet, and their beautiful children.

(middle) Andrew Fox (Australia), Josaiiah Benua (Vanuatu) and Clarence Stolte (New Zealand). What a privilege it would be for the three denominations these men represent to work closely together for the glory of God's great gospel!

(below) Josaiiah and Andrew learning to use Audio Bible recording equipment from Greg Carlson, SIL.



(top) Elder Josaiah Benua. Only the 'Sundei Servis' and 'Prea Miting' still regularly run!
 (below) Sunday worship.