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The Hezekiah response

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Editorial

King Hezekiah, from what we read in the Scriptures, was a good king, and that is also the opinion of many students of the Bible and commentators. And what is notable is that his father Ahaz did not do what was right in the sight of the LORD his God, as his father David did. In fact, after Hezekiah, Manasseh became king, and we see him as an exceedingly wicked king in Jerusalem.

During his reign he did do what was right in the sight of the Lord, as David did before him. He removed the places and objects of idolatry and put into effect other reforms for the proper worship of God. He trusted in the LORD the God of Israel ... he clung to the LORD; he did not depart from following Him

However, when reading through 2 Kings 20, we come to verse 19 which has a somewhat perplexing ending. Let me explain. In that passage, Hezekiah responds to Isaiah, "The word of the LORD which you have spoken is good." For he thought, "Is it not so, if there will be peace and truth in my days?" (2 Kings 20:19). It seemed to me, that King Hezekiah's response was actually one of selfishness and self-interest. He was more interested in peace in his day, than considering the consequences for his offspring. And isn't that the case so often, even in our day? An interesting point here is that some Bible commentators agree, and some do not.

Our contributors, Messrs Willemse and Holtslag take the side of those who do not. They comment: "In reference to your request about the 'selfish shelving of problems' angle, I agree that it is a possible, sinful attitude that we might fall into ... however, having looked at the [original] text and context, neither of us think that this is what Hezekiah was doing. It then becomes an illegitimate application of this text, even if it is a sin that we might commit." and "... reading this text in the light of 2 Chronicles helps us clarify what is going on".

Thanks to our contributors for doing the hard yards by comparing Scripture with Scripture and providing us with something to ponder.

Mr Michael Willemse removes the puzzle.

Mr Andre Holtslag warns against the danger of resting on our laurels.

Mrs Sally Davey reviews Ron Dreher's recent book, *The Benedict Option Letters from New Zealand* looks at what's in a name.

Protestant Reformed minister Joshua Engelsma writes "Wanted –men for the times".

Book reviews are: *Preaching Christ from the Psalms*, by Sidney Greidanus, reviewed by OP pastor Everett Henes; *True Beauty*, by Carolyn Mahaney and Nicole Whitacre, reviewed by OP member Victoria Van Dixhoorn; *Submission: What Every Christian Needs to Know About Islam*, by Marvin W. Heyboer, reviewed by John Van Dyk.

Focus on home includes Gleanings, and a profile of Vicar Graeme Zuidema.

Late minister Johan D. Tangelder writes about standing on the shoulders of giants.

Cover image: Hezekiah showing off his wealth to envoys of the Babylonian king, oil on canvas by Vicente López Portaña, 1789.

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 Dort, 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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Hezekiah's puzzling response to God – a blot on an otherwise perfect life?

Michael Willemse

Introduction

I don't know how it is for you, but there are certain passages in the Bible which puzzle me each time I read them. It is like bumping into a knot which I've not yet been able to untie and so, each time I read the passage again, I chew on it some more before moving on with the nagging feeling that I do not yet "get it." For me, one of those passages has always been Hezekiah's strange encounter with the prophet Isaiah in 2 Kings 20:12-21. But, as I hope you will find by the time you finish this article, there are often real blessings when we wrestle with those knots! Those who dig for hidden treasure are rewarded.

An exemplary king

Before looking at those puzzling verses, we need to take in the big picture of Hezekiah's life to this point. There are lengthy accounts of Hezekiah's reign in 2 Kings 18-20, Isaiah 36-39 and 2 Chronicles 29-32. The accounts in 2 Kings and Isaiah are very similar – in fact much of these accounts are a word for word match. Second Chronicles, on the other hand, has a very different focus, presenting Hezekiah as a second Solomon who re-establishes temple worship at the heart of the life of God's people. What all three accounts agree on is that Hezekiah is a good king, which is surprising.

Hezekiah was the son of Ahaz, one

of the most wicked kings of Judah. Ahaz had taken away the temple furnishings and shut its doors. In the place of temple worship, he had established the worship of foreign gods throughout Judah. When Hezekiah ascended to the throne, he immediately began a thorough-going process of cleansing the temple and re-establishing worship of the one true God. Just over half way through the first month of his reign, sacrifices and offerings began again in the way that God had prescribed. In the second month of his reign, the Passover was celebrated in a way that had not happened since Solomon, and the people responded with great joy. When the feast was completed, the people went out and destroyed the idols and places of their worship throughout Judah and even up into the northern kingdom, as revival swept through the kingdom.

Later, six years after the fall of the kingdom of Israel in the north and the exile of its people to Assyria, the Assyrians captured the fortified cities of Judah and sent a large army to Jerusalem. When they sought to discourage the people by mocking their God, Hezekiah cried out to the Lord and his angel put 185,000 Assyrian soldiers to death in one night, causing the Assyrians to withdraw from Jerusalem and not to return.

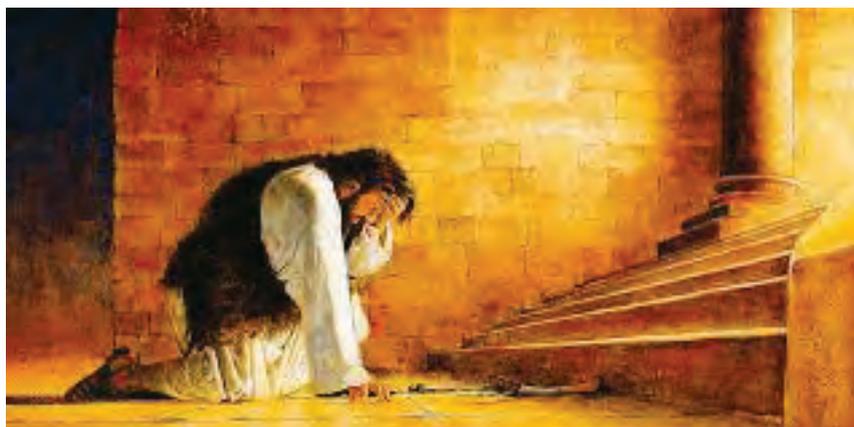
Hezekiah appears to be the ideal king! In describing Hezekiah's reign, 2Kings 18:5-8 says "Hezekiah trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of

"The word of the Lord you have spoken is good," for he thought, "There will be peace and security in my lifetime." Ouch! Is that as much of a clanger as it sounds? How are we to understand this statement?

Judah, either before him or after him. He held fast to the Lord and did not cease to follow him; he kept the commands the Lord had given Moses. And the Lord was with him; he was successful in whatever he undertook. He rebelled against the king of Assyria and did not serve him. From watchtower to fortified city, he defeated the Philistines, as far as Gaza and its territory.”

The puzzling episode

To this point in Hezekiah’s life, we form the view of him as a thoroughly good man who trusts in the Lord even when everything is against him. But, around that time or perhaps even in the middle of the incident with the Assyrians, Hezekiah becomes ill and Isaiah tells him to get his affairs in order because he is going to die. Hezekiah bursts into tears and pleads with God for his life – pointing



out his faithful trust in the Lord. Before Isaiah has even left the palace, God sends him back to Hezekiah with the gracious promise that he will grant him fifteen more years of life. Isaiah applies a poultice of figs and Hezekiah’s health is restored. Before him lies a test: he knows he will not die for fifteen years – how will he respond?

Hearing of his recovery, the king of Babylon sends messengers with letters and a gift. At this stage Assyria is still the super power of the day and Babylon is a relatively small kingdom. It appears that Babylon is seeking an alliance with Judah against Assyria – and, no doubt, the fact that their God singlehandedly put a large Assyrian army to death and miraculously healed Judah’s king makes them an attractive partner! Hezekiah receives the Babylonian envoys gladly and shows them all the treasures of his

kingdom. It seems clear that he, too, welcomes the idea of an alliance and is keen to show that Judah is a desirable ally.

Following this visit, Isaiah confronts Hezekiah because he has sought security in a human alliance instead of in God – a stark contrast to Hezekiah’s earlier reliance on the Lord. Isaiah prophesies that, in days to come, Babylon will defeat Jerusalem and carry off all its treasures as well of some of Hezekiah’s own descendants – but this will not happen in Hezekiah’s lifetime (in fact, in God’s grace, this did not happen for another 115 years.)

Hezekiah responds “The word of the Lord you have spoken is good,” for he thought, “There will be peace and security in my lifetime.” (2 Kings 20:19) Ouch! Is that as much of a clanger as it sounds? How are we to understand this statement? Does it mean that Hezekiah is a self-interested fraud after all? What about all the good he had done and his past faith in the Lord?

1st possibility – Hezekiah is (or has become) proud

At first glance, it seems that Hezekiah’s success has gone to his head. He has come to see himself as bullet-proof and entitled to God’s blessings and now all he cares about is his own comfort and wellbeing. That is possible of course – we’ve seen it in the lives of other kings like David (in the incident with Bathsheba) and Solomon. But we struggle with this because it seems so out of character. We desperately want Hezekiah to be good and we find it hard to believe he is otherwise. But, we have this nagging fear that maybe, underneath it all, he is just being proud after all.

Another possibility – Hezekiah is thankful for this temporary reprieve

Perhaps Hezekiah’s response is a little more complex than we first give him credit for. It is possible that Hezekiah recognises that his heart is “prone to wander” and is also well aware that the hearts of the people are too – he knows their very up and down history after all. His response may well be a humble acknowledgement that God is just in his judgement and in the punishment he has foreshadowed but also merciful in staying his hand at this time. On this reading, Hezekiah’s response is not one of selfishness but one of humility and gratitude. But ... this view seems a little too charitable towards Hezekiah.

ah and doesn't seem altogether to do justice to the very bald statement "For he thought, "Will there not be peace in my lifetime?""

Towards a better understanding – a process of repentance and grace

Were it not for the account in 2 Chronicles, we might well be left having to choose between these two possibilities without really being sure. However, this third account indicates that 2 Kings and Isaiah are compressing into a single incident what was actually a process. The Chronicler tells us that, when the Babylonian envoys came, "God left him to test him and to know everything that was in his heart." (2 Chronicles 32:31). This revealed that instead of responding with gratitude to his miraculous healing, Hezekiah's heart was proud (2 Chronicles 32:25) because he leaned on men and not God. But, when confronted with this, Hezekiah repented of his pride and so did the people and the Lord therefore delayed his judgement so it did not happen in Hezekiah's lifetime (2 Chronicles 32:26.)

So, was Hezekiah proud? Yes. Was Hezekiah acquiescing in the justice of God's judgement? Yes. But he also repented of his pride and received mercy. Was Hezekiah thankful for God's gracious reprieve? Yes! As you can see, the answer is more layered than it appears, more 'both and' than 'either or'.

So what? What does this have to do with us?

There are some really practical applications that flow out of this Biblical account and the way that we generally deal with it!

1. Don't view people as binaries and don't respond to them that way

Our struggle with Hezekiah's account shows that we tend to be very simplistic and binary (there are only two possibilities) in the way we view people. We want to be able to put them in a box. They are either good or bad, either my friend or my enemy, either trustworthy or deceitful and so on. We demonstrate

this in a couple of ways: We can view someone as a good person until they slip up badly and then they become a bad person – someone who cannot be trusted; We also do this with ourselves – we tend to think a great deal of ourselves and our standing with God and others until we stuff up badly or give into sin. Then our confidence is shattered and we think of ourselves as completely worthless.

The truth is that all God's people are works in progress – people being re-formed in the image of their Saviour. Because of this we are all a mixture of good and bad. The good is to be celebrated and the bad to be challenged. Hezekiah was a very good king but he was not perfect. Although he trusted in God, this was not the first time he tried a human solution. Before seeking God's help through prayer, he had tried to buy off the king of Assyria by stripping the very gold off the temple doors which he had put there at the beginning of his reign! (2 Chronicles 29:3; 2 Kings 18:15.) Expect people – even the best people – to fail you and don't be crushed when they do. Other people are not your saviour – only Jesus is. Don't expect from them what you will only find in him.

2. Beware the good times

It's instructive to note that when the chips were down, Hezekiah did very well. When God's people were in disarray, the temple doors closed and idolatry was rife; when the Assyrians were at the door, Hezekiah trusted in God and cast himself on God's mercy. It was at a time when it seemed his troubles were over – right after God's gracious response to his desperate prayer for life – that Hezekiah stumbled. This was true for David and Solomon and Elijah and the same is true for every Christian – it is often when things are going very well and especially after some great victory that we are at our most vulnerable. At our worst times we know that we have no other option than to cry out to God, but in peace and plenty we are inclined to be proud of "our" accomplishments

and to lean on our own resources. We often handle blight better than blessing.

Pray for your leaders when times are tough but pray even harder when times are good. When God blesses them and you, be sure to remember that it is because of what God has done and not because of what we have done. Remember that it is when we feel most secure and are least aware of the devil's attacks that we are in most danger and need God to hold us up more than ever.

J C Ryle has this to say: "Let us learn to pray for humility. "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall." (Prov. 16:18.) **There is far more wickedness in all our hearts than we know.** We never can tell how far we might fall, if once placed in temptation. There is no degree of sin into which the greatest saint may not run if he is not held up by the grace of God, and if he does not watch and pray. **The seeds of every wickedness lie hidden in our hearts.** They only need the convenient season to spring forth into a mischievous vitality. "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" "He who trusts in himself is a fool." (1 Cor. 10:12; Prov. 28:26.) Let our daily prayer be, "Uphold me and I will be delivered." (Psalm 119:117.)"

3. God's grace is always greater than our sin

God's purpose in testing Hezekiah was to show him what God already knew was in his heart. He did this so that Hezekiah would repent of his sin and receive God's grace again. God wounds in order to heal. He humbles us in order to lift us up. He challenges us in order to change us.

When your leaders fail – and they will – challenge their sin, but hold out God's grace to them as well. God is slow to anger and quick to forgive. He has never rejected those who come to him in repentance. There's a lesson in there for how we deal with our own falls as well!

Michael Willemse is the minister in the Reformed Church of Hamilton

"The truth is that all God's people are works in progress — people being re-formed in the image of their Saviour."

The Danger of Reclining

“Kings were not to trust in their own armies or alliances with surrounding nations. And this is probably what Hezekiah had in mind when he welcomed the envoys and showed them his treasures. It appears then that times of peace and plenty led Hezekiah to ‘drop his guard,’ as it were. A time of reclining had devastating consequences for the people of Judah.”

Andre Holtslag

I am not sure who made this observation first, but it has been said that ministers face three particular temptations: to *whine*, to *shine*, and to *recline*. They can fall into the sin of *complaining* when things are difficult, or *pride* when things are going well, or *lounging about* because there is no trouble on the horizon, which can have serious consequences.

And this is true for anyone in leadership. We see examples of all three in the Bible: Aaron and Elijah provide us with spectacular examples of whining in Numbers 12 and 1 Kings 19, Nebuchadnezzar of pride in Daniel 4, and King David of reclining in 2 Samuel 11:1ff.

We see something of these temptations also in the life of King Hezekiah. He had many military successes, including keeping the world super-power of that time, Assyria, at bay. We are told about the riches of gold and silver and precious stones that he amassed (2 Chron. 32:27). He also received the astonishing blessing of having 15 extra years added to his life (2 Kings 20). He shines brightly as one of the best kings that Israel and Judah ever had. Indeed, the Lord Himself said of Hezekiah, He “trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him. He held fast to the LORD and did not cease to follow him; he kept the commands the LORD had given Moses. And the LORD was with him; he was successful in whatever he undertook.” However, as the Rev. Michael Willemse has already explained, it is at this stage in his life that we read that his “heart was proud (2 Chron. 32:35).” And it is during this time that he welcomed the envoys from Babylon and showed them all the treasures in his storehouses. His defeat

of the forces from Assyria, his treasures and his 15 extra years of life probably contributed to an inflated view of his own abilities and a carelessness about his responsibilities as the king. Deuteronomy 17:14-20 provides the laws for kings. In that law, kings are warned against amassing gold (v17b), a command, as we noted above, that Hezekiah plainly broke. In the second place, kings were “not to acquire great numbers of horses ... or make the people return to Egypt.” In other words, kings were not to trust in their own armies or alliances with surrounding nations. And this is probably what Hezekiah had in mind when he welcomed the envoys and showed them his treasures. It appears then that times of peace and plenty led Hezekiah to ‘drop his guard,’ as it were. A time of reclining had devastating consequences for the people of Judah.

Well, Winston Churchill once said, “Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” So lest we repeat the mistake of Hezekiah, let us think about the dangers of reclining today.

Just recently I was at a presentation from a spokesman of a mission/diaconal organization that is busy in countries where Christians are persecuted. The spokesman shared with us a conversation that had drastically affected his own thinking. About 10 years ago he had been in China. A local there told him that we believers in the West had it the wrong way around. When asked to explain what he meant, he replied that we in the West see one day of suffering as *abnormal* and many days of health and prosperity and peace as *normal*, when it should be that we count each day of peace as an abnormal and extraordinary blessing. Was he right, do you think? 1 Peter 4:12 and 1 John 3:13 suggest he was. What kept the Apostle Paul from

becoming conceited in his work was a 'thorn in the flesh.' He said, "That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong." The church in the West has enjoyed a time of remarkable peace and prosperity. We are free to worship and share the gospel, without fear of arrest. But is the church in the West healthy? Is the general trend heading in the direction of a greater biblical faithfulness and personal holiness? Or is it heading in the direction of a greater tolerance of sin and heresy and anything-goes worship? I know of someone who lives in a New Zealand town where there is no Reformed Church nearby. So this person has been visiting the different churches in town. They have to travel a distance to get to town and they noticed that all the churches have just one service that begins at 9 or 9:30am. Now, it could be that these believers just cannot wait any longer to worship the Lord. It could also be that they wish to have as much of the day available for evangelism. May those indeed be the reasons! But it is also possible that the earlier service time is so that the folk can get worship out of the way early and have more of the day free for shopping and the beach. For this is the sort of thing that happens in a time of recline.

But let's narrow the focus of this question to the wider Reformed world. In recent years we have ended or placed under strain our ecclesiastical ties with other Reformed churches (like the Christian Reformed Churches in North America and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands – Liberated). And this has been because of a departure from the teaching of the Bible about things like Six-day creation and women in office and homosexuality and worship practices.

As we come closer to home, at their next synod, the Christian Reformed Churches of Australia will consider an overture from a Classis seeking a change in the church order that will remove the requirement for two services on Sunday and replace it with a requirement that there be at least one. I hope this overture will be defeated. It is symptomatic of the fact that in countries where there is freedom to worship, the trend is to worship less. And we in the RCNZ are by no means immune to this disease. There may not be a church order change on the horizon here, but is the trend in our churches towards a *better* attend-

ance at the second service, or a *decline* in attendance? In our persecution-free land, is the trend among office-bearers and members towards a *careful* observance of the Lord's Day or a *carelessness* about how we observe the Lord's Day? For example, are more of us avoiding long-distance travel on the Lord's Day, for example, even if it means more expensive flights and/or that we have to take some leave on Monday morning? Because if we will not do easy things like this as part of our devotion to Christ, do we really think we will do the hard things that come with persecution?

1 Peter 5:8 says, "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." Believers are



warned also, in Ephesians 6, to "put on the full armour of God so that [we] can take [our] stand against the devil's schemes." This is not a call to a life of comfort and recline. D.A. Carson has rightly observed, "We do not drift into holiness." Instead, as we read in Hebrews 12:14, we are to "make every effort ... to be holy."

And if this is true for every believer, it is *doubly* true for those in Christian leadership.

Hezekiah was the king. He had a special responsibility as a leader when it came to the spiritual well-being of the people. And today it is the task of elders (which includes ministers) to exercise oversight (1 Peter 5:2). In Greek, the word literally means to 'have scope

over.' If you were to try and draw a picture of the elder/shepherd, it should be of a man with spiritual binoculars who constantly sweeps his gaze over the flock, always on the look out for trouble. When the Apostle Paul talked with the elders of Ephesus (Acts 20), he used the imagery of sheep and shepherds. And what you don't read there is a poetic description of cuddly and fluffy carefree sheep, casually strolling about in the safety of a sun-drenched paddock while the shepherd lies in the sun chewing on a stalk of grass. There is concern in Paul's words. He urges the elders to keep watch over themselves and the flock. He warns them that savage wolves will come in to trouble the flock, and that trouble-makers will also arise from within the congregation.

So how does the Lord equip His people for works of service and guard them against false teaching and ungodly living? He does this by the reading and preaching of the Word, prayer, and the proper administration of the sacraments.

In terms of preaching, it is right that we hear about the gospel and God's grace in Christ Jesus. 'More of this!' is the repeated request one hears today. But have a look at Q/A 115 of the Heidelberg Catechism:

Q. No one in this life can obey the Ten Commandments perfectly: why then does God want them preached so pointedly?

A. First, so that the longer we live the more we may come to know our sinfulness and the more eagerly look to Christ for forgiveness of sins and righteousness.

Second, so that, while praying to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, we may never stop striving to be renewed more and more after God's image, until after this life we reach our goal: perfection.

The gospel only makes sense in connection with the law and sin. It is only as the blackness of our sin and misery is exposed that Christ becomes most lovely! Ministers and elders, are you preaching/reading sermons that have the flavour of Q/A 115? Members, are you asking for preaching that has the flavour of Q/A 115? We love to hear the assurance of salvation in our worship services. But are we as eager to hear the reading of the law and confession of sin?

The third mark of a true church, which is also a part of the proper administration of the sacraments, is the practice of church discipline. I had occasion recently to re-read the list of sins that were once considered the proper subject of discipline, which D.G. VanderPyl includes in his Church Order Commentary (p.146):

a. Sins of Omission

Failure to have children baptised, non-attendance of catechism classes, failure to make public profession of faith, non-attendance of the Lord's Supper, an unwillingness to become reconciled, a refusal to contribute to the support of the church and a failure to come to church services (like the second service).

b. Sins of Commission

Gross sins by both private members and office-bearers, forsaking one's own church and slander, joining a sect, transgression of the seventh commandment, to be quarrelsome, unscriptural divorce, membership in secret societies, Sunday-work and recreation, worldliness and deviation from doctrinal standards. Consideration must also be given to that which prevents the holiness of the Lord's Day such as work, except works of mercy or necessity and any recreational activity which interferes with the worship.

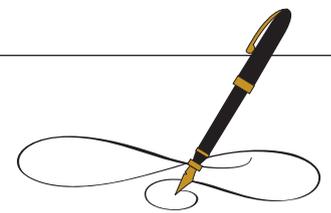
I say 'once considered' because I expect that many will have their eyebrows raised as they read this list and view it as quite draconian. My point

here is not necessarily to defend this list as THE list, but to ask elders if we are serious about the honour of the Lord, the purity of the church, and the welfare of erring members? As Brother VanderPyl says, "It is a sad state of affairs when a session is not willing to exercise its responsibility to admonish, warn, censure, convict and excommunicate delinquent members of the Church." All too often, however, this is exactly what happens in a time of recline.

If nothing else, the account of Hezekiah is a timely warning. He was a godly king. Nevertheless, a time of peace and plenty led to spiritual laziness and eventually to spiritual decline among the people. The solution is not in our own ability to change or to 'stem the tide.' The Apostle Peter is an example here. He once said to Jesus, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." However, we know what happened just a few hours later, as Peter did indeed deny Jesus, three times, and then fled. Later on, when the Lord Jesus asked Peter, three times, if he loved Him, there was no self-reliance in Peter's reply: "He said, 'Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.'" And then Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep." The church of the Lord Jesus needs elders who love the Lord Jesus. Brothers, are we walking in close fellowship with Him? And to love Him is to love His people. Are we giving our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4)? Are we overseeing? On guard? Keeping watch? Alert? Being examples to the flock? And as members, are we praying for our elders? May the Lord open our eyes to the danger of recline and may He reform us where we need to be reformed.

Mr Andre Holtslag is the minister of the Reformed Church of Avondale.

"If ministers wish to do any good, let them labour to form Christ, not to form themselves, in their hearers." John Calvin



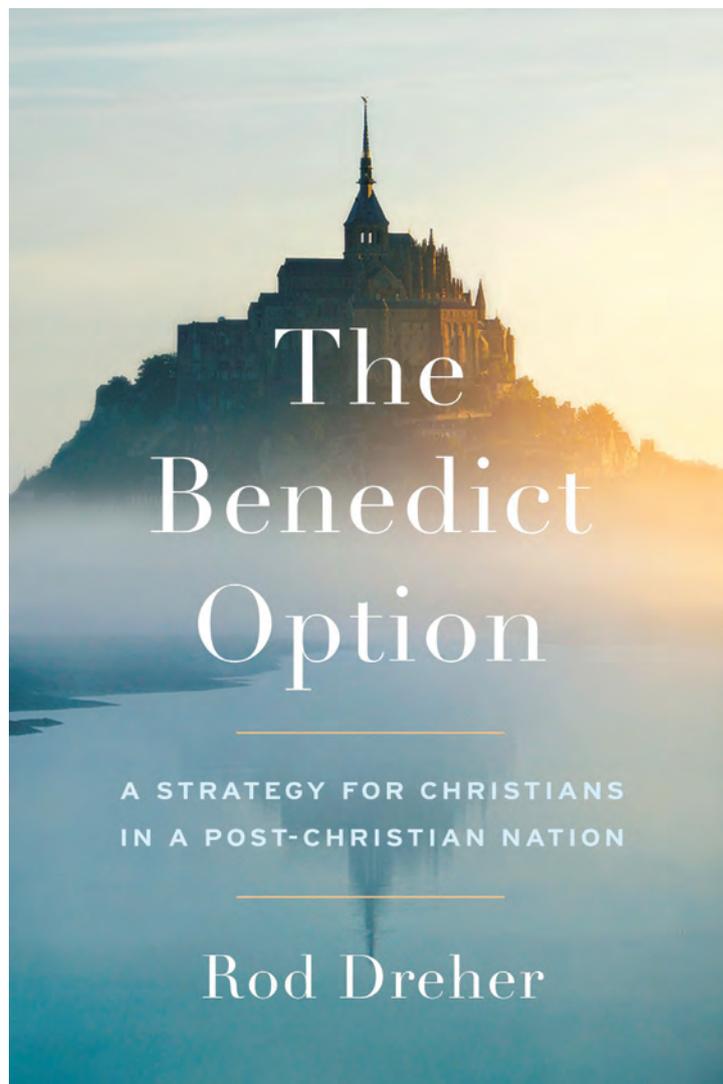
The Benedict option

This is a review of Rod Dreher's book *The Benedict Option* (Sentinel, New York, 2018)

When a book is talked about as much as this one was last year, it raises your curiosity to read it. Perhaps there is even a duty to read it, given the influence it seems to be having. And so I did. Initially I had been sceptical, thinking it would be yet another call to run away and hide from the influence of liberal America. I was also dubious about the book's focus on Benedict – I knew the author was an Eastern Orthodox Christian, so I was prepared for a plug for the medieval monastic movement, or some modern-day equivalent.

However, not all my scepticism was justified, and there was a lot in the book that was wise, encouraging and motivating. I'd like to share some of the things I learned from it, as well as some of the reservations I still have about it.

Rod Dreher describes himself as a believing Christian and a committed conservative; but one who began to have grave reservations about the market philosophy and consumerism of modern American conservatism about the time his first child was born. He could see that there was something wrong with the "me first" consumer culture that was bad for families and bad for the Christian church. He could also see that many Christians had lost their way, lost their grasp of biblical truth, and were assuming that being American and Protestant was somehow equivalent to being a Christian. Faced with the torrent of increasingly aggressive secularism, Dreher believes that many existing churches will simply be swept away. They are too flimsy, lack solid convictions, and are completely unprepared for what they must face. He believes that, despite efforts to put up resistance to abortion, gay rights and same-sex marriage, Christians in America have lost the culture



wars. Big business, which used to side with conservative Christians in state and national politics, has now switched sides and Christians face battles over religious liberty alone. Christian businesses, Christian colleges and even churches, must face their battles unaided by any real or imagined cultural consensus. Our views

“... the Benedict Option is a call to undertaking the long and patient work of reclaiming the real world from the artifice, alienation, and atomization of modern life. It is a way of seeing the world and of living in the world that undermines modernity’s big lie: that humans are nothing more than ghosts in a machine, and we are free to adjust its settings in any way we like.”

are considered “abominable prejudice”. And as conservative Anglican theologian Ephraim Radner has said, “There is no safe place in the world or in our churches within which to be a Christian. It is a new epoch.” (p. 9)

In response, Dreher presents the example of Benedict of Nursia, the sixth-century founder of the monastic movement that bears his name. Benedict lived in a time of drastic social upheaval, in which Rome – the centre of his civilization – had been sacked by the Goths. His world was quickly being transformed, all norms seemed up for grabs, and the future was very uncertain. His monasteries provided order and clarity for the monks who lived in them; and a pattern of life based on Christian ideals (set out in the Benedictine Order) which was to endure for many centuries. Dreher believes that what Benedict was doing for his chaotic world could be adapted in various ways to provide hope and direction for Christians in our own situation. We are in a situation of flux, and even many Christians are not sure of what they believe. We need self-discipline and clarity if we are to stand firm in the coming times. Benedict’s Rule, or something like it, Dreher contends, is needed to provide focus for our lives. (Well-schooled Protestants who “have a heart to study the Law of the Lord and to do it” like Ezra (see Ezra 7:10) did, would doubt that they need an extra Rule to guide them; but the point is more likely that we need self-discipline and motivation like Benedict’s).

In order to show how we became what we are in the West today, Dreher provides a good overview of the way modern secularism emerged from the Middle Ages onward, highlighting the contributions the Renaissance and Enlightenment made to its human-centredness and rationalism. The horrors of the two world wars simply finished things off by destroying the optimism about human nature and human progress which had existed before. The resulting individualism and the pursuit of material goods and pleasure which took hold in the 1960s produced a situation where the West has become rudderless. Without the Christian faith to undergird the freedoms of democracy we have increasing lawlessness, social breakdown and indeed despair.

It is no good, as Dreher explains, for Christians to imagine that the solution is to do what conservative Christians have done for decades – and that (if

you are American), by voting Republican everything will be fixed. “Though Donald Trump won the presidency in part with the strong support of Catholics and Evangelicals [I would add *white* Evangelicals], the idea that someone as robustly vulgar, fiercely combative, and morally compromised as Trump will be an avatar for the restoration of Christian morality and social unity is beyond delusional. He is not a solution to the problem of America’s cultural decline, but a symptom of it.” (p. 79). Indeed, Dreher continues a couple of pages later, “If conservative church leaders aren’t extraordinarily careful in how they manage their public relationship to the Trump administration, anti-Trump blowback will do severe damage to the church’s reputation.” (p. 81) Our witness is damaged by supporting, then attempting to justify, unsavoury leaders.

What Dreher advocates is a clear-thinking return to Christian ideals and a Christian way of life, in community, in such a way that American Christians – and Christians in the West in general – are able to become a beacon of light to those adrift in the modern, liberal and secular world. “We are not trying to repeal seven hundred years of history, as if that were possible. Nor are we trying to save the West. We are only trying to build a Christian way of life that stands as an island of sanctity and stability amid the high tide of liquid modernity.” (p. 53-4). He pictures groups of Christians meeting together, working together, and even living closer together, to build strong communities based on faith who will support and encourage each other in the tough times to come; as well as to reach out to the lost in the world beyond.

Dreher’s Eastern Orthodoxy becomes apparent, I think, in what he says in his chapter about the church. We would tend to think, given what he has said about the way Christians should support one another in a hostile world, that this is what the church does; the church being the visible body of Christ to which all true believers will belong, and which pledges to teach, admonish, love and encourage its members. However, Dreher emphasizes the liturgical life of the church, and sees it primarily as the place where we act out age-old ritual practices which nourish, remind, refresh and discipline (through repeated exercise) Christians as they meet weekly or more often to practise them.

This chapter will give Reformed Chris-

tians pause for thought. We are rightly wary of ritual, and the idolatry that it so easily morphs into. And we know that healthy, biblically-focused church life involves a lot more than meeting for public worship, however important that is. How I picture his insights really being played out today is in groups like William Wilberforce and his friends at Clapham, near London, around the turn of the 19th century. They lived near each other so that they could meet often in each other's homes, and were part of a church together where they were taught and encouraged in their work. They shared ideas, prayed together, were examples to each other, and helped each other in their common cause. Most of us could probably think of ways we could encourage each other in small groups in the wider context of the church; in ways that also reach out to the world around us.

There are several of Dreher's specific insights I thought especially helpful. One was that, if we are going to have any credence regarding sexual deviancies, we need to make sure that we live lives of sexual purity ourselves. Many in the unbelieving world are only too aware of the moral failings of some church leaders. But what, he asks, of the sexual promiscuity of many young and not-so-young church members who call themselves Christians? These are a disgrace to the

name of Christ, and rightly so.

A second is that we should prepare for opposition in the workplace; for loss of promotion, loss of sales, or even the loss of our jobs or businesses should the pressure to conform become stronger. This is happening right now in some service industries (think of accommodation or wedding planning) and in the medical and nursing worlds. Teachers and college professors and administrators are another group in the U.S. who face such issues. Dreher reminds us of the dignity of manual labour and many trades, where these pressures are not so direct. Perhaps, in the future, we may need to accept that engaging in these kinds of work, with lower expectations of income, is preferable to caving in to the gods of this age. Christians in the past have accepted a lower standard of living in order to remain faithful to Christ, and this is probably something we need to prepare for. The chapter entitled "Preparing for Hard Labor" is a very edifying read.

Likewise, a final chapter on "Man and the Machine" is a useful reminder about the pitfalls of technology. When our thinking is constantly mediated by what reaches us online; when new fads "turn worship into an electronic spectacle", Dreher suggests we are yielding our souls to false theology. He argues

that immersion in technology causes us to lose our collective memory as Christians – and without memory, we don't know who we are. He warns against the tendency to live in the artificial world of the internet: "... the Benedict Option is a call to undertaking the long and patient work of reclaiming the real world from the artifice, alienation, and atomization of modern life. It is a way of seeing the world and of living in the world that undermines modernity's big lie: that humans are nothing more than ghosts in a machine, and we are free to adjust its settings in any way we like." (p. 236)

This is an interesting book, full of pointed and challenging insights about our current state of preparedness as Christians in this alien land; and with plenty of suggestions about how we might take more resolute action. Various reviewers have called it "prophetic", "wise", "provocative" and "convicting". Russell Moore, himself a Christian leader on the front line of these kinds of issues, comments: "I'm more missionary than monastery, but I think every Christian should read this book... Even if you don't agree with everything in this book, there are warnings here to heed, and habits here to practice." I agree.

Letters from New Zealand

D. G. Vanderpyl

November 1978

Just recently I came across a little article in *The Banner*, entitled "Outsiders". Many years ago a minister in our denomination, serving a rather large church in a small community, presented his session with a bold, astonishing and even somewhat rash idea. He suggested that the congregation sponsor a citywide evangelistic campaign.

After the initial shock had worn off, a nervous discussion followed. It had never been done before! Their church was Dutch, the community American! Who would come? One elder, not at all convinced of the wisdom of the proposal, put his misgivings into these words: "But Dominee," he said, "suppose we

have a convert, an American. What in the world will we do with him?"

We can smile at the story. It happened a very long time ago. But the question is still asked: "Why do some among us still feel like outsiders?"

The sooner we become aware of our responsibility to reach out to our community with the precious Reformed faith, the better. We do not seem to be sufficiently aware of this grave responsibility. Of course, it is difficult and embarrassing to warn people that they are heading for eternal disaster if they do not repent. We'd better remind ourselves though, that God requires the blood of those who perish from those who fail to speak up. God warns us in Ezekiel that He will punish us if we don't get His message

out to all those outside the gate.

The Hamilton church operates a telephone counselling service and recently they were asked to submit a statement as to its purpose and function, to be included in a Directory for Social Agencies. The following definition of their aim was given:

"Crisis is a telephone counselling service, available 24 hours a day. The counsellors will seek to present a Bible oriented approach to problem solving, inter-personal conflicts, stress, fear and pain. Crisis is therefore also church based and its follow-up work seeks to provide a spiritual and emotional home in the accepting and loving fellowship of the church, especially for the lonely, distressed and the aged."

The minister of the Bucklands Beach church, Rev. Ken J. Campbell, prepared a small booklet, called "Critique on the Johnson Report." The recommendations of the Johnston report, if accepted by Parliament, will gravely endanger the moral and spiritual education of our children. This Report, in its entirety, seeks to embrace every aspect of the upbringing and education of the children, but it does not stop there. The aim is a continued oversight and education of these children right into adulthood. And so, Rev. Campbell concludes in his critique, "Every Christian ought to seek, without delay, the establishment of Christian schools." A copy of this critique may be obtained by writing to Rev. K. J. Campbell, minister of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Bucklands Beach.

March 1979

Nothing goes swifter than time as the years go by. As David said so clearly in Psalm 90 and concluded, "So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom."

But as we look back, we can't escape the truth that it is only a few short years from "diapers to dignity and from dignity to decomposition," as someone once said. As we enter another new year, we may compare it to a long, long road which has many bends and where each turn sometimes brings us a surprise, though not always a delight; it is only as we journey along that road of life that the various events reveal themselves. Some with, but too many without any anticipation at all.

The Reformed Church Family camp in the North Island has always been a good place for many of our church members to end the old and begin the new year in the company of brothers and sisters in the Lord. A member of one of our small churches once told me how much the camp means to him and his family, because it is the Family Camp which makes them aware that the Reformed Church is bigger than just that small group that worships in that small town somewhere in New Zealand.

This year the theme was "25 Years of Reformed Churches in New Zealand." The morning devotions were lead by Rev. J. Goris and he dealt with the seven churches in Asia Minor of the 2nd and 3rd chapters of John's Revelation. Comparisons and similarities were sought with

our present situation in this country. Rev. G. I. Williamson gave five addresses in the evenings on Ephesians on the following topics: The Vision, The Reality, Divine Prescriptions, Preparing for the Future and Putting First Things First. The children in the camp travelled with Christian each morning, in John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, as he fled from the City of Destruction on his way to heaven. It was a great camp; the weather was fine, the spirit excellent, the food great, a willingness to share and help, a unity in Christ and a wonderful fellowship with one another.

The past year saw most of our churches celebrate 25 years of existence and that was good, but now all that is history. I hope and pray that we may now enter a time of numerical growth and spiritual maturity. In that connection our sessions and pastors should show a deep concern for our youth and their spiritual welfare and appreciation of the Reformed faith. Allow me to make an observation, which has brought home to me how stupid and irresponsible we as parents can be in our lack of spiritual concern for our children. I'll give you an example. In many of our churches the parents sit in the front or in the middle with their very small children and the youth occupies row after row of the back pews. Why? Is it because they can hear God's Word better from the back of the church or is it because they don't want their parents to keep an eye on them? As a teenager I have sat in the back pew, read my Dick Bos comics, had my snooze and whispered with my friends and never heard the minister. It was an old caretaker who, one beautiful Sunday morning grabbed each one of us by the cuff as we entered the church and then took us to the seats where our parents were sitting. And he never said a word! He showed our parents their responsibilities when they made their promises at the baptismal font.

There is a fine booklet, "Pop Culture - A Christian View" and the author, Jim van Zyl, makes it quite clear that people nowadays do not believe in established authority anymore, whether of God, the state, parents or the church. He feels that with this shift in God-ordained authority has come a meteoric elevation of youth. Young people have been



given a prominence and status which is often far beyond their own maturity and experience and certainly is out of keeping with God's natural structure of order and authority. Especially in chapter 3 van Zyl gives a fine assessment on how to react to the pop culture and he proceeds to give a number of guidelines which will help us, young and old, to respond in the right way. It all boils down to the value of Christian homes: the place where children and young people must learn to assess and react to situations in terms of Biblical Christianity; where values, principles of action, attitudes, discernment, assessment of the cultural world around them and reaction to moral and spiritual problems must spring from clear-sighted Christian views.

As Christian parents we must accept our responsibilities to rear our children in an atmosphere in which parents instill a respect for authority and the acceptance of discipline as an essential part of life. The question is not primarily what is happening in our schools, churches or in family camps, but is more a question of what is occurring in our families.

April

Many a church member does not know what precedes the calling of a minister. In congregations where their pastors are of more than four or five years' standing,

one or two of the elders may get a confidential letter in their letter boxes. It is a letter which they can't or won't show to their pastor. They may show the inquiring letter secretly to their colleagues and they may ask them in a whisper: "How are you going to reply?"

You see then, that here the recipient's honesty is going to be taxed to the hilt. If he feels it is time for his pastor to move on, his report might show a bit more glow than it deserves, or if it is the other way round, their pastor's report might be somewhat unfairly depressed.

Personally, I have always had a bit of distaste for this sort of enquiry. One gets the usual queries to answer about his preaching, his work and impact on the youth of the church, his diligence in his pastoral work in the congregation and what his wife is like. Sometimes one gets a query about the size of the pastor's family and how they are health wise, but that question is usually influenced by the size of the congregation making the enquiry.

But there are some questions which are sometimes missing, and they seem to me to be the real ones, the vital ones! Questions about what impact has been made in that congregation, which he

has served for x-number of years, on the qualitative and quantitative growth of the congregation. Of course, growth is the work and will of God. We know that Paul planted and Apollos watered and that it was God who gave the increase. Of course, it is the Lord himself who adds to the church. But still, I can't help asking myself those questions. Growth is an innate quality of the Church of Jesus Christ; growth is the nature of the Gospel and isn't it characteristic of the New Testament churches? So, there must be that internal growth which takes place when the church is edified. It is growth in grace and growth in Christ-like maturity. This qualitative growth then ought to produce some quantitative growth too, which will cause the local congregation to expand within its own community. Then you see a numerical increase in a local church.

Maybe you will say that these are unfair questions. But that surely depends in which corner of the "problem of calling" you find yourself in. But never mind, we are Reformed and so we know that we cannot control the results of evangelism work nor the end figures of the church's statistics.

In Holland they have a problem with

redundant churches. It has been said that the problem dates back to the time of the Reformation when dissenting Protestants formed a number of breakaway churches. These churches flourished for centuries but now they, and many Catholic churches, are suffering from the religious indifference of the 20th century. Some are now maintained as historical landmarks, and that is a costly business. The Old Church (Oude Kerk) on the edge of the Red Light district in Amsterdam has cost almost nine million dollars in repairs and the New Church (De Nieuwe Kerk), next to the Royal Palace on The Dam is likely to run up a repair bill of 25 million dollars to have it restored to its former glory. Many other churches are receiving a new lease of life by being put to a number of new, and often unorthodox uses, such as a concert hall, a restaurant, a furniture showroom, an army garrison, a bicycle repair workshop, a children's playground, a car wash and even a sanctuary for immigrants. This change of function seems to be the only alternative to demolition for these churches. Isn't it a pity that we can't emigrate some of these "derelicts" to this part of the world?

Abridged

Wanted – men for the times

Joshua Engelsma

"Be a man! Man up! Don't be such a girl!"

Sound familiar?

I have a feeling that most young men are familiar with these expressions. Maybe your hair is getting a bit long, and your dad scolds, "Get a haircut! People are going to mistake you for your sister! You need to look more like a man!" Or maybe you are afraid to talk to a girl at school, and your friend prods, "Man up and talk to her!" Whether coming from

parents or from a group of buddies, at some point you have probably been told that you need to be more manly.

But have you ever stopped to think about what that means? What does it mean to be a man? What is expected of you as you enter into manhood? What exactly is it that makes you different from women? And not simply, what does the world or what do my parents or peers think it means to be a man, but what does my heavenly Father say?

That is what I would like to examine with you over the next few articles. I

want to lay out for you a biblical perspective on what it means to be a mature, Christian man.

A word to everyone else

If you are not a young man and still reading this, please do not stop! While addressing young men directly, I think there is benefit for others.

I think there is benefit for women, especially young women, in understanding what it means to be a man. Hopefully, they will be able to understand their brothers in Christ better and encourage



Photo by Priscilla Du Preez on Unsplash

them to be what God calls them to be. For those who are thinking about marriage, the benefit is that you know what kind of man to look for in a husband and how to help him grow into that more and more.

I also trust that there is benefit for parents and grandparents in reading this. As a father of four little boys, I want my sons to grow up into strong, godly men. And I am sure this is the desire of every conscientious parent of boys. Perhaps what is written here can be the springboard to further discussions with your sons as they grow into spiritual maturity.

Masculine muddle

In my opinion, it is absolutely imperative that we have straight in our minds what it means to be a man. I do not want to overstate the case, but it would be wrong to undersell the issue too. This is a critical issue for the church in the twenty-first century.

The reason why this is so important is due to the world in which you are now growing up. The world is actively promoting certain views of what it means to be man. These perspectives are boldly proclaimed in TV shows, movies,

music, books, magazines, the Internet, and social media.

One view that the world gives of manhood is that a real man is strong, handsome, and a bit wild. He has body-builder muscles and dashing good looks that turn the heart of every woman to mush. He drinks beer (lots of it!), drives either a Corvette or a heavy-duty pickup, and answers to no one. He is driven by sexual lust and can be found hopping from one bed to another.

Another, equally troubling view of manhood is that it really does not exist. The wise of this world inform us that gender is really just a social construction, something invented by an unenlightened society centuries ago, perhaps as a way to further oppress women. But today in our enlightened society, so they say, we are able to move past that into an age when people are free to be whatever they want to be.

Witness the surge of societal support for same-sex relationships. The world celebrates this as progress, since we are learning that this is the way that these individuals were born and they are simply living out what they are.

Witness the tidal wave of support for

transgenderism. Even though a young boy has the physical anatomy of a male, he has always identified more with being a girl. As he gets older, he is encouraged to take on a more feminine name, to dress like a woman, to receive hormonal injections, to mutilate his body through endless surgeries, all in an attempt to bring everything into line with the way he feels.

What is frightening is that this thinking has infiltrated the church world, even the Reformed church world. More and more there is a push to accept the idea that a man can be whatever he feels like being.

Thankfully, there is not this push in the PR churches. Yet, there is still the possibility that we too have a muddled view of what it means to be a man.

Think for a moment: what would you say is included with being a man? Often we think that a man has to be physically strong. He probably has a deep, gravelly voice. He can grow a beard in a week (or less). On a Saturday he can be found covered in grease under the hood of car. He is unconcerned about his clothes or appearance. He played every sport in high school, and still is gone once a week for his softball or golf league. He enjoys hunting and fishing, owns several shotguns and deer rifles, and is secretly "packing heat" (that is, carrying a concealed weapon). He never cries, cannot understand why others show their feelings and get emotional, and is too macho to tell anyone close to him that he loves them. If you cannot picture in your mind what I am describing, do a Google search for "Marlboro man."

"What a man!" we think.

Now, think for a moment: what would you say is unmanly? Someone who is unmanly is small and weak. That person maybe has a high-pitched, squeaky voice. He cannot grow facial hair to save his life. He has soft, uncalloused hands used to pecking on a keyboard rather than turning wrenches. He is always dressed carefully and stylishly. He was always the last one picked for a game at recess, has never played organized sports, and probably could not tell you the difference between a touchdown and a homerun. He has never gone hunting, gets woozy at the thought of killing an animal, and is secretly scared of guns. He would much rather spend his time reading a book, doing photography, or playing the piano. He can be brought to tears by a kid's cartoon, and tells those around him that he loves them.

"What a sissy," we think. "Not much of a man."

But if that is the way that we judge manhood, then we too have an incorrect view of masculinity. Our perspective of manhood is based on personal or cultural standards, rather than on the standard of God's Word.

The need of the hour

What the church needs at this late hour in history is men. Not men as the world would define them. Not men as we would define them. But the church needs men as God would define them in the Bible. The church needs spiritually strong, spiritually mature, Christian men. The church needs you who are young men to grow and develop into such men.

This need is not unique to the days in which we are now living. This has always been the need of the church on this earth. But especially at this time does the church require godly men. We are living in evil days. In the world, the cup of iniquity is swiftly filling to the brim and wickedness abounds on every side. In the church world, the love of many waxes cold and there is a forsaking of the old paths. The foundation of the kingdom of Antichrist is already being laid, and the days of persecution appear to be coming in the not-too-distant future. The church needs men to be men!

I am not saying that the church needs men to the exclusion of women. Not at all. The church also needs spiritually mature, Christian women. But the church needs godly men to take the lead by encouraging, nurturing, and leading these godly women.

If there are no godly men, then God may well raise up women in that time of crisis, similar to what he did at the time of the judges. The story is familiar. The people had sunk into another cycle of disobedience toward God, with the resulting chastisement of being conquered by a heathen nation, under whose thumb they suffered for twenty years. During that time God raised up the prophetess Deborah to judge the people. The reason for this is that there were no strong men who dared take the lead. Even when Barak finally stepped forward, he timidly said, "If thou wilt go with me, then I will go: but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go" (Judges 4:8). Deborah assured him that God would give the victory, however "the journey that thou takest shall not be for thine honour; for the Lord shall sell

"For men to be real men, they must know what it means to be a man. Not a muddled idea of masculinity, but what God truly requires of men in His Word."

Sisera into the hand of a woman" (v. 9).

Is it possible that the Lord is plaguing our society with radical feminism as judgment for the weakness of the men? This is certainly not to condone the wicked rebellion of the feminist movement, but could it be that God has allowed this to take place because men are not truly being men?

This ought not to be in the church. It ought not to be the case that God has to raise up women to lead because the men are not being leaders. The church needs her men, especially her young men, to be real men of God. This is the need of the hour.

And for men to be real men, they must know what it means to be a man. Not a muddled idea of masculinity, but what God truly requires of men in His Word. More on that next time.

Mr Joshua Engelsma is pastor of the Protestant Reformed Church in Doon, Iowa, USA.

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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/>

World in focus

Condemnation of Trudeau's "abortion attestation" for the Canada Summer Jobs program is nearly unanimous

By Jonathon Van Maren

If someone had told me last year that Canadian editorial boards and media outlets right across the political spectrum and the country would be expressing nearly universal outrage at Justin Trudeau's decision to insert an "abortion attestation" into the Canada Summer Jobs application, I wouldn't have believed it. I don't think he would have, either. For years, Trudeau and Canada's abortion activists have insisted that the debate is over, and that all enlightened Canadians of good faith were okay with that, seeing as how they *must* all be fans of abortion, too. In the minds of these abortion radicals, all good people supported abortion, and the few pro-life Canadians who *did* exist were fringe crazies.

Then, Trudeau decided to put his money where his mouth was to loud cheers from Canada's handful of aging abortion activists—and found out suddenly that Sikhs, Christians, Jews, Muslims, and a plethora of other faith communities were actually quietly pro-life while they went about doing essential community work and providing charitable services. In fact, his decision may have forced large communities of Canadians who had more or less ignored the issue to become educated on what the Canadian status quo actually is – and the Canadian media, to his astonishment, has been firmly rebuking him and demanding that he respect the right of pro-life people to express their views without facing government discrimination ever since.

In fact, Margaret Wenthe in the *Globe and Mail* this weekend took her criticism even further, noting that Trudeau and his elitist ilk cannot tolerate real

diversity – and as a result, have been attempting to force Christians out of the public square for some time now:

People of traditional Christian faith and values are being relentlessly marginalized in the public square. Last fall, Conservative MP Rachael Harder was ousted as chair of the status of women committee because of her anti-abortion views. Mr. Trudeau has decreed that all Liberal MPs must vote pro-choice. Trinity Western, a private Christian liberal-arts university in B.C., is waging what looks like a losing battle to gain accreditation for graduates of its new law school, simply because it will require students to sign a pledge saying they won't have sex outside of heterosexual marriage. Law societies across the country evidently fear that this stricture will turn the law students into raging homophobic and taint them for life. The latest assault on belief is the demand that faith-based hospitals, such as St. Mike's in Toronto – renowned for its deeply felt ethos of caring and compassion – be made to provide medical assistance in dying, despite the fact that this requirement would strike at the heart of these institutions' core Christian values...

We are getting very near the point where people with explicitly religious values will have no more role to play in mainstream society. As the brilliant writer Yuval Noah Harari observes, "God is dead – it's just taking a while to get rid of the body." The idea that people are obliged to order their lives and society according to the moral codes established by a higher power is regarded by the educated elites as nothing more than primitive superstition. In its place, we have created a new religion based on individualism and self-fulfillment – something that the Christian conservative writer Rod Dreher calls "an emotion-based spirituality of self-fulfillment."

I am as lapsed a Christian as they come. But I have a lot of time for people such as Mr. Dreher, who argue that the new orthodoxy of secular individualism is no more tolerant of difference than any other faith. We just don't

see it – because, like all true believers, we believe that people who don't agree with us suffer from disordered thinking.

The law increasingly exists not to protect minority opinion but to impose majority opinion, Mr. Dreher has written. "Those institutions that hold to Christian orthodoxy are going to be increasingly isolated and stigmatized."

That is why you will find Mr. Trudeau in mosques, temples, shrines and smudging ceremonies. But one place you won't find him is in Pastor Jones's or Ms. Redshaw's church. Diversity is all very well – but only when it's good for the brand.

Wente is precisely right. I noted back in October that Canada's "progressive" politicians were increasingly attempting to distract from their economic failures by targeting Canadian Christians in order to create a scapegoat to demonize. That a secular Canadian journalist has utilized Trudeau's most recent attempt to marginalize Canadians of faith to draw attention to the marginalization of Canadian Christians in general is another completely unexpected consequence of the ongoing "kerfuffle" over the Canada Summer Jobs Program.

But perhaps no editorial shocked me so much as that of the Ottawa Citizen, which followed on the heels of the *National Post* and the *Globe and Mail* in condemning Trudeau's move: They actually compared Trudeau to Trump – unfavorably:

Canadians face a weird, looking-glass version of the shift taking place in the U.S.: a prime minister leveraging the abortion issue by stealth to make people sign on to his version of Canadian values.

Justin Trudeau's government has changed the requirements for organizations seeking support from the Canada Summer Jobs grant program, which creates temporary employment for young people. In order to access funding, groups now must agree to respect women's reproductive rights, including the right to abortion (spelled out in the guidance document with the application).

Faith groups that oppose abortions say they can't meet this requirement. This, in turn, means some religious institutions won't be hiring many young people this year.

Our editorial board is pro-choice, but opposing abortion isn't illegal, and we believe that most of those who hold anti-abortion views sincerely seek a better world. Like capital punishment, or as-

sisted dying, abortion is an issue about which intelligent people are often deeply divided. Political parties may have their own membership rules – the federal Liberals, for instance, require their candidates to support choice – but when governments dole out public money, they have no moral right to shut out taxpayers or organizations that do not endorse their values.

The change to the Canada Jobs Grant program was brought to light by the faith organizations affected, not by the government, some of whose members are now claiming the requirement doesn't mean what the language says it means. How Kafkaesque.

Is it unfair to draw a Trudeau-Trump analogy on this issue? If the Trudeau government has overstepped, isn't it only a minor transgression? No. Trump, in his bumptious fashion, at least acknowledges overtly that there are differing views; he wants his side to win. The Liberals acknowledge no divide; they assume – or act as if it's axiomatic – that their values are everyone's values. That's insidious and dangerous.

The Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada, in response to all of this, is panicking and advising the government to revise the abortion attestation so that the backlash will perhaps die down a bit and only pro-life groups that do work on behalf of pre-born children will be targeted. Considering that ARCC's executive director Joyce Arthur is a virulent atheist who has dedicated much time to mocking religion and religious people online over the years, this is obviously an attempt to mitigate a campaign that phenomenally backfired: Instead of a Canadian government affirming their misguided belief that abortion is somehow a Canadian value, the public is getting a good look at those who oppose Trudeau's abortion agenda – including many charities and community outreach organizations – and the media is informing the Trudeau government that abortion is a *Liberal* value, not a Canadian one. It is no exaggeration to say that this is precisely the opposite of the discussion Joyce Arthur and her handful of keyboard warriors actually wanted to be having.

To sum up: In just a couple of weeks, Canadians from nearly every faith community have stood up and refused to sign off on a pro-abortion statement, the Canadian media has defended the right of pro-life Canadians to express their views in the public square, there has been

much pushback to the idea that abortion is a "Canadian value," and tens of thousands of Canadians have been educated on the abortion status quo and why abortion is not a "Charter right."

Perhaps Trudeau and Ms. Arthur may have overreached.

Also in the news

Nigerian Air Force complicit in massacre of Christian villagers, says Amnesty

China: 100 Christians sent to 're-education' camps in Xinjiang

China's new religion regulations expected to increase pressure on Christians

Malaysia church attacks highlight growth of Islamic extremism

Egypt: Church owner fined, attackers given suspended sentences

Bolivian Christians can still evangelise . . . for now

Boko Haram sets churches on fire in latest attack on Cameroon's Far North

Uganda: Refusal to convert to Islam ends in family tragedy

Chinese bishop reshuffle reinforces fears of state meddling

Global Warning or Global Warming?

Whatever way it spells indeed:
It is a warning one must heed!
"The seas have lifted up their voice!" *
And no one dares to say: Rejoice!

So call it then whate'er you will,
The sober fact stares at us still:
Warning or Warming globally:
It's God who reigns eternally!

So we do well to heed this truth
Proclaimed to ag`ed folk and youth.
Before His throne we all must stand:
What can we offer in our hand?

Have we conserved this planet green
For future generations clean?
And have we honoured Him Who gave
This habitat to guard and save?

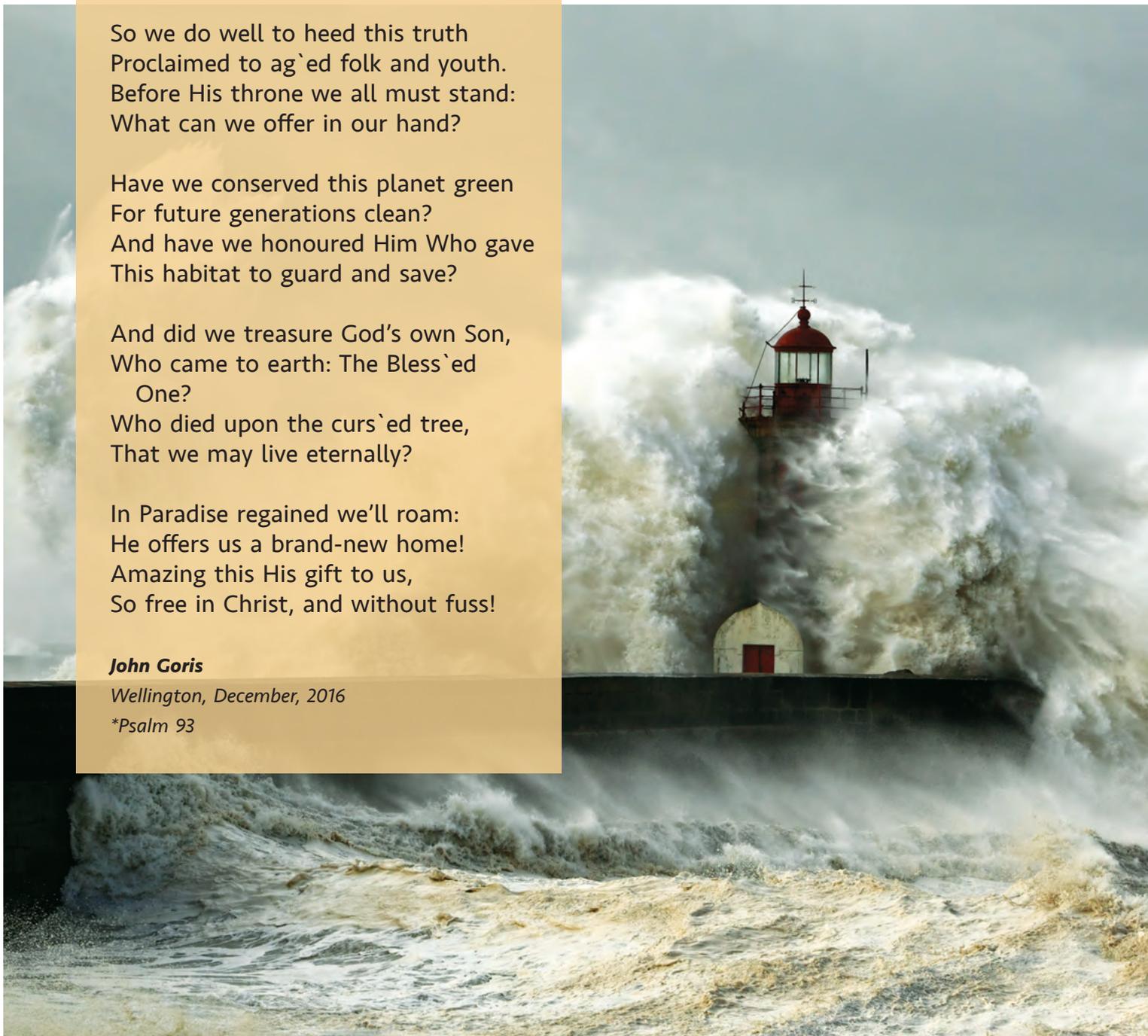
And did we treasure God's own Son,
Who came to earth: The Bless`ed
One?
Who died upon the curs`ed tree,
That we may live eternally?

In Paradise regained we'll roam:
He offers us a brand-new home!
Amazing this His gift to us,
So free in Christ, and without fuss!

John Goris

Wellington, December, 2016

**Psalm 93*



Books in focus

Preaching Christ from the Psalms,

by Sidney Greidanus.

Eerdmans, 2016. Paperback, 615 pages, list price \$40.00.

Reviewed by OP pastor Everett Henes

The Psalms have given words to generations who want to praise God, to cry out to him in anguish or confusion, to call out for salvation, or simply to recount his wondrous deeds and marvelous provisions. They are, as Calvin wrote, “an anatomy of all the parts of the soul; for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror.”

At the same time, the Psalms can be a real challenge for the pastor to preach. Perhaps this is due to their scarcity in our worship. It might also be due to the fact that they are not historical narrative, prophecy, or epistles, but poetry.

A good tool to help think about the Psalms for preaching can be a big help. Sidney Greidanus’s works on preaching Christ from the Old Testament are well known to many readers. He is committed to preaching Christ from all of Scripture, and this book is no different. The pastor will find many helpful insights on preaching from the Psalms, along with ample examples of sermons.

The introductory chapter, “Issues in Preaching Christ from Psalms,” is a helpful guide to thinking about the various challenges and approaches to the Psalms.

Greidanus then lays out the various interpretive approaches: literary, historical, theocentric, and Christocentric. He applies these approaches to preaching Christ from an Old Testament text: redemptive-historical progression, promise-fulfillment, typology, analogy, longitudinal themes, New Testament references, and contrast. He also gives attention to applying the Psalms.

The rest of the book is filled with examples from various psalms. While not every psalm is touched

on, Greidanus does cover the different types of psalms, so that the preacher learns how to handle the whole book.

While this book is a great help, there are a couple areas for caution. First, he asserts that the church’s acceptance and use of the Psalms are what make them the Word of God for the church: “Though many psalms originated as a human word to God, every psalm is now part of the Psalter and was accepted in the canon as God’s word for Israel” (p. 3). Here he cites father of canonical criticism, Brevard Childs. This is the kind of position that would trigger a slew of follow-up questions during a theology exam in presbytery.

Another interesting, and possibly challenging, feature of the book is its layout. The author fits various sermons into the seasons of the liturgical calendar. The regulative principle of worship raises serious objections to imposing such a calendar on the church. Nonetheless, this book can still be of great use to pastors and laypersons alike. In fact, it can be helpful to see how the Psalms fit in with events in the life of Christ. This serves to underscore the thesis of the book: the Psalms should be preached, and Christ should be faithfully preached from them.

New Horizons, Aug-Sept 2017

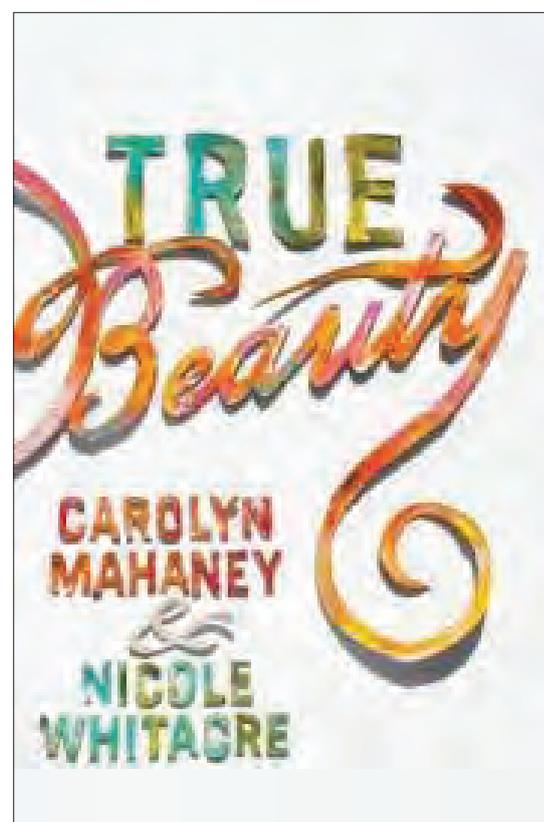
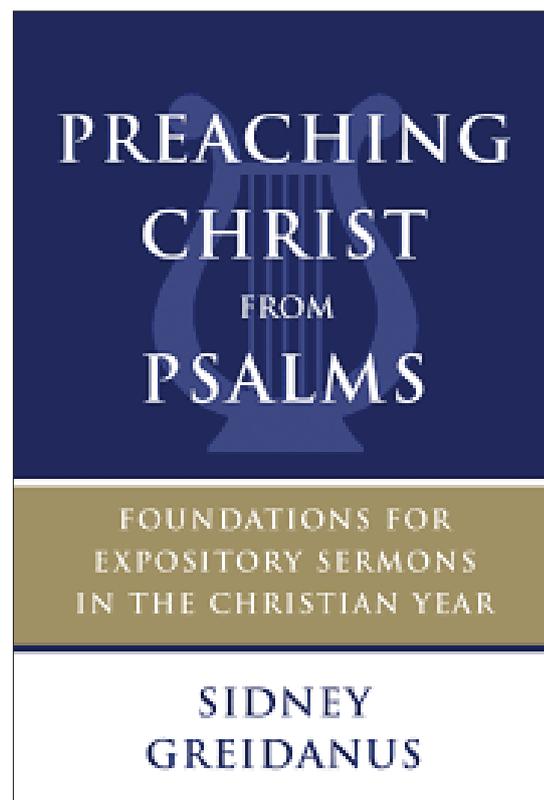
True Beauty

by Carolyn Mahaney and Nicole Whitacre.

Crossway, 2014. Hardback, 128 pages, list price \$15.99 (paperback, \$12.99).

Reviewed by OP member Victoria Van Dixhoorn

Carolyn Mahaney and Nicole Whitacre have crafted an exceptional book—partly a refutation of the world’s view of beauty and partly an affirmation of the biblical alternative. Through careful biblical study,



True Beauty details what it means to be lovely in God's sight. Its arguments are supplemented by personal stories and examples of people dealing with poor self-image and other personal struggles relating to beauty. Many of the stories are from people with varying backgrounds, making the book relatable for a wide audience.

True Beauty addresses a multitude of topics regarding beauty, including modesty, clothing, purity, and aging, while constantly reminding us that the world's standards are wildly incorrect. Mahaney and Whitacre state that since we are made in the image of God, we are beautiful in his eyes and our self-worth can be found in him.

True Beauty carries this one step further and addresses beauty within. It reminds us of the value of inner beauty—a beauty that is everlasting, immeasurable, and glorifying to God. After all, as the authors assert, our purpose in life as Christian women is to glorify God by his grace and enjoy him. When we display godly characteristics that flow from our beauty within, we reflect God's own beauty and wisdom.

The message of True Beauty is especially relevant in our society today. The world has an ever-changing view of beauty, which grows increasingly unrealistic. In a culture in which appearances usually trump inner beauty, True Beauty provides practical and theological reasons why beautifying our hearts is vastly more important. As a girl in high school, I often think that as I grow older, I will not feel the pressures of achieving the world's standard of beauty so intensely. But in reality this is a problem that every woman feels acutely throughout her life. Women nowadays feel pressure more than ever to keep up with new beauty trends and appear "flawless." Social media is flooded with new beauty regimes; magazines are swamped with young, ageless celebrities; television commercials constantly feature new beauty products, stating they are essential for your personal well-being and happiness. In light of this, True Beauty is especially helpful because it addresses both specific, modern-day problems and questions of beauty that women have faced for centuries.

Additionally, Mahaney and Whitacre have created a book that is easy to read, making it accessible to both young girls and older women. It is straightforward and clear, while remaining colorful and entertaining.

True Beauty reminds me to focus on what God considers beautiful and to consider how God himself is beautiful in all his perfections. True Beauty is a refreshing book, and I commend it heartily.

New Horizons, Aug-Sept 2017

Submission: What Every Christian Needs to Know About Islam

by Marvin W. Heyboer

Reviewed by John Van Dyk

Calvin College and Seminary trained, Dr. Marvin Heyboer's life's work is the defence of the poor and the oppressed. For 15 years he was an eyewitness to the atrocities inflicted on Christians in countries dominated by Islam. *Submission: What Every Christian Needs to Know About Islam* is an exposé of Islam from someone who knows both what this religion says in its written accounts and also what it does. Heyboer is convinced that North Americans in general, and North American Christians particularly, do not know much about Islam. And from what we hear and see in both the media and

from our political and some religious leaders, there is definitely a disconnect between perception and reality.

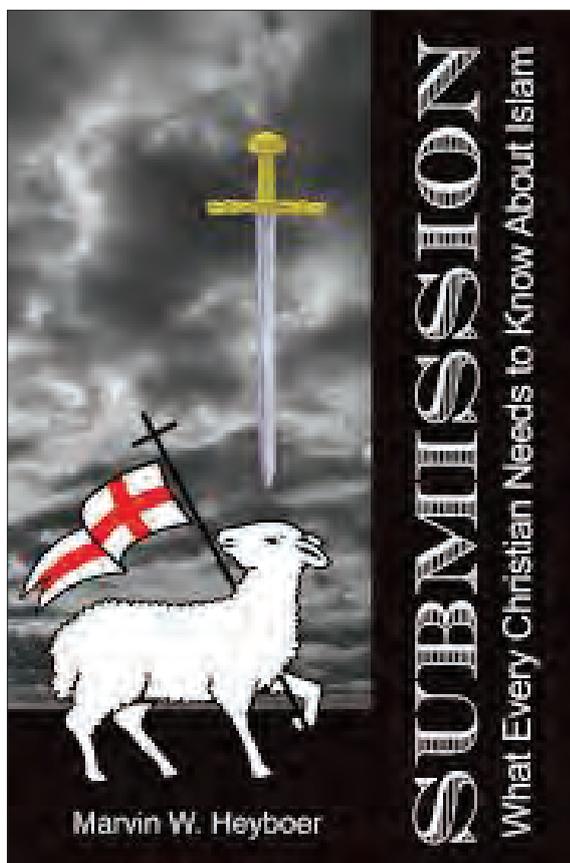
The book's title and cover is revealing of its content. The illustration includes dark skies and a menacing sword hovering over a lamb carrying a cross. Submission is what the Islamic faith expects of infidels and followers alike – full submission to the demands of Allah.

Heyboer begins with a comparison of Islam and Christianity – of Muhammad and of Jesus Christ, of the Quran and the Bible – challenging the view of some that "we (Christians and Muslims) worship the same God."

If there is a need for a clear to-the-sources book contrasting Islam to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, this is it. It is well written, very readable and applicable. If you want an informative book on Islam, buy and read.

To purchase a copy of "Submission", please send a request to drmarvinw@yahoo.com

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On the shoulders of giants: how church history helps

Johan D. Tangelder

Czeslaw Milosz, winner of the 1980 Nobel Prize for Literature, remarked in his acceptance speech in Stockholm that our age is characterized by a “refusal to remember.” I think it is more than that. I believe it is an indifference rather than an outright refusal to remember the past. And because we don’t know our past, we have become a rootless society.

In his provocative book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman argued that the television rendered the previous generation unfit to remember. Television’s focus on the immediate deprived us of an historical experience. So many know so much about the happenings of the last 24 hours, but very little of bygone centuries or even the last 60 years.

No wonder that youth show little affinity with the past. Today’s generation lives even more in “a perpetual present,” without depth, definition, or secure identity. Many think the study of history is a dull and irrelevant exercise.

Gathered wisdom

The lack of historical awareness has also affected the Church. Too many evangelical and Reformed Christians jump from the early church of the Apostles right to the present. They seem to forget that men and women lived the Christian life before them.

But there is this great “cloud of witnesses,” who have wrestled with doctrinal and moral issues that contemporary Christians can learn from. Because they are unaware of the profound doctrinal debates of the church fathers, of the Reformers, and even of the recent history of their own denominations and all the momentous implications, they deprive themselves of the gathered wisdom of the ages.

For example, as a student of church

history, I am deeply impressed by the outstanding theological works produced by the 17th century Puritan spiritual giants. They greatly surpass the generally weak and shallow theology and spirituality of the present.

The creeds and confessions are also a vital link with the past. They show how throughout the centuries the Holy Spirit has been at work in forming, maintaining and renewing the Church. The Three Forms of Unity express the heart of the apostolic and also of the Reformed faith, the faith which has been accepted as true for generations. The confessions remind us of the communal nature of the Church. They also tell us that we are not the first generation that has read the Bible. The confessions show us a particular way of understanding Scripture which the Christian Church has recognized as responsible and trustworthy. A church which no longer pays attention to her creeds and confessions denies her heritage. Only when we remain in fellowship with the faithful who have gone before us are we able to travel into the future. We must know where we come from so that we may know where we are going. Dr. J. I. Packer rightly observed, “Knowing the family history is one way of avoiding past errors and preparing to face the future.”

Inspiration

The study of church history is also important for the development of our spiritual life. Without a reflection on the past, Christians are prone to become spiritually anemic. The story of the Christian martyrs, who sacrificed their all for the cause of Christ, is inspirational.

A moving testimony from the early church is the martyrdom of Polycarp (c. 70-155), faithful pastor and champion of apostolic tradition. After his capture by his persecutors, infuriated Jews and

“The study of church history is also important for the development of our spiritual life. Without a reflection on the past, Christians are prone to become spiritually anemic. The story of the Christian martyrs, who sacrificed their all for the cause of Christ, is inspirational.”

Gentiles gathered wood for the stake. Polycarp stood by it, asking not to be fastened to it, and prayed:

O Lord, Almighty God, the Father of Thy beloved Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received knowledge of Thee... I thank Thee that Thou hast thought me worthy, this day and this hour, to share the cup of Thy Christ among the number of Thy witnesses.

And I think of the martyrdom in China of John and Betty Stam, missionaries with the China Inland Mission. Betty, a gifted poet, had been raised in China by Presbyterian parents, and felt God's call to return there. John, of Dutch immigrant ancestry from New Jersey, was also drawn to China where, as he said, "a million a month pass into Christless graves." Their missionary work was short-lived. In 1934

they were captured by the communists and executed. Their martyrdom made a great impact and led many to volunteer for missions.

The most publicized martyrdom in recent history is no doubt the January 1956 massacre of five young missionaries by the Auca Indians in Ecuador. The story of their lives has been well told by Elisabeth Elliot, the widow of one of the martyrs. But their deaths have not been in vain. There is now a church among the Auca Indians. The stories of the martyrs give a feeling of fellowship with those who have carried the torch before and an appreciation of the priceless heritage which is ours in Christ.

Seeing further

We can learn from the wisdom and the examples of godly men and women of the past. We can also learn from their

mistakes and follies. Here is how John of Salisbury, a 12th-century British author, described the importance of studying history:

We are like dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants. We see more things than them, and things that are farther away – not because we can see better than they, or because we are taller than they are, but because they raise us up, and add their stature to ours.

A version of this article first appeared in the April 1999 issue of Reformed Perspective under the title "Inspired by Past." Many of Rev. Johan D. Tangelder's (1936-2009) articles can be found at his blog Reformed Reflections. Used with permission.



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