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SMALL GROUP BIBLE STUDIES

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Editorial

Since the early days of my conversion I estimate that I have attended approximately 988 Bible studies, plus or minus a few here and there. On the basis of each study being about 75 minutes, that comes to 1,235 hours over a period of 38 years. That seems a lot! However, I know people who in their 70s and 80s could possibly have doubled that amount.

It has also been my privilege to attend a variety of studies. In the early days, I attended a young adults' Bible study for those who were reformed in their theology, but from different backgrounds. Most of the time it was both enlightening and edifying. Then there was the regular adults' study that I attended.

These groups weren't huge in size and it was very beneficial for a young Christian chap like me to learn in these settings.

Over the years I have experienced both small and large Bible study groups. While the large study groups were beneficial, it is hard to know how beneficial they were for all those who attended.

Small groups enable people to have the opportunity to speak, whereas the larger the group, the less the opportunity, but also, the less the incentive not only to speak, but also to prepare adequately for the study.

A matter that has always annoyed me is when people come to a study and 'wing it' either because they didn't have time to study, or forgot, or just couldn't be bothered, and would rather let everyone else do the work. Sorry, it may seem I am being judgmental, but I think the smaller the study, the more incentive there is to study and not hide in the large group.

I have also seen in the large group setting that people can remain silent for the entire study and let others do the talking. Of course, some may be more timid and not inclined to want to speak in such a large setting.

My conclusion then, is that the smaller group Bible studies are a more positive place for us all to learn God's word and grow in grace.

Our contributors share their positive views about the small group Bible study.

Mr John Goris shares his insights on how to improve these valuable events.

Mr Graeme Zuidema exhorts us to persevere in the small study setting.

Mrs Sally Davey gives us a very good reason to stand up in faith rather than cower in fear.

Letters from New Zealand, Focus on faith, Books in focus and Focus on home.

Mr Joshua Flinn proclaims a call to kingdom work in New Plymouth.

Mr Clarence Bouwman writes on the necessity to teach boys to fight – the good fight that is.

Mr Dirk J van Garderen reflects on death and dying.

Correction:

In the June issue (vol 46/5, 2019) on page 23 was a letter to the editor. I omitted the name of the author, Mrs Patricia van Laar. My apologies for this omission. **Ed**

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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Ways to improve this valuable time



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The *preciousness* of God's Word should make us study it all the more, with all the greater attention to applying it properly.

John Goris

There is no need to spell out the importance of studying God's Word.

However, we should always look for ways and means to *improve* this vital practice.

The Scriptures as a whole are a God-given tool to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” as the apostle Peter urges us to do in 2 Peter 3:18. For that to happen we need the Scriptures as our main tool so that we may be “trained in righteous-

ness” (2 Tim 3:16) and in true “godliness” (1 Tim 4:7).

It is also important to make use of the opportunity to do so together with other Christians, even in small numbers, for we have a special promise from the Lord, viz. “that where two or three are gathered in my Name, there am I in their midst” (Matt 18:20).

Studying the Word in small groups has the advantage of *strengthening* each other in the faith, *stirring* each other to prayer, and *sharing* precious truth learned.

The Truth of Scripture is worth our greatest attention and application. In his second letter to Timothy the apostle Paul stresses that it is a holy deposit worth treasuring.

The Bible is our manual for living in this world as God's people, and *discerning priorities* (e.g. "Seek first the Kingdom...").

If you have a mixed group of new Christians and mature believers, it is good to listen and learn where *both* are coming from. It is vital for our practical applications to have a wide spectrum of situations. The opening part of the meeting could even be used to briefly share thoughts which we discovered in our own personal Bible reading. The general rule is "*as iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another*" (Prov 27:17).

So how can we improve our study time?

We can initially discuss which parts of the Bible are not so well-known to members of our group.

A discussion and planning meeting at the beginning of the year may help to produce a useful programme. Topical studies have their value, but generally Book by Book is a good approach. After all, that is how we read Scripture, personally and family-wise. We must never forget that "*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us*" (John 1:14).

That implies the close connection between the whole message of Scripture and the Person of Christ. Bible study isn't just a gaining of knowledge of God's Word, but a discovery of the great reality of the person of Jesus Christ. He is the Person presented in the Book.

In seeking to make this study time together more practical and valuable, I would suggest to explore some of the themes found in the Pastoral epistles, viz. *1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus*. From these three letters of Paul we learn that the apostle speaks of the essentials required for *maturing* in the faith and for *equipping* God's people for service. We shall explore that under three headings:

1. Rightly reflecting on God our Saviour for godliness of character

In his first letter to Timothy the apostle refers to the word "*godliness*" or "*godly living*" nine times! That should arrest our attention. Let's check this out. Paul says to Timothy, "*Train yourself for godliness, for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way*" !! Look at 1 Tim 4:7,8.

It is so easy to build up "*head-knowledge*" (*we're good at that!*), without realizing that it should ultimately be "*heart knowledge*" that makes us a Christian. Remember John 3? We need to be born

again! We need a new heart!

Our head-knowledge may or may not impress unbelievers, but a powerful expression of a godly life can make people wonder: What makes this guy act like that?

In Psalm 119:10,11 we see that stress on the heart too: "*With my whole heart I seek you, let me not wander from your commandments. I have stored up (or hidden) your Word in my heart that I may not sin against you.*"

So what is the actual source of godliness? It is Jesus! Note what Paul writes in 1 Tim 3:16 "*Great is the mystery (i.e. the secret) of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh....*" His godly character, we could say, His God-pleasing character, was proclaimed in the world, and reached the acknowledgement of heaven.

The God-honouring life of Christ holds the secret of godliness. This does not mean that growing in the knowledge of God's Word has no value. However, if head-knowledge does not become heart-knowledge it does not produce a practical impact. Study the various references to "*godliness*" in 1 Timothy. It will be most enriching: this could be a valuable theme to study at the beginning of each year – a kind of "*refresher*" course. Self-examination is essential, and to do this together can be all the more profitable. Take note of what the apostle writes in 2 Corinthians 13:5... "*Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves...or do you not realise this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you –unless indeed you fail the test.*"

2. Rightly handling the Word of Truth

The truth of Scripture is worth our greatest attention and application. In his second letter to Timothy the apostle Paul stresses that it is a holy deposit worth treasuring. The word "*truth*" occurs many times in this letter. In chapter 1 Paul stresses treasuring the truth. In chapter 2 he underlines "*rightly handling the Word of truth*". In chapter 3 he speaks of the divine source of truth, and its usefulness for practical application. And in Chapter 4 he encourages Timothy to "*proclaim*" it boldly.

The *preciousness* of God's Word should make us study it all the more, with all the greater attention to applying it properly. The *prescription* of God's Word is the only effective medicine for the breakdown of society, which will occur all the more rapidly in the last

days (2 Tim. 3:1-5). Take note! It pinpoints the reality of attitudes which we face in the present day. God's Word is ever so relevant for the times in which we live.

Besides that, the apostle stresses that we must handle the Word correctly (2:15,16), and honour it as God-breathed (3:16,17). That applies particularly to the preaching of God's Word, and all the more because of its authority. Human error and falsehood creep in so easily.

In terms of our Bible study we do well to pick up the "headlines" of the various books of the Bible: we need to know not only its contents, but also its application. Becoming acquainted with the Scriptures, as to content and application, is also helpful for family devotions in the home.

Let us not forget that world-wide persecution is on the increase, and that means that access to the Word of God may diminish, as is already the case in China and other countries. "Hide the Word in your heart": the persecutors cannot take it away from there.

3. Rightly attuned to be ready for Christ's coming

In his pastoral letter to Titus the apostle Paul gives us practical instructions about the lifestyle of Christians, and in particular of leadership in the church. There is a stress on "sound doctrine". However, apart from a proper understanding, it stresses also the application of the truth.

This is vital for our Bible study group too. A good grasp is essential, but a transformation of the heart is absolutely vital too (see also Romans 12:2).

Look at the *key-word* which the apostle uses in this letter: "self-controlled". It is used five times! That means living by the Word of God, even while the moods of the times in which we live will try to influence us frequently (see again Romans 12:2). There is another expression used in this letter for us to take note of, viz "good works and sound speech".

All this is part of our preparation for the Coming Day of Christ: "our blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Christ Jesus" (Titus 2:13). He uses that lovely expression: "adorning the doctrine of God our Saviour in every respect" (2:10). It is worth our every effort. After all, we are the Bride of Christ, awaiting our heavenly Groom, for whom we want

to look at our very best!!

As we bear these goals in mind we can come to grips with the important essentials of our Bible study in smaller or greater groups. "All Scripture is profitable for teaching and training in righteousness".

So how can we improve our small Bible study groups? We must grasp the overall intent of God's Word for application to all the details of daily life. The Westminster Shorter Catechism says it so well:

"Our chief goal is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever!"

In terms of that great psalm about the truth of God's Word we may well pray and sing (Psalm 119:37-40):

*Oh, turn my eyes from fleeting things
to focus on the things that last.*

And while my soul within me sings

Or while it hurts, Lord, hold me fast!

Grant me a grounding in Your law,

A fervent longing to obey;

In love that's mixed with holy awe,

To live the Christ-like life each day!

So may the glory of the Lord

Shine forth in all I say and do.

Teach me to use the Spirit's sword

*To grow in grace and knowledge too.**

John Goris

*These words can be sung to the tune Uffingham (e.g. 336,443).

Literature consulted:

Wm Hendriksen: *Commentary of Timothy and Titus.*

Dr B.S. Poh: *The hidden life.*

Mr John Goris is an emeritus minister and a member of the Reformed Church in Wellington and.



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The small group Bible study: persevere in their practical purpose

When we gather in our small groups, we are committing to one another and urging each other in our Christian walk. A healthy small group will create a spirit of openness that encourages mutual accountability and a willingness to help others in need. We rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn (Ro 12:15).

Graeme Zuidema

Introduction

The weather was crisp and cold outside. The wood fire was on and we wondered who would come. Then one by one they arrived. They arrived with a smile, but also with a Bible in hand. Sometimes, they would come bringing food and drink to share. There was chatter and a healthy buzz among those who entered our warm and cosy house. But why were all these people coming to our place? They came because they desired to be fed by God's Word; they came because their hearts were full of joy or burdened with sorrow; they needed encouragement and comfort; they came because we could discuss all topics and share our concerns. These people came to a small group Bible study. I love small group Bible studies and they have long been part of my life and continue to be. So, let me say upfront that I am an avid proponent of a small group Bible study.

The small group Bible study goes under other names depending on what church you belong to. I have heard them called growth groups, fellowship groups, home groups, cell groups, small groups and I am sure that there are many more names. The reason why there are so many different names is because it is hard to nail down what a small group Bible study all does. Yes, in the strictest sense, a small group Bible study will just study the Bible. However, anyone who has been around the church for some time will know that more happens in these small gatherings. Thus, let us

explore in this article the purpose and the practicalities of a small group Bible study. And to avoid confusion, I will call small group Bible studies, 'small groups'.

Purposes for small groups

There is little push back from most Christians that you need to gather for worship regularly on a Sunday (Ac 20:7). So please don't ever say that meeting as 'small groups' is more important than meeting for Sunday worship. That is not the intention of this article. So, what, then, is the purpose for this mid-week (normally) gathering of the small group? Well, I don't think there is one unique purpose, but it has multiple purposes. Therefore, let me give you six purposes.

First, its main purpose is usually to study God's Word. Whilst a small group is more than just a Bible study, the Word must be at the centre (Ac 17), and hence, small groups must have the gospel at their heart. Now, as we study God's Word, we need to remember that we also need to apply God's Word, the sword of the Spirit (Ep 6:17), to our lives – Br Goris wonderfully walks us through the importance of head and heart knowledge in his article! Unfortunately, discussions in a small group can easily digress, which is not all bad, or we can say things like, "that's a personal question, let's skip that." But our desire is that the study of God's Word will change us with the power of the Holy Spirit and cause us to be more Christ-like.

Second, when we gather in our small groups, we are committing to one another and urging each other on in our Christian walk. A healthy small group will

create a spirit of openness that encourages mutual accountability and a willingness to help others in need. We rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn (Ro 12:15).

Third, small groups also provide us with an environment to assist people who have been hurt by a breakdown in relationships (Ph 4:2-3). When individuals have been hurt by a relationship breakdown or a previous bad experience in a church, then a small group can be a great, non-threatening stepping stone for this person(s) to begin healing those relationships and returning to the gathering of the saints on the Lord's Day.

Fourth, as we come together, we gather as praying Christians. We can set aside more specific time in a small group to pray for each other on a personal level (1 Th 5:17).

Fifth, a small group also strives to reach the lost. In today's world our church services can seem foreign to many and, therefore, it is advantageous to bring non-Christian friends into a fellowship through the small groups (Ac 10). This doesn't mean that we should not expect visitors in worship on a Sunday or on Good Friday and Christmas, but it is certainly less common for people

to just walk in off the street.

Sixth, small groups provide an opportunity for explaining the church's position on something or even socialising new ideas such as vision, building projects, extra ministry workers *etc.*

Thus, small groups have many purposes.

Practicalities for small groups

Whilst small groups have many purposes, here are seven practicalities to keep in mind as you consider small groups.

First, if you are a leader of a small group, it is your role to be a facilitator when the small group meets. Facilitate rather than lead because so often leaders can spend all night giving their insights and not inviting others to give their input. As a facilitator, keep the study on track but be flexible, allowing tangents that are connected to the study. If people are coming to a small group just so you as a leader can teach them, you are no longer leading a small group. You are teaching a class.

So as a facilitator, be careful not to ask someone to read the Bible or pray if they do not feel comfortable doing this in public. If someone needs to grow in this area, pre-warn them with the



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passage, so that they can come prepared. As far as prayer is concerned, be careful with the popcorn approach, where people can pray without any sort of order. Rather, it is less confronting to go around the circle, so people know where they are at.

With regards to prayer, my lecturer in Pastoral Ministry taught us at the RTC that we should keep B.A.I.T. in mind in our small groups. B – keep your prayers brief. It is always so hard to pray after someone that has prayed for everything under the sun. A – it is ok to affirm prayers using some ‘evangelical grunts’ now and then or just by saying, “Amen” at the end of every prayer. I – pray inclusively by using the words ‘we’ and ‘us’. T – pray thematically. Reassure people that they can pray a similar prayer to the person before them. Don’t be too hard and fast on this thematic point, it’s just good to see people growing in confidence to pray.

Second, to facilitate a profitable small group, it is important to choose good material. If you can write your own – great – but this is not the norm. Sometimes a small group is made up of mature Christians and so can explore the minor prophets or other trickier books that have a more complicated backstory or genre. Other times a small group will be made up of people who are at different stages in their spiritual growth. Therefore, the material that is chosen should be on a case-by-case basis. There can be benefit in studying what the church is preaching through, but generally it is prudent to avoid this practice. Each small group has its own unique character and we should choose material accordingly.

In our churches, the office bearers may choose what material is used and, therefore, it is important that they have a good understanding on where each small group is at. Small groups also present us with an opportunity to sing, be that from our *Sing to the Lord* hymnal or from the many sound resources that are available today. If need be, sing a *capella* or bring the guitar and get people singing the truths of Scripture to the glory of Christ.

Third, the size of your small group does play a part in how it will function. The ideal size may vary, but eight to twelve people is a good number. Anything larger may become problematic for someone’s home. Having said that, a small group may swell to over 20 people, but then it is not really a small

group anymore. There is something nice about having a few extra numbers but the downside to a larger group is that it makes it harder to become more personal with one another.

Fourth, if possible, a small group should aim to meet weekly to maintain good contact. If you only meet fortnightly and miss an evening, it means its four weeks before you have opportunity to meet. Yes, there are many functions in the church that we are involved in, but meeting weekly is still a good goal if at all possible. Remember, the more you meet with people the better you get to know them and can minister into each other’s lives.

Fifth, to create a better ‘chemistry’ within in a small group be willing to share a meal with one another. It really doesn’t matter what culture you come from – people have their best conversations over a meal. We are surrounded by different nationalities and religions, but there is one thing that we all have in common, we love to share a meal with friends and family. Perhaps three times a year, share a meal with one another and if appropriate, invite other people, even those outside of the church.

Sixth, remember to remind the small group that they are not a group that is autonomous in and of itself. Small groups are not a church. Small groups belong to the body of Christ and must submit to the ruling elders of a local church. Ideally, it would be great if an office bearer (this includes the pastor) can be part of the small group as well.

Seventh, whilst there is nothing wrong *per se* with a homogeneous small group, it may not always be beneficial. It can be very useful to include both genders and different ages. Small groups are a wonderful way where we learn from different people, coming from different ages, gender and culture.

Conclusion – Persevere with small groups

There is no doubt that the purposes and practicalities for a small group will vary from church to church and from person to person. Nonetheless, please persevere in the running of small groups. If there are no small groups in your church then request to start one; and may it prove to be a blessing for the small group and the broader church to the glory of God.

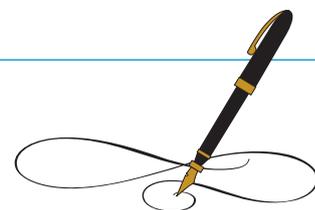
Mr Graeme Zuidema is a minister in the Reformed Church in Pukekohe.

Know Yourself and God

By H24X

*How well do you know yourself
how well do you know God
This is a life long process
as you travel down this road
If you want to know God better
you must first know yourself
That you are a sinner
and need Him above all else
That in yourself there’s nothing good
you come with empty hands
That all your best efforts
can’t fulfill the Lord’s demands
Everything we say and do
is tainted, dirty and stained
Yet God in His great mercy
has a love that never waned
God took your guilt and gave it
to His Son who took your sin
He is the only one who can
make you pure within
So if you want to grow in faith
then read God’s word and pray
And as you grow in a knowledge of Him
you will be able to say
“I thank you God I’m going through life
with you right by my side
That you for showing me
my sinfulness and pride
You are the great redeemer God
I thank you for your son
For cleansing me and save me
for the victory you’ve won.”
Amen*

Sally Davey



From Fear to Faith

Anxiety is a problem for many of us. There are too many things that seem to induce dread, fear or even panic in those of us who have trouble pressing the stop button on an overactive imagination. Perhaps for you it is your health. Or it could be your family, or your job. For others it is things way out of our control – the direction of our world, the future of grandchildren, or the possibility of war or global warming. Maybe you believe in a general sense that God is in control of all things; but today's headlines or the looming crises of tomorrow have your heart racing and your mind unable to focus. Trust in God becomes an abstract idea.

The recent Christchurch mosque attacks provide a case in point. While they were a terrible offence and a shock to our relatively peaceful city, there were aspects of the aftermath that I also found a little dismaying. I had expected Christians to react by looking for opportunities to reach out and help shattered Muslim families. Some did; and found good ways to extend kindness in Christ's name. But strangely, many Christians I talked with seemed more frightened than anything else. Were they afraid of men wearing backpacks or toting semi-automatic firearms walking into church? Some certainly murmured about "the possibility of revenge attacks". Others spoke of their children being "stressed" – but as I've learned from the earthquakes, that can be code for "I'm scared". Children often take cues for their response from their parents. Calm parents usually have calm children. The disturbing thing, as far as I could see, was that Christians should be so afraid.

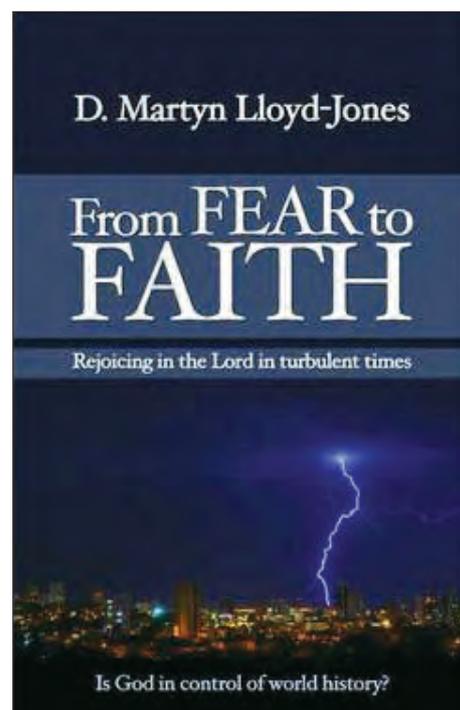
Well, what *should* we be doing about these kinds of fears? We live in what is a very unsafe world at times, and God has put us there. How can he help us deal with our fears? Most of us would say that Scripture is the answer. Turn to God's precious promises concerning worry, and let their truth sink into our

minds and hearts. All of us, myself included, have our go-to texts, such as Matthew 6, Philippians 4 or perhaps Psalm 46. Prolonged meditation on these passages, followed by prayer, will usually still our hearts. But sometimes we need a handle on the bigger picture, something which confirms for us God's sovereignty as it is worked out in history. That is what we need to reassure us that these times, and tumultuous events, are firmly in the hands of our all-loving, omnipotent and omniscient God. It is the big picture which will give us firm foundations, and enable us to stand amid the swirling waters of our current situation.

More than sixty years ago, at the height of the Cold War, when the threat of nuclear attack seemed a distinct possibility, London preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones preached a series of sermons on Habakkuk. Published as a little book entitled *From Fear to Faith*, these sermons prove just as helpful today as they were in 1953. In case you have not read them, I thought I would recommend them to you as a helpful guide for our own times.

Lloyd-Jones begins by addressing the fears and perplexities of his congregation. They were discouraged at the state of the church generally in Britain: they longed for revival, for unbelievers to be converted, but there was little of that. Instead, the church struggled against attacks on the Bible and general unbelief. In the wider world there was fear-inducing rivalry between the superpowers. Christians sensed they lived in an age hostile to the gospel – and yet, if those same listeners were alive *now*, what would they think? I wonder. Habbakkuk, the faithful prophet, was aware that in his day, God's people in Judah were disobedient and needed to heed God's law. He had been asking God, earnestly, to chastise them and bring revival. He had come to the point where he was asking, God, why are you inactive?

God's answer perplexed him: He was going to send the Chaldeans, a wicked,



godless nation, to destroy Judah's cities. This was not what Habakkuk expected, and he was deeply perplexed. God's answers sometimes surprise, even dismay us – but we need to acknowledge that he can use trials and unusual instruments (even evil people) to achieve his good purposes. We need to remind ourselves of several things. First, God is in control of all history, and he has a great plan in all of it, which is to further his kingdom and preserve his people. We can be sure of this – and it should affect how we react to perplexities.

So, how did the prophet respond to God's answer? The key, according to Lloyd-Jones, was that he applied the right approach. This is to stop and think, re-state basic principles (in this case, the basic principles about God's perfect character) and then apply those principles to the problem. Then, if still in doubt, we are to commit the problem to God in faith.

Habakkuk still had to commit his unresolved problem (trying to square God's perfect character with his use of the Chaldeans) to God. This is what he does by way of prayer. Lloyd-Jones makes several comments about prayer at this point. When we commit our problem to God we need to detach ourselves from it. To hang onto it, or to grab it back, is to make our prayer into a lie. We simply cannot, having cast our cares upon God,

go to the first Christian we meet and tell them "I have this terrible problem and I don't know what to do". Instead, we should expect an answer from God and go, figuratively (as Habakkuk did literally) to the watchtower and look to see what God will do. This, to me, is the hardest thing of all to do when I am anxious. I can genuinely follow all the other steps, but it is painfully difficult to stop my mind imagining all sorts of bad things that could still happen. Mental self-discipline is required, but fiendishly hard, given the propensity of unruly thoughts to slip in and consume us again. Here is Lloyd-Jones:

*"We may have to be almost violent in forcing ourselves to do this. It is none the less essential. We must never allow ourselves to become submerged by a difficulty, or to be shut in by the problem. We must come right out of it – 'I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower.' We have to extricate ourselves deliberately, to haul ourselves out of it, and as it were, to detach ourselves from it altogether, and then take our stand looking to God – not at the problem."*¹

God answered Habakkuk's prayer. He told him he would destroy the Chaldeans. (Have you ever noticed that God promised, through the prophets, to

Addendum: Little-known Little Gems

In the chapter on Malachi, page 52, fifth paragraph down from the sub-heading is a reference to *Nehemiah 9:23-31*. It should read *Nehemiah 13:23-31*.

The publisher apologises for this error.

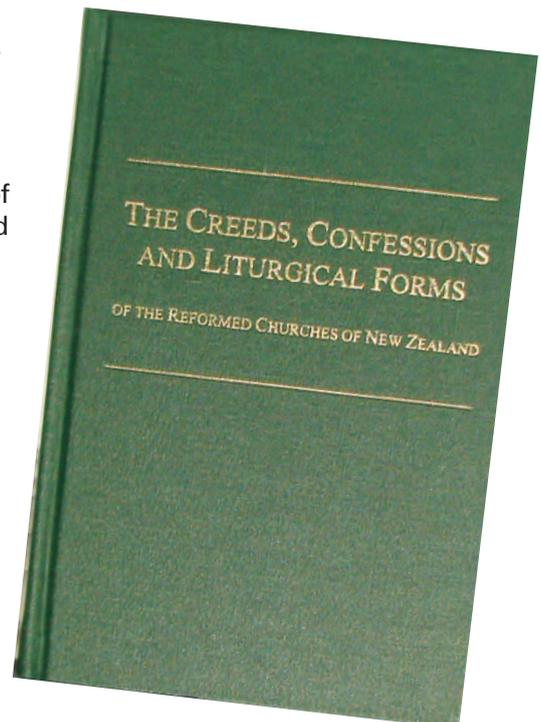
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judge the nations he used to chastise his people?) This much is certain, because what God has said he will do, *he always does*. (And, in time, he did). This leaves Habakkuk needing to live by faith. It is the same for us today. Our problems are not new – indeed, we are foolish to think they are. Believers all through the ages have faced the problem of living by faith in dangerous and perplexing times. But remembering that God has clearly promised he will destroy all evil (see, for instance the vivid pictures in the closing chapter of the book of Revelation) means we can live by faith, and that with steadiness.

Lloyd-Jones ends with some reflections on Habakkuk's prayer in Chapter 3 of the prophecy, noting that Christians who face perplexing situations should pray in humility, in a proper attitude of adoration, and to take heed that our petitions have appropriately spiritual priorities. Are we more concerned about the purity of the church – or about the

possibility of another war, for instance? We could ask ourselves whether we are more concerned about the salvation of the lost or our own safety from terrorist attacks, perhaps. Let's remember that God will give us the needed courage by the power of his Holy Spirit within us. We have in his Word so much more revelation than Habakkuk had to cheer him, too.

The final sermon in this book deals with Habakkuk's great declaration of faith at the end of the prophecy:

*Though the fig tree should not blossom,
Nor fruit be on the vines,
The produce of the olive fail
And the fields yield no food...
Yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will take joy in the God of my salvation." (Habakkuk 3:17,18)*

We still have to face down our fears when we live in troubling times that we do not understand. Our trust in God may

have solid foundations, but sometimes there are terrible things to endure. Believers have faced these in the past, and will do so until the Lord Jesus returns. Well, says Lloyd-Jones, we may turn to history for help. This was a time-honoured practice of the Old Testament believers, and of course New Testament ones as well. Look at the many recountings of Israelite history in the Psalms. The reciting of God's mighty deeds of rescue encouraged many a trembling saint that if God could save his people once, then surely he could do it again. It pays to know about subsequent church history, too. It will give us tremendous hope. It will also reduce our own troubles to realistic proportions, considering that they are usually far smaller than those experienced by Christians of past ages.

Resolve to move from fear to faith!

1 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *From Fear to Faith* (IVP, Nottingham, 1997), p. 36.

Letters from New Zealand

D. G. Vanderpyl

April 1983

Guides abound. We have them for tourists, museums, tax-free shopping, for road markings to give us proper directions and we also have our "spiritually-blind" guides with us. We have a book on the market with the title *The Good Church Guide*. Published by Penguin, it caters for the lost sheep but not in the way you and I understand lost sheep. This Guide explains it all: about church buildings, their history and architecture. It gives information about the type of services, the atmosphere during the worship service, the type and class of the average worshipper in that particular church, the quality of the music, type of lighting, comfortableness of the seating and popularity of the organist and choir.

What is missing, however, is the preaching of God's Word. No mention is made of it, not even what type of preaching one may expect, such as long or short, learned or popular, anecdotal or persuasive, orthodox or liberal. It seems that the authors of this guide had no intention of catering for the flock which

remains faithful to their fixed place of worship, but only wished to take care of the mobile churchgoer who wants to shop around for taste, quality and atmosphere. Is that why Robert Schuller built his glass cathedral?

The Avondale congregation has been successful in ending their present pastoral vacancy. They called Rev. D. J. van der Vecht from Tasmania who accepted the call and should be installed by the time you read this. I hope their new minister is not superstitious. Since the Avondale church was instituted as a separate church in 1964, they have had 4 ministers serving in an escalating sort of way: one year, three years, five years and eight years. According to the escalator system the Avondale congregation will have their new minister for the next twelve years. Maybe it is a good omen for that church.

In Mangere efforts are being made to work towards a Biblical oneness in the congregation. Existing Bible study classes where the young met separately from the old, have been disbanded. In their place they now have district fellowships

where young and old meet together for study, prayer, devotions and fellowship. The elders will be responsible for these. Also the weekly news bulletin will be used more intensely to improve advice and information between session and congregation. Very laudable indeed.

One pastor confronted his congregation with the question, "What do you get out of the church services on Sundays?" The answers could lie between the two extremes of "absolutely nothing" to "a great deal." But, fortunately, it was a rhetorical question, because he continued to say that there is a far better question to ask and that is, "What do you yourself put into the church services on Sundays?" If you go to church in order to get something out of it and you come away dissatisfied, then perhaps you blame the minister, the organist, those kids who mucked around on the seat in front of you or whatever, and you say, "I may as well have stayed home." But worship "is not a passive thing, where we just sit back and be entertained and preached at. A positive input is required. With the right approach and attitude

you will find those hours in church a real joy and blessing.

In an overseas magazine, an unmarried person posed the problem of neglect by parents towards the unmarried. While all attention and love and everything else emotional and financial

is given to those children who enter marriage, the unmarried ones are expected to care for themselves, are even questioned on what they do, where they spend their money, but are seldom supported with positive comments and understanding. Single people by the

thousands must be experiencing this inequality. Maybe, some parents may suddenly recognise a blind spot in their vision and correct this unfairness.

Abridged

Focus on faith

Self Inquiry

J C Ryle Part 2

Let me ask, whether we know anything by experience of conversion to God. Without conversion there is no salvation. "Except you be converted, and become as little children, you shall never enter the kingdom of heaven." – "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." – "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His." – "If any man be in Christ he is a new creature." (Matthew 18:3, John 3:3, Romans 8:9, 2 Corinthians 5:17)

We are all by nature so weak, so

worldly, so earthly-minded, so inclined to sin, that without a thorough change we cannot serve God in life, and could not enjoy Him after death. Just as ducks, as soon as they are hatched, take naturally to water, so do children, as soon as they can do anything, take to selfishness, lying, and deceit; and none pray or love God, unless they are taught. High or low, rich or poor, gentle or simple, we all need a complete change – a change which is the special office of the Holy Spirit to give us. Call it what you please – new birth, regeneration, renewal, new creation, quickening, repentance – the thing must be had if we are to be saved: and if we have the thing it will be seen.

Sense of sin and deep hatred of it, faith in Christ and love to Him, delight

in holiness and longing after more of it, love for God's people and distaste for the things of the world, – these, these are the signs and evidences which always accompany conversion. Myriads around us, it may be feared, know nothing about it. They are, in Scripture language, dead, and asleep, and blind, and unfit for the kingdom of God. Year after year, perhaps, they go on repeating the words of the creed, "I believe in the Holy Spirit;" but they are utterly ignorant of His changing operations on the inward man. Sometimes they flatter themselves they are born again, because they have been baptized, and go to church, and receive the Lord's Supper; while they are totally destitute of the marks of the new birth, as described by John in his first Epistle. And all this time the words of Scripture are clear and plain, – "Except you be converted, you shall in no case enter the kingdom." (Matthew 18:3).

In times like these, no reader ought to wonder that I press the subject of conversion on men's souls. No doubt there are plenty of sham conversions in such a day of religious excitement as this. But bad coin is no proof that there is no good money: no, rather it is a sign that there is some money current which is valuable, and is worth imitation. Hypocrites and sham Christians are indirect evidence that there is such a thing as real grace among men. Let us search our own hearts then, and see how it is with ourselves. Once more let us ask, in the matter of conversion, "How do we do?"

Una Sancta

Digital subscription to *Una Sancta*, the family magazine of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, is available for **\$10**/year (AUD).

Contact Sharon Heerema
admin@unasancta.com.au



“COME OVER AND HELP US”

A call to kingdom work in New Plymouth

A reflection on Acts 16

In Acts 16, Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia who urged him, saying “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” He immediately made efforts to go, concluding that God had called him to preach the gospel to them (Acts 16:6-10).

This passage has drawn my attention of late as the pastor of a church plant in New Plymouth.

First, it’s striking that the Holy Spirit forbade Paul and his companions to

preach the Word in Asia (Acts 16:6). Instead, they were directed to Macedonia. The place God wants Paul to serve isn’t defined by the closest need: it wasn’t God’s time for Asia to hear the gospel. And this wasn’t the only time God restricted (re-directed) Paul’s ministry (cf. Rom 1:11-13). The nature of being ambassadors for the gospel is that we’re dependent on where God sends us – and at times, that isn’t the first place we wanted to go (or the first need we see).

Secondly, Paul’s attitude to God’s direction is a powerful challenge. Although Paul was (in some ways) a special case, in reality, his priority to kingdom work is something all Christians should be defined by. He sought the spread of God’s kingdom on earth, and he pursued (and submitted to) God’s direction in order to do that (as did Timothy). The same attitude was seen in Timothy (Acts 16:1-3), who faced his own figurative ‘Macedonian call’ before Paul received his literal one. Paul ‘wanted Timothy to accompany him’, and so he did.

Third, God’s timing isn’t always practicable – serving Him doesn’t always fall into the category of what we would consider to be ‘well laid plans’. Sometimes He changes the trajectory of what we had in mind drastically and suddenly. Paul had a plan to go to Asia but was forbidden to do so – so he attempted to go to Bithynia but the Spirit of Jesus didn’t allow that either (Acts 16:6-7).

Mt Taranaki (Egmont) south of New Plymouth. On a clear day this is the sight you are greeted with as you come to worship at the church plant in New Plymouth.



Once clarity came, however, Paul *immediately* sought to travel to Macedonia.

It can be very difficult to determine God's will based on His providences – sometimes the hardest things are the most appropriate (more on that soon) – but the reality is that as Christians we're called to direct our attention to His will. Sometimes that means making tents and ministering to our local neighborhood (Acts 18:3); other times that means relocating to make tents in a different location; and other times that means giving up our 'I-need-money-to-eat-work' that we might go into full time mission-work. These transitions are seldom easy and they always come with sacrifice – but they're always spiritually profitable.

Another thing that amazes me is how God's will isn't always measurable by the quantity of fruit. Prior to going to Macedonia, Paul's ministry through the cities in Southern Galatia was so well received that the "churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily" (Acts 16:5). Yet, rather than remain in this profitable location, Paul was called by God to serve elsewhere. Although we're told the story of Lydia's conversion, the very next account shows us how Paul's efforts to do the Lord's work (in this case exorcising an

evil spirit) caused him to be seized and dragged before the rulers, clothes torn, beaten with rods, and thrown into prison with their feet fastened in stocks (Acts 16:16-24). In fact, this is representative of much of Paul's experience in ministry.

It's all too easy to become discouraged in such times and to think that we should give up because progress seems painfully slow. Even in the hardship and limitations (earthly restrictions to productivity), however, God is still at work; in Acts 16, not only does He draw Paul and Silas closer to himself through their suffering (vs 25) but provides a setting to again display His greatness (vs 26) and even brings about the salvation of the jailers (vs 33-35). We must never think that just because something is practically difficult it isn't spiritually worthwhile.

The nature of kingdom work

In kingdom work, it seems to me that we live with an odd blend of urgency and patience. The gospel of Mark is characterized by immediacy; Paul directs Titus and the church at Crete to urgency (Titus 3:12-14); we're called to strive for the sake of the gospel (Phil 1:27) and run the race so as to win (1 Cor 9:24). Yet at the same time, we're to be still and wait on the Lord (Psa 46:10); we stand in awe of God's work (Hab 1:5) and His kingdom isn't built by the efforts of our hands (Psa 127:1).

We're to use everything God gives us in His service to battle with the Devil over the souls of sinful men and women. And yet we're also to be content with the Lord's timing (which is often slower than ours).

The thing is, our battle isn't won or lost on the basis of shifting around pieces on the chess board of life, as if having a 'queen' in the right place makes all the difference. Kingdom work isn't about logistics or resourcing – we don't achieve success by pouring in more money. In fact, the gospel is expressed most poignantly by God using weak instruments to make much of himself. He chose disciples who had abandoned Him (and doubted Him) to spread His gospel (Matt 28:17).

Kingdom work is hard work – and Christian's can't escape it. As soon as we become a disciple of Christ we are, categorically, called to serve him as disciple makers. The devil is fighting tooth and nail to retain what he believes is his – and Christians are soldiers of the cross. There is nothing leisurely about our battle – God's kingdom work is per-

About New Plymouth

Schools

There are currently no Protestant Christian schools at any level in New Plymouth (we need to start one). There is an Adventist pre and primary school and then Roman Catholic and secular schools. There is also a home-school community.

Employment Opportunities

The main industries/jobs here revolve around health, oil and gas, farming and the hospitality industry. There are also a broad range of other opportunities though as we have a well-rounded economy.

Population

~82,000

Attractions

There is a Reformed Church plant here!

Despite the lack of a university, many who leave to study come back to settle. We have a lot of young couples raising children here.

We're a coastal city where it's said you can 'snowboard, ski, water ski and surf all in the same day' (Wikipedia).

We have beautiful gardens and parks and coastal walkways (we were even recognized as one of two walking & cycling 'Model Communities' by the government in 2010).

formed through sharing the suffering of Christ, not by hitting the snooze button. Your movements here on earth, your developing skill-set, all are to be used for the glory of God.

Help needed

The following is difficult for me to write because I'm vitally aware that there are needs in every town where people live. Nevertheless, there are times when in the mission field, further support is needed.

The most important thing we need is prayer – and I have said in earlier newsletters how much we appreciate your ongoing prayers for us. God has graciously given us prayer as a means of grace and He delights to answer such prayers to display His glory.

The other most important thing we need, however, is harvesters. We have been praying for years that God would raise up more harvesters in His harvest-field – might it be possible that He will answer that prayer by drawing even you to this work?

In a church plant, all the work of running a church rests on a very small group of people – and that load is heavy. I'm not primarily talking about administrative tasks (although there is that!); and I'm also not really talking about being on the creche roster, or supporting a Sunday School ministry, or running other programs (although there is a need there too!). I'm talking instead about a much broader call – to do whatever is necessary to make disciples of all nations.

I'm not going to romanticize church planting – it's hard work. When God calls you to run a race in such a work, He doesn't give you shoes, and the road is full of gravel – you're never comfortable and you feel each stone and shard of glass. Having said that, if it's true that testing produces perseverance and suffering purifies our faith, there is certainly much good that comes from such a work.

Yet the work also isn't glamorous – there is a great need for hospitality to be directed towards those who aren't easy; for an example to be set in our community about what true Christianity looks like – a deep seated love of God and one's neighbor; for a craving to see those who hate God to be reconciled with him; to be poured out by the Lord for the sake of the faith of the unlovable.

In such kingdom work there are times of discouragement and uncertainty, there are times of weakness and fear. But the thing about being on the coal face is, that although much of your work is done

while covered in soot, God sometimes allows you to find that precious rock. I remember seeing a picture of coal miners walking out of a mine – the only bright thing about them was their smiles!

Perhaps God desires you to serve in such a way in your local church plant. Perhaps He is prompting you to relocate to plant new churches in places such as Tauranga or Rotorua or Taupo or even overseas! But it may be that He's also calling you to come to New Plymouth and serve here.

There is a desperate need among our

community. We're a small church plant in need of help. If your desire is to be a fellow-soldier and a fellow-worker in the hands of your Lord, to see souls saved for Christ, we need you. If you're interested in the work, please call.

Warm regards,
Joshua Flinn

Mr Joshua Flinn is the minister in New Plymouth, which is a church plant under the supervision of the Reformed Church in Palmerston North.

*We give thanks to Our Lord for his faithfulness,
grace and love towards our parents*

Auke and Baukje ter Veen

As they celebrate

60
YEARS OF MARRIAGE.

29th July 1959 – 29th July 2019

Gerry and Jeannette

Janine and Kevin

Peter and Miriam

Hadie and Hans

*+10 grandchildren and
12 great grandchildren.*

1 Cor 13:13

*“So now faith, hope
and love abide,
these three, but the
greatest of these is
love.”*



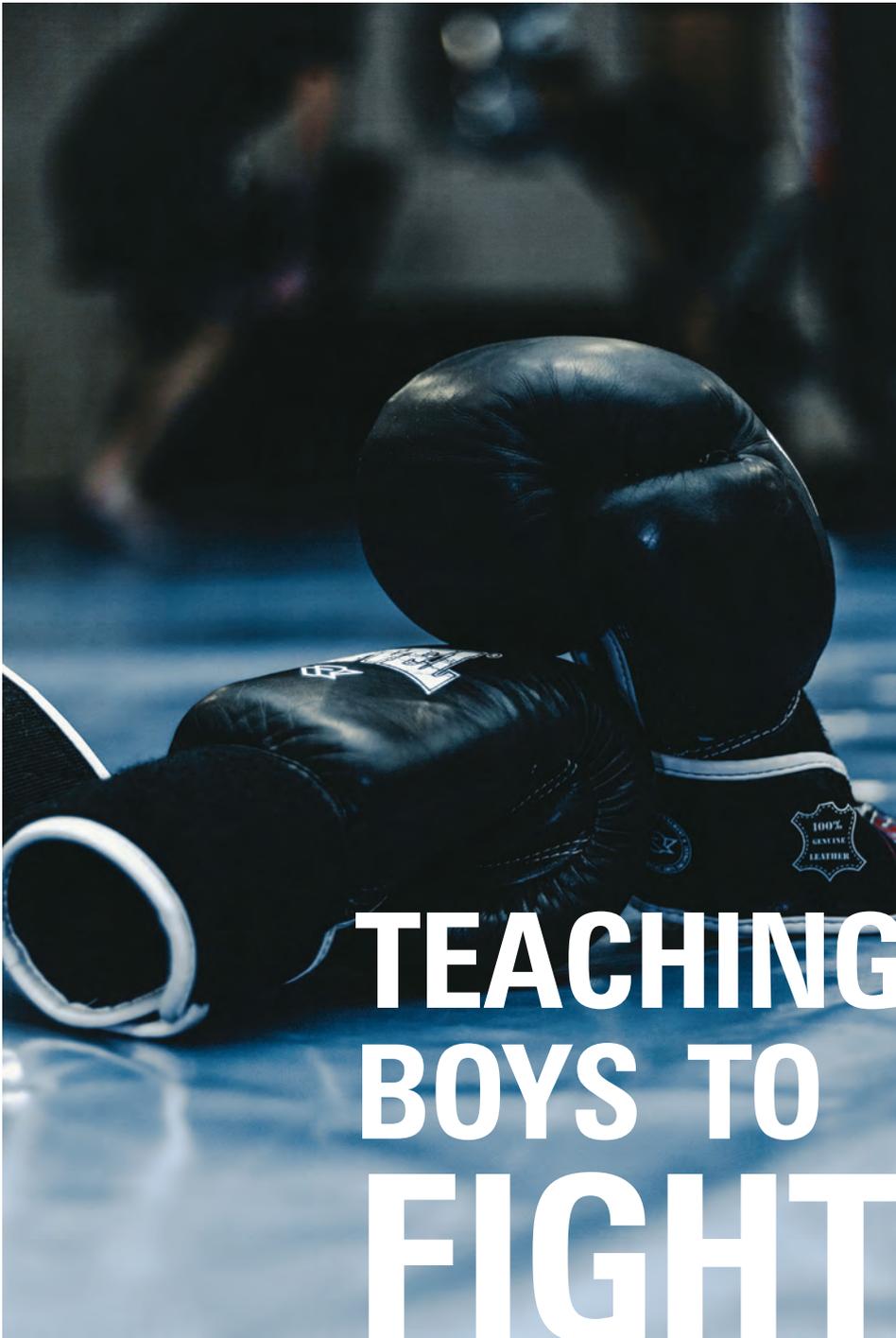


Photo by Bogdan Yukhymchuk on Unsplash.

TEACHING BOYS TO FIGHT

Clarence Bouwman

Boys today are no longer expected to become warriors as a rite of passage to manhood. And that's a good thing; I'm grateful that my sons did not have to physically kill an enemy to be considered men.

Yet there was something very healthy and wholesome about boys needing to lay their lives on the line for the protection of another. Fighting to defend the weak has a way of developing a lad's

sense of worth. And the Bible certainly encourages lads to become fighters.

Christians are warriors

God in the beginning told Adam to “work [the Garden] and keep it” (Gen 2:15). The verb “keep” used here appears again in Gen 3:24 to describe what the angel at the entrance to the Garden was to do after Adam's expulsion: with his flaming sword that turned every way he was to “guard” the way to the tree of life. We might think that the Garden was a place of peace void of danger, but omniscient God knew Satan had rebelled (or perhaps would yet rebel) and would attack his world. The man Adam was mandated to guard his territory and his home – and that involves fighting. The fact that he failed dismally in defending his home and family from an outside attack does not free his offspring from the same responsibility.

In line with that mandate from the beginning Paul reminds the saints of Ephesus that Christians continue to “wrestle” (6:12) – a term that catches the concept of hand-to-hand combat. He adds that the battle is “not against flesh and blood” so that it needs to be fought with fists or guns, but is rather against “the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” – all terms that describe the very same devil and his demons that attacked mankind in Paradise. That's why Paul instructs every Christian to “put on the whole armor of God” (6:11) and why Timothy was told to “fight the good fight of the faith” (1 Tim 6:12). It's fact: Scripture mandates men to fight.

I see two implications:

1. Men need to see themselves as fighters and so actually get out there and fight. Those for whom they go to battle are first of all those entrusted to their care – and that's primarily

the family. There's our role as Dads!
2. The boys in the family need to be trained to become tomorrow's fighters.

That's the question we will explore: how do we train our sons to fight?

Army training

Those who join the military must undergo rigorous training. The training invariably involves two aspects: classroom theory and physical practice. The same is true of Christian trainees preparing to fight the fight of faith. We commonly call the classroom theory "doctrine" and the physical practice "lifestyle."

These two elements to good training are obviously inseparable. Getting the classroom theory right is the first step in getting the fight right – and the second step is lots of practice. It's striking that Paul's letter to the Ephesians contains 3 chapters of doctrine and then 3 chapters of Christian lifestyle – with the two sections connected by the hinge-word "therefore" in 4:1. The word "wrestle" (mentioned above) appears in the second section on lifestyle. If we are to master the field instruction of the "wrestling" of Eph 6:12, we need first to get the classroom theory of the first 3 chapters straight in our minds. That is true for mature fighters (in this article we're applying that to the fathers) as well as for future fighters (that's the sons).

Classroom instruction

Paul ends chapter 1 with the glorious proclamation of Christ's ascension into heaven and his enthronement as King of kings and Lord of lords. Then he moves to chapter 2 to describe what enemies Christian fighters will encounter out in the field. What he says is highly instructive for Dads (and Moms) training their sons to be fighters.

Says Paul: that future fighter yet in the cradle is (contrary to appearances) not angelic and innocent but is instead "dead in sin" (Eph 2:1,5). From infancy, our dear little Johnny lives in step with the passions of his flesh, and from birth he carries out the desires of his body and mind (2:3). We hate to admit it, but all of us who has ever lived for any length of time with a toddler in the house knows from experience that that little child is inherently selfish and wants to press on those around him that he's the king of the castle – and you better listen to me now. That's the passions of his flesh....

Adding to the challenges of that de-

pravity, Paul continues, is the impulse of "the world" (2:2). That's the fallen creation in which that child lives with its *anti-God* patterns of thought and behavior. From birth little Johnny is inhaling that hostility so that he's as perfectly comfortable in this anti-God system as a fish is in water. More, because of his own deadness in sin, Johnny *hungers* for that anti-God system; it's his food and drink.

Furthermore, "the prince of the power of the air" – that's the devil- is "at work in the sons of disobedience" (2:2) – and that definitely includes our dear little Johnny! And Johnny is absolutely wired to follow the devil's work in his surroundings and in his heart.

My point: we fathers (and mothers) need to train our boys from infancy to fight the sin within and battle the influences of the world attacking them. Those little children are not angelic but are in fact – as I heard someone put it – *vipers in diapers*. The fact that God claims Johnny for himself in his covenant of grace does not change this tragic bent in little Johnny's heart nor does it change the fact that he's daily inhaling the toxic anti-God pollution of the world in which he lives and it does not diminish either the hellishly subtle schemes of the devil and his demons against him. My conviction: in the classrooms of life we need to teach our children from infancy to think in terms of those three sworn enemies, the devil, the world and the infants' own flesh. And as our children grow from infancy into toddlers and from there into childhood, we need to keep training them in the fields of life how to fight these three mortal enemies. There's a reason why the PLO let children play with guns; their fathers wanted their sons to become fighters – and excel in the battle.

In the field

God's instruction manual would have Dads train their children to "put on the whole armor of God" (Eph 6:11). Dads do that by systematically reading the Bible with the children and speaking about God's promises and obligations as caught in that passage (see 6:14-17). More, Dads pray with their children and for them (6:18). And they train the children – yes, children! – to turn off the TV when the program has foul language or nudity or selfishness (see 5:3-14). They train the children to cease the video game when the game turns to violence or murder or assault. Dads stop the program to make the children

... we need to teach our children from infancy to think in terms of those three sworn enemies, the devil, the world and the infants' own flesh.

take the advertisement apart in order to weigh what was actually communicated. Dads do it because they know *some* foul language and a *bit* of nudity and *the odd* murder and *some playful* violence are devilish ploys to make our children think that evil is normal and a bit of evil is harmless. That's the reason why Paul writes that, "sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints" (5:3) and adds the instruction to "take *no* part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them" (5:11). These are instructions *fathers* need to train sons to follow. As the boys are attacked by the devil in the stuff of daily life, they learn to fight temptation and evil.

Is there a problem?

Of course, young soldiers will not follow where the general fears to go. In the family Dad is the general. That becomes the question: when the children sneak out of bed to peek into the den, what do they see Dad watching on TV? Brothers, our children simply won't buy into our training if they don't see us fight-

ing in step with the training we give them. Anybody who has parented for any length of time knows that our children figure out what actually happens in the secret corners of our lives. And they figure out too where we fail to engage the battle whole-heartedly. My point is this: it is we Dads first of all who need to put on -and keep on- that full armor of God – and that's a reference to Bible study, committed prayer life, serious about living the faith. The children need to see that we are seriously wrestling with the enemy in our own decision-making, our own choices, our own tastes.

More, the children need to see that we Dads are actively defending the domain God entrusted to us – and that's first of all our own homes. We cannot close the windows of our homes so securely as to keep out the toxic air of the world outside and we cannot lock the doors either so tightly as to keep the demonic spirits of the air away from our children. In other words, we cannot prevent that the enemy lob his bombs our way. But we can alert the children to Satan's attacks and dress them in a way

that ensures minimum damage. More, we can teach our children -through instruction and example- how to fight back and -in God's strength- to say No to the enemy. That involves more than putting internet filters in your home; it involves also discussing issues with the children, answering their questions, analyzing a movie together, showing the children the two sides of a political or social issue and how to come to a God-pleasing solution, etc. It involves showing the children how you wrestle yourself with the issues of life, and how you respond when the enemy gets an arrow under your armor. It involves fighting beside your son, debating with your son, praying with him. Where we aren't fighters ourselves, we can't expect our children to become fighters!

A version of this article first appeared on the Smithville Canadian Reformed Church blog where Mr Bouwman is a pastor of the Word.

Reformed Perspective, January-February 2019. Used with permission.

Books in focus

Echoes of Exodus: Tracing a Biblical Motif,

by Bryan D. Estelle.

IVP Academic, 2018. Paperback, 392 pages, \$32.32 (Amazon).

Reviewed by OP pastor Thomas A. Martin.

Read this book and you'll be drawn back to the Bible with a renewed appreciation of the riches of God's Word and the fullness of redemption!

"Should you speed-read this book?" the author asks in his introduction (16). His answer is, "Probably not." That's a good answer because this is a content-rich book that engages vigorously with current scholarship. It's an academic book intended to equip preachers and teachers, but serious Bible students will profit from it too as an edifying study to stimulate the intellect and refresh the soul.

Most of the heavy lifting comes early

on, so don't quit at the opening chapter. Here Estelle lays out his hermeneutical methodology, introducing us to the concept of "echo" and locating its roots in the method of classical and Reformed exegetes. This is the most technical part of the book (augmented by a twenty-four-page concluding appendix), but its content is engagingly illustrated by the chapters which follow.

The second chapter establishes from Genesis the covenantal framework within which the exodus event is situated. This is an excellent explication of covenant theology as understood in our confessional standards.

Chapter 3 brings us to the exodus itself. Biblically, this is an event of "epic proportions" (93), which the reader is cautioned against reducing to a mere political liberation. Instead, Estelle notes approvingly the assessment of Geerhardus Vos, "The exodus from Egypt is the Old Testament Redemption" (4). On this

basis, he proceeds to demonstrate how the exodus paves the way for a full-orbed understanding of redemption. As a type of redemption, the exodus unites both forensic and participatory aspects of salvation and reverberates throughout the rest of the canon.

Having laid this careful groundwork, Estelle goes on in subsequent chapters to trace the echoes of the exodus event by examining selected passages from both testaments. This is a richly-textured and well-developed study. It makes judicious use of the original languages (generally transliterated) in a way that will be appreciated even by those unfamiliar with them. In unfolding his theme, Estelle provides preachers of the Old Testament with a fine case study in hermeneutics, demonstrating how all the Scriptures bear a unified and coherent witness to Christ.

As the subtitle suggests, this study traces a *biblical* motif – its value is not limited to those with an interest in the

Old Testament alone. The later chapters examine how exodus themes emerge in the New Testament, shaping its narrative and overflowing into the soteriology, ecclesiology, and ethics of New Testament believers. Finally, the book rises to a stirring climax in its treatment of the book of Revelation – a feast for the soul and a salutary lesson on how to read and preach the closing book of the canon!

For those still tempted to speed-read, there are helpful summaries at the end of each chapter. The usual indices include a comprehensive Scripture index. A concluding section prompts the reader to reflect on the implications of the study for systematic theology and adds some provocative comments on its implications for prayer and piety that are well worth pondering. Truly, as Estelle says, “much grist for the biblical, theological and ecclesiological mill” (326).

New Horizons, April 2019

The Ark of Safety: Is There Salvation Outside of the Church?

by Ryan M. McGraw.

Reformation Heritage, 2018.

Paperback, 112 pages, \$7.50.

Reviewed by OP pastor A. Craig Troxel.

In *The Ark of Safety*, Ryan McGraw’s primary quarry is the confessional phrase, “out of which [visible church] there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (WCF 25.2). At first glance such a phrase may appear overly narrow or strict. Isn’t it enough simply to love Christ? On that point, Geddes MacGregor wrote that the quickest way of getting a correct answer to the “very theological question, ‘What think ye of Christ?’ is by not asking it at all, but by ascertaining, rather, what your audience thinks of the Church” (*Corpus Christi*, preface). In his book, McGraw argues similarly. Not only does he get to his answer quickly – it’s a short book – but he also concludes that how we regard the church says more about how we regard Christ than how we regard the church herself. He makes this case in three successive ways.

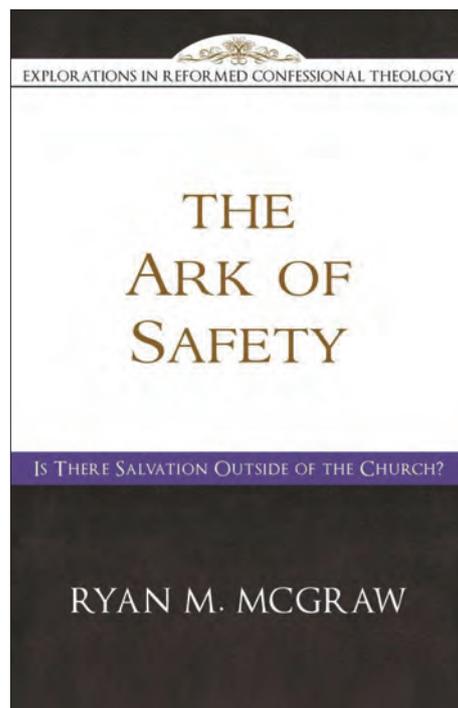
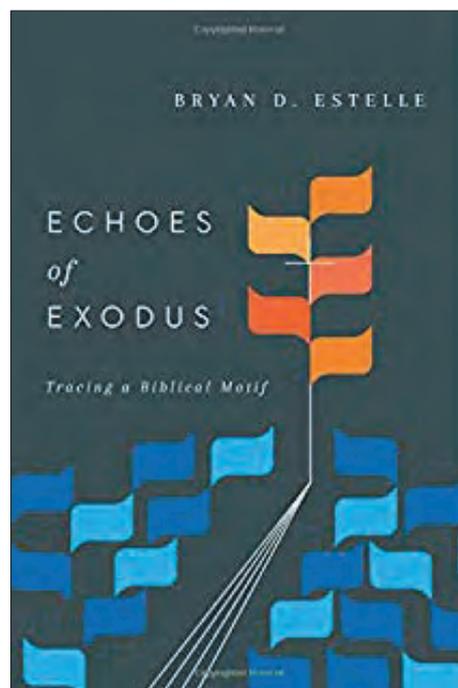
First, he tracks down the historical origin and development of the phrase “no salvation outside the church,” starting with Cyprian, Augustine, and then looking to Reformers like Heinrich Bullinger, William Ames, John Calvin, and Zacharias Ursinus. The author shows that

the latter argued their points around the important distinction between the church in her twin capacities as invisible and visible. He then surveys the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the thinking of John Owen, Francis Turretin, Wilhelmus à Brakel, and Herman Witsius – who taught that membership in the church invisible is absolutely necessary for salvation, while membership in the church visible is ordinarily necessary for salvation. McGraw rightly argues that both have their place and priority, and that the “church visible comes first in order historically, while the church invisible comes first in order theologically” (86). Nicely said.

Secondly, McGraw hunts down the scriptural evidence to see whether these confessional giants and standards hold up. As he discusses the covenantal structure of Scripture, he lands upon the importance of circumcision as the God-given sign and seal of membership among God’s people. Circumcision inevitably draws out the distinction between the visible and invisible nature of God’s corporate people, since the outward circumcision of the body was meant to signify the inward circumcision of the heart. Moses and the prophets capitalized upon this, as did Paul (Rom. 2:28–29). The author then shows how the New Testament ties circumcision to baptism as the covenantal sign that ushers new members into the expanding visible people of God since both sacraments fulfill the same function, have the same meaning, are applied to the same recipients, and underline the same significance of the church visible for the salvation of God’s people.

It is true that a person can be saved without joining the church or being baptized – like the thief on the cross. And yet, speaking to this very example, the author cites J. C. Ryle who wisely remarked that God gave us this one example of a deathbed conversion so that we would not give up on anyone, but he gave us only one, so that we might not be presumptuous and dismiss the importance of affiliating with the church. The church, and all the means God has given to her (like baptism) only emphasize how crucial these are for the believer.

Thirdly, McGraw brings together his historical and scriptural evidence. For example, he demonstrates how important the preaching of the Word of God is for salvation. He looks to Romans 10:14, which states,



*How then will they call on him
in whom they have not believed?
And how are they to believe in him
of whom they have never heard?
And how are they to hear without
someone preaching?*

Without faith, there is no salvation. Without the preaching of the Word, there is no faith. Without the church visible, there is no preaching of the Word. More-

over, without the church visible, there is no communion of the saints, no perfection of the saints, and no duties of the saints. How can anyone seriously entertain salvation without considering how necessary the church is for it?

I think McGraw should be complimented for obtaining his goal – and for doing so with brevity. This little book could have been even more concise,

but not by much. And yet, for its size, it is packed with solid work – especially helpful in its exposition of the distinction between the church visible and invisible. I'm pleased that the author has not lost sight of a more general readership and the types of questions that Bible readers like you and I, might ordinarily ask.
New Horizons, April 2019



Photo by Kilian Peschel on Unsplash.

Some reflections on death and dying

Dirk J van Garderen

"... all our days pass away under your wrath; we bring our years to an end like a sigh. The years of our life are seventy, or even by strength of reason eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away"

So teach us to number our days that we might get a heart of wisdom. (Psalm 90.9,10,12)

When you get a little older, recognis-

ing that, in earthly terms, the years of your life have reached that span of 70, or by reason of strength 80, 'looking back' comes naturally. Memories! You reflect, take stock and measure what you have learned in your life. But it doesn't stop there. As you get older you start thinking more and more about the future as well. Looking ahead.

It's that looking ahead that I want to reflect on in this article. What lies ahead for you?

In some respects that is as clear as crystal. Our days in our present body will

come to an end and, for God's adopted children in Christ, something much more beautiful awaits. We believe with Paul that to live is Christ and to die is gain. To depart and be with Christ is better by far. (*Philippians 1.21,24.*)

Thinking about death in the context of what awaits us is not hard. In and because of Christ, death has lost its victory and sting. (*I Corinthians 15.54.*) However, thinking about and preparing yourself for *dying* is something altogether different. Death marks the moment your heart stops beating. It is that state of being when life ceases. Dying is a process preceding and leading to death.

Ours is *not* an age or a culture that likes to focus on dying; on the when, how, how long, whether it will be painfully slow or mercifully quick. We'll be happy when we're dead in Christ but thinking about how we will die sends shivers down our spines.

In discussing dying with seniors, I have regularly heard them say, "*Pastor, I know what will happen to me **after** I die. But every night I ask, 'Lord, when I am going to die, take me in my sleep please.'*" In other words, please provide a special anaesthetic so that I don't have to experience a long, potentially painful process in which my body, mind and dignity fade away hour by hour, ounce by ounce. Let it be quick and painless – if possible, during a state of somnolent unconsciousness.

It is at this point that I often introduce Martin Luther into the conversation. He is quoted as saying, 'Being a Christian is all about *learning to die well.*' Dying *well* as opposed to dying badly, in an unsettled, unprepared and confused way. In the sixteenth century life was often short and dying slowly and painfully was something that every household experienced again and again. There was no chloroform or anaesthetic to ease the process. Dying was often agonising and brutal. Luther longed for the same assurance Paul expresses in his final letter to Timothy just before his execution in Rome. '*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness ...*' (*II Timothy 4.7,8a.*) In Luther's mind, Paul had learned to die well.

Interestingly, the motto '*learn to die*' was also a subject which received a lot of attention in sixteenth century evangelical England. That is unsurprising. In those days the average life expectancy was barely thirty, a figure determined

largely by heart-breaking levels of infant mortality: 25% of children died before their first birthday, and 50% before their tenth.¹

You will likely have heard of Lady Jane Grey (1537-1554) who ruled as England's queen for nine days. She was beheaded for treason in the Tower of London, aged 17. Jane, a godly woman whose story needs to be better known, wrote a letter to her sister(s) Katherine (and Mary). '*I have sent you, good sister Katherine, a book, which though it should be outwardly trimmed with gold, yet inwardly worth more than precious stones. It will teach you to live, **it will teach you to die ...***' (That book was her New Testament in Greek!)² An amazing, but not atypical sentiment among the godly of her generation.

I believe that our English version of

That comma !

We live and move and have our being:
facing our ups and down galore;
for such is life, that's what we're seeing,
but we don't know what's *next* in store.

We gather riches, fame, you name it;
sometimes much more than we can hold:
And so we do our best to frame it,
but all that glitters is not gold.

Sadly we face a world that suffers,
and pain, it's true, pinches us too.
We can't construct pain-barring buffers,
and death, at last, is all too true!

The grave, a-gaping to devour us ...
the sand, a-cov'ring, and we're gone!?
Such wishful thinking pales before us,
for we must stand before a Throne!

We think amiss "death is a full-stop",
ignoring it's a 'comma' true.
Called to account for life's performance,
what should we think, or say, or do?

J Goris

the Heidelberg Catechism seriously short-changes us in its rendering of Q&A 1 of Lord's Day 1 in the language it uses. Remember this statement originated in the sixteenth century. It begins with the question, 'What is your only comfort in life and death?'. However, the original German edition reads, '... beides im Leben und im Sterben.'³ The verb used is in the infinitive form.⁴ Surely a proper, accurate translation of the original German is 'What is your only comfort in living and **dying**' not 'in death'.

The word 'death' as read in this Lord's Day is most readily interpreted as referring to the state of not being alive, to what happens *after* this earthly life. This is altogether different from 'dying' which refers to the final stages of this earthly life. *That* is what the Heidelberg Catechism is discussing in the first question and answer.

My conviction is that our English translations of the Catechism, in using the word 'death' instead of the originally intended 'dying' do us a disservice. It deflects us from having to face up to what we naturally want to avoid facing – those last months, weeks, days, moments before we die. It, I am sure, is one of the reasons why thinking, praying and talking about dying is so easily avoided, even in our circles. I meet many seniors whose eyes widen in fear when their dying is mentioned. Think of the usual reaction when the 'C' diagnosis is given. What happens is that rather than face up to and speak openly about the process of dying the topic turns to what happens *after* death. That's much more comfortable.

But shouldn't we all think about and take time to prepare for the process of dying as well? Let me share some thoughts on this with you.

As I get older, *Psalm 90*, that prayer of Moses, soaks into my soul more and more. Before finally falling asleep at night, I often find myself meditating and reflecting on verse 12: '*So teach us [me] to number our [my] days that we [I] might get a heart of wisdom.*'

In the first part of this familiar Psalm the focus is on the brevity and suffering we experience as a result of the curse of sin. After the opening verses the focus is on the eternally unchanging, sovereign God who has been the dwelling place of his chosen children in all generations.

God is eternal, but we are not. All too soon God returns us to dust. We are here today, not even a memory tomorrow. In God's eyes, and, increasingly in

our own eyes, life in this body begins and ends in a flash. 1,000 years are like a single yesterday. A sudden flood sweeps us away before it *in a moment*. Think *grass*, it flourishes in the morning and by evening it fades and withers. Such is life. 'For we are brought to an end by your anger; by your wrath we are dismayed.' The moment we take our first breath the curse of sin takes us in its grip. We start to die. We are under God's wrath. The reason for this is not only what we do and fail to do, but who, in Adam, we are.

When life's weight makes us groan and experience the full force of the curse of sin, we shouldn't be angry with God or even surprised. On the contrary! Look at yourself. Nothing, absolutely nothing about you is hidden from God. You deserve the full weight of God's just anger and condemnation. So stop shaking your fist at God and complaining that what's happening to you is not fair. Stop moaning, 'Why me? What have I done to deserve this?' The reality is that *all our days pass away under your wrath; we bring our years to an end like a sigh. The seventy or eighty years we might be given are but toil and trouble. They are soon gone, and we fly away.*'

That's the problem. Our generation today is steeped and utterly saturated in its belief that '*we shall overcome*'; that this life is all there is, and that we can make it beautiful and meaningful; that success must be measured in health, wealth and happiness. We sing, '*Always look on the bright side of life.*' In short, there is a blunt refusal to face up to what Moses is saying in Psalm 90.

The antidote? Face up and think of not just living but also dying. *That* is what Moses calls us to do when he says, '*So teach us to number our days that we might get a heart of wisdom.*'

'*Numbering our days*' forces us to face our own mortality – the shortness and brevity of life and that we must number our days in the light of the curse of sin, which saturates every part of creation. Life's span is suffering no matter what medications we take or how loud we turn up the music to drown our fears. The inevitable suffering of body, spirit and soul in this life, will come to a climax in dying and, finally, death itself. To expect otherwise (and I fear many Christians do!) is to believe the lie used to deceive our first parents in the Garden. (*Genesis 3.4* 'You will not surely die ...')

Then there is the '*heart of wisdom*' Moses speaks of. Yes, it certainly is the

wisdom of seeking to understand, come to grips with and learn from the brevity, the suffering of life under sin's curse, from seeing and experiencing dying and death in this fallen world.

But there's more, much more. The Lord Jesus taught us to read the Old Testament Scriptures as being fulfilled in himself (*Luke 24.44ff*), also Psalm 90. From that perspective, getting a *heart of wisdom* is surely being clothed with the mind of Christ, indwelt by the Spirit of Christ, filled with the presence and insight of Christ.

That means that for those who are in Christ, getting a heart of wisdom is the realization that Christ is very much the '*founder (author, leader, champion) of our salvation*' (*Hebrews 2.10*). We live, experience and find the pathway of life in, with and through him. Facing up to the reality of living under the curse drives us towards Christ as nothing else can!

He was born – as we were. He suffered and died under what must aptly be called *excruciating* circumstances. He died well! He prayed: '*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit*' (*Luke 23.46*). '*It is finished! (accomplished!)*' was his cry (*John 19.30*).

Getting wisdom is grabbing hold of Christ with both hands, and with all your heart. It is living in Him. It also involves dying with hands and heart clinging to him. Finally it means that we join Christ in his death and from then, with him in glory.

A heart of wisdom is the heart, the mind of Christ. It is that focus of being in Christ in living and dying and the glory that he demonstrated as a sure pledge of what is in store for me.

What comfort in living! What comfort in dying! What comfort forever!

'*So teach us to number our days that we might get a heart of wisdom.*'

Notes

- 1 Prof Peter Marshall, University of Warwick, England (no date)
- 2 Quoted in The Sisters who would be Queen. Leanda de Lisle (Harpercollins UK 2008) p149f
- 3 Latin: 'sive vivam, sive moriar'. Dutch 'in leven en sterven', Afrikaans "'in lewe en in sterwe'
- 4 Thanks to Pieter van Huyssteen for researching this for me

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