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faith in FOCUS

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WHY we have CONFESSIONS

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Editorial

In this postmodern, anti-intellectual, no-creed-but-Christ age, a discussion on the confessions of the Reformation is not always a welcome topic. “Just talk to me about the Bible” is a catchphrase of many who don’t know about these historical documents, or of those who are quite ignorant about how they became so vital within the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions.

After my conversion I joined a church that subscribed to the Westminster Confession of Faith. I really had no idea about the Confession or the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, but took them at face value and learned as much as I could about them. Later on, I found myself attending a Reformed Church in the same city, which as you would expect, subscribed to the Three Forms of Unity. It didn’t take too long to learn what they were used for.

Every member subscribed to the Scriptures and the Subordinate Standards – the Belgic Confession, Canons of Dort and Heidelberg Catechism. It set the basis for the systematic instruction of the congregation as well as the foundation for what every member confessed together. That was something very new to me, and I found it exciting to see a church that was consistent in what it believed. I grew to love those Standards.

Eventually, I found myself in a congregation in the RCNZ. I was to be surprised yet again! Here was a federation of churches that subscribed to the Belgic, the Canons, the Heidelberger and the Westminster Confession, which seemed somewhat unusual, given the fact that it was the Reformed that subscribed to the Three Forms of Unity and the Presbyterians to the Westminster. However, here is an arsenal of objective, systematic truth that has stood the test of time and helps to equip God’s people for a witness to His Word.

Some years ago, when some of us were involved in prison ministry, we used the Heidelberg Catechism for the basis of our Bible study with the prisoners. It gave us a beautiful framework to teach the men essential scriptural truths. We grew to love that Catechism, and even today, I prefer to hear the Catechism preached, more than the other Standards.

I have learned to value the confessions and the creeds that our churches subscribe to. It is my hope that future generations will learn to appreciate them, adhere to them, and thank God for the men who helped to frame these ever-so-relevant documents, for the wellbeing of His Bride.

Our contributors give us their insights as to why our churches have confessions and why they are vital and relevant in our day.

Mr Andre Holtslag provides a lesson in history.

Mr John Haverland shares his thoughts about the importance of the confessions.

Mr Paul Davey considers the relevance of the confessions today in a number of different church settings.

Mr D J van Garderen provides his third instalment on being a serving church.

Mrs Sally Davey introduces an article by Mr William Shishko, which deals with the need for our churches to be appealing, not appalling.

Cover: Image of the Synod of Dort.

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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The Confessions – a lesson from history

Andre Holtslag

We have them in our thinner green books or in the back of the new *Sing to the Lord* hymnals. We usually read from them just before the sermon in the afternoon service. They are what we spend several years studying if we attend catechism classes as children and young people, or what we need to read and learn when we are preparing to become a member of an RCNZ church. They were written between 1561 and 1646, and there are four of them – they are our confessions (The Belgic Confession of Faith (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Canons of Dort (1618-19), and the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)).

Now, the RCNZ is not the only confessional church in New Zealand. It is probably fair to say, though, that the confessions play a more prominent role in the regular life of our congregations than they do in most other churches. Why? Are they useful? Are they relevant? Aren't they really just relics? If we have the Bible, which is the inspired word of God and "useful for teaching, reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16)," why would we make use of man-made confessions?

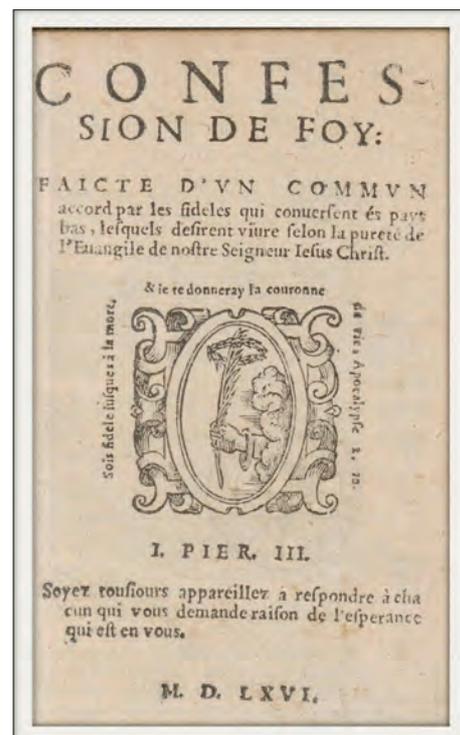
Well, my assignment is to begin seeking answers to these questions from the Bible. So we will begin with a couple of very instructive and parallel passages in Judges and Hosea. Here is Judges 2:6-10:

When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land. ⁷ And the people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all

the great work that the LORD had done for Israel. ⁸ And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of 110 years. ⁹ And they buried him within the boundaries of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the mountain of Gaash. ¹⁰ And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel.

The Book of Judges records the period of Israel's history when they lived in the Promised Land and were ruled by Judges (approximately 1350BC-1050BC). This was a particularly evil time in Israel's history and the further you get into the Book of Judges the more immoral and unjust and idolatrous the people become. In fact, two refrains that are repeated throughout the book are "in those days every man did what was right in his own eyes" and "in those days there was no king in Israel," with the clear inference being that a king (probably with King David in view) would not have allowed this wickedness to happen.

The passage before us comes early in the Book of Judges. It functions as a kind of foretaste or pattern of what we are going to read again and again in Judges, which is that a period of relative faithfulness is followed by a period of unfaithfulness, which brings the covenant curse of invasion and/or famine, which is followed by the Lord delivering His people at the hands of a Judge. Here it is Joshua who dies, having led the people into the Promised Land. And Joshua was a faithful leader of the people, as were the elders who outlived him (v7). However, just one generation



The confessions are a precious gift that greatly aids our instruction of covenant children, new disciples, and every member of the church of Christ. When we make use of the confessions, we are benefiting from the reflections of believers who have had to struggle with the same doctrinal and practical matters that we are thinking about today.

later (v10), a generation arises that “*did not know the Lord nor the work He had done for Israel.*” Back in Deuteronomy 6, parents, and especially fathers, as heads of their households, were commanded to teach their children about God and about His great works of creation and deliverance, every day, all day (**Deut. 6:4-25**). The priest and Levites were also to teach the people the law of God (**Leviticus 10:11**). So the reason that this generation did not know the Lord nor what He had done for Israel is clearly because the parents and priests *failed to teach them*. There was no round the dinner table instruction, there was no preaching, there were no catechism classes, there was no memory work, there were no Bible studies, there were no church history lessons, and whatever was taught was undone by the hypocrisy of the parents and teachers who *said* one thing but *did* another.

We see the same complaint of the Lord in **Hosea 4:1-6**:

*Hear the word of the LORD, O children of Israel, for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and **no knowledge of God in the land**; ² there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. ³ Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens, and even the fish of the sea are taken away. ⁴ Yet let no one contend, and let none accuse, for with you is my contention, O priest. ⁵ You shall stumble by day; the prophet also shall stumble with you by night; and I will destroy your mother. ⁶ **My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge**; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.*

Why was there no faithfulness or steadfast love? Why was there swearing and lying and stealing, etc? It was because the people had not been taught about God and His great works on behalf of His people.

Perhaps you have heard this saying before: The first generation does what it does and knows why it does it. The second generation just does what it

does but it does not know why. The third generation does not do. Well, this is the message of Judges 2 and Hosea 4 (and Deut. 6). We must teach our children who to believe in, what He has done, and why we do what we do. And as New Testament believers, who know THE work of deliverance that all of the Old Testament works of deliverance pointed forward to, the cross of Calvary, we have even greater reason to tell the next generation about who our Triune God is, the great salvation that we have in the Lord Jesus Christ, what the church is, how the church functions, and our calling as citizens of the kingdom of Christ.

Now, it stands to reason, given the quote from 2 Tim. 3:16 above, that our sole and sufficient authority for teaching is the Bible. After all, the Bible is the living word of God! It is able to “make us wise for salvation (**2 Tim. 3:15**).” It is by the preaching and teaching of the Bible that God brings people to faith in Christ (**Romans 10:13-14**). It is from the Bible that we learn what the church of Christ is and how it is to function. And yet, as J. Ligon Duncan said, “The church has had 2000 years of rich reflections on what the church is supposed to be and do. And we are not wise to ignore the great Protestant confessions.”¹ Yes, the confessions are not our authority; Scripture is our authority. In fact, pretty much every confession has as one of its first articles exactly that truth – Scripture is our authority! Nevertheless, the confessions represent the life and labour of believers who were filled with the Spirit of God and who spent their lives poring over Scripture. To toss them out as irrelevant and not necessary is to deny that the Holy Spirit has been at work in the church for 2000 years.

In **Acts 15** we see the early church reacting to doctrinal error by coming together and agreeing about how biblical truth applies in a certain situation, and writing it down so that approved men could take the letter and read it to the congregations for instruction. This was an early ‘type’ of confessional instruction. Have a look also at **1 Timothy 3:16** in your Bible. Most Bibles set the words of this verse in a different style to the verses around it. They will look something like this:

*Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:
He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,*

seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.

And they are set out like this because they are believed to be an early confession of faith. Very early on in the life of the Christian church, it appears to be the case that there were formulas or standards that were commonly taught and maybe even recited as a faithful summary of the person and work of the Lord Jesus. And it was not long before the great controversies about the Trinity, and especially the person and work of the Lord Jesus, arose through heretics like Sabellius and Arius. And these controversies gave rise to the great creeds – The Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed, the language of which is woven into our confessions. All this is why R. Scott Clark calls the confessions “living expressions of an ancient Christian tradition.” Joel Beeke said, “Confessions are a gift of the Lord to unite the church for instruction in the truth, defense against error, and as a testimony to the world about what we believe.”

The confessions are a precious gift that greatly aids our instruction of cov-

enant children, new disciples, and every member of the church of Christ. When we make use of the confessions, we are benefiting from the reflections of believers who have had to struggle with the same doctrinal and practical matters that we are thinking about today. I could not count the times that I have been in Bible studies or private conversations where a topic has come up and I have been reminded of Lord’s Day X or Article Y, where there is a helpful answer with Scripture references readily at hand (often via my creeds and confessions app! Have you got it on your phone?). Using the confessions to teach also demonstrates that what we are saying is not just our opinion or the opinion of Dad or Mum or Pastor X or Teacher Y, but the common belief of the church of Christ.

I am sure you have heard it said that those who fail to learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them. So let’s learn the lesson of Judges 2 and Hosea 4, and make use of the God-given and helpful teaching tools that the confessions are!

Notes

¹ This quote and the following quotes are borrowed from the recent documentary ‘Calvinist.’ It is well worth watching! www.calvinistmovie.com

Appendix

Here is a very simple catechism designed to teach doctrine to children:

- *The Children’s Catechism* (opc.org/cce/FirstCatechism.html)

Below are some modern catechisms/confessional statements (They have no official standing in our churches. They are merely offered for your discerning consideration, especially as they are designed for modern, electronic devices, and/or address contemporary issues).

- *The New City Catechism* – 52 Questions and answers to teach children and adults the core doctrines of the Christian faith (newcitycatechism.com).
- *The Danvers Statement* of 1987, which has to do with biblical manhood and womanhood and our God assigned roles (cbmw.org/uncategorized/the-danvers-statement/).
- *The Nashville Statement* – What it means to be created in the image of God and what the Bible teaches about human sexuality (cbmw.org/nashville-statement/).

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



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not made, being of one substance with the Father.” With these statements the church spelled out that Jesus is the Son of God, and is fully, truly, and eternally divine. This truth was accurately defined over against the error of Arius and his followers.

The Heidelberg Catechism was written in the height of the Reformation and was approved in January 1563 by a synod of the church of the Palatinate. It is an ecumenical confession, but some questions and answers were aimed at errors in other denominations. For instance, Lord’s Day 18 deals with the ascension of the Lord Jesus and affirmed that, “in his human nature Christ is not now on earth; but in his divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit he is not absent from us for a moment” (Q.47). The catechism made a particular point of this because the Lutherans believed in the ubiquity of Christ’s body, that is, that his physical body was everywhere present. They held this to allow for their doctrine of the Lord’s Supper in which they claimed that Christ was *physically* present in the Lord’s Supper. They expressed this by saying that the body of Christ was in, with and under the elements of the bread and the wine. The Catechism, however, affirmed the truth of the Bible that Jesus is *spiritually* present with us wherever we are, over against the error of the Lutherans.

2. They are statements of unity

The word ‘creed’ comes from the opening word of the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds in their Latin version, *credo*, which means, ‘I believe’. A Creed is “the formal statement of a group’s set of beliefs”.¹ The Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds are personal and corporate statements of what we believe as individual Christians and as the church of Christ. They are ecumenical creeds, which means they are confessed by the church of Christ throughout the world, the church universal. These three creeds unify us with all true churches of Christ historically and geographically; as such they are statements of unity.

Another example of this comes from the time of the Reformation in the 16th century. Frederick III was the Ruler of the Palatinate and he held to Reformed doctrines. His area of Germany was made up of people with different doctrines. He authorised the writing of the Heidelberg Catechism with the aim of uniting the people of his province in the Reformed faith. Again it was intended as a statement promoting unity.

3. They are teaching tools

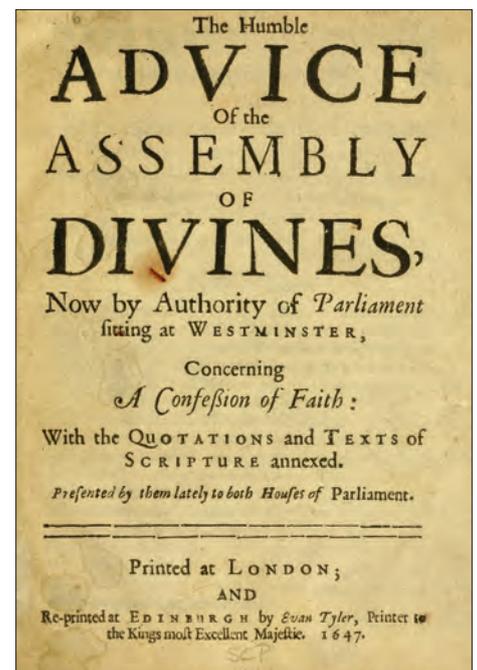
Frederick III also authorised the writing of the Heidelberg Catechism in order to teach children and adults the central truths of the faith in his province of the Palatinate. Within a few years it was translated into Dutch to be used in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands, and was officially adopted as one of their confessions. Since then it “has been translated into many languages and is the most widely used and most widely praised catechism of the Reformation period.”² In our own denomination we use this catechism as a valuable teaching tool for instructing young people, inquirers and new Christians the truths of the Reformed faith.

3. They preserve the continuity of faith

In Psalm 78 Asaph urged the men of Israel “to teach the law of the Lord to their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children” (v 6). The law of God, the *Torah*, is contained in the Scriptures, but is also explained in our confessions, along with the key doctrines of the Bible. Teaching these doctrines regularly and faithfully, from the Scriptures and the confessions, helps us pass on this precious faith from one generation to the next.

4. They are a witness to the world.

Some of the Reformed confessions were written to explain the Reformed faith to secular rulers who were opposed to this biblical faith. This was the motive of Guido de Bres when he wrote the Belgic Confession in 1561. The confession has this name because it originated in the Southern Netherlands, now known as Belgium. During the 16th century Christians in that country were cruelly persecuted by the Spanish, who were largely Roman Catholic. Guido de Bres wrote this confession to prove to their persecutors that Reformed Christians were not rebels but law-abiding citizens who professed the true religion of the Bible. In 1562 a copy of the confession was sent to King Phillip II, along with a letter affirming that these Reformed Christians were ready to obey the government in all things lawful but they were not prepared to deny the truth expressed in this confession. One of the modern commentaries on this confession is entitled *The Church’s Witness to the World*, which accurately expresses one of the purposes of the creeds and confessions.³



The creeds and confessions are no guarantee that an individual, a church, or a denomination will continue in the faith and remain true to God's word. We have superb confessional documents but if we do not read them and believe them they will be of no value to us. It is imperative that we study them and teach them so they are living documents in our churches.

5. They can be used in public worship

In our denomination we use the creeds and confessions in our public worship services. We often recite in unison the Apostles' or Nicene Creed as a confession of what we believe. In this way we identify ourselves with the universal church of Christ that worships the triune God throughout the world on the Lord's Day. In our preaching as pastors we follow the outline of Christian doctrine from one of our confessions in one of the church services of the Lord's Day. In these ways the creeds and confessions have a place in our worship services.

Two applications

My first application is that the Bible must always be our primary book, our main text, and our final authority. A Sunday school song goes,

*"The best book to read is the Bible,
If you read it every day,
It will help you on your way;
The best book to read is the Bible."*

This is simple and true and we seek to apply this in our denomination. We refer to our creeds and confessions as "subordinate standards", that is, they are subordinate to the Bible, they are below the Bible in importance and authority. We are not like the Roman Catholics who have two equal sources of authority, the Bible and the decisions of the popes and councils of the Roman Catholic Church. Nor are we like the Mormons who hold the book of Joseph Smith as equal to the Bible. No, we have one authoritative book, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. This is our final court of appeal, this is our ultimate authority, this is "the best book".⁴

This is why I strongly favour the practice of always preaching from a text of the Bible in every sermon I preach, including confessional preaching. Our Church Order requires that "Ordinarily at one of the services on each Lord's Day the Word shall be expounded as summarised in the Confessional Standards".⁵ To me it is significant that "the Word" shall be expounded. I read the article in the confession, or the question and answer of the Catechism, but my text is from the Bible. This highlights that the Bible is the final authority and the Confessional Standards are subordinate to it.

This also has an application for our personal reading of the Bible. Christians have written many helpful books about the Bible, including many devotion-

al books. In our modern technological age many devotional aids are available as Bible apps on our phones and computers. Many of these are edifying and helpful. But they ought not to replace, or be a substitute for, our reading of the Bible itself. We need to be reading the primary source, the main text. John Wesley wrote, "O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: Here's knowledge enough for me. Let me be a man of one book." Devotional books can be very useful, but they remove you one step away from the Bible, and they ought not to replace your reading of the Bible itself.

My second application is that the creeds and confessions are no guarantee that an individual, a church, or a denomination will continue in the faith and remain true to God's word. We have superb confessional documents but if we do not read them and believe them they will be of no value to us. It is imperative that we study them and teach them so they are living documents in our churches.

I could cite many examples from church history of decline and declension from the true faith. One example that is familiar to many is that of the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands, the Gereformeerde Kerken of Nederland (GKN). My parents belonged to this denomination, and in the 1950's it was sound in faith and doctrine and held to the "Three forms of Unity", that is, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort. In 1952 my parents immigrated to New Zealand, along with boatloads of young Dutch men and women, who married here, and raised their families. Some 25 or 30 years later, my parents, along with many of these immigrants, returned to visit their families in the Netherlands. They were shocked at how much these churches had changed in doctrine and practice. On paper they still subscribed to the creeds and confessions but in practice they had moved far from them. This was also true of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand in the 20th century which subscribed to the Westminster Confession in principle but not in practice.

Conclusion

Our biblical and reformed faith is well expressed in the creeds and confessions of our denomination. This truth must be held firmly in our minds, believed in our hearts, and lived out in our lives; without this our confessions are merely words on

paper. We need right belief *and* right behaviour. At times people have drawn a false contrast between these. Adolf Harnack, one of vigorous proponents of liberalism in the 19th century wrote, "True faith in Jesus is not a matter of creedal orthodoxy, but of doing as he did." That is wrong – true faith in Jesus must be expressed in our conduct *and* our creeds.

The Emergent Church movement of the 21st century has fallen into the same errors as old liberalism. Brian McLaren, one of their leaders, is critical of those who claim to have truth "nailed down, freeze-dried, and shrink wrapped forever."⁶ Erwin McManus wrote, "The power of the gospel is the result of a

person – Jesus Christ – not a message. The gospel is an event to be proclaimed, not a doctrine to be preserved."⁷ And Jonathan Campbell states, "To know Jesus is not an event, a ritual, a creed, or a religion. It is a journey of trust and adventure."⁸

These writers pose a false dichotomy. The gospel about Jesus Christ is about the person *and* the preaching of Jesus, it is about the God Man Jesus Christ *and* his message. We don't want the truths of the confessions to be "freeze-dried, and shrink wrapped forever"; rather we want them to be living testimonies of what the Holy Spirit has taught us about God the Father, God the Son, and the way of salvation, truths that will direct

our lives in a response of joyful and thankful obedience!

Notes

- 1 Cornelius Plantinga, *A Place to Stand*, Board of Publications of the CRC, 1979, p. 5
- 2 *The Creeds, Confessions and Liturgical Forms of the Reformed Churches of New Zealand*, p. 13
- 3 P. Y. de Jong, *The Church's Witness to the World*, Ontario, Paideia Press, 1980
- 4 The Belgic Confession gives us a fine statement of the sufficiency of the Scriptures in Article 7
- 5 Church Order of the RCNZ, Art. 56
- 6 Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, p. 235
- 7 Erwin McManus, *The Church in Emerging Culture*, p. 248
- 8 Quoted in Kevin de Young and Ted Kluck, *Why we're not Emergent*, 2008, p. 108

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Why we have Confessions

Are Confessions relevant in the 21st century church?

Paul Davey

Ask a raft of churchmen today, and there is likely to be a wide diversity of views expressed. Overwhelmingly, in the wider Protestant scene around the world, the response is likely to be a blank look that asks the question, "What are confessions?" In this brief article we will think of confessions, or confessional statements, concisely defined as formal declarations as to what we believe.

Those who say, "There is no creed but Christ", sometimes sniffily look down on those of us who see value in holding good confessions dear. They contend that all they need is the Bible, as God speaks through that to them. Who can argue with the latter part of their claim? However, this is an unhelpful diversion

from the discussion as to the usefulness of having confessional statements that are agreed to by a church. No sensible protagonist elevates confessions to the Bible's level as to authorship, accuracy or necessity for salvation; or even in any way suggests they replace the Bible.

Who uses Confessional Statements?

Those churches whose roots can be traced directly to the Protestant Reformation are more likely to use these statements. The Lutherans and Anglicans have used them, often in their written liturgies, and perhaps less obviously than the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches.

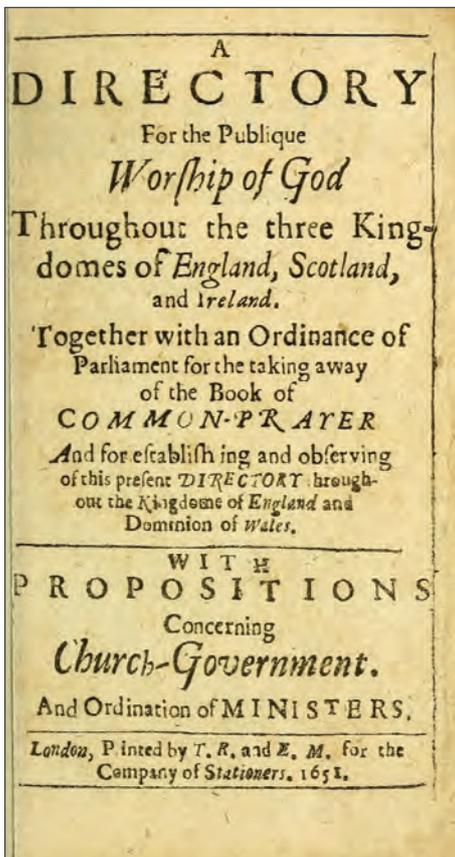
As diversity of doctrine increases in a denomination, or people within a denomination find themselves more divergent from the confessional statement,

then those statements tend to be sidelined or done away with.

How are they done away with?

In churches with congregational forms of government, such as Baptist Churches, confessional statements may be discarded or adopted, by simple congregational vote. In episcopal (eg Anglican) and presbyterial churches adoption or rejection of confessional statements is somewhat more complicated, and usually slower.

Abandonment of the confessions by a denomination is usually a drawn out process, and rarely, if ever, is there a clear excision. Those who begin to doubt various doctrines their denomination holds, consciously, or maybe even subliminally, then start to move away from believing them. The the conscience



comes into play. They have to face the question, “Do we try to take others’ thinking with us in this differing belief, do we minimise our shift and talk about anything but, or do we leave?” Over the years there have been various responses.

One of the more famous illustrations of degradation of Presbyterian government and doctrinal purity involved the *Declaratory Act of 1892*. In this Act, the Free Church of Scotland approved “That this Church disclaims intolerant or persecuting principles, and does not consider her office-bearers, in subscribing to the Confession, committed to any principles inconsistent with liberty of conscience and the right of private judgement.” This paved the way formally, within that denomination, for full and uncompromised subscription to be modified for officebearers. Subsequently, in 1893, a “second secession” within Scottish Presbyterianism resulted in the formation of the Free Presbyterian Church in Scotland, and no doubt eased the way in New Zealand for union between the Free Church of Scotland, Synod of Otago and Southland, and the northern churches (with Church of Scotland roots). By this stage theological liberalism, eg after the mould of the German higher critics, held attraction to some in both denominations.

Presbyterians in NZ

Tellingly, in many Presbyterian denominations, the doctrines of Westminster (Confession, Shorter and Longer Catechism and the Directory for Public Worship) are not now believed. Rather than formally throwing those teachings out, they are shelved and ignored. There is a crass type of subtlety in so doing. Nowadays I find very few young people brought up in the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa NZ (PCANZ) who know what the Westminster Confession or Catechisms are, let alone what they have to say.

Being 11 years old in the Presbyterian Church of NZ at the time of the Geering controversy limited my understanding of the events. Geering, a theology professor at Knox College, Dunedin, was acquitted by the General Assembly of his clear heresy. The charges included “doctrinal error” and “disturbing the peace and unity of the (Presbyterian) church”. The case, brought before the 1967 General Assembly of the PCANZ, was too quickly dismissed. Geering denied the bodily resurrection and the supernatural existence of God. Successive liberals in the pulpits throughout the land compromised, some believers, and others rightly saw

the church hierarchy as having “gone off the rails”. And let us not forget, many of these believers had been catechised in their youth between 1910 and 1950. A lot of them had had a considerable, Westminster theological diet. In the 1960s, for many, the choice appeared only to be between staying with liberalism, or joining the charismatics. The charismatic movement gained momentum through the late 1960s, 70s and 80s within the Presbyterian Church. A few of our family friends, who were converted, also joined Pentecostal churches at that time. This is such a shame. Fine people with genuine faith, who I knew until their death up to 45 years after these events, were lost to experimental Calvinism of the most mature type. We could ask, “Did the Confessional Standards help in this situation?” Clearly not. The Standards, albeit wrongly attributed, were seen by many as part of the old guard, and contributors to the problem.

Thus, the PCANZ is now a very mixed denomination. To be sure, you will find very fine Christian brethren there. You will find heretics; people who are confused as to what to believe or how to act; and everything in between. We sometimes muse as to whether the weakening of the role of the Confessions is “the horse” or whether it is “the cart”. Can we say that sometimes these are so intertwined in denominations with a strong confessional heritage that clear separation of cause and effect is nigh impossible?

What about Anglicans?

Within Anglican communions, individual bishops within dioceses, and synods held by the denominations, have sway as to the official position of the churches within their realms. My understanding is that the 39 Articles of the Christian religion, established by a Convocation of the Church in England in 1553, still hover in the background of the official position of the Anglican Churches. Informal relegation of the Articles to dusty shelves, rather than throwing them out, proved effective for those opposed to their doctrine.

Reformed evangelicals within the various Anglican churches around the world lament the theological, ecclesiastical and moral laxity of the modern, established church in many countries. 2018 in New Zealand became the breaking point for some, with various congregations and individuals departing for a new beginning. The new denomination, in the process of formation at the time of writing, proposes adopting the 39 Articles (a fine document

of Reformation theology) as one of their Confessional standards. These Christians indicate that they want historic, sound, biblical doctrine to be their light and guide.

We also muse at the effect of written liturgical forms, which are so often closely related to having [had] Confessional Standards, at least in Anglican and Lutheran circles. Though the heart has gone from some of these denominations, when we attend Choral Evensong, or other services using the forms, in Anglican churches, we hear the gospel in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, in the readings from the Gospels, canticles and Psalms. Who among us isn't constrained to say, "Amen", at the end of Cramner's Prayer of Confession from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer? The leader may or may not believe, but the words in the prayer are true.

The Brethren

The Open Brethren in NZ find their roots in the secession of J.N. Darby, a former Anglican clergyman, to a group of inter-denominational believers in the 1830s. The Brethren are famous for interesting applications as to the priesthood of all believers and their dispensational theology.

All the Brethren men I have talked with would not hold to Confessions "of men". Yet, so often in their practice they have been structured liturgically and theologically. These unwritten codes have informed their meetings (we'd call them services) and thinking. Despite their strong, contrary convictions on some matters we hold closely, many a Reformed believer has found warm fellowship and admirable character in these dear brethren.

What, now, can we say about the Open Brethren Movement in NZ? Surely it too is a very different body to the one we knew in the 1970s, let alone between the wars or earlier. Within the Brethren movement there were no confessional statements. Further, many of those old brothers knew and loved their Bibles. Perhaps having no agreed upon Statements of Faith/Confessional Standards contributed to the speed of some acceptance of the charismatic movement, seeker-friendly ideas and other *mores* of the modern and postmodern church groups? How many of the erstwhile Brethren assemblies now have "services" rather than "meetings", are led by pastors rather than brothers from within the meeting, and, in their services, have many of the hallmarks of contemporary evangelicalism with charismatic hues; or indeed, they no longer exist?

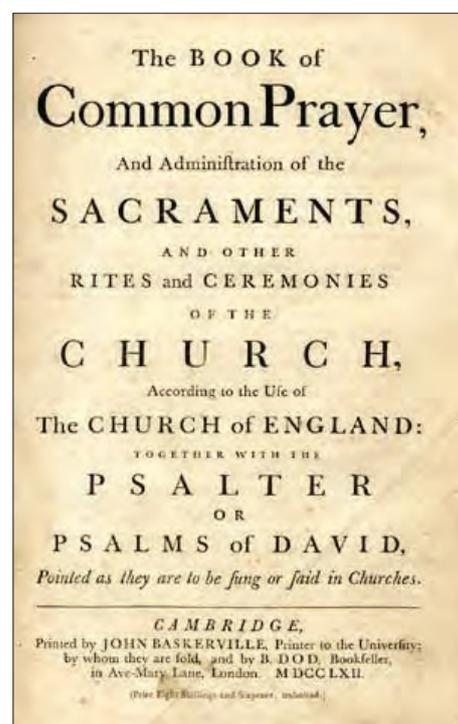
So what?

We can cite many examples of both confessional churches, and those with no confessional statements, that have departed from their roots. Sometimes not having a clear, confessional statement triggered the slippery slope to demise. In other church examples, causes apparently independent of the presence or absence of confessional statements have led to their declension – factors such as wealth, moral impropriety and personality disputes.

Concluding Comments

1. Whether or not confessional statements are valued in a church, the health of that church will be determined by the integrity, wisdom and godly devotion of the leaders, and the willingness of the congregants to follow their lead, as they follow Christ. We seek heart religion, knowing that the Christian's heart must be directed by the true Word.
2. In admirable confessional churches, every agreement, be it a confession, creed or order statement, will be thoroughly secondary to the Word of God.
3. Confessional statements help Christians, in concise and precise terms, to know what their church stands for; what all are expected to follow in the key tenets of Christian faith and practice.
4. In churches with devout, wise, godly leaders, holding to fine confessional statements is invaluable. When well used they save valuable time, effort and debilitating distraction from having to rework biblical, theological and practical ground every time there is an issue. These good confessions also state key doctrines and practical applications in considered, precise language that most of us are unable to formulate; let alone, as it were, "on the trot".
5. In short, confessional statements direct us to focus our minds and hearts on the Lord Jesus and His Word, how we are to live, and get on together in His kingdom.
6. Thus, within our Reformed Churches of New Zealand, we will honour the Lord by knowing, heeding and teaching the truths of our confessional statements, derived from the Word of God. We'd be the poorer without them – so long as we use them well.

Mr Paul Davey is a member of the Reformed Church in Dovedale, Christchurch.



Serving the community — how, why and what we offer in Christ's Name



Photo by Timon Studler on Unsplash

Dirk J van Garderen

I recall as a young catechism student studying the Heidelberg Catechism using two books. The green one was called *Saved from Sin* and the orange one, *Saved to Serve*. Very appropriate. We were saved from sin through the blood of Christ in order to serve him and, by implication, whoever is placed beside us as a neighbour. That, in a nutshell, is the teaching of the Catechism.

In this article I want to focus on the **how to** and, briefly on the **why we must** serve our communities. Thirdly, and more extensively, I want to get you thinking on the fundamental question of **what** it is we want to serve to them.

* * *

When discussing ways and means of serving the community in which we live and our churches are situated, the '**how to**' question tends to receive most attention. '*How best to serve?*' The fact is that there are more openings than you have fingers and toes! It's a matter of, 'which one?' Each community will present its own set of doors. If you think there aren't any (many!) in your community, you must be deaf, blind and heartless.

There will always be opportunities unique to the community in which the Lord has placed you. I recall that when I served as pastor in Bishopdale, the openings were among the kids from nearby state homes. '*Friday Night Frenzy*,' aimed at these kids, the outworking of one of the first Holidays Clubs, continues some 30 plus years later. The Lord provided the door as well as those willing to go through them and serve.

When coming to Avondale, that approach didn't work half as well as a ministry to the mentally impaired in that community. We had some 30 of these folks who joined in the special '*Friendship Ministries*'. As a one-on-one programme it involved many of our members and proved a real open door into the community and to some of the families of these special friends.

Buckland's Beach had its own special doorway. Living in an extremely expensive suburb by the sea, Asian migrants with means flooded into the area. Language and a curiosity about 'Christian' New Zealand, proved to be a ready-made way of establishing a programme we dubbed '*LABS*' (*Language Assisted Bible Studies*.) The impact of this ministry continues to this day.

The point? Each church community and its members will find openings unique to their own community. There is no 'one size-fits-all'. What works in one place fizzles in another. But there are open doors everywhere. Woe to us if we do not seek and venture through them, even as we fear and tremble with a sense of inadequacy. We can and we must. After all, didn't the Lord say, 'I am with you always, to the end of the age.'? (Matthew 28.20)

* * *

The 'why' question is equally straightforward. *Why should we serve the community in which the Lord has placed us?* Because as churches and individual Christians we are part of the community, the suburb, city, town or district where we live. The community is *us*. Fellow members of the community are our neighbours – the neighbours God's Word commands us to love, serve and do good to. They may not be our brothers and sisters in Christ, but they are our God-given neighbours. The Lord Jesus demonstrates this in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.25-37) and Paul exhorts the Galatians and us, 'So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.' (Galatians 6.10)

* * *

It is the 'what' question that gets to the heart of the matter.

What is it we are to offer our community as its servants? What are we seeking to give to our communities? Soup? Pregnancy Help? Free firewood? Gardening? Budgetary advice? Babysitting service? English lessons? After-school care for school kids? 'Yes!' to them all – as openings and opportunities to serve in these ways present themselves. They are all good and worthwhile means of serving our communities, loving our neighbour. Each is utterly commendable and worthwhile. At the very least they should demonstrate our genuine love and concern for our neighbour's well-being. A helping hand is a blessing. We are under obligation to do what it takes to serve sacrificially and with a generous heart.

This has come into focus in a very special way in post-earthquake Christchurch. What began as a late-night ministry providing hot soup to the many workers clearing up the streets of the CBD eventually developed into a once-a-week, 52 weeks a year, Monday-night soup kitchen focussed on the homeless

and other lost souls (many drug-addicted) in Latimer Square. Great.

But there's more, much more. These praiseworthy deeds, commendable and praiseworthy as they may be, are a mere *entrée*, not the *main course*. When all is said and done, what our neighbours need more than anything else is to receive the **Gospel of God**. The greatest news, life giving and life transforming news this planet has ever heard is what God's Son has accomplished for us. Everything else we can offer our community shrivels into insignificance when compared to that. Forgiveness, reconciliation, healing, new life and hope that does not disappoint or wither away is surely *the* pearl of great price. No service we can give our community compares with, is more urgent and necessary than what only the Lord **Jesus** offers. *That's* what we as Christians offer our communities. Nothing trumps it. The truth of the matter is that before we can truly change lives through our service activities, hearts need to be renewed and transformed by the Lord Jesus. Help and hope for the future begins with his redeeming work.

This truth was brought home to me in an unforgettable manner in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, South India. Here's what happened.

I had been invited to meet with an Indian Christian doctor/psychiatrist. She had an immensely successful practice and a very wealthy clientele. But she had also established a special clinic in one of the very poor areas of that immense city. Her focus there was on women who worked as prostitutes for Indian truck drivers. When I arrived at her clinic there were at least twenty of them sitting together in a small, rather stuffy room. Many were diseased and the victims of physical abuse. Clearly all of them had huge psychological issues. Equipped with a felt board, the doctor was preaching the gospel, pure and simple. She spoke of Jesus the healer and transformer of a sinner's heart. This was followed by lots of singing, praying, weeping. What amazed and humbled me was the fact that most of these women, young to middle-aged, were still actively engaged in their 'trade'. From a human, economic point of view they saw no way out of the trap in which they found themselves. Their men, pimps really, depended on them and, in turn, they would not survive without them. Most had children who had to be fed and schooled. It was a matter of prostitution or starvation.

'What are you doing to rescue these

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around.

women from prostitution?' I asked the doctor? Yes, she took care of them as a clinician and a competent counsellor. But that was not her priority. Far from it. 'My work begins with preaching the Gospel,' she explained. 'Unless and until their hearts are made new in Christ, their lives won't change and their slavery to prostitution continues to hold them. They see no way out. Real help begins at the level of the heart, and only the Lord Jesus can do that.'

I saw just how real this was when, after the service, one of the women who had been freed from prostitution took me to her home (hut, really) which she had transformed into a place of worship right in the middle of that community where she had formerly plied her 'trade'. She told me that she was given the strength to start a new life because Jesus was now her comfort, hope and strength. She beamed as she told me, 'First Jesus, and then my life began to change. Not easy. Very slow. Many failures. But he is my helper.'

It all begins with Christ. Only he can heal and make us new creations. It is the heart that is deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt, sick. (Jeremiah 17.9). The dead-in-trespases heart drives and controls the will, not the other way around.

What I learned in that clinic in Chennai was that serving the community starts with and flows from the proclamation of the Gospel – good news of God. The rehabilitation of prostitutes, drug or pornography addicts, the unemployed, those living in poverty, and all the other tragic circumstances that beset our communities can only be dealt with in Christ. It starts with and must be rooted in him. It is **not** a matter of 'first get the rest of my life in order and then I'll attend to things spiritual.'

In many respects this truth is counter-intuitive. Ours is an age that believes that you must first get your act together before you are ready to hear the Gospel. Work among the homeless, with druggies, or rebellious teens to help them face their demons, and then comes the

Gospel. This was the 'gospel' the late Abraham Maslow taught with this 'hierarchy of needs' theory. First address the 'basics' at the bottom of the triangular hierarchy, and then, step by step, you will be able to address the 'higher' needs – the spiritual which he placed at the apex.

Respectfully, that's pure nonsense. Scripture teaches over and over that the basic human problem, the root of all our suffering is sin: original sin, actual sin and residual impact even as born-again believers. Sin is the problem and until that is addressed – in and through Christ alone! – any other help, counsel or support for those in need is simply a bandage solution.

What is it that any human being needs more than anything else? **What** is it that will rescue, redeem, renew and give real hope to any individual in this broken, sin-sodden and sin-controlled age? The answer is Christ alone and before all else.

When we begin to see and develop strategies to serve our communities and the many opportunities that present themselves, it must surely begin with the overarching desire and plan to point to Christ Jesus as the only real hope for our community and every person in it.

* * *

We are saved from sin in order to serve/love the Lord our God and our neighbours. The 'how' is never a real problem. Every community and neighbour have countless doors. Just open your eyes and your heart! The 'why' is equally obvious. We are a part of the community in which the Lord has placed us. To fail to love and serve is to deny the gospel itself.

It is the 'what' question that is the most challenging. It is tempting to think of 'serving the community' as providing counsel, financial support, help in times of crisis, etc. But as Christ's ambassadors we offer the solution to the struggles of living in a fallen, sin-sodden world. Surely that is ultimately what serving the community is all about?

(March 2019)



*"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge."
Prov 1:7*

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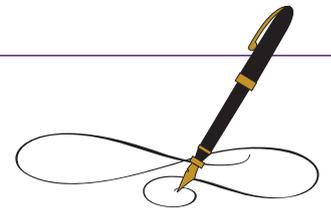
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Alongside is what I thought a very good article by well-known OPC minister, Bill Shishko. He makes some good suggestions for stirring one another up to be more welcoming to visitors. We all want our church to be appealing rather than appalling; and which it is depends on us. Read on!

Helping our churches be appealing, not appalling

William Shishko

Did you know that irritation is an important dynamic in helping us to be better servants of the Lord Jesus Christ? In Hebrews 10:24, the writer urges us to think carefully about how to — literally — *irritate* one another to love and good works.

Irritation is our natural response to suggestions for improvement in our personal life or in our church's life. But the Word of God tells us that such irritation can actually stir us up to *love*, that is, to do things for the good of others, and it can stir up *good works*, that is, things that are both pleasing to God and beneficial to those around us.

In my work as regional home missionary, I find it very helpful to be *irritated* by those who have different insights and experiences of church life than my own and who make suggestions for improvement that I may not want to implement. I may not agree with them on everything, but if their irritating suggestions help me do things better, I'm grateful — or, at least, I try to be.

One of these blessed irritants to me is Thom Rainer.

Thom Rainer is a Southern Baptist. Until recently, he served as president and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources. Prior to that, he served at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, where

he was the founding dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions and Evangelism. He is a consultant to churches of many denominations. And he knows far more than I do about church revitalization, outreach, and evangelism. Of course, I'm a Presbyterian (not to mention an *Orthodox* Presbyterian), and he's a Baptist, but, on most points, I find myself agreeing with him and being helped greatly by his insights into local church life and outreach. His work has *irritated* me to be a better pastor and regional home missionary.

In this article, I will pass along some of what I have learned from him about church outreach, an important although not the only labor of the church. I may have already irritated you with my title, "Helping Our Churches Be Appealing, Not Appalling." Now, I'll ask some questions and give some of Rainer's suggestions that I hope will irritate you to love and good works, bringing beneficial change to your local congregation.

First impressions

How does your church appear to visitors?

What's the quality of the signs both inside and outside your local church building? Remember that signs are not for church members — we know where everything is. Rather, signs show our concern for those who are not familiar with our church. Are they of good quality, at the right height, and done with easily readable fonts? Are they old and tacky, or no longer accurate? Are the signs friendly? (A sign that reads, "Those bringing food or drink into the sanctuary will be asked to leave," is rather harsh!) Should some signs be added?

Ask a few members to do a “sign audit” and examine every internal and external sign. We may think these things are frivolous, but people do look at the outward appearance (1 Sam. 16:7).

What’s the quality of the church nursery and Sunday School classrooms? Are they tidy, sanitary, and attractive? Get rid of the junk that can easily accumulate there and spend the money and effort to make the children’s areas truly delightful. This is a great Saturday project for church members. Unleash them to make these areas appealing and not appalling, and provide the funds for them to do the work well.

Do you have greeters for your worship services? Warm greeters give an important first impression. Choose greeters who are gifted with people. Train them. Urge them to invite single church visitors to sit with them. Have them show parents with

to visit the individual or family. In many cases, this prompt, personalized attention by a caring pastor is a key factor in the guest’s decision to return to the church.

Church websites

What’s your church website like? Especially for those of us who are older, it’s hard to accept that the internet has now replaced the yellow pages. Thom Rainer and others have pointed out that today it’s not the worship service but the church website that is the front door of the church. Most people make the decision to visit a church based on the church’s website.

Are you using volunteer help to cobble together a church website, or have you spent what is necessary and used an organization or person with expertise to build a quality website? (Rainer points out that we should “regard this expense like paying a church utility bill.” And, it may not be as expensive as you think.)

If you are a church leader, you may want to do a church website audit. Pretend that you’re looking for a church online. Is your website geared only for church members? Does it give staff names and titles, including pictures and contact information? Does it include easily accessible information about your ministries to children and young adults? Are there sermon archives in both audio and video? (These will also benefit members who, for whatever reason, were not able to attend worship.) Is there a church calendar? If so, is it up-to-date? Is there a statement of the church’s beliefs? Are there links to other church social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube? (Church young adults can be immensely helpful to your local church in establishing a social media presence.)

Do you have a church website secretary? The role of the church secretary has changed dramatically with the advent of the internet age. Recognizing this and making appropriate changes is a must if we are to get out of the horse-and-buggy days of church life and move into the twenty-first century! If no one in your local congregation is competent to do this, it may be necessary to hire a “virtual assistant.”

Giving gifts

What gifts do you give first-time guests at your local church? Do you do anything to show your appreciation for visitors and extend your ministry to them? Do you have some kind of “Welcome Center” for church guests? Consider creating a “visitor pack” that you can give

**THOSE BRINGING
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children where the nursery is. Better yet, take them there. And encourage all church members to reach out to visitors following a worship service, rather than gathering with those whom they already know. Holy huddles (let alone unholy huddles) do not make for welcoming churches! Church members should instinctively invite church guests to join them for the coffee fellowship, Sunday School classes, congregational lunch, and other things. Practice congregational hospitality in every way – reflecting the hospitality of God.

And, pastors, be sure to contact first-time guests. Greeters should have them sign a guest register or fill out a welcome card with their contact information. You should contact the church guest – preferably the same day – by e-mail, text, or phone call, to thank the person for being at worship, to offer your service as a pastor, and to express a willingness

to all first-time guests. Along with a church mug or tumbler with the church name and logo on it, include a greeting letter from the pastor, particularly giving his contact information. Make it short and to the point.

Have a good supply of short Christian books and booklets to give out. Consider booklets published by the OPC Committee on Christian Education, evangelistic booklets by Matthias Media, and short issue-oriented booklets published by the Banner of Truth Trust, the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation, and other biblically faithful organizations.

Most importantly, get rid of outdated booklets that look like they were (or really were) printed thirty to fifty years ago.

Church Invitation Day

Is your church intentional in its outreach? What are you doing to reach more people? Thom Rainer highly recommends planning and executing a day for everyone to invite someone to a worship service or a special church activity. This is not about numbers, but about helping to create an “invitational culture” in your local church. As a rule, church members are not in the habit of inviting others to worship or to church activities. Having a day set aside for this purpose helps to break that habit.

If you are a member, even better than just inviting others, you could offer to pick them up and drive them to church. Adding a meal to this invitation, either at the church or in your home, gives another opportunity to show the hospitality of God to others. Give every encouragement to them to be part of the life of your local church. And follow up with those contacts! This is a great way to begin developing a Great Commission mind-set in your local church.

These are just a few of the irritating insights I’ve gained from Thom Rainer. (Read his books or watch his webinars for more. I especially commend to church officers the webinar, in four courses, titled “16 Quick Adjustments to Reach More Guests in Your Church.” His books *Autopsy of a Deceased Church*, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched*, and *Simple Church* have been the most helpful to me out of the two dozen he has written.)

May these insights also irritate you – stirring you up to greater love for others and to more good works that make your local church *appealing* rather than *appalling*.

The author is regional home missionary for the Presbytery of Connecticut and Southern New York.

New Horizons, March 2019.

Used with permission.

Often, what we should do is clearer when we see it in the light of what we shouldn’t do. Here are some suggestions, taken from a helpful pamphlet available online, for the latter. Laugh, but take note . . .

20 blunders in welcoming church visitors

Here are 20 blunders I’ve seen churches make in greeting visitors to church. Feel free to add your own in the mix:

No One Said Hello.

Bad breath.

20 question doctrinal exam to make sure you are acceptable.

Survey family history and marital status and background check.

No follow-up contact.

Stale snacks / donuts / cookies.

Bad coffee.

Too friendly — smothering and not respecting boundaries.

Body odor.

No eye contact. Or eye contact and weak smile, but no hello.

Apathy in making a greeting. Whatever.

Limp handshake and a weak hello.

Too much enthusiasm.

“Is this your first time here?”

Hugs to strangers.

Swarming on visitors all at once, like flies on fresh meat.

Unclean bathrooms.

Unsafe Nursery.

Thinking hospitality is evangelism.

Rude staring at hairstyle, body piercings, or choice of clothes (See *How Not to Welcome A Visitor* about the Secret Dress Code).

<https://www.evangelismcoach.org/20-blunders-in-welcoming-church-visitors/>

Letters from New Zealand

D. G. Vanderpyl

October 1982

In the North Shore church, all office bearers are elected for a period of fifteen years with ratification every three years, by way of the ballot, (which needs to have a signature). This also includes their minister who is quite willing to submit himself to this system of ratification and so knows if his continuing ministry still finds wholehearted support within his congregation.

November

How often haven't we sung the hit hymn of praise Rejoice in the Lord, always and again I say, rejoice. Rejoice, rejoice and again I say rejoice, and done it with a swing and gusto that almost makes the windows rattle and the sound system scream.

As we were singing it last Sunday before the evening service, I was thinking of all the sadness that has struck so many of our homes in the last few years. Homes where an emptiness and loneliness has come due to the loss of a dear one. And then I also thought of the story of the guy who complained that he had no shoes until he saw someone who had no feet! I finished that song, thinking: "Let's stop looking at what we have lost and begin to concentrate on what we have left. We will then find that we have much, we can rejoice and be happy about. Let's count our assets then and not our liabilities, and we may find that we can still sing that popular hit song."

The Dutch Parliament has gone totally crazy, so they reckon in Holland. First there was a national campaign to get everybody to leave their cars at home and use a bicycle. The motto was "Be a sport, get fit, use your bike." And the whole of Holland pedalled to work across the dikes. Now parliament has made a law restricting the cyclists to a speed limit of 25km per hour and they must have a rest of 20 minutes after each 80km they have pedalled. If you want to do more than 200km per day, you need a permit for the exercise. That's what I call "clipping the wings of the Flying Dutchman." We Kiwis are fortunate, no way can anyone clip our wings.

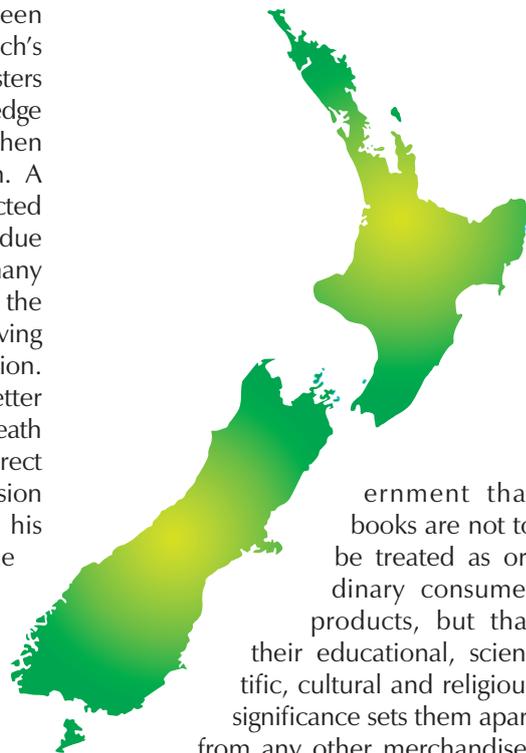
Over the years I have often been discreetly advised to mail all the church's correspondence directly to the ministers so that they can have firsthand knowledge of what is happening. They will then pass it on to the clerk and session. A thick file of correspondence, collected over a month, does not often get its due attention at session meetings and many an important item thus disappears in the archives of the church without receiving proper attention and the required action.

But recently, I came across a letter from one of our ministers and underneath it read, nicely boxed in: "Please direct all official correspondence to the session clerk." Now, that minister knows his priorities and dares to delegate authority.

Wellington has adopted the practice of electing office bearers during the month of November, the elected elders and/or deacons are thus able to commence their work at the beginning of the new year and also accept the responsibilities of the new year's budget. The Mangere church decided on this course of action some years ago, and it works!

December

Early this year there was quite a fear that the New Zealand Government planned to tax God's Word. Rumours were rampant that an "across the board" wholesale tax would also include the book trade. Just imagine a sales tax on the Sermon on the Mount! But these fears were thankfully unfounded when the Minister of Finance presented his budget to Parliament. The "please don't tax books" campaign reasoned that a tax on books would be a tax on knowledge, faith and learning. The value of books lies in their intrinsic merit, viz. that they can change lives. Apparently, such a tax would also violate the international principle of freedom of information. Even the guillotine-happy French revolutionaries had to axe the tax on books. I've been told that last year the Australian Government had to remove such a tax even before it could be implemented. It is very fortunate that the New Zealand book trade has been able to convince the gov-



ernment that books are not to be treated as ordinary consumer products, but that their educational, scientific, cultural and religious significance sets them apart from any other merchandise.

The sessions of the Christchurch congregations have come up with a beautiful plan to share in the burden of the cost of school fees for those children of their congregations who attend Christian schools. This "joint responsibility" suggests involving not only the parents, but also everyone else in the church that should share this responsibility and burden with the parents. This move for support is still in its initial stages and those in favour of this corporate sharing are asked to indicate to the organisers that they are willing to join. That is what I call "big thinking" in God's Kingdom.

As a book lover, it pleases me no end to see good Christian bookstalls sprouting up in a number of our churches. Hamilton has now also commenced such a venture and it seems to be enthusiastically received by the members in that church. Many people can't seem to make the effort to obtain good Christian literature, but are happy and keen to purchase them when good books are placed right under their noses. Of course, you'll find that it is always the same people who keep on buying books and are willing to invest in that type of gold, while many others, including office bearers, don't see books as nourishment

to the mind or that they do contain more real wealth than a good bank.

I came across an interesting little story in the North Shore church bulletin. One of their members is presently studying in the United States and lives there with his wife, along quite at dusty road. Every day a water tanker came by, dampening the road to keep the dust down. Bill

appreciated this very much and each day waved to the driver as he passed his place. One day the tanker stopped and the guy introduced himself and told Bill that he wanted to give him \$100 for being so nice to him. He insisted on giving him the money and since then Bill has had some opportunities to witness to him. This is a true story.

And to end the news for this month, let me pass on the following anecdote of a preacher who said rather satirically, "I have only one spiritual member in my church, and she causes me more trouble than all the others put together."

Abridged

Books in focus

Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality

by Nancy R. Pearcey. Baker, 2018. Hardcover, 336 pages, \$15.63 (Amazon).

Reviewed by OP pastor Charles B. Williams.

Nancy Pearcey contends that abortion, euthanasia, hookup culture, homosexuality, gender ideology, and modern notions of marriage hold one thing in common: each stems from a common worldview that denigrates the body – a worldview she labels “personhood theory.”

According to Pearcey, the Enlightenment redefined morality. Instead of upholding virtue as an objective external truth to which mankind must conform, modernity disregarded it as the subjective opinions of private individuals. By severing facts from values, modernity became a moral wasteland. After two world wars, however, our postmodern society now seeks to impose a new set of values onto all of society, by redefining morality after its own corrupted image. One consequence has been the redefinition of personhood, where the notion of “person” (value) is severed from the body (fact). Personhood theory replaces biology (who I have been created to be) with psychology (how I feel or think) as the basis for human identity. As a result, the world does not see the body as integral to personal identity, because the authentic self is no longer seen in the created self.

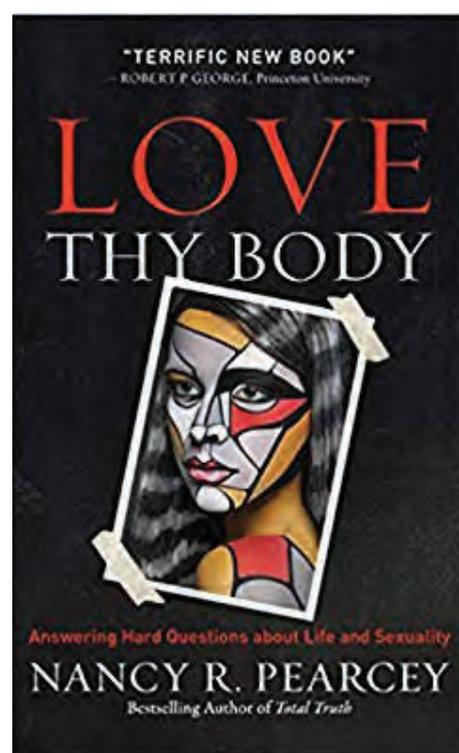
The grand irony is that personhood theory has led to a gross depersonalization: in exchanging loving marriages for pornography and families for social contracts, we have exchanged the truth of God for a lie. Pearcey not only dem-

onstrates how and why our present society denigrates the body, but how Christianity offers a better alternative. Pearcey reminds us that we have lost a “teleological” understanding of creation. In other words, we were created, both body and soul, for a purpose (*telos*) – the glory of God. Any true morality of the body, then, must be seen in light of this biblical teleology.

This book has its flaws, however. Although she situates humanity within a threefold grid of creation-fall-redemption (45), Pearcey fails to accent the importance of the consummation as a distinct category. That is not to say she denies the future resurrection, but she does take some rather frustrating cues from N. T. Wright. At one point, for instance, she scolds a pastor who preached a sermon on heaven as being implicitly gnostic (41).

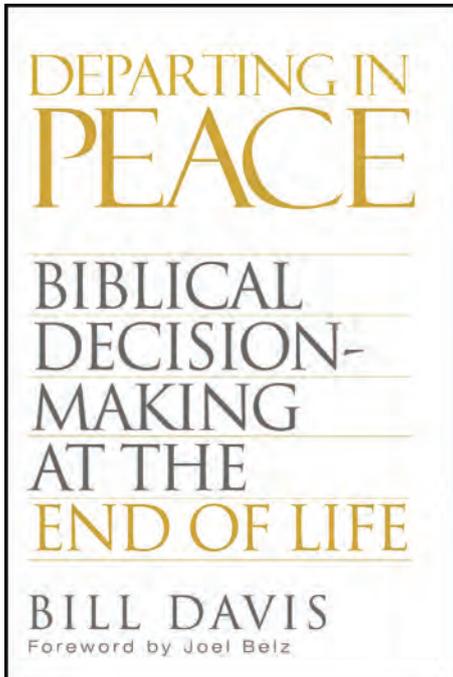
Furthermore, although her fact/value distinction provides a (mostly) helpful grid for assessing this somatic revolution, it is no silver bullet. Pearcey’s methodology is overly simplistic. *Love Thy Body* presents a history of “big ideas” severed from their historical contexts in such a way that reduces these ideas to caricature. Laymen could walk away thinking that Platonism, Cartesianism, Kantianism, and postmodernism are identical philosophies. She also grounds complementarity within the inter-Trinitarian relations of the Godhead (156, 249, 257, 260). For a work designed to uphold the biblical view of both body and marriage, this is no small problem. Marriage emphatically does not image the Father’s relationship to the Son. Marriage images the Son’s relationship to the church (Eph. 5:25–33).

Pearcey also endorses Wesley Hill’s



rather troubling spiritual friendship thesis (178, endnote 49).

Seventy-five years ago C. S. Lewis warned that society was primed to make men without chests. Now, it seems, we have made men without bodies. *Love Thy Body* provides a valuable aid to help the layman critically engage personhood theory and stand up for objective truth. *New Horizons*, February 2019



Departing in Peace: Biblical Decision-Making at the End of Life
by Bill Davis. P&R, 2017.
Paperback, 300 pages, \$15.00.
Reviewed by OP minister and professor David M. VanDrunen

Bioethical decisions about treatment and care at the end of life – concerning oneself or others – confront nearly all contemporary Christians. The process of dying has always raised important moral questions, but recent advances in medical technology and the complexity of the health-care system have made them exceedingly more complicated. Scripture doesn't directly address many options we face. What are we to do? Bill Davis has offered an excellent resource on this issue for Reformed Christians.

Davis draws on his experience as a philosophy professor, PCA elder, and member of local hospital ethics committees. He devotes a long early chapter to foundational moral-theological ideas that guide the rest of the volume. The following chapters are theoretically substantive but have a practical focus. Davis reflects upon treatment decisions people face as death looms, the function and importance of advance directives, how financial responsibilities affect treatment choices, and how to navigate hospital culture. He helpfully utilizes concrete examples to illustrate the process of moral reasoning that leads to godly decisions. Along the way, he advises readers how to interact with people wisely and pastorally.

Davis's primary audience is Christians inclined to think that being pro-life implies an obligation to try to extend life as long as medically possible, and hence to accept whatever treatment options accomplish this. Davis argues that being pro-life does *not* carry such implications. But he also warns readers tempted, in the other direction, to claim autonomous authority to choose life or death as they wish. In almost all cases, I believe Davis makes the right moral judgments. Many

readers will undoubtedly disagree with some of them. Even in those cases, they will profit from Davis's analyses of the important issues at stake.

I have only one critical concern. A large part of what Davis does is to help readers think through difficult end-of-life moral decisions that Scripture doesn't address, and to do so *wisely*, in a way consistent with our theological commitments. This is good. But, Davis's way of speaking frequently gives the impression that he's a biblicist who expects Scripture to answer everything. Throughout the book, Davis writes of what "God's Word permits," what "God's Word authorizes," or what "God's Word requires" (or of what's "biblically permissible," "biblically appropriate," etc.).

In some cases, Scripture does what he says. In other cases, it really doesn't. Consider a farmer who wants to carry out his vocation in a godly way. The question for him is not whether Scripture permits him to plant soybeans, or authorizes him to harvest in October, or permits him to sell his produce to China. God did not give Scripture to answer those questions. The farmer must exercise wise judgments about the climate, soil quality, government regulations, and market conditions. He is authorized to make such judgments as a divine image-bearer created to exercise dominion and to love God and neighbor. Farmers had such authorization long before Scripture existed.

A number of the "principles" Davis lays out require similar evaluation. For example, it's not exactly true that "God's Word authorizes spouses to speak ... for each other." That authorization comes from the nature of the marriage relationship as God created it; it existed long before Moses took up his pen.

Davis's topic, end-of-life bioethics, exposes the problems of a biblicist mindset. I don't think Davis really is a biblicist. In effect, he helps readers work through moral issues that Scripture doesn't contemplate. But if he had used words such as "wisdom" and "prudence" much more often and phrases such as "God's Word permits/authorizes" much less often, I believe he would have communicated more clearly.

New Horizons, November 2018

A Colorful Past: A Coloring Book of Church History

by William Boekestein, illustrated by Naomi Kamphuis. Reformation Heritage, 2018. Paperback, 88 pages, \$6.00.

Reviewed by OP pastor Jonathan L. Cruse

Children love to draw, just as they love to be told a great story. These two passions are combined in *A Colorful Past* to hopefully produce a third: love for the church. In this coloring book of church history by William Boekestein and Naomi Kamphuis, children (and their adult family and friends) are not only introduced to some of the most important figures in church history, but are immersed into their stories as well.

The book is organized to have at least one important church history figure represented from each of the last twenty centuries of the church. Young artists begin in the first century with the apostle Paul (depicted in chains under Roman guard) and by the end will have journeyed the whole way to Glenside, Pennsylvania, coloring in J. Gresham Machen lecturing at Westminster Seminary in the twentieth century. Each picture is accompanied by a few sentences that explain the important work accomplished by these various figures.

Readers will learn that John Wycliffe helped translate the Bible into English, that Tertullian articulated the doctrine of the Trinity, and that Lady Jane Grey stood for her faith even in amidst the threat of persecution. While the heroic figures of the Reformation are well attested, the book also includes lesser-known characters: Gottschalk, Vladimir of Kiev, and Saint Columba, for example. Budding artists who use this coloring book will be getting a head start on seminary!

A particular strength of *A Colorful Past* is that it represents the unity through diversity of the visible church. Men who would be on different sides of denominational lines still belong to the “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” of God’s church. To that end, medieval scholar Thomas Aquinas, fiery Baptist minister Charles Spurgeon, and brilliant Reformed theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper are all in the book, just as they were all used powerfully by God in and for his church.

I highly commend this informative and interactive book. It would be great for use in the home or even in Sunday

school programs of the church. Hopefully it will spark further conversations about the church and how God has been faithful to her from generation to generation. And since “there are no unimportant people in God’s church,” may this book help our children see their precious place in the body.

New Horizons, March 2019

Alphabet of Bible Creatures: Considering God in His Creation,

by Peggy Noll, illustrated by Cheryl DeGraaf. CreateSpace, 2017. Paperback, 56 pages, \$11.95 (Amazon).

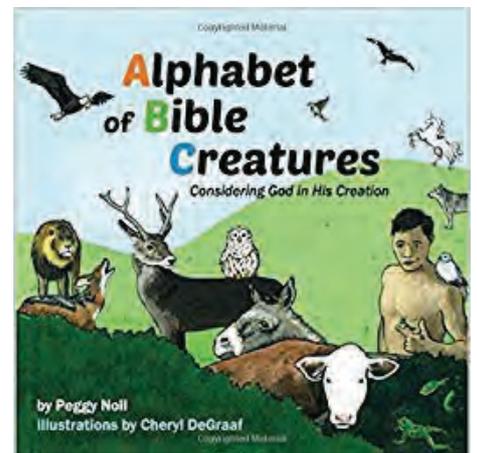
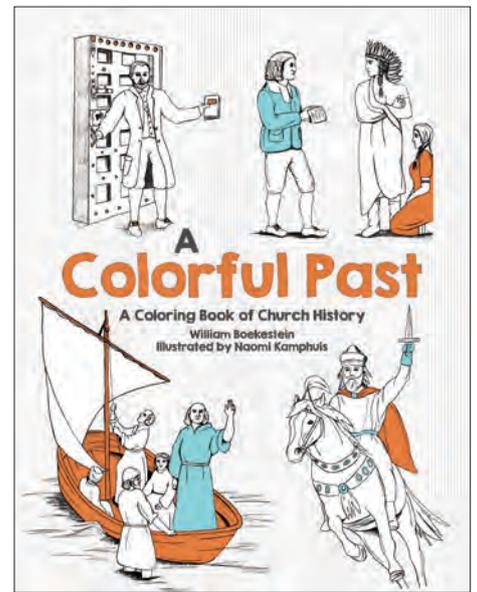
Reviewed by OP member Lois Sorkness

I tested this book out by reading it to two of my grandchildren, aged three and four. Following my short explanation that this was a book about animals that are mentioned in the Bible and that there is one for each letter of the alphabet, the two were thrilled page after page. They tried to name the animal, made the first sound in that animal’s name, then traced the letter with their fingers.

Each double-page spread consists of a simple yet colorful and captivating illustration. DeGraaf’s art incorporates the featured capital letter and its animal in a scene that fits well with the biblical concept conveyed in Noll’s short rhyming poems. Each poem is well crafted from, and substantiated by, several Bible verses, which are also written out. The opposing page is neatly arrayed with nine of the same capital letter pictured with its animal. My granddaughters loved spotting the animal from the right page that was used in the array on the left.

Noll’s poems are rich with deep theological truth stated in a child-friendly way that is fun to read and listen to as well as reverent, which I find rare in today’s world of trite Christian children’s media. She demonstrates how Scripture uses animals as metaphors to show the characteristics of God, the plight of man, and what God in his rich mercy has done for his people. God is our refuge and strength as the rocks are for the rock badger. The psalmist is like a desert owl in the wilderness. Our heavenly Father loves us more than the sparrows, each of whom he knows and sees.

I was surprised to see “U” is for unicorn, but the King James version of Job 39:9 asks, “Will the unicorn be



willing to serve thee?" Noll handles it well in her poem:

*It may have been a unicorn
That God revealed to Job
To show His servant who was boss
Of all who walk the globe.*

This is a delightful and valuable book for regular teaching of Bible truths and Scripture memory. As a teacher I have one critique. The alphabet should feature the lowercase letters more; children learn to read more readily when taught lowercase letters first.

New Horizons, November 2018

God Made All of Me: A Book to Help Children Protect Their Bodies

By Justin S Holcomb and Lindsey A Holcomb, (Illustrated by Trish Mahoney), NEW GROWTH PRESS / 2015. Hardcover, \$22.44 from Book Depository.

Reviewed by Moana Leenders

God Made All of Me is a simple and clear read-aloud picture book for parents to share with their 2-8 year olds. This book teaches children about good and bad touching and starts with the wonderful truth that God made our bodies very good! Our private parts aren't shameful, but they are private. The book assumes mum and dad will be having these con-

versations in the home and sensitively introduces the concept of keeping our bodies and ourselves safe. It gives parents a tool to talk with their children about their bodies and to help them understand the difference between the appropriate and inappropriate touch of others. Each page has a colourful, multi-font and modern illustration.



*"The Father is ready to love and receive;
the Son is ready to pardon and cleanse guilt away;
the Spirit is ready to sanctify and renew;
angels are ready to rejoice over the returning sinner;
grace is ready to assist him;
the Bible is ready to instruct him;
heaven is ready to be his everlasting home.
One thing only is needful, and that is, the sinner must be ready and willing
himself." J C Ryle*