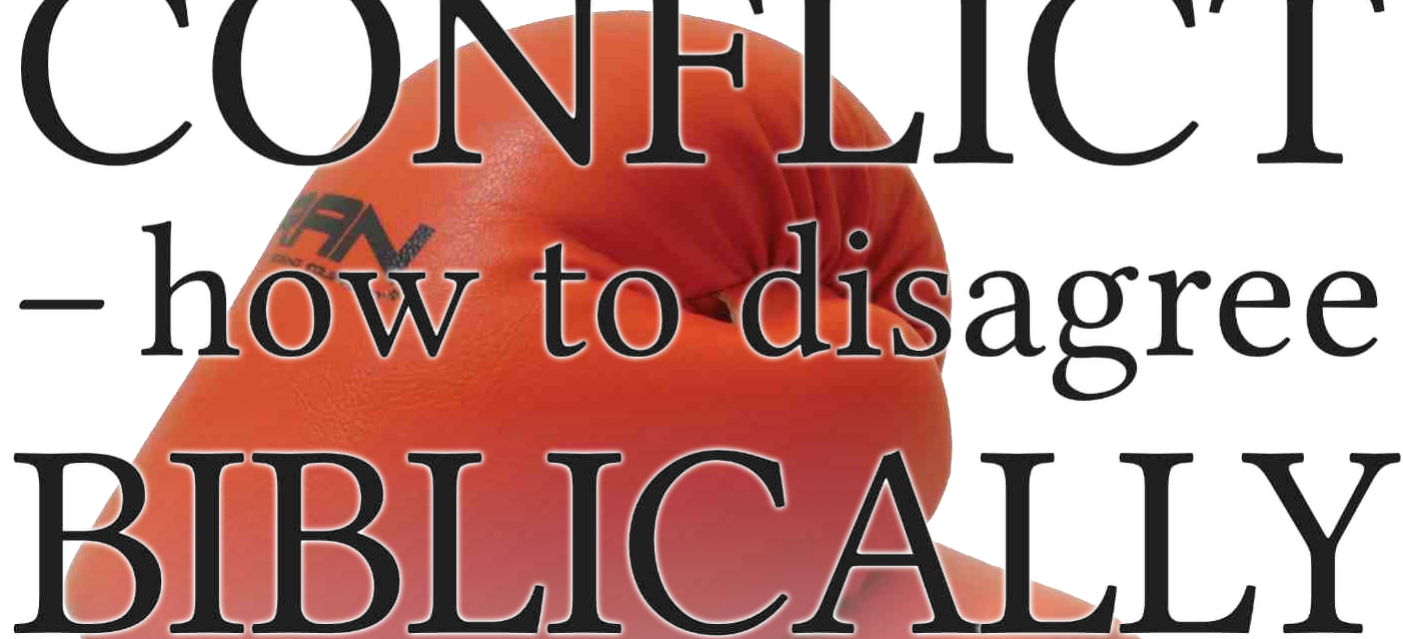


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Volume 50/11, December 2023

# Gracious CONFLICT – how to disagree BIBLICALLY



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## Editorial

It seems that we do not need to look far to find conflict! As I write, there is serious conflict in the Middle East and Ukraine, and there are protests around many parts of the globe in support of one side or the other. That is conflict on a large scale and it is a sad result of the sin and evil of mankind.

Most of us will be involved in some sort of conflict in our lifetime. That might be in our families or with our neighbours, or it might be within our church family and even spill over into the courts of our churches. Whatever the setting, it needs to be dealt with, by grace, preserving unity in the faith and for the glory of the Lord.

Quite often, what might be considered relatively innocuous by one person, can be a monumental problem for another, and that is where the conflict begins. The sad thing about conflict is that it may be a drawn out affair and leave many wounded, or in the case of war, many casualties.

In the November issue's editorial, I wrote about two families who lived directly opposite each other who had conflict over a period of 17 years, and in some respects, I remember that what began the problem was a misunderstanding between neighbours. They seemed to be out of sorts with one another over something small. When I used to go to primary school in Western Australia, I remember boys settling conflicts with one another with their fists.

However, within the church we do have problems from time-to-time. And how they are dealt with can determine the outcome. I appreciate how our Church Order deals with discipline in Article 67. It states that the purpose of Christian discipline is: *to vindicate the honour of the Lord; to maintain the purity of the church, and; to promote the welfare of the believer* (which is restorative). Hopefully, we need not go down that road, but should we need to, we should never shy away from it, because it is an act of love – love for the Lord, His people and the erring brother or sister.

To deal with such things requires love, grace, patience, wisdom, in fact all the fruits of the Spirit, and a good understanding of how to deal with sin. Think about the elder on a home visit discovering a major conflict within a family. What about a Session dealing with warring brethren, or about appeals to presbytery or synod between a Minister and his Session, or an aggrieved member and a Session, or an aggrieved Session and a presbytery/synod? The scenarios are endless, because the potential for conflict is often but a moment away. But it is how we deal with one another and conflict that makes all the difference.

We need to remember, that when there is conflict the potential for dishonouring the Name of our Lord is ever-present. So let us seek His glory and vindication first rather than our own and learn to be gracious with each other.

Our contributors write about *Gracious conflict – how to disagree biblically*. Thank you all for taking the time to contribute this month. *S.D.G.*

Featured in this issue:

Mr Reinier Noppers considers where grace may grow.

Mr Daniel Wilson reflects on how disagreeing may lead to the Lord's glory.

Mr Andrew M. Davis writes on maintaining unity.

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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REINIER NOPPERS

# “Conflict – where grace may grow.”

Conflict amongst God’s people has existed for a long time. Think of Abraham and Lot – Isaac and Ishmael – Esau and Jacob! Remember the civil wars fought amongst the people of Israel – throughout the time of the judges and the kings – and well into the New Testament, where almost every church records divisions, tension and disagreement.

The Corinthians had their preferences for different leaders, (1 Cor 1:10-13) some members had taken others to court (1 Cor 6:1-8), there was disagreement over food offered to idols (1 Cor 8:1-13) and then of course there was the variety of views regarding the perceived hierarchy of spiritual gifts.

Think of the members in the Galatian church, who were biting and devouring one another (Gal 5:15), or for that matter Paul’s challenge to the churches in Colosse and Ephesus to maintain unity, (Col 2:1-2; Eph 4:1-3) and then of course the preachers with false motives, the preachers with false teaching, the destructive disagreement between Euodia and Syntyche; all of which divided the church in Philippi. (Phil 1:15, 3:2, 4:2)

Romans 14 and 15 describe tension over what we may eat and which day is better, in the context of a weaker and stronger brother.

Even Paul and Barnabas had their moments of disagreement – see Acts 15:39, as did Paul and Peter – see Galatians 2:11.

### Are we any different?

Conflict amongst God’s people comes through many reasons – different backgrounds, different understandings, different issues running through our lives, different personalities, and different concepts of what is important and what can be set aside.

In one sense conflict is not necessarily wrong – God Himself set the tone in Genesis 3 when He put enmity between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman – conflict between right and wrong, good and evil; and where Scripture is clear – where the gospel is at stake – we also need to stand firm. The same applies in areas of morality – particularly in this time of flexible morality and man centred ethics.

However, there are many areas where such clarity is not immediately obvious, and we need to recognise that all of us approach conflict as sinners – imperfect in our understanding, ability to reason, and our perception of others.

Reasons can range from not getting our own way – to major doctrinal differences; and everything in between. Responses can be driven by genuine desire and love, or by personal likes and dislikes; and all too easily gossip and slander becomes easier than listening and understanding, people become bigger targets than ideas; with the danger that the reality of healthy debate degenerates into personality conflict and division.

Any such behaviour will destroy, tear down, and create division and enmity within the body of Christ. However, we all know that God’s people are not meant to be a place of danger, but a place of safety. A place where grace may grow.

Therefore James cuts to the chase.

In chapter 4:1-3 he states; *“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”*

Keep the main thing the main thing. We have a way of majoring on minors, as Jesus reminds us in Matthew 23:23-24. Back to the beginning – our unity is Christ, our foundation is the Word, our hope is the gospel, and our salvation is the cross. Strong believers ought to grow in love, the weak believer in knowledge, and both in humility.

**When any conflict appears,  
where do we start?**

With our own hearts, our own weakness, and our own perceptions of others with whom we debate and discuss these matters. And yes – even if all attempts to show love and make peace bring nothing but strife? We cannot control how others respond; we can only work on how we treat them. How our hearts see them. And see what God will do through it all.

It strikes me that the Apostle Paul, in almost all his letters to the churches, begins by thanking God for the believers – all of

even as Paul entreats Euodia and Syntyche to agree, he did not ask that these ladies agree for their own sake, or for Paul's sake, since they had laboured side by side with him for the gospel! Nor even for the good of the church (though these would have all been valid reasons for doing so). No, he urges them to agree with each other *in the Lord* – because their names are written in the book of life.

Our foundation is not the fact that we will agree with everyone on everything: (if that ever happens wake me up!) but we will always agree on one matter: the most important: that Jesus is Lord.

There is only one true unity. And that is our unity in Christ. With all our distinctives, with all our differences, we are One in Christ. When we begin with that confession, and live with that in mind, then even the strongest disagreement cannot result in disunity!

All the way through Philippians 1, Paul has been talking about a partnership in the gospel, sharing in God's grace together, using every event as an opportunity to spread the gospel! Even despite wrong motives in their midst, he could rejoice with and for God's people, concluding the chapter with a reminder of the main thing – a life worthy of the gospel.

A life worthy of Christ! So what better way to discuss a unity of spirit and purpose than to go back to Christ! This is exactly what Paul does in Philippians 2.

So when we talk about unity, we need to begin by asking – what does my faith look like? How is my relationship with Jesus as Lord and Saviour, and how does this affect my relationship with my brothers and sisters in Christ? Faith is a precious gift – living in our heads in all that we believe, and in our hearts in all that we do and say and think – a confession of Him who died for us the very bedrock and foundation of how we then live and act and interact with one another.

Dealing with conflict begins with recognising that we are not individuals going our own way, but a body going together.

Dealing with conflict continues by recognising that our goal is not to be right, it is not to be successful, not even to keep everyone happy, but it is about living and telling and proclaiming the gospel – about witness in thought and word and deed to each other and our community that Jesus Christ is Saviour and Lord!

In unity there will be a myriad of ways to express this truth – yet a oneness of mind as we encourage each other in it, comfort each other through it, united in the Spirit



them! – by rejoicing in their faith, and by delighting in the fact that they are one in Christ with him. Even though in all these letters his rebukes follow his thanksgiving, his comments and corrections are based on a genuine love in Christ for all the saints.

It is not that he was blind to their failings, but instead recognised the priority of God's grace to them and through them! *Surely this is where we must begin.* Our bond in Christ is for eternity, so whatever disagreement may come between us, it is never more important than our unity in Christ. This is the bottom line of our relationship, which is secured in Christ alone from before the foundation of the world, and therefore whatever we discuss and how we discuss begins with a Christlike love for one another and an acceptance of one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Note the emphasis in Philippians 4:3 –



of purpose, affectionate towards each other and sympathetic to each other's struggles and burdens.

In that sense, unity and humility go together. When we think first of ourselves, there is no unity. If everyone of us is focused on what *I* want in worship, on what makes *me* feel good, on what *my* personal preferences are, then we end up in little personality groups, preference clubs, and look for ways to have it our way.

However, when we think first of others, as together we exercise the mind of Christ, we are thinking constantly of how to serve others, of what will benefit the congregation as a whole, with all the different preferences and likes and feel-good moments, can anything less than a strong unity be the result?

Christ humbled himself: to death on a cross. He thought so little of keeping his own life, and so highly of restoring ours, that He went to death and hell for us. Is this how we think of others?

Regarding others as better than ourselves means that we are aware of our own failings and are thus willing to accept failings in them, not seeing theirs as worse than ours and not looking down on them because of it. It means we can also look for and point out the good in others, rather than just looking for and pointing to our own good qualities! We assume the best of motives in others, not the worst, and that wherever they differ they do so in good conscience to the glory of God.

In humility we constantly remind ourselves that we are far from perfect and so resolve to love other imperfect people no matter what!

### **And the particular issues?**

Differences of opinion and disagreements are not the problem! Remember to keep the issue at the centre – not the person! *Talk about losing sight of the woods for the trees.* Many had become believers through the witness of Euodia and Syntyche, but now they, who had spoken to so many about the love of Jesus Christ, and the reconciliation of the gospel, could not speak to each other with that same love or seek reconciliation. This is a parody of faith. And the actual issue? No one really knows!

Instead, we look to the Scriptures, and humble ourselves in its light. Be reminded that in conflict, as in all matters of faith, true humility begins by examining ourselves.

Philippians 2:3 is clear: *"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than*

*yourselves."*

Are we always right? Is our way the only way, or could there be a better way? Might another person have something to contribute – even if their opinion offends us? Are we able to admit we might be wrong? Are we quick to respond, eager to defend ourselves, or in wisdom accept others as equal in Christ and valuable in His sight?

James commands us to *"be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry."* It is true that we are given two ears and only one mouth – so let us listen well, seek to understand clearly, and that all our



responses are measured, given in love, and without anger. We do not show love if we do not first listen: without jumping to conclusions, or pre-empting judgement, or simply looking for points to disagree with. As Proverbs 18:13 simply states *"If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame."*

Listening involves more than hearing words, it seeks to understand the heart of the person, going beyond opinion, seeking to understand both past experiences and heart-intent. Who knows what hurt lies in those we disagree with? When their pain comes from a different point of view, do we crush them or uplift them in grace? How well do we apply Ephesians 4:29: *"Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear."*

Seek peace, not war. Hebrews 12:14 *"Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord."* Romans 12:18: *"If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."* Once again, the emphasis is not on the person we have the disagreement with, but on ourselves. Where is our heart? What are our motives? What outcome do we desire? That whatever we do, we do it all to the glory of God? (1 Cor 10:31)

Pray – not just about the issue, not just for our desired outcome, but for and with those we disagree with! As children of God together, we come before the throne of grace together, as equals, we bring one another before the Father. We may pray for God to change them, but in His grace He may change us! And if not, in Him we find our peace. As we pray for those who disagree with us, we cannot become bitter with them, as we recognise all our interactions are in the presence of God.

Employ a 'true companion' (Phil 4:3) to help – someone willing to serve, be involved, not judge but reconcile, a third party removed from the debate, following

our Saviour, who emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, lifting humility to its highest form by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. (Phil 2:6-8 ed) True reconciliation follows Christ, who reconciled us with God.

There is so much more that can be said. As we read through Romans 14, we note that whatever the debate, relate it to God. Christ is Lord – so whatever our opinion, it must be "to the Lord." Holy days, feast days, or all days as sacred; eating meat or abstaining; either position is to the Lord. The question is to be fully persuaded in our own hearts in good conscience, and not to require the same position from all others: verse 5 – that we can be convinced our stance is "to the Lord". We can pray, advise, even rebuke; but Christ alone is Lord.

In the end God alone is judge. (Romans 14:10-12) Both the weak believer who judges his brother and the strong believer who despises his brother in any issue or difference must give account of himself to God. In most cases, we don't "take sides";

instead we bow together before the Judge of heaven and earth.

If nothing else, choose our battles. How many issues have erupted in the past, divided congregations, created disharmony amongst believers, only for the passing of time to render them irrelevant, inconsequential, and certainly not "another gospel" or false teaching?

Keep the main thing the main thing. We have a way of majoring on minors, as Jesus reminds us in Matthew 23:23-24. Back to the beginning – our unity is Christ, our foundation is the Word, our hope is the gospel, and our salvation is the cross. Strong believers ought to grow in love, the weak believer in knowledge, and both in humility.

Consider also how God may use our dispute for our good, His glory, and the growth of His Kingdom.

Finally, let us always seek to edify one another. Romans 14:15: *"For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love."* How will others know that we are Christ's disciples? (John 13:35) The alternative is to cause our fellow believer to stumble – or to grieve – or even destroy the work of God. After all, *"knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."* (1 Cor 8:1)

A believer's spiritual maturity is revealed so quickly in conflict. Are we willing to give up our rights so that others might be helped? Do we consider this a burden or a blessing? Are we able to sacrifice to help others grow in their faith? Those of us who think we know so much better, have the responsibility to lead in humility, love and sacrifice.

As we grow in grace, even in the midst of conflict, only then will we rejoice with those with whom we have disagreed the most strongly on earth, and rejoice with them in heaven in the presence and the fellowship of God.

Mr Reinier Noppers is a minister of the Bishopdale Reformed Church.

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♡♡♡♡♡

DANIEL WILSON

# “Gracious Conflict: Disagreeing to the Glory of Christ”

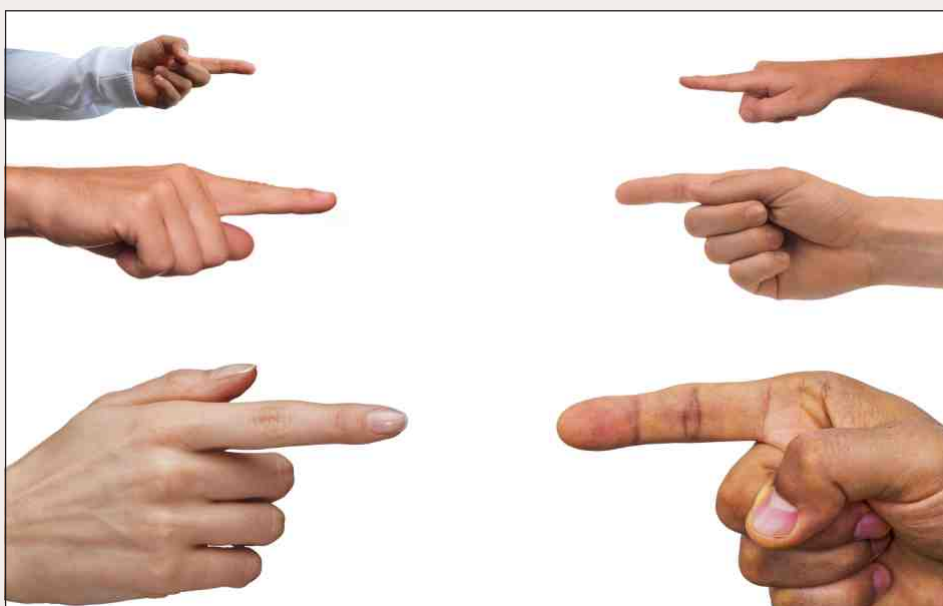
**“Grace enables you to see past who is really right, to see what is really wrong!”**

This quotation is from an old Christian short story about conflict between loved ones, and I believe it wonderfully illustrates the power of grace in the life of a believer in the midst of conflict. When we encounter opposition and conflict with friends or family members, we are far too quick to assert who is right and who is wrong. That is the nature of conflict. By definition, a conflict is when we disagree with what others think. We believe that we are correct and that they are wrong. But even when you and I are completely 100% correct in our view on a given topic, we can also be (at the exact same time) 100% wrong in how we are arguing our case or talking to the other person! In the moment, it is often quite hard to see what the real problem is in a conflict situation. Consider the example of two siblings in Christ (they can be fellow church members or even family members). We will call them “Person A” and “Person B.” They are arguing over some disagreement in church life or some political view for the next election, and they are going back and

forth in a heated debate about who is right and who is wrong. All the typical things that happen in conflicts and arguments are happening: both are making sweeping generalisations, both are speaking more than listening, both are more interested in proving themselves right rather than protecting their good relationship, and they are both using their knowledge of God’s Word to prove their point more than to humble themselves before the Lord. What is the biggest problem or issue in that conflict? Is the biggest problem that Person A is correct and that Person B is incorrect? No, not really! Is the biggest problem that Person A can’t find enough evidence to convince Person B of the correct position? No! The biggest problem is that this issue has caused a division between two people

who should love one another.

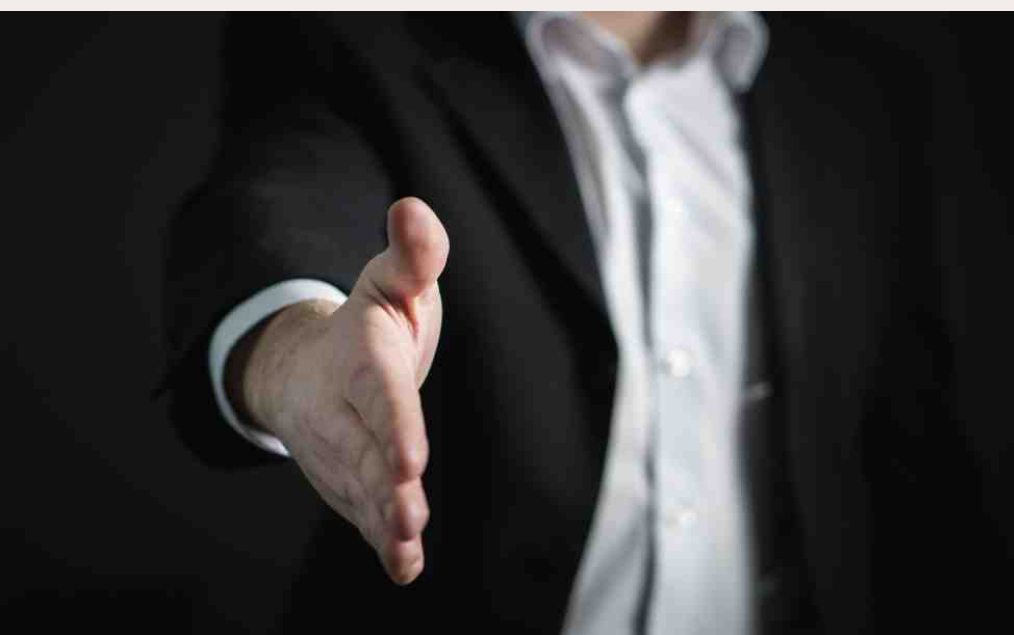
Now, I know that I need to interrupt myself at this point, because someone is probably thinking, “Are you saying that we should never disagree with anyone?! That is crazy!” No, I am not saying that you can never disagree with anyone. Instead, God’s Word requires us to do all to the glory of Christ, even when we disagree. In 1 Corinthians 8-13, we find a myriad of passages which explain how we are to relate to one another in the church. We ought to be careful not to offend a weaker brother in the faith (1 Cor. 8:7-13). We ought to willingly surrender our rights so that we might serve the Lord and others in His name (1 Cor. 8-9).<sup>1</sup> We ought to appreciate gifts and hospitality, but we should be careful to do all things for God’s glory and that





includes watching out for the consciences of others (1 Cor. 10:23-33). We ought to be unified in the church in spirit and service before coming to the Lord's Table (1 Cor. 11). We ought to use our spiritual gifts to bless others and not to outdo or belittle others (1 Cor. 12:1-13). We ought to value everyone in the body of Christ, even those who "need greater modesty" because they are "less presentable" in some way (1 Cor. 12:12-31). Paul's argument culminates in that beautiful passage about love in 1 Corinthians 13!

We often use 1 Corinthians 13 for wedding sermons and for talking about romantic relationships, but the majority of the terms used there to describe love are most appropriate for conflict situations!



*Love is patient and kind.* You don't have to be patient or long-suffering if people are on time and respectful. You have to exercise the patience of your love for others when they make you wait or when they try your patience! Kindness can be extended when people are not in conflict, but kindness is most visible where there are disagreements and a believer is still kind to his opponent! *Love does not envy or boast.* We often envy when there is some level of inequality in our life, and we boast when we think that we are better or have more than someone else. These actions of love are intended to prevent conflict! *Love is not arrogant or rude.* We are most tempted to arrogance when we think that we are right and the other person is wrong, leading us to be rude and contemptuous in our words and

attitudes. At that point, we *insist on our own way* because we are so confident that we are right and the other person is wrong. When others treat us in like manner, we get *irritable and resentful*! At that point, we begin to *rejoice in wrongdoing* by keeping a record of wrongs and listing them out to our opponent. I hope you are starting to see how much 1 Corinthians 13 is meant to apply a right understanding of love to how we engage with others in conflict! Love is an action verb, not a feeling. We need to *bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things* in our love for one another. I believe that this will make a tremendous difference to the way we disagree with those whom we love! Oh, and by the way, Jesus said that you must love your enemies too (Matt. 5:43-44). You can't escape applying 1 Corinthians 13 to all your relationships, because everyone falls into a category of whom we must love (family, friend, neighbour or enemy).

If you and I apply 1 Corinthians 13 to the way we love those who disagree with us, it will enable us to keep things in perspective. It will enable us to remember that the biggest problem in a time of conflict is not who is right and who is wrong. The biggest problem is that a division or rift has occurred in that relationship. I have often found that quotation from the beginning of this article to be helpful in giving me perspective in the midst of an argument: "Grace enables you to see past who is really right, to see what is really wrong!" I love my opponent and show him grace when I stop to consider the way in which I am arguing my point. I am most likely to love him with kind and gracious words if I first realise that maintaining our relationship is more important than winning the argument. I realise that maintaining relationships will not always be possible in a conflict. That is why God tells us in Romans 12:18, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." It won't always be possible, and there is a time to stop engaging with an argumentative or divisive person (Titus 3:10). But we don't start with that assumption. Instead, we ought to face each conflict with a loving hope that our relationship can be restored and that we might find a compromise or solution which honours God and is a blessing for all involved. That isn't easy – but that is what God calls us to in His Word.

What conflicts are you facing in your life? How have you conducted yourself thus far? Have you demonstrated a love for God and those around you? Or have you fallen into a selfish hatred for others in the way



you have fought for your point of view most of all?! Dear Brother or Sister in Christ, please realise that you are not alone in such failures. These are common pitfalls which we all face from time to time, but please don't stay there or excuse your mistakes. Instead, repent and put off that old man of sin that you might put on the Lord Jesus Christ! Look to Jesus for His righteousness to cover your brokenness. Look to Jesus for His forgiveness for your harshness when

you were right and your obstinance when you were wrong. As a forgiven sinner, seek to approach conflict and disagreements as opportunities to demonstrate your love for the Lord and others! Just as a torch is most visible in the dark of night, so our love for God and others shines the brightest in the darkness of conflict. May your love for God and others in the midst of disagreement be a living demonstration of the love of Christ to the dark and dying world around you.

<sup>1</sup> I believe this is one of Paul's points in 1 Cor. 9, although he seems to spend most of his time defending that he could have asked for pay or support. Instead, he sacrificially gave up those rights to serve the Lord for His glory and the good of those to whom he ministered.

*Mr Daniel Wilson is the minister of the North Shore Reformed Church.*

## Gracious conflict – how to disagree biblically

ANDREW M. DAVIS

# Preserving unity in the midst of disagreements

Sin's effect on the world could be likened to a fragmentation grenade. When the explosive charge is ignited, the grenade fragments into tiny bits that flee from the center in all directions, causing damage everywhere. So it has been since Adam ate the forbidden fruit. Things that God intended to be together have been blown apart. Man's loving fellowship with God Himself was destroyed; man's loving fellowship with one another was shattered (beginning with marriage); man's relationship with creation and creation's relationship with itself disintegrated. In these main ways and in every other way, sin has blown God's beautiful universe apart.

Christ came to put it all back together into perfect unity. He said, "Whoever does not gather with me scatters" (Matt. 12:30). John said that Jesus died "for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one" (John 11:52, NIV). Paul said that God's eternal purpose is to bring all things in heaven and earth together in Christ (Eph. 1:9–10). Since this is God's plan, Christ prayed accordingly in John 17, three times asking the Father that all the elect would be one as the Father and the Son are one (vv. 11, 21, 26). This is staggering. In heaven, all the redeemed will

be perfectly one, conformed in every respect to the unity of the Trinity.

What does this perfect unity of the Trinity consist of? There are three persons in the Godhead – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Being of one substance and having one will, They are entirely unified in Their mission. This kind of unity is analogous to the unity that the redeemed will enjoy in heaven.

However, we are not there yet. And in the work of the gospel, especially in the life of a local church or a Christian ministry, there is inevitably going to be disagreement. Brothers and sisters are going to see things differently and must address those differences in the most redemptive way for the glory of God and the advance of the gospel. It seems that almost every local church addressed in the New Testament had serious problems with disunity. James asked, "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?" (James 4:1–3). Paul had to address sinful divisions in the Corinthian church as his first priority (1 Cor. 1:10–12). Even the Apostle Paul himself had a severe disagreement with Barnabas (Acts 15:37–39). In the same way, church history is riddled with godly men who had serious disagreements with each other – Martin

Luther and Huldrych Zwingli; George Whitefield and John Wesley; John Stott and Martyn Lloyd-Jones. This is a timeless problem that is still plaguing us. Let's consider five motives and five methods for preserving unity.

Brothers and sisters must address differences in the most redemptive way for the glory of God.

### Motives for preserving unity

*Present and eternal spiritual reality.* Genuine Christians truly are one in Christ spiritually. From the moment of conversion, we become spiritually one with Christ (Rom. 6:1–4) and therefore with all other Christians. And in heaven, we will be one as the Father and the Son are one, in direct answer to Jesus' High Priestly Prayer in John 17. This reality gives us the basis for working out lesser issues.

*Obedience.* Paul commands Christians to be "diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3, NASB).

*Witness.* Jesus prayed that His followers "may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me" (John 17:23, emphasis added). The journey toward a more perfect unity among Christians in

this world is a powerful witness to Christ. Conversely, when Christians argue, it affects their ability to hold forth the word of the gospel (Phil. 2:14–16). Sinful Christian conflict is a bad witness to a watching world.

**Wisdom.** In every robust conflict among genuine Christians, it should be expected that there are usually elements of truth and wisdom on both sides of the issue. I like to think of the solution to every divisive issue as a recipe with multiple ingredients, and both sides must put in their ingredients for the recipe to be complete.

**Growth.** “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another” (Prov. 27:17). God uses conflicts to sharpen us, filing off pieces of our sinful selves and honing us for better service.

### Methods for preserving unity

**Love one another.** Review the descriptions of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4–7. Start with this: “Love is patient and kind.” Let us remind ourselves continually that we will be spending eternity in heaven together, loving each other perfectly.

**Humility.** Review the lessons of Philippians 2:1–11. Realize that the conflict is made hotter by the selfishness we all bring to the table. Paul commanded us to consider others better than ourselves and others’ interests as more important than ours.

**The Word.** All issues must be ultimately resolved by sound exegesis of relevant Scriptures. By “rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15), we will in all things grow up into Christlike maturity (Eph. 4:15) and discern God’s wisdom for all circumstances.

**Romans 14 guidelines.** Romans 14 is the handbook for handling debatable issues. One of the key principles is not to judge someone else’s servant (v. 4).

**Prayer.** Heartfelt prayer when divisions come is vital. Begging God for unity as well as for wisdom, humility, and love between all people involved follows the clear pattern Christ gives us in John 17.

*Dr. Andrew M. Davis is senior pastor of the First Baptist Church of Durham, N.C., and founder of Two Journeys Ministry. He is author of several books, including Revitalize.*

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## Focus on faith

LETTERS OF JOHN NEWTON

# I saw the Lord!

“In the year King Uzziah died, *I saw the Lord!* He was sitting on a lofty throne, and the train of His robe filled the Temple. Hovering around Him were mighty seraphim, each with six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with the remaining two they flew. In a great chorus they sang, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty! The whole earth is filled with His glory!’ The glorious singing shook the Temple to its foundations, and the entire sanctuary was filled with smoke! Then I said, ‘Woe is me, for I am ruined, because I am a man of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips, because my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty!’” Isaiah 6:1–5

Oh! for a glance of what *Isaiah* saw, and has described! Oh! that we, by the power of that faith, could behold the glory of the Lord filling this house; that we could realize the presence and the attitude of His attendant angels! They cover their faces and their feet with their wings, as overpowered by the beams of His majesty;



and conscious, if not of defilement like us, yet of unavoidable inability as creatures, to render Him the whole of that praise and homage which are justly due to Him!

Oh! that, by faith, we could enter into the spirit of their ascription – ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord Almighty, the whole earth is filled with His glory!’ If we were all thus affected, as the prophet was, surely each one for himself would adopt the prophet’s language. Or, if a comfortable hope in the Gospel prevented us from crying out, “Woe is me, for I am ruined!” we should, at least, say, (the Hebrew word might be so rendered,) “*I am silenced, I am struck*

*dumb! I am overwhelmed with confusion and shame; for I am a man of unclean lips myself, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty!”*

If we have a degree of this impression, we shall not perplex ourselves concerning the second causes, or immediate instruments of our calamities. The *evil of sin*, contrasted with the *holiness and glory of God*, will engross our thoughts! And we shall ascribe all the troubles we either feel or fear – to our own sins, and the sins of those among whom we dwell.



Since the beginning of September, Jae and Jinny Kim and their son Judah have been at the Reformed Church of Masterton, where Jae is pleased to be serving as a Vicar under the mentorship of Rev. David Stares. Jae and Jinny have been married four and a half years. Judah turns two next February, and their second child is due in March.

Jae was born and raised in Auckland. He grew up in a Christian home, attending

a contemporary Korean Presbyterian church, and came to have a vibrant faith in Jesus during high school. It was only while he was in university that he discovered Reformed theology through the online sermons and panel discussions of Ligonier and Desiring God. Jae had already been pondering a growing desire to pursue pastoral ministry as he got involved in campus evangelism and discipling fellow young people. This encounter with the Reformed faith stoked the flame.

Eventually, reading books by the likes of James Boice, David Wells, and Carl Trueman, he became persuaded that a Reformed doctrine of salvation must go hand in hand with a Reformed doctrine of the church and worship. In 2015, Jae became a member of the Reformed Church of the North Shore where Rev. John Rogers was the minister, followed by Rev. Daniel Wilson – both of whom continue to be an encouragement to him. A couple of years later, when Jae made his desire for the ministry known to the North Shore session, he was encouraged to pursue it. Jae, having been trained in law, worked in criminal defence for three years and was married to Jinny in March 2019 before making concrete plans to move ahead as a ministry student.

In mid-2020, Jae commenced his Master of Divinity studies at Mid-America

Reformed Seminary. He and Jinny moved to Indiana, USA, and became fully involved in the seminary community. During his three years in seminary, Jae underwent two formative summer internships – one in Pipestone Christian Reformed Church, Minnesota, and another in Lynwood United Reformed Church, Illinois – and was able to provide frequent pulpit supply at churches of various denominations (PCA, OPC, CRC, URC). He enjoyed the robust theological training and practical instruction he received, as well as the opportunities he and Jinny had to spend time with professors, fellow students, and their families outside of class.

Soon after graduation in May 2023, the Kims moved back to Auckland as a family of three. They are now settled in Masterton and look forward to how the Lord, through this vicariate, will further equip and prepare them for life in ministry.

Jae enjoys playing the guitar and is an avid reader in fiction and poetry, philosophy and sociology, and the “queen of the sciences,” theology; his favourite (dead) theologians are Augustine, Herman Bavinck, John Calvin, and John Webster. Jinny is a trained graphic designer and enjoys trying new cooking and baking recipes. Together they like to play board games and squash, and spending time with Judah.

## Acknowledgements

This year has just about run its course as we approach the festive season and embark on another year with anticipation, especially as our only Sovereign Lord, Jesus Christ, King of Kings and LORD of Lords reigns over all creation. All praise to Him for sustaining us in this past year and in His grace bringing us to another, and still we pray “come Lord Jesus”.

This world continues to suffer from the pains of this creation and struggles from the effects of ungodliness and being far removed from its Saviour in unbelief. As Christians, we still proclaim, *I will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress, My God, in whom I trust!”* And we trust in the Lord rather than putting our confidence in men (Ps146:3).

I would like to express thanks to our many contributors for providing edifying articles this past 11 issues, without you all, we could not manage well; Mrs Joanna Voschezang as sub-editor and contributor, for her gifts, insight, creativity, input, editorial assistance and wise counsel, which I value greatly; Mrs Yvonne Walraven for the compilation of the Gleanings; the members of the National Publications Committee, who unwaveringly give their time for the continuance of *Faith in Focus*; to Flying Laser Colours for their expert technical support and printing.

Many thanks also to Mr Sebastian Bolhuis, in Western Australia, for distributing the magazine for our sister church the FRCA. We appreciate your untiring labours, enthusiasm and support.

Many thanks to the readers in New Zealand, Australia and overseas, and those who encourage us on. On behalf of the *Faith in Focus* team, we wish you all a blessed and safe holiday season, and pray that the Lord will keep you all in His grace into the new year of our Lord 2024. *Soli Deo Gloria*.



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# The war in Ukraine

The Reformed Churches of New Zealand have been sponsoring relief efforts in Ukraine, especially since the escalation of the war between Russia and Ukraine in February 2022. Some of these funds have been channelled through the NDC to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Kharkiv where Mark Agarkov and a small team have been reaching out to needy people in Kharkiv and villages on the frontlines of the war with humanitarian support and the message of Christ. The purpose of this article is to encourage continuing support for this ministry by recalling some aspects of the war and how one church has responded with love and bravery.

## The War

On 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine in an escalation of the war between Russia and Ukraine that began in 2014. The invasion has had devastating consequences. Estimates vary but tens of thousands of soldiers have been killed on each side and a similar magnitude of Ukrainian civilians have died. Others estimate the total death toll is into the hundreds of thousands. Many Ukrainians have also been displaced. According to Wikipedia, by June 2022, about 8 million Ukrainians had been internally displaced and by May 2023 more than 8.2 million had fled the country, becoming Europe's largest refugee crisis since World War II. For those left behind in the areas where the fighting has been severe, there is much deprivation. With the destruction of infrastructure, the people in these areas have been severely affected, often having limited or no access to food and clothing, electricity, gas, water supply, communication, and heating.

## Kharkiv

Kharkiv is the second largest city in Ukraine and only 30 kilometers south of the Russia-Ukraine border. Kharkiv was a major target for the Russian military in the

early months of the invasion; they were shelling and firing missiles on the city, targeting not only military targets, but also administrative, cultural and residential buildings as well as civilian infrastructure. By the end of the first week, Russian troops had entered the city and over 600,000 people had fled Kharkiv. By God's grace, the Ukrainian forces soon pushed the Russian forces back out of the city, however, it continued to be heavily bombarded from Russian artillery still nearby as well as missile strikes. By the end of September 2022, Ukrainian counter-offensive efforts were successful in retaking most of the Russia occupied towns and villages in the Kharkiv region. Since then, Russian forces have largely focused their efforts further to the east, although missile strikes in Kharkiv are still occurring.

## The Church in Kharkiv

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Kharkiv have been very active in helping

*Mark and his wife, Cristina  
sorting medicine.*





their fellow countrymen since the early days of the invasion. Mark Agarkov is a member of that congregation and has been keeping us well informed of their needs with regular updates, some of which you will have received via your Deacons.

Mark has also provided some background on their church:

*"Our church, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Kharkiv, is also known as the First Presbyterian Church in Eastern Ukraine. It is affiliated with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Ukraine (EPCU). The denomination was established in the early 1990s by missionaries from the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA). My older brother, Sudakov Sergey, who was previously an assistant pastor for 15 years, is now the senior pastor (his surname is the same as our mother's)."*

Mark was made known to us through Frank and Emily van Dalen who had come to know Mark during his time spent

studying in Lithuania. Mark has written the following about how they came to know each other:

*"Frank and Emily van Dalen were like a second family to me during my time in Lithuania. I was pursuing my Master's degree in International Business in Kaunas during 2020-2021, amidst the Covid pandemic and lockdown. Finding a reformed church with good teachings was challenging, so meeting Frank and Emily was a true blessing for me. Their spiritual support was invaluable, and they were incredibly kind and hospitable. Being a lonely international student, their kindness meant a lot to me. I thank God for directing me to Kaunas International Church and Frank and Emily. They have also been a tremendous help to our ministry in Ukraine, especially since the full-scale invasion. They have raised funds for our humanitarian work and introduced our church to many Christians worldwide. They also host several Ukrainian families in Kaunas and organize camps for Ukrainian youth. Frank and Emily are regular supporters of our ministry, and they pray for us regularly."*

As a result of the upheaval in Kharkiv, most of the congregation relocated to Ivano-Frankivsk, which is about 1000 kilometers to the west of Kharkiv and well away from the fighting. They were able to meet there for worship, take care of refugees, and also coordinate aid and outreach.

### **The Church at work**

From Ivano-Frankivsk, members of the Church got to work helping to care for refugees, bringing supplies to those who stayed behind in Kharkiv and transporting people who still wanted to evacuate. Since the drive from Ivano-Frankivsk to Kharkiv is over 15 hours, they took turns driving and sleeping. Many supplies could be obtained still in Kropyvnytskyi (about 5 hours' drive from Kharkiv), so they also used that location as a supply hub. Thanks to financial support from abroad, they were able to scale up their efforts and soon acquired a large van with which they were able to bring greater quantities of much needed aid to the east. Many deliveries were made to the Kharkiv region and also other regions nearer to the frontlines of conflict that had been devastated by fighting. Van loads full of food, medicine, clothing, blankets, heaters, generators, torches, radios, water filters, gas cookers, and many other essential items have been distributed to the most vulnerable, such as widows, the disabled, the elderly, and refugees.

In May of 2023, many of the congreg-

A team of drivers with a load of supplies.





ation moved back to Kharkiv to try to rebuild their lives there. Mark wrote at the time: "As you know, some of our church members were at the beginning of the war evacuated to Ivano-Frankivsk. Of course, in Kharkiv, it is still not totally safe, but we see how necessary it is for the church to be together. And it is difficult for the pastor to serve and live in two cities with a distance of more than 1000 km. Please pray for our church members' safety and our small community's flourishing."

Now back in Kharkiv, the church has set up a social center there as a base for continuing the provision of aid. The social center has a group of nine part-time workers from the church with the help of more than 20 volunteers. Many of them are new believers, while others are non-believers who have previously received assistance from the Social Centre.

Regarding the social center Mark writes: "Over the last three months, we have seen a massive need in our community as the flow of refugees from the Kharkiv region continues to grow. Every week, we meet people who have miraculously survived, moved to Kharkiv with nothing, and are now lost and in need. As a result, we have decided to extend the social center project for another three months. The center currently requires about \$15,000 per month to operate.

We are also preparing for the upcoming winter season, which is predicted to be even more challenging than the previous one, with extremely cold weather expected. The Russians are storing missiles to hit infrastructure and energy facilities, which may cause power outages and heating and water supply disruptions... We provided families with a similar set last year, and we are now working on updating the contents of the set. Each box will cost approximately \$120, and it will be enough for a family of up to five people to survive a power outage, heating, and water supply disruptions.

We are also preparing our church building for the winter. In a crisis, it can become a point of unbrokenness – where there will be electricity, water, and heat. We are making our premises as energy-efficient and independent as possible. We have a generator, Starlink, a tank for 1000 liters of water, and ample drinking water supplies. Please join us in prayer for our church and our community as we prepare for winter."

Showing love to many people also brings opportunities for the Gospel to spread. In July Mark wrote: "We began to pray that God would open the hearts of people and they would seek salvation. And yesterday,

## How military control of Ukraine has changed

Feb 2022: Before the invasion



Mar 2022: Russia's rapid advance



Nov 2022: Ukraine regains ground



Sep 2023: Ukraine advances



- Russian military control
- ▨ Limited Russian military control
- Russian-backed separatist-held areas
- Held or regained by Ukraine
- Russia annexed Crimea in 2014

Note: Areas held or regained by Ukraine were reset by the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) on 12 May 2023

Source: Institute for the Study of War

BBC

God answered our prayers. Six people from the social center visited our services for the first time. God is so kind! It was a great encouragement and support for us!"

### Ongoing support needed

Following a generous response from our churches at the beginning of the war, the NDC decided to spread the money out over monthly payments. This has proven to be a helpful strategy to allow the ministry in Kharkiv to operate long term. Over 80% of the donations that the church in Kharkiv has received have been one-off contributions. Thankfully, our churches have continued to collect money to contribute to this ministry, although in the last few months there have been only just enough funds to maintain payments at the same level. We pray that our churches

would continue their support for this valuable work, as has been the case for the past 19 months.

The war in Ukraine continues to cause much hardship for the people there. We hope and pray that the conflict will come to an end soon, but even in the best-case scenario, we know that the needs there will continue for some time. In the midst of the suffering, it is greatly encouraging to see God's people showing love to those around them, by offering them relief from suffering along with the hope of the Gospel. The NDC, therefore, want to commend this work for support from our churches.

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/>

**There are 50 countries which are monitored by *World Watch Monitor* for being places where Christians around the world are under pressure for their faith.**

**We will bring you summaries from different countries each issue so that you may be focussed on praying for the needs of Christians' everywhere.**

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### Qatar

Under Qatar's strict Wahhabi Islam, converting from Islam to any other religion carries the death penalty. Seen as apostates, Christians from a Muslim background are at serious risk if they openly practise their faith. Outward symbols of Christianity are banned in Qatar, as is evangelism. Around 80 per cent of the population are migrant workers, predominantly from poorer countries. Though expatriate or migrant Christians are granted some freedom to worship, if caught evangelising Muslims they can be arrested and deported.

### Russia

Although Russia is a secular state with an atheist past, the regime favours the Russian Orthodox Church, which can mean problems for other denominations. Non-traditional Protestant churches are accused by the Russian Orthodox Church of stealing their members. Since 2011, several legal restrictions have shown a trend towards greater state control and more isolation from the West, which has affected denominations that are seen as "Western". Meanwhile, in the Muslim-dominated Chechnya and Dagestan republics, converts to Christianity are considered traitors to their national identity. In July 2016, President Vladimir Putin signed into law what some commentators referred to as an "anti-missionary bill". The Yarovaya Law was formally introduced as an "anti-terrorism" measure, allowing the government to monitor extremist groups. However, Russia's Christians have also been affected, particularly missionaries, who need a permit,

and "house churches", which are now illegal, as religious activity is only allowed inside registered buildings. Maximum fines are \$780 for individuals or \$15,000 for organisations. In August 2016 American missionary Don Ossewaarde was fined \$640 for holding a church service in his home. He took his case to Russia's Supreme Court and then, in March 2017, to the European Court for Human Rights.

### Rwanda

Rwanda is part of East Africa's "authoritarian drift", according to *Freedom House*. The press and political activism are tightly restricted, and civil society is weak, according to *Human Rights Watch*. By 2014 and the 20th anniversary of the 1994 genocide, hardly a critical word was to be heard in the country. The country is deeply Christian – 44 per cent Catholic and 38 per cent Protestant – but the government keeps a rigorous registration regime. Public events and even night-time meetings are regulated; police in 2014 arrested several Pentecostal church leaders for forming an unauthorised branch of the Church.

### Saudi Arabia

All Saudis are considered Muslims, and the legal system is based on Sharia, or Islamic law. There are no church buildings in the country; Christian services are held in secret places. Christians from Muslim backgrounds usually keep their faith hidden; several have been forced to leave the country after their newfound faith was discovered. Leaving Islam is technically punishable by death in Saudi Arabia, yet the number of Saudi Muslims becoming Christians is increasing.

### Senegal

Christians account for only around 5% of Senegal's population, and have lived among their nearly unanimously Muslim neighbours without incident for generations. Senegal's first president, who held office from 1960-80, was a Christian. The country is regarded as a model of stability

and democracy in Africa. Still, the government worries about the influence of militant Islamist insurgencies in the region; it moved to ban women from wearing full-face veils, and in 2015 arrested several imams accused of having ties to jihadist groups. There have been occasional reports of mobs targeting evangelical Christians, who are seen as encroaching on the identity of this almost entirely Islamic nation.

### Somalia

The militant Islamist group Al-Shabaab, founded in Somalia, says it wants the country to be "free of all Christians". The group is able to act with impunity in Somalia's lawless and tribal society. Many tribal leaders see being Somali and being Muslim as one and the same, and leaving Islam as a betrayal. Islam is Somalia's official state religion, and the government prohibits any celebration of Christmas.

### South Korea

In South Korea today, about a third of the population is Christian. This phenomenal growth (from just 2% before the Korean War) can be explained partly by social and economic factors. The 1950s were dark days, following that war. There was a sense of national emergency to rebuild the country and the Protestant work ethic appeared to encourage hard work as a way towards achieving worldly success. Some also saw this as a sign of God's blessing. South Korea's Christians face little pressure at home, but their humanitarian and missionary endeavours abroad have led to arrests in China's border region with North Korea, and also problems in several Muslim-majority countries. In May 2017, two Chinese nationals were abducted and later murdered by the Islamic State group in Pakistan, which claimed they had secretly travelled there to work with a South Korean as missionaries.

IAN KOENS

# History is boring

Sometimes you hear it, ‘*Church History is dusty, dry and boring.*’ If that is you, then be consistent and throw out much of your Bible because it is full of Church History! Those who want to come across less negatively might say, ‘*I don’t see the relevance of Church History.*’

Just as well that Jesus *did*, because He quoted it left, right and centre. Paul and Ezekiel also thought it was relevant. As did Zechariah. And Peter and Moses. And Joshua, Stephen and Isaiah. And Luke and your Dad. Come to think of it – so do you yourself! – that is, if you read your Bible. ‘*That’s different*’, you say. Really?

### Of pots and drawers

We are used to having lots of boxes and bins, cupboards and drawers for a variety of things: kitchen tools, bolts, nails and nuts and garden tools. And a good thing it is too! It works and saves lots of time.

This neatness is also basis for dividing the past into History of the Old Testament, the History of New Testament, the History of the World and the History of the Church. Having made these constructs, we put them in cupboards: Middle Ages, Renaissance, Post-Modernism and a lot more. Then we use shelves to divide, say, the Middle Ages. In this way we easily find, say, the Early Middle Ages. Using the glass jars on this shelf, we locate The Migration of the Nations as well as – *trying to impress* – the Merovingians. See, it works and saves lots of time.

But there is also a down-side to this. We have neatly divided the sum total of all God’s deeds that He worked through a wide variety of people at a wide variety of places during a wide span of time. True, occasionally we pay lip-service to the principle that all things are of God, by Him and for Him. But no sooner have we uttered this truism, we continue to look for a particular pigeon-hole. Because it works and we are so used to it.

So what’s the point? This. While it is

good to work neatly, with attention to details and organisation, it’s also important not to forget the overall purpose of our life and the lives of all those who went before us. And for that reason, we must see that the divisions mentioned are essentially artificial divisions, for Israel’s God is One. All of History is God’s History.

True, not all that was written is equally inspired; the Bible is totally from Alpha to Omega; the rest less so. Here are a few reasons why you should know that story.

### We avoid mistakes

Suppose: we know nothing of Anabaptists, Gnostics or Montanus. How quickly could we fall prey to those who advocate the Church Militant, exclusive divine revelations and personality cults.

What if we were ignorant of Neo-Platoism, and Arminianism. Would we have the insights to withstand Humanism which enshrines the belief that man is in control of his own destiny?

When we are oblivious to the life and motives of some early ascetics, we too might fall prey to sell up and live on a pole.

The study of Church History therefore goes much further than being aware of our spiritual ancestry. The point here is that many of today’s issues have had their counterparts in the past. And, to be forewarned, is to fore-armed.

### It spurs us on

Reading the Church’s past inspires us. As we are moved by the faith and courage shown by Deacon Stephen, so are we moved by Polycarp’s fiery death. Who among us remains stony-hearted when seeing Ambrose confront hot tempered Theodosius after the slaughter in Thessalonica? Who does not admire the dedication, courage and commitment shown by such people as Luther, Cranmer or the outspoken Knox? Who fails to be shocked by Boniface’s murder when a Frisian heathen horde closes in on him?

While we’re not about to glory in man’s deeds, at the same time we acknowledge that God used them for His purpose.

### It gives us tools

A further benefit of studying Church History is that it gives us practical tools. Just imagine we looked no further than the last page of the Bible. Would we know the Apostolic Creed or be familiar with the writings of Justin the Apologist and Calvin, both of whom wrote a theological system still in use today?

What a shame to be ignorant of Abraham Kuiper’s teachings and of Klaas Schilder, the man with the mild eyes.

We’d miss out on the Heidelberg, Guido de Bres’ Belgic Confession, as well as the Articles against the Remonstrants.

We’d have to invent liturgy, write the rhymed psalms and compose our hymns. In short – we’d have to start all over again – just like Luther once did.

### It takes us places

As a spin-off, we become culturally enriched as well. How can we understand the Great Reformation if we can’t interpret the rich tapestry of the Renaissance, a period in which God prepared the Reformation? How can we grasp Luther the man, if we don’t understand his superstitious fear of a world with devils filled? How can we fathom the depths of Nero’s or Augustine’s (early) depravity if we are ignorant of the moral decay of the Roman empire?

Understanding the mindsets of ages gone, makes us understand why beautiful cathedrals, paintings and sculptures were created.

Accompany Franciscus Xavier on his way to India, the Jesuits to South America and the Dutch predicant to the Spice Islands: not only do you know how the Gospel spread to these parts of the world, you have also left the boundaries of your local area and ventured into lands where different cultures dominate.

### It helps in mission

Knowing Church History aids in the spreading of the Gospel. Just study the methods of the Apostles. See how shoe-maker William Carey learns Hindi,



Sanskrit and thirty-three (!) other languages and so reaches the minds of millions of Indians.

Observe how Methodically the Wesley brothers operated. Watch Wielinga at work in Sumba early last century and learn that he and five of his brothers were all preachers. Accompany Patrick, apostle of Ireland, when he escapes tending swine and then boards a boat that is filled with hounds – Irish wolfhounds. From them we learn to avoid their mistakes and use what had worked.

### **And... it's amusing**

It's amusing to learn of King James I (of Bible fame) who wanted his subjects to engage in sporting activities after Sunday church services. It's tragi-comical to read the insults some reformers were hurling at kings and each other.

Our spirits are buoyed when we sit next to John Knox, chained to his bench while

rowing a slave-ship past St. Andrews, when he exclaims, 'One day I'll preach there.' He did too.

We're shivering with cold when we trudge behind the excommunicated King Henry IV who, seeking forgiveness, traversed the Alps in the middle of winter and was kept waiting for three days, standing in the snow, by one arrogant pope.

How bizarre can it get when strange heresies of the 1600's such as Levellers, Ranters and Diggers peddled their wares and attracted the crowds.

We gasp in horror when ex-pope Formosus, freshly exhumed – already nine months dead! – is propped up on a throne, put on trial by his successor for lying and manipulation. When he was found guilty, three dead fingers were chopped off and his dead body was thrown into the Tiber.

It's amazing to read the exploits of three popes who ruled all at once while the laity wondered, 'Who is him?'

When we read about *Auto de Fe*, we may wonder how fast these Mexican cars go. Digging some more, we learn that, in fact, these were *Acts of Faith*, undertaken by the Spanish Inquisition. The very elaborate ceremonies cloaked its one and only object: to squash any opposition to the church of Rome.

### **But most of all...**

In all this, it's most important to see, through a jungle so dense and dark, a well-defined path, designed and laid out by Jesus Christ.

Glory, praise and thanks to Him who guides our way on that section we have been assigned to walk. May we never stray.

*Mr Ian Koens is a member of the Free Reformed Church in Bunbury, Western Australia. He is an avid student and writer of church history. Used with permission.*

## **Christmas 2023**

JAMES T. LIM

# The Saint's great desire in the Song of Simeon

In the beginning of my current pastorate, I would regularly visit the eldest member of my church, Helen. She was the last of our founding members, who, in 1941, petitioned the OPC to start our church, Faith OPC in Long Beach, California. When she became housebound, I would sit with her for hours listening to her stories of the church. As her health deteriorated, she would continually tell me how much she wanted to depart and go home to be with the Lord. She echoed the apostle Paul's words when he said, "my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better" (Phil. 1:23).

This is the great desire of every true believer in Christ, and it is the same desire we see in Luke's account of Simeon in Luke 2:25–32. As Simeon holds the baby Jesus in his arms, he sings that he can depart in peace, celebrating the coming of Christ.

### **A song of faith**

Simeon's song is first a song of faith celebrating the fulfillment of God's promises in Christ. On the eighth day after Jesus's birth, Mary and Joseph take him to the temple "to present him to the Lord" (Luke 2:22). As they do, they come across Simeon, a "righteous and devout" Jew

who has been waiting for "the consolation of Israel" (v. 25).

The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he "would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ" (v. 26). Since then, he's been watching and waiting, trusting in God's Word. He has been trusting in the promises, not only made to himself directly, but made to all God's people, beginning with the very first promise of a Savior in Genesis 3:15: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." Simeon has been trusting in God's promise

of a son of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who would bless all the nations: "I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 26:4; see also Gen. 17:7 and Ps. 105:8). And, finally, he has been trusting in that great promise of David's greater son who would sit on his throne forever:

*I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. (2 Sam. 7:12–14)*

There in the temple, Simeon is holding in his arms the great fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises of God, which were promised in every law, every type and shadow, every redemptive event, every miracle, and every office of prophet, priest, and king. "For all the promises of God find their Yes" and "Amen" in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). Christ has finally arrived!

And so, Simeon sings a song celebrating the fulfillment of this promise as the climax, not only of the whole of the Old Testament and of redemptive history, but of his whole life. This is the great reason for which God saved him and sustained him until now. He can die having held the Messiah in his own arms, beholding him with his own eyes: the seed of woman; the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; David's greater son; the Son of God; the Son of man; the King of Israel; and the Savior of the world. All of God's promises to Simeon have found their "yes" and "amen" in this little baby boy that he is holding. So

*he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word." (Luke 2:28–29)*

What a beautiful illustration of how faith takes hold of Jesus alone for salvation! Simeon took Jesus up in his arms. If you've ever held a floppy, newborn baby, you know that you can't just hold them like you would a book or a basketball. You have to

drop whatever is in your hands and very carefully, gently, yet firmly hold that child with both hands and arms. That is what Simeon must have done, letting go of whatever he had in order to take hold of Jesus. This is what faith does as we let go of our sins, self-righteousness, and idols, in order to take hold of Jesus for salvation.

### A song of salvation

Simeon's hymn is also a song of salvation celebrating the person and work of Christ.

## 256 Now may thy servant, Lord

Capo 3: D G D Em B Em Bm A D

1 Now may thy ser - vant, Lord, ac - cord - ing to thy word,  
2 Thou didst for all pre - pare this gift, so great, so rare,

G D A Bm G D A Bm

de - part in ex - ul - ta - tion. My rest shall be se - rene,  
that peo - ples might a - dore thee; a light to show the way

G F#m D E A G Em D G D A D

for lo, mine eyes have seen thy won - der - ful sal - va - tion.  
to na - tions gone a - stray, and un - to Is - rael's glo - ry.

He sings of the very person of salvation. Simeon says he can now "depart in peace," and tells us why: "for my eyes have seen your salvation" (Luke 2:30). In holding and beholding the baby Jesus, he has seen the salvation of the Lord in the face of Jesus Christ. Now, Jesus doesn't save Simeon or anyone else merely by his incarnation and birth. Rather, it is what he was incarnate and born to do that brings salvation: living the perfect and holy life we

were supposed to; dying the death that we deserved to die, taking our sin and punishment on the cross; and rising from the dead to give us new life. The child Simeon is holding in his arms is not simply a part of his salvation. The child *is* salvation. If you have him, you have salvation. (See *The Incarnation in the Gospels* [P&R, 2008], by Daniel M. Doriani, Phillip Graham Ryken, and Richard D. Phillips, 126.)

Simeon also sings of the peace of salvation. He can depart in peace because Christ has come. It's Simeon's way of saying he's prepared to die and be with the Lord. Most interpreters assume that Simeon is an old man and, now, toward the end of his life, after seeing Jesus, he

can die happy. But the passage doesn't really tell us his age. He might be old, but he might also be young. The point is: Simeon isn't saying that he's going to die, but that he is ready to die. This is the deeper truth of Simeon's song. If you behold Jesus by faith, then, like Simon, you can depart and die in peace. But if you haven't, then you have no peace in life nor in death, whatever your age, for you have no peace with God.

Simeon exemplifies the peace that comes in the gospel, the peace of God that comes through peace *with* God through faith in Jesus Christ (John 14:27; Phil. 4:7; Rom. 5:1). When we see Jesus and his salvation, we are ready to depart from this

life in peace and enter into eternal life in heaven.

This is why Stephen, in the book of Acts, didn't cry out in fear as he was being stoned, wondering if there is a God or if heaven is real. No, he died with peace. Luke says he had such peace "that his face was like the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15). Stephen beheld the person of Jesus and was ready to depart and be with the Lord. As he was dying, he saw Jesus standing at God's right hand. Phillip Ryken says:

*Anyone who has seen Jesus with eyes of faith is prepared to die. And anyone who has not seen him – whether young or old – is not ready to die at all. When we*

# Celebrate Advent 2023 with **cbm** New Zealand

**"A Saviour has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord."**

– Luke 2:11

Join **cbm** NZ (Christian Blind Mission) online from the first week in December for Advent 2023 to celebrate the true meaning of Christmas. Invite others and spread the good news!

The free online four-week Advent series will be sent to you weekly. You can share this online Advent series with family members, friends, or neighbours, some of whom may not attend church. By registering online, at [advent.org.nz](http://advent.org.nz), you will have access to a personalised webpage, where you'll find suggested scriptures for prayer and reflection during the week, **cbm** stories of lives transformed, crafts, colouring-in activities for younger children, meaningful gift ideas for Christmas and more.

One of the stories of hope **cbm** will share is of Sabina, a courageous, and determined 9-year-old girl, who lives with her mother Devi and grandmother Mangali in Nepal.

They are from Nepal's lowest caste. Sabina's father died from typhoid when she was just a baby. Devi works hard, but her wages hardly

feed them. Sabina loves school, but now cannot see. Cataracts have blinded her eyes. Unable to go to school, her future has faded as badly as her vision.

But there is hope for Sabina. Join **cbm's** advent series to hear more.

During this season, stories like Sabina's and videos about **cbm's** mission to bring Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love to people with disabilities in the world's poorest places, will warm your heart. It will give you hope in difficult times, and fill your house with peace.

As part of **cbm's** Advent series, there is a guide on how to make your own Advent wreath and Advent colouring-in templates to bring joy to the creative among your family. And opportunities to give meaningful gifts over Christmas and show your love.

Designed to create special moments at home, you and your loved ones can enjoy and deepen your experience of 'Advent at Home' or share these thoughtful online activities with your Home Group.



*see Jesus and his salvation we are ready to be dismissed from this life in peace and enter the life to come... It is then and only then that anyone is prepared to die.* (The Incarnation in the Gospels, 126–127)

Lastly, Simeon sings of the scope of salvation. He not only sees salvation in Jesus, he also sees the extent of salvation through Jesus – “that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:31–32). Jesus comes to bring salvation to “all peoples.” This doesn’t mean every single person in the world, but rather people from every tribe, language, tongue,

and nation – Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free, rich or poor (Gal. 3:28; Rev. 5:9; 7:9). Jesus comes to bring the light of eternal life and salvation to all the “peoples” of the world.

### **Singing together of faith and salvation**

This Christmas season, we all sing the song of Simeon. We sing songs of fulfillment and of salvation; of incarnation and of advent. Like Simeon, we celebrate the promises of God fulfilled in Christ, beholding his person and work of salvation. Like Simeon, we take hold of Jesus by faith and sing of his salvation because he is our salvation. Whatever our circumstances may

be, like Simeon we are ready to depart in peace to be with the Lord, which is far better.

During my last visit with Helen, I read her some of her favorite passages including the one about Paul’s desire in Philippians 1:21–23. Soon after, the Lord granted her the desire of her heart. At the ripe age of ninety-seven, singing her favorite hymns, surrounded by family, she departed in peace to be with the Lord. May the Lord do the same for us.

*The author is pastor of Faith Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Long Beach, California.*

*New Horizons, December 2020*

You will also hear the lovely story of Huki, a very kind man from a little village in the Goroka region of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea.

He was a hardworking, productive part of his community – tree-cutter, fence-builder, latrine-digger, drain-layer, ground-clearer, weed-puller, and food-grower.

When a fatherless boy needed a dad, Huki stepped up and adopted little Kimmo, who grew up and married in the village. The couple then looked after Huki through his years of blindness. Without them, Huki may not have survived.

As his cataracts grew and thickened, he could no longer work. Finally, when he was completely blind, Huki could not fend for himself at all.

A popular man, he had plenty of visitors for a while. They would guide him around his home and bring him food, but being completely dependent was hard for Huki. “They would place food in the palm of my hand. I would be hungry until someone gave me more food.”

*Feeling so powerless, Huki became very depressed. “I didn’t want to have to ask others for help. I lost energy. I would lie in bed and stay at home.”*

Huki’s story will bring tears to your eyes. Don’t despair. His story also has a happy ending. In **cbm’s** Advent series, you can celebrate God’s love for Huki. And for you,

your family, and your neighbours. Today and tomorrow and the days beyond that.

### **In the four weeks leading up to Christmas, a number of Churches use cbm’s Advent resources.**

For each of the four weeks, **cbm** will provide a weekly sermon outline focussing on the themes of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. Included will be scriptures, suggested sermon notes, prayers, **cbm** transformational stories (with **cbm** short videos), each connected to the week’s Advent theme.

If you feel led by the Holy Spirit, why not tell your Church Leadership about this hope-filled series. Please encourage them to join with **cbm** and other Churches in Aotearoa in celebrating Advent this year.

Comments from previous participants included:

*“...weekly PowerPoint slides were a blessing for busy clergy.”*

*“...beautifully crafted, reflective and meaningful.”*

*“...video’s a real winner and not too long.”*

*“...stories and videos were powerful and prompted a response.”*

If you would like to view the Week One Advent presentation to see how it will support your service (including the short video), please email Elizabeth before 28 November at [elizabeth@cbmnz.org.nz](mailto:elizabeth@cbmnz.org.nz). Or call 0800 77 22 64 to talk to the team.

# ADVENT 2023

“A Saviour has been born to you;  
He is Christ the Lord.” – Luke 2:11



## Welcome to Advent 2023, celebrating the birth of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

We invite you to join **cbm** (Christian Blind Mission) online for Advent 2023 to celebrate the **hope, peace, joy** and **love** of Christmas.

Share it with your family, friends and Home Group, and spread the Good News! Support your Church in preparing for Advent 2023 – let them know of **cbm's** special four week Advent series with suggested sermon notes, prayers, slides, videos, and more.

By registering online, you will hear how the **cbm** family brings **hope, peace, joy** and **love** to people with disabilities in the world's poorest places.

Simply scan the QR code or go to **[www.advent.org.nz](http://www.advent.org.nz)** for online access to beautiful scriptures, prayers, stories, colouring activities for children, wreath making tips, meaningful gifts for Christmas, and more.



**JOIN NOW**  
BY SCANNING  
THE QR CODE

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