

faith in
focus

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The small group Bible study

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All correspondence regarding editorial content and advertising should be sent to:

The Editor:

Walter Walraven
7 Winchester Avenue, Pinehaven
Upper Hutt 5019
Email: fnf@rcnz.org.nz
Reformed Churches Home Page
<http://www.rcnz.org.nz>

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Mrs Nicola Wharekawa
79 McLeod Street
Upper Hutt
Email: ricwhare@paradise.net.nz

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Editorial

“Okay, it’s your turn to lead the next Bible study”. How many times has that been said to you? For the next week or so, you will be going through your commentaries and Study Bible, reading the lesson or topic and answering the questions and hoping that you have done enough work on it so that you can lead the group adequately on the night. Or maybe you have to go home, read the next passage to be studied and conjure up some questions. Oh, the agony of having to try to formulate intelligent questions that everyone will understand. Ever been in that position?

After doing all the preparation that you can, there are still the other issues that you find annoying about the Bible study. There is that person who does all the talking, or those people that never talk at all. Then there are those don’t do any preparation.

It would be fair to say that Bible study can be challenging for the leader. However, it ought to be challenging for all involved. If anyone is to derive some spiritual benefit from a small group Bible study, then each person needs to do adequate preparation in order to have an edifying study of God’s Word. Let’s face it – if everyone did their study, that could eradicate the problems of the incessant talkers and possibly those that don’t contribute at all.

Our contributors give us timely explanations on how to prepare for and lead Bible studies.

Mr Donald Poundstone, a retired (OPC) pastor, heads up our articles by writing about our living hope through Christ’s resurrection, the foundation and pillar of the Christian faith, on p3.

Dr Michael Flinn gives us a lot of helpful detail on how to lead an edifying Bible study discussion.

Mr Othniel Cressey writes about some of the challenges and joys of youth group Bible studies.

Dr Murray Capill lists some guidelines on how to write and prepare your own studies.

Mrs Sally Davey begins a series on taking cues from what the world writes, in order to share the gospel more effectively.

Mr Jack Sawyer gives us the third instalment of “The Glorious New Zealand Experiment” (from the book *Confident of Better Things*, by the OPC) and looks at how the RCNZ and OPC shared mission fields.

Dr Jason Van Vliet, Professor of Dogmatics at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary looks at the issue of infant baptism and asks the question: should we agree to disagree?

Mrs Harriet Haverland continues to keep us up to date with news from our churches in the Gleanings column.

Mr and Mrs Ed and Liana Havelaar report on the recent Family Camp and provide some snapshots of the event.

Cover: Dr M Flinn

Photos: p7&8 Mr Othniel Cressy; p24 Mr Ed Havelaar.

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The gospel of the Resurrection

Donald M. Poundstone

On April 8, Christians will gather, as we do each Lord's Day, to celebrate the victory of Jesus Christ, a victory that is ours as well. Our living hope is based on the fact of Christ's resurrection. It's the foundation and pillar of Christian faith. This is commonplace among Christians. We regularly confess, in the words of the Apostles' Creed, that on "the third day he rose again from the dead." We also confess our belief in "the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting."

It may surprise you that this wasn't always the case in Christian congregations. In ancient Corinth, there were some church members who denied the resurrection – if not of Jesus, then certainly of believers. The apostle Paul realised that this was a totally inconsistent view: "Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" (1 Cor. 15:12). Why they denied the resurrection remains something of a mystery. Perhaps they were influenced by Greek philosophy and the idea that the human body is a prison holding man's immortal soul. Or maybe they thought they had already experienced the resurrection: The Holy Spirit has come! Believers now possess a new life in Christ, and they enjoy victory over sin, sickness, suffering, and Satan. The resurrection has already occurred!

Such "triumphalism" finds expression today in various types of "prosperity Christianity." False teachers declare that God wants you to be rich and healthy, that you should have a comfortable life without struggle or suffering. What a cruel hoax on the majority of this world's Christians, who live in poverty and under oppression!

So Paul returns to the basics of the faith. He reminds these believers of what they should know because he himself

had preached the good news to them. He told them facts of primary importance: Christ died and was buried. He was raised from the dead and appeared to his disciples. All this happened "in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:1-7). That is, the Old Testament predicted these things, and the people of Israel expected them. The Messiah suffered death as a sacrifice of atonement for sins, he was buried to confirm the reality of his death, his body was raised from the grave, and he appeared to the disciples as testimony of his victory. What a marvelous bundle of good news! It all hangs together as a package. Jesus' death on the cross was necessary for the taking away of sins. His resurrection was the necessary sign of God's approval and the assurance of life beyond this world.

We may call this "the gospel of the resurrection" because some people in Corinth denied the full truth of this fundamental doctrine. Make no mistake: the gospel of the resurrection is basic to our very existence as Christians in the past, in the present, and also in the future.

Our past experience

First, this is the gospel we previously heard and received. In the past, the Corinthians and we received Christ and believed the truth about him. The gospel message had to be received in order to do us any good. A Messiah without followers, a Jesus without disciples who love and accept him, would be a lonely, frustrated, and defeated figure. Even more, apart from faith, without our acceptance of Christ, we get no help from the gospel. Its benefits don't come automatically. Some things do. The rain and sunshine benefit your lawn and garden regardless of your faith or gratitude to God. Lawns turn green and plants grow with or without a proper attitude from us. Not so with the gospel; it must be received with faith and love to do us any good.

“The gospel of the resurrection is good news only to those who personally and sincerely receive it.”



Anastasis, symbolic representation of the resurrection of Christ. Panel from a Roman lidless sarcophagus of the "Passion type", ca. 350 CE. From the excavations of the Duchess of Chablais at Tor Marancia, 1817-1821. en.wikipedia.org/wiki

Paul is a perfect example of this. He received the gospel from Jesus, but he wasn't always a disciple. Years later he remained conscious of his unworthiness to even be a Christian because he had previously persecuted the church. He once sought to destroy the followers of Jesus, he chased them from town to town, he put them in prison, and he delighted in their death. Then one day, on the road to Damascus, Jesus Christ met Paul and made himself known. Paul was converted, turned from a rejecter to an accepter. He believed Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah, and committed himself to the Lord and his service.

We have done this if we are Christians. We've experienced a real change of heart and mind. There's great value to being raised in a Christian home, one where Jesus is worshiped and loved. I thank God that I grew up in such a home. But it wasn't sufficient for me to have devout parents. I had to believe the gospel for myself. God made me willing; he opened my eyes and changed my heart. By the grace of God, I believed in Christ and embraced the truth about

him. This is true of every believer, even if you can't nail down the exact time it happened.

The gospel of the resurrection is good news only to those who personally and sincerely receive it. The Corinthians had done this, although now some doubted. Have you believed this gospel? You can be happy and enter the church's Easter celebration only if you have received Jesus Christ and the great truth about his death and resurrection on the third day. This is the gospel that we have received.

Where we now stand

Second, this is the gospel in which we now stand firm. It's our present lifestyle. The gospel involves more than ancient history; it's more than a recital of something that happened long ago, and more than our past decision. It's a present reality that affects our daily living now. Paul says that we "stand" in it (1 Cor. 15:1).

It's sad to see people trying to live in the past, to live off an old experience of Christ. They have no ongoing relationship with God, but merely recall something

they think happened years ago. They knelt at the altar, or walked down an aisle, or raised their hand in a meeting. That was it. Now they try to survive on the memory of past experience. It's as though they received a sum of money years ago and hid it under their mattress, where it didn't grow. They spent a little of it regularly until at last it shrank to nothing. Their religion is like a cut flower, fresh and beautiful at the beginning, but it slowly fades, dries out, and withers away.

The gospel can't be treated like that. It's God's truth for today. I live today with the assurance of forgiven sins because of the cross. God now accepts me in his Son. The resurrection of Christ is the basis of new birth, life, and hope. Being a Christian doesn't exempt us from trouble here. We're still human and we live in a world under the curse of sin. The gospel may create or increase our problems. You may need to take an unpopular stand against the habits of your family or the practices of society.

The gospel gives us a firm foothold for life every day. The cross of Christ and the empty tomb are the great realities that give meaning, direction, and significance to our lives. Life for the Christian is not a senseless round of eating and sleeping, working and playing, week after week. The gospel gives us a place to stand, motivation, perspective, stability, and joy. We received this gospel, and now we are standing in it.

Our future salvation

Finally, this is the gospel by which we are "being saved" (15:2). It has to do, not just with the past and the present, but also with the future. The resurrection of Christ gives us hope for our future. As the tense of the verb implies, we are now being saved; that is, we are in the way that leads to complete salvation. Already we have the first installment, but our full inheritance of eternal life is yet to come.

When we come to the end of this life and die, we pass into the glorious presence of God. And when Jesus Christ returns, even our bodies will be raised, just as his body was, to share in the glory of the new world that will be revealed.

We must pay attention to the complete message of God. "You are being saved, if you hold fast to the word" that Paul and the other apostles preached (15:2). It's essential that you hang on to the gospel and persevere in the faith of Christ. If your grip on the gospel is

O agony, oncoming death

O agony, oncoming death,
O mounting pains, most mortal pangs
that plagued the precious Son of God
Who for our sakes did shed His blood.

The mocking mob, with heartless hate,
the soldiers too, who smote and spat,
the priest and scribes who scorned His Word,
they all rejected Him as Lord.

The darkness deepened 'round the cross,
and e'en the crowd was at a loss.
In deadly silence of pitch-black night
He suffered, Who is this world's Light.

Of God forsaken, and of men,
and tasting th'emptiness which sin
caused, separating man from God,
and made them walk on ways so broad.

O agony, which Christ endured;
O death, which life for us secured.
May ever this remembered be,
that Christ did suffer this for me.

*John Goris
Geelong, March 1960*

so shaky that you're not really trusting Christ, that's not a faith that saves. Therefore, we all need to constantly remember and reinforce the heart of the gospel: Christ was crucified for our sins and is now risen from the dead. Are you committed to this truth?

The good news of the Bible is all about the resurrection of Christ and his ability to save sinners. There's nothing

more important than for us to believe in him and give ourselves to him. Christianity isn't concerned with mere survival in this world or even immortality, but with resurrection. False religions teach the transmigration of souls and the idea of reincarnation. Movie stars babble on about previous lives and future embodiments. This isn't the gospel, but a counterfeit spirituality. Only the gospel of the

resurrection is able to save us completely and forever. As you once received the gospel from God, hold on to it firmly today and every day.

Mr Donald M. Poundstone is a retired pastor and serves on the Committee on Home Missions and as stated clerk of the Presbytery of the Northwest. New Horizons, April 2011.

The small group Bible study (1)

How to lead a Bible study discussion group

Michael Flinn

So, you've been asked by a session member to lead one of the Bible study groups in your congregation and you are starting to sweat, because you have never done this before. What's more, you have been to a few uninspiring Bible studies and you definitely DON'T want your group to end up like that. Well, read on. Hopefully, this article will give you some guidance and some confidence. Let's look at a few principles and suggestions.

Purpose

I chose the wording of the title for this article quite deliberately. It is very important that you first understand what a Bible study group is supposed to be and what it is supposed to achieve. It is not a sermon or a lecture. These have their place, of course, but the place for them is not the local church Bible study group. In sermons and in lectures, the speaker does the preparation, knows what he wants to convey and sets about doing that in a public setting, usually without any questions or contributions from the hearers.¹ But in a Bible study discussion group, people do not come and expect to listen in silence to the leader give a 30 or 40 minute presentation of his or her views. People come, preferably having done some preparation beforehand, and they have questions that

they want to ask, and contributions or thoughts that they want to share with others. In a small group setting this works well. Your goal as a leader is to facilitate discussion and interaction between the members of your group and help them dig into the Scriptures for themselves rather than simply give people the benefit of all your knowledge. This may present you with a challenge. You have probably been asked to lead a group because you know quite a bit about the Bible. You may find it a real temptation to "do all the talking". Resist it. Remember that the Bible study group is not a lecture.

Preparation

You might be thinking by now that if all you have to do is facilitate discussion,

you can just "wing it" and do little or no preparation for leading the Bible study. Nothing could be further from the truth. For the study to run well, you must do your preparation thoroughly. If you are using published Bible study material, and I recommend that you do this,² work through the material in advance and come to some decisions about the main ideas of the study that need to be brought out in the discussion. You should also ask yourself: What perspective did the author of this material have on the subject or Bible passage being studied? Do we agree with this, or is there a viewpoint or an emphasis that needs modification or correction? If the latter is the case, you will need to draw attention to this at some point during the Bible study.



Once you have an idea of the important points in the study, you will then be able to bring the discussion back to these as the group works through the material. Side issues can be useful and worth pursuing. They come up because people are interested in them and they are keen on rushing headlong down the rabbit trail. All sorts of valuable biblical insights can be found in rabbit holes but as a study leader, you need to know that they are not what this particular Bible study is about. At an appropriate time, you can draw the group's attention back to the important points.³

“Silence is not necessarily bad. Sometimes people need a bit more time to think the matter through. If a silence persists, try to resist the temptation to jump in and answer the question yourself.”

Prayer

This is a vital part of preparation for a Bible study, but I want to give it a separate heading. Pray before the study for those who will be attending. Pray that the study would be informative and encouraging for those who attend. Pray for individuals within the group, especially those who are attending for the first time, or those who might be struggling with the material. Consider also a time of corporate prayer at the end of the study. Small group Bible studies are excellent opportunities for fellowship in prayer. They also help build close relationships and friendships in a congregation.

Participation

Since the goal is to encourage participation and interaction by members of the group, think of a few good questions that you can ask about the material. If you are discussing people's response to a particular question, for example, you might ask: Did anyone have anything different here, or did someone come up with something that we haven't yet considered? Does anyone know where this is taught elsewhere in the Bible?

Let's have a look at this other passage and see what extra light is thrown on this point... Or: This can be a challenge to put into practice in the Christian life. How do you think we can do this? Or: Do you think there is any application here to our congregational life? What might that be? Or simply: Does anyone have any questions about this? Is this straightforward? Clear as mud? What do you think?

Silence is not necessarily bad. Sometimes people need a bit more time to think the matter through. If a silence persists, try to resist the temptation to

jump in and answer the question yourself. Try rephrasing the question, or asking another question that relates to the issue that you want to bring out so that the point is made in another way.

Asking different people to read out the Bible passage being discussed or another passage that relates to the question is a good way of including people who might otherwise say little or nothing: "Let's have a look at these verses too. John, can you read those for us? Thanks."

On the matter of participation, in all groups you will find that some people have no trouble speaking, and seem to enjoy giving their own perspective on whatever is being discussed (whether they have done any preparation or not!). Others will be much more reluctant to say anything. As a study leader you need to watch out for this. As you glance around from time to time, look for people who are itching to say something but can't get a word in edgewise. They might half-heartedly be raising a hand, or fidgeting in their seats. Don't be afraid to stop a person who is doing a lot of talking and say: "That's great! Thanks very much for that. Does anyone

else have something to contribute? Julie, what about you? You looked like you were wanting to say something." If a person is regularly and repeatedly doing most of the talking in the study, talk to him privately. Thank him for his contributions, but say that we need to encourage others to open up as well. Ask him to think about how we might best do that.

One other thing in relation to the dynamic of a study group: It is likely that in your group there will be Christians at different levels of maturity and Bible knowledge. For some the material might be "easy" and they've covered all this before countless times. For others, the material might be new and challenging. Encourage a willingness to listen to others and to be patient. If the discussion gets bogged down or tangled up in a difficult question that no-one has answers to, or if there is a pretty major difference of opinion over something, don't think that you have to get the matter sorted out then and there. Instead, you can call attention to the unanswered questions, and say that you would like to look into that more fully before the next study. You can study this more fully yourself, or save some time and ask the minister how he would respond to this. You can even suggest to the group that you invite the minister along next time and ask him to give a biblical view on the issue under discussion.

Watch the time

Once a topic has been covered, and especially as the study is drawing to a close, summarise the main points once more and thank the group for their contributions. Try to stick to the allotted time. Some people might be happy to stay for an extra hour or three, but if this happens, another might not come back next time because the study goes on too long for him or her. Make sure that the meeting starts on time and finishes on or around the time allotted. There is no problem finishing off the rest of the material next time. Just call attention to this: "Well, we'd better stop for tonight so it doesn't get too late. We'll come back to the other questions next time." Bear in mind, though, that most Bible study guides have been constructed with the idea of one lesson or chapter per study. If you are only a third of the way through by the end of the evening, it is possible that you have been discovering an abundance of treasures in the rabbit holes. That's

okay, but don't lose sight of (and don't let the group lose sight of) the overall structure of where you are going. It can be discouraging for some people if the group takes too long to progress through the study material.

That's probably given you enough to go on. Leading a Bible study group well can be very enjoyable and edifying, for you as well as for the others in the group. I hope this article has stimulated you to carry on or to begin this task with confidence and enthusiasm.

Notes

- 1 In a lecture, there is more opportunity for feedback, questions, and contributions from those listening, but, as with the sermon, the lecturer has a certain amount of information that he or she needs to cover in the allotted time, and therefore most of the traffic of information has to be one-way, so to speak, from the lecturer to the students.
- 2 Making use of a study guide is much easier and less time consuming than writing your own study. It also means that the group members can have a copy of the guide as well and be working through it. In this way, everyone will have considered the same material prior to

coming together. This provides a useful structure to the discussion.

- 3 If the group is planning to go through a book of the Bible, a commentary or two would be very useful. Remember, though, that commentaries do not have all the answers, and sometimes they disagree with each other, so read with discernment. Your minister might have one that he can recommend and that you can borrow or there might be a commentary in the church library that you can make use of.

Mr Michael is one of the Ministers of the Word and Sacraments in the Reformed Church of Palmerston North.

The small group Bible study (2)

Bible study: Did we learn something ... ?

Othniel Cressy

Introduction

We are gathered together again. It is Sunday night and the youth in our group are sitting with their Bible and study guide at the ready. My voice breaks the silence for half a minute. Everyone is sitting or slouching – apparently, they're paying attention. (I probably wouldn't). For the next forty-five minutes, we try to wade through the questions with intermittent bursts of speech. We tend to keep on talking past what we were trying say, just to make things flow. I try and include everyone; it is hard work. Did we actually learn something from that one?

You might know the scenario, you may have different issues to deal with, but what we are talking about here is the group bible study, and in particular, the youth group Bible study. The leader of the Bible study is generally responsible for guiding and facilitating discussion, making it flow towards the final goal. I am going to address some of the challenges we have come across in group Bible studies, and show how they should be faced.

Paul says he planted, Apollos watered and God caused the growth: it is the same everywhere the Bible is studied –

God causes the growth. We should not think that by following the right methods with a good amount of enthusiasm, we will be able to produce an uplifting Bible study. This attitude to leading a study misses out the fact that God causes the growth, not man. From this we can see that one of the most elementary attitudes of the study leader should be

the attitude of a humble servant, a tool of God.

One of the reasons Jesus had so many poor people surrounding him was that he actually cared about them. In fact, he went further: he loved them. At all times during his ministry on earth, his actions were saturated with love; he never "sought his own". His words of



teaching to the people are permeated with this same attitude of love. This attitude of love undergirds and proves his message right throughout his life.

Humility and love are essential for a bible study; they are the piston and crankshaft of the study.

Challenges in the group

Relevance

During my time as Bible study group leader I have frequently arrived home from a study and been distressed by how little I had accommodated other people in their situations. It may be that people have felt distanced because either the language or the meaning was lost on them. It would not be very interesting to have a group of people who all think exactly the same way. Diversity in the group helps clarify some difficult points, and leads to deeper exploration of the truth. Some will immediately see applications that others wouldn't have thought of, others will have just read a verse in Psalm 2 that helps clear the waters. Diverseness in the church as seen in 1

Corinthians 12 should not be viewed as a recipe for divisiveness in the group, but as a gift of God to teach and encourage one another. The attitude which binds the natural differences between people together is the love which says to itself: 'first, how can I learn from what he or she is saying and secondly, how can I best help others in the group?' This attitude will overcome the problem of relevance for the extremities of age, culture, taste or whatever else varies between group members.

During my time as leader, I have had moments when group participants showed a persistent I-don't-want-to-be-here vacancy. It is not everyone's fault that such a member doesn't want to be there or participate. Sin needs to be seen where sin exists. It is the sin of that member that inhibits their participation. The remedy for sin, wherever it exists, both in exposing and dealing with it, is grace. It is essential to be gracious to such people, just as we ourselves have been shown grace. Don't aim to pull every application back to their obvious sins. There is a place for addressing such sins,

and that place is not group Bible study.

Others in the group may openly acknowledge they are not Christians but are interested and inquiring. Be aware of the needs of such people. Theological lingo and ideas can be numbing. A lot of concepts we tag with a bland word are actually quite amazing and should be explained for the benefit of the whole group. There may be a tension between explaining things on a simpler level and getting into the meat of the questions; however, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. Also, it may not be necessary to explain absolutely everything in detail; students learn grammar by many examples as well as direct instruction. Whatever method you take, include them in the atmosphere of love and understanding that exists in the group. Pray for them.

Will they remember it?

As a member of a group, you may have experienced going away from a study not remembering anything. Cognitive psychology has shown (unsurprisingly) that the best way of remembering something is to reason through what it means, connecting that knowledge to other areas of your experience. In addition, well-phrased sentences with a clear point also aid the memory. As a member or a leader of the group, make sure your words are meaningful (to the group), clear and logical. This means not using empty words and trying to relate in terms and ideas they understand, with examples that are relevant to them. If you speak as if others will remember what you are saying, they probably will. Speak with a point.

Attitude orientation

One attitude that can exist inside the group especially if the participants are younger is an undue respect towards the leader. This attitude shows itself when members look to the leader as a source of ultimate truth, or the best example of holiness. While it is true that the leader should be a good example and may need to do some direct teaching at times, this attitude stifles helpful thinking and discussion in the rest of the group. To combat this attitude, make sure you haven't assumed this character to yourself. We all need to come to God's Word, humbly learning His ultimate opinion. Secondly, make the discussion centre on God's Word rather than your own opinions. You will not always need to

“Diversity in the group helps clarify some difficult points, and leads to deeper exploration of the truth.”



qualify or conclude someone else's point. Finally, encourage quieter members of the group with thanks for their input and a genuine interest in what they are saying, even if this means you have to gently correct their statements.

Preparation

Prayer

Before you proceed to make all the mistakes and failures that have already been made by Bible study leaders, we must learn to pray and ask for God's strength. We cannot understand God's Word without his Spirit and we are always liable to misunderstand what others will say during the study. Ask for guidance in understanding His Word, in first applying it to your own heart and then in *encouraging* others while facilitating discussion. Ask for an ability to understand why others in the group are saying what they are. We fail often in so many ways; therefore, we must commit ourselves to God.

Structure

A Bible study, like a tree should have a trunk with branches, a main subject with variations which fill it out. If the branches become too many by introducing too many side topics, you get a disorganised bush which is hard to understand, let alone remember afterwards. If there are no branches however, you may understand and remember the main theme all too well but have no idea of

its fuller meaning or implications. During preparation try to pin down the central theme, try to make sure this comes out in the study and is realised by everyone in the conclusion of the study. The questions throughout should be related to the theme. The best way of doing this is simply to put in the hard work and study the passage of Scripture thoroughly, and do a good job of answering the questions in a meaningful way. By doing this you will also be able to ask questions about the questions to make sure people don't miss out obvious pieces.

Question prioritisation

Often you will not get through half the questions you wanted to. Some questions need to be prioritised in advance to meet your target finish time. A helpful tip is to rate the questions ranging from three ticks for an important question to one tick for an inconsequential question. If things are going too slowly, skip the single tick questions and move on to the more important ones.

Selecting Bible study material

Selection Criteria

Depending on the group you are dealing with, you may want to closely involve group opinion on what to study. If this is not practical, it may be helpful to write down a number of biblical themes that would help the group. This gives you a sieve to get rid of all the unsuitable study guides.

Searching

Seeking recommendations from people you know is the safest way of choosing a Bible study guide. However, if you can't find anything that really meets your interests, there are a number of other resources. The Internet has plenty of resources available. It will help to have a look at book previews in Google Books and Amazon's bookstore, which also usually give you a glimpse of the contents and a few pages from the book. These will give you a good representative summary of the book. Be careful with anonymous internet reviews, as they are prone to subjectivity. A local Christian bookstore will give you a better book preview at the expense of limiting your choice.

Conclusion

The study that is focused on God's Word, that encourages members to participate and enjoy the time of fellowship and discussion will be encouraging to the members. As a group leader, pray for understanding; pray that the study will be understood. Lead in humility and love.

References

- 1 *Encouragement: The Key to Caring* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1984) has some excellent points on attitudes and techniques of an encourager. It will be useful for all members of a Bible study group.

Mr Othniel Cressy is a member of the Reformed Church of Dovedale.

How to prepare and lead a study

Murray Capill

There are many published Bible study guides available for small groups, but if you're leading a Bible study group it's also worth considering writing and leading your own studies. This is a great skill to develop and can lead to some of the best studies. So what is involved in preparing a study? There is no one right way to go about it, but the following thoughts will perhaps be of some help.

1. Study the passage for yourself

Usually it will be worth spending an hour or so studying the passage (though more time is always possible!). There are a few things you'll want to do as you study the text:

1. Define the limits of the text. Go for a clear unit of thought, ignoring chapter and verse divisions if necessary. Make sure the passage is a manageable size.
2. Look carefully at the context. Who

is it by? Who is it written to? What do we know about them that affects the way we should understand the text? Are issues of geography or culture significant? Where does it come in the book? How is it connected to what is before and after? What period of biblical history does it fit into?

3. Think about the structure of the passage. How does it fit together? Are there sections within it? How are they related?

4. View the passage from a God-centred perspective. Ask, what is God saying or doing in this passage? How does this passage speak of Christ and our need of him? Where does this fit in the unfolding story of salvation?
5. Spend time on the details. Are there key words or ideas you need to find out about? Are there parallel passages to look at or quotes from Old Testament passages to look up? Maybe look up a commentary, use a Bible dictionary, or check a concordance.
6. Finally, try to pull together the main ideas of the text. As you go through the passage note all the key ideas. What strikes you as important, fresh, helpful, significant? What is the main point of the passage as a whole?

After that kind of study of the text you are ready to think more about application – the personal challenge of the passage. Again, there are a few things worth considering:

How does this passage help us develop in our relationship to God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

1. What does it show us about ourselves – about human nature, believers, unbelievers – and what difference should knowing that make to the way we think and act?
2. Does the passage call us to believe (or reject) something, to do (or not do) something, or to feel (or not feel) something?
3. Who is the passage aimed at – believers or unbelievers, the church or individuals, people going well or people who are struggling?
4. Ask yourself, how can I make this personal and specific? Apply it to your own life and spend time in personal prayer.

In studying and applying the text, you don't have to have all the answers, solve all the problems or produce heaps of material. Just try to get your head around the main things. Once you've done that, you're ready for the second part of preparation....

II. Plan how to lead the group study

The way we lead a study needs to be shaped by the aim of small group

Bible study. I believe it is helpful to think of the aim as *stimulating spiritual conversation centred on the study of God's Word so that as the people in the group teach and encourage each other they grow in their relationship with each other and with God.*

That means that in preparing to lead a Bible study we are not preparing a lesson or lecture.

We're preparing for a guided interaction on the text.

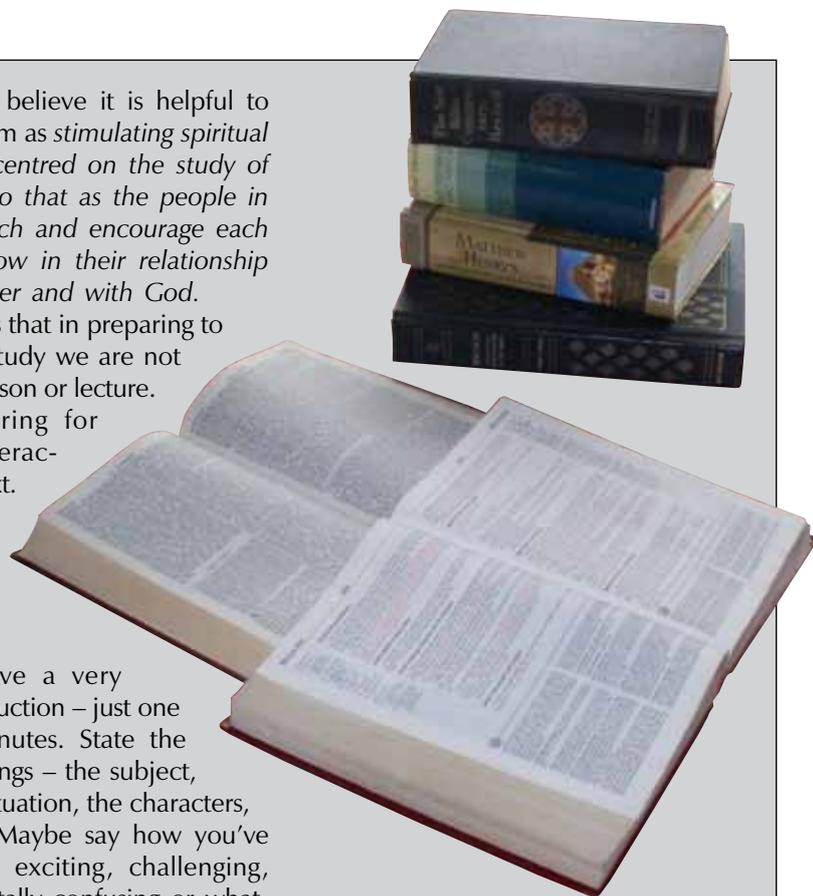
The following things are therefore helpful:

1. Plan to give a very brief introduction – just one or two minutes. State the obvious things – the subject, the basic situation, the characters, the issue. Maybe say how you've found it – exciting, challenging, difficult, totally confusing or whatever. And say how you are going to approach it.
2. Work out how you'd like the group to approach the passage. Will you take it as a whole, or section by section, or verse by verse, or begin with context, or start with a contemporary problem, or begin by going for the main thing, or start with the structure... Think about how you'd like the study to progress and vary your approach from time to time.
3. Plan a few leading questions for the analysis of each section. It's always useful to work out the first question you will ask. And it's helpful to have some key analysis questions to use along the way. And what are some curly or provocative questions you could throw in if things are sluggish?
4. Think about how you will steer the group toward application. What application questions will you ask? How will you get them to open up more personally? Is there a relevant contemporary problem or dilemma you can pose? Is there some personal application you can share?
5. Plan how you will wrap it up. Try to end with a focus on the main idea and on key applications. So think about where you would like the study to land – and in the last few minutes go there. Leave the

group with a main thought, challenge, or encouragement.

This might sound like a lot of work but it doesn't have to be. I usually spend a couple of half hour slots studying the passage (Part I) and then about 15 minutes working out my plan of attack (Part II). I'd rather not have everything totally sorted because one of the beauties of leading this way is that it is flexible. You're not trying to answer some obscure question in a study guide written by someone else, or get through a set number of questions. You're not presenting a lecture or a sermon. Rather, you're leading your group as you wrestle with a Bible passage together, thinking about what it means and what difference it should make to the way we live. As you lead, you will discover new things yourself, you'll find there are some red herrings worth following, and you'll realise that your own study only scratched the surface of what's there. Leading a study this way is both stimulating and enjoyable.

Mr Murray Capill is the Principal of Reformed Theological College, Geelong, Victoria.



Cues from the World (No. 1)

The search for a god that suits me

We love a God who orders all things well. In his wisdom he determined the times and the places we should live (Acts 17:26). It is no accident that you and I live in New Zealand, part of western culture, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. These things shape us, affecting the way we see the world, the ways we speak, eat, dress and travel. But we are also Christians: the gospel of Christ has intervened, and the focus of our life has been radically transformed. We have the responsibility, as Christ's ambassadors, to speak the truth to our lost generation; so rich in many ways, yet so poor in the things of the spirit.

To do this well we need a clear understanding of how our world thinks. Faulty assumptions about our neighbours, or complete ignorance of them, will make us useless communicators of the Christian faith. A good teacher knows her class. It's no use teaching the absolute basics of the French language to fluent speakers, for instance – or trying to give orthodox Jews a lesson in cooking with pork. They'll switch off completely, if they're not totally offended at our clumsy insensitivity. Likewise, we need to know what our unbelieving neighbours think about the big questions of life before we bring them the Christian answers. We need to know where they got their idea of God from before we tell them he won't like their wrong imaginings. We need to know how they think adults should behave before we tell them they should discipline their children for such ghastly behaviour. We need to know why they are so unhappy and are so overweight before we suggest they join Weight Watcher's or start going to the gym.

And how do we learn these things? We do it, first of all, by loving our neighbours enough to start talking with them, and being perceptive interpreters of what they often can't articulate too well. But we can also do some useful research.

There are some very good writers and commentators who are able to encapsulate what many ordinary people think about all manner of things. Reading their magazine articles and books, and listening to their radio or television comments can teach us a great deal about what motivates our neighbours to live as they do. Over the years I've enjoyed reading such pieces – as doubtless some of you do, too – and I've gathered quite a file of perceptive comment that helps me understand those I live among. I'd like

asking whether Easter was still relevant in modern New Zealand. A writer named Stephanie Dowrick, who apparently leads "spiritually inclusive services" at a large inner-city church in Sydney, and who has written a book entitled *Seeking the Sacred*, offered the magazine an article on "the quest for God".

I have met quite a number of women like Stephanie sounds. They are often active in liberal, mainline churches, and have pretty vocal opinions on what they think religion is all about. What she

“Whether [gods] are made of wood or stone, or whether they are the figments of our imagination, they are replacements for the true God, with whom we must come to terms, in Christ.”

to spend the next few months sharing some of them with you, in the hope that their insights will help you know our times, and bring the gospel to the women you meet.

The quest for God

I expect that many of you read *The Australian Women's Weekly*. It's a fairly pleasant, ordinary-woman's magazine containing good recipes, articles on the royal family and general life-interest topics, none of which could be called malicious or salacious. But sometimes, for the Christian reader, there are attention-grabbing exceptions. The April 2011 issue was one of these. It featured an article

wrote in this article chimes with how these women think; and I have to say that, while her opinions are very unbiblical, it is well worth grasping what she writes. Sooner or later some of us will need to try and help women like her in their hour of need. And furthermore, while they completely miss what the Bible is teaching about God, the Bible understands them perfectly. We need to know how God describes their ideas, and be ready with apt – and helpful – answers for them.

In her article Stephanie does two things: first, she stresses that the quest for God is good; and second, she suggests ways to search for God. Let me

lay out her thoughts for you, and set them alongside what Scripture teaches about them. Let us then consider some of the ways we could help a person who thinks like this.

The quest is good

There's no doubt that human beings all have spiritual hunger. God uses this hunger to stir us up and seek salvation in Christ. Stephanie is clear that searching for God is a very good thing. In the course of writing her book she interviewed more than a hundred people about their spiritual searches, observing that they came to a point in their lives "when the old answers or distractions would no longer do." This is good. Even if we have grown up in a Christian home, we need to search for ourselves and ask: is what I have always been taught true? We need to believe what God has said *for ourselves*: we need to make it *our own*. Stephanie notes that spiritual searches can be uncomfortable, especially in a world that regards the spiritual as weird: "We all know that some people will run a mile to avoid anything 'spiritual'. Or they will find a thousand ways to trivialise or disparage anyone else choosing this way of living." (pp.88, 90). Yet for Stephanie "it's something to celebrate and applaud. I know it can bring a new maturity and independence to someone's perceptions and values." (p. 90). So far, pretty good. It is good for people to seek God genuinely; and the world sneers at the spiritual. She's right there.

How should we search?

Stephanie then goes on to suggest ways *Women's Weekly* readers might go about this quest for God. Her advice reveals her assumptions – and quite strongly-held assumptions. Here is where a Christian, committed to the truth of the Bible, will disagree with her. Nevertheless, it is useful to understand what she is saying; so let me gather her thoughts under four general headings.

1. **I am the judge of truth.** Right at the outset, Stephanie makes clear that certain ideas about who or what God is are acceptable, and others are not. And the determiner is you. She herself has rejected all manner of "versions" of God that she finds offensive: the God who is used "to justify appalling harm and violence"; the God "that can banish innocents to hell because they have been taught to believe something different from the folks around the corner", the God who

is "offended" by women speaking up, or wanting to hold office in the church; the God who rules earth from heaven, and so on. Such a God, says Stephanie, "is not the God I know or want to know." In her list of tips for "finding God", she counsels checking others' ideas about God. If they are "uplifting and inclusive", consider them. If they are "divisive or disturbing", move on.

2. **Avoid dogma.** It is obvious that Stephanie prefers a fluid, loosely-defined notion of God that leaves plenty of room for development as the seeker looks through the lenses of her own changing experience. This means that one cannot simply accept truth about God as received revelation. It means that a clear set of propositions drawn from a written source such as the Bible is anathema. One must be free to choose what one likes from a smorgasbord of attractive concepts.

3. **Religion will make me feel better about me.** Stephanie notes a number of times that people have told her they have come to like themselves a lot better in the process of searching for God. They have also said that the quest is the best way of becoming "my authentic self".

4. **God is in all of life.** By this Stephanie means that all of life is good; all of life is "sacred"; and thus God is everywhere in every person and every thing. This enables her to be very inclusive and tolerant of all other opinions, and requires her to be very vague about evil and painful experiences. But it has the power of sounding very attractive in a postmodern world.

By now it will be clear to you that Stephanie totally denies the biblical teaching about God. She resists the idea that truth is something we receive and to which we submit. She does not like the idea that God may tell us we are wrong, and must change. In fact, she advocates creating a god in your own image; one that you like, that likes you, and makes you feel better.

The Bible and man-made gods

The Scriptures, of course, have a lot to say about such gods. Men and women have been creating them since the fall – they are idols. All of Israel's neighbours, the nations among whom they lived, made their own gods (2 Kings 17:29). Jeremiah asked "Do men make their own gods?" "Yes", he answered, "but they are not gods!" (Jeremiah 16:20). Centuries later, an Ephesian silversmith, aggrieved that the apostle Paul had

ruined his trade, complained that he had taught that "gods made with hands are not gods" (Acts 19:26) Whether they are made of wood or stone, or whether they are the figments of our imagination, they are replacements for the true God, with whom we must come to terms, in Christ. As Paul wrote in that great opening chapter of Romans, which traces the rebellion of natural man and its consequences – so helpful for us in understanding the mind of unbelieving men and women today – sinners suppress the truth in unrighteousness, and exchange the truth about God for a lie (Romans 1:18; 25).

That is the truth about what many women around us think and say these days. Yet we, who are blessed with the real truth about God must not shrink in horror from those who reject it. There are plenty of women around (like Stephanie) who need us to show them a better way. While they might seem full of themselves and stridently convinced of their own ideas, they have often become so because they are unhappy – shaken by life's hard experiences. Sometimes they have studied theology or psychology because they are trying to solve their problems – and they call it their quest for God. Because their idea of God is one of their own making, there will be times when they are forced to wonder if it is true. There may come a point when they have changed their picture of God so many times to make sense of different experiences that they realise, like Jeremiah and Paul, that a god of one's own making is no god at all. We must be on hand to help them, ready and equipped with the real truth of the gospel. Don't be afraid of such ladies: very often they are quite insecure underneath, and have only their shaky, self-created notions to fall back on. That is shifting sand, and when their foundations are gone, they will often fall apart. We need to befriend them, and to be generous about including them in our own warm, stable family relationships. Finally, we need to tell them the truth – but with humility in our certainty.

The glorious New Zealand experiment

Part 3

Shared Mission Fields

This is the third excerpt from an essay by Mr Jack Sawyer which appeared in the book *Confident of Better Things: Essays Commemorating Seventy-five Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*.

Jack Sawyer

In 1962, Richard B. Gaffin Sr., secretary for the OPC Taiwan mission wrote to the RCNZ Synod, "to extend a cordial invitation to the Reformed Churches of New Zealand ... to begin missionary work in Taiwan."¹ Among other grounds given for this invitation Gaffin Sr. would add,

We remind you that the first Protestant Churches to be established on this island was the work of heroic missionaries from Holland in the seventeenth century who endured great hardships in order bring the glorious gospel of Christ to the natives of Formosa. If you then take part in Christian work on this island, you will be continuing the noble work of your illustrious ancestors. Not only so, you will also be fulfilling the command of the Great Sovereign Lord of the church to preach the gospel to the whole creation.²

The RCNZ were willing and gladly received an OPC deputation in the person of Rev. J.D. Johnston, who toured the country describing the field and enlisting aid from the churches for the Taiwan mission. Making an excellent impression, he was subsequently entrusted with an appointment to be the field representative of the RCNZ for the mission while they sought to call their own missionary.³ The Rev. C. W. Oppelaar would soon

become the first RCNZ missionary and so cordial was the working relationship on the field that the 42nd General Assembly would actually come to approve a formal co-operative agreement between the Committee on Foreign Missions and the Overseas Mission Board of the RCNZ. By means of this agreement missionaries could actually be called from the OPC, while being sponsored by the OMB of the RCNZ. Provisions of this agreement included that, "any call will be effected according to normal OPC procedure, after that the candidate will come to New Zealand, to meet with the OMB, speak in the churches, and be commissioned for his work in Taiwan."⁴

The OPC General Secretary of the Committee on Foreign Missions fulfilled the mandate of the Thirtieth General Assembly, given to his committee, by writing on April 30, 1963:

We express thanksgiving to God for you ... for the firm stand which you have taken for the defense of the true faith and for the zeal and vigor with which you have been endeavoring to spread that faith in your own country, and now reaching across the sea ... we are grateful that at the beginning of your foreign missionary outreach you have chosen to provide vitally needed reinforcements ... and we would express our gratitude for the confidence you have placed in us in sending a missionary to work in close consultation with our Mission ... it is therefore with great joy that we extend a welcome to Formosa as fellow laborers with us in the gospel ... and our earnest prayer that that the Sovereign Spirit of the

Living God may abundantly bless the labors of your first missionary, the Rev. C.W. Oppelaar ... we pray too, that your faith, and ours, will in days to come be witnessed to the ends of the earth ...⁵

Mr. Galbraith's prayer would also providentially be answered some years later in another part of the earth where the OPC and the RCNZ would work together: Uganda. As the RCNZ were looking for missionary opportunity and the OPC was in need of personnel for its Mission, an *ad hoc* partnership would arise where the two churches would once again labor side by side.

Rev. Barry James and his wife Anne were called out of retirement in Australia to lecture, first at Westminster Theological College and then Knox Theological College alongside OPC missionaries Brian Wingard, and later Tony Curto. James, who had served as pastor of the

Reformed Church of Silverstream, near Wellington, was familiar with the OPC. His two immediate predecessors in Silverstream had both been OPC ministers.⁶ He faithfully served his flock there for nine years, before returning to his native land. The Silverstream congregation enthusiastically supported this project and Barry and Anne have been, and continue to be, a great blessing, "a fount of wisdom and encouragement," and a "God send" to the members of our Mission. On more than one occasion, "Barry has afforded crucial help in critical situations," dispensing energetic support through exasperating circumstances, and with a willingness to return to the field time and again despite being "retired."⁷ Also serving capably at one point were the Rev. John Rogers and his wife Sheryl.⁸

1 RCNZ Acts of Synod, 1962, Report 9.

2 RCNZ Acts of Synod, 1962, Report 9.

3 RCNZ Acts of Synod, 1961, Articles 59, 78, 83.

4 The Overseas Mission Board is not a board in the sense that American Presbyterians fear semi autonomous boards and agencies. While called a board, it is much more like its counterpart, the OPC CFM, except that in keeping with the Reformed Polity, a local congregation is designated the calling church, and the missionary is directly under its oversight, in behalf of the board, and the churches.

5 31st OPC GA Minutes, 1963.

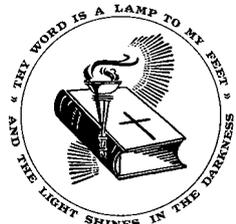
6 G.I. Williamson from 1972 to 1983 and Jack W. Sawyer from 1984 to 1988.

7 Mark T. Bube, L. Anthony Curto, John Rogers, Interviews with the author, 2010.

8 John, the son of a faithful Open Brethren evangelist, first came into contact with the RCNZ through G.I. Williamson who was helping start a mission congregation in the farming commu-

Other young people from the RCNZ, as well as a short term missionary deacon, have served as missionary associates, in various capacities to the great benefit of the OPC Uganda Mission.⁹

Another answer to Mr. Galbraith's prayer came in the interesting case of Frank Van Dalen. Today he is the Rev. Frank Van Dalen, an esteemed member of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian



Church, and the Director of World Witness, the Overseas Mission Board of the ARP. The reader will surely be curious of the significance of Mr. Van Dalen in an essay about the RCNZ and the OPC. And there is significance, for Van Dalen grew up in the Reformed

Church of Mangere, and G.I. Williamson was his pastor. G.I. remembers the young Frank as a "willing learner." For Van Dalen's part, he later reflected, "I had the best of the Dutch and English worlds." Every Wednesday the "girls sat on the front row and the boys on the second row," and they learned the Shorter Catechism by heart and listened as their pastor expounded it to

nity of Masterton, over the mountains from Silverstream. John attended the mission, had a business in town and would "have G.I. around to tea" discussing points of theology with him as he came to embrace the Reformed Faith. He also appreciated G.I.'s kindness to his wife and children. Joining the RCNZ and pursuing the ministry, John took Williamson's advice to study at the RTC in Geelong where he studied under Ray Zorn. Upon returning he served a yearlong vicariate (internship) under the mentorship of Jack Sawyer, who then ordained John to the ministry in 1988. Being nearly the same age, they still laugh about who learned what from whom. He has served as Pastor of the Reformed Church of the North Shore (Auckland) since 1995. His service to the OPCUM was sincerely appreciated. As to the mission in Masterton, G.I. helped begin it, another American, Bruce Hoyt (formerly ARP), would be the organising pastor, and Jack Sawyer would conduct the service of particularisation in 1987. Today, the Rev. Peter Kloosterman, formerly of the URCNA and younger brother of Prof. Nelson Kloosterman of Mid-American Reformed Seminary, is the pastor.

9 An example is Liana Havelaar (nee Hoyt), the daughter of Rev. Bruce Hoyt and his wife Lois. In 2001, Liana served as a teacher at Covenant Primary School in Mbale, Uganda with Mrs. Kathleen Curto, the school's founder.

them. For eight years, from ages 8 to 16, he listened to verse by verse expository sermons in the morning and sermons following the confessions in the evening. Sermons were so well organised that the Van Dalen family took note pads and wrote down outlines and concise notes. It was easy even for the youth. To this day Van Dalen testifies, "it was superb."¹⁰

Later, while taking a law degree at Victoria University in Wellington, from ages 18 to 22, Van Dalen would slip up the Hutt Valley to join in the second service in Silverstream, where he still sought guidance from the man who had become a "second father, a spiritual father." At this time the importance of order, in one's thinking and preaching began to take deeper root in him. Williamson's diagrams and systematic teaching had instilled in him a lifelong appreciation for the beauty and order of Reformed theology. The desire to seek theological training now began to stir within. Asking his pastor where, if he could suggest his ideal, would he advise Frank to study. The reply came, "Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia."

Van Dalen's introduction to the OPC in Philadelphia was twofold. First was Westminster Seminary where Richard Gaffin, Jr., was signally influential. His lectures on Hebrews were very helpful, solid as they were careful. From Harvey Conn, "provocative" in Frank's view, he learned valuable lessons about Islam. He appreciated Norman Shepherd's passionate love of the word and Clair Davis' lectures in Church History. Of particular note was the influence of Cornelius Van Til, and not only in the way one might expect. Van Til attended the weekly prayer meeting where students and faculty could and did join together to intercede for the Seminary

community. Van Dalen was intensely taken with Van Til's prayers.¹¹ They were child like in their simplicity, and yet the

10 Quotations from Frank Van Dalen, interview with the author, 2010.

11 Muether, *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman*, 215.

theology of the Heidelberg and Shorter Catechisms were integrated into the very vocabulary of his piety. Here was a rich spiritual life, where the treasures of his theology and the child likeness of his faith, permeated the very depth and breadth of his public prayer. Van Dalen, a Dutch speaker himself, also figured out that the key to reading Van Til was to understand that he seemed to be "thinking in Dutch but writing in English." Van Dalen also grew to appreciate the influence of Herman Bavinck in Van Til's theological and apologetic method and would later seek to do doctoral work with this insight as a thesis.¹²

The second OPC influence was congregational life at Calvary OPC in Glenside, PA, where Van Dalen happily transferred his membership. Ruling elder Howard Porter "adopted" Van Dalen's fiancé Miss Emily Wilder and announced the couple's engagement to the delight of the Calvary congregation. Emily, also a student at the seminary, was a missionary kid from a United Presbyterian Church background, and fluent in Urdu, the language of Pakistan, where she was raised. Van Dalen became keen to seek to minister in Pakistan and sought OPC support to do so. Unfortunately, the OPC was not able, due to finances, to send him. So Van Dalen began further investigation. It turned out the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARP) had long had a mission in Pakistan, and in fact, there was an ARP daughter church in Pakistan of over 100,000 members. And even though Frank had never heard to that point of the ARP, he began to explore this course. The Session of Calvary encouraged him, and sent a cordial, explanatory letter, over the signature of session clerk Howard Porter and Van Dalen's pastor, Steven J. Miller, explaining to the New Zealand Overseas Mission's Board and RCNZ Synod of 1992, why the Van Dalen's were pursuing this ministry. They also explained the session's "willing and joyful transfer and recommendations of the Van Dalen's" to the ARP, a sister church of the OPC, and a church with whom the RCNZ had maintained contacts since the 1950's.¹³ The result became Frank and Emily's service in Pakistan as ARP missionaries, with the hearty endorsement of OPC and RCNZ alike. Years later Frank would rise to the position of head of the entire

12 Muether, *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman*, 100-112.

13 RCNZ Acts of Synod, 1992, Report 4.

ARP Mission Board, World Witness, an influential appointment he still faithfully upholds today.

In 2006, in preaching at the 201st General Synod of the ARP, Van Dalen mentioned the catechism classes of G.I. Williamson as a vital key to his future service of the Lord Jesus and his church. He proclaimed this demonstrated, "that wherever you are, in whatever apparently obscure place you find yourself, strive for excellence in the service of Christ, for you never know what plans the Lord has for you and your work."¹⁴

¹⁴ Van Dalen, of course, was not referring to himself but to his mentor, Williamson. The pursuit of excellence by this Orthodox Presby-

Looking back, one can see the hand of the Lord at work in the pleas of Bill Deenick (from the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, or GKN, and the RCNZ) for ministerial help from the

terian/RCNZ pastor, far from the limelight, in the service of Christ, was a significant catalyst in the genesis for Van Dalen's later wide world ministry. Van Dalen was encouraging his audience at the Synod, to emulate his old Pastor. The Van Dalen's maintain a very cordial relationship (Frank's mother lives in Wanganui, where there is a new Reformed Church) with the RCNZ. Frank routinely preaches in the churches whenever itinerating or on sabbatical down under. The RCNZ still consider him one of their own. And so, from another perspective, may the OPC.

OPC, in the eagerness of John Galbraith to recruit men willing to answer this Macedonian call, in the willingness of pastors like Williamson to leave all and go far away to preach the Gospel, in the formative influence of OPC professors, and in the warm pastoral care and congregational life of Calvary OPC in Glenside, PA. The result? The result has been a great blessing for the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, and in fact the entire Reformed world, certainly including the OPC and the RCNZ. And here is an example of not only the prayer of John Galbraith being answered, but more importantly, our Lord's own prayer, "that they may all be one."

Infant baptism: should we agree to disagree?

Jason Van Vliet

Once, after a worship service, a brother in the Lord was speaking to me about Reformed Baptists. I don't remember the whole conversation, but one thing sticks in my mind. The brother said, "Basically, Reformed Baptist is a contradiction in terms." Is he correct?

Of course, you can understand where this brother was coming from. For example, the Belgic Confession is a Reformed confession. No one doubts or disputes that. Moreover, in Article 34 this Reformed confession of ours speaks about infant baptism in a rather straightforward way: "For that reason we reject the error of the Anabaptists, who are not content with a single baptism received only once, and who also condemn the baptism of the little children of believers." The Heidelberg Catechism also insists that "by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, they [infants] must be grafted into the Christian church" (LD 27). So infant baptism, also called paedobaptism, is not a *may*, or a *maybe*, but a *must*. With these confessions in mind, the aforementioned brother said what he said. Either you're Reformed and you maintain infant baptism, or you're Baptist and you wait with baptism until someone has publicly professed their

faith. But never the twain shall meet.

There's only one problem. The twain have not only met each other, and courted, they've also gone right ahead and got married. There are numerous Reformed Baptist churches around the world. In 1997 the Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America was formed. As of this year over seventy churches belong to this association, some of them from Canada as well. Since 2004 there's also been a scholarly journal called *The Reformed Baptist Theological Review*. Reformed Baptist may be a contradiction, but it's a contradiction that is alive and well.

One influential theologian, Wayne Grudem, has even suggested that "one way forward could be for paedobaptists

and advocates of believers' baptism both to come to a common admission that baptism is not a major doctrine of the faith, and that they are willing to live with each other's views on this matter and not allow differences over baptism to be a cause for division within the body of Christ." So, should we follow Grudem's advice and agree to disagree over infant baptism?

What's in a name?

So what exactly does a Reformed Baptist believe? As you might expect, there are different varieties of Reformed Baptists, but they all agree that only those who sincerely profess faith in, and submission to, Jesus Christ should be baptised. This is also called credobaptism. Since

“Many people resist infant baptism because they are afraid that these baptised babies will grow up to be spiritually sloppy individuals”

“In the old covenant, the Lord left no room for agreeing to disagree over circumcision.”

babies cannot yet make such a profession, Reformed Baptists teach that they should not be baptised. This is based on Mark 16:16: “Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved.” The sequence of words in that verse determines their practice: first profession of faith, then baptism. This accounts for the “Baptist” half of their name.

At the same time, Reformed Baptists do not want to be Pelagian or Arminian in their theology. In fact, they love the same five solas that we cherish: *sola Scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *solus Christus*, and *soli Deo gloria* (by Scripture alone, by faith alone, by grace alone, Christ alone, and to the glory of God alone). This explains the Reformed part of their name.

Many Reformed Baptist churches make use of, or even subscribe to, the

Second London Baptist Confession of Faith (1689). In structure and content this confession is similar to the Westminster Confession of Faith (1648). The most obvious difference is, of course, in the article about baptism (Chap. 29). Still, a pertinent question remains: is it permissible to substitute in credobaptism for paedobaptism, all the while leaving the rest of Reformed theology unaltered? We need a solid, scriptural answer to that question. However, first there are a few other matters that need attention.

Before we go any farther

There are at least three factors that deserve mention. For lack of a better term, we’ll call the first one the *Spurgeon-factor*. Charles Haddon Spurgeon was a gifted and influential British preacher in the nineteenth century. He

preached over three thousand sermons, often to thousands of people at a time. His sermons are still widely read and quoted today. Spurgeon was also a Reformed Baptist, or Particular Baptist, as they were known at that time. We have some contemporary Spurgeons as well: men such as John Piper and John MacArthur. Like Spurgeon, these men are popular preachers. They have websites with hundreds of sermons. Like Spurgeon, they have some familiar sounding, Reformed themes in their preaching. Like Spurgeon, they reject infant baptism. So, the argument runs like this: is rejecting infant baptism really so bad if these preachers are so good? The simple response is this: even good preachers can make serious mistakes. When that happens, we ought to address it, not overlook it. That’s the approach that the Apostle Paul took with Peter (Gal 2:11-16). We should do the same.

Next there is the *show-me-the-verse-factor*. If you’ve ever had to defend infant baptism, you likely had someone say to you, “Just show me the verse in the Bible where God commands us to baptise infants.” Well, there is no verse in the Bible which says, “Baptise babies.” So, the underlying yet overarching implication is that paedobaptism must be wrong. However, this show-me-the-verse shoe pinches just as much on the other foot. For some two millennia, ever since the days of Abraham, the Lord made it abundantly clear that children were included in his covenant (Gen 17:7). Therefore, the challenge could also be launched: “Just show me the verse in the Bible where God commands us to stop including infants in his covenant.” Well, there is no verse in the Bible which says that either. So, we need to step beyond this show-me-the-verse mentality and start looking carefully at what the Lord does actually say.

Finally, there is the *infant-baptism-breeds-laxity* factor. Many people resist infant baptism because they are afraid that these baptised babies will grow up to be spiritually sloppy individuals. They’re concerned that baptised youth (or adults!) will feel rather comfortable with immoral, worldly lifestyles since, after all, they’re baptised and, in the end, all will be well and forgiven. However, baptism is a sign of the covenant and God’s covenant does not give anyone a license to indulge in the ways of the world. Behold, God’s covenant has two parts: promise *and* obligation (Rom



Campbell Art Glass

6:1-4). Beware, God's covenant has two pronouncements: blessings *and* curses (Heb 10:26-31). Therefore, abandon laxity and embrace holiness.

Now let's turn to Scripture

When the Holy Spirit converts someone, turning him from rebellion and unbelief to repentance and faith, then that person should also be baptised. The Lord Jesus Christ clearly teaches this in Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:16. That's also why we have a Form for the Baptism of Adults, which incorporates the Form for Profession of Faith, in the back of our *Book of Praise*. Defined and understood properly, credobaptism has always been maintained by the Reformed church.

However, what does the Lord say about the children of baptised believers? Should they, too, be baptised? *That* is the critical question. As mentioned earlier, in the days of Abraham, the Lord explicitly included the children of believing parents in his covenant. In fact, the Lord was so strong on this point that if anyone failed to administer the sign of the covenant, that is, circumcision, to his infant son, he would be guilty of breaking the covenant (Gen 17:14). Clearly, this was a major doctrine with enormous implications, not a minor point of ecclesiastical practice. In the old covenant, the Lord left no room for agreeing to disagree over circumcision.

However, does that change in the new covenant? Reformed Baptists would argue that it does. Often they will say that the genealogical aspect of the old covenant was needed in order to bring Christ, the Mediator, into the world; however, after that, the new covenant is made with regenerate individuals, not the households of believers.

Now, it is true that there was something wrong with the first covenant. The Holy Spirit himself says, "If there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another" (Heb 8:7). Yet please note the next verse: "But God found fault *with the people* and said, 'The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant'" (Heb 8:8). Moreover, the following verses, quoting from Jeremiah 31:31-34, indicate that it was the stubborn sinfulness of the people which was "the fault." In the old covenant, the blood of bulls and goats could never deal effectively with that iniquity (Heb 10:4). Therefore, the Lord ushered in the new covenant with the long foreshadowed solution. The promised blood and Spirit of

Christ achieved what animals sacrifices could never accomplish. In other words, in moving from old to new, the Lord did not change the structure of the covenant. With the coming of Christ he did not begin excluding the previously included children. Rather, he changed the sacrifice for sin from shadows to substance, from livestock to the Lord Jesus Christ.

That young children are still included in the new covenant can be demonstrated by familiar passages like Luke 18:16 ("Let the little children come to me"), Acts 2:39 ("the promise is for you and your children"), and 1 Cor 7:14 ("your children ... are holy"). We should also remember the household baptisms recorded in the New Testament (Acts 16:15, 31-33; 1 Cor 1:16), as well as the connection between circumcision and baptism (Col 2:9-11).

“Baptism is a major doctrine.”

However, there is another passage which is often overlooked: 1 Corinthians 10:2. In this passage the Apostle Paul teaches us about the baptism into ... no, not Christ, but Moses! But, you say, baptism is a new covenant sacrament, and Moses is the mediator of the old covenant. Indeed, but the new sacrament was already foreshadowed in the old dispensation, at the Red Sea. "They were all baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea." A cloud contains water. According to Exodus 14:19, the special glory cloud of the Lord, which to that point had gone in front of the people, moved and stood behind the people, separating the Egyptians from the Israelites. Thus God's holy people and their enemies were distinguished by a wall of water, and "throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side" (Exod 14:20). And if that was not dramatic enough, next the Lord miraculously used the water of the Red Sea to both save his people and defeat their enemies (Exod 14:22, 28). These waters of separation and salvation were the baptism into Moses.

Who, then, was baptised into Moses? All of God's people were baptised into Moses, male and female, older and younger, including the little infants, being carried in the arms of eager parents who were race walking to safety on the op-

posite shore of the Sea. Therefore, since the babies were baptised into Moses, surely they should also be baptised into Christ, for Moses was faithful as a servant, but Christ is faithful as Son (Heb 4:5-6).

So, yes, we baptise adults whom the Lord, in his grace, converts. And yes, we also baptise the children of believing parents, with whom the Lord, in his grace, covenants. Why? Precisely because this is what the Lord teaches us in his Word.

Where do we go from here?

To begin with, agreeing to disagree over baptism is not the way forward. Contra Grudem, baptism *is* a major doctrine. At baptism a minister pronounces someone's name and says, "I baptise you into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Surely, since the

holy name of our Triune God is directly involved, it must, of necessity, be major.

The doctrine of infant baptism is also intricately related to many other doctrines. Baptised children receive, and need, the promise of forgiveness because they inherit a sinful nature from their parents (BC 15). The doctrine of original sin is linked to the sinless conception of our incarnate Saviour (LD 14). Baptism is also entwined with the doctrine of the covenant which is inextricably connected to the doctrine of the church (LD 27). And, lest we forget, there is the sensitive matter of children who die in infancy (CoD 1:17). Baptism, original sin, incarnation, covenant, church, and the life hereafter: there's a lot at stake here.

The way forward, then, is to keep teaching and defending the baptism of covenant children. We can be thankful that Reformed Baptists embrace the five solas, for they are scriptural. At the same time, we must be resolute in upholding infant baptism since it is equally scriptural. It's a matter of obedience, not options.

Dr Jason Van Vliet is professor of Dogmatics at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary in Hamilton, Ontario jason.vanvliet@canrc.org

Focus on home

Harriet Haverland

Gleanings from our bulletins...

QUOTABLE "QUOTES"

"We will never properly understand the work of God which takes place in the Christian life unless we first of all have some kind of grasp of why we need the grace of God." *Sinclair Ferguson*

"Holiness is not the way to Christ; Christ is the way to holiness." *Adrian Rogers*

"Grace is a ring of gold, and Christ is the sparkling diamond in that ring." *Thomas Brooks*

"A man may be a good doctor without loving his patients; a good lawyer without loving his clients; a good geologist without loving science; but he cannot be a good Christian without love." *D.L. Moody*

BIRTHS

Bylsma, Riley Alexander – a son born to Marc and Marike 14 February (Pukekohe)

Kerkhoven, Derek John – a son born to Davy and Melinda – 24th January (Pukekohe)

Wisse, Stephanie Holly – a daughter born to Piet and Amanda Wisse – 12 February (Hukanui)

PROFESSION OF FAITH

Avondale: Nathan Moelker

WEDDINGS

4 February – Jason Scheepers and Natasha Fietje married in Bucklands Beach

24 February – Tim Nugteren and Yvette van Ameyde married in Kaipoi

60th Wedding Anniversary Celebration

Piet and Bep Wierenga celebrated 60 years of Christian marriage on Saturday 11th February with the Wellington congregation, and together rejoiced in God's goodness to them.

DEATHS

Goris, Diane – The Lord called our sister Diane Goris into glory after her battle with acute leukaemia ended. To the very end, Diane faced the uncertainty of her medical situation with deep faith and assurance in God's power. Please remember the family and our congregation in your prayers. (18 February – Wellington)

FROM THE PASTOR

Nelson: Daniel Wilson

It is with great joy that we prepare to celebrate Good Friday and Easter! For on these days we remember the darkest and brightest days of all time! The darkest day was when Christ, the Son of God died for our sins – and yet the gracious gleaming Sun of God's love was shining behind those dark clouds! And that light and joy came bursting through when Christ rose from the dead on the third day! Oh, what a joyous occasion we have every Sunday to celebrate the resurrection and victory of Christ.

MINISTERS AND CHURCH WORKERS

Albert Couperus received word last week that his application to study at Mid America Reformed Seminary was accepted. All that remains is for Wellington Presbytery to approve Albert as student candidate for ministry in the RCNZ. Presbytery has appointed Rev Paul Archbald to interview Albert and Hanneke prior to Presbytery meeting on the third of March. Pray that the Lord's will may be done in this late stage of the decision making process.

Erik Stolte: Please keep Jan-Erik Stolte, vicar at Pukekohe Reformed Church, in your prayers as he completes this final leg of training for the pastoral ministry. His preliminary examination will be held on 13 April and he is due to complete his vicariate DV at the end of July.

Graeme Zuidema starts work as a ministerial intern. He will be attending the Tim course which is run by the Gospel Training Trust, teaching at Middleton Grange, and doing pastoral work and some teaching in the church. Please pray for him and encourage him as you have opportunity. The change from full-time work to part-time study and very different sort of work can be challenging.

CHURCH PLANTING

Pukekohe: Update from the Building Committee: After submitting the application for resource consent in late November, the Council came back to us requiring consultant reports on:

- Acoustics – particularly likely noise from the proposed car park,
- Lighting – how we would place lights so that neighbours were not in our light,
- Transport – how the car park would affect the intersections with Seddon and Dublin Streets.

The reports were returned to us in late January and have been submitted to Council. We are now waiting for Council's decision, which should be made by the end of February.

EDUCATION

Theological Education in Wellington: Grace@Wellington is setting up some courses for people interested in completing some theological studies for personal growth. They will be taught using courses produced by Covenant Seminary in St Louis, USA which they offer free over the net. Our first course will be Biblical Theology which is taught by a Dr Gerard Van Groningen, who was at RTC Geelong for a number of years. Students will listen to the course on mp3 and do the reading in their own time, and then meet fortnightly for review and encouragement. If you are interested, please make contact with Richard Eye (ph 565-3757 or eyrerd@clear.net.nz).

MISSIONS

Between attending conferences in Thailand, has heard that has not been cleared for entry to and will not be able to teach in the coming semester as she had hoped. She is back in , for the time being. Her situation remains uncertain. Please pray for , and in particular that God would give peace about what has happened, wisdom to know what to do, and grace to act in a way that honours Christ.

ACTS OF SERVICE

Bishopdale: Thank you! A number of you may have put together a Christmas

hamper for St. Chads Anglican church. They were greatly appreciated! "I would like to thank your people for your wonderful Christmas hampers that you gave us to distribute to people on the East-side. They were received with grateful thanks. People responded with tears of joy at your generosity. May God richly bless you all – Joan Clark (St Chads)"

Dovedale: CYFS Update – Our youth met with a few children and some lovely foster parents from one of the local foster homes. Everyone was well-behaved and was very thankful for the gifts you gave. Our youth ended up playing some rugby on the lawn with the young fellows. From here the youth group leaders and deacons will be meeting with a representative from the homes to hear how we could be further involved. More homework is needed in this regard, so please pray for all those involved and that we might have a good effect on the community in this way. Pray also that we can find suitable activities which will spread the love of the gospel to these kids. "A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." – Proverbs 18:24.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Dovedale: A group of believers are going door to door in the Hornby area to see how people are doing as the anniversary of the Feb 22 quake approaches. Invitations to a picnic in Hornby on the afternoon of the 22nd will be handed out (from the Hornby churches). It is hoped that a good number of believers can be at the picnic and take the opportunity to share the gospel with others from the community who attend. We have been invited to join in with the door to door visits and will be able to print some information on the back of the invitation about our church.

CLASSES & COURSES

Avondale – Adult Education – One of the most exciting ways to grow in our Christian faith is by being inspired by the work of God through His people in times past. Hebrews 11, with its long list of those who lived by faith, calls us to look to the past that we might take courage for the present. Come join us this term in Adult Education as we sweep through church history and learn the inspiring life stories of Polycarp, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Bunyan, Jonathan Edwards, and many more that we might be encouraged to run the race before us.

Hamilton – Catechism – Can students and parents please all gather in the church for a general introduction. After the introduction everyone can go to their classes. With regard to catechism teaching, it is the church's responsibility, together with the parents, to pass on to the next generation the truths of the Bible. Instruction in the Catechism and Confessions of the Church is a way we can assist fathers and mothers in the training of their Covenant children. We need to use the gifts that God has given to us for this ministry and for the spiritual life of the Church. The goal of this instruction is that the Holy Spirit will convict our children's heart of the need to believe that Jesus died on the cross for their sins, and receive His forgiveness in faith.

Hamilton: Biblical Parenting Study Group – With session's approval we are looking for expressions of interest in establishing a study group focused on looking at the biblical principles which guide us and encourage us as parents seeking to raise Christ centred children. This would be particularly beneficial for those at the beginning of their parenting journeys or couples considering having a family. You may know of others outside the Church family who may be interested. We have sourced some excellent resources which involve approximately 2 groups of 6 studies.

Hamilton: Advance Notice Easter Convention 2012: The 18th Hamilton Easter Convention will be held on 6th and 7th of April 2012 DV. Our speaker this year is Rev. David Schulz, currently minister at St Andrews Presbyterian Church, Hamilton, Victoria. The theme of his presentations will be *Spiritual Warfare*. More information is on our website.

Pukekohe: Seminar Series – As usual, we will begin this year with a seminar series that will run fortnightly on Tuesday evenings for the first term. This is in place of the local Bible Studies and is for the whole congregation, including the Senior Catechism class and the youth. The seminars this year are on "How to Read the Bible".

FUNDRAISING ACTIVITIES

Hamilton: Survivor Poverty 2012 – 'What are you willing to lose?' Once again, our annual Survivor Poverty weekend is being held in Port Waikato over Waitangi weekend. This year we are raising funds for Voice of the Martyrs. For many of our Christian brothers and

sisters in countries around the world, persecution is a daily reality and they constantly make great sacrifices for the sake of Christ's name. What are you willing to lose? A weekend without the comforts of clean clothes, nice bathroom facilities, three yummy meals a day, running water, and technology is hardly a sacrifice. Please *seriously* consider coming to this event and supporting our persecuted Christian brothers and sisters in this way.



THANK YOU!
From the Goris
family...

We have really been overwhelmed by the prayerful and loving concern of many in New Zealand and overseas on the occasion of the sickness and death of our beloved wife and mother, **Yoke Lan (Diane) GORIS**, nee Chang.

We would like to thank you all for sharing with us in our time of grief, and in our service of thanksgiving.

We carry on while God's "everlasting arms are underneath us" (Deut 33:27), and the loving arms of numerous people are around us.

We give thanks for a life that stimulated us to seek God in a practical expression of faith, with the aim of glorifying God.

Psalms 73:24-28.

John, Grace and Sam
Wellington, 27th February, 2012

ACTIVITIES

Auckland/Hamilton Women's Presbyterial: This will be held at the North Shore Reformed Church. We will follow with our speaker Pamela McCarthy from 'Freeset' – A fair trade business offering employment to Women caught up Kolkata's sex trade. They make quality jute bags and organic cotton t-shirts. Their main aim is to free these women from the bondage they find themselves in. Pamela will be bringing with her a wide range of these bags which she would like to sell. So we would encourage you to bring along your wallets to purchase some of these for a very good cause. If you would like to find out more about what Freeset people do you can just google 'Freeset' and you find several sights to look at. After lunch we will have an interesting demonstration which you will each be able to take part in with something to take home with you.

Bishopdale: The Session is having a retreat at Lake Coleridge this Saturday to reflect on how we can better serve as leaders, give thought to our future direction, and to spend time together in prayer. As leaders of the church, we ask you to pray for us. We feel the weightiness of the task that Jesus Christ has given us and desire to be faithful to Him in all that we do.

Dovedale: Carina Voges is starting a Christian Chamber Choir with the goal of honouring God through choral singing. We will sing sacred music, mostly traditional songs and oratorio, following the church year, in order to share the gospel through song. We plan our first 'performance' for Good Friday evening. The criteria for joining are: A love for the Lord, a love for good music and having a very good ear for music.

Hamilton: It's great to see many people making use of the Library! There have been a number of new books and DVDs added to the collection, mainly around the subject of creation and refuting evolution. There is a great variety of material which provides current evidence to show God is visible through His works and refuting evolutionary claims that He is not. Please make use of these books for you and your children.

South Island Ladies' Fellowship – Ladies! You are cordially invited to attend the South Island Ladies' Fellowship conference, held at Nelson Reformed Church in Nelson. Mrs Karen Dawson, wife, mother and conference

speaker from Hope Community Church, and Pastor Daniel Wilson of Nelson Reformed Church, will be speaking on the theme *A Refreshing Flavour*.

Wellington ladies are organising the Ladies Presbyterial this year. The speaker this year will be Jenny Waldron, speaking on *A Stranger Love* and *Practically a Stranger Love*.

Short Report of the Auckland Presbyterial Meeting held on 17th February, 2011

The Rev. Dirk van Garderen reported on Buckland Beach's plans for the Presbyterial Men's Study Day.

The Bucklands Beach Congregation, in response to the questions in Art.47 of the CO, reported good attendance at both services, mentioned especially "solid and enthusiastic" attendance at the evening Service. The congregation supports missions diligently. The congregation is experiencing significant growth especially from the Asian community with all its attendant challenges. To help foster unity, real incorporation into the congregation and growth to maturity, a special home fellowship group has begun especially for new members and catechism classes particularly for the children of new members. There is also a separate Chinese home group with its own care group. There is no reformed Christian school in the area. About 50% of the church's children attend Elim Christian College.

Hamilton reported seeking to work with a large number of baptised members who are rather seldom seen. Several members of the congregation are on the board of local Christian schools and the congregation offers support with school fees to church members; the church itself runs the Frankton Christian Kindergarten. Several members teach Bible in Schools and others are involved in Crossroads Bible Institute and other prison ministries. The church supports Janice Reid in her radio ministry in SE Asia and some members are involved in Streetworks, a practical diaconal work in the city. The number of home fellowship groups is growing and there are a number of new families.

Both congregations were commended

to the Lord in prayer.

Presbytery endorsed the Hukanui Session's letter of release and credentials for the Rev. Andre Scheepers to minister under a one year pastor and Supply Contract to the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia in Ulverstone, Tasmania with a view to a call. Presbytery's endorsing letter noted that brother Scheepers was released under Art.16b of our CO.

The Rev. Michael Willemse presented a summary of items of interest from other Presbytery/Classis (CRCA) minutes.

Presbytery received a letter from Vicar Erik Stolte requesting to be examined for entrance to the ministry in the RCNZ. His exam will be conducted on 13th April, Lord willing. Rev. John Haverland to arrange examiners.

The Rev. Dirk van Garderen reported that he was very encouraged by the National Youth Camp – especially by the general spiritual interest of the young people and their appreciation of the studies. Elder John Kaijser of Pukekohe was reappointed Youth Liaison Officer.

Revs John Rogers and Dirk van Garderen were reappointed as Synodical Deputies/Examiners

Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor

Many thanks for your sterling efforts and those of your team in faithfully providing a fresh copy of *Faith in Focus* each month. Special thanks to Sally Davey, whose recent articles deftly combine her evident love of hymnody and expertise in history to provide edifying and enjoyable reading.

Thank you also for highlighting Paul Jones' 2008 book, *Singing and Making Music: Issues in Church Music Today* in the December 2011 edition of *Faith in Focus*. Having obtained a copy from my dear friends at Amazon.com, I would agree with your reviewer, D G Hart, that this book provides "a valuable counterweight to the trend that flouts good taste and common sense in worship." Indeed, Jones' book might be regarded as a plea for excellence in Christian music.

Hart's commendation is, however, somewhat half-hearted, as he proceeds to criticise Jones for obscuring "the biblical theology that gave Presbyteri-

ans a form of worship that was distinct from Lutheran, Anglican and evangelical practices." According to Hart, music in worship should be limited to the use of musical accompaniment in worship, and the choice of lyrics limited to the Psalms of David. Citing Calvin, Hart views song simply as a form of prayer; to regard it as anything beyond this, for example as a form of proclamation, "invites a blurring of the elements of worship as well as the differences between officers and church members".

Hart's mention of Calvin provides food for thought. Must we consider Calvin's position on music in worship to be the final word? Or did it perhaps represent a mediating position between Luther's promotion of hymnody, and Zwingli's no music stance? History must be used with care; while informative, ultimately it is not normative. As with all areas of life, our worship must be informed not by precedent or human authority, but by the word of God. The catch-cry *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda* warns against a conservative position that treats the past, or even a leading figure from the past, as the primary basis for our opinions and behaviour.

Calvin's view that song was a form of prayer also bears consideration. Even if the lyrics used in worship were limited

to the Psalms, it would be difficult to regard all such songs as prayers, unless only those Psalms that are prayers were sung, or all Psalms were forced onto a Procrustean bed labelled "prayer". As examples, consider Psalm 1 which is more akin to a proverb than a prayer; Psalms 104 which provides a historical account as history; and even Psalm 150 which exhorts us to praise God without itself actually doing so. In fact, did not the Jews classify the Book of Psalms as wisdom literature?

Further, do not the Psalmists themselves use their compositions as vehicles for proclamation, and not only as prayers? To provide but one example, do not the sons of Korah specifically tell us in Psalm 49 that they are doing just that with their exhortation: "Hear this, all peoples, give ear, all inhabitants of the earth!"

I recognise that some members of our churches would concur with Hart. However as far as I am aware, none of the sessions of the RCNZ are committed either to exclusive Psalmody or to unaccompanied song in worship. This would seem to suggest that the Reformed view of worship permits a wider range of songs than that proposed by Hart. Our use of both the Psalms and other hymns in worship suggests that as a de-

nomination we concur with Jones' (and Rayburn's) broader understanding that chapter 21 of the Westminster Confession of Faith also refers to hymns when it speaks of psalms.

That said, Hart does encourage us to consider what it is that we are doing when we sing. This sentiment is shared by Jones. In 31 short and easily digested chapters Jones addresses such matters as the selection of hymns for a service, the choice of music for before and after the service and during the offering, the place of choirs, solos and applause, and the value of traditional hymnody. In the latter section he also provides some biographical notes on a number of significant composers, including the incomparable J S Bach.

While Jones' book does not offer a detailed theology of church music, it does provide a useful practical discussion of practical matters, and is an encouragement for both church musicians and all worshippers to apply all diligence to this significant element of our worship. I would therefore commend this book not only to church musicians, but to all who worship God in song. And that, surely, should be all of us!

Blessings

Rob Vosslamber
Christchurch

Books in focus

The Gospel and the Mind: Recovering and Shaping the Intellectual Life

by Bradley G. Green.

**Reviewed by Joel Pearce, a
graduate student and member
of Covenant Reformed Church in
New Holland, Pa.**

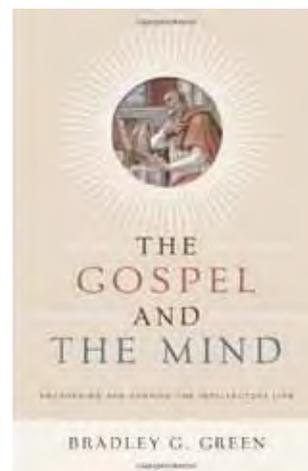
In an age of anti-intellectualism, scientism, and mind-numbing electronic media, how are Christians to live, learn, and glorify God? In *The Gospel and the Mind: Recovering and Shaping the Intellectual Life*, Bradley G. Green explores the connections between the Christian gospel and the pursuit of knowledge. Driven by the perception that "whenever the gospel goes, it seems to generate intellectual deliberation and inquiry," Green has written a persuasive defense of the Christian intellectual life as the best

context from which to study the world.

Christ died to redeem *all* of who we are, including our minds. Thus, "any sort of meaningful intellectual life will be rooted in Christ and the gospel" (p. 178). To flesh this out, Green examines five themes relevant to the pursuit of knowledge: the realities of creation and history, the *telos* [end, purpose] of history, the cross of Christ, the nature of language, and knowledge and morality. His thesis is twofold: "The Christian vision of God, man, and the world provides the necessary precondition of the recovery of any meaningful intellectual life; and the Christian vision of God, man, and the world offers a particular, unique understanding of what the intellectual life might look like" (pp. 13–14). Green leans heavily on Calvin, Aquinas, Athanasius, and especially Augustine to respond to Derrida, Nietzsche, Saussure,

and others. In the process, he shows how modern and postmodern thinkers have removed hope by rejecting the *telos* of history, while uncovering the destructive influence of sin on the mind.

Green expounds on Calvin's conviction



that to *know* God is to *honour* God, and that “the honouring is included within the knowledge itself” (p. 150). From Calvin, Green discusses the moral nature of knowledge, supported by the Psalms, Proverbs, and Paul. His conclusion, drawn from Calvin, C. S. Lewis, and Cornelius Van Til, is that all knowledge is more than just facts; it is personal, moral, and laden with responsibility. This responsibility is to know things truly, as they are known by God. We cannot know as God knows, but we can know in light of who God is and what he has

spoken. This is how, as Kepler wrote, we are able to think God’s thoughts after him. Since “God has revealed himself to all persons in the created order, then *all persons know God and are engaged in the moral, willful, ethical submission to or rejection of the God of Holy Scripture at virtually all moments of their existence*” (pp. 161–62).

The gospel enters this discussion in that, when our hearts and minds have been renewed by the Holy Spirit, our moral will and our natural loves will also change. Following the apostle Paul

and Augustine, Green argues that we cannot truly know what we do not love. Thus, “God is to be loved, while all other things are to be viewed in relation to that ultimate love” (pp. 166–67). Because we serve a good, personal, and rational God, knowledge is good. This lies at the foundation of a truly Christian understanding of the life of the mind. Therefore, a full Christian worldview “encourages attention to the world, its structures, and its mysteries” (p. 179).

Herman Bavinck: Pastor, Churchman, Statesman, and Theologian

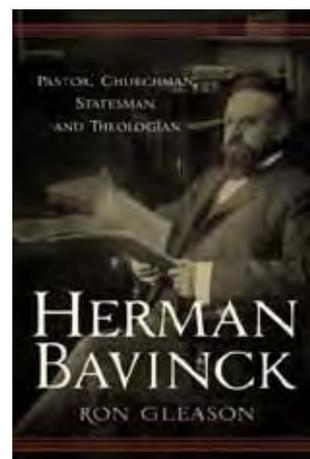
by Ron Gleason.

Reviewed by professor and OP minister J. V. Fesko.

Herman Bavinck is one of the more important and best-known Reformed theologians of the twentieth century. The recent translation of his four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics*, plus other works, has given English-speaking students access to one of Reformed theology’s greatest minds. But one of the crucial elements in understanding a person’s thought is being familiar with his life. What and who shaped the man? With great joy we now have a very readable biography of Bavinck, so we can understand the man behind the *Reformed Dogmatics*.

Ron Gleason has written an excellent biography of Bavinck, based largely upon three twentieth-century biographies written in Dutch. Some of the fascinating details of Bavinck’s life include the choices he made for his theological education. He studied at the University of Leiden, where he could learn liberal theology firsthand (p. 44). This helps to explain why Bavinck was so effective in refuting theological liberalism. Another interesting element that surfaces is Bavinck’s relationship with Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper regularly appears in times of camaraderie and in times of conflict, such as the debate over baptismal regeneration, in which Bavinck opposed Kuyper (pp. 190–91). Readers will find many tantalising details about Bavinck’s life that Gleason has ably communicated.

I have a quibble with the lack of



pictures in the book. Most biographies include pictures of family, of the subject, homes, offices, and the like. Readers can compare this work with the recent biography of Charles Hodge published by Oxford University Press, which includes not only a number of pictures, but also thumbnail sketches of the major figures mentioned in the book. Adding this type of artwork would have greatly enhanced the presentation of excellent content.

The major complaint I have is not with the author, but with the publisher. This major biography of Bavinck deserves a hardback with a sewn binding. Moreover, the paper has the feel of what one might find in pulp fiction. It does not have the feel (and hence the durability) of acid-free, archive-quality paper. Publishers send a message by the quality of the paper and the binding about the lasting importance of a book. This paperback edition will not last very long with heavy use. Granted, formatting decisions are often based upon financial constraints. However, this fine biography deserves a quality binding, one that will ensure that this book will be available to readers for generations to come. Reproduces with permission, New Horizons.



First Family Camp, 4-11 January 1961, Matamata

Camp leaders: Back: Rev & Mrs de Graaf; Rev & Mrs Scarrow. Front: Mrs & Mrs Meeuwse; Mr & Mrs Bos; Mr & Mrs Grul. Photo provided by Mrs Marty Eldershaw.

Family Camp 2012

by Ed & Liana Havelaar

My name is Bill; my wife is Flo.
We have eleven kids, you know!
We took them all to Finlay Park
and lost them somewhere – what a lark!
This Family Camp is really great
for parents to recuperate.

We drove about a thousand K's
to spend our Christmas holidays
up north at national family camp,
and though the weather was quite... "damp",
our tent stayed dry's a desert, man!
(We left it, folded, in the van).

Our children spent 'most every day
down in the skate park, or they'd play
on slide, or swing, or in the pool.
We saw them seldom, as a rule.
But "talk" at ninety decibels
assured us parents all was well.

The youth had a fantastic time:
got covered with aquatic slime
that lives beneath the water slide.
That "blob" thing looked like suicide:
it launched you way up in the air,
to plummet lakewards, stiff with fear¹.

Revs Rott and Moelker, it would seem,
were chosen, since they both were green,
to lead devotions, and (because
they knew not how much work it was)
agreed. But did the campers know
what conflict from this choice would grow?

The seeds were sown in 1812!
And *still* it's best one does not delve
into the neighbourly relations
of our pastors' two great nations.
The ministers who led the studies
began as foes!

But ended buddies.

To know God was the studies' end –
the One whom none can comprehend;
and yet His Word has made Him known.
To us His attributes He's shown.
Meanwhile, the children had their fun
with learning, singing, crafts well-run.

Who is it that the church most needs?
T'is the encourager, whose deeds
will build the others up in love,
into the Head, who is above.
This topic was our meditation
before the supper rumination.

A point of some contention is
the evening when they held the quiz,
with questions carefully selected
to keep us Southerners subjected.
But we're not sore – no, not a bit;
we've virtually forgotten it.

Of course the famous talent night
filled all the campers with delight.
The broken cup was won by magic
of sublimity just tragic.
Bellies ached for some time after;
eyes were wet from too much laughter.

For fifty years these camps have run;
the Meeuwsens went to every one!
The first one, as they one night told,
had only thirty-two enrolled.
Just think how far the rations went
When ninety extras pitched their tents!

This year, we had 300 plus!
Cook Heersping coped without a fuss.
There was a dinner revolution:
decentralised meal distribution
has helped us to reduce the queue.
He fed us well – and quickly too!

Now, to conclude this camp review,
I state that all I wrote is true
... or almost – yes, I will admit,
I dramatised it just a bit.
But after all, who'd want to hear
the same account year after year?

I realise my poetic flow
could hamper comprehension, so
your understanding to unhamper,
go sound out a happy camper –
I'm sure he'll spell it out for you.
Mayhap we'll see you next year too!

¹ If that rhymes poorly to your ear,
you're not a Kiwi! We don't care!



What the children did during the study one morning.



Veteran Family Campers – the Meeuwens.



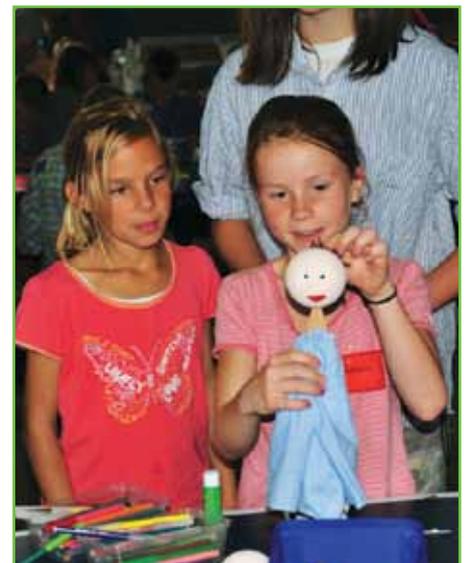
Jerome Kloeg is expelled from the water slide.



Youth having a fantastic time.



Henk Heersping and his catering staff.



Eliza Posthuma and friend showing off a puppet made as one of the crafts.