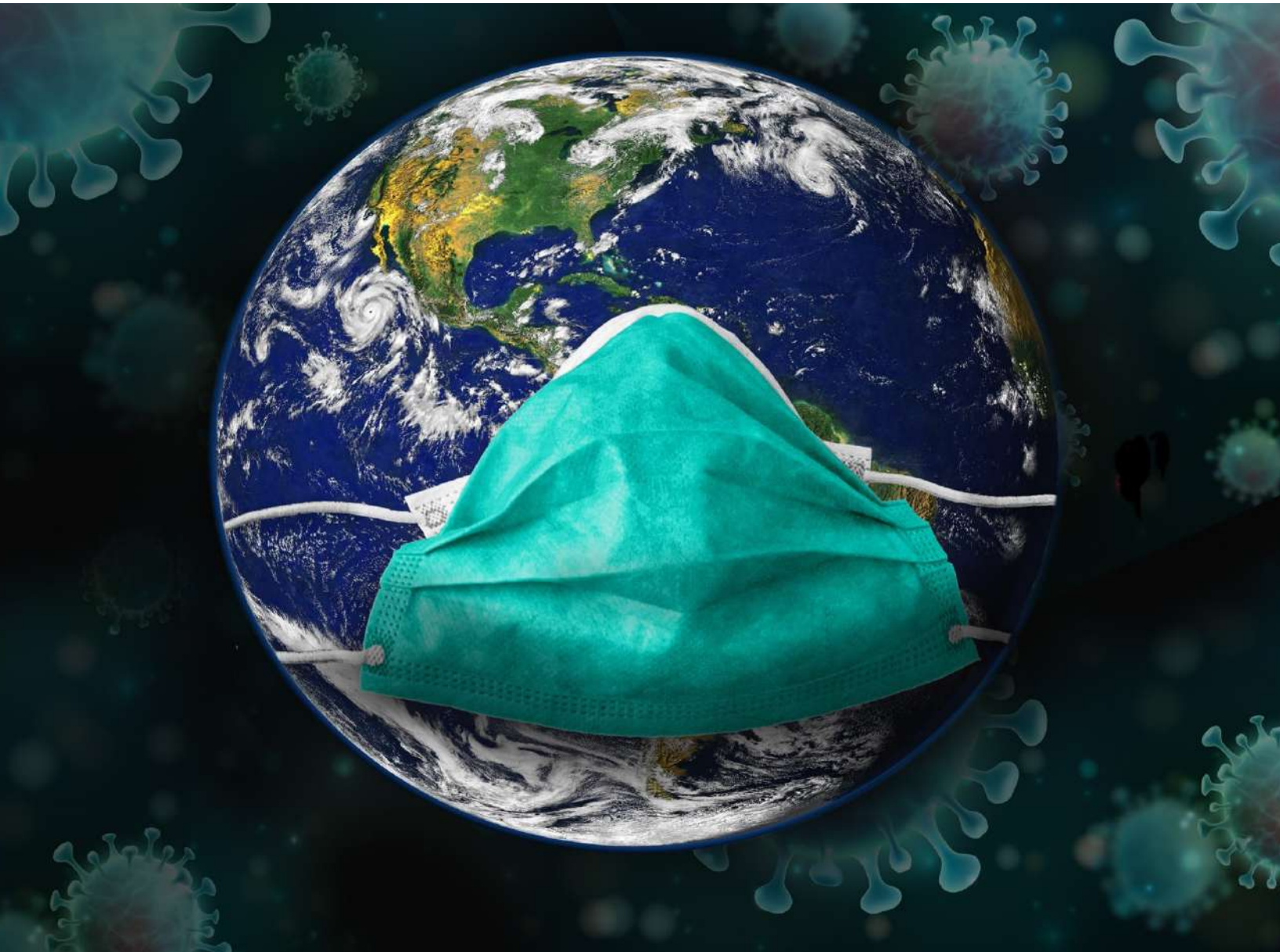




Lux Mundi

39:2-3 October 2020

Jesus said: "I am the light of the world." John 8:12



In this Issue

Perspectives on the pandemic
Preaching - the use of illustrations
Theological Education Conference

Magazine published by the
International Conference of
Reformed Churches



WHEN WILL IT END?

Author: Rev. Dr. Karlo Janssen

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Will covid-19 ever be behind us? The prevailing thought of science is “very unlikely”. Covid-19 is caused by a coronavirus and once the virus exists, it very rarely goes extinct. Yes, there will be an end, but likely not until our Lord and Saviour returns to restore this world to perfection.

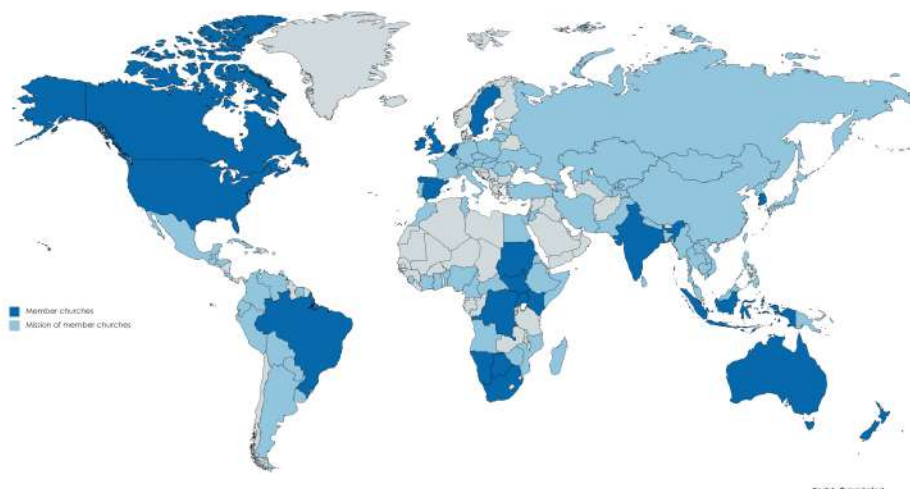
While we pray that Christ's Day may be soon, in the meantime we will endure patiently. Elsewhere in this edition of *Lux Mundi* you will find some Biblical wisdom on perseverance from South Africa. We are assured that while things may change around us, even suddenly and drastically, our Saviour remains unchanged. See the devotional by the ICRC's Corresponding Secretary.

While covid-19 has its impact, ICRC member churches are rising to the challenges it presents. The Diaconal Committee

has surveyed the ICRC member churches and its findings are presented in *Lux Mundi* and, in more detail, on the website www.icrconline.com.

This edition of *Lux Mundi* looks at some thoughts on how covid-19 impacts worship (an Australian contribution) and our obedience to God's commandments (a Canadian contribution). Some other news items fill the pages further. The reader might have expected overviews of broadest assemblies of ICRC member churches. However, these have all been cancelled, postponed, or adjourned. This is also why there was no summer edition of *Lux Mundi*.

May the Lord have mercy and grant us to persevere until it does indeed end. Maranatha, come Lord Jesus! ✱



Nations where ICRC member churches and their mission projects are located.



The logo combines the ICRC logo with the Lux Mundi monogram, an early Christian symbol combining the initials of Jesus Christ (in Greek I and X), referring to Him as the Light of the World (*Lux Mundi*).

Front cover picture source: pixabay.com

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THE UNCHANGING CHRIST

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. (Hebrews 13:8)

One of the distinctive features of our life is change. No matter where you look you see change. The world in which we live is a rapidly changing place. Especially in the area of technology it seems as if one invention follows on the heels of another. In a very short time we have moved from a society that did not know radio, television or computers to a world filled with MP3 players, high speed internet, plasma screens, interactive video games and much more. Our world is a rapidly changing place.

But our lives too are filled with change. We move from birth to childhood to teenage years to middle age and to old age. Our bodies never remain the same for long. Neither do our circumstances and relationships. Our jobs change. Our circles of friends change. Even we ourselves change in terms of personality, outlook, attitude and health.

The same applies to the church. It changes too.

Indeed, that may well have been one of the big problems for the believers in this letter to the Hebrews. Most likely they had been Jews originally but over time they had become Christians. That took some getting used to. As a matter of fact, it took so much getting used to that some of them were seriously thinking of going back, back to the ceremonies and rituals they had learned when young, back to the mindset and outlook that had dominated then. Perhaps old really is better? Perhaps the old ways are better than the new ways?

Nevertheless, the writer of this letter, whoever he was, does not agree. He spends page after page, chapter after chapter, defending the view that new really is better and greater. The angels are wonderful but Christ is more wonderful. Moses was a great leader but Christ is an even greater one. The OT priesthood of Levi was special but the NT priesthood of Melchizedek is even more special. The old covenant was a blessing but the new covenant is an even richer blessing. The sacrifices of old had their place but the sacrifice of Jesus Christ has a far more exalted place. In short, everything in the NT really is better.

You see, not all change is bad. God's unfolding revelation is needful. The movement from the shadows to the realities is absolutely necessary. In this regard it would be a sin to go back to the old ways for they are the lesser and inferior ways.

Still, as one reflects on all this, and also as the first readers of this letter reflected on one more aspect of change, namely changing leadership, (see Heb. 13:7) it is not so surprising that a certain yearning arose in their hearts. What kind of yearning? It is the yearning for something at least to remain

unchanging. "Oh, if only there was something in this life that never changed, that was always constant, that was always the same, that you could count on to remain fixed and immutable?"

Is there someTHING like this? The answer is "No!" Everything changes. At the same time, however, there is someONE like this. Who? Where is there a person who does not change? Where is there someone who does not change in terms of age, looks, attitude, ability and profession? "Turn to Jesus Christ," the writer of this letter says. For look, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." Our Saviour does not change.

He has always been God and will always remain God. True, there came a time when something was added to Him. Our humanity was added. After all, He was born of the virgin Mary. Today He is both God and man.

And that will never change. Jesus Christ will now always be both God and man. Better yet, Jesus Christ will always be almighty God and glorified man. He is the unchanging Christ!

Yes, and that is something that applies not just to His person but also to His work. For consider as well that today Jesus Christ is the unchanging Priest whose one sacrifice remains valid forever. He is the unchanging Prophet whose Word remains fixed forever. He is the unchanging King whose reign and rule continues forever.

Possessing as we do an ever-changing body and living as we do in an ever-changing world, it is a source of deep and abiding comfort to know that our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ does not change. There is at least someone who is constant and always the same.

In short, in Christ we have an anchor and a rock that is solid. When we feel in these days of COVID, of gender issues, and of sinking morality as if our life is being sucked down into a whirlpool of change, it is good to know that Christ is there to give stability, peace and rest to our lives. All who feel threatened by today's turbulent life, and who go to Him in faith, will find in Him a source of abiding and sure comfort.

Thankfully our Father in heaven knows our needs. And He also knows our fears. That is why He has given us His Son, His unchanging Son. He will lead us, keep us and fills us with His strength. We can always turn to Him. Truly, He does not change. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."





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OBSERVING BAPTISM AND THE LORD'S SUPPER IN EXTREME SITUATIONS

In all the discussion on the internet about observing the Lord's Supper in the situation of the Coronavirus, we should spare a thought for believers, particularly in Muslim lands, who have no regular contact with other Christians. They've become Christians through reading or hearing Scripture or Christian messages on the internet but live in situations where there are no other believers. They may experience persecution or imprisonment as they seek to express the faith. They may not even have access to the internet or printed literature and may only have part of the Scriptures. Who would deny that these believers belong to Christ and are part of his church even if not the church visible? Of course, we may not equate these isolated believers too quickly with the house churches mentioned in the New Testament since in general the implication there is not a gathering of just one family, while many homes in New Testament times might readily accommodate 20, 30 or more people, and all churches were equipped with elders and deacons (Acts 14:23).

It is said that exceptions make for bad law but on the other hand in extraordinary situations extraordinary things may be done. However, does that mean an isolated believer should baptise himself, or that he should have the Lord's Supper observance by himself with or without someone live-streaming the service? I would suggest this displays some misunderstanding of the nature of the sacraments. There is a distinction between 'at home' and 'in the church' (1 Cor 11:18,22) where the church is not referring to a building but to a distinct gathering of the Lord's people.

Baptism most fundamentally is the sign of God's covenant and is properly administered in the context of the visible church by those called to disciple the nations, baptising and teaching them (Matt 28:19-20). Those who believe already have the benefits which are signified and sealed in baptism so baptism itself is not essential to salvation. Baptism's necessity arises not from some inherent efficacy but because of Christ's command. Wilful disobedience to this command is sin, but there is no sin where the failure to be baptised arises without any fault in the person. Such a person belongs to the covenant which is why he or she would be baptised if that were possible.

When we come to the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:20) the

essence of the Supper is not whether the bread is leavened or unleavened or whether the fruit of the vine is fermented or unfermented or white or red, or even, in extremity, if it is wine at all. These staples to sustain life are sacramental symbols of Christ who is our life, and serve to aid our communion with the crucified and risen Lord. In the Supper the 'breaking of bread' - an expression used at ordinary meals too - is a significant action but the Supper must not be made a kind of passion play. Rather it points to the result of Christ's self-offering which nourishes our souls for eternal life. It is indeed Commemoration of the once-for-all sacrifice, Communion with the one who has been raised, and an anticipation in the Consummation in the marriage supper of the Lamb. So we do not celebrate at an altar but at a table which speaks of the fellowship with the One who has reconciled us to God by his death and who is now present with us at the table. That's a key point because it is the context of a meal with the Risen Lord that is an essential element (1 Cor 10:17). Hence it is also termed 'the table of the Lord' (1 Cor 11:27), an occasion on which we share one loaf and a cup for which we give thanks (1 Cor 10:16-17). Indeed, our Reformed fathers rejected the hosts or wafers used in the Mass by Roman Catholics precisely because they were not elements of an ordinary meal.

So it is in the context of the church as the assembly of God's new covenant community that the sacramental meal is observed and God administers his grace to us in a way different from but still subordinate to the Word. In a time like today's pandemic, when what is normal is taken from us by the greater obligation to preserve our own life and that of others, we still have the word of God to which the sacraments are always subordinate. In our homes we may read the Word and look in faith to the Saviour and know his blessing through the Spirit. We may even have livestreamed audio or video messages although these are not a full substitute for our church gathering. How we miss the worship and the fellowship! That we cannot observe the Supper in all its physicality in 'the church' as the gathered people of God is something we should miss just as we miss the regular worship services. If we cannot feast with the Lord in this manner we must accept his providence; meanwhile we fast and long for the coming of a renewal of

the gathered fellowship.

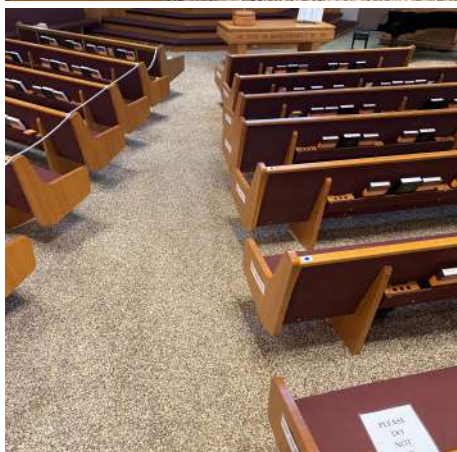
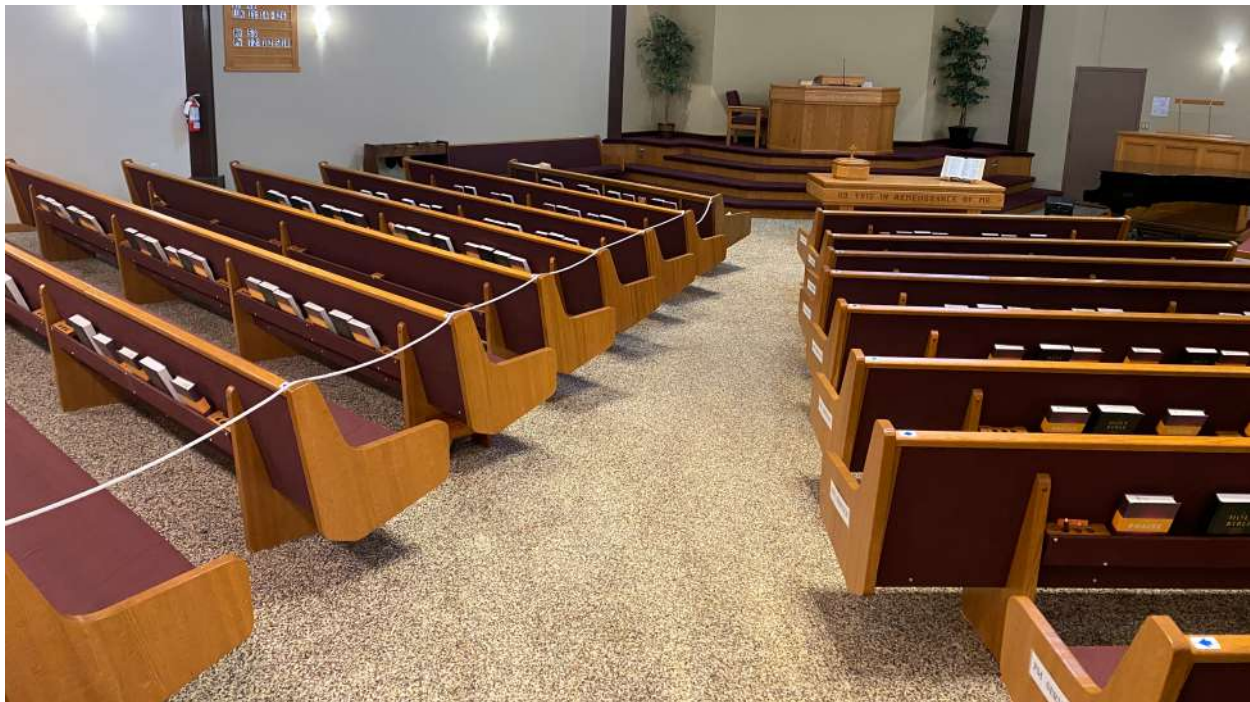
In many places around the world there are small gatherings of a few families without their own pastor and one could certainly contemplate one of the elders, although not ordained as a minister of word and sacrament, being commissioned to administer the Supper even as he may also be preaching as he is able. These are provisions that aim to maintain in exceptional circumstances the essence of church life. But to have a situation where outside the visible church sacraments are administered by those not called to office is perhaps well-intentioned but downplays the Biblical teaching in this area. Rather let us be more

conscious of our loss when we cannot gather together than upon insisting on or justifying an individualism by doing our own thing in a way that pays insufficient regard to Christ's institutions and the gathered community of the redeemed. And let us look forward to the promise of Matthew 26:29!

Originally prepared 12 April 2020 at the instigation of Dr Sam Logan for the website of the World Reformed Fellowship: wrfnet.org



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Signage and setup in a Canadian Reformed Church.

PERSEVERANCE IS REQUIRED

The covid-19 pandemic is beginning to take its toll and, given predictions, the end is not yet near. According to “experts” the peak lies still in the future, also for us in South Africa.

When I say that the pandemic is beginning to take its toll, for the purposes of this article, I'm not referring to the fact that an increasing number of people, also in our congregations and families, contract the virus and die. Of course, our hearts and prayers go out to and for all who are sick, and we pray for the rich comfort of our heavenly Father for those who have lost loved ones to death.

The focus of this article is on the “healthy” people for whom restrictions are becoming too much. It impacts people of all ages, but especially the seniors who, more so than others, live under “obligatory” isolation, not allowed to receive visitors, etc. A recent newspaper report (*Rapport Beleef*, June 12, p. 16) said: “...healthy seniors experience a wide range of emotional and psychological consequences as a result of isolation, such as fear, anger, depression, lack of sleep, boredom, loneliness, frustration, irritation, concern about the future, and issues with concentrating.” While there are many examples of seniors who remain positive in the current circumstances, there are still many who “feel that life is purposeless and it is better to die, especially since no one knows what will yet be” (ibid.)

Perseverance needed

Against this background one can posit that, more than ever, there is a need for perseverance. And we mean more than what the popular concept “stick it out” suggests. We mean perseverance in the Biblical sense of the term. There are quite a number of words in the original languages, especially Greek, which is translated with the Afrikaans word “*volharding*” (editor: less so in English). What is noteworthy, though is that this word points to human perseverance when we are confronted with setbacks in life. This word includes thoughts like patience, standing firm, waiting with perseverance, resistance, endurance. In the confines of this article we want to make a few comments.

Perseverance as command

In a number of places in the Bible we receive the command to persevere. Well known is the call in Hebrews 12 to run the race before us with endurance, our eye fixed on Jesus Christ,

the Founder and Perfecter of our faith.

And in Romans 12:12 we receive the command to be constant in prayer. We can only persevere if we do so prayerfully. When we are on our knees, we cannot be conquered, as long as in the race of faith (the struggle of life) we keep our eyes fixed on Christ.

Perseverance and faith

Perseverance and faith are closely connected. We see this in a passage like James 1:2-4: “Count it all joy, ... when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness”. In fact, this speaks for itself. For how can someone with a doubting faith persevere? This is why we must make fervent and industrious use of the means of Word and sacraments which God gives to strengthen our faith.

Perseverance and hope

In Romans 8:25 we read: “But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” As believers, our hope is focused on the eternal future, the glory towards which we journey, also in the most difficult of circumstances, such as those experienced by the congregation in Rome. Our eternal destination is firm and sure, for Christ has conquered death. But we do not see that yet. Hence, we can only continue to hope as we wait for it with patience. Without patiently persevering, hope disappears.

Perseverance and tribulation (testing)

In Romans 5:4,5 the inseparable connection between perseverance and hope also clearly comes to the fore. However, there is another important aspect of perseverance that comes to the fore in the verses 3 & 4 (NASB): “And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope.”

Without tribulations there cannot be perseverance in the life of a believer. Or, to say it differently: Perseverance is nurtured in circumstances and in a time of tribulation. This is part of the growth process in the life of a believer as fruit of testing and tribulation. That is why Paul makes the remarkable comment in verse 3 that we exult in our tribulations. This is so because our tribulations are not part of God's punishment for our sins. Rather, we have been



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justified by faith and have peace with God through Jesus Christ (vs. 1). (See also the sermon of Totius on Romans 5:3, *Versamelde Werke*, vol. 5, p. 188.)

Perseverance and the Word

In the end we receive perseverance from the Word (Romans 15:4). One cannot persevere without a prayerful and believing interaction with the Word. From the Word we receive all we stand in need of. In the end the Word is indispensable in every circumstance of life when it comes to standing firm and persevering. With the Word, the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord, we are to continue to encourage ourselves and each other, even when limitations and isolation increase. This is how God Himself works, the God of endurance and encouragement (Romans 15:5).

Perseverance and preservation

In the end this is not about perseverance until the pandemic or some other tribulation has passed. This is about the perseverance of the elect with a view to the coming salvation, as we, among others, confess in Canons of Dort 5:9: “Believers themselves can be certain of this preservation of the elect to salvation and the perseverance of true believers in the faith. And they are indeed certain according to the measure of their faith, by which they firmly believe that they are and always shall remain true and living members of the church, and that they have forgiveness of sins and life eternal.” (Feel free to read this whole chapter of the Canons of Dort). *

A MIGHTY FORTRESS IS OUR GOD

1. *A mighty fortress is our God,
a bulwark never failing;
our Helper he, amid the flood
of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe
doth seek to work us woe;
his craft and pow’r are great,
and armed with cruel hate.
On earth is not his equal.*

2. *Did we in our own strength confide,
our striving would be losing,
were not the right Man on our side,
the Man of God’s own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus, it is he;
Lord Sabaoth his name,
from age to age the same,
and he must win the battle.*

3. *And though this world, with devils filled,
should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear, for God has willed
his truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim,
we tremble not for him;
his rage we can endure,
for lo! his doom is sure;
one little word shall fell him.*

4. *That word above all earthly powers –
no thanks to them – abideth;
the Spirit and the gifts are ours
through him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go,
this mortal life also;
the body they may kill,
God’s truth abideth still;
his kingdom is forever.*

Martin Luther, 1529; tr. Frederick H. Hedge, 1852



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MORE BIRDS THAN BELIEVERS IN CHURCH

This past Sunday I had the privilege of leading worship in my home congregation just outside of Hamilton, Ontario. I arrived about ten minutes before the service began. Everyone was already in church ... all three of them! One elder, one brother taking care of sound and video, and one sister playing the piano. No more fellow believers joined us in the church building, although with a congregation of some 450 members, many were joining us from their homes via a livestream connection.

Alas, we have been living with this reality for about ten Sundays in a row here in Ontario. It is much the same in many other – but not all – places. To curb the spread of COVID-19, governments around the world have restricted large public gatherings. In Ontario (at the time of writing), no more than five are permitted to gather publicly. That is why there were only four of us in church.

But what about the birds? As I entered the building, one brother cheerfully quipped, “You have competition this morning. The birds are back.” You see, at present our congregation worships in a gymnasium. Resourceful feathered creatures sometimes discover a little gap somewhere up there in the roof. Are you also thinking of Psalm 84? The sparrow finds a home to rest / The swallow builds herself a nest (Book of Praise). By the volume of sound coming from that avian choir in the rafters, I would hazard an uneducated guess that there were more birds than believers in church this past Sunday.

In Article 27 of the Belgic Confession, we affirm that the church is “a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers.” When more birds than believers have assembled in a church building on Sunday, we have reason to grieve.

Caught between commands?

At least three divine commandments intersect in this circumstance. As part of the fourth commandment, we confess that we must “diligently attend the church of God to hear God's Word, to use the sacraments, to call publicly upon the LORD, and to give Christian offerings to the poor” (LD 38). So long as you have a good Internet connection and

your local congregation has livestreaming equipment, you can still see the preacher and hear the preaching quite well. Similarly, the minister can still lead us in public prayer, and by sending an e-transfer we can still give Christian alms. All of this is not nothing.

But so much is missing as well. In places where the restrictions are more severe, it is well nigh impossible to administer the sacraments. We sing psalms and hymns in our homes, but it does not even come close to the uplifting experience of singing together with hundreds of fellow believers in a building that is acoustically alive.

In short, did we “attend the church of God”? Well, sort of but not really. Psalm 122 rings in our ears and weighs down our hearts: “I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the LORD,” not stay in our own houses.

At the same time, in the fifth commandment, the LORD requires us to respect and obey our governing officials. Consider the words of Romans 13: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.... Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment” (vv. 1–2). Those words are both blunt and inspired.

This command still applies when governing authorities are unjust or unwise. The apostle Peter wrote, “Be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust” (1 Pet 2:18). But there is a limit to this, as well, for the same apostle said to the Sanhedrin, “We must obey God rather than man” (Acts 5:29). Do we have to break the fifth commandment and contravene the restrictions on public gatherings in order to keep the fourth commandment and assemble in church to worship God?

Answering that question is already complex, but now add the sixth commandment. This command not only prohibits murder but also calls us to “protect [our neighbour] from harm as much as we can” (LD 40). What now? If we fulfill the fourth commandment and attend the church of God, do we (potentially) break the sixth commandment by putting fellow believers, and by extension others with whom they may have contact, in harm's way?

We feel caught between the commands. Our consciences

“...we have reason to grieve...”

are hung up on the horns of a three-way dilemma. What is a sincere Christian to do?

Some historical perspective

As the Preacher teaches us, nothing is new under the sun (Eccl 1:10). Serious pandemics have afflicted the world before. For the sake of public health, governments have shut down church buildings before.

For example, between 1576 and 1578, during the plague of Milan, fifteen percent of that city's population died. At the peak of the infection curve, the city closed all "non-essential shops" and put into effect a "general quarantine," which also meant that public worship services were not permitted. Sound familiar?

The archbishop, a certain Carlo Borromeo, co-operated with local officials and organized the publication of booklets containing penitential Bible passages, prayers, and songs. These were then distributed, free of charge, to the citizens. At set times, when the church bell rang, everyone was to come to the doors and windows of their homes. Together the city recited prayers and sang songs. The cobbled streets of Milan, rather than the marbled nave of its cathedral, resounded with congregational singing. Can you imagine?

Similarly, in the fall of 1918 the so-called Spanish flu ravaged Philadelphia. On October 3, the city officials closed all schools. On October 4, they closed all saloons, theaters, and churches as well. For the balance of the month, everyone lived through a complete lockdown, other than doing what was necessary to feed their families and care for the sick, the dying, and the dead.

By the end of the month, though, the infection rate subsided

and things opened up again. As a sure sign of a different era, "the first step in removing the ban allowed churches and synagogues to open," although, at least in the case of the churches, "...without Sunday school."

History is interesting and instructive. We are certainly not the first generation to live through times like these. Still, history is not authoritative. The question remains: in the sight of our God, what are sincere Christians to do?

Do not subdivide the commands

Difficult circumstances can either push us apart or pull us together. Let us earnestly pray that it would be the latter. It is hard, though, to keep our minds simultaneously focussed on all the commands involved.

One believer quickly zeroes in on the fourth commandment:

God calls us to assemble for worship, therefore, we must assemble for worship. The heart of the next child of God, though, is gripped by the truth of

"We feel caught between the commands..."

the fifth commandment. God warns that if we resist the authorities he has put in place, we will incur judgment. Surely we need to take that seriously, don't we? Then, yet another brother or sister in the Lord feels the burden of the sixth commandment, being concerned that he or she might seriously endanger someone else's health. Asymptomatic transmission is a reality, after all. Different people emphasize different commands, and if they do it too aggressively, they may inadvertently push us apart from each other. We will need to have patience with each other and be mindful of each other's consciences.

Beyond that, though, be assured that there is no three-way dilemma in the Word of our God. Just as surely as Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35), it cannot be sub-divided either. The whole law is fulfilled in one key word: love (Matt 22:37-40; Gal 5:14; LD 2). Intertwined love for God and our neighbour will provide the unifying departure point for us all.

Walk forward in love

"I love the Lord" (Ps 116) and "I love your saints" (Ps 16) are the twin-engines of holy desire that propel us out of bed, into our cars, and on toward our church buildings twice a Sunday. Right? But that plush recliner in my family room is more comfortable than the oak pew in church, isn't it? And an extra hour of sleep on Sunday morning is rather nice, too, isn't it?

The Lord can, and will, use the COVID-19 pandemic to refine



our love-filled loyalty to him and burn away all dross of custom, superstition, or hypocrisy in our obedience of the fourth commandment. If our souls are yearning to be back in the courts of our God with our fellow believers (Ps 63), then our God is fulfilling his promise to take evil and turn it to our benefit.

Next, holding the fourth and sixth commandments together is already familiar territory for us. I long to attend the church of God, but if I'm seriously sick with an infectious disease I'll have to stay home or take other significant precautions so that I don't harm others. In such a case I am not breaking the fourth commandment in order to keep the sixth. Why not? Because in God's law love for him and love for the neighbour do not compete; instead, they complement.

For example, in the OT when some of his own people had serious diseases, God himself quarantined them "outside the camp," thereby also keeping them away from public worship (Lev 13, 14). To be sure, these laws were more than a public health matter. They also involved other, deeper, spiritual lessons. But as a loving Father, our God also ensured that public worship gatherings would not become seedbeds for the spread of serious sickness. Under certain circumstances, then, loving both God and our neighbour means we may need to stay away from public worship.

These biblical principles also apply as we deal with COVID-19. On the one hand, excessive fear of viruses should not stop us from assembling for worship. The Holy Spirit teaches us that the wise man will not be immobilized by unwarranted fear of lions on the road or, by extension, of viruses in the pews (Prov 26:13). On the other hand, love for the neighbour and for our heavenly Father who upholds our neighbour's health will compel us to exercise all due caution. In short, love and wisdom pave a path that holds the fourth and sixth commandments in harmony.

Fulfilling the fifth commandment in these present circumstances is more challenging but not impossible. In the final words of his Institutes, John Calvin reminds us that government officials may well have to correct some of their fellow officials when they act unjustly or unwisely (Institutes 4.20.31). Faced with the double affliction of both plague and persecution, Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor, also recommended working through the "lower magistrates" in order to redirect "higher magistrates," who may fail to uphold what is right and wise in the eyes of God.

This approach fits well with Romans 13. In verses 1–2, we read how the Lord instituted "governing authorities," not authority. The plural noun is significant. No one, single



person in authority embodies all the wisdom required to rule, especially in challenging circumstances like COVID-19. If some governing officials are acting unwisely or unfairly toward the church, even if their intentions are noble, then believers can work with and through other officials in order to promote the necessary corrective re-balancing. In this way, we honour all the authorities in their God-given calling and in doing so, honour God himself. Again, love for the neighbour and love for God cohere rather than conflict.

Thankfully, in some areas, we even have members of our Reformed congregation serving as government officials in town councils, provincial, and federal parliaments. Without denying the value of other efforts and initiatives, let us earnestly support and spur on these fellow believers, as well as any other elected representatives who will lend a sympathetic ear. The goal will be that, under the Lord's blessing, as soon as it is safe to increase the size of public gatherings, the church will be the first in line to benefit, not the last. This approach also holds together the fourth and fifth and sixth commandments.

May our God swiftly bring the day when the believers again far outnumber the birds in church. And may our chorus of congregational praise soon drown out their beautiful little chirps with a mighty sound that shakes the ground (Psalm 150, Book of Praise)! ✱

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THE LIGHT OF PREACHING

"Once upon a time ..."

"This reminds me of a story about ..."

"This idea might sound strange, but you actually experience the same thing in everyday life when you ..."

"Think about it this way, when you were little, did your parents ever ..."

What do all these phrases have in common? They are just a few examples of the millions of different ways that a preacher might introduce an illustration in a sermon. Each one of these phrases signals that we are about to hear how this great spiritual truth connects to life, or how we might better understand what it all means. The word illustration comes from the Latin word meaning *to shed light on, to illumine*. The purpose of an illustration is not to entertain, but to explain a concept so that the congregation is better informed. Charles Spurgeon called illustrations the windows of the sermon which let in light. A windowless building could easily feel like a prison, and a sermon without illustration might feel just as dark. Some of you may think that statement goes too far, but let me ask you a question. How many of us have had the experience where we felt trapped in a dull sermon that seemed like it would never end?! I confess that at least a few times, I felt that while preaching one of my own sermons! More than once, I realized *while preaching* that I had failed to include sufficient illustrations, analogies or concrete and expressive phrases. Can you imagine the horror of standing in front of God's people with great truths of eternal importance which they need to hear and yet being unprepared to communicate those truths in an engaging and understandable way? By God's grace, there were certainly some who still learned God's truth from those sermons. But I had taken the filet mignon of God's Word and served it undercooked and under-seasoned. Such glorious ingredients must be treated with respect and served in the most palatable and appetizing way! The same is true of God's Word. Preachers don't slap the raw passage of Scripture onto the pulpit and call it a sermon. Rather, ministers of the gospel seek to stew-in and study the Word that we might have an accurate, expressive, understandable message to give to God's people which will inform, stir, and

motivate them to godliness and faith.

If you have ever walked through an art gallery or museum, then you have seen many physical illustrations. Each painting has one or more lights shining just in the right way to highlight every detail of the painting, and yet, how often did you notice anything about those lamps? Illustrations are the lamps which help you see God's truth, but in such a way that it is the truth which stands out most. Too often people come away from a sermon and they talk about the wonderful illustration or story, but they can't remember the spiritual point or principle. That is just as tragic as someone leaving an art gallery saying, "what beautiful spot lamps they use here." This could happen because of poor preaching or poor listening, or more likely, a combination of the two. Which leads us to a vital concept: while illustrations are important, they must be used properly or they can cause harm!

When I was first asked to write this article, I confess that I was both delighted and terrified. Why? I was delighted because illustrations are the lifeblood of preaching. A few wisely chosen illustrations can make a difficult principle understandable, or they can make a well-worn doctrine come alive with fresh appeal. However, I was also afraid, because illustrations are a double-edged sword. They can be used of God to cut to the heart, or they can be the tools of the evil one to entertain, dull the mind, and distract from God's truth. While food without salt is often unpalatable, a meal of only salt is inedible and unhealthy. Too much illustration can lull a congregation into a spiritual coma where they confuse entertainment with true spiritual food. Perhaps even worse, such over-saturation of illustrations and stories in bad preaching can cause the opposite problem in conservative biblical churches. Fearing to go too far, faithful ministers avoid illustration to the detriment of their congregations. It is an ironic truth that you can be blinded by both too much light and insufficient light!

So, what is the right amount of illustration? That is much like asking, "How bright should the lights be?" The answer is the same, "Well, that depends ..." I believe that we first need to understand what illustrations are and how they are used, and that should guide us to how they can be beneficial in preaching.

Author: Rev. Daniel Wilson

Daniel Wilson is a minister with the Reformed Churches in New Zealand.



If I were to give you a sermon and ask you to count the illustrations, do you think that you could recognize them all? You might think, “Sure, all I have to do is count the stories, right?” Wrong. There are many types of illustrations:

1. Expressive or sensory language can be an illustration. There are words which communicate a paragraph of meaning in a single word. I can speak of a bad smell, or I could use the word stench. Words such as brutal, horrific, gluttonous, bruising and grotesque carry a weight of meaning which helps the congregation to feel, smell, or see the idea that you are describing in their mind. However, you must be careful not to use words which your congregation doesn't know – for a major part of illustration is using the known to explain something new.
2. Allusions or references to items in everyday life can be powerful illustrations of biblical truth. Rev. Paul Archbald will discuss this in a later article, but Jesus's sermons and teaching were full of parables from everyday life. The prophets and psalms also are full of brief references to the human body, to the sun, moon and stars, and to all types of items from everyday life. This kind of illustration is often only a single phrase or sentence. The power of brief similes or analogies is that the preacher takes something that is well-known and he uses it to explain something new. Using the known to explain the unknown is the foundation for all learning. The Puritans often used this form of illustration. Thomas Watson is one of my favorite authors, and his writings are full of these tiny gems of illustration. “Keys that are often used are bright, but if they are laid aside and never used, they grow rusty. So it is with men's hearts. If they are not used to family prayer [i.e. devotions], they will be rusted over with sin.”
3. Well-known ideas from the Bible can also be used as similes and metaphors. When describing how to fight for spiritual growth while in trial, Watson said: “Get some honey out of this lion.” For the Christian who knows the story of Samson well, that single phrase speaks volumes. Watson wasn't “spiritualizing” the reference to Samson and acting as if the original purpose of that story was to tell us how to grow spiritually during trial! Rather, Watson was referring to

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

“Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”
Matthew 6:25-34

how God gave sweet food where previously there had been a threat, and in a similar way, God may sanctify and enrich His people spiritually in the midst of threatening or painful situations. All that was communicated in seven words. It is true that not everyone will catch the full meaning of every allusion. But the point is not to grab everyone with every illustration, but to use enough variety of illustration that you shed light on the subject for all of God's people.

4. Quotations from books, history, authors or other ministers are another powerful source of illustration. When I began looking through a Thomas Watson book to see how he used illustration, I passed over half a dozen useful quotes from a variety of sources (from the history of King Henry VII to Arab proverbs and Greek classical literature).
5. Stories and extended examples are probably the best-known form of illustration. I do not need to give an example of these, but I should give a warning. There is a form of preaching called the *string of pearls* where a preacher collects stories which match or illustrate his theme. Such sermons rarely examine the text or give detailed explanation or application of God's truth. Instead, they basically only entertain the congregation.

This must be avoided at all costs. In his book, *The Art of Illustration*, Spurgeon gives this warning: “While we commend illustrations for necessary uses, it must be remembered that they are not the strength of a sermon any more than a window is the strength of a house; and for this reason ... they should not be too numerous. ... It is possible to have too much of a good thing ...”¹ Buildings without windows and sermons without illustration may seem like prisons, but they are far safer than glass houses and sermons full of stories but empty of content.


I am hoping that, after reading this list, some of you are realizing that your minister uses illustrations more than you initially thought! Many Puritan sermons were 50% illustration and application. But, it is only when you understand the various forms of illustration that you realize how frequently they go beyond basic explanation to shed light on the subject.

So, what do you do the next time you are especially moved by a story, quote, or biblical allusion in a sermon?

- a. Before you do anything else, note how that particular illustration connected to the main point. If you write that down (or type a note in your phone) it will help you remember that point or principle for much longer than if you don't.
- b. Later that same day, take some time to think through why it was that you were struck and affected by that illustration. It might be useful to speak to someone about what you experienced to help you figure this out. Share what you learn with your family or friends. Never allow spiritual lessons to remain private in your own mind, when you could share them to the benefit of others. It may be that what you learned was different from someone else, and together you will help each other grow further still.
- c. Tell your minister what helped you understand the sermon. I find it useful to hear what was moving or helpful in my sermons. More than once I have had experienced and mature elders tell me that one of the children's illustrations from my sermon helped them understand a doctrine which they had never quite been able to comprehend. This has encouraged me to not be afraid of speaking to different categories of hearers in the congregation, because while I may think that I am explaining that idea to the children, it might be the parents, elders, deacons or the unsaved who are

benefiting!

- d. Finally, remember that while useful, illustrations are meant to keep the focus on God's truth! Just because God uses one powerfully in your life, doesn't mean that you should start listening especially for the illustrations. Keep the light focused on the painting, and don't try to drive at night staring at the street lamps. Keep your eyes on the main thing, and illustrations will then function best to God's glory and your benefit!

1 C.H. Spurgeon, *The Art of Illustration* (New York, Wilbur B Ketcham, 1894) pg.15 

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Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Luke 15:1-10

Authors: Joseph Njuguna & Jan Buchanan

Joseph Njuguna is a Kenyan serving with Every Village, in partnership with Cush4Christ. He supports Christian radio work technically and trains and mentors local staff.

Jan Buchanan hails from Canada. Her main role on the Cush4Christ team is teaching at Cush Christian School, the team's education ministry.



THE MEDIATORIAL KINGSHIP OF CHRIST AT WORK IN SOUTH SUDAN

Last October at the annual Weer Bei FM Pastors' Conference, pastors were asked how Weer Bei ("Redemption") radio could serve them better. A pastor from Marial Bai, 55 miles northwest of the station, shared that the quality of the radio signal in his area was poor. People were putting tall antennas on their huts to receive Weer Bei. Others, from farther west where there was no signal at all, were walking several miles to Marial Bai daily to listen. "Could Weer Bei install a repeater station in Marial Bai?" the pastor asked.

The pastor's request was compelling. A repeater station receives a radio signal and re-transmits it at a higher power so it can cover greater distances, and it could certainly help the people in Marial Bai and beyond. However, the only place Weer Bei staff knew of to get a tower for the station was Nairobi, Kenya—1300 miles away. Purchasing and transporting the tower would be very expensive and logistically challenging! The radio staff entrusted the matter to the Lord and left it at that.

A few months later, they learned that a Christian ministry in Juba, the capital city of South Sudan, was selling towers. How providential! One of these towers would be cheaper and much closer than a new one from Nairobi. Meanwhile, the pastors in Marial Bai had obtained land for the station free of charge from the local government, and one of Weer Bei's partner organizations agreed to provide the funds to purchase the tower.

Only one challenge remained: transportation from Juba to Marial Bai. Quotes received from transport companies were very high. Some sections of the road

are in poor condition, and there are security risks from militia groups and roadblocks where bribes must be paid.

As Weer Bei staff prayed, the Lord brought to mind that the military could perhaps be of help. Weer Bei has a good relationship with a nearby military base and its chaplaincy. Radio staff have taught the Bible at the base and also distributed solar powered radios and audio bibles there.

After hearing of the need, the base commanding officer connected Weer Bei with a higher commander in Juba. The commander knew of the Weer Bei ministry, and he and his team agreed to transport the tower from Juba to Marial Bai. Weer Bei only needed to pay the cost of fuel. What a joy to see the Lord provide in a such a wonderful way!

Eight soldiers accompanied the big military truck transporting the tower, and the trip was blessedly uneventful: no trouble from militia groups, no bribes to pay at roadblocks. The tower arrived safely in Marial Bai in August. Lord willing, it will be installed and the repeater station will begin broadcasting by the end of October, a year after the request for a repeater tower was made. *



Military officers off loading the radio tower.

Weer Bei Radio is a locally-run Christian radio station in Wanyjok, South Sudan that is overseen in partnership with Cush4Christ, Reformed Presbyterian Global Missions' church-planting team in South Sudan (rpglobalmission.org) and Every Village (everyvillage.org).

CALL FOR MUTUAL HELP COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Author: Dr. Pieter Boon

Pieter Boon is a minister with the Free Reformed Churches in South Africa. He serves as secretary of the ICRC Diaconal Committee.



Never before have churches of the *International Conference of Reformed Churches* experienced such a disruptive year! Probably no single member church can recall a time in which church buildings stood empty for months on end. Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic, combined with the reactions of governments across the globe, deeply impacted on church life. In the country where I live, South Africa, worship services in church buildings were not allowed since April 2020, and since July 2020 only services with a maximum of 50 people were allowed, lasting until the now, when I am writing this article (end of August), and it will probably continue for some more months. Restrictive measures such as these in South Africa were no exception. I haven't heard of a country where an ICRC federation is located, where this was not the case.

These extremely invasive measures of governments into church life were met with mixed reactions. Some sympathized, acknowledging that it was necessary to flatten the curve of the Covid-19 infections, yet at the other hand conspiracy theories about governments trying to silence the churches, were also rife.

Fortunately in these times the Lord provided many technical solutions, making it possible that in most cases worship services could continue, using for example livestreaming on the internet, or pre-recording the services. Church life could also continue to a certain extent, making use of internet platforms such as Skype, Zoom, Whatsapp, Facebook and the like.

In May-July 2020 the Diaconal Committee conducted a survey among ICRC member churches, in order to find out how everyone was coping. These were a few of the findings:

- Yes, there were deaths because of Covid-19, especially among the elderly and those with other medical conditions. In Scotland, for example, one of the retired ministers passed on due to Covid-19.
- In general the fatalities in the

churches were / are comparable to the average in each country among the population at large. Church members are fully part of their society.

- Most churches managed to continue with worship services, although in digital format. Many ministers started recording daily or weekly devotions for their members to watch or listen. Not seldom did these devotions focus on passages about epidemics and natural disasters in the Bible, the Mosaic legislation on leprosy, the way Jesus treated lepers and the like.

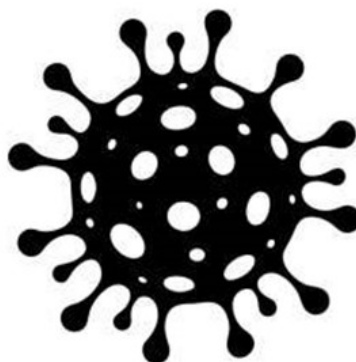
- Indeed, neither Covid-19 nor government restrictions could silence the Gospel! Some churches reported that thanks to their activities on internet, more non-members could be reached with the Gospel than before.

- In all countries Covid-19 caused an economic recession, also impacting on the churches. Many churches reported job losses among their members, or decreased job opportunities. However, it was also reported more than once that with the increased threat of poverty, there was also an increased willingness among church members to give for causes both inside and outside the churches. Covid-19 indeed precipitated Christian compassion to come to the fore more than usually. We sincerely thank the Lord, from whom all blessings come, for this!

- Especially in the poorer (third world) countries, Covid-19 caused huge economic damage. Apart from many members losing their income, some ICRC federations in these

countries reported that in the months of lockdown they lost most of their usual collections, with the consequence that many of their pastors lost their livelihood. Whereas in first world countries churches reported a switch to innning their financial contributions and collections via electronic means (such as SnapScan), these options are often not yet available in the third world.

At this stage, all the restrictive measures have most probably saved many lives, yet at the other hand these




same measures had many other negative consequences across continents.

First, we yearn for the day that church services at full capacity will be legal again! Although the internet, computer and mobile phone technology proved extremely helpful to maintain the community of saints, every believer who truly loves the Lord and his church, realizes that this is not as it was meant to be.

Second, the restrictive measures also caused huge economic damage, also to churches, and mostly in the third world. Especially with regards to this last point, the Diaconal Committee would like to call on all ICRC churches to reach out to one another. As a Diaconal Committee our role is not to distribute funds, but to network. In this regard we would like to ask your compassionate attention especially to those

ICRC churches in Kenya, India and Indonesia. If you haven't established personal bonds with these churches yet, you are welcome to make use of the following ICRC federations or trusted organizations supported by ICRC churches, in order to channel your financial contributions to these severely stricken federations as in the table elsewhere on this page.

For more feedback on the survey, per continent, please visit <https://www.icrconline.com/news>

It is important to note that the whole situation regarding the Covid-19 pandemic is very fluid. The survey only offers a “snapshot” of the situation halfway the year 2020. 

Country	Help via	Contact Person
India	Organization: Word & Deed	Rick Postma email: publicrelations@wordanddeed.org
Indonesia	Organization: kerkenhelpenkerken.nl	Janneke de Vries email: J.deVries@verrenaasten.nl
Kenya	Organization: Presbyterian Church Disaster Response	David Nakhla email: david.nakhla@opc.org

The Lord willing
 the next
General Meeting
 of
the International Conference of Reformed Churches
 will take place in
Windhoek, Namibia
 in
October 2021
 hosted by
the Reformed Churches in Namibia and South Africa



Author: Dr. Gerhard Visscher

Gerhard Visscher is a minister with the Canadian Reformed Churches, emeritus professor of New Testament with the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary. He serves as secretary of the ICRC Theological Education Committee.

TEC CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

1. **Opening:** The chair of TEC, Douw Breed, opens with prayer and reading from Psalm 3. He welcomes the brothers who are present by Zoom.

2. **Attendance:** Present (virtually) are the members of the TEC Committee (Jim Beeke, Douw Breed, Tony Curto, Matthew Ebenezer, Melle Oosterhuis, and Jerry Visscher) and 23 delegates from the following invited and registered seminaries (except for #14 and #16):

1. Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary – Canada
 2. Edinburgh Theological Seminary – Scotland
 3. Erskine College & Seminary – United States
 4. Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary – United States
 5. Karoli Gaspar Institute of Theology & Missions – Hungary
 6. Mid-America Reformed Seminary – United States
 7. Mukhanyo Theological College – South Africa
 8. Presbyterian Theological College – Australia
 9. Presbyterian Theological Seminary – India
 10. Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary – United States
 11. Reformed Theological College – Australia
 12. Theological College of Reformed Churches in Indonesia – Indonesia
 13. Theological School Potchefstroom of the Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid Afrika – South Africa
 14. Theological University of Apeldoorn – Netherlands
 15. Westminster Theological Seminary – United States
 16. Whitefield Theological College – United States
- Douw Breed acknowledges these brothers, and each has the opportunity to pass on a very brief greeting.

3. **The agenda** (italicized portions below) is then worked through.

a. Assisting Each Other. Share thoughts regarding: How can we assist each other? What needs are you experiencing? What could you contribute to assist others? Ways that we could work collectively or interested seminaries work together for more mutual benefit?

Douw introduces the topic and asks for suggestions as to how assistance might be rendered. Questions are asked

about online education and the new possibilities of co-operation available because everyone is online. Cooperation might also be possible with a view to database vendors for online resources if a consortium is created of the seminaries. The possibility of having others teach through physical presence as well as online is mentioned. Sharing faculty resources (books, articles, lecture material) is also discussed. The fact that each seminary has its own specific context which may be somewhat of a hindrance with respect to lectures is also noted. The question is asked whether any seminary has specific needs. Pila Njuka from Sumba, Indonesia expresses an interest in having others come to Sumba to teach; challenges with a view to a building is also mentioned. The challenge of having students move to different contexts for study purpose is also highlighted. The brothers from India highlight the need for physical books in majority world countries where the Internet is not as reliable.

b. Online Forum? Discuss whether online forums may be helpful for specific areas of interest; e.g. forums for presidents, academic deans, professors of systematic theology or New Testament or Church History, etc.? - Introductory presentation by Jerry Visscher, ICRC TEC Secretary

After Jerry makes his presentation on the possible usefulness of an online forum, a discussion follows. Several express the need for this with a view to the regulatory work of seminaries and the pressures of accreditation. There seems to be agreement regarding the benefit of OT professors, e.g., communicating with other OT professors, dogmaticians with dogmaticians, principals with principals, etc. It is emphasized that it would be helpful if specializations are also highlighted. This would not replace regional conferences but hopefully augment such. It is suggested that Jerry Visscher and the TEC Committee spearhead the development of this forum.

c. Topics for Future Discussion. Identify topics that would be of greatest interest and help, as well as type of presentation/discussion format(s) you would prefer when

we hold our first in-person meeting in Namibia in 2021? – Introductory presentation by Tony Curto, ICRC TEC Member. NOTE: The next ICRC Conference (held once every 4 years) is scheduled for October 13-19, 2021 in Windhoek, Namibia. Our first in-person ICRC-related Seminaries Meeting will be linked with the ICRC Conference, possibly a day before and/or after and/or interspersed throughout the ICRC Conference days. We are interested in hearing your scheduling thoughts and preferences in this regard.

Tony makes his presentation and asks for input re ways in which a conference in Namibia may be beneficial. The need is expressed to ensure that the agenda not be driven by the North American institutions. Some topics mentioned are: the ethics of institutions re funding, the prophetic place of schools in the public square and witnessing to society, spiritual formation, mentoring, promoting equality, curricula development, the relation between the seminary and the churches, regulation, accreditation and the challenge of standing up in a day when Christianity is persecuted. The suggestion is made that each college sends suggestions to TEC re the desired topics for the 2021 conference. A suggestion is made to ensure that the

meeting of seminaries be compacted rather than spread over days, perhaps at the end of the full ICRC conference.

d. Any other issues or questions. Nothing else is brought forward.

e. Closing. The meeting was closed in prayer by Matthew Ebenezer from India around 11:30 a.m.

4. “Takeaways.” In a subsequent TEC Zoom meeting, the conference is discussed. The “takeaways” from the meeting which the TEC Committee will follow up on are:

a. Organising the forum. It is agreed that security issues can be addressed concurrently with rather than before the organization of the forum. The forum will have areas for principals, academic deans, librarians, professors by subject area, to discuss common concerns. Attention will be paid to specialty areas.

b. A consortium of online resources. While this may grow spontaneously from the forum, the TEC will try to ensure that this matter receives due attention.

c. Availability of professors to teach. An attempt will be made to create a list of professors willing to teach 1-2+ week courses in majority world seminaries.

d. Topics for the 2021 Namibia Seminary Conference. TEC will soon request seminaries to submit preferred topics and will give special attention to requests from the majority world.

e. Organization of the 2021 Namibia Seminary Conference. TEC will consider carefully the scheduling of this conference.

f. Communicate with ICRC Regional Organizations to encourage inclusion of regional Reformed seminaries meetings in connection with regional ICRC Conferences.

After the meeting, on August 25-26, 2020, the TEC Committee agreed that these notes were an accurate reflection of the proceedings of the conference. ❁



Theological University of the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, located in the city of Apeldoorn.

THE CANDLESTAND STATEMENT: REVELATION AND BIBLE

Editor's introduction: Within ICRC circles there is much discussion about hermeneutics, the discipline of understanding Scripture. In 2004, fourteen church leaders set themselves the task of drafting a faith statement against the surging tide of the charismatic movement. Its first part touched on the issue of revelation and Bible. We reproduce it here to encourage reflection on what it means to be faithful to God's chosen instrument of revelation in today's world: the Holy Scriptures.

Some of the authors serve today as leaders with ICRC member churches. The statement they produced is known as the Candlestand Statement as the church building they were working in was known as the Candlestand Church.

A GIFT OF REFORMED MUTUALITY: THE CANDLESTAND STATEMENT

Reformed considerations regarding the Charismatic Movement composed by 14 church-leaders from Kenya, Indonesia, Uganda, The Netherlands, South-Africa, India and Zimbabwe; Pentecost 2004

Preamble

To all believers of Reformed faith, and for all that desire to have sound Biblical teaching.

We, churchleaders of different churches and nationalities, being concerned about the growing influence of the Charismatic Movement around the world, and the unpreparedness of our churches to meet its impact, feel obliged to make the following statements about the use of the Holy Bible, the work of the Holy Spirit and the Gifts of Grace.

One of the foremost characteristics of Reformed or Presbyterian churches is that they should always be reforming - *Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda*. This rule calls the churches that are rooted in the Great Reformation, to a progressive and dynamic attitude, and willingness to always adjust to the Word of God alone - *Sola Scriptura*. The church must apply its developing insights to God's Word to the needs of everchanging times and circumstances. This important characteristic of being Reformed should guard the church against formalism, traditionalism, or laziness to meet the concrete needs of the

church in her context. Church history shows that the church has striven to be faithful and zealous in living up to the reformed standards and in meeting the criteria of the criteria of being a true church of Jesus Christ.

On the other hand we have to acknowledge that we and other so called 'traditional churches' are not always successful in avoiding unhealthy and formalistic views on tradition and also on doctrine. Sometimes we have to admit that churches are trapped in the pitfalls of rigid formalism, traditionalism or dogmatism.

We also observe that many Christian churches tolerate the misleading influence of false teachings in their midst. We briefly mention liberalism, modernism, and wrong forms of ecumenism. This creates a fertile soil for all kind of teaching in the churches, preparing the way for secularism, or the charismatic movement.

Even when we do not recognise the mentioned elements in our own churches, the Bible gives us enough reason to regularly examine ourselves by asking the important questions on the Biblical standards of Christian spirituality and church-life. Do we really strive to live up to these standards? Or have we become lukewarm, and clever in making up arguments, to hide behind our church-walls, avoiding the consequences of our confession, of holiness, of being the children of God's covenant?

With regard to the work of the Holy Spirit: are we receptive or alert to the leading of the Spirit? Or are we succeeding in suppressing private experiences of the of the Spirit through the Word of God, by not allowing the expression of emotions and special experiences in our worship or in our Christian lives? Are we intentionally losing grip on the ethical aspects of our Christian lives, to grant ourselves a life not transformed by the Word of God, but conforming to the standards of the world?

We do not suggest easy answers to all these questions, however, we should be aware of our responsibility to lead the churches that Jesus Christ has entrusted to us, along the pitfalls and cliffs of all these. If not, we are preparing the ground for falsehood to grow abundantly within our ranks, overcoming and swallowing away our *sound teachings*. These teachings which, however sound they might be, have not succeeded in preserving the church from lifelessness, lukewarmness and unholiness. Therefore, we humble

ourselves before our Lord, and we confess our weaknesses and shortcomings in leading His beloved church, and pledge to make ourselves more available in His service.

At the same time we pray for His wisdom and guidance to fight against any false teaching and prophecy, and to do this in a biblical loving way. Our attitude should be open to other opinions, and receptive to good points and suggestions, and avoid being too quick to judge or prejudice other teachings or understandings of God's Word. We should show willingness to sincerely seek points of contacts with others, to find together the truth of God's Word.

Our loving and respectful attitude should not excuse us from persevering in sound teaching, and openly and clearly refute false teachings suited to the desires of men. In order that we may live according to the Biblical standards of persevering in sound doctrine and true Christian life, through faith alone – *Sola Fide*, dependent on God's grace alone – *Sola Gratia*. Let us be patient, let the love of Christ reign in our hearts and determine our attitude.

May the Lord help us, and may His Spirit guide us to understanding the Word of God in preserving the truth in His Church. To Him who is able to establish us by the gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, to the only wise God, be glory forever, through Jesus Christ!

Glory be to Him alone - *Soli Deo Gloria!* Amen

Candlestand-Church, Amersfoort, The Netherlands, Pentecost 2004

Part 1: Revelation and Bible

1.1 ABOUT REVELATION

1.1. - 1 Revelation

We believe in the Sovereign and Almighty God, creator of heaven, earth, and all that is created. He made man according to his image and likeness, giving him special qualities, making him responsible and capable to listen, to answer and to understand. The eternal God took the initiative to make Himself known to man. He was in fellowship with man, revealing His will, love and holiness to him. But man gave ear to the words of Satan. As a result of this man subjected himself to sin, and consequently to death, curse and corruption.

Irrespective of that, God did not cease to reveal Himself to man, but He came to search for him and to call him. He punished man because of his rebellion, but also promised the coming of a Saviour. A divine plan of reconciliation of all things was set up, to be fulfilled along the destined designed

lines of history. We confess the accomplishment of this plan in Jesus Christ, in order that, as recorded for us in the Scriptures, “we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing we may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

1.1. - 2 The Bible

In Jesus Christ, God's revelation received its climax and centre (Heb. 1:1-2). By his Holy Spirit God carefully handed down all that we need to know Him, and his redemptive works. We receive this knowledge through the Holy Scriptures, the Bible, covering the whole history of redemption, the teachings of the prophets and apostles. The works of creation and providence give us a sense of the existence of a divine being. The Bible is the only source containing sufficient information to really know the person of the creator of all things. By the Bible we also know the whole will of God needed for our salvation and comfort, as well as for the edification and guidance of our personal and congregational lives.

1.1. - 3 Completeness of the Bible

We believe that God has completed this work of authoritative revelation, recorded for us in the Scriptures. By reading and explaining the Scriptures the Holy Spirit will lead us to understand God's plan and will, and to believe his promises for today and for the days to come. This work of subjecting ourselves to the truth of the Bible provides the only source for teaching, reproof, correction, training in righteousness, and adequately equips us for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-17).

1.2 UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

1.2. - 4 The Bible and the church

We receive the 66 books of the Bible, 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament, as the only and sufficient source for the church to know God and His redemptive works. Although the Bible is composed of many different books, we acknowledge that it conveys the one, coherent story of God's redemptive revelation.

It is through this coherent story of God's revelation that we are enabled to know the Triune God, His great deeds, and His deep love for His creation and mankind. The church of all ages is established through the witness of the Prophets and Apostles (Eph. 2:20).

The church, being grateful for this special love, fully trusting that God will accomplish His plan, is equipped and

illuminated by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the gospel of total restoration to the world in Christ Jesus.

1.2. - 5 The need of Bible interpretation

We believe that the Bible can be read and understood by everyone who submits himself to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Yet, we believe that a thorough and competent method of interpreting the Bible is desirable and therefore should be encouraged, so that the church will be able to carry out its mandate and responsibilities in the right way. The need of such a method of interpretation is caused by the long historical distance between the ancient context of the Bible and the present situation of the church. This need is felt even more due to the rise of modern thoughts denying the divine authority of Scriptures.

Such a method of interpretation is needed for the faithful proclamation of the gospel, for the edification and expansion of the church. It provides the sound basis for theological understanding, and an important tool to support fruitful Bible-study.

We believe that the church should pray for opportunities to provide appropriate training to ensure that there are dedicated and spiritually motivated members of the church. Church leaders should be capable to rightly interpret the Bible and further the proclamation of the gospel, good preaching and sound theological development.

1.2. - 6 Hermeneutics and exegesis

We believe that biblical texts in the Bible as a whole communicate in a more or less clear (but often also complicated) way what the Divine Author intended to communicate.

We believe that the Biblical texts contains historical, literary and doctrinal aspects. We believe the trustworthiness of biblical events, the writer and the text. We believe that as a basis for this comprehensive mandate and responsibility of the church, the goal of interpretation of the Bible is to discover the intention of the Divine Author, and therefore we have to understand the original intended authorial meaning in the communication of the author to the addressed to his text. We believe that in our efforts to understand the original meaning of the text, it is important for us to acknowledge that these texts are based on specific phases of the coherent story of God's revelation.

For example, it is important to take into account that the books of the New Testament are related to the specific transitional phase of the realisation of God's plan. The life

and work of Jesus Christ broke down the temporary wall between Israel and the nations. The proclamation of the Gospel initiated the gathering of the whole worldwide church.

1.2. - 7 Application of Bible words

We apply the Scriptures to our present times by the transferring of the authorial meaning to our context. It is to be expected that applications may vary in time and place. For example, we do not recognize our governments to be theocratic as it was during the Old Covenant. Compared with biblical times, our society and time is influenced by quite different religions, philosophies, ideologies and world-views. The situation of the modern world is incomparable with the situation in which the first congregations lived.

Therefore, applying the Bible to our modern times we have to take into account the many factors that are different. We should avoid superficial similarities, and we are obligated to supply understanding on the basis of good studies.

This does not discourage the members of the church from reading their Bible every day, on the contrary. Regular reading provides more understanding. There should be a willingness to read, openness to accept guidance and correction by means of Bible-study, and regular listening to preaching and teaching of the Word.

1.3 THE POWER OF HOLY SCRIPTURES

1.3 - 8 The Scriptures as precious gift

We confess the Holy Spirit breathed the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as his very precious gift or charisma. By giving these written documents the Spirit convinces us that God's revelation is reliable, unchangeable, and undeceitful. In reading and hearing the Scriptures we express our gratefulness to the Spirit. For believers this reading and hearing is an act of obedience, by which the Spirit opens their hearts and lives to be governed and renewed in Christ.

1.3. - 9 The power of the Scriptures

We confess that the Holy Spirit cares for the Scriptures, and continues to empower the biblical text. We do realise that the better we study the Bible, the more we come nearer to God in our relationship with Him. We hear the loving voice of our Saviour speaking to us in our daily lives, and in this way we experience the intimate fellowship with the Spirit. God Himself promised His Spirit to be present, whenever a

believer opens the Bible and reads from it. "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and the one who hears it and takes to the heart what is written in it" (Rev.1:3). This close fellowship with the Word of God strengthens faith, comforts and makes the believer trust in the Lord. The power of the Spirit will fill him more and more, and enable him to rely fully on the Lord Jesus Christ during good and evil times. (Ecc. 7:14)

1.3. - 10 *The messenger of the Scriptures*

We confess that the Bible communicates to us divine revelation, which is, in its divine mysteries, far beyond the human capabilities of understanding (Ro. 11:32). We believe that God chooses people to bring the message of redemption: "Blessed are the feet of those who bring good tidings" (Is. 52:7). Therefore the messenger should be trustworthy, a solid, convinced believer, who honours the Scriptures as the gift of the Holy Spirit. On faithful prayer the Holy Spirit will graciously bless the message that is prepared by proper study and meditation of the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit then exercises His power and enables the reader and listener to really hear and accept the bearing of the message. We pray for a humble attitude of preachers and teachers to leave the power and the effect of preaching in the hand of the living Lord and the Holy Spirit.

1.3. - 11 *Illumination and personal experience*

We believe that the preaching of the Word of God bears fruits in the lives of His children - by this holy work the Spirit is leading, guiding, illuminating and governing our lives. That means, He is giving the true understanding of the Scriptures (1 Cor.2:16). This work of the Spirit influences our whole being; mind, soul, emotions, and conscience. This is the reason that sometimes we explain special experiences or unexpected circumstances as God's guiding hand in our personal lives, for instance to encourage us to follow godliness.

Dreams are part of a natural process, associated with daily life. In general a dream today, as reflection on human perceptions, cannot be a normative standard to know the truth. The guidance of dreams and other special experiences always has to be subjected to the authoritative message of the Bible. It is our responsibility to give ourselves to be led, guided, and transformed by the Spirit, by using our human insights in the way of planning, acting, receiving advice from others and correcting our human errors. However, overstressing the creational possibilities leads to

neglecting God's Fatherly guidance.

The link between the proclamation of the Word of God and its faithful reading will always be there, and should remain in place, to prevent us from drifting away on the ways and waves of human inventions and feelings.

1.3 - 12 *Expectation of perfect revelation*

We believe that on earth and in our historical times we live our Christian lives in the expectation of the coming of Christ. This is a longing for more perfect times. "... what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see him as He is" (1 Joh 3:2). This expectation of the coming of full revelation fills us with prayer and comfort. As was revealed to John: Then "the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Rev.21:3,4). Actually, we do not exactly know what we ought to pray for, "but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express" (Rom.8:26). The Lord taught us to persevere by praying, hoping and patiently waiting for the fulfilment of all His promises. In doing this we are encouraged by the intercession of the Holy Spirit. He helps us in our weakness, and He is a deposit, guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession (Eph. 1:13-14).


REFUTATIONS

1. We refute all teaching which denies that God has completed the work of authoritative revelation in the Scriptures. It is not to be expected that God still inspires special men to add specific or private authoritative revelation to bypass his already completed revelation.
2. We do not believe that the Bible is equal to God, nor do we expect any magical power of its written or spoken words. God is not to be reduced to the biblical text, easy to be manipulated and applied according to ones needs or desires.
3. We refute the misuse of the Bible, or Bible passages, or specific verses or even words, in order to derive extra power to heal or to prosper. There is no biblical basis for the teaching that God will perform miracles by repeating His words, or by forceful reading, or whispering.
4. The Bible is not to be seen as 'logos' (= biblical Greek

word meaning *word*) to become powerful 'rhema' (= another biblical Greek word meaning *word*) by speaking it. We refute the distinction made up between these words for the sake of defending a certain use of the Bible to work spiritual powers.

5. We refute the desire and prayer to receive instant messages for our daily life directly from God, bypassing the Scriptures.
6. We refute the preference given to direct personal experiences, for instance direct guidance by the Holy Spirit, by inner voices and visions. This preference goes

beyond the promises of the Covenant we live in, neglects the creational way of taking our responsibilities, and forsakes the sound use of Scriptures.

7. We refute every teaching claiming that dreams are directive in things concerning church and Christian life affairs, without subjecting it to the authority of the Scriptures. This is without biblical support and must not be taught to be pursued. So, there is no room for anybody to make his or her dreams a norm to us, conflicting with the Scriptures. 



One of the authors of Candlestand Statement speaking at the ICRC in 2017.

Lux Mundi welcomes submissions of articles from members of ICRC member churches that are considered of value for the global Reformed and Presbyterian community. Please send submissions to luxmundi@icrconline.com.