



# Lux Mundi

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



## In this Issue

Reports of broadest assemblies

The Sermon on the Mount

Hell

In the Beginning

Magazine published by the  
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Reformed Churches





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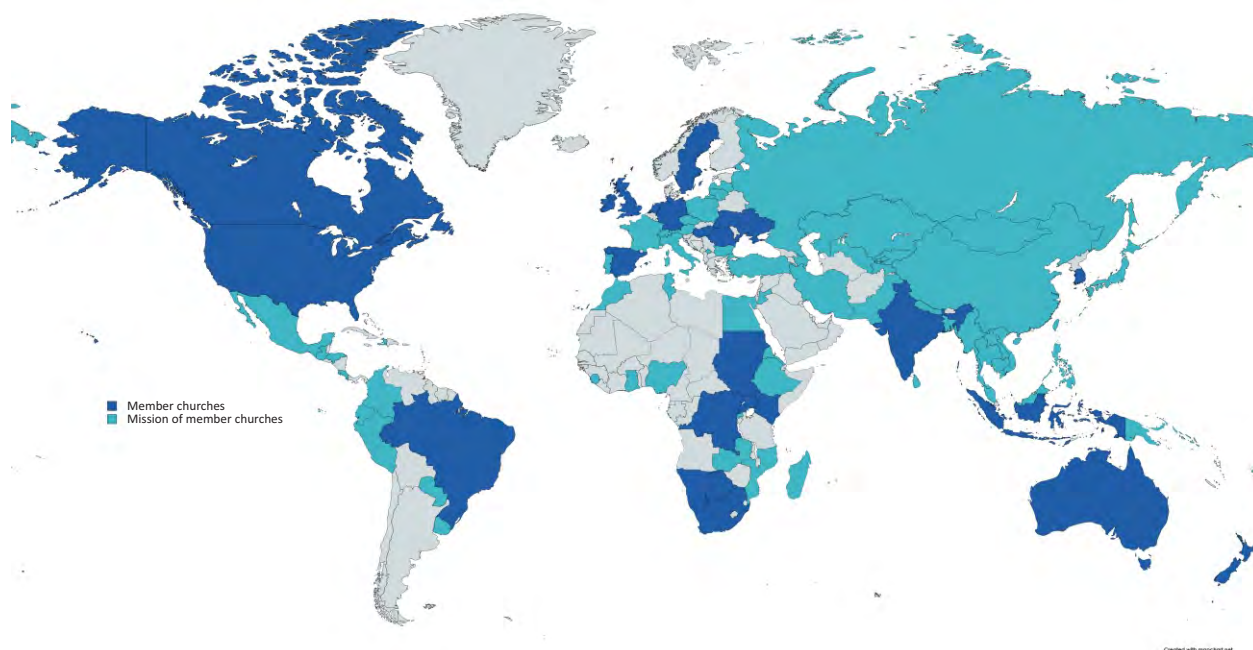
## ***Broadest Assemblies and more***

Many member churches of the ICRC will hold their broadest assemblies, known as a (general) synod or a general assembly, during the months of May or June. The practice is growing to devote the September issue of *Lux Mundi* to overviews of the activities of these broadest assemblies. There were ups and downs or, as one overview expresses it with words from Psalm 126, there were tears and there was joy. The bottom line is that the Lord God continues to gather, defend and preserve His Church throughout the world.

We've also had some articles submitted for (re)publication on a wide spread of topics: the formation of a national synod in

Namibia (and an article explaining how the RCSA is structured), the TEASA consultation in South Africa, the Sermon on the Mount, Hell, and the Welsh Methodist Confession. We close with a review/overview of a publication on the opening chapters of Scripture. It is longer than usual as many readers may not be able to access the publication while the work provides a good illustration of how to exegetes Scripture carefully.

As always, enjoy the read and marvel at how the LORD's Kingdom continues to expand throughout the world.



*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).

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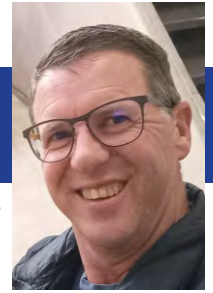
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## Take Heart!

*Editor: the following devotional message was spoken on the third morning of ICRC 2022 in Windhoek, Namibia.*

In Revelation, the letter to the 7 churches, Jesus teaches His universal Church about the impact of His authority on both heaven and earth.

Because this letter is addressed to the church, the church has not only the right but also the obligation to understand it and teach it as Jesus intended.

It means that, as the church we should read it with Jesus's own meaning in mind: it is a letter of hope in very difficult times of persecution and growing animosity against God's children. Yes, for times like we live in right now.

William Hendriksen puts it so eloquently: "To them (God's children) is given the assurance that God sees their tears; their prayers are influential in world affairs and their death is precious in His sight. Their final victory is assured; their blood will be avenged; their Christ lives and reigns for ever and for ever. He governs the world in the interest of His Church."

Revelation is meant to strengthen believers, because the end is made known, triumph is an undeniable fact.

With this firmly in mind, let's read Revelation 18.

The phrase "After this" directs our attention to chapter 17.

In chapter 17 an angel shows John the enemy of the Lamb and His people called the beast, and riding on the beast, a prostitute with the name Babylon.

For the purpose of understanding our text, we need to clarify the symbolic meaning of Babylon.

Babylon is in its heart like a woman who sells her body for pleasure and money.

But Babylon also has a historic meaning, namely that metropolis that is spoken of in the prophets, the city that prospered in its earthly wealth by destroying other nations.

A city of kings that declared themselves gods, where God's own people were humiliated and had to become part of a system where people from different cultures were controlled by commerce, wealth, sexual immorality etc.

Thirdly it represents all ages past, present and future, that adheres to this philosophy that the greatest goal in life is to have earthly pleasure and prosperity in opposition to the will of God.

Now enters a gloriously bright angel from heaven that with a mighty voice full of authority calls out: "Fallen, fallen is

Babylon the great!"

All who hear this call, including the church of today, should nod the head in acknowledgement, because this has been prophesied from the beginning.

Babylon did not stand a chance; she has always been in the crosshairs of our Commander and Chief for rejecting Him as King.

And as was prophesied by Isaiah and Jeremiah, she has become a place where only the worst of the worst and unclean keeps.

As if to remind everyone why this is happening, the angel highlights that she led nations astray by satisfying their fleshly needs for sex and luxury.

We will do well not to try and identify this kind of godlessness to a certain group of people or city, but to recognise it as a way of living that is becoming all too common in our own time, as in times before.

It is a temptation that pulls at deep roots of sin in us as well.

Because of this we hear another voice in verse 4, and this time the authority is overwhelming because it is God Himself calling:

"Come out of her, my people!"

This is one of two places where the people of God are mentioned in chapter 18.

It shows us that God is concerned for those that belong to Him, and that He is merciful.

This is a final warning, and again, this warning is not only to take serious at the end, but now, because Babylon's fate has always been certain.

The reason is clear in verse 5: "God has remembered her iniquities."

It reminds us that God is a jealous God who remembers the sins of the fathers for those who do not love Him.

To some this might look vengeful, but for those who understand that this King has always called people back to Himself, it shows His righteousness in finally bringing the godless to justice.

God is faithful, as He saves those He has chosen before creation, so He will finally judge those who rejected Him.

This Godly justice is best explained in the next verses as Babylon is paid back for her terrible deeds.

For glorifying herself and living in luxury from the profits of her

evil deeds, she will be paid back with torment and mourning. Because she hails herself as queen, her destruction will come swiftly, in a single day! There will be no doubt that she has been judged by the only true King of heaven and earth. Once mighty, in allegiance with all of God's enemies, the old sin of wanting to be my own ruler, is finally crushed.

But the reality of the fall of all man's desires to enjoy life in abundance without God, is further demonstrated as John sees how all those who loved Babylon is gutted with sorrow at the finality of her fall.

The first group is the kings of the earth, rulers who were not guided by the will of God, but by their own corrupt desire for power and wealth.

They will stand far off in fear of the finality: For in a single hour your judgement has come.

They have no hope, no victory.

Second is the merchants, who will weep, because together with their beloved Babylon their markets have also fallen.

Nothing is spared.

No more money is to be made from minerals, plants, spices, animals, and yes even other humans.

But they too will stand far off and shake in their fine clothes because "in a single hour all this wealth has been laid waste."

They have no hope! They have no victory.

Thirdly, the shipmasters will cry as they remember her beauty and the good luxurious life she provided for them.

They too will stand far off as they wonder how they could have lost everything in a single hour.

They have no hope, no victory.

And amidst these hopeless cries, the voice of God is heard again in verse 20, and again He is speaking to His people:

"Rejoice over her!"

May the contrast not be lost on us brothers.

We will not stand far off and cry because of the fall of Babylon. No, God's command is that the heavens, all the saints, apostles and prophets must rejoice!

Everyone that belongs to God must rejoice because even though we do not deserve it, the Good Shepherd shows us what the feast at His table is all about: "God has given judgement for you against her."

Remember Psalm 23: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows."

Do you realise brothers, even though it is all about His honour, He did it for you and me.

Yes, so that we might have hope, and victory in Him. This rejoicing continues in chapter 19 when the heavens react first.

And just to put a final nail in the coffin of Babylon but also to snuff out the last flicker of hope for those whose lives depended on her, another mighty angel appears and throws a millstone into the sea, symbolising the fate of Babylon.

She will be no more; her music will be heard no more; her crafts will be seen no more; her light will be enjoyed no more.

No more weddings; no more great merchants; no more deceiving sorcery.

No more!

It is as if the oxygen was sucked out of her.

In verse 24 it is the turn of God's people to remember, to remember the blood of the prophets and saints who have



Executive members, ICRC 2022 left to right: K. Janssen, A. Bae, D. Breed, J. Visscher



been slain in faith.

It was not for nothing! Unlike Babylon they will once again live, they will hear heavenly music, they will have the light of God always guiding them, they will have an everlasting feast with the bridegroom!

Their hope will bear fruit, and they will have victory.

Beloved, may we really be filled with hope because of this passage.

We are quick to forget. We forget the true meaning of life, the meaning of worship, the meaning of the Kingdom.

When trouble and hardships come, we tend to think too small. Why me? Why this? How long?

In this passage we are reminded that God remembers, and that what happens on earth, is judged in heaven.

We are reminded that what believers pray for on earth, is heard in heaven.

We are also reminded that God doesn't act on a whim or an emotion but according to His steadfast will.

We are reminded to take God at His word, for so many prophecies and promises come to fruition in this declaration of judgment for those who fall into the trap of self-worship, who live for worldly luxury, peace and belonging.

But for those who continually puts to death their idols, and "comes out of Babylon", and turns away from the fascinating, beautiful and deadly prostitute, this is also a mighty declaration of hope and victory.

Brothers, let us never think ourselves exempt from the temptations of luxury and prosperity away from God.

She is pretty in the comforts of more books, better computers, nicer schools, larger congregations, less conflict because of easy, soothing messages.

Let us also come out brothers, lest we become part of the plague instead of warning and standing against it.

Let's first start with the kings, and merchants and shipmasters that lives in us, confess and slaughter them at the feet of the Lamb.

This might even be more difficult for us to do, than to face those who oppose Christ.

And remember that when we do this, our blood might be part of the blood found inside Babylon because we were slain in service of the Lamb.

But only then will we stand far off from every human device, government or power that opposed God, and not cry at the finality of their judgement, but rejoice in the righteousness of God.

Take heart brothers, there is hope and victory for the people of God, and until Jesus comes again, let's take up the cross, and teach the people everything that He taught us.

As long as God is calling people out of Babylon, there is hope for them as well.

Our work is urgent, for judgement will happen quickly, and it will be final!



ICRC 2022 prayer service

## ARPC Synod 2023

### Sunshine, Fellowship, and Female Deacons

These reports on the year's Synod meetings have become somewhat of a tradition so, being that we are ARP, it would likely not be wise for me to forsake the work of the past. We met as is our usual pattern in the first full week of June, June 6-7 (more on that date range here in a second), at our heavenly camp and conference center, Bonclarken, nestled in the fair mountains of western North Carolina. We are immensely blessed by this facility and the director and all the administrators and workers at Bonclarken (One Fine Place). They along with our wonderful Central Services staff are to be commended and celebrated for their tireless ethic in making Synod run smoothly every year. We are treated as kings. Since I serve as Synod's Bill (financial) Clerk I am blessed to stay on campus (which was a little more difficult this year given the quadrennial World Focus, more on that later as well) and the facilities are just perfect, and we are also blessed with a great cafeteria. On top of these mercies we also have great eateries, like the Flat Rock Bakery, Haus Heidelberg, Hannah Flannagan's, and the world-famous Denny's on 4 Seasons Boulevard to fill our bellies and support our fellowship. It pays to be ARP.



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It is likely, however, that most of you who are reading this are not overly concerned with our dietary and sleep needs, yet it's things like that which grant us ARP's an advantage over our NAPARC brethren. Imagine being forced to endure the downtown warehouse and college gym assemblies when you can eat ice cream at the Back Porch and walk up the hill to the Nibble Nook? But I digress again back into the culinary delights of Synod. Back to the work.

If I was to describe the 219th General Synod of the ARP Church (dating back to 1803) it would be akin to a meteorologist's false flag reporting of a coming hurricane. There was much fear about what was going to happen, and the Lord blessed us in that none of it did. While we were aware of the flapping monstrosities of an insignificant noisemaker, it had no effect on the work of the men gathered at the YAB or the chapel. We had more important things to do, and our great God gave witness that we had done the right thing as a Synod by the way the sun shined and we got through our work with no negativities and roistering speeches of inanity. There was a calm and balm upon this year's Synod that we had not had in 50 years. That doesn't mean we didn't spend six hours passionately debating a special committee report on female deacons (that's for Tim, he knows), but the acrimony which could have been part of that discussion was noticeably absent.

Our worship began with a stirring sermon from David Lauten, Associate Pastor of 1st Columbia. The focus of the excellent preaching this week centered on the means of grace, and especially the priority of worship, which is the Moderator's theme for this year. It is our practice in the ARP to observe the Lord's Supper as we open the meeting of Synod. Many spoke to me, and I agreed, that the fencing of the Table was not only spiritually deep, but it moved many to tears as we thought more on the sacrifice of our Savior, and the need not to approach Christ's communion without proper consideration of our own sin, and His grace. Yet, we did something this year that had not been done at the ARP Synod since the early 20th century. There was a Memorial from Tennessee-Alabama Presbytery which was to be taken up later in the business of Synod, but the Principal Clerk and the Executive Board showed the love and care for the brethren which is a hallmark of the ARP, in that Tenn-Ala seeking redress of their

conscience in the use of real wine, the Principal Clerk et al provided a split-tray which had the wine on the outside ring and grape juice in the middle.

This show of unity was a blessing to many of us.

After the service of recognition for those ministers and elders who had passed in the year between Synod meetings, the new Moderator's Challenge (Rob Patrick) and a break for supper we entered into business. Yet before that I want to highlight the blessed sermon we heard from Jeff Kingswood. Such meat and devotion. God be praised! We had several discipline and appeal cases before us, and each one was handled cleanly and with care. But the big item on the agenda was a report from a Special Committee to take up a paper from First Presbytery, which had come to the floor at the 218th Synod, entreating the ARP to change its Form of Government allowance for local sessions to make the decision as to whether or not they would ordain women to the office of Deacon. There were many amendments, amendments to amendments, and much, much conversation about the various issues surrounding the Biblical and historical case either way. For those of you unfamiliar with the ARP's history here, and without trying to prejudice one particular argument over another, the allowance has only been around since 1972. The numbers of female deacons has always remained a minority in the ARP, and the situation in the last couple of decades has seen their number diminish, even if the percentage of congregations which have them has remained static. Yet after much conversation (including my own amendment being defeated, sort of) we ended business Tuesday night without a decision made.

Up comes Wednesday morning. A particular highlight of Synod is that every day before breakfast a group meets at 7:15am in front of the Heidelberg Hotel for a Psalm sing. It's probably my favorite part of Synod. As I noted before this year was a little unique in that our denomination takes time to celebrate and hear from our missionaries and our mission agency, World Witness, during an event called World Focus. Due to this we moved our meeting from the YAB to the chapel, which while presenting a few inconveniences is not that big a deal. Our business began Wednesday morning with an enriching message from Mackay Smith (whose dad, David, was serving as the Vice Moderator, and likewise did an excellent job). Back into the female deacon fray we went, with more talking and interaction both with the special report and the First Presbytery paper. After a couple more hours we came to a conclusion with the formation of a new special

committee that will provide an answer to the larger question of what a deacon is, and what is to be understood as the scope, and focus of their work in order that we as a Synod can speak with our own voice on the matter. There was not given a specific date as to when they will return with recommendations, but it is normal operation for us to receive an update at the following Synod.

After lunch we were given a stirring and moving address on the importance of family worship by James Hakim (I was so focused on the preaching that I let me ice cream cone melt on the pew. :) When business returned the rest of the meeting sailed by like the SEC's second bye week. Report after report was approved with unanimous consent. The only other matter of note was the Synod's Theological and Social Concerns committee was dissolved. T&SC had only one matter left, the question concerning Secret Societies and the ARP, and in order to deal with that issue the Moderator will appoint a special committee to bring recommendations next year.

One of the hats I wear at Synod is that I am chair of our denominations Inter-Church Relations committee. As part of that I have the blessing of introducing our fraternal delegates. This year we were honored to have representatives from the RPCNA, OPC, EPC, CanRC, and the Presbyterian and Reformed Commission on Chaplains. The biggest item to report was that the ARP moved to entered into ecclesiastical fellowship with the CanRC and the URC. This will be a big help to our Canadian and Mississippi Valley Presbyteries especially. Also, the ARP is continuing to prayerfully consider our relationship with the EPC. Prayers welcome as we both discern the way forward on that front.

We ended our Synod with the singing of Psalm 133 at 5:30pm on Wednesday, June 7. A new modern day record for efficiency. While there can be some quibbles as to the lack of movement on the board/committee question, all things considered the ARP is in a great place moving forward. The Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church has an opportunity to build and grow.

May the Lord grant this in His grace as we trust in Him for all things.

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## RPCNA Synod 2023

The Psalmist says, “They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him (Ps. 128:5-6).”

The 191st Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA) commenced on Tuesday, June 20, 2023. Following several years of ongoing discipline matters and formal complaints, the Lord gave us a year of both weeping and rejoicing. The meeting opened with a devotional message from the retiring moderator, Rev. Harry Metzger. He preached from I Corinthians 15, and three others preaching through the week would bring sermons from the same text: Revs. Ma and Blocki from North Hills (Pittsburgh, PA) and Rev. Dr. Ben Glaser from Bethany Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARP). Following the preaching, eleven first time delegates were introduced to the court, six of whom serve as pastors and the remaining 5 as ruling elders. Nominations were then open for moderator. Much to his surprise, Rev. Dr. Pete Smith of Covenant Fellowship RP Church was elected. He was an excellent moderator.

Most of Tuesday was spent working through a business of synod report that made recommendations on how various papers, communications, and complaints ought to be handled. Eleven communications needed to be processed by the court. Most of the complaints were returned to their authors with the court choosing to not speak to them. One complaint, which argued against the Pacific Coast Presbytery sustaining a pastoral examination following the complainant being dissatisfied with the answers of an examinee. This complaint resulted in a study committee which will seek to give counsel to pastors and elders who find themselves in worship contexts where the Psalms are not being sung exclusively.

The one complaint that was heard (and did not result in a study committee) was from Rev. Adam Kuehner against the Great Lakes Gulf Presbytery (GLG). Kuehner argued that when presbytery rebuked two elders for administering the sacrament to a disciplined minister, it was not a sufficient censure. After hearing both sides of this complaint, the synod sustained the complaint 50-40 against the GLG (GLG delegates were not allowed to vote in this matter).



Three other communications resulted in actions from the synod: A paper that came through the Midwest Presbytery (MWP) sought to change the language of our current Testimony regarding abortion. As it reads currently abortion is murder “except possibly” in the case where a mother's life is at risk. The proposal is seeking to bring equal dignity to the life of the mother and the child. This was sent to a study committee to report back next year.

The Orlando Session petitioned the synod to admonish the Reformed Presbyterian Women's Association (RPWA) for suing a retired minister who lived at the RP Home. The petition sought to urge the RPWA to seek forgiveness from the minister and to take actions to seek a session's aid in matters that would otherwise go to court (I Cor. 6). The Synod upheld the petition, admonishing the RPWA and urging them to facilitate change in their practice.

The Presbytery of the Alleghenies (POA) submitted a paper on the RPCNA's practice of women serving in the diaconate. (The RPCNA has had women serving as deacons since 1888.) A five-man study committee was established to study the biblical practice of women serving in the diaconate as well as the nature and purpose of ordination. They will report their findings at next year's Synod.

Several study committees as well as judicial commissions also reported. Over the last year, two commissions have been working with the former leadership of a congregation that was, sadly, caught in the middle of a minor-on-minor sexual abuse scandal. The pastor was deposed and suspended from communion, and the elders were suspended from office in 2022. These commissions have been working to the end of repentance and reconciliation. The former ruling elders told their commission that they were no longer able to work with

them, violating the agreement reached when they pled guilty in 2022. Synod elevated their discipline and deposed them from office by an 88-32 vote. The former pastor, who rejected the authority and discipline of the RPCNA, was excommunicated by a 99-24 vote. The former moderator called him on the phone to inform him and then the pronouncement of excommunication was read.

It was a sober and dreadful experience and you could feel the heaviness of the room and see

the tears streaming down men's faces.

A few study committees will continue into another year, either not reporting or needing to rework some of the ideas presented: Kingship of Christ (did not report); Recusals (sent back to committee); and Vows and Queries (did not report). A study paper seeking to define the previous acts of synod (191 years worth) encouraged the synod to maintain the written understanding of previous synodical acts: they are the “law and order of the church” rather than merely suggestive or informative. This committee's work began in 2018 or 2019 and came to synod through the GLG. The synod voted overwhelmingly in favor of previous acts remaining as law and order.

A major work that was sent back to committee was a paper seeking to set up a task force to response to claims of abuse. The paper sought a standing committee of thirteen made up of pastors, elders and professionals in various fields (medical, social work, police, etc.) that would serve as a resource for those with questions as to whether certain cases in the church would qualify as abuse. The synod debated this extensively before returning the paper that it may be improved.

We sowed in tears. We also reaped in joy.

Several boards and agencies of the church reported on their work in the past year. Crown and Covenant reported on their book sales and some of the things in the works (including posthumously published works by Rev. Gordon Keddie). Geneva College reported and we heard from president, Dr. Troup. Dr. Troup presented a brief presentation on how Geneva instructs from biblical literacy and confessional fidelity. We also heard from Dr. Barry York on the ministry of the RP Seminary, which seeks to be biblical, confessional, pastoral, and devotional.

The RPWA's representative spoke on the RP Home and disability ministries. Reformation Translation Fellowship is expanding beyond the Chinese language for the first time since the 1940s and the Chinese Education Fund seeks to help Chinese families who do not want their children in state-run (Communist) public schools.

The court also heard fraternal greetings from three denominations with whom we have relationships: Dr. Ben Glaser of the ARP was already mentioned and we also heard Rev. Ian Wright of the OPC and Rev. Bartel Elshout from the Heritage Reformed Churches. Each presbytery of the RPCNA also reported on the highlights of their ministries in the past year.

Various missionary arms of the church shared exciting news. Global Missions reported on their several fields and some of

the challenges that their teams face. From South Sudan to unpublishable locations, the RP Church is laboring faithfully in fields ripe for harvest. RP Global also presented a revised set of bylaws that were returned to them failing to be approved by the synod. We heard from two commissions that plant churches and train pastors in nations I am not allowed to write about. The Central and South America (CASA) committee reported on their labors in seeking to facilitate relationships with existing congregations in CASA. A commission of Global Missions was set up to ordain men and plant churches in CASA. Another missionary commission reported on the number of worshipers in three presbyteries in yet another nation I cannot publicly mention: 16,400 Reformed Presbyterian worshipers meet from Lord's Day to Lord's Day in this unmentioned nation. The numbers are amazing!

Some of the other numbers and dates-discussions were of interest. We have grown slightly in membership and attendance although last year we closed five congregations. Besides these five congregations, a dozen Canadian congregations departed this year to form the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Canada. This is a good thing! The Synod is also very interested in boards reporting salaries of employee in the name of greater transparency. Following several motions, these salaries will now be published in the Minutes of Synod. The salary of every pastor is already published annually. Other number discussions include an increase in ruling elders in the denomination and the fact that we have almost twice as many pastors on our rolls as we have congregations (many are not active, not serving, or retired). Giving has increased in our church and the denominational arm for giving (RPM&M) has increased significantly—of course there are more boards, committees, and agencies that are seeking financial assistance as well. June 11-14, 2024 is our next synod. RP International is June 25-July 1, 2024.

After several long days of difficulty, joy, fellowship, suffering, and labor—we adjourned on Friday just before noon. Many prayers were prayed. Many Psalms were sung. Many tears were shed. As brothers we looked to Jesus together to establish the work of our hands and to bring forth sheaves with rejoicing. In the words of the Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs, “grace teaches us how to make a mixture of sorrow and a mixture of joy together.”

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## OPC General Assembly 2023

### *The 89th General Assembly, the Kingdom of God, and You*

When I told the dear saints of my congregation that I would be gone for a week attending the OPC General Assembly, some of them probably wondered what a “general assembly” even is. Not a few of our members and attendees have come from independent, nondenominational congregations that

do not have substantial connections to other churches, let alone the regional churches, presbyteries, and general assembly to which OPC officers and churches willingly submit themselves. And most of the members of OP churches will never have opportunity to attend one of our annual general assemblies. It was these brothers and sisters I was thinking about as the moderator of the Eighty-Eighth General Assembly, elder David Nakhla (Calvary OPC in Glenside, Pennsylvania), called the Eighty-Ninth Assembly to order and welcomed Rev. Lendall Smith to lead the body in the worship of God. When I got home, how would I answer their questions about what this general assembly is that took their pastor away for a week, what happened when we met, and why it should matter to them?

The answers to those questions were framed for me in the first few minutes of the opening worship service of the assembly as the body sang “God, My King, Thy Might Confessing” and recited in unison the Lord’s Prayer and Apostles’ Creed. In that moment, the Ozinga Chapel on the campus of Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, Illinois, was filled with what seemed like ten thousand voices, all joyfully trumpeting the praises and promises of our triune God. I thought, surely this is not unlike what the Apostle John heard from heaven when the 144,000 sang a new song before the throne of God and of the Lamb. It was “like the voice of many waters” (Rev. 14:2) and a reminder that, by virtue of Jesus Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and ascension, and the pouring out of his Spirit upon the church, the kingdom of God is present today. This is manifested in the church and her members, who cheerfully surrender themselves to the worship and service of Christ the King.

No doubt the acoustics of the room and the exuberance of commissioners, not yet

wearied by the work that lay ahead, had something to do with creating this heavenly atmosphere. I’ve participated in equally sublime times of worship in our local church. But it did get me thinking about how the general assembly manifests the kingdom of God in either ways or degrees that we don’t ordinarily experience in the local church. It is my hope that, by telling you about how the presence of the kingdom of God was manifested in the business of the Eighty-Ninth General Assembly, you will better understand not only what our general assemblies are but why they should matter to you.

#### **The Good Order of the Kingdom**

One of the first things a person will notice about our general assemblies is the orderliness of the proceedings. This does not come from a legal spirit but rather is meant to display the fact that “God is not the author of confusion” (1 Cor. 14:33). He desires that “all things be done decently and in order” and for the edification of the whole church (vv. 26, 40).

Long before the assembly began, the Committee on Arrangements, chaired by elder David Mahaffy (Sovereign Grace OPC in Oak Harbor, Washington), was at work coordinating with the host college’s staff, gathering a small army of servant-hearted volunteers from OP churches around the country, and building the technological infrastructure that helped the meeting to run efficiently. Rev. Hank Belfield (Providence OPC in Chilhowie, Virginia),

the stated clerk of the general assembly, prepared and sent out the agenda many weeks in advance. This enabled commissioners to formulate intelligent questions from the floor about committee reports and recommendations as well as to make well-formed speeches during times of debate. The stated clerk and his assistant, Rev. John Mahaffy (Trinity OPC in Newberg, Oregon), kept careful record of the actions of the assembly that would be used to communicate its decisions to all our churches.

Rev. John Shaw, the general secretary of the





Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension, was elected to serve as moderator of the Eighty-Ninth Assembly. It was his responsibility to make sure members of the assembly conducted themselves in a charitable and orderly fashion, which duty he skillfully discharged with wisdom, well-timed humor, patience, and firmness.

## **The Mercy of the Kingdom**

During the assembly's opening worship service, Mr. Nakhla delivered an impassioned exhortation on Matthew 25:31–46, in which he described how Christ empowers his sheep to hold loosely the things of this world in order to exude a manifold ministry of mercy. One of the implications is that, through the church's ministry of mercy, Jesus Christ manifests his power, rule, and the presence of his kingdom here on earth.

In addition to the diaconal work of local OP churches, Jesus has empowered members of the OPC to exude an increasingly manifold ministry of mercy around the globe in several ways. As administrator of the Committee on Diaconal Ministries (CDM), Mr. Nakhla later reported to the assembly that in 2022, OP churches gave over a million dollars to the CDM's disaster relief efforts in Ukraine and in Neon, Kentucky. Over 170 volunteers went to clean up and repair the damage done to Neon Reformed Church by the July 2022 flood. Through the work of the CDM, members of the OPC participated in relieving the needs of refugees in Greece and South Sudan and supported the diaconal ministries on our mission fields in East Africa, Ethiopia, Haiti, Uganda, and Uruguay. Notably, at the Akisyon A Yesu ("Compassion of Jesus") Presbyterian Clinic in Nakaale, Uganda, over eleven thousand souls encountered the presence of God's kingdom in 2022, while being treated there in Jesus's name.

Mr. Nakhla also reported on the efforts of the CDM to expand the OPC's manifold ministry of mercy through its National Diaconal Summits, presbytery Summits, and the newly launched Reformed Deacon podcast at [opccdm.org](http://opccdm.org).

## **Stewardship in God's Kingdom**

In the parable of the talents, Jesus teaches that citizens of the kingdom are expected to faithfully steward the resources the Lord Jesus has given to them (Matt. 25:14–30). If the faithful stewardship of resources is empowered by the gospel of the kingdom, then the reports presented and budgets proposed to the assembly by the

trustees of the OPC for the General Assembly Operation Fund and by the Committee on Coordination (COC) for the denomination's standing committees were wonderful displays of Christ's presence to rule in his church.

The careful oversight, judicious decision-making, and forward thinking exercised by those who serve our church in these capacities were strikingly illustrated by the representatives of the COC during a question-and-answer time, when one commissioner asked about the safety of our committees' funds, in light of the recent banking crisis. Both COC controller, Melisa McGinnis, and COC treasurer, elder Keith LeMahieu (Bethel OPC in Oostburg, Wisconsin), gave precise, knowledgeable, and well-reasoned answers to questions about this complex and fluid issue. Mr. LeMahieu also reported that the COC has partnered with the Barnabas Foundation to provide stewardship resources, so that now OPC members can give non-cash assets to the church and its worldwide mission without tax implications, thus maximizing the resources the Lord has provided his people for gospel work.

It also pleases Jesus to bestow honor on servants who have proven faithful (Matt. 25:23). Throughout the assembly, exemplary service to our standing committees by several people was noted, such as that of Judith Dinsmore, Linda Foh, Abby Harting, Tin Ling Lee, and Charlene Tipton. Dozens of volunteers who generously gave their time to serve at the assembly were also acknowledged. The following men were publicly recognized for their long, distinguished, and faithful service: Rev. Mark Lowry (PCA) for twenty-seven years of service to Great Commission Publications; Rev. John Mahaffy for twenty-four years of service as assistant clerk of the assembly; elder David Winslow (Resurrection OPC in Westminster, California) for thirty-four years on the Committee on Christian Education; and the retired Rev. Roger Wagner for fifty years of pastoral ministry. Mr. Wagner asked the assembly for a point of personal privilege to honor his wife, Sherry, who has ministered lovingly at his side. By honoring faithful service, Jesus compels us all to labor for the dominical approbation, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

## **Expansion of the Kingdom**

Jesus likened the kingdom of God to a tiny mustard seed that, when it is sown, grows up, spreads out, and becomes exceedingly expansive (Mark 4:30–32). One of the greatest privileges Jesus has bestowed on his church is the task of

sowing that gospel seed, so that the kingdom of God expands. The OPC's Committee on Home Missions and Church Extension (CHMCE) is tasked with assisting presbyteries and congregations to plant new churches as outposts of the kingdom of God.

In his report for the committee, Rev. John Shaw provided encouraging news about the start of eight new church plants in 2022, bringing the total mission works supported in that year to thirty-seven. Seven new works have already started in 2023. In answer to the prayers of God's people, the Lord has raised up six new regional home missionaries since 2021 to spearhead church-planting efforts in our presbyteries, with at least two more slated to begin their labors this year. Mr. Shaw also gave an update on CHMCE's developing program for church revitalization, noting how the committee is gathering a list of vetted men to provide mentorship to pastors serving churches in decline.

CHMCE president, Rev. Mark Sallade (Calvary OPC in Glenside, Pennsylvania), concluded the committee's report with the announcement that Mr. Shaw will complete his service to the committee on December 31, 2023. After Mr. Sallade read a resolution of thanks to Mr. Shaw for his ten years of distinguished service, the assembly concurred with the committee's resolution by giving Mr. Shaw a standing ovation. Rev. Jeremiah Montgomery (Covenant OPC in Vandalia, Ohio) was introduced as Mr. Shaw's successor, drawing the applause of the assembly.

The report of the Committee on Foreign Missions (CFM) was one of the highlights of the assembly, not only because four of the foreign missionaries the OPC supports were present and gave riveting updates on their work, but because of the plea delivered by CFM general secretary Rev. Douglas

Clawson. He began his report by reading Isaiah 6:1–8 and then urgently stated that there are many vacancies on OP mission fields and open doors for others, yet there is not even one ordained minister applicant, presently, who is standing up to say, "Here am I! Send me." Mr. Clawson implored the commissioners to consider prayerfully if God would have them go. (See "A Need for Missionaries," page 15.)

In his Friday devotion on Acts 12:20–24, Rev. Matthew Holst (Shiloh OPC in Raleigh, North Carolina) reminded the assembly that "the voice of God will stand over the clamoring voices of men." The reports received from our foreign missionaries testify to this truth. One of many such examples is from the Nakaale base in the Karamoja region of Uganda, where, Mr. Clawson said, for the first time in twenty years of missionary labor, it appears there are Karimojong men qualified to serve as officers in the church. Some of the children our missionaries ministered to in the early days of the mission are now men, "Timothy Men," who have spurned the substance abuse and polygamy practiced by their forefathers and are becoming leaders who desire to minister the gospel of the kingdom to their people. Praise the Lord!

### Kingdom Discipleship

In the Great Commission, Jesus Christ called his church to the work of kingdom expansion but also to the discipleship of those who are gathered, so that they learn to live as citizens of the kingdom of God. The OPC's Committee on Christian Education (CCE) exists to assist local churches to present each member of the body mature in Christ, "both in faith and life," as Rev. Dr. Craig Troxel, president of the CCE, reminded us. In addition to detailing the efforts the CCE



*The 89th General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*

exerts to this noble end (including the production of various publications, Christian education material, and online resources), Rev. Danny Olinger, the general secretary of the CCE, also highlighted the conferences the CCE hosts throughout the year that are designed to encourage young men to consider ordained ministry in the OPC. Mr. Olinger reported that seventeen past attendees of the Timothy Conference have now become ordained ministers of the gospel in the OPC. With the latest expansion of CCE's ministry through the new podcast, Ruling Elder, church officers are encouraged and equipped to continue laboring to see Christ formed in his people (Gal. 4:19).

The assembly also debated what to do with the fruitful labors of the Special Committee to Update the Language of the Doctrinal Standards. The committee presented to the assembly over thirteen hundred suggested updates to the language of the Westminster Standards, with the goal of making the Standards more accessible to uninitiated disciples. The assembly determined to have the CCE publish by 2025 the proposed changes as a modern English study version for the use of the church.

## The Keys of the Kingdom

God's kingdom is a kingdom of righteousness and justice (Ps. 45:6; 89:14). Jesus has given the keys of the kingdom to ministers and elders, who open the kingdom to the penitent, close it to the proud, and judge all church controversies by the Word of God (Matt. 16:19; 18:18; Acts 15:2). An essential component of biblical justice is the right to appeal (Ex. 18:21–22; Deut. 17:8–11). The general assembly is the highest court of appeal in our church. At this assembly, one complaint came on appeal from a minister of the Presbytery of the Mid-Atlantic, and two matters of controversy concerning the OPC's Book of Discipline, with proposed amendments, were heard and decided. While these cases were not concluded to everyone's satisfaction, we are, nevertheless, assured by Jesus that he was there in our midst to rule (Matt. 18:20).

The body also received encouraging reports from two special committees of the assembly that were constituted to promote peace and unity in two of our presbyteries, the Presbytery of the Dakotas and the Presbytery of the Southeast. Representatives of both committees detailed how God's hand was at work through their peacemaking efforts to bring about measurable progress. The committees were dissolved with the assembly's gratitude.

## The Catholicity of the Kingdom

Our Confession of Faith states that

[t]he visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. (WCF 25.2; see 1 Cor. 1:2; Rev. 7:9)

The OPC's Committee on Ecumenicity and Interchurch Relations (CEIR) helps our churches and presbyteries to remember to maintain this catholic or universal vision of the kingdom. The CEIR also forges and strengthens our bonds with churches of like faith and practice. One of the most enjoyable aspects of our general assemblies is the fellowship with many fraternal delegates who come to represent churches from around the world with which we have some level of relationship. Of the forty-nine such church bodies around the world, thirteen sent delegates to this year's assembly to bring warm greetings. They came from North America, Brazil, Australia, South Korea, South Africa, Uganda, Scotland, and Switzerland. These addresses cheered the hearts of the commissioners, for, as Rev. Malcolm Macleod of the Free Church of Scotland stated, "the same heartbeat of God's kingdom is beating in us all."

## The General Assembly, the Kingdom, and You

If this summary of the Eighty-Ninth General Assembly's proceedings has had its intended effect, the reader now has a clearer picture of what the assembly is. It is the church at worship and work by which the presence of the kingdom of God is manifested in a broader and more fulsome expression than we ordinarily experience in our local churches. The work of the church conducted through the assembly's committees is done by members of our local churches and ministers of our presbyteries. It is kingdom work that was started right outside each of our back doors. In that way, it provides each member of the OPC a way to experience and participate in the global work of the kingdom of God, through the pastors and elders who are sent from our local churches and by our presbyteries to represent us. May the presence of the kingdom manifested in the assembly's ministry capture your interest and compel you to pray for, support, and find ways to participate in its ongoing work

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## HRC Synod 2023

### Opening

On Monday, June 5, Synod was preceded by an edifying prayer service led by Dr. Adrian Neele from Luke 22:27b focusing in on the words of our Lord Jesus, "But I am among you as he that serveth." We were reminded that our Lord Jesus is one who has come to serve and continues to be among His people serving, leading, and guiding them. As synod delegates, let us humble ourselves and serve, as Jesus did, aiming for the welfare of His church and the honor and glory of His name.

### Special Events

We rejoiced to hear of the Lord's provision and care for the churches which was noted in several ways. The Lord willing, Burgessville will celebrate its 30th year as a congregation this October. With thanksgiving to the Lord, Grand Rapids welcomed and witnessed the installation of Pastors John Byl and Darryl Dedert this past year. The congregation of Hull said very well to Pastor Bart Elshout as he took up his call to the Kalamazoo Reformed Church, but are also thankful for Pastor Peter van der Hoek's acceptance of their call to come and labour in their midst. The Kinnelon congregation noted that they will be celebrating their 25th anniversary as a congregation and that this summer they will be saying farewell to Pastor Johnny Serafini who accepted a call to the Landis Memorial OPC in Marion, NC. We are thankful to the Lord, the one who lives and reigns among us, for His faithful care and provision for each of our congregations.

### Fraternal Greetings

This year we had the privilege of receiving greetings from various Reformed churches with whom we have a bond of ecclesiastical fellowship. These federations of churches include the Bekennenden Evangelisch-Reformierten Gemeinde (BERG) Confessing Evangelical Reformed Churches in Germany, the Canadian Reformed Churches, the Free Reformed Churches, the Kalamazoo Reformed Church, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, and the United Reformed Churches. Letters of greetings were also received from Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Reformed Church, and the Reformed Church of the United States.

**Author: Rev. John Byl**

*John Byl is a minister with the Heritage Reformed Churches. He served as Clerk of Synod 2023.*

### Synod Agenda Items

This year our meetings were ably led by pastor David Lipsy, as chairman, and pastor John Procee, as vice-chairman. Spiritual Welfare Reports were received from each congregation. We are thankful for the Lord's faithful care and provision for each congregation and pray that He will continue to bless His church. It was with joy that Synod received news from the Harrison congregation that they have recently begun worship services at a new church plant in Conway, Arkansas. Synod directed the Domestic Outreach Committee to work with the Harrison consistory in supporting this effort.

We are thankful for the Lord's continued care for our theological students, Mr. Andy Gruswitz, Mr. Martijn Heijboer, Mr. Luis Loaiza, and Mr. Daniel Xue as their progress was reviewed and over advanced to their next years of study. Mr. Luis Loaiza was approved to complete an internship at our Tillsonburg, Ontario congregation and granted permission to pursue his Ph.D. In addition, Daniel Navarro, a member of the Grand Rapids congregation, was accepted as an HRC theological student.

Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary continues to be blessed by the Lord. Looking forward with the Lord's blessing, Synod appointed three men to the following positions at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary: Dr. Joel Beeke as chancellor, Dr. Adrian Neele as president, and Dr. Gerald Bilkis as vice-president, pending their acceptance of these positions. We trust that the Lord will continue to richly bless the labors of the seminary for years to come.

Looking back over these three days of meetings, we are grateful to the Lord for His presence among us, for the sense of brotherly love and fellowship. Please pray that our faithful Shepherd-King will continue to bless our federation of churches for the glory of His name and for the extension of His Kingdom.

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## FRC Synod 2023

Synod was opened by Rev. Jan Neels (Blackfalds FRC), with a sermon on 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5, with the title of, “Pray for Us.” He echoed the Apostle Paul’s appeal in Verse 1, by asking our church members to pray for our ministers who labor in the word of the Lord among us, because of our need for prayer, but especially for the spread of the Gospel, and for the glory of God.

Synod elected the following executive: Chairman Rev. J. Schoeman, Vice-Chair Rev. J. Overduin, 1st clerk Rev. E. Moerdyk, 2nd clerk Rev. L.J. Bilkes.

Present this year for the first time as delegates were the three newest ministers in the FRC—Revs. Jeff Overduin, Chris Mourik, and Isaac Epp; as well as elders from our two newest churches—Shiloh FRC, of Picture Butte, Alberta, and Redeemer FRC, of Wyoming, Michigan.

The Refugee Committee—which has the name “City of Refuge”—was very busy in 2022, facilitating and helping churches and sponsors (beyond just the FRC), welcome 151 refugees from 51 families into Canada. You may learn more about this committee at their website, [cityofrefuge.ca](http://cityofrefuge.ca).

Synod received an overture from one of our congregations reminding us of the importance, preciousness and holiness of the Lord’s Day, which Synod wholeheartedly affirmed. As churches we urge all our members to faithfully observe the Lord’s Day, by regularly gathering together in person to worship the King of the Church each time the elders call us to gather on the Lord’s Day, keeping the whole day holy.

At the request of the Theological Education Committee, Brother Jason—a PRTS graduate and member of the FRC in Grand Rapids—was successfully examined. With prayers to the Lord of the church and under the care of FRMI (Free Reformed Missions International), he will now go to Thailand with the goal of helping form a Reformed seminary.

Carsten Koopman (St. Thomas FRC), was officially accepted as a student for the ministry in our churches, and Lord willing, will

begin his studies at PRTS this September.

The Youth & Education Committee reported that Plants & Pillars has worked hard and a new app is now available (in both the Google Play store and Apple App store), to accompany the website—which now has over 1000 articles and videos. A free conference for young men called, The Summit, is planned for August 22-24 this year at PRTS in Grand Rapids for ages 16-25. You can register on the app or at [plantsandpillars.net](http://plantsandpillars.net). Billeting is provided.

The Interdenominational Psalter committee has nearly completed their work on the 150 Psalms and plans to secure a publisher.

With sadness Synod has decided that due to the lack of viability the work of the US Urban Missions will come to an end at the conclusion of 2023. We commend Pastor Young Jae Lee and his family to the Lord and remind the churches that he is eligible to be called.

A number of pastors and elders from the HRC and URC churches, as well as from the Kalamazoo Reformed Church and the Providence RCA congregations, attended our Synod as invited fraternal visitors and brought us formal greetings from their respective federations or congregations. Our relationship with the HRC churches continues in regard to practical cooperation in various local congregations and in synodical committees, and we warmly encourage and pray that this will continue in the year ahead.

Synod 2024 is scheduled, concurrently with the HRC Synod, D.V. for June 3-7, in Dundas FRC, with Chatham as the calling church.



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## PCEA Synod 2023

*Editor: An overview of the business of Synod 2023 of the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia was presented in the format of a month prayer points for the month of June as republished below. Unless otherwise noted, matters "in quotation marks" are taken from the Minutes, available online at [pcea.org.au](http://pcea.org.au). This is followed by an overview of visitors from other churches at the Synod.*

**Thursday, 1st:** "The Moderator, Rev Trevor Leggott... constituted the meeting, leading in prayer." Give thanks for Trevor's service as moderator over the previous year.

**Friday, 2nd:** [From the minutes for Tuesday, 2 May] "The Moderator advised the Court that Rev. Kenneth MacLeod had died in Maclean Hospital in the late afternoon." Give thanks for Rev MacLeod's service in the PCEA, and pray for his family.

**Saturday, 3rd:** "The Clerk reported that the Rev. Andres Miranda had been appointed Moderator-Elect." Give thanks for Andres' leadership as moderator, and pray for him as he serves in this role until Synod 2024.

**Sunday, 4th:** Give thanks for the work of David Kerridge at synod as clerk, and pray for him as he continues to serve in this role.

**Monday, 5th:** A Memorial Minute for Rev. Raymond Murray was incorporated into the permanent record (see The Presbyterian Banner, August 2022, pages 6-7). Synod also approved a memorial minute to Miss Heather Beaton (see The Presbyterian Banner, February 2023, page 9). Give thanks for service provided by these faithful servants.

**Tuesday, 6th:** From the Law and Advisory Report: "Synod... appointed a panel [last year] to formulate guidelines on Divorce, Separation and Remarriage for the PCEA... We need prayer for wisdom and help to carry out our task faithfully." Pray for the continuing work of this panel.

**Wednesday, 7th:** "The [Law and Advisory] committee reminds all presbyteries to carry out their responsibilities in safe church basic training for office-bearers and children's workers." Pray for the safe church training undergone by leaders in our congregations.

**Thursday, 8th:** From the Training of Ministry Committee Report: "Our prayer is that the Lord will continue to send forth labourers to our corner of the vineyard for the glory of His name and the growth of our denomination."

**Friday, 9th:** The Southern Presbytery overtured the Synod to confirm Zach Dotson's reception as a candidate for the ministry.

**Author: Rev. Jim Klazinga**

*Jim Klazinga is a minister with the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia*

"It was moved, seconded and carried that the crave of the overture be granted." Pray for Zach as he works toward becoming a minister in the PCEA.

**Saturday, 10th:** "Rev. Andrew Stewart... brought greetings from the RPCA and encouraged the delegates." Give thanks for our ongoing relationship with the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Australia, and pray for their three congregations, all located in Victoria. Also, "Rev. Bruce Backensto... was invited to speak and brought greetings from the RPCNA." Give thanks for the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America and pray for our relationship with them.

**Sunday, 11th:** "Mr Stuart Coles from the Southern Presbyterian Church was invited to address the Synod." Pray for our ongoing relationship with the SPC. Pray for their two congregations, both in Tasmania. Also, "Mr John Terpstra from the OPC was invited to speak online." Give thanks for our ongoing relationship with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

**Monday, 12th:** It was resolved that "Synod continues to pray for the children and youth in the Church and the work of the [Youth and Fellowship] committee in building relationships between congregations as members of Christ's body."

**Tuesday, 13th:** It was resolved that "Synod gives thanks and pray for those are involved in the work of teaching Sunday-school and youth classes." Also, it was resolved that "Synod thank Irene Steel for her dedication to the scripture search work and Nic and Amelia O'Dell for birthday card greeting and uphold them in prayer."

**Wednesday, 14th:** "Synod instructs Sessions and Deacons' Courts to keep a close eye on ministers' leave entitlements to ensure ministers do not suffer burn out through failure to take it, and that Presbyteries keep this in mind in the annual examination of records." Pray for wisdom for the ministers and the Deacons' Courts in ensuring sufficient time for leave.

**Thursday, 15th:** "The General Treasurer presented his report. It was resolved to receive the report." Pray for John Audet as he continues to serve as General Treasurer. Also, it was resolved that "We record our thanks to God for temporal blessings granted especially during the time of pandemic restrictions during 2022."

**Friday, 16th:** It was resolved that "Synod commend to our people giving by bequest to aid the extension of the Gospel in Australia and overseas." Pray for wisdom in the consideration of this matter.

**Saturday, 17th:** "Mr Laurens Nel... brought greetings and



encouragement from the CRCA.” Give thanks for the Christian Reformed Churches in Australia and pray for our relationship with them. Also, “Mr John Ferguson from the Associated Presbyterian Churches (APC)... brought greetings and encouragement from the APC. He spoke of the APC's formation and congregations in Scotland.” Give thanks and pray for our relationship with the APC.

**Sunday, 18th:** “Synod expresses its concern regarding the current threat facing the independency of Christian Schools if the recommendations of the Australian Law Reform Commission are adopted. Synod prays that Christian Schools be permitted to continue to exercise freedom to appoint staff members who are in agreement with its doctrines and beliefs. We also affirm that every child is made in the image of God and should therefore be treated with dignity and respect and be encouraged to discover the full potential of their identity in light of the Bible's teaching.”

**Monday, 19th:** “Synod recognises the distress of those families who have a family member who struggles with their sexual identity. We pray that they may receive the appropriate medical and/or spiritual counsel, so that ultimately, they may affirm their God given gender and come to discover fullness of life in Christ.”

**Tuesday, 20th:** “Synod affirms its belief that marriage as God intended is between a man and a woman and pledges to uphold and promote the Biblical teaching on human sexuality. Synod also encourages sessions to ensure that our congregations are welcoming places for all to attend; to be sensitive toward those who are same sex attracted, or who may

grapple with other temptations; and to provide the support necessary to encourage such to live a chaste and obedient life.”

**Wednesday, 21st:** “Synod encourage ministers and elders to use the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples – perhaps to conclude or finalise public prayer. The congregation might also be encouraged to 'seal up' the praises and prayers with a heartfelt 'Amen'!”

**Thursday, 22nd:** “As Synod anticipates the coronation of King Charles III on 6th May 2023 in Westminster Abbey, we assure him of our prayers so that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way (1 Tim. 2: 1-2). We pray that he, by God's grace, will be enabled to maintain the solemn vows made (Eccl. 5: 4-5); and to defend and contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). We pray that he may rule with the same attitude as the King of kings who humbled Himself and became a servant (Phil. 2: 3-8). Long live the king. God save the king.”

**Friday, 23rd:** “Synod is thankful for the work of the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL), Family Voice, and other such organisations, which are committed to upholding and defending Christian values in the 'marketplace.’”

**Saturday, 24th:** “Synod encourages members to continue to pray for the Lord's sovereign mercies that He may yet revive us, that we be given a fresh understanding of His majesty and glory, a profound understanding of our sin, a renewed sense of the wonder of God's grace, and a high view of the centrality of the Cross.”

**Sunday, 25th:** It was resolved that “Synod appoint Saturday 29th July 2023 as a Day of Prayer to seek the Lord's mercy and



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favour." Pray for the preparations being made for this year's PCEA Day of Prayer.

**Monday, 26th:** "Synod records its thanks to the editor of the Presbyterian Banner... and resolves to pray for him in his editorial work, and for the witness of the magazine." "Synod continues to endorse The Presbyterian Banner as the official magazine of the PCEA and encourages members and adherents to read it and contribute material to it."

**Tuesday, 27th:** It was resolved "That the Synod commend the PCEA website to delegates and congregations and they be encouraged to participate in the life of the church online by active registration, collaboration and comment." Give thanks for the website, and pray for the work of David Kerridge as webmaster.

**Wednesday, 28th:** "Rev. Matthew Winzer from the Australian Free Church... spoke of the history of the AFC and brought greetings." It was resolved that "Synod approves the [Inter-Church Relations] Committee's ongoing discussions with the Australian Free Church in seeking a closer relationship

between our denominations." Please pray for these discussions.

**Thursday, 29th:** "The Synod gives thanks to the Lord for the opportunity and privilege to be involved in the work of missions at home and abroad, both in giving, in praying, and being directly involved during this past year." Give thanks for this year's Missions evening and for the encouraging report offered by Samit Mishra and Pradeep Kumar on behalf of the Presbyterian Free Church of Central India.

**Friday, 30th:** "The Rev. John Forbes was nominated and voted as Moderator-Elect for 2024." Pray for John as Moderator-elect. Also, "It was agreed that the next Annual Synod take place in the Raymond Terrace Church of the Hunter Congregation from Tuesday 7th to 10th May, 2024." Give thanks for the hosting provided by the Hunter congregation, and for their willingness to host the meeting again next year.

### Visitors from Other Churches at Synod 2023

A highlight of Synod 2023 was the number of visitors who brought greetings from other churches. Four of the denominations represented were from Australia, two from the U.S.A., and one each from Scotland, Ireland, and India. Five of the greetings are focussed on here. The others will appear in next month's issue.

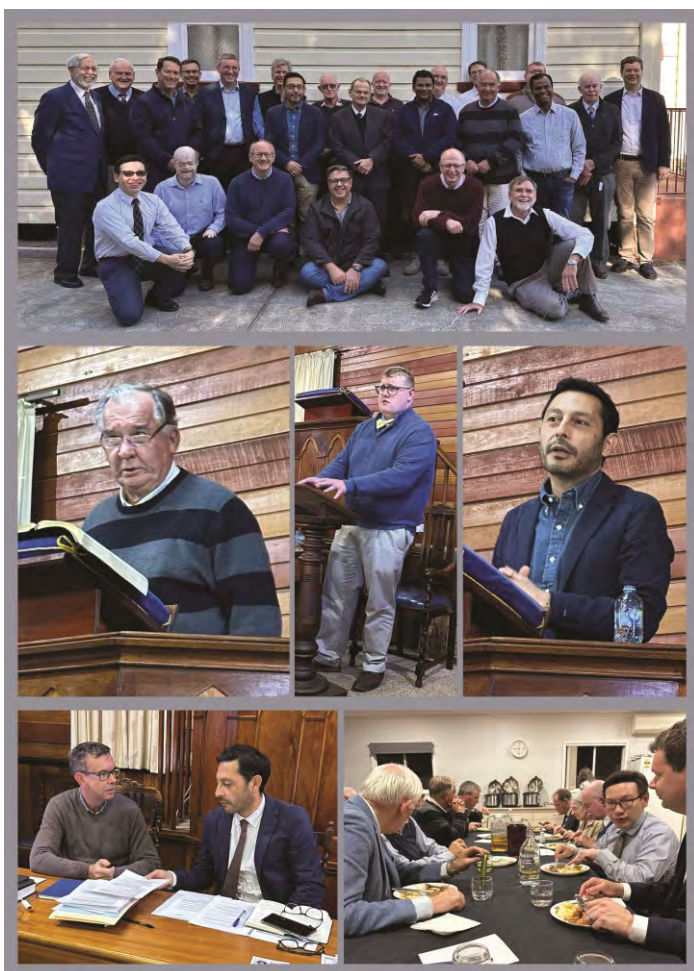
Synod resolved: "The Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia gives thanks to God for the churches with whom we have formal fraternal relations and for those churches with whom we have contact and resolve to pray for the Lord's blessing upon their work and witness."

"Mr Stuart Coles from the Southern Presbyterian Church was invited to address the Synod. The Moderator welcomed him. Mr Coles brought greetings and encouragement from the church, referring to 2 Timothy 1:13. He notified the Synod that Rev. Tom Budgen, of the FCC, (Kilmuir and Stenscholl - Staffin) would be inducted to their Launceston charge on 24th June."

"Rev. Andrew Stewart from the RPCA was invited to speak. The Moderator welcomed him. Mr Stewart brought greetings from the RPCA and encouraged the delegates to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. He brought news of the RPCA congregations in Victoria. Mr Forbes led the court in prayer for the RPCA."



Rev. Andrew Stewart





“Mr Laurens Nel from the CRCA was introduced to the Moderator. The Moderator welcomed him and invited him to address the Synod. Mr Nel brought greetings and encouragement from the CRCA: Behold I set before you an open door. Mr I Hamilton prayed for Mr Nel and the CRCA.”

“Mr John Terpstra from the OPC was invited to speak online. The Moderator welcomed him. Mr Terpstra brought greetings from the OPC. He spoke of the unfailing support of the Lord Jesus Christ to His Church. He spoke of growth in the OPC and their ministries... Mr Alex Steel led the court in prayer for the OPC.”

“The Convener presented a video greeting from Rev. Geoffrey Allen, Moderator of the RPCI. He brought greetings from the RPCI and spoke of the challenges of secularism. He spoke of interests in global Reformed churches and those in Australia as well as missionary work. He closed with words from Ps 33 'The eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him.' Mr Ball prayed for the work of the RPCI.”

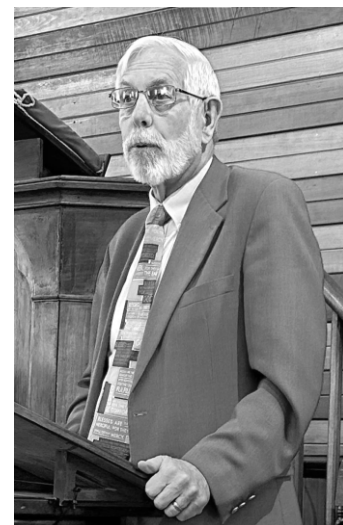
“Mr John Ferguson from the Associated Presbyterian Churches (APC) was introduced to and welcomed by the Moderator. Mr Ferguson brought greetings and encouragement from the APC. He spoke of the APC's formation and congregations in Scotland. Mr Ferguson encouraged the PCEA with the words of 1 Peter 5:7 – '...[cast] all your care upon Him for He cares for you.' Mr Hall prayed for John and the work of the APC “

“Rev. Matthew Winzer from the Australian Free Church was introduced to and welcomed by the Moderator. Mr Winzer spoke of the history of the AFC and brought greetings. He exhorted us to seek to maintain what we have attained in our common heritage. Mr Tso prayed for the work of the AFC.”

“The [Inter-Church Relations Committee] Convener presented the proposed deliverances and it was resolved that... Synod approves the Committee's ongoing discussions

with the Australian Free Church in seeking a closer relationship between our denominations.”

“Rev. Bruce Backensto from the RPCNA was introduced to and welcomed by the Moderator. Mr Backensto was invited to speak and brought greetings from the RPCNA. He spoke of pain and struggle in church discipline, but rejoiced in growth. He spoke of the formation of the RPC Canada and asked for prayer in their own move toward closer relationships with the ARPC. He encouraged us with Paul's words: “Only let your conduct be worthy of the Lord Jesus Christ...”



*Rev. Bruce Backensto*

“The [Missions Evening] Session [on Thursday 4th May] opened with prayer led by Dr Muldoon, at 7:15pm... The [Missions Committee] Convener, Dr Muldoon, introduced Rev. Samit Mishra and Mr Pradeep Kumar to the Moderator, who welcomed them to the Synod and invited them to speak. Dr Muldoon presented a video on the work of Dr Dickson with VETNET in North India (translated by Rev. Mishra). Rev. Mishra and Mr Kumar then spoke on the work of the schools in Chhapara and Lakhnadon. Rev. Mishra spoke of school developments into English based Medium schools, which are in demand from people in the region. He also spoke of the work in the presbyteries, with new ones being established. Strategic approaches are bearing fruit, by God's blessing, in church planting work, in building infrastructure, in community involvement and in some income generating

activities. The PFCCI hopes to conduct its first Synod in November, 2023. Rev. Peter Gadsby and Mr Greensill prayed for the brothers from India and the work of the PFCCI. The Session closed with prayer at 9:10pm.”

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## TEASA Consultation

### Many Challenges and Our Only Defense

*The Church in Africa is facing many challenges and threats, perhaps even more than our counterparts in the Western world. However, this should not discourage us from recognising the potential to address these issues. Ultimately, the African Church needs to re-establish its firm foundation in the comprehensive teachings of the Bible and relinquish all heresies and superstitions.*

This conclusion emerged from a three-day consultation of Bible colleges held north of Pretoria. Delegates attended from various African nations, including Botswana, Eswatini, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe as well as South Africa. It was arranged by Mukhanyo on behalf of the **Theological Education Association of Southern Africa (TEASA)**, centred around the theme “God’s Word for Bible Education in Africa.”

The presentations delivered by confessional theologians in Africa demonstrated their comprehensive understanding of both Western and indigenous African heresies.

In his opening keynote address, Rev. Dr Siegfried Ngubane, the regional director of SIM (Serving In Missions), highlighted various concerns within the church, including disunity, materialism, the lavish lifestyles of church leaders, ethical shortcomings, moral misconduct, and the emergence of self-proclaimed “apostles” who lack understanding of Christ’s teachings and propagate their false doctrines. He pleaded for

the establishment of a network of sound Biblical education institutions with collaboration and fellowship based upon the whole Word of God.

During the meeting, **Rev. Isaac Makashinyi**, academic dean of the Lusaka Ministerial College and lecturer at African Christian University, shed light on the perilous influence of liberal theologians who manipulate the interpretation of the Bible to conform to specific cultural contexts. Additionally, he emphasised the escalating challenge posed by the authority of the senior pastor figure, commonly referred to as “papa”, within African societies. Despite the teachings of Scripture, the statements of this revered church leader are revered and regarded as infallible truths.

In the realm of Bible education, it is vital that every course in the curricula recognises and honours the authority of the Bible. It is imperative to guard against succumbing to temptations such as “democratising” the curriculum, yielding to political correctness, or commercialising the pursuit of Bible education.

Makashinyi strongly criticised endeavours to “Africanise” hermeneutics as a means to distance oneself from “Western” hermeneutical approaches. Such efforts, he argued, often involve the promotion of African culture and traditions, which may lead to incorrect contextualisation and the blending of ancestral beliefs and practices, including those associated with sangomas (witchdoctors), with biblical truths.



TEASA Consultation 2023



According to **Rev. Rodgers Atwebembeire**, the regional director for Eastern Africa at the Africa Centre for Apologetics Research in Uganda, African cults misinterpret Scripture by blending its truths with their ancestral beliefs. These cults claim to accept the Bible but assert that its understanding necessitates additional revelations.

Scripture is distorted through various means, with a minimum of 20 identified methods. These include the employment of erroneous or selective quotations and the assertion that the Bible bestows divine authority upon particular individuals.

**Rev. Dr Victor d'Assonville**, dean of the Reformed Theological Seminary in Heidelberg, Germany, and a seasoned cross-cultural missionary who dedicated around 20 years to his work in South Africa drew upon J. Gresham Machen's famous book *Christianity and Liberalism*. He expounded on the prevalent tendency in Africa where humans endeavour to shape God in their likeness. Christianity is firmly rooted in the Bible as the divine Word, forming the bedrock for both its belief system and way of life. Conversely, liberalism finds its foundation in the transient emotions of fallen mankind.

The consensus among all twelve speakers was resolute: the authority of the Bible should remain unviolated and unchallengeable. They emphasised that the true understanding of God's Word can only be attained by attentively heeding the Bible and employing hermeneutics –

a God-given method that has proven its efficacy throughout the ages – to faithfully expound its teachings.

All keynote addresses of the Consultation are available at [www.TEASA.co.za](http://www.TEASA.co.za). This year's event was another great blessing for more than forty Bible education institutions. It was a collective affirmation, recognising Scripture alone as the ultimate authoritative source: *Sola Scriptura*!

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*OPC and PCU delegates at ICRC 2022*



*Some delegates from African Churches at ICRC 2022*



**Author: Rev. Dr. Heinrich Zwemstra**

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## Namibia now a National Synod

### Namibian population and independence

Namibia is a vast country with a population of approximately 2.5 million people. This small population in a large country makes Namibia's population density the second lowest in the world at just 3 people per square kilometre.

In 1884 Namibia became a German colony, but during World War I the South African army seized the then German South West Africa and the country was placed under the administration of the South African government. With the exception of Walvis Bay, Namibia became independent in 1990. In 1994 Walvis Bay became part of the rest of Namibia.

### The origin of the Reformed Churches in Namibia

Namibia has 13 congregations that are part of the Reformed Churches of South Africa (RCSA). In total there are 1633 professing members and 736 baptismal members. A large proportion of its members are descendants of the Dorsland Trekkers ("Thirsty Land Pioneers") who moved to Angola in various treks between 1874 and 1905. In Angola, they helped secure the country, they practiced agriculture, organized congregations, and established schools. But the Portuguese government at the time strongly opposed the Afrikaans schools and Reformed religion, and they did not want to give the Dorslandtrekkers property rights. The result was that the Dorsland Trekkers moved to South West Africa in 1928-29 and settled in the North and East of the country. There they founded Reformed churches that still exist today.

During the same period many farmers from the Cape moved to South West Africa for the sake of grazing for their livestock. They initially joined congregations of the Dutch Reformed Church (Karasburg and Keetmanshoop), but later founded Reformed churches.

Besides the descendants of the Dorsland Trekkers, church members therefore also comprise those who have moved or immigrated to Namibia. Furthermore, people also became part of these Reformed churches through missionary work. For example, in the vicinity of Drimiopsis there is the Reformed Church Sanveld which consists mainly of the San people.

### The necessity for a National Synod for Namibia

Namibia has great similarities with South Africa, but after independence in 1990, the country has developed its own nature and character. Namibia also has its own government

and unique challenges, therefore the churches in Namibia began to realise more and more that they had a unique calling. In 2017, Classis Etosha (the meeting of Reformed Churches in Namibia) started discussing the possibility of an own church affiliation. Deputies were appointed to investigate the matter. After investigating this case, Classis Etosha realized that:

1. There are still many similarities between the RCSA and Reformed Churches in Namibia. Furthermore, the Classis also realised that the RCSA and the Reformed Churches in Namibia still needed each other.
2. Classis Etosha is part of another country, and that the Reformed Churches in this country have a unique character and calling.

After the deputies received advice from experts in ecclesiastical law, Classis Etosha decided to organize itself as a National Synod during its meeting on 9 September 2022. Accordingly, the Reformed Churches in Namibia remain part of the General Synod of the RCSA, but are allowed to function much more independently. For example, the Reformed Churches in Namibia will have an own name and efforts will be made to train more Namibians as ministers.

Classis Etosha requested the General Synod to designate deputies to determine to what extent Reformed Churches in Namibia will function independently, and to what extent they will still liaise with the RCSA. Regional Synod North West supported Classis Etosha in this at its meeting in November 2022, and the last General Synod of 2023 unanimously approved it.

The purpose of the National Synod is therefore to discuss the unique calling of the Reformed Churches within the boundaries of Namibia. In the next few years the National Synod will have to define that. The National Synod will also have to decide whether there will be a National Synod only, or whether the 14 Reformed Churches within the National Synod will subdivide in Classes and Regional Synods. For all other decisions the National Synod of Namibia is still part of the General Synod of the Reformed Churches in South Africa.

### The special unity between the Reformed Churches in Namibia

Amongst the Reformed Churches in Namibia there is a special bond and unity. At least once a year, all the ministers and



their families meet for a few days to pray together, encourage one another and discuss the ministry in Namibia. They travel great distances to attend these gatherings. Namibia has 11 ministers and 5 emeritus ministers who are still actively involved in the ministry in Namibia by helping smaller congregations, leading worship services and giving wise advice to congregations and younger ministers. Every year the sisters from all over Namibia gather. At these meetings, sisterly bonds are renewed, they learn together, pray together and encourage one another. Classis Etosha has established a ministry fund to support the smaller congregations in the country. All the congregations in Namibia contribute to this fund through initiating projects, and as a result the ministry can continue in smaller towns

(especially in rural areas).

The Reformed Churches in Namibia are assisting the Reformed Church Tsumeb with a church planting in Oshakati in the North of Namibia. Rev. Ruan Steyn was called for this and we are grateful for the new congregation that is now being established there.

We ask that readers pray for the churches in Namibia. Pray that the Lord will give wisdom to the deputies appointed for the transition to a National Synod. Pray that we as churches in Namibia will be a light and prophetic voice in the country, and that the Lord will use us for the expansion of His church and His kingdom.

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## GKSA Church Government Structures

**Author: Rev. Chaka C. Mathundela**

*Chaka is a minister with the Reformed Churches in South Africa.*

### Abstract

The reformed churches of Southern Africa (GKSA) practices structural unity, opposed to federal unity of many churches that is practiced by many Reformational churches of South Africa, e.g. NG and URCSA, Hervormde and Maranatha. One will date this structural unity of GKSA from the first miraculous general synod, whereby the whole nations of South Africa abandon their national synod (the so called, volks kerk) but go for general synod (volkerekerk). In presence were the whites (die boere), the Vendas from Limpopo, the Tswanas from North West, The Pedis from Limpopo, The Sothos from Free State and Lesotho, The Xhosas from Western and Eastern Cape, The Swati from Mpumalanga, The Ndebele from Mpumalanga, the Zulu from Kwazulu Natal, the Coloureds from Northern Cape and the English from Western Cape. This general synod was a true reflection of South Africa. It was an answered prayer of Christ; I pray that they may be one. 2009 was the beginning of this excellent move of the church. This paper addresses the structures of GKSA from 2009. Though it is difficult to interpret church polity from certain years without attending to other previous years. For people of different colors, languages, dress, cultures to come together it is a milestone. Indeed it happened in 2009 for the first time and is still happening in GKSA.

### 1. Introduction

By the structure of the church I mean the way the church is governed. The reformed church polity uses the word ecclesiastical assemblies. Bouwman (1928:01) elaborates that "according to the sayings of the New Testament, the church is a gathering of the wicked, who seek in Christ their salvation, being washed in his blood and sealed by the Holy Spirit. As such, the essence of the church is invisible, an object of faith, and we cannot know with certainty who belongs to it. Christ alone knows infallibly who his own are, and once, in the consummation of ages, all who have been delivered from sin by Christ as members of the perfect body of Christ, will be taken up in glory, to serve and praise Him in perfection forever. But the church also has a visible side. In this life, the Lord gathers his own by His Spirit and Word into a body, to know Him, in Him to enjoy the forgiveness of sins and the peace of heart in His fellowship, and to fight His battle against satan and sin."

From this argumentation of Bouwman, two aspects of the church are important, namely, Invisible church and visible church. Du Plooy (2006:69) adds that "this system of government binds local churches together (mutuo consensu) on the basis of the confession so that they constitute a structural unity. The reformed church order does not go into

fine detail nor does it attempt to regulate the church by laying down rules and regulations.” The structures or assemblies that I’m attending to in the light of GKSA or Reformed Churches of Southern Africa are of the visible church. The church as we gather together every Sunday. The church as explained by Catechism of Heidelberg Lord’s Day 21 question 54 “The Son of God, out of the whole human race, from the beginning to the end of the world, gathers, defends, and preserves for Himself, by His Spirit and Word, in the unity of the true faith, a Church chosen to everlasting life; and forever shall remain, a living member thereof.” The point of departure of our confession is that Christ is the one who is building His Church.

Van der Walt (1976:19-20) argues that “the Reformed or Presbyterian church government system is determined by the scriptural fundamental principle that Christ Himself rules His church. In the reformed confession and church order is all about the glory of Christ as King, and in the confessions is all about kingship of Christ over His church, the heart of the church beats for this. For the church government this means that there is only one authority in the church, and that is the only authority of Christ. Right to command in the church belongs to no one.” This simply means the government of Christ is served by the church council. The church order of Dordt maintains the universal character of the church. This church that we find ourselves worshipping in it (local GKSA, e.g. GK Daveyton was planted by Benoni) and Benoni was planted by another GKSA Church. The church was born from mission work of another church. Hence the concept Kerkverband (Church communion). Article 29 – 52 of Church order of GKSA deals with ecclesiastical assemblies. Article 29 Church Order stipulates that “there are the following kinds of church assemblies: the church council, classis, regional synod and general synod. As far as GKSA is concerned it is important to note that before 2009 it had three national synods, namely, Potchefstroom, Middeland and Soutpansberg. Potchefstroom had 27classises, Middeland had 8 classes and Soutpansberg had 1 classis (Almanak2001:299-485).

## 2. Local church council.

Article 37 of GKSA Church order stipulates that “In all churches there shall be a church council composed of the minister or ministers of the Word and the elders. The church council shall meet regularly under the chairmanship of the minister, or the ministers alternately if there is a more than one.”

Reformational understanding of the church is that, the church

is a local church. Vorster (2011:65) states that the local church is a complete manifestation of the Universal Church. This truth that is stated by Vorster we learn it from the following scriptures:

1 Corinthians 11:18-19 “For, in the first place, when you assemble as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and I partly believe it, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.”

1 Corinthians 14:23 “If, therefore, the whole church assembles and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad?

Colossians 4:15 “Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.”

Romans 16:3a,5a “Greet Prisca and Aquila, ... Greet also the church in their house.”

These local churches have their own church councils or office bearers to apply service of the Word and the sacraments. Calvin also argues that the government of the church is vested in the local congregation (Calvin 1949c:1). The earliest synod of the Dutch Reformed Churches, Emden 1572, decided that in each congregation there should be gatherings of church council consisting of ministers of the Word, elders and deacons.

Vorster (2011:67) elaborates the function of the church council as follows:

- i. To regulate the services of the Word and catechism instruction.
- ii. The execution of church discipline according to article 71-80.
- iii. The house visitation.
- iv. The sacraments (Holy Baptism and Holy Communion).
- v. Consideration of all correspondences.
- vi. Delegation of representatives to major assemblies.

The meeting of deacons should be regarded as one of the most important meetings because it deals with the most important diaconal work.

## 3. Classis.

Article 41 of GKSA Church Order stipulates that “the classis is a meeting of neighboring churches of which each delegates a minister and an elder, or two elders if there is no minister, to represent them. The venue and time of the next classis is determined at each meeting. Such meetings shall be held at least once every three months. The various ministers shall preside over the classis in rotation, or one shall be chosen twice in succession. The chairman shall enquire whether the

churches hold meetings of the church council, exercise church discipline, take good care of the poor and the schools, and whether any of the churches require the advice and assistance of the classis in any matter regarding proper management. At the last meeting prior to the regional synod, delegates must be chosen to attend the synod.”

Classis is the second structure as far as the GKSA government is concerned. One can argue that classis is the first major assembly. Church council is the minor assembly. But one will be correct to say classis is the second assembly because classis is not a church but a meeting of churches. In other words matters that could not be finalized by church council they come to classis. As I have already mentioned under my introduction, from 2009 GKSA came up with new classes and new regional synods structures. This will mean all people of GKSA come together in one classis close to them.

In 2001 The GKSA, consisted of three national synods. Potchefstroom had 27 classes, Middelande had 7, and Soutpansberg had 1. Today there 27 classes from different provinces of South Africa, Lesotho, Namibia, Zambia, Botswana and Zimbabwe. No more synods Potchefstroom, Middelande and Soutpansberg but only one GKSA. Today the classis in the GKSA is above racial, cultural and linguistic differences.

#### 4. Regional Synod.

Article 47 of GKSA Church Order stipulates that “the regional synod is an assembly of neighboring classes, to which each classis delegates an equal number of ministers of the Word and elders, as determined by the regional synod. The regional synod shall meet annually, unless, in the opinion of at least two classes, it has become essential to call an extraordinary synod.”

The work of the regional synod is the application and implementation of articles 4, 30, 31, 46, 49 and 79 of the church order. These articles address the examination, admissions of candidates into ministry, matters that could not be finalized by classis, gravamina reports and church discipline. Synod can meet only once a year but if there is urgency or a need, two classises can request the meeting of a regional synod.

#### 5. General Synod.

Article 47 of GKSA Church Order stipulates that “the general synod is an assembly of all the regional synods to which each regional synod delegates an equal number of ministers and elders, as determined by the general synod. The general synod shall meet every three years unless, in the opinion of at least two regional synods, it has become essential to call an extraordinary meeting.”

It should be noted with great care that where there are no

regional synods, the classes can delegate directly to the general synod but this is not the case with GKSA. At this present GKSA have seven regional synods (7), namely, Pretoria, Bosveld, Oostelike, Randvaal, Noordwes, Vrystaat en Kwazulu Natal and Suidelike (Almanak 2023:44-45).

Bouwman (1934:155) argues that “assemblies must delegate skilled people to do the work and not look at personal interest.”

This aspect of who is delegated is crucial due to necessary gifts needed to partake in certain deputies or commissions. The agenda of the general synod according to article 30 is to deal with matters that have not been resolved by classis and regional synod. Vorster (2011:90-91) adds that “the agenda of a general synod should consist of:

- Reports of deputies according to art49.
- Appeals.
- Gravamina.
- Proposals from minor assemblies.

Bos (1950:179) maintains that “synods are held with open doors, except when dealing with disciplinary cases. Office bearers who are not delegated can attend a synod to see, to hear and to learn and they may even be asked to give advice, but not to vote.”

#### 6. Conclusion.

The exact structure of GKSA is church council, classis, regional synod and general synod. Equal numbers of elders and ministers should be delegated to the classis, regional synod and general synod. These governing structures are meetings of the churches; their responsibility is to administer authority of Christ by reminding each other on the following important aspect regarding management of the church, offices; assemblies; supervision over doctrine, sacraments and ceremonies; and church discipline.

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## Being Different

What makes people from abroad so different? Is it their language? Sure. Is it their appearance? Yes. But it is mainly their habits, their way of thinking and their culture of life. Hang out with people from other cultures a little longer and you'll be amazed by simple and complex things that are completely different from what you're used to and what you think is normal.

That's what you discover when you read the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). It has been called 'the constitution of the Kingdom of heaven'. The Sermon on the Mount is very well known and appealing, a third of the Sermon on the Mount consists of examples from everyday life. The Lord Jesus tells how the citizens in that Kingdom are His and how they behave, what their typical characteristics are and how they live differently from the world around them.

### Context

The Sermon on the Mount is introduced by Matthew through Jesus' baptism and temptation in the wilderness, the beginning of His ministry on earth. So what exactly is He coming to do? Matthew 4:17 puts it this way: "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Jesus also healed, He could control every disease and ailment. He overcame satanic powers and freed people from the evil one. All these signs were underlining His proclamation: the Kingdom is at hand. It has come near in Him, the King of God's Kingdom. Whoever repents to Him, turns from his wicked way, confesses his guilt, and henceforth turns to the Lord to live according to His Word and will, which are part of the Kingdom of heaven.

That is what Jesus is all about in His preaching: to call sinners as King from the realm of darkness into His Kingdom of light, to make them His subjects so that they will imitate Him as His disciples. You read in Matthew 4 that this happens: Jesus calls disciples and they follow Him. Then Jesus preaches in Galilee, He teaches and heals, and the peoples flow to Him, even from abroad.

Then comes the Sermon on the Mount. You could say that Matthew 5-7 is the subsection to Matthew 4:17: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." What does that mean, repentance because of the Kingdom? What does it mean, to live with King Jesus? The King Himself explains this in the Sermon on the Mount. Not that He brings a new law, on the contrary (Matthew 5:17). He has come as the superior Moses to reveal the depth and full richness of God's law.

### Address

In order to properly understand the Sermon on the Mount, it is important to see for whom the Sermon on the Mount is intended. Matthew 5:1-2 says, "Seeing the crowds, He went up on the mountain, and when He sat down, His disciples came to Him. And He opened his mouth and taught them." The Sermon on the Mount is addressed to His disciples, whom He has called and who follow Him. So the constitution of God's Kingdom is meant for people who belong to Jesus. It is inextricably linked to the King Himself. Whoever belongs to the King, belongs to the Kingdom and is taught in the Sermon on the Mount.

If you lose sight of that, you can easily fall into two pitfalls. One pitfall is that of people who think too optimistically about the Sermon on the Mount. These are the people who like it, but who think they can do as the Sermon on the Mount tells them without believing in the Lord Jesus, without wanting to obey Him warmly. They want to listen to Him as a Teacher, but He is not their Lord. Jesus has no say in their lives. His Spirit does not work in them. They expect it from themselves, but cannot perform as the Sermon on the Mount teaches, for their hearts are not in it.

The second pitfall is that of people who think too pessimistically about the Sermon on the Mount. They find it far too difficult and complicated and they think that although it is a beautiful ideal, it is ultimately an unfeasible dream. Too radical. Too unrealistic. They too listen to the Sermon on the Mount with no relation to Jesus. They too, look at themselves and they expect it of themselves. Indeed, they will never be able to perform the Sermon on the Mount. If they try, they will work themselves to death.

It is clear that the Sermon on the Mount is intended for the disciples of Jesus, who follow Jesus because He is their King and Lord. He has dominion over their lives. They have loved Him for His grace and compassion, and so they listen to Him with deep longing and devotion. Without Him they perish, but with Him they find true life and may call God their Father. A picture of how the Holy Spirit shapes them and what is increasingly typifying of them is expressed in the Beatitudes.

In short, the Sermon on the Mount is not meant for those entering the Kingdom, but for those who belong to the Kingdom by grace to instruct them as to how to live in the Kingdom. And that makes all the difference.

## Purpose

In doing so, we have already discovered the purpose of the Sermon on the Mount. The intention is not primarily that you do or do not do a lot of things, although it is constantly about that. But the first purpose of the Sermon on the Mount is that you care about the Lord Jesus. That you come to understand more and more of Him, of the work of Him as the Son of the Father Who brings us into communion with the Father, of living with Him in His Kingdom. The Sermon on the Mount is not a checklist, it is a lifestyle. It's not so much about doing things, but more about the relationship with the Lord Jesus. You can never separate everything that is written in the Sermon on the Mount from Him. As soon as you do that, you go wrong. And if you're going to do what it says through the Holy Spirit, what are you doing it for? For Him, for the Bridegroom, for the King, to the glory of the Father!

The Sermon on the Mount consists of several parts, but is one whole. You can sum it up with: being different. To be different from the non-religious people, the pagans with their customs, who do not care about God, but are king in their own hearts and lives. But also being different from the (strict) religious people with their customs and their rules. Being different in this world. That is the main message. People who belong to the Kingdom, redeemed sinners, have a different character (the Beatitudes); are different in their influence (salting salt); are different in dealing with God's law, for they love God with their hearts; are different in giving alms, in praying, and in fasting, for they live before their Father in heaven; therefore they also deal differently with money and goods, with being concerned, for they trust in the care of the Father; are different in their relationships with others, for they learn to live in the love and grace they themselves received; are different in their devotion to the Word of Jesus, for He is their foundation, their solid Rock. That is what the King asks of His church and at the same time wants them to work out through His Holy Spirit: to be different: To be like Him, and thus different from this world. A Christian is a citizen of two worlds and it will show.

It is striking how often the Lord Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount refers to God as the Father of His disciples, especially when you compare it to the Old Testament. In Matthew 6 alone, ten times. That is what makes their lives different, that they know and trust Him as their Father.

## Obedience

The constitution of God's Kingdom is given in this world. The Kingdom of God has already come in the Lord Jesus Christ, but it is not yet perfect here on earth. After all, Jesus teaches to

pray in the Sermon on the Mount: "Your Kingdom come." Kingdom life must come again and again and more in the lives of God's children. It will be perfect one day, in the future of God. But that future takes shape in the here and now in brokenness. This means that God's children listen to the words of Jesus in the midst of a world that is different from them, hostile to Jesus and to the message of sin and grace. If we really listen to the Sermon on the Mount, we will encounter enmity. We encounter the enmity in our own hearts because sometimes we want to sin and disobey. We face the temptations and opposition of the world. And we have to fight the devil. But then the way in that struggle is not to give it up because it would be too radical or too difficult, not to flee from, but to flee to the Lord Jesus and stay with Him.

The Sermon on the Mount ends with the parable of the wise and the foolish builders (Matthew 7:24-27). Jesus teaches His church to build on His Word and work. Not only in theory, but in practice. Not only to be hearers of the Word but also doers (cf. James 1:22). That requires obedience. And that is not without obligation. In Matthew 7, the focus is on eternity, about eternal well-being or eternal woe. Those who have learned by the Holy Spirit to obey, even if by trial and error, have a future because they have been made wise.

Whoever belongs to Jesus has been set free to live. We don't have to earn it, Jesus Himself did that. It can only be received by the poor in spirit who stand with empty hands (Matthew 5:3). When you have received it, you can't help but long for it to show in your life. That you are truly different and are already becoming more different from the world around you. The Sermon on the Mount thus calls for obedience out of love, in response to God's work in Christ.

If Jesus is your Savior, then this is His will. This is how He wants to shape you through the power of the Holy Spirit. And He does so in the way of repentance and faith, of obedience and dependence. As one of the (Dutch) rhymed Psalms sings (Psalm 95:4): "If you hear His voice today, believe His word of salvation and comfort, do not harden yourselves, but let yourselves be guided."



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## Hell

Why consider such a terrible topic?

It seems so morbid and, in the minds of most people, so outdated. I highly recommend Professor Donnelly's outstanding book on the Bible's teaching of Heaven and Hell. This article highlights two key reasons why it is crucial to consider what Scripture teaches about this sombre subject.

### 1. The Confusion of Contemporary Thinking

A number of competing views about the destiny of unbelievers has contributed to the confusion of contemporary thinking.

#### (a) Life after death is unlikely

This was the view of Bertrand Russell, a British philosopher and mathematician who died in 1970. He claimed to be agnostic and thought it was likely that death was the end of our existence: 'I believe that, when I die, I shall rot, and nothing of my ego will survive.' He denounced Jesus for talking about Hell and he described Jesus' warnings about Hell as being morally repugnant. Many today agree with Russell's basic conclusions even if they do not say things quite so bluntly.

#### (b) Everyone goes to heaven

This view, known as universalism, is an optimistic assessment of the fate of human beings. John Hick was a world-famous British philosopher of religion who died in 2012. Hick said that, as a young man, he experienced a religious conversion to evangelical Christianity. But then he rejected evangelical theology and showed particular contempt for the orthodox biblical teaching on Hell. He described it as a 'grim fantasy', 'a serious perversion of the Christian Gospel', and 'morally revolting'. Hick believed that all religions lead to God and that all people will be brought into the 'Kingdom of Heaven'.

Many modern preachers may not assert universalism dogmatically but they are nevertheless hopeful that all men will be saved. It is a popular view and very welcome among unbelievers. Often people will speak of a deceased person who had no love for Christ as if he is now in Heaven.

#### (c) Unbelievers get a chance after death

Clark Pinnock, a leading theologian in Canada, believed that the Church was wrong in teaching that death is a cut-off point for experiencing God's grace.

Pinnock believed that people who died without hearing the Gospel will get a chance to hear it after death and to repent. If they still reject God's grace through Christ, Pinnock said, their fate will not be eternal condemnation in Hell but rather extermination - they will simply cease to exist.

#### (d) Ultimately unbelievers face annihilation

This view, called annihilationism, asserts that only the repentant will live forever. By contrast, God will allow the unrepentant to pass into nothingness (to be annihilated).

This unbiblical thinking has been fairly widely accepted in recent times. John Stott, a champion of evangelical Christianity for many years, stunned the evangelical world when he tentatively defended the doctrine of annihilation of the unrepentant. Stott conceded that eternal punishment of the impenitent has been the view of the Church down through the ages. He acknowledged that most evangelical leaders in his day held to it. But he lamented, 'Emotionally, I find the concept intolerable.' Yet he knew that Scripture, and not emotion, must be his supreme authority.

Another leading Twentieth Century evangelical, Philip Edgecumbe Hughes, came out more strongly still against the doctrine of eternal punishment. He spoke of the unrepentant being obliterated or annihilated, but not eternally punished.

In the face of such twisted teaching, some may be tempted to think, 'These were clever men, great scholars, eminent leaders in the church. Is it not possible that they were right?' Yet Hell is mentioned frequently in the Bible and extensive sections of God's Word deal with this doctrine. Jesus Himself spoke more about judgement than He did about love. This brings us to a second reason to study this subject.

### 2. The Clarity of Christ's Teaching

In stark contrast with the confusion of contemporary thinking on Hell is the clarity of Christ's teaching. Jesus could not have been more plain when He spoke about this matter. In Mark 9 Jesus used the word 'Hell' three times, in verses 44-47. The word for 'Hell' here in the original Greek is 'Gehenna' which has a very telling background. Around 750BC godless King Ahaz was on the throne in Judah. King Ahaz was an idolater and adopted some of the most revolting heathen practices of his day - including the offering of human sacrifices. Indeed Ahaz even had his own sons burned to death. These atrocities were carried out in the valley of Ben Hinnom just south-west of Jerusalem. This valley was deemed to be cursed because of the vile practices that were continuously perpetrated there, until godly King Josiah turned it into a public rubbish dump. It became a place in which all the filth of Jerusalem was poured. Later, the bodies of animals and even corpses of criminals were flung there and left to rot. As one writer comments, this valley was a putrid public dump where 'the fires never stopped



burning and the worms never stopped eating.' We can see how this place fits the picture of Hell.

The Hebrew name for this place was Ge(ben)hinnom which was shortened to Gehinnom and the Greek translation of this name was Gehenna. It is used twelve times in the New Testament and is translated as 'Hell'. It vividly teaches us the reality of eternal punishment. Jesus uses it most and warns us eleven times about Gehenna. In Matthew 5:29 Jesus speaks of a person's whole body being 'thrown into Hell' and of those who will be 'thrown into the fire of hell' (Matthew 18:9). He also exhorts us to 'be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in Hell' (Matthew 10:28).

In Mark 9:43-45 Jesus describes Hell as 'the unquenchable fire' and says of those condemned there that 'their worm does not die'. Both these horrifying phrases point to the eternal nature of the punishment that awaits those condemned to Hell. Jesus' words regarding 'their worm' indicate, it seems, that this part of their suffering is internal rather than external, perhaps referring to the sinner's conscience. I believe Jesus is saying that the unrepentant will suffer continuously in Hell from the most severe pangs of conscience. They will be acutely aware that they defied God deliberately and freely chose the lifestyle that led them to Hell. They will be in utter misery, thinking over wasted opportunities they had had to repent. They will have 'no rest day or night' (Revelation 14:11). Their inner anguish will never end. There will be no prospect of ever having peace. Their worm will not die.

Jesus also describes Hell as 'unquenchable fire'. Fire is by far the Bible's most frequent description of Hell. But what does Jesus mean by 'unquenchable fire'?

Jesus was most likely using another metaphor for another terrible reality of Hell. Twice the Bible describes God himself as

a 'consuming fire', Deuteronomy 4:24 and Hebrews 12:29. The Old Testament prophet Nahum declared, 'His wrath is poured out like fire.'

These Scriptures all point us to the fearful conclusion: the fire of Hell is the holy, horrifying, unrestrained wrath of God thundering down on unrepentant sinners in exactly the way their sin deserves and God's holiness demands. According to Jesus, this is what lies ahead for the unrepentant human beings. He warns us with great clarity and compassion. All who remain unbelieving of the Gospel and unrepentant of their sin will be condemned to Hell, where the holy, horrifying wrath of God will burn against them and where their consciences will torment them as they remember their utter folly and appalling sin during their life on earth.

When Jesus spoke of Hell, it is evident He was speaking of eternal punishment. Indeed, that is what Jesus calls Hell in Matthew 25:46 where He says that the godless goats will go away to eternal punishment but His righteous sheep will go away to eternal life. If eternal life means everlasting bliss for all who belong to Jesus, how can eternal punishment not mean everlasting condemnation for those who do not belong to Him? The word for eternal is the same in both cases.

So why think about Hell? Why study what the Bible reveals to us about hell? It is imperative that we do so because of the confusion in contemporary thinking and the clarity in Christ's teaching.

It truly is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31).

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Namibian countryside



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## 200th Anniversary of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Confession of Faith of 1823

The history begins with the conversion of Howell Harris on May 25, 1735, at Talgarth, Breconshire, when, at the age of 21, he came to 'clear light as to the salvation of his soul'. He began to hold family worship in his mother's house and exhort his neighbors before Sunday morning services and in the evening. The official history also refers to Rev. Daniel Rowland, curate in the parish of Llangeitho some 60 miles west of Talgarth. Rowland was converted under the evangelical preaching of Rev. Griffith Jones of Llandowror and almost immediately began to preach with unusual power with many conversions following. The conversions of Harris and Rowland produced, respectively, a zealous organizer and a dynamic preacher. Under their leadership a revival began and prospered until, 78 years later, the Calvinistic Methodist denomination was formed.

Converts were nominal members of the established church but received little from it in the way of spiritual nurture and much in the way of persecution. Harris organized converts into private societies with ministry provided by 'exhorters'. More capable exhorters were appointed to superintend districts. The life of the societies was devotional, disciplined, pastoral and strongly experiential. Sometimes, quite detailed reports were delivered by superintendents to the associations. William Richard, the overseer of societies in Pembrokeshire and Cardiganshire, reporting on the Dyffryn Saeth society wrote: 'Thomas David, believing but subject to doubts, through the power of temptation; He desires and longs for greater liberty. David Morgan has tasted much of the love of God, believes daily and his experience is very clear.'<sup>1</sup>

The constitution began to take shape with the formation of associations (the word is still used by the Presbyterian Church of Wales for regional synods). At first they were confined to Welsh speakers but in 1743 a bilingual association was held at Watford, near the South Wales town of Caerphilly. It was attended by Harris, Rowland, George Whitefield (moderator), William Williams, John Cennick (he joined the Moravians in 1745), John Powell and Joseph Humphries. The aim was to clarify and reaffirm measures for the nurture of the societies and regulation of 'exhorters'. The practice of examining and disciplining 'exhorters' had already been addressed by Harris in a

series of measures written in 1742. At Watford it was resolved that no one is to be regarded as an exhorter ... until he has been first proved and accepted and that no one go beyond the limits assigned to him without previous consultation.'

With this and similar measures 'the organizational framework of the Welsh Methodist movement finally solidified.'<sup>2</sup> Its character was 'experimental' and its organization incipiently Presbyterian. When a formal constitution was agreed nearly 100 years later, the method of ordination reflected the earlier need for flexibility in the deployment of exhorters. Rule 6 of the method of ordination states that 'No ordained preacher shall consider himself the minister of one church more than another.'<sup>3</sup>

By the beginning of the 19th century, the relationship between Calvinistic Methodists and the parent church was so strained that some exhorters had already privately baptized infants or society members. Pressure to ordain reached a climax on June 20, 1811, when, at an association in the town of Bala, North Wales, Rev. Thomas Charles examined 8 exhorters, asking 19 questions about doctrine and two about commitment to the new body. These last were 'Do you sincerely approve of the present order of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Connexion?' and 'Do you intend, as far as lies in you, to preserve the unity of the Connexion in the manner in which the Lord has so greatly prospered it? And do you purpose to withstand all useless and contentious debates which have a tendency to create strife?' This marked the end of a slow and sometimes painful journey towards a de facto denomination. Clergy, who had favoured the Methodists up to this point turned against them, one pronouncing the ordination a serious mockery and caricature of heavenly ordinations.<sup>4</sup>

It remained for the denomination to formalize its doctrine. Responsibility was divided between the North and South and a combined result approved at Aberystwyth with on 14 March, 1823. The confession largely follows the Westminster but differs in some respects resulting in what someone described as modified Calvinism.

One point of difference is that it begins with the doctrine of God not scripture. Article 2 on the inspiration of scripture invokes the 'godliness and self denial of the writers, the purity



and holiness of the truths ... the consistency of all the parts' etc., as evidence that God is the author... but lacks reference to the testimony of the Holy Spirit. In contrast the Westminster states that 'notwithstanding open square brackets the above], our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority there of, is from the inward work of the holy spirit bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts.' Article 12, on the Election of Grace states that 'God in righteousness left some persons unpredestinated' but the Westminster [III.3] states that some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death. Article 18 'Of Redemption' states that 'It was ordained that Christ person should stand in the stead of those persons (and those only) who had been given to him to redeem'. This is qualified in an appendix of 1875, which arose because of a controversy among them. The appendix states that 'None will perish because of insufficiency in the atonement, but all because they will not come to Christ to be saved, and these men will have no excuse to make for their neglect of Christ.'

The general tone of the Calvinistic Methodist confession reflects the experimental character of Christianity and Wales from the beginning of the revival in 1735, e.g. article 36 (Of church fellowship) and 39 (Of the Lord's Supper). Article 39 states that by this means we profess that we truly receive him,

believe in him, feed upon him by faith; are united to him, and in him to one another; and as good soldiers of Christ, live unto him who died for us.

### Postscript

The confession was consigned to the historical archive in 1933, when the then Presbyterian Church of Wales was constituted under that name by a Declaratory Act, which committed the denomination to 'A Short Declaration of Faith and Practice' more notable for what it omits than what it includes.

### Endnotes

1. Welsh Calvinist Methodism p81: William Williams, Bryntirion press 1998
2. Howell Harris From Conversion to Separation 1735-1750 p89: Geraint Tudur: University of Wales press, 2000.
3. An appendix of 1875 recognized the validity of a call to a particular congregation in the context of connexional ordination.
4. Rev. Thomas Jones in the Welsh Looking-Glass.

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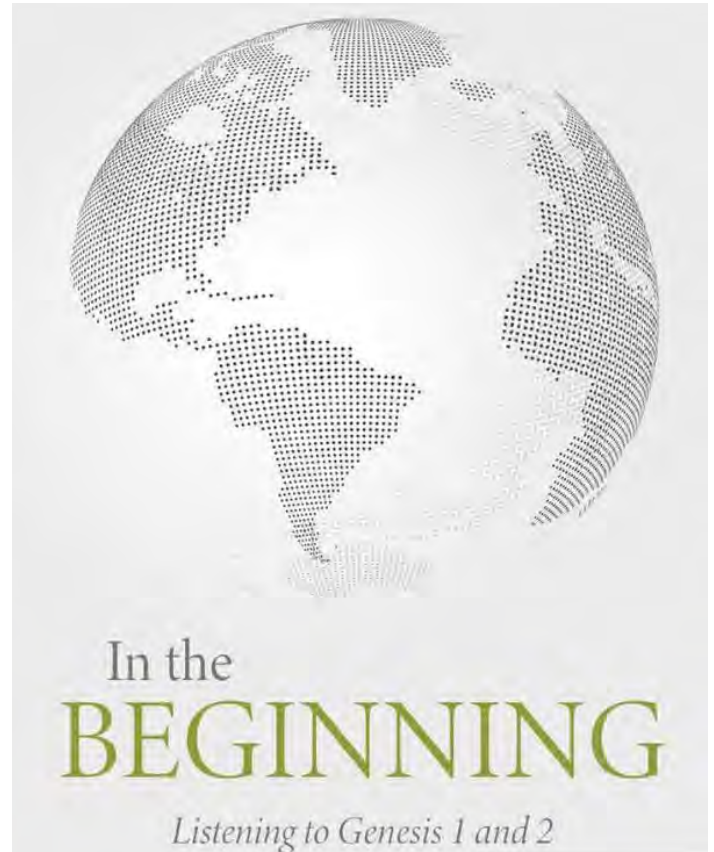
## *In the Beginning*

Cornelis Van Dam's *In the Beginning: Listening to Genesis 1 and 2* is an exegetical tour de force of the opening chapters of Genesis that combines a careful listening to the text with a thorough examination of recent scholarly developments that would seek to reconcile the creation account with modern evolutionary theory (9). The author notes that due to “the enormous prestige enjoyed by science and its championing the theory of evolution... the previous several decades have seen a remarkable momentum toward the acceptance of theistic evolution in theologically conservative circles” (2). The author mentions several distinguished Old Testament scholars who were respected for their generally conservative approach to the Scriptures, but have since embraced theistic evolution and consequently adjusted their interpretation of Genesis according: Peter Enns, Bruce Waltke, Tremper Longman, and John Walton (2-4). They have been joined by well-known scholars such as Mark Noll, N. T. Wright, and Tim Keller (4-8). As a result, the historicity, veracity, and authority of Genesis 1 and 2 have become contentious issues. A key question addressed by this book, then, is “whether the widespread departure from the historic Reformed and Presbyterian understanding of how to interpret Genesis 1 and 2 is justified” (9). The author writes, “[a]fter considering the evidence, this book comes to the determination that we should accept the plain, straightforward reading of the Genesis text as a reliable account of the historical events resulting in the creation of the world we now live in. This study will also try to convince fellow Christians that such a conclusion is justified” (9). A “secondary purpose is therefore to ascertain the place of science in the study of Genesis 1 and 2 and the implications that the historicity of Genesis has for the credibility of the theory of evolution for explaining the origin of creation” (9). As emeritus professor of Old Testament at Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary in Hamilton, Ontario, Van Dam is eminently qualified for the task. The author's handling of both evolutionary and creationist accounts of origins is judicious, fair, and balanced.

In **chapter 1** Van Dam begins by setting out the basic presuppositions that inform his work.

(1) The need to read in faith: “We need to read and study the biblical text in faith, receiving it as fully authoritative and trustworthy” (11).

(2) The clarity of Scripture: “Another fundamental assumption is that when God speaks to us in scripture, his Word is clear.”



Van Dam goes on to note that “[a]ffirming the clarity of scripture does not mean that there are no difficult passages that require scholarly study ... It does mean that the reader of Scripture is not dependent on scholars to understand the basic import and significance of the passage before them” (12).

(3) Take seriously the literal sense of the text: The biblical passage ought to be understood “in accordance with the obvious, plain meaning of the text while taking into consideration its context” (13).

(4) Finally, we need to consider genre of the text: “If the genre is determined to be historical narrative, then we must accept as historically true whatever scripture affirms to be so” (13). The author devotes 30 pages to a discussion of “the historicity of Genesis 1:1-2:3” (chapter 3).

**Chapter 2** discusses “the place of extrabiblical evidence in interpreting Scripture.” As it has become fashionable in recent decades to read extrabiblical ancient Near Eastern views of creation and cosmology in Genesis 1 and 2, the discussion in the first part of the chapter on ancient Near Eastern literature

is a very important one. The author asks: "How should this material be used in listening to and trying to understand Genesis 1 and 2?" (17) "As a general principle," he rightly points out, "such material must always take a secondary place in the interpretation process." He goes on to note that "[o]ne should not say, as Old Testament scholar John Walton has asserted, that the key to understanding Scripture 'is to be found in the literature from the rest of the ancient world'" (18). On the contrary, Van Dam asserts, "Genesis 1 and 2 do not contain the opinions of the ancient world as to how the world began. They are revelation from God" (21). The author then goes on to discuss both the challenges in using ancient Near Eastern literature as well as the similarities between it and the biblical account. So how do we account for the similarities between the Genesis account of creation and ancient myths? Answer: "It seems probable that where there are notable resemblances, the myths are drawing on corrupted memories of the original divine revelation about earth's and humanity's beginnings as found in Genesis" (25-26).

The second half of the chapter contains an excellent discussion on the relationship between science, general revelation, and special revelation. The discussion is too long (33 pages) to do it justice here, but here are a few important convictions I gleaned from this section of the chapter.

(1) While the Bible is "not a scientific textbook" and we should be wary about reading scientific data into the text, we should also reject any attempt to draw the opposite conclusion, namely, "that Scripture is less than accurate when it portrays historical events or that Scripture is irrelevant for science" (33). Rather Christian scientists ought to "be encouraged when their research leads them to articulate theories that are consistent with Scripture. After all, the events that Genesis records are factually true" (33).

(2) "Scripture gives information that excludes some theories (such as evolution), and Scripture reminds us that creation is a great work of God and as such will never be fully comprehended. ... scientists, especially those trying to reconstruct the past history of the earth, impoverish themselves if they do not reckon with the history the Bible narrates" (35).

(3) "If creation reveals God and if science studies the created world, then one of the first conclusions that science should arrive at is the reality and glory of God who reveals himself in the physical world that is studied" (36).

(4) Van Dam then concludes the chapter with four important convictions when considering the relationship of science to

God's Word:

- (i) "Doing science is consistent with the creation mandate";
- (ii) "Scripture provides relevant information for science";
- (iii) "Science needs the guidance of God's Word";
- (iv) "If there is a true contradiction between what science theorises and Scripture clearly states, then scripture should be followed" (48-58).

This leads logically to a consideration of the historicity of Genesis 1:1-2:3 in **chapter 3**. Van Dam rightly points out that "if we accept the account of Abraham or Joseph as historically true, then why not the account of Adam and Eve's creation?" For every major section of the Book of Genesis (including the creation narrative of Genesis 2:4ff.) is introduced by the Hebrew *tôlādôt*, "this is the history of," or "these are the generations of," or "the genealogy of" (61). He thus concludes that "[t]he book of Genesis is one beautifully constructed, unified narrative that intends to recount history. At no point is there any indication that we move from non-historical to the historical" (62). This, he argues, is supported by the literary style of Genesis 1:1-2:3: "[I]t becomes evident that the literary style of the opening chapter of Scripture shows that its intent is to relate historical events. This is not fictitious mythology or legend but a sober historical account, a narrative with a plot and connected events. ... The biblical text of Genesis 1 describes sequential action with one event following another over the span of six days. As such it is narrating historical events" (63-4). Van Dam goes on to demonstrate how the historicity of the creation is supported elsewhere in both the Old and New Testaments (helpful discussions can be found on the following passages: Exod 20:8-11; Job 38:4-11; Psalm 33, 104; Prov 8:22-3; Isa 44-45; Matt 19:4; Mark 13:19; John 1:1-2; Acts 14:15; 17:24; 2 Cor 4:6; Col 1:16-17; Heb 1:2; 11:3; Rev 4:11; 14:7 see [pp. 65-80]).

**Chapter 4** begins with a discussion of the meaning and significance of the words "in the beginning" (Gen 1:1), concluding that they quite simply describe the very beginning of God's creation work on the first day (89-94). Van Dam then goes on to examine three theories that seek to undermine the traditional interpretation of Genesis 1:1-2: the classic gap theory (e.g., the Scofield Reference Bible, 94-98), the precreation chaos theory (e.g., Bruce Waltke, 98-101); and the theory that there was an initial creation which was followed at a much later time by the seven days of creation as outlined in Genesis 1 (e.g., C. John Collins, John Sailhamer, Herman

Bavinck, 101-5). Van Dam demonstrates through a careful analysis of the language and grammar of Genesis 1:1-2 why “[t]here is no convincing evidence of an indeterminate time gap within the first verses of Genesis 1. ... no pre precreation chaos and no initial creation that preceded the six days of God's work of creating” (105).

**Chapter 5**, “The Days of Creation,” sets out to make “the case for understanding the days of Genesis 1 as literal days” (107). On the basis of grammatical, textual, and contextual features, contends Van Dam, “these were days defined by evening and morning, days as we are accustomed to reckon days. There were not long periods of geologic time or allegorical days or a figure of speech” (112). Again he writes: “The text of Genesis 1 presents each of the six days of creation as we normally understand a day, with an evening and a morning—a day measured in hours, not millennia” (119). The author then proceeds to examine three major alternatives which view the days of Genesis 1 as nonliteral days: the framework view (e.g., Meredith Kline, 122-28); the analogical day view (e.g., C. John Collins, 128-36); and the seven-day structure as an ancient literary device (e.g., John Stek, 136-38). The author rightly concludes that these views should be rejected on exegetical, contextual, and historical grounds.

**Chapter 6** asks the question: “What do those words in the opening verse of scripture—‘God created’—mean?” (141). While that would seem to be a rather straightforward question, recent history of interpretation shows it to be anything but. John Walton has argued that Genesis 1 must be viewed within the context of the ancient Near East where “to create something means to give it function.” According to Walton, Genesis 1 is “making no comment in material origins” (144). However, contends Van Dam, (1) “Walton is overrating the importance of ancient Near Eastern materials for a proper understanding of Genesis and not fully factoring in the differences between the pagan and biblical worldviews”; (2) Walton is creating a false dilemma (sometimes referred to as an “either-or fallacy”): Why can't it be both material and functional? Why exclude one or the other? (3) Walton is confusing in his use of language: “He writes that ‘it is still best to consider the verb *bārā'* as meaning ‘to bring something into existence.’ But then he goes on to suggest that ‘it is highly unlikely that material existence is in view’” (145). This also excludes the second view examined in this chapter (that of Ellen van Wolde) which contends that *bārā'* does not mean



*Dr. Cornelis VanDam*

“to create,” but rather “to separate.” Creation, rather, is the work of the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—by which this material universe was created out of nothing (149-51). The chapter concludes with an important discussion on the relationship between creation and providence (it is important because theistic evolutionists tend to confuse/conflate the two; see p. 228): “Genesis 1 distinguishes between God's works of creation and providence. At the same time, it is clear that one cannot separate creation from providence. ... these works are closely related to each other. The moment after each work of creation was finished, his work of providence, of causing his work of creation to persist in its existence, took over” (153-55).

**Chapter 7** examines the expression “the heavens and earth” (Genesis 1:1) and asks whether Genesis 1 intends to “set forth a biblical cosmology, a definitive view of the structure of the universe” (163-64). After a careful examination of the arguments in favour of this view that it does (163-78) the author states: “We can conclude that this passage [Genesis 1], and for that matter other passages often adduced, do not teach an authoritative cosmology. Rather, what we have is God's work of creation being narrated using the language of observation in terms comprehensible to those who live on earth and who did not witness those enormous events at the beginning of time” (178). One consequence of this view is that “[t]he biblical text of Genesis 1 gives no evidence that the cosmos is pictured as a temple” (pace G. K. Beale, 179).





**Chapter 8** contains an exegetically rich examination of “Days One through Six.” The discussion of each day is divided into two parts (181-225): “[T]he purpose of this chapter is [first] to listen to the text, especially respecting the historicity of God's work of creation, and [secondly] to briefly explore the implications of what Scripture says for the scientific endeavour” (182). This chapter provides an excellent model for bringing a careful listening to the text into conversation with the findings of modern science.

This discussion is then capped off by **chapter 9** which focuses on “The Completed Creation and the Seventh Day” (227-248). Van Dam answered all my questions related to these events: What does the word “very good” signify in Genesis 1:1? (228-29); How old was the earth on the sixth day? (229-240) Was there any sort of death in the natural realm before the fall? (229); How could all of the events of the sixth day fit into such a short time frame? (231); Was God being deceptive by creating everything to appear as though it had been around for many years? (233); What does Genesis 2:2-3 mean when it says that God “rested” on the seventh day? (241-48).

The focus of **chapter 10** is “The Historicity of Genesis 2 and the Garden of Eden.” Again, the author provided solid answers to the many questions people have on Genesis 2:4-25 and the Garden of Eden: What does Genesis 2:4-7 mean when it says that there was no rain and no one to work the ground? (252-257); What was the significance of God bringing the animals to Adam? (257-258); When and where did God plant the garden of Eden? (258-67); What was the meaning/significance of the two special trees in the garden: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life? (267-70)? And finally, was Eden a temple (as has been argued by scholars such as John Walton and G. K. Beale? (271-76). Van Dam concludes: “There is no doubt that the tabernacle and temple contain clear allusions to the Edenic garden ... It is, however, never called a sanctuary. Although we can find allusions to Eden later in the tabernacle and temple, that does not warrant calling the garden of Eden itself a sanctuary or temple” (276) (incidentally, to argue that the garden is a sanctuary or temple simply on the basis that we find allusions to Eden later in the tabernacle and temple would be to commit the fallacy of affirming the consequent).

Finally, I arrived at **chapter 11**, the one that I was most looking forward to read: “The Work of Creation and the Gospel.” In this chapter Van Dam does a very good job of demonstrating why “[d]enying the historicity [of Genesis 1 and 2] can ultimately call into question the reliability of the gospel. Scripture closely

relates the historicity of Genesis 1 and 2 with the historicity of God's work of salvation” (280). This chapter contains an excellent section on “the corrosive effects of the theory of evolution,” demonstrating how it undermines the Christian faith (187-92), undermines the church's confidence in the reliability and authority of scripture (192-94), and erodes biblical morals in society (194-95). My only criticism of this chapter is that Van Dam focuses most of his criticism on the theory of evolution in general rather than on theistic evolution in particular and how that undermines the gospel (for example, discussion is needed on how the presence of death and disease in the human fossil before the fall, according to the evolutionary timeline, undermines the Christian gospel and Christian theodicy). Van Dam concludes the chapter with a call to educate the church on the importance of the doctrine of creation: “It is critically important that each new generation is taught the biblical view of creation and the place of science in relation to Scripture” (296). Therefore, he contends, “special attention should also be given to these issues in Sunday school, catechetical classes, young adult groups, or wherever an occasion for discussing these matters can be arranged” (297). “For,” he concludes, “it is at bottom a matter of faith either in the fallible human theory of evolution or in God's inspired Word. And believers can be encouraged by the fact that the entire creation witnesses to God's glory (Rom 1:20)!” (303).

Van Dam's *In the Beginning: Listening to Genesis 1 and 2* is an exegetical tour de force that is characterised by careful and thorough research (it contains over 60 pages of bibliography), a rigorous exegesis of the text (without being overly technical), a competent handling of scientific issues, and a warm pastoral tone. I found the book to be stimulating, readable, informative, as well as biblically, theologically, and scientifically sound. I would recommend this book to (1) pastors and church leaders who will be called upon to respond to evolutionary thought and/or preach through Genesis 1 and 2; (2) theological or university students who are wondering how to respond to lecturers in theological colleges or secular universities who promote evolutionary thought and, in the process, undermine the historicity of Genesis 1 and 2; and (3) to educated lay people, home-schoolers, and youth leaders. This is an excellent resource that will be highly effective in equipping God's people to give an answer for the truth and authority of God's Word.