

Clarion



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Ordination of Candidate Ryan Kampen

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Dr. James Visscher is co-pastor of the Canadian Reformed Church at Langley, British Columbia
jvisscher@telus.net

Preaching 101

A healthy, living, true church needs faithful preaching and preachers

Something different

The Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary (CRTS) started on a new track in 2011 by organizing the first annual CRTS Conference dealing mostly with Old Testament topics in connection with the looming retirement of Prof. Dr. C. Van Dam. As 2012 dawns, the second annual CRTS Conference will be held on Evangelism and Church Planting. Once again professors, ministers, special speakers, and interested church members will be spending several fine days together in tropical Hamilton.

Yet this is not all that is happening in Steeltown. For prior to the conference there will be a preaching seminar. From January 3 – 5 students and teachers, as well as pastors from hither and yon, will spend their time and efforts dealing with all sorts of matters relating to preaching: how to expound on the gospels, how to use illustrations, what about the law, catechism preaching, homiletical habits, Revelation sermons, and Canadian Reformed preaching today. A second week will be filled with sermon proposals submitted by the students. All in all, it should prove to be a fruitful time. Unfortunately, I will not be there, so here's a little of my input all the way from the West Coast.

Preacher profile

The topic of preaching is a vital one for the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is a real sense in which the church lives and dies by the preaching of the gospel. Poor preaching will adversely affect the role that the gospel should play in the lives of God's people. It will stunt their spiritual growth, shrink their redeemed appetites, and dampen their religious fervour. A healthy, living, true church needs faithful preaching and preachers.

Naturally, this raises the question as to what a faithful preacher looks like. What can and should we expect from a person in such an office? Let me suggest five basic characteristics.

Beseeking believers

The first characteristic that a faithful preacher needs is a beseeching or beggarly attitude. No, I do not mean that he should be standing by the church doors after the Sunday services with a collection bag looking for a handout. What I mean is that such a preacher needs to be aware of his complete and utter dependence on the Lord. He has to see himself as a believer, but then as a believer in need. What he needs is light, insight, wisdom, and help from above.

These gifts, however, do not come automatically. He needs to beseech and beg the Lord for them. In particular, he desperately needs to ask the Lord for the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

At the same time this means that the moment the preacher stops being dependent and becomes independent, he is courting disaster. His work is to be done in the daily awareness the Psalmist spells out in Psalm 127:1, "Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain." He should make it his aim to wrap a blanket of constant prayer around all of his sermonic preparations.

On many occasions over the years I have found myself wrestling with Bible texts that I could not crack. No matter from what angle I approached them or what resources I threw at them, it did not help. I was stuck and so I did the only thing left to do and that was to pray more. Did it help? It sure did, for when I looked to the Lord, as the Psalmist says so often, he answered me.

So, preachers, believe and beseech, believe and beg! Pray at all times! Pray in all places! Pray over your sermons constantly!

Servile servants

Along with the temptation to be independent and to labour in one's own strength, there are also the temptations of pride and superiority. Usually a preacher is an educated bloke. He's spent years and years going to university and seminary. He's acquired all of the linguistic and methodological tools of the trade. He's equipped, or he should be. In that there is a danger, namely that we begin to look at ourselves as experts and no longer regard ourselves as servants.

Yet the latter is what we are and what we always must remain. Indeed, a proper preacher is a three-fold servant. First of all, he is to regard himself as a faithful servant of the Lord. His calling is to do the Lord's bidding. He is to pass along the words and wisdom of his Master. He is to magnify the name of his King. He is not in the business of self-promotion.

Second, a preacher is to see himself as a servant of the Word. In truth it is not his ideas, insights, and opinions that matter. No, what matters is what does the Word reveal, convey, and teach. Sticking closely to the Word is essential. Always being under the Word is fundamental.

Third, a preacher is also to see himself as a servant of the church. He is to know the needs of the sheep under his care and he is to do his best to meet those

What's Inside

This is the first issue of *Clarion* for the year of our Lord, 2012. It begins with an editorial from Dr. James Visscher on the faithful preaching of the Word. Faithful preaching and preachers are needed for a church to be healthy and alive; so what does a faithful preacher look like?

Rev. Peter Holtvlüwer continues his three part series on the "Jubilee Woman." He examines the pressures that women in our church face – slavery from which Christ sets us free.

As we enter 2012, Rev. Reuben Bredenhof discusses the prediction of the end of the world. What do we think of such predictions, and are we ready for Christ's return?

News from the federation includes Rev. Ryan Kampen's ordination as minister of the Word at Denver church. We also have an article from Dr. Wes Bredenhof on a recent trip that he made to the Ukraine.

The regular Treasures New and Old meditation is included, as well as a book review, and a Mission News insert.

Laura Veenendaal



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EDITORIAL COMMITTEE:

Editor: J. Visscher; Copy Manager: Laura Veenendaal
Coeditors: P. Holtvlüwer, E. Kampen, K. Stam, C. Van Dam

ADDRESS FOR COPY MANAGER:

Clarion, 57 Oakridge Drive South, St. Albert, AB T8N 7H2
E-Mail: veenendaal@shaw.ca

ADDRESS FOR ADMINISTRATIVE MATTERS:

CLARION, Premier Printing Ltd.
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needs with the gospel. In other words, it's not about him and his ego. It's all about what do the saints need in terms of spiritual food, awareness, encouragement, and direction.

So, preachers, look in the mirror and spot a servant, not a pope. Be small so that your people may become big in the things of God.

Clear communicators

One of the great frustrations of being a pew sitter Sunday after Sunday may be trying to follow the meanderings of a preacher who does not know where he is going. Alas, this is not a rare experience. Some preachers love to play "now you see it" and "now you don't." What this means is that for a moment or two you can see where they are going, but then they lose you. A few minutes later they pop up again and catch your attention for a little while, but then they fade out all over again. Sometimes it continues like this all through the service and the congregation goes home with the frustrating feeling that preaching is a lot like handling jelly.

In truth, however, it should not be this way. The preacher has to be a clear communicator. He has to be able to convey the meaning of the Scriptures to his hearers in such a way that they can follow him, see where he is going and end up in the right place.

One proof that the preacher can get his message across is in the sermon notes of his listeners. Of course, I realize that not all of them take notes and some even have good reasons for not taking them, but if a member sets out to take notes and then gives up after a few minutes, you know that something is usually wrong. Such a preacher has lost a hearer. Somewhere along the line he made a sudden and unexpected U-turn.

So, preachers, make sure that what you are about to say is clear and logical in your own mind. Do not rely on your listeners to supply the logic and precision that you lack. That's your task.

Passionate presenters

In the book of Proverbs there is a text that goes like this, "There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand" (30:18). Thereafter, he lists the four things. Whenever I read this I am tempted to add a fifth thing, namely the way of some preachers with the Word. How is it possible that there are preachers who mount the pulpit in a casual and indifferent manner? Even more, how is it possible that some preachers can turn great mysteries into boring and mundane musings? There is no life in their preaching, no energy, no excitement, no zeal. Whether

they are dealing with the joys of heaven or the terrors of hell, they adopt the same monotone voice and the same comatose posture.

One thing is obvious and it is that they have not listened very well to the Apostle Paul. To Timothy, and to all the preachers who follow after him, he declared, "Preach the Word, be prepared in season and out of season: correct, rebuke and encourage. . ." (2 Tim 4:2). As well he wrote to the Philippians, "I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ" (3:18). He reminds the Corinthians that "I wrote to you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears. . ." (2 Cor 2:4). In short, there is passion in his writing and in his preaching.

So, preachers, is there passion in your preaching? Are you convinced that what you are bringing Lord's Day after Lord's Day to God's people represents the most exciting and thrilling news in all of the world?

Dogged diggers

Now, this last characteristic may require some further explanation. Recently a candidate who accepted a call Down Under (he shall remain nameless) and who was on his way there, sat in on a worship service that I was leading. On the way out he asked me something that amounted to this, "What advice do you as an old preacher have for a young man like me who is just starting out?" I had only a few seconds to respond and so I said this to him, "Never stop digging."

To this day I am not quite sure where that answer came from so fast, except to suggest to you that the Holy Spirit overheard the conversation and helped me out. For what I meant to say with those words is that the Word of God is like a bottomless mine filled with a never-ending supply of treasure. With respect to that Word the preacher is to see himself as a miner, as someone who has the task, the opportunity, and the privilege to constantly dig and unearth new rubies and diamonds. Forgive me for saying it, but this really is "the best job" in the whole wide world.

Yet it is only so if the preacher keeps on digging. The moment that he becomes lazy the gems no longer appear.

So, preachers, become miners who are always digging and who never cease to spread before the people of God the treasures and marvels that you have unearthed. They will bless you for it, and so will God.

Brothers, for what they are worth, these are a few of my thoughts on the matter. Enjoy your preaching seminar! May what you learn benefit the congregations you serve.





MATTHEW 13:52

I Am a Prayer

Rev. Ken Kok is minister of the
American Reformed Church
at Blue Bell, Pennsylvania
revkenkok@aol.com

"In return for my friendship they accuse me, but I am a man of prayer." (Psalm 109:4)

Psalm 109 is probably not anyone's favorite psalm. While it is not sung as infrequently as, say, Psalm 88, it is not in the "regular rotation" of psalms used for congregational singing. This may be the case because the Psalm is calling for Yahweh's judgment. We also know from Acts 1:20 that this Psalm is about Jesus Christ. This should not surprise us, but often it does because we're used to thinking that the psalms are about us. We sing them as we do hymns, with ourselves as the subject. And when we do that, we become uncomfortable with those calls for judgment. If the psalms are about us and our various spiritual conditions, then Psalm 109 is rightly considered an oddity. Yet if we rid ourselves of the notion that the psalms are directly about us, then we may realize that the psalms are all about the Messiah. We may only sing them in him.

If we move away from a subjective understanding of the psalms, we may be able to understand David's statement at the end of verse 4. Literally it reads, "I am a prayer." Prayer, in some sense, defines the essence of the Messiah's being. This being the case, Paul's exhortation to "pray continually" (1 Thess 5:17) makes more sense. It has to do with being united to Christ. Similarly, Paul calls the church to be devoted to prayer (1 Cor 7:5), because she is devoted to Christ. When we are given an instance of the church's devotion to prayer, the church is praying Psalm 2 and calling for God's judgment on unbelieving Israel and the Roman empire (Acts 4:23-31).

Unfortunately, our understanding of the psalms and prayer has

gone astray. Prayer has become a "spiritual discipline" which is good for us. It is, in the words of a rather gooeey hymn, a "sweet hour" that takes you away from a "world of care." Prayer seems to ping-pong between being a discipline by which to attain stoic detachment and a mystical experience of losing oneself. Neither is biblical. Mystical and stoic influences have produced a radically subjective understanding of prayer. Gone is the notion of the Christian as a warrior who wrestles, even in prayer. Gone is the idea that in prayer the Christian's words are, by the Spirit, united to the intercession of the One who says, "I am a prayer." Instead, prayer gives you peace, calm, and detachment. Certainly prayer has an effect on the believer. In prayer we draw near to the living God who is a consuming fire. This is something that cannot leave you unaffected. Yet when this effect becomes the primary purpose of prayer, we have crossed the line from biblical religion to a sentimental mush.

Prayer is personal and objective. It operates in the sphere of the covenant. Look at Psalm 109: what does the Messiah do? He prays that God would fulfill his promises to his faithful people and would pour out his curses on covenant-breakers. Praying as we are taught in the psalms is to call on God to judge in terms of the covenant. What are the so-called historical psalms but long celebrations of the LORD's faithfulness to the covenant, a faithfulness shown in both blessing and curse? Prayers offered in and with the Messiah are legal petitions for God's favourable judgment. It is small wonder that

when Solomon dedicates the temple, one of the recurring phrases is "May your eyes be open." God's eyes are opened so that he can render judgment rightly and mercifully (1 Kings 8:32, 34, 36). This is the nature of prayer throughout the Old and New Testaments.

We pray in him who is a prayer, and we pray in terms of the covenant. Our prayers are not intended primarily for self-improvement or for peace of mind, but they are objective, legal petitions to the Judge of all the earth. This also means that what we pray is limited by God's Word. Over and over again, the prayers of the Bible are appeals to God to fulfill his promises and his warnings in the Messiah. God has sworn that he will be exalted on the earth. Our requests should follow this path. In all our prayers, we ask God to render judgments according to his commands and promises.

This also means that we should not shy away from the imprecations in the psalms. Some find it hard to pray "May no one extend kindness to him or take pity on his fatherless children" (v. 12). It's not "nice"; it certainly isn't something you'd find in any self-respecting hymn. But the imprecations are prayers that ask God to fulfill his promise to Abraham: "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse." The curses are simply the obverse of the prayers for blessing. In both, we ask God to judge according to his Word. The world is governed by God's judgments. In prayer, the church participates in Christ in the government of the world.





Rev. Peter H. Holtvlüwer is minister of the Spring Creek Canadian Reformed Church at Tintern, Ontario
holtvluer@bell.net

Jubilee Woman (Part 2 of 3)

What follows is the second of three instalments of a speech given to the sisters gathered at the 50th annual Ontario Women's League Day hosted by the Spring Creek congregation on October 19, 2011.

Forms of oppression

So dear sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ, you are, by definition, Jubilee women! If you belong to Christ by faith then you have been brought into his kingdom and you are free from the tyranny of the curse. Only you may not always feel like it. Perhaps you feel closer to the woman I described earlier. Perhaps you see her in the mirror and wonder what – if anything – can be done to help.

The thing about belonging to Jesus Christ is that there is always something that can be done. Not every form of oppression can be *solved* now, because sin remains in this life; but every problem can be *addressed* because Jesus has broken the curse! The completion of our liberation will arrive on the day Christ returns, but in the meantime already now freedom has been proclaimed, liberty has been announced, and liberty is breaking into the life of every Christian, also the Christian women in Canada, 2011! D-Day has taken place and the end of the war is within sight.

Paul speaks this language in Galatians 5:1, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." We have been handed freedom from sin's curse and it's our responsibility to stay free – notice that we are *commanded* to stand firm in freedom! Like the Israelites in the desert, we must not go back to Egypt and put ourselves back into slavery. To do that we need to identify the things which oppress us – in particular, the things which oppress women and what the Jubilee freedom looks like.

Pressure from outside

One form of oppression is the *pressure to conform*, the pressure to be like others around you. There are at least two sources of this pressure, one of which is from the world, from society around us. In our Canadian culture, Christian women can feel like a square peg in a round hole. The expectations of our society are more and more that a Canadian woman will be a career woman. The feminist movement has pushed our culture into ranking motherhood several notches down the list of life occupations for a woman with marriage even lower. First establish your career, then have a couple of kids (if you want them) – husbands are optional. Husbands and wives are described as "partners" and the relationship is seen as two independent people living under the same roof and sharing life together where each has his or her own sphere of authority and decision-making. You are to think of your husband as your friend and partner but never as your head. Gone is the family unit under the leadership of the husband.

When you receive a survey form to fill in with a list of occupations that could possibly apply to you, then most often you have to go to the "other" option and write in "home-maker." It's not given status let alone equality among acceptable occupations. Society makes you feel embarrassed and backward for marrying in your early 20s, for having children soon after, and being a stay-at-home mom. And don't mention that you have more than three kids because the looks you'll get will make you feel like an idiot, like you have to apologize for multiplying and being fruitful!

It's even the case that sometimes these looks and these view-points make their way into the doors of the church. You may have seen the disapproving or disbelieving looks or heard the disparaging comments in the church corridors or on the parking lot.

Pressure from inside

For that's another source of pressure to conform, the opinion of our very own brothers and especially sisters in the Lord! If I observe things correctly, then it's often the sisters who place on other sisters the pressure to be like others – at least, that pressure is perceived and felt by ladies from other church ladies. These things are subtle but unmistakable – how many sisters can walk into the door of the auditorium on Sunday morning and not feel like everyone is staring at her? Or her children? I have met many sisters who have great difficulty sitting near the front of the church or even walking up to the Lord's Supper table because of all the eyes they feel trained on them.

There is a fear there – a fear of what others are thinking, what other *church women* are thinking about my looks, my dress, my hair style or (in the case of mothers) my children – their looks and behaviour. In one instant of time we feel ourselves scanned and judged by two hundred pairs of eyes and it makes us nervous or – if we are having a good hair day or/and the kids are well-in-line – it makes us proud. The idol of vanity is never far from our hearts.

High expectations

There is other pressure too from within the church. If a woman gets a part-time or full-time job then she might be afraid of being thought a poor wife and mother, even though she is intent on keeping her family as her number one focus. Some sisters can feel quite nervous going to women's society because of the expectation they feel to have a high-level of knowledge and preparation. And if you say something that is not in conformity with prevailing opinion, you risk a cool response and a cold shoulder.

More generally, a church woman often feels the pressure to be all things to everyone: to be a supportive and loving wife, a God-fearing and caring mother, a faithful daughter to aging parents, a dedicated sister in the Lord who can be counted on to bring meals and sit on committees. It can feel like the weight of the world on a sister's shoulders to raise the perfect family, be a good example to others, give care to Dad and Mom, be the car-pool coordinator, the baby-sit organizer, the fund-raising committee co-chair – and you need to look chic and stylish while you're at it! Otherwise, you've failed and failure is not acceptable! In fact, failure is not even an option!

Keeping up

There is also in our time a growing pressure of "keeping up with the Jones" among us, a materialistic burden of sorts. If our peers give their kids access to sports, music, and entertainment, the pressure is on to do the same for our kids and to the same degree. If others give their kids access to Satellite TV, iPods, cell phones, and Wii, and going out to movies and restaurants, then we and also our kids feel "left out" if we don't keep up. We could even feel excluded just by virtue of the fact that the conversations of our friends and their children involve so many of these forms of entertainment that if we don't share in them, we soon won't have anything to talk about with them.

Following Christ frees us from all forms of oppression and sets our hearts free from serving other masters to serve the one true God

If half of our friends take a Florida vacation or go for a weekend to New York city, we start looking for ways to go there too when based on our income we would never have considered it. As our community grows in wealth, there is something almost like a force of gravity that pushes us into mimicking the world with its forms of entertainment and then mimicking each other so that we can keep up, fit in and belong. The idol of community approval is never far away!

Pressure from the Lord

But is this what the Lord Jesus wants from us? Is this the Christian life he calls his daughters to? Of course, any one of these activities or task in themselves can have their value and their place but it's *the burden you feel to do them a certain way and to a certain standard that is the trouble*. Sisters, I submit to you that the pressure you feel to do these things according to the opinions of people in society or people in the church is a form of slavery from which Christ has set you free!

The yoke of Christ is easy and his burden is light. That means, following Christ frees us from all forms of oppression and sets our hearts free from serving other masters to serve the one true God. And his

commandments are not burdensome! Your master is not the collective opinion of Canadian culture nor is it the collective opinion of the sisters in the church – perceived or real! Your master is the will of God as he has written it down in the Bible!

Free from worldly views

That means the pressure you *should* feel and pay close attention to is the pressure from the Lord Jesus Christ – and when you study it carefully, you'll discover it's quite pleasant! That it's not really pressure at all but simply direction for healthy, satisfying, and peaceful living! The Lord provides his grace and Spirit to his daughters – daughters like you – so you can give your hearts and lives to him and function as you were created to function. He sets you free from the sinful impulses of selfishness so that you may act as the godly and needed helper to your husbands like Eve was created to do in the beginning. He frees you from the pressure to be your own authority and instead provides the grace to submit to your husband's authority. He liberates you from ungodly opinions about marriage and children so that you can be a free mother in your home, happily raising however many children he may give you, joyfully managing the affairs of your family so that your husband has full confidence in you.

Precious brides

You don't need to be reduced to a "partner" or merely a "friend" for your husband, for you are something greater: *his one and only Christian bride!* According to God's Word, you are your husband's lover and unique helper, complementing him where he lacks and being one unit with him as his covenant wife for God's glory! You don't need to be a career woman for you are a woman with a critical calling to honour your God-given head and raise up citizens in Christ's kingdom. You have the glorious privilege to reflect – together with your husband – the marriage bond between Christ and his precious bride, the church! Society's so-called emancipation of the female is just another form of slavery ironically called, "Women's Liberation." All the world does is exchange one set of chains for another, another set of "shoes" all women's feet must pinch into, but under Christ the Jubilee

woman is free and joyful serving her husband as she was created to do, as we see her, for example, in Proverbs 31.

Precious daughters

This freedom applies equally to the Christian woman who is single or who has been abandoned in divorce. Singleness is a gift of Christ and frees a sister to serve her Lord in different capacities. She may be in the work-force, but as a Jubilee woman need not be consumed with climbing the ladder of success. She is free under Christ to serve an earthly employer while also giving of her time and talents in her extended family and church. She gives her best at work but she does not give her life to work. Nor does she need to be defined by the wishes of others – even well-meaning parents who only want her to be married and "give them" grandchildren. A single sister in Christ can rest in her identity as a precious daughter of her heavenly Father.

~~~~~  
*You are a woman with a  
critical calling to honour your  
God-given head and raise up citizens  
in Christ's kingdom*  
~~~~~

The same goes for a Christian woman who has suffered marital abandonment or otherwise been left in a broken situation by a husband: she too is set free by Christ! Her identity does not come from her marital relationship or from the car crash it has become – it comes from who she is in the Lord Jesus Christ! She is sister of the Lord Jesus, daughter of the Father who is renewed and being renewed (as we all are) in Christ. Thus, she can take her place in the church and in the world honourably. She does not have to hide or deny reality. She has brought the mess – including her own sin in it – to her Saviour and he receives her in grace. She lives in this grace. No daughter in Christ's kingdom is to be despised. She may find her rest and peace in belonging to that King and build a new life on that basis.





Rev. Reuben Bredenhof is minister of the Canadian Reformed Church at London, Ontario
reuben.bredenhof@canrc.org

Will the World Really End in 2012?

The end is nigh. . .

With calendars freshly turned to 2012, people are getting excited about the end of the world. From various corners there are voices saying that the end is now certainly near, that this new year will see catastrophic events marking the demise of civilization as we know it.

As Reformed Christians, our automatic response to such bold claims is to say that they're all a bunch of nonsense. We know well from Scripture that the day and hour are unknown, so people are getting excited about nothing. But as we're likely to hear more about this prediction as we get deeper into 2012, it may be good to take a closer look.

So why 2012?

I don't pretend to be a movie connoisseur, but it seems there has been no shortage of Hollywood films in the last few years revolving around the idea of a worldwide disaster that ushers in a new, and often frightful, world order. *The Road*, based on the Cormac McCarthy novel of the same name, concerns a father and son trying to survive in bleak, post-apocalyptic America. *The Book of Eli* recounts one man's struggle – also in a time after catastrophic nuclear war – to safeguard a book (the Bible, no less!) that has the potential to rebuild and transform society. Then there's *2012*, a film which depicts the unfolding of the end of the world, complete with spectacular special effects: asteroids pelting the earth, tsunamis heaving onto land, and earthquakes demolishing skyscrapers – all in fulfillment of some mysterious ancient Mayan prophecy.

That idea of a 2012 "apocalypse" isn't unique to the aforementioned movie, but it flows out of a general current of end-time speculation. Its origin is said to be a number of old predictions that all agree on this point: cataclysmic events will occur on December 21 of this year. Apparently this date is regarded as the end-date of a 5,125-year-long cycle in the Mesoamerican Long Count calendar, an end-date which is based on unique astronomical alignments.

Nostradamus, the famed sixteenth century French seer, is also said to have predicted a 2012 apocalypse. Indeed, his writings have been interpreted as predictive of a wide range of world events (always after the fact, mind you), everything from the death of Princess Diana to the terrorist attacks of 9-11. Suggested scenarios for the end of the world include a deadly intensification of the sun's heat, or earth's collision with a black hole or a passing planet.

Why not 2011?

If Harold Camping had been right, then we wouldn't even be talking about 2012! You might recall that Harold Camping was the American preacher and broadcaster who predicted that the world was supposed to end on May 21, 2011. Basing himself on complex calculations, not of astronomical movements but of biblical chronologies, Camping concluded that May 21 was going to be the date of Christ's return. He even pinpointed the hour at which this great event would take place. Skeptical observers were quick to point out, however, that this was actually Camping's third attempt at it; he previously predicted Days of Judgment in 1988 and 1994.

There were many who delighted in mocking this latest failure of Harold Camping. Yet one supposes that he garnered far more attention than he otherwise would have, because the general public does seem intrigued by this idea of a final apocalypse. Events in the months leading up to May 21 of last year could certainly have been taken to confirm that "something" was happening; there was civil unrest in a number of countries in the Middle East, there had been a massive earthquake and tsunami in Japan, all against the backdrop of continued and serious economic uncertainty.

Signs of the end notwithstanding, 2011 obviously wasn't the appointed year. It's too early to say the same for 2012, but again as Reformed Christians we are dubious about these precise predictions, and a little leery of all this fascination with apocalyptic events.

Eternity set in our hearts

On a different level, this whole trend is still interesting to ponder. Why is there so much curiosity about the idea of the world ending? On the one hand, people were all too glad to make fun of Harold Camping and his billboards when May 21 came and went. But on the other hand, there remains this keen interest in a future calamity and what will come of us and this world. We can be sure that the media will whip themselves into a frenzy in the days leading up to December 21 of this year: experts in Mayan astrology will be consulted, some Nostradamus scholars interviewed, and maybe even a Christian leader or two will be asked for his opinion on the matter. It's as if people need to talk about it, while at the same time insisting that it could never happen. Why?

There's no doubt that our society loves a spectacle and enjoys the drama of a disaster, real or potential. This could be the simple root of interest in things apocalyptic, but there may also be more to it. For it's almost like there's a lingering awareness in the human heart that this world cannot endure the way it is forever. Disney dogma aside, people seem to sense that we're not on some "circle of life" going endlessly around and around. Rather, there's a realization that there has to be a terminal point for our existence; there's a final destination that we're going to arrive at as a people and as a planet.

And isn't that what the Preacher in Ecclesiastes said long ago? "The LORD has set eternity in the hearts of men" (3:11). It could be said to be a basic part of our human thinking, the realization that there's more to this life than *just* this life. Call it a small trace of the image of God in all human beings, this perception that we were made to live in eternal fellowship with the Creator. A consciousness of our everlasting purpose remains. Moreover, the law that is written on every human heart testifies against us (Rom 2:14-16) and subtly reminds us that one day there must be an accounting for deeds done in the body.

Living for today

So will the world really end in 2012? It might. But from Scripture we know that's the wrong question to ask. Christ's words are plain, "Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will

come" (Matt 24:42). Which means there's a far better question to pose: Are we keeping watch in 2012? Are we prepared?

It's interesting that already two thousand years ago, the apostles of the Lord needed to rebuke some people who said that the end wasn't going to happen. Some false teachers had crept into the churches, and this was one part of their heresy; they were saying, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation" (2 Pet 3:4). From the apparent delay in Christ's return, they concluded he wasn't coming after all.

As false teaching so often does, this heresy had a direct influence on their behaviour. Because if Christ isn't coming and there's not going to be a final judgment, why not live whatever way you like? It's actions without accountability! As Peter describes these teachers, they "follow their own evil desires" (3:3). When the Lord continued to stay away, it gave them a false sense of security. It was all about today, the gratification available in the moment, because tomorrow doesn't matter.

We know well from Scripture that the day and hour are unknown

It's not so different in our time. Once people finished laughing at Harold Camping, surely many just went back to their godless lives, the attitude reinforced: "Where is the promise of God's coming? Everything goes on as it always has. So let's live for today." If it seems that the day of accounting for your life and choices never arrives, then why wouldn't you do as you please?

The Apostle realizes the danger of this thinking, so he responds forcefully. He points out that such an attitude is deliberately unaware. People forget that God already judged the world once for its sin; he did so in the Flood, wiping out almost every living thing. Yes, God has judged before and he'll do it again, not with water but with fire, when the elements will melt in the fervent heat and all things will be laid bare.

And when will he do so? God's timing is different than our timing: "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness" (3:9). God is not compelled to do things whenever they seem right to

mankind, but he does all things according to his perfect counsel. Which means Christ won't delay one second beyond the appointed time. His great day is most certainly approaching!

For us too, this is a needed reminder. Maybe we've never doubted that Christ will come back – it's in our creed every Sunday – but perhaps we have stopped reckoning with this truth in meaningful ways. A great danger in the present time is that we get lulled to sleep. For the most part, things are good for us as Christians in North America. We have our blessings, our many earthly activities, and our plans for next year. Perhaps any serious thought of eternity has been crowded out of our minds because we're too busy enjoying today.

But Scripture warns us to keep alert and to stay awake. We should not be like so many others in this world, unconcerned about or unprepared for Christ's return. Tomorrow we might have to appear before our Saviour and render an account.

Are we ready?

So then, God wants us to keep our eyes on the clock, for the hour is approaching. He wants us to see this and to live differently because of it. If denying the return of Christ has a real effect on a person's lifestyle, then *affirming* it must do the same – but for the better. What does the day of the Lord mean for our calling in the present time? How are we to live in the light of that pending judgment? It's as Peter asks, "Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be?" (3:11). And then he tells us: We ought to live holy and godly lives, as we look for and as we hasten the coming of the day of God. Because we await the coming purification, we should be increasing in purity already now. Because we look for the home of righteousness, we should be progressing in righteousness already now.

Are we keeping watch in 2012?

When we were younger, the grown-ups sometimes made us think about this. They'd ask us, "Would you want the Lord Jesus to come back when you're doing that? Would you be happy to see him at such a moment,

or would you be ashamed?" Not that we need to live in fear as Christians, but in awareness. Is our conduct holy? Is the way we're acting appropriate to Christ's kingdom? He's coming again, and in his absence we've got so much work to do. We must pray. We must love. We must give. We must share the gospel. We must build the church.

No matter how it seems to us, Christ isn't coming back one day in the far distance. He is ready to come back! Like Peter said in his first letter, "The end of all things is near" (4:7). Already now, you can hear the footsteps of the Lord. Sure, May 21 – or December 21 – comes and goes, and we might shrug the whole thing off, along with everyone else. But what we must *not* do is now think little of Christ's return. Because every day we ought to be ready. This much is certain: whether it's next December or the next millennium, the Master will return. And when he knocks, will we be ready to open the door? When he shows up, will our lamps be burning, bright and clear?

His great day is most certainly approaching!

This is what the church father Augustine wrote so wisely centuries ago, "He who loves the coming of the Lord is not he who affirms it is far off, nor is it he who says it is near. It is he who, whether it be far or near, awaits it with sincere faith, steadfast hope, and fervent love."

May that be our outlook in 2012 – and may we also have the courage to tell others about it. In a world that wavers between fear and defiance, panic and rebellion, as believers we should be prepared to speak of our confidence in the Lord. It's what the Spirit calls us to do in 1 Peter 3:15. They're well-known words, but notice where his emphasis falls, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." In a world that likes to scare itself with thoughts of apocalypse and doomsday scenarios, those who are in Christ face the future with hope! So let's tell them the reason.



A Day of Great Joy for Denver!

November 13, 2011 was a joyful day for the congregation in Denver as we witnessed the ordination of Rev. Kampen as minister of God's Word. The past year has been a time of much prayer and patience as we waited for news and approval from the immigration services in regards to Rev. Kampen's visa. An item they still required was a document showing that Rev. Kampen was an ordained minister of the Word. And so, it was with great thankfulness to the Lord that Emmanuel American Reformed Church witnessed the ordination of Rev. Ryan Kampen on Sunday, November 13, 2011. For prelude the organist played the hymn many of us are familiar with: How great is God's faithfulness. . . certainly we powerfully felt and witnessed God's faithfulness. Since the visa for Rev. Kampen has not been fully approved, he was only able to spend a week in our midst before returning to Canada to await final approval. We remain ever thankful to God that he has made everything possible so far and we trust and diligently pray that Rev. Kampen may soon be permanently in our midst.

Because of the many visitors, friends, and family that were expected to attend the ordination service, the worship services were held in a different sanctuary than our regular church building so as to accommodate everyone. Rev. J. Poppe led the ordination service. His sermon centered on the ministry of the gospel as the means by which God reconciles his people to himself. He spoke about the role of minister as ambassador of Christ, the character of the congregation as new people in Christ, and the focus of preaching as the ministry of reconciliation. Coffee and cookies were served after the service lending time for congratulations and interaction with the many visitors. Since many came from far away there was also a fellowship lunch organized for all those who attended the service.

The afternoon service followed soon after the lunch. Rev. Kampen led the afternoon worship. His sermon



*L to R: Elder P. Temu, Rev. J. Poppe, Rev. G. Wieske,
Rev. D. Wynja, Elder D. Salazar*

theme focused on the Lord who appoints a watchman for the benefit of his people. In this the Lord wants the watchman to listen, to speak, and to save. The text came from Ezekiel 3:16-21, where Ezekiel is sent by the Lord with an urgent message of repentance; but Ezekiel had to listen first to what the Lord said before he could bring the message to the people. A message of repentance and forgiveness from the Lord! Rev. Kampen began his sermon with these words, "Today is not about Emmanuel American Reformed Church receiving Rev. Kampen as minister, but rather about Emmanuel American Reformed Church with Rev. Kampen receiving direct orders from the Lord. What does the Lord have to say for as many days as he gives us together?" Something we may never forget when we consider the ministers and shepherds God places in our congregations; they are called by the Lord most High to bring his Word! Let us always thank God for his provision and Word. It was a very blessed Sunday for the people in Denver!

Church News

Called (a second time) by the Free Reformed Church of Albany, Western Australia:

Rev. H. Alkema

of Houston, British Columbia

Sustained his ordination exam at Classis Manitoba of December 2, 2011:

Candidate Steve Vandavelde

minister elect of the Carman East CanRC

Declined the call to Barrhead, Alberta CanRC:

Rev. D. Poppe

of Coaldale, Alberta

Accepted the call to the Living Word CanRC of Guelph, Ontario:

Rev. D. Agema

of Fergus (Maranatha), Ontario

Accepted the call of Bethel CanRC of Toronto, Ontario:

Rev. C. Kleyn

of Kerwood, Ontario

Called by the CanRC of Yarrow, British Columbia:

Rev. R. Eikelboom

of Free Reformed Church of Launceston, Tasmania

Accepted the call to the Free Reformed Church of Albany, Western Australia:

Rev. H. Alkema

of Houston, British Columbia

Sunday evening there was an "open house" at the R. Bruintjes residence. There was once again an abundance of food for everyone to enjoy. It was nice to visit with all of Rev. Kampen's family as well as friends that came from afar. We were happy to hear that the Rocky Mountains had made an impact on them and look forward to seeing some of them again when they come to visit Rev. Kampen in the future!

As previously mentioned Rev. Kampen was able to spend a week in our midst visiting with all the church members and families. It was very nice to be able to reconnect with Rev. Kampen on a personal level after such a long time of patience and waiting. We feel truly blessed with the minister God has called to our midst and we pray that as minister and congregation we may remain faithful, diligently reading and listening to his Word so that there may be true repentance and change of life! How great is your faithfulness Lord unto us!





Dr. Wes Bredenhof is pastor of the Providence Canadian Reformed Church, Hamilton, Ontario
wbredenhof@bell.net

The Reformed Church is (Still) Alive in Ukraine

"The Reformed Church is Alive in Ukraine" was the title of an article by J. Van Rietschoten in the July 9, 1999 issue of *Clarion*. In that article from long ago, we learned of the mission work being doing in Ukraine by our Dutch sister churches. Van Rietschoten told of how the Reformed church at Hattem had sent out two missionaries, Rev. Marten Nap and Rev. Jan Werkman. They were working to assist the fledgling Evangelical Reformed Church of Ukraine.

Now flash ahead to today. I recently had an opportunity to visit Ukraine and see some of the mission work first hand. Rev. Nap and Rev. Werkman have repatriated, but others are carrying on the work. How is the Reformed faith progressing in the largest country in Europe? What kind of fruit has come from over a decade of work by the Dutch missionaries?

Trip to Ukraine

I was greeted at the Boryspil airport in Kiev by Rev. Jos Colijn. He was mentioned in Van Rietschoten's earlier article, but at that time was working in Hungary. Since then he has moved to Kiev where he teaches church history and dogmatics at the Evangelical Reformed Seminary. This institution provides theological training via a modular program. The staff comes primarily from our Dutch sister churches as well as from the Presbyterian Church in America (who also have a number of missionaries working in Ukraine).



The students come from the Evangelical Reformed churches, as well as from the Presbyterian churches.

On the Lord's Day, I worshipped with the Evangelical Reformed congregation in Kiev. There were about forty to fifty people in attendance, mostly made up of young people and families. This church has its own modest building and pastor. Interestingly, the service was conducted in a mixture of Ukrainian and Russian – not uncommon in Kiev. After the service, the brothers and sisters spent time fellowshiping, just as they do in other parts of the world.

Later that afternoon, I joined my Dutch colleague as he taught a catechism lesson at a house church in another part of the city. This church had been Pentecostal and was in the process of learning how to be Reformed. The pastor and elder of the church had invited Rev. Colijn to teach them the Heidelberg Catechism. In a room in a small apartment in a huge complex, there we sat with some ten people and Rev. Colijn taught the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper. There were some questions and discussion afterwards, but from all appearances his teaching was well-received.

That weekend the other two Dutch missionaries (yes, there are now three!) were much further south in Ukraine. Rev. Henk Drost and Rev. Cor Harryvan were assisting two of the Evangelical Reformed congregations near the Black Sea. They returned to Kiev on Monday along with a group of men who were going to attend the conference scheduled for Tuesday and Wednesday of that week. Rev. Henk Drost lives in the city of Rivne, about 350 km west of Kiev. From there he provides mentoring throughout Ukraine for the Evangelical Reformed Churches. Rev. Cor Harryvan has the same task, but he is based in Kiev.

Conference

The reason I was in Ukraine was to speak at the All Reformed Conference. This was held on November 8 and 9. I spoke on the subject of my doctoral dissertation, the missionary significance of the Belgic Confession. The Conference was held at a Baptist



With Rev. Henk Drost (r) and Rev. Cor Harryvan (l), GKV missionaries in Ukraine

retreat in a beautiful outlying area of Kiev. Attending the conference were Reformed and Presbyterian elders, pastors, and missionaries from all over Ukraine. There was also one brother who came from the neighbouring country to the north, Belarus. In terms of the time travelled to reach the conference, some of these men had given up far more than I had. They spent many hours by train and bus to attend this time of learning and fellowship. They appeared to be quite interested in the subject and we had some excellent discussions. Of course, since I don't know Russian or Ukrainian, all of that had to take place through a translator. Sergey Nakul was always at my side (or slightly behind me) giving me the gift either of tongues or of understanding – he did excellent work!

Reformed faith in the Ukraine

From the conference it became apparent that the Reformed faith is holding its own in Ukraine. There is some modest growth, but there are also many challenges. Some of those are cultural and have to do with the fact that Ukraine is a post-communist nation. Communism fostered suspicion and a lack of trust that is still embedded in the psyche of Ukraine. Some of the challenges are spiritual and have to do either with the atheism birthed by communism or false teachings masquerading as Christianity. Other challenges are personal. Slavic peoples admire strong men who dominate even to the point of tyranny. In Reformed church leadership that approach rarely, if ever, ends well or really serves God's people. Despite these challenges, the Reformed churches in Ukraine are committed to the truth of God's Word and to the life-changing power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They continue to reach out to this dark world and, in small measures, God is blessing their efforts.

In the earlier article in *Clarion*, mention was made of the St. James Bible College. Some United

Reformed pastors had been involved with teaching the Heidelberg Catechism at this institution in Kiev. Even though St. James was not Reformed, they had been invited and were welcomed to bring Reformed teaching. Before I left for Ukraine, and after I returned, several people asked me about this. I inquired about it while in Kiev. This institution apparently changed direction in the last decade and is now hostile to the Reformed faith. This is a sad turn of events, but the upside is that the Lord did bless the efforts of URC pastors such as Rev. Ray Sikkema. Some of the current students at the Evangelical Reformed Seminary first heard and embraced the gospel of grace via this means.

These days there's a lot of negative press about our Dutch sister churches. To be sure, there are some reasons for concern. But there in Ukraine I encountered some Dutch brothers who were deeply passionate about being confessionally Reformed *and* missional. My time there was delightful, not only because of the cross-cultural experience (mmm. . . borscht!), but especially because I felt a real bond of fellowship with my Dutch colleagues. I could enjoy their fantastic hospitality and some thought-provoking discussions on theological and missionary matters. We can be thankful for the good work being done by these men on behalf of our Dutch sister churches. May God continue to richly bless their efforts for the gospel of our Saviour. C



All Reformed Conference. Pastors, elders, and missionaries attended from all over Ukraine and Belarus.

More information about the Dutch mission work in Ukraine can be found at the website of the Ukraine Committee, www.oekrainezending.nl (includes English content).

Suffering and Disability

Larry J. Waters and Roy B. Zuck, eds.,
Why, O God? Suffering and Disability in the Bible and the Church

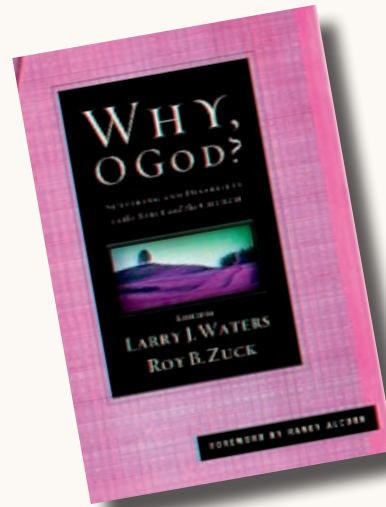
Foreword by Randy Alcorn. Wheaton, ILL:
Crossway, 2011; 336 pages

Suffering is a heart wrenching reality in a fallen creation. It comes in many forms such as debilitating disease, sorrow for lost loved ones, and severe disabilities. The challenges these present can be very difficult to face and overcome. There is so much darkness. Indeed, the baptismal form even characterizes this life as "no more than a constant death." Those faced with suffering cry: "Why, O God?" And what child of God will not utter that question from time to time?

This book faces the hard realities of life in a sin-filled world head on and gives biblical answers that inform, encourage, challenge, and comfort. This book is not just a theoretical exercise. Virtually every author in this collection has experienced first-hand what suffering and contending with wasting disease or crippling disability means. Many aspects are covered.

The first five chapters deal with how the church community should be ministering to those suffering. It is very easy for Christians unconsciously to be insensitive and ignore the specific needs of those hurting. This section gives helpful pointers and also shows how the church needs the disabled. They belong and make a vital contribution.

The following nine chapters go through different parts of Scripture and explain how God's Word deals with suffering. The quality of these chapters varies. I found chapter 13 by James Allman on the non-Pauline epistles particularly well done. It deals with causes, attitudes, benefits, and strategies in dealing with



suffering in the light of God's Word. The next chapters take up pastoral care and theological issues. The essay by Douglas Blount on receiving evil from God is very good and addresses the common objection that the existence of evil makes belief in a loving and good God untenable. Some of the chapters are very touching and evocative. The manner in which Patricia Evans lovingly describes children with disabilities, and particularly the life of an autistic child within the church, is unforgettable especially when she reveals at the end that she was writing about her sister. This chapter also contains a strong warning since in her case the church community failed to recognize the needs of the one afflicted with autism. The final chapter ("Wheelchairs in Heaven?") by the well-known quadriplegic, Joni Eareckson Tada, is likewise powerful and moving.

Reading this book has been a very edifying experience. It is biblical, pastoral, practical, and motivational. There is a good emphasis on how hurting Christians can be comforted from Scriptures, help others, and be realistic about the realities of life in a fallen world, without losing hope. Heartily recommended.

